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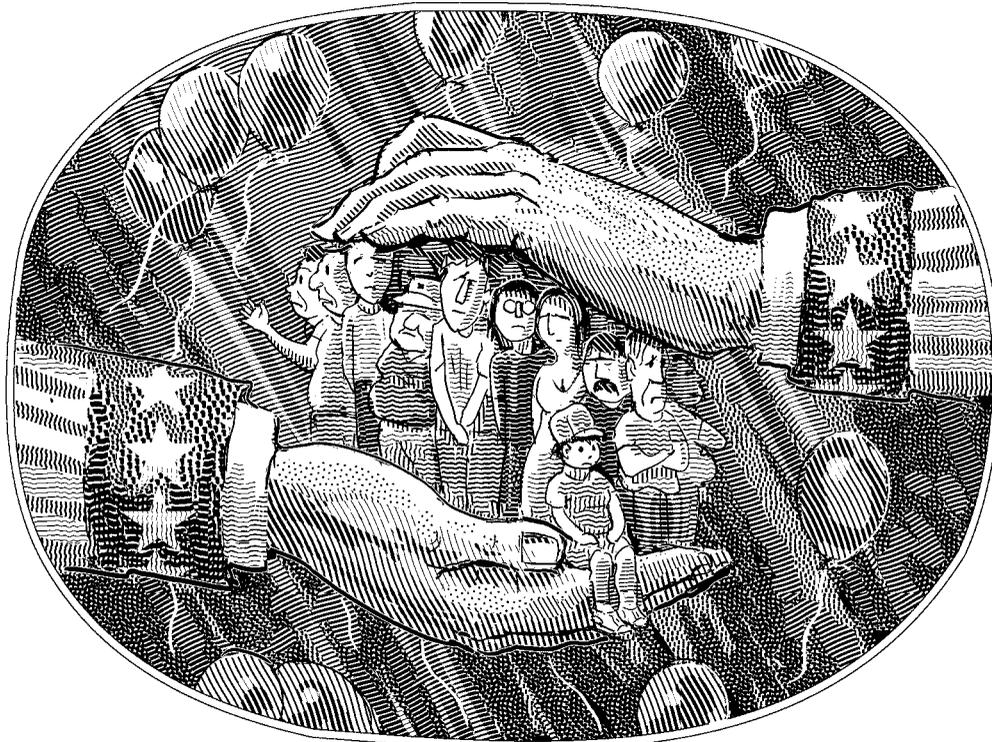
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Book Review by Rich Lowry

I FEEL YOUR PAIN

The Pity Party: A Mean-Spirited Diatribe Against Liberal Compassion, by William Voegeli.
Broadside Books, 320 pages, \$26.99



THE TRUMP CARD OF LIBERALISM IS always compassion. Whether it's in a dorm room or on the Senate floor, in any debate the presumption is that liberals self-evidently care about people and their opponents do not. End of discussion. In his new book, William Voegeli subjects liberal compassion to a sustained examination that exposes its inadequacies, contradictions, perversities—and, ultimately, its threat to our system of government.

I don't need to introduce the author of *The Pity Party* to readers of the *Claremont Review of Books*. His work is invariably acute and grounded in a sure-footed understanding of the philosophical undercurrents of our politics. Despite its subtitle, this book is neither mean-spirited nor a diatribe; it's a brilliant intellectual dissection that bristles with insight and arresting formulations.

Since compassion is so central to contemporary liberalism, *The Pity Party* is less a critique of an aspect of liberalism than of liberalism itself—and of our most prized virtue. Compassion, Voegeli notes, “is routinely used not just to name a moral virtue, but to designate the pinnacle or even the entirety of moral excellence.” In his famous 1984 Democratic convention speech, New York Governor

Mario Cuomo set out the animating vision of liberalism. He said that government should be “the idea of family, mutuality, the sharing of benefits and burdens for the good of all, feeling one another's pain, sharing one another's blessings—reasonably, honestly, fairly, without respect to race, or sex, or geography, or political affiliation.” President Obama has said, less ringingly, that “kindness” accounts for all of his political principles. (Voegeli comments acidly, “Apparently, all one really needs to know about politics can be learned in kindergarten.”)

Voegeli's examination begins with the vacuum left by modernity's destruction of the former “comprehensive shared understanding” of human affairs. By his account, there are several ways to fill it. One is totalitarianism, which discredited itself in the horrors of the 20th century. Another is the notion of self-interest well understood that undergirds *The Federalist's* political science and informs Adam Smith's economics. But liberals distrust the market's propensity to render selfishness benevolent. Their answer is compassion. They rely on what they take to be our natural empathy to forge a togetherness. This dispensation doesn't depend on any grand theory, and liberals reject both premodern and totalitarian

versions of philosophical unity. They notionally reject certainty itself, embracing Judge Learned Hand's belief that “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right.”

THERE IS A COUNTERVAILING TENDENCY, though. Liberals, according to Voegeli, “want the modern bargain of agreeing to disagree, but also keep trying to graft a moral and teleological unity onto it.” They envy the universality of the great religious faiths, and seek their own vague, secular version. “The marriage of liberal universalism and liberal skepticism,” he writes, “proclaims the brotherhood of man while rejecting the fatherhood of God.”

Although it is difficult to recall, there was a time when liberal compassion didn't dominate the Democratic Party. It used to be that what Voegeli calls the “Eleanor tendency,” after Franklin Roosevelt's naïvely do-gooding First Lady, was checked by a patriotic, tough-minded vein within the party. John F. Kennedy represented the high tide of the “desentimentalization of liberalism.” His assassination changed everything. Liberalism went from appealing to the country's pride to inveighing against its depravity. In 1962,

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., published a collection of essays called *The Politics of Hope*; in 1969, he titled a new collection *The Crisis of Confidence*.

This is the liberalism we know. It demanded the enactment of a sweeping program to save America from itself, and lurched from an emphasis on “the helplessness of sufferers” in the 1930s, to the further contention that they were helpless because of what had been done to them. The cultural attributes that lift people out of poverty came to be dismissed as merely a way to blame the poor for their own poverty.

VOEGELI SUBJECTS ALL OF THIS TO withering assault. He makes liberal use of the word “bullshit,” elevating it to a major concept and featuring it in a chapter heading: “How Liberal Compassion Leads to Bullshit.” The word is a little jarring, especially from a writer as calm and judicious as this one, but Voegeli makes a good case that it’s exactly right, quoting the philosophy professor Harry Frankfurt that the “essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*.”

At the core of liberal bullshit is the fact that the same people who care so much about social programs—don’t seem to care whether they work or not. Social programs never end, and only extremely rarely are they significantly reformed. Even if programs like Head Start are *proven* to be ineffectual, they are still defended as totems of compassion. The answer is always more spending, and more programs, regardless of how much government has already grown.

This gets to the central dynamic of liberal compassion. To wit, “the liberals who create, perpetuate, defend, and expand social welfare programs are devoted to them less because they care about helping than because they care about caring,” as Voegeli puts it. It is this flaw, he writes, that “connects the theory of liberalism to the malpractice of liberalism,” to its toleration of waste and failure. There may be a perverse psychological benefit to the malpractice. He quotes the late political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain: “Pity is about how deeply I can feel. And in order to feel this way,

to experience the rush of my own pious reaction, I need victims the way an addict needs drugs.” Considering people as victims, and encouraging them to consider themselves as such, does them no favors. Citing Thomas Sowell’s work on the success of Chinese immigrants throughout Southeast Asia despite persistent discrimination, Voegeli notes that there are no examples of “groups that have acquired significant, durable social and economic advantages by feeling sorry for themselves, or by inducing other, more powerful groups to feel sorry for and guilty about them.”

LIBERALS ARE LOATH TO INSIST ON basic cultural norms. Who are we to judge, they ask, between a life of indolence and of work, a life of self-discipline and of indulgence? It is this attitude that gives rise to what George W. Bush aptly called the soft bigotry of low expectations. C.S. Lewis famously diagnosed the tendency of kindness, unmoored from any standards, to exhibit an “indifference to its object, and even something like contempt of it.” This non-judgmentalism applies only to victims, not to those who liberals believe are heartlessly unwilling to help. Voegeli borrows the formulation of Harvard’s Harvey Mansfield that liberalism is, in essence, an “alliance of experts and victims.” It scorns those who resist this alliance—as stupid for not deferring to the experts and as unfeeling for not bowing to the needs of the victims. The only truly legitimate expression of compassion in the liberal mind is government programs, which tend to crowd out private charity. The United States has much more private social welfare spending than Western European countries that have more fully embraced the welfare state. As Voegeli writes, “The sincere, spontaneous reaction to suffering, which propels the liberal project, is attenuated by the pursuit of that project.”

How have conservatives responded to liberal compassion? Voegeli devotes his final chapter to this question. The compassionate conservatism of George W. Bush sought to blunt the image of conservatives as heartless, with some limited political success (it helped make Bush seem less threatening in the 2000 campaign). But substantively it was a non-

starter. Obviously, social problems have policy implications, but that doesn’t mean they have policy solutions. The Bush agenda, consequently, was always unclear and smallbore.

Voegeli himself is partial to the negative income tax schemes advanced by Milton Friedman and Charles Murray to guarantee a certain income to everyone and leave it at that. Murray would abolish most major social welfare programs. For Voegeli, this approach has the advantage of acknowledging that the welfare state is inevitable (every modern developed country has one), while radically simplifying it. It would establish boundaries on the state and accentuate the importance of private charitable organizations and individual responsibility. Of course, a negative income tax is not going to get marked up by the House Ways and Means Committee anytime soon, let alone signed by a president.

Voegeli concludes *The Pity Party* by arguing that the politics of compassion is inherent to democracy, with its natural emphasis on equality. This doesn’t mean that it is good for democracy. The tendencies of liberal compassion are deeply harmful to it. The pity party’s impatience for action and willingness to trample procedural constraints to get it are corrosive of our constitutional system. Its programs erode the mores upon which self-government depends. Compassion, in short, can’t be the basis of a worthy democratic politics. “Much more than their empathy,” Voegeli writes of the people who govern us, “we require their respect—for us; our rights; our capacity and responsibility to feel and heal our own damn pains without their ministrations; and for America’s constitutional checks and limitations, which err on the side of caution and republicanism by denying even the most compassionate elected official a monarch’s plenary powers.”

To wring this out of them is an essentially endless project, to which William Voegeli’s new book is an invaluable contribution.

Rich Lowry is editor of National Review and the author, most recently, of Lincoln Unbound: How an Ambitious Young Railsplitter Saved the American Dream—and How We Can Do It Again (Broadside Books).

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