

THE STATE OF CONSERVATISM

by

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Ken Crib and I grew up in very similar circumstances and with very similar appreciations of this nation's past as well as the tasks which confront its future. In fact one of the things that Ken does not yet know, and which is a new project of mine that will be gathering steam as the year progresses, is my effort to win at last a pardon for General Lee. I think it long overdue and entirely deserved. One of the great problems we have had lies in estimating incorrectly the value of the decisions that General Lee made in 1860—a problem that stands in the way of our properly understanding decisions that confront us. General Lee—at bottom anti-secessionist and anti-slavery—showed what it means to defend one's own, to recognize the overriding importance and value of hearth and home. This is a starting point without which none of the other professions of loyalty and dedication are of any value whatever. For us to fail to give due honor to that demonstration on General Lee's part is, in a way, to deprive ourselves in this country of the enduring example of his talent and his leadership. You will see me returning to that question in the course of the coming year, hoping to prod the Congress of the United States to do the right thing.

Tonight, however, we gather not to remember General Lee. We gather rather to remember what has happened to conservatism and what its prospects for leadership are. I wish on this occasion to approach that question in a different way than I have on previous occasions. Let us remember at the outset that there are many distinctions to bear in mind when we speak of conservatism. There is, to be sure, a conservative movement. But there is also that broader notion in which those who may properly call themselves conservative are not so much united in a common movement as they are joined by a common understanding. That understanding is not acquired at the cost of exceptional effort, but is in some respects a reflection of lives of ordinary decency. We often lose the ability to expect ordinary decency in this late twentieth century, this abstract world in which we live and in which the presentations of theories often crowd out some of the most ordinary expectations that human beings ought to have of one another. There is a sense, in other words, in which, when we say conservatism, we ought not to be saying anything more than ordinary human decency. I want to try to remind us to think of it that way—to think beyond the movement even as we remember how much we owe to those folk who have dedicated themselves to trying to refocus attention on this very important question.

Intercollegiate Studies Institute has played a vital role in this respect. Organizations such as Young Americans for Freedom have been no less diligent in trying to restore that level of conscience. We gathered in the fall of 1988 at Hillsdale College—at a meeting we dubbed “Sharon III” in honor of the original meeting at which YAF was born in Sharon, Connecticut—precisely to attempt at that moment, when the Reagan Administration marched gracefully into its twilight, to capture some notion of what it meant now, in retrospect, to have been conservatives, to have been involved in a movement, and what lay before us in the way of challenges. I am further mindful how during the course of those sessions (over two days) our minds turned again and again over the question of leadership, and the prospective need that we all saw so clearly then for a re-articulation of a conservative agenda. We all appreciated, moreover, the tension between this need for a re-articulation and, at the same time, the expectation that what we really mean by conservative is something that is within the reach of every human being—certainly every competent human being.

Of course, the reality is that the competence is not always there. The matter, the substance to which we address ourselves is sometimes rather balky. We gather, therefore, to discuss these things in order that we may learn, and relearn as often as need be, how to deal with the balky substance to which we address ourselves.

Regarding the state of conservatism, I come before you persuaded that conservatism has failed. We require properly to understand why conservatism has failed in order to understand what our challenge is. I do not say that conservatism has failed in order to be paradoxical. I celebrate, and so many of my colleagues of the last thirty years join me in celebrating, what have been honest victories truly and properly acclaimed over the course of those years. I do not doubt for a moment that our country and our culture are better off for the struggles waged and gained by conservatism.

But there is one respect in which conservatism has failed, and in which we require to rethink what we seek to accomplish. That is the respect I choose to address tonight. Summarizing, I may say, that if conservatism means anything at all, it means restoring a proper estimation of politics, which means again properly subordinating our expectations of politics. If it does not mean that, it does not mean much at all. If it does not promise to restore our confidence in those exertions within our communities and within those intermediating institutions that form our communities as the primary focus of our concern, as area to which we turn when we address the most important questions of our lives, where we seek answers, where we seek authoritative judgments—if conservatism does not mean that, then conservatism does not mean anything.

The one thing that we have not accomplished as yet is that reversal of view. We of the late twentieth century, in the United States and the West at large—whether liberal or conservative—still depend primarily on national politics to answer the most important questions that we confront. That, I submit, is a problem. Why are we in such a situation, and why, in that respect, am I permitted to say that conservatism has failed?

I listened this evening to the re-broadcast remarks of the new President of

Czechoslovakia, Mr. Havel. He made a particularly interesting comment that epigraphically summarizes an important dimension of our failure. He referred to the American Founding Fathers and gave them credit, in his words, for “inspiring us to be citizens.” Very eloquently expressed. He went on to quote Thomas Jefferson, and that passage in the Declaration of Independence, in which Jefferson and his colleagues affirmed the necessity of consent in order that government be legitimate. Havel then added, on his own authority, the reflection that Jefferson did not simply write those words but also spent a lifetime living them out. So understood Havel, concerning not only Jefferson but the Founders in general.

I reflected how truly remarkable this was. Havel’s comment brought the Congress to rising applause, yet, I must tell you that it is a virtual certainty that were you or I to make such a comment the result would be exactly the opposite. You would readily find from every side of the hall cavils about Jefferson’s ownership of slaves, reminders that he never freed his slaves, clichés about the Declaration meaning not “all men” but only “white anglo-saxon protestant males” are created equal! Some wag would surely have quoted Justice Brennan to the effect that the founding was not so extraordinary or, at least, is now only “the dead hand of the past.” Or, Justice Marshall’s followers would chime in that the Founding was actually despicable and not noble, and that, but for the Reconstruction Amendments there would have resulted nothing of value at all!

The truth is, of course, that we know that the American Founding is generally travestied, not only within the American academy but throughout our public institutions. Further, as yet the counter-offense has not succeeded to diminish the effect of that general travesty. Havel spoke with an innocence about the American Founding before the Congress of the United States, in which there sits (I do not doubt for a moment) a majority of members who do not believe what he said about America! They do not believe it, applaud though they may.

How, then, can we account for the fact that we have not yet restored a sound and adequate understanding of the American past? If we mean to guide our futures with recourse, not simply to the general cultural background from which our particular society emerged but also to its particular providences, its own particular experiences and many of those doubtless divinely inspired, then we must become responsible for the account of our past. This is the central concern of my conclusion that conservatism has failed. It has by no means been an absolute failure. Nor does conservatism lack the means ultimately to succeed in this respect—the ability to go back, to recover and to rehearse, will always be within our reach and always of value to us, above all as there remain among us persons who take it as their dedicated goal to lead in that process. We go back not out of a simple love of the past nor from a fear of the future; we go back for sources of strength, that as we proceed forward we lack nothing in the way of strength and resolve to guide us properly toward the end.

This is what we require to do. I wish now to apply it to a particular case. Last November 9th I was in Europe, where for the space of nine or ten days I traveled in Germany and Italy attending conferences. I was present in Germany before the 9th, before the wall

came down. The very events that we discussed at Sharon III back, in 1988 had anticipated this dismantling of the Eastern Empire; we wondered whether we would have the resources in our society to understand what to do in this auspicious moment. The unfolding of this challenge is what I was there to witness in some small way last fall.

I spoke with Germans especially, concerning the events before the wall came down. I realized that, in the midst of their euphoria (and they were euphoric; there is simply no way adequately to describe their excitement. And, remember, the wall had not yet come down; all that had transpired then was that flow of humanity from east to west), they yet had the presence of mind to join me in the reflection, if the Soviets have opened the taps, what is their policy? Why was this course chosen? It would not have been so difficult to close the embassy doors, to barricade the border with Austria! As we reflected we speculated about possible goals in this great moment, and we arrived at a mutual conclusion, namely, that they intended to sell East Germany to the West. When subsequently the wall tumbled, we were completely convinced. There remained a difficulty, however. While we thought they would sell East Germany to the West, we were not at all certain what the price would be.

We imagined ourselves in Gorbachev's shoes and still arrived at no palpable account—an obvious reflection on our own limitations. Now, since that time, the price has become crystal clear. It is, and always was, NATO. We behold a systematic policy undertaking, a gamble to be sure but one the Soviets can no longer avoid (thanks to Ronald Reagan). Nevertheless, this is a gamble in which they prove not to be such poor poker players after all. For, not only is NATO the price—meaning the end of NATO for practical purposes—but it is clear that the United States is prepared to pay that price. Admittedly, there will be many palliations along the way, many qualifications, many attempts to fog the air, to obscure what will happen. But it is already clear now, that our policy entertains the sale of NATO for German unification and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. This will effectively remove the United States as a European power.

What is the relevance of this observation? Immediately, two things occur: the United States returns from Europe and balance of power politics return to Europe. The American presence has been the only instrumentality for the elimination of Europe's prior balance of power politics. There has been no true balance of power politics during the era of superpower politics simply because of the presence of the United States there. When a new common European home is established, it will bring with it a return of balance of power politics. Now, this happens to be a system of relationships and possibilities for which there are adequate examples in the history of Europe and the history of this country's relationship with Europe. It is also the case, therefore, that the decision to pay the price of NATO is not merely a policy decision taken in abstract, but says a good deal about the United States itself and what we imagine the role and future prospects of the United States to be.

I submit that those responsible for making the decision have arrived at this decision with an insufficient appreciation of the uniqueness of the United States. They may, in principle, have accepted arguments, in light of which we may regard the United States

as favored, prosperous, and even unique in the sense that other nations may ultimately imitate some aspects of our society. But I do not believe that they see the United States as possessing particular claims, moral or otherwise, that require us to be more attentive to the risk we run in our dealings with other nations in the world. In short, there is a species of equivalence, not merely as between the United States and the states of Western Europe, but as between the United States and the hoped for democracy in the Soviet Union. We have people whose own judgments, whether within powerful positions or outside in the academy or in journalism or wherever, commonly entertain the thought that there is a legitimate transformation taking place within the Soviet Union, by which the Soviet Union is becoming more pluralistic and more democratic, like us (which you always must add, if you wish to understand what they're talking about), and that this is being done on command. It is being done from the top, down!

Now it may be the case that people totally unfamiliar with the principles that inform the American Founding and the development of the American polity could imagine such a reform taking place. But it would take a total lack of familiarity with the struggles that brought freedom and republicanism into the world, on a solidly established, practical basis for the first time, to think that such a transformation can occur. It is not to deny that one beholds a transformation within the Soviet Union; it is not to deny that a transformation has taken place in Romania, as in Czechoslovakia and Poland and elsewhere. It is, however, seriously to question the judgment of those Americans who believe that what is of principal value in the United States can be recreated so easily elsewhere in the world—and then without the affirmations that were characteristic of the American Founding, namely, that this edifice was erected not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

This is what I mean when I say that we have not yet succeeded in recapturing an appropriate understanding of who we are and whence we derive. For, if we had done so, no one could glibly speak on McNeil-Lehrer of a revolution in the Soviet Union without at least being a little bit ashamed. If we had made the standard of correct opinion, the standard of academic excellence, so clear that no one could speak otherwise without being conscious of running against that clear understanding of what it means to create a free republic, then our discourse would be different today.

That, then, lays out for you the task of leadership that we still confront. The task so to establish a ground of opinion, of salutary understanding of the foundations of republicanism, that it acts itself as a restraint, not only on the hard left (to borrow the term from Ken Crib) but a restraint in general on those easily maintained and asserted opinions that turn out to become on their authority harmful to the perpetuation of this particular way of life.

I use intentionally the expression “way of life.” We do not use it often enough. Therefore, failing to use it, we sometimes come to believe that ways of life are very much matters of chance, matters of happenstance, that we take on and off much the way we do suits of clothing. But that is not so. The principles of self-government demand certain expectations within our common life. One of those expectations is that we do not answer the most important questions of that common life with recourse to political means.

All too often within our own politics we depart from that perspective. We use politics with vague notions of collective interest or collective welfare to impose upon individuals and communities. A simple example may be taken from the story of Albert Ginsberg. He built a 31-story apartment building in Manhattan, adhering to every conceivable regulation and being approved by every committee or commission. He went through the elaborate process only to discover, once his building was standing, that the city had erred. His building actually stood on a site zoned only for 19 stories not 31 stories! The city had drafted its regulations incorrectly, but the cost of the mistake was Mr. Ginsberg's. He litigated his case all the way up to the Supreme Court of the United States and lost at every turn. The city could do no wrong; the planning commission that somehow addressed itself to a collective interest in the appearance of the city as a whole overrode not only Ginsberg's property interest but also his good faith effort to comply in every detail with whatever was required of him. This is a very mild example of things that we daily entertain and endure, within our own society, and that are utterly incompatible with any honest defense of liberty.

Part of the notion of recapturing the Founding spirit; part of the idea of reminding ourselves how uniquely established this America was, is not simply to enable us to respond to the various collectivists from abroad, but also to fend off those quiet and subtle intrusions here at home. I have thrice sworn the oath to uphold and defend the laws and Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Most people do not remember that the authors of that oath were wise enough to recognize that enemies were not just foreign. Our ability to respond to domestic enemies lies very much within our preparation, our sense of understanding, our carrying with us constantly an orientation from which we derive strength. If the Founders could inspire Vaclav Havel to be a citizen, how much more might they not bring citizenship to mean to us. That is the challenge we yet face as conservatives, to recognize that unless we articulate an American citizenship on grounds compatible with all the hopes of that American Founding, and capable of being transmitted yet to posterity, we have not succeeded. That is the ultimate test for us.

I invite you, then, as you continue your deliberations, to bear this test in mind, to recognize that leadership not only entails the willingness to stand forth and speak when the hour comes—when we are called—but also it entails that long period of preparation, in which we undertake personally the responsibility to see that, when we are called, we will not stumble, we will not mutter. We will boldly and articulately set forth claims that deserve the respect not only of our fellow citizens but all of humanity.

What is the state of conservatism? It is, I hope, penitent and prayerful. For we have much to repent and much more to pray for.