

CENTENNIAL REVIEW

Principled Ideas from the Centennial Institute

Volume 7, Number 10 • November 2015



Publisher, William L. Armstrong

Editor, John Andrews

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CHOOSE OPTIMISM, CONSERVATIVES

By Arthur Brooks



In 2008 the United States elected a man who won the White House promising the nation hope, optimism, and unity. Yet the same man has governed for seven years on the basis of division and pessimism, setting Americans against

one another with the politics of resentment and envy.

This presents conservatives with a choice. We can either have competing pessimism to match the President of the United States and his party, or we can choose optimism. Today I want to tell you how to choose optimism.

I'm the president of a think tank; I look at research all day long. Dutch psychologists, for example, performed an experiment in 2013 to see how a leader, played by an actor, would be received by two groups if he was happy in front of one group and sad in front of the other; optimistic in one and pessimistic in the other.

Subjects rated the optimistic leader approximately *two and a half times* more effective than the same guy with the same words acting as if he was a pessimist. Optimists win and pessimists lose. It's conclusive.

So the choice is up to us. We could, with some justification, go out there in the world and say, "it's lousy. The other guys are no good. Everything is against us." But if we do, we're going to see the same outcomes we saw in the last election and the one before. Let me instead give you three tips on how to choose optimism:

1. *Be a happy warrior and fight for people.*
2. *View everyone in our lives like an asset to develop, not a liability to manage.*
3. *Don't be a whiner.*

To illustrate the first one, be a happy warrior, think about the patron saint of our movement—Ronald Reagan. Today, conservatives always remember the things Reagan fought against: government overreach, bureaucracy, taxes, regulation. But we forget the real magic of Reagan, which was fighting *for people* every single day.

Coming from a liberal household in Seattle, I literally did not know one person who voted for Ronald Reagan. How he got elected was a mystery to me. But one thing I knew, notwithstanding that everybody in my family and friends thought something was wrong with Reagan and he shouldn't be president: I still had this sense that he loved me.

Don't Fight Against Things

Why was that? Because it was true. In his acceptance speech for the Republican nomination in 1980, the most frequently occurring word was "people." He said "people" 38 times. Reagan was a president who fought for people as opposed to fighting against bad policies, and that's the lesson that we need to learn today.

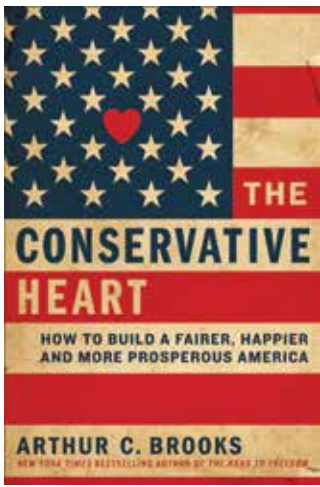
Fight for people, not against things. And fight for who in particular? The people who are not in this room. The people who can't be with us. The people who have been left behind by this administration. We've had seven years of marginalization of the poor, and now somebody's got to fight for them. That somebody is us. We are our brothers' keepers.

Listening to the State of the Union address last January, I noticed that when President Obama was boasting about how America was back, the economy was back, his key piece of evidence was the value of the stock market.

It's true the Dow Jones Industrial Average has increased by 40 percent since he took office. But wait: 81 percent of those gains have gone into the pockets of the top 10 percent of the income distribution—under this supposedly

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Brooks's new book expands on this talk.

redistributionist, supposedly pro-poor president.

When economists tell you that economic growth is going to be 2.5 percent this year, slow but steady, that's misleading. It's going to be 6 percent for people in the top 20 percent of the income distribution, most of you here today. It's going to be zero percent for everybody in the bottom half. This country's leaving the poor behind, led by this president.

Since Obama took over in 2009, the number of Americans on food stamps has gone from 32 million to 47 million. That's a 50 percent increase in the number of people—now almost one in six—who are so poor that they have to rely on the government for food assistance. That's un-American. That's not right.

Somebody needs to fight for those people. It doesn't matter how they vote. True patriots fight for everyone who needs them, not only for people who support them – and that falls to you and me. So be a happy warrior. Fight for people. Be truly like Reagan. That's the first characteristic of an optimist.

The Human Family

Now for the second principle: Treat everybody like an asset, not like a liability. Listen to many of our friends on the left when they talk about poverty or vulnerability, immigrants or people with disabilities. Notice what they say: "I want to give them a better life."

All right—good for them. But to "give" somebody else a better life is to treat them like a liability, to treat them like a dependent. Whereas what do we want as conservatives? We want to build other people's lives so they can give themselves a better life, because we believe everybody's an asset. The human family has a place for everybody. Nobody is merely a liability to manage.

A company that manages liabilities wants to get rid of those liabilities as soon as it can. But a company that sees it has assets wants to develop them. Sometimes it costs

money and effort, sure. It may cost the time and talent and treasure of each one of us. But if we look at every human person and realize that he or she is an asset in our human family, we're going to treat them very differently—the way they should be treated.

Richard's Story

I'll never forget the guy who taught me that. At AEI, we seek out the best-performing organizations in America that help people who have needs. We found one in New York City called the Doe Fund. It deals with the cases of people that society wants to throw away, such as men coming out of prison after serving time for major crimes and winding up homeless.

If anybody's a liability to manage, these guys are, right?

The Doe Fund shelter is run by a husband and wife who don't think so. George and Harriet McDonald believe everybody's an asset. I met one man named Richard who came to the Doe Fund after being in prison for 18 years. He didn't know how to drive a car or use a cell phone. He'd never had a job. His story was heartbreaking.

It was a year before I saw Richard again. He had gone through the life-skills program, gotten his first apartment, and landed his first job, working as an insect exterminator. When I asked him if he was happy, he said, "Am I!" Then by way of showing me why, he pulled out his iPhone and pointed to an email. "For the first time in my life, someone needs me now." There you have it: the American way, the conservative way, the optimistic way. People want to earn their success. Dignity comes through honest work. Every person can add value.

No One is a Liability

Principle number two for being a conservative optimist, then, is to talk about and treat and see everyone—every child, every person with disabilities, everyone no matter where they were born, everyone, no matter how much money or education they have—as a child of God and an asset who must be developed, not a liability we have to manage. Leave the liabilities to the left. We're the optimists with the assets.

Principle number three is my favorite: Stop whining. We all know this in our own families. As the father of three teenagers, I'm saying it all day long. One of them was having trouble with grades, and after a tough parent-

**'Someone
needs me
now.'**



CENTENNIAL REVIEW is published monthly by the Centennial Institute at Colorado Christian University. The authors' views are not necessarily those of CCU. Designer, Justin Jones. Illustrator, Benjamin Hummel. Subscriptions free upon request. Write to: Centennial Institute, 8787 W. Alameda Ave., Lakewood, CO 80226. Call 800.44.FAITH. Or visit us online at www.CentennialCCU.org.

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- John Andrews, Director



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teacher conference, my wife and I were driving home in tense silence. Finally she said, “Look at it this way. At least we know he’s not cheating.”

True Confessions

That’s choosing optimism, and my wife excels at it. We met in Spain, along my non-traditional path to becoming the president of a think tank. I’m not a Harvard man; in fact, I dropped out of college at 19 and spent my twenties on the road as a musician. But it always bugged me that everybody had gone to college in my family except me—my brother, my mom and dad, my grandfather.

It was while playing with the Barcelona Symphony that I met a girl and we fell in love. I told her I needed to confess something that was on my heart: “I didn’t graduate from college.” She just started laughing, and when I asked why, she confessed in turn: “I dropped out of high school.” In other words, I had nothing to whine about!

After we moved to America, soon to be thirty, I was going to go back and get my college degree. We had no money, and we needed my wife to work. But she had no high school diploma, no fluency in English, and no work skills for this country. We were very worried. Was she going to be able to work? What was going to happen?

Aggrieved? Not us.

What happened rocked my world, and it was the first step on my path to joining you as a conservative. She got three job offers in the first month. She said to me, this immigrant from Spain, “This is

the greatest country in the world for people who want to work.” She’s no whiner, that Ester.

Who Stole the Pens?

Four Stanford psychologists did a wonderful study about this in 2010. They divided a hundred graduate students into two groups and asked one group to talk about the last time they were bored and the other to talk about the last time that they felt like a victim of unfairness. In other words, they encouraged the students to complain and whine.

The experiment was to investigate what whining does to your character. After all the venting, each student was asked to help the experimenter with a simple task. What they found was that the ones who had complained the most, refused to help. They were also more likely to feel entitled; more likely to leave trash on the table; more likely to steal the experimenter’s pens.

So the research nails it: Nobody likes a whiner. Now as we all know, whining is the national sport of some liberals. On their side, everybody’s a victim, everybody’s getting into the act. But it’s a problem when we get into the act. We’re conservatives, not complainers. We’re not in this to stand up against some grievance of ours. We stand up for other people who are being left behind.

Voices of CCU

IN GOD DO WE STILL TRUST?

By Ellen Densmore



“In God We Trust.” Those four simple words from our national motto represent America’s very foundation. Yet today, God is banned from schools, ridiculed in politics, and shunned in the public square. And many Christians refuse to entangle themselves in politics, which leaves that arena conspicuously devoid of the light of Christ.

The misapplied phrase, “wall of separation between church and state,” is being used by the secular world to strip religion from public life, as well as by the religious community to justify disengaging from the worldview battle.

“Freedom prospers when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged,” said Ronald Reagan. “Government should uphold and not undermine those institutions which are custodians of the very values upon which civilization is founded.”

But now the vibrancy of authentic Christianity has waned, and our government no longer supports those values; indeed many policies directly contradict biblical principles. Public schooling was created so children could read the Bible for themselves—the first elementary textbook was the New England Primer, full of lessons taken straight from Scripture—and yet the courts have purged every essence of God’s law from those same schools.

Proverbs warns that “the borrower becomes the lender’s slave,” yet our national debt exceeds \$18 trillion. Murder, adultery, and homosexuality are condemned in the Bible but condoned in America through government-funded abortion, contraceptives for middle school students, and legalized gay marriage.

Our government literally subsidizes the breaking of every single one of the Ten Commandments. How can the church simply stand by? If we don’t step up and speak out, America will continue to crumble. You and I can make a difference with our words, our votes, and our donations to candidates and institutions that are taking a stand for biblical economic policies and family values. ■

Ellen Densmore is a CCU sophomore from Denver, Colorado, majoring in political science. A longer version of this essay appeared on our '76 Blog at Tinyurl.com/p5hqokk



Is it tempting to complain? Sure. We have a lot to be disappointed about. We can feel victimized by the Supreme Court, the mainstream media, the left wing in academia. We can rant about Hollywood. You hear it all the time.

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Pessimism and complaining are the national sport of the left. Rather than compete on that ground, we on the right should be happy warriors. That means fighting for people not against things, treating everyone as assets not liabilities, and no whining. We should put each 2016 candidate to the optimism test.

It's true, these institutions are disappointing—but you know what? When we complain, it takes away from our message of unity and optimism. It takes away from our ability to show compassion and fight for true fairness.

And if you don't believe a bunch of Stanford psychologists, I bet you'll believe St. Peter in his first letter, chapter 2, verse 15: "It is God's will that your good lives should silence those who make foolish accusations against you." In other words, live right, show love, and don't complain about being a victim.

Bet on America

There's plenty to be angry about in America today, but how many of us would turn in our passports for the passport of any other country in the world? Show of hands. I see no hands raised. None. I'll bet that even if you were a bunch of liberals in this room today, and you spoke what's written on your heart, you'd vote the same way.

Being an optimist aligns with the facts about this country that we love. This is still the greatest country, no matter how angry we are right now, no matter how much we get

the short end of the stick in the liberal media. Nobody should ever bet against America—and I believe that in your hands, this country's coming back.

So here's my charge to you for the remainder of this Summit. You'll be seeing one candidate after another up here who wants to be President of the United States. You get to assess them; they're in your hands. It's the activists, the leaders, the conservative movers at gatherings like this who are going to decide.

Put them to the optimism test. Ask yourself, "When I look at a candidate, does he or she bring me up or down? Do I feel more optimistic or more pessimistic about this country? Does this person encourage me to be my best self or not? Does he or she believe

that every single person is an asset to America and the world or not?"

Optimists are going to win. The future will belong to them. Our side needs that, and America needs that. The answer is in our hands. Let's choose right. God bless you, and God bless America. ■

This country is coming back.



An Evening with Dick Cheney

46th Vice President of the United States

CCU Distinguished Speaker Series • Hosted by Hugh Hewitt

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Colorado Christian University and Centennial Institute welcome former Vice President Dick Cheney, one of the most eminent statesmen and patriots of our time, for a conversation about his new book, *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Strong America*, and his thoughts on the challenges of 2016.

The event is free and open to the public, but reservations are required.

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