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Essay by Jeffrey H. Anderson

PROJECT 2025 RECONSIDERED

An ode to the Constitution the Left hates.



THERE AREN'T TOO MANY POLICY blueprints that can boast of having a lengthy Wikipedia entry. By September, the now notorious Project 2025's entry, including footnotes, printed out at 56 pages—longer than any single chapter in the initiative's hefty policy guide released last year, *Mandate for Leadership*. Admittedly, Project 2025 isn't merely a policy blueprint, although that's the part of the project that has gotten the most attention. Indeed, Project 2025 as a whole has received more attention than anyone could ever have imagined. This summer, while walking along a lightly traveled footpath connecting a non-touristy part of Virginia Beach to a quiet residential neighborhood, I saw a sticker on the back of a road sign, saying, "Know about Project 2025? You'd better!" Such warnings were everywhere during the election season. But the sign's exhortation isn't a bad one: to evaluate Project 2025 in any meaningful way, one must examine what's in it.

According to Wikipedia, "[c]ritics have characterized Project 2025 as an authoritarian, Christian nationalist plan to steer the U.S. toward autocracy." What's more, "[l]egal experts have said it would undermine the rule of law, separation of powers, separation of church and state, and civil liberties." And all of this is in just the second paragraph of that 56-page Wiki

entry! Later, we learn, "[d]emocracy experts, political scholars, and other commentators have described the project as dangerous."

There's a wide chasm, however, separating the actual Project 2025 from the "Project 2025" bogeyman projected by the Kamala Harris-Tim Walz presidential campaign and the mainstream press (but I repeat myself). The real Project 2025 champions Main Street Americans—who have been held back by decades of "expert" bureaucratic rule—and seeks to restore and strengthen our constitutional forms. Indeed, although widely criticized as "a threat to democracy," Project 2025 is more aptly described as an ode to the Constitution. And that's a large part of why the Left hates and anathematizes it.

No Bad Publicity

A LITTLE OVER TWO YEARS AGO, IN AUGUST 2022, I met Paul Dans, the director of Project 2025 from its nascent stages until August of this year, in his office at the Heritage Foundation to talk about the policy initiative. I was impressed with Paul, who struck me (as he still does) as a dedicated patriot and an affable yet formidable opponent of the unchecked administrative state. Later that same day, Project 2025 added two new groups to its board of advisors (which already

included the Claremont Institute): the American Main Street Initiative (my small think tank for everyday Americans) and Hillsdale College. That brought the tally to 30 affiliated organizations from across the conservative movement—or at least from across the more Main Street-focused, less establishment-oriented parts of the movement—a tally that would eventually reach 114.

Project 2025's goal was, and is, to provide policy ideas, a personnel database, training, and a Day 1 playbook for the next president to make use of to whatever degree he might choose. At the time—before the midterm elections—it wasn't at all clear who the nominees for the two major parties would be (no one had yet announced an intention to run), nor for the possible swarm of "third parties." About six months later, Dans tapped me to write the introductions to all five sections of *Mandate for Leadership*—so I'm likely one of the few people who has actually read most of the book's 920 pages.

Mandate for Leadership has a history dating back to the Reagan era, with the inaugural 1981 version of the book—in its own words—having been "conceived in the fall of 1979 as a means of assisting the transition to a new administration in the event that a conservative President were elected in 1980." Heritage has been putting out a new iteration of *Mandate*



for *Leadership* in connection with most presidential elections since then. The difference this time around is that, under the leadership of President Kevin Roberts, Heritage consciously and wisely sought to make the effort a movement-wide project, for perhaps the first time since 1981, not just the work of Heritage staff. Indeed, the bigger-tent nature of the current edition helps explain why this *Mandate for Leadership* has been far more widely referenced, and presumably more widely read, than the intervening versions. Indeed, if there's truly no such thing as bad publicity, then Project 2025 has already been a smashing success.

"What you're going to hear tonight is a detailed and dangerous plan called Project 2025 that the former president intends on implementing if he were elected again," said Kamala Harris on September 10 during her one debate with Donald Trump. Harris also mentioned Project 2025 during her maiden statement that she'd been selected by party insiders as the new presumptive Democratic nominee, as well as during her acceptance speech at the Chicago convention. During the debate, she added, "Understand in his Project 2025 there would be a national abortion—a monitor that would be monitoring your pregnancies, your miscarriages." Running mate Tim Walz, never able to resist upping the ante when it comes to a good yarn, proclaimed a month later at a campaign rally in Wisconsin, "By the way, Project 2025? They've got a national pregnancy coordinator that tracks all pregnancies." Never mind that even the notoriously biased "fact-checkers" have debunked these falsehoods, with the reliably left-leaning *PolitiFact* saying, "Walz's claim is a new version of something Democrats, including...Harris, have been saying for weeks: that [Project 2025] calls for monitoring each woman's pregnancy.... It doesn't. Walz is describing a policy that doesn't exist." Project 2025 proposes compiling better information about abortions (how many occur, how late they take place, etc.), not keeping track of pregnancies. Perhaps this error was to be expected, however, given that the Harris-Walz campaign seemed incapable of talking about pregnancies without talking about abortions.

The Harris campaign spent about \$5 million in battleground states to run a new ad that, according to *The New York Times*, formed "part of Ms. Harris's closing argument." Focused on Project 2025, the ad stated that the project calls for a "national abortion ban," putting those words on the screen for emphasis in addition to saying them aloud. Alas, this claim was a complete fabrication.

Project 2025 doesn't even call for statewide abortion bans, let alone a national one.

Project 2025 does, however, have a lot to say about abortion. Most of it has to do with opposing the Biden Administration's use of taxpayer funds to pay for abortions (both statewide and abroad—including in African nations, which "are particularly (and reasonably) non-receptive to the U.S. social policies such as abortion and pro-LGBT initiatives being imposed on them"), and the administration's playing fast and loose with existing abortion laws ("skirting and sometimes blatantly defying the Hyde Amendment," ignoring "federal laws that prohibit the distribution of abortion drugs by postal mail," and violating "the spirit, and sometimes the letter, of conscience-protection laws"). Such laws protecting the rights of conscience are designed to ensure that those who don't wish to be a party to abortion need not be. Beyond this, Project 2025 objects to pregnancy being classified as an "illness," with abortion portrayed as the cure. (Biden's Department of Health and Human Services refers to abortion pills as "medication.") Project 2025 stresses that "abortion

Discussed in this essay:

Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise, edited by Paul Dans and Steven Groves. The Heritage Foundation, 920 pages, \$35

should be clearly defined as only those procedures that intentionally end an unborn child's life. Miscarriage management or standard ectopic pregnancy treatments should never be conflated with abortion." Harris and Walz, of course, conflated these repeatedly.

Harris also claimed that Project 2025 would "restrict access to IVF [in vitro fertilization] and contraception." *PolitiFact* responded that "Project 2025 does not mention IVF or propose restricting it," and it "also doesn't call for restricting standard contraceptive methods." About the best defense *PolitiFact* could marshal for Harris's claim was that Project 2025 "would end taxpayer funding of Planned Parenthood, which provides contraception."

Main Street Agenda

BEYOND HARRIS'S OWN FICTIONALIZED depictions, her allies in the media have asserted that Project 2025 would lead to all manner of horrors. A *Guardian* headline declared "Project 2025 would 'unequivocally' lead to more hurricane deaths, experts

warn," and the corresponding article said that "federal forecasting of severe storms" would "be drastically scaled back." In truth, Project 2025 calls for the National Weather Service to shift its "organizational focus" to "core functions such as efficient delivery of accurate, timely, and unbiased data to the public and to the private sector." It also highlights the particular importance of "National Hurricane Center and National Environmental Satellite Service data," which "should be presented neutrally, without adjustments intended to support any one side in the climate debate."

The New York Times, apparently asleep during the past four years under President Joe Biden and Attorney General Merrick Garland, worried that a second Trump Administration, fueled by efforts like Project 2025, might "end the post-Watergate norm of Justice Department independence from White House political control."

Encyclopedia Britannica, MSNBC, and *The Washington Post* have all associated Project 2025 with Christian nationalism. This claim is an odd one—except insofar as Christianity and Americanism both clash with the Left's one-world, secularist worldview. Nowhere in *Mandate for Leadership* do the terms "Christian nationalist" or "Christian nationalism" even appear. Nor does "nationalist" or "nationalism." "Christian" (whether singular or plural) is used just seven times in all and "Christianity" not once. Three mentions of "Christian" are references to keeping religious freedom from being abridged by LGBT activists or in the name of public health. Another advises the State Department to pay special attention "to challenges of religious freedom" abroad, "especially the status of Middle Eastern Christians and other religious minorities" in that region.

Of the other three references, one says, "The Judeo-Christian tradition, stretching back to Genesis, has always recognized fruitful work as integral to human dignity, as service to God, neighbor, and family." A second mentions "the many prominent Christian and Jewish voices in the early labor movement." The third, the closest thing to a proposal to implement uniquely "Christian values," or rather Judeo-Christian "values," is a call to have Congress—not the president—promote the Sabbath day by passing a law: "Congress should encourage communal rest by amending the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to require that workers be paid time and a half for hours worked on the Sabbath."

Whatever one thinks of that particular policy proposal—and I'd personally rather not have the federal government mandate higher pay on Sundays, or in some cases Sat-

urdays, from coast to coast (would pastors be exempt?)—all of these references to Christianity seem rather benign and unobjectionable. Beyond that, it’s hard to construe them as providing any evidence of nationalism.

Washington Post politics reporter Amber Phillips helpfully made clear what she means by “Christian nationalism,” which she claimed Project 2025 calls for “infusing...into every facet of government policy,” when she wrote in July that Christian nationalism involves “promoting policies that encourage”—and here she directly quotes Project 2025—“marriage, work, motherhood, fatherhood, and nuclear families.” On that count, Project 2025 is surely guilty as charged. In addition to promoting meaningful work and stable families, Project 2025 calls for other things that a great many, likely most, Americans would probably support. For example, it recommends the government “should end the Biden Administration’s unprovoked war on fossil fuels, restore America’s energy independence, oppose eye-sore windmills built at taxpayer expense, and respect the right of Americans to buy and drive cars of their own choosing.” It advises that “the surest way to avoid war is to be prepared for it,” and that part of being prepared is emphasizing “the core roles and responsibilities of the military over social engineering and non-defense related matters.” More broadly, it calls for a pro-Main Street agenda, writing, “For several decades, establishment ‘elites’ have failed the citizenry by refusing to secure the border, outsourcing manufacturing to China and elsewhere, spending recklessly, regulating constantly, and generally controlling the country from the top down rather than letting it flourish from the bottom up.”

To be sure, *Mandate for Leadership* also proposes some long-term reforms for which the public case hasn’t yet been effectively made, such as returning more authority over education to states and localities by abolishing the Department of Education—a creation of the Jimmy Carter era—and reducing needless bureaucracy by abolishing the Department of Homeland Security spawned under George W. Bush. But most of Project 2025’s policy proposals are more readily achievable.

Presidential Power

THE DEMOCRATS’ PRIMARY MOTIVATION in going after Project 2025, of course, has been that it offers something policy-related to talk about other than Joe Biden’s record. But a secondary motivation is that the Left can’t abide an effort that seeks to restore our constitutional forms of government. Indeed, the most bizarre attacks on Project

2025 have been the widespread claims that it is “authoritarian,” would violate the Constitution, and would turn the president into something resembling a king. The Left’s attacks in this vein seem like a classic case of projection.

In truth, the Left resents that it is bound by a document written in the 18th century—long before the “progress” that has occurred in current progressives’ lifetimes, when they naïvely believe that enlightenment and justice have hit their historical apex. Even more so, the Left chafes under a Constitution designed to disperse and check the powers of government. Progressives can’t abide that they live under a Constitution designed to limit government and secure our God-given rights, when they want an unlimited government that magnanimously bequeaths whatever “rights” it sees fit to grant, and then takes them away just as easily.

The New York Times wrote in July that Project 2025 calls for “a sweeping expansion of presidential power over the machinery of government” that would “concentrate” and “centralize” “authority” and “power.” It claims the project’s “legal underpinning is a maximalist version of the so-called unitary executive theory.” That legal theory, asserted the *Times*, “rejects the idea that the government is composed of three separate branches with overlapping powers to check and balance each other. Instead, the theory’s adherents argue that Article 2 of the Constitution gives the president complete control of the executive branch.”

In other words, the *Times*—which believes in big government, in federal power at the expense of federalism, and in having power be exercised by whatever branch of government can achieve the desired ends at a given moment—has finally found a form of consolidated and centralized power it doesn’t like: the Constitution’s vesting of authority in the president, thereby concentrating power in his hands, rather than in those of his underlings.

On a BBC World Service program, “The Inquiry,” which aired on August 15, Don Moynihan, now a professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, said this about the “unitary executive theory”: “If you worry about a more authoritarian turn to American government, that theory really facilitates that by placing so much power into the hands of the president.” Moynihan said, “The shorthand for understanding unitary executive theory is sometimes presented as, the president is king.” This view’s supporters, according to Professor Moynihan, have developed “a theory around language that is not explicitly stated in the Constitution but, they say, implies that the president has these really

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Western historians have tended to idealize democratic Athens and dismiss Sparta as a brutish armed camp. In reality Sparta's constitution, with its sophisticated network of checks and balances, proved a robust platform for leaders capable of conceiving and executing a grand strategy.

—David P. Goldman, “Sparta’s War to Win,” Fall 2023

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enormous powers.” He described the theory as “novel,” “very controversial,” and as having “been seen as kind of a fringe idea until very recently.” He added, “The unitary executive theory certainly makes it more complicated to hold the president accountable,” inasmuch as it contradicts “a textbook understanding of the American Constitution.”

This is wrong in essentially every respect. The opening line of Article II of the Constitution reads: “The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.” The founders chose to vest power in this fashion, in part, to ensure accountability. What’s more, the Supreme Court effectively sided, in advance, with Project 2025, writing in *Seila Law LLC v. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau* (2020), that “[t]he entire ‘executive Power’ belongs to the President alone.” It is Moynihan’s and the *Times*’s notions that are at odds with our constitutional design.

Unaccountable Government

BUT THEY ARE HARDLY ALONE IN THEIR wild characterizations of Project 2025 as being a threat to the constitutional order. In October, MSNBC’s Ali Velshi maintained that “according to Project 2025... the president *should* be a king, with every lever of government serving him alone” (italics in original). *Encyclopedia Britannica* reported that “[e]ven some conservatives have come to regard Project 2025 as a serious threat to democracy,” pointing, as an example, to establishment Republican Donald Ayer, former deputy attorney general in the George H.W. Bush Administration, who told the *Guardian* that “Project 2025 seems to be full of a whole array of ideas that are designed to let Donald Trump function as a dictator.” *USA Today* columnist Rex Huppke called the project “hellishly authoritarian” and seemingly inspired by the Third Reich: “Project 2025 [is] a governing blueprint designed by a collection of former Trump administration officials who seem to have looked at Adolf Hitler’s path to power in 1930s Germany and thought, ‘Yeah, there are some pretty good ideas here.’”

These are rather strange—one might say unhinged—ways to characterize Project 2025’s efforts to ensure that executive branch employees are accountable to the president. As Donald Devine, Dennis Kirk, and Dans write in Chapter Three of *Mandate for Leadership*: “The people elect a President who is charged by Article 2, Section 3 of the Constitution with seeing that the laws are ‘faithfully executed’ with his political appointees democratically linked to that legitimizing

responsibility.” By contrast, “[a]n autonomous bureaucracy has neither independent constitutional status nor separate moral legitimacy. Therefore, career civil servants by themselves should not lead major policy changes and reforms.” It’s hard to imagine most Americans objecting to this notion—let alone calling it “hellishly authoritarian.”

Showing its reverence for autonomous bureaucracy, the *Times* wrote in July that “Congress created...specialized technocratic agencies inside the executive branch and delegated to them some of its power to make rules for society.” John Locke didn’t think legislative power could be delegated, writing in his *Second Treatise of Government* that “[t]he Legislative cannot transfer the Power of Making Laws to any other hands,” as the grant of power from the people to the legislative body is “to make Laws, and not to make Legislatures.” But regardless of whether or not the lawmaking power can be delegated, having unaccountable, so-called experts “make rules for society” hardly sounds like how our democracy is supposed to function.

The notion that the administrative state should be brought to heel, instead of operating like a fourth branch of government, unaccountable to the American public, is a major theme of Project 2025, which argues that decisions should be made in a transparent way by those whom the American people have elected, rather than by those who simply have entrenched themselves and have been wielding bureaucratic power across the decades. As Dans told *Politico*, “The archetype of what we want to end in a bureaucrat is none other than Dr. Fauci.”

When he was running for reelection, President Biden bizarrely claimed that Project 2025 “would give Trump limitless power over our daily lives and let him...gut the checks and balances.” It’s hard to see how Project 2025, or any other proposal, could give Trump, but only Trump, such power. Besides, having government executives wield unchecked power over Americans’ daily lives is about the last thing the Left is worried about, except when Donald Trump is president. Think of how leftist executives—such as Governor Walz in Minnesota, Governor Gavin Newsom in California, and President Biden in the White House—acted during COVID. Besides usurping legislative power by mandating masks and vaccines, the current administration spawned an immigration crisis by refusing to enforce federal law, brazenly tried to dictate what kinds of cars Americans can buy, and issued a kingly order to try to transfer student-loan debt from actual borrowers to all taxpayers.

Everyday American Ideas

IN MARKED CONTRAST, PROJECT 2025 FOLLOWS Abraham Lincoln in emphasizing that adherence to the Constitution must take priority over any particular policy goal. Therefore, the president should not exercise quasi-legislative power through executive decrees. *Mandate for Leadership* states explicitly, “Above all, the President and those who serve under him or her must be committed to the Constitution and the rule of law.”

Beyond reining in the administrative state and calling for the president to exercise only executive power, Project 2025 calls for a return to our constitutional forms in at least four additional ways: for the State Department to stop treating unilateral presidential agreements with foreign nations as treaties, even though they haven’t passed the Senate; for the Justice Department to respect the freedom of speech, rather than trying to restrict free speech on the internet; for the Senate to fulfill its constitutional duty to vote on presidential appointments without delaying those votes for months or years; and for a return to “the Founders’ wise division of war powers, whereby Congress, the most representative and deliberative branch, decides whether to go to war; and the executive, the most energetic and decisive branch, decides how to carry it out once begun.”

All of this is an affront to the Left. As I’ve written elsewhere in these pages (“Our Democracy,’ Not Our Constitution,” Fall 2022), progressives like the term “our democracy” a lot more than they like our Constitution. Indeed, their disregard for that document makes them instinctively rear up in opposition whenever any effort like Project 2025 demonstrates a sincere commitment to restoring it.

Project 2025’s recognition of the ongoing battle between those fighting to preserve the Constitution and the American way of life, on the one hand, and those calling for—in Barack Obama’s words—“fundamentally transforming the United States of America,” on the other, permeates its recommendations. In the opening paragraph of Section One of *Mandate for Leadership*, I wrote,

America’s Bicentennial, which culminated on July 4, 1976, was a spirited and unifying celebration of our country, its Founding, and its ideals. As we approach our nation’s 250th anniversary, which will take place during the next presidency, America is now divided between two opposing forces: woke revolutionaries and those who believe in the ideals of the American revolution. The



former believe that America is—and always has been—“systemically racist”... that it is not worth celebrating and must be fundamentally transformed, largely through a centralized administrative state. The latter believe in America’s history and heroes, its principles and promise, and in everyday Americans and the American way of life. They believe in the Constitution and republican government. Conservatives—the Americanists in this battle—must fight for the soul of America, which is very much at stake.

While much of this sounds like it should be up Donald Trump’s alley, the former (and future) president—not wanting to risk giving his opponent an issue to run on—sought to distance himself from Project 2025. In his debate with Harris, Trump said in no uncertain terms,

I have nothing to do with Project 2025. That’s out there. I haven’t read it. I don’t want to read it, purposely. I’m not going to read it. This was a group of people that got together. They came up with some ideas—I guess some good, some bad. But it makes no difference.

A few weeks earlier, at a rally in Michigan, Trump spoke even more critically:

And, you know, the other side is going around trying to make me sound extreme, like I’m an extremist. I’m not. I’m a person with great common sense.

I’m not an extremist at all. Like some on the right, severe right, came up with this Project ’25, and I don’t even know, I mean, some of them I know who they are, but they’re very, very conservative, just like you have—they’re sort of the opposite of the radical left, okay? You have the radical left, and you have the radical right, and they come up with this—I don’t know what the hell it is—it’s Project ’25.... [T]hey are extreme, I mean, they’re seriously extreme. But I don’t know anything about it. I don’t want to know anything about it.


Trump made these comments not long after Kevin Roberts, who’d been making the rounds to publicize Project 2025, went on Steve Bannon’s “War Room” podcast and said that “we are in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless, if the Left allows it to be”—a comment widely reported by the mainstream media. So, it’s hard to say whether Trump’s reference to things that are “seriously extreme” was to Roberts’s remark, or to something in *Mandate for Leadership*, which was released 15 months earlier. Suffice it to say, it’s almost impossible to imagine a Democratic candidate repudiating a policy blueprint from, say, the Brookings Institution or the Center for American Progress in similar fashion. One can understand how Trump, a genuine commonsense pragmatist in an age of leftist extremism, wouldn’t want to be tarred by proposals he didn’t vet. But the truth is, Project 2025 is full of proposals that don’t reflect an extreme ideological agenda; it’s not remotely

a libertarian wish list. Its proposals largely reflect the views of everyday Americans and of Trump himself, and it was written by a lot of people who had worked for Trump, been loyal to him, and might serve under him again.

Will Trump in his second term hire people who worked on Project 2025, draw from its personnel database, and adopt some of its ideas? The answer, based on his picks so far, appears to be yes. Although Trump can sometimes hold a grudge with the best of them, he has also often shown a Churchillian willingness to let bygones be bygones when someone can be a useful ally going forward. Witness his selection of J.D. Vance, a onetime bitter critic, as his vice-presidential nominee. The truth is that Trump—whose biggest weakness in his first term might well have been his leaving many political-appointee positions unfilled (thereby creating a power vacuum for career bureaucrats to fill) and filling many others with people who weren’t remotely allies or kindred spirits—probably stands to profit from an effort like Project 2025 more than most politicians would.

But Project 2025 was not written for any particular candidate or political party. Democrats might want to reassess their platform in the wake of Harris’s defeat. Although they are unlikely to find a volume subtitled *The Conservative Promise* appealing, its prescriptions are there for the taking.

Jeffrey H. Anderson is president of the American Main Street Initiative and served as director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics at the U.S. Department of Justice from 2017 to 2021.



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