

THE CONSERVATIVE L I E

The 1992 election showed us something: whether people voted for Bill Clinton or for Ross Perot, they certainly voted against George Bush. In fact, as a result of the 1990 and 1992 elections, Democrats now control the Presidency, the Congress, and a majority of state governorships and legislatures.

Why? What have the Republicans done over the last few years to push themselves into minority status in so many arenas?

Depending on one's viewpoint, they have either become too conservative or they have let right wing ideologies dominate their party. The political philosophy we call conservatism boasts a noble mission: to preserve the best of our heritage against an onslaught of experimentation. Usually this tinkering is labeled liberalism. If we take a close look at the two kernels of this philosophy preservation and fighting the liberal onslaught we see that the conservative philosophy has at its core a lie, a lie which is getting progressively more difficult to maintain.

In the 1992 election, this lie was exposed. Conservatives want to preserve the best of our heritage: our freedoms, our market economy, our vibrant society, our

values. They complain that liberal tinkering with the world will likely destroy each of these things. Yet these very qualities are themselves the result of previous liberal tinkering (or even more drastically, the result of liberal revolutions). Social security, medical care for the aged, our near universal access to higher education many of those institutions which conservatives hold so dearly were brought about as a reaction to stultified conservative societies in the past. It would make sense for all of us, liberal and conservative alike, to acknowledge this debt and move on to figuring out where we go from here. Apparently, though, the more conservative one's views, the greater one's fears. The most conservative people among us appear to live in terror of the changes social tinkering might bring even though they appreciate the benefits of past experiments.

Why this fear of change, this hasty generalization of all "liberal" change as inadvisable? One answer may lie in the decreasing ability of western society to control its own destiny. Since Europe and the United States were the first areas to reap the benefits of industrialization, we have been at the top of the economic heap for decades. Now, however, we no longer have our old monopoly on raw materials and gizmos the southern half of the world is catching up. In addition, because information now

travels instantaneously throughout the world, the previously under educated masses of the poorer nations are catching up to us in their ability to produce prosperity, and they are also becoming more adept at those business skills which result in a movement of some of the world's wealth towards their countries.

It would be bad manners to publicly deny the right of these poorer societies to try to catch up with the wealthier ones, but how should we wealthier societies react to the gradual diminution of our wealth? One approach and variations of this approach are the domain of both thoughtful liberals and conservatives is to accept the change and adjust to it in a reasonable fashion.

This, however, requires action by the federal government, and ideologues who have gained audiences by complaining that the government does too much already are unwilling to take responsibility for having mouthed off imprudently. Obviously, the trouble is that if we don't want the federal government to oversee this adjustment to a changing world, we need to ask someone else to oversee it. Right-wing ideologues respond by chanting their mantra of the free market economy, and by attacking governmental attempts to smooth the change as "tax and spend economics."

In truth, though, the

economic history of all western countries has been a sporadic but definite trend towards regulating economic activity; most of us long ago realized that unregulated greed produces unrelieved misery: only governments have successfully combatted this problem.

Thus, the often heard conservative gripe let's get the government off our backs really isn't of much use because there is no realistic alternative to an activist, centralized government. Furthermore, in an age where information travels so quickly, it has become evident to many that whatever the cause of our current economic dislocations, only government is big enough to do something about them.

Certainly, many thoughtful conservatives see a beneficial role for progressive government (though their definition of progressive would no doubt appall many liberals). Their problem is that they are being drowned out by right-wing radicals.

Oregon's Measure 5, with its now generally discredited promise that needed government services would survive intact, is an after the fact example of what happens when fringe radical thought stifles thoughtful conservative thought.

Much of the current differences between liberalism and conservatism is at bottom a dispute over how to react to our changing world. As in the past, the conservative mentality fears the change, and this fear is justified: for every major social change has its winners and losers, and the losers in the shift southward of the world's wealth will no doubt be those northern (or "Western") societies which have enjoyed a disproportionately large amount of this abundance for so long. The conservative instinct is to somehow fight this change, to slow it down; the liberal instinct is to adjust to it, to ameliorate its effects. We see this fighting against change in many ways. In the United States, France, Germany, and England, ideologies stir up anger against immigrants.

Here in the U.S., this stirring up is directed against immigrants from Latin America; as a result it is often perceived as racist. In reality, it is probably an economic grasping at straws, a last-ditch stand against perceived erosion of our life style. It is this poorly conceived gut reaction which, when mouthed by right-wing radicals, turns the conservative philosophy into a lie.

On the one hand, the Statue of Liberty, that very bastion of conservative symbolism, proclaims to all: "Give me your tired, your poor"; at the same time, right-wing blabbermouths complain that the influx of poor immigrants is depleting our resources. The gap between the stated value and

the policy suggestion is too big to hide. It simply makes no sense to be inhuman in the name of humanity.

Not all conservatives spout this nonsense, to be sure. Many thoughtful conservatives recognize that we must adjust to this changing world, but at the moment their voices are being drowned out by radical right-wingers who insist that their own inconsistencies be forgiven or ignored.

The conservative values freedom, prosperity, a vibrant society, and a moral outlook are being put in various straight-jackets. Some of these straightjackets are: Freedom is an absolute except when it contradicts one particularly strict interpretation of biblical morality Prosperity, which we all realize means the prosperity of our entire society, can only be achieved if we're willing to temporarily sacrifice the material well-being for the poor to create capital for the rich to invest. A Vibrant Society is necessary, but we must recognize that people who have been here the longest, or people who think and behave conventionally, are more entitled than others to have their vibrancy safeguarded by law.

Moral Outlook must emphasize one view of morality and label other views as too secular or too sinful. These inconsistencies are most visible in what's left of the anti-communist crusaders, in certain religious fundamentalists, and in ardent nationalists. The problem goes beyond these groups, however: each of the above four examples represents an intolerant, all-or-nothing approach to values. Information travels too fast for these narrow negative hypocrisies to survive indefinitely.

Early this year, an anti-abortion activist shot and killed a Florida physician who provided abortions. Immediately, some anti-abortionist activists -- fortunately for conservatives, a small number -- labeled the killing as "understandable" and suggested we view the killer as somehow more noble than an ordinary murderer. In a very public way, these people were fudging on the absoluteness of the Fifth Commandment: the absolute nature of their "morality" was thus exposed as relative, just like anybody else's might be under extreme circumstances.

There was a time when a politician could garner votes, as George Bush did in 1988, by symbolically associating liberalism with moral failure. But the information revolution is speeding up; and in 1992, Bush's similar ploy -- his desperate last-minute labeling of the democratic candi-

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Monuments

A small, brown hill stands in the middle of the American plains. It rests in South Dakota on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. My mother, my sister, and I went a couple of hundred miles out of our way just to see that hill last summer.

We arrived in the early evening, just as the sun was preparing to set. There were no brilliant oranges, no violet reds, no manufactured sunsets. There was only a pale blue quiet in the sky.

The brown grass was waist high everywhere except the dusty path of a road that rolled up one side of the hill. At the top of the hill rests the ruins of a church. Just the cement basement and the strong stone steps at one end, which must have at one time led to the chapel. Now they only lead to the sky. Behind the church sits a graveyard, a small patchwork field of broken crosses and plastic flowers hidden in the grass. Standing in the center was a gray stone pillar that bears the name of this place: Wounded Knee. Beside the pillar lies the mass grave holding over two hundred massacred Sioux. It is a simple piece of ground where the grass can barely stand to grow. The monument and the grave were surrounded by a shoulder high chain link fence.

The intrusion of this foreign object into the scene was softened by the solemn beauty (and irony) of the many, sacred tokens and ribbons that were tied on the fence. Sun bleached reds and yellows, beads and scarves, prayer ribbons were swinging on the rhythm of the wind. I could hear crickets in the grass trading secrets. I could hear the warning rattles of a snake. Even though instinct told me to walk the other way, I felt no fear. We returned to the car and the road, crossing over the weathered landscape.

We passed dirty trailers and broken down shacks. It seemed as if each yard, and even some of the fields, held several rust covered cards that had given up hope. As we drove out of the reservation, we passed a large, green information sign that told the history of Chief Red Cloud. Streaks of white paint disrupted the story with large graffiti letters that spelled "RED CLOUD KIX ASS".

I saved that thought as we continued on our way. The next morning we broke camp and headed for Mt. Rushmore. We drove through the forests of the Black Hills in the morning sunlight. The trees and the reddish brown rock formations stood proud against the sky.

It was not hard to imagine why that place is the sacred ground of the

Sioux, the place that they call the center of the earth. When we reached the visitors' parking lot at ten a.m., there were few open spaces, even in the furthest lots. The paths up to the viewing point bustled with people. The sounds of many different languages could be heard. People had traveled from all over the country, all over the world, to see this great American monument.

Over the path hung the flags of every state in the union. Many colors fluttered in the breeze. The whole place was seething with color and noise. We reached the viewing point and stood looking at the four familiar faces. The faces stared back. They stared over the heads of the admirers, across the hills and plains that now supposedly belong to them. That someone was able to carve those faces so big and so exact impresses me.

However, I could not help but think of what a grotesque insult it must be to the Sioux, not only to have their holy land taken away from them, but to see the images of the men who stole it carved on its sacred face. I hope to return to South Dakota to see the Badlands and the Black Hills and to experience the quiet beauty of those places. I will not return to Mt. Rushmore. My stomach can turn and my heart cry from anywhere.

By Lichen June

WAS REAGAN A RADICAL?

As a political theorist it never ceases to amaze me that people refer to Reagan Republicans as conservative. Why would anyone think Reagan as conservative? Granted, Reagan referred to himself as a conservative and did pursue a conservative social agenda, but this is only half of the story.

When it came to economic policy, Reagan Republicans pursued the interests of the capitalist and not the agenda of the conservative. Economic policy has always been the offensive lineman to the quarterback of social policy in American politics. Social policy may get all the press, but it is in the arena of economic policy that

in the realm of economic policy Reagan Republicans can hardly be described as conservative.

Conservative political theory got its name from its central premise, which is, simply put, to conserve the past. That is, conservatives believe present political policy should be guided primarily by experience as embodied in tradition.

It is important to note that political conservatives are not chained to the past or dogmatically opposed political reform. Nonetheless, the conservative thinks that the primary duty of governmental policy is to conserve the past as it is manifested in the present workings of any given community. Hence, the conservative litmus test for political reform is: Does this new policy better conserve a community's integrity than present policy? Which gets me back to my point: Reagan Republicans

hardly attempted to conserve anything when there was a profit to be made.

The Reagan Republican's political agenda of profits over persons at the expense of conservative principles has been overwhelmingly documented in the academic world by statistics. Tragically, and much more importantly, it has also been measured in the broken lives of many middle and lower class Americans.

This unbridled pursuit of profit which is the real agenda of the so called "New Right" is in no way a conservative agenda. Pursuing cheap labor at the expense of factory dependent American communities is in no way conservative; endorsing the practice of financing unsound merger and acquisition practices by raiding employee pensions is not a conservative position; authorizing environmentally destructive business

practices hardly conserves resources; and the utter disregard of both the urban and rural poor that was on display during the so called "Reagan Revolution" hardly respects the traditional conservative concern for family values via strong vibrant communities.

To be sure, there is nothing ingenious about supporting Reagan Republican policy the wisdom of which is another question altogether if one believes it is wise public policy to pursue the interest of the wealthy over all other interests in society.

What is ingenious is attaining electoral victory for this policy under the guise of conservatism. One of the great political frauds perpetrated on the middle and lower classes in this century, I believe, was the Reagan Republicans convincing these groups they were on their side. The so called "Reagan Democrat,"

(i.e. the white working class) constituted the heart of Republican presidential electoral success.

Reagan Republicans played on the white working class' ignorance by tailoring their message to highlight the perceived dangers of any policy which pursued some measure of social tolerance, while concealing from them the actual dangers of their own economic policies.

Reagan Republicans were concerned with social policy only as means, never as an end. They saw a feigned allegiance to conservative social values as a vehicle to electoral success by garnering them the necessary majority that electoral victory requires. Once in, they were able to concentrate their energies not on social policy, other than throwing the

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