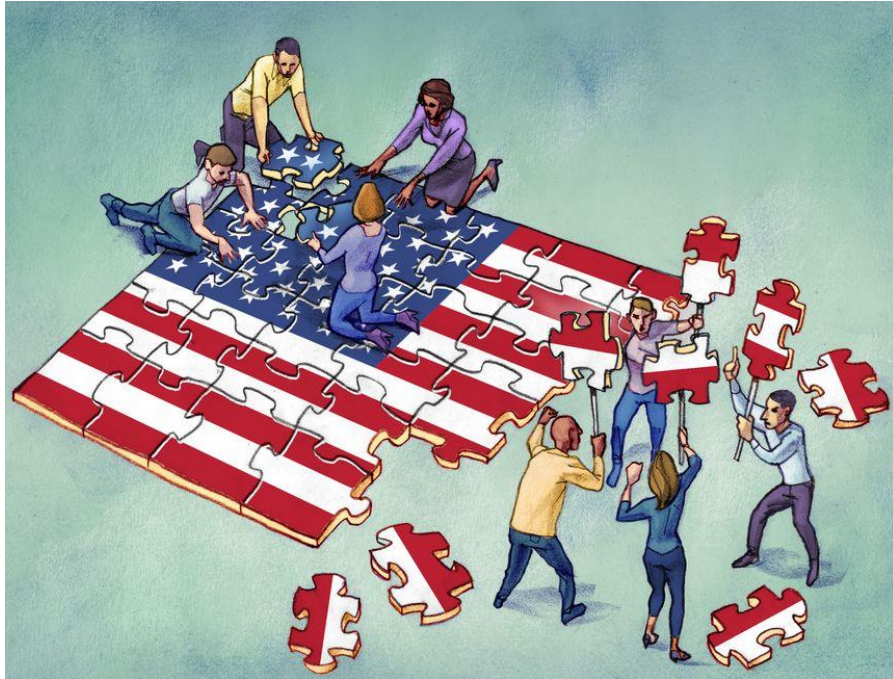


Why America Needs National Conservatism

By Christopher DeMuth; November 2021



This essay is based on [a talk](#) at the [National Conservatism Conference](#) in Orlando, Florida, on 1 November 2021. A somewhat shorter version ran in [The Wall Street Journal](#) on 13 November 2021. An exchange of letters on the Journal article is included [here](#).

Proponents of communism and other utopian isms often say their programs have never really been tried. Lenin and Mao don't count. The Soviet Gulag and Chinese Cultural Revolution were unfortunate detours. Only when their prescriptions have been faithfully applied by men of good will it be possible to judge them on the merits.

Progressivism can no longer make that excuse. Its doctrines are being extensively implemented by earnest practitioners with wide establishment support. The results have come in with astonishing speed. Mayhem and misery at an open national border. Riot and murder in lawless city neighborhoods. Political indoctrination of schoolchildren. Government by executive ukase. Shortages throughout the world's richest economy. Suppression of religion and private association. Regulation of everyday language—complete with contrived redefinitions of familiar words and ritual recantations for offenders.

This makes an easy case for national conservatism: Our ism is the opposite of theirs. Natcons are conservatives who have been mugged by reality. We have come away with a special sense of how to recover from the horrors that are taking America down.

When the American left was liberal and reformist, conservatives could play our customary role as moderators of change. As Americans, we, too, breathed the air of liberalism, and there are always things that could stand a little reforming. We could be Burkeans—emphasizing incremental improvement, continuity with the past, avoiding unintended consequences, working within a budget. In the 1970s, I collaborated with liberals on regulatory reform—refining environmental policies and restraining crony capitalism. Such bipartisan pragmatism yielded, for a time, many policy improvements.

But today's woke progressivism is not reformist. It seeks not to build on the past but to tear it down, by promoting as much instability as democratic politics allows. In 1968, Democratic mayors sided firmly with police and prosecutors against rioters, looters, and arsonists; in 2020, they sided with the lawbreakers. Last year, congressional progressives not only rejected Sen. Tim Scott's police reforms but vilified and degraded him. This year they vilify any Democrat whose spending plan is less than revolutionary. Compromise is antithetical to their goals and methods. They are prepared to break a few eggs to make their omelet.

When the leftward party in a two-party system is seized by such radicalism, the conservative instinct for moderating the course of events is futile and may be counterproductive. Many conservative politicians will stick with the tactic, promising to correct specific excesses that have stirred popular revulsion. Republicans will win some elections that way—but what will they do next? That is where we come in. National conservatives recognize that, in today's politics, the excesses are the essence. Like Burke after 1789, we shift to opposing revolution tout court.

Why *national* conservatism? Have you noticed that almost every progressive initiative subverts the American nation, as if by design? Explicitly so in opening national borders, disabling immigration controls, and transferring sovereignty to international bureaucracies. But it also works from within—elevating group identity above citizenship; fomenting racial, ethnic, and religious divisions; disparaging common culture and the common man; throwing away energy independence; defaming our national history as a story of unmitigated injustice; hobbling our national future with gargantuan debts that will constrain our capacity for action.

The left's anti-nationalism is another sharp break with the past. Democratic presidents of previous eras—including the original progressive, Woodrow Wilson—were ardent nationalists. But in 2021, President Biden gazed on his countrymen's epic invention of Covid vaccines and concluded that he should help the World Health Organization seize their patents.

The explanation for the break is that modern progressives imagine themselves as champions of humanity at large. To their way of thinking, the nation is a happenstance and a nuisance—a primitive artifact that constrains human aspiration and inhibits global solutions. It inclines its inhabitants to provincial grudges and myths of terroir. Moreover, progressives see the downtrodden of humanity as held down by structures of systemic privilege—systems embedded in the nation's traditions and institutions.

National conservatives understand that these sentiments are romantic delusions. Nations evolved organically over centuries of struggle, trial, and error and acquired staying power. Man is naturally social and fraternal, and successful nations have learned how to transmute group loyalties into broader allegiance. Citizens, however skeptical or cynical about politics, understand that their security and freedoms depend on their nation and its highly imperfect institutions. They realize that their fortunes are linked for better or worse to those of their disparate compatriots.

These circumstances give national conservatives a lot to work with. To be sure, three of the foundations of nationhood—family, religion, and locality—are far weaker than in earlier times. Yet Americans remain notably patriotic and grateful to be in the USA. They know that our liberties, our prosperity, and our institutions of justice, equality, and opportunity are rare achievements. Today, the sense of national decline is prevalent among many Americans who are not part of the esoteric debates among conservative and progressive intellectuals. Our political future is in their hands: If they can be persuaded that progressivism is not energetic idealism, but is a program for national dissolution, we may make serious headway.

My strategy is to show that each discrete controversy is part of a larger political movement that threatens our national ideals, institutions, and stability. Consider the current efforts to establish critical race theory and sexual optionality in primary and secondary schools. Here progressives have made a serious tactical mistake. A great many Americans, including the prized electorate of suburban women, pay only passing attention to these weird developments when they involve adults who can fend for

themselves—but rush to the barricades when they are imposed on innocent neighborhood children. It seems like a perfect case for targeted, single-issue opposition.

But it is also a great teachable moment on the sources of national decay. The school controversies dramatize the shrinking domain of family, parenthood, and religion in American life; and also the pathologies of school monopolies and imperiousness of teachers' unions; and also the cultural elites' practice of wrapping themselves in moral virtue at the expense of the sympathetic minorities they claim to be championing. And it is an opportune moment for introducing to a wider public our brilliant ideas for vastly expanded school choice and greatly improved school curricula, and our brilliant young African American conservatives and family advocates who are throwing themselves into the fray.

The move from criticism to nation rebuilding makes national conservatism a political movement, not simply a school of thought. We are concerned not only with the errors of our intellectual adversaries but the circumstances of our fellow citizens. That has led us to the problems of our working-class compatriots in declining regions whose interests had been ignored in national politics and policy. We need to turn in the same spirit to the problems of our African American compatriots in poor, violent, fatherless urban precincts. If the elites would scuttle the nation, the rest of us will just have to come together to rescue her.

We have other potential recruits. Many affluent, highly educated Americans who are not hard progressives, and are often self-declared “independents,” are imbued with the universal humanitarianism I have mentioned. Well, we have a large, universal canvas of humanity right here at home. But it changes everything when that humanity is our countrymen, with rights and responsibilities equal to our own. They have our empathy and support—and our expectations as national teammates. We expect them to suit up, measure up, pull an oar. Nationalism, properly understood, is the most potent kind of humanitarianism.

Being part of a movement can be good for us too, as a corrective to the tendency of intellectuals to overtheorize the world. National conservatives hold a variety of views about our predecessors in twentieth-century conservatism, neoconservatism, libertarianism, and constitutional originalism. In the extreme, it is said that those isms accomplished nothing and only set the scene for our current shambles. That exaggerates the potential of ideas and intellectuals to affect the course of society.

I was engaged in each of those movements. We made some mistakes and some compromises that might have turned out better; I was sometimes in the room where it happened. But we were alert to the opportunities and constraints at hand, and we got a few things right. The great prosperity of the 1980s following the miseries of the 1970s, and the luminous revival of New York City in the 1990s following decades of degeneration, were the products of conservative ideas applied strategically against ferocious opposition. Originalism rescued our written Constitution from untethered judicial extemporizing and turned attention to our nation’s epochal founding principles and institutions. But we never thought the ideas we were propounding were free of problems. And we realized that, if they did succeed, the results would be partial and contingent and would expose further difficulties for our successors to grapple with.

We were also aware of deep cultural changes that could overwhelm everything we were doing. Decades ago, the neocons Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Irving Kristol, and James Q. Wilson published prophetic studies of the decline of marriage, family, and religion, and warned that it could produce social upheavals that politics and government would be helpless to ameliorate. Recently, a young natcon explained to me that capitalism must operate within a moral framework. “That is extremely interesting,” I said; “Have you ever heard of Michael Novak?” “No,” he replied; “Who is he? Does he do a podcast?”

It is certainly true that our predecessors’ conservatisms failed to keep up with the times. What began as strategies designed for exigent circumstances tended to harden into overarching philosophies, glib talking points, formulaic fundraising programs, and Inside-the-Beltway careerism. One wishes conservatism had adapted itself to new problems before they became as dire as they are today. But many terrible developments—such as the pathologies of social media, and the arrival of Marxian radicalism in a political system we had thought immune—were understood by practically no one until they were upon us.

So here we are. Our defining challenges are to revive our cultural and political institutions, reintroduce a morally informed common culture, recast America’s role in international politics, and revise the social compact of business and government. A tall order!—and the subject of our most intense deliberations. Let me offer a few observations from the standpoint of a free-market man.

I have been a libertarian since I was a little boy and noticed the label on my bed mattress: “Do Not Remove Under Penalty of Law.” But then, as a young man, I attended my first capital-L Libertarian conference, where people were wearing buttons that read: “Freedom Is My God” and “There Is No Such Thing as Society.” These were as frightening as the mattress label, and I sought a middle ground that balanced freedom with virtue, markets with society, and recognized that, in both cases, you can’t have one without the other.

I eventually settled on empirical libertarianism, which considers each policy on the merits but in the spirit of Adam Smith: Government interventions “ought never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention.” I also understood that freedom, although grounded in human nature and God’s design, is in practice an artifact of government. Property and contract, freedom of speech and religion and commercial competition, separation of powers, due process of law—all were introduced and calibrated through centuries of piecemeal conflict and resolution that produced the modern, self-governing nation. Government is at once the source of our freedoms and their most dangerous enemy.

Today we face the need to rebalance freedom and virtue, market and society. Private enterprise is the source of cornucopian blessings but, like every powerful thing, requires boundaries and discipline. It has become a willing accomplice of cultural decline and has developed global markets that eclipse the nation and divide its citizens. These developments are largely the result of modern technology, not any political doctrine, but they demand political responses.

Here national conservatives face a dilemma that is well known to empirical libertarians: How can government reform the very society it is designed to represent and protect? Government and markets are alternative mechanisms for interpreting prevailing interests and preferences. But government is more responsive to large, well-connected groups and tends to entrench them—its responses are less open to continuous challenge and adaptation than those of the market. This problem is exacerbated by today’s “executive state,” a particularly uncongenial setting for national conservatives. It consists of a profusion of special-purpose bureaucracies with little ability to discern, articulate, or pursue the common good.

One strategy for our circumstances is to start with the tried and true. Facebook and other powerful network czars are going to be regulated in some fashion unless blockchain dethrones them first—and the common-carrier obligation has a long pedigree in Anglo-American law. Americans have excelled at big, bureaucracy-busting projects in science and engineering, most recently Operation Warp Speed. Cybersecurity and quantum computing are prime candidates for such national mobilization, which could do much to redomesticate production in critical fields. Self-help is another American specialty. Our once-great universities and museums were established by private initiative—we are a rich nation and could do that all over again.

Another strategy is to direct our reformist energies at our decrepit political institutions themselves, aiming to make them more attentive to the state of the union rather than to yesterday's polls and tweets. This is my own field, where I think much can be accomplished with our constitutional structure and traditions. The originalist in me notes that the president is not only CEO of the executive bureaucracies but also, and primarily, head of state, responsible for the success of the nation and the welfare of all its citizens.

National conservatism, not Marxian progressivism, is today's vanguard. My own motto for national conservatism is another extrapolation from Adam Smith: There is a great deal of ruin in a nation, especially these days—but also a great deal of repair, especially in America.

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National Conservatism Is Having an Identity Crisis

Letters to the Editor, *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 November 2021

Christopher DeMuth's "[Why America Needs National Conservatism](#)" (op-ed, Nov. 13) was so fascinating I read it twice—and the second time I conducted an experiment. I removed the adjective "national" whenever it modified "conservatism" and found that it didn't make much of a difference to his case.

Mr. DeMuth lists the accomplishments of the conservative movement in economics, social policy, and jurisprudence, and explains that the current moment demands institutional reform in the spirit of both Edmund Burke and Adam Smith. As he points out, an earlier generation of conservatives made exactly this point. They did so without abandoning the classical liberal principles of limited government, equality under the law, religious pluralism, and individual rights.

What struck me most about Mr. DeMuth's essay was its incongruity with other speeches delivered at the recent National Conservatism Conference, where speakers bemoaned "neoliberalism," proposed a government-directed industrial policy, and held up Hungary as some sort of model for America. During the closing remarks, the audience cheered at the mention of Patrick J. Buchanan, the sworn enemy of the "neocons"—Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Irving Kristol, and James Q. Wilson—whom Mr. DeMuth and I revere.

Can national conservatism encompass both postliberal Catholic integralists and an "empirical libertarian" such as Mr. DeMuth? If so, then the movement is so capacious as to defy definition and resembles the polyglot conservative movement that so many of the national conservatives deride.

I'll take my conservatism without modification—constitutionalist, market-oriented, and unapologetically American.

Matthew Continetti
American Enterprise Institute
Washington

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Thank you for publishing Mr. DeMuth's well-reasoned argument for national conservatism. As traditional conservatives evaluate and dialogue with "natcons," two questions must be posed to determine the extent to which their goals are common or adversarial.

First, what is the endgame of national conservatism? Is its vanguard approach intended to re-establish norms of American political life? Or does it call for a constant winner-take-all political war that endorses majoritarian tactics when in power and rejectionism when in the minority?

Second, while many traditional conservatives may welcome a vibrant ideological camp to the Republican tent, do natcons share this view? Are they willing to work together to win? Or will they endorse populist voices calling for the same types of purity tests and loyalty to the zeitgeist that they decry on the left? Do they view only the left as a force that can no longer be dealt with through compromise, or do their tactics apply to those in the conservative camp who still see virtue in what Mr. DeMuth labels “moderation”?

Rafael Hoffman
Lakewood, N.J.

Answering the Critics of National Conservatism

Letters to the Editor, *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 November 2021

Regarding Matthew Continetti’s and Rafael Hoffman’s [letters](#) (Nov. 17) about my op-ed “[Why America Needs National Conservatism](#)” (Nov. 13): I devoted half the article to the challenge of sustaining American nationhood in the face of a concerted political assault. How can it be said, as Mr. Continetti does, that the term “national” is surplusage in “national conservatism,” with no role in my arguments?

The National Conservatism Conference included my talk and a few that Mr. Continetti refers to disapprovingly among around 80 others, including several by liberals and thinkers who cannot be pigeonholed. The conference organizers (I was one) aimed for a diversity of views on issues central to national conservatism. Our discussions produced important convergence on some contentious matters, such as the desirable role of religion in the public square and of tariffs in politics among nations. On other important matters, disagreements remain and are likely to continue. We regard this as a sign of health in our movement, not disarray or crisis.

In the course of the conference I heard not a single call for the “purity tests” that alarm Mr. Hoffman. Peter Thiel’s keynote address emphasized the dangers of “epistemic closure” in politics and the essential role of forthright debate in keeping institutions alive and productive. As for “equality under the law” and “religious pluralism,” the spirit of the conference was emphatically the opposite of what Mr. Continetti suggests.

The words and deeds of our conservative predecessors of 50 and 500 years ago are invaluable foundations for national conservatism. But they leave open many hard questions of application and strategy in confronting new problems—such as the assault on nationhood, the dissolution of cultural norms, and the paradoxes of market globalization. It is striking that Mr. Continetti ends up likening national conservatism’s internal tensions to the “polyglot conservative movement” of yore, which he admires and regards as having been vibrant and fruitful. In time, I hope that he, Mr. Hoffman, and other skeptics may come to see national conservatism as similarly successful in harnessing intellectual debate to practical accomplishment.

Christopher DeMuth
Hudson Institute
Washington