

A Conversation with ROBERT P. GEORGE

The McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and founding director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton, Robert George is one of the nation's most distinguished students of legal and moral thought. In this conversation, George discusses the state of American conservatism as well as the condition of freedom of speech and thought on university campuses. He also details the development of his own political and moral views, including his interest in the natural law tradition in moral philosophy. Finally, Kristol and George discuss the importance of social conservatism in our public policy debates today.

On his advice to students, George says: If you have a professor on the campus who is questioning the campus dogmas, the campus orthodoxies, regardless of what side you're on, whether you're a liberal or a conservative, seek out that professor. That professor is potentially your very best friend because he's going to cause you to think. He's going to cause you to think through some of the things that you're taking for granted that really ought to be questioned.

On the development of his conservatism, George says: The Reagan Democrats were motivated by a lot of issues but one of those issues was abortion and the sanctity of human life. That's [one reason] that put me on the road toward being what today counts as a conservative...

[Growing up] in Appalachia, I knew many people who were poor. I was a bluegrass musician and I played a lot of music in the hills and hollers of West Virginia with people who were genuinely poor—some really great musicians by the way. Reading the works of writers [like James Q. Wilson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan] in view of my own experience, I could tell that what they were saying was right. The well-intentioned [Great Society] social programs were not helping the people they were meant to help. In some cases, they were actually hurting those people.

On the Natural Law tradition, George says: The basic idea is that there is indeed a law, a higher law, a law above the positive law: a moral law. We can know [this law] even by unaided reason, that is reason without the benefit of revelation. This is not to deny that there is a God, or that God can reveal or reinforce what we know in the way of moral truths and how we should live our lives, but the idea is that the basic understanding of morality is available to us as rationally-capable creatures.

On arguing for socially-conservative ideas, George says: [Young people] haven't heard the [socially-conservative] position. And if they've heard the position they haven't heard the arguments for the position. I find that when students actually hear the arguments, it can make an enormous difference... So I think the question is...can we find the forums and opportunities to present the [social conservative] argument to each new rising generation? Those on

the left on the social issues are operating shrewdly, astutely, when they try to shut down debate. They're right to try to do that because their greatest concern ought to be that the debate will take place. If the debate takes place they're going to lose a lot of ground. It should be our goal on the conservative side to open up spaces in which the arguments can be made. We can only benefit from it.

Chapters in ROBERT P. GEORGE Conversation

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[Growing Up in Appalachia](#)

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