



BOOK REVIEW

The Conservatarian Manifesto: Libertarians, Conservatives, and the Fight for the Right's Future

By Charles C.W. Cooke

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| Reviewed by Francisco Gonzalez

In 1955, William F. Buckley, Jr. launched *National Review* magazine. It became a place where conservatives and libertarians of all stripes debated their differences and extolled ideas to forge a strong movement against big government at home and the spread of totalitarianism abroad. As conservative

movement historian George Nash has since demonstrated, the common enemy of communism held together this “fractious coalition” of conservatives and libertarians from World War II through the early 1990s.

Since the 1990s, and particularly since the beginning of the George W. Bush Administration in the early 2000s, many on

the Right have been searching for the “glue” to hold this movement together from the threats of the so-called “Progressive Left,” but also from the frustration with those in power on the Right.

After reading *The Conservatarian Manifesto: Libertarians, Conservatives, and the Fight for the Right’s Future*, I believe Charles C.W. Cooke may have just found the glue to put Buckley’s fusionist project back together. In fact, I believe 30-year old author Cooke (the same age as Buckley when he started *National Review*) may have hit the “reset” button to reframe the way the Right presents its case for fiscal conservatism and adherence to constitutional principles. Mr. Cooke, English by birth, is also a writer for *National Review*. His case for a “conservatarian” philosophy would have been pleasing to Buckley, were he still alive.

Over the past decade, Cooke has found many people on the Right say that when they are around conservatives, they feel more libertarian, but when they are around libertarians, they feel more conservative. Count me in that camp.

I come from mostly a traditional conservative background, but in recent years, I have become increasingly discontented with many so-called free-market conservative politicians. They campaign on free-market principles, but when they get into office, they use the power of government to do things antithetical to the free market and

individual liberty. Even here in Florida, some so-called conservative Republicans in our Legislature have colluded with industry groups to impose regulations that exclude new competitors, in the name of “health and safety.” This is corporate protectionism, and there’s nothing free-market about it.

These kinds of actions often make me want to move in a more libertarian direction. But then, as Cooke notes, “the primary weakness of libertarianism is that it can become unreasonably ideological and unmoored from reality.” Libertarians are “all too ready to pull down institutions that they fail to recognize are vital to the integrity of the society in which they wish to operate.”

I believe this has always been the challenge discouraging someone like me from moving fully into the libertarian camp. If we were starting with a blank slate, libertarianism might likely be the way to go. But seeing that we must live in the real world, diving all the way into that “utopian” philosophy is not realistic. I always felt the best conservatism has a good strong streak of libertarianism running through it. In fact, Ronald Reagan once said that, “The very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism.” And Cooke offers more than that simple statement.

His “conservatarian” philosophy calls us to go back to the first principles of the Constitution and embrace federalism. And this won’t be an overnight project. His challenge to the Right is to play the long

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game.

He notes how unpopular the federal government has become over roughly the past decade. Today, about 33 percent of Americans approve of the federal government; they approve of their state government by an average of 51 percent; and they approve of their local government by an average of about 62 percent. These statistics are roughly the same no matter where one sits on the political spectrum, although the numbers sometimes tend to shift a bit depending on which party controls the White House or Congress. That is remarkable, but it also demonstrates that government is best (and most popular) when it is closest to the people.

Cooke notes that obviously not all functions of the federal government can be done at the state or local level. We would do best to have things such as national defense, immigration, and individual rights dealt with at the federal level, as our founders intended. But on issues such as education, healthcare, marriage, drug policy, state and local taxation, the regulation of intrastate commerce, and many other matters, decisions are best handled at the local and state levels.

With the work we do at The James Madison Institute, we see how much more effective reforms can be at the state and local level. Many of the best reforms experienced in our country over the past decade have come from the states. If we in Florida want an economy that looks more like Texas and less like California, we should have as much decision-making flexibility here to choose that path.

This also allows controversial

policy experiments such as the legalization of marijuana to be done in states such as Colorado and Washington, while allowing other states the opportunity to watch and see if that is the road that they, too, want to travel – or avoid.

As Cooke argues, having 50 different ways to try something is better than having all required to comply with just one way. We also live in a country where we can move about. If policies at the state level affect our individual liberty, our everyday life, or our business, we can choose to move someplace more in line with our values.

The “conservatarian” philosophy is also a way we can live more peacefully as a country. Those on the “Progressive Left” wouldn’t have to freak out if Alabama decides to ban gay marriage, and those on the Right wouldn’t have to freak out if Vermont passes a single-payer health care plan. Each time a law is enacted, it wouldn’t necessarily have to ignite a national debate where warlike passions are inflamed on Twitter, MSNBC, or Fox News. Life is much better when we don’t have to obsess about politics; it’s much better when we can go about our lives peacefully.

Adhering to federalism also gives us a right to be wrong with fewer consequences. Just because someone thinks a policy idea is a good one doesn’t mean it will work. However, failing on a small scale – such as at a local or state government level – is far less disastrous than failing on the scale that affects more than 300 million Americans (see: ObamaCare). It would also allow us to adjust those failings with less disruption to people’s lives.

In *The Conservatarian Manifesto*,

Cooke effectively uses gun laws and drug policy to challenge the many forces on the Left and Right to think differently and to consider changes in the role of government in these areas. He also separates all of the various “social issues” into their own categories, offering a way forward on gay marriage, abortion, religious liberty, drugs, and immigration.

Also, he defines American foreign policy as a “hot mess.” Cooke states that America’s foreign policy is currently “directionless, weak, and irrational.” He takes aim at reckless defense spending, while recognizing America has a proper leadership role to play in the world.

Cooke is basically a libertarian who lives in the real world and has a great respect for traditions and culture. He also has a great knowledge of history. He acknowledges that the nation’s founders wanted us to have a non-interventionist foreign policy, but he also demonstrates that during the time of our nation’s founding and throughout the 19th century, the United States could afford to stay out of world affairs mostly because the British Navy controlled international waters.

After WWII and the decline of the British Empire, American leadership moved into that vacuum and has since attempted to provide peace and security for the world, including during the Cold War. He challenges libertarians to recognize this fact, while also challenging war hawks on the Right not to be hypocritical by allowing

the Pentagon to spend as it pleases in the name of national security – or to commit U.S. troops to every hot spot in the globe.

History and culture are so important to how we speak about politics and entertain policy solutions for our communities, our state, and our nation. Charles C.W. Cooke’s conservatarian outlook takes these aspects into account and crafts a new way forward for the Right – and for the country. It’s just remarkable that it took an Englishman – turned American – to reassert a philosophy of self-governance. The only difference is that this time it’s being done with a little red book that has the word “manifesto” in the title.

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About the Author: Charles C.W. Cooke is a writer at *National Review* and a graduate of the University of Oxford, at which he studied modern history and politics. His work has

focused especially on Anglo-American history, British liberty, free speech, the Second Amendment, and American exceptionalism. He is the co-host of the *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* podcast, and has broadcast for HBO (Real Time with Bill Maher), the BBC, MSNBC, Fox News, The Blaze, CNBC, CTV, ABC, Sun News, and CBS. He has written for *National Interest*, the *Washington Times*, and the *New York Post*. ☹

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