

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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What Does It Mean to Be a Conservative in 2017?

Until quite recently, if someone mentioned “conservative” it was rather clear what that meant—generally a commitment to limited government, individual liberty, and free trade. In 2017 the meaning of “conservative” is no longer clear. Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas recently wrote: “Last year, for the first time in our nation’s history, the American people elected as president someone with no high government experience—not a senator, not a congressman, not a governor, not a cabinet secretary, not a general. They did this, I believe, because they’ve lost faith in both the competence and the intentions of our governing class—of both parties! Government now takes nearly half of every dollar we earn and bosses us around in every aspect of life, yet can’t deliver basic services well. Our working class—the ‘forgotten man,’ to use the phrase favored by Ronald Reagan and FDR—has seen its wages stagnate, while the four richest counties in America are inside the Washington Beltway. The kids of the working class are those who chiefly fight our seemingly endless wars and police our streets, only to come in for criticism too often from the very elite who sleep under the blanket of security they provide. Donald Trump understood these things, though I should add he didn’t cause them. His victory was more effect than cause of our present discontents. The multiplying failures and arrogance of our governing class are what created the conditions for his victory.” Although Trump understood the changing nature of the 21st world, is he a conservative? Evangelical Christians, 81% of whom voted for him in 2016, are apparently answering that question, “yes, he is.” It is time to evaluate the term “conservative” and how it applies to President Trump.

Christian conservative writer and author, Rod Dreher, comments “I’m a social and cultural conservative, and I think Trump is a disaster—because of his incompetence, his recklessness and his malice. Plus, he is destroying conservatism as a credible public philosophy. The conservative movement needed serious reform, but this is annihilation.” For Dreher, “. . . the conservative person is simply one who finds the permanent things more pleasing than Chaos and Old Night . . . A people’s historic continuity of experience, says the conservative, offers a guide to policy far better than the abstract designs of coffee-house philosophers.

- . . . The conservative believes that there exists an enduring moral order. That order is made for man, and man is made for it: human nature is a constant, and moral truths are permanent. This word *order* signifies harmony. There are two aspects or types of order: the inner order of the soul, and the outer order of the commonwealth. Twenty-five centuries ago, Plato taught this doctrine, but even the educated nowadays find it

difficult to understand. The problem of order has been a principal concern of conservatives ever since *conservative* became a term of politics.

- Our twentieth[-first]-century world has experienced the hideous consequences of the collapse of belief in a moral order. Like the atrocities and disasters of Greece in the fifth century before Christ, the ruin of great nations in our century shows us the pit into which fall societies that mistake clever self-interest, or ingenious social controls, for pleasing alternatives to an oldfangled moral order . . . A society in which men and women are governed by belief in an enduring moral order, by a strong sense of right and wrong, by personal convictions about justice and honor, will be a good society—whatever political machinery it may utilize; while a society in which men and women are morally adrift, ignorant of norms, and intent chiefly upon gratification of appetites, will be a bad society—no matter how many people vote and no matter how liberal its formal constitution may be.
- Anyway, as Kirk said, conservatism is an attitude toward the world, not a dogmatic religion. It irritates me to no end that the American conservative mind is so closed, even to thinkers and resources in its own tradition. As Kirk's tenth canon says, "The thinking conservative understands that permanence and change must be recognized and reconciled in a vigorous society." That means that we have to be willing and able to think creatively about conservative principles, and apply them to new facts and circumstances."

But today Republican voters and much of the Party have jettisoned traditional conservatism in favor of the Trump-Bannon brand of ethno-nationalism. As Peter Werner of the Ethics and Public Policy Center contends, "They have turned inward instead of outward, they have embraced white identity politics as a matter of course and they have developed a disdain for the intricate work of governing . . . There is a nihilistic strain coursing through the veins of a significant number of people on the American right. They delight in Mr. Trump's effort to annihilate truth and peddle conspiracy theories, and they draw energy and purpose from the unsettling effect he has on the nation as a whole. For them, Mr. Trump is a 'fighter,' and politics needs to be weaponized in order to be enjoyed. They see politics as World Wrestling Entertainment, and Mr. Trump as the best wrestler in the ring." To that end, Bannon has declared that "There is a time and season for everything. And right now, it's a season for war against the GOP establishment."

Into this foray in mid-October, stepped former President George W. Bush, who broke his nearly nine years of silence as a former president in an important address in New York. He declared that "We've seen our discourse degraded by casual cruelty. At times, it can seem like the forces pulling us apart are stronger than the forces binding us together. Argument turns easily into animosity. Disagreement escalates into dehumanization. Too often we judge other groups by the worst examples while judging ourselves by our best intentions, forgetting the image of God we should see in each other. We've seen nationalism distorted into nativism. Forgotten is the dynamism immigration has always brought to America. . . . Being an American involves the

embrace of high ideals and civic responsibility. . . This means that people of every race, religion and ethnicity can be fully and equally American. It means that bigotry or white supremacy in any form is blasphemy against the American creed.”

That former President Bush was thinking of President Trump is obvious. A rather common defense of Trump is the positive things he has accomplished (e.g., the appointment of Neil Gorsuch and other conservative judges, the war against ISIS and his deference to the evangelical right). But as conservative columnist Michael Gerson argues, what is not considered is “the cost on the other side of the scale. Chief among them is Trump’s assault on truth, which takes on a now-familiar form. First, assert and maintain a favorable lie. Second, attack and discredit sources of opposition. Third, declare victory based on power or applause.”

Nearly thirty years ago, University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom began his most influential book (*The Closing of the American Mind*) with this statement: “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.” Gerson writes that “Conservatives were supposed to be the protectors of objective truth from various forms of postmodernism. Now they generally defend our thoroughly post-truth president.” The consequence of President Trump’s (and Steve Bannon’s) “dark, divisive, dystopian version of reality” is a “pernicious form of tyranny: a tyranny over the mind.” But here is the cost: When there is no objective source of truth—no commonly agreed upon set of facts and rules of argument—political persuasion becomes impossible. There is no reasoned method to choose between one view and another. The only way to settle disputes is power—determined by screaming mobs or because ‘I’m president and you’re not.’ Politics become an endless battle of believers, conditioned to distort and dismiss every bit of evidence that does not confirm their preexisting views. The alternative to reasoned discourse is the will to power.” As columnist David Brooks so wisely observes, “The traits Trump embodies are narcissism, not humility; combativeness, not love; the sanctification of the rich and blindness toward the poor.”

In America, evangelical Christianity is becoming increasingly “Cultural Christianity,” which bears little resemblance to genuine, biblical Christianity. Cultural Christianity’s embrace of Donald Trump has astonished me. If a Democratic president lived a lifestyle like Trump, talked and lied as he does, and attacked and belittled as he does, they would be leading the effort to impeach him. But an end-justifies-the-means ethic drives them, apparently. “At least he is president and not Hillary” is what I constantly hear. But Trump is no longer running against Hillary, he is running the nation. It matters how he is governing. I just finished reading Ian Kershaw’s monumental two volume biography of Adolf Hitler. Although the historic circumstances are totally different, the character and temperament of Hitler perfectly parallel Trump. Hitler was an extreme narcissist and a perverse egomaniac, as is Trump. Germany followed Hitler because he promised to restore the greatness of Germany after the humiliation of Versailles—“make Germany great again” and “I am the only one who can do that.” Germany, including the German religious leaders, followed Hitler because “better Hitler than Stalin” was their mantra.

It is my conviction that America is a nation under judgment—and has been for some time. Trump is not our messianic savior but an instrument God is using to discipline this nation. Evangelical leaders see him as the savior of evangelical culture and they are as deceived as the church in the Germany of the 1930s was. May God have mercy on us.

See Tom Cotton in *Imprimis* (October 2017, 46:10); Rod Dreher, “What is a Conservative,” *The American Conservative* (22 September 2012); Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (16 and 23 October 2017); Peter Waldman in the *Washington Post* (19 October 2017); David Brooks in the *New York Times* (27 October 2017); and Peter Wehner in the *New York Times* (22 October 2017).