

HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION? THE PROSPECTS FOR AMERICAN CONSERVATISM

The occasion of this award has prompted me to reflect about the influence of Richard Weaver on my own life. The other day, while rummaging through an old desk drawer, I came upon a list of the books that I had read in high school. It was a list that I had compiled at the time, recording the date that I completed my reading of each volume. There I found that on August 14, 1963, just a month before entering college, I finished *Ideas Have Consequences* for the first time.

Weaver's book fortified me for the experience of attending a very liberal, liberal arts college in the 1960s—and particularly for my freshman-year English Composition course, which was steeped in the theories of the semantics movement that Weaver abhorred. Like Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, which I read a year later, Weaver's book provided an intellectual foundation for dissent from the collegiate *Zeitgeist*. *Ideas Have Consequences* was one of the first serious books that I ever read a second time. And if memory serves, it was the first book that I ever gave to someone other than a family member to read.

Looking back, I now realize that it was not just Weaver's writings that impressed me. His sense of vocation, his example of being in liberal academia but not of it, were, I believe, among the influences that

encouraged me to pursue a scholarly career. So I feel especially moved tonight to receive this high honor to which his name is attached.

We have gathered this evening—and at this conference—to consider the future of American conservatism. Until a few weeks ago, it did not appear to have much of a future at all. Writing in the September issue of the *American Prospect*, the liberal columnist E. J. Dionne declared flatly that “the conservative era” in American politics is “in its final days.” The “conservative project,” he said, is “exhausted.” Meanwhile, in the September 10 issue of the *New Republic*, Sam Tanenhaus, the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, asserted that the conservative movement “has never been in poorer shape than it is today.” Indeed, he claimed, it has entered “its last and genuinely decadent phase.”

Such sentiments are by no means confined to the American Left. In the past three years an increasing number of conservative commentators have wondered

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aloud whether the long-foretold “conservative crackup” was finally at hand. Jeffrey Hart, for example, in his 2006 history of *National Review*, perceived a movement succumbing to a tide of doctrinaire, unconservative ideology and a reckless politics of imprudence. William F. Buckley Jr. reportedly believed in his last years that the conservative movement he had so tirelessly championed was (in Hart’s words) “probably finished”—a case of “intellectual suicide.” A leading conservative journalist of my acquaintance remarked a couple of years ago that the movement is suffering a nervous breakdown—a consequence, he said, of the end of the Cold War. A few on the Right have even suggested that if the movement is not already dead, then it ought to be. “Is the Conservative Movement Worth Conserving?” was the title of a posting at a prominent conservative website just a couple of months ago.

Earlier this year the *New York Times*’ technology columnist David Pogue listed the five stages of grieving when you lose your computer files: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Moving to Amish Country. It sounds like a fair description of the mood gripping many American conservatives in 2008. Certainly, evidence abounds of a political and intellectual movement in crisis. One sign of this is the growing tendency on the Right to classify conservatives into ever-smaller sectarian groupings: neoconservatives, paleoconservatives, big government conservatives, leave-us-alone conservatives, “national greatness” conservatives, compassionate conservatives, crunchy conservatives—and the list goes on. Another sign is the sharp intramural polemicizing in which some of these elements have indulged in recent years. Thus, the paleoconservatives relentlessly pound the neoconservatives, Straussians exchange fire with anti-Straussians, devo-

tees of Abraham Lincoln debate his detractors, libertarians take issue with religious conservatives, and neo-agrarians critique capitalism and free marketeers. A once relatively disciplined band of brothers (or so it used to appear in the Age of Reagan) has seemingly devolved into a rancorous jumble of factions. It calls to mind Napoleon’s answer when asked against whom he preferred to fight. He replied: against his allies. They were the ones who caused him the most trouble.

Several adventitious factors have strengthened the impression among many observers that American conservatism has come to a cul-de-sac. The deaths of Milton Friedman in 2006, Jerry Falwell in 2007, and William F. Buckley Jr. in 2008 precipitated an outpouring of anxious retrospection and an intensified awareness that nearly all of modern conservatism’s founding fathers have now gone to the grave. Coupled with this generational changing of the guard has been the phenomenal upsurge of popular interest in the life and achievements of Ronald Reagan. More than any of our forty-three presidents, Reagan has been on the minds and tongues of a nation hungering for renewal in 2008. From conservatives in particular has come the cry, “What would Reagan do?” Critics scoff at this as mere nostalgia, the right-wing equivalent of the liberal cult of John F. Kennedy. It is much more than that, but memories of the Gipper remind embattled conservatives of better days and reflect the feeling of disorientation that many on the Right now feel.

A more subtle ingredient in this mix has been the efflorescence in the past decade of historical scholarship about American conservatism since World War II—much of it written by young liberal historians. This is not necessarily a sign of declension, but it certainly testifies to the growing pas-

sage of time: the conservative movement has now been around long enough to be the object of academic inquiry. To put it another way, modern American conservatism—a marginalized orphan in academia when I began research on it a generation ago—has become middle-aged. Which, of course, raises the uncomfortable question: are old age and remarginalization just around the corner?

Clearly, many conservative thinkers and activists are determined to avoid any such outcome. One of the notable features of the conservative landscape at present is the quest by the intellectual Right to revitalize its roots and recover its philosophical moorings. Last year, for example, the conservative quarterly *Modern Age* devoted one of its fiftieth-anniversary issues to “Conservative Reflections on Neglected Questions and Ignored Problems.” Next spring the Philadelphia Society, the nation’s oldest society of conservative intellectuals, will focus its entire national meeting on the legacy of the luminaries of twentieth-century conservatism. Meanwhile, younger authors like Ryan Sager, Michael Gerson, and Ross Douthat have written books attempting to reformulate conservatism for a new generation. In and of themselves, these efforts might be considered a token of vitality. Taken together, however, they convey the impression that the condition of conservatism has become problematic.

Current explanations of the conservative predicament tend to fall into two distinct categories. The first stresses the movement’s political failure and frustrations during the presidency of George W. Bush. With the exception of its Supreme Court nominations and tax-cutting policies, Bush’s administration now seems to many conservative stalwarts to have been in large measure a liberal Republican ad-

ministration—more akin to Rockefeller and Nixon than to Reagan. At home, Medicare drug entitlements have been expanded, education policy has been nationalized, and federal deficit spending has been allowed to soar unchecked. The administration’s abortive immigration reform initiative in 2007 further alienated most conservatives from the man in the White House. The concurrent wave of congressional scandals and the battle over earmarks have reminded rueful conservatives of M. Stanton Evans’ remark: many conservatives, he says, have gone to Washington believing it to be a cesspool, only to decide that it is really a hot tub.

Even more than its sometimes heterodox domestic policies, the Bush administration’s approach to foreign policy has placed severe strains on the conservative coalition. The president’s audacious assertion of executive power in the war on terrorism has rattled libertarians and others for whom the restraint of executive power is a settled conservative principle. His sweeping invocation of the language of democratic universalism has gratified neoconservatives but has struck some other conservatives as an exercise in platitudinous naiveté. For those on the Right who base their foreign policy outlook on the virtues of prudence and realism, Bush’s “hard Wilsonianism” has seemed disturbingly utopian and unconservative.

There can be little doubt that the war in Iraq proved to be vexing to the American Right. It exacerbated what is now a nearly thirty-year war between the neoconservatives and the paleoconservatives. It led William F. Buckley Jr. to announce in early 2007 that if he were a member of Congress, he would vote against the proposed troop surge in Iraq. Buckley did not live to see the surge’s success—at least for the time being—but his pessimism about

Iraq and his negative verdict on the Bush presidency exemplified a broader mood of disillusionment on the Right with the fruits of its political ascendancy.

This feeling of disenchantment was all the more agonizing because political victory had been so long in coming. The conservative movement as we know it began to coalesce more than half a century ago, but it was not until 2002—just six years ago—that the nominally conservative political party in the United States gained simultaneous control of both houses of Congress and the presidency. Not even Ronald Reagan had the influence over Congress that George W. Bush possessed between 2003 and 2006. Although we must not overlook the paralyzing tactics of liberal Democrats in the U.S. Senate during those years, this fact did not keep many conservatives from concluding that their leaders in Washington had squandered a historic opportunity for conservative reform.

The second cluster of explanations for conservatism's present malaise focuses not so much on external, political circumstances but on internal factors—that is, the structure and dynamics of the conservative movement itself. Perhaps the most important thing to understand about modern American conservatism is that it is not, and has never been, univocal. It is a *coalition*, with many points of origin and diverse tendencies that are not always easy to reconcile with one another. Historically, it has been a river of thought and activism fed by many tributaries: a wide and sometimes muddy river, but one with great power, so long as the tributaries flowed into the common stream. By the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency, the conservative coalition had grown to encompass five distinct parts: 1) classical liberals and libertarians, apprehensive of the threat of overweening government and the welfare

state to individual liberty and free-market capitalism; 2) "traditionalist" conservatives, appalled by the weakening of the ethical norms and institutional foundations of American society at the hands of secular, relativistic liberalism; 3) anticommunist Cold Warriors, convinced that America was increasingly imperiled by an evil empire seeking the conquest of the world; 4) neoconservatives—disillusioned men and women of the Left who had been "mugged by reality" and were gravitating toward the conservative camp; and 5) the Religious Right, traumatized by the moral wreckage unleashed upon America by the courts and by the culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s.

So long as the Cold War continued, this coalition held together reasonably well. Anticommunism—a conviction shared by nearly everyone—supplied much of the essential unifying cement. But with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, and the departure from office of the ecumenical Reagan, long-suppressed centrifugal tendencies resurfaced on the American Right. What had once appeared to be creative tensions began to look to some like irreconcilable differences. Without a common foe to concentrate their minds and tongues, it became easier to succumb to the bane of all coalitions: the sectarian temptation, the tendency to go it alone and accentuate disagreements with one's former collaborators.

Cropping up in both of these sets of explanation, from time to time, has been a kind of historical determinism: the notion that political and intellectual movements, like individuals and nations, have immutable life cycles. Just as it was once believed that civilizations ineluctably pass from barbarism to Arcadian bliss to urban prosperity and eventual rot and decline, so, it sometimes seems, must the conservative

movement itself pass—in Jacques Barzun’s phrase—from dawn to decadence. This half-articulated theory of social entropy underlies much of the current giddiness on the Left about conservatism’s prospects—and, perhaps, some of the angst that one finds among some commentators on the Right.

There is one other explanatory framework that has recently arisen to account for conservatism’s success and, inferentially, for its supposedly imminent demise. It is the thesis—popular among some left-of-center academics—that in political terms American conservatism arose in reaction to the tumult of the 1960s and that as the traumatic Sixties recede into the past, so will the voting patterns associated with it. Put more bluntly, it is the thesis—again, popular among some on the Left—that the key to the conservative ascendancy since 1968 has not been conservative ideas or the failures of liberalism but something uglier: the racial prejudice of white people.

Although most scholars, I believe, would reject this line of historical analysis as crudely simplistic, nevertheless, on both sides of the political divide one detects at times a sense—of hope on the Left and fear on the Right—that conservatism is doomed to political decrepitude as America becomes more multiracial in character. It is one more manifestation of the nervousness with which some conservatives are facing the future.

So, then, are Dionne, Tanenhaus, and other declinists correct? Is the house of conservatism in shambles and about to collapse? When addressing such questions, historians are expected to be judicious, and accordingly, I begin with the judicious words of Mark Twain. When informed in 1897 that a newspaper in New York had reported that he had died, he told a visiting journalist, “Just say the reports of my death have been grossly exaggerated.”

How firm are the foundations of modern American conservatism? Let us look further. Perhaps they are sturdier than many observers now think.

There are several reasons for considering this possibility. First, when examining the epiphenomena of contemporary politics—especially in our era of ever-more frenzied and frothy news cycles—it is helpful to remember the adage “This, too, shall pass away.” The divisive Bush presidency is nearly over, and the Iraq war gives signs of winding down. Slowly, some of the “external” political circumstances that so dismayed conservatives in recent years have begun to dissipate.

As George Orwell reminded us years ago, one of the temptations to which intellectuals are susceptible is to assume that whatever is happening right now will continue to happen—that tomorrow will inevitably look just like today. In some ways it will, but in some ways it won’t. Certainly the future is preconditioned by the past, but it is not *predetermined* by the past. We are creatures of our mental constructs and our life experiences, yes, but we are not robots. The longer I study history, the more impressed I am by the importance of contingency—the unforeseen and the unforeseeable—in the shaping of human events. American conservatives, I suspect, instinctively look upon our history in this way: not simply as a burden and constraint but as possibility. They should therefore take heart in 2008 from the knowledge that this, too, shall pass away.

Secondly, in their obsession with the sound and fury of the stormy present, it is easy for conservatives to overlook and undervalue one of their most impressive achievements during the past forty years: the creation of a veritable conservative counterculture, a burgeoning infrastructure of alternative media, foundations, research

centers, think tanks, publishing houses, law firms, homeschooling networks, and more. From the Beltway to the blogosphere, these clusters of purposeful energy continue to multiply and flourish. From the perspective of a historian, this flowering of applied conservatism, this institutionalization of conservative ideas, is a remarkable intellectual and political development.

Think of it: when Richard Weaver was writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, the number of publicly active, professedly conservative intellectuals in the United States was minuscule—perhaps a few dozen at most. Today how can we even begin to count? Since 1980 prosperity has come to conservatism and, with it, a multitude of niche markets and specialization on a thousand fronts.

Does this mean that all is well in the conservative parallel universe? Not necessarily. A few months ago the neoconservative columnist David Brooks accused the conservative think tanks of being “sclerotic.” Other conservatives have quoted Eric Hoffer’s pungent aphorism that every cause begins as a movement, becomes a business and then a racket. Still, the fruit of a generation of successful conservative institution building appears to have reached a critical mass that is unlikely to crumble anytime soon. This augurs well for the continued influence of conservatism on our national conversation.

A third source of durability for conservatives is this: on the home front, the cohesion that was once supplied by Cold War anticommunism has increasingly come from another “war,” one that seems integral to the identity of most Americans on the Right. This is the so-called culture war, pitting an alliance of conservative Roman Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Orthodox Jewish believers against a post-Judeo-Christian, even anti-Christian,

secular elite whom they perceive to be aggressively hostile to their deepest convictions. Every day fresh tremors break out along this fault line—over abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, gay marriage, and the composition of the federal courts. It is a struggle literally over the meaning of right and wrong, a battle (for conservatives) against what Pope Benedict has called “the tyranny of relativism.”

During the past year it became commonplace in the media to suggest that the culture wars are over as a salient feature of American life. It was said, for example, that young evangelical Protestants are tiring of the old battles and turning to new causes like global warming and relief for AIDS victims in Africa. But, oh, the unpredictable contingencies of history: in the past two months the culture wars have returned to the national arena with a vengeance. We shall see how this latest episode in the contest for our culture plays out. For now, at least for a season, the seemingly irrepressible conflict between conservative people of faith and the secular Left has resumed, especially among the media and chattering classes for whom politics seems increasingly to be a form of warfare.

Fourthly, the conservative coalition seems likely to endure for a while because most of the external stimuli that goaded it into existence have not disappeared. In some respects, they have recently grown stronger. The Berlin Wall may be gone, and unvarnished socialist economics may be discredited in theory, but the Russian bear under Vladimir Putin is growling again, while at home the drive for redistribution of wealth and a nationalized medical care system gathers force. Large swatches of American life—notably, the universities, the major media, and the entertainment industry—seem more hostile than ever to the Christian faith and worldview. For

defenders of Judeo-Christian ethics—and that means most conservatives—there remains much work to do. There is still a potent enemy on the Left.

This awareness of external challenge from the Left is, I believe, integral to the prospects for American conservatism in the years ahead. If anyone doubts this, the phenomenal events of the past two months should be persuasive. If the conservative movement earlier this year seemed anemic and in need of fresh energy, it received it massively on August 29, 2008, when Senator John McCain introduced Governor Sarah Palin to the nation, and a few days later, on September 3, when Palin addressed the Republican national convention. I do not think we will soon forget the emotional intensity of those six days—an intensity not felt on the American Right since the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater. To the amazement of much of the punditocracy, the conservative grassroots turned out to be alive after all.

But Governor Palin's nomination did more than bring joy and rejuvenating vigor to most conservative hearts. The ferocious and mocking assault on her by many in the media reminded indignant conservatives of who they are and, even more vividly, of who their opponents are. It restored to conservatives a sense of their cause as a fighting faith. Moreover, at least temporarily, it relieved some of the internal, structural stresses in the conservative camp and tended to pull the fractious coalition back together. From the paleo-conservative Patrick Buchanan to the neo-conservative William Kristol, from ardent free marketeers like Lawrence Kudlow to the crunchy conservative Rod Dreher and a legion of social conservatives, with just a few conspicuous exceptions, leading spokesmen for the American Right rallied to the Palin candidacy.

Whether this turnabout will prove to be a fleeting spasm or a precursor to a conservative revival, one cannot say. As I mentioned earlier, it is always risky to presume that tomorrow's headlines will necessarily resemble today's. But it does appear significant that in the fiery furnace of political and cultural contention this autumn, an insurgent spirit has returned to American conservatism. If this persists, it will likely buttress the movement's foundations.

Nevertheless, spirit alone cannot do it all. Ideas, too, have consequences, as Richard Weaver long ago reminded us, and it is in this realm that conservatives face challenges that should curb any temptation toward triumphalism. Consider for example, the phenomenon known as globalization. When we use this word, we tend to think first of the globalization of markets—of free trade in goods and services across national borders. But far more significant, I think, is the accelerating globalization of human migration patterns, with cultural and political consequences that we have scarcely begun to fathom. More people are now on the move in the world than at any time in the history of the human race, and more and more of them are making America their destination. The number of international students, for instance, attending American colleges and universities is now approximately 600,000 per year—a figure more than double what it was in 1980.

Meanwhile, increasing numbers of Americans are electing to live outside the United States. At least four to six million Americans are now permanent residents abroad. Among American college students, particularly those matriculating at elite institutions, it is now quite common to spend one's junior year overseas—something very few could afford to do just a generation ago.

This unprecedented intermingling of peoples and cultures—abetted by rising prosperity, expanding air travel, and the incredible velocity of mass communication—has already begun to have ideological ramifications. In the United States, it has been accompanied by the emergence of multiculturalism as the driving philosophy of our educational system. It has been accompanied by the deliberate dilution of traditional civic education and the resultant explosion of cultural illiteracy about America's heritage. It has been accompanied, in the field of historiography, by narratives which accentuate the failures and blemishes of the American experience. It has been accompanied by the rise of a liberal, cosmopolitan elite imbued with a post-national, even anti-national sensibility and motivated by what the historian John Fonte calls "transnational progressivism"—an ideology profoundly antithetical to conservative beliefs.

What does all this portend for the party of the Right? For generations, American conservatives have been united in their defense of our nation, of our inherited constitutional order, against enemies both foreign and domestic—something relatively easy to do during the Cold War but increasingly difficult today. Traditionally, American conservatives have been Eurocentric in their political and cultural discourse, but how can conservatives convincingly articulate this perspective to non-European immigrants and to millions of superficially educated young Americans at a time when Europe itself no longer seems Eurocentric?

These are not idle questions. The political scientist James Ceaser recently observed that for thirty years the conservative movement in the United States has been defending ideas "that almost all other nations in the West are abandon-

ing": "the concept of the nation itself," "the importance of Biblical religion," and "the truth of natural right" philosophy. Traditionally Americans have adhered to a form of national self-understanding that scholars term American exceptionalism. Ronald Reagan did so, and he carried the country with him. Now, increasingly, the Reaganite vision of American goodness and uniqueness that most conservatives embrace seems both more exceptional and more vulnerable than ever.

With what arguments, symbols, rituals, and vocabulary can conservatives make their case for the American way of life that they cherish to those for whom the traditional arguments, symbols, rituals, and vocabulary are either unfamiliar or seem hopelessly passé? Again, this is not a trivial concern. It lies at the very heart of our current election campaign. Behind the disputes over public policy and personal fitness for the presidency, behind the vehemence of the culture war surrounding Governor Palin, lurks the question: What kind of a polity does America desire to become? As the conservative British commentator Gerard Baker recently noted, the election of 2008 has turned into a "struggle between the followers of American exceptionalism and the supporters of global universalism." Whatever the outcome on November 4, American conservatives have not yet adequately articulated their convictions in terms that can appeal to people outside their own camp and particularly to those whom James Burnham called the "verbalizers" of our society.

This leads me to a final observation. I am an historian of American conservatism, and I can happily report that sophisticated discourse is thriving on the American Right—in journals like *Modern Age*, the *Intercollegiate Review*, the *New Criterion*, the *University Bookman*, the *Clare-*

mont Review of Books, and *Humanitas*, to name a few. But it also appears to me that conservatives spend much of their time (in current parlance) “cocooning” with one another and that, in this Age of the Internet, too much conservative advocacy has been reduced to soundbyte certitudes and sterile clichés. What do conservatives want? Limited government, they answer; free enterprise; strict construction of the Constitution; fiscal responsibility; traditional values and respect for the sanctity of human life. No doubt, but I wonder: how much are these traditional catchphrases and abstractions persuading people anymore? How much are they inspiring the rising generation? How much are they resonating with America’s dominant professional classes, particularly those in the more secularized and urbanized regions of this country? It is not a new problem. In fact, it is a perennial problem, the essence of which Whittaker Chambers captured long ago. “Each age,” he wrote, “finds its own language for an eternal meaning.”

What do conservatives want? To put it in elementary terms, we want to be free, we want to live virtuous and productive lives, and we want to be secure from threats beyond and within our borders. We want to live in a society that sustains and encourages these aspirations. Freedom, virtue, safety: goals reflected in the libertarian, traditionalist, and national security dimensions of the conservative movement. But to achieve these perennial goals, we must communicate in language that connects not only with our own coterie but with the great majority of the American people.

Can it be done? I think it can. If there is one thing that virtually all conservatives hold in common, it is the conviction that there is indeed an “eternal meaning,” a fount of wisdom to be drawn upon through thick and thin. Believing this, we can smile and persevere. The immediate future may prove unsettling to American conservatives, but in the words of William F. Buckley Jr. nearly fifty years ago, “the wells of regeneration are infinitely deep.”

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