

13 Conservatism

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FOUNDATIONAL THEMES

Throughout American history, the logic, legitimacy, and status of conservatism have been subjected to recurrent patterns of critique. These challenges to the presence and plausibility of American conservatism are almost invariably based upon the operational premise that the American republic is an intrinsically liberal construction. The foundation of the United States is closely bound up with an explicit reaction against the imperial position of the British Crown and its supportive structure of Toryism in the form of a landed aristocracy with inherited estates, legal privileges, and a static stratification of society. Given that, its identity remains so integrally connected to the authority of liberal principles that the United States can appear to be a society wholly at variance with the precepts of conservatism. Moreover, the United States is often taken to be a society that is actively characterized by its generic incompatibility with conservatism. Arguably, social mobility and liberal opportunity have given the United States a historical capacity for emancipation not least from the kind of constraints that in more traditional cultures embed the individual into a social stasis of established authority and hierarchical stability.

It was the United States' departure from the European norm of conservative traditionalism that provided the motive force of Louis Hartz's celebrated assertion of an all-embracing liberal consensus as the defining characteristic of American civilization.¹

¹ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955).

The initial absence of feudalism and an *ancien régime* in American society had permitted liberalism to acquire an uncontested monopoly status in the public philosophy and individual mindsets of an uninhibited bourgeois culture. Laissez-faire capitalism built upon the civil libertarian implications of the republic's foundations and further encouraged the abandonment of any notion of a fixed social order. It was not simply that individualism increasingly supplanted those corporate community values that were traditionally the preserve of conservative institutions. It was that individual enrichment and social mobility were potentially correlated with the operational ideals of the American republic. Just as property ownership was regarded as a natural right, so was the conferral of property upon individuals through the operation of the market the basis of a constantly mutating pattern of social relationships. America lacked a feudal conception of class

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relations and responsibilities. As a result, it was deemed to be devoid of the kind of anti-industrial right wing and class-consciousness peasantry or proletariat that might have fostered a polarizing opportunity for a conservative alternative to the liberal alternative mainstream.

Hartz reasoned that in America's conceptual landscape, conservatives could only ever be a derivative of the liberal consensus. The claim was that American conditions had effectively merged conservatism into liberalism, so that a secular unity had been produced in which American conservatives were condemned to conserving liberal traditions. As a consequence, 'anyone who dared to use conservatism in order to refute liberalism would discover instead that he had merely refuted himself'.²

² Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, p. 151.

Hartz's calculus was designed for one outcome: to demonstrate that a social consensus in American conditions could only ever be an expression of liberal principles and priorities.

Notwithstanding the acclaimed prominence of America's foundations, it is possible to advance the claim that a liberal ascendancy cannot, and does not, incorporate every position and condition in the interplay of American political argument. In fact, over the last quarter of the twentieth century, it has been the conservatives who have dominated public debate and who have been pre-eminent in the formulation of political ideas and policy agendas. Far from being subsumed within the parameters of a liberal orthodoxy, conservatives have been in the vanguard of alternative ideas, radical programmes, and iconoclastic initiatives. Conservatives have contested the prevailing constructions of American values and the conventional priorities of liberal-based policies. By organizing grass-roots movements, establishing think tanks, managing lobbying campaigns, advocating policy shifts, and securing electoral leverage, conservatives have become the most conspicuous feature of American politics in terms of intellectual engagement and ideological conviction. In effect, they have set out to redefine the moral and historical basis of the liberal mainstream. Thus, American conservatives have sought to offer a

genuine and culturally authenticated alternative to the notion of a singular disposition.

Although conservatives have exerted enormous pressure upon the established configurations of policy and policy-making in the United States over the past twenty-five years, their efforts have been marked more by their extraordinary diversity rather than by the evidence of any unified doctrinal or sociological basis.³

³ William F. Buckley, Jr. (ed.), *American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970); William F. Buckley, Jr. and Charles R. Kesler (eds.), *Keeping the Tablets: Modern American Conservative Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Charles W. Dunn and J. David Woodard, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

Self-styled conservatives and their policy solutions have been drawn from traditionalists and libertarians, law-and-order advocates and free-market ultras, corporate financiers and Southern evangelicals, patrician Wasps and tax-cutting suburbanites, and disillusioned intellectuals and blue-collar populists. Such a rich ecology offers breadth of vision and political energy. By the same token, it also generates a confusion of discordant impulses and mixed messages. This leads

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to complaints that a proliferation of conservative dissent amounts to neither a coherent system of thought nor a settled programme of action. Nevertheless, it is this very plurality of conservative principles and impulses that not only underlines the usage of values in American political argument, but also demonstrates the dependency of political debate upon the contested meanings of ostensibly settled reference points of social principle. American conservatives may exhibit a bewildering profusion of stances and preferences, but a substantial proportion of this diversity can be reduced to the derivatives of two seminal traditions. Although they intersect one another and their themes draw upon each other, there exists a clear sense of differentiation in terms of first principles, ideological priorities, and attitudinal traditions.⁴

⁴ See George Carey (ed.), *Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative/Libertarian Debate* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

ORGANIC CONSERVATISM

Organic or traditional conservatism is the term used to describe the attempt to locate a conservative ethos within a culture of historically sanctioned customs and norms. This form of conservatism conceives of society as an integrated whole. While the separate parts and categories of society can be discerned and even analysed, a society's basic nature can only ever be comprehended as an organic unity from which each part derives its function and purpose. The components of a society are likewise only to be understood in terms of their relation to the entirety of society.

The basic consequence of this holistic conception is that society is accepted as a corporate entity, which not only exists historically prior to the individuals within it, but is ethically superior to them as well. According to this perspective, societies, like organisms, are products of history and experience. Their very existence is proof of their evolutionary success and of their moral virtue in a world of constant turbulence and danger. The traditional structure and behavioural conventions of such societies, therefore, are to be valued in their own right as embodiments of survival. Guiding principles are derived from history, religion, natural law, and tradition. They are sustained through instinct, sentiment, and practice.

This form of conservatism has always been strongly associated with European politics. Drawn from the social forms and certainties of various *anciens régimes*, European conservatism has had a strong tradition of accepting the historical bequest of classes, ranks, and hierarchy within society. Such stratification is believed to be essential to the very continuation of society. Traditionalist conservatives place their trust in the security offered by social experience within what is conceived to be a dangerously fragile system of civilized order. In such a context, the highest attainment and the lowest levels of barbarism are divided by the finest of margins. The course of history to this mindset is not one of assured progress

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but rather a cautionary tale of delicate inheritance secured from the tragedies of human error and conceit.

Societies may engage in forms of enhancement, but to the traditionalist there is always a price to pay because an unqualified improvement is a chimera. The benefits of progress have to be carefully judged in relation to the inevitable costs of change. Although this kind of conservatism possesses a powerful attachment to the society in existence, it does not subscribe to the idea that such a society has reached perfection or that it could ever attain perfectibility. On the contrary, traditionalist conservatives are cautious, suspicious, and fatalistic. Their belief in humanity's inner drives towards greed, violence, and

destruction and in the limitation and fallibility of human reason leads them to the conclusion that the human condition is inherently imperfect. On this basis, traditionally minded conservatives adhere to the security of order and to the obligations that are necessary to its preservation. They refute the claims of reason, progress, rights, democracy, and equality as delusions serving only to threaten the delicate bonds of civilization and to risk a subsequent descent into the barbarism of anarchy or tyranny. Traditionalists conserve out of an instinct for continuity and because of an anxiety over the cost of any ostensible improvement.

The values and principles defended in this sort of conservatism have generally been thought by Europeans to be common to western civilization as a whole. However, in the United States this premise could not be so easily assumed. American experience and conditions appeared to be diametrically opposed not just to this type of conservative tradition, but to any conservative tradition. America's political independence and cultural autonomy, together with its avowed principles of liberty, progress, democracy, and reason, and its celebration of natural rights, contractual government, and individual autonomy within a self-made society, seemed to be wholly incompatible with the spirit of conservative sentiment.

To Sheldon Wolin, the predicament of the American conservative has been highly problematic because of the society's affinity with progress through capitalism. Conservative traditionalists may have offered eulogies to artisan virtue, Sunday observance, community cohesion, and individual responsibility, but their appeals had become increasingly plaintive set against the driving forces of modernity.

[C]onservative bankers, businessmen, and corporate executives were busy devitalizing many local centers of power and authority, from the small business and family farm to the towns and cities. They created the imperatives of technological change and mass production which have formed the attitudes, skills, and values of the worker; and erased most peculiarities of place, of settled personal and family identity; and made men and women live by an abstract time that is unrelated to personal experience or local customs. ⁵

⁵ Sheldon Wolin, 'The New Conservatives', *The New York Review of Books*, 5 February 1976.

The outcome has posed a 'formidable challenge to the conservative imagination': a 'traditionless society that conserves nothing; ruling groups that are committed

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to continuous innovation; social norms that stigmatize those who fail to improve their status; incentives that require those who move up must move away'. ⁶

⁶ Ibid.

Several strategies have been employed to resolve the problem of establishing an acceptable foundation for traditional conservatism within a self-consciously liberal culture. Three devices in particular have been prominent and they can best be conveyed by examining the views of three key individuals in the development of American conservative thought during the middle of the twentieth century. All three had to contend with the challenge of differentiating a clear basis of conservative value in the American mainstream which at the time was characterized by the prevailing doctrines of cold war liberalism.

The strategy employed by Russell Kirk was simple and direct. He made an explicit attempt to recreate a European form of conservatism on American soil. His campaign to infuse American life with an organic prescription for order, authority, and mystique would have been instantly recognizable to a European traditionalist. ⁷

⁷ Russell Kirk, 'Prescription, Authority and Ordered Freedom', in Frank S. Meyer (ed.), *What is Conservatism?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), pp. 23–40; Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7th edn (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1986); see also Russell Kirk, 'The Essence of Conservatism', <http://www.kirkcenter.org/kirk/essence-1957.html>.

Kirk saw no necessary connection between a balance of interests within society and the need for a particular set of political institutions. A monarchy or an aristocracy might just as easily secure such an equilibrium. Moreover, according to Kirk, these political estates would help to give authenticity to the idea of a fixed order of social rank: 'What really matters is that we should accept the station to which "a divine tactic" has appointed us with humility and a sense of consecration'. ⁸

⁸ Russel Kirk, 'The Problem of the New Order', in Buckley, Jr. (ed.), *American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*, p. 367.

Many fellow-conservatives felt that Kirk's conservative prospectus belonged to a different time (i.e. the eighteenth century) and to a different place (i.e. Europe). He had attempted to universalize organic conservatism into a single timeless model

and then to embed the construct within a social identity that was based upon difference to the point of exceptionalism. In trying to provide a comprehensive statement on the way tradition can and should act as the guiding principle of social conduct, Kirk had shown just how problematic such a proposition could be in the American context. Against the historical spirit of traditionalist conservatism, Kirk invoked the liberal presumption of individual choice and social autonomy to create a prefabricated conservatism that could be absorbed within another tradition. His vigorously organic form of conservatism led paradoxically to claims that his prospectus represented a dissociation with the American experience and to an 'unhistorical appeal to history' and to a 'traditionless worship of tradition'.⁹

⁹ Peter Viereck, 'The Philosophical "New Conservatism" (1962)', in Daniel Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1963), p. 188.

Peter Viereck's solution to the source of an authentic American traditionalism was to privilege cumulative experience over notions of an idyllic past age or a fixed

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social order. Viereck was not concerned with trying to attach American conservatism to an overarching western tradition, or to a permanent system of moral and social absolutes. He was largely indifferent towards the argument that American conservatism needed to be based upon an indigenous historical continuity which, in his opinion, the passage of American history could not support. What Viereck viewed to be of central significance were the habits of mind that were drawn simply to what were taken to be traditions in a contemporary context. He gave emphasis not to what traditions *were* in some objective sense, but what they had *become*.

In the context of organic conservatism, Viereck pointed out the importance of the adaptation of tradition, in order for tradition to be preserved in a changing world and especially in America, whose world was always changing faster than elsewhere. As a consequence of this adaptive and evolutionary outlook, Viereck was prepared to approve of what had become an 'increasingly conservatized New Deal liberalism'.¹⁰

¹⁰ Viereck, 'The Philosophical "New Conservatism" (1962)', p. 188.

In his view, the true conservative ought to cherish the New Deal reforms because they had become an integral part of American society. Time had lent legitimacy so that a 'now middle-aged New Deal' had 'become conservative and rooted'¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

and, therefore, worthy of preservation as a development of integral value.

While conservative advocates like Viereck offered a mantle of Burkean consolidation to the quest for an operational American tradition, the problems with a liberal mainstream persisted. It was possible to criticize such conservatives on the conservative grounds that they were engaging in a form of liberal relativism and disguising it as a search for a core conception of society. They could also be accused of ignoring the status and the consequences of the liberal norm in American society. Clinton Rossiter was particularly significant in this respect because he set out to confront the issue of liberal orthodoxy head on. He recognized it and engaged with it on the same terms as Hartz. However, unlike Hartz, he did not claim that liberalism and conservatism enveloped one another to produce a single undifferentiated whole. Instead, Rossiter used American history to substantiate the argument that there has existed a long-established duality of ideas and impulses in American society.

On the one hand, Rossiter conceded that the American political tradition was basically liberal in form because of the way it gave emphasis to progress, liberty, democracy, equality, and individualism. On the other hand, Rossiter claimed that such a tradition had only remained viable with the coexistence of a 'deep strain of philosophical conservatism'.¹²

¹² Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, 2nd edn (New York: Vintage, 1962), p. 73.

This was embodied in the American adherence to conservative principles such as tradition, loyalty, unity, patriotism, morality, constitutionalism, religion, higher law, property, and community. Without this conservative element in American history, the attachment to liberal principles would not have been tempered into the stability and order for which America

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had become renowned. Conservative principles, therefore, had provided the corrective force that prevented liberalism from realizing its potential for internal contradictions and destabilizing excess. In the United States, the 'unquestioning devotion to a whole series of inherited ideals and institutions'¹³

¹³ Ibid., p. 75.

had 'kept reform like almost everything else, within the bounds of tradition and reality'. ¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

In terms of everyday political conduct, Rossiter had no doubt that conservative intuition was predominant.

In any showdown between liberalism and conservatism in American political thought, Liberalism wins out nine times out of ten. In a showdown between liberalism and conservatism in American political practice, conservatism wins out almost as monotonously. We have long-standing habit of doing political business and carrying on social relations in a conservative way. ¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

Notwithstanding his claims for the historical and social authenticity of conservative values in America, Rossiter was not disposed to assert the existence of a conservative parity with liberalism.

Even though he made an extensive case for the existence and influence of conservative principles in American history, Rossiter found it difficult to characterize the phenomenon as a singular and exclusive tradition. His argument was based wholly upon tradition, but his conclusion avoided the term. ¹⁶

¹⁶ In this respect, he stood out from other conservative analysts who have been less inhibited over the use of the term 'tradition'.

See Allan Guttman, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Jay A. Sigler (ed.), *The Conservative Tradition in American Thought* (New York: Puttnam, 1969).

The refusal amounted to a form of denial because in effect he made a convincing argument for an indigenous conservative tradition but at the same time revealed a conspicuous refusal to give it recognition. Rossiter could neither make the American consensus conservative in nature nor satisfactorily disestablish American conservatism from the liberal mainstream to give the American conservative tradition an autonomy and an identity completely its own. In alluding to a tradition that dare not speak its name, Rossiter reflected not only the conformity of his era but also the cultural prejudice against the term 'conservative'. Traditionalism, unity, patriotism, constitutionalism, and other elements of America's stable order were to Rossiter 'profoundly conservative principles'. ¹⁷

¹⁷ Rossiter, *Conservatism in America*, p. 75.

But political pragmatism appeared to have intervened at this point: '[W]e might label them conservative if it were not for the open contempt that our mind has displayed toward the conservative faith.' ¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid.

For nearly half a century, American conservative thought, and particularly the advocacy of an organic traditionalism, was confronted by the historical foundations of American liberalism compounded by the political momentum of successive liberal reform. From the New Deal era to the 1970s, the ideological initiative lay with the generation that had developed the organizing and protective power of the positive state. In 1951, Lionel Trilling had reached the conclusion that

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liberalism was so dominant that it had become essentially 'the sole intellectual tradition' ¹⁹

¹⁹ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1970), p. 9.

within the United States. He continued:

For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation... [T]he conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not... express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas. ²⁰

²⁰ Ibid.

In 1964, J. K. Galbraith was equally confident in his assessment that liberalism had acquired the status of a ubiquitous presence: 'These, without doubt, are the years of the liberal. Almost everyone now so describes himself'. ²¹

²¹ Quoted in John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, 'For Conservatives, Mission Accomplished', *Sooner Thought*, 18 May 2004, <http://www.soonerthought.com/archives/000672.html>.

Conservatism was widely seen to be a reactive impulse confined to the margins of American political debate. Ironically, conservatives occupied non-consensual positions and offered choices that the mainstream largely ignored. A senior conservative recalls that for 'nearly half a century, conservatism was or felt itself to be, in the political wilderness'. At this time, 'it became cranky and recriminatory' and many questioned whether conservatives could 'come to terms with a social reality more complex than their slogans'. ²²

²² George Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), p. 130.

Yet, over a relatively short period of time, the political status of conservatism was transformed from that of a political outlier to a central governing doctrine with a durable electoral base.

Several factors have been advanced to explain the dramatic shift to a conservative hegemony. They include the public's disenchantment over Vietnam and the way that the war was conducted; the decline in economic performance combined with inflation, unemployment, and high government expenditure levels; and the breakdown in law and order, race relations, and moral conventions. New Deal liberalism and the coalition that sustained it began to unravel over the 1960s under the weight of a faltering welfare-capitalist economy and the duress of social division and political distrust. Against such a disintegrative background, conservative ideas acquired an increased currency and electoral appeal. Conservatives offered analyses, explanations, and plausible solutions. Rossiter's notion of a remedial conservatism correcting liberalism found favour with large sectors of the American public. They viewed the conservative response as a means by which some sense of autonomy over social and economic processes might be restored through the force of alternative perspectives. ²³

²³ See Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Why America is Different* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

The stimulus of increased social dislocation, economic stagnation, and Soviet adventurism fostered a ferment of conservative activity. A defining theme was that reform liberalism had not so much failed in its policy prospectus as had

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succeeded in revealing its dysfunctional capacity for political overreach and in overlooking the fragility of the social order. Many of the complaints against the liberal ascendancy settled upon the critique that social engineering and experimentation had inherent limits. Society could not be regarded as possessing an endlessly mutable basis. As such, it could be expected to assimilate a range of premeditated reconfigurations without any negative ramifications. ²⁴

²⁴ M. Stanton Evans, *The Future of Conservatism* (New York: Anchor, 1969); Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Majority* (New York: Pocket Books, 1971); M. Stanton Evans, *Clear and Present Dangers: A Conservative View of America's Government* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

Organic conservatives were swift to make allusions to a breakdown in political authority and to draw on the contemporary state of disarray to underline the value of society's historical and traditional foundations. They condemned liberal government for having condoned and encouraged a culture of minority privileges over public interest concerns. This kind of self-serving myopia was cited as having disrupted the processes of public policy and fragmented the Democratic Party into a proliferation of segmented clienteles. Their pursuit of minority rights denied any opportunity for a grand vision that could counter the centrifugal energies of liberal self-interest in the cause of social cohesion or even cultural unity.

This concern for the contemporary state of the social fabric was reflected in the work of Robert Nisbet. In *Twilight of Authority* (1976), Nisbet despaired over the deterioration of authority as political communities, social classes, families, and churches had been marginalized by a central state devoid of traditional social ligaments. The decline of these agencies not only reduced the level of integration and meaning in social existence, but also failed to replace the structures of authority with anything resembling a holistic construction of legitimacy. On the contrary, the only substitute were forms of dislocated and alienated power, complemented by an intellectual scepticism that, in Nisbet's view, had no conception of the need to support a belief system. ²⁵

²⁵ Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

Samuel Huntington was another who criticized the way that government had been turned into an amoral service agency of special interests. What authority it still possessed had to be secured by the multiple appeasement of continual coalition-building. The leverage of sectional interests had progressively displaced the community-based agencies that supported the

cultural interest of an overarching authority. To Huntington, this dynamic had produced in the 1960s a condition which he termed 'democratic distemper'. This referred to the expansion of governmental activity on the one hand and the simultaneous reduction of governmental authority on the other. By the end of the 1970s, this had led to the paradoxical situation of Americans 'progressively demanding and receiving more benefits from their government and yet having less confidence in their government than they had a decade earlier'. Government was deemed in effect to have become ungovernable.²⁶

²⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Democratic Distemper', in Nathan Glazer and Irving Kristol (eds.), *The American Commonwealth—1976* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 11.

Another aspect of this concern over the totality and interconnectedness of society underlined the importance of a moral order. Implicit in this perspective was

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the need of society to reiterate the significance of moral foundations. Government should be required both to embody a social hierarchy of values and to engage in the active shaping of the citizenry's moral character. This kind of conservatism assumed the existence of an objective moral order that prescribed standards of human conduct to which governments should be expected to approximate. Integral to this perspective was the belief in moral priorities and in a moral imperative to act upon them. Liberalism could not be relied upon either to acknowledge the value of deep cultural traditions or to provide any substitute for them.

Drawing upon the work of writers such as Leo Strauss, Frank S. Meyer, Joseph Cropsey and Henry V. Jaffa, these conservatives placed a central value upon the moral foundations of society and upon the virtuous circle of the good citizen and the good society. According to this perspective, society was endangered by the moral relativism of secular liberal values and by schemes of social improvement that processed individual responsibility and moral consciousness out of the equation of public policy. In this respect, authority was an instrumental value that allowed a moral purpose to be served and the moral spirit of the people to be strengthened in the light of a continual conflict between good and evil.

The outlook fostered by this reactive form of conservatism was well captured by the analyses and prescriptions of George Will. In *Statecraft as Soulcraft* (1984), he stated his objections to the way that modern liberalism privileged self-expression and emancipation over established rules and standards of excellence. Because liberals favoured the 'egalitarian principle that all desires are created equal in moral worth',²⁷

²⁷ Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, p. 90.

notions of excellence and discipline were construed as illiberal. Notwithstanding the liberal bias in support of relativism, subjectivism, and spontaneity, Will called for a 'conservative counterattack, in law and culture and elsewhere, in the name of those forms of excellence which, as the Founders said, a free society especially presupposes'.²⁸

²⁸ Ibid.

Just as there were bad moral arguments and outcomes, so were there also good ones, and it is these which Will believed was the responsibility of the government to promote.

[I]t is not compelling persons to act against their settled convictions; it is not a collision of wills, the state's and the citizen's. Rather, it is a slow, steady, gentle, educated and persuasive enterprise. Its aim is to dispose citizens toward certain habits, mores and values, and to increase the probability that persons will choose to will certain things.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid., p. 94.

To Will, the objective was 'not to make society inhospitable to pluralism, but to make pluralism safe for society'.³⁰

³⁰ Ibid.

In the same way that the 'continuance of the citizenry's moral profile is a matter of political choice', conservatism had to operate on the understanding that 'authority grows organically from the rich loam of social mores and structures'.³¹

³¹ Ibid., p. 95.

Traditionalist conservatives like Nisbet and Will reflected a widespread concern over the state of American society and an anxiety that its cohesion and moral

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basis could no longer be taken for granted. Increasingly, conservative dissenters found that their expositions on authority, order, and morality were acquiring a critical leverage over the priorities of the liberal mainstream. Nevertheless, the more inroads they made into the profile of Washington agendas, the greater became the realization that their challenge had to be shared with another form of conservatism that occupied quite a different set of nuances upon American values.

INDIVIDUALISTIC CONSERVATISM

The other main organizing principle of American conservatism gives primacy not to the community and its web of evolving traditions, but to the individual and the need to protect personal liberties from the encroachment of constraining structures and doctrines. Individualistic conservatives have a powerful attachment to nineteenth-century liberalism and to the central questions relating to the foundation and purpose of the state. These issues possess a sustained immediacy to such conservatives because of their emphasis upon the recent origins of American society and because of their conviction in the New World's basic condition as a state of nature. The pre-existence of freedom in America is the key conditioning factor to this conservatism. Although the formation of government is taken to be a basic necessity for the security of society, it remains a contingent institution whose role is to preserve and maximize individual freedom to the fullest possible extent within a social setting. The criterion of optimizing liberty remains the sole priority and evaluative standard for such conservatives. Their preoccupation is one of scrutinizing the boundary between the state and individual, and of ensuring that the burden of proof for altering the relationship falls upon the state to establish legitimate reasons for increasing its remit.³²

³² See David Boaz, *Libertarianism: A Primer* (New York: Free Press, 1997), pp. 27–58, 94–104, 148–211; Charles Murray, *What It Means To Be a Libertarian: A Personal Interpretation* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), pp. 18–44, 60–79, 124–38, 143–56.

Individualistic conservatives accept that the United States is a mass society that can no longer depend wholly upon a vision of primitive freedom. Nevertheless, their belief in the contractual nature of political authority leads them to attribute enormous instructive value to capitalism in the organization of a free society. In the same way that the contractual ethos finds an extended resonance in the framework of capitalism, a capitalist order of property distribution is seen to offer a convincing rationale for a free society operating on the basis of full contractual freedom. It is for this reason that individualistic conservatives tend to take the period most closely associated with the productivity of laissez-faire capitalism (1875–1910) as the defining model of individual liberty and social advance. This was a period when the remit of government was weighted towards a minimal intervention in the economy. The absence or removal of restraint not only reduced the chances of political authority being abused but also allowed

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the natural dynamics, productive forces, and social benefits of the market to be maximized to reach a state of optimum synergy. The degree of economic liberty was regarded as the litmus test for all other liberties. Political liberty, therefore, was assumed to be reliant upon the condition of economic freedom embodied in a freely competitive market and in the absolute freedom of contract between any two parties.

Modern individualist conservatives take this era as their point of reference because to them it provides absolute standards of social and political prescription. Laissez-faire capitalism and the operation of the free market continue to offer a heroic vision of modernity to these conservatives. It is this period that the Cato Institute, for example, has in mind when it describes free-market capitalism as 'the most progressive, dynamic, and ever-changing system the world has ever known'.³³

³³ The Cato Institute, 'Statement of Principles', <http://www.cato.org/about/about.html>.

To conservatives of this persuasion, the values of the economic organization and human possibilities released by capitalism are regarded as timeless and universal in character. Successive deviations from this model on the part of misguided or malign reformers have not invalidated these principles of early capitalism. On the contrary, their appeal has been enhanced by the cumulative claims that the positive state has not only failed to provide solutions to America's social economic problems, but has in fact served to exacerbate them. This is the reason why the Cato Institute dedicates itself to the need to 'broaden the parameters of public policy debate to allow consideration of the traditional American principles of limited government, individual liberty, free markets and peace'.³⁴

³⁴ Ibid.

Individualistic conservatives draw their inspiration not only from the idealized era of laissez-faire capitalism but from a reaction against the explicitly illiberal regimes that were formed during the historical experiment of communism. This strand of conservatism celebrates the work of F. A. Hayek who persistently warned Western governments during the cold war that they had to avoid the 'road to serfdom'³⁵

³⁵ F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1944).

which would be the inevitable result of an incremental drift away from the free market. Hayek made a direct connection between economic freedom and political liberty. The management and planning of the economy by the state, therefore, posed huge risks to society.

Hayek's warning had two bases. First, government intervention compromised the efficient operation of a self-regulating mechanism of demand, supply, and price levels. The market remained the only means by which the sheer volume of information or changing individual demands could be systematically processed in an immediate and responsive way. The second threat posed by state interference was an ethical objection to the restriction of individual freedom. In seeking to displace the technical proficiency of the market, the state would always attempt to compensate for its lack of information and responsiveness by imposing abstract and subjective notions of fairness and social justice. Such rationalist exercises were misplaced and thoroughly dangerous. Their failures would always lead to

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greater and more coercive attempts to impose a centrally directed system of resource allocation. The result would lead to the economic and moral bankruptcy of totalitarianism. According to Hayek, therefore, the free market was both an embodiment of free choice and a preventative measure that kept tyranny at bay.³⁶

³⁶ See Fritz Machlup (ed.), *Essays on Hayek* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977); John Gray, *Hayek on Liberty* (Oxford: Robertson, 1984).

This concern for the overriding importance of liberty had a deep cultural appeal in the United States where the theme was further refined into an ideological frame of reference. Milton Friedman, for example, popularized the view that post-war government programmes and expenditures had already demonstrated the damage to freedom of market manipulation and social intervention by central government. Since a free market and a free political order are interdependent entities, any government intrusion in one would always destabilize the other. By intervening in both sectors at the same time, Friedman believed that liberal reformers had placed the condition of natural liberty in double jeopardy. To an individual like Friedman, laissez-faire capitalism was both the direct expression of freedom and also the chief means of ensuring its continuation. The freedom of the market necessarily had a prior claim over the requirements or contingencies of other areas of society. Political freedom in Friedman's view had a relationship of dependency upon the economic freedom of individuals making multiple choices in an open market.³⁷

³⁷ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

The connections between market capitalism and freedom, and between fundamental precepts of human nature and social ethics, are also forcibly pursued in the work of Ayn Rand. Proceeding on the basis that reason is necessarily the only guide to individual action and the sole means of ensuring an individual's survival as a person, the process of politics represents a quest for a social system that optimizes individual freedom and rights. Rand's sustained assault upon the state was explicitly derived from a philosophical-ethical foundation.³⁸

³⁸ Donna Greiner and Theodore Kinni, *Ayn Rand and Business* (New York: Texere Publishing, 2001).

From this basis, it was possible to postulate that individuals exist for their own sake and that the pursuit of their own happiness was a moral obligation with the highest priority. Governments could neither take on, nor take over, such a pursuit. They could assist in the securing of rights and in managing the different spheres of rights between separate individuals, but in the main governments constituted one half of a permanent dichotomy between freedom and statism. To Rand, self-ownership and free action could not and should not be differentiated from free trade and the free property of capitalism. She objected to capitalism being defended on ameliorative or altruistic grounds. Capitalism had a moral justification but it had nothing whatever to do with collective notions of the public interest. In Rand's view, capitalism's moral rationale was rooted in the fundamental reality

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of human existence and in the asserted power of reason to elicit and extrapolate the requirements for pure survival.³⁹

³⁹ Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet Books, 1986); Mimi Reisel Gladstein, *The New Ayn Rand Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

Another exercise in creating a countervailing ethos to liberal reform and the positive state came with Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).

This amounted to an assault upon the post-war consensus that freedom and social justice were reconcilable through redistributive and welfare programmes. In many respects, it was conceived and subsequently cited as an explicit response to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1972).⁴¹

⁴¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

In what was in essence a systematic re-enactment of John Locke's theory of individual rights, private property, and the state, Nozick repeatedly concluded that any interference with individual choice amounted to coercion. His premise was that everything begins with, and is consequently rooted in, individuals and their rights to liberty. Nozick accepted that individual rights should afford a floor of equal status. But once this basic condition is satisfied, the need is eliminated for any ceiling to be imposed upon the unequal outcomes that inevitably attend the exercise of personal freedom. Accordingly, the role of the state should be limited to that of a night watchman in protecting citizens against violence, theft, and fraud and in enforcing contracts and property rights. Assuming any additional roles would be to exceed its remit: 'The minimal state is the most extensive state that can be justified. Any state more extensive violates people's rights'.⁴²

⁴² Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, p. 149.

All attempts to enhance the claims and responsibilities of the state through pretexts such as social justice, collective rights, or national sovereignty are fraudulent in that they only serve to disguise coercion and the contraction of liberty.

According to Nozick, for a state to sustain its legitimacy, it has to possess the least capacity for force consistent with the maintenance of rights. If a state were to intervene to reduce inequalities, therefore, it would have nullified its *raison d'être*. It would have destroyed liberty by unjustly infringing upon property rights, in order to bring about a state of affairs different from that produced by the free trade of property holdings. Nozick points out that whenever a state pursues a policy of equality, even in accordance with the most altruistic motives, it inevitably subverts its own foundations. The position is further compounded by Nozick's assertion that egalitarian schemes are not only ethically questionable, but also operationally problematic. They are said to break down through the operation of free choice by individuals who will always attempt to circumvent an imposed pattern of social justice. Nozick's conception of an atomized society reduced to a stark basis of individual freedoms and property holdings afforded a fundamentalist calculus, through which almost every government action could be condemned on principle.

Anarchy, State and Utopia is in many respects an unconservative tract of political thought. It is highly libertarian in content and rationalist in its manner of

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construction. It eschews any ideas of justice based upon religion or natural law and it dispenses with any concern for the social bonds of mutual and collective obligation. Nevertheless, its iconoclasm appealed to those who were frustrated with the perceived heavy-handedness of government and who felt that they were paying the price of a social benefit that was in effect a forcible expropriation. Nozick's exposition was highly influential in the way it provided a fully developed expression of individualist conservatism in a period when such conservatism no longer seemed reactionary or shameless, but appeared to present logical alternatives and even the prospect of solutions.⁴³

⁴³ See Jeffrey Paul (ed.), *Reading Nozick: Essays on Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982); Jonathan Wolff, *Robert Nozick: Property, Justice and the Minimal State* (Oxford: Polity, 1991).

Theorists like Hayek, Friedman, Rand, and Nozick have enjoyed widespread notoriety in the United States because of the way they combine cultural instincts with elegant reasoning. Their systematically reasoned expositions of first principles are significant in their own right, but they are also important for the way their themes create a resonance within American society. The strong American impulse towards anti-statism and anti-establishment scepticism is well served by such extensive critiques. The libertarian character of the analysis both reflects a deep undercurrent of social attitudes and contributes

towards a radical right theme in much of America's public life. The advocacy of contractual restraints upon the state, the advancement of free-market dynamics, and the libertarian thrust against hegemonic structures and doctrines have found a particularly receptive audience in parts of the Republican Party. The effect of these same impulses, and their affinity with the iconoclastic outlook of libertarian intellectualism, has also fostered the development of alternative political movements with adventurous policy agendas.

The Constitution Party, for example, adopts a fundamentalist approach to the problems of American society and the 'mess in Washington'.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Constitution Party, 'Party Programme (2003)', <http://www.constitutionparty.com/pr03.htm>.

Its project is to reclaim the principles of the Constitution which it claims 'have been abandoned by our political establishment'.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Constitution Party, 'A Brief History of the Constitution Party', http://www.constitution-party.com/party_history.php.

In order to reverse 'America's slide into lawlessness, corruption and tyranny',⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ibid.

it is necessary to restore the government to its 'proper balance'.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Ibid.

and to its rightful role of preserving and promoting individual liberty. The party's principles expressly coincide with the foundational themes of the Constitution itself. It asserts that the original objective of the government was to protect individual rights which included the 'freedom to own, use, exchange, control, protect, and freely dispose of property'.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Constitution Party, 'Constitution Party National Platform', http://www.constitution-party.com/party_platform.php.

The lessons of history had made 'clear that left unchecked, it is the nature of government

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to usurp the liberty of its citizens and eventually become a major violator of the people's rights'.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Constitution Party, 'Constitution Party National Platform'.

Accordingly, it was necessary to stop and to reverse the processes of government expansion and usurpation. By eliminating income tax, sales taxes, estate taxes, gasoline taxes, and the Internal Revenue Service, the federal government would be downsized to a format consistent with its original purpose. The corollary would be a restoration of liberties to individuals and local communities. The libertarian logic of the Constitution Party leads it to advocate the abandonment of the welfare state with the same animus against government as it reflects in the party's proposals to repeal the Patriot Act, the Homeland Security Act, and the National Security Act because of the way that they enable government agencies to conceal their activities and to undermine the freedoms of citizens.

The same unequivocal hostility to government is also reflected in the formation and guiding principles of the militia movements. The sense of government as a direct threat both to personal liberty and to national security is conveyed in their mission statements which draw on themes of dispossession and popular sovereignty to legitimize the claim for an alternative and countervailing force for the benefit of American society. The common view is that just as 'all power is inherent in the people', so the 'greatest system of checks and balances exists with the people'.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ <http://texas-militia.us/main/content/view/32/42/>.

Whether it is the decline of public trust in government, or a symptom of the eroded autonomy of individuals and communities, the militia movements offer a combination of pioneering self-reliance with political primitivism that is directed against government-sponsored enemies. The purist libertarian conclusion is that government is the greatest threat of all. Direct action, therefore, is required to defend the people against its government:

The usurpation of our Constitution and Bill of Rights has awakened many Americans to the dangers of lawless government and people are catching on to the fact that the problems in America today are coming out of Washington, D.C. and their own State House—not the rural areas and backwoods of their State.⁵¹

⁵¹ <http://www.indianamilitia.homestead.com/Milandyou1.html>

Given the conviction that the 'domestic enemies of the Constitution. . . are found in every institution and sector of our society', and that Washington can be equated with 'gangster government',⁵²

⁵² <http://www.constitution.org/mil/adversaries.htm>

the logic of the diagnosis is pressed to its conclusion of radical and direct action. In this way, the citizen militias are a characteristic product of libertarian reasoning in which the logic of critical analysis is driven to the point of identifying a solution that is in exact accordance with the parameters of the stated problem. When the imperative of these first principles is combined with the normative force of America's legendary state of first existence, the result is one of an enriched appeal to the simplicities of a recoverable past.

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THE CONSERVATIVE MATRIX

The doctrinaire nature of individualistic conservatism is its strength. It provides an absolutist position of core convictions based upon a notion of historical endowment drawn from a period when the state had only a rudimentary presence in society. By offering a counternarrative to modern political development, individualistic conservatism affords a framework of critique in which elements of modernity can be opposed as heretical breaks with the past. This type of conservatism has a tendency to view politics as an epic encounter and a continual moral struggle between the baseline of liberty and the corrupting force of government. The relationship between the two is assumed to be a strict zero-sum conflict of values. In reflecting upon, and in celebrating the past, individualistic conservatives use history as a way of directing public attention to certain values that are closely associated with a previous era or, more accurately, with the idea of a period that reputedly epitomizes the American spirit. The intention is to underline what appears to have been lost, but at the same time to demonstrate what can be reclaimed through the force of human will and moral courage.

It is evident that major tensions exist between the evolutionary character of organic conservatism and the conservative instinct that is inclined to value a fixed regime of fundamentalist positions. Traditionalists give emphasis to order, authority, continuity, duty, moral purpose, and social cohesion. They are sceptical of the laissez-faire outlook and of its faith in the reliability of self-regulating social dynamics. In organic conservative thought, religious and moral values are often given a higher priority than the claims of individual liberty. While property rights and the notion of a natural aristocracy are common to both, the traditionalist conception of hierarchy is closely tied to a more settled social order than that envisaged by the market dynamism of the libertarians. This is witnessed by the equanimity shown by someone like Kirk towards differences within society. Because a natural hierarchy exists in society, inequalities should be seen as 'occasions for positive virtue, if accepted with a contrite heart'.⁵³

⁵³ Kirk, 'The Problem of the New Order', in Buckley, Jr. (ed.), *American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*, p. 367.

He continues:

That some men are richer than others. . . and that some are more educated than others is no more unjust, in the great scheme of things, than that some undeniably are handsomer or stronger or quicker or healthier than others. This complex variety is the breath of life to society, not the triumph of injustice. . . Without inequality, there is no opportunity for charity, or gratitude; without differences of mind and talent, the world would be one changeless expanse of uniformity.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Ibid.

In general, organic conservatives acknowledge the importance of individual liberty both as an ethical value and as an instrument of progress but are not prepared to concede that freedom represents either the supreme cultural tradition or the primary prescriptive standard by which social developments and government

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actions are judged. The libertarian thrust of individualistic conservatives arouses suspicion amongst organic conservatives that freedom is being used to legitimize a form of rootless materialism that violently erodes the traditional patterns of social hierarchy. Organic conservatives tend to believe that the unreflective drives of libertarians are likely to lead to social distortions in which recent patterns of wealth are progressively strengthened, leading to an exacerbation of social discord and a widening of those social and economic differences that threaten the cultural fabric of America.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Viereck, 'The Philosophical "New Conservatism" (1962)', pp. 185–207.

To a traditionalist cast of mind, individualistic conservatives can appear to be not merely ahistorical but anti-historical in their demands for time to be reversed and for America to be projected back to a selected era of social harmony and economic prosperity. Because of their abrasive contempt for the consequences of accumulated experience, these individualistic conservatives are said to challenge the present from a position of wanting to recreate the past. Their antagonism towards tradition has in the past earned them the reputation of being described as 'pseudo-conservatives'. ⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1967), chs. 2–4.

Certainly, organic conservatives are wary of the impulsive fundamentalist character of many on the radical right of individualistic conservatism. Traditionalists speculate upon whether these individualistic conservatives have a closer approximation to reform liberals than to conservatives. It can be claimed that individualistic conservatives and liberal reformers both fail to appreciate the limitations of politics and the restricted opportunities for ordered change.

At a temperamental and intellectual level, organic conservatives have a greater affinity with the philosophical principles and historical properties of classical political thought than is the case with their libertarian counterparts. Organic conservatives tend to draw upon the classical traditions of examining the definitions, ideals, and practicalities of the right way of life. These take into account the unchangeable nature of humanity, but also the central importance of social harmony and individual virtue within the limits of that nature. By adopting a classical outlook in terms of both historical perspective and transcendent existence, organic conservatives are able to suggest that individualist conservatism was formed from, and remains attached to, a narrowly constructed base. Within this context, it is possible to claim that the libertarian prospectus was derived from one atypical historical period (i.e. the Enlightenment) that had temporarily overlooked the moral limitations and behavioural continuities of human nature. Because complexity as well as evil would always persist in human society, the eternal and problematic question of virtue could never be resolved by liberalization or any other one-dimensional panacea. The classical outlook ensured that for many organic conservatives, order and virtue would remain paramount over the demands of freedom in a flawed world of moral imperfectability. The political pertinence of Strauss in this particular sphere is based precisely on this element of the threat of modernity and liberal democracy not only upon the proper

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consideration of moral values and the categories of classical antiquity, but also upon the organic integrity of a society capable of withstanding challenges to its principles. ⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

Those who subscribe to the position of individualistic conservatism remain equally sceptical of organic conservatives. Traditionalists are often criticized for their attachment to the status quo. In some quarters, this is equated with appeasement towards the consequences of accumulated liberal intervention. Some libertarian conservatives even draw parallels between traditionalist conservatism and socialism. Murray Rothbard, for example, always stressed the contrast between libertarianism and conservatism, and to this end he urged his readers to regard conservative traditionalists as the real adversary:

[Historically] conservatism was the polar opposite of liberty; and socialism, while to the 'left' of conservatism, was essentially a confused, middle-of-the-road movement... Socialism, like [classical] liberalism and against conservatism, accepted the industrial system and the liberal *goals* of freedom, reason, mobility, progress, higher living standards for the masses, and an end to theocracy and war; but it tried to achieve these ends by the use of incompatible, conservative means: statism, central planning, communitarianism, etc. ⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Murray Rothbard, *Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1979), pp. 6–7.

While organic conservatives tend to be concerned about the fragility of the state, libertarian anxieties are directed towards the growing incursions of a state whose basis is one of cumulative and increasingly irresistible power. To a libertarian like Rothbard whose proposals included the privatization of the police and national defence forces, the mobilization of values had to confront head-on the exigencies of this kind of historical drift. They had to oppose the statist habits and hierarchical presumptions of society's traditional stratification.

Individualistic conservatives complain that instead of using a prior state of existence to generate forms of emancipation, traditionalists are consumed by, or entrapped in, the processes of history. They are accused of failing to understand the forces through which a free society organizes itself, and in particular the progressive dynamics of economic power. Those who

align themselves with the libertarian ethos of individualistic conservatism tend to view traditionalist conservatives as too elitist, too passive, and too inhibited to engage in a counter-revolution against government. While organic conservatives give weight to continuity and gradualism, individualistic conservatives are disposed to call for a state of emergency and for action to be taken commensurate with the perceived presence of crisis. Within these debates, iconoclasts like Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan pitted themselves as much against the assimilative properties of traditionalist conservatives as they did against the prospectus of liberal reform.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002); Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, *Reagan, In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America* (New York: Touchstone, 2002); Craig Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution: The Untold Story of the Campaign That Started It All* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Current, 2005).

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Senator Goldwater notoriously admonished his own party in his 1964 presidential campaign that 'extremism in the defence of liberty [was] no vice'.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Barry Goldwater, 'Acceptance Speech to the Republican Party Convention, 1964', <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/may98/goldwaterspeech.htm>.

In a similar tone, Reagan flatly asserted at the outset of his presidency that government was the problem rather than the solution. Both succeeded in disrupting the conservative mainstream and in injecting libertarian energy into its agendas.

It is this libertarian insurgency which traditionalists find particularly difficult because it demonstrates the destabilizing potential of a freedom that attacks the source of its own social and moral standing. To Peter Berkowitz, the 'self-subverting tendencies' of freedom give rise to an apparent paradox.

Freedom depends upon a variety of beliefs, practices, and institutions that are weakened by the increasingly forceful reverberations of freedom throughout all facets of moral and political life. Some more traditional conservatives will say that such weakening is the baleful and inevitable consequence of modern freedom.⁶¹

⁶¹ Peter Berkowitz, 'The Liberal Spirit in America', *Policy Review*, no. 120 (August/September 2003), p. 41.

Berkowitz is unimpressed with such an argument because it overlooks the self-regulating dynamics of freedom. Berkowitz typifies the commonly held supposition amongst individualistic conservatives that freedom provides its own solutions. An expansion of freedom is thought to release its potential for indigenous order. In fact, 'the very same circumstances that unleash freedom's self-subverting tendencies also create opportunities for the exercise of the liberal spirit's self-correcting powers, which primarily consist of the free mind's ability to understand its interests well and devise measures to secure them'.⁶²

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 47. For another attempt to reconcile American traditionalism with the libertarian thrust of minimal government, see Murray, *What It Means To Be a Libertarian*.

Organic conservatives are not convinced that extreme liberty induces its own discipline and they remain concerned over the Jacobin language and adversarial outlook of those conservatives who urge the need for historical discontinuity.

The views of Berkowitz echo attempts made in the past to achieve a synthesis or 'fusion' between these two constituent elements of American conservatism. In the 1960s, for example, Meyer sought to meld the two strands together by arguing that freedom was an individual objective that could best be achieved within an ordered social setting. Meyer recognized the libertarian priority that freedom was the primary political objective, but he drew out a concomitant responsibility that invested liberty with a requirement to foster virtue through persuasion and example.⁶³

⁶³ Frank Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo* (Chicago, IL: H. Regnery, 1962).

To the organic conservatives, he acknowledged their objections to the rise of an insurgent central state over American society, but he pointed out that they needed to give due attention to the coercive nature of inherited structures and traditional communities. The communal imposition of virtue was to Meyer as serious a critique as the libertarians' reputation for sharply

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distinguishing law from morality. The solution to both complaints was a synthesis of the two traditions that proceeded upon the assertion of their interdependence upon one another. Meyer sought to strengthen the fusion by enfolded it within a form of American exceptionalism by claiming that the conditions and traditions of the New World had fostered a form of conservatism that was separate and independent from the experience of European conservatism. His drive to create a basis for a conservative coalition that could unite against the common enemies of communism and reform liberalism was well conceived in terms of practical politics. Nonetheless, Meyer's exposition upon the mutual inclusiveness of the two traditions was generally considered to be an intellectual failure and one that was widely condemned by traditionalists and libertarians alike. ⁶⁴

⁶⁴ See Kevin J. Smant, *Principles and Heresies: Frank S. Meyer and the Shaping of the American Conservative Movement* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002).

While the threat of communist expansion and collective coercion proved to be a durable source of social solidarity at the level of national endeavour, it did not subdue the tension between these two generic expressions of American conservatism. Despite the changes in international conditions—or arguably because of them—the struggle between traditionalists and libertarians continue to fuel many of the internal debates within the conservative movement. Thus, they contribute to the energy and vivacity of contemporary American conservatism. Each side disputes the foundations and doctrinal ramifications of the other. Each seeks to establish primacy of its own conservative credentials and to shift the balance of the conservative movement decisively in accord with its own principles. And each has a cultivated antipathy towards the pragmatism of mainstream conservatism which, in the view of both organic and individualist conservatives, has been responsible for the unprincipled drift of conservatism into the state-centric and socially disruptive policy regimes of successive liberal administrations.

On the libertarian side, the cause has been promoted by a range of organizations such as the Cato Institute, the Ludwig von Mises Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Institute for Humane Studies, and the John Randolph Club. Libertarian views and analyses have been projected into the public realm by journals (e.g. *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*), magazines (e.g. *Reason*, *Liberty*) ⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Liberty* defines itself as a 'journal of culture and politics written from a classical liberal point of view' (see <http://www.libertyunbound.com/>); it should not be confused with *Liberty Magazine*, which is devoted to the cause of religious freedom.

) and websites (e.g. www.libertarian.org). Organic conservatives also have their outlets of propagation which have contributed to conservative debates and to the overall struggle over conservative identity (e.g. Family Research Council, Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies, Center for the Community Interest, and Ethics and Public Policy Center). Because organic conservatism is more instinctive and attitudinal in its origins, outlooks, and tone, it has less of a tradition of intellectual analysis and systematic exposition. By the same token, it has often suffered from being temperamentally associated with the predispositions of mainstream conservatism.

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This has created internal tensions which have led to various attempts to make some of the roots and implications of organic conservatism not only more explicit but also more stridently expressed.

The most controversial element of this development has been the emergence of what has become known as 'paleoconservatism'. In their desire to draw out the deep historical and even mystical elements of conservative attachment, paleoconservatives have adopted several highly reactionary positions. Individuals like Pat Buchanan, Samuel Francis, and Paul Gottfried, and outlets such as *The American Conservative*, *The American Cause*, and *Chronicles Magazine* have deliberately distanced themselves from the evolutionary norms of traditionalist conservatism. Their critiques vary but they tend to centre upon the racial and ethnic identity of the United States, the historical presence of an innate social order; and the cultural threats posed by the federal government and the welfare state. Against accusations of being pre-modern or even anti-modern in outlook, paleoconservatives press for restrictions on immigration, a rollback of multicultural programmes, the decentralization of the federal polity, the restoration of controls upon free trade, a greater emphasis upon economic nationalism and isolationism in the conduct of American foreign policy, and a generally *revanchist* outlook upon a social order in need of recovering old lines of distinction and in particular the assignment of roles in accordance with traditional categories of gender, ethnicity, and race. Perhaps the most succinct illustration of the paleoconservative outlook is conveyed by the works of its chief polemicist Buchanan: *Right from the Beginning* (1988); *The Great Betrayal: How American Sovereignty and Social Justice Are Being Sacrificed to the Gods of the Global Economy* (1998); *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (2002), and *State of Emergency: The Third World*

Invasion and Conquest of America (2006).⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Patrick J. Buchanan, *Right from the Beginning* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1988); Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Great Betrayal: How American Sovereignty and Social Justice Are Being Sacrificed to the Gods of the Global Economy* (New York: Little, Brown, 1998); Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2002); Patrick J. Buchanan, *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2006).

In their various forms, the organic and individualist strands of conservatism account for much of the dissonant energy that characterizes American conservatism. The distinctive outlooks and contentions of these two conservative variants have considerable ramifications in the organization of political argument and action both within the conservative movement and in the wider public sphere. However, while many groupings and positions have their roots in one or other of these perspectives, this is not to say that all conservative viewpoints are reducible to the derivatives of a clear bipolar distribution. On the contrary, a number of conservative phenomena and organizations are complex compounds that draw upon both strands in idiosyncratic ways. Two of the more significant melds are illustrated below.

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THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

The term 'religious right' refers to an amalgam of issue advocates and organizations that rose to political prominence in the 1980s and that have continued to pursue an active agenda of religiously inspired proposals designed to recalibrate public policy back towards a condition of moral integrity. The proponents of religious right give priority to the kind of 'hot button' issues that most elected office-holders normally try to evade due to the polarizing properties of the disputes that they generally arouse in the public sphere. The issues embrace controversial themes such as abortion, school prayer, gay rights, childrearing, public education, and government funding for the arts. Supporters of the religious right seek to place these issues at the centre of political debate. They do so not only to present politics as a series of moral dichotomies, but also to lend credence to the idea of a deep moral crisis afflicting the nation. These religious groups claim that they are uniquely able to act as society's moral barometers and to offer morally based solutions commensurate with the apocalyptic scale of the identified problems.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Michael Lienesch, 'Right-Wing Religion: Christian Conservatism As a Political Movement', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 97, no. 3 (1982), pp. 403–25; Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow (eds.), *The New Christian Right* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine, 1983); A. James Reichley, 'Religion and the Future of American Politics', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 101, no. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 23–46; A. James Reichley, *Faith in Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2002), pp. 289–303, 329–36; Martin Durham, *The Christian Right, the Far Right and the Boundaries of American Conservatism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 105–25.

By identifying themselves with concepts like the 'silent majority', or 'God's people', the religious right organizations offer a collective ministry to the nation and a way of mobilizing large numbers of people who would otherwise be political non-participants. Reacting to the sense of moral malaise in society, and to the emergence of localized groups centring upon the issue of 'family values', leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson formed umbrella organizations to pull the disparate elements of religious protest together. These agencies drew upon, and encouraged the development of, an evangelical revival. Traditionally, evangelicals have tended to avoid political engagement because they regard society as being permeated with evil. Organizations like Moral Majority, Religious Roundtable, Focus on the Family, and the Christian Coalition, however, have actively solicited evangelical support and directed it to a public crusade for moral values.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America* (New York: Doubleday, 1980); Michael Cromartie (ed.), *No Longer Exiles: The Religious Right in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992); Michael Cromartie (ed.), *Disciples and Democracy: Religious Conservatives and the Future of American Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1995); Ralph Reed, *Active Faith: How Christians Are Changing the Face of American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

Significantly, the religious right has also fostered an alliance between evangelicals and conservative Catholics. This was pioneered in the early 1990s by several religious leaders from both denominations who wished to create a Christian 'solidarity in opposition to the forces of unbelief'.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ 'A Statement of Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Communion of Saints', *First Things*, vol. 131 (March 2003), <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0303/articles/sect-saints.html>.

Father Richard Neuhaus,

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together with the Institute on Religion and Public Life and its journal *First Things*, was especially prominent in establishing a basis for cooperation in the form of the 'Evangelicals Catholics Together' (ECT) organization.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ 'Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium', *First Things*, vol. 43 (May 1994), pp. 15–22; 'The Gift of Salvation', *First Things*, vol. 79 (January 1998), pp. 20–3; Charles Colson and Richard J. Neuhaus (eds.), *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995).

The ECT movement has been significant not only in developing a spiritual and theological basis for joint action over social issues, but also in giving the Catholic East European element of the conservative coalition a base through which to express its religious and moral objections to the state of American society.

Increasingly, religious groups with mass memberships have sponsored forms of mass political action. They have engaged in an intense lobbying campaign to increase voter registration, to support candidates for public office, and to promote Christian values within society.⁷¹

⁷¹ Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978–88* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 50–125.

The Christian Coalition, for example, has defended its record of political action in terms of having had a 'continual impact on America's political discourse'⁷²

⁷² Christian Coalition, 'Our Vision: The New Christian Coalition: Faith with Action in the New Millennium', <http://www.cc.org/vision.cfm>.

and thus 'returning a sense of cultural ownership to Christian citizens nationwide'.⁷³

⁷³ Ibid.

The religious right not only became an integral part of the 'new right' in the last quarter of the twentieth century, but it also typified the theme of a conservative movement independent of party structure and institutional support. Its mix of evangelist denunciation of society and the usage of modern marketing techniques (e.g. satellite broadcasting, cable television, sophisticated market targeting, and computerized mass mailing) succeeded in generating an impression that the unsophisticated mass of those with simple faith was being unfairly frustrated by godless elites.

The electoral potential of the religious right was quickly recognized by conservative strategists. As a consequence, religious right organizations became a key constituency in the Republican Party and were in the vanguard of the 'Reagan revolution'. They have been credited with a succession of defeats for liberal office-holders and with having shaped the national political agenda since the 1980s. They remain very influential and in 2001 celebrated the elevation to the presidency of George W. Bush, whom the evangelicals regarded as one of their own. President Bush for his part has responded by giving emphasis to the need for 'moral clarity' in the conduct of the presidency, by infusing his speeches and public statements with biblical references, and by setting up agencies such as the cabinet level Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ See Jo Renee Formicola, *The Faith-Based Initiatives and the Bush Administration: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); David Masci, *CQ Researcher Religion and Politics v. 14–27* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2004); Marvin Olasky, *Compassionate Conservatism: What It Is, What It Does, and How It Can Transform America* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

During the course of his presidency, it became evident that Bush's Christian commitment was neither perfunctory nor

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symbolic but represented a core element of his personal philosophy and inner convictions.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ For an illustration of President George W. Bush's view upon the role of personal faith in public service, see Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003), chs. 5–8; George W. Bush, *George W. Bush on God and Country: The President Speaks Out about Faith, Principle, and Patriotism* (Fairfax, VA: Allegiance Press, 2004).

While his reliance upon prayer and moral instincts has caused dismay in some quarters,⁷⁶

⁷⁶ For example, see Ron Suskind, 'Without a Doubt', *New York Times*, 17 October 2004.

his 'faith-based presidency'⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Ibid.

was a key component of his successful campaign for re-election in 2004.

Although the religious right is based upon the professed need for clear principles, the movement itself is not devoid of differing points of emphasis.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ For an impressive examination of the internal debates within the Christian Right, see Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000).

On the contrary, a major disjunction is discernible along the classic fault-line between supple traditionalism and fractious fundamentalism. Some elements of the religious right movement are clearly animated by the impulse towards a moral order in a society, or more particularly by the recognition that society is in jeopardy of a debilitating moral disorder. The central premises are that American society is rooted in a Judaeo-Christian tradition; that American culture is under assault from the insidious influences of liberal rationalism and 'secular humanism'; and that the causes and symptoms of this syndrome are discernible in the nation's moral and social breakdown. In the same way that there are thought to be limits to the rate at which society can assimilate forms of social engineering, it is assumed that there are genuine dangers for a society that allows religious doctrines to be redesigned into more secularized constructions.

The organic response to these threats is one of giving priority to unity through the reclamation of tradition. By rediscovering the textual foundations of theology and providing a clearer sense of a divinely sanctioned moral order, the traditionalist strand of the religious right seeks the reintegration of society. This is regarded as a wholly viable solution on the grounds that it is based upon a revival of a prior American condition; that the United States is an exceptional society; and that the advocacy and attainment of national renewal represents God's will. The restoration of a past moral order is also seen as a viable objective because it can draw upon the close affinity of religion with the traditions of American conservatism.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Kenneth J. Heineman, *God Is a Conservative: Religion, Politics and Morality in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

Notwithstanding these connections, the intention to place God at the formal centre of society not only creates a profusion of political challenges but also generates an ambiguity over the authenticity of the religious right's traditionalism. For example, it can be argued that the emphasis which is given to the idea of a moral past and to the need to restore it through a moral revival casts doubts upon the evolutionary character of organic adaptation. It can be

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claimed that the radicalism of the religious right's programme on social issues amounts to a challenge upon the Constitution's separation of church and state. In its most extreme form, the ideas associated with 'Reconstructionist' theology explicitly assert the need to replace democracy with a form of 'Biblical law' that would restrict civil rights and impose a theocratic state.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Frederick Clarkson, 'Theocratic Dominionism Gains Influence', *The Public Eye Magazine*, vol. 8, nos. 1 & 2 (March/June 1994), <http://www.publiceye.org/magazine/v08n1/chrisre1.html>.

On the one hand, a usage of religious and spiritual injunctions may be seen as a symbolic device to produce an increased appreciation for social cohesion. On the other hand, it may also indicate a real intention to transform a particular form of religious doctrine into the only permissible substance of social unity. Whatever the motivations underpinning the religious right's employment of organic allusions, the strategy has placed severe strains upon the unifying properties of the theme. A programme that is geared to the injection of moral absolutes at the expense of settled traditions, or at least long-established social practices, in areas of personal responsibility or individual freedom (e.g. abortion, gay rights, religious observance, pornography, medical ethics) can be construed as being repressive, intolerant, and divisive. Apart from the direct challenge to the cumulative nature of constitutional jurisprudence, the policy agenda carries implications, if not of a theocratic state, at least of an established doctrinal order and a revival of an eighteenth-century Tory-church duopoly. In seeking to evoke the virtues of an older America and of a society apparently more settled within a clear public philosophy, the religious right's properties threaten to place it outside the accepted contours of America's liberal tradition. American liberty in this regard can denote a freedom to emancipate oneself from the imposition of liberal social doctrines, but at the same time to conform to an alternative conception of social order and moral sanction.

Other elements in the religious right reveal far less interest in, or concern for, tradition and organic unity. The emphasis here echoes the radical right ethos of ideological battle, fundamentalist critique, a revolt against authority, and a complete break with the past. Some of this belligerence is attributable to the absolutism of religious truth, which by its very nature is not open for negotiation. Another source is provided by the social equivalent of revelation in which complex systemic problems are

attributed to a single, or at least to a simple, set of agencies of corruption and expropriation. Deviations from the expected norm of American excellence are presupposed to be the direct result of active intervention by corrupting forces. Malicious intent requires an equally concerted response on the part of those who are aware of the moral danger of appeasement.⁸¹

⁸¹ See Robert Boston, *The Most Dangerous Man in America? Pat Robertson and the Rise of the Christian Coalition* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1996), pp. 63–148.

These themes of absolutism and revelation are complemented by a populist message of unjustified social exclusion and cultural deprivation. By rationalizing the social and moral discomfort of modernity with a conflict of interests between

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secular elites and popular Christianity, the religious right has attempted to channel diffuse resentments into a coherent theme of majoritarian liberation. The organization has clear populist overtones of elite conspiracies, moral subversion, social resentments, and the personalization of interests, issues, and politics. As part of this explanatory structure, the religious right has on occasion encouraged a vengeful attitude towards those sectors of American society that are identified as being responsible for the economic and social discomfort of the forgotten millions of lower middle-class Americans and for the subsequent dislocation of American society. The subversives generally include liberals, blacks, pacifists, feminists, federal judges, homosexuals, Jews, and urban sophisticates.⁸²

⁸² Daniel C. Maguire, *The New Subversives: Anti-Americanism of the Religious Right* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1982).

Even when the movement's leaders have been more inclusively benign in their outlook, 'the America to which they wish to return is a Protestant America' where—withstanding developments like the ECT—there is often 'very little in the mythology of "one nation under God" to which Catholics, Jews and Mormons can attach their aspirations'.⁸³

⁸³ Steve Bruce, 'Zealot Politics and Democracy: The Case of the New Christian Right', *Political Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2000), p. 267.

The extensive sources of cultural disinheritance also offer a point of access to the sphere of fundamentalism. Within this dimension, the initial indictment of specific American conditions can be widened into an altogether more sweeping condemnation of the norms and values of modern society. Fundamentalism is an international phenomenon that is present in all religious traditions. It is characterized by a pronounced sense of the need (i) to fight *back* the rise of modernism; (ii) to fight *for* a traditional world view and the identity associated with it; (iii) to fight *with* doctrinal and textual fundamentals; (iv) to fight *against* those who would subvert the divine integrity of an established order; and (v) to fight *under* the direction of God's active presence in society.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ See Martin E. Marty and Scott Appleby, 'Introduction?', in Martin E. Marty and Scott Appleby (eds.), *The Fundamentalism Project*, Vol. 1: *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1991), pp. ix–x; Nathan Glazer, 'Fundamentalism: A Defensive Offensive', in Richard J. Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie (eds.), *Piety and Politics: Evangelicals and Fundamentalists Confront the World* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1987), pp. 245–58.

In the United States, this fundamentalist ethos has a close affinity with the religious right's antagonism against those who are identified as being responsible for the subversion of America's moral identity. The religious right has worked assiduously in this vein to associate itself with the fundamentalist vocation of providing a commensurate response to the extreme conditions of a chronic epoch.

Religious right organizations have been remarkably adept at translating the generic properties of fundamentalism into a style and language that can resonate with American audiences. They have worked to conflate civil dissent and democratic assertiveness with an attachment to freedom of conscience, moral restoration, and divine authority. They have also mixed doctrinal integrity with sectarian

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pluralism and given priority to the authenticity of experience over historical continuity.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ See Matthew C. Moen, 'From Revolution to Evolution: The Changing Nature of the Christian Right', *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 55, no. 3 (1994), pp. 345–57; Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, 'Second Coming: The Strategies of the New Christian Right', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 111, no. 10 (1996), pp. 271–94; Clyde Wilcox, *Onward, Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996); Mary E. Bendyna and Clyde Wilcox, 'The Christian Right Old and New: A Comparison of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition', in Corwin E. Smidt and James M. Penning (eds.), *Sojourners in the Wilderness: The Christian Right in Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), pp. 41–56.

The United States is a highly religious country and also the defining model of modernity. The religious right has sought to extend the logic of this duality by developing a pronounced fundamentalist outlook of doctrinally based aggression in the service of an urgent and radical break from the secular world. This kind of fundamentalism is further strengthened by its proximity to the libertarian priorities of individualistic conservatism and its revolt against governing elites. When the latter are transfigured into secular and cultural forces intent upon removing religious attachments and moral strictures from the public sphere,⁸⁶

⁸⁶ For example, see Richard J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).

the religious right has sought to invoke both traditionalism and libertarianism in its calls for a moral revival. The evangelical impulse has been particularly suggestive in this respect. Its attachment to inner experience and a personal apprehension of God, combined with the resultant privatization of faith as an individualized process of being 'born again', have a strong resonance with the anti-institutional instincts of the free market. The clearance of impediments and the subsequent emancipation of the individual generate a metaphorical and political leverage. This libertarian ingredient runs concurrently with the religious right's determination to clarify the range of moral choices and to underline the full impact of the individual's moral responsibility for the consequence of those choices.

The religious right straddles the complex and ambiguous terrain between formal religious affiliation and religiously informed political behaviour. Those seeking to use religious belief to shape electoral and policy choices have been able to draw upon core American themes to advance their claim. The freedom from oppression, the individualism of the soul, the democracy of a mobilized silent majority, the rule of law as God's ordinance, and the appeal for order have all featured as instruments of advocacy by religious right organizations. But in pursuing its themes of spiritual consciousness and social conversion, the movement has often proceeded with an intensity that has proved to be divisive and intolerant. Its fundamentalist agenda has arguably exceeded the limits of conventional pluralist politics and this has meant that many of its policy objectives have not been achieved. Nevertheless, the movement retains an important role in framing the evaluative criteria of public action and in conditioning the political agenda to fundamental issues of moral conscience. The religious right's ability to infuse political argument with subtexts of moral complaint and ethical critique has been effective in creating a medium of opposition and an alternative channel of political

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expression. This builds upon the traditions of republican virtue, which has not only allowed social conservatism to be equated with a transformative ethos but has also permitted the ideal of progress to be defined as a reversal of the processes of social degradation.

NEOCONSERVATISM

This form of conservatism is rarely referred to as a collective entity. Instead, it is characterized as an association of individuals who share a range of family, professional, and intellectual connections and who have, over twenty-five years, developed into a formidable centre of opinion formation. The roots of their collaborative project lay in the civil dislocation of the 1960s when, in their view, America's social consensus was undermined by excessive expectations of what government could achieve and by an intellectual vogue for new left critiques and social democratic agendas. Many of those who became neoconservatives had their origins in the Democratic Party and in the liberal reform tradition of the New Deal (e.g. Irving Kristol, Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Bell, James Q. Wilson, and Daniel Moynihan). Whether it was a form of disillusionment over the segmentation of government into clientele-servicing units, or whether it was the alarm over the destructive energies of an apparently dysfunctional society, the neoconservative response was to make a robust analytical claim for a thorough reassessment of public policy priorities. Their previous liberal allies in government and academia labelled them 'neoconservatives' as a term of ridicule, but the epithet was accepted by the recipients who believed that their outlook would represent a genuinely new variant of American conservatism.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ See Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Christopher DeMuth and William Kristol, *The Neoconservative Imagination* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1995); Mark Gerson (ed.), *The Essential Neoconservative Reader* (New York: Perseus, 1996); Jeane Kirkpatrick, 'Neoconservatism as a Response to the Counter-Culture', in Irwin Stelzer (ed.), *Neoconservatism* (London: Atlantic, 2004), pp. 233-40.

The neoconservatives have a strong sense of purpose, place, and identity. Their habitat is centred on a cluster of organizations located for the most part in New York City and Washington, DC. The close proximity of neoconservatives to

governmental and social elites reflects both the neoconservatives' own backgrounds and their agenda of challenging policy interests with an 'in-house' feel for the political dynamics of government. In effect, they form a social and intellectual network and, on this basis, have developed their own foundations, publishing houses, journals, magazines, radio and television outlets, research institutes, and think tanks. The weight given by neoconservatives to public intellectualism makes them an unconventional component of American conservatism. But as Mark Lilla points out, their 'strategies for retaking cultural and political territory'⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Mark Lilla, 'The Closing of the Straussian Mind', *New York Review of Books*, 4 November 2004.

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conservative authenticity to their critiques of the media, educational, and policy establishments.

Traditional American conservatism was anti-intellectual; neoconservatism is counter-intellectual. That is the source of its genius and influence. Unlike traditional conservatives who used simply to complain about left-leaning writers, professors, judges, bureaucrats, and journalists, the neoconservatives long ago understood that the only way to resist a cultural elite is to replace it with another. So they have, by creating their own parallel universe.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Lilla, 'The Closing of the Straussian Mind'.

That universe is composed of a tightly defined cluster of organizations in which neoconservatives congregate and exchange ideas (e.g. Project for the New American Century, American Enterprise Institute, Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs and Center for Security Policy, Heritage Foundation). The epicentre of neoconservative thought has been the journals *The Public Interest*, *The National Interest*, and *First Things*,⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Although *First Things* is nominally a Catholic publication based upon the Institute on Religion and Public Life, its founding editorial board contained a number of Jewish intellectual figures.

as well as the magazines *Commentary* and *The Weekly Standard*. It is from this organizational and media base that a profusion of intellectual critiques and policy initiatives have flowed for over a generation into the public domain. The effect of these public and private activities is widely cited as having been instrumental in shifting the national agenda to the right and in having reinvigorated American conservatism in general.⁹¹

⁹¹ See David Brooks, 'The Neocon Cabal and Other Fantasies', in Stelzer (ed.), *Neoconservatism*, pp. 39–42; Joshua Muravchik, 'The Neoconservative Cabal', in Stelzer (ed.), *Neoconservatism*, pp. 241–57.

Although neoconservatives operate across a broad spectrum of public affairs and are associated with a diversity of viewpoints, they can in the main be distinguished by a number of common themes. A developed scepticism towards the purposes and utility of liberal programmes, for example, constitutes a keynote neoconservative posture. Although neoconservatives are in the main wary of liberals who advocate government schemes of social intervention, their opposition is not based upon a fundamentalist or libertarian antagonism against the state. Instead, it is grounded in an analytical assessment of the cost–benefit ratio of government action. In many areas of public policy, neoconservatives seek to demonstrate that government programmes have not only failed to diminish social problems but have actually served to exacerbate them. In material terms, the counterproductive nature of much of government intervention is one of high cost and negligible benefit. In terms of the social fabric, government programmes are often cited as having undermined the mediating structures of social cohesion (e.g. family units, neighbourhood communities, voluntary associations), thereby screening out the requirements of individual responsibility and group respect (e.g. the welfare system). The pivotal neoconservative indictment was not simply that of policy-makers having insufficient knowledge or of having misapplied the available

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data. It was more a question of the inherent unreliability of social knowledge, and the limits of self-awareness in being able to recognize the deficiency.⁹²

⁹² See Nathan Glazer, 'The Limits of Social Policy', *Commentary*, September 1971; Irving Kristol, *On the Democratic Idea in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 127–49; Daniel P. Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* (New York: Free Press, 1970).

Another recurrent element of neoconservative thought is the malign influence of what is termed the 'new class'. This refers to the growing number of policy professionals and knowledge elites who are primarily upper middle class in composition and dependent upon the growth of activist government for their power, status, and wealth. They include scientists, administrators, social workers, educators, journalists, planners, health-care managers, welfare operatives, and social scientists. Neoconservatives claim that these occupational sectors constitute a highly organized apparatus that not only possesses class interests of its own but also has at its disposal the influence to service them in ways that are detrimental to the public interest. This new class is denounced by neoconservatives for developing an independent constituency within government and for exploiting it to maintain and expand government programmes irrespective of their expense, or their impact upon the community.⁹³

⁹³ See Irving Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. 25–31; Norman Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), pp. 283–95; Nathan Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), ch. 6.

Collectively the members of the new class are said to possess a deep-seated influence upon government and to be responsible for the durability of those policy agendas that have not resolved the problems for which they were originally put in place. This class is generally depicted as a self-perpetuating elite of liberal politicians and policy professionals whose interests are tied to the material manifestations of the liberal reform tradition. Far from being progressively oriented, the new class is dismissed as regressive and retrograde in the way it is able to persist with indefensible policy structures and to rely upon the force of bureaucratic inertia against the challenge of fresh thinking. To the neoconservatives, the new class gives physical expression to the 'liberal establishment', which is claimed to rest upon an attitude of government support devoid of any understanding either of the limitations of public action, or of the way that government intervention can deplete political authority.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ See Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism*.

Although neoconservatives have a jaundiced view of government competence in domestic policy, they have a powerful attachment to the state in the field of foreign policy. They are resolved to use the state in a concerted way in order to advance American interests abroad but, more importantly, to propagate American ideals and to act on behalf of them in the international sphere. This nationalist Hamiltonian conception of government purpose originally emerged from the neoconservative objections to the new left critiques of the United States in the 1960s. A discourse on the corrupt and even fascist nature of American values was thought to be not only extreme but also dangerous in that it weakened the contribution of the United States in the wider global struggle over political

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principles. As a consequence, the classic neoconservative response in this field has been one of uninhibited ideological warfare.

Neoconservatives have a fervent conviction in the supremacy of western civilization, especially in the ethical superiority of the American variant that features liberal capitalism, Jeffersonian democracy, and national resolve. During the cold war, neoconservatives became progressively dismayed over the Soviet Union's control of Eastern Europe, its arms build-up, human rights abuses, expansionary policies, and nuclear threat to the West. The alleged weakness of the West's response, together with its adoption of containment, coexistence, and, ultimately, détente were increasingly subjected to neoconservative critiques. Their chief complaint was that the United States was engaging in a form of appeasement that legitimized a repugnant status quo. The presidency of Reagan afforded some respite to this complicity, but even his administration sought to temper ideological confrontation with negotiation and accommodation in areas such as arms control and human rights. After the cold war, the neoconservatives became even more agitated that a historic opportunity to shape the world rather than merely reacting to it was being needlessly wasted. They complained that the West's initiative was being relinquished by the Clinton administration's emphasis upon multilateral engagement, trade promotion, conflict resolution, and peaceful long-term democratization.

On George W. Bush's accession to the presidency, several neoconservatives were appointed to key positions in the new administration. From their respective vantage points in the State Department and the Pentagon, they and their allies are reputed to have exerted disproportionate influence upon policy-making in the defence and national security areas. According to this perspective, they have been able to press the neoconservative agenda in favour of the United States abandoning international treaty obligations, acting independently in the absence of collective action, and using the power of the United States to shape a world congruent with American values and interests. The agenda has been described as 'hard Wilsonianism' because its advocates 'embrace Woodrow Wilson's championing of American ideals but reject his reliance on

international organizations and treaties to accomplish our objectives'.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Max Boot, 'What the Heck Is a Neocon?', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 2002.

The belligerent nature of neoconservatives' position reflects this expansive view of the national interest. It was one of the founders of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol, who declared that extensive nations had vital interests well beyond their borders: '[L]arge nations whose identity is ideological, like... the United States today, inevitably have ideological interests as well as more material concerns'.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Irving Kristol, 'Can Neo-cons Break Out and Save the World?', *Sunday Times*, 24 August 2003.

On both counts, neoconservatives believe that the United States is rightfully engaged in an ideological conflict which requires the strongest exertion of national will.

It has been suggested that the clarity of the neoconservative world view has been shaped by the experiences of their formative years. John Ehrman, for example, regards many neoconservatives as essentially cold war liberals. They are said to correspond to the working assumptions of President Harry S Truman, who

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combined a centrist position on state-organized social reform with a vigorous foreign policy centring upon anti-communism.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs 1945-1994* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

Other interpretations go further back and take up the Trotskyite past of seminal neoconservative figures such as Nathan Glazer, Sidney Hook, and Albert Wohlstetter.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Khurram Husain, 'Neocons: The Men behind the Curtain', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 59, no. 6 (November/December, 2003), pp. 62-71.

On the left, the Trotskyite attachment to global change over the pragmatic and more restricted ambitions of Stalin's nationalist priorities produced a lasting legacy of revolutionary internationalism. Those neoconservatives who began on the left but who then subsequently shifted to the right are thought to have retained their revolutionary outlook.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Irving Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 3-13; John B. Judis, 'Trotskyism to Anachronism: The Neoconservative Revolution' *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 4 (July/August 1995), pp. 123-9.

Henry Kissinger observed that 'once they had changed sides, their anticommunism was intense'. Moreover, it was expressed through a 'considerable affinity for strategy honed by years of ideological warfare on the left side of the barricades'.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Henry Kissinger, *Year of Renewal* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 106.

While their energetic outreach remained constant, it could now be said to have been placed in the service not of international socialism but of the exportation of democratic capitalism.

An alternative explanation of the neoconservatives' conception of their political role places the emphasis upon the philosophical influence of Leo Strauss. He had underlined the need for cohesive elites to drive policy in the light of truthful imperatives and had drawn attention to the utility of an external threat in clarifying a moral vision and the need to act upon it. Strauss advocated a greater sensitivity to the fundamental themes and universal principles of classical philosophy, in order to reveal the depth of crisis in western civilization. In denouncing the cultural relativism and nihilism of a liberal democracy that negligently propagates its own destruction, Strauss underlined the need for political character to be measured by the civic virtue required to confront the evil of tyranny in whatever form it presented itself. Straussians are sensitive to the complexity and fragility of the social order as well as to the limited mutability of the human condition and to the intractability of social problems. In this light, careful and informed thought should activate political action.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: S. Martin's Press, 1999); Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

Any distinction between theory and practice, therefore, is seen as a false dichotomy. Just as theory is regarded as an integral part of political conflict, so is it thought vital for political action to be shaped by theory. Indeed, as Michael C. Williams makes clear, it would be difficult 'to find a contemporary position more committed to the proposition that ideas matter in politics and that theoretical commitments and debates have practical consequences'.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Michael C. Williams, 'What is the National Interest? The Neoconservative Challenge in IR Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 11, no. 3 (September 2005), p. 308.

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Other constructions of neoconservative cohesion make allusions to the high concentrations of Jewish intellectuals within the movement. Set against the experience of the Holocaust, these individuals are highly sensitive to the history of international inaction in relation to the protection of human rights. They are also strongly supportive of an activist foreign policy to protect the security of democracies in general and Israel in particular as it offers a regional model of democracy for the Middle East as a whole. Whatever the precise blend of factors at work in the neoconservative mindset, their net effect has been to create an influential point of advocacy in support of a foreign policy for a global battle between moral extremes.

Ostensibly it is ironic that, in a period that has witnessed a developing conservative movement, the neoconservatives have come to prominence as a small and distinct group of policy analysts and scholarly ideologues. Neoconservatives attach great significance to the concerted power of ideas and to leadership expressed through intellectual rigour. Nevertheless, their political strategy is primarily one of re-energizing the republican ideal of an active public interest and reconnecting the populous with a socially compelling conception of a national prospectus rooted in republican virtue. The neoconservative diagnosis of American society does focus upon the vacuity, decadence, and disintegration of contemporary life and is informed by a general scepticism of modernity and its effect upon communal ties, social cohesion, and moral solidity. Yet, the neoconservative outlook is not one of despair or fatalism.

Neoconservatism is oriented towards reversing the processes of individual alienation and social 'nihilism' ¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, pp. 114–22.

through reviving a republican identity and transforming the individual from a state of isolated self-interest to an integral part of an encompassing social order. Instead of relying upon the unidimensional categories of modern liberal-capitalism with its bounded concepts of interests and balances, neoconservatives redefine progress in terms of recalibrating American society in line with its roots in classical liberalism and civic republicanism. Some conservatives look to the sentimental comforts of a regressive patriotism, or to the more exotic appeal of European conservatism, to provide the foundations for a conservative reaction to modernity. In contrast, neoconservatives remain optimistic and progressive in their view of the American nation as both an intrinsic repository of social value and an emancipatory source of universal principle.

The neoconservatives' relationships with other parts of the conservative coalition have not been without incident. ¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Adam Wolfson, 'Conservatives and Neoconservatives', in Stelzer (ed.), *Neoconservatism*, pp. 213–31.

Williams' observation goes to the heart of the matter: 'As neoconservatives are well aware, advocating the necessity of an ideological nationalism and a heroic politics of national greatness are likely to cause more than a little unease'. ¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Williams, 'What is the National Interest?', p. 317.

The disquiet has been deepened by what is

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widely seen to have been the neoconservatives' disproportionate influence upon the policy-making processes within the Republican Party and in the administration of President Bush. ¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ For an assessment of this complaint, see Zachary Selden, 'Neoconservatives and the American Mainstream', *Policy Review Online*, <http://www.policyreview.org/apr04/selden.html>.

A particularly potent source of doctrinal conflict comes from the libertarian wing of the conservative movement. Advocates of this strand of conservatism claim that neoconservatives are in essence apologists for 'big government' who have encouraged a rapid expansion of central power at the direct expense of civil liberties, individual privacy, and constitutional restraint. Far from being progressive in nature, libertarians regard the neoconservatives as a regressive and authoritarian force which seeks to reformulate conservatism under a false prospectus. Moreover, it is claimed that the privileged position of neoconservatives within the state has allowed them to 'control the debate over what western values are and by what methods they will be spread throughout the world'. ¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Honourable Ron Paul, 'Neo-Conned', Statement to the House of Representatives, 10 July 2003, <http://www.house.gov/paul/congrec/congrec2003/cr071003.htm>.

As a consequence, libertarians like Congressman Ron Paul refuse to integrate the neoconservative position within their conception of modern conservatism or historical processes.

Restating the old justifications for war, people control and a benevolent state will not suffice. It cannot eliminate the shortcomings that always occur when the state assumes authority over others and when the will of one nation is forced on another, whether or not it is done with good intentions... If the neoconservatives retain control of the conservative, limited-government movement in Washington, the ideas, once championed by conservatives, of limiting the size and scope of government will be a long-forgotten dream. ¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Libertarians claim that there is an alternative morality and a competing conception of republican authenticity to that of neoconservatism. It is structured around the reductionist calculus relating to the asserted zero-sum duality of the individual and the state. The rationalist character of this unilinear approach to social analysis and prescription leads libertarians to dismiss the complex nuances of the neoconservatives cause as collectivist contrivances solely designed to diminish freedom. Neoconservatives for their part acknowledge the strain with libertarians who are seen to be 'conservative in economics but unmindful of the culture'. ¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Irving Kristol, 'The Neoconservative Persuasion', *The Weekly Standard*, 25 August 2003.

By contrast, traditionalist conservatives share much of the neoconservatives' concern for social order, community cohesion, and civic temperament. It is true that the neoconservative attachment to the positive state and to the muscular promotion of democratic values abroad presents difficulties for some traditionalists and especially for paleoconservatives whose priorities of isolationism, protectionism, and cultural enclosure sit uncomfortably with the expansive internationalism

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of the neoconservatives. Patrick Buchanan has no doubts that under the 'tutelage of Jacobins who call themselves idealists', ¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Patrick J. Buchanan, 'The Anti-Conservatives', *The American Conservative*, 28 February 2005.

President Bush has abandoned traditional doctrines of American foreign policy in order 'to embrace Wilsonian interventionism in the internal affairs of every autocratic regime on earth'. ¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Ibid.

To Buchanan, the penalty for breaking with tradition is dire:

A conservative knows not whether to laugh or weep... We are going to democratize the world and abolish tyranny. Giddy with excitement, the neocons are falling all over one another to hail the president. They are not conservatives at all. They are anti-conservatives, and their crusade for democracy will end as did Wilson's, in disillusionment for the president and tragedy for this country. ¹¹²

¹¹² Ibid.

In spite of these sources of friction, many traditionalists and neoconservatives do share a close common cause in relation to the depth and seriousness of what is perceived to be America's moral crisis. The traditionalists' belief in the existence of a transcendent order to which societies should approximate finds a connection with the neoconservatives' more functional appreciation of the role of moral principles in the furtherance of community solidity. Accordingly, the need for ethical principles to be propagated and ethical standards to be adhered to in a society is given a high priority by traditionalists and neoconservatives alike.

The neoconservatives' foundational premise that America possesses a social and national significance as a historically exceptional moral entity has opened up alliances with the Christian right and other social conservatives. ¹¹³

¹¹³ Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Unbound: The Neoconservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 6.

Even though many neoconservatives have Jewish origins and, therefore, possess a strong affinity with Israel, their emphasis upon the role of morality within the political order has found a strong resonance in the agendas of more conventional centres

of conservatism. It is noteworthy, for example, that a number of leading Catholic intellectuals (e.g. Michael Novak, Richard J. Neuhaus, George Weigel) have been closely associated with the neoconservatives and their robust prescriptions. The constituency of anxiety over the influence of secularism, feminism, and cultural relativism in American society have encouraged many conservatives to advocate the kind of assertive moralism within America that is comparable to the neoconservatives' moral commitment to international reconstruction. The theology of an influential sector of evangelicals, which places a high priority upon Israel's security on grounds of biblical prophecy, further underlines the common ground between the religious right and the neoconservatives.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Richard Popkin and David Katz, *Messianic Revolution: Radical Religious Politics to the End of the Second Millennium* (London: Penguin, 2000); Victoria Clark, 'The Christian Zealots', *Prospect*, July 2003, pp. 54–8.

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CONCLUSION

The religious right and the neoconservatives account for just two compounds within the complex chemistry of American conservatism. While the conservative persuasion in the United States is often referred to in terms of contemporary cultural predominance, the nature of conservatism remains highly segmented and open to many permutations. Any attempt to assemble a political coalition of conservative forces always reveals the varied underlying ecology of American conservative thought. It is this pluralistic composition that distinguishes American conservatism and marks it out as a complex and contingent amalgam of contested properties.

In its classic guise, conservatism carries the inference of a clear set of values and priorities to be conserved. Almost by definition, conservatism implies a unified outlook and a fixed point of reference incorporating a hierarchy of ideas. American conservatism, however, exhibits properties that do not fit the traditional norms of conservative thought. As this chapter has attempted to show, conservative identity in the United States has been strained by the foundational status of liberal principles in both the conceptual and historical basis of the New World ethos. The related theme of American universalism has also imposed strains upon the conservative ethos of societal uniqueness and the organic differentiation of nations.

The core value of progress in the United States constitutes another conceptual and practical difficulty for American conservatism. The need to oppose many of the precepts of liberalism without opposing the progressive consequences of a liberal society has remained a problematic feature of conservative existence within a culture attached to the virtues of improving movement. In seeking to be associated with the liberal optimism of progress, conservatives have had to ground it within a cautionary outlook that recalibrates progress into a benefit drawn from static principles and ideally located within a construction of American society repeatedly set in a securely idealized past. On these and other grounds, American conservatives have traditionally been discomfited by the strains of being on principled grounds both American and conservative. American conservatives have to operate in a culture pervaded by liberal values. Nevertheless, they are not so immersed in the primacy of liberal principles not to be conservative. However, to the extent that they are conservative, they remain open to the criticism that they are set apart from the grain of the American tradition.

Notwithstanding these apparent cultural disadvantages, it is clear from the evidence presented in this chapter that American conservatism has not only flourished for a generation but has also arguably become the dominant force in American political argument. During the same period that the Republican Party adopted a more rigorous perspective, it also succeeded in developing an electoral coalition capable of breaking the Democratic hegemony in the Congress and of becoming the dominant force in presidential elections. The electoral effectiveness of the Republican coalition and its varied successors has coincided with the continued

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growth and vitality of the conservative ecology of think tanks, policy institutes, advocacy organizations, journals, and media outlets. The political confidence and mobilizing energy of the conservative sector have been symptomatic of a momentum that has not only witnessed the forcible presentation of conservative issues onto the national agenda, but has decisively shifted the centre ground to the right over the past twenty-five years.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ See William C. Berman, *America's Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

To John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, the shift has been palpable and far-reaching: 'Not only has America produced a far more potent conservative movement than anything available in other rich countries; America as a whole is a more

conservative place'.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, p. 11.

The sense of achievement was evident in President Bush's address to the American Conservative Union on the occasion of its fortieth anniversary:

Some here tonight were there for that first meeting of the ACU in the fall of 1964. Back then. . . you stood behind a good man from Arizona, Barry Goldwater. You knew that the principles he represented—freedom and limited government and national strength—would eventually carry the day. And you were right. . . The conservative movement has become the dominant intellectual force in American politics. . . It's easy to understand why. On the fundamental issues of our times, conservatives have been right. . . These convictions, once defended by a few, are now broadly shared by Americans. And I am proud to advance these convictions and these principles.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ President George W. Bush, 'Remarks to the American Conservative Union 40th Anniversary Gala', 13 May 2004, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/05/20040513-8.html>.

Yet, in spite of the electoral and political impression made by conservative forces, conservatives have not always managed to translate their resources into a coherent programme or even into a settled pattern of preferences. On the contrary, conservative energies have constantly been dissipated by the variability exhibited in the precepts and priorities of different conservative groupings. In many respects, the conservatives' collective weaknesses have been a product of their multiple successes in the sphere of energetic and focused mobilization. But very often high value-rallying strategies and doctrinally inflated expectations are accompanied by disappointments and recriminations. The biodiversity of conservative perspectives, therefore, has been both a source of vitality and an explanation for the conservatives' own sense of continuous frustration.

The segmented nature of American conservatism was well illustrated by the Reagan coalition. At one level, it was a highly successful combination of blue-collar social conservatives centred in the Midwest; Southern-based religious conservatives; and a broadly suburban constituency of economic libertarians whose main emphasis lay in the reduction of taxes and government activity. Ostensibly, the coalition represented a 'fusionist synthesis' between the free market, social conservatism, and an enhanced military. The disciplinary effect of the cold war was another key element in the cohesion of a movement that has been described

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by Jonathan Schoenwald as the culmination of a process of post-war development: 'Traditionalism, libertarianism and anticommunism all offered something for those who were inclined to believe that the country needed to change, that programs wrought by the New Deal hurt rather than helped.'¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing*, p. 12.

But while the coalition may have been electorally effective, difficulties inevitably arose in translating it into a workable framework of government. The Reagan administration was continually divided by the differing interpretations and priorities given to the conservative project. For example, friction occurred

- *between* the moral fundamentalism of the religious right *and* the more evolutionary and pragmatic outlook of incremental traditionalists;
- *between* the class connotations of cosmopolitan intellectuals and Wall Street's Keynesian conservatives who were generally moderate, interventionist, and even progressive *and* the classless provenance of suburban insurgency against cities, bureaucracies, and government in general;
- *between* 'retrenchment conservatives' intent upon reducing government *per se* *and* 'empowerment conservatives' who were prepared to use market structures and taxation incentives to achieve imaginative ways of achieving social objectives and raising public services without recourse to high-expenditure bureaucracy (e.g. tax credits, vouchers);
- *between* the principled elitism of the neoconservatives *and* the populist outrage of those experiencing cultural exclusion and dispossession;
- *between* the property consciousness of big business and capital gains constituencies *and* those concerned with social cohesion and civic values;
- *between* free-traders *and* nationalistic protectionists;
- *between* the economic 'supply-siders' seeking to stimulate both the economy and government revenues *and* the free-market libertarians who wanted the economy to be stimulated in order to reduce government spending;

- *between* the free-marketeers *and* those business interests who did not want their enterprises to be liberated by 'deregulation';
- *between* evangelical and Catholic 'Main Street' conservatives animated by issues of social and ethical decline *and* patrician 'Wall Street' conservatives who privileged the stability of the economic order over political experimentation in the enforcement of morals and, finally;
- *between* the conservative working class 'Reagan Democrats' who were critical of the abuses of the welfare state *and* the individualist laissez-faire ultras who wished to turn a campaign against abuse into a holy war against the positive state that provided much of the working class with its long-term financial security.

Reagan's difficulties were symptomatic of a president who wished to base his administration firmly upon conservative principles. He found that not only were

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such principles many and varied, but that in order to transform even a fraction of them into law he necessarily had to be selective over which conservative principles he would adopt and which ones he would reject. He also had to confront the paradox of having to centralize power, in order to implement a radical programme of concerted decentralization.

Another celebrated attempt to fuse together the disparate elements of conservative support was attempted in the Republicans' 'Contract With America' (CWA) in 1994. ¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ See Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey, *Contract with America* (New York: Times Books, 1994); Elizabeth Drew, *Showdown: The Struggle between the Gingrich Congress and the Clinton White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

The package of proposals was designed to maximize the Republicans' conservative base by drawing upon a set of themes that could unite different conservative constituencies. The Contract included commitments to balance the budget, reform the welfare system, improve defence, protect the family, impose term limits on members of Congress, and reduce taxation and regulation. Even though the CWA was expressly formulated to avoid divisions over doctrine and priorities, the objective of establishing a post-Reagan programme of conservatism was only partially realized.

Points of contention that reflected the tidal undertows of American conservatism quickly emerged. For example, the pledge to reduce budget deficits, decrease taxes, and restrict the growth of the federal government appealed to economic conservatives. However, the economic package did little to resolve the debate between these conservatives over whether the main objective was to reduce taxes in order to achieve economic growth or to balance the budget through fiscal discipline. Social conservatives were more concerned with civil dilapidation and family values. Their priority was to strengthen society's mediating structures and to increase individual responsibility and local autonomy. But even within this field, social conservatives differed with one another. For example, some approved of the objective of government promoting moral values—albeit with doubts over the likely effectiveness of such a course of action. Others possessed a more libertarian approach that centred upon the denial of public funds in support of policies and practices that condoned a particular moral outlook. This would prevent a state sponsorship of secularism and allow Christian values within an expanded social sphere to have greater leverage.

The CWA's propositions on defence and foreign policy also sought to disguise substantive differences between conservatives. Broad statements of intent related to a stronger defence and greater independence from international organizations, however, provided only a temporary respite from the seminal conflicts between national isolationists, the proponents of democratization and globalization, and 'neo-realists' who urged cautious internationalism based upon the priority of national interest. The debates within each subfield of the CWA were compounded by priority disputes between the separate subfields. The net effect was a successful programme of electoral mobilization but one that underlined the disaggregate properties of American conservatism. It typified the profusion of themes within

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a conservatism that has to endure within a prevailing liberal culture. Different diagnoses, prognoses, and solutions competed with one another amidst a mosaic of diverse objectives and methods, together with a variety of moral and technical orientations.

Similar fissures of principled positions have been evident in the conservative reactions to the presidency of George W. Bush. His 'compassionate conservatism' in areas such as education and prescription drugs has been criticized by libertarians whose concerns over the scale of federal expenditures and powers have been compounded by the rapid expansion of the national security state. President Bush's proposals for faith-based organizations to receive federal funds to provide selected

social services may have been welcomed by church organizations, religious leaders, ethical theorists, and government agencies committed to the theme of moral regeneration. But the policy has raised doubts over the President's conservative priorities and, in particular, over his attitude to the intrusiveness of 'big government'. While much of his ideological constituency is committed to the economic conservatism of fiscal restraint and limited government, he does not appear to regard government reduction as an overriding priority. On the contrary, President Bush has made it clear that as long as government serves the purpose of expanding individual choice and responsibility, the scale, structure, and intrusiveness of government is not a key issue.

After ushering in some of the biggest federal programmes since the Great Society, and committing the administration to both the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and a partial privatization of the Social Security fund, fiscal conservatives have grown alarmed over the scale and projection of the federal deficit. Along with many libertarians, they claim that the White House is running a big government administration but with a small government tax base, and that the president's declarations on social conservative issues (e.g. abortion, stem cell research) only serve to distract attention from the main issue of government expansion. In addition, those with an organic disposition remain sceptical of the administration's interest in social cohesion and have shared the libertarians' dismay over the inequity of the Republican tax cuts and in particular the tax breaks for the wealthiest sectors of society. Demands for further tax reductions for the most affluent, suspension of environmental regulations, and condoning of the ineffectual policing of corrupt corporate practices have only exacerbated the anxieties felt in many sectors of mainline conservatism. Finally, while traditionalists and internationalists have been concerned over the administration's aggressive foreign policy positions, free-traders have been less than impressed with the administration's predilection for protectionist measures.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ See K. R. Mudgeon, 'Nowhere To Go', *Liberty*, July 2004; George C. Edwards, III, *Governing by Campaigning: The Politics of the Bush Presidency* (New York: Longman, 2006); 'Send in the Cronies', *The Economist*, 24 September 2005; Holly Yeager and Caroline Daniel, 'Will Cracks in the Conservative Coalition Stop a Lasting Realignment of US Politics?', *Financial Times*, 13 October 2005.

The profusion of contested conservative positions is a sign of both the vitality of conservative thought and the social significance attached to the incorporation

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of primary values within a conservative rubric. In 1952, a keynote article on American conservatism bore the subtitle 'The Forbidden Faith'.¹²¹

¹²¹ Raymond English, 'Conservatism: The Forbidden Faith', *American Scholar*, vol. 21 (Autumn 1952), pp. 393–412.

The same theme was taken up by Clinton Rossiter in his 1955 study of American conservatism under the subtitle *The Thankless Persuasion*.¹²²

¹²² Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion* (New York: Knopf, 1955).

To Rossiter, the conservative persuasion in the United States had always been a historically problematic attachment. As a conservative he concluded that its status would continue to remain ambiguous within such a self-consciously republican society. But contrary to his predictions, conservatism since the 1960s has become transformed from an implicit set of understandings in support of stability and order into an altogether more explicit, assertive, and manifold social movement. Instead of constituting a partial antidote to America's historical commitment to liberal principles, conservatives have risen in confidence and now compete openly for the imprimatur of American authenticity in the medium of ideas.

It has to be conceded that the prominence and status of contemporary thought is still highly dependent upon a cultivated antagonism towards the attributed excesses and social leverage of reform liberalism. American conservatives retain their characteristically oppositionist posture, their defensive outlook against government presumption, and their antipathy towards cultural elites. They continue to rely heavily upon the central theme of a governing liberal establishment, with its entrenched policy regime, for summoning up public sympathy with the stated need for a vigorous response. Just as the civil and moral basis of society is depicted as being under assault, so are America's core values interpreted as experiencing a transmutation and even a form of corruption. The conservative impulse to preserve and defend an inheritance thereby becomes fused with a principled dispute over the contemporary resonance of America's foundational and elemental concepts.

Conservative reactivity in support of its own alarmist references to social change and moral challenge has proved to be a very successful political strategy. However, the very responsiveness associated with American conservatism has limited its ability to achieve a position of systematic domination. Although conservatives are generally considered to have achieved a position of ideational hegemony, conservatism is far from being a supreme, autonomous, and systematic public philosophy.

American Credo, The Place of Ideas in US Politics

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In sum, it remains an eclectic amalgam of sentiments and traditions that necessarily has to compete for political position on the generic grounds of freedom, democracy, and other primary values. Conservative pre-eminence is neither self-sufficient nor comprehensive in nature. It relies upon a capacity to assimilate itself to, and make full use of, a dominant liberal discourse. It also depends upon an ability to compete effectively for the political resources associated with two other notable compounds that feature the agency of instinct and temperament within the usage of ideas: namely populism and nationalism. It is these two aggregates to which our attention will now be turned.

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