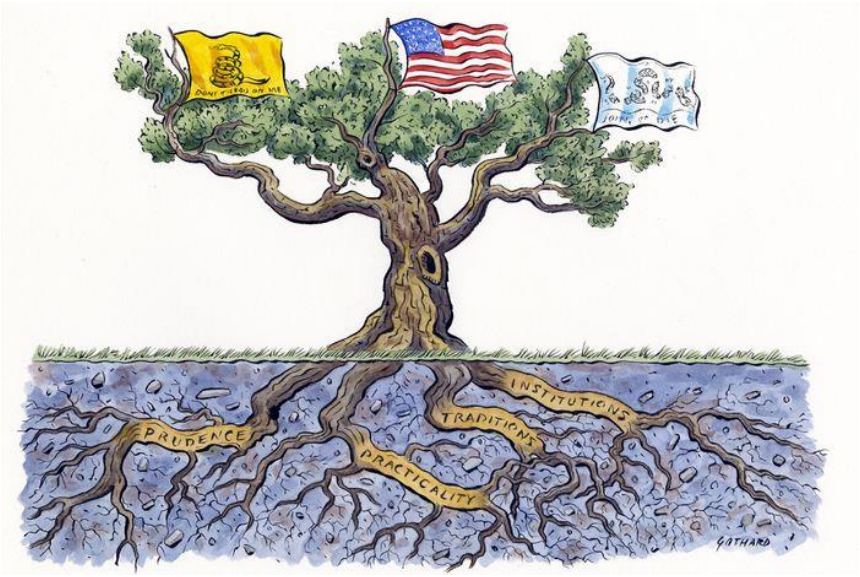
AMERICA'S RIGHT CONFRONTS THE 21ST CENTURY

Christopher DeMuth; *The Wall Street Journal,* November 18, 2022

This article is based on a talk at the Hillsdale College Constitutional Celebration in Washington on Sept. 16, 2022.



Political conservatism has general characteristics, notably prudence, practicality, and respect for settled traditions and institutions. But conservatives bring these dispositions to bear in a variety of times and places. The American experience is a vivid example of how conservatism adapts to a particular national circumstance.

American conservatism isn't in thrall to the status quo. We have always been a nation of bustling aspiration and earnest self-criticism, perpetually seeking to remake the status quo. Conservatives have been as striving and critical as their neighbors, discontented with the circumstances at hand and impatient to set things right.

The Founders set the pattern. Intent on conserving a century of colonial traditions and self-government, they fought a revolution, then tore up their constitution and wrote a radically new one. The only exception since then has been the Harding and Coolidge administrations in the 1920s, whose rallying cry was "normalcy." Even then, Calvin Coolidge was a zealous reformer of taxing and spending.

Consider the 1950s, a time of political stability, government restraint, and wide embrace of family, religion, and public civility. Those were the years when the modern conservative movement was founded by William F. Buckley Jr. and his agitated band of Catholic traditionalists, anarcho-libertarians, disaffected Marxists, and Southern agrarians. These were not stand-patters. They saw contented America as on the road to serfdom and foreign domination.

Today we are in a new era of conservative discontent. The national conservatives are at the ramparts against the new status quo of woke progressivism in government, the military, business, education, culture, and media. Many of them are also dismissive of the conservatism of Buckley & Co. and Ronald Reagan and their legacy of journals, think tanks, and policy doctrines that became a settled Washington establishment by the 2000s and 2010s.

In their view, that establishment was complicit in progressivism's political ascent. American conservatism became unduly attached to libertarian individualism, unfettered markets, and free trade as ends in themselves—which helped set the stage for anything-goes cultural corruption, the decline of community, family, and religion, and the rise of global corporations and institutions that decimated the American heartland.

When the natcons first appeared, following Donald Trump's 2016 election, establishment conservatives struck back forcefully. The newbies, they said, were abandoning age-old conservative commitments to individual liberty, free enterprise, and limited government for a loose and dangerous commitment to "the common good" and fantasizing about an integration of government and religion that would subvert American pluralism.

But in recent years the new and old conservative camps have begun to consider each other's arguments. It has helped that political events have forced them to turn from abstract philosophical questions to immediate practical ones: What should be our next steps following the Supreme Court's decisions on abortion, guns, the administrative state, and religion in public schools? How should we counter the indoctrination of schoolchildren in the insidious ideologies of racial essentialism, environmental catastrophism, and transgenderism?

An organic feature of our national experience helps explain how conservatives are regrouping in response to today's upheavals: American culture has always been at once strongly libertarian, individualist, and pluralist, yet also strongly communitarian, moralist, and religious. Our spirit of rugged individualism has been conjoined with, and often a source of, our spirit of common destiny and moral obligation and our talent for association and community:

- The Mayflower Compact was an agreement among Christian adventurers to make their own "just and equal" laws for their common good.
- The religious Great Awakening of the early 18th century emphasized democratic equality, personal responsibility, and self-mastery—laying the groundwork for the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution.
- In the years before the Declaration, two images of the American rattlesnake appeared on flags and in newspapers and went viral as icons of our emerging national

consciousness. One, a libertarian snake, was captioned “Don’t Tread on Me”; the other, a communitarian snake, segmented to represent the individual colonies, read “Join, or Die.”

- The Great Awakening of the early 19th century, emphasizing moral obligation, was a vital impetus to the abolition of slavery—an epic expansion of individual liberty.
- Modern conservative leaders such as Buckley and Reagan were both libertarian and socially conservative, thought the combination perfectly natural, and attracted enormous followings.

Today’s disputatious conservatives are leading our latest effort to conjoin individual freedom and collective purpose. Many are academics and intellectuals, experts at constructing elegant abstractions and demonstrating their conflict with other abstractions. If you get a headache trying to keep up with the blur of terms such as “classical liberal,” “neoliberal,” “postliberal,” and “antiliberal,” try turning your attention to events in the world around you.

Our traditional idea of individual freedom assumed that the individual is shaped by society and exercises his freedoms as a member of that society. It has been replaced by the modern idea of personal autonomy, in which freedom expresses the inner self, is exercised exclusively for that self, and must be honored by society as authentic self-realization. When a high-school boy announces he has discovered he is really a girl and wants to compete on the girls’ track team, the girls’ team must abandon its collective purpose to make way for his freedom.

When conservatives insist that the boy must find other ways of dealing with his circumstances, and otherwise insist that individuals accommodate the proper interests of the community, we don’t propose to demote individual freedom. We propose to restore the integration of the individual and the group, of personal freedom and moral obligation. That integration is necessary to realized freedom, including the freedom of those who reject social mores and are prepared to live with the consequences.

Similarly, new conservatives argue that the rights-based liberalism of the American founding has been the seed of many modern disorders. That is because, it is argued, the liberal principles of individual rights, political pluralism, and voluntary consent present themselves, and come to be regarded, as complete and sufficient foundations for democratic government. Liberalism then attempts to banish from legitimate politics conceptions of the common good based on cultural tradition, religious belief, and standards of conduct and decency—which had previously been regarded as essential complements to liberalism, and were customary in American politics and government until the late 20th century.

"Liberalism, even if it begins in its 'classical' form, always ends up wanting more for itself," as Shadi Hamid has written.

Yet when you read that some new conservatives are "religious integralists" plotting to install an American theocracy, please notice that conservatives have become the outstanding champions of our constitutional freedoms of speech, religion, inquiry, and association. Progressives have abandoned them in the pursuit of enforced secular orthodoxy. Conservatives are picking up those aspects of our liberal, pluralist tradition and integrating them into our own programs of thought and action—precisely to preserve islands of morally robust self-government. One sees this in our efforts to protect religious, classical, and single-sex schools, colleges dedicated to the pursuit of truth, and other private associations and local communities with charters of their own.

A continuing argument among today's conservatives concerns our interpretation of the American past. Many traditional conservatives emphasize the revolutionary Enlightenment ideals of our national founding, especially the "self-evident" truths of the Declaration of Independence. Natcons, on the other hand, see the Revolution and founding as adapting established traditions of British law and constitutionalism to the New World.

And however momentous the founding, today's America is also the product of the quarter-millennium national pilgrimage that it launched—the conquest of a continent, the Homestead Act, the antitrust laws, women's suffrage, industrialization and urbanization, the Cross of Gold and fiat currency, airplanes, the internet, waves of disparate immigration, and a long succession of wars and plagues, booms and busts.

Our evolved nation may be less lovely and pristine than the one we imagine the Founders bequeathed to us, but it is the only one we have to work with today. Recognizing this is essential to the unromantic situational awareness of practical conservatism. Here are two examples:

First, if our nation hadn't fought and won the Civil War and enacted the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, the equality principles of the Declaration, sanctified at Gettysburg, wouldn't be central to our national self-conception and political institutions in 2022. Political and legal equality was realized through a terrible war, hundreds of incremental, political, legislative, and judicial decisions and changes in social conventions.

If equality is an abstract philosophical imperative, a good in and of itself, then its boundaries are bursting and subject to never-ending expansion. That is how it is used nowadays to justify equal rights for illegal immigrants, racial preferences, and the Biden administration's equity programs favoring a long and elastic list of politically selected identity groups, including its catch-all category of those "adversely affected by inequality." In responding to these initiatives, we have much more to go on than the thrilling poetry of

the Declaration. We have 150 years of prosaic experience calibrating the dimensions and boundaries of equality in a multitude of circumstances and learning from the results. That gives us the means, and ought to give us the confidence, to accept some contemporary claims and reject others.

Second, today's administrative state is much more than the outgrowth of Woodrow Wilson progressivism, which proposed to replace James Madison's fussy separation of powers with efficient, expert, unitary government. It is also the product of late-20th-century affluence, mass media, and expanded political participation, which generated profuse new demands for government action on behalf of personal health, safety and dignity, the natural environment, and much else. These were more than a representative legislature could manage, and Congress turned them over to specialized bureaucracies—with their thoroughly modern fusion of lawmaking, surveillance, and enforcement. Debunking Wilson and reviving Madison may be necessary to taming this monster, but it isn't remotely sufficient. We need to devise forms of representative lawmaking, due process, and federalism suitable to today's circumstances—a big assignment even if we win the intellectual arguments.

The essential purpose of modern American conservatism is to conserve the American nation. My program for doing so would be in part anti-progressive. It would re-establish national borders, reduce our million annual illegal entries to zero, and calibrate lawful immigration to the needs of cultural assimilation, social harmony, and economic growth. It would abolish all official racial and other group preferences, quotas, and gerrymanders. It would liberate the energy sector.

My program would also address causes of national disorder in which conservative politicians have been fully complicit. This would include returning to a balanced federal budget outside of wars and other emergencies, redirecting federal spending from personal entitlements and income transfers to public goods such as national defense and infrastructure, withdrawing the collective-bargaining privileges of public-employee unions, and instituting stable currency—not 5% inflation, not today's official goal of 2% that quintuples prices in a lifetime, but zero.

And it would include not only the historical tried-and-true but also modern innovations. These include universal school choice and initiatives to mobilize science and enterprise to dominate China in advanced computation, communication, and weaponry,and to repatriate production of national essentials such as pharmaceuticals.

My to-do list is meant to be suggestive: The purpose of conserving the American nation points to concrete actions rather than abstract desiderata, encourages us to be as bold and disruptive as our illustrious conservative forebears, and is necessary to everything else a modern conservative would want to conserve.