

The Growth of American Conservatism

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With the capture of control of the United States Congress, Republicans made history in 1994. For the first time in more than forty years the Republicans had control of both houses of Congress. The new Republican Congress had a decisively conservative flavor, with attacks on the liberal social programs and calls for limiting federal power over the states. But the conservatism that climbed into Congressional leadership did not always possess such influence. In fact, there was a time when conservatism was thought to be intellectually dead, or at least catatonic. Between 1946 and 1996 American conservatism rose from a beleaguered remnant to the halls of Congress and widespread popularity. The rise of this conservatism can be laid at the feet of the changes in American society that have taken place in the last fifty years and on the heads of a liberalism that failed to respond adequately to the conflicts and complexities created by these social and economic changes.

Arriving at a definition of conservatism is not an easy task, for the word means many different things to different people. In many books and articles, conservatives and others have tried to define the term and themselves. Definitions varied. Peter Witonski, in his "Introduction to the Wisdom of Conservatives," agreed that conservatism did not have a fixed meaning, but added to the confusion by insisting that conservatism was not an ideology but instead a "style of thinking."¹ George Nash

presented the simplest definition. He identified post-World War Two conservatism "as resistance to certain forces perceived to be leftist, revolutionary, and profoundly subversive of what conservatives at the time deemed worth cherishing, defending, and perhaps dying for."²

Although American conservatism shared many similarities and ideas with European conservatism, the two were not the same. In *Conservatism in America*, historian Clinton Rossiter stated that there were three general differences between American and European conservatism. The former was clearly more optimistic about the nature of man, the uses of reason, the possibilities of progress, and the prospects of democracy. Also, American conservatism was clearly more materialistic because much more of it is based on economics instead of ethics or politics. Finally, the kind of conservatism extant in the United States was clearly more individualistic because it relied less on the primacy of society and the state.³

Nash described the state of conservatism in 1945 as such: "In 1945 no articulate, coordinated, self-consciously conservative intellectual force existed in the United States... In 1945 'conservatism' was not a popular word in America, and its spokesmen were without much influence in their native land."⁴ There were several reasons for the weakness of conservatism during this time period. The chief reason was that there was no clear body of conservative doctrine. Its detractors saw conservatism as almost exclusively a reaction against Roosevelt and the New Deal.⁵ These were the very programs and leaders which were seen as victorious over the Depression and the Second World War. During the Depression and the war, the federal government increased its role in the economy and society so that by 1945 the reactions and cries of conservatism seemed out of place and out of step with the times to the majority of Americans.

¹George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York, 1976), xii.

²Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thoughtless Persuasion*, 2d ed. (New York, 1962), 201.

³Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, xii-vx.

⁴E.J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York, 1991), 153.

If conservatism was in such low regard and seemingly very unpopular, what happened in the course of fifty years to resurrect the movement? Despite the bleak outlook in 1945, there were people who committed themselves to rallying the conservative cause, but they were isolated and lacked an intellectual voice in society. It is ironic that one of the first voices to speak out for the conservative cause in America was Friedrich von Hayek, an Austrian professor who had immigrated to Britain in the 1930's and was an early antifascist. In his 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek argued that "the rise of fascism and Nazism was not a reaction against the socialist trends of the preceding period but a necessary outcome of those tendencies."⁶ This connection between Nazism and socialism was important because it gave American conservatives a clear response to the charge that fascism and Nazism had been brought into power by the frightened business class. The book allowed the conservative movement to escape from the charge that it had much in common with fascism and Nazism, and the book gave a strong philosophical basis for their support of the war.⁷

The Road to Serfdom became very popular in the United States. Hayek's thesis for the book was simple: "[p]lanning leads to dictatorship," and "the direction of economic activity" would inevitably necessitate the "suppression of freedom."⁸ The book became a controversial bestseller in America. It offered the conservatives a vibrant new weapon to attack the New Deal and the planning structures of the war effort. Liberals strongly opposed the book since it attacked the very successes and triumphs which they had achieved in the previous twelve years.

Hayek's book fit into the first of three categories of conservatism established by Nash: "libertarian" or "free-market" conservatism. This branch was mainly concerned with limiting the role of the state in the economy and society. These conservatives were especially concerned with the growth of

⁶Quoted in Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 6.

⁷Dianne, *Why Americans Hate Politics*, 152-3.

⁸Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 5.

power in the executive branch and the growth of statism, which they connected to socialism and communism. Though Hayek himself did not agree with the total free-market or the pure laissez-faire idea, his book gave much intellectual force to the beliefs of the libertarian branch of conservatism. Other examples of early libertarian writers were Hayek's mentors, Ludwig von Mises and Albert Jay Nock, whose best known book was *Our Enemy, the State*. Libertarian and individualistic thought was also spread through journals such as *The Freeman* and *Analysis* and by organizations such as the Foundation for Economic Education and the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists.

The revival of conservatism did not limit itself to the individualists and libertarians. The postwar period also witnessed the growth of two other branches: traditionalism and anti-Communism. The "new conservative" or traditional branch of conservatism looked back at the destruction and desolation caused by the war and questioned the modern society. Richard Weaver and Russel Kirk were two early proponents of this form of conservatism. Both looked into history to explain the problems of man. Kirk argued that America did indeed have a conservative tradition and that it defined the American experience. Kirk enhanced the philosophy of non-American Edmund Burke, but also traced conservatism through figures such as John Randolph, John Adams, John C. Calhoun, and Henry Adams. Both Weaver and Kirk argued that there were fundamental, unchangeable truths or principles in the world. They saw modernism and ethical relativism as dangers to civilization and were even uncomfortable with democracy and totally free markets. The traditionalists emphasized values, community, and self-discipline over profits, pure individualism, and consumerism. Many viewed capitalism as a possible threat to the community.

The third school of conservative thought—anti-Communism—was mainly made up of people who had in early years been influenced by or involved in leftist organizations and had come to repudiate these early beliefs and associations. The anti-Communists favored an interventionist type of foreign policy and spoke about rolling back the gains made by Communism. These conservatives attacked Harry Truman's containment policy as costly and cowardly. Their crusading spirit came from ex-

communists, who supplied much energy and zeal and helped the Right to acquire a fervent mass following for the first time in years.⁹

The differences among the three schools were obvious to both liberals and conservatives, and in the 1950s a movement started to bring the three together. This movement searched for a unifying journal that would be able to spread the conservative message to new converts and establish a sense of unity or community among the three schools of conservatism. For a while, many hoped that *The Freeman* could be the unifying voice of conservatism but when it was sold and the editorship turned over to Frank Chodorov, a near anarchist, the call for a new journal increased.

Into this vacuum moved William F. Buckley, Jr., who founded the *National Review* in 1955. The *National Review* was weekly and aimed at a wide audience. Buckley saw the purpose of this new journal as not only to renew the attack against the Left but to consolidate the Right. Although the editorial board was made up a wide range of conservative thinkers, the new journal was stridently anti-Communist. The new journal allowed for the discussion of ideas while emphasizing the unity of the movement. Since the journal was the only weekly avowed conservative magazine for a long time to come, it became indispensable to the Right. Without such a similar journal, there would not have been a cohesive intellectual force on the Right in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰

Not only did the *National Review* promote conservative unity, it also acted as a tester of orthodoxy. Through its criticism of arch individualist Peter Viereck, Ayn Rand, and the radical libertarians, the journal tried to establish a coherent vision of conservatism. The fusionist consensus built by the *National Review* proved durable and lasted through to the 1990s.¹¹

If the 1950s, however, began the molding of new conservative thought, it did not appear to be the beginning of new conservatism practice. In 1947, historian Arthur Schlesinger called for a new politics of freedom in his book *The Vital Center*. Schlesinger stressed his belief in liberalism and Keynesian economics. A liberal consensus seemed secure. Even when Republicans were elected to high public offices, the New Deal and welfare state policies did not under go significant revision. The Eisenhower presidency, too, did not prove a chance to implement the Right's ideas and beliefs. Although Eisenhower was economically conservative, he did not agree with social conservatism. The Right started to realize that it needed to gain more influence in the Republican party before its views could gain more widespread political support. Yet, America was undergoing a dramatic transformation. The very success of the welfare state and liberalism planted the seeds of a counter-attack. Mainstream Liberalism would be gravely weakened under concerted attacks from both the Left and the Right.

The 1960s saw the growth of the conservative movement in both the intellectual world and the political. Retrospectively, the 1940s and 1950s could be seen as a time of rebuilding and preparation for the changes that would shake America's belief in liberalism. The administrations of President Kennedy and President Johnson raised hopes in the general population that poverty, racism, and chronic unemployment would disappear through liberal legislation and Supreme Court decisions. Some groups were not satisfied with the progress of government action and resorted to street protests and even violent confrontations.

The 1960s were a time of great political and social change but that change caused a backlash by those who did not agree with the way they saw American society to be progressing. This backlash also caught up large numbers of less affluent, or working class whites, who felt that their interests had been forgotten by the elitism of liberalism. This, combined with the increased power of middle-class intellectuals and reformers in the

⁹Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 129.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 153.

¹¹Dionne, *Hate Politics*, 166.

Democratic Party, caused the New Deal liberal coalition to start to fracture.¹²

The fracturing of the liberal coalition became noticeable in the 1964 Presidential elections. Although Barry Goldwater lost in a landslide, the election served notice that there was a growing number of conservative voters in both the Republican and Democratic Parties. Future Republican presidential candidates started to see this realignment and to use conservative messages and themes to draw the support of these voters. The conservative Republicans realized the potential power of these voters and the campaigns of Nixon, Reagan, and Bush were successful in courting social conservative working-class and lower-middle class vote.¹³ Through this process the conservative voices gained a wider audience and increased their credibility.

The great changes that took place in the 1960s also caused some liberals of the day to react. It was a movement made up of liberals "who had been mugged by reality."¹⁴ These people were concerned with what they saw as ideological rigidity in liberal programs. The belief that liberalism no longer knew what it was talking about became a central theme for the neoconservative movement. Neoconservatives also perceived liberals as soft on Communism.

Several erstwhile liberals became very critical of liberal programs. The writers and journalists of the movement became increasingly skeptical of the liberal view of rationally analyzed social problems with quasi-scientific solutions. The neoconservatives doubted that imperfect and unpredictable man could be organized socially on the basis of 'scientific' knowledge alone.¹⁵ Their criticisms of the liberal programs were more accepted by the mainstream press, which saw them as credible since they were seen as urbane intellectuals and not penny-punching businessmen or racists.¹⁶

As the neoconservative movement progressed, it became increasingly conservative. The attacks on liberal programs were

¹²Dionne, *Hate Politics*, 51, 80-3.

¹³*Ibid.*, 180-91.

¹⁴Irving Kristol, "Neoconservative Guru to America's New Order," *McClean's* 94 (January, 1981): 9.

¹⁵Dionne, *Hate Politics*, 60.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 61.

extended until just about every government program was called into question. The neoconservatives did not just criticize. One of the main strengths of the movement and one of its great contributions to American conservatism, was its ability to set up foundations, journals, and think tanks. These institutions helped to formulate positive counter proposals to liberal programs. Instead of just criticism, the neoconservatives were able to offer alternatives to the liberal programs. The neoconservatives wanted to reverse the agenda of government, turn the government away from grand schemes, and reform America by relying upon the private sector, market mechanisms, and traditional institutions such as the family and local community.

Another group of Americans who became active in the process of political and social thought due to the changes taking place in the 1960s, was the religious conservatives. Prior to the 1962 Supreme Court decision against school prayer and the Court's subsequent rulings on abortion and pornography, most on the religious right did not actively participate in the political, intellectual, and social discussions of America. In fact, fundamentalists prided themselves on being apolitical if not anti-political. The growing permissiveness of society and the mass media concerned the religious conservatives. These concerns caused the religious right to reexamine their separatism; in the late 1970s right-wing evangelicals organized themselves to defend the Judeo-Christian tradition and the cultural values that they believed in and which they felt to be under attack.¹⁷ Organizations such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition sprang up to advocate and voice the concerns of the religious conservatives. These organizations were successful in motivating and mobilizing large blocks of religious conservatives in support of the conservative cause.

Despite the variances and differences within the conservative movement, many were able to find common ground and bring the movement together. The anti-Communists found common cause with the religious conservatives who were concerned about the atheism of communism. The traditionalists and the religious conservatives had common grounds in their beliefs and in eternal truths and principles. Without the groundwork of the 1940s and

¹⁷Dunn, *Conservative Tradition*, 8-10.

The conservative movement was ultimately successful because it was able to offer alternatives to the liberal programs and policies which had increasingly been criticized and called into question. This ability to offer an alternative to liberalism enabled conservatism to attract new and diverse groups to its ranks.

Whether the conservative revival will see continued growth is a question that has yet to be adequately answered. The 1996 elections saw a conservative Republican majority return to the halls of Congress; but their numbers are fewer and President Clinton was reelected. But perhaps the reelection of President Clinton bodes well for American conservatism. The President did pledge support for a balanced budget and signed into law the welfare reform bill, both of which were widely supported. Perhaps America is not as conservative as the conservatives wish to think it is, and the reaction to some of the 1994 Congress's actions on the environment and Medicare are examples of this; support for welfare repeal, however, and other reforms of the welfare state suggest that America has moved perceptibly to the Right.

1950s, there may not have been a conservatism to turn to when the 1960s caused a great reaction in many people.

But the conservative revival must not be seen as just a reaction to the 1960s. Because of *Commentary*, *National Review*, and Russell Kirk's *Modern Age*, along with other conservative journals, the conservative movement was able to offer alternatives to the policies and beliefs of liberalism. As conservatives became more adept at formulating and presenting these alternatives to the American people, they became more readily accepted. This process was greatly helped by the emergence of the neoconservatives, whose criticisms of the liberal programs and policies were accepted as much more credible by the mainstream media. The neoconservatives also significantly helped the conservative cause by establishing foundations and other groups that were able to positively present conservative policies for governmental and social reform. Thus, modern conservatism was able to offer full alternatives to the people and voters who turned away from modern liberalism in the second half of this century.

People turned away from modern liberalism for many different reasons. Blue collar and less affluent whites turned away from liberalism because of what they perceived as an abandonment of their interests by modern liberalism and the Democratic Party. The radical Left also turned away from liberalism because of their concern over the lack of social progress. Some of these radicals, interestingly enough would later start to identify with the libertarian school of conservatism. Maybe some of the success of conservatism was due to the very fact that it contained so many divergent and different aims and beliefs. If Wiltonski was right and conservatism was not an ideology that would also help explain its rise. The conservative movement was open to various beliefs and people. The same people who voted for F.D.R in the 1930s could feel at home with conservatism in the 1980s and 1990s because it allowed them to keep and express their traditional social and cultural beliefs. Modern conservatism was open to the ideas of the neoconservatives and the religious conservatives. Though conservatism was not open to everyone, it did allow in groups that had become alienated and disenchanting with modern liberalism.