

Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part I: Our Immoderation

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the first of a five-part essay by the Hoover Institution's Peter Berkowitz on the challenges faced by liberal democracy in America in light of Patrick Deneen's recent book "Why Liberalism Failed."*

Our politics increasingly encourages citizens — members of the intellectual and political elite particularly — to take to an extreme the perennial human propensity to take one's opinions to an extreme. This imperils liberal democracy in America.

More than most forms of government, American liberal democracy is a hybrid, multi-dimensional regime. Grounded above all in the conviction that human beings are by nature free and equal, the American constitutional order embodies a mix of principles. It draws upon and shelters a variety of traditions. And it calls upon citizens to tolerate a diversity of beliefs and practices, including beliefs with which they may intensely disagree and practices of which they may strongly disapprove.

To accommodate these manifold tendencies, the Constitution establishes complex institutional arrangements that summon the political moderation — that is, the ability to combine and reconcile competing claims about sound policy and justice — on which the American experiment in self-government depends.

Resisting the Constitution's incentives to combine and reconcile, leading figures on the left and right seem bent on heightening tensions and magnifying divisions. Donald Trump's ascent to the White House exacerbated both camps' growing determination, in evidence well before Trump upended the 2016 presidential campaign, to insist that the apocalypse is just around the corner. Powerful conservative voices argued that a Hillary Clinton victory would irreversibly entrench a ubiquitous progressivism that ruthlessly uses government to redistribute wealth, regulate the economy, and restrict worship and speech. Since the election, many prominent progressive voices, joined by a few vehement conservatives (and ex-conservatives), have accused Trump of wrecking democracy in America by debasing political discourse, trampling on norms, corrupting political institutions, empowering working-class bigots and white supremacists, and undermining the rule of law.

To doubt that the United States is on the brink is not to deny that the country confronts formidable challenges. On the increasingly risible grounds of disinterested expertise, our profligate and inexorably expanding federal government has subjected the nation to a morass of intrusive, inefficient, and often indecipherable rules and regulations. Senior figures in the

permanent bureaucracy have set aside impartial administration of the law to commandeer state power to advance partisan agendas. A civilized immigration policy consistent with the rule of law and the right of sovereign nation-states to control their borders eludes both parties. Our foreign policy establishment fails to persuasively articulate America's interests abroad, let alone connect them to the country's governing principles and highest ideals and advance them effectively in the global arena. While the stock market has done very well since Trump's November 2016 victory and unemployment has reached impressive lows following his 2017 deregulation orders and tax reform, income inequality in America widens, good jobs flow out of the country's industrial heartland, and the national debt balloons to massive proportions. Popular culture frequently revels in the low, the mean, and the tawdry. The combined dysfunction of the state, the economy, and culture operates to fray the fabric of family life, erode the underpinnings of faith, and sap vitality from communities. And many members of the prestige media appear to believe that their professional responsibilities require them to put bringing down the president ahead of getting the story right, even as the president goes overboard in declaring the press "the enemy of the people."

Our educational institutions make matters worse. They lend their authority to the scurrilous charge that free speech, due process, and a core curriculum rooted in Western civilization promote persecution based on race, class, and gender. And they cultivate the self-aggrandizing claim that the greater the victim status of the group with which one identifies, the more deserving is one's speech, the less the formalities of due process should stand in the way of one's accusations and ambitions, and the more the curriculum should elaborate one's oppression and vindicate one's demands.

It would be reasonable to hope that so weighty an assemblage of problems and perils would focus minds and occasion cooperation in defense of America's all-but-unmatched achievements in securing individual freedom and equality under law, producing economic prosperity, and welcoming new citizens from around the world. Yet party elites avidly indulge the vulgar pleasure of detesting the other side, while many members of Trump's populist coalition resent the elites of both parties whom, they have reason to believe, unite in detesting them.

In a much-discussed book published earlier this year, Patrick Deneen goes beyond those who think that the United States stands on the brink of systematic collapse. In his view, America as we know it has lost its moral legitimacy and deserves to disappear, though Deneen acknowledges that he is unable to specify the new form of political order that ought to replace it. In "Why Liberalism Failed," he places the blame for America's drastic plight — more or less shared, he suggests, by liberal democracies throughout the West — on liberalism.

By liberalism, Deneen means the modern tradition of freedom that came into its own in England in the 17th and 18th centuries, that served as a powerful source of inspiration to the founding of the United States, that spread throughout the West, and that informs countries around the globe that protect individual rights and rest political power on the consent of the

governed. He maintains that our prospects for decent lives hinge on grasping the malign influence of John Locke, who in the late 17th century provided a groundbreaking statement of the liberal ideas that, Deneen insists, relentlessly deceive and dehumanize. From a perspective that, he asserts, transcends the debate between contemporary left and right, he purports to expose liberalism's poisonous origins in erroneous theoretical doctrines and base moral intentions, to lay bare the calamitous social and political pathologies it generates, and to pave the way for the development of new and more humane forms of political community.

Deneen's extreme contentions are arresting and illuminating. He shows how the vain pursuit of total freedom underwrites myriad follies, inequities, and cruelties of contemporary political life. He highlights the moral costs of progress and our strategies for evading them. He mounts a compelling case for recovering dimensions of morality and politics — the virtues, duty, family, faith, community, local associations, and self-government — that intellectual and political elites tend to neglect or condemn. A compassion for those who suffer, a devotion to piety and moral excellence, and a keen appreciation of the paradoxes of freedom and thralldom in contemporary America suffuse his writing.

But Deneen can't make his radical hopes for a new form of political community cohere with his traditionalist appeal to the wisdom of classical political philosophy and Christian teaching. Mixing and matching venerable criticisms of the modern tradition of freedom from the left and the right, he falls prey to an anti-liberal zealotry that induces him to exaggerate the defects of the modern tradition he rejects and to import revolutionary implications into the premodern traditions to which he professes allegiance. As a result of equating liberalism with its most extreme variant, and of overlooking the lessons of moderation woven into classical and biblical wisdom as well as into the modern tradition of freedom, he intensifies confusion about the sources of our infirmities and misdirects political and intellectual energies away from viable reforms. In the quest to overcome the spirit of the age, Deneen has produced a book that embodies a propensity — taking one's opinions to an extreme — that typifies the age.

The exploration of zealotry in the critique of liberalism — as in its defense — can furnish a soberer understanding of our predicament. Amid the cacophony of discontent that marks the moment, assessing Deneen's arguments offers an opportunity to clarify the blend of traditions, principles, and virtues that nourishes liberal democracy in America.

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