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REVIEW ARTICLES



LETTERS TO A YOUNG CONSERVATIVE

Dinesh D'Souza

New York: Basic Books (2002)

229 pages, cloth, \$22.00

The classical principles of the American Revolution, D'Souza argues, are "liberal." It is these same principles that are now best upheld by modern Conservatives. These vital principles include economic freedom, political freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Dinesh D'Souza argues that when these four basic freedoms are linked to a commitment to both civic and social virtue, the vision of life in America has been established correctly.

What does it take for modern Conservatives to refute the liberal dogma of the elite media and the baby-boom-generation university professors of our time? D'Souza argues that Conservatives must not only study and promote ideals but they must master the types of strategy that are necessary to refute the regnant lies of Liberals. This is his burden in these "letters" to a young student named Chris. What strategies will actually work in the battlefields of our culture? How do Conservatives adopt a philosophical conservatism that is both temperamentally radical and aggressive at work, school, college and everyday life? This is not an armchair philosopher's detached look at issues but rather a guide for the young and the already convinced.

Dinesh D'Souza has become one of the most articulate spokesmen of our time for the cause of political and social conservatism.

Liberalism is not a bad word. In its original and classical

sense it refers to the "free man." In Greek the word was used to describe that man was *not* a slave. Liberals were the partisans of liberty. The American founders, in this sense, were Liberals. Liberalism meant limiting the power and use of government. D'Souza is clearly correct when he writes that this philosophy is found in the Bill of Rights when it says: "Congress shall make no law . . .". It was in the last century that this classical definition underwent serious change. The revolution of the 1930s and the 1960s changed the word liberal from this older use. Franklin Roosevelt championed the idea that people who lack the necessities of life are not free. He believed that giving people true liberty meant the government should insure citizens against deprivation, the loss of a job, calamitous illness, and impoverished old age. This social definition of the word liberal introduced, at least in the American sense, a whole new use of the word. Government would now have a wider role in people's lives, and the liberal view was to champion that role.

In the 1960s this ideology was expanded once again. D'Souza writes:

The second liberal revolution occurred in the 1960s. Its watchword was "liberation," and its great prophet was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Before the sixties, most Americans believed in a universal moral order that is external to us, that makes demands on us. Our obligation was to conform to that moral order. Earlier generations right up to the "greatest generation" of World War II, took for granted this moral order and its commandments: Work hard and try to better yourself, be faithful to your spouse, go when your country calls, and so on (4).

D'Souza argues that in the 1960s several factions arose that redefined the way many Americans see the moral order—the feminist movement, the antiwar movement, the gay activist movement. These new Liberals "fought for a new ethic that would be based not on external authority but on the sovereignty of the inner self" (4). This is where Rousseau's radical idea emerges. He argued for a universal

inner freedom, or moral freedom to do what one wants to do. Rousseau argued "that people make major decisions—whom to love, what to become, what to believe—not by obeying our parents, teachers, preachers, or even God. Rather we make such decisions by digging deeper within ourselves and listening to the voices of nature" (4). The result of this way of thinking and living was that people would now be urged to be "true to yourself." A new liberal morality was born and rapidly advanced in a myriad of ways. The bitter results are before us forty years later.

Being a Conservative in America is different than being a Conservative in Europe, D'Souza argues. In Europe a Conservative defended "throne and altar" but in America Conservatives decided to "sit around a table in Philadelphia" and establish a "new order for the ages" (5). D'Souza concludes that "paradoxically American conservatism seeks to *conserve a certain kind of liberalism*" (5, emphasis mine). There is, in the modern use of the term conservatism, an important added idea—virtue. This is one of the things that sets conservatism apart from libertarianism. Conservative virtues include ideas like civility, patriotism, national unity, a sense of local community, and an attachment to family. They also include a belief in merit, just desserts, and personal responsibility for one's actions (6). For most Conservatives the idea of virtue, notes D'Souza, "cannot be separated from the idea of God" (6).

It has been said that Liberals want government to get out of the bedroom and into the pocketbook. Conservatives, it is sometimes said, argue the reverse, that government should get into the bedroom and out of the pocketbook. This slogan is close to absurd. Conservatives are willing to curb liberty at times, especially when there is a threat to national security as in a post-9/11 world. Contrary to libertarians, Conservatives see nothing wrong with restricting pornography and the legal benefits of marriage to heterosexual couples, or with outlawing the use of hard drugs (7).

The bottom line, as we often use the term today, is that Conservatives and Liberals have a radically different view of

human nature. The Liberal holds a high opinion of human nature, which says that if people are given complete autonomy they will use their freedom well. Conservatives, on the other hand, see two principles within human nature—good and evil. These two principles are in continual conflict. Conservatives, seeing this warped nature of humankind, seek “a social structure that helps to bring out the best in human nature and suppress man’s lower or base impulses” (9). This is why Conservatives support capitalism. It is, to their way of thinking, the best way to direct our natural pursuit of self-interest so the larger society will benefit. Conservatives also believe that since radical evil exists in the world, and governments cannot at times be “talked out of their nefarious objectives” force will sometimes be necessary (10).

D’Souza writes, about our times:

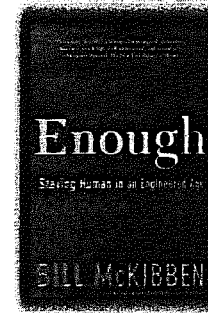
For all its grand proclamations, today’s liberalism seems to be characterized by a pathological hostility to America, to capitalism, and to traditional moral values. In short, liberalism has become the party of anti-Americanism, economic plunder, and immorality. By contrast, conservative policies are not only more likely to produce the good society, they are also the best means to achieve liberal goals such as peace tolerance, and social justice (10).

This stereotype is consistent with D’Souza’s dogmatism throughout. It is also what makes this an engaging book, even if you disagree at certain points, as I do. One thing is certain—D’Souza does not bore.

D’Souza is an Indian immigrant from a Roman Catholic background. His conservatism arose in his college years as a foreign student at Dartmouth. While he was at Dartmouth he began a conservative campus newspaper. His conservatism also comes from serving in the Reagan White House while he was still in his twenties. He is now a research scholar at Stanford University and a best-selling author of *Illiberal Education*, *The End of Racism*, and *The Virtue of Prosperity*. He even maintains an excellent Web site at www.dineshdsouza.com. You

will not read D’Souza without profit. He is a polemicist who writes with clarity and factuality. The last letter of the book includes a reading list of conservative titles that is well conceived.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG
Editor-in-Chief



*ENOUGH: STAYING HUMAN IN AN
ENGINEERED AGE*

Bill McKibben

Henry Holt: New York (2003)

271 pages, cloth, \$25.00

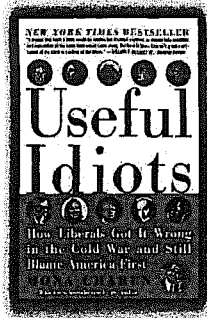
Rarely have I read a book that deals with genetic engineering and the coming “brave new world” that is so well-researched, so profoundly engaging, and so generally useful. Bill McKibben, whose earlier work, *The End of Nature*, which was perhaps the best treatment of global warming of its time, has done it again in *Enough*. Here he takes on the proponents of the new technologies of genomics, nanotechnology and robotics and shows how they threaten civilization as we know it. This is not the cry of a fanatic, however, but the plea of a realist who has done his work.

McKibben compares the development of germline engineering to the nuclear development of the past fifty years. This is anything but an exaggeration if his arguments are correct, which I find to be the case. Now is the time to engage this discussion openly and calmly before it is too late.

The real question boils down to this: Are we ready to surrender our human freedom, and the basic ways we have always understood human life, to a technological determinism that will be imposed by this new science? McKibben believes there is still time to say no. As Wendell Berry writes, “This is not a happy book, but it is, in its courage and its affirmation of what

we have to lose, a book that is hopeful and hope-giving." Every thoughtful Christian reader who cares about our future and that of those who will follow us should read this powerful book.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG
Editor-in-Chief



**USEFUL IDIOTS: HOW LIBERALS GOT IT
WRONG IN THE COLD WAR AND STILL
BLAME AMERICA FIRST**

Mona Charen
Washington, D.C.: Regnery (2003)
308 pages, cloth, \$27.95

Lenin is credited with the prediction that both liberals and weak-minded souls in the West could ultimately be relied upon to be "useful idiots" when it came to the future of the Soviet Union and its ambitions. Mona Charen, a syndicated columnist and television commentator on CNN's Capital Gang, who also wrote speeches for former First Lady Nancy Reagan and worked in the Jack Kemp presidential campaign, takes no prisoners in showing how certain Americans in fact became a group of "useful idiots" until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The danger, she suggests, is that the "blame America first" crowd is still at it.

What is the central conflict of our time? Charen has no doubt that it once was the Soviet Union. She also has no doubt that the same people who regularly downplayed the Soviet threat for forty years remain unconcerned about the growing threats of Islamofascism (Judge Robert Bork's term) as expressed in the events of 9/11. The liberal wing of the Democratic Party continues, Charen believes, to excuse murder and mayhem, while finding every reason to say that America brings the opposition of the world upon itself. This mantra has been uttered by so many, for so long, that even ordinary people have come to believe a great deal of the message. We must be hated

by the world precisely because we deserve it! Charen may not change your mind but she will challenge your assumptions. She will also expose the actions and words of leading liberals like Jessie Jackson, Hillary Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Strobe Talbott, Sidney Blumenthal, Bill Moyers, Phil Donahue, Bryant Gumbel and Katie Couric. And why have many of our leading universities become centers for the promotion of anti-Americanism and anti-capitalism? Mona Charen will tell you why this happened and how.

In March of 1983, President Ronald Reagan, speaking about the arms race to the National Association of Evangelicals, said:

I urge you to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation blithely to declare yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil (11).

The use of the term "evil empire" startled the political Left and news reports characterized Reagan's words as "strident" and dangerous. Professor Henry Steel Commager, a noted historian, called Reagan's speech "the worst presidential speech in American history, and I have read them all. No other presidential speech has ever so flagrantly allied the government with religion. It was a gross appeal to religious prejudice" (12). Charen notes that what infuriated the Left was that Reagan actually believed this stuff! And when George W. Bush refers to the nations of Iran, Iraq, Syria and North Korea as an "axis of evil" the same reaction appears again. (No one seems to notice that Bush's speechwriter borrowed this phrase from Franklin D. Roosevelt, certainly not a war-monger to the liberal Left.) What provokes this kind of response by the Left? Charen believes it is their accepted and oft-repeated view of America, its history, its freedoms, its principles, and its place in the modern world.

Charen is a realist. She does not gloss over America's

flaws. What she does do, however, is show that these flaws are real but our principles are still the best the world has to offer. Because we are a republic of laws and because we have constitutional principles about freedom we have a basis for righting our wrongs, a context in which things can really improve. Fascist and communist societies have no such foundation. Muslim societies don't either. Only in the Christian West do we find laws and a government of laws that can support and sustain freedom. If the liberal Left's bias prevails we will see our freedoms erode from within and without. Charen is determined to do all that she can to show why this should not happen. "Her book," says celebrated conservative writer William F. Buckley, Jr., "is [what I] prayed would be written but doubted that anything so wonderfully readable and instructive at the same time would come along." I must agree. This will open your eyes to the greatest political issue of our time if you care to find out.

She also understands the essential Christian truth that is missed by most in the modern world when she concludes her engaging work with this final paragraph:

Christian doctrine to one side, the world is a fallen place—a roiling, corrupt, unstable, vicious, and unpredictable place—at least in many places. Absent American leadership and strength of mind during the twentieth century—it could have been infinitely worse. Liberal views, forged in Vietnam and tempered in Central America and beyond, got the world all wrong. Even worse, they got America all wrong (257).

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG
Editor-in-Chief