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Where do Heritage, and conservatism, go next?

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Above this space in print each day are three words: “From the Right.” In my experience, most conservative writers started as one of two types: “movement conservatives” who adopted journalism as their platform, or trained journalists who had conservative instincts but weren’t necessarily steeped in the right’s intellectual underpinnings.

I’m in the second group, and it would be hard to overstate how much the Heritage Foundation helped me build my knowledge base since I got into opinion writing more than 12 years ago, along with the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute and, locally, the Georgia Public Policy Foundation. I’ve quoted or studied Heritage experts on issues from taxes to trade, from welfare reform to the decline of the family. Their focus on ideas over the politics of the moment is one reason American conservatism, like any good political philosophy, has maintained coherence and consistency over time.

So I’ve watched with sadness as Heritage has drifted away from the long time horizon and toward the temporal. Reportedly, that drift drove this week’s ouster of its president, ex-U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint. Depending on whose account you believe, his forced resignation is either the antidote to Heritage’s politicization or a prelude to even more of it. For the sake of America’s political thought and debate, I hope it’s the former.

It’s worth pausing here to appraise the state of conservatism more generally. The term “conservative” suffers from a curious problem: too much appeal. Hence, opportunistic politicians adopt it as a label without knowing much about what it means and why; one needn’t look any further than many members of the Georgia Legislature. Likewise, hucksters use the term as bait to coax money out of earnest folks.

And so conservatism has come to include whatever the opportunists and hucksters need it to mean at the moment. Which is another way of saying that, more and more, it means nothing.

The reaction to this development has wrought a different problem, which brings us back to Heritage’s waywardness.

The problem of politicians who got elected as conservatives but governed otherwise fueled all sorts of candidate pledges and scorecards. These may have been useful once, but over time they became purity tests and cudgels for whacking anyone who supported anything less than a 100 percent victory, anytime. Or, if necessary to keep an issue alive — and the checks rolling in — anything less than a 110 percent victory.

Here it’s worth noting that both left and right play this game. On any given issue, an array of groups on both sides have every financial incentive to hold an absolutist line rather than working

toward a solution. For if lawmakers were to solve, say, the problem of illegal immigration, what would happen to those groups — and the paychecks of those who work for them?

Heritage got in this game with its political arm, Heritage Action. DeMint did not start that effort; it preceded him at Heritage by three years. Nor does he even run Heritage Action; that's a former political operative named Michael Needham. But because DeMint had a political background, rather than an academic one, he was synonymous in many people's minds with the new, heavy-handed tactics Heritage Action toward members of Congress, always demanding 100, or 110, percent.

Frustrated conservatives have cheered on such efforts in part because they misread history. American law and policy for the most part have not moved leftward in leaps and bounds such as Obamacare, but with gradually corrosive changes that lay the groundwork for a law like Obamacare — such as the slow choking of the health-insurance market with myriad regulations. Somehow, the “conservative” answer always seems to be going for broke rather than retaking the ground available at the time, securing it, then aiming for the next bit of turf. That's the biggest reason why, so far this year, repealing and replacing Obamacare has not moved forward. Republicans can't agree on the whole thing, and groups like Heritage Action won't let them get away with moving forward on only the parts they do agree on.

It's easy to get caught up in this kind of thinking, and one probably wouldn't have to look too far into my archives to find a piece in which I did what I'm now lamenting. But that's exactly why we need groups like Heritage to maintain the long view and produce policy ideas in both large and small bites, so conservative statesmen (and writers) don't have to choose between purity and practicality.

It's not a question of picking relevance or ivory tower-ism; the irony here is Heritage and DeMint came to this impasse right as the think tank had won the ear of a president, because it had lost the respect of too many legislators. Rather, it's a matter of maintaining a true north while acknowledging the hiker may have to dodge the occasional roadblock or pitfall along the way. When everyone instead tries to tell him where exactly to step next, they shouldn't be surprised when he stops moving altogether.