

think you are in danger. But how can you be courageous? Light has come to me lately: the term is an acknowledgement of the truth. Mr. Truman was brave because, and only because, what he did was so bad. But I think the judgment unsound. Given the right circumstances (e.g., that no one whose opinion matters will disapprove), a quite mediocre person can do spectacularly wicked things without thereby becoming impressive.

Where would we be without women? Men don't like the truth about modern war, which is that it is often both criminal and cowardly. The rot began in World War II when, abandoning all civilized rules of conduct, we terrorized and murdered hundreds of thousands of German and Japanese civilians by using so-called conventional weapons. Then we developed a way of using nuclear power to kill even more people but at less risk to ourselves. Risk-free war is what we now crave, with the almost invariable result that—despite the skill and courage of the poor bloody infantry—more civilians than combatants die when the drums begin to roll. The smart bombs we drop from drones operated from Kissimmee, or wherever, are seldom clever enough to distinguish between a terrorist training camp and a bunch of whirling dervishes at a folk wedding.

The truth is that man is no longer civilized enough to wage war. It's why we lost in Vietnam and Iraq. It is why we will lose in Afghanistan. War doesn't work. "[W]ar is the worst solution for all sides," said Pope Benedict XVI in August 2006. "It brings no good to anyone, not even to the apparent victors. We understand this very well in Europe, after the two world wars." ■

Stuart Reid writes from London.

Right Reflections

Conservatism should oppose the liberal state without becoming statist.

By David Bromwich

CONSERVATISM MAY HAVE given up too much when it became an -ism. "A disposition to preserve," wrote Edmund Burke, "and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman. Everything else is vulgar in the conception, perilous in the execution." He never called himself conservative. The adjective and the noun both came into English too late for that. Yet synonyms were available, and Burke did not make use of those, either.

Ability, as he saw it, was an expression of active energy—not always a good thing. Disposition, on the other hand, is fixed. It never goes anywhere. So Burke distrusted energy in politics—distrusted (you might say) people and countries that want to be on the move. The last sentence of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* turns from its ostensible subject and alludes to the British Empire and its crimes. This book, he tells the French politician for whom he has written it, is the work of one "who snatches from his share in the endeavours which are used by good men to discredit opulent oppression, the hours he has employed on your affairs; and who in doing so persuades himself he has not departed from his usual office." *Opulent oppression*: as if riches sometimes did things other than buoy up a well-earned mass of property.

"A disposition to preserve" is the central intuition of many Americans who call themselves libertarians. Some of them also call themselves conservatives, but if they say that word, they

know they will spend the afternoon in explanation. Their perception is that you should not have to earn the right to live unmolested. The main harm of property would seem to be its encouragement of self-conceit, but though wary of the danger, the creed of liberty is to live and let live without resentment. The broadness of so simple an appeal is a tremendous political resource, and it makes the libertarian the natural antagonist of people who like to be up and doing things—for themselves, for others. The distinction of person is immaterial, the point is to keep going. But it is shallow to think of such people as liberals. They descend from a timeless party of improvers, and there is goodwill in their energy. Even virtue, however, needs some check.

"I do not like to see," said Burke, "any thing destroyed; any void produced in society; any ruin on the face of the land." Might there be some link between the cause of constitutional liberty and the defense of an environment without which all creation would shrink to a man-made scale? This seems at least a possible convergence of motives between people of diverse beliefs whose largest concern is the protection of a restrained liberty.

It is an odd fact of American society in the past 60 years that a section of the party of improvers—the improvers of wars—have so often called themselves conservatives. There are family dynasties of warriors, of course, especially in the South, who form an undeclared

aristocratic class in America. Their authority and coherence may give them a title to the name, but their beliefs do not. It is no less strange—except that one saw it also in the 1950s—that property libertarians have so often failed to live up to their duties as civil libertarians.

It would be hard to say whether statist liberals or statist conservatives are more seduced by love of the state. The most acute recent critics of the American empire have been writers like Chalmers Johnson and Andrew Bacevich who in the decade of Truman and Eisenhower would surely have been called conservatives. Both served in the military. Both came late to their stand against imperialism. If critics such as these ever joined forces with a statesman like Chuck Hagel, we might see a change in the things that are speakable in our politics.

It has been invigorating in the past few years to notice the first signs of a conservatism that is libertarian about civil rights as much as property rights; distrustful of the liberal state but not itself illiberal or the tool of bigotry; willing to speak of morals and religion but distrustful of compelled displays of piety; and hostile to any proselytism that claims a higher sanction than honest argument. Will the experiment succeed? The answer may depend in some part on its relationship to the remnant of liberalism that values liberty.

The antiwar element of this conservatism is its most rigorous and honor-

able feature. Wars are the destructive force that in the 20th century did most to level the world to obey a single will. Wars are the largest machine for the production of the totalitarian state and the totalitarian mind. It should trouble us to consider which country in the world today most serves the cause of “homicide philanthropy.” That phrase, again, is Burke’s; its exact synonym, “humanitarian wars,” is a favorite pretext of the war improvers. What do humanitarian wars signify if not the rightness of killing 3 million Vietnamese or a million Iraqis for the sake of turning a mass of oppressed creatures into properly certified human beings?

HOW SAFE DO YOU WANT TO BE? THE STATE LIVES FOR ITSELF AND WILL NOT LET YOU LIVE TWO MOMENTS TOGETHER UNWATCHED AND UNSECURED.

Government has a better function than war. “The legitimate object of government,” wrote Abraham Lincoln, “is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, *at all*, or can not *so well do*, for themselves—in their separate, and individual capacities.” The people, in their separate and individual capacities, realize the need for government, and make the choice to use it, to help them do what they would want done if they could do it themselves. Lincoln took government as a matter-of-fact necessity. For there are things such as posts and roads, the man- agement of places of public gathering,

the rational regulation of commerce, which we cannot sanely think of doing neighbor-by-neighbor. We cannot decline all use of government unless we cherish an abstract distrust of convenience. Government multiplies rather than adds; the advantage is plain and so is the hazard. But how many today who rail against government do not think it reflexively right to put offending Americans in larger numbers into bigger prisons and to subsidize more and faster wars?

The expansive ethic of modern war, or “force projection,” is justified by the imperatives of security and safety. But how safe do you want to be, and what

makes you call it safety? The state lives for itself and will not let you live two moments together unwatched and unsecured.

“Power, in whatever hands, is rarely guilty of too strict limitations on itself.” Burke wrote that in 1777, when he denounced the suspension of habeas corpus. Power *in whatever hands*. Not only the power that forms a government by popular mandate that can be used to authorize “new laws” but equally the power of those with money to buy an exemption for themselves from sufferings they caused; the power of tribunals to render judgment without oversight; the power of those who deploy an army on the ground and drones in the sky to watch and kill a thousand miles away from the man who presses *send*. ■

David Bromwich is the editor of a selection of Edmund Burke’s speeches and letters, On Empire, Liberty, and Reform (Yale University Press).

Daniel Larison **EUNOMIA**
www.amconmag.com/larison *n. the principle of good order*

“Beyond sheer knowledge, Larison possesses an old man’s wisdom rare in someone young enough to have that much energy.”

Steve Sailer, isteve.blogspot.com

Change in 2012

FOR CONSERVATIVES fretful over the future of the party to which they have given allegiance, *How Barack Obama Won: A State by State Guide to the Historic 2008 Election* reads like something out of Edgar Allan Poe. Co-authored by NBC's Chuck Todd, it is a grim tale of what happened to the GOP in 2008 and what the future may hold.

Yet on second and third reads, one discerns, as did General Wolfe's scouts 250 years ago, a narrow path leading up the cliff to the Plains of Abraham—and perhaps victory in 2012.

First, the bad news. Obama raised the national share of the black vote to 13 percent, then swept it 95 percent to 4 percent. The GOP share of the Hispanic vote, now 9 percent of the electorate, fell from George W. Bush's 40 percent against John Kerry to 32 percent. Young voters ages 18 to 29 went for Obama 66 percent to 31 percent. And Obama ran stronger among white voters with a college education than did either Al Gore or Kerry.

Put starkly, the voting groups growing in numbers—Hispanics, Asians, African-Americans, folks with college degrees, the young—are all trending Democratic, while the voters most loyal to the GOP—white folks and religious conservatives—are declining as a share of the U.S. electorate. And demography is destiny.

Other grim news: 18 states and Washington, D.C., with 247 electoral votes—all New England save New Hampshire; New York and New Jersey; the mid-Atlantic states, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland; Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota; the three Pacific Coast states plus Hawaii—have gone Democratic in all of the last five presidential elections. And John McCain lost every one of them by double digits. In this Slough of Despond, where is the hope?

Despite all of the above, John McCain, two weeks after the GOP convention, thanks to the surge in energy and enthusiasm Sarah Palin brought to the ticket, was running ahead of Obama.

It was the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the crash and the panic that ensued, which McCain mishandled, that lost him all the ground he never made up. Had the crash not occurred, the election might have been much closer than seven points, which in itself is no blowout.

Second, an astonishing 75 percent of voters thought the country was headed in the wrong direction. Obama won these voters 62 percent to 36 percent. But if the country is seen as heading in the wrong direction in 2012, it will be Obama's albatross.

Third, only 27 percent of voters approved of Bush's performance as of Election Day; 71 percent disapproved. Only Harry Truman had a lower rating, 22 percent, and Democrats were also wiped out in Washington in 1952.

Here is Todd's dramatic point: "With the single exception of Missouri, which barely went for McCain, Obama won every state where Bush's approval rating was below 35 percent in the exit polls, and he lost every state where Bush's approval was above 35 percent."

Obama rode Bush's coattails to victory. Had Bush been at 35 percent or 40 percent, McCain might have won. But in 2012, Obama will not have Bush to kick around anymore.

On candidates' qualities, the situation looks even rosier for the GOP. In 2008, no less than 34 percent of the electorate said that the most important consideration in a candidate was that he be for "change."

Obama was the change candidate. He patented the brand, and he carried this third of the nation 89 percent to 9 percent.

But in 2012, Obama cannot be the candidate of change. That title will belong to his challenger, the Republican nominee. Obama will be the incumbent, the candidate of continuity.

The second most critical consideration of voters in choosing a president was "values." No less than 30 percent of the electorate said this was their primary consideration in voting for McCain or Obama.

Among values voters, fully 30 percent of the electorate, McCain won 65 percent to 32 percent, or by two to one.

What these numbers demonstrate is that liberals and neocons instructing the GOP to dump the social, moral, and cultural issues are counseling Republicide. When African-Americans, who gave McCain 4 percent of their votes in California, gave Proposition 8, prohibiting gay marriage, 70 percent of their votes, why would the GOP give up one of its trump cards—not only in Middle America but among minorities?

A conservative who could have sharpened the social, moral, and cultural differences might, from the exit polls, have done far better.

McCain's diffidence on life, affirmative action, and gay rights, his embrace of amnesty and NAFTA, all help explain the enthusiasm gap. Twice as many voters were excited about the prospects of an Obama presidency as were about a McCain presidency.

Lastly, on Election Day, only 7 percent thought the U.S. economy was doing well, while 93 percent rated it as not so good or poor. The GOP will not have to wear those concrete boots in 2012.

The tide is still running strong against the GOP. But there may be one or two more White Houses in the Grand Old Party yet. ■