

Conservative Reform?

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 13, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

If I were a conservative, which I am not, I would read several times [Peter Berkowitz's recent essay at RealClearPolitics](#) [1], and the article upon which his essay is based by Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner [published at National Affairs](#). [2] Berkowitz has long distinguished himself as among the most thoughtful commentators on the right, not least because of his willingness to be self-critical and critical of his fellow conservatives.

After noting that President Obama's second term is flailing, both at home and abroad, Berkowitz sets forth the kind of conservative reforms he thinks could earn the Republican Party a governing majority. He writes:

A sober and reform-minded conservatism could very well fit the bill. It would focus on promoting opportunity and economic growth. It would present alternatives rooted in the free market and experimentation in the laboratories of democracies of the state capitals, for expanding health insurance coverage and lowering health care costs. It would reconstruct America's massive and debt-ridden entitlement programs.

It would repair a broken educational system. It would ensure that the associations of civil society—family, religious institutions, and the thousands of voluntary associations Americans form—have the breathing space they need to serve as an expression of and training ground for freedom. And it would reground United States foreign policy in a realistic assessment of the threats America faces, the capabilities America can marshal, and the responsibilities—flowing from its interests and ideals—that America should shoulder.

This language, and indeed the essential perspective, here is for conservatives what the Democratic Leadership Council was for Democrats in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a mix of articulating conservative principles, while co-opting some of the policy goals articulated by one's political opponents, very pragmatic, very balanced. In a political culture that tends to the extremes, for a variety of reasons from low turnout primaries to the influence of cable news talking heads, let's give two cheers for balance and pragmatism wherever we find them.

What is missing, of course, is the "how" in this prescription. When I get medicine for my dogs, the labels say something like: "Administer one pill twice a day, with food," or "Give as needed for pain." Certainly, conservatives are not the only ones interested in "promoting opportunity and economic growth" or "repair[ing] a broken educational system." The question is how to achieve these goals. Pointing to Gov. Scott Walker in Wisconsin is a far more problematic example than Berkowitz cares to admit.

Berkowitz has come to share some of what I consider canards about "left-liberal" tendencies and ideas. For example, he writes that conservatives "justly focus on equality of opportunity and resist the left-liberal quest to use government to bring about equality of result." I honestly do not know any serious "left-liberal" who advocates "equality of results," although I plead guilty to being one of those left-liberals who believes certain basic necessities such as shelter, food and health care should be guaranteed to all citizens no matter what "results" they achieve from their involvement with the market economy. I recognize, too, that Democrats have not done such a smashing good job of explaining the moral argument for guaranteeing a dignified floor for all

citizens regarding these necessities.

Berkowitz's most important contribution to conservative thinking, however, is his fidelity to the actual Constitutional framework, and his willingness to expose the fantasies regarding the founding that animate too many conservative voters. He writes:

Tea Party activists, however, have also promulgated two profound misunderstandings of the Constitution. First, while rightly insisting on the importance to the founders of limited government, they have neglected the significance the framers also attached to a national government supple and strong enough to carry out its essential tasks.

Second, while contending that close attention should be paid to the original meaning of constitutional text, Tea Party leaders have often confused original meaning with a crude literal interpretation of that document.

We can hope the people at FreedomWorks and other Tea Party groups take Berkowitz's criticism to heart. Certainly, I would like to see Senators Ted Cruz or Mike Lee or Rand Paul tackle, as Berkowitz does, the example of Lincoln, who revered the Constitution enough to bring the nation to war to preserve it but who, also, in pursuit of that goal used the Constitution in ways that would not have occurred to the founders.

The work of Berkowitz, Gerson and Wehner points me to a different question than the ones they pose: Who functions within the left as this kind of critic of one's own? Too many commentators, and not only on cable news but in the op-ed pages of leading newspapers, have become cheerleaders for their cause or their team, incapable of, or unwilling to undertake, criticism of those who foundational ideological and partisan tendencies they share. I would not that even cheerleaders put down the pom-poms when their team fumbles the ball. I would note, also, the degree to which certain issues that capture the imagination of cultural elites, such as gay rights, assume a significance out of proportion to the common good. We saw this these past months in the lead up to Sochi when you would think that Vladimir Putin's greatest political sin was his treatment of gays and if, tomorrow, he would endorse gay marriage, no one would raise any concerns about the way he treats ethnic minorities, political opponents, or the press.

Political leadership requires many moral qualities, but the capacity for self-criticism is certainly near the top of the list. No one wants Hamlet as president, to be sure, but when political leaders, and political parties, lose the capacity for what Berkowitz calls "supple and strong" political action, they have become slaves to their own ideologies and will, over time, doom themselves to paralysis in moments and crises when their ideological presuppositions are unequal, or ill-fitting, or even misguided, when applied to a new set of facts. I do not know if the conservative activists who need to heed Berkowitz's counsel will do so. We have a test coming up: Will House Republicans allow a vote on the Senate immigration bill? But, if they don't, the GOP will only become more and more irrelevant, which is not good for the country and not even good for the Democrats. And, it may be two years hence, or two months hence as congressional Democrats grow tired of making excuses for the Obama White House, but at some point, the left must re-learn the ability for self-criticism too. The pendulum never stops.

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[1] http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2014/02/08/the_spirit_of_conservative_reform__121475.html

[2] <http://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/a-conservative-vision-of-government>