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What Ails Conservatism

By WILLIAM KRISTOL and DAVID BROOKS September 15, 1997

The era of big government may be over, but a new era of conservative governance hasn't yet begun. Why the delay? Why isn't a victorious conservatism now reshaping the American political landscape?

The problem isn't primarily the failures of Republican politicians; nor the absence of a charismatic conservative leader; nor the cleverness of Bill Clinton. Nor is the problem simply the entrenchment of liberal interest groups; nor the recalcitrance of the status quo; nor even the power of deeply problematic cultural trends.

All of these, of course, pose challenges. But, unpleasant though it is to admit, a barrier to the success of today's conservatism is ... today's conservatism. Something is missing at conservatism's core. And the main tendencies that now compete to guide today's conservative movement can't fill this void.

Foolish Contempt

The first of these tendencies is the antigovernment, "leave us alone" sentiment that was crucial to the Republican victory of 1994. This sentiment followed naturally from a disgust with big-government liberalism. By bringing together all the groups that shared this aversion, Republicans built a winning electoral coalition. But a governing movement is more than an electoral coalition. Wishing to be left alone isn't a governing doctrine. And an American political movement's highest goal can't be protecting citizens from their own government. Indeed, in recent years some conservatives' sensible contempt for the nanny state has at times spilled over into a foolish, and politically suicidal, contempt for the American state. A conservatism that organizes citizens' resentments rather than informing their hopes will always fall short of fundamental victory.

A second powerful tendency in today's conservatism does try to speak to citizens' hopes, but it does so in too limited a way. The effort to defend "family values" and to "remoralize" society through a renewal of religious faith is an important response to the depredations of modern liberalism. But it, too, is insufficient. We need to do more than to create havens for families, or for religion, in an unfriendly political world. America certainly would be better off if there were a religious revival. But this is both too grand and too sectarian an agenda for a political movement in a liberal democracy.

National greatness conservatism does not despise government. How could it? How can Americans love their nation if they hate its government?

A third major tendency in today's conservatism looks to strengthen communities and to invigorate the institutions of civil society. This means devolving power and authority from the federal government to states, localities, and voluntary institutions. As with the first two tendencies, there is much that is sensible and admirable in these efforts. But this too isn't enough. Devolutionists like to quote Edmund Burke's praise of "little platoons," the communities within which citizens can find a home and deal with their problems. But Burke argued that citizens' affection for their own small communities depends on their being linked to "higher and more large regards," such as the nation. The revitalization of our local civic life depends, ultimately, on our national political health. America won't be good locally if it isn't great nationally.

In other words: What's missing from today's American conservatism is America. The left has always blamed America first. Conservatives once deplored this. They defended America. And when they sought to improve America, they did so by recalling Americans to their highest principles, and by calling them forward to a grand destiny. What is missing from today's conservatism is the appeal to American greatness.

American nationalism--the nationalism of Alexander Hamilton and Henry Clay and Teddy Roosevelt--has never been European blood-and-soil nationalism. It's true that in the absence of a real appeal to national greatness, some conservatives are tempted, *a la* Pat Buchanan, to turn to this European tradition. But this can't and shouldn't work in America. Our nationalism is that of an exceptional nation founded on a universal



principle, on what Lincoln called "an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times." Our pride in settling the frontier, welcoming immigrants and advancing the cause of freedom around the world is related to our dedication to our principles.

That's why American nationalism isn't narrow or parochial. It doesn't believe in closing our borders or fearing the global economy. It does believe in resisting group rights and multiculturalism and other tendencies that weaken our attachment to our common principles. It embraces a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of national strength and moral assertiveness abroad. It would use federal power to preserve and enhance our national patrimony--the parks, buildings, and monuments that are the physical manifestations of our common heritage. And it insists that while government should be limited, it should also be energetic.

George Will recently rebuked conservatives who 20 years ago rallied to defend the Panama Canal: "But would they have built it?" It's a fair question to ask many of today's conservatives. But American conservatism's answer should be clear: Of course we would have. And we look forward to building its equivalents in the future.

If American nationalism differs from its European counterpart, so does the American view of greatness. We don't seek our greatness in the inheritances of throne or altar, their origins shrouded in the mists of time. American greatness is not reactionary. It is the greatness achieved by free citizens striving, as Lincoln put it, "in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations."

This American understanding of greatness is friendly to private property, prosperity and progress. And it isn't unfriendly to government, properly understood. After all, as Lincoln reminds us, it is "through this free government which we have enjoyed" that Americans have secured "an open field and a fair chance" for our "understanding, enterprise, and intelligence." Free government--limited but energetic--is not the enemy. It can be used, in the spirit of Henry Clay and Teddy Roosevelt, to enhance competition and opportunity.

Today this means policies that would bust the great public trusts of our time--the education, health and Social Security monopolies. It means welfare programs that demand personal responsibility. It means education policies that promote high standards, challenge our best talents and promote scientific and national progress. It means taking seriously questions of public morality, while recognizing the limitations of legal sanctions. For example, in lieu of a consensus to outlaw abortion, it might mean a campaign to reduce the number of abortions year by year, via adoption and in other ways.

In sum, national-greatness conservatism does not despise government. How could it? How can Americans love their nation if they hate its government? But the way to restore faith in our government is to slash its flabbiness while making it more effective. Rudy Giuliani has shown that New York City is governable. Problems of crime and incivility--which had come to seem inevitable features of modern urban life--have in fact been mitigated by an energetic executive. If New York is governable, so is America.

No 10-Point Program

It would be silly to try to lay out some sort of 10-point program for American greatness. In any case, the particular policies are less important than getting Americans to begin to think differently about politics. The gravest threat to America today is the complacent mediocrity and petty meddling of the nanny state. Efforts to get big government off our backs, to strengthen families and to invigorate communities are healthy responses to the threat. But they are insufficient without the ambitions and endeavors of a conservatism committed to national greatness.

They way to defeat the unctuous and trivializing politics of Bill Clinton is by making it seem petty and contemptible in light of the greatness of the American experiment. And a key to that greatness is our system of government--a government that must be improved, but one that remains, to quote Lincoln once more, "an inestimable jewel." Only a robust conservatism can triumph over a cloying Clintonism. Let Clinton talk about building a bridge to a multicultural, diverse and politically correct 21st century. Conservatives should act to shape the next century as an American century.

Mr. Kristol is editor of The Weekly Standard, where Mr. Brooks is a senior editor.

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