

The Debate Over 'Common-Good Conservatism'

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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In the face of progressives' persistence in [portraying](#) contemporary conservatism as a mortal threat to American democracy, conservative intellectuals have launched the latest round in a learned and hard-hitting debate — as old as the post-World War II conservative movement — about the character of the conservative task. Donald Trump's tumultuous presidency and his post-presidential sway over the Republican Party give added urgency to the latest iteration of the debate.

At its center lie rival interpretations of America's founding principles and the U.S. Constitution's primary purposes. At their best, both sides agree that constitutional government in America depends on blending freedom and virtue. They disagree sharply, however, on the proper proportions and government's role in achieving the right mix.

Harmonizing freedom and virtue has divided and united American conservatives since the 1950s when William F. Buckley Jr. opened the pages of his fledgling magazine, *National Review*, to both libertarians and social conservatives. The libertarians prized individual liberty, limited government, and economic freedom. The social conservatives cherished a transcendent moral order, tradition, and organic community. Both tended to take their principles to the extreme and to see the other as an inveterate foe. In the name of freedom, libertarians were prone to deny government the ability to act in areas that the Constitution and the American political tradition permitted. Social conservatives sometimes favored the regulation of morality to an extent that ran afoul of basic constitutional barriers.

The better view — both because it made good sense and because it was well grounded in the sentiments, convictions, and ideas that informed the Constitution — was that in a large and diverse republic, individual freedom and limited government, on the one hand, and traditional morality on the other, were mutually dependent. By protecting rights and restricting government’s sphere, the Constitution gave room for individuals, families, and communities to pursue their conceptions of well-lived lives. At the same time, by cultivating moral virtues — not least self-control, toleration, civility, and hard work — families and communities formed individuals capable of benefiting from the blessings of freedom and sustaining democratic self-government under the Constitution.

In the 1960s, this synthesis of limited-government principles and traditional morality acquired the misleading nickname “fusionism” — as if mysterious and titanic forces were necessary to unite opposing sensibilities. Since it restates the outlook that animates America’s fundamental charter of government, the synthesis is more accurately described as “[constitutional conservatism](#).” Although it did not go by that name, Ronald Reagan’s success in welcoming limited-government conservatives and social conservatives into a popular coalition represented the highwater mark of constitutional conservatism.

Proponents of what recently has come to be called “common-good conservatism” contend that the Reagan synthesis has outlived its usefulness. Changing circumstances, they rightly assert, necessitate new policies. But from that unexceptionable axiom they are inclined to jump to the extreme proposition that a conservatism rooted in the Constitution’s commitment to individual freedom and limited government is inadequate to achieve, or undermines, the common good.

The January issue of *The New Criterion* hosted a constructive [debate](#) over common-good conservatism. *New Criterion* editor Roger Kimball [observed](#) that the new conservatism’s two strands — one championing nationhood, the other calling for moral renewal — “have more in common” with the older conservatism they seek to displace “than may at first appear.” Both the old and the

new conservatism, for example, oppose the left's use of government to allocate government benefits and burdens based on race as demanded by the many variants of identity politics.

Also, and despite the boast implicit in the new conservatism's moniker, both "seek to foster the common good." Yet the new conservatism and the old divide over two key questions: How should the common good be conceived? And who or what is responsible for ensuring its attainment?

Common-good conservatives equate the *common* good with the *highest* good; they want government to go beyond defending freedom to directly cultivate moral virtues and enforce moral duties. In contrast, the older constitutional conservatism, in accordance with America's founding principles, regards the common good as revolving around the protection of individual rights shared equally by all. This establishes a wide civil society that enables citizens to promote the general welfare and justice through democratic politics and, in and through their families and communities, to pursue their differing conceptions of the highest good.

Kim R. Holmes, former executive vice president of the Heritage Foundation, led off the debate. In "[The Fallacies of the Common Good](#)," he restated the case for a constitutional conservatism and showed the weakness of the common-good conservatives' efforts to downplay or deny that the America's founding was rooted in the "natural rights" tradition to which the 17th-century Englishman John Locke made a seminal contribution. Holmes emphasized that the founding generation's preeminent figures — from Thomas Jefferson, principal author of the Declaration of Independence; to his friend and rival, the conservative John Adams; to James Madison, the Constitution's chief architect — affirmed that all human beings are endowed with unalienable rights and that government's primary task is to secure them. The Declaration highlighted these Lockean ideas and the Constitution institutionalized them.

Newsweek Opinion Editor Josh Hammer took the brashest and most revealing exception to Holmes's analysis. In "[Yesterday's Man, Yesterday's Conservatism](#)," Hammer dished out insults but failed to deliver on the revisionist history that he wishes to promulgate. He mocked as "tendentious, to say the least," Holmes's well-supported account of America's founding, accusing him of indulging in a "monolithic Lockean thought experiment." Yet it was Hammer who cherry-picked words and phrases while espousing implausible interpretations. Leveraging the Founders' undoubted conviction that freedom depends on virtue, Hammer advocates a conclusion that they rejected — namely, that the federal government must supervise moral beliefs and habits.

Hammer rightly highlights several ways in which constitutional government in America depends on morality. The Constitution does aim to "establish Justice" (consistent with Locke's appeal in [section 6](#) of the "Second Treatise" to the moral and rational "law of nature"). The American experiment in ordered liberty does rest on tradition and culture (so important were the virtues to Locke that he devoted an entire book, "Some Thoughts Concerning Education," to parents' duty to cultivate them). The founding generation did draw a line between liberty and license (following Locke's explicit argument in section 6 of the "Second Treatise"). And Madison (in [Federalist 57](#)) does argue that the Constitution aims at "the common good" (a standard that, Locke explains in [section 131](#) of the "Second Treatise," circumscribes the exercise of political power).

But none of these pertinent observations about justice and constitutional government entail the extravagant claim that the Constitution authorizes the federal government to take a leading role in fostering citizens' character and directing moral conduct. Indeed, the words and phrases Hammer cites are perfectly consistent with the constitutional conservatism that Holmes elaborates.

Moreover, Hammer's common-good conservatism conflicts with — while Holmes's defense of limited government reflects — Madison's assertion in [Federalist 45](#) that "the powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined" and "will be exercised

principally on external objects, as war, peace, negotiation, and foreign commerce.” The same is true concerning Madison’s pervasive concern, expressed succinctly in [Federalist 51](#), that “If a majority be united by a common interest, the rights of the minority will be insecure.”

First Things editor R.R. Reno spoke for many of the more temperate responses to Holmes in [urging](#) conservatives “to defend freedom” amid new perils by focusing on “the responsible use of state power.” Reno favors policies that promote vocational education, subsidize low-income workers, reform the safety net so that it promotes the virtues of freedom rather than the vices of dependency, design tariffs to steer investment to domestic production, and adjust taxes to rebuild the middle class.

Promoting in accordance with individual rights and limited government the virtues of freedom and the conditions under which citizens flourish is not merely consistent with constitutional conservatism. It is an imperative of constitutional conservatism.

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