

U.S.

What Is Conservatism?

By LEE EDWARDS | October 22, 2018 12:03 PM

It's a philosophy, not an ideology.

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The National Review Institute, led by the redoubtable Lindsay Craig, has been engaged in a praiseworthy project these past five years, sponsoring a “rigorous examination” of conservative principles for mid-career professionals who want a deeper understanding of conservatism. Leading the discussions over the course of eight dinner seminars are such knowledgeable conservatives as Victor Davis Hanson, Jonah Goldberg, Richard Brookhiser, Dan Mahoney, and Kathryn Jean Lopez.

I have been privileged to kick off the series in New York City, Washington, D.C., Dallas, San Francisco, and Philadelphia with a profile of the polymath founder of NATIONAL REVIEW, William F. Buckley Jr. In the Q & A that follows, two questions are invariably asked by the lawyers, educators, government employees, physicians, entrepreneurs, and even pastors who attend.

The first usually comes half-way through the discussion: “Is there anyone on the scene today who could be the next Bill Buckley?” I decline to be pinned down to one name, but point to dynamic young speakers such as Ben Shapiro and Matthew Continetti, and insightful editors such as Yuval Levin and Dan McCarthy. When pressed, I will respond that Bill Buckley was *sui generis*, and it is unlikely we will see his like again. But, I am quick to add, there are a goodly number of conservatives under 40 whose talents in sum are equal to

the man who more than anyone else made the modern conservative movement.

The second question usually comes toward the end of the dinner: “What is conservatism?” Most of the NRI Fellows live in a hostile liberal world in which they are challenged to justify their positions philosophically. They do not seek a tweet but an in-depth explanation of conservatism on which they can base their support or opposition to the pressing issues of the day.

My answer draws upon four sources: (1) The Sharon Statement, drafted by M. Stanton Evans and adopted by Young Americans for Freedom at its founding meeting in September 1960. (2) Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, which says that the essence of conservatism lies in six canons. (3) Barry Goldwater’s *The Conscience of a Conservative* talks about the two sides of Man: the material and the spiritual. (4) Buckley’s own *Up from Liberalism*.

I begin with the main points of the Sharon Statement, recognized by *The New York Times* as a “seminal document” of the conservative movement and accepted by many conservatives as the best brief statement of conservative ideals.

We, as young conservatives believe:

- That foremost among the transcendent values is the individual’s use of his God-given free will, whence derives his right to be free from the restrictions of arbitrary force;
- That liberty is indivisible, and that political freedom cannot long exist without economic freedom;
- That the purpose of government is to protect those freedoms through the preservation of internal order, the provision of national defense, and the administration of justice;
- That the Constitution of the United States is the best arrangement yet

devised for empowering government to fulfill its proper role, while restraining it from the concentration and abuse of power;

- That the market economy, allocating resources by the free play of supply and demand, is the single economic system compatible with the requirements of personal freedom and constitutional government; and that it is at the same time the most productive supplier of human needs;
- That American foreign policy must be judged by this criterion: Does it serve the just interests of the United States?

I then offer my digest of Kirk's six conservative canons: (1) A divine intent, as well as personal conscience, rules society. (2) Traditional life is filled with variety and mystery, while most radical systems are characterized by a narrowing conformity. (3) Civilized society requires order and hierarchy. (4) Property and freedom are inseparably connected. (5) Man must control his will and his appetite, knowing that he is governed more by emotion than reason. (6) Society must change but slowly.

I next turn to Barry Goldwater, who with L. Brent Bozell wrote *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Goldwater was the first presidential candidate to campaign as a fusionist, drawing upon both traditional and libertarian strains of conservative thought for his policies and positions. Conservatives take account of the *whole* man, Goldwater writes, material as well as spiritual. While liberals tend to look only at the material side of man's nature, conservatism looks upon the enhancement of man's spiritual nature as the primary concern of political philosophy.

With this view of man's nature, Goldwater says, it is understandable why "the Conservative looks upon politics as the art of achieving the maximum amount of freedom for individuals that is consistent with the maintenance of social order." The conservative is the first to understand that "the practice of freedom requires the establishment of order." It is impossible for one man to

be free if another is able to deny him the exercise of his freedom.

But the conservative also recognizes that the political power on which order is based is a self-aggrandizing force; that its appetite grows with each feeding.

“He knows,” says Goldwater, “that the utmost vigilance and care are required to keep political power within its proper bounds.”

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I end my definition of conservatism with an excerpt from Buckley's *Up from Liberalism*, in which he lauds the conservative alternative based on “freedom, individuality, the sense of community, the sanctity of the family, the supremacy of the conscience, the spiritual view of life.” In just 21 words, Buckley provides a neat summation of conservatism's first principles.

Conservatism is a philosophy, not an ideology. It is the collective wisdom of conservatives such as Evans, Kirk, Goldwater, Buckley, and Abraham Lincoln, who when asked what conservatism is replied, “Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried?” Conservatism stands on the solid rock of the American Founding and Western civilization. Its overriding principle is “ordered liberty,” which NRI and conservatives everywhere are

determined to preserve and protect for this generation and generations to come. I'm proud to be a part of this noble project, and I hope you'll join me and NRI as a part of it, too.



LEE EDWARDS is the Distinguished Fellow in Conservative Thought at the **HERITAGE FOUNDATION**. His many books include biographies of Ronald Reagan, Barry Goldwater, and William F. Buckley Jr.

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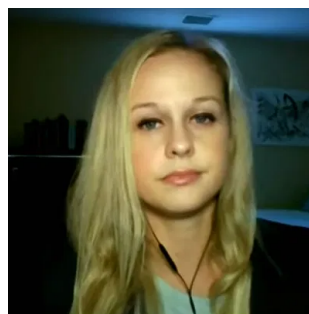
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