

Conservatism and the Spirit of Reform

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In 1955, in the first issue of *National Review*, William F. Buckley Jr. exuberantly proclaimed that the task for conservatives was "to stand athwart history, yelling stop."

In these tumultuous times, it still is. But for those devoted to conserving individual freedom, preserving what's positive from the past can never be their only task. Conserving freedom always also requires reforming existing institutions and practices.

Conservatives tend to be suspicious of reform and distrustful of the impulse to improve, seeing in both perennial threats to freedom. This is exacerbated by the common tendency, on the right and the left, to equate reform and improvement with the progressive aspiration to remake society. Conservatives warn—with a good deal of dismal political history on their side—that owing to ineradicable human arrogance, ignorance and error, big plans to centrally regulate human affairs are bound to go awry.



William F. Buckley Jr. left, talks with Ronald Reagan at the South Carolina Governor's Mansion in Columbia S.C., on Jan. 13, 1978. ILLUSTRATION: Associated Press

But that's no excuse to conflate reform, which is often necessary to advance the cause of political liberty, with the progressive interpretation of it. Indeed, conservative reform will very often involve devising policies to limit government in the face of relentless progressive pressure to expand its reach and responsibilities.

Conservative reform is particularly necessary today. Revolutions in telecommunications and transportation continue to transform business, the family and the environment. The threat of transnational terrorists employing biological, chemical, radiological, nuclear and cyber weapons demands greater resourcefulness and agility at all levels of government, as well as greater cooperation among federal, state and municipal officials. And the vast expansion of the federal government undertaken by President Barack Obama and the Democrats has focused the electorate on government's cost and role in a way not seen since Ronald Reagan ran for president.

Unfortunately, over the past decade, conservatism in America has squandered the reputation for reform that it earned in the 1980s and 1990s. President Reagan led the way with his signature tax cuts, which launched two decades of stunning economic growth. Gov. John Engler in Michigan (1991–2003) and Gov. Tommy Thompson in Wisconsin (1987–2001) gained national prominence for the benefits they brought to their states by cutting taxes, promoting school choice and renovating welfare. The 1994 Republican congressional campaign's Contract with America, which drew on President Reagan's 1985 State of the Union Address to propose concrete legislation to make the federal government more transparent and accountable, promised a new era of conservative reform.

The promise was not fulfilled. Congressional Republicans grew complacent and in some cases corrupt. While he ran as a reformer in 2000—remember "compassionate conservatism"—President George W. Bush was soon consumed with two wars and never regained his footing after Hurricane Katrina.

The reform efforts the Bush administration did undertake—the No Child Left Behind Act, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and the campaigns to overhaul Social Security and deal with immigration—fizzled at best. Perhaps most damaging to conservative reform over the past decade was the profligate spending that united President Bush and congressional Republicans.

In 2007 and 2008, taking advantage of the nation's war-weariness, candidate Obama sonorously invoked hope and change while deftly playing down the content of the change he hoped to bring about, thereby obtaining for his party a monopoly on the spirit of reform.

To earn the opportunity to be embraced again as the majority's governing creed, conservatism must recover its reformist heritage. In fact, prudent reform—grounded in limited government and respect for tradition, order and virtue—has deep roots in the conservative tradition.

No one appreciated that more than Edmund Burke, a founding father of modern conservatism. In "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (1790), his great polemic against radical political change driven by abstract theory, Burke insisted that "a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation."

In the causes that defined his political career—reconciliation with America, toleration for Irish Catholics, and securing the rights of the native population of India—Burke demonstrated that conserving freedom could require alteration of popular policies, breaking with entrenched practices, and upholding abroad the universality of individual rights.

Like Burke, contemporary conservatives should take their bearings from the principle of freedom and the conditions that sustain it. The question to ask in every case is whether current arrangements or proposals for alternative ones are more likely to promote individual responsibility, self-reliance and opportunity. The answers should recognize that a federal system favorable to local self-government, respectful of religion and supportive of the family is a time-tested way of cultivating individuals capable of conserving free institutions and taking advantage of the opportunities freedom affords.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour and Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan are among those officeholders in the process of recovering reform as a conservative virtue. In November, Meg Whitman, the new Republican nominee in California, and Brian Sandoval, the new Republican nominee for governor in Nevada, stand a good chance to join their ranks.

Today's conservative reformers appreciate that within its limited sphere government should be excellent. Promoting individual responsibility, self-reliance and opportunity requires targeted action, beginning with health-care reform that really controls costs by eliminating barriers on insurance companies operating across state lines and limiting malpractice damages; public-sector reform that reins in unions by reducing benefits and expanding accountability; and education reform that through school-choice programs gives parents, particularly in low income and minority communities, greater control over their children's education.

That's a big agenda and it doesn't even address immigration and energy or national security and foreign policy. It's a long way from standing athwart history yelling stop.

In 1965 Buckley launched a quixotic campaign for New York City mayor, running as a practical reformer and issuing detailed position papers on water, welfare, education, fiscal affairs, crime, taxation, housing, pollution, drugs and transportation. He hadn't changed his

mind about the importance of tradition. Rather, his platform was built around the conviction that tradition cannot be conserved without political freedom, and that political freedom cannot be conserved without restraining and reforming government.

That was a sound but losing conviction in 1965, less than a year after Lyndon Johnson crushed conservative standard-bearer Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential race. The conviction is just as sound in 2010 and, judging by public opinion polls and grass-roots activism, it is what the people want.

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