

## **“One Nation Conservatism”**

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The *Weekly Standard's* "One Nation Conservatism," an amalgam of George W. Bush's "Compassionate Conservatism" and John McCain's "New Patriotic Challenge," seeks to provide a vision of the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That vision contains useful guidelines for renewing the American dream, but could stand some improvement.

As articulated by the *Standard's* senior editor David Brooks in the September 13, 1999 issue, One Nation Conservatism "marries community goodness with national greatness." To that end, Brooks offers several moderately conservative prescriptions, both foreign and domestic. The first task of One Nation Conservatism is to abolish "the chunks of the modern welfare state that smothered civic activism." A "burbling civic life" would be achieved instead through education vouchers, charter school grants, charitable tax credits to religious groups and other institutions, and the privatization of Social Security.

One Nation Conservatism seeks to restore faith in government by reforming Medicare, simplifying the tax code, and reducing corporate welfare. It also seeks a ban on "soft money" – unregulated contributions to the two political parties that frequently find their way into candidate coffers.

Next, One Nation Conservatism "champions a series of measures designed to remind American citizens of their common bonds. It revitalizes

our transportation network, which has always bound us together. It nourishes the parks, forests, and preserves that are our common heritage. It reforms the nation's culture policy, so that museums and arts institutions that accept taxpayer dollars are more likely to explore what it means to be American than they are to nourish alienation and multicultural parochialism."

Lastly, One Nation Conservatism embraces an interventionist foreign policy based on America's moral leadership and democratic ideals.

By contrast, the conservative movement of the '90s has been isolationist and devoted exclusively to the doctrine of "cut, devolve and dismantle." While transfer of power from federal to state authority has been one of its greatest achievements, the conservative agenda has been essentially negative in character – more against what it's against than for what it's for. One Nation Conservatism discounts "the notion that the highest end of government is to leave us alone," rejecting this as ultimately self-defeating. Rather, One Nation Conservatism envisions an activist, if limited, role for government.

This philosophy, at least in its initial form, presents significant logistical problems. For example, given the state of public education (falling test scores, overcrowding, and a shortage of qualified teachers), its call for vouchers and grants for charter schools make eminent sense. Brooks fails to indicate, however, where the money will come from and who would dole it

out. (The Education Department? The states?) Taking a page from G.W.'s book, Brooks wants to set aside grants for faith-based groups. This seems to be a legitimate idea because religious institutions are woven into the fabric of communities and, presumably, a magnet for civic involvement. But allocating such funds could prove tricky. Should a church in upper New York receive the same money as one in the Bronx, or less? And again, who decides?

More problematic still is the call for privatizing Social Security. For years, some of the Senate's leading lights (Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Bob Kerrey and John McCain among them) have argued that Social Security recipients should be allowed to invest a portion of their payroll tax in the stock market. Permitting some investment in this fashion, proponents claim, would help save a program expected to hand more money out than it takes in by 2015, when baby boomers hit retirement age. This argument is bolstered by the fact that the market has consistently returned about 7% on investment over the past hundred years.

Limited privatization of Social Security is an idea worth exploring. Investing in stocks, as everyone knows, is not just for your rich Uncle Bertie anymore; even small, middle class investors have jumped into the market during the past decade, and their knowledge of its inner workings has grown, too. Allowing workers to invest 2% of their payroll tax in the stock market – as George W. Bush recently suggested – is a reasonable way to promote wealth among Americans while easing the anticipated strain on Social

Security. Yet few who have studied the issue believe even limited privatization to be more than a partial solution to the Social Security problem, and fewer still believe complete privatization is a realistic or responsible goal. One Nation Conservatism turns a blind eye toward the historical gyrations of the market, refusing to posit what might happen should the economy go sour. Whatever else Social Security might be – a gigantic drain on the budget, a rickety entitlement in desperate need of repair – it's also the biggest social safety net in the United States. In the event of economic catastrophe, complete privatization could wipe out individual investment, leaving working and middle class Americans with nothing to fall back on. History teaches that a large and financially secure middle class is essential in upholding democracy. If the program sustaining that middle class disappears, all Americans, not least the folks at the *Weekly Standard*, have reason to fear what Theodore Roosevelt called "a riotous, wicked day of atonement." Limited worker investment in the market to prop up Social Security is fine. Going beyond that is too much of a gamble.

More promising is One Nation Conservatism's plan to revive public trust in government. Refreshingly, Brooks abjures the conservative shibboleth that money in politics equals free speech, a position shared by the Supreme Court until very recently. (Deviating from past decisions, a divided Court ruled in February that states had the right to limit individual contributions to candidates). Elimination of soft money from electoral politics

is an excellent place to start, but One Nation Conservatism could go a lot further toward campaign finance reform.

Along with the abolition of soft money, candidates should be required to fully disclose both the source and amount of their campaign contributions. "Advocacy ads" must clearly indicate who pays for them. TV ads attacking John McCain's environmental record during the primaries, for example, should have disclosed that they were funded not by "Republicans for Clean Air," but by G.W.'s Texas pals, the Wyly brothers. "Issue ads" paid for by corporations and unions are permitted by law to support political positions but are often used to endorse or attack a given candidate. They should be banned. Section 527 of the Internal Revenue Code – a loophole that allows groups to organize in ways that permit the collection of unlimited funds from anonymous sources, which are then passed on to politicians – should be done away with as well.

Though Brooks doesn't mention it, political advertising might also benefit from reform. Ever since television became the primary means of reaching voters, the TV networks and their affiliates have raked in countless millions charging fat fees for ad buys. Vociferous in its criticism of politicians who spend their way into office, television news remains predictably silent on this score. In light of the fact that networks and affiliate stations profit by using airwaves supposedly owned by the public, a system allocating free airtime for candidates should be imposed.

Finally, and more radically, the concept of public financing of elections deserves serious consideration. Unable to tap party organizations and wealthy constituents, challengers are presently at a distinct disadvantage when attempting to unseat incumbents. Lacking a substantial war chest, first-time candidates often get lost in the shuffle. This has produced a succession of wealthy candidates (Ross Perot, Michael Huffington, Steve Forbes) whose essential qualification for office is their ability to spend the millions necessary to mount credible campaigns. Thus far the super-rich have failed to buy elections, but that fact is scarcely reassuring. There's nothing to suggest they won't stop trying, and under current rules it's inevitable that at least a few will finally succeed. Even if they don't, candidates with little money but a lot to say will probably remain outside the corridors of power, blocked on all sides by an impenetrable wall of cash. Office holders, on the other hand, are forced to start calling on donors for their next campaign almost as soon as they're sworn in. To remedy these problems, challengers and incumbents could be funded equally during the election cycle. No spending beyond a set limit would be permitted, thereby leveling the playing field and obviating the need for accumulating ever-greater sums of money.

Conservatives and others might object to this proposal as unfairly squelching free speech, but it's become painfully clear over the last twenty-five years since *Buckley v. Valeo* (the Supreme Court ruling that limited individual contributions but lifted caps on campaign spending) that political

speech in America is anything but free. The idea that spending gobs of money in campaigns somehow equals "free speech," and that the backers of candidates who do so are merely exercising their right to voice political opinions, is laughable. Politicians want to get elected, and once elected, they want to stay elected. At minimum, wealthy individuals and corporate benefactors want friendly consideration of their business and policy aims. This would be fine if everyone had millions to run for office, or millions to contribute to candidates, but most Americans don't. Who speaks for them?

To demonstrate that government is not an auxiliary arm of corporate America, One Nation Conservatism hopes to do away with tax breaks and subsidies to big business. This is a thorny proposition, as corporate influence on Capitol Hill is entrenched and pervasive. However, enacting the campaign finance reforms mentioned above would go a long way toward reversing this situation. Members of congress might feel emboldened to eliminate outrageously generous subsidies to huge multinationals like Archer Daniels Midland. (ADM, which contributes handsomely to members of both parties, controls 40% of ethanol production in the U.S. The Congress appropriates \$700 million in ethanol subsidies annually.) Some suggest this is impractical. Because corporate welfare represents a *quid pro quo* for campaign contributions, they argue, politicians are naturally reluctant to rock the boat. True, but it's possible that one highly visible, widely respected member of Congress who's been in Washington for years – a Dick Lugar or John Breaux

– might be courageous enough to take the lead. An esteemed member of The Club could make it safe for colleagues to follow in ending corporate subsidies. This may seem a slim reed upon which to hang real reform, but one must begin somewhere. And, as One Nation Conservatism affirms, slashing corporate pork would send a heartening message to Americans that their government is not for sale.

One Nation Conservatism's hopes for restructuring Medicare present a daunting challenge. While cutting aid to dependent families or benefits to legal aliens is acceptable to many Americans, tampering with a cherished middle class entitlement is not. For decades, the leadership of the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) has successfully fended off any attempt at reform, using scare tactics to marshal the political power of its members. Plans for bringing down the runaway cost of Medicare, therefore, rest on convincing Americans that unchecked growth of the program will do irreparable harm to the nation's economy. As with the Social Security debate, citizens have to understand that the time for reform is *now*, while deficits are low and drastic solutions are as yet unnecessary. In an era of unprecedented prosperity, that's a hard sell. The intestinal fortitude to make the pitch has to come from a new congress and, especially, our next president.

One Nation Conservatism's ambitions for streamlining the tax code are politically popular and will surely enjoy bipartisan support after the November elections. Yet the approach has to be just. Conservatives love the



idea of a flat tax, but they forget – or choose to forget – the proposal bandied about most often, a consumption tax, disproportionately affects the poor and is hence regressive. Indeed, revising the system presents a multitude of fairness problems. One Nation Conservatism's desire to simplify tax collection by ridding the code of unnecessary and ridiculously complicated provisions is laudable, but everyone deserves to benefit from the result.

Comparatively, wealthy Americans pay the most taxes, so scrapping the inheritance tax and reducing the capital gains tax is in order. For the middle class, the mortgage deduction can be increased. The Earned Income Tax Credit, which primarily benefits the working class and has proved successful, warrants expansion. Finally, the so-called "marriage penalty" – which gives singles who live together a larger standard deduction than married couples – should be scrubbed from the books. None of these palliatives are mentioned in Brooks' manifesto, but it's a fair bet his associates at the *Standard* would find them agreeable.

In the area of foreign policy, One Nation Conservatism has a foot in the right place. It needs to contemplate where that other foot might land, however. There's nothing wrong with advocating an internationalist, engaged posture toward the world beyond our shores. The United States has security commitments in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, and she can hardly abandon them now. Likewise, as nations become more interdependent

through technology and free trade, American economic security is tied to countries thousands of miles away.

To suggest, however, that the U.S. conduct foreign policy by moral imperative is naive, arrogant, and potentially disastrous. Even assuming America's moral leadership on the world stage, and her divine right to dispense that leadership (dubious propositions both), there's no guarantee of success. A classic case in point, of course, is Vietnam. More recently, after the high-handed antics of its inept Secretary of State foreclosed any possibility of compromise, the U.S. stumbled and bumbled its way into war in Kosovo. The price for this supercilious policy was high: The Serbs intensified atrocities against ethnic Albanians after U.S. bombing began. Allied relations grew increasingly rancorous (particularly with Italy and Greece). Most damaging of all, U.S. intervention earned the lasting enmity of the Russians (who were barely consulted) and the Chinese (whose embassy was mistakenly bombed). Clearly, the United States has a role to play – a limited one – in global crises that aren't solely related to its national interest. When serving up romantic fantasies of American Exceptionalism, however, the purveyors of One Nation Conservatism would do well to remember that grand designs have a way of biting their architects in the rear end.

One Nation Conservatism's recommendations for bringing people together – "revitalizing" public transportation, "nourishing" parks and forests, and funding cultural projects that forsake "alienation and

multicultural parochialism" – are admirable goals. Yet as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our country must arrive at a workable consensus as to who we are and what we stand for. Our next president is the best person to promote that consensus, and his most effective means of doing so is the bully pulpit. In inclusive but plain language, Americans need to hear some basic truths.

As Brooks intimates in his treatise on *One Nation Conservatism*, it should be frankly admitted that the precepts of political correctness and multiculturalism have had a disruptive influence on American society. Michael Lind, in his 1995 book *The Next American Nation*, warned the hypersensitive dictates of political correctness, coupled with the "separate but equal" ethos of multiculturalism, were apt to create a Balkanized, overly touchy society. Five years down the line, one may judge the prescience of Lind's thesis. Conversely, religious fundamentalism has concocted a rigid litmus test for morally upright behavior, further polarizing the national debate. In conjunction with extremists on the left, its adherents have contributed mightily to an atmosphere of hostility between people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

These ideologies have continued along mutually exclusive trajectories for the better part of thirty years, each clinging fiercely to its concept of America. The politically correct crowd seeks to establish equality by imposing an impossibly stringent code of conduct on everyday social interaction, even down to what people can and cannot say. While sincere, in practice this

theory is unworkable; the American ideal derives from the proposition of individual freedom – within limits – and the right to speak one's mind. Perhaps inevitably, political correctness has engendered a cultural backlash among those it sought to convert (read: white males). More importantly, already tense relations between whites and other ethnic groups have been exacerbated. Regardless of the movement's original intent, a case can be made that political correctness has actually led to *less* communication between whites and "minorities," not more. Blacks, Asians, Latinos and women continue to resent the privileged status of white men; white men shy away from openly discussing ethnic or gender issues for fear of giving offense or being labeled racist and/or sexist.

The strictures of America's self-appointed morality police, meanwhile, impress many Americans as equally corrosive to the social fabric, if not more so. Advocates of political correctness have been criticized for self-righteous behavior and rhetoric, but the greatest censure can be reserved for Christian fundamentalists. America, it is true, was founded by Puritans, and their injunctions against moral turpitude constitute a lasting legacy. Yet, as mentioned above, America was also founded on the supposition of personal freedom. Obliging others to adhere to a particular belief system, through denunciation of a lifestyle (e.g. homosexuality) or threat of violence (bombing abortion clinics), is deeply inimical to nurturing social stability.

Neither political correctness nor religious fundamentalism reflect the views of most U.S. citizens. The people of this nation have been described, accurately, as "tolerant traditionalists" who believe in the Golden Rule – "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." People needn't be religious to embrace this simple premise, or to recognize its wisdom holds special resonance in today's America. By 2050, the U.S. population is expected to be less white and more brown. Continued division along ethnic and religious lines will merely succeed in tearing the country further apart, perhaps irrevocably. Observance of the motto "live and let live," therefore, strikes one as common sense.

Our next president must remind citizens that their first allegiance is to the ideals of tolerance, unity and social conscience. "Social conscience" doesn't necessarily mean involvement in political or social causes. It does mean, at the very least, loyalty to something more substantial than SUV's and the bottom line. The greatest injury to the American Experiment in the last few years has been the triumph of a corporate ethic that deifies profit and material wealth above all else. While this development keeps the multinationals happy, it's difficult to see how it leads to anything but spiritual bankruptcy for the rest of us. Americans need to remember that there are other, more important things in life than making extra money.

All of this may sound like hopelessly ingenuous rhetoric, but presidents possess a unique advantage in shaping the political landscape. For

example, Lyndon Johnson's "War On Poverty" vaulted the plight of the poor to prominence in early 1964. President Kennedy was preparing anti-poverty legislation before he was assassinated, but it was Johnson's single-minded attention to the problem that awakened the moral conscience of America. The time is right to address what it means to be an American, and the dialogue begins with the man in the White House.

Confronted with problems thus far ignored and future dilemmas yet unknown, the people of the United States must decide how they will define their nation. Will they continue to tune out a government many feel no longer represents them, or will they agitate for reform of the political process? Do they want to assume the mantle of World Policeman, ever on the lookout for trouble and eager to intervene, or will they favor another, less imperious approach to statecraft? Can we move beyond a divisive culture war to adopt a more moderate, encompassing notion of the American spirit, one that celebrates shared values over material gain? These questions, and countless others, will likely be answered by the end of the century. How Americans choose to answer them will say much about our character, and about our vision – or lack thereof – for the country's future.

One Nation Conservatism aspires to furnish a template for that future. Its arguments are suffused with sincerity and thoughtfully reasoned. What they lack is specificity, a shortcoming this essay has attempted to correct. The themes espoused in One Nation Conservatism, and the amendments

proposed here, don't offer a comprehensive plan for remaking America, but a framework for debate. Admittedly, discussing the issues doesn't solve the problems. "But," as John Kennedy once said, "Let us begin."