

Jefferson Wasn't a Conservative

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American conservatism has a heritage, and it is time for modern conservatives to pinpoint their ancestry, to develop a deeper appreciation for the characteristics which have been transferred to this generation.

Surprisingly, American conservatives have a rather foggy notion as to the source of their beliefs. Often a conservative will extol the virtues of Thomas Jefferson and consider him as the basis for conservatism, 1980s-style. On the surface this might seem plausible because Jefferson certainly did preach the merits of small government and the free market. Much of what Jefferson advocated, however, would seem foreign to conservatives of the Reagan era, if they only knew him better.

Let's start at the beginning. The Constitution was written in 1787 and Washington was inaugurated as the first president in 1789. The 1790s were a time of great controversy, during which the politically aware divided into Federalists and Republicans. The Republicans hailed Thomas Jefferson as their leader, and although the historian must be careful not to make too sweeping a generalization, it can safely be said that they were the liberals of their day. (See how the labels change.)

Yes, they were free market and limited government in ideal, but their overall tendencies gravitated toward what we term libertarianism nowadays, rather than toward the tenets of the New Right.

For example, in the matter of religious freedom, Jefferson's concept was less the freedom to worship than it was the freedom whether to worship. There is a world of difference in the attitudes which inspire both positions. Jefferson also edited the Bible and produced his own "authorized" version, devoid of any hint of the supernatural.

In contrast, a large segment of modern conservatism is based on the traditional Christian beliefs, complete with acceptance of the reality of the supernatural. Jefferson would have been uneasy in the company of Jerry Falwell—and vice versa.

Jeffersonian Republicans were also in the forefront of support for the French Revolution. This revolution was the one that decided to de-Christianize France and enthrone reason as the new deity. Approximately 5,000 priests were executed and 20,000 chose to abdicate their clerical offices because of the persecution.

Republicans in America formed Democratic Societies to promote the ideals of the revolution and frowned upon Federalists who had a hard time being inspired by the events in France. One

society member got carried away and wrote a letter to a Federalist newspaper, declaring, "May the guillotine become a favorite instrument in America, its influence be disseminated in every direction, and the neck that swallows or emits such heresies (i.e., Federalist beliefs), the American victim."

The French Revolution is the prototype for all subsequent class revolutions and has become anathema to conservative thought.

If that isn't enough, there's also the matter of national defense. Conservatives consider a strong defense to be the first responsibility of a government, for without it there would be no government. Jefferson, on the other hand, took his idea of limited government to the extreme in the defense policy. Soon after assuming the presidency in 1801, he dismantled what navy America had, reduced the army (2,500 strong), and embarked on a defense that relied on a few small gunboats roaming up and down the Atlantic seaboard—apparently an attempt to frighten European warships in the same manner a mouse presumably frightens an elephant.

This unpreparedness cost America dearly in the early going of the War of 1812. By way of contrast, modern conservatives—well, you probably understand the point by now.

The true heritage of contemporary conservatism has more solid roots in the Federalist camp. Federalist values—the primacy of religious belief, the importance of gradual change to ensure societal stability, the need for an adequate defense—form the foundation of the new conservatism.

True, the Federalists were the big-government advocates of their time, but again historical perspective is essential. For them the government existed primarily to protect traditional rights, liberties and cultural bonds.