

## Contemporary Conservatism

Contemporary conservatives—including such prominent political leaders as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, such well-regarded academics as Thomas Sowell and Jeane Kirkpatrick, and such media pundits as Rush Limbaugh and Pat Buchanan—believe that communists, democratic socialists, and contemporary liberals create unrealistic expectations about what can be accomplished in political life. They assert that governments cannot solve a wide variety of human problems. While some governmental authority is needed to provide national security and social order, more expansive governmental power threatens individual liberty, the autonomy of civil society, and the economic prosperity provided by free markets. According to contemporary conservatives, most governmental programs intended to solve such problems must be regarded as failures, and they must be eliminated, reduced, and/or modified in ways that provide for greater individual incentives and choices. If there is to be progress, it will come about by the hard work of individuals who exhibit traditional virtues and who are motivated by the rewards available to them in the marketplace and from their involvements in voluntary associations.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary conservatism is thus a reaction against communism, democratic socialism, and contemporary liberalism.<sup>2</sup> To criticize the “threats” posed to freedom and capitalism by these ideologies, contemporary conservatives rely on many of the ideas of classical liberalism. To condemn the assaults on traditional political practices and social customs by these ideologies, contem-

<sup>1</sup>A much more extensive list of ideas held by contemporary conservatives is provided by Rush Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be* (New York: Pocket Star Books, 1992), pp. 2–3. This best-seller by the popular talk show host is just the latest of a series of conservative books that have captivated Americans. Perhaps the first and most revered book in this tradition is Barry Goldwater’s *The Conscience of a Conservative* (New York: Macfadden Books, 1960).

<sup>2</sup>Contemporary conservatives, such as England’s Winston Churchill, have also been strong opponents of the totalitarian ideologies of fascism and nazism. However, because contemporary conservatism has been most fully developed since the heyday of these ideologies, its principles have been largely defined in reaction to those held by its opponents on the political left.

porary conservatives also draw on some of the ideas developed by traditional conservatives. Contemporary conservatism is a mix, then, of portions of two ideologies that were historically and philosophically antagonistic. Contemporary conservatism is able to overcome some of the contradictions and tensions between traditional conservatism and classical liberalism by focusing very sharply on the problems generated by communism, democratic socialism, and contemporary liberalism.

The rise of contemporary conservatism as a coherent ideology, especially in the United States, can be attributed to the publication of the first issues of *National Review* in 1955. William F. Buckley, Jr., the first editor of *National Review*, provided a magazine where intellectuals distressed about the advances made by contemporary liberals, socialists, and communists after World War II could air their grievances. Many of these intellectuals were uncomfortable with what they perceived to be the blatant contemporary liberal (and even radical) bias in journalism, in the entertainment industry, in government bureaucracies, and in universities. Buckley's magazine provided a forum where contemporary conservatives could articulate a more consistent critique of current affairs among colleagues with similar concerns.

Throughout the 1950s, conservatives prided themselves on their position as an intellectual elite outside the mainstream of academic and political affairs.

#### Sidebar 10-1

### *Some Contemporary Conservatives and Their Main Writings*

William F. Buckley, Jr.* <i>McCarthy and His Enemies: The Record and Its Meaning</i> (1954) <i>Up From Liberalism</i> (1959) <i>Keeping the Tablets: Modern American Conservative Thought</i> , editor, with Charles R. Kesler (1988)	Jeane J. Kirkpatrick* "Dictatorships and Double Standards" (1980)
Milton Friedman* <i>Capitalism and Freedom</i> (1962) <i>Free to Choose: A Personal Statement</i> , with Rose Friedman (1980)	Irving Kristol* <i>Two Cheers for Capitalism</i> (1978)
George Gilder* <i>Wealth and Poverty</i> (1981)	Thomas Sowell* <i>Preferential Policies: An International Perspective</i> (1990) <i>Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, and the Dogma</i> (1993)
Friedrich von Hayek (1899–1992) <i>The Road to Serfdom</i> (1944) <i>The Constitution of Liberty</i> (1960)	George Will* <i>Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does</i> (1982) <i>The Pursuit of Virtue and Other Tory Notions</i> (1983)

\*Living author.

In the 1960s, conservatives began to deliver their criticisms to the public, and they launched political campaigns based on the conservative ideology that was developing. The conservatives associated with *National Review*—mostly intellectuals from the eastern United States—soon found allies among Republicans from the western states, who celebrated rugged individualism and the competition in free market economies. Many of these western conservatives were much more libertarian than were the eastern conservatives, but both were able to agree that communism abroad and big government at home were the most pressing problems facing American society after World War II.

During the 1960s, several developments in the United States gave momentum to the conservative movement. The growth of the welfare state, the free speech movement and antiwar demonstrations on college campuses, the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the riots in urban areas were just some of the developments prompting many citizens to rethink their allegiance to contemporary liberalism. In the early 1970s, many intellectuals who had originally been supportive of contemporary liberal programs, especially the programs of President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society initiative," joined the conservative movement because they considered these programs naive and dangerous failures. These intellectuals were dubbed the "neoconservatives," and they brought innovative ideas to conservatism by suggesting ways of using the market itself to achieve many of the goals that had previously been sought by governmental regulation of, and intervention in, the free market. The most important outlets for these ideas have been *The Public Interest* (first published in 1965) and the various publications of the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation, two leading conservative think tanks.

The decade of the 1980s was marked by numerous victories by conservatives at the polls. The elections of Ronald Reagan and George Bush in the United States, Brian Mulroney in Canada, Margaret Thatcher (and, subsequently, John Major) in Great Britain, and Helmut Kohl in Germany are the most visible examples of the popularity of conservatism in recent years. Such politicians succeeded, in large part, because of their incisive criticisms of the failures of contemporary liberalism, socialism, and communism to deliver the good life for citizens. In the 1990s, conservatives have not always enjoyed the electoral successes of the previous decade, but over the past forty years, they have shaped an ideology that has mass appeal and that offers a constant counterpoint to communist, democratic socialist, and contemporary liberal ideologies.

## THE POLITICAL BASES

### *Problems*

Conservatives have identified four general problems facing Western Europe and the United States in recent years: (1) the failure of western foreign policy to promote the interests of the "free world"; (2) the promotion of socialist

domestic policies by increasingly strong central governments; (3) the prominence and power of radical reformers, social engineers, and socialist utopians in educational institutions, especially at universities and colleges; and (4) a culture of permissiveness that combines a relativism of values with thoughtless uniformity of opinions and manners. Conservatives have not always agreed on solutions to these problems, but these areas of concern have served as rallying points for those holding a variety of perspectives within the conservative movement.

During the ten years following World War II, several international tragedies occurred, and conservatives attributed these tragedies to the growing **communist menace** and the failed foreign policies of Western democracies. The Soviet Union emerged as a world power, threatening western interests around the globe. Europe was divided by an "iron curtain" that separated a free west from Soviet-dominated totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe. In Asia, China was lost to the Communists, and, despite a costly conflict, Korea remained a divided state, comprising the (pro-Soviet) North and (prowestern) South.<sup>3</sup> These communist advances in the international arena were certainly disturbing. However, even more troublesome for conservatives, especially those in the United States, was a sense that western leaders and policy makers were unwilling to acknowledge the profound threat posed by communism. Furthermore, conservatives suspected that communist spies and sympathizers had penetrated western governments and military research projects. The Soviet Union's rapid development of an atomic bomb in the 1950s was viewed as evidence by conservatives that a communist conspiracy existed within the national security systems of the United States.

Even those foreign policy makers who were anticommunist were, according to conservatives, much too willing to rely on international cooperation and international institutions as means of neutralizing the threat posed by communist advances. Conservatives in the United States have always been highly critical of the United Nations, arguing that such institutions deprive nations of their rightful sovereignty and pave the way for a single "world government." Such a world government would be controlled by nations and bureaucrats whose worldviews would be hostile to the best interests of the United States and her western allies.

Conservative criticisms of western foreign policy can be summarized by the four "C's." The west had accepted *capitulation*, by failing to respond vigorously to Soviet claims over spheres of influence in Eastern Europe and to Mao's communist forces when they overran mainland China. The United States had employed a policy of *containment* in which Soviet aggression around the world was contained but not counterattacked. In the west, there was a lack of vigilance against the spies and the *conspiracies* deployed by international

<sup>3</sup>The Korean conflict was waged between 1950 and 1953, and United States casualties reached thirty-five thousand. The boundary between North and South Korea remained the same, despite the fighting.

communism. Finally, the west had naively accepted international *cooperation* and the efforts of the United Nations as vehicles for conflict resolution, despite the dangers such an approach posed to national sovereignty.

The west, according to conservatives, must meet the communist menace with more moral zeal and greater military force. They hoped that the successful Republican presidential candidate in 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower, would provide the requisite moral zeal and make use of greater military force. They were, however, disappointed when Eisenhower pursued a more moderate path of bipartisanship that accepted many of the policies criticized by conservatives. Indeed, not until Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 did contemporary conservatives finally witness the moral rhetoric (e.g., Reagan's claim that the Soviet Union was an "evil empire") and the massive military buildup that they had sought for so long.

Strong anticommunism has been the "glue" binding contemporary conservatives throughout the "Cold War." The recent dismantling of the Soviet Union and its loss of power over Eastern European countries might weaken the anticommunist bond among contemporary conservatives in the 1990s. However, communism remains a powerful force. Communist regimes exist in Asia, and Castro remains in power in Cuba. Strong advocates of communism can be found in Central and South America, and in Africa. Communism may reappear in some of the regions of Eastern Europe and of the former Soviet Union. It is still too early to determine whether conservatism has lost a defining problem in its ideology. Continuing criticisms of Nicaragua, Cuba, China, and Vietnam by conservatives suggest that the fervent anticommunism of contemporary conservatism may still provide some ties that bind.

Contemporary conservatives view the pursuit of socialist policies that empower centralized bureaucracies as the most serious domestic problem. In Europe, conservatives have deplored the nationalization of industries and the development of elaborate welfare schemes. In the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" was seen not as an attempt to save capitalism during the great depression of the 1930s, but as an assault on business interests and on individual choice. The Social Security system in the United States, established by FDR in 1937, has long been a favorite target of conservatives because it creates a huge bureaucracy, compels citizens to participate, and (mildly) redistributes income from the rich to the working poor. Social Security socializes risk while reducing the need for individuals to make thoughtful and independent decisions about their futures. Although Social Security is now seen by most conservatives as too politically sensitive to be assaulted directly, it remains an indirect target, and conservatives continue to call for the privatization of retirement plans.

For conservatives in the United States, domestic policies from World War II until the 1980s were too antibusiness and too pro-union to foster the best in a capitalist economy. Government regulations are seen as costly, intrusive, and excessive. Support of union rights by FDR and subsequent Democratic presidents is seen as driving up wages beyond the market price for labor, thus con-



tributing to inflation. Costly and unnecessary regulations on businesses, and high wages for workers, weaken U.S. businesses competing in the world economy. The antiregulatory views of conservatives have been received favorably by the owners of small and medium-sized businesses, and have helped broaden the appeal of contemporary conservative views beyond the eastern intellectuals mainly responsible for founding the conservative movement.

Especially after the government's turn in a socialist direction as a result of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program, conservatives have been very critical of numerous programs expanding the size of central governments. They argue that many social and economic problems cannot be solved by governmental interventions and that, in fact, government interventions often compound or complicate the original problems. In *Wealth and Poverty*, George Gilder, reviewing the social programs of the American federal government during the 1970s, claimed that many of these programs had unanticipated and perverse consequences that he called **moral hazards**. Gilder explained, "Moral hazard is the danger that a policy will encourage the behavior—or promote the disasters—that it insures against."<sup>4</sup> Gilder's views on the failure of liberal social programs, widely shared by other contemporary conservatives, emphasized the counterproductive results of the programs:

The moral hazards of current programs are clear. Unemployment compensation promotes unemployment. Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) makes more families dependent and fatherless. Disability insurance in all its multiple forms encourages the promotion of small ills into temporary disabilities and partial disabilities into total and permanent ones. Social security payments may discourage concern for the aged and dissolve the links between generations. Programs of insurance against low farm prices and high energy costs create a glut of agricultural commodities and a dearth of fuels. Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) subsidies for government make-work may enhance a feeling of dependence on the state without giving the sometimes bracing experience of genuine work. All means-tested programs (designed exclusively for the poor) promote the value of being "poor" (the credential of poverty), and thus perpetuate poverty. To the degree that the moral hazards exceed the welfare effects, all these programs should be modified, usually reducing the benefits.<sup>5</sup>

Gilder aimed his attacks at United States social policies, but his criticisms, and his views of the problems created by government subsidies, can also apply to the more vigorous welfare policies of many Western European countries.

Contemporary conservatives argue that liberal domestic policies are not only often counterproductive, they are often based on profoundly mistaken analyses of the roots of social problems. Conservatives claim that, too often, social problems are seen as the result of structural problems, rather than as the

<sup>4</sup>George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 132. The term "moral hazard" is taken from the language of the insurance business. For example, insurance companies must be careful not to overinsure for fire damages to property, because it may encourage policyholders to neglect safety procedures or, even worse, to resort to arson.

<sup>5</sup>Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*, pp. 135–136.

result of a failure of individual character.<sup>6</sup> For example, drug use is a social problem that conservatives blame on the lack of individual character and the inability to “just say no,” rather than on the poverty and powerlessness of the drug users. The willingness of liberal policy makers to place the blame for social problems on structural problems (like poverty) overextends government and ignores the crucial role that individual responsibility and virtue must play in a civil and well-ordered society.

According to contemporary conservatives, the increasing scope of government activity spawned by liberal policies creates both vast centralized bureaucracies and huge government expenditures. These massive expenditures have forced western governments to rely on high, and progressive, tax rates. High taxes stall general economic growth by diverting money from the private economy, and progressive rates discourage the wealthy from making more money and from investing in private ventures.

Conservatives hold some views on domestic politics, especially on government regulation and expenditures, that are very similar to the ideas held by Adam Smith and other classical liberals. Among these is the notion that government should keep its role in economic matters to a minimum and allow the economy to steer itself. The attempts by contemporary liberals to use Keynesian fiscal tools to steer the economy and avoid recessions have only created sluggish economies prone to inflation. Conservatives believe that, since the 1930s, liberal policy makers have had much too little faith in capitalist economies.

Conservatives point to the liberal and radical biases within higher education as one of the key sources for the lack of faith in capitalist economies. Western universities—at least since World War II—have been too sympathetic to liberal reforms and too critical of the workings of the private economy. Professors in the social sciences have encouraged the belief that social engineering is both necessary and easy, and have ignored the fact that vast structural reforms only enhance the power of national governments at the expense of local governments and private actors.

Contemporary conservatives are also critical of universities, because these institutions are seen as havens for socialist scholars and communist sympathizers who have little respect for western traditions and private economies. In the United States, conservative magazines, especially *National Review*, have complained that the universities have been, and are, hotbeds of subversive and radical thought. During the 1980s, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher accused English universities of harboring socialists and communists, and of promoting antiwestern values. Her primary targets were sociology departments in publicly funded universities, which her Conservative Party tried to weaken, or eliminate, by underfunding.

Conservatives in the United States were particularly critical of the universities and colleges during the 1960s. The “free speech movement” in the early

<sup>6</sup>James Q. Wilson, “The Rediscovery of Character: Private Virtue and Public Policy,” *The Public Interest* 81 (fall 1985), pp. 3–16.

1960s was seen as an assault on tradition and authority. Protests against the Vietnamese war often originated on college campuses during the late 1960s and were sometimes accompanied by verbal assaults on moderate and conservative professors.<sup>7</sup> Campuses also were the setting for "black pride" protests, "love-ins," ecology "teach-ins," women's rights demonstrations, and protests against traditional curricula. The universities were no longer institutions celebrating and transmitting the western tradition. Rather, universities had become a setting for unrelenting criticism of western beliefs and practices.

The universities and colleges were also blamed for creating a **culture of permissiveness** that permeated society during and after the 1970s. Too many professors, according to conservatives, were unwilling to defend (absolute) standards of conduct and a clear hierarchy of values. In the quest to develop independent critical thinkers sensitive to cultural differences, universities have produced, instead, spoiled children who consider all values to be relative.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, according to conservatives, liberal reforms in education have fostered permissiveness in all public education, and have contributed to a general lack of respect for authority throughout society. This culture of permissiveness feeds on the relativism of liberalism, which will not, or cannot, provide a definition of "the good." For conservatives, many of the problems facing western societies are the result of liberal neglect of the importance of virtue and personal character. Crime, social disorder, single parents, large welfare rolls, and excessive public spending are traceable to this culture of permissiveness. James Q. Wilson has summarized clearly this contemporary conservative perspective:

Conscience and character, naturally, are not enough. Rules and rewards must still be employed; indeed, given the irresistible appeal of certain courses of action—such as impoverishing future generations for the benefit of the present one—only some rather draconian rules may suffice. But for most social problems that deeply trouble us, the need is to explore, carefully and experimentally, ways of strengthening the formation of character among the very young. In the long run, the public interest depends on private virtue.<sup>9</sup>

Contemporary conservatives have identified a broad set of problems facing western societies. They have also articulated a variety of specific criticisms, many of which will be examined in the following sections.

<sup>7</sup>Not missing the irony, conservatives noted that former free speech protesters have recently become enforcers of "politically correct speech" in many of the elite universities in the United States. Conservatives coined the term "politically correct" to denigrate liberal approval of the agendas and language of militant minorities and feminists. To the extent that liberals have tried to curtail "insensitive" racial and sexist remarks, conservatives rightfully chide liberals for betraying their own free speech principles.

<sup>8</sup>See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). Bloom's reverence for the ancient Greeks may have made him uncomfortable with being labeled a contemporary conservative, but his views on higher education in the United States clearly extend criticisms that have been launched by contemporary conservatives.

<sup>9</sup>Wilson, "The Rediscovery of Character," p. 16. Former Secretary of Education William Bennett has recently edited *The Book of Virtues*, an anthology of great literature depicting the character of virtuous men and women.



## Goals

Like traditional conservatives, contemporary conservatives believe it is a mistake to articulate visionary and utopian goals. They believe that their ideological opponents have created unrealistic expectations by specifying such goals. For example, promising to create a more equal society only brings about demands for governmental programs that invariably fail to achieve equality and lead to frustration, distrust, and social instability. The goals of contemporary conservatives are more modest and, they believe, more realistic, involving the redirection of economic, moral, and social life. In this vein, three general goals seem to unite contemporary conservatives and, to some extent, set them apart from traditional conservatives. While traditional conservatives had some fears and reservations about capitalism, contemporary conservatives embrace the free market. Defending and extending free market capitalism has become the central goal of contemporary conservatives. While traditional conservatives emphasized a sacred morality that made reverence for God a core ethical value, contemporary conservatives emphasize a more secular morality that stresses a work ethic. Motivating people to forego immediate gratifications and instead become educated, skilled, and productive workers has become a central moral concern of contemporary conservatives. While traditional conservatives believed that many smaller voluntary associations must be sustained to have an organic society, contemporary conservatives have focused on the family as the most important social unit—one that gives people shelter in a society that is both increasingly individualistic and collectivist. Sustaining the family has become the central social goal of contemporary conservatives.

Contemporary conservatives agree with Adam Smith, the classical liberal economist, on two points—both regarding the desirability of capitalism.<sup>10</sup> First, minimal government intervention promotes dynamic domestic economies. When governments refrain from regulating economic activities, domestic economies are most efficient, they produce more economic growth, and national wealth is enhanced. Second, free markets among nations promote a harmonious international order. Free trade among nations produces maximum economic benefits (in the long run) for all parties to international trade and, thus, reduces tensions among nations.

After World War II, communism was viewed as the most fundamental threat to an international free market. Indeed, for most conservatives, the goal of an **international free market** was deemed so important that other political goals were clearly secondary. Conservatives defended many authoritarian and despotic third world governments, if they were also anticommunist and if they pursued favorable trade policies. Conservatives prefer that nations be run democratically, but they are much more critical of democratically elected gov-

<sup>10</sup>Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) is regarded by conservatives as the most important contemporary celebration of free market capitalism.

ernments that are communist (or socialist) than they are of undemocratic governments that are anticommunist and pro-free market.<sup>11</sup>

In defense of domestic free-market economies, contemporary conservatives champion **privatization**. In western Europe, conservatives have tried to reprivatize industries that have been nationalized. During the Thatcher years, for example, over half of the industrial assets that had been owned by the state were converted to private enterprises—including British Petroleum, Jaguar, Rolls Royce, and British Steel. According to conservatives, compared to nationalized industries, privatized industries are more competitive, more innovative, less bound by bureaucratic inertia, and less prone to labor disputes.

In the United States, where nationalization of industrial sectors is rare, conservatives have focused on the benefits of **deregulation**. Conservatives claim that governmental regulations reduce innovation, discourage investment, raise costs for consumers, and damage the international competitiveness of United States companies. Some regulations may be necessary, but most regulation is excessive, and all regulation creates frustrating and costly mounds of bureaucratic red tape. Domestic economies, then, are healthy when privately owned companies compete in markets in which they are unfettered by rigid regulations.

Conservatives believe an effective free market requires an educated, well-trained, and energetic workforce. Thus, they seek to reinvigorate the work ethic. According to conservatives, students in public schools are no longer challenged to develop academic and occupational skills that make them effective contributors to society. Conservatives fear that hard work has lost its luster in societies that are constantly increasing entitlements and welfare. Furthermore, taxes on the middle class, the working class, and small business owners dampen the work ethic and limit productivity. In particular, small business owners are “neglected heroes” to conservatives, because these entrepreneurs are willing to test their ideas, put their savings on the line, and work long hours in the face of excessive government taxes and bureaucratic red tape.

Conservatives want to strengthen the traditional family, which they regard as the most important mediating group in society.<sup>12</sup> According to one conservative group:

Marriage and the family—husband, wife, and children joined by public recognition and legal bond—are the most effective institution for the rearing of children, for the directing of sexual passion, and for human flourishing in community. . . . It is necessary to discriminate between relationships; gay and lesbian “domestic partners,” for example, should not be recognized as the moral equivalent of marriage. Marriage and family are institutions for our continual social well-being. In an individualistic society that tends to liberation

<sup>11</sup>Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” in *Keeping the Tablets: Modern American Conservative Thought*, edited by William F. Buckley, Jr., and Charles R. Kesler (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 392–414.

<sup>12</sup>The traditional (nuclear) family emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is thus a recent tradition.

from all constraints, they are fragile institutions in need of careful and continuing support.<sup>13</sup>

The traditional family, though, has been assaulted by government policy, schools, feminists, and children's rights advocates. Government welfare policy, which was designed to aid children without paternal support, has encouraged the emergence of female-headed single-parent households. Schools employ curricula and teach practices that undermine the role of the family in inculcating values in children. Liberal and radical feminists criticize the division of labor in the traditional family, and discourage women from playing their traditional domestic roles in the family. Children's rights advocates question (and limit) the authority traditionally exercised over children by their parents. Such assaults on the traditional family have led many conservative women—like Phyllis Schlafly and Bev LaHaye—to condemn contemporary liberals, and especially liberal feminists, as being "antifamily."<sup>14</sup>

Conservatives are far from unanimous in offering solutions to these threats facing the family. However, they believe public policy, culture, and institutions must all be reformed in ways that strengthen the family. The trend toward liberalized, "no-fault" divorce laws must be reversed. Children must be taught to respect the authority of their parents, and parents must recognize that their responsibilities include instilling proper moral values in their children. Schools must retreat from teaching liberal moral relativism to children and recognize that it is the parents' role to provide proper moral instruction.

Obviously, the goals of contemporary conservatives are close to the economic goals of classical liberals. Conservatives bring to these goals, though, concerns about family, tradition, and authority that echo some of the sentiments expressed by traditional conservatives.

## **SUBSTANTIVE POLITICAL PRINCIPLES**

### ***Authority***

Conservatives want governmental authority to be limited, but within its limits it should be powerful. Governmental authority should not be used to solve every social problem. Indeed, labeling problems like the spread of AIDS and drug abuse as social problems, rather than as personal problems, is regarded by conservatives as a typical liberal tactic to invite governmental solutions to these allegedly social problems. Governmental authority should not be used to help every group seeking to realize its particular objective. Western governments have spread themselves thin, weakening the authority needed to fulfill the properly defined role of government.

<sup>13</sup>The Ramsey Colloquium, "Morality and Homosexuality," *The Wall Street Journal* (Feb. 24, 1994), p. A20. The authors of this article, which first appeared in *First Things* (Mar. 1994), were sponsored by the Institute for Religion and Public Life.

<sup>14</sup>Phyllis Schlafly, *Power of the Positive Woman* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1977).

For contemporary conservatives, the most important tasks of government are to provide national security and domestic order. Governments must effectively pursue national interests in foreign policy and provide military forces strong enough to deter communist expansion, international terrorism, and nationalist aggression. Reducing military expenditures in order to finance the welfare state reflects a reversal of the proper governmental priorities. Governments must also focus on domestic disorder. Because of their great concern with the rights of criminals, liberals have shackled the police (and other law enforcement officers) and have been "soft" on crime. In contrast, conservatives want to expand police forces, reduce the "loopholes" in the law that allow the guilty to go free, make punishment more certain and severe, and reinstate the death penalty in cases of particularly heinous crimes.

Contemporary conservatives believe it important to use governmental authority to promote traditional cultural values and public virtue. Some conservatives, particularly those associated with the *new right*,<sup>15</sup> endorse governmental censorship of literature, movies, art, and music that they regard as offensive. Such conservatives also support laws prohibiting abortion, restricting the rights of homosexuals and lesbians, and curtailing other "objectionable" ideas and practices. More moderate conservatives, however, believe that government should simply not promote morally offensive ideas and practices. For example, they oppose governmental funding of "obscene" art shows and of abortions, and they oppose making homosexuals and lesbians a protected class in antidiscrimination legislation.

Contemporary conservatives also believe in some governmental intervention in the economy, though to a much lesser degree than do their ideological opponents on the left. They understand that a completely unregulated market may produce undesirable outcomes in some instances. Some governmental policies must be developed to deal with the problems of negative externalities, the provision of public goods, and poverty, but they must be much less heavy-handed and make better use of market incentives than do the policies of contemporary liberals and socialists.

Some governmental regulations of business practices may be necessary. For example, without governmental regulations concerning water pollution, it may well be in the best interest of a company to keep prices on products low by pouring the by-products (pollution) into a river. Pollution is a "negative externality" that imposes costs on third parties and that escapes the market mechanism. The polluter gains full advantage of disposing of the pollution, while it is the downstream residents who share the costs of foul water. For a company that is trying to maximize profit, there is thus little or no incentive to clean up the mess caused by its production processes.

Conservatives acknowledge the need for public action to correct market

<sup>15</sup>In American politics, "new right" is a term given to conservative populists who arose in the 1970s because of their disillusionment with the conservative establishment. Perhaps the best treatment of the "new right" remains Kevin Phillips, *Post-Conservative America* (New York: Random House, 1982).

deficiencies caused by externalities. They argue, though, that the approach to regulation taken by liberal policy makers is heavy-handed, excessively bureaucratic, and not attuned to the benefits of "marketlike" strategies for regulation. Following the arguments outlined in Charles L. Schultze's influential work, *The Public Use of Private Interest*, conservatives have argued against the almost exclusive reliance on "command and control" regulations by United States policy makers.<sup>16</sup> They contend, for example, that pollution regulations command industries to use the best available technology and to process their goods according to government controls and standards that must be written and enforced by large bureaucracies. These regulations do not encourage the development of innovative solutions by industries, and they provide no incentives for companies to reduce pollution to levels below the standards set by these bureaucracies.

Neoconservative economists have developed **marketlike incentives** to replace many command and control regulations. For example, pollution can also be reduced by creating situations in which polluters must pay for the pollution they produce. Government agencies would monitor pollution releases and set fees for units of pollution released. The costs of pollution would now be *internalized* by the polluting companies. Companies would be encouraged to reduce their pollution to keep the costs of their products low. Those companies with the most innovative pollution control techniques would be rewarded in the competitive market. Self-interest would be harnessed for a public good (e.g., clean waterways), and the size and scope of government bureaucracies could be reduced. Of course, some pollutants may be so toxic that no level of emissions is tolerable, and in these cases a command and control approach would still be necessary. Such cases should prove rare, though, and a "polluter pays" approach to the problem of negative externalities can take advantage of the market's ability to turn private interests into the public good.

Conservatives also seek to use market-like approaches to deliver public goods that are necessary and must be paid for by governmental expenditures. A public good has positive externalities that benefit others who do not consume or pay for them. Because inoculations help control the spread of diseases throughout society, governmental payment or subsidies for inoculations can serve the public interest. Because education helps create an informed and skilled citizenry and can disseminate important values, governmental expenditures for schools can serve the public good. But conservatives do not believe that public goods must necessarily be delivered by public bureaucracies that squelch innovation and raise the cost of goods. For example, instead of children receiving their education at designated public schools that are guaranteed students no matter how poorly (or well) the institutions perform, governments could provide parents with vouchers that they can use to send their

<sup>16</sup>Charles L. Schultze, *The Public Use of Private Interest* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1977); see also, Allen V. Kneese and Charles L. Schultze, *Pollution, Prices, and Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1975).



children to the public or private schools of their choice.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the **voucher system** uses governmental authority to pay for (most of) the costs of education, ensuring its availability to the poor—who might be unable to afford private education without tax-subsidized vouchers—but it relies on a market-like mechanism to give incentives for schools to be innovative and effective, to be the parents' school of choice for their children. Bad schools, including public schools, that are unable to attract students would close, because they could not compete in the market created by the voucher system. But good schools would flourish, bringing a better delivery and quality of school services than that provided by the existing public school "monopolies."

Conservatives also recognize that poverty is a problem requiring some governmental response, but they oppose the massive welfare states created by contemporary liberals and socialists. Conservatives differ on their approaches to poverty, but all hope to reduce governmental spending on welfare, curtail bureaucratization in the delivery of welfare services, and encourage welfare recipients to acquire the education and job skills that will limit or eliminate their dependency on welfare. One conservative approach has been the negative income tax, a system that reduces the need for a welfare bureaucracy by having the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) simply issue checks to those whose incomes fall below a minimal level. Another conservative approach is to give tax breaks to businesses that locate in "urban enterprise zones" and employ the poor living in these depressed areas. Still another conservative approach is both to tighten eligibility requirements for welfare and to limit the time that persons can receive welfare benefits, thus reducing the number of recipients and encouraging recipients to work themselves off the "public dole." In general, conservatives doubt that the unequal distribution of income in society is unfair, and they reject the idea that it is governments' proper role to redistribute income. Rather than using government authority to achieve more income equality, income distributions are better left to the "impenetrable" workings of the free market.<sup>18</sup>

Contemporary conservatives argue that governmental authority is eroded when liberal legislatures provide too many programs and entitlements to too many groups and when liberal courts provide too many rights. Legislatures have created entitlement programs for the unemployed, the poor, and the elderly, and all of these groups now consider these entitlements part of their just desserts. Courts have expanded rights to groups and individuals, and these rights often conflict with public authority. Not only have the courts recognized the rights of welfare recipients, they have also granted rights to crim-

<sup>17</sup>The most thoughtful approach so far is by John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990). For a useful critique of school vouchers, see Jeffrey Henig, *Rethinking School Choice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Among the problems that the voucher system does not solve is that of providing or assuring special education for students having various learning disabilities and handicaps.

<sup>18</sup>Schultze, *The Public Use of Private Interest*, pp. 76–83. Schultze argues here that the market is preferable, because it is less accountable than government and because it tends to disguise equity issues.

inal suspects, prison inmates, asylum patients, refugees, children, and gays and lesbians. As these groups and individuals (or their advocates) press their rights-claims, they diminish governmental authority and limit the choices of public officials. For example, judges who find that overcrowded prisons violate prisoner rights can force state governments to change their budgets and, thus, limit the choices of elected officials. At the institutional level, judges can also weaken the authority of those in charge. For example, judges have ruled that asylum patients have the right to refuse certain medical treatments. The extension of rights diminishes both governmental authority and the authority of institutional officials who act in the name of public authority.

Public authority has also been diminished by the emergence of "interest group liberalism." Conservatives argue that liberals cater to almost every

#### Sidebar 10-2

### *Conservative Statism*

Conservatives in the United States accept the need for (limited) governmental authority, but fear that excessive authority threatens individual liberties. Thus, while critical of liberal interpretations of the Bill of Rights that extend the freedom of speech to dancing, nudity, flag burning, and other forms of "nonpolitical" speech, conservatives generally value the protection against governmental power and majority tyranny that the Bill of Rights provides. Some conservatives, though, rely on the ideas of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) to defend the authority of the state against individual freedoms. Hobbes argued that individual rights must give way to the overpowering need to prevent anarchy and to enforce order. Only a powerful state free from constitutional restraints could prevent the natural chaos of human interaction. Hobbes rejected natural-rights claims and offered a defense of state power that can be interpreted to justify "might makes right" and "majority rule without restraints." The most vocal conservative supporter of Hobbes's statist position is William Rehnquist, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Rhenquist, in his decisions on the Supreme Court as a Justice (1971–1986) and then as Chief Justice (1986–), rarely sides with individuals or minority groups in cases where governments are involved. In speeches and writings, Rhenquist argues that the U.S. Constitution was not designed to protect individual rights, but to create direct governmental authority over individuals.\* The great danger facing modern society is not the tyranny of government, but the perils of anarchy. Rhenquist also is critical of the Bill of Rights for making no exceptions for curtailing political speech, and for protecting minorities against the "sovereign power" of the majority. Making claims very similar to those of Judge Robert Bork, Rhenquist argues that majority rule is too often hindered by the protections guaranteed by the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution.

\*Samuel Blumenthal, "How Rhenquist Came Down in *Hobbes v. Locke*," *The Washington Post Weekly Edition* (Oct. 6, 1986) pp. 23–24.

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group within society, resulting in the proliferation and empowerment of interest groups. Government has parceled out authority over public decisions to these groups, who look after their own interests rather than seeking the public good. Furthermore, these interest groups frustrate public authority by blocking policies which might erode benefits they have already achieved. Conservatives accuse the Democratic Party of being a party of interest group appeasement, rather than a party with firmly held principles. Democrats and liberals pander to interest groups for votes, without considering how this weakens the authority of government and limits the options available to government. This has been particularly evident in battles over the federal budget, where attempts to cut spending have been thwarted by interest groups seeking to preserve the economic benefits granted to them in previous years.

Governments have extended their reach throughout society since the 1940s, but they have lost authority as entitlements and rights have multiplied, and as interest groups have garnered power at the expense of the public good.

### *Justice*

Contemporary conservatives' views on justice are very similar to those held by classical liberals. Indeed, the entitlement theory of Robert Nozick, which we discussed in our treatment of classical liberalism, has been embraced by most contemporary conservatives. According to Nozick, people are entitled to all of those goods they can acquire by means of any process of acquisition and exchange that does not infringe on the rights of others. Justice requires that people have the freedom to acquire and exchange goods. Given this freedom, the distribution of goods will be unequal, but not thereby unjust. The income and wealth that each individual attains will partially reflect his or her efforts and contributions to the marketplace, but will also reflect the degree of luck he or she has had. The role that luck plays in the market economy means that economic distributions will be, for the most part, unpredictable and unpatterned. However, economic inequalities are not unjust if all citizens are provided with an equal opportunity to apply their talents and to cope with their good and bad fortunes. Rather than seeking to redistribute wealth to attain more equality, a just society should provide individuals with equal treatment before the law and with equality of opportunity in education and employment. Government should protect the private property individuals accumulate and should refrain from legislating preferential treatment for individuals or groups.

Contemporary conservatives, then, are critical of ideologies which judge fairness by the final outcomes individuals achieve.<sup>19</sup> They reject the egalitarian-

<sup>19</sup>According to Friedrich von Hayek, the market system is a spontaneous process where luck plays a significant role and whose results cannot be judged for their fairness. See Hayek's *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. II: *The Mirage of Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1982). Irving Kristol, the longtime editor of *The Public Interest*, has been perhaps the most prolific opponent of egalitarian conceptions of justice. For a statement of his views, see *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), esp. pp. 141-238.

ian notions of economic justice held by socialists, Marxists, and communists. They disapprove of the egalitarian tendencies in contemporary liberalism, and they are especially critical of contemporary liberals' attempts to "solve" inequalities by the use of affirmative action programs that specify demographic goals or quotas. If the market processes and opportunities are fair to all participants, economic inequalities are not unjust and, thus, do not require attention or social action.

This emphasis on the process, rather than the outcome, reveals an important difference between contemporary conservatism and traditional conservatism. Traditional conservatives defended hierarchies and inequalities as necessary components of complex organic societies. A just society produces a (fairly) predictable pattern of outcomes, and the good citizen accepts his allotted role within the (fairly) stable hierarchy created in each society. Different citizens will have different roles and responsibilities, and they will be treated differently according to their stations in society. Free market economies threaten the social stability by releasing citizens from traditional roles and by allowing competition among citizens that will lead to unpredictable economic outcomes. Traditional conservatives have always been wary of the consequences of a free market on a well-ordered, just, and stable society.

Contemporary conservatives also defend hierarchies and inequalities of outcome. However, positions within hierarchies and the distribution of wealth must be the unpredictable and dynamic results of competition among individuals who are treated equally before the law and given equal opportunity to pursue their educational and economic goals. Inequality will always exist, but each individual has an equal opportunity to compete for better positions and more income. The structures of hierarchies and the ranges of inequalities may be very stable in a society, but the individuals who occupy particular positions in those structures and ranges will be changing constantly. Government must avoid attempts to "correct" the outcome of this competition among individuals, and citizens must recognize that economic inequalities of outcome are not unjust if opportunities are equal. Government agencies or private organizations may aid those who compete unsuccessfully in the economic sphere, but such aid is an act of compassion, not a rendering of justice.

Contemporary conservatives have endorsed free markets and capitalism as mechanisms for distributing rewards and goods justly. The market produces and distributes goods efficiently, and free markets discourage discrimination on the basis of characteristics like race and gender because these traits are irrelevant to issues of economic productivity. Thus, markets encourage sellers and buyers to be "colorblind." Self-interested individuals will hire, promote, and deal with the most competent individuals—regardless of the race, ethnicity, religion, or gender of such individuals. According to these conservatives, discrimination against groups will ultimately hurt the discriminator by limiting his or her labor pool and his or her options to buy and sell.

While free markets should encourage colorblind behavior, contemporary conservatives believe that governments may have to enforce (what liberals call "formal") equal opportunity laws if discrimination persists. Governments



must prohibit discrimination in the distribution of educational and job opportunities, outlaw discriminatory selling practices such as allowing realtors to discourage blacks from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods, and rescind any preferential policies that exist. Although some conservatives in the United States initially opposed the antidiscrimination reforms of the 1960s, they now accept such reforms as a necessary means of providing equal opportunities for minorities, especially African-Americans, who suffered from previous policies preferential toward whites.

Contemporary conservatives believe, however, that injustice results from policies (such as affirmative action and the establishment of quotas) that provide **preferential treatment** as compensation to victims of past discrimination. Conservatives point to the injustice of "reverse discrimination" policies such as those setting quotas for preferred-group students at universities. The insistence that freshmen classes mirror the general population often denies admission to qualified students, giving their places to underqualified preferred-group students in order to meet goals or quotas. This is unfair to both sets of students. The qualified students are denied the fairness of colorblindness, and the underqualified students are placed in settings where many are doomed to fail. Top-echelon universities in the United States, for example, accept African-American students with much lower Student Aptitude Test (SAT) scores than other students so that minority student quotas can be met. This not only leads to the failure of many African-American students at prestigious universities, it creates a "ratcheting effect," whereby second- and third-tier universities find that the better minority students have been placed in the top schools, and the second- and third-tier schools must now lower their standards to meet their minority recruitment quotas. Less-qualified minority students admitted in order to meet quotas, who might have done well at a second-tier school, face difficulties at the top schools, and minority students who might have been successful at third-tier schools suffer difficulties competing with students at the second-tier institutions. Quotas can result in the mismatching of students and institutions throughout all levels of the United States university system.

Economic and educational quotas may hurt non-preferred-group members more than they ever help preferred-group members, and thus create economic and educational losses for the entire system. The final economic and educational outcomes do not produce the justice or equality that liberal reformers promised, and the process of quota systems violates the conservative norm of market-produced colorblindness.

The conservative author writing most prolifically and thoughtfully about the dangers of preferential policies is Thomas Sowell. His criticisms of preferential treatment are provocative, because he marshals empirical evidence that challenges the basis for affirmative action policies and quotas. Most important in this regard is his argument that racism—while still an unfortunate aspect of American society—is not a significant cause of unfair economic outcomes. Sowell points out that not all minority groups which have encountered racism in the United States live under poor economic conditions. For example, Jews



and Asians in the United States have average family incomes higher than the national average and higher than the Anglo-Saxon average.<sup>20</sup> Minority groups that do have average family incomes below the national average may have lower incomes as the result of factors other than racism. Advocates of preferential policies assume that racism is the most significant cause of different income levels between minorities and whites, but Sowell shows that the causal relations are more complex. While incomes are highest in the north and in urban areas, minorities are relatively concentrated in the south or in rural areas. While income levels rise with age, the median age for minorities tends to be younger and minority families tend to have more children. While income levels tend to rise with educational attainment, minorities tend not to place as high a cultural value on education as whites do. When such factors are incorporated into analyses of income differentials between minorities and whites, the impact of race per se—or racism—is rather small.

Sowell also argues that discrimination has historically been a transitory phenomenon, disappearing naturally over time—without the need for preferential governmental policies. In the American experience, immigrants such as the Irish, the Jews, Asians, and the Polish suffered deprivations upon arrival and only later caught up with (and often surpassed) the national family income average. Currently deprived groups—African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, as well as recent immigrants from such places as the West Indies—were making typical progress toward the national average before the development of preferential policies.<sup>21</sup>

Sowell also marshals empirical evidence describing and explaining the failures of moving from policies of colorblindness to “color awareness.” When people are rewarded with positions and opportunities on the basis of their status as minorities (or women or other “victimized” demographic groupings) rather than on the basis of being the most qualified, several negative consequences are said to occur.

First, preferential policies demean the achievements of individuals in preferred groups and prompt the animosity of non-preferred-group members, who are resentful that they must pay for the errors of previous generations. Minority individuals who are successful must reap their rewards under the suspicion that they were granted privileges and opportunities unavailable to others. They and other minority members must also face the animosity and “new racism” which is directed against them by individuals who feel that they themselves have become members of an underprivileged group.<sup>22</sup> Preferential policies have spawned mass violence against preferred-group members in

<sup>20</sup>Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 5–7.

<sup>21</sup>Sowell, *Ethnic America*, pp. 273–296.

<sup>22</sup>Sowell’s discussion of “new racism” at U.S. universities is outlined in his *Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, and the Dogma* (New York: Free Press, 1993), pp. 132–173. Sowell neglects to mention that this “new racism” has also been aimed at Jews, Arabs, and Asians (and United States citizens with those religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds), despite the lack of preferential treatment for members of these groups.

some countries and, in the United States, a rise in racism against African-Americans and Hispanics has been linked to affirmative action policies.<sup>23</sup>

Second, preferential policies have often harmed, rather than helped, members of the preferred group.<sup>24</sup> One of the reasons that affirmative action quotas have harmed members of the preferred groups is that hiring quotas create incentives for employers to practice "credentialism." Sowell argues that, in the United States, credentialism is the logical response by employers to quotas in the workplace.

An employer who was once free to choose among job applicants on the basis of his own assessments of their ability to do the job must, because of preferential policies, consider how readily his decision can be justified to third parties (in terms that will be understood and accepted by those who are less knowledgeable about his business) who not only were not present at the interview but also would lack the pertinent experience on which such an assessment must be based. "Objective" criteria, in general—and educational credentials, in particular—are likely to gain more weight under these circumstances, because third parties can understand the use of such criteria, even if other qualities are in fact more important on the job.<sup>25</sup>

The employer is encouraged to hire members of preferred groups who are already experienced and who have had success in the workplace, and is discouraged from hiring those members who have not obtained adequate credentials or who have had no success in acquiring experience. Employers will be reluctant to hire members of preferred groups with limited credentials, because affirmative action procedural requirements can make firing such employees costly and time-consuming. Thus, quotas aid only the already successful members of the preferred groups, but hurt the opportunities of those members who are disadvantaged and who were supposed to be the beneficiaries of the quotas.

Third, because preferential policies are easily abused by democratic politics, these policies have often harmed the most deprived groups. Preferential policies are usually targeted initially for only a few groups, but more and more groups are included as protected groups when politicians respond to interest group demands. For example, affirmative action policies intended originally to benefit African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans have often been modified to extend preferential treatment to women, then to veterans, then to the elderly, then to gays and lesbians, and so forth. According to Sowell, the extension of protected groups—combined with the growth of credentialism—results in "fewer job opportunities for less-educated black males" than would exist without affirmative action programs.<sup>26</sup> Further, because middle-class white women typically have more credentials in America than

<sup>23</sup>For an examination of the violent reactions against preferential policies, see Sowell's *Preferential Policies: An International Perspective* (New York: Quell, 1990), pp. 20–35.

<sup>24</sup>Sowell, *Preferential Policies*, p. 171.

<sup>25</sup>Sowell, *Preferential Policies*, p. 171.

<sup>26</sup>Sowell, *Preferential Policies*, p. 171.

black males, employers often fill their affirmative action quotas with women who possess the requisite credentials, and otherwise qualified black males remain unemployed. While colorblind equal opportunity policies allow deprived groups to progress over time, "coloraware" affirmative action policies become permanent features of the political economy that curtail the advancement of the most deprived groups. As preferential treatment is expanded to more groups, the leaders of these groups seek to ensure that their members continue to receive protected status under affirmative action laws. Preferential policies, which were announced as "temporary" remedies to address past injustices, have become permanent features of liberal government, and its replacement with a policy of colorblindness has been pushed off to some future date that is never specified. Unequal treatment based on "color awareness" becomes a permanent injustice of liberal regimes.

### *Structure*

Contemporary conservatives accept the institutions of representative democracy as legitimate. In Western Europe, conservatives have worked within parliamentary systems and, in the United States, conservatives have supported our presidential system, including the separation of powers and federalism.

Rather than embracing universal structural principles, contemporary conservatives have sought to retain, and sometimes return to, the institutions that define the particular historical identities of their nations. Canadian politics during the past twenty-five years has been preoccupied with the efforts of Pierre Trudeau, the former Liberal Prime Minister, to build a stronger national Canadian government and of the Parti Quebecois and the recently formed Bloc Quebecois to create a sovereign Quebec. Canadian conservatives have sought to position themselves between these forces by developing and endorsing various accords (e.g., Meech Lake and Charlottetown) that provide greater power and autonomy to the provinces and territories while retaining a unified, multiethnic state of Canada. British politics has addressed the issue of integrating England into the European Community, a proposal that has been strongly opposed by Margaret Thatcher, the former Conservative Prime Minister, on the grounds that England's sovereignty and cultural identity may be endangered by joining the Common Market. Germany has, of course, had to deal with issues regarding the reunification of West and East Germany. In this instance, conservative Chancellor Kohl has been a strong supporter of unification, as he attempts to reclaim a German community under a constitution that retains the principles of representative democracy.

In the United States, the structural issue of greatest concern to conservatives deals with the character of American federalism. Conservatives generally support states' rights and local governmental power, and accuse liberals of expanding excessively the size, range, and power of the federal government. Conservatives support the decentralization of political power because state and local governments provide a defense against a powerful national government and promote regional and local values and responsibilities. Local gov-

ernments have local knowledge and, thus, can best determine the proper cultural values to be reflected in law and policies. Libertarian conservatives—that is, those conservatives most committed to extensive economic and social liberties and to minimal government—are not always comfortable with this idea of enforcing community standards, because it violates their commitment to personal freedom. However, they do agree with other conservatives that local control over many policies forces citizens to recognize that public programs are expensive. President Reagan's purpose in decentralizing some federal programs in the 1980s was to awaken citizens to the costs of the many responsibilities governments had assumed. Awakened citizens, Reagan hoped, would be willing to prune these programs.

Indeed, Republican presidents since 1968 have regularly promised a new division of responsibilities among the three levels of the federal system. Both Nixon and Reagan announced "New Federalism" approaches that would reduce the size of the federal government and provide local governments with increased discretion for spending in some policy areas. Nixon's plans were more specific about the distribution of responsibilities than were Reagan's, but his plans were not implemented. Reagan's approach was guided less by concerns about proper spheres of responsibility than by the desire to transfer spending from the national to the local level.<sup>27</sup>

### *Rulers*

Conservatives embrace popular sovereignty and representative institutions. \* Rulers should be selected by citizens, although mechanisms (e.g., the electoral college) that distance the rulers from popular passions are reasonable. While critical of "professional politicians," conservatives expect those who hold positions of power in legislatures and executive offices to be talented individuals. Good rulers should be able to listen to the people, and yet still provide guidance and direction for the country. In particular, good leaders should be able to avoid being captured by interest groups which seek their own good, rather than the public good.

Conservatives believe that there have been several threats to the proper functioning of representative democracy, particularly in the United States. One threat is that provided by the "new class"—an elite of liberal professionals, intellectuals, journalists, public bureaucrats, and cultural megastars who are committed to various abstract liberal values like egalitarianism and absolute human rights. While committed to abstract economic equality, the "new class" betrays a political elitism. According to Jeane Kirkpatrick, the "new class" believes in utopian possibilities, ideas arrived at by intellectual speculation and artistic imagination, and it forgets the real limits of human nature and economic scarcity.<sup>28</sup> Although the "new class" advocates values and ideas that are often at odds with popular beliefs, it nevertheless is portrayed in the media as

<sup>27</sup>For a discussion of the idea that guided Nixon's "New Federalism," see Robert P. Nathan, *The Plot That Failed: Nixon and the Administrative Presidency* (New York: John Wiley, 1975), esp. pp. 13–34.

<sup>28</sup>Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Politics and the 'New Class,'" *Society* 16 (Jan./Feb. 1979), pp. 42–48.

speaking for American ideals, and it eventually influences popular thinking on many concrete issues. Because the realities of political life cannot live up to "new class" ideals, it breeds cynicism and despair about political life. In short, the "new class" has power over the public and in representative institutions that is unwarranted and undemocratic. Members of the "new class" have great influence in education, in the media, in culture, and in government—influence that is not subject to democratic control and that is unrepresentative of the views of the "silent majority" of conservative Americans.

Another danger to representative democracy is posed by what James Payne calls **autonarchy**. While "democracy" refers to a system where government is controlled by the people (and "oligarchy" refers to a system where government is controlled by the rich), "autonarchy" refers to a system "of circular government-by-itself [where] those working for and paid by government dominate the decision-making process themselves."<sup>29</sup> According to Payne, almost all those who testify at congressional hearings support new governmental initiatives and spending. Most of these people are federal bureaucrats who administer programs in the area of interest, state and local officials who seek funding for their initiatives, other congressmen with interests in the program, and lobbyists for groups benefited by the programs. In short, government is dominated by those who are part of the political system and understand that the political system can be used to target benefits for specific groups; taxpayers who must pay for these programs or future generations that must deal with the resulting national debt are in no position to control "government by itself."<sup>30</sup>

While the concepts of the "new class" and autonarchy address conservative concerns about democratically elected leaders being "outgunned" by idealistic elites and self-interested insiders, some conservatives also fear that representatives can be overwhelmed by populist forces. In fact, U.S. conservatives have battled among themselves over how much democratization is healthy in representative government. The libertarian conservatives of the western United States have populist tendencies that eastern conservatives find, at the least, unnerving. Eastern conservatives endorse republican structures and processes that distance the rulers from the ruled. They believe that Congress should be above the fray of passionate democracy. Eastern conservatives have always displayed an almost traditional conservative reverence for the Senate and its elitist moment in representative politics. George Will has even argued the C-SPAN 2 coverage of the Senate deprives the institution of the requisite distance and isolation from the public.<sup>31</sup> Western conservatives, on the other

<sup>29</sup>James Payne, "The Congressional Brainwashing of Congress," *The Public Interest* (summer 1990), p. 12.

<sup>30</sup>A more theoretical discussion of this problem is provided by William Mitchell, "Efficiency, Responsibility, and Democratic Politics," in *Liberal Democracy: Nomos XXV*, edited by Roland Pennock and John Chapman (New York: New York University Press, 1983), pp. 343–373.

<sup>31</sup>Will's views on U.S. history and political institutions are presented clearly in J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *Watch on the Right: Conservative Intellectuals in the Reagan Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 53–80. Hoeveler presents the views of many leading conservatives in the United States in this thoughtful and well-researched work.



hand, have endorsed and used the populist mechanisms of recall, referendum, and initiative. Eastern conservatives view such democratic devices as unnecessary contrivances that reduce the distance between thoughtful representation and the passions of constituencies. Neoconservatives are critical of western populism and have sided with eastern conservatives in this debate.

Libertarian conservatives have favored term limit legislation, arguing that term limits will make elected representatives more attentive to their constituents and less likely to be influenced by national interest groups. Eastern conservatives have been reluctant to endorse term limits because such restrictions would limit the opportunities for talented and prudent politicians to participate in legislative politics. George Will, though normally associated with eastern conservatives, now supports term limits, arguing that they would free politicians from reelection concerns and provide them with the distance from the electorate needed to make wise national decisions.<sup>32</sup> Thus, most conservatives now find themselves in agreement over the desirability of term limits, although they still differ over the nature of the consequences that term limits will have on the connection between elected officials and their constituents.

Finally, conservatives have had to address themselves to the issue of the executive power in modern democracies. In the United States, conservatives were critical of the growth in presidential power achieved during Franklin Roosevelt's four terms as president and of his use of direct appeals to the populace as a means of gaining popular support in his battles with Congress. FDR created what has been termed the **imperial-plebiscitarian presidency**.<sup>33</sup> Wary of concentrated power and of power too closely linked to a passionate public, conservatives have defended congressional power and warned against the dangers of populist impulses. Despite these concerns, conservatives in the 1980s could safely endorse the strong and plebiscitarian presidency of Ronald Reagan. Only a strong and popular president seemed capable of slowing the growth of federal government and of shaking up politics in the insulated and liberal world of Washington, D.C. Reagan, who developed into a conservative in the more populist environs of the western United States, was adept at deploying popular support in his legislative battles with Congress and was an open admirer of FDR's presidential style.

There remains a tension, then, in contemporary conservative thought. On the one hand, there is the fear of strong executive leadership and of a populist politics that promotes passion and reduces the requisite distance leaders must have to rule thoughtfully. On the other hand, at times conservative goals may only be achievable when there is a strong populist president who can be an effective counterforce against the "new class" and who can rally the public against an autonarchic government. Republican principles about rulers clash with prag-

<sup>32</sup>George F. Will, *Restoration: Congress, Term Limits, and the Recovery of Deliberative Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>33</sup>For the best discussion of the plebiscitarian element, in the context of United States presidential history, see James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

matic concerns about goals for United States conservatives, making conservatives inconsistent in their commentary on leadership in the United States.

### *Citizenship*

The issue of citizen participation has divided contemporary conservatives. The populists in the "new right" have called for the empowerment of "average Americans." They have developed sophisticated techniques for identifying and mobilizing conservative voters. They have called on their troops to become active in local politics, especially in demanding that prayer be allowed in the schools, in forcing removal of "scandalous" books from the libraries, and in blocking access to abortion clinics. They have developed a broad network of national lobbies to further conservative causes on Capitol Hill. Jack Kemp, Barry Goldwater, Phil Gramm, Howard Jarvis, and Pat Buchanan are just some of the most prominent conservatives who support *Initiative America*, a proposal to allow national initiatives, thus giving citizens an opportunity to participate

#### *Sidebar 10-3*

### *Contemporary Conservatives and the Working Class*

By the 1980s, conservatives in the United States and Britain had gained a new ally, the working class. Many working-class voters who had long been supporters of socialist and liberal parties shifted their allegiance to conservative parties. Partly because of this new climate, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were successful in cultivating working-class voters. Reagan, in particular, was successful in making conservatism folksy and populist.

In the 1980 election, Reagan won 44 percent of the union household vote. In 1984, Reagan captured 48 percent of these voters. Reagan succeeded in breaking a weakening bond that had existed between the working class and the Democratic Party since Franklin D. Roosevelt's election to the presidency in 1932. Reagan's personal qualities helped deliver working-class votes to the Republican Party, but many working-class voters appear to have left the Democratic Party permanently. Recent Democratic nominees for the presi-

dency have not fared very well with working-class voters. In 1988, Michael Dukakis received only 57 percent of the union household vote and, in 1992, Bill Clinton only managed to secure 55 percent of this vote. The Democratic Party can no longer count on receiving overwhelming support from union households.

Thatcher was able to attract working-class support through appeals to nationalism. She was also able to recruit future Conservative Party leaders from the working class. When John Major became the prime minister in 1990, he became the first Conservative Prime Minister with a working-class background.

Contemporary conservatism has cut across class lines in its appeal to voters in western countries. This marks a major shift in the national politics of these countries. A historic dividing line in electoral politics has been erased, and socialist and liberal parties have lost their old base of support.

directly in policy making. According to Kemp, a constitutional amendment to enable national initiatives would "allow you to vote yes or no on such issues as a balanced budget, reducing your income taxes, tax limitations, and much more."<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, most conservatives in the eastern United States have rejected calls for greater citizen involvement, questioning whether the citizens have the wisdom, technical knowledge, and virtue to support appropriate policy choices. In his classic work, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter developed a "realistic" theory of democracy that claimed that the proper role of citizens is limited to choosing a government among competing parties.<sup>35</sup> According to Schumpeter, greater citizen involvement in politics should be discouraged because citizens tend to be motivated by irrational mob impulses and because their preferences (or "will") can be manufactured and manipulated by demagogues. More recently, neoconservatives have also warned against a **democratic distemper**, in which too much citizen participation is a disruptive force in politics.<sup>36</sup> According to Samuel Huntington, a professor of government at Harvard, citizen participation is, for the most part, citizen demand-making. The needs and wishes of various groups of citizens—minorities, women, the poor, children, students, the elderly, and so forth—become demands for "rights" and lead to claims on the public purse that involve an expansion of governmental activity. But government cannot and should not satisfy all of the competing demands made on it. When citizen participants fail to have their demands for rights satisfied, they become cynical and disrespectful of government, leading to a crisis of governmental authority. Thus, except for voting, citizen participation in governance should be discouraged.

While conservatives disagree about citizen participation in policy making, they agree that citizens ought to become more involved in community life, especially through involvement in voluntary associations. Rather than demanding that government be expanded to provide assistance to various needy populations, citizens ought to form various local charitable and service organizations that provide help to the disadvantaged and that build character and a sense of community in those who volunteer. George Bush described such voluntary groups as a "thousand points of light," and he believed that citizen involvement in such groups evoked the true spirit of American citizenship described by Tocqueville in his classic work, *Democracy in America*, written in the 1830s.

Conservatives also agree that liberal societies have done far too little to

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Thomas Cronin, *Direct Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 173. Allowing national initiatives and referenda would require a constitutional amendment because Article 1, Section 1 of the United States Constitution vests all legislative power of the United States in the Congress.

<sup>35</sup>Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1942). Schumpeter had been the Conservative minister of finance in the Austrian government and a professor at the University of Berlin before Hitler rose to power, prompting him to move to the United States.

<sup>36</sup>Samuel P. Huntington, "The Democratic Distemper," *The Public Interest* 41 (fall 1975), pp. 9–38.

cultivate the virtue of citizens. Governments have provided too few incentives to keep intact the nuclear family, and public schools have not provided students the guidance they need if they are to become virtuous citizens. Liberals (and their institutions) have preached an ethic of self-expression, when what is needed is an ethic of self-control. The good citizen should have self-discipline and a good character. James Q. Wilson has described the conservative view of the good citizen as follows:

By virtue, I mean the habits of moderate action; more specifically, acting with due restraint on one's impulses, due regard for the rights of others, and reasonable concern for distant consequences.<sup>37</sup>

Conservatives believe that governments have only a limited role to play in developing the virtue and character of citizens. Legislatures can pass laws regulating the most obvious vices—prostitution, drug abuse, pornography, and so forth. Legislatures can reform or eliminate those public policies and programs, such as Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC), that provide incentives for persons to abandon responsible behavior. Schools can promote good character in children by emphasizing academic achievement, by instilling discipline through homework, and by praising conduct that conforms to agreed-upon standards of human virtue.<sup>38</sup> The police can apprehend and the courts can punish those who violate the rights of others and who undermine social order. Conservatives believe that liberals have only exacerbated the decline of citizen virtue by giving undue attention to the “root causes of crime.”<sup>39</sup> Even if some criminal acts are the results of poverty, broken homes, abuse, and substance dependency, it still may well be in the best interest of society to act “as if crime is the result of individuals freely choosing among competing alternatives . . .”<sup>40</sup> Stiffer sentences for crimes, fewer opportunities for parole, and larger police forces may be the best ways to deter criminal activity, and should produce results that are much more cost-effective than the current attempts to solve root problems.

Nevertheless, conservatives are wary of “moral imperialism” by the state, as they believe that individual liberty and social order can be threatened when state power is used for moral crusades.<sup>41</sup> According to William F. Buckley, Jr., for example, government ought not legislate against smoking; however, it may legitimately try to alert the public to dangers of the habit. Ultimately, the individual must choose.<sup>42</sup> James Q. Wilson argues that citizens do not require government to instruct them on the moral virtues, as most people have deep intuitions about the requirements of sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty. What is required is that citizens confidently acknowledge their “moral sense,” repudiate the unwarranted skepticism and exaggerated tolerance that have

<sup>37</sup>Wilson, “The Rediscovery of Character,” p. 15.

<sup>38</sup>Wilson, “The Rediscovery of Character,” pp. 5–9.

<sup>39</sup>Wilson, “The Rediscovery of Character,” p. 13.

<sup>40</sup>Wilson, “The Rediscovery of Character,” p. 14.

<sup>41</sup>Hoeveler, *Watch on the Right*, p. 37.

<sup>42</sup>William F. Buckley, Jr., *The Jeweler's Eye: A Book of Irresistible Political Reflection* (New York: Putnam, 1968), pp. 257–259.

been promoted by liberals, speak out against immoral behavior, and reinforce virtue through robust civil institutions encompassing family life, churches, schools, and other voluntary institutions committed to instilling character in the citizenry.<sup>43</sup>

### *Change*

Conservatives are suspicious of changes in the practices of society. They draw on traditional conservative ideas about the dangers and unanticipated consequences of social engineering in complex societies. However, contemporary conservatives' view of change differs from that held by traditional conservatives in three important ways. First, contemporary conservatives are much more tolerant of the changes that free-market economies create. Traditional conservatives were critical of the new technologies, changing social relations, and unexpected developments that markets produce. In contrast, contemporary conservatives, especially libertarians and neoconservatives, are even willing to celebrate the dynamic and creative features of capitalism. According to Michael Novak, the free market encourages beneficial social and economic change by reinforcing self-discipline and creativity.<sup>44</sup>

Second, compared to traditional conservatives, contemporary conservatives are much more confident in their ability to undo existing, long-standing liberal reforms which interfere with market relations. In the 1980s, contemporary conservatives in elected offices took the opportunity to reverse liberal reforms that had long histories. For example, in England, Prime Minister Thatcher rapidly reprivatized industries and privatized much public housing, despite the length of time these socialist reforms had been in practice. In the United States, President Reagan deregulated industries that had operated within regulatory structures for many years—in some cases, for up to ninety years. Indeed, Reagan had, in the 1970s, called for an end to Social Security, as he considered it an unnecessary government infringement on citizens' rights to choose their own retirement programs in a free market. A traditional conservative would be very wary of ending a program that began in 1937 and has shaped the expectations and practices of several generations of citizens.

Third, contemporary conservatives are much more willing than traditional conservatives to experiment with new reforms. Traditional conservatives cautiously endorsed some social reforms—if problems were persistent and costly and if institutions were clearly broken. But such conservatives were wary that reforms often had costly unintended consequences. Contemporary conservatives sometimes invoke this traditional conservative view, but they have been willing to push reforms that are quite wide in scope and that may produce a broad range of unanticipated consequences. Contemporary conservatives are

<sup>43</sup>James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

<sup>44</sup>Michael Novak, *Freedom with Justice: Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) and *Will It Liberate? Questions about Liberation Theology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1987).



## Sidebar 10-4

### *From Protest to Governance* *Conservative Ascendance in the 1994 U.S. Midterm Elections*

As a result of the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans won more than 50 Congressional seats previously held by Democrats and gained control of the United States House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. Republicans—mostly those holding conservative or New Right views—also gained eight seats and became the majority party in the United States Senate. In addition, Republicans wrested control of eleven governorships from Democrats. Such gains mean that the role of conservative lawmakers will no longer be limited to criticizing liberal initiatives and programs, but rather will include new opportunities to govern on the basis of their conservative ideals.

Conservative ascendance to a governing role is indicated not only by this increase in the number of Republican legislators and governors but in the ideological leanings of the new legislative leaders. The new Speaker of the House for the 104th Congress is "Newt" Gingrich, the leader of the more-conservative forces in the Republican Party and a highly vocal opponent of the liberal programs established during FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society. The new majority whip, the second most-powerful position in the Senate, is Trent Lott, who is aligned with Gingrich on many issues and who won his position over a more moderate candidate preferred by Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole. Dole, a long-standing, acidic critic of liberal Democrats, is widely regarded as the most moderate Republican leader in Congress—suggesting just how far to the right the ideological pendulum has swung.

Gingrich was the architect of a ten-point "Contract with America" that promised voters speedy enactment of

laws embodying conservative principles in return for their electoral support. Conservative Republicans—as well as many commentators—interpret the electoral results as constituting a mandate to make policy changes in the following areas:

1. Enacting a constitutional amendment requiring a balanced budget
2. Reducing crime (e.g., through funding additional law enforcement personnel and imposing stiffer sentences, including the death penalty)
3. Reducing welfare spending and imposing two-year benefits limitations and work requirements on welfare recipients
4. Reinforcing family values (e.g., by encouraging adoptions and giving parents greater control over their children's education)
5. Providing tax relief for the middle class
6. Strengthening national defense
7. Changing Social Security laws in ways that benefit senior citizens
8. Stimulating economic growth by reducing capital gains taxes and business regulations
9. Stemming the "endless tide of litigation"
10. Enacting laws that limit the terms of elected officials

In order to achieve these changes, conservatives will have to cut, eliminate, and/or turn over to the states many federal programs that liberals regard as important responses to social, economic, and environmental problems. The members of the 104th Congress can be expected to hold vigorous debates between contemporary conservatives and contemporary liberals as they consider these initiatives.

generally supportive of school choice or voucher approaches to public education. Attempts to make education more marketlike may well change the education system and the larger community dramatically. For example, a choice system—where parents can send their children to school in any of a variety of locations in a large city—might produce new community groups of concerned parents, but it might erode the sense of community within neighborhoods by eliminating local schools. Contemporary conservative support for term limits would also strike the traditional conservative as overly enthusiastic. Term limits could produce a variety of consequences that are difficult to foresee. Some conservatives support term limits in the belief that such limits will produce legislators whose ideals are closer to those held by their constituents, but other conservatives support term limits in the belief that such limits will help distance legislators from their constituents. In contrast to contemporary conservatives, traditional conservatives would be wary of term limits because the major outcomes of this reform are so uncertain.

Contemporary conservatives, then, are more comfortable with change than are traditional conservatives. They do resist change, though, especially the egalitarian reforms sought by liberal and socialist social engineers. They are particularly resistant to liberal reforms that demand changes in behavior before citizens have been persuaded that such changes are necessary. Wilmoore Kendall stated, most forcefully, the contemporary conservative resistance to politically mandated changes when he wrote the following in 1971:

The Conservatives *do* drag their feet—let the Liberals take note that I concede the point. When a Conservative reads in his newspaper that nearly 90% of the Southern schools are still segregated, and that the rate at which Southern schools are being desegregated is tapering off, he does not—unlike the Liberal—feel moved to the condemnation of the White Southerners for their allegedly wicked ways. . . . When the Conservative finds himself up against proof that the kids in the public schools of Middletown, Connecticut—which is 90 percent Catholic—recite “Hail Marys” in the classrooms and even the corridors, he does *not* feel that liberty has died in America. . . . And when the Liberal hammers the Conservative over the head with the awful fact that the good folk of New Haven and Hartford . . . do not have the voice in the state legislature to which their numbers might seem to entitle them—when the Liberal hammers the Conservative over the head with that awful fact, I say, he feels no temptation to order a couple of divisions of the U.S. Army to Connecticut to restore its republican form of government. I repeat: I concede the point that the Conservatives do drag their feet on what are fashionably called civil liberties, equal representation, desegregation.<sup>45</sup>

Kendall’s defense of foot-dragging is even too forceful for some conservatives, but it captures the conservative resistance to liberal reforms designed to enhance egalitarianism.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Wilmoore Kendall, “Equality and the American Political Tradition,” in *Keeping the Tablets*, p. 81.

<sup>46</sup>Harry V. Jaffa criticizes Kendall’s views on equality in his *How to Think About the American Revolution* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1978).

Contemporary conservatives view change as inevitable, given their defense of the dynamism of capitalism. Change should, however, rarely be instigated by government unless it is designed to undo the damage of liberal reformers.

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASES

For the most part, contemporary conservatives have eschewed deep philosophical issues. They believe that socialists and liberals have used philosophy to develop ideals about what human nature and society should be like, but these ideals are often naive fantasies. They accept the idea of limits on human and social possibilities, and, like George Bush, they have problems with "the vision thing." Contemporary conservatives pride themselves on their **realism**. They accept the world, humans, and societies as they are—in all their wonder and with all their deficiencies. They doubt the existence of some epistemology that will provide sure knowledge about how to solve all human problems and lead the way to a perfect world. Conservatives point to the works of such political philosophers as Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss as providing a conservative philosophy, but specific instances of conservatives drawing on these works are rare.<sup>47</sup>

### *Ontology*

Questions about the nature of reality have not been of much interest to conservatives. Conservatives usually avoid metaphysical explanations and treat reality as a material world in which people can draw on common sense and science to help guide them in their activities.

Religion is important to conservatives, but for most conservatives, it does not serve as an essential guide to understanding the material world. Religion promotes values that improve the social order, and religious institutions provide local sites for solidarity and for charitable work. Religion can help define and shape the good life for individuals, but conservatives do not invoke religious explanations of how the world is ordered.

In the United States, much of the conflict between mainstream conservatives and the "new right" grows out of efforts by the latter to invoke religious explanations. For example, some leaders of the "new right" originally claimed that AIDS was a disease sent by God as a punishment for homosexuality, but most conservatives distance themselves from such an interpretation. Most con-

<sup>47</sup>In *Keeping the Tablets*, edited by Buckley, the following works by Voegelin and Strauss are included: Eric Voegelin, "Gnosticism—The Nature of Modernity," pp. 181–197; and Leo Strauss, "The New Political Science," pp. 198–216. These essays, though, are rarely mentioned in any of the other essays. In *Hoeveler's Watch on the Right*, Voegelin and Strauss are given their due as important political thinkers for conservatism, but the conservative thinkers examined in the text rarely draw on Voegelin and Strauss. While Voegelin and Strauss have influenced such conservative scholars as Harry Jaffa and Herbert Storing, their influence on the more popular literature of conservatism is hard to detect.

servatives have also been unsupportive of "new right" attempts to introduce creationism into the curricula of public schools, acknowledging that creationism relies on a particular, untestable reading of the Bible. Conservatives argue that contemporary liberalism has not been supportive of religious life, but conservatives are unwilling to join the "new right" in seeking religious explanations of reality. For conservatives the world is well-ordered, and speculation over ultimate design is not fruitful.

According to contemporary conservatives, the natural world is a source of beauty that is extremely resistant to human abuses, and should remain "open" for human uses. Conservatives, thus, are very critical of the environmental movement. To conservatives, the doomsday prophecies of environmentalists on such issues as global warming underestimate the resilience of nature, and the attempts by environmentalists to "protect" nature from human uses prevent the sustained management of natural resources. Nature is there for us to use, and, with careful management, both nature and humans can benefit. The proper approach to nature, according to conservatives, includes conservation and managed use. It is based on common sense, and does not rely on any metaphysical assumptions.

### *Human Nature*

For conservatives, people are neither naturally good nor naturally bad. People have a moral sense that propels them to virtue, but this can be undermined by the excessive egoism and relativism of liberal society. The good society encourages virtuous action and uses disincentives to discourage vices. Individuals generally possess sufficient rationality to respond appropriately to incentive structures. Rationality is limited by passion, but rational action should prevail in a well-structured society.

Contemporary conservatives assume a level of rationality in individuals far beyond that considered to exist by traditional conservatives. Contemporary conservatives believe that individuals are capable, in general, of pursuing their own interests intelligently. Indeed, in justifying free markets, contemporary conservatives often point to the market as a place where rational decision making, patience, and self-control are rewarded.<sup>48</sup>

Contemporary conservatives are divided on the issue of how much control must be exercised over the decisions of individuals, but they all assume that individuals are capable of a broad range of decision making in political, social, economic, and private life. Thus, even when contemporary conservatives differ on the freedom of choices that ought to be available to citizens, their arguments bear little resemblance to the concerns expressed by traditional conservatives on this subject.

Among contemporary conservatives, the more libertarian conservatives are willing to allow individuals a very wide range of choices in their lives, if

<sup>48</sup>This has been a theme in Michael Novak's attempts to reconcile Catholicism with capitalism; see *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

no one else is harmed unwillingly. Libertarian conservatives, sharing the views of classical liberals, believe that attempts to control behavior limit freedom and expand the tyrannical force of government. Most conservatives, though, are not persuaded that the libertarian approach to freedom can work. Individuals should be free to make a wide range of choices, and government regulation should not be expansive, but activities that are self-destructive or that violate established norms can be regulated. Conservatives will, for example, prohibit drug use, pornography, and prostitution, because such activities are bad even for consenting adults and because they incur social costs. The toleration of vice creates an environment in which the worst in people can prevail, but a virtuous society can promote virtuous citizens.

Attempts to encourage virtue and discourage vice are not the result of conservatives' entertaining utopian ideals. Conservatives do not think human nature can be perfected, and they accept **human imperfection**. There will always exist the industrious and the lazy, the wise and the foolish, the multi-talented and the ungifted, and the witty and the banal. No reforms by egalitarian dreamers can alter the broad differences in proclivities and abilities of individuals without denying freedom and enforcing mediocrity. Conservatives seek to limit bad behavior, but they do not seek to mold the perfect individual.

Conservatives also believe that men and women have essential differences that sometimes justify different treatment before the law. For example, conservatives in the United States oppose drafting women into the military, claiming that most women lack the strength and ferocity characteristic of male soldiers. Conservatives especially oppose the use of female soldiers in combat, because the mix of women and men in a highly charged and dangerous setting will lead to tensions and emotions among soldiers that could harm combat morale. Conservatives also argue that women are less likely than men to be career-driven and more likely to leave jobs for marriage and childrearing, thus justifying some inequalities between men and women concerning wages and promotions. While conservatives generally believe that men and women should be equal under the law and question traditional laws that have denied women basic economic rights, they oppose egalitarian reforms that ignore substantial differences between the sexes. For example, conservatives in the United States opposed the Equal Rights Amendment on the grounds that it would generate egalitarian reforms blind to gender differences.

### *Society*

Conservatives view society as a complicated mechanism that must be treated delicately. They reject traditional conservatism's organic metaphor of the "body politic." However, contemporary conservatives see society and its components as so complicated and interconnected that they often draw conclusions about social life similar to those of traditional conservatives. Both contemporary and traditional conservatives fear that reforms will produce unanticipated consequences that will shred the social fabric. Both also support



mediating institutions, such as families and churches, that bind people to local communities and offer protection against centralized government. Contemporary conservatives, though, endorse a dynamic market economy that traditional conservatives viewed with distrust because of the unhealthy effects it would have on a stable society. For contemporary conservatives, the well-structured society must foster the dynamic qualities of the market, without allowing the economic sphere to upset the more stable relations conservatives value in the political, cultural, and private spheres of social life.

The good society, for conservatives, then, must be a mechanism that runs at different speeds in different spheres of life. In the economic sphere, technological changes and social mobility will generate fairly rapid changes in the ways people live and interact. In the political sphere, change should be much slower and should be the result of careful and prudent consideration. In the cultural sphere, the pace of change must be slower still, so that religion and traditional values can curb the unsettling changes generated by the economic sphere. Conservative criticisms of the avant-garde in literature and the arts, especially when publicly funded, and conservative endorsements of "solid middle-class values" reveal the conservative concern over the "new" in cultural life. In the private sphere of individual and family life, change must be very slow, so that individuals can enjoy the certain and expect the expected. The metaphor of a "delicate watch" is useful for describing a society that is authoritatively tuned.<sup>49</sup> The second hand is economics, the minute hand is politics, and the hour hand is both culture and private life.

Maintaining the different speeds for different spheres of life in society is a difficult task for conservatives, and one that is made more difficult by the recent liberal embrace of the policies of **multiculturalism**, such as endorsing bilingual education. Society is delicate, even fragile, according to conservatives. Shared values and a shared respect for political and cultural traditions keep society from flying apart. Multiculturalism, which celebrates the diversity of worldviews and the richness of various cultures, does not promote the shared set of understandings and values required for social cohesion. It encourages excessive skepticism about the values needed for social stability. It invites a cultural relativism which refuses to recognize the superiority of western, middle-class values. Bilingual education promotes permanent cultural separateness and discourages immigrant groups from conforming to mainstream values necessary for educational and economic success. Liberals may think they are assisting minorities and illustrating respect for other cultures by advocating bilingual education, but conservatives insist liberals are in

<sup>49</sup>The metaphor of the "delicate watch" has been used by classical liberals. They emphasized the delicate qualities to point out that interference with the economy should be carried out carefully and precisely, and only when the economy is not accurately "keeping its own time." Conservatives here, once again, take up part of the classical liberal program, but such liberals were not concerned about different spheres of life moving at different paces. A discussion of the watch as a metaphor in the history of classical liberal political economy can be found in Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 81-93.

fact ignoring the normal patterns of cultural adaptation that all immigrants must face and are thus harming the futures of immigrant and minority groups.

In the United States, conservatives have never objected to citizens of similar racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds living together in their own neighborhoods instead of rapidly becoming assimilated into the “melting pot” of an integrated community. These conservatives, relying on nineteenth- and twentieth-century experiences in the United States, argue that separate communities are but a temporary feature and disappear as groups are slowly integrated into the dominant culture.<sup>50</sup> Multicultural and bilingual education threaten to turn temporary preferences for separation into permanent arrangements. The permanent “balkanization” of society makes impossible the shared cultural norms that conservatives desire and makes probable the disintegration of social norms.<sup>51</sup>

This vision of society as a complicated mechanism whose components must be held together while they move at different speeds in different spheres requires conservatives to embrace a rather difficult account of social harmony. Social harmony is not created by the egalitarianism of socialists and communists, nor is it fostered by the organic stability of traditional conservatives. Social harmony is the result of careful tending of the interactions between different spheres as they move along at their respective speeds. The dynamics of a market economy must be nurtured, but the pace of cultural change must be protected from the rapid innovations generated in the economy. It is far from obvious how culture can be sheltered from the innovations of the economy. The conservative can respond that there exists a natural proclivity to embrace the familiar and the traditional, but the conservative cannot push this claim too far, or else he or she cannot explain the success of entrepreneurs who have acted creatively and innovatively in the economic sphere. What the conservative can endorse in public policy matters, though, is that government should not put added pressure on the cultural and private spheres to meet the pace of economic transformation. Furthermore, the conservative can wage battles against the liberal reformers who refuse to see the complicated relations among spheres of life that exist in society.

### *Epistemology*

Rather than developing epistemological theories, conservatives employ four forms of reason to guide understanding and action. These four forms of reasoning—examination of tradition, reliance on historical knowledge, use of common sense, and development of science—provide insights into the world, but alone, or in combination, they do not result in perfect knowledge. Our knowledge about the world can be improved, but it will always be limited.

<sup>50</sup>Sowell, *Ethnic America*, pp. 277–280.

<sup>51</sup>Conservatives have not addressed how this problem of shared norms will be answered by school choice or voucher systems. School choice may encourage a wide variety of educational and cultural norms, and fail to provide social cohesion.

Conservatives rely on reason (broadly understood), but they do so without the optimism of liberal social reformers or of utopian social engineers.

Contemporary conservatives draw on some of the views on reason expressed by traditional conservatives. Traditional conservatives argued that tradition was the accumulated reason of previous generations, and thus it deserved respect and deference. Contemporary conservatives do not desire to recreate the past that traditional conservatives revered, but they agree with traditional conservatives that traditional beliefs and practices are the result of reason being tested over time. For contemporary conservatives, tradition distills some knowledge of the social world, but it does not reveal certainties about social life, nor does it create a foundation for an unchangeable social order. Indeed, the social, economic, and political traditions defended by contemporary conservatives are rarely older than two hundred years. The traditions that contemporary conservatives respect are the beliefs and practices that emerged during and after the traditional conservative defense of tradition.

Paying attention to the "lessons of history" is a second form of reason. Reliance on historical knowledge as a means of determining appropriate actions should prevent the repetition of errors and highlight effective practices. For example, the "lesson of Munich"—where the Western Allies permitted Hitler to incorporate parts of Czechoslovakia into Germany in return for a promise that he would curtail further expansionary efforts—teaches that democracies must never attempt to appease aggressors. And the "lesson of Watergate" teaches that cover-ups rarely succeed and that immediate disclosure of mistakes is the best policy. Historical knowledge is far from perfect, though, because different lessons can be drawn from the same events and previous events may bear little resemblance to current conditions. History is a guide that only charts general directions.

Conservative reliance on common sense as a form of reason provides both an acknowledgment of the value of everyday experience and a counterweight to the abstract and theoretical tendencies in scientific thought. For example, common sense argued that the Soviet Union was not to be trusted concerning nuclear weapons, that the best policy was therefore to be able to deter nuclear attack, and that it was foolish to pursue arms limitation treaties and, worse, unilateral disarmament policies that depended on theories about Soviet goodwill. Just as tradition has withstood the test of time, common sense is the result of reason and action put to the test. Common sense is a form of reason that works without theoretical elaboration, and one which is centered on the everyday needs of people. Common sense resists the utopian ideas of abstract thinkers.

Contemporary conservatives are not as critical of science as are traditional conservatives. Traditional conservatives called into question the very foundations of the scientific approach to knowledge by challenging the idea of causality. Contemporary conservatives have serious reservations about science as a form of reason, but they do not challenge the idea of causality, nor do they challenge the ability of science to render explanations about behavior in the natural and social worlds.

Contemporary conservatives employ scientific methods in their studies

and call upon scientific results to strengthen their arguments and interpretations. Many conservatives, especially the neoconservatives, have been trained in the social sciences and are familiar with the techniques and methods used for describing and explaining social activity. According to Albert Hirschman, the findings of neoconservatives can be summarized in terms of three basic theses.<sup>52</sup> First is the **perversity thesis**: conservative social science suggests that well-intended social policies often produce perverse effects that are precisely the opposite of those intended. For example, the crosstown busing of children was a liberal attempt to integrate schools, but the policy prompted white flight away from inner-city public schools to private schools and the suburbs, resulting in increasingly segregated schools.<sup>53</sup> Second is the **futility thesis**: conservative social science shows that liberal reformers are oblivious to deep social laws that resist attempts at social improvement. For example, George Stigler argued that the distribution of income has a natural character that cannot be significantly changed by redistributive federal policies.<sup>54</sup> Third is the **jeopardy thesis**: conservative social science shows that naive attempts to expand prior reforms only undercuts the gains that these reforms produced. For example, the equal opportunity laws of the 1960s succeeded in breaking down many barriers to minority employment, but when radicals attempted to expand equality through affirmative action, the unintended results included increased white resistance to minority advancement and a reduction in minority employment opportunities. (Our discussion of Thomas Sowell in the section on justice further illustrates the jeopardy thesis.)

Despite employing social science to demonstrate the failures of liberal programs, conservatives generally regard science with skepticism. Science—without the addition of tradition, historical knowledge, and common sense—encourages scholars to assume the world is much more pliable, and much more amenable to reform, than it actually is. Dependence upon science must be tempered by the prudence that reliance on tradition, historical knowledge, and common sense provides.

Science is missing more, though, than just prudence. Conservatives view science as missing the proper grounding in the quest for knowledge. The natural sciences should be driven by the quest to improve the living standards of citizens. The agricultural researcher improving the quality and quantity of crops provides more valuable information than does the astronomer seeking to explain black holes or the anthropologist seeking the remains of human ancestors. Research that does not have practical applications is not regarded highly by conservatives. Most conservatives in the United States were not particularly supportive of funding a space program unless it illustrated United States superiority over the communists' space programs or unless it could be

<sup>52</sup>Albert Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, and Jeopardy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1991).

<sup>53</sup>James Coleman and Sara Kelly, "Education," in *The Urban Predicament*, edited by William Gorham and Nathan Glazer (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1976).

<sup>54</sup>George Stigler, "Director's Law of Public Income Distribution," *Journal of Law and Economics* 13 (Apr. 1970), pp. 1-10.



deployed for nuclear defense systems. The search for theoretical insights that have little foreseeable application is not opposed by conservatives, but they see little reason for the government to support such research.

Conservatives draw on the works of Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss to question the concerns of the social sciences. Voegelin and Strauss argued that classical political thought sought to understand the social world in order to improve political life and to nourish the qualities of the good citizen. The modern social sciences have forsaken the quest for the good citizen in the good polity in order to provide an "objective" explanation of how social life works. The social sciences now explain behavior, but that behavior is not judged in relation to any model of the best behavior, because social scientists seek neutrality in their presentations. The modern social sciences are thus distanced from the concerns of the good political life and have lost the classical ability to criticize political life.<sup>55</sup>

Social sciences that only explain, but that cannot judge, have a disastrous effect on society. Neutrality in scholarship leads to relativism in the classroom. Since standards of the good citizen in the good polity are not used, all forms of political life are deemed worthy of attention and respect. Universities promote a multicultural tolerance that leaves the critical abilities of students impaired and that fails to win the allegiance of citizens to the best in the western tradition.<sup>56</sup> Conservatives claim that modern knowledge of the social world is too often simply the explanation and prediction of behavior, without the evaluation of human action.

Conservatives employ reason, but they recognize the limitations of all forms of reason in understanding a natural world and a social world that are too complex for human mastery. The best understandings of the human condition will blend the four forms of reasoning that conservatives employ. These understandings will be rich and multifaceted, but they will not approach the richness and complexity of our lives.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary conservatism has achieved dramatic and rapid success as an ideology. Conservatives have scored electoral successes in many western nations, especially since the 1980s. Conservatives, once highly critical of the media—from which they felt excluded—now command much space on the editorial pages of newspapers and magazines, and control much time on the radio and on television. Conservative ideas on policy issues are taken seriously by policy makers, including those who would never describe themselves as conservatives. Possibly the most telling aspect of conservative success is the unwillingness of nonconservative politicians to describe themselves as liberals. Conservatives have effectively turned liberalism into a ten-letter "four-letter word."

<sup>55</sup>For detailed and explicit criticisms of this type applied to political science research, see *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, edited by Herbert J. Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962).

<sup>56</sup>Sowell, *Inside American Education*, esp. pp. 70–74.



This, of course, does not mean that conservatism is without difficulties as an ideology. Conservatives still confront the challenge posed by their defense of dynamic market economies *and* their desire for stable social and private relationships. Can communities be cohesive and stable when markets create innovation and dislocation? Are market approaches to education dangerous to neighborhoods, which have been a source of community valued by conservatives? Can the nuclear family survive when economic conditions in many western countries force or, at least, encourage, both spouses to work? Can the self-discipline that conservatives applaud be generated in market economies that often laud immediate gratification? These are questions that cannot be answered by merely criticizing liberal and radical reforms.

In the foreign policy arena, conservatives must respond to a world in which their archenemy, communism, is no longer as powerful or as threatening. Conservative reluctance to embrace international organizations makes the future of conservative foreign policy difficult to predict. Conservatives are now arguing among themselves over how much internationalism to embrace, and how to carry out foreign policy objectives.

In the domestic policy arena, conservatives must start to illustrate the effectiveness of their approaches to domestic issues. Conservatives cannot simply point to the failure of previous liberal regimes after conservatives too have had the opportunity to wield national power. Marketlike approaches to pollution and education seem likely to be pursued by western governments in the 1990s, and the results of these attempts may provide conservatism with the positive agenda needed for continuing its electoral success. Conservatives must also illustrate that they can cut taxes without engaging in the deficit spending that they so often criticized when they were not in power.

In the electoral arena, conservatives also face tough questions and decisions. Were the electoral successes in the 1980s the result of broad ideological changes in the populace of western nations, or were they the result of the charisma and forcefulness of such leaders as Reagan and Thatcher? Can conservatives win elections without procuring the allegiance of "new right" and neofascist groups? In the United States, the 1992 campaign of George Bush was damaged when he alienated the "new right," but it was also hurt when Bush then allowed the "new right" to dominate the first night of the Republican National Convention—its adherents scared many voters with their strident and mean-spirited oratory. In France and Germany, conservative politicians must decide how much anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy they will borrow from neofascist groups and parties.

Conservatives must also decide whether, without diluting their ideology, they can broaden their appeal in western nations. The environmental concerns of young people are not met by conservative ideas about nature, and conservatives may have to reassess their utilitarian and "managed-conservation" approaches to the environment. Conservatives must also confront the lack of support for their ideology among women and minorities. Conservatism has some adherents among women and minorities, but its strongest support is from white males. Conservative leaders have not been very effective so far in making their ideology more inclusive. Can they do so, without threatening the base of conservative support?

Conservatism, despite its many challenges, remains a potent ideology. The defense of the economic ideas of classical liberalism will continue to find adherents in a world in which planned economies have rarely proved dynamic or successful. The search for stable social and personal relations is unlikely to disappear from the modern agenda. How conservatives will handle the tension between these two powerful sources of support will shape the future successes (or failures) of contemporary conservatism.