

WHY CONSERVATIVES CAN'T GOVERN



KEVIN SIERS

BY ALAN WOLFE

"America is conservative in fundamental principles ... but the principles conserved are liberal and some, indeed, are radical."

~GUNNAR MYRDAL (1942)

Search hard enough and you might find a pundit who believes what George W. Bush believes, which is that history will redeem his administration. But from just about everyone else, on the right as vehemently as on the left, the verdict has been rolling in: This administration, if not the worst in American history, will soon find itself in the final four. Even those who appeal to history's ultimate judgment halfheartedly acknowledge as much. One seeks tomorrow's vindication only in the context of today's dismal performance.

About the only failure more pronounced than the President's has been the graft-filled plunder of GOP lawmakers — at least according to opinion polls, which in May gave the GOP-controlled Congress favorability ratings in the low 20s, about 10 points lower than the President's. This does not necessarily translate into electoral Armageddon; redistricting and other incumbency-protection devices help protect against that. But even if many commentators think that Republicans may retain control over Congress, very few think they should.

Eager to salvage conservatism from the wreckage of conservative rule, rightwing pundits are furiously blaming rightwing politicians for failing to adhere to rightwing convictions. Libertarians such as Bruce Bartlett fret that under Republican control, government has not shrunk, as conservatives prescribe, but has grown.

Insiders like Peggy Noonan complain that Republicans have become — well, insiders; they are too focused on retaining power and too disconnected from the base whose anger pushed them into power. Idealistic younger conservatives bewail the care and feeding of the 'K Street' beast. *Paleocons* Pat Buchanan and Robert Novak blame *neocons* William Kristol and Charles Krauthammer for the debacle that is Iraq.

Through all these laments there pulsates a sense of desperation: A conservative President and an even more conservative Congress must be repudiated to enable genuine conservatism to survive. Sure, the Bush administration has failed, all these voices proclaim. But that is because Bush and his Republican allies in Congress borrowed big government and foreign-policy idealism from the left. The ideas of Woodrow Wilson and John Maynard Keynes, from their point of view, have always been flawed. George W. Bush and Tom DeLay just prove it one more time.

Conservative dissidents seem to have done an admirable job of persuading each other of the truth of their claims. Of course, many of these dissidents extolled the President's conservative leadership when he was riding high in the polls. But the real flaw in their argument is akin to that of the Trotskyites who, when confronted with the failures of communism in Cuba, China and the Soviet Union, would claim that real communism had never been tried. If leaders consistently depart in disastrous ways from their underlying political ideology, there comes a point where one has to stop just blaming the leaders and start questioning the ideology.

The collapse of the Bush presidency, in other words, is not just due to Bush's incompetence (although his administration has been incompetent beyond belief). Nor is it a response to the President's principled lack of intellectual curiosity and pit-bull refusal to admit mistakes (although these character flaws are certainly real enough). And the orgy of bribery and special-interest dispensation in Congress is not the result of Tom DeLay's ruthlessness, as impressive a bully as he was. This conservative presidency and Congress imploded, not despite their conservatism, but because of it.

Contemporary conservatism is first and foremost about shrinking the size and reach of the federal government. This mission, let us be clear, is an ideological one. It does not emerge out of an attempt to solve real-world problems, such as managing increasing deficits or finding revenue to pay for entitlements built into the structure of federal legislation. It stems, rather, from the libertarian conviction, repeated endlessly by George W. Bush, that the money government collects in order to carry out its business properly belongs to the people themselves. One thought, and one thought only, guided Bush and his Republican allies since they assumed power in the wake of Bush vs. Gore: Taxes must be cut, and the more they are cut — especially in ways benefiting the rich — the better.

But like all politicians, conservatives, once in office, find themselves under constant pressure from constituents to use government to improve their lives. This puts conservatives in the awkward position of managing government agencies whose missions — indeed, whose very existence — they believe to be illegitimate.

Contemporary conservatism is a walking contradiction. Unable to shrink government but unwilling to improve it, conservatives attempt to split the difference, expanding government for political gain, but always in ways that validate their disregard for the very thing they are expanding. The end result is not just bigger government, but more incompetent government.

"Ideas," a distinguished conservative named Richard Weaver once wrote, "have consequences." Americans have learned something about the consequences of conservative ideas during the Bush years that they never had to confront in the more amiable Reagan period. As a way of governing, conservatism is another name for disaster. And the disasters will continue, year after year, as long as conservatives, whose political tactics are frequently as brilliant as their policy-making is inept, find ways to perpetuate their power.

CONSERVATIVES' LONG HISTORY OF COMPROMISE

The United States, as the political scientist Louis Hartz argued in the 1950s, was born liberal. We fought for our independence against Great Britain and the conservatism that flourished there. In Europe, a conservative was someone who defended the traditions of the monarchy, justified the privileges of the nobility, and welcomed the intervention of a state-affiliated clergy in politics. But all those things would be tossed out by the revolutionaries who led the war for independence and then wrote the Constitution. We chose to have an elected President, not an anointed monarch. Our Constitution prohibited the granting of titles of nobility. We separated church and state.

Of course, we had more than our share of thinkers who distrusted national authority; conservative political philosophy may not come naturally to Americans, but a fear of centralized power and an unwillingness to pay heavy taxes does. Beneath the broad political liberalism embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution was a frequently unexamined conservatism that questioned the very idea of the vibrant, expansive society that America promised to be.

Odd men out in America's liberal political culture, America's conservatives were never very united. Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall wanted to see a strong national government created to improve America's economic prospects, even if they retained an aristocratic sense that only social superiors should control that government. (John Adams outdid them on behalf of a strong executive; he thought our first President should be addressed as a monarch.)

But this kind of New England Federalism would go into abeyance once America's democratizing forces were unleashed. Other insisted that this country should embody timeless Christian principles; they, however, soon ran up against the skepticism of the Founding Fathers and conceptions of religious liberty associated with dissenting Protestantism. With the decline of both, the only significant conservatism left would come from defenders of slavery such as John C. Calhoun. Once the advocate of strong national government, Calhoun, putting the rights of slaveholders first, viewed this country as a compact among states, not as a unified society. His ideas would live on in the voices of those thinkers, primarily Southern, who objected to relying on national power to promote equal rights for all.

As this litany of lost causes suggests, our conservatives, while representing different regions and economic interests, were united by their irrelevance in the face of history. If the term reactionary is too pejorative, let's call them reactive. In this entrepreneurial, mobile, innovative, and individualistic country, conservatism was constantly on the defensive, aiming to preserve things — deference, reverence, and diffidence, to name three — that most Americans were anxious to shed. Deprived of both a church and state to defend, American conservatives became advocates for privileges determined by birth, suffrage restricted to an elite, and rural virtues over urban realities.

And so conservatives faced a dilemma from the moment the first shots were heard around the world. They could be true to their ideals and stand on the sidelines of political power. Or they could adjust their principles in the interests of political realism and thus negate the essential conservative teaching that principles are meant to be timeless. All the conservatives that played any role in America's history since the age of Jackson chose political relevance over ideological purity.

The Whigs abandoned aristocracy to nominate a popular military leader in the 1840s, hoping thereby to out-democratize the Jacksonians. An emerging business elite defended the free market — an 18th century liberal innovation detested by agrarian-oriented conservatives — to protect the very kind of privileges that Adam Smith hoped the free market would curtail. Isolationists abandoned the cosmopolitanism of Hamilton, perhaps America's greatest conservative, for a populous nativism suspicious of worldly grandeur. Clergy from evangelical churches played down such depressing doctrines as original sin and predestination in favor of the wonders of salvation for all. European conservatism had defended authority against liberty and social standing against equality. American conservatives used the language of liberty to justify inequality and promoted democracy to stand against change.

A conservative in America, in short, is someone who advocates ends that cannot be realized through means that can never be justified, at least not in the terrain of conservatism itself. In the past, the ends sought were the preservation of hierarchy, even if the means included appeals to democratic sentiment. In more recent times, conservatives promised order and stability through means dependent upon uncertainties and insecurities of the market. Unwilling to accept the fact that government was here to stay, conservatives stood on the sidelines as conditions kept arising that demanded bigger and more effective national authority. Westward expansion required Washington to settle the issue of slavery, and the recalcitrant South ultimately lost. Industrialization forced the country to deal with big business trusts and workplace oppression, and the Gilded Age leaders ultimately lost to the Progressives. The Depression demanded stronger government action even more urgently, even as the advocates of laissez faire opposed the New Deal. Similarly, the rise of fascism necessitated a vast expansion of federal power; and again, the conservative impulse, in the form of isolationism, lost.

By the 1950s, anti-federal-government conservatism was somewhat in retreat. Conservatives in the Republican Party still pushed for spending restraint while Southern conservatives in the Democratic Party resisted a greater role for the federal government in entrenching civil rights for blacks. But in general, leaders of both political parties, reflecting public sentiment, basically accepted big government as legitimate. The liberal propensities within both parties led to a federal government that continued to take on new challenges as they arose, from providing healthcare to seniors and the poor to regulating safety and pollution.

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