

A WAY FORWARD: A Call to Restore the American Project

The American political system suffers from a serious but treatable disorder. We see the most obvious symptoms easily enough, ranging from political polarization and radicalization to apathy and civic disengagement, leading many to wonder if we are coming apart. The malady itself is a profound, pervasive alienation where citizens have lost our connections to politics and each other. We are experiencing a modern loneliness so acute as to threaten what we call the American Project.

The American Project represents the distilled core of a long American tradition, and it is the essential common ground of our national understanding, one that invites all in to a connective history and a set of rights and responsibilities. With deep roots in Western Civilization, the American Project is grounded in the conviction that the capacity for self-government is a source of a distinctly human dignity, one that in America produced an exceptional and peculiarly American governing document, the US Constitution. Related, this right and ability to pursue happiness requires energetic social and political institutions—from schools and houses of worship to workplaces and political parties—to supply moral order and speak to our deep human needs for virtue and belonging. The collapse of these community-building institutions has led directly to a severe questioning of what it means to be an American with a looming threat of losing any sense of our common American identity.

In particular, our major political parties—once sources of connection and deliberation over our future—both reflect and have contributed to our crisis of self-understanding. Originating out of competing political philosophies and perspectives on our Constitution, both Democratic progressivism and Republican conservatism have been unable, by policy or rhetoric, to specify the American identity in a manner that speaks to and for the American people. Amid falling party registration numbers and decreasing voter turnout, the party establishments are increasingly seen as irrelevant or incompetent to address our societal challenges. Our political machines have lost their souls; our politics must become humane again to inspire and unite us.

Disconnecting Our Politics from Principles

As conservatives, we believe our principles offer the best way forward. Originally an intellectual movement, American conservatism became a political coalition held together by a common rejection of the growing power of government in the Great Society, a righteous battle against the threat of global communist totalitarianism, and a battle to restore social order through strengthening America's major institutions.

This Cold War conservatism connected well to the times. Ronald Reagan's simple but powerful message of lower taxes, lower regulation, and winning the Cold War not only demonstrated his ability to exercise the art of the possible in politics, but it came as part of a richly American narrative of strong families, of vibrant communities, of people taking care of themselves and each other. Through this message, Reagan created a new political coalition, which stretched across party lines ("Reagan Democrats") and age groups ("Reagan Generation"). The economic and geopolitical successes of the Reagan years were real, but they also demonstrated that these accomplishments were tied to deeper principles, and were grounded in an argument about American identity.

Victory in the 1980's produced a new political environment and ought to have caused the conservative movement to refocus its energy. In the hands of the Republican Party, the simple equation of economic policies meant to produce growth became a simplistic mantra for winning elections. The forces of globalization altered dramatically the economic conditions in which national policy functioned. For decades, the Republican Party largely ignored these realities while seeing success through the narrow lens of technological progress and fast rising profits. Those left behind—including millions with traditional moral and religious beliefs—had these beliefs ridiculed and even criminalized by powerful institutions beyond the reach of the American citizen. These Americans heard only empty promises from the one political party that claimed to represent them.

Conservatives were not the only movement to recognize the problem of radical individualism and alienation. Some American progressives also observed it, and responded by defining "community" through the creation of identity politics, elevating ethnic, racial and sexual qualities to the point where the self is seen as fully determined by these characteristics. Though promising a communitarian fix, it created a paradoxically exclusionary politics, limiting membership to those possessing very particular identities, and confining individuals into immoveable categories of those with and without "privilege."

In addition to identity politics, a different progressive solution embraces the abstraction of a global citizen not bound by nationhood. We see this definition manifested in issues ranging from immigration to international trade. Borders are dismissed as arbitrary, when they actually define nations as places possessing unique histories, cultures, and thereby, affiliation.

In an era demanding deeper and more frequent points of attachment, progressives have turned the American motto—E Pluribus Unum ("Out of many, one")—on its head, defining it either as all diversity and no unity, or all unity without diversity. These newer conceptions of progressive community demand strong government involvement to establish and protect their frameworks of identity and connection—often of an unelected administrative type. As a result, progressives hold dearly to the one community that makes their philosophy possible. For them, "government is the one thing we all belong to."

A Way Forward: A Conservatism of Connection

America needs a new way forward. Despite big challenges, we will find it. Ours is a hopeful endeavor. For the American Project to be restored, America's conservative principles must be articulated anew to connect Americans to an American Project for the 21st century.

Authentic conservatism is essentially about three connections: 1. Connection to the Past: We retain from our heritage what is valuable and worth cherishing, 2. Connection to Our Future: We innovate as conditions change to adapt inherited ways to new conditions, 3. Connection to One Another: Through America's famed mediating institutions, we connect to one another in achieving the common good. In his last major political address to the GOP Convention of 1992, Ronald Reagan perfectly connected these three elements: "We can no longer judge each other on the basis of what we are, but must, instead, start finding out who we are. In America, our origins matter less than our destinations and that is what democracy is all about."

American conservatism recognizes that today's crisis of spirit has repeated itself throughout our history. Episodes of alienation and estrangement not only punctuate our history, but also reveal our deepest ongoing challenge. America's gradual incorporation of an astonishing array of peoples and cultures into a common civilization is a true, powerful, and profoundly important story, even as each stage of that development as a nation has required us to overcome tragic

periods of exclusion, particularly racial and ethnic exclusion. This too, is an “identity politics” of a very dangerous sort, which must be rejected.

We must restore the American Project by repairing the three conservative connections that demonstrate our principles and draw us into the risky but rewarding work of active citizenship.

Restoring the American Project by Reclaiming Conservative Principles

To restore the American Project, we, the signatories of this document, call on our political institutions, and the conservative movement specifically, to restore the following institutions to their rightful places as platforms for connection and progress:

1. America Must Restore Government as a Facilitator of Civic Institutions

The Constitution’s design of limited government was never an end in itself, but the necessary precondition for self-government expressed through community and civic organizations. Americans’ community building can be seen every day in the response to personal, social, and natural disasters. America is the world’s most charitable nation with the greatest number of volunteers. This accomplishment has always demanded governing structures that enable this compassion by limiting its own intrusion into the spheres where civil society operates, providing the freedoms necessary for these groups to continue in their mission-based work. Government must become again the servant of the people not our master. Rebuilding civic trust between government and citizens demands an acknowledgement that many of the best solutions to society’s problems occur in local communities not national bureaucracies. We seek government that facilitates and does not crowd out our civil society. This requires a renewed commitment to federalism, localism and subsidiarity.

2. America Must Restore Work as a Civic Institution, While Advancing True Free Markets

Americans have always valued hard work, and the role it plays in the creation of community, the realization of personal purpose, and self-worth. Our increased standards of living and diversity of vocations developed through the action of entrepreneurs operating in relatively free markets. The free and competitive markets of American capitalism have been the greatest engine for social equality, the decrease of poverty and the eradication of illness in the history of the world. It harnesses our innovative spirit. This is the core of the American Dream and we must work to make sure the rising generation believes in this as a real opportunity.

Today, these commercial practices have been shaken in the face of persistent threats. Americans are again questioning the fairness and freeness of trade agreements struck between national governments in consultation with international companies sometimes more incentivized to corner markets than to open them. National and even local concerns should be respected in the formation of trade policy. To this end, while we remain opposed to public sector unionization, we call on conservatives to rethink their longstanding opposition to private sector unions, and to prioritize entrepreneurial competition in the marketplace.

3. America Must Restore Education as a Civic Institution

From our founding, Americans viewed formal education—from elementary school through college—as not simply providing skills for the marketplace, but also skills for citizenship. Testing and surveys have revealed the woeful state of our civics education in elementary and secondary levels, and we call on these institutions to better incorporate not only the “names and dates” of America’s distinctive history into their curricula, but also the central importance of civic virtue and its formative institutions, including the military. At the collegiate level, multiple studies have uncovered the lack of “viewpoint diversity” in America’s social science faculties. Researching and teaching in subject matter so deeply related to preparing

our next generations of public leaders, we call on conservatives and academia to focus on the university's own founding principles: to serve as places for open and diverse thinking, speech, and scholarship. We support the work of the "Heterodox Academy" movement in promoting greater diversity of thought both inside and outside the classroom. We also call on conservative students to consider academic careers, seeing them as a "mission field" for the larger cause of increasing viewpoint diversity in teaching and research.

4. America Must Protect Faith as a Civic Institution

America was founded by people seeking freedom from religious persecution. Our citizens have traditionally been focused both on this world and the world to come. This history has created our vibrant network of associations dedicated to the common good through charity, while providing the spiritual values necessary to develop a self-governing citizenry. Religious liberty is primary in that it supports our other rights most concerned with civic virtue. As America has grown more secular and faith is often mocked by elites, we have seen a gradual chipping away at our cherished religious liberty by courts and statehouses. We must resist the "weaponizing" of religious freedom. When people let themselves be convinced that it's "kind" or "tolerant" to scrub the public square of evidence of religion, the result is ever-tighter government restrictions on religious freedom. Religious liberty must mean protection of all faiths, with a concern for those with the least protection against the reduction of religion to mere conscience. As America has become much more diverse in its faiths, the societal benefits of religious liberty for all must be stoutly defended in our policy and our politics.

5. America Must Restore our Role in the World as a Defender of Her Interests

Our nation has fought and defeated race-based slavery, National Socialism, and international Communism. We should be regarded as one of mankind's greatest defenders. Now, our country moves from the Cold War to the "Warm War" of fighting yet another radicalism, facing threats from hostile state and non-state actors, WMDs in the hands of such foes, and cyberwarfare. Due to the technological revolution in communications, the intelligence gathering powers of our federal government have become comforting to some, but disturbing to many. The United States is a regime based on the principles of equality, liberty, consent of the governed, and the rule of law. As such, America is a friend to liberal democracies, representative and open governments, free trade, human rights, and the Free World. But from its inception, the United States has pursued its national interest; U.S. foreign policy must evaluate and defend against threats to our form of government, our citizens, and our allies. It must cover the core interests traced by our borders, our airspace, and our institutions, as we acknowledge these realities in other nations. This conservative internationalism with its recognition of national borders and cooperative relationships between independent nations contrasts with a progressive globalism founded on non-state bureaucracies and a so-called "international law." It extends to our people's lives and well-being at home and abroad, including their access to trade and energy resources. And it requires us to pursue, to the fullest possible extent, the prevention of major threats to the critical regions of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

6. America Must Restore the Balance of "E Pluribus Unum"

The failure of identity politics and the silence of conservatives have clouded the importance of diversity. To bring America together requires that modern conservatism speak and act on our belief in the awesome value of our diversity, tied together not by blood, but by a common commitment to civic virtue. While acknowledging times when the pursuit of happiness has not been open to all, we must lead in confronting the perennial challenge implicit in our national motto, agreeing that part of what makes America so exceptional is this "promissory note" written by our founders through our Constitution. It will be fulfilled when all citizens are given equal opportunity to realize their self-interest rightly understood.