


What Unites Conservatives

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Donald Trump's flamboyant incursion into the Republican primary has not prevented the return of the quadrennial spectacle featuring conservatives arguing among themselves, often vociferously, about the principles that define their movement.

Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton's march toward coronation as the Democratic presidential nominee has been disrupted by her reckless conduct of government business on a private email server and by the unexpected rise of Sen. Bernie Sanders. Yet, as in previous election cycles, while differing about how much and on which government programs to spend, progressives and left-liberals largely agree about giving priority to more government regulation of the economy and more redistribution of wealth.

The contrast between conservative dissension and progressive consensus is frequently interpreted in favor of the left, especially by our left-leaning media and universities. Whereas conservatives are portrayed by elites as naturally ornery and contentious, progressives depict themselves as conciliatory and collaborative.

But what if free societies were marked by permanent tensions? What if constitutional government did not depend on realizing ever more perfectly some one principle, such as equality of outcome? What if, instead, it called for the harmonization of competing principles beginning with, on the one hand, the freedom of individuals to do as they see fit and, on the other, the moral and political order that creates the conditions for mutually beneficial cooperation and competition?

That liberal democracy in America is in need of a synthesizing spirit is the central implication of "What Is Conservatism?," an influential book in the history of the conservative movement, reissued this month by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute with a new foreword by syndicated columnist and best-selling author Jonah Goldberg.

Originally published by ISI in 1964, the short collection of essays was edited by the late Frank S. Meyer, then a senior editor of National Review. He presented a diversity of conservative luminaries including Russell Kirk, Willmoore Kendall, M. Stanton Evans, F.A. Hayek, Stephen Tonsor, and William F. Buckley Jr. Meyer aimed to disclose the unity that underlay the sharp disagreements among his fellow conservatives.

Modern American conservatism, then still in its youth, was a fractious movement composed of traditionalists and libertarians. The former sought to conserve—and in important respects restore—traditional morality and social life. The latter sought to conserve—and in important respects restore—the individual liberty and limited government typical of 19th century, or classical, liberalism.

The two camps joined forces in the 1950s to oppose the steady expansion of the New Deal and to lead America to victory against the Soviet Union in the Cold War. But while they could agree about the dangers of statism at home and collectivism abroad, the traditionalists and the libertarian were frequently at loggerheads.

In their quest to conserve traditional morality, the traditionalists were pleased— notwithstanding their harsh criticism of the New Deal—to use the state to promote traditional moral judgments and, despite their fierce opposition to communism, to subordinate the individual to traditional forms of community. Meanwhile, libertarians stood firm in wanting to limit government power, but often neglected questions about maintaining a vigorous civil society—the domain beyond the individual and apart from the state where families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and religious organizations form character and sustain social life. To both traditionalists and libertarians, it seemed that the other camp was oblivious, if not hostile, to their most cherished concerns.

“What Is Conservatism?” is as timely today as when it appeared five decades ago, because traditionalists—or, in today’s parlance, social conservatives—and libertarians, or economic conservatives, continue to joust for preeminence in the conservative movement, and both are still prone to neglect the insight into American constitutional government championed by the other.

To be sure, it is increasingly common to find national figures in the Republican Party who comfortably combine traditionalist and libertarian impulses—think Paul Ryan, Marco Rubio, and Tom Cotton. But the spirit of the synthesis remains poorly understood. “The new consensus for a new movement,” in the words of Jonah Goldberg’s foreword, that Meyer forged 50 years ago still provides a coherent framework for the movement in its maturity.

Goldberg observes humorously that the disagreement among Meyer’s contributors “is so great at times, it is as if ‘The Federalist Papers’ included essays not just from Anti-Federalists but even from an occasional monarchist and royalist.” This only enhances Meyer’s achievement in clarifying the interlocking beliefs that undergird the conservative coalition.

In “Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism,” which opens the volume, Meyer argues that the divergence between the libertarians’ focus on individual freedom and the traditionalists’ devotion to virtue reflects the differing strands of Western civilization to which, in opposing

the reigning liberalism, the coalition partners appealed. According to Meyer, however, Western civilization “has been specifically distinguished by its ability to hold these apparently opposed ends in balance and tension.”

To choose either freedom or virtue and to neglect the other, he contends, is to undermine both. That’s because the enjoyment of the blessings of liberty and the maintenance of free institutions require the exercise of virtue while it is impossible to practice courage, generosity, prudence, and the other virtues without freely choosing ends, forming judgments, and executing intentions.

Meyer emphasizes that despite the indissoluble connection between freedom and virtue, the state stands in different relations to them. Government’s task is restricted to securing the conditions of freedom so that the associations of civil society can develop in individuals the virtues that enable them to pursue their goals and discharge their duties.

Meyer claimed no originality for the synthesis he propounded. His contemporaries called it “fusionism.” Since, as he argued, the U.S. Constitution embodies it, he is properly seen as a proponent of a constitutional conservatism. Meyer’s constitutional conservatism shows that what should unite conservatives “is a great deal more fundamental than the divergence.”

It is difficult, even today, to credit any conservative who does not along with Meyer affirm the dignity of the individual; recognize justice as an objective standard; oppose state enforcement of morals; reject economic planning and social engineering, the better to protect tradition and community as well as liberty; venerate the Constitution for institutionalizing limited government based on federalism and the separation of powers; and embrace Western civilization both because it is ours and because of its unparalleled devotion to human freedom.

Whether he or she leans traditionalist or libertarian, the candidate who deserves to win the 2016 GOP nomination is the one who best translates these defining conservative principles into policies suitable for today’s myriad challenges.

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