



R.I.P. National Greatness Conservatism, 1997-2012

By Gene Healy – 11/27/12

Politically speaking, conservatives didn't have much to be thankful for this November. After President Obama's re-election cakewalk, 2013 looks like a rebuilding year, a time for "soul-searching" by GOP leaders and the conservative intelligentsia alike.

Last week, believe it or not, the New York Times' erstwhile "National Greatness Conservative," David Brooks, made an important contribution to that project. Brooks's Nov. 19 column, "The Conservative Future," identifies a number of youngish right-leaning thinkers who can help the GOP evolve.

And what's notable about his list is that not one of Brooks' rising stars is a dedicated follower of "National Greatness Conservatism." Since Brooks was the ideological godfather of that late-'90s variant on neoconservatism, his omission speaks volumes. It seems the "Conservative Future" won't be found in bellicose national crusades.

What is, or was, National Greatness Conservatism? As Brooks described it, NGC was a muscular, nationalist ethos devoted to "great projects designed to physically and spiritually unify the nation." In a 1997 *Weekly Standard* cover-story "manifesto" entitled "A Return to National Greatness," Brooks decried limited-government conservatives "besotted with localism, local communities, and the devolution of power" and insisted that "energetic government is good for its own sake."

"Wishing to be left alone isn't a governing doctrine," he and co-author Bill Kristol (editor of *The Weekly Standard*, a sister publication of *The Washington Examiner*) argued later that year in the *Wall Street Journal*. Instead, Americans needed grand federal crusades to pull them away from private, parochial concerns and invest their lives with meaning.

Compulsory national service, a Mars mission and "a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of national strength and moral assertiveness abroad" were among the specific causes championed by NGCers. But "it almost doesn't matter what great task government sets for itself," Brooks wrote, so long as it's busy dragooning us into causes greater than ourselves.

"Ultimately, American purpose can find its voice only in Washington," Brooks maintained. And Washington is never louder or more powerful than when it has a war to fight. Sept. 11, 2001 brought that war, and the possibility of the grand crusade NGCers had hungered for. "Does anybody but me feel upbeat, and guilty about it?" Brooks wrote less than a month after the towers fell.

If you seek a monument to National Greatness Conservatism, look around you. After a decade-plus of bloody, fruitless wars and budget-busting "energetic government" for its own sake, there's not much to be cheerful about.

So it says something that last week, Brooks began his "Conservative Future" op-ed with a shout-out to the *American Conservative*, a magazine whose editorial philosophy -- standing athwart the "welfare-warfare state" and championing "peace, community, and fiscal restraint" -- could hardly be more hostile to the NGC project. The once-bellicose Brooks recommends reading TAC's Daniel Larison, a writer who rejects "the imperial tendencies of both the Bush and Obama foreign policies ... crusades against what he sees as the unchecked killing power of drone strikes and champions a more modest and noninterventionist foreign policy."

It's significant, too, that Brooks goes on to recognize the contribution of libertarian-leaning writers -- like George Mason's Alex Tabarrok, the Atlantic's Conor Friedersdorf and *The Examiner's* own Tim Carney -- all of whom emphatically reject the notion that American purpose can only find its voice in Washington.

Where National Greatness Conservatism focused on spiritual uplift through government activism, the writers that Brooks now hails have less presumptuous goals, like addressing "the economic concerns of the multiethnic working class" and staving off "the fiscal crisis of the entitlement state."

It's doubtful that Brooks himself has fully rejected NGC. Friday's column found him up to his old tricks: title? "Why We Love Politics." (Speak for yourself, Bobo.) But he's right to recognize -- if only implicitly -- that the conservatism of the future will focus on humbler, but nobler goals.

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