



There was a time when conservatives cared about freedom

By Richard Esenberg

The conservative movement is in crisis. Although it was always an uneasy coalition of people with differing views — religious traditionalists, defense hawks, free marketeers and those who have been turned off by the Democrats' embrace of the cultural left — one of the foundations of the movement has been a commitment to limited government. One of the values of a smaller state was individual liberty. We thought of ourselves as the freedom movement.

Some of us remember “ponytail guy” from a town hall debate held during the 1992 presidential election. Social worker Denton Walthall — addressing candidates Bill Clinton, President George H.W. Bush and Ross Perot — asked them, “how can we, as symbolically the children of the future president, expect the two of you, the three of you, to meet our needs?” To their discredit, all three candidates took the question seriously. Conservatives heaped scorn on this ambitious view of government and infantilization of the public.

Walthall's question echoed Chris Matthews' contem-

porary description of the Democrats and Republicans as the “Mommy and Daddy” parties. According to Matthews, “Republicans protect us with strong national defense; Democrats nourish us with Social Security and Medicare. Republicans worry about our business affairs; Democrats look after our health, nutrition and welfare.”

Political economist Jude Wanniski offered a more nuanced variation on the theme. He saw Democrats and progressives as — excuse the stereotype — the feminine “yin” of American politics, the party that emphasized equality and security. Republicans and conservatives represented the male “yang,” focusing on individual initiative and its potential fruits, rather than collective needs. In 2004, pundit Michael Barone offered another version of this dichotomy, characterizing Republicans and Democrats as, respectively, the “hard” and “soft” parties.

In 2012, the theme was repeated in our arguments over the attractiveness of the Obama campaign's celebration of the fictional “life of Julia,” a woman who passed through life wrapped in a warm blanket of

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government largesse and President Barack Obama's scolding of business owners ("you didn't build that") for believing that they are primarily responsible for their own success. Whatever its faults — the RINOs and the occasional cronyism — conservatives' vision of limited government and individual freedom found expression, however flawed, in the Republican Party.

What this election cycle has taught us is that a lot of Republican voters have a different view. The nomination of Donald Trump was, in part, a product of a divided field and a set of rules that were contrived to produce an early winner. But it also suggests that a lot of GOP voters aren't much interested in freedom.

The GOP nominee is a guy who is uninterested in entitlement reform — indeed, he has proposed a new and expensive program for child-care leave — and just can't quit his bromance with the authoritarian Russian president, Vladimir Putin. Trump wants to "open up" the libel laws so that powerful politicians like him can sue their critics. He thinks that eminent domain is a "beautiful" thing and wants to rein in global markets. He harps on making America great but never talks about ensuring that Americans remain free.

So I am not persuaded that the Trump movement is a misguided and inarticulate — but somehow understandable — response to the "failure" of the Republican "establishment" to shrink the government and repeal Obamacare. It is not at all clear that Trump's core supporters — as opposed to those who are now supporting him as the least disastrous choice available — are against big government or the dominance of Washington.

They just want the Leviathan to be more responsive to the needs of the white middle class and less solicitous of the traditional Democrat coalition of minorities, the cultural left and government workers. Trump's sup-

porters have no problem with redistribution. They just don't like where it's going.

The Trumpkins are not looking for a new Ronald Reagan as much as they want a 21st-century George Wallace. Trump has redefined the "Daddy Party" from one that seeks to empower "the children" to act on their own to a stern patriarch who emphasizes protecting them from threatening forces and who is ready to give orders.



This is one of the reasons that reluctant support for Trump to defeat Hillary Clinton has proven so difficult for many on the right. A President Clinton would seek to advance many of things that we oppose — a Supreme Court dominated by legal progressives, enhanced executive and federal power, a larger nanny state, more regulation, compulsory "tolerance" and intolerance. But a President

Trump could fundamentally change the Republican Party from a vehicle for freedom to a nationalist and statist party along the lines of rightist parties in Europe such as the United Kingdom Independence Party or the National Front in France. A flawed candidate Trump is one thing; a toxic Trumpism is quite another.

Somewhere along the line, I think, we started to assume the case for freedom and stopped making it. We failed to appreciate that most people have not built a business and don't believe that they ever will. They need to see that liberty government will lead to opportunities that they and their children can actually take advantage of.

This may require rethinking our message. It may be that we cannot simply continue to bang on about taxes or the heroic entrepreneur. We need to demonstrate that freedom works. No matter who wins on Nov. 8, the work of rebuilding our movement begins the next day. [WI](#)

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