

David Mamet: Why I Am No Longer a 'Brain-Dead Liberal'

An election-season essay

by David Mamet

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John Maynard Keynes was twitted with changing his mind. He replied, "When the facts change, I change my opinion. What do you do, sir?"

My favorite example of a change of mind was Norman Mailer at *The Village Voice*.

Norman took on the role of drama critic, weighing in on the New York premiere of *Waiting for Godot*.

Twentieth century's greatest play. Without bothering to go, Mailer called it a piece of garbage. When he did get around to seeing it, he realized his mistake. He was no longer a *Voice* columnist, however, so he bought a page in the paper and wrote a retraction, praising the play as the masterpiece it is.

Every playwright's dream.

I once won one of Mary Ann Madden's "Competitions" in *New York* magazine. The task was to name or create a "10" of anything, and mine was the World's Perfect Theatrical Review. It went like this: "I never understood the theater until last night. Please forgive everything I've ever written. When you read this I'll be dead." That, of course, is the only review anybody in the theater ever wants to get.

My prize, in a stunning example of irony, was a year's subscription to *New York*, which rag (apart from Mary Ann's "Competition") I considered an open running sore on the body of world literacy—this due to the presence in its pages of John Simon, whose stunning amalgam of superciliousness and savagery, over the years, was appreciated by that readership searching for an endorsement of proactive mediocrity.

But I digress.

I wrote a play about politics (*November*, Barrymore Theater, Broadway, some seats still available). And as part of the "writing process," as I believe it's called, I started thinking about politics. This comment is not actually as jejune as it might seem. *Porgy and Bess* is a buncha good songs but has nothing to do with race relations, which is the flag of convenience under which it sailed.

But my play, it turned out, was actually about politics, which is to say, about the polemic between persons of two opposing views. The argument in my play is between a president who is self-interested, corrupt, suborned, and realistic, and his leftish, lesbian, utopian-socialist speechwriter.

The play, while being a laugh a minute, is, when it's at home, a disputation between reason and faith, or perhaps between the conservative (or tragic) view and the liberal (or perfectionist) view. The conservative president in the piece holds that people are each out to make a living, and the best way for government to facilitate that is to *stay out of the way*, as the inevitable abuses and failures of this system (free-market economics) are less than those of government intervention. I took the liberal view for many decades, but I believe I have changed my mind.

As a child of the '60s, I accepted as an article of faith that government is corrupt, that business is exploitative, and that people are generally good at heart.

These cherished precepts had, over the years, become ingrained as increasingly impracticable prejudices. Why do I say impracticable? Because although I still held these beliefs, I no longer applied them in my life. How do I know? My wife informed me. We were riding along and listening to NPR. I felt my facial muscles tightening, and the words beginning to form in my mind: *Shut the fuck up.* "?" she prompted. And her terse, elegant summation, as always, awakened me to a deeper truth: I had been listening to NPR and reading various organs of national opinion for years, wonder and rage contending for pride of place. Further: I found I had been—rather charmingly, I thought—referring to myself for years as "a brain-dead liberal," and to NPR as "National Palestinian Radio."

This is, to me, the synthesis of this worldview with which I now found myself disenchanted: that everything is always wrong.

But in my life, a brief review revealed, everything was not always wrong, and neither was nor is always wrong in the community in which I live, or in my country. Further, it was not always wrong in previous communities in which I lived, and among the various and mobile classes of which I was at various times a part.

And, I wondered, how could I have spent decades thinking that I thought everything was always wrong *at the same time* that I thought I thought that people were basically good at heart? Which was it? I began to question what I actually thought and found that I do not think that people are basically good at heart; indeed, that view of human nature has both prompted and informed my writing for the last 40 years. I think that people, in circumstances of stress, can behave like swine, and that this, indeed, is not only a fit subject, but the only subject, of drama.

I'd observed that lust, greed, envy, sloth, and their pals are giving the world a good run for its money, but that nonetheless, people in general seem to get from day to day; and that we in the United States get from day to day under rather wonderful and privileged circumstances—that we are not and never have been the villains that some of the world and some of our citizens make us out to be, but that we are a confection of normal (greedy, lustful, duplicitous, corrupt, inspired—in short, human) individuals living under a spectacularly effective compact called the Constitution, and lucky to get it.

For the Constitution, rather than suggesting that all behave in a godlike manner, recognizes that, to the contrary, people are swine and will take any opportunity to subvert any agreement in order to pursue what they consider to be their proper interests.

To that end, the Constitution separates the power of the state into those three branches which are for most of us (I include myself) the only thing we remember from 12 years of schooling. The Constitution, written by men with some experience of actual government, assumes that the chief executive will work to be king, the Parliament will scheme to sell off the silverware, and the judiciary will consider itself Olympian and do everything it can to much improve (destroy) the work of the other two branches. So the Constitution pits them against each other, in the attempt not to achieve stasis, but rather to allow for the constant corrections necessary to prevent one branch from getting too much power for too long.

Rather brilliant. For, in the abstract, we may envision an Olympian perfection of perfect beings in Washington doing the business of their employers, the people, but any of us who has ever been at a zoning meeting with our property at stake is aware of the urge to cut through all the pernicious bullshit and go straight to firearms.

I found not only that I didn't trust the current government (that, to me, was no surprise), but that an impartial review revealed that the faults of this president—whom I, a good liberal, considered a

monster—were little different from those of a president whom I revered.

Bush got us into Iraq, JFK into Vietnam. Bush stole the election in Florida; Kennedy stole his in Chicago. Bush outed a CIA agent; Kennedy left hundreds of them to die in the surf at the Bay of Pigs. Bush lied about his military service; Kennedy accepted a Pulitzer Prize for a book written by Ted Sorenson. Bush was in bed with the Saudis, Kennedy with the Mafia. Oh.

And I began to question my hatred for "the Corporations"—the hatred of which, I found, was but the flip side of my hunger for those goods and services they provide and without which we could not live.

And I began to question my distrust of the "Bad, Bad Military" of my youth, which, I saw, was then and is now made up of those men and women who actually risk their lives to protect the rest of us from a very hostile world. Is the military always right? No. Neither is government, nor are the corporations—they are just different signposts for the particular amalgamation of our country into separate working groups, if you will. Are these groups infallible, free from the possibility of mismanagement, corruption, or crime? No, and neither are you or I. So, taking the tragic view, the question was not "Is everything perfect?" but "How could it be better, at what cost, and according to whose definition?" Put into which form, things appeared to me to be unfolding pretty well.

Do I speak as a member of the "privileged class"? If you will—but classes in the United States are mobile, not static, which is the Marxist view. That is: Immigrants came and continue to come here penniless and can (and do) become rich; the nerd makes a trillion dollars; the single mother, penniless and ignorant of English, sends her two sons to college (my grandmother). On the other hand, the rich and the children of the rich can go belly-up; the hegemony of the railroads is appropriated by the airlines, that of the networks by the Internet; and the individual may and probably will change status more than once within his lifetime.

What about the role of government? Well, in the abstract, coming from my time and background, I thought it was a rather good thing, but tallying up the ledger in those things which affect me and in those things I observe, I am hard-pressed to see an instance where the intervention of the government led to much beyond sorrow.

*But* if the government is not to intervene, how will we, mere human beings, work it all out? I wondered and read, and it occurred to me that I knew the answer, and here it is: We just seem to. How do I know? From experience. I referred to my own—take away the director from the staged play and what do you get? Usually a diminution of strife, a shorter rehearsal period, and a better production.

The director, generally, does not *cause* strife, but his or her presence impels the actors to direct (and manufacture) claims designed to appeal to Authority—that is, to set aside the original goal (staging a play for the audience) and indulge in politics, the purpose of which may be to gain status and influence outside the ostensible goal of the endeavor.

Strand unacquainted bus travelers in the middle of the night, and what do you get? A lot of bad drama, and a shake-and-bake Mayflower Compact. Each, instantly, adds what he or she can to the solution. Why? Each wants, and in fact needs, to contribute—to throw into the pot what gifts each has in order to achieve the overall goal, as well as status in the new-formed community. And so they work it out.

See also that most magnificent of schools, the jury system, where, again, each brings nothing into the room save his or her own prejudices, and, through the course of deliberation, comes not to a perfect solution, but a solution acceptable to the community—a solution the community can live

with.

Prior to the midterm elections, my rabbi was taking a lot of flack. The congregation is exclusively liberal, he is a self-described independent (read "conservative"), and he was driving the flock wild. Why? Because a) he never discussed politics; and b) he taught that the quality of political discourse must be addressed first—that Jewish law teaches that it is incumbent upon each person to hear the other fellow out.

And so I, like many of the liberal congregation, began, teeth grinding, to attempt to do so. And in doing so, I recognized that I held those two views of America (politics, government, corporations, the military). One was of a state where everything was magically wrong and must be immediately corrected at any cost; and the other—the world in which I actually functioned day to day—was made up of people, most of whom were reasonably trying to maximize their comfort by getting along with each other (in the workplace, the marketplace, the jury room, on the freeway, even at the school-board meeting).

And I realized that the time had come for me to avow my participation in that America in which I chose to live, and that that country was not a schoolroom teaching values, but a marketplace.

"Aha," you will say, and you are right. I began reading not only the economics of Thomas Sowell (our greatest contemporary philosopher) but Milton Friedman, Paul Johnson, and Shelby Steele, and a host of conservative writers, and found that I agreed with them: a free-market understanding of the world meshes more perfectly with my experience than that idealistic vision I called liberalism.

*At the same time*, I was writing my play about a president, corrupt, venal, cunning, and vengeful (as I assume all of them are), and two turkeys. And I gave this fictional president a speechwriter who, in his view, is a "brain-dead liberal," much like my earlier self; and in the course of the play, they have to work it out. And they eventually do come to a human understanding of the political process. As I believe I am trying to do, and in which I believe I may be succeeding, and I will try to summarize it in the words of William Allen White.

White was for 40 years the editor of the *Emporia Gazette* in rural Kansas, and a prominent and powerful political commentator. He was a great friend of Theodore Roosevelt and wrote the best book I've ever read about the presidency. It's called *Masks in a Pageant*, and it profiles presidents from McKinley to Wilson, and I recommend it unreservedly.

White was a pretty clear-headed man, and he'd seen human nature as few can. (As Twain wrote, you want to understand men, run a country paper.) White knew that people need both to get ahead and to get along, and that they're always working at one or the other, and that government should most probably stay out of the way and let them get on with it. But, he added, there is such a thing as liberalism, and it may be reduced to these saddest of words: ". . . and yet . . ."

The right is mooring about faith, the left is mooring about change, and many are incensed about the fools on the other side—but, at the end of the day, they are the same folks we meet at the water cooler. Happy election season.

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