

Godfrey Hodgson: *The World Turned Right Side Up; A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 365 pages. Cloth, \$27.50 (ISBN: 0-395-82294-7); paper \$13.00 (ISBN: 0-395-82293-9)

In the April 1994-issue of *American Historical Review*, Leo Ribuffo asked the question 'Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything About It?'<sup>1</sup> Since then a number of bootls have attempted to fill the information gap. The best contribution so far comes from British historian and journalist Godfrey Hodgson, a lteen observer of American politics, whose previous production includes the popular *America in Our Time* (New Yorlt: Random House, 1976). Hodgson traces the evolution of conservatisin from its status as a discredited political philosophy in the early postwar years to its ascendancy and apparent triumph in the Reagan years. Eventually, however, he questions the notion of a 'Reagan Revolution,' and in the light of the current impasse under the banners of Newt Gingrich, he atteimpts to explain why conservative dreams of political hegemony have so far ended in disappointment.

Apart from a number of interviews with leading conservative figures, the book is solely based on secondary sources. For readers who are familiar with bootls such as George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York, 1976), Martin Anderson's *Revolution* (New Yorlt, 1988), and Thomas & Mary Edsall's *Chain Reaction; The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, 1992), Hodgson's book may hold only a few surprises, but it is a compelling and extremely well-written synthesis of the existing literature. In separate chapters, Hodgson attempts to trace the many streams flowing into the conservative delta. On the way he serves up amusing anecdotes, brief but precise biographical sketches of ltey conservative players, as well as a few largely unknown episodes. One is the story of how forty democratic members of Congress in the Christmas holidays of 1972-1973 seriously contemplated an informal Republican invitation to join the GOP. This near-realignment, which Hodgson calls 'one of the great untold tales of American politics,' became a non-event when the Watergate scandal suddenly hit the front pages.

Among the myths that Hodgson attempts to eradicate is the notion that the new religious Right was first of all triggered by *Roe vs. Wade* and the issue of abortion. What really started their involvement in politics, Hodgson argues, was the Internal Revenue Service's denial of tax exemption to Christian schools on the grounds that they were *de facto* segregated, and thus violated the Fourteenth Amendment. This clash with the regulatory powers of the Federal government allegedly made many fundamentalists realize that they could not continue to isolate themselves from the nation's political life, and they accordingly joined the anti-statist chorus of the conservative movement.

Regardless of all its many qualities, Hodgson's book does have its weaknesses. The

1pp. 438-449. In all fairness, it was actually Alan Brinkley who in the same issue of AHR opened the discussion about conservatism as an underexplored issue in American history ('The Problem of American Conservatism,' pp. 409-429), Ribuffo's article was a response.

author describes it as 'the story of how many indigenous conservative traditions came together as a united political movement,' but does not attempt to define in what sense these different strains constitute a movement, and in the second half of the book he clearly loses interest in conservatism as both an intellectual and a political movement. There are only passing references to the continuing discussions among the various intellectual strains of conservatism, and the struggles within the Republican Party are largely ignored. Hodgson claims that Nixon's opening to China was welcomed by conservatives: 'It was better still [for conservatives] to see an American president in China, always dear to conservative hearts as the place where there would one day be the most souls to save and the most business to be done.' In fact, Nixon's trip to China made part of the Republican Right revolt and support the nomination of Congressman John Ashbrook as a conservative challenger to the president – a significant event in the history of the conservative movement, yet something that Hodgson doesn't mention at all.

In a sense, the real subject of Hodgson's book is not the conservative movement, but the collapse of liberalism. It is not the story of a triumphant movement which in time would win over large segments of the American public, but rather an account of a series of developments which since the great upheaval of the 1960s have altered public attitudes towards social and religious issues, and towards the respective roles of government and business. According to the book, race has been at the center of this process since the early days of the civil rights movement. Southern politics have become nationalized, and the Democratic Party's near-monopoly in that region has ended, but in return national politics have also become 'Southernized,' and race-related issues have been allowed to dominate the political agenda, albeit often disguised as 'cultural' issues.

While a good part of the book is devoted to the issue of how racial tensions have helped the conservative ascendancy, another part of the book concerns the consequences of the so-called Reagan Revolution. Hodgson obviously has affection for Reagan, both as president and as a private person, but contends that 'Reaganomics' with its blend of monetarism and supply-side economics was a disaster which made the United States the most indebted nation on earth and caused a rapid growth in social and economic inequality. In the process, conservatives brought back something many thought long dead: the politics of class. Reagan's optimism, charisma and unabashed nationalism sugar-coated the conservative pill, while the inclusion of the religious right not only further shifted the focus of the political debate away from the politics of rich and poor, but also provided a link between the fiscal conservatism of the elites and the populism of the excluded. The formula worked fine for a while, Hodgson argues, but it never fulfilled conservative dreams of a new Golden Age. The notion of a decisive blow to the welfare state was quickly abandoned, and as for the evangelicals, they were simply taken to the cleaners.

Since the Reagan years, Hodgson argues, the conservative movement has declined because it has allowed itself to become the mere defender of suburban economic privilege. Its vision has eventually proven to be too narrow and non-inclusive. One is tempted to add here that although the conservative *movement* may have reached an impasse, conservative *ideas* are still doing fine. Now they are not merely being forwarded by self-proclaimed conservatives, but also by people who have leapt up the appearance of being liberals.

Regardless of some minor objections, I am truly impressed by *The World Turned Right*

*Side Up*. With its broad scope it is highly recommendable, not just to people with an interest in American conservatism, but to anyone with an interest in American politics. It will also make an excellent addition to the syllabus of anyone teaching U. S. history since 1945.

Niels Bjerre-Poulsen

Copenhagen Business School