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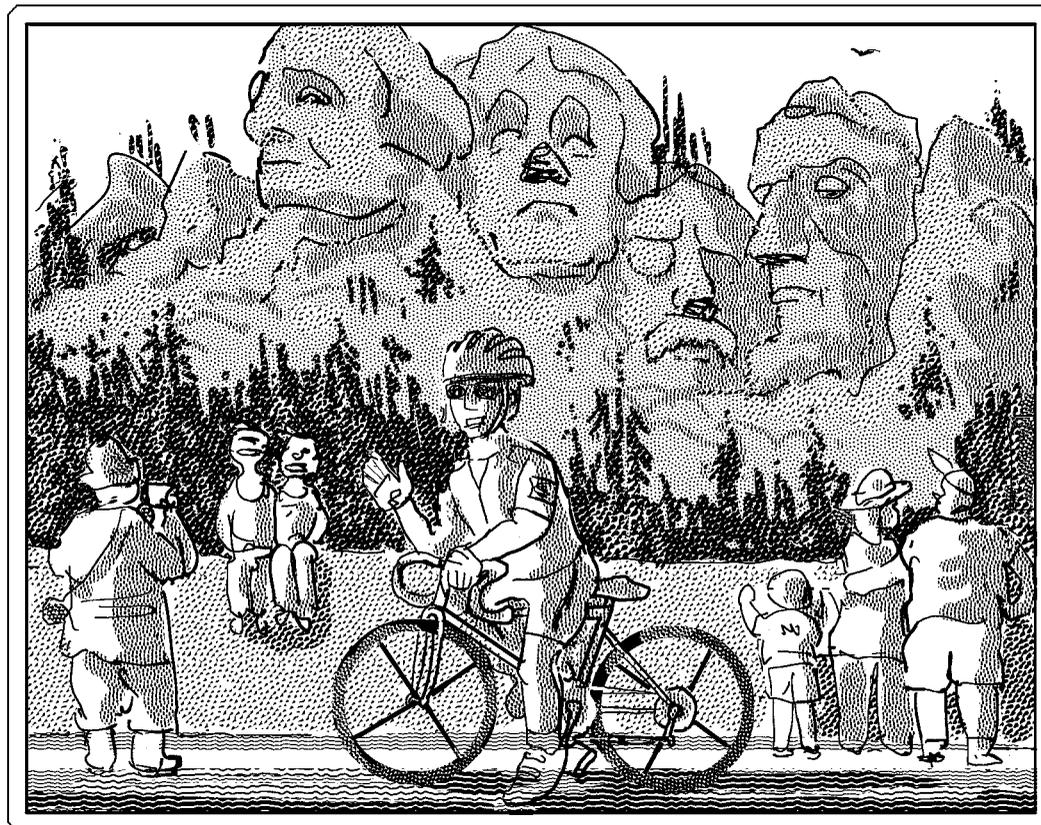
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Essay by Robert R. Reilly

FOR GOD AND COUNTRY



DO HER PRINCIPLES DOOM AMERICA to moral and cultural decline? The question is hardly new. More than two decades ago, Professor John A. Guegan, participating in a conference reflecting on Jesuit priest John Courtney Murray's book *We Hold These Truths* (1960), condemned the American Founding for "the philosophical errors that are embedded in the American civil religion." The task for Christians, he said, should be to destroy the "erroneous philosophy of man and society which underlies the American Proposition and the currently reigning gnosis of pragmatism and positivism which grew out of that philosophy." In other words, the American Founding was a poison pill with a time-release formula. We are its victims.

This view has been gaining strength among Christians. Witness the recent *New York Times* bestseller *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* by Rod Dreher, who assumes that the American "purpose of government is to liberate the autonomous individual." What this means, as he states elsewhere, is that "[t]he summum bonum of our American civil religion is maximizing the opportunities

for individuals to express and satisfy their desires—a belief that orthodox Christianity by nature opposes." A broad range of Christians has endorsed *The Benedict Option*, from the Catholic archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles J. Chaput, to such notable figures in the Southern Baptist Convention as Russell Moore.

There is, in other words, a growing faith-based critique of the founding, based on premises accepted almost offhandedly by many of its followers, including Dreher. We would do well to examine these premises by looking at the critique's leading theoreticians. Two thinkers frequently referred to by Dreher as authorities are Patrick Deneen, an associate professor of constitutional studies at the University of Notre Dame, who previously taught for many years at Georgetown, and Michael Hanby, a scholar at the Vatican's Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family. Both are major contributors to *First Things* magazine and prominent members of the conservative Catholic cadre that holds to the poison-pill thesis. Deneen thinks the founding is based upon a lie about humanity, a false anthropology. Hanby believes that the founding is based on an er-

ror about the nature of reality, a false metaphysics. Their arguments, considered together, provide the central elements of the poison-pill case, which is why writers like Dreher invoke them sympathetically.

Scorning America

MURRAY HAD INSISTED THAT THE American Founders

thought...the life of man in society under government is founded on truths, on a certain body of objective truth, universal in its import, accessible to the reason of man, definable, defensible. If this assertion is denied, the American Proposition is, I think, eviscerated at one stroke.

This is exactly the assertion that Deneen and Hanby do deny, with the consequences Murray predicted. He would find this development ironic. Murray had expected that if the growing forces of voluntarism (meaning law as will rather than reason) further imperiled the founding, the "guardianship of the original American consensus, based on



the Western heritage, would have passed to the Catholic community, within which the heritage was elaborated long before America was." By this, he meant that the natural law tradition within the Catholic Church, going back to the Middle Ages, was strong enough to resist modern corrosives, and a return to it might be possible, led by American Catholic intellectuals steeped in that tradition.

This is exactly what should have happened in light of what Murray called "the evident coincidence of the principles which inspired the American Republic with the principles that are structural to the Western Christian political tradition." Thinkers such as George Weigel and the late Michael Novak did indeed follow this path. These principles did not align coincidentally, of course, since one set was born of the other. It apparently did not occur to Murray, however, that some Catholic intellectuals would do the opposite—*refuse* the guardianship because they disavowed the paternity.

Why have these Catholics repudiated the founding? Perhaps the single most significant reason is their urgent need to explain the increasingly precipitous decline in America's cultural and moral life. The policies that many Christians (and others) find most repugnant and hostile to their religion or basic sense of decency, such as abortion, pornography, and same-sex "marriage," are publicly put forth as essential parts, even *requirements*, of the American Proposition. Think only of Justice Anthony Kennedy's opinion in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) that "Liberty presumes an autonomy of self that includes freedom of thought, belief, expression, and certain intimate conduct," which he used to advance sodomy as a constitutional right. Or in his notorious statement in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) that "[a]t the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." If Kennedy is right, it is no wonder, then, that an increasing number of Christians suspect that the fault is in our founding principles themselves.

Ironically, Deneen and Hanby are in full agreement with Justice Kennedy as to what the founding holds. Kennedy sees radical autonomy there, and so do they. The only difference is that they excoriate it, while Kennedy celebrates it. They all agree as to its substance and source. But Kennedy and his judicial colleagues *fabricated* an "autonomy of self" out of the Constitution's penumbras.

Where do Deneen and Hanby locate the presence of this radical autonomy in the American Founding? Their evidence for it is negligible. Deneen has asserted online that

the founding was based on "a relativistic philosophy." Otherwise, he asks, "If we are to believe that the American founding represents the culmination of a long and unbroken tradition that stretches back to Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Aquinas, then how did that tradition disintegrate so quickly?" In fact, it didn't.

Around the time of Murray's book, Leo Strauss pointed out that "unqualified relativism" was characteristic "of Western thought *in general*" (emphasis added). Indeed, no Catholic country has withstood it and most of them, like Italy and Spain, are in worse shape than the U.S. Why has America proven more stalwart? Why was it the principal redoubt against Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, both of which embodied the voluntarism that Murray decried? And why does America today remain by far the strongest force against the contemporary expression of voluntarism in Islam? Though the United States is obviously not incapable of wholesale defection from the laws of nature, its greatest chance of recovery lies in returning to its principles, not in jettisoning them.

But Deneen says that "we have today more the country that springs from our political DNA than one that doesn't." That DNA is primarily Lockean, which, according to Deneen, accounts for the perverted "autonomy of self" we see. In a recent *First Things* article, "Moral Minority" (April 2017), he states that the practical consequences of the founders' definition of liberty "were long obscured by the fact that Americans had a rich and sustaining Christian culture that was older and deeper than the political structure.... Over time, our political order would shape our culture, or more accurately, it would eliminate traditional culture in favor of a liberal anti-culture." Thus, Deneen does not speak of "the betrayal of our political origins, but the fulfillment of [their] logic."

This indictment leads Deneen to question the very basis of American republicanism: "To have allegiance even to this mixed Constitutional founding is ultimately to declare allegiance to the trajectory of radical autonomy and individualism." Can a Christian give such allegiance? If the American proposition is not only hostile to Christianity but in fact the product of its denial, he cannot. Abortionists, pornographers, and same-sex "marriage" proponents can legitimately claim, if Deneen is correct, that "the founding made me do it." On this basis they can *require* our approval of their behavior, the legal enforcement of which is now working its way through the court system.

Therefore, says Deneen, "I increasingly fear that Americans will have to break with

America, and seek to re-found the nation on better truths—ones that have perhaps never been self-evident, but rather hard-won, and which are far better than our philosophy and increasingly better than ourselves." In his new book, *Conserving America?: Essays on Present Discontents*, he states that these better truths must be "explicitly in departure from the philosophic principles that animated its liberal founding...to build a new civilization worthy of preservation." Is there not anything worth saving in the American Founding? Deneen conveys how comprehensively he scorns America by proffering this parallel: "[Vaclav] Havel did not appeal to the better version of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia or seek to reform it from within, but to 'expose its unstable foundations' by refusing to pretend that its lies were true."

Deneen's views recall William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist who believed that the U.S. Constitution was a "covenant with Death, an Agreement with Hell." For Garrison, solving the problem of slavery required eliminating the Constitution, copies of which he publicly burned. To cure today's ills, Deneen calls for replacing, not improving the American Founding—though he never says what exactly should supplant it, a crippling omission. Both Garrison and Deneen fail to understand that the founding principles themselves are the strongest case against such public moral corruptions as slavery and abortion.

Misquoting Madison

WHERE IN THE FOUNDING ITSELF can Deneen locate the malign principles that render it unworthy of preservation? Deneen repeatedly cites James Madison in *Federalist* No. 10 as evidence that the American regime is based upon a notion of radical individual autonomy. *Conserving America?* states, "'The first object of government,' writes Madison in *Federalist* 10, 'is the protection of the diversity in the faculties of men.'" Deneen concludes:

The political order exists to permit, even positively encourage, humans to differentiate themselves by their choices with near infinite variety, unfettered by limitations of family circumstance, geographic accident, undesired citizenship, unwanted religious identity, and increasingly—as we now see—even gender or any other form of identity that would suggest some form of external limitation on our shaping of selfhood.



That certainly loads a great deal on Madison's shoulders...even transgenderism! What's more, "only when individuals are rootless, culture-less, history-less and context-less—depersonalized and abstracted—do we realize the ends prescribed by our regime. And yet we don't realize that we have been shaped in just this way because we understand our condition to be that of freedom...while the invisible architecture of the regime continues to exert its shaping force." Shaped by this invisible architecture, "The citizenry increasingly conforms to the stated aims of the Constitutional order, its first object being the protection and encouragement of the 'diversity of faculties.'"

Deneen relies heavily on his Madison quotation for a definitive expression of "the ends prescribed by our regime." The only problem is that Madison did not say what Deneen says he said. Deneen cobbles together parts of two sentences and creates a new one that supports his own critique, creating a Madison strawman to indict the founding. In *Federalist 10*, Madison is talking about minimizing the problems of faction, especially majority factions, in order to preserve the United States. Just after saying that one insuperable problem leading to fac-

tion is the connection between man's "reason and his self-love" he states, "The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests." In other words, "diversity," a simple fact of nature in men's diverse talents, is in the first place a *problem*, not a solution.

Madison never says diversity is something government should positively encourage, as Deneen suggests. A multiplicity of interests (not of factions) can be useful in helping to prevent the formation of a tyrannical majority, Madison emphasizes. But the whole point of *Federalist 10* is to foster consensus out of diversity: *e pluribus unum*. It is Madison's next sentence that declares, "The protection of these faculties is the first object of government." It is the protection of the *faculties* themselves, not of diversity, that is the government's object. By this, Madison means that government protects the free exercise of an individual's abilities.

But Deneen might respond that since people's faculties are, in fact, diverse, isn't Madison in effect calling for the protection of diversity? This objection would be mistaking essence and accident. For instance, men have reason by their nature, i.e., it is *essential*

to them as human beings. But different men have different capacities to reason. The differences, no matter how great—as between a child and an adult—are *accidental*. No one is less human because of a lesser or impaired capacity to reason. Madison makes the object of government the protection of something essential (man's faculties), not of something accidental (the diversity of faculties).

This is the reason Madison *never* uses the phrase "the protection of the diversity in the faculties of men." Deneen creates this phrase and then attributes it to Madison so he can read back into *Federalist 10* Justice Kennedy's views of radical individual autonomy—thus implying a straight line from the founding to today's LGBT "rights."

Deneen has used this fabricated sentence frequently to prove his position. In 2012 he employed it against the idea that the founding was in any way a continuation of premodern natural law thinking. As proof, he promised "the founders' explicit statements." After all, Deneen wrote:

We need only look at their words, most obviously the Lockean basis of the Declaration...but so too to the justifications they offered for the Constitution. In the

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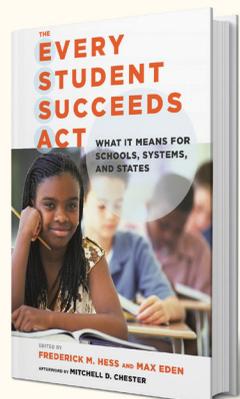
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Edited by Frederick M. Hess and Max Eden

February 23, 2017
Publisher: Harvard Education Press
ISBN: 978-1682530122

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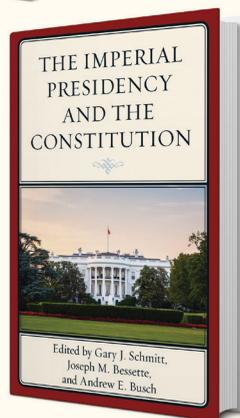
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Edited by Gary J. Schmitt, Joseph M. Bessette, and Andrew E. Busch

March 2, 2017
Publisher: Rowman & Littlefield
ISBN: 978-1-5381-0102-5

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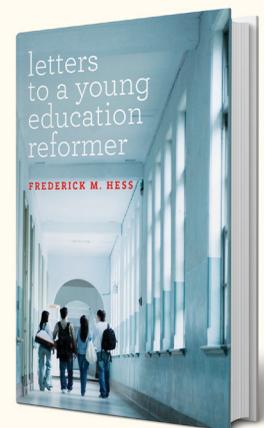
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Frederick M. Hess

April 25, 2017
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ISBN: 978-1682530238

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course of *Federalist* 10, Madison makes the matter plain: ‘the [protection of the] diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate... is the first object of government.’

Here again he mauls what Madison actually said. It is very hard to “look at their words,” if you get their words wrong. (As we have seen, Deneen eventually dropped the brackets, so there remained not even a hint that he had elided two sentences to make a new one.)

Misquotations breed misinterpretations, as when Deneen says, “The pursuit of appetites, in the form of accumulation of property, is understood to be the main activity of individuals, requiring the protection of the government—indeed, forming the ‘first object’ of government.” Since Deneen promises to show “their words,” whose words are these? Madison does not say that the “pursuit of appetites” forms the first object of government. Nor does the Declaration of Independence. In fact, these are Deneen’s words which he takes in effect from Thomas Hobbes and places in the mouths of the founders. Unless the founding was Hobbesian, a subject which we shall address later, this will not work. Nevertheless, he draws the conclusion that “their liberal logic, making protection of sovereign choice and individual appetite the main object of government, leads with nearly inexorable certainty to an outcome such as that we now witness today.”

Harmonizing Sentiments

THIS CONCLUSION REPRESENTS THE opposite of the founders’ logic, since it follows from a travesty rather than a fair representation of the founding. In the absence of “founders’ explicit statements” in support of his argument, Deneen turns to “most obviously the Lockean basis of the Declaration.” But what did the principal author of the Declaration himself say about its basis? In 1825 Jefferson wrote:

Neither aiming at originality of principles or sentiments, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind.... All its authority rests on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.

Closer to the actual time of the Revolution, John Adams said something similar: “These

are what are called revolution principles. They are the principles of Aristotle and Plato, of Livy and Cicero, of Sidney, Harrington and Locke; the principles of nature and eternal reason.”

John Locke is the only one in these groupings who could be read as undermining natural law teleology, due to the epistemology of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Since the other thinkers embraced a more teleological understanding of nature, one can assume that Jefferson and Adams did not read Locke in this way. Otherwise, his presence in their groupings would be completely incongruous. Jefferson could hardly have claimed that the “harmonizing sentiments of the day” included them all together, as such a contradiction could not be harmonized.

When one sets aside Locke’s epistemology and focuses on “public right,” the problem goes away. The modern way of reading Locke, strongly influenced by Leo Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* (1950), is to extract the radical epistemology from the *Essay* and then use it to elicit esoteric teachings from the rest of Locke, including from his earlier

The Declaration’s signers were *not* Hobbesians.

writings on natural law. There is certainly a modern element in Locke but it is neither the only element nor what principally appealed to the founders. They were attracted by those parts of Locke that could be brought into harmony with the thinking of the other sources of public right. It should be remembered that the founders used Locke for *their* purposes; Locke did not use them for his.

Deneen’s misreading of Madison is typical of his overall misunderstanding of the American Founding, but most especially of the Declaration. One startling example is his misinterpretation of its last words: “we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.” Deneen responds by calling this closing “a bit mysterious and incomprehensible.” The “willingness to pledge their lives for the sake of independence,” he says, “is remarkable especially because the first part of the document is based extensively on the political philosophy of John Locke.” More specifically, “Social Contract theory is based on the premise that we value, above all, *self-preservation*—even more than we value our total liberty.”

For Deneen, the pledge of “our sacred honor” is especially incomprehensible since he thinks it is precisely “what they are willing to give up.” But the words don’t mean that they’re *willing* to lose their sacred honor, but that they promise *not* to lose it, as it can only be lost by acting dishonorably. Honor guarantees the pledge only if it is *not* sacrificed. Deneen thinks the signers are putting their prestige at risk, which they will forfeit if the British win, as victors are in charge of reputations.

What is at stake in *sacred* honor, however, is the loss of their very souls, their very selves—something beyond time and space that the British cannot control. At all costs, they refuse to lie about who man is and how he ought to live, i.e., in freedom rather than servility. As Paul Eidelberg explains, “to pledge one’s sacred honor is to affirm, in a most emphatic way, allegiance to one’s publicly proclaimed moral principles.”

Since it is “for the support of this Declaration” that they make their pledge, we may be sure these principles are those spelled out in the first part of the Declaration—the part that Deneen so seriously misreads because he thinks it is really about the Hobbesian social contract. He consequently finds the founders’ willingness to stake their sacred honor “unfathomable.” It’s unfathomable unless one understands that the Declaration’s claims are those of *moral* worth, not mere “self-preservation.”

It is, however, surprising that Deneen failed to see the obvious contradiction in which he was caught. A Hobbesian regime is based upon fear of a violent death. Why would a Hobbesian sacrifice his life? The plain answer is: he wouldn’t, which argues for the conclusion that the Declaration’s signers were *not* Hobbesians. Thus their pledge of sacred honor is easily fathomable.

Not My Philosopher

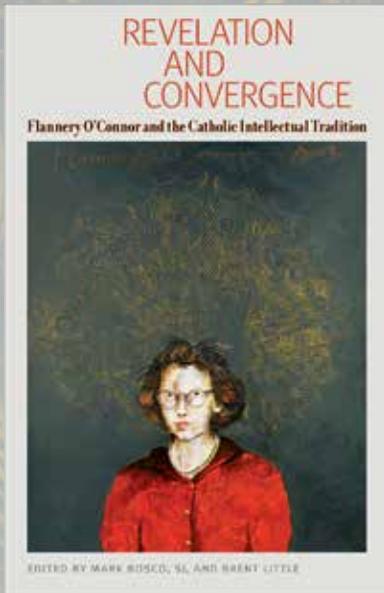
DENEEN AND MUCH OF HANBY’S ARGUMENT against the founding can be reduced to a simple syllogism:

- Hobbes and Locke are the same;
- the American Founding is Lockean;
- ergo, the American Founding is Hobbesian.

The first part of the syllogism is on ample display in both Deneen’s and Hanby’s writings. The name of Locke rarely appears there unless it is paired with Hobbes, repeated over and over. Because their critique of the founding depends so much on their characterization



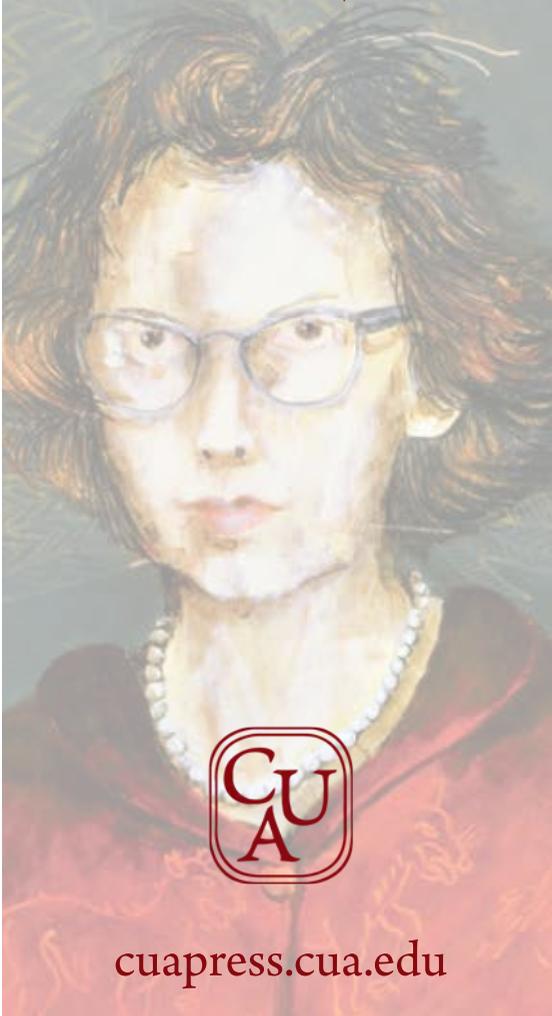
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of Locke, it is necessary to address the charge that Locke is simply Hobbes with a smiley face. Let us briefly look at the differences:

- Hobbes used his transmogrification of natural law theory to defend absolutism. Locke used natural law teaching against absolutism and as the basis for limited, representative government.
- Locke asserted the right, indeed the duty, to revolt against tyranny. Hobbes denied any such right.
- Hobbes denied the existence of any law in the state of nature. Locke said the law of nature obtained in the state of nature.
- Hobbes said man was pre-social in the state of nature. Locke said he was social in that condition.
- Hobbes said the sovereign was unaccountable. Locke said that he was accountable to the people.
- Locke believed men could be self-governing. Hobbes did not.
- Locke said the law of nature was the “eternal, immutable standard of right.” Hobbes held that the will of the sovereign was the only standard of right.

Most importantly, it was necessary for Hobbes’s project that there be no eternal rewards or punishments, only temporal ones that the Leviathan state can deliver. By contrast, a transcendent God’s everlasting judgment in sending souls to Heaven or Hell according to their just deserts was fundamentally necessary for the success of Locke’s endeavor. From the former you get tyranny. From the latter, you can get constitutional government.

It is impossible to interpret Hobbes as the American Founding’s intellectual source. His notion of mutable man dominated by his passions, incapable of ruling himself, requiring an absolute sovereign to hold his desires in harness, is incompatible with the idea of immutable man under the rule of his reason, capable of ruling himself through constitutional government. Hobbes’s teaching was as antithetical to the founders’ thinking as Locke’s was congenial to it.

In an 1816 letter Jefferson wrote that, “the principles of Hobbes” are a “humiliation to human nature; that the sense of justice and injustice is not derived from our natural organization, but founded on convention only.” In his essay *The Farmer Refuted*, a young Alexander Hamilton also vigorously attacked Hobbes:

Moral obligation, according to [Hobbes], is derived from the introduction of civil society; and there is no virtue, but what is purely artificial, the mere contrivance of politicians, for the maintenance of social intercourse. But the reason he ran into this absurd and impious doctrine was, that he disbelieved the existence of an intelligent, superintending principle, who is the governor, and will be the final judge, of the universe.

There are other such expressions of repugnance. In a letter to his son John Quincy Adams in 1777, John Adams warned him that Hobbes’s works contain “a great deal of mischievous Philosophy”—with the word mischievous meaning something far graver than it does today. As Paul Downes writes in *Hobbes, Sovereignty and Early American Literature* (2015), “Hobbes, if he was mentioned at all in polite company in the 1770s and 1780s, was immediately repudiated as the philosopher of everything the American Revolution sought to eradicate including monarchism, absolutism, and an epicurean or atheistical refusal to believe in mankind’s natural propensity for goodness.” In sum, the founders’ detestation of Hobbes and their concomitant embrace of Locke together with Aristotle, Cicero, and Sidney means that, unlike Deneen and Hanby, they emphatically did not consider Locke a Hobbesian.

Cogs in the Machine

HANBY’S ARTICLES IN *COMMUNIO* magazine and *First Things* share Deneen’s view of the founding but more explicitly spell out the metaphysics he sees underlying its faulty structure. The “founders built worse than they intended,” he thinks. In fact, he questions “whether the founders adequately understood the nature of their own deed.” What did they not correctly understand? Hanby says, “American constitutional democracy codifies for all eternity the metaphysical and anthropological assumptions of eighteenth century political thought, assumptions that are premised upon the seventeenth century conflation of nature and art which provide the ontological foundation for the separation of freedom and truth.”

The key to understanding Hanby’s accusation that the founding separated freedom from truth is to grasp that the “conflation of nature and art” means the removal of formal and final causality from metaphysics—leaving only material and efficient causality. Rightly, he understands this as the onto-

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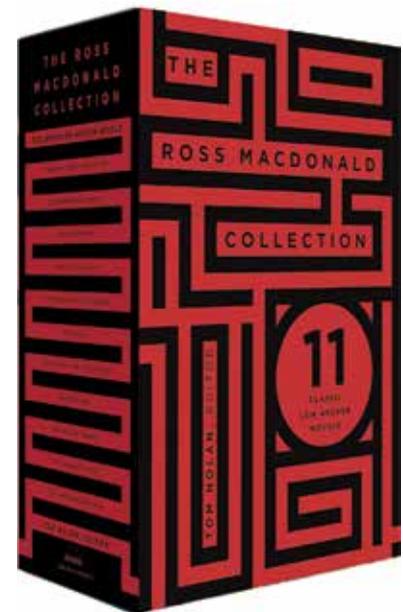
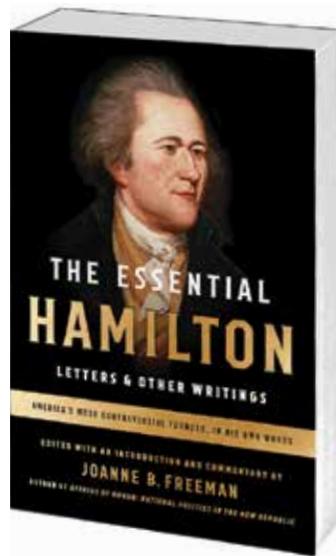
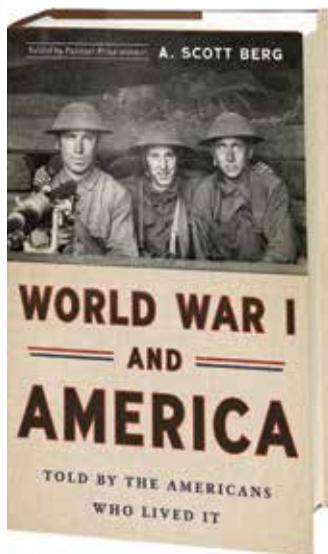
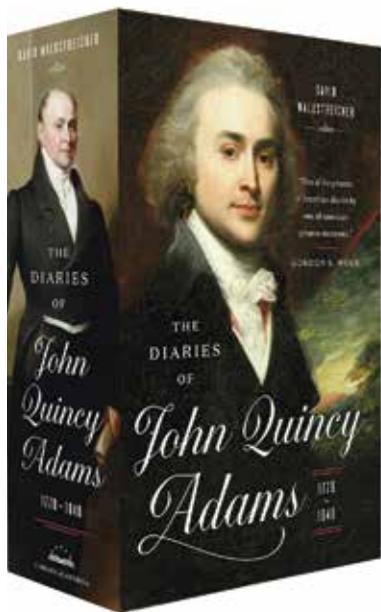
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logical foundation of modern thought—the metaphysical premise for accepting as real only those things man can change through the instrument of modern science. If the entire view of reality is collapsed to fit within its limited scope, then there will be perpetual revolution of one kind or another because nothing in nature could direct anything to its end or *telos*. Therefore, the modern enterprise is *necessarily* unlimited, its goals decided by will rather than reason.

That view, however, has no connection with what the founders said or did. They based their claim to freedom upon the Declaration's "self-evident" truths, which they considered transcendent. Does Hanby show that they were kidding themselves? Like Deneen, he doesn't think he needs to. He rests his case almost solely on the evidence of Locke's influence on the Declaration. Hanby contends that 17th- and 18th-century philosophy was materialistic, mechanistic, and voluntarist, and so therefore was the founding. This influence negates anything that the founders *themselves* said about the meaning of the words they used. The "Declaration's specification of those rights, its treatment of the end of government, and its justification for dissolving political bonds with England are all recognizably Lockean," according to Hanby, "*irrespective of the founders' private predilections about the nature of liberty, virtue, and self-governance*" (emphasis added).

For Hanby, the founders' "predilections" do not matter because the underlying metaphysics had changed—which, in turn, changed the meaning of everything. For this reason he goes on about the metaphysics of modernity, and not the founders. It didn't really matter what they said, since their world was imbued by the new metaphysics whether or not they realized or admitted that fact.

For their critique to stand, however, Hanby and Deneen would have to prove that the founders held a non- or anti-teleological view of nature along the lines of Machiavelli or Hobbes. But then why did the founders execrate Machiavelli and Hobbes? If the American Founding was inspired by Hobbesian ontology, why did it not look like it? The denial of formal and final causality defines Hobbes's thought and his *unlimited* Leviathan. If they shared in a similar metaphysical rejection, why did the founders not replicate a Leviathan state? Their government was *limited* precisely because they did not dismiss either formal or final causality, which they acknowledged in "the laws of nature."

Deneen claims that the Constitution perversely aims at "liberating humanity from the

constraints of nature." Why would the founders seek to subvert the constraints of the very "laws of nature" on which their endeavor depends? They wouldn't, and didn't. The contradiction is only in Deneen. He cannot possibly square his claim with John Adams's statement: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people."

But, as we have seen, the founders were simply cogs in the wheels of the new ontology. Deneen and Hanby remove from them what Pascal called "the dignity of causality." Otherwise, they could have seen the disaster coming. Smuggle historicism and relativism back into the founding, and then wonder why the founders did not see this "tragic flaw."

The notion of a new ontology controlling and transforming everything, however, has more than a touch of historical determinism about it, which is how Hanby can assert that the founders did not adequately understand "the nature of their own deed." Therefore, they must be understood *better* than they understood themselves. We now know where Deneen's "invisible architecture of the regime" came from and who put it there: not the founders, but the forces of History.

Ironically, the progressive Left dismisses the founders on the same grounds, as products of History. The Left is just as happy as Hanby to say that the founders did not know what they were doing, which is why they "built worse than they intended." The difference is that the Left embraces the new ontology, while Hanby rejects it. The Left has its hands full as a result, while Hanby's are empty.

Hanby ends up as much a product of History as he claims the founders were. As Dennis Teti has put it, "Hanby cannot *both* believe that freedom and truth are united, *and* believe that what the founders said they were doing is irrelevant because they are cogs in the machinery of the new ontology." The signers of the Declaration appealed to the "Supreme Judge of the world" for the rectitude of their intentions, not to History. Hanby and Deneen, in effect, appeal to History to undermine the founders' rectitude. Their argument rests on the determinism they condemn.

Against Hanby's and Deneen's thesis is the fact that nothing like the Declaration and American Constitution could have issued from the irresistible 18th-century worldview they depict. They make what the founders said, sacrificed, and did, unintelligible. The founders would not recognize or comprehend the choice that Deneen and Hanby see them as having made: to found a regime on moral relativism and radical individual autonomy.

The founders repeatedly described these concepts as repugnant.

Suicidal Blunder

IN THE END, PATRICK DENEEN AND MICHAEL HANBY can do no more than leap to the conclusion that Hobbesian results *must* have come from Hobbesian premises in the (Lockean) American Founding, most especially since today's radical individualism is justified in terms of its principles. There is, however, no guarantee that an originally sound polity may not turn against its founding principles, debauch itself, and then try to rationalize its debauchery by a different set of principles, all while retaining the same vocabulary. After all, Hobbes kept the language of natural law while eviscerating its content.

As soon as one moves from the rational "laws of nature and of nature's God" as the standard of justice to making human will that standard, one is headed for Leviathan. We are now enduring such a transformation of the United States, where political rule is becoming increasingly arbitrary. This is happening under the cloak of "natural rights," understood in the Hobbesian way as validating one's "right" to do whatever one desires. But it is entirely wrong to say that this turning away is the result of the principles it turns away from. In other words, the fault is not in our founding principles, but in ourselves. We have not remained true to the founding.

Deneen and Hanby confuse the cure for the disease. To the extent to which it is accepted, their misdiagnosis demoralizes our youth and disarms us in the face of our enemies, who are further empowered by their disavowal of the founding. This school of thought has penetrated higher education. Courses on American political thought at Catholic universities are often imbued with it, causing real, deleterious consequences. Students feel they no longer have a country they can love and should wish to serve.

It is a suicidal blunder to denigrate the founding in this way. Those who do so automatically exclude themselves from the public arena by conceding it to their opponents, thereby accelerating the very decline they decry. They should heed Gerhart Niemeyer's warning: "The critic who forgets that he is a citizen produces not a changed order but sheer disorder."

As John Courtney Murray might say, the founding is not the problem; it is the solution.

Robert R. Reilly is the author of the forthcoming book In Defense of the American Founding (Ignatius Press).

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