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**Ideology, Politics,  
and the  
American Family:  
Setting the Agenda  
for the 1990s**

*By Gary L. Bauer*



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# Ideology, Politics, and the American Family: Setting the Agenda for the 1990s

by Gary L. Bauer

I am very honored to be chosen as the inaugural lecturer in the Resource Bank Lecture Series. All of us must have a sense that an era in the history of American conservatism ended when Ronald Reagan's helicopter lifted off from the Capitol last January 20. Without prejudice to the evolving thought patterns of President Bush, or to the possibilities of conservative victories in this administration, we can fairly say that a period of reflection, and perhaps of regrouping, has begun.

A period of reflection and regrouping is not a sign of dissolution. Conservatism is not spent, for the simple reason that conservatism is made up of good ideas, and good ideas are timeless. Nor do I accept Arthur Schlesinger's cyclical theory of American politics, in which liberal and conservative periods alternate. There is both a need for, and a chance for, a conservative future.

But clearly the landscape has changed. In the lifetimes of most people here today, American conservatism has developed from a philosophy embraced only by a handful of *National Review* intellectuals and Western-state politicians into a movement that put a President into office.

And while many in our movement have had a hard time making the transition from an embattled group of critics on the sidelines to a potentially powerful group of leaders on the inside, I do not draw any discouragement from this. The liberal agenda wasn't accomplished in the first eight years of the New Deal. In the Reagan Era we have made not just a start, but a good start. The question, of course, is: Where do we go from here?

**Core Issues.** Conservatism rose to political eminence in the late seventies because we were able to put together a political coalition built around a strategic cluster of "economic," "foreign policy/defense," and "social" issues — or, as I prefer to phrase them: free enterprise, anti-communism, and traditional values.

This issue-mix is basically sound. It brought us to the great watershed election of 1980, and it deserves to be kept more or less intact.

However, I fear it may unravel because some members of the coalition are treated as less equal than others. In a word, it is time to stop assigning the social and family issues to the back of the policy bus.

Politically, the conservative movement was nowhere before it successfully reached out to social-issue voters.

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We are in a civil war over values in America — a war over the kind of nation we are and will become. It is over what we will teach our children about life and death, love and sex, and freedom and slavery.

**The Vision Thing.** In July of 1988 when George Bush was at the Kennebunkport Yacht Club expressing puzzlement over what he called “the vision thing,” he was 17 points behind the eminently forgettable Mike Dukakis. And where is George Bush now, after taking up law and order, the Pledge of Allegiance, and some clear stands on issues like abortion? He’s in the White House, the beneficiary of the biggest turnaround in the history of polling.

What I would like to suggest today is that both conservatism’s ability to win elections, and its ability to help America, coincide with its advocacy of traditional values — which, as Paul Weyrich has been reminding us lately, are also functional values. It was the fact that they are functional that made them traditional in the first place.

We aren’t the sort of conservatives who like traditions because they’re old; we like them because they work. We are traditionalists because we believe that mankind, over time, is not stupid. Fallen, yes; stupid, no.

Consider this in relation to the other elements in the issue-mix.

**Pitfalls of Hedonist Culture.** First, economics. Economic conservatives take note: The free-market system that we praise cannot operate without hard work and postponement of gratification. Unfortunately, both our present welfare policies and the hedonist culture undercut these values. The welfare state, as currently administered, tells people that an income is an entitlement, not a result of work. And the hedonist culture tells people — especially our children — that the course of action that causes the most immediate pleasure and the least pain or inconvenience is the one to take, regardless of probable future results.

Of course, the free market is itself implicated in the rise of a hedonist culture. It produces prosperity, and prosperity weakens the perceived need for self-denial and self-discipline. A citizen with a low capacity for self-denial not only has very little sales resistance, which may be good for business: he also has very little government resistance, and that’s bad for business. Pampered people may buy lots of consumer goods; but they also buy bills of goods from politicians.

The free market is cited by those who want to turn a profit by trading with the Soviets. It’s cited by television executives to justify the sleaze that teaches our children that fidelity is old-fashioned and adultery the norm.

The paradox is that the free market needs old-fashioned virtues but also undermines those virtues. Economic conservatives will have to address this problem, which sociologist Daniel Bell calls the “cultural contradiction of capitalism.”

**Defense of Western Values.** Next, consider traditional values in relation to defense. Let me put the matter as starkly as I know how: Defense of what? Defense against the kind of tyranny we might otherwise fall under is always worthwhile. But the more it costs — and it’s always going to cost a lot — the more people can and should demand that the way of life we are defending be a worthy one, not just the lesser of two evils.

Is it worthy? I have often argued against the “moral equivalency” crowd, and I will continue to do so. Their ingratitude is a scandal. But when I see the statistics on abortion,

the retreat from marriage, the tax burden on hard-working families, the attempted elevation of homosexuality to the status of a protected activity, the state-sponsored value-free sex-ed programs in the schools, I begin to wonder whether we have abandoned the values that are at the heart of the American experiment in liberty under God – the values that make America defensible. To be better than the Soviet Union is not necessarily to be good enough.

About a year ago, Pat Buchanan wrote a column about French and American cosmetic companies using aborted human children in their products – baby parts going into compounds to make the faces of rich women more beautiful. Then Pat told the story of Whittaker Chambers on his deathbed, talking to a Catholic priest. Chambers was talking about the need to save the West. The priest asked him, “What makes you think the West is worth saving?” I can answer that question, but it becomes more challenging as we slide down the slope of moral relativism.

To be able to answer that question without hesitation requires us to rededicate ourselves to the values the Founders embraced, and to stand against the values that so often prevail in modern America.

The social issues are the binding agent of the conservative movement, not just in terms of votes, but because functional, traditional values are necessary to make the free economy work and to make successive generations of Americans willing to make sacrifices to defend our society. People don't offer their lives and sacred honor for the rights of pornographers or for the right to abort – there must be a loftier concept of what it means to be an American than that.

**Thinking about the 1990s.** As I see it, the key issues of the nineties are going to be: abortion, the traditional family, education, and home ownership. These are obviously interconnected; they are obviously not all equally important; and they are obviously not the only issues worth working on. But I think that together they are the heart of the social agenda, and the social agenda is the heart of the conservative agenda. Let me say a little about each one.

Abortion is really a pre-political issue, because it concerns the question of who is a member of the political community. This is what gives it many similarities to the slavery issue.

As my friend Bob Morrison of the Lutheran Church/Missouri Synod has put it, “If abortion is not wrong, then nothing is wrong. It is more than a singular or separate wrong – it is the source of all wrong. To kill the small, the weak, the sick, the dependent, the defenseless, violates all that our people's faith and our nation's history tell us is right.”

But some people reject that reasoning by an act of will. They don't like the old moral universe with its absolute rights and duties, so they create a moral universe of their own. The core issue is metaphysical, not religious: is individual self-fulfillment absolute, or are there imperatives that can supersede it?

Despite the altruistic rhetoric that some old-line liberals still use, liberalism is profoundly oriented toward individual self-satisfaction. That is why liberalism, which supposedly advocates the rights of the powerless, has never embraced the rights of the powerless person in the womb.

Most liberals are committed to the moral revolution, and like any revolution, this one means to crush – sometimes literally – anyone that stands in the way.

It was more than just an electoral ploy that got the right-to-lifers hitched to the conservative bandwagon. It was a sense that together we are all defending the integrity of God's creation, against those who want to rearrange it and devalue it.

My friends, this is an irrepressible conflict. The White House and conservative public officials should hear this clearly: there can be no compromise on abortion. Any retreat on this issue will result in an immediate and permanent sundering of the conservative coalition.

**The Attack on the Family.** The next key issue is the future of the traditional family. It is a sign of our times that I feel compelled to define what I mean by that term. I mean: a man and a woman, married to each other, with children, natural or adopted, present or intended. There are many other ways that human beings can congregate and cohabit, but congregation and cohabitation do not make a family.

This form of social organization has been the universal norm of history, with variations that are few and mostly insignificant. Yet today it is under intense challenge. To assert its rights in the public forum is to be tagged as offending the god of pluralism.

Currently the attack is concentrated on traditional roles within the family: the father as primary breadwinner, the mother as primary care giver. At the top of the liberal agenda is to subvert this arrangement by federally subsidizing alternatives to it, via taxes that will transfer wealth from those who follow the old norms to those who obediently live the way liberals in Congress think they should live. There are precious few politicians willing to say what the research overwhelmingly tells us – children need to be raised by their parents.

**Last Barrier to the Total State.** If the other side achieves its agenda on child care, it will have effectively removed this function from the family, just as it once removed the education function. I have spoken with congressional aides who have told me flat-out that children should be raised by “professionals.”

If the family ceases to exist in any recognizable form, the last and most formidable barrier to the total state will have fallen. Abolition of the family has been high on the agenda of every totalitarian movement – even though they have all found this impossible to accomplish.

It could be that what Lenin, Stalin, and Mao failed to do by force, congressional liberals will succeed in doing by using the federal taxing and spending power. To stop them on this issue should be at the top of the agenda of everyone who claims to favor small government. The therapeutic state plays to win, and it is now attacking its ultimate enemy, the family.

**Crisis in American Education.** Next issue: education. This has been at the heart of all political philosophy since Plato. The main preoccupation of every generation is how to bring up the next generation. It was education issues that first galvanized the Christian Right in the late 70s, and it has largely been education issues that have kept that movement going, such as school prayer and the sex education mess. There is trouble in American education.

Take for example if you will, a recent article in the *New York Times* that quoted several New York educators who proclaimed that they deliberately avoid trying to tell students what is ethically right and wrong.

In this article, the author describes the events that took place at a counseling session among fifteen high school juniors and seniors. In the course of the discussion, a majority of the students decided that another student had been foolish to return \$100 she recently found in a purse at the school. After reaching this conclusion, the students asked their counselor his opinion. He told them that although he believed the girl had acted correctly, he would not try to force his views on them. "If I come from a position of what is right and wrong," he explained, "then I wouldn't be your counselor."

Well, once upon a time counselors counseled, and among other things they counseled about right and wrong. That a counselor in an American public school felt compelled to tell a reporter that he did no such thing, is a sad comment about what still happens in too many of our schools.

I served in Bill Bennett's Department of Education, and I can tell you that the powers that control education in this country react like cornered cats to anything that threatens to weaken their power over our children's minds. They know – and we should too – that whoever controls education controls whether or not the therapeutic state wins out. If you want to be an Education President, this should be your guiding thought: Break the power of the educational establishment!

**Mandate from Parents.** Our position should not be that education should be run by conservative bureaucrats rather than liberal bureaucrats. Our position should be that it should be run by parents, and by school personnel who understand that they are exercising a mandate from parents.

Some take great pleasure in pointing out that some parents are utterly unable or unwilling to take an interest in their children's education. This is tragically true – and it is largely the result of the liberal welfare state, which promotes family break-up. The therapeutic state always proposes to make additional messes so as to clean up the messes it's already made. The fact that parents are not exercising their responsibilities only means that the goal of public policy should be to help them do so – not to create new alternatives to parental responsibility. No bureaucrat can substitute for a father or mother.

Of course, it is not only poor parents who lack the ability to invest as much time in their children as they should. The same happens to parents in the middle or even upper classes, and that is because of the very thing that puts them in those classes: both parents have full-time jobs outside the home. So the issue of the traditional family is closely related to the issue of education, and both are related to my last issue for today, home ownership.

**Home Ownership as a Conservatizing Influence.** The need to own a house is the reason for a lot of modern two-income situations. Through this link in the chain, the high cost of home ownership is implicated in the decline of the traditional family and the takeover of education and child-rearing by the therapeutic state.

On the brighter side, home ownership, once attained, ranks right up there with parenthood as a conservatizing influence. Both of these things give people a greater stake in their country and in their community than they had had before.

**Good Politics.** I think it's time for conservatives to look at creative solutions to the problem of affording home ownership — ideas such as down payment IRAs, as well as pushing harder to permit public housing tenants to buy title to their apartments at good rates. I'm not touting one idea in particular; I just want to provoke conservatives into thinking about this. It's not only compassionate, it's good politics too.

I recall a Doonesbury cartoon in which Mike Doonesbury learned he was to become a father. In some consternation, he began ticking off the things he would have to do before the baby arrived. This list included taking Lamaze classes, getting a bigger place, and switching his registration to Republican.

I suspect that on this point, Garry Trudeau's instinct is right: a nation of homeowners is a nation of conservative voters. The greatest secret of American politics is not the gender gap but the family gap. Americans married with children are much more likely to vote for conservative candidates and conservative ideas.

Margaret Thatcher has turned the Conservative Party into Britain's majority party by increasing the number of beneficiaries of the free enterprise system relative to the number of the beneficiaries of socialism; and selling off public housing has been one of the way she's done it. We should look into policies like that here.

**Toward a Traditionalist/Populist Coalition.** If you will permit me one more British reference, I'd like to quote from Benjamin Disraeli, who was once asked whether "the masses" would be an obstacle to his Conservative government, and responded, "The masses are conservative."

I deeply believe that he is right. The great mass of people are basically at home in the universe; those who want to turn the universe upside down have to resort to manipulation and demagoguery to do it, stirring up artificial grievances and making lying promises.

To the extent that the conservative political movement has linked up with its natural populist constituency, it has been successful. But it has to continue in a populist vein. It has to insist, not on radical individualism, but on the family, the local community, and the churches as the bulwarks against the therapeutic state.

This outreach means including many people who are social conservatives but economic liberals, at least insofar as they see a wider sphere of public responsibility than some conservatives have been willing to acknowledge.

High on this list of new coalition members must be the black family. Here I do not mean embracing the reverse-racism agenda of the Left. I mean addressing the problems that black people have in real life, not just in sociological journals: problems like crime in their neighborhoods; how to keep their families together; how to keep their kids away from drugs; and how to avoid pre-mature sexual involvement.

When I was in the White House I occasionally spoke with some black leaders about these issues, and the experience was very instructive. Whenever I went easy on the ideological aspects of what I have to say, I found that they outflanked me on the right. They wanted to go even further!

The problem with black outreach for conservatives is not whether we're too conservative for them, but whether we're conservative enough. Conservative in the right way, that is.



Let's talk, in conclusion, about "social justice," and what it means for all Americans.

Conservatives have to seek justice, both in reality and appearance. There is no excuse for the words "social justice" being universally perceived as code words for the Left. Every conservative issue I have discussed today is a "social justice issue" under any reasonable definition of those terms. If conservatism is perceived as merely a defense of the economic "haves" against the "have-nots," it will never become a governing philosophy – and in such a case I would question whether it would deserve to be one. We must be a movement that attracts people for larger reasons than the income tax bracket they are in.

**Overthrowing the Liberal Elite.** This means we do not need to become less conservative: we need to become more conservative. We need to become conservative enough to get serious about overthrowing the liberal elite that is forcing the therapeutic state on us – with disastrous results particularly in the black community. Indeed, "community" ceases to exist where liberalism's social agenda has run amok.

Finally, as conservatives, we have to recognize that not everything that matters can be measured in terms of the GNP. We are the party of growth and opportunity, and we should remain so. But we are also the party of family and faith. If we ever give those things up, we will return to being the party of the loyal opposition – always critiquing – never governing. Conservatism is better than this, and in the months ahead we will have the opportunity to prove that – to ourselves and to the nation.

