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# The Politics of Virtue—Is Not Political at All

Amitai Etzioni

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Amitai Etzioni is University Professor at George Washington University. He also has taught at Harvard Business School and at Columbia University. He was a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution in 1978-79 and a senior adviser to the White House in 1979-80.

Among his nineteen books are *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda* (1993) and *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (1996), which won the Simon Wiesenthal Center's 1997 Tolerance Book Award.

Perhaps best known nationally as a leader of the communitarian movement, Professor Etzioni is the editor of the movement's journal, *The Responsive Community*. "Individual rights presume personal and social responsibilities" is one of the primary communitarian principles.

An astonishing wave of conservative voices is calling for stronger government. These voices have been dismissed by other conservatives, leaving the right camp deeply divided between those who champion virtue and believe government can foster it, and those who seek first and foremost freedom from government. Signs of conservatives' weakness, all too evident when one compares the euphoria following the 1994 congressional elections to the recent sense of drift, are

often viewed as temporary. Various conservatives blame President Clinton's craftiness, cite the Democrats' co-optation of the conservative agenda, and lament the lack of compelling national leaders.

There may be considerable truth in all these analyses, but there is no denying that the conservative malaise partly reflects the profound ideological split between social and economic conservatives, between those who are concerned about the social values that

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ought to govern Americans and those who seek to be governed less. There is a way to heal this profound split, but to do so we must grasp the motives behind the new (and revived) arguments of the social conservatives.

George Will opened the conservative campaign for an energetic central government when he was being honored at the annual American Enterprise Institute (AEI) dinner in December 1995. Will argued that people are self-indulgent by nature: left to their own devices, they will abuse their liberties to become profligate and indolent. People require a “strong national government,” a “shaper” of citizens, to help them cope with the weaker aspects of their nature, Will said.

More recently, he claimed that while there have been excesses in “welfare statism,” the basic notion that “the ethics of common-provision—the idea that some of life’s risk should be socialized” is a sound conservative ideal. And, he firmly believes, an “energetic national government,” Alexander Hamilton’s term, is required to revive Americans’ love of country and our national greatness. Will is seconded by Walter Berns of AEI, who argues that one cannot fold conservative ideals into the notion of “freedom,” and by Elliot Cohen of Johns Hopkins University, who maintains that the last thing the Founders envisioned was a “feeble government.” Such ideals are enough to make followers of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek see red.

But they are not alone. William Bennett stresses that while there is much to lament about big government,

he is deeply troubled by conservatives’ “increasing and reckless rhetorical attacks against government itself.” He draws on Benjamin Franklin, who is said to have understood that “the strength of the nation depends on the general opinion of the goodness of the government”—a concept not often employed by economic conservatives.

William Kristol and David Brooks’s analysis in the *Wall Street Journal* of the deeper needs of conservatism follows a similar line. Antigovernment themes provide too narrow a base for a winning ideological political agenda. Conservatives need to build on the virtue of America, on national greatness. In the process, the two authors even tackle an article of faith among those conservatives who are not viscerally against all government; Kristol and Brooks argue that the success of devolution to state and local governments will depend on “our national political health.”

While most religious social conservatives do not put “national greatness” on the top of their list of virtues, most of them are much more concerned with the moral rehabilitation of America than with slashing government. Indeed, many of them are more willing to draw on the government to render divorce more difficult, ban abortion, censor pornography, and outlaw homosexual activities. While secular nationalism is unlikely to satisfy these conservatives as a fountain of virtue, national character, and discipline, their concerns are closer to the views of Will, Bennett, and Brooks than to those of the let-me-be crowd.

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## Building a Bridge

The two conservative camps can find a joint platform of great merit by focusing on ways to shore up virtues that are not statist—on “changing the culture,” as Americans say when they shy away from speaking openly about moral values and virtuous conduct. Study upon study (see the August 15, 1997, issue of the prestigious magazine *Science*, for example) shows that crime, drug abuse, and other forms of antisocial behavior are best prevented when the communities involved censure such conduct, and that they are very difficult to suppress without community involvement. John DiIulio of Princeton University, director of the Partnership for Research on Religion and At-Risk Youth, who is leading a drive to draw on religious groups to fight crime in inner-city neighborhoods, finds that rebuilding social forces is what is most needed, not more traditional law enforcement. Strong communities and strong values are precisely why antisocial behavior is less frequent in small-town America and in tight-knit communities, even in urban centers as different as Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Salt Lake City, and Korean Town in Los Angeles.

The basic fact is that practically all of us—the main exception being psychopaths—care a great deal about the approval of others in whom we are emotionally invested: family members, friends, neighbors. Hence, if and when the social mores of a community support civility, responsible conduct, and other virtues, most members of the

community most of the time will conduct themselves in a prosocial manner, leaving to the law the recalcitrant exceptions. Richard Epstein, a law professor at the University of Chicago and a leading laissez-faire conservative scholar, writes in a recent issue of *The Responsive Community* in support of “imperfect obligations,” those that are underwritten by social sanctions rather than by law. (“Imperfect” because, absent the law, not everyone will abide by them.) Epstein’s main point is that adding law enforcement to social pressures often vastly increases the costs of compliance as well as saps social mores.

Where there are no communal bonds, they can be formed by faith-based groups, civic associations, community colleges, and other communal organizations (of which there are many hundred thousands). A growing role is played by residential community associations, which encompass some 50 million Americans.

More challenging is to transform communities that have coalesced around antisocial mores. But even here, stronger government has turned out to be a very poor way of shoring up virtue, as we have learned from our largely futile war against drugs, and long ago from Prohibition. Creating opportunities for communities to fight drug dealers, recapture playgrounds and parks from aggressive begging, and discourage life on welfare often has entailed a gradual withdrawal of government, a priming of community action, and, above all, building coalitions among the prosocial groups found in all but

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the most completely lost communities. The much touted success of Boston, which reduced juvenile murder rates by two-thirds, and the lesser known success of Tillamook County, Oregon, in greatly curbing teen pregnancies, are two powerful recent examples that show that communities can be won over to shore up prosocial behavior.

Advocates of this communitarian approach—Senator Dan Coats of Indiana, for instance, and many associated with the Communitarian Network—are almost as leery of big government as laissez-faire conservatives are, and almost as dedicated to social virtues as social conservatives are. Hence, it is these ideas of relying on community-building to shore up virtue—not on the government nor leaving all of us free to indulge ourselves—that provide the bridge whereby social and laissez-faire conservatives may meet.

## Roadblocks

Why don't both kinds of conservatives line up in support of the communitarian approach? Laissez-faire conservatives are nervous about promoting virtue because they confuse freedom from the government with freedom from social forces. They need to see that there is a world of difference between an IRS or FBI agent or a state trooper on the one hand, and one's mother-in-law, kin, friends, and neighbors on the other. When the state enforces virtue, it is truly coercive: those who object to its dictates are carried away and locked up. Communities seek to educate, persuade, lead, pro-

mote, foster, and even censure, but they leave the final decision to the individual. Indeed, a major virtue of contemporary communities is that they do not have the traditional power to banish or ostracize dissenters. They must convince people or they fail.

Many social conservatives have not yet embraced the communitarian approach, it seems, because they are in a hurry to save the world, or at least America. They witness around them much that is profoundly troubling. Impatient with the slowness that relying on communities entails, they are willing to rush forward to legislate virtue. They need to be persuaded that to force virtue is to lose the battle, on ethical and pragmatic grounds.

Once both camps overcome their doubts about the communitarian agenda—much less significant than those they harbor about each other—the time will be ripe to forge the specifics of a conservative-communitarian agenda. This would entail developing shared understandings about our families (how to sustain marriage without turning women into second-class citizens, for example); our schools (how to provide character education without liberal or any other indoctrination, say); the proper place of faith-based groups in the fabric of necessary social services; relations among the races in our communities; and legitimate roles the government might play, the last item in the list. Polls show that most Americans would embrace such an agenda. n