

Conservative Movement R.I.P.?



Anna Myreck-Wodecki

WICK ALLISON

When one is asked about the future in the context *Chronicles* has set, the obvious response is to talk in political terms. But conservatism is not a political phenomenon. I have always been uncomfortable with references to the “conservative movement” when I read the political press or some of my favorite columnists. It seems like an oxymoron.

Conservatism is a philosophical attitude. To be a conservative is to accept the fallibility of man and the imperfectibility of human institutions. It is an odd kind of skepticism, because it is a skepticism based on, finally, faith. If God created man to be the creature he is, then it is not for us only to accept man as he is but to try to understand man as he is—and to understand joyfully. That requirement for joyful understanding gives the positive dimension to conservatism. In fact, it makes it kind of fun.

The Founders, despite their differences, were almost uniformly conservative in contemporary terms. Their knowledge of history was deep, and therefore they were not optimistic about the construction of a government that would both preserve liberty and promote the growth and expansion of the common wealth.

In some conservative circles today their lack of optimism translates into pessimism. I would argue there is a profound difference. Pessimism is a surrender of faith, a spiritual shrugging of the shoulders. But the Founders, looking back over five thousand years of history, were not pessimistic; they were realistic about the limitations of human reason and human accomplishment.

Looking forward, our attitude should be the same. Conservatives will never besiege a Bastille, storm a Winter Palace, parade into Havana. We’ll simply go about the business of being normal. That means we’ll spend a great

deal of time reminding our fellow citizens and arguing with our fellow Republicans about what government can be expected to do and what our culture ought to preserve and pass on. If all goes well, we’ll keep this magnificent experiment called America going for another century or two. If I’m supposed to have aspirations, that’s about the best I can come up with.

Wick Allison is the publisher of National Review.

CHARLEY REESE



To look at the present out of which the future grows one must conclude that American conservatism is now only a footnote in the history of the rise and fall of the American Republic. It has been reduced to a remnant of the body politic.

At the national level, most prominent people who call themselves conservative are not. They are either Republican partisans, like Representative Newt Gingrich, trying to compete for votes by painting the old welfare state with new rhetoric, or they are an American imitation of the British Tory, imperialist to the bone and elitist to the marrow.

The only powerful political movement left in the present is imperialism, or transnationalism. It encompasses both Democrats and Republicans, both those who label themselves liberal and conservative, both the New Right and the

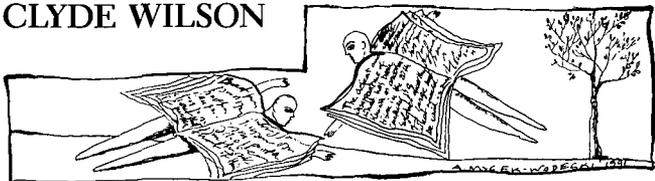
Old Right, as well as those democratic socialists who branded themselves neoconservatives to explain their imperialistic aims. Like the British in the 1920's, they all cling to the fantasy of a superior America, powerful enough militarily and economically to impose what they suppose are its values at a tidy corporate profit on the rest of the world. Most recently they have exulted in a military victory over a Third World country while conveniently ignoring the begging bowl that accompanied the tanks and the necessary acquiescence—not likely to continue—of the Soviet Union. Genuine American conservatives are found only in pockets and are generally denied access to the great organ of propaganda—network television. Thus there is faint hope that seeds of conservative thought can be planted by national leaders.

But a look at the soil itself—the American people—withers even faint hope. Where is there any sign of conservative values among the people? The mobility of the population, its concentration in urban centers, seems to have destroyed any sense of community. The deliberate post-World War II effort to devalue nationalism in public education seems to be the only aspect of public education that has succeeded. There is little sign of enlightened nationalism, only occasional bursts of jingoism and the steady grumbling of the welfare statists who complain of foreign aid only because they want the money spent on themselves.

George Washington said you could not maintain a free republic without virtuous people. Thomas Jefferson said you could not maintain one with ignorant people. They were both right.

Charley Reese is a nationally syndicated columnist.

CLYDE WILSON



The defeat and disappearance of what has been known as conservatism in the 20th century is a subject worthy of a large book. What would be said in such a book would depend on whether we took a historical focus of a few years, a few decades, or a larger span. And on whether we looked at political parties and mass politics, intellectual movements, or far-reaching social change.

It is possible that the most recent American experience in international adventurism has effectively finished off what we have known as conservatism, and also what has been known as liberalism—both swallowed up by the imperial state, for which ideas, principles, and even material interests are expendable. For the latest adventure, unlike earlier ones, has not occurred because of unavoidable conflict, but by deliberate choice.

It would be interesting to pursue Roman analogies and what they suggest about the long-term perils of bankruptcy and proletarianization for the state that undertakes the imperial role. But it is perhaps enough to point out that the

bill is not in for the economic and psychic costs, and they cannot be discussed until the present euphoria has passed. And that politicians will be able to obfuscate the costs for a long time.

It would also be interesting to chart the course of movement of intellectual conservatism into the terminal state of vulgarity and triviality in which George Will can be regarded as a leading intellectual. However, I will focus in this brief space on the strange and almost unnoticed failure and betrayal of conservatism as a domestic political movement, despite three resounding national election victories.

The chief reason for this failure is that conservatism allowed itself to be captured within the contaminated vessel of the Republican Party. Our President, who was elected three times on an anti-affirmative action platform, is for affirmative action. And who can gainsay the Great Emancipator of Kuwait? He was elected by millions concerned about the Willie Hortons of the world. We have no evidence that he has done anything about the Willie Hortons. We have no evidence that he wishes to do anything. The only evidence we have is that he wants the votes of those who are concerned.

He was elected, after an explicit promise, by the votes of millions of middle- and working-class Americans who sought some remedy for the government burden on their earnings. They now face increased government spending and greater taxes, to bail out the bureaucracy, the bankers, and the sheiks. Northeastern yuppies who voted for Dukakis may take a tax deduction for the interest on their vacation homes. The millions of middle-class people who voted for Bush cannot take a deduction for the interest paid to buy a car needed to get to work and support the government.

The difference between the Democratic and Republican parties—and this dichotomy can be found in earlier periods of the history of the vile American two-party system—is that the Democrats serve their constituency. The unions, minority groups, bureaucrats, and assorted social enemies who support them can expect to profit by their victory. And also by their defeat, since the other party neither wants to nor can provide effective opposition to their agenda.

The Republicans have been talking about the Emerging Republican Majority, Middle America, the Silent Majority, etc. for more than two decades now. Some pundits have wondered why this Majority has not emerged. The explanation is simple. It has been betrayed by the Republican Party, which wants its votes but not its platform. The only effective conservative movement in recent history in mass politics was that of a non-Republican, George Wallace, which made a far profounder change in American politics than the so-called Reagan Revolution. If Wallace had not badly scared the leaders of both parties, they would not now be giving even lip service to the concerns of Middle America. The function of the Republican Party is to capture and contain those concerns.

Many political movements and tendencies emerged in postwar America—those of Johnson, Nixon, Wallace, Reagan, and others. But the winner has been that tendency that had the least popular support: Nelson Rockefeller's. His Liberal Republicanism of the 1960's postulated that the Republicans could do everything the Democrats could do, but could do it better. (Meanwhile minimizing impact on