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So, Who's a Conservative?

by James R. Muhm

It wasn't so long ago that most people, if they thought about politics at all, tended to categorize themselves as either liberal or conservative. And most of those people considered themselves to be conservative rather than liberal, by a margin of more than two to one. For most of the past 50 or so years, labeling oneself a conservative meant proclaiming that one believed in a smaller, less-intrusive federal government, the hope for a balanced budget, lower taxes, and even the hope, if dim, that the national debt might someday be paid off. Traditional conservatives also believed in a strong military establishment that would be ready to defend the nation against an attack from foreign shores, but would not be sent off on expansionist excursions into foreign lands. Above all, conservatives traditionally have had respect for, and have advocated comportment with, the Constitution.

But the prevailing model of conservatism today centers on and defers to the persona of the president, having little regard for the literal words of the Constitution, while subordinating the concept of checks and balances to the presumed duties and prerogatives of the commander in chief. These wartime conservatives are imbued with a messianic confidence that the United States is charged by heaven with bringing about throughout the world virtuous democracies that will help less-enlightened peoples enjoy the marvelous values, lifestyles, and overall culture that befit us here at home. Moreover, messianic conservatives in doing these good works hold themselves justified in being oblivious to world opinion. They walk and talk with a swagger, and are ready to "get tough" whenever and wherever any person or nation appears ready to challenge their imperious policies. These new-model conservatives even argue that domestic spying without a court order is acceptable and that torture is all right if needed to accomplish their ends. Party has trumped principle.

To publicly question the "war-time" actions of the commander in chief brings quick censure, as in "not supporting our troops" or as in "helping the terrorists." As Paul Craig Roberts puts it, like the Brownshirts of Nazi Germany, these conservatives take personally any criticism of

their leader and his policies. To be a critic is to be an enemy. You're either with us or against us. Pope John Paul II decried this pervasive and destructive attitude as "the ideology of force."

Other ways in which traditional conservatism has changed is seen in the way federal spending in the past few years not only has gone unquestioned but has actually been abetted. And it's not only ever-growing military spending that encounters indifference but domestic spending as well. Under the purview of a supine, nominally conservative Congress, federal spending has broken all bounds. New social programs are adopted unquestioned. New agricultural subsidies are championed.

Civil liberties, the fundamental driving force of the American revolution, now are dismissed as a casualty of war, something not to be worried about, and the mention of which exposes a lack of backbone and grit in the protester. But in spite of their mindless acceptance by modern conservatives, these attributes of bloated government do not represent traditional conservative ideals.

It appears that the angry, power-hungry conservatives of today may be losing their grip on Washington, just as the neoconservatives and their discredited foreign policies are fading from the seat of power. Empires imposed by force on others do not live forever and puppet governments are eventually overthrown. Runaway public debt, sooner or later, must be either repaid or repudiated, likely in the collapse of the value of the dollar. Civil liberties, once so easily and thoughtlessly surrendered, will be harder by orders of magnitude for our children and grandchildren to reclaim. All of these failed policies can be laid at the feet of today's ruling conservatives. If this is what conservatism has become, deliver me to libertarianism.

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This article was originally published in the March 2006 edition of *Freedom Daily*.