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21st Century Conservatism

Good afternoon Ladies & Gentlemen. Glad to be here, or at my age I'm glad to be anywhere, for that matter.

Our esteemed colleague & Director, Brother Campbell—Comrade Campbell, Midge calls him, helping us to update the movement and transition to the brave new world—has asked us to ponder the “New Conservatism,” obviously a linguistic breakdown and oxymoron. But hey, this is still America, and we want to cheer you up about things. Meeting here in the Big Easy, the city that care forgot, is one step in that direction of course. We laugh to keep from crying, someone said.

Now I'm all for being up-to-date, as many of you will know. For instance, I've personally begun by smashing all my CDs of Beethoven piano sonatas and DVDs of Puccini operas, even country & Western, and hated especially to see that good Blue grass go. But now it's exclusively Hip hop and Gangsta rap—keys to understanding the 2008 election and mood of the new administration, as *Newsweek* opines, and they should know. Obviously the RNC needs to fashion a new constituency for 2010 and beyond and this seems to be the way and the truth to that life.

Some decisions are especially heart rendering, like tossing “You are my Sunshine” which I hum every morning while shaving. Some of you will know this is a song written by one of La's more esteemed governors, never sent to jail is one distinction. He made news when he rode his horse up the great granite stairway into the lobby of the capitol on inauguration day. Papers reported it was the first time a horse's head was ever in our capitol.

Having to discard one all time favorite was awfully hard—“If you don't like my peaches don't be shaking my tree.” Sacrifices on every hand.

Some sage once said, if you listen to a nation's music, you don't need to read its constitution (or trillion dollar recovery plans). He was really onto something I think. We could all become members of Congress with that advice.

Thomas Carlyle claimed economics is the dismal science, even though he wasn't around for the last election—but politics can't be far behind.

Some mild reservations have recently been expressed about a few of the new Obama policies you may have noticed. For instance, George Will complained last Tuesday about “anti-constitutional government;” and the EU president on Wednesday slammed U.S.

plans to spend its way out of recession as "a way to hell." (Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek, AP story.) He told the European Parliament that President Barack Obama's massive stimulus package and banking bailout "will undermine the stability of the global financial market." The Czechs know something about the glories of "real socialism." But obviously this is hyperbole. Always some spoilsport out there grabbing headlines.

Despite my cheerful disposition and hopeful outlook, I have to admit I've begun again assigning George Orwell's 1984 in my classes, with particular stress on the splendid appendix on "Newspeak." Actually, I'm told the book is being reissued under the title 2008 with a rhetorical guide to "Obamaspeak," contributed by a famous Chicago professor named Ayres.

I don't want to go on too long... But I did ask Bill if chairing this forum meant I couldn't say anything. He assured me that no oath of silence was intended by the assignment (as I had feared)—just to be pithy and leave 15 minutes for the others.

Which sounded fine to me. After all in our noble state of Louisiana—whose proud heritage of political purity is today second only to that of Illinois and New Jersey—one of our lesser jailbird governors explained to constituents that, when he "took the oath of office, he didn't take no oath of poverty."

But—in a more serious vein for a few moments, before I get the hook, I would suggest the following—and hope my esteemed colleagues will augment the points and correct me.

1. The question is this: What is this "conservatism" we're so concerned about, anyway? If the term in our general usage means conserving the abiding traditions of America and of the civilization of constitutional republican liberty it enshrines, then no substantial modification or up-dating is needed just some details. Thomas Jefferson summarized it well on his personal seal: "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God." That about covers it. Although I also like our other famous philosopher's motto, Davy Crockett's: "Figure out what's right and Go Ahead!"

But perhaps in our quandary some other reminders of enduring principles should be mentioned, as we take stock and try to keep our bearings in an oddly hostile environment.

Common ground and General Principles—Homonoia (Aristotle) i.e. like-mindedness or basic agreement of the community.

A. Federalist No. 2 (Jay):

"Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government...who have nobly established their general liberty and independence....as if it was the design of Providence...an inheritance so proper and convenient for a band of brethren...."

In justifying union under the Constitution, Publius (Madison) later appeals "to the great principle of self-preservation; to the transcendent law of nature and of nature's God,

which declares that the safety and happiness of society are the object at which all political institutions aim and to which all such institutions must be sacrificed.” Publius (Madison) thus invokes Aristotle, Cicero, and *salus populi, suprema lex esto*, as often also had been done by John Selden, Sir Edward Coke and the Whigs in the 17th century constitutional debate. This was understood to be the ultimate ground of all free government and basis for exercise of legitimate authority (not tyranny) over free men—the *liber homo* of Magna Carta and English common law. James Madison and the other founders knew and accepted this as a fundamental of their own endeavors.

B. John Adams to Thomas Jefferson on the principled basis of American cohesion during the Revolution:

“And what were these general Principles? I answer the general Principles of Christianity, in which all those sects were united: And the general Principles of English and American Liberty, in which all those young Men United, and which had United all Parties in America, in Majorities sufficient to assert and maintain her Independence. Now I will avow, that I then believed, and now believe, that those general Principles of Christianity, are as eternal and immutable, as the Existence and Attributes of God; and those Principles of Liberty, are as unalterable as human Nature and our terrestrial, mundane System.”

Salus populi suprema lex esto—the safety of the people ought to be the supreme law before which all others must stoop, Samuel Rutherford, quaintly said—and traced it to the Law of the 12 Tables and to Cicero’s reiteration.

Thus: Key ingredients of the tradition include liberty, rule of law, *salus populi*, limited government based on consent of the governed, individual and political freedom of speech, press, and conscience.

John Milton fervently wrote of the Liberty lying at the heart of our vision of the free individual human being, created *imago Dei*, and of the free government most conducive to human flourishing, saying in one place:

“Know that to be free is precisely the same thing as to be pious, wise, just and temperate, careful of one’s own, abstinent from what is another’s, and thence, in fine, magnanimous and brave—so, to be the opposite of these, is the same thing as to be a slave....If it be hard, if it be against the grain, to be slaves, learn to obey right reason, to be masters of yourselves....Unless you do this to the utmost of your power, you will be thought neither by God nor man...to be fit persons in whose hands to leave liberty [and] the government of the commonwealth.” (*Second Defence of the People of England in Areopagitica*, etc., ed. John Alvis, Liberty Fund, 1999, p. 412)

Algernon Sidney who gave his life for the Good Old Cause (d. 1683) thought “God helps those who help themselves,” and we remember him for saying it. (Discourses, ed. T. West, L. Fund 1990, p. 210).

Elsewhere Sidney argued: “If governments arise from the consent of men, and are instituted by men according to their own inclinations, they did therein seek their own good; for the will is ever drawn to some good, or the appearance of it. This is that which [each] man seeks by all the regular or irregular motions of his mind. Reason and passion, virtue and vice, do herein concur.... A people, therefore, [who set up any government do it]...that it may be well with themselves and their posterity.” (Ibid., 49.) Thereby Sidney recapitulates Aquinas’s philosophy of natural law.

2. This small sample reminds us that the rich rhetoric and common sense political theory of liberty and free government abound. We must again make them our own. Thus, what is needed is, not new principles, but effective reaffirmation, propagation, and experiential revival of abiding truth—to the end of refurbishing and persuasively re-validating American civic consciousness. This has fallen into neglect, decay, and disarray under persistent onslaught by an ideologically unsympathetic mass media and by educational and even religious institutions consciously and reflexively dedicated to its disparagement if not overt destruction. (Lest you think I exaggerate recall: We are a “nation of cowards” and “God-damn America” they say. Not exactly the words of the “Gettysburg Address” or “Pledge of Allegiance.”)

3. In sum: A virulent counter-vision of America has taken shape and mushroomed before us. It fosters a comprehensive intellectual and spiritual alienation that is nurtured through systematic mis-education by a determined self-appointed elite, many of whom (for whatever reasons) personally and collectively despise the core convictions of our Founders and the truths fundamental to the country. This is a massive problem.

4. This alienation thrives, among other ways, through the crisis of the family and of religious institutions, and through our demographic crisis of intensifying ethnic rivalries and animus that is multifaceted, insidious and sometimes violent. (See the late Samuel P. Huntington’s *Who are We?* Simon & Schuster, 2004.)

5. The complex political dimension is intentionally propelled by the principle of never letting a good societal crisis go to waste— as you’ve heard from the White House itself. Meaning what? By capitalizing on magnified, exacerbated, and distorted economic difficulties, and political fears and intimidation, a concerted move is made to seize power through shrewd community organization techniques familiar to every student of “revolutions of the miserable” (Arendt). The result is a ruthless, breath-taking power grab that is a kind of coup d’etat as radical mass democracy comes home to roost in—at the expense of our constitutional compound mixed republic. Victimized are state sovereignty and individual liberty through a variety of well-calculated means, especially including vast expansions (projected at 55% over the next eight years) of Federal jurisdiction and entrenched bureaucracy. The exit door against the takeover is nailed shut by enacting a tangle of multi-trillion dollar deficits rewarding faithful core constituencies as far as the eye can see, debt so onerous as possibly to jeopardize the stability and very independence of the country itself. Already Plato (no fan of ochlocracy, to be sure) identified domination by a demagogue as the penultimate stop in a polity’s slide into the abyss of tyranny.

In sum: The evidence mounts that, regrettably, we are dealing not merely with a garden-variety pragmatic demagogue, but with a true believer bent on ideological transformation of the American political and economic system at any cost.

To which, in the spirit of Chicago, we can only cry : “Say it ain’t so, Joe! Say it ain’t so!!”

What is to be done? Win the next election for openers.

Meanwhile: Resist! Take heart, and remember Joshua who, in a time of great trial stood to say: I know not what others may do, “but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15)