It Takes a Family

Conservatism and the Common Good

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The Task of Stewardship

On my right wrist, every day, I wear a royal blue piece of cloth, a bracelet of sorts. Stitched in white are the letters M.I.L.Y. That is a word, of course, but it is also an acronym. The word is what's most important in the choices we face as a country. The acronym is what is most important to me as I confront the choices I must make in my own life—a husband, father, citizen, and lawmaker.

I'll explain F.A.M.I.L.Y., the acronym, a bit later. But the word, family, is where I want to start. It is where we have to start, because it is where we all do start—a fact that many in Washington often overlook.

The liberal news media, Hollywood, and the educational elite in America tend to portray political liberals as the courageous champions of the average guy—and, of course, the poor. It is simply assumed that their more "enlightened" economic policies are all about helping the poor and middle class. Conservatives, on the other hand, are portrayed as fundamentally selfish, self-interested individuals, whose economic policies are crafted to protect or advance their (or their golf partners') "special interests." I will argue in this book that liberal eco-
omic policies have not only been devastating to the poor and the middle class economically, but have actually undermined the basic structures of our society. I will also argue that both conservative economic policy and conservative efforts to help the poor help themselves are more genuinely compassionate—and effective—than the liberal alternative. These policies are already beginning to work, for all Americans.

Another view of the media echo chamber promotes is that liberal social policies are rational, tolerant, progressive, and caring. Social conservatives, on the other hand, are portrayed as irrational, ignorant, rigid Bible-thumpers obsessed with prophesying woe. In this book, I hope to show that this all-too-common caricature of conservatives and their social policies by the liberal elite can be attributed to liberals’ fundamentally different vision for America—a vision that is completely at odds with that of our nation’s founders, and with the views of most Americans today. Liberalism is an ideology; conservatism is common sense.

By almost any measure, the political, economic, and social achievements of this nation in just over two centuries are astounding, and American accomplishments in our own lifetime are no less extraordinary. We all recognize the progress we have made through a sustained effort over the course of the last few decades: we have faced down Soviet communism, the greatest tyranny the world has ever seen; through an effort of moral self-examination and reform, we have made extraordinary strides in overcoming the legacy of racial prejudice; we have committed ourselves to programs that have made our natural environment cleaner for future generations; we have remained in the forefront of scientific investigation in virtually every field; and through it all, America has remained a land of economic opportunity unmatched in human history. Nevertheless, just as

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personal success can lead to pride, avarice, extravagance, and self-absorption, history has shown that great civilizations can also go astray.

The simple truth is, as the voters in the 2004 elections indicated, not everything is well in America. If, over the past generation, we have made great strides in some areas, it is also the case that in the same generation we have seen alarming trends in American society as well: an epidemic of promiscuity and AIDS among young adults; crime rates that are still much too high; extreme violence and offensive sexual content on everything from video games to the Internet; 3,500 healthy expectant mothers carrying healthy children exercising a “choice” to end the lives of their children every day; religion under assault by the media and liberal activists and then boosted from the public square by court order; our schools failing the poor in providing the basics for life and indoctrinating both rich and poor with politically correct dogma instead of virtue and truth; the foundational institution of every civilization known to man—marriage—under siege; and millions retreating from our neighborhoods and the civic and fraternal organizations that bind us together. Across America, when they gather at backyard barbecues or Little League games, parents share with each other their deep concerns about how hard the world around us makes it to raise children the right way today.

Once, our social, governmental, and educational institutions, along with the popular culture, seemed to work together to aid parents in raising their children. Today, many feel that these same institutions are somehow conspiring against them. The media missed the impact of the “values voter” in the 2004 election, in part because they didn’t know what to look for. These values voters may not be pro-life or favor a constitutional amendment to define traditional marriage, they may not
think of themselves as conservatives, and they may not be registered Republicans, but they can feel in their bones that something is wrong, and they sense that the institutions dominated by liberals are a big part of the problem. I believe these voters decided one of the most critical elections in recent times in favor of President Bush and the Republicans because they see these values issues as a bigger problem in their lives than either terrorism or the economy. They are looking to something or someone for answers.

That points to a problem facing postmodern America. We too readily look to those wielding power and influence to solve society's big problems for us—in particular, we look to the government. And why not? They are "society's" problems, and the government is society's representative. But over the past generation we have been learning that governmental, cultural, social, moral, and intellectual power brokers in far too many cases have made our problems worse. This has created a vicious downward spiral in which the more the public relies on the powerful elite, the worse it gets, which leads to the public relying on these elites even more.

Who are these big, powerful forces upon which so many rely to shape our economy, culture, society, values, and learning? They are what I call the "Bigs"—big news media, big entertainment, big universities and public schools, big businesses and some big national labor unions, and of course, the biggest Big of all, the federal government. When I hear that catchphrase of the liberals, "It takes a village to raise a child," I hear Big. It's a homely image, a village, but when you get past the metaphor, what do you really see in the details? Top-down, elitist prescriptions imposed by those who believe they are the postmodern kings of the masses—particularly of the supposedly ill-informed "peasants" of red-state America.

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The people who run the Bigs I like to call the "village elders." They are the liberal elite who think they know what is best for individual Americans and how best to order (or rather, un-order) our society along the lines of their ideological abstractions. They see any institution that stands between the Bigs and the isolated individual as an annoyance or hindrance. In fact, in the view of the Bigs, it is often just these intermediary associations that are responsible for what the Bigs understand to be our social problems. The liberal answer to the "problem" of intermediary institutions is to "liberate" individuals from them—whether individuals want that or not.

And what are these problem-creating associations that liberals believe harm people? They are the "Littles": local government, civic and fraternal associations, clubs, small businesses, neighborhoods, local school districts, churches and church ministries—and of course, the greatest offender of all and the greatest thorn in the liberals' side, the iconoclastic traditional family. Liberal ideology promises a utopia of freedom and equality, if only the Littles can be engineered out of existence.

So where do we conservatives look for answers to the social issues of such widespread concern to Americans today? Why, to the very associations that the village elders distrust. And we ought to start with what has been the foundation of every successful civilization in history: the traditional family.

Let me start by defining the conservative mission in the broadest terms.

One twentieth-century American conservative thinker, Russell Kirk, argued that the fundamental conservative disposition in politics is the "stewardship of a patrimony." Those are two words we don't use every day. A patrimony is simply an inheritance.
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Speaking in terms of our "inheritance" has a special advantage, because it helps us think, symbolically, about "capital." In a business, capital (money) must constantly be invested to keep things going. Machines wear out and have to be replaced; money must be spent to train workers in new techniques; if the business is to grow, whole new buildings must sometimes be built. There must be constant reinvestment for the business to remain productive—investments not just in buildings and equipment, but in salespeople, marketing, distribution, accounting, and management. And something like this is true about our civilization as well. We need to invest not only in our economy, but in our culture, our social interactions, our values, and the methods by which we pass all these good things on to the next generation. That is what is meant by the stewardship of a patrimony: in society as a whole, various kinds of capital, not just money, must be replenished in every generation. I will argue that the unit that most efficiently, effectively, and naturally builds and replenishes capital in every aspect of our civilization is the family.

Throughout this book, therefore, I will be discussing different types of "capital" and how family breakdown—out-of-wedlock births, divorce, cohabitation, and absent parent—has depleted that capital in recent decades. For it sometimes happens that the patrimony we inherit has not been well cared for by the immediately previous generation. I will also show how strong families can help build up our common capital, for this and for future generations.

I group American civilization into five distinct but interrelated pieces. These pieces represent the forces that determine who we are collectively as a people, and, at once, constitute the environment in which our lives and the lives of the next generation are shaped. Our task as stewards of this great land
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and build strong communities. There are too many “wealthy” families and communities that are far from healthy.

That leads me to moral capital and the key roles religious institutions and the family play in transmitting virtue. Moral capital refers to the virtue, proper conduct, and respect for human life that build trustworthiness and bind us together in a common mission. When moral capital is high, we feel that our common life is a moral and ethical endeavor, and we strive to live up to high standards. Too often today, however, we have a public standard of moral neutrality, which amounts to moral relativism. As a result, we become de-moralized, and thus we live down to our lowest selves.

There is also cultural capital. This includes all the stories, images, songs, and arts that explain to us, and in particular our children, who we are. The arts and entertainment industry is producing a flood of content so pervasive that the sheer quantity of images is overwhelming. The messages in these “artifacts” of the culture are too often more interested in sizzle and shock than truth and meaning. I believe that bad culture is culture that lies; good culture, even if it may be ugly, tells the truth. There is hope here, however, and I will explore how families influence the culture and how they can be protected from its destructive effects.

Finally, I’ll have something to say about what I call intellectual capital. That’s a fancy way of talking about our traditions of education and schooling. The most essential thing any society does is to help parents raise the next generation. How are our schools and families doing at this vital task today? Let’s just say we can do better.

We must be good stewards of each of these stores of “capital” so that our children will inherit a strong, vibrant country. That requires every generation to put forth the effort to renew...
and restore the capital of their patrimony, just as in a family 
business. If even one part of our inheritance becomes depleted, 
we will have failed the test of our generation, to the detriment 
of our children. And let's be honest with ourselves: have we 
been good stewards of our inheritance on all these fronts? 
Here is the good news. America has faced such challenges 
in the past and has risen to meet them. We have overcome 
declines in capital during the Great Depression (economic), Civil 
War (social), slavery and racism (moral), the Roaring Twenties 
(cultural), and the era after Sputnik (intellectual). In many 
respects, the problems we now face represent a more complex 
challenge, because almost all aspects of our civilization seem 
to be at tipping points. The good news is that capital can be 
replenished. But just as with any other problem, we must first 
admit it exists before we can work together to solve it. Then 
we must determine the reason for its depletion and the sources 
of rejuvenation. 
I do not want to exaggerate and claim, like Chicken Little, 
that the sky is falling. But I do want to be honest in laying out 
in detail the challenges that face us on these five fronts—social, 
economic, moral, cultural, and intellectual. I will then step back 
and analyze the reason for the decline, and try to offer some 
ideas to turn back the tide. It will come as no surprise that I 
believe the place to start in restoring these pillars of our society 
is with the family—because the family is at the center of all 
the types of capital I've just described. 
As the fundamental building block of society, the family 
creates, strengthens, nurtures, and replenishes each of these 
stores of capital. And each of these kinds of capital directly 
affects the strength and stability of families. In other words, if 
any of these stores of capital are weakened or depleted, it harms 
families, especially low-income families.