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Completing
the Reagan
Revolution

By William J. Bennett



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COMPLETING THE REAGAN REVOLUTION

by William J. Bennett

When I accepted The Heritage Foundation's invitation to speak on "What It Means to be a Conservative," we agreed that I would discuss the question, "Is Conservatism Optimistic?" Partly because Midge Decter addressed precisely this question so well a couple of weeks ago, and partly for other reasons, I want to address today a somewhat different topic--what I will call, "Completing the Reagan Revolution." But let me introduce this topic by briefly considering the first question--the question of whether conservatism is optimistic.'

The answer to this question is--Yes. American conservatism today is optimistic. Or rather, it has become so. American conservatism has become optimistic--it has become cheerful and high-spirited and enthusiastic and forward-looking--thanks in the main to the leadership, the transforming leadership, of Ronald Reagan. Thanks to his leadership, American conservatism is now the party of the future, because it is the party of spirit, the party of energy and enterprise, the party of ideas.

American conservatism now sets the terms of our national debate. It does so because, without in the least abandoning its principles, it has succeeded in identifying itself with the quintessential American appetite for new challenges and new opportunities. Under the leadership of Ronald Reagan, American conservatism has shed its skin of distrust and defensiveness toward the world in which we live.

It has overcome what once was a suspicion--even a dread--of the future. It has become vigorous, bold, assertive--in a word, fully Americanized. While contemporary liberalism has moved away from--in some cases, even against--the mainstream of American political life, today's conservatism is at home with the common sense and the common beliefs of the American people. As a result, where once conservatives resisted the future, they now view it as something to shape. And there is a good chance to do just that.

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Consider the sea changes in two areas in which President Reagan has sought to bring about fundamental shifts in national policy--economics and foreign policy. In economics, we are on the verge of an historic tax reform made possible because the underlying terms of economic debate have been transformed. The 97 to 3 vote in the Senate of the United States to simplify the tax code and to cut top marginal rates nearly in half is a vote of epochal importance. It signifies the utter eclipse of the old economics, mistrustful as it too often was of private enterprise, overly trustful as it too often was of government planning. A new understanding has set in of some old truths concerning the entrepreneurial sources of economic growth and well-being, and the role of government as a reliable and steady economic umpire. The practical reforms that have been achieved in the past five years--the practical successes we have had--rest on a real intellectual revolution, one in which, I might add, The Heritage Foundation has played an indispensable role. And just as the failed ideas of the past underlie the spirit of malaise which President Carter apparently thought our national condition, so this intellectual revolution justifies the optimism with which we face our future.

Foreign and defense policy is the other main arena in which the Reagan Revolution has, of necessity, focused its energies. And here too, I believe, we have succeeded in fundamentally overturning the self-indulgent pessimism of the 1970s. In fact, if the President had achieved little else, he would have secured forever his place in American history for his undeviating commitment to the rebuilding of our nation's defenses--the absolute precondition of our ability to conduct a sound foreign policy of any kind. And then there are the successes in Grenada and El Salvador, the historic opportunity represented by the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the new realism concerning the threat of Soviet and Communist expansion, not least in Central America. In light of such tangible achievements as these, it seems to me fair to say that we have turned a corner. To put it simply: the United States as a nation is becoming a stronger force in the world arena. And--what is more significant--we understand once again why it is important to be strong. Once again we acknowledge the necessity of acting energetically to defend our interests and our values in a dangerous world. For no less than in the economic sphere, the great success of the Reagan Revolution in foreign and defense policy reflects not just particular changes in discrete policies, but rather a transformation in our underlying sense of what America is and what it can accomplish. In effecting this second transformation, the role played by Heritage has again been vital; and on this front as well, American conservatism under the leadership of President Reagan has created grounds for optimism about the future.

More remains to be done in these areas, of course; more remains to be accomplished. The Reagan Revolution is not complete. But conservatives do not expect completion or perfection in the things of this world. Just as, when in the wilderness, conservatives knew that there were no lost causes, so they know, while governing, that there

are no causes finally and irrevocably won. It will be the task of future Presidents and administrations--and of the American people as a whole--to sustain and enhance and extend what this Administration has done to secure our economic well-being and our national security. But that the accomplishments are real and that we are now on the right path--this much is clear.

It is worth pausing for a moment to ponder what a peculiar revolution the Reagan Revolution has been. True, we seem to have broken with the past, or at least the immediate past. And true, we look forward with fresh expectation to a future of our own shaping. But this has been a revolution presided over and executed by conservatives--which means that it has been accomplished not by abandoning but, to the contrary, by recovering and conserving fundamental institutions, fundamental principles, and fundamental truths. Indeed, it is precisely by reinvigorating our commitment to these principles and institutions and truths that the President has fostered in Americans in general, and in American conservatives in particular, their new sense of optimism and confidence.

Thus it must be as well in the areas that still need to be addressed if we are to complete the Reagan Revolution. National wealth and military strength are necessary means to national greatness; but they are not, of course, sufficient. As the President has observed, "A nation's greatness is measured not just by its gross national product or military power, but by the strength of its devotion to the principles and values that bind its people and define their character." National greatness, in the end, depends on--is embodied in--the character of our people. This in turn depends on these things: first, on our sense of who we as a nation are and what we believe in; second, on the well-being of the institutions we create to express those beliefs; and third, on the values according to which we shape the next generation of Americans. And it is here, in the somewhat amorphous but nonetheless palpable realm of beliefs and attitudes and values, that an effort of national recovery must be mounted if we are to realize our potential as a people.

Now on this front--on this moral and cultural front--there are also grounds for hope. In fact, it may be that nothing the President has done is more important than his achievement here. In his evocation of our national memory and symbols of pride, in his summoning us to our national purpose, he has performed the crucial task of political leadership. Moreover, he has done this precisely when many were wondering whether such presidential leadership was still possible. If, as the President has said, "In recent years, Americans values almost seemed in exile," no public act has been more significant than his welcoming them home. The American people have renewed their commitment to our common principles; the task of cultural reformation and reconstruction has begun.

But the task has only just begun; the triumph is nowhere near complete. Far too many decent Americans remain, in effect, on the moral defensive before their own social and cultural institutions. Can Americans be confident that our children are likely to inherit the habits and values our parents honor? Are we confident they will learn enough about our history and our heritage? Are we confident they will be raised in an environment that properly nurtures their moral and intellectual qualities? Can we be confident in the cultural signals our children receive from our educational institutions, from the media, from the world of the arts, even from our churches? Are we confident that our society transmits to our young the right messages--teaches them the right lessons--about the family, about drug use, about respect for religious beliefs, about our meaning as a nation and our responsibilities as individuals? Is the public air conducive to moral and intellectual health, or do we have cause for worry as we contemplate the future well-being of our families, of our children, of our fellow citizens?

This is a very large topic, and I cannot do it full justice here. Let me simply say this: I am confident--I am certain--that the vast majority of parents have only the best, the soundest and most sensible hopes for their children. And most do their best as individuals and families to make those hopes a reality. But as a society, we some time ago lost confidence in our right and our duty to affirm publicly the desirability of what most of us believe privately. It is this confidence we must regain. We allowed the public square to become, in Richard John Neuhaus's term, "naked"; we allowed our social and cultural institutions to drift away from their moorings; we ceased being clear about the standards which we hold forth and the principles by which we judge, or, if we were clear in our own minds, we somehow abdicated the area of public discussion to the forces of moral and intellectual relativism.

As a result, we do our best individually; but as a society we have much to worry about when we consider the context, the environment, the public ethos in which we raise our children. And we are right to worry, because we are in this together. As we learn in Plato's Gorgias, no man is a citizen alone. Individuals and families need support, their values need nourishment, in the common culture, in the public arena.

About fifteen years ago, Harvard professor Nathan Glazer entitled a book of essays, Remembering The Answers. His point was that in the 1960s we forgot--many willfully rejected--the most basic and sensible answers to the first questions, to the questions about what contributes to social well-being and prosperity, about what makes for individual character and responsibility.

Well, thanks to the President and many others, we have begun to remember the answers, and we are no longer too timid to speak them out

loud. On fundamental issues of individual character and responsibility, on the role of social institutions like religion and the family, on the common purposes of our national life, we have come a long way in the last few years. But it is the work of more than a few years to reinvigorate and renew and restore our common culture. This work is not primarily the work of government. But it is work that those of us in government must be attentive to and supportive of, work to which we can contribute in careful and limited ways. And it is a work of supreme importance. Jimmy Carter ran for President promising a government as good as the American people. Ronald Reagan has given us a government worthy of the American people's respect and trust. But are our social and cultural institutions worthy of the American people? Do they promote the qualities and habits and values that we would wish? If they do not, we need to see to it that they are reformed. This task requires appropriate government policies, but it goes beyond government; it represents the completion of the reforms that have already been undertaken.

Let me give three brief examples of the failure of our institutions to fulfill our hopes as individuals, as parents, as citizens.

Our children need to learn about our nation--about our history, our heroes, our heritage, our national memories. They need to learn this not simply in order to have pride in our nation but, as Leszek Kolakowski put it in his Jefferson Lecture, because to "learn history [is] to know who we are"; it is to learn "why and for what [we are] responsible"; it is to learn how this responsibility is to be taken up. A recent survey of parents, residents, and teachers in Arlington, Virginia, provides evidence that Americans care very much that their children know who they are, and for what they are responsible, and how this responsibility is to be taken up. Arlington parents want their children to learn why America is distinctive (79 percent wanted a "great degree of emphasis" put on America's distinctiveness, 0 percent wanted only a "little emphasis"). Arlington parents want their children to develop basic citizenship skills (79 percent to 4 percent); and Arlington parents want their children to study historical periods (70 percent vs. 6 percent), chronological facts (88 percent vs. 6 percent), and geography (62 percent vs. 10 percent). But do our youngsters know what they should know? Is our history a living tradition, a mystic chord of memory, for us today, as it was for our forefathers? We spend far more on education than ever before. We are exposed, through the communications media, to a heretofore unimaginable variety of messages and information. We enjoy cultural opportunities beyond the dreams of generations past. But are we confident that the principles of the founders, the traditions embodied in our institutions, the memories of our sacrifices, the examples of our statesmen will be alive in the next generation's minds and hearts? I do not think we can be as confident as we should be.

What is to be done? Government has a role here--especially the localities and states that govern our public schools; and the national government has an important educational part to play as well--through speeches, reports, recommendations, recognitions and ceremonies, through the dissemination of ideas and the setting of a national agenda, as well as funding for various enterprises. Individuals have an even more central role--at home, and in voluntary associations. But above all, we as a society, as a common culture, have to respond to the call of our national history, and to the responsibility it imposes upon us of instilling in our children an informed appreciation of American principles and American practices. The variety of ways in which this can be done will become clearer once we rise above all the pseudo-sophisticated claims and counter-claims, all the educational cacophony and cultural confusion, and decide: yes, we need to know our national experience, so as to know our national purpose.

A second example: the family. This is our most important social institution. And it is perfectly clear that its decline has been disastrous for many of our youth.

I shall be brief, as I recently devoted a whole speech to this topic. Let me say this: As individuals, most of us believe in the family; we want strong families; we presumably want government policies that help families; we want our educational and other cultural institutions to support the family; and we try ourselves to foster habits and to embrace practices that strengthen the family. Yet, as a society, we are distracted by so many currents and cross-currents that we tend to lose sight of these basic goals. And while we earnestly try to help our young people, we tend to lose sight of this basic fact: without strong families, many of our other efforts will be in vain.

Now there may be no simple answers to the question of how to strengthen the family. But prior to any discussion of ways and means must come the simple unapologetic public affirmation that the family is an absolute value, and that heroic measures are justified in preserving and strengthening it. As a polity, as a society, as a culture, we now send, at best, mixed signals about this--and we get mixed results. And in the rates of youth drug use and crime and lesser forms of irresponsibility and waste of talents and opportunities, we see the human cost of those mixed signals and mixed results. It is a cost we should resolve to bear no longer.

A third and final example: drugs. The Department of Education will soon be releasing a book and announcing other initiatives that will help parents and school personnel to get drugs out of our schools. Here, once again, government has a definite role to play, and individuals and families have an even greater role to play. But, with the recent deaths of young athletes in mind, let me also ask this: What of the role of our cultural institutions? Our colleges and

universities often, and sometimes quite properly, call to task the rest of society for failing to live up to its stated ideals. They set themselves the role of moral gadfly, moral conscience. But what of them? Surely when parents send their children to college, they have a right to expect the colleges to take some measures to protect their sons and daughters from drugs.

I made this simple point to the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges this March--the point that colleges and universities had a basic responsibility to care for the moral and indeed the physical well-being of their charges. I said that "All colleges must protect students from certain influences--drugs, criminals, fraud, exploitation." "Specifically, for example," I continued, "parents should be able to expect colleges to do their best to keep pushers off campus, and get drug users and cheats, frauds and exploiters off campus, if they are already there. Parents expect colleges to be positively and publicly and actively against these things. Parents do not expect colleges to be neutral as between decent morality and decadence." And for saying this, I was criticized for sounding like "a small-town PTA President" and for being "simplistic." Well, if our academic and cultural institutions have become so "sophisticated" that they have forgotten their elementary duties and responsibilities, then it is time for us to call them back to first principles and responsibilities.

To be specific: Every college president should write his students this summer and tell them this: "Welcome back for your studies in September; but no drugs on campus. None. Period. This policy will be enforced--by deans and administrators and advisors and faculty--strictly but fairly." Such a policy could in fact be enforced. It should be enforced. And no parent or taxpayer would object if such a policy were announced and carried out. It would be good for our youth, good for our society, and good for institutions of higher learning. But putting in place such a straightforward policy would require a kind of reinvigoration of our institutions, a resumption of their basic responsibilities.

Such a reinvigoration of our institutions and a resumption of responsibilities has, I believe, begun in America. The meaning of the Reagan Revolution extends beyond tax reform and a stronger defense to a recovery of our national purpose, a strengthening of our social bonds, a reaffirmation of our common cultural beliefs. This is a task that goes beyond politics, let alone the politics of one administration. Yet, it cannot be accomplished without support from the polity. To borrow a phrase from an earlier era to which the President is fond of alluding, completing the Reagan Revolution means embarking upon a national recovery act. It means fashioning, in traditional but also in novel and imaginative ways, support for the social and cultural and, yes, the moral fabric that, in the end, makes possible true greatness, in nations no less than in individuals. In this effort of national recovery, today's generation of Americans,

joining a conservative preference for the tried and true to a newfound willingness to embrace the innovative and the bold, face their own rendezvous with destiny.

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