
Debacle: The Conservative Movement in Chapter Eleven

Claes G. Ryn

The Catholic University of America

As this article will discuss the state and future of the so-called “conservative movement,” it is only fair to inform readers not familiar with the author’s views that he has long been a critic of prominent features of that movement. He has complained about its obsession with politics and its disproportionate interest in public policy and economics. For a society really to change, its mind and imagination need to be transformed. The author has complained about the movement’s propensity for formulaic thinking, its blithe acceptance of the anti-historical theorizing of Leo Strauss and the Straussians, and about purported conservatives’ thinking and acting like French Jacobins. He has criticized the movement for being less and less attentive to philosophy and the arts. Its

trend-setters have been intellectual activists, journalists, and heads of foundations and think tanks rather than serious thinkers. Intellectual and moral confusion made it susceptible to manipulation by people with access to money and the media. The decline of the movement and of America was put into relief by absurd claims that conservatism had “triumphed.”

These arguments will not be repeated here; they are in print in various places.¹ It should also be stated that, needless to say, the so-called conservative movement has

¹ For a sampling of the author’s criticisms, see “American Intellectual Conservatism: Needs, Opportunities, Prospects,” *Modern Age*, Vol. 26, Nos. 3-4 (1982); *The New Jacobinism* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1991); “How Conservatives Failed ‘The Culture,’” *Modern Age*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (1996); *America the Virtuous* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003); and “The Decline of American Intellectual Conservatism,” presented as the “Conclusion” to the 50th anniversary issue of *Modern Age*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2007).

CLAES G. RYN is Professor of Politics at the Catholic University of America, Chairman of the National Humanities Institute, Editor of *Humanitas*, and President of the Academy of Philosophy and Letters.

had many admirable features. Some of its members *resisted* the trends that brought it to its present low point. Unfortunately, as it tries to recover, it may ignore those voices again and repeat its old mistakes.

To understand the predicament of the conservative movement it is important to realize that it originated as a largely political alliance. It was cobbled together out of diverse intellectual currents. Some of these were philosophically remote from each other, but could agree on a limited range of political objectives, particularly opposing communism and defending limited government. But not even *those* objectives were understood in the same way by all. With the fall of communism the lack of intellectual coherence became more glaring than ever.

If self-described American intellectual conservatives were to be asked to give a summary definition of conservatism, most would probably say that it is a belief in freedom, minimal government and a strong defense. Advocating “principles” of this kind is what Rush Limbaugh means as he now stresses the need for more “philosophy.” But this definition suggests an ideological rather than a philosophical frame of mind. It says nothing about what must surely be distinctive to conservatism—that it is *conservative* of something, a heritage that it wants creatively to preserve. Neither does the definition say anything about adapting a universal higher purpose to historical circumstance.

In addition, each component of the mentioned definition can be giv-

en vastly different interpretations. Here it is only possible to take up one, the belief in freedom—an issue that illustrates well the deep intellectual confusion within the movement. It was a simplistic, unhistorical understanding of freedom that made it possible for neo-Jacobins to invade the movement and cause disaster in U.S. foreign policy.

All know the story of Benjamin Franklin being asked at the end of the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention what it had accomplished. He answered, “A republic, if you can keep it.” Whatever his precise meaning, the Constitution could be sustained only if Americans would shoulder high responsibility. For liberty under law to be possible they had to keep their passions in check, exhibit the constitutional personality. The following words of Edmund Burke are relevant: “Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.”² In other words, people wishing to be free have to exercise exceptional self-control. Human nature being torn between higher and lower potentialities, the latter have to be reined in. Without this self-restraint, no freedom. To the extent that order does not come from with-

² Edmund Burke, *A Letter from Mr. Burke, to a Member of the National Assembly in Answer to Some Objections to His Book on French Affairs*, 1791.

in, it has to be imposed externally. This was the moral-spiritual ethos of the American constitutional republic, which was deeply rooted in classical and Christian civilization as transmitted through British culture.

Most of today's defenders of the U.S. Constitution proceed on the superficial assumption that it could be revived if only more people could be persuaded of its correct interpretation. But the original Constitution and the liberties from which it is undistinguishable presupposed Americans with certain historically formed character traits that could buttress them. Thus, for ordered liberty to be restored today, an older type of American, endowed with the constitutional personality, would first have to reemerge and begin to transform society.

But many so-called conservatives understand ordered liberty very differently, for example, as John Locke does. According to Locke, freedom is not the fruit of protracted moral and other struggle over time. It existed even prior to civil society, back in a purported state of nature in which freedom was simply bestowed on human beings. It is a free gift. "We are born free as we are born rational," Locke asserts.³ Freedom does not result from individuals' taming their lower selves with the aid of civilization. No, nature fully equipped men to live to advantage. They left the state of nature only to remedy a few "inconveniences" relating to the

safety of private property.

Unlike Burke, Locke has little or no awareness of what ordered liberty owes to history. He explains the existence of freedom in the state of nature by conveniently reading back into that state personality traits and ideas that could have evolved only in an advanced society. Seemingly an advocate of rationality and empiricism, Locke is first of all a liberal dreamer, an ideologue. He takes his bearings not from actual, historical experience but from purely hypothetical theorizing, rather naïve theorizing at that. His notion of the social contract could be given a more charitable interpretation, but a fondness for ahistorical Lockean speculation is not indicative of conservative leanings.

Locke has been a major source for the notion that freedom will flourish if only external impediments are removed. Just get rid of bad government! As combined with American nationalistic conceit, this kind of romantic dreaming helped form what this writer calls the new Jacobinism. The latter assigns to America the task of ushering in freedom and democracy everywhere. In the words of one conservative hero: "The American dream lives—not only in the hearts and minds of our own countrymen but in the hearts and minds of millions of the world's people in both free and oppressed societies who look to us for leadership." "America has always recognized our historic responsibility to lead the march of freedom."⁴

³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, paragraph 61 (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 34.

⁴ President Ronald Reagan, Remarks at the Annual Washington Conference of the

The ideology of freedom does not ask whether the preconditions for freedom are present in a particular society. It simply assumes that freedom will blossom once dictators have been kicked out. Utopianism used to be a monopoly of the left. In recent decades it has been the stock-in-trade of putative “conservatives.”

The just-quoted conservative hero is Ronald Reagan. His speeches were filled with the romantic rhetoric of freedom. Like Locke, Reagan had little grasp of the moral and cultural preconditions of freedom. He proclaimed: “Liberty, just as life itself, is not earned but a gift from God.”⁵ Members of the conservative movement cheered Reagan’s anti-communism and desperately wanted a political leader. Because of wishful thinking and lack of intellectual discernment they swallowed the sentimental dreaming. Operation global freedom was constrained in Reagan’s case by the Cold War, but, with 9/11 as the pretext, George W. Bush could commit the United States to removing remaining obstacles to freedom in the world, starting in the Middle East. The ideological and political momentum for launching this grandiose project and for going to war against Iraq had been generated by the neoconservative network inside and outside of government, which, in concert with Big Oil, gave

Bush its enthusiastic support.

To a Burkean or an American of similar outlook it is clear that the ideology of freedom misunderstands the origins of freedom. It is not surprising that such ideas should produce disastrous practical consequences.

Real freedom grows out of historically evolved character traits and institutions. It cannot strike roots in inhospitable soil. This is as true in the marketplace as in politics. You want maximum economic freedom? Then make sure that there is morality and culture that foster a maximum of individual responsibility. In an economy manned increasingly by gamblers and crooks and dominated by greed and short-sightedness the line between honesty and crime dissolves, and the misuse of economic freedom invites the imposition of external controls.

Has the conservative movement long protested the kind of economism that ignores the moral and cultural preconditions of a sound economy? Has it bemoaned the emergence of a crass, callous new economic elite? Has it called for the moral and cultural reinvigoration that might shore up economic and other freedom? Those setting the tone have not.

The new Jacobins and the worshippers of the free market in the abstract do not care about historical circumstances, only about adherence to their abstract “principles.” With friends like them freedom does not need enemies. Even after the disasters in foreign and domestic policy in recent years the so-called conservative movement may not want to give up ideology and romantic dreaming, but chapter eleven reorganization demands it.

American Legion, February 22, 1983; Remarks at Flag Day Ceremony, Baltimore, MD, June 14, 1985.

⁵ President Ronald Reagan, Remarks and a Question and Answer Session With the Students and Faculty at Moscow State University, May 31, 1988.