

Imprimis

Over 6,600,000 Readers

June/July 2024 | Volume 53, Number 6/7

National Conservatism, Freedom Conservatism, and Americanism

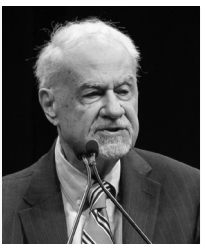
John Fonte

Hudson Institute

The following is adapted from a talk delivered on April 18, 2024, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Bellevue, Washington.

IN THE past two years, two competing groups of conservatives—National Conservatives or NatCons and Freedom Conservatives or FreeCons—have issued competing manifestos. These manifestos reflect a divergent understanding of the progressive challenge to the American way of life.

This divergence can best be understood in the context of the history of modern American conservatism, which can be broken into three waves: the first wave, symbolized by William F. Buckley, Jr. and Ronald Reagan, lasted from the mid-1950s to the end of the Cold War; the second wave, symbolized by Paul Ryan and the two Bush presidencies, ran from the 1990s to roughly the second decade of this century; and the



JOHN FONTE is a senior fellow and director of the Center for American Common Culture at the Hudson Institute. He received his B.A. and M.A. in history from the University of Arizona and his Ph.D. in world history from the University of Chicago. He has written for numerous publications, including *Foreign Affairs*, *Commentary*, *National Review*, *The National Interest*, and the *Claremont Review of Books*, and is the author of *Sovereignty or Submission: Will Americans Rule Themselves or Be Ruled by Others?*

A PUBLICATION OF HILLSDALE COLLEGE

third wave, symbolized by Jeff Sessions and Donald Trump, is ongoing.

Modern American conservatism began with the circle around Buckley's *National Review* magazine. Conservatism in this period united traditionalists, who were concerned above all with virtue, and classical liberals, who were concerned above all with liberty. *National Review*'s Frank Meyer famously developed a theory called fusionism, which argued that freedom was a prerequisite for a virtuous society. Fusionism, whatever its philosophical inconsistencies—and aided by the common and urgent cause of anti-communism—worked politically to hold differently-minded conservatives together, particularly during the Reagan administration.

Following the end of the Cold War, American conservatism entered a new phase, embracing globalization at home and abroad. Conservatives supported an integrated global economy, resulting in the North American Free Trade Agreement and China's entrance into the World Trade Organization. President George H.W. Bush supported legislation that greatly increased immigration, and the State Department under James Baker abandoned traditional American opposition to dual citizenship. President George W. Bush promoted North American economic integration and declared in 2005 that it would henceforth be the goal of U.S. foreign policy "to seek and support the growth of [democracy] in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."

Paul Ryan exemplified this second wave of conservatism intellectually and politically by promoting free trade, entitlement reform, increased immigration, and amnesty for illegal immigrants. Ryan told the *Washington Examiner*: "We need an immigration system that's more wired to give our economy the labor it needs to grow faster."

The third wave of conservatism can be characterized as a nationalist-populist revolt against the policies and attitudes of the second wave, particularly on issues of immigration, trade, sovereignty, and national identity. Originally leading the opposition was U.S. Senator Jeff Sessions, who for years issued amendments, memos, and speeches, explicitly calling for a humble populism and "immigration moderation . . . so that wages can rise, welfare rolls can shrink, and the forces of assimilation can knit us all more closely together."

Donald Trump, needless to say, turbocharged the nationalist-populist revolt and remains the leading political figure of third-wave conservatism. But I note Sessions' contribution to make the point that third-wave conservatism did not begin, nor will it end, with Trump.

To a large extent, the current divide between National Conservatives and Freedom Conservatives is a divide between third wavers (NatCons) and second wavers (FreeCons).

NATCON STATEMENT

The National Conservative Statement of Principles recognizes that progressives have already achieved dominance in American universities, K–12 education, the media, Fortune 500 corporations, entertainment, Big Tech, Big Philanthropy, Big Law, the administrative state, many state and local bureaucracies, and the leadership of the military and the intelligence agencies. The statement thus rejects a strictly conservative approach of defending the status quo, calling rather for a counter-revolutionary sensibility.

Imprimis (im-pri-mis), [Latin]: in the first place

EDITOR
Douglas A. Jeffrey

ART DIRECTOR
Shanna Cote

DEPUTY EDITORS
Matthew D. Bell
Timothy W. Caspar
Samantha Strayer

STAFF ASSISTANTS
Emilee Horwath
Carrie Moore

Copyright © 2024 Hillsdale College. To request permission to reprint, email Imprimis@hillsdale.edu or call (800) 437-2268. The opinions expressed in *Imprimis* are not necessarily the views of Hillsdale College.

ISSN 0277-8432

The NatCon statement decries “with alarm” that “the traditional beliefs, institutions, and liberties . . . that we love have been progressively undermined and overthrown.” It calls for a restoration of the virtues inherent in “patriotism and courage, honor and loyalty, religion and wisdom, congregation and family, man and woman, the sabbath and the sacred, and reason and justice” as the “prerequisite for recovering and maintaining our freedom, security, and prosperity.”

NatCon theory favors the sovereignty of democratic nation-states over the authority of international institutions; the constitutional rule of law over the oligarchical rule of judges and administrators; a free enterprise economy that does not place abstract laissez faire theories above concrete national interests; a moral order that honors religion in the public square; the traditional family supported by economic and cultural conditions that prioritize normal family life and child-raising; an education policy that affirms patriotism and repudiates the contemporary academy; a more restrictive immigration policy that emphasizes national interests; and a color-blind approach to civil rights that opposes special treatment for any group regardless of outcomes.

NatCon policies began to emerge during the Trump administration. The National Security Strategy document of 2017 emphasized “strengthening American sovereignty” and realistic national interests rather than adherence to international institutions and global rules. In September 2020, Director of the Office of Management and Budget Russ Vought (a NatCon signatory) issued a directive based on an executive

order to end “employee trainings that use divisive propaganda to undermine the principle of fair and equal treatment for all.”

In the closing days of the Trump administration, the White House released the report of the 1776 Commission (chaired by another NatCon signatory, Hillsdale President Larry Arnn) that directly repudiated *The New York Times’* 1619 Project, offering a patriotic and historically accurate civic education framework consistent with America’s founding principles.

THE KEY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NATCONS AND FREECONS HAS TO DO WITH THE CHARACTER OF THE CURRENT POLITICAL STRUGGLE. FREECONS BELIEVE WE ARE MAINLY INVOLVED IN POLICY ARGUMENTS. YUVAL LEVIN WRITES THAT OUR DIVISIONS ARE A FAMILY ARGUMENT BETWEEN TWO FORMS OF LIBERALISM—THAT WE ARE NOT IN A “POLITICAL FIGHT TO THE DEATH.” NATIONAL CONSERVATIVES, ON THE OTHER HAND, GENERALLY BELIEVE WE ARE INVOLVED IN WHAT THE LATE ANGELO CODEVILLA CALLED A “COLD CIVIL WAR.”

Last year Indiana Congressman Jim Banks founded the Anti-Woke Caucus, declaring, “Wokeism is a cancer that’s going to eat our country inside out and kill us if we don’t do something about it.” Since then, the caucus has introduced amendments eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) funding in the military and elsewhere.

At the state level, more than 30 bills have been introduced in 25 states prohibiting, restricting, and defunding DEI in public colleges. To date, ten bills have been signed into law. In Florida alone, Governor Ron DeSantis signed legislation that prohibited classroom instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity from kindergarten through third grade; required transparency in educational materials so that parents could see what is being taught;

prevented critical race theory indoctrination from kindergarten to public universities; revised a biased College Board African-American studies course, changing it into an academically sound black history course; revised history and civics standards to eliminate progressive bias; and transformed New College in Sarasota into an institution dedicated to the classical liberal arts.

FREECON RESPONSE

In response to the NatCon statement, a group of mostly second-wave conservatives published a Freedom Conservative Statement of Principles. The statement itself was generally benign, affirming the principles of individual rights, private enterprise, the rule of law, equality of opportunity, and secure borders. Almost any conservative, including NatCons, could have signed it. But despite its benign character, some who signed the FreeCon statement—such as *Bulwark* editor Charlie Sykes—are Biden supporters due to their virulent opposition to third-wave conservatism. And the main organizer of the FreeCon statement, Avik Roy of the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, wrote a series of articles making it clear that the statement’s purpose was to repudiate National Conservatism.

According to Roy, the FreeCon statement was modeled on the Sharon Statement of the Young Americans for Freedom adopted at William F. Buckley’s home in Sharon, Connecticut in 1960. But there were some obvious differences. The Sharon Statement, for instance, declared “that foremost among the transcendent values is the individual’s use of his God-given free will.” But the FreeCon statement (unlike the

NatCon statement) makes no reference to God. Also, whereas the fusionism that characterized first-wave conservatism hinged on the symbiotic relationship of freedom and virtue, the FreeCon statement (again unlike the NatCon statement) makes no reference to virtue.

In practical terms, Roy charges the NatCons with a “willing[ness] to abridge individual and economic freedom to fight the woke Left.” He is dismissive of efforts by DeSantis and other governors to fight the advance of woke education in their states, preferring the idea of universal education savings accounts. He also talks tepidly about “eliminat[ing] DEI excesses,” as if some form of DEI would be acceptable.

THE CONFLICT TODAY IS NOT SIMPLY A NORMAL POLICY ARGUMENT BETWEEN CONSERVATIVES AND PROGRESSIVES. IT IS OVER THE FUTURE OF THE HISTORIC AMERICAN NATION, BOTH ITS CREED AND ITS CULTURE. THEREFORE, THOSE WHO AFFIRM THE AMERICAN NATION—WHETHER THEY ARE NATCONS, FREECONS, OR PATRIOTIC LIBERALS—SHOULD BE CALLED AMERICANISTS. THOSE WHO FIND OUR INHERITANCE DEEPLY PROBLEMATIC AND SEEK A REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION OF THE AMERICAN REGIME SHOULD, LOGICALLY, BE CALLED TRANSFORMATIONISTS.

On combatting racial discrimination, Roy maintains that FreeCons would go further than NatCons “by recognizing the persistent inequality of opportunity for descendants of the victims of slavery and segregation.” The FreeCon statement commits to expanding opportunity for “victims” who face “economic and personal hurdles” as a result of this persistent injustice. Although the statement specifically opposes affirmative action and discrimination, such language borders on agreement with the woke Left’s view that America is “systemically racist.”

The general view of FreeCon critics of National Conservatism seems to be that NatCons depart radically from

the first-wave conservative principles of Buckley and Reagan. But to a significant extent, NatCons seem closer in spirit to the legacy of first-wave conservatism than the FreeCons.

There was a nationalist-populist overtone, for instance, to the Reagan victory in 1980. As Irving Kristol put it: “Reagan . . . came out of the West riding a horse, not a golf cart, speaking in the kind of nationalist-populist tonalities not heard since Teddy Roosevelt, appealing to large sections of the working class.” In 1980, the Big Business-oriented Republican establishment—a similar establishment to the one that now looks askance at Trump’s populist MAGA movement—considered Reagan unreliable and preferred George H.W. Bush, John Connally, Howard Baker, and Robert Dole.

In the mid-1950s, fusionist Frank Meyer regretted that the terms “‘nationalist,’ even ‘patriot’ [had] become terms of reproach.” Buckley himself famously sounded a strong populist note when he declared that he would rather be ruled by the first 2,000 people in the Boston telephone book than by the faculty of Harvard University.

First-wave conservatism did not embrace anything like the neo-con foreign policy views of second-wave conservatism. Buckley’s *National Review* advocated anti-Soviet Communism, not the worldwide promotion of democracy. Indeed, the magazine supported undemocratic leaders such as Franco in Spain, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, and Salazar in Portugal. Reagan worked with undemocratic forces including the Argentine military, Communist China, the Afghan Mujahedeen, Savimbi in Angola, and Somoza elements within the Nicaraguan Contras. To be sure, Reagan withdrew support for undemocratic allies in the Philippines and South Korea, and later put more emphasis on the ideological struggle between democracy and Soviet Communism, endorsing the

creation of the National Endowment for Democracy. But even that was within the context of the Cold War and was focused on opposing the Soviet threat.

Nor was the Buckley-Reagan era one of unalloyed laissez faire on immigration and trade. *National Review* supported the McCarran-Walter Act to restrict immigration. In 1986, Reagan hoped to achieve a grand bargain in immigration policy—he agreed to amnesty for three million illegal immigrants in return for enhanced border security. We all know how that turned out: amnesty first, followed by continued weak enforcement.

Reagan negotiated a free trade agreement with Canada, but he also used tariffs when he believed them to be in America’s interest. William Niskanen, who served on Reagan’s Council of Economic Advisors, said that “the [Reagan] administration imposed more new restraints on trade than any administration since Hoover.” Overall, the share of American imports covered by trade restrictions increased under Reagan from eight percent in 1975 to 21 percent by 1984.

The key difference between NatCons and FreeCons has to do with the character of the current political struggle against progressives on the Left. FreeCons believe we are mainly involved in policy arguments. FreeCon signatory Yuval Levin, for instance, writes that our divisions are a family argument between two forms of liberalism: progressive liberalism and conservative liberalism—we are not, he assures us, in a “political fight to the death.” National conservatives, on the other hand, generally believe we are involved in what the late Angelo Codevilla called a “Cold Civil War”—or as third waver Victor Davis Hanson has put it, we are in an “existential war for the soul of America.”

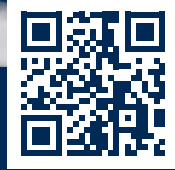
HILLSDALE COLLEGE ONLINE STORE

Looking for Hillsdale College merchandise?

Visit our online store to purchase Hillsdale apparel, gifts, books, and more.



Go to hillsdale.edu/shop or scan the QR code.



Here, too, NatCons seem to be closer in spirit to first-wave conservatives. Early *National Review* senior editor Willmoore Kendall, for instance, wrote that since liberalism “seeks a change of regime, the replacement of one regime by another, of a different type altogether, it is, quite simply, revolutionary.” Kendall asks: “Is the destiny of America the Liberal Revolution or is it the destiny envisaged for it by the Founders of our Republic?” And Buckley’s closest advisor, James Burnham, wrote in his book *Suicide of the West* that “the principal function of modern liberalism” is to facilitate the suicide of Western Civilization. This suicide would be rationalized “by the light of the principles of liberalism, not as a final defeat, but as a transition to a new and higher order in which Mankind as a whole joins in a universal civilization.”

THE DISNEY CONTROVERSY

In his campaign against woke progressivism in Florida, Governor DeSantis is perhaps best known for his conflict with the Walt Disney Corporation. The drama of a Republican governor in a serious conflict with a major corporation in his state over core principles highlights the difference between second- and third-wave conservatives.

In 1967, at the request of Walt Disney himself, the Florida legislature passed a law that gave the Disney Corporation its own autonomous local government, with an independent tax district and its own board of supervisors. It was exempt from many state and local environmental rules, building codes, and development restrictions. According to *The*

Wall Street Journal, “Disney sav[ed] tens of millions of dollars a year by avoiding paying certain county and state taxes and fees.”

When these benefits were granted, the Disney Corporation was a stalwart promoter of popular middle class American patriotism. But by the 2020s it had become an active supporter of the woke revolution. Under pressure from its employees, Disney denounced and lobbied against DeSantis’ Parental Rights in Education Act that prohibited instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity to children from kindergarten to third grade. In response, DeSantis and the state legislature established a state oversight board that ended Disney’s control over the district. Disney sued the state but ultimately lost.

Second-wave conservatives like Nikki Haley and Mike Pence criticized DeSantis on ideological grounds. Haley invited Disney to relocate to South Carolina, declaring, “We don’t need government fighting against our private industries.” DeSantis replied that Haley represented the “corporate element” in the GOP. “We need to stand up for the people,” he said. “The days of Republicans just deferring to large corporations . . . need to be over.”

For his part, Pence charged that DeSantis “turned his back on the principles that make our country great,” presumably referring to the principles of the American Founding. We cannot, of course, know with certainty what the Founders would have done. But we can speculate with the help of Hillsdale Politics Professor Thomas West. In his book *The Political Theory of the American Founding*, West examined state constitutions and laws of the period. He discovered that the Founders were vigorous in their promotion of a natural rights (rather than a libertarian) view of the common good. In practice, that meant enacting laws that sustained the moral order rather than assuming a strictly “hands off” approach to the private sector.

Let us speculate that in 18th century Massachusetts or Virginia there was a powerful corporation that controlled its own local government, had its own board of supervisors, made its own rules and regulations, and had a more favorable tax situation than other corporations. In addition, this corporation exercised undue influence in the politics and culture of the state and recently promoted manners and mores that undermined the principles and beliefs of the majority of citizens. Unlike the Haley-Pence view that corporations are somehow sacrosanct, it would not surprise us if an 18th century Massachusetts or Virginia state government would have responded as DeSantis did, acting in the name of republican government and the common good, by ending the corporation’s special fiefdom.

The Disney controversy helps to clarify a core difference between second- and third-wave conservatism. Second wavers argue that civil society and culture generally must be neutral zones free of any governmental or overt political influence. Third wavers see culture as crucial, because they believe it is critical to the struggle for ideological hegemony.

I will conclude with a recommendation on terminology that could become the basis for a new conservative fusionism. The conflict today is not simply a normal policy argument between conservatives and progressives. It is over the future of the historic American nation, both its creed and its culture. Therefore, those who affirm the American nation—whether they are NatCons, FreeCons, or patriotic liberals—should be called Americanists. Those who find our inheritance deeply problematic and seek a revolutionary transformation of the American regime should, logically, be called Transformationists. Today’s polarization should be viewed as an existential struggle between Americanists and Transformationists. ■