



# Liberty & Opportunity for All— Conservatism & “The Florida Way”

Paul Renner

**F**rom the Reagan era to the 2016 election, there was little difference among those who embraced the conservative label. Like your favorite brand, you knew what to expect. Yet during the 2016 primaries, diverse candidates like Donald Trump, Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz and John Kasich each uniformly described themselves as conservative, but there were clear differences in both style and substance. Two generations

removed from the “Reagan Revolution,” Reagan’s descendants were often speaking past each other. While conservatism’s core philosophical foundations remain the same, conservatism’s policies and focus are shifting to meet the historical challenges of this era.

Since Ronald Reagan swept Jimmy Carter out of office, there has been an unmistakable leftward shift among elites who

control our major institutions, globally and in our country. This new dynamic explains who conservatives elect to office and the shift in our policy priorities. Take free trade, for example. While efficient from a market perspective, when the picture emerged that global trade advocates had compromised our national security by creating dependence on hostile nations like China, conservatives took notice. Legacy media may decry conservative “nationalism” in ominous tones, but conservatives have reasonably retreated in their support of global trade to favor American interests and American workers. Other changes in what conservatives emphasize today follow a similar pattern.

The changes on the political left represent a profile very different in kind from your father’s tax and spend liberals for whom politics was only one aspect of life, who nevertheless joined us at church, shared our belief in free speech, and at holiday gatherings respected the adage that “we don’t talk about politics and religion.” For today’s left, politics *is* religion. Turning politics into a religious faith, the left now promotes the *politicization of everything*. It seeks to dominate or replace true religious faith, the nuclear family, and every other institution in America that might oppose it. Conservatism’s priorities have changed in both substance and tone because we are facing a radical cultural revolution that seeks to redefine everything, including what you can say—or even believe—in the land of the free.

In their push to politicize everything, the left is mainstreaming self-destructive ideas once limited to university campuses.

Only religious devotion can explain why they care more that our military receive CRT training than address China’s military expansion and threat to world peace; why they push to shut down key elements of our energy sector in their worship of climate alarmism and the statist control it will require; and, why they want to indoctrinate our children and deny parents the primary role of raising their children (while almost half of our 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students fail to read on grade level). If you challenge their doctrinal tenets, they want you cancelled. Cancel culture is nothing more than a means of enforcing their politico-religious orthodoxy on the rest of us. It’s a new, more dangerous Inquisition.

Our nation was founded by various religious refugees who wanted to keep the state out of religion to avoid the persecution they had experienced before they fled their home countries. It resulted in the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. For many of us, our faith brings us to conservatism as the best secular model for a secular world, but we can unequivocally say that conservatism is not our religion. My faith is Christianity, not politics. I have no idea which of my fellow believers are Democrats and really don’t care. We share a common bond, a non-political one. In fact, most people of faith understand that merging religion and politics is dangerous and can result in corrupting both.

In practice, the left’s shift to politics as religion means their own doubts can never be spoken out loud and they become trapped in irrational policy prescriptions that are immune to reason and countervailing facts. Politics-turned-faith allows

an irrational idea like Defund the Police to proceed unquestioned while new crime victims pile up. Even when the facts revealed clear spikes in crime, the left held firm until it became politically untenable. The same is now happening with the effort to shut down large sections of our energy sector. A rational assessment would conclude that this will induce an energy crisis, but it's an article of faith that strict carbon neutral timelines must be met. The negative real consequences for real people will remain a non-factor until it's too late.

Conservatism advocates for the reason-tested principles of freedom described in the Declaration of Independence and enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Freedom and liberty worked in 1776 and they work just as well today. And the path is never static—as a state and as a nation, we are in a constant state of movement—either in the direction of freedom and opportunity or away from it. Conservatives want freedom, liberty, and opportunity for everyone, not just those who agree with us. As a veteran who served in Desert Storm and Afghanistan, I was privileged to join our great military to protect the freedom of all Americans, including those who do not share my views. When conservatives speak about founding principles, those principles protect and serve everyone. Significantly, the conservative principles we follow come through application of common sense and asking what works in the real world. The principles of the left have no such limitation. Coming from academia, where abstract ideas win praise without a moment's contact with reality, it is no surprise their solutions fail spectacularly

when implemented in the real world.

Unfortunately, there are a few on the right who claim to be conservative for whom politics has become a religion of their own, complete with anger, irrationality and a disregard for the rule of law. A Republican candidate for the state house angrily tweeted that “Under my plan, all Floridians will be able to shoot FBI, IRS, ATF, and all other federal troops on sight. Let freedom ring.” Anyone on the right who disregards the rule of law or speaks in the language of leftist groups like Antifa may have a name, but it's not conservatism. True conservatives will stand for freedom, the rule of law and the Constitution—always.

Instead of rage, what we need in this moment is principled and courageous conservatives who, like Margaret Thatcher, are not for turning. I firmly believe that the future of American conservatism is being defined and put into practice here in Florida by Governor Ron DeSantis and the Florida Legislature. All eyes are on Florida. What we do here has and will continue to influence what happens in other states. For the nation, Florida has become the beacon of hope as we suffer through the leftist policies of the Biden Administration.

Florida is providing conservative leadership at the state level that places us on a collision course with the Biden Administration and our philosophical opposites at the state level. Think Gavin Newsome and the California Legislature. Federalism allows us to watch the competition between what I call the Florida Way and the California Way, two dramatically different visions that are vying to represent our nation's future. Spoiler alert: businesses and people are

*leaving* California in droves, while businesses and people are *coming to* Florida in droves.

During COVID, blue states like California decided that casinos and abortion clinics were essential, but churches were not. In Florida, we declared everyone essential. California locked down; Florida remained open and free. Governor DeSantis and the Florida Legislature led the fight against the Biden Administration, so people did not lose their jobs over unconstitutional vaccine and mask mandates. California ordered children with little risk from COVID to remain masked, while Gavin Newsome dined at fancy restaurants unmasked with friends. The California Way is that the rules don't apply to our masters, just the rest of us.

The Florida Way understands that parents are responsible for raising their children. The California Way thinks parents have no business determining what is taught to their children in school. The Florida Way quickly returned students to in-person learning, avoiding major learning losses experienced in blue states, which kept children home far longer. The California Way will cast a tragic COVID shadow over an entire generation of children, both academically and psychologically.

The California Way embraces woke prosecutors who object to their main role: prosecuting criminals. The Florida Way was

demonstrated when the legislature passed HB 1, which said yes to free speech but no to violent riots and destruction of property. The California Way has left a trail of victims who will never receive justice. The Florida Way stands for victims and sends perpetrators straight to prison.

Like the Governor, I am laser focused on protecting our constitution and the rule of law while expanding freedom, liberty, and opportunity for all Floridians. Along with my colleagues in the legislature, like President-designate Kathleen Passidomo, we intend to leave Florida better than we found it. We will pursue The Florida Way, advancing policies that benefit everyone in our state. We can and will fight aggressively, but without abandoning civility or a commitment to openly debate ideas with our colleagues on the other side. Our challenges are great, but we fully intend to tackle them. Florida will lead the nation, so that we can remain the Shining City on a Hill that Reagan once described. Conservatism has adapted to meet the historical moment, but our love for this country is as strong as ever, it calls us to action, and we will not be turning.

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