

# The Bold, the Principled, and the Conservative

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor  
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American conservatives find themselves at a perplexing juncture. Not least of the vexing issues they face concerns the principles that should guide them.

Related anxieties revolve around the causes of their successive poor showings at the ballot box. Conservatives came up well short of the low end of their expectations for the 2022 mid-term elections, suffering what amounts to their third consecutive setback with Donald Trump at the head of the Republican Party. Widening the aperture, the GOP has lost the popular vote in seven of the last eight presidential elections, including Bush's 2000 victory and Trump's 2016 victory.

Meanwhile, conservatives deplore the deteriorating state of the union. High inflation persists, large numbers of immigrants flow illegally across the southern border, the vast and unaccountable administrative state extends its reach, and weaponization of law enforcement – from Obama administration IRS [targeting](#) of the Tea Party to Biden administration [targeting](#) of parents concerned about their children's education – proceeds apace. Notwithstanding Twitter's mischievous new owner, the rage to restrict conservative speech in the traditional media and social media, on campus, and in the federal bureaucracy remains strong. And government officials, corporate executives, and university administrators and professors often invoke the mantra of diversity, equity, and inclusion to slander the Constitution and to authorize the allocation of jobs and benefits based on race.

A loose alliance of indignant activists, journalists, and theorists sometimes referred to as the New Right has taken the conservative movement to task for failing to arrest these alarming developments or, worse, for making common cause with progressives to accelerate them. The New Right's

propensity to fault the organizations and schools of thought to which they once belonged for conservatism's electoral defeats, policy reversals, and culture-war setbacks has its admirable aspect. Introspection and examination of where one's team has gone astray are crucial to regrouping, correcting course, and forging ahead.

Yet significant elements of the New Right blame the nation's wrong turns on venerable principles of ordered liberty deeply rooted in the nation's constitutional traditions. They also contend that a short-term interest in economic measures to protect working-class communities hard-hit by globalization must override, rather than fit, the long-term public interest in a constitutional system that puts a premium on securing individual freedom.

Last spring, the Edmund Burke Foundation published "[National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles](#)," which provides a distillation of New Right thinking. Contrary to the Declaration of Independence, which rests on the assumptions of the natural freedom and equality of the individual and government's responsibility to secure the rights all human beings share, the natcons regard "the tradition of independent, self-governed nations as the foundation for restoring a proper public orientation toward patriotism and courage, honor and loyalty, religion and wisdom, congregation and family, man and woman, the sabbath and the sacred, and reason and justice." Putting the nation before the individual is essential, argue the natcons: "We emphasize the idea of the nation because we see a world of independent nations – each pursuing its own national interests and upholding national traditions that are its own – as the only genuine alternative to universalist ideologies now seeking to impose a homogenizing, locality-destroying imperium over the entire globe."

The natcons' simultaneous elevation of the nation and disparagement of universal principles give rise to two major internal conflicts. First, although the natcons decry universal ideas for fostering imperial ambitions, they espouse a single form of political organization and international order. Second, leading natcons have [displayed](#) special antipathy to universal political thinking grounded in

the belief that all human beings equally share certain basic rights and fundamental freedoms. But a political movement that heaps scorn on the universal principles on which America was founded and which serve as the backbone of America's constitutional traditions can hardly be said to uphold either the idea of the nation in the United States or the American conservative sensibility.

Writing recently in the Wall Street Journal, the estimable Christopher Demuth, a drafter of the National Conservative statement and chairman of the Edmund Burke Foundation's National Conservatism Conference, offers a restatement of the natcon outlook that responds to concerns about the new movement's coherence and its demand for aggressive action. In "[America's Right Confronts the 21<sup>st</sup> Century](#)," he reminds that conservative dissatisfaction with circumstances and yearning to improve America is nothing new. "We have always been a nation of bustling aspiration and earnest self-criticism, perpetually seeking to remake the status quo," Demuth writes. "Conservatives have been as striving and critical as their neighbors, discontented with the circumstances at hand and impatient to set things right."

True, but aspiration, critique, and impatience must be harnessed and disciplined. Consideration of the varieties of American conservatism – including the competing ideas of, say, Friedrich Hayek, Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley, and Irving Kristol – confirms that prudent remaking of the status quo depends on a model of things set right that is well-grounded in America's political inheritance.

In contrast to the flamboyant boasts and the harsh denunciations that [typify](#) some prominent national conservatives, Demuth adopts a conciliatory tone. He seeks synthesis and balance along with decisive change. Consistent with his long and prudent stewardship of the American Enterprise Institute as its president from 1986 to 2008, Demuth, now a fellow at the Hudson Institute, acknowledges the importance of principles while stressing the need for a "practical conservatism" which, taking account of history and circumstance, formulates viable public measures to meet contemporary challenges.

For example, Demuth urges conservatives to go beyond invoking “the thrilling poetry of the Declaration” to devise concrete policies that rein in progressive use of the equality principle to socially engineer proportional representation of races and sexes. In addition, he exhorts conservatives to appreciate that taming the administrative state will take more than debunking Woodrow Wilson’s dream of “efficient, expert government” by reviving James Madison’s “fussy separation of powers.” Congress and the executive branch have delegated legislative, executive, and judicial functions to “specialized bureaucracies” in part to handle novel and intricate regulatory issues faced by 21<sup>st</sup>-century constitutional democracy, Demuth argues. Accordingly, conservatives must descend into the policy trenches to devise alternative “forms of representative lawmaking, due process and federalism suitable to today’s circumstances.”

Demuth’s stress on hard questions of governance is welcome, but he ignores the natcons’ far-reaching proposal to remake America by assigning the government responsibility to honor Christianity. In the Wall Street Journal, Demuth limits himself to highlighting that “American culture has always been at once strongly libertarian, individualist and pluralist, yet also strongly communitarian, moralist and religious.” That’s well said and true. Contrary to the natcon ambition to empower the state to intrude on civil society to manage religion, however, the Constitution rests on the conviction that in a free and democratic nation, community, morality, and faith flourish, and best promote private and public virtue, when the law protects them to the extent possible from government regulation.

Demuth also dodges the controversial claim espoused by eminent natcons that America’s deepest problems derive from the modern tradition of freedom. “Many traditional conservatives emphasize the revolutionary Enlightenment ideals of our national founding, especially the ‘self-evident’ truths of the Declaration of Independence,” he dispassionately writes. “Natcons, on the other hand, see the Revolution and founding as adapting established traditions of British law and constitutionalism to the New World.” Demuth’s attempt to defuse the controversy, however, implies that we must choose between a politics of principle and a politics of tradition. But the principles of individual freedom

and human equality are as much a part of America's political heritage as are British common law and constitutionalism.

"The purpose of conserving the American nation," Demuth concludes, "points to concrete actions rather than abstract desiderata, encourages us to be as bold and disruptive as our illustrious conservative forebears, and is necessary to everything else a modern conservative would want to conserve."

Demuth's conservative brief on behalf of the concrete, the bold, and the disruptive plants national conservatism well within the ever-fractious American conservative movement. Concrete actions must reflect sound ideas and sober judgments, however. Bold deeds must advance the nation's interests. And disruption must serve the preservation of American security, constitutional self-government, and prosperity. Otherwise, the right's attack on the status quo and its ambition to remake America coalesce with the cacophony of the angry and the reckless on the left and provide one more catalyst of discord and disarray.

Conservatives should choose the concrete, the bold, and the disruptive guided by – not in opposition to – the principles of freedom.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](http://PeterBerkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*

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