

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Mark R. Levin, *Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto* (New York, Threshold Editions, 2009), ix, 245.**

The founding of the United States had its roots in the ideas and philosophies of great thinkers like Adam Smith, Charles Montesquieu, John Locke, and Edmund Burke. The Declaration of Independence by the founding fathers was greatly influenced by the desire to enthrone the principles and laws of nature that guarantee the preservation and protection of the inalienable rights of all men, including rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That charter of American independence has been, to some extent, guiding the political development of the United States of America since its birth. Indeed, the document has continued to be the yardstick for assessing successive American governments to ascertain their level of compliance with or deviation from it.

The book under review is a treatise on the declining influence of conservatism in American politics, contrary to the vision of the founding fathers. The author believes that the values encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence were conservative in import and essence. According to him, it was this deviation from the envisaged path of conservatism, charted by the founders, that has been responsible for the ascendance of *statism* or “soft tyranny” in the United States of America – a development resulting in diminishing liberty of Americans over the years. Thus, the book is a call for the restoration of the foundational agenda of implanting conservatism in the body polity of American society.

The book has ten chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter provides a panoramic view of the major arguments of the book, pointing out the different implications of the transition from conservatism to statism for the liberty of Americans. The second chapter elucidates the concepts of statism and conservatism. It describes communism, national socialism, fascism, economic socialism, monarchism, feudalism, and militarism as varying manifestations of statist’ Utopia; while classifying free market economy, self-government, and right to acquire and retain property

as vital elements of conservatism. Chapter three examines the religious inclinations and predisposition of the founding fathers in comparison with the evident secularism that currently pervades American society – a shift that the author blames on the resort of the statist to stigmatize religion. Chapter four points out different and conflicting perceptions of the statist and the conservative about the Constitution. The author is of the opinion that whilst the conservatives affirm the sanctity, inviolability, and immutability of the Constitution, the statist do not believe in the immutability of the Constitution. Chapter five highlights how the statist have, at different times, in American history sought to empower the federal government at the expense of the governments of the federating units – a situation that contrasted sharply with the understanding of the conservatives about American federalism.

Chapter six details the series of efforts by the statist to violate the property rights of individual in utter disregard for the Constitution, and points out that the conservatives uphold the free market dictum as encapsulated in the Constitution. Chapter seven reveals how the statist have over the years intensified the growing dependence of Americans on government through deployment of Social Security, medicare, Medicaid, and other social insurance schemes. Chapter eight exposes statist's utilization of fear-mongering to promote public health and environmental scares as a cunningly devised mechanism for further circumscribing the liberty of American people. Chapter nine takes a swipe at the immigration policy by the statist, which allows illegal immigrants including criminals and terrorists into the United States without the consent of the American people – a policy which is exactly opposite to that of the conservatives. Chapter ten condemns the tardiness often displayed by the statist in prosecuting American security policies and wars – a situation that the conservatives view as an impediment to America's national security interest.

In an epilogue titled "A Conservative Manifesto," which concludes the book, the author details the policies and strategies that would help the conservatives to resist the devouring encroachments by the statist on the liberty of Americans. The policies cover taxation, environment, judges, the administrative state, government

education, immigration, entitlements, foreign policy and security, faith, and the Constitution.

As interesting and convincing as the arguments in the book may appear, they are value laden. The author did not leave anyone in doubt of his predilection for conservatism in American body polity. The passionate concern displayed in all the chapters of the book in exonerating the conservatives from blame for what is considered as denigration of the values and principles of the founders of American society by successive American governments makes our author an ideologue of conservatism. This robs the book of any claim to scientific analysis of the phenomena and issues that elicited our author's concern.

Implied in our author's theorizing on conservatism is his belief in the prospects of self-government in contemporary American society. That itself is a utopian idea that lacks empirical validity in the face of the ever growing complexity of modern human society, in which the level of technological attainment, sophistication, and enlightenment has worsened the severity of competition among different interest groups; thereby necessitating the existence of a central government or supra-authority to mediate among competing interest groups. Self-government of the conservative mould broaches anarchy, and it is unrealistic.

The book can be described as a megaphone for free market and private property rights. The author is derisive of the social security and insurance schemes of the government for certain categories of Americans. He would have preferred an unregulated economy in which the government would give the private sector free hand to determine the nature and character of the country's social system.

Having said this, the book is a well-written publication, which chronicles the contending policy issues in American politics between modern democratic liberalism and conservatism. The book is revolutionary in its advocacy for change from statism to conservatism – a transition it believes requires concerted efforts on the part of the conservatives, whose knowledge of the requisite steps and strategies for advancing the agenda of conservatism in

American society would be enhanced by the Manifesto embedded in the book. Overall, the book is an important addition to the literature on American politics.

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