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The End Of the Right?

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Friday, August 4, 2006; A17

Is conservatism finished?

What might have seemed an absurd question less than two years ago is now one of the most important issues in American politics. The question is being asked -- mostly quietly but occasionally publicly -- by conservatives themselves as they survey the wreckage of their hopes, and as their champions in the Republican Party use any means necessary to survive this fall's elections.

Conservatism is an honorable disposition that, in its modern form, is inspired by the philosophy developed by Edmund Burke in the 18th century. But as a contemporary American movement, conservatism is rooted intellectually in the 1950s and the circles around William F. Buckley Jr. and National Review magazine. It rose politically with Barry Goldwater's campaign in 1964.

Conservatism was always a delicate balancing act between small-government economic libertarians and social traditionalists who revered family, faith and old values. The two wings were often held together by a common enemy, modern liberalism certainly, but even more so by communism until the early 1990s, and now by what some conservatives call "Islamofascism."

President Bush, his defenders say, has pioneered a new philosophical approach, sometimes known as "big-government conservatism." The most articulate defender of this position, the journalist Fred Barnes, argues that Bush's view is "Hamiltonian" as in Alexander, Thomas Jefferson's rival in the early republic. Bush's strategy, Barnes says, "is to use government as a means to achieve conservative ends."

Kudos to Barnes for trying bravely to make sense of what to so many others -- including some in conservative ranks -- seems an incoherent enterprise. But I would argue that this is the week in which conservatism, Hamiltonian or not, reached the point of collapse.

The most obvious, outrageous and unprincipled spasm occurred last night when the Senate voted on a bill that would have simultaneously raised the minimum wage and slashed taxes on inherited wealth.

Rarely has our system produced a more naked exercise in opportunism than this measure. Most conservatives oppose the minimum wage on principle as a form of government meddling in the marketplace. But moderate Republicans in jeopardy this fall desperately wanted an increase in the minimum wage.

So the seemingly ingenious Republican leadership, which dearly wants deep cuts in the estate tax, proposed offering nickels and dimes to the working class to secure billions for the rich. Fortunately, though not surprisingly, the bill failed.

The episode was significant because it meant Republicans were acknowledging that they would not hold congressional power without the help of moderates. That is because there is nothing close to a conservative majority in the United States.

Yet their way of admitting this was to put on display the central goal of the currently dominant forces of politics: to give away as much as possible to the truly wealthy. You wonder what those blue-collar conservatives once known as Reagan Democrats made of this spectacle.

Last night's shenanigans were merely a symptom. Consider other profound fissures within the right. There is an increasingly bitter debate over whether it made any sense to wage war in Iraq in the hopes of transforming that country into a democracy. Conservatives with excellent philosophical credentials, including my colleague George F. Will, and Bill Buckley himself, see the enterprise as profoundly unconservative.

On immigration, the big-business right and culturally optimistic conservatives square off against cultural pessimists and conservatives who see porous borders as a major security threat. On stem cell research, libertarians battle conservatives who have serious moral and religious doubts about the practice -- and even some staunch opponents of abortion break with the right-to-life movement on the issue.

On spending . . . well, on spending, incoherence and big deficits are the order of the day. Writing in National Review in May, conservatives Kate O'Beirne and Rich Lowry had one word to describe the Republican Congress's approach to the matter: "Incontinence."

In that important essay, O'Beirne and Lowry argued that the relevant question for conservatives may not be "Can this Congress be saved?" but "Is it worth saving?"

Political movements lose power when they lose their self-confidence and sense of mission. Liberalism went into a long decline after 1968 when liberals clawed at each other more than they battled conservatives -- and when they began to wonder whether their project was worth salvaging.

Between now and November, conservative leaders will dutifully try to rally the troops to stave off a Democratic victory. But their hearts won't be in the fight. The decline of conservatism leaves a vacuum in American politics. An unhappy electorate is waiting to see who will fill it.

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