What is conservatism?

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Historians Donald Critchlow and Nancy MacLean argue, “Conservatism in modern America is not a systematic ideology but a political perspective with a shared set of general beliefs.” Specifically, there are three principles that characterize conservatism: confidence in the individual, advocating minimal federal government, and reliance on tradition to guide public policy. These three principles, individualism, minimal federal government, and a focus on tradition, remain the heart of conservatism today and were exhibited in Beck’s speech.

**CONTEXT**

President George W. Bush left office in 2008 with one of the lowest presidential approval ratings ever recorded, dragging the image of the Republican Party down with him. The failing “No Child Left Behind Act,” controversial presence of U.S. troops in the Middle East, and the growing federal deficit left many Americans with the impression that Republicans could not govern. The negative image associated with President Bush tarnished John McCain’s 2008 campaign, as the Republican candidate could not escape the negative image of the GOP thus costing him the election. Within two years of his inauguration, Democratic President Barack Obama allocated the second half of President George W. Bush’s TARP funds; passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act; and initiated the healthcare reform plan. These three political events together caused concern for many conservatives and resulted in town hall meetings and the creation of the TEA Party. Fears of government spending and regulation sparked conservative movements across the country for many believed the country was “headed in the wrong direction.”

Glenn Beck’s keynote address illustrated a rhetorical persuasive proof specifically projected by conservatives. The combination of two rhetorical elements, arguments from the past and American Exceptionalism, acted as persuasive proofs that redefined and rejuvenated conservatism after a massive defeat in 2008. In order to demonstrate the significance of this conservative rhetorical proof I examined the context for conservatism in 2008, the tenets of conservatism and the influence of Beck as a conservative political pundit as they illuminate this particular proof.

**METHOD & ANALYSIS**

The analytical framework for this examination focused on two rhetorical theories, arguments from the past and American exceptionalism. The two types of arguments from the past, genetic and analogical, coupled with American exceptionalism embody the rhetorical proof. Each of these elements are described below:

**Genetic arguments from the past**

The first form, the genetic argument, represents history as a linear process. The genetic argument “captures human activity in sequences, in narratives,” but also acts as logical evidence. Bruce Gronbeck explains that the genetic argument puts a concept, idea, pattern of activity, or belief in an ordinary and recognizable time and place. A genetic argument gives an abstract conception tangible space in which it can be understood. The genetic argument is especially valuable because of the past’s clear beginning. Origins are easily recognized as significant times where a narrative begins.

**Analogical arguments from the past**

David Zarefsky defined analogical arguments as “a reference to a whole class of arguments that assert important similarities and other relationships between two or more persons, places, things, or events in order to support a disputable proposition.” A speaker makes an analogical argument from the past when placing two events, one of the past and one of present, in a side-by-side comparison. The comparison is then used as evidence what should take place today.

**American exceptionalism**

American exceptionalism is a phrase that multiple scholars claim originated from Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831, when he characterized the United States as “exceptional.” Jason Edwards used Tocqueville’s conception of America’s exceptional character to define American exceptionalism as, “the distinct belief that the United States is a unique and superior nation that has a special role to play in human history.” American exceptionalism is the perception that the United States is different from other nations because of its unique origin, historical evolution and distinguishing political and religious institutions.

**OVERALL ARGUMENT & CONCLUSION**

Glenn Beck’s keynote address specifically illuminated how arguments from the past coupled with American exceptionalism acted as persuasive proofs specific to conservative rhetoric. Beck’s speech illustrated that when combined; arguments from the past and American exceptionalism create a unique persuasive proof in conservative rhetoric and characterize conservatism. However, key to this combination of rhetorical elements was Beck’s popularity as a conservative political pundit and the context for conservatism after the 2008 defeat. Beck’s popularity and vocation provided the capacity for these proofs to act as classification tools for revitalizing and defining conservatism. Beck’s speech displayed how conservatives characterize their ideology as a foundational perspective rooted in American history. As such, the image of conservatism was positioned as the means for alleviating contemporary problems because of its relationship with the traditions of an exceptional nation like the United States.

**REFERENCES**

Only Brief References are provided. Please contact petersh@unl-neb.edu to request references.
