Lament for a Stillborn American Post-Liberalism

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Abstract: In *Lament for a Nation*, George Grant identified America as the vanguard of liberalism, and thus a threat to Canadian nationalism. His prophecies seem prescient, as many Canadians today long for American right-liberalism. Yet Americans today increasingly reject right-liberalism, with some embracing a post-liberalism that bears surprising resemblances to Grant's thought. Did Grant misread America? Might America have innate non-liberal resources? Can post-liberalism perhaps claim a legitimate American provenance in the ordered liberty of Puritan Massachusetts? This article argues in the negative. The largest faction in the American New Right descends not from the Puritans, but from a Borderlander tradition diametrically opposed to ordered liberty. Moreover, as Grant showed, even the orderly Puritans nonetheless planted the seeds of liberalism in their emphasis on technical education and liberation of the will. This helps to explain why current Republican anti-liberalism takes the form not of Grant's pre-modern Christianity, but of Nietzsche's post-modern self-assertion.

Keywords: George Grant, Post-Liberalism, Ordered Liberty, New Right, American Conservatism

INTRODUCTION

The post-liberal moment in America is underway. The American New Right directs its fury not simply toward political "liberals," but equally toward "establishment Republicans" who retain the "fusionist" neoliberalism of Ronald Reagan. These American anti-liberals critique not only the border enforcement policies of the Biden Democrats, but the neoliberal immigration consensus enabled by George W. Bush.[1] This New Right rejects free trade, opting instead for economic warfare against China, Canada, and rest of the world. National Conservatives delight as Donald Trump pivots away from traditional NATO allies and retreats from Reagan-Bush-style democracy promotion. This reactionism happily withdraws funding to American universities that have used their academic freedom to endorse Hamas and to critique the West. "Make America Great Again," cries the New Right. "End the forever wars." "Drain the Swamp."

Enlightened Canadians love to dispatch these slogans as the deranged ramblings of disinformed hillbillies. Such Yankee sentiments allegedly express white patriarchal rage at the long-overdue reckoning of America's racist colonial-

ism. Donald Trump thus embodies an inevitable and regrettable—but ultimately transient—speedbump that merely slows the inexorable Hegelian advance of democracy, equality, human rights, and inclusion. Southern Evangelicals have not yet begun to digest Charles Taylor's "The Politics of Recognition" as they line up to cast Liberal ballots.

Yet to dismiss this phenomenon as a mere species of rage with some light intellectual window dressing is to miss the point. True enough, politics is not driven by pure philosophy; even the ordinary supporters of the French Revolution were not quoting Rousseau. But as Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out, Rousseau nonetheless precipitated the Revolution and clarified its meaning (Tocqueville 1955, pp. 138-41, 145-48). And many of these Canadian dismissals overlook the changing American self-perception after the end of post-Cold-War unipolarity, which is producing significant new schools of thought on the American Right. One of the most influential—and most deeply surprising—calls itself "post-liberalism."

Perhaps the ur-moment of post-liberalism was a 2019 declaration in *First Things* entitled "Against the Dead Consensus." This statement begins by acknowledging that its signers range from hearty Trump supporters to "Never Trump" Clinton voters. Yet they all agree that "there is no returning to the pre-Trump conservative consensus that collapsed in 2016" (*First Things* 2019). One signer, Patrick Deneen, had just written *Why Liberalism Failed*—recommended even by Barack Obama—and has more recently penned *Regime Change*. Together with Deneen, C. C. Pecknold (another signer) and Gladden Pappin formed *The Postliberal Order*, whose November 2024 headline confidently proclaimed, "Trump's Victory Inaugurates the Postliberal Era" (Pappin 2024). These later teamed up with Adrian Vermeule, whose *Redeeming the Administrative State* riled up Reaganite neoliberals from the title alone.

Canadians should exhibit an innate interest in the intellectual transformation of the American Right, simply because American foreign policy will always matter to a country with such a long border. They should be especially interested ever since Donald Trump declared economic war on Canada, and began openly envisioning Canada as a US state.

But Canadians are now affecting a different—and more disconcerting—interest in America. A March 2025 Ipsos poll bore the telling headline: "Four in ten (43%) Canadians age 18-34 would vote to be American if citizenship and conversion of assets to USD guaranteed." Needless to say, they are not all Albertans. Three of eight Canadians under 55 agree: nearly the same percentage as Quebeckers who voted for separation in 1980 (Ipsos 2025). In other words, at a time when Canadian intellectuals hold up Canadian left-liberalism as a contrast with America, an unprecedented number of ordinary Canadians would eagerly sell out their Canadian liberalism for the right price. How did the Canadian "wealthy and the clever"—that class targeted by Grant in the opening phrases of *Lament*—miss this development?

For one, Canadian elites no longer read George Grant. In *Lament for a Nation*, Grant had argued—loudly and clearly and even angrily—that Canadian liberalism would inevitably lead to continentalism. If Canadians really wanted liberalism, they would get it good and hard from America. For Grant, Canadian liberalism was a departure from the distinctive Canadian identity. That identity, Grant argued, lay in Canadians' own pre-modern inheritance. This inheritance was grounded in the traditional Christian natural law of Richard Hooker, not the enlightenment liberalism of John Locke, let alone the progressivist liberationism of Thomas Paine (Grant 2005 [*Lament*], 321).[2] Hooker had argued, with the pre-modern tradition, that virtue and order were prior to freedom. (This own formulation was the core of Grant's Christianity: the "recognition that I am not my own" (Grant 1978, pp. 62-63)). But Canadians increasingly saw their British inheritance not as a link to Europe, and thus to a pre-modern inheritance, but rather as a progressive liberalism that would render this inheritance a footnote of history. Hence Grant's famous *cri de coeur* which opens the penultimate chapter of *Lament*: "the impossibility of conservatism in our era is the impossibility of Canada" (Grant 2005 [*Lament*], p. 325). Canadians would become *de facto* Americans not from the whip of compulsion, but through the co-optation of the liberal American soft empire: "the fate of the willing" (Grant 2009, p. 704).

But herein lies an irony. If Canadians today are attracted to America, is this not a blow against (Canadian) liberalism, and indeed a victory for post-liberalism? I seek to extend this question even fur-

ther. If America-friendly Canadians are rejecting the liberalism led by their own "wealthy and the clever," shouldn't Grant have found a very silver lining? Might America actually be saving Canada from the very liberalism that undermines what is distinctive about Canada? Might Grant, in the 21st century, have looked South for inspiration? Might American post-liberalism, paradoxically enough, help to restrain American liberal imperialism and strengthen the Canadian sense of nationhood?

This paper seeks to temper such optimism. It suggests that a genuinely American post-liberalism must ultimately critique modern liberalism from a post-modern perspective, not a pre-modern one. In other words, it suggests that while there may be helpful post-liberal voices in America, there cannot be an authentically American post-liberalism; Americans can be post-liberal only in spite of themselves. And it suggests that Grant already saw this coming.

I: AMERICAN POST-LIBERALISM: THE DESCENDANT OF PURITAN NEW ENGLAND?

Grant's *Lament for a Nation* seems to lurk in today's post-liberalism in America. Most obviously, Grant excoriated the Canadian elite that hated the populist Diefenbaker. Post-liberals, like most factions of the American Right, critique the elite and welcome a populist challenge. But the parallels go deeper. For instance, Grant identified the essence of liberalism in the liberation of the will from the guidance of God and nature. Deneen, in particular, has argued that liberalism conditions its subjects to make choices that will best preserve their future realm of freedom (Deneen 2012). (The dramatic decline in marriage and fertility rates since his writing only seems to confirm his diagnosis.) Grant foresaw the "mental health" state; writer Rod Dreher (another "Dead Consensus" signer) often cites Philip Rieff's *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, and critiques what Christian Smith has called "moral therapeutic Deism." Grant raged against the will-enabling technique of abortion; post-liberals excoriate Canada's MAiD regime, which is now the fifth-leading cause of death in Canada. Grant spoke at teach-ins, and understood nineteenth-century British socialism to restrain greed and promote the social good (Grant 2005 [*Lament*], pp. 318, 330). Deneen also measures the economy more through "deaths of despair" rather than through ever-growing GDP, and Vermeule seeks to empower the administrative state (Deneen 2020; Sunstein and Vermeule 2020). Grant hated free trade; post-liberals support increased tariffs. Finally, and most deeply, Grant's critique of liberalism was grounded in his traditional Anglican Christianity and his great respect for pre-modern Catholic Quebec. American post-liberals are disproportionately Catholic, and generally embrace Catholic Social Thought as an economic model.

Had he lived to today, Grant surely would have been heartened to see a few American thinkers critique liberalism.[3] Might he have consequently softened his outlook toward America itself? In his own day, Grant had argued that the American essence was thoroughly liberal. When he looked southward, he had seen the very spearhead of modernity; the vanguard of Hegel's "universal and homogenous state." Today, might he have instead seen a country with the native resources to critique liberalism? Might he now see 20th-century liberal America as an aberration from a more truly non-liberal American tradition?

Deneen seems to see it that way. He argues that American "inheritances, practices and self-understandings…include, above all, America's religious inheritance, including the Puritanism that was present before the Founding" (Deneen 2020). Alexis de Tocqueville agrees. He points out that colonial New England was not populated in the usual fashion of a colony (or, for that matter, in the fashion of Fort McMurray): by poor, uneducated, single men seeking a better economic life. Rather, it was populated by middle-class families who sacrificed their economic station in life for ideational reasons: to establish a society on Puritan principles. In this account, it was these fervent religious believers who birthed and nurtured the spirit of America (Tocqueville 1990, pp. 3, 13-16).

The Puritans surely embodied a central post-liberal claim: that order comes before liberty (Deneen 2023). For Puritans, liberty belonged to the community, not to individuals. Liberty thus implied significant restraints on individuals, as long as these restraints were written in law. One such law went so far as to punish any man who would "exceed the bounds of moderation." Even more central was the idea of "soul

liberty": "the freedom to order one's own acts in a godly way—but not in any other." These liberties implied laws enforcing the Sabbath and punishing doctrinal nonconformists. Furthermore, Puritan liberty included a "freedom from fear" (later employed in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal) that led to laws assisting the poor (Fischer 1989, pp. 200-205). In other words, one was guided by the community toward a pre-existing standard of nature. For this reason, liberty was not given to all, but had to be earned, which explains why gentlemen possessed more liberties than ordinary men. One first had to demonstrate the ability to attain that standard; only then was one entrusted with liberty. Nature preceded will. In all, the Massachusetts Puritans would seem to constitute a promising foundation for an authentic American post-liberalism, and a pre-emptive rebuke to Grant's vision of liberal America.

Yet this hypothesis faces two substantial objections.

II. OBJECTION ONE: LIBERAL MATERIAL CAUSE OF AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The first objection to this hypothesis is that the Puritans constituted only one of four major migrations from Britain to America. More damagingly to this hypothesis, Puritan descendants today in New England, New York, and Michigan (Han et al., 2017) are, by far, the *least* likely of the four groups to vote Republican today. It is a different one of these four migrations that constitutes the electoral strength of the contemporary American Right: the Borderlander Scots-Irish.

These migrants came from the English-Scottish borderlands, having been caught in the crossfire between Anglo-Saxons and Scots for centuries. They often came by way of Northern Ireland, a region that did little to tame their violent impulses. They were overwhelmingly poor, and migrated for reasons material rather than ideational. When they first arrived through Philadelphia, they startled the locals with their vulgar manners and their revealing dress. Yet as Fischer writes, "even in their poverty they carried themselves with a fierce and stubborn pride that warned others to treat them with respect." Unlike the Puritans, for whom liberty of the will had to be earned through adherence to God and nature, Borderlanders emphasized "absolute equality of dignity and right" (Fischer 1989, pp. 605-11). This meant that "no one has a right to tell the self-reliant [Borderlander] what to say, do or think" (Mead 1999, pp. 12-13). Hence, the Borderlander concept of liberty was not an ordered liberty. Instead, it was an arch-libertarian concept of "elbow room," one that enshrined individual sovereignty.

Borderlander family relations reinforced this individual sovereignty. Borderlanders tacitly permitted young men and women to "sow their wild oats": at one point, over 90 per cent of first pregnancies were to unmarried women. The resulting solemnizations were prompted by individual policing from the bride's father, as indicated by the term "shotgun wedding." Likewise, borderlanders reared their children in a fashion "highly indulgent and permissive." As Fischer (1989, p. 687) describes, "For backcountry boys, the object was not will-breaking as among the Puritans….The rearing of male children in the back settlement was meant to be positively will-enhancing. Its primary purpose was to foster fierce pride, stubborn independence and a warrior's courage in the young." Yet this paternal permissiveness was punctuated by frequent bouts of alcohol-fueled domestic violence, as if to emphasize its essential lawlessness (Fischer 1989, pp. 680-81, 687).

In Borderlander country, order came not from the law, but from the principle enshrining every man as sheriff—and thus vigilante—of his own hearth. Fischer describes the backcountry credo as "do unto others as they threatened do unto you," an antipathy applied "to all strangers without regard to race, religion or nationality" (Fischer 1989, pp. 617, 650). The champion of Borderlanders, populist president Andrew Jackson, was taught by his mother not to sue for justice, but to "settle them cases yourself" (Fischer 1989, p. 765). This informal maxim was widely known as "Lynch's law," prompting a legacy of atrocities too voluminous to list here. Needless to say, they did not involve scrupulous attention to such legal niceties as due process. Liberty was not a reciprocal relation; it did not demand even an adherence to mutually-agreed limitation of will. One's will was bound only by one's self-chosen code of honour. The Borderlander concept of the will thus seems to militate against Grant's pre-modern Christian belief that "my will is not my own."

It is surely no coincidence that the Declaration of Independence concluded a decade in which two-thirds of the entire Borderlander migration took place. Indeed, over this decade, Borderlanders in the Carolinas had taken up a wave of vigilante 'law enforcement' known as "The Regulation," one that prepared them for a greater war. Of course, one could object that the Revolutionary War began in Massachusetts—a predominantly Puritan state. Yet one of the few Borderlander settlement areas proximate to ideational centres was indeed Central Massachusetts (Fischer 1989, pp. 636-37). The county seat, Worcester, took its name from the English city where, in 1651, Cromwell's forces had decisively defeated those of the Crown. In September 1774, Worcester (Massachusetts) saw the first successful episode of 4,622 Patriot vigilantes forcing colonial officials to recant their offices, accomplishing an effective transfer of power. When the actual first shots of the Revolution were fired in April 1775, British Regulars marched on Concord only because they knew that they had already lost Worcester.

These Borderlanders today—from West Virginia to South Carolina to Arkansas—form the energy of the Republican party. Yet they are an odd fit for post-liberal intellectuals. As Tanner Greer notes, "When I read New Right writings and meet with New Righters in person I cannot help but notice how *Northeastern* their vision of politics is." Greer characterizes their vision as "unapologetically elitist, hierarchical, and communitarian. The right-wing base, in contrast, is rebellious, egalitarian, and individualist" (Greer 2021). Hence, post-liberals have their work cut out for them:

> Pity the Whig who wishes to lead the Jackson masses! Spare a prayer for the post-liberal politico who must herd the backcountry crowd. The pillars of the New Right's rising moral order are the most licentious and rebellious people in the nation. This is an unstable foundation for a post-liberal body politic if there ever was one" (Greer 2021).

Yet the Borderlanders may have a surprising commonality with Puritans. Ironically, Borderlanders may even embody the Puritans' dirty little secret: their unacknowledged children.

III: OBJECTION TWO: LIBERAL FORMAL CAUSE OF AMERICAN REVOLUTION

To be sure, the American Revolution was not led merely by Borderlanders, but by Puritans. Yet even in Boston, one can trace the cause of the Revolution not to Puritan mores of ordered liberty, but to a proto-Lockean liberalism.

Alexander Hamilton, the Tory who became a Revolutionary in Boston, acknowledged that the Revolution did not actually hinge on "the petty duty of 3 pence per pound on East India tea." Rather, it rested on a rejection of the British sovereign right to collect customs duties in the first place (Hamilton 1774, pp. 2-4). An objector might interject that the Crown—the King, with the advice and consent of Parliament—held this prerogative as the inherited sovereign. After all, today the United States Congress, not the legislative assembly of Puerto Rico, sets tariff rates on Chinese goods arriving in San Juan.[4] (The US Congress may even delegate this power to the absolute prerogative of one man; the current President seems rather fond of it). But Massachusans agreed with Hamilton. They considered this prerogative to be their own long-held sovereign (and exclusive) right. As early as 1636, Massachusetts imposed its own (seemingly illegal) customs duties on foreign ships. When the Crown attempted to do likewise in the 1680s, Bostonians had—in ostensible violation of the rule of law—violently resisted British customs collectors (Sabine 1957, pp. 40-43). (These acts of vigilantism would prefigure the American "wild west," whose importance in distinguishing America from Canada merits its own separate treatment (Grant 2005 [*Lament*], p. 327)).

The violence of the 1689 Boston Revolt could only have been legitimate if the legislative sovereignty of the Massachusetts Bay Colony—even in its relations with other sovereign nations!—rested with the legislative assembly of the colony, not with the King, in Parliament. Under this theory, the Crown—the King, in Parliament—could not be, and could not ever have been, a legislative sovereign for Massachusetts. It could only be a mere executive branch—the servant of a legislature elected by the people of Massachusetts.

Hence, even if Massachusetts claimed to acknowledge its Royal Charter, its *de facto* sovereignty could not have flown downward from an inherited monarch, or even from an inherited legislative body; it had to rest in a liberal social contract. How fitting that the Pilgrims had already signed the Mayflower Compact! (Indeed, the very Puritan appropriation of uncultivated land in the new world also prefigured Locke's concept of the state of nature, especially when Locke himself had identified America as one such instance of the state of nature). In other words, its liberty did not flow from the pre-existing order represented by the British Crown; its order was not ontologically prior to liberty. Rather, its (admittedly impressive) order was built on the foundation of a voluntary, liberal foundation: the acts of will in which signatures were affixed to a social covenant and checks marked on ballots for assembly representatives.

The idea that sovereignty flowed from the bottom up, rather than from an inherited obligation to Parliament, flowed naturally from Congregational Calvinist polity, in which the pastor was accountable not to any bishop above but to his congregation below. But as Grant notes, Puritan Calvinism also imparted to America a deeply (if perhaps accidentally) modern approach to education. Calvinist moral seriousness came from adherence to a Divine Command theology that grounded obligation in the will of God; this moral order did not flow from any natural theology that grounded obligation in God's reason. Reason, after all, had been corrupted in the Fall. Hence, the Puritan quest for Christian wisdom was effectively narrowed to the study of theology, which left the other traditional arts and sciences in an ambiguous state. When the Puritans effectively separated moral education from liberal education, their pursuit of applied science would now be restrained only by direct Biblical prohibitions, of which there were few. Of the Puritans, Grant writes that "Salvation was one thing; the educational process was another. Thus they came more and more to be held apart. The educational process gradually came to be concerned only with the teaching of techniques, so that Christians could be effective in the world" (Grant 2002 [*Philosophy in the Mass* Age], pp. 369-70). In Grant's telling, the Puritan approach to reason naturally produced a more uncritical attitude to modern technology.

If this dim Puritan view of reason eclipsed the traditional concept of reasoned spirituality, the Reformed emphasis on ordinary vocation further diminished the role of contemplation in the Christian life. In Grant's words, "the old philosophical education, which was intended as a means to the contemplative vision of God, became largely beside the point" (Grant 2002 [*Philosophy in the Mass Age*], pp. 369-70). Thus man's participation in revelation no longer occurred in retreat from worldly activity, in a posture of quiet receptivity. Rather, Reformed Christianity witnessed God's revelation in pragmatic and active human pursuits. The implication? Grant perceives that "the Puritan interpretation produced a driving will to righteousness more than a hunger and thirst for it" (Grant 2009 [*English-Speaking Justice*], p. 239). This "will to righteousness" naturally mirrors the Calvinist understanding of God as a Being who wills—and indeed a God who wills damnation for some. (It is surely no coincidence that the doctrine of "limited atonement" was first codified in the 1619 Synod of Dort, a mere 50 km from where the original Pilgrims were planning their voyage to America). In sum, the Puritans espoused the seeds of modern liberalism: a bottom-up approach to authority; a liberation of technology to provide more choices to the individual; and a heavy emphasis on the self-assertion of the active life.

By the Founding generation, only twelve per cent of New Englanders were church members, and by the 1820s, most Congregationalist churches there had become liberal, Deist, or even Unitarian. This paved the way for a distinctively Protestant pragmatism, one that did not critique technology itself, but focused on spreading its fruits in an egalitarian fashion (Grant 2002 [*Philosophy in the Mass Age*], pp. 370, 373).

Such an implicit emphasis on the "last man"—while yet rejecting Marx!—paves the way for an inevitable backlash that seeks a return of greatness. But this desire for greatness, lacking the Christian image of Christ, cannot recall the classical image of Socrates. A traditional Christianity that understands nature as a precondition to grace can, as it secularizes, retain a classical pagan sense of nature. A bad Catholic or Anglican can be a good Aristotelian. But a Puritan Christianity that rejects nature will, as it secularizes, stare into Nietzsche's abyss of nihilism. Thus a bad Puritan is less likely to be a good Aristotelian, and more likely a good Nietzschean. Grant recognizes that American pragmatism (now typically manifested in right-

wing "common sense") is an even faster road to postmodernism than is Marxism (Grant 2002 [*Philosophy in the Mass Age*], p. 374). The Calvinist will to righteousness unwittingly enables a Nietzschean will to power.

IV: AMERICAN POST-LIBERALISM AS POST-MODERNISM

Politicians often stretch the truth. But Donald Trump may be the first President to revel in telling falsehoods that can be immediately disproven upon their utterance. To take one example, Trump did not attempt to justify the extradition of Kilmar Abrego Garcia to a Salvadorean prison by pointing out that Abrego had allegedly been apprehended for two hours while driving eight undocumented passengers with no luggage from Texas to Maryland (United States Department of Homeland Security 2025). Rather, Trump insisted on the obviously false claim that a doctored image of Abrego's hands proved a connection to Salvadorean gangs. When the interviewer called him out on it, Trump threatened in real time to punish the interviewer. Why should Trump resort to plausible evidence if he can coerce the public to accept his obvious lies as truth? The evidence-based approach would require acknowledging a pre-existing source of order in the concept of *logos*; the alternative asserts a Nietzschean "will to truth." Fittingly, Trump's own cabinet secretaries respond to difficult questions with Trump flattery, asserting that "the world's best negotiator" can solve otherwise intractable problems through the force of his will alone.

Trump's post-modern emphasis on the will is increasingly wedded to technology. The likely key to Trump's 2024 victory was his conversion of tech leaders—for decades a determined Democratic demographic. But did the tech leaders really convert? Elon Musk asserted that his older views—more or less Bacon-Mill liberalism—remained unchanged; they were simply now more at home in the Republican party. In this, Musk speaks for a legion of tech leaders—Marc Andreessen, Peter Thiel, Eric Schmidt—who now saw their belief in scientific progress as better allied with religious conservatives than with DEI-espousing Ivy League graduates. These personal associates of J. D. Vance know that social conservatism—traditional marriage, opposition to abortion, emphasis on the Western canon—is not a priority under Trump (Andreessen 2025).

To be sure, Musk now claims to be a "cultural Christian," and espouses some superficially pre-modern positions, such as pronatalism. Yet while Musk has sired (as of this writing) twice as many children as Grant, he does not aim to father his children as God the Father loves His Son. (In this, Musk is bros with Trump, the latter of whom bragged to Howard Stern that to raise his own children was effectively beneath his dignity). Rather, Musk is motivated by scientific progress, which allegedly compels genetically superior humans (such as himself) to reproduce with gusto.

Likewise, America's leading pronatalist influencers, Malcolm and Simone Collins, are atheists who employ surrogacy, utilize IVF to preselect embryos, and claim to promote not eugenics but "polygenics." They name their children not after saints, but after pagan gods ("Titan" and "Torsten") or pagan Emperors ("Octavian").[5] In the words of one chronicler, the Collins' utilitarian "branch of effective altruism considers the suffering of humans today to be "pretty irrelevant" because the suffering of billions of future humans could be eliminated if they succeed in creating a "technophilic, interplanetary" species" (Kleeman 2024, p. 10). The marriage of post-modernism and technology is apparent. But already in *Lament,* Grant saw that "without the conception of such an [eternal] order, conservatism becomes nothing but the defence of property rights and chauvinism, attractively packaged as appeal to the past" (Grant 2005 [*Lament*], p. 329).

Grant's observation raises the question: is the American New Right even conservative? Mary Harrington, in her article "The future belongs to right-wing progressives," has instead dubbed it "space fascism" (Harrington 2024). Much earlier, in *Lament,* Grant had pointed out that an imperialist society, one out to conquer more frontiers, cannot be a conservative one. But the conquest of space has long been an American drive. As Grant noted, Sputnik did not threaten America, but invigorated it.

The animating frontier of conquest today is Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), a prelude to Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI), under which AI (some believe) could become not only superhuman but self-di-

recting. Many tech leaders call ASI a "god," hoping it could bring incredible happiness and incredible longevity to humanity. Yet they also acknowledge that such a "god" could also enslave or eliminate humanity; Geoffrey Hinton, the "godfather" of AI, has estimated a 10-20% chance. Three-quarters of AI scientists caution against the direct pursuit of AGI, instead advocating for "AI systems with an acceptable risk-benefit profile" (Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence 2025, p. 66). Yet this does not seem to stop the industry. Indeed, one tech promoter has argued that the benefits of attaining immortality justify the existential risk to all planetary life (Urban 2015). Elon Musk recognizes this threat to human existence, but his backup plan to prioritize humans over machines is cold comfort: Neuralink will "achieve a symbiosis with artificial intelligence." An observer writes that "The goal is to develop a technology that enables humans "merging with AI" so that we won't be "left behind" as AI systems become more and more advanced" (Thomas 2024). Few seem to appreciate the irony that Musk joined Trump to combat the transgenderism of his own child, while yet advocating for a form of transhumanism as a way to combat ASI-induced extinction.

Indeed, on his first day in office, alleged post-liberal Donald Trump signed an executive order removing his predecessor's requirement that AI companies share the results of their safety testing with the government before they are released. Trump's tech allies rejoiced. Indeed, kingpin venture capitalist Marc Andreessen recently stated that his (and the broader AI community's) unwavering support for Trump arose from the prior administration's caution around AI. They found it unacceptable that the Biden administration sought to classify AI research, in the same way that the government limited certain areas of physics curing the Cold War, and throttled the free market in start-up nuclear power (Andreessen 2025). For the New Right, it seems, the combination of free enterprise and scientific technology must be unleashed, even as this cocktail portends existential risk to human civilization. But God forbid that the Chinese get ahead. Grant would surely see a defense of property rights and national chauvinism, in service to a technology that explicitly tries to eclipse the eternal (and even merely human) order. And he would be little surprised that an allegedly conservative, putatively post-liberal American order would pursue the creation of a mechanized Overman: the frankenfruit of Bacon and Nietzsche. It was but one more "triumph of the will" (Grant 2009, pp. 726-28).[6]

CONCLUSION

In the end, the ideas of thoughtful post-liberals in America—ideas with which Grant might have had significant affinity—have a hard time accounting for actual American phenomena. American post-liberal intellectuals, in hopes of returning to a classical concept of order and virtue, find themselves situated in an America that seeks to liberate the will. The New Right's actually existing post-liberalism has not, in fact, rejected the liberal emphasis on the will; it has radicalized the will through a post-modern (and post-human) augmentation of liberalism. It has not put its capitalism in the service of a transcendent order; it has turned its capitalist competition into a Nietzschean struggle. Granted, America may furnish post-liberalism with ample critique of the Marxist "last man," but post-liberalism's consequent reference to greatness seems to look to the overman (or the man-god), not the Incarnate God-man. If the New Right is illiberal, it is so primarily in its discomfort with the rule of law, an attitude with a long American pedigree.

Indeed, the most natural home of North American post-liberalism is likely found in the tradition of Canadian Toryism, of which Grant is the best-known (but far from the only) expositor.[7] This Canadian Tory tradition arose in 1783, when those orderly Puritans who consciously rejected Locke were forced to migrate north. There they continued a pre-modern tradition that self-consciously perceived itself as rejecting democratic-republican popular will.[8] They also established an (admittedly uneasy) coexistence with a pre-modern Quebec that saw itself as France without the Revolution. Grant, among others, recognized in this marriage the basis for an indigenous Canadian post-liberal unity (Grant 2005 [*Lament*], p. 331).[9] Post-liberals in America may need to look north if they wish for a (North) American post-liberalism.

Such a suggestion would likely vex post-liberals in America. Yet if three in eight working-age Canadians are willing to sell out their Canadian liberalism for the right price, their openness would seem to substantiate the continued existence of an American liberalism willing to offer such terms. After all, no American post-liberal worthy of the name would court Canada with such pecuniary incentives as to "have your Car, Steel, Aluminum, Lumber, Energy, and all other businesses, QUADRUPLE in size, WITH ZERO TARIFFS OR TAXES" (Trump 2025). But Canadians should not get too proud. This fact also reveals—as per Grant's diagnosis—an advanced Canadian liberalism that is not particularly nationalistic. Canadian liberal (and indeed Liberal) nationalism still struggles to articulate substantive Canadian distinctives sufficient to motivate economic sacrifices in fidelity to a Canadian vision. Merely being "Not American" will no longer do. How can Canadians recover their own tradition? One final irony comes to mind. Perhaps more speeches by post-liberals visiting Canada, such as Deneen's exhortation to recover Grant at the 2025 Canada Strong and Free Conference (Deneen 2025), might strengthen both Canadian sovereignty and American post-liberalism.

NOTES

1 George W. Bush's campaign genius, Karl Rove, endorsed a guest-worker program in a 2007 speech, saying "I don't want my 17-year-old son to have to pick tomatoes or make beds in Las Vegas" (Krikorian 2007).

2 Most references to the work of George Grant are to the 4-volume collected works. For the sake of clarity, the original book being cited is named in square brackets.

3 Grant was not temperamentally incapable of appreciating American non-liberals; in his later years, he discovered and admired the Southern Agrarians. See Grant 1996, pp. 358-60.

4 As the US Constitution states in Article I, Section 10, Clause 2, "No State shall, without the Consent of the Congress, lay any Imposts or Duties on Imports or Exports."

5 Machines also figure prominently: "Industry" (reflecting Musk's progeny "Mechanicus")

6 In one of Grant's final articles, in which he criticized the legalization of abortion in Canada, Grant described the marriage of modern technology and the "resolute mastery of ourselves" as the "triumph of the will." (Grant was fully aware of the fascist provenance of the phrase, which he used at the title of his article). I thank Tyler Chamberlain for highlighting this connection.

7 For a comprehensive exposition of thinkers, see Massolin 2021, Chs. 1, 6, and 7.

8 For specific figures, see Geddert 2023; Geddert forthcoming. For a more general treatment, see Vaughan 2004.

9 As Grant notes here, "To Catholics who remain Catholics, whatever their level of sophistication, virtue must be prior to freedom." Indeed, in 1775, Quebec had already made the choice to stay with Britain: "Quebec was not a society that would come to terms with the political philosophy of Jefferson or the New England capitalists."

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