

Defining Conservatism

by Earl P. Holt III

Most Americans live basically conservative lives, yet, "*conservatism*" has never realized the kind of popularity it should have. I fault some of its founders, who over-intellectualized it while in its infancy, and made its definition and purpose unnecessarily complicated and vague. As a result, conservatism never "*got down where the chickens could peck at it,*" as George Wallace liked to say.

The "*godfathers*" of modern, American conservatism were primarily Bill Buckley and the gang at **NATIONAL REVIEW** (NR,) a bunch of eccentrics I greatly admired and whose work I greedily read every two weeks when each new issue arrived. Most of the NR gang were intellectuals and like many of their kind, they complicated the task of defining conservatism when they should have been making it more intellectually accessible by welcoming **ALL** those who value our Constitutional freedoms and cultural traditions.

In contrast, those who have had a profound and lasting influence on the movement -- like Nobel Laureates Milton Friedman and Fredrich von Hayek -- possessed the rare ability to explain complex ideas in a way that even normal people and non-economists could understand. Their contributions are as profound and legitimate today as they were when first published more than a half-century ago.

I remember one issue of NR in the mid-1970s that was devoted almost exclusively to defining conservatism, and it contained the only NR article in 30 years of voracious readership that I could not finish. It was written by a European intellectual whom Bill Buckley greatly admired named Eric von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, and it was the longest and most turgid read I ever found in NR. I have no idea how this scholarly gentleman defined

conservatism, because his prose was over my head and better suited to obscure academic journals.

I've been a conservative for at least 50 years, and although I don't come close to Buckley's intellect or erudition, I think I can improve on his efforts to define conservatism. That's only because I'm more interested in making the movement comprehensible and accessible to potential recruits than Buckley was: He often seemed more interested in dueling with New York's leftist *intelligencia* than leading a political movement with broad appeal and willing to welcome people who didn't necessarily attend Ivy League schools.

Conservatism is NOT an ideology like Marxism, it is a POLITICAL MOVEMENT whose purpose is to preserve the vision of the Framers of the Constitution and the Founders of our Republic. It's as simple as that: We are trying to *conserve* our Constitutional and cultural traditions against an assault by the dominant *ideologies of the age*, the many manifestations of Marxism that include socialism, feminism, multiculturalism, transgenderism, and even *national socialism*.

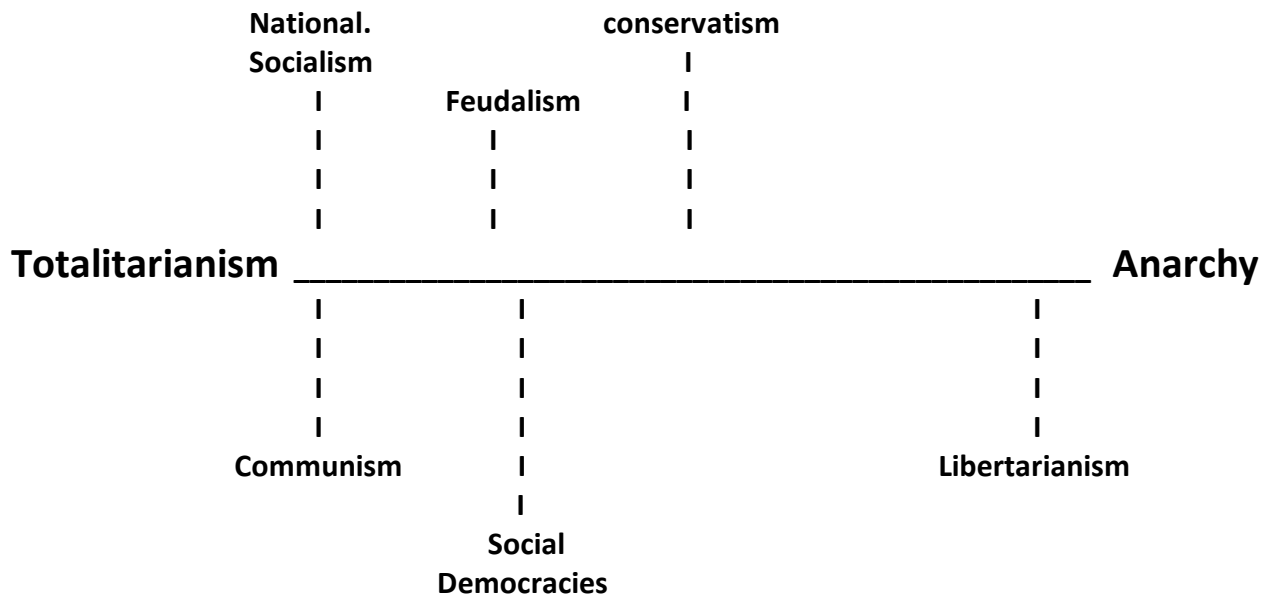
As such, conservatives find ourselves right in the middle of a political spectrum defined by totalitarianism on one end and anarchy on the other. As advocates of the Rule of Law -- as well as defenders of the Natural Rights granted to us by God -- we are often tasked with balancing the need for civil order against the desire to defend and exercise of those very rights and liberties.

The designations "*right*" and "*left*" were used for much of the second half of the 20th Century as a lazy man's shorthand for *conservative* and *Marxist*, but they are antiquated and have no relevance in 21st Century America. They were terms used during the *French Revolution* to indicate one's support for the either the *Bourbon* monarchy or the *Jacobins*. As members of the *General Assembly* filed in, supporters of the monarchy

sat on the "RIGHT" side, and supporters of Robespierre and the *Jacobins* sat on the "LEFT" side.

A much more logical and useful model is the following *political spectrum* whose extremes are defined by totalitarianism and anarchy. Political economic systems such as communism or National Socialism are found at the totalitarian end of the spectrum. Meanwhile, Libertarianism would be on the opposite end of the political spectrum near anarchy, since libertarians advocate fairly radical degrees of individual freedom, often at the expense of civil order.

POLITICAL SPECTRUM



What are often referred to as "*social democracies*" would fall between conservatism and totalitarianism, since they represent a system that often conflicts with attempts to preserve individual liberties against the encroachments of its own, overly-powerful *socialistic* central

governments. Thus, feudalism would probably fall somewhere between social democracies and totalitarianism.

Finally, conservatism would be located right in the middle of the spectrum, where it attempts to balance individual freedom with civil order.