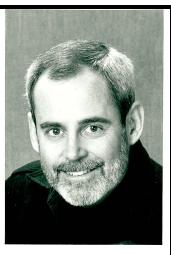
Perspectives:

Interview with

Brad Miner



"I wonder how many who describe themselves as conservative can actually cite a litany of conservative principles." – **Brad Miner**

[This interview with Brad Miner was conducted in September 2003.]

BW: As a starter, how would you describe the current state of the Conservative Movement, its greatest assets and biggest liabilities?

BM: To begin, I reject the suggestion that there is a Conservative Movement. I don't deny that there are conservatives; we know there are, if only because so many of us describe ourselves as such. But a movement? There are some PACs and some foundations and numerous grass-roots organizations, but I can think of none that can honestly claim to offer leadership, philosophical or practical, to more than a fraction of the 40+% of our fellow citizens who consider themselves conservative. Conservatives are diverse and decentralized. If there were a movement, they might vote more.

There is a conservative worldview, but how do we describe its current state? Fluid as always: organic and evolving, never ideological. If we can point to anyone claiming to be conservative who by a fair measure we can classify as an ideologue, he is ipso facto not a conservative. But all this is generalization, so here is a specific: American conservatives are divided.

This is not new. If I read history correctly, the Right has always been roiling in conflict. The turbulence never ceases, although we are always more aware of it in times of war, and the current dispute seems to me at best a debate about preemption and at worst a debate about isolationism. What tends to be missing in much of opinion expressed is the slightest consideration of soldiers and weapons. Most of the debaters have no military experience, and so the conversation resembles commentary at a chess match.

You haven't asked me to settle the question, but I will say this: all people of goodwill need to heed the lessons of history. The Taliban and Saddam no less than Al-Qaeda were threats to America and world peace. Not to strike them would have been cowardice the equal of Europe's appearament of Hitler, which gave us WWII. The preemptive war against Islamic extremism and terror is the prevention of WWIII.

So I'd say the biggest liability of some conservatives is the reactionary appeal to isolationism. Although nearly as great a threat is the progressive-conservative defense of imperialism.

The greatest asset of conservatives – the best ones anyway – is honesty, specifically the ability to look at the world without illusions and to tell the truth about it. So-called liberals – the worst ones anyway – have lost themselves in the fog of political correctness. They believe Man can be perfected and his world become an Eden, and that's why we and they speak of "liberal guilt." Nobody ever speaks of "conservative guilt," and that's because conservatives are only ashamed of sin. We take the world as it is.

What worries me, especially as we finalize our plans to launch the American Compass book club, is that conservatism is largely being defined by attacks on liberal excesses. I wonder how many people describe themselves as conservative to Mr. Gallup because they dislike liberal ideas put forward by professors and pundits. Put another way: I wonder how many who describe themselves as conservative can actually cite a litany of conservative principles. We need to balance the books about falsehood with books about the truth.

- **BW**: How do you view the paleocon/neocon divide over 1) the war in Iraq and 2) the resurrection of Joseph McCarthy as a conservative icon?
- BM: My view about the neo-paleo split over Iraq is immoderate: the neos are right; the paleos are wrong. I said earlier that the war on terror is the prevention of WWIII. I know that to many probably including some neos that seems extreme, but this is how I see it. Americans tend to think that WWII began in the attack on Pearl Harbor or, if they are a bit more thoughtful, that it began with Hitler's moves into (take your pick) Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland. But it probably began in Manchuria in 1931, when the Japanese began their conquest. Each and every one of these aggressions against sovereign nations was met with indifference by countries with which the conquered territories had treaties of protection. Chamberlain's "peace in our time" accommodation is rightly considered not only cowardice but also incitement. We can't remake history, but it seems likely that strong action taken by allies against German rearmament and aggression (and Japanese aggression) might very well have prevented the World War. What seem like insignificant sparks thrown up by regional conflicts may cross borders to ignite conflagration. But preemption has one great disadvantage: if it is successful, we don't really know it, because we have eliminated the consequences of inaction.

As to Joe McCarthy . . . Is there a neo-paleo split here? It seems to me that Ann Coulter has taken heat from all sides. In some cases the criticism of her book *Treason* has been humorless. Miss Coulter is a provocateur, although her attack mode is never ad hominem. Her main point, I think, is that McCarthy has been slandered; not that he was a saint, which he certainly wasn't. As I wrote in *The Concise Conservative Encyclopedia*, the trouble with McCarthy is that he gave anticommunism a bad name.

- BW: Do you envision a backlash over contemporary neocon supremacy in foreign policy?
- **BM**: Will there be backlash over neoconservative supremacy in foreign affairs? Well, yes. Preemption has all sorts of consequences, and many are not good. But to the extent that some paleocons have been vocal in their criticism of the invasion of Iraq, they have been, as David Frum has suggested, "unpatriotic." Many of our paleo forebears opposed entry into WWII, but when the war was joined, they quickly rallied to support our troops. I have heard Pat Buchanan take exactly this position with regard to Iraq, and it is the correct position.
- **BW**: What is your assessment of paleocons today, particularly with regards to the neo-Confederate elements (e.g., Lincoln Reconsidered Conference)?
- **BM**: If a revival of respect for McCarthy seems bizarre, the degradation of Lincoln seems positively fantastic except that revisions in our understanding of both men are long overdue. I once got

caught in what was an ongoing argument between Harry V. Jaffa and Melvin E. Bradford over the "real" Lincoln – this was when I was Literary Editor of *National Review*, and I know first hand that the bitterness is acidic. I suspect – although I am hardly a Lincoln scholar – that Honest Abe will slip down a few notches in history's judgment of him and yet remain by consensus one of our best presidents and greatest Americans.

But, again, we see the problem of war: it is a power granted solely to the national government, and it is almost an inevitability that its concurrent powers will increase as a consequence. But as war itself is inevitable, we will never be free of the necessity both to fight enemies and our own human lust for power. In the end, I think, paleos and neos will find common ground at least in the certainty that limited government and personal responsibility are among conservatism's first principles.

The conservative book club, American Compass, which I and my colleagues at Bookspan are launching in January will welcome the work of all conservatives. We are leading with *An End To Evil: What's Next In The War On Terrorism* by David Frum and Richard Perle, a January book, and we would have taken Thomas DiLorenzo's *The Real Lincoln* but for the fact that it is a September book and published too soon for us. The debate over great men – Lincoln, Churchill, Reagan – will never cease, and anybody who believes history will settle on a single, objective judgment of any man or event is kidding himself.

- **BW**: How do you view the rise of Ann Coulter as a "conservative diva" and the critical acclaim (by some conservatives) of her books, *Slander* and *Treason*?
- **BM**: With regard to Ann Coulter . . . Conservatism needs a public face faces really. And Miss Coulter is one of our finest faces. She is also intellectually solid, if somewhat reckless. But her recklessness and that's probably too strong a word reflects her courage. Critical response to her work and including her many public appearances has been mixed, but public acceptance of her and her work indicates the breadth of American conservatism. But Ann's success also points to a problem: without exception, best-selling conservative books have been attacks on liberal excesses. That's fine up to a point; we need to blow the whistle on media bias and legal tyranny and political correctness. But I do hope we'll soon see books that make positive statements about the content of the conservative worldview
- **BW**: What are the principal principles of Conservatism and how would you describe the conservative temperament assuming there is such a thing)?
- **BM**: So what is that content? It is both a resistance to political and social experimentation and a set of specific principles about the good life. Of the first, it is enough to recall G.K. Chesterton's remark (often quoted, by the way, by John F. Kennedy) that we ought never to tear down a fence until we know why it was built.

In cataloging conservative principle there are numerous lists put forward by the likes of Edmund Burke, Russell Kirk, Peter Viereck, Robert Nisbet, and William F. Buckley Jr. among others. Their accounting is superior to mine, but since you ask, here goes: Conservatives favor realism over relativism, skepticism over progressivism, evolutionism over constructivism, federalism over statism, capitalism over collectivism, and theism over secularism.

These are the elements in what I call the dialectics of prudence.

As Karl Popper put it, common sense "is clearly on the side of realism," and the Faustian bargain modern liberals have made with relativism undermines a stable sense of reality: academic objectivity has been abandoned in favor of intellectual fad.

Conservative skepticism about those fads has much to do with our view of human nature. As I wrote once: "Put in the simplest terms: conservatives believe that Man must be bound; liberals believe that he must be liberated."

"Evolutionism" and "constructivism" are infelicitous words, but here's what I mean: we prefer the tried and true over the unproven innovation. Better is Daniel Boorstin's summary: "[I]nstitutions are not and should not be grand creations of men toward large ends and outspoken values; rather they are organisms which grow out of the soil in which they are rooted and out of the tradition from which they have sprung." It's the principle F.A. Hayek referred to as "spontaneous order."

That the state's power should be limited and its functions decentralized and balanced with the rights of individuals and communities few Americans – even many liberals – will doubt. Here the best summary of the principle is the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity.

Are conservatives bound to believe specifically in capitalism? Yes, at least to the extent that economic fairness begins with the conviction that people ought to be free to choose and free to keep the rewards of their labors. Conservative moral sensibilities are often offended by the excesses of a free market, but we must never forget that economic liberty is the most effective check against Leviathan.

Do all conservatives believe in God? No, just 99%. Religion is essential for many reasons: first, because it is true; second, because, even more than economic liberty, it defends against absolute politics; third, because it provides a basis for the moral order upon which law is derived; fourth, because it presents Man with a paradox designed to complete him. In order to be free, we must be obedient. Because God made us free, obedience must never be compelled.

- **BW**: Regarding California's gubernatorial election, do you agree with "pragmatic" conservatives who favor Arnold for an "R" as governor or "principled" conservatives who oppose his anti-conservative positions?
- BM: All this seems somehow too highfalutin' in transition to a consideration of the California Mess. I am not a Republican. I am a member of the Conservative Party of New York, but if I were a Californian, I probably would be a Republican, since there is no conservative option there. The CPNY was founded during the Rockefeller years in part to hold Republican feet to the philosophical fire, which it has done for more than forty years with varying degrees of success. Pataki in '94, good. Pataki in '02, bad. But the party's support of Governor Pataki in the last election was a pragmatic act. No conservative any longer has a shred of faith in Pataki, but in order for the party to survive under New York's arcane election laws it was necessary to back a winner. I know we hate to speak the words of Bismarck, but "Politics is the art of the possible." In California, Mr. McClintock's candidacy is detrimental to the chances of good government emerging in his troubled state. He should step aside, allow Arnold Schwarzenegger to broaden the state's Republican base, and hope to gradually move the electorate towards the center. I would not say this if I believed the votes might split in such a way as to allow Mr. McClintock to slip in. But as I see it, he cannot win but may boost Bustamante to victory. That would be unfortunate.

If I had to guess, though, Arnold will win even with McClintock in the race.

- **BW**: How did (and does) the Religious Right impact Conservatism and the public square, and what effect did that nexus of politics and religion have on religion in America?
- **BM**: If by the Religious Right we mean the political efforts led by televangelists, I think the impact has been uneven at best. If, on the other hand, we mean the involvement in political and social conversation and controversy by Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, then I think the impact is

profound and becoming profounder. I must be careful not to ape a proper historian's seasoned judgment, but it seems beyond question that American politics began in religion. What many of us fear is that our political culture – especially in that part of the culture shaped by the judiciary – is increasingly bent on driving religion from public life. Honestly, it is nauseating to hear so many invoke the First Amendment as proof that expressions of faith must be banned from public speech. It is both dishonest and dangerous, and I never tire of reminding my liberal friends of the words attributed to Ivan Karamazov: that without God anything is permissible. Above all, I am sickened and saddened by the contemporary denial of sin. The last elected official to speak publicly of sin was Dwight Eisenhower.

On the other hand . . . religious Americans are ever more aware of the threat. We are, by the grace of God I'm sure, a mostly civilized people, and so the courageous faithful do not risk martyrdom as more and more stand up to deny the deniers. Peter Viereck called conservatism the "revolt against the revolt," and we are witnessing today the "denial of the denial." I make no assertion about God's will in all this, and we know that we are not judged by words alone, but many will be blessed who reassert that our rights are not man-made. Against the waning trend, look for religion to wax powerful. But don't look for theocracy.

- **BW**: In America, the "politics of personal destruction" arose with her first nascent political parties. Recalling that there is "nothing new under the sun," what are your views on character assassination and hate-mongering as it is extant today?
- **BW**: Related to the above, in your *Encyclopedia* you note Shils' observation about extremism threatening "the politics of civility" and our "fragile consensus." How do you regard the extremism extant today at both ends of the political spectrum and how is it best combated?
- BM: My views about political discourse and civility are explained albeit obliquely in my new book, The Compleat Gentleman: Chivalry In A Democratic Age (Spence, February). The American republic is the chivalrous man writ large. Our institutions depend upon loyalty, justice, courage, and honor (and that's an incomplete list) and upon the remnant of men and women who possess those qualities. We need no charismatic leaders, just decent gentlemen. We need gentle men who are also dangerous; peacemakers who carry swords. Civility is not intellectual castration. I'm not a big fan of Teddy Roosevelt, but he said it: "Speak softly but carry a big stick." But note: to speak softly is to show restraint. To attack a political opponent simply as a means of vote getting is beneath the dignity proper to a chivalrous man. Why on earth would any man want to behave like a cad? The essence of the cad is selfishness, the same thing that moves the extremist.
- **BW**: As you consider contemporary Conservatism in America, do you see generational and regional distinctions?
- BM: Yes and no. Conservatism is at least partly about the earth; the soil we grow in. Southern, Eastern, Midwestern, and Western conservatives will be more alike than different, but Southerners especially live a conservatism of manners that is somewhat lost on the others, and many Easterners are all about ideas and policies and could live interchangeably in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington: their roots are in the air. What matters most is what happens at home, then in the neighborhood, the town, the state. The few national issues that unite or divide conservatives are rarely the ones that define their conservatism. So even though I may quarrel with anti-war conservatives, we'll put the argument behind us when peace comes. That may be never, but the point is made. How conservatives deport themselves in church, at dinner parties, and in the workplace these actions probably speak louder than words about a foreign war or federal taxes. A conservative may be, I suppose, an elegant gentleman or an awkward oaf. And I

think conservatism, which is hardly a monolithic world view, tracks very specifically with religion, and there are very obvious differences in worship north and south, east and west.

To be a Georgian is to see history differently than an Ohioan. I grew up a Yankee in Ohio, and I was thirty years old before I heard or read a defense of the antebellum South – Margaret Mitchell notwithstanding. No matter what I learn about the "real" Lincoln, I'll always revere him because my great-grandmother did. As a little girl, she watched from her father's shoulders as the slain president's funeral train rolled through western Ohio on its way to Illinois. She was 97 when she died in 1960. I understand that her impressions weren't scholarly – no more than mine were learning from her. But to be a Buckeye, which I am, is to be a Lincoln man, even if I'm not so much a Lincoln fan as once I was.

My sons, who are 16 and 14, get a snootful of conservatism at home. My wife and I have tried to educate them about religion, history, and manners, and they are exemplary, if I may say so. But they are – for now anyway – more libertarian than conservative, and I must say that's my impression of most people born after about 1970. So many forces drive their lives, none more powerfully than media, and the press of legal and educational reforms has created an environment in which conservative dissent is not only difficult – that would be good – but capricious. There's a sense that although some of us may have been athwart history yelling stop, history has moved on. We have changed its course – at least Buckley, Reagan, and others did – but we have not stopped it. If there is a single motto that seems to me to capture the spirit of the times it is this: Live and let live. Some of what's behind such an attitude is not good: it's resignation in the face of constant assault. But there's also our tradition of tolerance, which is very good: in spite of the rest of the world's determination to split apart, Americans still live together as one people. We teach our kids to respect others – if they deserve respect – regardless of color or creed. We have overcome much bigotry in my lifetime. Is it surprising that teens are receptive to appeals for tolerance from, say, homosexuals?

What I can't measure is the depth of this libertarian proclivity. So many young people are beginning their adult lives so much closer to the center – even right of it – than was true a generation earlier. They will grow more conservative over time. And I note that among the kids who tell you they believe "gays" ought to have all the rights and privileges of straights, the actual acceptance of homosexual practice is nil.

In the end – and in every step and age in between now and then – religion will guide conservatism, probably even among secular conservatives. Our great debates may turn out to be about faith again: Do we need sacrament and magisterium? Or are we justified by personal revelation alone? Is the Bible the answer to all our questions? Or is it idolatry to call it inerrant?

Does life begin at conception? Or does it begin . . . later on? How we think about how we answer questions such as these is what separates conservatives from liberationists.

"The founding editor of the American Compass Book Club, Brad Miner is a former literary editor of *National Review* and the author of *The Concise Conservative Encyclopedia* and *The Compleat Gentleman*. He lives in Westchester County, New York" (http://www.harpercollins.com/authors/31208/Brad_Miner/index.aspx).