



Epistulae

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Where in the World Are We Going?

By Claes G. Ryn

The legacy of the Cold War and the need to resist communism can only partially explain why so many American so-called conservatives have foreign policy attitudes that are not conservative in any meaningful historical or philosophical sense. They assume that to be conservative is to be always hawkish and prone to intervention. America, many “conservatives” assert, is an “exceptional nation” called to promote “American values” in the world, by military means whenever needed. But such thinking is characteristic not of conservatism but of radical ideological movements for which the French Jacobins are a prototype. According to the militant ideologies, the world should be made to conform to the dictates of Righteous Power. At the 2006 national meeting of the Philadelphia Society, Claes Ryn, a former president of the Society, discussed the anomaly that the term “conservatism” should be attached to a militant ideological spirit or to a primitive nationalistic desire to “kick butt.” Ryn’s 2006 remarks are republished here because they are relevant to sorting out what is what in current public debate and addressing the larger moral and political principles involved. Most generally, the article sketches the contrast between a conservative and an ideological

temperament. Recent opinion surveys indicate that a majority of Americans, now including approximately half of Republican voters, are disinclined to foreign policy interventionism.

Within the so-called American conservative movement intellectual and political confusion are today rampant. Hence the following attempt to sort out what is what.

First of all, a conservative is acutely aware of the flawed nature of man. The capacity of human reason is limited. Our existence is ultimately a great mystery. Conservatives recognize that for these reasons we need the best of the human heritage to help guide us.

The Jacobin suffers from no such humility. Who needs history when there are universal principles that are also self-evident? It’s all so clear. Traditions are but historical accidents, props for old elites that should be replaced by the enlightened and virtuous, people like him. Leo Strauss and his disciples have taught us to disdain “the ancestral” and heed only principles of reason.

Conservatives and Jacobins differ profoundly on what ultimately commands our loyalty. Conservatives stand in awe of a higher power. The ancient Greeks spoke of it as the good, the true and the beautiful. Others refer to it as the will of God. This higher reality is, in any case, not some ideological blueprint. To feel obligated to look for and to do the right thing is not the same as to

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know just what it is in particular circumstances. The complexity and unpredictability of life incline the conservatives to sweeping, categorical assertions.

The Jacobin is a true believer. He has access to universal principles, you see, and they demand "moral clarity." You are either for his principles, which makes you virtuous, or you are against them, which makes you evil. It's all so clear.

To have unquestioning faith in one's own moral superiority is for Christians the cardinal sin. Only a profoundly conceited person could think that for another to oppose him is by definition morally perverse.

But the Jacobin assumes a right to have his way. Behind his moralism hides a desire to dominate. The hesitation or trepidation that may trouble men of conscience do not deter him. The will to power silences all doubt.

For the conservative, the universal imperative that binds human beings does not announce its purpose in simple, declaratory statements. How, then, does one discern its demands? Sometimes only with difficulty.

Only through effort can the good or true or beautiful be discovered, and they must be realized differently in different historical circumstances. The same universal values have diverse manifestations. Some of the concrete instantiations of universality take us by surprise.

Because there is no simple roadmap to good, human beings need freedom and imagination to find it. Universality has nothing to do with uniformity.

For the Jacobins, ahistorical, ideological precepts define universality, and these demand conformity. Comply with them, or else.

The conservative is attracted to both universality and diversity, because the two do, in a sense, need each other. He does not cherish diversity for its own sake, for much of the diversity in the world offends all higher values, but diversity of another type is how universality comes alive in the infinite variety of individuals and circumstances.

Because universality manifests itself variously, the conservative is no narrow-minded nationalist. He is a cosmopolitan. This does not mean that he is a free floater, at home everywhere and nowhere. That describes the Jacobin ideologue.

The conservative is a patriot, deeply rooted in the best of his own heritage. It is because he is so attached to what is most admirable in his own culture that he can understand and appreciate corresponding achievements in other cultures. He is able to find in different places variations on a common human theme. The culturally distinctive contributions of other peoples deepen and enrich his awareness of goodness, truth and beauty.

The Jacobin is not interested in diversity, only in imposing his blueprint. What history happens to have thrown up is just an obstacle to what ought to be. Only what is "simply right" deserves respect. It's all so obvious.

Conservatives see in Jacobin principles a hair-raising obliviousness of life's complexity. To implement such principles may devastate a society. A society may be wholly unsuited or unprepared for changes demanded of it. So what, say America's neo-Jacobins. We need moral clarity. What was there before does not matter. "Democracy" must take its place. One model fits all. To ensure a democratic world, America must establish armed and uncontested world supremacy.

The will to power is here bursting at the seams. What argument could be better for placing enormous power in the hands of the neo-Jacobins than a grandiose scheme for remaking the world? At lunch yesterday we got to hear [from Max Boot] the pure, undiluted neo-Jacobin message.

All Jacobins warn of the Enemy with a capital "E." The Enemy is the embodiment of evil, a force with which no compromise is possible. For the American neo-Jacobins the Enemy is Terrorism with a capital "T." Though the only superpower, America must be in a permanent state of emergency, be armed to the teeth and relentlessly pursue the Enemy.

One current assumption about conservatives is nothing less than weird: that they are hawks, always looking for prey and always bullying. Conservatives are in reality normally doves, looking for ways to settle conflicts peacefully. They view war differently from neo-Jacobin desk-warriors. The suffering and destruction of war are frightful realities involving actual human beings. War is the very last resort.

Conservatives harbor no illusions about the international arena. Bad people behave badly. So conservatives want to be prepared to handle

threats to their own society and civilization or to international peace. But their normal way of interacting with other peoples is to try to defuse conflict and to pursue a common human ground. This is the cosmopolitan way.

In domestic affairs, American conservatives have always feared unlimited power, partly because of their belief in original sin. Fallen creatures must be restrained by law. Government must be limited and decentralized, hence the separation of powers and federalism.

The spirit of constitutionalism forms the core of the American political tradition. Unchecked power is an invitation to tyranny. The framers even wanted the U.S. Congress, which was to be the preeminent body of the national government, to have divided powers. Needless to say they disdained democracy.

Jacobins see no need for restraints on virtuous power. Today American neo-Jacobins are promoting presidential ascendancy and great leeway for the executive. Old restraints and liberties must yield to the needs of the virtuous national security state.

Neo-Jacobins undermine American constitutionalism by radically redefining its meaning. They have little loyalty towards the culturally distinctive, historically evolved America. This country, neo-Jacobins assert, represents a sharp break with the past. They love to speak of the "Founding," because that term suggests that America does not have historical origins but emerged afresh from enlightened minds. Harry Jaffa and others insist that to celebrate America is to celebrate radical innovation and revolution.

Conservatives cherish local autonomy and strong communities. As far as possible people should be able to shape their own lives, partly because the good life has to be lived differently in different circumstances. Jacobins resist anything that might interfere with ideological homogeneity. Individual and local autonomy could, they think, so easily get out of hand.

It should be obvious that, due in large part to barely masked neo-Jacobinism, American conservatism has in the last few decades been turned virtually inside out. In 1952 many conservatives regarded Dwight D. Eisenhower as too "liberal" because he was not willing to dismantle the New Deal. He would only prune it. Today, in all but rhetoric, people calling themselves conservatives accept a vastly larger and more intrusive central government. Under the current allegedly conservative president [George W. Bush] alone the federal government has expanded [as of 2006] by 25%. Yet representatives of the so-called conservative movement proceed as if nothing had happened and absurdly celebrate "triumphs of conservatism."

Only a major intellectual or moral flaw in American conservatism could have made so many susceptible to the neo-Jacobin bug. Many who caught it were myopically preoccupied with practical politics and Republican partisanship. They lacked historical perspective and philosophical discernment. Others dimly recognized what was happening but went along to reap financial rewards and advance careers. They concealed almost from themselves that they had become hired guns advocating the positions expected of them. Both groups made alliances that will prove compromising. Historians will wonder how so many could have been so easily swayed and manipulated.

Today the utopianism, recklessness, cynicism and sheer incompetence of the neo-Jacobins are becoming obvious. Many of their fellow-travelers are trying to save what remains of their reputations by jumping ship. Intellectually challenged supernationalists just raise their voices and call critics unpatriotic. As for the neo-Jacobins themselves, they are blameless. It is those who implemented their policies who should be blamed. They didn't do it right.

The neo-Jacobin virus should have been flushed out long ago.