

*For conservatism to live and grow, it must be discerningly critical — toward the human situation, toward its opponents, and toward itself.*

## *The Critical Process of Conservatism*

DEAN TERRILL

CONSERVATISM is a comprehensive body of ideas and principles upon which to order one's life in society. Because it is so comprehensive, it has a political aspect; and because it possesses a political aspect, conservatism is automatically in trouble. One does not have to live many years to know that no truer words were ever spoken than those that proclaim politics as one of the three areas (love and war being the other two) in which everything dastardly must be expected.

The ideological opponents of conservatism have always feared it, and never more so than today, when it is vigorously reviving from a condition of near rigor mortis;

and they stop at nothing to make it unattractive. If Lowell Mason, Ex-Commissioner of the Federal Trade Commission, had not, in his recent book, *The Language of Dissent*, convinced me that decent, intelligent people had better cut their tongues out rather than tattle to the FTC to enlist Big Brother's grisly assistance, I should be inclined to recommend that conservatism lodge a complaint against its competing ideologies, particularly the one whose most self-righteous leaders are the loudest in proclaiming themselves to be liberals.

The so-called liberals (although there are more accurately descriptive words for many of them) are, beyond a doubt, guilty of the

most unfair competition, and particularly are they guilty of false and misleading advertising. And the worst of it is that they do not stop at painting their own lily in falsely beautiful colors: they even more snidely paint conservatism in falsely ugly ones. They have deliberately led multitudes away from conservatism by wrongly identifying it with mere nostalgia, with blind standpatism, and with automatic and bitter reaction.

It is not necessary to debate whether, at some times in our history, those who may have been deemed representative of conservatism could be charged with partiality to those attitudes. The men and women who are today most representative of the resurging conservative movement certainly cannot be saddled with such viewpoints. But the fact that liberals can make such charges stick, can persuade so many of our neighbors that we conservatives are unfeeling, unintellectual reactionaries, 'demands our own inspection of that area of conservatism which provides the liberals the grain of sand upon which they have erected the terrifying papier-mâché façade they call conservatism.

CONSERVATIVES *do* utilize the distilled wisdom of the past as a part of the data for determining present and future social policies and practices; and we hold it is disastrous not to do so. It has been a forever debatable question to what extent man can, at any particular period in time, determine truth and predict the future with accuracy. The methods for doing so, in testing social policies and procedures both for validity and effectiveness, are the subject of almost as much dissension as are social objectives. Conservatives believe these tests must include a critical appraisal of man's cumulative experience and wisdom rather than rest solely upon the ratiocinations of one generation, based only or largely upon cur-

rent corroborative proofs developed from quantitatively measurable phenomena.

The fact is that radical liberals and totalitarians largely do eschew the lessons of history in favor of novel grandiose schemes of purported reform and utopian beneficence—schemes conceived and based upon alleged scientific and sociological hypotheses, and logically planned for continued coercive direction of mankind's blueprinted welfare by an authoritarian élite. But the greater and more abrupt the chasm between man's existential values and judgments and those implicit in these meticulously charted schemes, the less desirable they are in the eyes of freedom-loving men. The combination of these facts does, upon occasion, give the liberals pause but not always one that 'is salutary. And it is significant, perhaps, that their greatest venom is directed to those conservatives who most steadfastly insist upon weighing such plans upon a scale that will accommodate, as a part of the counterbalance, the totality of mankind's experience and wisdom, whether or no every element thereof can be proven by man's currently accepted scientific formulas and demonstrated by his most up-to-date technology.

Conservatives do not always readily accept the panaceas of the radical liberals at the full value placed upon them by their creators. We believe there is knowledge and wisdom and truth that is not—not yet at least—demonstrable solely by quantitative measurement or embraced by coldly logical plans derived therefrom, without regard to the vagaries of human nature. For one thing, we believe human nature is a distinct reality, that it has its bad aspects as well as those that are good, and that as yet it is neither fully known nor fully manageable. We hold that mankind, whether it will ever arrive, has not yet arrived at a state of development of its capacities that warrants

disregard of the principles and traditions and lessons of mankind's past. Hence, although we do not eschew novelty or planning for men's welfare, we do insist upon examining proposals concerning social attitudes and governmental policies and procedures with one eye, at least, comparing the essence of these proposals to those that men have experimented with in the past.

We do not say this is the conclusive test; but we do say it has often, and may again, shed much needed light on the necessary or potential wisdom or folly implicit in such proposals, and on their feasibility or impracticability. We say that such an evaluation is necessary before we wax enthusiastic about how desirable they would be *if* they were to work. As often as not, we desire, as much as do the proponents of these plans, the result they predict will come about; but we hold it is the better part of wisdom and of the honor and safety of mankind that if there is moving evidence that the plan not only will not effect the desired beneficent end but may well lead to greater difficulties and dangers than those sought to be remedied, the proposed social action should not be pursued. And such moving evidence frequently can be, we hold, adduced, in part at least, from the plainly existential experience and most deeply rooted traditions of mankind—even though the pertinence and validity of each detail of that experience and those traditions may not be susceptible to demonstration by the most severe tests of rationality and quantitative measurement that mechanistically minded critic might insist upon. Or withstand, in the heat of such controversy, the scathing emotional contrary appeals of wishful thinking, bleeding-heart, addle-brained, self-appointed, dictatorial do-gooders.

BECAUSE OF THIS attitude we are labeled as blind, stubborn, heartless reactionaries;

and we must be most careful we do not merit the appellation. If *we* be only emotionally opposed to a proposal it is not difficult to find in history an apparent parallel that was disastrous upon which we may base an opposition that has a sound of reasonableness. Conservatives (being humans also) have been guilty of just such errors. The failure of conservatism to stem the worst of the last tide of revolutionary radical liberalism and totalitarianism is largely because conservatism lost its critical faculty and neglected its own self-discipline. Too many conservatives did become blind stand-patters; and when violent change was being imposed upon society, too many conservatives did become indiscriminate reactionaries.

The prime function of conservatism in an age such as ours, when there have been such vast and violent breaks with the past, is to be discriminatingly critical. The pattern of the past has been, for better or for worse, torn beyond restoration in all its detail. The conservative believes there is still much of beauty and social value in that pattern, much that must be salvaged if mankind is to have the opportunity to realize his aspirations and not become a mere desire-satisfying animal. The critical faculty required to discern which elements of the pattern must be conserved cannot be developed without the application by conservatism of much intellectualism of the highest order. Thus, our critical conservatism should attract (and it must, for its full success, attract) the best adult minds of our age. And, for its growth, it must re-ignite in our younger people an enthusiasm for excellence of every kind. That necessary fire has been all but smothered by the foggy mediocrity that is implicit in the ideologies to which conservatism is opposed, those mechanistically oriented ideologies and egalitarian sociologies that have imposed their depres-

sant averages where our inspiring norms should be.

The hard core of the conservative's belief in the value of the sum of man's experience and wisdom is in this: Conservatives are convinced that time, economics, and human nature are not yet as elastic and rewarding to our manipulation as the radical liberals and totalitarians must mistakenly, and perhaps sincerely, believe. Either they must sincerely so believe, or else their fantastic disregard for the obvious limitations of these raw materials of social action and social welfare—a disregard implicit in so much of their social planning—must be taken as mere cynical jockeying for personal power, or for the delusions of feeble or unsound minds. It is one thing to look a thousand years ahead and predict what mankind *may* accomplish with the aid of the additional knowledge and skills he then will possess (unless he has destroyed himself, either physically or spiritually or both, in the process of their acquisition). It is another thing to determine, *today*, how best to utilize the limited knowledge and skills man possesses today, and how best to preserve and further the purpose of mankind, as man, and not merely as animal. There are periods in the growth of man, both individually and collectively, when his welfare requires critical appraisal of that which he has acquired, rather than continued greedy uncritical acquisition.

Conservatives believe that our era is such a time for close critical scrutiny of every proposition regarding social attitudes and action. We do not propose to force the aspirations of humanity backward and downward; indeed, our purpose is the opposite. To that end we do not propose that mankind shall be shoved into dangerous circumstances so difficult to cope with in the existing state of its knowledge, its abilities, and resources as to pose

a real threat to humanity's very existence; into circumstances that impose stresses and strains beyond man's limited capacity, because he is man, to endure; into those tending to destroy the finest achievements of mankind to satisfy mass clamors for those of a lower order, immediately and at whatever cost of all kinds. It is a combination of the best and the worst in man, his good will and his vanity, that deludes some of each generation into thinking they can speedily solve the problems and inequities that have forever existed, and that still defy immediate and complete solution. It is the unwelcome but necessary task of conservatism to search out, and at times to harp upon, the lessons of history, sometimes upon the sordid and horrible ones, in order to prevent disaster from attending much of such wishful thinking. Conservatism does not indict all radical liberals as knaves. But it is poor solace to the mortally wounded to know he has been done in by a foolish saint.

IN THESE FEW PAGES calling attention to the critical aspect of the doctrine of conservatism, it is possible to do little more than affirm the faith of conservatism in the totality of human experience as a necessary element in arriving at judgments respecting the probable efficacy of proposed social action. It is not possible to set forth the elaborate argument that some would require in order to be either convinced or persuaded. Neither is it possible to do more than identify a most important element implicit in this critical process—one which is not a necessary part of most of conservatism's opposing ideologies and which is expressly rejected by some of them. I refer to the amalgam of the religious principle and standards of morals and ethics.

Conservatism's process of criticism, based in part upon all aspects of history and the totality of man's awareness of himself and the world about him, neces-

sarily brings into play the religious, moral, and ethical principles with which much of mankind is imbued, no matter how loudly devotees of some ideologies may deny any valid bases for them. It seems to me that one can hardly be a conservative unless he believes that man is born, if not with aspirations, at least with a disposition thereto, and that disintegration of his humanity must occur and he may lose his identity as a human being if these aspirations, or tendencies thereto, are overlaid and smothered by social attitudes and actions that pander to his desires only. The conservative must, then, hold that this worst of all possible conditions is not compensated for by the highest possible materialistic standard of living that may be achieved by a technically proficient society wholly devoted to its scientifically material feats of mechanistic magic and their measurement.

Contrariwise, conservatism, being fully aware of the power of the frailties and human-ness of human nature, must always keep in mind that it is the exception, rather than the rule, for a cold and hungry man to be an excellent and a cooperative man. We do not, and we must not, overlook the part that man's standard of living necessarily plays in social action and reaction. We must make it apparent that we do properly value man's hunger for physical necessities and luxuries at the same time we affirm that his animal hunger cannot crowd out his need also for the necessities and luxuries of the spirit.

There are few confidence men who would be greatly successful were there not a bit of cupidity in all of us. Likewise the slanders upon conservatives could not have been so detrimental had there not been some factual basis for them. Those who are devoted to rebuilding conservatism into an effective ideology in our country believe, of course, that it provides the neces-

sary direction and procedures for the best social action and by far the best protection for the individuals of a society (and individualism, the freedom and joys that inhere in the rights of individuals and the responsibilities that ensue from individual autonomy, is a most important aspect of conservatism); but we realize conservatism has never had a more difficult and vital task to achieve than that which confronts it today. We believe the label of blind and unfeeling reactionary is not justifiably applicable to the critical conservative of today; but a large part of our job, at this stage, is to convince others that the epithets with which conservatives are labeled are false and misleading. This is a necessary preliminary to the great achievements that only then will be possible.

As a part of this preliminary job, we must develop within our own alliances a more acute and cohesive perception of the historical principles and traditions of mankind that are essential to his welfare now and in the future, and we must more surely formulate accurate criteria as to that knowledge which is valid despite lack of proof based upon quantitative measurement. Then, we must persuade the uncommitted that the tests for proper social action thereby revealed do have pertinency as to mankind's better future. But all our endeavors will be in vain unless we also persuade men generally that conservatism's prime reason for existence is the improvement of their human condition and that the concern of the conservative with the past, his desire to conserve certain elements of the past, is related solely to that consideration. In short, we conservatives know that our prime concern is for the welfare of all of mankind; but a large number of our fellows are skeptical, and we must remove much of that doubt before conservatism can be effective.

Thus a large part of conservatism's task

today is to regain the confidence of men, in general—a confidence we have largely lost, partly because conservatism did, for a time, cease to be sufficiently critical, and partly because our opposing ideologies have hugely capitalized upon our slightest error and blatantly proclaim themselves the sole possessors of all the social virtues. They propagandize us as unthinking, unfeeling relics of a past age that is best entirely forgotten if man is to achieve a better future. But without the

precepts of conservatism—precepts that link, in ways not solely mechanistic, all of mankind's past with all of its future—mankind cannot be men and women in the human sense we believe in. We must not permit conservatism and the preservation of humanity to be scuttled by a misconstruction of these principles or by their disregard or misdescription. We must keep conservatism alive and growing and, to do this, we must make it, and keep it, both persuasive and discerningly critical.