

Perspective

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Why liberal ideas won't die

By Jeffrey Scheuer

It's been four years since Sen. Edward Kennedy delivered a ringing oratorical call to liberal ideals at the Democratic convention in New York, declaring that "the dream shall never die." He brought down the house at Madison Square Garden, but as the chief spokesman that year for liberal Democrats, he was a minority voice.

Now, four years later, as the Democrats prepare to fight another internecine struggle, this time in San Francisco, it seems it's still more fashionable to talk about "new ideas" and "rainbow coalitions" and say that liberalism is dead—even though it appears the nominee will be Walter Mondale, an archetypal liberal shaped in the mold of Hubert Humphrey.

But if we set aside the petty political squabbles of the primary season, and take a longer, more philosophical view of this apparent contradiction, it might well be concluded that eulogies for liberalism are premature. Its ailments, though perhaps chronic, are never terminal.

The term "liberal" is of course somewhat ambiguous, as are "conservative" and "radical." But liberalism can be defined, first of all, as that part of the political spectrum that holds individual freedom to be paramount among moral and political values. Second, it is animated by the notion that people have certain basic rights, or inviolate freedoms—not by virtue of birth or status, or because having them contributes to some greater good, but simply because we are individuals. Ultimately, there is no higher good than our freedom itself.

Freedom is the primary value precisely because it is the gateway to all other values; it is the currency, so to speak, of our moral economy. My private ends, whatever they may be, are contingent upon my freedom to pursue them. Thus, to assert the primacy of freedom is not to choose among values but rather to acknowledge the supreme value of choice itself.

Liberals, furthermore, see a natural link between freedom and equality. The state is not the only impediment to freedom; indeed, its very *raison d'être* is to equalize freedom, thus neutralizing other impediments—from pickpockets to industrial polluters.

The liberal's question, then, is not whether the state ought to regulate society, but how; not whether government should be big or small, but where and how far it can be a liberating force. To do this, the state must be variously absent, present and dominant in different sectors of human society: much more than a "nightwatchman" and much less than a "Big Brother."

Although liberalism undoubtedly will revive in America, it faces one basic and inherent obstacle, which I would call the "complexity factor." This factor at once suggests a final defining characteristic of liberalism, a cause of its present malaise and the reason it is not about to expire or become obsolete. In fact, the "complexity factor" will be at the very heart of the political debate this November.

Conservatives, with their narrow assumption that big government is bad government, tend to paint a tidy, uncomplicated picture of the power relations in society, thereby minimizing the extent and intricacy of our moral obligations. In their view, capitalism is the essence of freedom, and socialism its antithesis; talent always triumphs over brute circumstance; business enterprise is uniformly a force for the public good; the rights of criminals compete with the rights of victims; military might equates with military security; and foreign states are always unimpeachable friends or blood enemies.

Such a view appeals to order and tradition, privilege and self-interest. But most of all, it appeals to our thirst for simplicity. Conservatism, as such, is an intellectual and emotional bargain.

Liberals, however, reject the notion that the world is so simple and clean. They recognize the enormous complexity of power relations in society, and attempt to devise a subtler, more intricate network of reciprocal rights and duties, freedoms and restraints.

If the "complexity factor" in this era of simplicity limits the appeal of liberal ideas, it will never wholly defeat them. Eventually, the electorate will recognize that freedom for the wolf is not the same as freedom for the sheep; that self-interest must adapt to public interest if our social contract is to survive change.

For the Democrats this year, philosophical discourse may not be the road to the White House; but a more complex and sophisticated perspective on public policy issues will be needed by whoever expects to assume the presidency. The complexities of human freedom will not go away. It is tempting to ignore them; understanding them is a far more difficult, more interesting and more humane task—a task that only a truly free and liberal mind dares to undertake.

Jeffrey Scheuer, a New York writer, has just completed a philosophical study of freedom and equality entitled "The Freedom Nexus."