

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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By William Lucas



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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
U.S.A.
202/546-4400

The Conservative Opportunity

By William Lucas

I stand here today as evidence that for an individual in America, the pursuit of opportunity can mean success. And as unexciting as that statement might be, I believe that simple equation is the most exciting element of America's foundation and continuing strength.

I began my career inauspiciously as a police officer in Harlem, New York. It was not a job that a lot of people would want. It was not a job that a lot of police officers would want. And it was certainly not a low stress job that would make you wealthy.

But for me, and for thousands of other men and women like me, more than anything else, that first job, while neither easy nor glamorous, was a job that held a key to my future — a key that unlocked doors to opportunities, which when pursued, led to more opportunities, all of which ultimately led me here today.

That, again, is not a startling or difficult equation to master — opportunity equals success equals greater opportunity. But what has been difficult to master is the equation that will resolve the differences between those on the left of the political spectrum and those on the right concerning how we can best create opportunity for all. There is an added challenge to those who are conservatives of effectively arguing the case without appearing callous and insensitive.

You know the litany. Conservatives are: anti-poor, anti-worker, anti-education, anti-civil rights, anti-everything; This is in large part because we have not presented our views particularly well. No matter what the issue and no matter what the course, our opponents are obliged to disagree.

No-Win Situation. For example, the President increases military personnel at our base in Panama, and is attacked for increasing the chances for the involvement of U.S. troops in potential hostilities, then is attacked for not doing enough to support a military coup.

The Administration is attacked for not having a anti-drug plan, and then is attacked for presenting one that is not costly enough.

Or Congress rescinds Individual Retirement Account deductions, calling them write-offs for the rich, only to try to reinstate them as an alternative to cuts in the capital gains tax, this time calling them an advantage for all Americans.

So it is without question that often we are placed in no-win situations. But it is also true that many times we place ourselves at a disadvantage by not presenting our arguments as well, or as forcefully, or as completely as we should. We refuse to blow our own horn.

William Lucas is Director of the Office of Liaison Services of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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Frustration and Silence. Our achievements pass without note. Our success is denigrated. And our work is always made suspect. With little argument from us.

We see it all the time. New economic figures show sustained growth yet the message the public hears is that it is not as big as it should be or that a recession is very definitely right around the corner.

And what is the response from conservatives? Well, usually, frustration and silence. Since we cannot win an ever-changing argument, we tend to stop arguing altogether, moving forward with the expectation that our accomplishments will speak for themselves, leaving our opponents to shape our arguments and making us appear as though we do not care and that our view of opportunity in America is a selfish one.

But the fact of the matter is, conservatives do care. Far from being selfish, our hopes and plans include all Americans. Our desires for opportunities are not in any way exclusive to any group. And our vision for a better America for all Americans is not narrow, but, in fact, is far broader than that of our opponents.

I know that to be true and so do you. And that is the truth and the message we must deliver to the American public, thoughtfully and forcefully.

We cannot simply let success speak for itself, because too often that message is distorted.

We cannot expect our plans to be endorsed simply because they make sense, because too often, logic pales in the face of emotion. And we can never assume the value of our ideas to be self-evident.

Affording Opportunities. The value of our free enterprise system is not found in statistics – it is found in human beings and the opportunities it affords them.

The value of our educational system is not found in analysis of America's potential for future competition in world markets – it is found in the young people of our nation and the opportunities it affords them.

And the value of our system of government is not found in political theories – it is found in the opportunities it affords all Americans and in the hope it affords the rest of the world.

In other words, while conservatives are very good at quantifying the value of their ideas, we are not so good at expressing the quality of our ideas as they relate to people of all races, color, creed, and gender.

And the quality of those ideas in its most essential form is found in opportunity. That is especially true for minority Americans, and unfortunately, it is a message that we have been unable to deliver.

In employment, in education, in political involvement – we are not opposed to providing opportunities in those areas to anyone. Yet, many Americans believe that we are. In part because of the distortion I spoke of a moment ago, but also partly because we have not argued our case well.

And our case is this: We have a dream of what this nation can be...for all Americans. A dream that can only be built on opportunities for all of us. A dream that will only be achieved through a united effort.

A dream not of exclusion but of inclusion. A dream of a nation where people are not set apart from society with opportunities provided them on an as-needed basis, but where they are included in the mainstream of society and allowed to pursue the full range of opportunities this nation offers.

This is the case we must argue. A case that is as valid in a practical sense, as it is positive in an inspirational sense, and we must communicate both its practicality as well as its inspiration.

Great, Powerful Dreams. Conservatives do not usually speak of dreams, possibly because our opponents so often offer up great dreams which either turn into nightmares or wither into failures. But whatever the reason, we tend to keep our dreams and visions to ourselves. And that may be our greatest mistake.

Our efforts may be good, our ideas even better, but our dreams are great and carry more power than we appreciate – if we share them with our fellow Americans.

It is not a cliché to say that this is a nation built on dreams. And we should not be shy about our effort to continue to build this nation out of dreams. Not in a piecemeal fashion. Not through a program that addresses only a small part of an individual's need. And not through plans that deny the worth of individual initiative and opportunity – all of which are elements of our opponents' agenda.

I stand here today as evidence of what opportunity means in America. And as I am grateful for those opportunities and for the rewards they have given me, I am also anxious to see them offered to all others in this great nation – not as a matter of a program or policy, but as a matter of right based on the American principles of fairness, free will, free choice and free enterprise, the right to pursue and achieve the American dream.

That is my message to you, and that, my friends, must be our message to America.

