

WHY INTELLECTUAL CONSERVATISM DIED

The collapse of intellectual conservatism in America has been as complete as it has been swift. Consider a few contrasts. In 1984, the leading conservative spokesman in the media was George Will; by 1994, it was Rush Limbaugh. The basic concerns of intellectual conservatives in the eighties were foreign policy and economics; by the early nineties they had become dirty pictures and deviant sex. In the early 1980s, the *Public Interest* was publishing scholarly analyses of public policy, from a moderate conservative point of view; by the early nineties, it was publishing a potted commentary on the sexual practices of the ancient Greeks and Chinese by a California radio talk show host, Dennis Prager. The *American Spectator*, which in the eighties had striven for respectability by publishing neocon scholars, had by 1994 turned into a semipornographic tabloid of a kind familiar in Britain. Barry Goldwater was a conservative hero in the early eighties; now he is a pariah, considered too far to the left because he supports an end to legal and social discrimination against gay Americans. In the eighties, Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus authored a thoughtful monograph on the importance of intermediate institutions; by the nineties, Berger was ranting in *Commentary* about the persecution of smokers, and Neuhaus (a convert to Catholicism) was publishing articles in his magazine, *First Things*, denouncing Darwin and defending the theory that today's animals descend from honeymoon couples aboard Noah's Ark. In the 1980s, conservatives claimed to be defending the color-blind civil rights idealism

of Martin Luther King, Jr.; in 1994, Charles Murray has revived old theories about the innate inferiority of average Latinos and blacks compared to whites in his new book (written with the late Richard Herrnstein), *The Bell Curve*: "Latino and black immigrants are, at least in the short run, putting some downward pressure on the distribution of intelligence. . . . The shifting ethnic makeup by itself would lower the average American IQ by 0.8 per generation."

I was present at the destruction of intellectual conservatism over the past several years, as executive editor of the *National Interest*, published by Irving Kristol, as a research assistant for William F. Buckley, Jr., and as a contributor to such conservative intellectual journals as *Commentary*, the *Public Interest*, and *National Review*. What I observed convinces me that the conventional explanations for the demise of American conservatism as a serious intellectual force are wrong.

It is a mistake, for example, to attribute the death of intellectual conservatism to the end of the cold war. The loss of the Soviet enemy did not cause the right to crack up; on the contrary, the differences among "paleoconservatives," *National Review* conservatives, and neoconservatives have actually diminished in the years since 1989 (as the former center-right has enthusiastically adopted the far right's "culture war"). What is more, it is *only* in foreign policy that there have been any interesting or

rigorous debates among conservatives (chiefly in the pages of Owen Harries's *National Interest*). The foreign-policy half of the conservative brain remained alert long after the other hemisphere was clinically dead.

The decline of intellectual conservatism has had less to do with geopolitics than with domestic politics. By far the most important factor has been a process well under way before 1989: the growing power within the Republican party of the Protestant right.

The two main varieties of mainstream conservatism, from the founding of *National Review* in 1955 to the disastrous Houston convention of 1992, were Buckley-type fusionism ("fusing" free-market economics and a sort of high-church traditionalism) and neoconservatism. These corresponded more or less with the Catholic right and the Jewish right. Not all Buckleyites were Catholic (though the non-Catholics tended to convert, like Russell Kirk and Lew Lehrman) and not all neocons were Jewish; even so, the difference between fusionists and neocons was as much ethnocultural as ideological.

For several decades, the chiefly Protestant and heavily southern and western mass constituency of conservatism had, as its spokesmen, Catholic and Jewish intellectuals, most of them Ivy League-educated Northeasterners. This was no accident, as the Marxists say; the success of Buckley and his allies in discrediting the John Birch Society in the early 1960s effectively wiped out the major rival for the leadership of conservative white Protestant Americans. Though the Birchers probably reflected the views of the conservative base more faithfully than people like Buckley or Kristol, the leaders of the Catholic right and the Jewish right became the only *respectable* spokesmen for conservatism.

The disparity in social origins between the conservative base and the conservative elite became even more pronounced in the 1980s, which saw a great influx of Thatcherite British journalists and policy analysts and other foreigners into the upper ranks of American conservatism. One Englishman, Stuart Butler, became the chief social policy thinker of the Heritage Foundation; another, John O'Sulli-

van, became editor of *National Review* (making the United States, to my knowledge, the only democracy in which the editor of the leading conservative journal is not himself a citizen of the country). A Belgian immigrant, Arnaud de Borchgrave, edited the conservative daily, the *Washington Times* (itself controlled by Korean would-be messiah Reverend Sun Myung Moon). Increasingly, conservative leaders like Bill Buckley and Irving Kristol socialized with foreign media tycoons like Rupert Murdoch (Australian) and Conrad Black (Canadian) and Greco-British-American trophy wife Arianna Stassinopolous Huffington, a "Minister of Light" in California cult leader John-Roger's Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA). The complaint of "paleo-conservatives" that their movement was being taken over by opportunistic (and in many cases weird) foreigners was not completely without foundation.

Sooner or later, it was inevitable that the conservative masses would find leaders who did not speak with funny upper class or foreign accents. Indeed, this came to pass after 1988, when Pat Robertson succeeded in converting his presidential campaign organization into the Christian Coalition. Here, for the first time since World War II, was the stable infrastructure of a Protestant right with real clout. The institutions and the leaders of the older Catholic and Jewish conservatives suddenly became superfluous. Pat Robertson spoke the language of the conservative masses more authentically than Bill Buckley or Irving Kristol (to say nothing of Her Majesty's loyal subject John O'Sullivan). Who needs the Philadelphia Society when you can have the Christian Coalition? Who needs *Firing Line* when you can watch *The 700 Club* and Rush Limbaugh?

Now that the hitherto silent majority of white evangelical Protestant conservatives has found its own leaders, the Catholic and Jewish (and mainline Protestant and secular) conservatives are at a loss. They have lost an empire, and not yet found a role. Some of them, like R. Emmett Tyrrell, have more or less abandoned serious politics altogether for sensational and lucrative tabloid journalism. A more typical response—exemplified by William Bennett and

William Kristol—has been to seek out a new role for Catholic and Jewish intellectuals as middlemen between the uncouth fire-and-brimstone Protestant evangelicals and the world of serious journalism, policy, and scholarship. The task of the go-between is to formulate a compromise language, a set of ambiguous code words, which can win the fundamentalists over to the GOP without alarming the moderate majority. Thus, “pro-family” as a euphemism for “antigay,” and “cultural elite” as a code word for what George Wallace more pungently called “eggheads” and “pointyheads.” But this is image-laundering, not thinking. Indeed, the careers of Bennett and the younger Kristol are part of the history, not of American thought, but of American public relations.

The eagerness with which most intellectual conservatives have embraced this degrading new role as image consultants for Protestant fundamentalists took me and many other former conservatives by surprise. A few years ago, I rather naively expected the *National Review* conservatives and the neocons to close ranks, to prevent the takeover of the Republican party by the fundamentalists, whose leaders (not their voters) would be sent packing like the Birchers. Remember, at the beginning of the decade there were signs of a purge of the far right by the center-right. Midge Decter accused Russell Kirk of anti-Semitism, and Bill Buckley more subtly suggested that Patrick Buchanan was guilty of the same offense. The “paleoconservatives” of *Chronicles* broke off and formed their own far-right organization, the John Randolph Society. Neocons railed against the conservatism of “the fever swamps.” Only a few years later, however, the fusionists and neocons had themselves adopted “fever swamp” themes, like the so-called “culture war” and the claim that homosexuals are trying to destroy family, religion, and Western civilization. After Bush lost in 1992, the center-right quickly became indistinguishable from the far right.

In hindsight, I failed to realize just how corrupt the conservative leadership had become. I don’t mean personally corrupt; as individuals, the conservatives are no better or worse than intellectuals or activists of other political persua-

sions. (They are, perhaps, more hypocritical, though: the conservative leadership is full of secular Jews recommending Christianity for other people, closeted homosexuals condemning “alternative lifestyles,” and divorcees and adulterers praising marriage and family.) The corruption of the conservatives has involved, rather, the sacrifice of intellectual standards.

One reason is nepotism. Anyone spending any time in conservative circles in Washington or New York in the past decade has constantly run across what Charlotte Allen dubbed the “minicons,” the children or nieces or nephews of eminent conservatives—little Podhoretzes and Kristols, as well as junior Buckleys and Weyrichs. An intellectual movement that hopes to endure must constantly replenish itself by recruiting the best outside talent and relentlessly purging its ranks of mediocrities. Instead, the leaders of conservatism turned the magazines and institutions of the right, like the Moonie-controlled *Washington Times* and various think tanks, into patronage dumps for their offspring and in-laws. The best jobs tended to go to direct lineal descendants, minicons proper; a second tier of positions was occupied by friends of the minicons (usually, their roommates at Harvard or wherever). The bottom tier tended to be reserved for a mudsill class of wealthy and dense Young Republicans. It is no accident that the most impressive of the younger conservative intellectuals, Dinesh D’Souza, was an outsider, an immigrant from India. Even he owed his rise in part to the fact that he was a friend, at Dartmouth, of Ben Hart, son of long-time *National Review* editor Jeff Hart. Irving Kristol’s son William, Dan Quayle’s former chief of staff, has been trying to position himself as heir to the leadership of the movement.

Hereditary political aristocracies are not unknown to the left of center—think of the various Kennedys and Galbraiths. The neoconservative intellectual movement might have survived this sacrifice of meritocracy to family values. It could not, however, survive its corruption by excessive partisanship in the service of the Republican party.

The conservatives, one can argue, tried to take over the wrong party after 1955. In many ways, the Democratic party would have made a more

natural home for conservatives than the Republicans. This is not as crazy as it sounds. The discrediting and political demise of the southern segregationists in the 1960s left a void on the right wing of the Democratic party that a nonracist conservative movement (anticipating the Democratic Leadership Conference) might have filled. Conservatism would have had to make its peace with the New Deal—but that should not have been all that difficult for a Catholic-influenced American version of European Christian Democracy, with a strong base in the unionized working classes of the Northeast (who tend to be more conservative in morals than the business and professional classes). First-generation conservative thinkers like Russell Kirk, Willmoore Kendall, and James Burnham had little use for laissez-faire capitalism and were comfortable with the idea of a conservative welfare state. Conservatism would have had far more influence as the theory of the dominant wing of the dominant party, and defending congressional prerogatives against presidential Caesarism (a staple of conservative theory in the 1950s) would have been more compatible with conservative constitutionalism than apologizing for the imperial prerogatives of a succession of Republican presidents.

If conservatizing the Democrats was ever an option, it was foreclosed by the “Draft Goldwater” movement, by Nixon’s southern strategy, and the defection, one by one, of the Democrats who remained conservative to the GOP. As the conservative movement and the Republican party became identified, conservative doctrine began to be cut and stretched to accommodate the short-term needs of Republican coalition strategy. The debates over first principles that made *National Review*-type conservatism lively in the 1950s and 1960s, and neoconservatism interesting in the 1970s, gave way to united-front solidarity on a growing number of issues important to this or that wing of the Republican party, from tax cuts to the outlawing of abortion.

The point of no return, in my view, came with the adoption of support for supply-side economics as a litmus test for true-blue conservatism. No first-rate economist took the supply-siders seri-

ously—even Milton Friedman scoffed at them. Ominously, for the first time, a theory that most serious intellectuals on the right did not believe became the official doctrine of the conservative movement, because it served the narrow short-term interests of an important Republican constituency, the rich.

Once critical thinking had been abandoned as a threat to the program of massive tax cuts for the super-rich, further sacrifices of rigor and empiricism became easy. By the mid-eighties, conservatives were dismissing very serious objections to the practicability of space-based strategic defenses as “liberal” propaganda (as though there were “liberal” physics and “conservative” physics). As standards of evidence sank, conservative journals opened their pages to previously marginal ideas and thinkers. *National Review* debated the question of whether Shakespeare’s plays had been written by the Earl of Oxford. In the once-moderate *Public Interest*, editor Irving Kristol published a rave review of a book by Richard Epstein, a legal theorist who argues that most federal laws against racial discrimination are unconstitutional—a view formerly associated with the John Birch Society rather than the neocons. Another *Public Interest* author argued that the solution to the crime problem is for everyone to own a gun.

Then there is “creation science.” The silence of serious conservative intellectuals in the face of fundamentalist campaigns to force public schools to teach the book of Genesis in geology and biology classes has completely discredited the claim of conservatives to be defenders of objectivity and empirical scholarship against politicization. How can intellectual conservatives credibly attack Afrocentrists for distorting history while passing in silence over efforts to teach American children that the dinosaurs lived with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and drowned in Noah’s Flood? Even worse, *National Review*, *Commentary*, and *First Things* have actually run essays attacking evolutionary theory and espousing “guided evolution,” “creation science,” and similar nonsense. Who would have thought that, at the end of the twentieth century, the remnants of the New York Intellectuals would be refighting

the Scopes Trial—from the point of view of William Jennings Bryan?

Kookiness has been joined by complacency. Instead of exploring plausible conservative solutions to genuine problems, the right began to deny that problems existed at all. What pollution problem? What overpopulation problem? What secondhand smoke problem? What falling American wages? What health care crisis? Conservatism—which historically has tended to be pessimistic—in recent years has become strangely Panglossian, adopting, as it were, the motto of *Mad* magazine's Alfred E. Neumann—"What, me worry?"

One aspect of conservative complacency has been a growing toleration of the vicious lunatic fringe. The "no enemies to the right" policy has been symbolized in recent years by annual conservative "summits" in Washington—small, private dinners bringing together people like Bill Buckley, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Charles Krauthammer, and the far-right activist Paul Weyrich. At one of these meetings, Weyrich circulated a proposal (which I have held and read) that the federal government secretly lace illegal drugs with substances like rat poison and release them into the black market. Drug addicts would be more easily identified and punished, Weyrich reasoned, if, in public, they went into sudden convulsions. None of the other conservative leaders at the meeting walked out in protest, or insisted that this man be ostracized. On the contrary, at subsequent summits Weyrich has been welcomed by the same conservatives who criticize the NAACP for meeting with Farrakhan.

Such latitudinarianism has become the norm. Bill Buckley recently appeared on television as an ally of Pat Robertson, who in print has accused the Council on Foreign Relations—an organization to which Buckley belongs, and to which he successfully nominated me—of being a secret instrument of Satan's plot to destroy America and condemn most of humanity to eternal damnation. Call me sensitive, but I resent that.

By the late 1980s, the conservative movement, drifting into crankiness and complacency under the control of a small number of elderly men,

was in desperate need of a revolutionary renovation from within the ranks, as well as an invigorating transfusion of outside talent. At the very least, there needed to be a searching reconsideration of first principles, a questioning of dogmas like supply-side economics and hypocrisies like the lip service paid to criminalizing abortion.

Such a free and frank debate within conservatism, however, was made impossible by the dependence of the journals of the right on foundation money. One by one, every leading neoconservative publication or think tank over the past decade has come to depend on money from a few foundations—Olin, Smith-Richardson, Bradley, Scaife. Many were started in the first place by seed money from the foundations. Inevitably, this has promoted groupthink. The foundations are the chief reason that *Commentary* sounds more and more like the *New Criterion*, which sounds so much like the new *Public Interest*.

It is not that there is some centralized conspiracy imposing a party line. By and large, the program officers of the foundations, though partisan, sincerely believe in debate among conservatives. They do not deliberately impose an orthodoxy. They do not have to. The editors tend to censor themselves, for fear of appearing "liberal" and losing that critical annual grant. There are a few honorable exceptions—the *National Interest* and the *American Scholar* continue to put the life of thought above the life of the party. For the most part, though, instead of boldly attacking falsehoods wherever they are found, conservative editors tend to print only what they believe will confirm the prejudices of the program officers.

The addiction to foundation dollars has reinforced the disastrous "no enemies to the right" policy. The last thing the foundations want is for one set of grantees to criticize the policy views or intellectual standards of other grantees. The major conservative foundations ended their support of *Chronicles* a few years back when its editors got into a spat with Richard John Neuhaus and the neocons—a lesson that has not been lost on other conservative grantees.

In addition to reinforcing groupthink, the addiction to foundation money has also led to the

lowering of intellectual standards. After all, if you, the editor, turn down a piece by a mediocrity or crackpot who is a friend of a program officer, this could have consequences. Once too many Republican hacks start moving into a journal or a think tank, serious thinkers and their audiences go elsewhere. A cycle of decline is set in motion. With foundation money comes the implicit imperative to avoid questioning partisan pieties—but this very avoidance of controversy sends intellectuals away, even as it attracts true believers (the truer they are, the crankier). As third-rate zealots gradually replace first-rate thinkers and intelligent readers, the beleaguered editor places the blame for the decline of his journal's prestige on the "liberals," the "media elite," the "cultural elite"—anyone but himself and his sponsors.

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In this way, bit by bit, a number of once-interesting intellectual journals on the right have degenerated into newsletters for Chamber of Commerce Republicans, creationists, and elderly curmudgeons denouncing the music that young people listen to nowadays.

Eventually there may be a revival of serious thought on the political right, but this seems unlikely for at least a generation. For the foreseeable future, American conservatism will be defined by the fundamentalist/tabloid right, with its program of making centrist and liberal Christians, Jews, and secular Americans, working women, nonwhite Americans, gay men and lesbians, and intellectuals scapegoats for the serious problems afflicting American society (problems for which the conservatives I have worked with for a decade have no plausible answers). The new Radical Right of Pat Robertson and Pat Buchanan, which sets the agenda for trimmers like William Bennett and William Kristol, has more in common with the pre-World War II right of Father Coughlin and William Randolph Hearst than with the intellectual conservatism of the decades after the war. The Radical Right has no arguments, only hatreds.

Today, as always, it is possible to be an American intellectual who is politically conservative. But conservatism as an intellectual movement in the United States is dead. □