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James Piereson
Executive Director, John M. Olin Foundation

Conservatism, as a self-conscious movement, is a new phenomenon in the United States, originating only in the 1950s with the founding of *National Review* by William F. Buckley, Jr. It began as an intellectual movement—a movement of ideas, if you will—and from there, gradually but relentlessly spread into politics—and from there, into the broader culture. The Republican Party, notwithstanding the Goldwater insurgency, resisted the pressures arising from conservatives through much of the 1970s. So much was this the case that President Ford, when he appointed a vice president in 1974, looked to none other than Nelson Rockefeller, the liberal governor of the most liberal state in the union. Only with Ronald Reagan’s victory in 1980 did the Republican Party become a self-conscious and self-described conservative party. Today, most Republican leaders are proud to call themselves “conservatives.”

Liberalism, by contrast, has an older pedigree, originating in the early 1900s with the rise of Progressivism. Every Democratic president in this century beginning with Woodrow Wilson has described himself as a “liberal.” President Wilson said that he could not understand how any thinking person could be anything other than a liberal. FDR said that he was “a proud liberal.” John F. Kennedy said in 1960 that he was a “liberal without illusions.” Today, though their party is certainly liberal, Democratic candidates for office resist this once proud designation.

The political landscape has thus been re-shaped and turned upside down over the past generation by these twin developments—the rise of conservatism and the fall of liberalism. Neither development was predictable. A generation ago, liberalism was plainly the governing philosophy of the nation, and liberals were certain beyond any doubt that they owned the future.

Yet today, fifty years after the founding of *National Review*, conservatism has emerged as the new governing philosophy, and conservatives can point to a growing list of achievements since 1980 that explains and justifies their new status. Conservatism is now, if anything, in a mature phase, sustained by a robust arsenal of ideas, an impressive array of institutions, and a broad base of support among the American people—none of which existed a generation ago. Having clawed their way into power, conservatives naturally wonder what they have to do to stay there.

HUDSON INSTITUTE

1015 18th Street, N.W.
Suite 300
Washington, DC 20036

202.223.7770
202.223.8595 Fax
pcr.hudson.org

Conservatism in America

What is the conservative vision for the future? One might say, in answer to this question that it is not in the nature of conservatives to pursue visions, as that is a game more typically played by liberals and radicals. Edmund Burke, after all, attacked the French revolutionaries for rejecting convention and experience as guides to political action and elevating “visionary designs” in their place. But in America, perhaps conservatives must be visionaries, too.

Even so, in querying conservatives, instead of asking, “What is your vision?” we might rather start with another question, namely, “What will you conserve?” This is the question posed by Disraeli to his British contemporaries, and one that might be posed today in assessing the achievements of modern conservatism and its hopes for the future. What do we hope to conserve?

Conservatives, it has been said, occupy a paradoxical position in a nation devoted to the ideals of democracy, equality, and progress. For this reason, Clinton Rossiter titled his 1954 book on the subject, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*. How do conservatives act effectively in a polity seemingly devoted to liberal ideals? After all, they cannot promote or defend institutions favored by conservatives in other countries, such as an established church or a landed aristocracy. In a nation of constant movement and change, it is difficult to conserve much of anything for very long. What then can they conserve?

Modern American conservatives have instead done something different—yet still essentially conservative and American. They have deployed the conservative principles of realism and tradition to defend and strengthen the institutions of a liberal political order: liberty and property, a free economy, our Madisonian Constitution with its checks on governmental power, and a national government free to chart its own course in foreign affairs. They have, in addition, defended the morals and mores of middle class life, with its emphasis on religion, family, work, and individual responsibility.

They have done so because in our era, these institutions and morals have been under persistent attack from liberals, who have sought to re-write the Constitution by judicial fiat, extend the welfare state as far as possible, tie down American power in a web of international institutions, and eliminate all traces of religion and morality from the public square. This was a new and radicalized liberalism, one that took shape in the 1960s and thereafter; and, as a consequence, the conservatism that arose to challenge it was also in many ways new. In deploying conservative arguments to defend traditionally liberal institutions, modern conservatives have followed a path charted by illustrious predecessors such as Edmund Burke, Alexander Hamilton, and Winston Churchill.

Conservatives, in addition, owe many of their modern achievements to their willingness to act boldly, to break with precedent, and to take great risks with policy—contrary to the image of conservatism as the doctrine of caution and gradualism.

Ronald Reagan’s tax cuts in 1981 were called a “riverboat gamble” by Howard Baker, yet they restored the economy to growth and started an 18-year bull market in stocks. Reagan’s military budget, his “Star Wars” initiative, and his general challenge to the Soviet Union were all denounced as reckless and irresponsible, yet they brought down the Soviet Union and ended the Cold War. Experts said that the effort to remove Saddam Hussein from Iraq in 1991 would lead to a “bloodbath,” yet that victory was won in a matter of days with minimal casualties. Rudy Giuliani’s efforts to reduce crime in New York City were attacked as foolhardy and naive by social policy experts, yet by the time his term ended New York City was the safest large city in the nation, and its homicide rate had been reduced to levels not seen since 1960. Senator Moynihan, along with an army of experts, said that welfare reform would leave poor people “sleeping in the gutters,” yet it has proved to be the most successful domestic reform of modern times. Now, it is much to be hoped, we may see a re-play of all this as the difficult intervention in Iraq runs its course.

These are not simply important or historic breakthroughs; they are staggering breakthroughs when viewed in relation to what the experts said and what was thought to be possible. They happened because conservatives did not act like the conservatives of old, listening to the experts, respecting precedent, acting cautiously. The conservative as “riverboat gambler” is a disconcerting image, but not an inaccurate one, at least in modern times.

So it is that conservatives have not been content simply to oppose the designs of liberals, but have taken the initiative to shape the future with policies of their own. It is in this sense that, in a modern democracy, every philosophy that seeks to govern is forced to adopt its own vision or plan for the future—contrary to the core of conservatism as that may be. And today conservatives have a long list of policies designed to extend these gains, and to strengthen the institutions of a free society.

An argument of sorts has broken out among conservatives as to whether they should employ the power of the national government to advance conservative principles or simply scale back government power to leave maximum choice in the hands of individuals. This is a reprise of sorts of the original debate between Hamilton and Jefferson over the scope and purposes of federal power—and, more deeply, over their visions for the future of the nation. These contending visions have so far operated cooperatively under the umbrella of conservatism, albeit with growing tension, particularly in foreign affairs. It is noteworthy that both major poles of thought in American history—the Hamiltonian and the Jeffersonian—exist within the framework of modern conservatism, a sign at once of conservatism’s broad influence but also of its tendencies to division. There are not a few conservatives today who worry that contemporary conservatism looks too much like the liberalism of a few years ago.

Can a governing philosophy embrace the doctrine of minimal government while maintaining broad public support? Or, given the realities of the contemporary world, must it of necessity embrace a more active and energetic agenda of government? These questions are being answered as we speak by a conservative president who has advanced precisely such an active and energetic agenda—and one breathtakingly so in foreign affairs. In doing so, he has broken new ground, contradicted once more some traditional presumptions about conservatism, and perhaps oriented conservatism to its next phase.

Conservative Philanthropy

Conservative philanthropy, from the end of World War II down to the present, has gone through two distinct chapters, and is now entering a third.

The first chapter ran from the 1940s well into the 1970s, and was defined more by an interest in classical liberalism than in conservatism as it is understood today (or even as it was understood by Buckley and his associates in 1954). The main foundations, or donors, associated with this philanthropic campaign were the Volker Fund, the Relm and Earhart foundations, the Liberty Fund, and business executives like Jasper Crane of DuPont and Henry Weaver of General Electric. The Liberty Fund and the Earhart Foundation live on today, and continue to support important work; the Relm Foundation and the Volker Fund had self-limiting charters, and went out of business by the early 1970s.

The single greatest intellectual influence on these donors was Friedrich von Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*, published in 1944, which converted them to the cause of classical liberty and the fight against collectivism. Hayek, in fact, in a later essay, *The Intellectuals and Socialism* (1949), mapped out a general strategy for waging a war of ideas on behalf of liberty, which these donors and their grantees sought to implement. Hayek concluded that the great transformation from agricultural to modern society had given intellectuals great leverage over the direction of politics—and, moreover, that they had used this leverage to promote government planning and

socialism. Thus the great challenge in his view was to train a new generation of thinkers to make the case for liberty.¹

Hayek's writings did have a more or less immediate impact in Great Britain, where Anthony Fisher (with Hayek's encouragement) established the Institute for Economic Affairs in London in 1955 for the express purpose of advancing the market alternative to socialism and the welfare state. The IEA, true to Hayek's prediction, spent two decades making this case until a sympathetic friend, Margaret Thatcher, was elected Prime Minister. Such influence, however, proved harder to come by in the United States.

Looking back to the 1950s, we can see that the founding of *National Review* was a seminal event in the development of modern conservatism in the United States. Yet none of these donors was involved in the creation of this important enterprise. This was due both to their philosophical commitments to classical liberty and also to their wish to operate at a higher and more fundamental level of argument and debate. It was also the case that in the early 1950s the intellectual battle against collectivism was identified with individualism and classical liberalism rather than with conservatism. Indeed, conservatism, as an intellectual current, barely existed at all. Buckley was thus trying to do something quite new.

These foundations did advance an important and interesting body of work, nearly all of it focused on the intellectual battle to defend individual liberty against the gathering forces of statism. Most of their work in the 1950s and 1960s was oriented to economics, and the importance of the free individual in the marketplace. They helped Hayek secure an appointment at the University of Chicago as Professor of Moral Science in the Committee on Social Thought, after the Department Economics vetoed his appointment there; and they paid the salary at New York University for Ludwig von Mises, who could never secure a regular faculty appointment. They published numerous books, many them devoted to the elaboration of Austrian economics, and funded conferences for scholars on themes dealing with the ideals of a free society. They funded hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fellowships for graduate students, many of whom later became prominent scholars. The *Freeman*, a journal published by the Foundation for Economic Education, published articles by leading spokesmen for classical liberalism, and earned a dedicated readership of intellectuals, students, and (surprisingly) businessmen. These donors also created organizations to advance this point of view, most notably, the Foundation for Economic Education and the Institute for Humane Studies, both of which are still prospering. They accomplished a great deal working against the political and intellectual tides of the era.

Yet this intellectual movement never found its way beyond its circle of followers into the wider world of politics and policy debate. Hayek had advised his followers to maintain a distance from politics and policy, and to focus on the world of ideas for the purpose of converting the next generation of scholars, writers, and intellectuals. There was thus in this movement a certain disdain for political involvement and debate because, it was felt, ideals are corrupted and cheapened by politics, and exploited by cynical politicians. In addition, Hayek and his followers were aiming for influence beyond the daily headlines.

At the same time, they did not have great success in breaking into the world of academe, where broad philosophical argumentation is more the norm. This was not entirely their fault because the chaos and pandemonium on campuses during the 1960s drowned out the type of reasoned inquiry they sought to advance. By the time the tumult had died down, the American university was an even more inhospitable place for classical liberalism than it had been before. But without gaining a foothold in the academy, there was little hope to convert the next generation of academics and intellectuals to these important ideas. As a consequence, the range of

¹ Hayek, of course, in another famous essay, wrote that he was not a conservative at all, but a liberal of the old school. Thus perhaps it is technically inaccurate to consider this movement as a chapter in conservative thought. Still, the classical liberals generally made common cause with the conservatives in our era in fighting against communism and the advancing welfare state. Frank Meyer, writing for *National Review*, attempted to formulate a "fusion" between classical liberalism and conservatism.

influence of the classical liberals was limited and contained. And, through this period, the pace of change in the United States continued to move in the wrong direction.

A second, and quite different, chapter of conservative philanthropy took shape in the mid-1970s, through the efforts of a handful of other foundations, most especially, the John M. Olin Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, the Scaife Trusts, and later, the Bradley Foundation. These donors were more self-consciously conservative rather than libertarian. And while they were sympathetic to the ideals of classical liberalism, they adopted a broader intellectual framework that encompassed conservative work in several fields, including economics, foreign policy, the humanities, and religion. These new donors were also eager to wage the war of ideas in a more direct and aggressive style by engaging the world of political controversy and policy debate.

In shaping their programs, these foundations were greatly influenced by the neoconservatives, most especially by Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Hilton Kramer, and Michael Novak, who coincidentally rose to prominence in the 1970s. These writers, for the most part, had spent their formative years on the left, and had been little influenced by the writings of the classical liberals.² Yet they understood how the Leftists thought, which was a great advantage in countering them. They understood that the war of ideas is fought by engaging real controversies with stakes waged on the outcomes. And, thus, through their writings, and also through their advice, they helped to orient the conservative foundations to the ongoing contest to decide which ideas would govern the nation.

Through their key publications, *Commentary* and *The Public Interest*, the neoconservatives broadened the appeal of conservatism by drawing on social science to document the worrisome consequences of liberal policies. Just as importantly, they understood that the attacks on capitalism and markets arose from deeper cultural sources; thus in order to defend capitalism, they argued, it was necessary to invest in history, law, political theory, and religion. The conservative foundations, the John Olin Foundation especially, were eager to help the neoconservatives, and just as eager to follow their advice—and some of us, after all these years, still look to them with the greatest admiration.

The neoconservatives, along with the Straussians, brought a different approach and emphasis to conservatism, which broadened its appeal, brought in new subjects and new lines of argument, made it more effective in the political world, and helped it to adapt to the challenges of the time. It was a significant step in the history of conservative philanthropy when these foundations embraced the neoconservatives—without in any way, however, rejecting or diminishing other strands of conservative thought.

This chapter of conservative philanthropy coincided with the rise of conservatism and the notable successes mentioned earlier. From the late 1970s forward, these foundations worked to build an impressive network of conservative publications, university programs, and research centers that will continue to be influential in the years ahead. When Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, for example, he could turn for guidance to a small handful of conservative institutions—the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution, and the American Enterprise Institute. By the time George W. Bush was elected in 2000, however, he could look to conservative and free market organizations actively working in every area of policy. And these organizations, in turn, were

² Hayek's influence on the neoconservatives, and particularly on Kristol, raises interesting questions. There are parallels between the ideas Hayek developed in "The Intellectuals and Socialism" and Kristol's writings in the 1970s on the role of intellectuals in politics. Kristol, borrowing from a book by Milovan Djilas with this title, wrote about a "new class" of intellectuals who augmented their own influence by attacking religion and promoting the expansion of government. Like Hayek, he criticized their utopianism and their tendency to criticize the real world from the standpoint of abstract standards of their own making. Kristol, once more like Hayek, sought to persuade business leaders to support thinkers who could defend capitalism against its growing body of critics. Kristol, however, was not a classical liberal, and he criticized the libertarian philosophy. Nor was he prepared to wait a full generation to exercise constructive influence. One might say that, leaving their philosophical differences aside, Kristol was more effective in implementing Hayek's strategy than Hayek's philosophical offspring.

augmented by journals and magazines, by university programs of various kinds, by public interest law firms, and by networks of scholars and writers that had achieved broad influence during the 1980s and 1990s. These organizations churned out arguments, ideas—and talent, which over time changed the balance of power between liberals and conservatives.

All of this was accomplished with modest financial resources, especially so when the conservative foundations are compared to their liberal counterparts. The five leading liberal foundations—Ford, Rockefeller, MacArthur, Pew, and Carnegie—reported assets in a recent year of some \$24 billion and annual expenditures of \$1.2 billion. The combined assets of the five leading conservative foundations do not exceed \$1.5 billion, and their annual expenditures do not reach \$100 million. Yet they were able to achieve much with focus and discipline—and by allying themselves with as talented a group of thinkers and writers as this nation has seen in a long time.

This is the past. What of the future?

First of all, this second chapter of conservative philanthropy has now run its course, partly because it has done its work, partly because conditions have changed, and partly because some of the old players are leaving the scene and new ones are entering. A third chapter of conservative philanthropy is waiting to be formulated. Whatever comes next will necessarily be different from what has gone before; and whatever shape it takes, there is no guarantee that it will be important or have lasting consequences.

Second, the proliferation of individual donors will probably mean that the larger conservative foundations will be less influential than in the past. The prosperity of the past few decades, along with the success of the conservative movement, has created a new generation of conservative donors, few of them fabulously rich, but many wealthy enough to make significant gifts. Grants from the larger foundations make up an ever diminishing share of the budgets of conservative think tanks and policy organizations. This is probably a positive development, as it broadens the financial bases of these organizations, makes them less dependent on a few donors, and gives our policy entrepreneurs an incentive to beat the bushes for new contributors. In the future, therefore, there will be much less strategic direction given to conservatism from a few donors.

Third, the preoccupations associated with governing, combined with the proliferation of individual donors, are gradually turning conservatism into a policy movement rather than a movement of ideas. This is an understandable evolution in a movement that now has the responsibility to govern, and thus always to have a workable agenda of policies to propose and enact. It also reflects the changing concerns of donors, who naturally wish to achieve something tangible and practical with their investment of funds. And what is more practical, in this realm, than the passage of a law or the adoption of a new program?

But a movement preoccupied by policy will be less compelling to prospective converts than one defined by broader ideas about politics, history, and religion. Few, after all, will become conservatives primarily because they like caps on malpractice awards or private accounts in social security. In this sense, both Hayek and the neoconservatives were right. Conservatives, to maintain and augment their influence, will ever have to wage the broader war of ideas, but to do so they will need the help of far-sighted philanthropists.

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