A review of *The Political Theory of the American Founding* by Thomas G. West.

**BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE**

*Thomas G. West*

_The Political Theory of the American Founding: Natural Rights, Public Policy, and the Moral Conditions of Freedom_

Cambridge University Press, 428 pages, $34.99

Convention requires me to disclose that I have known, admired, and learned from Thomas G. West for more than twenty years. I also recently became his colleague as a scholar and lecturer at Hillsdale College. Moreover, Professor West and I studied many of the same subjects, with some of the same teachers. Cynics might therefore be tempted to discount the ensuing praise for his new book as logrolling by an ally. But I beg to be believed when I say that I would lavish acclaim on *The Political Theory of the American Founding*, whoever wrote it—though, in my judgment, only Tom West could have.1

West has spent the better part of a very productive life studying the American founding as deeply as anyone ever could. The result is the most important political book published in my lifetime, a distinction I expect it will hold even if I live another half century. West’s effort probably has been, and may yet be, surpassed philosophically or historically by two or three volumes. But no other book has brought these three strands of inquiry together in a way that meets the twin exigencies of
timelessness and urgency.

West sets for himself the seemingly modest task of “explaining” the American founders’ political views—first, their political theory per se, and second, how they applied that theory to the practical task of building a new government. The qualifier is necessary because while we think we understand the founding, West shows that we—especially, all too often, those who’ve been specifically trained to explain it to others—do not.

We misunderstand the founding, first, because of the dismal state of modern education, and second, owing to deliberate efforts to libel the founders and their works. The founders’ political theory has been, by turns, denounced, misrepresented, mocked, dismissed, and forgotten. The culprits have been and are of the Left, Right, and Center. The founders’ detractors include fascists and communists, despots and anarchists, Yankees and Southerners, ardent abolitionists and slaveholding oligarchs, eastern elites and western individualists, foreign enemies and domestic terrorists, anti-American leftists and patriotic conservatives, smug atheists and the deeply religious.

There may appear to be no common thread, but look a little deeper. In modern America (and beyond), to be highly educated is to despise the founding. Ordinary Americans, by contrast, love their country and its history. The farther one drives from a blue metropolis—try it; it’s a tonic!—the more American flags one sees flying from porch posts. To these people George Washington is still a hero, the Fourth of July still sacred, and the Declaration of Independence still inspires.

And so it does for Tom West, who is as educated as anyone alive—when you come across a quote from Aristotle or Nietzsche and the next phrase (in parentheses) is “my translation,” you know you are in the presence of the real deal—but whose learning has taught him to love America all the more.

Not that he admits as much in this book. West explicitly disclaims any effort of “evaluation,” whether praise or blame. He admits that questions of right or wrong, good or bad, are of greater moment than merely cataloguing the content of the founders’ views. But he insists that those questions can only be answered once we know what those views are: “Evaluation presupposes knowledge.”

I think that, here, West is being a little coy. Surely he remembers the dictum of one of his mentors, Leo Strauss, that there are subjects the understanding of which is incompatible with neutrality. Certainly, West refrains from passing explicit judgment on the founders’ thought. But by giving them a fair hearing, by allowing their arguments to shine forth in all their noble sobriety, he inevitably leads the engaged reader to admire the founders’ wisdom and prudence, and to conclude that their views are infinitely superior to the malevolent insanity force-fed to us as
A ny competent review of The Political Theory of the American Founding must answer: Is West’s account of the founders accurate? Does he succeed at the task he sets himself? A more ambitious (or hubristic) review would also tackle: Are the founders’ views true? And, if so, what are the prospects—if not immediately, then at some point in the future—for restoring them to their rightful preeminence?

But let us begin with the obligatory question. The answer is an emphatic yes. If The Political Theory of American Founding were a legal brief, any impartial judge would have to concede that Tom West has proved his case. His method is to rely on public documents—declarations and proclamations, the federal and state constitutions and bills of rights, laws and ordinances, and the like—and look for consensus, which he finds, on issues of first principle and public policy alike.

Too many scholars overemphasize disagreements among the founders—e.g., Jefferson’s agrarianism versus Hamilton’s mercantilism (which West treats at length)—thereby obscuring fundamental areas of agreement that make the opinions of those two (and nearly all the founders) far closer to each other than they are to (say) those of contemporary liberalism. Another related, yet different, sin is to rummage through the private letters of individual founders in search of validation for today’s policy preferences: The “wall of separation” that liberals imply (and some doubtless are ignorant enough to believe) is enshrined in the First Amendment? The one that allegedly bars any contact of any kind between government and religion? The phrase is actually from a private letter of Jefferson’s, and the context makes clear that he is endorsing the principle of religious liberty, not proposing the radical alienation of faith and the state. In reality, West shows that Jefferson—like all the founders—well understood that republican government is impossible absent a strong moral foundation in the people, which in turn depends on religion, which government therefore has a duty to promote.

The inaccuracies about the founding that West must correct are legion. In a previous volume, Vindicating the Founders, he took on and demolished the dominant left-wing calumnies that the founding, and hence the country, are inherently and irredeemably racist, sexist, oligarchic, and much else. Not that the calumniators did the right thing: shut up and slink off, never to be heard from again. But West’s rejoinders are still the definitive rebuttals to their lies.
In the newer, less polemical book, West addresses what we may term the more scholarly, intellectual errors. Chief among these is the so-called “amalgam thesis,” viz., that the founding is an incoherent mishmash of differing, and often conflicting, ideas and traditions. West demonstrates that, while the founders were indeed influenced by many strains of thought—including the Bible and Protestantism, the English constitution and common law, ancient and modern political philosophy, and historical examples of political success and failure—the core of their political theory is a coherent account of all human beings’ equal natural rights.

Combing through a vast array of documents, West finds strikingly consistent—and often identical—language describing the origin, nature, and practical implications of those rights. On no other justification for the American Revolution and the political legitimacy of the new republic were the founders—across all thirteen colonies, socio-economic classes, and walks of life—so broadly consistent. Not the “rights of Englishmen,” but the assertion of equal natural rights was the common thread that unified the new nation.

In proving his case, West carefully avoids falling into the opposite error: seeing everything through the prism of abstraction and philosophy. At its extreme, this view sees America as nothing but “a great stage for the acting out of great thoughts”—less a country with a people, territory, and traditions than Locke’s Second Treatise incarnated.

Some may recognize in this (very) brief sketch a certain strand of Straussianism (those words above are from Allan Bloom’s Closing of the American Mind, a book I still greatly admire, but which is not without shortcomings). West, himself a student of Strauss and Straussians, utilizes Straussian methods—reading texts carefully in order to understand his subjects as they understood themselves—to come to a radically different conclusion. West is forthright about the enormous influence of the early moderns—especially Locke—on the founders’ natural-rights doctrine. But he finds illumination from an earlier philosophic tradition that distinguishes, while recognizing the essential connectivity, between “form and matter.”

For the American founders, the matter was their country as they found it: the people, their language, traditions, customs, and religion(s); the topography, resources, and climate; its site, situation, and relations with neighbors and other world powers. In other words, the “brute facts.” The form was the regime, or mode of government, and above all the principles informing that mode. There may be, as the ancient Greek philosophers assert, one regime that is simply best. But even they quickly add that this best form is not always practicable or possible; it is suitable only for the finest matter, and only in those rare instances when circumstances permit. Philosophers from Plato to “the celebrated Montesquieu” (Madison’s phrase) insist that form must always suit
matter. The great task of statesmanship facing the American founders was to devise a form consistent with timeless truths about human nature—above all, equal natural rights—while appropriate to the particular characteristics and circumstances of the actual American people at that time.

The above should suffice to dismiss another error, this one from a certain quarter of the contemporary Right, which holds that any appeal to equal natural rights amounts to “propositionism”—as in, the “proposition that all men are created equal”—which in turn inevitably leads to the twin evils of statist leveling and the explicit or tacit denial that there is anything distinct about the American nation. In this telling, “all men are created equal” is dangerous nonsense that means “all men are exactly the same.” Among other dismal policies we are allegedly compelled to enact if we recognize the existence of equal natural rights are redistribution, racial quotas, and open borders.

Refuting this is easy, and well-trodden, ground. The true meaning of natural equality is clear from the founders’ words, as West shows, and in Lincoln’s, and in the works of scholars such as Harry V. Jaffa, and in West himself. But like a picket fence that must be continually repainted if it is to remain white, there are some self-evident truths that must be restated over and over.

West does so, in perhaps the clearest articulation of natural human equality penned since the founding itself. The idea is elegantly simple: all men are by nature equally free and independent. Nature has not—as she has, for example, in the case of certain social insects—delineated some members of the human species as natural rulers and others as natural workers or slaves. (If you doubt this, ask yourself why—unlike in the case of, say, bees—workers and rulers are not clearly delineated in ways that both groups acknowledge and accept. Why is it that no man—even of the meanest capacities—ever consents to slavery, which can be maintained only with frequent recourse to the lash?) No man may therefore justly rule any other without that other’s consent. And no man may injure any other or infringe on his rights, except in the just defense of his own rights. The existence of equal natural rights requires an equally natural and obligatory duty of all men to respect the identical rights of others.

Because men are driven by passions as well as reason, the temptation to violate the rights of others is always present, especially in the strong over the weak. Men in the state of nature—that is, without government, whether understood as a pre-political state or one following the dissolution of a political order—while free, are thus at grave risk of injury and depredation. Such afflictions are not merely bad for individual men, they violate a moral standard which nature provides but leaves to man to enforce. Moreover, in the state of nature, men cannot utilize to their full potential those talents God and nature have given them. Living well requires not merely the society of others, but also security, which requires government. Hence men consent to government to secure their equal natural rights and to thrive within that security. Upon establishing a government, men conditionally cede some of their rights and liberty to secure the far larger remainder. For instance, men must surrender to government their natural right to inflict just punishment personally. (This
insight was not the founders’ innovation. The lesson of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* is that if there is to be lasting civilization, private vengeance must give way to public penalty.) This ceding is conditional because men’s rights remain the gift of God and nature, not of government, and men’s consent can be withdrawn if the government fails in its duties or abuses its powers. Therefore, there is an inalienable natural right “to alter or to abolish” an oppressive or incompetent government.

Men naturally differ in virtue, intelligence, and talent. This natural inequality will inevitably lead to unequal outcomes, especially when equal natural rights to use unequal talents are properly secured. Since excellence in husbandry, the arts and sciences, commerce, and many other endeavors is a boon to individual men, to society, indeed to all mankind, inequality of outcomes is welcome and just.

These principles, while universally valid for all men in all times and places, are subject to practical limits. First, any social compact—and hence any political community—is inherently particular. Its scope and authority extend only to those men who have consented to its terms, and whose membership has been consented to by all other citizen-members. The equal natural rights of all men do not demand or imply world government or open borders. To the contrary, a social compact without limits is impossible, a self-contradiction. A compact that applies indiscriminately to all is not a compact. If—as the founders insist—mutual consent is an indispensable foundation of political legitimacy, then the political community must be invitation-only. Moreover, the same “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” that endow men with inalienable natural rights similarly entitle the nations of the world to a “separate and equal station” with respect to other nations. “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master,” Lincoln said. Applied to international relations, we may similarly express the founders’ thought: as no nation is by right a colony, none should be an empire.

Second, as noted, form must fit matter. It is, in the founders’ view, a sad but intractable fact that not all peoples in all times and places are ready or able to assume the responsibilities of liberty or to secure their equal natural rights through republican government. (Here is a lesson our own political leaders should have heeded before upsetting the imperfect but—at least before they intervened—stable political order of the Middle East.) The particular traditions, customs, laws, talents, education, religious practices, and private habits of America’s largely English-descended colonists made that people especially—perhaps uniquely—qualified to devise, institute, and maintain a regime based on equal natural rights.
West shows that the founders, far from being hostile to or dismissive of religion, tradition, and other non-rational sources of guidance for human life, saw these things as not only broadly useful for political society but fully compatible with natural rights and absolutely indispensable to a political order based thereon. In the founders’ view, it is reasonable that the God who both revealed the Decalogue and is author of the natural world created that world with natural moral principles that accord with His law. The alternative—moral commands with no basis in, or that contradict, nature—seemed to the founders profoundly irrational and implausible.

But the founders also agreed that religions and traditional sources of human guidance should not be authoritative for politics. In Europe, resting political legitimacy on religion led, first, to a millennium of oligarchic stagnation and, later, to bloody religious wars. Any attempt to do so in America would also crash into the many deeply held religious convictions on the new continent. Whose understanding of God would rule? Better to ground politics in a reasoned account of human nature that admits man’s inability to know the mind of God and respects each person’s equal natural right to follow his own conscience in matters of worship. Similarly, traditions not infringing on the equal natural rights of others were to be tolerated, and even celebrated. Under the new “form,” men would be freer to live as men than ever before in human history.

This points to other, closely related but distinct, errors with which West also contends. In doing so, he is unafraid to criticize many eminent scholars, some of them ostensibly on “his side,” as conservatives, Straussians, or both. One such error identifies the founding as identical with “liberalism”—in that term’s original, Enlightenment meaning—and holds that the founders’ political theory emphasizes rights at the expense of duties, or even that the founders’ idea of rights logically excludes any concept of duty. At the extreme, this view insists that the founders saw getting and spending as the ends of political life. Another error admits that there is a “republican” as well as “liberal” element to the founding but finds the two in irresolvable tension. Another allegedly irresolvable tension is said to be that between equality and liberty.

West answers all of this, both in the book’s more theoretical first part and in its more practical second and third parts. We have seen that, according to the founders, the concept of equal natural rights is logically incoherent without a concomitant duty to respect the rights of others. Morality and virtue, they insisted, are indispensable both for private happiness and for the common good. The former is too often simply identified with “liberalism,” the latter with “republicanism,” as if the two are always at odds. The founders didn’t see any conflict, and neither does West. Similarly, equality and liberty are the two inherent sides of the same philosophic coin. Men are equal in being equally free of domination by others, and they are justly free because they are naturally equal.

The aforementioned Straussian view was not the source of these errors. The Slave Power, for obvious reasons, found it in their interest to mischaracterize the founders as interested only in self-interest. But in the middle of the last century—perhaps inadvertently—Leo Strauss gave this
In his monumental *Natural Right and History*, Strauss sought to revive the idea of natural right—which since the late nineteenth century had been dismissed by philosophers, scholars, and intellectuals—as a serious possibility. In other words, he argued that natural right might be true. In doing so Strauss drew a sharp contrast between natural right in its “classic” (i.e., ancient Greek) and “modern” (primarily Hobbesian and Lockean) forms. The former, Strauss argued, is sober, subtle, and reasonable, the latter reductionist and radical. The real Locke, he wrote, is not in his works’ moderate surface but in their hidden depths. At the core of Locke—at the core of modernity itself—is the firm denial that there exists any higher good than the satisfaction of material needs and wants. Liberating the passions, especially acquisitiveness, and channeling them via “institutions with teeth in them” is said to be a firmer grounding for politics than the classic insistence on character formation and education to virtue. Strauss ends the chapter on Locke with one of his most widely quoted sentences: “Life is the joyless quest for joy.”

Strauss did not extend this argument to America. In fact, he begins *Natural Right and History* by quoting the Declaration of Independence as the political statement of natural right. But many of Strauss’s students, including West himself, did come to see America solely or almost solely through the lens of the alleged radicalism of early modern political philosophy. In this telling, the American founders—in basing their regime on Locke—unwittingly created a country whose core is a corrosive selfishness that eats away at all support, traditional and rational, for morality and virtue until the whole structure inevitably collapses.

This line of argument has had great influence. The Straussians like it because it fits the formula “ancients good, moderns bad.” The Left likes it because it gives their reflexive anti-Americanism a high-minded gloss. And certain parts of the Right like it because they think it helps explain the moral collapse they see all around them.

West absorbed this view in his early studies but over decades developed second thoughts. His argument today is threefold: the Locke of *Natural Right and History* is a deliberate caricature; the real Locke is eminently more sober and sensible; and the founders in any case did not rotely follow Locke (or any other thinker) like a cake recipe.

West argues that Strauss caricatured Locke (and early modern philosophy more broadly) in order to sharpen awareness of the differences between ancients and moderns that fashionable scholarship had long denied. To revive the serious study of ancients required instilling in students a sense of urgency about Greek thought, and the best way to do that was to convince them that ancient wisdom might be not merely true but even superior to subsequent philosophy. This notion
ran against the dominant idea of intellectual progress—in philosophy, as in technology, the more up-to-date the better—so overstatement was necessary to ram home the point. West notes that Strauss, late in his life, published “restatements” on three thinkers—Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke—whom he had already treated at seemingly comprehensive length. In each case Strauss’s later judgment is palpably more favorable than his earlier efforts. West’s conclusion: Strauss had accomplished his rhetorical mission of reviving serious study of the ancients and wanted to nudge readers back toward a more balanced appreciation of the moderns.

This interpretation is plausible, if unprovable, given the deliberately ambiguous nature of Strauss’s writing. But we should remember that Strauss himself draws attention to the fact that great thinkers sometimes make deliberate overstatements. In a famous passage, he excuses Machiavelli’s cruel maxims as “not meant seriously” but intended to shock his effeminate contemporaries out of their intellectual torpor.

In taking his own fresh look at Locke, West goes beyond the justly famous Second Treatise to consider the less-studied Letter Concerning Toleration, Reasonableness of Christianity, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and Some Thoughts Concerning Education. West finds Locke to be nearly every bit as sober and reasonable as Strauss found the classics. There is, in Locke, a strong insistence on the necessary concomitance of rights and duties, deep awareness that both individual happiness and just government depend on moral virtue, and an appreciation for the indispensable role of education and religion.

This reassessment is necessary, given the widespread belief—stated by commenters who mean it as praise as well as blame—that the American founding and Locke are nearly one and the same. One hopes that certain Straussians and conservatives may rest easier in the belief that, if Locke isn’t so bad after all, maybe America isn’t either.

Yet the assumption that America=Locke turns out to be just as misleading as the characterization of Locke as a soulless radical. West more than once disclaims any investigation into the “origins” of the founders’ thought, and, true to his word, he provides no such sustained discussion. But by quoting the founders so widely, he can’t help but allow them to demonstrate to us that they drew their inspiration widely, and well beyond Locke. But the deeper point, as West shows, is that the founders were, above all, practical men, dealing with the practical necessities they faced at the time. It’s an intellectuals’ conceit that every man of action must have been following some book. The founders were well read, to be sure, but they were statesmen, not scholars. It’s high time we intellectuals give statesmanship its due on its own terms, and stop viewing statesmen merely as actors following our scripts.

In its final two-thirds, The Political Theory of the American Founding shifts from restating old arguments to blazing new scholarly trails. West provides the first comprehensive account of how the founders applied timeless natural-right principles to pressing issues of public policy—virtue, morality, and the family in Part II, and economics and property rights in Part III. He chose these, I suppose, to show how the founders addressed necessity and utility—mere life—while never forgetting that true utility should always serve the good life. Exploring these topics also
further rebuts—in irrefutable detail—the falsehoods that the founders didn’t care about virtue and that natural equality requires democratic leveling.

These two sections will, for different reasons, arouse the anger of certain sects within conservatism. But they also provide a basis for reconciliation and reunification. Libertarians will at first be annoyed by West’s treatment of virtue, which they will (rightly) interpret as a rebuke to their wish for unlimited personal freedom. But one hopes West’s account will help them come to see that the liberty they prize cannot survive absent strong families and widespread adherence to moral principle. Traditionalists will, or should, love this section—if they can get past their prejudice that any appeal to rights is destructive of the family and religion, for West shows it is not. Both should appreciate West’s treatment of property: libertarians because West provides the strongest possible arguments for economic freedom, traditionalists because he makes clear not merely the moral basis, but also the moral limits, of capitalism.

By the time the book ends, the “selfishness” thesis is in ruins. West shows that the founders wished to excise from their new republic the stagnating caste system of the old world for reasons that were at once utilitarian, political, and moral. Property rights are essential to incentivizing men to industry, to the production of those goods and services without which society cannot thrive nor the higher arts and sciences emerge. A wealthy nation is also better able to defend itself and deter enemies. Widespread property ownership boosts the independent spirit of the citizenry, making men more spirited in the defense of liberty and less apt to submit to tyranny, while giving them a personal stake in the success of the republic. And it is simply immoral to deny men their equal right to use their talents to the fullest.

The “selfishness” thesis does not, alas, exhaust the many ways the American founding is said to be “low but solid” (in a widely misused phrase of Churchill’s). In two of the book’s most philosophic chapters, West explores in depth the founders’ conception of virtue and finds it not nearly as low as alleged. He addresses the differences and commonalities between Christian and secular virtue; the proper role of spiritedness or manliness, not only in the founding but in any just society; ancient versus modern virtue; and the distinction between those ordinary virtues that must be practiced by the citizenry at large and the higher virtues that by natural necessity will only appear in some. West shows that the founders were more than attentive to the needs of the soul. They understood not just the necessity of courage to protect the community but also its intrinsic nobility. This is not to suggest that West attempts the intellectual dodge of “synthesis” that denies real differences. But he does show that man in a natural-rights republic is anything but the “last man.”

West’s great teacher Harry V. Jaffa is admitted—even by most of his many detractors—to have understood his great hero, Abraham Lincoln, correctly. Criticism of Jaffa therefore tends to be not that he’s wrong about Lincoln but that Lincoln was wrong about everything, so accuracy in service to Lincoln is useful only to know what not to do, and perhaps not even then.

Similarly, West may be right about the founding—and he is—but is the founding itself right? Is the
founders' political theory true?

As noted, West—perhaps from an abundance of philosophic caution—declines to answer this question. Lacking such caution, I will.

Yes.

To which I would add, there must be something to it, given the enormous success of America in delivering to its citizens over two centuries exactly what the founders aimed for: security, prosperity, happiness, and—yes—greatness. There are only three possibilities: these good things happened because of, in spite of, or unconnected to the founding principles. My money is on the first.

Does nature offer us any guidance on how to live well?

West has been overheard to remark that there exists in the hearts of men a “longing for justice,” and that this longing becomes more acute the more remote justice appears. In corrupt times, such as ours, the longing is acute indeed. The longing itself does not of course prove the existence of justice. But it is curious that those on the left and the right who wail the loudest about the injustices of our time are always among the first to dismiss and denounce any notion of natural right. The question is begged: “unjust” according to what—or whose—standard?

The central question of political philosophy—perhaps of philosophy itself—is: do right and wrong, good and evil, exist by nature? Put another way: does nature offer us any guidance on how to live well? To answer “no” is either to limit oneself to recourse to God—and God alone—or else to accept a blackness at the heart of human things. Tradition offers no solace, as traditions may be good or bad, and merely asking which of the two a particular tradition is presupposes God or natural right. Recourse to God is necessary, as we shall see, but one wonders what is so unacceptable about the founders’ argument for a fundamental compatibility between His law and His nature. Similarly, one might ask of the traditionalists: what could be so bad about a body of American ideas that, even if you dispute their truth, are unquestionably our own? And isn’t that, for traditionalism, the highest source of guidance? So how could those ideas be, in the final analysis, untrue for us?

Few have the courage or “probity” (in Straussian terms) to face the other alternative squarely but instead settle for what Allan Bloom stingingly termed “nihilism with a happy ending.” We may thank God for this widespread incoherence and hypocrisy, since living amid a Nietzschean hoi polloi would be at best inconvenient.

But surely a better alternative would be to understand the true grounding of our rights and duties. Is that possible?
One problem in establishing a regime based on reason is that, even among the finest “matter,” reason does not always prevail. How then to fix in the public mind a firm and accurate conviction of the ground of men’s rights and duties? In the book’s other primarily philosophic passage, West analyzes the founders’ three core arguments for the existence of natural right: God, the “moral sense” or conscience, and the “natural fitness of things.” The first two of their arguments West finds rationally unsatisfying. That is, not necessarily untrue, but not amenable to rational validation on their own terms. Reasoning according to Aristotle’s dictum that we should “seek out precision in each genus to the extent that the nature of the matter allows,” West finds the third fully rational yet too abstract to command mass assent. In words of Machiavelli of which the Florentine’s great admirer John Adams might have approved, “a prudent individual knows many goods that do not have in themselves evident reasons with which one can persuade others.” Recourse to God and the conscience is necessary, even if rationally unsatisfying to the philosopher. But then the philosopher is satisfied by nature alone; it’s everyone else we need to worry about. The founders in any case made all three arguments with apparent conviction.

Attentive readers will notice that, in the passage under discussion, West (without acknowledging) violates his own prohibition against evaluating the founders’ thought. Why? I think West’s ambitions for his book are greater than he explicitly lets on. For instance, he quietly provides the bases for settling the momentous question as to the real difference between ancient and modern natural right and finds that the founders’ notion is not so distant from its ancient counterpart. The founders agreed with the ancients that wisdom and virtue are, in the highest analyses, the most fully just titles to rule. They also agreed that these qualities are too often in short supply and that what men try to pass off as them are all too often anything but. Safer, then, to find a rational alternative to the absolute rule of the wise.

The book is sprinkled with other such judgments, which West mostly leaves the reader to figure out for himself.

In that sense, as in others, The Political Theory of the American Founding is not a programmatic book. West prefers to let us think issues through on our own than to tell us what to do. But the third question inevitably arises: can we revive any of this?

The fact that a natural-rights republic has been established before proves that it can be done—and so presumably can be done again. Yet in our time this notion (in the rare instances when it is even entertained) is mocked—as if heaven, sun, elements, and men have varied in motion, order, and power from just two centuries ago. Hence the first obstacle that must be overcome is the widespread insistence that “times have changed” and the founders’ ideas no longer have any validity, or even that they never did in the first place.

There are other headwinds, at least as strong. The limits that the founders insisted were necessary to constrain any just government get in the way of so many of the Left’s objectives, that they too are denounced or ignored. The brute fact of slavery—despite its existence since the dawn of
civilization, and its abolition in the West being a direct result of the founders declaration that “all men are created equal”—is a cudgel with which to crush not just the founders but their admirers. If you find the founders’ views more sensible than current year insanity, then you—like they—are “racist” and thus bad, full stop, no discussion, go directly to jail, do not pass “Go,” definitely do not collect $200.

Yet if there is nature, then insanity must—eventually, but inevitably—bump up against natural limits. The “longing for justice” will force change, whether for better or worse remains to be seen and depends, in part, on who gains the upper hand to effect that change. But we can be sure that decent, ordinary people will not forever tolerate being treated like criminals, and worse—as if their very existence in the country of their birth, which they love and believe in, somehow constitutes a standing affront, an intrinsic evil. Yet for that longing to bear just fruit, we must have a just alternative to which to turn. The political ideas of the founders provide that. We should be buoyed by the fact that the cure for what ails us exists, is available, and—thanks to West—has been adequately explained.

This does not, of course, relieve us of the necessity or obligation to do the hard work, without which improvement—to say nothing of restoration—will be impossible. In performing this great task, we cannot assume that the founders’ ideas will supply us with recipes for today’s use. Only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today. West himself at several points draws attention to the differences between the founding era and our time and stresses the impossibility of directly applying their solutions to our problems. Among other difficulties, the “matter” has undergone decades of “fundamental transformation.” It is an open question whether the disparate, disunified, irreligious, cosseted, and over-regulated portion of our nation is any longer capable of governing itself according to the founders’ ideas.

A fourth question will inevitably be asked of this reviewer, and so I shall state and answer it: what does any of this have to do with Trump? The facile, but not false, response is that the chief magistrate, elected by the whole people, always has something to do with the regime. But in Trump’s case, more so than usual.

He did not run, and has not governed, as an explicit avenger of the founders’ vision. Then again, unlike all of his recent predecessors, neither does he misuse the language of natural rights to justify policies inconsistent with, and even diametrically opposed to, that vision.

Yet, like the founders, Trump is trying to address the crises of his time. Trump has finally smashed the “three-legged stool” of “fusionism” and replaced it with one that addresses the problems of today. On Trump’s core issues—immigration, trade, and foreign policy—he is closer to the founders than he is to approved opinion in the uniparty.

On Trump’s core issues he is closer to the founders than he is
The three legs of Trump’s stool do not merely meet the exigencies of our time; they also share an essential connectivity that the original lacked. For, contrary to the President’s left-wing enemies and their NeverTrump enablers, he has a political theory—at least implicitly or unconsciously—and his is closer to the founders’ than to any politician’s in recent memory. One can hear the incredulous sniggering. “Did he really just write ‘Trump’ and ‘political theory’ in the same sentence without irony?”

For those who can move beyond the laughter, consider that the three pillars of the founders’ political theory are consent (the social compact), the securing of equal natural rights (government’s sole just function), and “safety and happiness,” the ends for which government exists. In other words, to protect the people from dangers, foreign and domestic, so that they may freely and happily enjoy their equal natural rights.

Trump’s agenda is consistent with all three. He insists that only the consent of the whole people can legitimize not just immigration, but also laws and regulations. He understands that the property rights of Americans cannot, in a globalized economy, withstand predatory trade practices from abroad. He intuits that the “separate and equal station” nature demands for all nations requires a fundamental recalibration of America’s expansive and ambitious foreign policy. To these three one may add his equally emphatic insistence on law enforcement—at the border, in trade relations, and in local communities—to protect the people’s safety and happiness.

More than this, unlike our elites, Trump knows in his bones that life is better than death, that the survival of any community—and especially a political community—depends on the willingness of its leaders to stand up for its members. One does not need recourse to natural right to understand this, though this natural impulse is one of the roots of natural right.

All of this is not merely consistent with but indispensable to an older, better, truer understanding of how government ought to work. The way forward is in some respects the way back. What Trump has done politically—open a window for restoration, for progress and return—West has done philosophically.

The hour is late, success uncertain—just as it was for the American founders, who pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to a just yet dangerous cause. West quotes Aristotle that “the first one who founded a city was the cause of great goods.” The American founders were the cause of the greatest goods for the American nation. Our great task is to match not only their courage, but their wisdom and prudence, in order to revive what they bequeathed to us, lest the glory of America be extinguished forever.

1 The Political Theory of the American Founding, by Thomas G. West; Cambridge University Press, 428 pages,
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