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# What's with Conservatism? Should the Right Be Toasting— or Crying in Its Bier?

Fred Barnes

After ten years as senior editor and White House correspondent for *The New Republic*, Fred Barnes joined with William Kristol and John Podhoretz in 1995 to found a weekly conservative magazine, *The Standard*, of which he is executive editor. *The Standard* is the first weekly opinion magazine to be launched in eighty years.

Barnes is a regular panelist on *The McLaughlin Group*; a moderator of Fox News Channel's *Fox on Politics*; moderator of *Voice of America's Issues* in the News show; and host of a weekly radio show on the media, *What's the Story?*

A graduate of the University of Virginia, Barnes covered the Supreme Court and the White House for the *Washington Star* before joining the *Baltimore Sun* in 1979. He was selected in 1984 as a panelist for the first nationally televised debate between President Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale after more than a hundred other journalists had been vetoed by the two presidential campaigns.

He spoke to a Center of the American Experiment audience in December 1997.

Conservatism is at a relatively high point in American political life, but it has some problems. We have reached a historic moment in American history, a conservative moment. I used to call it a conservative era, but I was a little premature in that. An era lasts a generation or more. A moment can fade, though it might evolve into an era. I'm not yet ready to predict a conservative era.

You don't always get what you expect in politics, but already we see signs that the history of the twentieth century—that is, the growth of the power of central governments around the world, and particularly here—is being reversed. So why not just declare it a conservative era in American politics and policy? Two reasons.

One is this: conservatives are winning strategically—conservative ideas

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are dominant in American political life, in Washington and elsewhere, and to a great extent they are paramount around the world—yet conservatives often are defeated tactically, needlessly losing battles in Washington and elsewhere.

The other reason is that while liberalism and liberal policies have been discredited everywhere on every conceivable issue, they have been replaced in America's governing philosophy by conservative solutions in only a couple of instances. Clearly, conservatives have won strategically and tactically on crime. Twenty years ago, you would not have thought that the death penalty would be instituted or reinstated in so many places, yet it has been. Three strikes and you're out. President Clinton has accepted these conservative solutions. One of the main reasons why there has been a decline in crime is that many more prisons have been built, and the worst criminals are locked up for longer periods of time.

In many other cases, liberal solutions have not been replaced by credible conservative alternatives. Don't doubt, however, that we conservatives are winning strategically: the conservative agenda is now dominant in Washington and in many state capitals and elsewhere. Balancing the budget, cutting taxes, and promoting and developing traditional moral values in American life have become the central aims of American politics. This is new. The liberal agenda was dominant for sixty years before Republicans took over Congress in 1994.

At the core of liberalism is the idea that modern problems require an

expanding federal government. The conservative agenda says let anybody but the federal government solve our problems. State and local governments, civil society, the free market—anybody—can do it better.

Libertarians mistakenly think this means we don't need a federal government except for national defense. That is not what the American people want, nor is it really what conservatives believe. We do need a strong national government. We are not just fifty states; we are a country, and the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts. I don't regard libertarianism as a governing philosophy.

Although the conservative agenda is ascendant, it doesn't dominate everything. The public does not accept the conservative environmental alternative right now. I don't think we need more regulation of the environment from Washington, but poll after poll says the public does believe that. And then there's health care. After the public so forcefully rejected health care run by the federal government as proposed by President Clinton in 1994, there is still tremendous public support for smaller steps to be taken by the national government in the health care arena. Conservatives still have a lot of arguing to do.

## From Washington to Warsaw

The most interesting struggle in Washington at the moment is between two brands of conservatives: status quo conservatives and reform conservatives. By status quo conservatives I really mean liberals, because they have lost faith in the transformative power

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of a big federal government and just want to preserve the programs and policies they have created over the past sixty years, when the liberal agenda was dominant. The reform conservatives like Newt Gingrich and other House Republicans want to dismantle much of that policy apparatus and much of the welfare state. That is what the fight is about.

Bill Clinton seems very comfortable as the chief status quo conservative in American national politics. He speaks every year at the White House correspondents' dinner, one of the most boring dinners in American life. He made the last one delightful because he didn't lecture the press about the importance of good relations between the press corps and the White House and what that means for America. Nobody wants to hear that stuff. Instead, he told jokes. He was much funnier than the hired comedian. He said the Democrats had come up with the best fund-raising tool ever: for \$25,000 donors could come in and hear Al Gore talk about reinventing government, and for \$30,000 they wouldn't have to come.

Newt Gingrich hasn't settled quite as comfortably into his role as leader of the reform conservatives. His popularity took a big hit during the government shutdown in 1995, and it hasn't fully recovered. He's had to apologize to the Republican conference for being too brash and confrontational and pushy, even though those are among his good points. Being confrontational is one of the things he does best.

Gingrich's grip on House Republicans loosened a great deal in March

1997 when he called a conference in a small room in the Capitol and brought in the 228 House Republican members to hector those who voted against a bill that would have enlarged the budgets of the congressional committees. Those eleven Republicans joined the Democrats in defeating the bill, and the leadership—led by Gingrich—was furious. One of the rebels was Steve Largent from Tulsa, who was elected in 1994. You may remember his prior career as a wide receiver for the Seattle Seahawks. He is now a member of the pro football Hall of Fame.

As Gingrich was lecturing the assembled Republicans and particularly the renegades, Largent was sitting about halfway back in the audience seething. Finally he bolted to the microphone and said, "Speaker Gingrich, you are trying to intimidate us. Well, let me tell you, I've been in smaller rooms with bigger guys, and I'm not going to be intimidated by you." The room went silent. Joe Scarborough of Pensacola, another class of 1994 Republican congressman, said it was the most thrilling moment he had ever experienced in politics. Gingrich hasn't been quite the same since then.

It's not just America that has moved in a conservative direction. Around the world, we see politicians and other people embracing conservative ideas: the free market, decentralization, halting the growth of the welfare state. The most astonishing phenomenon is the way the political left around the world has moved to the right. They have done it not because they wanted to, but because they have

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had to in order to remain politically viable. Look at England, where Tony Blair was elected prime minister in May 1997. He heads the Labour Party, the party that nationalizes industries, the party that is a member of the Socialist International, yet he said he wouldn't undo Margaret Thatcher's reforms, wouldn't raise taxes, wouldn't raise spending, wouldn't nationalize any industries. Even the Spice Girls are Thatcherites.

In Italy, the former communists were elected on a probusiness platform of fiscal restraint and privatization. These people were communists just three or four years ago. Poland has gone through several cycles: the communists were thrown out, democrats were elected, the former communists came back. Now they've been thrown out and reform capitalists are running Poland.

My friend Michael Barone of *Reader's Digest*, editor of *The Almanac of American Politics* and an expert on Alexis de Tocqueville, says America is beginning to return to the country that Tocqueville found when he came here in the early 1830s—a country that is egalitarian, individualistic, decentralized, religious, property-oriented, a country that is lightly governed. In fact, I think we are a little bit more lightly governed than we were, say, ten years ago. Telecommunications have been deregulated, and a variety of other things like that have happened.

Look at America's recovering cities, many of them recovering without massive aid from the federal government. The best urban policy turns out to be

no national urban policy. Conservatives are strategically triumphant, yet there is a problem. The problem is not that liberals occasionally get elected—liberals are still going to get elected in a conservative era. The 1950s were the heart of the liberal era, but Eisenhower was elected in the United States, Churchill and Macmillan in England, de Gaulle in France, Adenauer in Germany. They defined themselves as conservatives but endorsed the liberal agenda. They allowed taxes to rise and the welfare state to grow.

Now it's just the opposite: it's the liberals who are declaring themselves conservatives. That is a fundamental and important difference, but there are a couple of problems. One is winning the battle of ideas while we lose the political battles.

The budget deal forged in the summer of 1997 requires a balanced budget and tax cuts, not a tax hike. It's the conservative dream. But look what conservatives needlessly gave up. The 1998 budget will have the largest increase in domestic spending in eight years; domestic spending will go up 10 percent, four times inflation. After three years of cuts since Republicans took over Congress, programs that Republicans wanted to zero out—the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Goals 2000, the Legal Services Corporation—all get big increases. The Appalachian Regional Commission, probably the single most useless agency in the history of government, gets \$10 million more. And so on.

Only one area of spending gets a tiny increase, less than inflation, and

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guess what it is? Defense. The one that conservatives do and should want to increase the most increases by slightly less than the rate of inflation. That's winning strategically but losing tactically.

## Conservative Alternatives

The other big problem is replacing liberal policies and programs and ideas and solutions with credible conservative alternatives. Look at the education crisis in this country. It is fairly well agreed that liberal ideas have all but ruined public education with big spending, low standards, no accountability, a watered-down curriculum, and lack of discipline. But the conservative alternative has not been effectively sold around the country. School choice is getting a foothold in Minnesota, but it has not been embraced in many places around the country. The full conservative alternative—school choice, giving federal block grants to the states rather than letting the Department of Education in Washington spend the money, tougher and more rigid standards, and a better curriculum—has not been put across yet.

Health care run by the national government was rejected unequivocally in 1994, but now President Clinton plans to achieve the same thing incrementally, piece by piece. He's very candid about it. What is the conservative alternative? Right now, it appears to be medical savings accounts, or just blocking what Clinton is proposing. That's not enough. Newt Gingrich asked me what a proactive conservative health care policy would be. That's the prob-

lem: he was asking me. Gingrich will come up with one, but he doesn't have one yet.

The next big Clinton push is going to be federally financed child care. What is the conservative alternative? Financial incentives that allow mothers to stay home with preschool children—but conservatives are afraid to embrace and proclaim this alternative.

Affirmative action, racial and gender preferences, and set-asides, quotas, and so on have lost the faith of the American people completely. Every poll shows it. The Republican alternative, the conservative alternative, would be to do the opposite. Congress could but hasn't.

Radical feminism now has been almost wholly rejected in America. You saw it being rejected again when a legal counsel for the army declared that the Marines are macho extremists. She was fired, yet neither Congress nor the Pentagon is moving to stop the feminization of the military, which is harming America's defense posture.

Let me mention two other problems that face conservatives. One is the effort by many economic conservatives to ban social conservative ideas as a part of the conservative agenda. They say, Gee, these ideas are divisive and many people don't like them and they drive people away from the Republican Party, so we don't want to talk about abortion and school prayer and gay rights and things like that. They are divisive issues. On the other hand, they are the issues that have built the Republican Party to include many people who do not embrace conservative

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economic policies. Ronald Reagan was a favorite of social conservatives—of the “Reagan Democrats” before we called them that—well before he embraced supply-side economics in 1980; he took strong moral positions and was America’s foremost anticommunist. During the 1980 campaign, he also embraced tax cuts and supply-side economics, but that isn’t mainly what drew people to him. It would be suicidal for Republicans to drive away social conservatives and to strip their issues from the conservative agenda, yet that is what some people are advocating.

My friend Jim Glassman, who is something of a libertarian, got into a quibble with my friend Bill Kristol. Bill had said that Americans have a right to expect their government to uphold moral standards. Jim said, “When government devotes itself to enforcing moral regimes, tyranny is just around the corner.” My view is just the opposite: when the government doesn’t try to uphold moral values, tyranny is just around the corner.

## Shutting Out the Buzz

One final matter: the question of political courage—or I should say the absence of political courage?—particularly among conservatives in the past couple of years. When conservatives were out of power and in the minority, they were noisily courageous. Now we don’t see that kind of willingness to stick by their convictions regardless of what the polls say.

You don’t see many conservative leaders, in Washington in particular, who can shut out the buzz. The buzz is

what the political community is saying and what is being written in the Washington Post and the New York Times and what all the lobbyists are talking about. The only politician now in Washington I know who can do it is Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Ronald Reagan used to be able to shut out the buzz. He had remarkable political courage, and of course he was a conservative. If he’d had political courage on behalf of socialism, he wouldn’t have been president. His political courage won the cold war and helped restore America’s economic health. He didn’t accept the conventional wisdom about how to deal with the Soviets. Conventional wisdom was that we had to have détente, we had to accommodate them; they would always be there so we would just have to get along with them. Reagan said no.

I didn’t believe this when he said it, and I’ll bet very few others in Washington did. Practically no one at the White House believed it. Reagan said in a speech early in the 1980s that the Soviet empire would soon wind up on the ash heap of history. White House aides were embarrassed when he insisted on saying that and talking about the evil empire. Reagan wasn’t embarrassed. He said the Soviets needed to be confronted, not accommodated.

In 1983 Reagan was ready to deploy Pershing missiles in Europe to counteract Russian nuclear missiles aimed at Europe. There were peace marches all over Europe and in Washington. President Reagan’s chief negotiator, Paul

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Nitze, said it was hard for him to sell the Russians on the idea that Reagan wouldn't deploy his missiles so long as they took theirs out. They didn't think that was a very good bargain: we're not doing anything, and they're taking their missiles out. How can I argue this?

"Paul, just tell them you work for one tough son of a gun," Reagan said.

The Russians didn't buy it, Reagan deployed the missiles, the Soviets stormed out of the arms control talks in Geneva, Washington was in a tizzy, and Reagan was declared a warmonger, particularly in Washington. His staff was in an uproar. Reagan's reaction to the Soviets marching out was that they would be back, and six or eight weeks later they were.

Reagan met with Gorbachev in Reykjavik, Iceland, just before the 1986 election. Unbeknownst to his staff, Reagan proposed that they ban nuclear weapons from the face of the earth. Gorbachev agreed on one condition: that Reagan stop development of the Strategic Defense Initiative, Star Wars. Reagan said no, can't do that, this is a defensive weapon that will protect people in the United States and ultimately around the world from attack by anyone.

The summit collapsed. The press declared it a disaster. Détente would falter, and the cold war would deepen. On the flight back to Washington, there was only one smiling, happy person on Air Force One, and that was Ronald Reagan. He had stood firmly behind SDI.

Margaret Thatcher declared it the historic turning point in the collapse of

the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war. After that the Soviet negotiating strategy changed completely. They agreed to take out these weapons in Europe and to other arms control reductions. Their military knew and Gorbachev knew that they could not compete with the United States on the Strategic Defense Initiative and in practically everything else. That was the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union, and it happened because Reagan shut out the buzz. He didn't calculate the odds. He didn't look at the polls. He stood by his convictions.

It isn't just Republicans who have shown political courage. Harry Truman certainly did in the late 1940s when only 12 percent of the American people were for the Marshall Plan and he pushed ahead with it. Lyndon Johnson was politically courageous when he backed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, knowing full well that it would hurt the Democratic Party over the long run. George Bush was politically courageous when there was no national desire to deploy and use 500,000 troops in the Persian Gulf in 1990 and 1991.

We haven't seen a lot of political courage recently, though, and there are many issues on which political courage would help. Social Security and Medicare are still going bankrupt. Our education system is in a state of collapse. The federal tax bite is bigger than it's ever been in American history. We know that around the country, governments gobble up 40 percent of the gross domestic product. It's 60 percent in France, yes, but 40 percent is

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still very high by American standards. And then there is something we face every day: the coarsening of American life. We see it on television, in street conversations, in football games, in movies. It's inescapable.

We need political courage. I pray that a new generation of leaders will emulate Ronald Reagan and show that kind of courage. When that happens, it will be a conservative era and not just a conservative moment.

Following his talk, Fred Barnes spoke with members of the audience, including American Experiment Distinguished Senior Fellow Tim Penny, a former Minnesota representative to Congress.

Ron Theisen: What are your views on replacing the present Social Security system?

Fred Barnes: I'm in favor of instantly privatizing the whole thing. That is not politically possible, but there are things that are politically possible in the short run that a lot of Republicans and some Democrats are for. Senator Bob Kerrey of Nebraska came up with a good idea. A guy who lives down the street from him in Omaha suggested that we allow people to take two percentage points of the Social Security money that is deducted from their take-home pay—about a third of the amount that is taken out on their side, not the employer's side—and invest it in mutual funds or stocks or whatever.

The guy who lives down the street from Bob Kerrey knows a little about investing. His name is Warren Buffett,

and he's the greatest investor in human history. It's a fantastic idea, because when people start getting a statement every month and see what their money is doing instead of sitting in some mythical Social Security trust fund that they don't believe in, it will open a door that will never be shut again. Eventually they will want all their money to be in it. I don't mean just those of us who are gathered here, either. I mean the people working at minimum wage, who pay a much higher marginal rate on Social Security than we do. Once that happens, we can move rapidly.

Even President Clinton has accepted the idea that at least 40 percent of the money in this Social Security trust fund, so called, should be invested. Start there. Start with the Kerrey idea, start with what Clinton has accepted, something proposed by a commission he set up, and then I think the movement toward full privatization is inevitable.

Evan Stanley: Why should tax cuts take priority over cutting government spending, running a surplus, and paying down the debt? I was raised to believe that it is irresponsible to carry debt.

Fred Barnes: I was raised that way, too, though when I bought a house I got a lot of debt. I can think of several reasons. One, tax cuts are easier politically, and over time they do starve government spending. Phil Gramm used to say, back in 1981 when he was still a Democrat and was pushing the Reagan tax cut plan, that the tax cuts would starve government spending.

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You're not going to rally a lot of people to the idea of paying down the national debt. I think probably the Republican compromise if there is a surplus—and I'm for waiting until there is one and not spending the surplus before we get one—is to divide it, some going to the national debt and some going for tax cuts. But you are certainly going to have an easier time with the surplus rallying people to the notion that the government took too much of their money and is going to give some of it back. That's easier to sell than paying down the national debt.

Steve Moore: What's the conservative agenda for dealing with the ever widening gap between the First World and the Third World?

Fred Barnes: The Third World is in fact beginning to adopt the conservative agenda: the free market. It has worked in many Third World countries. Singapore and Hong Kong were Third World countries only thirty or forty years ago, and look where they are now. The Wall Street Journal ran a list—put together by the Heritage Foundation and some others—rating every country in the world on the degree of economic freedom there. Cuba was at the bottom, and Singapore and the United States and Switzerland and even England were at the top. To the degree that your markets were free, you were doing well, and to the degree that you were in a state-controlled economy, as in Cuba, you were not doing well.

It's a simple solution. Foreign aid won't do it. Foreign aid is channeled through the political class in these

countries and is generally counterproductive. It has been proven to my satisfaction that foreign aid hinders economic growth and development. The free market works. Look at Czechoslovakia: of the former communist countries, it's probably the one with the most freedom, and the economy is really beginning to take off. Less so in Poland, but there's some movement there. Look at the Baltic states. The one with the most economic freedom is Estonia.

A friend of mine, a Republican economist, went to Estonia a few years ago and talked to the former communist leaders. He said, "Look, just start by privatizing some sector of the economy—restaurants, say. Just let anybody open a restaurant who wants to."

The economic official said, "OK, that's a great idea. How many should we have?"

"No," my friend said, "you don't understand. The market will decide this. If people want five hundred, they'll support five hundred, and maybe five hundred will start but they will only support three hundred and those other two hundred will collapse and people can do something else."

Estonia is doing far better economically than the other Baltic countries. Why? Because it has much more economic freedom. The free market has taken over there almost totally.

Tim Penny: What is your assessment of the potential for new leadership to emerge in the House and the Senate? Who do you see in each chamber emerging to carry this agenda forward?

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Fred Barnes: Let's start on the Democratic side. Senator Bob Kerrey of Nebraska is one to watch. When he ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1992, he ran as a conventional big-government liberal who was in favor of the Canada-style health care plan, and he was a protectionist. He couldn't sell that, and the problem was that he didn't believe in it. He has reversed himself completely since then and is now for privatizing Social Security, for taking a stab at making Medicare solvent over the long term. Bob Kerrey won a Congressional Medal of Honor in Vietnam; that says a lot to me and to others.

On the Republican side, a lot of younger members who were elected in 1994, in particular, have enormous potential. Steve Largent has leadership qualities. He is not ideological the way Newt Gingrich has been over the years. I think he's going to emerge as a very strong leader.

I believe Bill Paxon, a congressman from New York, will be the next Republican Speaker of the House. [Oops. Representative Paxon subsequently announced that he will not seek reelection to Congress in 1998.—Ed.]

One of the smartest young Republican congressmen I've ever met—I have a vested interest here because my oldest daughter works for him—is Dave McIntosh from Indiana, who heads a subcommittee on economic growth. He worked for Dan Quayle in the White House. He's that ideal sort of politician you want in Washington who can play the political game but also has a policy dimension: under-

stands policy, talks about policy, is interested in policy. Many in this newer class of Republicans fit that description.

Ed Wollerman: Where do you see the media fitting into the emergence of a conservative era?

Fred Barnes: A friend of mine who has written very cogently about this says the media are not reliably pro-Clinton, not reliably proliberal, not reliably prodemocratic—but they are reliably anticonservative and anti-Republican.

Chuck Chalberg: When you were talking about political courage, you didn't mention the affirmative action issue. Why have Republicans been so maddeningly reluctant to take this one head-on?

Fred Barnes: They're reluctant because they're afraid they will be called racist, among other things. This is a moral issue. I believe in a color-blind society where people advance by merit. It doesn't mean that you don't have affirmative action that tries to help people, but you don't set quotas in college admissions and hiring and promotions and so on. The public doesn't buy that, and they shouldn't. They recognize it as immoral.

Newt Gingrich says he's been waiting for the one black member of the House Republican caucus, J. C. Watts of Oklahoma, and a Hispanic member, Henry Bonilla of San Antonio, to feel comfortable with a bill that would erase all preferences, set-asides, and such from the federal government.

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What they're worried about is the immediate political downside and the buzz in Washington. If you worry about that, you're paralyzed—as they are on this issue. Frankly, I think you just have to do it, but it takes political courage. n