

AlbertMohler.com

Another Angle on the Culture War: Robert Reich's 'Reason'

America is now under siege by a band of radical conservatives who wish to overthrow personal liberty, return the culture to the Middle Ages, and enforce their morality on the entire nation—right down to the smallest detail. That's the vision presented by Robert B. Reich in his new book, Reason: Why Liberals Will Win the Battle for America.

Wednesday, September 1, 2004

America is now under siege by a band of radical conservatives who wish to overthrow personal liberty, return the culture to the Middle Ages, and enforce their morality on the entire nation—right down to the smallest detail. That's the vision presented by Robert B. Reich in his new book, Reason: Why Liberals Will Win the Battle for America.

Reich, who served as secretary of labor under President Bill Clinton, currently serves as Unity Professor at Brandeis University. He is a smart man with considerable political experience, and his book represents a manifesto for what he hopes will be a Democratic resurgence and a turning of the tide in the nation's culture. As he sees it, America is currently under the sway of conservative politicians and their colleagues in the media who are attempting to turn America into a moralistic police state.

In times past, Robert Reich has offered some genuinely helpful insights about America, its economy, and postmodern culture. An unabashed liberal, Reich was a law school classmate of Bill and Hillary Clinton at Yale, and he has served in three Democratic administrations. Several years ago, he painted a future for the American economy in which the agents of economic productivity would be "symbolic analysts" who would work with ideas rather than physical tools. This was a genuine insight, pointing to the reality now known as the "knowledge economy" and underlining the critical asset of knowledge and intelligence in the economic sphere.

Unfortunately, Reich's latest book represents little more than a rant against conservatives. Nevertheless, Reason also serves as an instructive guide to the reality of the worldview conflict that now divides the nation. While Robert Reich hopes that his new book will help liberals to retake the nation, he actually serves conservatives by making the issues at stake crystal clear.

Reich begins his book with ominous tones. "In recent years, the conservative agenda has become far more radicalized. Its latest incarnation is more threatening and potentially more destabilizing to America and the world than its previous forms." Scared yet? Reich presents a vision of America under the sway of "Radcons," or radical conservatives who "are taking over the public agenda."

Give him credit—Reich understands the basic worldview conflict. Though liberals seem primarily focused on their hatred for President George W. Bush, Reich wants his allies to deal with ideas. "Casting Bush as the villain of a dark conspiratorial drama may be emotionally satisfying to many liberals," Reich argues, "but it doesn't illuminate the larger clash of ideas and principles. We need to look beyond any specific election in order to understand what is occurring and why, and consider the alternative choices facing America in the years ahead."

According to Reich, the Radcons are akin to ideological termites who are undermining the very foundations of civil society. The result of Radcon influence is seen in "unbridled greed and abuses of power," as well as the shedding of social safety nets and the stifling of dissent in the face of global terrorism. "In all these respects, there is a clear alternative to radical conservatism," Reich asserts. "It is a bold new liberalism, properly defined."

Listing the "Radcon agenda" now threatening the nation, Reich accuses conservatives of wanting to prevent sex

before marriage, ban abortion, condemn homosexuality, prohibit gay marriage, require prayer in the public schools, make English the official national language, and allow pollution of the environment, among other things. With access to cable television and respective media outlets such as The Wall Street Journal, the Radcons, Reich argues, are setting the national agenda without adequate opposition from liberals. Opposing themselves to the liberalism of the 1960s, the Radcon movement is known by “its moral absolutism, its faith in the redemptive power of discipline, its emphasis on punishment, and its theory of evil.”

Nevertheless, the central thrust of Reich’s argument is that the Radcons are hung up on sex. “Radcons have blended Christian fundamentalism and right-wing moralism into their larger worldview. Unrestrained sex, they believe, unleashes an evil that hides inside human beings. It threatens the social order. Therefore it must be controlled. The evil sexual impulses inside us have to be disciplined, just as evil forces from outside have to be. The war on sexual ‘deviancy’ is, in this respect, a lot like the war on terrorism: If we lose, Western civilization may fall into chaos.” Of course, since Reich makes this a keystone of his entire argument, one must assume that Reich believes that unrestrained sex does not threaten the social order.

According to Reich (Bill Clinton’s labor secretary), the conservative critique of the former president was completely without basis. President Clinton’s sexual sins—including the infamous Monica Lewinsky scandal—had nothing to do with public policy or public morality.

In a fascinating section, Reich documents a 1996 instrument developed by Clinton pollsters Dick Morris and Mark Penn. The campaign consultants developed a series of five questions that “proved to be a surefire way to tell if a voter was likely to choose [Bill] Clinton or [Bob] Dole.” The questions were: “Do you ever personally look at pornography? Do you believe sex before marriage is morally wrong? Would you look down on someone who had an affair while married? Do you believe homosexuality is morally wrong?” And, “Is religion very important in your life?” According to Reich, those who gave “liberal” responses to the questions three out of five times were two times as likely to vote for Clinton as for Dole. Those giving “conservative” responses to at least three out of the five questions were “twice as likely to vote for Dole.” This inside look at a campaign mechanism for Clinton’s 1996 race offers a direct and documented proof of the worldview divide that separates Americans on basic moral issues. What Robert Reich sees as evidence of conservative hyper-moralism, most Americans are likely to see as a reassurance that the nation still possesses some degree of common sense.

Returning to Reich’s argument, what drives conservatives to be so obsessed with sex and morality? It’s God, of course. While Reich dismisses any “slippery slope” argument about moral decline, he does offer this warning: “Here is a real slippery slope that does concern me. Once we allow Radcons or anyone else to decide how we should conduct our private sex lives, where would it end? If we accept the idea that one religion’s view about proper sexual behavior should be the law of the land, how do we decide whose religious view should count?”

We are already well down this slippery slope towards the imposition of a moralistic theocracy, Reich warns. “Evangelical Christians are seeking to become a majority on many of our nation’s school boards,” he alleges, “so they can impose their religious views on public school children.”

Apparently without recognizing the contradiction in his own argument, Reich argues that disagreement over fundamental moral issues is rooted in different religious understandings, even as he argues that no faith or religious perspective can be incorporated into public policy. Consider his treatment of abortion. “Let’s at least agree on three things,” Reich suggests. “First, Americans are deeply split on the question of when life begins, or whether abortion constitutes the killing of a child. Second, how one comes down on this question is a matter of personal or religious conviction. Third, we don’t want to live in a society where one set of religious views is imposed on a large number of citizens who disagree with them. That’s not a democracy; it’s a theocracy. One religion rules all.”

How can Reich miss the contradiction that stands at the very center of his own argument? His second assertion acknowledges that how one comes down on the issue of abortion “is a matter of personal or religious conviction.” As he acknowledges, this is true for those on both sides of the abortion divide. He then has the audacity to argue that we should not live in a society “where one set of religious views is imposed on a large number of citizens who disagree with them.” But the very pro-abortion position he articulates is—as he has just admitted—a religious position! When Robert Reich now warns that we must protect the separation of church and state against a Radcon assault, he means that he wants to preserve the dominance of his secularist worldview over against the worldview of those who believe that life begins at

conception.

The radical nature of Reich's commitment to abortion is seen when he describes partial birth abortion as "an extremely rare medical procedure resorted to when the mother's life is in danger." He goes on to claim that "the term is used repeatedly by Radcons who want the public to think that abortion is the equivalent of killing a baby." Where is the moral sanity in this? A partial-birth abortion is, by definition, the killing of a baby who is just minutes from birth. What morally sane individual would argue that this is not "the equivalent of killing a baby?"

On a host of issues, Reich urges his fellow Democrats to veer left. "Centrism is bogus," Reich instructs. "There's no well-defined, consistent political center in America. The rush by many Democrats in recent years to the so-called center is a pathetic substitute for clear thinking and candid talking about what the nation needs to do, and why."

There you have it. Robert Reich argues that if reason—rather than religion—rules in America, we will all come to his conclusions about issues ranging from abortion to taxation to labor policy to homosexuality. Whether or not the Democratic Party takes his advice, readers of his new book will receive an education in our contemporary clash of worldviews.

In writing *Reason*, Robert Reich offers what he hopes is a platform for resurgent liberalism. At least we know what we're up against.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

