Political Moderation in America’s First Two Centuries

*Political Moderation in America’s First Two Centuries* seeks to correct the popular impression of moderation as timidity and caution. Robert McCluer Calhoon examines the structure of political moderation in detail, characterizing it as a compound of principle and prudence and defining it as humility in the face of the past and as historically grounded political ethics.

Calhoon examines moderation’s history during the Peloponnesian War, the French Wars of Religion, and the century of its efflorescence from 1572 to 1680 when it failed to coalesce into an ideology. The bulk of the book then examines the popularization of political moderation in America from 1713 to 1884 as an integral element in political culture and the product of religious belief and practice.

This book is the first comprehensive history of this subject, yet it draws on more than a hundred books published over the past half century, proving conclusively that political moderates were made, not born.

Robert McCluer Calhoon is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His books include *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760–1781* (1973); *Revolutionary America: An Interpretive Overview* (1976); *Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740–1861* (1988); *Dominion and Liberty: Ideology in the Anglo-American World, 1660–1801* (1994); and *The Loyalist Perception and Other Essays* (1989; second edition, 2009). He is also the founding editor of the online *Journal of Backcountry Studies*. 
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ROBERT McCLUER CALHOON
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
In Memory of Tom
and
for George and Carl
Liberalism (as used today) I take to be the happy view that life is mainly a matter of *choice*. Conservatism, by contrast, is the belief that life is mainly a matter of *consent* in which you recognize your duties and live as duty requires.

Perhaps some middle course can be found, the way of the volunteer. The volunteer is the person who takes charge of a situation he did not choose. His way combines consent and choice because as concerns consent, he does not try to remake everything, and as regards choice, he does not passively accept what others have done or what chance has wrought.

Harvey Mansfield, Jr. (1991)

Love is a requirement of freedom because the community to which man is impelled by his social nature is not possible to him merely upon the basis of his gregarious impulse. However closely [people] have been bound together by ties of nature, they cannot relate themselves to one another – in terms which will do justice to both the bonds of nature and the freedom of their spirit – if they are not related in terms of love.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1940)
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Preface

Political moderation was a norm for most Americans from the eve of World War II until the mid-1990s. The 2006 midterm elections and the Obama and McCain presidential candidacies in early 2008 indicate that moderation may be staging a comeback. This is not to say that the postwar decades, or even the final two years of the George W. Bush presidency, were and are devoid of bitter partisanship and acrimony. McCarthyism, the 1960s, and Watergate were infamous monuments to negativity and strife. The Iraq War and global terrorism remain polarizing issues.

But cheek by jowl with these corrosive events have been intervals of civic healing and rediscoveries of common ground:

- Wendell Willkie supported his victorious opponent’s internationalist foreign policy in 1940–1941 and thereby weakened isolationism in the Republican heartland.
- Arthur Vandenberg endorsed the Marshall Plan and other Truman administration foreign policies in 1947–1948 on the ground that Pearl Harbor ended “isolationism for any realist.”
- Dwight Eisenhower’s presidency perpetuated bipartisan, internationalist foreign policy throughout the Cold War.
- Representative William McCulloch, a Robert Taft conservative from Ohio and in 1964 ranking Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, drafted tough enforcement language in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and persuaded Midwestern Republicans to break their historic alliance with Southern Democrats on issues of race.
- Between 1948 and 1951 Martin Luther King, Jr., struggled to find himself at Crozier Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. He read
quickly Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy (1944), but instead of being vaguely transfixed, like many liberal writers, King moved on to consider his own “theistic dilemma”: how could a believer confront the miasma of prejudice and segregation? And how could he not?

- That dilemma threatened to shake the American political system to its foundations, and it was moderates like seminarian King who heard the rumblings first.
- The writings of Reinhold Niebuhr taught him about power, and even more importantly, the memory of his black Baptist upbringing shaped his understanding of Christian mystery. Together Niebuhr and Daddy King – and King believed the voice of God as he prayed following a late night death threat against his family – told him that he was not alone in the cosmos. Before and during Montgomery, King’s theological moderation did its work.

This brief tableau of midcentury political milestones encapsulates the nature of moderation. American political leaders, moderates and nonmoderates alike, have known that healing festering wounds was good politics and may have known in their souls that, even when moderation cost them politically, it was still the right thing to do and a legacy worth securing.

Thus, political moderation did not arise from a subsidence of conflict but was, rather, a response mechanism within American political culture to manifestly destructive levels of partisanship and polarization. Nor did these protective mechanisms function automatically. For one thing, moderates were not high-profile political figures accustomed to the grand gesture or the historic initiative. More often than not, moderates were chastened, Burkean conservatives, humbled in the face of the past. Or they were historic Lockean or Scottish Common Sense liberals, with a reverence for implicit social compacts and an appreciation of interests as being both material and benevolent. Migrations of voters, candidates, and officeholders toward middle ground did not clump moderates into the single heap; yet at the same time, middle ground was familiar and intimate enough that even new arrivals recognized comrades and familiar faces in the crowd.

These moderate habits and inclinations had a long history, and that history is the subject of this book. The Prologue and Introduction trace moderation from the Peloponnesian War to the French Wars of Religion and the English constitutional crises of the seventeenth century. The bulk
of the book examines political moderation in American history through the Civil War and, briefly in the Epilogue, into the 1880s.

This inquiry was not a solitary venture. It goes back several decades to my discovery of moderates among the Loyalists, Patriots, and Evangelicals who were subjects of earlier books. Former graduate students David Turner, Thomas Taylor, Cheryl Junk, John Larkins, Mark Moser, Bradley Foley, Mark Hager, Mike Humphreys, Jay Palmer, and, especially, Kenneth Anthony were “present at the creation” as this project took shape.

More recently, Emily Beaver, Sally Blaser, Theresa Campbell, Dennis Clary, Richard Gorden, John Maass, MaryJulia Moore, Cory Stewart, and, especially, Joseph Moore ably assisted me in the final stages of writing. Marguerite Ross Howell created the index.

In the 1990s, as the book began to take shape, Eugene Genovese and the late Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Mark Noll, Sylvia Frey, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, and Vernon Burton provided decisive advice and support. Chris Beneke, David S. Brown, Timothy Breen, John Buchanan, Andrew Cayton, Janet Cornelius, Daniel Crofts, Jack Davidson, John Dittmer, John Dunn, Clyde Ellis, Ellen Eslinger, James Farmer, Gary Freeze, Sylvia Frey, John Hart, Nathan Hatch, Samuel Hill, David Hsiung, Jack Maddex, Donald Mathews, Ellen Pearson, William Pencak, Jack Pole, Greg Roeber, Constance Schulz, Jonathan Sassi, the late David Smiley, Berk Smith, the late Durward Stokes, Lowry Ware, Robert Weir, the late Harvey Wish, and Michael Zuckerman contributed ideas and insights. Darren Staloff appraised an anonymous early sketch of my argument and offered generous, intuitive suggestions. Lewis Bateman of Cambridge University Press nurtured the book from glimmer of thought to finished work, and his colleague, Eric Crahan, conducted the review process and final revisions. Emily Spangler capably oversaw production of the book, and Stephanie Sakson copyedited the manuscript with thoroughness, insight, and grace.

The editors of the Journal of Scotch Irish Studies and the Journal of the Historical Society permitted articles to be incorporated into this book, and an article published in the Journal of Presbyterian History anchored the closing portions of the study.

With permission of the Johns Hopkins University Press, Chapter 4 emerged from my essay in Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World (2005), edited by Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf. That book is part of a three-volume exploration of themes in the scholarship and teaching of Jack P. Greene, with whom I studied at Western Reserve University in 1960–1964. For each of his eighty-seven
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doctoral students, Professor Greene has, with extraordinary generosity, energy, and insight, remained engaged in our lives as historians, and I hope this book testifies to his gifted teaching and partakes of his rigorous and insightful scholarship.

At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, my first department head, the late Richard Bardolph, and his successors Ann Saab, Allen Trelease, Steven Lawson, William Link, Karl Schleunes, and Charles Bolton, as well as the late Warren Ashby, Richard Whitlock, Murray Arndt, and Fran Arndt, Directors of the Residential College, have, for more than four decades, incorporated me into a supportive intellectual community. To my great good fortune, UNC Greensboro has been blessed with gifted, selfless senior administrators: the late James Ferguson (who pointed out to me, with some urgency, the need for new research on religion and politics in the Old South); William Moran (who asked the specific question about moderation to which this book responds); and the late Mereb Mossman, Robert Miller, James Allen, Stanley Jones, John Young, Walter Beale, Timothy Johnston, Edward Uprichard, Patricia Sullivan, and William Friday, each of whom took personal interest in my work.

Christopher Hodgkins, author of two important books about moderation in British literature, and Josh Hoffman, who teaches a course on the American Constitutional Founding in the Philosophy Department, both read and commented on the Introduction. Hugh Parker helped me with Latin sources, as did Derek Krueger with the history of the early Christian church. Charles Tisdale shared a Gibbon quote on moderation. David Olson, colleague in political science, joined with me in teaching an honors course on moderation and constitutionalism. Former students Frank Dale, Timm Perry, Rusty Robertson, Adam Prior, and the late Bill Mobley memorably explored nooks and crannies of political moderation. Sigrid Walker at the Walter Clinton Jackson Library, now emerita, was a knowledgeable and tireless bibliographical consultant. Gaylord Callahan and her staff scoured the world for interlibrary loans.

Sources on political moderation are scattered throughout the American East Coast, Southern Backcountry, Middle West, and the British Isles. I am indebted to scores of archivists and librarians, especially Rosa Anthony, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Virginia Aull, South Carolina Lutheran Archives; Bill Bynam, Presbyterian Historical Society, Montreat; Bill Erwin, Duke University; Brenda Finley, Roanoke Public Library; the late Richard Fritz, Lutheran
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Theological Southern Seminary; Sara Harwell, Disciples of Christ Historical Society; the late Robert Hill, New York Public Library; Matt Schaefer, State Historical Society of Iowa; Richard Shrader, Southern Historical Collection; Vaughan Stanley, Washington and Lee University; the late F. B. Stitt, Staffordshire Record Office; John Woodard, Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University; and Lisa Long, Ohio Historical Society.

My Western Civilization teaching partners in the 1980s and early 90s – Mary Helms, the late Randolph Bulgin, Henry Levenson, Richard Sher, Richard Whitlock, Fran Arndt, Bradley Macdonald, and Jeffrey Kinard – helped me to connect early America and early modern Europe in the larger scheme of things and prepared me to undertake this project.

In addition to departmental colleagues already mentioned, Richard Barton, Jodi Bilinkoff, Ken Caneva, Peter Carmichael, Ron Cassell, Richard Current, John D’Emilio, Jane de Hart, Jean Gordon, Tom Jackson, Bill Link, Paul Mazgaj, Frank Melton, Kaarin Michaelsen, Stephen Ruzicka, the late Roy Schantz, Lisa Tolbert, and Edwin Yoder shared specific discoveries about moderation in British and American history. Charles Holden, a rising scholar of southern political thought, spent four years at UNCG just as the book was coming together and played a significant role in its development. Loren Schweninger made available the riches of the Race and Slavery Petitions Project. Especially gratifying, fellow early American historians – the late Converse Clowse, Phyllis Hunter, Watson Jennison, and Linda Rupert – have strengthened our common enterprise.

The late Arthur S. Link helped me to plan research in The Papers of Woodrow Wilson and understand Wilson’s historic moderation. Erica Rhodes of Juniata College tracked down David Imes’s property and tax records. Josephine Miller regularly gauged the temper of our times, the progress of the book, and reminded me of the connection between the two. The late Richard Curry and Lawrence Goodheart found a place in American Chameleon for my essay on individualism and religion, which facilitated this study of moderation and religion. Congressman Howard Coble took time to talk with me about moderation, civility, religion and politics, and political ethics. College of Wooster classmates Willem Lange, George McClure, Paul Reeder, Ron Rehner, and Don Custis included moderation in our reunion discussions of politics. The guidance of Martin Luther Stirewalt, Jr., classicist, theologian, church historian, and poet, was of critical importance. Andrew Weisner shaped my
understanding of the Western Catholic tradition. Tracey Hagerty responded thoughtfully to the story of Sally Thomas.

My paper on “American Loyalism, 1774–1775,” presented at Georgetown University in April 1965, privileged moderate loyalists and elicited memorable comments and questions from W. W. Abbott, John Dunn, Rhoda Dorsey, the late Aubrey Christopher Land, and David Skaggs, which informed my research over the next quarter century. I tried out sections of this book before the 1999 meeting of the Historical Society (Drew McCoy and Nan Woodruff, commentators); Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture Conferences in Glasgow (2001) and Williamsburg (2007); the Shenandoah Valley Historical Seminar at James Madison University (organized by Ann McCleary, Warren Hofstra, Christopher Arndt, and Stephen Lockenecker), the Triangle Early American History Seminar (which has included Peter Wood, Elizabeth Fenn, Victor Carnes, Joan Gunderson, Don Higginbotham, John Nelson, and Willis Whichard), and its Piedmont counterpart, SHOpTalk (Michelle Gillespie, Clyde Ellis, Gary Freeze, Charles Irons, Walter Beeker, and Philip Mulder); the Center on Religion in the South (especially Carl Ficken, Susan McArver, Raymond Bost, Paul Jersild, and Kevin Lewis); the St. George Tucker Society; and the Historical Society of North Carolina.

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The same is true of my extended family, three of whom shaped the book in tangible ways. Historical and political discussions with my brother-in-law, the late Tom Nelson, initiated and sustained this project. An empiricist to the core, skeptical of political moderates in his own time and party, and thoughtful, pugnacious, and generous to boot, Tom virtually willed this book into being. At family gatherings in the 1990s, my cousin,
George Johnson, with a bridge-builder’s sense of theory and structure, sent me back to the sources, working harder and having more fun. Finally, my brother-in-law, Carl Stump, fellow western Pennsylvania transplant to the Virginia–Carolina backcountry and a Linwood Holton–Terry Sanford moderate, has been, and remains, a political kindred spirit.

R.M.C.
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