

# The Family in America

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## **Fiscal Conservatism Is Not Enough: What Social Conservatives Offer the Party of Lincoln**

Robert W. Patterson

**THE REPUBLICAN VICTORIES** in Massachusetts (Scott Brown), New Jersey (Chris Christie), and Virginia (Bob McDonnell), coupled with growing disenchantment with President Obama's initiatives, has the Republican party feeling bullish about its prospects for congressional elections this fall. Many strategists are predicting a repeat of 1994, where the Grand Old Party takes control of the House of Representatives and possibly the Senate. Indeed, the party has rebounded dramatically from the beating it took in 2006 and 2008. Even divisions among conservatives within the party that *New York Times* columnist David Brooks characterizes as pitting "traditionalists" against "reformers"<sup>1</sup> do not appear to be dampening Republican hopes. As historian George H. Nash reminds the faithful, factions have been a feature of American conservatism since the 1950s and reflect the movement's vitality.<sup>2</sup>

Yet among the contradictions that have worked against the ability of the party of Lincoln to become, in the hopes of Karl Rove, "a permanent

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1. David Brooks, "Darkness at Dusk," *The New York Times*, November 11, 2008.

2. George H. Nash, *Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2009).

Republican majority” is the disconnect that separates the GOP and conservative establishments—including elected and party officials, think tanks and activist organizations, political strategists, and even talk-radio hosts—from registered voters outside the Washington Beltway that the former depend upon for electing Republicans to public office. As Brooks observes, “most professional conservatives are life-long Washingtonians who live comfortably as organization heads, lobbyists, and publicists.” While Brooks applies his characterization to the traditionalists that he finds wanting, it applies equally to the reformers that he champions. Indeed, nothing separates the professional class of Republican thinkers and players from the voting public more than the issue of how the party should position itself vis-à-vis the “social issues.” As much as the media like to portray the GOP as beholden to the Religious Right, the reality is that Republican elites, with rare exceptions, are more beholden to economic conservatives and foreign-policy hawks than to social conservatives. Paraphrasing Jeffrey Bell’s observation in *The Weekly Standard*, Republican elites would rather talk about anything *but* social issues.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Conservative Pass on Social Issues**

The reluctance to discuss, let alone embrace, social issues is widespread. Turn on Fox News in the evening, and chances are Sean Hannity will be dispensing, as he did frequently through 2009, policy prescriptions to help the GOP recover its promise, including “a strong defense,” “national security,” “energy independence,” “fiscal responsibility,” and “low taxes.” But the popular broadcaster never includes, in his litany, principles that would encourage, for example, a recovery of the child-rich, married-parent family as the centerpiece of American life. He claims to be a pro-life Catholic and traditional family man, but these commitments do not appear to inform the “free-market policy solutions” that he encourages the GOP to advance.

Likewise, the numerous Tea Party rallies protesting President Obama’s expansion of government do not reference social issues, even though these events attract a good number of social conservatives. With

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3. Jeffrey Bell, “Alive and Kicking: Reports of the Demise of Social Conservatism Are Greatly Exaggerated,” *The Weekly Standard*, December 24, 2007.

the exception of Sarah Palin's key-note address at its Nashville convention in February that was heavy on national security and foreign policy, the focus of the movement is more domestic and more economic, reflecting the "core values" posted on the Tea Party's website: "fiscal responsibility, constitutionally limited government, and free markets." The tea parties are not venues where speakers explore how the family crisis of the past thirty years, a crisis driven by the assault of American ideals like marriage and the two-parent family that began with the Great Society and was reinforced by Supreme Court rulings, has contributed to the present economic and social crisis. That silence may be intentional, given the role that two economic action groups based in Washington—FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity—appear to have played in the movement.<sup>4</sup> Judging from the blog categories and policy issues listed on their respective websites, neither activist group will broach the social issues.

The social issues are not entirely absent from the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), sponsored by the American Conservative Union. At the three-day 2010 conference in Washington, D.C., several socially conservative organizations were among the 88 cosponsors, including the American Principles Project, Americans United For Life, Concerned Women for America, Eagle Forum, Focus on the Family Action, the National Organization for Marriage, and the Susan B. Anthony List; some of these groups even sponsored special events and seminars. However, the subject breakdown of the twenty-five panel-discussion sessions that explored the conference theme, "Saving Freedom," is revealing. Only two of these general sessions could be classified in the social-issues category—"Saving Freedom One Life at a Time" and "Saving Freedom from the Enemies of Our Values"—and the registrant would only know that beforehand by the identity of the panelists listed on the conference literature and website. Like the Tea Party movement, nothing at CPAC explicitly explores the political implications of the American crisis brought on by the decline of marriage and the two-parent family.

The avoidance of social issues extends to many elected Republican

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4. Marc Ambinder, "The Tea Party Movement: Who's In Charge?" *The Atlantic Politics Blog*, April 13, 2009.

officials, even those with pro-life and pro-family credentials, who couch those commitments as subordinate to economic concerns. In an interview last summer in the *Wall Street Journal*, Governor Rick Perry of Texas made it clear that he does not see social issues as all that important. “You may elect me if I am pro-life. You may elect me if I’m pro-family values. But you probably will not elect me if I’m not a proven fiscal conservative.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, when GOP House Whip Eric Cantor, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney convened a caucus in May 2009 to discuss the future of the party, “talk of cultural issues like abortion,” according to journalist David Paul Kuhn, was “notably absent.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, when pressed by the media on the campaign trail last year, the now Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell dismissed as “simply an academic exercise [that] clearly does not reflect my views” his master’s thesis that had noted the negative impact that rising rates of maternal employment, which is well-documented in the empirical literature, on the well-being of children. Rather than highlighting how misguided public policy—gender preferences and quotas since the 1970s that have resulted in patterns of employment that neither American men nor women want or desire<sup>7</sup>—the popular figure with impressive social-conservative credentials instead prided himself that his wife and three grown daughters work outside the home and that he had hired five women in senior posts as the state’s attorney general.<sup>8</sup>

Conservatives often defend their squeamishness by claiming that matters like sex-based affirmative action, no-fault divorce, same-sex marriage laws, abortion rights and federally funded contraception, women in combat, and homosexuals in the military are “divisive.” Television-show

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5. Emily Esfahani Smith, “The Weekend Interview with Rick Perry: Fiscal Conservatism and the Soul of the GOP,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 22–23, 2009, p. A11.
  6. David Paul Kuhn, “Social Conservative Leaders Feel Scapegoated,” *Real Clear Politics*, May 11, 2009.
  7. See: George Steven Swan, “The Deconstruction of Marriage, Part 2: Is the Political Economy of Gender-Based Affirmative Action Good for the Home Economy?” *The Family in America* 24 (Winter 2010): 3–6.
  8. Amy Gardner, “’89 Thesis a Different Side of McDonnell,” *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2009, p. A1.

host and former GOP Congressman Joe Scarborough claims in *The Last Best Hope*, “the public does not want to hear their national politicians debating divisive social issues. Whether one is pro-life or pro-choice, for or against same-sex marriage, such issues are uncomfortable subjects for most Americans to discuss.”<sup>9</sup> His road map therefore not only encourages the party to “turn down the volume rather than turn it up” but also shift public deliberation of issues he considers “inherently controversial and potentially explosive” to the state and local level.

How that strategy works in challenging American elites, who are more than happy to talk about such issues, is unclear. President Obama, for example, has not only spoken against the federal Defense of Marriage Act of 1996 but also called for, in his first State of the Union address, the repeal of the Military Personnel Eligibility Act of 1993 that codified into law long-standing Defense Department regulations proscribing homosexual behavior as incompatible with military service.<sup>10</sup> In fact, GOP elites, namely, David B. Rivkin Jr. and Lee A. Casey, both of whom served in the Reagan and Bush 41 administrations, have either joined the assault on the 1993 law or, in the case of former Vice President Dick Cheney, show little willingness to defend it.<sup>11</sup> These Republicans seem to forget that both laws were passed by veto-proof, bipartisan majorities in both Houses and signed by President Bill Clinton.

Yet Scarborough’s sentiments, which would codify a regional moral relativism under a misguided notion of federalism,<sup>12</sup> are widely shared in GOP circles. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* last December, research fellow Michael J. Petrilli of the Hoover Institution encouraged the GOP to mount “a full-fledged effort” to reach out beyond “Sam’s Club”

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9. Joe Scarborough, *The Last Best Hope: Restoring Conservatism and America’s Promise* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), p. 170.

10. The 1993 eligibility law should not be confused, as the media have done since its enactment, with President Bill Clinton’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” enforcement regulations that removed “the question” about homosexuality from military service applications. Elaine Donnelly, “Constructing the Co-Ed Military,” *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 14 (2007): 910.

11. David B. Rivkin Jr. and Lee A. Casey, “‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’: The End is Near,” *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2010, p. A21, and Dick Cheney on ABC’s *This Week*, February 14, 2010.

12. This insight comes from Dan Middleton’s unpublished op-ed, “The Futility of ‘Federalism,’” an assignment prepared for this writer’s speechwriting class, Patrick Henry College, December 8, 2009.

Republicans to “Whole Foods” Republicans, “independent-minded voters who embrace a progressive life-style but not progressive politics.” Believing that the party’s message on “divisive social issues” can make or break a GOP resurgence, Petrilli calls the party to stick “to its core economic message instead of playing wedge politics.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Most Loyal Republicans**

The downside is that Petrilli’s single-theme politics ignore the girls that GOP candidates must woo to the dance: the largest single block of Republican voters is overwhelmingly socially conservative. They may not be attractive to American elites, but they deliver votes. A *Washington Post* poll conducted last November found that 66 percent of Republicans consider themselves “conservative” on social issues; nearly half of this subset (or 32 percent of the sample) consider themselves “very conservative” on social issues.<sup>14</sup> Reviewing a Pew Research Center study, Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam claim that staunch social-conservative convictions stand at the core of GOP popular support, expressed by both “Enterprisers” (11 percent of registered voters) and “Social Conservatives” (13 percent of registered voters).<sup>15</sup> These findings dovetail with the results of the 2004 election, when exit polling found not only that 22 percent of all voters picked “moral values” as the factor that influenced them the most but also that 80 percent of these voters pulled the lever for Bush.<sup>16</sup> These realities outside the Beltway lead Douthat and Salam to suggest that the GOP “isn’t just out of touch with the country as a whole; it’s increasingly out of touch with its own base.”<sup>17</sup>

More important, David Paul Kuhn writes that social conservatives “have proven perhaps the most loyal Republicans,” showing themselves

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13. Michael J. Petrilli, “Whole Food Republicans,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2009, p. A25.

14. Jon Cohen and Dan Balz, “A Party Both United and Divided,” *The Washington Post*, November 30, 2009, pp. A1 and A4.

15. Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam, *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), pp. 150–51.

16. Jeffrey Bell, “The Politics of a Failed Presidency: How John McCain and the Republican Party Should Deal with the Bush Record,” *The Weekly Standard*, March 17, 2008.

17. Douthat and Salam, *Grand New Party*, p. 150.

to be team players. They supported John McCain in 2008 in large numbers (half of all Americans who voted for McCain were weekly churchgoers) even though they had preferred Mike Huckabee for the nomination.<sup>18</sup> Would economic conservatives like Petrilli or the party bigwigs done the same had Huckabee won the nomination? Moreover, did social conservatives revolt when President Bush, after his reelection in 2004, announced he would no longer pursue the federal marriage amendment that he had supported during the campaign? Instead, the president attempted without success to use his political capital to push for “private accounts” for Social Security, a hobbyhorse of economic conservatives and libertarians. Now, if the reverse had happened, and Bush had decided to push for the federal marriage amendment after campaigning for Social Security reform, would the party’s economic conservatives have remained team players?

The dirty little secret is that social conservatives can be fully trusted to be economically conservative as well, but economic conservatives are unreliable on social issues. The former have enthusiastically joined the Tea Party, but do the latter support the annual March for Life or the World Congress of Families? A study by researchers at Penn State University, using data from the General Social Survey that has tracked U.S. households from 1972 to 2004, confirms this joint commitment of social conservatives, finding a robust correlation between evangelical Protestants and “economic conservatism,” especially among those who are college-educated. The study also predicts that these voting, college-educated evangelicals will become more strategic to the GOP.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this commitment to social *and* economic conservatism leads Jeffrey Bell to observe: “Social conservatism is the only mass-based political persuasion that fully believes in the core ideas of the American founding. It has taken over that role from parties, professions, and ideologies that used to perform it, and as a result it is touching a deep chord with millions of American voters.”<sup>20</sup>

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18. Kuhn, “Social Conservatives.”

19. Jacob Felson and Heather Kindell, “The Elusive Link Between Conservative Protestantism and Conservative Economics,” *Social Science Research* 36 (June 2007): 673–87.

20. Bell, “Alive and Kicking.”

That “deep chord” is reflected in the success of the ballot initiatives pushed hard by social conservatives: the ratification of constitutional amendments protecting the legal status of matrimony in thirty-one states, including California, against elites—including those of the GOP—who want America, in Bell’s words, “to become a value-free zone in the image of Western Europe.”<sup>21</sup> The irony is that many GOP candidates, from Senator George Allen in Virginia in 2006 to President Bush in Michigan in 2004 and candidate John McCain in Florida in 2008, demonstrate little savvy in using the marriage issue to differentiate themselves from their Democratic opponents who express opposition to the marriage amendments. In the three cases above, the Republican candidate lost narrowly in those states while the marriage amendment received more votes than did the Democratic candidate.

As much as they claimed they wanted to broaden the party, the candidates failed to appreciate the degree to which marriage referenda generate wide support among independents, the working class, Democrats, African-Americans, and Hispanics. Nor were they encouraged to tap that rich voting block, as the Republican National Committee has demonstrated little interest in translating the support of 60 percent of the American public for marriage amendments into strategies that will, in Maggie Gallagher’s words, “elect our friends and defeat our enemies.”<sup>22</sup>

The Democrats play this game much better; they understand, more than the Republicans, how social conservatism threatens the liberal agenda, which is not just economic. In fact, Bell notes that the “left today defines itself mainly in terms of social issues rather than economics.”<sup>23</sup> Yet RNC Chairman Michael Steele remains silent on the marriage battles taking place in various states. Nor did he seek any photo-op last year in his own backyard to demonstrate solidarity with African-American clergymen who are behind the effort to allow the voters—and not the city council—to determine the legal definition of marriage in Washington, D.C. The unwillingness of Steele, an African-American, to defend the

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21. Bell, “A Guide to Elite Opinion,” *The Weekly Standard*, November 17, 2008, p. 19.

22. Maggie Gallagher, “The Carrie Effect: Notes from the Frontlines of the Marriage War,” *National Review*, August 10, 2009, p. 34.

23. Bell, “Alive and Kicking.”



right of his brothers and sisters to vote on community standards in the nation's capital further illustrates how Republican elites have become out of touch with middle America.

### **Social Conservatism 'Lite'**

At least some books written by conservative or Republican insiders offer principled reasons why the GOP should take social conservatism more seriously. Talk-radio program host Mark Levin's *Liberty and Tyranny* includes an admirable chapter defending the role of transcendent values that informed the American founding, noting that even Barry Goldwater, the libertarian hero, claimed that the American republic presumes that God is the "author of freedom" in his 1964 GOP convention address. Levin also claims that "for the Conservative, 'social issues' relating to life and lifestyles, tested by human experience through the centuries, are not merely personal habits and beliefs but also merit encouragement throughout the society." Consequently, his ten-point "Conservative Manifesto" acknowledges, "Faith provides the moral order that ties one generation to the next, and without which the civil society cannot survive."<sup>24</sup>

Yet socially conservative ideals do not fully inform Levin's policy prescriptions. His tax recommendations in particular reflect the libertarian influence that has shaped GOP tax policy for years; he calls for a flat-income tax or national sales tax and for the elimination of the corporate income tax and death tax.<sup>25</sup> The same weakness mars the tax plan of Paul Ryan's "Road Map for America's Future,"<sup>26</sup> although the Wisconsin congressman's more detailed proposal calls for an income tax with two rates and for a business consumption tax in place of the corporate income tax. Neither Levin's manifesto nor Ryan's road map, which is also endorsed by Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina,<sup>27</sup> calls for reducing income

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24. Mark R. Levin, *Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto* (New York: Threshold, 2009), p. 35 and 34.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 199–205.

26. Paul D. Ryan, "A GOP Road Map for America's Future," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 2010.

27. Jim DeMint, *Saving Freedom: We Can Stop America's Slide into Socialism* (Nashville: Fidelis Books, 2009), pp. 243–44.

and FICA taxes on young-married parents with children as a way of encouraging family formation and fertility. As Allan Carlson laments in commenting on the George W. Bush tax cuts, in the Republican universe American families take a back seat to the claims of the Fortune 500.<sup>28</sup> GOP leaders have yet to learn the point Timothy P. Carney makes in *Obamanomics*: big business is no friend of the Republican party or conservative ideals.<sup>29</sup>

An even stronger case for the role of transcendent values in public policy comes from President George W. Bush's evangelical speechwriter Michael J. Gerson. His prescription for renewing the party, *Heroic Conservatism*, expands to a global scale the "compassionate conservatism" and faith-based social-welfare initiatives that Gerson helped his boss articulate when he ran for president in 2000. But the weakness of his "religiously informed moral vision" of advancing America's ideals is that Gerson conflates the role of the state, traditionally an instrument of justice, with that of family and church, traditionally instruments of compassion. He also forgets, in the words of Charles R. Kesler, that "the classic political virtue is justice, not compassion, for compassion is often indiscriminate and misdirected."<sup>30</sup> Consequently, he expresses greater faith in the power of federal programs run by bureaucrats and grantees than he does in the natural institutions of wedlock and the two-parent family to temper poverty and human suffering.

Although he is strongly pro-life, his social conservatism does not run much deeper. He apparently believes that "some organic social arrangements can become rotten," but presumably never government entities or crusades that aim to correct them. When television coverage of Hurricane Katrina revealed the dire living conditions of tens of thousands of single mothers and their children in New Orleans, Gerson hoped that a presidential address would trigger a "serious national dialogue on race and poverty"—not the more needed discussion about the disappearance of the intact African-American family from urban

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28. Allan Carlson, "Discounting Family Values," *American Conservative*, November 17, 2008, p. 14.

29. Timothy P. Carney, *Obamanomics: How Barack Obama is Bankrupting You and Enriching His Wall Street Friends, Corporate Lobbyists, and Union Bosses* (Washington: Regnery, 2009).

30. Charles R. Kesler, "The Conservative Challenge," *Claremont Review of Books*, Summer 2009.

neighborhoods. Gerson does not seem to consider that material hardship might be more due to the rise in single parenthood brought about by the Great Society than due to the “generations of slavery and segregation” that he repeatedly blames.<sup>31</sup> The ideals that he admonishes heartless Republicans to embrace, therefore, are not matrimony or the child-rich family that Adam Smith, Benjamin Franklin, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Theodore Roosevelt saw at the heart of American identity,<sup>32</sup> but rather “liberty, tolerance, and equality”<sup>33</sup>—values that Kara Hopkins notes echo the battle cry of the French Revolution.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Social-Economic Nexus**

The political arguments of both Gerson and Levin show that commitments to religious standards of morality do not necessarily translate into a robust commitment to social conservatism. In fact, the most promising book exploring the malaise of the GOP—a book that calls for a stronger GOP commitment to and more lively GOP concern for the working class—says relatively little about religion and public life. In *Grand New Party*, Douthat and Salam make a compelling case, as did George Gilder and Jennifer Roback Morse in their earlier books,<sup>35</sup> that social and moral well-being are more intertwined with economic issues than most Republican and libertarian players are willing to admit. Improving upon Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s remarks about politics and culture, Douthat and Salam claim: “The central *American* truth is that there’s no way to cleanly separate politics from culture, or to separate either one from economics.”<sup>36</sup>

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31. Michael J. Gerson, *Heroic Conservatism: Why Republicans Need to Embrace America’s Ideals and Why They Deserve to Fail if They Don’t* (New York: Harper, 2007), pp. 273, 260, 173, and 15.

32. See: Allan Carlson, *Conjugal America: On the Public Purposes of Marriage* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2007), ch. 5.

33. Gerson, *Heroic Conservatism*, p. 22.

34. Kara Hopkins, “The Gospel According to Gerson,” *The American Conservative*, November 17, 2007.

35. George Gilder, *Sexual Suicide* (New York: Quadrangle, 1973), *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), and *Men and Marriage* (Gretna, La.: Pelican, 1986); and Jennifer Roback Morse, *Love and Economics: Why the Laissez-Faire Family Doesn’t Work* (Dallas: Spence, 2001).

36. Douthat and Salam, *Grand New Party*, pp. 20–21.

Consequently, the two young writers frame the central domestic crisis facing America today as the loss of normative standards, especially the retreat from monogamy and the breakdown of the family. This loss of standards has not so much disadvantaged the college-bred, “mass upper-middle class” that has emerged in the last thirty years, note the authors, but rather the working class—the “Sam’s Club voters” of Minnesota Governor Tim Palenty that have been struggling “ever since the social revolution of the sixties.” Where Gerson sees poverty and racism at every corner, Douthat and Salam recognize “insecurity and immobility” as the root causes of America’s social maladies. Consequently, they see in “the ‘social issues’ from abortion and marriage law to the death penalty and immigration” very substantive political questions, not merely an opportunistic spinmaster’s wedge issues:

[These issues are] the *root* of working-class insecurity. Safe streets, successful marriages, cultural solidarity, and vibrant religious and civic institutions make working-class Americans more likely to be wealthy, healthy, and upwardly mobile. Public disorder, family disintegration, cultural fragmentation, on the other hand, breed downward mobility and financial strain—which in turn breeds further social dislocation, in a vicious cycle that threatens to transform a working class into an underclass.<sup>37</sup>

Douthat and Salam echo Peggy Noonan’s observation that “so many Americans right now fear they are losing their country, that the old America is slipping away and being replaced by something worse, something formless and hollowed out.”<sup>38</sup> They write: “The American Dream is slipping out of reach for a large and growing majority,” especially Americans without a college degree. Because the Democrats have no message for this key demographic group, *Grand New Party* encourages the GOP to look to the social conservatism of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and “the *conservative* New Deal” for inspiration.<sup>39</sup>

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37. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

38. Peggy Noonan, “Try a Little Tenderness,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2008.

39. Douthat and Salam, *Grand New Party*, pp. xix and 25 (emphasis added).

Borrowing from the research of Allan Carlson on the “maternalists” of the early-twentieth century, Douthat and Salam explore the socially conservative nature of the New Deal. Indeed, unlike the socially liberal Great Society that embraced family diversity, the New Deal celebrated the “normal, and indeed the *normative*, family: a male head of household who served as the sole breadwinner, a mother who remained in the home, and three or more children.” By upholding a “family wage” for working fathers, they note, the New Deal helped to deliver security and independence for almost every household, allowing the American family to carve out for itself, in the words of Christopher Lasch, a “haven in a heartless world.”<sup>40</sup>

Although Douthat and Salam do not mention the GOP contribution to the New Deal—namely, the 1948 Revenue Act that targeted tax relief toward married parents with children<sup>41</sup>—they do credit the bipartisan New Deal for fostering an “era of profound social conservatism” after World War Two that “embodied the domestic aspirations of Americans from every walk of life”:

The economic order reinforced the social order, and vice versa: There were stable families in every stratum of society, and rising incomes as well. Marriage rates soared, and birth rates followed; divorce rates plunged; the illegitimacy rate fell among rich and poor alike. The chaos associated with industrialization had been turned back, seemingly; civic life flourished, churchgoing rose, and crime rates fell and fell. Immigration had been tightly restricted, and assimilation had worked so well that fewer Americans spoke a foreign language in the fifties than at any point since the 1840s.<sup>42</sup>

It comes as no surprise, then, that the first chapter of *Grand New Party* that offers a policy agenda is entitled, “Putting Families First.” Moreover, that chapter’s first recommendation is “pro-family tax reform”

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40. *Ibid.*, p. 27 and 26.

41. They do, however, note that the GOP pushed for the 1939 Amendments, which included generous spousal benefits, that made the Social Security Act of 1935 even more supportive of marriage, the family wage, and large families.

42. Douthat and Salam, *Grand New Party*, pp. 29.

that “keep taxes lowest for those entering the workforce and preparing to have children and for young families making investments in their offspring.” The authors like the tax-reform proposal of *National Review’s* Ramesh Ponnuru, a proposal that eliminates most deductions but expands the tax credit for children to \$5,000, indexes it to inflation, and makes it also applicable to payroll taxes. But unlike Ponnuru, they think such reform must not back away from the difficult challenge of being specifically *marriage* friendly, meaning limiting the child tax credit to married couples only: “America needs to reckon seriously with the damage done by illegitimacy, and the importance of policies that privilege married couples, and reward them for doing right by their children.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Why the GOP Needs a Social Vision**

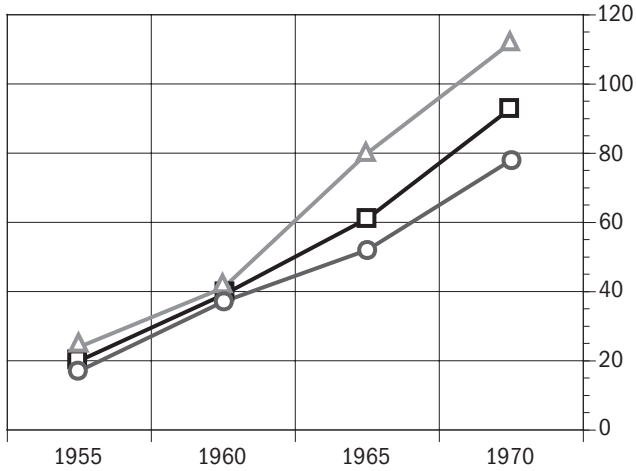
Douthat and Salam’s basic argument, “It’s the culture, stupid,” may not sit well with economic conservatives, but the record confirms the authors’ contention that widespread anxiety has not been displaced by lower taxes, free trade, and a rising GDP. Even before the meltdown of 2008, the economy that Ronald Reagan inspired was never as great as its cheerleaders claim, especially when compared to the achievements of the 1950s and the 1960s. In the immediate postwar era, household income largely kept pace with GDP growth, and did so with only one wage earner in the vast majority of households. According to the Census Bureau, the median income of a married-couple family increased in inflation-adjusted terms by 93 percent between 1950 and 1970, as GDP increased by 112 percent in real terms. But from 1980 to 2005—when the GDP increased at the same pace (113 percent) as in the previous era—the median income of married-couple families chugged along at a much slower pace, increasing only by 26 percent. Ironically, the slower pace of family-income growth in the later period occurred as many mothers joined the labor force and as average family size dropped from just under four to two children. In fact, the median income of the married-couple family with a stay-at-home mother increased by only 4 percent.

The disparity between the two eras suggest that the Republican

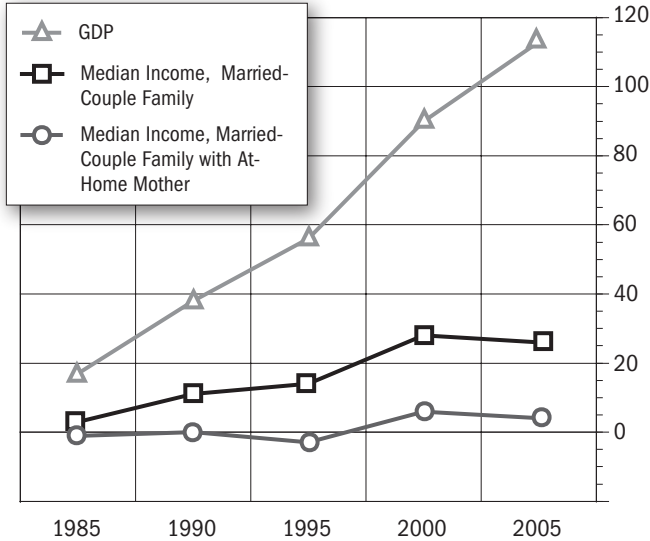
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43. *Ibid.*, pp. 186 and 166–68.

**The New Deal Boom**  
Percent Increase Since 1950



**The Reagan Boom**  
Percent Increase Since 1980



Source: Family-income increases were calculated using 1947–2008 data in 2008 dollars, from U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements. GDP increases from 1950 to 1970 were calculated using data in 1996 dollars from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2003 edition, Tables HS-32. GDP increases from 1980 to 2005 were calculated using data in 2000 dollars from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2010 edition, Table 651.

formula for growing the economy by cutting taxes across the board—party orthodoxy since President Reagan—has not ushered in the promised golden age. Reagan was surely the greatest president of the postwar era, and a friend of social conservatives, but the Great Communicator did little to implement policies to temper the destructive social pathologies let loose by the sexual and feminist revolutions, pathologies that have only grown worse since Reagan left office. Likewise, the Grand Old Party should not presume that an updated version of the “Contract with America” would deliver a permanent majority. The 1994 contract had its pluses, but its social vision was limited to reforming means-tested welfare and curbing illegitimacy among the underclass. It did not, like the New Deal, offer a normative social vision of the American middle-class family as the basis of a healthy society and a robust economy.

Republicans will surely balk at taking lessons from a Democratic president, namely Franklin Roosevelt, yet they should remember that the social achievements of the New Deal owe their genius to *Theodore Roosevelt*, a Republican and the nation’s first socially conservative president. Douthat and Salam do not make the connection, but Allan Carlson documents that most of the social policies of the New Deal—from the family wage and income-tax rates based upon number of children to the endorsement of full-time motherhood that justified public assistance for young widows—were initially advocated by the nation’s twenty-sixth president. Like no other president, Theodore Roosevelt saw the correlations between family life and national life. He was alarmed at Census Bureau data showing significant increases in divorce rates and declines in birth rates in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, he highlighted throughout his presidency the themes he introduced in his famous 1899 “strenuous life” speech. Lamenting the self-indulgence of his own generation, especially privileged Anglo-Saxons living in the northeastern states, the father of six children claimed that the future of the American civilization depended upon moral citizens who “do their duty,” which he interpreted chiefly in terms of family life:

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44. Allan Carlson, *The “American Way”: Family and Community in the Shaping of American Identity* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003), pp. 1–16.



A healthy state can exist only when the men and women who make it up lead clean, vigorous, healthy lives; when the children are so trained that they shall endeavor, not to shrink difficulties, but to overcome them; not to seek ease, but to know how to wrestle triumph from toil and risk. The man must be glad to do a man's work, to dare and endure and to labor; to keep to himself, and to keep those dependent upon him. The woman must be the housewife, the helpmeet of the homemaker, the wise and fearless mother of many healthy children.<sup>45</sup>

### Learning from Lincoln

TR is not the only Republican president that, if alive today, would warn his party of the shortcomings of a narrow economic focus at the expense of a social vision. Similar moral concerns motivated the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln. According to two-time Lincoln Prize winner Allen C. Guelzo, his appreciation of and contention for “the necessity of a moral republic” as the only way to deal with the issue of slavery is what drove the home-schooled prairie lawyer to run for the Senate in 1858 and for president in 1860. That did not keep him from advancing economic arguments against slavery, but his “hatred” of the peculiar institution stemmed from his conviction that slavery is a moral wrong—an evil—that violated natural law and American founding principles.<sup>46</sup>

His chief opponent, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, approached slavery in the same way that economic conservatives and most Democrats would prefer to deal with social issues today: keep questions of morality out of the public discussion. As an advocate of what Michael J. Sandel calls “the procedural republic”<sup>47</sup>—which may well be the prevailing political philosophy of both parties today and the “mass upper-middle class” of Douthat and Salam—Douglas feared that the injection of morality into

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45. “Theodore Roosevelt Blasts Ignoble East and Advocates the Strenuous Life,” in *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, updated and expanded, ed. William Safire (New York: Norton, 2004), pp. 537–42.

46. Allen C. Guelzo, “Forging A Moral Vision for a Don't Care Society: The Moral Leadership of Abraham Lincoln,” *Family Policy*, March-April 1999, pp. 1–14.

47. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 27 and 43–54.

national politics would polarize the nation, prevent the development of the western frontier, and hamper economic prosperity. His solution to the predicament of slavery was “popular sovereignty,” a variation of today’s “pro-choice” position on abortion: allow each territory to decide the issue before it was granted statehood; this way, Yankees and southerners would not have to argue over a “divisive” issue. As Guelzo summarizes:

Douglas, for Sandel, was the paragon of a “thin” notion of democracy, in which a preoccupation with personal rights trumps all notions of advancing a common good . . . Lincoln, by contrast, saw politics as moved by a universal and shared morality, and opposed slavery as a violation of that morality. Douglas argued that the people ought to be allowed to make up their own minds about slavery . . . and that all that mattered was whether the process of making up those minds was open-ended and uncoerced; Lincoln argued that minds which could not see that slavery was an abomination were operating on the wrong principles.<sup>48</sup>

If he were alive today, Lincoln would not be intimidated by “divisive” social issues. Nor would he listen to those seeking to narrow the party’s agenda to “fiscal responsibility, constitutionally limited government, and free markets” or advance a “federalist” solution to abortion rights or marriage law. He might even suggest that influential voices that think the party can be fiscally conservative but socially neutral are operating on the wrong principles. The sixteenth president would surely want to see the GOP offer *moral* leadership for a country that faces a crisis almost as serious as what she faced in 1860.

Resting on its laurels in the wake of recent victories in Massachusetts, Virginia, and New Jersey, the party establishment may be tempted to dismiss all this talk about Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. But that would be short-sighted. If the party wants the prize that has remained out of reach since Kevin Phillips wrote *The Emerging Republican Majority* in 1969, it will need to listen, like never before, to its most loyal constituency and project a principled moral vision that transcends tax

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48. Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), pp. xxi.

cuts, a vision that will resonate with the aspirations of middle America, not elites. If it does that, the Grand Old Party will not only save itself, but also might save America.

*Mr. Patterson, editor of THE FAMILY IN AMERICA, served in the George W. Bush Administration as a senior speechwriter at the Small Business Administration and at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*