

National Conservatism and American Conservatism Join Issue

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COMMENTARY

In The Claremont Review of Books winter 2023/24 issue, the magazine's editor Charles Kesler published "[National Conservatism vs. American Conservatism](#)." Siding with American conservatism, Kesler offered a [respectful critique](#) of National Conservatism, a transnational movement that embraces citizens of several Western nations, many of whom Kesler counts as friends and colleagues. CRB's spring 2024 issue followed up with "[National Conservatism and Its Discontents](#)." The symposium features thoughtful, mostly amicable and conciliatory replies to Kesler from 10 signers (including four co-drafters) of "[National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles](#)," which the Edmund Burke Foundation, chaired by Israeli author Yoram Hazony, published in June 2022. Kesler provides a characteristically incisive response.

Much of the lively CRB exchange revolves around questions of tone and emphasis. The debate also exposes a fateful division among conservatives over fundamental principles and constitutional bedrock.

In his winter essay, Kesler highlighted National Conservatism's important contribution: "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."

The nation-state's principal enemies and critics spring from the progressive left, which mounts attacks from opposite directions. Proponents of identity politics, mostly intellectuals and activists, put group loyalty – racial, ethnic, and sexual – ahead of the nation. So-called liberal internationalists – political science and law professors, government bureaucrats, and diplomats – seek to subordinate American decision-making in domestic as well as foreign affairs to international organizations. Nevertheless, the left-wing contingents agree: The power and prerogative of nation-states – not least those of the United States – must be devolved to other entities, either subnational or supranational.

Kesler also examined two problems with National Conservatism. First, despite its criticism of classical liberalism's supposed abstraction from the particularities of tradition and peoplehood in favor of universal principles – often articulated as natural rights – National Conservatism, Kesler maintained, organizes itself around an abstraction and issues in universal political prescriptions. Instead of starting with the American nation and its founding

principles and constitutional traditions, National Conservatism begins with, as its Statement of Principles proclaims, “the idea of the nation” and “the tradition of independent, self-governed nations.”

Perhaps the abstraction from America is the price that U.S. conservatives must pay to join forces not only with conservatives of various Western nations but, as the Statement envisages, to build a transnational movement that also embraces conservatives of non-Western nations. Then, however, National Conservatism is not proposing an alternative to “universalist ideologies” but an alternative universalist ideology. Why, though, would an American conservative prefer National Conservatism’s universalist ideology, which is grounded in a general theory of the nation-state, to the universal principles on which the United States is founded and which express the American spirit and which structure and elevate American traditions?

Second, according to Kesler, National Conservatism demotes America’s distinctive form of nationalism while assimilating America to a “generic nationalism” suitable for all times and places. The American nation, argues Kesler, is “limited and shaped by human equality, liberty, and consent.” The Natcon Statement echoes these hallmarks of the American constitutional tradition but obscures the original.

For example, the Statement, following the U.S. Constitution, asserts that the nation-state should “secure the general welfare and the blessings of liberty.” The Statement espouses “private property and free enterprise” not only for the prosperity they bring but also because they reflect “traditions of individual liberty that are central to the Anglo-American political tradition.” It expresses belief “in a strong but limited state, subject to constitutional restraints and a division of powers.” And it repudiates racism and insists that nation-states must reconcile “the unique needs of particular minority communities and the common good of the nation as a whole.”

That’s all to the good, but of the unalienable rights and the consent of the governed in which American constitutional government is grounded, the Statement is silent. This suggests that in forming an international movement, Natcons redefined as negotiable those truths that the American constitutional tradition held to be not only self-evident but also essential to America’s experiment in ordered liberty.

In the CRB symposium, my Hoover colleague Victor Davis Hanson largely endorses both Kesler’s praise of National Conservatism’s defense of the nation-state and his criticisms of the Natcons’ departures from America’s fundamental principles and constitutional traditions. Hanson also provides a grim summary of discontents that provoked a considerable number of eminent conservatives to rebrand themselves as National Conservatives:

The border is now not just porous but nonexistent. Crime is not just rising but often construed as not crime at all. The goal of judging others by the “content of our character, not the color of our skin” has been superseded by tribal chauvinism, segregation, and “good racism” (called “antiracism”) that doesn’t combat but promotes a racial spoils system. Transgenderism is now a purported third sex, and biological males claim a civil right to dominate if not destroy women’s sports. Deterrence abroad is replaced by abandoning \$50 million in munitions to terrorists in Kabul, paying billions of dollars to win back hostages, ignoring serial attacks on America’s overseas installations, and allowing Chinese spy balloons to drift across the United States with impunity.

Nevertheless, reminds Hanson, conservatives have failed to make the case: “Republicans lost seven out of the last eight presidential popular votes; they have not won more than 51% of the vote since 1988.”

National Conservatives and Kesler-style American conservatives agree that America suffers from deep dysfunction. They part ways in their response.

Several CRB-symposium contributors stress that their Statement was, as Hazony writes, “a compromise document” that provides a big tent for diverse conservative factions, yet Natcons readily unite around a sense of national crisis. They commonly see progressives as enemies of the regime. They generally aspire to a decidedly more muscular conservatism. And they tend to believe that our desperate times call for harsh rhetoric and drastic action.

In contrast, in his spirited response, Kesler maintains a genial tone and even keel. While grasping the seriousness of the challenge and the urgency of corrective measures, he discerns that any alternative to America’s founding principles and constitutional traditions is bound to end badly for the nation. He worries that the Natcons, prodded by unruly colleagues on the New Right, stoke suspicions that America “is probably beyond revival or restoration, even though all those invocations of our sacred text seem belatedly to be having an effect against abortion and affirmative action.”

Kesler prefers revival or restoration to the alternative. “What comes after the Constitution? What comes after America?” he asks in conclusion. “Pray to the God Who never fails that we will not have to find out.”

The Natcon Statement of Principles departs most dramatically from the American constitutional tradition by nationalizing religion. Section 4, “God and Public Religion,” asserts that “no nation can long endure” that is not grounded in “authentic religious tradition.” The Statement stresses that the Bible has been the West’s “surest guide” to politics and morality as well as religion. It declares that “schools and universities” should teach the Bible “as the first among the sources of a shared Western civilization.” Since these observations and exhortations avoid giving state sanction to specific religious beliefs and practices, they

remain within the ambit of the American Constitution's promise of religious liberty. But then the Natcon Statement of Principles breaks with the American nation-state by authorizing government to promulgate faith: "Where a Christian majority exists, 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."

These formulations track closely those in Yoram Hazony's "Conservatism: A Rediscovery" (2022), which attacks America's roots in the modern tradition of freedom. The Natcon Statement's oddly worded qualification also echoes Hazony's book: "At the same time, Jews and other religious minorities are to be protected in the observance of their own traditions, in the free governance of their communal institutions, and in all matters pertaining to the rearing and education of their children." The revealing passive voice leaves mysterious just who or what will safeguard citizens from "religious or ideological coercion" when the state employs its immense powers to promote faith.

In a much smaller and substantially less diverse country, America's founders recognized religion's moral and political significance but rejected its nationalization. They understood that amid diverse Protestant denominations, government support of Christianity would cause bitter divisions within the nation, especially among Christians, by favoring one contested interpretation of their faith. America's founders knew, moreover, that officeholders lacked expertise in religion, and the disposition and skill to honor it. And they believed that responsibility – limited by basic rights and fundamental freedoms – for fostering piety and cultivating the moral virtues primarily belonged to individuals, communities, and religious authorities. Even more so in today's vastly larger and more diverse America: Government honors religion best by vigorously protecting religious liberty.

For Americans, America's founding principles and constitutional traditions provide better guidance to conserving and improving America than do "the idea of the nation" and "the tradition of independent, self-governed nations."

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