Less than seven months after President Trump’s inauguration, conservative pundit William Kristol called for “liberating...conservatism from Trumpism”—a battle cry that treats conservatism and Trumpism as separate entities, impossible to reconcile or synthesize. To ask whether that premise is sound raises a question that is difficult, interesting and, above all, important. For many years to come, conservatism’s fortunes and meaning will turn on how conservatives interpret Donald Trump’s political career.

The first step, however, is to reflect on the meaning of their cause prior to, and apart from, Trump. Two hundred years ago, following the chaos unleashed by the French Revolution, people began to describe the fundamental political antagonism as “liberalism” versus “conservatism.” There has been conflict and confusion over the two terms’ meaning ever since. There is an asymmetry, however: only “liberalism” has a clear referent. Liberals promote liberty, even as they disagree among themselves and with their opponents about what it encompasses and requires.

To declare oneself a conservative, on the other hand, is to employ a verb without providing its direct object. What, exactly, does conservatism exist to conserve? And whatever those objects of its solicitude might be, why must they be conserved, rather than being able to fend for themselves?

Precarious

The one constant for conservatives, clearly implied by the designation they have chosen, is an acute sense of precariousness. In How to Be a Conservative (2014), the English philosopher Roger Scruton says that conservatism originates in “the sentiment that good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created.”

This is especially true of the good things that come to us as collective assets: peace, freedom, law, civility, public spirit, the security of property and family life, in all of which we depend on the cooperation of others while having no means singlehandedly to obtain it. In respect of such things, the work of destruction is quick, easy and exhilarating; the work of creation slow, laborious and dull. That is one of the lessons of the twentieth century. It is also one reason why conservatives suffer such a disadvantage when it comes to public opinion. Their position is true but boring, that of their opponents exciting but false.

Conservative policy agendas and philosophical explications, Scruton maintains, all derive from a disposition. For conservatives, “We’ve never done things that way before” is not a decisive objection, but one that does carry considerable weight. They worry that the more sustained and substantial are the benefits enjoyed under long-standing arrangements, the more we take them for granted. In doing so, we stop comparing our condition favorably with known, existing alternatives, and begin comparing it unfavorably with hypothetical possibilities. On the political supply side, public officials compete to be visionary and idealistic, to promise those transformations that will be the most fundamental. Those citizens increasingly disposed to believe that their glass is half-empty welcome or even demand such boldness.

Scruton’s “good things” is, of course, a capacious term, rendered only somewhat more definite by the idea of collective assets dependent on others’ cooperation. One result of this indeterminacy is that conservatives never lack for reasons to argue over which good things are most valuable, thereby meriting conservation, and most vulnerable, thereby requiring it. A second implication is that conservatism is more explicable in prudential than in essentialist terms. The dangers posed in a particular time and place to those things conservatives...
More basically, the advent and spread of Christianity had caused a “fundamental transformation in the human condition,” according to Harry V. Jaffa, from “a world in which each city had its own god—to one in which there was but one God for the human race.” It took more than 17 centuries, but the radical innovation of severing temporal from ecclesiastical authority finally reshaped both the foundations on which democracy, liberty, and constitutionalism rest.

After the Cold War

The disarray about the meaning and boundaries of conservatism did not, then, commence with Donald Trump’s famous escalator ride in June 2015. Rather, that event followed two decades of far-ranging but fruitless efforts to reorient conservatism. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, five years...
The Case for Trump, Hanson wrote that he “furthering a media narrative that he was iso-
ownership society” and “compassionate con-

Trump had shown himself likely to be Hillary
Clinton’s toughest general-election opponent.

Writing in 1993, Irving Kristol forcefully
conveyed the sense of continuing and even heightened danger: “There is no ‘after the Cold War’ for me. So far from having ended, my cold war has increased in intensity, as sector after sector of American life has been ruthlessly corrupted by the liberal ethos.” Less clear, however, was the nature of the peril and the way to defeat it. The liberal ethos, Kristol wrote, “aims simultaneously at political and social collectivism on the one hand, and moral anarchy on the other.”

Twenty-two years later, very little flesh had been put on these bones, though not for lack of trying. The roster of reformulated conservative mission statements include: Newt Gin-
grich’s “Contract with America”; ‘national greatness’ conservatism; George W. Bush’s ‘ownership society’ and ‘compassionate conserva-

Trumpism is not only bound up with the intra-conservative debate over conservatism is permeated with racism, ex-

Hanson’s observation that “Trump’s crit-
ics ‘despise rather than just oppose him’ is especial-

Trump, Considered

Heinlein’s odiousness to make a prima facie case against allowing conservatism to be defined and defiled by him. A movement asso-

Never Trumpism

Where that repudiation leaves the Never Trumpers with respect to conservatism is a harder ques-

Unlikely Hanson, who has never met the
president, Conrad Black knows him well. A businesswoman as well as an author, Black re-
counts tough but fair, forthright, and mutu-
ally beneficial business dealings with Trump before he entered politics. (Chicago’s Trump
International Hotel and Tower was erected on a site owned by the Chicago Sun-Times when Black was its publisher.) Yet even in a book so supportive as Donald J. Trump: A President Like No Other, Black at one point describes Trump the businessman as “a right-fisted, devious employer, a very tenacious litigant, and an efficient and imaginative developer.” As a politi-
tician, Trump has proven to be “unpredictable and somewhat erratic,” a leader whose “stri-
dency and ill-tempered outbursts are not what Americans expect of their presidents.”

These measured evaluations of Trump are, of course, quite unlike the ones made by his conservative detractors. In How the Right Lost Its Mind, author and former radio talk-show host Charles J. Sykes derides Trump as “a seri-
all liar, a con man who mocks the disabled and women…a narcissist and a bully, a man with no fixed principles who has the vocabulary of an emotionally insecure nine-year-old.” Max Boot, Washington Post columnist and advisor to Republican Senator Marco Rubio’s 2016 presidential campaign, uses some of his all terms in The Corrosion of Conservatism: Why I Left the Right, castigating Trump as a “bigoted bully” with “few fixed convictions outside of narcissism and nativism, racism and sexism.”

Atlantic columnist David Frum’s Trumpocracy calls Trump “cruel, vengeful, egoistic, igno-
rant, lazy, avaricious, and treacherous.”

The intensity of their loathing takes the form of using Trump’s odiousness to make a prima facie case against allowing conservatism to be defined and defiled by him. A movement associated with, much less led by, such a man is one the “Never Trump” conservatives reject as bankrupt, intellectually and morally.

Never Trumpism

Where that repudiation leaves the Never Trumpers with respect to conservatism is a harder ques-
tion. One can imagine some of them reenlist-
ing as conservatives after the Trump presiden-
tial library and museum has opened at Mar-
a-Lago. Both Sykes and Frum conclude their books by sketching the qualities needed for a post-Trump conservatism, one that “can not only win elections but also govern responsibly,” in Frum’s words. Their diagnoses are similar: they agree that conservatism’s problems pre-
dated Trump, and both are particularly criti-
cal of Fox News and conservative talk-radio for, as they see it, affording their audiences a parallel universe tenuously connected to the one other Americans inhabit.

Notably, when he still thought Hillary Clinton was going to win the 2016 general election, Frum’s Atlantic articles called for conservatives to incorporate a good deal of Trump’s message, while continuing to treat him as a very bad messenger. For all his “many faults and flaws,” Frum wrote four weeks before Election Day, Trump “saw things that were true and important,” things most Re-
publicans did not see or refused to acknowl-
edge. These included: the need to get serious about controlling immigration; to stand up for the “deplorables” denounced as bigots by the politically correct; and to realize that many more Republican voters are employees than entrepreneurs. As such, these citizens’ sense of vulnerability and fairness dictates accepting that “the social-insurance state has arrived to stay.”

Frum even had a good explanation for why Trump’s supporters found his obnoxious-
ness inspiring, not embarrassing. To voters constantly aware of being disrespected, like the Irish in James Curley’s Boston, Italians in Frank Rizzo’s Philadelphia, or blacks in Marion Barry’s Washington, D.C., it’s at the very least satisfying to elect a leader who antago-
ngizes your antagonists. Told again and again about their imminent, inevitable demo-
ographic decline, Trump’s voters decided “to start acting like a minority,” in Frum’s words. “We’re going to vote like a bloc, and we’re go-
ing to vote for our bloc’s champion. So long as he keeps faith with us against you, we’ll keep faith with him against you.”

Max Boot, on the other hand, does not appear to have any kind of conservative fu-
ture, since he has come to be ashamed of his conservative past. What’s wrong with Don-
al Trump, Boot believes, is not that he be-
trayed conservatism but that he embodied it.

Boo, in other words, now shares the opinion of leftists like Corey Robin that Trump’s ro-
tenness is of one piece with conservatism’s. “Upon closer examination,” he writes, “it’s obvious that the whole history of modern conservatism is permeated with racism, extremism, conspiracy-mongering, ignorance,
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— Kathryn Jean Lopez, Editor-at-Large, National Review

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isolationism, and know-nothingism." Conservatism lost its way at the very beginning of the journey, in the 1950s, when it should have embraced Dwight Eisenhower’s “Modern Republicanism” rather than scorn it as capitulation to the New Deal and the anti-Soviet containment policy.

The Trump Treatment

Conrad Black’s case for Trump and Trumpism is virtually identical to the case Trump made for himself as a candidate, not only substantively but expressed with the same direct, emphatic style: America had been governed so badly, for so many years prior to 2016, that it was far less reckless to choose a completely different kind of president than it was to pick yet another member of the same discredited governing class, whether a Republican like Jeb Bush or a Democrat like Hillary Clinton. Once in office, Trump began “slowly winning his tumultuous crusade against political correctness and systematic defeatism in foreign and domestic policy,” according to Black. Above all, Trump has “promoted Americanism over the atomistic and Wilsonian notions of purifying other countries.”

Victor Davis Hanson’s argument has more facets. Indeed, The Case for Trump presents what would be more accurately described as a case for Trump. When Hanson asks whether Trump is better understood as “a clumsy buffoon who said the first thing that came into his one-dimensional mind” or “a multidimensional strategic thinker who liked to bait and goad elites, as a mockery for others to enjoy,” it doesn’t appear to be a rhetorical question. A chapter titled “Trump, The Tragic Hero?” suggests—note the question mark—that Trump is one of those necessary but unassimilable figures identified by George Orwell: “men can be highly civilized only while other men, inevitably less civilized, are there to guard and feed them.” Hanson offers examples from ancient literature (Achilles in The Iliad), film (Gary Cooper in High Noon and Clint Eastwood in Dirty Harry), and military history (George Patton and Curtis LeMay). The tragedy is such figures’ awareness “that the natural expression of their personas can lead only to their own destruction or ostracism from an advancing civilization that they seek to protect,” Hanson writes. “And yet they willingly accept the challenge to be of service.”

The Case for Trump offers, less equivocally, a different analogy: nominating and electing Donald Trump is like chemotherapy—the effects are nauseating or even debilitating but, in the circumstances, any milder remedy will allow the patient to die. The power of that argument depends on the accuracy of the diagnosis. In October 2016 Hanson wrote that Hillary Clinton’s victory would not be just another turn of the wheel, but would consummate the fundamental transformation promised by Barack Obama over 12 or 16 years of uninterrupted Democratic administrations. “A likely two-term Clinton presidency would complete a 16-year institutionalization of serial progressive abuse of the Constitution,” he wrote.

David Frum, writing the same month, made the opposite judgment: it was madness to resort to a drastic remedy to avert a manageable problem. Hillary Clinton, he declared, “is a patriot” who will “uphold the sovereignty and independence of the United States,” “defend allies,” and “execute the laws with reasonable impartiality.” A vote for her amounted to a vote to defend America’s commitment to norms and rules that today protect my rights under a president I don’t favor, and that will tomorrow do the same service for you.” Elect her opponent, and those norms and rules will shudder and shake in a way unequalled since the Union won the Civil War.

Malignant or Benign

We cannot know whether the Clinton presidency Trump’s election prevented would have proven as malignant as Hanson feared or as benign as Frum expected. We do know, however, the direction of the Democratic Party, before, during, and after her campaign. It forced Clinton to move steadily to the left from the day she announced her candidacy, to the point that she and her husband spent more time apologizing for his administration’s triangulations on crime, race, welfare, taxes, spending, and regulation than they did boasting of his achievements.

And we know that since Trump’s victory the Democrats have been “The Resistance,” not the opposition party. As a result, the hectoring self-righteousness that grievance studies professors display in faculty senates is now an increasingly common feature of the U.S. Senate. Thus, Judiciary Committee hearings on a Supreme Court nominee became a venue for the same contempt for procedural fairness and epistemological humility as a campus sexual harassment tribunal run by the campus Women’s Center’s Grand Inquisitors.

By the same token, had President Hillary Clinton placed two new Justices on the Supreme Court, they would have joined the four nominated by her husband and President Obama to form a sturdy liberal majority. In a 2014 campaign finance case three Justices joined Steven Breyer’s dissenting opinion, which held that the First Amendment exists not to secure inalienable rights but so that “public opinion could be channeled into effective government action.” With two more votes, the idea that rights should be calibrated according to whether they satisfied jurists’ ideas about what constitutes effective governance would have formed the basis for majority opinions. By the same token, there would be enough votes to enshrine Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s opinion that “race matters.” Indeed, in Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action (2014) she ruled it matters so much that a state cannot abolish affirmative action policies, even if a majority of the state’s voters have already voted for a referendum to end preferences.

In short, a commitment to norms and rules protecting the rights of those not allied with the Democrats appears to be weakening steadily within the party, the continuation of a trend that predated Donald Trump’s political career. If conservatism must adapt to meet the changing threats to liberal democracy, then it has no choice but to be preoccupied with American liberalism’s menacing evolution. Waugh’s claim that liberals are gullible and feeble, complacently unaware of the threats to liberty, needs to be modified to account for the ways that liberalism has itself become such a threat.

A 2018 New York Times article, for example, lamented that conservatives have “weaponized” the First Amendment, whose defense was once the raison d’etre of liberal activists in general, and the American Civil Liberties Union in particular. Though he used to have “the standard liberal view of civil liberties,” one law professor explained, he has now come to realize “that it’s a mistake to think of free speech as an effective means to accomplish a more just society.” The Occam’s Razor explanation for this shift is that free speech “was only ever a means to an end” for liberals, in
the words of law professor and blogger Ann Althouse. “When they got their free speech, made their arguments, and failed to win over the American people, and when in fact the speech from their opponents seemed too successful, they switched to the repression of speech, because the end was never freedom.”

The Evolving Threat

Also evolving, and also requiring conservatives’ close attention, is the liberal understanding of what a just society demands. Any conservative who lives long enough will eventually be astounded by the need to defend propositions long considered self-evident. The idea that Western civilization is a real and good thing, whose preservation is necessary to hopes for a better future, is one of these. That human beings are either men or women is another.

Trumpism is especially forceful in upholding a third: the nation-state is the best, most workable basis for sovereignty in the modern world. The growing liberal challenge to this belief treats the nation-state as both dangerous and irrelevant. In its stead, the political attachments that do and should matter are either transnational, the core tenet of globalism, or subnational, the core tenet of multiculturalism. In these circumstances, writes Scruton in Conservatism, conservatives have found it necessary to remind that “governments are elected by a specific people in a specific place,” and to insist on “the defence of the homeland, the maintenance of national borders, and the unity and integrity of the nation.”

Scruton goes on to contend that popular sovereignty is impossible, logically and practically, without national sovereignty. That is, “accountability is possible only if the electorate is bound together as a ‘we.’ Only if this ‘we’ is in place can the people trust the politicians to look after their interests.” By way of attacking Trump and his followers, Charles Sykes declares that the “rejection of populism runs deep in the conservative tradition.” But that assessment is selective and mostly wrong. It has, after all, been nearly 60 years since William Buckley declared, “I should sooner live in a society governed by the first 2,000 names in the Boston telephone directory than in a society governed by the 2,000 faculty members of Harvard University.” In doing so, Buckley deftly captured what is best about populism and worst about progressivism: governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, not the expertise of the experts.

Leverage

Clearly, more than an aversion to the president’s bearing and character drives the Never Trump conservatives. Trump has spent his adult life identifying and making the most of situations where he has leverage, power to help or hurt partners, lenders, or adversaries exceeding their power to help or hurt him. And he has done it again. Conservatives know Trump does not need the conservative movement, least of all its intellectuals, and has little reason to fear it. National Review devoted most of its February 15, 2016 issue to denouncing him, a widely discussed event that proved utterly inconsequential. Unlike Reagan, then, Trump is neither a product of the conservative movement nor a president who considers its well-being among his responsibilities.

So, how should conservatives play their weak hand? The Never Trump answer is that after years of obsessive-compulsive political hygiene, the conservative movement emerging from the other side of the Trump presidency can credibly deny complicity with his failures and foibles. There are several reasons to believe this approach makes the worst of a bad situation. For one, Trumpism has both a constituency and a stunning win to its credit, unlike all the other efforts to reformulate conservatism for the post-Cold War era. The New York Times columnist Ross Douthat, one of the leading reform conservatives, once called Trumpism, with its focus on working-class needs and fears, reform conservatism’s “evil twin.” He later acknowledged that it could also be described as reform conservatism’s “more politically successful twin.” Defenestrating Trumpism in favor of one of the options that predated it now entails violating one of the most basic conservative principles, as summarized by Thomas Sowell: don’t replace one thing that works with a different thing that sounds good.

Moreover, the Never Trump effort, now in its fourth year, has been procedurally unfair and politically opaque. Run a two-party democracy in a diverse nation of 328 million people, and each party will necessarily be a broad, ungainly coalition. No major party can cohere if one big part of it has good reason to believe that it is expected to endorse decisions made by others, but never be allowed to have its own position prevail. As Hanson points out in The Case for Trump, the Trump Republican voters dutifully supported Mitt Romney and John McCain as the party’s nominees, despite well-founded doubts about both men’s commitment to conservatism and ability to defeat Barack Obama.

Donald Trump won the nomination contest by the same rules as all his GOP opponents, which would only have intensified his followers’ bitterness if the Never Trump efforts to thwart his nomination, election, and presidency had somehow succeeded. The fact that, after all this time, the Never Trump effort has gotten much attention but little traction does not prove it is wrong, but strongly suggests that it is imprudent—quixotic rather than noble. As Max Boot concedes about the Never Trumpers, “There’s enough of us for a dinner party, not a political party.”

The challenge, then, is not to liberate conservatism from Trumpism in the belief that the latter “poses an existential threat to the conservative vision of ordered liberty,” as Sykes asserts. Nor is it to exchange conservatism for Trumpism. It is, rather, to elaborate a conservatism for the 21st century that integrates Trumpism by absorbing what Donald Trump’s nomination and election have revealed—about America and about the shortcomings of the conservative movement and argument prior to his entry into politics. (Elsewhere in this issue, Christopher DeMuth provides an invaluable first draft of that synthesis.)

The task would have been much the same if Trump had lost in 2016, but it’s one now complicated by the president’s volatility and aversion to message discipline. Steven Hayward says that President Trump has often been his own worst enemy, which is an impressive accomplishment for a man whose enemies are so numerous, and hate him so intensely. The rise of Donald Trump has presented conservatives with new opportunities and insights, but also unprecedented challenges. The best version of Trumpism may end up being fashioned after Trump’s presidency rather than through it.

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