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A New American Fusionism: Recovering Principles in Our Politics

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“If we could first know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending,” Abraham Lincoln once observed, “we could then better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it.”

I think we all have a good idea where we are. Where we are tending is a government that does more, spends more, and regulates more and more. Our politics is covered by an intricate web of policies and procedures, rules and regulations, driven by growing streams of money flowing from Washington to every state and locality, thousands of private and nonprofit organizations, and millions of individuals. As a result, growing numbers are dependent on government benefits and entitlements. The American people are becoming more subjects of the state than self-governing citizens.

In fits and starts over the last century, our country has been tending toward what Alexis de Tocqueville warns us about in *Democracy in America*: the soft despotism of the nanny state. “Such a power,” he concludes, “does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.”

If you have any doubts about the possibility of this future, just look across the ocean. Europe is already far down this path, in a societal death spiral. It would be suicidal for us to follow that lead.

I would like to suggest a different path.

Talking Points

- The fusion of our ideas and our politics is to be found not as much at the level of *policy* as at the level of *principle*, where there is foundational agreement among a broad swath of the American people. And therein lies our greatest opportunity.
- But this depends on political leaders willing and able to make the case for these principles, even in trying times.
- Keenly aware of the necessities of particular circumstances and the reality of actual outcomes, but fully informed by core principles, the political task is to advance principle as far as possible under prevailing conditions, always moving toward the goal and wary of illusory, short-term gains at the expense of larger objectives. We must be consistent in principle but also innovative in practice.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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An Enduring Framework

America is unique in that it was founded at a particular time, by a particular people, on the basis of particular ideas. Stemming from the self-evident truth of human equality, those who launched this experiment in popular government asserted a new basis of political legitimacy based on the consent of the governed.

Through a carefully written constitution, they created an enduring framework of limited government based on the rule of law. With this structure, they sought to secure national independence, provide for economic opportunity, establish true religious liberty, and maintain a flourishing society of republican self-government.

These principles—proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and promulgated by the United States Constitution—define us as a country and inspire us as a people. They are responsible for a prosperous and just nation unlike any other in the world. They are our highest achievements, serving not only as powerful beacons to all those who strive for freedom and seek to vindicate self-government, but also as a warning to tyrants and despots the world over.

While there is much that we have forgotten of late about our history, the growing absence of America's foundational principles in our country's life is not simply a case of national amnesia. Over the course of the 20th century, America's principles have been attacked, undermined, and redefined by progressive liberalism—in our culture, in our universities, and in our politics. Based on the anti-foundational concepts of relativism and historicism, liberalism has attempted to “re-found” America around evolving rights, unlimited government, and a “living” Constitution.

In many circles, especially among liberal intellectuals and cultural elites, the truths proclaimed in 1776 have been supplanted by the passionately held belief that no such truths exist, certainly no truths applicable to all time. Over the past century, the federal government has lost many of its moorings and today acts with little concern for the limits in the Constitution, disregarded by many as an obsolete document.

As a result, many of our political leaders are increasingly rudderless, speaking in vague generalities, all the while mired in small-minded politics and petty debates. As a nation, we are left divided about our own meaning, unable—perhaps unwilling—to defend our ideas, our institutions, and ourselves.

Empty Promise or Principled Renewal?

To solve this problem, there are increasing calls for change in our politics and progress in our national life. After all, it is said, change and progress are the essence of American democracy. We must keep up with the times and be liberated from the shackles of the past.

“The great thing about America,” candidate Barack Obama said in one of his speeches, “is that everything changes.” In his Inaugural Address, President Obama advised that we “pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and *remake* America.”

But where are we going? Forwards or backwards? Up or down? Change can be an empty promise or a dangerous deception.

“About the Declaration there is a finality that is exceedingly restful,” wrote Calvin Coolidge.

It is often asserted that the world has made a great deal of progress since 1776, that we have had new thoughts and new experiences which have given us a great advance over the people of that day, and that we may therefore very well discard their conclusions for something more modern. But that reasoning can not be applied to this great charter. If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions. If anyone wishes to deny their truth or their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people. Those who wish to proceed in that direction can not lay claim to progress.

The change we need, the change that is consistent with the American idea, is not movement away

from but toward our principles—which are both the fixed goal and the unchanging ground of our ever-changing experience. And so as we look ahead, we must also look back, not as a matter of historical curiosity, but as a guide for our nation. What we seek is *renewal*.

A Rebirth of Conservatism

The path we must follow requires a reborn conservatism, grounded in the abiding principles of American liberty as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution.

A conservatism of the Declaration asserts self-evident truths according to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” It defends life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It derives legitimacy from the consent of the governed. It recognizes man’s self-interest but also his capacity for virtue.

A conservatism of the Constitution limits government’s powers but makes sure that it performs its proper job effectively and energetically. It refines popular will through the filter of democratic representation at the same time that it checks and balances political power in distinct branches of government and through an extended nation of states.

A constitutional conservatism unites all conservatives through the natural fusion provided by American principles. It reminds economic conservatives that morality is essential to limited government, cultural conservatives that unlimited government is a threat to moral self-government, and national security conservatives that energetic but responsible government is the key to America’s safety at home and prominence in the world.

America’s principles were key to Frank Meyer’s original fusionism of traditionalism and libertarianism, as well as Ronald Reagan’s robust conservatism of the 1980s. These principles can be the source of a new fusionism and a new American conservatism if we understand them less as a fusion of opposites and more as inferences from the same source of foundational truth.

Lastly, a conservatism based on first principles provides the core framework for an internally consistent and meaningful policy agenda.

- It sustains conservatism’s appreciation for the central place of individual liberty in American political life.
- It informs our resistance to the liberal shift from equality of opportunity to equality of results.
- It supports America’s national interest in advancing freedom in the world but prudently considers what we can and should do in that cause.
- It demands the appointment of judges who understand that their proper function is to uphold the Constitution, not make social policy according to their own pop-philosophy.
- It shores up the idea of free markets and encourages policy reforms grounded in market-based solutions.
- It works against unsustainable federal spending and the fiscal burdens placed on future generations by uncontrolled entitlements.
- It informs conservatism’s defense of family, neighborhood, local community, and church.

Consistent in Principle, Innovative in Practice

A recurrence to our first principles is not about returning to the 18th century, or the 1950s—or the 1980s for that matter. It is not some abstraction or retreat from reality. It is about recalling the timeless principles that guide us in making practical decisions in accord with those principles, to regain our grounding so that we can think prudentially about the great policy questions of our time.

It is important to understand that the true fusion of our ideas and our politics—what we might call “the conservative consensus”—is to be found not as much at the level of *policy* as at the level of *principle*, where there is foundational agreement among a broad swath of the American people. And therein lies our greatest opportunity.

Rebuilding this consensus depends on political leaders willing and able to make the case for these principles, even in trying times.

Keenly aware of the necessities of particular circumstances and the reality of actual outcomes, but fully informed by core principles, the political task

is to advance principle as far as possible under prevailing conditions, always moving toward the goal and wary of illusory, short-term gains at the expense of larger objectives. We must be consistent in principle but also innovative in practice.

Preserving the Temple of Liberty

“At what point is the approach of danger to be expected? It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher.”

“As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”

So said the first Republican President, Abraham Lincoln, the 200th anniversary of whose birth we celebrate this year.

In that same speech, Lincoln sketched the solution for America’s perpetuation. We have suffered much from “the silent artillery of time,” he wrote—as well as, we might add, the heavy bombardment of modern liberalism. The temple of liberty must fall, said Lincoln, unless we supply new pillars hewn from solid materials, molded into *general*

intelligence, sound morality, and, in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws.

Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor.

This is the change we believe in.

If we are to succeed in the battles sure to come, we must be sure in our purpose. And we must begin by retaking, and defending, the high ground of America’s founding principles.

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