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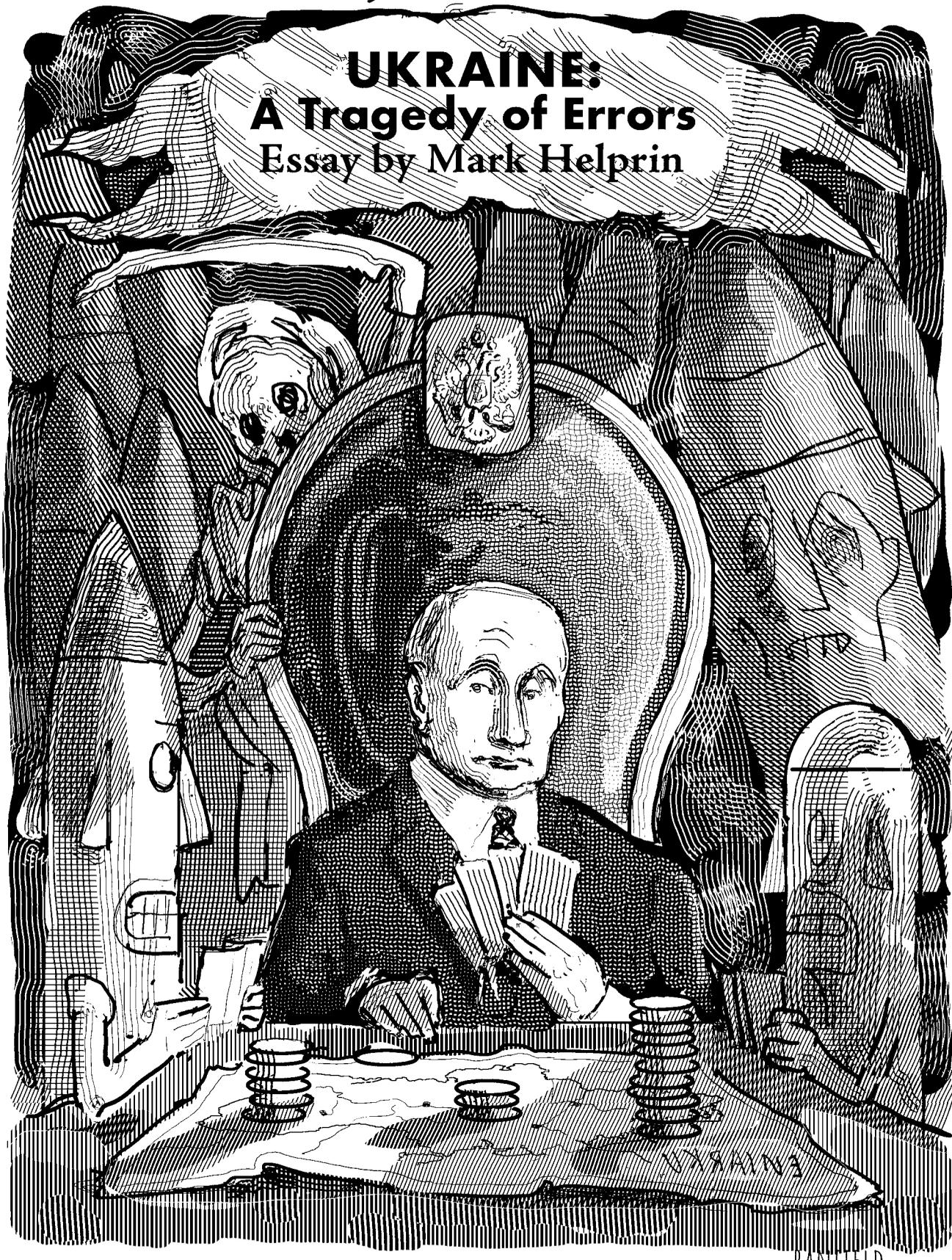
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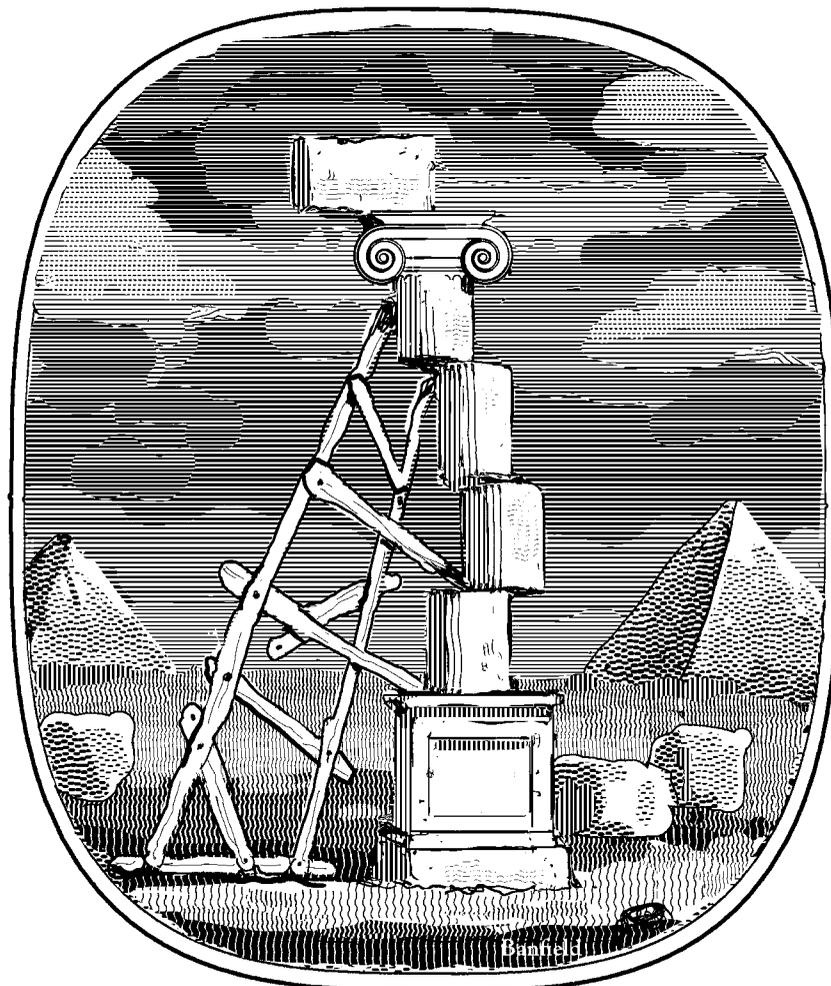


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Essay by William Voegeli

THE RIGHT NOW

What Trump hath wrought...and revealed.



WHAT IS IT THAT CONSERVATIVES conserve? And why does what they conserve need conserving? Further, from whom or what does the object of conservatives' concern need to be kept safe? Which people, groups, or impersonal forces would damage or destroy it?

To embrace conserving as a defining obligation is pessimistic in one sense and optimistic in another. The conservative is resigned to a never-ending supply of evidence demonstrating that no good thing is ever so good that fallible humans—forgetful of the past, ungrateful in the present, improvident regarding the future—can avoid squandering or scorning it. There is “no such thing as a Lost Cause because there is no such thing as a Gained Cause,” T.S. Eliot wrote in 1927. Knowing that “victory itself will be temporary,” he continued, “we fight rather to keep something alive than in the expectation that anything will triumph.” Sisyphus, it appears, was the first conservative.

At the same time, the work of conserving makes sense only for those who expect the situation to deteriorate in the future but who also believe that it's not presently hopeless. You can't prevent something from being destroyed if it has already been destroyed. The conservative, then, believes that prospects are daunting but also that there is nothing irretrievable about the situation right now.

I draw your attention to these general questions to explore something specific, the state in 2022 of American conservatism, whose meaning and objectives have never been more contested and confused. The proximate cause for this upheaval is, of course, Donald Trump: his shocking nomination and election in 2016; the wild ride of his four years in office; his defeat in 2020, disputed violently on January 6, 2021, and denied by Trump and many of his supporters ever since; and the possibility, not remote, that he will again be the Republicans' nominee in 2024 and the nation's president in 2025.

American Revolutions

WE LIVE FORWARD BUT UNDERSTAND backward. If Trump was an aberration, then conservatism after Trump, whenever he leaves the scene, could be fundamentally the same as it was before his famous escalator ride in 2015. In a global context, however, Trump does not appear to be sui generis. Parties and movements on the Right that resemble Trumpism have come to power in Brazil, Hungary, India, Italy, the Philippines, and Poland, while contesting elections and influencing events in France, Israel, and the United Kingdom, especially with Brexit.

Alternatively, then, Trump could be seen as a culmination, revealing intentions and qualities inherent in the conservative enterprise all along. The latter interpretation is one shared by some of Trump's conservative admirers as well as nearly all of Trump and conservatism's



most vehement critics. “If Trumpism was the Right’s end point,” asks historian Timothy Shenk, co-editor of *Dissent* magazine, “then wasn’t it an act of naïvety—maybe even complicity—to pretend there was more to [conservatism’s] story than crude bigotry?”

Let us engage that question by first considering conservatism as such, and then discussing attributes unique to conservatism in America, in order to sort out the challenges for American conservatism that have emerged in the past seven years. When “conservative” first became a political term a little over 200 years ago, providing a direct object would have belabored the obvious. Everyone understood that the first self-identified conservatives wanted to conserve the *Ancien Régime*, Europe’s hierarchical order besieged by the furies the French Revolution set loose. Perhaps the most categorical, fervent expression of this “throne-and-altar” conservatism came from France’s Joseph de Maistre, who advocated kings’ divine right and popes’ temporal authority.

There was nothing for any such conservatism to conserve in a new nation founded as a republic after a successful revolution against a monarch, and which rejected an established church from the outset. In *The Conservative Sensibility* (2019), George F. Will emphasizes the resulting Americanness of American conservatism. The thing this republic’s conservatives conserve is “the American Founding,” he writes, “showing the continuing pertinence of the Founding principles.” Doing so renders American conservatives “custodians of the classical liberal tradition.”

That tradition’s key tenets are also central to America’s idea of itself: Despite the many other ways men may be unequal, they are equal in the crucial respect that no one among them is good enough to govern any other without that other’s consent. As a result, governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. Elections—free, fair, and periodic—are the ligature whereby the governed confer this legitimating consent on the government. These democratic processes prevent unaccountable governments from violating or failing to fulfill any government’s legitimate purposes: to secure citizens’ inalienable natural rights and effect their safety and happiness.

A quarter of a millennium ago these principles were revolutionary, ones that had rarely been advocated and never successfully established. Today they are bromides. Almost all Americans are liberals, in the most encompassing sense of that term. How is it, then, that principles so widely shared and so rarely disputed can be in jeopardy? If the founding is what American conservatives conserve, from whom or what must it be kept safe?

Will’s answer in *The Conservative Sensibility* is Progressivism, the rejection of the founding advanced in the late 19th century, which culminated in the New Deal and Great Society’s “second founding” in the 20th. Will relies on the work of Hillsdale College political scientist Ronald J. Pestritto, who argues that Progressivism’s essence is in its name: the rejection of transhistorical truths—“applicable to all men and all times,” in Abraham Lincoln’s words—about human nature and rights inherent in that nature, in favor of aligning with and furthering salutary historical processes.

Progressivism’s overriding imperative is to be on the right side of history, to embrace and advance “the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society,” as the 1958 Supreme Court opinion in *Trop v. Dulles* stated. The words “evolving,” “de-

political power to the voters, and the other factors of democratic government are means that have been found expedient for realizing democracy as the truly human way of living. They are not a final end and a final value.” If they prove inexpedient in the future, in other words, the evolving standards of decency may require discarding them, all for a distinctly ominous sounding maturity.

Will and Pestritto’s argument about Progressivism’s profoundly destructive impact, begotten by its intellectual and moral disarray, is persuasive but not exhaustive. The emergence of Progressivism has become a serious problem for conserving American self-government, but it is not a problem that had to have happened. Even if Germanic historicism and faith in expertise had never had any purchase on the New World’s intellectual and political life, sustaining a republic based on America’s founding principles would have been difficult, and always will be.

Books mentioned in this essay:

The Conservative Sensibility,
by George F. Will.
Hachette Books, 640 pages,
\$35 (cloth), \$19.99 (paper)

*Statecraft as Soulcraft: What
Government Does*, by George F. Will.
Simon & Schuster, 186 pages,
\$14.95 (paper)

Liberalism and Its Discontents,
by Francis Fukuyama.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
192 pages, \$26

*Insurrection: How Republicans Lost
Their Party and Got Everything They
Ever Wanted*, by Jeremy W. Peters.
Crown, 432 pages, \$28.99

Unresting Egalitarianism

THE PROBLEM THAT MODERN LIBERAL democracy generates for itself, as Alexis de Tocqueville argued, is that its animating commitment to equality recognizes no limiting principle. Every breakthrough erasing a longstanding disparity moves a new item to the top of the egalitarian agenda. Some inequality, previously ignored or regarded as unproblematic, comes to be designated an intolerable inequity that must now be rectified. In 2020, less than five years after the Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that the Constitution’s guarantee of equal protection of the laws required states to recognize same-sex marriages (37 states had already done so at the time), presidential candidate Joe Biden declared, “Transgender equality is the civil rights issue of our time.” Some other equality, he implies and experience argues, will be the civil rights issue of some other time.

Liberal democracy imperils itself, and complicates the work of those determined to conserve it, when its unresting egalitarianism weakens the foundations on which its viability depends. One that’s in play in the 21st century is America’s moral quality and cohesion. In *The Federalist*, James Madison extolled a Constitution in which ambition was made to counteract ambition. However, he wrote, it is also the case that a republic presupposes those “qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence.” Virtue is especially important to republics because a self-governing people cannot hope, even as a theoretical possibility, that an enlightened despot will compensate for pervasive immo-

decency,” “progress,” and “maturing” reflect the progressive’s bland confidence that history’s inner logic is for everything that matters to get better and better. If existing conditions stubbornly refuse to comply with this rule of improvement, it has to be because some people are impeding the progress of progress by advancing their selfish interests or refusing to discard their antiquated ideas.

Implicit in this analysis, however, is the unnerving possibility that the right side of history, as discerned by those who consider themselves history’s oracles, may entail discarding fundamental attributes of liberal democracy. As the Progressive philosopher John Dewey wrote in 1937, “Universal, suffrage, recurring elections, responsibility of those who are in



rality. Such a republic would be ungovernable, and ultimately uninhabitable, given its critical deficiencies in the qualities we have come to identify as social capital: honor, self-restraint and self-respect, magnanimity, public spiritedness, and trust.

It is, therefore, a problem when egalitarianism arrives at the belief that all lifestyles and self-determined identities are created equal. As such, each deserves not merely to be tolerated, but affirmed and celebrated. To do any less inflicts psychic violence that is as wounding as physical violence.

This metastasizing egalitarianism is doubly menacing to the emergence and perpetuation of virtue. Its direct effect is to endorse the idea that flouting long-accepted standards of decency is brave and authentic, while respecting them is timorous and false. Indirectly, it weakens the institutions that encourage moral development: churches, private associations, and strong, loving families. Though no longer emphasizing the direct, determinative relationship between the two he examined in *Statecraft as Soulcraft* (1983), George Will still worries that there is “a cultural contradiction in modernity.” According to *The Conservative Sensibility*, “although religion can sustain liberty, liberty does not necessarily sustain religion or the other preconditions for its own security.”

Liberal democracy is no more likely to succeed among strangers and antagonists than it is among the amoral. As political scientist Francis Fukuyama puts it in his new book, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, “The kinds of diversity that liberal societies can successfully manage are not unlimited.” The Declaration of Independence begins by treating as settled and obvious what was, in 1776, contested and unclear: Americans were one people and the British another. A decade later, after military victory had vindicated the Declaration’s claim, John Jay listed in *The Federalist* attributes attesting to America’s national identity: the people’s shared ancestry, language, religion, political beliefs, manners and customs, and legacy of sacrifice and achievement.

One can imagine a nation cohering without a few of these commonalities, but not without most of them. Liberal democracy, reduced to a list of postulates about governmental procedures, would be highly tenuous in a polity comprising a random assortment of people representing the world’s many languages, faiths, traditions, and cultures. It is particularly unlikely that such a “nation” could defend itself, that its people would endure sacrifice and risk death on the battlefield to vindicate something no more connecting and compelling than a political rulebook. Ameri-

ca has been one of history’s most diverse nations, sometimes celebrating and sometimes merely tolerating its heterogeneity. For most of its history, though, it affirmed that plurality must manifest itself within the context of a required, fundamental unity.

But egalitarianism has evolved to reject the distinction between countryman and foreigner, citizen and immigrant, turning “other” into both a verb and a sin. As recently as 2008 the Democratic Party platform stated, “We cannot continue to allow people to enter the United States undetected, undocumented, and unchecked.” Eight years later, the platform confined itself to discussing how federal policy could facilitate rather than impede immigration. (In the interim, universities began instructing their students and staff that calling the United States a “melting pot” was a microaggression.) The Democrats’ 2020 platform was even more expansive about the ways immigrants would be made to feel welcome, even more opaque about the ways in which the immigration laws would be enforced. Nothing in either the 2020 or

Is Trumpism a proportionate or disproportionate response to leftism’s 21st-century manifestations?

the 2016 Democratic platform explicitly endorsed open borders, but nothing in either document made it clear that the federal government would, or had the right to, prevent the immigration of at least some foreign nationals who really want to be here.

As a result of these developments, the modern conservative mission has become a dilemma: how do those who cherish liberal democracy—who see no decent, feasible alternative to it—conserve that sociopolitical order from its own self-destructive tendencies? What is to be done when the unfolding of liberal democracy’s logic undermines institutions, practices, and dispositions necessary to liberal democracy’s survival?

Threat Assessment

THE RESPONSES TO THIS DILEMMA help explain the discord within conservatism’s ranks since 2015. Donald Trump’s political career personalized and intensified this turmoil, given his talent for preventing people from having mixed feelings

about him. But the key questions would have been difficult and divisive anyway.

At the core is a dispute over whether Trumpism, including some hypothetical post-Trump version of it, is a proportionate or disproportionate response to leftism’s 21st-century manifestations: identity politics; cancel culture; critical race theory; transgender rights; calls to defund the Border Patrol and police and to end “mass incarceration,” even if these measures cause more violent crime. All these notions are routinely advocated in a strident, inquisitorial tone.

Which side is the aggressor in the ongoing culture war? For Never Trump conservatives, it is the populist Right overreacting to the newest Left’s tactics and agenda. Trumpism, in this view, is more dangerous to liberal democracy than the threats it purports to combat. The *Bulwark* writer Tim Miller, for example, asked last year, “Does Trumpism or socialism/woke-ism threaten our republic more?” Miller found it an easy call. The “biggest threat to the country by far is the racist, nationalist Trumpers who just tried to steal an election and are prepping the ground for an encore,” he wrote. “Trump and his potentially more competent imitators imperil our entire democratic experiment.” By contrast, “while there are certainly some concerning elements to the Robin DiAngelo-fication of American life, on balance I consider the most recent racial awakening a net societal plus.”

For those keeping scorecards at home, Miller worked as communications director for Jeb Bush’s 2016 presidential campaign. DiAngelo is the author of the bestselling *White Fragility* (2018), which argues that racism is intrinsic to white identity. The *Bulwark* is the webzine founded in 2018 by William Kristol after the *Weekly Standard*, which he had also founded, was shut down by its publisher. (The *Bulwark* is also, full disclosure, a frequent critic of the Claremont Institute.)

When it launched, the *Bulwark*’s motto was “Conservatism Conserved.” Such a mission statement suggests a kind of conservative essentialism, which runs counter to conservatism’s need to understand itself prudentially. That is, to be custodians of the classical liberal tradition requires assessing the gravest threats to that tradition in any given circumstance, and then doing what is necessary to preserve classical liberalism from those dangers. New threats, such as moral anarchy and open borders, replace old ones, such as Soviet Communism. As they do, conservatism will revise itself constantly in response to these emerging challenges to America’s republic.

In any case, however, the phrase is no longer evident on the *Bulwark* website. Instead,

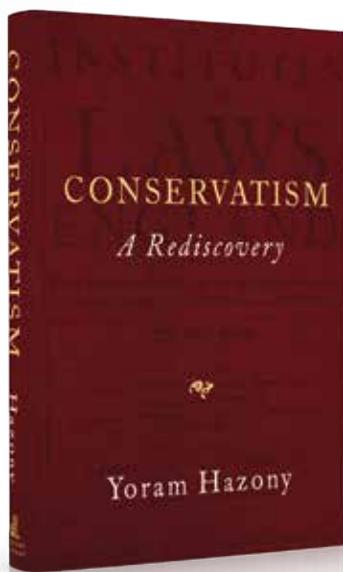


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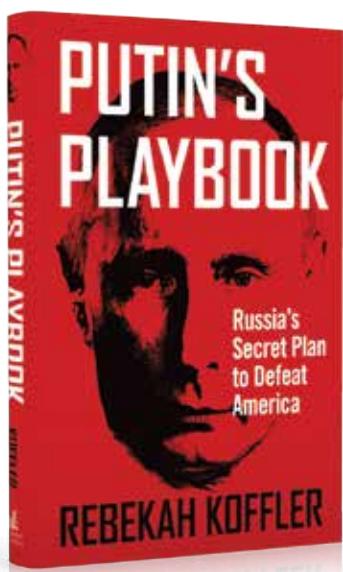
CONSERVATISM

A Rediscovery

By Yoram Hazony

The idea that American conservatism is identical to “classical” liberalism is seriously mistaken. Award-winning political theorist Yoram Hazony argues that the best hope for Western democracy is a return to the empiricist, religious, and nationalist traditions of America and Britain—the conservative traditions that brought greatness to the English-speaking nations and became the model for national freedom for the entire world.

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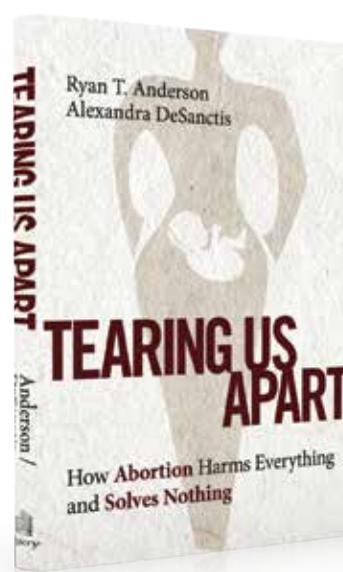
PUTIN'S PLAYBOOK

Russia's Secret Plan to Defeat America

By Rebekah Koffler

Russia is not America's friend. *Putin's Playbook* is urgently essential reading. Rebekah Koffler, a former U.S. intelligence specialist who was born and raised in the Soviet Union, explains what Vladimir Putin wants and how he plans to get it. Russia's ruler is following a carefully devised plan to defeat the United States.

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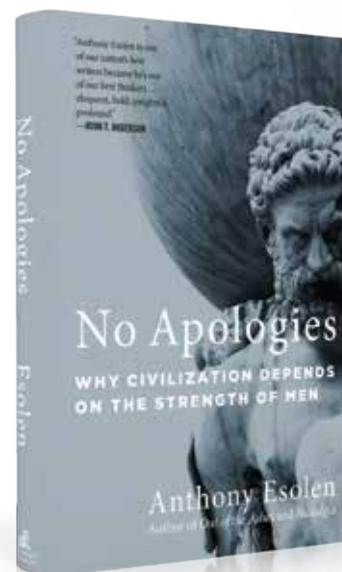
TEARING US APART

How Abortion Harms Everything and Solves Nothing

By Ryan T. Anderson and Alexandra DeSanctis

Hope in the Ruins of Roe. Political philosopher Ryan T. Anderson, bestselling author of *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment*, teams up with the pro-life journalist Alexandra DeSanctis to expose the catastrophic failure—social, political, legal, and personal—of legalized abortion.

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By Anthony Esolen

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as *Power Line's* Steven Hayward observed last year, the project's Never Trump mission seems to have morphed into a Never Conservative one, reflected in articles, as he put it, "attacking conservative views on climate change, health care, and many other issues."

For conservatives who favor Trump, as well as for those who want to see the political break he initiated carried forward by more effective and less gratuitously divisive leaders, it is the newest Left that is singularly threatening to the republic, rendering just and necessary a comparably aggressive response from the Right. These conservatives are not persuaded that "socialism/woke-ism" is partly a welcome development, partly a benign one, and altogether too inconsequential to worry about while Trumpism stalks the land. The idea that conservatism can tolerate or ignore radical ideas because they're self-disqualifying does not align with lived experience in 21st-century America. As Ross Douthat recently wrote in the *New York Times*, "If conservatives had predicted just before *Obergefell v. Hodges* that soon a fifth of young adults would identify as L.G.B.T.Q., prominent voices would deploy terms like 'pregnant person' and 'menstruator' in place of 'woman,' and natal males would be winning women's track and swimming competitions, they would have been treated as hysterics."

Conservatives in the MAGA-tolerant camp have become convinced that it is better to pose rude, insistent questions than to believe egalitarians' assurances about what will and won't turn out to be on the right side of history. For decades, the pattern has been for those on the Right to object to some left-of-center reform, A, by arguing that it implies B, which in turn implies C...and C is completely crazy. The reformers' standard response has been, "Yes, but nobody is arguing for C."

Nobody in favor of minority-group pride, for example, was arguing for college dormitories and graduation ceremonies restricted to members of just one race or ethnicity. Nobody opposed to mass incarceration was arguing in favor of de facto decriminalization of shoplifting. Nobody who wants schools to prepare students for life in a more diverse America was arguing that eight-year-olds should be assigned to specify their racial and gender identity, then rank themselves according to the power and privilege it confers. Nobody committed to transgender equality as the civil rights issue of our time was arguing that teachers and guidance counselors who support a teenager's desire to transition should get judges to revoke the custodial rights of "abusive" parents who oppose the severe, irreversible drug regimens and surgeries needed to alter gender identity.

The passage of time, though, regularly makes clear that nobody had been arguing for C...*just yet*. Some of the pro-A activists were earnest but naïve, unable or unwilling to grasp that C was the logical culmination of A. Other, smarter advocates were cynical but deceptive. They understood that it is not enough to be on the right side of history unless you also move at the right pace of history. Accordingly, securing C may require dismissing it until after A and B's implementation alters the climate of opinion, making it possible to start explaining that, upon reflection, C turns out to be a pretty good idea—indeed, a moral imperative. (To be sure, however, nobody is arguing for D. Not just yet.)

"We Won't Get Fooled Again," sang the Who's Roger Daltrey, a sentiment central to Trumpism. The Right has taken up other defiant attitudes whose provenance was countercultural, leftist, or both. Feminists, for example, started saying, "Well-behaved women seldom make history" in 1976. According to the MAGA update, well-behaved conservatives seldom impede it.

National Review "stands athwart history, yelling Stop," William F. Buckley, Jr., declared in that magazine's inaugural issue, published in 1955. The emergence of Trumpism is best understood as a judgment that despite six decades of yelling, conservatives could boast of very little stopping. This attitude was captured in Michael Anton's famous 2016 *CRB* essay, "The Flight 93 Election," especially the passages in which he charges that too many conservatives have accepted their role as "the Washington Generals of American politics," allowed to participate provided they agree to "show up and lose."

Post-Conservatism

THERE'S NO WAY TO KNOW WHETHER the Never Trump faction or the MAGA faction will prevail in the contest over the future of conservatism, or of whatever it is that comes after and replaces conservatism. It does seem clear that we are beyond the point where either side can say anything that would persuade the other on any important question. If so, conservatism's future will be defined less by evidence and syllogisms than by the ability to formulate a political goal and a strategy for achieving it. What will it mean to prevail, and what will it take?

Each wing of the conservative house divided faces challenges unique to its situation. The Never Trump faction has taken the position that Job One is eradicating every vestige of Trumpism. This appears out of reach, not only because the 74 million Americans who,

with varying degrees of enthusiasm, voted for Donald Trump in 2020 won't just disengage from politics. It's also tricky to rescue democracy if the *demos* doesn't accept the premise that it's in jeopardy. Things could change before the 2022 midterm elections, but the clear indications so far are that few voters outside Democratic and Never Trump circles share the belief that Trumpism is so menacing that its repudiation is the nation's most urgent task. Polls about voters' generic preference in congressional elections, for example, show Republicans faring better than Democrats, a rarity glimpsed only when the GOP makes big gains, as in 1994 and 2010.

The Never Trump project's Job One would be more attainable if Job Two were at least a bit comprehensible. It's difficult to say, however, what is supposed to happen if and after Trumpism is eradicated, root and branch. The Never Trump differences with the larger part of the Republican Party and conservative movement are profound, but its objections to the progressive agenda are increasingly difficult to specify. The main problem, as Never Trumpers see it, seems to be that progressivism is bad politics rather than bad governance. As *Bulwark* policy editor Mona Charen recently complained, Democrats' ineptitude and the power of their far-left wing prevents the party from discharging its "overriding obligation," which is to keep "the Q-Anon-indulging, Putin-friendly, truth-optional, insurrectionist party from returning to power."

The *Bulwark* has sometimes beseeched the Biden Democrats to provide a "Sister Souljah moment," a repudiation of the most extreme leftists as public and explicit as the one Bill Clinton delivered during his first presidential campaign. (In 2020 one article called for a Sister Souljah *month*.) But the intra-Democratic correlation of forces is decidedly different today than it was in 1992. Nate Hochman writes in *National Review* that the "outsized influence of the party's activist wing, powerful teachers' unions, and the left-leaning corporate media" forces Democrats to endorse broadly unpopular policy positions. Making abortion legal at every point throughout pregnancy is a strong candidate for Exhibit A.

Florida Democratic Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy said much the same thing in explaining her decision to retire rather than run for a fourth term this year. The problem, she told *Politico*, is that Democratic leaders are willing to let members from moderate, swing districts vote how they need to vote and say what they need to say...but only when the party is in the minority. Once it won a majority in 2018, and could pass bills and get them signed into law after 2020, there was a "march

toward party unity” driven, Murphy said, by “the faction that wants to dismantle capitalism.”

In short, it is unclear what Never Trump conservatism (or post-conservatism) is selling, and unclear who will buy it. Its likeliest future appears to be among not-so-woke Democrats, providing the political vigor and skills Never Trump adherents currently find lacking in their ranks. Whether many Democrats will welcome not only campaign contributions and votes but strategic guidance from disaffected Republicans is a separate question. In any case, very little money will be wagered on a political movement that knows what it abhors but otherwise lacks a rationale, agenda, or constituency.

Coalition Building

IT'S NO LESS DIFFICULT, THOUGH, TO explain how Trumpism transitions from venting to governing. For electoral purposes, building on the 2016 victory seems like a start, in that the raw material for a right-of-center majority is more evident there than in John McCain's or Mitt Romney's defeats. But even Trump's 2016 campaign manager, Steve Bannon, says, “Trump did not win in 2016.” Rather, “Hillary Clinton lost,” a judgment he delivers in *Insurgen-*

cy: How Republicans Lost Their Party and Got Everything They Ever Wanted, a new book by *New York Times* reporter Jeremy Peters. Prudence dictates treating the in-kind contribution to the conservative cause that was the 2016 Clinton presidential campaign as a nonrecurring phenomenon.

In a large, diverse country with a deeply entrenched two-party system, any majority coalition necessarily brings together disparate, often antagonistic elements. Coalitions change over time, partly as a cause and partly as an effect of the changing arguments used to hold them together. By following Barry Goldwater's advice that Republicans should “go hunting where the ducks are,” the GOP made what had been the Democrats' Solid South its own strongest region. In the same spirit, Florida senator Marco Rubio took stock of the 2016 and 2020 election returns to declare his party's future to be a “multiethnic, multiracial, working-class coalition.”

It's an appealing vision in several ways, but that doesn't make it an attainable one. Driving up the price of labor by using immigration restrictions to reduce its supply is central to Trumpism's economic and political logic. High wages and low immigration were indeed a feature of the 1950s Affluent Society, but not the only ones. No political party

can recreate the global conditions in which American industry was competing against nations devastated by war, or the social ones in which male breadwinners had most parts of the labor market to themselves. Above all, the postwar boom occurred when labor unions were much stronger than they are now. Is it likely that the GOP, four decades after the 1981 air-traffic controllers strike, reaches an accommodation with the labor movement, or builds a working-class coalition with voters who either share or forgive Republican opposition to unions?

Similarly, a working-class Republican Party would seem to be one that abandons decades devoted to limiting or disciplining the welfare state, a surrender conveyed by Donald Trump's promise during the 2016 campaign to “save Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid without cuts.” (These three programs, plus interest payments on the national debt, accounted for 41.5% of all federal outlays in 2020.) Hunting where the ducks are means moving on from locations where the ducks aren't. Former House Speaker Paul Ryan's various roadmaps to make our welfare state smartly targeted and solvent had every element needed for success, except popular support. The fact that nobody can figure out the political problem of winning an election by making entitlement



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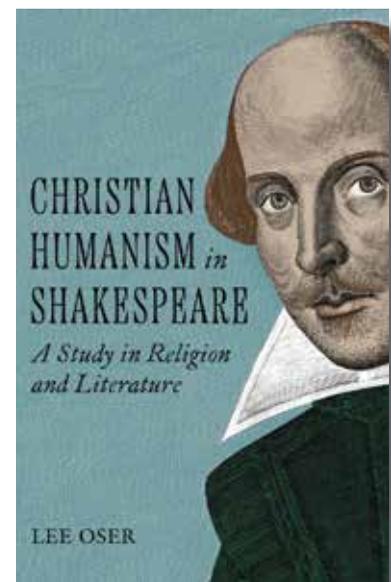
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programs sustainable does not, however, mean that America's grave long-term fiscal problem will conveniently solve itself.

This rendezvous with bankruptcy is not the sort of self-destructive democratic tendency that preoccupies the Trumpist mind. Cultural decline is. My Claremont colleague Glenn Ellmers wrote last year that the "basic fact" is, "Our norms are now hopelessly corrupt and need to be destroyed" (emphasis in the original). The "political practices, institutions, and even rhetoric governing the United States have become hostile to both liberty and virtue," he continues. Additionally, "the mainline churches, universities, popular culture, and the corporate world are rotten to the core." So, he asks, "What exactly are we trying to conserve?" This is how Sisyphus would explain his decision to just let the goddamned boulder roll to the bottom of the hill and stay there.

But then what? Despair generates consequences that vindicate despair. Consider Donald Trump's unhinged decision to make the 2020-21 election for Georgia's two U.S. Senate seats a referendum on his allegations of voter fraud. He tweeted before the January 2021 special elections took place that they were "illegal and invalid," and concentrated on his own grievances against the state's electoral process in campaign appearances with the candidates. Both Republican sitting senators fell just short, getting between 49 and 50% of the vote in the one-on-one run-off elections. "Turns out if the leader of a party spends two months actively delegitimizing elections and saying voting doesn't matter, voters listen," one Georgia Republican told *Politico*.

These victories gave Democrats the barest of Senate majorities, with Vice President Harris breaking 50-50 ties. The upshot is that every Biden proposal approved by Congress and deplored by conservatives—every executive branch appointment and policy decision rendered by those officials, every judicial appointment and ruling delivered by those jurists over the next 40 years, every spending increase crammed into a reconcilia-

tion bill—could have been prevented or mitigated if Trump had displayed a modicum of responsibility, restraint, and intelligence. What are we trying to conserve? Well, significantly less now than there would have been but for Trump's signature blend of solipsism and nihilism.

This dereliction of a party leader's duties is a miniature of Trump's dereliction of a national leader's duties. Despite Trump's outsized personality, Trumpism started out as about something—above all, repudiating Bush-era nation-building, entitlement reform, and immigration amnesty. Some of what Trump promised got done, while most of it proved harder than he made it sound in 2016. But since Election Day 2020, "All that is left of Trumpism are Trump's grievances and aspirations," as Michael Brendan Dougherty wrote this year in *National Review*. The entirety of Trump's agenda now is to "restore his tarnished honor and make credible his belief in his own victory."

Too Far Gone?

“THERE IS A GREAT DEAL OF RUIN in a nation,” wrote Adam Smith in 1777, which is heartening but doesn't clarify how much ruin there is exactly, or whether a particular nation at a particular time has used up its supply. There are two irresponsible ways to deal with the uncertainty. One is to treat a nation's staying power as inexhaustible, justifying the heedless pursuit of policy and lifestyle experiments. In other words, progressivism. The other is to dismiss all encouraging or ambiguous evidence to conclude that the nation is already ruined. In other words, late-stage Trumpism. Ellmers writes that because the "Constitution no longer works" and "there is almost nothing left to conserve," it is time to give up on conservatism and accept that what we really "need is a counter-revolution."

How, then, do conservatives navigate the foggy question of whether or not a republic

is too far gone to be conserved? The least bad approach, I submit, is a variant of Pascal's Wager: faced with a quandary in which we do not, and fear that we cannot, know the answer to an important question, we should select the answer that will have the least damaging consequences if we turn out to be wrong. So, which would be the bigger mistake—to keep fighting to preserve a republic that turns out to be beyond resuscitation, or to give up defending one whose vigor might yet be restored?

The question answers itself, especially in the American context. Those who abandon conservatism for counter-revolution are either fighting to reestablish America's founding principles, or for a new founding based on new principles that will prove more resilient than those of 1776 and 1787. In the former case, there's no functional difference between conservation and counter-revolution. Both are interchangeable terms describing the effort to make principles proclaimed in the 18th century work as well as they can in the 21st. In the latter case, the counter-revolutionaries need to explain why their principles are superior to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison's. The failure to provide such an explanation would not only show an indecent disrespect for the opinions of mankind but vindicate fears that the counter-revolutionaries are no less enthused about chaos and averse to clarity about ultimate objectives than the revolutionaries they war against.

The central conservative impulse is that because valuable things are easy to break but hard to replace, every effort should be made to conserve them while they can be conserved. Conservatives, opposed to assisted suicide as a medical procedure, should be equally reluctant to perform it as a political procedure on a republic that, however debilitated, has time and again proven resilient, confounding those prepared to write its autopsies and deliver its eulogies.

William Voegeli is senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

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