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## The Claremont Institute, Ron Paul, and the State of Conservatism

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Leslie Gelb's piece in the *Daily Beast* lamenting the resurgence of the neoconservatives has attracted the ire of Justin Logan, who suggests that neocons have taken over the Republican establishment and, moreover, that being a neocon amounts to a kind of career. But are the neocons slated to remain dominant? Yesterday I attended a stimulating conference held by the Claremont Institute at the Marriott Hotel in Washington, DC called "The Constitution and Our Politics." It offered a tutelary seminar in the thinking that has, more or less, informed (or at least characterized) the rambunctious Tea Party when it comes to constitutional issues.

In speaking during the lunch break with Sam Tanenhaus of the *New York Times*, Brian T. Kennedy, the president of the Claremont Institute, suggested that he has been trying to place his fellows in conservative think tanks in Washington such as Heritage and AEI. Matthew Spalding of the Heritage Foundation, who spoke at lunch, is a former Claremontian, as is Stephen F. Hayward of AEI. Claremont has been ahead of the curve on constitutional issues that have not always been taken as seriously by the neocons. I don't mean to exaggerate the differences between neocons and the Claremont faction, which is deeply influenced by Harry Jaffa, who, in 1987 in *Social Research*, identified the existence of a West Coast branch of Straussianism—the piece was called the "Crisis of the Strauss Divided." There are clearly fructifying influences between Claremont and the neocons: Hayward, for example, has a temerarious cover story in this month's *Commentary* about the sudden spate of admiration for Ronald Reagan from the Left. But Claremont has focused tenaciously on the matter of the expansion of the American government.

Claremont thus represents an older wing of conservatism—one that deplores the omniscient state. Neocons, by contrast, have tended to take a less alarmist view of the growth of the federal government. In addresses by John Marini and Jean Yarbrough, much attention was focused on the Progressive Era. Marini focused on Franklin Roosevelt and his September 23, 1932 address to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco. In that speech, Roosevelt [announced](#) <sup>[3]</sup>,

Every man has a right to his own property, which means a right to be assured, to the fullest extent attainable, in the safety of his savings. By no other means can men carry the burdens of those parts of life which, in the nature of things, afford no chance of labor; childhood, sickness, old age. In all thought of property, this right is paramount; all other property rights must yield to it. If, in accord with this principle, we must restrict the operations of the speculator, the manipulator, even the financier, I believe we must accept the restriction as needful, not to hamper individualism but to protect it.

Marini suggested that the speech in particular and the Progressive ethos generally ushered in a degradation of natural right. Freedom became a privilege—a "gift," in his words—that was extended by the government rather than the sovereign right of the people. Neither the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution implied a firm compact between the government and the people in which Washington compensated for the deficiencies of some citizens. But the rise of the administrative state entailed, indeed empowered, a technocratic elite that led to rule making rather than law making. The Great Society "institutionalized" the administrative state. Marini further suggested that "constitutionalism" has become "obsolete as a political theory." At the same time, Jean Yarbrough saw the emergence of a "shadow government" of administrators and maintained that the root of the evil went even further back to Theodore Roosevelt and the New Nationalism; and that there was a "romance" among progressives with Hegelianism and the German worship of the state.

There can be no doubting that conservatives have helped focus attention on the Constitution. But can these theories

actually be "operationalized," as the unlovely political science term has it? Will politicians adhere to an older vision of America and the state? I suggested to Kennedy that the only politician fervently embracing these doctrines was Ron Paul. But the Claremont fellows appear to regard Paul's foreign-policy views with deep disapprobation.

There is something of a contradiction, however, between the wish to curb the size and reach of the federal government domestically, on the one hand, and the urge to maintain America's current level of military spending, on the other. It's not clear to me how conservatives will reconcile it. A further conundrum is that what Claremont likes to call "the administrative state" seems almost impervious to attack. There is no sign, in other words, that big government won't keep getting even bigger. That is the way the public seems to like it, even as it complains about taxes and deficits. Social Security and Medicare appear to be taboo.

Whether the Claremont fellows will be able to make actual political inroads, then, is an open question. Whether liberal intellectuals wield the kind of power that was ascribed to them is also subject to debate. Currently, Claremont's influence is probably best described as being in an embryonic phase. But perhaps it will be able to emulate the neocons and exercise real influence in a future Republican administration.

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