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America Reborn? Conservatives, Liberals, and American Political Culture Since 1945

Abstract

[Excerpt] From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, we can chide the good professor for not carefully considering the consequences of what he wished for half a century ago. For it is clear that the force of this conservative movement in America was in fact “stronger than most of us [knew]” or could have imagined in 1950, or, indeed, in 1968. This conservative “impulse”, those “irritable mental gestures”, has largely restructured American political thinking with a force and popular approval that remains stunning to consider. The growth of the conservative movement since 1945 was also accompanied by the slow fragmentation of liberalism and, taken together, these developments raise a fundamental question: Does the New Deal, its policies and its legacy between 1933 and 1972, constitute the long exception in American political life, as opposed to the new norm? In short, was Richard Nixon the last liberal?

Keywords

New Deal, liberalism, politics, conservatism, social welfare

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Comments

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Nick Salvatore

America Reborn ?

Conservatives, Liberals, and American Political Culture Since 1945

1 In his widely read 1950 collection of essays, *The Liberal Imagination*, Lionel Trilling, the New York intellectual and literary critic, gloried over liberalism's triumphant place in postwar American political culture :

n the United States at this time, liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation. This does not mean, of course, that there is no impulse to conservatism or to reaction. Such impulses are certainly very strong, perhaps even stronger than most of us know. But the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.

2 Interestingly, Trilling expressed concern over the purported demise of conservative thought. Without an occasional bracing intellectual critique from conservatives, he feared that liberalism might flounder, in part because American liberalism was « a large tendency rather than a concise body of doctrine, » and needed periodic testing it might not administer itself.¹

3 From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, we can chide the good professor for not carefully considering the consequences of what he wished for half a century ago. For it is clear that the force of this conservative movement in America was in fact « stronger than most of us [knew] » or could have imagined in 1950, or, indeed, in 1968. This conservative « impulse, » those « irritable mental gestures, » has largely restructured American political thinking with a force and popular approval that remains stunning to consider. The growth of the conservative movement since 1945 was also accompanied by the slow fragmentation of liberalism and, taken together, these developments raise a fundamental question : Does the New Deal, its policies and its legacy between 1933 and 1972, constitute *the long exception* in American political life, as opposed to the new norm ? In short, was Richard Nixon the last liberal ?

4 Before I continue, allow me one personal reflection. I have spent the better part of my professional career writing three books that explored individuals and movements that sought to redefine the nation's dominant narrative with a focus on the ideal of social justice. In each I explored a deeply American, alternative perspective of the nation's history and experience. While what follows in no way negates that work, I do recognize more sharply here the persistent power of conservative thinking at the core of American history, as I do the seemingly contradictory proposition that conservatism was a dissenting political movement to the liberalism Trilling so aptly described.

I

5 Contrary to some current analysis that would attribute the success of American conservatism to the individual genius of a brilliant political strategist (Karl Rove is most frequently mentioned today), or to the legacy of a genial former actor, Ronald Reagan, who was thought to have « impersonated » an American president in the 1980s, the sources of American conservatism run deep in the nation's national experience. While there is not time today to discuss in detail the pre-1945 experience, it is important to recall that a pervasive individualism, one that coexisted with deep religious beliefs, a strong anti-statist philosophy, and a commitment to freedom for some that demanded the bondage of others, framed elite thought and popular movements alike in antebellum America. Then, too, between 1868 and 1928, with the partial exceptions of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the sixteen successful presidential candidates, conservative politicians and mainly Republicans, were fully committed to the system of industrial capitalism and they all received significant working class support.²

6 But to liberals and conservatives alike in 1945, the political landscape appeared very different. The fifteen year crisis of depression and world war had resulted in an unprecedented

governmental involvement in American life and liberals largely assumed that the nation had experienced an irreversible turning point. The inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933 and the stunning policies he introduced simply precluded any return, ever, to the policies of Herbert Hoover. Liberals largely opposed the Republican, Dwight David Eisenhower in the 1952 presidential election, but Roosevelt's continued influence, they thought, would temper Eisenhower's policies as well.³

7 In 1945 conservatives rather gloomily shared liberals' perception. The state with its centralized planning reigned supreme, they judged ; and religious values were absent from public life, particularly given the withdrawal from public debate of the Fundamentalist movement in the aftermath of the 1925 Scopes trial. A decidedly secular liberalism, conservatives decried, one with a very American pragmatic, problem-solving approach orchestrated by the state and its bureaucracies, crippled the very notion of individual liberty. But as would happen repeatedly in the decades to come, what liberals saw as the *finale* to conservatism's role as a political movement, conservatives themselves saw as but the end of the first act in a much longer performance. They were self-conscious dissenters from the liberal norm who rejected the twelve years of New Deal dominance. They were dissenters on behalf of tradition, and not, as a liberal might put it, of progressive change, and they sought to preserve and revitalize what they thought Roosevelt had overturned.

8 At first, this dissenting conservative movement consisted of a small group of intellectuals attracted to the ideas of two Austrian economists, Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. Spurred especially by Hayek's 1944 publication, *The Road to Serfdom*, they condemned contemporary liberalism in light of a nineteenth-century classical liberalism as reflected in the writings of Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, Lord Acton, and others. The central insight of this libertarian wing of the modern American conservative movement can be expressed succinctly : Centralized state planning, bureaucratic organization and regulation, and other intrusions of government into the lives of individuals and their families constituted a full-scale attack on the very concept of human liberty. As the economist Milton Friedman, in the 1940s a young devotee of this movement, wrote in 1962, economic freedom « is itself a component of freedom broadly understood, so economic freedom is an end in itself. » And, he continued, « economic freedom is also an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom. » In time that formulation, which grounded America's very idea of political liberty in the vitality of an unfettered free-market capitalism, would resonate deeply among Americans of all conditions who would vote for candidates who promised, in one manner or another, to dismantle the New Deal legacy.⁴

9 Before long, another conservative intellectual voice emerged to contest these conservative libertarians. Many, but not all, of these intellectuals were born Catholic or converted to that religion and found, as Patrick Allitt has suggested, « a special congruence between Catholicism and political conservatism. » Like the conservative libertarians, they too were horrified at the descent into barbarism that World War II signified, which they partially attributed to the state's undermining of individual freedom. They also emphasized even more strongly liberalism's sweeping dismissal of traditional moral concepts as guides to public life and policy. Their view of human nature, the diametrical opposite of liberalism's, underscored the centrality of evil and demanded, that the theological concept of original sin anchor American approaches to both public policy and private conduct. Nor were these thinkers averse to employing the coercive power of the central state to restructure society in accord with their moral precepts. Mass culture in liberal society, Richard Weaver, Russell Kirk, and others proclaimed, was anathema, a biblical monstrosity on the level of Sodom and Gomorrah, and traditional American religious values so scorned by liberalism—demanded a reconstitution of American moral and cultural life. This predominantly Catholic group found a welcome ally in the emergence of Billy Graham, a Protestant fundamentalist preacher, whose condemnation of American popular culture during his massive, eight-week revival in fall 1949 in Los Angeles—the very center of production for that culture—propelled him to national fame and enormous influence. Not insignificantly, Graham also emphasized in his sermons an apocalyptic vision of the global conflict between western civilization and a communism he proclaimed was « a religion that is

inspired, directed, and motivated by the Devil himself. » Those « ecclesiastical exceptions » Lionel Trilling would so quickly dismiss a year later were, in fact, once again gathering their strength as Fundamentalists and Pentecostals alike returned, slowly but surely, into the public square.⁵

10 The strains between these two conservative approaches were obvious in the 1950s, yet they never split the conservative movement, thanks in part to William F. Buckley. In 1955 he founded *National Review*, a conservative journal of politics and opinion that quickly assumed, under his incisive, even acerbic, editorial voice, a leading role in bridging these differences by repeatedly reminding each side of their common enemy. The *Review* also expanded the conservative base, perhaps especially among youth. As Patrick Buchanan, the quixotic American conservative, recalled of his youthful political awakening in the late 1950s : « It is difficult to exaggerate the debt conservatives of my generation owe *National Review* and Bill Buckley #...# For us, what *National Review* did was to take the word conservatism, then a synonym for stuffy orthodoxy, Republican stand-pat-ism and economic self-interest, and convert it into the snapping pennant of a fighting faith. » But as successful as it was, Buckley's magazine alone was not responsible for conservatism's growing influence in communities across the nation. How did the dissenting thoughts of a small group of intellectuals, themselves not unified, evolve into a broad popular movement ?⁶

11 Anti-Communism was one major motivation that attracted Americans to conservatism. The perceived threat of the Soviet Union in a world newly fraught with nuclear danger greatly encouraged the spread of apocalyptic imagery to describe the inevitable final battle. A corollary concern over the imagined legions of domestic agents of communism working to transform America brought the issue home even more concretely. For a people raised on the famous dictum that « government is best that governs least, » this was a threat to the very idea of America. For some, global and local concerns merged. Descendants of European immigrants, for example, themselves native-born members of the working and middle classes, concentrated in the urban North, and often practicing Catholics, watched in growing horror as the « Iron Curtain » securely encompassed nations that still held relatives or, even more gripping to the imagination, the familial memories of lands they had never visited and now, perhaps, never could. They brought these cultural and political beliefs into their work places, their trade unions, and their politics.

12 Given these currents in American political life, it was not surprising that liberal foreign policy, most famously associated with George Kennan, came under fierce attack. Kennan sought the containment of Soviet territorial expansion and geo-political influence. To conservatives, however, this required a policy of co-existence with communism, and not its elimination ; committed anti-communists understood this as an immoral compromise with evil itself, tantamount to treason. Liberals, conservatives now suggested, were found wanting when the defense of the nation was at stake. Some went further. Liberal support of centralized planning and bureaucratic problem solving, without public reference to transcendent religious values, encouraged conservative activists as well as intellectuals to depict liberals as advocates of a philosophy that constituted the essential first step toward communism. What made this plausible for many so soon following Roosevelt's successful defense of the nation during the 1940s was the changed nature of the enemy. Fascism was no longer a concern, and the repeated « red scares » that unearthed purported communist agents in sensitive government positions reinforced the belief that liberalism was but a forerunner of communism. That many of these anti-statist conservatives themselves benefited, directly and indirectly, from the expanding public sector of federal bureaucracy—through grants, contracts, and employment—was an irony few wished to discuss.⁷

13 Liberals were generally quick to dismiss this anti-communism with a glib reference to the bizarre claims of Robert Welch, his John Birch Society, and other practitioners of what historian Richard Hofstadter once called « the paranoid style » in American politics.⁸ But, as Lisa McGirr's fine study of conservatism in southern California, *Suburban Warriors*, indicates, it was local efforts that proved most important. Spurred by anti-communism and the related concern that God had no place in the dominant American culture, conservative

activists organized locally to achieve certain goals : concerned women, many never before involved in politics, gathered in small groups (coffee-katches, in the language of suburban America) in their homes to discuss political ideas and their local impact, often organized by a neighbor who was herself newly active in the movement ; conservative men and women worked to oust liberals who opposed prayer in public schools from all local political offices ; and growing numbers of church-based discussion groups explored the biblical imperative to resist secular culture. These men and women created a densely layered network of local activists who gathered across the nation to publicly affirm the introduction of the phrase, « under God, » in the Pledge of Allegiance recited daily by public school children ; to condemn, as an unwarranted and unconstitutional intrusion by government in their individual lives, the 1962 United States Supreme Court's decision banning prayer in those same public schools ; and to demand that the power of the same central government outlaw abortion. Liberal intellectuals could well deride the contradictory principles at work in these stances, but Lisa McGirr was also accurate when she suggested that, to these activists, the conflicting approaches nonetheless made a « common sense. »⁹

14 The ideology of anti-statism had a second major impact on political life in these years when it forcefully reappeared as states' rights, an enormously popular political call to arms to defend against perceived federal intrusion in local or state affairs. That this phrase, saturated with John C. Calhoun's historic antebellum defense of slavery, was as well a call to defend a segregated America was not accidental. Decisions of the Supreme Court during the 1940s had weakened some state laws that prevented African Americans from voting ; the historic *Brown* decision in 1954 declared unconstitutional the policy of separate but equal ; and in 1957, Eisenhower sent in federal troops to force the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Yet, even before *Brown*, the approval of a civil rights plank in the 1948 national Democratic convention led to a walkout of many southern delegates led by the then Democratic governor of South Carolina, Strom Thurmond. Under the banner of the States' Rights Party, he ran for the presidency in 1948 and, in an American South where the Democratic party had dominated since 1876, as it proudly and publicly proclaimed itself the party of the white man, Thurmond won majorities in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. This was indeed a harbinger of things to come.¹⁰

15 Ideas were important but, like all political movements, conservatives also desired power, and they never assumed their current minority status was permanent. During the 1950s they began a concerted effort to gain control of the Republican party, which was then considerably more liberal. In a local community or on a college campus, it seemed, there was no office too insignificant that did not have a conservative candidate in the race. At the 1960 Republican presidential convention, conservatives, who always thought Richard Nixon was too liberal, worked to gain the vice-presidential nomination for Barry Goldwater, the senator from Arizona. In this they failed, but never stopped organizing. In September 1961, some 100 college students, representing campuses across the country, met at William F. Buckley's estate in Connecticut and formed Young Americans for Freedom. Two years later, conservative young Republicans, with the assistance of some very astute older political activists, gained control of the National Republican Youth Committee. In 1964 the conservative movement won control of the Republican party, nominated Barry Goldwater, and, after an exhausting effort, watched in some grief as Lyndon Baines Johnson overwhelmed Goldwater in the November election. That same year, however, at a time when the total membership of the emerging New Left's major organization, Students for a Democratic Society, had approximately 1,500 members, Young American for Freedom added 5,400 new members.¹¹

16 Once again conservatives reacted to a major defeat as if it were but one more act in a long and complex play. They continued to grow locally even as they suffered disappointments at the national level (Richard Nixon, in 1968, was again not their top choice), and gave further evidence of creating an alternative institutional culture that reflected their ideas and values. It was during the 1960s and 1970s that Christian schools, usually formed to avoid desegregation orders, strongly emerged as a conservative option, as did the home schooling movement. At the same time, conservative and/or Christian bookstores and speakers' bureaus supplied local

study groups and audiences with scathing appraisals of student protestors, civil rights activity, and the feminist movement. This political faith, in light of Goldwater's defeat, was anything but an unthinking reflex born of disappointment. The conservative vision that projected the belief that the basic struggle was for the very soul of America also grasped, in the wreckage of the Goldwater campaign, two quite pragmatic lessons.

17 The first directed attention to what Goldwater, an uncompromising conservative, had achieved. More than 27 million Americans had voted for him, and he carried the electoral votes of six states : Arizona, his home state, and Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina—Strom Thurmond's four from 1948, plus Georgia. Moreover, seven Republican congressmen were elected from the South where, before the election, there had been no southern Republicans in the House of Representatives. Coupled with the appeal of the Democratic segregationist governor of Alabama, George Corey Wallace, whose campaign in his party's 1964 presidential primaries revealed surprising strength outside the South, Republican conservatives recognized that, by appealing directly to white voters on the basis of states' rights, a moral and fiscal conservatism, and near open disdain for the civil rights movement, they could win white voters away from the New Deal electoral coalition. If successful, this would weaken the Democratic party at every level and, simultaneously, complete the transformation of the Republican party by defeating all but a few stragglers from the liberal wing. This, in turn, set the foundation for a broader conservative reorientation of national political debate. In essence, this was the core of Kevin Phillip's « Southern strategy, » which he organized for Richard Nixon in the 1968 campaign.¹²

18 The second lesson learned from 1964 was the recognition that, in Ronald Reagan, conservatives had a political talent of extraordinary ability to articulate the conservative cause. He was less acerbic than Bill Buckley, less rigid than Barry Goldwater, less vitriolic than George Wallace, but Reagan was able to successfully present the core values of the movement to ever wider audiences. His nationally televised speech for Goldwater toward the end of the campaign could not save Goldwater's candidacy, but it provided Reagan with one. He ran successfully for governor of California in 1966, on a platform that opposed civil rights legislation in housing and employment ; attacked student demonstrators, particularly at the University of California at Berkeley, for their lack of patriotism and their culture of « filthy speech » and free love ; and promised an administration of fiscal conservatism and lower taxes. Reelected in 1970, he was by then a major presence in the Republican party who, of course, won election to the presidency in 1980. It was in that 1980 election that Philip's strategy proved successful nationally, with the emergence of the so-called Reagan Democrats—white, northern, urban working men and women, many third generation members of the New Deal coalition, who voted for Reagan in significant numbers.¹³

19 There was one additional event of great consequence for American politics that no one could have foreseen. In 1973, in a landmark decision known as *Roe v. Wade*, the United States Supreme Court legalized abortion. As conservatives recovered from the shock of that decision, their fury at yet another major intrusion by the central state generated a powerful organizing campaign. National organizations rededicated their efforts, new groups appeared, and, in local communities across the nation, individuals gathered with neighbors, friends, and fellow church members to plan public responses. The growing political presence of the church community had been evident for some time, but the reaction to *Roe* completed a major transition among Fundamentalists in understanding the relation between their faith and political action. In a 1979 sermon, Reverend Jerry Falwell, pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia and a leading Fundamentalist preacher, forcefully preached that Fundamentalists must reform their traditional separatist attitude toward the world. « [W]e have to rebuild a nation, » he preached, « ...[for] the fact is, you cannot separate the sacred and the secular. » This was a startling change for Falwell's born-again followers. The task of the religious school was not simply to train ministers, he continued, but « to train men of God » to enter politics, medicine, business, and other professions. « If we are to turn this country around, » he preached, with *Roe* and the battle concerning the legal status of women over the Equal Rights Amendment in his audience's consciousness, « we have to get God's people mobilized

in the right direction and we must do it quickly. » Falwell was an important figure in bringing fundamentalists into the world of politics, and he also helped them bridge the deep chasm that existed between them and the more charismatic Pentecostals. It was this sea-change of theological and fraternal understanding that allowed the creation of the Moral Majority in 1979, perhaps the most effective religiously-based, conservative political group in the two decades following its founding. In a society where, in 1976, 34 percent of adult Americans reported themselves as born-again Christians, this was of enormous significance. Ironically, as Falwell substantially aided in the creation of Reagan Democrats, he did so in the soaring tones of an evangelical tradition that Charles Grandison Finney had used to oppose slavery in the 1830s and which, more recently, had been the core of the belief system that propelled the southern Civil Rights movement.¹⁴

II

20 The results of this conservative effort have been astounding. Between 1968 and 2004, seven of the ten presidential elections have sent increasingly conservative Republicans to the White House ; and the two Democrats elected, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, grew ever more distant from the New Deal and its legacy. The Congress became Republican, and the conservative beliefs of congressional Republicans intensified dramatically. How did liberalism, apparently reigning supreme in 1945, falter so profoundly before the growth of this conservative movement ?¹⁵

21 Some argue that the answer lies in a series of strategic errors in the past : The widespread liberal conceit that the 1925 Scopes trial signaled the irreversible decline of fundamentalism. Others emphasized 1964, when liberal political wisdom dismissively rejected Goldwater's politics as beneath analysis. As the historian Richard Hofstadter asked of the conservative candidate who would win 27 million votes that year, « When, in all our history, had anyone with ideas so bizarre, so archaic, so self-confounding, so remote from the basic American consensus, ever got so far ? » Some pointed to the reaction to *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which many liberals again thought settled another major religio-cultural issue, abortion. The elections of 2000 and 2004 also came under scrutiny, and many felt that a mistake here, a lack of focus there, might have produced quite different results. But none of these approaches address the one question symbolic of the changes in American political culture since 1945 : In the 1984 presidential campaign, when Ronald Reagan stood for reelection against Walter Mondale, the quintessential New Deal legacy Democrat, how did Reagan's frontal attack on the Air Traffic Controllers' Union in 1981, his hostile attitudes toward unions in general, and his economic policies which benefited the wealthy, encourage 46 percent of voters *in trade union families* to support his reelection ?¹⁶

22 This question raises the possibility that the New Deal and its legacy was, in fact, something of « the long exception » in American political life, and not the major step in the inevitable growth of a progressive liberal politics. I recognize that this inversion of traditional liberal conceptions about American exceptionalism, about being « born free » as Louis Hartz proclaimed, requires a more thorough analysis of political thought, to say nothing of social and cultural change, than I can present today. But I offer this as a start.

23 Twenty years before Lionel Trilling expressed concern that liberalism lacked « a concise body of doctrine, » John Dewey, the pragmatic philosopher and left-leaning liberal, posed the question in a more fundamental fashion. Dewey argued, in *Individualism Old and New*, for a reconfigured liberalism, one that proclaimed the centrality of democratic debate and decision-making in social life, and ground itself in a new concept of individualism that derived its vitality from the collective and individual values imbedded in that broader, democratic process. Obsolete and detrimental in an era of corporate capitalism, Dewey argued, was the atomistic individualism of nineteenth-century classical liberalism ; but detrimental too was the embrace of bureaucratic organization and centralized planning implemented by liberal and/or left « experts » who largely ruled apart from the people whose lives their decisions altered. Beyond problem-solving by educated elites versed in the technology of management, Dewey asked, what did liberalism offer ? His answer was not comforting : The « lack of secure

objects of allegiance, without which individuals are lost, is especially striking in the case of the liberal. » Liberalism had had in the past « a definite intellectual creed » that marked it from conservatism, he wrote in 1930, but perhaps no longer : « Liberalism to-day is hardly more than a temper of mind, vaguely called forward-looking, but quite uncertain as to where to look and what to look forward to. » For a political movement, Dewey considered this a tragedy, « For human nature is self-possessed only as it has objects to which it can attach itself. » Dewey's solution to what the first George Bush would famously call « the vision thing » was not religion. Rather, he thought that such an allegiance could only develop through the democratic control « of the science and technology that have mastered the physical forces of nature. »¹⁷

24 Liberalism grasped the control of science and technology, but was less enamored of either democratic decision-making or a new individualism. In part, Roosevelt's astute genius in articulating his goals (including the preservation corporate capitalism and its non-democratic governance) utilized a political rhetoric steeped in the mythic images of the traditional American narrative, which extolled a pre-industrial ideology of individual effort and will as the cornerstone of opportunity and social mobility. Upon this foundation FDR constructed an electoral coalition of social groups with disparate, even antagonistic, interests. So deep was the crisis that Roosevelt was able to present problem-solving as the tool to fulfill the historic American mission, and to that extent he presented to Americans a compelling vision for their allegiance. But this would not last.¹⁸

25 The fissures in that coalition were immediately evident. Roosevelt's influence in the Congress depended upon a shaky alliance between conservative southern Democrats defending their segregationist culture and low-wage, non-union labor force, and northern Democrats increasingly supportive of civil rights and labor legislation. Given the power of southern Democrats to block New Deal legislation, FDR carefully avoided references to racial issues in most of his talks to the nation. Roosevelt understood this political imbroglio even before he took office, remarking in 1932 of the conservatives in his party, that by 1940 « we might not any longer have a Democratic party ; but we will have a Progressive one. » In 1938 FDR took a dramatic step toward reorganizing political parties by ideology when he declared the right to endorse one Democratic candidate over another in the primaries based on their commitment to progressive liberalism. Yet the realignment Roosevelt desired never materialized. Indeed, at his death in 1945, Lawrence and Cornelia Levine have written, « the greatest irony » was that the New Deal Democratic coalition remained « as inherently unstable and prone to ideological and political stalemate as the day Roosevelt became its leader. » Three years later, when Henry Wallace sought to implement his version of FDR's Progressive party, even Strom Thurmond's limited success far outdistanced Wallace's results.¹⁹

26 What held the coalition together into the 1950s was what might be called class politics. It was not that FDR dabbled in socialism—he told the nation in 1936 that « Labor Day in this country has never been a class holiday. It has always been a national holiday »²⁰—but rather that the New Deal's programs extended significant help to those in need. Yet, even during the 1930s, this liberal appeal lacked a core vision that transcended immediate issues. A letter from Mrs. H. A. Thompson, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, written to FDR on April 29, 1935—one of more than 15 million letters written by Americans to FDR during his long term as president—is worth examining in this context, even though one letter culled from so many cannot be called representative.

27 Mrs. Thompson did not give either her or her husband's occupation, but it was clear from her letter that the Depression had taken its toll on her family. She reported that she had worn but one house dress for the last three years, and that the family was in desperate need of bedding, clothes, rugs, and other household goods. She and her husband had listened to FDR's defense of his policies on the radio the night before, and generally approved. But, Mrs. Thompson suggested, she had some comments. New Deal programs had been « more than generous in taking care of the unemployed, » she began, « and there are many in the lower class of people also some of the colored ones, who think they should have more. Dear Sir, » she continued, warming to the core of her thinking, « they have more than any working

man who works every day but does not get enough only to pay his bills and nothing left to buy things we need so badly. » Having separated herself and her husband from those she deemed among the undeserving—those who lacked individual initiative, those who were African American—Mrs. Thompson concluded with a vivid sentence that conveyed another deeply held conviction : « Employers just want to pocket the money and make one work for a pittance. »²¹

28 Mrs. Thompson's letter is helpful in understanding the depth of the belief patterns that would inform conservative, populist critiques of American liberalism after the war. Employers, the undeserving poor, blacks—these were the groups she mentioned when the New Deal's programs still held her broad allegiance. In the decades that followed, opposition to government involvement, particularly in the context of a rising economic well-being, proved attractive to many.

29 The New Deal liberalism captured in that phrase, class politics, never became the central vision for a significant segment of Americans. Following FDR's death, one political supporter warned Eleanor Roosevelt that in the South « a general retreat » from « the forward-looking policies of the new deal » was already in progress. But the retreat, as James Dombrowski called it, was not a withdrawal from a position once held unambiguously. Rather, the meaning of individualism, the importance of religious faith, the imbedded values associated with racial difference, an anger at the devaluing of civic worth in a society regulated by giant governmental and corporate bureaucracies—these issues never found a comfortable home in liberalism as it was experienced by many. It is here, in this rugged terrain with intense personal and public meaning, that progressive liberalism's fate as the « long exception » in American political life must be explored.²²

30 Liberalism has rightly been applauded for its efforts to unionize a broad group of workers during the 1930s, most notably into the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the CIO. Some activists then and many historians since have considered these CIO members as integral parts of that progressive liberal coalition, as in some ways they were. Yet, these men and women were always more complex than a singular focus on their union activity might suggest. Satisfactory figures are hard to obtain, but the most careful estimate suggests that 30 percent of CIO members were ethnic Catholics, and perhaps 40 percent occupied leadership positions in local and state union organizations. In addition, of course, Philip Murray, who succeeded John L. Lewis as CIO president, was a devout Catholic, as were others in the national CIO leadership. Leaders and members alike could be practicing Catholics and militant unionists, but what they meant by liberalism often differed greatly from the thinking of the college-educated men and women who staffed the New Deal agencies in Washington.²³

31 Catholic industrial workers in the 1930s and 1940s had largely been raised in urban enclaves bound by ethnic loyalties that were yet powerful, and by a religious faith intensely critical of individualism, modernity, and liberalism. The parish priest, the immediate point of authority, usually preached obedience to God and considered the claim of mankind's mastery « of the physical forces of nature » blasphemous. The parish community in which workers lived, with the physical church at its center, was the site of their profession of faith, of the education of their children, and of much of their family's social life. To be a practicing Catholic at this time could involve, simultaneously, a defense of unionism as reflected in papal encyclicals, a total opposition to birth control and euthanasia, and a commitment to follow the church's censorship of popular culture deemed immoral. As Michael Curley, the archbishop of Baltimore, a largely working class and heavily ethnic Catholic city, from 1921 to 1947, expressed it, he believed in the « Catholic Ghetto, » in developing self-sufficiency within the parameters of Catholic institutions, and rejected individualism and what he termed « forceful, improper Americanization. » Catholics, the American church proclaimed repeatedly through the 1950s, lived in a community where their religious values gave meaning and direction to their individual lives.²⁴

32 As would become clear in the 1940s and 1950s, moreover, Catholic opposition to communism never shared the same root meanings with liberal anti-communism. On May 1, 1947, some 50,000 Catholics, working people and trade unionists included, crowded into Baltimore's

Memorial Stadium to pray for the conversion of Russia from communism to Christianity. A local bishop made two central points. Catholics, Lawrence Shehan cautioned, should not attack the Russian people, for they have been manipulated by a very small group of leaders. His second point revealed the unfathomable chasm with liberal anti-communism : « [T]his country and every country in the world, » Shehan insisted, « needs a reconversion to God. As individuals and as a nation we have often wandered from God's law. » To the extent that Catholic working people absorbed these ideas (and there is much evidence to suggest many did), any similarity between their vision and that of progressive liberalism remained accidental.²⁵

33 Nor was this faith-based tension with liberalism just a Catholic response. Protestant evangelist Billy Graham would have been quite comfortable with Bishop Shehan's words, and the call to revival echoed as well among working people, the majority of whom were Protestant. Protestants and Catholics had their sharp tensions, but they would discover that growing numbers of them shared a critique of modernism, mass culture, and the underlying assumptions of progressive liberalism. Among them were many union members, and even more unorganized working people.²⁶

34 On matters of race as well, the rhetoric of progressive liberalism remained alien to many who benefited from its programs. As the letter from Iowa's Mrs. Thompson suggests, this was not simply a southern problem. In the height of the New Deal, white northern working people frequently battled African Americans to prevent integration of desirable jobs. « Hate strikes »—where white union members walked off the job to protest working with black union workers—occurred throughout industrial life, and in quite progressive unions. In time, white workers made an accommodation on the job, but fiercely resisted black efforts for additional housing. In Detroit, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere, whites defended the racial purity of their neighborhoods with political power, mob action, and violence. Frequently, white neighborhood groups organized and held planning meetings in the social rooms of their local parish churches. Here then was another nexus of belief that marked its adherents as apart from progressive liberalism. That many thought they were defending their home, the one financial investment a working man might possess, and their neighborhood in the face of liberal criticism of their racism was perhaps poignant, but only underscored the narrowed political limits liberalism could successfully engage. It also had another consequence. Many white union members blamed communist or liberal organizers within unions for raising the issue of black equality. This quickly sharpened the anti-elitism already evident among workers. As one nationally-known Catholic priest wrote in 1944, before communist sympathizers infiltrated the union local, they « had rarely lifted anything heavier than a pen. » Long after communism as a domestic issue had receded, the image of educated, liberal elites imposing social and cultural policy on others remained the dominant motif of a potent conservative populism.²⁷

III

35 The postwar conservative ascendancy, then, was not accidental. The conservative movement found those « secure objects of allegiance » that John Dewey recognized as critical, and grounded that broader vision in traditional concepts of individualism and patriotism ; in deeply-held, public expressions of religious faith ; and in a race-based appeal, well into the 1980s, to white voters to leave the Democratic party. It is most interesting that, in its populist outreach, conservatism has recently sought to include African Americans and Hispanics as allies and potential voters. If the conservative political base can avoid alienating voters with its millennial rhetoric, and if the approach to minorities, more successful with Hispanics than blacks in 2004, does make significant electoral inroads, the conservative dominance of American political life may stretch even beyond the horizon.

36 Liberalism, meanwhile, remains largely in turmoil, as neither Dewey's emphasis on the control of nature, nor any other approach, has provided it with a compelling structure of belief. Of all the liberal postmortems on the 2004 election, one struck me as particularly poignant. ZZ Packer, an African American woman raised in a black evangelical church community and a committed Democratic liberal, addressed the need for liberals to recognize the power of

faith-based activists even in their own party. Religiously-orientated Democrats could reach those moderate Christian evangelicals attracted to conservatism's moral appeal, but offended by the political implementation. Impressed by party strategist James Carville's comment that the party of liberalism possessed « litanies, not a narrative, » Packer argued that the Democratic vision never transcended a list of single issue policies representing specific interest-group positions. « The problem, » she suggested, « is that a single issue is a single thread, and the Republicans have proved adept at snipping it with the sharp scissors of 'values.' »²⁸

37 In her efforts to call her fellow liberals back from the precipice inherent in « their deep ingrained assumption that human rationality will win the day over human nature, » Packer echoed a nineteenth-century American effort to better integrate these dimensions of human experience. In 1870, John Humphrey Noyes, a participant in and historian of the American utopian socialist movement, wrote that the successful socialist communities were those that centered their socialism in a strong religious faith. Despite the sharp differences between the two movements—the one « of Bible men, and the other of infidels and liberals, » he wrote—Noyes thought the two movements deeply interdependent for they complemented the other's shortcomings : evangelical religious enthusiasts often failed in their engagement with society's problems ; socialists in understanding the importance of the « regeneration of the heart. »²⁹

38 Operating as it must in a political culture framed for more than two centuries by popular evangelical commitments, liberalism has little choice, if it is to remain a vital political option, but to better understand the historical specificity of its own ascendancy in a culture part of whose fundamental narrative it has largely sought to dismiss.

Notes

1 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Tradition : Essays on Literature and Society* (New York, 1950), ix, x. See also Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955).

2 John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, *The Right Nation : Conservative Power in America* (New York, 2004), 227-229.

3 Micklethwait and Woolridge, *The Right Nation*, 41-42 ; Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan : The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964-1980* (Roseville, CA, 2001), 230.

4 George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York, 1976), 3-35, 284-289 ; Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, 2002/1962), 8. The book has been in print in America for over 40 years and has sold more than one million copies.

5 Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985* (Ithaca, 1993), 1-82 (the quote is on 3) ; Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 36-83 ; Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again : The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York, 1997), 217-226 (the quote is on 224).

6 For examples of a free market approach to cultural issues the social traditionalists would find anathema, see Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 20-21 ; for a broader discussion, see Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 131-252 ; Buchanan is quoted in John A. Andrew, III, *The Other Side of the Sixties : Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1997), 63.

7 Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 256-289 ; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 40-60 ; Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm : Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York, 2001) 110-119.

8 But two American socialists took aspects of the conservative position quite seriously ; see Irving Howe, « Journey To the End of Right, » *Dissent*, IX, 1 (Winter 1962), 81 ; and Michael Harrington, « The American Campus : 1962, » *Dissent*, IX, 2 (Spring 1962), 167. See also Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York, 1965). Perhaps the most prescient book about the 1960s and student activism was M. Stanton Evans, *Revolt on the Campus* (Chicago, 1961), which foresaw the growth to prominence and power of a conservative youth movement.

9 Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors : The Origins of the New American Right* (New York, 2001), *passim* (the quote is on 9).

- 10 Zachary Karabell, *The Last Campaign : How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election* (New York, 2000), 219-229 ; for the election results, by state, see *ibid.*, 293-294.
- 11 On YAF see, McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 129-31, 175-76 ; Micklethwait and Woolridge, *The Right Nation*, 51 ; Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, *passim* ; on the conservative takeover of the Republican Youth committee, see Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 216-21.
- 12 Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 513-14 ; Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage : George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York, 1995), 211-225 ; Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 54-55. See also Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (Garden City, NY, 1970) and Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).
- 13 Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment : Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York, 2000), *passim* ; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 187-216 ; Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 96-102, 327-28. Reagan's speech, « A Time for Choosing, » is available at www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan/speeches/rendezvous.asp
- 14 Micklethwait and Woolridge, *The Right Nation*, 309-310 ; Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 316-17 ; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 231-37. On the broader issue of the success of conservatives on the abortion issue in public life, see Kristen Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley, 1984) ; William Saletan, *Bearing Right : How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, 2003). On Falwell, see Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell : Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, 2000), 126-27, and *passim*. On religion and the southern Civil Rights movement, see David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope : Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, 2004) and Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer : Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, 1997). Nor was this understanding solely a southern phenomenon among African Americans ; see my discussion of a southern-born, Detroit-based Afro-Baptist minister in the postwar years in Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land : C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (New York, 2005), 136-171 especially.
- 15 On the growth of conservatism among Congressmen and Senators, see Micklethwait and Woolridge, *The Right Nation*, 2-3.
- 16 Edward J. Larson, *Summer of the Gods : The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York, 1997), 225-246 ; Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 141-210 ; Hofstadter is quoted in Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 452 ; Saletan, *Bearing Right*, *passim* ; *New York Times* (Week in Review), November 12, 2000, 4.
- 17 John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (New York, 1930) 59-61, 93 ; Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, 1991), 429-439.
- 18 For statements of these themes by FDR within 6 months of his inaugural, see his second (May 7, 1933) and third (July 24, 1933) addresses to the nation (the Fireside Chats) in Kenneth D. Yeilding and Paul H. Carlson, compilers, *Ah That Voice : The Fireside Chats of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (Odessa, TX, 1974), 6-14, 15-22, respectively. FDR's trusted advisor, Rexford Guy Tugwell, commenting on FDR's efforts to publicly bridge traditional concepts of individualism with modern corporate society, suggested that FDR « too had not been immune to our national myths....like all of us, [he] had a weakness for what was familiar and trusted which led him to overestimate their sufficiency and to underestimate their irrelevant antiquity. » Cited in Lawrence W. Levine and Cornelia R. Levine, *The People and the President : America's Conversation with FDR* (Boston, 2002), 219-220.
- 19 Levine and Levine, *The People and the President*, 250-256 ; Yeilding and Carlson, compilers, *Ah That Voice*, 105-115, for FDR's Fireside Chat of June 24, 1938, esp. 112-115. For FDR's 1935 justification for his lack of involvement in passing the anti-lynching bill (he emphasized the political power of southern Democrats), see Levine and Levine, *The People and the President*, 248. On the Wallace campaign, see Karabell, *The Last Campaign*, *passim*.
- 20 FDR's Fireside Chat, September 6, 1936, as reprinted in Yeilding and Carlson, compilers, *Ah That Voice*, 65.
- 21 Mrs. H. A. Thompson to FDR, April 29, 1935, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, as reprinted in Levine and Levine, *The People and the President*, 142-143.
- 22 James Dombrowski to Eleanor Roosevelt, April 23, 1947, as quoted in Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions : The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 28.

23 Neil Betten, *Catholic Activism and the Industrial Worker* (Gainesville, FL, 1976), 108-123, and especially 110-112 ; see also Kenneth J. Heineman, *A Catholic New Deal : Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh* (University Park, PA, 1999), 133-143, 165-169.

24 John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom : A History* (New York, 2003), 189-249 ; Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of American Catholicism : A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York, 2002), 127-190 ; Kenneth D. Durr, *Behind the Backlash : White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore, 1940-1980* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 11. See also, on the issue of the changing nature of ethnic loyalties, Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace* (Pittsburgh, 1976/1941) ; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal : Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York, 1990).

25 Durr, *Behind the Backlash*, 51.

26 Colleen McDannell, *Picturing Faith : Photography and the Great Depression* (New Haven, 2004) ; Edith Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith : The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* (Urbana, 1993) ; Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 47-48, 103-105.

27 On racial tension at work, see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979) ; Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis : Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, 1996) ; Kevin Boyle, « The Kiss : Racial and Gender Conflict in a 1950s Automobile Factory, » *Journal of American History*, 84, no. 2 (September 1997), 496-523 ; William Harris, *The Harder We Run : Black Workers Since the Civil War* (New York, 1982) ; on violence over neighborhood boundaries, see Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* ; Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land* ; John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries : The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago, 1996) ; Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto : Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York, 1983) ; Durr, *Behind the Backlash*, 39.

28 ZZ Packer, « Losing My Religion. »

29 Packer, « Losing My Religion, » 3 ; John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (New York, 1969/1870), 25-29, 655-657 (the quotes are on 25, 27, respectively).

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