

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is a companion to the previous issue on liberalism. The term that everyone contrasts to liberalism is conservatism. The two terms are assumed to cover the full range of opinion on political and religious matters.

The shorthand description that conservatives are opposed to change and that liberals favor change makes no sense. Everyone is in favor of change; to live is to change. No one is in favor of all change; some changes are destructive.

The use of the term conservative in politics has never been entirely clear and over time it has only become more muddled. As was argued in the previous issue, the term “liberal” has been equally unclear. The one thing that seems constant is that liberal and conservative are assumed to be opposites. That is the biggest muddle of all.

The most common meaning of conservative is an attitude of respect for the past. How could anyone be opposed to that attitude? In politics and religion, however, there is a nearly unlimited amount of material from the past. History is a process of both remembering and forgetting. Everyone is a conservative in matters they wish to preserve; nobody can be conservative of the entire history of the past.

The first essay is by Gabriel Moran who grew up with a conservative attitude that he has never repudiated. Yuval Levin expresses a conservative attitude toward institutions while acknowledging that they need liberal reform. Ben Shapiro

outlines what is a common set of conservative beliefs about the foundation of this country and what is wrong today.

ON BEING DEEPLY CONSERVATIVE

By Gabriel Moran

I grew up as a Robert Taft Republican in New Hampshire which was then known as the most conservative state in the country. At that time the term conservative was a recent import to the U.S. but it gained ground during the 1950s. William Buckley's founding of the *National Review* in 1955 was a key moment in the development of a "conservative movement." Conservatives held that the government in Washington should do only what citizens could not do for themselves or in cooperation with their neighbors. Government in New Hampshire meant the gathering on "the first Tuesday after the first Monday in March" when the town meeting decided how things would be run for that year.

By continuing politics as it had been practiced for several centuries, New Hampshire conserved valuable traditions of political participation. There was not much note of the fact that the state was 99% white. That was a tradition that was conserved not by laws but by customs that did not encourage any nonwhite people to migrate to the state.

Today New Hampshire is a very different place. Many of its long-standing traditions remain, but it engages in what is called liberal politics. New Hampshire has the highest per capita population who work in high-tech industries of any US state. (The industries themselves are across the line in Massachusetts). As a result, it is a population high in education and income and viewed as politically liberal.

New Hampshire tries to continue its democratic tradition by giving representation to every town, some with only a few dozen people. The result is a legislative body that was once the largest in the world and now ranks fourth in the English-speaking world behind, Britain, India and the US Congress. This huge and clumsy body accomplishes little except that it produces the split that is evident in most states, an imbalance tilted toward rural areas. The main New Hampshire cities reinvented themselves when the owners of the textile mills went

South, but the cities lacked support from the state legislature. People called conservative who understandably wish to retain the best of the past must make adaptations of what the past has provided.

New Hampshire mirrors the United States in having a government that is not up to its task. The founders of the US gave equal electoral power to each state. The result is a terrible inequality tilted toward rural areas. A federation of thirteen states was difficult to manage; a federation of fifty states is probably impossible. A conservative view today might be that there should be only one state, the United States, and a small number of regions or provinces based mainly on population.

Christopher Caldwell, a writer known as conservative, argues in a recent book that all the political problems of today are the result of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Why would any conservative interpret all of US politics by starting from 1964? Any analysis of US politics implicitly assumes a starting point for the beginning of US history.

Writers called conservative almost always assume 1776 to be the beginning of the United States; liberal writers seldom object. Interpretation of US history begins with the document that has the title “The unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen united States of America.” The document’s main body of twenty-nine accusations against the king is preceded by a preamble of ideals that might be philosophically admirable but are historically false. The Declaration has no place for a federal government to form one united states.

The reason for this strange perspective on US history is due largely to Abraham Lincoln’s funeral sermon at Gettysburg in 1863. That address of 262 words begins: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation...” The words are beautiful poetry but they are historically untrue.

The values that are most cherished in this perspective are the Declaration’s life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. People who identify themselves as conservative especially treasure “liberty” which was named by Jefferson as the number two right after the “right to life” – which is also aggressively and confusedly argued for today.

The current administration in 2019 appointed a commission to investigate if “human rights” are conflicting with our “unalienable rights” of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The term human rights originated in the abolitionist movement in the early 19th century. Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized toward the end of his life that he was fighting for human rights as well as civil rights. If one interprets US history with awareness of slavery’s importance, then life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are subordinate to human rights which recognize the dignity of every human being.

Anyone professing conservatism should be interested in the whole history of the United States that begins in 1787. When people known as conservative refer to the Constitution it is usually to the Bill of Rights which was the work of opponents of the Constitution because they thought it limited the rights in the Declaration. The preamble to this collection of ten rights (or more exactly, liberties) says that they are “restrictive clauses” aimed at the Constitution.

The Bill of Rights is a series of assurances of what the government will not do. The Constitution is a valuable document, but it is in desperate need of dozens of amendments, starting with changes in the first ten amendments.

A liberal-conservative reforming of the first amendment would affirm what the government should actually do about freedoms of speech, the press, assembly and religion. The fourth amendment on unreasonable searches needs changing for the digital age. The sixth and seventh amendments’ right to a speedy trial is carried out these days mainly on television’s “Law and Order.” The eighth amendment’s idea of bail, not just excessive bail, needs to be debated. The second amendment is absurd in the 21st century.

A liberal attitude should be an ally of conservatives in addressing what to do about the deficiencies in the founding document and in the history of the United States. The disagreements between conservative and liberal attitudes should be about which things in history should be changed, how are they to be changed, and how fast they are to be changed? Politics should be a debate on these questions which would result in compromises leading to action.

HOW WE LOST FAITH IN EVERYTHING

By Yuval Levin

Americans are living through a social crisis. We can see that in everything from vicious partisan polarization to rampant culture-war resentments, to the isolation, alienation and despair that have sent suicide rates climbing and driven an epidemic of opioid abuse. These dysfunctions appear to have common roots, but one symptom of the crisis is that we can't quite seem to get a handle on just where those roots lie.

When we think about our problems, we tend to imagine our society as a vast open space filled with individuals who are having trouble linking hands. And so, we talk about breaking down walls, building bridges, leveling playing fields or casting unifying narratives.

But what we are missing is not simply greater connectedness but a structure of social life: a way to give shape, purpose, concrete meaning and identity to the things we do together. If American life is a big open space, it is not a space filled with individuals. It is a space filled with these structures of social life — with *institutions*. And if we are too often failing to foster belonging, legitimacy and trust, what we are confronting is a failure of institutions.

This social crisis has followed upon a collapse of our confidence in institutions — public, private, civic and political. But we have not given enough thought to just what that loss of confidence entails and why it's happening.

Each core institution performs an important task — educating children, enforcing the law, serving the poor, providing some service, meeting some need. And it does that by establishing a structure and process, a form, for combining people's efforts toward accomplishing that task.

But as it does so, each institution also forms the people within it to carry out that task responsibly and reliably. It shapes behavior and character, fostering an ethic built around some idea of integrity. That's why we trust the institution and the people who compose it.

We trust political institutions when they undertake a solemn obligation to the public interest and shape the people who populate them to do the same. We trust a business because it promises quality and reliability and rewards its workers when they deliver those. We trust a profession because it imposes standards and rules on its members intended to make them worthy of confidence. We trust the military because it values courage, honor and duty in carrying out the defense of the nation and forms human beings who do, too.

We lose faith in an institution when we no longer believe that it plays this ethical or formative role of teaching the people within it to be trustworthy. This can happen through simple corruption, when an institution's attempts to be formative fail to overcome the vices of the people within it, and it instead masks their treachery — as when a bank cheats its customers, or a member of the clergy abuses a child.

That kind of gross abuse of power obviously undermines public trust in institutions. It is common in our time as in every time. But for that very reason, it doesn't really explain the exceptional collapse of trust in American institutions in recent decades.

There is in our era a distinct kind of institutional dereliction — a failure even to attempt to form trustworthy people, and a tendency to think of institutions not as molds of character and behavior but as platforms for performance and prominence. In one arena after another, we find people who should be insiders formed by institutions acting like outsiders performing *on* institutions. Many members of Congress now use their positions not to advance legislation but to express and act out the frustrations of their core constituencies. Rather than work through the institution, they use it as a stage to elevate themselves, raise their profiles and perform for the cameras in the reality show of our unceasing culture war.

All of us have roles to play in some institutions we care about, be they familial or communal, educational or professional, cultural or economic. Rebuilding trust in these institutions will require the people within them — that is all of us — to be more trustworthy. And that means in part letting the integrities and purposes of these institutions shape us, rather than just using them as stages from which to be seen and heard.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH US?

By Ben Shapiro

In order to fix ourselves we must re-examine what we believe. We believe freedom is built upon the twin notions that God created every human in his image, and that human beings are capable of investigating and exploring God's world. Those notions were born in Jerusalem and Athens, respectively.

Those twin notions – those diamonds of spiritual genius – built our civilization and built us as individuals. If you believe that life is more than materialistic pleasures and pain avoidance, you are a product of Jerusalem and Athens. If you believe that the government has no right to intrude upon the exercise of your individual will, and that you are bound by moral duty to pursue virtue, you are a product of Jerusalem and Athens. If you believe that human beings are capable of bettering our world through the use of our reason, and are bound by higher purpose to do so, you are a product of Jerusalem and Athens.

Jerusalem and Athens built science. The twin ideals of Judeo-Christian values and Greek natural law reasoning built human rights. They built prosperity, peace, and artistic beauty. Jerusalem and Athens built America, ended slavery, defeated the Nazis and Communists, lifted billions from poverty and gave billions spiritual purpose. Jerusalem and Athens were the basis of the Declaration of Independence, Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and Martin Luther King Jr's Letter from Birmingham Jail.

Civilizations that rejected Jerusalem and Athens, and the tension between them, have collapsed into dust. The USSR rejected Judeo-Christian values and Greek natural law, substituting the values of the collective and a new utopian vision of "social justice" – and they starved and slaughtered tens of millions of human beings. The Nazis rejected Judeo-Christian values and Greek natural law, and they shoved children into gas chambers. Venezuela rejects Judeo-Christian values and Greek natural law, and citizens of their oil-rich nation have been reduced to eating dogs.

In America, especially, with our unique history and success, we have long seen progress and prosperity as our birthright. The conflicts that

tear apart other nations are not for us; we certainly don't need to worry about revolution or collapse. We're America. We're different.

That sanguine view is utterly wrong. The fight against entropy is never over. Our way of life is never more than one generation away from the precipice. We have already begun to see a huge number of our citizens lose faith in free speech, in democracy, in economic freedom, in the idea of a shared morality or cause. That turn away from our values began when we lost faith in the path that brought us here in the first place.

We are in the process of abandoning Judeo-Christian values and Greek natural law, favoring moral subjectivism and the rule of passion. And we are watching our civilization collapse into age-old tribalism, individualistic hedonism, and moral subjectivism. Make no mistake: we are still living off the prosperity of the world built by Jerusalem and Athens. We believe we can reject Judeo-Christian values and Greek natural law and satisfy ourselves with intersectionality, or scientific materialism, or progressive politics, or authoritarian governance, or nationalistic solidarity. We can't. We've spent the last two centuries carving ourselves off from the roots of our civilization. Our civilization could survive and thrive – for a time. Then it began to die, from the inside out. Our civilization is riddled with internal contradictions, communities bereft of values and individuals bereft of meaning.

Philosophically, the West has been running on fumes for generations. We are viewing birth rates plummet and government spending skyrocket across the West – and we are watching large swaths of immigrants unfamiliar with Western values imported to fill the gap, resulting in polarizing backlash.

To strengthen our civilization, we must examine how the bridge was built. It took Western civilization three thousand years to get here – we can lose it all in one generation, unless we begin shoring up our foundations, brick by brick.

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