

Conservatism and the Repair of the Republic

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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The divisions among American conservatives have generally been more evident -- certainly to conservatives -- than the principles that might unite them. President Reagan's two terms are the exception. The pronounced divisions of today are the rule.

While the Republican electoral base has rallied around Donald Trump, his presidency has amplified resentments and intensified enmities among conservative elites. The internal clashes roiling the highest echelons of the conservative movement, though, need not be merely disruptive. They also furnish an opportunity to clarify the core ideas and assortment of virtues that would enable conservatives of different stripes to join forces to preserve America's constitutional order.

Not all conservatives are inclined to see, much less seize, the opportunity.

Sohrab Ahmari prefers to heighten the contradictions. In his much-discussed First Things essay, "[Against David French-ism](#)," the New York Post op-ed editor declared that "the depth of the present crisis facing religious conservatives" makes it necessary "to fight the culture war with the aim of defeating the enemy and enjoying the spoils in the form of a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately to the Highest Good."

Because David French is determined to treat American leftists as fellow citizens to be persuaded rather than as enemies to be crushed, he is, in Ahmari's eyes, too "nice" and "polite" for the

hostilities into which the left has plunged the culture. French's "conservative liberalism," moreover, compounds the problem because of its "great horror of the state, of traditional authority, and the use of the public power to advance the common good, including the realm of public morality." Ahmari recognizes that "civility and decency" have their place in politics, but only as "secondary values." The metastasizing corruption of the established order makes the liberal virtues an unaffordable luxury and warriors' virtues an urgent necessity.

In "[What Sohrab Ahmari Gets Wrong](#)," French — a senior writer at National Review, former president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and a U.S. Army veteran -- argues unapologetically for exercising the liberal virtues to conserve the classical liberalism that undergirds the American Constitution. No stranger to the culture wars, French, himself a dedicated Christian, points to the lawsuits he has won on behalf of religious conservatives.

Moreover, it wasn't "punch-them-in-the-face-populism," that led, against fierce and frequently disreputable opposition, to the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh as a Supreme Court justice. Rather, French insists that victory was achieved by "appealing to 'classically liberal values such as cross-examination, hard evidence, and the presumption of innocence,'" which "pushed [Sen.] Susan Collins to tip the scales in Kavanaugh's favor." Confronted by the choice between a "zealous defense of the classical-liberal order (with a special emphasis on civil liberties) and zealous advocacy of fundamentally Christian and Burkean conservative principles," French rejects the demand to choose. "It's not one or the other. It's both."

Peter Wehner agrees. In the "The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump," the author exhibits an inspiring civility and decency in defense of the classical liberalism in which the American constitutional order is rooted, and on behalf of the Christian faith and commitment to family and community that liberal democracy in America enables him to pursue. At the same time, he reveals a blind spot to the damage done by higher education in undermining the

liberal virtues. Correcting that oversight shows that the conservative mission also depends on the insights and energy of culture warriors like Sohrab Ahmari.

Wehner brings to the argument a remarkable combination of experience in politics and in the world of ideas. A veteran of the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations and a senior adviser in the George W. Bush White House, he is now a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and a contributor to the New York Times opinion section and The Atlantic. He has excelled as a speech writer, political strategist, policy wonk, and student of political philosophy and religion.

In a city in which vicious partisanship long ago became the default option, Wehner has never wavered from the convictions that he propounds in his book: Politics is a necessary activity that should aim “to solve public problems” and can be a noble calling that at its best serves as “an imperfect but essential way to advance justice and human flourishing.” Christian teaching supports liberal democracy in America even as Christians must be vigilant in resisting the temptations to place their faith in the service of status and power. And the virtue of moderation, the practice of persuasion, and the art of compromise are essential to maintaining the American experiment in self-government.

Although addressing all who sense that “our political culture is sick,” Wehner specifically entreats those conservatives who would throw in the towel to take a step back and consider conservatism’s successes over the last 40 years. These include tax reform and welfare reform, nurture of the charter school movement, salutary anti-drug efforts of the 1990s, and the introduction of greater market competition into Medicare in the 2000s.

Government’s failures over the last 50 years must be considered alongside its accomplishments, he emphasizes. The United States lost the Vietnam War, but won the Cold War. Watergate exposed government corruption at the highest levels, but the peaceful transference of power from Richard

Nixon to Gerald Ford vindicated the rule of law. The U.S. financial system nearly collapsed in 2008, but government helped avert a second Great Depression and a decade later Americans enjoy a historic economic expansion. The environment is exposed to a variety of dangers but thanks to a combination of government action and private sector creativity made possible by free enterprise, the quality of air and water in the United States has been improving for years. The U.S. entitlement system is wasteful and heading for insolvency, but America's social safety net remains a significant achievement and it is not too late to save it.

Wehner notes all this with a measured tone and sense of proportion that is increasingly rare in American politics. But when it comes to identifying the causes of the decline of frank and scrupulous engagement in public debate, Wehner strays from the composure and balance he eloquently espouses and typically exemplifies.

His criticisms of President Trump are precise, extensive, and unsparing. Wehner acknowledges, moreover, that "as a general matter our elites have been detached from the problems that have overwhelmed many Americans, especially those without college degrees and those who are living in rural areas." Yet his assertion that the president is "attempting to murder the very idea of truth" attributes to Trump a philosophical ambition he almost certainly does not possess while overlooking the war on truth waged by progressive elites.

Wehner recognizes the media's contribution to the corruption of words. The Internet's rise in the late 1990s and early 2000s accelerated a long-term trend in marquee journalism to blur the difference between reporting and opining. Reconceiving their professional responsibilities, many leading print, broadcast, and online journalists placed the advance of progressive political goals ahead of getting the story right while exuding contempt for those who dared to view the world differently.

But Wehner does not consider that many journalists under the age of 65 would have learned such attitudes and orientation from the elite universities from which, over the last five decades or so, they have increasingly hailed. The bland moral relativism that predominated on campuses in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was in the 1980s and 1990s given a European twist by cutting-edge professors who imported postmodernism. Campus progressives wielded relativism in its various forms both as a sword to strike down claims that deviated from leftist orthodoxy and as a shield to fend off critical scrutiny of their own convictions.

Campus relativists' covert dogmatism eventually gave way to the boastful dogmatism of today's "woke" generation. Instead of presuming to know that all truth is relative, social justice warriors — students, faculty, and administrators — casually assume that they possess the final truth about America's supposedly disgraceful past and present and about how the country can begin to make amends in the future. Even as ideas come and go in higher education, an air of arrogant certainty and disdain for dissent links the climate of opinion on campuses from the 1950s to the present moment.

The restoration of liberal education — either through reclaiming it on campuses from the illiberal forces that dominate there or by creating outside of established colleges and universities supplemental programs and alternative institutions — is crucial to healing our frayed republic.

This is where culture warriors like Ahmari should concentrate their fire. It is in the domain of education — for all ages and in America particularly at the state and local levels — that liberal democracies, consistent with their foundational commitment to securing liberty by limiting government, can most effectively promote public morality. Meanwhile, exemplars of the liberal virtues such as David French and Peter Wehner must continue to make the case that toleration, civility, and the discipline of compromise are at the heart of the public morality that constitutional democracy in America may properly foster.

By taking advantage of the divisions within their ranks, conservatives can fortify freedom and the political culture that sustains it.

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