

CAN CONSERVATISM WEED OUT ITS IMPOSTORS?*

by
W. B. Allen
Pomona Valley Republican Assembly

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Winston Churchill's switching political parties from Conservative to Liberal to Conservative in the early years of this century singed many an eyebrow. Churchill defended himself by pointing to the sad state of affairs to which the Conservative Party, first of all, had fallen. In effect, he held that the Party had left him; it had sacrificed the only principles that could make it truly a party of patriotism.

We witness such an era evolving in the United States today. The Conservative revolution has been stopped dead in the water, victim to a politics of expedience and self seeking that was brightly illuminated in the California Republican campaign for the U. S. Senate nomination. That, however, was only the fever. The disease is far wider.

Evidence

Consider the mounting evidence: something calling itself "mainstream Republicanism" and organizing around Iowa's Mr. Leach is making a resurgence and being warmly greeted by politicians who have made whole careers out of calling themselves "Reagan Republicans;" the present Administration accomplishes less with each passing day to vindicate our expectation of a genuine redress in American politics, a return to constitutional rule not as a mere talking point but as an efficacious ground for the defense of liberty; not only does the national debt roll merrily higher, it is not even a matter of debate within officialdom how it shall be retired; a "stalwart conservative" candidate for the U. S. Senate alarms citizens that they will lose their home mortgages if the progressive income tax is given up; names like Reynolds, Manion, Gardner Zuckerman, and others fall like droplets on the guillotine of the Civil Rights Lobby with scarcely more than a whimper from an Administration which nominates them; the liberal sacrifice of freedom in South Africa to racial manipulation in the United States not only fails to draw forth official rebuttals but gains a giant huzzah ("I'm losing patience with South Africa") from the conservative Governor of our largest state; and meanwhile affirmative action wreaks havoc on a heritage of equality and liberty with nothing more than tepid rear-guard actions from the Administration and fairly active complicity from the "Republican controlled" Senate. We could go on much further. We haven't mentioned national defense. Or Nicaragua. Or abortion. Or education. The point is: these failures are not the failures of sincere efforts falling short. They are failures to make sincere efforts!

An Organizing Test

Artists painters and interior designers alike speak of something they call the ground tone. It has the same effect in any context. In every composition there is one color that serves to

organize and lend coherence to the entire plethora of tints which form the whole composition. That is the ground tone. Its strength is that it survives shadows and contradictions.

There is also a ground tone in social and political life—a general tenor or opinion that serves as the organizing test or principle for every other opinion that may be ventured. Had there truly been a conservative revolution in America, that social ground tone would be manifest in our politics and our policy debates. What can it mean, therefore, when a general consensus even among conservatives holds that a conservative cannot defeat Democrat Alan Cranston in an election? Or that a liberal Republican is called for? (I call Mr. Zschau a liberal, not a moderate, because I do not accept the attempt to reduce this distinction to whether one will or will not vote for a tax hike; what identifies a liberal or a conservative are programmatic dispositions, and I believe Mr. Zschau is rather disposed to advance liberal programs.)

Why do I point to this truth at this time? One reason: our pretending otherwise blinds us to the danger our country faces. We have invested much hope and effort in the conservative revolution, thinking that the countless “conservatives” who have been vaulted into public office or prominence would take up the cause with a spirit of dedication. We thought their dedication would bring them unrelentingly to confront the prevailing welfare state ground tone to the point that it would cede place to a view more consonant with our heritage. To be sure, conservatism would still have to confront contradictions and sometimes exist in shadows, but steadily pursued it could survive that. What we got instead were some genuine conservatives, to be sure, but apparently far many more spurious conservatives. The spurious conservatives found in growing public responsiveness to the conservative revolution an easy ride into office. And we, confiding and hopeful, have helped them to it.

The Welfare State Test

What we have as a result is a strengthened welfare state, managed by people who still submit every proposition first of all to the test, Is it acceptable to liberal opinion, the liberal ground tone? Our conservative revolution is a dappled mare, with the welfare state in the saddle. How can we change this? We must begin by setting out a new opposition. Let us restate the principles of conservatism emphasizing fidelity to the principles, not to a party. We cannot forget that a Republican Party turned traitor to its principles presents a far graver threat to our country than a Democrat Party openly carrying out what it openly espouses. There is always the hope, at least, that patriotism may rescue us from Democrat error. What possible recovery can there be from treachery?

The conservative agenda begins with affirmation of the priority of individual rights. But it can no longer suffice to accept a nod of the head as signifying meaningful acceptance of this principle, any more than the metaphorical petticoat, “Reagan Republican,” can convince us that an official is safe and sound. No. Let us rather push every pretender to the last degree through every policy commitment. Let us demand that they stand forth when it is not popular. Their speeches will not suffice. Let us demand the evidence of their deeds in service to the principles.

A Confession

I have been praised for putting principle above ambition when I withdrew from the California Senate race in 1986 in order to enhance the chance for a conservative victory. I have a confession to make: it never occurred to me that there was any option! What I did was neither courageous nor noble. It was natural. I am grateful for this episode, for it has made clear to me how far we have to go to construct a genuinely free future for our nation. That journey begins with ourselves.

I must add a final word, to avoid all misunderstanding: California! The California Senate primary election was not just one of several elections. The backward results in this election were not just a statistical blip on an otherwise progressive scale. The California election offered a diagnostic signal, as I have spelled out above. The conservative revolution received its decisive impulse from California. So, too, is the repudiation of conservatism in California politics decisive that is, it will be decisive unless we do something to change that. We must go to the root of the matter and plant new seed, lest the weeds in our garden completely supplant the tender blossom of only twenty years ago.

* The foregoing essay was written in the Summer of 1986 and submitted to the *CRA Newsletter* for publication. At the time it was not published. We lost the election that November, and have yet to rediscover the formula for unambiguous victory. Now that this essay can see the light of day, we will perhaps have a chance for recovery. It was ideas such as those expressed here that inspired the convening of Sharon 111.