

CONSERVATIVE PRINCIPLES THAT AMERICA NEEDS

PAUL RYAN

Contrary to the views of some pundits, sweeping Republican losses at the polls last November did not signify a repudiation of conservatism. “Republican” is not always synonymous with “conservative” and the divergence between the two has been spotlighted in recent years for American voters to see.

Excessive federal spending, particularly on wasteful earmarks such as a “Bridge to Nowhere,” flew in the face of conservatives’ goal of fiscal restraint. Likewise, cases of corruption, where certain members of Congress broke the law and abused their positions for financial gain, are far removed from the conservative ideal of the citizen legislator who serves ethically and upholds the trust of constituents. In fact, quite a few of the Democrats who won did so by projecting conservative messages, including the need for greater accountability in Washington.

If anything, Republicans lost our majority in Congress because voters lost confidence in our ability to stand up for policies true to the underlying conservative principles that so many Americans share, regardless of their party affiliation.

By advancing solutions grounded in individual liberty and opportunity, we can work to reunite Americans behind policies that will help us realize a twenty-first century where people are free, safe, and prosperous.

Among these principles is the notion that individuals and families should be the focal point of our society, not the government. Confidence in the unlimited potential of free individuals has always been part of the American dream, and this outlook tracks closely with conservatives’ belief that government is meant to serve the individual—not the other

way around. This predisposes us to seek solutions that allow American innovation to flourish and avoid burdening our children with high taxes and spiraling government debts.

Most Americans also recognize that the desire for freedom doesn’t stop at our borders, but extends to many people in other lands who are struggling against oppression to make a living, practice their religion, and raise their families. Now, more than ever, it is clear that the strength of our foreign and defense policy impacts these individuals, as well as our security here at home.

The challenge for conservatives today is to put forward solutions rooted in these common-sense conservative principles to address

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America's most pressing problems. We are a great nation and throughout our history our country has overcome crises such as the Great Depression, Nazism, and Soviet communism, one after the other. Today, America faces three great challenges that are converging all at once: globalization, entitlement bankruptcy, and the threat posed by radical Islamist ideology.

The first two issues are closely linked and call for a combination of reforms that harness the power of the free market.

As we increasingly find ourselves competing with China, India, and other rapidly growing economies, we need to lower the cost of doing business here in the U.S. Bringing down health care costs, reducing tax rates on American manufacturers, making our energy supply more independent, affordable and reliable, and cutting the costs of excess regulation and frivolous lawsuits will help American businesses remain competitive. Conservative proposals are best equipped to help us achieve these goals.

For example, consumer-driven health care that puts power and information in the hands of patients can bring down the cost of quality medical care, which is crucial not only for Wisconsin families but also for businesses. Soaring health expenses elevate the cost of doing business here and put us at a disadvantage compared with other nations. We should promote true free-market competition between providers to lower these costs and improve our global competitiveness.

Policies such as expanding tax-free health savings accounts are a good start, but these new tools must be paired with transparency. If patients are going to make informed decisions, just as consumers do throughout every other sector of our economy, they must be able to find out easily what treatments actually cost and what the quality of care is like at different hospitals and doctors' offices.

Congress should also encourage nationwide competition between insurers, by enabling consumers to purchase the best health coverage for them—regardless of

whether the plan is based out of state. In addition, Washington has begun to pay closer attention to the imbalance within our tax code that penalizes individuals who do not have employer-sponsored health insurance. I have introduced legislation that would correct this, providing an advanced refundable tax credit for those who lack coverage through their workplace.

But progress on these fronts will amount to little if we fail to enact meaningful reforms that address the demographic and financial crunch our nation faces when the baby boomers retire and the cost of simply sustaining present entitlement benefits skyrockets.

Entitlement spending is now growing at 6 percent per year—faster than our entire economy and more than twice the rate of inflation. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) projects that, by 2040, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid will consume nearly 20 percent of our economy—equivalent to the cost of the entire federal government today. This means our children will have to pay twice as much in federal taxes just to maintain the status quo. Not only would this place a heavy burden on America's workers and families, but it would also hobble our economy and hurt our businesses' ability to compete in the global marketplace.

Entitlement reform presents conservatives with an excellent opportunity to strengthen Americans' retirement and health security, while advancing individual ownership of the benefits that citizens pay into throughout their lives.

The third major challenge our nation faces is the jihad being waged by radical Islamist terrorists against Americans and other free societies. The al Qaeda operatives, who attacked us on September 11, 2001, were steeped in this fanatical mindset, and variations of this extremist ideology are helping fuel the ongoing violence and instability in Iraq. While the enemy we encounter today is quite different from the Soviets, the Nazis, and other 20th century foes, we can draw lessons from these past struggles. In particular, these experi-

ences taught us that peace is best achieved from a position of strength and preparedness, rather than appeasement. While we may differ on tactics in the war on terror, conservatives should remember this underlying truth.

I also believe we can learn from President Reagan's outreach to citizens behind the Iron Curtain. Speaking at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and at Moscow State University, he appealed to their inherent desire for freedom and prosperity. We, too, must take this opportunity to encourage economic and political freedom to take root around the world and

particularly in moderate Middle Eastern nations. Lasting economic and political reforms in this region will give young people job opportunities and a stake in their government—promoting peace and taking away potential terrorist recruits.

Conservatives must be leaders in addressing the most crucial challenges ahead for our country. By advancing solutions grounded in individual liberty and opportunity, we can work to reunite Americans behind policies that will help us realize a twenty-first century where people are free, safe, and prosperous.