

Why I Love Conservatives

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I love conservatives. That's probably a good thing because, as a professor at the U.S. Naval Academy, I'm surrounded by them.

Our students are conservative. I know because I correct their papers, talk with them in class, and interact with them in their off hours. All but a few of the junior officers who function as Company Officers in Bancroft Hall, the "world's largest dormitory," are conservative too, and those that aren't don't let it be publicly known: it's not a good career move. So far as I can tell, the military administrators of the institution itself are the most conservative of all. Their mandate is keep traditions going, foster respect for authority, and generally keep the lid on things.

Justifying the claim that a military institution such as the Academy is an arch-conservative bastion may well seem at first glance like what my students call a "no-duh." In today's climate, the military is what the conservatives are all about. Voting money for military needs is a badge of honor of conservative Senators. A yellow ribbon to show you "support the troops" is right up there with an American flag in the lapel to show you support the current Commander-in-Chief. And even the Commander-in-Chief competes to see how martial he can look, dressing up in a flight suit to make a carrier landing to announce "Mission Accomplished" and spending Thanksgiving with the troops in Baghdad. Democrats vying for their party's presidential nomination try to outdo each

other in bellicose rhetoric. They rarely say that the problem with the war in Iraq was that it was a war, or a pre-emptive one, only that it's going on too long and costs so much.

But the Naval Academy is conservative in more than the fact of being a military institution. The clockwork, spit-and-polish nature of the surface here at Annapolis is not mere window-dressing, it's an expression of the conservative way of life.

For the most fundamental fact about conservatism is that it *is* a way of life, not a pattern of argument, as liberalism is. That's why conservatives and liberals will always be at each others' throats. Liberals and conservatives don't merely disagree about issues. We're engaged in fundamentally different enterprises—and almost all people are one or the other, fundamentally liberal or fundamentally conservative.

Liberal and conservative, to be sure, are only relative concepts. They're made to describe complementary but opposing viewpoints, and that means, opposing (or complementing) in a specific context. The tenets espoused by someone who counts as liberal in one place need not jibe with the tenets espoused by someone who's liberal in another; a conservative here might be liberal there. You're a conservative on a specific issue in a specific place because you're not a liberal, and the reverse.

Yet it tends to be the case that liberal thought and conservative thought each build a constellation of predictably linked issues. If we meet a man at a cocktail party and somehow find out that he is opposed to gay marriage, we're justified in betting serious amounts of money that he is also going to be against abortion (or, as he would probably say, murdering "the unborn"), for the war in Iraq (unless we stay there too long), and probably drives an SUV, or would like to. (His equally conservative cousin with the pickup truck won't be at the cocktail party, but downing a six-pack with his buddies.)

And if he tells you out of a clear blue sky, in the first moments of your acquaintance, that he's against gay marriage, the chances of all these things being true shoot up exponentially. He probably thinks the pledge of allegiance ought to say "one nation under God," and isn't too interested to hear that it's only done so since 1954.

If you turn to the woman nursing a drink near the shrimp and somehow learn that she is "pro-choice," you can be pretty sure that she doesn't approve of allowing drilling on public lands in Alaska, and isn't in favor of giving the rich tax breaks (what the man you've just turned away from would describe as "tax relief"). Nor, in all probability, does she think the Ten Commandments belong in courtrooms. Clothes are part of the package too: the person in the dress-for-success suit is more likely to be conservative than the one in the bell-bottoms. And it's relevant too that the person with the first set of ideas, in the example, is a man, and the second a woman.

Of course not everyone espouses such a predictable package of ideas. Libertarians, whom Ayn Rand famously (and accurately) called "hippies of the right," overlap in many instances with John Stuart Mill-influenced liberals. Sometimes you'll find somebody who, usually because of personal experience (an abortion? a gay uncle?) approves of "choice" or gay marriage, while otherwise holding fast to the current conservative project of feeding the military and starving all the rest of the government. But they're the exceptions. You'll shake your head for weeks if the woman in Birkenstocks and the multi-colored skirt with the clunky necklace just about to get a glass of chardonnay turns out to be a fan of Rush Limbaugh.

Midshipmen at the Naval Academy typically subscribe to an entire package. It's not just politics that makes the Naval Academy such a conservative place. Yes, midshipmen almost all vote Republican, and, unsurprisingly, fully support the use of military force in whatever direction the current Commander-in-Chief chooses to use it—which is to say, them. After all, going to war is what they're trained to do: they want to use their skills. As newly-arrived plebes, they all bid good night to Jane Fonda, remembered for having gone to North Vietnam while US troops were fighting in that unhappy country: "Good night, Jane," they chorus in exhausted unison before lights-out. "Good night, bitch."

What visitors see when they step through the gate into the Yard is also part of the place's conservatism. Liberals tend to find that uniforms get in the way of "expressing their individuality," so the fact that everyone here wears a uniform is already a sign of the conservative world-view at work. Midshipmen and officers say "sir" and "ma'am" to superiors, something that tends to stick in liberal's throats (liberals may even resist the notion of a "superior," acknowledging at most the person with the power). They salute officers and stand up when professors, including civilians like me, enter the room for class. Most midshipmen go to some form of church service on Sunday, oppose abortion, and are comfortable with a world in which women stay at home and take care of a brood of children while the men deploy on ships for months at a time. Half of our students self-identify as Roman Catholic, a notably conservative religion. Many of them were Eagle Scouts and members of athletic teams, frequently football—not a sport noted for the liberalism of its players. They pick up trash along highways on Saturday mornings, and tutor in the local schools.

An absolute good for the conservative lifestyle is tradition. The more traditions we have at the Academy, the better people hereabouts like it. Traditions let us know how things are going to proceed, a good thing to conservatives. Recent traditions aren't of lesser value, just so long as they are "traditions." The fact that the now-problematic annual greasing and climbing of Herndon obelisk dates only from 1955 does not deter those who defend it as tradition. (It's problematic because of the scores of so-far low-level injuries it creates, and the fact that women have to join the half-naked puppy pile with the men, and sometimes are pulled off if they get too close to the prize, a cap on top.)

All this makes for what I think of as a conservative paradise. To be sure, it has problems, though these problems tend to be invisible to visitors. When you ask a midshipman how he or she's doing, the lowest his scale of responses goes is "Outstanding, sir/ma'am." Liberals are much more prone to demand you share in their problems. Or perhaps, they're less concerned with the relentless insistence, perhaps designed to confuse the enemy, that everything is going very well indeed. Part of the conservative lifestyle is putting on a good face to the outside and not thinking you're a hypocrite doing so.

Perhaps at least partly for this reason, the smile-production factor is very high for visitors to Annapolis. It's the very gung-ho-ness of the students that's so lovable, their sense of purpose, not to mention the fact that they look so "sharp," as midshipmen say. Such a midshipman, typically male (about 16% are women), has "taped off" offending specks of dust from his natty close-fitting uniform, stands up tall, calls any tourist "sir" or

“ma’am,” looks you in the eye, and, if called upon to do so, shakes your hand with a firm grasp.

He must pass a physical readiness test (PRT) twice a year, which means he has to stay in shape. Probably he’s on a team of some sort. Probably too he works out in the weight room, so his shoulders are as broad and his waist as trim as they are ever going to be. He is by definition clean-shaven, short-haired, and has in all likelihood been certified before entrance as being Grade A Beef (we allow a certain number of “waivers” for less than physically perfect specimens). Nor will he be dumb. How can he be, with the heavy load of courses ranging from Calculus and Physics, Electrical Engineering and even English Literature he has to master? And when visitors see masses of these students at parades or football games, their chests out and their spines rigid, how can they not burst with pride? This really seems America’s finest.

Of course, not all conservatives have this effect on people because not all of them are young, fresh-faced, and smart. A recent *Washington Post* article about the obese white supremacist Lovell A. Wheeler and his neo-Nazi wife, who hosts an Internet radio program called “Grandmother Elizabeth’s Reading Hour for White Children,” gives the other side of the coin. Broad shoulders are unrelated to politics. But the cultivation of broad shoulders as an end in itself is not.

I’d submit that there’s no comparable liberal institution in this country—pick any Ivy-level college or university for an example—where the students come near to putting the same kind of smile on your face. Students at what midshipmen call “real schools” slouch, avoid the gym, binge drink, chain smoke, wear caps inside, and never, ever, say “sir” or “ma’am” to a professor. Not to mention that our students aren’t—for lack of a

better word—sullen. (I remember being sullen at 18, back at Haverford College.)

Teaching plebes at the Academy, I sometimes think, is like tussling with twenty golden retrievers at once. Who wouldn't be exhilarated?

The conservatism of the Naval Academy is so intense because it's a point of overlap of many individually different Venn diagram circles, each one representing a different, if related, form of conservatism. Not all conservatives are conservative in the same aspects of life, or in exactly the same way. And this means, those who are conservative by one standard sometimes disagree with those who are conservative by another standard. There is the military, there is the Catholic Church, there are the libertarians, and there are the rich guys in their SUVs and their gated communities, all of whom are conservative in their own ways. As circles in the Venn diagram they overlap only partially.

The military, in what may come as a surprise to some people, typically disdains the gated-community set as being insufficiently “hard” and self-denying. In fact, the truth that will surprise many outsiders is that the military, generally speaking, looks down on the civilians they have pledged to defend. I wish I had a dollar for every time I've heard the phrase “civilian scum” here at Annapolis, a taxpayer-supported institution. The midshipmen are told, and most believe, that what they are doing is a higher, purer, better thing than the lives of the people not fortunate enough to live on their side of the Wall that surrounds the Academy. From the perspective of the Marines, even more demanding and unforgiving of weakness, almost all the civilian world is corrupt and soft. And Pope John Paul II, in what may be his waning months on Earth as I write, and as conservative on some issues as one can imagine, preaches against both militarism and what for him is

the illusion that material goods, the goal of all those SUV-driving gated community types, are the goal of life.

It's possible too to be conservative in one aspect and liberal in another. Students at St. John's College, the country's only Great Books school, whose campus adjoins that of the U.S. Naval Academy, were famously critical of the midshipmen during the 60s and 70s, seeming to define politically liberal as much as the midshipmen defined (and define) conservative. Even now, you'd have to be unobservant to mistake a 20-year-old midshipman disguised in civilian clothes walking along Annapolis's neat brick-lined streets for a Johnnie, or the reverse. But in its own way, St. John's is as conservative as they come, its curriculum built on an unvarying canon of Masterworks studied in rigid chronological succession, its students standing at the entrance of their Dean and Tutors as midshipmen stand at the entrance of officers and faculty. To explain this, we would probably make the distinction between political liberalism and curricular conservatism. But liberal still contrasts with conservative; we can separate out the elements of each in a given institution.

Even given the differences between kinds of conservatism, they still overlap to some degree, most to a large degree. Collectively, different conservatisms form a constellation in the same way that liberalisms do on their side. This is the reason we can predict with a tolerable margin of error how someone who (say) supports the military is going to react to legalizing gay marriage. We can predict, but—and this is the important point—we can't explain, unless we go a level deeper.

Deep structure

If we try to say what the nature of liberalism and conservatism is merely by looking at what the two groups say, we will soon give up in frustration. Both make claims to the same things. Whatever is held to be a good thing is what each side will claim it serves better than the other. Conservatives claim that they are the better defenders of life because they oppose abortion. Liberals claim that *they* are the better defenders of life because they oppose the death penalty, and because they ask more often than conservatives what the cost in human lives of wars will be. Conservatives claim that they are the better defenders of freedom because they oppose government interference in people's lives; liberals claim that they are the better defenders of freedom because conservatives would have all women barefoot and pregnant, with everyone forced to go to the same group of approved churches on Sunday morning.

The arguments between liberals and conservatives are becoming more shrill. Do we allow or disallow "partial-birth" abortion, inscriptions of the Ten Commandments in public places, tax breaks for SUVs and drilling for oil in wilderness areas? Each side has a predictable position which it defends vociferously.

The Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice who smuggled the rock bearing the Ten Commandments into the courthouse in the middle of the night to "acknowledge God" is removed from his position, yet cheered wildly by supporters. Fundamentalist Christians kneel on the sidewalk in front of the Supreme Court in Washington praying for God to intercede as the Justices inside strike down the Texas anti-sodomy law. The "partial-birth" abortion ban is passed in Congress and immediately blocked by the courts.

The opponents of gay marriage are readying proposals for a constitutional amendment to block it.

The rhetoric quickly heats up, nowadays seeming worse than it has been in recent political memory. Liberals (according to conservatives) are bleeding-hearts and lack decisiveness, conservatives (according to liberals) are blind destructive idiots. Self-identified conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer summarizes the name-calling this way: “conservatives think liberals are stupid. Liberals think conservatives are evil.” Conservatives like Krauthammer accuse liberals of thinking the rest of the world much nicer than it is. It’s true that when we have decided the world poses a threat, conservatives are much more effective and purposeful about neutralizing it. Conservatives, however, are unable to judge whether the situation is of this sort, or one where we might in fact be able to reason with others, which is the liberal point of departure. Conservatives speak to people who feel threatened, which explains the wave of popular support post-9/11 for President Bush’s conservatism.

Liberal commentators such as Paul Krugman have suggested that the source of this sudden increase in shrillness is that conservative thought has ceased to play by the same rules as before, having gone on an offensive to disrupt the equilibrium and take over the show. Whether or not this is so, it would be surprising if liberals and conservatives did not conflict: the nature of each is only defined by the other. They’re fighting over the same turf. All this sound and fury is produced by liberals looking at conservatives and coming to the unsurprising conclusion that they don’t make very good liberals, and conservatives looking at liberals and expressing their fury that liberals aren’t a bit like them. In fact, all it means is that each group is working through its own world-

view. Liberals are just being liberals, and conservatives are just being conservatives. What's the point of arguing, once this has been established?

In seeking to understand the nature of liberalism and conservatism, we must understand first of all that they are world-views, not merely lists of tenets. Liberalism and conservatism are structural patterns, not specific beliefs. And structures always take their definition from each other. This is why, in order to understand, rather than merely register the conflict, we must go to a level we may call—with apologies to Chomsky—that of the deep structure, the level of the world-view. On the deep-structural level, there is no disagreement, only difference. One world-view can't disagree with another. Of two opposing views, one will be liberal and the other conservative, though it may take us a while to figure out why.

Feminist theory has offered a broad-based explanation of conservatism: gonads. For most feminism, it's all about gender. The male gender, to be specific. Conservatism is about protecting the patriarchy. Hence, according to feminist theory, the conservative abhorrence of abortion (kills off so-desirable offspring, proof of masculinity), the support of war (men are naturally aggressive, plus look how phallic all those guns and rockets are), and the belief that everybody ought to be driving an SUV, if not a motorcycle—or a tank (men like big throbbing machines between their legs).

Feminist thought correctly perceives a link, considered below, between conservative thought and male thought. But it makes too much of this. Gender is one of the overlapping Venn diagrams, it's not the underlying explanation for them. We see this from the fact that there are, after all, female conservatives (feminists can explain this only by calling them brainwashed, co-opted by the patriarchy, or pawns), and plenty of male

liberals, not all of whom, despite conservative caricatures, or at least those popular hereabouts at Annapolis, are 98-lb. weaklings who can't change a flat tire. Another common definition of conservatism holds that the conservatives are the ones trying to hold the line, keep things the way things were. The liberals are the ones trying to change things, trying to move forward. This comes closer than the gonads theory to being useful as an underlying principle, but still comes up short.

It's true that the conservative position always articulates what I call the home-field advantage position, the position of those who don't see why things have to change. That's why this is the position most closely associated with the well-off, with older and more established people, and with those in the position of privilege. This explanation overlaps to a large degree with the "gonads" explanation: it's still the men who have the power. This theory of conservatism says their beliefs are nothing less blatantly self-seeking than a defense of privilege.

But this still gets the causality backwards. It's a definition of conservatism from the liberal point of view, that tries to discredit conservatism by implying that it's fighting a losing battle, belongs to the past, and is trying to hold back the train hurtling towards the future. It's difficult to see how opposing abortion is trying to keep things the way things they are. Or why being pro-military should be so. Not attacking Iraq would have been staying with the status quo; the current Bush administration's neo-conservative strategists talk a theory of global change to justify the invasion. Certainly we cannot say that this is holding to the status quo.

We begin to get a sense of the structural disconnect between liberal and conservative thought in the bumper sticker that taunts conservatives: "Against Abortion?"

Don't Do It!" For of course, liberals know what conservatives want is not merely that they themselves be allowed to forgo aborting, but that the action itself be forbidden, to everyone. What will satisfy liberals will never satisfy conservatives.

For the same reason, conservatives mount a "defense of marriage" by ensuring not merely that they continue to have the right to marry people of the opposite sex, but that everyone who marries marries someone of the opposite sex (or more correctly, as I consider below, that marriage be defined as being between a man and a woman: the first formulation is the way a liberal, incorrectly for conservatives, would express the conservative position). For liberals, by contrast, what they're aiming at is a world where those who want to abort do so, those who don't, don't. Similarly, those who want to marry people of the same sex don't, to liberals, have much effect on those who want to marry those of opposite sexes by doing so.

All ethical pronouncements are expressed in terms of generalizations, whatever their specific content. The primary difference at the deep-structural level between liberalism and conservatism is that liberal ethical pronouncements are expressed in terms of actors, conservative in terms of actions. From this basic structural divergence follow all the otherwise inexplicable surface divergences. Why is it that conservatives are apparently unconcerned with the lives of soldiers or of civilians caught in wars? Why is it that liberals seem to be unconcerned with the lives of defenseless "unborn children"?

For conservative thought, the action itself, regardless of the nature of the actors involved in it, is forbidden or allowed. Liberals, by contrast, express ethical dicta in terms of actors. As a result, the particularities of the person's situation are relevant to the liberal, and irrelevant to the conservative. A statement of the form of "thou shalt X" or

“thou shalt not Y” is an intrinsically conservative dictum. Negatives are better than positives, from the conservative perspective, because they’re so much clearer. With positives, we still don’t know how we’re going to accomplish it. A negative, however, both tells us what we want to do and the fact that we’re not going to do it. A negative is a complete little drama, all in itself.

Thou shalt not, for example, steal. Only a liberal, to whom the particularities of the actor’s situation are relevant, would ask, Is it all right to steal if you’re starving and you’re stealing bread from a millionaire who won’t miss it? It is not that conservatives always say “no” to such questions. The question itself doesn’t process as a legitimate part of the conservative world-view. To conservatives, the individual is a relatively meaningless unit that is constantly found wanting with respect to The Action, that great looming thing outside of him. The conservative individual as a result is constantly struggling to achieve what he perceives as something greater than himself, to be able to fulfill a teaching or dictum.

The relationships between the self and others are different in conservative and liberal thought. The conservative matrix at its deep-structural level has nothing at all to say about other people; they enter the structure only as a second step. The action does not vary according to who’s doing it, so as a logical corollary (rather than something that needs to be asserted) all others must be attempting to achieve the same action.

Conservative thought doesn’t say that everybody has to be alike, because conservative assertions are in terms of actions, not actors. This is a secondary quality of the thought matrix, not a primary one. (Note the difference in the two ways of expressing the conservative position on gay marriage, above.) If you listen to conservatives talk

about themselves, this is what they say, and we have every reason to believe them. They're not out to ensure that everybody be like them, just that the rule be followed (by everyone). The difference in intonation here may be slight, as conservatives will probably admit as a "no-duh" corollary that of course if everyone is doing the right thing, then everyone will be doing the same thing. But sameness is merely an effect, not the primary goal. Conservatives always get hot under the collar (hot under the choler, in the original phrase) when liberals accuse them of forcing people into a mold. That's not how they see what they're doing at all. If a liberal wants to talk with a conservative, s/he has to accept this. Now, the possibility that this is a secondary effect (it clearly is) is something that can be discussed, though it is not likely the conservative will be too upset by it. What's wrong with everybody being the same if everybody is right?

Each side assuming the structure of the other side is like their own leads to errors from both sides. Liberals almost invariably make the mistake of thinking this secondary quality or mere corollary of the conservative structure central to its nature. They do so because liberal thought contains, at its fundamental level, a space to specify relationships between individuals. So they assume that all thought-matrices must do so. Indeed, we may say that liberal thought is all about relationships between individuals.

Conservatives, as Krauthammer suggests, typically feel that liberals are unrealistic. To conservatives, they seem to believe everyone can be convinced by reasoning. This, to conservatives, means that liberals are indecisive and weak, as well as stupid. Everybody knows the world is a scary place; you can't make nice with people who want to blow you up. It is certainly true that liberals, whose ethics is articulated in units of actors rather than actions, will tend to see other people (who, as a result, can in

theory be talked with rationally) where conservatives primordially see The Enemy. For a liberal, this fact does not yet determine whether s/he are going to fall into their arms, or oppose them. For a liberal—and this is the point that conservatives fail to appreciate—the mere fact that s/he sees the other person’s point of view doesn’t mean s/he accepts it. What if that point of view is utter rejection of all s/he holds dear? In that case a liberal is perfectly comfortable resorting to the conservative’s default of violent opposition.

But because the liberal doesn’t make that decision until s/he determines what it is the other person is thinking, s/he seems indecisive and weak to conservatives. For conservatives, you have to know exactly where you’re going before you start. Thus conservatives fail to understand a world-view that encourages people to react as they go along according to the specifics of the situation. For conservatives it means not knowing where you’re going.

If you ask two people “what do I do?” and the first one says, “Do X,” while the second one says, “Weeeell, it depends on A, B, and C,” the first is by definition the conservative and the second the liberal. Liberals always tailor their actions to the particular givens of the situation, because their ethics are written in terms of actors rather than in terms of actions. We have to know something about the actors. Actions are inhuman things that humans aim at. For liberals, it’s the human doing the aiming that’s the point. Thus clarity and force is a good in itself for conservatives. You’re supposed to be decisive, even if you later “reverse yourself” (as we say at Annapolis) and charge just as decisively in the opposite direction. The point is the charge. One thinks of the Light Brigade as immortalized by Tennyson: they were heroic, even if their charge was the wrong way.

That's why conservatives think patriotism is most properly expressed in the forceful action of, what else, the military. We strike at foreign enemies. War is specific, conceivable action. A liberal might think patriotism is expressed in inaction rather than action, in allowing people with different viewpoints to express themselves. But that's not either sufficiently specific or definable for conservatives. The result is the current American rush to show yourself as more martial than your opponent, and of course the Bush Administration's frequent equation of patriotism with waging war. My students love it, needless to say, as do their officers. They too think that the most patriotic people in America are those in the armed forces.

Because the individual is not a major part of the conservative world-view, self-sacrifice is fundamental to conservatism. Midshipmen at the Academy are taught a scale of values, from most to least: "Ship, shipmate, self." The individual is the carrier of the action, not the reverse. The individual takes last place to things outside himself. Conservative ethics looks like many threads going from countless individuals to a single external action. The individual follows his or her thread to the action, not necessarily looking sideways to the other individuals at all. Liberal thought, by contrast, is based on what may be as many actions as individuals. Thus actions are not conceived of as primordially external to the person, and the threads between people can intersect and sometimes tangle.

Conservative thought and liberal thought are not only different species, they are different genera (plural of "genus"). Conservative thought is absolutist thought. Things are this way and no other. The definition of conservative thought is intrinsic to itself, rather than with respect to something outside of it. Conservative thought is homogeneous.

It isn't seeking to be completed by anything outside itself. It's complete, it's whole. And that's why it tends, in the liberal view, to be obtuse and destructive. It doesn't reason with the outside, because there isn't supposed to be an outside there. Thus it frequently reacts by trying to overpower the outside, or blow it away.

The liberal matrix, by contrast, is relativist thought. It offers a structure for other things to happen in rather than telling us what happens. It exists to be filled in. That doesn't mean it's devoid of content itself; its content is that of preventing any one thing filling it in from taking over the whole matrix. It's a traffic light that makes sure everybody gets a turn, a honeycomb whose structure exists only to allow each individual cell to carry on independently of the over-structure. Of course, traffic lights have to be bought and maintained. More fundamentally, everyone has to agree that you stop on red and go on green, even if you get the red when you're in a hurry.

Many of the actions that are part of the conservative lifestyle are public actions. Their very publicness is the point, from "acknowledging God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and the public exhibition of moral codes such as the Ten Commandments, to saying "Sir" and "Ma'am" to acknowledge Earthly superiors. Because they are public actions, they are necessarily formulaic. The conservative might be willing to accept that some of these individually might have flaws, but it is extremely annoying to them that liberals seem ready to question absolutely everything.

In fact, it's the questioning itself that is infuriating, not the particular nature of the questions. This is so because, for conservatives, the point is not to give proofs for the things publicly enacted, but to enact them. The point for conservatives is to settle on a set

of formulae to be publicly followed, and show them respect—which means, accept them as givens.

The contrast between the conservative demand for respect and the liberal impulse to question is shown by the two sides of the campus in the Naval Academy Yard here in Annapolis. On one side is Bancroft Hall, home to all 4,000 of the students. The goal of military education in Bancroft Hall is to produce instantaneous obedience to lawful orders—or at least, all lawful ones. Education in Sampson Hall, home of the Division of Humanities and Social Science, is, by contrast, largely by the Socratic method, designed to get students to question their presuppositions. Things aren't true merely because someone in authority tells you they are. You have to think about them yourself. What we do is summed up in the 60s bumper sticker that enjoins tersely, Question Authority. You can respect rules or you can question them. Either/or, not both.

Respect at the Naval Academy is shown in the usual military ways, including constant saluting, bracing up, and standing at attention. Watch a group of midshipmen shift their weighty book-bags from their right hands to their left in unison to salute a single officer coming toward them along the walkways, shift the bookbags back in near unison after they are behind him or her, and then shift again as a group twenty paces further along. The liberal would say that all the midshipmen are doing the same thing. In fact, from their perspective, each one is doing the proper action; it just happens that they are all doing it at the same time and the same place.

Conservatives either assume that the rest of the world is just like them, or discovering their error in this, that it is out to get them. Conservatives usually discover the existence of other points of view only after hearing protesters outside, telling them

that they are bad people, or are doing something immoral. Huh? they probably said the first time. What's immoral about my SUV? It's the protesters outside who have to come up with the reasons for their stance; if conservatives do so it's only retroactively, and probably defensively. For this reason conservative thought is intrinsically the thought of those with the "home-field" advantage: it isn't trying to change anything, because it's reached a stable position, what game theory would call a "saddle point."

Conservatism will always be a major force in American society to the extent that Americans simply aren't exposed to other people who are different. In America, conservatism is largely synonymous with fundamentalist Christianity. Thus when American conservatives say "religion" or "God" they are thinking of their particular brand of American Christianity. For them, it seems like a "no-duh" that if you're religious, you are religious in a way they can understand. Conservative—say—Hindus are not a force in the U.S. Hence it always come as a shock to them that someone else, say a Muslim, might infer quite different actions from the notion of being "religious."

All conservatisms feed on what liberals perceive as ignorance. All of us are ignorant of many things; it's just that the liberal here thinks s/he knows what the conservative is ignorant of. The conservatism of (to indulge in stereotypes) a well-to-do Southern college girl whose biggest decision is what clothes to wear and whether the football team will win on Saturday is the conservatism of ignorance. But she's almost certain to be a lovely girl. The members of the football team where football teams are revered are almost certain to be conservatives (probably members of the League of Christian Athletes). But they're almost certain to be exactly the kind of guys you'd want your daughter to go out with. Things are good; this is expressed by an absolutist world-

view. It would take a feeling that things weren't so good (perhaps a trip to a Third World country, or the discovery of homosexual leanings) for things to fall apart. The pieces might be put back together in a liberal world-view.

The conservative world-view isn't one that permits of other points of view, except as wrong, or Outside. From within the structure of conservative thought, a voice telling them that there are other ways of doing things must seem faint, irrelevant. Of course there are other ways; they just aren't the right ones. In order to change, conservatives merely have to experience different things. Their natural element is actions, things done—not things articulated.

Certainly there are as many brilliant conservative thinkers as liberal ones. But what they defend with all their brain-power is a kind of anti-intellectualism, or at least an insistence on the insignificance of the individual in the face of principles. Some of the most committed neo-conservatives working today became conservative as a revolt against the flakiness of their so-liberal, or alcohol-soaked youths. They got tired of asking so many questions, or of not knowing what The Answer was. The nature of The Answer is that it's not just your Answer, but The Answer, valid for everyone. This is the well-known phenomenon of the rootless cynic becoming the most convinced of absolutist Believers. T.S. Eliot was one, and many people before and since have made the same switch. Converts tend to be unforgiving of people who are the way they used to be.

Liberals are frequently frustrated talking to conservatives. They've seen things which suggest the conservatives' viewpoint is limited. How to convince the conservatives of this except by telling them there are things in Heaven and on Earth not dreamed of in their philosophy? Liberals usually learn the hard way that conservatives can't be

convinced they're wrong. A liberal proven wrong by events always kicks himself that he failed to see that coming. The conservative is always blind-sided. It feels like a kick in the head—something that shouldn't have been there to begin with.

Conservatives believe in submission to external Truths. (“Islam” means “submission,” as it happens, a fact whose relevance becomes clearer below.) They can outline future scenarios of breathtaking complexity, all of which presuppose nothing more or less than . . . the acceptance, simple acceptance, of the Truths they are touting. The well-meaning young Ivy Leaguer in Saigon who is the title character of *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene's book about early U.S. involvement in Vietnam, written, eerily, in 1954, and seeming to predict the events of the following two decades, can show sixteen ways from tomorrow why he is right about the “middle way” the U.S. is looking for in Vietnam. The fact that his certainty leads to many deaths, among them his own, is the only way his theories can be called into question. One of Greene's points is that absolutist world-views aren't disprovable by theory, only by facts lying outside the theory. This is the sense they're anti-intellectual, even though they may take a lot of gray matter to lay out.

Nowadays, we see very bright people laying out a breathtaking vision of an abruptly democratic Middle East. As I write, the rhetoric is becoming more and more openly sold as American “idealism,” as if this were a good thing. But Greene's “quiet American” was in this sense idealistic too. Idealism is only another word for describing from within something that would be nice. It's not being a bad sport or raining on the parade to talk about the real probability (or lack of probability) of this working, as

conservatives sometimes feel it is. It's the only way liberals can respond to conservatives, by trying to come from outside of the bubble of their absolutist thought.

At the Naval Academy, "cynicism" is what you're guilty of if you try to explain why some plan won't work. You're breaking the covenant if you admit difficulties. Not admitting them doesn't mean they aren't there (as liberals sometimes think conservatives are saying), only that you don't talk about them. At the Naval Academy, conservative idealism is expressed as a relentless demand for sunniness, from the "outstanding" to the only partly ironic "Have a fine Navy day!" Not only is there no point in being a grump, it's simply not done.

Liberals are worriers and conservatives aren't. Liberal thought is always finding something wrong with things; that's the nature of how it works. Liberals aren't smarter than conservatives, they just like the process of questioning. That's why college and university faculties are almost all liberal—a fact that has begun to pose problems for conservative intellectuals looking for university teaching jobs. Calling a halt to questioning and picking up (say) a football or a gun isn't a sign of stupidity, just of conservatism. Being a conservative means knowing the answers to questions that liberals are still worrying about. At any rate, it's about acting as if you do, whatever doubts you may have.

It's possible to argue that because conservatism offers absolute principles for action, it's more congenial with what average people want and need than liberalism is. This is similar to the argument of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor who, though himself not a believing Christian, ran the Inquisition because the common folk needed the illusion of something unquestionable. This isn't real conservatism, it's cynical liberalism.

Both liberalism and conservatism have what we may call a poster-boy (girl) version and a nightmare version. The liberal we have to love is the thoughtful Ivy League graduate with a commitment to looking at both sides of the picture and helping the unfortunate who keeps in shape, dresses neatly, knows what that funny thing on his or her plate is when abroad, and listens to NPR. The nightmare extreme of liberals is a Hamlet, perpetually mulling over the “what if”s rather than taking action, or a Woody Allen caricature of himself, all twisting of legs and whininess, with his hair flying wild. DO SOMETHING! we want to shout at Hamlet. GET A HAIRCUT AND STAND UP STRAIGHT! we want to shout at Woody’s Woody-character. (The problem with Allen’s later movies, as many critics have pointed out, is that suddenly we were asked to revere this character rather than despise him.) One popular T-shirt at the Academy shows the international symbol for “no” (the circle-with-crossout) over the word “whining.” Enuf said.

The conservatism we have to love is that of the USNA midshipman, square-jawed, open-faced, idealistic, eager to serve, running at 5 a.m. with a pack on his back because it presents more of a challenge, tutoring in the local schools. The nightmare vision of conservatism is racist, gay-baiting thugs, Arno Brecker’s muscle-bound nudes for Albert Speer’s stadiums (though they might look just like the midshipmen’s body ideal), and Stalinist or Nazi medals for women who produce sons to serve the Fatherland. When conservatives and liberals go on the warpath, each tends to think the nightmare version of the other typifies all those who hold this world-view.

A rampant conservatism becomes fascism, one cell of the honeycomb expanding till it takes over. A rampant liberalism demands that everyone be an unbelieving secular

humanist, politically correct and without any personal views or qualities. At this point the comb has expanded so there's no room for the cells. They can only be prevented from becoming this if each side reminds itself that in American democracy, its primary goal is to get along with the other. That's what no one is doing nowadays. We're drunk on our own marginal differentiation, rebelling against what we don't want to admit: that conservatism and liberals are two sides of the same coin.

Because conservatism is a thing done rather than a thing said, conservatives tend to conceive of others this way too. Hence what for liberals is the odd use of "lifestyle" in the phrase "homosexual lifestyle," which is the way conservatives refer to people whose sex is with people of the same sex. For most gays and lesbians, who you have sex with doesn't determine your lifestyle (there are promiscuous gays and boringly domestic ones). And for this reason, conservatives insist that everything is a "choice"—weirdly echoing the Existentialists, they insist we can always "just say no."

This is their position for structural reasons, of course: there's nothing in their structure between the individual and the action, connected by a direct line. Of course conservatives know there may be reasons why we wouldn't want to do the Right Thing. All these things are lumped together under the rubric of "temptations" or "weaknesses." We just have to try to overcome them. As the Marine Corps T-shirt I sometimes see in the weight room has it, "Pain is Weakness Leaving the Body." (In my next life I'm going to be a Marine, if they'll have me. Gotta love those guys.)

Ethical differences

All ethics are ways of cutting the same pie. It goes without saying they can't make something in the pie disappear absolutely, only cut the pie so it seems of secondary

importance. Relationships between individuals are not part of the conservative matrix. They do not cease to exist in the conservative world-view, but because they are not matters for public discussion, they may seem to do so.

By contrast, the relationships between individuals are the very stuff of liberal ethics. But because we are talking about ethics, all things are expressed as general principles. The backbone of liberal ethics is always some form of the Golden Rule, which is why thinkers as diverse as Jesus, Kant, and John Rawls make it the centerpiece of things. Instead of telling us what to do and what not to do, which is the form conservative ethics takes, it couches its rules (such as they are) in terms of the actor. We are to think of other people as if they were ourselves, and do to them what we would have them do to us. At least this is the liberal point of departure: the result, as I have indicated, may well be the person decides she/s unable to do this. But at least s/he tried.

Such an ethics does not tell people what to do, so a conservative is left scratching his or her head. That's the fill-in-the-grid aspect of liberal thought, like the "pursuit of happiness" in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The result is that people aren't necessarily going to be doing the same thing. For liberals, they're like people coming into a library: each may choose a different book; the only concern of the system is that they check them out, refrain from talking, and so on—all the qualities of the liberal grid, the traffic light, the honeycomb. For conservatives, this indicates chaos. For liberals, it indicates just the way things are supposed to be.

Liberal ethics has us look at others as primarily being many discrete individuals. This is the source of the liberal claim that liberals are concerned with individual rights, and conservatives are not. Looking at them in this way blanks out the concentric circles

that surround each individual one of us, with ripples going outwards from our own biological families to our extended families, our towns, perhaps our counties, and usually stopping at the edges of the nation-state. A die-hard liberal, as a result, will insist that there's no more reason for me to defend my own child than to defend someone else's child.

For a conservative, this is ludicrous. Conservatives typically defend these concentric circles. For the conservative, there is simply no reason not to acknowledge them, because the locus of conservative ethics is elsewhere completely. Yet this means that devotion to the rings around each of us aren't an intrinsic part of the conservative world-view either, only a corollary. To conservatives, liberals are infringing on their liberty by drawing relationships between people into the ethical realm. For conservatives, they're part of the realm of personal choice. So long as I refrain from (say) committing adultery, I am free to give a job to my own son over someone else's son. And it goes without saying I will defend my own family.

This is the source of the conservative devotion to gun ownership. (As a poster seen frequently around USNA says smugly, "Gun Control Means Hitting Your Target.") It's not because "it's guaranteed in the Constitution." Conservatives make so much of the "right to bear arms" in Amendment II of the Bill of Rights because they want the guns. If they didn't want the guns this amendment would go as unremarked as, say, Amendment VIII prohibiting "excessive" bail. Indeed, Amendment I prohibiting any "law respecting the establishment of religion" is one that many conservatives might like to see disappear. Having a gun makes people think they have personal control. In a world with guns that people couldn't access, they would feel doubly bereft of control. Those who would take

guns away, as conservatives always perceive it, are threatening them. Liberals simply don't feel threatened.

Faith and the military

Holy Writ gives an answer to the question of “what do we do?” without having to re-invent the wheel every time. This achieves the conservative goal of clarity and decisiveness. The point for conservatives in the case of what they take to be Holy Writ isn't so much the content of that Holy Writ as the fact of having it at all.

This is the source of conservative allegiance to religion, and religious-like state absolutisms. This is the source of the conservative insistence that we must “acknowledge” God in forms like the “under God” phrase of the Pledge of Allegiance, as well as the more than occasional conservative attempts to emphasize the Christian—or usually, with an eye to the media's beady eye, the “Judeo-Christian”—nature of U.S. society. (When evangelical Christians talk about our “Judeo-Christian” society, they don't mean that Judaism is an acceptable alternative to Christianity, only that Judaism was necessary for Christianity to come to be. The “New” Testament re-interprets and fulfills the “Old.”)

Liberals ask, Why does God need to be acknowledged? How are we doing so by including this phrase? What does it mean? Liberals would certainly point out that even those conservatives claiming allegiance to the Ten Commandments as the basis of American democracy pick and choose which they'll really focus on. A liberal might well ask, How does the Commandment that, in the King James version, says “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” relate to US politics? Does it mean that Hindus or Buddhists can't enter the territorial US? Similarly, we tend to look away from all those bizarre

dietary guidelines that Yahweh also provided the tiny flock of Jews in the same book of the Bible, so many centuries ago. If it weren't these Ten Commandments, it could equally well be another set for conservatives: the point is to have a fixed set of doctrines that can be referred to. And being hung up in public rooms, or carved on blocks of stone for parks is precisely the point.

The military's link with God is through its conservatism, its approval of moral tenets expressed in terms of actions. It's less interested when confronted with things like the Golden Rule or the "thou shalt not kill" Commandment. All military organizations enter battle invoking God, or their gods. The German army went into World War I with belt buckles saying "Gott mit uns," God with us. Islamic militants famously invoke God before setting off on their suicide and murder missions. The Bush administration official General Boykin, with his 2003 invocation of a God that was stronger than the opponent's Islamic one, is an example of this. So too, for that matter, is the Emperor Constantine, who Christianized the Roman Empire, converting to Christianity because of a dream of the True Cross promising him victory in battle, which he won.

For this reason conservatives of whatever sort are appalled by those who proclaim themselves atheists or agnostics: it seems to fly in the face of the hierarchy, in the order of things. Some faith in a higher power is necessary. For conservatives, people are relatively insignificant, constantly trying to better themselves through their actions. It's the rankest sign of hubris to deny this.

For the vast majority of my students and the officers who lead them, bowing your head to a higher power, however you understand that Power, is part of living correctly. If you tell them you're happy they believe in a Higher Power but don't yourself, they look

at you as if they were afraid you'd do something immoral, right then and there. If you don't believe in a Higher Power, what's keeping your natural egotism in check? Surely such a person should be raping and murdering, since in the conservative world-view there is nothing between the level of the individual and that of the all-powerful Outside Action or Principle. Obedience to something beyond the individual is the nature of conservatism, and the military that overlaps with conservatism to such a great degree would feel impoverished if this were taken away from them. The connection of the military with God is thus direct, in this sense, not the result of doctrine. Indeed, doctrinal difficulties produced by linking the military with God, such as, say, a Quaker might raise, are held not to exist. Ethical objections to war are of course shushed up here at Annapolis; to the military, military chaplains do not seem a contradiction in terms.

Because all conservative thought links the individual by a straight line to the Right Action, it can also link them to God without having to answer pesky questions like whether other very different people are similarly linked to God, or what justification they have in believing that they themselves are so linked. This is also the reason why conservatives tend to be sure that God is personally interested in the things they do—in whether or not their team wins, in whether or not they graduate from the Academy, in what they think and do each day. They don't think about all the other people out there.

President Bush's support of for "faith based" initiatives on all fronts gives a sense of the fundamental irrelevance for conservatives, within limits, of the particular nature of religious doctrine, so long as we bow our heads: the point is largely the bowing of the head, in public if possible. The liberal might wonder what's intrinsically good about faith. The answer is, it acknowledges the smallness of the individual in the same way that

postulating the absolute Action outside of us postulates the smallness of the individual. To be sure, it's not just faith in any old thing, it's faith in a fairly limited range of options. I doubt conservatives would be so quick to support faith-based initiatives if the faith in question is Wiccan teachings (witchcraft), or a belief that (say) frogs are the highest life form. I'm pretty sure they wouldn't approve of worshiping a god with the head of an elephant, usually accompanied by a rat—though many Hindus are devotees of Lord Ganesh, one of the most popular gods in the Hindu pantheon. Because this hasn't been proposed yet, many conservatives would probably say, and really mean, that it was faith itself that was valuable.

Here at Annapolis, nobody is trying to get you to follow a particular form of monotheism. But the assumption is, you won't be doing anything else either. There are services for Catholics and Jews, and a non-denominational Protestant service. The system would be strained if other belief forms than monotheism gained much of a foothold. The prayers that all midshipmen must stand through before meals (currently being challenged, and vociferously defended by the administration) invoke God the Father. Probably the administration thinks it is being broad-minded by eliminating references to Jesus. The possibility that Faith could involve, say, God the Mother, or many Gods as instantiations of the whole Godhead (Hinduism) is an uncomfortable one.

Liberals like diversity; it's a sign that their system is working. Conservatives find difference past a certain narrow band of toleration anathema, a sign that their system *isn't* working. Conservative in America means flag-waving anti-feminist, anti-gay Christian, or some cluster of positions from that list (if too few are chosen, the person is merely a reprobate liberal, not a real conservative). But of course the world offers many other

varieties of the same sort of absolutisms, the most remarked at the moment being fundamentalist Islam.

American conservatives live under the illusion that their most nefarious enemy is the secular liberal. That's just because they haven't really had butt heads with other strong absolutisms in any way but the military way, which is to say, as something outside to be destroyed. How does fundamentalist Christianity argue with fundamentalist Islam? Each side tries to out-yell the other. In Islamic fundamentalism, we might say, fundamentalist Christianity has finally found a kindred spirit. Of course, it doesn't like what it sees. My truth! No, MY truth! Your revelation's a fraud! No, yours!

Bernard Lewis, the distinguished American scholar of Islam, held the theory that the West had developed religious toleration and Islam had not because the West had already been through the wars. We'd done the Protestant Reformation and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and after a few centuries of bloodshed, realized that we had to get along. Islam, he proposed, had never had this experience, so it charged into religious conflict with the enthusiasm of the unembittered.

This interesting theory portrayed the West as the older, jaded, civilization that had already made the mistakes the Islamic world was in the process of making. Yet it seemed to imply that religious toleration only works with the specific religions you've agreed to tolerate: all toleration is limited. Catholics and Protestants, at least outside of Northern Ireland, get along relatively well. But now it seems the American Christians who are spoiling for the fight, drunk on the possibility of scratching the itch of Difference rather than merely tolerating it. Fundamentalist American Christians are about to make the same mistake with Islam Lewis claims we long ago decided to avoid within the West.

Among other reasons Christians are so infuriated by Islam is the fact that Islam makes the same claims to historical irrelevance about Christianity that Christianity makes about Judaism. This revelation, which Gabriel had to bring down precisely because earlier revelations to prophets had become garbled, supercedes and complements earlier revelations just as the “New” Testament does the “Old” for Christians. And it announces itself as the final one. This time is it. Of course Christians don’t like the notion of being superceded, any more than Jews do.

Islam holds that the Holy Qur’an is the prophecy necessitated by the perversion of God’s message sent through such great prophets as Jesus of Nazareth. God keeps trying to get through; people keep getting it wrong, so God sent Gabriel down to get things straight. Most fundamental is the fact that God is One. That means, He isn’t three, as Christian teaching inexplicably has it. In fact, the Qur’an makes gentle fun of the notion that a virgin is supposed to have given birth and that God has a son. How absurd this is!

Conservative thought and male thought

Conservative thought limits its consideration of actions to actions with results we can conceive of. Conservative action is about control. We don’t actually make an absolute increase in the amount of control in the world when we limit our attention to the things we control, only fill our lives fuller with the things that an individual controls and turn away from the things that an individual doesn’t control. It’s all in the way we cut the pie, but the pie remains the same.

Conservatives are individualists because that’s the realm of things they can control. They fiercely resist solidification of things like economics or skin color as determinatives. For conservative thought, the question is closed when we (say) defeat our

foe, or effect what change we as individuals can effect. It doesn't mean there aren't ripple effects, only that it's unfair to ask us to be responsible for them. This is the source of what conservatives see as their greater individualism: they just won't look into the area of things that cannot be controlled. I didn't cause them, so they don't enter into my calculations.

The war may be won, say the liberals, but what about the effects of the peace? Or on civilians? Or on the economy? For conservatives, this is speaking a foreign language. Conservatives are interested only in the tangible rewards: did we take the territory, do we have the bodies, can we proclaim "Mission Accomplished" and draw a line under the whole thing? In the same way, discussions of the effects of owning a SUV are for conservatives simply out of bounds: the car is here on the lot, it isn't illegal to buy it, end of story. Why are liberals harping on about greenhouse gases? That's beyond the realm of (personal) control.

Conservatives don't deny that things they don't control fail to exist, only avoid focusing on them. This is why conservatives become exasperated when liberals want to talk about secondary and tertiary effects. Sometimes this is expressed as rejecting determinism in favor of free will: we may find a way out. But all it really means is that they don't want to talk about it. (For the same reason conservatives love insisting that "miracles are possible.")

The current conservative obsession with abortion is another expression of the conservative need for control and clarity. The fact is, developing human beings aren't like us: initially they don't even have sexual characteristics, and look like fish. They don't have likes and dislikes. Nonetheless, conservatives can't allow another category, a

sort of half-and-half, or Unknown category: for conservatives, they have to be exactly like living breathing adults in any way that counts.

An earlier age demanded the same certainty not about not-yet people but about once-were people, whom they called angels. Are angels male and female? Do they take up room? (This one was the famous “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” question.) Instead of saying we don’t and can’t know, conservative religious thought provided answers. To the question, How old are angels?, Christian thought ingeniously suggested 33, Jesus’ age—for everybody, whether they died at the age of 2 or 92. Let’s say we can somehow make this make sense. Does being a 33-year-old angel mean, with the bodily decay (and desires?) of a 33 year old person? Easy answers aren’t enough. Nowadays we’ve simply ceased to ask these questions about once-were people. And one day we may simply walk away from the abortion argument, difficult as that is to believe for those obsessed with it. Human history is littered with abandoned questions—which is not to say, questions that have been answered.

For conservatives, you always answer force by force. This gives conservatives a feeling of strength and control, though in fact they may not be strong and may not be in control. What they want is the sensation of being so, not necessarily actually being so—but of course it is only a liberal who would make such a distinction. Thus conservatives are typically in favor of capital punishment. One killing is answered by another. Sometimes they will say they are in favor of capital punishment “because the Bible says, ‘an eye for an eye.’” But the Bible, like the U.S. Constitution, says a lot of things. The reason they focus on this is that they like the clarity, the finality of the message.

Male thought

Because there is such a tight correlation between conservative thought and control, conservative thought overlaps to a great degree with male thought. Men see themselves as individual active agents working against constraints. Control is achieved through actions. Men are socialized to compete with others, and to have no pity for foes. It's all about the here and now: you don't have to be right in any metaphysical sense, you just have to be stronger than the next guy.

For this reason the unit of interaction for men is binary: right here, with another man. Thus, from the outside, there is a certain repetitive quality about male action: watch two Latin men who've had a car accident, one car running into the other. Testosterone requires that they fight. What if one of the men wanted somehow to short-circuit the wearisome prayer-wheel-turning of vituperation he saw coming? He'd be vilified as a wimp.

Conservatives see all relationships as larger versions of that of one man against the world. You don't have to see any further than the man in front of you. It's even somehow unmanly to spend too much time thinking about things like, what happens if he defeats me? (This is "cynical" thought.) Or: What do I do with him if I defeat him? Or: Is there any real point in defeating him? Or: What of all the people that will suffer if I defeat him? The notion that nations don't function like independently acting males is not one conservatives can consider, because this destroys the absolutism of the conservative world-view, and its requirement for control.

This is why nations make mistakes in international affairs, refuse to "learn from history." Barbara Tuchman's *The March of Folly* gives numerous examples, from the

Trojan War to World War I and Vietnam, of countries resolutely and over long periods of time doing the wrong thing. For her this means, doing things that had deleterious effects on their country. Her question is, how can this happen?

If run by conservatives, countries will conceive of all actions by nations as forms of male actions writ large. Not avoiding mistakes is a value not very high on the male list of must-dos. You do something, then ask questions later, if then. At least you've made a decisive action. If you make a mistake, you say "oops," or you say nothing at all. It's especially true you say nothing at all if you're dead. And then it's the next generation's turn.

Men reacting with men, rather than with women, multiplies the need for absolute control exponentially, and so creates worlds like Annapolis, or the military in general. For this reason, the military will retain its male cast, even with women in it.

In his affecting book *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Chris Hedges offers as his title postulate that war gives a purpose to life that otherwise lacks it, horrible though it undoubtedly is. He's trying to answer Tuchman's question: why do nations seem to love war? I think it's the inevitable working-out of the conservative world-view, which to a large degree means, the male world-view. Of course, you'll probably initiate events that you then can't control. But because you don't consider them, you never lose the sense of being in control, even when you aren't. You can always say, "I was blind-sided," and you retain your dignity. So what if there are people screeching in the streets, "We *told* you so!!?" You don't have to listen to them. You've stayed the course, acted like a man. Or here, like a conservative.

Men are actors: they express themselves by acting. It doesn't seem unfair to them to act in such a way that another man is defeated, it feels right. And he has to take his punishment. There's a fine line between muscle and testosterone: it's an expression of maleness in all senses for one gladiator to defeat and kill another. Here at Annapolis, midshipmen still speak of themselves as "warriors," and many doodle knights-with-swords pictures in their notebooks. (The football team at West Point is called the "Black Knights.") The strong right arm still determines your fate. So you try to make it as strong as you can. If you win, you rejoice. If you don't, and you're not dead, you lick your wounds and don't whine about it, and with any luck come back and try again.

I don't feel a bit guilty in saying that this kind of thinking is enormously appealing. Hey, I'm a guy. I know the thrill of crashing against another man, whether physically or only verbally. Strength is an enormous pump, whether that's the literal one of biceps or the transferred one of rooting for a football team, or for a "side" in battle. Aiming at this kind of victory at least gives us a goal in life. There may not be such a thing as ultimate victory, but precisely for that reason the transitory victories we can work towards achieving are that much sweeter. Remember, gun control means hitting your target.

That's why so many men get so defensive and exasperated at liberal thought, or at Rush Limbaugh's "feminazis." YES, we want to say. We're big and loud and hairy and we fart and smell and we love banging on each other and we love our hard rods and we don't much like thinking about the consequences of our actions, because the point isn't to think but to do, and we accept that we may be defeated but we'd much rather be victorious and either way we're not going to whine. That's the way we are. So sue us.

This kind of thought is male thought, and it is conservative thought. It's appealing to men. Now, whether it makes much sense in the long run is another question entirely. But pointing this out is being unfair. It isn't made for large-picture things, but for small-picture ones. It's taking a different point of view, pulling back from the one-on-one of two men fighting (where each had better care very deeply about the outcome) to a long shot of bodies writhing across a vast battlefield where we can't really understand what it's all about. This is the liberal point of view, seeing individuals not as servants of an outside principle but as acting with, and against, each other.

It was Thoreau's point of view when he looked at two groups of ants tearing each other to pieces in his woodpile on Walden Pond, and thought human battles just as pointless to the outside observer. Thoreau speaks of the ants in grandiloquent but of course ironic terms, comparing them to ancient Greeks and to the American revolution. Only rarely does one of the many midshipmen with whom I read this passage see Thoreau's irony, that the point in fact is that human battles are pointless. Almost to a person, they insist that Thoreau is saying all battles are heroic, even those of ants.

Or at least this is true of the plebes, our first year students, still starry-eyed and "ardent for some desperate glory," as Wifred Owen put it. It's what they hear day in and day out in "Mother B," Bancroft Hall.

The intrinsically conservative military acts in terms of definition and achievement of objectives because this, at least, gives people a goal. Military thinking, like the male thinking that overlaps with it, is unitary: it focuses on one thing, and then the next. It only focuses on the achievable, the controllable, not the uncontrollable. The insistence of the Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz that war is intrinsically unpredictable—you can go

in with a plan but it gets blown to bits in the first few minutes of fighting—is something military people can contemplate in a classroom, like the upsetting possibility that God doesn't exist. But it cannot allowed to influence their actions. At the Naval Academy, the bottom-line question is always: is X good or bad for morale? If it's bad for morale, it's bad.

Hence the somewhat comical nature of USNA ethics courses, instituted in a hurry in the wake of massive cheating scandals in the 1990s, and of our Academy-wide “Character Development Seminars.” I've taught these, and know how disoriented our students become when I tell them I want discussion and don't care how it turns out. First they set their jaws: I have to be lying to them. This is too much at variance to what they hear every day over in Bancroft Hall. Just give us the bottom line, they are saying with their clenched jaws, and stop the charade. As it began to dawn on them that I really didn't have a bottom line, they became angry, smelling the rank scent of “relativism.” Conservatives are all the time accusing liberals of relativism, as if liberals should recognize it immediately as an undesirable thing. For liberals, in fact, it's a fine thing.

One of the things that can be controlled is who we live with. The Naval Academy, and more generally the military, offer examples of the conservative love of clustering like to like. They're proof that much of conservatism is a way of life, a set of things done in public. If you live with people doing other things, you might begin to wonder if you were doing the right thing. In this world things are clear: each person knows who is above him and who is beneath him, he knows what is good and what is bad. He has sworn an oath to support the Constitution, however this is understood, and knows he must follow (lawful) orders by his superiors. Midshipmen graduate at the age of 21 or 22. Officers who grow

infirm are simply retired out and in a sense, disappear. People who don't fit in simply don't get in, or leave in mid-process. I've been on the admissions committee, and I know how monotonous all those essays about serving our country become—even if I applaud each one individually. Where are the people who want to serve their country in other ways? Not, unsurprisingly, at a military college.

Thus all the groups whose thinking is congruent in this way—men, the military, political conservatives, religious conservatives—come together in an institution like the Naval Academy, perhaps most absolutely on Sunday morning when rows of largely male uniformed midshipmen bow their heads to the Almighty. Or then again in the controlled ranks of the parade field, where 4000 white-gloved hands slap simultaneously onto bayonets. Here the illusion of control is complete—or rather, the perception of control.

For again, the point is that all control is a perception. It's a particular way to cut the pie so some things are uppermost and others not. We don't know what the people in these so-identical uniforms are thinking, or what they are muttering under their breaths, or what they look like outside the uniform, or what is written on the T-shirts under their uniforms, which no one inspects, or whether their shoes, similarly un-inspected, have holes in them (a surprising number of them do: "Sir, it takes so long to get them back from the cobbler!"). Or what they do afterwards.

The control here is produced by constant practice, by punishments for absence from drill, and from moral exhortations (your parents are watching) and threats of immediate reprisals (your company officer is watching). A story from the 1960s still makes the rounds: President Kennedy, addressing the midshipmen, is supposed to have told them to be "at ease." One student remained rigidly at attention. When reminded later

that the Commander-in-Chief had told him to relax, he indignantly responded, “But Sir! My Company Officer was there!” The uncontrolled can be held at bay, but its force is shown by the elaborate lengths to which we go to keep it there. The uncontrollable is always baying at the gates.

There are many other things we don’t control in life: ageing, for one, or what Freud called the subconscious, or sexuality, the sheer unpredictability of life. Men don’t like thinking about these things. We lose all sense of control if we have to deal with the desires of another person, especially if she is female and so intrinsically (it seems) unpredictable. We lose control if we think too much, worry too much, or question too much. We lose control if we consider people too unlike us: what are we to make of this? Does this imply we ourselves should be different?

For all these reasons men create worlds that banish the old, the unpredictable, the sexual, and substitute for it the neat hierarchical ranks that parade on Wednesday afternoons on Worden Field at the U.S. Naval Academy as the sun slants across the emerald-green grass and four thousand white-gloved hands slap in perfect unison on rifles. No wonder it’s such a beautiful world. It comes at an awful price. As a civilian faculty member, I can afford to regard it with a mixture of love and repulsion. But that’s because I’m a liberal.

Yin and Yang

Being a conservative is more fun, and feels better, and infinitely more macho, than being a liberal: you state what IS, and you take steps to achieve it, and you don’t worry too much about the fallout. I can understand why people, most of them lovely

people within their own worlds, are conservatives. I can see why most men are conservative: it's closer to how men are men.

Still, I'm a liberal. I'm a liberal because I grew up as a fish out of water in a small-town high school where the only game in town was football and the worship of the football team, and where you were supposed to show "school spirit" at "pep rallies" in the gym. It was a world where wearing the wrong kind of shoes or shirt meant you were mercilessly teased. It was a world where the high point of the political decade was a wildly cheered appearance by the extreme right-wing presidential candidate Barry Goldwater—"AuH₂O," as my father's bumper sticker had it. It was a world where "colored" people knew their place, living in a run-down shadow-version of the white Main Street that continued on over the bridge—though Salisbury had voluntarily integrated its stores early enough to avoid the fate of Cambridge, 30 miles down the road, which was largely burned in protests organized by the activist H. Rapp Brown.

I had a gay brother so I don't see what the big deal is with who puts what where, sexually speaking. I'd say that people probably have a default of one set of sex objects or another. But I also think that we don't even consider the non-default as an option because that's easier for us, and the way we think things have to be. (That's why the nature/nurture debate can never be resolved as an either/or.) I've lived and taught in several European countries, as well as in Rwanda, Central Africa, and have lectured all over central Africa and south India. I think American anti-French jokes are embarrassing—for Americans. (As I write a joke is making the rounds in Washington: When you type "French military victories" into Google you get no matches. Huh? Nobody's heard of Napoleon?) I speak a handful of languages. I know that other people

do things differently than we do, and that it's possible to be a good person and be, say, a Hindu—or a Muslim.

As a liberal, the most important thing for me is the person, who comes first. Thus I think the thing about religions is what you do with them, not what their frequently wacky scriptures say. I'm not a Muslim, so the Holy Qur'an (I've only read an "interpretation," in English—as strict Islam calls non-Arabic versions of the Qur'an) for me lacks the sense of completeness it has for believers. But by the same token that patchwork we call The Holy Bible lacks for me the finality it has for evangelical Christians: there are too many books that almost made it into the canon (the Book of Thomas, or the Book of Tobit) and we know too precisely what people determined the doctrine that's now so fought over (St. Athanasius, who helped formulate the creed that bears his name and that simplifies things so nicely).

But that's because I see the people who touched it all; a conservative, by contrast, acknowledges the people, but holds them unimportant. They fade into the construction of the Truth, like the nameless Egyptians who constructed the pyramids. Sure they were there, but they're not the point. For me, and I think for all liberals, they are. It's a difference of what you focus on. Try it with a zoom lens sometimes to see clear things become blurry, and the reverse.

For that matter, the tenets of all religions, if you read them in the cold light of day—which means, if you don't have any reason to believe them—seem screwy. Ever wonder about this "Holy Ghost" thing? What about the Mormon belief that Native Americans are one of the Lost Tribes of Israel? The Muslim belief that Mohammed rose into the air and was transported to Jerusalem? That Jesus walked on water? The Orthodox

Jewish practice of setting up remote light switches before the Sabbath so you don't violate the Commandment by doing any work that day? The Hindu belief that Lord Krishna seduced a hundred milkmaids in one night? (Okay, I admit it: I think that one's charming.)

I don't think abortion is murder because we'll never be able to decide the nature of the intrinsically gray area of not-yet-humans. The people defending the "rights of the unborn" are those who in fact won the lottery and got to be born: they feel threatened by the mind-game of their own non-existence. If I had been aborted, they think, I wouldn't be here. So I have to defend the "right to life" of fetuses.

But the fact is that lots of pregnancy starts don't end in people, for lots of reasons. Abortion is only one. Every person who got born is surrounded in what Wittgenstein would have called "logical space" by a cloud of non-people, might-have-beens who never even got conceived, much less brought to term. All those other loser sperm never got to produce people. Most fertilized eggs don't implant properly. If you're busy developing in your mother's womb that means that as many as eight other possible children never actualize, so in that sense each person is a murderer of people who never were. What's the big deal about this one more not-yet-human not making it to birth? Most not-yet-humans don't, and there are always (it seems) more where those came from. But of course, this isn't how conservatives think: all the people who are have to have been planned, from the beginning, with souls. Some of them don't make it to birth, but that doesn't mean we're allowed to impede them ourselves. Conservatives don't deny that the woman carrying the baby has a point of view, only that it's a determinative factor.

As a liberal, I know that all people are people, with wishes, hopes, aspirations, and sensory perceptions. I think it's short-sighted to think of a war as something that kills only your own soldiers. It also kills the other side's, and they're people too, with beliefs, feelings, and mothers who (with any luck) loved them too. There are many effects to war beyond the battlefield. War disrupts the whole fabric of civilized life: reading books, sipping tea, talking with the neighbors. It's not being soft to point this out, it's being realistic. But yes, it involves looking beyond the immediate circle of individual control where conservatives feel at home. Which is why conservatives would rather walk over hot coals than do it. Hot coals they can tough out.

It's not chance that urban, which is to say usually urbane, educated people with university degrees who have traveled and seen the world—or who read magazines like this one—are a darn sight more likely to be liberal than conservative. They know that the world is a complex place. They get to the point of thinking that human happiness might after all be what we should be aiming at, not some pre-planned theory-world, yet another conservative absolutism. To conservatives, this means they've lost the ability to be idealistic. Yes, and a good thing too, liberals would say. Ultimately it's about whether you get to be with your family, and hug your children, not whether you celebrated some great battlefield “victory.”

You'd think that older people would be more likely to be liberal than conservative, because over time you learn that control is an illusion. Clausewitz was right: the world always gets the last laugh. But somehow it doesn't work that way. As people age they shut out unpleasant truths, maybe because it's just too much pain to acknowledge them. Frequently they become horrible ranting old people, insistent that

God's will must be done, or America's, or Allah's. But believing that you have a short line to God doesn't make you right, just one of the crowd. Remember the psycho played by Kathy Bates in the diverting Stephen King-based movie "Misery" who first saves then kidnaps a popular novelist and forces him to write a novel to her liking before trying to kill him. "God has delivered you unto me for a reason," she tells him, all smiles, as he realizes that he will probably die.

What gets me down is all the energy liberals and conservatives spend attacking each other. Liberalism and conservatism are complementary world-views; they're only defined as liberal and conservative by silhouetting against the other. They're the yin and the yang, in that order, female and male, of the political world. Liberalism is the framework, conservatism tells us how to fill it in.

This means, there are some things each group does better than the other. Conservatives are better at achieving goals than liberals, better at staying focused, better at being optimistic, and better at looking beyond the individual to something bigger. All these are very good reasons to love conservatives. By the same token, liberals are better than conservatives at looking at long-term effects. They're better at acknowledging practical difficulties. They're better at being sensitive to individual variations. And they believe that human happiness is a good in itself, not lightly to be sacrificed to yet another "principle." Those are good things too.

American democracy is best served by each side doing what it does best, while understanding that the other side is equally necessary. If we forget this, we're goners. That's what we're currently in danger of doing, each side gloating at scoring cheap

debating points at the expense of the other, reveling in insisting ever more strongly on positions of absolute divergence.

Things like whether developing humans are people or not and whether homosexuality is a “choice” are such flash points nowadays precisely because we lack the means to resolve the problems by argument. The proof is that if we could do so, we would have done so. But we can’t. They’re the products of underlying structures. All thought structures leave gray areas as the price of answering other questions. We have to let such questions go, as earlier ages let go the question of the nature of angels, or the eighteenth-century philosophical question of whether two people can ever see the “same” book on the table.

Questions like that are never solved, they’re just run into the ground so people walk away with a hangover, wondering what that was all about. In practical terms, it means that each side has to understand that the things that seem to define them the most absolutely as different from the other side are in fact trivial, precisely because the two sides are complementary, because so different. The disagreements are precisely on the subjects where they’re closest, and so the things that actually (despite appearances) matter the least. This one almost seems paradoxical: the things we want most of all to achieve, we’ll never achieve. But that’s the way things are. The abortion debate (for example) will never be solved, only abandoned.

Of course the two world-views are different; that’s the nature of complementarity. Of course we’ll disagree. But if we don’t at the same time acknowledge that the disagreement is what binds us together, we’ve lost the miracle wrought on this American

continent in the late eighteenth century, one that, in an increasingly threatening world, seems increasingly a miracle worth preserving.