

## A Populist Specter

“The Triumph and Collapse of Liberalism” by John Lukacs, in *The Chronicle Review* (Dec. 10, 2004), 1255 23rd St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

Lukacs has “never been a liberal,” but he sees in the fact that the term has become “soiled, outdated, torn at its edges” a serious threat to democracy itself.

Modern liberals have only themselves to blame for this state of affairs, writes the prolific historian, author of the forthcoming *Democracy and Populism*. Their sins are many, from a too-tolerant view of communism and the Soviet Union during the Cold War to a contemporary tendency “to take the ideas of the Enlightenment to extremes,” for instance, by promoting “a public morality devoid of, if not altogether opposed to, religion.” Yet traditional liberal ideals still desperately need defending:

“When it came to the formation of the democracies of the West, the concepts of liberalism and democracy, while not inseparable, were surely complementary, with the emphasis on the former. Among the founders of the American republic were serious men who were more dubious about

democracy than about liberty. They certainly did not believe in—indeed, they feared—populism; populism that, unlike a century ago, has now become (and not only in the United States) the political instrument of ‘conservatives,’ of so-called men of the ‘Right.’ It is significant that in Europe, too, the appeal of the term ‘liberal’ has declined, while ‘democratic’ is the adopted name of a variety of parties, many of them not only antiliberal but also extreme right-wing nationalist.

“Yes, democracy is the rule of the majority; but there liberalism must enter. Majority rule must be tempered by the rights of minorities and of individual men and women; but when that temperance is weak, or unenforced, or unpopular, then democracy is nothing else than populism. More precisely: Then it is nationalist populism. It may be that the degeneration of liberal democracy to populism will be the fundamental problem of the future.”

## The Grail of Efficiency

“Boosting Government Productivity” by Thomas Dohrmann and Lenny T. Mendonca, in *The McKinsey Quarterly* (2004: No. 4), [www.mckinseyquarterly.com](http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com).

With the first of the 76 million aging baby boomers due to begin retiring in a few years, the federal government will soon be facing some hard choices: Cut retirees’ benefits or raise taxes to pay for them—or reduce public services for everyone else. But there’s another, less painful option: Improve government productivity.

Yes, it’s been tried before, notably in the “reinventing government” effort of the early 1990s, and with some success. But the surface has barely been scratched, say Dohrmann and Mendonca, principals in the Washington office of McKinsey & Company, a management consulting firm.

Between 1987 and 1994, the federal government’s productivity grew by a total of only 0.4 percent, while the private sector’s grew at a

1.5 percent annual rate. Washington then stopped measuring its productivity; private sector productivity has since grown by three percent annually. If Washington could match the 1.5 percent rate, the savings would total \$104 billion to \$312 billion.

That wouldn’t mean simply taking an ax to government payrolls and programs. A handful of state governments and quasi-governmental organizations have shown the way. Illinois, for example, has consolidated public aid programs scattered through six different departments into a new Department of Human Services, eliminating duplication, better serving aid recipients, and redeploying saved money and staff to new programs.

One study shows that the Medicare budget could be pruned by about 20 percent

with no loss in the quality of medical services if the program could be administered as well in every region of the country as it is in the ones where service is most efficient.

Even the U.S. Postal Service has had successes. Despite an increase of seven million since 1999 in the number of addresses it serves, the Postal Service “has saved \$5.5 billion by replicating the best practices of the best sorting plants and by improving its delivery and counter operations.” Productivity has increased by six percent, and “customer satisfaction ratings are at all-time highs.”

New competition has spurred the Postal Service to improve, and governments could

use a stiff dose of the same stuff. Outsourcing, which can put everything from paper clip procurement to schooling in the hands of private contractors, is one way to go. But more can be done even when there’s no competition to be found. Conducting customer satisfaction surveys, publicizing the results, and establishing “metrics” to gauge improvement would prod government agencies to perform better.

Admittedly, the task is difficult. It’s one thing to pass good legislation, the authors note, another to put in the sustained and thankless effort needed to make it effective. But if the Postal Service can do it, why can’t everyone else?

## *The Christian Gender Gap*

“The Partisan Paradox: Religious Commitment and the Gender Gap in Party Identification”  
by Karen M. Kaufmann, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Winter 2004), Northwestern Univ., School of Communication, 2240 North Campus Dr., Evanston, Ill. 60208.

If religious voters are more conservative than others, and if women tend to be more religious than men, why is there a “gender gap” in national elections that leaves the women’s vote tilted toward the Democratic Party?

It could be that religious commitment influences the partisan leanings of only the most devout voters. But that’s not the case, according to Kaufmann, a University of Maryland political scientist who analyzed public opinion surveys from the four presidential elections between 1988 and 2000. Among the highly devout (as measured by such factors as weekly church attendance), the gender gap persists: 59 percent of men, but only 49 percent of women, identified with the Republican Party.

Perhaps religious commitment has a stronger effect on men than on women, making the men more conservative? No, says Kaufmann. On a range of issues—from defense policy to gay rights and other cultural issues—religious belief pulls men and women to the right in equal measures.

But that rightward shift still leaves a big gender gap on one question: attitudes toward the size and nature of the welfare state. Women, Kaufman says, “are simply more liberal than men on questions of social welfare.” And for many religious women, social welfare policies are a more important determinant of voting behavior than the hot-button cultural issues that are said to animate so many religious voters.

## FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

### *Army Lite*

“How Technology Failed in Iraq” by David Talbot, in *Technology Review* (Nov. 2004), 1 Main St., 7th fl., Cambridge, Mass. 02142.

In April 2003, an armored battalion of the Third Infantry Division was at the tip of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Racing toward a key bridge near Baghdad, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest Marcone, the battalion commander, had one problem: He knew very little about

the strength of the Iraqi opposition. After seizing the bridge on April 2, Marcone received intelligence that a single Iraqi brigade was moving toward his position. His unit would actually confront three brigades, including 5,000 to 10,000 troops and dozens