

William C. Dennis  
Philadelphia Society National Meeting  
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Panel of Former Philadelphia Society Presidents

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Thank you. It is a pleasure to be with so many friends this Sunday Morning. I believe this is the second time I have had the opportunity to speak on a panel of past Philadelphia Society presidents where, as with this panel, we were asked to remark on the role of the United States in the World Today. Stephen Tonsor told me once that the future had a logic of its own, so that it was a perilous activity thinking that one had anything useful to say about future events. So before I say a few words again about looking ahead I think I will briefly look back to the National Meeting in 2006, to see how well my remarks then have held up after three years.

I began with two assertive comments on speeches given previously at our 2006 meeting.

1. Whatever one may think of the Iraq war, our military has fought a magnificent operation. For a military to be great it must be used once in awhile, as awful as that is, and the young officers now serving in Iraq are now gaining the experience necessary to provide us a superb officer corps for decades to come.

I think I got this right. And we should continue to be grateful to the young men and women in the military who serve us well and faithfully.

2. Our economy is booming—not on the brink of collapse—if we cannot do what we need to do in the world today with this economy, we will never be able to, for as a nation we are rich, entrepreneurial, creative, and optimistic.

I think I got this mostly right—we did have a great economy going, but the mistakes of the Fed, the SEC, and especially Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were already beginning to undermine our economic strengths. No doubt private mistakes and personal greed played a role too. No one quite understands how our current situation came about. We will need some time to sort things out and learn how to lessen future risks. But while doing so, we must continue to defend the general institution of capitalism against its critics.

But the main body of my talk in 2006 was devoted to a plea for conservatives to deal more realistically, as conservatives are supposed to be realists, with globalization and immigration. As I remember it, some of this commentary turned out to be controversial. I am not going to go over my argument again, but here are two sentences from that paper that pretty much sum it up: *Only those nations prepared to embrace the possibilities of globalization will thrive, and through their successes have the better hope of protecting and enhancing the positive aspects of their nation's characteristics and traditions. Since America is a nation of immigrants, multi-cultural in fact and tradition, populous, creative, growing, and since we are also a relatively free society, we should be more able to meet the challenges of globalization than any other society on earth.* I continue to believe that conservatives have failed in their vision by not embracing the positive sides of globalization in the way they should. In part, because of this, we have a president who likely will divert the United States from its proper place as a force for good in the world. I note in passing that none of the previous speakers at our meetings this year have discussed these issues. We cannot continue to avoid them,

But that was then, what of 2009? Early on after Steve Hayward and Bill Campbell invited me to speak I had decided to talk about "Responsibility", even before our new president called for a "New Era of Responsibility" in his Inaugural Address, and then labeled his first budget "The New Era of Responsibility." For the President responsibility means massive new governmental responsibilities over our lives, combined with higher taxes on the most productive and responsible Americans, and excuses for the mistakes and lack of accomplishment of the irresponsible. It certainly has nothing to do with individuals standing up and taking charge of their own lives as responsible parents,

friends, neighbors, professionals, and citizens. As has been widely remarked, this is the most irresponsible budget in American history in its profligacy and in its grasp for power. This irresponsibility now has been widely noted— by Rush and Sean, by Mark Levin in his new book *Liberty and Tyranny*, by *The Weekly Standard*, by the scholar Paul Rahe in his new book, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift*, and by many others. So much so, that I come before you this morning without much new to offer, but only to say great minds think alike, and that I came up with the message that follows without the help of these other good authorities. I had even contemplated quoting Tocqueville's famous commentary on such democratic irresponsibility, only hesitating to do so because I thought it so well known as to be redundant. But the *The Weekly Standard* in its March 9, 2009 issue, with its cover of Americans as a Nation of Sheep, used Tocqueville and his passage as its opening editorial, so I decided to use a portion of the Tocqueville again here (from the George Lawrence 1966 translation, rather than the Mansfield and Winthrop translation used by *The Weekly Standard*).

“I am trying to imagine under what novel features despotism may appear in the world. In the first place, I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls.... Over this kind of men stands an immense protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment and watching over their fate. That power is absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident, and mild. It would resemble parental authority if, father-like, it tried to prepare its charges for a man's life, but on the contrary, it only tries to keep them in perpetual childhood. It likes to see the citizens enjoy themselves, provided that they think of nothing but enjoyment. It gladly works for their happiness but wants to be sole agent and judge of it. It provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, makes rules for their testaments and divides their inheritances. Why should it not entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living?”

There is much more. It is in Volume II, Part Four, Chapter Six, of *Democracy in America*, “What Kind of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear.”

When I started working on this talk I had also been reading *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, by James C. Scott, (1998, Yale University Press) the first two parts of which I recommend highly to all thoughtful conservatives, even though, especially though, Scott is a self-professed man of the left, because he pretty much comes to the same conclusion as Tocqueville about the dangers of the all knowing, all pervasive modern democratic state. With what Scott calls “authoritarian high modernism” comes an altogether new idea that “one of the central purposes of the state was the improvement of all members of society—their health, skill and education, longevity, productivity, morals, and family life... (41). I like that phrase” Authoritarian High Modernism.” We should use it often.

These high modernists, as Tocqueville predicted, do wish to take over our living for us. Authoritarians everywhere have promised as much: the Southern slave holder, the communist apparatchik, welfare state social worker, the Grand Inquisitor. All tell us that life is hard and that they wish to bear the burdens of living for us. High modernity gives them the knowledge, the tools, the necessary measurements and statistics, and the financial might to make their promises seem plausible and attractive to many. They promise us pleasure and security, and assure us that this soft despotism will work, that freedom is slavery, and we need not worry. But do we want to live as their slaves? Or do we want to live real human lives, directing our own courses of action, making our own life choices as much as in humanly possible?

So what should the conservative responsible response be to this coming New Era of Irresponsibility or perhaps more correctly “unresponsibility?” Time here is short, but let me give one example of what I think our approach should be. You all have heard this before, but I think the thought often gets lost in the cacophony of daily political life. Take American health care—already a mess with third party payers and government involvement. Now many in Congress plan to move us towards some system of national health care based on the Canadian or British model. Now we know what this will lead to, because a lot of careful studies have been done. Some of you in the audience have written some of these studies, and this is difficult, important, and necessary work. We know compulsory national health care will lead to delays in treatment, long queues for services, denial of best available treatments, medical decisions made by bureaucratic boards, further regulation of medical professionals, huge paper work inefficiencies at every doctor’s office in the country, and reduced medical research and innovation. This is bad; this is wrong-headed; this is unnecessary; this is shameful. But it is not the whole story. Canada and England have suffered all these perverse consequences of in their medical systems and yet they still are not awful places to live. They get by with National Health Service. And America will get by too. We will not become some soviet hellhole or another Zimbabwe. We just won’t have anymore the world-class medical system we have become accustomed to. Lots of us, needlessly, will suffer a bit, and some of us will die sooner than otherwise. Well too bad, because lots of our fellow citizens will think they are getting on just fine and since the cost will be mostly hidden many will believe that they are doing better than before. So these good policy studies are necessary but not sufficient. They do not tell the whole story. They do not tell the worst of it. Our primary loss will

not be fairly good health care, but, more significantly, a slice of our humanity. We will have turned over some more of the cares of living to government officials; we will lose control of an important part of our lives. And that will be tragic. Are we then going to stand on our own two feet and be free men, or are we going to sink back into the statism of the past, into the mire of history? Besides the policy studies which need wide publicity, this is the point we must emphasize over and over in every debate, with everyone we deal with when the opportunity presents itself and with constant mention in our daily lives: *We are losing our liberties and with that a portion of ourselves and what it means to be human.* And we must make this point again when it comes to similar issues involving family law and education policy, the regulation of commerce and enterprise, environmental issues, and the control over our property and our tastes. We need to become scolds about liberty. We must reject the kind blandishments of the high modern authoritarians because we reject their false promises of care and concern and well-being. We know that they do not mean well, for their real purpose is not to provide necessary assistance, but to keep us from being free men.

Here is Paul Rahe's final paragraph from his new book:

Rahe, Paul A., *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville & The Modern Prospect*. New Haven. Yale University Press. 2009.

The great storms have come and gone; the horrors of the twentieth century recede now into the past. But tyrannical ambition and servile temptation will always be with us, as they are most emphatically now. The choice is, nonetheless, ours. We can be what once we were, or we can settle for a gradual, gentle descent into servitude. It is high time that we reclaim what is, after all, our legacy as Americans, for the genuine self-government that we once enjoyed in plenitude is a possession wholly consonant with our dignity as human beings and with our rights as women and men. Let our motto be, as once it was, "Don't tread on me!" And let our virtue be individual responsibility.

Amen to that. We live in nation based on “The Pursuit of Happiness,” not as happiness defined as entitlements provided by a benevolent state.

Ladies and gentlemen, that is the true argument; that is the reason why we must not just retire from the scene, but must stand for Liberty again and again. I fear, however, it will not be a winning stance. The High Modern Authoritarians are right: Living free is a serious and difficult business. Humanity in general may not be up to it. Will Americans be any different? We shall see.

Thank you.