

AMERICA
the STRONG



*Conservative Ideas to
Spark the Next Generation*

WILLIAM J.
BENNETT

New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Book of Virtues*

AND JOHN T. E. CRIBB

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America the Strong: Conservative Ideas to Spark the Next Generation

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INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK IS to explain what conservatism means. It explains basic conservative principles, the reasons conservatives stand for them, and how they apply to challenges our country faces.

We live in a time when many Americans feel uncertain about the future. They worry about jobs and the economy. They worry about whether the next generation will have a standard of living as high as previous ones. Distrust of major political institutions runs deep. There are concerns about whether the country is on the right path, and even if it might be in decline.

Conservative principles speak to these problems. The United States was founded on conservative principles, and they helped America become a great and strong nation. They can help keep it strong for generations to come.

For that to happen, each generation must pass those principles on to the next. Each generation has to offer clear explanations of certain ideas and values to young people as they reach adulthood. That responsibility has much to do with whether the next generation's future is dim or bright.

The idea for this book grew from questions a smart teenager asked her dad, one of the book's coauthors, John Cribb. The questions

came during their drives to school while listening to *Bill Bennett's Morning in America*, the conservative talk radio show hosted by this book's other coauthor.

Questions like "Why do terrorists want to kill Americans?" and "What do you think about global warming?" and "Why shouldn't rich people pay all the taxes?"

And this one: "Exactly what is a conservative, anyway?"

They're the kind of questions some bright young people start to ask when they're in high school or college, or perhaps when they start to vote or get their first full-time job. Questions they ask when they begin to realize that events in the news really do affect them, their family, their friends, and their country.

What is a conservative? This book answers that question and more than a hundred others about issues ranging from immigration to illegal drugs. It examines issues from a conservative standpoint and explains why conservative ideas are good for our country.

If you are a young person just beginning to pay attention to current affairs and politics, there are a couple of things you should know. The first is that nearly 40 percent of Americans consider themselves conservative. Nearly 25 percent consider themselves liberal (the opposite of conservative). So conservatives outnumber liberals by a fairly wide margin.¹

The second thing you should know is that despite their numbers, conservatives sometimes face questions and even sneering remarks about the values they stand for. Portions of the culture tend to depict conservatism as backward and wrongheaded. They may try to convince you that conservatives are mean-spirited, greedy, prejudiced people.

Most of the national "mainstream media" news organizations in the United States have a strong liberal bias. That includes ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, MSNBC, PBS, and NPR. (Fox News is the major exception.) It also includes influential newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

INTRODUCTION

Liberal journalists outnumber conservative journalists in overwhelming numbers. Only 7 percent of journalists identify themselves as Republicans (a largely conservative political party). Four times as many identify themselves as Democrats (a largely liberal party), and there is little doubt that the 50 percent who say they are “independent” generally lean left.² Many reporters claim to be objective, but they slant their news coverage to favor liberal causes and put conservatives in a bad light.³

Hollywood, likewise, is a famously liberal place, and many of the television programs and movies it produces have the same bias. They carry messages that belittle the values and attack the institutions many Americans respect—messages like sleeping around is fine, religious people are nuts, and businessmen don’t care about poor people or the environment.

College campuses may be the most anti-conservative places in the country. Liberal professors dominate most faculties. At many universities, conservative ideas are shouted down or cut off. “Instructors feel free to mock conservatives in the classroom, and administrators pay scant attention when their posters are torn down or their sensibilities offended,” writes a rare conservative Ivy League professor.⁴

Liberal politicians routinely paint conservatives as mean-spirited extremists. President Barack Obama, for example, who is probably the most liberal president in history, told Republicans in Congress, “Stop just hating all the time.”⁵

In short, several of America’s “elite” institutions give out anti-conservative messages, some subtle and some not so subtle. The bearers of those messages aren’t interested in helping anyone understand conservative principles. They’re interested in smearing those principles and, if you are conservative, then maybe you, too.

One good way to understand what conservatism is really about is to use the acronym FLINT to remember five core concepts: Free enterprise, Limited government, Individual liberty, National defense,

and Traditional values. These five principles are a good summary of conservative thought in America today. They represent ideas, institutions, and values that conservatives prize.

The acronym FLINT has several things in common with the stone flint, a hard quartz that produces a spark when struck by steel. This property made it an indispensable part of the flintlock rifle carried by the Minutemen, who were always vigilant and ready to mobilize in the Revolutionary War.

Like the stone, the ideas represented by FLINT are sound and durable. Like the Minutemen, they stand for strength and vigilance in defense of liberty. They've sparked greatness in the American people and can do so again for the next generation.

You can get a good overview of these principles by turning to the next section. Following the overview, you'll find chapters that go into more detail about conservative ideas and related issues using a question-and-answer format.

The questions in this book are good jumping-off points for discussions about political and civic values. These are important discussions for younger Americans to have with parents and older adults. If they don't take place, it will be hard for the rising generation to understand what this country is all about and to take up its civic responsibilities. It will also be hard for young conservatives to defend their ideas.

It's not easy to come up with off-the-cuff explanations when a young person asks a question like, "Was America founded on Christian principles?" Or when a student says, "My teacher told me that the United States is an imperialist country—is that true?" A lot of times, the first reaction is, "Good grief, where to begin?" We hope that conservatives who have the next generation's best interests in mind can use this book to help supply some answers.

There's an old saying that if you're not a liberal when you're twenty-five, you have no heart, and if you're not a conservative by

thirty-five, you have no brain. In other words, liberal ideals often appeal to the passions and enthusiasm of youth, but wisdom and experience eventually lead people to become more conservative.

There is some truth to that, but it's also true that many young Americans are conservative by nature and upbringing, at least in some respects. And it's not always easy for them to face the onslaught of cues from the popular culture telling them that being conservative is backward and wrong.

This book provides some armor for their intellect. It supplies, we hope, reinforcement for conservative beliefs and clear rationales for taking a conservative stance. When people have a good understanding of their own beliefs, they feel more confident sticking up for them when challenged. This book can help conservatives make their arguments with candor, intelligence, and good will.

In reading this book, you may realize that you are conservative about some issues and not particularly conservative about others. Or you may come to the conclusion that you are not conservative at all. That's fine. There is lots of room for differing views in this country. You may not agree with conservative viewpoints, but you should at least know what they are.

We hope that in reading and thinking about the principles discussed here, you find much that appeals to common sense. On a personal level, conservative philosophy is rooted in solid, lasting values that can help you live a good life, one that does good for others. On a political and social level, those values can help your community, state, and country be better places.

We also hope this book helps you understand that conservatives are not people who are stuck in the past. Like this country's founders, conservatives have deep respect for the past and what we can learn from it, but they also welcome new ideas that make good sense.

We believe this country's best days are ahead. But we need to refocus on some values and principles that have made it great. As the

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Declaration of Independence says, “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires” that we restate those principles from time to time. In the hearts and hands of the next generation, they will help our nation thrive.

CONSERVATIVE PRINCIPLES: AN OVERVIEW

IF YOU'RE WONDERING what it means to be a conservative, this chapter is a good place to start. It gives a general overview of modern American conservative thought, as well as a brief description of its opposite, liberalism.

When you're ready for a little more detail, flip through the chapters in the rest of this book. There you'll find issue-by-issue answers to questions about conservative ideas and values.

What is a conservative?

The term *conservative* comes from the Latin word *conservare*, which means to keep safe, maintain, or preserve. Conservatives want to preserve society's best values and wisdom.

The values that conservatives strive to maintain aren't new. Most have been around for a very long time, passed down from generation to generation because they make life worth living. Values like "love your neighbor as yourself" and "honesty is the best policy." Virtues such as self-discipline, generosity, and gratitude. When we forget or neglect these things, individual lives unravel and civilizations can even come apart.

When conservatives step back and look at the world, when they study human activity and history, they see a pattern. That pattern is a set of truths that run through all of time—principles about how best to live and treat our fellow human beings.

These principles aren't truths that each person invents for himself or herself. They are universal standards of right and wrong, or "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," as the founders of the United States put it in the Declaration of Independence. They were in operation before you were born and will be around long after you die.

The Ten Commandments, found in the biblical books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, are some of the greatest and most famous examples of such timeless moral laws. No better code of conduct has ever been written. When people follow principles like "thou shalt not steal" and "thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour," their lives tend to be fulfilling, meaningful, and good. When they break them, bad things generally happen.

Conservatives recognize that enduring moral truths exist, and they are concerned with preserving ways that help us all live up to them. But conservatives don't claim to be morally superior to everyone else. Like everyone else, they are imperfect creatures. They also realize that the world is a complicated place, that applying principles to life requires judgment, and that sometimes there are exceptions to rules. (For example, killing is generally wrong, but sometimes—for example, in war—killing is necessary.)

Conservatives take history seriously. They know there is much to be learned from the long record of human experience. It reveals both the possibilities and limitations of human nature. History contains much inhumanity and misery, yet an honest reading shows that, despite some great blots, the achievement of Western civilization—and the United States in particular—stands high.

None of this means that conservatives revere and want to preserve

everything old. Sometimes old ideas, such as ancient prejudices, need to be rejected. Values are worth protecting only if they do good.

Preserving society's best values and wisdom lies at the heart of conservatism. But there's more to it than that, as you'll see throughout this book.

In America, being conservative involves a commitment to the principles upon which this country was founded, ideals found in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, and other writings—ideals such as that all people are created equal and that all have the right to think and speak freely. Conservatives believe that these founding principles have made the United States a powerful force for good in the world.

Although there is no neat and tidy list of American conservative beliefs, there are several ideas that conservatives tend to agree with. One handy way to remember those ideas is the acronym FLINT, which corresponds to the five concepts of Free enterprise, Limited government, Individual liberty, National defense, and Traditional values. These five concepts are critical for understanding American conservative thought.

Free Enterprise

Conservatives recognize that free enterprise—or capitalism, as it's also known—is the best system the world has ever seen for creating jobs and good living conditions. It has lifted countless millions of people out of poverty and made their lives better.

The liberty we enjoy is closely connected to free enterprise. At its best, free enterprise makes possible the liberty we have to choose our own paths, to work toward our goals and dreams.

Free enterprise brings the opportunity to obtain property, whether it be a home, a car, or a new pair of shoes. No one is really free without being able to retain the fruits of his or her own labor.

Conservatives recognize the benefits of competition, which is a

vital part of free enterprise. Competition between businesses creates better products and services, as well as lower prices. It encourages entrepreneurship and fosters good, hard work. The competition of free enterprise is a major reason businesses are usually more efficient and productive than government.

For all these reasons, the American founders set up this country to be a “commercial republic,” as Alexander Hamilton called it. They wanted it to be a place where business flourishes and where freedom and commerce support each other so people can thrive.

Like any human institution, free enterprise brings problems. It can cause excessive materialism and emphasis on money. Wide gaps can open between rich and poor. Competition can bring out the best in people, but sometimes it brings out the worst. Corporations sometimes take advantage of people, both customers and employees alike.

Free enterprise requires some checks on its darker impulses. Sensible laws can help keep business free *and* fair. Even more important is a culture that values integrity and expects business to be conducted honestly.

Despite its drawbacks, the free enterprise system is without equal in giving people the opportunity to earn a good living. It is a cornerstone of our republic, our liberty, and our nation’s success.

Limited Government

Conservatives support the principle of limited government. That means government powerful enough to protect people’s rights and vigorous enough to help make the country a better place, but not so powerful that it keeps sticking its nose into people’s business and stepping on their liberties.

The founders realized that over time governments have a natural tendency to assume greater power and exert more control over people. “Power whether vested in many or a few is ever grasping,” Abigail Adams wrote, “and like the grave cries give, give.”¹ In framing

the Constitution, the founders did their best to set up checks and balances to curb government's power.

Despite their efforts, today's federal government keeps growing, spending, borrowing, taxing, and regulating. It's now so huge and clumsy that it has a hard time governing even itself. Many of its programs don't work very well. Bills passed by Congress are often so long and complex that few if any senators or congressmen read them before they become law. Researchers at the Library of Congress say that tallying the number of federal laws today is "nearly impossible."² Meanwhile, federal bureaucracies churn out thousands of regulations per year.

Government spending is out of control. Every year Washington spends more money than it has. As this book went to press in 2015, the federal debt was a staggering \$18 trillion and rising—nearly \$60,000 for every man, woman and child.³

Conservatives believe we should respect the limits the Constitution places on government. The federal government should focus on vital jobs such as defending the country from foreign enemies, protecting basic rights, enforcing laws, ensuring equal opportunities, and helping people who are truly in need. It shouldn't be smothering businesses with regulations and burying the country under a mountain of debt. It shouldn't be taxing so much that it hurts the economy.

Conservatives recognize that state and local governments, being closer to the people they serve, often do a better job at governing than the federal government in Washington, DC. The elected representatives in state and local governments have a better sense of what works in their regions. And being closer means it's easier for citizens to hold those representatives accountable.

It's a mistake to assume that government has a solution for every problem. Government has important work to do, but in the task of helping society remain intact, much work takes place in the families, neighborhoods, churches, temples, schools, and voluntary groups that make communities good, healthy places to live.

Individual Liberty

The Declaration of Independence states that all people are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including the right to liberty. Our right to liberty does not come from government. It is a gift from God. Government's job is to protect that right.

If you look back at history, you realize that most people never got to enjoy much freedom. Most of the world's history is one of rule by kings, emperors, dictators, and governments that told people how they must live. That's still true today in many parts of the world. Liberty is a rare and precious thing, and conservatives are mindful that we must never take it for granted.

Liberty doesn't mean being able to do whatever you want without regard for yourself or others. That is licentiousness, a lack of moral restraint. Millennia ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle pointed out that liberty is no good unless it involves some limits. "Every man should be responsible to others, nor should any one be allowed to do just as he pleases," he wrote, "for where absolute freedom is allowed, there is nothing to restrain the evil which is inherent in every man."⁴

Conservative thought stresses that true liberty comes with responsibilities. It involves seriousness about acting the right way. It means using your freedom to take charge of yourself and your conduct and owning up to it.

Liberty worth having requires virtues like self-restraint, honor, and respect for others. It involves living up to obligations to family members, friends, neighbors, and anyone who may depend on you. It involves thinking not just of self but of the common good as well.

True liberty implies respecting the rights of others and abiding by the law. In a democracy, it also means abiding by the will of the majority while preserving the rights of the minority. When people neglect those duties, liberty disintegrates.

In a self-governing nation like the United States, it's critical that

citizens take responsibility for their own decisions and actions. It's also critical for citizens to assume some obligation for the well-being of their community and their country.

When we don't take responsibility for ourselves and our communities, government often assumes it for us. Whenever that happens, we forfeit some of our liberty.

National Defense

Conservatives have tremendous admiration and gratitude for the United States military. Like most Americans, they place more confidence in it than any other national institution.⁵

To be a conservative is to grasp that men and women in the US armed forces are engaged in a noble effort. When citizens enter the military, they enter an organization pledged to defend the lives of others. They live and perhaps die for other people.

We owe our liberty and our existence as a country to the US military. It is the greatest defender of freedom in the world. There have been times when America has made mistakes with its armies, and even committed grave injustices. But overall the world is a much better place because of the American soldier, and it's a much safer place because our military is strong.

Defending the country from foreign attack is arguably the federal government's most important job. No other part of society is capable of taking over that responsibility.

We live in dangerous times. Islamic terrorist groups have declared all-out war against the United States. They take joy in murdering American citizens. Iran and North Korea routinely make threats. Authoritarian regimes in Russia and China have been signaling an alliance.

Maintaining a powerful military is not only the best way to defend ourselves; it's the best way to keep the peace. It's an

expensive obligation. But as General Douglas MacArthur once said, “The inescapable price of liberty is an ability to preserve it from destruction.”

Conservatives hate war as much as anyone else. They fully understand the costs of war, including the lost and damaged lives. They know that wars often don’t go the way the strategists planned. But they also understand that sometimes war is necessary. “War is an ugly thing,” the philosopher John Stuart Mill once wrote, “but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing *worth* a war, is worse.”⁶

Traditional Values

Many of the topics covered in this book touch on traditional values. When conservatives stake out a position on an issue, you can count on it often being one that seeks to preserve those values.

For example, conservatives are strong advocates for freedom of religion, not just because they tend to be religious themselves, but because faith is the anchor of morality for most Americans. Most religions make us better people. Conservatives believe that the country is a better place when churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship flourish.

Family is another institution that conservatives strongly support. It has been said that the family is the first and original Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. It’s where the first and most important moral training takes place. Marriage is one of society’s fundamental institutions. Good marriages make men and women better people, and they make homes the best settings for raising children.

Conservatives expect schools to be parents’ allies in character training. Good schools teach about right and wrong. They make sure students learn math and history, but they also help students become honest, hardworking, fair-minded people who love their country.

Patriotism is an example of a traditional value that conservatives

promote. Some “sophisticated” people consider it an outdated, distasteful notion, one that can even lead nations to war. American conservatives believe that patriotism—love of country—is a virtue that leads us to improve our homeland and that the United States deserves our love and gratitude (as well as our willingness to criticize it when deserved).

A deeply held value among many conservatives is that abortion is wrong and that society should protect unborn babies, who are among the most vulnerable members of the human community. The Declaration of Independence says that all of us are endowed by our Creator with an unalienable right to life. Most conservatives believe that children in the womb have that right.

Conservatives understand that culture shapes and reflects people’s values. Music, art, books, movies, television shows, websites—they all send messages about right and wrong, about acceptable and unacceptable behavior. It makes a big difference whether the culture is sending messages that marriage is a serious and sacred matter and that doing drugs is dangerous and wrong, or whether it sends messages that no one expects marriages to last and that smoking weed is fine. Traditional values have a hard time surviving if the culture is at war with them.

Are conservatives against change?

No, not at all. It’s true that conservatives look to the past for guidance. They want to preserve the best values and wisdom handed down through the centuries. But conservatives also look to the future. They are eager to embrace change that makes sense and is in line with good, sound values.

Change is a necessary and inevitable part of life. Where there is no change, there is no vigor. If we never change, we can never make ourselves better.

In many ways, change is a very American ideal. This country is

quick to take up what's new, what's young, what's forward looking. Our nation was born out of change. The Great Seal of the United States, which you can see on the back of every dollar bill, carries the words *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. That's Latin (a very old language) for "A New Order of the Ages," signifying that 1776 marked a historic change—a new democratic era.

Conservatives don't reject change, but they are wary of rapid change because they know it can turn out to be change for no good reason or change simply for the sake of change. They disagree with the notion that everything new is good and everything old is bad. And they are suspicious of politicians who promise radical, sweeping changes that will transform the world. Such promises usually end up bringing more problems than solutions.

When it comes to change, conservatives often prefer to take things gradually. That gives time to see which changes are really good and to preserve conventions worth holding on to.

Conservatism is grounded in reality. It seeks to make the world better, but it does so with the understanding that the world is a complex place, and that often people's ideas to improve it don't work out as planned. Better to move forward step by step than lunge for a utopia that may well turn out to be a mirage.

Conservatives like to look at the evidence before them when tackling a problem and ask hard-nosed questions like "Has this approach worked in the past?" and "Has spending that money really been worth the results?" They are practical minded about reforms but also flexible about considering different approaches as circumstances change.

Prudence comes into play here. Prudence is practical wisdom. It's using reason to figure out the best course to take. Ancient Greek philosophers considered prudence to be one of the most important virtues because it allows us to make good decisions in putting other virtues like courage and perseverance into practice.

Prudence helps us look before we leap. It makes us stop and think

through long-term consequences instead of dashing toward a goal without considering the risks.

“I wisdom dwell with prudence,” the biblical book of Proverbs says.⁷ Conservatives welcome change, but they welcome it with prudence.

Do all conservatives see eye-to-eye on all issues?

No. There are millions of conservatives in the United States, so as you can imagine, they represent a range of views. Get any two of them in a room and they’ll agree on many issues, but they’ll find at least one or two they see differently.

All conservatives share, to some degree, basic positions like support for the free enterprise system, wariness of big government programs, and concern for preserving the ideals enshrined in the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and other founding documents. But there is much room for variety.

Here are some terms you’ll hear applied to conservatives of different stripes:

- **Fiscal conservatives** are concerned with trying to make the federal government more responsible in its spending habits. They favor less government spending, balanced budgets, and trying to reduce debt. They generally oppose higher taxes, though some fiscal conservatives believe tax increases may be necessary to pay off the government’s enormous debt.
- **Social conservatives** focus more on social issues—that is, issues that affect the health of society, such as education, crime, and abortion. They are concerned with preserving traditional moral values. They also want to strengthen the institutions that teach these values, like families and churches.
- **Christian conservatives** are Christians who support socially conservative policies. They apply their Christian values to

questions of politics and public policy. You'll sometimes hear this group called the "religious right," though that term may also include religious conservatives who aren't Christians, such as conservative Jews.

- **Traditionalist conservatives** emphasize the role of tradition and custom in guiding humanity. In their view, each generation inherits the accumulated wisdom, experience, and values of previous generations, kept alive in the traditions and customs that are passed down through time. Radical change that sweeps away traditions may harm society's best values.
- **Neoconservatives** have traditionally emphasized using evidence presented by social science to address problems like crime, poverty, and poor education. They also stress the importance of keeping America's military strong and, when necessary, opposing tyranny overseas. *Neo* means "new" in Greek; the original neoconservatives were former liberals who became conservative in the 1960s and 1970s in reaction to several developments, including the "sexual revolution," rising anti-Americanism on the left, and the left's failure to confront communism.
- **Libertarians** ally themselves with conservatives on some principles. They place their main emphasis on individual liberty and private property rights. They don't like the idea of government using its power to restrict people's freedom of choice. Libertarians don't necessarily consider themselves conservative. Many are conservative on fiscal issues and in their dislike of big government but more liberal on social issues. In foreign affairs, libertarians support free trade and generally oppose US troops being deployed overseas.

There is a fair amount of overlap between these different categories. Many people straddle or fall into more than one group. Some people are conservative on some issues and not so conservative on others.

Conservatives sometimes disagree about how to solve specific problems. That's because applying broad principles to real-life issues isn't easy. For example, it's one thing to believe that limited government is a good thing but quite another to decide exactly how much to limit government spending on programs like defense or aid to the poor.

The bottom line is that while conservatives agree on some fundamental principles, there is much diversity of opinion among their ranks. That's a good thing. Variety is often a sign of rich ideas and healthy debate.

How are liberals different from conservatives?

Liberals lie on the opposite side of the range of political opinions from conservatives. You'll sometimes hear them called "progressives" or "the left" (as opposed to "the right" or "the right wing," as conservatives are often called). Liberals are likely to vote for Democratic candidates and conservatives for Republicans, although that rule does not always hold true.

Liberals have much more faith than conservatives in the ability of the government to fix society's problems. They like the idea of the federal government in Washington, DC, running big programs that provide lots of services to people. Generally speaking, they place great confidence in the idea of skilled and knowledgeable government officials managing society at every level.

In essence, liberals want to use the power of government to reengineer society. The dream of many liberals is a government that provides services for everyone at every stage of life (a cradle-to-grave "nanny state," as conservatives often call it).

Liberals generally favor more government spending and higher taxes to fund more government programs. They are not as concerned about the government running up debt in order to fund more programs.

Many liberals are suspicious of the free enterprise system. They see it as a source of much inequality and unfairness in the world. They're often in favor of more government regulation to exert more control over business activities.

In the view of many liberals, one of the chief roles of government is to make things more equal in terms of people's income and material possessions. They support using the tax system to redistribute wealth from people with more to people with less.

Liberals are generally inclined to spend less than conservatives on defense and the military. They would rather spend money on social programs. Some liberals take a skeptical view of the military and regard it as an agent of destruction.

Liberals tend to attribute many of society's problems to racism, gender discrimination, and divisions between rich and poor. They often think of themselves as defenders of minorities and groups that have suffered discrimination in the past, such as blacks, women, and gays.

Extreme liberals (sometimes called "radical leftists") view American history largely in terms of its failures. They look at the American record as one of mistreatment of minorities, exploitation of the poor, and imperialism toward weaker nations.

As you can imagine, conservatives and liberals disagree on many political issues. For example, while conservatives in general believe that abortion is wrong and that society should protect unborn babies, many liberals support abortion rights. Liberals are more inclined than conservatives to believe that climate change is a serious threat and that government should regulate human behavior to slow down global warming. They are more likely than conservatives to believe that government should play a greater role in running the nation's health care system.

It's important to remember that conservatives and liberals are political opponents, but they're not enemies. They're fellow

Americans. Our enemies are those who want to do us harm, like Islamic terrorist organizations.

It's also important to remember that despite their differences, conservatives and liberals share many beliefs. For example, we can all agree on the importance of virtues like honesty, perseverance, and compassion. When conservatives say things like "We should honor our police officers for upholding the law and keeping us safe," the large majority of liberals would say, "I believe that too."

Conservatives and liberals share many of the same goals. They want people to get good educations and good jobs and to be happy and live good lives. They want the United States to be a nation that lives up to its finest promises. But ask a conservative and a liberal how to make all that happen, and you'll often get profound disagreement.

FREE ENTERPRISE



ONE SUMMER DAY IN 1807, a crowd gathered on the bank of the Hudson River in New York to watch Robert Fulton launch a “boat driven by a tea kettle.” People called it “Fulton’s folly” and predicted it would explode. Fulton lit the boiler, and the boat chugged up the river at an astounding four miles per hour. The *Clermont*, the first commercially successful steamboat, marked a new age of steam transportation.

Orville and Wilbur Wright dreamed up the first airplane in their bicycle shop in Dayton, Ohio. They experimented with model wings in a wind tunnel built out of an old washtub, a fan, and a wooden box. One of the nation’s leading scientists had shown by “unassailable logic” that human flight was impossible. But on a frigid December morning in 1903 at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, the Wright brothers’ plane lifted into the air with Orville aboard and launched the age of flight.

In the early 1970s, Motorola Corporation began developing a

wireless phone that people could carry around with them. One day in 1973, Motorola engineer Martin Cooper stood on a sidewalk in Manhattan, punched a number into a handset while pedestrians gave him curious looks, and made the first cell phone call. “Joel, I’m calling you from a cellular phone,” he told his counterpart at rival Bell Labs, “a real cellular phone, a handheld, portable, real cellular phone.”¹ That first cell phone was as large as a brick and weighed two and a half pounds. Within four decades, billions of people worldwide had pocket-sized phones.

On April Fool’s Day 1976, twenty-five-year-old computer hobbyist Steve Wozniak (“Woz” to fellow nerds) and his friend Steve Jobs, twenty-one, formed a company to sell a computer circuit board that Wozniak had built. Jobs sold his Volkswagen minibus and Wozniak sold his programmable calculator to fund their efforts. They assembled the circuit boards in the Jobs’s garage. It was the beginning of Apple, Inc.

All of those ventures were made possible by a system that in itself is a miracle, one that has transformed the world again and again—free enterprise.

Free enterprise is an economic system in which property, resources, and industry are controlled by individuals and businesses to make profits. Another name for free enterprise is capitalism, although free enterprise is in many ways a more accurate term since the freedom to conduct business is one of its bedrock principles.

Is free enterprise good or bad for the world?

Free enterprise has its drawbacks, but overall it’s a terrific economic system—the best the world has known. It’s certainly the best system in history for creating jobs and material well-being. Even government jobs depend on it since tax revenues generated by free enterprise pay government workers’ salaries.

In free markets, companies have to compete against each other for profits. That competition encourages businesses to offer the best possible products and services for the lowest cost. That puts a higher standard of living within more people's reach. Opportunity unleashes the creativity of inventors and entrepreneurs. That creativity drives civilization forward, from steamboats to airplanes to cell phones.

One way to appreciate free enterprise is to look at what life was like before it came along. Modern free enterprise, or capitalism, began in Great Britain along with the Industrial Revolution in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Before then, cities such as London were filthy, violent places where most people struggled simply to make it from one day to the next.

A child born in London around 1750 faced poor odds—as low as 25 percent—of living past age five.² Most people were illiterate. Poverty and disease were rampant. Jobs were hard to come by and often fleeting. The masses owned little more than the clothes on their backs. They had almost no hope that their lives or their children's lives would ever be any better.³

In the short term, free enterprise and industrialism did little to improve people's conditions—in some ways, they may have made things worse. You've probably read Charles Dickens's descriptions of early industrial towns full of soot-covered streets and dark factories with chimneys "out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled."⁴

But over time, as nations and cities adjusted to the upheaval brought on by rapid change, something close to miraculous happened. For millions of people, life got immeasurably better as they gained access to mass-produced goods—clothes, furniture, books, and automobiles. As business increased, so did job opportunities. A middle class emerged. Literacy spread. Incomes rose. People began to live much longer. Free enterprise was not solely responsible for these changes, but it had a great deal to do with them.

If you want to see the stark difference between life with free enterprise and life without it, search the Internet for “North Korea night photo.” Take a look at one of the nighttime satellite images of North Korea, a country run by a harsh dictatorship that controls the economy, and neighboring South Korea, a vibrant republic where free enterprise thrives. The darkness of North Korea is a sobering sight.

Yes, there is a troubling side to free enterprise. There are booms and busts. People get laid off, sometimes at the worst of times, as companies watch their bottom lines. In some parts of the world, workers labor in sweatshops.

But overall, the effects of free enterprise have improved people’s lives in countless ways. It is difficult to imagine what life would be like without mass-produced electric lights, washers, telephones, medicines, vaccines, motors, pens, soap, tires—the list goes on and on.

As Peter Wehner and Arthur C. Brooks write in their book *Wealth and Justice: The Morality of Democratic Capitalism* (to which this chapter is indebted), “The history of the last three centuries is indisputable: The rewards and benefits of capitalism far outweigh the drawbacks. In our view, it is not really a close call.”⁵

Doesn’t free enterprise make some people rich while others remain poor?

The median pay package of CEOs at large American companies was over \$10 million in 2013.⁶ Some of those businesspeople put on lavish displays of wealth with their mansions, yachts, and private jets.

It’s enough to make some people ask, “Is that fair, when so many people are struggling? Is it too much money?”

The first point to realize is that free enterprise can’t make everyone wealthy. No economic system can. We can’t all be rich. It’s just a fact of life we need to accept.

But the second point is just as important: while making relatively

few people rich, free enterprise brings countless others good incomes. It can help make everyone better off.

A woman who founds and spends twenty years building a biotech company might (or might not) make a lot of money for herself, but along the way her company provides jobs for its employees, jobs that otherwise would not exist. That's a very good thing. In this way, free enterprise has done more to employ people, lift them out of poverty, and improve their lives than any other economic system in history.⁷

"Fine," you might say, "let some people make lots of money, but not *that* much money—not \$10 million a year!" The problem with this argument is that it raises the question, Who gets to decide how much money people should make? The government? Should officials in Washington, DC, have the power to decide how much that woman who built the biotech company with twenty years of hard work should make? Is that fair? Should a nameless bureaucrat get to decide how much *you* can make?

If you take away people's chances to earn money and even make themselves rich, you take away much of their incentive to work hard, take risks, and launch new businesses. Do that, and people have much less reason to build companies like Apple, Google, and General Electric—or smaller companies like your local bank and hardware store. Then everyone loses, especially people who need jobs at those companies.

Fans of free enterprise need to acknowledge that huge income gaps between a company's management and its workers can lead to resentment. That can be bad for the company and all involved. It's something corporations must keep in mind.

People who make lots of money should remember, as Saint Paul tells us, that "God loveth a cheerful giver."⁸ It's also smart to remember that the Bible warns again and again of the dangers that wealth brings.

As for those among us who don't make lots of money, it's good to remember that free enterprise offers the best opportunity to rise

in the world and to make more money, perhaps even creating more jobs for others along the way. As Abraham Lincoln said, “The man who labored for another last year, this year labors for himself, and next year he will hire others to labor for him.”

Is free enterprise a moral system?

Critics say that free enterprise causes greed and excessive ambition. It turns life into a vicious competition in which the ruthless and dishonest exploit others to come out ahead.

In truth, sometimes people can and do act immorally in business—just as people sometimes act immorally in government or in their family lives. Human beings are imperfect creatures, and any system involving humans can lead to abuses and corruption. But we must weigh the good against the bad.

Yes, free enterprise is driven largely by self-interest, as the moral philosopher Adam Smith pointed out in his great book *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. People are naturally interested in getting things they need and want for happy, comfortable lives.

But self-interest is not the same as selfishness. We can be interested in improving our own lives while at the same time helping others. That’s what most business owners do when they hire people or when they sell products that people want. They are helping others while they help themselves.

In many ways, free enterprise can actually help us become better people because it encourages us to exercise several virtues. In work we learn responsibility and reliability when tasked with projects large and small. We gain perseverance in meeting tough deadlines. We learn about cooperation in dealing with colleagues and about civility in relations with customers, employers, and employees.

Entrepreneurs exercise creativity in coming up with new ideas. They develop habits of thrift in saving to start a business and

dedication in getting it off the ground. Managers and employees alike learn the value of honesty because the reality is that in the world of business, dishonesty is one of the surest ways to lose a business or get fired.

That said, the main purpose of free enterprise is to help people prosper and have more comfortable lives, not maintain virtue. To make sure people act morally and treat each other fairly in a free enterprise system, we have to look outside of free enterprise itself.

Government can help here. Laws that keep businesses from putting children to work or dumping chemicals in streams, for example, are good checks on free enterprise. As long as they don't hamper business with too much red tape, legislatures and courts can be business's allies in improving lives.

More important than government, though, is culture. The morality of any society's economic system depends on the morality of its culture. A corrupt culture will produce corrupt enterprise (and corrupt government). A decent culture will produce businesses that treat people well.

That means our most important institutions—families, churches and other houses of worship, neighborhoods, schools, and communities—must help produce people of good character who make good employers and employees. It takes a lot of work to maintain a culture that keeps capitalism within moral bounds. In a world full of commercialism, attention to virtue helps keep money and the things it can buy in perspective.

Calvin Coolidge, the thirtieth president of the United States, is famous for saying that “the chief business of the American people is business.” But he also reminded us that for all the prosperity that free enterprise has brought this country, without dedication to some deeper matters, it's all for nothing. “The things of the spirit come first,” he said. “Unless we cling to that, all our material prosperity, overwhelming though it may appear, will turn to a barren sceptre in our grasp.”¹⁰

Does socialism work?

Socialism is a political and economic system in which the government controls the means of production (such as factories and land) and the distribution of income. In essence, government control replaces the free markets of capitalism.

Virtually all Western nations, including the United States, have “mixed economies”—that is, economies that contain some elements of socialism mixed with free-market capitalism. The mixture varies from nation to nation. Political debates often involve the question of how far government control over a nation’s economy should go.

Some people on the left are attracted to the idea of socialism because it promises more economic equality. Because government has more control over the economy, the theory goes, it can make sure workers receive a greater share of goods.

The real-world record of nations that have veered toward socialism, however, is not good.

One reason socialist countries have often failed is that it’s virtually impossible for government officials—or for anyone—to plan and run an economy. Economies are enormously complex, made of countless interacting forces. No one fully understands how they work. Over time, centralized government control doesn’t work well.

More important, socialist countries take freedom away from people. Since the government assumes more control, individuals have fewer choices. If you have an idea to start a business and it doesn’t fit into the government’s plans, too bad for you—you might wait years for a permit to start that business, if it ever comes at all.

Someone once said that the problem with socialism is socialism, while the problem with capitalism is capitalists. Capitalism, despite the good it does, is sometimes abused by people. Socialism, on the other hand, is itself a fundamentally flawed system.

Socialism demoralizes people while making them dependent

on the state. It promises equality but in fact levels everyone down (except the ruling authorities) by taking away liberty. As Pope John Paul II wrote,

In the place of creative initiative there appears passivity, dependence and submission to the bureaucratic apparatus which, as the only “ordering” and “decision-making” body—if not also the “owner”—of the entire totality of goods and the means of production, puts everyone in a position of almost absolute dependence. . . . This provokes a sense of frustration or desperation and predisposes people to opt out of national life.¹¹

Cuba is a nearby socialist nation. A journalist on a recent visit wrote about the misery of most citizens and the luxurious lifestyles of the ruling class that controls the poor. Outside Havana’s tourist district, “the rest of the city looks as though it suffered a catastrophe on the scale of Hurricane Katrina or the Indonesian tsunami. Roofs have collapsed. Walls are splitting apart. Window glass is missing. Paint has long vanished. It’s eerily dark at night, almost entirely free of automobile traffic. . . . It is filled with people struggling to eke out a life in the ruins.”¹²

Free-market economies, even with their flaws, are far better than the trap of socialism.

What is “crony capitalism,” and what’s wrong with it?

In a free enterprise system, one of government’s jobs is to make sure competing businesses all play by the same rules. Government shouldn’t give some corporations special privileges and others not. Competition that’s truly free and fair requires a level playing field.

Unfortunately, modern American government tends to do this

job badly. Big corporations often get too cozy with government officials. That can lead to special treatment known as “crony capitalism.” Under crony capitalism, businesses (usually big corporations or groups of corporations) hire lobbyists who work to pass laws and regulations that favor those businesses. This goes on a lot in Washington, DC, in statehouses across the country, and even at the local government level.

Sometimes companies are looking for loans or grants. A corporation might go to its friends in government and say, “Look, we can create all kinds of jobs making this new product, but we’ll need some help getting it off the ground. Can the government guarantee a loan for us?”

That means taxpayers are taking a risk for that company, and if it fails, taxpayers are the ones who pay. A recent well-known example is Solyndra, a solar cell manufacturing company that went bankrupt in 2011 after getting a loan guarantee from the US Department of Energy. The bankruptcy cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.

Sometimes crony capitalism involves big corporations pushing for government regulations that make it tough for new businesses to enter their line of work. In other words, they use the government to protect themselves from new competition.

Sometimes it involves corporations getting special tax breaks for themselves written into a law. There’s nothing wrong with lower taxes (especially since America has one of the highest corporate tax rates in the world), but it’s not fair when some businesses have to pay much more than others. And it makes people mad when they read about big corporations that manage to pay practically no taxes.

Corporations that lobby the government in their own interests aren’t breaking any laws—that’s part of our democratic system. And there are times when it makes sense for government to extend a helping hand, especially if it’s help that can boost the economy and get people to work.

But rampant crony capitalism interferes with free enterprise, which depends on fair competition. It usually favors big corporations, which can afford to lobby government, at the expense of smaller companies. That can keep entrepreneurs from launching small businesses and creating jobs.

Crony capitalism rewards businesses based on connections and their ability to influence the government rather than the quality of their product or service. It inhibits competition, driving up the prices of goods for consumers.

Corporations shouldn't get a government-supplied edge over competitors. Government should be on the side of fair and open competition. That's the best way to foster innovation and economic growth.