WE CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

Ben Domenech

The Fractured Republic:
Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism
By Yuval Levin
(New York: Basic Books, 2016)

The 2016 election season is certain to launch a plethora of books explaining how Donald J. Trump won the Republican Party's nomination for the presidency. They will be written by analysts and academics, sorting through data and trends that explain how a black swan candidacy could prove so successful. They will blame conservative talk radio, online extremism, Fox News, the political establishment, the donor class, the debates, reality television, and the rise of the Kardashians among other causes. They may even venture, as some early commentaries already have, to blame those Americans who actually voted for Mr. Trump for everything that's gone wrong—adopting Bertolt Brecht's suggestion that it would be easier to dissolve the people and elect another.

Unfortunately for all the authors rushing to finish those books by Inauguration Day, Yuval Levin has beaten them to the punch. *The Fractured Republic* was composed prior to the success of Trumpism, in some ways making it an even more insightful commentary on why this political earthquake transpired. Levin's book may not be the only work you need to read to understand the origins of Trump's success, but I believe it will prove the most essential. It describes, with compassion and empathy, the failings of a nation that has combined the twin dangers of extreme individualism and centralized governance while ignoring the frustrations of the working class. Levin tells where we have been as a nation, where we are, and why so many people are eager to shrug off the benefits of globalization in a Quixotic effort to get back to where we were.

Levin is a rare author—an intellectual who converses with intellectuals without ever losing his natural gift for an uncommon clarity of language. In his telling, American politics and culture are crippled by an inability to adapt to the demands of the age, this owing to a false perception of the nature of the country, driven in large part by the lasting power of Baby Boomer nostalgia. The siren song of this longing calls us back to a time when jobs were stable, unions were strong, shared traditions provided a sense of an underlying foundation,

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and our polity and culture were dominated by a handful of large, trusted institutions. It is the lure of a past rendered in a rosy glow, as in the poet A. E. Stallings's "Lovejoy Street"—"The house where we were happy / Perhaps it's standing still / On the wrong side of the railroad tracks / Half-way down the hill."

The Fractured Republic charts this nostalgia through demography, data, and cultural outlooks, outlining in a decade-by-decade fashion the experiences of a mainline Baby Boomer who views the world through a skewed lens. The reality is that the period of 1950–70 was very much at odds with the rest of the American experience. Large institutions of government were trusted to a much greater degree than they had been in the past, and the military eradication of many of America's economic competitors allowed for the rise of corporate behemoths unlike any seen before. It is no accident that when candidate Trump is asked to identify the last time America was great, he cites the 1950s and '60s, a period when a unified vision of the American dream held sway.

In Levin's framing, we have a nostalgia for a time when the world made sense. A time when America's common culture was overwhelmingly driven by underlying white identity politics, the vast majority of the country was Christian (at least in name), and employment was more stable and predictable than it is today in an economy exposed to global competition. But this wistfulness is blinding us to the truths of our current economic and social challenges. And it is not just the Boomers who are animated by this "counterproductive nostalgia"—many other institutions, including major media entities, social movements, and Congress itself, are captured by this longing for an earlier time.

Whether rooted in a need for a system of governance that still runs on earmarks and smoke-filled rooms or a desire for a shared culture where everyone says "Merry Christmas," Levin identifies a crippling sentimentality that is hardly monopartisan. His opening chapter cites the same from Paul Krugman's *The Conscience of a Liberal* (2007), which opens with "a characteristic example of the sort of homesickness, or longing for a time that got it right." The economist is referring to his childhood in the 1950s, "a paradise lost." It is the cultural dominance of this vision—not as a period that breaks with the rest of the nation's history, but an apotheosis of our greatness—that has skewed politics to the point that many citizens long for a time when schools were segregated, taxes were high, and you had to save for a year to buy a refrigerator.

In Levin's telling, America began to grapple with the fact that you can't go home again—that the global economy was here to stay, for good or for ill—beginning in the 1970s, only to cast the challenge aside. He writes: "The lesson many Americans implicitly learned in the 1970s was that the emergence of a new national ethic of liberation and fracture could not be reversed, and so had to be channeled to the good." But after twenty years of wrestling with these challenges under first Republican and then Democratic administrations, decades in which every household of every race experienced significant income gains, the nation turned toward the softer appeal of nostalgia.

Levin's explanation is that Americans have suffered a disconnect from the traditional core institutions that make life in America better—family, faith, work, and neighborhood. At the same time, the failure of our policies to mitigate or moderate the dramatic changes in our economy and culture have left Americans feeling abandoned by their government. Levin identifies many examples of this, particularly when it comes to the experience of workers who no longer benefit from the security of employment in the postwar economy. Our entire system of welfare, health care, and entitlements is built for a bygone era that was the exception to the American economic experience.

This loss of faith in mediating entities—churches, schools, unions, fraternal organizations—whether founded in the community or buttressed by government, to meet the needs of the people has generally accelerated levels of distrust for large bureaucratic institutions as well. Today the American people view many of them as irresponsible or corrupt, stagnant dinosaurs incapable of responding to the speed of an advancing and evolving society. Coupled with a decline in shared values and cultural experiences—moving from an era when two-thirds of television sets were tuned to *I Love Lucy* to one where highly developed subcultures thrive without any overlap—we see the disintegration of our common vision. We no longer share what it means to be American, instead viewing the pursuit of happiness as a purely individual act of self-actualization.

One can measure this collapse in the decade and a half during which the American people witnessed the 9/11 attacks, a failed war in Iraq, a bungled response to the Katrina hurricane, a financial catastrophe, a Wall Street bailout, scandals in the Catholic Church, a failed stimulus, the embarrassing launch of Obamacare, a series of incomprehensible Supreme Court decisions, and the rise of the Islamic State—all things that serve to raise distrust for our elites and the institutions they run as having even a basic capability to lead us through a time of turmoil.

Given the decline of trust in centralized institutions, one would not expect that Americans would favor investing more power in these entities. But that perspective represents a failure to understand what Alexis de Tocqueville and Robert Nisbet understood—that the rise of a hyper-individualism and excessive centralization of government go hand in hand. As individuals become detached from the sources of social order and meaning for their lives, they also become more desperate for strong centralized leadership to make up for perceived failures. Levin writes: “As a centralizing government draws power out of the mediating institutions of society, it leaves individuals more isolated; and as individualism further erodes the bonds that hold civil society together, people conclude that only a central authority can pick up the slack.”

There is another nation where the absence of such mediating institutions can be seen—Mexico, as described in Jorge Castañeda’s 2011 book, *Mañana Forever?*:

> In the United States, there are approximately 2 million civil society organizations, or one for every 150 inhabitants; in Chile there are 35,000, or one for every 428 Chileans; in Mexico there are only 8,500, or one for every 12,000, according to Mexican public intellectual Federico Reyes Heroles. Eighty-five percent of all Americans belong to five or more organizations; in Mexico 85% belong to no organization and, according to Reyes Heroles, the largest type, by far, is religious. In the United States, one out of every ten jobs is located in the so-called third sector (or civil society); in Mexico the equivalent figure is one out of every 210 jobs. In polls taken in 2001, 2003, and 2005 on political culture in Mexico, a constant 82% of those surveyed stated they had never worked formally or informally with others to address their community’s problems.

The end result is a nation where the hyper-individualized mob appeals to a strong centralized government for help, time and again. The "expressive individualism" that Levin identifies as being the "ethic of our age" lacks the understanding of self and what individuals require beyond mere self-liberation or the generous funding for personal priorities. Levin is concerned with the costs of this liberation, as he views this as a dangerous trend that must be channeled back toward a more beneficent understanding of what freedom, as traditionally conceived, requires.

The danger is that it is possible that the American people have traveled too far down this road and are set to ping back and forth between servitude and license. As de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America* (vol. 1, part 1, chap. 5):

> There are some nations in Europe whose inhabitants think of themselves in a sense as colonists, indifferent to the fate of the place they live in. The greatest changes occur in their country without their cooperation. They are not even aware of precisely what has taken place. They suspect it; they have heard of the event by chance. More than that, they are unconcerned with the fortunes of their village, the safety of their streets, the fate of their church and its vestry. They think that such things have nothing to do with them, that they belong to a powerful stranger called "the government."
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> They enjoy these goods as tenants, without a sense of ownership, and never give a thought to how they might be improved. They are so divorced from their own interests that even when their own security and that of their children is finally compromised, they do not seek to avert the danger themselves but cross their arms and wait for the nation as a whole to come to their aid. . . .
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> When a nation has reached this point, it must either change its laws and mores or perish, for the well of public virtue has run dry: in such a place one no longer finds citizens but only subjects.

In the concluding chapter of his book, Levin makes the case for the citizen. He argues that we have underappreciated the importance of Americans to the American project:

> Our highly individualist, liberationist idea of liberty is possible only because we presuppose the existence of a human being and citizen capable of handling a remarkably high degree of freedom and responsibility. We do not often enough reflect on how extraordinary it is that our society contains such people.

It is this requirement that is at the center of Levin's aim—to move beyond the sentimental politics of Baby Boomers seeking to restore an economic and cultural subsistence that no longer exists, and instead to build up the associations that sustain our system of self-government. It asks much of the people, but less of their government. The devolution of power to localities that Levin favors requires that citizens step up to the task of leading their communities and not take the easy course of ceding responsibility to Washington.

Levin's book is far more analytical than prescriptive, and this may leave readers feeling dissatisfied if they seek a legislative answer to our problems. He advocates for his favored agenda, but beyond that calls on conservatives to live out their principles in their own lives, forming families and communities, thus "offering living models of their alternative to the moral culture of our hyper-individualist age." Leading by example is the long game for pushback against hyper-individualism, but it will require conservatives to have faith that their model is more tempting than the alternative progressive vision, where the all-encompassing state absolves us of our responsibilities.

It is healthy to be skeptical about such an approach given how easy it is to pretend man is an island in an age when government promises to take care of nearly every aspect of our lives, and when the definition of personal freedom is free birth control and wireless Internet to ensure your ability to "Netflix and chill." For Levin's approach to succeed, the people will need to want more than that for themselves, and less than that from government. It is not clear they desire this anymore.

The focus of our politics in 2016 has been warped by the yearnings of the Baby Boomers, but it does not need to stay that way. And it will be our people who determine this, not our politics. In Donald Trump, we have an avatar of nostalgic American greatness, without an understanding of what makes America truly great. The false promise of a candidate who inhabits the living rooms of working-class whites and sells them the idea of a golden future is not the prophet of a return to American greatness. It is the American people in all their forms—varied, courageous, humble, ambitious, free—who together will determine whether we move on from the wistful obsession of "all that once was good, and that could be again" to be one nation, after all. †

A RETURN TO HUMAN NATURE

Aaron Urbanczyk

Life Under Compulsion:
Ten Ways to Destroy the Humanity of Your Child
By Anthony Esolen
(Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2015)

Professor Anthony Esolen is an accomplished literary scholar who in recent years has become a prolific cultural critic. His most recent book serves as a companion to an earlier work, *Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child* (2010). *Life Under Compulsion: Ten Ways to Destroy the Humanity of Your Child* is a more ambitious book, vaster in scope. While his earlier "Ten Ways" capably explore the power of imagination (and how it can be corrupted), this latest book explores human nature itself.

A useful way to introduce Esolen's project might be to quote Flannery O'Connor: "The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural. . . . To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and

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