

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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Teddy Was a Champion - Who's Left?
African American Leadership
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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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When I started my academic career at Brandeis University just outside Boston, Ted Kennedy was in the Senate, but had established little fame. Twenty years later, I came back to Boston, or rather Cambridge, as a Fellow at the Kennedy School at Harvard and then, Ted was becoming a legend for standing up to Ronald Reagan's attempt to roll back the clock on the Civil Rights era. In those years I paid a great deal of attention to his leadership. His speeches on the floor of the Senate became the place where he trained his unbridled anger at those who would seek to block children's health care legislation, or the minimum wage for the poor, or funding for Title 9 that supported female sports in school, or discrimination against the elderly or those with physical handicaps. Yes, he did roar: pointing his finger at his adversaries, turning red as he pounded his lectern, generally raising hell as an unrepentant Liberal. Who would do this today?

We have become so divided ideologically that media analysts highlight Ted Kennedy Liberalism (big L), as if to follow the common practice of landing him in a pigeon-hole of long-forgotten politics. But where did we lose the Founders' conception of the great American experiment as a partly liberal one, not only mixing the population with those from other lands, but affording them a unique notion of progress – the opportunity for inclusion in a dynamic society where change, invention and growth were the norm?

Even the structure of government that was created had liberal aspects: one without royalty, with checks and balances on the use of power by government, with a mandate written in the Constitution to take care of the "general welfare," with a theme that "all men are created equal," and the establishment of Constitutional rights to make it real. We have expanded that structure to both representative and popular democracy.

However, the recent denigration of Liberalism devalues the citizenship of Blacks, most Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans and many whites who are Democrats, since the ideological divide is now the dominant characteristic of the two main political parties; Republicans are mostly white and conservative and Democrats are mostly moderates (afraid to use the term "Liberal").

We are at a serious divide in America where a substantial segment of the population dislikes Liberal government – or at least dislikes the fact that government does not behave in ways of which they would approve. Republican conservatism manifests itself as an opposition to government policies, while Democrats still believe in a positive role for government.

The problem here, as someone who studies government, is that I cannot think of a civilization or country that achieved greatness in the long run where most of the people hated their government. They usually ended up in a civil war until one faction overthrew the other forcibly. And although the American system of politics uses elections to affect a change in government when one faction is large enough to do so, what happens if radical dissidents view the electoral system as an insufficient tool for change? They start strapping on weapons to intimidate change as they are doing now at town hall meetings.

Many conservatives would argue that Ronald Reagan did great deal for the country. Actually he accomplished very little to move the country forward, his legacy was to reverse social progress. His party felt that people should take care of themselves and government should take care of their money and fight wars against those whom they consider enemies abroad. By contrast, the generosity of the spirit, common of Ted Kennedy, allowed government to care for the least well-off in society and include them in a modern notion of a progressive democracy. His liberalism was mostly right about the big issues of our day.

The current health care debate is a massive referendum on the Dr. King/Kennedy legacy and whether the current temper of the American spirit contains the substantive values that will allow the country to move forward again. People are correct that perhaps the death of Ted Kennedy is the end of an era, but it raises the monumental question of where are we headed. For President Obama, who has inherited the Kennedy mantle of leadership, Liberalism is a historically accurate destination.

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One of his latest books is: [*Freedom Is Not Enough: Black Voters, Black Candidates, and American Presidential Politics \(American Political Challenges\)*](#) (Rowman and Littlefield Press). Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Walters.




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