Episode 544: Where Do Liberal and Conservative Skepticism of Liberty Come From?

Guest: Tom Mullen

WOODS: Give me the 60-second thesis of your book, and then we'll get into the details.

MULLEN: Well, what I set out to do in the book was really to examine not just what liberal and conservative politicians do and say, but how they think. What is the underlying philosophy, and I especially wanted to address the idea on both sides, but especially in the conservative movement, that if we could only get a true conservative or an authentic liberal who really represented those philosophies, that everything would be fine. And what I do is I compare the philosophers who everybody cites as the foundational writers and thinkers of both conservatism and liberalism and compare them to what I call the American creed, which is the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence — inalienable rights, government instituted to secure them, etc. — and see if they hold up. I mean, would a true conservative really execute the American creed or would a true liberal do so, and that's what the book is about.

WOODS: Well, let's jump in. Let's do conservatives first, because they're a bit more of a challenge, in a way, because they very ostentatiously associate themselves with the Founding Fathers, and I notice that the order in which you take them on in the book is you do the conservatives first. It sort of reminds me of — I don't mean to make this entirely self-referential, but when I did my last book last year, *Real Dissent*, I took the toughest part of all, the foreign policy part, and put it right at the beginning, so that people would be throwing it down in anger right away, rather than waiting for them to throw it down in anger. So likewise, you start right out with the conservatives. Now, when I listen to conservative rhetoric on TV and when I read it in conservative magazines, it sure sounds to me like they simply want to get back to the Founding Fathers. Is there something misleading about that?

MULLEN: Well, I think you really do in 2015 have to cut through a little bit of rhetoric, because they definitely do lean on that, and they say the word "free market." But if you look at what they really want to do — I mean, what's the greatest example? We're not going to repeal Obamacare; we're going to repeal and replace it. And the question: why does it have to be replaced? Why can't we just start repealing if we really believe government interventions are what cause our problems?

And what I get into in the book is that as you go back in time, I think conservatives were a lot more explicit that they don't really believe in what's in the Declaration of Independence, and you know, the thinkers that even modern conservatives point to, like Russell Kirk, who harkens back to Edmund Burke, really don't have a lot of disagreements with what I call the mounding founding father of conservatism, Thomas Hobbes.

And the main reason that they don't is that they see human nature the same way — all of them do — which is as fallen, kind of depraved because of the original sin or whatever they trace it back to, that without government force and left to his own inclinations, man will always make war against his fellow man. He'll never keep a contract. He will never respect the property or the liberty or the life of anybody else, and so the conservative believes you need force in every space to counteract this, to counteract man's natural inclinations. And as Thomas Hobbes often says, to keep us in awe so that we don't act the way that we otherwise would.

WOODS: Now, there is an initial plausibility to what you're saying, given that there's so much emphasis among conservatives in the political arena on the military and the police. These are the sectors of society that are held up to us repeatedly as models, uniquely so. And it does seem to feed into what you're saying. It seems to be a symptom of what you're saying, that given what man is, we're always more or less on the verge of some kind of catastrophe, and he needs to be held in check, and his passions need to be held in check through the use of force. Now, that's not to say, by the way, that libertarians or the Founding Fathers didn't believe that human beings had passions that needed to be kept in check, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the police are the people to do it.

MULLEN: And you know, what I call the libertarians in the book, which would be the people who agreed with Thomas Jefferson's Preamble in the Declaration of Independence, they do see that without a government there that there is danger. But what the difference between what I would call a libertarian and a conservative is that the libertarian sees man in a more realistic way, in my opinion, which is he's capable of good and evil, and we see people without being forced to voluntarily doing all kinds of philanthropic things. We see them existing peacefully with their fellow people when they really don't have any downside to not doing so. But then we also see them stealing, murdering, lying, cheating, and everything else, so I think the libertarian view of man is actually the most realistic. He's capable of both, and if we're going to employ force, whether by a government or some private institution, it should only be in response to the bad side, to when he does aggress against somebody and commit some sort of real crime with a victim.

WOODS: Also in terms of being realistic, which side sounds like it's really being more realistic about the state and its nature and its likely behavior? The irony is this is the institution that's held up as the preserver of order, as the institution that will help to form man's soul and form his conscience and make him into a good citizen and restrain his wicked appetites and promote his virtues. But given the incentive structure that exists in the state, the state is the very institution in which man's most undesirable

qualities are the most magnified. So it's not a coincidence that it attracts people like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama and George W. Bush and John McCain. These are its natural constituents.

MULLEN: Yeah, and I think you said an important word, which is "promote." One thing the conservative believes that the libertarian does not, in my opinion, is that the government can promote anything. I mean, the best that the libertarian thinks the government can do is thwart evil when it's immediately presented, to defend somebody, and even a lot of libertarians don't even believe it can do that very well. But the conservative believes there's a larger role for the government, to promote virtue, as you said, which means that the government can require certain things of people. The American creed, as I call it, doesn't include that. It only includes securing rights. So you can't require anybody to do anything; you can just prohibit certain actions, and what you can prohibit is very limited.

I do think there's one other important point, though, that you also made, and which I get into the book, which is that there are two kinds of conservatives. There's kind of two schools, and one of them are definitely the Hobbesians or the centralizers, as I call them, and these are the John McCains; these are the George W. Bushes, the Abraham Lincolns, if you go back farther, who say that, look, all the power has got to be in one place, because even if you divide it, let's say, between state and federal government or between branches of government, you have a problem. You have a chink in the armor. Here we go back to the cars turned over and burning and total chaos.

And then there's the other school that says just what you said, that wait a minute, these people in the government are just as fallen as everybody else, so we do need to divide that power up. And what I call the constitutionalists, more the followers of Edmund Burke, say some things should remain local, locally governed. But I think the important point is that whether you're a Burkean constitutionalist or a Hobbesian centralizer, all the power is delegated to the government somewhere, so as I say, if it's not going to be the federal government, it's going to be the state or the municipal or your local school board. Nothing is left to the individual.

On the other side, Thomas Jefferson, John Locke, who was his inspiration, as I go through in the book, they had most power left with the individual, and only the power to thwart aggression against property as delegated to the state.

WOODS: I would say I think you make a bit too strong of a distinction between conservatives and the Founding Fathers on some things. I think this is one of them: Jefferson believed in castration for sodomy, which is not a reflection of a pure idea of individual rights. A lot of early American thinkers, including some Founding Fathers, believed in protective tariffs, rather than a purely laissez faire economy. And a whole lot of them believed in local self government, which did mean the power of local government sometimes to interfere with people's liberties. That sounds like a constitutional conservative to me.

MULLEN: Yeah, and I do get into people not being consistent in the book, and I think, to me, the idea of leaving any power, much less as much as Locke does, is very new. I can't find anybody before Locke to come up with this idea, that the government would never have any more power over the citizens than one individual has over another in the absence of a government. So then, do they apply it very well? Well, they apply it better, and libertarians have applied it better as time goes on. Libertarians in the 21st century apply those ideas much better than Thomas Jefferson or any of his Democratic-Republicans.

And a real good example, John Locke is also cited for religious tolerance, and he said that we should tolerate all religions, but he says you can't tolerate atheism, because then the oaths in court wouldn't have any meaning. And Jefferson breaks from him there and says, no, that's nonsense. We can tolerate atheism just as well as all the others. It doesn't pick my pocket or break my legs. So I mean as time goes on, I think the ideas get applied better. Were they consistent? By no means.

And I think I mention in the book that in *A Summary View* that Jefferson wrote, he's very conservative, very much like a Burkean conservative that these liberties and rights are prescriptive; in other words, we've had them over time, they're established, you can't come in here and change things. So that's kind of my answer to that. I think that you have to always be separating in any one individual, are they thinking like a conservative or are they thinking like what I would call a libertarian or a liberal?

WOODS: I thought it was interesting that you even went to the extreme — and I don't mean extreme in a negative way (laughing) — of saying that conservatives don't necessarily believe in the free market to the extent that you might think they do. And on this, of course we can think back to some 19th century conservatives whose view was that the free market is going to undo all kinds of social relationships that have existed. When the only thing linking us is the almighty dollar, this will dissolve all other types of relationships, and there were all these fears. And this was the sort of thing that Karl Marx even talked about. But as usual, Marx was wrong. I think this was a dumb fear; I think these conservatives were totally — that their analysis was completely off. But there definitely were the Ruskins of the world and others who were fearful that the market was going to upset the established order.

Now having said that, when I listen to Ted Cruz talk about the economy, he sounds pretty laissez faire to me; relatively speaking, he sounds pretty laissez faire. So that's one point that you would have to answer. On the other hand, the Trump phenomenon does seem to line up very well with what you're saying, because Trump is more or less not ideological. Like, he does think that taxes should be cut, but he's not dogmatic about it. He does think that the government is broken, which is a typical sort of conservative think to say. He does think that maybe businesses shouldn't have so many regulations on them, but he's not going to take that to any dogmatic extreme. He's more or less going to go on his instincts. He's a smart guy, and he's going to implement what seems to be necessary, and that seems to include tariffs and all these other interventions, and the Republican base is absolutely eating it up, even though it runs contrary to the ideas they've been telling us they believe for 20 years.

MULLEN: Yeah, and I think — that this is something I'm going to get into in Part II of the book. I released Part I because it wasn't getting better with age, and this book has been mostly written for three or four years. And in this book, Part I, ends at the end of the 19th century, saying things are going to change in the 20th, and I think the way I see things happening in history is that after the Democratic Party kind of got rid of classical liberalism and became the progressive liberal party that it is today, those classical liberal ideas had to reside somewhere.

And I see the more modern Republican Party as this jumble of classic conservatism, which I would associate with Lincoln — Lincoln's a great Hobbesian. He not only believes that there should be interventions — there should be subsidies to corporations, high tariffs, protectionism — but he also believes all the power's got to be in one place. You know, he says so, and he says, like Burke and like Hobbes, that once the social contract is established, it can never be changed. That's the direct refutation of the Declaration of Independence.

So if you follow, I would say, the real, true conservatives through American history are going to go from Hamilton to Henry Clay to Lincoln to, you know, the early — Teddy Roosevelt has the progressive influence there, but really a big government conservative. And then what happens to the Grover Clevelands and the more free market, laissez faire people? They kind of migrate and find the only place in the 20th century that even talks about private property being a good thing, and that's the Republican Party. So you've got — and I think that's where you get this huge — you know, it's always a battleground with the Republicans. It rarely is as much with the Democrats. They're very much all singing the same song, which is we need to undo the economic inequality that occurs because of private property.

WOODS: Now I want to talk about where liberals come from, and of course we're talking about left-liberals, not classical liberals. So now we'll have even more fun. All right, Tom, as much as I like critiquing conservatism or what it's become or some of its initial errors, I have some sympathy for conservatism all the same. I have no sympathy for leftism whatsoever. I guess that's probably become obvious to listeners of the show. I just have no sympathy for it at all, so for me, this is the more fun part, even though — I feel like critiquing the conservatives is like a dreary necessity, for some reason I can critique the Left with gusto. And that's just the way I was raised; it's the influences I had when I was a kid, and there ain't no changing me now. I'm in my 40s, and I'm set in my ways. So let's talk about where liberals come from. And here you talk about Rousseau, which I think is so great and so important, because his imprint is all over these people.

MULLEN: Yeah, I mean I think if you just picked up his two treatises that I talk about in the book, you just can't help but hear Hillary Clinton, hear Barack Obama, hear every Democrat you can remember over the last century — Woodrow Wilson especially, which I get into in Part II of the book. But Rousseau's premise, it's so interesting the striking contrast. So what does he see as man's nature? He doesn't see him as an angel as opposed to Hobbes' devil, but he sees him as kind of this blissfully ignorant Adam-before-the-apple kind of thing; he's wandering through nature, picking

berries, and as you always say, sunshine and rainbows, right? Barely aware of his fellow man, no division of labor, and he's in the Garden of Eden.

And what is it that takes him out of this? It's not eating the apple; it's not original sin; it's when he first gets the idea to acquire private property, when he says, "This is mine," and he finds suckers to believe it — I think, not in so many words, Rousseau says — after that all the conflicts start. And the government's job for Rousseau is to undo these — well, I should say, not only do the conflicts start, but the main defect of the state of nature, the advanced state after private property, which is gross inequalities all over the place. That is the result of having private property, and it's the government's job to make people equal again or as equal as they can be made, at least for Rousseau's purposes, and have some kind of what he would call justice, which has to do with equality rather than equal rights.

WOODS: He also has quite a bit to say about education. What would you say is the most fundamental principle in terms of education that comes from Rousseau that might shock us today?

MULLEN: Well, he comes right out and says that education, the purpose of education is not reading, writing, and arithmetic; it's primary purpose is to what we would now call brainwash or indoctrinate people into loving the government. He doesn't use the word Big Brother, but you might as well when you read the passages about what he says education should do. Of course the government has to control education and make sure that only things that would make people obedient to it and obedient to what he calls the general will, something we would argue doesn't exist. And in some respects, all the actors in my book, the real people share this. Even Jefferson — and this is a very unlibertarian thing — he wanted to indoctrinate people as libertarians. He actually had a resolution passed at the University of Virginia to say this is the ideas that we are going to inculcate in people. So that's one thing that human nature seems to not be able to resist. But back to Rousseau, yes, obedience to the government and conformity is definitely the goal of education for the liberal.

WOODS: How do we see the influence of Rousseau in the typical leftist we might encounter?

MULLEN: Well, there are two things. I mean, obviously, what's the number one issue on the Democratic platform this year? Income inequality. And this is the primary defect of nature that government is supposed to solve for Rousseau. He's not a communist; he doesn't say that we're going to confiscate everybody's property. He says we're going to regulate it, and we're going to make sure that no one gets too rich. You know, there are shades of Plato, although Plato does go communist in some passages, but very much there's going to be an unlimited democracy, and how much property everyone's going to be able to keep or acquire in the first place is going to be heavily determined by majority vote. So the big difference there is there's no limit on what the majority can do in Rousseau's vision, where with Locke and the libertarians, there's a huge limit on what can be voted on.

And it doesn't just extend just to economics. Economics are dominant, but it's equality in everything. So what do we see that the Democratic Party is advocating everywhere? They want everybody to have an equal experience, and it's gotten so outlandish that even men and women are supposed to experience the world exactly the same, and this all stems from the idea that the chief political end is this unqualified equality of all people.

WOODS: What I took away from reading this book — and something I'm not sure you realized as you were writing it — maybe you did. No, you probably did. But I realized it much, much more sharply after reading it, which is that it's just wrong, it's wrong on every level to say that libertarians borrow some from the Left and some from the Right, and that's where their ideology comes from. And that is unfortunately the way it's portrayed, even by heads of major libertarian think-tanks. They say, well, we're fiscally conservative and socially liberal. Like, we don't really have a philosophy; we just take things that we think you guys will like. That is exactly the opposite of the truth. We have a very systematic philosophy that is extremely principled, and it doesn't owe anything to either of these positions. What do you say about that?

MULLEN: No, I absolutely agree, and that's the inspiration for the book. And especially with the conservatives, we tend to get lumped in with the conservatives. But no, the American Revolution as I see it was a war between libertarians and conservatives, and much of the 19th century was the same in American politics. It's not till the 20th that you get the philosophy we now call liberalism coming in. It was a battle very much between the libertarians and the conservatives. Unfortunately the conservatives won a resounding victory. And then here comes the liberals as a reaction, and today that founding libertarian principle of the individual retaining most of his authority and all of his right is just completely gone.

WOODS: Well, the book is *Where Do Conservatives and Liberals Come From?* Of course I will link to it on the show notes page, which is TomWoods.com/544. I'll also link to your website, Tom, TomMullen.net. Anything else I should be linking to on that page?

MULLEN: No, that sounds great, Tom, and I appreciate it very much.

WOODS: It's been a pleasure chatting, Tom. We'll have you back soon. When's the next book coming out?

MULLEN: I've got it targeted for sometime in the spring. Part II's about half written right now, so it should be just as controversial and startling with some of the things that come out in the 20th century.

WOODS: Well, I'm really looking forward to it. We'll definitely have you back to talk about it. Thanks again.

MULLEN: Thank you.