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"Founding philosophy": Michael Anton responds

by Michael Anton

Editors note: In response to Michael Anton's June 2018 feature article, "Founding philosophy," a review of Thomas G. West's The Political Theory of the American Founding*, a reader asks (edited slightly for clarity and concision):*

> Why did American self-government fall apart so easily? Yes, it was attacked and undermined by bad German philosophy. But that just begs the question. If the Framers designed something truly aligned with human nature; if they created very thoughtful, carefully crafted institutions; if they made provision for cultivating virtue, strong families, and education; if they had sound theory as well as sound statesmanship; why did it all crumble within a few decades of the first foreign assault? That is by definition not a robust system. And the progressives won across the board—in every major institution and aspect of culture. We may eke something out with Trump, and possibly turn things around. But it will be a very close call. And it will require very hard thinking about how to rebuild *après le deluge*. But we can't do that until we know how it failed so badly. If I were advising Madison *et al* in the 1780s, I don't know what I would recommend differently. West and you suggest they got it pretty much exactly right. But given how it turned out, that's a problem, isn't it? If the whole system crashed, and needs to rebuilt, then it wasn't quite *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, was it?

Michael Anton responds:

This is a good and necessary question, one I have wrestled with for many years. I've also debated it with West himself, privately and even publicly on one occasion. I do not pretend to have any definitive answers, nor do I claim that West will agree with what follows, though it is influenced by my debate with him.

Before attempting to answer the question, we must first question some of its premises. *Has* American self-government actually "fallen apart," or is it merely very sick? We cannot settle that here. What we *can* do is begin from a premise on which those of us who understand how the American government is supposed to work can agree. Our government is not now operating as designed and hasn't for some time. The changes were in large part deliberate and imposed by those who did and do not like the original design. Part of the reason for that dislike was the (accurate) assessment that institutional checks and popular will were getting in the way of leftist

ends and must be gotten around. If that means undermining the founders' work, so be it. Eventually, as we have all seen, the project of undermining the founders becomes reinterpreted from mere necessity into a positive good. On this basis, altering the founders' regime becomes ever easier, as we have also seen.

Accepting this project of alteration as our provisional definition of "fall apart," we may still question the assertion that it fell apart "easily." Is that really so? The enormous, history-beating success of America in providing not just what the founders explicitly promised to the American people but also all of history's time-honored measure of national success and greatness would suggest otherwise. Has any nation in history been more successful? Rome perhaps, but in different times, on different terms, with different ends.

Plus, the aforementioned effort by enemies of the American government's original design was anything but easy or foreordained. We may dismay that they succeeded at all (I know I do), but give them *some* credit: it took a lot of work. Their triumph was neither fated nor inevitable.

The only inevitability is that the founders' project had (or has) to end. Everything human does. Recall the story that Lincoln liked to tell about the ancient king who asked his sages to craft a sentence that would be true in all times and places. Their offering: "And this too shall pass away."

Perhaps a better question is: why did it fall apart so *quickly*? But even that premise is questionable. Is two centuries really such a short time? Compared to Rome, yes. But in the modern world? The United States still boasts the world's longest continuously operating written constitution (even if it is more and more honored in name only). Only England and Switzerland can today claim longer-serving forms of government. Everywhere else in the world has seen either continuous tumults and revolutions, or else colonization, imperial conquest, or stagnating tyranny. Two centuries seems like a short time only by comparison to one example—the preeminent and unique example—from the ancient world. We may also observe that owing to various changes—in philosophy, information technology, and much else—political and societal trends seem to morph and advance at a far more rapid rate in modern times than in antiquity. Two centuries may actually turn out to be, by modern standards, a very long time indeed.

I also want to put in a partial plug for the progressives. As West notes, much of progressive policy was not bad, and even good, on precisely the founders' terms. For instance, it was the progressives who lead the charge for serious immigration restriction after World War I. That was a great boon for the American people, including recent immigrants and their descendants. Restriction raised wages for the working class. Can one even imagine how much worse the Great Depression would have been with an endless flood of new workers pounding down wages? In a country with tens of millions more additional workers, what would the unemployment rate have risen to? Restriction also vastly hastened assimilation so that (for instance) in less than two decades, the nation was able to go to war united as it hadn't been since the founding era. Another good progressive policy was competitive civil service examinations, which we later had to sacrifice on the alter of diversity. Would government be better or worse with the progressive system of hiring or the one we have

now? This is not to absolve the progressives for their false and deleterious theoretical attacks on the founding principles, only to make the point that the story is not quite so simple.

All that said, something has clearly gone wrong and it's reasonable to ask why, both simply to understand and to learn from our mistakes.

My pat answer used to be: "modernity, mass immigration, and the cycle of regimes." While my understanding of this triumvirate has undergone some revision, especially on the first point, it still more or less captures the likely culprits, or at least the lines of inquiry we must think through.

The cycle of regimes is a kind of Second Law of Thermodynamics for politics. One can find the cycle discussed in many great works of political philosophy, though perhaps the most concise and easy-to-follow is found in the historian Polybius (book VI). The basic idea is that—absent any external forces—men, and hence political regimes, ascend from bad to good and degenerate from good to bad in an endless cycle. Machiavelli expresses the idea most concisely in his *Florentine Histories*:

> [V]irtue gives birth to quiet, quiet to leisure, leisure to disorder, disorder to ruin; and similarly, from ruin, order is born; from order, virtue; and from virtue, glory and good fortune.

In other words, success is in the long run self-defeating. It eventually, but inevitably, breeds complacence and decadence.

The cycle has been denied, derided and forgotten in our supposed age of intellectual and moral "progress." But it deserves a reconsideration and a return to favor.

I will say more about the temporal and intellectual origin of the idea of progress when we turn to modernity. For now, let us merely acknowledge the dominance of this idea not just in elite intellectual discourse but also in the popular mind. Everyone (except a tiny number of dissident thinkers who object for religious and/or philosophic reasons) takes for granted that the thought of the present is always and everywhere superior to that of the past. Tomorrow we will be wiser than we are today, and the day after that wiser than tomorrow, and so on, *ad infinitum*. According to this view, there exists for politics and morality something like the cumulative nature of knowledge that one finds in the natural sciences. Newton surpasses Galileo, Einstein surpasses Newton, Heisenberg and Planck modify and supplement Einstein. Thus does Hegel supplant Rousseau; Marx, Hegel; Dewey, Marx; Rawls, Dewey; and Ta-Nehisi Coates, Rawls.

Progress in the intellectual understanding of justice leads to progress in the implementation of justice. When our intellectuals are being generous (which is admittedly rare to the point of nonexistent these days), they will allow that our forebears who understood justice differently and tolerated or even enacted injustice were not malevolent; they just didn't know any better. But we know better, which is why our time is more just, and the future will be yet more just.

This notion is laughable to the classics and not born out by history, which clearly shows justice waxing and waning, as it shows civilizations and nations rising and falling. Rome was more just under the Antonines that it was under the Julio-Claudian emperors, or than it would be under Commodus and Severus. Similar examples are infinite.

Just as there is a cycle of regimes, there is also a cycle of civilizations or of what Machiavelli called "sects." A sect is the overarching religious-civilizational framework in which individual nations are born, thrive, and eventually die. Like the nations themselves, sects also are born, thrive, and eventually die.

According to this understanding, the original American government—the regime—cannot and will not last forever. It must give way to something else. Indeed, we may say that it already has. The transformation does not fit neatly into classical categories, but there are similarities. The regime of the founding era was akin to a classical mixed regime, in that it drew strength from and gave due consideration to the characteristic strengths of both the people, or the many, and of the great, or the few. But what we have today is more of a populist-oligarchy. No, I do not mean "populist" in the sense in which the word is applied to Trump. His populism is a reaction against the current understanding of the regime. What I mean is that our elites have managed to construct an oligarchy that depends on the enthusiastic support of a portion of the people—in particular, the poorer, more marginalized portion. The formula is top + bottom vs. middle.

On the one hand, this development fits the theory of the cycle, and not just because one regime gave way to another. Very loosely speaking, a republic with aristocratic characteristics gave way to a more (nominally at least) popular regime, just as the cycle predicts. On the other hand, populist-oligarchy appears to be unusual historically and outside the scope of the classical understanding. *Uno solo*—whether monarch or tyrant—aligning himself with the people against the great is as old as the hills. But the few and the many are usually at odds. On this score at least, we perhaps ought to give our oligarchs props for innovation.

In any case, both history and theory demand that the American regime must end. Unless the cycle can be overcome. Can it?

It has been argued that philosophic modernity—specifically, the thought of Machiavelli—is an attempt to overcome the cycle. This is another debate we cannot settle here. But we can sketch the argument. Modernity attempts to overcome not so much the cycle of regimes but the cycle of sects. This and that regime will still come and go. But the new sect—modernity—will go on forever, overriding in importance any individual city or state or human institution, and move from strength to strength, achievement to achievement, in an endless upward arc of progress.

Whether or not this is true or even possible, that does sound something like the belief in progress sketched earlier, doesn't it? And we know that untrue, impossible ideas can nonetheless have wide influence and baleful effects. It suffices to recall Marx giving birth to Communism and the non-trivial responsibility that Rousseau bears for the Terror and Nietzsche for the Nazis. But the effect

can also work in the other direction, away from bloody self-assertion. I am reminded of the story of Caius Fabricius, sent as ambassador to Pyrrhus. The latter—to display his plenitude—had his personal philosopher regale the Roman with the doctrines of Epicureanism. To which Fabricius replied, in effect, that he wished to clone this man and send him to the courts of all of Rome's enemies.

In at least two essays, Leo Strauss plots a more or less straight line from early modern innovation to late modern decadence. He attributes the decline not to the workings of the cycle but to the character of the modern innovations. West's challenge to this interpretation has caused me to rethink my heretofore orthodox Straussianism.

Yet while I grant to West his rehabilitation of Locke and (to a lesser extent) of modernity more generally, West still admits that something went wrong *somewhere*, and that part of that something was, broadly speaking, philosophic or intellectual. Regarding the specific bundle of errors that led us to our current predicament, further inquiry is required to find its precise origin. I am still inclined to believe that the seeds are all present in modernity's beginnings but I am open to being persuaded otherwise. For the moment, let me make the following observation.

There really can be no question of the antipathy to Biblical religion in Machiavelli, Spinoza, and other early moderns. (To these I would add Hobbes, though West disagrees.) We may stipulate every point that West makes about Locke (and I am inclined to do so). But that still leaves us with a very large problem. By the time we reach the Enlightenment, not just philosophers but popularizer-intellectuals such as Voltaire and Diderot not only take atheism for granted; they attack and ridicule faith and authority with gusto. Locke wisely insists on the centrality of religious belief and observance to any healthy political life. Yet he surely was aware of the philosophic atheism of so many of his forebears and peers. He surely must have worried that an atheistic intellectual elite would eventually undermine belief among the people.

Machiavelli appears to assert that the many will always and everywhere be religious. An irreligious people seems (to me anyway) inconceivable in his thought. Yet that is what we have now, throughout Europe and in very large portions of the United States. How did that happen, after millennia of religious fervor in the people? There appears to be no precedent. The only one might be late imperial Rome, whose elites were certainly irreligious, but whose people embraced Christianity even more enthusiastically than they abandoned paganism.

Prosperity and ease may have something to do with it. But, to say nothing for the moment about the extent to which these things are direct results of modern philosophy, we must also acknowledge that the Roman empire of the first and second centuries AD delivered more prosperity to more people than any society in history before the Industrial Revolution. I do not doubt that prosperity and ease contributed to the decline and fall of the Roman empire. But they do not appear to have made that ancient people irreligious. To the contrary, a religion of self-denying abnegation spread like wildfire through that prosperous society.

So to repeat: how did the modern West become so uniquely irreligious? However it happened, it must be counted as highly likely that several centuries of atheistic philosophy played a role. Moreover, modern philosophic atheism was unlike its classical counterpart in that its esotericism was temporary and solely for self-protection. The point of modern atheism was to rid human society of the need for esotericism, to destroy the basis of religious authority, to reestablish intellectual authority on a rational basis. In other words, modern philosophic atheism was intended, eventually, to become public. The classical political philosophers by contrast held that what they believed to be the truth about the gods could and should never be aired publicly, so as not to harm the unphilosophical multitude. They also appeared to genuinely assert a form of metaphysics which a believer would not recognize as God *per se*, but which is consistent with many tenets of religious belief.

Public opinion always takes its cues from above. For two thousand years in the West, our elites were either conventionally religious, or else posited a metaphysics friendly to religion, or both. It seems reasonable to me that five or so centuries of elite atheism would eventually filter down to the people at large—as, indeed, it was intended to do.

I do not think that the American founders saw this disaster coming. If they did, why did they design a regime that depends for its very survival on widespread religious belief?

One may ask how, in the Age of Enlightenment, with atheistic philosophers spilling ink all over Europe, could the founders not at least have suspected the problem? First, there were no such *philosophes* here in America. Second, to the extent that any American writers or statesmen actually were non-believers, they took care—like the rulers of antiquity—to conceal that from the public. Third, all of America's political and intellectual leaders openly supported and argued in favor of religion. Fourth, Americans were primarily of British stock, a people much less decadent and more religious than their Continental peers. Fifth, by and large, aristocrats and other wealthy elites—always the first among any people to turn away from religion—were not the ones who chose to emigrate to America. The American people were rather mostly descended from those lower on the socio-economic latter, who tend to be more religious. Sixth, irreligion thrives in luxury; America, with its rusticity, frontier and few avenues (outside a slave plantation) for escaping the necessity of hard work, was conducive to religion.

Hence, I do not see how we can blame the founders for not foreseeing today's widespread irreligion. Religious belief was, in their time, so common, so deeply ingrained, and so important to people's lives that a future of widespread atheism or indifference must have seemed inconceivable.

Perhaps a fairer criticism of the founders would be that they should have intuited the extent to which manifest and ongoing scientific and technological progress would undermine religious belief. This is also something the classics warned about, perhaps the poets more strongly than the philosophers. Indeed, the poets warned the philosophers! Floating up there in the clouds in your balloon may enable you to discover the true nature of thunder (hint: it's not Zeus). But making that known robs the phenomenon of its mystery and wonder, turning it ordinary and banal. It's like

explaining a magic trick. Oh, so the card was marked, got it. Yawn.

Perhaps the founders deserve some blame for not sufficiently foreseeing this problem. But they cannot be blamed for the problem itself. Nor is it easy to retroactively prescribe what they should have done about it.

Two further objections could be raised against the assertion that a decline in faith contributed to Americans' drift away from our founding principles. First, someone might note that, according to surveys, Americans are still the most religious people in the developed world, and ask: how, therefore, can irreligion be a cause of our problems? Second, it will be asserted that religion can hurt as much as it helps.

To the first, one might reply that "more religious than the rest of the developed world" is, in 2018, a rather low bar. Further, the mere profession of belief in some higher power is not the same as actual religious observance, church attendance, and rigorous religious education of children—all of which were central to the founders' conception of salutary religious practice. Finally, modern religiosity tends to be sanitized, stripped of its power to inspire obedience and fear. The word one most often hears these days from the allegedly religious to describe their faith—"spirituality"—rather gives the game away. "Spirituality" is in effect religion without a living God, without Commandments, without Scripture, without hell. It is religion stripped of everything difficult and unsettling, religion befitting an age of prosperity and ease.

In making these points, I do not mean to disparage the faith of the very large portion of Americans who are still genuinely faithful in ways the founders would recognize and respect. I only mean to call into question any assertion that Pew data on "belief in a higher power" should console those of us who are concerned about the future of republican government. The country is simply not nearly as religious as it used to be, and if the founders were right about the importance of religion, that's a problem.

To the second, one must grant that religion can cut more than one way, politically. It suffices to recall the Inquisition. But the instant we do, we must also remember that it's been a very long time since the Salem Witch Trials, and nothing of the sort, or even close, has happened since. It is true that in certain ways, faith has been factor dragging us to the Left—on welfare and immigration, surely, and occasionally on foreign policy. (Leadership of the nuclear freeze movement, for instance, was stacked with clergy.) I do not, however, think it is reasonable to conclude from this that religion in America has been a net negative, or a wash, or even close.

All this is before we even consider the other baleful elements of late modern philosophy: historicism, positivism, hedonism, nihilism, contempt for tradition, and the elevation of transgression to secular sacrament. Yet religion is the heart of the sect. Given how bad things are in Europe—in so many ways, much worse than here—we must wonder if there is something deeply wrong not just with the American regime, but with the sect itself, with the West. We must question modernity's self-assertion to have conquered the cycle, to be a self-perpetuating sect that will never

end. We must also ask ourselves not just where we are on the sine curve of the cycle of regimes, but of the cycle of sects.

Before moving off the topic of philosophy, let me make one other point. The classical political philosophers famously warn against any attempt to rationalize politics. Their argument is twofold: it's impossible, and even if it weren't, the outcome would be disastrous. Too few men are sufficiently rational to make reason a sound basis for politics and inevitably some will be so certain in their own minds that they alone have the answers that they will seek to impose the cruelest tyrannies in reason's name.

It's important to note that the classical admonition does not arise from any belief that the truth about politics either does not exist or is unknowable. The classics believed that they had found the true political principles. They just stopped short of embarking on a project of implementation, preferring instead a project of indirect mitigation of the worst political evils. They did not believe that the truth of their principles would suffice to ensure the practical success of those principles. On the contrary, they believed that permanent headwinds, inherent in human nature, would always or nearly always make rational politics impossible.

Now, it would seem that the American founders, in building a regime based on reason, did not heed the classical admonition. Perhaps that is the core reason why it all "fell apart"? The American regime can be based on true political principles, as I have asserted they are, and still fail for precisely the reasons the classics warned about two thousand years ago.

But then we have to ask: what were the founders' alternatives? They faced an unprecedented situation: founding a new nation, in broad daylight, in an "enlightened" age of widespread literacy. Clearly, in that circumstance, appealing to something like Plato's "noble lie" would have been laughable. Locke had demolished the thin intellectual tissue of the divine right of kings nearly a century before. What does that leave? Tradition? How does one successfully appeal to tradition in a nation so young—one that, unlike the nations of Old Europe, had been born and raised post-Guttenberg? How the nations of Europe became what they are—how England became English and France French—is, if not forgotten, then at least shrouded in mystery. Historians still debate the issue and always will. But we know how America became American, and the Americans at the time were keenly aware that not just the whole American people, but the whole world, were watching.

Moreover, America was not coming to be in a swirl of inchoate conflicts, events, and historical currents. It was coming to be as a matter of conscious choice, publicly debated. The founders strongly believed that justice required them to make the case for the justice of their revolution. On what basis were they to make that case, if not reason?

So let us not hastily blame the founders' violation of the classical admonition. I for one do not see, given the circumstances of their time, what or how they could have done differently. Nor do I see an alternative for us today. Perhaps after some cataclysm there may arise in the human spirit some

surge of non-rational sentiment that will allow future statesmen the opportunity to re-found a decent politics on a non-rational basis. That's speculative. And in any case, such a cataclysm is guaranteed to be unpleasant. Who would wish for it?

The third cause is more prosaic but not therefore unimportant. Through a combination of active policy and deliberate non-enforcement of the laws, we have changed the composition of the American people. Or it is more precise to say that our elites have changed it, while the people have acquiesced in the change by declining—at least until recently—to rise in opposition.

The American founders believed—consistent with the entire preceding philosophic tradition and the evidence of history—that some peoples are more fit for liberty, or republican government, than others. Indeed, some are positively unfit for such government—if not inherently and permanently, at least at certain times. We may note that this thought is consistent with the cycle of regimes, which holds that (in Leo Strauss's words summarizing a thought of Machiavelli) "republics are not always possible. They are not possible at the beginning and they are not possible if the people is corrupt." In other words, the same people can be incapable of self-government at one time, gain that capability later, and lose it later still.

Our founders therefore argued for strict controls on which foreigners the American government would admit to citizenship and in what numbers. The success and survival of the whole project seemed to them to depend in no small part on prudence in this area. Welcoming millions from countries with no tradition of liberty—e.g., Russians—would have been, to the founders, absolute folly that would cause the end of America as a self-governing republic.

Moreover, the founders believed in and argued for a certain degree of commonality in the citizenry as a blessing. Here is John Jay in *Federalist* 2, expressing a sentiment well-nigh universal among the founders:

> With equal pleasure I have as often taken notice that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established general liberty and independence.

Our immigration policy—official and tacit—has for more than fifty years been directly contrary to these two ideas. Strauss said that a principal cause of Rome's fall was that "many men who never knew republican life and did not care for it . . . became Roman citizens." We Americans have allowed into our country millions upon millions who have never known republican life and do not care for it. Is it any wonder, then, that as the composition of the American nation changes, our government drifts further and further from liberty?

And we deliberately "diversified"—i.e., disunified—the nation in the vital respects for which Jay celebrated America's unity: language, religion, political principle, manners and customs, shared

sacrifice.

It would be a vast understatement to say that the founders' ideas on these two subjects are today unpopular. In the hyper-radicalized climate of opinion of 2018, they are vilified as "literally Hitler." That doesn't make them any less true.

And while I have no doubt that the Left will continue to viciously attack anyone who defends the founders' views, or who raises doubts about the sanctity of mass immigration and "diversity," it is not difficult to see how the Left itself tacitly accepts the founders' premises. Since at least 2002, when *The Emerging Democratic Majority* became a big hit, the Left has been trumpeting and celebrating the fact that the more immigrants America admits, the more "diverse" we become, the more leftward our government travels, the Democratic party cements its dominance, and America is—thankfully—pushed further and further away from our benighted founding principles. This is of course the exact flipside of the founders' warnings about the dangers to republicanism from disunity. But logical coherence is not a strong suit of today's Left. They have no problem celebrating a claim with one side of their mouths, denying it from the other, and attacking those who repeat it from the middle. It's good when *we* say it, but it's false and bad when *you* say it. When *we* say it, we mean it as praise. When *you* say it, you mean it as a warning to those on your side, the bad side. But since you are bad, justice requires that you sit silently and take what we have in store for you, which you have coming. Bad people should not be allowed to make arguments in their defense. "That's racist!" One of the Left's aims is to disarm their enemies (i.e., us) rhetorically and intellectually by making certain thoughts unthinkable and unsayable, and at this they have been quite successful.

And so to my final point. Thucydides intimates that one reason Athens lost the Peloponnesian War was that the frank amoralism of the Athenian elites—on display most spectacularly in the Melian dialogue—demoralized the Athenian people. It undermined any sense that they were fighting for a just cause. It prevented them from believing, deep down, that they deserved to win and even caused some to wonder if they deserved to lose.

Something similar has happened to America, the roots of course being slavery, but also the treatment of the Indians, Jim Crow, property requirements for voting, lack of women's suffrage, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and a long list of other sins, real and imagined. Lincoln saw the problem with perfect clarity, as his Second Inaugural vividly shows. He hoped that the great sacrifice of the war would exorcise the demon, and it did, for a while.

But our sense of hereditary blood guilt is back with a vengeance and has been for some time. I will not pretend to give a definitive answer as to how, when, and why it reemerged and took on such a staggering magnitude. It's enough for now simply to acknowledge that it did, that it's currently strangling our political and intellectual discourse, that it has led to decades of disastrously bad policy, and that the Left understands all this and deliberately enflames it for its own perverse ends.

Somehow our elites and a large portion of the population—essentially, the captains and foot soldiers of the aforementioned populist-oligarchy—have become convinced that the only way to expiate America's considerable sins is to "fundamentally transform" the country into something else, something quite other, quite alien to what the founders designed or intended. The rest of us may not like it, but most are too cowed to object, and even when we do, our objections are drowned out by the incessant din of the leftist megaphone.

There you have my (provisional) answer. It was a combination of fundamental forces, bad choices, and bad faith. Trump's election—and the popularity of his policies—are signs of residual health. So too is the resurgence of a more populist, national-interest Right in Europe. It remains for us to capitalize on these hopeful flickers on the ekg of civilization. Ultimately, we have only ourselves to blame, if we cannot keep the republic that our founders bequeathed to us.

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