

# The Conservative Heart

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Much to the disadvantage of conservatives, a familiar narrative looms over the Fox News Republican Debate scheduled for Thursday evening at Cleveland's Quicken Loans Arena.

It is widely accepted—among experts as well as among ordinary people—that the left reflexively cares about people whereas the right is instinctively concerned about keeping the books straight, the accounts balanced, and the economy on track. Not that it is commonly supposed that Democratic and Republican office-holders always or routinely enact policies that implement the principles with which they are closely associated. And shrewd Democrats at least pay lip service to economic growth while most Republicans have reconciled themselves to the need for a social safety net. But many on the right join with the left in believing that the left is most true to itself when it promotes compassion and the right expresses its fondest wishes by championing fiscal responsibility.

Arthur C. Brooks rejects this well-known account of American political character. In an earlier book, *Who Really Cares*, he compiled an impressive array of data to show that contrary to the conventional wisdom conservatives tend to give more to charity than do those on the left. In his new book, *The Conservative Heart: How to Build a Fairer, Happier, and*

*More Prosperous America*, he goes further, arguing that not only is the conservative heart a caring heart but that the conservative head has produced public policies that are truly compassionate because they are capable of generating jobs and opportunity that--in turning the economy around--would infuse the lives of substantial numbers of poor and struggling people with dignity by providing them the opportunity to earn success.

The president of the American Enterprise Institute—a leading conservative think-tank in Washington—and a former professor of business and government policy, Brooks has produced an unusual mixture of public policy, self-help admonition, inspirational exhortation, and campaign strategy. While he would undoubtedly like to reach independents and would be delighted to convert progressives, his primary goal is to persuade “committed conservatives” to emancipate themselves from the misapprehension that their hearts are cold and their governing philosophy harsh. He seeks to win over the conservative heart on behalf of the conservative head by helping it to know itself.

On the basis of abundant empirical evidence, Brooks asserts that “the ideals of free enterprise and global leadership, central to American conservatism, are responsible for the greatest reduction in human misery since mankind began its long climb from the swamp to the stars.” Why, then, is the conservative movement regarded as hard-hearted and why does it struggle to attract new members?

Because, maintains Brooks, “defenders of free enterprise have done a terrible job of telling people how much good the system has done around the world.” And because conservatives have failed to convince millions of Americans who today believe that their children face diminished prospects that market-based policies also help the poor, the low-income, and the middle class.

Brooks distinguishes his reclaiming of the conservative heart from George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservatism.” Whereas the Bush formulation implies that conservatism must be modified by a virtue foreign to it, Brooks argues that “a creed that flows from the optimistic belief that every person is valuable and capable of earned success is inherently compassionate to the core.”

Although the Declaration of Independence characterizes “the pursuit of happiness”—along with life and liberty—as an inalienable right, the protection of which is government’s primary task, Brooks finds in the Declaration an obligation to *foster* the pursuit of happiness. He urges conservatives to unite goal with tone by becoming “happy warriors” fighting for the institutions that, according to both scholarly research and traditional wisdom, make for happy lives: faith, family, community, and meaningful work.

But doesn’t the free enterprise system promote materialism and hedonism? Brooks replies that the confusion of love of things and physical pleasure with happiness in the fullest sense is not specific to capitalism but is a mistake as old as the hills. In America as elsewhere,

education—particularly at home and in religious institutions—must teach that people come before things and that achieving material prosperity is not the essence of happiness but a means by which the happiness that comes from faith, family, community and work is pursued.

Brooks emphasizes his agreement with progressives that poverty is a massive impediment to the pursuit of happiness. However, he argues, since President Lyndon Johnson's launch of the Great Society in 1964, progressive public policy has spent trillions without significantly reducing the poverty rate. Brooks does not doubt LBJ's intentions and considers his goals "noble," but believes that progressivism suffers from the delusion that technocrats organized into large bureaucracies spending loads of taxpayer money in accordance with the latest social science can solve complex social and political problems.

Brooks's conservative alternative treats people not as cogs in a bureaucratic machine but as assets; regards all honest work as a blessing; holds the poor to high standards out of respect for them; and concentrates on removing barriers to work rather than expanding entitlements likely to generate dependence on government. While adamant that a social safety net is an imperative of justice in a free and prosperous society, he insists that it be restricted to the truly needy. And he rejects the "redistributive fairness" championed by the left in favor of "meritocratic fairness."

Conservatives should not mock progressive dedication to social justice, Brooks advises, but rather put forward a conservative social justice agenda devoted to "making the starting line more equal for the vulnerable by improving education, expanding the opportunity to work, and increasing access to entrepreneurship." Conservatives must also "ensure that rewards reflect effort, merit, and virtue." And, Brooks stresses, "true conservative social justice" will "fight cronyism that favors powerful interests and keeps the little guy down."

To advance this agenda, Brooks advocates the enlargement of choice in education through charter schools and vouchers, and the creation of greater inducements to work by means of the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, but offers little in the way of new policy proposals.

That is in keeping with his focus on changing conservative attitudes. If they are serious about forming a governing majority, Brooks counsels, conservatives need to shed the anger and oppositional stance that typify protest movements. To "open hearts and minds of the persuadable majority," conservatives must focus on what they are for, develop a positive agenda, and explain in accessible terms why fiscal restraint is necessary to keep the social safety net solvent and how it undergirds the dignity of all by multiplying opportunities for earned success.

By concentrating on the conservative heart, Brooks inevitably slights issues that command the attention of the conservative head. He says too little about limited government. He overlooks the fundamental tensions between free enterprise and traditional morality and religion. And, contrary to core conservative teachings, he encourages unrealistic expectations about what can be accomplished through politics.

But Brooks's overall message is engaging, sound, and timely.

It would be much to the advantage of candidates at the Republican debate Thursday evening—and would benefit the conservative movement as well—to make the moral case for free enterprise in a manner that conveys the ambition to address, and improve the condition of, all Americans.

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