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## Viewpoint: Toward a new American consensus

By Andrew L. Yarrow

Since [Ronald Reagan](#), the Republican Party and significant chunks of the [Democratic Party](#) have coalesced around a consensus that has supported largely free markets and a diminished government role in the economy, value-free social values, and a wink and a nod toward fiscal responsibility. But now, this mixture of watered-down cultural values and hands-off economic policies simply isn't working well or in most Americans' best interests. It's time for a new way forward, taking the best from our country's liberal and conservative heritages.

So, what's next - or should be next?

What the United States needs is a new political cocktail: one jigger of greater focus on values, one jigger of fiscal rectitude, and one jigger of new public-sector engagement in building a prosperous society with security and opportunity for all. It's time to jettison the oft-used mantra of being a "social liberal and economic conservative" for a 21st-century political philosophy that is both more radical and, in crucial respects, more conservative.

That's not to say that LBJ and Ronald Reagan, the hippies and the evangelicals all didn't get some things right. The Democrats, and their union base, benefited millions in fostering broad-based economic growth, using activist fiscal policy, social protection and regulation, and support for worker and retiree economic security in the decades after World War II. Mr. Reagan and many subsequent Republicans also highlighted that, in many respects, the free market gets things right

more often than government. (Granted, this may not seem especially evident during the current financial crisis).

Moreover, the 1960s counterculture and rights movements were absolutely right to press for greater tolerance - in the form of more equitable gender roles, respect for once-marginalized groups, the ability to pursue less traditional routes to personal fulfillment, and the principle that nonharmful individual behavior should not be subject to state or community intrusiveness. Likewise, religious conservatives have taken the important lead in saying that much of modern narcissism - in family and personal life, unbridled consumption and hedonism, and putting the individual ahead of the community or nation - is not OK.

Such a philosophical amalgam may not appeal to those who believe in unregulated, winner-take-all capitalism; welfare state socialism; the cheapening of relationships, sex, credit, truth or sense of responsibility to community and nation; or debt-financed spending. Nor will it inspire those who would want women, gays, nonwhites or non-Christians (narrowly defined) to be brought into line by the values police. Yet, most Americans, in their hearts, believe in personal and social responsibility, in economic prosperity and equity, and in Lincoln's immortal words of "charity toward all and malice toward none."

While the policy adjustments may be complex, the real issue is about culture and changed beliefs and values as precursors and

corollaries to policy change. Of course, probing these cultural and value domains would require much more than a single column, so let's consider a few places where such a new philosophy might lead in practical terms.

For one, it would mean government reshaping its priorities and roles to spend more on growth and opportunity-producing investments such as education, energy, the environment, and science and to be stronger in regulating not only out-of-whack financial markets but also labor markets that have created a small flotilla of super-rich executives and investors and an oversized armada of workers struggling to make ends meet for their families. But it also would mean reshaping government so we don't continue to spend ourselves deeper and deeper into a national debt that is fast approaching \$10 trillion.

Equally importantly, it is about fostering an appreciation - in families and houses of worship, in schools and the media - that we can't just "live for today" or "look out for No. 1," in two discardable phrases of the 1960s and 1970s. Americans, historically a proudly self-reliant people, need to take more responsibility for themselves and their children, for example, by saving more and spending less, by eating and living in a more healthful fashion, and by taking a lead in teaching their children to value learning. Strong families and extended interpersonal networks not only help build better futures for America's children but also make values of love and commitment



October 5, 2008

more meaningful. This is especially important in our easy-come, easy-go culture exemplified by the lives of supermarket-tabloid celebrities. Similarly, rather than thinking only about what we can get, we need to think more about what we can give-in our communities, to our nation and to the world.

Values such as the importance of family, service, thrift, respect, responsibility, honesty and giving are essential for a good America. But so too are economic policies that, once again, can provide what [John Kennedy](#) called "a rising tide that lifts all boats," because growth without equity offers neither justice nor strength.

Would such a heretical brew alienate hard-core believers on all sides? We can only hope that those in each camp see the benefits of finding a new American common ground that emBRACes at least some of the values of their their principled antagonists.

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