



The Case for Conservatism

(Published in *The Washington Post*, May 31, 2007)

George F. Will

Colaboraciones n° 1762

June 15, 2007

Conservatism's recovery of its intellectual equilibrium requires a confident explanation of why America has two parties and why the conservative one is preferable. Today's political argument involves perennial themes that give it more seriousness than many participants understand. The argument, like Western political philosophy generally, is about the meaning of, and the proper adjustment of the tension between, two important political goals -- freedom and equality.

Today conservatives tend to favor freedom, and consequently are inclined to be somewhat sanguine about inequalities of outcomes. Liberals are more concerned with equality, understood, they insist, primarily as equality of opportunity, not of outcome.

Liberals tend, however, to infer unequal opportunities from the fact of unequal outcomes. Hence liberalism's goal of achieving greater equality of condition leads to a larger scope for interventionist government to circumscribe the market's role in allocating wealth and opportunity. Liberalism increasingly seeks to deliver equality in the form of equal dependence of more and more people for more and more things on government.

Hence liberals' hostility to school choice programs that challenge public education's semimonopoly. Hence hostility to private accounts funded by a portion of each individual's Social Security taxes. Hence their fear of health savings accounts (individuals who buy high-deductible health insurance become

eligible for tax-preferred savings accounts from which they pay their routine medical expenses -- just as car owners do not buy insurance to cover oil changes). Hence liberals' advocacy of government responsibility for -- and, inevitably, rationing of -- health care, which is 16 percent of the economy and rising.

Steadily enlarging dependence on government accords with liberalism's ethic of common provision, and with the liberal party's interest in pleasing its most powerful faction -- public employees and their unions. Conservatism's rejoinder should be that the argument about whether there ought to be a welfare state is over. Today's proper debate is about the modalities by which entitlements are delivered. Modalities matter, because some encourage and others discourage attributes and attitudes -- a future orientation, self-reliance, individual responsibility for healthy living -- that are essential for dignified living in an economically vibrant society that a welfare state, ravenous for revenue in an aging society, requires.

This reasoning is congruent with conservatism's argument that excessively benevolent government is not a benefactor, and that capitalism does not merely make people better off, it makes them better. Liberalism once argued that large corporate entities of industrial capitalism degraded individuals by breeding dependence, passivity and servility. Conservatism challenges liberalism's blindness about the comparable dangers from the biggest social entity, government.

Conservatism argues, as did the Founders, that self-interestedness is universal among individuals, but the dignity of individuals is bound up with the exercise of self-reliance and personal responsibility in pursuing one's interests. Liberalism argues that equal dependence on government minimizes social conflicts. Conservatism's rejoinder is that the entitlement culture subverts social peace by the proliferation of rival dependencies.

The entitlement mentality encouraged by the welfare state exacerbates social conflicts -- between generations (the welfare state transfers wealth to the elderly), between racial and ethnic groups (through group preferences) and between all organized interests (from farmers to labor unions to recipients of corporate welfare) as government, not impersonal market forces, distributes scarce resources. This, conservatism insists, explains why as government has grown, so has cynicism about it.

Racial preferences are the distilled essence of liberalism, for two reasons. First, preferences involve identifying groups supposedly disabled by society -- victims who, because of their diminished competence, must be treated as wards of government. Second, preferences vividly demonstrate liberalism's core conviction that government's duty is not to allow social change but to drive change in the direction the government chooses. Conservatism argues that the essence of constitutional government involves constraining the state in order to allow society

ample scope to spontaneously take unplanned paths.

Conservatism embraces [President Kennedy's exhortation](#) to "Ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country," and adds: You serve your country by embracing a spacious and expanding sphere of life for which your country is not responsible.

Here is the core of a conservative appeal, without dwelling on "social issues" that should be, as much as

possible, left to "moral federalism" -- debates within the states. On foreign policy, conservatism begins, and very nearly ends, by eschewing abroad the fatal conceit that has been liberalism's undoing domestically -- hubris about controlling what cannot, and should not, be controlled.

Conservatism is realism, about human nature and government's competence. Is conservatism politically realistic, meaning persuasive? That is the kind of question presidential campaigns answer.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company