The Dilemma of the American Ideology

by Tom W. Smith

If Russia is "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" as Churchill observed, then America is a dilemma encased in a contradiction inside a paradox. At the core of the American ideology are a series of noble, inspirational ideals that are inherently at odds with themselves. At best, this creates a synergy that spurs America to greatness and helps maintain a balance that keeps the nation from veering too far off-course. At worst, this generates a schizophrenia that blurs our collective vision and debilitates the national will. A central contradiction revolves around the ideals of freedom and equality. We usually see these two values as easily in tandem as when Lincoln described America as "born in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." But the pursuit of freedom and equality leads in opposite directions. Our pursuit of freedom is epitomized by the rugged individualism of the pioneer, free of government and social conformity, engaged in a one-on-one struggle with the wilderness. Our search for equality lives in our populist distrust of great wealth and power, centering around an idealized society of small farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers.

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Individualism vs. Equality

Perhaps no contemporary social issue captures the conflict between these two ideals more so than affirmative action. The spirit of individualism calls for equality of opportunity, even if this results in a meritocracy of talents and efforts. The principle of egalitarianism says that disparities between races, genders, and other groups would not naturally occur and that steps must be taken to remove their unjustifiable existence.

To its opponents, affirmative action policies based on group rights and implemented by quotas and special preferences are at best anathema to individual rights and Horatio Algerism and at worst reverse discrimination. To its proponents, affirmative action is essential for overcoming inequalities created by racism, sexism, and other bigotries.

Siding with the foes of affirmative action, the public opposes special preferences and quotas. On the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, only 16% backed giving blacks preference in hiring and promotion and on a related item just another 16% said that "Blacks have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to help improve their living standards." But the public also shares Bob Dole's sentiment that "This is America. No discrimination. Discrimination ought to be punished...". In a Yankelovich survey conducted in 1995, 64% favored "affirmative action programs that promote black employment, but do not contain quotas."

President Clinton has tried to finesse the dilemma with his "mend it, don't end it" review of current federal policies, but voters in California decided instead just to end it. They passed with 54% of the vote the California Civil Rights Initiative (Proposition 209) which says that "(t)he state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin." Of course that will hardly end the debate. Already the ACLU has challenged the constitutionality of the CCRI and civil rights activists have met with White House and Justice Department officials to urge Clinton to lead the fight for affirmative action.

While race alone makes this a divisive issue, the difficulties it raises are ultimately philosophical and ideological. They involve serious conflicts over individual vs. group rights, between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, and over the role of race in opposing racism. Only by facing up to the contradictory ideals that are tapped by affirmative action can American society decide on what its appropriate role should be.

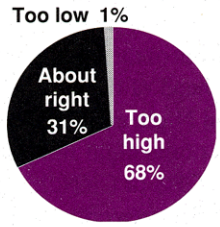
Role of Government

This same tension between maximizing individual liberty and furthering social equality extends to the very purpose of government itself. The ideological progeny of the pioneers view government warily, seeing every government handout as a hand on their liberties. The descendants of the small-town society of equals see government as the tool for solving problems of poverty and the undemocratic concentration of wealth.

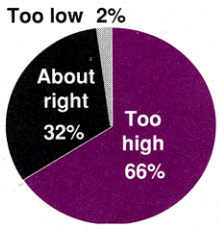
These and other divisions ensconced in the American soul lead to great tensions within American public opinion. On one hand, the public wants

Lower Our Taxes... But Spend More on Education, Health, and Environment

Question: Do you consider the amount of federal income tax which you pay as too high, about right, or too low?



Question: ...for those with middle incomes, are taxes...?



Question: We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount...?

	Too Little	About Right	Too Much
Education	73%	22%	6%
Health	66%	25%	9%
Environment	62%	28%	10%

Source: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey, 1996.

the government to improve education, reduce poverty, and solve other social problems. Large majorities endorse more governmental spending for the poor, the environment, schools, and other programs. For example, in the 1996 GSS, 55% said the government was spending too little on assistance to the poor while only 19% thought it was spending too much. Likewise, the pro-spending balance was 62% to 10% for the environment and 73% to 6% for education.

But on the other hand, the public wants lower taxes, fewer government regulations, and less meddling in people's lives. The 1996 GSS found that 66% think taxes on the middle class are too high and 68% declare that their own federal income tax is too high. Also, 64% think the federal government has too much power and 69% believe that the information that the government keeps on people is a threat to individual privacy. The public endorses New Deal goals and Reaganite means!

Crisis of Confidence

Moreover, these and other policy contradictions are, perhaps, becoming greater and less tractable. Confidence in both the executive and legislative branches of the federal government fell to a 23-year low in 1996. Asking about confidence in 13 institutions, the 1996 GSS found Congress and the executive branch of the federal government battling for bottom place with 44% of the public having "hardly any" confidence in both branches of government. In the case of Congress the non-confidence vote rose from only 16% in 1973 to being over 40% since 1993. For the executive branch the 1996 figure topped even the 1974 Watergate level of 43% and is up from 22% in 1991. The crisis in confidence is also reflected in the little trust that people place in their government. Only 25% agree that the "people we elect to Congress try to keep the promises they have made during the election" and just 19% think that "most government administrators can be trusted to do what is best for the country."

Unable to resolve the deep-seated uncertainties over who should do what, the electorate swings between electing a Democratic president and a Republican Congress, while third parties have gained a greater percent of the presidential vote in two successive elections than at any time since before the Civil War. Unless some candidate or party understands the foundational conflicts within American culture and rallies the citizenry behind a new balance of these competing ideals, public dissatisfaction will rise and our paralysis of values and policies will worsen.

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