

VOLUME XVII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2016/17

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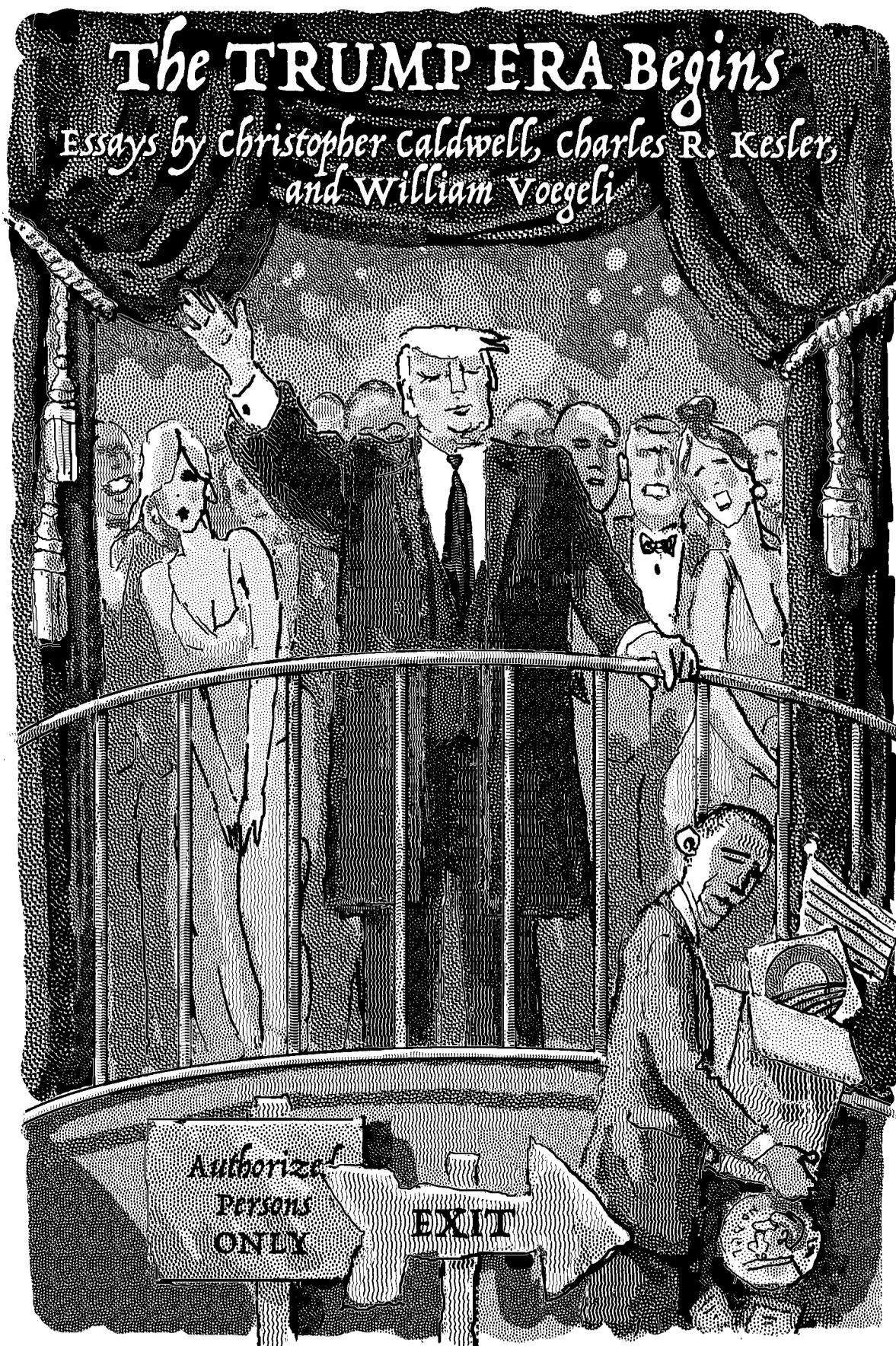
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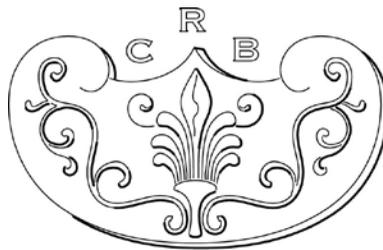
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A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

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Essay by Charles R. Kesler

THE REPUBLICAN TRUMP

FOR POLITICAL TAXONOMISTS, DONALD J. Trump is a difficult specimen to classify. A Democrat most of his life, admittedly more out of opportunism than conviction, he toyed once with running for president on the Reform Party ticket, the erstwhile political vehicle of his fellow billionaire Ross Perot. Trump said he admired Ronald Reagan and Winston Churchill, but also, for a while, Barack Obama, at least until discovering that his birth certificate was missing.

As he launched his run for president as a Republican, Trump said he had always been a conservative of sorts, a “common-sense conservative,” as opposed to the impractical, ideological, all-talk-and-no-action conservatives, as he regarded them, with whom he would share the stage during the long primary election season. He never considered himself a movement conservative, and still doesn’t. He gave short shrift to those—above all Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio—who boasted of their conservative pedigrees. (The party platform on which he ran was a different matter. It embodied the lengthy catechism of principles and policies promoted by today’s conservative movement, with slight nods to Trump’s own America First themes.)

All this makes him seem to many observers politically exotic, erratic, unserious—at best eclectic, at worst simply unprincipled. And viewed against the recent history of liberalism and conservatism, both of which have grown more doctrinaire as they’ve grown more insti-

tutionalized in Washington, D.C., it’s easy to see why those pat dismissals are so common. But a closer look, with the benefit of a broader historical perspective, suggests that President Trump’s notions have many precedents within both capital-R and small-r republicanism, and that they are not nearly so *outré* as they may seem when viewed against post-Reagan trends.

Granted, there has never been a president quite like Mr. Trump, but the voters, with reason, greeted his principal views as a kind of long overdue return to home truths—truths highly relevant though half forgotten. As he would say: sad!

The Party of McKinley and Coolidge

A CLUE TO THIS DIMENSION OF TRUMP came last May, in a conversation with George Stephanopoulos on ABC. “Don’t forget,” Trump said, “this is called the Republican Party. It’s not called the Conservative Party.” Though he didn’t dilate on the distinction, he was pointing to a plain fact, connected to a whole set of facts: that the Republican Party is much older than the modern conservative movement (dating, in most accounts, only to the 1950s); that the former used to have a progressive or liberal wing, vigorous until the conservatives took over the party in 1964 and began to remake it in their image; that there are not enough self-declared conservative voters to win the presidency, and

that Republicans must always attract, therefore, some non-conservative voters if they intend to win. Trump likes to win.

Add to those facts some gleanings from the campaign trail. About the only “movement” Trump talks about is his own, the unplanned, unanticipated, unnamed popular movement that arose in response to his candidacy and carried him to the White House. He respects the conservative movement—not so much its journalistic interpreters at *National Review* and the *Weekly Standard*, or its political leaders who challenged him—but he doesn’t love it with the ardor he reserves for his own, nameless popular movement. But with his victory, the Trump movement is now in the process of taking over the Republican Party, displacing the “Republican establishment,” which was partly the conservative establishment, he enjoyed vilifying so much.

The new Republican Party that he hopes to form will, I submit, resemble in certain crucial respects the old Republican Party that existed before the modern conservative movement got going. Where could you find a Republican Party that stood for high, or at any rate protective, tariffs; immigration only with assimilation or, to use Teddy Roosevelt’s term, Americanization; and a restrained foreign policy guided by a firm but modest version of the national interest? (One might extend the list to include, for example, “internal improvements” or infrastructure spending to stimulate commerce and unite the nation, and judges



prepared to be activist in order to defend the Constitution.) If not in Mr. Trump's dreams, you would have to turn to the pre-Cold War GOP, which reached its heyday at the turn of the 20th century and in the 1920s, but whose (declining) influence extended at least to the Eisenhower and Nixon Administrations.

It's not that Trump consciously set out to return the GOP to its roots. There is very little evidence of that, other than some expressed interest in Nixon. It's more like his reading of the political situation led him to retrace some of the old GOP's reasoning, and arrive independently at some policies similar to its own. In fact, he may now have arrived at a point where some acquaintance with the party's history and principles may help illuminate his administration's own way forward; and for well-wishers and critics alike, the knowledge could be helpful.

The party of William McKinley and Calvin Coolidge dominated national politics. In the 72 years between Abraham Lincoln's first election and Herbert Hoover's loss to Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, only two Democrats were elected president. Between them, Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson racked up 16 years of Democratic presidencies, versus 56 years of Republican ones. That's a staggering 40-year advantage. Republicans' control of Congress started strong but became episodic in the late 19th century, only to steady again after McKinley's victory in 1896. Overall, the GOP controlled both houses of Congress for about 46 of the 72 years. By these measures, the old GOP, the national majority party for decades, achieved far more power and popularity than the modern, conservatized party ever has.

Those halcyon days of power and popularity coincided with the party's embrace of the Trump-like policies mentioned above. Which doesn't prove that these policies caused that political success, needless to say. Many other factors figured in, like the little matter of the Democratic Party's discrediting itself for decades by its support of slavery, secession, and Jim Crow. Still, a glance at the old GOP's rationales for these policies may reveal something.

Protectionism

TARIFFS PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN American politics for most of its history, because they played a central role in funding the government. Before the income tax, tariffs were usually the federal government's chief source of revenue. One of the Lincoln Administration's first acts was to pass a tariff bill; and afterward, until Hoover's

administration, at least, the Republicans remained the party of high tariffs. They inherited their support for protective tariffs from their predecessors in the Whig Party, who stood for Henry Clay's "American system" of protection and internal improvements, and who had in turn inherited their protectionism from the Federalist Party and its leading economic thinker, Alexander Hamilton. In his "Report on Manufactures" (1791), Hamilton first spelled out the argument for tariffs on imported manufactured goods as a way to stimulate infant industries and thus a balanced, interdependent, and more dynamic American economy.

The economic case for protectionism has always been thin, of course, and from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman great economists have preached the disadvantages of high tariffs, and their typically self-defeating consequences. The interesting thing is that Hamilton and his Republican descendents knew all that. He had read *The Wealth of Nations*, and agreed, as a matter of economic theory, that free trade was the superior policy. He restated some of the objections to excessive tariffs in *The Federalist*: they are "prejudicial" to the revenue itself; "they tend to render other classes of the community tributary to an improper degree to the manufacturing classes, to whom they give a premature monopoly of the markets; they sometimes force industry out of its more natural channels into others in which it flows with less advantage." In today's language, picking winners and losers, crony capitalism, raising prices for domestic consumers, losing tax revenue by setting the tax rate too high—he was aware of all these downsides.

Yet he favored a policy of protection, nonetheless, because he thought the *political* reasons for it outweighed its economic drawbacks and reinforced some of its salutary political-economic effects. In Hamilton's day and until the Civil War, at least, these overriding political reasons included stimulating an American armaments industry and merchant marine, encouraging the interdependence of South and North so as to cement the Union, stimulating inventive genius and entrepreneurial risk-taking, weakening the power of the nation's vast agricultural faction, and, in particular, lessening the economic and political might of slave-based agriculture.

After the Civil War, the Republican Party continued to follow the protectionist logic, though with a few modifications. The slave-power was no longer a threat, but European empires had expanded in Africa and Asia, introducing new threats to national security, as

well as new competition and terms of trade to ever more globalized trade flows. Tariff policy became controversial within the GOP, though the issue was seldom whether to have tariffs but how high they should be and what imports they should affect. American agriculture sank into a prolonged depression after the war, adding an industry that needed protection but also one increasingly unable to pay higher prices for manufactures and other protected goods.

One of the classic GOP statements of the wisdom and justice of protectionism occurs in the party platform of 1896, the year of McKinley's big victory:

We renew and emphasize our allegiance to the policy of protection, as the bulwark of American industrial independence, and the foundation of American development and prosperity. This true American policy taxes foreign products and encourages home industry. It puts the burden of revenue on foreign goods; it secures the American market for the American producer. It upholds the American standard of wages for the American workingman.... We demand such an equitable tariff on foreign imports which come into competition with American products as will not only furnish adequate revenue for the necessary expenses of the government, but will protect American labor from degradation and the wage level of other lands.

The platform specified that protection went with "reciprocity," meaning that "protection for what we produce" should go hand in hand with "free admission for the necessities of life which we do not produce." The idea was to "gain open markets for us [i.e., for our surplus] in return for our open markets for others" in goods not produced at home. Free trade and protectionism could be combined in a statesmanlike package.

In 1924, the year of Coolidge's big victory, the Republican platform reiterated, "We believe in protection as a national policy, with due and equal regard to all sections and to all classes." The goal was to assure "American standards of life" to farmers, workers, and manufacturers alike, so that American families would not be forced to endure globalized low wages and low safety standards. The tariff, according to the GOP, brought economic confidence, stability, and employment sufficient to maintain the middle class as the basis of American republicanism, and without a huge federal welfare state.



Products taxed and tax rates would fluctuate. The nation's first tariff under the Constitution, the revenue Tariff of 1789, had average rates of 8% on listed articles. Lincoln's war-time tariffs raised rates to 48% on dutiable items. The highest modern duties ever came in the Smoot-Hawley tariff, passed under Hoover, which set dutiable rates at 59% and led to a trade war and a deepening of the Depression its supporters had hoped to ameliorate. These were the kind of negative effects from an "excessive" tariff that Hamilton, following Smith, had warned against.

Donald Trump, in his Inaugural Address, became the first Republican president to speak favorably of "protection" in a long time. He used the term in a broad sense, not limited to high tariffs, asserting that we must "protect our borders" from economic invasion, that we are "protected by the great men and women of our military and law enforcement," and perhaps most memorably, that "we will be protected by God." The Great Protector is not necessarily a protectionist, of course. But Trump's assurance that "Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength," despite flying in the face of several generations' worth of conservative Republican orthodoxy, not to mention the disaster of Smoot-Hawley, harks back to a moral-political argument once vital to the party of Lincoln:

that in setting economic policy, Americans should be considered not merely as consumers and producers but also as citizens, who have a democracy to maintain.

Immigration

HERE TOO TRUMP'S POSITIONS ARE more old-school than they may seem. In 1860 the Republican Party platform opposed the nativism of the former Know-Nothing Party, which had called for the exclusion of Germans and (Irish) Catholics from public office. The GOP opposed any change in federal or state laws "by which the rights of citizens hitherto accorded to immigrants from foreign lands shall be abridged or impaired." By 1872 the party took a stand for "continued careful encouragement and protection of voluntary immigration," taking exception explicitly to "the doctrine of Great Britain and other European powers concerning allegiance—'Once a subject always a subject.'" The Republicans insisted that allegiance was voluntary, on both the foreigner's part who wanted to become an American, and the U.S.'s part, which was being asked to receive and naturalize the immigrant.

The latter consideration, especially after the mass immigration of the late 19th and

early 20th centuries, led Republicans to expound on what kind of immigrants America should be looking for. The 1920 platform put it this way:

The standard of living and the standard of citizenship of a nation are its most precious possessions, and the preservation and the elevation of those standards is the first duty of government. The immigration policy of the U.S. should...insure that the number of foreigners in the country at any one time shall not exceed that which can be assimilated with reasonable rapidity, and to favor immigrants whose standards are similar to ours.

Unexceptionable perhaps in theory, in practice those standards could be interpreted in capricious and tendentious ways, e.g., as in the nation's then existing policy "for the practical exclusion of Asiatic immigrants," which the platform approved. Such sentiments were strengthened by the racial science—or scientific racism—of the day, which many leaders of the Progressive movement in politics and education (e.g., Woodrow Wilson) regarded as settled science. To be sure, what we might call race science-deniers, many of them Re-

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crats had on offer. At the 1924 Democratic convention, the largest bloc of delegates belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, whose favored candidate, ultimately unsuccessful and not himself a KKK member, was William McDoo, Wilson's son-in-law.

In general, however, the GOP's insistence on assimilation and Americanization of immigrants reflected the common sense of the social contract, as articulated by Lincoln and many others before and after him. In that view, joining a country was like joining a private club—it had to be voluntary on both sides, with standards of membership agreed to by all. In the U.S. these standards, applied on an individual basis, amounted to little more than minimal good health, English proficiency, and basic civic knowledge and loyalty. Applied on a group basis, however, the standards judged not actual civic knowledge and loyalty but the group's purported propensity or capacity to acquire such virtues. Though more problematic, such generalizations could never be completely excluded from practical immigration policy. The 1924 immigration reform act—controversial at the time, and since—imposed limitations on maximum immigration and a new series of national-origins quotas, resulting in a long pause in mass immigration to

the U.S., and establishing a policy favoring applicants, at reduced levels, from European nations already well represented in the U.S. population.

No individual alien, nor any alien group (race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, tribe), had therefore a right to come to America, much less to become citizens, without the consent of the American people through their government. And it was never doubted that "[e]very government," in the words of the 1920 platform, had the right and power "to exclude and deport those aliens who constitute a real menace to its peaceful existence."

Trump's concern for our borders and caution about admitting alien enemies to America are consistent with these premises. As his focus shifted from Muslims as a group to immigrants from particular countries racked with "radical Islamic terrorism," as he called it in his Inaugural, he revisited, in effect, some of the arguments that energized and divided the Republican Party and the nation early last century. Far-removed from open-borders libertarianism and from multicultural identity politics, Trump's nationalism, his insistence on "America First," points in this respect back beyond the Republican Party to the small-r republicanism of America's beginnings.

Foreign Policy

WHAT DOES AMERICA FIRST MEAN for foreign policy? Trump said little about foreign policy in his first address as president, except to deny the isolationism critics inferred from the slogan. There was no hint of Charles Lindbergh in Trump's pledge "to reinforce old alliances and form new ones—and unite the civilized world" against the Islamist terror movements, which he vowed to eradicate. That very day Trump had a bust of Winston Churchill (Lindbergh's *bête noire*, as William McGurn pointed out in the *Wall Street Journal*) returned to a place of honor in the Oval Office. He acknowledged, perhaps more emphatically than necessary, "the right of all nations to put their own interests first." His kind of American exceptionalism, he said, seeks not "to impose our way of life" but "to let it shine as an example...for everyone to follow."

He set his face, unmistakably, against the neoconservatives' mad strategy of exporting democracy to the most inhospitable corners of the world, and against the sentiments and swagger of George W. Bush's Second Inaugural. By the same token, Trump smiled on some of the weightier themes of traditional American statecraft, and of Republican

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3	4 Labor Day	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17 General Resisters' Constitution Day	18	19	20	21 Rosh Hashanah	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30



statecraft a century or more ago. In 1896 the GOP declared elegantly, “Our foreign policy should be at all times firm, vigorous, and dignified, and all our interests in the Western hemisphere should be carefully watched and guarded.” The platform proceeded to discuss those interests, invoke the Monroe Doctrine, call for the protection of American citizens and American property abroad, and offer sympathy and indignation on behalf of the Armenians and other oppressed peoples. In 1924, the Republicans stated: “The basic principles of our foreign policy must be independence without indifference to the rights and necessities of others, and cooperation without entangling alliances.” That meant no part of the League of Nations, but a surprising trust in international arbitration and disarmament conferences.

By the 1920s, the party’s foreign policy was more Progressive than it had been in 1896. But it still demanded, first and foremost, the protection of American interests and security. The advancement of self-government in other nations, though desirable, was not our business, except through the power of the American example or, temporarily, through the administration of conquered territory like the Philippines. World War II and the Cold War changed things, but Trump’s assumption seems to be that the conditions of international relations—with the big exception of Islamist terrorism—have returned to something like the pre-Cold War norm.

The Business of America

WHEN IN 1920 WARREN HARDING announced that his party sought to return the nation to “normalcy,” he meant to liberate Americans from the wartime strictures imposed and never relaxed by the Wilson Administration. The government had remained on a war-time basis, exercising emergency powers to restrict speech and free assembly; tax exorbitantly; socialize the railroads, telegraph, and telephone lines; and to regulate what it did not socialize. Harding and the Republican Congress unwound most of this “unconstitutional and dictatorial course,” in the words of the 1920 platform, returning the nation to a peace-time basis; and his successor Coolidge continued the effort, slashing both government spending and income tax rates in a supply-side frenzy.

The 1920s roared because business boomed in reaction to Republican policies. Trump is not only our first billionaire president, he is the first famous businessman since Herbert Hoover to be elected to the office. He brings

with him the ethos and enthusiasm not merely of a tycoon but of a business evangelist. (Reagan was a former Hollywood star, not businessman, despite all the nice things he said about them.) Trump’s belief in the know-how and nobility of business opens a huge cultural gulf between him and modern liberalism, especially its mandarins in the academy and the media. Republicans, by contrast, usually admire business leaders, and Republican presidents typically stock their cabinet with them. (Eisenhower’s cabinet, the jibe went, consisted of “eight millionaires and one plumber.”) To find full-throated support for something like the Trump ethos, however, it helps to go back to the Republicans of the 1920s, and particularly to the one who supposedly pronounced what could be Trump’s motto, “The business of America is business.”

That would be Calvin Coolidge, though his words are misquoted. What he actually said was, “After all, the chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing and prospering in the world.” The

Trump’s insistence on “America First” points back to America’s beginnings.

chief business is not the only, nor the highest, business of the American people, though liberal historians and journalists have deliberately misinterpreted Coolidge’s meaning, the better to tar his character and career. Thus Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.: “But, for Coolidge, business was more than business; it was a religion; and to it he committed all the passion of his arid nature.” Or William Allen White: “Coolidge exalts the ideals of the peddler, the horse trader, the captain of industry.... [He has] a mystic faith in the righteousness of a swap.” Trump’s detractors have said worse about him.

Schlesinger and other New Deal apologists heavily invested in the thesis that the 1920s were an orgy of moneymaking, a one-percenter’s delight, which brought an inevitable correction and retribution in the 1930s—bad economics, but bestselling history. In fact, Coolidge Prosperity was rapid and widespread, bringing radios, automobiles, and rising incomes to families throughout the land.

Yet to the mainstream media of the New Deal era, Coolidge was, as Thomas B. Silver

wrote, “the unlikely pimp” for a prostituted generation. Now, there could hardly be two more different characters than Coolidge and Trump, Silent Cal and the Tweeter-in-Chief, however much their tax policies may coincide. It is instructive to wonder how far their differences may extend to the ultimate valuation they put on business and moneymaking. Here is Coolidge, from the same speech in which he described the chief business of the American people:

Wealth is the product of industry, ambition, character and untiring effort. In all experience, the accumulation of wealth means the multiplication of schools, the increase of knowledge, the dissemination of intelligence, the encouragement of science, the broadening of outlook, the expansion of liberties, the widening of culture. Of course, the accumulation of wealth cannot be justified as the chief end of existence. But we are compelled to recognize it is a means to well-nigh every desirable achievement. So long as wealth is made the means and not the end, we need not greatly fear it.

Coolidge made the same point in many other addresses. Here is a pointed passage putting the captains of industry, whom Coolidge allegedly worshipped, in proper perspective:

Great captains of industry who have aroused the wonder of the world by their financial success would not have been captains at all had it not been for the generations of liberal culture in the past and the existence all about them of a society permeated, inspired, and led by the liberal culture of the present. If it were possible to strike out that factor from present existence, he would find all the value of his great possessions diminish to the vanishing point, and he himself would be but a barbarian among barbarians.

We haven’t seen anything like that from Trump, and probably won’t. Yet this was an understanding that men of immense wealth and intelligence like Andrew Carnegie, or Coolidge’s Treasury secretary, Andrew Mellon, shared. Business involved the pursuit of gain, but it could minister to higher ends. “It rests squarely on the law of service,” Coolidge once said. “It has for its main reliance truth and faith and justice. In its larger sense it is one of the great contributing forces to the moral and spiritual advancement” of the nation.

Then and Now

AS THE EXAMPLE OF COOLIDGE SUGGESTS, the similarities between Trump's agenda and sensibility and those of the historic Republican Party have to be balanced by the many differences. McKinley and Coolidge were deeply experienced political men; Trump, though a fast learner, is an amateur. Although Hoover's first elected office was president, too, unlike Trump he had served as secretary of Commerce and as the "Napoleon of Mercy," bringer of emergency relief to Europe, Russia, and the lower Mississippi River. The GOP in those days was a much stronger political force. The party was superior to the candidate then, and the Constitution was regarded as superior to both; nowadays a candidate like Trump, or Obama, can bring his party to heel, and neither major party, nor any major candidate, has to wonder very much about getting the Constitution's permission before setting out to transform America.

By contrast, in 1912 the Republicans waged a civil war between the supporters of William Howard Taft, the incumbent president, and Teddy Roosevelt (who lost, and then bolted to run as a Bull Moose Progressive), over what the Constitution required of modern Americans. T.R., borrowing a page from the late People's Party (the original populists), endorsed the spirit of direct democracy in state-level use of the initiative, referendum, and recall, extending even to the legislative override of state Supreme Court decisions. He did not have a good reason why something similar might not be tried at the national level. He already, as Taft's predecessor, had taken a very expansive view of presidential power. This inclination alarmed Taft, Henry Cabot Lodge, and many of T.R.'s old party friends and allies, who denounced him as a threat to the Constitution. Though Taft lost the presidency to Wilson, he managed to preserve the Republican Party as the future home for non-, and even anti-, Progressive politics.

Thus both the conservative movement of William F. Buckley and Ronald Reagan, and Trump's insurgency against their successors, depend in a distant way on Taft's achievement. But neither the movement nor its singular critic is as steeped in constitutionalism as the old, pre-Cold War Republicans were. Among other things, they founded the National Association for Constitutional Government, which published the *Constitutional Review* from 1917 to 1929, arguing against Progressivism in the name of the old constitutional order. (There is now a good book on this subject, *Toward an American Conservatism:*

Constitutional Conservatism during the Progressive Era [2013], edited by Joseph Postell and Johnathan O'Neill.) Their efforts, and the GOP's "return to normalcy" during the '20s, were swept away by the Depression and the New Deal landslides of the '30s.

What's interesting is why, when Buckley and company decided to found modern conservatism in the 1950s, they didn't recur to the historic Republican formulas of McKinley, Taft, and Coolidge, not to mention Lincoln. Hoover was alive and played a role, mostly ceremonial, in the launching of *National Review*. But the new conservatives paid little attention to the pre-New Deal Republicans. They were far more interested in the Burkean cultural criticism of Irving Babbitt, the sectionalism and communitarianism of the Southern Agrarians, the "philosophical anarchism" of Albert Jay Nock, and the Nietzschean anti-populism of H.L. Mencken.

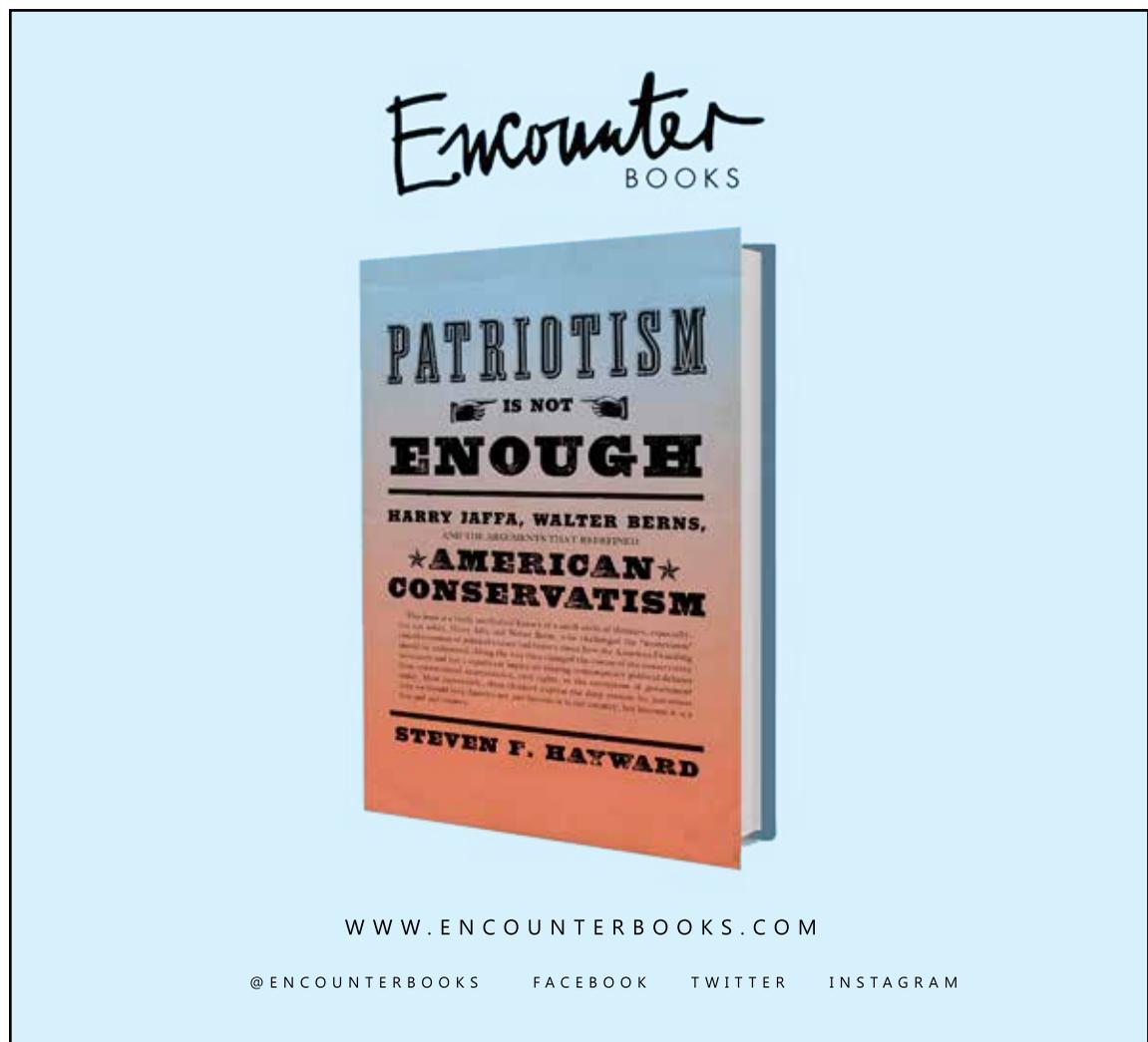
Perhaps Buckley thought that, as Trump might say, the old GOP formulas had proved such political losers that a revival was impossible; or he suspected that their opposition to the New Deal revolution had been insufficiently anti-statist. Or maybe he concluded that a return to normalcy was simply inadequate to the problems of the Cold War world, which made any hint of a modest foreign policy, much less of America First-style iso-

lationism (always a slippery word), untenable. Buckley thought that America needed to go on the offensive against Communism, needed to break with President Eisenhower's reluctance to intervene abroad and his desire to negotiate with Nikita Khrushchev.

Whatever the reasons, the conservative movement spent decades debating traditionalism versus libertarianism, and neoconservatism versus everybody, and not concentrating on the business before it, as it were: how to get back to the Constitution, to a responsible if hardly perfect form of popular self-government based on American standards. Trump captured the resulting American way of life rather nicely in his Inaugural Address: "When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice."

By passing most of the existing conservative interests, Donald Trump may be in a position, paradoxically, to reconnect conservatism and the GOP to their American roots, and to renew them for the next generation. Much depends, therefore, on how he, his administration, and the people come to terms with his Republican patrimony.

Charles R. Kesler is the editor of the *Claremont Review of Books*, and the author of *I Am the Change: Barack Obama and the Future of Liberalism* (Broadside Books).



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