

## **Where Conservatives and Liberals Can Agree**

*di William A. Galston*

In the Journal on Monday, former Vice President Mike Pence [clarified](#) the difference between conservatism and populism. Conservatism in America is defined by its commitment to the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Populists “follow urges, not principles,” and pursue an agenda “stitched together by opinion polls, personal grievances and performative outrage.”

At its best, conservatism doesn't try to freeze the status quo or move us back to some imagined golden age. Rather, it identifies the aspects of a tradition that are enduringly good and seeks to conserve them. In the U.S., this means dedication to the principles of the Declaration and the rule of law embodied in the Constitution. In this sense, we should all be conservatives.

Dedication to these documents demands openness to change. The principles provide standards for judging practices and, when necessary, reforming them. Slavery violated the principle that all men are created equal, and excluding African-Americans from the franchise violated the 15th Amendment.

At its best, liberalism in America focuses attention on the gap between principles and practices and mobilizes public support to close these gaps. In this sense, we should all be liberals.

So defined, conservatism and liberalism stand on common ground. This doesn't mean conservatives and liberals will agree in practice. How the Declaration's principles are applied to specific policies is always up for debate, and the language of the Constitution can be interpreted in different ways. But as long as all parties regard our founding documents as the authoritative basis for political argument, our house will remain united.

In our polarized times, it was inevitable that the Declaration would spark controversy. Left-leaning progressives at the [New York Times](#) in 2019 launched the “1619 Project,” which argued that the year enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia, not 1776, represented our nation’s true birth year. In the project’s lead essay, Nikole Hannah-Jones claimed that “one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery,” a contention that the Times was forced to modify in response to protests from leading historians.

More surprising, at least to me, was the debate over the Declaration that erupted on the political right. Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration’s lead author, regarded the English political thinker John Locke as one of the three greatest men who ever lived. In a letter Jefferson wrote a year before his death, he named Locke a major contributor to the “American mind,” to which he gave expression in our founding document.

Beginning roughly a decade ago, Patrick Deneen and Yoram Hazony, two scholars who influenced what became the national-conservative movement, denounced Locke as a source of America’s ills. Locke’s liberalism, they claimed, encouraged the hyperindividualism and hypercritical rationalism that had undermined America’s natural communities, traditions and common good.

These views shaped the outlook of Vice President JD Vance, the Republican leader most attuned to the emerging new right. The first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, defined America as dedicated to the Declaration’s creed that all men are created equal. By contrast, Mr. Vance argued in a speech to the Claremont Institute last July that the creedal definition of what it means to be an American was underinclusive because it would reject many people the Anti-Defamation League “would label as domestic extremists, even though those very Americans had their ancestors fight in the Revolutionary War and the Civil War.” Mr. Vance seems to believe that if your family has been in America long enough, it doesn’t matter whether you think that some people are inherently superior to others.

This argument went too far for some conservatives. Vivek Ramaswamy, now the Republican nominee for Ohio governor, [wrote](#) in December: “No matter your ancestry, if you wait your turn and obtain citizenship, you are every bit as American as a Mayflower descendant, as long as you subscribe to the creed of the American founding and the culture that was born of it.” In a speech delivered in April, Justice Clarence Thomas recalled his days as a schoolboy in segregated Georgia, where he and his classmates recited the Pledge of Allegiance, memorized the Constitution’s Preamble, and yearned for the fulfillment of their promised ideals even as many “of our God-given and constitutional rights were denied us.”

Justice Neil Gorsuch recently referred to the Declaration as “our nation’s report card,” by which we assess how well we’re living up to its principles. He expressed hope that in this anniversary year, Americans will spend time “reflecting on the Declaration and recommitting to its creed.” As we do, I hope we will reject the extremes of both the left and the right. Neither a nation defined by its past sins nor one defined by ancestral lineage can replace an America dedicated to the principles of the Declaration.