

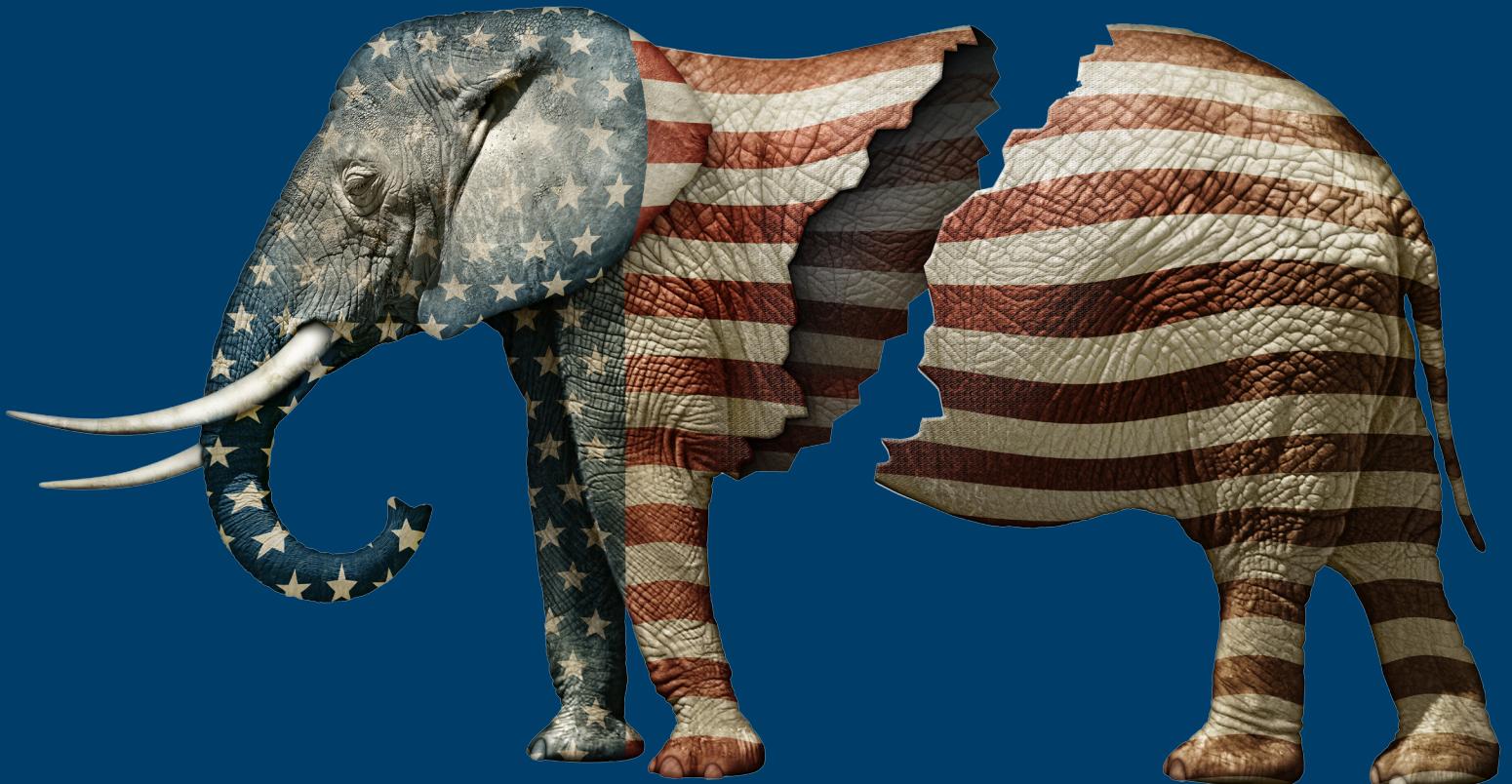


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The Corruption of American Conservatism

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It is true that courtiers in America do not say ‘Sire’ and ‘Your Majesty’—a great and capital difference; but they speak constantly of the natural enlightenment of their master; they do not hold a competition on the question of knowing which one of the virtues of the prince most merits being admired; for they are sure that he possesses all the virtues, without having acquired them and so to speak without wanting to do so; they do not give them their wives and daughters so that he may deign to elevate them to the rank of their mistresses; but in sacrificing their opinions to him, they prostitute themselves.

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *On Democracy in America*, Vol.I,
Part 2, Chapter 7.

On a sunny morning in January 1962, an editor, a philosopher and a presidential aspirant huddled in a Florida hotel room. The topic of discussion was a deranged candy manufacturer, Robert Welch. Welch, a millionaire, was the head of the John Birch Society, an extremist movement that trafficked in anti-communist hysteria and absurd conspiracy theories—most notably claiming that President Eisenhower had been a “conscious Communist agent.”¹ Troubled by the growing popularity of the movement, William F. Buckley, founder of *National Review*, and Russell Kirk, the famed conservative political theorist, had agreed to meet with a firebrand senator from Arizona, Barry Goldwater. Senator Goldwater—himself something of a fevered populist—was reluctant to fully rein in the members of the John Birch Society.² This movement, he plaintively noted, was not confined

to a crackpot fringe of “Commie-haunted apple pickers and cactus drunks,” but also included prominent Arizonians—some of whom had expressed sympathy for his candidacy. For William F. Buckley and Russell Kirk, however, the Birchers were a tumorous outgrowth of American conservatism, and one that needed to be carefully excised. Buckley later recalled himself thinking, “How can the John Birch Society be an effective political instrument while it is led by a man whose views on current affairs are at so many critical points so far removed from common sense?”³

Soon after, the *National Review* and the Republican establishment undertook a systematic effort to marginalize the John Birch Society, first by excommunicating its founder, and then by rejecting the movement in its entirety. This was not the last time that conservative thought

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leaders were called upon to purge the American Right of its more insalubrious elements.⁴ In 1981, for example, leading conservative intellectuals joined forces to prevent Mel Bradford, a southern revanchist and Confederacy-sympathizer, from serving as chairman for the National Endowment for Humanities. In 1990, a horrified George H.W. Bush administration actively maneuvered to prevent David Duke, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, from winning a Senate seat in Louisiana.⁵

For decades, it appeared that the GOP, while susceptible to spasms of hysteria—as witnessed, for instance, during the McCarthy years—retained a strong reservoir of antibodies which, when activated, would slowly but surely cleanse modern conservatism of any lingering traces of immoderation or reactionary rot. This is sadly no longer the case, and as a result modern American conservatism is dying a slow and painful death.

At its root, political conservatism is a philosophy of moderation, which can only thrive in a state of delicate equilibrium. Less a rigid ideology than a temperament or state of mind, the Burkean worldview of leading postwar conservative intellectuals, ranging from Russell Kirk to Isaiah Berlin, Eric Voegelin, or Peter Viereck, was prudential, organicist, and stoic in nature. Many of these men had lived through personal, bruising encounters with tyranny. They had structured their worldviews in opposition to authoritarianism, stolidly hacking a spiritual path through the dark undergrowth of irrationalism that had engulfed the old world. Isaiah Berlin remained haunted by the memory of a pale faced tsarist policeman, hauled off to his doom by a frenzied mob in 1917 Petrograd.⁶ Peter Viereck felt a burning shame *vis-a-vis* his Nazi-sympathizing father, who he only ended up forgiving in the autumn of his life. His pained reflections on the dangers of political romanticism had a largely redemptive quality, as he grappled with the failings of his flawed progenitor.⁷ Eric Voegelin, who in his writings cautioned against importing religious-style fervor into terrestrial politics, only narrowly escaped the bloodhounds of the Gestapo when he fled Austria in 1938.⁸ All warned against the perils of demagoguery, revolutionary movements, and political radicalism. All would recoil in horror when contemplating the current state of the Republican

Party, as it slowly sinks into the fever swamps of the radical right.

Indeed, principled conservatism is coterminous with a deep reverence for the West's more humanist traditions, and an aversion for binding ideational constructs. Mark C. Henrie judiciously notes that gardening—with its patience and respect for local conditions—provides an apt metaphor for the traditionalist conservative's approach to statesmanship.⁹ Another eloquently articulated description of the conservative disposition was provided by Michael Oakeshott, who wrote that,

To be conservative (...) is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.¹⁰

Prudential political philosophies do not come naturally to most human beings, nor do they fire much political enthusiasm amongst the masses—which is why conservatism remains such a fragile thing, perpetually at risk of corruption. Historically, conservatism has had to shield itself from two major corrupting impulses, both of which feed off each other. The first is misanthropic elitism, which can rapidly take on shades of illiberalism. With their constant focus on the societal dangers tied to humanity's imperfections conservatives can—out of sheer jadedness—tumble into cynicism. This was the case of many prewar American conservatives, whose contempt for the masses was often accompanied by antidemocratic sentiments. A good embodiment of this mindset can be found, for example, in the acidic writings of H.L. Mencken, who famously predicted that,

As democracy is perfected, the office of the president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.¹¹

Were Mencken still alive, he might feel smugly vindicated following last year's election. This would be shortsighted, however, for it is this noxious form of elitism—which alienates the common man and breeds class resentment—that also helps fuel the other main threat to conservatism—reactionary populism. Indeed, the traditionalism inherent to conservatism can all too easily be contaminated by radical reactionary thought. As Peter Viereck noted, there is a line that separates the conservative from the reactionary, even though that line can sometimes prove hard to see. "Not all the past is worth keeping," he reminds us, before adding that,

The conservative conserves discriminately, the reactionary indiscriminately. Though the events of the past are often shameful and bloody, its lessons are indispensable. By "tradition" the conservative means all the lessons of the past but only the ethically acceptable events. The reactionary means all the events. Thereby he misses all the lessons.¹²

By their irrational attachment to "lifeless roots," "contrived by nostalgia,"—such as the Southern mythology of the lost cause, for example—reactionary populists are condemned to frustration.¹³ This angry, pulsating mass of grievances almost invariably curdles into the mobocratic turmoil Abraham Lincoln once warned of in his Lyceum Address.¹⁴ As T.S. Eliot observed, a mob—"detached from tradition, alienated from religion and susceptible to mass suggestion"—is "no less a mob if it is well fed, well clothed, well housed, and well disciplined."¹⁵

With the ascension of Donald Trump, we have witnessed the convergence of these two threats, and modern American conservatism has been corrupted from above and below. The original sin may have been committed—as Viereck suggested—a long time ago, when the GOP dallied with McCarthyism. Or perhaps the slide toward reactionary Jacobinism started much later, with the profoundly misguided choice of Sarah Palin as Vice Presidential candidate in 2008, or with the emergence of the Tea Party in 2009. In any case, the result is depressingly clear.

A bloviating billionaire with little to no respect for America's democratic traditions, or the sanctity of its institutions, roams the White House. The callous indifference of certain Republican apparatchiks to the plight of the middle class—and their perceived subservience to a wafer-thin stratum of plutocrats—has only strengthened the power of his coarse appeal.¹⁶ For many decades, anti-communism provided a useful ideological cement that helped to unite the various disparate strands of the American right. Even as this unity began to fissure in the years following the end of the Cold War, the patriotic fervor following 9/11 helped to delay the moment of reckoning between radical and moderate rightists. Now this moment of reckoning is upon us, and in our turbocharged social media-driven age there are no intellectual sheriffs in the vein of Buckley that can help police the frontiers of the conservative movement. The barbarians are no longer at the gates. Led by their daft king, they have spilled into the city, defaced its monuments, and sullied the heart of the forum.

Meanwhile, most moderate conservatives have bent the knee like de Tocqueville's courtiers, crawled into inner exile and/or retirement, or chosen to ride off into the Arizona sunset after firing off one last, desperate salvo.¹⁷ Stephen Bannon, the poor man's Robespierre, has declared a "season of war" against sane Republicans, using a vocabulary reminiscent of the COMINTERN's campaigns against European social democrats in the 1930s.¹⁸ In the meantime, the White House endorsed a man accused of being a child-molester for the U.S. Senate, and the Republican National Committee quietly, meekly reopened the financial spigots for Roy Moore's failed campaign.¹⁹ Bearing witness to the repeated genuflections of formerly staunch Republican critics of Donald Trump triggers a special sort of moral nausea, one that brings to mind Bassanio's words in *The Merchant of Venice*,

How many cowards, whose hearts are all as false
As stairs of sand, wear yet upon their chins
The beards of Hercules and frowning Mars,
Who, inward search'd, have livers white as milk.²⁰

Only a few months ago, when I penned the draft for my recently published essay in *The Washington Quarterly*, I argued that the battle for the soul of the Republican Party would define not only the future of conservatism in the United States, but also the future of U.S. foreign policy.²¹ Little did I know that the battle would barely outlast the first clash of arms. As difficult as it may be for true conservatives to admit, the GOP is no longer the party of Lincoln. The fight has been lost. The principled men and women were too few, the milk-livered opportunists too many.

Much has been written about the widespread yearning to recreate what Arthur Schlesinger Jr. once termed the “vital center.”²² Unfortunately, however, there is little prospect—given the nature of the American political system—of creating a viable third party. At this stage, it also—sadly—seems unlikely that moderate rightists will ever succeed in recapturing the Republican Party. In the dark age of Trump, they are viewed as yesterday’s men—the “tired old guard” of the democratic game—by a narrowing but increasingly authoritarian and tribalistic Republican base.²³ As a result of this dispiriting state of affairs, moderate internationalists of the right will no doubt need to find a new home in the Democratic Party—much like the Scoop Jackson democrats who migrated to the GOP during the Reagan era.²⁴

A centrist European conservative such as myself, desirous of seeing this great country unify around a strong civic creed—and increasingly uncomfortable with the identity politics and illiberal attitudes now permeating certain quarters of the American left—would certainly welcome their moderating influence with open arms.²⁵ After all, as Samuel Huntington once remarked, the true enemy of the conservative is not the liberal, but the radical.²⁶

Endnotes

¹ For an excellent history of the John Birch Society, see D.J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism and the Cold War* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).

² See Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), Chapter 11.

³ William F. Buckley, Jr. “Goldwater, the John Birch Society, and Me,” *Commentary*, March 01, 2008, available at <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/goldwater-the-john-birch-society-and-me/>.

⁴ For a good overview of these ideological struggles, see George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016).

⁵ See Peter Applebone, “Republican Quits Louisiana Race in Effort to Defeat Ex-Klansman,” *The New York Times*, October 05, 1990, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/05/us/republican-quits-louisiana-race-in-effort-to-defeat-ex-klansman.html>.

⁶ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conservations with Isaiah Berlin* (London, UK: Halban Publishers, 2007 Ed.)

⁷ Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From Wagner and the German Romantics to Hitler* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941).

⁸ See Clifford F. Porter, “Eric Voegelin on Nazi Political Extremism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 63, No.1, 2002, pp.151-171, and Charles R. Embry and Glenn Hughes, *The Eric Voegelin Reader: Politics, History, Consciousness* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2017).

⁹ Mark C. Henrie, “Understanding Traditionalist Conservatism,” in Peter Berkowitz (Ed.) *Varieties of Conservatism in America* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004), p.19.

¹⁰ Michael Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” in Stephen Eric Bronner (Ed.) *Twentieth Century Political Theory: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.78.

¹¹ H.L. Mencken, “Bayard Vs. Lionheart,” *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, July 26, 1920.

¹² Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt Against Ideology* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1962), pp.70-71.

¹³ For an excellent overview of the mythology of the lost cause, which lionizes Confederate generals such as Robert E. Lee, and deemphasizes the centrality of the struggle against slavery during the Civil War, see James M. McPherson, “Southern Comfort,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 12, 2001, available at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2001/04/12/southern-comfort/>.

¹⁴ See Abraham Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions: Address Before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois,” January 27, 1838, available at <http://abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>.

¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014 Edition), p.19.

¹⁶ Most recently evidenced by the GOP tax plan, which aims at a historic redistribution of wealth toward the top 1% of the U.S. population. See Martin Wolf, “A Republican Tax Plan Built for Plutocrats,” *The*

Financial Times, November 21, 2017, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/e494f47e-ce1a-11e7-9dbb-291a884dd8c6>.

¹⁷ See Amber Phillips, "I Will Not Be Complicit. Jeff Flake's Retirement Speech, Annotated." *The Washington Post*, October 24, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/10/24/i-will-not-be-complicit-jeff-flakes-retirement-speech-annotated/?utm_term=.4b20a5d6ab80.

¹⁸ On the ideology of Stephen Bannon and his fellow reactionaries, see Iskander Rehman, "Bring Everything Crashing Down: Bannon's Reactionary Guard and U.S. National Security," *War on the Rocks*, February 27, 2017, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/bring-everything-crashing-down-bannons-reactionary-guard-and-u-s-national-security/>. On the COMINTERN's campaigns against what it termed the "social fascists" of the moderate left, see Kevin McDermott, "Stalin and the COMINTERN during the Third Period, 1928-1933," *European History Quarterly*, 25, No.3, 1995, pp.409-429.

¹⁹ James Hohmann, "Trump Solidifies Control of GOP with RNC Reversal on Roy Moore," *The Washington Post*, December 05, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2017/12/05/daily-202-trump-solidifies-control-of-gop-with-rnc-reversal-on-roy-moore/5a259bfb30fb0469e883f9e0/?utm_term=.8fb68d312c30.

²⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene 2.

²¹ Iskander Rehman, "Rise of the Reactionaries: The American Far Right and U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Washington Quarterly*, 40, No.4, 2017, pp.29-48.

²² Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "Not Left, Not Right, But a Vital Center," *The New York Times*, April 04, 1948, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/26/specials/schlesinger-centermag.html>.

²³ Dan Balz, "Trump Dominates the GOP Base. Party Leaders Live with the Consequences," *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-dominates-the-gop-base-party-leaders-live-with-the-consequences/2017/11/11/3f2a14de-c6f3-11e7-84bc-5e285c7f4512_story.html?utm_term=.1aab5ebf37b2. On the overwhelming support for Trump among American citizens with authoritarian inclinations, see Amanda Taub, "The Rise of American Authoritarianism," *Vox*, March 01, 2016, available at <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>.

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²⁵ On the nefarious consequences of an overreliance on identity politics, see Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017). On the growth of illiberalism across the

political spectrum, see Sohrab Ahmari, "The Terrible Turn Toward Illiberalism," *Commentary*, September 13, 2017, available at <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/terrible-american-turn-toward-illiberalism/>.

²⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *American Political Science Review*, 51, No.2, 1957, pp.454-473.



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