

“So, what is a ‘true conservative’, anyway?”

By

Jay B. Hargett

Presented to The Raleigh Tavern Philosophical Society

5/21/08

In the beginning, God created 'conservatism'... and it was confusing...

When Sen. John McCain became the Republican Party nominee for President, the response from those who characterize themselves as 'conservative' was practically unanimous. They openly questioned his 'conservative' credentials. He was characterized as being on the wrong side of illegal immigration, taxes, judges, campaign finance reform, and issues of previous dissatisfaction with the very party that had nominated him. Over and over, the complaint has been that he's not conservative enough; that he's not a 'true conservative'. But, when pinned down to a definition of the term, they give points of application of conservative principles, rather than the actual core principles themselves. Take, for example, illegal immigration. How does a position on illegal immigration define one's political ideology as being a 'true conservative'? How do you get from support for immigration reform to such beliefs being a litmus test for what is being called 'true conservatism'? So, the question that titles this paper became a quest, of sorts. There should exist a core set of values of a true conservative, if properly defined, right? After all, how can you believe in a political philosophy or ideology whose core values and beliefs can't be effectively defined? Who gets to define them? How would such core values stand up to the test of time if they can simply be beat to fit and painted to match?

Well, if there is such a definition of 'true conservatism' out there (wherever 'there' is), it couldn't be found. Sure, there are plenty of platitudes, applications and issues 'de jour' of various conservative principles, but no real definition. Those who profess to be 'true conservatives' hold up President Reagan as the poster child of such ideology, using the quote of "I didn't leave the Democratic Party, it left me," as evidence of Reagan's historical support for the conservative ideology regardless of party affiliation. But one cannot simply apply political positions to the 'flavor of the month' issue without there being a credible definition of why one does so. That being said, there are lots of 'what conservatives believe' statements, but not 'why they believe it' definitions.

So, how do we get from here to there?

One must start with an identification of why a 'true conservative' believes what they believe. So, if a core value of such beliefs does not exist in application, it must be created in theory from those applied principles. Think of it as "backwards engineering" a political ideology. If there is a standard of beliefs, then a 'true conservative' can actually mean something besides a series of fickle political platitudes applied arbitrarily. It will take away the application of principles of 'true conservatism' from those who would apply it for their own selfish reasons, and place it with those who have chosen to embrace it for the betterment of all who chose to accept its tenants. Just as citizenship in the United States requires acceptance of representative democracy for governance, so too must those who wish to embrace a certain political ideology be governed by its definition. Or, at the very least, be willing to embrace it for what it is: a 'plumb line' by which one's political soul is measured. A well written definition of 'true conservatism' will survive a test of time, and be able to either transcend descent, or be open to change. Either way, the line is drawn from a core set of values, derived from the application of such principles. The application of the rule of law, without selling out one's humanity, in the debate of illegal immigration is one such line from which that core belief is applied. But, how to get to that set of core beliefs is the real challenge. These needed core values must be able to be applied equally across the board, and applied with a standard that will accurately describe those who embrace it. So, without a working set of core beliefs, how do you then try to define them? This is the test of this paper: to 'backwards engineer' the applied principles of what are considered to be politically 'conservative'. And, therein lies an even bigger problem. What was once considered 'conservative' in the past has evolved to being commonplace for any political ideology. So, history must be examined to understand where conservatism began and to what it has evolved into. And, in doing so, we can begin to find some of those 'core' values and beliefs we hear so much about.

The Republican Party: The 'home' of conservative ideology...

Abolishing slavery. Free speech. Women's suffrage. These are all stances the Republican Party, in opposition to the Democratic Party, adopted early on. Reducing the government. Streamlining the bureaucracy. Returning power to the states. These issues don't sound like they would be the promises of the party of Lincoln, the party that fought to preserve the national union, but they are, and logically so. With a core belief in the idea of the primacy of individuals, the Republican Party, since its inception, has been at the forefront of the fight for individuals' rights in opposition to a large, bloated government.

(The Republican Party Web Site – History)

The beginning of this quote, “Abolishing slavery, Free speech. Woman’s Suffrage,” were historically ‘liberal’ concepts, given the time in history in which they were proposed, but are now commonplace across the political spectrum. But you get a hint at a core value with the quote, “...the primacy of individuals....” But where does that ‘core’ come from? If we ‘backwards engineer’ the concept, you’re most likely to need to return to the writings that were used to create this country; the Federalist Papers and the U.S. Constitution, and the moral center from which our democracy descends, The 10 Commandments, as put forward by Christianity. These places are as good a place as any to start. Take for example, “We the people of the United States,” from the beginning of the Preamble to the Constitution. The statement does two things; a) It celebrates the collective of the United States citizenry, and; b) does not differentiate one individual from one another as all are equal to one other. All citizens are equal under the collective “We” and the primacy of the individual is therefore guaranteed by the strength of that collective. So, we have our first ‘core value’ as the ‘primacy of the individual’ and defined by the Preamble of the Constitution as being limited to its citizenry, across the board, equally.

This is reinforced by the following quote:

Resolved, That we invite the affiliation and cooperation of the men of all parties, however differing from us in other respects, in support of the principles herein declared; and believing that the spirit of our institutions as well as the Constitution of our country, guarantees liberty of conscience and equality of rights among citizens, we oppose all legislation impairing their security.

(The Republican Party Platform of 1856)

...and this one:

From freedom comes opportunity; from opportunity comes growth; from growth comes progress.

This is not some abstract formula. It is the vibrant, beating heart of the American experience. No matter how complex our problems, no matter how difficult our tasks, it is freedom that inspires and guides the American Dream.

(The Republican Party Platform of 1984).

To be truly free, as the quote above refers, the 'primacy of the individual' must be the core value of the democracy that guaranty's it. One cannot speak of liberty without it. One cannot expect his/her human rights without it. One cannot claim the promises of the Bill of Rights without it. One cannot be free without it.

Some applications of conservatism:

What follows are quotes from various points in history that the Republican Party found to be important to include in their party platforms. They were chosen over Democratic Party Platforms because they highlight the birth and growth of what is now considered to be modern conservatism. This is not to say that conservative principles do not exist within the Democratic Party's history, because it does. This is also not to say that the Republican Party has some divine right to the term of 'conservatism', because it does not. Neither party has a claim to either 'conservative' or 'liberal' monikers, nor to the political concepts they represent. But they have the benefit of reflecting on current issues, so a focus on such conservative applications that illustrate the 'evolution' of the principles will be examined. Issues such as stewardship of public spending, regulation of commerce, foreign policy, justice, immigration, personal responsibility, ethics, morality and acknowledgement of God will be the focus of these quotes, followed by comments on them that tie to modern issues and will hopefully begin to mold a checklist of sorts for determining true conservatism.

Economics

That the people justly view with alarm the reckless extravagance which pervades every department of the Federal Government; that a return to rigid economy and accountability is indispensable to arrest the systematic plunder of the public treasury by favored partisans.

You would think this is a quote from Michael Savage's radio program, but you'd be wrong. It's from the Republican Party Platform of 1860. The fact that this quote is so timely illustrates the ongoing battle with those not of 'conservative' stewardship of public spending. You would also think that this problem would have been solved by now, given the issue existed in 1860, but it has not. Why not? The Preamble hints at it, with "...in order to form a more perfect union..." No creation of man can be 'perfect' because man is an imperfect creation. Therefore his creations cannot be perfect. This was known by our founding fathers and the imperfection of man was included up front, in the Preamble, as a goal in forming '...a more perfect union...' "But what is the 'core value' that governs the issue? Let's try The 10 Commandments, starting with #7, "Thou shalt not steal", and follow that with #9, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house", and end with # 10, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his cattle, nor anything that is thy neighbors". All are core moral values that apply to the very lack of ethics that enables a person in a position of authority to allow the "reckless extravagance" of governmental stewardship mentioned above. Add to that the "systematic plunder of the public treasury by favored partisans", above, and you have 2 more core values that define what 'true conservatism' should be. Of course, one person's "favored partisan", like industries that benefit from tax incentives, are another person's "return to rigid economy and accountability" as defined by the mortgage expense tax deduction. Again, if we are to apply 'true conservative' ideals, it must be done equally across the board.

Immigration

The priceless heritage of American citizenship is our greatest gift to our friends of foreign birth. Only those who will be loyal to our institutions, who are here in conformity with our laws, and who are in sympathy with our national traditions, ideals, and principles, should be naturalized.

This could easily be a quote from Sean Hannity's radio program, but it isn't. It's from the Republican Party Platform of 1928. It would seem that immigration has been an issue for much of this country's history, and 1928 was no exception. Again, you would think that this country has had ample opportunity to solve this issue, but it has not. Why not? The Preamble states the concept quite clearly, "...establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...." This includes native and naturalized citizens alike. All of the concepts described in the Preamble as the "Blessings of Liberty" are so stated for the benefit of all who would aspire to citizenship in this nation. But the issue remains to this day. So the questions become: Do those who come to this county illegally aspire to citizenship? Are they willing to accept inviolate the tenants of the 'Blessings of Liberty' as being, first and foremost, having the strength of character to obey the law? Perhaps, as a nation of immigrants, we have become aware that if one is willing to illegally come to this nation that there is cause for not wanting them to extend such lack of respect for the rule of law to other areas of their lives. The above Party Platform quote sets the ideal of a healthy immigration policy from that which is not 'conservative' in the statement, "...who are in conformity with our laws..." Therefore, our next core value has to be in what the Preamble indicates as must be created for every citizen, for this country to "...establish justice..." There can be no justice if there is no 'rule of law'. All citizens must except the 'rule of law' if there is to ever be justice for its citizens, including its potential citizens.

Personal Responsibility

There is a real need for the people once more to grasp the fundamental fact that under our system of government they are expected to solve many problems themselves through their municipal and State governments, and to combat the tendency that is all too common to turn to the Federal Government as the easiest and least burdensome method of lightening their own responsibilities.

This could easily be a quote from former H.U.D. Secretary Jack Kemp, but you'd be wrong. It's a quote from the Republican Party Platform of 1928. It would seem that we as a nation have been combating burdensome Federal entitlement programs for quite some time. Given that this quote is from 1928, those of conservative principles have done little to actually apply the ideal to the governance of this nation. Perhaps the 9th and 10th Commandments of "Thou shalt not covet..." have been confused with the Preamble's statement of "...promote the general welfare..." In any event, we as a nation have been more generous with distributing our wealth to those less fortunate than ourselves than any other nation, and this continues to this day. But to be a 'true conservative', you must acknowledge that sometimes this generosity can be a 'two-edged sword'. There are many who now 'covet' what others have, and expect to "turn to the Federal Government as the easiest and least burdensome method of lightening their own responsibilities." Therefore, our next 'core value' must be the acceptance of the 9th and 10th Commandments of "Thou shalt not covet..." of those whom the federal government takes wealth from and redistributes it.

...and there is this quote:

- 1. Every person has the right to govern himself, to fix his own goals, and to make his own way with a minimum of governmental interference.*
 - 2. It is for government to foster and maintain an environment of freedom encouraging every individual to develop to the fullest his God-given powers of mind, heart and body; and, beyond this, government should undertake only needful things, rightly of public concern, which the citizen cannot himself accomplish.*
- (The Republican Party Platform of 1964)*

...and this quote:

It has been said that mercy must have a human heart and pity a human face. We agree. Democrats measure social programs in terms of government activity alone. But the divine command to help our neighbor is directed to each individual and not to a bureaucratic machine. Not every problem cries out for a federal solution.

We must help the poor escape poverty by building an economy which creates more jobs, the greatest poverty fighter of them all. Not to help the poor is to abandon them and demean our society; but to help the poor without offering them a chance to escape poverty is ultimately to degrade us all.

The great tasks of compassion must be accomplished both by people who care and by policies which foster economic growth to enhance all human development.

(The Republican Party Platform of 1984)

Regulation of Commerce

To preserve the American system of free enterprise, private competition, and equality of opportunity, and to seek its constant betterment in the interests of all.

Encouragement instead of hindrance to legitimate business.

Withdrawal of government from competition with private payrolls.

Elimination of unnecessary and hampering regulations.

This could easily be a quote from Rush Limbaugh's radio program, but you'd be wrong. It's from the Republican Party Platform of 1936. It was a response to the 'New Deal' of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the effects of which this nation is still experiencing, given its current timeliness. These tenants express a fundamental approach to commerce, being the concepts of "free enterprise, private competition, and equality of opportunity." When an establishment of a 'windfall profit tax' on an industry causes shortages of that industry's product, that is a "hindrance to legitimate business". When mandated fuel additives create regional gasoline price spikes that effect those who can least afford them, this is not done with the "...betterment in the interests of all..." fully in mind. When the Federal Government becomes one of this country's largest employers, that is an example of the government's "competition with private payrolls." When E-85 Ethanol requirements create food shortages around the world for those who can least afford the loss, that is the government's "unnecessary and hampering regulations." Perhaps we've forgotten that part of the Preamble that says, "...promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity..." So, our next 'core value' must be an adherence to the concept of 'free enterprise' as one of the "Blessings of Liberty". One cannot exist without the other.

...and there is this quote:

Government must be restrained in its demands upon and its use of the resources of the people, remembering that it is not the creator but the steward of the wealth it uses; that its goals must ever discipline its means; and that service to all the people, never to selfish or partisan ends, must be the abiding purpose of men entrusted with public power.

(The Republican Platform of 1964)

When any earmarked funds are spent for 'selfish or partisan ends', government's goals are not 'disciplined by its means'. When votes are bought by pork-barreled projects, like the now-infamous "Bridge to Nowhere", there is no 'service to all people'. When former ABC News reporter Sam Donaldson can avail himself of a farm subsidy for mohair production, that is the government's lack of stewardship 'of the wealth it uses'.

...and there is this quote:

Free enterprise is fundamental to the American way of life. It is inseparable from the social, religious, political, and judicial institutions which form the bedrock of a nation dedicated to individual freedom and human rights.

Economic growth enables all citizens to share in the nation's great physical and spiritual wealth, and it is maximized by giving them the fullest opportunity to engage in economic activities and to retain the rewards of their labor.

(The Republican Party Platform of 1984)

When the owner of The Miami Dolphins is criticized for considering renouncing his citizenship because if he dies, his team would have to be sold off by his heirs to pay the estate tax, this prevents his heirs from retaining 'the rewards of their labor'. If the Commerce Clause in the Bill of Rights can be construed, by the Supreme Court, to include the use of 'eminent domain' to acquire private property that would benefit private enterprise that would create more tax revenue than it's current owner could provide to the tax base, this also prevents the current owners from retaining 'the rewards of their labor'.

Justice and the Acknowledgement of God

Constant and effective insistence on the personal dignity of the individual, and his right to complete justice without regard to race, creed or color, is a fundamental American principle.

Guided by these principles, with continuing faith in Almighty God; united in the spirit of brotherhood; and using to the full the skills, resources and blessings of liberty with which we are endowed; we, the American people, will courageously advance to meet the challenge of the future.

This quote could easily be from Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, but you'd be wrong. It's from the Republican Party Platform of 1948. As the Republican Party Website indicated above, the "primacy of the individual" requires not just "personal dignity", but "justice" as a fundamental right. "Continued faith in Almighty God" means that it is from God that the 'blessings of liberty' flow. And, it is from our diligence to the ideals stated in our Preamble that states for us to "establish Justice" that our continued blessing of liberty stream from. The 8th Commandment States that, "Thou shalt not bare false witness against our neighbor."

Just as there cannot be "free enterprise" without liberty, so to can justice not exist without it. It is why there is no longer slavery, even though we came to blows over it. It is why women now have the right to vote, even though they did not when this nation was founded. It is why we have the Civil Rights Act to counter the injustices of the likes of the remnants of "Jim Crow" laws.

When a person in prison can successfully sue the prison system for rights to practice Satanism in jail, “personal dignity” has been sacrificed for something outside of our concept of “justice”. When a school led prayer can be made illegal, but a prayer to open a congressional session is not, there is a disconnect in what is and is not ‘justice’. If illegal aliens can openly march in protest against immigration reform and not be arrested, there is a lack of will to establish true ‘justice’.

So, our concept of justice must be tempered with not only common sense, but with the ideals as expressed in our “...continuing faith in Almighty God...” as a promise of individual freedom and not an abuse of it. The same freedom that also states that “freedom *of* religion” does not mean “freedom *from* religion”. It has been said that being an American is ‘advanced citizenship’, so our next ‘core value’ must be the acknowledgement of personal freedom as a fundamental right of liberty. The “primacy of the individual” represented here in its purest form.

Morality

Much of today's moral decline and drift—much of the prevailing preoccupation with physical and material comforts of life—much of today's crass political appeals to the appetites of the citizenry—can be traced to a leadership grown demagogic and materialistic through indifference to national ideals rounded in devoutly held religious faith. The Republican Party seeks not to renounce this heritage of faith and high purpose; rather, we are determined to reaffirm and reapply it.

This is a quote that parts of which could be heard from the pulpit of any church or synagogue in this country. But it's from the Republican Party Platform of 1964. And it is as relevant today as it was then. As with all discussions of morality, it is easy to forget that this is a nation founded on Christian Principles. This is in stark contrast with what a vocal minority would like us to acknowledge, but is ignored at our national peril. This was punctuated in recent history with a call for prayer by President George W. Bush for the victims of the attack of 9-11. It was also punctuated by the removal of the Ten Commandments from the courthouse in Alabama. We seem to be, as a nation, conflicted with our religious heritage, so this should be our next core value: A Christian set of moral values as illustrated by the Ten Commandments.

...and there is this quote:

Our national renewal starts with the family. It is where each new generation gains its moral anchor. It is the school of citizenship, the engine of economic progress, a permanent haven when everything is changing.

Change can be good, when it liberates the energy and commitment of family members to build better futures. We welcome change that corrects the mistakes of the past, particularly those at war against the family.

(The Republican Party Platform of 1992)

Can we be a moral society, founded on Christian Principles, if we legalize gay marriage? Can that same morality extend to overturning polygamy laws for practitioners of Islam? Can it be moral to have a wife who is under the current age of consent? These are the type of questions that we, as a society, must face during the course of our nation's evolution. And we must either accept the precepts of who we once were or re-write that which we want to be.

...and, of course, the big one:

We recommit ourselves to the values that strengthen our culture and sustain our nation: family, faith, personal responsibility, and a belief in the dignity of every human life.

(The Republican Party Platform of 2000)

Note the last part of the quote, above; "...and a belief in the dignity of every human life." When we as Americans speak of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," this includes all life, and the lives of the unborn. If liberty is a right of all life, that must, by definition, include the life that exists from within as it does from without. Much is said about this position being in conflict with that of war and the death penalty. There is none. The death penalty is a form of punishment for a crime; it being the ultimate punishment. Casualties of war are just that: casualties. As our Preamble says, our Constitution must "...secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity..." Our "Posterity" includes *all* our "Posterity", not just the ones that are in the maternity ward or day care.

In Summery

As we navigate through our minefields of political ideology, it is important to be grounded in the core values of the ideologies we profess to adhere to. One must be confident in them, competent in their tenets, and knowledgeable in defending them. If they cannot be defined, how can they be defended? With that said, let's recap what has been determined about what a "true conservative" believes and why.

1. Belief in the primacy of the individual.
2. Belief in the tenants of the Ten Commandments.
3. Belief in the rule of law, to the exclusion of none.
4. Belief in the concept of free enterprise.
5. Belief in a Christian-based moral compass.
6. Belief in the concept of Liberty as secured by all of the above.

As illustrated above, the primacy of the individual must be first and foremost as a core value of 'true conservatism'. If we keep true to this, government cannot succeed in being the masters of the governed. A true and dedicated adherence of the Ten Commandments will never be irrelevant to any person's life. A dedicated adherence to the rule of law, to the exclusion of none, will mean that laws that are outside of the rest of the above beliefs will not stand the test of time. To work is to have a sense of purpose, and to do so in an economic system of free enterprise promotes a pursuit of excellence rather than a lack of initiative. And all of these things secure for us all the basic right of liberty.

These are rudimentary in scope but they are not rudimentary in meaning. They are simple guidelines that can be applied equally across the political spectrum. They are the basic building blocks, or principles, that this nation was built on.

In the book, "Getting America Right: The True Conservative Values Our Nation Needs Today", by Heritage Foundation President Edwin J. Feulner, and Chairman of Townhall.com, Doug Wilson make the statement about what true conservative values are, below:

And what are those core values and principles? They are nothing less than what has made America great. And despite our hotly contested elections and increasingly rancorous partisan disputes, Americans still share fundamental principles. We still support free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, a strong national defense, and the rule of law. Most Americans still believe in the Ten Commandments as a guide for our individual lives. We still stand for such traditional values as fairness, volunteerism, the primacy of the family, the freedom to worship as we see fit, self-government, and the defining faith that the least among us can rise to the top – but no one is above the law.

(Getting America Right – Edward J. Feulner & Doug Wilson)

It encapsulates, in a quote, some of what this paper discusses, but the book includes a set of six questions that are a good start for questioning what government does in the name of good governance.

I leave you with them as a beginning of the discussion, not the end of it:

1. Is it the government's business?
2. Does this measure promote self-reliance?
3. Is it responsible?
4. Does it make us more prosperous?
5. Does it make us safer?
6. Does it unify us?

The 10 Commandments (Texas Capital Monument)

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven images.
2. Thou shalt not take the Name of the lord thy God in vain.
3. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
4. Honor thy father and mother, that the days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God Giveth thee.
5. Thou shalt not kill.
6. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
7. Thou shalt not steal.
8. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor
9. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his cattle, nor anything that is thy neighbors.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.