



A Review of “Conserving America? Essays on Present Discontents”

Several fundamental questions underly a collection of essays by Professor Patrick J. Deneen that was recently published by St. Augustine’s Press: First, is there an American cultural heritage to conserve; and, second, do American conservatives understand what they should be trying to conserve? Deneen seems to be pessimistic about the ability of most American conservatives to address these two questions, because most conservatives are obsessed with narrow issues of policy, rather than comprehending the larger philosophical viewpoints that underpin the larger discussion. American politics, Deneen argues, has been reduced to a “zero sum game” in which “It matters not whether Republicans or Democrats control various institutions: to the extent that increasing and pervasive policy runs through the nation’s capital, all questions of import come under its orbit and it becomes of tantamount importance that all or most of the three branches be controlled by one’s preferred party.”



[Conserving America? Essays on Present Discontents](#) is a collection of 12 essays by Deneen, who currently serves as an associate professor of political science and constitutional law at the University of Notre Dame. Although the essays were delivered over the course of many years and were first presented to diverse audiences, the author provides the context of each essay in such a way and sets forth the essays in such an order as to provide a coherent whole to his overall argument. However, there is a noticeable inconsistency of academic tone between essays that can be somewhat jarring, and this inconsistency is made worse by uneven editing of the texts. However, these minor criticisms aside, Prof. Deneen offers readers a sustained argument that is worthy of consideration.

A recurrent theme among the essays in *Conserving America? Essays on Present Discontents* is the choice of false alternatives with which Americans are confronted by politicians. As Deneen observes in his Introduction:

Thus, the insistent demand that we choose between protection of individual liberty and expansion of State activity masks that the two grow constantly and necessarily together: statism enables individualism, individualism demands statism. For all the claims about electoral transformations — for “Hope and Change” or “Making America Great Again” — two facts are naggingly apparent for



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those with eyes to see: America, like a ratchet-wrench that moves only in one direction, constantly becomes more individualist and more statist. This is not because one party advances individualism without cutting back on statism while the other achieves (and fails) in the opposite direction; rather, both move simultaneously together, as a matter of systemic logic that follows our deepest philosophical premises.

The reason that conservatives are often distracted by policy debates is that they have lost track of the real issues; in Deneen's words, "The debate that most divides our country, then, is fundamentally over means, not ultimate aims." Until true conservatives thoroughly regain their ability to clearly articulate their first principles and judge policy questions according to those principles (a habit that *The New American* regularly encourages in its readers), the flawed reasoning and ideological confusions of the neoconservatives and other '[chirping sectaries](#)' will continue to beguile many citizens.

Conservatives need to understand and articulate their guiding principles (e.g., Russell Kirk's famous "[ten principles](#)") and the connection between such principles and the policy viewpoints that are drawn from such first principles. Otherwise, the battle is lost before it has even been joined. Deneen thus speaks of the debate between "two narratives" that predetermine many of the policy debates in American political discourse: "Two narratives today dominate our political landscape, both of which claim to protect the cherished value of Liberty against unjust political encroachments and limits. One, from conservatives, poses liberty in the form of individual rights — especially of property — against the collectivism of 'progressive' liberalism or Statism. The other, from progressives, opposes limits on personal liberty—especially in the area of sexual autonomy — against a paternalistic state." What is needed is to better understand what is meant by "Liberty" — and how that term is being misused. Although traditional conservatives may cringe at Deneen's talk of "narratives" — a jarring intrusion of post-modern falderal into an otherwise conservative discussion — his reasoning is fundamentally correct:

By expanding our consideration to a different understanding of liberty, we change our position somewhat and see with more clarity that, what looks from our current position like a deep antipathy between individualism and Statism, is in point of fact something more of a continuity and logical progression. Without the addition of a distinct understanding of liberty to that of classical liberalism, from close up, all that we can discern are the opposite features of the two dominant political views of our day. By expanding our vista, however, we can better discern their relatedness, and propose that a true alternative is not between these siblings, but between a false choice of these two ideologies and a true choice between distinct and competing ideas of the very nature of liberty itself.

In short, for the sake of the Republic, conservatism must return to its first principles and offer what is truly a "choice and not an echo," to borrow the phrase of an earlier generation. True conservatism holds the high ground of the received heritage of the philosophical traditions of the West and the faith of Christendom. A robust conservatism that is faithful to that which it has received is one that can contend with Progressivism, just as its philosophical and theological antecedents dealt with aberrations from Gnosticism to Marxism. In the words of Deneen:

For the central vision of Conservatism to survive the coming storm, in all these realms it must provide a better and fuller understanding of liberty, liberty as self-rule learned and practiced amid robust human relationships and personal bonds of trust and shared sacrifice. Conservatives just can't be against Progressivism, because increasingly that is seen by the world as being against the



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freedom of everyone to do anything. In the realms of economics, politics and culture, it must turn creatively to promoting ideas, policies and ways of living that show, support, and protect the excellence of the life ... of families, communities, churches, and institutions that have been the schoolhouses of republican self-government.

There is much in *Conserving America? Essays on Present Discontents* that is worthy of careful reflection. Amidst the babble of talking heads both Left and Right, the reasoned voice of received tradition needs to be heard once more.

[***Conserving America? Essays on Present Discontents***](#), by Patrick J. Deneen, South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2016, Paperback. 213 pages.



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