

# American Conservatism Clarifies National Conservatism's Contribution

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## COMMENTARY

Members of moral, political, and religious traditions share basic assumptions, fundamental principles, and central convictions about their associations and institutions. Since human beings are self-interested and fallible, words and concepts are many-sided and ambiguous, and justice makes competing demands, traditions – no matter how noble and good their purposes – naturally divide into rival camps that espouse clashing interpretations of their shared inheritance. Grappling with this diversity and dissent within a framework of overall unity is a mark of a living, breathing tradition.

So understood, American conservatism forms an exemplary tradition.

The most recent battle over the future of conservatism has raged for several years. The aggressor, the new New Right, condemns as moribund the movement conservatism that descends from the old New Right represented most prominently by William F. Buckley, Jr.,

and Ronald Reagan. The contemporary conservatives seek to overthrow a once-dominant conservative sensibility that they believe is chained to an antiquated agenda and out of touch with the demands of the moment.

In 1955, the 29-year-old Buckley founded *National Review*. The magazine, which quickly established itself as the flagship publication of the then-fledgling American conservative movement, brought together under one tent traditionalists and libertarians. The traditionalists emphasized preserving ancestral morality and the religious faith that supports it. The libertarians focused on maximizing individual freedom by means of government limited to a few, well-defined, indispensable tasks. The traditionalists and the libertarians tended to see one another as political adversaries.

Despite their mutual antagonism, the traditionalists and the libertarians forged an alliance in the 1950s and 1960s against a growing progressive state at home and an expanding Soviet communism abroad. At the same time, and although they seldom appreciated it, the rival camps supplied a lack in the other. As *National Review* senior editor Frank Meyer explained in 1962 in *National Review*, in a diverse and transcontinental republic, limited government provides an essential protection for traditional morality. And thriving families, communities, and civic life foster virtues and instill dedication to duties that sustain free societies.

This understanding of conservatism, in which the preservation of limited constitutional government and the preservation of traditional morality go hand in hand, has strong roots in America's founding-era political thinking. It sometimes goes by the name of fusionism.

Fusionism found its foremost political leader in Ronald Reagan. Serving as the 40<sup>th</sup> president of the United States from 1981 to 1989, Reagan honed his rhetorical skills in Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign and his political acumen from 1967 to 1975 as a two-term governor of California. Reagan's tax-cutting and deregulation turned around a broken American economy, and his military build-up and his diplomacy – based on his understanding of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” – led the nation to victory in the Cold War. He defended individual freedom, limited government, traditional morality, and advanced a U.S. foreign policy that sought peace through strength and promoted human rights.

But that was two generations ago. Impatient with its intellectual and political inheritance, the new New Right aims to break free of the conservative movement championed by Buckley and consolidated by Reagan and effect dramatic change in response to what it views as headlong American decline.

The new New Right finds in America disarray and decadence everywhere it looks. It sees a popular culture that caters to the left. It sees an academic world that converts the classroom into a vehicle for the transmission of progressive propaganda and restricts speech that deviates from campus orthodoxy. It sees a deliberate policy of expanding illegal immigration. It sees a weaponization of the federal bureaucracy extending back to the Obama

administration IRS's targeting of Tea Party civic associations. It sees a ramping up of the criminalization of political differences with the FBI's and Justice Department's prodigious but failed efforts to show that Donald Trump collaborated with Russia to steal the 2016 election. It sees rank partisan lawfare in prosecution of former President Trump for retaining classified documents while declining to bring charges against President Joe Biden and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for indistinguishable if not arguably more serious mishandling of classified documents. And it sees a foreign policy – conservative as well as progressive – that pursues elusive goals at extravagant expense.

The new New Right, argues Charles Kesler, has a point. But, he believes, it also leads astray. In "National Conservatism vs. American Conservatism," which appeared in the Winter 2023/24 issue of the Claremont Review, which he also edits, Kesler maintains that the older American conservatism is better suited to American political culture and constitutional government than the new New Right, and more adequate to the full constellation of challenges the nation faces.

What goes by the name of "National Conservatism," Kesler observes, "is perhaps the most visible, identifiable, and successful part of the New Right." He admires many of the movement's intellectual architects but finds "exaggerated and unfair" its judgment that the "former New Right of Buckley and Reagan" was "myopically libertarian and temperamentally unserious about politics and morals."

National conservatism, it is true, confronts new disorders: social justice warriors; the diversity, equity, and inclusion industry; wokeness; and globalization. Yet the emergence of new disorders, argues Kesler, does not eliminate the old disorders. The challenges to which the conservatism of Buckley and Reagan responded remain: the transformation of the federal bureaucracy into a mechanism for promoting progressive values; the promulgation of the idea of a living Constitution, which gives judges the authority to promiscuously read into America's charter of government their moral judgments; a welfare state that instead of equipping citizens – assisted by their families and communities – to care for themselves incentivizes dependence on government; and a communist superpower that threatens the free world.

Kesler elaborates on his substantial agreement with the Natcons as well as his considerable unease through a discussion of their 2022 manifesto: "National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles." National conservatism, he maintains, rightly comes to the defense of the nation at a moment in which it is under attack, "both from above – from international and transnational organizations, laws, and ideological-cum-religious movements, and from below – racial, ethnic, sexual, and tribal-cultural factions asserting claims against national citizenship." But then again, Kesler points out, the older conservatism of Buckley and Reagan takes as axiomatic that an American statesman's first duty is to honor the nation's leading principles and advance its vital interests.

What then sets national conservatism apart? Rather than putting America first, Kesler argues, Natcons give priority to a theory of the nation and of international relations, and then reconfigure the national spirit in America in accordance with their idealized model. According to their statement's opening paragraphs, the Natcons "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." That, however, is the sort of political abstraction that Edmund Burke, a founding father of modern conservatism, warned against. The Natcon statement provides not an alternative to the universalist ideologies it decries but an alternative universalist ideology.

With signatories to its statement of principles from not only the United States but also from Austria, Canada, Croatia, France, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom, national conservatism is proudly international. "How paradoxical," remarks Kesler, "is an avowedly international movement on behalf of nationalism."

Furthermore, national conservatism – at least in the writings of its most prominent theorist, Israeli Yoram Hazony – does not merely abstract from the central features of American nationalism. Hazony, who is chairman of the Edmund Burke Foundation, which hosts the Natcon statement of principles, attacks them: His version of national conservatism vilifies America's enlightenment and classically liberal roots. The self-evident truths of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, not least unalienable rights – the rights shared by all human beings – and government's primary responsibility to secure them, reflect for Hazony falsehoods that undermine "the idea of the nation."

Yet, as Kesler stresses, American nationalism is "limited and shaped by equality, liberty, and consent." In the founding era, all major political camps embraced natural rights, individual freedom, and limited government based on the consent of the governed.

Failure to appreciate this constitutive feature of America produces other errors. Contrary to Hazony, the upsurge of progressivism in post-1960s America was not fueled by confused libertarians and neoconservatives advocating natural rights and limited government. Rather, progressivism was unleashed owing to a failure to adhere to America's founding principles and to apply them prudently to new circumstances. And contrary to the Natcon ambition to harness the state to uphold Christianity, such an alliance between faith and government, as America's founding inheritance teaches, would undermine both.

"What the national conservatives are actually offering," writes Kesler, "is not so much the return of American nationalism – or of a purely traditional form of American conservatism, shorn of neos and libertarians – but a re-writing of American conservatism along new, less brazenly American lines, assimilating it, in effect, to the nationalism of other nations, beginning with Great Britain."

The problem is not that the Natcons take seriously the American national spirit and the American conservative tradition. The problem is that they do not take them seriously enough.

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