



A Conservative View Toward Public Policy and the Political Process

by John Hendrickson

“What is conservatism? Is it not preference for the old and tried, over the new and untried,” stated Abraham Lincoln in defining conservatism?¹ The conservative view of public policy has always been to examine issues and policies based on prudence and with respect for the Constitution. Senator Robert A. Taft stated that “while I am willing and ready to consider changes, I want to be darned sure — darned sure — that they are really better than what we have.”²

In the twentieth century, conservatives have defended the constitutional principles of limited government and economic liberty against progressivism and modern liberalism. As Constitutional scholar Matthew Spalding wrote:

Progressive thinkers sought to “re-found” America according to ideas alien to Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison. Repudiating the Founders’ belief in the existence of self-evident truths, Progressives asserted that there are no truths, only relative values. Similarly, they claimed, man enjoys no permanent rights endowed by God, only changing rights held at the indulgence of government. Thus, lacking eternal truths and rights, Americans must be governed by a “living” Constitution, one that endlessly “evolves” and “grows” with the times.³

The Progressive Movement was not just confined to one political party, but rather claimed supporters in both the Republican and Democrat parties as well as existing as a third party in several presidential elections. The Progressive presidential administrations of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson helped launch and institutionalize the administrative and welfare state of the federal government. In the twenty-first century, President Barack Obama is trying to launch a fourth wave of progressivism with his efforts at reforming health care and the environment and at the same time pushing for increased regulation and administrative oversight of the economy.

President Obama and Democrat leaders are pushing for “progress” in an attempt to renew America. For Progressives, as Spalding writes, “progress means a form of government able to engineer a better society, assuring equal outcomes and redistributing wealth.”⁴ This is why Progressives reject the principles of the American Founding. Progressives believe that since the age of industrialization the truths of the American Founding, that is, limited government and economic liberty, can no longer govern the nation.

Conservatives argue that the principles of the American Founding are permanent. In 1937 Ogden Mills, former Secretary of the Treasury under President Herbert Hoover, warned of the increasing collectivism occurring because of the New Deal. Mills wrote that the principles of the American Founding “are as valid today as when first proclaimed; and that our written Constitution, our federal form of government and our system of checks and balances are sufficiently flexible to meet new conditions and new needs.”⁵

“The challenge is not to find new or different truths, but to learn how to apply established truths to the problems of the contemporary world,” wrote Barry Goldwater.⁶ Goldwater argued that “to suggest that the conservative philosophy is out of date” is similar to arguing that the Ten Commandments are out of

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date.⁷ Conservatives understand that change is inevitable, but as Russell Kirk wrote: “the conservative, in short, favors reasoned and temperate progress; he is opposed to the cult of Progress, whose votaries believe that everything new necessarily is superior to everything old.”⁸

Change has become a popular word in President Obama’s administration and philosophy. However, as General Douglas MacArthur wrote: “Change should not be made for the sake of change alone. It should be sought only to adapt to time tested principles which have been proven in the crucible of human experience to the new requirements of an expanding society.”⁹ Conservatives believe that not only is the Constitution based in truth, but also the biblical heritage of the nation.

“The object and practice of liberty lies in the limitation of governmental power,” wrote MacArthur.¹⁰ “The fate of nations is determined more by the character of the people than by the character of the government. In fact, in the long run, the character of the government is determined by the character of the people,” wrote Mills.¹¹ The truths contained in the American Founding of limited government and economic liberty must be taken more seriously. Mills argued that “there must be a revival of faith — faith in our institutions, faith in our future, faith in each other, and faith in ourselves.”¹²

The virtue of prudence needs to be brought back into the public policy process and the nation must have restored faith in the American Founding. MacArthur wrote “that the Constitution is not to be treated as an instrument of political expediency.”¹³ Conservatives must rally the nation in the defense of the Constitution, but also as Buckley wrote in 1955, to “stand athwart history yelling stop” to policies that undermine constitutional government and undermine our Judeo-Christian heritage.¹⁴

Endnotes:

¹Abraham Lincoln, quoted by Russell Kirk in “The Essence of Conservatism,” The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, <<http://www.kirkcenter.org/kirk/essence-1957.html>> (November 24, 2009).

²Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement that Remade America*, The Free Press, New York, 1999, p. 9.

³Matthew Spalding, “Rejecting principles in the name of progress,” The Heritage Foundation, November 30, 2009, <<http://www.heritage.org>> (December 3, 2009).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ogden L. Mills, *The Seventeen Million*, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1937, p. 142.

⁶Barry M. Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, Victor Publishing Company, Shepherdsville, Kentucky, 1960, p. 5.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Russell Kirk, “Ten Conservative Principles,” The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, <<http://www.kirkcenter.org/index.php/detail/ten-conservative-principles/>> (November 24, 2009).

⁹Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1964, p. 417.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Mills, p. 143.

¹²Ibid.

¹³MacArthur, p. 417.

¹⁴William F. Buckley, Jr., “National Review: Credenda and Statement of Principles,” in *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, Gregory L. Schneider (ed.), New York University Press, New York, 2003, p. 201.

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