

It Takes a Family



CONSERVATISM AND
THE COMMON GOOD

RICK SANTORUM



WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

The Task of Stewardship

On my right wrist, every day, I wear a royal blue piece of cloth, a bracelet of sorts. Stitched in white are the letters F.A.M.I.L.Y. That is a word, of course, but it is also an acronym. The word is what's most important in the choices we face together as a country. The acronym is what is most important for me as I confront the choices I must make in my own life—as a husband, father, citizen, and lawmaker.

I'll explain F.A.M.I.L.Y., the *acronym*, a bit later. But the word, *family*, is where I want to start. It is where we have to start, because it is where we all *do* start—a fact that many in Washington often overlook.

The liberal news media, Hollywood, and the educational elite in America tend to portray political liberals as the courageous champions of the average guy—and, of course, the poor. It is simply assumed that their more “enlightened” economic policies are all about helping the poor and middle class. Conservatives, on the other hand, are portrayed as fundamentally selfish, self-interested individuals, whose economic policies are crafted to protect or advance their (or their golf partners’) “special interests.” I will argue in this book that liberal eco-

conomic policies have not only been devastating to the poor and the middle class economically, but have actually undermined the basic structures of our society. I will also argue that both conservative economic policy and conservative efforts to help the poor help themselves are more genuinely compassionate—and effective—than the liberal alternative. These policies are already beginning to work, for all Americans.

Another view the media echo chamber promotes is that liberal social policies are rational, tolerant, progressive, and caring. Social conservatives, on the other hand, are portrayed as irrational, ignorant, rigid Bible-thumpers obsessed with prophesying woe. In this book, I hope to show that this all-too-common caricature of conservatives and their social policies by the liberal elite can be attributed to liberals' fundamentally different vision for America—a vision that is completely at odds with that of our nation's founders, and with the views of most Americans today. Liberalism is an ideology; conservatism is common sense.

By almost any measure, the political, economic, and social achievements of this nation in just over two centuries are astounding, and American accomplishments in our own lifetime are no less extraordinary. We all recognize the progress we have made through a sustained effort over the course of the last few decades: we have faced down Soviet communism, the greatest tyranny the world has ever seen; through an effort of moral self-examination and reform, we have made extraordinary strides in overcoming the legacy of racial prejudice; we have committed ourselves to programs that have made our natural environment cleaner for future generations; we have remained in the forefront of scientific investigation in virtually every field; and through it all, America has remained a land of economic opportunity unmatched in human history. Nevertheless, just as

personal success can lead to pride, avarice, extravagance, and self-absorption, history has shown that great civilizations can also go astray.

The simple truth is, as the voters in the 2004 elections indicated, not everything is well in America. If, over the past generation, we have made great strides in some areas, it is also the case that in the same generation we have seen alarming trends in American society as well: an epidemic of promiscuity and sexually transmitted diseases among the young; crime rates that are still much too high; extreme violence and offensive sexual content on everything from video games to the Internet; 3,500 healthy expectant mothers carrying healthy children exercising a "choice" to end the lives of their children every day; religion under assault by the media and liberal activists and then booted from the public square by court order; our schools failing the poor in providing the basics for life and indoctrinating both rich and poor with politically correct dogma instead of virtue and truth; the foundational institution of every civilization known to man—marriage—under siege; and millions retreating from our neighborhoods and the civic and fraternal organizations that bind us together. Across America, when they gather at backyard barbecues or Little League games, parents share with each other their deep concerns about how *hard* the world around us makes it to raise children the right way today.

Once, our social, governmental, and educational institutions, along with the popular culture, seemed to work together to aid parents in raising their children. Today, many feel that these same institutions are somehow conspiring *against* them. The media missed the impact of the "values voter" in the 2004 election, in part because they didn't know what to look for. These values voters may not be pro-life or favor a constitutional amendment to define traditional marriage, they may not

think of themselves as conservatives, and they may not be registered Republicans, but they can feel in their bones that *something is wrong*, and they sense that the institutions dominated by liberals are a big part of the problem. I believe these voters decided one of the most critical elections in recent times in favor of President Bush and the Republicans because they see these values issues as a bigger problem in their lives than either terrorism or the economy. They are looking to something or someone for answers.

That points to a problem facing postmodern America. We too readily look to those wielding power and influence to solve society's big problems for us—in particular, we look to the government. And why not? They are “society's” problems, and the government is society's representative. But over the past generation we have been learning that governmental, cultural, social, moral, and intellectual power brokers in far too many cases have made our problems worse. This has created a vicious downward spiral in which the more the public relies on the powerful elite, the worse it gets, which leads to the public relying on these elites even more.

Who are these big, powerful forces upon which so many rely to shape our economy, culture, society, values, and learning? They are what I call the “Bigs”—big news media, big entertainment, big universities and public schools, some big businesses and some big national labor unions, and of course, the biggest Big of all, the federal government. When I hear that catchphrase of the liberals, “It takes a village to raise a child,” I hear *Big*. It's a homely image, a village, but when you get past the metaphor, what do you really see in the details? Top-down, elitist prescriptions imposed by those who believe they are the postmodern kings of the masses—particularly of the supposedly ill-informed “peasants” of red-state America.

The people who run the Bigs I like to call the “village elders.” They are the liberal elite who think they know what is best for individual Americans and how best to order (or rather, re-order) our society along the lines of their ideological abstractions. They see any institution that stands between the Bigs and the isolated individual as an annoyance or hindrance. In fact, in the view of the Bigs, it is often just these intermediary associations that are responsible for what the Bigs understand to be our social problems. The liberal answer to the “problem” of intermediary institutions is to “liberate” individuals from them—whether individuals want that or not.

And what are these problem-creating associations that liberals believe harm people? They are the “Littles”: local government, civic and fraternal associations, clubs, small businesses, neighborhoods, local school districts, churches and church ministries—and of course, the greatest offender of all and the greatest thorn in the liberals' side, the iconoclastic traditional family. Liberal ideology promises a utopia of freedom and equality, if only the Littles can be engineered out of existence.

So where do we conservatives look for answers to the social issues of such widespread concern to Americans today? Why, to the very associations that the village elders distrust. And we ought to start with what has been the foundation of every successful civilization in history: the traditional family.

LET ME START by defining the conservative mission in the broadest terms.

One twentieth-century American conservative thinker, Russell Kirk, argued that the fundamental conservative disposition in politics is the “stewardship of a patrimony.” Those are two words we don't use every day. A patrimony is simply an inheritance.

A steward is a caretaker, like the Steward of Gondor in the movie *Return of the King*, who does not truly possess but simply administers on behalf of something or someone more important. Conservatives are the caretakers of a precious inheritance.

Our inheritance, as we will see in a moment, isn't stocks and bonds. What's more, to be stewards of an inheritance does *not* mean sitting back and enjoying our dividends. Think about someone who inherits a family business. She knows that her parents or even grandparents built up the business with years of hard work cultivating clients, increasing productivity through new techniques, and improving the business's products or services. In the spirit of *stewardship*, she knows that she will also have to invest years of hard work and much capital, so that her own children will be able to inherit a thriving business. That is what stewardship means. All of us naturally want to bequeath to our children something more, something better, than we received from our own parents, and so we naturally want to be good stewards of whatever inheritance we may have had.

That is how a conservative approaches social and political life. We know that the good things in American life that we are tempted to take for granted are not necessarily ours by nature or by chance, but are the result of the constant efforts of those who came before us. We don't think that it is necessary to reinvent the wheel just because it's our turn to run the business. We don't believe we are free to experiment with the inheritance we have been given just because it's the fad of the day. No, governing America is serious business, for we have been entrusted with the greatest enterprise in the history of the world. America not only provides for us, but also is the beacon of hope for much of the world. As stewards, our task is to secure and increase this patrimony for our children.

Speaking in terms of our "inheritance" has a special advantage, because it helps us think, symbolically, about "capital." In a business, capital (money) must constantly be invested to keep things going. Machines wear out and have to be replaced; money must be spent to train workers in new techniques; if the business is to grow, whole new buildings must sometimes be built. There must be constant reinvestment for the business to remain productive—investments not just in buildings and equipment, but in salespeople, marketing, distribution, accounting, and management. And something like this is true about our civilization as well. We need to invest not only in our economy, but in our culture, our social interactions, our values, and the methods by which we pass all these good things on to the next generation. That is what is meant by the *stewardship* of a patrimony: in society as a whole, various kinds of capital, not just money, must be *replenished* in every generation. I will argue that the unit that most efficiently, effectively, and naturally builds and replenishes capital in every aspect of our civilization is the family.

Throughout this book, therefore, I will be discussing different types of "capital" and how family breakdown—out-of-wedlock births, divorce, cohabitation, and absentee parenthood—has depleted that capital in recent decades. For it sometimes happens that the patrimony we inherit has not been well cared for by the immediately previous generation. I will also show how strong families can help build up our common capital, for this and for future generations.

I group American civilization into five distinct but interrelated pieces. These pieces represent the forces that determine who we are collectively as a people, and, at once, constitute the environment in which our lives and the lives of the next generation are shaped. Our task as stewards of this great land

is to enhance the richness of these five pillars of American civilization: social capital, economic capital, moral capital, cultural capital, and intellectual capital.

I will argue that the key to building capital in all of these areas is fostering the formation, stability, and success of the traditional family. This conviction of mine is not born from a desire to return to an idyllic bygone era that liberals insist never existed, but from a basic understanding of how America can fulfill her promise to her people. This stands in sharp contrast to those who believe that America's promise lies with the village elders redesigning America from on high.

The first kind of capital I will be talking about is social capital. Social capital comprises all the habits and forms of trust, mutual responsibility, and solidarity and connectedness that make it possible for us to get along together. That sounds rather simple, until you realize that there are large parts of America where social capital has eroded badly, with disastrous results especially for the poor. Where social capital has disappeared, the breakdown of the traditional family usually was a huge factor in that calamity.

I'll also be talking about economic capital. Here, I don't mean millionaire capitalists. Rather, I mean the *wealth of families*. Too often, "village" economic policy looks only at income transfers as a solution to poverty—which can lead to making families dependent on the government, year after year. But financially secure families, standing on their own two feet, are the basis of any good society. Therefore, our economic policies need to aim at creating economic growth, and importantly, building up family savings, especially among those who are struggling at the margins of our society. With even modest wealth comes more opportunity, and also more family stability. But as we all know, wealth alone does not create strong families

and build strong communities. There are too many "wealthy" families and communities that are far from healthy.

That leads me to moral capital and the key roles religious institutions and the family play in transmitting virtue. Moral capital refers to the virtue, proper conduct, and respect for human life that build trustworthiness and bind us together in a common mission. When moral capital is high, we feel that our common life is a moral and ethical endeavor, and we strive to live up to high standards. Too often today, however, we have a public standard of moral neutrality, which amounts to moral relativism. As a result, we become de-moralized, and thus we live down to our lowest selves.

There's also cultural capital. This includes all the stories, images, songs, and arts that explain to us, and in particular our children, who we are. The arts and entertainment industry is producing a flood of content so pervasive that the sheer quantity of images is overwhelming. The messages in these "artifacts" of the culture are too often more interested in sizzle and shock than truth and meaning. I believe that bad culture is culture that lies; good culture, even if it may be ugly, tells the truth. There is hope here, however, and I will explore how families influence the culture and how they can be protected from its destructive effects.

Finally I'll have something to say about what I call intellectual capital. That's a fancy way of talking about our traditions of education and schooling. The most essential thing any society does is to help parents raise the next generation. How are our schools and families doing at this vital task today? Let's just say we can do better.

We must be good stewards of each of these stores of "capital" so that our children will inherit a strong, vibrant country. That requires every generation to put forth the effort to renew

and restore the capital of their patrimony, just as in a family business. If even one part of our inheritance becomes depleted, we will have failed the test of our generation, to the detriment of our children. And let's be honest with ourselves: have we been good stewards of our inheritance on all these fronts?

Here is the good news. America has faced such challenges in the past and has risen to meet them. We have overcome declines in capital during the Great Depression (economic), Civil War (social), slavery and racism (moral), the Roaring Twenties (cultural), and the era after Sputnik (intellectual). In many respects, the problems we now face represent a more complex challenge, because almost all aspects of our civilization seem to be at tipping points. The good news is that capital *can* be replenished. But just as with any other problem, we must first admit it exists before we can work together to solve it. Then we must determine the reason for its depletion and the sources of rejuvenation.

I do not want to exaggerate and claim, like Chicken Little, that the sky is falling. But I do want to be honest in laying out in detail the challenges that face us on these five fronts—social, economic, moral, cultural, and intellectual. I will then step back and analyze the reason for the decline, and try to offer some ideas to turn back the tide. It will come as no surprise that I believe the place to start in restoring these pillars of our society is with the family—because the family is at the center of all the types of capital I've just described.

As the fundamental building block of society, the family creates, strengthens, nurtures, and replenishes each of these stores of capital. And each of these kinds of capital directly affects the strength and stability of families. In other words, if any of these stores of capital are weakened or depleted, it harms families, especially low-income families.