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The work of generations

by [Andrew C. McCarthy](#)

On *Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto*, by Mark R. Levin.

It is a rarity that an important book arrives at its perfect moment. Such is the case with *Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto*.^[1] We are in the high tide of America's Leftist ascendancy: the Obama evisceration of individual freedom and installation of authoritarian collectivism—at warp speed, driven by an ambition that would have made Woodrow Wilson and FDR blush. Against this tidal wave, Mark Levin offers not so much a defense as a plan of attack, a clarion call to roll back the seas of Change.

His answer is a restoration of civil society: the Burkean paradigm of ordered liberty in which the citizen and his society thrive, in all their ineradicable imperfection. Individual freedom is tempered by a moral order that is the heritage of each new generation, and its bequest to the next, in the “chain and continuity of the commonwealth.” In the three-quarters of a century between the New Deal and the new New Deal, civil society has gradually evaporated while the means of its preservation have become ever more remote and elusive. Like Dorothy, though, we've always had it in our power to return home. In our case, the ruby red slippers are the principles of the Founding—the Declaration of Independence and a Constitution that elevates liberty by sharply limiting government and, further, divides powers among competing departments, ingeniously suppressing any tyrannical tendencies.

The plan, however, is not self-actuating. To be the land of the free, Levin insists that we must also be the home of the brave. Invoking Ronald Reagan, he admonishes: “Freedom is never more than one generation from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same.” That is so, as Levin sharply demonstrates throughout this fast-paced book, because the values and core of “the Conservative” are forever under assault by “the Statist.”

There is no gainsaying Levin's fighting spirit: a Reagan administration official who served as chief-of-staff to Attorney General Edwin Meese III, he is an accomplished litigator. In recent years, he has been among the nation's most successful talk-radio hosts, notable for the verve he brings to a nightly dilation of conservatism and his skill—richly on display in *Liberty and Tyranny*—rendering legal and historical complexity accessibly, but not condescendingly, to the layman. Like Russell Kirk, Levin is a conservative because he is a liberal, in the classical, freedom-loving sense. Hence the choice of “the Statist” to describe his nemesis: he refuses to cede the term “liberal” or to deem “progressive” that which regresses civil society.

To trace the dynamic struggle between liberty and tyranny, Levin must both locate conservatism and frame the attributes of statism. The latter is easier to do, and not merely because statism is today engulfing us. It owes to the fact that the statist *has* an agenda.

He seeks the agglomeration of power in government for the purpose of wielding it to impose his preferences, though the goal is pursued under the seemingly noble auspices of enforcing “equality”—the statist’s primary organizing principle. Self-determining individuals are the impediment to this vision, so the statist must eviscerate the bedrock of civil society that enables them to thrive. He accomplishes this by relentlessly attacking bourgeois values; abrading American exceptionalism with multi-culti relativism; and inculcating a resentment-driven class consciousness that sets tribe against tribe along racial, ethnic, and economic lines—exploiting the divisions beneath the banner of “economic justice,” through such toxins as the “progressive income tax.” In every sense, the statist’s project is a conscious, Fabian one, with coconspirators and useful idiots throughout the international community (with its global governance aspirations), the academy, Hollywood, and the media.

By contrast, the conservative’s objective is simply life: faith, family, community, and country. His imperative is to preserve. The conservative does not have a project; for him, the personal is not the political—which is why the statist finds him an easy foil. The conservative resists change, but is open to reform, for the latter addresses meritorious grievances by improving civil society’s time-tested institutions without radically altering their character. Contrary to conventional (i.e. statist) lore, the conservative cannot be dogmatically wedded to the status quo; as Levin points out, the status quo “may well be a condition created by the statist and destructive of the civil society—such as 1960s cultural degradations.” The conservative accepts that inequality is the natural condition of mankind because each individual is uniquely endowed by our Creator. For the conservative, equality means enjoying the same opportunity as the next person to live free and flourish, coupled with impartial treatment before a just law. The conservative is alert to injustice but does not see it in each and every iniquity.

Tyranny is the suppression of liberty. In the United States, it is a soft but increasingly suffocating and arbitrary state power. The Obama moment is not “the iron fist of absolute despotism”—the only dire condition, the Founders explained, which could justify the last resort of revolution. But it is an alarming nadir for liberty. How did we get here, and how do we get back?

Levin answers these questions in a well-conceived, exquisitely executed format. He first addresses the ways in which we have veered far from our founding principles: the centrality of faith, the primacy of the Constitution, federalism, free-market capitalism, the welfare state, the role of science, legal immigration, and national defense. Having diagnosed the pathology and its major symptoms, Levin finally offers his prescription, the “Conservative Manifesto”—a series of practical albeit hugely hard-to-implement remedies.

The author is especially trenchant on the animating role of faith in the American founding, and, consequently, its place atop the statist hit-list. The Framers understood “that liberty and religious liberty are inseparable.” But Christianity, unapologetically, was and is America’s dominant religion and it is undeniable that Judeo-Christian values heavily influenced our founding law. The point of religious liberty was to forfend the establishment of a theocracy of the type Tocqueville discerned in the Islamic world, where the Qur’an imposed not merely religious tenets but control over every aspect of life. The Supreme Court’s fabrication of a “wall of separation” in its 1947 *Everson* decision (authored by one-time Klansman Hugo Black, the first justice appointed by FDR), installing official hostility to religion, was “a wretched betrayal of America’s founding.” As a result, “American courts sit today as supreme secular councils, which, like Islam’s supreme religious councils, dictate all manner of approved behavior respecting religion.”

A strong proponent of constitutional originalism, Levin particularly laments FDR’s “Second Bill of Rights,” the initiative Obama has thrown into high gear. These “positive rights”—economic and social welfare benefits, not rights but redistributions—are “tyranny’s disguise”: the statist’s “false

promises of utopianism ... to justify all trespasses on the individual's private property." Like freedom of conscience, property is part of liberty's irreducible core, and is thus exalted in our founding law. So, like religion, it is forever in the statist's cross-hairs as he seeks to micromanage every vestige of autonomy from employment to healthcare to the type of cars we drive.

To carry out such intrusions requires two essential ingredients. The first is a welfare state, the ever more staggering dimensions of which play to the strength of the technocrat. With Ponzi math and junk science swaddled in the rhetoric of good intentions, the expert cons bewildered citizens about what government can do (the public hears "world peace" and "ending poverty" but never seems to think "post office"), while the statist converts them into irrational dependents—such that demands resulting in tens of trillions in unfunded liabilities for schemes like Social Security and Medicare would inevitably demolish the economy even if there were no credit default swaps.

The second is the statist's infiltration of government's faceless bureaucratic sprawl. Levin recounts story upon jaw-dropping story of radicals at the helm: the Social Security Administration's adoption of Henry Rogers Seager's socialist rant against the "creed of individualism," calling for "an aggressive program of governmental control and regulation" to enforce "the common welfare"; the National Park Service ecologist David M. Graber's declaration that the human beings are a "plague upon the earth" engaged in an "orgy of fossil-energy consumption" which caused him to conclude that "until such time as Homo sapiens should decide to rejoin nature, some of us can only hope for the right virus to come along"; and so on. The utopia they promise is a conveyor belt of misery, rolling out millions of deaths when enviro-statists banned the use of DDT, and thousands more (to say nothing of an industry destroyed), when mandated fuel-economy standards made American cars less safe.

Levin is not a dewy-eyed dreamer. His blueprint of solutions is ambitious not because it is instantly achievable but because our condition is dire. Among other things, he recommends ending the progressive income tax; a legislative veto over Supreme Court decisions; a yearly sunset of all federal agencies subject to congressional reauthorization; breaking government's ruinous education monopoly; repealing chain immigration and multiculturalism in public institutions; slowly reforming entitlement programs by reversing the education system's proselytism on their behalf; rejecting treaties and other international arrangements that encroach on U.S. sovereignty; a revitalization of the Constitution's original limits of government power; and a restoration of faith's rightful place as the source of rights the citizen cannot be denied. Like conservatism itself, it is the work of generations. And taking its lead from Mark Levin, it is not for the faint of heart.

Notes

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1. *Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto*, by Mark R. Levin; Threshold Editions, 256 pages, \$25. [Go back to the text.](#)

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