

Defining Conservatism

by Earl P. Holt III

Most Americans live basically conservative lives, yet, "*conservatism*" as a political movement has never achieved 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 complex and vague. As a result, conservatism was often inaccessible to those who don't devote large amounts of time to analyzing politics. Ronald Reagan helped change this.

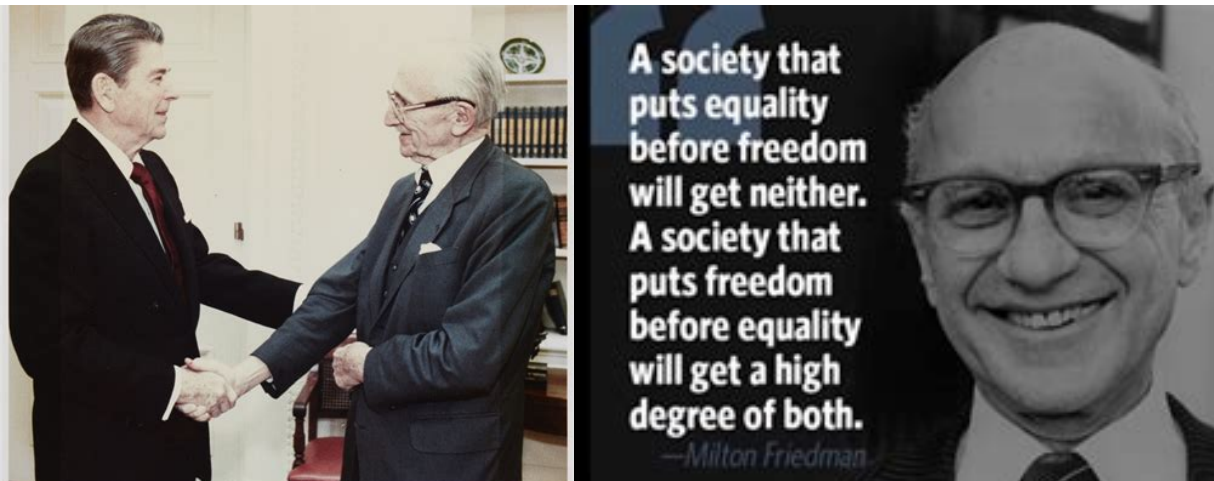


President Ronald W. Reagan, *The Gipper*

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 Reagan and I greedily devoured 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 worked to make it more intellectually accessible to **ALL** those who value our Constitutional freedoms and cultural traditions.

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



President Reagan, Friedrich von Hayek, and Milton Friedman

I remember one issue of NR in the late-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 conservative movement comprehensible and welcoming to potential members than Buckley was. Buckley sometimes seemed more interested in dueling with New York's leftist *intelligencia* than leading a political movement with broad appeal and one willing to welcome people who didn't necessarily attend Ivy League schools.

Unlike Marxism, conservatism is NOT an ideology, 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 assaults by the dominant ideologies of the age, those manifestations of Marxism that include socialism, multiculturalism, feminism, transgenderism, and fascism.

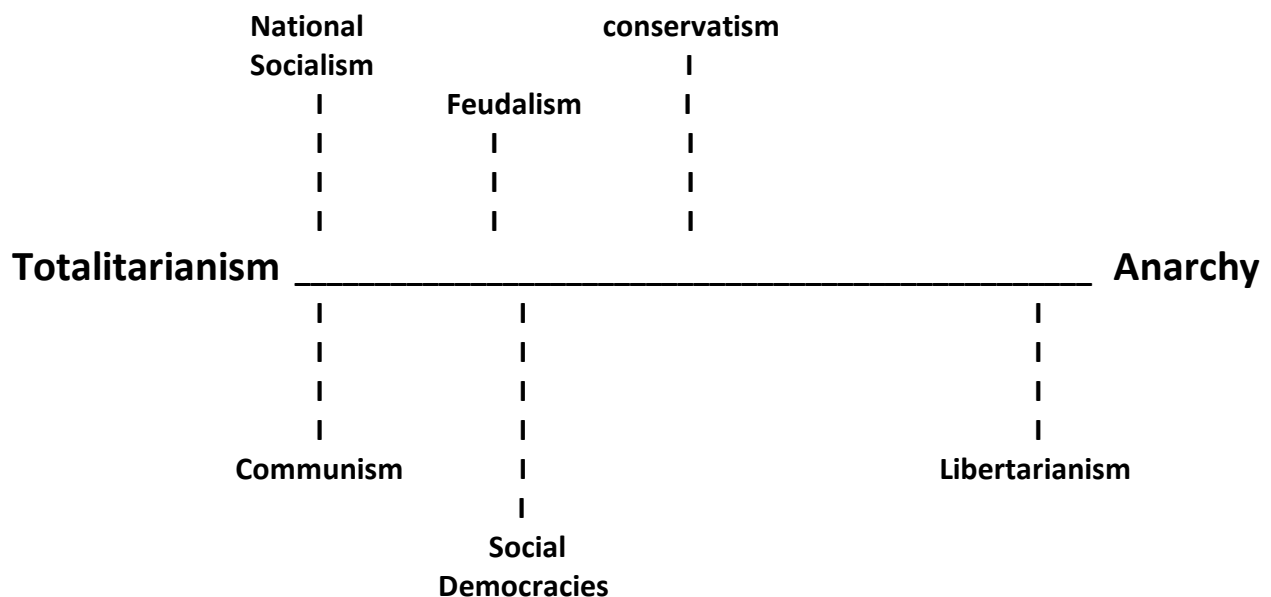
As such, conservatives find ourselves right in the middle of a political spectrum defined by **TOTALITARIANISM** at one end and **ANARCHY** at the other. As advocates for the *Rule of Law* -- as well as defenders of the *Natural Rights* granted to us by God -- we are often tasked with **BALANCING** the need for civic order with the exercise of those very rights and liberties that are our heritage as Americans.

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 obsolete and archaic, with no relevance to 21st Century America. They were terms coined during the *French Revolution* to indicate one's support for 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 far 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 near the totalitarian end of the spectrum. These are systems that emphasize civic order and obedience at the expense of individual freedom. Meanwhile, Libertarianism would be at the opposite end of the spectrum near anarchy, since libertarians advocate fairly radical degrees of individual freedom, and are often willing to exercise those freedoms at the expense of civic order.

POLITICAL SPECTRUM



What are often referred to as "*social democracies*" -- found in many European states -- would fall somewhere between conservatism and totalitarianism. These represent a system where overly-powerful *socialistic* central governments often conflict with and intrude upon the civil liberties which their ostensibly "*democratic*" traditions claim to uphold and defend. Feudalism, on the other hand, would probably fall somewhere between *social democracies* and totalitarianism.

Finally, conservatism would be located right in the middle of this political spectrum, where it stubbornly and valiantly attempts to strike a balance between individual freedom and civic order.