

The Harbour League Articles



The Uneasy Future of American Conservatism

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In the boisterous chatter of current political debate, it is easy to forget that American conservatism has become middle-aged. In 2005 its flagship publication, *National Review*, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. A couple of years before that, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, another star in the conservative firmament, celebrated its own half-century of existence, along with the golden anniversary of Russell Kirk's tour de force, *The Conservative Mind*. In Washington, DC, the Heritage Foundation—the nerve center of the conservative public policy establishment—is now more than thirty years old.

The Anxieties of Maturity

What happens when a political movement reaches maturity? For those within its ranks, the impulse grows to proclaim success and salute its intrepid founders in festschrifts, biographies, and other acts of commemoration. For those outside its ranks, passion yields to envious curiosity: how, the critics wonder, did such a phenomenon come into prominence and power? With the advent of middle age, present-mindedness gives way slowly to increased self-consciousness and a quest for deeper understanding of one's roots.

In 2007 American conservatives are proudly conscious of their past. But mingling with their impulse to celebrate is a discernible note of unease. In part this is a consequence of the instability of the world as we now know it. Particularly since September 11, 2001, Americans of all political persuasions have lived with a heightened sense of the unpredictability of events. Whether the source of anxiety be terrorism abroad, hurricanes at home, the prospect of nuclear weaponry in the hands of Iran, or predictions of an imminent global pandemic of bird flu, many Americans at present are convinced that things are not quite under control. All this makes it risky for anyone in politics to rest on his laurels. Relaxation is impossible. The shape of the future cannot be taken for granted.

Other unsettling perceptions are peculiar to conservatives. Among many on the right, there is a growing realization that conservatism's political

success in recent decades has not been matched by commensurate changes in the way we live. For two generations the critique of the liberal welfare state has been integral to conservative discourse, yet governmental expenditures and regulations continue to grow. Conservatives passionately decry the tide of moral relativism, yet year by year they perceive a further hollowing out of the moral foundations of our civilization. There is a sense, moreover, in parts of the conservative intellectual community, that “the old gray mare, she ain’t what she used to be”: that the conservative movement itself has been corrupted, even transmogrified, on its road to power.

Lurking beneath these anxieties is another, seldom expressed yet not far (one suspects) from the surface of conservative consciousness: when a political or intellectual movement becomes middle-aged, does this mean that its glory days are numbered? Must noonday sunshine fade inevitably into twilight? To put it bluntly: is the sun about to set on the conservative empire?

The Evolution of Fusion

Such questions cannot be addressed in a vacuum. Before we can profitably peer into conservatism’s future, it is necessary to grasp its present configuration and understand how the present came to be. In a post-9/11 world, it would be a bold person indeed who would venture to predict the contingent factors that may affect the prospects of American conservatives. In this respect the future is unknowable. What *is* knowable is conservatism’s past. By examining the recent evolution of the American Right, we can identify some of the internal factors that impinge upon its present, creating the frontier where the next chapter in the conservative saga will be written. In conservatism’s own history, first as an intellectual and then as a political movement, may be found important clues to its problematic present and uncertain future.

Perhaps the most important fact to assimilate about modern American conservatism is that it is not, and has never been, univocal. It is a *coalition* with many points of origin and diverse tendencies, not always easy to reconcile: a river of thought and activism fed by many tributaries. At its best it has been driven not by petty material interests but by ideas and by a driving urge to implement them. It is a coalition, moreover, that has evolved over two generations: a datum of increasing significance.

In 1945, at the close of World War II, no articulate, coordinated conservative intellectual force existed in the United States. There were, at most, scattered voices of protest, profoundly pessimistic about the future of their country and convinced that they were an isolated Remnant, standing athwart history yelling, in the words of William F. Buckley Jr. at *National Review*, “Stop!” History, in fact, seemed to be what the Left was making. The Left—liberals, socialists, even communists—appeared to be in complete control of the twentieth century.

In the beginning, in the aftermath of the war, there was not one right-wing

renaissance but three, each reacting in diverse ways to challenge from the Left. The first of these groupings consisted of libertarians and classical liberals, resisting the threat of the ever-expanding State to individual liberty, free-market capitalism, and individual initiative in the economic realm. Convinced in the 1940s that post-New Deal America was rapidly drifting toward central planning and socialism—toward what the economist Friedrich Hayek famously called “the road to serfdom”—these intellectuals offered a powerful defense of free-market economics that achieved some prominence and influence by the mid-1950s. From men like Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and John Chamberlain in the 1940s and 1950s, to Milton Friedman and the Chicago School economists in the 1960s, to Arthur Laffer and the supply-side economists in the 1980s, and to such recent winners of the Nobel Prize in Economics as Gary Becker, the libertarian conservatives produced a sophisticated defense of free-market capitalism and exerted an enormous influence over the American Right. They helped to make the old verities defensible again after the long nightmare of the Great Depression. The Reagan administration’s policies of tax-rate cutting, deregulation, and encouragement of private-sector economic growth in the 1980s were the direct product of this intellectual legacy. More recently, the current Bush administration’s agenda for tax-cutting can be traced intellectually to the supply-side orthodoxy that captured the Republican Party in the Reagan era.

Much of this perspective was enunciated in powerful books, such as Hayek’s masterly polemic *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), a book now recognized as one of the most influential works published in the English language in the twentieth century. Other works of note included Ludwig von Mises’ *Human Action* (1949), Milton Friedman’s bestselling *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), Thomas Sowell’s *Knowledge and Decisions* (1980), and George Gilder’s *Wealth and Poverty* (1981). On a more popular level, the free-market fiction of Ayn Rand shaped the minds of many, including a young man named Alan Greenspan.

Concurrently, and independently of the libertarians, a second school of nonliberal thought emerged in America in the first decade after World War II: the “new conservatism” or “traditionalism” of such men as Richard Weaver, Peter Viereck, Robert Nisbet, and Russell Kirk. Appalled by totalitarianism, total war, and the development of secular, rootless, mass society during the 1930s and 1940s, the “new conservatives” (as they were then called) urged a return to traditional religious and ethical absolutes and a rejection of the moral relativism that had allegedly corroded Western values and produced an intolerable vacuum filled by demonic ideologies. More European-oriented and historically minded, on the whole, than the classical liberals, the traditionalist conservatives extolled the wisdom of such thinkers as Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and the Anglo-American literary giant T. S. Eliot, and called for a revival of Christian orthodoxy, classical natural law, pre-modern political philosophy, and mediating institutions between the citizen and the state. Why? In order, they said, to reclaim and civilize the spiritual wasteland created by secular liberalism and the false

gods it had permitted to enter the gates.

In provocative books like Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948) and Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community* (1953), the traditionalists expounded a vision of a healthy and virtuous society antithetical to the tenets of contemporary liberalism. From towering European émigré scholars like Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin they learned new techniques for assessing the problem of secular modernity. From Russell Kirk's monumental tome *The Conservative Mind* (1953) the fledgling traditionalists acquired something more: an intellectual genealogy and intellectual respectability. After Kirk's book appeared, no longer could conservatism be dismissed, as John Stuart Mill had dismissed British conservatives a century before, as "the stupid party." No longer could conservatism be disparaged as the philosophy of provincials and philistines. In books like *The Conservative Mind* the high-brow conservative academics of the 1950s struck a blow against the liberals' superiority complex.

Third, there appeared in the 1940s and 1950s, at the onset of the Cold War, a militant, evangelistic anticommunism, shaped by a number of ex-communists and ex-Trotskyists of the 1930s, including Whittaker Chambers, James Burnham, Frank Meyer, and many more. It was also reinforced by anticommunist exiled scholars from Eastern and Central Europe, including Stefan Possony and Gerhart Niemeyer. These former men and women of the Left and their European émigré allies brought to the postwar American Right a profound conviction that America and the West were engaged in a titanic struggle with an implacable adversary—communism—which sought nothing less than the conquest of the world.

Each of these emerging components of the conservative revival shared a deep antipathy to twentieth-century liberalism. To the libertarians, modern liberalism—the liberalism of Franklin Roosevelt and his successors—was the ideology of the ever aggrandizing, bureaucratic welfare state which would, if unchecked, become a centralized totalitarian state, destroying individual liberty and private property. To the traditionalists, modern liberalism was a disintegrative philosophy which, like an acid, was eating away not only at our liberties but also at the ethical and institutional foundations of traditional society, thereby creating a vast spiritual vacuum into which totalitarianism could enter. To the Cold War anticommunists, modern liberalism—rationalistic, relativistic, secular, anti-traditional, quasi-socialist—was by its very nature incapable of vigorously resisting an enemy on its Left. Liberalism to them was *part* of the Left and could not effectively repulse a foe with which it shared so many underlying assumptions. As James Burnham eventually and trenchantly put it, modern liberalism was essentially a means for reconciling the West to its own destruction. Liberalism was the ideology of Western suicide.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the three independent wings of the conservative revolt against the Left began to coalesce. The movement found

its first popular embodiment in the editor of *National Review*, William F. Buckley Jr., who, apart from his extraordinary talents, personified each impulse in the developing coalition. He was at once a traditional Roman Catholic, a defender of the free market, and a staunch anticommunist (a source of his ecumenical appeal to conservatives).

The Evolution of Division

As this consolidation began to occur, certain intellectual problems arose for those who took the name conservative. It was not enough for them to rebel against contemporary liberalism. If they were conservatives, what did they wish to conserve? What was the conservative tradition to which they professed such fealty?

It soon transpired that the conservative intellectuals (not all of whom liked the word “conservative”) gave a variety of answers. Some identified conservatism with the defense of Christian orthodoxy. Some extolled what they labeled the Great Tradition of political philosophy going back to ancient Greece and Rome. Some invoked natural law in opposition to liberalism’s emphasis on natural rights. Some venerated Edmund Burke as their political patron saint. Most admired America’s Founding Fathers and its tradition of limited government and constitutionalism. Some, like Hayek, repudiated the conservative label entirely and styled themselves Old Whigs or classical liberals.

Complicating this quest for philosophical order was a severe challenge to the fragile conservative identity: a growing and permanent tension between the libertarians and the traditionalists. To the libertarians the highest good in society was individual liberty, the emancipation of the autonomous self from external (especially governmental) restraint. To the traditionalists (who tended to be more religiously oriented than most libertarians) the highest social good was not unqualified freedom but decent behavior, or, as they often put it, *ordered* freedom resting ultimately on the cultivation of virtue in the individual soul. Such cultivation, argued traditionalists, did not arise spontaneously. It needed the reinforcement and guidance of mediating institutions and even of the government itself. To put it another way, libertarians tended to believe in the beneficence of an uncoerced and spontaneous social order, both in markets and morals. The traditionalists often agreed, more or less, about the market order, but they were far less sanguine about the unregulated moral order. Spontaneity was not a term of endearment in the traditionalist lexicon.

Not surprisingly, this conflict of visions generated a tremendous polemical controversy on the American Right in the 1960s, as conservative intellectuals attempted to sort out their first principles. The argument became known as the freedom-versus-virtue debate. It fell to a former communist and chief ideologist at *National Review*, a man named Frank Meyer, to formulate a middle way that became known as fusionism—that is, a fusing or

reconciliation of the competing paradigms of the “libs” and the “trads.” As a purely theoretical construct, Meyer’s fusionism was rickety, but as a formula for political action and as an insight into the actual character of American conservatism, Meyer’s project was a considerable success. He taught libertarian and traditionalist purists that they needed each other and that American conservatism must not become doctrinaire. To be relevant and influential, especially politically, it must stand neither for an abstract, dogmatic antistatism nor for a regimenting authoritarianism but for a society in which people are simultaneously free to choose and desirous of choosing the path of virtue.

In arriving at this *modus vivendi*, the architects of fusionism were aided immensely by the third element in the developing coalition: anticommunism, an ideology that everyone could share. The presence in the world of a dangerous external enemy—the Soviet Union, the Evil Empire, the mortal foe of liberty *and* virtue, of freedom *and* faith—was a crucial cement for the nascent conservative movement. The life-and-death stakes of the Cold War helped to curb the temptation of right-wing ideologues to absolutize their competing insights and thereby commit heresy.

Politically, the postwar American Right found its first national expression in the campaign of Senator Barry Goldwater for the presidency of the United States in 1964. The 1964 election had three enduring consequences for conservatives. It created the Democratic congressional majorities which permitted enactment of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society program, the greatest lurch to the Left in domestic policy since the New Deal. It led to conservative capture of the political machinery of the Republican Party. And it created a new national political figure in Ronald Reagan, whose eloquent television speech for Goldwater on the eve of the election led directly to Reagan’s successful candidacy for governor of California two years later.

It was not long after the 1964 election that a new impulse appeared on the intellectual-political scene, one destined to become the fourth component of today’s conservative coalition. The phenomenon became known as neoconservatism. Irving Kristol’s definition conveyed its essence. A neoconservative, he said, was “a liberal who has been mugged by reality.” According to another definition, a neoconservative was someone who uttered two cheers for capitalism instead of three. In any case, one of the salient developments of the late 1960s and 1970s was the intellectual journey of various liberals and social democrats toward conservative positions.

The stresses that produced this migration were many. In part, neoconservatism may be interpreted as the recognition by disillusioned denizens of the Left that good intentions alone do not guarantee good governmental policy and that the actual consequences of liberal social activism in the sixties and seventies were often devastating. In this context, it is clear that one of the key intellectual events of the 1960s was the founding of *The Public Interest* in 1965, an act of revisionist liberalism that

forced many melioristic social scientists to reexamine their premises. In considerable measure neoconservatism was also a reaction of moderate liberals to the antinomian cultural upheavals of the 1960s, particularly on the college and university campuses, and to the eruption of the so-called New Left, with its tendency to blame America first for world tensions and its neoisolationist hostility to a vigorous prosecution of the Cold War.

Many neoconservatives, in fact, were former anticommunist liberals of the Harry Truman/Henry Jackson wing of the Democratic Party who found themselves bereft of a political home after the capture of their party by the followers of George McGovern in 1972. Such names as Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz (the editor of *Commentary*), and Midge Decter come quickly to mind.

To the already existing conservative community, the entry of erstwhile liberals and socialists into its precincts was to have many consequences. One of these was already discernible in the 1970s. Since the days of the New Deal, American liberals had held a near monopoly on the manufacture and distribution of prestige among the intellectual and chattering classes. From a liberal perspective, the libertarian, traditionalist, and Cold War conservatives of the fifties and sixties were eccentric figures, no threat to liberalism's cultural hegemony.

The emerging neoconservatives, however, were an "enemy within" who had made their reputations while still on the left and could not be so easily dismissed. By publicly defecting from the Left, and by critiquing it so effectively, the neoconservatives undermined a hitherto unshakable assumption in academic circles: the belief that only liberalism is an intellectually respectable point of view. By destroying the automatic equation of liberalism with intelligence, the neoconservative intellectuals brought new respectability to the Right and greatly altered the terms of public debate in the United States.

Meanwhile another development—one destined to have enormous political consequences—began to take shape in the late 1970s: the political "great awakening" of what came to be known as the Religious Right. Initially the Religious Right was not primarily a movement of intellectuals at all. It was, rather, a groundswell of protest at the grassroots of America by aroused citizens, many of them Protestant evangelicals, fundamentalists, and pentecostals, but including some Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews as well. While Religious Right leaders like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson appeared to share the foreign policy and economic perspectives of earlier conservatives, their guiding preoccupations lay elsewhere, in what became known as the "social issues": abortion, school prayer, pornography, drug use, sexual deviancy, the vulgarization of mass entertainment, and more. Convinced that American society was in a state of vertiginous moral decline, and that what they called secular humanism—in other words, modern or postmodern liberalism—was the fundamental cause of this decay, the Religious Right exhorted its hitherto politically quiescent followers to enter the public arena in defense of their traditional moral code

and way of life.

In a very real sense the Religious Right was closest in its concerns to traditionalist conservatism. The Religious Right also shared the neoconservatives' revulsion against the nihilism of the sixties. But whereas the traditionalists of the 1940s and 1950s had largely been academics in revolt *against* rootless, mass society, the Religious Right of the 1980s was a revolt *by* the "masses" against the secular virus and its carriers in the nation's elites. And whereas the traditionalist conservatives of the pre-Reagan era had been disproportionately Roman Catholic and the neoconservatives disproportionately Jewish, the religious conservatives who became prominent in the Reagan era were disproportionately drawn from the ranks of long marginalized evangelical Protestants.

And whereas conservative intellectuals had heretofore concentrated most of their energies on national issues (like economic policy and conduct of the Cold War), the Religious Right was different. It addressed the moral traumas experienced by ordinary people in their everyday lives, especially those conflicts affecting the transmission of normative values to the young. Above all, the religious conservatives derived their fervor from an unremitting struggle against what most of them considered the supreme abomination of their time: legalized abortion, a practice that from 1973 to the present has taken the lives of more than 40 million unborn children.

In time the Religious Right acquired intellectually influential voices. Many other conservative writers shared its disquietude about the debasement and de-moralization of culture and joined in various struggles to reverse the tide. The phenomenon gained further momentum from its organic ties to a vast and growing evangelical Protestant subculture: a "parallel universe" (as one observer has called it) of Christian universities, colleges, television and radio stations, magazines, publishing houses, philanthropies, parachurch ministries, crisis pregnancy centers, and bookstores. It acquired still more influence by forging an alliance with like-minded Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews—a conservative ecumenical movement without precedent in American history.

Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of Ecumenicity

Spearheaded at the political level by the Moral Majority and then by the Christian Coalition, the Religious Right brought to American conservatism a moral intensity and populist dimension not seen since the Goldwater campaign of 1964, indeed transcending it. By the end of President Reagan's second term in office, the American Right had grown to encompass five distinct impulses: libertarianism, traditionalism, anticommunism, neoconservatism, and the interfaith Religious Right. And just as William F. Buckley Jr. had done for intellectual conservatives a generation before, so Ronald Reagan in the 1980s performed an ecumenical function politically, giving each faction a seat at the table and a sense of having arrived.

Reagan also did something more. As Michael Barone has recently observed, the Great Communicator gave American conservatism a demotic voice and a more optimistic tone, evoking hope for the future rather than nostalgia for the past. In the dark days of the 1940s and early 1950s, American conservatives had occasionally sounded like General Bullmoose in the Broadway play *L'il Abner*: "Progress is the root of all evil / Bring back the good old days!" Reagan's message more nearly resembled the motto of the General Electric Company (for which he had worked as spokesman in the 1950s): "Progress is our most important product." More than any conservative leader in memory, he reaffirmed the continuing validity and vitality of the American Dream.

With Reagan's political triumph as a clinching incentive, American conservatism completed a transition, already underway in the 1960s, from a defiant, contrarian, minority posture and rhetoric to a confident identification with Middle America. Conservatives who had once perceived themselves as history's losers now saw themselves as the vanguard of the silent majority. With Reagan's presidential candidacy providing the bridge, both the neoconservatives and the Religious Right crossed the Rubicon into the arms of the conservative coalition.

As these disparate elements merged under Reagan into a political as well as intellectual force, they experienced a stirring passage from the world of theory to the world of public policy. Perhaps the most striking feature of conservative intellectual activity in the Age of Reagan was that there was so much of it. The publication of conservative books, articles, and syndicated columns—already substantial in the 1970s—attained in the Reagan era the proportions of an avalanche. Gone were the days when *National Review* and a couple of other periodicals constituted the virtual totality of intelligent conservative journalism in the United States. Increasingly, it seemed that every strand of the conservative movement had its own publication—its own branch, as it were, on the family tree.

This cascade of literature was intimately linked to a second extraordinary trend: the proliferation of a burgeoning network of conservative media, foundations, research centers, and idea-based advocacy groups, from the shores of the Potomac to the farthest corners of the country. By the 1990s literally hundreds of them had come into being. In the legal profession, a phalanx of public interest law firms challenged overweening government in the courts. Among law students and legal scholars, the Federalist Society (founded in 1982) articulated conservative approaches to constitutional interpretation and provided an invaluable resource for networking and information exchange. In the field of environmental policy the Political Economy Research Center (PERC), based in Bozeman, Montana, championed a paradigm shift known as free-market environmentalism. For Religious Right activists, the Focus on the Family organization, the Family Research Council, and the American Center for Law and Justice, among other groups, provided

an arsenal of intellectual and legal ammunition.

The examples are legion, but the point is clear. Within a span of less than a generation, something truly remarkable occurred in American political and intellectual life: a vibrant conservative counterculture was forged. We need not dilate upon its more recent and familiar manifestations, such as the efflorescence of talk radio, the spread of homeschooling and classical Christian schools, and the birth of the blogosphere. Suffice it to note the magnitude of the change. No longer a tiny and marginalized Remnant, the conservative conglomerate as we know it today, Hillary Clinton's "vast right-wing conspiracy," is literally at our fingertips, if we but choose to tune in or log on.

Fueling this surge in programmatic conservatism was another development which the Reagan presidency accelerated: a deepening collaboration between conservative intellectuals and politicians. Such a symbiosis had long been common on the other side of the ideological spectrum. From the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt to the New Frontier of John F. Kennedy to the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson, prominent academicians have regularly supplied "idea power" to the American Left. Since 1980 this "intellectualization" of domestic politics and public policy formulation has extended to the American Right as well.

There was no more dramatic example of this trend than the appearance in the 1970s of a body of thought called "supply-side economics," initially identified with Professor Arthur Laffer of the University of Southern California. In a remarkably short time Laffer's work was enthusiastically publicized by several influential conservative writers until, in the form of tax-reduction legislation sponsored by Representative Jack Kemp and Senator William Roth, it became the official tax policy of the Republican Party. In 1980 Ronald Reagan heartily endorsed this proposal, and he signed a modified form of it into law early in his presidency. No more could it be charged that conservative politicians were stodgy reactionaries lacking in fresh ideas. On the contrary, many of them—like Newt Gingrich, Steve Forbes, and Reagan himself—craved ideas, thrived on ideas, and found in supply-side economics a way of taking the ideological offensive. In supply-side economics, theory and practice decisively merged. The Republican Party has not been the same since.

The Ambiguities of Success and the Perils of Prosperity

The successes of the Reagan years did not come without costs, however. During the 1980s and long afterwards, conservative intellectuals (usually of a traditionalist bent) could be heard to complain at times that the conservative cause was being "reduced to politics," drained of its ethical vision, and deflected from its larger mission of cultural renewal. As the Reagan Revolution passed into history some of its intellectual architects—especially

libertarians— wondered what it had really accomplished. Reagan had tarnished the intellectual pretensions of social democracy, to be sure, and had undermined the legitimacy of the liberal status quo. But he had not overturned it; “big government” was bigger than ever.

More recently, scholars such as Steven Hayward have noted that the rise of “populist” or majoritarian conservatism in the eighties (and beyond) was accompanied by a conspicuous weakening of the antistatist ideology that had long united conservatives. Still others have suggested that conservative politics, like all politics, attracts not only those who come to do good but also those who come to do well. Conservative journalist M. Stanton Evans has famously remarked that over the years some conservatives have gone to Washington believing it to be a cesspool, only to decide that it is really a hot tub.

From the perspective of today it is increasingly apparent that the Reagan presidency coincided with and fostered a profound, generational shift in American conservatism. Before 1980 the American Right had been primarily a movement of dissent, spearheaded by intellectuals. Its capital city (to the extent that it had one) was New York, the home of *National Review*. After 1980 it became a political movement as well, subject to the constraints and temptations of political action. Its capital city, the focus of its dreams and energies, became Washington, DC, itself. Perhaps not coincidentally, in practice if not quite in theory American conservatism today stands well to the left of where it stood in 1980.

Yet even as conservatives in the eighties and nineties escaped the wilderness for the promised land inside the Beltway, the world they wished to conquer was changing in ways that threatened their newfound power. Ask yourself this question: aside from conservatism, what have been the most important social movements in America in the past thirty years? To this historian the answer is plain: feminism and environmentalism. Since the 1970s the United States has been moving right *and* left at the same time. Out in the culture—both highbrow and lowbrow—the vectors of social change have not been pointing in a uniformly conservative direction.

Next, ask yourself this: what has been the most historically consequential date for conservatives in the past generation? September 11, 2001? Perhaps. But surely the other such date was November 9, 1989, the night that the Berlin Wall came down. Since 1989 one of the hallmarks of conservative history has been the reappearance of factional strains in the grand alliance.

By far the most persistent source of discontent on the right has been the status within its ranks of the neoconservatives. To an angry group of traditionalists in the late 1980s who took the label “paleoconservatives,” the “neocons” were “interlopers,” “impostors,” and Johnny-come-latelies who, despite their recent journey to the right, remained essentially secular, Wilsonian, and welfare-statist in their underlying philosophy. In other words, said their critics, they were not truly conservative at all. During the final

phase of the Cold War, and more recently during the war against Islamist terrorism, the paleocons accused the neocons of foisting on the Right a profoundly unconservative, neo-Wilsonian ideology of “global democratic capitalism.” As if, said disgusted paleocons like Patrick Buchanan, Wilsonian “global democracy” were the sum and substance of the conservative vision.

Like the neoconservatives against whom it endlessly polemicized, pugnacious paleoconservatism became a discordant element in conservative circles. Fiercely and defiantly “nationalist” (rather than “internationalist”), skeptical of “global democracy” and entanglements overseas, and fearful of the impact of Third World immigration on America’s Eurocentric culture, Buchananite paleoconservatism increasingly resembled much of the American Right *before* 1945; before, that is, the onset of the Cold War. When Buchanan himself campaigned for the presidency in 1992 under the pre-World War II, anti-interventionist banner of “America First,” the symbolism seemed deliberate and complete.

Nor were neoconservatives the only faction to come under fire from disaffected members of the pre-Reagan Right. To certain libertarians and traditionalists, it appeared that the other latecomer to the coalition, the Religious Right, was also insufficiently antistatist—too willing to use governmental power to implement its moral vision. Congressional intervention in the Terry Schiavo case in 2005 brought some of these latent conflicts to the surface.

Aside from the built-in philosophical tensions with which the conservative coalition has been living for half a century, two fundamental facts of political life explain the recrudescence of intramural debates among conservatives since the Reagan era. The first is what we might call the perils of prosperity. In the 1950s and early 1960s the number of publicly active, conservative intellectuals in the United States was minuscule: perhaps a few dozen at most. Today how can one even begin to conduct such a count? Prosperity has come to conservatism, and with it a multitude of niche markets and specialization on a thousand fronts. With prosperity and specialization have also come signs of sibling rivalry and an attenuation of “movement consciousness,” as the various elements in the coalition pursue their separate agendas.

Although the Heritage Foundation and others have taken important steps to coordinate conservative activism inside the Beltway, the “vast right-wing conspiracy” is now so large and dispersed that no single institution can function as its general staff, as *National Review* was able to do in its early days. No longer does American conservatism have a commanding ecumenical figure like Buckley or Reagan.

As the conservative universe has expanded, there has arisen a tendency to categorize conservatives in ever smaller subgroups. Thus we have the neocons, the paleocons, the “theocons” (theological or religious

conservatives), and the "Leocons" (disciples of Leo Strauss or Straussians). Certain immigrant conservative writers like David Frum and John O'Sullivan have been dubbed "immicons." Traditionalist conservatives with "green" sensibilities and countercultural tastes are called "crunchy cons." Young conservatives have been labeled "minicons." All this is rather playful and amusing, but it does suggest the sectarian impulses at work.

The second fundamental fact of political life that explains the renewal of friction on the right is one that has been hinted at already. It did not escape notice in the early 1990s that the conservatives' uncivil strife coincided with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communism in Europe, and the stunning end of the Cold War. Until then most conservatives had been governed by Benjamin Franklin's prudential advice in 1776: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

Inevitably, after 1989, the question arose: could a movement so identified with unyielding anticommunism survive the disappearance of the adversary in the Kremlin? Or would long-suppressed centrifugal tendencies prevail?

The Challenge of William Jefferson Clinton

The conservative movement, of course, did not crumble in the 1990s. Predictions of its imminent demise proved unfounded. Conservatism since 1945, after all, had always encompassed more than geopolitical anticommunism. The downfall of the Soviet Union did not render obsolete the deeper, civilizational concerns of a Friedrich Hayek, a Richard Weaver, or a Russell Kirk. Conservatives were also helped by the appearance in 1993 of a new unifying agent in the person of William Jefferson Clinton. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that anticommunism supplied much of the glue in the post-1945 conservative coalition and that the death of communism in Europe weakened the fusionist imperative for American conservatives. As the post-Cold War era settled in during the 1990s, many conservatives appeared to be searching for a new, post-anticommunist synthesis of their aspirations.

Indeed, much conservative intellectual activity in the past ten years or so can be interpreted as a succession of efforts to formulate a new fusionism for a new era. In the first term of President Clinton, we saw the rise of the "Leave Us Alone" coalition, united in its detestation of intrusive government, be it in the form of higher taxes, Hillary Clinton's health care plan, gun control, or subversion of private property rights. Its galvanizing principle was that of individual liberty—the libertarian paradigm. A little later, certain neoconservatives at the *Weekly Standard* propounded something called "national greatness" conservatism, an adumbration of the muscular foreign policy of George W. Bush. Bush himself, before he was elected president, expounded what he called "compassionate conservatism." It was among other things a deliberate rebuke of the antistatist thrust of the Leave Us Alone movement and the confrontational governing style of Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, which Bush perceived as an electoral dead-end.

More recently, the metaphor of war—with its insistent summons to unity—has returned to conservative discourse. A new enemy has appeared in radical Islam, and with it a new *raison d'être* for conservatives. The reemergence of foreign threats at the center of public consciousness after 9/11, and after what Charles Krauthammer has called our decade-long “holiday from history,” gave American conservatism a renewed sense of mission grounded on the bedrock principle of national security. In the global war on terrorism most American conservative intellectuals and grassroots activists found the functional equivalent for the Cold War against communism.

On the home front, the cohesion that was once supplied by anticommunism has increasingly come from another “war,” one that seems ever more integral to conservative identity. This is the so-called culture war, pitting an alliance of Roman Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Orthodox Jewish believers against a postmodern, post-Christian, even anti-Christian secular elite whom they perceive to be aggressively hostile to their deepest convictions. Every day fresh tremors break out along this fault line—over abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage, stem-cell research, the Terry Schiavo case, “the war against Christmas,” and the composition of the federal courts. It is a struggle literally over the meaning of right and wrong, a battle (for conservatives) against what Pope Benedict XVI has called “the tyranny of relativism.” It is a protracted and seemingly irrepressible conflict that gives few signs of ebbing, at least among the media and political classes for whom politics seems increasingly to be a form of warfare.

The Challenge of George W. Bush

Whatever its outcome, for the present the conduct of the “culture war” has given most conservatives a renewed sense of purpose and embattlement. Yet all is not well on the Potomac. For a full generation now, American conservatism has thrived as a coalition of five distinct components, each reacting to a perceived external challenge from the Left. Now, for the first time in its history, conservatism confronts an *internal* challenge from an utterly unexpected source: the so-called “transformative” presidency of George W. Bush.

For the Religious Right and the neoconservatives, the Bush years have been relatively congenial ones. The president himself, a born-again Christian from Texas, has assiduously cultivated the Religious Right and has rewarded it with Supreme Court nominations and various public policy initiatives. To this crucial constituency he has appeared to be “one of us.” Together with the Religious Right, many neoconservatives have exerted a powerful influence on the Bush administration’s foreign policies and, just as importantly, on the rhetorical and theoretical garb with which they have been clothed. The editor of *First Things* has even suggested that the pro-life Religious Right and the neoconservatives have become the new center of gravity in the conservative coalition, vessels for a “new fusionism” aimed at remoralizing American life and foreign policy.

Other and older parts of the conservative coalition have been more ambivalent and at times dismayed. Although happy enough with the administration's judicial appointments and tax-cutting policies, they note that, under Bush, Medicare drug benefits have been expanded, educational policy has been increasingly nationalized, and federal spending (at least until recently) has been allowed to soar unchecked. For conservatives whose intellectual roots predate the 1980s, and for whom "limited government" has been a defining mantra, Washington, DC, in 2007 is not a pretty sight. Although "big government" conservatism—or, as they might say, big-government "conservatism"—may now be on the wane (at least in theory), it is painfully clear that a substantial segment of the American electorate has a vested interest in the welfare state and that anything deemed to be a frontal assault upon it is unlikely to be very successful.

Even more than its sometimes heterodox domestic policies, the Bush administration's approach to foreign affairs—especially in Iraq—has placed new stresses on the conservative coalition. The president's audacious assertion of executive power in the war on terrorism has rattled libertarians and others for whom the restraint of executive power is a settled conservative principle. His sweeping invocation of the language of democratic universalism reminds some conservatives of Eleanor Roosevelt—the epitome (for them) of platitudinous naïveté. For those who base their foreign policy outlook on the virtues of prudence and realism, Bush's "hard Wilsonianism" seems egregiously unconservative, although it must be added that, unlike Woodrow Wilson, Bush is not a supranationalist: a fact that has helped to draw conservative patriots to his colors.

With the exception of the paleoconservatives associated with Patrick Buchanan's *American Conservative* magazine, most conservatives, especially younger ones, continue to support Bush's conduct of the War on Terror, as the recent debate over national security wiretapping suggests. The seriousness of the terrorist threat, and the stridency and near hysteria of the antiwar Left, have done much to suppress any inclination on the right to defect from the man in the White House. But some "old school" conservative intellectuals, like George Carey and Jeffrey Hart, are now openly questioning whether the Bush administration is conservative at all. Like a pool player whose opening shot scatters the billiard balls in all directions, the president has unsettled many parts of his putative base. Whether the voices of dissent on the right grow louder will probably depend on contingent events in the Middle East and Asia.

The Future of a Fractious Coalition

And so we come to the uneasy future of American conservatism. It will be uneasy, first, because the global village in which we live is a troubled place, capable of altering the trajectory of our politics in unpredictable ways. It will be uneasy, secondly, because American conservatism, as it has evolved over

two generations, is fundamentally a coalition—which, like all coalitions, contains within itself the potential for its own dissolution.

There is no certainty, for example, that the Religious Right—the largest demographic bloc in the right-wing alliance—will remain mobilized at the level of intensity that has brought conservative victories at the polls in recent years. In 2004 white evangelical Protestants accounted for approximately one-quarter of the voters in the presidential election, and they voted overwhelmingly for Bush. One catalyst for their high turnout was the presence on the ballots in eleven states of initiatives to prohibit homosexual marriage. The existence of these ballot referenda presumably helped the president gain votes, but this is not a tactic than can be replicated at every election.

Will the religious conservatives—“the boots on the ground” of the conservative movement, as Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention has called them—remain in their present state of discipline and zeal? The Religious Right’s agenda of moral reformation has not been easily translatable into public policy, as the “thirty-year war” over abortion abundantly attests. If, for instance, future Supreme Court decisions should thwart the religious conservatives, or should some of their foot soldiers grow weary and discouraged, enough of them might relapse into political passivity to tip the electoral balance against the Right.

Is the long foretold “conservative crackup” just around the corner? Conceivably—but it has not happened yet in fifty years. Despite the genuine (and perennial) risks of such an implosion, despite the inherent philosophical tensions and intramural squabbles that have marked its history, the disintegration of the American Right seems unlikely any time soon. For one thing, each wing of the movement has become thoroughly institutionalized. From the Beltway to the blogosphere, the clusters of purposeful energy (and funding) that social scientists call institutions continue to multiply and flourish. These are not the manifestations of a dying political army. And thanks to such weapons as e-mail, the Internet, and Rush Limbaugh, the permanent mobilization of “the boots on the ground,” an electronic Tammany Hall, so to speak, seems easier than ever.

A conservative crackup is also unlikely because signs of cultural renewal—or at least of hope—continue to appear. One sees it in the growing interest in Christian-oriented movies and in the multiplicity of faith-based initiatives seeking the remoralization of our society: “compassionate conservatism” at the hardy grassroots. One sees it in the rise of what one author has called a “missionary generation” of college students coming out of evangelical Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox Jewish institutions of higher learning. If the “return to religion” that is now taking place on America’s campuses (even in the Ivy League) persists, in fifteen years America may be a much different nation.

Above all, the conservative coalition seems destined to endure because most of the external stimuli that goaded it into existence have not

disappeared. In some respects, they have grown stronger. The Berlin Wall may be gone, and socialist economics may be discredited, but significant sectors of American society continue to move in directions antithetical to conservative beliefs. Particularly in the area of “lifestyles”—of drug use, sexual mores, acceptance of pornography, and taste in mass entertainment—popular attitudes and behavior have veered sharply in a permissive, even neopagan, direction in recent decades.

More than forty years ago the conservative theorist Frank Meyer proclaimed that “the Christian understanding of the nature and destiny of man, which is the foundation of Western civilization, is always and everywhere what conservatives strive to conserve.” Not everyone will accept this formulation. But those who do must admit that large swatches of American life—such as the academy, the media, and the entertainment industry—have become increasingly indifferent, even antagonistic, to the Christian faith and worldview. For defenders of Judeo-Christian ethics—and that means most conservatives—there remains much work to do. There is still a potent enemy on the left.

This precarious state of affairs raises a question. Can a national house so deeply divided govern itself effectively? Can a regime flourish in which the Right dominates the election returns and the making of public policy while the Left dominates our underlying mores and cultural transmission belts? Whether conservatives can thrive indefinitely without victory in the *final* struggle—the contest for our culture—may be the great, unanswered question about American politics.

A number of years ago a young member of the British Conservative Party was campaigning for a seat in Parliament. At a public rally he zestfully defended the Tory platform and concluded: “These are our principles. If you do not like them, we have others!”

American conservatism in its middle age is a diverse movement with many principles, not always easily harmonized. For this reason it may appear to be an unstable coalition. But it has also proved remarkably resilient, united in part by overlapping aspirations and by a recurrent sense of mortal challenge from enemies at home and abroad.

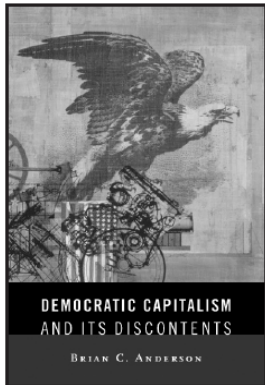
For conservatives the wilderness years are long over. But the conservative ascendancy is incomplete, and tomorrow belongs automatically to no one. If the conservative coalition is to continue to prosper, it must remember the ecumenism of Reagan, resist the tendency to fragment, and avoid the temptation to retreat into a fatal passivity induced by disillusionment or despair. Let not the words of an unknown poet become conservatism’s epitaph:

On the plains of hesitation
Bleach the bones of countless millions
Who, at the dawn of victory,

Sat down to rest,
And, resting, died.

Excerpted, with permission, from The Future of Conservatism: Conflict and Consensus in the Post-Reagan Era, edited by Charles W. Dunn and published by ISI Books, the imprint of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (www.isibooks.org). The author, Dr. George Nash, is a historian and author of seven books, including The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945 (ISI Books). He writes and lectures frequently about American conservatism.

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