When American scholars debate the origins and effects of liberal political thought, they are really diagnosing the health of American politics. A book published in the United States bearing the title *Liberalism at Wits' End* has the same prognostic force that a title like *The Death Knell of Marxism-Leninism* would have in the Soviet Union.

The difference, of course, is that America supposedly possesses no official ideology. The genius of American politics, proclaimed by the eminent historian and now Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin, is that it has never been guided by ideas but only by what works.

This is plainly wrong. Whatever their disputes over candidates or policies, most Americans believe in individual rights, private property, equality of opportunity, and limited government. By the canons of political theory, these ideas fall under the rubric of "liberalism," a tradition of political thinking that originated in the writings of Hobbes, Locke, and Adam Smith and was concretely embodied in the American Revolution and the Constitution of 1787.

Thus, liberalism and politics in the United States have an intimate relationship: crudely put, it is the relationship of theory to practice. This relationship was most trenchantly examined by former Harvard professor Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America*.

According to Hartz, America from its founding—that is, since the period between the Revolution and the ratification of the Constitution—has had only one great class, the middle class, and only one great theory, liberalism. Never ruled by a monarch, and never having known an hereditary nobility, the United States never had the political or social foundation for a genuine conservatism. American "conservatives" have sometimes emphasized the rights of property over those of the individual, and "liberals" have often reversed those priorities; but both conservatives and liberals think of politics generally in terms of rights. Unlike Daniel Boorstin, Louis Hartz never equated this univocal quality of American political thought with genius. In fact, Hartz asserted that American politics and political thinking had been impoverished by lack of variety. Potentially curative ways of political thinking that transcend the boundaries of liberalism are ignored or reviled in the United States.

In recent years, both liberalism and Louis Hartz's thesis linking liberalism with the United States have been subjected to increasingly powerful assault by political theorists and historians. Marxist theorists rejected liberalism from the beginning, calling it "a theory of possessive individualism" and many harsher things. And since the 1950s, decidedly non-Marxist, neo-Aristotelian political theorists have contended that liberalism's excessive attention to individual rights and its insufficient concern for public life have produced the breakdown of political community. The dissolution of community has induced a sense of aimlessness, a turning inward and away from others—not to deep reflection but into the solipsism of the senses. To avoid confronting their despair, individuals mock Jeffersonian happiness through possession of drugs, sex, and promiscuity. The political effect of liberalism, according to this analysis, is the silence and resignation of the citizenry and the corruption of the government. Thus, *The Pentagon Papers* and Watergate were not deviations from liberalism's course but the inevitable end of the road.

Stephen Newman's *Liberalism at Wits' End* concisely expresses this understanding of liberalism. As his title indicates, Newman sees the libertarian movement as the logical culmination of John Locke's liberalism; not surprisingly, he discovers that libertarianism is liberalism's lowest rung.

In his opening chapters, Newman gives a clear and coherent account of a small but significant political movement that we usually hear about in only a fragmentary way. Newman goes on to analyze the political thinking of the libertarians and their progenitors, particularly of Locke, Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and Robert Nozick.

Libertarians, according to Newman, take for the whole of Locke's theory that aspect which sees power in perpetual conflict with freedom. Both Newman and the libertarians ignore the more statist, more political Locke of *The First Treatise on Government*. Newman writes: "The Libertarian party wants to abolish the entire regulatory apparatus along with social security, welfare, public education, and the powers of taxation and eminent domain. Insisting on the right of all persons 'to live in whatever manner they choose'...the party asks the repeal of all drug, sex, and consumer-protection laws...."

Newman criticizes the libertarian ideological formula on two somewhat contradictory grounds. First, he rightly contends that the libertarians have an insufficient regard for community and for the necessary and worthy aspects of political power. Then, leaving aside the notion of community, he suggests that the libertarians, by recognizing only the harm of political power, fail to see the danger posed by economic power to individual autonomy.

Any type of individual autonomy acceptable to a libertarian would probably not be welcome in the type of political community that Newman advocates. How far beyond liberalism is Mr. Newman's own position? He obviously opposes the radicalism, really the fanaticism, of the libertarians; but perhaps, at bottom, he wants to fend off their attack on the welfare state by buttressing that state with more participation and a thicker theory of the public good. To borrow a line from Alexander Hamilton, is this not pork still with a little change of the sauce?

Newman's theorizing, however, is less interesting than his description of the movement itself. Analyzing John Locke or even Ayn Rand does not really reveal the contemporary importance of the libertarians. Locke and Robert Nozick aside, the libertarians are ideologues and activists, so one must ask of them different questions than one would ask of genuine political theorists.

One political question raised by the libertarian movement is whether or not they, and other anarchists, should be seen as allies by communarians seeking a decentrali-
American politics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He wants to under-
stand Henry Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and
Herman Melville as political thinkers who
found the right balance between liberalism
and Calvinism. Unfortunately, his dense and
complex analysis will be of interest pri-
marily to scholars working in the areas of
American political thought and intellectual
history.

Both Newman and Diggins see liberalism
as the driving force in American politics,
and both see pure liberalism as pure dis-
aster. They take individualism to be lib-
eralism’s invincible core, but they also be-
lieve that America’s politics and political
thinking can be reformed without eradicat-
ing that core. Diggins advocates a Calvinist
revival, while Newman proposes a new
public philosophy and an invigoration of
the citizenry. Neither book ventures very
far outside of liberalism’s boundaries. In
short, neither work offers a challenge to
the Hartz thesis that American political
thought is almost wholly confined to the liberal
room. So the question becomes: Is liberalism, even
an enriched liberalism, adequate to Amer-
ican politics in the last decades of the twen-
tieth century? W

IRAQ: EASTERN FLANK
OF THE ARAB WORLD
by Christine Moss Helms
(The Brookings Institution; 215 pp.; $9.95
[paper])

IRAQ AND IRAN: THE YEARS OF CRISIS
by Jasim M. Abdulghani
(The Johns Hopkins University Press; 270
pp.; $28.50)

Lisa Anderson

Few would have believed five years ago
that a war could break out that would con-
sume the lives of hundreds of thousands of
people, threaten the oil supplies of the West,
and revive the use of chemical weapons,
while the world stood by, helpless to ex-
tinguish it. This, of course, describes the
Iraq-Iran war that broke out in September,
1980. It is an object lesson in the frailty of
the world community’s understandings and
institutions.

If the war did nothing else, however, it
did serve to attract the attention of the
American public to Iraq, Iran, recently
triumphant in its revolution and still pos-
sessed of the American hostages (they were
released four months after the start of the
war), was well known—if perpetually mys-
terious—to most Americans. Iraq, by con-
tраст, had no diplomatic relations with
the United States since the 1967 Arab-Israeli
war; and, to those who thought of it at all, it seemed likely to be just another of
those closed, probably drab, Third World
Soviet satellites, implacably hostile to
American interests. The restoration of U.S.-
Iraqi diplomatic relations in December,
1984, served merely to underscore how lit-
tle most Americans know about the modern
history of the country and about the disputes
that underlie its war with Iran. With books
under review serve admirably in filling these
lacunae and should be essential reading for
anyone who wants to understand the war,
particularly the Iraqi side of the story.

Christine Moss Helms’s volume is de-
signed to inform the educated nonspecialist.
While adequately annotated, it does not
bristle with arcane references, and it pro-
vides a good introduction to contemporary
Iraqi politics and foreign policy. As dem-
onstrated in The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia,
his previous work on twentieth-century
Saudi history, Helms’s strong suit is as-
sessing the political implications of geog-
raphy—a useful and too often neglected
perspective. Iraqi foreign policy is shaped
by a long-standing sense of geographical
insecurity. The country is virtually land-
locked. It is dependent for agriculture on
the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, whose
headwaters lie in Syria and Turkey, for oil
on the mountainous Kurdishe regions on the
Iranian border, and for access to interna-
tional waters on the disputed Shatt al-Arab
waterway. Not without reason, Iraq’s rel-
lations with its neighbors have often been
tertiary.

Iraq’s largely arbitrary borders—a legacy
of the European dismemberment of the
Ottoman Empire after World War I—are
matched by the diversity of its population.
For fifty years, governments in Iraq have
been trying to fashion a nation from the
various communities of Arabic, Persian, and
Kurdish-speakers, Sunni, Shi’a, and
Christians, each with ties to peoples beyond
the country’s borders. The most recent ef-
forts have been made by the Ba’th party,
which has ruled since 1968; and Helms’s
description of the party’s activity in “build-
ning Arab nationalism in one country” makes
for fascinating reading, particularly those
capsules based on interviews with many of
the regime’s major figures, including President
Saddam Hussein. The sources of Iraq’s
aversion to the Iranian Revolution’s reli-
gious fervor are perhaps best conveyed in
the small but symbolic fact that the coun-

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