The fallacies of the common good: a response
by Kim R. Holmes

On respect for liberty and natural rights.


I knew when I submitted my essay that I was poking a hornet’s nest. From my perch as an executive at The Heritage Foundation, I had watched a revolt unfolding among a small number of activists against the conservative principles of William F. Buckley Jr., Ronald Reagan, and countless other conservatives. Traditional conservatives were called “Reagan zombies.” Mostly younger conservatives targeted liberty and the idea of limited government, the same ideas that for well over a century socialists and progressives had made enemy number one in their philosophies and politics. I was surprised that they did not see the danger of flirting with philosophies and tactics embraced by both the Left and the far Right.

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But I should not have been surprised. As anyone can see from some of the responses to my essay, these new self-styled conservatives are not content merely to update conservatism to make it more relevant to the times. Rather, they are trying to overturn the actual principles and philosophies of traditional American conservatism. We used to worry at The Heritage Foundation that the destruction of conservatism, if it ever came, would most likely come from within, from either the slow drip of well-meaning but harmful change that is not recognized as such or, worse, from imposters trying to throw the whole thing out the window. Well, it is now a combination of both. Conservatism, in the language of the progressive “hipsters,” is now dated. These new-fashioned conservatives are out to make an intellectual revolution that, if it succeeds, will weaken American conservatism and, what is worse, harm the future course of the country.

You would think by the amount of ink spilled in rebutting my essay that these new in-house critics of conservatism represent the majority of conservatives. They do not. The nationalists and common-good ideologues are still a minority, mostly composed of intellectuals and activists. Most conservatives still believe in liberty and limited government, which are the main traditional conservative ideas that these critics have singled out for destruction. The current revolt against vaccine mandates, reminiscent of the Tea Party rebellion against Obamacare a few years ago, reminds us that a mistrust of centralized state power is alive and well in the conservative movement.

James Piereson in his essay understands this fact perfectly well. As he says,

> Nearly all conservatives today see federal power as a threat to conservative principles, since it usually means more taxes and regulations, less authority for state and local governments, more emphasis upon identity politics, and more money and power for left-wing advocacy groups. National conservatives should be mindful of the risks they run in promoting such an enterprise.

The mistake that nationalists make is assuming that the conservation of America’s governing philosophy can be reconciled with the essential tribalism of nationalism. No amount of pretending that nationalism is really about Edmund Burke—frankly, it isn’t—can alter the fact that a governing philosophy of nationalism ultimately is about tribalism. Robert R. Reilly in his essay correctly argues that nationalism is at odds with the universalism of the American creed. He believes, as I do, that what makes America exceptional is how its Constitution and way of governance embody the universal ideas of natural law and natural rights. They do so in a specific time and place, and it is this manifestation in the people that constitutes the American “nation.” The point cannot be overstated: the American nation is not embodied in the state, nor in one race, religion, or class. It resides in the people.

Nationalists innocent of history may think that nationalism consists simply of striking a tough pose of populism against the encroachments of globalism. If only. Most nationalisms as practiced by other countries in history are fundamentally un-American. If we really think we can absorb and
accommmodate the methods of Hungarian or Russian nationalism in an American conservative approach, then we might as well start thinking like those peoples in all areas of public life. Some conservatives may believe that the Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán, for example, is great because he is tough on immigrants. But there is a great deal more to his brand of nationalism than being tough on immigrants. There is his cozy relationship with Putin; his corrupt oligarchic management of companies and businesses; his political control of the press; his ethnic-based nationalism; and his strains of anti-Semitism.

I noticed in these essays that sometimes my critics stumble over their past selves. Ryan T. Anderson, for example, spent years at The Heritage Foundation defending the rights of religious conscience and free speech. But now in his essay responding to me, he appears to believe that we give too much credence to conscience. By conceding that conscience is no match for the claims of the common good, which will be defined by politics and not philosophical seminars, Anderson weakens his own appeal to religious conscience as a defense against the new dominant woke version of the common good.

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One of the more striking claims made by critics of my essay is that I have supposedly no notion of the common good at all. This is false. I believe that the common good is more than the defense of rights, and I made that crystal clear in my essay. I very much believe that conservatives should develop and promote their notion of the common good in laws and the public square. By this I mean that we should first and foremost cultivate and implement our values, religion, and morality in civil society, mainly in the family and through mediating institutions. That is where we have mainly failed as a movement, and that is what seriously needs our attention now.

What we should not now or ever do is develop a political ideology blindly in thrall to the idea of the common good, based either on sectarian religious beliefs or even quasi-socialist notions of economics, and use that as an excuse to deploy the power of the state to impose it as a political doctrine, devoid of respect for natural rights, on all the people. This line of distinction was well understood for decades, but the new common-good ideologists are now trying to blur it.

I do believe in natural rights—the right to life and liberty. Where some of my critics got the idea that I and others like me somehow now believe in the manufactured rights invented nigh-weekly by libertarians and progressives is beyond me. I have battled real libertarians all my life. I’m fully aware of the difference between an anything-goes, rights-obsessed libertarian who thinks the national parks should be privatized and a limited-government conservative who understands that constitutional powers are enumerated, believes with our founders that Americans were “endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” and doesn’t want to bankrupt the country.
through ever-expanding government.

In his thoughtful essay, Charles R. Kesler believes that I have misunderstood Hobbes’s influence on Locke. Anderson draws the same conclusion. I am indeed aware of Hobbes’s influence on Locke, but despite that influence, I still firmly believe that Locke had a very different view of natural rights and the purposes of civil government than Hobbes had, and it was this aspect of Locke that was absorbed by America’s founders. Hobbes believed in absolute monarchy. Locke did not. Hobbes believed that absolute monarchy was necessary to enforce the social contract. Locke believed civil governments should be instituted to protect the natural rights and liberty common to all people. Locke believed in religious liberty, whereas Hobbes did not. Locke was far more optimistic about human nature than Hobbes was. Jefferson and other founders took Locke’s view of religious toleration and the liberty-oriented ends of civil government, not Hobbes’s view.

If the more radical of these new-style conservatives truly believe that the road to defeating progressivism runs through bringing down traditional conservatism, then I remind them of the story of the fall of Warsaw in World War II. Approaching the gates of Warsaw at the very end of the war, the Russians paused outside the city to allow the Germans to eliminate the resistance inside. When they marched into Warsaw after the Germans vacated the city, there was no resistance left because it had been destroyed completely by the Germans.

The progressives are like the Russians watching our internecine battles. They have recognized that having someone inside the conservative fold who hates “bourgeois liberalism” (a term of derision developed by Marxists) as much as they do is an incredible boon for their cause. They will watch and wait, as the Russians did outside Warsaw, until their nemeses, the Reagan conservatives, have been weakened and destroyed from within. Once they are gone, the progressive way of governance—greater spending, bigger government, laws interpreted by a “living” constitution (i.e., adding the new fad of “common-good” constitutionalism), a class-based welfare populism, more identity politics—will have been legitimized by the actions of the Right. Religious conscience will have been sacrificed to the common good because, as the new-style conservatives argue, the common good always trumps conscience and liberty. Freedom of speech to dissent against woke culture will be weakened, since the state will have the power and the prerogative to control it for political purposes at both individual and corporate levels. Trying to limit government spending and the size of government will become a bad joke.

Josh Hammer calls me “yesterday’s man” in his essay. Of course, he means it as an insult, which is in keeping with the low road he usually takes. But I agree with him. I am proudly “yesterday’s man” because I am—wait for it—a conservative! That is what conservatives believe and do. They
conserve what is great about America. I believe the traditions of liberty and limited government are worth saving, even though Hammer and his friends do not.

It is a strange paradox for someone claiming to be a conservative to want to revolt. Hammer has the sensibility of the avant-garde progressive, eagerly trying to find the “next big thing” to shock the old folks. It is the style of the perpetually adolescent male, striking brave verbal blows against “Conservatism, Inc.” from the comfort of bars and intellectual seminars. C. Bradley Thompson calls the fringes of this new anti-American movement from the Right “pajama-boy Nietzscheans.” They are joined by a strange brew of sectarian professors, Spenglerian pessimists, and paganistic “Bronze Age perverts” who appear to disdain America as it was (and still is in most parts of the country) as much as the Left does. They say they despise only “woke” America, but their war on the American founding and traditional conservatism suggests otherwise.

It is a schtick, however, that will not age well. Not only is the posture of these comfortable young men staring down the “twilight of the gods” in America downright silly. The methodology is also all wrong. Whether or not they wish to admit it, the nationalists and the Catholic integralists are making a deal with the devil of historicism. They can appeal to ancient philosophies and organic cultures all they want to, but the ideas and principles they seek to import are foreign to American history, experience, and values. Perhaps if the United States were Spain or a country in Latin America or Eastern Europe, their proposed political doctrines could be taken seriously. But it is not.

Kesler is right to remind us that not every conservative advocate of natural law believes what Patrick J. Deneen and Adrian Vermuele do. There is no disciplined “school” of thought among all these intellectuals. Moreover, we should make a distinction between the bomb-throwers and serious intellectuals who are raising important questions. But there are sympathies and common attitudes among all the current critics of traditional conservatism that are undeniable, and they mainly concern critically exploring the limitations of liberty, limited government, and sometimes capitalism. If we can face and debate our differences openly and seriously, rather than engage in sophomoric tirades, we can all benefit.

I recall how conservatives in Europe in the early part of the last century fell for the trope of revolutionary conservatism. Thomas Mann, in his novel Doctor Faustus (an apt touchstone if there ever was one in discussing conservative nationalism), described the type:

> It was very strange, partly painful and partly comic, to observe Riedesel’s conservatism in contact with another brand of the same thing. Here it was a matter not so much of “still” as “again;” for this was an after- and anti-revolutionary conservatism, a revolt against bourgeois liberal standards from the other end, not from the rear but from the front; not from the old but from the new.

Revolutionary conservatism is an oxymoron. The attempt of new “conservatives” to save conservatism by transcending it destroyed it in continental Europe in the twentieth century. If American conservatism becomes what Hammer and others like him so ardently desire, it will do
so under a strange pretense, a “cult of the new” pretending to reconstruct a kind of conservatism that never existed in America in the first place. The irony of using Edmund Burke, who was skeptical of change, to invent an entirely new way forward for American conservatism is obviously missed by the nationalists. They try to get around this contradiction by pretending that we have misunderstood the founding all along, and that all that talk about natural rights is hogwash. But this is historical revisionism pure and simple. The nationalists have every right to want to change America and even reinvent American history, but they should spare us the canard that doing so constitutes a kind of American conservatism.

Kesler suggests I should be more patient with these demands for change. He is right to remind us that the conservative movement has seen challenges like this before. He mentions the conservative revolution of 1932 to show how conservatism can benefit from something resembling revolutionary change. But there is a difference. That revolution then was aimed at progressive liberalism. It was attempting to restore a conservative sensibility that had once existed but had been lost. It was not an attempt to create a new kind of conservatism by importing ideas at odds with our founding philosophy.

The question should be whether the new ideas build upon a solid structure of shared experience, or whether they are foreign to or incompatible with the foundations of that structure. My argument is not against change per se, but against ideas that are fundamentally at odds not only with the conservatism of the past decades, but with the American founding itself.

Kesler ends his essay by welcoming efforts to divide the conservative movement “so long as they remember the point is ultimately to reunite and enlarge it along stronger and wiser lines.” I am not so confident that some of these critics are as wise as Kesler is. Popularizers at magazines such as The American Conservative, who are seeking a place in the sun of the new populism, may be interested in unity, but it is one in which the old guard of traditional conservatives, as they never tire of saying, has been completely overthrown. A new unity could never be achieved with such a mindset. I am particularly concerned that as they make this revolution, dangerous ideas from the fringes are given more leeway and respect than they deserve.

Conservatism in America is not like any other in the world. The key difference has always been a fundamental respect for liberty and natural rights. Without that, conservatism in America could go the way of conservatism in Germany, France, Russia, Hungary, or Spain, either abandoning real conservatism altogether or grounding it in some form of common-good statism or nationalism that shows too little respect for the natural rights of all Americans.

This need not happen. It will not happen if American conservatives remain vigilant. It will never happen if conservatives remember that liberty and natural rights are intrinsic, government should be limited, and the common good should always be pursued in civil society and upheld by the law, but never established as a political or economic doctrine of the state.
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