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The Conservative Movement: A Light in Dark Times

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Let me give you some context. I won a football scholarship to Xavier University in Cincinnati, and annually we played the Quantico Marines. In my junior year, a staff sergeant playing across the line from me gave me a physical education that was superior to the academic preparation the Jesuits provided in the classroom. So complete was the whooping he put on me that day that I spent almost every day in the intervening year in chapel, praying that he not be sent to Vietnam so I might return the lesson in kind in my senior year.

As my good friends know, God answered my prayers and delivered him unto me. For one complete half, I was returning the lesson. At the beginning of the third quarter, I did one of my patent moves, pushed him to the ground, sidestepped him, and instead of tackling a 240-pound Marine fullback cleanly with my shoulder, my chin got in the way; I was knocked out momentarily.

They sent me to Good Samaritan Hospital, which was a stone's throw from where we were playing that Saturday afternoon. They did head X-rays for a concussion, and the X-rays came back negative. They sent me back to the field, where three Jesuits met me at the sideline. They laid hands on me, prayed, and put me back into the game for the balance of the fourth quarter.

Now, we won that game, miraculously, 9 to 7. Legend has it that the next day in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the headline read, for my dear mom to read, "Blackwell: Head X-rays Show Nothing." So I am indeed

Talking Points

- A fault line has been drawn that stretches from the Pacific to the Atlantic. On one side are the advocates and apologists for big government; on the other side are the advocates of freedom and the individual liberties that are so crucial to the American tradition and America's future.
- The apologists for big government are trying to change the nature and uniqueness of our democracy and culture by running God and faith out of the public square. This is the ultimate threat to the vibrancy of the freedom movement.
- Conservatives have understood the power of the human will and networked human beings as a force. We understand that history is not moved by chance; it is moved by men and women of dedication and purposeful action.

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honored to have been asked to keynote this luncheon engagement.

“The Fierce Urgency of Now”

Our dear brother and master teacher Russell Kirk has told us that “A culture does not survive and prosper merely by being taken for granted. Active defense is always required.”

Some 44 years ago, in another historic city at a historic time in American history, Martin Luther King, Jr., stood at the Lincoln Memorial, and among other things he uttered these words: “We have come to this hallowed ground to remind Americans of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to relax in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”

I say to you this afternoon in Philadelphia that I come to underscore “the fierce urgency of now.” Our revolution of ideas, policy formulations, and citizen action is not over. This revolution requires us to finish the job. It requires us to stand in the gap, as our invocation called us to earlier.

Moral Coherence and the Promise of America

Some 22 years ago, I read a book entitled *Habits of the Heart*, penned by Robert Bellah and a few others, and in this book they advanced the concept of moral coherence. Moral coherence is when you get your behavior to match those things that you profess to believe. When you talk one way and behave in another, you have moral incoherence, and there is a gap.

Throughout the last 230 years, there have been times in American history when the promise of America has been missed by the practice of her citizens, and there has been a gap between America’s promise and our practice. That has required men and women to stand in that gap and to close it.

Now, as then, we must act to achieve moral coherence—just like when Americans were debating slavery, the civil rights movement, universal suffrage, the moral outrage of *Roe v. Wade*, or some of the international tragedies that have in fact beset the human condition. Now, as then, the challenge is for men and women who understand that our

freedom is indivisible and we have an intrinsic right to be free to close the gap.

Our ideas are winning; we have changed the discussions and language in the cloakrooms, the backrooms, and the legislative chambers of our country. But still gaps exist between what we say we believe and what we do in many areas of American life. And within our federalist system, it is important that we—in our cities, townships, counties, states all across this country—not only continue to churn out and advance ideas, but actually change the behaviors of men and women who represent us in our government. We must help them close the gap between principle and practice.

Across this entire country, we have 511,000 elected public officials, and what they do—not what they say—matters. It is our job as citizens to hold them accountable so that we might finish our revolution. That means we might have to rethink our relationships with one another—how do our 501(c)(3)s relate to our 501(c)(4)s, and how do they both relate to 527s?—to advance ideas and change behaviors.

My conservatism comes from practical living experiences. My dad was a meatpacker, and he was a boxing fanatic, and early in my childhood he enrolled me in a Golden Gloves amateur boxing program. I won my first four bouts with relative ease; the fifth bout, I was hit so hard in the nose I had to go home and tell my dad I was going to find a more scholarly career to pursue.

I stayed away from boxing arenas until I was a freshman in college when Father E. G. O’Connor, a senior Jesuit and former Marine, took me and a friend of mine, Benji Schwartz, to the Golden Gloves fights with him at the old Cincinnati Gardens.

We watched 10 bouts; the 11th bout, a young boy from the western side of Cincinnati, he too of Irish Catholic heritage, came out, and before his bout he made the sign of the cross. Benji, who was Jewish, elbowed Father and said, “Father, what’s the significance of that?” Father said, “Son, it’s important, but it ain’t enough if he can’t fight.”

Advancing the Big Ideas

And I would suggest to you that all of the great research we turn out is not enough—it’s important,

but it's not enough—if we can't convert it into changed behavior and the advancement of big ideas.

We have done good work. Let's not underestimate the impact that we've had. Many kids today are enjoying an invigorating education because we have been in the forefront, setting the vision, advancing ideas, and motivating citizen action to expand school choice. School choice gives birth to innovation, fosters competition, and improves quality education. It changes the 1965 union model of education that has failed so many of our children and schools. We've been in the forefront of a liberation movement of children who are locked in dysfunctional schools and parents who have been marginalized.

But our job is not done, because the other side has geared up, muscled up, and drawn the fault line—a fault line that stretches from the Pacific to the Atlantic. On one side are those who are the advocates and the apologists for big government; and on the other side are those of us who are advocates of freedom and the individual liberties that are so crucial to the American tradition and America's future.

But it doesn't do us any good just to understand that there is a fault line. It really comes back to how we engage our opponents and fight for what we believe will shape America's future.

We are here in Philadelphia, where the Constitutional Convention was held, and I can tell you there was a battle of ideas, a test of wills, in the hot rooms where the convention was being held. It was at a point of impasse when words that were a harbinger of things to come were uttered by Benjamin Franklin. Folks were ready to go their separate ways when he stood up—he was over 80 years old at the time—and said, "Gentlemen, I'm an old man, but this I know: If a sparrow cannot fly without His assistance, then a nation cannot rise without His aid." And at that point, he laid the theoretical understanding on the table that the essence of our free society is that it is built on a moral foundation.

If you begin to listen to the words that were uttered, they shape the battle of today. Those words later gave rise to the words in the second paragraph of our Declaration, that "We hold these truths to be self-evident." That all of us "are created equal." And you continue to read in that paragraph that we are

"endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights."

That's where the fault line originally started because we believe that our human rights are gifts from God, not grants from any government. When you understand that, you never fall into the trap of treating government as God and the provider of our freedoms. You see, government can do only two things: promote our human liberties and protect them or abridge and abuse them. It cannot give them to us. When we understand the source of our freedom, it dictates how we fight the fight that is in front of us.

As we look around the room, we can begin to understand the importance of our movement. We are a third force that will have an impact on American thinking and American behavior.

Dedication and Purposeful Action

Two hundred and thirty years ago, only 2 million people lived under the aegis of democratic government. Today that number is well over 2.4 billion. So in 230 years, we've gone from 2 million to 2.4 billion internationally, and America has led the way. I would suggest to you it is because we've fought a good fight over the years, and we have understood the power of the human will and networked human beings as a force. We understand that history is not moved by chance; it is moved by men and women of dedication and purposeful action.

When I was growing up in Cincinnati in a public housing community, I could get in trouble at one end, and before I got home at the other end, my mom already had the news. That's because I had an "aunt" in every window and on every stoop of that public housing community. The young people today have the Internet. Back then we had the aunty-net; it moved information just as fast.

We in this room are a connected human force augmented by new technologies. If we take advantage of these new technologies, we can move our ideas and change behaviors. But it requires us to stay engaged. It requires us to remain dedicated to those first principles that The Heritage Foundation has advocated and advanced in its brilliant history.

But the power of The Heritage Foundation is that it understands that in many of our 3,300 counties and 50 states, there are local and regional

policy organizations carrying out the revolution. Our job is to connect them and make them one powerful force.

We must also help our network realize that our work is not finished just because Bill Clinton said, “The era of big government is over.” Government gets bigger and our tax code is still the handmaiden of big government, not the engine of economic growth. The model of government schools driven by big unions is still surviving on plenty of oxygen. The threat of big government is still real.

The threat is still real because we now have on the left apologists for big government who are trying to run God’s faith and religion out of the public square. We must understand that this is the ultimate threat to the vibrancy of our freedom movement. They are not just trying to reestablish the so-called Fairness Doctrine in broadcasting to choke off the voices of the right; they are trying to change the nature and uniqueness of our democracy and culture by running God and faith out of the public square. They have tried to turn us on ourselves. We had best understand that as we work to maintain our majority coalitions and continue to impact policy and behavior in the public square.

So our plate is still full. We still have a job to do. We must be filled anew with the “the fierce urgency of now.”

Punching Holes in the Darkness

Coming up in that working-class home, my grandmother was a domestic worker, and she used to get books given to her by the families for whom she worked. I remember reading a novel about a little boy who spent a lot of time in infirmaries, and one evening—this was in the early 1900s—a nurse came into his room, and she said, “Little boy, what are you doing?”

It was dusk, and he said, “I’m watching the man punch holes in the darkness.” She said, “What?” He said, “I’m watching the man punch holes in the darkness.”

So she walked over to the window, and she looked out, and what this little boy who was 9 years old or so saw was a lamplighter going down the street lighting streetlights. In this little boy’s mind, this man was punching holes in the darkness.

We have no time to waste cursing the darkness as a conservative movement. It is now our time to light candles with our research, to light candles with our ideas, but more importantly, to join together candles so that we become torches so that we can punch holes in the darkness of our time: the darkness of big government, the darkness of a faithless culture, the darkness of children being locked out and kept from quality education.

We must understand that we’ve done some good. We’ve punched some holes in the darkness. There are 8 million people who now have their health savings accounts because we at the state and local levels drove that idea and drove that policy.

We’ve done some good, but there are still dark clouds, and my charge to you is that we recommit ourselves to going out and punching holes in the darkness. Our children and our grandchildren count on us to have that courage.

I leave you with the words of Winston Churchill. For those of you who, like me, suffered a political setback, Mr. Churchill said, “Courage is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm.” So I go forth with a smile and a candle to punch holes in the darkness.

—J. Kenneth Blackwell served from 1998 to 2006 as Ohio’s 51st Secretary of State. Before that, he served as Mayor of Cincinnati, Under Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Administration of President George H. W. Bush, and Ohio State Treasurer. He is currently Senior Fellow for Family Empowerment at the Family Research Council; Ronald Reagan Distinguished Fellow for Public Policy at the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions; a visiting fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation and the American Civil Rights Union; chairman of the Coalition for a Conservative Majority; member of the National Rifle Association’s Public Affairs Committee and the boards of directors of the Club for Growth, National Taxpayers Union, and Pastors Retreat Network; and columnist for the New York Sun, contributing editor and columnist for *Townhall.com*, and public affairs commentator for the Salem Radio Network. He delivered these remarks at the 30th Annual Meeting of The Heritage Foundation Resource Bank, held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on April 26–27, 2007.