

Cruz, Trump and the Caricature of Conservatism

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The angry and uncompromising tone adopted by Ted Cruz in Iowa and in the aftermath of his victory there has reinforced the perception of right-wing callousness. So, too, has the vulgar rhetoric of Donald Trump, who has topped Republican national polls for months.

Cruz and Trump and many of their supporters insist that politics requires toughness and an iron will. So it does. Yet Cruz and Trump also lend credence to a widespread view aggressively promoted by progressives and internalized by some conservatives that the public policies of those on the right reflect hard hearts and mean spirits while programs championed by those on the left mirror their caring and generous natures. As New Hampshire voters prepare to go to the polls on Tuesday in a state where Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are leading in the Republican and Democratic fields, the stereotypes about liberals and conservatives are front and center.

The serious political question at issue in 2016 is whether conservative devotion to individual freedom and limited government or progressive dedication to overcoming economic inequality through aggressive government regulation and redistribution best serves the interests of the American people.

But seldom do the GOP candidate who won Iowa and the one who seems poised to prevail in New Hampshire address the needs of, and government's legitimate responsibilities toward, those unable to care for themselves or who find themselves temporarily in need of a helping hand.

The problem predates the rise of Trump and Cruz. In introducing himself to America during the 2000 presidential campaign as an advocate of a "compassionate conservatism," Texas Gov. George W. Bush declared that conservatives also cared about the poor, the unemployed, the sick and disabled, and the elderly. And Bush argued for distinctive reforms that incorporated market mechanisms and the voluntary associations of civil society to lift up the less fortunate. But Bush's terminology had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the impression that compassion supplied something to conservatism that it was otherwise lacking, as if a Democrat were to embrace a "realistic progressivism."

Indeed, progressives are vulnerable to the charge that they focus more on burnishing their pleasing self-image as caring individuals than on the actual benefits and costs to those whom they purport to assist.

When conservatives highlight data showing that some welfare programs create a debilitating dependency on government, that affirmative action often undermines minority students' prospects by systematically placing them in academic programs for which they are poorly equipped, and that humanitarian military interventions -- however pure the moral impulses that inspired them -- can sow chaos, progressives are more inclined to impugn conservatives' motives for mentioning inconvenient facts than to reconsider their own policy preferences.

A group of 12 distinguished conservatives contends that championing human rights and effective measures on behalf of "the poor, persecuted, and vulnerable" remains an essential component of the conservative tradition. The group—which includes columnist and Ethics & Public Policy Center Senior Fellow Mona Charen, theologian Michael Novak, Twenty-First Century Initiatives CEO Michael Horowitz, Hoover Institution Senior Fellow Chester Finn, and Quadrant magazine editor John O'Sullivan—produced a report, "Challenging the Caricature," that argues that concern for human rights flows from conservative convictions about liberty and limited government and that restoring human rights to the center of the conservative agenda is vital to fashioning long-term conservative majorities.

The authors reconstruct an impressive record. Conservatives have been at the forefront of efforts to combat sex trafficking; end "labor slavery" at home and abroad; rein in the tendency to over-criminalize and over-incarcerate in the United States; and prevent prison rape and violence while encouraging respect for basic human rights in developing-world prisons.

Conservatives have promoted higher education access by fighting escalating tuition costs and relentless administrative bloat. They have worked assiduously to provide education for the children in poor and low-income inner-city families through voucher programs and charter schools.

Conservatives also have rallied to the assistance of developing-world girls and women by battling the plague of obstetric fistulas, which leave women infertile and incontinent. They have directed substantial support to the fight against AIDS in Africa. They have taken the lead in exposing dictators' human rights abuses in general and in particular have sought to bring pressure to bear on China and the United Nations to end support for North Korea, "the world's most oppressive regime." Conservatives can be found championing Internet freedom in closed societies, standing up for religious freedom around the world, and fighting the scourge of anti-Semitism.

Whereas progressives seek to divide the world into those on the left who care about the less well-off and the mean-spirited conservatives who do not, the authors of "Challenging the Caricature" contrast two competing conceptions of how to deal with poverty, misfortune, and human rights abuses. The left backs a central and centralizing government that raises and, through massive bureaucracies and administrative agencies, transfers vast sums of money to those it regards as in need. In contrast, the right seeks to rein in government taxing and

spending, to direct government toward its constitutionally assigned tasks, to enlist wherever possible market mechanisms, and, by invigorating civil society, to foster the virtues of self-reliance. These measures, conservatives contend, will promote economic growth, create opportunity, and reduce dependency on government, thereby breaking the cycle of poverty that progressive policies perpetuate.

The authors of “Challenging the Caricature” stress that persuading Americans of the superiority of the conservative conception of fairness is crucial to conservatives’ electoral prospects. In 2012, President Obama carried by an enormous margin the 21 percent of voters who said that “caring for people like me” determined their choice for president. Republican nominee Mitt Romney lost decisively among African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and young, single women—all critical demographic groups inclined to reject candidates out of hand whom they consider cold and uncaring. If the mere letter “R” on the ballot elicits that reaction, Republicans’ long-term prospects look bleak.

Changing perceptions won’t be easy. This is not least because the left determinedly propagates the belief that the defense of human rights is inherently progressive and antithetical to conservatism—and because too many conservative leaders play into their hands.

So far Trump and Cruz have done little to recognize the legitimate political claims of the powerless and the persecuted or the resources within the conservative tradition to address them. This creates an opening for one of them—and perhaps more so for the surging Marco Rubio—to enlarge the conservative tent by explaining how the principles of limited government, and policies consistent with those principles, advance the interests of the least well-off and vindicate human rights.

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