

Redefining conservatism

by Cal_Thomas

This just in: Ronald Reagan is dead and he's not coming back. Now, can conservatives please move on? Reagan always spoke about the future and its possibilities. Today's conservatives, however, can't seem to break with the past and the nostalgia for the Reagan years. Even in his letter to the American people in 1994 in which he revealed he suffered from Alzheimer's disease, Reagan wrote of his "eternal optimism" for the country's future. Too many modern conservatives seem embedded in a concrete slab of pessimism, preferring to go over a bridge and drown rather than "compromise" their "principles." If you can't get elected, your principles can be talked about on the lecture circuit, but are unlikely to be adopted in Washington. John McCain, some say, is not a true conservative. Was Reagan? Reagan campaigned as a tax cutter. He cut taxes, but he also raised them. He promised conservative judges and spoke of his opposition to abortion, yet named two justices to the Supreme Court (Sandra Day O'Connor and Anthony Kennedy) who voted to uphold *Roe v. Wade*. Against the advice of some, Reagan deployed Marines to Lebanon and saw them murdered by a homicide bomber. Reagan engaged in an arms-for-hostages deal with Iran. As president, Reagan seldom went to church, unlike his evangelical base. If conservatives knew in advance these things about Reagan, would they have voted for him in such numbers? Contemporary conservatism has mostly been about saying "no" to the liberal agenda. Suppose conservatives instead begin to circumvent liberals by applying better ideas to achieve ends liberals and conservatives claim to seek? This is the point of David Frum's new book, "Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again." Frum, a former speechwriter in this Bush administration, believes the issues that brought Republicans to power in the 1980s and '90s are different from the concerns of most Americans today. That hasn't stopped Republicans and conservatives from resurrecting what worked before: taxes, guns and promises to restore "traditional values," things that are beyond the power of politicians. As we've seen in both parties, politicians have trouble imposing morality on themselves. Why do we suppose them capable of imposing such "values" (don't they really mean "virtues"?) on the citizenry? Frum proposes an agenda that uses conservative principles to actually solve, rather than just talk about, serious problems. He wants universally available health insurance, but offered through the private sector; lower taxes to encourage savings and investment, but higher taxes on energy and pollution to promote conservation; a conservative environmentalism that promotes nuclear power to reduce our need for oil and coal (this would satisfy the Left's misguided belief in "global warming," while simultaneously pleasing the Right by freeing us from dependence on foreign oil); federal policies to encourage larger families; major reductions in unskilled immigration; a campaign for prison reform and a campaign against obesity; higher ethical standards inside the conservative movement and Republican Party; and a renewed commitment to expand and rebuild the armed forces in order to crush terrorism and prepare for the coming challenge from China. I would add a micro-loan program to help the poor out of poverty, rather than more government programs that subsidize the poor in their poverty and offer no hope for the future. Conservatives also need to do a better job of storytelling. They should celebrate people who have overcome poverty and hopelessness as examples to others. It is not enough for conservatives to advocate for lower taxes and smaller government if the purpose is for Americans to acquire more money and material goods Americans already have so much they are renting storage units in which to place the overflow. Imagine the economic - even spiritual - revival that might occur if conservatives "adopted" one person or family and made it their goal to help them improve their lives. There are few thrills greater than seeing a life transformed in which you have played a part. Reducing the "need" for government would shrink its size and cost. It also would pay political dividends for conservatism and the Republican Party. If conservatives really want to win, they will adopt new ideas based on old principles. Conservatives are in danger of losing the coming election and future ones because they have not reinvented themselves for a new era. Liberal ideas mostly don't work. Conservatives must demonstrate to voters their ideas do. (Direct all MAIL for Cal Thomas to: 2225 Kenmore Ave., Suite 114, Buffalo, N.Y. 14207. Readers may also e-mail Cal Thomas.) (C) 2008 Tribune Media Services, Inc.