

“The Conservative Future: Compassion”

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The First International Conservative Conference on Social Justice
September 27, 2005

We are meeting here to discuss important issues about the nature of conservatism, the state of its intellectual capital, and its governing philosophy. These are big issues for big minds—the sort that populate places like Heritage.

That being said, I am not William Buckley. I can’t even do a good imitation.

I am not Russell Kirk. Although I believe in the “American Cause” and that conservatives have minds.

I’m no Midge Decter or Irving Kristol. And no one is going to mistake me for Ed Feulner. His office is much nicer than mine.

I have, however, written a rather heavy book recently - amazon.com says it weighs 1.4 pounds. Handled properly, it can harm small animals.

So I am humbled and grateful to be here. I will speak seriously because serious issues deserve to be discussed seriously.

This is a time of unprecedented conservative power in the United States. I use the word ‘power’ intentionally. For the last decade Republicans have controlled both houses of Congress. For 17 of the past 25 years we have controlled the White House. And for the last four-and-a-half years we’ve controlled both the legislative and executive branches of government. The American people have entrusted us with their future.

During that time much has improved because much has been done. Democracy is spreading throughout the world - more people are free. Welfare has been reformed and millions of families have found the freedom of work, home ownership, and liberty. Taxes have been reduced and despite the recession, 9/11, intense global competition and nature’s fury the economy is growing.

But conservatives need to remember that in the early 1960s, *liberalism* was the dominant governing philosophy, and it laid claim to the nation’s future. At that time it was seen as America’s deliverer from the Great Depression. It helped bring civil rights to all Americans, was overseeing an unprecedented economic boom and providing a government-funded safety net for seniors.

Within a generation though, liberalism was in full-scale retreat. It was -- rightly or wrongly - considered the philosophy of ‘tune in, turn on, drop out’ and America’s humiliating defeat in Vietnam. Liberalism had been in power for oil shocks, inflation, unemployment and stagnation. It had become a philosophy of a hopeless malaise.

In other words, things change quickly, and liberalism splintered and failed in no small part because it did not do what we are doing here today - taking a long hard look at ourselves and our changing times, asking ourselves which parts of our tradition are suited for today’s and tomorrow’s challenges, and what has become outmoded.

So let me begin with self-criticism. There are problems in American conservatism. A decade ago Republicans came to Washington promising to change it rather than to be changed by it. I’ve talked about some of our victories. It’s crucial to also talk about our failures. We have not reduced the size of government. There is no balanced budget amendment. Pork-barrel and self-interest politics have grown. Special interest groups haven’t been defeated or tamed, they are thriving.

There are philosophical concerns as well. We are, for instance, witnessing the unprecedented rise of libertarianism. Libertarianism is rooted in grand ideals about the sanctity of liberty and freedom. You will find no argument against liberty’s virtue or freedom’s valor in this quarter. But there are some who seem to believe that conservatism’s future lies in lowering our aspirations, leaving people alone, adopting a collective “no harm, no foul” mentality and do no harm individualism.

This is where we disconnect with most people, because we disconnect with how people live their lives. People don’t live lives as radical individuals. It doesn’t work. Nor can they live lives as pathetic dependents, which is all too often the result of the policies of the left. Both sides seem to be talking about an ideological utopia ungrounded in reality.

We have long recognized the folly of the left’s worldview, but to avoid a similar fall we must ask ourselves the hard questions, and make corrections when needed is not only needed to ensure the success of the conservative movement, as well as the American experiment. With that mission, I’d like to take this time to talk about conservative philosophy and make a few suggestions of my own.

Let’s start with our roots: Intellectual conservatism was once defined by two clear goals - the defeat of communism and the reduction in governmental size, scope and sweep. The former was perhaps best captured by the great Ronald Reagan who rightly declared the former Soviet Union an “evil empire” while the latter was most accurately described by the great Margaret Thatcher as the “nanny state.”

There are three observations I’d like to make about this conservatism:

First, it was a conservatism with a purpose. The goal of ending the scourge of communism wasn’t so that we might all be left alone to do our own thing but to eliminate oppression, increase liberty, and enable freedom. Eliminating the evil empire was absolutely about protecting America and Americans. But it was also about setting the captives free. It was about lifting the yoke of oppression from millions of innocent people who wanted to be free. Similarly, limiting government’s scope wasn’t just about making the budget smaller or closing some departments. The purpose of limited government was the expansion of the unlimited potential of people.

Second, it was a conservatism with definable objectives. We could tell whether or not communism was eliminated and government reduced.

Third, it was a conservatism of hope. For many decades, it seemed altogether unlikely that we would ever see the end of the Soviet Union. The Cold War seemed to be getting hotter and hotter while America's morale got lower and lower. But we never gave up. We never stopped believing in the rightness of our cause.

Purpose, objective and hope; those were the hallmarks of a conservatism that quite literally saved the world. They should also be the defining characteristics of conservatism's future. Is that possible? I believe it is. And I believe what we call "Compassionate Conservatism" has something unique to offer to the shaping of our future.

But before I define the particular contributions that we have to offer, let me make two observations. First, conservatives in general hold in common, at least here in the United States, a commitment to a strong national defense, the promotion of democracy, vibrant economic growth through low taxation, less regulation and an unencumbered free market, and a recognition of the limits of government as successful social engineer. These principles I embrace and are our common denominator.

Second, the competitor to conservatism's future, I believe, is libertarianism. It is a consistent and vibrant, although I believe misguided, strain of conservatism.

America's conservative heritage never pursued a limitless freedom to do whatever one wants so long as no one is hurt. That kind of "freedom" to be and do whatever we want, irrespective of the choice is a selfish freedom that cannot be sustained or afforded. Someone always gets hurt when masses of individuals do what is only in their own-self interest. That is the great lie of liberal freedom, or as I like to say, "No-Fault Freedom" -- all the choice, none of the responsibility.

We here today believe in something altogether different. It is the liberty America's Founders understood properly defined. Freedom is liberty coupled with responsibility to something bigger or higher than self. It is a self-less freedom. It is sacrificial freedom. It is the pursuit of our dreams with an eye towards the common good. Freedom is the dual activity of lifting our eyes to the heavens while extending our hand to our neighbor.

The only orthodox conservative philosophy that matches with this is compassionate conservatism.

What is it? Compassionate Conservatism is rooted in the general welfare and relies on healthy families, freedom of faith, a vibrant civil society, a proper understanding of the individual and a focused government to achieve noble purposes through definable objectives which offers hope to all, including those in poverty.

Ironically, for all of the chatter about it during the last number of years it is still an emerging philosophy. It hasn't ever been tried as a governing philosophy. From one end of Pennsylvania Avenue to the other, Republican passion for compassionate conservatism has waned as other "more pressing matters" took over. For some this lack of action has meant discouragement and for others it has meant cynicism. But the truth is that this compassionate conservative philosophy is the only viable conservative philosophy we Republicans possess.

There are four cornerstones to compassionate conservatism.

First, compassionate conservatism is founded on the family. The family is the foundation of an effectively functioning civil society.

There is nothing more simple or basic than this one fact. Kids need moms and dads. This is not a place for government to be neutral. Common sense and social science research are in accord on this fact. Children in father-absent homes are two times more likely to abuse drugs, to be sexually and physically abused, and to become involved in a crime. They are three times more likely to fail in school and to commit suicide. They are five times more likely to live in poverty.

And that isn't all. Families set standards and demand that their children live up to them. Strong families are grounded in a code of conduct, morality, values, and, much more often than not, a shared faith, plus judicious use of the age-old sanctions of shame and stigma. Families teach us about the essential democratic virtue of selflessness - the mantra of the popular culture - 'if it feels good do it' just doesn't wash in a family.

Why are these things important? Because these statistics are about all of us. These "kids" aren't nameless, faceless, social security numbers with arms and legs. They are our neighbors. And all of us want and America needs good neighbors. These children are made in the image of God so we must help their parents to protect them. And they are our country's future. We can't make it without them.

We could spend trillions of dollars and have public schools with personal valets and individual tutors. Every child in America could be given \$1,000 a month in government allowances to spend as they wish. But none of it will make a difference unless our kids are raised in healthy families. Ten years after a marriage breaks up, research has shown that approximately two-thirds of children report that they haven't seen their father for over a year.

That said, I have two important caveats. First, lots of single parents do a wonderful job raising children. It may not have been their first, second, or third choice but that is the hand that they have been dealt and they fight. They deserve our help, support, and prayers. Second, "family" is not a code word, and I am not talking about any particular group of people. "Healthy families" are needed in every zip code and in every demographic group. There are unhealthy families in the Hamptons and at Queens Gate, London. It is very much about fathers and father absence isn't just about men who get women pregnant and then abandon them. It is about divorce and emotional detachment as well: middle class-men whose lives center around work and the golf course instead of around their wives and children, for example.

Second, Compassionate Conservatism believes in the transformative power of faith and the integral role of charities, houses of worship, and other civil institutions. If government is to be effective, these institutions must be respected and nurtured rather than overpowered or effectively controlled by government. Societies deteriorate absent freedom of religion and effective mediating institution.

This may sound overblown but it isn't. Taken as a whole these institutions and the people of them create what is known as 'social capital'. They work together for our mutual benefit creating much more as a whole than they are in their parts. They instill values and bind us together in a common cause. These bonds build trust, which is the grease that makes the gears of society run without friction.

How do we strengthen these mediating institutions so they help restore social capital?

The most important answer is to build up what the village elders or liberal elites have spent decades trying to tear down and drive underground-religious institutions and faith-based organizations. The Democrats in this country now espouse European-style secularism (with all due respect and affection for my fellow legislators with us today from across the seas). They have gone to great lengths to create government bureaucracies to displace the work that religious groups have done ever since the days of the Pilgrims, and to marginalize and privatize faith and its black and white moral demands. Their approach to expansive government regulation and programming has worked in countless ways to sideline people of faith.

This is a horrible mistake, as many Europeans are now sadly recognizing. Faith is the great protector of our freedoms. We are endowed by our Creator, and we are the poorer when we forget it. When we talk about faith, we are talking about a principled pluralism where all faiths are taken seriously and all people of all faiths are treated with absolute equality.

Third, Compassionate Conservatism is founded on an inviolable belief in humanity's inherent dignity. Bill Gates' intrinsic worth is the same as yours. Yours is the same as your cab drivers and your cab drivers is the same as a woman now dying of AIDS in Africa. The 50 million orphans we currently know of have every bit the same worth as my children. I am not suggesting we hold hands and sing "Kum By Ya," but I am saying that humanity's inherent dignity is a massive responsibility we have no choice but to embrace.

That means abortion, which ends life at its beginning, and euthanasia, which ends life before it reaches its natural end undermine human dignity. It means that genocide destroys human dignity and ending it is in our strategic interest. We must step up and lead because that is what Compassionate Conservatives do when we see suffering and injustice. We need to continue to fight international sex trafficking and oppose the oppression of minority groups, and promote respect for religious freedom around the world.

Fourth, Compassionate Conservatism targets the poor and hurting for help. Too many of my colleagues act as if poverty doesn't exist.

Then came Katrina. Our collective blinders were shredded not by wind or rain but by our television sets. We will all always remember the pictures of New Orleans, the poor and sick who were forced into the light of day and into our consciousness by the waters of a horrible flood. Theologically there is this idea of an age of accountability - a certain age where a girl becomes a woman or a boy becomes a man. After that age they have to stand before God on their own. Katrina brought Americans to the age of accountability when it comes to caring for the poor. No one, no one can deny the persistent and noxious poverty that still plagues this country.

Just as Katrina has seared American poverty into our moral consciousness, AIDS has seared Africa into our moral vision. Caring for the sick and dying in Africa now is morally right and it is geopolitically prudent - for if we don't help I guarantee you someone else will and that someone else will not be friendly to our interests. This is a time of unparalleled crisis in Africa and other developing countries around the world. That is why I believe we need to embrace the challenge to dedicate more of GDP to foreign aid as well as encourage more international trade with developing countries. History will judge this moment not by what we say but what we do.

Perhaps this is what is meant by the 'severe mercy' of God. There is an old spiritual that sings of how the great life-giving river of God will lift us all up and over the barriers that separate us. This river will make old walls irrelevant. Well, the rivers have come; the walls have been breached. It is now our responsibility to see that new life comes after the catastrophe, not more of the same.

There is much more that could be said and that needs to be said. But it is time that I leave that task to the professionals.

Some final points; Yes, this will require a role for government that some conservatives find disquieting. But that is a discomfort worth confronting. For too long there has been an implied belief that government was the problem; if government just stepped out of the way everything would be fine. That is philosophical nonsense. Government is as important as the other vital societal structures that order our lives. It is time for conservatives to stop treating government as if its elimination were the highest good that could come to humankind.

It also means that politicians like me have to start saying some hard truths. There are things that government can't afford to do as much anymore. Everyone running for office likes to promise everything while saying it will cost nothing. But that is Willy Wonka politics. We are going to have to look at everything from pork to entitlements and make some tough decisions and about changing the role of government in our lives.

That includes not only cutting the old, but putting forth new initiatives like the CARE Act. It is a bold package of expanded charitable giving incentives which I am reintroducing this week with Senator Lieberman. We must do this to help replenish the efforts of these heroic faith-based and community organizations, and because we believe people motivated to serve are people who make our country unique and sustain our social capital into the future.

We must be on the side of the traditional family. We have a lot more work to do with welfare. So many have been helped but so many still need help. We should cut the rate of divorce and out of wedlock births by 30% over the next decade. Before anyone dismisses these as the rhetorical flourishes of a politician I want to say that they are doable not because we can write one great law in Washington that will make everything right. These objectives are doable because compassionate conservatism says that righting wrongs isn't the duty of one person or institution alone but of our whole society. Compassionate conservative seeks to unleash the charity and creative energy of our citizenry in a new war on poverty-a war from the family-up, a waged by a volunteer army, a war in which the poor themselves are the most important combatants, all facilitated by government policies that get bureaucracy out of the way of American creativity, energy, and compassion. In fact, Senate Republicans have developed an anti-poverty agenda, which respects the critical roles of work, investment, and neighborhoods in empowering families in need.

Compassionate conservatism didn't begin in the 90s or the 80s or any other time in recent memory. Arguably it goes back to early notions about the nature of the republic in days before there were basic civilizing tools like Starbucks. But there is no more certain example for me than that of William Wilberforce. It was Wilberforce's band of unlikely friends who moved the levers of government, faith, and culture against the abomination known as slavery. Time and again he suffered mockery, defeat, and desperation. But he never gave up because he knew that what he wanted to achieve was worthy of his all and because he knew he had the purpose, objective, and hope to achieve it. I believe, and I hope we all believe, the same is true for us today. That is why this gathering of conservatives from both sides of the Atlantic is so encouraging to me.

A last lesson from Lady Thatcher and President Reagan; we must never forget hope. Hope is what allowed Reagan and Thatcher to see that a nuclear freeze was folly, that communism was corrupt and that freedom would win. It is easy for us now, on this side of history, to see how axiomatic those truths were. It was less clear then. Remember the great marches where millions wanted us to unilaterally freeze weapons production? How about the mocking of a military defense shield that could threaten Soviet first-strike capability? The simple idea of it terrified the Kremlin. Conservatism is based upon the idea of preserving the good of our society, adding to it the wisdom of experience coupled with the courage and optimism of a new generation. This formula inspired Reagan and Thatcher to dare to hope, and to work together to build the world. Let us build upon their example to be that beacon of hope in this troubled world.