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The Rise (and Fall?) of American Conservatism

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REVIEW ESSAY

The Rise (And Fall?) of American Conservatism¹

The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History. By Donald T. Critchlow. (Harvard University Press, 2007.)

America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy. By Francis Fukuyama. (Yale University Press, 2007.)

They Knew They Were Right. The Rise of The Neocons. By Jacob Heilbrunn. (Anchor, 2009.)

Upstream: The Ascendancy of American Conservatism. By Alfred S. Regnery. (Threshold, 2008.)

The Death of Conservatism. By Sam Tanenhaus. (Random House, 2009.)

Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, “neo-conservatism” was the buzzword in debates on American politics. Both on the left and the right commentators debated the alleged power grab of this group of intellectuals, who were widely seen as the masterminds of President George W. Bush’s controversial invasion of Iraq. However, despite their proclaimed influence, American academics largely ignored neoconservatism. As far as neoconservatism has been studied academically, it has been mostly in the subfield of international relations (e.g., Erman 1995; Halper and Clarke 2004).

Similarly, the ascendance of conservatism into the mainstream of American politics, through the capture of the Republican Party, has become a received wisdom in and outside of academia, yet few political scientists have actually studied the

phenomenon (with the notable exception of the Christian Right). Hence, a broad variety of interesting questions remain unanswered. What is the conservative movement and who belongs to it? How did an ideology that was shunned by virtually all intellectuals and politicians in the 1950s become practically hegemonic within the public debate in the 1980s? And what effect does the recent rise (and fall?) of neoconservatism mean for the future of American conservatism?

Interestingly, it is mostly conservatives who publish on American conservatism. All five books reviewed here are written by conservatives, although of somewhat different types. While some are clearly favorable toward their topic of study (Critchlow and Regnery), others are modestly to very critical (from least to most critical: Fukuyama, Heilbrunn, Tanenhaus). This essay will discuss the rise and alleged fall of American conservatism, as presented in conservative writings, focusing particularly on conceptual and ideological issues, which are often ignored or understudied in the literature.

American Conservatism: Definition(s) and Typology

Although conservative thought has a long tradition in the United States, American conservatives have shied away from the label until well into the 1950s. Various authors (including Critchlow and Regnery) credit Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* (1953) with making conservatism acceptable to the American elite and (through them) public. However, the acceptability of the term also created problems: “The word ‘conservative’ became a label, and it applied to

¹I want to thank Dave Campbell, Valerie Hoekstra and Joe Lowndes for providing valuable feedback on earlier versions of this review essay.

virtually everybody who wasn't a liberal" (Regnery, xv). Not that surprisingly, none of the authors provides a definition of conservatism; in fact, throughout his book, Critchow uses the terms "Right" and "conservative" interchangeably.

Although Regnery doesn't define conservatism explicitly, he does identify the key ideas behind the conservative movement: "individual liberty, free markets, limited government, and a strong national defense" (xvi). It is doubtful that all American conservatives would subscribe to this list. Less controversial is his distinction between three main strands of American conservatism, although some authors use somewhat different terms and categorizations: libertarians, traditionalist, and anticommunists.

The libertarian movement emerged largely as a consequence of the influence of European emigrant-intellectuals like Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Ayn Rand in the 1950s. They substantiated the core values of free market and small government within the broader conservative movement. However, while their intellectual influence upon the broader movement has been significant, they have never been able to mobilize beyond some think tanks (notably the Cato Institute). Moreover, they have often been at odds with the other two main groups, notably over social issues (traditionalists) and foreign policy (anticommunists).

The traditionalists are the most ideologically complex of the three types, sharing a devotion to religious piety, tradition, and Western civilization. While they support the free market, particularly in the economic sphere, they have no problem with state involvement to protect and foster conservative institutions (notably the family and churches) and virtues (e.g., honor, respect). The intellectual guru of the traditionalists is Russell Kirk, whose book *The Conservative Mind* provided "a kind of historical manifesto" to American conservatism (Regnery, 46). The traditionalists are the closest to the general "Burkean" understanding of conservatism, which is predominant outside of the United States.

The anticommunists, finally, might have had the least ideological sophistication, they were actually able to capture the masses. At least until the Christian Right took over in the 1980s they constituted the grassroots of the initial conservative movement. The core idea was that "(a)ggressive policies on Communism abroad should be complemented by aggressive policies against Communists at home" (Regnery, 37). Interestingly, at the elite level, "many of the most effective anticommunists were former party members, fellow travelers, or undercover operatives"

(Regnery, 35); ranging from Whittaker Chambers, key witness before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (which launched the careers of both Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon), to Irving Kristol, the late godfather of neoconservatism.

Most authors consider the combination of key features of these three strands as the core of American conservatism; although, at times, recognizing their internal contradictions. Critchow and, particularly, Regnery credit William F. Buckley, Jr., and his highly influential journal *National Review*, with bringing the three groups together, both ideologically (through review editor Frank Meyer's "fusionism") and organizationally (by publishing authors from across the broad conservative specter). Because of his independence, Buckley was also crucial in keeping the conservative movement aligned with, but not fully dependent upon, the Republican Party.

Unlike many other authors, Regnery (26) implicitly recognizes the neoconservatives, although with a slight (dis)qualification: "(a) fourth camp, *in a sense*" (my italics). Although they also combine the key features of the other three strands—in essence, neoconservatism is a combination of economic liberalism, social traditionalism, and democratic interventionism—neoconservatives have always been met with reservation (and even outright hostility) by the larger conservative movement. In addition to prejudices because of their Jewish and Trotskyist roots and urban intellectualism, it is the first generation's support for a "conservative welfare state" (Irving Kristol), even at the expense of substantial budget deficits, and the second generation's belief in regime change that informs the suspicion towards these "big government conservatives" within the broader movement (e.g., Regnery, 156–57).

A fifth and final type, mentioned only in passing in the five books, are the paleoconservatives. Although paleo derives from the Greek word for ancient or old (*palaeo*), as they claim to subscribe to an original form of (American) conservatism, the term has become widely used only after Pat Buchanan's defection from the Republican Party and his subsequent presidential bid for the Reform Party in 2000. Unlike their nemesis, the neocons, the paleocons have (so far) not been able to build an important ideological or organization presence; journals like *The American Conservative* and think tanks like the Rockford Institute are marginal within the conservative movement, let alone outside of it. Although ideologically isolationist, paleoconservatives are the most internationally connected of all American conservatives. Their nativist struggle

against (Latino) immigration and Islam leads to connections with and support for European radical right parties (e.g., *Vlaams Belang*) and thinkers (e.g., Alain DeBenoist).

The Rise of American Conservatism

Donald T. Critchow is Professor of History at Saint Louis University and known for his biography of famed female Conservative activist, Phyllis Schlafly, who, not surprisingly, features prominently in this book too. Alfred S. Regnery is the second generation of a conservative publishing family; a former director of Regnery Publishing and current publisher of the conservative monthly *The American Spectator*. Despite their different positions, i.e., as scholar and activist respectively, they have written remarkably similar histories of the ascendance of American conservatism.

Both are sympathetic to the conservative movement, even if Critchow expresses it less directly and openly. Also, Regnery is more interested in the conservative movement as a whole, while Critchow focuses overwhelmingly on the GOP. The latter focuses on the double-edged struggle of the conservatives: first, against moderates within the Republican Party, and, only second, against liberals in the Democratic Party. Despite their clear sympathy for the “Right,” and their politicized inflation of the influence of the “Left,” both books are well documented and offer largely plausible accounts. Unfortunately, they are also highly descriptive and provide very little systematic analysis and empirical evidence for their claims (aside from some cherry-picked surveys).

Critchow sees the success of American postwar conservatism as a consequence of the emergence, in the 1950s, of right-wing intellectuals (from Friedrich Hayek and Ayn Rand to Russell Kirk and William F. Buckley, Jr.) and a popular grassroots anticommunist movement, and their slow but steady convergence in the next decades, culminating in the heydays of American conservatism: the Reagan “Revolution.” In this process the first generation of neoconservatives played a crucial role, by providing the intellectual power and institutional framework of a kind of “managerial conservatism” that legitimized conservatism at the highest intellectual and policy circles (Critchow, 105).

Both authors describe the wealth of (neo)conservative journals (e.g., *National Review* and *The Public*

Interest), think tanks (e.g., American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation), and funders (e.g., the Bradley and John M. Olin Foundations), while at the same time stressing their relative modest means compared to “liberal” counterparts (see, in particular, Regnery, Chapter 8). Similarly, they describe the crucial role of the Christian Right, and its many organizations (e.g., Religious Roundtable, Moral Majority) and personalities (e.g., Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson), who, enraged by liberal-induced “moral decay,” progressive laws (e.g., Equal Rights Amendment) and court rulings (e.g., *Roe v. Wade*), provided the foot soldiers and new electorate for the conservative ascendance. Of particular interest is their position on the so-called New Right of Paul Weyrich, whom they credit with the professionalization of conservative campaigning and with mobilizing the evangelical Christians for the conservative cause. Regnery also devotes a separate chapter to the importance of “the Law, the Courts, and the Constitution,” which highlights the “law and economics movement,” the Federalist Society, and Reagan’s true legacy, i.e. the reshaping of the courts “in a way not seen since the founding of the Republic” (250).

Critchow summarizes postwar American politics as follows: “Whereas Democrats held fast to their New Deal liberal and internationalist vision, Republicans represented the fears of white middle-class and religious voters through a political platform of low taxes, national defense, preservation of family values, regulation of social morality, and opposition to policies that affirmed racial, gender, or sexual preferences in the public sphere” (4). In essence, he argues that “(a)t different times the GOP Right tottered on complete defeat, only to be revived through political miscalculation on the part of its opponents or through good luck” (4). Roughly speaking, the political miscalculations were the Democrat’s alleged left-wing policies and pandering to (ethnic and radical) special interests, while the good luck remains a bit unclear—Carter’s “political ineptitude” (154), Ronald Reagan’s unique qualities?

Regnery’s account does not differ much, except for a (more) partisan position and a stronger emphasis on movement conservatism. For example, he devotes excessive space to singing the praise of “Bill” Buckley and his *National Review* as well as Barry Goldwater and his (ghost-authored) book *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960); about which Critchow somewhat dismissively writes that “it remains unclear whether Goldwater read any of the manuscript” (49). Regnery’s account of the anticommunist movement also differs somewhat from

Critchow, as he openly and unapologetically acknowledges the crucial role of radical right groups like the John Birch Society, without denying its anti-Semitic and conspiratorial ideology (see on this also Tanenhaus, 56 ff).

Notably, Regnery concludes that “although the John Birch Society is today usually dismissed as a right-wing fringe group with little impact, it in fact played a much greater part in the conservative movement than is generally held, having organized the grassroots nationally as never before” (80). In contrast, Critchow claims already in his introduction that “(p)ostwar American conservatives quickly distanced themselves from (. . .) anti-Semitic cranks” (Critchow, 7). At the same time, he does recognize that, despite some strategical denunciations by mainstream Republicans, “the John Birch Society remained a strong presence in the conservative movement” (Critchow, 59). He is able to square these two opposing views by taking some questionable positions, including the description of Robert Welch, the founder of the Birchers, as particularly sensitive to prejudices (Critchow, 32).

Crucial to all accounts of the rise of American conservatism is the realignment of the South beginning in the 1960s. Both Critchow and Regnery spend considerable time on this transformation, in which they see the Republican nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964 as “(t)he defining moment in the conservative movement” (Critchow, 285). In sharp contrast to recent scholarship, which emphasizes the crucial importance of race and racism in the “Southern Strategy” (e.g., Lowndes 2008), they argue that “economics, not race, won the South for the Republicans” (Critchow, 181). Oddly enough, segregationist Governor of Alabama George Wallace, a Southern Democrat who ran for president for the American Independent Party in 1968, is almost completely ignored by Regnery, while Critchow argues, without any empirical evidence, that “Wallace was not a bridge candidate for white voters in the South into the Republican Party” (181).² Not surprisingly, the accusation of racism is explicitly rejected, or better reduced to a liberal strategy to taint the Right, as the conservative opposition against segregation and civil rights legislation was “principled” and based on “opposition on constitutional grounds and conservative resistance to radical social change” (Critchow, 73).

²Interestingly, the importance of both race and Wallace are acknowledged by Tanenhaus, albeit implicitly.

At the same time, it is interesting to note how often Critchow uses terms like “anxiety” and “fear” to explain the success of (Republican) conservatives. The conservatives are able to profit from anxieties and fears over internal and external Communism, over moral decay, over race riots in the cities, etc. He implies that these anxieties and fears were logical and spontaneous reactions to the increasingly left-wing agenda of the Democratic Party. Even the possibility of conservative actors whipping up these anxieties and fears is not mentioned. Fear mongering is almost the exclusive quality of the “left” (read: the Democrats), to unfairly disqualify honest, God-fearing conservatives; with the exception of some radical right nuts, who are, of course, shunned by the conservatives.

While Regnery rightly noted that the Reagan years constituted both a conclusion and a beginning for conservatives, and that in the subsequent 25 years the movement “grew and gained influence previously unimagined by the Founders [sic]” (3), his analysis of post-Reagan conservatism is rather limited. Both books end their thorough description with Newt Gingrich and the “Contract for America” (1994), the completion of the South’s transformation from Dixiecrat to conservative Republican. The most recent fifteen years, which have been at least as relevant for American conservatism, are treated with less detail and insight.

The Neoconservative Era

Political journalist Jacob Heilbrunn, senior editor at the (formerly neo)conservative magazine *National Interest*, provides the most complete history of neo-conservatism to date, describing both the first and second generation. His premise is that “neoconservatism isn’t about ideology. (. . .) It is about a mindset, one that has been decisively shaped by the Jewish immigrant experience, by the Holocaust, and by the twentieth-century struggle against totalitarianism” (10). While explicitly rejecting anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of a neoconservative cabal, put forward by radicals of the left and right alike, he argues that “neoconservatism is in a decisive respect a Jewish phenomenon, reflecting a subset of Jewish concerns” (11).³

³This is certainly not without merit. Irving Kristol (1996) himself has argued that his Jewish faith was a key reason for the difference between (his) neoconservatism and British conservatism.

Despite the overemphasis on the Jewishness of the movement, and an excessive focus on details and individuals, Heilbrunn provides an at times fascinating history of this complex and oft misunderstood movement, structured on the basis of an ancient biblical narrative. In "Exodus" he chronicles in detail the Trotskyist origins of the first generation of neocons, a group of Jewish graduate students at City College of New York ("the poor man's Harvard"). In "Wilderness" he describes how the group of "liberals mugged by reality," as Irving Kristol's famous self-definition goes, grows more and more unhappy within the Democratic Party and, in the 1960s, increasingly emphasizes two positions: "a trenchant social and political critique of the Great Society and a vigorous, Israel-centered anticommunist foreign policy" (69). In "Redemption" he details how most neocons make the long-prepared move into the Republican Party under Reagan. Heilbrunn labels them, somewhat dismissively, "the court theologians of the right" (165) and "Reagan's intellectual shock troops" (168). But while Reagan implemented various neoconservative policies (notably supply-side economics), he appointed very few neocons to important positions. In the end, most neoconservatives would grow increasingly critical of and disappointed with Reagan.

After a short stint outside the halls of power, which is mistaken for the death of neoconservatism by friends and foes alike, a second generation of neoconservatives emerges in the 1990s, to a large extent the sons of the first generation, who had served in the second tier of the Reagan administration. This second generation is from the beginning openly partisan and party political, despite its problematic relationship with much of the elite of both the conservative movement and the Republican Party (particularly under George H. W. Bush). Moreover, "(t)he skepticism and sense of detachment that characterized the elder Kristol were absent from the younger generation" (226). Somewhat counterintuitively, Heilbrunn discusses the George W. Bush administration under the heading "Return to Exile." He subscribes to the now mainstream view that the second generation of neoconservatives was at the right place at the right time, i.e., that 9/11 propelled them, with key support of vice-president Dick Cheney, from the margins into the center of the Bush administration. Not unlike Fukuyama, he claims that "(t)he longer his presidency went on, the more of a neoconservative Bush became—and the less power the neoconservatives themselves exercised directly" (267).

Heilbrunn's picture of the neoconservatives is one of an arrogant, incestuous, insular, traumatized,

yet "well-oiled family enterprise" (274), built around two Jewish dynasties, the Kristol and the Podhoretz families. He explains their political success as a consequence of a "peculiar mixture of prophetic bravado and savvy street-fighting skills" (70). While the book provides important new insights, it is badly structured and too simplistic in its argumentation. Causation is by and large assumed as a consequence of personal connections.

Former neoconservative scholar Francis Fukuyama's book is part attack on his former colleagues and ideology, without much self-criticism, and part call for a virtually identical program. He sees (second generation) neoconservatism as one of four approaches to American foreign policy, built upon concepts such as "regime change, benevolent hegemony, unipolarity, preemption, and American exceptionalism" (3). His main critique is that the neocons made three key mistakes with regard to Iraq: (1) exaggeration of the threat; (2) underestimation of international opposition to American hegemony; and (3) underestimation of the difficulty of building democracy in the Middle East.

Despite his critique of the second generation neocons "Fukuyama is trying to rescue neoconservatism from the neoconservatives" (Heilbrunn, 273). Fukuyama has concluded that "Neoconservatism has now become irreversibly identified with the policies of the administration of George W. Bush in its first term, and any effort to reclaim the label at this point is likely to be futile" (xxxi). Hence, he no longer defends neoconservatism, but "realistic Wilsonianism." In reality, the two differ mainly in means, not in goals. Fukuyama himself acknowledges as much: "Realistic Wilsonianism differs from neoconservatism (...) insofar as it takes international institutions serious" (10). He labels this rather awkwardly as "multi-multilateralism," i.e., "a world populated by a large number of overlapping and sometimes competitive international institutions" (158). However, this multi-multilateralism should mainly allow the United States more opportunities for international recognition by choosing to collaborate with those international institutions that support its policies. I seriously doubt Bill Kristol or Robert Kagan would disagree.

The End of American Conservatism?

At least since the end of the Bush presidency a broad variety of commentators have proclaimed the end of

neoconservatism. The mainstream thesis holds that the highly unpopular war in Iraq has shown that neoconservatism never had a popular base, invoking various degrees of conspiracy theories about their influence within the Bush administration, and has tainted neoconservatism forever. While these kinds of analyses were to be expected from the many ideological foes, on both the left and right (paleocons in particular), they have come from deep within the movement itself. One of the most prominent neocons, Richard Perle, the “Prince of Darkness” many have identified as one of the key instigators of the Iraq War, denied the very existence of neoconservatism in a bizarre interview with *Vanity Fair*.

While the end of neoconservatism seems received wisdom in the Obama era, reformed neoconservative Sam Tanenhaus goes even one (big) step further. His proclamation that “Conservatism is Dead,” in *The New Republic* (18 February 2009), caused quite a stir among (internet) conservatives. Hence, several months later he declares roughly the same in a well-marketed book/pamphlet entitled *The Death of Conservatism*. Unfortunately, Tanenhaus uses the extra space of the booklet mainly to restate his position over and over again, rather than substantiating it with empirical or even just logical evidence. His main thesis that “movement conservatism is not simply in retreat; it is outmoded” (4) is not really an empirical claim, but rather a normative one. A more accurate title for his pamphlet would therefore be “The Death of My Conservatism.” Although it is not always clear what Tanenhaus’ preferred strand of conservatism is, he seems to move between early neoconservatism (before Irving Kristol betrayed it by embracing the market) and Disreality’s pragmatic “conservatism” (which, in essence, was devoid of any particular value except of pleasing the people). What is clear is that Tanenhaus despises most American conservatives with at least as much fervor as many on the left, though his rejection is at least as much personal as it is ideological.

That conservatism is not really dead can be observed at all levels. If the first months under Obama showed anything, it was the enduring power of conservatives within the GOP. Think only of the stand-off between GOP chairman Michael Steele and conservative talk radio king Rush Limbaugh, which led to a humiliating public apology of the former. In fact, despite all obituaries, not even neoconservatism is dead. Various neocons served in campaign teams of leading Republican presidential candidates in 2008, and they still feature daily as commentators on *Fox News* (e.g., Bill Kristol and Charles Krauthammer) and in other mainstream media (e.g., *Wall Street*

Journal). They have merely retreated to their well-funded magazines (e.g., *The Weekly Standard*) and think tanks (e.g., American Enterprise Institute, Manhattan Institute), similar to the 1990s, when they were also declared dead by in- and outsiders. At best, they have dropped the term neoconservatism, understanding that it is still stained by the Iraq War. That said, their ideas have changed little (see Fukuyama).

As neoconservatives retreated to their plush seats in the shadows of power, other conservatives hit the streets with a vengeance. While there certainly is an elite-led organized element to the Tea Party and Town Hall movement(s), such as FreedomWorks (led by former Republican House Majority leader Dick Armey) and *Fox News Channel* (notably Glenn Beck), there is no denying its strong grassroots support. In fact, in many ways the movement resembles the initial Christian Right.

However, this movement is much less centrally organized and, thus, controlled than previous conservative grassroots groups. While it is vehemently anti-Democrat, it is only loosely aligned to the GOP. And though its calls for small government might overlap with the current priorities of the moderate conservative GOP leadership, the movement’s strong underlying currents of nativism and isolationism are much closer to the paleoconservatives. And, as Pat Buchanan has showed, paleocons have a very tenuous relationship to mainstream conservatism, and are not afraid to mobilize outside of the GOP.

In short, American conservatism is far from dead. In fact, it is very much alive and increasingly kicking. Surveys show widespread support for key conservative positions, while extraparliamentary politics are completely dominated by conservatives. However, while the neoconservatives dominated the first decade of the twenty-first century, no strand is truly predominant within the larger movement today. Most likely, the second decade of this century will bring an increasingly heated struggle between the moderate conservatism of the GOP (leadership) and the paleoconservatism of the grassroots movement.

The Academic Study of American Conservatism

This review article was intended to discuss only contemporary neoconservatism, but was broadened because of a lack of academic scholarship. It is odd that one of the most debated issues in American politics is hardly studied by American political

scientists. In fact, the broader political ascendance of American conservatism has been studied almost exclusively by historians (e.g., Phillips-Fein 2009), and not by political scientists. This is in part a reflection of broader blind spots in political science research. I'll finish this article by suggesting some routes for the further study of American conservatism.

First, political science has a tendency to treat political parties as unitary actors. This is particularly problematic in two party systems, where political parties tend to be more like broad coalitions spreading one whole side of the political specter. Hence, there should be more work which looks at internal party struggle (e.g., between *Fundis* and *Realos*), and more scholars should pay attention to the insights from that work.

Second, and related, parties are part of a wider civil society, which they influence and that influences them. The relationship between party factions and broader movements, such as movement conservatism, is crucial in understanding the internal power struggle of political parties. Here, the literature on (new) social movements could provide important insights, despite its blind eye for right-wing movements. So far, political scientists have predominantly focused on the Christian Right, which is but a part of the broader conservative movement.

Third, at least since Daniel Bell's famous "end of ideology" argument in the 1960s, political scientists have shown little interest in the role of ideology. Politics is supposed to be a pragmatic (even opportunistic) struggle between various factions (including lobbyists) with different material interests. Political power is based upon money or votes. Clearly, this is not always true. The neoconservatives had relatively little of either, yet have had a phenomenal impact on postwar American politics. To study their Gramscian struggle for hegemony insights from political theory

should be integrated into the empirical study of American politics.

The rise of the Right is one of the most significant developments in recent American politics. So far, political scientists have studied this development only sparsely and vaguely. Let's hope future research will go beyond economic and social determinisms, and explain the central role of American conservatism in contemporary politics through a mix of established and innovative concepts and theories that do justice to the complexities of politics and the public relevance of our discipline.

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