

---

## The Masculinist #42: Why You Should Be on the Advance, Not the Retreat

---

Aaron M. Renn <aaron@aaronrenn.com>

Mon, Jul 13, 2020 at 7:49 AM

To: aaron@aaronrenn.com

Welcome back to the Masculinist, the newsletter about how we live as Christian men and as the church in the modern world.

Subscribe, read back issues, and download free resources at: [www.aaronrenn.com/masculinist](http://www.aaronrenn.com/masculinist) - and please forward far and wide.

I am still planning to launch a podcast, but it's not ready yet. I'm in the process of creating a new, public-facing web site for the Masculinist, something that is overdue. The newsletter has been a semi-hidden page on my personal site for way too long. Along with the new site, I'll be rolling out the podcast as well as the capability of more frequent blog style posts you'll be able to follow. So stay tuned.

Also, now that I'm living in Indianapolis, I'm looking to connect with readers here that I don't already know. Please email me at [aaron@aaronrenn.com](mailto:aaron@aaronrenn.com) to connect.

### The Mentality of Retreat

I've noticed a lot of conservative political types writing about how people should get out of cities in the wake of recent riots, and similar tweets from conservative Christians unhappy with a excessively woke turn from their churches likewise talking about getting out and encouraging other people to do so.

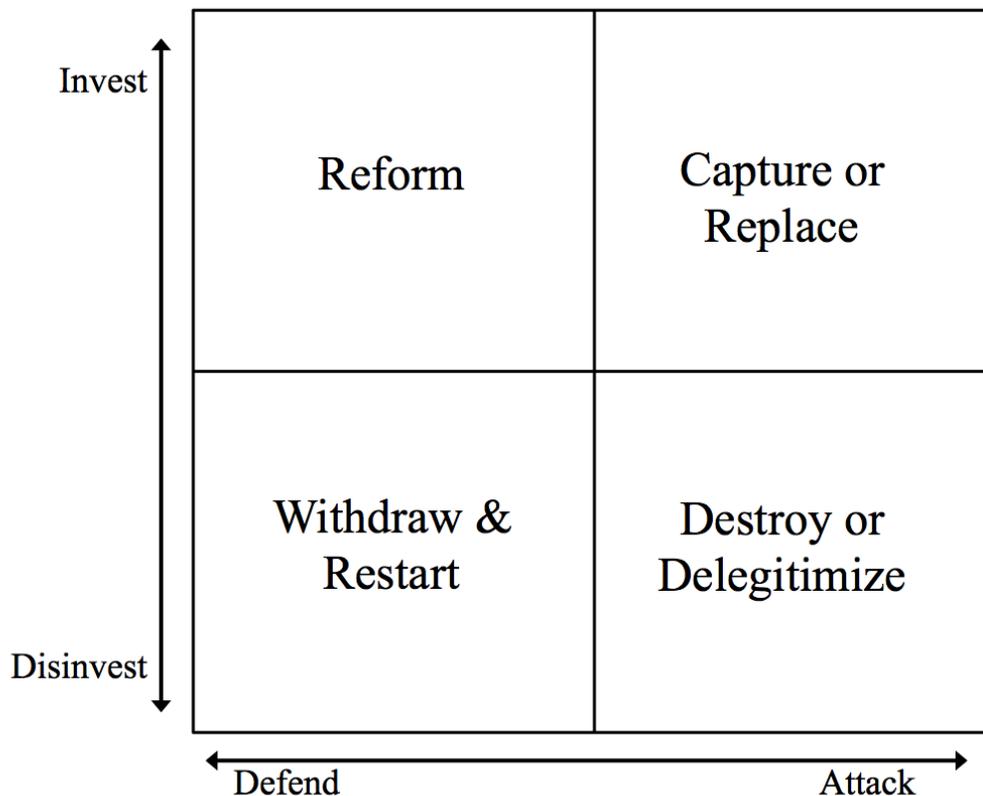
I find these statements highly revealing, not just about conservatives but the majority of Americans, whose default response when encountering problems is to Exit the situation.

In this month's newsletter, I'm going to discuss:

- How running away is the American way,
- The problems of a purely retreating or defensive mindset
- Why too much focus on mission is a bad thing
- The necessity of having an expansionist mindset in at least some domains of life.

Back in [Masc #24](#) I put together this 2x2 matrix of potential responses to institutional decline, defined by the axes of invest-disinvest and defend-attack.

# Institutional Decline Response Framework



In it I noted that conservatives tend to almost default to the bottom left Withdraw and Restart quadrant. By contrast, the left tends towards the attacking Capture strategies of the upper right.

This idea of withdrawing and starting over or switching to a new institution is what Albert O. Hirschman called “Exit” in his 1970 classic *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. I can’t begin to do this book justice here, but would definitely recommend it as it contains a lot of stimulating thought on various dynamics of reforming organizations. I consider Exit a fundamentally defensive strategy. It’s about withdrawing and attempting to escape to someplace else free of our opponents or enemies.

Hirschman observes, “Exit has been accorded an extraordinarily privileged position in the American tradition.” That shouldn’t be surprising. After all, people who chose Exit settled this nation, followed by immigrants likewise pursuing an Exit strategy. The marketplace, which occupies such a central place in the American consciousness, is built on the idea of Exit. If I don’t like what Company A has to offer, I’ll just switch to Company B. And this willingness to switch is what makes the motor of the marketplace function at all.

A friend of mine in Germany is fond of saying that, “We’re the children of the people who stayed.” That would make Americans the children of the people who left. The original Renn who came to America in my family left the Saarland sometime in the mid-1800s. We are a nation of leavers who prefer to run away from our problems and our roots.

Americans have long been a far more mobile society than Europe, reflecting that relative rootlessness. (Internal migration in America has been in decline in recent decades, however).

This willingness to pull up our stakes and move on in search of greener pastures (to the frontier, perhaps) is an almost stereotypically American way of life. Rod Dreher’s prolific commenter “Matt in VA” insightfully notes that there’s nothing conservative in this. He has described, for example, the semi-disposable communities that are built in Texas. It should not be surprising that this brand of “conservatism” has never conserved anything.

But as I said, Exit is hardly limited to conservatives. Hirschman pointed out about the 60s counterculture, “The present-day ‘cop-out’ movement of groups like the hippies is very much in the American tradition; once again dissatisfaction with the surrounding social order leads to flight rather than fight, to withdrawal of the dissatisfied group and to its setting up a separate ‘scene.’” Or think of small town misfits heading to the big city in search of freedom and

a tribe of their own.

In short, Americans, and conservatives in particular, are prone to solve their problem through retreat and Exit – by running away from them or trying to escape the battlefield.

We see this playing out right now in the United Methodist Church, where conservatives negotiated an exit ramp for themselves. The progressive faction is going to retain the present day UMC denomination and its institutional infrastructure. Having read the agreement, I'd consider it a bad deal for the conservatives because getting out is not nearly as easy as they might think. But even with a fairer balloting process, the approach of simply looking to Exit would remain.

## **The Problems of a Retreating Mindset**

Using Exit as a default strategy comes with a number of downsides in the real world. One is that it cedes high value territory or institutions to people who either won't steward them well or who may use them in ways contrary to your values. As Hirschman wrote:

While it is most clearly revealed in the public-private school case, one characteristic is crucial in all the forgoing situations: those customers who care most about the quality of the product and who, therefore, are those who would be most active, reliable, and creative agents of voice are for that reason also those who are apparently likely to exit first in case of deterioration

In fact, has it ever occurred to those advocating that people leave their city, church, etc. that this is exactly what their opponents want them to do? Hirschman notes that in some cases the incumbent management of failed organizations wants to create opportunities for exit in order to get rid of potential troublemakers. He cites the example of Latin American countries offering the right of asylum to foreign leaders and dissidents.

Latin American powerholders have long encouraged their political enemies and potential critics to remove themselves from the scene by voluntary exile. The right of asylum, so generously practiced by all Latin American republics, could almost be considered as a "conspiracy in the restraint of voice."

So by leaving you give up on something established and are forced to start over from scratch. Not only is starting over difficult in general, in some domains it is impossible to replicate the institution you just left. It's highly unlikely anyone will ever create a new high status university from nothing today, for example.

Secondly, the world is dynamic, not static, and the problems that you think you are escaping by Exiting have a tendency to follow you to the next place. The city goes downhill, so people move to the suburbs. A generation later people are moving to a newer suburb on the edge because the older suburbs started declining.

Not only do problems have a way of chasing after us, choosing Exit means we seldom reflect on our own role in creating those problems. Sometimes the problems seem to follow us because the problem is us, or at least is partially related to us.

But sometimes it's not. Sometimes there are social trends that work against you and sometimes you do have enemies that don't like you and will continue to pursue you even as you flee the battle. As the apocryphal Trotsky quote puts it, "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you."

You frequently see this play out in conservative breakaway organizations. They tend to ultimately have a reprise of the same disputes that caused them to split off from the main organization originally. The present day disputes over gender roles in the Presbyterian Church in America are an example of this. And any future conservative breakaway Methodist denomination will encounter similar problems down the road.

There's definitely a place for Exit or retreat. In many contexts, the stakes are low and there's no moral dimension to departure. If your employer is failing or the culture is becoming toxic there, there's no shame in taking a better job elsewhere. You have no ethical duty to stay and fight to save the place.

In other contexts, by the time you realize there's a serious problem in your city, church, or other organization, it's often too advanced for you to effectively combat it. And let's not pretend that fights are always symmetrical or fair. Some people and movements have massive societal support behind them, others don't. Withdrawing and regrouping is sometimes the best option in these cases.

But if all you ever do is retreat, if you never stand and fight to the end, if you never go on the advance, things are not going to go well in the long run. This is, as one writer put it, surrender on the installment plan.

It is true that many Christians have an expansionary, advancing mindset in some areas – a focus on evangelization, for example. But I think many of the things that on the surface look expansionary are in fact defensive or retreating. The new, growing suburb is not actually an example of expansion but of retreat, retreat from the places the people who are moving to the shiny new town are coming from.

In the church world, the bulk of church planting (that is, new church startups) falls into this category. Almost every town in America is replete with struggling and dying churches, but almost nobody ever tries investing in one of those. Instead, they are deemed hopeless and a new church is started instead.

There's nothing more laughable than the web sites of these urban churches that talk about "renewing the city" or some such. 99% of these churches were started recently. These people couldn't even renew one existing church, so why would anyone believe they have what it takes to renew a city?

There are some Christians who've chosen a different path. I'm not surprised that most (but not all) of these are progressives. For example, there's a church here in Indianapolis called Englewood Christian Church. You may know them from their well regarded [Englewood Review of Books](#). They are in a rough area on the East Side of Indianapolis. As the neighborhood went into transition and decline, rather than moving further out to the suburbs, as so many Protestant denominations did, they stayed. What's more, many of their members have stayed too, buying houses and rooting themselves in that community. They've been extremely active both in serving the basic needs of their neighborhood but also community development. They took the attitude that this is our neighborhood and we're not going anywhere. Who knows where it will end, but they have done well so far.

And mostly by chance, I happened to have previously attended two churches in the past that were nearly dead or dying but that were revived by people who went into very risky situations and undertook turnarounds. My impression is that this is highly unusual so I feel fortunate to have experienced it. One result of taking on turnarounds is that these congregations ended up with strategic real estate in the form of church buildings in very expensive places like Lincoln Park and Roscoe Village in Chicago, and the Upper East Side of Manhattan, something very few of these new church startups have.

You should ask yourself in what areas you plan to stand and fight, and in what areas you plan to be on the advance. If there aren't any, that's a very negative sign.

What would a mentality of advancing rather than retreating look like? One example might be in how you pick a church. Are you trying to find the best and "safest" church you can find? Instead perhaps you should consider looking for a less attractive choice, but one where you (and potentially people you recruit to join you) could make a real difference in a place that might otherwise tip the wrong direction. I'm not saying everyone should do this, but it's an example of a different kind of attitude.

## **Excessive Devotion to Mission**

If Americans are typically wired to Exit, then who are the people, typically on the left but only a minority there, who pursue the Attack strategy and seek to capture institutions?

The late science fiction writer Jerry Pournelle coined something he dubbed "[The Iron Law of Bureaucracy](#)" that sheds light on this:

In any bureaucratic organization there will be two kinds of people. First, there will be those who are devoted to the goals of the organization. Examples are dedicated classroom teachers in an educational bureaucracy, many of the engineers and launch technicians and scientists at NASA, even some agricultural scientists and advisors in the former Soviet Union collective farming administration. Secondly, there will be those dedicated to the organization itself. Examples are many of the administrators in the education system, many professors of education, many teachers union officials, much of the NASA headquarters staff, etc. In every case the second group will gain and keep control of the organization. It will write the rules, and control promotions within the organization.

In other words, there are people who are focused on the mission of the organization, and there are those who are

focused on using the organization to achieve other goals, typically self-advancement, but often political or other ones. This second group need not be consciously aware that they are seeking to use the organization this way, but using it they are.

People who are typically classified today as right wing are almost all “mission oriented” in some way. In the Christian context, these are people who want preach the gospel, save souls, feed the hungry, etc. It’s especially notable in the Evangelical world that those that reject various leftist incursions often justify their position by an appeal to the mission of evangelization or some such.

But there are also plenty of people who would boast of being on the political left, who check every progressive box, who fall into the mission oriented category. Consider, for example, a person working in Apple’s iPhone division who is focused on creating “insanely great” phones. People like this are on the left, but are clearly most oriented towards making their organization deliver on its core function.

Yet there are plenty of people within every organization, neighborhood, city, etc. to whom the mission is secondary to other objectives. The vast bulk of these are simple careerists who see the organization primarily as a vehicle for getting ahead personally. Fortunately, in the business world getting ahead is generally linked at some level to advancing the mission of the organization. And conflicts between personal benefit and organizational benefit are mostly well understood and addressed at the management level. Everyone knows that salesmen are basically mercenaries who are seeking to maximize personal compensation, for example. That’s why firms aggressively manage salesmen, their compensation structures, etc. Non-profits, like churches, are much less adept at recognizing and managing this, alas.

But there are other people who have other agendas that they are promoting within organizations. They are seeking to change the organization or its mission to align with their own preferences and to serve different ends.

I believe this is only a minority (albeit not tiny number) of people, but in a world where most people care either about the mission or personal advancement, and in which the default strategy for unhappy people is Exit, it’s not surprising that these activists often gain the upper hand.

In fact, as noted above, these activists actually want you to Exit because that strengthens their hand in taking over the organization.

Unsurprisingly, as these activists (and self-advancers) capture the organization over time, it becomes increasingly unable to deliver on its actual mission. That’s one reason for our overall institutional sclerosis today.

The implication of this is that *you need to care at least as much about the organization as you do about the mission*. Because if you don’t, the organization will be taken over by people who don’t care about the mission and in fact might not even like the mission all that much.

The more I think about it, the more I think there’s almost a sort of pride involved in being too focused on direct mission activities. It’s as if people think they are too pure to get involved in denominational politics or bureaucratic maneuvering.

Sadly, I probably fall into the category of too mission focused myself. I don’t think it’s out of pride in my case (at least I hope not). Rather, it’s because I’m much more interested in developing content than I am building institutional infrastructure or support, or raising money. But if there’s no “organization” then ultimately there’s no mission either, or at least not for long.

That’s one reason I’ve become more aggressive about asking people for money. I have to do a lot of fundraising to keep this going – and more importantly to expand it dramatically - and if I fail to do that it doesn’t matter how true or insightful my writing is.

So yes, I am asking you to become a financial supporter of the Masculinist. You can do it in four ways:

1. Become a supporter on Patreon: [www.patreon.com/masculinist](http://www.patreon.com/masculinist). I have tiers set up for \$100, \$25, or \$10/month, but you can contribute any amount you’d like.
2. For those of you who are only able to contribute \$5/month, I would encourage you subscribe using Gumroad: [www.gumroad.com/masculinist](http://www.gumroad.com/masculinist). You can use Patreon too if you want, but I would prefer you to use Gumroad if possible.

3. PayPal can be used on Gumroad for those who prefer PayPal. I hope to have a direct PayPal option for monthly support soon, but for now if you'd like to make a one time only contribution, you can PayPal me: <https://paypal.me/masculinist> (goes to my Urbanophile business account).

4. Some people have asked to mail checks. If you'd like to do that, please send it to me at PO Box 33171, Indianapolis, IN 46203.

Raising funds for the kind of work I'm doing here is not as easy as it is for many other things, so your support means that much more and I greatly appreciate it.

But the same is true for you as well. You'd better be thinking at least as much if not more about the key organizations that you are part of than you do the actual mission of the organization. That's because maintaining organizational integrity is critical to actually accomplishing the mission. Today, for some people, the best way to actually advance the mission is to be full time focused on institutional integrity

## Summary

In summary:

- Americans in general, and especially conservatives have a mindset of retreat and trying to escape their problems by running away.
- A purely escapist, retreating, or defensive approach is almost certain to lead to long-term defeat. You need to be on the advance in at least some domains.
- People who care about mission tend to undervalue the important of institutional control and fail to understand institutional integrity in missional terms. (I plan to do an entire future issue on institutional integrity).
- Anyone who wants to survive, thrive, or succeed in mission must have a mindset of expansion and be on the advance institutionally and in other domains.
- Strategic retreating and regrouping in some cases is the wise move, but someone who never does anything more than that is a loser who will only keep on losing.

Next month I plan to expand on this with some companion concepts and more examples of what going on the advance looks like.

In the meantime, the question I'd challenge you to answer is where you are personally going to be on the advance and not on the retreat or just keeping your head down.

## Judgment Day Is Coming

The Apostles Creed says that, "Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there He will come to judge the living and the dead."

Christ is ruling now. And Judgment Day is coming. There will be a day of reckoning for us all. That's very important for us to keep in mind as we think about the realities of retreating or advancing.

First, the prospect of giving an account of ourselves should prompt us to take stock of ourselves and repent where necessary.

Second, for those who are in Christ, it provides eternal certainty and hope.

Instead of fearful retreats in this world, this should inspire confidence and boldness. There's no need to fear, and let a fear-based approach lead us to run away from difficult situations. Again, for reasons of wisdom, retreat might be the best option in some cases. But we might also well decide, like Jonathan that "the Lord is not restrained to save by many or by few." (see 1 Samuel 14). Our treasure is, or should be, safe in heaven.

The goal of many in this world is to make you despair. To make you believe that the situation is hopeless, that all is lost. To make you "blackpill" as they say on the internet.

This is a dangerous place to be and one where a Christian should never find himself. It makes you give up on things. But worse yet, it can lead to a Machiavellian view of life, one that believes that any tactic is justified because without us, justice will never be done, one that adopts the dictum that "A man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions

of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil. Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity." (Or to even worse places. This is the logic of incel killers and the like).

Don't get me wrong: I believe in winning where possible. And I think too often we've talked ourselves out of actually seeking to win or out of using fully legitimate tactics to do so because we've imbibed propaganda from people who want us beaten. But despair and fatalism generally lead to terrible outcomes, not victory.

Hope is one of the great theological virtues. And the certainty of Christ's triumphant return should keep us fully grounded in it.

Tim Bayly: [Kingdoms, Government, and Politics Are Not for Us to Know](#).

## How Are You Living and Leading Now?

Back in Masc #38 I wrote on [leadership in the time of the coronavirus](#). The world has only gotten crazier since then and I wanted to check in to see what you decided to do. How are you living and leading right now? For me, one thing I'm doing is pushing forward with the planned mission of the Masculinist, and not let current events overly distract me from that task. This issue, for example, was in part inspired by recent events, but was also something that I'd already wanted to write about. Your mission and plan are not necessarily mine, but you should be thinking about them and acting on them.

## Noteworthy

Last month I mentioned Anthony Bradley and his college course on masculinity. He's now posted his [reading list](#) online.

An interesting animated graphic on [the percentage of men and women in the U.S. married at each age \(18-64\) by year, 1968-2019](#) from @graykimbrough

Brad Wilcox and Lyman Stone: [Empty Cradles Mean a Bleaker Future](#)

Lyman Stone: [The Rise of Childless America](#)

Brookings: [Half a million fewer children? The coming COVID baby bust](#)

## Coda

What's most scary about this moment, at least to me, is not what is happening to statues or in cities or at the hands of HR departments and gangs of vile teenage girls and 44-year-old teenage girls on social media. What's scary is that the forces that could oppose and moderate this stuff are so rotted out that one struggles to see a mechanism for controlling the hysterias of the moment.

"The Villages" are a very easy target and very easy to pick on; it is like picking on Olive Garden or whatever. They are pretty crummy places to be sure. But The Villages and Olive Garden are downmarket/low-status versions of things that aren't much better. Most of Fairfax County in Northern Virginia, where Our Moral Betters (national defense contractors and "intelligence community" secret police and libertarian think-tank writers) live, is not really any better. Much of suburban and urban Texas is no better. And countless medium-sized and smaller towns across the country have let their older, more distinctive and character-ful neighborhoods decay and fall into neglect or even ruin, while building the residential and commercial equivalents of Olive Garden and the Villages alongside the highway exit or out where the farms and orchards used to be. There is anomie, materialism, disconnection, atomization, and the like all over the place. Every fast-food chain restaurant embodies it. They are all built to be pulled down in 20 years. How can we look at our suburbs, our exurbs, our "developments," and the like, and be surprised that our statues and our history and our past is being chucked in the gutter?

How many of those older people in The Villages were born in America's older cities, just before they were abandoned en masse for suburbs, then further-out suburbs, then exurbs, then finally "planned communities" in the middle of nowhere northern Florida? How many Boomers were born places like Buffalo, Chicago, St. Louis, Newark, Poughkeepsie, Pittsburgh, etc., and then spent their lives on a trajectory of abandoning/leaving/moving away from what is old to what is new and shiny and disposable and without a past? The Sun Belt trajectory -- and it is a very

movement conservative/Republican trajectory, the Reagan trajectory, the Bush trajectory, it is embedded in movement conservatism. Abandonment, planned obsolescence, moving away, junking where you came from. "Those poor prole whites [need a U-Haul!](#)"

- Matt in VA comment on [Rod Dreher's blog](#).

PO Box 33171

Indianapolis IN 46203

USA

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Change Subscriber Options](#)