

# Explaining Conservatism

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**By Dennis Prager**

LOS ANGELES, Calif.—There are a number of reasons many young people shy away from conservatism.

The most obvious is that they have been exposed only to left-wing values—from elementary school through graduate school, in the movies, on television, on social media and now even at Disneyland.

Less obvious but equally significant is that they have never been properly exposed to conservative values. Since at least the World War II generation, most parents who held conservative values either did not think they had to teach their children those values or simply did not know how to do so. Most still don't. If asked to define conservative values, most conservatives will be tongue-tied.

In light of this, I present here, and in subsequent columns, a list of conservatism's defining characteristics.

## **Liberty**

We will begin with the most important conservative value—liberty.

Conservatives believe in individual liberty (there is no liberty other than individual liberty). It has been the primary value of the American experiment. While many countries include the word "liberty" in their national mottoes and national anthems, no country has so emphasized liberty as has America.

That is why.

- The French designers of the Statue of Liberty gave the statue to America.
- The iconic symbol of America is the Liberty Bell.
- The one inscription on the Liberty Bell is a verse about liberty from the Book of Leviticus: "And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all

its inhabitants."

- Americans sing of their country as "the land of the free" and "sweet land of liberty."
- Until recently, every American schoolchild knew by heart Patrick Henry's cry, "Give me liberty, or give me death!"
- Chinese young people who protested the Communist takeover of Hong Kong waved the American flag.

And that is why America's founders were adamant that the state—the national government—be as small, as limited, as possible. The bigger the government, the smaller the liberty. Big government and big liberty are mutually exclusive.

### **Human life**

Moreover, liberty is not the only victim of big government. Human life is also a victim.

Every genocide of the 20th century, the century of genocide, was committed by big government. Without big government, one hundred million people would not and could not have been slaughtered, and a billion more would not and could not have been enslaved. (There was one exception: the Hutu genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda, which was tribal in nature. Tribal culture, like left-wing culture, emphasizes the group over the individual.)

### **Limit size and power**

In order to limit the size and power of the national government, the founders delegated most governmental powers to the states. They did so in the Constitution by specifying what powers the national government had and by asserting that all other powers be delegated to the states. In addition, they increased the power of the states by having presidential elections decided by the states—the Electoral College—rather than by the popular national vote, and by how they structured the Senate, one of the two branches of Congress. They gave every state equal representation in the Senate, no matter how small the population of the state.

The Left's opposition to the Electoral College and to the Senate makes perfect sense. It is the power inherent in big government, not liberty, that animates the Left. The defining characteristic of every left-wing party and movement in the world has always been an ever bigger and therefore more powerful government.

## **Liberty is not left-wing value**

Liberty is a liberal value as well as a conservative value, but it has never been a left-wing value. Liberty cannot be a left-wing value because the more liberty individuals have, the less power the government has. Conversely, the weaker the state, the weaker the Left.

This especially holds true for the greatest of all liberties—free speech.

## **Free speech**

Free speech is a fundamental conservative value, and it has been a fundamental liberal value. But it has never been a left-wing value. For that reason, everywhere the Left is dominant—government, media, universities—it stifles dissent. The reason is simple: no left-wing movement can survive an open exchange of ideas. Leftist ideologies are emotion- and power-based, not reason- or morality-based. So, leftists cannot allow honest debate. They do not argue with opponents; they suppress them.

For the first time in American history, freedom of speech is seriously threatened—indeed it has already been seriously curtailed. With the ascent of the Left, the inevitable suppression of free speech is taking place.

## **Liberals need to beware of the left**

That liberals—who have always valued liberty and free speech—vote for the great suppressor of liberty, the Left, is the tragedy of our time. The reason they do so is that liberals forgot what they stand *for*; they only remember what they believe they stand *against*: conservatives.

So, the next time a liberal or left-wing friend or relative asks you what conservatives stand for, say "liberty"—especially free speech. And explain that is why you fear and oppose big government—because big government and individual liberty cannot coexist.



LOS ANGELES, California—In part 1, I wrote the following: "Since at least the World War II generation, most parents who held conservative values either did not think they had to teach their children those values or simply did not know how to do so. Most still don't. If asked to define conservative values, most conservatives will be tongue-tied."

I discussed the preeminent value of conservatism—freedom, and the

preeminent freedom—of speech.

In Part II, I will discuss an equally important conservative value, which derives from the word itself.

### **Preserving the past**

Conservatism conserves.

Conservatism attempts to conserve the best of the past—the best art, literature and music, the best standards, values and wisdom. Conservatism then passes the best of everything to every succeeding generation.

The Left—meaning progressives, not necessarily liberals—loathes the fact that conservatism preserves the past. That is why "change" is one of the most cherished words in the Left's vocabulary. There is nothing more threatening or, perhaps more important, boring, to a leftist than preserving the past. "New" and "change" provide leftists meaning and excitement.

### **Example of music**

As one involved in the music world (I periodically conduct orchestras), I have always been struck by how important it is to orchestra CEOs, music professors and especially music critics that as much "new" music be played as possible. If a conductor prefers to program the classics, he is deemed a reactionary, while conductors who regularly program new music are heroes in the music world.

Music critics rarely discuss the question that preoccupies conservatives: Is this new piece of music good, let alone nearly as good as the classics? What matters to music critics is that the music is new—and, these days, that it was composed by a nonwhite person, ideally a woman.

Conservatives ask whether new music is good enough to warrant being played. They are preoccupied with excellence, not with newness or "change."

This difference between conservatives and leftists/progressives applies to virtually every realm of life.

### **Example of literature**

It explains the decision of the University of Pennsylvania's Department of English to remove a large mural of Shakespeare and replace it with a mural of a gay female poet of color. No one in his or her right mind thinks that this poet is the equal of Shakespeare. But the members of the Penn English Department are not concerned with literary excellence. Shakespeare's

picture wasn't replaced because his writing was surpassed. He was replaced because he was male, white and straight. And most of all, he was replaced because he was old. He is an "old (or dead) white European male," in the words of the Left.

Change and newness are so vital to leftists that a progressive who cared first and foremost about excellence would cease to be a progressive.

Why are "new" and "change" intrinsic to leftism?

### **Chasing exciting causes**

One reason, as noted, is excitement. Excitement is important to human beings because it provides an adrenaline rush and because it seems to be an antidote to boredom. When your child complains that he or she is bored, your child is really saying, "I want some excitement." It is difficult to overstate how important boredom is in shaping human conduct. As I have long argued,  $S+A=B$ : Secularism plus affluence equals boredom. And boredom, in the contemporary world, leads to leftism.

Leftism is an endless search for exciting causes such as saving the world from alleged extinction; fighting "racism" and "white supremacy" in a largely nonracist America; combating "fascism" in what was—for more than 200 years, until the Left changed it—the freest country in the world; trying to force society to accept a brand-new definition of human sexual identity—namely that, contrary to all of recorded history, it is nonbinary. All these exciting causes are led by the affluent and secular. In other words, the bored.

### **Giving everyone a trophy**

A second reason for the Left's love of the new and love of change is that if traditional standards of excellence are preserved, the talentless will fail. Just as the cultural Left fought to award every young person a trophy whether or not his or her team actually won, the Left declares every piece of junk "art."

The conservative wants to pass on to every generation the best that human beings have created. Depriving young people of the greatest art, literature, music and ideas is a form of child abuse. The result has been generations of ignorant and foolish people, many of whom are actively working toward the opposite of what the "progressive" label suggests: taking society backward.

I would wager a serious sum of money that most American college students could not spell "Beethoven," let alone recognize any of his music; has never heard of Dostoevsky; and would not recognize a single sculpture or painting

by Michelangelo. Instead, they learn about "preferred pronouns."

### **Conserve versus destroy**

For these reasons, the end of conservatism must lead to the end of Western civilization. When you don't conserve the ideas and art, the religious moral values, and even the nuclear family that made Western civilization the most advanced civilization—materially, morally, scientifically and artistically—ever devised, you will no longer have that civilization. You will have morally confused, emotionally broken, lonely and angry young people—who will eventually wreak havoc on all that is good and worthy of surviving.

We conservatives want to conserve the beautiful, the profound and the wise.

What does the Left wish to conserve? The answer is: nothing. That's why everything the Left touches it destroys. The less you conserve, the more you destroy.