



The Free Congress Commentary

The Next Conservatism #30: The Next Conservatism and Conservation

By Paul M. Weyrich

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The next conservatism, like conservatism today, should regard environmentalism warily. Environmentalism is on the verge of becoming an ideology, if it has not done so already. That means environmentalists twist facts to fit their preconceived notions. All ideologies do that, which is why conservatives don't like ideologies.

But conservation is another matter. The words "conservative" and "conservation" come from the same root, conserve. As conservatives, we believe in conserving traditions, morals, and culture, but also clean air and water, farms and countryside, energy (much of which must be imported), and the soil itself, on which we all depend for our food.

Conservatives don't like waste. Reckless, frivolous, unnecessary consumption is not a conservative virtue. Like many conservatives, I grew up in a household where nothing was wasted. We used everything until it was used up, or until we passed it on to other people poorer than ourselves. We seldom bought things we did not need. That is a good way to live, regardless of how much money we have. A society's real strength comes from production, saving and investment, not consumption. Earlier generations of Americans understood this and lived accordingly.

In my opinion, conservation needs to be part of the next conservatism. This will be particularly important as energy becomes more expensive, and as some traditional sources of energy such as oil become relatively scarce.

But there is a larger aspect to conservation, one that ties into a central idea of the next conservatism, the importance of local life. Globalism, which is a dominant idea among the Washington Establishment, preaches bigness. We are supposed to welcome a "world economy" where virtually all our manufactured goods come from overseas, our energy comes from massive, often international networks, our food from huge agribusinesses. The Globalists seldom talk about how vulnerable this leaves us to events in other parts of the world. Nor do they talk about the

consequences for the lives of ordinary Americans, who are left both dependent on and in competition with other people all over the world.

In my view, the next conservatism's conservation needs to point away from Globalism and toward a new focus on local life. Here, some new technologies may be helpful. In the future, it may be possible to produce energy locally, from solar or wind power or in-home fuel cells. And even with current technology, there is much we can do to reduce our dependence on big systems by reviving old ways, something conservatives favor. In much of America, we can eat food grown locally and use local products much more than most of us now do. Often, the quality is better, and if the price is somewhat higher, the money is going to our neighbors rather than to some international mega-corporation. As I have said before, the quality of our lives is not determined by how much cheap junk we own.

There are two conservation movements that represent the sort of things I think the next conservatism should support, sustainable agriculture and organic farming. Both attempt to restore and maintain the fertility of the soil itself, as opposed to relying on ever-greater doses of chemicals and genetically engineered crops. The nation's soil is perhaps our most important resource, one that we should feel honor bound to pass on in a healthy condition to the next generation. These two movements, in turn, tie into efforts to promote local foods through farmers' markets and cooperatives and to restore family farming as a viable way of life. Those also make sense from a conservative perspective, because they strengthen local life.

I have suggested previously in this series that "think locally, act locally" needs to be a principle of the next conservatism, if we want to steer our country away from Brave New World. Conservation, in turn, is a logical part of thinking and acting locally, because if we do not conserve our local land, water and air we degrade our own neighborhood. As conservatives, we should not fall for environmentalism or any other ideology. But we should conserve, in the way we live our own lives and relate to the people around us. The next conservatism, like all real conservatism, is ultimately a way of life.

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