

WHAT DOES AMERICAN CONSERVATISM EXIST TO CONSERVE?

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Political conservatism has certain general characteristics, notably prudence and practicality. Conservatives regard inherited social customs and political arrangements as a form of wisdom—even if they cannot be fully understood and rationalized, they have survived the test of time and embody trial-and-error experience across many generations and historical epochs. That leads conservatives to be dubious about proposals for large-scale departures and to favor reforms that are incremental and provisional. Conservatives prefer the empirical to the abstract, the familiar to the ideological. They do not rebel against life's constraints but attempt to work within them.

But political conservatives bring these dispositions to bear in a variety of times and places. Nations differ widely in their histories, politics, resources, and ways of life, and these will shape the attitudes and actions of conservatives in unique ways. Being practical and empirical, they will take account of the opinions of their neighbors and countrymen—and will recognize that the process of trial-and-error evolution is one that they, too, are living through and must contend with. In the extreme, a status quo of manifest cultural decadence or social discord is hardly one that a conservative would wish to conserve. The movements to abolish slavery and renounce anti-Semitism—long-established institutions and social conventions—included many individuals we rightly regard as conservatives.

The American experience is a vivid example of how conservatism adapts itself to a particular national circumstance. In what follows, I will attempt to describe, from the perspective of an American conservative, why and how our conservatism is distinctive and what it should attempt to conserve in our deeply troubled age.

We can begin by dismissing the conservatism of throne-and-altar and of blood-and-soil, which have been prominent in the politics of Europe and Great Britain and still resonate in certain respects. These are alien to the American experience. From our earliest days we have been a republican government of a highly democratic people of various and increasingly diverse attachments of ethnicity, religion, locality, and old-country heritage. Most of our nation was settled in rugged circumstances, still celebrated in our popular culture, where church and state were improvised on the fly, bloodlines and social classes were porous, and the *terroir* was contested and negotiable.

I would go further and say that American conservatism has never been and never could be any sort of status-quo conservatism. We have always been a nation of bustling aspiration and earnest self-criticism, perpetually seeking to remake the status quo. It is not just that American conservatives have had to accommodate this ethos: as Michael Oakeshott argues in his 1956 essay “On Being Conservative,” an adventurous, enterprising body politic might prefer a government that is stodgy, aloof, and rule-bound—which would stand back, not take sides, and let the citizenry aspire away.¹ The deeper circumstance is that American conservatives, being Americans, have been part and parcel of our striving, self-critical ethos. Our political conservatism has almost always been discontent with the circumstances at hand and impatient to set things right.

Of course, American conservatives have often opposed innovations in government and culture. But not just because they were innovations: instead, we have argued on the merits that particular innovations—say, price controls, public-employee unions, or brutalist architecture—were likely to be harmful rather than beneficial. When we have extolled our past, it has not, usually, been a simple argument to “turn back the clock”—that has been the mischievous formulation of our progressive opponents. Rather, we have used the past to call attention to some subsequent decline—say, in workforce participation, student proficiency, or public health—and to draw on past experience for solutions to problems of the day. And to recall that our ancestors summoned the wit and resilience to overcome problems as serious as ours.

The only important exception to this pattern was the period of conservative contentment in the 1920s, during the Harding and Coolidge administrations, when our rallying cry was *normalcy!*—and even then, Coolidge was a zealous reformer of taxing and spending. The typical case, indeed the canonical case for contemporary conservatism, was the Eisenhower 1950s. Today, conservatives rightly regard that decade as a halcyon age of peace, political stability, government restraint, widespread embrace of family, religion, and public civility, and vibrant culture high and low. Yet those were the years of the birth of the modern conservative movement by William F. Buckley and his agitated band of Catholic traditionalists, anarcho-libertarians, disaffected Marxists, and Southern Agrarians. These were not stand-patters. They saw pacific, contented America as on the road to serfdom and foreign domination.

The pattern of disruptive discontent is dramatically in evidence today. The New Right, the National Conservatives, and other party-crashers are at the ramparts

¹ *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (LibertyPress 1991), p. 407.

against our new status quo of woke progressivism in government and the military, finance and commerce, schools and universities, and culture and communications. But they are also dismissive, some of them vehemently so, of the conservatism of Buckley & Company and Ronald Reagan and of their legacy of journals, think-tanks, public intellectuals, and policy doctrines that became a settled Washington establishment in the 2000s and 2010s. In their view, that establishment was not only too willing to compromise with progressive initiatives but was positively complicit in progressivism's political ascent. That is because, they argue, American conservatism became unduly attached to libertarian individualism, unfettered markets, and free trade as an end in itself—which 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 and New Right first appeared at the time of Donald Trump's 2016 election, establishment conservatives struck back forcefully. The newbies, they said, were abandoning the age-old conservative commitments to individual liberty, free enterprise, and limited government for a loose and dangerous commitment to “the common good”; they were fantasizing about an integration of government and religion that would subvert American pluralism; they were dominated by Millennial and Gen Z hotheads insufficiently versed in the struggles and achievements of their forebears. On both sides there was a lot of overstatement and social-media conflict promotion, and left-wing onlookers delighted in the fracas. But there were also many deep and serious essays and books on both sides.

I myself am an old establishment conservative who has thrown in his lot with the National Conservatives. I have found the challenges to the old order bracing and necessary. In my view, hard argument is a strength, not a weakness, in an intellectual movement, and much to be preferred to the doctrinal rigidity of today's progressive Left. Increasingly, and especially since the arrival of the Biden administration, the new and old conservative camps have been listening to one another and sorting through the strengths and weaknesses in their positions.

It has helped that political events have forced us to turn from abstract philosophical questions to immediate practical questions. What should be our next steps following the Supreme Court's recent decisions on abortion, guns, the administrative state, and accommodation of religion in public schools, and its upcoming decisions on racial preferences? How should we counter the indoctrination of schoolchildren in the insidious ideologies of racial essentialism, environmental catastrophism, and sexual transgenderism? Some say policy

questions such as these are epiphenomenal distractions from the impending End of Times or at least End of America. But most conservatives seem eager to fight back within our inherited structure of electoral politics, representative legislation, and litigation.

Now there is an important objection to my argument that American conservatives are innately oppositional and reformist. It is that we have been reacting to the seemingly inexorable ninety-year march of progressivist and socialist ideas and policies that we have been able to moderate only intermittently and partially. The growth of the welfare state; the abandonment of fiscal restraint and stable money; the concentration of power in a national executive apparatus; the corruption of our universities and schools, museums and arts, professions and media. And now the emergence of neo-Marxism at the helm of a major political party and the national government, bent on dismantling national borders, setting American against American, and suppressing intellectual dissent and political opposition. That conservatives are mightily discontent, and at odds about what to do next, is simply a consequence of dire modern reality.

There is much truth in this argument. But I believe the distinctiveness of American conservatism goes back beyond the 1960s and 1930s, all the way to the Founding and colonial period. Before the twentieth century, there was no such thing as “political conservatism” in its modern form. But efforts to conserve America and its distinctive ways of life have been a prominent part of our politics from the beginning, absorbing the attentions of leading statesmen, legislators, and thinkers, and are important antecedents of modern conservatism. These include the American Revolution itself, which aimed to preserve the social customs and practices of self-government the colonists had pioneered for more than a century.

Let me point to an organic feature of our national experience that helps explain how conservatives are now regrouping in response to today’s upheavals. It is that American political culture has always been at once strongly libertarian, individualist, and pluralist on the one hand—and strongly communitarian, moralist, and religious on the other. One can find these impulses at large in most societies, but in America they have been the defining features of popular sentiment and national character. And, while there are obvious tensions between them, they have been highly complementary in practice. 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 eighteenth century emphasised 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 of 1776, two images of the American timber 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 nineteenth century, emphasising moral obligation and social justice, 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 social conservative, thought the combination perfectly natural, and attracted enormous followings.

Today’s NatCons and other new conservatives are leading our latest effort to conjoin individual freedom and collective purpose in order to address exigent problems. 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 “liberal,” “classical liberal,” “neoliberal,” “post-liberal,” and “anti-liberal,” with meanings that shift from essay to essay, 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, inspiring self-realization. So that, when a high-school boy announces that he has discovered he is really a girl, and now wants to compete on the girls’ track team, the girls’ team must abandon its purposes to make way for his freedom. But when conservatives insist that the boy must find other outlets for his circumstances, and otherwise insist that individuals accommodate the proper interests of the community, we are not proposing to demote individual freedom. We are proposing 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 twentieth century. The Islamic scholar Shadi Hamid, who is not himself a conservative of any stripe, puts it thus: “Liberalism, even if it begins in its ‘classical’ form, always ends up wanting more for itself.”²

However, 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 their pursuit of enforced secular orthodoxy (itself a kind of religion, especially in its racist and environmentalist embodiments). 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. Whether these are refuges from civilizational decline or seeds of eventual renewal remains to be seen. Whatever the upshot, we are protecting rights that belong equally to all our countrymen.

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My assessment of American conservatism is that it exists to conserve the American nation. I think this is an improvement over prominent competing formulations—that our conservatism exists to conserve the Constitution, or natural rights, or the Enlightenment principles of the Preamble to the Declaration, or, in George F. Will’s deeply elaborated synthesis, “the American Founding.”³ However momentous, however providential the ideas and events of the Founding, today’s America is also the product of what the Founding launched—a quarter-millennium national

² “How Modernity Swallowed Islam,” *First Things*, Oct. 2022.

³ *The Conservative Sensibility* (Hachette Books 2019).

pilgrimage of further ideas and events, of wisdom and folly, of decision and sacrifice and sheer happenstance. 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 and the internet, and 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 that is the basis of effective conservatism. Here are two examples:

First, if our nation had not fought and won the Civil War and enacted the post-war constitutional amendments, with much more to follow, the equality principles of the Declaration, sanctified at Gettysburg, would not be central to our national self-conception and political institutions in 2022. Political and legal equality is a practical achievement, grounded in Christian understanding and pursued through a terrible war and then hundreds of incremental, brass-tacks political, legislative, and judicial decisions and vast accompanying changes in social conventions. Regarding it this way is not only true to history but also highly advantageous in managing contemporary politics.

If equality is an abstract philosophical imperative, a good in and of itself, then its boundaries are bursting and subject to never-ending expansion (one might say that "equality always ends up wanting more for itself"). That is how it is used nowadays to justify equal rights for illegal immigrants, racial preferences and reparations to achieve equality of social and economic outcomes, and the Biden administration's "equity" programs favoring a long and elastic list of politically selected 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 contemporary circumstances and learning from the results. That gives us the means, and ought to give us the confidence, to accept some newer claims and to 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 government. It is the product of late-twentieth-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—which are themselves thoroughly up to date in their ability to combine lawmaking, surveillance, enforcement, and informal methods of coercion. Invoking Madison’s Constitution and debunking Wilson is helpful, probably necessary, to taming this monster, but not remotely sufficient. We need to devise new means of instituting representative law-making, due process, and federalism suitable to modern circumstances—a big assignment even if we win the intellectual arguments.

My proposition is supported by another aspect of our history: Conserving the nation was the overarching purpose and achievement of the greatest American presidents. George Washington established and saved the nation several times over—fighting and winning the Revolutionary War, leading the effort to replace the Articles of Confederation with an effective national government, and setting the standard of a principled executive and republican head of state. From start to finish, Abraham Lincoln put preserving the Union first; whenever it was, along the way, that he became equally intent on abolishing slavery, he always knew that the Union was necessary to that result. Ronald Reagan reintroduced the political rhetoric of unabashed patriotism that had gone missing for decades, and deconstructed the gravest foreign threat the nation had ever faced. Every one of these men aimed to disrupt the status quo on behalf of a larger project of national conservation. Each brilliantly invoked high ideals and mystic memory, but succeeded through action and decision, extemporizing with the materials at hand.

We do not need to liken our circumstances to the gravest crises in our history to realize that conserving the nation is the central battleground of American politics today. Permit me to quote from myself, something I wrote last year:⁴

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.

⁴ “Why America Needs National Conservatism,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 13, 2021.

My own program for conserving and strengthening our nationhood would be, to a degree, anti-progressive. It would re-establish national borders, reduce our current one million annual illegal entries not to 10,000 but to approximately zero, and calibrate lawful immigration, downward and differently, 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.

But my program would also address causes of national political disorder in which recent 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 a stable currency—not 10 percent or 5 percent inflation, nor even today’s official goal of 2 percent inflation that quintuples prices in a single lifetime, but 0 percent.

And my nationalist program would include not only measures that reinstitute the historical tried-and-true but also thoroughly modern innovations. These include universal school choice, which would give all parents the wherewithal to direct resources to the schools they think best for their children, and initiatives to mobilize science and enterprise to dominate China in advanced computation, communications, and weaponry and to repatriate production of national essentials such as pharmaceuticals.

This is not a policy manifesto. I have not prepared a PowerPoint briefing for Ron DeSantis or Mitch McConnell. I mean only to suggest that 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.

This is a talk delivered at the Hillsdale College Constitution Day Celebration at the Waldorf Astoria Washington DC on September 16, 2022.