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The Pillars of Modern American Conservatism

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Over the past half century, conservatism has become the dominant political philosophy in the United States. Newspaper and television political news stories more often than not will mention the word *conservative*. Almost every Republican running for office—whether for school board or U.S. senator—will try to establish his place on the political spectrum based on how conservative he is. Even Democrats sometimes distinguish among members of their own party in terms of conservatism.

Although conservatism as we know it today is a relatively new movement—it emerged after World War II and only became a political force in the 1960s—it is based on ideas that are as old as Western civilization itself. The intellectual foundations on which this movement has been built stretch back to antiquity, were further developed during the Middle Ages and in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, and were ultimately formulated into a coherent political philosophy at the time of the founding of the United States. In a real sense, conservatism is Western civilization.

The basic foundations of American conservatism can be boiled down to four fundamental concepts. We might call them the four pillars of modern conservatism:

The first pillar of conservatism is liberty, or freedom. Conservatives believe that individuals possess the right to life, liberty, and property, and freedom from the restrictions of arbitrary force. They exercise these rights through the use of their natural free will. That means the ability to follow your own dreams, to do what you want to (so long as you don't harm others) and reap the rewards (or face the penalties). Above all, it means freedom from oppression by government—and the protection of government against oppression. It means political liberty, the freedom to speak your mind on matters of public policy. It means religious liberty—to worship as you please, or not to worship at all. It also means economic liberty, the freedom to own property and to allocate your own resources in a free market.

Conservatism is based on the idea that the pursuit of virtue is the purpose of our existence and that liberty is an essential component of the pursuit of virtue. Adherence to virtue is also a necessary condition of the pursuit of freedom. In other words, freedom must be pursued for the common good, and when it is abused for the benefit of one group at the expense of others, such abuse must be checked. Still, confronted with a choice of more security or more liberty, conservatives will usually opt for more liberty.

The second pillar of conservative philosophy is tradition and order. Conservatism is also about conserving the values that have been established over centuries and that have led to an orderly society. Conservatives believe in human nature; they believe in the ability of man to build a society that respects rights and that has the capacity to repel the forces of evil. Order means a systematic and harmonious arrangement, both within one's own character and within the commonwealth. It signifies the performance of certain duties and the enjoyment of certain rights within a community.

Order is perhaps more easily understood by looking at its opposite: *disorder*. A disordered existence is a confused and miserable existence. If a society falls into general disorder, many of its members will cease

to exist at all. And if the members of a society are disordered in spirit, the outward order of society cannot long endure. Disorder describes well everything that conservatism is *not*.

The third pillar is the rule of law. Conservatism is based on the belief that it is crucial to have a legal system that is predictable, that allows people to know what the rules are and enforce those rules equally for all. This means that both governors and the governed are subject to the law. The rule of law promotes prosperity and protects liberty. Put simply, a government of laws and not of men is the only way to secure justice.

The fourth pillar is belief in God. Belief in God means adherence to the broad concepts of religious faith—such things as justice, virtue, fairness, charity, community, and duty. These are the concepts on which conservatives base their philosophy.

Conservative belief is tethered to the idea that there is an allegiance to God that transcends politics and that sets a standard for politics. For conservatives, there must be an authority greater than man, greater than any ruler, king, or government: no state can demand our absolute obedience or attempt to control every aspect of our lives. There must be a moral order, conservatives believe, that undergirds political order. This pillar of conservatism does *not* mean mixing up faith and politics, and it certainly does *not* mean settling religious disputes politically. It also does *not* mean that conservatives have a monopoly on faith, or even that all conservatives are necessarily believers.

Each of the four pillars is closely related to all the others. Liberty, for example, is considered a gift of God and must be protected by the rule of law. The rule of law itself is dependent on the natural law—a transcendent law reflected in every orderly and civilized society, demarcating good and evil. Tradition and order are best reflected by our common law—a law developed over centuries by reasonable people in their everyday lives, which sets the rules for social order consistent with the past. And tradition is an important dimension of belief in God. What could demonstrate tradition and order more fully, for example, than the Old Testament and the history of the Jewish people, or the doctrines of the Christian Church?

The Four Cities

Another way of understanding these four pillars is to see them in terms of the historical origins of the conservative tradition. Russell Kirk, who is probably the preeminent conservative scholar of the twentieth century, often spoke of the four cities in which the foundations of Western civilization—and so, of conservatism—were laid: Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London. Our own Philadelphia in the late eighteenth century can then be seen to represent the culmination of a great tradition.

The first city is Jerusalem, where the concept of a transcendent order originated—the understanding that true law comes from God and that God is the source of order and justice. From Jerusalem came one of the most essential ideas of conservatism—that man does not have all the answers, that there is a

power greater than man to which we owe our lives and everything that is good. The Hebrews in the Old Testament taught that God made a covenant or compact with His people; He decreed laws by which they should live, and from that revelation we eventually developed modern ethics and modern law. The idea of a compact forms the very basis of our modern political order.

The second city is Athens, where the ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle, described the basis of the social order—what was required for people to live together and to thrive in society. Ethics and politics are, they believed, at the root of man's existence: ethics is what establishes one's character, and politics is the means by which human beings can achieve the good life. Aristotle, whose writings have had a profound influence on conservative thought, understood the needs of the individual and his relationship to community. Man is a political animal, he taught, and only recognizes his talents and how to use them for the common good if he is part of a community. The Greek philosophers, however, added nothing to the argument for liberty; in fact, Greek philosophy tended to advocate total subjugation of the individual by the state.

The third city in this progression is Rome, where we learn of the highest form of government, the *republic*, and the use of the separation of powers and checks and balances for the control of political power. Rome also provided the very idea of the rule of law—how law was necessary to preserve order and liberty, and how it needed to be reliable and consistent. Until the Roman republic collapsed, Roman statesmen such as Cato and Cicero also taught us about virtue as a necessary restraint on the passions of men, vital for the preservation of liberty. The Roman Empire, which followed the republic, taught little about individual liberty, of course, but a great deal about the use, and abuse, of power.

Finally there is London, where the teachings that helped to establish the foundations of modern conservatism stretched from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century and beyond. The foundation was laid by the Magna Carta in 1215 and evolved into the concept of the common law and the idea that the law applies equally to all, whether the king or the lowliest commoner. The Magna Carta and the common law also taught the concept of the permanence of the law—the principle of the supremacy of law, meaning that an enduring law exists and must be obeyed by all men.

William Blackstone, a professor at Oxford and later a judge, published his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* in 1765; he argued in that massive work that natural law was the basis of all law and was rooted in Christian ethics, and he declared that man had innate rights to personal security, to personal liberty, and to private property. But Blackstone also argued that these rights were not absolute. In society, you had to give up certain rights as the price for the mutual commerce that you enjoyed. Call it a social contract; it is a fundamental doctrine of American politics and central to conservative philosophy.

The influence that British political thinkers had on conservative philosophy could fill many books. Among those whose thought is central to conservative philosophy are John Locke, John Stuart Mill, David Hume, and most important, Edmund Burke.

Burke was Irish, a member of the House of Commons, and is probably the closest thing we have to the intellectual father of modern American conservatism. Among his most important contributions to conservative philosophy are his views about the wisdom of tradition and order. He believed that the wisdom of any one individual is minuscule compared with the collective wisdom accumulated by our ancestors over the centuries.

To Burke, habit, instinct, custom, faith, reverence, prejudice—the accumulated practical knowledge acquired through experience—is more important than abstract speculation. Tradition, in other words, is vital for a good society. And if laws are reasonable, Burke believed, the benefit of the security they provide compensates for any diminishment of an otherwise abstractly “perfect” freedom. It is not law and tradition as such that are to be feared, but *arbitrary* laws and *arbitrary* government. Burke also taught that the most important political virtue is prudence—the art of calculating the eventual results of policies, of avoiding extremes, of shunning haste.

The Philadelphia Experiment

The ideas that came from Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London were all alive in the minds of the men who gathered in a fifth city, Philadelphia, in 1776 and again in 1787, in order to draft, debate, and eventually adopt the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Our Founders had studied the Bible; they had read the classics and the British political writers; they knew the history of Western civilization. Weaving together the best elements of that tradition, they formed what would endure as the greatest experiment in the history of a political community founded on the concepts of liberty, morality, and justice. In this way, our American Founders were also the founders of the American conservative cause.

The Declaration of Independence dissolved the relationship between the American people and Great Britain and established a new, sovereign nation—the United States of America. The Declaration set out the moral vision of the new nation and articulated a theory of what a legitimate government should be. It then spoke in quite specific terms about how Britain had violated those principles.

Many of the early Americans had left Europe because they had been oppressed and wanted the freedom promised in the New World. They wanted to worship as they saw fit, to speak their minds, and to earn a living freely. But over the years, British rule began to undermine American liberty. The Declaration lists twenty-eight abuses by the king—taxation without consent, denial of trial by jury, denial of religious liberty, freedom of speech, and more. The social contract had been broken—by the king—so the colonists declared that they owed no further allegiance to him.

The Declaration’s most memorable passage encapsulates the most basic beliefs of our Founders:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Here the Founders are affirming that natural law is a higher law than that made by men, one that establishes the difference between right and wrong. The Declaration goes on to say that to secure our God-given rights, “governments are instituted by men”—in other words, natural law is the foundation on which all legitimate man-made law is built. It then says that the only legitimate governments are those that operate by the consent of the governed, and that the governed have a right—again, God-given—to change the government or abolish it.

Put another way, the Declaration says there is no divine right of kings, no absolute power of government. Instead, all rightful power in government derives only from the people. The Declaration makes it clear that we are born with these rights, which means that every person has equal rights. The only legitimate function of a government is to secure these rights, and, again, only with the consent of the people. So the Declaration limits the power of the government not once but twice: once by its purpose or *ends* (the securing of rights) and once by its function or *means* (our consent).

Eleven years later, the U.S. Constitution was drafted and ratified by the thirteen states. The Constitution was designed to be the supreme law of the land—the law that constructed a new government and spelled out how it would work. The Constitution reflects the principles of the Declaration. The dilemma the Founders faced was how to create a government that would be powerful enough to protect the rights affirmed by the Declaration from both internal and external threats while also providing sufficient checks and balances so the new government would not have so much power as to overrun those rights.

The Constitution establishes the three branches of the federal government—the executive, the legislative, and the judicial—and delimits the powers of each. It sets forth the role of the states, recognizing in the states a power to do things that the federal government is not specifically tasked with doing. It gives the citizens of the United States various ways of protecting themselves against abuses of government power. It clearly enumerates the powers of the federal government and gives it none that are not enumerated.

The Constitution also establishes a powerful system of checks and balances so that no branch of government would become too powerful. First, through the doctrine of the separation of powers, each of the three branches checks the power of the other two. For example, there are two houses of Congress that must agree on any legislation. Any bill passed by Congress must then be signed by the president to become law. The president can also reject the legislation through a veto, though Congress has the power to override his veto by a supermajority. And the courts can review anything that either Congress or the executive branch does and rule it unconstitutional, outside the scope of the law. To further limit federal power, the Constitution establishes the idea of federalism by recognizing the legitimate powers of the states and insisting that all power not specifically granted to the federal government belongs to the states.

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, taken together, were the work not of a moment, an hour, or even a lifetime, but of two thousand years of Western thought, political struggle,

and hard-won knowledge about political power and the pursuit of liberty. These two documents have rightly been called the most perfect, and most successful, conservative documents in the history of the world. Consider how these two founding documents of the United States reflect the four pillars of conservative thought:

First is the concept of liberty, and the necessity of protecting liberty from the abuses of state power. The Founders recognized that government was necessary but also recognized that unless its powers are strictly limited, government can threaten the freedoms it was established to protect. The Bill of Rights ensured that our most essential liberties could never be infringed by the U.S. government.

Second is the rule of law. To protect the freedoms recognized by the Constitution, a fixed and certain rule of law was necessary. As the Founders saw it, a system in which the ruling power could alter the Constitution and the law as it pleased, and thus expand the scope of its authority, was a system in which freedom was always imperiled. Thus, in America, there can be no rule by arbitrary decrees, and justice is settled by fixed rules and duly authorized judges. The Constitution can be amended, but to do so is an arduous and cumbersome process that requires both houses of the Congress to approve the amendment by a two-thirds majority, and three-quarters of the states need approve as well. So the Constitution was the ultimate bedrock law of the land, providing certainty and predictability to the American people, the safety of the rule of law.

And third is order and tradition. The Constitution was the culmination of nearly two thousand years of Western civilization and Western thought. Further, the Founders recognized that government was needed to provide defense, administer justice, and otherwise supply a zone of order in which people could safely go about their business. The Constitution established the idea of continuity and stability of leadership, and provided an orderly process for choosing leaders, making laws, and administering the new republic.

And finally, belief in God. Both documents reflect the great reverence of the Founders and their understanding of the Bible. The Declaration of Independence opens by proclaiming that men are “endowed by their Creator” with certain rights, continues by speaking of “the laws of nature and nature’s God,” and ends with an appeal to “the Supreme Judge of the World.” The Constitution, although less explicit, recognizes the liberties discussed in the Declaration and protects them as almost sacred. The Constitution’s Bill of Rights also makes religious liberty our “first freedom,” reflecting the Founders’ view that the free exercise of religion would have a positive effect on the workings of government. Sadly, the Founders’ concept of religious liberty has now been turned on its head by a grossly errant Supreme Court.

It is no wonder that many conservatives now call themselves *constitutional conservatives*, why the Tea Party has adopted the Constitution as its standard text, and why the conservative legal community has resurrected the Constitution as its fundamental document. The Constitution sets forth the basic tenets of modern American conservatism in clear and unambiguous language; it is brief but complete, and still stands as the bedrock of American conservatism. If you are ever asked what conservatism in

America stands for, you can say it stands for what is in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and you will have given as good an answer as possible.

Postwar Conservatism

How, then, are these principles reflected in the conservative movement as it rose to prominence over the past half century? In 1945, as World War II drew to a close, America was culturally a conservative country but politically not conservative at all. Government had grown to dominate the economy through both wartime emergency measures and the programs of the New Deal. All three branches of government were controlled by left-leaning Democrats. Communist Russia had been our ally during the war, and “Uncle Joe” Stalin was still considered a benevolent figure. Our other major ally, Great Britain, was largely a socialist state. Opinion makers were pretty much in agreement concerning politics and economics. In short, the liberals were in control.

But within a few years after 1945, conservative intellectuals began to speak out about what they viewed as a dangerous drift of the United States toward socialism. First of all, there were *libertarian economists*, led by Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, who defended the virtues of capitalism. Hayek argued that socialism was the road to serfdom. Only free-market economics could rebuild Europe and enable the U.S. to combat the growing Communist threat from Russia. These libertarians advocated limited government instead of socialism, self-reliance instead of the welfare state, private property and entrepreneurship instead of central planning. Chaos, they wrote, was the only real alternative to a free economy—chaos and global poverty.

A second group of thinkers believed that the primary threat to the West was the spread of Communism, advancing from both the Soviet Union and China, which exerted their influence geopolitically and also attempted to subvert the American way of life internally. Communism represented everything abhorrent to Western values: it was tyrannical, radical, socialistic, and atheist. It used terror, deceit, and subversion to achieve its ends and was determined to force its ideology on the rest of the world. Communism’s goals included the destruction of tradition and order in the rest of the world, and it routinely defied the rule of law.

Conservative *anti-Communists* also believed that liberalism was a progenitor of Communism. Because liberalism and Communism shared the same substantive goals, liberalism was more often than not complicit in Communism’s spread. These conservatives were appalled at the peace settlement that followed World War II, particularly the fact that most of Eastern Europe had been handed to the Soviet Union by Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. They were concerned about the problems they anticipated from the growing strength of Soviet Russia, the fall of China to Communism, and the lack of will on the part of American liberals to stand up to the Communists. They were also concerned about internal security—the fact that the federal government had been infiltrated by Communist agents and other leftists to the detriment of our national interest. The anti-Communist movement

became a mainstay of American conservatism and attracted more people than any other part of the movement.

A third group was concerned with the need to maintain American values. They were focused on tradition and faith and the preservation of Western civilization and culture. They saw a growing threat from permissiveness and vulgarity. They believed in ethics and honor, in the importance of the church, and in the need for traditional education and higher learning. In short, they were concerned about the decline of the West, and they thought the way to reverse that decline was through an appeal to tradition and order. Among these *traditionalists* were writers such as Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley Jr., and Richard Weaver.

None of the three groups of postwar conservative thinkers was concerned with ideas merely as an academic exercise. Instead, they advanced practical ideas that challenged the status quo. They wanted their ideas to change the world. They lamented what had happened to the United States, and indeed to the rest of the world, during the first half of the twentieth century. They believed that cultural and political liberalism was at odds with American ideals at home and abroad, and saw that liberalism's assaults on individual liberties, limited government, free markets, and Western culture ran counter to everything they believed in.

Over the next fifteen years, many of the conservatives who would dominate the stage for the balance of the twentieth century developed their views through books, articles, and lectures. In the process, they set the stage for the upsurge in conservative politics that would follow. By the early 1960s, conservative organizations were being formed, magazines and book-publishing companies were organized, and the beginnings of a "movement" emerged. In 1964 Barry Goldwater, a Republican senator from Arizona and the country's most popular conservative politician, was nominated to head the Republican ticket for president. Although he lost, his campaign solidified the conservative movement politically, introduced thousands of young conservatives to national politics, and transformed the Republican Party from a middle-of-the-road party dominated by Easterners into a more conservative party largely dominated by the South and West.

It is important to understand the driving force that compelled American conservatives to become practically engaged in the worlds of politics, education, the courts, the culture—namely, the force of *reaction*. Conservatives believed they had no choice but to fight against what was happening in their country and in the world, and what was happening was largely the result, in one way or another, of the Left. Things were going wrong and needed to be fixed: the advance of Communism, the expansion of the welfare state, overregulation of free-market capitalism, the growing power of labor unions, activism in the courts, sexual permissiveness, crime, the breakdown of the family, the deterioration of the schools and of the churches. What the Left saw as progress, conservatives saw as decline—and in reaction they searched for practical solutions.

During the next two decades—the 1960s and '70s—conservatives became increasingly influential in politics, conservative organizations grew, financial resources were developed, new periodicals were

founded, and a vibrant youth movement in colleges and universities became prominent. In 1980 Republicans nominated, and subsequently elected, Ronald Reagan, the most conservative politician ever to have reached national standing in American politics.

American conservatism had emerged as an intellectual movement in the 1950s, had become a political movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and then, with President Reagan, a governing movement in the 1980s. Along the way, the conservative movement built a coherent philosophy that still exists today. And it is no exaggeration to say that most of today's prominent conservatives—whether politicians, academics, activists, donors, or writers—got their start, in one way or another, working for Ronald Reagan.

Standing Firm

While the particular issues we face today may be different from those of the past, the four pillars of modern American conservatism remain robust. Conservatives universally advocate a return to limited government, for as Ronald Reagan used to say, a government that can give you everything you want can also take away everything you have. Conservatives advocate free market capitalism, less regulation of economic activity, and fiscal responsibility. They also favor entrepreneurship and lower taxes to spur economic growth. Conservatives work to restrain activist judges in an effort to restore the rule of law.

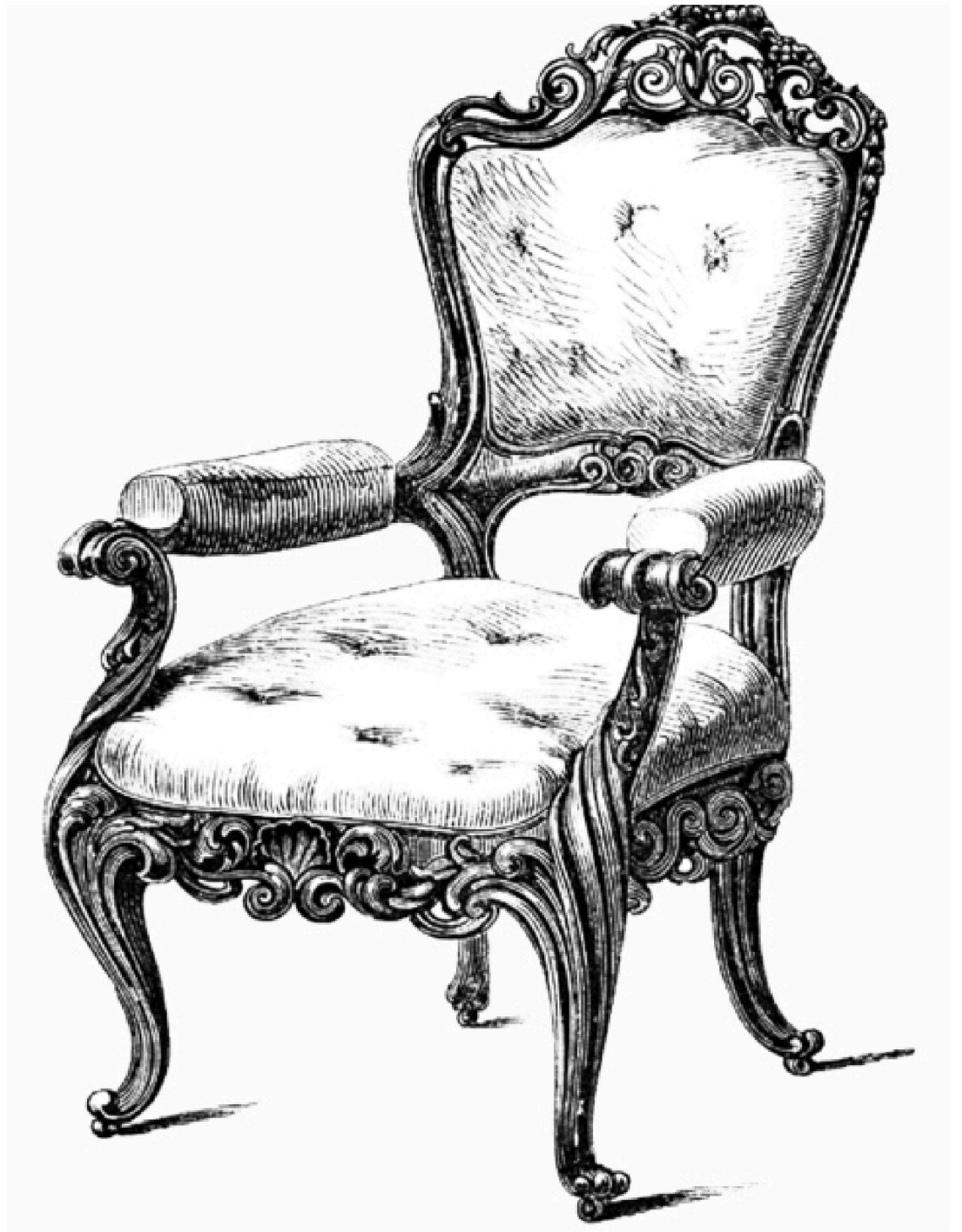
Social conservatives today work to shore up family values. They oppose abortion, same-sex marriage, and sexual permissiveness. They also advocate strengthening traditional standards in education, and a larger role for religious faith in public life.

On foreign policy issues, conservatives have recently been divided. Traditionally, conservatives have believed that war should be avoided if at all possible but that a strong national defense is nevertheless vital. Peace through strength, if you will. But a new strand of conservatives joined the movement in the 1970s and 1980s: the so-called neoconservatives. Many of these were former Democrats, liberals on domestic policy but anti-Communists and hawks who made common cause with other conservatives toward the end of the Cold War. Neoconservatives tend to be more willing to use military power for purposes other than simply defending American interests.

Still, there are really no clear lines of demarcation between the different branches of conservatism, and in fact most conservatives don't fit neatly into one or another camp. Almost always there are enough genuine similarities in outlook such that, wherever they come from, conservatives can usually work together for the broader cause. As long as we remain faithful to the four pillars of conservatism, the order of liberty, morality, and justice that we have built will stand firm.

Alfred S. Regnery has served on the ISI board since 2002. He is the former publisher of The American Spectator, a monthly journal of politics and culture. Previously he was the president and publisher of Regnery Publishing, Inc., the firm founded in 1947 by his father, Henry Regnery, who was formerly Chairman of the ISI Board. Mr. Regnery served in the Department of Justice during the Reagan Administration, as counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee and has practiced law in Washington and in the Midwest. He is a graduate of Beloit College and the University of Wisconsin Law School.





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