

A Liberal Calls Out His Party for Its Identity Politics

COMMENTARY

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Following a week of relentless criticism from the mainstream media for ham-handed and vacillating responses to the neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville, President Trump saw his approval rating **rise** slightly. It's as if elites have one agenda, and a significant part of the public another.

The polling result also suggests that round-the-clock banging on about Trump's flaws and missteps will not be enough to rehabilitate the fortunes of a flailing Democratic Party that not only lost the White House last year and remained the minority in both houses of Congress but also, since the 2008 election of Barack Obama, has been routed on the state level, retaining control of only 16 governorships and 21 of 98 partisan state legislative chambers.

There is, though, another approach.

In 1985, in the aftermath of Ronald Reagan's crushing defeat of Walter Mondale, a small group led by party operative Al From and several Democratic governors and senators formed the Democratic Leadership Council. The DLC sought to understand why the electorate had thoroughly repudiated their party, which, in their minds, was the people's true representative.

Undertaking the frequently painful act of looking within, the DLC found the party's message to be out of touch with the legitimate interests of middle-class voters. The DLC brain trust—including a slick young Arkansas governor who studied at Georgetown, Oxford, and Yale Law School—recalibrated their side's rhetoric and refashioned policies to address, consistent with core Democratic convictions and progressive ideals, voters' sincere concerns about dysfunctional big government, the fraying of community, and the elite scorn for faith.

Seven years later, DLC golden boy Bill Clinton was elected president of the United States.

Although Hillary Clinton won the 2016 popular vote, her Electoral College loss—the only result that is constitutionally relevant—to Donald Trump inflicted a trauma for Democrats comparable to 1984. True, Mondale's margin of defeat was enormous, but he ran against a popular incumbent president and gifted politician whose policies were credited with reviving a moribund economy. And yes, Clinton fell a mere 70,000-combined votes short in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. But the embarrassing scandal for Democrats was that a race between their former secretary of state/former senator/former first lady and the major-party candidate with the highest disapproval ratings and the least political preparation in American history was even close.

In contrast to the DLC's prudent 1985 decision to ask where *their* party had gone astray, today's Democrats revel in racking up points in the target-rich environment provided by Trump's incessant tweets and belligerent utterances. This leaves the left little time for the less thrilling but vital task of introspection and self-criticism.

Mark Lilla, whose antipathy toward Trump is heartfelt and resolute, recognizes the danger. Last November, shortly after the election, he **called** in the New York Times for fellow liberals to face up to their party's portion of responsibility for Trump's victory, which Lilla traced to the rise "identity liberalism." His contention that "American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism's message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing" provoked outrage on the left.

In "The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics," Lilla elaborates on his thesis, providing a short, elegant polemic exposing the profound harm that identity liberalism has caused to the Democratic Party. A professor of humanities at Columbia University, and a regular essayist at the New York Review of Books, Lilla uses the term "liberal" to denote those who identify with the achievements of the New Deal, which summoned Americans to "a collective enterprise to guard one another against risk, hardship, and the denial of fundamental rights." The essential contrast in post-World War II American politics, for Lilla, is between such liberals, who embodied the "Roosevelt Dispensation," and those who embraced the "Reagan Dispensation" with, according to Lilla, its hyper-individualistic citizens living in their separate communities and its dedication to free markets, economic growth, and the shrinking of government.

Liberals, he argues, must repudiate the politics of identity because it undermines the pursuit of the common good to which American liberalism is properly directed. Identity liberalism divides Americans into groups—women, African-Americans, Latinos, LGBT Americans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, and on and on. It nourishes a "resentful, disuniting rhetoric of difference" that defines membership in terms of distinctive narratives of victimhood, and confers status in proportion to the magnitude of the oppression one claims to have suffered under the hegemonic sway of white, male structures of power. Propelled by America's colleges and universities—which, Lilla observes, have replaced political clubs and shop floors as the incubators of liberal political leaders—identity liberalism has abandoned the political mission of bringing fellow citizens together in favor of the evangelical one of extracting professions of faith and punishing heretics, apostates, and infidels.

Disappointingly for an author whose purpose is to rouse fellow liberals to action, Lilla offers no proposal for reforming our colleges and universities, which he blames for indoctrinating students in identity politics dogma. But he does sketch the larger political goal: a “more civic-minded liberalism” that cultivates a shared appreciation of the rights and responsibilities that all America citizens share and which encourages individuals to undertake “the hard and unglamorous task of persuading people very different from themselves to join a common effort.”

The reply from the establishment left to Lilla’s brief for less victim politics and more retail politics was swift and sure. To mark publication last week of “The Once and Future Liberal,” the New York Times published a **review** by Yale University History Professor Beverly Gage that dismissed Lilla’s critique as “trolling disguised as erudition.” Finding nothing bad to say about identity liberalism except to wonder why it hasn’t generated more marchers, Gage sent Times readers on their way with a clear conscience to continue to exhaust themselves in venting fury against Trump’s daily outrages.

The serious criticism of Lilla is twofold. First, while holding aloft the idea of a common citizenship, he lapses from time to time into an illiberal politics of friends and enemies revolving around a fundamental antagonism between right and left. Conservatives, in Lilla’s account, are simple-minded, selfish, and anti-political; indifferent to the plight of those not like them; and oblivious of the claims of culture and nation. To assert that “a vote for Trump was a betrayal of citizenship, not an exercise of it” is—in lockstep with the purveyors of identity liberalism—to smear nearly half of your fellow citizens as traitors.

Second, Lilla propagates a basic misunderstanding about the liberalism he laudably sets out to save. That liberalism is not the antithesis of conservatism, or, at least of that conservatism devoted to liberty, limited government, and democratic politics. Despite his best efforts to ignore or conceal it, the liberalism that he labors to restore has a decisively conservative element, because, as Lilla rightly recognizes, the enduring ground of citizens’ solidarity in America is a shared commitment to a constitutional order that equally protects the individual rights of all.

Sorting these matters out can provoke a useful soul searching for Democrats. And for Republicans who believe that Trump has hijacked their party.

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