

Bridging the Conservative Divide

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Commentary

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June 26, 2017

Donald Trump's ascent to the presidency precipitated a rift of unprecedented proportions in American conservatism. To prevent a permanent split, conservatives must recover an appreciation of the enduring tensions that constitute their movement. Too few conservatives, however, are focusing on conciliation.

In 2016, many reluctantly concluded that Trump, despite manifest flaws and eclectic priorities, was more likely than Hillary Clinton to advance a conservative agenda of limited government, economic prosperity, and strong defense. A number of prominent establishment conservatives, however, announced that they could not in good conscience support the renegade GOP nominee. Meanwhile many ordinary voters, some influential websites and popular talk radio hosts, and a few maverick intellectuals reveled in Trump's broadsides against the Republican as well as Democratic establishments.

In some cases, things got ugly. "Never-Trump" devotees denounced the candidate as a fascist who disgraced conservative principles, not least the principle that moral character is vital to good government. Trump and his backers dismissed critics as preening hacks determined to preserve a corrupt status quo that had handsomely rewarded them. The bitter invective and high political stakes strained, and in some cases ended, friendships.

Internal disputes about the conservative bona fides of their presidential nominee are nothing new for the Grand Old Party. "Rockefeller Republicans" never fully recovered from the beating they took from Barry Goldwater's forces at the 1964 convention. Notwithstanding Ronald Reagan's iconic standing today in the party, many Jerry Ford loyalists did not forgive the Reaganauts for their challenge in 1976 to the status quo—and vice versa.

Contention among conservatives over their defining principles, moreover, is the norm. Ever since a self-consciously conservative movement arose in post-World War II America, members have been hurling accusations of heresy at one another.

William F. Buckley Jr.'s great achievement in the 1950s and 1960s was to form an alliance between those dedicated to conserving individual liberty and limiting government, and those devoted to conserving traditional morality and faith. This synthesis was more than a marriage of convenience in the struggle against statism at home and communism abroad. In the late 18th century, Edmund Burke gave the synthesis classical expression in "Reflections

on the Revolution in France,” which showed that the defense of individual liberty depended on traditional moral virtues, faith, and the voluntary associations of civil society. The classical synthesis paid political dividends for the American conservative movement in 1980 with Reagan’s election.

In line with the persistent battle over ideas that has marked post-World War II American conservatism, Ofir Haivry and Yoram Hazony argue in “What Is Conservatism?” -- in the summer issue of the new journal *American Affairs* -- that the time is ripe for conservatives to revise their understanding of the roots of “the Anglo-American conservative tradition.” In keeping with conservatives’ penchant to denounce heresy in their ranks, the authors accuse many prominent present-day conservatives of espousing ideas that are antithetical to legitimate conservative politics.

To Haivry, vice president of the Herzl Institute, a research center in Jerusalem, and Hazony, its president, the villains are classical liberalism and its founding father, John Locke. The authors seek to rescue the movement by setting forth “a strong and intellectually capable conservatism” that is “utterly opposed” to Lockean liberalism.

The heroes of the authors’ one true conservatism are the 15th-century English jurist Sir John Fortescue and even more the 17th-century English jurist John Selden, both of whom wrote important works of political thought. The tradition, according to the authors, includes Richard Hooker, Sir Edward Coke, Jonathan Swift, Edmund Burke, George Washington, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton.

Haivry and Hazony identify five principles of the one true conservatism. First, “the authority of government derives from constitutional traditions known, through the long historical experience of a given nation, to offer stability, well-being, and freedom.” Second, peoples—and their political possibilities—are shaped by “different constitutional and religious traditions.” Third, in the Anglo-American tradition, “the state upholds and honors the biblical God and religious practices common to the nation.” Fourth, executive power—whether that of king or president— “is limited by the laws of the nation” and “by the representatives of the people,” who must consent to the laws. Fifth, “the security of the individual’s life and property is mandated by God as the basis for a society that is both peaceful and prosperous” while “the ability of the nation to seek truth and conduct sound policy” is secured by freedom of speech which, along with other “fundamental rights and liberties,” is protected by law.

These, the authors maintain, are the “principles that we can affirm today, and which can serve as a sound basis for political conservatism in Britain, America, and other countries in our time.” That’s doubtful.

There is good reason to reject Haivry's and Hazony's bestowing of the title "conservatism" exclusively on their favorite mix of principles—and principals. What they have discovered, or rediscovered, are classic early works of English constitutionalism. The authors are right that the thinking of Fortescue and Selden, in which the biblical tradition and freedom are unswerving allies, has been neglected, and they perform a service by showing that their works deserve careful study. But with rise of modernity, the firm alliance between tradition, especially religious tradition, and freedom has been destabilized by myriad factors including secularism, science and technology, capitalism, and globalism.

The conservatism most pertinent to America's contemporary challenges was pioneered by Burke. In response to the French Revolution—which bred the Reign of Terror—he criticized the excesses to which natural rights thinking was prone. He also affirmed the reality and political relevance of natural rights. Burke argued that liberty well understood protected traditional ways and that tradition well understood nourished liberty. The struggle to reconcile the competing claims of liberty and tradition links Burke to Buckley and separates both from the seminal early expounders of English constitutionalism.

Another problem with the authors' analysis is their transformation of Locke into a boogeyman. The author of "Two Treatises of Government" (1689) exercised an enormous influence—along with biblical faith, classical thought, and British common law—on the American founders. Contrary to Haivry and Hazony's fun-house mirror image, Locke was not a radical who argued that "all men, if they will just gather together and consult with their own reason, can design a government" superior to existing ones. Locke's purpose was narrow: to give an account of the origins, extent, and ends of legitimate government for an age that rejected the legitimacy of divine-right monarchy. We live in that age.

Not the least defect in Haivry and Hazony's efforts to drive a wedge between classical liberalism and conservatism is their violation of their own conservative principles, which call for respect for constitutional traditions and historical experience. Classical liberalism is not the only root of the American constitutional tradition but it is a deep one. Natural rights are woven into the fabric of the American spirit and American political institutions. The authors' counsel to conservatives to reject classical liberalism and natural rights amounts to a summons to rebellion against American constitutional traditions and historical experience.

Haivry and Hazony's primary aim is restoration of a biblically infused politics. Their labors rightly fortify the opinion that a healthy national spirit, abiding biblical faith, robust family life, and vibrant civil society can nourish individual freedom and limited government. But their disregard for the tensions between reason, liberty, and tradition that mark our inheritance conflicts with that respect for moral and political realities they purport to champion.

Understanding those enduring tensions is essential to reconfiguring conservatism to meet the immense challenges shaking the nation in the Trump era.

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