

Lee Edwards

The Heritage Foundation

Philadelphia Society Annual Meeting, March 29, 2009

---

“The End of Conservatism?”

The modern conservative movement began as a Remnant with Albert Jay Nock and Frank Chodorov, grew into an intellectual movement with Friedrich Hayek, Richard Weaver, and Russell Kirk, blossomed into a political movement with William F. Buckley Jr. and Barry Goldwater, burst into full bloom as a governing movement with Ronald Reagan and the Heritage-ACU-YAF axis, succumbed to hubris with Newt Gingrich and Tom DeLay, imploded under George W. Bush and the neoconservatives, and is now wondering whether it is headed for the ash heap of history.

American conservatism has undoubtedly suffered steep ups and downs in the post-World War II period. Indeed, it seemed on the edge of extinction after the crushing defeat of Goldwater in 1964, after Reagan’s failure to capture the Republican presidential nomination in 1976, and after Bill Clinton’s “Third Way” victory in 1992. But each time, conservatism rose from the ashes like the fabled phoenix.

How has conservatism survived crisis after crisis for more than 50 years and emerged each time with renewed strength and momentum?

Was it luck? Divine intervention? Well, I believe in providence, but I also believe in free will.

Was each conservative recovery simply part of the pendulum that Arthur Schlesinger Jr. suggested dominates American politics, swinging left for a generation or so, then right, then left again, *ad infinitum*?

Or is the continuing success and durability of American conservatism due to the conscious acts of individual men and women operating on certain fundamental principles?

The movement has been fortunate—I might even say blessed—to have been led by a remarkable group of philosophers, popularizers, politicians, and philanthropists.

First came the men of ideas, intellectuals like Hayek, the Austrian-born classical liberal; Kirk, the Midwestern traditionalist, and Whittaker Chambers, the one-time Communist spy turned anticommunist champion.

Next came the men of interpretation, the journalists and commentators like the polymath William F. Buckley Jr., the columnist George Will, and the radio talkmeister Rush Limbaugh.

Last came the men of action, the politicians and policy-makers, led by what I call the Four Misters: “Mr. Republican,” Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio; “Mr. Conservative,” Senator Goldwater of Arizona; “Mr. President,” Ronald Reagan; and “Mr. Speaker,” Georgia Congressman Newt Gingrich.

But the philosophers would not have been able to write their books and the popularizers would not have been able to publish their magazines and the politicians would not have been able to run their campaigns without the support of conservative philanthropists—men of means and vision—such as Sun Oil Company’s J. Howard Pew, who gave ISI its first \$1,000; Colorado beer baron Joseph Coors, whose \$250,000 investment enabled the Heritage Foundation to open its doors; and California oilman Henry Salvatori, who put up much of the money for Reagan’s historic TV address for presidential candidate Barry Goldwater.

So, where is conservatism is headed today? Let us examine the essential elements of a successful political movement and how weak or strong conservatism is in each one.

. To begin with a political movement must have a clearly defined consistent philosophy. Conservatives of all stripes honor the Constitution and its system of checks and balances. They agree that government should be limited, individuals should be free and responsible, and there can be no lasting liberty without virtue, public and private.

These are not just conservative ideas but American ideas that have their roots in the Founding of the Republic and are endorsed by a majority of the American people. Current polls show that a clear majority of Americans call themselves somewhat or very conservative while just 35 percent consider themselves somewhat or very liberal. Even in the midst of the current economic crisis. America remains a center-right nation in its political philosophy, although the center has shifted somewhat to the Left in the last twenty years.

. Next, a political movement must have a broad-based, broad-minded national constituency. Yes, conservatives are independent, individualistic. They like to argue about ideas and institutions with friends as well as adversaries. But they come together and stay together when the times require it and under the right leadership—as with Goldwater in the 1960s, Reagan in the 1980s, and, I would argue, with George W. Bush immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

. Next, a political movement must have a sound financial base. Thanks to technical proficiency and political success, the number of conservative donors has grown exponentially, from as few thousand in the 1950s to more than eight million today. The fiscal strength of conservative organizations is impressive. The combined annual budgets of the 16 most influential—including Heritage, ISI, Young America's Foundation, and the Media Research

Center—total \$544 million, in 2008 dollars. The total assets of the major center-right foundations, including the Big Six—Templeton, Scaife, Bradley, Noble, Amway, and Castle Rock—are \$7.4 billion.

. A political movement must be media savvy, familiar with and expert in the use of the latest mass communications. Here there is a paradox. Conservatives have displayed mistrust, anger and contempt toward the mass media for decades. Yet, the number one newspaper columnist in America is conservative Cal Thomas. The number one radio talk show host is conservative Rush Limbaugh. The number one cable news network is conservative Fox News.

. Which brings us to the fifth element of a political movement—charismatic, principled leadership. Today, for the first time, in 60 years, there is no undisputed conservative leader—no Taft, no Goldwater, no Reagan, no designated successor like Bush 41.

But there are many rising and already visible stars in the conservative firmament, such as Congressmen Mike Pence, Paul Ryan, and Tom Price, chairman of the Republican Study Committee; Senators John Cornyn, Tom Coburn, and Jim DeMint, chairman of the Senate Steering Committee; Governors Bobby Jindal, Sarah Palin, and Mark Sanford, chairman of the Republicans Governors' Conference—plus past and future presidential candidates like Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee.

When the day comes, as it will, when the conservative movement unites behind the right leader and puts him on course to win the presidency, a question will be raised: Can conservatives govern? It is a reasonable question, given the painful missteps and failures of the Bush administration, from the major deficits and record federal spending to the unrealistic goal of building democracies overnight and around the world.

The answer is simple: Of course conservatives can govern. In 1947, a Republican Congress under Robert Taft cut taxes and federal spending and helped lay the foundation for the successful foreign policy of containment.

In 1981, the Reagan administration overcame the opposition of a Democratic House of Representatives and passed the Economic Recovery Act, which cut marginal tax rates across the board and prepared the way for a period of unprecedented economic recovery lasting more than 20 years.

In 1996, a Republican Congress under Speaker Gingrich passed, over President Clinton's veto, an historic welfare reform which substituted work for welfare and enabled the states to reduce their welfare rolls by as much as 33 percent.

In 2001, the Bush administration working with a Republican Congress enacted a monumental tax cut of \$1.6 trillion—the largest in U.S. history—which kept the economy humming until the financial collapse of 2008.

Professor Schlesinger wrote in 1947 that “there seems no inherent obstacle to the gradual advance of socialism in the United States through a series of New Deals.” Five and a half decades later, George Will wrote that we had experienced “the intellectual collapse of socialism.”

The one political constant throughout these years was the rise of the Right, whose path to national power and prominence was interrupted by the death of its leaders, calamitous defeats at the polls, constant feuding within its ranks over means and ends, and the hostility of the prevailing liberal establishment.

But through the power of its ideas—linked by the priceless principle of ordered liberty—and the successful political application of those ideas, the conservative movement became a major and often dominant player in the political and economic realms of our nation.

So it was and so it is in these times of crisis and doubt and even fear when conservative values are called for—prudence, not rashness; custom, not the impulse of the moment; a transcendent faith, not a fatal conceit; reform, not revolution.

As we seek solutions to problems that seem almost unsolvable, we should recall the wisdom of T. S. Eliot, who reminded us that no great cause is wholly lost because no great cause is ever wholly gained.

Thank you.

##

Lee Edwards is Distinguished Fellow in Conservative Thought at The Heritage Foundation and author of some 20 books about the individuals and institutions of the modern conservative movement.