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What's Wrong with the Right: A Conservative Vision For the Twenty-First Century

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What's Wrong with the Right: A Conservative Vision
For the Twenty-First Century

Nothing is more commonplace in American political discourse than to assert that the nation is divided. To whatever degree this axiom is true, the rhetoric, partisan analysis, and postmortems of the '04 election expose that the political and intellectual classes speak in slogans. The restricted categories they employ to both understand American political culture, and to shape it, produce ideological dichotomies that are reinforced by the election results. In recent weeks, leftists and Democrats have responded to defeat with almost mindless diatribes. So sure are they of their own intellectual rigor, of their own moral equations, that all those who disagree are too stupid to educate.

However soft-headed and hardnosed the American left appears, their failings are paralleled and equaled on the right. Those on the right are in power for the moment, but they have won this power by narrowing their intellectual compass dramatically, by demonizing their opponents, and creating a propaganda machine that effectively taps into a long-standing populism. It is to the pathologies of the right that I turn my attention, but even as I do so I warn myself and my audience that the dualism of left / right, of blue state / red state, of Democrat and Republican simplifies analysis while rendering it nearly useless. If, as I believe, a healthy republic requires communication, then one of the first tasks before us is a semantic clarity appropriate to the complexity of the subject. If, as I also believe, the health of a republic requires a genuine conversation, including diverse members who are nonetheless devoted to articulating and defending common purposes, then we need to provide a language and analysis that fosters deliberation rather than acrimony.

The Rhapsodies of the Right

The right is rhapsodic, but understands nothing of romance. Its message is seductive because it offers certainty—an ideology drawn selectively from the American experience and universalized to humans as such. Those who give voice to the ideology

of the right assume that the American experience is the human experience—or rather the human experience when it is free to articulate itself. The right is internationalist in a very particular way. The corrupted or fallen world is awaiting the innocent and unmediated expression of human yearning. The United States offers to the world an end to history by returning humankind to its natural state. America is the end because it is the beginning.

I emphasize the rhapsodies of the right to note the tendency toward political ideology. At least two ecstatic visions—different and yet reinforcing—form to produce a gnostic ideology. One vision is philosophical, an expression of the unchanging reality or nature of humans. Extracted from the opening rhetorical flourish of the Declaration of Independence, this vision expresses a timeless moral claim about human rights and human governance. Not only do the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness transcend time and culture, but so also does the assertion that a legitimate government operates with the freely and consciously given consent of the governed. Understood by some to be the beginning of American national identity, these moral claims also define its world-historic significance. To the degree that American leaders internalize this claim, the United States becomes a crusading nation.

The second ecstatic vision emerges with less precision but with the advantage of tapping into deeply-held American beliefs about cosmology, American destiny, and personal identity. Rather than being an ahistorical claim about human nature, it is a Christian teleology in which American “values” get conflated with Christian purposes. Like the first vision, this one has America set aside for a special destiny, and this destiny requires that America remain faithful to its covenant, its founding and defining purposes. There is an unfolding historical destiny, but it is much tied to human choices. Paradoxically, America is destined for its purpose insofar as its citizens choose to live their destiny.

Whether emphasizing philosophical certainties or a rather too precise Christian eschatology, or some amalgam of the two, the right bases its political action on claims to knowledge of universalizable truth. This gnosticism insulates those on the right from any serious engagement with alternative views and justifies a wide variety of political action—at home and abroad—that do “good.” These leaders need not concern themselves with the democratic process of deliberation, though in order to stay in power

they must engage in propaganda. Increasingly persuaded of the rightness of their cause, they need not concern themselves as much with the means of accomplishing their ends.

This ideology leaves no room for mystery—for either the delight that comes from participating in the unknowable or the humility that comes from confronting messy realities. Moreover, there is a strange irony involved here as the defining word of this ideology is “freedom,” which one might expect to produce a grand, uncontrollable and potentially exciting diversity. But the freedom tied to this universalistic conception of human nature and human ends produces a powerful conformity and in many cases it is a freedom that comes at the expense of liberties.

The Creation of a Movement

The American right is now programmatic, organized into a political “movement.” Its members and leaders define issues and problems in political terms, seek political solutions, and regard the American social and cultural landscape as contested territory. This articulation of conservatism as a political movement has dramatically altered the American right, making it more prone to ideology and to a Manichean language, creating an environment hostile to the poetic disposition of conservatives

The creation of a “movement” involves the production of memory, a structured account of the origins, evolution, and mature expression of its ideals, purposes, and defining characteristics. Movement conservatives, as they often call themselves, tap into a ready-made historical account. This story, to which they belong, helps them understand where in history they fit, processes out the eccentric or recalcitrant elements in their history, and leaves them with a reductive but clear understanding of goals and purposes and well as enemies.

This conservative historiography, which has helped shape the prepackaged historical memory for young movement conservatives, is fascinating in its own right. After the “Reagan Revolution” the story gained a peculiar and valuable clarity—conservatism had a definer in the person of Ronald Reagan. Of course there remained the problem of defining Reagan, but that problem aside, the emerging story took the Reagan administration as the years of triumph and therefore looked backwards and forward from

the 80s. Backwards they saw the history as preparing the ground for Reagan. The election of 1980 clarified and simplified the history. But insofar as history didn't end with Reagan, the story that followed was defined relative to a narrowed set of principles, programs, and policies, leading to a fascinating struggle to appropriate for causes on the right the Reagan mantle.

Processing history in this way clarifies purposes and distorts events and ideas. Post Reagan story-telling has produced selective amnesia concerning those people, ideas and institutions that don't fit well the newly centered story-line. They are now among the forgotten of history. But for others, who have been too much associated with the "movement" for years, whose names, but not ideas, are so widely known as to make it impossible to forget them entirely, they become incorporated selectively into the story. Many of these people are "fathers" of American conservatism and so must remain part of the story. But, because these men were not naturally political animals and because they didn't write or speak in slogans, their ideas—or at least the texture and nuance of their ideas—are not well understood. Under these conditions, the founding fathers of American conservatism become rather plastic, molded by the story-tellers into new characters for a new history. Such is the power story-tellers have over the dead.

But reclaiming the dead, to overstate my case, is how modern American conservatism evolved. One of the standard beginning places from which to tell the story of the "movement" is the publication of Russell Kirk's The Conservative Mind in 1953. Most every movement conservative has heard of this book, but few have read it. Read today as formidable challenge to mid-century American liberalism, The Conservative Mind is itself a sort of processed history, a book that was really historical only in the sense that Kirk intended the book to recapture lost memories. It was literary in the sense that it weaved faded memories into a single and seemingly coherent story.

How much of Kirk's artful construction of an American conservatism remains in the "movement's" genetic code is a debatable subject. But much like the subjects of Kirk's applauded but neglected work, Kirk's ideas and aesthetic sensibilities function as hidden treasures that we might discover, appropriate, and artfully adapt. Kirk's work has very much the smell of mid-century debates, but written in a style florid and arcane—

redolent with scents from a nearly forgotten past. In style as much as in idea, Kirk's work offered an alternative to existing categories—so refreshingly old and exotic.

My point, however, is not about Kirk as much as it is about the potential resources, latent in the right, that might serve a new generation of thinkers and doers who want to rethink American conservatism. The narrowing of the right into a political movement has produced the discipline and focus to gain and hold power, but the costs have been high and may create a combination of hubris and ideological blindness that causes a fall—and perhaps a fall risking more than a movement.

Politics: A Consuming Passion

Reagan came to office promising to get the government off the backs of the American people. The many people who cheered this sentiment did so by interpreting it rather differently. Libertarians, and others disposed to an ideological or reflective hatred of governments, found in Reagan an anti-government sentiment. Tax reformers and big-business allies took Reagan to mean that the federal government ought to lower taxes and reduce regulations on businesses (which is probably what Reagan meant). Still others heard this political message in the context of the expansion of federal government into more aspects of American life during the Great Society and the judicial activism of the 1970s. But whatever the precise meanings Reagan's supporters invested in his slogan, there can be no question that Reagan was entering national politics with the object of restraining the national government. Since that time a new generation of professional right-wing politicians have infiltrated the federal government, creating a new establishment that effectively employs populist and anti-government language even as they control the distribution of government resources and power.

This passion for national politics and power has a long and complicated history. In almost all cases, the groups that allied to form the “movement” developed in reaction to something. A generation of conservative leaders came of age in the Republican Party when a segment of self-proclaimed conservatives were creating the institutions and ideas to fight a cosmic battle with both communism and liberalism. Idealistic members of a small and yet confident counter-cultural movement, they helped overtake the Republican

Party with a “fusionist” political agenda that blended the many diverse parts of a nascent conservative intellectual movement into a political agenda. Adding sophistication to their youthful passion and idealism, by the 1970s many conservative Republican politicians had crafted ever more successful political strategies, tapping into growing fears and resentments of a “silent” majority of Americans who otherwise paid little attention to national politics. From the beginning of this conservative political rise, its success depended on politicizing heretofore apolitical citizens.

Other groups, like the well-educated “neoconservatives,” also moved to the right in reaction to perceived excesses of liberals. Evangelical and fundamentalist Christian groups, altogether hidden from view before about 1976, reacted to a nation that was fast changing in terms of behavioral norms. In all these cases, and so many more, the array of groups on the right began to see the national government as a major source of mischief. As a result, these groups sought a political take-over, believing that political power was a necessary condition to chasten and restrain the federal government. To this end the emerging coalition on the right produced institutions aimed at acquiring political power and of altering public policy once in power. Whatever the policies that would emerge, this new movement was deeply committed to politics, however paradoxical at times their policies might be relative to their political passion.

The Three Agendas of the Movement

The general direction of this new policy agenda, churned out by right-wing scholars (especially libertarian economists) and right-wing think-tanks, was toward “market” solutions to what had been political problems. Whether the problem was poverty or education, the emerging consensus of movement conservatives was to understand government as the problem rather than the solution to the problem. Whether intended or not, the emerging market orientation implied moral commitments, including an understanding of human flourishing that had people relating to one another as customers or as people engaging in mutually beneficial contractual obligations. This economic definition of human life encouraged a perverse moral language in which the

economic term “value” became the signifier of people’s deepest ontological, moral, and personal commitments. Freedom to choose is the highest moral ideal in this system.

Implied in this market-centered view of policy are a number of assumptions. Right-wing market advocates assume a “scientific” understanding of the economy—an understanding that rests upon claims about human nature and therefore human good. Markets can solve so many of our problems because they are more natural—they do not involve the attempt to engineer human society or human nature. Even without articulating this dubious claim, market advocates note at least two accomplishments: much greater productivity and therefore wealth and a greater measure of individual freedom to craft her own life.

Like all parts of the “movement’s” agenda, this view of the market rests on a claim to knowledge of the most basic sort—human nature. Advocates might not claim that productivity and wealth are necessarily good, but they will always resort to the claim that freedom of choice is good. Less obvious, but just as important, a market-orientation to the human problems tends to create a sharper public / private dichotomy than humans have historically recognized. Society, and the many diverse institutions that foster and govern the social order, are redefined to fit into the public / private dichotomy. Society becomes a set of arrangements and institutions that individuals select or choose. In some ways, for them, the market replaced society.

The great complexity of human life has been simplified by means of reducing human nature to the autonomy of the individual in pursuit of private advantage. These members of the right had discovered, they thought, the human as she is naturally and has found the system most fitted to her reductive goals or purposes. Their views were anti-utopian in the narrow sense that they rejected a government or public effort at designing human relations and human nature according to an a priori design. But their vision was not without its own messianic tendencies—a vision made possible only because they began with a reductive view of human nature and human ends. Because their view of humans was simple their proposals were radical, requiring that the complex and seemingly irrational structures that had governed human political and social life must be re-formed to fit the narrowed definition of humans. All rationalist prescriptions are

simple and clear, in sharp contrast to the prescriptions, habits, prejudices, and traditions that emerge otherwise.

The market couldn't solve the problems of national security, however. The movement was most unified with regard to a shared belief in a strong military and an aggressive posture toward the Soviet Union. This consensus has roots in the 1950s, with the Cold War helping diverse elements on the right to concentrate on a common enemy. But with the rise of the successful political movement, a particularly ideological construction of this hawkish orientation became the centerpiece of the right. Rejecting both a Kissinger-like Realism and a Carter-like emphasis on human rights, Reagan gave powerful voice for an idealist foreign policy. Reagan, and indeed the movement, sought nothing short of a world-historic transition in international politics and in global norms.

Reagan not only believed that the Cold War could be won but that he carried a moral, even divine, imperative to win it. Hanging over human existence was the prospect of nuclear annihilation. The American people could never be secure so long as this threat existed and this threat would remain so long as the Soviet people were unfree. American security was tied to other people's freedom. Tethered together, American interests and grand visions of a free, democratic, and liberal world, created a most powerful, seductive, and ideologically pure cause. For Reagan American nationalism and imperialism was benign because it rested on the ideal of freedom. Nothing exposed this belief better than Reagan's favorite analogy for America as a city on a hill. America is the beacon for freedom in the world. To oppose America is to oppose natural rights and human progress.

Reagan's championing of both market solutions and a liberationist foreign policy played upon longstanding, if inchoate, American sentiments about American identity. By stressing freedom, Reagan could mobilize populist sentiments against government meddling in the economy while simultaneously arguing for a massive build-up of the military. Freedom was also the defining ideal of the third agenda of the movement—to preserve the Christian character of the nation.

Choosing a label for those who joined the movement because of these cultural concerns is most treacherous, and perhaps unnecessary, since a wide variety of people found cultural matters of growing concern in the 1970s and 80s. What is important,

however, is to understand how these concerns emerged as pressing and how the resulting politicization altered American discourse and politics.

Cultural or “moral” issues have always been central to American politics. Consider the two largest reform movements of the 19th century, for instance—abolitionism and prohibition. Most issues, however, were matters for local or state politics. The elusive question of religion and politics, particularly, was debated largely in the context of local politics. But by the late 1960s, cultural, moral, and religious (using these categories rather loosely) matters entered increasingly into the national conversation and national politics. Once the personal became political and groups sought national redress for grievances or national answers to divisive moral questions, the character of national politics changed. The recent manifestation of the culture wars dates from this period.

The movement, as a political force, was the primary winner in this process. The list of catalyzing issues are familiar and, in details, complex. The federalizing of the abortion debate via the courts, the myriad constitutional and policy issues surrounding the women’s movement, more aggressive efforts to eradicate Christian images from governments, and more recent efforts at legal and constitutional protections for gays, all of these produced a reaction. For a large number of people who had taken only scant interest in national politics, the combination of economic turmoil and cultural transformation in the 1970s frightened them. Signs of decay, from the ignoble end of the Vietnam War to economic recessions, led many of Nixon’s famous “silent majority” to worry about the nation’s future. Prodded by effective grass-roots political activities, a newly energized political force began to take shape, though the direction this populist energy might go was unclear.

A large number of these newly politicized Americans found that the Republican Party, led by Ronald Reagan, was the only political institution in which they could meaningfully express their concerns about the moral health of the nation. But why had these people, always deeply interested in a variety of moral issues, suddenly concerned themselves with national politics? When the liberty to live by the moral canons of local majorities, to craft or defend ways of living that corresponded to the ideals of the vocal majority in a local area, were threatened by the federal courts and national politics, these

Christians sought to make the nation live by their standards. When the right of local majorities to define local ways of living was eliminated, these groups decided that the fight was national and that their ability to live as they like in their home town depended on making the entire nation affirm in politics and policy their same moral commitments. In reaction to the attack on local liberties the emerging religious right turned to the national government to secure their freedom to live in a society of their choosing.

National politics became the venue for protecting their way of life from a moral imperialism. As a result, the struggle for national power became a zero-sum game. To lose the struggle is to lose the ability to live in a society they thought desirable. In order to win, they had to defend universal moral axioms, paint opponents as the enemy and as dangerous—dangerous to the soul of the nation. All hope for a political conversation, of an understanding for local difference, of competing views of the good, were lost. In fairness to the religious right, they were reacting to a political crusade that operated with a universal moral code as well—a code that liberated the individual to do as she wishes with few constraints. Ironically, their opponents did not choose to use the language of morals, which they associated with traditional and religious restraints on personal freedom. The resulting characterizations of the clash between the Christian right and the defenders of individual rights were misleading. What was at stake in the final analysis was two universal moral codes, both seeking in national politics the power to apply their beliefs nation-wide.

Power and the Uses of Power

Since the election campaign of 1992, a post-Reagan struggle to define the movement has shaped a powerful ideological coalition. Out of the complex pressures on the movement to articulate a common political vision, a new generation of baby-boomer politicians crafted a powerful *mélange* of issues, policies, and rhetorical strategies—and a right-wing ideology, grounded on a priori, universalist moral claims. Armed with such an unimpeachable understanding of reality, of human nature, and of the social and political good, the movement sought to change America and the world. Having learned how to win political power, the movement now used its political savvy to shape a

national agenda, employing the federal government to accomplish its goals. Wedding an anti-government, populist language to an aggressive and transforming political power became the defining characteristic of the political movement.

The three agenda items of the 1980s became the set ideological trinity for the post-Reagan movement, though the meaning of, and the relationship among, the three was open for constant re-thinking. With regard to the first agenda, of lower taxes, fewer regulations, and something called a “free market” became such a standard language that no responsible political figure of either party challenged it. The evolution of the “new Democrat” and the election of Bill Clinton demonstrated that political success rested on a political rhetoric of low taxes. Still, much room remained for debate within this new framework—but the point is that everyone accepted the framework. So imbedded is this new economic wisdom that even during the fast growing government deficits of the Bush years, tax cuts remained politically powerful ideas. At least insofar as people understand lower federal taxes in terms of getting the government off the people’s back, the movement has retained its claim to be a populist movement even as it provides tax protection to the wealthiest citizens and, more importantly, to those artificial persons, corporations.

The two other agenda items are more important for my purposes here. As they have developed into parts of the movement ideology they have become, together, the leading edge in an increasingly hardened ideological war. Both the liberationist foreign policy and the moral crusade are non-negotiable because: 1. they are grounded in claims about an unchanging reality, and 2. the fate of the nation and, perhaps, the world rests on the outcome of these policy struggles.

9/11 provides the most compelling context to understand the so-called “neo-conservative” foreign policy that has moved to center stage during the past 3 years. But, as Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke so convincingly argue in their book, America Alone, the story begins much earlier as a group of policy advocates framed a foreign policy vision that would go largely unnoticed until the terrorist attacks of 9/11 sent Americans and, especially policy makers, in search of ready answers of how to deal with an unexpected threat. A decade in the making, the neo-conservatives presented President

Bush and the American people with a wide-ranging explanation of events and a well-developed prescription.

The neo-conservative vision is neither pragmatic nor historically (which is to say empirically) rooted. It leads with a moral philosophy that takes American liberal , democratic ideals to be universal goods. Understood in these terms, America is not only the defender of natural rights but the promulgator of those rights throughout the world. So important is this liberal imperialism that the nation's leaders justifiably transgress the very liberal principles at home because of a "prudential" expansion of power necessary to accomplish the world-historic role of the United States. The neo-conservatives, then, have outlined such a grand goal for our nation that prudence demands that it not allow questions of means to interfere with the moral task at hand. By such a sleight of hand, the neo-conservatives can always claim the moral high ground, no matter how often they violate the very principles they seek to spread across the globe.

It appears that the neo-conservatives consider the defining historic event to be the Munich compromise, from which they learn that the forces of good should never, ever, appease the forces of evil. They claim to be—and perhaps they believe themselves to be—heir to Ronald Reagan's foreign policy. There are important similarities, though to my eyes the neo-conservatives have the ideological fervor without the prudence they so often invoke.

Because the United States is the super-power, it is incumbent on America to create a great military that can fight evil-doers everywhere (and I do mean everywhere) while using its immense economic and military power to foster American-style political and economic freedom across the globe. With freedom as their defining ideal, neo-conservatives envision a hostile world in which force and the threat of force are the only tools for creating this better world. One detects a version of the end of history concept. The Hobbesian world of warfare of all against all, of power against power, will only be ended with the complete victory of the good side. In a narrow sense, American security is threatened by the evil-doers of the world, but in a larger sense all humans live under the tyranny of these same evil forces so long as the war is incomplete. Once American values have become triumphant, once political and economic freedom are global, then the

world of Hobbes will become a paradise of prosperity and security, because, as every neo-conservative claims, freedom-loving democracies never go to war with each other.

Because they begin with a claim about human rights and human nature, neo-conservatives feel certain about the good they are about and also the danger of all those who disagree with them. Because the freedom they so fervently praise is only possible through victory, and because victory is only possible by an aggressive militarism, neo-conservatives quite logically have no real desire for either compromise or conversation.

The same narrowness might be said of those on the religious right and their fellow-travelers. The moral and ontological commitments of the religious right have been, in important respects, a part of the American tradition from the beginning, and especially since the early part of the twentieth century. These Christians have not, however, always found it necessary to seek national political power nor when they have involved themselves in national politics have they attached themselves to a political party that protected the interests of corporations and the wealthy.

So, the importance of the religious right is tied to these two transformations: their politicization and their new political alliances. On the matter of the new alliances, at least two reasons account for the change. First, self-proclaimed Christian conservatives are a wealthier segment of the population than they've been in their history. More of them prosper under Republican policies than before. Second, as the economic policy differences separating the two parties became increasingly cosmetic, more people from a wide variety of Christian affiliations looked to distinguish between the two parties by reference to "moral" issues.

Meanwhile, the attacks on their values, which had mobilized many of these people in the late 70s and early 80s to concern themselves with national politics, only became more virulent. Not only has the Democratic Party rejected their most prominent moral claims, but when these religious traditionalists speak out for what they consider to be the common, historical, and American understanding of moral claims, they are accused of being intolerant, close-minded, and bigoted. In short, they believe, with good reason, that the moral ground has shifted under their very feet. Moral assertions that Americans recently considered standard fare have now become polarizing claims. Shocked by the degree to which some groups attack them for their beliefs, religious

traditionalists have developed a battle mentality. America has changed while they slept. Awakened, they are determined to win it back.

Those on the religious right believe that the United States was founded on Christian principles and that God has favored this nation because of its fidelity to these principles. Some Christians think in terms of a fairly specific eschatology while others simply note that God rewards good people and will punish nations that reject Him. Even more Christians react to recent cultural and moral changes by reference to the nation and society that they want for their families. The presumed moral decay represents a threat to a cherished way of life, inherited from generations of previous Americans.

Common to all of these groups, however, is a growing belief that they must employ all necessary means to win, that the stakes are too high for tolerating defeat. Convinced of the moral rectitude of their views, they see politics in Hobbesian terms, as a power game. Historically, conservative Christians have not had a reluctance to use the powers of government. As a whole, they had accepted the expanding state of the New Deal and even portions of the Great Society. One of their early heroes was the great liberal, William Jennings Bryan, who had promised to use the government to bring economic justice and a great measure of equality to the nation. In local and state matters, they had often employed governmental powers, supported by majority opinion, to control all manner of personal behavior—from drinking to sex. What is new about the religious right is that it has moved its moral agenda to the federal government in reaction to a moral agenda pushed by others. This culture war is not a product of the religious right, but rather the religious right is a product of a cultural attack.

For now at least, it appears that the time when matters of regulation over personal conduct and social norms were local and state matters, is over. All sides in this battle are working aggressively in all aspects of federal power to win for their cause. And since the issues are couched in universalistic language, there is no hope for a conversation. The only issue is getting the necessary power to establish the moral order.

Whatever George Bush meant by “compassionate conservatism,” the present coalition that he leads is anything but conservative. What kind of administration he might have had absent a 9/11 attack, I can’t say. What is clear is that Bush and his administration have accepted the imperatives of the American right. But equally important, Bush has accepted the view of power that reigns on the right. Because the stakes are so high, because defeat is not an option, Bush, and the Republicans more generally have expanded the reach of the federal government while centralizing within the government the exercise of power. The alterations the Republicans have made go against long-standing fears of expanding governmental power and they provide the very means by which an opposition party, once in power, can more easily impose its agenda on the American people.

The conversation of a free, democratic people has been replaced by power politics. Bush is unwilling to talk about purposes and ideals because, at least since 9/11, he considers conversation to be a luxury that the nation cannot afford. Increasingly taking his methods and his persona from the neo-conservatives, Bush stresses the importance of standing on firm conviction rather than changing one’s mind. In such a dangerous world, vacillation is deadly. The longstanding complaint about Clinton and other Democrats, that they are unwilling to stand on principle, has turned into a slavish devotion to a fixed course and an unwillingness to acknowledge mistakes. For the neocons, and perhaps for Bush himself, the historical examples are important, if selective. Lincoln and Churchill provide the relevant standards—leaders made great not by their immediate popularity, but because of their fixed moral compass and their unyielding devotion to the right cause.

Importantly, the examples to which neoconservatives obsessively turn are wartime leaders. The significance of this fact can hardly be overstated. But in a more particular way, it is important for understanding Bush and those who elected him. In both cases they understand America to be engaged in a war and during wars the American people accept, even require, a clear vision and strong leadership from the federal government. Enough Americans accepted the claim that the US was in a war so as to re-elect Bush. But, in the old phrase, war is the health of the state.

The Patriot Act is only the most famous example of rather aggressive federal action to deal with potential war-time threats. But this example shouldn't hide the fact that the Bush administration has consistently pushed for both a more intrusive federal government and a persistent attempt to undermine a fragile federalism. Before 9/11 Bush pushed for and won the passage of the "No Child Left Behind" legislation, which did more to federalize public education than any policy in American history. Attorney General Ashcroft, meanwhile, has moved aggressively, in a manner with few precedents, to undermine state laws, especially concerning marijuana and assisted-suicide laws.

The marriage issue is particularly revealing, I think. It is quite true that advocates of gay marriage have pushed with unseemly aggressiveness to force the nation to accept their more expansive definition of marriage. They have used illegal means and they have used fairly aggressive political campaigns. The reaction has been predictable. Now that the right has national power, it seeks to use the levers of power to preserve its values. Importantly, it seems that federalism is not among those values any more. The most symbolic reaction is the effort to pass a Constitutional amendment defining marriage, thereby prohibiting any state from defining it differently. The defeat of several gay marriage ballot measures in the states provided support to Bush and his allies. Speaking more generally, but in a way consistent with this issue, Bush declared that the election had given him political capital, which he intended to "spend." In other words, his side had won the plebiscite and so would rule with as little compromise as possible. Conversation over.

However troubling are these trends, they do not finally expose what is wrong with the right—though they may point to the problem. One has to expect that a party gaining so much power is going to have an overwhelming tendency to use this power. For all their appeals for smaller government in the 1980s, one might still expect that two decades of growing power would lead to changed attitudes and agendas.

I might illustrate the deeper problem with the right by noting President Bush's September 21, 2004 speech before the United Nation's General Assembly. The subject here is foreign policy, but the nature of the argument reflects a more general ideological orientation. In a masterful stroke, Bush compared the American Declaration of Independence with the Universal Declaration of Human rights, noting their similar moral

commitments. His argument, on purely formal grounds, is strong. He said: “and both of our founding documents affirm that this bright line between justice and injustice—between right and wrong—is the same in every age, and every culture, and every nation.” Appealing to common moral ground, Bush was also stating a very strong universal claim. Sweeping away the influence of history and culture, Bush pointed to a “bright line” between justice and injustice. Such bright lines are rare in history, and the list of specifics that the president offers preceding his declaration read rather more like a western, liberal definition of justice than a universal one.

Bush didn’t leave his argument with this universal moral code. He added a prudential argument that draws its inspiration from a neoconservative reading of history: “there is no safety to looking away, seeking the quiet life by ignoring the struggles and oppression of others.” Moreover, “the security of our world is found in the advancing rights of mankind.” Already one catches a whiff of a millennialism, a sort of capitalist Marxism. Advancing the rights of mankind creates security—freedom begets security. Justice, peace, and freedom will take away the need for rebellion or terrorism.

This moral code that stands outside of time and culture, includes democracy. “No other government,” intoned the President, “has done more to protect minorities, to secure the rights of labor, to raise the status of women, or to channel human energy to the pursuits of peace.” Moreover, democracy is for everyone, no matter their heritage, their traditions, their cultural values. “Democratic institutions have taken root in modern societies, and in traditional societies.” Emphasizing that all humans, all societies, are properly fitted for democratic institutions, Bush displayed a staggering ignorance of almost all serious scholarship about the cultural conditions for successful liberal democracy. Even more dumbfounding, he said “when it comes to the desire for liberty and justice, there is no clash of civilization. People everywhere are capable of freedom, and worthy of freedom.”

Still, Bush seems to suggest that human variety matters. Democracies are the product of much effort and time. It may be that democracy is the natural form of government (that is, best suited to human nature), but its particular form is not certain or set in stone—“democracies take on the unique character of the peoples that create them.” However, it is unclear how much cultural variety is tolerable. The logic of his argument,

taken as a whole, is that democracy shapes or alters a people rather than the other way around. It is further unclear of what the precise nature of the relationship between democracy on the one hand, and freedom and rights on the other. Bush operates with loose categories, making his sweeping moral assertions as imprecise as they are grand.

In the same paragraph in which Bush noted the variety of democratic forms, he concluded with these prophetic words. “This much we know with certainty: the desire for freedom resides in every human heart. And that desire cannot be contained forever by prison walls, or martial laws, or secret police. Over time, and across the Earth, freedom will find a way.”

The certain knowledge that Bush claims concerns the human heart. Not this or that heart, but the defining human desire. At least by historical standards, freedom has not been the highest ideal of the human heart. But even if we accepted Bush’s sweeping claim about human nature, we are left uncertain about what content he invests in the elusive word “freedom.” Is it freedom from certain kinds of restraint? Is it the freedom of the individual to do as she wishes? Is it freedom from fear and want? Is it the old ideal of freedom to do good? Perhaps it is freedom to participate in the consumer excesses of a global capitalism.

Whatever freedom is, Bush declares that it will find a way. Now reifications are not uncommon in political discourse, but reifying freedom in this way is a striking example. Because Bush has declared that freedom is natural, that it is the end of human yearning, he is suggesting that it is the defining human good. He adds to this argument from nature a directional understanding of history. History points toward the end, the realization of freedom. Clearly Bush understands that the United States plays a major role in this drama of history, this unfolding of the story of freedom. But, he adds the idea, suggestive of a larger power that governs human affairs, that with or without the United States, Freedom will find a way.

Knowing human nature and the direction and end of human history, Bush and the party he leads, claims access to the defining knowledge of human purpose. Armed with knowledge—a knowledge that Bush himself declares is “certain”—the right is working toward cosmic purposes. With such higher purposes, the democratic imperative to deliberate about common purposes is unnecessary.

A Conservative Vision

Conservatives in the Burkean tradition suffer from numerous liabilities. Despite Burke's example, few have been particularly interested in the art of politics. Attracted to literature and the humanities, these conservatives have often employed a metaphor-rich language ill-suited to any form of political agenda, much less policy debate. Insofar as they have engaged in political discourse, they do so mainly by rejecting programs and programmatic approaches. Unlike the intellectuals on the left, who developed a science of politics relative to their goals, conservative thinkers rejected political systems as such. However the intellectuals on the right who continue to have a voice in politics are not conservatives but defenders of a right-wing ideology. By defending forcefully an ideology, these intellectuals provide a counter-weight to liberal intellectuals who also defend an ideology. Absent an ideology, conservatives have little that politicians can use.

Unfortunately, the most systematic effort at employing a conservative perspective in political life came from southern traditionalists. These southerners provided powerful critiques of the emerging capitalist order in the north, but in so doing defended a race-based slave system. Southern traditionalism has much to commend itself, but it can never escape the taint of slavery and racism, for in the long run their critique rested in some measure on their own immoral system—efforts to disentangle their critiques from the system they defended, notwithstanding.

A traditionalist perspective has even greater difficulties being relevant in a forward-looking, individualistic, consumer culture. Perhaps, then, the greatest duty for a conservative in a liberal democracy is to offer corrective critiques rather than propose systematic alternatives. I believe, however, that if we recover the buried wisdom of the conservative movement and think back to first principles, conservatives today can offer important criticisms of the culture around them as well as suggest ways of applying first principles to ever-new circumstances. But American conservatism loses its peculiar ability when it becomes a competing ideology or political program. Indeed, the most important role for conservatives is to offer an alternative aesthetic to contemporary tastes

and to cultivate the affections that are so undernourished in an egalitarian, consumerist, democratic culture.

I noted at the beginning of this essay that the right is rhapsodic but knows nothing of mystery. Conservatives not only recognize mystery but relish in the eccentric nature of the universe they occupy. They find the love for efficiency, ever greater productivity, and increased systematization to be a malformed affection of the modern world. Among the things lost by this modern, transforming passion are the myriad cultural forms that emerge from the darkest past and have grown, each differently, through unplanned interactions between a constantly changing people and a constantly changing environment. Part of the joy of life is found in variety—particularly variety that emerges out of circumstances and have deep roots in the past. Associated with this aesthetic is an affection for the eccentric, the odd, the un-processed.

People of a political persuasion find it easy to dismiss aesthetic judgments as irrelevant or inapplicable to what they call “the real world.” But it is this fetish for the skills that one can employ to make changes in business or political environments that conservatives warn against. They are not rejecting utility, but rather the narrowing of vision that such a posited “real world” suggests. The advocates of a real world are blind to the way altered affections change the nature of this world they are so interested in controlling. For conservatives, the cultivation of loves and affections alters the world rather profoundly, and in some measure they see the course of the modern world to be the narrowing and coarsening of human affections.

An important corollary of the conservative love of mystery and variety is an emphasis on complexity. Conservatives are particularly frustrated by the love of the simple and declarative. The most important modern efforts at simplification have come from reductive claims about human nature. A simple definition of human nature makes possible a science of government--a universal science of government--applicable across time and cultures. The conservative anthropology is non-reductive, exposing general principles and staggeringly numerous particular varieties.

Conservatives can agree with most modern understandings of human nature, but not to their exclusive claims. They recognize the dignity of the individual, but conservatives don't recognize the abstract individual that comes out of the state of nature

arguments. In the Anglo-American tradition, any real conservative must be a defender of the individual and her rights, but he wants to insist that all persons are crafted in social and political contexts. The person is shaped by an array of networks that connect the individual to other humans, to institutions, to meanings and ideals. Because the human is not abstract and because the kind of human that emerges depends in great measure on the nature and quality of the social environment that moulds that person, a primary concern of any social and political order is to the maintenance of a healthy and vibrant civil society.

Conservatives put great stock in institutions—and in the importance of variety of institutions. A healthy order requires government institutions, families, voluntary organizations, work-related institutions, religious institutions, educational institutions, and many institutions that have only the shadow of a structure or organization. In the interstices of these institutions, individuals develop a wide array of affections for others, find ways of working together for common purposes, find purpose in belonging, and develop obligations and duties that tie people to their neighbors. These institutions help form a community as well as the kind of individuals who are fit members of the community.

Of course the conservative also expects that each community will be unique. These communities aren't crafted relative to some blueprint, but rather grow more naturally according to the evolving needs and traditional connections that are rooted in a particular place and a particular people. The same general principle holds, however, for communities experiencing rapid population turn-over. Even here, the institutions are extremely important in providing a sort of structural memory with which new members might understand existing expectations and find ways of involving themselves in conversation with other members of the community. The goal in all communities is to find the ways by which the members, however rapidly they change, might find their place and begin to participate as important voices in the ongoing identity and collective purposes of the community.

A simple answer to how communities thrive would take away the most important part of community-building—the process of deliberation, compromise, and conversation that make any given community bear the image of its members. At such local levels,

people are forced to deal with other humans rather than abstract ideas. The diversity of views, the variety of ways of living, and the need to define common purposes all work to create the unique and affirming quality of one's community.

This organic understanding of human development emphasizes local control, thick institutions, and a strong sense of the sociability of humans. This developmental model cannot be achieved by replacing this social life and this complex array of institutions with free individuals and the market. Markets are important parts of any community, but a market is not the same thing as a society. From a conservative point of view, the interactions between merchant and customer is not only a financial exchange but one of the many ways that people (rather than agents exchanging things) relate to each other.

By emphasizing the importance of society, not as an abstract concept but as it evolves in its manifold forms, conservatives stress a certain primacy of the group. This primacy comes not at the expense of the individual but as the means to individual human flourishing. Rather than understanding either the social or political order to be a narrow contract among equal individuals, conservatives see this order to be an inheritance—an inheritance to be embraced and honored, but not ossified. One's society, with its historical continuities and with an openness to the future, gives the individual a connection to those before and an obligation to those who are to come. A healthy society brings people out of the prison of the self and into a network of meanings and human purposes in which the individual participates.

Because the conservative does not accept a radical individualism, he is unwilling to accept absolute claims about many individual rights. Probably the most important right in today's context concerns property. Conservatives emphasize the importance of private property and the moral education that comes from controlling property. But the creation of corporate property has been a troubling move. The federal government has given corporations the status of artificial persons, providing enormous financial protections. Because in most cases the property is owned by people who have little or no say in the use of the property, corporations tend to act in more predatory ways than real humans. Corporations are, in many cases, very valuable creations, but because they are creations of the state, governments ought to force them to behave in ways that assist the

communities of which they are a part. Community values, in an age of global capitalism, require government protections.

Because conservatives don't define human flourishing to mean expansive individual freedom or ever-greater wealth, they are not tied to a moral language of "values." There is not a moral economy that is relative to the tastes and desires of each individual nor is it a universalist moral standard. Conservatives often stress a greater spiritual unity that ties people together for purposes great and small, connected as they are to both mundane and spiritual purposes. But even without a religious view, conservatives find moral claims emerging out of common purposes rather than individual desires. Out of differences, but in intimate community with one another, the people of a society seek principles that they can live with, purposes that bind them together. Insofar as this is possible, the evolution of collective moral purposes should come at local levels among people who have a vested interest in the lives of their neighbors. More distant governments, especially national governments, ought not impose a universalistic moral order on the entire nation beyond very general principles of justice.

This understanding of conservatism, of course, argues against constitutional amendments defining marriage. For this reason alone—this preference for local option--conservatives ought to reject the amendment. Because conservatism is, in large measure, a form of organicism, stressing the development of a society and its habits relative to a constant interaction with a changing environment, then institutions, like the family, are important for the way they have functioned in specific cultures. In large measure the family has served as an economic (productive) unit, as a political unit, as a means of protection, and as the primary means of socializing new generations. The family has changed, often dramatically, relative to changing economic or political conditions. As its functions change so also does its structure.

So families, like all institutions, are important because they serve valuable purposes of the society and the members therein. This is still the case in the United States. However, as government has taken on larger roles in educating and socializing children, as families rarely function to produce goods or services, and as the United States has a very well-functioning social order that provides protections and opportunities for its members, new family structures have emerged.

But marriages and families do serve valuable purposes. They are stabilizing influences in a mobile society. They create legal obligations between people, making families take primary care of their members. Beyond that, marriages and families are the primary means by which people become connected to others, and develop their sense of obligations. Families are still the primary means of socialization, giving citizens the habits of self-rule and of mutual dependence.

In an age in which procreation is not a pressing concern and in which homosexual behavior is legal, there is little prospect of getting gay people to accept the obligations of heterosexual marriage. As a result, the society is encouraging them to live outside of those institutional structures that habituate people to the very practices that are most healthy for a society. Not only would gay marriage provide legal obligations between two people, making them responsible for the basic health and welfare of their partners, but this legal sanction of a union would encourage the stability and order that marriages in general provide for a society.

This is a prudential argument for gay marriage. But beyond this issue, there is a conservative principle at stake that is extremely important. For conservatives, all liberty is local. The choices made by people in community with one another are of a special quality. In healthy societies, the very process of deliberating about matters like the definition of marriage, about whether Walmart should come into the community, about a whole host of issues that impact the society as a whole, is central to human development. This conversation with the many parts of the community forces a recognition of people unlike you—not simply awareness, but recognition. The conversation about mutual ends helps educate all members of the community about the moral commitments of their neighbors, fostering understanding and, perhaps, a measure of respect. So also does this conversation lead to pressures from majorities to uphold the principles of the community. So while some people lose in this deliberative process, the very act of conversing changes subtly the substance of the policy and it forces a recognition of the substantive diversity that makes the community.

From my description of conservative thought, the basic outline of a foreign policy should be evident. The essential organicism of conservatism dictates that political structures emerge out of the habits, customs, and traditions of a given people. Imposition

of an alien political process produces pathologies, and even if “successful” tend to undermine the cultural development of a people. They become increasingly part of an homogenized global order. No nation ought to impose by force a political system on another, except under extreme circumstances. However, this prohibition does not extend to forbidding nations from assisting peoples who seek to develop a stable, liberal democracy.

Militarism is a danger to any democracy and so a posture toward the world that requires a heavy military investment and continuous foreign entanglements and confrontations threatens to transform a federal system into an ever-more centralized national government—more plebiscitary but with fewer liberties, more democratic and less liberal. Still, every nation has the obligation of self-preservation. A conservative supports a vigorous, voluntary military and a certain willingness to use that military. In this case, the United States has an obligation to defeat any nation or group that threatens its interests. Absent that threat, the US must keep its peace except during humanitarian crises that exceed a certain threshold—and then it must be careful to not use such efforts as an excuse for imperialism.

Conclusion

What’s wrong with the right? It has become a political movement, disconnected from a larger, more complicated and diverse social and cultural tradition. As the movement aimed to gain and exercise power, it developed a populist rhetoric that brought into its folds a heretofore latent political force, Christian conservatives. By the 1980s the right had transformed the Republican Party, had articulated a clear if not consistent agenda. After Reagan the right turned policy agendas into ideological objectives. What made their ideology different was the apocalyptic quality to the struggle for power. With the right ideas, the good cause, the right settled into a Manichean language that demonized opponents. With the stakes so high, those on the right approached politics as a Hobbesian conflict rather than a conversation. The risks associated with losing were too great to contemplate, justifying almost any political tactic. Moreover, this ideological structure, fully formed and in no need of further elaboration, justified using the

expanding power of the federal government to secure the good causes, to protect cherished ways of life, and to impose a new political order.

The conservatism that I've sketched briefly as a response to the excesses of the right emphasizes the limited knowledge of humans, even about moral choices. It is a persuasion that, in the context of a historically developed liberal democracy, emphasizes the conversation among diverse parts, the continuous struggle to define common purposes, and the importance of building social institutions to foster the cultural habits that nurture a democracy. Conservatives love liberty, but not abstract rights. They seek to craft a decent, humane, and tolerable order that affirms the dignity of the individual person in the context of a rich network of obligations and affections. Because they see in all things human a grand complexity, conservatives abhor simplifying ideologies.

For the conservative, human life is lived in the shadow of great mysteries. Grand purposes, perhaps divine purposes, govern human life, but no human can understand or predict these. Rather than finding this human limitation enervating, conservatives find great joy in the mystery of human existence, in the grand variety of its forms, even in the complicated and sometimes worrisome play of human motives and emotions. Understanding themselves to be heirs to a long history of human development, conservatives seek first to conserve and then to improve. Open to new possibilities that are well suited to new circumstances, they are nonetheless hostile to grand visions of a new human and a designed society.

The conservative has much to offer the United States in this polarized time. Most of all he offers a non-ideological invitation to rejoin the conversation and to a genuine effort to habituate a people to self-rule and the processes of deliberative democracy.