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## LIBERTY AND POWER: THE STATE AND THE FREE MARKET



## THE TIES THAT BIND: THE LOCAL AND FAMILIAR

## THE EXCEPTIONAL NATION: AMERICA AND THE WORLD



# Introduction

By Andrew J. Bacevich

THE MODERN American conservative tradition—roughly dating from the dawn of the twentieth century—emerged in reaction to modernity itself. Modernity meant machines, speed, and radical change—taboos lifted, bonds loosened, and, according to Max Weber, "the disenchantment of the world." It induced, and perhaps required, centralization. States accrued power. Bureaucracies thickened. Banks, corporations, rail systems, and industrial enterprises grew to mammoth proportions. War became more destructive.

Modernity promised liberation and for many did improve the quality of everyday life. Yet it also subjected individuals to immense and only dimly comprehended forces. In exchange for choice, it demanded conformity. Modernity demolished tradition or rendered it irrelevant. What remained of the past might retain interest as artifact but was drained of substantive relevance.

Liberals, progressives, leftists—choose what label you will—have tended to embrace modernity, seeing it, on balance, as a positive force. By comparison, conservatives have typically viewed modernity as a threat, responding to it with a mixture of apprehension, alarm, and horror. This anthology collects in a single volume noteworthy examples of the American conservative critique prompted by the encroachments of modernity.

That said, I am not suggesting that in the long, contentious, at times bitter debate about America's purpose and destiny, proponents of conservatism have necessarily gotten things right. The issues being

contested are too complex to allow for reductive judgments of right or wrong, good or bad. Yet in the crisis that has enveloped twenty-first-century America—a crisis made starkly manifest by Donald Trump's election as U.S. president in 2016—conservative principles deserve a second look, even, or especially, from those who bridle at the very use of the term.

Skeptics might respond that Americans today already have more than ample exposure to conservative perspectives, whether coming directly from Trump's White House, from megaphone-wielding House and Senate Republicans, or from outlets such as FoxNews, AM talk radio, and right-wing websites. Yet all of these qualify as conservative only in the sense that blue-chip recruits at a football factory qualify as "student-athletes." Any resemblance to the real article is superficial and manufactured.

Donald Trump is not a conservative. Nor are the leaders of the Republican Party over which Trump presides. Prominent GOP figures such as Kentucky senator Mitch McConnell seem to adhere to no worldview worthy of the name. As for the provocateurs who inhabit the sprawling universe of rightwing media, their principal motive is not to promote genuine conservative values but to rabble-rouse and line their own pockets. Indeed, allowing Trump, McConnell, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, Rush Limbaugh et al. to present themselves as exemplary conservatives testifies to the pervasive corruption of contemporary American political discourse.

So except among the multitudes who sport MAGA hats and look to the likes of Sean, Laura, and Rush for instruction, the conservative brand has of late been badly tarnished and even degraded. As a result, conservatism today has become synonymous with meanness, bigotry, and retrograde attitudes. The contents of this book suggest that this condescending characterization is wildly off the mark.

How did the American conservative tradition acquire a reputation as both noxious and intellectually disreputable? Trumpism provides a convenient but utterly inadequate answer to that question. More important are two related factors that long precede Trump. The first factor is history—or at least the myth-history to which Americans choose to attribute abiding significance. The second is the anti-conservative progressive tradition, whose adherents long ago seized



the high ground in American intellectual life and have successfully defended it ever since.

Of course, it is progressives who curate that myth-history and thereby determine the hierarchy of truths that it purportedly yields. Preeminent in determining that hierarchy were two specific events, the one related to politics and the other to America's role in the world. The first was the Great Depression. Then hard on its heels—as much sequel as distinct episode—came World War II.

Broadly speaking, in each case, the analysis and prescriptions offered by leading conservatives proved at least inadequate, where not downright misguided. On the Great Depression, fearing an irreversible expansion of state power, conservatives resisted the conclusion that restoring economic health was going to require large-scale and protracted federal intervention. On World War II, until the attack on Pearl Harbor, many influential conservatives strenuously opposed U.S. entry into the conflict that Nazi Germany had begun and appeared to be winning, fearing a recurrence of the disillusionment that occurred just two decades earlier when the United States, discarding all past precedent, had raised an army to fight in Europe.

Conservatives can no more escape these twin failures of judgment—for so they have been judged ever since—than the ghost of Jacob Marley can shed his chains. Yet concluding that on the two pivotal episodes of the twentieth century the left was right and the right was wrong soon enough gave rise to its own misimpressions and mistakes.

Crediting the New Deal with restoring American prosperity has turned out to be a vast oversimplification, impeding our understanding of the factors that finally brought the Great Depression to an end. In that regard, the global conflagration of another war rather than an array of well-intentioned but sometimes contradictory domestic reforms proved decisive. Worse still, identifying "isolationism" as an abiding temptation to which Americans were susceptible imparted an interventionist tilt in postwar U.S. policy, contributing appreciably to catastrophes such as Vietnam and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Intent on inoculating the United States from so-called isolationism, the foreign policy establishment fell prey to militarism and ultimately preventive war. Throughout, dissent voiced by conservative intellectuals went largely unheeded.

In the aftermath of World War II, with the liberal ascendency in politics now at its height, liberal thinkers and activists denied even the existence of an intellectually coherent and morally acceptable alternative to their own beliefs. Liberals occupied, indeed owned, the "vital center" of American politics, as the historian and Harvard product Arthur Schlesinger Jr. put it, thereby consigning all others to the ignominious fringes.[1] To the left of this vital center were communists, to the right conservatives. In Schlesinger's construct, both were enemies of freedom: American communists as lackeys of the Soviet Union, conservatives as willing pawns of Big Business.

To the literary critic Lionel Trilling, writing in 1950, the facts of the case were likewise plain to see. Liberalism, he wrote, was "not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition" present on the American scene. Try as he might, Trilling could discern "no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation," merely "irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas."[2]

Other members of the eastern academic elite concurred. In an influential book that appeared in 1953, Harvard professor Louis Hartz ruled that "the American community is a liberal community." Conservatism, largely confined to the antebellum South, was beset by "fantastic contradictions" that made it "an alien child in a liberal family, tortured and confused" and doomed to destruction.[3] American politics did not allow for an alternative to liberalism.

The prize-winning historian Richard Hofstadter, who like Trilling taught at Columbia, indicted what he called "the far right wing" for "a categorical folkish dislike of the educated classes and of anything respectable, established, pedigreed, or cultivated."[4] Thus did conservative inclinations invite lampooning.

According to Schlesinger, Trilling, Hartz, Hofstadter, and other members of their exalted but thoroughly unrepresentative community, sincere seekers after enlightenment necessarily look left. As a

[1] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949).

[2] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking, 1950), xv.

[3] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), 3, 8.

[4] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 12, 39.



class, therefore, intellectuals have tended to embrace a progressive outlook, taking for granted the correlation between a liberal orientation and wise, farsighted, or providentially foreordained outcomes. By extension, serious conservative thinkers have tended to languish outside of the mainstream, talking to one another without reaching a larger audience. Indeed, in some quarters, even today, the very phrase "conservative intellectual tradition" carries with it oxymoronic connotations.

Handed down as if from the atop Mount Olympus, or at least from Morningside Heights and Harvard Yard, this verdict seemed incontrovertible—at least it did until Vietnam rolled around and the hegemony of postwar liberalism crumbled with astonishing suddenness. A New Left rose up to deflate Cold War liberalism's pretensions to inevitability and presented conservative intellectuals an unforeseen opportunity to be heard. Yet even before Vietnam and the upheaval of the 1960s, they had begun to challenge their marginalization, if not effectively, at least noisily.

Launching his conservative journal of opinion in 1955, the young journalist William F. Buckley declared that *National Review* "stands athwart history, yelling Stop."[5] As a branding ploy, it was a clever formulation. Yet it was also a bit of journalistic flimflam. The purpose of Buckley's magazine was not to stop history, but to nudge it in a positive direction. Much the same can be said about conservatism itself. Yet such nudging presumes a capacity to distinguish between truth and folly.

Unfortunately, postwar movement conservatives, many of them rallying around Buckley and his upstart magazine, struggled to make that distinction. What little most Americans today know about conservatives after World War II does not make for a flattering or reassuring record. For example, many (including Buckley himself) supported Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy in his reckless crusade to purge the U.S. government of communists and fellow travelers.[6] When revolutionaries led by Mao Zedong seized power in Beijing, they insisted

[5] William F. Buckley, Jr., "Our Mission Statement," *National Review*, November 19, 1955.

[6] William F. Buckley, Jr., and L. Brent Bozell, *McCarthy and His Enemies* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954).

that the defeated Nationalists, now sequestered on the island of Taiwan, continued to represent the "real" China. Perhaps most egregious were conservative attitudes regarding civil rights, the great moral issue of the day. Sympathizing with white southerners who were resisting efforts to dismantle segregation, many conservatives attributed greater importance to preserving the social status quo than to confronting racial injustice. In all of this, postwar conservatives managed to convey the impression of being ill-tempered, small-minded, devoid of both judgment and compassion, and given on occasion to views that were at least disquieting, if not altogether repellent.

Yet let me suggest that what we have here are examples of self-described conservatives violating genuine conservative precepts. Reprehensible? Yes. Unforgivable? Well, only if promoting eugenics, enacting racist immigration laws, and criminalizing the possession and consumption of alcoholic beverages, as progressives did after World War I, invalidates the basic principles that progressives and liberals hold dear.[7]

To his followers, Jesus had commanded: love God and love your neighbor. Over the course of two millennia, Christians acting in his name proceeded to commit numberless crimes up to and including genocide. Do these crimes nullify Christ's teachings? No, they merely testify to the abiding sinfulness of humankind. So too with American conservatism: it deserves to be judged by the core principles that conservatives have articulated, not by the occasions when those principles have been trampled upon.

The essays that follow explore those principles. Taken collectively, these essays do not comprise anything approximating a seamless whole. Conservatism is more akin to an ethos or a disposition than to a fixed ideology. So the thinkers featured in these pages frequently disagree with one another—much as do progressives, not to mention Marxists, socialists, fascists, anarchists, libertarians, and distributists. Intellectuals tend to be a quarrelsome lot.

Yet their intramural quarrels notwithstanding, most American conservatives, most of the time, subscribe to a common set of propositions

[7] Thomas C. Leonard, "Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19 (Fall 2005): 207–224.



from which to fashion a critique of American politics, policies, and culture and to proffer alternatives. Those propositions have evolved over time—conservatism is anything but static. Yet in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, they have come to center on the following:

- a commitment to individual liberty, tempered by the conviction that true freedom entails more than simply an absence of restraint;
- a belief in limited government, fiscal responsibility, and the rule of law;
- veneration for our cultural inheritance combined with a sense of stewardship for Creation;
- a reluctance to discard or tamper with traditional social arrangements;
- respect for the market as the generator of wealth combined with a wariness of the market's corrosive impact on human values;
- a deep suspicion of utopian promises, rooted in an appreciation of the recalcitrance of history and humankind's recurring susceptibility to hubris.

No doubt my own prejudices inform this brief rendering of conservative tenets. Much the same can be said about the materials included in this anthology. Many readers familiar with what conservatives consider their intellectual canon might have chosen otherwise. So allow me to offer several brief observations regarding the overall scope and contents of the volume.

First, *American Conservatism: Reclaiming an Intellectual Tradition* does not claim to provide a fully comprehensive record of that tradition. Any such attempt would result in a book that would be unwieldy, uneconomical, and probably unreadable. So the selections that follow are just that: selective.

Second, in choosing texts for inclusion, my aim has been to assemble a representative sample of the best American conservative thought drawn from across the modern era, defined as dating from the turn of the twentieth century. I have attempted in particular to recognize once prominent writers, among them Irving Babbitt, Albert Jay Nock, Richard Weaver, who in recent decades may have suffered from

neglect. Yet I have also singled out figures such as Patrick Deneen and Andrew Sullivan, who are still in the process of making their contribution to the American conservative tradition.

Third, I have prioritized quality of thought over name recognition. This has resulted in the exclusion of figures who may have figured prominently in the contemporary conservative movement, but who were not original thinkers. Hence, the absence of Phyllis Shlafly, Barry Goldwater, and Patrick Buchanan, among others. Their absence from this volume does not imply disrespect. In political histories of modern American conservatism, each will have an important place. But when it comes to deepening our understanding of the American conservative intellectual tradition, writers such as Whittaker Chambers, Russell Kirk, and Murray Rothbard have left far more important legacies.

Fourth, I have excluded altogether anyone associated with what in the last quarter of the twentieth century became known as neoconservatism. My reasoning is quite simple: While neoconservatives for a time made a considerable impact on the national conversation and even arguably on U.S. foreign policy, they were never genuinely conservative. Neoconservatism is a heresy akin to antinomianism, its adherents declaring themselves unbound by the constraints to which others are obliged to attend. In a volume on American exceptionalism or on the various manifestations of American radicalism, neoconservatives will deserve a place, but not here.

Fifth, and very much in contrast, this anthology includes contributions from individuals who may not have identified themselves as conservatives, but whose work makes them de facto fellow travelers. Whatever the banner under which they marched, they articulated truths that resonate with the American conservative tradition. Charles Beard, Randolph Bourne, Wendell Berry, Christopher Lasch, and Reinhold Niebuhr are examples.

Finally, I ought to acknowledge up front that women and people of color are underrepresented in the table of contents. Joan Didion, Zora Neale Hurston, Glenn Loury, and Shelby Steele are all here. Yet the fact is that until relatively recently, major contributors to American conservative thought have tended to be male and white. To pretend otherwise is to falsify history.

The essays I have collected here may not convert nonbelievers. That is not my purpose. Yet the United States today finds itself at a



crossroads. We confront perplexing problems to which there are no glib answers or easy solutions. The questions we face are fundamental: What is the common good? What is the meaning of freedom? What are the responsibilities of citizenship? What is America's proper role in the world?

Most fundamentally, on each of these, we wonder where to look for guidance. My firm conviction is this: to understand how the United States arrived at its present confused and divided straits—and perhaps even to begin navigating back toward less troubled waters—the American conservative tradition offers insights worth considering. I invite readers of this volume to consider that proposition.

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*April 2019*