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2008 | **Are Principles
Passé?**

By Christopher Manion, Ph.D.



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Are Principles Passé?

by Christopher Manion, Ph.D.

I chose the title for this presentation because members of the Third Generation are confronted nowadays by a sad spectacle. We hear countless reports of conservatives who have set their principles aside in Washington in order to “go with the flow,” or to do “business as usual” in order to make their lives in Washington more comfortable. Thus the subtitle, drawn from the observation made famous by Stan Evans: “Most conservatives know when they come to Washington that it is a sewer; the trouble is, too many of them wind up treating it like a hot tub.”

Unfortunately, we all recognize the ring of truth in that observation. Our experience here over the course of the past eight years has made realists of many of us, and diehard cynics of a few more. And that represents a change. Most of us, in the words of Charles Dickens, had great expectations after the 1980 elections, when the Reagan Revolution had brought a generation of conservatives to Washington. In those days we had fond hopes that the principles we had been cultivating for years would finally find a platform for action. In those triumphant days, the entire conservative movement seemed committed to the proposition that, for the first time in many years in American politics, right principle would lead to right action and good policies. Yet, the eighties abound in examples of policies that were snatched from the jaws of victory when someone who was “one of us” joined the opposition at a critical moment, allowing the opportunity for the victory of a principled policy to pass. The decade is strewn with the wreckage of such policies, a sight which brings more than a hint of sadness even when we take into account all the good that President Reagan was able to achieve.

Powerful Temptation. I do not intend to render a blow-by-blow account of the won-lost column tonight. This room has hosted many discussions offering such analysis, issue by issue. Instead, I want to look at one facet of this problem: What causes conservatives to bail out and join the liberal Washington crowd? What draws them? What is the liberal temptation?

We know that it is a powerful one. And it tempts conservatives just like it does anyone else. And Washington is a liberal town. It hasn't even begun to forgive the American people for electing Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Dan Quayle. Instead, the permanent government here just hunkers down and tries to wait out the conservatives who come to town so full of optimism and resolve. And it delivers a barrage of acrimony and derision, all designed to make the conservative leave, or change his spots — to stop trying to shut the water off, so to speak, and to jump into the trough instead.

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Chipping Away at Conservative Resolve. The liberal establishment knows that it's hard to live in Washington as a conservative, to be subjected constantly to the kind of treatment that one could expect only from the paragon of tolerance and understanding that this town purports to be. And it incessantly harasses, cajoles, and chips away at our resolve to persevere.

All too often, alas, conservatives do get tired, or give up, and go over. It's a sight that has become almost routine: good solid people, many ensconced in positions of power, influence, and even prestige, begin to think that running the world is not so bad after all. In fact, there's a lot of money to be made in this town, and a piece of that pie can go to those conservatives who are willing to cooperate. That is the message, and that is the sad fact.

Of course, this comes as no surprise. Many of us knew from the beginning that a lot of the Reagan "team" trooping into Washington after the 1980 elections were just sojourning opportunists. In 1981, those of us who had been working for Ronald Reagan since before Woodstock found ourselves in a sea of resumé's from job-seekers, many of them recent converts, whose liberal pasts were being renounced now that they had seen the light. No doubt many of these conversions were genuine, but many more — possibly the majority — represented nothing more than an ideological face-lift for those who had come to town to cash in.

All this, and so much more, as T.S. Eliot sighs. But we were prepared to deal with opportunists, I think, and we had our share. What has hurt conservatism as a movement the most, though, and what has hurt many conservatives most personally, is the number of outright defections we have suffered, people who traded their conservative credentials for upward mobility, cash, or power. We've been reading about a few of them in the press lately.

Fundamental Reality. I must admit that, when Betsy Hart invited me to address you tonight, I was tempted to use my few moments at the mike to single out some of the more vexing examples of these conservative turncoats. For some reason, they have decided that it's more important to get comfortable in the trough, rather than to try to unplug it. It is even more perplexing to see these stalwarts on television defending themselves and their actions as being "perfectly legal," as they flaunt hundreds of thousands of dollars gained with a few minutes of working the system. And these are the people who led the charge for principle and change just a few short years ago. They have lost sight of the fundamental reality of the trough: the only way you can pull the plug is to be on the *outside*.

Often enough, it appears, the sellout seems to luxuriate in the Washington power culture. The media coverage of such figures is carefully crafted to send the message to Americans that all principled conservatives are really turncoats in their hearts, each longing for the big time, awaiting the moment when he can cash in his rolodex for the highest price. The ultimate message, they imply, is clear: There is no one of principle left in the movement. Ultimately, they tell us, principle and politics are incompatible. Self-interest alone survives. So go for all the gusto you can, because you only go around once in Washington.

Frankly, that's not a very inspiring message for young people, and I think there's an alternative. As I contemplated tonight's topic, I thought we could go below these surface disappointments, to the abiding realities that underlie them, and find a ray of hope.

Heart of Conservatism. Now I do think the pathology of the sellout conservative should be analyzed some day with care, don't get me wrong; but I do not intend to conduct that intellectual autopsy tonight. Perhaps someday The Heritage Foundation will publish a *Backgrounder* on it. Rather, I intend to bypass that tempting opportunity in order to concentrate on a more central question. Let us not ask, "How did they lose their principles," but, rather, "How can we *keep* ours?"

That's the question I want to address with you, the members of the Third Generation, who still hold high the principles you thought were at the heart of conservatism. Well, don't lose heart. They still are, and they always will be.



Those conservatives who came to Washington with their eyes open knew that it was a liberal town. Often enough, though, we were so intent on becoming policy experts that we lost sight of the principles that made us conservatives, and not just whiz-kids. Conservatism is not a set of formulas, it is a set of principles. It is not based on an economic or social model, but on an understanding of man, society, and the cosmos. It is a view that is shared by the vast majority of the American people — indeed, in principle, by a majority of the world's people. But this view of man and society is constantly under attack, because it constitutes a fundamental obstacle to the power-trippers of the world, and their kind usually doesn't enjoy being frustrated.

I have come to believe that there are two fundamental principles central to our tradition that present a virtually impregnable bulwark to the liberal power trip. They will be the focus of my analysis, because they are easy to understand, but also because they are intimately bound up in our history and in our culture. One of these principles is political and one is personal: they are the Tenth Amendment and the Tenth Commandment.

The Tenth Amendment to the Constitution, the anchor of the Bill of Rights, reads in full: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people."

Period. Pretty straightforward. And the Tenth Commandment is even simpler. Not easier, but more simply stated: "Thou shalt not covet."

Principle of Limits. Together these signposts, born of the historic course of man working with Divine Providence in search of political freedom and of spiritual salvation, reflect one principle central to all human experience: the principle of limits. Government must be limited, or man's freedom is lost. And the individual must govern himself according to strict limits, so that the government doesn't have to do it for him.

Our forefathers knew that society, like man's nature, was designed to reflect the order of God's creation, the order of nature. In fact, the Greek word for order is *cosmos*, which we use to denote the created universe.

But that cosmos is not guaranteed for fallen man. While history has chronicled man's unending search for order, man has always been tempted to assume the place of God the Almighty and decide for himself what was good and evil. That temptation automatically invites man to impose his will on his fellow man as well. Why? Because the offer that Satan made to Eve in the Garden of Eden — "You shall be as God, knowing the difference

between good and evil” – did not merely promise her personal liberation from the rules of order – or, in more contemporary language, “control over her own body”; rather, it offered man the opportunity to rule all creation the way God had done before the Fall. Satan made the same offer again to Christ, in the Desert, as recounted in Chapter IV of the Gospel according to St. Luke: “And the Devil took Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to Him: “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours.””

Devil’s Attractive Offer. In the course of history I would reckon that the Devil has made that offer, in various versions, many, many times. And, sadly, history has shown that quite a few people seem to have taken him up on it. It has been perfected, over the centuries, to appear to be very attractive. It is hard to resist.

This temptation to unlimited power has been the engine of the history of disorder since the Fall of man, and it likewise constitutes the major attraction of modern liberal thought. While the Declaration of Independence invokes “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” modern ideologies reject both the natural law and its Divine Author. Thus the modern ideologue – and the contemporary liberal – both reject any natural or supernatural principles that might limit human conduct, embracing instead the principle of power, whether of the raw variety, or administered through some process designed to guarantee “individual rights.” No matter what machinery is adopted in a political community, however, one truth remains: once the concept of limits is destroyed, power reigns supreme.

Thus the conservative affirmation of the Tenth Amendment and the Tenth Commandment acknowledges the political and the personal limits on human conduct imposed by the laws of nature and of nature’s God. The balance between personal conduct and limited government is indispensable here. In the words of William Penn, “those who will not govern themselves by the laws of God will be ruled by tyrants.”

Lust for Power. Moreover, the embracing of the Tenth Amendment and the Tenth Commandment is no mere pious symbol: our century has shown that the temptation to reject these limiting principles is much stronger than any merely physical temptation, such as avarice or physical lust. Yet, while the liberal ideology preaches to us about the evils of greed, religious zealotry, or the conservative’s insatiable desire to interfere with artistic independence, it never quite gets around to the dangers of the lust for power. The avoidance is all the more harmful because it is clear that this lust is much more powerful than any other: it seduces not the physical passions, which are quickly dissipated – witness the town drunk or the aging casanova – but the will, whose lust for power, in the absence of God’s limiting presence, is absolutely unbounded.

About now you must be asking, what does this have to do with co-opted conservatives?

The answer is quite simple, really: our conservative principles are based on some very powerful realities in history that have prevailed for thousands of years. If a conservative should put those principles on hold, for whatever reason – boredom, inconvenience, or opportunism – then he will be savaged by a wave of temptations of every sort, from the most trivial to the most venal, from the petty to the profound, all with one ultimate result: the dismembering of the moral order of the individual which is the backbone of the free society. And it is that moral order which is ideological liberalism’s major stumbling block.

"The Government is Us Now." In fact, if we even forget about our fundamental principles as we are caught up in the high-pressure work environment in Washington, we can fall prey to the liberal temptation to fight, not to limit the power of the government, but to expand it, because, after all, the government is us now. And, as many ex-conservatives have discovered, you can do very well by doing good.

There's a personal story about this I can relate, about President Eisenhower. My father was an early supporter of his, and was also a supporter of the Bricker Amendment. That piece of legislation, which fell one vote short of the required two-thirds majority in the Senate, would have limited the powers of the President to unilaterally approve executive compacts without the advice and consent of the Senate. Essentially, it required that any new Yaltas would have to be open to public knowledge and Senatorial debate.

Eisenhower, elected as a conservative, nonetheless felt that the Bricker Amendment was no longer necessary. "But *I'm* President now," he told my father. But Dad stuck to his guns: "Mr. President, this is a matter of constitutional principle, this amendment will restore the balance for all presidents to come."

Ike said, "Dean, if you'll just be neutral on this, I'll put you on the Supreme Court." But Dad said no, so the seat went to another Irish Catholic Democrat, William Brennan. And I grew up on a farm in Indiana instead of in Bethesda.

Seemingly Insignificant Sellouts. Now this brings us to another point: Not all sellouts are done at the price of a quarter of a million dollars, or a seat on the Supreme Court. Most of them, in fact, begin with very small, seemingly insignificant decisions. You have all been there, I'm sure. The moment comes when you must choose, "Do I do the right thing here, even though it might mean I lose my job, or embarrass my boss, or make an unnecessary enemy?" We have all been in the situation where it is so easy to say, "Good grief, I'm on the fast track, and if I keep my head down I can get into a position of *real* power someday, and then make some tough decisions that will really do something for the country. But not this issue, not now; it's too inconsequential, it's too nit-picking, and, what the heck, people are doing it all the time!"

So the moment passes, and with it, an opportunity. I remember hearing my father's advice to his law students while I was growing up: "If you take the first bribe, you may as well take the rest."

The conservative principles of the Tenth Amendment and the Tenth Commandment cannot merely serve us as slogans. Rather, they must serve us as constant guides, in our personal and political lives, to right conduct. They mean bringing together the moral foundation of our personal *and* our political selves. We cannot separate our life artificially and live morally on the personal level, and neutrally on the political plane. It causes personal and social schizophrenia; it cannot impart any order, any peace, to society.

True Prudence. And yes, it is important to be prudent, but with a regard for the proper sense of that word: Too often we hear that a certain politician or diplomat is "prudent" because he is careful, he covers himself well, he is never out front on an issue. He never takes a stand.

Well, in the terms of classical moral theory, that isn't prudence – in fact, it might very well be cowardice. True prudence does not mean being careful, it means doing the right

thing, even if it makes people mad, and makes you unpopular. And, with Aristotle, bear in mind the importance of habit in the moral life: to confront thousands of small decisions with the same love of truth, and inclination to the good, as we bring to the big decisions. Then, as the Good Book says, “as ye are in small things, so shall ye be in great things.” There’s no conservative line drawn in the sand that says, “if the issue is smaller than ‘x,’ then go ahead and accommodate, compromise your principles; it’ll put you in a better position to stick to your guns when the really big decisions come along.”

No, conservatives know better; if you cut corners in small things, then you will cut them in great things as well. On the other hand, a knowledge of the principles of moral action and moral societies – and the continued study of those principles, never taking them for granted – will bring you to love them and apply them with greater care and uniformity in your personal life as well as your political career.

Principles Remain. Young conservatives, take heart. You don’t have to sell out. Those tempting fruits you seem to see on the other side of the sellout are nothing more than a siren song that will bring you crashing onto the rocks of relativism, nihilism, and despair, no matter how rich, powerful, or popular you think you will be. All that will disappear in a flash. What remains are the principles that have been sharpened and polished with the silent strength and determined dedication of countless generations that have gone before us. Remember, they too were tempted. They fought despair as their friends sold out, and they struggled to survive while the turncoats were riding high. They felt alone, abandoned, when the tide was going against them. But they stuck it out, and their efforts were rewarded. Our freedom is the fruit of their labors. Be one with them, in solidarity with their courage and their perseverance.

Remember, in the words of Dickens, that our actions on each given day lay the foundation for our own *Great Expectations*. In closing, let me quote from that beautiful work a passage which has given comfort to many generations of young people longing to live beautiful, principled lives:

That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me. But it is the same with any life. Imagine one selected day struck out of it, and think how different its course would have been. Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.

