

Bridging Conservative Divides

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COMMENTARY



AP Photo/Dennis Cook, File

Donald Trump's disruptive presidency has exacerbated a long-festering intra-conservative controversy about American conservatism's core principles and purposes. So big and diffuse has the conservative world become since the 1960s -- when William F. Buckley's *National Review* set the agenda -- that thoughtful right-wingers themselves doubt that anything so discrete and organized as a movement exists today. They suspect, moreover, that the ambition to revive one represents a distracting exercise in nostalgia.

Contemporary conservatives' dissatisfaction with conservatism bolsters such doubts. Trump owes his election in no small measure to a rebellion undertaken by many working-class conservative voters against an establishment -- conservative as well as progressive -- that they perceived to be contemptuous of their concerns about the loss of good jobs, the influx of illegal immigrants, the waging of foolish wars, and the spread of a haughty high culture of political correctness. Former Trump campaign manager and White House chief strategist Steve Bannon has led a crusade against what he regards as an ossified Republican elite. The Judge Roy Moore debacle in Alabama, in which Bannon's candidate in the special election to replace Attorney General Jeff Sessions lost a dependable Republican seat, may have exposed the outer limits of right-wing populism. But Moore did not lose by much, and Bannon has not abandoned his quest to subject GOP Senate incumbents all over the country to 2018 primary challenges.

Meanwhile, many conservative intellectuals have advanced bleak diagnoses of America's condition and proposed radical remedies. Implacably averse to the president whom they regard as an existential threat to the republic, leading Never-Trumpers have thrown their lot in with progressives. A new breed of "paleoconservative" seeks to restore the true conservatism. They derive it from the Hebrew Bible and Protestant thinkers who adapted biblical politics to early modern conditions, and contend that this true conservatism is separate from and incompatible with classical liberalism. Proponents of "the Benedict Option" wonder whether the classical liberalism inscribed in America's founding has corrupted politics and debased culture to a degree that leaves men and women of goodwill and understanding little choice but to withdraw into communities apart, where they can preserve decency and faith as the new Dark Age descends.

The scope and intensity of conservative complaints with the status quo further reinforce the conclusion that it is wrongheaded to speak of a conservative movement or dream of reviving one. But that doesn't mean that the 1960s reconciliation of traditionalists and classical liberals over which Buckley presided has ceased to be relevant.

For starters, this fractiousness isn't new. The traditionalists, classical liberals, and various intellectual rebels whom Buckley gathered inside his big tent were often at one another's throats and routinely indulged in apocalyptic rhetoric. In losing in a landslide to Lyndon Johnson in the 1964 presidential election, Arizona Sen. Barry Goldwater confirmed popular suspicions about conservative zealotry when he declared at the GOP convention that "extremism in the service of liberty is no vice." Yet Goldwater's ablest surrogate went on to win two terms in the White House, the second in the greatest landslide in American history. Like Bill Buckley, Ronald Reagan was an exception among spokesmen for conservatism: He disarmingly harmonized dedication to individual liberty and limited government with respect for traditional morality and biblical faith.

The regular discord that has marked the American right stems in part from the nature of conservatism in general and the distinctively modern form of conservatism in particular. Progressives can unite around a substantive goal: the pursuit of an increasingly egalitarian society through ever more comprehensive government regulation and redistribution. Classical liberalism also advances a recognizable doctrine -- namely, individual liberty and the limited government, free markets, moral virtues, voluntary associations, and religious practices that secure it. In contrast, conservatism never was and never can be a single school of political thought. It is always relative to, and intent on preserving, a particular tradition. Since traditions—moral and religious, national, and civilizational—differ, and sometimes dramatically, there is no one conservatism. There are only varieties of conservatism.

Not only do the varieties of conservatism conflict with each other, but each also harbors conflicting tendencies. As the 18th-century Whig statesman Edmund Burke observed in “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” which became the classic statement of the distinctively modern form of conservatism, we confront a “choice of inheritance.” Every morality and religion, every nation and civilization, contains diverse imperatives and aspirations. Consequently, even those fervently devoted to conserving the same tradition may well find themselves at loggerheads over the dangers it confronts and the principles it cherishes.

The distinctively modern form of conservatism emerged in response to the French Revolution, the first major crisis of the modern tradition of freedom. The classical conception equated liberty with self-government but did not specify who was entitled to it. In contrast, the modern liberal view—articulated most memorably by John Locke, affirmed by the Declaration of Independence and embodied in the American constitutional order—held that human beings are by nature free and equal, legitimate government is based on the consent of the governed, and government’s task is to protect individual rights. Conserving freedom became the paramount political purpose of the new variety of conservatism.

Conserving freedom is a complex undertaking. That’s because freedom, which in the first place means choosing for yourself, is in tension with tradition, which begins with submitting to someone else’s authority. Since the experience of freedom disinclines one to submit to any authority but one’s own, modern conservatism faced an unending struggle between respect for the individual’s authority and respect for tradition’s authority, including that of the tradition of freedom.

Burke brokered a reconciliation. In the “Reflections,” he warned friends of freedom against the “total revolution” underway in France that sought to overthrow throne and altar, erase custom and habit, and transform humanity by reinventing morality and politics. Waged in the name of liberty, the French Revolution’s sweeping rejection of tradition presented a novel and grave threat to liberty, Burke argued. Political freedom, as British history demonstrated,

was rooted in beliefs, practices, and institutions that develop over centuries, and was sustained by morality, religion, family, community, and sound political judgment grounded in historical study and long experience in political affairs.

American conservatism also emerged in response to a crisis of freedom. In the mid-20th century, classical liberals and traditionalists could agree that statism at home and communism abroad threatened to crush the individual and swamp civil society.

In the early 1960s, in the face of the frequently flaring rancor inside Buckley's big tent, National Review senior editor Frank Meyer restated for his time Burke's reconciliation of liberty and tradition. To pursue happiness, Meyer maintained, individuals, families, and communities require a limited government capable of protecting a robust civil society and a broad private sphere where citizens are largely left alone to govern themselves and advance their material and moral interests as they define them. At the same time, democratic self-government and free markets rest on citizens well-endowed with self-restraint, industriousness, perseverance, tolerance, prudence, and a host of other virtues cultivated best by family, faith, and community.

Meyer's synthesis was called "fusionism," but it is more aptly named constitutional conservatism. As Meyer argued, it preserves the mix of freedom and virtue that, for all their bitter differences, was shared by "the men who created the republic, who framed the Constitution and produced that monument of political wisdom, The Federalist Papers."

Today, reconciling the claims of liberty and tradition is hardly foremost on the minds of conservative politicians and conservative voters. Congressional Republicans have made little headway in overcoming their disagreements on immigration, trade, and America's role abroad. Although in his first year in office President Trump scored a major victory on tax reform; appointed an outstanding Supreme Court justice and numerous fine appeals court judges; substantially undid through executive orders the large regulatory burden that President Obama instituted through executive orders; gave the military the authority and encouragement to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; and delivered sober speeches in Saudi Arabia on terrorism, in Warsaw in defense of Western civilization, and in Washington criticizing Iran, he has failed to articulate a compelling legislative agenda. With the president's job approval ratings continuing to lag and with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's far-flung investigation exacting its toll, Republicans have cause to worry about the 2018 midterm elections.

Though not a guide to devising policy and directing campaigns, the spirit in which Meyer reconciled liberty and tradition has pragmatic implications. A constitutional conservatism provides, to borrow Alexander Hamilton's suggestive phrase from Federalist 1, a "lesson of moderation." It is not a lesson, to put the matter gently, that conservatives have internalized. But if properly attended to, the unending task of reconciling liberty and tradition -- a task to

which the conservatism that descends from Burke is dedicated -- encourages the sifting out of what is false or exaggerated in clashing claims concerning the whole range of political affairs and the weaving together of what is true and useful in them.

This sifting and weaving is more than an intellectual virtue. It is as essential to assembling electoral majorities and governing responsibly amid our fractured politics as it was half a century ago amid the fractured politics of Buckley's and Meyer's era that culminated in the presidency of Ronald Reagan and as it was more than two centuries ago amid the fractured politics of America's founding era that was capped by the drafting and ratification of the Constitution.

Considered in the spirit of constitutional conservatism, the leading conservative dissatisfactions with contemporary conservatism can be seen as both illuminating genuine challenges and distorting the political landscape by pressing valid concerns to an extreme.

The populist champions of economic nationalism rightly expect the advance of their interests to be of paramount concern to their elected representatives. They reasonably demand that the federal government toughen border security and adopt temporary and targeted measures to mitigate the hardships that globalization has inflicted on millions of blue-collar families. But these critical short-term steps must be formulated in a manner that affirms the public's long-term interest in the contribution that free markets and free trade make to individual freedom.

Never-Trumpers rightly emphasize the importance to politics of sound character and solid principles while contending that President Trump lacks both. But they underplayed Hillary Clinton's glaring character defects. They also discounted the danger to freedom stemming from the progressive principles she embraced and from her effortless abandonment of her principles whenever they interfered with her pursuit of power. Never-Trumpers might have dialed down their outrage, moreover, had they appreciated better that the emergence of ostentatiously flawed elected officials is no earth-shattering scandal but instead is among the primary contingencies for which the Constitution was designed.

Today's paleoconservatives rightly argue that the liberalism stemming from John Locke is implicated in perilous political tendencies. These include reducing all political questions to matters of abstract rights and legally justiciable claims; ignoring or denigrating the wisdom embodied in inherited institutions; neglecting the role of family and faith in forming moral character; supposing that one model of government fits all peoples; and championing a universal political order at the expense of national sovereignty. But the new paleoconservatives deprive themselves of an essential ally in the quest to reconcile liberty and tradition by equating Locke and classical liberalism with the left-liberal interpretation of the Lockean inheritance.

And those who contemplate the Benedict Option rightly observe that from the perspective of Christian teaching, contemporary American moral and political culture is in many ways degraded and degrading. But they sometimes overlook that Christianity teaches that politics always falls short; believers are never fully at home in this life; the City of God serves as an eternal reproach to and standard for the City of Man. Those drawn to the prospect of retreating from American society also tend to disregard how their option to do so vindicates the American constitutional order. For the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness secured by the Constitution protect the choice of a pious life in inward-focused communities.

If conservatives of various stripes devoted less energy to exposing heretics, apostates, and infidels in their midst and more to locating common ground on which those who both cherish freedom and respect tradition can meet, they might find policy debates more fruitful and electoral outcomes more agreeable.

The current disarray on the right may preclude the reconstruction of a conservative movement. But the cultivation of the reconciling spirit at the heart of modern conservatism is as urgent as ever.

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