

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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Friday, July 23, 2004

A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 29, 1995

CONSERVATISM? WHAT CONSERVATISM?

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The battle between the White House and Congressional Republicans over the size and spending priorities of the government is in many ways a classic confrontation between liberalism and conservatism. One side wants big government; the other side wants smaller government. Most of the principal players in the drama see it in these terms, and from a political writer's standpoint, the use of the liberal-conservative paradigm greatly facilitates analysis and comment.

It has certainly been comfortable for me to view the budget fight this way this past year. But throughout the period it has become increasingly clear that this is not really a battle between "conservatism" and "liberalism," in the sense that these terms were understood only a few decades ago. This is a fight about something else, something quite new in American politics. It involves a new post-cold-war political paradigm that is not yet fully formed, but is, to paraphrase Yeats, still a rough beast slouching toward Washington to be born. In fact, this may be America's first major "post-modern" political fight.

Space does not permit an in-depth discussion of such a broad topic. But I thought this week I'd throw out some related ideas that I hope might lend a new perspective to the on-going budget battle and to the political fights that lie ahead. In doing so, I would hope also to provide some insights into where U. S. society might be headed in the 21st century.

For starters, I would argue that most of today's "conservatives" are little different from yesterday's liberals. This is not so much a criticism as a simple observation about the political realities of the day. The concept that every problem demands a government solution has burrowed so deeply into the American psyche that the transformation of most conservative politicians into old-style liberals was all but inevitable.

To be a "conservative" politician today is to be one who seeks "conservative" government approaches to the nation's problems (i.e. less costly and/or more efficient) rather than "liberal" government approaches. The difference between the two is primarily a matter of spending levels and the locus of power.

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For example, recent GOP efforts to decentralize government by shifting responsibilities to the states could hardly be described as "conservative." It is in reality a means of wresting political power away from Washington's liberal bureaucratic establishment and placing it in the hands of a new state-based establishment, which would be beholden to a Congress dominated by these new "conservatives." Either way, the government is still the tax collector for the welfare state.

It is also worth remembering that when such contemporary "conservative" stalwarts as Jack Kemp and Bill Bennett assumed leadership of HUD and the Department of Education respectively in the Reagan era, they didn't try to dismantle these departments. Instead, to borrow a term from British colonial times, they immediately "went out and married the natives." They became advocates for their departments, arguing that they could make them "work better."

Such actions by these present day "conservative intellectuals" stand in sharp contrast to those of such conservative scholars as Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver, whose ideas and intellectual heft were so instrumental in the early 1950s in revitalizing the conservative movement after it had become virtually extinct in the years following the presidency of Herbert Hoover.

In those halcyon days, conservatism was not a political ideology, but a way of viewing the world. Conservatives then believed that order and justice and freedom were not gifts of government, but were, in the words of Kirk, the "products of a long and painful social experience, the results of centuries of trial and reflection and sacrifice." Conservatives then believed, as Kirk said, that "human society is no machine to be treated mechanically;" that "necessary change ought to be gradual and discriminatory, never 'unfixing old interests at once;'" that "revolution slices through the arteries of a culture, a cure that kills."

Conservatives believed then that the driving force behind society was not government, but the moral and spiritual life of a people, and their culture, their art, literature, poetry, music, and architecture. Walt Whitman, who in his later years outgrew his youthful populist radicalism, described these pieces of the cultural mosaic as "little ships" that "have arrived safely, as from voyages over wide, century-stretching seas."

"The little ships, the miracles that have buoy'd them, and by incredible chances safely convey'd them (or the best of them, their meaning and essence) over long wastes, darkness, lethargy, ignorance, etc. have been a few inscriptions--a few immortal compositions, small in size, yet compassing what measureless values of reminiscence, contemporary portraitures, manners, idioms and beliefs, with deepest inference, hint, thought, to tie and touch forever the old, new body, and the old, new soul! These! and still these! bearing the freight so dear--dearer than pride--dearer than love. All the best experience of humanity, folded, saved, freighted to us here. Some of these tiny ships, we call Old and New Testament, Homer, Aeschylus, Plato, Juvenal, etc. Precious minims! I think, if we were forced to choose, rather than have you, and the likes of you, and what belongs to and has grown out of you, blotted out and gone, we could better afford, appalling as that would be, to lose all actual ships, this day fasten'd by wharf, or floating on wave, and see them, with all their cargoes, scuttled and sent to the bottom."

My good friend Claes Ryn, who teaches government at Catholic University, and is, in my opinion, one of the nation's most thoughtful political scholars, argues that the ruling assumption of today's "conservatives" "seems to be that the crux of social well-being is politics: bad politicians ruin society: good politicians set it right." He argues that this "limited awareness of what really shapes the long-term direction of a society or civilization--specifically, of the roles played by thought and imagination--leads [them] to inadequate analyses of the existing political and social situation and of what might bring real and lasting improvement."

Ryn is perfectly willing to admit that the actions of today's "conservative" "toilers in politics" will lead to a better economy and to healthier financial markets than would those of their liberal political counterparts. But he believes their efforts will do little to halt the decay that is attacking society, because he believes this decay cannot be arrested by making simple adjustments in the government "programs" that are themselves symptomatic of what has gone wrong.

Ryn argues that "every society has a dominant sense of its own identity and purpose . . . deep within our personalities are the marks left by the imaginative and intellectual master minds--poets, religious visionaries, painters, composers, and philosophers--the individuals whose intuitions or ideas leave others changed. Directly or indirectly, those individuals create the tenor of an age, for good or ill . . . they throw light on the human condition, sometimes on the reality of politics."

"Especially over time," he says, "the power of all the politicians in the nation's capital is dwarfed by the power of those who influence us through teaching, writing, preaching, art and entertainment." Yet, he continues, today's "conservatives" see "no large and compelling reason to worry about professors, writers, composers, and artists. After all, according to them, society is moved not by them but by individuals who pursue more 'practical' pursuits, especially persons who affect public policy and, most prominently, leading politicians."

This view of where the real power lies is thought by its adherents to represent hard nosed realism, Ryn notes. Yet, he says, "in actuality, it exemplifies a narrow and shortsighted understanding of what shapes the future."

Ryn acknowledges that many "individuals known as conservatives" have recently taken a greater interest in the state of the culture. He says he hopes that this represents an awakening to the importance of thought and imagination. Without such a renewal, Ryn maintains, all the political efforts of the new "conservatives" to seek to renew American society via "better, less expensive" government programs will in vain.

Yet Ryn is pessimistic. He fears that this "civic boosterism" by conservative politicians about culture might simply confirm and give new impetus to the ideologization of American conservatism, since "issues of cultural decline are more often than not discussed as if the key to reversing the trend lies in the hands of politicians and their intellectual allies."

After all, Ryn notes, unlike Kirk, most of today's leading conservative intellectuals, such as Bennett and Bill Kristol, Editor and Publisher of the new neo-conservative *Weekly Standard*, which absolutely gushed recently over the possibility of a Colon Powell presidency, are up to

their elbows in day to day politics. Perhaps, he says, with no small amount of irony, "in some future conservative administration there will be appointed a 'culture czar.'"

What is really needed, Ryn maintains, is a "broad intellectual and cultural movement that might in time redirect the moral and political life of civilization." In keeping with this view, Ryn himself is a founder and Chairman of the National Humanities Institute, a small Washington-based think tank that promotes social renewal by attempting to revitalize the nation's moral, cultural and intellectual life through the humanities.

This is wonderful organization and is, so far as I know, the only think tank around that approaches the nation's problems from outside the Washington mind set. (Tax deductible contributions are gratefully accepted at their offices at 214 Massachusetts Ave. in Washington, as are subscriptions to the organization's journal *Humanitas*.)

My purpose here is not to criticize today's "conservative" politicians. As regular readers know, I have cheered them on all year, and I will continue to do so. I think they're doing a wonderful job and I wish them well. But I think it is important to understand that theirs is a fight for raw political power, not for a more conservative society. All the political power in the world couldn't create a conservative society. That would require something very different than what is happening in Washington.

I would not want to carry this analogy too far. But I think there are some parallels between what has happened to American conservatism in the past few decades and what has happened to Islam during the same period. In an article entitled "The Western Mind of Radical Islam," in the December issue of *First Things*, another good friend, Daniel Pipes notes that "traditional Islam emphasized man's relations with God while playing down his relations to the state. Law loomed very large, politics small. Over the centuries, pious Muslims avoided the government, which meant almost nothing to them but trouble."

Fundamentalist Muslims, which Pipes calls Islamists, on the other hand, "make politics the heart of their program," he says. "They see Islam less as the structure in which individuals make their lives and more as an ideology for running whole societies. Declaring 'Islam is the solution,' they hold . . . that Islam 'is rich with instructions for ruling a state, running an economy, establishing social links and relationships among the people, and instructions for running a family.' For Islamists, Islam represents the path to power."

If modern day "conservative" politicians have lost their way and are now merrily sailing along an ideological course charted years ago by liberals, it is logical to expect, I would think, that they will in time arrive at the same place that the liberals are now. And where is that?

Well, today's liberals have, in my opinion, sailed far from the views of their predecessors of only a few years back. The old liberals, as exemplified by such men as Hubert Humphrey and Jack Kennedy, believed strongly that all of society's problems should be addressed in one way or the other by government. But they also had a reverence for the other institutions that support American public life, and for the traditional customs and mores of society. And they were not purveyors of class envy.

It is worth remembering that Kennedy once put forth a tax bill that would, in his own words, "lower personal as well as corporate income taxes, for those in the lower brackets who are certain to spend their additional take-home pay, and for those in the middle and upper brackets who can thereby be encouraged to undertake additional efforts and enabled to invest more capital."

These old liberals sincerely believed that government could create a "great society" without resorting to such drastic totalitarian methods as racial quotas, the destruction of the tenth amendment to the Constitution, the creation of endless declarations of special "group rights" for all sorts of different subsets of humanity, and, as I said earlier, the aggressive promotion of class envy. In my opinion, they were wrong. But I believe they believed it.

Today's liberals operate under no such illusion. Yet, unlike conservatism, I don't believe liberalism has gone astray. I believe it has simply moved forward toward its logical conclusion; that place where sage after sage, from Tocqueville to Hayek to Orwell to Babbitt to de Jouvenal to Boorstin have said it would inevitably lead; to a mad, frenzied "big brother" confiscatory, nanny state, run by people who "know what is best" for everyone; a state that promotes class envy, which in turn causes social unrest, and which in turn "requires" government "solutions," concocted by the same "social engineers" that created the problem; a state that bestows "rights" on favored groups and individuals, and confiscates those of others less favored, with all the pomp, ceremony and arbitrariness of a feudal lord blessing or punishing a serf.

Barring a renewal, or at least a halt in the deterioration of the nation's culture and its moral and spiritual life, it seems to me that what lies ahead in the 21st century is an escalation of the trends that are already at work, i.e. a public life that is dominated by politics.

Absent those cultural factors that have historically acted as unifying and harmonizing forces in society, I believe we can look forward to a long period of ugly political jousting among competing political ideologies. This will keep society in constant turmoil and sometimes, almost certainly, will result in open savagery.

Without the unifying effects of common morals and values, the quest for political power will turn the presidency into nothing more than the top prize for the interest group exercising the greatest political power at any given time. This is, of course, already happening today.

All of this is, of course, a prescription for a balkanized nation in which competing interest groups perpetually form and dissolve political alliances to assert their "rights" against the competing "rights" of others. One wonders when contemplating such an eventuality whether it wouldn't be a good idea to send troops to Bosnia for the purpose of learning in real conditions how to keep order in a balkanized society.

In the meantime, I'll root for my side in the political battles ahead, as I do today. And I'll continue to be optimistic about the financial markets and commerce in the near term, if "my side" continues to score victories, as they are doing.

But I'll look to the less publicized, on-going battle over who ultimately controls the institutions that shape the nation's ideas, attitudes and principles for clues as to the direction of American

society. Even if, cultural renewal could be directed by politics via Washington, it is doubtful that the fights over how much to spend on the various, existing wealth redistribution programs would be the way to go about it.

As Robert Bork, one of the nation's most brilliant jurists, once noted: "Hollywood and the network evening news will not change their ways because of Republican majorities. Political correctness and multiculturalism will not be ejected from the universities by New Gingrich . . . even a persistently conservative government can do little to deal with social deterioration other than stop subsidizing it."

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