

Johnny Rocco's World

Conservative political strategists are like the military strategists they would like to emulate: They are always fighting the last war. For how many years, when the Soviet Union was collapsing, did conservatives continue to rail against the communist menace? Marxism, and not only the virulent Leninist strain adopted by the Bolsheviks, had once posed a serious threat to the security and order of the United States and Europe. It was a life-threatening disease that all decent people were bound to combat. By the 1970's, however, the threat of communism was no longer on the order of congestive heart failure or even a slow-wasting cancer; it was more like a recurrent malaria the body had got used to. It weakened the constitution of the patient, certainly, and its periodic bouts under Kennedy and Obama have been undoubtedly unpleasant, but it is not Marxism that is going to kill us.

For at least 50 years, the wars conservative ideologues have been fighting were lost even before open hostilities broke out. The feminist revolution was already won when women were given the vote and Republican businessmen at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce were championing "equal pay for equal work." The subversion of the family represented by the pernicious movement to secure "children's rights" was well under way when Americans accepted government schooling, school-attendance laws, and child-protection statutes—at the beginning of the 20th century. As for Marxism in America, one could apply to our Cold War politicians the statement (which put Lawrence Dennis on trial for sedition) that FDR waged war against fascism abroad in order to impose it at home. When the New Dealers succeeded in winning acceptance for the withholding tax, it meant they had already persuaded a majority of Americans that the government was in charge not just of the entire national economy but of every employee's income. Every socialist measure since has merely been a question of more or less, of working out the consequences.

Whatever the issue of the moment—same-sex "marriage," global warming, the Obama administration's takeover of the automobile industry—conservatives are at least a decade late and a couple of trillion dollars short. But even if they knew in advance what the left's next big assault on our liberties was going to be, it would make no difference, because they still would do nothing. It is a question of mental outlook.

Let me explain with a self-serving anecdote. Some years ago, when it became clear that I had correctly anticipated several crises—over immigration, the Balkans, and the

upsurge of an "America First mentality"—a colleague asked me to look into my crystal ball and tell him what the next big crisis would be. I tried (and failed) to explain that it is not prescience that is needed but comprehension. His question assumed that our difficulties arise from a conscious plot being hatched by some little group out there. We Americans, conservatives have assumed since Mr. Welch went from being a candy butcher to a conspiracy butcher, are basically good. It's the Harvard faculty; it's the Jews or the Catholics; it's the feminists, homosexuals, union bosses, capitalists, Sierra Clubbers or fluoridationists. If we could anticipate whence the next threat would come, we could be plotting our resistance in advance.

But there is no plot, only consensus among the powers that be and their allies. Listen to the Democrats today. Free to speak openly, they treat with contempt any common assumption of 50 years ago, *e.g.*, that a contract is a contract, that the workman is worthy of his hire (and no more), that marriage is a binding relationship between a man and a woman, that what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours. Rejection of everything normal is the common sense of the modern political class.

The leftist aversion to common sense is nothing new; it is as old at least as the 18th century. Conservatives cannot fight the left, much less win, because—whether they know it or not—they share the same outlook, the same set of basic principles. They support the leftist revolution, but they think it has gone far enough. How many times have you heard a conservative say, "I did not leave the Democratic Party; the Democratic Party left me"? How many conservative Republicans were offended by the adulation that Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich displayed toward the President-for-Life, Franklin Roosevelt? How many conservatives do not preface their objection to, say, "gay marriage" or affirmative action with the disclaimer, "Now, I believe in equality, but . . ."?

For longer than I can remember, the conservative strategy has always been the same: First, concede the principles of the left, then quibble over their implementation. A few years from now, we shall be hearing conservatives whining, "I have never objected to marriage between two guys, but three is one too many."

About this time in the conversation, I am supposed to



say something like, “I am only talking, of course, about Washington insiders, not the rank-and-file conservatives who preserve traditional American virtues, *etc.*, *etc.*” At best, however, one might say of the best American conservatives what Metternich once said of the German people: Their heart is good, but their head is unsound.

A simple illustration of this lack of connection between heart and head can be found in the support of decent conservatives for the Iraq war. Muslims had, after all, launched an attack on the United States, and it was time for our country to show that she could defend herself. Those were sound patriotic instincts, but it did not at all follow that we were justified in attacking a country that had nothing to do with the events of September 11, 2001. It is not just that conservatives believed Dick Cheney’s lies. (How much are the Democrats paying the former vice president to keep his party in disrepute? Is there any other rational explanation for his bizarre behavior?) After all, popular ignorance and credulity must be taken for granted in the American electorate. What was seriously disheartening, however, was the widespread acceptance of the immoral arguments for preemptive war and executive privilege put forward by the administration and accepted by most conservatives.

Many Catholic Republicans, who are supposed to know better, were outraged by Joe Sobran’s moral condemnation of the war in the pages of *The Wanderer*, but no serious Christian of any kind can possibly accept such propositions as, if you are attacked by person A, you are free to retaliate by killing unrelated person B, or if you claim to fear an attack by B, you are justified in taking him out by anticipation. If I applied this principle to my troublesome neighbors, I would be doing life for murder one.

The conservatives’ support for the war might be explained away as an expression of national panic, but the ethical confusion they have displayed on every issue they care about—abortion, same-sex “marriage,” trade policy, immigration—makes it apparent that there is no “conservative mind” that shapes the conservative agenda. In fact, the American conservative movement accepts the basic principles of a revolution that first assumed a violent form in the French Revolution.

What principles? Many of them are tidily summed up in a propaganda pamphlet written, for the most part, by one of our greatest men. The Declaration of Independence, with its affirmation of self-evident truths, natural equality, and the social contract is a tidy summation of the liberal-revolutionary principles that undermined the social order of Europe and North America, stripped us of our Christian defenses, and exposed us to wave after wave of destructive innovation. The Jacobins, the Forty-Eighters, the Bolsheviks, the feminists, the environmentalists—where would they be if John Locke, Adam Smith, and their mentors and disciples had not first laid the ax to the roots of Christendom?

I am not blaming Jefferson or even the Straussian and Marxist leftists who have twisted his fatuous propaganda into a “founding document.” The Declaration would be

harmless if American conservatives did not accept all the other lies of the Enlightenment or the thousands of lies that it has been misused to justify. Let me just name a few at random: the equality of the sexes; the government’s obligation to ensure equal opportunity; the right to attend the church of one’s choice; the power of government to regulate or define marriage, to provide for the health and welfare of the citizens, and to confiscate property in a good cause; the principle of one man, one vote; the notion that America is uniquely a “nation of immigrants” that cannot in good conscience defend her borders; and, finally, the sick and destructive lie that all nations, ethnicities, cultures, and religions are of equal worth and ultimately compatible with one another, making it possible for lying politicians to claim that “Islam is a religion of peace.”

After the left wins the “gay marriage” battle, who knows what will be the next bout of shadowboxing the conservative movement will undertake? Massive confiscation of property? The subjugation of religious groups to the newly discovered principles of the 14th Amendment? (What, you won’t pay for abortions or permit lesbian bishops?) It does not matter, because the contest will only determine the speed with which the revolution proceeds.


This long and tedious preface brings me to the question at hand in this issue. For over a hundred years the left has condemned wealth and economic inequality. For the most part the conservative response has been to encourage some form of consumerist hedonism. If we are to believe Rush Limbaugh—who is far from being the most obtuse conservative leader, quite the contrary—greed is not only good, it is the American way of life. After September 11, George W. Bush wanted us to spend our way into euphoria, and Barack Obama now says he wants us to spend our way out of depression, by buying not necessities but worthless junk, most of it made in China, that rots our minds and pollutes our existence. Check out the blogs of younger conservatives, if you have a strong handkerchief to protect your nose, and you will find chatter about name brands and celebrities that might have been posted on their MySpace pages.

The conservative response to the disappearance of civilized life is the second answer Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson) gives when the old man asks him what he wants out of life. First, he says he doesn’t know; then, prompted by Humphrey Bogart, he utters the conservative credo: “Yeah, that’s it. More. That’s right! I want more!” When Bogart presses further and asks if he will ever get enough, Rocco reflects: “Well I never have. No, I guess I won’t.”

Perhaps the director and cowriter (John Huston) was only venting his leftist spleen against any free-enterprise economic system that depends on growth. But in a social organism, just as in a biological organism, there is healthy growth, as when a creature or society, reaching its natural size, can thrive and propagate, but there is also the cancerous growth, which is growth for growth’s sake: the brain tumor that first robs us of our intellectual faculties, then kills

us; the unrestricted immigration and cancerous industrial and commercial growth that makes the land unfit for the people whose ancestors fought and died for it.

To all the liberal slogans spouted by conservatives and libertarians, there is always a question that must be asked. To Milton Friedman's "free to choose," a sane person would have to ask, "Choose what?" Otherwise, we shall become like the librarians and teachers who tell children to read without specifying whether they should be reading *Emma* or *Harry Potter* or *The Philosophy of the Bedroom*. So, to

the champions of unlimited growth, we should be asking not only *what* should grow and *how big* but also *for what good purpose*. Until conservatives ask—and answer—such questions, they will be stuck playing the same old games with the leftists who pick the playing field and dictate the rules. Conservatives have always lost in the past—especially when, as in the 1980's, they thought they were winning—and, unless they wean themselves from the revolutionary ideology they have taken in with their mothers' milk, they will always lose in the future. 

John 21.18

by Ralph McNerny

Four seasons of a family pass my house,
An old man wheeled by a younger, the son
Of his daughter who follows with two tots.
The ancient has been shaken up, clothed by others,
Does not choose the way he goes.
His cap is pulled down firmly on his head,
Its bill pulling him forward into what
Throughout his life had been his final end
If not his goal. I watch the wintry figure
Pushed by summer as autumn and spring
Attend his going. No need to ask reasons
For his passing, save that of the seasons.