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### American Individualism and Democracy

In both its creation and in practice, American democracy is influenced greatly by conservative individualism, an ideal rooted in American Christianity and colonialism that continues to affect social and economic policies. Barry Goldwater and other conservative American thinkers have maintained the “sacred” nature of individualism, but others such as Milton Friedman have accepted the necessity for conformity in certain government actions while still staying true to individual economic liberties. Black Elk, a Oglala Lakota spiritual leader, provides a non-American perspective that challenges the need for individualism in economy and democracy. Ultimately, while American democracy was created and shaped by individualists, its future depends on the appropriate balance between the individual and the collective.

Individualism is a major component of American conservatism, especially during the 1960s. In his book *Conscience of a Conservative*, Arizona senator and 1964 Republican nominee for President Barry Goldwater makes a serious contrast between American conservatives and liberals. Liberals, argues Goldwater, only consider the material side of man’s nature, believing that an individual only exists to serve the “dominant mission of society,” which apparently is to use political and economic forces to compel “progress.” What exactly Goldwater means by “progress” is unknown, yet it is likely that he believes any progress made by liberals is likely progress in the wrong direction.. Specifically, Goldwater calls the liberal approach to politics as a “collective effort.” It is an interesting choice of words. Throughout Goldwater’s first chapter, he implies heavily that only liberals would ever erase the multifaceted nature of man for the sake of a “collective effort.” Goldwater thereby condemns collectivism and upholds individualism as a

conservative ideal that Americans should work to preserve. This is because, while liberals focus on the societal value of a person, conservatives take account of “the whole man.” In this narrative, conservatives see the economic as well as the spiritual character of man. Thus Goldwater’s argument for the “sacred” nature of individualism.

The United States has a deep connection with Christianity that extends back to its very founding. The majority of the country has historically been Christian, and the ideals of Christianity permeate every level of government. This includes the very Christian notion, specifically the Protestant notion, of individualism. A singular identity is a core value American Protestantism and that extends to American politics. Goldwater crosses the line from simple political values to a deeply ingrained belief that “man’s most sacred possession is his individual soul... the mortal side establishes his absolute differentness from every other human being.” He then connects individualism with conservatism, writing that conservatism “has regarded man neither as a potential pawn of other men, nor as a part of a general collectivity in which the sacredness and the separate identity of individual human beings are ignored.” Here he returns to this idea of “sacredness.” The use of a word with religious connotations is far from unintentional. He correlates the moral high ground of religion with a conservative political ideology when he writes “the conscience of the Conservative is pricked by *anyone* who would debase the dignity of the individual human being,” and “ a Conservative knows that to regard man as part of an undifferentiated mass is to consign him to ultimate slavery.” He is arguing that individuality is something that must be respected, yet only conservatives can respect it. This intentionally creates a polarization of the two dominant political ideologies, but Goldwater goes further. He brings the conversation to economics. This is logical, since economics and politics are intertwined, but he specifically writes that societal good can only come from a policy that is essentially every man

for himself. Even his language is similar to this old adage when he says that, “every man, for his individual good and for the good of his society, is responsible for his *own* development.”

Goldwater was not a revolutionary by any means. He was writing during the 1960s, and at that time American individualism was not a new concept. Though he believed himself to be defending conservatism against a liberal collectivism, his views reflect those of traditional American society.

In fact, conservative individualism has been the status quo in America for centuries, and this had a direct impact on the indigenous peoples displaced by American colonialism. Black Elk, a spiritual leader of the Oglala Lakota, offered his observations of American individualism in contrast to the collectivist culture of his own people in the book *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. Before delving into Black Elk’s vision of the Wasichus, or white people, it is important to understand the lens through which he saw American individualism. Oglala Lakota nation prior to colonization is proof that a society can flourish while still being collectivist. Black Elk’s people belong to a strong community, and their strength and happiness came from the “sacred hoop of the nation.” This sacred hoop, a symbol of collectivism, is present in many aspects of Oglala culture, from architecture and symbols to the very structure of society itself. There was an understanding between the Oglala people that every member of the nation would be taken care of, and “so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished.”

The Oglala Lakota culture stands in complete contrast to the vision exemplified by Barry Goldwater. The only similarity between the two is that both perspectives are informed by spirituality. In his lifetime, Black Elk had many interactions with the Wasichus, and he saw that they were far more individualistic than his own people. He recalls in *Black Elk Speaks* that “the

Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did before the nation's hoop was broken." To someone who had been raised by such a strong community, the importance that was placed on individualism in Wasichu society was completely foreign and even cruel. He says that "they would take everything from each other if they could, and so there were some who had more of everything than they could use, while crowds of people had nothing at all..." This is a very different view of American society than the one Goldwater presented. Goldwater saw individualism in economics and politics as sacred and freeing, but Black Elk saw a system that rewarded selfishness and indifference. Even when colonization had forced his people to abandon their old ways, Black Elk still saw the flaws in their new way of living, and recalled that "they were traveling the black road, everybody for himself and with little rules of his own." Black Elk's perspective is important when discussing the future of American democracy, because it shows that the world is not completely subject to individualistic policies. Individualism is flawed in that it perpetuates inequality and it alienates people from one another. Yet there are still times when a balance between individualism and collectivism can create a stable democracy.

Milton Friedman may have identified a synthesis of individualism and collectivism. Friedman is an economist who was one of Goldman's advisors. He has been described as a libertarian, though he objects to the use of party labels, and he has a more liberal view of collectivism than Goldwater while tending more towards individualism than Black Elk. Similar to Goldwater, he believes that the government should not advance on individual freedoms, writing that "the major problem in deciding the appropriate activities of government is how to resolve such conflicts among the freedoms of different individuals." Individualism should be preserved especially in the market, and the role of the market specifically is to permit unanimity without conformity, and through government, "prevent coercion of one individual by another."

He does not go so far as to claim that this is a sacred identity that can never be infringed upon. In fact he acknowledges that there are instances where individuals do need to act as a collective, especially in politics. He specifically characterizes political channels as tending to “require or to enforce substantial conformity.” Whereas Goldwater defended individualism in American democracy, Friedman argues that the very nature of democracy is conformity, but democracy still has to respect individualism. The process of democracy, according to Friedman, is as follows: “with respect to such indivisible matters we can discuss, and argue, and vote. But having decided, we must conform.” Up until that decision in this process, however, participants in democracy are able to have their individual opinions. They can discuss with one another as individuals, they can debate matters that they are passionate about, and they can cast their vote in a system that is designed to give them political advocacy through proportional representation. Friedman writes, “to the liberal... the ideal is unanimity among responsible individuals achieved on the basis of free and full discussion.” This is actually consistent with Goldwater’s belief that liberals advocate for collectivism or “unanimity,” but this collective agreement is only reached through a recognition of individual voices in a “free and full” discussion, otherwise known as democracy. Once the votes are counted and the majority found, however, the individuals must respect the result and by doing so, maintain the order of society. If individualism were to go too far, democracy would be pointless. Everyone could simply act on their own agendas and inevitably, individuals would turn on individuals. It is actually through collectivism that individualism is maintained. Friedman says as much when he writes that, “men’s freedoms can conflict, and when they do, one man’s freedom must be limited to preserve another.” The idea of conflicted freedoms is the primary reason why Goldwater’s ideal of absolute individualism would never work. In other words, “the need for government in these respects arises because

absolute freedom is impossible.” Still, Friedman believes that there should also be limits to collectivism. Most of Friedman's arguments in the chapter “The Role of Government in a Free Society” of his 1962 book *Capitalism and Society* revolve around defining where the government can and cannot enforce this collectivism.

At this point there has been discussion of the perspectives of three thinkers on the matter of individualism in American democracy and government. Each one shares similarities with the other just as much as differences. For both Black Elk and Goldwater, their beliefs are spiritually informed, though Black Elk conflicts with an entirely individualist philosophy. For both Goldwater and Friedman, their perspectives are American and deal with the impact of American policy. They both recognize the importance of individual freedom in democracy, but Friedman concedes that collectivism is inherent to democracy and government if there is to be a free and peaceful society that protects individuals.

There is evidence that there is a relationship between individualism and democracy since the founding of American democracy, but there is still the question of whether or not democracy was meant to be individualistic. Goldwater certainly seems to think so, but Friedman thinks that democracy achieves a collectivist result. I believe it is both. Those who believe that democracy is collectivist might argue that the Founding Fathers did not agree with individualism. Afterall, they opposed the British monarchy. What this argument fails to consider is that monarchy places value on one individual over everyone else. One person has unlimited individualism, and as a result, the rest of society becomes one big collective. When creating the structure of American democracy, the Founding Father and the first American political thinkers wanted a system where individual freedoms to be protected above all else. The best solution that protected individuals without allowing unlimited individualism was to create policies built around the idea of

collective individual powers. This is the idea reflected in Friedman's idea of democracy. A group of individuals who participate in a political process that respects their individuality but ultimately makes a decision that affects the collective. Individualism played an important role in the structuring of our government and philosophy, but was only reinforced culturally, politically, and economically and over the past two centuries, American individualism has grown to permeate democracy to a degree that the Founding Fathers had never intended. We see evidence of this in Black Elk's telling of American expansionism and colonization. The idea of growing American individualism is only reinforced in Goldwater's writing when he calls individuality "sacred" and implies that infringing upon that individualism in any way would be an act against Christian ideals. Again, this is only a reflection of American beliefs during the 20th century. During this time, individualism was certainly on the rise. Americans had to protect their own interests and only look out for themselves both politically and economically.

Today we see individualism in both conservative and liberal rhetoric, but it manifests in totally different ways. Conservatives, similar to Goldwater, believe in a free market with little government interference and a political system that rewards individualism and cares little for the collective. For liberals, individualism manifests in the idea that every person deserves security, advocacy, and rights that are protected from other individuals.

That is not to say that individualism doesn't have its place in a democracy. A truly uniform collective threatens to drown out the minority. The point of a democracy is to give people representation and a sense of political advocacy. Political freedoms rely on individualism. A system that is too individualist, however, threatens to alienate people from one another and warps democracy into anarchy where every man must fend for himself. A balance must be struck between the two. The future of American democracy depends on it.