

# What Conservatives Really Want

*Dedicated to the peaceful protestors in Wisconsin, February 19, 2011.*

The central issue in our political life is not being discussed. At stake is the moral basis of American democracy.

The individual issues are all too real: assaults on unions, public employees, women's rights, immigrants, the environment, health care, voting rights, food safety, pensions, prenatal care, science, public broadcasting and on and on.

Budget deficits are a ruse, as we've seen in Wisconsin, where the Governor turned a surplus into a deficit by providing corporate tax breaks, and then used the deficit as a ploy to break the unions, not just in Wisconsin, but seeking to be the first domino in a nationwide conservative movement.

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Deficits can be addressed by raising revenue, plugging tax loopholes, putting people to work and developing the economy long-term in all the ways the president has discussed. But deficits are not what really matter to conservatives.

Conservatives really want to change the basis of American life, to make America run according to the conservative moral worldview in all areas of life.

In the 2008 campaign, candidate Obama accurately described the basis of American democracy: empathy — citizens caring for each other, both social and personal responsibility — acting on that care, and an ethic of excellence. From these, our freedoms and our way of life follow, as does the role of government: to protect and empower everyone equally. Protection includes safety, health, the environment, pensions. Empowerment starts with education and infrastructure. No one can be free without these, and without a commitment to care and act on that care by one's fellow citizens.

The conservative worldview rejects all of that.

Conservatives believe in individual responsibility alone, not social responsibility. They don't think government should help its citizens. That is, they don't think citizens

should help each other. The part of government they want to cut is not the military (we have 174 bases around the world), not government subsidies to corporations, not the aspect of government that fits their worldview. They want to cut the part that helps people. Why? Because that violates individual responsibility.

But where does that view of individual responsibility alone come from?

The way to understand the conservative moral system is to consider a strict father family. The father is The Decider, the ultimate moral authority in the family. His authority must not be challenged. His job is to protect the family, to support the family (by winning competitions in the marketplace), and to teach his kids right from wrong by disciplining them physically when they do wrong. The use of force is necessary and required. Only then will children develop the internal discipline to become moral beings. And only with such discipline will they be able to prosper. And what of people who are not prosperous? They don't have discipline, and without discipline they cannot be moral, so they deserve their poverty. The good people are hence the prosperous people. Helping others takes away their discipline, and hence makes them both unable to prosper on their own and function morally.

The market itself is seen in this way. The slogan, "Let the market decide" assumes the market itself is The Decider. The market is seen as both natural (since it is assumed that people naturally seek their self-interest) and moral (if everyone seeks their own profit, the profit of all will be maximized by the invisible hand). As the ultimate moral authority, there should be no power higher than the market that might go against market values. Thus the government can spend money to protect the market and promote market values, but should not rule over it either through (1) regulation, (2) taxation, (3) unions and worker rights, (4) environmental protection or food safety laws, and (5) tort cases. Moreover, government should not do public service. The market has service industries for that.

Thus, it would be wrong for the government to provide health care, education, public broadcasting, public parks and so on. The very idea of these things is at odds with the conservative moral system. No one should be paying for anyone else. It is individual responsibility in all arenas. Taxation is thus seen as taking money away from those who have earned it and giving it to people who don't deserve it. Taxation cannot be seen as providing the necessities of life for a civilized society, and, as necessary, for business to prosper.

In conservative family life, the strict father rules. Fathers and husbands should have control over reproduction; hence, parental and spousal notification laws and opposition to abortion. In conservative religion, God is seen as the strict father, the Lord, who rewards and punishes according to individual responsibility in following his Biblical word.

Above all, the authority of conservatism itself must be maintained. The country should be ruled by conservative values, and progressive values are seen as evil. Science should not have authority over the market, and so the science of global warming and evolution must be denied. Facts that are inconsistent with the authority of conservatism must be ignored or denied or explained away. To protect and extend conservative values themselves, the devil's own means can be used against conservatism's immoral enemies, whether lies, intimidation, torture or even death, say, for women's doctors.

Freedom is defined as being your own strict father - with individual, not social, responsibility, and without any government authority telling you what you can and cannot do. To defend that freedom as an individual, you will, of course, need a gun.

This is the America that conservatives really want. Budget deficits are convenient ruses for destroying American democracy and replacing it with conservative rule in all areas of life.

What is saddest of all is to see Democrats helping them.

Democrats help radical conservatives by accepting the deficit frame and arguing about what to cut. Even arguing against specific "cuts" is working within the conservative frame. What is the alternative? Pointing out what conservatives really want. Point out that there is plenty of money in America, and in Wisconsin. It is at the top. The disparity in financial assets is un-American - the top one percent has more financial assets than the bottom 95 percent. Middle-class wages have been flat for 30 years, while the wealth has floated to the top. This fits the conservative way of life, but not the American way of life.

Democrats help conservatives by not shouting out loud, over and over, that it was conservative values that caused the global economic collapse: lack of regulation and a greed-is-good ethic.

Democrats also help conservatives by what a friend has called "Democratic Communication Disorder." Republican conservatives have constructed a vast and effective communication system, with think tanks, framing experts, training institutes, a system of trained speakers, vast holdings of media and booking agents. Eighty percent of the talking heads on TV are conservatives. Talk matters, because language heard over and over changes brains. Democrats have not built the communication system they need, and many are relatively clueless about how to frame their deepest values and complex truths.

And Democrats help conservatives when they function as policy wonks — talking policy without communicating the moral values behind the policies. They help conservatives when they neglect to remind us that pensions are deferred payments for work done. "Benefits" are pay for work, not a handout. Pensions and benefits are arranged by contract. If there is not enough money for them, it is because the contracted funds have been taken by conservative officials and given to wealthy people and corporations instead of to the people who have earned them.

Democrats help conservatives when they use conservative words like "entitlements" instead of "earnings" and speak of government as providing "services" instead of "necessities."

Is there hope?

I see it in Wisconsin, where tens of thousands citizens see through the conservative frames and are willing to flood the streets of their capital to stand up for their rights. They understand that democracy is about citizens uniting to take care of each other, about social responsibility as well as individual responsibility, and about work - not just for your own profit, but to help create a civilized society. They appreciate their teachers, nurses, firemen, police and other public servants. They are flooding the streets to demand real democracy - the democracy of caring, of social responsibility and of excellence, where prosperity is to be shared by those who work and those who serve.



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