

sustainable development” such as that expressed by Pope Francis: “What is needed ... is an agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of so-called ‘*global commons*’” (*Laudato Si’* [2015], no. 174).

—D. Brian Scarnecchia (e-mail: bscarneccchia@avemarialaw.edu)
Ave Maria School of Law, Florida

The Fractured Republic: Renewing America’s Social Contract in the Age of Individualism

Yuval Levin

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Public policy debates begin in the realm of morals and ideals and policy can affect the ability of people to act morally, but rarely do those debates explicitly acknowledge that they are based on fundamentally conflicting views of a good life. Yuval Levin takes on this task in *The Fractured Republic*, in which he argues less for specific policy solutions than for an approach that relies on the humility of policymakers.

Levin is editor of the journal *National Affairs*, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and a leading voice for reform of the conservative political movement. As such, he is more fluent in the conservative political case for humility than in the progressive case. He acknowledges this, even as he argues for a broader political movement for economic competition and flourishing subcultures.

Modern politics is less a clash of ideas than of nostalgias for the childhood of white Baby Boomers, according to Levin. America had a unified culture defined by an established elite in the 1950s. Families were stronger and church attendance was higher. Employers provided more secure benefits to employees who stayed for their entire career in unionized jobs. This idyllic scene of the immediate postwar period resulted from decades of struggle as first companies, then government, expanded to inhuman proportions regulated by nameless, faceless bureaucrats in gray flannel suits. American companies lacked global competitors as Western Europe and Japanese industries rebuilt and the Soviet Union unintentionally hobbled Eastern European economies. This idyllic scene was upset by more open cultural norms in the 1960s and 1970s, then more open economic competition in the 1980s and 1990s.

As one would expect from a hundred-year history that spans just seventy pages, it misses a great deal and is not always subtle or nuanced, but the story is cohesive and accurate enough to form a reasonable basis for the second half of the book. Rather than try to return to a lost Eden that left large segments of the population in the wilderness, Levin argues, the task ahead of us is to embrace diversity and decentralization, which means a market in economic interactions and subsidiarity in social interactions.

Subsidiarity means learning to love the small platoons of daily life. Levin quotes Friedrich Hayek and Ronald Reagan in the footnotes on the importance of small-scale solutions. Hayek noted that “liberty in practice depends on very prosaic matters.” Recognizing

this, Reagan “call[ed] for an end to gigantism, for a return to the human scale . . . the scale of the local fraternal lodge, the church congregation, the book club, the farm bureau . . . that creates the fabric of community.” Practical liberty is humble, experimental, and local, recognizing that there is not one right answer.

“The point [of subsidiarity] is not to find the ideal administrator,” Levin writes, but to “use our diversity as a tool while also combating isolation and estrangement.” He clearly states, “The Judeo-Christian moral vision is not, at its deepest and most fundamental level, a political vision, so its enactment does not require (and in some ways is surely even undermined by) control of the commanding heights of society. It generally looks to the forming of souls before the forming of nations.” It creates those human-scale communities of Reagan as it carries out its moral calling in the very prosaic work of helping the poor, educating the young, and keeping the neighborhood safe. Those are the earthly things that get “thrown in” by aiming at heaven.

Government programs have reduced material poverty since the 1960s, though that reduction is not always visible in official statistics. They have done this at the cost of increasing spiritual poverty and replacing the communal ties between neighbors with ties to government as citizens. Larger government has begotten alienated, atomistic individuals who look to government instead of one another for solutions to their problems. As a result, the mediating institutions that could help have been weakened and corrupted so that many are mere appendages to the larger government project.

Given the state of civil society, what is the best way to inject new life into the mediating institutions and rebuild the pillars of faith, family, work, and education? Levin does not provide any answers, but he is asking the right questions. Likely the only way to do it is to *try*, even while government makes it difficult, so that there will be more pressure for government to get out of the way of those doing good work.

—Joseph Coletti (e-mail: jcoletti@betteryest.org)
Better Yes Network, Cary, North Carolina