

The Clay-Hamilton-Lincoln Cult Resurgence Within Conservatism

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
November 17, 2004

Conservatism has reached a crisis point—at least insofar as its representation by the Republican Party is concerned. Pat Buchanan predicts that a civil war will break out within party ranks, and Samuel Francis said in a recent column that “the impact of Bush on American conservatism has been a disaster.” And, as usual, right-wing libertarians like me (although I actually prefer the favored sobriquet of Dr. Walter Williams: “Jeffersonian radical”) simply grin and bear it all.

Also weighing in the fray is neoconservative David Brooks, writing a couple months ago in the *New York Times Magazine*, “How to Reinvent the G.O.P.” (August 29, 2004). He argues that the Libertarian-Conservative alliance against big government and favoring freer markets of Ronald Reagan, Barry Goldwater, and Calvin Coolidge is now *passé*. Socialism has been defeated and considerable decentralization has been accomplished, and thus the Libertarian-Conservative alliance has attained its goal. As Brooks says, “Socialism has stopped its march. Now almost every leading politician accepts that government should not interfere with the basic mechanisms of the market system. On the other hand, almost every leading official acknowledges that we should have as much of a welfare state as we can afford. Now the debate over the role of the state takes place within much narrower parameters” (p. 33). Compassionate conservatism is also waning as a key theory. In its place, Brooks says, we have neither big government nor small government. Instead, under George W. Bush, we have “strong government”: carefully limited but also strong and active. Brooks argues that now that the Leftist bogeyman is gone, whether in Berlin walls abroad or FDR welfarists at home, Republicans need to return to their roots. To maintain their majority rule for years to come they must adopt the paradigm marked by Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, Abraham Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt. These men believed in using government to “enhance” the market mechanism and dynamism “by fostering more equitable competition.”

Public works or infrastructure projects, expansion of bank credit through the central bank, financing scientific development, and various “internal improvements” are examples of what “strong” government should do. Such thinking epitomizes the Clay-Hamilton-Lincoln cult—what Brooks says is the until recently dormant third brand of conservatism. The great political historian and theorist Albert J. Nock described the Clay-Hamilton-Lincoln state as the “merchant-state” which, at least in America, has always held out “helping business” as its foremost goal. As Brooks comments: “Individuals would be held responsible for their own behavior. But government would do what it could to open up opportunities, so that people would have second, third, and fourth chances to succeed” (p. 36). Tyrannical governments are no longer a problem. The new problem is “failed governments”, i.e., those that do not sufficiently help business.

Alternatively, a “successful” strong government, improves citizens’ incomes, alters culture in a way that helps families, and helps improve labor force skills. Highlights of this revitalized brand of conservatism include improving the perceived integrity of government, spawning an energy revolution to better utilize technology and resources, and mandates national service programs for citizens (to briefly turn the focus off of self-interest in favor of the public interest).

So what’s the problem with the Clay-Hamilton-Lincoln-Bush cult? In a word, *socialism*. The cult paradigm presumes that the market fails to provide business the opportunities it needs to succeed and thus the state steps in to “help business.” The presumption is that the state is able to fix the market’s failures, that it will have the requisite social knowledge to do so, and that the state’s bureaucrats will work honestly (i.e., in the “public interest”) to do what is right. However, each of these premises is debatable theoretically and each has been rebutted empirically on many occasions. The economics literature, for instance, is replete with examples of government failure.

Like most American presidents over the last seventy years, George W. Bush is simply another quasi-socialist who believes that he can improve on what the market provides through the use of proactive public policy. Sure, his social programs and programs to “help business” will not be as egregious as those of totalitarian socialists like Russia’s Stalin, China’s Mao, or past dictators in smaller nations. But other

than being on a smaller scale, Bush's socialism and war-mongering is little different. The revitalized Clay-Hamilton-Lincoln-Bush brand of conservatism will further erode and undermine the Jeffersonian ideals that launched our great nation, creating a benefactor and big-brother state instead of one that merely protects its citizens from predators. Indeed, conservatism is going to make a turn—for the worse. George W. Bush is about to lead conservatives to the left, just as our country was betrayed by the likes of Hamilton and Lincoln.

If conservatism is really going to survive in the coming decade, especially in the Republican party, the Libertarian-Conservative alliance against big government and favoring freer markets must be rejuvenated. Jefferson should not be scorned, but Hamilton and Lincoln should be. Instead, the ideals of John Adams, Andrew Jackson, Daniel Boone, Grover Cleveland, Russell Kirk, T.S. Elliot, Calvin Coolidge, and, to some extent, Ronald Reagan, should be heralded by conservatives. Let's support limiting the federal government according to the vision that the Founding Fathers had for it: reactive public policy that protects us from predators. There is still too much business regulation and economic intervention that affect people's lives, and too many rights have been infringed upon by Bush-led state intrusions and phony wars.