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Peter Berkowitz on *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* by Patrick Allitt

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In these challenging times, libertarian or economic conservatives and traditionalist or social conservatives confront opposing temptations. More commonly, they feel the allure of purity. Impatient or disgusted with compromise and conciliation, many members of both of conservatism's leading camps are keen to rally around their own favored principle or highest priority and disregard or denounce the principles and priorities of their longtime coalition members. Meanwhile, a few, typically social conservatives, are drawn to the prospect of achieving a more perfect unity among conservative factions. They argue that if only economic conservatives and social conservatives would think through their deepest commitments, they would grasp that the differences between them are in reality superficial, and that when they understand their principles properly and examine policy alternatives rigorously, they will see that their opinions on major matters converge nicely.

Both the quest for purity and the quest for unity are misguided. This is because modern conservatism in general and certainly American conservatism in particular is a paradoxical orientation. The central paradox pervades the writing of Edmund Burke. Rightly recognized as having informally and unofficially but powerfully launched modern conservatism in 1790 with his Reflections on the Revolution in France, Burke cherished two fundamental goods, liberty and tradition, that do not obviously cohere and sometimes obviously conflict. Constitutional government in America intensifies the paradox. Insofar as American conservatism involves the conservation of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution — and how could it not? — it puts a revolutionary doctrine and a founding document, forged by men in the heat of the political moment and constructed with numerous painful compromises, at the heart of the conservative mission.

Patrick Allitt displays a superb eye for the paradoxes that constitute conservatism in America. The Goodrich C. White Professor of History and Director of the Center for Teaching and Curriculum at Emory University, Allitt has written a fine book that is especially valuable at this moment of conservative soul-searching and regrouping. The questions that guide his study are straightforward: "Where did conservatism come from, what are its intellectual sources, and why is it internally divided?" In answering them, however, he is obliged to

undertake considerable intellectual legwork because a recognized conservative movement in America only came into existence after 1950. This doesn't prevent Allitt from reconstructing "a strong, complex, and continuing American conservative tradition" stretching from The Federalist to the Federalist Society. It does mean, though, that to justify his decisions about whom and what to include and exclude in the absence of a formal conservative tradition, a common canon, and an established set of spokesmen, Allitt is compelled to spell out the conflicting elements that distinguish a distinctively conservative approach to politics in America.

Allitt does not seek to go beyond his role as a historian. Yet his learned and fair-minded reconstruction lends support to the view that the proper way forward for conservatives is neither greater purity nor a more perfect unity, but a richer appreciation of the paradoxes of modern conservatism and a more assiduous cultivation of the moderation that is necessary to hold conservatism's diverse elements, frequently both complementary and conflicting, in proper balance.

According to Allitt, conservatism is, first, "an attitude to social and political change that looks for support to the ideas, beliefs, and habits of the past and puts more faith in the lessons of history than in the abstractions of political philosophy." Second, it involves "a suspicion of democracy and equality." This can be divided into a concern that the formal equality of men before God and law not be confused with equality in all things, particularly virtue, and that too much government power not be placed directly in the people's hands. Third, conservatism reflects "the view that civilization is fragile and easily disrupted" and therefore it teaches that "the survival of the republic presupposes the virtue of citizens" and calls for "a highly educated elite as guardians of civilization."

Within this unity, considerable diversity of opinion has flourished. Conservatives, Allitt emphasizes, have differed in their "attitude to the proper role of government" and can be found on "both sides of great conflicts." For example, while Alexander Hamilton, as first secretary of the treasury, sought to increase the size and scope of government's responsibility for the economy, conservatives, by the time of the New Deal, opposed a larger federal role in the economy. In the run-up to the Civil War, northern statesman Daniel Webster strove to conserve the Union and southern conservative John C. Calhoun strove to conserve the southern way of life. Since the founding, many American conservatives have viewed democracy as destabilizing because it gave too much power to ordinary people; more recently conservatives have seen ordinary people's common sense and decency as a bulwark against elite ideas about radical change.

Like all traditions, the conservative one has harbored hypocrisy and spawned characteristic vices. Conservatives, Allitt notes, have over the years exploited and betrayed their principles, using them as a pretext to defend social station and inherited wealth. And conservatives are particularly susceptible, he notes, to the vices of "pessimism and complacency." But unlike so many partisan critics of conservatism who are only too happy to define conservatism by and

dilate upon its worst moments, Allitt, without sweeping its lapses and bad tendencies under the rug, seeks to understand conservatism in light of its most thoughtful expounders and influential practitioners.

In so proceeding, he provides a model of scholarly and liberal inquiry. One can't understand America properly, he properly contends, without understanding the conservative tradition that flows through it. And one can't understand equality and democracy and other goods central to American constitutional government without understanding their deficiencies, which conservative thought brings to light. Progressives in particular will benefit from Allitt's account of the continuities within the conservative tradition. And conservatives will especially profit from Allitt's examination of the disparate strands out of which their tradition has been woven.

Allitt finds conservative convictions and goals amply represented at the founding. Indeed, the drafters of the American Constitution were "conservative innovators" whose

> work was simultaneously revolutionary, in that it created a written blueprint by which the nation would live, and conservative, in that it drew from the wisdom of the ages and aimed to embody the political lessons taught by the experience of generations.

The authors of The Federalist expounded the Constitution's conservative innovations.

They explained that to secure individual liberty it was necessary to embody in the federal government greater power than had been granted by the Articles of Confederation, and that this could be done safely by incorporating new institutional mechanisms to check the propensity, inscribed in man's nature, to abuse power. They honored the claims of democracy by grounding government's legitimacy in the consent of the governed, and they saw the people as "the primary control on the government." At the same time, they believed that the people were frequently irrational and so limited their role to regular elections that they trusted would place in office comparatively sober, knowledgeable, and able representatives. John Adams, the second president of the United States and the most recognizably conservative of the politicians that came to be referred to as federalists, had a darker view of human nature, was more skeptical of democracy, more devoted to virtue, and believed more vigorously that social hierarchy was natural. But like conservatives of many stripes in America who would follow, he learned to give such convictions expression within the political framework established by the Constitution.

While federalists led by Adams, Hamilton, and George Washington were seeking to consolidate the power of the national government, a conservatism emerged in the antebellum south that emphasized states' rights and small government. John Taylor (1753–1824) and John Randolph (1773–1833) defended agrarian life and deplored city life, opposed standing armies and favored state militias, feared the participation in politics of the poor and propertyless, emphasized the political relevance of inequalities among men, stood against territorial expansion as a threat to citizens' virtue, and argued that states had the

inherent authority to reject congressional action that they determined to be inconsistent with the Constitution. In Disquisition on Government and Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States (both published posthumously), Calhoun (1782–1850) elaborated the idea that states had the power to veto or nullify federal actions, and he set forth his notion of "concurrent majorities," which referred to "the accumulation of evidence that all parts of a society, and all interests in it (rather than a mere numerical majority of voters), consented to measures of vital significance."

Eventually, all the opinions and doctrines of southern conservatism, whatever their intrinsic merit, became bound up with the defense of the institution of slavery. And eventually, Calhoun and other southern conservatives argued that slavery was not only good for the slave owner but good for the slave, who enjoyed a better way of life working on the plantation than, given his alleged racial inferiority, he could enjoy if left to fend for himself.

In fact, the southern way of life was inescapably unstable not only because slavery conflicted with America's fundamental political principles, but also because it was at odds with the momentum of modernity and industrialization. Southern conservatives conceived of themselves as defenders of Christian and European tradition, but "they were," Allitt observes, "locked into an industrializing world as producers of raw materials for textile factories, dependent on such capitalist innovations as railroads, steamships, banking, and credit facilities." They sought to stand against "the disintegrating tendencies of the modern world," but "like so many others in American conservative history, they were vulnerable to contradictory pressures, economic and political, which in the long run doomed their system to destruction."

Distinctive forms of conservatism also emerged in the antebellum North. The Whig Party, which arose in the 1830s and 1840s in opposition to Andrew Jackson and his democratizing spirit, reflected a "moderate conservatism." It favored a capitalist economy that would generate economic growth and create a community of interests between the more and less prosperous; virtuous and well-educated statesmen and judges; and a general respect for tradition and morality that underlay the economics and politics of a free society. Whig statesmen Henry Clay (1777–1852) and Daniel Webster (1782–1852) undertook to preserve the union by supporting federal projects to build canals, railroads, and communications infrastructure, and by urging compromise and conciliation between slave owners and radical abolitionists. In the same period and displaying a similar sensibility, Edward Everett (1794–1865), a professor of Greek at Harvard and deliverer of the other address at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, argued that civilization in America was dependent on its British, European, and Greek inheritance, and on appreciating the complementarity of the conservative and progressive spirit: "'the conservative element is as important in our nature and in all our relations as the progressive element. . . . I doubt [any notion of] progress which denies that the ages before us have anything worth preserving.'"

Allitt understands the Civil War as a “clash of rival conservatisms,” the conservatism of Clay, Webster, and Lincoln, who wished to conserve the Union, and the conservatism of the Confederacy, which wished to conserve the South’s traditional way of life. Both conservatisms abounded in paradox.

Some hyper-traditionalists, or paleoconservatives as they have come to be called, regard Lincoln as a great enemy of conservatism who denied the right of the southern states to secede and enormously expanded the role of the federal government. In fact, his opposition to secession and his enlargement of the federal government sprang from his commitment to conserving the principles of the Declaration and the Constitution. In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln argued that the liberal and democratic principles inscribed in the country’s founding had themselves become a sacred inheritance worth fighting and dying for. And in his Second Inaugural, after the tide in the war had turned, he drew heavily from the Bible on behalf of a message of moderation: Both sides had sinned, neither side could claim to be acting as God’s agent, all stand under God’s judgment, and all must respect the great principles of individual freedom and human equality. And yet to conserve the Union, Lincoln adopted emergency measures — suspension of habeas corpus, forcible conscription, and assumption of congressional warmaking powers — that in ordinary times would have been a grave affront to constitutional principles.

Conservatism in the Confederacy was even more paradoxical. After all, though dedicated to conserving the southern way of life, the Confederacy’s break with the Union was a revolutionary act. And the break had profound unforeseen consequences:

> The reality of having to fight for its existence almost from the moment of its birth prevented the Confederacy from retaining the distinctive features of the Old South. First, to create an effective army through conscription, whose soldiers could march wherever necessary under a unified command, it had to abridge the very same states’ rights that had helped motivate secession in the first place. Second, it had to divert agricultural energies into growing more food and less cotton. Third, it had to industrialize as quickly as possible in light of the mechanized character of modern warfare and to intervene in the market to promote economic efficiency. Fourth, the exigencies of war led to the transformation of traditional social roles, relationships, and gender roles; as men went off to fight, women had to take on more roles than ever before. And fifth, before long the Confederacy, like the union, had to suspend habeas corpus and other citizens’ civil rights.

These wartime exigencies and the traumas of defeat and Reconstruction gave rise to “Lost Cause” conservatism, which stressed states rights, white supremacy, and the dignity and grace of southern civilization. This conservatism fiercely opposed Reconstruction, and, according to Allitt, “blended easily with the creation of the Ku Klux Klan.” At the same time,

through its pride in the defensible features of the southern way of life, it would, once purged of nostalgia for slavery, provide a foundation on which the south could modernize and industrialize.

In the North, in the years between the end of the Civil War and the end of World War I, several new conservative types arose. All, in one way or another, were responding to the tremendous growth fueled by industrialization, urbanization, and new technologies, particularly in transportation and communication. One type, the capitalist conservatives, foremost among them William Graham Sumner (1840–1910), championed the free market and classical liberal ideas even as economic and political freedom were sweeping away traditional forms of life. A subset of the capitalist conservatives, the conservative Mugwumps, sought to temper the excesses of the Gilded Age by reforming national and local governments rife with corruption. The traditionalists, represented above all by the brothers Adams, Henry (1838–1918) and Brooks (1848–1927), were antimodernists who looked back to the Middle Ages as the high point of human civilization and who regarded America as a civilization in decline, dominated by greed, given over to vulgarity, and rapidly descending into barbarism. Meanwhile, Theodore Roosevelt stood for a progressive conservatism that combined a commitment to progressive reform with a devotion to the preservation of the aristocratic ethics and the manly virtues that, in his judgment, were threatened by rapid social, political, economic, and technological change. All three groups were conservers in one way or another even if, as Allitt argues, the only point they probably agreed on was “that socialism represented a severe and growing threat to their world and that it would be a formidable enemy in the twentieth century.”

In the 1920s and 1930s, conservatives in America were confronted by three epochal events: the emergence of the United States after World War I as a superpower; the rise of communism, following the Russian Revolution in 1917, as a major threat to American vital national security interests; and in response to the Great Depression, fdr’s launch of the New Deal, which initiated a dramatic alteration in the relationship between the federal government and the economy and the federal government and the individual. During this period, both the “New Humanists” in the north and the Southern Agrarians in the south registered protests on behalf of culture and tradition against the seemingly ineluctable march of modernity. But more than any other development in the interwar years, it was the New Deal that shaped conservative self-understanding and established the terms of debate in America between left and right.

Whether one views the New Deal “as a coordinated plan to rescue American capitalism,” or “as a set of ad hoc experiments to find ways of reducing unemployment and stimulating recovery,” or “as a project to transform permanently the balance of power between state and federal governments, augmenting government control over all aspects of national life,” it provoked, Allitt maintains, a remarkable change in the meaning of conservatism as well as liberalism:

> Until then, the term liberal had connoted giving citizens the greatest possible liberty to pursue their own concerns while minimizing government. From the New Deal onward, liberalism came to mean assigning an ever larger role to government in promoting equality and protecting citizens' health, welfare, education, employment, and access to justice.

Moreover, "by the 1930s the defense of old-style or classical liberalism — the heritage of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill — had become a form of conservatism." One sees this in former president Herbert Hoover and Ohio Senator Robert Taft, progressive Republicans who criticized fdr's massive expansion of the federal government as a grave threat to constitutional principles. And in the writings of Alfred Jay Nock (1870–1945), particularly in the conservative classics Our Enemy the State (1935) and Memoirs of a Superfluous Man (1943), one sees as well a harsh critique of state intervention in the economy coupled with a celebration of high culture and aristocratic virtue, a coupling that would become a hallmark of the new conservatism of the 1950s and 1960s.

A self-consciously conservative movement in American came into existence in the years following World War II. These conservatives were from the outset a fractious bunch. Libertarians such as Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992), Murray Rothbard (1926–1995), and Milton Friedman (1912–2006) focused on conserving the idea of limited government (as a defender of freedom, Friedman considered himself a liberal, and Hayek went so far as to deny that he was conservative). Traditionalists such as Richard Weaver (1910–1963), Russell Kirk (1918–1994), and Peter Viereck (1916–2006) were devoted to conserving religious faith and conventional morality. The contending elements of the new conservatism were united in thought by opposition to the New Deal and to Soviet communism.

And they were united in practice by William F. Buckley (1925–2008), perhaps the pivotal figure in making conservatism in America a respectable intellectual force. With National Review, which he launched in 1955, he sought to "set up a big tent, bringing in as many types of conservatives as possible, and to keep them together despite their differences." He succeeded marvelously, avoiding the quest for purity and for unity. In the early years in particular his big tent excluded only isolationists, which, Allitt shrewdly points out, "put National Review in the paradoxical position of hating big government in all areas except the one in which it was becoming biggest of all, defense."

In In Defense of Freedom (1962), National Review book review editor and columnist Frank S. Meyer (1909–1972) explained the basis of cooperation in Buckley's big tent. Libertarians had an interest in preserving religious faith and morality because they fostered the virtues critical to prospering in and maintaining a free society. And traditionalists had an interest in limiting government because the expanding and intrusive state was the chief threat to religious faith and morality.

In 1964, conservatives believed that they had found their candidate in Barry Goldwater, a two-term senator from Arizona, whose 1960 best seller, Conscience of a Conservative (ghostwritten by Buckley's brother-in-law, L. Brent Bozell), smoothly synthesized the libertarian and traditionalist elements of the new conservatism and articulated strong positions on the great public policy issues of the day. Despite Goldwater's resounding defeat by Lyndon Johnson, and the evident tension between "traditionalism, with its stress on the restraint of man's will and appetites, and libertarianism, with its zeal for individual freedom and (implicitly) self-assertion," conservatism in America rebounded quickly.

One can't understand equality and democracy and other goods central to American constitutional government without understanding their deficiencies, which conservative thought brings to light.

The rebound was facilitated by the divisive new issues the 1960s introduced into the mix of national politics. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, designed to bring about equality for all citizens, especially African-Americans, raised the question of whether the state should become color-conscious and give preferences to African-Americans to overcome the lingering effects of past discrimination or rigorously adhere to the ideal of color-blindness. The escalation of America's involvement in Vietnam by presidents Kennedy and Johnson sharpened the question of how American should wage the Cold War. Campus unrest brought to the fore old questions about the limits on freedom necessary to maintain the institutions of a free society. And the rise of feminism compelled politicians and intellectuals to confront issues about the legal status of women, the meaning of equality, and the extent of the state's responsibility to ensure that women were treated fairly in both the public and private sphere.

The struggle over these vexing matters drew new conservative factions into the fray. Having come of age on the left in the 1940s and 1950s, the first generation of intellectuals subsequently known as neoconservatives modified their ideas in response to the social and political upheavals of the 1960s. Led by Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, they became forceful critics of Johnson's Great Society initiatives, arguing that the empirical evidence showed that government programs designed to help the poor were in fact creating a culture of dependency which further mired its supposed beneficiaries in poverty. And they were foreign policy hawks, animated by a conservative sense of the dangerousness of the world and the vulnerability of civilization and therefore the need for a strong military, while also inspired by a progressive belief that America ought to promote liberty and democracy abroad.

Around the same time the new Christian Right rose to prominence. These mostly evangelical Protestants found their political voice in opposition to the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in Roe v. Wade. Focusing on social values, especially marriage, children, and the family, the Christian right established itself as an important player in national politics through its role in 1980 in electing Ronald Reagan president.

In reality, the “Reagan Revolution,” the culmination of 30 years of conservative ideas and activism, was not a revolution at all: It left the New Deal largely intact, at best slowing the rate at which government continued to grow. But it did provide a reinvigorated defense of free-market capitalism, the political expression of which was the 1981 tax cuts, which ushered in three decades of vigorous economic growth. It rejected peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union, which Reagan famously dubbed the “evil empire,” in favor of pursuit of victory in the Cold War, a pursuit that was rewarded in 1989 with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and in 1991 with the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union. And with the help of a cadre of intellectuals nourished by conservative think tanks, which were themselves supported by a network of conservative philanthropists, it renewed an appreciation for the wisdom and relevance of the founders’ understanding of the Constitution and the enduring principles of self-government.

To be sure, there were dissenters within conservative ranks. The paleoconservatives, with roots in the Midwest and south, were traditionalists and in many ways descendants of the Southern Agrarians. They were particularly displeased with the influence that neoconservatives had on the Reagan administration. The paleoconservatives correctly understood the neoconservatives to be liberals of a certain sort. And they feared that the importance the neoconservatives attached to conserving the principles of liberal democracy would corrupt the true conservative mission. For the paleoconservatives, America was an essentially conservative country, and conserving this conservative heritage — consisting of devotion to the life of the gentleman possessed of landed property, respect for the rule of law, and Christian faith — was more primary than, say, the ideas of freedom and equality inscribed in the Declaration and the Constitution. The most public face of this strand of conservatism has been Pat Buchanan.

By the time, President George H.W. Bush left office in 1992, the two greatest issues that had occupied the new conservatives since the 1950s had been resolved. One — the defeat of communism — represented, from the conservative perspective, a glorious triumph. The other — the entrenchment of the New Deal as part of the American tradition — represented for most conservatives an unfortunate reality that needed to be accepted and dealt with even as many continued to wish, sometimes aloud, that the reality were otherwise.

By the time President George W. Bush exited the White House, conservatives seemed as confused as they had ever been about how to conserve the competing elements of their tradition. If the history of conservative thought and politics in America is a good guide about how to remain faithful to conservative spirit, then conservatives ought to find the self-restraint to resist the delusive lures of sectarian purity and harmonious unity. The ambition to respect both liberty and tradition, and to moderate the paradoxes that it brings, are as old as America. Indeed, they are challenges inherent in a free and democratic self-government. To conserve well, conservatives must renew that ambition and cultivate the moderation that allows them to prosper with the paradoxes that it generates.

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