

THE NEW FEDERALISM

It is hard to tell whether the "New Federalism" is basically a "liberal" or a "conservative" concept. In some ways, although proposed by Reagan, it seems to run counter to conservative principles. In any case it is confusing, and of more than passing interest to the Jews.

Suppose that the "New Federalism" were pushed to the point where the U.S. armed forces were dismantled -- and, instead, block grants were sent to each of the states so that they can set up their own armies and missile bases. That would get rid of the federal defense bureaucracy, reduce bureaucratic waste, and allow the people to be closer to the defense policy-making decisions.

Well, the new federalists would call that absurd, saying that the proper business of the federal government is to "provide for the common defense," as it is written in the preamble of the Constitution, but not to promulgate social programs.

But that preamble to the Constitution, the premises on which the national government was formed, talks about the purposes of our national government in these terms: "to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the Common Defense, promote the general Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty."

Of course that was general language written in the 18th century. It did not authorize the national government to issue food stamps, any more than the biblical injunction to help the poor automatically legitimates a national food stamp program. All those general prescriptions have to be translated into modern terms. It is obviously necessary, in modern terms, to maintain a unified defense system. But for a couple of the same reasons, it may also be necessary to maintain a unified basic welfare system.

For one thing, we are a nation not because of a common ethnic background as in the case of other countries, but because of certain shared values and ideals:

political freedom, human rights, open opportunity. As a nation, our ideal is that each individual has the right to a fresh start and that no family should be stuck, generation after generation, in the mire of hoplessness. Aid to children of destitute families is a case in point. The strength of this nation lies in the expression of a national will, a national resolve to fulfill its ideals.

In addition, the state of the economy and the components of social welfare needs are so closely intertwined that they both must be dealt with by some overall design, not through 50 different disconnected designs. On both counts, as in the case of the defense establishment, we are looking for national strength and unity, not fragmentation.

The dismantling of national purpose would seem to run counter to conservative goals. But even more interesting is the thought that Reagan New Federalism and populist liberalism both rest on the same notion: decentralize, return to the grass roots, let the people at the local levels decide. It is certainly the opposite of fascism which concentrated all control, including total social welfare programs, in the central government. But it has its own dangers, which seem alien to the precepts of conservatism.

As we move towards this "direct democracy," now being pushed by Reagan as it was once pushed by Saul Alinsky, and then by the liberals of the 1960's -- we are essentially moving away from the representative government which is a conservative (and classic liberal) article of belief. Very often this just means that we are moving closer to a different kind of raw lobbying, more acute manipulation and elitism, or more direct competition among groups, more factionalism, a decreased margin for negotiation or for coalitionism, and the growth of political extremism.

By way of illustration, imagine the scene as fifteen different racial, religious and ethnic groups fight for allocations in public hearings before city

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council members, most of whose judgements are already in a constant state of paralysis because they are just preoccupied with juggling close pressures.

And, by way of illustration, imagine the vulnerability of Jewish agencies in the midst of such a massive political auction.

The New Federalism may be taking us back to an Old Jacobin Jungle.

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