



Conservatives Confront The Trump Era

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October 25, 2019

For someone with no prior experience as a professional politician, President Donald Trump has had an amazing impact on the politics of our nation. He has transformed the focus of the Republican Party on issues ranging from immigration to foreign policy. And in heated response to Trump, the Democratic Party has transformed itself from the voice of the “working class” to the voice of radical and elitist “progressivism.” What we have today on the left is no longer your father’s Democratic Party. And what we have today on the right is no longer your father’s Republican Party after he switched.

For conservatives, the temptation too often is to retreat to nostalgia and merely celebrate the golden eras of the past, whether that be the founding of the nation or the Reagan era. Certainly it is important to understand and propagate the ideas and political achievements that made those eras the “good old days,” but to capture the present and the future, any movement has to make its philosophical and policy ideas relevant to new political cycles. And we are in the midst of such a transformative period today.

The Philadelphia Society, one of the conservative movement’s premiere intellectual gatherings, is trying to do just that. It was founded in 1964 to connect the dots between political philosophy and government policies, bringing together scholars, educators, journalists, business and professional leaders, and clergy—all devoted to “deep reflection on the nature of the free society and shared moral commitment to its realization.” At its March 2019 meeting in Chicago, the theme was “The Future of Conservatism in a Bewildering Age,” with a focus (among other topics) on the future of economic freedom in an age of trillion-dollar companies and the future of political freedom in the digital age. At its most recent meeting, October 18-19 in northern Virginia, the theme was “Populism, Markets, and Political Economy,” focused on immigration, cronyism, America’s place in the world, and the coming economy.

Taking note of our new era, the keynote speaker—William McGurn of *The Wall Street Journal*—identified the task as “applying timeless principles to new circumstances.”

I found the session on immigration to be the most successful, perhaps because it was the most narrowly defined topic, thus requiring more specific applications of political philosophy and fewer generalities. The two main divisions within the conservative movement are the traditionalists and the libertarians, and here they were represented in a spirited debate between David Azerrad of the Heritage Foundation (the traditionalists, supporting more restrictive immigration policies) and Alex Nowrastah of the Cato Institute (the libertarians, supporting more

generous immigration policies). Conceding the differences, one got the impression that reasonable people could still come to reasonable compromises despite the contentious nature of the topic—provided illegal immigration and an open borders policy are off the table. And in this Trump era, it is.

In the session on populism and cronyism, Veronique de Rugy of the Mercatus Center noted that the topics the American people are most upset about are the very areas where government has been most active. (Cause and effect? Of course.) And Jim Antle of *The American Conservative* argued that “cronyism is an existential threat to a free society,” that it’s baked into the system today, and that young people confuse it with capitalism, thus turning away from this faux “capitalism.” (Yes, it is indeed necessary to educate the public, young *and* old, on the defining differences between cronyism and free-market economic policies.)

And so it went. To listen to the talks and debates, go to <https://phillysoc.org> and click on “Voices of Conservatism” (the audio archives). The audios of this most recent meeting in October will be added in due course. And for written papers that are available, click on “Collections” and then “Papers.”