



THE CONSERVATIVE MANDATE

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the primary meaning of *mandate*, from the Latin *mandatum*, is a “command, order, injunction.” This sense is now, however, “poetical or rhetorical.” Its next sense is a “judicial or legal command from a superior to an inferior,” and there are a number of variations on this sense of the term, all involving a powerful agency stipulating the action or conduct of a subordinate entity. But there is also what the *OED* calls a “political” significance of the term: the “instruction or commission as to policy given by the electors to Parliament or one of its members.” An analogous sense is very familiar in current political discourse when we wonder whether a newly elected government official has won his office with a sufficient margin of voters (or voter enthusiasm) to implement his program. Hence a mandate can be either an imposition of power upon an individual or a group or an investiture of power in the person or group.

It is worth dwelling upon this somewhat slippery term because it figures prominently in the argument of the lead essay in this issue of *Modern Age*. Kenneth L. Grasso’s “American *Kulturkampf*” takes up the implications of the mandate for employers of moderately sized businesses and nonprofit agencies, including those associated with churches,

to provide health insurance with forms of coverage that many find objectionable, even immoral. Professor Grasso thus deals with “mandate” both as an imposition of a particular action by the government on those subject to its authority and also as a perceived electoral “mandate” by government officials. The essay’s principal focus is religious freedom, but the argument has significance for the general concept of self-government, which is always bedeviled by the conundrum of balancing majority rule with the defense of minority rights and freedoms: How much of a *mandate* is required in order to implement a *mandate*?

This raises the issue of what we may call—somewhat facetiously, perhaps—the *conservative mandate*, especially insofar as it applies to the mission of *Modern Age*. The name “conservative” is itself a marker of the conservative mandate to cherish and maintain our social and cultural institutions. American conservatives are particularly “mandated” to guard zealously our constitutional form of government with its goal of liberty under law. Yet conservatives are not reactionaries: as Edmund Burke well knew, a society, like a living organism, cannot continue unless it adapts to changing conditions. Our institutions must be responsive as well as firm.

Conservatives have, then, a far more complex task than liberal progressives, for whom all *change* is, well, *progress* and an occasion for *hope*. Conservatives, to the contrary, must survey judiciously the changing social and political landscape in order to ascertain what modifications in our practices are necessary to preserve a decent way of life that promotes the flourishing of men and women.

The role of *Modern Age*—its mandate, so to speak—is to provide a forum for the weighing of such issues by prudent, learned writers. Sometimes this will involve directly confronting an issue of current moment, as in Professor Grasso’s treatment of the HHS mandate; sometimes it will involve a discussion of a historical figure, as in Ann Hartle’s analysis of Montaigne’s conservatism. Professor Grasso, however, grounds the political theory of his argument in the history of American constitutional practice. Professor Hartle, in raising the contrast between the social and the political in Montaigne’s thought, reminds us of a source of contemporary intellectual conflict: a critical difference between conservatives and progressives is that for the latter, social institutions are all subsumed by politics, while conservatives intend to protect local, communal ways of doing things from government intrusion.

“American *Kulturkampf*,” with its provocative title and severe engagement with an issue of immediate concern, is likely to be acutely controversial; but it will be a rare essay or review in *Modern Age* that does not arouse at least a demurrer among some readers. This is a goal at which we should be aiming, since we cannot determine how to proceed as conservatives in an increasingly dubious political environment without a realistic assessment of the situation and a sober weighing of the alternatives. The essays we publish are, like Montaigne’s, *essays*—trials, efforts to get to the bottom of a problem. They are

not intended to be the final word, and nothing would please the editors of *Modern Age* more than to receive well-reasoned, polite rejoinders to anything we have published previously. There is more than one perspective consistent with conservative thought.

In fact, an author’s taking up a particular figure from the past does not necessarily imply complete agreement or approbation. Mark Malvasi’s account of Donald Davidson’s *Attack on Leviathan*, another article that may well prove controversial, is a commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of that work’s publication. Nevertheless, Professor Malvasi does not shy away from noting the problematic aspects of both the book and its author. Debate can occur not only between essays but within a single article, because—again in contrast to liberal progressivism—conservatism is not a simple political platform or ideological program but rather an acknowledgment of the flaws in every person and the limitations of every idea.

Perhaps the rationale of these remarks can best be indicated by calling attention to another commemorative piece in this issue: Daniel J. Heisey’s poem “T. S. Eliot” celebrates (evocatively rather than provocatively) the 125th anniversary of the poet’s birth. Eliot scandalized many by his radical literary innovation; he scandalized more by his staunch conservative defense of the traditions of Western civilization. He seems a paradigmatic figure for *Modern Age*.

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We close on a somber note by marking the passing away of George Carey, a longtime member of the *Modern Age* editorial board and a beloved mentor and friend to many young conservatives. We expect to publish his last essay, written in collaboration with Gregory Weiner, in a forthcoming issue.

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