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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 including confidence in the individual, advocating minimal federal government, and a 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.

CONSERVATIVE TENETS

The re-branding of the right manifested itself in conservative movements and gatherings across the country in-between 2008 & 2010. One of those events included Glenn Beck’s Restoring Honor Rally on August 28, 2010. This research project is a case study that illustrates how the conservative political ideology is defined and rejuvenated after massive defeat.

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 spurred conservative movements across the country for many believed the country was “headed in the wrong direction.”

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.