

# A Conservative's Case for Moderation

 [realclearpolitics.com/articles/2014/05/15/a\\_conservatives\\_case\\_for\\_moderation\\_122638.html](http://realclearpolitics.com/articles/2014/05/15/a_conservatives_case_for_moderation_122638.html)

By **Peter Berkowitz** - May 15, 2014

Recently William Kristol, a pillar of Washington's Republican establishment, issued a call to arms, admonishing conservatives to abandon their "calm, cool, and collected affect" and to passionately reject Democratic Party leadership.

Kristol was speaking for many in the conservative movement. Driven by the fear that every political compromise brings the country one step closer to the defeat of the idea of limited constitutional government at home and the ruinous erosion of America's ability to defend itself abroad, conservatives have taken to equating political moderation with capitulation.

This is nothing new. The impulse to repudiate moderation runs deep in American conservatism. When he launched *National Review* in 1955 -- and with it modern American conservatism -- William F. Buckley summoned fellow conservatives to unswervingly oppose the reigning left-liberal orthodoxy.

What conservatives tend to overlook, however, is the crucial role that moderation plays in satisfying the persistent need to reach accommodations among themselves.

One benefit of the decision by St. Augustine's Press to reissue "The Meaning of Conservatism," written by British philosophy professor Roger Scruton, is to call attention to the varieties of conservatism and the tensions between them. First published in 1980 and then revised in 2002 to take account of Margaret Thatcher's tenure as prime minister, this short, bold book sparkles with passion, purpose, and discernment. As a young scholar in the 1960s, Scruton had "rebelled against the prevailing ethos of rebellion." Writing at the dawn of what would become the Reagan-Thatcher era, his aim was to explain "the conservative view in politics and in the course of doing so to show the possibility of subscribing to them."

Like many conservatives, Scruton argues as if his version of conservatism is the true and only one. At the same time, he presents a striking alternative to the forms of conservatism that dominate in Britain and America, which see conserving liberty as the goal of politics. In contrast, Scruton sees freedom as a vital means, but still only a means, to the preservation of society and the state.

His account of conservatism's characteristic instincts, attitudes, and principles converges with what in the United States was once called traditionalist conservatism and overlaps considerably with what are today called social conservatism and paleoconservatism. In the years following World War II, Richard Weaver, Peter Viereck, and Russell Kirk set forth

traditionalism's tenets and themes and explored its sensibility. Venerable magazines *Modern Age* and *The University Bookman* continue to provide forums for its ideas. And organizations such as the Intercollegiate Studies Institute and the Philadelphia Society cultivate its spirit.

Such a movement shares much with the conservatism of Edmund Burke, but alters the delicate balance struck by the 18th century British statesman: Whereas Burke emphasized the services tradition renders to liberty, Scruton stresses the services that liberty renders to tradition.

Accordingly, he places maintaining public order and honoring duty ahead of the protection of rights. This would be apostasy to libertarian-leaning Republicans such as Rand Paul -- who sometimes sound as fearful of government as they are of terrorism -- and unacceptable to most other conservatives.

Scruton would further worry many American conservatives by arguing that it all starts with society rather than with the individual. He holds that "citizens are bound to each other and the state" by a "web of obligations." This brand of conservatism recognizes the utility of rights, but emphasizes "the constraints on freedom" that "arise through the law's attempt to embody (as for a conservative it must embody) the fundamental values of the society over which it rules." Freedom, thus, is inseparable from traditions of thought concerning its limits and the social and political institutions that define its scope.

Conservatism, Scruton-style, is not averse to change provided it reflects the animating spirit of society. Rejecting the widely held liberal view that all obligations arise only from our own choices, his conservatism asserts instead that the bonds of both family and society carry an authority that transcends individual consent and the decisions of contracting parties. It seeks to strengthen persons' allegiances to the associations that form, nurture, and protect them. It treasures tradition, custom, and ceremony because of the social knowledge embodied in them, and esteems patriotism as a virtue, especially where it can receive expression in devotion to a state governed by a constitution under law.

His conservatism attaches great importance to constitutions but regards them as primarily unwritten and informal. States, which it sees as organisms, are constituted by "something generalized and tacit" that "permeates the body of society, just as a person's self-image permeates his organic nature." The constitution comprises custom, expectations, and settled practices. The unwritten and informal constitution, which is the soul of the nation, provides the animating principles guiding the interpretation and reform of written laws and established institutions.

Scruton is quick to observe that the U.S. Constitution does not represent a refutation of the true conservative's depreciation of written and formal constitutions. Rather, "the slender document" necessarily embodies a shared inheritance of language, custom, and English common law tradition.

Traditionalist conservatism values democracy for providing procedures “that enable us to get rid of our rulers” though it is avowedly elitist, “concerned to safeguard difficult and exclusive attainments, and to ensure that they” are “not diluted by cheap substitutes and outright fakes.” It mixes political institutions that reflect an aristocratic element -- a House of Lords or a Senate -- with a democratic element -- a House of Commons or House of Representatives. And it maintains educational and cultural institutions devoted to developing elites.

Traditionalist conservatism candidly recognizes the connection between private morality and public conduct. In contrast to the American constitutional tradition, it would assign to the law a robust role in regulating the former for the sake of the latter. It does not doubt the obligation of the state to make minimum provisions for all citizens, but rejects egalitarian schemes that overlook or deliberately seek to overcome “deep inequalities of skill, industry and talent.”

Traditionalist conservatism accords private property and the rights associated with it special protection, but not because it places a premium on the promotion of commerce and economic growth. It teaches that through ownership, particularly of a home, one puts one’s stamp on the natural world, creating a place where one can develop one’s distinctive identity in relations with others and achieve a measure of permanence amid the flux of everyday life.

Much of Scruton’s conservatism -- particularly his forthright defense of hereditary privilege, fixed hierarchy, and religious establishment -- will prove a bridge too far for all but the most ardent American paleoconservatives. Yet all conservatives -- and progressives endowed with the liberal spirit -- can acquire from Scruton’s exposition of traditionalist conservatism a better appreciation of the complexities, trade-offs, and roads not taken involved in the American constitutional tradition’s paradoxical commitment to conserving liberty.

They can also achieve a more supple understanding of why there are few virtues more critical to conservative hopes than political moderation. Contrary to the prevailing prejudice in the movement today, political moderation does not mean hoisting the white flag of surrender in the face of the steady growth of the federal government, the secularization of the public square, the deterioration of the family, the unraveling of sexual mores, and the decline of patriotism.

Conservatives, however, will not effectively wage the good fight to which Bill Kristol has summoned them against threats to liberty unless they exercise political moderation in its highest form. That consists in honoring the abundance of worthy but conflicting instincts, attitudes, and principles to which conservatives are fortunate to be heir.

*Peter Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at [www.PeterBerkowitz.com](http://www.PeterBerkowitz.com) and you can follow him on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*

