

WHAT SHOULD CONSERVATIVES BE SEEKING?



A VALEDICTORY ADDRESS ON LIBERTY, LICENSE, AND THE AMERICAN DILEMMA

BY SENATOR DAN COATS

Dan Coats—a popular Indiana Republican in the prime of his powers—is voluntarily retiring from the U.S. Senate this month. Following is our adaptation of a recent speech in which he suggests a course for America in the testing times ahead.

Today, people throughout the world are inspired by the hopes of America's Founders. But we should also be instructed by their fears. In 1819 John Adams asked Thomas Jefferson, "Will you tell me how to prevent riches from being the enemy of industry? Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing intoxication, extravagance, vice and folly?" When the Founders turned from dreaming to worrying, they worried about this: How could a free and prosperous people preserve a moral culture? How could a commercial republic, celebrating individual liberty and personal gain, cultivate concern for the common good and moral restraint? Would the spirit of freedom undermine the habits of character that make freedom noble and possible?

The Founders believed a free republic requires a certain kind of citizenry, one whose internal virtues would temper our political and economic liberties. Internal virtue would promote obedience to laws out of choice, not fear; it would encourage the pursuit of happiness over the pursuit of mere pleasure; it would promote public and not just private interests.

The forms of democratic government—its checks, balances, and rules—are not sufficient to achieve these things. "Neither the wisest constitution nor the wisest laws will secure the liberty and happiness of a people whose manners are universally corrupt," Samuel Adams warned.

The Founders assumed religion would be a critical instrument of civic education, so they celebrated faith, even when they did not share it. John Adams was not a churchman, but he wrote, "One great advantage of the Christian religion is that it brings the great principle of the law of nature and nations—love your neighbor as yourself, and do to others as you would have that others should do to you—to the knowledge, belief and veneration of the whole people."

The Founders sensed that a tension might develop between the spirit of religion and the spirit of democracy. Adams worried aloud that "commerce, luxury, and avarice have destroyed every republican government." The Founders feared citizens might come to view freedom not just as the goal of their government and their economy, but also as the goal of their lives. Freedom as a moral goal is empty and often dangerous, because it can lead to the tyranny of unbridled appetites and self-interest. The Founders agreed with the sober English statesman Edmund Burke: "Men of intemperate mind never can be free. Their passions forge their fetters."

This is a hard teaching, and it makes many modern Americans uncomfortable. But the Founders knew self-government is possible only when citizens tightly govern themselves, and that freedom requires a citizenry sharing some broad moral vision of what is right and good.

Paradoxically, America is a liberal country that relies on the vitality of conservative institutions teaching moral habits to keep us free. The experiment is conducted on a tightrope. If moral absolutes are harshly imposed through institutions, we sacrifice freedom. But if liberalism, relativism, indi-

vidualism, and materialism undermine the authority of traditional institutions to shape moral citizens, we will also lose our freedom, by a different route. This places Americans in a delicate position: How can we nurture the virtue of a free nation and still leave it free?

An illustration used by Michael Novak makes this point. He asks us to examine the Statue of Liberty. "Look at the statue closely. It is the figure of a woman, in French iconography the symbol of wisdom. In her uplifted hand is the torch of reason warding off the mists of passion and ignorance; in her other hand, the Book of the Law. Liberty in this representation is ordered liberty, liberty under the sway of reason; liberty under law. This is not, Lord Acton said, the liberty to do as one wishes; it is the liberty to do what is right."

In the last few decades a good deal of obvious human suffering has given rise to doubts about our current arrangement of liberty and law. Easy divorce, for example, has brought new destruction to the lives of children, making them prone to violence, depression, suicide, educational failure, sexual aggression, and drug abuse. There is a conflict here between the rights of adults to do as they please and our duties to protect fragile minors from being scarred by others. Similar arguments could be made regarding sexual liberty that leads to poverty and pain, or alcohol use that leaves carnage on the roads, or gambling that disrupts families.

When these bad moral choices are rare, isolated, and punished by stigma, they remain private tragedies. But when these moral choices are prevalent and threaten to dissolve the norm, when 70 percent of children will spend some time in a broken home, when in some communities 90 percent of births

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are illegitimate, these private tragedies gather into major social problems, complicating the lives of every citizen, leading the young into dark and empty valleys.

After decades of "liberation" from traditional norms, family obligations, and community expectations—all obstacles to personal freedom and self-expression—haunted voices are calling out indictments of our times: sons and daughters betrayed by their fathers; victims tortured by crime; young persons under the death sentence of a sexual disease; women in poverty and lonely abandonment. Together these citizens might ask, Where is my liberty in this system of absolute liberty?

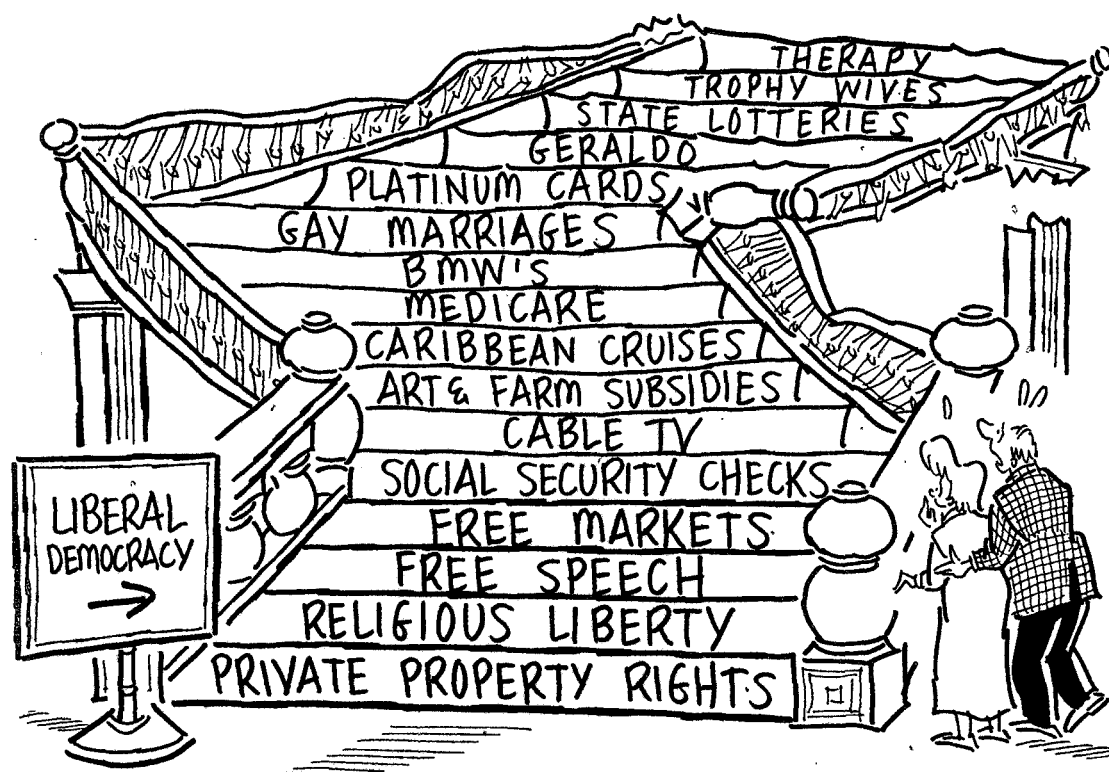
Great forces in our society are now unleashing destructive individualism, making civic education more difficult. But some of those same forces have created wealth and propelled social progress. They have simultaneously built American greatness and undermined American character. They are a mix of light and shadow, cursed blessings of American life.

The first of these mixed blessings is government. It would be simple blindness to ignore the achievements of our government this century. In 50 years it saved the world and liberty itself from two totalitarian states, sponsored the Manhattan Project and the Apollo program, granted voting and other civil rights to African Americans, and delivered millions of the elderly from destitution.

But it is also impossible to deny that the bloated size of our government has damaged the character of democracy and the nature of citizenship. At the beginning of Andrew Jackson's administration, the federal government excluding Congress and the military totaled 352 individuals, serving a population of 12.5 million. In 1815, President Madison paid a single secretary out of his own pocket, and the Supreme Court met for two months a year in a boarding house. In today's America, on the

other hand, there are 18.6 million government employees—one for every 17 people.

The Faustian bargain of contemporary government has traded our spirit for sustenance. As government has taken more, citizens have retained less. And centralized power has often replaced communities and families and discouraged community participation, thus weakening the skills of self-government. Government has subsidized self-destructive behavior, sent perverse moral messages, and encouraged habits of depen-



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dence, sometimes reducing citizens to serfs.

I have seen firsthand how a well-intentioned government can treat living communities as the playthings of utopian planners. After my undergraduate work, I joined a Chicago consulting firm whose purpose was to implement President Johnson's Great Society programs. One of my tasks was to go door to door in poor neighborhoods, convincing residents it was a good thing that their houses were to be bulldozed to make way for high-rise public housing. I showed them pictures of the clean, new apartments with modern elevators. But many protested and even wept when hearing the news because, to my astonishment, they loved their homes and the decayed neighborhood around them. But none of this mattered; they had to go anyway, because our good intentions required it.

It turned out, of course, that they were right. Their homes and neighborhoods, bad as they were, were living communities. Our government high-rises were sterile, impersonal, and soulless. In the years since, they have become unworthy of human habitation, a shame to our nation and a symbol of the destructive potential of goodness without wisdom. My experience in those homes and neighborhoods profoundly shaped my view of government and politics.

If government is one powerful force that has complicated the cultivation of American virtue, the second cursed blessing is a force harder for most conservatives to discuss. For many American families find that the most disruptive force in their moral lives is *not* government. It is a powerful market that aggressively sells an ideology of consumption, immediate gratification, sexual freedom, and resentment of authority. They find more to fear from rock stars like Marilyn Manson and the moral anarchy of the Internet than from the paternalism of the Great Society and Social Security.

Once again, we cannot downplay the accomplishments of free markets that are the wonder of our age. They are history's most powerful tool to eliminate poverty, defeat disease, and extend life. And they make a moral contribution to every society that embraces them, justly rewarding risk, creativity, energy, and merit.

But we also cannot downplay how markets can undermine the traditional institutions conservatives want to conserve. I have spent a considerable part of this past year on two issues: the Internet and the content of television programs. In both cases we are dealing with particularly pure free markets. Television programming depends directly on viewer demand. It embodies democracy. But much of what we get is vacuous or positively warping. As author George Gilder—no enemy of economic liberty—observes, "Under the sway of television, democratic capitalism enshrines Gresham's law: Bad culture drives out good, and ultimately porn and prurience, violence

and blasphemy prevail everywhere from the dimwitted 'news' shows to the lugubrious movies."

Conservatives must understand what most parents know by hard experience: Markets both respond to appetites and incite them, because it is possible to make a considerable amount of money feeding the weakness of human character. This is true of movie companies that assault taboo after taboo in a never-ending race with boredom. It is true of entertainment companies that increase their market share with lyrics about the murder of policemen and the dismemberment of women. It is true of companies that market malt liquor specifically to inner-city communities. It is true of companies that accumulate profit

through the astounding proliferation of gaming, drawing income and savings from many who can least afford it. And all this is causing a backlash. From the Disney boycott, to Bill Bennett's pop culture campaign, to the movement for television ratings, to the fight against legalized gambling—all these movements are directed toward limiting the destructive impact of markets, not government. And much of this activity is on the pro-market right.

This is the return of the Founders' fear that we could lose the moral order that makes it possible to be a liberal society. A wealthy nation can still display a poverty of purpose. And eventually there comes a wisdom won from pain: Liberty unconstrained by character can destroy freedom.

So: How do we encourage the virtue of a free nation and still leave it free? In this task we must understand that not all of civil society is created equal. The success of voluntary associations in creating civic virtue depends directly on the health of two institutions that cannot be called voluntary, at least not in the same way the Elks or bowling leagues are voluntary: family and religion. The family initiates us into the traditions of the human race—loyalty and love, diligence and duty. Religious institutions instruct us in the spiritual purposes that make a good life possible, causing us to sacrifice "a thousand ephemeral pleasures" in pursuit of "lasting happiness," as the French sage Alexis de Tocqueville put it.

We need to recognize that in a liberal society that elevates individual rights, it takes effort to maintain family and religion. For liberalism has a tendency to extend its assumptions to every area of life, dissolving bonds of duty and obligation.

All around us we see attempts to reinterpret or reinvent traditional institutions, stripping them of their moral demands, making them more acceptable to democratic men and women. But those moral demands are the essence of faith and family. And there is nothing more likely to destroy those institutions than the application of democracy to morality. We have all heard the refrains, "Who are you to determine what a family is?" and "No one should judge anyone else"—arguments that re-

WE MUST REJECT

duce convictions to tastes. But holding together the commitments of a family, and serving the injured, and restraining our interests for the interests of others—these are difficult moral tasks. People will only undertake them if they believe with all their heart and mind that these tasks are good, noble, and virtuous—not just choices but immutable truths and moral laws and religious callings.

We cannot remove these moral imperatives from families and churches and expect them to perform their social function. We believe in democracy because it is better to count heads than to break them. But we must reject a democracy of values in which every belief is equally true, equally false, and equally meaningless. The first requirement of nurturing virtue in our culture is to defend the existence of virtue itself, celebrating it in our families and churches.

I have described how a grasping, intrusive government can undercut civil society. But this should not lead to the simplistic belief that cutting government is sufficient to rebuild civil society. In fact, an effective small government is often the prerequisite of a healthy civil society. Civic engagement is difficult when front porches attract random gunfire, when public meeting places become needle parks, when evening church services are canceled because reaching them is too dangerous.

The value of effective government has been proven in our recent victories in welfare and crime. When welfare reform was passed, critics predicted a million more children shoved into poverty and 11 million disadvantaged families suffering want. What has happened is the opposite. In one year, nationwide welfare caseloads dropped by 18 percent, falling in every state except Hawaii. Faced with a changed welfare culture of time limits and work requirements, many recipients have changed themselves.

Crime is another area in which effective government has proven its value. For a generation we were confidently told by experts that criminal behavior was hopelessly rooted in immovable root causes. Then the public got fed up and started building prisons, toughening sentencing, and tightening laws. William Bratton became head of New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority in 1990 and banned panhandling, removed graffiti, and arrested fare beaters, many of whom turned out to have weapons. The felony rate in the subway fell by 75 percent. Then Bratton took over the New York City Police Department, applying the same principles and attacking disorderly behavior, aggressive panhandlers, and squeegee men. By the end of 1995 residents of New York were less likely to be robbed or murdered than at any time in 25 years.

Effective government strengthens those who obey and uphold civilized standards, making law-abiding citizens feel less lonely, isolated, and besieged. It cannot impose virtue, but it can help create an atmosphere in which civic institutions can do their work. That atmosphere is fostered when local commu-

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nities restrict pornographic bookstores and liquor stores, and prosecute prostitution, when states reform divorce laws to favor the interests of children, when the federal government favors families and charities in the tax code, and fights the importation of drugs. The federal role in these efforts is limited because it takes local communities to enforce community standards. Yet at whatever level, the law has an important role to play. When it comes to the decency of public culture, the moral atmosphere in which children are raised, or

the stability of the family, government "neutrality" is indistinguishable from surrender.

Government can also play a role in strengthening the compassionate work of private and religious institutions. The state cannot directly rebuild civic institutions. But we must find ways to encourage these institutions to renew themselves—for the alternatives are either a destructive indifference to human suffering, or an eventual filling of the breach by Big Brother government.

My struggle in the last few years has been to translate some of these ideas into legislation. The goal, whenever possible, is to apply private resources of compassion and moral instruction to public problems, expanding society while limiting the state.

One of the centerpieces of my efforts is a charity tax credit. It would allow every taxpaying family to give \$1,000 of what it owes the government each year to a private charity in their community instead. I believe most people would prefer to fund the Salvation Army than the Department of Health and Human Services, Habitat for Humanity instead of the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In welfare policy, I am convinced, devolution and block grants are simply not enough. It's not sufficient to shift programs from federal bureaucrats to state bureaucrats, who often have the same blind spots and limitations. We must break completely the monopoly of government as a provider of compassion, and return resources instead to individuals, churches, and charities. As Pope John Paul II has written, "needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbors."

Many of our worst social problems will yield only to moral solutions: renewal of parental commitment to children, internal restraint of impulsive violence and aggressive sexuality, a return of public spirit and civic engagement. The institutions of civil society teach these lessons. By supporting them broadly, government can promote moral answers to human problems without favoring any one moral or religious vision. It can encourage the work of civil society without overwhelming it with rules and restrictions. It can encourage the virtue of a free nation and still leave it free.



Is America Turning A Corner?

Data by

Karl Zinsmeister • Stephen Moore • Karlyn Bowman

About 30 years ago, America had a national nervous breakdown. In the last half of the 1960s and the early '70s, a vast range of social trendlines headed south. We endured a crime wave, an illegitimacy surge, a welfare explosion, a drug abuse crisis, a deluge of abortions, a boom in divorce, a suicide spike. Cultural radicals took over many of the nation's institutions. The size and intrusiveness of government raced upward. Families collapsed. In many cities social order evaporated.

Worried Americans looked on in horror as multiple forms of social breakdown accumulated into a self-reinforcing spiral. The chorus of warning and worry reached a crescendo in the late '80s and early '90s. In his speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention Pat Buchanan decried the "cultural war in America." In 1994, William Bennett published his *Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, containing what Rush Limbaugh called "some of the most chilling statistics I have ever read." Bennett's portrait of U.S. behavioral trends found that "almost every modern-day social pathology has gotten worse." The result, he said, has been "a palpable cultural decline over the past 30 years."

These heralds were right: The 1960s opened an era of dangerous social regression in our nation. Both the breadth and the speed of our decline were breathtaking: violent crime quadrupled in just 30 years; illegitimate births, single-parent households, and teen suicides

tripled; the rate of marriage was almost cut in half. In Washington, D.C., there were more abortions than live births. In many cities a *majority* of children were being reared in fatherless homes.

But over the last decade, something remarkable has happened. The alarm bells rung by cultural conservatives seem to have been heeded by many Americans, and a new pattern of recovery and even reversal has emerged. This positive pattern is beginning to look every bit as broad and interlinked as our social collapse was when it showed up in the late '60s. But judge for yourself: On the pages following, we provide clear documentation of this brand new—and wholly unpredicted—revival.

Whether the encouraging trends depicted here will continue, deepen, and spread remains to be seen. Most of these turnarounds are very fresh, at most a few years old. But the sheer number and simultaneity of the shifts suggest that something important is now afoot in American culture.

To help make sense of these surprising new developments, *The American Enterprise* invited a group of distinguished trend watchers to look over our newly collected evidence and then speculate on exactly what's going on, who or what is to be credited, and how securely these improvements are rooted. Their views—ranging widely—follow immediately after the factual data.

—the Editors