

Standing Athwart History, Yelling Stop: The Emergence of American Movement Conservatism, 1945-1965

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***Abstract:** The article analyzes the emergence of the American conservative movement as a postwar reaction to the New Deal order and the new role of the federal government. It discusses the different concepts, and the sometimes conflicting aims of the various strains of the conservative movement, as well as the inherent tension between political populism and the quest for intellectual respectability. It also takes a comparative view of the “Radical Right” of the 1960s and the current “Tea Party movement,” and discusses how the conditions for “ideological gatekeeping” have changed.*

***Keywords:** The Conservative movement—Traditionalism—Libertarianism—The New Deal—Anticommunism—Senator Joseph McCarthy—William F. Buckley, Jr.—Barry Goldwater—The Radical Right—The John Birch Society—The Republican Party—Tea Party Movement*

There have always been conservatives in the United States, but they have not always called themselves “conservatives.” Nor have they always made up a movement. Since the founding of the nation, there have been stalwarts, reactionaries, traditionalists, social conservatives and temperamental conservatives. There have been laissez-faire liberals, who did not want the federal government to do much, except keeping taxes low, tariffs high and business regulation as lax as possible. Today we would probably call them

conservatives, but that was not how they described themselves. Furthermore, their activities tended to be parochial and they had no sense of being part of a national movement.¹

Such a national movement did not emerge until conservatives felt that they were being culturally and politically displaced and marginalized, and the thing most responsible for that happening was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. Thus, the emergence of an American conservative movement was first of all a reaction to the new political order that emerged during the 1930s, and to the new expanded role it gave to the federal government. If the state had previously been viewed as a potential transgressor of individuals' liberties, it was now to a much larger extent seen as a promoter and guarantor of social rights.

The connotations of liberalism clearly changed during the 1930s. That created the desire for both a new political brand and the organizing of a principled opposition. However, it was not until after the end of World War II that the contours of a conservative *movement* began to emerge.

This article surveys this emergence in the early postwar years, and how the creation of a "counter-establishment" outside the established party system eventually enabled conservatives to conquer the GOP.² It also analyzes some

- 1 Some may contest the idea of a national "movement" and argue that there have simply been a number of conservative organizations at any given time. I base my claim, however, on organizational continuity, a will to cohere, and a deliberate intent to counter most parts of the alleged "liberal establishment" with conservative counterparts.
- 2 The defining work on postwar American conservatism is still George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). The commonly accepted description of the movement as a marriage of convenience between separate strains—traditionalism, libertarianism, and anti-Communism, comes from Nash's book. Other valuable introductions to postwar American conservatism include Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001); 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). The organizational effort made to create a conservative "counter-establishment" prior to the ultimate plunge into partisan politics is the subject of Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face: Organizing the American Conservative Movement, 1945-65* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002). With her fine book *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Ronald Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), Kim Phillips-Fein has broadened the scope of American conservatism by focusing on the business community's substantial contributions to the movement. Other historians and sociologists have to a greater extent viewed modern American conservatism as a *social* movement—finding its sources of recruitment in opposition to "open housing ordinances," busing, urban unrest, affirmative action, sex education in schools, and other alleged assaults on traditional American values. Among the works taking such an approach in analyzing the rise

of the enduring ideological tensions within the movement and the limits they have imposed on its ability to present a positive political vision, hold “political territory,” or win over new constituencies, in the absence of a larger conceptual framework such as the Cold War or the “War on Terror.” Finally, it draws some lines from the conservative movement of the 1960s to the so-called “Tea Party Republicans” of the Obama era. It notes the ideological continuity, but also the diminished importance ascribed to intellectual credibility.

Accepting the Conservative Label

In American political culture, the label of conservatism had traditionally been associated with feudalism and aristocracy—with a rigid European class system, devoid of any appreciation of social mobility. After World War II, however, many *laissez faire*-liberals felt compelled to accept it anyway, since the term “Liberalism” had been appropriated by the New Dealers, with their alleged faith in “collectivism” and social engineering.³

The very idea of *laissez faire*—the belief that markets would be self-regulating—had been politically discredited during the early years of the Great Depression. When a group of businessmen founded the American Liberty League as a vehicle for opposition to the New Deal, the Republican National Committee actually asked it to refrain from endorsing the Republican candidate Alf Landon in the election of 1936.⁴

Occasionally, books advocating conservative/*laissez faire* ideas would be published, but they were like lonely cries in the wilderness.⁵ By the end

of the right are Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right Wing Movements and Political Power in America* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995); Janice M. Irvine, *Talk About Sex: The Battle Over Sexual Education in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), and Michael W. Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). For an excellent historiographical essay of the postwar conservative movement in America, see Jennifer Burns, “In Retrospect: George Nash’s *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*,” *Reviews in American History* 32 (2004), pp. 447-462.

- 3 The semantic battles of the labels of “liberal” and “conservative”—small or capital “C”—occasionally broke out throughout the 1950s. However, by the 1960s, most of the American right proudly used the label “conservative.”
- 4 For a history of the league, see George Wolfskill, *The Revolt of the Conservatives: A History of the American Liberty League, 1934-1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962).
- 5 Among them were Albert Jay Nock, *Our Enemy, the State* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1950 [1935]); William Henry Chamberlin, *Collectivism; A False Utopia* (New York: Macmillan, 1937) <http://mises.org/books/falseutopia.pdf>.

of World War II, however, such books seemingly resonated with a new audience. Among the new books that seemed to have an impact were Richard M. Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* and F.A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*.⁶ Particularly the latter managed to successfully link the notion of the welfare state to the growing fear of international communism. The argument was that there was a philosophical affinity between all "collectivists." When Hayek's book was first published in the United States in 1945, the reaction was surprising—not least to Hayek himself. Helped by a strong promotional effort by a couple of conservative funds, an abridged version of the book was distributed by *Readers Digest* in more than a million copies. Hayek soon found himself on a national book tour, speaking to large audiences. In New York City, some 3,000 people showed up to hear him.⁷ Several conservative intellectuals would later refer to their reading of the book as a crucial event in their political awakening.

Hayek's argument in *The Road to Serfdom* was that countries such as Great Britain and the United States were most likely to be taken down an unforeseen road to "totalitarianism" by well-meaning democrats adopting "planning" in their attempt to promote the general welfare of the nation, rather than by dedicated communists or fascists. Thus, "totalitarianism" would be an unintended consequence of the way in which economic planning would ultimately change the social and moral values of the nation.

While this argument was not new on the American political scene, Hayek's book now became essential reading for American conservatives.⁸ Perhaps it was due to his status as an economist. Perhaps it was simply a matter of timing. In any case, there was a certain irony in the fact that much of the intellectual firepower for an emerging conservative movement in America came from European émigrés such as Hayek, his fellow Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises, and Leo Strauss, as well as from the "rediscovery" of European conservatives such as the Anglo-Irish politician and political thinker Edmund Burke.⁹

6 F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1944); Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

7 Richard Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable: Think-tanks and the Economic Counter-revolution, 1931-83* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p. 101.

8 In 1936, Robert Taft had claimed that "If Mr. Roosevelt is not a Communist today, he is bound to become one." Quoted from Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule & Ruin*, p. 5.

9 Von Mises fled to the United States in 1940 and became a visiting professor at New York University. As for Leo Strauss, see Paul E. Gottfried, *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America; A Critical*

Stalin's gift to the American right

The emerging Cold War presented an obvious dilemma for Conservatives: how to balance principles of small government with support for a global military and economic engagement in the Cold War. However, it also presented new political opportunities. The notion of a global struggle between individualism and collectivism enabled a sort of “guilt by association” strategy against liberals, who were accused of being “soft on Communism.”

The Conservative attack on New Deal liberalism would come in two varieties. One was that its ideas about public planning and the creation of a basic welfare state constituted a milder, but not necessarily less dangerous, form of socialism. Everything from Communism to the New Deal was branded together as “collectivism.” The argument was at the core of ex-Communist turned conservative hero Whittaker Chambers’ book *Witness*, written after his participation in the famous case against Alger Hiss.¹⁰ Liberals had continued to defend Hiss, he claimed, due to an instinctive kinship to Communism:

The simple fact is that when I took up my little sling and aimed at Communism, I also hit something else. What I hit was the forces of that great socialist revolution, which, in the name of liberalism, spasmodically, incompletely, somewhat formlessly, but always in the same direction, has been inching its ice cap over the nation for two decades.¹¹

The other line of attack was that New Deal liberals were too weak to fight Communism, due to their ethical relativism. A lack of belief in an objective moral order made them incapable of understanding and reacting resolutely to the threat. They simply lacked what both Conservatives and Communists had: dedication and a sense of mission. This view was central to another book that helped shape the conservative movement in the early postwar years: Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences*.¹² In Weaver’s view, the New Deal represented the final step in a long decline of Western civilization—a decline caused by Western man’s loss of belief in transcendental values.

The idea that the Cold War was, at its heart, a spiritual struggle, was also central to James Burnham, who became the conservative movement’s guru

Appraisal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

10 Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (London: Andre Deutch, 1953).

11 Whittaker Chambers, *Witness*, p. 566.

12 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

on power politics and the global struggle against Communism. Although his primary concern was with a clearly recognizable enemy, The Soviet Union, Burnham nevertheless talked about a possible “Suicide of the West,” because he found that it was the softness of liberals that made the threat mortal.¹³ Thus, he too helped establish a link between the movement’s cultural antagonism towards Liberalism and Cold War national security concerns.

Like Whittaker Chambers, Burnham had also been a Communist in the 1930s. They were both part of a large group of ex-Communists intellectuals (most of them Trotskyites), which historian John P. Diggins has called “Stalin’s gift to the American Right.”¹⁴ Among the others were Louis Budenz, Frank S. Meyer, Max Eastman, Freda Utey, Elizabeth Bentley, William Henry Chamberlin, and John Dos Passos. These ex-Communists had sort a “takes-one-to-know-one” credibility to their anti-communism, but there was more to it. Bentley—a former Soviet spy who had been turned—explained why she had been unable to stop in the “mushy middle” and become a Liberal: “People, who are genuine Communists, as I was, aren’t the lukewarm type. They can’t go into a vacuum if they give up Communism. They must have something to tie to.”¹⁵ The conservative movement provided that something.

Spreading the Conservative Gospel

In the early postwar years, this emerging movement was mostly an intellectual phenomenon, but few accepted the notion that conservatives would remain a “remnant” in a liberal world for a very long time. The major intellectual concern was with political power and how to achieve it. A first step was the creation of journals and other fora. They could see conservative views expressed in the Hearst papers, in the New York *Daily News*, the Manchester *Union Leader*, and in the *Chicago Tribune*, but these newspapers could not serve as standard-bearers for a political movement. Among the first new journals which attempted to play that role were *Human Events*, founded in 1944, and *The Freeman*, founded in 1946. The emerging movement also got publishers dedicated to publish-

13 James Burnham, *Suicide of the West* (New York: The John Day Company, 1964).

14 John P. Diggins, *Up from Communism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 3.

15 *Time* (November 29, 1948), p. 46.

ing conservative books, including The Henry Regnery Company, Caxton Printers, and Devin-Adair Company.

In 1948, F.A. Hayek elaborated on why he and his like-minded had to emulate what the left had done a generation before. In an essay entitled “The Intellectuals and Socialism,” he noted that “in every country that has moved towards socialism, the phase in development in which socialism becomes a determining influence on politics has been preceded for many years by a period during which socialist ideals governed the thinking of the more active intellectuals.”¹⁶

As Hayek saw it, Germany, England and France had long since reached that stage, while the United States had only reached it during World War II. “Experience suggests,” Hayek noted, “that once this phase has been reached, it is merely a question of time until the views now held by the intellectuals become the governing force of politics.”¹⁷ The critical step was to secure the transmission from the scientists and utopian thinkers to the “professional second-hand dealers in ideas.” This was why the creation of a conservative “counter-establishment,” with journals, publishers, think tanks, interest groups and action committees, was considered a crucial step. From its founding in 1955, William F. Buckley, Jr.’s journal *National Review* became the most important intellectual hub in such a counter-establishment.

Guardians of Civilization or the Voice of the “Silent Majority”?

William F. Buckley, Jr. (1925-2008), who in the following decades became a leading figure among conservative intellectuals, had once entertained plans about writing a book entitled *The Revolt against the Masses* (a play on Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses*).¹⁸ Like most conservative intellectuals in the early postwar years, he lamented an alleged vulgarization of American political culture and saw himself as part of a “remnant,” whose job it would be to, in the words of Albert Jay Nock, adhere to “the principles issuing in what we know as the humane life” and build up a new society “[w]hen everything has gone completely

16 F. A. Hayek, “The Intellectuals and Socialism,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* (Spring 1949), pp. 417-433. Reprinted in George B. de Huszar (ed.), *The Intellectuals: A Controversial Portrait* (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1960), pp. 371-84.

17 Ibid.

18 Jose Ortega Y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1932).

to the dogs.”¹⁹ The political aspirations of the conservative movement were defined—and inhibited—by a latent disgust for mass society and majoritarian politics.

Something happened, however, during the anticommunist crusades of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Not least the responses to Senator Joe McCarthy’s endless attempts to link New Deal Liberalism to Communism and treason, helped persuade many conservative intellectuals that the basic political instincts of the masses were perhaps healthy after all. As historian Fredrik Logevall has noted, “Eden and Churchill and other British Conservatives were mystified by the seeming support in Middle America for extreme Red-baiters such as Senator Joe McCarthy, who applied constant pressure on the White House to live up to their rigid standards of anticommunist purity.”²⁰

The particular role that anti-Communism came to play in America, paved the way for a more populist brand of Conservatism. Rather than the last guardians of Western civilization, conservatives began to think of themselves as spokesmen for a “silent majority” of Americans, with whom the liberal establishment had lost touch.

The rabble rousing and opportunistic Joe McCarthy himself remained a potential embarrassment for an intellectual movement craving intellectual respectability, but many conservatives, including William F. Buckley, Jr., were intent on justifying “McCarthyism” as a principle. They attempted to elevate it to a noble attempt to create a “public orthodoxy.” The pervasive influence of McCarthyism also provided an opportunity to substitute resentment of intellectuals for more traditional forms of class resentment. Likewise, it changed the ethno-political placement of the conservative movement. The anticommunism of the “Old Right”—in the 1930’s and before—had often been closely connected with nativism, anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism. Now the alleged subversives were found elsewhere, and Catholic individuals such as McCarthy and Buckley, as well as organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, had truly entered the cultural mainstream.

19 Albert Jay Nock, “Isaiah’s Job” in *Free Speech and Plain Language* (New York: William Morrow, 1937), pp. 248-265.

20 Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War; The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), kindle edition, location 7527.

The Traditionalist/Libertarian Divide

If F.A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* had galvanized the American libertarians, then Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana*, published in 1953, became a primer for traditionalist conservatives. Kirk's views were rooted in the belief that "[a] civilized society requires order and classes" and that "man has an evil nature and therefore must control his will and appetite."²¹ This was clearly not the classical liberalism of Friedrich Hayek, but somewhat ironically, also a European import: the organic Conservatism of Edmund Burke. Kirk and other traditionalists would, at least in principle, claim the primacy of preserving the social fabric of the community over individual freedom. Real freedom could not be separated from self-restraint and a sense of duty towards the general interest of society.

The liberal historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., for one, was not convinced that Kirk's aspirations matched political realities. He noted that once conservatives left the field of rhetoric, they tended to forget about Burke and "adopt the views of the American business community." They leaped, as Schlesinger put it, "[f]rom Tory fantasy into Republican reality."²² Many libertarians would agree that if there were an American tradition for conservatives to be claimed, it was built on a rationalist view of human nature and a worship of individual autonomy. The American Way was not based on order and a fixed social hierarchy, but on "creative destruction" and the idea of the market as the sublime selector of a "natural aristocracy."²³ America was the "land of new beginnings." Freedom, libertarians would hold, did not mean the ability to recognize virtue, but freedom to choose, and maybe choose wrongly or irresponsibly.²⁴

To Kirk, on the other hand, the idea of freedom as a goal in itself was absurd. With an image borrowed from C. K. Chesterton, he compared it to liberating goldfish by smashing their bowl. That was beside the point, libertarians would retort. Libertarianism was a strictly political philosophy,

21 Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Books, 1953), pp. 7-8.

22 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The New Conservatism: Politics of Nostalgia," *The Reporter* (June 16, 1955), p. 11, 76.

23 "Creative destruction" is a term coined by Joseph Schumpeter in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1994 [1942]).

24 See Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), p. 53 ff.

which did not consider morality to be a public matter. Half a century later, this basic split on the American Right would remain unresolved.

The traditionalist/libertarian debate illuminated a paradox that seems particular to American Conservatism: On the one hand, the libertarians, to whom loyalty to tradition and acknowledgement of the wisdom of the forefathers were not serious political concerns, actually had few problems giving claim to a well-established tradition in the American political economy, while the traditionalists, who considered the claim to tradition an essential part of their political legitimacy, time and again had to invoke either Burke—or a larger Western tradition—in their attempt to construct a usable past. It was, as the American poet and political thinker Peter Viereck expressed it, “a traditionless worship of tradition,” or an “unhistorical appeal to history.”²⁵

Regardless of the ideological incoherence, the various strains of the conservative movement managed to work together most of the time from a set of shared beliefs. From 1955, *National Review* became a central hub for all of them. From the outset, William F. Buckley Jr. was devoted to the idea of fusing these different strains of Conservatism, although there were a few groups on the right that he quickly gave up on.²⁶

Buckley also accepted that some of the contributors to the journal never embraced the idea of “fusionism.” Russell Kirk, for one, maintained that the notion of a “libertarian conservative” was an oxymoron comparable to a “Muslim Christian” or a Jewish Nazi.” Conservatives and libertarians had nothing in common, he said, except for their detestation of collectivism.²⁷ Buckley’s critical role notwithstanding, what ultimately made the odd political partnership between traditionalists and libertarians work for decades was a common enemy.

Even today, American conservatives are still mostly united by their common resentment of liberals. There are now “paleoconservative” non-inter-

25 Peter Viereck, “The Philosophical ‘New Conservatism,’” in Daniel Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1963), p. 188.

26 One of them was the radical libertarian followers of the novelist Ayn Rand, whose atheism and worship of selfishness he profoundly disliked. For her part, Ayn Rand probably wasn’t all that troubled by the exclusion, considering her denunciation of modern conservatism as an “embarrassing conglomeration of impotence, futility, inconsistency and superficiality. Quoted from Eliza Simmons, “Who’s an Objectivist?” *The New Guard* (May 1962), p. 21.

27 Russell Kirk, “Libertarians: The Chirping Sectaries,” in George W. Carey (ed.), *Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative Libertarian Debate* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), p. 113, 119-120.

ventionists, who read *The American Conservative* and strongly disagree with the neoconservative readers of *The Weekly Standard* on most matters of foreign policy. There are also social conservatives, who read *First Things*, have theocratic inclinations, and are mostly concerned with issues such as abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, and the role of religion in the public space. They have obvious conflicts with the followers of Ayn Rand, Senator Rand Paul (R-Kentucky) and the radical libertarians. Now as then, however, regardless of the fact that conservatives have long since captured control of the Republican Party, all strains have to some extent preserved the sense of being under siege by a powerful liberal “establishment.”

Conservatives or “Counter-revolutionaries”?

While the Conservative movement of the 1950s undoubtedly was more closely tied to the Republican Party than to the Democratic Party, it was hardly made up of loyal partisans. While the majority of Republicans had accepted the basic framework of a limited welfare state in the United States, American conservatives were not looking to conserve the best elements of the New Deal order, but rather to overturn it. However, in order to dismantle government power, they would have to first win political power, and the first difficult step to doing that was winning control of the GOP, where moderate factions were still dominant. Actually, some of these factions also employed the notion of “conservatism” to describe their own efforts to modernize the Republican Party.

Moderate Republicans talked about their basic acceptance of the welfare state as “dynamic conservatism” or “new conservatism.” One of the fora for such moderate views was the journal *Confluence*, founded in 1952 and edited by Henry A. Kissinger, then a graduate student at Harvard. To his mind, the movement conservatives were not really conservative: “It seems to me the essence of conservatism is to have change evolve from existing structures and to avoid sudden convulsive disruption. This means that evolution should be gradual, but also that one should not be unbending.”²⁸ Kissinger’s view was emblematic of a time that many scholars identified with pragmatism, “pluralism,” and a new bipartisan consensus. Much of the early criticism of the conservative movement emerged from this “plu-

28 Quoted from Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin*, p. 17.

ralist” perspective, where “movement” conservatives were categorized as “pseudo-conservatives.”²⁹

Much to the displeasure of said movement conservatives, such views also came to characterize the policies of the Eisenhower administration. Senator Barry Goldwater from Arizona quickly branded it a “dime-store New Deal.” The pragmatism of Ike further encouraged movement conservatives to create independent organizational structures outside of the GOP with the explicit goal of “taking it back.” The idea of a betrayal by moderate “me too-Republicans” was central to their political thinking.

In a sense the pluralists were right: the movement conservatives were not out to conserve: They were radical reactionaries—or, as William F. Buckley, Jr. himself would suggest—“Counter-revolutionaries.” In his mission statement for the first issue of *National Review*, Buckley talked about how “the most alarming single danger to the American political system” was the way in which “an identifiable team of Fabian operators” was trying to control both major political parties in order to reshape them “in the image of Babbitt, gone Social-Democrat.”³⁰

The Myth of the “Hidden Conservative Majority”

In 1960, the conservatives were the smallest faction within the GOP, but they had the sense of being part of a larger movement beyond the party and speaking on behalf of millions of Americans who were not currently participating in the political process. However, despite a long list of organizations, it was difficult to assess the actual strength of this conservative network. Many organizations were mere “fronts” and letterhead groups with no real membership. Marvin Liebman, a pioneer in conservative fundraising, ran a long list of such front organizations directly from his office in New York.³¹ Over time, however, new organizations with actual members

29 Among the best expressions of this pluralist approach to the study of the conservative movement are Daniel Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), and Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

30 William F. Buckley, Jr., “Our Mission Statement” *National Review*, November 19, 1955 (<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/223549/our-mission-statement/william-f-buckley-jr>).

31 See Marvin Liebman’s political memoirs *Coming Out Conservative; An Autobiography* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992).

emerged. Thus, in 1960, the *National Review* crowd was instrumental in creating the New York Conservative Party and the conservative youth organization Young Americans for Freedom (YAF).³²

In 1960, the movement found a political champion in Senator Barry M. Goldwater from Arizona. His book *The Conscience of a Conservative*—ghost-written by William F. Buckley, Jr.'s brother-in-law, L. Brent Bozell—became its new political manifesto.³³ Goldwater was no Tory and had no governing philosophy. In his view, the primary purpose of winning control of the federal government was to lessen its influence. Goldwater wanted to occupy the White House as an insurgent. Not unlike the present day “Tea Party” Republicans, his mission in Washington would be to repeal existing laws, rather than to pass new ones. In the context of the ongoing struggle for civil rights, his message of granting more power to the individual states created new political opportunities for the GOP.

The obvious question to conservatives in the early 1960s was how they thought they could win at a time when liberalism clearly seemed to be in ascendance. Their answer was to suggest the existence of a “hidden conservative vote,” which would emerge on Election Day if the Republicans nominated a true conservative, rather than a moderate “me-too-Republican.” They claimed that even voters who were not affiliated with the movement would respect and reward principled stands more than moderation and prudence. Thus, the key was to offer them “a choice, not an echo.”³⁴

Barry Goldwater himself had suggested as much when he had withdrawn his candidacy after a brief struggle at the Republican National Convention in 1960: “We must remember that Republicans have not been losing elections because of more Democratic voters. Now get this. We have been losing elections because conservatives too often fail to vote.”³⁵

The dreams of a hidden majority were evidently shattered, when Goldwater became the Republican nominee in 1964, and subsequently was buried in a landslide by President Johnson. It didn't happen because true conservatives stayed at home, but because there were not that many, after

32 See Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face*, pp. 141-184.

33 (New York: Manor Books, 1974 [1960]).

34 *A Choice, Not an Echo* was the title of a widely circulated book written by conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly in connection with the Barry Goldwater's presidential nomination in 1964 (Alton, IL: Pere Marquette Press, 1964).

35 Quoted from John H. Kessel, *The Goldwater Coalition* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1968), p. 48.

all. A Harris poll taken after the election indicated that of the 27 million Americans who voted for Goldwater, only 6 million could be characterized as dedicated supporters who wanted to take over the Party. The other 21 million were simply faithful Republicans, who stuck with their party regardless of the candidate.³⁶ Yet, the notion that ideological purity was the key to winning a national majority didn't die on the American Right. Actually, it is alive and well in today's Tea Party movement.

After the presidential election in 1964, many liberal commentators had been convinced that the conservative movement was dead. Historian Richard Hofstadter contended that Goldwater's campaign "broke the back of our postwar practical conservatism."³⁷ In retrospect, however, it became clear that Goldwater's defeat was more aptly described as the end of the beginning.

Despite the fact that the conservative quest for ideological purity had helped pave the way for a new wave of social reforms, the campaign had been a baptism of fire for the movement conservatives. Some 3.9 million volunteers had gone to work for it—twice as many as for the Johnson campaign.³⁸ While the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) drew a lot of public attention in those years, its membership never surpassed 1,500. Meanwhile, their conservative counterpart, Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), recruited 5,400 new members during the "Draft Goldwater" campaign in the summer of 1964.³⁹ Even more importantly, the campaign had been an important step in the "Southernization" of the Republican Party.

In the early 1960s, the Republican Party had been a broad coalition, with moderates and even a progressive faction in states like New York and California. For its part, the Democratic Party still held on to large constituencies of social conservatives in the South. President Eisenhower had managed to win a few states in the upper South during the 1950s, but in the years between 1903 and 1960, not a single Republican Senator had been elected in any Southern state. By winning a special election in Texas in 1961, John Tower became the first to break the mold.

Tower's victory was perhaps an early sign of change, but it was Gold-

36 John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties; Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 208.

37 Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979 [1965]), p. 115.

38 Sam Tanenhaus, *The Death of Conservatism*, p. 61.

39 Sam Tanenhaus, *The Death of Conservatism*, p. 61.

water's victories in five states in the Deep South in the midst of a national landslide, which indicated that a major realignment had begun. In the years that followed, an increasing number of Southern Democrats overcame their traditional hostility towards the GOP, while moderates and progressives increasingly left the party. Racial and ethnic politics in the wake of the civil rights movement was at the center of this process, although they were often cloaked in more lofty debates about federalism and "states' rights." As the GOP gained ground in the South, in the following decades, the social values of the region in return transformed the party. Thus, it became both more coherent and more socially conservative.

Considering how significant a role they would later play, the marginal role of protestant fundamentalists and evangelicals in the American conservative movement of the 1950s and 1960s is quite striking. However, that changed during the 1970s—partly due to this process of "Southernization," partly due to a significant effort to bring protestant evangelicals into the movement.

There were of course some Christian fundamentalists on the political scene in the 1960s. Among them were radio preachers like Carl McIntyre and Billy James Hargis. However, their organizations were largely "letter-head organizations." Indeed, many protestant fundamentalists had an aversion to getting involved in "worldly" affairs. During the 1970s that began to change in reaction to Supreme Court decisions or legislation concerning issues such as abortion, school prayer, gay rights, and the teaching of evolution. However, it was not until the 1980's that conservative organizers really managed to create ecumenical coalitions within the movement and present a broader political agenda. In the words of historian Dan T. Carter, "Conservative Christians had become Christian Conservatives."⁴⁰

The Extremists and the Conservative Gatekeepers

In the early 1960s, many liberals expressed great concern over what became known as "the Radical Right"—organizations such as The John Birch Soci-

40 Dan T. Carter, "The Rise of Conservatism since World War II," *OAH Magazine of History* Vol. 17, No. 2 (January 2003), p. 15. For more on the rise of the Christian Right, see Matthew Moen, *The Transformation of the Christian Right* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1992) and Clyde Wilcox, *God's Warriors; The Christian Right in 20th-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

ety, the Liberty Lobby, and Christian Crusade. “Conspiracists” was perhaps the most apt ideological label for the members of such organizations, since they tended to see subversive activities everywhere—not least in the federal government.

The John Birch Society, with around 60,000 members, showed remarkably little interest in geopolitics. Its primary concern was domestic subversion. The Birchers were convinced that America was already “60-80% Communist” and the battle almost lost. Some years before, its founder—retired candy manufacturer Robert Welch, Jr.—had famously accused President Dwight D. Eisenhower of being a “conscious, dedicated agent of the Communist Conspiracy.”⁴¹

Welch was convinced, though, that even the communists were mere tools for a much bigger conspiracy. The world was run by “insiders”—probably the Bavarian Illuminati in association with the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, and the Bilderberg Group. Their powerful tools included control of the Federal Reserve System and the Internal Revenue Service.

Both the Kennedy administration and a number of governors around the country decided to investigate to what extent “Radical Right” organizations such as The John Birch Society constituted a genuine threat to American democracy. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy asked Walter P. Reuther of the United Auto Workers to head the federal government’s investigation. In a memorandum he concluded that the Radical Right posed “a far greater danger to the success of this country in its battle against international Communism than [did] the domestic Communist movement.”⁴²

In California, Attorney General Stanley Mosk came to a somewhat different conclusion. The John Birch Society was a nuisance, not a peril: “... formed primarily of wealthy businessmen, retired military officers, and little old ladies in tennis shoes.”⁴³ In other words: only the rhetoric was extreme, and there was a long way from the Birchers to hate groups and paramilitary organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Minutemen.

Peril to democracy or not, the Radical Right posed a serious dilemma for

41 Robert Welch, Jr., *The Politician* (privately circulated manuscript, 1958). When the book was later published, this controversial claim was removed (Robert Welch University Press, 2002).

42 Walter P. Reuther, “The Radical Right in America Today,” p. 15. Robert F. Kennedy Attorney General Papers, John Fitzgerald Kennedy Presidential Library.

43 Quoted from Patsy Moore, “Display at County Law Library Commemorates Life of Justice Mosk, High Court’s Longest-Serving Member,” *Metropolitan News-Enterprise*, January 25, 2005. (<http://www.metnews.com/articles/2005/mosk012505.htm>).

a conservative movement eager to win intellectual respectability and take center stage in American politics. Leading figures like William F. Buckley, Jr. wanted the passion of the Birchers and their ability to mobilize on the grass-roots level, but also realized that the organization, in the words of *National Review* publisher William A. Rusher, was “a Mecca for every crackpot in America.”⁴⁴

Buckley and the *National Review* crowd made a few attempts in 1962 to distance their brand of “responsible Conservatism” from the Radical Rights endless stream of conspiratorial accusations, but hesitated. They also tried to persuade Senator Goldwater to speak out against the John Birch Society, but he refused to do it. It was only after seeing what damage the label of extremism had done to Goldwater’s presidential campaign in 1964 that Buckley and his associates finally concluded that any association with the John Birch Society and other “Radical Right” organizations could become a kiss of death for their movement.

In 1965, they finally took upon themselves the role as ideological gatekeepers. In a coordinated effort, several organizations were written out of the movement. Thus, the leadership of the American Conservative Union (ACU) cancelled participation in a conference organized by “We, the People!” with the argument that “Conservatism cannot triumph if it allies itself with ideologies which bear no relationship to responsible conservative thought and action.”⁴⁵ The Birchers were written out with the same argument.⁴⁶ This kind of ideological gatekeeping was deemed a prerequisite for making it possible to conquer the Republican Party and turn it into a vehicle for the movement.

From Birchers to Birthers

In comparing the so-called Tea Party Republicans of the present to the movement conservatives of the 1960s, one finds many of the same dynamics and many of the same tensions. However, something has clearly changed. Historian Sean Wilentz has noted that the “pressing historical question is how extremist ideas held at bay for decades inside the Republican Party

44 Letter, William A. Rusher to L. Brent Bozell, September 28, 1961. The William A. Rusher Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

45 Telegram from Robert E. Baumann, reprinted in “Bruce Deserts Conservatives,” *Free Enterprise* (October, 1965). The William A. Rusher Paper.

46 William F. Buckley, Jr., “On the Right” (syndicated column), August 17, 1965.

have exploded anew—and why, this time, Party leaders have done virtually nothing to challenge those ideas, and a great deal to abet them.”⁴⁷

Part of the explanation may be that there no longer seems to exist an elite of conservative intellectuals, who can take it upon themselves—or have the authority to—serve as “gatekeepers” for the movement. There is also less faith in the autonomy of ideas and more interest in political strategy and rhetorical “framing.” Likewise, the quest for intellectual respectability no longer seems to be a major concern. Few conservatives now entertain romantic ideas about being the guardians of a civilization under assault.

It was telling that the rise of the Tea Party movement also marked the return of some of the groups that Buckley and his fellow gatekeepers had written out of the conservative movement in the 1960s. With the help of cable-television host Glenn Beck, the publications of The John Birch Society and other representatives of “the Radical Right” have resurfaced and gained a new audience.⁴⁸

In 2010, The John Birch Society co-sponsored the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, D.C. Before that, Glenn Beck had re-introduced the writings of Willard Cleon Skousen—Mormon, teacher at Brigham Young University, and former chief of police in Salt Lake City—to his audience of two million viewers. Back in the 1960s, Cleon Skousen was considered a radical conspiracist, and deliberately marginalized by movement conservatives. Now Glenn Beck singled out his writings as a personal political revelation. Within six months of this reintroduction, one of Skousen’s books had sold more than two hundred and fifty thousand copies and was being discussed in Tea Party study groups across the country.⁴⁹

When Buckley died in 2008, former *National Review* editor David Klinghoffer lamented the conservative movement’s lack of anyone to play

47 Sean Wilentz, “Cofounding Fathers; The Tea Party’s Cold War Roots,” *The New Yorker* (October 18, 2010) http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/18/101018fa_fact_wilentz?printable=true#ixzz2FdqOrLEl

48 Sean Wilentz, “Confounding Fathers; The Tea Party’s Cold War Roots,” *The New Yorker* October 18, 2010 (http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/18/101018fa_fact_wilentz?printable=true¤tPage=all). See also Alexander Zaitchik, “Meet the man who changed Glenn Beck’s Life”, *Salon*, September 16, 2009 (http://www.salon.com/2009/09/16/beck_skousen/).

49 Sean Wilentz, “Cofounding Fathers; The Tea Party’s Cold War Roots,” *The New Yorker* (October 18, 2010) http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/18/101018fact_wilentz?printable=true#ixzz2FdqOrLEl. Many of these Tea Party groups, including FreedomWorks, were sponsored by the brothers Charles and David Koch of Koch Industries, whose father, Fred Koch, had been a major sponsor of the John Birch Society.

the role of gatekeeper that he once did. It was now dominated by media figures, “demagoguery and hucksterism” and ruled by “the crazy-cons,” he claimed.⁵⁰ Better than anything, this call for a “new Buckley”—repeated several times in the following years—illustrated both the insurgent nature of the conservative movement and the continuing right turn of the Republican Party: the activist, who had played such a crucial role in the movement’s defeat of a moderate “establishment” was now himself remembered as a moderate establishment figure, who had once helped purging the radicals from the party.⁵¹

50 David Klinghoffer, “From neocons to crazy-cons,” *Los Angeles Times* (August 1, 2010) <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/aug/01/opinion/la-oe-klinghoffer-conservatism-20100801>.

51 For one example, see David Welch, “Where Have You Gone, Bill Buckley?” *The New York Times* (December 3, 2012) http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/04/opinion/where-have-you-gone-bill-buckley.html?_r=0.