Ellis Sandoz’s most recent book is a collection of essays focusing on two subjects which have been at the center of his scholarly work: American political thought during the founding period and the philosophy of Eric Voegelin. The collection coheres, insofar as it does, more because of the consistency of Sandoz’s particular conception of the role and character of philosophy than because of its specific thematic concerns. However, the two broad themes actually are connected in a way that is not immediately apparent. Both are related to the two primary projects of the American conservative intellectual movement as it has developed since 1945.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, there were many American intellectuals who were dissatisfied with the way things had turned out. Soviet armies had subjugated eastern and central Europe, while a socialist government prevailed in Britain and communist movements threatened in Europe. In the U.S., Mr. Roosevelt’s depression- and war-era consolidation of power was not dismantled but instead augmented. Under these conditions, men like Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley, and Willmoore Kendall, embracing a political identity as conservatives, began a process of diagnosis. They were attempting to answer a looming and fundamental question: What has gone wrong with the West?

Among the many who offered answers was an émigré political philosopher at Louisiana State University named Eric Voegelin. With immense erudition, Voegelin advanced the striking claim that modernity itself was suffering from an intellectual disease which he initially called Gnosticism. Sandoz explains that “the leading attributes of modern Gnosticism are: (1) immanentist programs for the transformation of the world; and (2) atheism and the deification of Man.” In the West, religion and its ultimate promises had been secularized, and subsequently the political life of modern states had been divinized. Modern man had thus “immanentized the eschaton,” as Voegelin so famously put it, and it was this error that had led the West into crisis.

Voegelin’s critique also pointed to the Classical tradition as the great theoretical alternative to the spiritual malaise of modernity. The Greeks, Romans, and Medi-
eval Christians understood human nature to be limited, and conceived of true philosophical understanding not as rationalistic system-building, but instead as the openness of human reason to divine transcendence. It was only in this way that philosophy could truly be, as it was meant to be, a “way of life.” In this current collection, Sandoz, one of our foremost expositors of the thought of Voegelin, offers several delightful essays on different aspects of the work of his great teacher, ranging from a cogent discussion of the differences between Voegelin and Leo Strauss to a stimulating account of developments in the later works of Voegelin. For anyone wanting to gain a deeper appreciation for Voegelin’s genius, these essays are indispensable.

Of course, even in the immediate post-war years, it was not readily apparent how Voegelin’s subtle and exceedingly complex philosophical claims related to the practical political situation that conservatives confronted. Indeed, Voegelin’s grand critique of modernity did not seem to offer much of practical value to those who were attempting to answer charges that conservatism, insofar as it was anti-modern, was by that very fact un-American. This charge led to the second line of inquiry which has engaged the attention of American conservative intellectuals for the past half century. Is America, a state founded in the eighteenth century with no landed aristocracy, no established church, and no hereditary monarchy, really a conservative country? This was never simply a historical question, and it has not elicited simply historical responses. Instead, conservative thinkers as diverse as M.E. Bradford and Harry Jaffa have endeavored to craft from the historical record a “usable past” for American conservatives. Such histories are designed to frame and direct current policy discussions; they have little concern for the past in its intrinsic pastness.

Sandoz’s essays on American political thought in the founding period are profound and suggestive contributions to this conservative project. His is an attempt to read the American founding period through the lens of a Voegelinian conception of philosophy. His most controversial claim—though one of considerable merit—is that America’s constitutional order owes its intellectual foundations to a pre-modern conception of political activity and human nature. Modernity is characterized by Sandoz as a radical attempt to create an “an intramundane religion” in which human salvation is achieved as the result of human effort. This sort of neo-Pelagianism is the intellectual basis for the various ideological formations—like socialism in its various forms, and liberalism with its pluralist and agnostic commitments—which inform most contemporary politics.

Sandoz is at his best when rightly insisting on the centrality of a particular type of Protestant Christianity to the way most of the eighteenth-century founders conceived the world. He is reacting against the anachronistic and self-serving claims by modern liberal writers that the founding was the result of the straightforward application of the abstract, rationalist, and agnostic philosophical principles of the Enlightenment to the American colonial situation. In “Republicanism and Religion: Some Contextual Considerations,” for example, Sandoz writes of the American understanding of government that...
both temporal and spiritual affairs, in regimes
based on consent and churches organized
congregationally.

Sandoz is claiming that the American
founders had a profound understanding of
and respect for the transcendent ground of
their being. Unlike many of their descend-
ants, the founders understood the limits
of political activity. In other words, and to
borrow a descriptive phrase from the po-
litical philosopher Michael Oakeshott, the
American founders engaged in a skeptical
style of politics. Ironically, it is those who
reject the divine and so must attempt to
build a New Jerusalem within
time who engage in the politics
of faith.

The conception of politics
shared by the founders was
based upon a philosophical
anthropology which under-
stood human beings as created
by and sharing in the divine
spark of transcendent reality,
while at the same time acknowl-
edging the limitations and in-
herently fallen character of
these same human beings. Consequently,
the Voegelinian critique of modernity as
the divinization of the temporal does not
apply to the pre-modern commitments of
the founding generation. For Sandoz,
George Washington, John Adams, John
Dickinson, and Jonathan Edwards (a man
of singular wisdom and importance for
Sandoz) had more in common with
Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, and Richard
Hooker than with such continental con-
temporaries as Berkeley, Rousseau, Hume,
or Kant.

In addition to his insights on the impor-
tance of religion to the founders’ worldview,
Sandoz also recognizes the other traditions
central to the justification of the American
Revolution and its consolidation in the
decades following. He writes that

the American appeal was grounded in philoso-
phy as expressed in Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas,
Harrington, Locke, and Thomas Reid; in Pro-
estant Christianity in the form of political
theology that mingled religious revival, keeping
the faith and fighting the good fight, providen-
tial purpose, and a palpable sense of special favor
or choseness; and in a constitutionalism that
recapitulated all of the arguments seventeenth-
century Englishmen had thought valid in resis-
ting the tyranny of Stuart kings by invoking
common law liberty back to Magna Carta and
the ancient constitution.

In essays on American education during
the founding period, on the emergence of
the American national identity, and on the American under-
standing of law, Sandoz dis-
plays a keen understanding of
the complexity of the various
intellectual strands which to-
gether comprised the Ameri-
can character in its first expres-
sion. Unfortunately, it is the
strengths of these essays, their
meticulous research and theo-
retical richness, which make
them less successful as practical
exhortation than the more obvious and less
subtle accounts of other conservative lumi-
naries. Sandoz is too good of an intellectual
historian to write a truly effective story of
the mythical past, and the more historical
his essays are, the less “useful” they become.

Nonetheless, these essays still manifest
some of the weaknesses of similar attempts
to create a practical conservative past. Any
such attempt necessarily narrows the range
of interest in the past and rules out certain
questions in the same way that Sandoz sug-
gests an ideology works. For example,
Sandoz rather coyly admits that “an array
of...chiliastic and millenarian sentiments
was well represented in America during the
Revolutionary period”—and then dismisses
such movements as untrue to the American
spirit. In fact, this “array” constitutes a very
significant part of the American political tradition, and it suffers from precisely those Gnostic temptations against which Voegelin warned. Sandoz downplays the significance of the Gnostic rhetoric of the Puritans with their “City on a Hill,” but Voegelin himself regarded these prototypical Americans, at least in their Cromwellian manifestation, as exemplary Gnostics. Furthermore, those who, like Jefferson, were indebted to Thomas Paine, did indeed rely upon an appeal to Enlightenment abstractions of a kind similar to those which animated the French Revolution. Jefferson not only supported that particular misadventure, but it was also Jefferson, after all, who believed himself capable of re-writing the Bible to suit a more “rational” age, an example of Gnosticism par excellence.

There is a great temptation among conservatives—though not unique to them—to write a clean and unitary narrative which will guide current political activity. Sandoz avoids this temptation better than most, but his work still reflects the allure of this notion when he writes that “history is surely too important to be left to the historians.” Would he say the same about carpentry and carpenters? dancing and dancers? Christianity and Christians? Succumbing to the temptation to create mythical pasts necessarily entails a rejection of the complexity of the political ideas of the founding and an erasure of those aspects of the founders’ thought that we find currently unacceptable. Sandoz, like so many American conservatives, looks to the founding period as a sort of pre-lapsarian state of perfection which was then ruined by liberalism, post-modernism, historicism, or some other exotic and foreign ideological disease.

This line of argument is no longer politically necessary for conservatives. Instead, conservatives should heed the very different suggestion that Sandoz proffers in his last essay, “Truth and the Experience of Epoch in History.” There he observes that “there can be no permanently valid institutional solutions to the question of the best order for human society”; all we can do is attempt to make the world a place appropriate for human beings while recognizing both that human reason is limited and that the source of truth lies in a transcendent reality which can neither be systematized nor immanentized.