

Notre Dame Prof: America Can't Be Saved; It Must Be Re-Founded

[A poll this past summer](#) showed that 79% of Americans believe their country is headed in the wrong direction.

[Patrick Deneen](#), a well-respected Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame, is one of them.

However, the reason he believes America is in decline is unique. Most people—"conservatives" especially—typically accept the narrative that America's founding principles were inviolable, and that any decline is the result of losing sight of those principles.

For Deneen, however, the decline we're seeing today is *precisely because of* the principles on which America was founded.

In his new book [Conserving America?](#) he explains (it's a long paragraph, but worth a careful read, or re-read):

"Enlightenment and liberal philosophies [by the way, he's talking about [classical liberalism](#) here] that informed the American founding posited the existence of radically autonomous human beings in the 'state of nature,' rights-bearing creatures who consent to the creation of a government which exists to secure those rights. This basic construct that informs the philosophy of the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution reveals the deeper truth that is masked by our purported electoral choices: government is brought into existence to bring into *reality* the basic experience of individual autonomy that in fact exists only *in theory* in liberal philosophy. Liberal theory posits we are *by nature* 'free and independent,' but no human being anywhere has

ever come into the world, nor been raised to maturity as 'free and independent' creatures. We are rather creatures of duty, obligation and—one hopes—gratitude who are born, and most often live and die, dependent upon others. The great task of civilization has been to sustain and support familial, social and cultural structures and practices that perpetuate and deepen personal and intergenerational forms of obligation and gratitude, of duty and indebtedness. However, liberal philosophy is based on the theoretical construct that humans are by nature autonomous, free and independent, and that it is the role and function of the State to *realize* personal, national and even globalized individualism. What liberal theory purports to be our condition according to *nature* in fact must be arranged by means of massive State intervention, expansion and constructs. It is hardly coincidental or accidental that the liberal State has become the most comprehensive and intrusive State system in the history of the globe—while purportedly establishing a limited government, in fact it establishes a limited *end* to government—the 'securing,' or better put, *creation*, of individual liberty—while necessarily taking on unlimited means to the realization of that 'limited' end."

Translation: America was founded on the radical ideal of individual liberty and rights. But securing the right for everyone to do whatever they want inevitably requires increased State intervention, and inevitably results in the destruction of the family, religion, education, the arts, and culture—all things that require a priority placed on personal relationships and obligations to those in both the present and the past.

So, if you follow Deneen's reasoning, the decline we see in America today is a logical conclusion of the premises on which America was founded—premises promoted by both modern conservatives *and* modern liberals.

And so, according to Deneen, America can't really be saved—at

least, not a version of America that's actually sustainable. Instead, he writes, "it must be founded again, now explicitly in departure from the philosophic principles that animated its liberal founding."