

The Cultural Contradictions of Conservatism

Welcoming Remarks at AEI Annual Dinner, December 6, 1995

Open with singing of "America, the Beautiful," led by Rev. Robert Childs, Pastor, Berean Baptist Church.

Rev. Childs, thank you for leading us in that stirring musical benediction. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the American Enterprise Institute's 1995 annual dinner and Francis Boyer Lecture.

This gathering is substantially the handiwork of the sixty-three corporate and professional leaders who constitute our dinner committee, led by two outstanding generals, George Peapples of the General Motors Corporation and Susan Walter of the General Electric Company. I would like to extend heartfelt thanks from everyone at AEI for their spirited hard work on behalf of our common enterprise.

I also want to recognize and thank Mr. Henry Wendt, AEI trustee and former chairman of SmithKline Beecham, and Dr. Jerry Karabelas, president of the firm's North American Pharmaceuticals division, not only for SmithKline's long-time sponsorship of the Francis Boyer Award in memory of their former chairman, but for their own steadfast intellectual and moral support of AEI.

We are not uncompromising deficit hawks at AEI, but we have of necessity been engaged in our own deficit reduction program since the mid-1980s, and tonight I am happy to declare victory. Nine years ago AEI had a few thousand dollars in the bank and \$9 million in debts; tonight we have zero debt and \$13 million in the bank. At long last AEI's financial resources are catching up to her prodigious intellectual resources; I am profoundly grateful to the many people in this room who have made that possible.

And not a moment too soon for the momentous political debates begun this year, which will touch every corner of the overgrown federal establishment. People of conservative and libertarian disposition have good cause to think history is moving their way—but the initial skirmishes of 1995 provide important lessons that need to be learned quickly. Deficit reduction, the driving argument of limited-government politics for more than a decade, which has helped break the growth of government and avert a thousand new impositions on the public weal, has now, this month, run its course. It will not help much with the huge middle-class income-transfer programs or with fundamental tax reform or school choice; it will not describe what a sensible EPA or FDA should look like; it can be a positive nuisance to deregulation and privatization. It will not ameliorate our racial divisions or the terrible circumstances of our poorest urban communities.

The politics of "we have the will but not the wallet" was temporizing at best. We are in fact an inconceivably wealthy society; the problems we face are in many

respects byproducts of our very affluence and lack of considered will.

Partisans of limited government and the restoration of civil society are no longer a fringe or even a movement: we are a social consensus, and a political coalition. But if our time for temporizing is past, so is our time for abstract ideology; what is now required is practical imagination. In America, policy agendas live not by logic but by experience: by hitching themselves to the grand old national affections for freedom, equality, and progress, and by appealing to the everyday sensibilities, material and spiritual, of citizens who are not political activists of any stripe. Whether governmental abstinence and cultural renewal can be expounded in those terms is the great question of the hour. It is a story that, if it can be told at all, has yet to be written, and at this point we don't even know who its author will be. But in the meantime we in this room should not be waiting querulously for Godot. The coming drama needs first drafts and seconds and thirds to be written and polished and passed around. Opening night—which could also be closing night—is fast approaching.

One of those drafts will now be promulgated. It is said that the baby boom generation seems to think that life on earth began in the 1960s—fancying that its every trial and triumph has been a totally new and amazing experience without precedent in all of humankind. Washington has gotten to be a much younger town in recent years, and baby boomers are now the elders in charge at the House and at the White House. I surmise that AEI's Council of Academic Advisers, in selecting this year's Francis Boyer lecturer intended to caution the energetic young men and women now overseeing American politics that they got there by more than their own devices—that they are standing upon the shoulders of giants, none broader than those of George Will. So listen up, fellow youngsters.

James Q. Wilson, chairman of AEI's Council of Academic Advisers, is unable to be here tonight. He has asked Gertrude Himmelfarb, a member of the AEI Council and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, to read the tribute he prepared for the occasion and to present AEI's Francis Boyer Award for 1995.