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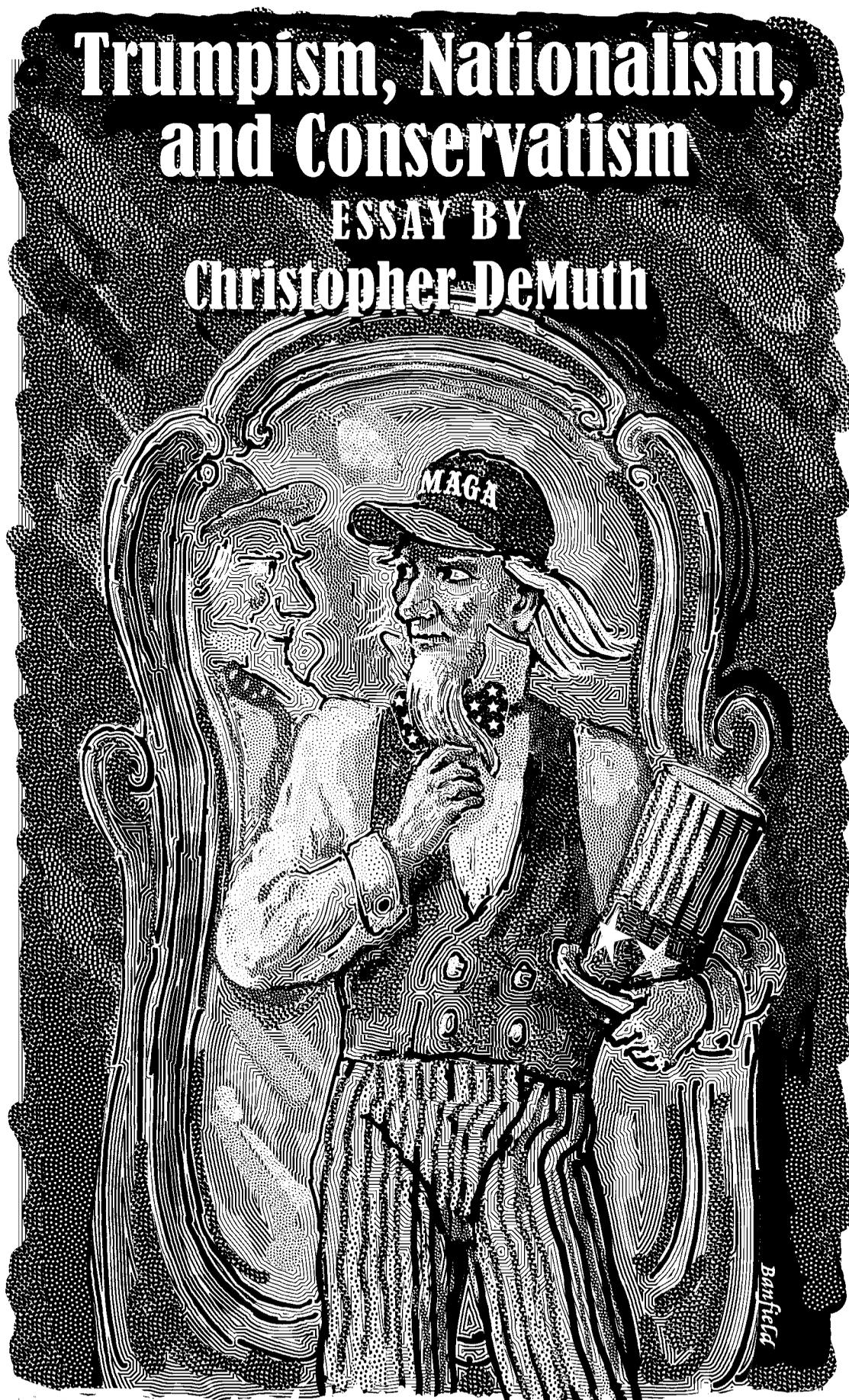
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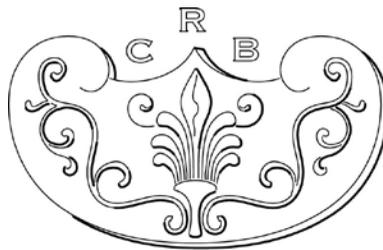
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Essay by William Voegeli

CONSERVATISM AFTER TRUMP

LESS THAN SEVEN MONTHS AFTER PRESIDENT Trump's inauguration, conservative pundit William Kristol called for "liberating...conservatism from Trumpism"—a battle cry that treats conservatism and Trumpism as separate entities, impossible to reconcile or synthesize. To ask whether that premise is sound raises a question that is difficult, interesting and, above all, important. For many years to come, conservatism's fortunes and meaning will turn on how conservatives interpret Donald Trump's political career.

The first step, however, is to reflect on the meaning of their cause prior to, and apart from, Trump. Two hundred years ago, following the chaos unleashed by the French Revolution, people began to describe the fundamental political antagonism as "liberalism" versus "conservatism." There has been conflict and confusion over the two terms' meaning ever since. There is an asymmetry, however: only "liberalism" has a clear referent. Liberals promote liberty, even as they disagree among themselves and with their opponents about what it encompasses and requires.

To declare oneself a conservative, on the other hand, is to employ a verb without providing its direct object. What, exactly, does conservatism exist to conserve? And whatever those objects of its solicitude might be, why

must they be conserved, rather than being able to fend for themselves?

Precarious

THE ONE CONSTANT FOR CONSERVATIVES, clearly implied by the designation they have chosen, is an acute sense of precariousness. In *How to Be a Conservative* (2014), the English philosopher Roger Scruton says that conservatism originates in "the sentiment that good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created."

This is especially true of the good things that come to us as collective assets: peace, freedom, law, civility, public spirit, the security of property and family life, in all of which we depend on the cooperation of others while having no means singlehandedly to obtain it. In respect of such things, the work of destruction is quick, easy and exhilarating; the work of creation slow, laborious and dull. That is one of the lessons of the twentieth century. It is also one reason why conservatives suffer such a disadvantage when it comes to public opinion. Their position is true but boring, that of their opponents exciting but false.

Conservative policy agendas and philosophical explications, Scruton maintains, all derive from a disposition. For conservatives, "We've never done things that way before" is not a decisive objection, but one that does carry considerable weight. They worry that the more sustained and substantial are the benefits enjoyed under long-standing arrangements, the more we take them for granted. In doing so, we stop comparing our condition favorably with known, existing alternatives, and begin comparing it unfavorably with hypothetical possibilities. On the political supply side, public officials compete to be visionary and idealistic, to promise those transformations that will be the most fundamental. Those citizens increasingly disposed to believe that their glass is half-empty welcome or even demand such boldness.

Scruton's "good things" is, of course, a capacious term, rendered only somewhat more definite by the idea of collective assets dependent on others' cooperation. One result of this indeterminacy is that conservatives never lack for reasons to argue over *which* good things are most valuable, thereby meriting conservation, and most vulnerable, thereby requiring it. A second implication is that conservatism is more explicable in prudential than in essentialist terms. The dangers posed in a particular time and place to those things conservatives



protect mean that conservatism *will* be what the circumstances demand that it *must* be.

A third implication follows from the first two: the fact that conservatism lacks a clear, fixed meaning helps its adversaries explain conservatives' words and deeds in the most sinister terms. Always and everywhere, conservatism is driven by "animus against the agency of the subordinate classes," according to political scientist Corey Robin's *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (2017). Seeking a rationale for why the poor, women, or ethnic and religious minorities "should not be allowed to exercise their independent will," conservatism amounts to nothing more than "a meditation on—and theoretical rendition of—the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back." Robin regards "the right as a unity," going so far as to insist that the differences among Edmund Burke, John Calhoun, Winston Churchill, Phyllis Schlafly, and Donald Trump are trivial. The only consideration that really matters, and defines them all as conservatives, is the shared desire to thwart those seeking their place in the sun.

Saving Liberalism from Itself

THIS SWEEPING AMALGAMATION ASCRIBES to all subsequent conservative politics the earliest conservatives' categorical rejection of liberalism, expressed most forcefully by Joseph de Maistre, implacable opponent of the French Revolution. Such "throne-and-altar" conservatives repudiated modernity in toto: the separation of church and state; accountable, representative government; individuals' rights to make up their own minds and follow their own paths. Applying the preference for the familiar over the novel in the broadest way, these conservatives interpreted the fact that liberal democracy had never even been attempted prior to the 18th century as a warning to be heeded rather than a challenge to be met.

Defenders of monarchic and papal supremacy had been on the defensive for a century prior to the storming of the Bastille, however, and neither the Reign of Terror nor the Napoleonic wars allowed them to regain the upper hand. As a practical matter, two centuries of savage warfare between and among Catholics and Protestants had exhausted Europe, leaving it newly receptive to addressing political disputes without having to settle religious ones. The ideas that governmental authority was conferred by the people, not the mandate of Heaven, and that people of different faiths could live in civic union but creedal diversity, offered a way out of this dilemma.

More basically, the advent and spread of Christianity had caused a "fundamental transformation in the human condition," according to Harry V. Jaffa, from "a world in which each city had its own god—to one in which there was but one God for the human race." It took more than 17 centuries, but the radical innovation of severing temporal from ecclesiastical authority finally reshaped both

in the broad ideas of popular sovereignty, the liberty of the individual, and constitutional rights." Rather than save the *ancien régime* from liberalism, the conservative mission became to save liberalism from itself. That is, instead of worrying exclusively about liberalism's enemies, liberals should—although they mostly don't—also worry about liberalism's self-destructive proclivities to undermine the foundations on which democracy, liberty, and constitutionalism rest.

Consider John Stuart Mill, the foremost 19th-century liberal theoretician. It's significant that Mill believed liberal democracy was the only completely defensible form of sociopolitical organization, but also that it was not self-generating. "Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion," he wrote in *On Liberty*. Accordingly, he considered benevolent despotism the least bad way to govern and civilize "barbarians." Yet Mill also believed that liberalism, once established, would be self-sustaining: "But as soon as mankind have attained the capacity of being guided to their own improvement by conviction or persuasion... compulsion... is no longer admissible as a means to their own good, and justifiable only for the security of others" (emphases added).

The conservative is far less sanguine about progress being irreversible. Instead, he considers civilization to be something "laboriously achieved" but only "precariously defended," as novelist Evelyn Waugh wrote in 1964. (Twenty-five years earlier Waugh had warned that barbarism "is never finally defeated," which means that civilization "is under constant assault," requiring "most of the energies of civilized man to keep going at all.") The result of these ineradicable dangers, and liberalism's blithe complacency about them, is that the conservative considers liberals "gullible and feeble," in Waugh's account, "believing in the easy perfectibility of man and ready to abandon the work of centuries for sentimental qualms." Georges Clemenceau said that war is too important to be left to the generals; conservatives think liberty too important to be entrusted to liberals.

After the Cold War

THE DISARRAY ABOUT THE MEANING and boundaries of conservatism did not, then, commence with Donald Trump's famous escalator ride in June 2015. Rather, that event followed two decades of far-ranging but fruitless efforts to reorient conservatism. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, five years

Books discussed in this essay:

How to Be a Conservative,
by Roger Scruton.
Bloomsbury Continuum,
208 pages, \$25 (paper)

*The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism
from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*,
by Corey Robin. Oxford University Press,
354 pages, \$74 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper)

*Conservatism: An Invitation to the
Great Tradition*, by Roger Scruton.
All Points Books, 176 pages, \$24.99

The Case for Trump,
by Victor Davis Hanson.
Basic Books, 400 pages, \$30

*Donald J. Trump: A President
Like No Other*, by Conrad Black.
Regnery Publishing, 256 pages, \$27.99

How the Right Lost Its Mind,
by Charles J. Sykes.
St. Martin's Press, 288 pages, \$27.99

*The Corrosion of Conservatism: Why
I Left the Right*, by Max Boot.
Liveright, 288 pages, \$24.95

*Trumpocracy: The Corruption of
the American Republic*, by David Frum.
Harper, 320 pages, \$25.99 (cloth),
\$17.99 (paper)

politics and religion. If legitimacy could not come from God above, it could only derive from the people below.

In the ensuing recalibration of conservatism, "the dispute between liberals and conservatives would emerge in its modern form," according to Roger Scruton's latest book, *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition*. Thereafter, the debates took place "with-



before a Democratic president declared that the era of Big Government was over and signed a bill abolishing the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. Conservatives took pride in these Reaganite victories for limited against unlimited government, but also felt that liberal democracy remained in jeopardy.

Writing in 1993, Irving Kristol forcefully conveyed the sense of continuing and even heightened danger: "There is no 'after the Cold War' for me. So far from having ended, my cold war has increased in intensity, as sector after sector of American life has been ruthlessly corrupted by the liberal ethos." Less clear, however, was the nature of the peril and the way to defeat it. The liberal ethos, Kristol wrote, "aims simultaneously at political and social collectivism on the one hand, and moral anarchy on the other."

Twenty-two years later, very little flesh had been put on these bones, though not for lack of trying. The roster of reformulated conservative mission statements include: Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America"; "national greatness" conservatism; George W. Bush's "ownership society" and "compassionate conservatism"; a "war on terrorism" conceived to require establishing stable democracies in the Middle East; Paul Ryan's "roadmaps" to make entitlement programs solvent; the Tea Party movement; and "reform conservatism." Many of these efforts offered valuable insights, but all turned out to be either too unclear, too unpopular, or both, to frame a 21st-century conservatism that would be intellectually and politically formidable.

Trump, Considered

THE INTRA-CONSERVATIVE DEBATE OVER Trumpism is not only bound up with those over conservatism, but also with the debate about Trump himself. Even *The Case for Trump*, by historian and Hoover Institution scholar Victor Davis Hanson, calls the president "mercurial" on its first page, a judgment repeated several times. Elsewhere in the book, Hanson says that Trump can be "vulgar, uncouth, [and] divisive," and that many of his Twitter broadsides have been counterproductive. For the sake of "evening scores with non-entities," he laments, the president ends up "furthering a media narrative that he was isolated, petulant, puerile, and erratic." In an October 2016 *National Review* article, also titled "The Case for Trump," Hanson wrote that he preferred all 16 of the other Republican candidates to Trump at the outset of the nominating contest, but ultimately concluded that Trump had shown himself likely to be Hillary Clinton's toughest general-election opponent.

Unlike Hanson, who has never met the president, Conrad Black knows him well. A businessman as well as an author, Black recounts tough but fair, forthright, and mutually beneficial business dealings with Trump before he entered politics. (Chicago's Trump International Hotel and Tower was erected on a site owned by the *Chicago Sun-Times* when Black was its publisher.) Yet even in a book so supportive as *Donald J. Trump: A President Like No Other*, Black at one point describes Trump the businessman as "a tight-fisted, devious employer, a very tenacious litigant, and an efficient and imaginative developer." As a politician, Trump has proven to be "unpredictable and somewhat erratic," a leader whose "stridency and ill-tempered outbursts are not what Americans expect of their presidents."

These measured evaluations of Trump are, of course, quite unlike the ones made by his conservative detractors. In *How the Right Lost Its Mind*, author and former radio talk-show host Charles J. Sykes derides Trump as "a serial liar, a con man who mocks the disabled and women...a narcissist and a bully, a man with no fixed principles who has the vocabulary of an emotionally insecure nine-year-old." Max Boot, *Washington Post* columnist and advisor to Republican Senator Marco Rubio's 2016 presidential campaign, uses some of the same terms in *The Corrosion of Conservatism: Why I Left the Right*, castigating Trump as a "bigoted bully" with "few fixed convictions outside of narcissism and nativism, racism and sexism." *Atlantic* columnist David Frum's *Trumpocracy* calls Trump "cruel, vengeful, egoistic, ignorant, lazy, avaricious, and treacherous."

Hanson's observation that Trump's critics "despise rather than just oppose him" is especially true of his conservative detractors. After all, left-of-center politicians and writers have a cry-wolf problem when anathematizing Trump, since so many of them also despised rather than simply opposed Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, and George W. Bush. The conservatives who detest Trump cannot be discounted so easily. The intensity of their loathing takes the form of using Trump's odiousness to make a prima facie case against allowing conservatism to be defined and defiled by him. A movement associated with, much less led by, such a man is one the "Never Trump" conservatives reject as bankrupt, intellectually and morally.

Never Trumpism

WHERE THAT REPUDIATION LEAVES the Never Trumpers with respect to conservatism is a harder question. One can imagine some of them reenlist-

ing as conservatives after the Trump presidential library and museum has opened at Mar-a-Lago. Both Sykes and Frum conclude their books by sketching the qualities needed for a post-Trump conservatism, one that "can not only win elections but also govern responsibly," in Frum's words. Their diagnoses are similar: they agree that conservatism's problems predated Trump, and both are particularly critical of Fox News and conservative talk-radio for, as they see it, affording their audiences a parallel universe tenuously connected to the one other Americans inhabit.

Notably, when he still thought Hillary Clinton was going to win the 2016 general election, Frum's *Atlantic* articles called for conservatives to incorporate a good deal of Trump's message, while continuing to treat him as a very bad messenger. For all his "many faults and flaws," Frum wrote four weeks before Election Day, Trump "saw things that were true and important," things most Republicans did not see or refused to acknowledge. These included: the need to get serious about controlling immigration; to stand up for the "deplorables" denounced as bigots by the politically correct; and to realize that many more Republican voters are employees than entrepreneurs. As such, these citizens' sense of vulnerability and fairness dictates accepting that "the social-insurance state has arrived to stay."

Frum even had a good explanation for why Trump's supporters found his obnoxiousness inspiring, not embarrassing. To voters constantly aware of being disrespected, like the Irish in James Curley's Boston, Italians in Frank Rizzo's Philadelphia, or blacks in Marion Barry's Washington, D.C., it's at the very least satisfying to elect a leader who antagonizes your antagonists. Told again and again about their imminent, inevitable demographic decline, Trump's voters decided "to start acting like a minority," in Frum's words. "We're going to vote like a bloc, and we're going to vote for our bloc's champion. So long as he keeps faith with us against you, we'll keep faith with him against you."

Max Boot, on the other hand, does not appear to have any kind of conservative future, since he has come to be ashamed of his conservative past. What's wrong with Donald Trump, Boot believes, is not that he betrayed conservatism but that he embodied it. Boot, in other words, now shares the opinion of leftists like Corey Robin that Trump's rottenness is of one piece with conservatism's. "Upon closer examination," he writes, "it's obvious that the whole history of modern conservatism is permeated with racism, extremism, conspiracy-mongering, ignorance,

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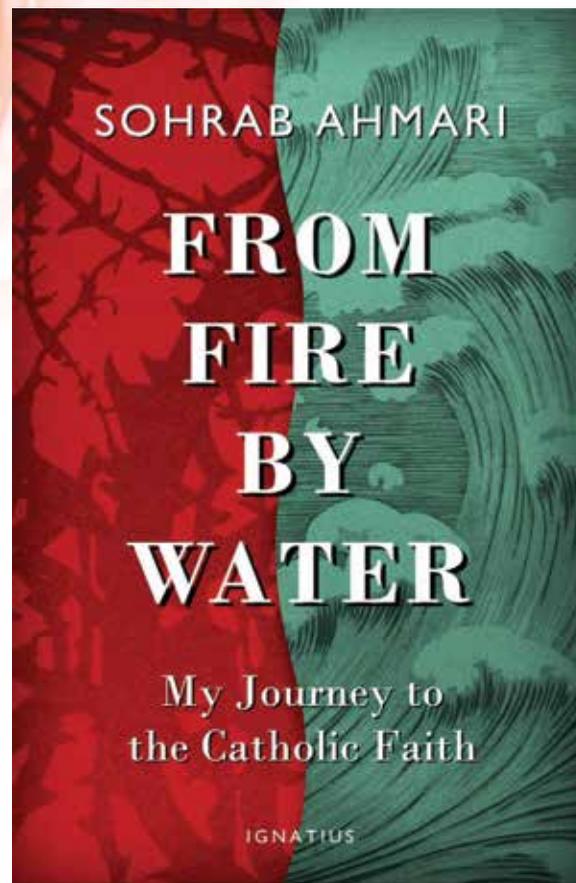
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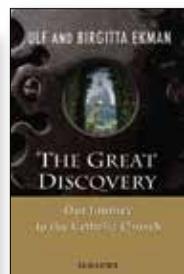
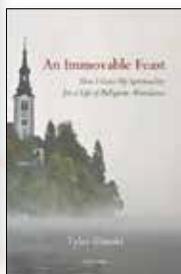
Sohrab Ahmari is the op-ed editor of the *New York Post* and a contributing editor of the *Catholic Herald*. Previously he served as a columnist and editor with the *Wall Street Journal* opinion pages, and as senior writer at *Commentary* magazine. His work has also been published in the *New York Times*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *Weekly Standard*, *First Things*, *Dissent*, and *America*.

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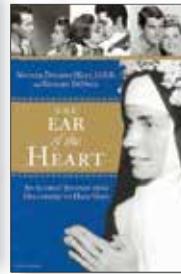
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isolationism, and know-nothingism.” Conservatism lost its way at the very beginning of the journey, in the 1950s, when it should have embraced Dwight Eisenhower’s “Modern Republicanism” rather than scorn it as capitulation to the New Deal and the anti-Soviet containment policy.

The Trump Treatment

CONRAD BLACK’S CASE FOR TRUMP AND Trumpism is virtually identical to the case Trump made for himself as a candidate, not only substantively but expressed with the same direct, emphatic style: America had been governed so badly, for so many years prior to 2016, that it was far less reckless to choose a completely different kind of president than it was to pick yet another member of the same discredited governing class, whether a Republican like Jeb Bush or a Democrat like Hillary Clinton. Once in office, Trump began “slowly winning his tumultuous crusade against political correctness and systematic defeatism in foreign and domestic policy,” according to Black. Above all, Trump has “promoted Americanism over the atomization of identity politics” while pursuing the country’s national interest without “evangelical or Wilsonian notions of purifying other countries.”

Victor Davis Hanson’s argument has more facets. Indeed, *The Case for Trump* presents what would be more accurately described as a case for Trump. When Hanson asks whether Trump is better understood as “a clumsy buffoon who said the first thing that came into his one-dimensional mind” or “a multidimensional strategic thinker who liked to bait and goad elites, as a mockery for others to enjoy,” it doesn’t appear to be a rhetorical question. A chapter titled “Trump, The Tragic Hero?” suggests—note the question mark—that Trump is one of those necessary but unassimilable figures identified by George Orwell: “men can be highly civilized only while other men, inevitably less civilized, are there to guard and feed them.” Hanson offers examples from ancient literature (Achilles in *The Iliad*), film (Gary Cooper in *High Noon* and Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*), and military history (George Patton and Curtis LeMay). The tragedy is such figures’ awareness “that the natural expression of their personas can lead only to their own destruction or ostracism from an advancing civilization that they seek to protect,” Hanson writes. “And yet they willingly accept the challenge to be of service.”

The Case for Trump offers, less equivocally, a different analogy: nominating and electing Donald Trump is like chemotherapy—the ef-

fects are nauseating or even debilitating but, in the circumstances, any milder remedy will allow the patient to die. The power of that argument depends on the accuracy of the diagnosis. In October 2016 Hanson wrote that Hillary Clinton’s victory would not be just another turn of the wheel, but would consummate the fundamental transformation promised by Barack Obama over 12 or 16 years of uninterrupted Democratic administrations. “A likely two-term Clinton presidency would complete a 16-year institutionalization of serial progressive abuse of the Constitution,” he wrote.

David Frum, writing the same month, made the opposite judgment: it was madness to resort to a drastic remedy to avert a manageable problem. Hillary Clinton, he declared, “is a patriot” who will “uphold the sovereignty and independence of the United States,” “defend allies,” and “execute the laws with reasonable impartiality.” A vote for her amounted to a vote to defend America’s “commitment to norms and rules that today

The fact that the
Never Trump effort
has gotten much
attention but little traction
strongly suggests it
is quixotic rather
than noble.

protect my rights under a president I don’t favor, and that will tomorrow do the same service for you.” Elect her opponent, and “those norms and rules will shudder and shake in a way unequalled since the Union won the Civil War.”

Malignant or Benign

WE CANNOT KNOW WHETHER the Clinton presidency Trump’s election prevented would have proven as malignant as Hanson feared or as benign as Frum expected. We do know, however, the direction of the Democratic Party, before, during, and after her campaign. It forced Clinton to move steadily to the left from the day she announced her candidacy, to the point that she and her husband spent more time apologizing for his administration’s triangulations on crime, race, welfare, taxes, spending, and regulation than they did boasting of his achievements.

And we know that since Trump’s victory the Democrats have been “The Resistance,” not the opposition party. As a result, the hectoring self-righteousness that grievance studies professors display in faculty senates is now an increasingly common feature of the U.S. Senate. Thus, Judiciary Committee hearings on a Supreme Court nominee became a venue for the same contempt for procedural fairness and epistemological humility as a campus sexual harassment tribunal run by the campus Women’s Center’s Grand Inquisitors.

By the same token, had President Hillary Clinton placed two new Justices on the Supreme Court, they would have joined the four nominated by her husband and President Obama to form a sturdy liberal majority. In a 2014 campaign finance case three Justices joined Steven Breyer’s dissenting opinion, which held that the First Amendment exists not to secure inalienable rights but so that “public opinion could be channeled into effective governmental action.” With two more votes, the idea that rights should be calibrated according to whether they satisfied jurists’ ideas about what constitutes effective governance would have formed the basis for majority opinions. By the same token, there would be enough votes to enshrine Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s opinion that “race matters.” Indeed, in *Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action* (2014) she ruled it matters so much that a state cannot abolish affirmative action policies, even if a majority of the state’s voters have already voted for a referendum to end preferences.

In short, a commitment to norms and rules protecting the rights of those not allied with the Democrats appears to be weakening steadily within the party, the continuation of a trend that predated Donald Trump’s political career. If conservatism must adapt to meet the changing threats to liberal democracy, then it has no choice but to be preoccupied with American liberalism’s menacing evolution. Waugh’s claim that liberals are gullible and feeble, complacently unaware of the threats to liberty, needs to be modified to account for the ways that liberalism has itself become such a threat.

A 2018 *New York Times* article, for example, lamented that conservatives have “weaponized” the First Amendment, whose defense was once the *raison d’être* of liberal activists in general, and the American Civil Liberties Union in particular. Though he used to have “the standard liberal view of civil liberties,” one law professor explained, he has now come to realize “that it’s a mistake to think of free speech as an effective means to accomplish a more just society.” The Occam’s Razor explanation for this shift is that free speech “was only ever a means to an end” for liberals, in

the words of law professor and blogger Ann Althouse. “When they got their free speech, made their arguments, and failed to win over the American people, and when in fact the speech from their opponents seemed too successful, they switched to the repression of speech, because *the end was never freedom.*”

The Evolving Threat

ALSO EVOLVING, AND ALSO REQUIRING conservatives’ close attention, is the liberal understanding of what a just society demands. Any conservative who lives long enough will eventually be astounded by the need to defend propositions long considered self-evident. The idea that Western civilization is a real and good thing, whose preservation is necessary to hopes for a better future, is one of these. That human beings are either men or women is another.

Trumpism is especially forceful in upholding a third: the nation-state is the best, most workable basis for sovereignty in the modern world. The growing liberal challenge to this belief treats the nation-state as both dangerous and irrelevant. In its stead, the political attachments that do and should matter are either transnational, the core tenet of globalism, or subnational, the core tenet of multiculturalism. In these circumstances, writes Scruton in *Conservatism*, conservatives have found it necessary to remind that “governments are elected by a specific people in a specific place,” and to insist on “the defence of the homeland, the maintenance of national borders, and the unity and integrity of the nation.”

Scruton goes on to contend that popular sovereignty is impossible, logically and practically, without national sovereignty. That is, “accountability is possible only if the electorate is bound together as a ‘we.’ Only if this ‘we’ is in place can the people trust the politicians to look after their interests.” By way of attacking Trump and his followers, Charles Sykes declares that the “rejection of populism runs deep in the conservative tradition.” But that assessment is selective and mostly wrong. It has, after all, been nearly 60 years since William Buckley declared, “I should sooner live in a society governed by the first 2,000 names in the Boston telephone directory than in a society governed by the 2,000 faculty members of Harvard University.” In doing so, Buckley

deftly captured what is best about populism and worst about progressivism: governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, not the expertise of the experts.

Leverage

CLEARLY, MORE THAN AN AVERSION TO the president’s bearing and character drives the Never Trump conservatives. Trump has spent his adult life identifying and making the most of situations where he has *leverage*, power to help or hurt partners, lenders, or adversaries exceeding their power to help or hurt him. And he has done it again. Conservatives know Trump does not need the conservative movement, least of all its intelligentsia, and has little reason to fear it. *National Review* devoted most of its February 15, 2016 issue to denouncing him, a widely discussed event that proved utterly inconsequential. Unlike Reagan, then, Trump is neither a product of the conservative movement nor a president who considers its well-being among his responsibilities.

So, how should conservatives play their weak hand? The Never Trump answer is that after years of obsessive-compulsive political hygiene, the conservative movement emerging from the other side of the Trump presidency can credibly deny complicity with his failures and affronts. There are several reasons to believe this approach makes the worst of a bad situation. For one, Trumpism has both a constituency and a stunning win to its credit, unlike all the other efforts to reformulate conservatism for the post-Cold War era. The *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, one of the leading reform conservatives, once called Trumpism, with its focus on working-class needs and fears, reform conservatism’s “evil twin.” He later acknowledged that it could also be described as reform conservatism’s “more politically successful twin.” Defenestrating Trumpism in favor of one of the options that predated it now entails violating one of the most basic conservative principles, as summarized by Thomas Sowell: don’t replace one thing that works with a different thing that sounds good.

Moreover, the Never Trump effort, now in its fourth year, has been procedurally unfair and politically obtuse. Run a two-party democracy in a diverse nation of 328 million people, and each party will necessarily be a broad,

ungainly coalition. No major party can cohere if one big part of it has good reason to believe that it is expected to endorse decisions made by others, but never be allowed to have its own position prevail. As Hanson points out in *The Case for Trump*, the Trump Republican voters dutifully supported Mitt Romney and John McCain as the party’s nominees, despite well-founded doubts about both men’s commitment to conservatism and ability to defeat Barack Obama.

Donald Trump won the nomination contest by the same rules as all his GOP opponents, which would only have intensified his followers’ bitterness if the Never Trump efforts to thwart his nomination, election, and presidency had somehow succeeded. The fact that, after all this time, the Never Trump effort has gotten much attention but little traction does not prove it is wrong, but strongly suggests that it is imprudent—quixotic rather than noble. As Max Boot concedes about the Never Trumpers, “There’s enough of us for a dinner party, not a political party.”

The challenge, then, is not to liberate conservatism from Trumpism in the belief that the latter “poses an existential threat to the conservative vision of ordered liberty,” as Sykes asserts. Nor is it to exchange conservatism for Trumpism. It is, rather, to elaborate a conservatism for the 21st century that integrates Trumpism by absorbing what Donald Trump’s nomination and election have revealed—about America and about the shortcomings of the conservative movement and argument prior to his entry into politics. (Elsewhere in this issue, Christopher DeMuth provides an invaluable first draft of that synthesis.)

The task would have been much the same if Trump had lost in 2016, but it’s one now complicated by the president’s volatility and aversion to message discipline. Steven Hayward says that President Trump has often been his own worst enemy, which is an impressive accomplishment for a man whose enemies are so numerous, and hate him so intensely. The rise of Donald Trump has presented conservatives with new opportunities and insights, but also unprecedented challenges. The best version of Trumpism may end up being fashioned after Trump’s presidency rather than through it.

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