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Philosophical Conservatism:
Reflections on the Declaration at 250

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In the final days of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, responding to a question about its outcome, Benjamin Franklin famously is said to have remarked, "a republic, if you can keep it." So too now, as we reach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, it is worth asking: What have we conserved? What exactly has been kept during this quarter millennium? The question is especially poignant for American conservatives, who have generally struggled to understand themselves philosophically. Is conservatism a doctrine about the conservation of timeless principles? Or is conservatism the disposition to conserve a distinct inheritance? The Declaration is both: it is a bold philosophical statement of timeless principles that have endured as a uniquely American inheritance.

Those principles, however, have recently come under attack from "postliberal" conservative thinkers like Patrick Deneen, who see the principles of the Declaration as the foundational premises of a liberal ideology that has failed to the extent that it has succeeded.[1] In recent work, Deneen proposes a "regime change" to right the American ship of state, reorienting it toward a pre-modern "common-good conservatism."[2] The philosophical principles of the Declaration can be gleaned from the famous opening sentences that follow its preamble:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain

[1] Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018).
[2] Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (Sentinel, 2023).

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> unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.[3]

Although he does not discuss the Declaration in detail, Deneen interprets its core claims as the foundation of a broader liberal view grounded in Lockean individualism. This view, Deneen argues, rests on a false anthropology that ignores the fundamentally social and relational nature of human beings. Furthermore, it instantiates a conception of liberty as the absence of constraints, while happiness is understood subjectively as the satisfaction of appetites and desires. Finally, while liberalism appears to limit government, in practice, it ends up empowering the state as an agent of individualism, diminishing the ties of place and sapping citizens' capacities for virtue and self-government. Taken together, Deneen's critique underscores his central thesis that liberalism has failed because it has succeeded.

There is much one could dispute about Deneen's characterization of the American Founding. But suppose he is right about the *philosophy* of the American regime, that it is liberal to its core. Should American conservatives thereby reject the Declaration? On the one hand, if American conservatism is fundamentally liberal in character, then conservatives are paradoxically seeking to conserve the very thing that conservatism has historically opposed. If Deneen is correct, this enterprise must be ultimately self-defeating. On the other hand, if American conservatives are *not* trying to conserve the inheritance of the Declaration and the U.S. Constitution, then neither "American" nor "conservative" seems an apt descriptor. For to seek an alternative philosophy to the American Founding is to be a radical, or perhaps only a reactionary.

This dilemma about the Founding reflects a deeper dilemma about the nature of conservatism itself. Is conservatism a *doctrine*, articulable in a set of philosophical principles? Or is it fundamentally a *disposition* to conserve the status quo? In Deneen's critique, the Founding principles are found wanting by comparison to rival

[3] "The Declaration of Independence (1776)," in *The American Republic: Primary Sources*, ed. Bruce Frohnen (Liberty Fund, 2002).

conservative principles: rights and duties bound up with society, ancient liberty as self-limitation, and government oriented toward the common good. Yet according to conservatism, understood as a disposition, the Founding principles—however liberal—are nevertheless an inheritance to conserve. Conservatives thus appear forced to choose between a doctrine-first approach ready to abandon genuine inheritance and a disposition-first approach that risks self-defeat.

The way out of this dilemma, I propose, is a *philosophical* approach to conservatism that works within the inheritance of tradition. As I argue in *Conservatism, Past and Present*, philosophical conservatism seeks to conserve and promote the human good through the inheritance of tradition, subject to moral and epistemic limits.[4] It begins in gratitude, proceeds prudently, and remains bound by humility. It is at once doctrinal, grounded in timeless truths about the human good, and dispositional, oriented toward prudent reform of what has been handed down. American conservatives, therefore, need not choose between the inheritance of the Declaration and conservative principles rightly understood. Rather, even if the principles of the Declaration are *not* conservative, we should preserve the regime it bequeathed while reorienting it toward the human good.

"A state without the means of some change," Edmund Burke writes, "is without the means of its conservation."[5] Undoubtedly, part of the enduring strength of the American regime has been its capacity to spur and absorb change without descending into the cyclical transformations of regimes observed by the ancients. While conservatives will rightly oppose particular changes, the general character of progress in America has taken the form of Burkean reform from within rather than radical rupture. Just as Burke defended the Glorious Revolution of 1688 as a restoration and preservation of England's ancient constitution rather than an innovation, Americans can view themselves as trustees of an inheritance transported to these shores and adapted over time through a rough combination of choice and circumstance. As Roger Scruton reminds us, "We do not merely study

[4] Tristan J. Rogers, *Conservatism, Past and Present: A Philosophical Introduction* (Routledge, 2025).
[5] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790; repr., Liberty Fund, 1999), p. 108.

the past; we *inherit* it, and inheritance brings with it not only the rights of ownership, but the duties of trusteeship. Things fought for and died for should not be idly squandered."[6]

But if Deneen is correct that the liberal premises of the Declaration are self-undermining, can American conservatism amount to anything more than managed decline? Are American conservatives "beautiful losers"?[7] A trustee, in this negative sense, resembles the caretaker of a formerly great, but depleted estate, a kind of museum or repository of relics without any vitality of its own. Arguably, this has been the fate of much of modern Europe against which America's experiment in greatness has often been contrasted. Yet philosophical conservatism cannot rest content with mere preservation. As Burke recognized, there is no conservation without the means of prudent change. Conservatives are builders, not caretakers.

Deneen offers one path forward by invoking the ancient concern with the cycle of regimes. A "regime," in the classical sense, encompasses philosophical principles, governing institutions, and the character of the people, particularly the ruling class. Deneen, as we have seen, rejects the philosophical principles of the liberal regime. But he does not want to *replace* the core institutions of the American regime. Instead, his regime change seeks a change in the people who constitute the regime, that is, the ruling elite (what he calls "aristopopulism"). This requires a cultural renewal that works from within existing American institutions, traditions, and practices. It is a philosophically conservative approach to change.

The prospects for any such renewal remain uncertain. Other paths include regime collapse, replacement by new institutions, or continued liberal drift. In the meantime, populist conservative energies may signal either the start of something new or the last gasp of something old. So, after 250 years, and as the Trump-era winds down, American conservatives face a choice. They can turn away from the Declaration's principles toward a postliberal future. Alternatively, they may rediscover a philosophical conservatism that orients the American

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[6] Roger Scruton, *How to Be a Conservative* (Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 182.
[7] Samuel Francis, *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (University of Missouri, 1994).

inheritance toward the human good through prudent, piecemeal reform and vigorous cultural renewal of family, faith, and community. At the very least, they can approach the task with gratitude for the goodness of what has been conserved—and with humility to improve it without squandering it.