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A Conversation with John McGowan, author of

American Liberalism: An Interpretation for Our Time

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Q: In *American Liberalism: An Interpretation for Our Time*, you identify five tenets of liberalism. Why those five, and what is their connection to “our time”?

A: American liberalism is a complex and multi-faceted political philosophy. So the five tenets I use to organize my presentation of liberalism necessarily oversimplify to some extent and, undoubtedly, lead me to neglect some features of liberalism altogether. The five I actually focus on are very much motivated by current events. For example: the rule of law. We usually take the rule of law for granted—and assume we know what it means. Most books on liberalism barely give it a thought. But on both the national and international level, events since 9/11 have made it crucial to clarify what the rule of law means and to consider how it is currently being challenged. Similarly, pluralism—the acceptance that people in modern societies have diverse ethnic origins, religious beliefs, and political views—needs to be re-examined in light of contemporary ethnic, religious, and political conflicts.

Q: Who is your ideal audience for this book?

A: I have joked that the book was written as a letter to all the presidential candidates, Democratic and Republican, for the 2008 election, but that I’ll let the rest of the world read it as well.

Q: Will your book impact readers of different ages differently? In your opinion, how engaged are young people in America today with contemporary politics as contrasted to forty years ago?

A: I do hope that, for all readers, my book will succeed in providing a coherent and reasonably comprehensive understanding of what liberalism stands for. I want to provide a clear statement of liberalism’s basic principles, values, and commitments. Older readers will perhaps find this picture of liberalism much more familiar because it was, to a pretty large extent, America’s “common sense” from 1935 to 1970. Today’s sources of information are more varied—from newspapers and the Internet to talk radio and the *Daily Show*—which means there is no ruling

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Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina_Mahalek@unc.edu

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consensus. As for engagement, the forms of political engagement have changed dramatically over the past forty years. Today's young people volunteer for various "service" projects in much larger numbers than ever before. Perhaps that means they want to learn their politics from the ground up, rather than signing on to grand theories from either the left or the right. But that's a tentative first thought about an intriguing issue that I'd like to think more about. I certainly don't believe today's youth are any less engaged. It's always a minority of people who are very tuned into politics.

Q: Why did liberalism begin to decline forty years ago?

A: The historical reasons are many and complex, but identifiable: the oil crisis of the 1970s and its continuing effects on Western economies; increased migration from the under-developed to the developed world; the ethnic conflicts that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union; the rise of terrorism as a tactic in political struggles; and economic globalization. The ideological reasons are also complex but, I think, identifiable: strong intellectual, moral, and political arguments raised against the welfare state and against liberal cosmopolitanism, pluralism, and tolerance; the revival of laissez-faire economic and social views; and the combination of a distaste for liberal society's permissiveness with a "strong" foreign policy that recommended confrontation over "peaceful co-existence." Conservatives developed a set of ideas and policy recommendations that they used to contest liberalism in public debate and public elections. Liberalism had gotten complacent and had responded poorly to changing conditions both abroad and at home. As a result, liberalism has been on the defensive for quite some time now.

Q: So why write a book about a political position that is on the decline?

A: With the hopes of reversing that decline. I believe that liberalism names certain values and commitments that are central to who we as Americans are and what we hope our country can be. Recent events make it evident in my view that the death of liberalism would leave us much worse off. I try to offer a convincing account of what liberalism is, an account that is true to what liberals believe at the same time that it convinces at least some of my readers that liberalism is the right set of political beliefs for Americans to cherish.

Q: How might your book relate to the upcoming 2008 presidential elections?

A: I have tried to articulate the principles that underwrite what I think are the significant distinctions between liberal and conservative positions in contemporary America. So the reader of my book, I hope, will have a clearer picture of why—and in relation to what fundamental values—liberal and conservative candidates differ on questions like health care, the minimum wage, the United Nations, and how to move forward in the Middle East.

Q: You describe ours as a transitional time. Why?

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Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina_Mahalek@unc.edu

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A: I'm not alone in believing that the period of 1945 to 1970 saw in the West a fairly stable "compromise" among political elites, economic elites, and the non-elite people. That compromise, which in the United States produced the most equal distribution of economic resources in our nation's history, began to unravel with the oil crisis recession of 1973. But fundamental features of the compromise—like Social Security and some governmental regulation of workplace and product safety—have not disappeared entirely, even if they have all come under attack. So we do not yet live in an entirely post-liberal society. (Some people will say I am way too optimistic, that liberalism is totally dead.) Instead, we live in a time when I think the basic choice facing America is whether we want to adapt to changing circumstances in a way that aligns with basic liberal values or if we want to abandon liberalism altogether. Either way, it will never be 1960 again. But I don't think that we have settled into another era as well-defined as 1960 was. We are still in transition toward that next era.

Q: How is American liberalism different from liberalism elsewhere? Could the ideals expressed in your book be adopted in societies outside the United States?

A: My account of American liberalism looks a lot like what is called "social democracy" in Europe. One of the confusions attending the word "liberalism" is that, in the American context, proponents of laissez-faire economic and social views are considered conservatives, while in Europe they are called "neo-liberals." Similarly, globalization is called "economic liberalism" in Europe and Latin America. So, in terms of terminology, American liberalism is very distinct from European and Latin American liberalism. Even if we get past that confusion (no easy task), American liberalism is still not identical to "social democracy." Put most simply, Americans are (generally) much more individualistic than Canadians or Swedes. So, even though I do believe that some of the values I describe would be good to adopt in other societies, I think that the exact shape those values would take when put into practice would be highly influenced by the specific history and culture of the country in question. That's why my book has a short "historical interlude." It's important to recognize that ideas and values are often abstract formulations of social meanings that are produced in history—and thus vary from one historical context to another.

Q: What's the relation of liberalism to democracy? Are they distinct—or inseparable?

A: Historically, the two are distinct. Ancient Athens was a democracy, but it was not liberal. Conversely, England in 1820 was liberal, but not democratic. It is only in the twentieth century that we have come to think of the two as inevitably wedded, as "liberal democracy," the reigning political form of the post-World War II West. One argument in my book is that the two could be separated again, even divorced (to continue the marriage metaphor). Today's conservatives, after all, insist that they are stalwart defenders of democracy. I take them at their word—and try to distinguish "liberal democracy" from the "illiberal democracy" that they promote. We need to understand liberalism today so that at least we know what we are doing if we opt for illiberal democracy over liberal democracy.

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Q: What’s the difference between the modern liberal and the modern conservative?

A: Actually, I think the basic differences between liberals and conservatives have remained pretty constant since 1600—and those basic differences help us to navigate through the very confusing waters of political debate. Liberals are committed to as much equality (social, political, and economic) as practicable, while conservatives always argue that inequality is inevitable, beneficial, or the lesser of two evils (i.e. that more equality will lessen freedom or some other cherished good). Conservatives defend privilege and the elite, while liberals side with the little guy and decry all accumulations of power and resources into the hands of the few. (Again, conservatives have very ingenious—and not totally false—arguments about the benefits accruing to all members of society from the existence of elites; but that doesn’t change the fact that conservatives consistently favor elites in any social conflict.) Finally, conservatives are the “party of order” and place a high priority on “security,” “authority,” and “traditional values” as antidotes to what they see as liberal “permissiveness.”

Q: You describe your book as an “an interpretation for our time.” Yet you also hearken back to the founders, especially Madison, throughout the book. Do you expect your definition of liberalism to change or become outdated in the future?

A: I do believe that every generation—and every single writer—constructs a political vision that aims to address what seem the pressing issues of the day. The features of liberalism I find most salient and thus emphasize most are responses to current events. But they are features of liberalism that are present in previous writers like the founders. So there is continuity in the meaning of liberalism, even as there are shifts in emphasis and even some revision of core beliefs. I try to capture that continuity in my book because I do want to show that liberalism has a long and honorable tradition in American political thought and American political action. However, I am also trying to describe a liberalism that is particularly relevant to our moment in American history.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: An interview with John McGowan, author of *AMERICAN LIBERALISM: AN INTERPRETATION FOR OUR TIME* (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2007). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/mcgowan.

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116 South Boundary Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-3808

919-966-3561 (office) 1-800-848-6224 (orders) 919-966-3829 (fax)

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