

# Conservatism Is Dead

An intellectual autopsy of the movement

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In the tumultuous history of postwar American conservatism, defeats have often contained the seeds of future victory. In 1954, the movement's first national tribune, Senator Joseph McCarthy, was checkmated by the Eisenhower administration and then "condemned" by his Senate colleagues. But the episode, and the passions it aroused, led to the founding of *National Review*, the movement's first serious political journal. Ten years later, the right's next leader, Barry Goldwater, suffered one of the most lopsided losses in election history. Yet the "draft Goldwater" campaign secured control of the GOP for movement conservatives. In 1976, the insurgent challenge by Goldwater's heir, Ronald Reagan, to incumbent president Gerald Ford was thwarted. But Reagan's crusade positioned him to win the presidency four years later and initiate the conservative "revolution" that remade our politics over the next quarter-century. In each instance, crushing defeat gave the movement new strength and pushed it further along the route to ultimate victory.

Today, the situation is much bleaker. After George W. Bush's two terms, conservatives must reckon with the consequences of a presidency that failed, in large part, because of its fervent commitment to movement ideology: the aggressively unilateralist foreign policy; the blind faith in a deregulated, Wall

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Street-centric market; the harshly punitive "culture war" waged against liberal "elites." That these precepts should have found their final, hapless defender in John McCain, who had resisted them for most of his long career, only confirms that movement doctrine retains an inflexible and suffocating grip on the GOP.

More telling than Barack Obama's victory is the consensus, steadily building since Election Day, that the nation has sunk--or been plunged--into its darkest economic passage since the Great Depression. And, as Obama pushes boldly ahead, apparently with public support, the right is struggling to reclaim its authority as the voice of opposition. The contrast with 1993, when the last Democratic president took office, is instructive. Like Obama, Bill Clinton was elected in hard economic times and, like him, promised a stimulus program, only to see his modest proposal (\$19.5 billion) stripped almost bare by the Senate minority leader, Bob Dole, even though Democrats had handily won the White House and Senate Republicans formed nearly as small a minority as they do today. The difference was that the Republicans--disciplined, committed, self-assured--held the ideological advantage, which Dole leveraged through repeated use of the filibuster. Today, such a stratagem seems unthinkable. There is instead almost universal agreement--reinforced by the penitential testimony of Alan Greenspan and, more recently, by grudgingly conciliatory Republicans--that the most plausible economic rescue will involve massive government intervention, quite possibly on the scale of the New Deal/Fair Deal of the 1930s and '40s and perhaps even the New Frontier/Great Society of the 1960s. All this suggests that movement doctrine has not only been defeated but discredited.

Yet, even as the right begins to regroup, it is not clear that its leaders have absorbed the full implications of their defeat. They readily concede that the Democrats are in charge and, in Obama, have a leader of rare political skills. Many on the right also admit that the specific failures of the outgoing administration were legion. But what of the verdict issued on movement conservatism itself?

There, conservatives have offered little apart from self-justifications mixed with harsh appraisals of the Bush years. Some argue that the administration wasn't conservative at all, at least not in the "small government" sense. This is true, but then no president in modern times has seriously attempted to reduce the size of government, and for good reason: Voters don't want it reduced. What they want is government that's "big" for *them*--whether it's Democrats who call for job-training programs and universal health care or Republicans eager to see billions funneled into "much-needed and underfunded defense procurement," as William Kristol recommended shortly after Obama's victory.

Others on the right blame Bush's heterodoxy on interlopers, chief among them Kristol's band of neoconservative warriors at *The Weekly Standard*, who beguiled the administration into the Iraq war and an ill-starred Wilsonian crusade for global democracy. But here again the facts are complicated: Bush's foreign policy owes no more to the neoconservative vision of exportable democracy than to the hard-right "rollback" philosophy of the cold war years. Bush's preemptive war against jihadists, with its promise to "take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge," echoes Goldwater's assertion, in 1960, that "given the dynamic, revolutionary character of the enemy's challenge, we [must] ... always try to engage the enemy at times and places, and with

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weapons, of our own choosing." And it was Reagan, the hero of the movement's putative golden age, who, in 1982, called for a worldwide "crusade for freedom that will engage the faith and fortitude of the next generation."

Perhaps, then, the explanation lies not in the Republicans' ideas but in the defective marketing of them. This is the line taken by party strategists who think Karl Rove and his team of operatives grew complacent after their victories in 2002 and 2004 and failed to update "the brand" to suit changing demographics in Sunbelt states like Colorado and Nevada, with their socially liberal white professionals and economically liberal blue-collar Hispanics. But this thesis evades a big question: Does the movement have anything to offer such constituencies apart from a plea for their votes?

What conservatives have yet to do is confront the large but inescapable truth that movement conservatism is exhausted and quite possibly dead. And yet they should, because the death of movement politics can only be a boon to the right, since it has been clear for some time the movement is profoundly and defiantly *un-conservative*--in its ideas, arguments, strategies, and above all its vision.

**What passes for conservatism** today would have been incomprehensible to its originator, Edmund Burke, who, in the late eighteenth century, set forth the principles by which governments might nurture the "organic" unity that bound a people together even in times of revolutionary upheaval. Burke's conservatism was based not on a particular set of ideological principles but rather on distrust of *all* ideologies. In his most celebrated writings, his denunciation of the French Revolution and its English champions, Burke did not seek to justify the *ancien regime* and its many inequities. Nor did he propose a counter-ideology. Instead he

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warned against the destabilizing perils of revolutionary politics, beginning with its totalizing nostrums. Robespierre and Danton, the movement ideologues of their day, were inflamed with the Enlightenment vision of the ideal civilization and sacrificed to its abstractions the established traditions and institutions of what Burke called "civil society." They placed an idea of the perfect society over and above the need to improve society as it really existed.

At the same time, Burke recognized that governments were obligated to use their powers to meliorate intolerable conditions. He had, for example, supported the American Revolution because its architects, unlike the French rebels, had not sought to destroy the English government; on the contrary, they petitioned for just representation within it. Had King George III complied, he would have strengthened, not weakened, the Crown and Parliament. Instead, he had inflexibly clung to the hard line and so shared responsibility for the Americans' revolt. "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation," Burke warned. The task of the statesman was to maintain equilibrium between "[t]he two principles of conservation and correction." Governance was a perpetual act of compromise--"sometimes between good and evil, and sometimes between evil and evil." In such a scheme there is no useful place for the either/or of ideological purism.

The story of postwar American conservatism is best understood as a continual replay of a single long-standing debate. On one side are those who have upheld the Burkean ideal of replenishing civil society by adjusting to changing conditions. On the other are those committed to a revanchist counterrevolution, the restoration of America's pre-welfare state *ancien regime*. And, time and again, the

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counterrevolutionaries have won. The result is that modern American conservatism has dedicated itself not to fortifying and replenishing civil society but rather to weakening it through a politics of civil warfare.

How did this happen? One reason is that the most intellectually sophisticated founders of postwar conservatism were in many instances ex-Marxists, who moved from left to right but remained persuaded that they were living in revolutionary times and so retained their absolutist fervor. In place of the Marxist dialectic they formulated a Manichaeian politics of good and evil, still with us today, and their strategy was to build a movement based on organizing cultural antagonisms. Many have observed that movement politics most clearly defines itself not by what it yearns to conserve but by what it longs to destroy--"statist" social programs; "socialized medicine"; "big labor"; "activist" Supreme Court justices, the "media elite"; "tenured radicals" on university faculties; "experts" in and out of government.

But, if it's clear what the right is against, what exactly has it been *for*? This question has haunted the movement from its inception in the 1950s, when its principal objective was to undo the New Deal and reinstate the laissez-faire Republicanism of the 1920s. This backward-looking program mystified one leading conservative. Whittaker Chambers, a repentant ex-communist, had passed through a brief counterrevolutionary phase but then, in his last years, had gravitated toward a genuinely classic conservatism. He distilled his thinking in a remarkable sequence of letters written from the self-imposed exile of his Maryland farm, and sent to a young admirer, William F. Buckley Jr. When their relationship began, Buckley--a self-described "radical conservative"--was assembling the group

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of thinkers and writers who would form the core of *National Review*, a journal conceived to contest the "liberal monopolists of 'public opinion.'" Buckley was especially keen to recruit Chambers. But Chambers turned him down. He sympathized with the magazine's opposition to increasingly centralized government, but, in practical terms, he believed challenging it was futile. It was evident that New Deal economics had become the basis for governing in postwar America, and the right had no plausible choice but to accept this fact--not because liberals were all-powerful (as some on the right believed) but rather because what the right called "statism" looked very much like a Burkean "correction."

Chambers witnessed the popular demand for the New Deal firsthand. He raised milch cattle, and his neighbors were farmers. Most were archconservative, even reactionary. They had sent the segregationist Democrat Millard Tydings to the Senate, and then, when Tydings had opposed McCarthy's Red-hunting investigations, they had voted him out of office. They were also sworn enemies of programs like FDR's Agricultural Adjustment Act, which tried to offset the volatility of markets by controlling crop yields and fixing prices. Some had even been indicted for refusing to allow farm officials to inspect their crops. Nonetheless, Chambers observed, his typical neighbor happily accepted federal subsidies. In other words, the farmers wanted it both ways. They wanted the freedom to grow as much as they could, even though it was against their best interests. But they also expected the government to bail them out in difficult times. In sum, "the farmers are signing for a socialist agriculture with their feet."

To Chambers, an avid student of history, this trend toward government reliance was a function of the unstoppable rise of industrial capitalism and the new

technology it had brought forth. Chambers put the matter bluntly: "The machine has made the economy socialistic." And the right had better adjust. "A conservatism that will not accept this situation, he wrote, "is not a political force, or even a twitch: it has become a literary whimsy." It might well be "the duty of intellectuals ... to preach reaction," but only "from an absolute, an ideal standpoint. It is for books and posterity. It does not bear on tactics or daily life. ... Those who remain in the world, if they will not surrender on its terms, must maneuver within its terms. That is what conservatives must decide: how much to give in order to survive at all; how much to give in order not to give up the basic principles."

It sounded like Burke, though Chambers occupied what he called "the Beaconsfield position," a reference to the Earl of Beaconsfield--a.k.a. Benjamin Disraeli, after Burke the second great figure in classic conservatism. In his long career, which spanned most of the nineteenth century, Disraeli advocated "just, necessary, expedient" policies--that is, the policies the public demanded even when they contradicted his own ideological certitudes. Disraeli conceived this approach during the Industrial Revolution, which had caused a serious rupture in England's social structure and also in its politics, as a rising class of capitalists began to accumulate vast wealth and demanded more say, via voting reform, in a government still dominated by the Crown and landed aristocrats. At first, Disraeli favored the status quo because he believed that the monarchy bound different classes together and that centuries of feudal obligation had instilled in the nobility a deep sense of responsibility to the poor, who were most vulnerable to exploitation in the industrialists' factories and workhouses. But, ultimately, Disraeli realized the futility of this argument. As a statesman, he became an innovative reformer, partly to outflank the Liberals, partly to keep the Conservative party



viable in a time of dynamic upheaval, but also because he came to see that, in the modern age, conservatism required an activist government that guarded the interests and needs of the entire population.

Chambers was not alone in seeing a divide between classic conservative thought and the polarizing politics of the movement. Indeed he seems to have been influenced by "The Politics of Nostalgia," an essay by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. published in June 1955, five months before the first issue of *National Review* appeared. Schlesinger's subject was the unexpected rise of "conservatism as a respectable social philosophy" in the postwar period. One book in particular, Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, a sumptuously written survey of the classic Anglo-American tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had attracted much attention. But, Schlesinger noted, there was a strange disconnect. Kirk and others genuinely revered traditional conservatism. And yet, once "they leave the stately field of rhetoric and get down to actual issues of social policy, they tend quietly to forget about Burke and Disraeli and to adopt the views of the American business community." Kirk, for example, denounced federally sponsored school lunch programs as a "vehicle for totalitarianism" and Social Security as a form of "remorseless collectivism."

Where in this, Schlesinger asked, was even a hint of classic conservatism, with its concern for the social and moral costs of unchecked industrial capitalism?

Disraeli with his legislation on behalf of trade unions, his demand for government intervention to improve working conditions, his belief in due process and civil freedom, his support for the extension of suffrage, his insistence on the principle of compulsory education! If there is anything in contemporary America that might

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win the instant sympathy of men like Shaftesbury and Disraeli, it could well be the school lunch program. But for all his talk of mutual responsibility and the organic character of society, Professor Kirk, when he gets down to cases, tends to become a roaring Manchester liberal of the Herbert Hoover school.

For years to come, this paradox would roil the right, which remained split between the Burkean politics of realistic adjustment and the revanchist politics of counterrevolution. The realist Chambers, agreeing at last to write for *National Review*, clung to the Beaconsfield position. He supported the Eisenhower administration's negotiations with the Soviets, defended civil liberties, praised the writings of John Kenneth Galbraith. Another realist, Garry Wills, *National Review's* wunderkind in the 1950s and early '60s, urged a consensus conservatism that "can give the practical art of politics a combination of flexibility and stability" and also "seek 'the common good,' not as some ideal scheme of order, or quantitative accumulation of individual goods, but as the real life of the 'commonality,' of community in all its enriching forms." By contrast, the revanchist (and ex-Trotskyist) Willmoore Kendall--a mentor to both Buckley and Wills--advocated a contemporary politics waged in military terms, "a line of battle between two sets of *combatants*, each fighting to *defeat* the other ... there is a *battle in progress, even a war in progress.*"

At first these debates were intellectual sideshows, with no overt connection to the actual politics of the time. The 1950s and early '60s were the apex of bipartisan consensus. No matter who was in office, whether it was the tightfisted Eisenhower or the free-spending Kennedy and Johnson, government inexorably expanded, driven by the twin engines of what Eisenhower called the "military-industrial

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complex" and a booming post-industrial economy that made it possible to improve conditions for the mass of citizens. But, by the late '60s, the situation had changed. Social disruptions similar to the kinds Burke and Disraeli had experienced had come to America. A "communications revolution" created a culture of continual novelty. And the Vietnam quagmire, combined with a civil rights movement shifting from hope to frustration, undermined the authority of the Democratic Party and its current version of New Deal liberalism. The same policymakers who conceived and executed New Frontier and Great Society programs, from the Peace Corps and Vista to the War on Poverty, were helpless to manage a politics of countercultural protest--from the Berkeley Free Speech Movement to the March on the Pentagon to riots in Watts and Detroit. The most conspicuous energies flowed outside the bounds of organized government and normative society and, in many instances, *against* them both.

Conditions were ripe for a resurgent conservatism predicated on reasserting the values of institutional stability. One who saw this was Buckley, whose politics had steadily matured. In 1968, a cataclysmic year in which two political assassinations and a series of riots made it seem that the country might actually descend into anarchy, Buckley, writing in explicitly Burkean terms, affirmed the need to maintain social order, even if it meant preserving the welfare state. Weeks before the two national conventions were held (each eclipsed by a riot), Buckley wrote a column based on a remark Gerry Bush, a young operative in Hubert Humphrey's campaign, had made to a British journalist. "We can win the election in November," he had said, "but then can we govern the country?" Buckley interviewed Bush and reported that Bush's "stated worries were by no means confined to the difficulties that a Humphrey administration would have in

governing the country. He meant that the serious question has arisen:

Can *anyone* govern the country?"

Buckley had begun to give serious thought to Chambers's equation: "how much to give in order not to give up the basic principles." The reason was a rapid sequence of election campaigns--Goldwater's for president in 1964, Buckley's own for mayor of New York City in 1965, and Reagan's election as governor of California in 1966. Each episode had reinforced a political home truth: The right had a chance of prevailing, but only if it attracted the broad base of voters who were non-ideological and, in some cases, not even attached to either major party. To attract these voters in the middle, the GOP had to acknowledge that most were as dependent on big government as Chambers's Maryland neighbors had been. What was more, amid the upheavals of the '60s citizens wanted government--specifically the federal government--to exert the authority Burke and Disraeli had claimed for it. It made no sense for conservatives to attack "statism" when it was institutions of "the State" that formed the bedrock of civil society. In 1967, when Reagan, soon after his election, was being accused of having sold out his anti-government principles--not least because he had submitted the highest budget in state history--Buckley wondered what exactly critics expected Reagan to do, "padlock the state treasury and give speeches on the Liberty amendment?"

**It was this new sophistication** that propelled modern American conservatism to the heights it reached in 1965-1975, its peak period as an intellectual force. In those years, *The Public Interest* came into existence, with its rigorously nonpartisan policy analysis; Commentary published searching essays by writers

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left (Richard Goodwin), right (Jeane Kirkpatrick), and center (Daniel Patrick Moynihan); *National Review* published Wills and Joan Didion along with bracing columns by Buckley (who proposed, in 1969, that the country would benefit from the election of a black president), James Burnham, and Frank Meyer. The period's two most prescient political books--Wills's *Nixon Agonistes* and Kevin Phillips's *The Emerging Republican Majority*--were shaped in the crucible of the right, and drew on its vocabulary, but were exercises in analysis, not in polemics. Sifting through the 1968 election, Wills concluded: "The liberal Eastern Establishment found it was not needed on election day--which made its leaders take a second look at the Forgotten American, at an angry baffled middle class that, paying the bill for progress, found its values mocked by spokesmen for that progress. These voters felt cheated, disregarded, robbed of respect; and unless their support could be reenlisted, the Establishment's brand of liberalism would perish as a political force."

Phillips, meanwhile, was one of several thinkers who examined a crucial distinction between the New Deal and the Great Society. The first had been a response to an economic emergency. A fearful public had been clamoring for help, and the government had met it responsibly. But the Great Society was developed at a time of supreme confidence among the governing class, who were convinced they could preemptively cure ills invisible to others. Policy intellectuals had moved ahead of the public--perhaps too far ahead. The "war on poverty was not declared at the behest of the poor," Moynihan wrote in the first issue of *The Public Interest* in 1965. "Just the opposite. The poor were not only invisible . . . they were also silent." Coal miners in the Appalachians, the first targeted beneficiaries, "were desperately poor, shockingly unemployed, but neither radical nor in any significant

way restive." The radicalism, such as it was, originated inside the Beltway. Once the program got under way, there was "little involvement from the workers themselves."

As liberals unwittingly squeezed themselves into the stereotypes conservatives had invented, conservative intellectuals began to look like prophets for identifying a self-appointed "managerial elite" (Burnham's term from 1941) that was leading a "liberal revolution" (Kendall's, from 1963). The poor--believers in the American dream, content to struggle upward on their own--had become "a project" for technocrats intoxicated with *nostalgie de la boue*. In his book *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, Moynihan--disillusioned with the programs he helped instate--ridiculed the pretensions of social scientists, "who love poor people [and] ... get along fine with rich people" but "do not have much time for the people in between." "In particular," he wrote, "they would appear to have but little sympathy with the desire for order, and anxiety about change, that are commonly encountered among working-class and lower middle-class persons. The privileged children of the upper middle classes more and more devoted themselves, in the name of helping the oppressed, to outraging the people in between." The absurdities of "social engineering" became sport for observers like Tom Wolfe, who satirized their excesses in *Mau-mauing the Flak Catchers*: "So the poverty professionals were always on the lookout for the bad-acting dudes who were the 'real leaders,' the 'natural leaders,' the 'charismatic figures,' in the ghetto jungle."

This liberal overreach combined with the right's new sophistication promised a new period in U.S. politics, one in which conservatives, fortified by Burkean principles, might emerge as the most articulate voices of "civil society," separating

out the strands of true reform, which drew on inherited values, from "liberal-left" attempts to make those values extinct. Perhaps the Great Society could be retooled, tamed into a legitimate extension of the New Deal. But, to accomplish this, the right would have to deal honestly with capitalism and its many ambiguities.

In 1958, Chambers had declared (following Disraeli): "Conservatism is alien to the very nature of capitalism whose love of life and growth is perpetual change. We are living in one of its periods of breathless acceleration of change." This contradiction and others animated "Capitalism Today," a special issue of *The Public Interest* published in 1970. In an ambitious essay, Daniel Bell wrote that capitalism was transforming society and that "the corporate class," America's most powerful, had "abdicated" its obligation to reconcile its modernizing impulses with traditional values and so bore some responsibility for a contemporary culture in which "antinomianism and anti-institutionalism ruled." Writing in the same issue, Irving Kristol lauded two intellectuals of the industrial era, Matthew Arnold and Herbert Croly--both "liberal reformer[s] with essentially conservative goals." Arnold, Disraeli's contemporary, had deplored the philistinism of the business elite, its complacent indifference to humanism and the arts, while Croly, in his book *The Promise of American Life*, had exposed the emptiness of free-market liturgy and its corollary belief that moral and social benefits could be achieved "merely by liberating the enlightened self-enterprise of the American people." Kristol himself lamented "the ideological barrenness of the liberal and conservative creeds" and said that what America needed was a "combination of the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal."



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In retrospect, two horrific events, Vietnam and Watergate, crowd out all other memories of the early 1970s. But the decade began with the promise of a mature conservatism. Richard Nixon, who took office as a credentialed anticommunist, had the authority to orchestrate a quick end to the Vietnam war, something voters clearly wanted. The civil disruptions that had plagued the late '60s also seemed soluble since the increasing militancy of the protest movements (the Weathermen, the Black Panthers) had tried the public's patience and created the demand for a return to civil society and respect for its governing institutions. Nixon, a protege of the moderate Eisenhower but also the prosecutor of Alger Hiss, seemed well equipped to combine "the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal." And his presidency initially seemed to pursue this objective. In 1969, Kevin Phillips, the most gifted strategist in Nixon's first campaign, recognized the need for Burkean compromise. Since "the emerging Republican majority," as Phillips called it, was sure to be built on the party's cooptation of Southern conservatives and on the frustrations of restive white ethnics, some of whom were attracted to the provocations of the segregationist George Wallace, it was all the more important that "Democratic liberalism" remain "a vital and creative force in modern politics ... injecting a needed leavening of humanism into the middle-class realpolitik of the new Republican coalition."

Of course it didn't happen. Why not? A big reason was Nixon himself. Rather than reconciling the two strains of conservatism, he played them against each other, sometimes strategically, sometimes cynically, sometimes paranoically, always chaotically. He perpetuated civil rights initiatives in the North, but then tried to appease white Southerners with archconservative Supreme Court appointees. Even as Nixon's most inspired cabinet choice, Moynihan, proposed a dramatic program



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for transferring cash directly to the poor, Nixon planted Donald Rumsfeld in the Office of Economic Opportunity, with instructions to dismantle it. In foreign policy, Nixon sent equally mixed messages. His overtures to the Soviet Union and China angered the right; his secret bombing of Cambodia inflamed the left. His legacy would be "the politics of polarization."

The polarization climaxed with Watergate. That cluster of White House crimes, once uncovered and prosecuted, gave conservatives the ideal occasion to reassert their role as guardians of social order. It was, after all, conservatives--most notably Burnham in *Congress and the American Tradition*--who had been inveighing for years against the destabilizing dangers of overreaching "Caesarist" presidents. Burnham was incensed when Nixon invoked "executive privilege" to evade congressional inquiry into "[t]he shoddy little trail of this pipsqueak Watergate business."

But the new generation of movement intellectuals interpreted Watergate differently. Just as liberals suspicious of Bill Clinton rallied around him during his impeachment, so Nixon's critics on the right defended him during Watergate. The true culprit, they decided, wasn't Nixon. It was the dark liberal forces arrayed against him. A "long term change in the equation of political power," Jeffrey Hart theorized in *National Review*, had placed the president at the mercy of "the federal bureaucracy," which, "though nominally part of the 'executive branch,' actually operates with considerable autonomy." But this "long term" change appeared to have happened overnight, with the election of the first president who had ties to the right. Hart also identified a second culprit, the "liberal-left bias of the major media."

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The argument that political power emanated from an alliance of liberal government bureaucrats and a sympathetic press became the favored theme in the movement's next phase, elaborated in neopopulist books like Phillips's *Mediocracy*, Patrick J. Buchanan's *Conservative Votes, Liberal Victories*, and William A. Rusher's *The Making of a New Majority*. In assessing the burgeoning literature of "New Right" ideology, Jeane Kirkpatrick detected a unifying set of beliefs she found delusional:

Among these are the idea that there exists in the electorate a hidden conservative majority; that the social division with the greatest potential political significance is not that between "haves" and "have-nots" but between the liberal elite and everybody else; that a realignment of the parties into two ideologically homogeneous groups is both desirable and likely; that the Republican party may not prove an effective institutional channel for the expression of truly conservative politics and should perhaps be abandoned; and that the principal obstacles to the conservative cause are the nation's media monopolies through whose "distorting lens" is filtered "almost every scrap of information Americans receive of their national government, its programs, policies, and personalities."

It was back to civil war, with some of the most intense skirmishes waged inside the GOP. Buchanan and Rusher, in particular, "were offended by the continuing presence in the Republican Party of a liberal minority which, ideologically speaking, belonged on the other side," Kirkpatrick noted. So preoccupied with doctrinal purity, however, New Right analysts missed the real meaning of the country's rightward drift, which had almost nothing to do with movement ideology. It was true that "a large majority of American adults are conservative," Kirkpatrick

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acknowledged, but in the classic, not movement sense, since "they are attached to the existing society and will support it against challenges to its legitimacy."

The Burkean moment was dissipating, and not only because of New Right populists. In 1975, the same year Phillips's, Buchanan's, and Rusher's manifestos all were published, Irving Kristol, the onetime elegist of the non-ideological "reforming spirit," identified a "new class" of liberal enemies. They were "not much interested in money but are keenly interested in power," Kristol wrote. "Power for what? Well, the power to shape our civilization--a power, which, in a capitalist system, is supposed to reside in the free market. The 'new class' wants to see much of this power redistributed to government, where *they* will then have a major say in how it is exercised." And who, exactly, populated this new class? "[S]cientists, teachers and educational administrators, journalists and others in the communication industries, psychologists, social workers, those lawyers and doctors who make their careers in the expanding public sector, city planners, the staffs of the larger foundations, the upper levels of the government bureaucracy."

This formulation mirrored "the antinomianism and anti-institutionalism" Bell had attributed to the countercultural left. The right, it appeared, was nursing its own version of anti-Americanism. In fact, it had been festering for many years. As Garry Wills, who broke with the movement in the 1970s but continued to call himself a conservative, observed: "The right wing in America is stuck with the paradox of holding a philosophy of 'conserving' an actual order it does not want to conserve."

The attack on the "new class," rooted in cultural hostility, dominated movement conservatism for the next 30 years, up through the administration of George W.

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Bush. On one side, as Rusher described it, were "businessmen, manufacturers, hard-hats, blue-collar workers, and farmers." On the other: "a liberal verbalist elite (the dominant media, the major foundations and research institutions, the educational establishment, the federal and state bureaucracies) and a semipermanent welfare constituency."

The great tribune of this new polarity was Ronald Reagan, with his denunciations of "big government" and the Cadillac-driving "welfare queens" it supported and his devotion (with urging from Kristol) to supply-side economics. The New Right was not only anti-Burkean. For all its populist enthusiasms, it reached back to the plutocratic Old Right of the Depression years, when businessmen had opposed federal assistance to the jobless because (as William E. Leuchtenburg summarized the argument in his book *The Perils of Prosperity*) "the suffering of the unemployed was not the product of an economic breakdown but was the direct result of their moral infirmity."

As Reagan's first term approached its end, it "has achieved as yet hardly anything in bringing the most rapidly growing domestic programs under control," Nathan Glazer concluded, after examining the available budget data. There was a reason nothing was done: The untouched programs benefited the "Reagan Democrats" who had been wooed in 1980 with the pledge that "insurance programs" like Social Security and Medicare would not be touched. The boom had been lowered in only one place: "The advocates of the poor play no role in this administration," Glazer found. "From this fact one can conclude that a certain blindness to their problems at best, and a positive malice at worst, animates the administration's policies." So much for the Beaconsfield position.

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With Reagan, the argument between realism and revanchism all but ended. The revanchists had won. They consolidated their power during the 1990s when Republicans spent the better part of Bill Clinton's two terms trying to delegitimize him, even as he collaborated with them "to end welfare as we know it." The movement's new Danton, Newt Gingrich, who became speaker of the House in 1995, proposed "reforms"--"term limits" for representatives, the purging of moderates from committee chairmanships--that would have mystified conservative thinkers, such as Burnham and Kendall, who had contended that Congress's strength derived in large part from its institutional traditions.

The right, which for so long had deplored the politics of "class warfare," had become the most adept practitioners of that same politics. They had not only abandoned Burke. They had become inverse Marxists, placing loyalty to the movement--the Reagan Revolution--above their civic responsibilities. In 1995, the time of Gingrich's ascendancy, Kristol buoyantly spelled out the terms of revanchist strategy: "American conservatism is a *movement*, a popular movement, not a faction within any political party. Though, inevitably, most conservatives vote Republican, they are not party loyalists and the party has to woo them to win votes. This movement is issue oriented. It will happily meld with the Republican party if the party is 'right' on the issues; if not, it will walk away." By this calculus, all the obligations flow in only one direction. Parties are accountable to movement purists, while purists incur no reciprocal debt. They determine the "right" position, and the party's job is to advance it. Kristol does not consider whether purists might be expected to maneuver at all or even to modify their views--for the good not only of the party but also the larger polity.

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Kristol went on, in this essay, to extol the contributions of two movement subgroups, the neoconservatives and the evangelicals. It was of course this alliance that most fervently supported George W. Bush during his two terms and remains most loyal to him today.

By their lights, they are right to do so. Bush, so often labeled a traitor to conservative principles, was in fact more steadfastly devoted to them than any of his Republican predecessors--including Ronald Reagan. Few on the right acknowledge this today, for obvious reasons. But not so long ago many did. At his peak, following September 11, Bush commanded the loyalties of every major faction of the Republican Party. The big central domestic proposal of his first term, the \$1.3 trillion tax cut, extended Reagan's massive "tax reform" from the 1980s. Shortly before the Iraq invasion, Martin Anderson, Reagan's top domestic policy adviser, told Bill Keller (writing in *The New York Times Magazine*) that Bush was unmistakably Reagan's heir. "On taxes, on education, it was the same. On Social Security, Bush's position was exactly what Reagan always wanted and talked about in the '70s," Anderson said. "I just can't think of any major policy issue on which Bush was different." The prime initiative of Bush's second term, the attempt to privatize Social Security, drew directly on movement scripture: Milton Friedman denounced the "compulsory annuities" of Social Security in *Capitalism and Freedom*. Buckley noted the advantages of "voluntary" accounts in his early manifesto, *Up From Liberalism*. So did Barry Goldwater during his presidential campaign in 1964. Bush went further than Reagan, too, in the war he waged against the federal bureaucracy. And his attacks on the "liberal-left bias of the major media" were the most aggressive since Nixon's.

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And then there was Iraq, the event that shaped Bush's presidency and, by most accounts, brought both him and the movement to ruin. It was also the event most at odds with classic conservative thinking. It is customary even now to say that the architects of the Iraq occupation failed because they naively placed too much faith in democracy. In fact, the problem was just the opposite. So contemptuous of the actual requirements of civil society at home, Bush's war planners gave no serious thought to how difficult it might be to create such a society in a distant land with a vastly different history. Those within the administration who tried to make this case were marginalized or removed from power.

In one of his prescient early writings, *The Vindication of the English Constitution*, a pamphlet published in 1835, the very young Disraeli reviewed the parallel democratizing experiments of his own time. In every nation where democracy had flourished, Disraeli observed, the rule of law was already embedded in social custom. This was why America had easily made the transition from a colonial protectorate to an independent constitutional society, while South American nations had not. Democracy was the fruit, not the precondition, of civil order. "Political institutions, founded on abstract rights and principles, are mere nullities," Disraeli wrote. Europe, too, had its pre-democratic places where "a comparative civilisation had been obtained under the influence of a despotic priesthood. And these are the regions to which it is thought fit suddenly to apply the institutions which regulate the civil life of Yorkshire and of Kent!"

In the end, movement conservatives got the war they wanted--both at home and abroad. It ended, at last, with the 2008 election, and the emergence of a president

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who seems more thoroughly steeped in the principles of Burkean conservatism than any significant thinker or political figure on the right.

What our politics has consistently demanded of its leaders, if they are to ascend to the status of disinterested statesmen, is not the assertion but rather the renunciation of ideology. And the only ideology one can meaningfully renounce is one's own. Liberals did this a generation ago when they shed the programmatic "New Politics" of the left and embraced instead a broad majoritarianism. Now it is time for conservatives to repudiate movement politics and recover their honorable intellectual and political tradition. At its best, conservatism has served the vital function of clarifying our shared connection to the past and of giving articulate voice to the normative beliefs Americans have striven to maintain even in the worst of times. There remains in our politics a place for an authentic conservatism—a conservatism that seeks not to destroy but to conserve.

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