

COMMENTARY: Why liberals always win, as history's tide flows left
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By James A. Haught

One of my history-minded friends has a long-range political view summed up in three words: Liberals always win. Complex social struggles may take centuries or decades, he says, but they eventually bring victory for human rights, more democratic liberties, a stronger public safety net and other progressive goals.

Look how long it took to end slavery. Generations of agitation and the horrible Civil War finally brought triumph for liberal abolitionists and defeat for conservative slavery supporters.

Look how long it took for women to gain the right to vote. In the end, liberal suffragettes prevailed, conservative opponents lost.

Look at the long battle to give couples the right to practice birth control. Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger was jailed eight times for the crime of mentioning sex — but she eventually transformed U.S. society. A Supreme Court victory in 1965 struck down contraceptive bans for married couples, and a follow-up victory in 1972 struck them down for unwed ones. Liberals won, conservatives lost.

In the 1920s, conservatives imposed Prohibition of alcohol on America, but they eventually lost, and booze flowed again.

Similarly, conservatives tried to block Social Security pensions for retirees — and unemployment compensation for the jobless — and equality for blacks — and Medicare and Medicaid — and equality for women — and food stamps for needy families — and expanded health insurance under the Affordable Care Act — and equality for gays — etc. But all these stormy social conflicts ended the same way: Liberals always win. Conservatives always lose.

The nonviolent civil rights movement that ended Jim Crow segregation and made Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. an American icon was a classic liberal victory.

Of course, history doesn't move in a clear, predictable manner. Germany was advanced and modern — yet it sank into the horrors of Nazism. Other setbacks have occurred, but the overall tide of civilization flows in a progressive direction.

In his landmark book, "The Better Angels of Our Nature," Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker concludes that all sorts of human evils — war, genocide, murder, rape, torture, dueling, wife-bashing, attacks on minorities, etc. — have faded enormously from the Western world. International warfare has virtually vanished. The pursuit of such humane goals lies at the heart of the liberal agenda.

When I first became a news reporter in the 1950s, conservative Bible Belt morality was enforced by laws. It was a crime for stores to open on the Sabbath. It was a crime to look at the equivalent of a Playboy magazine or to read a sexy book. (The mayor of my town once sent cops to raid bookstores selling "Peyton Place.")

Back then, it was a felony to be gay, and those who were caught were sent to prison under old sodomy laws. Back then, it was a felony for a desperate girl to end a pregnancy. It was illegal for an unmarried couple to share a bedroom. Divorce or an unwed pregnancy was an unmentionable disgrace. Jews weren't allowed into Christian-only country clubs. Public schools had a mandatory teacher-led prayer. It was a crime to buy a cocktail or a lottery ticket.

That world disappeared, decade after decade. The culture slowly evolved. Sunday “blue laws” were undone. Teacher-led prayers were banned. Gay sex became legal. Liquor clubs were approved. Abortion became legal. State governments became lottery operators. Censorship ended. Other conservative taboos gradually disappeared.

Within my lifetime, morality flip-flopped. Conservative thou-shalt-nots lost their grip on society. Liberals won — yet it happened so gradually that hardly anyone noticed.

For several decades, the strongest indicator of politics was church membership. White evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Mitt Romney. People who don’t attend worship voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama. The latter became the largest group in the Democratic Party base. They’re generally more tolerant.

Today, survey after survey finds American church membership fading, while the young generation ignores religion. Many sociologists think the secular trend is unstoppable. People who say their faith is “none” already comprise one-fourth of the adult population — 56 million Americans — and they seem destined someday to be the largest segment. The social tide is flowing away from conservative fundamentalism and its Puritanical agenda.

All these factors support my friend’s maxim that liberals always win. The progressive worldview is called humanism — trying to make life better for all people — and it’s a powerful current. In 1960, John F. Kennedy said in a famed speech:

“If by a ‘liberal’ they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reaction, someone who cares about the welfare of the people — their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights and their civil liberties — ... then I’m proud to say that I’m a liberal.”

Now that progressives have won the battle for same-sex marriage and locked the Affordable Care Act into law, the never-ending struggle undoubtedly will shift to new fronts. Maybe legalization of marijuana or registration of pistols or free college will be the next big showdown. Whatever comes, I’m ready to predict the eventual winner.

Amid all the chaos and confusion of daily life, through a thousand contradictory barrages, the struggle for a safer, fairer, more secure, more humane world never ceases. It’s a historic wave that began with The Enlightenment three centuries ago. Thank heaven for progressive victories that keep on prevailing.