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Joseph M.
Bessette

Bradley C.S.
Watson:
**Old Right &
New Right**

Michael
Knowles:
**Christopher
Rufo**

Allen C.
Guelzo:
**Lincoln &
Majority Rule**

Brian Patrick
Eha:
**Cormac
McCarthy**

Martha
Bayles:
**Truly Strange
Science Fiction**

John J.
DiIulio, Jr.

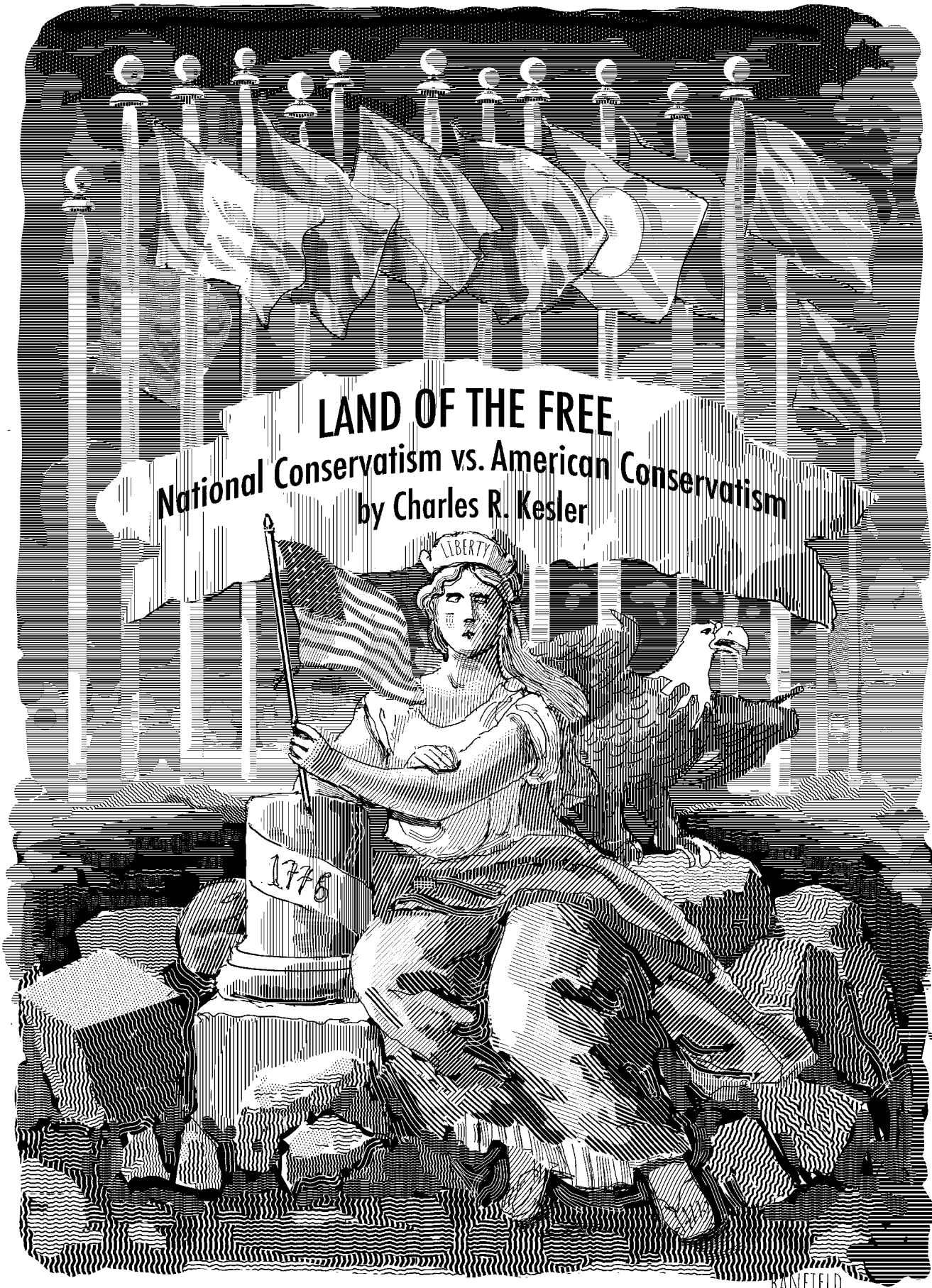
William
Voegeli:
**A Second
New Deal?**

Helen
Andrews:
**Elon
Musk**

Catesby
Leigh:
**Rebuild
Penn Station**

Christopher
Caldwell:
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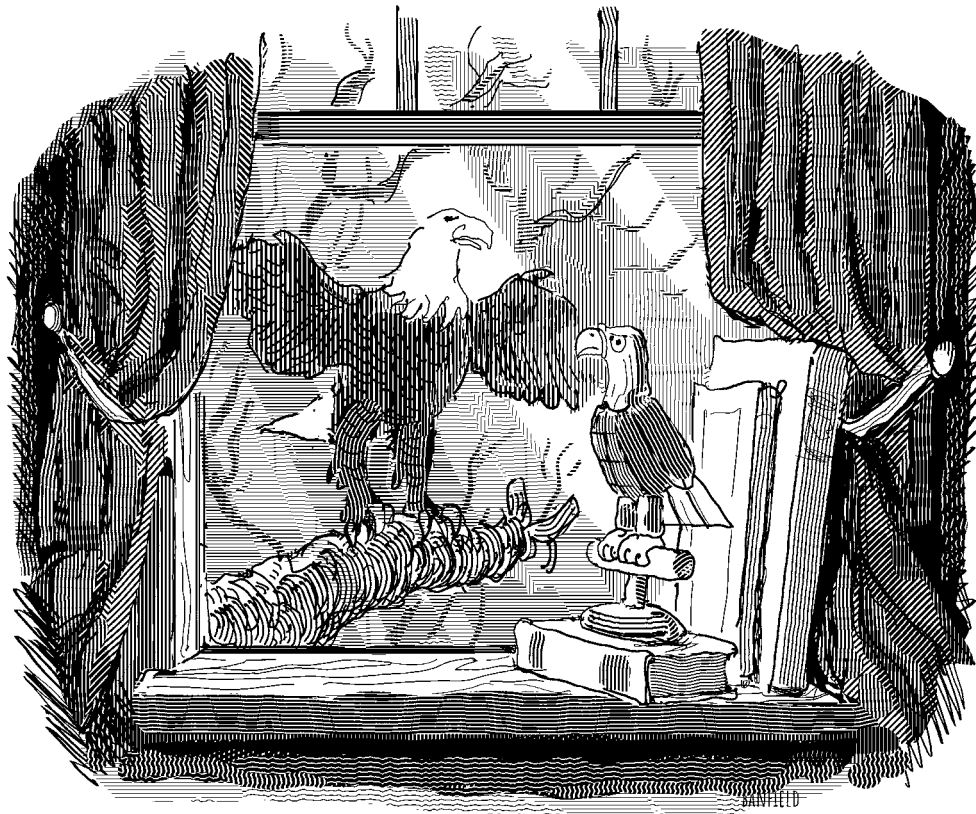


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Essay by Charles R. Kesler

NATIONAL CONSERVATISM VS. AMERICAN CONSERVATISM

The problem with internationalist nationalism.



WHAT GOES BY THE NAME OF “National Conservatism” is perhaps the most visible, identifiable, and successful part of the New Right. It overlaps with the MAGA conservatives, but not every National Conservative thinks former president Donald Trump is so great or even knows greatness when he sees it. It should also be admitted that there are circles of the current New Right who doubt that America herself is or ever has been great, or could be made great “again.” These radical doubts come from two contrary directions: from Catholic “integralists” who bemoan America’s secularism, materialism, and individualism, which they sometimes allege to be necessary legacies of the country’s founding; and from pseudo-Nietzschean critics who blame Christianity and bourgeois morality for America’s purported ignobility and lack of manliness. These critics are not mainstream National Conservatives if they are Natcons at all. Though influential, their circles seem small enough to neglect for the purposes of this essay, which is interested in the relation between official or organized National Conservatism and the older American conserva-

tism—rooted in American constitutionalism—at its best or most inspiring.

The political scientist Martin Diamond used to say that the oldest word in American politics is “new.” It ought not surprise, then, that today’s New Right is not the first, nor likely the last, that America will experience. The first proper or self-conscious modern conservative movement was the brainchild of William F. Buckley, Jr., among others, in the 1950s, and cast its first presidential votes for Barry Goldwater in the Republican primaries of 1960 and the election of 1964. Yet even that founding generation of American conservatives sometimes called itself the “New Right,” in contradistinction to the “Old Right,” whose anti-statist domestic policy had been crushed by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the “Revolution of 1932” (as Willmoore Kendall and Frank Meyer christened it) and whose non-interventionist foreign policy had been sunk by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. Yet the presence of other novel experiments in post-New Deal conservative thought, now largely forgotten, soon induced Buckley and his allies to begin referring to themselves also as “movement conservatives” and even “radi-

cal conservatives.” The point was to emphasize they were outside of and opposed to the reigning establishments—not only the liberal establishment but also the “well-fed Right,” in Buckley’s words, the regrettable allies of the northeastern (read: liberal) Republican establishment.

In fact, these two New Rights have many things in common, though no one would ever mistake Donald Trump for Bill Buckley, and neither today’s MAGA youth nor the editors of today’s *National Review* would regard any political resemblance as a compliment. Nonetheless, both movements were populist (a slippery word, admittedly) in spirit, focused on issues of internal loyalty and subversion and fear of American decline, deeply distrustful of the American academy, and confronted by an ideologized Left eager to exploit rapidly changing racial and sexual mores. Perhaps most noticeably, each New Right was impatient with the spiritlessness and excessive “modulation” (Buckley’s word) of the mainstream Republican Party, its typical politicians, big donors, and campaign strategists. These GOP elites reflected a ruling class that didn’t understand, or



care to understand, how close America had drawn to the point of political crisis. As today's young Right started saying some years ago, they didn't know what time it is. WFB criticized this ruling class as the "Fabian operators...bent on controlling both our major political parties." Today, the kids condemn what they term the "uniparty."

Of course, politics doesn't stand still, and since the early 1960s the Right's political evolution, or at least the succession of names we apply to ourselves, has proceeded apace: paleoconservatives, neoconservatives, the Religious Right (whether Moral Majority or Christian Coalition), "Reagan's regiments," civil society conservatives, leave-us-aloners, national greatness conservatives (Bill Kristol, we hardly knew ye), big government conservatives, compassionate conservatives, Sam's Club Republicans, Reformocons, Tea Partiers, and many other appellations. American conservatives, by whatever name you call us, seem to suffer from a bad case of not wanting to join any club that will have us as a member—or at any rate, that will have *all* of us as members.

The varieties of conservative experience tell us something, however, about the range of goods that conservatives seek, and have sought, to conserve: the political good, as recognized by conservatives, is quite heterogeneous. Which is one reason it's always been easier for us to coalesce around what we are *against* rather than what we are *for*, exactly. Besides, different generations experience different threats to different combinations of goods. The Zoomers have never known anything like the Boomers' experience of the Cold War and Communist expansionism; likewise we Boomers have little sense of how awful it is to grow up choking on the strident ideology and self-loathing culture of today's schools, or trapped in the global web. Many of the confusions within contemporary conservatism stem from such generation gaps. "Modern formulations are necessary even in defense of very ancient truths," Bill Buckley advised in the 1960s. "Not because of any alleged anachronisms in the old ideas...but because the idiom of life is always changing, and we need to say things in such a way as to get inside the vibrations of modern life."

But not all the disagreements on the contemporary Right stem from the search for new idioms, or from understandable differences over means to the same ends. Our New Right charges the old New Right with certain errors, which allegedly cost it victory against the Left when it had the chance. In fact, the cardinal characteristic of our New Right is the almost equal vehemence with which it denounces both woke liberalism and mod-

ern conservatism in what it imagines to be its anachronistic Reagan and Buckley mode.

The Natcon Project

TO SEE WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THE DEBATES between these two New Right schools or movements, let us look closely at what the Natcons themselves endorse as their manifesto, the document titled "National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles." Drafted, according to the document itself, by Will Chamberlain, Christopher DeMuth, Rod Dreher, Yoram Hazony, Daniel McCarthy, Joshua Mitchell, N.S. Lyons, John O'Sullivan, and R.R. Reno "on behalf of the Edmund Burke Foundation," the statement is copyrighted by that foundation and resides on the website of nationalconservatism.org, a project of the Edmund Burke Foundation, whose offices are in Washington, D.C. Hazony, an Israeli political thinker with a B.A. from Princeton and a Ph.D. from Rutgers, is the foundation's founding chairman and the movement's leading thinker and chief convenor. Many friends and old friends have signed this statement and endorsed National Conservatism as essential to the revitalization of American Conservatism. I did not sign it, not so much because of what it said but because of a certain unease over what it did not say. This essay is an elaboration of the reasons for my unease.

The statement's parade of worthy authors—not to mention its numerous and eminent signers, who range from Michael Anton to Peter Thiel—are known to hold clashing views on some of the items discussed or referred to in it, and the statement doesn't identify who wrote which part of it, nor does it explain exactly how and why the group of authors came to assemble in the first place. These puzzles raise the question whether each author understands the statement and its principles in the same way and with the same enthusiasm. Hazony's influence is apparent throughout, but by comparing the statement to parallel passages in his books and articles one sees subtle changes and emendations that suggest compromise or disagreement with Hazonyism, at least in its pure or primary form. With Marx and Engels, to take a famous case of joint authorship, there was never any doubt that Engels played second fiddle. The seats in the Natcon orchestra are not so clearly assigned. Nonetheless, in a striking sentence, the preliminary "Overview" offered on nationalconservatism.org announces: "National conservatism is a project of the Edmund Burke Foundation, a new public affairs institute dedicated to developing a revitalized conservatism for the age of nationalism already upon us."

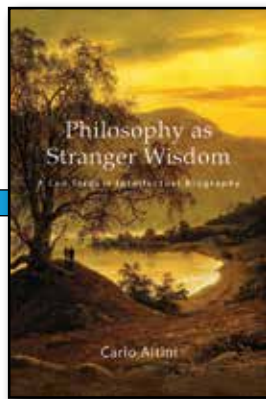
Bill Buckley never claimed that American conservatism was a "project" of his magazine, nor that it intended to complement the times. On the contrary, he claimed (in his Publisher's Statement in *National Review's* inaugural issue) that the magazine was extremely untimely and intended only to stand "athwart history, yelling Stop." Buckley-Goldwater conservatives did not expect history to be on their side, and indeed Whittaker Chambers wasn't the only one among them to feel that when he deserted Communism he was leaving the winning for the *losing* side. The National Conservatives are not progressives, to be sure, but neither do they display that marked defiance of history and its supposed inevitability that lent to the Cold War conservatives a startling gallantry.

In the National Conservatism site's Overview, the foundation explains that since the end of the Cold War, American conservatives have been lost in a triumphalist haze. Movement conservatives have grown "increasingly attached to a vision of a global 'rules-based liberal order' that would bring peace and prosperity to the entire world while attenuating the independence of nations." To put it less diplomatically, they effectively accuse libertarians and neoconservatives, who became enamored with that vision, of stealing credit for the defeat of Communism and the victorious worldwide spread of liberal democracy—thus allowing ascendant libertarians and neocons to come to dominate the conservative movement.

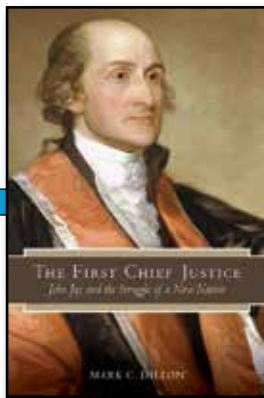
At one level, National Conservatism thus presents itself as a new and improved American conservatism purged of neocons and libertarians, or at least of their excessive influence. This means particularly the neocons associated with the George W. Bush Administration, who defended and exacerbated its policy of democratizing the Middle East by force of arms. The Natcons would certainly not be alone in criticizing the so-called second-generation neoconservatives (the first generation, with the conspicuous exception of Norman Podhoretz, were much less gung-ho about the export of democracy). Here in their manifesto, however, the Natcons emphasize not so much the errors of the neoconservatives as "the excesses of purist libertarianism," accusing it of leading American conservatives into a neoliberal apostasy from nationalism.

In other words, they charge that the "fusionism" of Buckley-style conservatism didn't work, at least in post-Cold War conditions. The fusion never happened. Instead, libertarianism came increasingly to dominate the blend, and traditionalism receded *pari passu*. A similar critique was raised memorably by paleoconservatives in the 1980s and '90s, frus-

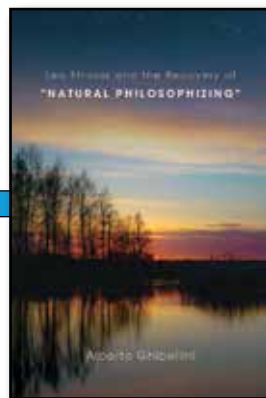
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trated over the rising fortunes of the first-generation neoconservatives. It was anticipated by the libertarian Ronald Hamowy and others in the 1960s, who argued that Frank Meyer's formulation of fusionism (from his perch as a senior editor and book review editor at *National Review*) was incoherent and amounted only to “libertarianism manqué.” Fusionism encouraged conservatives to focus on resisting the growth of the state, which plainly and urgently threatened personal and collective liberty, but to consign the campaign for personal and collective virtue (ordered liberty) to the backburner of civil society through vague involvement with its schools, churches, and other mediating institutions. In short, rhetorical fusionism but effective libertarianism—an outcome that Hamowy and other libertarians did not regret, except for what they regarded as the lost honor due to libertarianism. National Conservatives in particular, and the contemporary New Right in general, share this diagnosis of the failures of fusionism, reviving and deepening it into a critique of neo-liberal economics as a way of life.

They criticize the former New Right of Buckley and Reagan as myopically libertarian and temperamentally unserious about politics and morals. These judgments seem to me exaggerated and unfair. American libertarians could be intensely political: they were right to add their warnings to those of more traditionalist and patriotic conservatives about the dangers of the modern state, its uncontrollable appetites and overweening ambitions, and its drive to overcome all those “inventions of prudence” like the separation of powers and federalism that *The Federalist* had patiently defended as essential to liberty and the common good. The libertarians were right to keep warning against socialism, too, with all its enticements and dangers. Our contemporary New Right sometimes talks as though we don't have to worry any more about the first and second waves of liberalism—the living constitution and welfare state entitlements—because the problems of wokeness are so much more urgent and oppressive. I agree these are more urgent and oppressive. But the older disorders are still present, and someday will be urgent again, and in the meantime render wokeness more threatening by sapping the foundations of natural rights and limited government. The Natcon Statement of Principles and its Overview are, by the way, more alert to some of these lingering constitutional derangements than the youthful New Right tends to be.

Nor do I think the Buckley Right was politically naïve or cowardly or unserious. Whatever the limitations of the fusionist

formula (see chapter 14 of my book *Crisis of the Two Constitutions*; 2021), they did not prevent the Buckley and Reagan conservatives from waging immense political battles over McCarthyism, anti-Communism, and internal security, and against the legal shortcuts and unrestrained moralism of the civil rights revolution. These debates were not so far from the principles at issue in today's debates over wokeness.

The Idea of the Nation

ENTER DONALD TRUMP, BREXIT, AND “[t]he return of nationalism” via populist conservative movements around the world. And enter National Conservatism itself, the project which its spokesmen claim will “solidify and energize” latent national conservatives everywhere, and alone will answer the question “[a]t the heart of this crisis.” That question, according to the Overview, is self-referential: “Is the new American and British nationalism a hostile usurper that has arrived on the scene to displace political conservatism? Or is nationalism an essential, if neglected, part of the Anglo-American conservative tradition at its best?”

One can anticipate the answer. But first, what is this nationalism that dominates the new age, according to the Natcons? How do they define it? Not as in the first place a preference for one's own nation—as say, Trump (“America First”) or the Brexiteers (“take back control”) might define it; but rather as loyalty to “the idea of the nation,” and thus also “a commitment to a world of independent nations.” Given this quick transition from “nation” to “the idea of the nation,” a more accurate name for themselves might be Nationalist Conservatives. But perhaps that sounds worse, more ominous. They seem wary of the love of one's own that is a natural root of nationalism. Inasmuch as “nation” and “race” have sometimes proved hard to disentangle, they go out of their way to anticipate charges of racism and to announce to their credit that they stand “in stark opposition to political theories grounded in race.”

One begins to see the strongly *international* flavor of this nationalism, and at the same time the highly processed flavor of this conservatism. How paradoxical, to begin with, is an avowedly international movement on behalf of nationalism. *Whose* nationalism is this, which the movement seeks to propagate among the world's nations? Although “National Conservatism” might suggest the movement is open to any and every nation, the Overview invokes, in particular, “the new American and British nationalism”—singular rather than plural, notice,



as though the nations shared the same nationalism. The statement's emphasis on "the Anglo-American conservative tradition" echoes a major theme of Hazony's writings, especially his recent book, *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (2022), in which he devotes several hundred intelligent pages to working out the idea. Since founding our own republic, Americans have rejected British and even Anglo-American identity, along with king, aristocracy, commons, and the national church with bishops sitting in the House of Lords. Many of the statement's signers and authors, in their own writings, acknowledge and emphasize the distinctiveness of American politics and national identity—in brief, Americans have insisted on being citizens, not subjects. Amalgamating the two traditions risks misunderstanding both. Hazony knows all this, of course, but appeals to reconsider the question on the grounds that American conservatism à la Buckley and Reagan has, he argues, gone so wrong.

Given how nonchalantly Hazony blurs the difference, however, one has to wonder: is National Conservatism about *conserving American nationalism*, or is it about *nationalizing American conservatism* along Anglo-American or some other reconstructed or abstract lines, such as "the idea of the nation"?

As expected, the Overview reassures that far from being a "hostile usurper," National Conservatism comes in peace to restore nationalism as "an essential, if neglected part of the Anglo-American conservative tradition at its best." This sentiment is one reason why I don't denounce or condemn the signatories because I think I understand why they signed up, and their reasons are honorable. The nation-state as a political form is under insidious pressure these days both from above—from international and transnational organizations, laws, and ideological-cum-religious movements, and from below—from racial, ethnic, sexual, and tribal-cultural factions asserting claims against national citizenship. The big thing that the Natcons get right is the present duty to come to the defense of decent nation-states against their enemies and critics. And this generous perception is the overwhelming reason why so many have felt moved to associate with their cause. Regrettably, the Natcon arguments cannot vindicate that cause. Fortunately, they don't have to, because there are plenty of better arguments available from our own tradition.

American Nationalism

IN THE FIRST PLACE, IT IS NOT SIMPLY A matter of putting "nationalism" back into conservatism. The principles of our nationalism derive from the founding docu-

ments of the republic. For Americans, as the Declaration and countless other public affirmations make clear, the nation itself is or conceives itself to be the result of a choice by individuals, enjoying certain inherent and unalienable rights, to join together as a people for their mutual safety and happiness, and to form a government for themselves to secure those rights and effect those ends. The American people, happily, had those characteristics in common that most nations have or wish to have—in the words of *The Federalist*, Americans were "descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs"—but regarded these as necessary or useful, but certainly not sufficient, conditions for a free and virtuous nation, which must also have a good government capable of securing the common good and protecting natural rights. Most forms of nationalism regard those shared inheritances as the essence of a shared identity and common will, hence not only necessary but *sufficient*

The Constitution is not ordained and established for the sake of the world or humanity, though it may be a blessing to both.

for nationhood. That's why our nationalism has always been exceptional, featuring more individualism, more pluralism, more freedom, and more statesmanlike deliberation and prudence than is typical. We think of ourselves as a *founded* nation; most nations don't think they have or need such a clear, conscious, and principled beginning. President Obama got it exactly wrong, as usual: our exceptionalism is not the same as the Greeks' or the Brits'.

For most nation-states the state or the constitution is the expression of the nation, but the nation comes first, in theory and usually in practice too. That is, nationalism is the fundamental political phenomenon. For the United States, the emphasis is on the regime or the Constitution and its principles as the fundamental phenomenon that shapes the nation. Thus, for example, among the first questions the founding generation had to face was whether the U.S. was one nation, albeit cast into a partly federal form, or whether it was what Willmoore Kendall liked to call a "baker's dozen" of independent, sovereign states.

"We emphasize the idea of the nation," the Statement of Principles explains, "because we see a world of independent nations—each pursuing its own national interests and upholding national traditions that are its own—as the only genuine alternative to universalist ideologies now seeking to impose a homogenizing, locality-destroying imperium over the entire globe." But that view of nationalism is itself an ideological category, a homogenization. America's special view of civic or republican nationalism, that is, nationalism limited and shaped by human equality, liberty, and consent, is ignored or downplayed, incautiously mixed with generic nationalism. Though standard-issue nationalism is not always illiberal or oppressive, it can be. What the National Conservatives are actually offering, then, is not so much the return of American nationalism—or of a purely traditional form of American conservatism, shorn of neos and libertarians—but a re-writing of American conservatism along new, less brazenly American lines, assimilating it, in effect, to the nationalism of other nations, beginning with Great Britain. Genuine American nationalism with its laws of nature and of nature's God and its unalienable rights and its written constitutionalism appears to Hazony and his followers as more like part of the problem than part of the solution.

Having liberated nationalism from some of the moral limitations that the Americans in the best case demanded of it, the Natcons are free to add back new limitations to try to deal with nationalism's illiberal tendencies. For example, nationalism as they define it is explicitly anti-imperialist, and Hazony in his books traces nationalism back to the children of Israel's hostility to the Babylonian and Roman empires of their day. "We condemn the imperialism of China, Russia, and other authoritarian powers," the Natcons declare, "But we also oppose the liberal imperialism of the last generation, which sought to gain power, influence, and wealth by dominating other nations and trying to remake them in its own image." The difficulty with these general formulas when applied to policy becomes apparent. Take the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Is this a case of Russian imperialism trying to swallow its neighbor, or of liberal imperialism (NATO and the E.U.) trying to absorb part of Russia's legitimate sphere of influence? Or both? In any case, it's clear that the new emphasis on nationalism does not obviate the dilemmas of old-fashioned prudential statesmanship, the necessity, as George Washington put it succinctly in his Farewell Address, to "choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel."



“We wish to see a world of independent nations,” the statement says early on. But is every nation in the world capable of independence? Equally capable? The Natcons acknowledge the problem, without quite admitting it, in the next sentence: “Each nation *capable of self-government* [emphasis added] should chart its own course in accordance with its own particular constitutional, linguistic, and religious inheritance.” Yet what exactly qualifies or disqualifies a nation from governing itself? How many peoples lack the right “constitutional, linguistic, and religious inheritance”?

The higher the standards of self-government are raised, the more exclusive a club it becomes. What do the Natcons propose to do with the nations incapable of nationalism—those nations, that is, that are either (a) incapable of self-government or (b) capable of much more than self-government? Many nations have had a tradition of imperialism, after all, from ancient Rome to modern Britain and Russia. Isn't the root of Russia's depredations in Ukraine often said to be its, or Vladimir Putin's, peculiar *nationalism*? Some nations are so good or, more likely, so bad at self-government that they presume they should govern other nations too. The Natcons are keen to see that each country steer by the light of its own tradition and almost nothing more—as the “only genuine alternative to universalist ideologies.” But what if your nation's tradition includes a healthy dose of imperialism, or for that matter, universalist ideology?

Standards and Traditions

IN ANY EVENT, THE NATCONS NEED A STANDARD of some kind by which to defend national traditions, and to judge among competing or contradictory traditions. That is, they need a standard whose validity is in principle external to or superior to tradition as such. Buckley's American conservatism looked for such a standard in the West's “Great Tradition” of reason and revelation; indeed, as a young debater and journalist Buckley specialized in the arguments against value relativism. The Natcons bow to the virtues too, praising an eclectic list of them as “essential to sustaining our civilization.” Yet far from refuting relativism by argument, they praise tradition as the key to recovering needed virtues.

Granted, Buckley's “movement conservatism” contained many critics of rationalism who regarded tradition as “a better guide than reason,” often because they considered long-standing traditions to be wiser, that is, more reasonable, than the evanescent speculations of philosophers. Those traditionalists were, in addition, only one part of a political

and intellectual coalition including libertarians, anti-Communists (who were often ex-Communists), serious Christians, intelligent patriots and statesmen, Nobel prize-winning economists, and others. By contrast, National Conservatism's brand of traditionalism doesn't have to fight to be heard; judging from the statement, at least, it sets the tone for the movement. Dissents, though apparent at the movement's periodic general meetings, are not ventilated widely or officially outside them.

The meaning of the Natcons' reliance on tradition is clearer in Hazony's writings than in the statement, though it is implicit in its insistence on each nation (at least those capable of self-government) following “its own particular constitutional, linguistic, and religious inheritance.” In his books and articles, Hazony's *bête noire* is “Enlightenment rationalism” with its reliance on “reason alone,” and thus its penchant for philosophical abstractions like natural rights and social contract theory. Although he objects both to the Enlightenment and to rationalism, he objects to the latter more strenuously because he regards it as the root of the Enlightenment's folly. Hence, he is critical, too, of what he calls “conservative rationalism,” the efforts by, for instance, Catholic natural law thinkers and Straussian scholars and even some of America's founders to appeal to “universal reason” for conservative purposes. His judgment is firm: “conservative rationalism has failed” because “by endorsing the methods and assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism, conservative rationalism has contributed something to the calamity.” Indeed, it has made things worse by leaving once-healthy traditions “largely without defenders.” He says little about Edmund Burke's own appeals to natural law and to the “real rights of man.” Nor does he distinguish consistently between reason (aware of its own limitations) and rationalism (the ideology of reason), nor between what Aristotle would call practical reason and theoretical reason.

Yet to his credit, he recognizes there are good traditions (e.g., American freedom) and bad traditions (e.g., American slavery), and hence there must be some standard by which to distinguish good from bad that isn't simply reducible to tradition or inheritance as such. He calls that standard “general principles”—general, not universal; hoping that these can be apprehended by experience rather than by reason. But his main example (in his earlier book, *The Virtue of Nationalism* [2018]) is hardly modest or simply empirical: namely, the Ten Commandments, which he calls “the moral minimum,” and suggests has to be mixed with any nation's traditions

if its nationalism is to be respectable. With the Ten Commandments, specifically the “second table” of them, we are back to what Thomas Aquinas described as the natural law—revealed by God in this case as part of divine law too. This is more the territory of the older American conservatism, however, than of National Conservatism, in whose Statement of Principles neither natural law nor natural rights nor the Decalogue is mentioned. The turn to natural law along these lines remains a road not taken, then, even though Hazony seems to have scouted it. Rather than indicating a moral standard by which to judge national traditions, the Natcons in their Statement of Principles, following Hazony, seem keen to do the opposite, to make national traditions the standards by which to define the moral minimum, if not quite moral excellence in full. Thus, at one point (in *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*) Hazony condemns slavery as “that unspeakable digression from the course of English constitutional history.”

When it comes to the American case more specifically, he tries to distinguish between what he regards as the more sound, because more traditional, side of the founding, imbued with Christian and English influences, which he discerns in George Washington, John Adams, James Wilson, Alexander Hamilton, and the Federalist Party in general, on the one hand, and in contrast, the Jeffersonians, who “focused on universal theories of individual rights, at the expense of a careful cultivation of America's strength and cohesion as a nation.” He attempts to separate the two traditions or emphases and to argue that the one, Anglo-American conservatism, held in check the other, namely “the liberal state modeled on the social-contract theories of Enlightenment rationalist philosophers,” until the 1960s or so.

There are at least two flaws in this argument. In the first place, Washington, Adams, and the others concurred in the moral reasoning of the Declaration, including its premise of unalienable natural rights. James Wilson devoted several chapters in his *Lectures on Law* to defending this premise—on grounds friendlier to Christianity and the Scottish Enlightenment than to John Locke's philosophy, it is true, but without concluding that the self-evident truths were anything but self-evidently true. Doubtless, the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans did come to differ over the republican institutions or practices (national bank, federal judicial review, state rights, nullification, interposition, seditious libel) they considered necessary to live up to the Declaration's moral strictures,



but both sides accepted the logic of individual rights and the social contract, even when they drew different conclusions from that logic. The second flaw is imagining that the rise of the “liberal state” in the 1960s had more to do with 17th- and 18th-century social contract doctrines than with the very public rejection of those doctrines by American political science and jurisprudence in the 20th century.

We the People

NATIONAL CONSERVATISM RIGHTLY argues that the nation-state is a respectable and essential form of human self-government, and that it is proper and obligatory for such states to pursue the safety and happiness of their own nation first and foremost. Far from being a Trumpian invention or norm-shattering assertion, the latter conclusion is a truism of politics and of social contract theory in particular. As the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution states, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union,...and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity” [emphasis added]. The Constitution is not ordained and established for the sake of the world or human-

ity, though it may be a blessing to both, but for the sake of the People who are represented in and through the government established by it. In our Age of Unreason, truisms have to be explained and defended, and the Natcons deserve credit for doing so.

With this elementary point established, the Natcons proceed in their statement to recommend sensible policies for the various peoples of the world intent on assuming “among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them,” to borrow the Declaration’s language. Among these are policies designed to promote national independence, “a strong but limited state,” “God and public religion,” the rule of law, free enterprise, the traditional family, and “much more restrictive” immigration until such time as more liberal immigration becomes reasonable and tolerable again. For the most part these are moderate proposals moderately argued for. Immigration restriction, perhaps National Conservatism’s signature issue here and in Europe, and the issue on which popular majorities usually share the Natcons’ reservations, comes out mildly in the statement: the authors advise tying immigration to a nation’s capacity to absorb

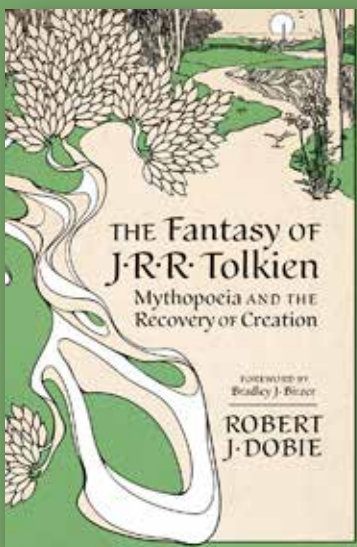
and assimilate the newcomers. Nothing that the American Founders or most of the Buckley-Reagan conservatives would likely have objected to, except for the most dogmatic libertarians, though even Milton Friedman argued that a country could not have open immigration and a welfare state at the same time.

On economic nationalism or protectionism, another question often associated with National Conservatism, the statement says disappointingly little. It rejects “the socialist principle” while affirming that “the free market cannot be absolute” but ought to be rendered compatible with “the Anglo-American political tradition” and with “the general welfare of the nation.” The Natcons criticize not only “globalized markets” and transnational corporations and deindustrialization but also the “crony capitalism” that often results from eschewing such temptations. The statement does not mention, as Hazony does in *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*, how much this presumptive Natcon economic agenda owes to that of the old Republican Party from Abraham Lincoln to Herbert Hoover, and to the Federalist and Whig parties before that.

Too often the Natcons are induced to bowdlerize the American political tradition,

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in order to play up their own originality or novelty. Consider their paraphrase of the Constitution's Preamble:

The independent nation-state is instituted to establish a more perfect union among the diverse communities, parties, and regions of a given nation, to provide for their common defense and justice among them, and to secure the general welfare and the blessings of liberty for this time and for future generations.

Conspicuously left out of the statement are the individuals who constitute "We the People," who through their states consented to the Constitution and to the Union. This is a good example of how in order to fulfill their "idea of the nation," every nation must be re-fashioned, or at least reconceived, in light of that idea. As one can tell even in this passage, the nation is always "a given nation" even in respect to its pre-existing "communities, parties, and regions." In effect, the nation already—perhaps always—exists at least potentially, which means "individuals" as such never exist because they are never outside of the nation or its constituent social groups, membership in which may be far from voluntary. The nation as the Natcons visualize it seems to emerge only from pre-existing communities, not also from individuals who might just say no. This priority of the nation to the individual is Romantic or Rousseauian, and has more in common with the political science of American Progressivism than with that of the American Founding.

The Natcon theory of nationalism culminates in the arrival of the "independent nation-state," one per nation, whose purpose is to make a unity out of diversity, and whose special concern is therefore the diverse groups (communities, parties, regions) that must be organized into a more perfect union. As with Progressivism, a certain priority for group or community rights over individual rights is almost assured, no matter how often Natcons say favorable things about individual rights. Thus "the federalist principle," as explained in the statement, is said to prescribe "a delegation of power to the respective states or subdivisions of the nation so as to allow greater variation, experimentation, and freedom." Notice that the delegation of power is from

the top down and promotes a freedom defined and limited by what is tolerable to the national government. (If any states or subdivisions are "manifestly corrupted...national government must intervene energetically to restore order.") Compare the U.S. Constitution, in which delegated powers derive from the Constitution (hence from "We the People"), not from the national government, and in which there are powers *reserved* to the states or to the people.

An even more striking example emerges from the Statement of Principles concerning "God and Public Religion." "No nation can long endure without humility and gratitude before God and fear of his judgment that are found in authentic religious tradition," it begins. But what is "authentic" religious tradition? The Natcons turn to the Bible to resolve the question. "For millennia, the Bible has been our surest guide" not only to authentic religious tradition but also to "nourishing a fitting orientation toward God, to the political traditions of the nation, to public morals, to the defense of the weak, and to the recognition of things rightly regarded as sacred." The Holy Book seems to be a necessary and almost sufficient guide to the things that are Caesar's as well as to the things that are God's. The truth of the Bible is not settled on its own terms by an appeal to revelation, but in a now familiar move, by converting it into a tradition, and not necessarily a sacred one. "The Bible should be read," advise the Natcons, "as the first among the sources of a shared Western civilization in schools and universities, and as the rightful inheritance of believers and non-believers alike." While I don't disagree with that, I doubt that classes on the Bible as Literature will do all for the National Conservative cause that the Natcons expect. But even if schools and universities take the Bible more seriously than that, as they should, that very seriousness raises in turn an obvious problem neglected by the statement: that the "shared Western civilization" generated partly by the Bible was often bitterly, bloodily divided over clashing interpretations of the Bible. Agreement on the "things rightly regarded as sacred" was never as easy as the authors seem to imply; separating "authentic religious tradition" from inauthentic never as straightforward as they might wish. To express it in Natcon terms, what if a nation's "constitutional in-

heritance" and its "religious inheritance" are at odds?

Hence their problematic recommendations: "Where a Christian majority exists," they write, "public life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision, which should be honored by the state and other institutions both public and private." They don't say where Christianity stops and its moral vision begins. Public support for Christian churches (including from public taxes) and for Christian belief (e.g., requiring it as a prerequisite for holding office) was common though never ubiquitous in 18th-century America. It sounds like the National Conservatives want to revive such policies, what used to be called limited establishments of religion, though their language is so general it's impossible to tell how far they contemplate going.

The National Conservatism Statement of Principles goes on to call for "a Cold War-type" national defense program of research to counter China, to extol and demand protection for "the traditional family" ("nature" isn't mentioned in connection with the family), and it concludes with a strong paragraph condemning "racialist ideology and oppression."

The statement goes far to attempt to establish the centrality of nationalism as "an essential, if neglected, part of the Anglo-American conservative tradition at its best." If that were all that National Conservatism were about—restoring a lost fragment of conservatism's heritage—it wouldn't be necessary to examine this manifesto so closely. But the nationalism it prefers is not the same as that advanced in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The Federalist*. In order to make their idea of nationalism prevalent and credible, the Natcons risk supplanting Americans' actual political inheritance with a faux inheritance, all in the name of tradition. The result might be National Conservatism in some sense, but would scarcely resemble American conservatism or American constitutionalism at its best.

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