

Is Donald Trump Objectivist or Not Objectivist Enough?

The election of Donald Trump has brought into the public eye one of the great intellectual battles of the mid-twentieth century; the battle to define the philosophical system that would become the leading alternative to progressivism and socialism waged between novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand and writer, cultural and political commentator William F. Buckley, Jr.

Yet this battle, which still shapes our politics today, was largely unnoticed and unrecorded by the left-leaning establishment media when it was occurring during the 1950s and 1960s.

Rand proposed her libertarian philosophical system, which she called "objectivism," through her articles and novels, such as *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

Objectivism rather than libertarianism is the formal name Rand gave to her philosophical system, and it was a whole system, says objectivist Robert Tracinski in *The Federalist*. Objectivism has positions on everything from the validity of the senses to the nature of abstractions to the factual basis for morality to the psychological function of art.

Rand's pro-capitalist politics was only a part of this larger system that stressed the primacy of the individual and individual striving for excellence and achievement as the source of human well-being.

The modern conservative movement that Buckley and others sought to establish was best defined through Russell Kirk's book *The Conservative Mind* and in the Sharon Statement, the founding document of Young Americans for Freedom, written by M. Stanton Evans and signed on Sept. 11, 1960 by some 90 young

conservatives meeting at the Buckley family's Sharon, Connecticut estate.

Kirk and Buckley proposed a conservatism that understands the importance of "voluntary community" as the alternative to big government and espouse the belief that "freedom and property are closely linked."

This conservatism recognizes the imperfectability of human beings, which renders utopian schemes of government, such as communism and socialism, impossible, thus "the conservative perceives the need for prudent restraints upon power and upon human passions."

This sobriety and skepticism indict as dangerous folly the historical evolution propounded by progressivism as well as all utopian planning. Opposed to the willful ideologues on the left, they said, are those who "recognize an enduring moral order in the universe, a constant human nature and high duties to the order spiritual and the order temporal."

Another point of disagreement between Buckley and Rand, as I recounted in my book *Takeover*, was how those on the right should work to achieve the goal of rolling back progressivism and socialism.

Buckley argued that conservatives should take over the Republican Party, while Ayn Rand argued for a separate movement and a third party. When I became executive secretary of Young Americans for Freedom in August 1961, I got to see this disagreement up close. The battle between Rand and Buckley eventually became so intense and so personal that Rand refused to be in the same room with Buckley.

The importance and relevance of this battle for the soul of the right has only come back into the public eye as commentators on the left, such as James Hohmann of *The Washington Post* and Salon's Heather Digby Parton try to indict Donald Trump as a follower of Rand's atheist libertarian

objectivist philosophy because of his praise for Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* and the fact that several of his senior Cabinet choices have expressed admiration for other Rand novels, particularly *Atlas Shrugged*.

That the left would see Donald Trump's focus on personal achievement and wealth creation and opposition to collectivism as objectivist is not surprising, but is Donald Trump really an objectivist?

And more important for conservatives, are Trump's critics on the right still movement conservatives in the tradition of William F. Buckley, Jr. and Russell Kirk, or have they themselves become objectivists?

If Trump is an objectivist that appears to be news to objectivists, such as The Federalist's Robert Tracinski and the objectivists of the Atlas Society and Galt's Gulch online communities who, instead of embracing Trump during the Republican primaries, debated which Ayn Rand villain he most resembled.

However, what's even stranger is that many intellectuals on the right, especially William F. Buckley Jr.'s establishment conservative inheritors at *The National Review*, have criticized Trump for not being objectivist enough.

In a cover article in *National Review* by Kevin D. Williamson, the foundational publication of the conservative movement sought to explain in Malthusian terms why the "benighted white working class" that saved America from the Hillary Clinton presidency is "immoral" and should just die and blow away:

It is immoral because it perpetuates a lie: that the white working class that finds itself attracted to Trump has been victimized by outside forces. It hasn't. The white middle class may like the idea of Trump as a giant pulsing humanoid middle finger held up in the face of the cathedral, they may sing hymns to Trump the destroyer and whisper darkly about

“globalists” and—odious, stupid term— “the establishment,” but nobody did this to them. They failed themselves.

A more objectivist-grounded statement has probably never appeared in *National Review*. I doubt that William F. Buckley, Jr. or Russell Kirk would have said that white workers who have lost their jobs and had their quality of life devastated by eighty years of liberal folly and establishment Republican cronyism with big business are immoral for wanting a government that actually serves the interests of its citizens.

So where do Donald Trump, and Rex Tillerson, Andrew Puzder, Mike Pompeo and other Trump appointees and supporters who have read and been influenced by Ayn Rand fall on the socialist progressive vs. movement conservative vs objectivist spectrum?

Here’s what Newt Gingrich told the Heritage Foundation in a recent speech:

I’m arguing he [Donald Trump] is an anti-John Galt.

If you look at *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt is a billionaire who withdraws from society because he’s so sick of the welfare state and so sick of redistribution and so sick of the idea that creative people are being dragged down by noncreative people.

It is both defensive and cowardly.

All of these people are so incompetent that he’s withdrawing from the fight. They are going to go on strike, and all the creative people are going to refuse to be creative, and society will grind down.

This might have seemed plausible if you read *The New York Times* coverage of the Soviet Union.

[However] where John Galt retreats, Trump attacks.

Where John Galt goes to a mountain fastness, Trump goes to

the American people.

Where John Galt withdraws, Trump says let's have a movement.

John Galt says it's over, and all we can do is hold up in the mountain fastness, Trump says why don't we make an American great again?

It's a wonderful civil overlay that says the road to opportunity is to arouse the American people and with them, take back their country and he is living it out. That makes him, I think, an extraordinary figure ...

He knew he was going to be vicious, nasty and personal because it had always been that way in New York. He said trying to lead America is worth paying the price, both financially and personally.

He announced, "We can solve our problems; we can make America great again." He went to the American people, aroused their spirit and gave them hope.

Trump is an optimist where Galt was a pessimist ...

While objectivists would cede the government to the socialists and progressives and wait for the collapse, Trump has taken William F. Buckley Jr's admonition to stand athwart history and yell "Stop" literally.

Trump has promised to take power back from the state and end forced political correctness. And now his populist-influenced movement is forcing conservatives, many of whom had wandered into ivory towers, to make themselves and their policies once again relevant to the citizenry.

Clearly, Donald Trump is not a contemplative conservative in the mold of Russell Kirk, but I think, as is often the case, Newt is on to something. The battle between objectivism and conservatism for the soul of the right is far from over, but

by mounting a campaign to make America great again, Trump and his team are the anti-objectivists. {eoa}

Richard Viguerie transformed American politics in the 1960s and '70s by pioneering the use of direct mail fundraising in the political and ideological spheres. He used computerized direct mail fundraising to help build the conservative movement, which then elected Ronald Reagan as the first conservative president of the modern era. As the "Funding Father of the conservative movement," Viguerie motivated millions of Americans to participate in politics for the first time, greatly expanding the base of active citizenship. He is our era's equivalent of Tom Paine, using a direct mail letter rather than a pamphlet to deliver his call to arms. *George* magazine credited this as one of the defining political moments of the 20th century.

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