

Blueprint for a New America

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THE END OF EQUALITY

By Mickey Kaus
New Republic/Basic Books. 293 pp. \$25

By Amitai Etzioni

THIS REMARKABLE BOOK draws on keen insights to advance an encompassing agenda for social change. It is misfocused, yet surprisingly compelling. I recommend it to all who scour this parched election for some spirited ideas.

The trouble starts with the title, which plays off successful

The Washington Post

SUNDAY, JULY 12, 1992

books such as *The End of History* and *The End of Ideology*. Actually, *The End of Equality* is about shifting our attention from economic inequality to the beginnings of social equality. Kaus demonstrates that a fair degree of economic inequality is required by the capitalist system. He builds on the astute observation that Americans are not particularly troubled by income differences, but become incensed when they are treated as socially inferior. They all want to be treated with dignity and to feel, deep inside, that they are all members of one community. So far so good.

Instead of asking how we might overcome the indignities of social gradations, however, Kaus chooses to write a memo to liberal Democrats. (You can practically hear him debating with some of his fellow editors at the New Republic, somewhere within the Beltway.) His central thesis is that the Democratic party (which he views as synonymous with liberals) will keep losing national elections until it

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shifts from "Money Liberalism" to his agenda, "Civil Liberalism."

To overcome class differences Kaus would restore the draft (and introduce national service), because these are better class mixers than the selective all-volunteer army. He would provide a national health-care system, as well as child care. These, too, would be places to mix, as we all would have to queue at the same clinics and deposit our children at the same centers on the way to work).

KAUS WOULD eliminate the underclass by providing public work, WPA-style, to all those who cannot find employment. To force people to work, he would shut off welfare, except possibly for two years and only for a woman's first child. He would also launch a massive neighborhood class-assimilation program, where "parents of all income levels might freely live near each other," which would also integrate schools. To help achieve this, Kaus calls for cuts in state taxes to bribe suburbs into various zoning and other deregulations, to make them less exclusive. The end result of all these proposals, he promises, would be to reduce crime and to allow people to return to public places—parks, sidewalk cafes and squares—in which they can mix freely.

Kaus is thoroughly honest throughout his

book: He admits that his program would have a huge price tag. His workfare proposal alone would cost some \$43 billion to \$59 billion a year. Most visionaries avoid this small matter of cost, and in this book even Kaus does not mention several of the other mega costs his program would entail.

Given our long list of domestic needs, I doubt that reducing feelings of inferiority ranks that high on our national set of priorities. Sure, Americans would probably love

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to do away with social inequality but wouldn't they first prefer to invest in getting the economy growing again, combating HIV, etc. etc.? Kaus might well argue that reducing social distance among the classes would help advance most of the other items on our social agenda. True, but only marginally. Several of the programs he favors seem highly commendable—but not merely or primarily to enhance social equality. These programs would, therefore, require

different analyses and rationales to be acceptable. Above all, Kaus lays the burden of change on the wrong agent.

True to his liberal feathers (and legal training), Kaus wants the government to change American society. He is enamored of the "affirmative state." As I see it, however, most of what Kaus proposes would require a change of values, a different civic culture, and these are not matters that government can or should change. Moreover, the same changes in values are essential if new government programs are to be supported by the public. For example, if people of different backgrounds are thrown together in mandatory national service without believing in the importance of getting to know others from different backgrounds, they will segregate along racial and class lines, as they do these days on many college campuses.

The only way to modify values significantly is to fashion a social movement, like the civil rights and environmental movements. I am referring not to the specific values they fashioned but to their *modus operandi*. Only if millions of Americans will band together to oppose tribalism, to support community and full participation in our society for all will we find the moral and political force required to advance several of the programs that Kaus correctly perceives to be necessary to revitalize America. This is not an agenda for liberal Democrats, let alone for the government. It is one for all who care about the future of our country.