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**Ideas and
Strategies
to Unite the
Conservative
Majority**

By Paul M. Weyrich



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Ideas and Strategies to Unite The Conservative Majority

By Paul M. Weyrich

I know in the wake of the election of Bill Clinton some of the people here in the audience and others watching this on national television are extremely discouraged, so I thought that perhaps I would begin by telling you about an experience I had which, I believe, illustrates a point.

In 1963, about a week after the Kennedy assassination, I attended a meeting in Milwaukee of organizers of the Goldwater for President campaign. Somebody at this meeting said, "Well, you know the American public is very fair. Lyndon Johnson has just become President, and the election is less than a year from now. In all probability, if we run Barry Goldwater against Lyndon Johnson, he will be defeated. It seems to me we would be a lot better off allowing whoever might get the nomination to get it and be defeated, because in all probability that is going to happen. Then four years from now, in 1968, we will come back with a vengeance, and at such a time Goldwater could probably be elected, whereas now he couldn't be."

Well, the crowd turned on this poor fellow—it was absolutely startling—and they told him, "Don't you understand that the 1964 election is going to be our last free election? Don't you understand that if we don't nominate Goldwater now we are never going to have another opportunity?"

I am afraid that such a mentality prevails even today to a certain extent; there is a belief that somehow this election defeat (which was a defeat, in my opinion, not for conservative ideals, but rather a defeat for the inability to articulate and practice conservative ideals) is our last opportunity, that we are not going to ever see another conservative President.

Concentrating on State and Local Levels. I don't happen to believe that, nor do I happen to think that our movement is dependent on the Presidency alone. I think this is one of the problems that we have had with this movement: We have been far too presidentially focused and far less focused on state and local conservatism, which is where it ought to begin. We ought to practice what we preach. We always say that the unit which is closest to the people is the most important unit of governing—yet we don't believe that. We are good monarchists at heart; we always look to the Presidency and this great symbol.

But in point of fact, after the Reagan election in 1980, the liberals survived precisely because they were so well entrenched in the state legislatures, in the city councils, and all these other places where they could put the brakes on the so-called Reagan Revolution.

If we would concentrate on making politics, if you will, at the local and state level, I think we would be a lot better off. And in due course, you could have a President come along who could accomplish a lot more if that infrastructure were built in.

About 500 years ago Sir Francis Bacon said that if we begin with answers we will end up with questions, but if we begin with questions we may end up with answers. I want to ask a key question. I was asked to talk about what issues might unite this movement. I could come here with a

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laundry list of particular issues that we could agree on. But I don't think that that is appropriate, because we can have, of course, temporary coalitions on all kinds of issues. We had very successful temporary coalitions on the term-limit issue, which I was very much a part of. But it involved a lot of people who are not part of the conservative movement. And so, in line with asking the right questions, I think we have to first examine what we are talking about when we talk about the conservative movement, and then what kind of movement we should be looking at in the future, because of what I think is happening in this country.

Transcending Political Parties. The first point that I think we need to understand is that when we speak of a conservative movement—or at least when I speak of it—we are not talking about a political party. This movement never was a political party. It got absorbed into, and was very active with, and in coalition with a political party, but it was not in and of itself a political party. This movement ought to transcend political parties and ideally be affecting both political parties—or however many political parties we end up having. To suggest that this movement is synonymous with one of the major political parties is a mistake.

Secondly, I think we have to look very carefully at the current notion that we can simply replicate the Reagan coalition, that this could be put together again for the mid-1990s, and that all we have to do is simply revive the same elements that we had before.

This is a problem, in my opinion, for several reasons. First of all, there is no Reagan. And there is nobody approaching a Reagan. There is nobody approaching the kind of senior status that I think would be necessary to put together that kind of coalition. You have some Reagan wannabe's; you have some people who could approach greatness if they perhaps tried a little harder. But I don't see anybody right now who fits that bill and who also who wants to run for national office.

Secondly, the politics that dominated the mid-1970s and beyond really were Reagan-oriented politics. He was the focal point of it, from his 1976 campaign, when he nearly won the Republican presidential nomination, to his election in 1980, and going all the way through the election of George Bush in 1988.

That particular kind of politics cannot be replicated again. It cannot be replicated again because one of the central focuses of that political coalition was the world as it existed at that point. And even though there are some conservatives who find it hard to believe, the world, in fact, has changed. We do not face the same kind of threat from the Soviet empire that we did before. We may have another kind of threat which may ultimately prove to be more serious, but we do not have the same kind of threat.

And the people who were attracted to that coalition because they were concerned about the strength of the country, and who swallowed hard and accepted Republicans even though they really didn't like them very much, will not necessarily be attracted to a coalition of the future. We have to understand that.

Economic Issues Insufficient. Secondly, the great focus of that coalition was economic. We saw in this past election a completely economic focus. Attempts to raise other issues, like family values, were very inadequate and didn't work very well. With this economic focus, of course, we did not push the kind of issues in this last election that are winners for such a potential coalition. But even as such, I will contend that the economic issues alone are insufficient for a new coalition to be put together. And this is because a functioning, democratic, capitalist society, or a society where the free enterprise system functions well, depends upon a moral nation. It depends upon a functioning society.

And I believe that the coming decade will see a greater and greater emphasis on values questions, despite the fact that the 1992 election is going to be interpreted by some as a repudiation of that notion, and despite the fact that there will be an attempt by people in both political parties to avoid discussing such issues. I believe that these issues have to be the center of any new coalition precisely because what is happening in the country is dangerous to its future.

Facing Cultural Questions. If you do not have a functioning society, if a lot of people cannot act, cannot think, cannot function normally, if they are from dysfunctional families and do not relate to family and to society correctly, then economic policies and tax rates and whether or not you have a minimum wage ultimately are irrelevant, because you will have a continued decline in the society regardless of what economic policies this administration or any future administration adopts. The cultural questions have to be faced.

A recent *Forbes* magazine cover story tried to explain why we feel so bad when things, according to them, are not all that bad. They were, of course, speaking economically. One thing about the article was striking. It revealed that the real reason why so many people feel bad is essentially cultural. And indeed, the fact that these issues were never addressed in a real way in this last campaign was, I think, one reason why a lot of people voted for Perot. I think that movement will grow—not necessarily around him personally, but as an independent political movement—if neither political party addresses these questions.

We have to understand that traditional values are functional values. We must not be afraid to defend traditional Judeo-Christian values. Traditional values lead to functioning families, healthy communities, and productive nations. Secular humanism, on the other hand, causes dysfunctional families, sick communities, and nations that have lost their competitive and productive edge.

We need to understand that in order to construct an agenda that will work, in order to construct, frankly, a society that will work, we have to get back to the very basics. And these basics involve family and community. This movement ought to go back to the local level and become involved with real people.

Out of Touch. The striking thing about this movement in terms of Washington is that this city, in its conservative movement, in many ways has become as unreal as the rest of the city has become in its governmental functions. Many people do not think the way folks think out there. Many people here, with their high mortgages and their good-paying jobs and their insulation from the real world, do not understand what problems are facing real people in real communities out across the country. The only reason that I am reasonably sane after 26 years here is because I travel most of the time and I am out among real folks and I see what is going on.

I think we had better understand that whether or not we publish some theoretical paper on some issue or another does not mean anything to those people who are struggling in their home communities with their school districts, to those people who are trying to keep body and soul together and who are impeded by government policies and by the culture in general, to those people on college campuses who are struggling to maintain any kind of representation of our society and who are being challenged now even at so-called conservative and Christian institutions.

They are suffering real problems, and many times the conservative movement does not understand them, is not particularly involved with them, and—I hate to say—does not particularly care. In many cases we don't really identify with the struggles of people out in the countryside. Because of that you can have a Perot phenomenon; because of that you can have great disaffection with what has happened politically in the country.

I was a commentator on the BBC international television operation on election night. They have access to all kinds of surveys and they had a very impressive, sophisticated set-up.

And one of the surveys that I heard on the BBC that I never saw in this country was a survey of Clinton voters—people who had admitted that they had voted for President-elect Clinton. These voters were asked, “If he wins, do you think that things are going to get better?” Something like 63 percent said “no.” And then they were asked, “If you find that Clinton is able to enact most of his policies, do you think that things will get better?” And over half of the people said “no.”

Now, these are people who have “the courage to change,” and these are people who in voting for this presidential candidate have admitted that they do not think he is the solution. And the reason is, because these are people, whatever their motivations, who are connected with their families and their communities. They know that these problems are essentially cultural, and they know that no presidential campaign, no presidential candidate, no Presidency is going to remedy these problems.

They are waiting for some political movement in this country, or some people who have some moral authority, to come along and recognize that. In my opinion, this movement has utterly failed to do that.

So, I think that it is going to be very difficult to simply try to reconstruct a movement which was unique for its time. I think that the needs of the 1990s and beyond are going to be so focused on family and community and what is happening at the local level that it will be very difficult to convince people that they ought to be interested in other things. What they are experiencing in their own communities says otherwise.

Now, I think that a cultural agenda opens this movement to a lot of new allies. Anybody with children in school, for example, is a potential ally, but particularly those in the inner cities. There, school choice makes sense. A lot of areas in the country—rural areas and suburban areas—where they have nice schools, they are not that interested in this question. There, we can come up with issues that make sense.

I think that there is a new opening in the black community. Another statistic that I didn't see on U.S. television, but which the BBC had, was that Bill Clinton got a lower percentage of the black vote than did other Democratic presidential candidates. I think that people in that community, as well as in other communities, are beginning to take a look at whether or not they ought to be affiliated with one particular movement or one particular political party.

Reverse Marxists. And that represents an opening, provided that we simply do not talk to people solely on economic terms. Now, so that nobody misinterprets this, let me assure you that I subscribe to virtually all of the conservative economic agenda. But I think we make a mistake when we pretend to be reverse Marxists, when we suggest that the only thing that people think about is money or the economics of the situation, when we don't talk to people in the language that they understand because of what they are experiencing in their own families.

That is why, I think, in a lot of blue-collar families, in a lot of what we used to call the Reagan-Democrats, the right approach is to talk to these folks in cultural terms. I think if they had understood that they were voting on a referendum on the future of the traditional family, on homosexuals in the military, on children's rights and others of those kinds of questions, many voters would have stayed with the previous coalition that Mr. Bush had put together. But, everything was focused on economics, and when other issues were raised, they were either raised in the context of a quick shot with a retreat, or they were raised in a sort of supercilious way in which serious debate was precluded. People are very sensitive to this sort of thing; they don't

want to be used and they don't want to be trivialized with. I think that we had better understand that.

Now, I think that another thing we need to understand is that this movement needs to be, in order to be successful, anti-establishment—a little bit populist, in the sense that it relates to ordinary people.

I am very interested in the Perot vote, because he is an improbable candidate. For him to have gotten the largest third party vote since 1912, since Teddy Roosevelt, is politically significant. And a good deal of this vote was profoundly anti-Washington, profoundly anti-establishment.

We as a movement cannot have it both ways. We cannot pretend to do all of these wonderful things here in Washington, while at the same time suggesting that we are against Washington. I think we had better make up our mind, and if we are serious, then we had better get active on the local level. We had better run people for office at the local level. We had better take state and local politics much more seriously.

We at the Free Congress Foundation have constructed a vehicle called National Empowerment Television, by which we are trying to reach grass-roots people and are having an ability to organize them in a way that we have never been able to organize them before. The interesting thing about National Empowerment Television is that states are now forming their own intra-state networks so that people can come to meetings and get an hour of national issues and what to do about it, and an hour of state issues and what to do about it. When we achieve an intra-state television operation in all 50 states, where this movement has real strength working on issues at the local level, then we will have put together a serious national movement again.

We cannot be inside the Beltway and anti-establishment at the same time. And so many of the issues that people in this town get so tied up with don't resonate at all with people out there. Of course, I am not the first person to have said that. But, what I am saying is that this movement is as caught up with that problem as are the liberal Democrats, as is the Republican party, as is most of the Washington establishment that operates here. We have become part of that problem, and in my opinion we had better re-evaluate where we are.

“Defective Elites.” So, this new movement then, I think, has to take on the essential question of what I would term the “defective elites.” Every society requires elites. By elites I mean examples, role models, people who are in charge and who act as moral authority, who can be relied upon and depended upon not to sell out. We are faced with a whole panoply of defective elites, ranging from the political leadership, to the leadership in many of the churches who no longer are believers, to the business leadership that takes care of themselves—companies are going out of business and they are busy arranging for golden parachutes. If you don't think that ordinary people understand what that means, then think again.

I don't think that we can put together a new movement until we address the question of the defective elites and understand that the responsibility of this movement ultimately is to produce a new set of elites, but ones who live by a solid moral code. All of us, of course, are sinners. All of us fall short. All of us are inadequate. But at least we ought to have the goal of trying. At least we ought to put forward people who don't excuse every kind of behavior imaginable. And at least we ought to understand that personal conduct is relevant.

Look at the embarrassment now of all these women's groups. They knew that their hero, Bob Packwood, was involved in objectionable behavior toward women. Of course they knew it. Some of the people making the charges used to work for him, and then went into the women's groups. But they remained silent on this issue, and they wouldn't have raised it, except for the public revelation, because in their mind-set, people should be judged not on individual conduct,

but by their position on groups, as a group morality. So, people can be pro-women, even though they abuse women. They can be good on the “black” questions, even though we know some of these fine Senators who have imported Haitians to work at \$1.25 an hour so that they can avoid having to pay people real wages, and so on and so on.

We have to get back to real morality. We have to get back to accountability. And we have to get back to a movement that at least puts forward people who can be trusted, who at least pray every day that God will guide them, who don’t think that they can do all of this on their own and thus are somehow disconnected from God’s reality, which is very different from the reality that is attempted to be constructed in this city.

A Way of Life. If we get back to those kind of fundamentals, it seems to me, then we will be worthy to construct a new movement, one which is relevant to ordinary people, and one which will resonate with real people. But, if we reject the notion that we should move in that direction, if we remain fixated on what ultimately in the survival of America will prove to be irrelevant economic questions, if we attempt to put together some kind of a coalition based on a world which no longer exists, then I think we will ultimately fail. And we should fail. I joined the conservative movement—and I define conservatism not as an ideology, but as a way of life—because conservatives were connected with reality. Liberals are not connected with reality.

This conservative movement, if it is to revive and play the vital role that I think it can play in the future of this great country must, in my opinion, be connected with reality. And reality is that, despite all of the television commercials and speeches to the contrary, we are in decline. We are in decline precisely because we are not leading moral lives. We will not get back to any kind of semblance of order in this country (I don’t mean order in the repressive sense; I mean order in a society that works well) until we recognize what is the root of the problem, and until we decide to address it.

And that is why I cannot stand before you with a simple formula that says, “Here, sign onto these twelve issues and we can all bring this happy party back together again.” No. We must face reality, and we must face it now. We must first see to it that, as best we can as broken human beings reflecting imperfectly the likeness of God in whose image we were created, we begin to live by the words we profess. We must have inner character and strength before we can lead anything.

Understanding we may fail, we must at least strive toward an ideal. Then, if we are strong morally, we must begin by looking to our own families, then our own neighborhoods, our own communities, and our own states to be active in the reconstruction of society.

Such a movement will be so strong and powerful that it will, in due course, elect that President we all want to see elected. Only this time that President will be able to actually accomplish something of long-term significance because he will have an infrastructure of real people behind him.

Family and Community. The romantic notion of conservatives that they, as the John Wayne movies suggest, can go it alone is not the way we need to look at the world. We would be better off looking at Frank Capra movies. He understood right and wrong and he understood that we are not alone, but part of a community. And why not? We are, as I said, created in the image of God, and God is Trinity and Trinity is community. So it is only natural that we should understand ourselves and our movement as part of family and community.

The media now have already begun to construct the artificial debate about our future. Let us have a real debate. A debate between the policies of extreme individualism where people do their own thing regardless of the consequences to society, and the policies of true community. Not the collectivist community where the government makes decisions for everyone. Marxism has

failed. Rather the policies of true community where individuals try to do good in the context of and for the good of family and society.

We will win that debate and in doing so we will build a powerful following of people of good will who can, therefore set about the task of reconstruction with an elite that will deserve to be followed.

