



# Symposium: National Conservatism: Catholic Perspectives

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## Introduction

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Donald J. Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election may well be a turning point in American history comparable to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's victory in 1932 or Andrew Jackson's in 1828. Trump did not radically transform the federal government like Roosevelt did. Historians might never write of a "Trumpian Era" of American politics as they do the Jacksonian Era. Nonetheless, Trump's election broke open the floodgates on the American Right. Unorthodox in style, Trump was similarly unorthodox in policy, bucking the Republican Party establishment on the key issues of war, trade, and immigration. What were once held as foundational beliefs of the conservative movement are now open for questioning in the political and intellectual arenas.

Trump revealed deep disagreements within the conservative movement. Many who might be called "movement" or "fusionist" conservatives—that is, those who hold typical Republican views such as a hawkish approach to foreign affairs, free trade, and small, *laissez-faire* government—claimed that Trump is no conservative at all.<sup>1</sup> Fusionism was originally coined by *National Review* editor Frank Meyer to denote his "fusion" of the traditionalist emphasis on virtue and the libertarian emphasis on liberty. It was Meyer's contention that liberty (in the sense of unrestrained action) is the prerequisite and best safeguard for virtue.<sup>2</sup> While Meyer's fusionist philosophy was never short of intellectual critics, it did reflect in a practical sense the conservative political coalition of the late twentieth century that found champions in Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan.<sup>3</sup> *National Review's* 1955 mission statement is an example of prac-

tical fusionism, reflecting the goals and priorities of disparate conservative factions.<sup>4</sup> The coalition that brought Reagan into high office in landslide elections has often been called a “three-legged stool”: evangelical Christians (and socially traditional Catholics), fiscal libertarians, and foreign policy hawks.

If Donald J. Trump’s successful 2016 presidential campaign marks the fracturing of the Reaganite three-legged stool, the rise of national conservatism as a serious intellectual force marks the deeper philosophical fissure on the Right. Fusionist conservatism, in practical terms, can be summed up by President Reagan’s famous line, “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.”<sup>5</sup> National conservatives would deny, or at least qualify, this statement. If movement or fusionist conservatives emphasize the dangers and abuses of state power, national conservatives emphasize the legitimate and beneficial uses of state power. Their coalition would not feature libertarians or interventionists at the forefront, and would replace these groups with economic populists and advocates of foreign policy restraint. The national conservative electoral coalition might look something like the pre-World War II Republican Party with a focus on the cultural and economic concerns of Middle America.

National conservatism distinguishes itself from movement conservatism by focusing on the political, economic, and philosophical foundations of national sovereignty, the use of public policy to promote the economic wellbeing of the working and middle class, the need for the state to reinforce traditional morality with civil law, and the temporal and spiritual need to cultivate a religious people. This is an intellectually broad movement with members from a wide variety of theoretical and religious backgrounds. The authors and signers of “National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles” include Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant intellectuals, traditionalist conservatives, venture capitalists, activists and think tank fellows, natural rights conservatives affiliated with the Claremont Institute, Trump Administration alumni, and even writers from legacy conservative media such as *National Review*.<sup>6</sup> The “Statement of Principles” stresses the importance of national sovereignty, the destructive force of globalism, the problems of both socialism and unrestrained free markets, the destabilizing effect of mass immigration, and the need to sustain the traditional family.

If there does not seem to be anything new in national conservatism, it must be remembered that there was nothing new about Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign platform either. The issues that Trump identified and national conservatives emphasize were all previously brought to national attention by Patrick J. Buchanan. Buchanan broke from the Bush dynasty

and movement conservatives on the same issues as Trump. He wrote entire books on war (*A Republic, Not an Empire*, 1999; *Where the Right Went Wrong*, 2004), trade (*The Great Betrayal*, 1998), immigration (*The Death of the West*, 2002; *State of Emergency*, 2006), and the lawlessness and moral corruption of the American ruling class (*Day of Reckoning*, 2007; *Suicide of a Superpower*, 2011). Moreover, national conservatives do not claim to be devising new principles. Rather, they claim to be recovering an older tradition that has been forgotten by ideologies Left and Right.<sup>7</sup> If there is anything new about national conservatism, it is only the sense of urgency that arises with increasing moral, political, and social decay.

The articles in this symposium contribute to the understanding of national conservatism in relation to the American political order and to conservatism writ large. Bruce Frohnen's contribution is a trenchant critique of Yoram Hazony's particular theory of national conservatism which threatens healthy regionalism and overlooks the Catholic contribution to restraining secular powers and centralized authority. Thomas Varacalli examines national conservatism through the lens of Catholic social thought and concludes that while the former might be a useful ally to political Catholicism, there is a danger of conflating its goals and priorities with those of serious American Catholics. Casey Wheatland's contribution examines the legacy of the American Founding within the debate between fusionism and national conservatism, noting the areas of policy agreement between national conservatives and the general consensus of the American Founding.

### Notes

1. See the special February 15, 2016, edition of *National Review* laconically titled "Against Trump."

2. Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo*, in *In Defense of Freedom and Related Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1996), 66–76.

3. Consider Murray Rothbard's critique that Meyer contributed to the conceptual confusion of conservative thought by attempting to synthesize traditionalism and libertarianism while actually landing squarely in the libertarian camp by asserting that virtue must be freely chosen without the threat of coercion. Despite his libertarianism, Rothbard's critique of Meyer is shared by many traditionalist conservatives. See Murray Rothbard, "Frank S. Meyer: The Fusionist as Libertarian Manqué," *Modern Age*, Fall 1981, 352–63.

4. William F. Buckley Jr., "Our Mission Statement," *National Review*, Nov. 19, 1955, <https://www.nationalreview.com/1955/11/our-mission-statement-william-f-buckley-jr/>.

5. Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1981. <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/128614/inaguration.pdf>.

6. Edmund Burke Foundation, “National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles,” <https://nationalconservatism.org/national-conservatism-a-statement-of-principles/>.

7. N.B. the subtitle to Yoram Hazony’s recent book: *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2022).