

Burke's Words Should Hearten Dismayed Conservatives

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - February 25, 2012

The drawn-out Republican primary season, which is almost certain to extend well beyond March's Super Tuesday round of voting, has sparked puzzlement over conservative principles and provoked consternation about the persistence of disagreement over conservative priorities.

The jockeying between the four remaining GOP contenders for the affections of the conservative base of the party commands the headlines. But at times like these, conservatives would be well-served to recall the now-forgotten causes championed by British statesman Edmund Burke in some of his greatest speeches and in his 1790 classic, "Reflections on the Revolution in France," which, it is no exaggeration to say, is one of the founding documents of modern conservatism.

Burke's causes, and the trenchant arguments he summoned in their behalf, are instructive because they teach that liberty's defense is the paramount political task, not perfecting man. His career is reassuring because it illustrates that quarrels, indeed bitter disputes, about the policies that advance liberty are not a function of some temporary breakdown in civility. They are endemic to self-government.

Prudent reform to meet the changing requirements of liberty was a hallmark of Burke's long service in Parliament, stretching from his election in 1765 as member of the House of Commons to his retirement in 1794. The signature stances he took were hugely controversial, affecting weighty interests, stirring bitter passions, and roiling party politics. Although often unpopular with his constituents and rejected in the short run, his positions and principles were vindicated in the long term and honorably reflected his conviction that beyond unflinching devotion to their interests, a legislator owed constituents his reasoned and independent judgment.

Burke delivered his "Speech on Conciliation With the Colonies" in the House of Commons on March 22, 1775 -- 10 years to the day that Parliament passed the Stamp Act, substantially increasing taxes on the colonists while ignoring their demands for representation, and less than a month before the battles of Lexington and Concord would ignite the Revolutionary War. In that speech, Burke counseled Britain against armed conflict with America and advised how to reestablish relations with the colonists on a solid footing. The key, he argued, was to recognize their shared love of freedom.

In appreciation of America's "fierce spirit of liberty," Burke favored granting the colonists limited representation in Parliament on questions of taxation, though not as a matter of right. Under British law, he stressed, the colonists had none.

Statesmanship, however, required a further consideration: "The question with me is not whether you have a right to render your people miserable, but whether it is not your interest to make them happy." Statesmanship also called for more than crude calculations of utility: "I am not determining a point of law," he said. "I am restoring tranquility; and the general character and situation of a people must determine what sort of government is fitted for them."

While conciliation, "the ancient constitutional policy of the kingdom," involved a concession to the Americans, its propriety was rooted in the very nature of politics: "All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter."

Conciliation was specifically warranted in the case of America because it advanced Britain's material and moral interests. By allowing English liberties to flourish in the colonies, Britain would encourage the spirit that made America prosperous, reinforce liberty at home, and conserve English dominion on the most favorable long-term basis.

Two hundred and 20 years before Newt Gingrich converted to Catholicism, Edmund Burke gave a speech at the Guildhall in Bristol offering his constituents a carefully crafted defense of a bill -- his support for which contributed to the loss of his Parliamentary seat that year -- that eased harsh disabilities imposed by England's Penal Laws on Irish Catholics. Passed in 1699, the Penal Laws, among other things, required Catholics to renounce their Catholicism or forfeit their land, disqualified them from holding public office, and placed severe restriction on their professional advancement (Burke's father almost certainly converted from Catholicism to Anglicism to practice law).

Some critics contended that Burke pushed toleration beyond what the public would bear. He replied that reform was demanded on multiple grounds: the moral teachings of Protestant Christianity, the universal claims of individual rights, and the prospects of bolstering the case for equal treatment of Protestants throughout Europe.

Yet if toleration were so important, other critics asked, why back a measure that provided only partial relief from the Penal Laws? Prudence so directed, answered Burke. Although outright repeal was politically unattainable, by incremental steps “the people would grow reconciled to toleration, when they should find by the effects, that justice was not so irreconcilable an enemy to convenience as they had imagined.”

And 228 years before Sarah Palin and Rick Perry condemned the evils of “crony capitalism,” Burke delivered his “Speech on Fox’s East India Bill” in the House of Commons. In that 1783 address, Burke bitterly denounced Warren Hastings who, he contended, as first governor general of India used the East India Company — established in 1600 by Queen Elizabeth I to promote trade — to enrich himself and his cronies while trampling on the rights of India’s indigenous inhabitants. A former shareholder in the East India Company, Burke would devote the greater part of his final decade in politics to altering its charter as a private company and increasing Parliament’s responsibility for overseeing its conduct. For this, he was accused of advocating radical measures.

The more famous Burke who polemically opposed the French Revolution does not contradict the less familiar Burke who eloquently championed liberty in America, Ireland, and India. To preserve liberty when the revolutionaries in France sought to remake society and human nature in freedom’s name, Burke gave impassioned expression to the essential role that tradition, religion, community, and virtue play in sustaining liberty. And when his countrymen failed to grasp freedom’s imperatives in connection to their interests and responsibilities in America, Ireland, and India, he passionately urged reforms that secured liberty by extending the sphere of those enjoying its blessings.

One can overdo historical lessons. There is no convenient WWEBD template advising modern conservatives what Edmund Burke would do about Obamacare, or the General Motors bailout, let alone restructuring entitlements, reining in domestic discretionary spending, and formulating a foreign policy that takes pride in American ideals and vigorously advances America’s interests. Yet Burke’s supple defense of liberty does teach that resolute reform is critical to conserving it, and depends on combining firmness and flexibility in undertaking, as circumstances dictate, conciliation, incremental change, and, in exceptional cases, fundamental alteration of established institutions.

Burke's words and deeds clarify the stakes in the race for the Republican nomination. That candidate deserves to prevail who most convincingly demonstrates a unifying concern with the balance of interests and principles, beliefs and virtues, practices and associations that favor liberty.

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