

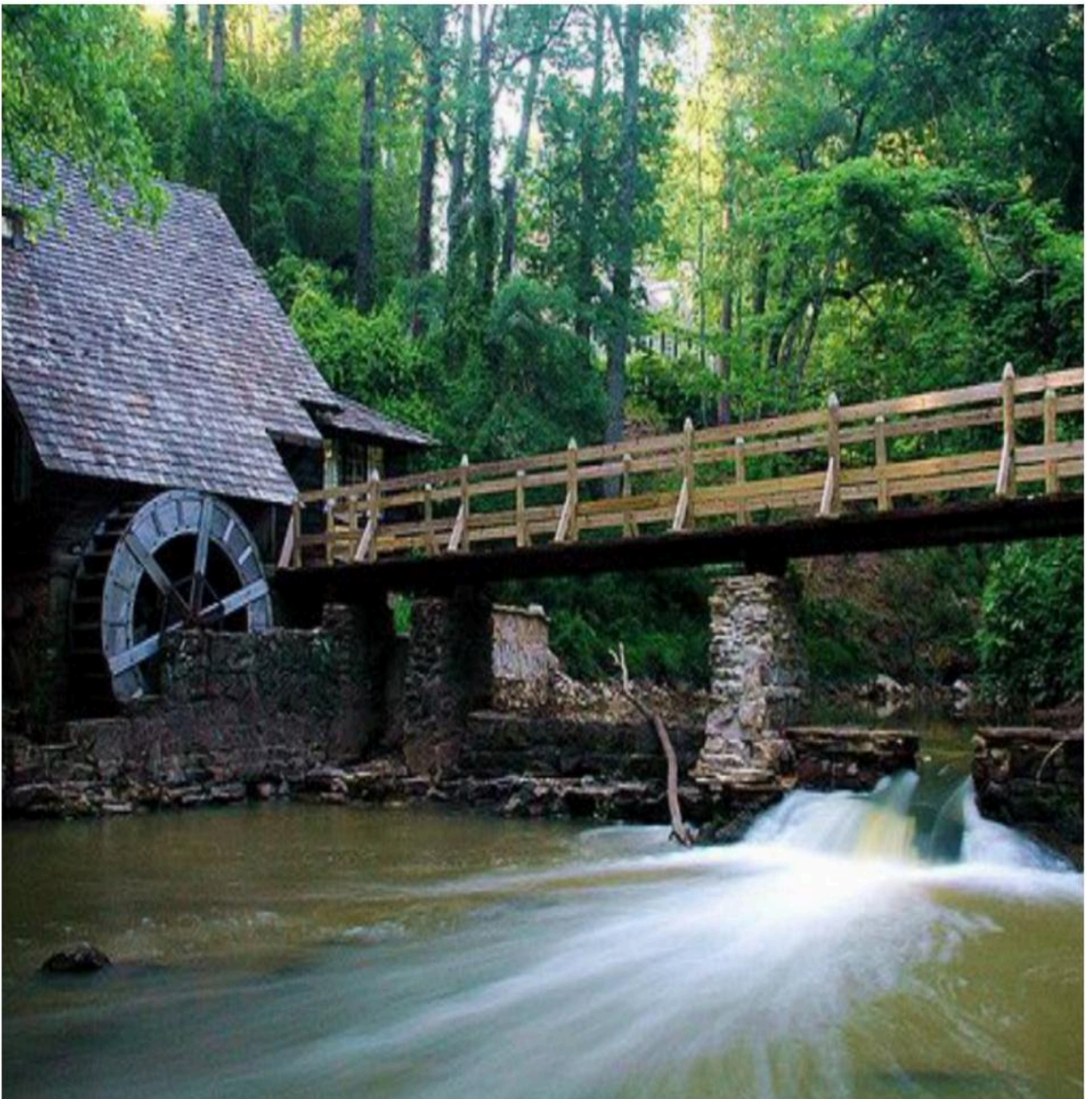


THE
CONSERVATIVE CHARTER
IN TIMES OF CRISIS
From Reagan to Redd

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There's this story that was once told to me in 1993 by a Family Court juvie hall minder, a 50-year-old guy named Rev who used to wrestle alligators and root for Alabama Roll Tide. Whenever he came to work he played Spades with the kids, and he always picked me as his partner. One day while playing he fell into an ole talk-lecture about a neighbor of his who, the day before, had sold a fine old building, long in her family, to be demolished that a lot for used-automobile sales might take its place. The neighbor had certain regrets; but, said she with finality, "You can't stop progress." He was startled at the a second neighbor's reply, which was this: "No, often not; but you can try." The second neighbor did not believe that Progress, with a Roman P, is a good thing in itself. Progress may be either good or bad, depending on what one is progressing toward. It is

quite possible, and not infrequently occurs, that one progresses toward the brink of a precipice. The thinking conservative, young or old, believes that we must all obey the universal law of change; yet often it is in our power to choose what changes we will accept and what changes we will reject. The conservative is a person who endeavors to conserve the best in our traditions and our institutions—ridding society of racism, protecting free market capitalism, the rule of law—reconciling that best with necessary reform from time to time. “To conserve” means “to save.” . . . [Consider] Cupid’s curse:

They that do change old love for new, Pray gods they change for worse. A conservative is not, by definition, a selfish or a stupid person; instead, he is a person who believes there is something in our life worth saving. Conservatism, indeed, is a word with an old and honorable meaning—but a meaning almost forgotten by Americans until recent years. Abraham Lincoln wished to be known as a conservative. “What is conservatism?” he said. “Is it not preference for the old and tried, over the new and untried?” It is that; and it is also a body of ethical and social beliefs. The word “liberalism,” however, has been in favor among us for two or three decades. Even nowadays, though, there are a good many conservatives in both national and state politics, in neither major party do many leading politicians describe themselves as “conservatives.” Paradoxically, the people of the United States became the chief conservative nation of the world at the very time when they had ceased to call themselves conservatives at home. What with our stern opposition to the radicalism of the Soviets, however, and our national abhorrence of collectivism in all its varieties, a good many Americans now doubt very much whether they care to be called liberals or radicals. The liberals, for a good while, have been drifting leftward toward their radical cousins; and liberalism, in recent years, has come to imply an attachment to the centralized state and the dreary impersonality of Huxley’s *Brave New World* or Orwell’s *1984*. Men and women who sense that they are not liberals or radicals are beginning to ask themselves just what they believe, and what they ought to call themselves. The system of ideas opposed to liberalism and radicalism is the conservative political philosophy. What is conservatism? Modern conservatism took form about the beginning of the French Revolution when far-seeing men in England and America perceived that if humanity is to conserve the elements in civilization that make life worth living, some coherent body of ideas must resist the leveling and destructive impulse of fanatic revolutionaries. In England, the founder of true conservatism was Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the*

Revolution in France turned the tide of British opinion and influenced incalculably the leaders of society in the Continent and in America. In the newly established United States, the fathers of the Republic, conservative by training and by practical experience, were determined to shape constitutions which should guide their posterity in enduring ways of justice and freedom. Our American War of Independence had not been a real revolution, but rather a separation from England; statesmen of Massachusetts and Virginia had no desire to turn society upside down. In their writings, especially in the works of John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison, we find a sober and tested conservatism founded upon an understanding of history and human nature. The Constitution which the leaders of that generation drew up has proved to be the most successful conservative device in all history. Conservative leaders, ever since Burke and Adams, have subscribed to certain general ideas that we may set down, briefly, by way of definition. Conservatives distrust what Burke called "abstractions"—that is, absolute political dogmas divorced from practical experience and particular circumstances. They do believe, nevertheless, in the existence of certain abiding truths which govern the conduct of human society. Perhaps the chief principles which have characterized American conservative thought are these: (1) Men and nations are governed by moral laws; and those laws have their origin in a wisdom that is more than human—in divine justice. At heart, political problems are moral and religious problems. The wise statesman tries to apprehend the moral law and govern his conduct accordingly. We have a moral debt to our ancestors, who bestowed upon us our civilization, and a moral obligation to the generations who will come after us. This debt is ordained of God. We have no right, therefore, to tamper impudently with human nature or with the delicate fabric of our civil social order. (2) Variety and diversity are the characteristics of a high civilization. Uniformity and absolute equality are the death of all real vigor and freedom in existence. Conservatives resist with impartial strength the uniformity of a tyrant or an oligarchy, and the uniformity of what Tocqueville called "democratic despotism." (3) Justice means that every man and every woman have the right to what is their own—to the things best suited to their own nature, to the rewards of their ability and integrity, to their property and their personality. Civilized society requires that all men and women have equal rights before the law, but that equality should not extend to equality of condition: that is, society is a great partnership, in which all have equal rights—but not to equal things. The just society requires sound leadership, different rewards for different abilities, and a sense of respect and duty. (4) Property and freedom are

inseparably connected; economic leveling is not economic progress. Conservatives value property for its own sake, of course; but they value it even more because without it all men and women are at the mercy of an omnipotent government. (5) Power is full of danger; therefore the good state is one in which power is checked and balanced, restricted by sound constitutions and customs. So far as possible, political power ought to be kept in the hands of private persons and local institutions. Centralization is ordinarily a sign of social decadence. (6) The past is a great storehouse of wisdom; as Burke said, "the individual is foolish, but the species is wise." The conservative believes that we need to guide ourselves by the moral traditions, the social experience, and the whole complex body of knowledge bequeathed to us by our ancestors. The conservative appeals beyond the rash opinion of the hour to what Chesterton called "the democracy of the dead"—that is, the considered opinions of the wise men and women who died before our time, the experience of the race. The conservative, in short, knows he was not born yesterday. (7) Modern society urgently needs true community: and true community is a world away from collectivism. Real community is governed by love and charity, not by compulsion. Through churches, voluntary associations, local governments, and a variety of institutions, conservatives strive to keep community healthy. Conservatives are not selfish, but public-spirited. They know that collectivism means the end of real community, substituting uniformity for variety and force for willing cooperation. (8) In the affairs of nations, the American conservative feels that his country ought to set an example to the world, but ought not to try to remake the world in its image. It is a law of politics, as well as of biology, that every living thing loves above all else—even above its own life—its distinct identity, which sets it off from all other things. The conservative does not aspire to domination of the world, nor does he relish the prospect of a world reduced to a single pattern of government and civilization. (9) Men and women are not perfectible, conservatives know; and neither are political institutions. We cannot make a heaven on earth, though we may make a hell. We all are creatures of mingled good and evil; and, good institutions neglected and ancient moral principles ignored, the evil in us tends to predominate. Therefore the conservative is suspicious of all utopian schemes. He does not believe that, by power of positive law, we can solve all the problems of humanity. We can hope to make our world tolerable, but we cannot make it perfect. When progress is achieved, it is through prudent recognition of the limitations of human nature. (10) Change and reform, conservatives are convinced, are not identical: moral and political innovation can be destructive as well

as beneficial; and if innovation is undertaken in a spirit of presumption and enthusiasm, probably it will be disastrous. All human institutions alter to some extent from age to age, for slow change is the means of conserving society, just as it is the means for renewing the human body. But American conservatives endeavor to reconcile the growth and alteration essential to our life with the strength of our social and moral traditions. With Lord Falkland, they say, "When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change." They understand that men and women are best content when they can feel that they live in a stable world of enduring values. Conservatism, then, is not simply the concern of the people who have much property and influence; it is not simply the defense of privilege and status. Most conservatives are neither rich nor powerful. But they do, even the most humble of them, derive great benefits from our established Republic. They have liberty, security of person and home, equal protection of the laws, the right to the fruits of their industry, and opportunity to do the best that is in them. They have a right to personality in life, and a right to consolation in death. Conservative principles shelter the hopes of everyone in society. And conservatism is a social concept important to everyone who desires equal justice and personal freedom and all the lovable old ways of humanity. Conservatism is not simply a defense of "capitalism." ("Capitalism," indeed, is a word coined by Karl Marx, intended from the beginning to imply that the only thing conservatives defend is vast accumulations of private capital.) But the true conservative does stoutly defend private property and a free economy, both for their own sake and because these are means to great ends. Those great ends are more than economic and more than political. They involve human dignity, human personality, human happiness. They involve even the relationship between God and man. For the radical collectivism of our age is fiercely hostile to any other authority: modern radicalism detests religious faith, private virtue, traditional personality, and the life of simple satisfactions. Everything worth conserving is menaced in our generation. Mere unthinking negative opposition to the current of events, clutching in despair at what we still retain, will not suffice in this age. A conservatism of instinct must be reinforced by a conservatism of thought and imagination.