

The Modern "conservative" in the United States  
by Clarence A. Crawford

Ralph Waldo Emerson began his essay "The Conservative" with these words: "The two parties which divide the state, the party of Conservatism and that of Innovation, are very old, and have disputed the possession of the world ever since it was made. This quarrel is the subject of civil history....[S]till the fight renews itself as if for the first time, under new names and hot personalities."

The fight goes on.

In my adult lifetime, the fight was intense during the Vietnam War, and it was personified in the person of Richard Nixon. I think we had some breathing space in the late 1970s, but I am tempted to think that a new and frightening era of unusually intense ideological fervor began in 1980; the commitments of large groups of people since then are to ideologies rather than to issues; and their commitments are dogmatic in nature. I am reminded by Emerson that perhaps it has always been so, but I also question the relationship between modern "conservative" ideologues and the Conservative. Are they the same?

Virtually every point of conflict in contemporary society can be described as a split between conservatives and liberals, and since 1980 the conservatives seem to be in the ascendancy, if not in numbers, then in their ability to control events. What is unclear to me, however, is what a new modern American conservative is. I have a better understanding of liberalism. I have heard liberals described by "conservatives" as being somewhere on the spectrum between Satanic and soft-headed, but I have also read clear, reasonable, and responsible re-affirmations of what liberalism is. The Conservative and the "conservative" therefore command my interest. They are my puzzle.

We must yield the Conservative pride of place. The Conservative is prior in time. (I am not sure that Emerson is correct in his assertion that the party of Innovation is as old as the world. Long reaches of the human past were exceedingly stable; aboriginal peoples remain the most Conservative of us all.) The Conservative, of course, conserves: the past, our historical inheritance, traditional ethical behavior. The Conservative has a long memory, recorded in history, institutions, or habit. The Conservative favors the status quo while being deeply suspicious of change. If the Conservative advocates change, it is change towards some historical standard, because he knows that social and ethical experiments are likely to fail; what has been tried by time is more likely to be true. The Conservative can draw on a store of human success and error, and knows why it is prudent to move towards safety, and how to do so. The world is hostile; stability is precious and difficult of attainment. A smart person knows where to place his bets: with the known. Those who are subject to the vagaries of Nature—aboriginals, farmers—are therefore natural Conservatives. They value the wisdom of the elders. Fear lurks in the background. Never assume too much. Avoid mistakes. The world is an uncertain place.

Not only must we be wary of hostile cosmic forces. We must also be wary of the explosive nature of our selves. What has history taught us about human beings? For the Conservative, history has taught us that human nature is not to be trusted. Humans are prone to evil. Humans have great difficulty controlling themselves. We can't control our violence; we can't control our sexuality; we can't control our greed. These, a

Conservative would claim, are simple facts, amply illustrated by history. How should we respond to our inclination to misbehave? We should create religious and social institutions that provide a structure in which human passions can be subdued or controlled. The best institutions have already been created in the forms of traditional religion, the family, and the laws. In the words of Edmund Burke, "Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without."

I call myself a liberal, but I cannot deny the strength of the above observations. A reading of history, right to the present moment, tells the dismal tale.

However, the story contains other plots. We know that human beings can also create what is not only new but, perhaps, better, in art, science, social relationships, ethics. And this is where the Liberal, a relative newcomer in history, enters the picture. The Liberal is convinced that humans are capable of seizing their own fate because the Liberal has faith in the powers of the human intellect and in the potential goodness of human beings. Human nature is not necessarily vile; we may actually be prone to good, given the proper circumstances. Hence he believes that individuals and societies can be improved, not by a reversion to some past standard, but by the creation of something new. The Liberal believes that our status in society can and should be earned rather than inherited. The Liberal believes that the human intellect is powerful enough to discover the secrets of nature by implementing the scientific method, and that the intellect is powerful enough that it can create new and lasting governments and social institutions, as the American Founders did. Where the Conservative is convinced that frail humans should be formed by institutions wiser than themselves, the Liberal believes in the sanctity of individual choice. There is empirical proof that the liberal view has worked: people in many societies are more free than in the past; social progress has occurred; some societies have become better, and many individuals have had the opportunity to improve their personal lives, or have come to lead better lives because they have experienced a greater degree of economic and social justice than existed in the past.

In short, the two views are based on two apparently antagonistic views of human nature. There is abundant evidence for the truth of both views. As Emerson wrote, "each is a good half, but an impossible whole."

I think that tragedy best expresses the spirit of Conservatism, and that the Conservative view is rooted in tragedy.

Emerson again: "That which is best about conservatism, that which, though it cannot be expressed in detail, inspires reverence in all, is the Inevitable. There is the question not only, what the conservative says for himself? but, why must he say it? What insurmountable fact binds him to that side? Here is the fact which men call Fate, and fate in dread degrees, fate behind fate, not to be disposed of by the consideration that the Conscience commands this or that, but necessitating the question, whether the faculties of man will play him true in resisting the facts of universal experience?"

King Lear's error was to vacate his true position in the universe; he did not consider himself bound by that Inevitable Fact; and the dissolution of his kingdom and his mind followed the dictates of "fate in dread degrees, fate behind fate." Our necessary relationship to Fate is one of the marrow-deep truths of life. This is Conservatism.

Spain is certainly the most conservative country of Western Europe, and perhaps of all

cultures the Spanish come closest to incorporating the tragic view into their national life. If the truth of tragedy lies in its depiction of an inescapable Fate, the belief in Fate is also the belief in an ordered world. The tragedian knows that human life, chaotic and egocentric, is actually played out against the background of a cosmic order; placed against this backdrop, human destiny can be seen in its proper proportions. This is why comedy and tragedy are closely related. In the larger view, the joke is on us. Don Quixote is simultaneously a comic and a tragic character. Humans are ridiculous and pathetic, our place in the universe miniscule. Like Don Quixote, we take ourselves very seriously indeed, which can be laughable. However, because of our place in the world, as conscious, moral beings, deeply aware of the need for meaning and keenly aware of our impending deaths, we must do so. The inevitable outcome of the bullfight expresses this ultimate seriousness. The ending is preordained; only the manner of the execution of the drama remains to be revealed. The bullfighter and the bull are equally pawns. The bull must die, the matador must play his role. The outcome is known. Only the details need to be enacted. Such is tragedy, such is life.

In the realm of fiction, Karen Blixen (Isak Dinisen) clearly delineates this view. In a well-ordered and aristocratic world, it is not for us to escape our fate but to understand it, or at least recognize it, and grasp it. The peasant and the nobleman are both very small figures on a very large stage; both have assigned roles; Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, the emperor and the slave, are equally at the mercy of Fate. The only true wisdom is to recognize and understand this truth. The philosopher Spinoza knew this well and clearly pointed out that the only real freedom lies in our understanding of what is, not what should be. Wisdom is submission to the truth.

Emerson could have had Spain in mind when he wrote: "There is always a certain meanness in the argument of conservatism, joined with a certain superiority in its fact. It affirms because it holds. Its fingers clutch the fact, and it will not open its eyes to see a better fact. The castle, which conservatism is set to defend, is the actual state of things, good and bad...[Conservatism] must saddle itself with the mountainous load of violence and vice of society, must deny the possibility of good, deny ideas, and suspect and stone the prophet...Conservatism tends to universal seeming and treachery, believes in a negative fate." One thinks of the two prongs of the Inquisition, its dogmatism and its anti-Semitism; the plague of the Conquistadors in the New World, and the legacy of violence left there to continue into contemporary times; the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War; the fact that Fascism survived in Spain, incredibly, until 1976, outlasting Hitler and Mussolini by 30 years; and when Franco's power ended, it was passed to another anachronism, a monarchy.

Perhaps it was this stubborn defense of the castle that led the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno to write in 1912, in *Tragic Sense of Life*, "War has always been the most effective factor of progress, even more than commerce. It is through war that conqueror and conquered learn to know each other and in consequence to love each other" (p. 111), and "war is the school of fraternity and the bond of love; it is war that has brought peoples into touch with one another, by mutual aggression and collision, and has been their cause of their knowing and loving one another. Human love knows no purer embrace, or one more fruitful in its consequences, than that between victor and vanquished on the battlefield. And even the purified hate that springs from war is

fruitful” (pp.279-280. Dover Publications, 1954). Written two years before the commencement of trench warfare in Europe, and less than three decades before the Spanish Civil War, we can with hindsight properly judge this Conservative advocacy of one of our most ancient institutions. This statement may be one of the most astounding justifications of the status quo ever written.

The Spanish conquest of the Americas may be the greatest human tragedy of history (prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, against which no event or century can be compared.) It is one thing that the natives of the New World were enslaved under the sign of the Cross, and that the work force of the American colonies was expanded by the importation of African slaves. But this situation was aggravated and prolonged because Central and South America were left with no seeds of liberal government or liberal social thought to carry them into the modern world. Hence the brutality of the Conquistadors was carried right into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among the legacies of the Spanish in the southern hemisphere are the torture chamber, one-man rule, and dysfunctional social and economic institutions. The Spanish themselves recognize and celebrate their national fascination with blood and death.

Referring to the conquest of the New World, Unamuno wrote, “Is it not a cultural achievement [for Spain] to have created a score of nations, *reserving nothing for herself*, and to have begotten, as the Conquistadors did, free men on poor Indian slaves? (p. 308; italics added.) This Conservatism is pure and unadulterated, and is precisely mirrored in the words of the previous Pope, who has claimed that the Indians of South America were fortunate to have been conquered. This is Conservatism, uttered from the ultimate seat of Conservatism, the Conservatism of the Inquisition and rigid dogma. What carries more weight than the voice of God Himself, uttered through a consecrated human mouth?

The English in North America, and their Anglo-Saxon descendants who became Americans, also have bloody hands when it comes to their treatment of native peoples. They too knew what it was to enslave others. But to their credit they brought institutions with them that would allow North America to pursue a different path from their southern neighbors; in the United States and in Canada those institutions promoted a respect for civil law, recognition of the value of the individual, and the protection of free debate, which are among the legacies of liberal thought. We in the United States tolerated or practiced slavery for more than two centuries, and we waged genocidal warfare on our aboriginal peoples, but we also were willing to pay the price of enduring a horrible civil war to end slavery, and we have, slowly and reluctantly, come to recognize our obligations to Native Americans, and we have, albeit belatedly, moved towards an expansion of civil rights. As dark and bloody as is our past, at least we had the seeds of liberal thought and a foundation of liberal institutions to guide us into the future.

(I think Americans should ask the question, How did the Canadians manage to settle their west with very little loss of life? How did they manage without slavery? Why is violent behavior unusual in Canada and common in the United States?)

Using the definitions I have offered, I am led to conclude that the Conservative, except in his darkest aspect, is in the United States a very rare specimen. Who then are these numerous creatures who call themselves "conservatives," and what do they believe?

Based upon what I read and hear, the modern "conservative" has a list of dislikes that serve as a substitute for a political philosophy. Ask a “conservative” to define his

philosophy and he will give you a list of things he hates: welfare, abortion, illegal aliens, taxes, "big government," environmentalists, "secular humanists," Charles Darwin, public property, "socialists/communists," feminism, affirmative action, liberals. When challenged that a list of grievances is not a coherent philosophy, he is apt to strike back with the notion that someone is to blame for all our problems, and that the fault lies with the unrighteous: his hands are clean. He feels embattled; nostalgia and self-righteousness are his primary qualities; he feels that he must nobly fight the good fight against the forces of evil and disintegration.

I frequently hear a phrase that is emblematic of this embattled spirit: "I am a *staunch* Republican." This phrase has interesting ramifications. It suggests a level of self-righteousness: "I am *staunch*, others are not. I stand firm against the forces of evil." It also suggests a degree of embattlement; the forces of evil are not only continually arrayed against you, they are near to winning; life is a continual rear-guard action; since victory is never assured, one must be perpetually vigilant. To be steadfast requires that you be rigid, unyielding, inflexible; pragmatic compromise is a character flaw. Debate and discussion are formalities not realities. The *staunch* believer therefore has little or nothing of value to learn, since they already know all they ever intend to know. The only test of truth is if any proposition conforms to the mental template they already possess. A proposition such as: "Protection of the environment complements rather than contradicts sound economic behavior," would find no place to lodge within the *staunch* Republican's mind since it contradicts rigidly preformed ideas. The dominant emotional value here is self-righteousness reinforced by a destructive nostalgia.

I have encountered this attitude in my personal life with annoying frequency. In some instances, someone on the political right will demand my political credentials before establishing a relationship with me, as if I must answer to him, meet his criteria; he assumes, in his superiority, the right to question not just my political affiliations but my character (since they are the same). It has not once crossed my mind to put him, or anyone else, to a similar test, and in my naiveté I am offended at his arrogance; his reflexive and ingrained attitude is for me a shocking and offensive abnormality. Another kind of incident is when I express an opinion and find that he on the right will not only challenge the opinion but my right to express it; *it is strictly personal*; he must point a finger at my face and wag it while he "corrects" me. Again, I am naïve enough that I find his approach authoritarian, thoroughly undemocratic and illiberal. He, on the other hand, has his view of the world confirmed; I am one more enemy to annihilate.

I find the relationship between conservative and liberal impulses to be, in the world I inhabit, close to Emerson's view. I would, however, take the idea further. Not only is "each a good half, but an impossible whole," but I think that both exist everywhere in human life, at multiple levels simultaneously, in the microcosm and in the macrocosm. Every individual is a blend of the two positions; each small community is a blend of the two positions; each nation is a blend of the two positions. One or the other may be in the ascendancy at any given time, but both are inevitably present. All children, for example, are the very models of Conservatism, tending towards the safe and the known, in love with repetition. Yet many of those individuals will some day abandon safety in favor of exploration and experimentation. Governments swing back and forth over time between liberal and conservative impulses; neither are extinguished, unless under extraordinary

circumstances. Individuals may behave liberally within the context of a conservative society; I also think that we can have a liberal society and a conservative government. The two impulses are permanently wedded to each other. Emerson: "Each exposes the abuses of the other, but in a true society, in a true man, both must combine. Nature does not give the crown of its approbation, namely, beauty, to any action or emblem or actor, but to one which combines both these elements...."

Does the modern political right in the United States deserve the name "Conservative"? I think not, no more than do Hitler or Mussolini. My observation is that Conservatism in the United States is a very rare flower; that we are Liberal at heart, as expressed explicitly in most of our original documents; and that the "conservatives" who manage to impede our political and social progress resemble in a very few respects the Conservative.

Here I must express a problem with terminology.

I recently read, finally, Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, which of course includes his classic essay so titled. In the second essay, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," he writes that he took the term "pseudo-conservative" from Theodore Adorno in his *The Authoritarian Personality* (which I have not read). I wrote most of this essay years before I encountered this term. "Pseudo-conservative" is an accurate phrase, pseudo meaning false, deceptive, fake, sham. However, it is awkward, and clumsy to write. It also expresses its meaning as a negative. An option is "right-wing." I am tempted to use this, since the pseudo-conservatives are right-wing; however, I am not sure that all right-wingers are pseudo-conservatives. I will then use Conservative to refer to the real thing, and "conservative" to refer to its degraded, distant relative.

No country on Earth can take the preservation or the attainment of liberal democracy for granted. The preservation of the ideals embodied in the Bill of Rights and the First Amendment, and the freedom of debate as described by John Stuart Mill, once apparently assured in the United States, now seem to many Americans to be useless anachronisms as they blindly, angrily, resentfully pursue their own narrow ideologies. Examples abound; I offer one as the type. The Obama administration is negotiating with Iran during the late winter of 2015, with the aim of controlling nuclear arms, and likely with some additional aims in mind. On March 13, Senator Ted Cruz, R-Texas, is reported as saying, "I believe we are at a moment like Munich in 1938," and John McCain, R-Arizona, claims that the German Foreign Minister, who wants the negotiations with Iran to succeed, is "in the Neville Chamberlain school of diplomacy."

These statements are worth examining, not for their content, which is minimal, but because they are typical of what passes for informed discourse in our benighted era. First is the pose of historical knowledge. One would think from their authoritative voices that these "conservatives" are students of history, as a Conservative should be. But even a modest knowledge of the development of World War II reveals that Germany in 1938 does not resemble Iran in 2015 in any regard whatsoever; nor does the United States and its allies resemble the allies of 1938. The pose of historical authority is just that, a pose, assumed for rhetorical effect.

Second, the modern “conservative” always uses the biggest hammer he can get his hands on, and nowadays that hammer is Hitler and the events around him. So Obama’s executive actions are like Hitler’s; Obama is a Nazi dictator; or, if he is not like Hitler, then he is like Hitler’s opposition, Neville Chamberlain; try to work in the word “appease” whenever possible. Every comparison must be apocalyptic, while suggesting historical accuracy without the substance of historical knowledge. The effect is purely emotional, attempting to taint one’s political opponent by association while offering for oneself an image of rectitude and strength. As we read back through Hofstadter we find that this approach is not new in the United States. During the McCarthy era the biggest hammer wasn’t Hitler but Communism; that’s what you attacked the enemy with. The next question is, Who is this horrifying enemy among us? A tiny portion of Americans were Communists during the Cold War, yet the “conservatives” saw them everywhere. Today’s “conservatives” are just as passionate about their bugbears, and equally irresponsible, morally and intellectually, about their imaginary enemies as their forebears were about Communists.

Inflated rhetoric is so common that it crops up incessantly. The rhetoric may claim various “wars” on this, “wars” on that, or false comparisons to Nazism and Hitler, but may also include references to popular culture, including television and movies, which is in itself a sign of ignorance and shallowness. My newspaper, on April 18, 2015, quotes Governor Rick Scott, R-Florida, as claiming that the Obama administration is like organized crime. In April 2015 the federal government proposed that federal money spent in Florida to subsidize hospital care for low income patients be spent instead by giving the money to low income families to purchase medical insurance. The feds claim that this would lead to better care and less waste. Scott to Fox “News”: “They [the Obama administration] don’t care about the low income families. This is the Sopranos....They’re using bullying tactics to attack our state.” There are layers of irony here, beginning with Scott’s persistent opposition to establishing Medicaid in Florida. A further breathtaking irony is the fact that Scott’s chain of hospitals, Columbia/HCA, was found guilty of the largest healthcare fraud in history, (excluding the recent drug company frauds). His corporation was guilty of fourteen felonies and was fined \$1.7 billion for Medicare and Medicaid fraud. Yet he claims that the feds are the criminals, and that the feds are opposed to health care for the poor.

Modern “conservatives” use a variety of reprehensible rhetorical tactics. A short list:

1. The reflexive use of *ad hominum* arguments. Every argument comes down to the opposition’s bad character.
2. Recasting the opposition’s arguments in an unfavorable, even grotesque, manner and presenting the distorted argument as the opposition’s. “What the Democratic Senator really wants to do is destroy the Department of Defense,” (a hypothetical but plausible example).
3. Incessant exaggeration. “Setting aside this wilderness is a gut-punch to Alaska,” “This legislation signals open warfare on America’s small businesses.” Liberals are waging war on this, war on that. Every statement is apocalyptic.
4. Repetition of falsehoods until they become “true.” “Social Security is failing,” “All public education in the United States has failed,” “Global warming is a hoax,” “Obama had a childhood in Kenya,” “The Affordable Care Act requires death panels.” No claim

is too preposterous to repeat. It really is true that lying works, and that there are two parts to the method. First, tell the Big Lie. No Big Lie is too preposterous to present to the public, as the lies about Obama illustrate. Second, repeat it endlessly and even its victims will start to believe it. (The belief in the universal failure of all public schools is the best example I can think of.) Saul Friedlander points out in his book *The Years of Extermination* that anti-Semitism in Germany increased late in the war...when there were very few Jews left alive. Presumably the Jews defeated Germany.

5. The rejection of science, especially when that rejection shores up a pre-determined position, as in: we must not empower the federal government to deal with global warming, therefore global warming doesn't exist, or at least is not affected by human behavior.

6. The re-writing of history. See Cruz above; listen to a right-wing southerner recast the Civil War primarily as a struggle for states' rights with slavery as a secondary or even tertiary issue; interpret the Founders as being explicitly Christian Protestants who had no interest in separating church and state, but instead established a Christian nation.

7. Always appeal to fundamentalist impulses. This approach is nearly universal among "conservatives."

Judicial fundamentalism: Scalia and Thomas on the Supreme Court, and judges like them, view "original intent" as something literally sacred, equivalent to God's word. If we want the truth we must ponder a sacred text and adhere to its most simple interpretation.

Political fundamentalism: simplify every issue following some declaration such as "government is the problem," government can't do anything right, government is always wasteful, government is always too big, government employees are lazy and incompetent, on and on. That the Social Security Administration, the Postal Service, the military, NOAA, the National Transportation and Safety Board, the National Park Service, NASA, to name a few, are in fact effective, usually (not always, especially the military) efficient, and valuable, violate the "conservative's" fundamentalist principles and therefore somehow can't penetrate their thinking.

Economic fundamentalism: Libertarian economists base their views on the abstract concept of "freedom," likewise a sacred term, thereby simplifying complex systems (let us remember the Laffer Curve); the reverence expressed towards "free markets" likewise can lead to fundamentalist simplifications. I have often wondered why "free" people can't be entrusted to craft their own economies if they are in fact free. Instead they are instructed to let the markets do their thinking for them. I have also been struck by the fact that "free markets" continually strive to eliminate free markets and establish monopolies.

Religious fundamentalism: Islamic and Christian fundamentalists trace every belief to a sacred document. Every problem is easily defined, every solution is simple.

8. The conviction that the United States, and by extension its citizens, are somehow exceptional is an article of faith. Somehow, magically, we Americans are exempt from the constraints that bind other humans. The empirical basis for this belief resides I think in certain remarkable events in our history, such as the unlikely success of the Americans over the British during our revolution, our ingenuity first in promoting science and then adapting science to technology, our success in putting together large business enterprises, and our success in certain wars, such as successfully fighting a two front war in World



War II. We do things like invent basketball, baseball, and football, all our own (mostly). Our successes really are extensive. However, our fascination with our successes blinds us to our failures. American Exceptionalism is claimed for what we have done well, but not for our profound failures. We revere the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution, but we don't understand or feel the scope of slavery, our refusal to include its existence in our original documents (the Declaration claims several important "self-evident" truths, but was written by a slave-owner), its persistence in the United States long after most of Europe rejected it, and our refusal to deal with the consequences of slavery until a full century after the Emancipation. We have never understood that one aspect of our "exceptionalism" was the practice of genocide towards many Native American groups; we can't bear the thought that we righteous Americans could have advocated and practiced genocide. Andrew Jackson, one such practitioner, still is viewed favorably many millions of times every day when people handle twenty dollar bills. So, we Americans are "exceptional," but not merely in the way the "conservatives" would have it. (The unexceptional and nearly invisible Canadians occupied a continental mass sea-to-sea larger than the United States and managed to do it without slavery or Indian "wars." We revere, with good reason, the accomplishments of Lewis and Clark, but who recognizes that the Canadian Alexander McKenzie crossed his larger country not once but twice, and to two different oceans, and before the Lewis and Clark expedition?)

The methods of the "conservatives" are reinforced and complicated by two additional factors. One is the traditional use of money to buy influence. For the "conservatives" there is a natural link between deregulation and favoring certain business practices, an example being the budget passed in December 2014, which, in spite of the misbehavior we witnessed in the financial sector leading to the 2008 economic collapse, provides another government guarantee if it happens again. Hence "conservatives" are in this way like traditional Republicans.

The second method is even more reprehensible. "Conservatives" have as allies Fox "news" and Hate Radio; they operate in concert; and so any lie told by one is reinforced by the others.

I write about the methods of the "conservatives," but I do not write about the substance of their thought. That may be because there is little substance beyond the clichés we incessantly hear. I cannot grasp what it is they want; I can only see the seething hatred. I am tempted to blame the irrational hatred of Obama on racism, but the "conservatives" had the same unreasoning hatred of Clinton. I can sympathize with these words I recently stumbled across, attributed to George Santayana: "Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim." I see the fanaticism of the "conservatives," but I can't find the substance.

Since I have these strong opinions, I must declare my views, not what I am against but what I am for. First, I recognize the truth of the Conservative viewpoint I outlined above. Second, I accept the idea that in reality the Conservative and the Liberal viewpoints exist everywhere in tandem, except where intellectually or emotionally perverted (the extreme case being European fascism, a domestic example being the contemporary Tea Party). More specifically, I characterize myself as being a First Amendment, John Stuart Mill,

Liberal. I accept the idea that the basis of any living democracy lies in the freedoms therein protected, including free debate as protected (and invited?) by the First Amendment, and the argument for unrestrained free debate as argued for by Mill in his long essay *On Liberty*. I also recognize the fact that no democracy can live unless those freedoms are also *exercised*, not just protected. The other aspects of Liberalism in America, which the “conservatives” find offensive, such as government activism to alleviate the effects of poverty, or government efforts to protect the environment, are for me secondary offshoots of the Liberal view. Government activism is I think the result of discussions about real problems and what we can do to fix them. For me, the First Amendment leads naturally to pragmatism. The ancient Platonic concept of Justice falls, perhaps paradoxically, within the purview of pragmatism. For example, this liberal thinks that the State should promote justice. Economic justice is one aspect of this larger Justice. We should deal with the question, How can we bring it about? (The “conservative, and maybe the Conservative, would not ask, How can we bring it about? Instead asking, Should we bring it about? Certainly answering no, preferring the status quo for two reasons: economic justice should be sorted out naturally, by markets; and the status quo favors the privileged, which conveniently, and just incidentally, happens to be them.)

I am perhaps naïve to imagine that politics actually functions because of the results of free speech. I know that power may trump persuasion and free speech in a democracy. Nevertheless the definition of Liberal at least offers an ideal: "Not limited to or by established, traditional, orthodox, or authoritarian attitudes, views, or dogmas; free from bigotry; favoring proposals for reform, open to new ideas for progress, and tolerant of the ideas and behavior of others; broad-minded," (American Heritage Dictionary). The word has by the “conservatives” been cynically and viciously turned into a word expressing contempt. The American right wing and their “conservative” brethren have learned how to corrupt language by stripping words such as “liberal” and “environmentalist” of their meanings, and they have contrived new meanings that suit their purposes. We Americans, when we express our hatred of liberals, might as well be saying that we have come to hate freedom.

I do not think that this situation has arisen because the liberal view has become corrupt in fact; I think it has occurred because the people who call themselves “conservatives” in America don't have a clear view of what the two positions entail; or else they are motivated by bad will; or both.

The one crucial difference between liberals and “conservatives” is the liberal belief in the value of debate as opposed to the “conservative” (and Conservative) view of authority.

As I mentioned above, in the United States the liberal touchstone is the First Amendment to the Constitution, which protects freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion (which can be viewed as a form of freedom of thought). Another touchstone of liberal thought is John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty*. The thinkers of The Enlightenment created the foundation for the ideas which are expressed in the documents I have named: specifically, that in order to make the best decisions, humans must promote uninhibited debate; and furthermore, it is not enough to merely allow debate; one must engage in debate, which means that one must *in actual*

*fact sincerely* listen to ideas contrary to their own and give them serious consideration.

It is on this last point that American society seems to have broken down, and it is on this point that modern “conservatives” and modern liberals seem to diverge irrevocably. It has been claimed often that we have become a nation of several rigidly held viewpoints. I think this apparent truism is false, because the rigidly held viewpoint is on the right, among the “conservatives,” as evidenced abundantly by their rejection of both pragmatism and truth. This is the bulk of the dogmatism that I mentioned near the beginning of this essay. To my mind, the persistence of this unreason is our potential tragedy. The pragmatic and very American purpose of debate is to define and clarify issues so that we can collectively reach the best decision; “best” being a near synonym of “most just.” True, the ultimate decision will be an expression of power, but one hopes that the power of the lawmaking majority is ultimately based on human reason as revealed through informed debate.

It has been truly said that of all the world's major religions, the Christians and the Moslems are the most militant. They are the two religions most alike in their aggressiveness; it is therefore logical that they have been frequently at war. This was so when the Moslems expanded into Europe during the Middle Ages; it was so when the Christians attempted to expand into the Middle East during the time of the Crusades; it was (and is) so when Moslem fundamentalists practice terrorism against the liberal devils of Europe and America; it was so in Bosnia and Serbia.

One of the ironies of this situation in our domestic life is that the fundamentalist Christians have failed to grasp how similar they are to fundamentalist Moslems. As with the Moslems, free debate is out of the question because one's beliefs are already set in stone. There is no belief in a better future (until one dies) because they recognize no social mechanism, such as the free exchange of ideas, to bring it about. Indeed, there is for them only one acceptable way to improve the temporal future and that is to convert everyone else to one's beliefs. Lacking this, we face only perpetual war. (I trust that the reader understands that I am discussing specifically the fundamentalist branches of those faiths.) So I have seen and heard fundamentalist Christian preachers in their pride consign liberals to hell from their pulpits in front of television audiences; like the Ayatollah they presume to speak with the voice of God. But many fundamentalist preachers have forgotten that the original sin, the worst sin of all, the sin recognized by the ancient Greeks and the Jews as well as by the Christians as the fatal flaw in human nature, is the sin of pride. The prideful preacher has taken it upon himself to speak with the authority of God.

What would happen in the United States if, like Iran and other governments and movements in the Moslem world, we did not separate church from state? This is the dream of many on the Christian right: to have a Christian nation, run by Christian politicians, to serve fundamentalist Christian ideology and only fundamentalist Christian ideology.

In America, fundamentalist Christian thinking resembles the Medieval Catholicism of our nightmares. Again, the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, in *Tragic Sense of Life*: “The real sin – perhaps it is the sin against the Holy Ghost for which there is no remission – is the sin of heresy, the sin of thinking for oneself. The saying has been heard before now, here in Spain, that to be a liberal – that is, a heretic – is worse than

being an assassin, a thief, or an adulterer. The gravest sin is not to obey the church, whose infallibility protects us from reason...The Church defends life. It stood up against Galileo, and it did right; for his discovery...tended to shatter the anthropomorphic belief that the universe was created for man. It opposed Darwin, and it did right, for Darwinism tends to shatter our belief that man is an exceptional animal, created expressly to be eternalized" (pp.71-72). These astonishing sentiments are aggressively expressed and endorsed by our own right wing Medievalists of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. One does not debate to learn or to reach pragmatic compromise; one only wages war. Total, uncompromising war, in which one's fellow citizens are your enemies if they live in violation of your dogmas.

And, in recent months (2014, 2015) we have seen fundamentalist Moslems likewise revert to a horrifying Medievalism that, though hard to credit, is nevertheless being relentlessly put into practice.

When I wrote the words "total, uncompromising war" above, I unconsciously assumed that the "war" was metaphorical, more an attitude and conviction that usually falls short of physical violence, except in the case of certain true believers who bomb women's health clinics or kill the practitioners.

But the Moslem war is metaphorical too. If you behead helpless people, or execute physically restrained civilians, often aid workers, or bomb shoppers or worshipers, that is not war. That is murder of a particularly cowardly sort.

Attacks on liberal thinking come from the secular political realm as well as from the pulpit. For example, during his presidential campaign against Michael Dukakis, George H. W. Bush "accused" Dukakis of being a "card carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union," (an organization dedicated to the protection of First Amendment rights). For older voters, "card carrying" was shorthand for "commie." In the 1950s and early 1960s the word "communist" was usually preceded by "card carrying;" I can recall no other phrase so structured. People were accused of being "card carrying members of the Communist Party" but not "card carrying members of the United Steel Workers." The phrase used by Bush was structured to indicate that to be a member of the ACLU was somehow linked to something disreputable and un-American. So for the illiberal mind you are either completely one thing or completely another; you are "for" America (and Bush) and "against" the ACLU or you are "for" the ACLU (and Dukakis) and "against" America; you will no longer be allowed to defend the plurality of views which exists in society and still be thought of as a legitimate citizen. If I defend First Amendment rights, I must be in favor of pornography and flag burning; if I defend the rights of women, I must be in favor of abortion; if I defend the rights of homosexuals, I must be in favor of sexual deviancy; if I believe that adolescents should be taught about sex, I must be in favor of adolescent promiscuity; if I defend affirmative action, I must be in favor of inequality.

You can add many more examples of these kinds of attacks, which are attacks not against the substance of liberal thought but against the stereotype that was created by "conservatives" to serve their political purposes. For more than two decades the attacks have been so effective that few politicians are willing to apply the word "liberal" to themselves.

In practice and in fact, I, who call myself a liberal, am more consistently Conservative than the "conservatives" I know. The same goes for my liberal friends, without exception. I have a stable marriage; I work hard; I have raised my children to behave ethically; I have managed my finances prudently; I adhere to strict personal and community values. Lo, I am more Conservative than the "conservatives"! Yet Dan Quayle and Newt Gingrich, Rush Limbaugh and John Ashcroft, think they are my moral superiors; they must lecture me to improve my moral life! But they should instead heal themselves. The hallmark of such pale "conservatism" is its hypocrisy. This form of hypocrisy about personal, family, and community values began with Ronald Reagan, the nation's only divorced president.

The contemporary American "conservative" is inclined to a vicious form of self-righteous hypocrisy that turns falsehoods into truth for the sake of ideological consistency. Examples: in the 1980s and 1990s, if you listened to "conservatives", you would have thought that welfare was bankrupting the country. In fact, welfare for the poor had been 1%-3% of the federal budget for some years. You would have thought that most people need tax relief. In fact, we were and are the least taxed of all industrial nations; and ten times as many people experienced tax cuts than experienced tax increases in the early 1990s. You would think that our national deficit of the 1980s and early 1990s was caused by liberal spending, when in fact, during Reagan's eight years in office, when most of our previous deficit accumulated, the budget approved by Congress was virtually identical in amount to the budget submitted by President Reagan. Reagan, advocate of balanced budgets, ran the largest deficits since World War II, and George W. Bush ran up the largest deficits in our history, which were only aggravated by the economic collapse of 2008; and the "conservatives" then clamored for a balanced budget and refused to take responsibility for their own profligacy. You would have thought that environmental laws were making it impossible for businesses to function; meanwhile the economy of the 1990s boomed. And so on. Now, under a new regime, the falsehoods have returned. Welfare is no longer attacked, but affirmative action is; taxes can still serve as a tool of demagoguery; deficits can still be used to drive social policy; and the value and economic benefits of environmental laws can still be unrecognized, falsified, and undermined. This "conservatism" is in part a moralistic mask for a narrow self-interested materialism, perhaps best exemplified by the "conservative" push to deregulate Wall Street, which led to the crash of 2008 (as it led to the Savings and Loan collapse and the misbehavior at Enron under Reagan, both of which scandals damaged the economy and cost the government billions of dollars. Deregulation has a well-documented history of failure.)

This hypocrisy take nasty personal forms. For example, I guided three "conservatives" on a fishing trip one fall. All day I heard them rant about filthy liberals; they especially hated Hillary Clinton, of course. They were very aggressive about asserting that they held the moral high ground on every issue. Each night, after a day of fishing and rant, they retired to their tents with their library of pornographic magazines. They hated the liberals whom, by protecting the First Amendment, and thereby protecting the publishing of pornographic materials, allowed them to engage in their peculiar form of recreation. I could not imagine me or my liberal friends, who defend First Amendment rights, consuming pornography, especially with the gusto of my

“conservative” clients. They hated liberals, but they loved the pornography. Their criticisms of the liberal view was particularly aggressive and self-righteous, and their behavior particularly obnoxious and hypocritical.

I am convinced that many “conservatives” enthusiastically practice the vices that liberals are accused of. I would love to see studies that would analyze the consumption of pornography, the rate of male homosexuality, the rate of drug use, or the rate of marital infidelity, by political conviction. I suspect that my “conservative” brethren are as prone to vice as anyone else. I say, let them have the vice if they want it; but spare me the hypocrisy.

The love of rant, and the assumption of moral superiority, are the two unmistakable signs that one is in the presence of a “conservative.” I must ask the question, is the “conservative” more of a personality type than an intellectual position?

One of the most obvious differences between the Conservative and the “conservative” is that the former has a profound respect for the truth, the latter a complete indifference, even contempt, for the truth.

Although I am fundamentally at odds with Unamuno, I can read *Tragic Sense of Life* (I don’t know why the article was omitted from the title) with great interest, and to my benefit. I can probe into his mind, explore his thesis, even understand the intellectual foundation for his more outrageous statements when I stretch my mind to understand his context. He sincerely, passionately, almost desperately, wants to understand and reveal the truth about the roots of human faith. I can embrace and love many fundamentally Conservative thinkers, from Plato to T. S. Elliot, because of the quality of their thought and art. I can do this because of the basic, even profound, integrity of their minds.

But the modern “conservative” finds that the truth is contemptible. Ronald Reagan for years told his story about the welfare queen, but when Republican and Democratic operatives, and the press, tried to find her, she was nowhere in evidence. You never heard her name, you never saw her photo. She was a fiction. To make matters worse, the story did not even illustrate the truth about how welfare actually worked, but the opposite: it was designed to reinforce false stereotypes. In the same vein, Reagan said “he was sure glad to get back to Hollywood after the war.” The truth was, like John Wayne, he did not serve in World War II, but his words were designed to suggest that he did. Many young people I worked with at the time assumed he was a war hero. The lie worked, as it worked for the manly superpatriot John Wayne, who never served in World War II either; though both Reagan and Wayne were healthy and fit. Many of us will remember George H. W. Bush’s television ad making Michael Dukakis responsible for the terrible crimes of Willie Horton, although Horton was actually benefiting from a program established by Dukakis’ Republican predecessor. The Bush administration of the Lost Decade has stretched and distorted the truth so often that it would be tedious to offer examples here, though it is impossible to ignore the lie about Iraq possessing nuclear and chemical weapons, which lie was the immediate justification for war. Add to these acts of elected officials the systematic distortions disseminated by Hate Radio, and one would have to conclude that lying by the right has become normal rather than exceptional. This willingness to embrace falsehood in the service of expediency is exactly contrary to the principles of Conservatism. I suspect that the “conservatives” assume that, when you wage total war, any tactic is acceptable.

But the important question is: where is the real debate? Where are the open-minded people who want to advance the public interest by engaging in a sincere dialogue with their fellow Americans?

Perhaps we Americans should look to ourselves before we cast stones at our politicians. Why do political candidates condense an entire political platform into three simple sentences in a thirty-second advertisement? They are willing to reduce public debate to an infantile level because they correctly assume that the voters will respond in an infantile way. After all, to allow one's view of the world to be formed by television images is itself infantile. The conduct of most political campaigns reveals that the candidates have a thorough contempt for the thought processes, such as they are, of the public. There is ample reason to think that the politicians are right to scorn the public. Much is made of the contempt in which the public holds politicians; but little is made of the contempt in which the politicians hold the public. The politicians know that we are ignorant, easily manipulated, and lazy. They know that we will not hold them to account. They know that we are ignorant of their behavior. They know that they can manipulate our view of them by controlling the images that play across our television screens. I say, we have earned their contempt. We deserve them.

When the *Citizen United* decision came down I was as appalled as most people. However, since the 2014 elections I have come to understand it differently. Where does most of that unrestricted spending go? Surely, to television advertisements. And so I am no longer appalled by unrestricted spending, but I am instead doubly appalled that the proud voters in the Land of the Free, Home of the Brave, beneficiaries of the First Amendment and a free press, base their voting choices on television advertisements. A large part of our electorate votes the same way that it selects shaving cream and fast food. As long as the electorate is so lazy, so unreflective, I can only conclude that we have the democracy we deserve.

America needs a true Conservatism to complement its liberal heritage. We have our Jefferson, our Lincoln, our Franklin Delano Roosevelt; but where is the American Edmund Burke, the American Winston Churchill? Where in our current Senate is a Conservative who can stand beside Daniel Patrick Moynihan? The degraded form of "conservatism" now current in America is nothing but narrow self-interest, primarily economic self-interest, hiding behind a mask of self-righteous rectitude. The current situation, of hate-filled language, of sound bites and television images and the promotion of falsehood, needs to be replaced by real debate, conducted in all sincerity. If we can do this, then the centuries old contrast between real Conservatism and enlightened liberalism can serve to help us form sound public policy. Conservatism is as old as the species. It is an inherent part of being human. But enlightened liberalism is new and fragile. We know what happens when it is destroyed: Spain under Franco, the USSR under Stalin, Germany under Hitler, and the examples multiply as we look around the third world.

American Liberalism is a direct descendant of the Enlightenment. An inspiring metaphor, the Enlightenment. Light with which to see our way along an ascending path. What an invigorating sensation, to leave the darkness and walk in the clear light of day. To see with increasing clarity, to be guided by a clear understanding, free of hatred and

prejudice. Couple this with the Latin *libre*, free, one root of Liberal, and we have a second excellent metaphor; for we can *liberate* ourselves. The Truth *shall* make you free, as opposed to falsehood, which *does* yield mental slavery. Yes, these happy sentiments do sound naïve. Yet John Stuart Mill's claim remains true: to make free choices after freely and honestly exercising the mind is one of the greatest joys of being human. In no other way can we experience the true glory of the human intellect. In no other way can we understand what it is to be fully human. If we refuse to exercise our intellects in order to make free choices, all of our potential comes to naught, and we condemn ourselves to voluntary servitude, slaves to dogma and ignorance. Our American heroes, the Founders, though thoroughly fallible and capable of grave error, were nevertheless men of the Enlightenment who built the idea of free choice following informed debate into our system of government. They must have believed that a sincere exchange of ideas led somehow to the truth. True, all political decisions in the end resolve themselves into who has the power. The question, though, is can we ensure that that power is somehow based on the truth?

We hear much about how our national politics is divided between two opposite points of view, both based on partisanship; the two points of view are irreconcilable. This is only partly true. The liberal and the "conservative" are not equally rigid and antagonistic. Liberalism does not value rigidity disguised as principle as does the "conservative." The Liberal and the Conservative, on the other hand, can live together. To repeat Emerson's words, "Each is a good half, but an impossible whole." This is particularly true of our First World democracies. The only time any position makes a complete whole unto itself is when that State is either totalitarian or very authoritarian—Franco's Spain and Stalin's Soviet Union come to mind—both examples of the single viewpoint. But in a democracy Conservatism and Liberalism will always be wedded to each other; I think of Roosevelt's and Churchill's wartime partnership as personifications of this relationship. But the modern American "conservative" cannot be married to anything; it tolerates only itself. In its self-righteous narcissism, its highest value is unity; all must be alike; all must conform to it; it is at heart totalitarian. Perhaps America needs a rejuvenation of Liberal thought; but it certainly needs the emergence of a real Conservatism to replace the pretenders now so much in evidence.

Emerson concludes his essay with a heartwarming and optimistic prophecy of the power of the individual. "It will never make any difference to the hero what the laws are. His greatness will shine and accomplish itself unto the end, whether they second him or not....Of the past he will take no heed; for its wrongs he will not hold himself responsible: he will say, all the meanness of my progenitors will not bereave me of the power to make this hour and company fair and fortunate....I am primarily engaged to myself to be a public servant of all the gods, to demonstrate to all men that there is intelligence and good will at the heart of things, and ever higher and yet higher leadings....Wherever there is worth, I shall be greeted. Wherever there are men, are the objects of my study and love. Sooner or later all men will be my friends...."

I honor and respect Emerson's optimism, but I also must recognize an alternate and equally plausible description of our situation: that



The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

from "The Second Coming," William Butler Yeats