

The Myth of Conservative Purity

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By Peter Berkowitz

With the opening of the fall political season and tonight's Republican candidate debate, expect influential conservative voices to clamor for fellow conservatives to set aside half-measures, eschew conciliation, and adhere to conservative principle in its pristine purity. But what does fidelity to conservatism's core convictions mean?

Superstar radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh has, with characteristic bravado, championed a take-no-prisoners approach. In late July, as the debt-ceiling debate built to its climax, he understandably exhorted House Speaker John Boehner to stand strong and rightly praised the tea party for "putting country before party." But then Mr. Limbaugh went further. "Winners do not compromise," he declared on air. "Winners do not compromise with themselves. The winners who do compromise are winners who still don't believe in themselves as winners, who still think of themselves as losers."



We saw the results of such thinking in November 2010, when Christine O'Donnell was defeated by Chris Coons in Delaware in the race for Vice President Joe Biden's vacated Senate seat. In Nevada Sharron Angle was defeated by Harry Reid, who was returned to Washington to reclaim his position as Senate majority leader. In both cases, the Republican senatorial candidate was a tea party favorite who lost a very winnable election.

The notion of conservative purity is a myth. The great mission of American conservatism—securing the conditions under which liberty flourishes—has always depended on the weaving together of imperfectly compatible principles and applying them to an evolving and elusive political landscape.

William F. Buckley Jr.'s 1955 Mission Statement announcing the launch of National Review welcomed traditionalists, libertarians and anticommunists. His enterprise provides a model of a big-tent conservatism supported by multiple and competing principles: limited government, free markets, traditional morality and strong national defense.

These principles may appear harmonious. That's because they all served the cause of preserving freedom against the leading threats of the day: massive expansion of government, intrusive regulation of the economy, a breakdown of established sources of authority and belief, and communist tyranny. But harmony was an achievement. Just ask those who made a priority of limiting government about the impact of funding and maintaining a powerful military. Or inquire of a traditionalist what measures are necessary to maintain the virtues amidst the constant churn and cultural cacophony generated by capitalism.

Our greatest conservative president, Ronald Reagan, prudently wove together a devotion to limiting government and protecting the moral bases of a free society. But the policies he pursued were not mechanically derived from his principles. They stemmed from complex considerations concerning the necessary, the desirable and the possible. His landmark pro-growth tax cuts of 1981 were followed later by some tax increases. On divisive social issues such as abortion and school prayer, he offered strong words but restrained actions. And in confronting the Soviet Union, he insisted on the unmitigated evil of communism while pursuing dramatic negotiations to lessen the threat of nuclear conflagration, thereby paving the way to victory in the Cold War.

The intellectual architects of the American political and economic order were also blenders and weavers. For example, John Locke, the great 17th-century theorist of individual rights and limited government, argued in "The Second Treatise of Government" that in the event a father dies and fails to provide for the care and education of his son, the state must make provision.

And in "The Wealth of Nations," Adam Smith, the father of free-market economics, maintained that the public should offer and require an education for almost all. While it would be grossly misleading to designate Locke and Smith as founders of the modern welfare state, it would be negligent to overlook their teaching that beyond securing individual rights, governments devoted to freedom had interests in the welfare of their citizens.

Today, we are urged by tea party activists, and with excellent reason, to look to the authors of "The Federalist," the authoritative expounders of the Constitution, to recover the principles of limited government. But it is instructive to recall that in their day the makers of the

American Constitution were the enlargers and strengtheners of federal power.

Hamilton, Madison and Jay defended the new Constitution not only because of the many and varied limitations it imposed on the exercise of power. They also defended it because, in contrast to the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution incorporated in the national government the power to operate without the regular intervention of state governments; assigned it ultimate authority in matters requiring uniformity, including regulation of trade and naturalization; and made it supreme over the states, including in judicial matters.

On issue after issue, fidelity to the variety of conservative principles imposes not only the obligation to blend and balance but also to give due weight to settled expectations and longstanding practices. For instance, an appreciation of these crisscrossing obligations should impel conservatives to work both to improve the public schools we have and to increase competition and parental choice among an array of options.

While developing cost-cutting and market-based reforms for health care, conservatives should frankly acknowledge, as does Rep. Paul Ryan in his bold plan, the importance of maintaining a minimum social safety net. And in the Middle East and elsewhere, conservatism encourages a vigilant search for opportunities to promote liberty while counseling that our knowledge is limited, our resources scarce and our attention span poor.

Compromise can be, and often is, the path of least resistance, the province of the mealy-mouthed, weak-kneed, and lily-livered. Yet when circumstances warrant—and they often will—compromise will be the considered choice of the steely-eyed and stouthearted.

Clarity about principles is critical. It enables one to spot the betrayal of core convictions. But contrary to the partisans of purity, in politics winning and compromise are not antithetical.

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