

Commentary

How to Be a Conservative in the Age of Trump

Noah Rothman

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Under different circumstances, the election of a Republican president in 2016 might have been a moment of triumph for conservatism. Instead, Donald Trump's ascent to the White House has revealed a movement in crisis.

Trump ran a campaign that was explicitly hostile toward long-held conservative policy prescriptions. He blended conventionally Republican rhetoric with support for protectionist, big-government interventionism. At the same time, he adopted a long-standing liberal critique of conservatism as impractical, heedless, and even cruel. To the astonishment of many Republicans, Trump's negative characterization of conservatism resonated with millions and, in part, earned him the presidency.

For some on the right, this presented no problem. The first conservatives to publicly fall in with Trump came from media. During the campaign, many of the right's self-styled political entertainers—those who once had an outsized role in popularizing conservatism—gave up on that mission to indulge in a burst of new enthusiasm. They were soon joined by members of the right's intellectual class, who began questioning whether conservatism itself had failed and deserved to be redefined.

Trump's victory did not, however, displace any of the traditional conservative legislators who made up the GOP's backbone. They have found themselves at a crossroads. Will they embrace a new populist right, which is largely disdainful of conservative ideas but flush with political power? Or will they hold fast to conservative principles, even if that means alienating the Republican president and his supporters?

Judging by Trump's first months in office, many of these Republicans have reached an accommodation with the new political reality. Without echoing Trump or the alt-right, they've backed away from defending or advancing conservatism. Stung both by the progressive cultural victories of the Obama years and Trump's march to the White House, they no longer give voice to some of the most fundamental ideas of conservatism: the benefits of free-market health care, skepticism toward centrally planned infrastructure projects, the moral imperative of the preventive use of American military force, the centrality of strong family and community bonds, the necessity of failure, the importance of immigrants to the American project, and an incremental approach to political change.

Many Republicans in Washington now articulate their "conservative vision" for the country using the language of the right in advancing aims that would once have been considered

traditionally Democratic policy objectives. They suggest that everyone should have health insurance, even if the care supposedly available to the insured is impractical or substandard. And they don't even want to entertain the notion of a preemptive strike on Iranian nuclear sites. Republicans just want a better nuclear deal with Iran than the one negotiated by the last administration. Somehow.

If American politics becomes a contest over which party will lead a liberal and increasingly statist country, then the set of ideas that have undergirded modern American conservatism—the preservation and advancement of individual liberty as a universal right and the unapologetic stewardship of the national interests of the United States—will be thrown onto the ash heap of history. Trump himself occasionally seems to grasp the value of conservative ideas. Conservatives cannot, though, pin their hopes on the day-to-day actions of a mercurial political novice.

It is, therefore, necessary to articulate principled conservatism as it applies to modern life and the daily policy debates that consume news cycles. In some respect, the Trump administration is an opportunity for conservatism. Where past presidents could be relied upon to guide the development of the movements they came to lead, Trump's lack of ideological convictions suggests that he may be more reliant on the conservative movement than the movement is on him. Practical conservatism is, in many ways, instinctually accepted by Americans. Ours is a culture that cherishes self-sufficiency, prudence, and frugality. These are also conservative values, but conservatives cannot assume they are universally accepted as such.

Responsible conservatives have ceded the latitude to shape conservative positions to disreputable provocateurs, thus repulsing persuadable voters. Sober-minded conservative Republicans are obliged to take their ideas back. Those are:

THE DISASTER OF CENTRAL PLANNING

In broad strokes, Donald Trump has embraced self-described socialist Bernie Sanders's proposal for a 13-figure infrastructure project focused on rebuilding the nation's roads, bridges, and airports. What's more, Trump endorsed Sanders's rationale. "Sometimes you have to prime the pump," Trump told *Time*.

This is textbook Keynesianism. It was the same logic that led to Barack Obama's \$800 billion effort to stimulate America's moribund economic engine in 2009. Obama later confessed that his "shovel-ready jobs" were "not as shovel-ready as we expected," but at least Obama's Keynesian spending program followed Keynesian reasoning. That is, it was implemented amid an acute crisis. Donald Trump just wants to spend on infrastructure. Period.

Some Republicans—such as Lou Barletta, Mark Meadows, and Grover Norquist—support Trump's objective, albeit with varying degrees of skepticism over how that \$1 trillion investment would be financed. Other Republicans have been more reluctant but not altogether hostile toward an infrastructure bill, especially if it means new public works in their home districts. Why is such a program necessary? There is nothing in the overall picture of the American economy to justify a Keynesian prescription for economic growth.

The official unemployment rate today is 4.5 percent, lower than at any point since June 2007. At 63 percent of the eligible workforce, the labor-participation rate is improving, albeit slowly. Wealth is being created on Wall Street at a remarkable pace. In late April, the NASDAQ closed above the 6,000 mark for the first time in history. The Dow Jones Industrial Average topped a record 20,000 just five days after Trump's inauguration and has stayed there since early February. Manufacturing output expanded for the seventh consecutive month in March, and Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED) shows industrial production nearing full recovery from the crash in 2008. Consumer confidence is on the rise; public optimism has led more firms to make big-ticket capital investments, Americans are taking out automobile loans at record rates, and the dollar is so strong the president is starting to tell reporters that it needs to cool off. Every available indicator suggests that there are no recessionary signals on the horizon, and the Federal Reserve is raising interest rates as a result.

None of this is to say that the economy in America is perfect, but the malady afflicting the American workforce in the wake of the Great Recession is one of morale. Trump's voters believe, with good reason, that Washington's elites don't care about them, so they demand from Washington a gesture in acknowledgment of their plight. Their individual stories are often heartrending. But appeals to emotion, however compelling, can give birth to terrible policy.

America's brief infatuation with urban planning in the 20th century, typified in New York City by Le Corbusier's stark concrete towers punctuating absurdly broad avenues down which no pedestrians walked, was a mistake (Tom Wolfe dubbed New York's sixth Avenue the "Rue du Regret"). The technocracy envisioned by planners, such as the brilliant but tormented Robert Moses, rejected the idea that there was such a thing as "thickness," that neighborhoods were organic things and not simply collections of old buildings that could be torn down and erected better somewhere else. In this period, construction became a perpetual-motion machine until it was eventually unclear whether it was serving the needs of the public or the project's commissioners.

Even the sanctified Eisenhower-era national highway system was, in its own way, a boondoggle. "Haste, waste, mismanagement, and outright graft are making a multibillion-dollar rat-hole out of the Federal Highway Program," wrote Karl Detzer in a 1960 *Reader's Digest* essay, "Our Great Big Highway Bungle." The tax dollars lost from property seized and destroyed, the people dislocated, the corruption, and the congressional horse-trading were whitewashed away in a revisionist effort to grease the skids for more federal infrastructure spending. The highways ultimately represent a national achievement with a primarily strategic and military value, but the great human cost of it all is forgotten. In any case, those highways were necessary. There is no current need for a grand, federal construction campaign.

The American infrastructure that needs repair is mostly mundane—rolling stock, water mains, gas lines, wiring to improve real-time traffic management, and so forth. But talk of that is often subordinated to the notion of glittering new roads, bridges, and airports. Amid the development of these showpieces, aspiring technocrats rarely give a thought to the people they dislocate or the tax dollars they waste—to say nothing of the natural progress they are arresting, which otherwise might have solved many woes.

The unqualified successes of central planning are few. More often, it leads to dehumanization, isolation, and anguish. America should be the home of free-market, entrepreneurial solutions responsive to local conditions and needs. Grandiose, centrally planned show projects are for socialist bureaucrats.

THE ERROR OF GOVERNMENT MANDATES

When Americans think about government mandates, they are likely to first think about health care; specifically, their newfound “responsibility” to purchase insurance or pay a penalty to the government (or a tax, if you’re Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts). That is just one kind of government mandate—a subject of much consternation for Republicans and the focus of the GOP’s “Devolution Revolution,” a legislative campaign that began under Ronald Reagan and accelerated following the GOP’s 1994 midterm election victories. From the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), to the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, to No Child Left Behind, well-meaning programs designed to address immediate and urgent concerns often have adverse unintended consequences and conflict with the tenets of federalism.

Conservatives have no problem attacking excessive environmental regulation or top-down education dictates. Only the bravest conservative lawmakers and columnists, however, dare to point out the unforeseen and adverse effects of legislation that purports to protect necessities such as breathable air, potable water, and the rights of the disabled. In the ADA’s case, as the Cato Institute scholar Walter Olson has demonstrated, the law failed to pay for itself (as promised) and has not improved the participation of the disabled in the labor force. In fact, the ranks of the disabled have swollen as the definition of “disabled” has grown more expansive. Olson further notes that the law has proven a cash cow for the attorneys who manage complaint “filing mills,” which target businesses that fail to comply with the ADA for quick cash settlements.

Similarly, it has become heresy to advance longstanding conservative ideas in discussing health-care reform. So here they are: Obtaining health insurance must be voluntary. Government should not, through inducement or penalty, prevent people from investing their income in areas they deem more efficient or personally satisfying than health coverage.

What we have learned since the passage of ObamaCare in 2010 has proved its naysayers correct: Government is incapable of efficiently expanding access to health care either in terms of quality or cost-effectiveness. In the long run, government-run health care will help fewer people than its free-market counterpart. Conceptually, ObamaCare conflated insurance with welfare, undermining the very theory of insurance in the process. In the absence of any other positive metric, ObamaCare has now come to be judged by its defenders solely by the number of people it insured (through the threat of punitive taxation).

When a nation believes that health care is a national challenge, it sets out on a slippery slope. If personal health is no longer a matter of individual choice but a collective responsibility, how can anyone justify the unequal use of health-care products? Every daily activity that has an impact on health could—some might argue, should—be subject to regulation. In time, everyone would be compelled not only to obtain insurance but also to avail themselves regularly of medical services.

Conservative health-care reform should aim for greater personal freedom, not streamlined government coercion.

THE NEED FOR A STRONG (SOMETIMES PREEMPTIVE) NATIONAL DEFENSE

Amid the Obama administration's effort to win congressional support for the nuclear accords with Iran, it wasn't uncommon to hear Republicans contend that "no deal is better than a bad deal" and that only "the credible threat of force" could dissuade Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Over time, however, Obama successfully demonized conservatives who were skeptical of the deal as the American analogs to Iran's radical mullahs. Many on the right were cowed and stopped recommending a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Instead, they pushed for a "better deal" with Tehran. In this instance, conservatives lost their nerve well before they had to pay heed to Donald Trump.

Their timidity about military action extended into the 2016 election. Trump ran for president claiming that even Obama was too hawkish for his taste—a campaign pledge that found purchase among Republican voters. The Trump administration's strike on a Syrian air-base, its raid on an al-Qaeda facility in Yemen, and the deployment of a massive bomb against ISIS in Afghanistan were worthy of praise. But they are also notable for how out of sync they are with the rhetoric of today's Republican establishment. Moreover, these disparate actions do not appear to be elements of a coherent strategy.

Even more notable is the fact that, on the right, discussion of *preemptive* military action is practically nonexistent. Snake-bit by the perception that the Iraq War was a failure, many Republicans stopped making the ethical case for the use of preemptive force. And because Barack Obama's military interventions, such as in Libya, underestimated the commitment that would be necessary to see American objectives achieved, the GOP usually stood in opposition. That was always a political calculation, and it had at least one unforeseen consequence: Conservatives stopped arguing in favor of preventively neutralizing the threats posed by those who wish Americans or their allies harm.

To this assertion, the rote and perfunctory response from the left will always be that Republicans are "warmongers." Yet, the dispatch of American "boots on the ground" to theaters of war has not abated just because conservatives joined Democrats in refusing to debate the necessity of those deployments rationally and in clear terms. Indeed, small-scale "advisory" deployments only proliferated as conservatives became faint-hearted about advocating the use of legal, definitive, and overwhelming force in defense of U.S. national interests. American soldiers find themselves deployed in increasing numbers to places such as Syria, Somalia, Iraq, and Libya.

Ultimately, the debate over preventive force will become impossible to avoid when the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear program fully matures. The United States cannot allow its soldiers and allies in Northeast Asia to live with the threat of a nuclear strike that could occur with virtually no warning. North Korea is not the Soviet Union; its engagement in and material support for terrorism renders it a threat that is not subject to traditional deterrence models. Though the technology is evolving at a rapid pace, there is no guarantee that anti-ballistic-missile interceptors will be able to neutralize a missile in flight. One day soon, America and its allies

will be faced with an imminent threat that necessitates preemptive intervention in North Korea and all that entails. Conservative Republicans had better be prepared to make a case to the public for a definitive strike lest the United States ends up creating the conditions for another protracted and bloody slog on the Korean Peninsula.

Despite Trump's campaigning for office on a platform of retrenchment and the modest application of American power abroad—or, perhaps, because of it—American troop deployments have continued with Trump in office. If there are to be American deployments to global hot spots, responsible conservatives should advocate the decisive application of military power to ensure that those deployments are as effective and short-lived as possible. The protection of American soldiers and allies is a moral necessity, and therefore preventive military action can be a just and righteous imperative. Few conservatives speak of military action in such terms anymore, but that does not render this truth any less evident.

THE NECESSITY OF FAILURE

Nothing and no one should be “too big to fail.” Failure yields creative destruction, natural selection, ingenuity, innovation, and progress. Our choices make us who we are, and we should not be rescued from their consequences. Be it on the individual level or in more comprehensive terms—trade, industry, and enterprise—Americans must be free to be outbid, to go under, and to rebound on their own terms.

Americans are, in fact, relatively tolerant of failure in comparison with the rest of the developed world. In her book *The Upside of Down*, Megan McArdle wrote: “In the business world, we are very good at recognizing the fact that failure holds an enormous amount of critical information.” Contrary to the irrational attacks on conservatism's antipathy toward bailouts, true compassion is found in allowing individuals and institutions to reinvent themselves amid adversity.

For most, this is more palatable in theory than practice. When faced with an acute crisis, such as the collapse of the mortgage market in 2009, laissez-faire disengagement is simply not an option. The Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) funds that prevented a liquidity crisis were necessary. The TARP assets that were eventually distributed to the Big Three auto manufacturers in an attempt to save American industry from the marketplace were, however, not. Ford didn't need a bailout, but it took one anyway. GM and Chrysler had valuable intellectual property, manufacturing equipment and facilities, and a skilled workforce to leverage—all of which would have found more efficient (and likely more lucrative) allocation in a world without the auto bailout.

The emotionally gratifying impulse to freeze American industry in place is a bipartisan one, and it is being applied now without any limiting principle. Take, for example, the vaunted “Carrier deal,” in which the Trump transition team negotiated through then-Indiana Governor and now-Vice President Mike Pence a series of “inducements” (read: tax breaks) to keep 1,000 jobs in the Hoosier State. Surely, those Carrier employees are grateful to the administration for saving their jobs, but the defense contractor that owns Carrier—United Technologies—lost the \$65 million it planned to save in labor costs. Those costs will be passed along to the consumer. Adding insult to injury, UT's CEO later announced that the tax relief it received would go to finance the

automation of its Indiana plants. For this, the nascent Trump administration set a precedent to which other troubled manufacturers will surely later appeal.

Government intervention on behalf of distressed firms or disadvantaged members of society is not always unwarranted or even undesirable. The impulse to create a soft landing must be tempered, though, with the understanding that this protective instinct often isn't really helping anyone in the long-term. Trade protectionism, crony capitalism, the best-intentioned social-welfare programs: All are the results of an impulsive desire to shield Americans from the free market.

A RATIONAL IMMIGRATION POLICY

Perhaps no other policy issue so split the right in 2016 as did immigration. The early appeal of Donald Trump's insurgent White House candidacy is arguably attributable to the fact that congressional Republicans shared a consensus view on immigration policy that many of their voters rejected. In a February 2015 *Bloomberg View* op-ed, Ramesh Ponnuru marveled at the "very narrow range of opinions" on immigration reform reflected in the early presidential field. Like nature, politics abhors a vacuum, and Trump filled it.

Yet there are some basic elements of any sound U.S. immigration policy on which most Americans who call themselves conservatives ought to agree. America needs immigrants as much as immigrants need America, but citizenship is a privilege that should be extended only to those who demonstrate the capacity and willingness to become Americans. The purpose of immigration into the United States must first be to benefit the United States, not the immigrant.

America's inherent heterogeneity is a source of character and strength. This is also a nation that values private property and individual rights. There will always be an inherent tension between those already here and those who wish to come. It is, therefore, incumbent on the country's elected leaders to assuage those who are wary of immigration while also pursuing an immigration policy that addresses specifically enumerated needs.

Immigration helps maintain America's population growth, and immigrants make up an increasingly crucial portion of the base of taxpayers. Conservatives who are willing to speak honestly about these matters cannot assume that the case for limited immigration is well understood. They are obliged to spell out in clear terms why immigration—to say nothing of the importation of seasonal, temporary, and skilled labor—is an economic necessity.

The resettlement of at-risk populations abroad can also advance American national interests. The intake of refugees from trouble spots all over the globe is an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. The first point of order, however, must be to demonstrate how any of these programs benefit U.S. national interests. If the case cannot be made, those programs are not essential.

The United States is an ethnically variegated country, but one with a unitary culture. That culture must be preserved and enriched by America's immigration policy. It can be done. The United States has seven times more people of Irish descent than Ireland has. Chicago, New York, and Detroit have respectively the second-, third-, and fourth-largest Polish populations of any city on

Earth. These exemplary immigration successes can occur only with a policy that promotes American ideals to achieve diversity without division.

The left regards a U.S. immigration policy that benefits Americans first as somehow parochial or chauvinistic. Any nation that fails to see to its own interests isn't going to be a nation for long.

THE SUPERIORITY OF INCREMENTALISM

In legislative practice, incrementalism is the view that modest, circumspect reforms provide the soundest way to govern. Revolutionary leaps forward are best left to the private sector.

“Comprehensive legislation” is almost never comprehensive and always rife with unintended consequences.

Conservatives in the Obama era became convinced, however, that the Democratic Party engineered some rather radical transformations of American society almost overnight. The right's traditional attachment to baby steps, therefore, came to seem like unilateral disarmament in an ideological war. In truth, Democrats spent the better part of 30 years laying the foundations for the policy advances Barack Obama helped achieve in the first two years of his presidency. For example, the left worked tirelessly for decades to strip the concept of universal health care of any controversy. Since Edward Kennedy declared at the 1980 Democratic National Convention that “the dream shall never die,” Democrats labored toward this objective.

Liberal efforts have resulted in numerous cultural changes: the acceptance of alternative lifestyles, sexual preferences, and gender ambiguity, for example. Though some resent these outcomes, conservatives also begrudgingly admire the tactics that led to these victories. The late Andrew Breitbart cleverly observed that “politics is downstream from culture.” This phrase is often repeated but rarely internalized. Remaking the nation's politics is the end product of labor that spans generations in which advances are measured at glacial speeds.

Because their own cultural victories have not materialized instantaneously, conservatives have adopted a tendency to undervalue them. These include the triumph of free-market capitalism over European socialism, the creation of a series of global frameworks that prohibit protectionist industrial and trade policies, the revitalization of First and Second Amendment freedoms, the scaling back of organized labor's privileges, and the reformation of the nation's welfare programs with the aim of inculcating in beneficiaries a work ethic. In terms of policy and governance, America in 2017 is a much more conservative country than it was in 1992. It's a marvel that so few conservatives recognize their own substantial achievements.

Unlike sudden and convulsive policy changes, incremental progress is not fleeting. Falling for the illusory promise of revolution has been a feature of leftist politics, not conservatism. It's critical that populist talk of “tearing down” the establishment and Trump's penchant for executive action not overwhelm good conservative sense.

Republicans in Washington do not fully understand the crisis of confidence afflicting the conservative movement. It's hardly a wonder that conservative voters turn to those who strut and posture with confidence, even if that confidence is a mirage. They perceive themselves beset by the indecisive and insecure.

The best way for conservatives to ensure lasting change is not to act from desperation but to create thoughtful policy bolstered by enduring principles. This means, above all, knowing what conservatism is and explaining its virtues. But by failing to take custody of their intellectual inheritance, reputable conservatives allow their political opponents and a few professionally scandalous attention seekers to caricature them.

“This is called the Republican Party,” said Donald Trump in a 2016 interview. “It’s not called the Conservative Party.” Factually, he was correct. And, politically, his hostility to conservatism served him well during the campaign. But now in the White House, President Trump is being taught an unforgiving public lesson on the limits of populism. The courts have put a hold on two rashly drafted executive orders on refugees. The health-care legislation he championed was dead on arrival. For these early failures, the president has suffered losses both in public opinion and political capital.

If the GOP needed the unlikely candidacy of Donald Trump to win the White House, Trump now needs conservatism to make coherent policy. This means that the prospect of a genuine conservative triumph is still within reach. Nationally, self-described conservatives outnumber both moderates and liberals. According to a 2015 Pew Research poll, conservatives are more politically active and informed than any other ideological group in the country. And, of course, Republicans hold the executive branch and maintain majorities in both chambers of Congress.

Trump is right: It’s the Republican Party, not the Conservative Party. But parties are merely vehicles designed to secure political power. Ideology answers the question of how to use that power wisely and effectively. If the Republican president hopes to be successful, it’s up to him to make use of conservative ideas, regardless of whether he’s a true believer or not. And it’s incumbent upon the conservatives in Washington to speak boldly about what that entails. This might make for an improbable and uneasy collaboration, but conservatism has always warned against making the perfect the enemy of the good.