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Conservatism Needed a Trump Reset

Many institutions have been too corrupted by the left to be worth preserving in their current form.

By Karl Zinsmeister

Like many conservatives, I have spent my life as an advocate of unforced societal evolution rather than radical change. Yet in recent years I've found myself in unexpected territory. Washington has become a depressing mix of failure and left-wing illiberalism. Governments have imposed new cultural dictates that encroach on freedoms of conscience, speech and action.

These trends shriveled the conservative instinct to guard and temper. There is no appeal in conserving dysfunctional institutions. Suddenly, knocking down defective entities and building anew tempts even the most cautious patriot. The result was the current icon-breaking by the Trump administration.

I share Thomas Jefferson's view that federal rule should be "mild"—modest in scope, light in its press on citizens, never high-handed or imperious. "That government is best which governs least," is a line often attributed to him. The less Washington roils our daily life, the better.

What happens, though, when daily life has already been warped? Over the past decade, our communities were wrenched by government and cultural manias more controlling, crusading and coercive than anything ever seen in the U.S. The Great Awakening. The Covid lies and lockdowns. The hypocritical exemptions to the pandemic mandates granted for the Black Lives Matter riots. Disturbing new racial and sexual ideologies. Vast expansions of federal spending and power. Political weaponization of the justice system.

These spasms pushed public opinion into new places. Five years ago there was no broad public support for shutting down the Education Department. Then the Biden administration used the department to push inflammatory nostrums of identity politics into children's classrooms and unload billions of student loans from recipients to taxpayers. The status quo got ugly, the stakes soared and impossible reforms suddenly became inevitable.

For decades, conservatives acted almost solely as defenders and refiners of society, while progressives were active in attacking norms and taking over organizations. Conservatives came to feel like patsies. They merely kept faulty procedures and rotten agencies in place. They were managing decline.

The left, meanwhile, has been aggressively capturing institutions by patiently feeding activists into the operating ranks of an organization, gradually taking it over from within, then turning it into whatever they wanted. Over the past generation, progressives captured universities, labor unions, the media and more in this fashion.

An even more confrontational approach has been to delegitimize and destroy a disfavored institution. The traditional family, confidence in the police, religion in the public square, classical education—all have faded in the face of withering liberal attacks.

Then Donald Trump roared into the picture. He flashed into action on the capture and tear-down side of social change, where previously only politicians of the left had operated. The public so far has been surprisingly tolerant of his aggressive interventions. There are times when some messy political demolition and noisy rebuilding are necessary.

A few years ago, temperamentally conservative Americans wouldn't have countenanced the raucous methods of Mr. Trump. He has many of the qualities our mothers warned us against—self-absorption, vulgarity, braggadocio, lack of humility. Yet in our current moment, he seems the only political figure with the fearlessness and vigor needed to clear blockages, cut out tumors and reset our national health.

Americans, however, have no lasting appetite for upheaval. Once we are beyond today's emergency, our national healers will need to shift to more restrained, disciplined and respectful modes of treatment. Our revived nation will require builders of consensus—leaders who share Jefferson's preference for a "mild" and less intrusive state.

Ordinary citizens will soon want Washington to become a quieter and more boring place. That way they can stop focusing on events in our nation's capital and pour energy into their traditional priorities of enterprise, family and community building.

If there isn't eventually a transition of this sort, the Trump era could end in flaming hubris and overreach. From Odysseus to Napoleon, that's the way bold chargers always fall down—overconfidence and pride causing fatal mistakes.

That outcome is entirely avoidable. But it will require a shifting of gears at some point by Mr. Trump. And by all of those who want to see his reforms extended into the future.

Mr. Zinsmeister served as the White House's chief domestic policy adviser, 2006-09. He is author of Backbone: Why American Populism Should Be Welcomed, Not Feared and the new memoir My West Wing, from which this article is adapted.