

# American Conservatives Should Focus on Reform and Restoration

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A “New Right” has taken shape over the last few years that tends to share the conviction that the American experiment in ordered liberty confronts a monumental crisis. Encompassing national conservatives, common-good conservatives, and postliberal conservatives, this New Right sees pervasive moral, political, and spiritual decline. Only prompt, decisive, and sweeping action, so the New Right argument goes, can save the United States from the self-destruction long underway and in danger of careening, if it has not already, beyond the point of no return. Many pin their hopes on President-elect Donald Trump to at least slow the rate of decline.

Members of the New Right are hardly the first to discern something profoundly amiss within the West and particularly within the modern tradition of freedom out of which the United States sprang. Intellectuals have been diagnosing the decline of the West – and writing its postmortem – at least since Rousseau’s mid-18<sup>th</sup> century “Discourse on the Arts and Sciences.” The French philosopher decried the educated urban elites of the day whose hypocrisy and hollowness, he contended, betrayed the common good. After Rousseau came the romantics, Marx, Nietzsche, Spengler, the Frankfurt School, some traditionalist American conservatives, postmodernists, and others. From the left and the right, they excoriated Enlightenment liberalism, anticipated its collapse, and envisaged alternatives.

New Right intellectuals mock – for, as they like to say, not knowing what time it is – Americans who cling to the path of reform. Presuming an essentially well-functioning government and a healthy society, reform involves working within the established system. It takes account of changing circumstances and applies new insights to adjust laws and recalibrate policies. If, however, you believe as do many on the New Right that your country totters on the edge of a precipice, reform seems feeble and beside the point.

Proponents of restoration accept that bold measures must be undertaken to avert disaster, but they think that the original regime and the moral assumptions out of which it emerged remain sound. The problem, restorers maintain, is that neglect or malice has deformed basic political institutions and has corroded citizens’ attachment to the unwritten norms, habits and dispositions, and formal principles that sustain the regime. Consequently, major efforts must be undertaken to reclaim and restate the nation’s constitutional traditions, and to educate citizens about the regime’s structure, vital operations, and sustaining opinions and forms of conduct. In the United States, National Review conservatives, Straussians, numerous old-time neoconservatives, and many Claremont Institute conservatives have long espoused a return to and renewal of America’s founding principles and the best in the nation’s

constitutional traditions. At the same time, they have endeavored to work within the system to carry out reforms that both answer to the needs of the moment and conform to the underlying structure of American constitutional government.

The extreme response to political crisis is regime change or revolution. Some regimes are impervious to reform because of their advanced decay and are ill-suited to restoration because the social and political pathologies from which they suffer stem from inherent defects in their fundamental principles and basic institutions. Proponents of regime change or revolution maintain that since the United States has been exposed as rotten to the core and irremediably hostile to citizens' security and flourishing, its constitutional order must be brushed aside or overthrown and replaced with another. Regime change or revolution may be a minority view on the New Right, but some of its best-known figures champion it. Sometimes they do so openly as in the case of University of Notre Dame professor of political science Patrick Deneen. In other cases, they do not come right out and say so but indulge in extravagant rhetoric and inflammatory innuendo that excites, especially among young conservatives, revolutionary rage and stimulates ambitions for regime change.

A proud member of the New Right – or the “New Conservative Movement,” as he labels it in his spirited new book – Kevin D. Roberts believes both that America is in grave danger and that reform and restoration must play an essential role in saving the day. In “Dawn’s Early Light: Taking Back Washington to Save America,” Roberts describes a nation beset by an elite – “the Party of Destruction” – that is resolutely hostile to tradition and, in the name of unlimited freedom, aspires “to abolish the existing order.” He calls on “the Party of Creation,” which defends “the God-given natural order,” to beat back elite hegemony – in government bureaucracy, media, education, entertainment, corporate HR, and diplomacy and national security. To that end, he advances several ambitious and well-considered reforms. These focus on strengthening the family, rescuing education, invigorating the economy and revitalizing the middle class in particular, and orienting foreign affairs around the threat to American freedom and prosperity posed by the Chinese Communist Party. Roberts argues that these reforms must be informed by, and undertaken amid a restoration of, America’s founding commitment to individual liberty.

He also flirts with fashionable New Right revolutionary tropes, prominent among them the urgency of “radical action” and the need to destroy to build anew. He would do better without this flirtation, as it undercuts his dedication to salutary reform within the confines of American constitutional government.

Appointed in 2021 president of the Heritage Foundation and of Heritage Action for America, Roberts arrived in Washington with a rich and varied background in education and public policy. His book draws on his experience as well as his study. Growing up in Cajun Louisiana in a close family that handled its share of hardships, he acquired a deep appreciation of the classic American combination of traditional views about family and faith and love of American liberty. He earned a Ph.D. in history from the University of Texas, taught history at the

collegiate level, served as president of Wyoming Catholic College, and led the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Much of his book describes, with a refreshing and self-professed Reaganite optimism, the combining of reform with restoration that his career exemplifies.

Yet Roberts' bleak assessment of contemporary America seems to justify revolutionary action. America is going "up in flames," he argues, owing to "a conspiracy against nature – against ordered, civilized societies, against common sense and normal people – orchestrated by a network of political, corporate, and cultural elites who share a set of interests quite apart from those of ordinary Americans." Embracing both left and right, "they are known as the Uniparty."

It is not enough, he contends, for conservatives to adopt defensive measures against the Uniparty's conquests and depredations: "To escape our current darkness, restore America's civic life, and take back our country for good, conservatives can't merely continue putting out fires; we must be brave enough to go on the offense, strike the match, and start a long, controlled burn." His lengthy list of institutions that "*need to be burned*" (emphasis in original) starts with every Ivy League college and university, the FBI, and the New York Times.

Noting occasionally that he is speaking metaphorically, Roberts urges the application to politics of a practice common to the management of nature. To keep forests healthy – and often to prevent a larger wildfire from raging out of control – well-trained experts under carefully supervised conditions sometimes burn down a part of the forest to save the whole. Roberts, however, gives no reason based in theory or drawn from experience and history to suppose that politicians and political activists – those on the right any more than those on the left – have the foresight, know-how, and tools to control political fires that they deliberately ignite. While decisive action will always be a concomitant of good government, politics is not a science and the management of nature rarely provides reliable prescriptions for governing a nation.

Notwithstanding his enthusiasm for controlled burns and contained destruction, much of Roberts' book elaborates policies that, in the spirit of Edmund Burke, simultaneously conserve and improve. Especially welcome as the Republican Party prepares to assume control of both the legislative and executive branches is Roberts' contention – epitomizing Burkean balancing – that American conservatives must combine their big plans for repairing America with respect for the Constitution's limits on government power.

Such balancing means, for example, that in restructuring the economy to serve rather than to subordinate the family, conservatives must honor not merely tradition and faith but the variety of American traditions and faiths. It means conservatives must introduce miseducated young people to America's precious inheritance and inspire in them an appreciation for America's great experiment in ordered liberty but without countering indoctrination of the left with indoctrination of the right. And it means that in rising to the threat to American freedom

posed by the Chinese Communist Party, conservatives must avoid the temptation – to which many on both sides have succumbed – to treat approximately half the country as an enemy to be defeated rather than as fellow citizens to rally to a common enterprise.

The very gravity of the challenges faced by the United States requires that conservatives set aside revolutionary outrage and dreams of regime change for the hard and high-minded work that combines reform and restoration.

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