

# Don't Get Fooled Again

“I’ll tip my hat to the new constitution; Take a bow for the new revolution; Smile and grin at the change all around; Pick up my guitar and play; Just like yesterday; Then I’ll get on my knees and pray; We don’t get fooled again. No, no!”

—The Who

by Deacon Keith A. Fournier

I moved to Northern Virginia, in the “beltway” of Washington, D.C., in 1997 after serving as the executive director of the American Center for Law and Justice for seven years where I had engaged in public interest law for pro-life, pro-family and religious freedom causes.

I made the move geographically and professionally in order to more directly engage in political activism and bring about lasting social change. My goal was to mobilize Catholic citizens to serve the common good through informing their political participation by the principles derived from their faith and the social teaching of the Church. It is still one of my goals.

Prior to that I was a part of what many

who are aware of it call the “Steubenville miracle” for sixteen years. I had moved to the then “College of Steubenville” (now Franciscan University of Steubenville) in Ohio as a transfer student in 1974 upon the invitation of my friend, a giant of the Church, Fr. Michael Scanlan. He took the helm of a small Catholic college that had almost lost its soul and transformed it through the power of the Holy Spirit into a vibrant center of Catholic faith and life.

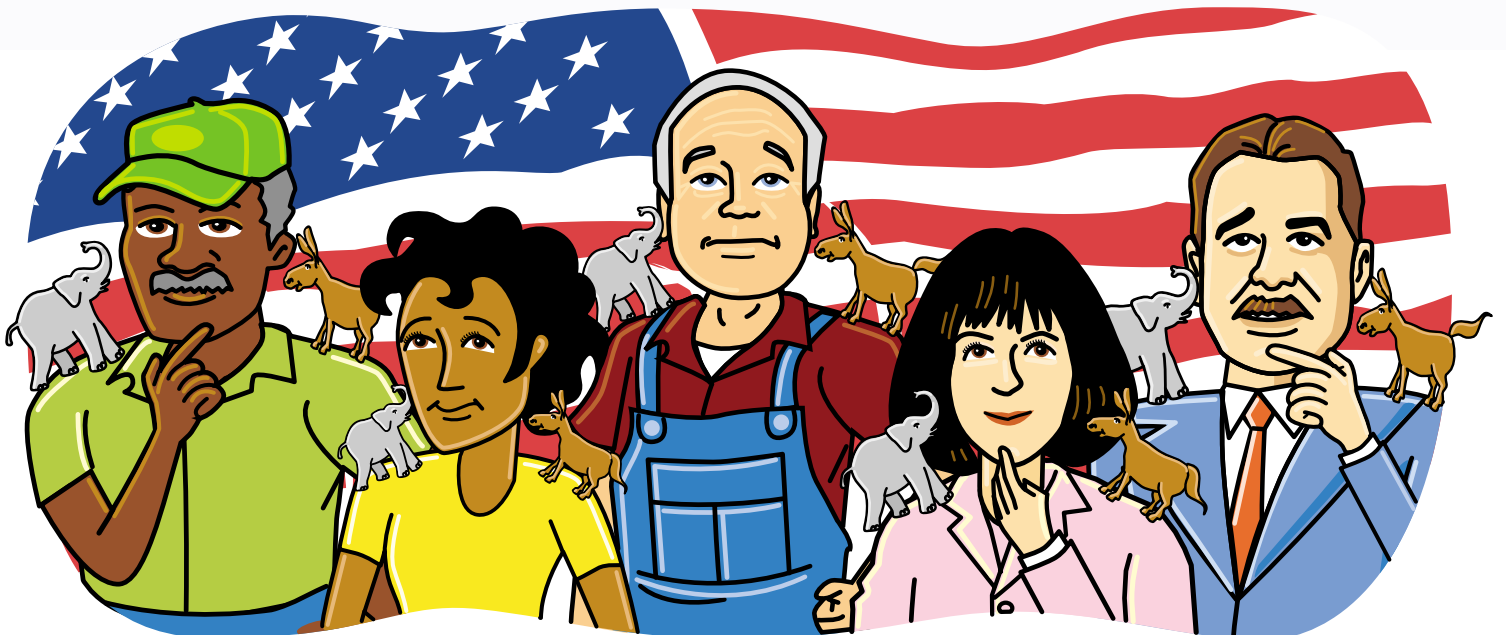
I moved to Steubenville from a monastery which I entered after I had reaffirmed my Catholic faith as a young man. That reaffirmation occurred after much intellectual, spiritual and physical journeying. It also occurred, oddly enough, while I was a student in a

Pentecostal Bible College where I had enrolled shortly after I had made a choice to “rededicate my life to Christ” on a California beach.

My cross-country sojourn had ended on that Beach and my new life began. I was a depressed and disillusioned counter-cultural hippie searching for truth. Truth found me and He had a name, Jesus Christ. Oh, like Augustine of Hippo I would soon come to find He had never left me. I had left Him.

All of this occurred in my life after having been raised in a Catholic home in Massachusetts. I know, it seems an odd journey to some these days. But those were odd days. We were searching for something more in life. My search, and that of many others of my generation, led me to the place where heaven touched earth in the embrace of the Son of God on the Cross, the Hill of Calvary.

Since I had never officially left the



Catholic Church, I am a “revert” to Catholicism.

After following my friend Father Michael Scanlan to Steubenville, I married, graduated with a double major in philosophy and theology. I went to law school to become more equipped to fight the “culture war” with the hopes of being a part of the first class-action lawsuit that I believed would one day be brought on behalf of all children who had been killed by abortion since the infamous *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1976.

My conviction that my faith must inform my politics runs deep.

My tenure in Steubenville lasted sixteen years. It helped to form my deepening conviction that Catholic social teaching was a treasure hidden in a field that had to be shared so as to form the basis of a social, economic and political movement that could actually build a new culture of life and civilization of love. It was there that I also discovered and fell in love with the extraordinary teaching of Pope John Paul II.

I became deeply involved in ecumeni-

cal collaboration very early on, before it became acceptable and even commendable with the “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” accord, of which I was a signer. I did so because my unique background and relationships with evangelical Christians, my reading of the documents of the Second Vatican Council and my understanding of the ecumenism of Pope John Paul II convinced me that we must work together, especially in our

common cultural mission. I was also convinced that Catholics held the missing matter for the emerging movement of evangelicals in political activism because only Catholic Christians have a rich and cohesive body of social teaching.

My hope was to be a part of building a movement of Catholics who truly connected their faith and their citizenship with that teaching—and then worked alongside other Christians, other people of faith and all people of good will. It still is.

As a student of John Paul II and his extraordinary writings, I was convinced that if Catholics (and other Christians) simply understood the wealth and treasure that is the social teaching of the Catholic Church, they would begin to inform their social, economic and political participation by its clear wisdom and act accordingly. Such a new Catholic action would serve the common good of all society.

During those years I sincerely tried to shape my political philosophy and participation by my faith. Along with classical Catholic writings and thinkers, I drew largely from the works of many intelligent and compelling contemporary Catholic thinkers. Most of them would now be called “neo-conservatives.” I read Michael Novak, Father Richard John Neuhaus (even back when he was Rev. Neuhaus, a Lutheran pastor) and others from the growing body of intellectuals associating with their efforts. I struggled with the integration of their thought with the classical Catholic writers I was read-

ing at the time, but I still continued down the path of being a student of their proposed synthesis.

I was always uncomfortable with being called a conservative (I still am) but I certainly knew I was not a contemporary liberal. I just wanted to be a faithful Catholic, informed by my faith and committed to Catholic action for the common good. Though never an easy task, it is a particularly difficult one in the contemporary American climate.

## “INSIDE THE BELTWAY”

**W**hen I moved to the Washington, D.C. area, my acceptance of the neo-conservative synthesis began to seriously fray. I discovered their tremendous influence on contemporary conservative activism and found myself increasingly at odds with the neo-conservative synthesis as I saw it worked out in contemporary application on issues.

My graduate work at the John Paul II Institute of the Lateran University helped me to more fully understand why I had such a “check” in me as I tried to embrace the efforts to synthesize Catholic thought with contemporary neo-conservative social, political and economic philosophy. I also realized in my work that I simply am not a neo-conservative at all. Though I respect these thinkers and appreciate their sincere faith and desire to serve the nation, I now fundamentally disagree with them on some vital issues. I will address that (briefly) later on in this article.

However, I also found that I was even more at odds with another powerful group in contemporary conservatism that was luring many activist evangelical conservatives like a pied piper. I will refer to them in this article as the “leave us alone coalition,” a term coined by Grover Norquist, one of their leaders. Again, by addressing my concerns with their positions, I do not

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intend to denigrate their leaders. Rather I simply disagree with them and want to raise some serious concerns for consideration by my fellow Christians who have seemingly joined their camp.

Though I could address many issues that challenge sincere Christians in their efforts to participate in the current political climate in American political life, I will focus only these two dangers in this article. Again, I do so not to injure but rather to raise concerns as we head into a very important political year.

### THE “LEAVE US ALONE COALITION”

Three years before my move to the D.C. area, upon the invitation of a Washington lawyer and Republican activist, I contributed a chapter for a book that was an anthology of conservative reflections on the American founding. My chapter was entitled “Do We Still Hold These Truths?” As a part of the unveiling of the book, I was invited to speak at a reception held at the Heritage Foundation Building.

Preceding me at the podium was Grover Norquist. He spoke of the “Leave Us Alone Coalition.” My eyes were opened as I listened to him. I realized that I simply was not a member of that coalition. Also, I decided then that if that notion was the modern conservative movement, I was not a part of it either. Finally I decided that if a “leave us alone” coalition was the best the conservative Christian movement could have on the Republican Party, it would be a dismal failure.

This group have never met a tax or a government program they like. At root they are suspect of all government. They have a notion of freedom rooted in the autonomous individual and not in the Catholic (and classically Christian) understanding that we are never fully human

outside of social community. They view freedom very differently than those who profess that we have an obligation to one another, especially the poor; and to serving the common good. They are simply libertarians. Unfortunately, they have persuaded some Christians who have not

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thought through the implications of their faith on their world view to join them. They also have influenced other Christians who have no world view or theology and are simply reacting to current social issues in a philosophical vacuum.

This part of the conservative movement continues to grow. One of its proponents, David Brooks was recently on the “News Hour” with Jim Lehrer explaining why he favored the Massachusetts Supreme Court’s recent opinion in the Goodrich case that creates, in that state, a new “right” for homosexuals who live together to now “marry.”

That state’s high court has now ruled that full, equal marriage rights for gay couples are constitutional, a move that will essentially become law despite opposition in the state’s Legislature. A constitutional amendment that would legally define marriage as a union between a man and a woman won’t make it to the state’s ballot until 2006. President George Bush has denounced the court’s ruling and vowed to fight for the traditional definition of marriage.

Brooks explained his support of this social revolution as a conservative position because this judicial engineering somehow promotes marriage. After all, as a conservative, he wants to see all couples—homosexual or straight—“married.”

Some faith-motivated conservative activists seem to have no hierarchy of values and are thereby easily deluded by

such proponents of the “leave us alone” coalition. They think the best we can expect in a foray into a world that they think is corrupt is to be left alone. They fail to connect our obligations in the social order as rooted in the central Christian mission. They also tend to

eventually lump all the pet conservative issues together and place them on the same level of importance as fundamental human rights like the unalienable right to life for every human person at every age and stage.

Oh, they did not start out that way. Many of the Christians I know who now even lead some of these conservative “leave us alone” type groups started into activist politics in order to protect innocent, unborn human life. Now, their rhetoric sometimes sounds as though they have placed so-called “rights,” like owning an assault rifle, on the same level as the preeminent right to life.

I upset one of these folks in the mid-90s. Back then, Charlton Heston, a good man of iconic stature in conservatism, had done some ads for the National Rifle Association (N.R.A.). In them he referred to the “right to bear arms” as the “first freedom.” I commented publicly that the first freedom was traditionally considered to be religious freedom and that the first right is the right to life.

This particular man, a good Christian whom I still admire, treated me as though I had sinned because I had made such a comment. He saw it as an affront to Mr. Heston and a betrayal of conservatism. Frankly, the reaction deeply concerned me. I wondered how it had come to this. Good Christians can and do have various opinions on the gun control issue in American politics. However, at least in

the mind of this activist, there was a new set of issues that Christians had to agree on and they seemed to now include owning guns—including assault rifles!

The fundamental problem with the “leave us alone” coalition is they have no real notion of there even being a set of truths to be held that must inform the exercise of our freedom. They have little use for the notion of the common good as governing our social and political life together; and even less for the suggestion that there is a moral code that should govern our lives together on this planet—one that is universal and intercultural. They are adverse to talk of basic human rights and mutual obligations in solidarity to one another and especially to the poor.

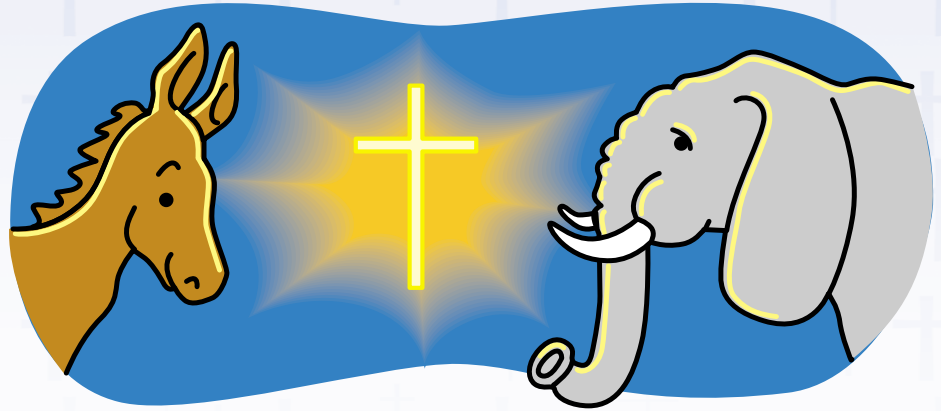
This “News Hour” commentator I watched illustrates the way in which this part of the contemporary American conservative movement is simply using the mostly evangelical Christian base that has joined its efforts. After noting that the GOP’s opposition to so-called homosexual marriage is a “winning issue” for them in 2004 because “it will bring the evangelicals to the polls for President Bush” he warned that in the long run it could be a huge liability if the party allows the “religious right” to have too much say in the party in the future.

However, the leaders of the “leave us alone” coalition are not alone in using people of faith for their political ends.

## THE NEO-CONSERVATIVES

Not long after my move I had my first run in with another very powerful group in Beltway conservative politics, the “neo-cons.” Once fancying myself to be included in their number, this experience was what my dear mother always called a “rude awakening.”

This was the later 90s and President Bill Clinton was in the White House. Many of us were joined solidly in our



absolute and unwavering commitment to defend innocent, unborn life in the face of an administration that had absolutely refused to protect any child until he or she was completely outside of the womb.

However, I was also dedicated then—and now—to applying what I call the “whole life/pro-life” position of the Catholic Church on other issues as well. After all, I believe that part of the depth and beauty of Catholic teaching on the dignity of life is the insistence on a consistent ethic of life. In acting accordingly, I encountered opposition from some “neo-conservative” Catholic friends. Some of it was mild, some of it was not.

I will give only three examples.

First, I spoke out publicly against capital punishment. Though I made the distinction that it was not intrinsically evil—as is the taking of innocent human life in the womb—I clearly took the position that it was no longer justified in the West to protect and defend the common good; that bloodless means were available and that it was time to end the practice for a lot of other reasons. Finally, to do so would allow mercy to triumph over strict justice. This position against capital punishment is clearly set forth in Pope John Paul’s extraordinary encyclical letter “The Gospel of Life” and was made even stronger in a revision to the Catholic Catechism. It had also always been my lifelong position. I encountered encouragement to not

speak as vocally on this issue because it would disaffect some Catholics and it was, after all a “prudential judgment” issue. I did not believe that it was back then nor do I now.

Next, I accepted an invitation to gather on the Mall with a large, bipartisan group to oppose the U.S. granting most favored nation status (M.F.N.) to “mainland” Communist China. This occurred on the state visit by Chinese President Ziang Zhemín. I raised serious concerns regarding that brutal regime’s treatment of Catholics, other Christians, Buddhists and other people of faith, along with its horrid human rights record and treatment of workers. This public protest occurred during the “free trade” emphasis in much of conservative Republicanism and my actions upset others among my friends.

Finally, I commented negatively on the bombing of Iraq under the Clinton Administration and told the press that I shared the serious concerns expressed by the Holy See. I noted that this kind of use of military force was unjust. Well, that one was the final straw for one of the benefactors of the group I was leading at the time. He left the board after chastening me for being some kind of “loose cannon” in expressing such a position publicly.

There were other encounters I will not mention. They only added to my growing discomfort with the neo-con synthesis, its leaders and its applications in the political

climate and issues of the day. At the time I also hosted a radio program called “A Millennial Moment” for Radio America. I shared these and other positions regularly. I used the song “We Won’t Get Fooled Again” by The Who as my theme. It has a driving refrain. On an almost daily basis I warned fellow Catholics, other Christians and other people of faith not to be fooled by the conservative or neo-conservative movement but to stay focused on their social mission.

I then began my further graduate work in Catholic theology at the John Paul II Institute of the Lateran University. It was during these theological studies that I came to understand the roots of my growing discomfort with the neo-conservative political world view. The more I studied Catholic teaching—and particularly the writings of Pope John Paul II—the more I saw that the neo-conservative synthesis did not fit.

Now, years later, when I hear concepts such as “pre-emptive wars,” “enlightened self interest” and others, I realize why. However, for many who have looked for leadership in the “culture war” the neo-conservative Catholic thinkers have provided both a spiritual and an intellectual ground to stand on as they continue the struggle.

Though they may be preferable to the other alternative addressed in this article, I am concerned that many who parrot their positions have not thought through whether they are always congruent with the teaching of the Catholic Church. I am also concerned there is a growing tendency to equate neo-conservative positions with the Catholic “position,” at least in the Beltway. The current presidential administration in America seems to listen mostly to neo-conservative Catholics when they seek input from Catholics. They may assume theirs is always the “Catholic” position. They

seem to have extraordinary influence.

That is not to say that many of these men and women are not good Catholics and good Americans. It is simply to raise a concern. I encourage my readers to examine some of the classics of Catholic social thought such as Hillaire Belloc

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and Jean Ousset. Read them alongside some of these thinkers. Read the social encyclicals of Pope John Paul II and his predecessors. Read the writings of our bishops—not just commentary from even well-intended secondary sources, including the contemporary American neo-conservative thinkers. With prayer and with your own eyes read what the Church teaches.

To make the point that Catholic social thought is not easily categorized as “right” or “left,” I also encourage you to read Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin and others from that wonderful tradition of “Catholic Action.” Read those who carry on their work in a different time such as Mark and Louise Zwick of the Houston Catholic Worker and its Casa Juan Diego House.

Finally, I encourage the regular reading of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and its extraordinary sections on the common good and all the social justice issues.

**CONCLUSION:  
NEITHER RIGHT NOR LEFT**

**M**y experience in political action and policy work has often been with folks who act as though Catholic is an adjective. In other words, they are Catholic conservatives. Or they are Catholic neo-conservatives or

Catholic\_\_\_\_\_, fill in the blank. I do not believe that one can fit Catholic social teaching in the categories of left or right, liberal or conservative. However, there are some contemporary issues where our positions must be crystal clear as Catholic Christians.

On the predominant human and civil rights issue of our age—the inherent dignity of every human life—no matter what the age or stage of that life, from conception to natural death and all in between—the current ruling class of the party calling itself Democrat has left those of us who understand the infallible teaching of our Church on life (which is the same truth revealed by the natural law) in the dust.

One simply cannot be both a faithful Catholic and what is euphemistically now called “pro-choice”—period.

Like many of my fellow Catholic Americans, I grew up equating being Catholic with being a Democrat because—at least I thought—Democrats cared more about the poor, the working class, the marginalized and those with no voice. The current ruling elite of the Democratic Party has proven just how wrong that stereotype is. The current Democrat leadership has embraced a counterfeit notion of freedom as a power over others and choice as a right to do whatever one wants. Fortunately, there are a growing number of pro-life Democrats. I believe they will take that party back once the current crew finishes running it into the ground and are themselves run out of leadership. I will welcome the day! Who, knows, I may return to the party of my youth!

This absolute failure to hear the cry of the child in the womb is simply one more example of the unbridled hypocrisy of the current leadership of the party that still claims to care more about the poor. Medical science has confirmed what our conscience has always known, that the child in the womb is both one of us as well as our neighbor.

His or her voice cannot be heard because it is muffled in the once hallowed home of the womb and disregarded by political opportunists, both right and left. Once the first safe home of every human person, too many wombs have now become hostile environments that can be invaded, at any time and for any reason, and reduced to chambers of horror for thousands of smaller persons, children, who have an inalienable right to be born.

However, the other party called “Republican” has all too often earned the stereotype of its opponents who point out that it cares about children only when they are in the womb and that once outside, it proposes an economic Darwinism, a public policy of “every person for themselves.” This will become the case if a “survival of the fittest” approach to the market economy becomes the most important priority of the leadership of the Republican party.

The current Republican talk of a compassionate conservatism must be accompanied by a reaffirmation of our obligations in human solidarity—we simply are our brother’s keeper—and a public policy that acknowledges our special responsibility for the poor in our midst. Though big government solutions have often not worked all that well in the delivery of charity, they must be slowly replaced with a new approach to empowering the mediating associations to deliver that charity. The party of Lincoln must not become a party that champions a “libertarianism” that cares

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little about our social obligation.

The “dynamism” of the market economy must be infused with the values that make us truly free or it will blow up entire segments of the weak and the vulnerable. We must expand participation and ownership and never lose our concerns for the family and a just wage. We must build a truly moral market economy and affirm the truth that markets were made for man (and woman) and not man for the market.

**I**nformed, faithful and engaged Catholic citizens are beginning to see the connection between the social teaching of their Church (which is true for all persons and not just those who believe) and their politics. They are gathering around what I call four pillars of political and social participation: the dignity of life; the primacy of family; authentic human freedom; and solidarity with the poor.

They are not first Democrats or Republicans, conservatives or liberals. They are Catholics. Catholic is the Noun.

We should build a different model. Our political participation is rooted in our baptismal vocation and geared toward serving the common good by promoting human life and dignity, the family, authentic human freedom and solidarity with the needy. We are not first conservatives or neo-conservatives, we are first Catholic. There is a hierarchy of truths we speak of in Catholic theology.

We now need an understanding of the hierarchy of values and how it applies to political participation.

We need to be careful in our political participation that we do not get fooled again. If we do not know what the Church teaches, how can we be faithful sons and daughters in our mission to society?

I began this article with a verse from a song by the Who entitled “We Don’t Get Fooled Again.” If we are not careful, when all is said and done, all our work in this vital field of social and political participation will have produced no fruit.

Don't get fooled again. †

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