

Faith, Freedom, and Conservatism in Today's GOP

Many traditional supporters of Republicans, including many libertarians, have become quite critical of what they see as the party's betrayal of conservative ideals in practice. At an October 3 Book Forum, Andrew Sullivan, author of *The Conservative Soul: How We Lost It, How to Get It Back*, and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks debated the nature of this intellectual crisis.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: What are the fundamental questions that have made conservatism, in America at least, such a fundamentally divisive and internally quarrelsome movement?

Part of that is obviously a function of extraordinary success. Part of it is also a function of intellectual health: that there is still so much positive debate on the Right about what it means to be conservative and what conservatism might mean in the future. And part of it is just enormous dismay among many of us at the incoherence of the current administration and the Congress and the betrayal of fundamental conservative principles. Indeed, I would argue an actual attack on conservatism as a governing political philosophy.

I want to talk about the relationship between freedom and doubt. This may not seem to many people an immediately obvious connection. Most people understand freedom as the freedom to do things, to engage in the world, to make decisions.

Not everybody understands that freedom is rooted, and Western freedom is particularly rooted, in the very fundamental understanding of the fallibility of the human mind and, indeed, the moral fallibility of the human soul and the need to put fundamental and unalterable restraints on human beings, in order to avoid some of the great mistakes and some of the great tyrannies that certainty in human history has provided.

Sometimes when I talk to conservatives about this, I start with a simple point about conservatives' attachment to free markets. Why have conservatives been in favor of free markets historically? And I would posit the following:

The critical argument behind free markets is that markets devolve decisionmaking to the people closest to the activities involved, and those people have the most knowledge and understanding of what they are doing. The closer you are to what you are dealing with, the more likely you are to know what you are doing. And the further away you are from those particular interactions on the ground, the more likely you are to get it wrong.

And so conservatism in the 20th century had a very powerful critique, from Hayek to Oakeshott, of the insanity of governments and of central authorities dictating to large, complex, organic, dynamic groups of people what was the right way to order their economies or societies.

Why? Because one individual, one expert, is often wrong. Not only that; when people become certain that they are right, they can create great damage to the fabric of society. This was the essence of Burke's critique of the French Revolution: You are messing with things you do not understand. French society is too complex for one human mind, however brilliant, to master.

Michael Oakeshott had a great metaphor for this particular issue. He called

it governing by the book. When Oakeshott spoke of "the book," he was speaking primarily of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, of the great era of liberal triumphalism: We have figured it all out. We know how to make society wealthy. We will abolish poverty. We will be rid of war. We have figured it all out at Harvard, and we are just going to implement it all upon the world.

Oakeshott said no at a time when it was very unpopular and difficult to say no. But he said no for a very simple and powerful purpose. He said: If you are governing a society by a book, and you are actually having to govern as you are reading and understanding and writing that book, every now and again you are going to have to look up from the book just to make sure that people are behaving according to plan. And very soon after you have written that book and you have your idea of what the world should be like, you will look up and realize there are people misbehaving. They are not following the rules in the book. If you are going to govern them, you are going to have to keep looking up from the book just to keep them all in line. And eventually you are going to be looking up from the book so often that there will come a moment when you will have to close the book.

For the book, think of *The Communist Manifesto*. Think of *The Affluent Society*. Think of any treatise that declares it contains the truth about humankind and wishes to impose that truth. But now take it to a whole new level and think the Quran, the Bible, the Torah. Not just any old book, but "The Book," containing the truth with a capital T.

And conservatives, for reasons of political opportunism, found themselves closely and continuously and ever more tightly connected with people who believed the world should be governed from "The Book." And conservatives did not see that they were getting trapped in the same trap they were forced into in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s from the Left, except now it is coming from what we might call the Far Right.

The critical conservative insight for Oakeshott, for Burke, for Hayek, for the great titans of conservative thought, is that we must know what we do not know. That when we go from theory to practice, we engage practice with a humility and an empiricism, and a reality-based judgment that is always flexible, always intuitive, always looking for what is new, for how society is changing, for how human beings are actually organizing their own lives and forging their own destinies in ways that no central planner will ever understand.

And doubt, of course, is the key to this. A conservative stands in the way of the great theoretician and says: Are you sure? He stands in the way of the great ideologue and he says: Do you know this for certain? I like my way of life. I like my freedom. Why do you want to take it away from me?

The Constitution of the United States of America was absolutely clear, and staggering in its time, that there would be no church and no religion and no “Book,” to define the meaning of this new country. There would merely be a constitution. And the Constitution would be primarily directed toward stopping people doing things.

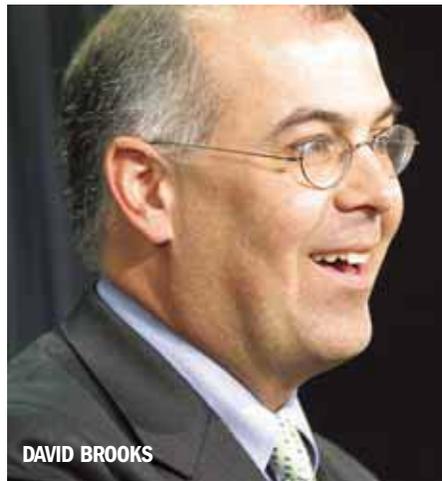
It set up a rule of law whereby people could not affect each other’s property. And because government is always a necessary evil, it set up a system of checks and balances, of separation of powers, to make sure that if anybody anywhere got the idea that he knew the truth and wanted to enforce it to remove people’s liberties, to make them behave according to plan, there would be plenty of opportunities to stop that person and his ideas in their tracks.

Many people regard this as a terribly inefficient way of doing things. In the early 20th century, lots of liberals were rather frustrated with this procedure. Our current president is terribly frustrated with the possibility that any other branch of government would interfere with his right to do whatever he wants.

But the point is precisely that the Founders knew and understood the dangers of the activist man, the energetic ruler. They also particularly understood the terrible dangers of the activist man who is infused with the zeal of religious truth and knows that it is his divine duty to impose it upon as many people as possible with as much power as possible.

And when the Founders set up executive and legislative and judicial branches to check each other, they devolved power to the states in a great federalist experiment to ensure that if there were new ideas or innovations, they would not be imposed by one person on the whole place at once. There would be places to experiment. There would be diversity so that errors could be corrected.

It is impossible, I realized, to write about politics today without writing about religion, because religion has become our politics. People are actually being elected on the grounds of their religious convictions. The mobilizing political base of one of the parties, which actually controls all three branches of government, by which I mean



the two houses and the presidency, and is fast gaining control of the judiciary, is fundamentally a religiously motivated group of people.

What I want to argue is that religion is not always like that. It is, in fact, the greatest lie of our time that the only genuine religious faith is fundamentalist.

Another kind of faith—that is not born again but begins and ends in ways that are hard to explain, that is a process and an experience that interacts with everyday life as well as with the divine, and that prays because it doubts—is another tradition. It was the great tradition of the mainline Protestant churches in this country for a very long time.

We see our religious development into an increasingly fundamentalist world most extremely and terrifyingly in what has happened in Islam, where the most fundamentalist forces within it have taken over and the

more moderate forces are in complete retreat. And you see it also in Christianity to a lesser extent, not in the kind of violence associated with Islamism, but certainly intellectually and doctrinally. Christianity, the attempt to turn Christianity into an absolute certain truth that must be imposed politically at all times, is the deepest danger to liberal democratic life.

DAVID BROOKS: I share a lot of Andrew’s essential diagnoses of where we are in this country. I share his sense that the key value that the conservatives have abandoned is the truth of epistemological modesty, the awareness of what we do not know.

Nonetheless, here is where the disagreements begin. The first is his diagnosis of the problem. As I look at evangelical Christians, the incredible diversity of 30 million or 40 million Americans, I do not see Christianity. I do not see a lack of doubt. I certainly do not meet anybody, or many people, who thinks that doubt equals sin.

I, for example, just saw the exhaustive research that Baylor University researchers did on the nature of evangelical Christians. They found that only 1 percent of them call themselves fundamentalists. Two percent call themselves evangelicals. And the best thing the Baylor researchers did was to describe how the evangelicals view God. They have incredibly diverse views of God. Those people are not detached from mainstream America; they are fully absorbed into mainstream America. The evangelical Christians are not out there in some parallel universe along with the Muslim fundamentalists.

If you want me to describe what has led to the present absence of doubt, the aggressive “I know best” mentality in this country, it has nothing to do with religion. It has to do with partisanship. It is tribalism, people who think their team is always right and the other team is always wrong. It is those people who lack doubt and those people who lead to these hyperaggressive errors. Some of those people are Christian activists in Washington, but some partisans are not Christian activists in Washington.

When I look around the world, to me, often it is the Christian politicians who are the most useful, because they understand something. They understand that human beings are not profit-maximizing creatures

who respond to incentives. They understand the dark aspects of human nature, because the concept of original sin is core to their being—another key conservative concept. So when they look at the Middle East, the idea that somebody would commit suicide to kill people is not a surprising thing, because the Bible has prepared them for depravity.

Turning to Andrew's second prognosis, his prescription, the conservatism of doubt. I am with Andrew in admiring Michael Oakeshott.

Yet, Michael Oakeshott, while he should always be the voice in the back of your head urging caution, should never be at the front of your mind, telling you where to go. That is because we live in a democracy, and to get elected in a democracy, you have to have certain plans and visions. And if you are practicing the politics of doubt, you are not going to get elected, and you are not going to be able to wield authority when you get elected, because doubt does not win elections and doubt does not mobilize legislatures. And so the reality is that we live in an imperfect world where we have to assert ourselves. We have to possess doubts, but we also have to project with a trumpet.

The second problem I have with Oakeshott is that there are some aspects of his thought that are aloof from America and American culture. The United States is a creedal country. We believe in a creed, which is expressed in our Declaration of Independence. It is an assertion of a universal truth. There is no doubt in that creed. Oakeshott would have been distrustful of that creed. He believed in a politics in which you sail along, you are buffeted by storms, and all you are trying to do is keep the ship of state balanced.

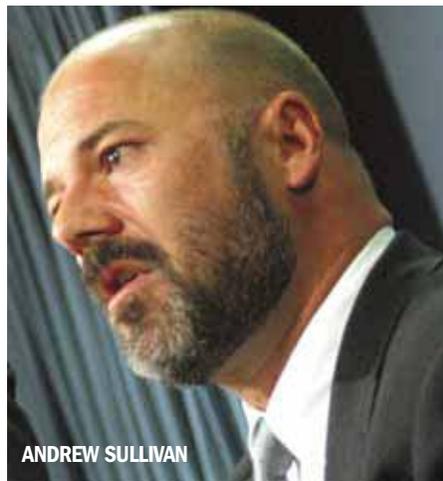
Well, America's purpose in the world is not just to keep stability balanced. America has a creed, a creed that states that people are endowed with inalienable rights. And if America abandoned that creed, it would no longer be the country we know.

SULLIVAN: Let me address two of the points that you make and say why I think I do not entirely agree with you.

The first is about the diversity of evangelicalism. I think you are absolutely right that actual believing evangelical Protestants are not in fact a monolithic bloc.

In their faith lives, there is an enormous span from what one might call extreme inerrantists to evangelicals who are even on the Left. But when evangelicalism and religion are deliberately marshaled by political parties and targeted as a means of political support, then inevitably the political use of evangelicalism will home in on its certainties and its inviolable truths.

Now, we have clear examples of that. We also see it in the belief that gay people are anathema and our relationships so bad that, not only must we ban our ability to marry each other, but we must actually amend the federal Constitution to make sure that no one ever, anywhere, in any state, can ever do that. That kind of certainty was the first position these people took on a very com-



plicated issue of social change.

Similarly, on issues like contraception or even on abortion, insisting on a federal constitutional amendment criminalizing all of it in all its forms, and insisting that a second-old zygote is as fully a human being as anybody in this room as a matter of truth, and having the president assert that as something nonnegotiable, is not pluralist, diverse, or tolerant. It is a political manifestation of evangelicalism and the cynicism with which it has been exploited.

Last, yes, America is a creedal nation. But the creed is that there is no single creed to govern all Americans. The creed is a minimalist creed of liberty and legal equality. It is a nonfoundationalist foundation. And I think the nonfoundationalist foundation in the Constitution was deliberate because the Founders had seen societies based on securer foundations, and they decided no, we will try something less.

BROOKS: The core problem with conservatism these days has nothing to do with religion or fundamentalism. It has to do with a complete absence of a governing philosophy. Conservatives had a governing philosophy in the 1980s, and it achieved many great things. It was replaced by a governing philosophy that really powered the Gingrich revolution, which was the idea that we should reduce the size of government by 25 percent. And that was the one idea, reducing the size of government, that united all types of conservatives.

That governing philosophy was tried out in the winter of 1995, with the government shutdown. And the problems with that governing philosophy are (a) it was unpopular and politically ruinous, and (b) it just did not fit the country, which wants government to solve its problems.

And so within three years of the collapse of the government shutdown, you had the Republican Party, pre-Bush, appropriating more money to the Department of Education than Bill Clinton even thought to ask for, because they had no governing philosophy.

Bush came in with an attempt at a renewed governing philosophy, after the collapse of the anti-government philosophy of the Gingrich years. That attempt at a philosophy had the name compassionate conservatism, and it was the idea of using government for limited but energetic means to help people who were poor, addicted to drugs, et cetera, et cetera, in terms of education.

The problem is that that governing philosophy was never fleshed out. What you had was spending without any sense of priorities, without any sense of philosophy. You just had a splurge. You had Tom DeLay, acting as party hacks always act, using money to buy votes. That was the betrayal. It was not that conservatives had a bad governing philosophy. They had no governing philosophy. So they became raw partisans.

SULLIVAN: I want to challenge directly that somehow Newt Gingrich's idiotic form of politics discredits the entire notion of limited government forever. It is an absolute nonsense argument. What Gingrich represented at that point was the inability to articulate the message. And you take from that that the entire philosophy is done for

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and we want big-government conservatism? No. You take from that that Gingrich was a terrible politician. But if you persuade, as Reagan and Thatcher did and true conservatives did, ordinary people about the restraints of government, you will win a majority.

It was a deliberate decision to change government philosophy to big-government conservatism based on evangelicalism. That gave conservatives the politics of meaning.

They filled it with religion deliberately, with premeditation, complete cynicism, and, in some parts, complete faith. And in

Bush they found the perfect example of someone who both represented that faith and had never had to balance a checkbook in his entire life and, to use Margaret Thatcher's definition of a socialist, whose only real skill was spending other people's money.

BROOKS: As you know better than I, there were 4,000 earmarks in the budget in 1994 when the Republicans took over. And what are there now, 27,000 earmarks? Was it faith that created those earmarks? It had nothing to do with faith.

SULLIVAN: It was faith that kept conservatives

in power, that allowed them to abuse it. Do you think Karl Rove, trying to win Ohio last time, was using government money? No, he was using gay baiting. He was using the Religious Right.

Previous conservatives talked about principles of limited government. And many evangelicals, historically, in this country agreed—they did not want government running their lives. They were suspicious of government power and its corruption, and they were part of that coalition. It was the leadership that betrayed it and turned that part of religion into a governing philosophy and into a rationale for their power. And then they abused it.