

Fidelity to Our Founding Principles Requires Conserving the Constitution

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
October 16, 2022

In “[What Does Fidelity to Our Founding Principles Require Today?](#),” my friend Michael Anton dares conservatives to defend the right of revolution. As one dedicated to conserving America’s founding principles and the best in our constitutional traditions, I accept the challenge.

Vindication of the right of revolution, however, illuminates the imprudence in the present circumstances of flirting with its exercise. Reconsideration of the [unalienable rights](#) tradition in which the nation is grounded, moreover, clarifies that the serious problems that the country faces do not pose a revolution-justifying threat to the legitimacy of constitutional government in America.

Anton is a man of many parts: a serious student of political philosophy with special interests in Machiavelli and Xenophon, a lecturer and research fellow at Hillsdale College, a senior fellow at the Claremont Institute, and a former national security official in the George W. Bush and Donald Trump administrations. Of late, Anton has established himself as a witty and mordant polemicist, wielding mockery, hyperbole, and obloquy to dismiss conservatives who do not share his level of alarm as sheepish spokesmen for a ruinous status quo.

Anton achieved fame among some conservatives and notoriety among others in February 2017 when the Weekly Standard revealed that under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus he had authored “[The Flight 93 Election](#).” Published in early September 2016, that short, flamboyant essay cast the upcoming presidential election in apocalyptic terms. Either ensure that disastrous progressive

policies will destroy the nation by electing Hillary Clinton, he stated, or take a calculated risk on Donald Trump. Anton acknowledged that the billionaire businessman and reality-TV star was ill-suited in multiple ways to lead the nation. But a Trump presidency at least held out hope of imposing order at the border, arresting globalization's hollowing out of America's industrial base, and ending vain and costly military adventures to remake other countries in America's image.

Since leaving government after his 2017-2018 stint on the Trump National Security Council as deputy assistant to the president for strategic communications, Anton has elaborated in books and essays a grave diagnosis of America's afflictions. He also has ominously speculated that the regime is losing its just claims on the dwindling ranks of citizens standing for common sense, moral decency, and the nation's founding principles.

In a recent article, which grew out of a speech delivered in Washington at the September 2022 Philadelphia Society meeting, Anton promises "to speak very frankly." Heaping scorn on the conservative establishment, he berates its members as abject failures who busy themselves with preserving progressives' mistakes and therefore conserving "almost nothing." A strange result of Anton's scathing indictment of conservatives is that it gives progressives almost all credit for America's status – despite the nation's shortcomings and setbacks – as the freest, most prosperous, most tolerant and pluralist great power in world history.

Anton allows that "the physical territory of the United States" has been conserved, but otherwise he sees only false promises and rampant decay. Life expectancies, birth rates, religiosity, and marriage rates are falling. The country faces "the total unaffordability of housing, especially for younger people" along with "deindustrialization, the decline of the middle class, wage stagnation, falling standards of living, and the increasing necessity of a college degree in the job market – at a time when colleges teach less and less, charge more and more, and vacuum up middle class wealth to enrich what are effectively hedge funds with bad schools attached." Meanwhile, administrative

agencies have become “[a] giant, unaccountable, unelected fourth branch of government” even as “[t]he Justice Department, FBI, CIA – all the security agencies – are out of control in attacking American citizens.”

Bad as things are, Anton maintains, movement conservatives and the Republican establishment make matters worse. Instead of recognizing progressives as the enemy, they direct their fire at those on the right such as himself who, Anton believes, speak the unvarnished truth. Consequently, along with progressives, much of the conservative intelligentsia and the GOP leadership count for him as enemies of authentic conservatism, forming “part of the operation to ensure that the Right is forever feckless and useless, and to destroy anyone on the Right who scores real points against our anti-conservative, anti-liberal, anti-American and—brace yourselves, I’m just going to say it—increasingly anti-white regime.” Such conservative collaborators are, in Anton’s eyes, “weasels, compromisers, mediocrities, and losers” who “have completely internalized the narrative of the Left.”

Seeing himself surrounded by enemies and his country plagued by internal disarray, Anton is driven to reaffirm the right of revolution. He does so, he asserts, not in defiance of America’s founding principles but in fidelity to them. An integral part of America’s natural rights tradition, the right of revolution is universal and unalienable as Anton indicates, though, as he also observes, its exercise is subject to prudent assessment of whether regime change is feasible and likely to leave the nation better off.

Anton does not, as he reiterates in a [reply to critics](#), call for revolution. But presuming to “know that they won’t answer,” he taunts conservatives with a cluster of theoretical questions that have practical significance: “Is the right of revolution ever justified? Was it justified only that one time, in 1776, but never again? If so, why was it justified then and what makes it unjustifiable ever again?”

The short answer is that people are justified in changing regimes, according to the [Declaration of Independence](#), “when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism.” When government aims to extinguish the people’s freedom – a condition “much worse, than the state of nature, or pure anarchy,” as Locke writes in the [Second Treatise](#) (sect. 225) – “it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.”

Responding to Anton’s questions gives rise to additional ones. Notwithstanding the disorders and ill omens of which he writes, do American citizens face the threat of “absolute despotism” and a condition worse than “pure anarchy”? In the face of all lesser dangers to freedom – including ineptitude, corruption, and decadence – doesn’t fidelity to America’s founding principles require the hard work of maintaining families, building associations within civil society, forming majority coalitions, winning elections, and engaging in lawful reform rather than the armed resistance and violent seizure of power essential, Anton emphasizes, to the revolution of 1776? By encouraging the belief that sufferable evils are insufferable, doesn’t the rhetoric of revolution deflect citizens from cooperating to curb inflation, restore the border, rebuild the nation’s manufacturing base, produce energy and care for the environment, fix the health-care system, rein in the administrative state, ensure that all eligible citizens can vote and that all legal votes and only legal votes are recorded, counter wokeism in corporate culture, depoliticize the federal bureaucracy, renovate the diplomatic corps and the military for strategic competition with China, and educate students for the rights and responsibilities of freedom?

Unlike the original American revolutionaries, who wished to preserve their moral, religious, and political inheritance, Anton finds repellent much of the America in which he lives. His conviction that rot pervades the nation puts him in some respects closer in spirit to the French revolutionaries who aspired to not only change the regime but to effect, as Edmund Burke wrote in “[Reflections on the Revolution in France](#),” “a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions.”

Like Locke and the Declaration of Independence, Burke recognized the right to oppose tyranny while stressing that its proper exercise would be rare. “The science of government being therefore so practical in itself and intended for such practical purposes – a matter which requires experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life, however sagacious and observing he may be – it is with infinite caution,” he wrote in the “Reflections,” that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.” Those models and patterns of government incorporated, Burke wrote, “the real rights of men,” which “are often in balances between differences of good, in compromises sometimes between good and evil, and sometimes between evil and evil.”

The American Constitution is devoted to securing citizens’ inalienable rights and premised on the sober recognition that folly, self-seeking, and injustice are creative and ever-present menaces. Even amid gross abuses of power, shameless policy promiscuity, and the widespread politicization of education, Americans continue to enjoy greater freedom than citizens at most any other time and in most any other place. Therefore, reforming rather than overthrowing American government is not only prudent but also required by the nation’s founding principles.

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Links:

https://www.realclearpolitics.com/authors/peter_berkowitz/

<https://amgreatness.com/2022/09/26/what-does-fidelity-to-our-founding-principles-require-today/>

<http://www.peterberkowitz.com/gov/cur/Report-of-the-Commission-on-Unalienable-Rights.pdf>

<https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election/>

<https://amgreatness.com/2022/10/10/the-dishonest-and-dishonorable-disagreements-of-former-friends/>

https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp

<https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/hollis-the-two-treatises-of-civil-government-hollis-ed>

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