

"Conservatarians" Welcome Both Cowboys, Community

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As the response to the parade of possible 2016 presidential candidates at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) attested, conservatives continue to admire rugged individuals: entrepreneurs, test pilots, and cowboys. They also cherish tight-knit communities: neighborhoods, voluntary organizations, and religious congregations.

To some critics this looks like conservative incoherence. Aren't tight-knit communities the antithesis of rugged individuals? To others—better versed in the basics of character formation in a free society and in what Tocqueville called “the art of association”—the conservative celebration of the individual and community appears quite sensible: it takes strong individuals to build flourishing communities and flourishing communities to nourish strong individuals.

This leads to a more fundamental difficulty. How do conservatives, whose very designation proclaims their inclination to preserve that which is time-honored, embrace free societies? After all, freedom encourages individuals to depart from established beliefs and practices and authorizes them to make their own way in the world. Isn't tradition one thing and liberty quite another?

In most times and places, liberty and tradition have been at loggerheads. But America's great experiment in constitutional self-government forged an alliance between them. The American founders were Englishman and Puritans, or Deist descendants of Puritans. Both their political and religious heritage taught them the sanctity of the individual and the imperative of limited government.

Limiting government to protect individual freedom is the precious inheritance of the American constitutional tradition. Conserving that legacy is American conservatism's unifying task.

It is an appreciation of this task that lies at the core of Charles Cooke's first-rate contribution, “The Conservatarian Manifesto,” to the robust debate within conservative circles about the future of conservatism. A writer at National Review and a proud immigrant to the United States from his native Britain, Cooke sets forth with vigor and subtlety a summons to conservatives to unite around the “timeless principles” that inform the American founding. In applying those principles to a host of prominent issues of public policy, he demonstrates refreshing common sense, a confident command of empirical realities, and savvy political judgment.

What, specifically, does Cooke advise conservatives in America to conserve? His answer embraces the fundamentals of freedom: “property rights; separation of powers; hard limits on the power of the state; staunch protections of the rights of conscience, assembly, speech, privacy, and self-protection; a preference for local governance over central planning; a free and dynamic market economy that permits rapid change and remarkable innovation; and, above all, a distrust of any government that would step in to answer questions that can be better resolved by civil society.”

Cooke’s is an optimistic vision, and he has written an optimistic book about a conservative movement that in his judgment has in important respects lost its way. President Obama’s job approval rating has been below 50 percent for more than a year and half; his signature legislative achievement, the Affordable Care Act, is even more unpopular than he; and four months ago in the November elections the president’s party suffered substantial setbacks in the House, the Senate, state legislative chambers, and gubernatorial offices. Yet Republicans are not particularly popular, either.

Part of the problem is confusion within conservative ranks. What Cooke calls the conservative branch of the conservative movement, but is better referred to as traditionalist, has not always upheld fiscal restraint. Moreover, on some issues close to their heart—abortion, same-sex marriage, drugs—the traditionalists have turned to government to legislate their moral positions. Meanwhile, the libertarian branch often ignores the moral prerequisites of freedom, and too frequently proposes policy as if it were legislating for a country where expectations have not been molded by more than three-quarters of a century of an ever-expanding welfare state.

What is needed—in the spirit of National Review eminence Frank Meyer’s influential 1962 book, “In Defense of Freedom”—is a fusion of the best of the social conservative and libertarian elements that overcomes the typical errors of each.

Cooke the fusionist, or “conservatarian,” embraces the formula of Ronald Reagan, who “reduced taxes, cut regulations, and relentlessly attacked the popular conceit that the answer to the nation’s problems was invariably more government intervention,” while recognizing that new times require new applications of that formula. For Cooke, as for Reagan, the essence of conservatism is limited government.

But that does not, Cooke emphasizes, imply indifference to the moral questions. To the contrary, proponents of limited government, he argues, regard the virtues and moral beliefs as of the first importance, and therefore reserve the people’s responsibility for them and seek to assign legislation that touches them most directly to the level of government nearest to the people.

Whereas progressivism, according to Cooke, “is built on the core belief that an educated and well-staffed central authority can determine how citizens should live their lives,” Cooke’s conservatarian is a federalist who wishes, in conformity with the Constitution’s design, to decentralize power. Federalism promotes genuine diversity by offering Americans in different regions with varying sensibilities the opportunity to “thrive on their own terms.”

The conservative defense of federalism is not, as progressive critics and some misguided conservatives contend, anti-government. Rather, it strives to keep federal and local government focused on their proper tasks. Accordingly, the principled federalist wholeheartedly affirms the federal government’s constitutionally mandated responsibility to protect constitutionally proclaimed rights and uphold federal law everywhere in the United States.

Crucial to Cooke’s agenda for reform is a renewal of appreciation of the Constitution’s structure and purpose, starting with its separation of powers, which by design seeks to slow down decision-making, promote deliberation, and raise the likelihood that major legislation enjoys broad, deep and enduring popular support.

Cooke is well aware that the American cultural elite—academia, journalism, Hollywood—is dominated by left-liberalism. He urges the right to build alternative institutions. Or rather—since conservatives dominate talk radio, Fox leads in cable news, and the Internet and social media have shattered the left’s role as the gatekeeper of all the news that’s fit to report—Cooke calls on conservatives to continue the work already under way.

The field of education presents particularly daunting challenges. Cooke counsels conservatives to be aggressive in making the case for a classical liberal education built around study of the great books. They should also, in his view: support alternative paths outside the university to career success, such as vocational training; champion school choice; and seek to reduce the centralization and monotony of public education while orienting it more toward teaching students the basics—reading, writing, arithmetic, as well as the principles of political freedom.

Cooke vigorously defends the right of citizens to own and carry guns, and not only because the right to bear arms is enshrined in the Constitution. Since the late 1980s, he notes, support for this right has increased significantly. And even as gun controls have been loosened, gun-related crime has fallen significantly.

Cooke expresses doubts that the federal government has any legitimate authority to regulate recreational drugs. His preferred approach affirms that the use of such drugs is a matter of individual choice—a choice he deplores—while assigning their regulation to the states.

He rejects the widespread opinion that social issues are lost causes for conservatives. True, the data indicate that sooner rather than later, same-sex marriage, now legal in 37 states, will be legal throughout the country—an outcome of which Cooke approves. Moreover, though a

clear majority of the country favors preserving a woman's right to terminate her pregnancy during the first trimester, support for the pro-life view is slowly on the rise. One reason, Cooke observes trenchantly, is that the pro-life stance has no essential link to religious views or even social conservatism. It is grounded in opposition to murder and the belief, bolstered by the increasingly common use of sonograms since *Roe v. Wade* was decided in 1973, that the unborn child is a human being.

On immigration, Cooke faces a tough divide between traditionalists who want the country to control its borders and to calibrate immigration to the nation's social and economic needs, and libertarians who favor open borders and the free flow of people. Cooke would refocus the debate around the policies that serve the interests of ordered liberty in America. This involves shifting decisions about immigration away from questions of family and instead placing the emphasis on "professional skills" and "personal virtues." It also requires reshaping policy so that it encourages assimilation rather than social balkanization. Cooke denies that Republicans can only avoid electoral disaster by adopting the Democrats' vision for comprehensive immigration reform. Hispanic voters, he points out, are diverse and their views are various.

In foreign policy, Cooke advocates a prudent internationalism. He criticizes President Obama's exploitation of the exhaustion Americans felt after Iraq to foster the view that America should mind its own business internationally. But Cooke does not wish to revive the Bush administration's aggressive promotion of freedom and democracy.

While acknowledging that the American constitutional tradition has always embodied a powerful "noninterventionist instinct," he argues that after World War II, nonintervention became "a luxury that the United States," having achieved superpower status, "could no longer afford." In agreement with Bret Stephens' recent book, "America in Retreat," Cooke maintains that America's proper international role is one of global policeman. If not the United States, who would maintain the international order, keep the sea lanes open and skies safe, and resist the spread of totalitarianism?

Cooke's conservatarian manifesto reflects the spirit of James Madison, Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Friedrich Hayek. One could worry that his conservative defense of freedom overlooks the extent to which conservative hopes today depend not only on conserving and improving but also on restoring, and that it understates the paradoxes involved in reconciling liberty and tradition. Such worries, however, should be used to refine and fortify Cooke's judicious ideas for keeping the country hospitable to both cowboys and community.

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