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BEING A LIBERAL

By Douglas Archibald

I retired in August 2004, with two presentations at literature meetings in Liverpool providing a satisfying punctuation, then returned to volunteer for the MoveOn.org effort to change the administration in Washington. The effort worked in Maine but not well enough across the country, and I descended into depression and alienation, the intensity of which startled me.

What had happened to my country? Actions and attitudes that would have been unthinkable 10 years ago now characterize the government to which I pay taxes and pledge allegiance. The most striking instances (including some made manifest after the election) include:

- The bombing, invasion, and occupation of Iraq, a war of choice dishonestly justified, pursued at incredible cost in human life and material resources with no end in sight, and which makes us more rather than less vulnerable to terrorism;

- A bullying, belligerent view of the world. A belief that we are exempt from the provisions of the Geneva Convention and a willingness to kidnap, torture, maim, and kill human beings on flimsy evidence and without due process;

- Economic and tax policies that would return us to the 1920s, are indifferent or hostile to the poor, reckless about our environment, and pander to the very rich and powerful;

- A political culture defined by the school of Lee Atwater and Karl Rove, whose view of truth is entirely instrumental, who make Nixon's people (back in the news because of the revelation of Deep Throat's identity) look Milktoastian (see the outing of Valerie Plame).

Election Wednesday was a deeply discouraging moment. I had not been so invested in politics since the late 1960s, and I naturally thought again about those turbulent years. I had arrived at Cornell to teach English in 1963, just after my 30th birthday, about the same time as Mario Savio's slogan from Berkeley, "Don't trust anyone over thirty," and I was soon caught up in the politics—campus and country, academic and "real"—of that moment. Here is an attempt at self-definition and group identity from an essay I wrote about academic freedom at Cornell, November 1969:

We are generally without tenure and our chairmen fret about too much politics and too little publishing. ... We thought, a few years ago, that we were the liberal caucus, and were surprised to discover that everyone else thought they were too. We have observed with chagrin the erosion of liberalism and the discrediting of the liberal establishment, its endless talk and willful self-deception. Without systematic intent, with some amusement and more confusion, we have become the radical caucus: which means, since we are also teachers, that we are hung up. We believe that the university is one of the last places left in America where we can work, where life might possibly be critical, decent, and humane. So we want to preserve the university. At the same time we see that the university is manifestly not alive and well; ... that it must be decisively reformed if it is to be anything worth preserving. So we support—sometimes enthusiastically, sometimes nervously—various reform movements. We are increasingly distressed because the "Movement" seems too often either dead or crazy, and

the university, particularly its faculty, seems to be getting more nervous and rigid.

I'll stand by those words, but it is true that they do not seem wholly apt today. What has happened in 35 years—besides my being older, a little tired and creaky, maybe cranky?

That war is over. America lost. Vietnam is united and a tourist destination. We are in another war, even less justified and probably longer.

Universities have changed and good undergraduate colleges like Colby foster student participation in both academic governance and community service.

Right-wing fears of "tenured radicals" are largely self-serving fantasies—the Movement really is dead and faculties more settled and establishmentarian—but it is true that teachers are likely to be left of students, providing the delicious closet drama of conservative youth correcting reckless middle age. People like me feel some nostalgia for a solidarity with groups of students that rarely happens

in this century, at least not so far.

What seems most clear to me now is that we were never the radical caucus, however heady and gutsy that might have felt, but—willy-nilly, like it or not, warts and all—liberals. Our perspectives and values were those created by the liberal tradition with its roots in the French and American revolutions, the reform movements of the nineteenth century, especially in England and America, and the creation and implementation of the welfare state at the beginning of the twentieth.

And—here's the point—this was a huge historical achievement and a Good Thing. How have we allowed "liberal" to become a term of abuse or one to evade? What's wrong with a state that declares human welfare to be its chief goal? The radical caucus has moved to the far right and we have allowed sway to various authoritarianisms. For all the differences in intellect and experience, Vice President Cheney and Pope Benedict are profoundly united by what they felt as the trauma of the sixties, their belief that the right people are finally in control, and their determination to keep it that way. They are not alone.

What's an old guy to do? I joke with my children that I follow two slogans: "Keep the Faith" and "Living Well is the Best Revenge." That means golf, movies, nice meals, good books, the occasional peace vigil, regular volunteering at the homeless shelter. It means working locally—Maine really is special—and thinking not so much globally (though that's OK) as historically. One of my courses of reading has been literary biographies I never got to while working; that recently included E.P. Thompson's big book about William Morris. Morris's outcries against Victoria and Disraeli's imperialism and the ravages of unchecked industrial capitalism in the 1880s sound like home truths now. And Morris was right. And he was vindicated. The times they will change.

Douglas Archibald—Roberts Professor of Literature emeriti, former dean of faculty, authority on Yeats, Joyce, and others—retired in 2004 after a 40-year career that began at Cornell in 1963. Post-retirement events have moved Archibald to reflect on the place of the liberal, now and in his own political past.

