



## ***The Free Congress Commentary***

### ***The Next Conservatism #44: The Next Conservatism and Power***

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In J.R.R. Tolkien's *LORD OF THE RINGS* trilogy which is one of the great Christian literary works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ring of power represents power itself. Tolkien warns that it can never be used for good purposes, because it ultimately distorts whoever uses it to the point where they become evil. Regardless of their original intention, they end up wanting power over everyone else.

These warnings are consistent with what conservatives have always believed. The reason America's Founding Fathers devised a government of three competing branches was to keep governmental power in check. Conservatives have also sought to keep government small, to keep most governmental power local and the federal government weak. And, they have emphasized tradition, legal precedents and established rights as further means of controlling government power. Rightly, conservatives have realized that the task is not merely to put the right people in power; it is to keep too much power out of anybody's hands, even the right people's.

Politics, however, is about acquiring and using power. Does that mean conservatives should not engage in politics? No, because that would allow radicals to take total power and use it to destroy us and everything we believe in. Rather, it means conservatives have to think carefully about how to use power when they obtain it. They have to use it cautiously, prudently, and in measured quantities, just as they would use any other explosive.

There is, I believe, a way the next conservatism can think about political power that can help prevent its abuse. We should use it defensively, not offensively. By using power defensively, I mean we should use political power, success at the ballot box, to prevent government from ramming schemes, ideologies, social engineering and other radical “improvements” down the American people’s throats. There is plenty of this going on, as anyone can see. From “affirmative action” through “No child left behind” to federal regulations that tell us what kind of shower heads and toilets we have to have in our homes, government power intrudes massively into our lives. Defensive use of power seeks to get rid of such intrusions and restore our liberties. In a free American republic, ordinary people would seldom if ever face the power of government, telling them what to do. That was the case in America through most of our history.

Offensive use of power would be if we tried to use the power of government to create the kind of country the next conservatism envisions. That is what our opponents on the Left fear we would do, and I respect that fear (we fear the same of them and with reason). If we did that, we would be using the ring, as Tolkien would put it. The results would not be what we want.

Rather, the way the next conservatism should work to restore America is from the bottom up, from the grass roots, not from the top down. Real restoration comes when free individuals decide to change how they live their own lives. This is what the Christian call to repentance means. Repentance cannot be forced. It can only come from a change of mind and heart, which is brought about most powerfully by example, by seeing how we, as conservatives, live.

That puts a heavy burden on us, a heavier burden than just winning elections. By living our lives according to the old rules and in the old, honest, modest ways of our forefathers, preferring work over entertainment, our neighbors’ well-being over profits and production over consumption, we can set the right example. We can demonstrate that lives lived this way are richer, fuller, more rewarding than lives devoted to instant gratification and conspicuous consumption, to ego, vanity and stuff. The power of example is safe power, because it does not coerce. Rather, it leads and inspires.

Again, this does not mean the next conservatism should avoid politics. That would lead to our destruction. Rather, it limits what we expect from politics, and points to a harder, slower, but also safer and surer road to restoring America. Think locally, act locally, and provide a local example of life lived well: that is how the Christian church grew amidst a decaying Roman Empire. It is also how the next conservatism can restore an American republic as a falling America Empire collapses around us.

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