American Conservatism, the Republican Right, and Postwar U.S. Political History

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This thematic issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* discusses the rise of American conservatism since World War II and the way issues dear to conservatives increasingly shaped the political conversation and legislative agenda in the United States. The Age of Franklin Roosevelt, with shared prosperity and an expansion of the role of government in welfare and economic activities, came to an end in the late 1970s and has been replaced by the Age of Ronald Reagan, an era of deregulation of business, tax cuts, and a renewed focus on self-reliance. In spite of the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the Age of Reagan is arguably still ongoing. The House of Representatives is led by conservative Republicans, and conservatives in the Senate have repeatedly filibustered Democratic legislative proposals. The Supreme Court has a majority of conservative justices. The Affordable Care Act, President Obama's signature legislative accomplishment, does not have a public option and is based on ideas initiated by Republicans.

In the middle of the 20th century it did not seem likely that conservatism would strongly influence the trajectory of American politics in subsequent decades. In 1950 American literary critic Lionel Trilling claimed that "liber-

alism is not only the dominant, but even the sole, intellectual tradition" in the U.S. According to Trilling, conservatism did not have fully developed ideas, but was expressed in "irritable mental gestures."[1] During the decades after Trilling made his observation, conservatism would definitely shape the direction of American politics. The four articles in this special issue represent different aspects of conservatism. Niels Bjerre-Poulsen examines the roots of modern American conservatism and the early post-war mobilization of the conservative movement. Tom Packer discusses the role of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms in crafting a foreign policy that reflects the values of the conservative movement. Hilde Løvdal Stephens analyzes the significance of evangelical parenting and tension between the Christian values of evangelicals and the increasing degree of secularism of public schools. Leif Magne Lervik assesses the challenge of guns on college campuses in the aftermath of important, recent Supreme Court decisions on the 2nd Amendment. The paragraphs below will contextualize these four articles.

When President Lyndon B. Johnson defeated Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater in a landslide in the 1964 presidential election, scholars and journalists saw the election results as a repudiation of the ideas of the conservative movement, and columnist James Reston of *The New York Times* argued that "Barry Goldwater not only lost the presidential election yesterday but the conservative cause as well."[2] Reston would be mistaken. In subsequent decades conservatives would mobilize and capture the Republican Party. The GOP would win five of the six presidential elections from 1968 to 1988, seize control of both chambers of Congress in the 1994 midterm elections, enact large tax cuts and policies of deregulation during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, and also influence the views of the Democratic Party on economic policy, specifically during the presidency of Bill Clinton.

How was all this possible? It took decades to establish what Sidney Blumenthal has called the "Conservative Counter-Establishment."[3] Ideas were disseminated and political strategists helped build a social movement. In

1 Quoted in John Micklethwait & Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 43.

2 Quoted in Lee Edwards, *Goldwater: The Man Who Made a Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1995), p. 344.

3 Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

his article, Niels Bjerre-Poulsen points out that there were three factions among conservatives: libertarians, traditionalists, and anti-Communists. Anti-Communism was the glue that helped unite the disparate strands of libertarianism and traditionalism. The conservatism of Russell Kirk, inspired by Edmund Burke's belief in institutions, order and religious values, was not easy to reconcile with the libertarian views of Friedrich Hayek that emphasized laissez-faire capitalism and the danger of state planning. In his 2002 book *Right Face: Organizing the American Conservative Movement, 1945*-65, Bjerre-Poulsen describes the process of coalescing libertarians and traditionalists as "fusing ice and fire."[4] Yet both factions repudiated the New Deal's expansion of the federal government apparatus and sought to take the United States in a new political direction.

Founder of *National Review* William Buckley played a highly significant role as a facilitator in unifying different types of conservatives. Both libertarians and traditionalists were welcome to write articles on behalf of the magazine. Moreover, as Bjerre-Poulsen argues in his article, Buckley served as a gatekeeper, refusing to embrace the positions of right-wing groups that were located outside of mainstream American conservatism, such as the John Birch Society. Bjerre-Poulsen contends that the modern Republican Party no longer has any gatekeeper that matches Buckley's stature, and he points out that the John Birch Society was a co-sponsor of the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (C-PAC) in 2010.

The 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater was important in shifting the gravity of the Republican Party from the Northeast towards the South and the West. Bjerre-Poulsen discusses the significance of Goldwater's victory in the states of the Deep South for the "southernization" of the Republican Party. Nixon and Reagan could build on the work of Goldwater in order to attract racially conservative white southerners. The South was transformed from a Democratic stronghold to Republican territory, first in presidential elections and subsequently in congressional elections.[5]

Moreover, the Goldwater campaign was significant in bringing together many young ideological conservatives who would become key political strategists and activists in the emerging New Right of the 1970s. The mobi-

4 Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face: Organizing the American Conservative Movement: 1945-65* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press/University of Copenhagen, 2002), ch. 2.

5 See Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Vital South: How Presidents Are Elected* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

lization of the conservatives in the 1970s was partly a reaction against the social tension of the 1960s and partly an effect of the disillusionment with President Richard Nixon's domestic policies. In office Nixon would govern from the middle, and the large Democratic majority in Congress made it virtually impossible to enact conservative economic policies. In spite of nominating conservative justices to the Supreme Court, Nixon did little to break with the Great Society policies of Johnson, and the federal government's regulatory capacity was expanded considerably with the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970), The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (1970), the National Traffic Safety Commission (1970), and the Mine Safety and Health Administration (1973).

A significant event that spawned the campaign by conservatives to roll back the liberal regulatory agenda was the widespread circulation of a memorandum by Lewis Powell in 1971 on behalf of the Chamber of Commerce. Powell, who would soon be appointed by Nixon to the Supreme Court, claimed that the American system of free enterprise was under attack, and that business leaders needed to organize to fight back. According to French reporter Eric Laurent, the memo "sketched out a strategy to be adopted not merely to reconquer the power and influence that had been lost, but also to establish an enduring domination over American politics and society."[6] Business leaders certainly took Powell's warning seriously, and already the year after, the Business Roundtable of influential CEOs was founded. As sociologist Jerome Himmelstein points out, the emergence of the Roundtable is particularly interesting due to the "historical fragmentation of business lobbying." The Roundtable represented most of the large corporations and "combined lobbying on discrete issues with broad-gauged policy-making."[7] During the 1970s business groups would mobilize through political action committees and lobbying organizations. Entrepreneurs Richard Mellon Scaife and Joseph Coors were important for the funding of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C. that was established in 1973.

In the mid-1970s a group of political strategists formed what they called the New Right. Among these were direct-mail fundraiser Richard Viguerie and political strategists Paul Weyrich, Howard Phillips, and John "Terry"

6 Eric Laurent, *Bush's Secret World* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004), p. 13.

7 Jerome L. Himmelstein, *To The Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1990), p. 139.

Dolan. The New Right was deeply disappointed with the failure of Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford to turn American politics away from the New Deal-Great Society trajectory. Richard Viguerie has referred to President Ford's appointment of former New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller as his vice-president as the moment that launched the New Right network. Viguerie has noted that "[t]he Republican party is like a disabled tank on a bridge we have to cross. The only way we're going to cross the bridge is to take the tank and shove it into the river."[8]

The conservative groups needed access to politicians in order to influence the enactment of new legislation. One of the key lawmakers of the 1970s and 1980s was Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, whose work Tom Packer describes in his article. In several ways Senator Helms was the link between the strategists of the New Right and the conservatives in Congress. He had a large congressional staff that operated a mailing list that helped him raise substantial amounts of money for his reelection campaigns and for the campaigns of other conservatives. Packer discusses how Helms helped shape the foreign-policy views of the conservative movement. Packer argues that there were several principles that influenced his foreign-policy opinions, such as the notion that there should be no limits to American sovereignty, and Packer claims that Helms was a proponent of nationalist unilateralism. Helms played a leading role in the opposition of conservatives to the Panama Canal Treaties, which President Jimmy Carter signed in 1977. According to Packer, Helms was not an isolationist, but he rejected the view that international institutions had authority and legitimacy to curb American foreign-policy initiatives.

The conservatism of the New Right has been compared to a "three-legged stool." Above we have referred to the economic and military legs. The third leg is social conservatism. The New Right was deeply troubled by the women's liberation and feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s and argued that this development threatened the traditional family. Feminism was connected to rising divorce rates, and absent fathers were blamed for the increasing crime rate and fragmentation of society. In her article Hilde Løvdal Stephens discusses evangelical parenting in light of the new expertise on

8 Richard Viguerie, quoted in Pat Ordonensky, "The New Right: Viguerie Is Its 'Godfather' as It Aims at Replacing the GOP," *The Palm Beach Post-Times*, March 7, 1976. See also Alf Tomas Tønnessen, *How Two Political Entrepreneurs Helped Create the American Conservative Movement, 1973-1981: The Ideas of Richard Viguerie and Paul Weyrich* (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009).

upbringing, epitomized by the work of psychologist James Dobson and his organization Focus on the Family, founded in 1977. Dobson criticized permissiveness in upbringing and urged parents to discipline their children. He was an advocate of traditional general roles and emphasized the role of the father in being a spiritual leader at home.

Løvdal Stephens points out that public schools became a battleground for evangelical parents who were critical of the secular values of schools that diverged from their own values. Sex education was one contentious issue that energized evangelicals, who feared that this education would challenge the belief in abstinence before marriage. Comprehensive sex education was another big blow to evangelicals who had been horrified by the Supreme Court decisions that ruled school prayer (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962) and devotional Bible reading in schools (*Abington v. Schempp*, 1962) unconstitutional.

Løvdal Stephens' article can be read within the context of the rise of the Religious Right. Since the end of the Second World War there had been a major increase in membership of conservative Protestant denominations and a decline in membership among liberal and mainline denominations. The period between the mid-term elections of 1978 and the elections of 1980 is important for the rightward turn of the Republican Party because of the rise of the Religious Right and the increasing awareness of social issues. Abortion became a key social issue for the Religious Right. It was a new issue for evangelicals. Conservative groups such as the Southern Baptist Convention and *Christianity Today* had expressed support for therapeutic abortion in the late 1960s and early 1970s. *Roe v. Wade,* the 1973 Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion, was initially not a major concern because many evangelicals believed the ruling protected the privacy of the patient and the doctor's office from invasive government regulations. Moreover, it was seen as a Catholic question and not a Protestant issue. But by the end of the 1970s, evangelicals turned against abortion, largely thanks to the intellectual leader of the newly politically aware evangelicals, Francis Schaeffer, whose book *How Then Should We Live* (1976), and later book and documentary *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (1979), would awaken conservative Protestants such as the Reverend Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority to the cause of ending abortion.[9]

9 See e.g. Barry Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) and Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

But the issue that made evangelicals organize politically was the threat by the Internal Revenue Service to withdraw tax-exemption of private schools that could not document an effort to prevent discrimination of minorities. Many Christian private schools had been established in the South in the years after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. If the IRS plan were to take effect, the private schools would have to increase tuition considerably. This issue did not generate much attention in the media, but evangelicals were outraged and mobilized against the IRS. According to Richard Viguerie, the announcement "kicked the sleeping dog. It galvanized the religious right. It was the spark that ignited the religious right's involvement in real politics."[10] The IRS received more than 120,000 letters of protest, and after a congressional subcommittee had held several days of hearing about the issue, the IRS decided not to carry out the plans.[11] This decision was interpreted as a victory for evangelicals, and it is one of the factors that inspired church leaders to become more strongly involved in politics. In 1979 Jerry Falwell launched the Moral Majority.

The rise of the Religious Right was a threat to moderates within the Republican Party. The Ripon Society, a group of northern moderates, was critical of the policy of some conservatives to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment and support a constitutional ban on abortions. Howard Gillette, a former president of the Ripon Society, left the GOP due to the nomination of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Illinois Congressman John Anderson left the party to run as an independent. He disapproved of the new emphasis on social issues that evangelicals had brought to the fore. The historian Geoffrey Kabaservice compares the departure of progressives in 1980 with the "Bull Moose bolt" in 1912, when Theodore Roosevelt challenged President William Taft, but he argues that the departure in 1980 was not as dramatic as the one in 1912, but "the net effect in both cases was to shift the GOP center of gravity to the right."[12]

The historian Sean Wilentz refers to the period from the mid-1970s until 2008 as the Age of Reagan.[13] During this period conservatives experienced

10 Richard Viguerie, telephone interview with Thomas B. Edsall, January 17, 1990; quoted in Thomas B. Edsall with Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), p. 132.

11 William Martin, *With God On Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), p. 172.

12 Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 358, 362.

13 Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

a significant number of legislative successes. Among the most important ones are the tax cuts of 1981, 2001, and 2003. The three decades were characterized by economic growth, but also widening economic inequality. Many jobs in manufacturing were outsourced, and these were replaced by service sector jobs that often paid significantly less.

The Republican capture of both congressional chambers in 1994 had a significant impact on the presidency of Bill Clinton. Even though Clinton was a moderate associated with the Democratic Leadership Council, he arguably moved further towards the center of the political spectrum than he would have done if Democrats had retained control of Congress. During his last six years as president he signed a number of conservative policy proposals, including the 1996 welfare reform, which replaced the New Deal-program Aid to Families with Dependent Children with Temporary Aid to Needy Families and devolved the responsibility to the states. He also signed the 1997 tax reform that reduced taxes on capital gains to a rate of twenty percent.[14] This was a major tax relief for the richest Americans. Finally, President Clinton supported the 1999 Financial Services Modernization Act that repealed the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933 that had separated investment banks and commercial banks. The emergence of banks that were "too big to fail" would be one of the factors that led to the financial crisis of 2008.[15]

The Age of Reagan has also been characterized by the so-called culture wars that have intensified due to the rise of both new right-wing and left-wing media. The culture wars are not only about religious issues, but also attitudes towards guns and a dispute about the correct interpretation of the Second Amendment. Cultural issues often divide urban and rural America. Leif Magne Lervik explains that the gun issue is highly emotional and separates advocates of gun control and gun rights. It is difficult to find policies of compromise that both groups can live with. This polarization is reflected in important decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court, which took a rightward turn in the Age of Reagan and became very different from the Warren Court of the 1950s and 1960s. After Samuel Alito replaced Sandra Day O'Connor on the bench in 2005, the Roberts Court became more reliably conservative than the Rehnquist Court had been.

14 Tim Dickinson, "How the GOP Became the Party of the Rich," *Rolling Stone*, Nov. 10, 2011.

15 Jacob S. Hacker & Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), p. 197.

Lervik discusses the significance of the 5-4 decision in the 2008 case *District of Columbia v. Heller*, in which the Supreme Court strengthened the right of individuals to own guns. Two years later in the *McDonald v. City of Chicago* decision the Supreme Court made *Heller* applicable to state and local governments. Lervik analyzes arguments in favor of and against guns on campuses in light of the *Heller* and *McDonald* decisions. He argues that the gun debate represents "battles of opposing cultures," and that one aspect of disagreement between these cultures is a conflict about what constitutes safety.

As the conservative wing of the Republican Party became more powerful in the Age of Reagan than it had been in the Age of Roosevelt (1932-ca. 1978) there has been a strong emphasis on personal responsibility for one's own economic well-being. In recent years this view is reflected in the budget proposals by Paul Ryan, chairman of the House Budget Committee. In the budget Ryan presented in 2011, he sought to reduce the national debt by about $4 trillion over a ten-year period, as Obama would, but in a remarkably different way. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has estimated that at least two-thirds of these cuts would affect programs for low-income Americans. Among these programs are Medicaid, Pell Grants for college students, food stamps, and low-income housing assistance.[16] Ryan presented a similar budget in April 2012, which President Obama condemned by asserting: "[d]isguised as a deficit-reduction plan, it's really an attempt to impose a radical vision on our country. It's nothing but thinly veiled social Darwinism."[17]

Paul Ryan had certainly expected criticism from liberals, but he also received negative comments from former advisors of conservative presidents. Bruce Bartlett, former Economic Committee executive director, senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, and a senior policy analyst for President Reagan, has written that "[d]istributionally, the Ryan plan is a monstrosity. The rich would receive huge tax cuts while the social safety net would be shredded to pay for them."[18] The view of the GOP as the party of the rich and Mitt Romney's infamous comment about the 47 percent hurt the Romney-Ryan ticket in the 2012 presidential election.

16 Thomas B. Edsall, *The Age of Austerity: How Scarcity Will Remake American Politics* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), pp. 166-167.

17 James Politi and Anna Fifield, "Obama hits out at 'social Darwinism,'" *Financial Times*, April 3, 2012. http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/547a2c14-7d59-11e1-bfa5-00144feab49a.html#axzz2D1wb2vud

18 Edsall, *The Age of Austerity*, pp. 167-168

In spite of this view the Republican Party currently appears to have a firm grip on the House of Representatives, partly because Republican supporters are more reliable voters in midterm elections and partly due to redistricting and gerrymandering after the 2010 national census. By contrast, in presidential elections after 1988 a more demographically heterogeneous electorate has made it more challenging for the GOP to receive a majority or plurality of votes. The right-wing policies advocated by the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party, which have contributed to congressional gridlock, has limited national appeal. In decades to come American conservatism needs refinement and must appeal to more than a base of middle-aged and old white men in order for the Republican Party to preserve the legacy of the Age of Reagan and prevent a new generation of liberal reforms.