



Free Congress Foundation Commentary

The Next Conservatism #46: Why the Next Conservatism Needs a New Movement

By Paul M. Weyrich

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I can honestly claim to have been one of the godfathers of the existing conservative movement. In some ways, that movement has achieved far more than we ever dreamed it could when we started it in the late 1960s and 1970s. Then, most people thought of conservatism as a marginal force that had been killed and buried with Barry Goldwater's defeat in 1964. The idea that conservatism could in just a few decades come to represent the American mainstream while liberalism was marginalized would have been unimaginable. Yet that has been the very real achievement of today's conservative movement.

At the same time, every political movement that succeeds pays a price for its success. In its early stages, as an outsider, it can be true to its agenda. But once it takes power, it inevitably comes to find much of its agenda politically inconvenient. It gets in the way of making deals, gaining more power and collecting money. In time, it ceases to be a real movement and becomes an Establishment.

Regrettably, I have to say this has happened to most of the existing conservative movement, with the exception of the Religious Right. It has gotten in bed with the Republican Party, which provides access, influence and resources to those who will play along. The price has been a "conservatism" that in many respects bears little resemblance to what many of us thought we were fighting for. Most conservative institutions support or are at least silent about a Republican Party

government that will not control spending, has driven deficits up to dangerous levels, exports America's industrial base through "free trade," promotes ever-larger and more intrusive Federal government and follows a Wilsonian foreign policy. In the face of this abandonment of our old agenda, it is not surprising that it is hard to speak of a conservative "movement" anymore, again excepting the Religious Right. Most of the troops have gone home in disgust.

The old conservative movement is now so compromised that it has little grass-roots credibility. This is the first reason the next conservatism needs a new movement. The existing movement just isn't real anymore.

But it is not the only reason. The old movement, with a few exceptions like the home-schoolers, was just about politics. As these columns have said over and over, the next conservatism needs to be about much more than politics. Politics of course remain important. Conservatives must remain politically involved and effective, or the Left will mobilize the full power of the state to destroy us and all we believe in.

But we cannot restore our old culture through politics alone. The next conservatism needs not only a new movement, it needs a new kind of movement, a movement of people dedicated to restoring the old ways of living in their own lives and those of their families. The next conservative movement is perhaps best thought of as a community, one devoted to the old conservative virtues of modest living, hard work, prudence (which includes not running after every new thing), thrift, conservation, and living God-centered rather than man-centered lives. If we want to restore our old culture, we have to live by its rules.

There is one other reason why the next conservatism needs a new movement, and it is a promising one. I think the next conservative movement may be able to attract the support of many people who would never join a movement that is an arm of the Republican Party. When I raise the kinds of issues this series of columns has discussed, I find many people saying to me, "I never thought of myself as a conservative but I agree the old ways of life were in many ways better." It is not just political conservatives who are distressed

by the decay of our culture. Lots of people who are not politically involved, or who may think of themselves as moderates or even liberals, are distressed and frightened by the sex and violence that dominates our entertainment, by divorce and illegitimacy, by the fact that school children don't seem to know anything, and by rampant consumerism and self-centeredness. The next conservative movement could potentially draw some of these people in.

The question then becomes, how do we build a new conservative movement? Building movements has been one my specialties for more than four decades. In my next column, I will offer some suggestions as to how we might accomplish that.

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