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Why conservatism doesn't work

If you want to read one article that says it all, that explains why American conservatism is bankrupt and always has been, read this article in the *Washington Monthly* by Alan Wolfe, "[Why Conservatives Can't Govern.](#)"

For years I have tried to teach courses in public philosophy and public policy in balanced ways that was fair to conservative ideas and ideals, all the while knowing that at bottom conservatism today is founded on myths and fantasies about the market and the individual that just don't stand up to scrutiny.

I have also known that the American public, despite its "no more taxes" faith wants government that works. The conservatives also know this. The polls show this ad nauseum.

As Wolfe says, "A conservative, in short, is someone who advocates ends that cannot be realized through means that can never be justified, at least not on the terrain of conservatism itself."

Well said, and deadly accurate.

What he means by this is that American conservatism has always been a philosophy of reaction, a longing after either a lost world of feudal privilege, or agrarian order, or the protection of great power in the trusts, or a belief in a small federal government in the face of the Great Depression, WWII, and the post-War era. When Goldwater put his conservative individualism on the line, in black and white, American conservatism nearly disappeared forever.

What conservatives came up with is a party that harvested anger and resentment covered with the fig leaf of "no more taxes." And when the schools started failing and the inner cities started boiling over and the corporations despoiled the environment, the conservatives came up with the politics of distraction.

Wolfe's article creates a problem for all those like me who are under the gun to be "fair" and "balanced." Wolfe's thesis is devastating and he has a book coming out in September that promises to be a much fuller exposition of his point.

I think Wolfe points to a way to attack conservatism: No matter what conservatives say they know they can never win power unless they promise to solve problems in America. They say they want lower taxes but what they really want is really lower taxes for the really rich who will bankroll their elections and continued government spending, generating deficits and debt that is staggering.

Conservatives say they want Medicare prescription drugs. Not one single conservative said, "Let the elderly take care of their own prescription drugs. We've done enough for them" That would have been political suicide.

So what do they do? They strip the government of power to negotiate lower drug prices, hand the administration of the program over to the red-tape hell of insurance companies, and offer the retirees a blinding array of choices that no one can explain with a straight face. The result is one of the most expensive government programs in American history.

They say they want to create individual accounts for Social Security when it is plain what they want to do is pour billions of dollars into the pocket of Wall Street and they really don't care if Social Security is unraveled or ruined. Let someone else clean up the mess.

They say they want to make us safe from terrorism so they embody classic conservative approaches to running a war. They proceed unilaterally without the support of our key allies and thus embrace an America First faith. They spend not

one minute on planning the task of governing an occupied nation; God forbid they would use government, good solid experts, to help the Iraqis get back on their feet.

What they did was hire an army of private contractors, spending money hand over fist, to make sure that when election time comes, they will be amply rewarded.

And with disaster protection, they take one of the best small agencies in government, FEMA under Bill Clinton, and run it into the ground with political hacks and then blame everyone else for their failures.

And they used K Street to turn over important functions of government to wealthy and corrupt lobbyists, corrupting Congress along the way.

Words fail.

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I think you have a point that true conservatism is dead in today's world. Implementing a truly conservative government is impossible. That being said, many of the concepts held dear by conservatives do have a place in government today.

Issues like limited government and fiscal responsibility are extremely important right now, but unfortunately are not being represented by the conservatives in power. Simply because good ideas have failed to be implemented properly does not make them bad ideas.

On the other hand having a conservative government means giving up much of what we take for granted at the moment. It requires an educated population that is intent on caring for itself. The national mindset required for such a government to work is, in my opinion, completely out of reach.

So yes conservatives are a bit ridiculous; most of them could not survive in the world they strive for. However, I don't think this justifies dismissing the entire ideology. The second you fall into the "I'm right and everyone who disagrees with me is wrong" mindset, you have lost your ability to be objective.

And to be fair the liberals are not exactly fantastic either (they are guilty of some of the same crimes you charge the conservatives with). Why anyone would choose to align themselves with either of the two major political parties in this country is beyond me. Regardless of where you stand politically, most people agree the government can and should be doing drastically better.

Posted by: Aaron | [January 24, 2010 at 05:48 PM](#)



For those of you who have given up on solving the Human Dilemma, and it's continuing unresolved human problems, I refer you to the content at website: www.worldtransformation.com. Therein is the knowledge upon which a revolutionary new paradigm is presented, for what it is to be a human in this present day.

Posted by: Robert V. Achen | [May 23, 2010 at 12:03 PM](#)

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