Foreign observers of politics in the United States may be forgiven if they believe that conservatism in that nation is wholly committed to the belief in the republic as a “chosen nation” of God, whose mission is to spread democratic ideals across the globe. From Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush, various figures of the postwar Right have invoked the image of a “City built on a Hill” (Matthew 5:14), whose values of liberty and equality represent the credos of the human family as a whole. This rhetoric rose to dizzying heights when the Bush administration insisted back in 2005 that the republic’s mission had always been to make the world American, to end tyranny all over the globe. True conservatives as well as true Americans must then act as defenders of a global democracy-building tradition with deep roots in the republic’s history, according to this interpretation.

Lest anyone still thinks that the Republican Party’s neoconservative promotion of democracy as the universal regime counts as true American conservatism, I recommend reading Willmoore Kendall’s and George W. Carey’s *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (Catholic University of America Press, 1970). This work, which is primarily based on Kendall’s lectures on the American political tradition given at Vanderbilt in 1964 (with additional discussion provided by Carey in the last chapters), reveals one of the most astute minds ever to shape American conservative thought. As Kendall’s last work, it also provides an essential antidote to the ailments afflicting American conservatism today.

Kendall, who died in 1967, is best known as a defender of the principle of majority-rule democracy in the United States. Specifically, Kendall believed that the American founding was a paradoxical event which finally reconciled conservatism with trust in the judgment of “We, the People.” In contrast to the antipopulist views of many postwar Americans conservatives, Kendall did not equate the “People” with a mob bent on destroying the rule of law in favor of tyranny. Instead, Kendall insisted in all of his writings that the “deliberate sense” of the people, to which several articles of the *Federalist* refer, was the foundation of successful and stable politics in this new republic. Despite the events of 1789, conservatives should embrace rather than fear the People.
The People

Still, who were the “People”? In *Basic Symbols*, Kendall provides his most systematic answer to this question. Americans were a *Christian* people, from the Mayflower Compact to the Founding and beyond. Whatever the differences between the overtly religious symbolism of the Compact and the secular terms of the Founding, Kendall was certain that the meaning of the “basic symbols” (or principles) of the American tradition persisted throughout the nation’s history, even before it became a nation in the late eighteenth century. Specifically, Americans were a “moderate” and “virtuous” people who set up political arrangements that defied radical and extremist politics. Kendall argued that this stable character of Americans, evident as early as the Mayflower Compact, informed the development of stable institutions that discouraged faction and fanaticism from threatening the polity.

The skeptical reader may well ask how American Christianity, which more than a few observers have described as “gnostic” and “primitive” in its adulation of mystical experience over ecclesiastical dogma, can be a conservative force in the republic’s politics. Kendall believed that the true Christian heritage of America militated against the idolization of any one political good over another. The genius of the Christian picture of man was to force both citizens and leaders to debate with “deliberate sense” the implications of giving too much liberty or equality to any one particular group (or faction). Through the checks and balances of republican democracy (which, Kendall argued, echoed the spirit of the Mayflower Compact), no minority or majority could hold the nation hostage to a single agenda. Relying on the terminology of the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, Kendall attributed this moderate politics to the “differentiation” encouraged by the political system and the people who insisted on its stability: no single meaning of liberty or equality would triumph for long if the American people did not accept it.

This conservative defense of majority rule has provoked mostly negative reactions from prominent figures of the postwar American Right. William F. Buckley Jr., who invited Kendall to contribute to *National Review* until they parted company in the early 1960s, considered his optimism in the wisdom of the American people to be “baffling.” Russell Kirk thought of Kendall as an American version of Rousseau, whose defense of majority rule was presumably little more than the old “General Will” hostile to conservative tradition and aristocratic leadership. Harry Jaffa believed that Kendall’s populism was even reminiscent of national socialism! Libertarians were generally unhappy that Kendall’s commitment to the “deliberate sense” of the people was unsympathetic to the rights of individuals and dissenters.

These criticisms generally miss the mark, for Kendall did not deny that the American people were often susceptible to the worst passions in politics. While employing another term from Eric Voegelin’s study of political religions, Kendall recognized that “derailments” of the basic stability of the American system often took place. These periods of civil war were largely the result of clever demagogues who had manipulated the religious symbols of the tradition in ways that radically adulterated their meaning. Kendall warned that the most destabilizing periods in American history occurred when particular presidents elevated one “good” above all others. Kendall specifically targeted presidents from Abraham Lincoln onward for taking an abstract notion like
equality and declaring it to be the good that the American system must preserve at all costs, even if other worthy goods like peace, order, and sober deliberation are sacrificed in the process. A cursory look at the Preamble of the Constitution showed that goods like “tranquility” counted for more than equality. Even that great document of human equality, the Declaration of Independence, simply proclaimed the right of a people to form any government it liked, whether democratic or not. It did not call on Americans to protect the individual rights of peoples all over the world.

Kendall’s arguments here certainly invite debate and scrutiny. It is not obvious that Lincoln consistently elevated equality above all other goods, especially when one considers his willingness to protect slavery with a constitutional amendment and even remove freed slaves to nations outside of the United States in order to save the Union. As I have argued in Lincoln and the Politics of Christian Love (University of Missouri Press, 2009), the president’s understanding of morality (Christian charity) cannot be easily conflated with a simple defense of egalitarian social engineering. Nevertheless, I generally agree with Kendall that the most radical changes in American history have resulted in large part from the successful transformation of a conservative Protestant tradition into a radical political religion.

**Chosenness**

What particularly troubled Kendall was the temptation of Americans to believe in themselves as a “chosen” people. In his view, the appeals to chosenness that mark American history from Winthrop onward distort the meaning of American Christianity and threaten the stability of political governance. The character and system of American politics were simply not fitted for radical dreams of recreating the world in the precise image and likeness of the republic. The Christian heritage of America, which opposed the idolization of authority and political abstractions, was not in sync with leaders who longed for the power to remake the cosmos in a hurry. The careful deliberation that the process of checks and balances presupposed was incompatible with the desire to “immanetize the eschaton” (in Voegelin’s famous phrase).

Why, then, have there been so many examples of successful appeals to chosenness in American history? Long before the term “Protestant Deformation” was coined, Kendall warned that there have always been radicals who reinterpret the symbols of the republic in ways which, once again, “derail” their original meaning. These extremists might even pretend to be conservatives, even though they fit more snugly on the leftist side of the spectrum. Lest anyone urge conservatives to embrace chosenness, Kendall challenged the avatars of a new Exodus politics to show exactly where any of the founding documents called for transforming the City of Man into the City of God. The men who participated in the Constitutional Convention were tough-minded Protestants who were realistic about the limits of human wisdom, not devotees of social revolution. The one consistent revolutionary of the founding generation was Thomas Paine, who called on Americans to “begin the world all over again.” Yet Paine had long disappeared from the political scene before the deliberations at Philadelphia, as Kendall liked to remind his readers.

It was up to true conservatives, in Kendall’s view, to teach Americans that their traditions do not call for the reinvention of human nature at home or abroad. Tempt-
ing as it may be to turn the Mosaic narrative into a call for the spread of equality throughout the world, the American system was not designed for such a mission. Although it is impossible to know with any certainty how Kendall would react to the modern Right’s embrace of chosenness since the Reagan era, it would likely not surprise him that this pseudoconservative appropriation of radical religiosity has only contributed to the election of one of the most leftist presidents in American history.

What are we to make of Wendell Berry? He’s a guru to Americans across the political spectrum. He writes about love and marriage, war and peace, conservation and growth, heaven and hell, food and free markets. Now, in this enlightening book, a distinguished roster of writers reveals the humane—and profoundly conservative—vision that unites Berry’s wide-ranging work.

“Berry is a wise, funny, rooted, radical, poetic, and practical sage. The gems in this collection of essays do Mr. Berry justice—and they illumine the path to a peaceful, humbler, better country.”

—BILL KAUFFMAN, The American Conservative