

The Battle for the Future of Conservatism

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In 2016, prominent conservatives warned fellow Republicans against backing Donald Trump in the GOP presidential primary. The billionaire real-estate mogul and reality TV star, Trump's conservative critics argued, was vain, vulgar, and mercurial; ignorant of public policy; and lacked commitment to conservative or any other principles. After Trump won his party's nomination, conservative Never Trumpers exhorted Republicans to vote in the general election for Democrat Hillary Clinton or a third-party candidate. To elect Trump, the Never Trumpers contended, would inflict long-term harm by legitimizing a rogue element within the conservative movement. Better to lance the boil early and suffer less pain later.

During his first term, President Trump did much to please the conservatives who voted for him. Notwithstanding the drumbeat of accusations that he would destroy freedom and democracy in America and an onrush of his own over-the-top pronouncements on social media, Trump cut taxes and reduced regulations. He appointed conservative judges. He cracked down on illegal immigration. Until COVID-19 struck the world in the final year of his term, he presided over a growing, low-unemployment economy. His administration reoriented U.S. foreign policy around the overarching challenge to American freedom, playing out on every continent, presented by the Chinese Communist Party. And Trump accomplished all this despite a two-year special-counsel investigation that did not find evidence to vindicate the charge that he colluded with Russia to steal the 2016 presidential election, and an impeachment and Senate trial for improperly withholding aid from Ukraine that ended in acquittal.

Trump then executed an astonishing political comeback – overcoming the Jan. 6 riots, a second impeachment, two civil lawsuits, four criminal indictments, and two assassination attempts – to win back the White House in 2024.

The frenetic and tumultuous first four months of the second Trump administration have put the president and his teams still more at odds with traditional American conservatism. Whereas in 2017 he arrived in Washington accompanied by a small, largely inexperienced retinue, this time, no longer a political neophyte, he surrounded himself with an extensive network of officials, advisers, and assistants who share an overriding loyalty to the man and his agenda. Already, he has signed more than 150 executive orders that disrupt, scale back, or terminate long-established government programs. He has taken on the federal bureaucracy, illegal immigration, and elite universities. He has imposed, and then suspended or reduced, massive tariffs on America's trading partners – friends and allies as well as China. He has scoffed at America's promotion of freedom and democracy abroad while

emphasizing the pursuit of peace and stability through commerce. And he has exploited social media not only to circumvent the press and communicate with the people directly but also to troll adversaries, including world-famous musicians.

The second Trump administration seems to have thrown caution to the wind. Does it still make sense to characterize as conservative the president, his administration's shock-and-awe tactics, and the "New Right" for whom the president can seemingly do little wrong?

In "Don't Call This Conservatism," a lengthy essay appearing mid-May in The Dispatch, Jonah Goldberg puts the matter starkly. "If being a principled defender of the constitutional order, limited government, free markets, traditional values, and an America-led world still makes you a conservative, are you still on 'the right' when the loudest voices on the right reject most or all of those positions?"

A prominent conservative voice for more than 20 years, the former National Review senior editor is editor-in-chief and co-founder of The Dispatch as well as the bestselling author of "Liberal Fascism" among other books, an AEI senior fellow, a Los Angeles Times columnist, and host of "The Remnant" podcast. Always entertaining and illuminating and as home in popular culture as in the classics of conservatism and the particulars of public policy, he insists that "[l]abels matter, because we use labels – terms, constructs, categories, words – to understand reality and chart our course through it, both individually and collectively."

Goldberg credits the Catholic man of letters G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) with providing, in describing two reformers' competing attitudes toward a fence or gate, a good first approximation of conservatism. "The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, 'I don't see the use of this; let us clear it away,'" writes Chesterton. "To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: 'If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it.'" Whereas progressives are disposed to tear down to make way for the new, conservatives' inclination is to preserve and improve what exists.

Conservatism so understood designates both a temperament and an intellectual orientation.

The 20th-century British thinker Michael Oakeshott, according to Goldberg, captures the conservative temperament: "To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss," Oakeshott observes. The conservative temperament cherishes the inherited, admires the beauty in the passing moment, and aims high while taking in stride the world's rampant folly, perfidy, and ill fortune.

A conservative in the intellectual sense brings such a temperament to life in the preservation and improvement of a particular tradition. An American conservative, for example, cultivates and transmits the nation's fundamental beliefs, practices, and institutions. That starts with America's founding principles and constitutional practices: individual rights, limited government grounded in the consent of the governed, equality under law, free markets, and robust civil society composed of families, faiths, and a multitude of civic associations. It includes the convictions and virtues that enable a free people to govern itself and pursue happiness. In the 1960s, National Review senior editor Frank Meyer gave the name "fusionism" to the blend of freedom and traditional morality that undergirds America's constitutional inheritance, and which reflects the logic of free and democratic self-government.

Trump and the New Right that has consolidated around him, Goldberg contends, pose a fatal threat to traditional conservatism in America – temperamental and intellectual. Under the guise of rethinking or reinventing conservatism, the Trump right panders to the people by repackaging as conservative policies that fit popular grievances, Goldberg maintains. The Trump right endorses an "apocalyptic politics," insisting that American institutions – including the conservative establishment as well as the progressive establishment – are crumbling and that the right ought to hasten their collapse. It regards the rule of law as an instrument to be used and not used as pursuit of the common good dictates. It embraces the statism of tariffs and industrial policy. It downplays the power of American principles in diplomacy and disparages long-standing American allies. It celebrates manliness, which it equates with bravado, brute strength, and conquest, and which it severs from honor, virtue, and justice.

Much of the Trump right would agree with Goldberg that it and traditional American conservatism represent divergent and increasingly clashing political outlooks. Yet that leaves open the prudential question whether given the circumstances, a traditional American conservative might reasonably have preferred Trump in 2024, as in 2016 and 2020.

Oddly, given the importance that traditional conservatism attaches to prudence, Goldberg overlooks the question. But a traditional conservative is obliged to take stock of the world as it is. By 2016 it had become incumbent on traditional American conservatives to recognize that American conservatism had lost its way.

Traditional American conservatives stress realistic assessment of the nation's capabilities, fiscally responsible governance, and the dependence of politics on culture and education. Yet during George W. Bush's two terms, conservatives conducted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that fell far short of their objectives. In addition, they oversaw reckless increases in government spending. And they offered little opposition to the progressive culture war, not least on campuses, against traditional morality.

Traditional American conservatives emphasize the importance of character to statesmanship and citizenship. Such a conservative might have sensibly viewed as the worse option the corrupt and cynical Hillary Clinton in 2016, the obviously declining Joe Biden in 2020, and the often unintelligible and progressive-left-backed Kamala Harris in 2024.

And while traditional American conservatives can never regard the people's passing predilections as the supreme guide to politics, in the 2010s popular discontent with self-regarding and incompetent elites surged throughout the rights-protecting democracies of the West. Far from lancing a boil by keeping Trump out of the White House, a vote for Clinton or Harris – as a vote for Biden demonstrated – would have paved the way for more hard-left policies that would have further alienated red-state America and intensified the grievances that Trump rode to victory in 2016 and 2024.

In these situations, traditional American conservatives might reasonably have chosen to moderate the Trump right rather than join the resistance against it.

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