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The liberal antinomy: flag burning division

by Roger Kimball

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Mark Steyn reflects on the constitutional amendment to criminalize burning the American flag. (Thanks to Instapundit for the link.)

For my own part, I believe that, if someone wishes to burn a flag, he should be free to do so. In the same way, if Democrat senators want to make speeches comparing the U.S. military to Nazis and the Khmer Rouge, they should be free to do so. It's always useful to know what people *really* believe.

Indeed. But Steyn goes on to make an even more important point: The media's collusion in

One of the big lessons of these last four years is that many, many beneficiaries of Western civilization loathe that civilization -- and the media are generally inclined to blur the extent of that loathing.

the orgy of self-loathing is repellent. The spectacle of self-loathing on the part of many of our society's most privileged members is both shocking and depressing. I have been in the habit of saying these past few years that Islamic fundamentalism is a threat to our civilization at least as big as Communism. I still believe that, but the inner paralysis cultivated and purveyed by our cultural mandarins confronts us with an even graver prospect: suicide by moral aphasia.

More and more, it seems, we are a society whose relativism has yielded to a state of intellectual and moral indifference. Like Nietzsche's last men, we blink, contemplate our boredom, and wonder why nothing matters to us--nothing, that is, except for our anxious monitoring of our health.

What is love? What is creation? What is longing? . . . thus asks the last man, and blinks. The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. . . . Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion. No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse. Formerly, all the world was mad, and they blink. . . . One has one's little pleasure for the day and one's little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health.

In some ways, our current paralysis is a predictable coefficient of weary liberalism--a liberalism, that is, which has become too sophisticated to believe in the freedom that originally gave it meaning and direction. In a recent [article on the Polish philosopher Leszek](#)

Kolako

The antinomy is this: liberalism implies openness to other points of view, even (it would seem) those points of view whose success would destroy liberalism. Tolerance to those points of view is a prescription for suicide. Intolerance betrays the fundamental premise of liberalism, i.e. openness.

. . . [O]ur liberal, pluralist democracy depends for its survival not only on the continued existence of its institutions, but also on [what Kolakowski describes as] a belief in their value and a widespread will to defend them.

Do we, as a society, enjoy that belief? Do we possess the requisite will? The jury is still out on those questions. A good test is the extent to which we can resolve the antinomy of liberalism. And a good start on that problem is the

extent to which we realize that the antinomy is, in the business of everyday life, illusory. The openness that liberal society rightly cherishes is not a vacuous openness to all points of view: it is not value neutral. It need not, indeed it cannot, say Yes to all comers. American democracy, for example, affords its citizens great latitude, but great latitude is not synonymous with the proposition that anything goes. Our society, like every society, is founded on particular positive values: the rule of law, for example, respect for the individual, religious freedom, the separation of church and state. Western democratic society, that is to say, is rooted in what Kolakowski calls a vision of the world. Part of that vision is a commitment to openness, but openness is not the same as indifference.

Western Civilization at the Crossroads (Encounter Books).

We enlightened citizens of Western munificence and freedom are beset by many evils in the midst of our opulence. Some come to us from outside our society in the form of totalitarianism and the insanity of mullahs and their pathetic followers. But the graver evil, I suspect, is within us. G. K. Chesterton, as usual, had some illuminating things to say about that side of the problem: I

Man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth. . . . [T]he old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about his aims, which will make him stop working altogether. . . . We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table. [This is from his book Orthodoxy]

dislike the spectacle of people burning the American flag as much as the next fascist, right-wing, pro-capitalist extremist (I summarize some of my recent fan mail). But Steyn is surely right that criminalizing the activity is cosmetic plaster, as ineffectual as it is incompatible with the principles of a free society. Are we so weak that such dissent is threatening as well as unattractive? If so, we are in worse shape than I had thought.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include The Critical Temper: Interventions from The New Criterion at 40 (Encounter Books) and Where Next?