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## Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism

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**Abstract:** *What do conservatives want? To be free, to live virtuous and productive lives, to be secure from threats beyond and within our borders, and to live in a society that sustains and encourages these aspirations: freedom, virtue, safety—goals reflected in the libertarian, traditionalist, and national security dimensions of the conservative movement and coalition. But to achieve these perennial goals, conservatives must communicate in language that connects with the great majority of the American people in all stations of life. Virtually all conservatives hold in common the conviction that there is indeed an “eternal meaning.” The recent past has been unsettling to American conservatives, but in the words of William F. Buckley Jr. nearly 50 years ago, “the wells of regeneration are infinitely deep.”*

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In the American election year of 2008, as Barack Obama glided unexpectedly toward the White House, a new political narrative took hold among the chattering classes: The conservative era, the Age of Reagan, was said to be ending. According to liberal writers like E. J. Dionne, the once-mighty conservative intellectual and political movement that had dominated the nation's debates since the late 1970s had fallen into moribundity and disarray.

A few conservative pundits seemed half-inclined to agree. Yuval Levin, a frequent contributor to National Review Online, sensed “intellectual fatigue” among his ideological allies and added, “The conservative idea factory is not producing as it did.”

### Talking Points

- What do conservatives want? To be free, to live virtuous and productive lives, and to be secure from threats beyond and within our borders.
- Conservatives want a society that sustains and encourages these aspirations: freedom, virtue, safety—goals reflected in the libertarian, traditionalist, and national security dimensions of the conservative movement and coalition.
- To achieve these perennial goals, conservatives must communicate in language that connects not only with themselves, but with the great majority of Americans in all stations of life.
- If there is one thing that virtually all conservatives hold in common, it is the conviction that there is an “eternal meaning.”
- The recent past has been unsettling to American conservatives, but in the words of William F. Buckley Jr., “the wells of regeneration are infinitely deep.”

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Another rising conservative commentator, Jonah Goldberg, commenced a column in *USA Today* in mid-2008 by quoting the writer-humorist Philander Johnson: “Cheer up, for the worst is yet to come.” Although Goldberg went on to insist that the conservative movement had “a lot of life left in it,” his *bon mot* captured the mood of the trepidation gripping many around him as the election approached.

Some on the Right were more acerbic. Patrick Buchanan expressed his dismay at the conservative Establishment by invoking an aphorism attributed to Eric Hoffer: “Every great cause begins as a movement, becomes a business, and then a racket.”

Such sentiments did not dissipate with the defeat of the Republican Party—that imperfect vehicle of modern conservatism—at the polls later in the year. Some weeks before the election, Sam Tanenhaus, the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, asserted in print that the conservative movement in America had entered “its last and genuinely decadent phase.” Some weeks after the election, his prognosis became grimmer still. Writing in *The New Republic*, he offered what was called an “intellectual autopsy” of the movement. And just three months ago, he turned this essay into a little book entitled *The Death of Conservatism*.

Once again, voices on the Right could be found who at least partly agreed with him. Within days of last year’s election, Jeffrey Hart—a longtime senior editor of *National Review* who left the magazine in 2008 and endorsed Obama—declared at a liberal Web site: “Movement conservatism, RIP.”

## The Burke Revival

As if all this were not sufficiently unsettling, in recent months we have witnessed a sudden revival of interest in Edmund Burke in a most unexpected quarter: the American Left. Last spring, Jon Meacham, the liberal editor at *Newsweek*, hailed Burke as a role model for our times—a “complex, pragmatic figure” who “distrusted absolutes” and who might be “an antidote to the pervasive spirit of division” in today’s America. More recently, Meacham has proclaimed Barack Obama “the most significant Burkean in American politics today.”

Meanwhile, David Brooks of *The New York Times* has reported that when he had a meeting last spring

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with President Obama’s senior adviser David Axelrod, Mr. Axelrod was conspicuously carrying a copy of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

Sam Tanenhaus has taken the Burke revival even further. In *The Death of Conservatism*, he distinguishes between what he calls Burkean “realists” (the good guys in his formulation), committed to “flexible adjustments” to “changing conditions,” and those he excoriates as “revanchists”: ideologues seeking a destructive “counterrevolution.” According to him, the American conservative movement is dominated by extremist revanchists who have betrayed Burkean moderation for a politics of destabilizing intemperance.

Tanenhaus’s book has been criticized by conservative reviewers as a tendentious misreading of American conservatism. What Tanenhaus wants, they charge, is a passive, defeatist, accommodationist “conservatism” that politely adjusts in the name of Burke to a political and social order created and controlled by the American Left: an arrangement, as one conservative has put it, in which conservatives “serve as chauffeurs to liberals, tapping the brakes occasionally as the nation speeds toward socialism.”

This is not the first time in recent American history that liberals have tried to appropriate Edmund Burke, a conservative patron saint, for their purposes and interpret him as little more than an artful compromiser: a liberal Republican, as it were, in 18th century garb. I think I know what Russell Kirk would have thought of such an interpretation.

Be that as it may, most activists and intellectuals on the Right in 2009 seem less convinced of their movement’s supposed exhaustion and infidelity to Burke than of its need for a speedy escape from the political wilderness. But how, on what terms, and under whose banner?

## “A Dance Along the Precipice”

Beneath all the intramural squabbling of the past year lie philosophical and strategic fault lines of importance:

- How should American conservatives regain their footing in the new political terrain?
- Should they go “back to basics” and proclaim their principles with renewed fervor after the frustrations and muddled compromises of the past eight years, or should they calm down and concentrate on devising fresh public policy initiatives designed to attract a putatively centrist and pragmatic electorate?
- Should they militantly reaffirm their antistatist convictions or reluctantly concede that, like it or not, “big government” is here to stay?
- How much—if at all—should the conservative message and movement be reconfigured?

In back of these questions lies the specter of a dilemma that Whittaker Chambers described to William F. Buckley Jr. in another time of conservative anguish more than 50 years ago. “Those who remain in the world,” Chambers observed, “if they will not surrender on its terms must maneuver within its terms. That is what conservatives must decide: how much to give in order to survive at all; how much to give in order not to give up the basic principles.” All this, he predicted, would lead to “a dance along a precipice.”

## A Movement in Ferment

In 2009, a new era of conservative maneuvering began. It did not commence auspiciously. Last year, *The New York Times*’s technology columnist David Pogue listed the five stages of grieving when you lose your computer files: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Moving to Amish Country. It sounded like a fair description of the mood gripping many American conservatives in the wake of the 2008 election.

Well. Have conservatives really lost their “computer files”? Certainly, evidence abounds of a political and intellectual movement in ferment. One sign of this is the growing tendency on the Right to classify conservatives into ever smaller groupings: neo-

conservatives, paleoconservatives, big-government conservatives, leave-us-alone conservatives, compassionate conservatives, crunchy conservatives, populist conservatives, elitist conservatives, tea-party conservatives, dinner-party conservatives—and the list goes on.

Another sign is the volume and vehemence of intramural polemicizing in which some of these elements have engaged in recent years and months. A once relatively disciplined band of brothers and sisters (or so it used to appear in the Age of Reagan) has seemingly devolved into a jumble of inharmonious factions.

Several adventitious factors have strengthened the impression that American conservatism has come to a cul-de-sac. The deaths of Milton Friedman in 2006, of William F. Buckley Jr. in 2008, and

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of Irving Kristol in 2009 precipitated an outpouring of retrospection and an intensified awareness that nearly all of modern conservatism’s founding fathers have now gone to the grave.

Coupled with this generational changing of the guard has been a phenomenal upsurge of popular interest in the life and achievements of Ronald Reagan. Critics scoff at this as mere nostalgia, the right-wing equivalent of the liberal cult of John F. Kennedy. It is much more than that, of course, but memories of the Gipper do remind conservatives of better days and reflect the feeling of disorientation that many on the Right now feel.

A more subtle ingredient in this mix has been the efflorescence in the past decade of historical scholarship about American conservatism since World War II, much of it written by young liberal historians. This is not necessarily a sign of declension, but it certainly testifies to the growing passage of time: The conservative movement has now been around long enough to be the object of academic inquiry.

To put it another way, modern American conservatism, a marginalized orphan in academia when I began research on it a generation ago, has become middle-aged. Which, of course, raises the uncomfortable question: Are old age and remarginalization just around the corner?

### Explaining the Conservative Predicament

Current explanations of the conservative predicament tend to fall into two distinct categories. The first stresses the movement's political failures and frustrations during the recent presidency of George W. Bush. With the exception of its tax-cutting policies and judicial nominations, Bush's Administration, at least on the home front, now seems to many conservative stalwarts to have been in considerable degree a liberal Republican Administration—more akin to Nelson Rockefeller and Richard Nixon than to Ronald Reagan.

The second cluster of explanations for conservatism's present malaise focuses not so much on external political circumstances as on internal factors—that is, the structure and dynamics of the conservative movement itself. Perhaps the most important

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thing to understand about modern American conservatism is that it is not, and has never been, univocal. It is a coalition with many points of origin and diverse tendencies, not always easy to reconcile with one another.

Now, so long as the Cold War continued, this coalition held together reasonably well. Anticommunism—a conviction shared by nearly everyone—supplied much of the essential unifying cement. But with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s and the departure from office of the ecumenical Reagan, long-suppressed centrifugal tendencies resurfaced on the American Right, as we well know. Without a common foe on whom to

concentrate their minds, it became easier for former allies to succumb to the bane of all coalitions: the sectarian temptation, the tendency to go it alone.

Cropping up in both of these sets of explanations from time to time has been a kind of historical determinism: the notion that political and intellectual movements, like individuals and nations, have immutable life cycles. Just as it was once believed that civilizations ineluctably pass from barbarism to arcadian bliss to urban prosperity and eventual rot and decline, so, it sometimes seems, must the conservative movement itself pass, in Jacques Barzun's phrase, from dawn to decadence. This half-articulated theory of social entropy underlies much of the recent giddiness on the Left about conservatism's prospects—and perhaps some of the angst that one finds among some commentators on the Right.

### Foundations of Modern American Conservatism

So, then, is the house of conservatism about to collapse? How firm are the foundations of modern American conservatism? I suggest to you that they are sturdier than many observers think.

First, when examining the epiphenomena of contemporary politics, especially in our era of ever more frenzied and frothy news cycles, it is helpful to remember the ancient adage: "This, too, shall pass away." The divisive Bush presidency is over, and many of the "external" political circumstances that so dismayed conservatives in recent years have begun to dissipate.

As George Orwell reminded us years ago, one of the temptations to which intellectuals are susceptible is to assume that whatever is happening right now will continue to happen—that tomorrow will inevitably look just like today. In some ways it will, but in some ways it won't. Certainly the future is preconditioned by the past, but it is not *predetermined* by the past. We are creatures of our mental constructs and our life experiences, yes, but we are not robots.

The longer I study history, the more impressed I am by the importance of contingency—the unforeseen and the unforeseeable—in the shaping of human events. American conservatives, I believe, instinctively look upon our history in this way:



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not simply as a burden and constraint, but as possibility. They should therefore take heart (and indeed are already doing so) from the knowledge that this moment, too, shall pass away.

Second, in their fixation on the sound and fury of the stormy present, it is easy for conservatives to overlook and undervalue one of their most impressive achievements during the past 40 years: the creation of a veritable conservative counterculture, a burgeoning infrastructure of alternative media, foundations, research centers, think tanks, publishing houses, law firms, home-schooling networks, and more. From the Beltway to the blogosphere, these clusters of purposeful energy continue to multiply and flourish. They comprise a significant part of what has been called the “influence industry” in Washington.

From the perspective of a historian, this flowering of applied conservatism, this elaborate institutionalization of conservative impulses and ideas, is a remarkable intellectual and political development.

Think of it: When eminent conservative thinkers like William F. Buckley Jr., Richard Weaver, and Russell Kirk were writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, the number of publicly active, professing conservative intellectuals in the United States was minuscule. Today, how can we begin to count? Since 1980,

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prosperity has come to American conservatism and with it a multitude of niche markets and specialization on a thousand fronts. The fruit of a generation of successful conservative institution building has reached a critical mass that seems unlikely to crumble anytime soon. This augurs well for the continued influence of conservatism on our national conversation.

A third source of durability for conservatives is this: On the home front, the cohesion that was once supplied by Cold War anticommunism has increasingly come from another “war”: the so-called culture war, pitting an alliance of conservative Roman Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Orthodox Jewish believers against a post-Judeo-Christian, even anti-Christian, secular elite whom they perceive to be aggressively hostile to their deepest convictions. Every day, fresh tremors break out along this fault line over abortion, euthanasia, “death panels,” the definition of marriage, and the composition of the federal courts.

Last year, the clash appeared in then-Senator Obama’s claim that “bitter” rural Americans “cling” to God and guns. Today, as I speak, it is front and center in the fight over federal funding of abortions

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in the Senate health care bill. It is a struggle literally over the meaning of right and wrong, a battle (for conservatives) against what Pope Benedict has called “the tyranny of relativism.”

Early in 2008, it became fashionable in the media to suggest that the culture wars were over as a salient feature of American life. But, oh, the unpredictable contingencies of history: In the meteoric ascent of Sarah Palin to national prominence, and in the storm of publicity that has enveloped her ever since, the smoldering culture wars (in some ways also a class war) have reignited. For the foreseeable future, the perception of an irrepressible conflict between conservative people of faith and the secular Left is likely to energize large sectors of the American Right.

Fourth, and perhaps most important of all, the conservative coalition seems likely to survive for a while because most of the external stimuli that goaded it into existence have not disappeared. On the contrary, they have recently grown stronger and more threatening. The Berlin Wall may be gone, and with it the unifying force of anticommunism, but

fresh authoritarian challenges abound overseas on many fronts, while at home the drive to tax, regulate, and even socialize the private sector gathers force. Large swatches of American cultural life—notably the universities, the major media, and the entertainment industry—continue to move in directions antithetical to conservative beliefs. For defenders of Judeo-Christian ethics—and that means most conservatives—there is still a potent enemy on the Left.

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This awareness of a revived external challenge from the Left is integral to the prospects for American conservatism in the years just ahead. The most hopeful portent for conservatives, paradoxically, may be the very audacity and even hubris of their ideological foes. As the Obama Administration and its congressional supporters have lurched leftward, talk of a conservative crackup has all but disappeared—at least on the Right. More quickly and effectively than many observers thought possible, President Obama's initiatives have galvanized his intellectual and political opponents into fervent resistance.

### **A Revived Spirit of Insurgency**

A spirit of insurgency has swiftly returned to conservative ranks. The language of liberty—"Don't tread on me"—has acquired new resonance on the Right and beyond. Just as Sarah Palin's candidacy in 2008 reinvigorated millions of despondent grassroots conservatives, the reality of liberalism *in power* in 2009 has bestirred them even more.

The setbacks of 2008 and the "tea party" protests of 2009 have taught the Right a valuable lesson: In the words of the computer scientist Alan Kay, "The best way to predict the future is to invent it." As 2009 gives way to 2010, resurgent conservatives seem determined to do just that.

Nevertheless, spirit alone cannot do it all. Ideas, too, have consequences, as Richard Weaver long ago reminded us, and it is in this realm that conservatives face long-term challenges that should curb

any tendency to relax. Consider, for example, the phenomenon known as globalization. When we use this word, we tend to think first of the globalization of markets, of free trade in goods and services across national borders.

But far more significant, I think, in the long term is the accelerating globalization of human migration patterns, with cultural and political consequences that we have scarcely begun to fathom. More people are now on the move in the world than at any time in the history of the human race, and more and more of them are making America their destination. The number of international students, for instance, attending American colleges and universities is now approximately 600,000 per year—a figure more than double what it was in 1980.

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

This unprecedented intermingling of peoples and cultures, abetted by expanding air travel and the incredible velocity of mass communication, has already begun to have ideological ramifications. In the United States:

- It has been accompanied by the emergence of multiculturalism as the driving dogma of our educational system.
- It has been accompanied by the deliberate dilution of traditional civic education and the resultant explosion of cultural illiteracy about America's heritage.
- It has been accompanied, in the field of historiography, by narratives which accentuate the failures and blemishes of the American experience.
- It has been accompanied by the rise of a liberal, cosmopolitan elite imbued with a post-national, even anti-national sensibility and motivated by what the historian John Fonte calls "transnational progressivism"—an ideology profoundly antithetical to conservative beliefs.

David Gelertner of Yale University put it this way just before Thanksgiving in a blog at National Review Online:

Each year there is less Americanism and more globalism among our leading citizens, less knowledge and more sophistication. Among children, less interest in Thanksgiving and a small band of fierce Christians hanging onto a new world by their fingertips, [and] more interest in Black Friday, the perfect post-Christian feast.

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

These are not idle questions. In 2008, the political scientist James Ceaser observed that for 30 years, the conservative movement in the United States has been defending ideas “that almost all other nations in the West are abandoning”: “the concept of the nation itself,” “the importance of Biblical religion,” and “the truth of natural right” philosophy. Traditionally, Americans have adhered to a form of national self-understanding that scholars term American exceptionalism. Ronald Reagan did, and he carried the country with him. Now, increasingly, the Reaganite vision of American goodness and uniqueness that most conservatives embrace seems both more exceptional and more vulnerable than ever.

### **Making the Case**

With what arguments, symbols, rituals, and vocabulary can conservatives make their case for the American way of life that they cherish to those for whom the traditional arguments, symbols, rituals, and vocabulary are either unfamiliar or seem hopelessly passé? Again, this is not a trivial concern. It lay at the heart of our recent presidential election

campaign. Behind the disputes last year over public policy and personal fitness for the presidency, behind the vehemence of the culture war surrounding Governor Palin, lurked the question: What kind of a polity does America desire to become?

As the conservative British commentator Gerard Baker has noted, the election of 2008 turned into a “struggle between the followers of American exceptionalism and the supporters of global universalism.” As the election outcome made plain, American conservatives have not yet adequately articulated their convictions in terms that can appeal to people outside their own camp and particularly to those whom James Burnham called the “verbalizers” of our society.

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On this point, consider a demographic datum from the last election. Make a list, as Ronald Brownstein and David Wasserman have done, of all the counties in the United States with at least 20,000 people. Then look at the 100 “best educated” of these counties: those having the highest percentage of college graduates, defined as people over the age of 25 with a bachelor’s degree or higher. Most of these counties—America’s so-called Diploma Belt—used to be Republican. That is no longer the case. In 1988, the Democratic presidential candidate carried only 36 of these 100 counties. Last year, the Democratic candidate won 78 of them.

Another datum sends a similar warning signal to conservatives. According to exit polling statistics cited by Michael Barone, 50 percent of Americans aged 30 and over voted in 2008 for Barack Obama. In other words, Americans aged 30 and up were divided almost evenly in that election. But among voters aged 29 and under, Obama won by a margin of 66 percent to 32 percent. It was the widest “generation gap” in the history of American exit polling—and probably in the history of the United States.

All this prompts me to ask:

- Isn't it time that conservatives create a kind of conservative version of National Public Radio, or at least a coordinated network of conservative equivalents of NPR's *Fresh Air*, *On Point*, and *Talk of the Nation* programs, devoted not just to daily political combat and commentary, but to conservatively oriented cultural explorations of the broadest character?
- Isn't it time to revive the great 1970s television program *The Advocates*, which featured periodic, prime-time, nationally televised, 90-minute, live debates on public television between liberal and conservative attorneys and supporting teams of expert witnesses? (As some of you may recall, William A. Rusher was the conservative star of that series.)
- Isn't it time to revive *Firing Line* or something like it?

Surely, the talent, the resources, and the audience are there to make such acts of cultural reclamation worth attempting.

### What Do Conservatives Want?

This leads me to a final observation. I am a historian of American conservatism, and I can happily report that sophisticated discourse is thriving on the American Right. But it also appears to me that conservatives spend much of their time, in current parlance, "cocooning" with one another and that, in this Age of the Internet, too much conservative advocacy has been reduced to sound-bite certitudes and sterile clichés.

What do conservatives want? Limited government, they answer; free enterprise, strict construction of the Constitution, fiscal responsibility, patriotism, traditional values, and respect for the sanctity of human life. No doubt, but I wonder: How much are these traditional formulations and abstractions inspiring the rising generation (present company excepted)? How much are they resonating with America's new immigrants and dominant professional classes, particularly those in the more secularized, urbanized, and globalized regions of this country?

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It is not a new problem. In fact, it is a perennial problem, the essence of which Whittaker Chambers captured long ago. "Each age," he wrote, "finds its own language for an eternal meaning."

### Conclusion

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

Can it be done? I think it can. If there is one thing that virtually all conservatives hold in common, it is the conviction that there is indeed an "eternal meaning," a fount of wisdom to be drawn upon through thick and thin. And believing this, we can smile and persevere. The recent past has been unsettling to American conservatives, but the immediate future is waiting to be invented. And in the words of William F. Buckley Jr. nearly 50 years ago, "the wells of regeneration are infinitely deep."

—Dr. George H. Nash is a Senior Fellow at the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, an Associate of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University, and the author of *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* and *The Life of Herbert Hoover*. This lecture is adapted, with the kind permission of ISI Books, from the introduction and concluding chapter of Dr. Nash's *Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism* (2009).