

What Next for Young Conservatives? A View from the Post-Reagan Generation

By Kevin Pritchett

Much has been made of the apathy the American people have this year: about the economy, about the current crop of presidential candidates, even about the very future of America and the world. A sweeping prospect of our country would show an America whose collective soul is tortured and aimless. This is quite a change from less than a half-decade ago, when all was aglow and the Gipper was in the Oval Office.

People my age have sharp memories of our past three Presidents, though mention Ford or Nixon, and we have to pull out our encyclopedias. We grew up in times of malaise and misery, then recovery and prosperity, now apathy and depression. There was a distinct change in this country when Jimmy Carter left office and Ronald Reagan became President. There was in this Age of Reagan safety and security, passion and purpose, idealism and principle.

Then, as if we were asleep, the dream shattered, and beyond the glass was the emptiness many of us now feel.

What happened? Why are we adrift, without moorings and with desperation? How can we reach home port, and how can young conservatives in the post-Reagan era pilot our ship of state in the right direction?

It's important to realize that the 1980s were not just about prosperity or economic good times. Yes, the great gospel of getting along, the rush to succeed and, on a national scale, the perpetuation of a strong vibrant economy were totems of the day.

Crippling Pragmatism. What separates today from the halcyon days of Reagan, I think, are the loss of conviction, the loss of belief, and the loss of wonder. Where is the conviction? A crippling pragmatism pervades the land. The wild rush to compromise, in our daily lives and in our government, has watered down our conviction to live decent lives and to have decent government. We are paralyzed at home and abroad, because there is no force left to push us to prosecute our goals and policies.

Because of the lack of conviction, we now hand out condoms to kids; we are afraid to tell them that sex outside of marriage is wrong. Because of a lack of conviction, we stopped right outside of Baghdad, for we were afraid of fully prosecuting the war against Iraq. Because of a lack of conviction, accolade upon accolade is bestowed upon one who does nothing; one can become a hero by standing still. Why else is Mikhail Gorbachev, swept away by forces he could not control, worshipped by the press, and Ronald Reagan, the man who actively caused the end of the Cold War, still denigrated? Why else did the current administration let the economy slide to the depths it is in now, and call doing nothing an economic policy?

At least during the Reagan years, there was sincere conviction. Now, mediation, trade-offs, compromises are the order of the day. From the days of antiquity to the present, we have seen that compromise, whether personal, national, or international, has been a course for catastrophe.

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But the extreme of conviction—radicalism—at the same time must be avoided. Radicalism has never saved a soul, a people, or a country. The loss of conviction should not drive conservatives into far-right camps or free-for-all, libertine philosophies.

Since this is Black History Month, I should point out the most obvious manifestation of radicalism in the black community, and that is Afro-centrism. Black Americans have strong convictions about what to do for our people. No doubt the American Dream is still deferred for many black Americans, and it seems that we do not know how to gain opportunity for them.

Racist Outlook. As a solution, some blacks have turned away from the teachings and inspiration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and to romanticize Africa and have begun to breed a racist outlook, an African-American kin to the world view of the Ku Klux Klan.

Afro-centricity is blindness, insect vision in which one sees a small sliver of the world, a grain of sand, and tries to glean the rest of reality from this minuscule viewpoint. It will not help black America. Hatred and the revisionism of history—for example, some Afro-centrists say Africans flew to work in the morning on gliders and discovered quantum physics millennia before Einstein—will not give us self-esteem. We should not replace the old lie our lives were based upon—that we were inferior, that we were only fit to be slaves—by the new lie of Afro-centricity.

Where is the belief? Very few people actually believe anything anymore. Beliefs are passe; people just have opinions or have positions, and very few today take that leap and totally embrace any idea or creed.

Who in this room remembers Earth Day? In 1990, this event was played up to nauseous proportions. I was at Dartmouth then, editing *The Dartmouth Review*, and it was just awful. People actually would not wash for a week to save water, and they would carry the week's trash in plastic bags over their shoulders. This was not pleasant to the nose. There were magazine covers, television shows, newspaper articles about Earth Day and how it heralded a new day of idealism for the nation's young. The nineties are the sixties again, said pundits.

But who remembered Earth Day last year? Who will remember it this year? Earth Day is typical of how many people view the world today—to many, all is fad and fashion. The newest rage is tricked up in importance and given a blessing by columnists and television commentators, and it becomes a new religion overnight.

Empty Churches. Old-time religions, which have none or very few supporters in the media, have lost out. Many churches echo in their emptiness. God is hardly ever mentioned in everyday discourse, and He is, unfortunately, banned in our schools. I do not care if they try to use this in some confirmation hearing someday, but I agree with Justice Thomas: When they took prayer out of the schools, the schools went to hell.

Black Americans, it seems more than anyone else in this country, have forgotten about our religiously grounded heritage. Most of us no longer take umbrage at sin, and this is the one problem that has caused many problems: drugs, premarital births, loss of a work ethic. It seems that there is no such thing as heresy and no such thing as sin. The Reagan Revolution was essentially based on beliefs: the belief that man is free, and that man should be free to labor, to enjoy the fruits of that labor, to raise his family, and to serve his God.

Whenever there is an age where there is a lack of belief, there is always the danger of fanaticism. Fanaticism has many manifestations, from powerful cults that brainwash, kill, and destroy to the dangerous campus fanaticism of political correctness. In all its forms, fanaticism replaces God with some little god, whose powers are coercion, destruction, and malice.

Finally, where is the wonder? The country has been shackled by the economic gloom; people are watching their pocketbooks more than events around them. We conservatives have been bogged down with theory, policy, mandates, and legislative initiatives, and have not been fully aware of the implications of the new age we are entering. This new age can potentially be the most fruitful in human history, or it can be the last gasp of humanity. The outcome depends on us.

We have not stopped to fully think and wonder and experience awe at peoples around the world losing their communist chains and throwing off the yoke that has crushed nations. We are caught up in our own problems.

The loss of wonder has made us forget that we young ones, more so than any previous generation, are citizens of the world and beneficiaries or victims of what happens around the globe. The loss of wonder also has spawned those who do not dare to look out into the world, and experience a sense of awe at the fact that the human spirit, undaunted by totalitarian political systems, has triumphed over totalitarianism. A loss of wonder has instilled a turtle fear into those who call for isolationism: They would rather pull back into their shells than nurture and celebrate the human spirit abroad. Sophocles wrote in his *Antigone*, "Numberless are the world's wonders, but none more wonderful than man." This could not be more true as we look at the brave souls who braved decades of Communism.

The loss of awe has bent our heads to the ground, and very few people even look up and out on a starry night, and wonder about what is out there in the heavens, and when we shall get there. While we strain our eyes and our minds with budget deficits, tax cuts, Medicaid reimbursements, and rubble stabilization funds; we are blocked from daydreaming about out there, and our ears are fortified against that ancient call to explore, to roam, to quest. We send our mechanical minions—*Voyager, Magellan, Galileo, Hubble*—but little thought is given to when we ourselves shall go.

Grand Age. Despite our small but wondrous achievements, some celebrated "thinkers" because of the loss of wonder have proclaimed our time the end of history, a "sad time" in which the human spirit is dead, a boring day in which everyone is either an accountant of meaninglessness or a historian of glories past and glories never to be reenacted. These sad sacks should be pitied more than criticized.

Ronald Reagan knew that we were actually nearing the beginning of a grand age. He proclaimed it was morning in America—we recently have forgotten to pull up the shades and gaze outside our own little world and into the glorious day of freedom that the whole world is experiencing.

We young conservatives of the post-Reagan age should all do that—look around the world, see what is going on. The cure of the lack of conviction, the loss of belief and the loss of wonder is new romanticism, a new exultation in the possibilities that are before us. Through President Reagan we have reached this precipice, looking over a valley of peace, prosperity, and the full attainment of what humanity should be.

America is looking for the vision thing. And only the young, untouched by the trappings of pragmatism and still able to daydream, can give this country a vision.

As a great man said once, "Facts are stubborn things." The fact is, this country is adrift because it is without a defining vision. What do we stand for? The young, inspired by this country's traditions and history and imbued with a sense of purpose, can turn the country's sails to the right wind, the breeze that will carry all of us to a new and better day.

