



## Forgotten Conservatives and Libertarians

Guest: Brion McClanahan

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**WOODS:** I would bet a good chunk of this audience knows at least the name William Graham Sumner, so give us the background on Sumner, and then we'll talk about what it was that he thought, and the sort of forbidden opinions that he uttered.

**McCLANAHAN:** Sumner was in many ways in my opinion the best sociologist in American history. You hear that term sociologist, and immediately your eyes are going to roll back, oh, no.

**WOODS:** Yeah, and if he's the best one in American history, talk about the faintest praise in the history of the world.

**McCLANAHAN:** (laughs) Right, because everyone thinks sociologists are all just these—they've all had a sociology class where it's this cultural Marxist who comes in and tells you whatever they believe. So you have Sumner who is a sociologist, but he was great! Here is a guy that was just the epitome of the antithesis of whatever you think sociologists are today. His positions on the economy, on war, on politics, society, are refreshing. You think, this guy was a sociologist? My gosh. And he was writing at a time in the late 19th century when you had progressivism just really taking hold of America, and he was so much against it. Actually at one point I think that because of Sumner people thought progressivism was dead because he ripped it apart so easily, and then it has this resurgence, of course, in the early 20th century. But Sumner is just this great classical liberal, and I know we call—the book is *Forgotten Conservatives*—but Sumner is more accurately a classical liberal or a libertarian in many ways that was very concerned about the power of the state, and of course, the expansion of the state in terms of the economy and, of course, war as well and what that would do to what he called forgotten man—the individual who's being left behind in all of this stuff.

**WOODS:** I'll get to the forgotten man later. Let's talk about an essay Sumner wrote, "The Conquest of the United States by Spain," a very interesting essay, and a very cutesy kind of title. The reader will think to himself, well, I don't recall the United States having been conquered by Spain. What could this madman have in mind? It's perhaps not meant to be so literal.

**McCLANAHAN:** Right, absolutely! Of course, he wrote that essay at the conclusion or about the time of the Spanish-American War, and the United States won. So how are you saying that the United States is conquered by Spain? We won the war! What are you talking about? Well, he was saying, okay, we won the war, but what happened? What we did through this war was pervert the American tradition, which was anti-imperialism. Now we've become this imperialist country. We've gone out and acquired colonies. We've acquired Cuba, and Guam, and Puerto Rico. We've acquired these places, and the Philippines. We've essentially become just like Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries. We have become an international or world power through imperialist motives. He was taking America, the American foreign policy leaders, to task for this and saying this is wrong. What we're doing here is destroying everything we've built up to 1898. Now, I think you could contend that the United States had some imperialist motives at other times in history, but he's saying at this point we've turned the corner. We're no longer what we used to be. We're now just like Spain, and that is to be not loved or admired, it's something we should be opposing completely. So that's why that little cutesy title works, and it's such a powerful essay. If you haven't read it, you should go out and read that. It's one of the top essays to read in terms of anti-imperialism in the United States.

**WOODS:** You know what? Offhand I can't remember if we—gosh this is what happens when you get to be my age. First of all, when you get to be my age, you get to start saying "when you get to be my age." I can't remember if we used any portion of that essay in our book *We Who Dared to Say No to War* [TW note: we did include excerpts from it after all], and if we did, I am glad we did, and if we didn't, the only reason we wouldn't have is that I would feel like it was a bit hackneyed at this point because everybody has read it. But you know, there's always a point in somebody's life where he hasn't read even a classic essay. You have to provide these things for people, so shame on me if I didn't.

What does he mean by the forgotten man?

**McCLANAHAN:** Well, the forgotten man is the guy that's been left behind. Essentially what you have in society when you get to a plutocracy, which is what he was saying America was, is one class getting the benefits, the wealthy, and then you would have a sociological, or a socialism construct. You would have another section, the poor ostensibly, getting benefits. And the people in the middle are left behind in this entire process. You have the rich always going for their own interests, and of course, because of democracy, they are going to oftentimes pander to the poor to give them their interests. But in the middle everyone else is getting taxed to death. They are not getting any benefits from the system. They are being destroyed, and so that's what he said: this is the forgotten man. The man essentially that goes out, pays his taxes, works a job, does everything that he's supposed to do—he's getting hit from both ends of the system and getting nothing out of it.

**WOODS:** Let's shift to Grover Cleveland. If you ask libertarians in particular for favorite presidents, generally they'll roll their eyes, and say, I don't want to talk about my favorite politicians, for heaven's sake, of all the possible things you could ask me! But if you really, really press, you usually get a handful and Cleveland is in that handful. What is it that makes Cleveland what you call him in this chapter title, the last Jeffersonian president?

**McCLANAHAN:** Well, I think he was really the last—you could make a case for maybe Coolidge or Reagan, but he really was the last conservative president we had in the founding tradition in the United States. And that's because Cleveland looked at the office the way that the founding generation looked at the office. For example, when he came into office, you had the Republicans controlling Congress, or at least for years. And they had been doing all kinds of things, unconstitutional legislation, and he came in and used the veto as the founding generation intended it, as a wrecking ball against unconstitutional legislation. What he was vetoing mostly were pension bills. And he was saying these things are completely unconstitutional, so he vetoed them. And of course, the Congress would go irate about this stuff, go bonkers that he was doing this, but he issued more vetoes than anyone combined before him, vetoing all this legislation because it was unconstitutional. He believed in sound money. He believed in free trade and limited central authority. So all the things that we talk about that made the first five presidents for the most part very good was what Cleveland was trying to do. And he was anti-imperialist. So this guy really personified that Jeffersonian tradition in the late 19th century, and he was the last one to do it.

**WOODS:** Yeah, say a little something about what happened in Hawaii under Cleveland's watch as opposed to what happened under McKinley's watch.

**McCLANAHAN:** Right, well, so you had—he had this issue of Hawaii, and essentially, Hawaii is hanging out in the Pacific. It's the halfway point between China and California. And so you had American interests in Hawaii, and there was this fear at one point that the Japanese would take it over, and so then we would lose Hawaii. You had these British and American sugar growers essentially there, and they were saying, here's what we need to do. We need to take Hawaii back from the ruling class in Hawaii, the Hawaiian people, the monarch, and we're going to try to push for annexation to the United States. So they do it. They lead a coup, and they take Hawaii by force, and Cleveland refused to recognize it. He said, no, I am not going to recognize the situation. This was essentially illegal. You've taken it, but I am not going to recognize what you've done because that's not the American way. Of course, when he's out of office and McKinley's in office, they just codify what the American interests had done there by overthrowing the queen and taking it through a coup, which they used the United States Navy to do without the government in Washington knowing about it. This was a disaster in terms of foreign policy, and Cleveland recognized that and said, no, I am not going to back this. I am not going to support this. Whereas when McKinley became president, he did it 100 percent.

**WOODS:** Now, if I am remembering correctly, there was agitation on the part of some Americans with regard to intervening in Cuba even then, even in the second term of Cleveland,

and his response to this was to say that even if Congress were to go ahead and declare war and want to intervene in Cuba, I am the commander in chief, and I just won't call out the troops. Now, I have never heard of any president saying something like that. It just bowls me over that there was somebody who was saying that I as the president am going to be the restraining force when it comes to foreign policy. What is this? It's some kind of crazy Bizarro World we're in.

I want to take the rest of our time to talk about a figure that I think libertarians need to know about even though he was not a libertarian; he was a conservative, but he's a conservative that for the sake of cultural literacy you need to know about. Now, the average American has no idea who he is, so you can be culturally literate without knowing who M.E. Bradford is, but he saw what the neocons were up to before they even realized what they were up to. In that debate that he had with Harry Jaffa he was already putting his finger on how un-conservative the neocons were and that what they were really pushing was a condition of permanent revolution, the absolute opposite of conservatism and really the opposite of libertarianism. Bradford is a guy that libertarians ought to respect, not only because he was a smart guy, he was a gentleman, but he was prescient. He saw what these bad guys were up to very early on.

**McCLANAHAN:** Absolutely! And of course, he was blacklisted by the Reagan Administration for it.

**WOODS:** Yeah, he was blacklisted all through the conservative movement, which is all you need to know about what a great guy he must have been.

**McCLANAHAN:** Right. Bradford taught English, he was an English professor, and he taught the classics in Texas. And he was in so many ways one of the last of what they called the Southern Agrarians. He wasn't that old, and he died in the '90s. I think it was 1994, actually. His main point was, look, we have this founding generation—and in his book on the founding generation, of course, the Constitution, he went through and looked at all the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention and talked about who they were, and this was fantastic, but he wrote essays on the founding generation overall and some different individuals in it. What he essentially said was that Jaffa is wrong because he's distorting the Declaration of Independence and this idea that all men are created equal and what that actually meant. In fact, he differentiated between equality with a lowercase e and equality with capital E.

**WOODS:** All right, before you go any further, tell people who Jaffa is, because I neglected to.

**McCLANAHAN:** Well, okay, Jaffa was a Straussian. He really is a nobody when it comes down to it, but he was a history professor, and I can't remember where he taught.

**WOODS:** I think he was at one of the Claremont colleges on the West Coast. And when you say he's a nobody, you're not just insulting him gratuitously. When we talk about in the field, he's not held in high regard at all. It's only among his fellow Straussians that he's held in high regard, as if he's writing holy scripture, but no one else really thinks much of him.

**McCLANAHAN:** Right, that's exactly right. He's not Forrest McDonald, or Gordon Wood.

**WOODS:** No, no.

**McCLANAHAN:** He's not somebody that's written some great books on the founding era. He just had this idea that the Declaration essentially was a conservative document and the principles behind it were really conservative, and so this society of equality—but as Bradford pointed out, you can't do that. You are distorting what they meant by these things, and so he took them to task. Of course, this also led to a discussion of Lincoln, and this is where Bradford got in a lot of trouble because he pointed out that Lincoln really wasn't a conservative. All the neocons went bonkers over this. How can you not call Lincoln a conservative? He was. But as Bradford said, no, he's not a conservative in the American tradition. He's distorting, perverting this idea of Union and the founding principles, and so as Bradford continued to write, he really started articulating what the Southern Agrarian conservative tradition was. In fact, it's interesting we're talking about that because Kevin Gutzman and I have been having this conversation today on Facebook about this very thing, which is kind of funny, but what is American conservatism? Is it this Hamilton all the way through Lincoln which Jaffa would say, of course, looking at Jefferson's Declaration is kind of the basis of that in some ways or is it something else? And Bradford would be on the side of saying, no, you neocons are wrong. You can't love Lincoln and really be a conservative. That led to his eventual ostracism from the conservative movement.

**WOODS:** It's interesting, Brion, that Russell Kirk, who is sort of an intellectual godfather for conservatives of all stripes, said—it might have been in his book *A Program for Conservatives*; I don't remember exactly which one—that Hamilton does not qualify as a conservative because he was an innovator in so many ways, and conservatism is opposed to reckless innovation. But let me back up on Bradford and Jaffa a bit. We talked a little bit about this when I had our mutual friend Marshall DeRosa on the program. He's written a very good essay on nomocratic and teleocratic regimes. And that's really what this issue between Jaffa and Bradford boils down to: Jaffa is claiming that the American regime is teleocratic and Bradford that it's nomocratic. In other words, Jaffa is looking at the Declaration of Independence and saying this is an ideological mandate for American society and for all societies. That society must be arranged according to the principle of equality. And what Bradford is saying is that, no, we don't have grand, overarching abstractions that begin with capital letters like capital-E equality. We just have a society here where people can live the way they want to live. Now, that sounds a lot more like the libertarian message than what Jaffa is saying. Now, a libertarian may say, wait a minute, I believe in equality. What's the problem with Jaffa saying that equality is the key to everything? One of the problems with it is that equality is one of these concepts that once that particular genie is out of the bottle, it never goes back in again. Your view of equality, Lincoln's view of equality, may not be the same as Hillary Clinton's view of equality, which may not be the same as Cornel West's view of equality, and each one of them will be saying I am simply trying to carry out the political/philosophical mandate of this country, and that means

that I have to impose all kinds of egalitarian schemes on the society. It leads to a condition of permanent revolution. That was Bradford's warning.

**McCLANAHAN:** Exactly right, and of course, that—it's hard to explain that to people when you say there's equality with a capital E and equality with a lowercase e. They don't get it. Equality with a capital E, if you want that, then talk about the French Revolution, because that's what that was. And so essentially you're carrying that forward. It takes perpetual revolution. There's perpetual innovation because you're never going to achieve it, and it's a moving target, and so when you have that, you're going to continually disrupt society, and of course, destroy everything in its path to get what you want. And you're never going to say you have it, and we see that now, right? Look at what the central government is doing today. They are never happy with anything, so they keep changing, or as Obama simply said, remaking America over and over because it only fits within the confines of their head, this is what we have to have, and so we're going to do this, this, and this to enforce it, but then the next one comes along, and they do something else. And so there's continual disruption, and there's no peace in that, and I think that's the important thing about Bradford's position, and of course, libertarian, it's peaceful. It's very peaceful. And I think that's something we really have to hammer home. This is not violent. Capital-E equality is violent. What we are advocating is peace. Get along. You have your society or what you think is great. We have ours and just leave each other alone. What's so bad about that?

**WOODS:** And, of course, when you say that equality can never be reached, of course you're right. The classic example is the thought experiment that Robert Nozick gave about Wilt Chamberlain. Wilt Chamberlain was a great basketball player. Let's say everybody began with equal incomes and equal wealth, but as soon as Wilt Chamberlain comes along, they all want to watch him play basketball. So let's say everybody pays a dollar to go see Wilt Chamberlain play basketball. Now Wilt Chamberlain suddenly has a lot of money and everybody else has \$1 less than he had before. So what's the proper solution to this? Is it that Chamberlain, after providing the basketball service, should then be required to turn around and give everybody his money back? This makes no sense. So this idea—it can never be reached. That's why government loves it, because it gives it a constant pretext for intervention. And I love your view that they are never satisfied. I always say this about the Left. They never get to a point where they say, okay, American society is just the way we want it. We don't need to change anything else. We finally got here. That ain't never gonna happen, is it?

**McCLANAHAN:** No, absolutely not! Where can you show me an example where they have ever been happy with what's there? I don't think you can find one. It's always, well, okay, yeah, this is better, but we can do more. This is okay, but there's always more work to do. You hear that phrase all the time. We have more work to do. What work? What does that mean?

**WOODS:** And we are the raw materials in that work. It's disturbing.  
Why do you think the people in your book are forgotten?

**McCLANAHAN:** Well, that's a very good question. They are not all forgotten in certain circles. You think, as I said, of William Graham Sumner. People know who he is if you're a libertarian, but if you're not a libertarian, you've probably never heard of him before. Or people know who Grover Cleveland is—oh, yeah, he's the guy who served two non-consecutive terms, but they know nothing about him other than that. He's a trivia question. Or John Tyler, oh, yeah, he's the guy that assumed the presidency after that old president died after a month in office. He's that guy. The problem is that these guys articulated positions that are completely contrarian to the established norms in society today. They are not what people want to hear. They want to hear the stuff—the greatness of Lincoln, or the greatness of Roosevelt, or the greatness of some political philosopher that advocates a leftist position. These are the people that are studied because those are the people that like them, and they have control over the thought process, and so I think that's why the neoconservatives dominate the intellectual element of American conservatism.

Libertarians, of course, are making great strides, but for years they weren't really a factor in the American political discourse, and so I think that's it. You just don't have people out there who talk about these people the way they should. When we were actually pitching the book we had to go to a very small publisher, because nobody wanted to publish it. It's unfortunate because we thought this was good stuff that people need to know.

**WOODS:** Yeah, that's interesting because you have published with Regnery, which a major publisher. It's been around since 1947, published all kinds of big names. Think of the big names of the conservative moment, they were published by Regnery or its antecedent, Henry Regnery Company. So that's interesting to me. I think another factor here is that these particular individuals don't fit into neat, little categories. This one is a conservative. This one is a liberal in the modern sense. Well, these people are not neoconservatives, which is unfortunately what conservatism in the modern sense has become. They certainly do not accept any of the pieties of modern liberalism. So therefore, there's no place for them in the comic-book story of America. And of course, if they have some misgivings whatsoever about the course of American foreign policy, then they have to simply be erased from history.

**McCLANAHAN:** Right. Well, you know I actually pitched the book to Regnery, and they turned it down?

**WOODS:** Yeah, that was kind of what I was driving at. I am partly surprised and partly not surprised, and I don't mean to—neither one of us wants to insult Regnery. They do what they do because they want to sell books, and they go for the books they think will sell. If they think this book won't sell as well as they want it to, it doesn't mean that they are bad, it means that frankly, the conservative readership is unreliable when it comes to offering them something that's worthy. You can't be sure they are going to want to buy it. They would rather buy Sean Hannity's ghostwritten book.

**McCLANAHAN:** Right. That's exactly right, and I think that was the response. We don't know if this is going to be successful because of our readership, not that they disagree with it. I think there are some great people at Regnery.

**WOODS:** Yeah, and I think they would like this book, absolutely.

**McCLANAHAN:** Yeah, but they don't know—it's not Ann Coulter, or as you said, Sean Hannity, or take your pick. It's not a book about Obama, which are a dime a dozen now. So it's something different. When Clyde and I were conceptualizing this, we wanted it to be in the tradition of Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*. Well, his conservative mind is snapshots of different people that he though articulated a conservative position.

**WOODS:** And there is no conservative publisher that would be interested—well, there are conservative publishers that would publish that today, but they wouldn't be big publishers.

**McCLANAHAN:** Right, that's exactly right. Of course, that was published by Regnery!

**WOODS:** Yeah! I know.

**McCLANAHAN:** And so we thought, this is going to be great. Somebody is going to want to eat this up. But for example, Sam Ervin, we'll talk about him, but he was a Democrat. Also, people get in that mindset of, well, if he's a Democrat, then he's really not like me because I am a Republican. So you have that situation going on.

**WOODS:** Exactly, yeah, and that's a big part of the Regnery audience. I will just say in closing that when Kevin Gutzman and I wrote *Who Killed the Constitution?* our naïve idea was that we would appeal across ideological lines by blaming everybody. Unfortunately, that's just not how books are sold: hey, everybody has a share of the blame! Nope. You have to sell it: this is the book for conservatives, this is the book for libertarians, this is the book for liberals. That's what people want, unfortunately. So it can be a struggle.