

well be living in a time akin to the breakup of the Roman Empire, when people stopped believing in what you might call the main organizing principle of their society and instead pioneered new forms of community in which to live out the moral life. He raised St. Benedict of Nursia, the father of European monasticism (and indeed, in many ways of Europe) as an example of the kind of figure we need now.

I'm not as pessimistic as MacIntyre, not yet at least, but I find my political imagination engaged by the prospect of a revived Benedictinism in our time. I'm not talking about a neo-Amish quietism but instead about forming loose associations of tradition-minded folks committed to living out the virtues in community, as much as we are able, and building local communities with our time, our labor, and our consumer dollars. Buying your meat directly from a local farmer might just be a more noble and useful political act than writing a check to the GOP. The work my politically liberal friend David Spence does in Dallas—buying abandoned historic properties in the inner city and restor-

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ing them lovingly for office and residential space—strikes me as one of the most authentically conservative things anybody in the country is doing. There is nothing ideological about it, either, but to grasp the real meaning of what David is doing, and what the Hale and Hutchins families—Christian fundamentalist farm families who raise meat organically, as they believe God intended—are doing out in rural east Texas, you have to think beyond superficial ideological categories.

Absent some catastrophe, American politics at the macro level will no doubt lumber along on its present dreary course. Real change will happen at the margins, where creative thinkers can emerge. Here's hoping that in the months and years to come, those of us, Christians and otherwise, who might be thought of as Friends of St. Benedict will find each other and figure out practical ways to preserve the traditional moral life and to strengthen communal bonds against an atomizing, hedonistic, and alienating popular culture—and against two political parties—that seeks, however unwittingly in the case of many conservatives, to sever us from our roots. ■

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**Mary Eberstadt** The Republican Party today is riven by two particular issues with which *American Conservative* readers are more familiar than many other citizens: the war in Iraq and the ongoing fact of illegal immigration. Yet neither division of opinion on the Right, I would argue, spells the end of the conservative/liberal divide as we know it.

First, and contrary to what is often asserted, neither immigration nor the war in Iraq can be settled by appeal to conservative first principles of any stripe. Consider Iraq. The ostensible justification for the war—removal of a perceived threat to the United States in the form of an implacably hostile dictator who had already demonstrated willingness and ability to use weapons of mass destruction against enemies—was one to which liberals as well as conservatives could sign on. And so many did.

The war may yet prove to be a tragic mistake. It may yet go down in history as the definitive refutation of the subspecies of conservative foreign-policy ideas known as “democratism.” On the other hand, it may also yet prove, as proponents argue it will, to have a salutary effect on other governments in the region, working in the long run to America's benefit. However it is ultimately judged by posterity, the war in Iraq is not, and cannot properly be called, a conservative war. It was dictated and justified in the first instance not by political principles but by an extra-ideological perception (correct or incorrect) of imminent threat. Thus the war, controversial though it is, does not re-draw the red-blue state divide that exists independently of it and for other reasons.

Similarly, the conservative division over immigration does not spell the end of that same divide, either. There is nothing intrinsic to the traditions of conservative thought in any form—whether the Founding Fathers, Edmund Burke, Abraham Lincoln, Whittaker Chambers, Russell Kirk, writers of Catholic or evangelical or libertarian bent, or indeed in any other right-leaning thinker of note—to settle what will always be a perplexing question: how is a nation of immigrants to draw the line on other immigrants? It is a difficult question, perhaps even an impossible question; but there is no intrinsically conservative (or liberal) answer to it.

Does a conservative welcome the work ethic and overall traditionalism of the Mexican migrant, thus pressing for laws that make legal immigration less restrictive—or does he build a wall in the name of conserving what is already here? Of course it is considered more conservative than liberal to argue for simply applying the law. But at a time when it is exactly the question of which law is best for the country, the enforcement principle is of limited utility as any ultimate political guide. Thus this question of what to do about illegal immigration, like that of the rightness or wrongness of the war in Iraq, is fundamentally extra-ideological. So

here too, we see no evidence for the demise of the liberal-conservative distinction.

On the other hand, if we look beyond these two particular issues in dispute, we see enduring reasons for conservatism—as opposed perhaps to the current Republican Party’s—ongoing ideological and moral appeal to many millions, indeed to judge by numerous polls a plurality, of Americans. After all, despite real disenchantment among many on the Right, the overall conservative realignment of the United States remains one of the biggest political stories of the past quarter century. Whatever the particular fortunes of the Republican Party one year, two years, or five years hence, the United States as a whole, as a torrent of polls confirms, as progressives foreign and domestic regularly complain, and as the red and blue map makes unforgettably clear, has plainly moved Right.

Thus, in one sense, it is tempting to answer the question of whether conservatism and liberalism as such still exist as Samuel Johnson is said to have refuted Bishop Berkeley’s subjective idealism by kicking a stone: i.e., by pointing to the color chart and leave it at that. More interesting, though, is to ask why this strength continues despite the contemporary disputes that are otherwise dividing the Right.

Having just concluded editing and writing for a forthcoming anthology called *Why I Turned Right*, in which a dozen thinkers representing conservative institutions and magazines explain what led them away from liberalism and centrism and toward their current positions in what is generally called the conservative world of ideas, I can sketch at least some version of an answer based on the common denominators of these converts’ tales.

First, conservatism and liberalism continue to exist, in one sense, because the *New York Times* and its allies everywhere say so; i.e., “they” know their adversaries when they see them, and that means “us.”

## “Conservatism continues and is only as strong as its positive rather than negative visions.”

Second, the binary divide also exists as long as the phrase “pro-life liberal” remains an oxymoron. For though not all conservatives are pro-life, nearly all pro-lifers have come to see themselves, and are seen by others, as “conservative” in some usable sense of the word. And so they are, if only by default. They simply haven’t anywhere else to go.

Third, the binary divide also exists as long as the universities, especially the elite universities, continue to exile sanity and tenure illogic and turn otherwise apolitical people against political correctness; that is how some converts to the Right are first pulled in.

Fourth—and this is a guarded point at a time when what is called the natural family is as perilous as it is today—conservatism as we know it exists in part because people as we know them reproduce. “I became a conservative at 11:59 pm on December 4th, 1997, the way many people become conservatives,” as contributor P.J. O’Rourke puts it in a formulation that will resonate with many. “I became a parent.”

If there is a mini-moral here, it appears to be that conservatism continues and is only as strong as its positive rather than negative visions. Of course there remains much to depress any observer, conservative or otherwise, about the current scene. But as to whether a fundamental realignment of our binary political code has been worked, I believe the evidence for now at least shows otherwise. Admittedly, conservatism for now trumps contemporary liberalism partly by default—but that is still a win, if not the most satisfactory one. ■

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**Nick Gillespie** As a small-“l” libertarian—a believer in “free minds and free markets” (to quote my magazine’s tagline), open immigration, civil liberties, educational and reproductive choice, gun rights, pluralism, noninterventionist foreign policy, drug legalization, gay marriage, and perhaps most scandalously of all, a world of meaning far beyond politics in which people are generally free to pursue individual and communal happiness on something approaching their own terms—it’s hard to get too worked up over whether the terms “liberal” and “conservative” mean much anymore. This is sort of like trying to decide whether Razzles are really a candy or a gum: it’s drawing a distinction that doesn’t amount to much of a difference. From the first bite to the last, you still end up with a bad taste in your mouth.

At least since the reign of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, American politics have been marked by a broad consensus that the role and scope of government should be big and bigger. This consensus, reflected most clearly in the upward trajectory of public spending at all levels and the willingness of politicians to insinuate themselves via legislation, regulation, and moral grandstanding into every aspect of our lives, is so pervasive that the supposed great gutter of government, Ronald Reagan, described himself—accurately—as a New Deal Democrat. To be sure, liberals and conservatives—and their political proxies, the Democrats and Republicans—have sometimes differed in the ends toward which