

The Politics of the Impossible

By Jack Kemp

To be a realist in America today, you must believe in miracles. Think of the things that until last Tuesday seemed a conservative pipe dream.

Who could have imagined Mario Cuomo giving a concession speech?

Or Speaker Gingrich looking over the President's shoulder during the State of the Union?

Or a new House committee on deregulation and privatization?

Or The Heritage Foundation replacing the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard as the dominant intellectual force in the United States Congress?

Of course, the White House and the media are in deep denial.

President Clinton says the people voted for a quicker pace of "reinventing" government. We at Heritage reply that big government programs cannot be reinvented that should never have existed in the first place.

Liberals say the election was not a rejection of Bill Clinton. We reply it is even more than that—it is the beginning of Ronald Reagan's third term.

Liberals say this election was a triumph of negativism. And we reply it was Democrats who tried to scare the elderly on Social Security, played the cards of race and class warfare, and practiced bigotry against religious conservatives.

It is interesting, isn't it, that Franklin Roosevelt said in 1932, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," and today the only thing the Democrats have to offer is fear.

Democrats tried to make this an election about anger. But thanks to Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey, and with the help of organizations like The Heritage Foundation and Empower America, we made this into an election about ideas—about opportunity, ownership, entrepreneurship, responsibility, education, safe streets, and jobs for all.

The Republican "Contract With America" turned an electoral victory into a national mandate. Now our challenge is to implement that mandate and truly build the city on a hill, plank by plank, brick by brick, and export it to a waiting world.

The election of 1994 was not just a rejection of the party in power. It was the rejection of the party with an elite view of power: power exercised by benevolent bureaucrats, power wielded by arrogant experts, power centralized in the hands of what Margaret Thatcher called the "nanny state."

It is not an exaggeration to say that 50 years of American history have found their resolution in this moment. In that half century, Americans saw the power and potential of government devoted to the accomplishment of great goals. People trusted a federal government that had humbled the Kaiser, stormed Normandy, liberated Europe, split the atom, and helped win the long twilight struggle against communism. People gave of their taxes,

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gave of their freedom, and even gave their lives to show they were equal to the challenge of their times.

But that same federal power was soon applied—and, in most cases, misapplied—at home. The organized, centrally directed prosecution of a war became the dominant metaphor of American politics: a liberal war on poverty, a war on crime.

That metaphor became the liberal theory of power—top-down and organized by an aristocracy of experts. This became the official ideology of the Democratic party—the only real banner it carried into battle.

Government, it was promised, could defeat poverty, could replace families, could create wealth and redistribute it, and almost wipe the tears from every eye. The inalienable right to pursue happiness enshrined in our Declaration became an “entitlement” program.

But confidence in government has been broken against the simple, solid fact of human suffering and government failure. After \$5 trillion in well-intentioned but misguided spending, the sleep of children in our cities is disturbed by gunfire. They enter their school through a metal detector. They sit in a classroom where no learning takes place. They are children without childhoods, and their experience is the final, conclusive testimony in the trial against imperial liberalism.

The rest of America is left wondering why we still bear the burdens of domestic wars that consist almost entirely of retreats and surrenders.

Why is the average family forced to pay nearly 40 percent of its income in taxes?

Why must parents be forced to take two or three jobs to support, feed, and educate their children?

Why are more Americans today employed producing government red tape than making cars, computers, or other manufactured goods?

Americans see no connection between this sacrifice and the performance of their government. They have lost faith in a liberalism which promised to save the world but could not save the peace in our streets.

For years, Democrats belittled anyone who questioned their methods as somehow selfish and hard-hearted or even bigoted and cruel. But Americans are not cold. They are not stingy. They are the most compassionate people in the world. But they cannot deny the evidence of their senses—clear evidence that the Great Society has done more harm than good, that welfare has created more dependence than opportunity.

We are not talking about money alone. We are wasting more than our national treasure. We are undermining the essential elements of American character and of the American idea—the things that make freedom work in our nation.

Centralized, bureaucratic power is undermining both community and responsibility. It attacks community because the power to replace an institution like a family or a neighborhood is the power to destroy it. And it destroys individual responsibility when government creates incentives to fail, when government penalizes marriage, family, work, and savings, all of which are stepping stones toward self-reliance.

The vacuum left by the collapse of liberalism has given Republicans and conservatives an opportunity few Americans have ever been given—a chance to remake America. Our goal now is not the containment of liberalism; it is to roll back its boundaries everywhere in our lives and expand the frontiers of freedom and opportunity for all.

The Bible says, "To whom much is given, much is required." Ladies and gentlemen, much has been given to conservatives in this election, and much is expected.

Our unfinished business is more difficult than any we have undertaken. Without a compelling vision, a new generation of reformers becomes a new establishment, to be rejected in turn. But the conservative movement has prepared for this moment for decades—since the founding of *National Review*, since the nomination of Barry Goldwater, since the election of Ronald Reagan, since The Heritage Foundation was just Ed Feulner's dream. Our revolution was interrupted, but never abandoned. And now we are poised to complete it.

Let me share a vision of the American idea, deeply rooted in the conservative vision of the Founders:

Return to people their resources, and they will accept their responsibility.

Return to people power, and they will rebuild the institutions of a free society.

Return to people authority, and they will create the moral capital to help renew our nation.

This begins with some form of bureaucratic birth control. In 1937, a presidential commission concluded that government programs need "a coroner to pronounce them dead and an undertaker to dispose of the remains." Too many endless, useless public programs remain unburied. If a new Republican Congress can't privatize the NEA, then our mandate will be meaningless. And the NEH and the SBA and the REA and PBS and agricultural subsidies. And while we're at it, we should privatize HUD, the IMF, the World Bank, and on and on.

But that is just the beginning. Our concern is not only for government's cost, but for its role and reach. Einstein said "a problem can never be solved by thinking on the same level that produced it." We must think on a deeper level—finding ways to reverse the tide of 50 years of impersonal centralization.

First, this means relocating government control from the federal level to states and localities close to their own problems.

Problem solving at the federal level means 500 experts, meeting in secret, producing 1,400-page "solutions." When problems are solved by states, you get a Tommy Thompson promoting school choice for inner city children, a John Engler moving welfare recipients into work and education, a Christie Todd Whitman slashing income tax rates by 25 percent, a Fife Symington eliminating state income and capital gains taxes, and a George Allen empowering residents of public housing to manage their own communities and ultimately own their own homes.

This was the meaning of this election: wisdom lies outside Washington, and we should locate power there as well.

Second, a new conservative philosophy of government should disseminate power beyond government, directly to families and churches and community groups—institutions with spiritual and moral authority denied to federal power.

We should give families control over education and health care.

We should reduce their taxes so they can care for their own needs, be generous to others, and save for the future.

We should provide help to those in need, whenever possible, through private and religious groups experienced at both reform and reformation.

We should provide a safety net below which people should not be allowed to fall but, more important, a ladder of opportunity upon which all people can climb.

This would be a radical change, but it would also be a return to normalcy—to life as lived before American government was centralized by the struggles of our century. It would mean the return to lower taxes, economic growth, stronger communities and families, and a limited federal government—to a stronger era of American life.

An America where the goals of education are set by the PTA, not the NEA.

An America where the debate in Congress is over which taxes to cut, not which taxes to raise, about which government programs to privatize, not which ones to nationalize.

An America where prosperity begins on Main Street and extends to Wall Street, not the other way around.

An America where the character of children is shaped by their parents and grandparents, not by Donna Shalala and Joycelyn Elders.

But conservatives must offer more than a lament for a lost America. We must offer the vision of a new one. We have a responsibility, not just to diagnose what has failed, but to propose what will replace it.

We need a tax code that is flat, fair, and simple—one that rewards work and entrepreneurial risk-taking, that sets economic growth for all as its highest goal, not the redistribution of wealth or soaking the rich.

We need an education system where parents have influence and values have a voice—with school choice for parents in every community.

An anti-poverty agenda based on democratic capitalism, not socialism—on private ownership, not government control. Our definition of compassion is not how many people live on the government welfare plantation, but how many of our people are liberated from government dependence.

Our approach must empower people, not government. It helps men and women without robbing them of their birthright—control over their own lives.

The goal of government is not to secure happiness. It is to secure the God-given inalienable right to pursue happiness, to live our lives in obedience to conscience, not to government.

Conservatives must communicate a simple principle: that government governs best that allows us to govern ourselves.

We have stood together since a time when we met in the catacombs, not in conventions. Since a time when conservatism was known as “the forbidden faith” and “the thankless persuasion.” We have lived to see conservatism pronounced dead. We have lived to see it survive all of its would-be conquerors. And not just to survive, but to come to this threshold, when dreams become objectives and hopes become plans. It is an historical process that should be familiar: “the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief and corner stone.”

Ladies and gentlemen, it is liberalism that now defends an old, crumbling order—an order maintained by threats and propped up by fear. Now it is conservatism that is the creed of intellectual liberty, of free markets, of faith in people.

We can be proud but not prideful, confident but not content, because our work is not done. It is time to become missionaries for our message in every forgotten corner of the American community. It is time for a new governing conservatism captured by a passion for the possible with a commitment to moving our nation ahead but, like the Good Shepherd, leaving no one behind.

One of the most dramatic moments in post-war history took place on New Year's day, 1990, in Prague. After four terms in prison, and over four decades of national repression, Vaclav Havel climbed a podium to be inaugurated as president of his country. "Let us teach ourselves and others," he told the crowd, "that politics can not only be the art of the possible, but the art of the impossible." And he ended his address with these words: "My people, your government has been returned to you."

On a cold January day, just over two years from now, a new President will mount a platform and take an oath and give a speech that should end, "My fellow Americans, your government has been returned to you." That is the politics of the impossible, suddenly made possible in our times.

