

Democratic Conservatism

By Matthew Continetti

I recently received a copy of a forthcoming book on conservatism. Its author is an eminent legal scholar who laments the absence of conservative philosophers in America. There are conservative journalists, pundits, and wonks, this author says, but no academic heirs to the legacy of Friedrich Hayek, Michael Oakeshott, Leo Strauss, or Eric Voegelin.

The closest one gets to a contemporary theorist of conservatism is the 82-year-old George F. Will. That is a shame, the author concludes, because the idea of conservatism needs to be revived, and at a high level of sophistication, for it to have purchase on the minds of the rising generation.

Perhaps he is right. And yet, while there are not many globally recognized conservative theorists these days—nor liberal theorists, for that matter—there are scores of active political theories. Liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, authoritarian “managed democracy,” democratic socialism, national socialism, communism, and radicalism of all stripes populate the globe.

The realm of conservative thought is just as diverse. In the United States there are dozens of competing versions. The list is long: national-greatness conservatism, compassionate conservatism, crunchy conservatism, respect conservatism, neoconservatism, paleo-conservatism, theoconservatism, and reform conservatism, for starters.

The loudest schools of thought on the American Right today are post-liberal Catholic conservatism and national conservatism. Together, they make up the intellectual nerve system of the American New Right and provide arguments on behalf of authoritarians abroad and the Make America Great Again movement at home.

This New Right is the latest in a series. By my count, there have been at least three “new Rights” in the United States over the past century. The label is slippery, so it makes more sense to follow historian Edmund Fawcett and refer to this constellation of thought, and to the politics it champions, as the “hard right.”

From Capitol Hill to the presidential campaign trail, the hard right is on top. I would like to describe this hard right, identify a few of its problems, and suggest another path for the American Right to follow. At the risk of terminological overload, I will call this path “democratic conservatism.”

The hard Right defines itself against what it labels the “dead consensus” that ruled the Right from 1976 to 2016. Over those four decades, the hard Right says, Republican Party officials were libertarian in economics and culture and backed free trade, immigration, and foreign intervention.

The hard Right, by contrast, privileges Biblical Christian faith and the traditionalist culture of rural America. It wants to use state power to constrain institutions that have been captured by the Progressive Left. It wants to rectify political economy to the advantage of working-class male wage earners. And it wants to abandon a foreign policy of intervention and nation-building for a position of neutrality and noninterference.

The sentiments behind the hard Right are not new. They stretch back to before World War Two. And the hard Right has been active on the sidelines of the Republican Party and conservative movement in both the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. Every now and then, it has taken the field with the insurgent candidacies of George Wallace, Patrick Buchanan, Ron Paul,

and the Tea Party movement. What is novel is the hard Right's current stature. It is far and away the driving force within conservatism and the GOP.

This was not inevitable. The hard Right's dominance is a consequence of its alliance with Donald Trump. Had he not won the 2016 Republican presidential nomination, Trump would have joined the ranks of failed insurgents. The hard Right's views would have been mediated by established conservative institutions.

So too, had he not won the 2016 general election—or, perhaps more accurately, had Hillary Clinton not lost it—Trump would not have had the opportunity to reshape the GOP in his image. And the hard Right would not have had an opening to reclaim the mantle of conservatism.

Ideas have consequences and accidents do too. Donald Trump brought the hard Right to power not only in Washington but also within center-right nongovernmental organizations. The result is an American Right that is more conspiratorial, more apocalyptic, more statist, more alienated from the popular culture, and more committed to personalist rule than a decade ago.

Not every Trump voter belongs to the hard Right. Millions of Americans voted for him in 2020 not because they believed he was a good man, much less a good president, but because they were satisfied with the state of the economy and feared the overreach of the Progressive Left. Nor is Trump an ideologue who assumes hard Right positions because he agrees with their underlying logic. Indeed, I suspect that if he listened to an apologist for post-liberal Catholic Integralism, he would be confused and repelled.

Trump was not present last October when the post-liberals met at the Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. Sohrab Ahmari, co-founder and editor of *Compact: A Radical American Journal*, decried what he called “private tyranny.” Notre Dame's Patrick Deneen, author of *Regime Change*, demanded a new Marshall Plan to revitalize the former manufacturing

centers of the Rust Belt whose decline he attributes to global neoliberalism. Gladden Pappin, a professor at the University of Dallas and co-founder of *American Affairs*, said, “Another world is possible, namely, Hungary.” Pappin is now president of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

Mary Imparato of Belmont Abbey College recalled a youthful desire to see a statue of Mary, mother of Jesus, replace the Statue of Freedom atop United States Capitol. Harvard Law School’s Adrian Vermeule told the audience not just that big, intrusive government is here to stay, but that the Right ought to embrace it.

Without a belief in limited government, without boundaries between state and society, the Right becomes unconstrained. It becomes untethered from the base of the American experiment. It runs against the grain of American democracy, and it risks irrelevance and obsolescence.

Consider the manifesto issued in the summer of 2022 by the largest and most influential grouping on the hard Right, the National Conservatives, aka the Natcons. The Natcon “statement of principles” is an eloquent recital of traditionalist and religious concerns. Plenty of its arguments for national pride, two-parent families, color blindness, technological research and development, and the rule of law would fit comfortably in what was until recently the American conservative mainstream.

Yet the Natcon declaration contains no reference to the American Declaration of Independence. It has nothing to say on constitutional structure, the separation of powers, or checks and balances. It suggests that federalism is fine, so long as states and localities do what the Natcons want. And it proclaims that the majority religion of a given country “should be honored by the state and other institutions both public and private.”

The post-liberals and the Natcons disagree over the role of the nation state. They squabble over Protestantism and what is good and bad in the American Founding. What unites them is a denial of the American idea of free and rights-bearing individuals who are equal before a limited and nonsectarian government.

When I look at the hard Right, I recall the New Left. As you know, beginning in the 1960s, the liberal establishment broke against the shoals of Vietnam and civil disorder. A New Left, focusing on culture rather than economics, shook the foundations of the Democratic Party. It captured the presidential nominating process in 1972.

Nowadays a similar phenomenon is taking place on the other side of the political spectrum. But the causality is reversed. The New Left's anti-establishment challenge culminated in its takeover of the Democratic Party. The hard Right, much to its own pleasant surprise, began with control of the presidency—and has marched through the Republican Party and conservative movement.

The hard Right, like the New Left, is antiwar—except in the culture. The hard Right, like the New Left, is suspicious of and hostile to capitalism. The hard Right, like the New Left, considers itself part of an international movement. The hard Right, like the New Left, says that Russia—well, Russia is misunderstood.

The hard Right, like the New Left, tends toward rhetorical overstatement and ad hominem attack. It has no time for manners, and it has little patience with the democratic process. Where public opinion stands and how to move it are subjects left unaddressed in the plenary sessions of the hard Right's many conferences.

For the hard Right, the New Left idea that the personal is political is true—so long as the person is Donald Trump. What you think of his person is the best test of your politics. On a

different level, the hard Right reverses the New Left slogan. For the hard Right, the political is personal. Disagree with their ends and means, and you are, and I [quote](#), “a zombie and a human rodent who wants a shadow-life of timid conformity.”

The hard Right has lost sight of American conservatism’s lodestar: the constitutional order. It is an order founded on human freedom and dignity. It is an order of enumerated powers, individual rights, and religious freedom. It is an order [designed](#) to “decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”

And it is an order in which the deliberate sense of the people is channeled through representative institutions into positive law that is [intended](#) to “form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

When the hard Right and the MAGA movement corrupt this order and undermine its strength, they must be opposed.

A responsible Right worthy of public support would leave behind national conservatism for democratic conservatism. This combination of adjective and noun has been rarely used, it is true, but democracy and conservatism are neither incompatible nor meaningless in combination.

A brief Internet search calls up one revealing reference to democratic conservatism. In a short essay under that title published in *First Things* in 1990, Richard John Neuhaus [wrote](#) that “Ronald Reagan championed a conservatism of democracy, capitalism, and progress,” a conservatism that forthrightly rejected anti-Semitism and racism.

The job of religious conservatives, according to Neuhaus, is to wage the battle of ideas in the culture space and “define the moral symbols and truth claims by which a people live.” Such activity would provide “a nuanced account of democratic governance that is limited, constitutional, and accountable to what some call natural law and the common good.”

Democracy, capitalism, progress, limitation, constitution, accountability, and respect for religious and ethnic difference—these are categories of thought and action now absent from much of the American Right. But man does not live by Father Neuhaus alone. For a clear and pithy account of democratic conservatism one turns to its great champion of freedom, Ronald Reagan.

His address to the British Parliament at Westminster on June 8, 1982, laid out the program. Stating his “conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings,” Reagan said, “The objective I propose is quite simple to state: to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.”

Democratic conservatism, then, is dedicated to the repair, maintenance, upgrade, and growth of our democratic infrastructure. Where institutions are debased, they should be revived, or new ones built in their place. Where there are obstacles to freedom and ingenuity, they should be removed. Where freedom is under attack, it should be defended. Where evil exists, it should be confronted.

Democratic conservatism understands that freedom requires an infrastructure, as well. Faith, family, and the communal institutions of civil society give purpose and meaning to individual lives and direct acts of liberty away from license. Faith, family, and community are

sources of identity that encourage personal responsibility. The democratic conservative knows that freedom and identity, and choice and commitment, are not at odds. They are complimentary parts of a full and happy life.

Reagan is the exemplar of democratic conservatism because he integrated traditional values into a vision of future greatness. He was a product of small-town Middle America who embraced growth, said that true progress belonged to the Right not the Left, and encouraged innovation and technological development. He denounced anti-Semitism and bigotry and had no truck with conspiracy theories. Above all, he believed in the God-given capacity of ordinary men and women to work out their own destinies.

Democratic conservatism does not stop at the nation's shores. It seeks to preserve America's role as guarantor of international security and the alliance structure that maintains the peace. It sees trade as a strategic asset that bolsters democracy and encourages prosperity. It believes that America should welcome global talent and make it easier for employers to find skilled and unskilled labor from abroad. Why? Because economic growth is the fountainhead of democratic stability.

Democratic conservatism is not woolly headed. Its eyes are open to reality. And what it sees is the tenacious and inspiring human will to freedom. That is what it wishes to conserve, "All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights—until that moment some might have said that was just a high-blown sentiment, the dreams of a few philosophers and their hotheaded followers," Reagan said in 1987.

<blockquote>Could one really construct a government, run a country, with such idealistic notions? But once those ideals took root in living, functioning institutions, once those notions became a nation—well, then, as I said, the revolution could really begin, not just in America but around the world, a revolution to free man from tyranny of every sort and secure his freedom the

only way possible in this world, through the checks and balances and institutions of limited, democratic government.</blockquote>

A democratic conservatism that preserves and extends the West's tradition of freedom is within our grasp. Our task is to seize it.

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