

# American Conservatism and its Contradictions

Hideichiro Nakano

## Conservatism in general

Speaking of 'conservatism,' there are two kinds of conservative attitudes, one is 'situational,' as Arthur Schlesinger once called it, and the other, 'substantial.' The former is a general attitude of people who are always opposing something new, sticking to and trying to conserve the old and traditional, whether it involves ideas and ideologies or customs and the way of life. This psychological tendency of human beings is analogous to the 'inertia' in classical mechanics, respecting continuity and consistency and avoiding breaks and changes. It can be found in any society at any time, though the motive to do so may differ individually as well as collectively according to the specific historical conditions. The latter is much more historically constrained and substantial in the sense that it is always clear as for what to conserve.

Ideologically, the European conservative thought is one which has been trying to perpetuate some specific social values, such as prudence and responsibility on the part of individuals. It also defends some of the traditional social institutions like family, community, and state, in addition to such things as the belief in God and commitment to secular hard work. As Edmund Burke (1729–1797) stated, this conservative ideology based on the following presuppositions of human beings and human society says that,

(1) Social order is a part of the natural order that God has created in the universe, and it exists prior to the individuals who are born into it.

(2) Man is a social animal. Therefore, the family, not the individual, is the proper unit of social order. Families are organized into classes that reflect social functions and into regional communities that

reflect geographic conditions.

(3) A nation must have rules of behavior to bring unity of purposes out of the mutual adaption of conflicting interests and emotions.

(4) Inequality is inescapable in society. But social leadership is most properly founded on the natural sense of dependence, subordination, and affection, which respond to ability, virtue, age, and graciousness.<sup>1)</sup>

## American Conservatism

Clearly, the American conservatism, as a political ideology, is not just a general psychological attitude. It has demonstrated what is to be preserved. On the one hand, it espouses the bourgeois social values which had been emancipated from the political suppression of the 'ancient regime.' Among other things, there are the individual human rights and freedom which cannot be alienated to anybody. But it tried to protect some old 'virtues,' community, and secular hard work. On the other hand, it defends itself against the socialist social thoughts, as they seem to deteriorate the essential precondition of modern conservatism, the will and opportunity of the individuals, which can be easily oppressed by the collective action encouraged by socialists. Thus, the modern conservative ideology is coping with both the 'old' and 'new' collectivist social thoughts.

Historically speaking, the American conservative ideology is rooted in the founding spirit of the Union, which is called a "classic liberal individualism." This individualistic ideology is also closely connected to Protestant Christianity, by which the concept of 'individual' was firmly established, though it is also true that despite the influence of Lockean ideology on American political thinking,

1) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 1 and 2, Collier-Macmillan, 1968, p. 222.

the Founding Fathers of the Nation were uneasy with radical democratic tendencies found in the separate states as they might weaken the authority of the new federation. The Declaration of Independence, however, eloquently tells that the Nation was created, under the providence of God, by the contract of these independent individuals to assure their inalienable rights. This was why the government was instituted among men, it says. The collectivist socialist ideas were alien to this political culture. This is why no socialist political party has never been substantially powerful in American political scene. On the other hand, what socialists attempted to attain in other countries have been achieved in America through social and political institutions based on this classic liberal individualism.

In the United States, it was the Republicans who were and are the proponents of this ideology. But since the Depression, from the 1920s through WW II, the federal government had to play an important role in leading the Nation. Democrats with their idea of 'Big Government' took the initiative in politico-economic activities. Liberal ideology espoused by Democrats also tolerated some of the excessive freedom of the individuals, particularly during the 1960s, which, to the eyes of Conservatives, was a menace to the traditional virtues. To the Conservatives, personal freedom should be confined within the limits of the time-sanctioned social order. In addition, Liberals' progressive attitudes came to admit the communist regimes, whose orthodoxy had destroyed religions in East-European countries. The communist materialism was also incompatible with the American conservative ideology which is inherently tied to Christianity.

### Backlash of Conservatism

After WW II, there were two historical trends that stimulated activation of the American conservatism ; one is America's confrontation with the communist block, particularly the USSR ; and the other, the incremental influence of the Welfare-State ideology based on Keynesian economic policies. More concretely, the failure of the Vietnam

War and the relative decline of American influence in the international political context during the 1970s contributed to the rise of a conservative nationalism, thus making the plan of recovering a 'strong' America appealing to the people. Internally, the liberal welfare policies dated back to the 1960s. Johnson's Great Society Program, together with the 'excessive' liberal life-style, made the ordinary middle-class Americans react in a conservative way so that the 'good' American way of life should not collapse. In a relatively stagnant economy caused by the weaker American competitiveness in world market, some of the 'average' Americans began to cast a second thought on the way their tax money was spent by the government, going mainly to help welfare dependents and newly arriving immigrants.

The general mood of American society during the 1970s was, thus, clearly revealed in the analysis of many opinion polls, something like what Daniel Bell in 1975 described in the following way ;

"... the belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of empire, the weakening of power, the loss of faith in the nation's futures. There are clear signs that America is being displaced as the paramount country. . . Internal tensions have multiplied and there are deep structural crises, political and cultural. . ."<sup>2)</sup>

Also Everett Ladd, Jr. wrote,

"In 1958, only 18 percent of respondents told Michigan interviewers that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves ; in 1980, however, the proportion had risen to its all-time high of 76 percent. In 1958, just 25 percent maintained that the national government cannot regularly be trusted to do what is right, while in 1980 the percentage had reached a massive 71 percent."<sup>3)</sup>

Actually, Jimmy Carter, in his address of July 15, 1979, said,

"The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for

2) D. Bell, "The End of American Exceptionalism," *The Public Interest*, Fall, 1975, pp. 197-198.

3) E. C. Ladd, "205 and Going Strong," *Public Opinion*, June-July, 1981, p. 8.

our nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.”

### Reagan Conservatism

Though Reagan conservatism consisted of a variety of policies, ranging from economy and finance to defence and welfare, the essence of its over-all message was that we, the people, could get the difficulty America faced, and that we could restore the strong and prosperous America if united under his leadership. And there was a social layer which echoed this message; there was a conservative climate produced, especially after the economic downturn which had begun since the first oil-shock in 1973. According to J. A. Davis’ multivariate causal model<sup>4)</sup>, in various segments of the American population, including the college-educated young—who normally are the vehicles of increasing liberalism—a significant conservative “climate” reacting against a longer-term secular trend toward liberalism was produced after 1973.

For example, in 1974 those Americans who identified themselves as liberal were 29 percent, against 25 percent in 1980. While those who identified themselves as conservative in 1974 were 28 percent, this portion increased to 33 percent in 1980.

Together with these and other data—whether based on quick impressions of the local campus scene or on an elaborately gathered questionnaire survey data—a sociologist Edward A. Tiryakian concluded that the American value climate has made a shift to the right in most matters pertaining to attitudes towards the government, towards American social institutions, and towards the traditional “American way of life”—the one major exception being sexuality and conformism. Having the moralism of American Puritanism in mind, he also assumed that “all in all, then, the 1970s was a decade of malaise, of political and economic crises, and of paralyzed or stagnant presidencies. No

wonder there was such an emphasis on nostalgia, of yearning and curiosity about the past of a few or several decades before; The reaction to this malaise is one factor that has given strength to the Moral Majority movement.”<sup>5)</sup>

Though his rhetoric is to be scrutinized in connection with the limits or contradiction of the 1980s conservatism in the next section of this paper, it is widely recognized that Ronald Reagan was a great communicator. He was tremendously successful in giving a hope to the American people who were desperately at odds around the end of the 1970s, by achieving “a moral revolution—moral in the sense of affecting the character-shaping ideas of the American people, a revolution in the sense of returning the nation to its moral starting point.” (W. K. Muir, Jr.)

### Reagan’s Rhetoric

William K. Muir, Jr., when he wrote about an incumbent president, Ronald Reagan, characterized him with “rhetoric,” by saying that “Reagan’s primary instrument to shape America’s morals was rhetoric, and any effort to describe his administration must focus on the rhetorical presidency—the words he spoke, the institutions that transmitted them, and the difference they made to state and nation.”<sup>6)</sup> He argues that one of the presidential powers is to speak, an independent rhetorical power, and Reagan had it. He used it well and, through language, clarified the fundamental and animated the ideas that free people carry in their heads. President Reagan in the Oval Office has successfully accomplished his duty to replenish what Tocqueville called “the common spring from which all the rest emanates.” That was the rhetoric of human liberty. But in this rhetoric he shared many points with the traditional conservatives. In connection with the nature of free society, he enumerated three notions which sound purely ‘classic,’ namely partnership, human imperfection, and spiritual dignity. The following are its details;

- 
- 4) “Conservative Weather in a Liberalizing Climate: Change in Selected NORC General Social Survey Items, 1972–78,” *Social Force*, 58, June 1980, 1129–1156.
  - 5) E. A. Tiryakian, “Changing Values in the United States: Continuity and Rupture,” Keynote address delivered at the 16th Annual International American Studies Seminar at Mt. Sorak, Korea, September 1981.
  - 6) Fred I. Greenstein ed., *Leadership in the Modern Presidency*, Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 262.

1) The central feature of a free society—its very definition, so to speak—is not the competition among individuals, but the voluntary and reciprocating association between them.

2) Human nature has never been pure and never perfectible: it has always consisted of a divided self, with hate and love inextricably and permanently intermixed. Every individual, of whatever culture or status, is marked with the capacity for cruelty and the free will to overcome the countless temptations to hate and hurt.

3) The ethical measure of man is not the actual consequences of his actions, but his efforts to resist his worst, and uphold his better, self; that is, what matters about an individual is not his material, but his spiritual, achievement.<sup>7)</sup>

Muir argued that these three notions justified the Reagan domestic and foreign programs, synchronized the personal of the administration, and inspired the nation, which, in combination, constituted the moral revolution of the Reagan years.

Though whatever this rhetoric may seem to be, there exist always some contradictions between ideas and programs. Many Americans, notwithstanding, wanted to listen to Reagan, particularly those who loved the 'religious' rhetoric of the president. Some of these are examined in the rest of this paper.

### Contradiction of Conservative Rhetoric

Basically, there are two inherent contradictions in Reagan's rhetoric, namely 1) liberalism-related contradiction and 2) individualism-related contradiction. Though conservative ideology strongly embraces liberty and freedom, it cannot tolerate 'excessive' forms of these, which would cause a deterioration of 'good' traditions and customs, or lead society into a state of normless anarchy. On the other hand, American conservatives convincingly bolster up individual initiatives, but they are inclined to maintain some form of 'communal' unity, which might be conducive to a vehement patriotic feeling as a nation. Let me explain this in detail.

### 1) Liberalism-related contradiction

First of all, I would like to note the usage of this term, liberalism. In America, as is well known to everybody, liberalism as a public philosophy refers to a progressive notion of political and economic reform, which originated mainly from the New Deal in the 1930s. The idea of government intervention or 'Big Government' is the central pillar of this ideology, with a possibility of leading the nation towards a socialist-welfare or a military-dictatorial state. This is the very type of 'progressive and liberal' ideology, of which American conservatives showed themselves to be an openly declared foe. But, here, dealing with the rhetorical contradiction of conservative thoughts, I am talking about the original meaning of 'liberalism,' that is to say, liberty and freedom of human beings.

It is said that the late 1960s and early 1970s was a time of increasing liberalism in public attitudes, liberalism of enhancing personal liberty and freedom in many social spheres including religion, sex, divorce, abortion, drugs, and business. In 1965, for example, only 15 percent of an NORC sample said that a pregnant woman who did not want any more children should be able to obtain a legal abortion. By 1973, 46 percent supported abortions in this circumstance. Between 1969 and 1973, the number of Americans who felt that "sex relations before marriage are not wrong" jumped from 21 percent to 43 percent. The number who agreed that "there's too much power concentrated in the hands of a few large companies" increased from 52 percent in 1965 to 75 percent in 1973.<sup>8)</sup> The 'liberal' life-style symbolized by Hippies was in vogue. Many young people committed themselves enthusiastically to this way of life, some escaping from their military service during the Vietnam War. The loyalty to the nation gave way to the individual freedom, freedom to be indulged in personal satisfaction, sometimes involving illegal substances such as marijuana and abortion.

A backlash to this 'excessive' freedom occurred in the 1970s, particularly after the first oil-shock. Although the conservatives support the idea of freedom and liberty, they cannot afford to overlook these excessively 'liberal' behaviors. This shows the

7) op. cit., p. 266.

8) William G. Mayer, "The shifting sands of public opinion: Is liberalism back?" *The Public Interest*, Spring 1992, pp. 7-8.

limit of conservative ideology, by which we understand that there exists a certain point or certain areas beyond which you cannot enjoy your 'inalienable' right called 'liberty.' Again, this conservative backlash, widely known as "Right turn," can be adequately illustrated in survey results of Gallop and Roper polls. Let us take a concrete example here, the matter of abortion.

In the above-cited Mayer's article, abortion is placed among the "issues on which public opinion became more liberal" between 1966 and 1973. But between 1974 and 1980, it is placed among the "issues on which public opinion exhibited little or no change." And finally, between 1981 and 1988, we can find abortion among the "issues on which public opinion became more conservative," together with crime and punishment, legalizing marijuana, divorce, economic rights and privileges, and business profits.

As is well known, abortion was designated as a right of privacy by the Supreme Court (*Roe v. Wade* decision) in 1973 (legalization of abortion). But the pro-choice and pro-life controversy has been active and even now is still one of the important political and moral issues in this year's presidential election. Pro-choice argues that it is a women's right, an individual right which cannot be withheld from by anybody. But to the eyes of the conservatives, particularly those who are regarded as protestant fundamentalists (pro-life), it is beyond the realm of a human being. Life is under the providence of God, and to kill a fetus is murder, which cannot be admissible in a 'decent' society like America. So, since 1973, the conservatives have been trying to make this Supreme Court decision invalid and to curtail the basic human liberty of women, by resorting to any possible means. In 1989, though with a slight margin, the Supreme Court returned to the states the authority to limit a woman's right to legal abortion (*Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*).

In his State of the Union address, February 6, 1985, Reagan said, after having talked of the rediscovery of the traditional American values of faith, freedom, family, work, and neighborhood, that "the question of abortion grips our nation. Abortion is either the taking of human life, or it isn't ; and if it is—and medical technology increasingly showing it is—it must be stopped."

He continued ;

"It is a terrible irony that while some turn to abortion, so many others who cannot become parents cry out for children to adopt. We have room for these children. We can fill the cradles of those who want a child to love. Tonight, I ask you in the Congress to move this year on legislation to protect the unborn."

Here he tried not only to protect the life of the unborn (based on his religious stance), but also to emphasize the mutual dependence of fellow Americans, alluding to a sort of 'communal' unity of American society.

In his 1988 State of the Union address on the same issue, Reagan recognized the right of self-defense of the mother, not the right to have an abortion, but the right to self-defensive behavior when her life is threatened by the unborn baby.

"Well now, we come to a family issue that we must have the courage to confront. Tonight, I call America—a good nation, a moral people—to charitable but realistic consideration of the terrible cost of abortion on demand. To those who say this violates a woman's right to control of her own body—can they deny that now medical evidence confirms the unborn child is a living human being entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? Let us unite as a nation and protect the unborn with legislation that would stop all federal funding for abortion—and with a human life amendment making, of course, an exception where the unborn child threatens the life of the mother. Our Judeo-Christian tradition recognizes that right of taking a life in self-defence."

## 2) Individualism-related contradiction

Individualism is another heritage of the American Revolution, to which the conservatives often return in order to legitimate their public ideologies and policies. It is deeply rooted in Protestant Christianity, where, unlike the traditional Church in the old Continent, individual Christians are expected to have a personal relationship with God and to assume the responsibility of their behavior based on their own conscience. Accordingly, individual initiatives, in whatever the social sphere, are strongly encouraged and 'Big Government' which would suppress the voluntary will and efforts of the individuals, should be avoided. The secular version of

this idea can be seen in both economic and welfare policies under Reagan administration.

Again, in the same token of 'Right turn' in the 1970s, particularly after the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, when a good many items of 'liberal' legislation were passed, the conservative backlash began. Johnson, who succeeded the assassinated President Kennedy, found his job to accomplish the unfinished business of Roosevelt's New Deal. He made a large cut in income taxes (the first application of Keynesian theory in peace time), expanded social security benefits, realized Medicare (for the elderly) and Medicaid, passed a civil rights act, and waged the War on Poverty. Against these trends, together with stagnant economy and inflation, the ordinary middle-class Americans began to complain, first in the form of "Taxpayers' Revolt" (Proposition 13 in California in 1978.) The conservative prescription for the "illness" was to stimulate individual and private initiatives in economic activities through tax cuts and deregulation (a "Small Government"). Whenever possible, President Reagan emphasized the conservative's faith in free markets by reducing the role of government. In welfare policies, he also accentuated individual efforts and self-respect, instead of the "Big Government" who pours money into the poor to keep them 'dependent.'

"To encourage opportunity and jobs rather than dependency and welfare, we will propose that individuals living at or near the poverty line be totally exempt from federal income tax."

"This government will meet its responsibility to help those in need. But policies that increase dependency, break up families, and destroy self-respect are not progressive, they are reactionary."

"Let us resolve that we will stop spreading dependency and start spreading opportunity ; that we will stop spreading bondage and start spreading freedom."<sup>9)</sup>

In his 1987 State of the Union address, Reagan depicted the reality of welfare and proposed a new strategy ;

"We've created a welfare monster that is a shocking indictment of our sense of priorities.

Our national welfare system consists of some 59 major programs and over 6,000 pages of federal laws and regulations on which more than 132,000 million dollars was spent in 1985.

I will propose a new national welfare strategy – a program of welfare reform through state-sponsored community-based demonstration projects. This is the time to reform this outmoded social dinosaur and finally break the poverty trap. We will never abandon those who, through no fault of their own, must have our help. But let us work to see how many can be freed from the dependency of welfare and made self-supporting, which the great majority of welfare recipients want more than anything else."

In this President's rhetoric, the emphasis not only on individual initiatives but also on a kind of communal group integration such as family and neighborhood are seen. To him, there is a romantic vision of America, collectivist despite the traditional American individualism, a much more 'gemeinschaftlich' community, which is often expanded to embrace all the American Nation.

He describes it;

as "an America not only rich in opportunity for the individual but an America, too, of strong families and vibrant neighborhoods, an America whose divergent but harmonizing communities were a reflection of a deeper community value—the value of work, of family, of religion—and of the love of freedom that God places in each of us and whose defense He has entrusted in a special way to this nation."<sup>10)</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

Having examined some aspects of Reagan's conservative rhetoric, how can we evaluate the conservative decade of the 1980s? On the one hand, we should take the rhetoric as 'rhetoric,' and take the reality as 'reality.' Actually, mainly because of the democrat-dominated Congress, the President could not accomplish many of his programs designed on the basis of conservative ideology. On the other hand, however, his enterprise of a Second American

9) Reagan's State of the Union address in 1985

10) State of the Union address in 1988

Revolution had some impact on the American people and American society. Early in his second term as president (in 1985), he proudly announced his achievement ;

“Tonight, we can take pride in 25 straight months of economic growth, the strongest in 34 years ; a three-year inflation average of 3.9 percent, the lowest in 17 years ; and 7.3 million new jobs in two years, with more of our citizens working than ever before.<sup>11)</sup>

A recent Brookings Institution study<sup>12)</sup> suggested some improvement of American society ;

—The proportion of whites “dropping out” from high school declined about two points between 1975 and 1988 to about 9.5 percent. Among blacks, “the dropout rate fell from 28 percent in 1970 to 15 percent in 1988.”

—In spite of isolated flare-ups of violence caused by “drug wars” in city ghettos, “by 1987–88 both the murder and aggravated assault rates were 14 percent lower than they had been in 1973–75, and the robbery rate was 21 percent lower. . . . The risk of being assaulted or robbed by a black person decreased fairly steadily from 1973 to 1986. . . . The black homicide rate was lower in 1987 than it was in 1970 and not much higher than it was in 1950.”

Nevertheless, some scholars argue for the “Liberal Resurgence” in the 1980s ; “Across a vast range of issues—including military spending and relations with the (now former) Soviet Union, taxes, domestic spending, and environmental protection—liberals have made up much of the ground they lost in the late 1970s.”<sup>13)</sup> Maybe the prospects for liberalism will be bright, but some of the fundamental conservative principles here described will remain intact.

---

11) State of the Union address in 1985

12) U. S. “Underclass” : not a Simple Phenomenon,” by Paul Malamud, 1991.

13) W. G. Mayer, op. cit., pp. 11.