

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

## Death of the good Conservative

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On Dec. 26, 2006, Gerald Ford, the 38th president of the United States, died. His death marked the passing of the last presidential symbol of true American conservatism. While Republicans revere Ronald Reagan for neoconservative values, his election began the modern decline of the 'good Conservative.'

So, what happened in American politics between 1976 and 1981 when Ford (barely) won the Republican nomination and the Gipper took office? More importantly, why are Conservatives like Ford so difficult to find when America has so bluntly rejected Reagan's neoconservative progeny?

President Ford and other like-minded Conservatives most often had the best national interest in mind while more recent Conservatives seem motivated by other factors. For example, Ford's pardon of President Richard Nixon for his role in the Watergate crimes outraged America - even though, historically speaking, it was the correct decision. It began the nation's healing process and made his administration noteworthy, even though it lacked signature policies and Ford himself was a walking gaffe.

On the other hand, Reagan accomplished a great deal that elated the general populace and Conservatives in particular. He slashed taxes, increased defense spending, openly embraced socially conservative causes (anti-abortion, anti-gay, pro-abstinence, pro-Christian fundamentalism, etc.) and deregulated industry. Sound familiar, W? Some even go so far as to credit Reagan with the downfall of the Soviet Union.

Despite Ford's lack of policy accomplishments, his administration, compared to Reagan's, has had a more long lasting positive influence. Consider the impeachment of President Clinton. As historians observe, a common argument in 1996 was that Republicans intensely pursued the Lewinsky scandal and impeachment proceedings as retribution for Watergate and Nixon's resignation. If vengeance were even a small factor after Ford's pardon, imagine the Republican wrath had President Nixon faced trial.

Alternatively, Reagan's legacy lives principally in his neoconservative legislation and those laws' socioeconomic effects. Deregulation of utilities produced soaring utility fees, confusing telecommunication options, and, oh wait, Enron. Meanwhile, Reagan's tax cuts began the previously unprecedented cycle of deficit spending from which our government cannot escape and has us precariously locked in debt. Likewise, Iran-Contra reminded the country of the danger an unchecked military-industrial complex brings (one that currently has us in Iraq). Given this analysis of Reaganism, Dubya is nothing more than a less effective extension of the Great Communicator, only without the charm to mask the bad policy.

Before Reagan, the difference between Conservatives and Liberals was philosophical but lacked the outright enmity felt today. Conservatives were foreign policy hawks with respect to the Cold War while Liberals favored government programs to help the less well off. As money's influence in politics has increased, the wealthy have preyed on the social fears of Middle America to elect clueless, incompetent, corrupt and dangerously conservative national officials. As a result, the meaningful debates of the 1960s and 1970s that revolved around substantive issues like foreign policy and the government's role in daily life have changed to discuss inflammatory issues like abortion, gay marriage and religion.

While liberals have evolved as well, they tend to be progressive. By definition, progressives continually advocate new policies and new uses for government. Previously, Conservatives acted as the voice of moderation and helping select the best policy. Sadly, that conservative brake that slowed change no longer exists. Part of the political process inherently involves those advocating change (Progressives) and those preferring the status quo (Conservatives). The dialogue between the two groups should allow for naturally select the best, most effective ideas, yet since Reagan's time, we have had reactionaries attempting to roll back the progress of previous generations.

As the 2008 election cycle gains momentum, America can only hope that from the vast field of Republican candidates emerges a good-hearted Conservative to elevate policy debate. The current array of candidates lacks the prudence that inspired confidence and trust in the past. Unfortunately, Republicans and Conservatives simple are not what they used to be, leaving the American public with a choice between shades of liberalism or treacherous neoconservatism.

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