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Building the  
Conservative  
Movement after  
Ronald Reagan

*By Rep. Newt Gingrich*



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# BUILDING THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT AFTER RONALD REAGAN

by Representative Newt Gingrich

I look out and see here many of the people who, over the years, have done much to make possible the conservative movement. We believe the process of ideas matters. And you matter because you care about ideas and you care about using ideas to change the real world. Let me point out that we have come a long way. In the early 1970s, it was probably inconceivable that you could have an intellectual, activist conservative meeting and fill more than a table. This meeting would have been unthinkable fifteen or twenty years ago.

Clearly new ideas are gaining momentum across this planet. Fundamental breakthroughs in political and social thinking are occurring. Look at Reagan in the U.S., Thatcher in Britain, Kohl and Mitterand on the Continent, and you see that the introduction of market-oriented thinking, the decentralization of government, and the privatization of social services are today's most important new ideas. Look at Hernando De Soto's work in Peru and its implications for the Third World. Look at the economies of Japan and the Four Tigers. Richard Nixon once compared his visit to Asia in the early 1950s with his visits thirty years later. He said the greatest single change was that in 1953, the wave of the future in Asia was Marxism. By 1983, Marxism in Asia was the wave of the past.

Yet in the United States and in the conservative movement, even with all these achievements, we have a sense of anxiety. I suspect almost every one of you has a sense that, somehow after eight years of Reagan, it was not supposed to be quite like this.

**Reasons to Be Anxious.** I want to suggest that there are good reasons to be anxious. Republican politicians seem to be very shocked when every poll asking the question: "Do you think America is on the right track or the wrong track?" produces majorities saying "the wrong track." And Republican politicians and conservatives feel that after seven years of Reagan, these should not be the results.

Conservatives need to understand that there are good reasons for this dissatisfaction. If you sit home for a couple of evenings and watch the news, you will see stories on the twin deficits of the budget and trade, stories on the tougher economic competition we now face in the world, stories on the new dynamic Soviet leadership. You will start to think that the longest economic growth cycle in peacetime also has to mean that a recession will occur at some point. You will see stories on terrorism. What do you think twenty nights of watching the Kuwaiti terrorist action does psychologically to people's sense of control over their immediate world? You look at the AIDS epidemic and at the drug problem and you say to

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yourself, “Gee, do you think America is on the right track or the wrong track?” You would have to be nuts to say the right track.

As a member of Congress, I am struck by the increasing level of anxiety in the House of Representatives — and the House is the nervous system of the body politic. There is a level of anxiety in both parties that I have not seen in the ten years I have been in Congress. And yet I think that this anxiety is warranted. If I were a Democrat and I looked at the track record of Democrats in presidential races since 1964, I would feel enormous anxiety that Edward Kennedy’s state had produced a governor with an ethnic name who was going to a convention in Atlanta which had as its other, largest, single bloc of delegates Jesse Jackson’s followers. I would say to myself if I were a Democrat “I feel a little uncertain about what November could look like.”

**Afraid to Polarize Issues.** On the other hand, if I were a Republican with any sense of historical knowledge, I would have to confront the following realities. In my lifetime, the Republican Party has twice attempted to hold the White House for longer than eight years — 1960 and 1976. Both times it had the advantage of incumbency — incumbent vice president and incumbent president who had been a vice president. Both times the Republican candidates thought of themselves in a bureaucratic model. They were superb bureaucratic politicians. They also tended to have the slowness and the caution associated with bureaucratic politicians. They were surrounded by advisors who thought winning required moving to the Left, crowding the Democratic candidate so that most voters would find a place under their umbrella. These candidates were afraid to polarize the issues or to identify the Democrat with the Left so that voters would support them because they were repelled by the Left. Both candidates lost very close elections, and in both cases the marginal states were probably stolen.

In both campaigns, the Republican candidates early on managed to be so confused about who they were that the conservative activists in the party spent most of the spring and summer worrying about their own nominee rather than defining the Democrat. Almost all their creative energy went into what the platform would look like, what the convention would look like, who the vice president would be, rather than asking the media and the electorate why the Democrats were getting a free ride. In both cases, the candidate thought that because of his incumbency he could run a truth-in-advertising campaign about politics in September and October. In both cases, the Democratic nominee was new, an outsider, a person who could claim achievement and, most important, a person who represented a swing ethnic group — Kennedy with Catholics, Carter with southerners. In both cases, an undefined candidate triumphantly went to the Democratic convention, bonded culturally with voters who then ignored the Republican political ads in September. And in both cases, the ads began to take effect in October — too late.

**Recovering from Jimmy Carter.** In 1960 and 1976 the Republicans assumed that the Democrats were more interested in ideology and personal differences than they were in power. The Republicans said up until Los Angeles that John F. Kennedy would never get Lyndon Johnson on the ticket and that Kennedy would lose the South. Republicans said up until New York that Carter, having humiliated the party regulars, would never get them to back him and that he would not carry the Northeast. Forced to choose between power and ideological politics, it took the Democrats in each case approximately a minute and twelve seconds to decide to put together the optimal ticket, bind the party together, get the machine geared up, and win the election.

Given that history lesson, I would say there are profound reasons why a Republican looking at the current situation should be at least as anxiety-ridden as the Democrats. The Reagan Administration deserves enormous credit for helping this country recover from Jimmy Carter, which I would remind you was no mean achievement. But we are still functionally ill as a nation. To be told as a patient that you have recovered from a heart attack does not mean that your gall bladder problem is not important. The heart attack was real. Carter, by 1980, had really led America to the verge of disintegration. We tend to forget that when we ask why Reagan did not accomplish more; we forget the mess he inherited. But I think there are five profound reasons why we did not accomplish more and why, without regard to the presidential race, we are anxiety-ridden today.

**Explaining Why the Left Was Wrong.** First, no political leader with Reagan's breadth of vision and authority has emerged in the conservative movement. Kemp speaks for economics, DuPont speaks for new ideas, Robertson speaks for social values, but there is no single charismatic articulator of our felt beliefs who binds us together and projects the future in the way that Goldwater did in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and in the way that Reagan did in the 1970s and 1980s.

Second, governing proved to be far more complicated than conservatives were prepared to handle. We had done very well in the 1970s at developing an analysis of the Left and explaining why the Left was wrong. We found two or three large themes that were adequate to govern at least through July of 1981.

We then discovered that the actual daily process of managing America was incredibly more complex than we understood. I would say we are only now beginning to catch up to where we should have been in January of 1981. That is why I am delighted this group is here to look at our system: not only the horizontal complexity of the separation of powers — the Supreme Court, the Legislative Branch, and the White House — but the vertical complexity of our federal system. For instance, to talk about education policy in America, you must begin with voluntarism and parenting, deal with child care and Sunday school, and then consider the varieties of formal schooling. There are approximately 17,000 public school districts alone. So when you talk about changing America, you are talking about an extraordinary system whose complexity we underestimated in the 1970s.

**Politics as Civil War.** Third, our conservative political philosophy calls for fundamental changes in our national culture. That has made our political victories less significant. We are in many ways more analogous to Wesley's "Methodism" and its impact on Britain in the 18th century than we are to a purely political movement. Because when you say "let's talk about voluntarism"; when you say "let's talk about privatization"; when you say "we need the work ethic"; when you say "we need tougher penalties and sanctions for unacceptable behavior like selling cocaine," you are talking about a cultural value shift far more fundamental than a change in politics. And we still have not fully accepted how important that is and what its consequences are.

Fourth, up until the Bork nomination, all of us failed to appreciate that the Left in this country has come to understand politics as civil war. The Left at its core understands in a way that Grant understood after Shiloh that this is a civil war, that only one side will prevail, and that the other side will be relegated to history. This war has to be fought with the scale and duration and savagery that is only true of civil wars. While we are lucky in this country that our civil wars are fought at the ballot box, not on the battlefield, nonetheless it is a true civil war. So the deliberate, systematic smearing and destruction of Bork was normal. It was

precisely what would happen in a civil war. You can expect from here on that the hard Left, which includes Jim Wright and Tony Coelho and many people who do not look hard Left, will try by chameleon-like actions to destroy our country. In fact, these individuals practice being chameleons: they are who they have to be today in order to be acceptable. But they do not represent American values. The hard Left will systematically root us out and destroy us if they can. We underestimated that, and frankly, we underestimated how socially dominant they would be. For instance, there are corporations that insist on funding socialists who then teach their grandchildren to despise them. We also underestimated how dominant and entrenched they would be in academia, the news media, and on Capitol Hill. As a consequence, the Left continues to seize the moral high ground in policy debates.

**The Anti-Religious Left.** Let me give you a couple of quick examples. There is an anti-religious Left in the U.S., and that is what the fight to override the Supreme Court's *Grove City* ruling was all about. The Left is anti-religious — a simple notion, not complicated. In the new liberal child care bill there is a paragraph that says that any institution receiving money under the bill cannot display religious pictures or symbols. They must be either physically removed or physically covered. That is fairly anti-religious. They do not pick on homosexual activist lifestyles. They do not pick on cable rock video. They do not pick on drug use. But in an age when we are concerned about child abuse, they say that to allow a four-year-old into a room displaying the Star of David or the Crucifix is to pollute them for life. But as conservatives we are not allowed to criticize these attitudes. We are ridiculed if we say anything.

Second example: The Democrats, in particular the Left, intend to make this the year of the family. To prove this point, Gore and Dukakis and Jackson all have agreed that there is nothing wrong with homosexual couples adopting children. And yet for us to say, "Now what kind of family do you mean when you say this is the year of the family?" is considered anti-children.

Third example: There is a consistent routine in large cities and in some rural counties in America for political machines to steal votes. Citizens are defeated by people who are dead or have moved out of town. Yet to say that is to be called a racist.

**Cheerful Lies.** One final example: Jesse Jackson has been saying for several months that it is terrible that \$100 million was taken out of the Coast Guard budget that could be used to fight drugs. It is true. Bill Lehman, Democrat from Miami, Chairman of the Appropriations Transportation Subcommittee, took the money out to give it to mass transit. Now nobody in the White House has thought to have the President go on TV and say publicly, "You know, Jesse, I wish you would call Bill Lehman and tell him to put the \$100 million back in as we requested at the time." Instead, we will allow Mr. Jackson to cheerfully lie. And he knows it because Secretary Burnley talked to him personally. We should tell Jackson not to blame us for what some of his allies did to buy off his other allies. We do not even have the nerve to say it. And we wonder about the degree to which we are browbeaten and dominated by the Left.

The fifth major challenge to conservatives is that the scale of global change is dramatically greater than we expected. None of us at any level understands how to deal with that. Frankly, our national experience compounds the problem because we so dominated the world after World War II that it was easy to wish that it would stop changing. And we acquired habits of indolence, dominance, and thoughtlessness that are going to cost us dearly until we drop them. I keep reminding my friends at home, "You want to dominate 53

