

*What's Left of Conservatism?*  
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If the question is taken to mean what remains of conservatism after the past quarter of a century and particularly after the last six years, the answer is “not much.” After a run of tax cuts for people who didn’t need them, record deficits, an unnecessary and illegal war, corporate scandals, crony capitalism, congressional corruption, and public mismanagement by an ostensibly conservative administration the conservative movement is in a shambles. Grover Norquist the tax cutter who would drown our government in his bathtub is said to be unhappy about NSA spying on the public and the loss of civil liberties. He had apparently assumed that the ACLU would protect the Bill of Rights for him. Francis Fukuyama, for another, has abandoned the Neocon persuasion in frustration. A lot more will jump the good ship Cheney/Bush as it becomes obvious even to the dullest that a country cannot be run on debt, blood, mendacity, corruption, and incompetence for very long, and we’ve been at it for a while now.

Under Democrats and Republicans alike government has grown larger, more intrusive, less manageable, less accountable, less competent, and less proficient at doing what good governments ought to do. It has grown only in power, assertiveness, secrecy, violence, and brazenness. It is a mistake to call this conservative in any fashion. It is certainly not the principled conservatism of the kind once proposed by Edmund Burke, Richard Weaver, Russell Kirk, or even Barry Goldwater which never took a firm hold in the United States. But that isn’t news. Political scientist Clinton Rossiter once opined that genuine conservatism was done in by twin forces of democracy (too much, too fast) and industrialism creating a “one-way ticket to social nonconformity, financial mediocrity, and political suicide.” True conservatism, as a

result, “withered and died” long ago and descended into anger, stereotyping, sloganeering, myth-making, and “frightening simple-mindedness.” Written in 1982, those words were a harbinger of what was to come. Of late the cause of conservatism and the energies of conservatives have been pressed into service of moving America toward a police state, ostensibly to keep us safe and toward empire, ostensibly to fulfill our destiny.

I am less interested, however, in the collapse of conservatism than I am in asking the question from the other side: what’s to the left of conservatism. The answer, again, is “not much.” Liberalism of the sort we associate with Franklin Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy is moribund or as optimists would have it—dormant. It wilted in the face of a ruthless, determined, and well-funded right-wing onslaught and for the lack of political backbone. So called liberals bent and twisted to accommodate the outrages of the right in the belief that principles and the public interest mattered less than polls and safety. The public quickly smelled fear and defeatism, and if there is anything Americans don’t like it is cowards and losers. But like conservatism, a full-blown liberalism didn’t take a firm hold in America either. History, again, conspired against us so that nothing like a robust left ever developed in American politics. Franklin Roosevelt, still despised in some circles for introducing Social Security, was the best friend capitalism ever had and he was a lot closer to pragmatic and creative conservatism than to socialism. Consequently our sense of the public and commonwealth is shriveled and so too our awareness of better solutions for what ails us than those provided only by the unfettered free-market. As a public, we are more remarkable for the ideas we do not and cannot discuss than for those that we actually talk about. Compared to most countries our political discourse is pathetically limited and censored by an increasingly centralized press that seems intent on dumbing us down even further if that’s possible. As a result, the discussion of good public remedies for public problems is a

quarter of an inch wide. Killing our young and bankrupting ourselves to spread democracy abroad, we watch helplessly as democracy daily shrinks at home.

Political failure, the exhaustion of ideas, of both right and left, comes at a particularly unfortunate time. American civilization was built on the simple facts of ecology and geology: our pioneering forefathers had stumbled on the last and greatest reserve of stored carbon left on Earth. Our soils were some of the richest anywhere and our supplies of coal and oil were vast. Like yeast cells feeding on sugar in a wine vat we prospered by feeding on that carbon, depleting soils and oil alike, redistributing it upward into the atmosphere. Our great good luck gave rise to the sense of self-congratulation and the belief that we were God's favored on Earth. From there it was a short step to doctrines of manifest destiny and a foreign policy built on the idea of American supremacy. Access to abundant carbon also led to the excess now apparent in over consumption, an epidemic of fatness, urban sprawl, energy inefficiency, and a host of derivative environmental problems. Access to the energy of soils and fossil fuels did something else to us: it made us dumb. My friend Wes Jackson believes that high energy use destroys the capacity to internalize information, that is to say it makes people stupid and we don't need much encouragement in that direction. In combination with the arts of commercial seduction finely honed by the likes of Edward Bernays, father of the modern advertising industry, we eagerly fall prey to all manner of delusions, frauds, and deceits. Even George Bush now says that we are addicts of cheap carbon and rather like an addict our behavior tends to be dictated by the ancient reptilian brain making us more deranged and violent—until reality kicks in.

Americans are the largest contributors to atmospheric carbon dioxide in the world and we have no good policy and still little inclination to reverse that fact. Worse, there is still a robust denial industry led by a president and vice president who consider the fantasies of Michael

Crichton superior to the decades of patient, peer-reviewed, and increasingly consensus science done by the U.S. Academy of Science or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and hundreds of scientists who study climate for a living and must live by the rigors of evidence, fact, logic, data, and peer review. For this dereliction that willfully puts posterity in jeopardy we have, as yet, no suitable words. But they will come.

Americans are second only to the Aussies in per capita use of fossil energy and overall the largest users. This, too, is unfortunate. Our gargantuan appetite for fossil energy contrasts with growing evidence that we will soon pass the point of peak extraction. Whether it is a matter of a year or two or a decade or two won't matter much in the bigger picture. The point is that we have consumed the easy half of what was available. The other half is deeper down, farther out, harder to refine, and a lot more vulnerable to terrorists and political conflict alike. The good stuff is mostly gone and what's left is largely in places where we are not much liked, and for good reasons. Yet those who purport to rule over us steadfastly refuse to pass energy efficiency standards even remotely appropriate to the problem. The result is national vulnerability, rising foreign debt, more terrorism, endless wars, and political divisions at home and abroad. This will rank perhaps as the defining chapter in the next book on human folly.

So, what's left of conservatism? Either way, not much; we are at the end of an age of large political ideas, most of which did not work out very well anyway. But never has the need for workable philosophies and practical visions been greater. The evidence is coming clearer and clearer that if we fail to control CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere very soon we could pass the point at which climate change tips over into some uncontrollable state. This will not be global warming, a nice sounding thing on cold days in the Northeast, but planetary destabilization with rising sea levels, spreading diseases, rapid ecological changes, severe heat waves and droughts,

economic disruption, political turmoil, and resource wars. Serious scientists now talk about “tipping points” and the end of civilization.

One can legitimately quarrel with a few of the details in the large and growing body of scientific evidence about the reality of climate destabilization, but no longer with the overall conclusion that the combustion of fossil fuels is the major cause forcing climate destabilization and that at some point we will tip climate into a new state that could very well jeopardize civilization itself. The energy status quo, in other words, risks the end of all that has gone before—truly the end of history. Already the human costs are very large. The World Health Organization estimates that 150,000 are presently killed each year by climate change driven weather extremes. As climate change worsens, that number will rise. So too the number of climate anomalies: temperature extremes, severe storms, the likelihood of drought and heat waves, spreading diseases, rising sea levels, and the number of ecological refugees. Katrina-scale storms, amplified by warmer sea water, will become more common, even a kind of normal occurrence.

Genocide was the word coined to describe the willful destruction of entire ethnic groups. But we have none to describe the effects of willful actions the consequences of which are the death of millions of nameless victims in the future. The effects of our present use of coal, oil, and natural gas will kill into the far future, but we cannot know exactly who and exactly how. We do know, however, that the number will be very large and that they will die in storms, or heat waves, or of strange diseases, or in scarcity-driven violence, or in any of a thousand other ways.

We have, however, no word by which to describe our bovine obtuseness in the face of calamity at this scale. Scientists have been warning us at least since the late 1970s in ever more insistent terms. Energy experts have also been warning us that we face the end of the era of

cheap oil on the one hand and great opportunities to radically increase energy efficiency and develop solar energy on the other. No one can ever legitimately plead that they did not know.

The fact that we can predict with a general certainty wrongs in the future raises a difficult problem for the law and the politics by which some principles become law. The U. S. Constitution mentions posterity only in the preamble but not thereafter. In the more than two centuries since, no significant case law has developed around the issue of posterity leaving future generations substantially without standing in the courts and without protection against the violence knowingly perpetrated on them by previous generations. It might be argued that it has always been the case that each generation both benefited from the progress bequeathed by earlier generations and suffered the effects of, say, soil loss or the loss of biological diversity accidentally incurred. We presume that, on balance, each subsequent generation benefits more than it loses from the actions of its predecessors. It is an open question how much earlier generations understood the effects of their actions or had the means to control them. In any event the scale of costs imposed from one generation to the next was contained locally or regionally and the damage was often repairable in a matter of decades or centuries. The intergenerational costs of climate change, however, are another matter. They are global, permanent insofar as we measure time, and now thoroughly studied and well understood. We can neither plead ignorance of the facts in the case nor can we say that time will heal the problems in a meaningful way for future generations. And neither can we make a plausible case that we had no other choice given the large and well-documented evidence of the potential for energy efficiency and renewable energy. We will stand before whoever is able and willing to judge as a generation that willfully and unnecessarily imposed egregious wrongs on all future generations depriving them of life, liberty, property, and the benefits of civilization for which we are trustees. We are utterly and

wholly in the wrong but the law as presently constituted conveniently lets us off scotch free because it cares not a whit about the rights of posterity.

A great deal of ink and some blood has been spilled over the rights of the individual fetus to life regardless of the wishes of the particular mother. Whatever's one's opinion in the matter of abortion, I plead a larger case: the right of future generations to life, liberty, property, happiness and all of the many benefits of civilization. Similar to the fetus, future generations have no defenders other than those now living who are willing to speak and act on their behalf. In contrast to the fetus they exist only in prospect and even that prospect can be aborted or radically crippled by the indifference or dereliction of the present generation. And in contrast to the individual fetus, future generations pose a collective challenge both to the law and to our moral sensitivities. We must imagine their lives at a scale for which we are unaccustomed and must summon the moral wherewithal to act on their behalf as well as the intellectual acuity to know how to act effectively to defend their interests. Since it is within our power to grant or to withhold life, what can we do?

The beginning point is to understand our recent history and the flaws in our contemporary politics that have prevented us from doing what posterity will regard only as overwhelmingly obvious and utterly necessary. American politics, not to put too fine a point on it, have been hijacked by extremists whose goal was to divide the country and exploit that division toward the ends of establishing a corporate driven authoritarianism. Whatever other religious or political values might have been involved, it clearly resulted in the largest transfer of wealth from the middle and poor classes to the extremely wealthy in history. Beginning with the Gingrich "contract with America" to the angry fulminations of the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and others it was a con job through and through sponsored by a few who had a lot

to gain by public befuddlement and extreme polarization. From 1970 to 2000 they spent an estimated \$3 billion to take control of the airwaves, creating a network of broadcasters, commentators, think-tanks, and news outlets to control the public conversation. The result was a dumbing down of the public and a pathetically limited and confused national conversation about the conduct of the public business that distracted us from the heist underway in which “more than half of the income lost by the bottom eighty percent was captured by the top one-quarter of one percent.”

The real fault line in American politics is how we orient to, say, the seventh generation from ours when the full weight of our present behavior bears down on them. The issues, rather, align along a line at right angles to liberalism—conservatism that runs from present to future. One can be either a good conservative or good liberal and be concerned about that long-term future. From the perspective of, say, the seventh generation from our own, those will not be regarded as competing positions, but reverse sides of the same coin. A mature and responsible political perspective will have elements of both. At our best, Americans are a pragmatic people who aim to solve problems, share opportunities and burdens, and open possibilities for advancement. At our worst we’ve been driven by ideologues and fear mongers. More than conservative v. liberal, the true geometry of our politics is our orientation to the far horizon.

It is necessary that we understand more fully our own political principles drawn from the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and translated to American soil by a group of brilliant men that we call the Founders. They wrestled with the perplexities of liberty and a workable democracy albeit with far less at stake. Among the fundamental principles written into the Constitution is the necessity to check ambition and power by clearly demarcated countervailing power. James Madison explained why in The Federalist Papers, number ten. We are now living through his

nightmare in which legislative, judicial, and executive power have been unified in the hands of a faction within a single party. If and when power would be so joined in a few hands, Madison thought the American experiment in self-government would come to an end. It is a great deal worse that he could have known. In addition to executive, legislative, and judicial power, the Republican Party of Bush/Cheney/Rove also controls the military, the CIA, FBI, and NSA, and a good bit of the press. If anyone is really interested in the original intent of the founders of this experiment in democracy, they had no clearer and more forcefully stated intention than to avoid the tyranny that would result from a single party or person controlling the country. The whole point of the revolution they fought was to throw off a far less tyrannical authority than presently exists.

Freedom of the press, was particularly important for Madison and the founders. Without access to information, Madison believed that things would degenerate into “either a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both.” In the first edition of Media Monopoly in 1983, Ben Bagdikian lamented that we were down to fifty major media outlets. When he wrote the updated version in 2005, the number of outlets was five, one of which is FOX News, an oxymoron. The homogenization of news, the competition for market share, and corporate ownership mean that news is increasingly indistinguishable from entertainment and filtered to remove anything that might disturb our national sleepwalk. When the Millennium Ecosystem Report, the work of hundreds of scientists worldwide, appeared in the spring of 2005, it was not reported on any of the major news channels, but Terry Schiavo’s plight was and so, too, that of Michael Jackson. The fact that the natural systems on which we depend were dying did not matter to the people who define the “news,” but short-term market share did and that called for sensationalism and distraction from anything that might require serious thought and investigation.

Third, what ails our politics both in the present and increasingly over the long-term is money. We have, as Will Rogers once noted, the best Congress that money can buy. The solution is straightforward: remove money from politics entirely. No amount of tinkering will do. No reform will solve the problem which is simply the pervasive and increasingly corrupting power of money flowing through the political system like heroin through the veins of an addict. The idea that campaign money is a form of free speech covered by the First Amendment is ludicrous in a true democracy. It is time, for our sake and for that of our posterity, to separate money and politics in the same way the founders intended to separate church and state. The upshot is that all elections ought to be federally financed, period. The corollary is that no elected or appointed official after leaving public office can ever hold a paid position with any regulated industry. If they face financial destitution as a result of their public service, let us publicly pay them better. It is time to return the conduct of the people's business to the people.

Finally, our politics suffer for want of large visions at a time of cataclysmic possibilities. It is time to widen our political and moral horizons. In this vein, Albert Einstein once proposed that:

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (emphasis added)

Aldo Leopold, similarly, wrote that the achievement of “a land ethic would change the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.” Both

men, products of the early and middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, regarded our diminished sense of community as part of the unfinished business of human advancement. And both regarded the extension of our sense of inclusiveness to the larger community of life and to the far horizon, not as a burden so much as growth in our human stature justifiable on grounds of altruism and self-interest.

It is time to expand our political vision in ways commensurate with the extent of our effects on the future and the community of life. It is time to grant standing to our posterity whose lives, liberty, and property are imperiled by our actions and adjust our priorities accordingly. The principle involved draws from our own revolutionary experience simply states that:

***No generation and no nation has the right to alter the biogeochemical cycles of Earth or impair the stability, integrity, and beauty of natural systems, the consequences of which would fall as a form of intergenerational remote tyranny on all future generations.***

This wording draws from Thomas Jefferson and the generation that threw off the arbitrary authority of a King, Aldo Leopold's description of a morally and ecologically solvent land ethic, and hundreds of contemporary ethicists and scientists who have wrestled with the darkening shadow that our generation casts onto succeeding generations and the opportunities we have to lighten that darkness.