



Conservatives' history problem: Why they're doomed by their own "Golden Age"

Compare the heydays of progressives and conservatives -- and it's clear which one fared better for Americans

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"He who controls the past, controls the future," George Orwell wrote in 1984. One of the greatest weapons in the arsenal of a political movement is what the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks called "a usable past" and what the historian William McNeill calls "mythistory." The most potent political narrative in any country on earth goes something like this: "The past was a glorious Golden Age, and the present is dismal. Follow us, and we will create a future as glorious as the Golden Age in the past!"

Until recently, neither the center-left nor the center-right in American politics had agreed-upon historical narratives. But recently each movement has moved toward a greater consensus in its view of America's past, present and future.

The center-left consensus today holds that the New Deal era of the 1930s through the 1970s, and perhaps its Progressive Era prelude, constituted the Golden Age. The present dismal Bronze or Iron Age began with Ronald Reagan in 1980—or, more accurately, in 1976 with Jimmy Carter elected as the first of three weak, center-right Democratic presidents—Carter, Clinton and Obama—who have followed the last liberal president, Lyndon Johnson. The Glorious Future, according to the emergent progressive consensus, will take the form of a "new New Deal" which, by some combination of policies, will check or reverse growing inequality and plutocracy, in the spirit of the New Deal and its echo, the Great Society.

This new center-left historical consensus marks the defeat of the alternate historical visions of both New Left radicals and New Democrat neoliberals.

New Left historians like the late Martin J. Sklar denounced the Progressive-Liberal tradition of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson as "corporate liberalism"—a diversion and a substitute from what America really needed, some vague kind of democratic socialism. You don't hear many progressives, outside of cloistered campuses, denouncing FDR and LBJ nowadays as pawns of the capitalist class. After a generation of corporate conservatism, the supposed "corporate liberal" era looks relatively good in hindsight.

The neoliberal New Democrats have also lost the history wars. Coming of age in the period of conservative ascendancy from the 1970s to the 2000s, they tried to distance themselves from “big government liberalism” in several ways. To begin with, they dropped the term “liberal” for the old-timey term “progressive,” which had no negative connotations because nobody was quite sure what it meant. Neoliberal Democrats succeeded in replacing “liberal” with “progressive”—only to see the term identified with the Democratic rivals and competitors to their left, rather than their brand of centrism.

The New Democrats also tried to downplay the importance of the two greatest liberal Democratic presidents, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, whom the Reagan right vilified as the architects of “big government.” Dethroning Roosevelt and Johnson, neoliberals elevated the lesser Democratic figures Woodrow Wilson, whose “New Freedom” was more conservative than FDR’s New Deal and LBJ’s Great Society.

In foreign policy, the New Democrats of the late 20th century understandably avoided identifying with Lyndon Johnson, who is associated with failure in Vietnam. But instead of identifying with Franklin Roosevelt, who guided the United Nations to victory in World War II, they revived his vice-president Harry Truman, whose early Cold War resoluteness and support for Israel endeared him to liberal hawks, like those of the Truman National Security Project. Another second-tier president of the New Deal era, John F. Kennedy, set the precedent not in policy but in persona for Democratic presidential candidates from Gary Hart to Barack Obama—relatively young, dynamic, and Ivy League-educated.

Like the New Left, the New Democrats failed to dislodge FDR and LBJ from their central positions in the progressive pantheon. Johnson’s legacy will always be marred by the Vietnam disaster. But to millennial progressives, whose hero Barack Obama has started two undeclared “wars of choice” in Libya and Syria and assassinated hundreds of terrorist suspects without a trial by means of missiles, the misleading Gulf of Tonkin Resolution may not seem like as big a deal. At least Congress voted for Johnson’s escalation in Vietnam, unlike Obama’s undeclared wars in Libya and Syria. Furthermore, the half-century anniversary of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act have rehabilitated LBJ’s reputation among twenty-first century progressives. Like his mentor Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson towers over other leaders of the American center-left, past and present.

A similar move toward a new consensus about American history seems to be taking place on the American right. The new right-wing historical consensus illustrates the growing intellectual homogeneity of the movement.

As recently as the 1990s, the American right was divided among neoconservatives, theoconservatives, paleoconservatives, Straussians and libertarians. Each subculture within the right had its own distinct theory of history, including a theory of the date at which American history took a wrong turn.

Neoconservatives (I was one, until the early 1990s) began as New Deal/Great Society liberals who were alienated by the New Left's rejection of the Cold War liberal containment strategy and its utopian radicalism. The first-wave neocons accepted and endorsed the New Deal and the Civil Rights revolutions; for them, American history took a wrong turn with the campus radicalism of the late Sixties.

Shorter neocon history: Yay 1932! Yay 1964! Boo 1968!

This kind of neoconservatism died in the mid-1990s. The second-wave neocons like Robert and Donald Kagan and Irving Kristol's son Bill, editor of the Rupert Murdoch magazine *The Weekly Standard*, abandoned or downplayed domestic liberalism and specialized in promoting a post-Cold War American empire. The mutation of what had been Cold War liberalism into perpetual warmongering helped to drive me (and other former neoconservatives including Francis Fukuyama and Mark Lilla) out of the right altogether. Neocon militarists still have some influence in the GOP, but after the bloody failures in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, the right is likely to be more hawkish in rhetoric than in practice.

At the other extreme from the neoconservatives were those whom Jacob Heilbrunn called the theoconservatives or "theocons" of the religious right. Most theocons argued that the Founders intended to establish a "Christian" or "Judeo-Christian nation." But an even more extreme minority of neo-Calvinist "reconstructionists" argued that America went downhill after Cotton Mather. The Enlightenment was really the "Endarkenment" and Thomas Jefferson was an infidel whose ideal of separation of church and state was an abomination. The Reverend Pat Robertson, whose conspiracy theories I exposed in [the New York Review of Books in 1995](#), claimed that Freemasons and Illuminati and international bankers were manipulating American foreign policy on behalf of Satan. (After two decades of U.S. foreign policy fiascos, I wonder whether I was too quick to dismiss this theory).

Many mainstream conservative politicians and intellectuals disgraced themselves by opportunistically kow-towing to crackpot preachers with mass followings like Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell for a couple of decades. But their ideas never had an audience outside of evangelical Protestantism. The religious right went has gone into steep decline in this century, as younger generations of Americans become more socially liberal and secular.

The paleoconservatives in the 1980s and 1990s tended to be apologists for the Old South like the late historian M. E. "Mel" Bradford, whom the neoconservative Bill Bennett displaced as Reagan's choice to head the National Endowment for the Humanities. For many paleocons, the date at which American history took a wrong turn was 1865. It was the bloodthirsty tyrant Abraham Lincoln, not Woodrow Wilson or Franklin Roosevelt, who destroyed the Constitution, crushed the Old Republic and fastened big government on the American body politic.

Shorter paleocon history: Yay 1776! Boo 1865!

Like theoconservatism, paleoconservatism is all but extinct as an intellectual force, though some of its elderly votaries still have sway in some Republican primaries. The decline of neoconservatism, theoconservatism and paleoconservatism has left Straussianism and libertarianism as the most influential intellectual currents on the American right.

Straussians are disciples of the German émigré philosopher Leo Strauss, who taught that modern “natural rights” theory represented a break with ancient and medieval “natural law” philosophy. Because the American republic was founded on natural rights, attitudes toward the American founding among Straussians depend on whether they think the replacement of natural law by natural right was progress or not. “East Coast Straussians” tend to be equivocal about modernity, the Enlightenment and the American Founding, while “West Coast Straussians” embrace all three. There is some overlap among Straussians and neocons, but equating them is a mistake.

The intellectual leader of the West Coast Straussians was Harry Jaffa, author of “Crisis of the House Divided” (1959), who died in January of this year. Jaffa argued against pro-Confederate paleocons that the American right should embrace the figure of Lincoln. In Jaffa’s account Lincoln vindicated the timeless and true natural rights ideals of the American Founding against Southerners who repudiated natural rights in order to defend slavery.

Jaffa seems to have won the debate on the right. Rich Lowry, the editor of National Review, has recently published a book in which he attempts to draft Lincoln for conservatism. And in 2001 David Boaz, vice-president of the libertarian Cato Institute, in an essay entitled “**Don’t Put Slavery in the Flag,**” argued that the South’s institution of chattel slavery was a greater offense to freedom than the North’s high tariffs. This thesis was and is controversial among libertarians.

The Straussians also have shaped the contemporary right’s views of the twentieth century. While Lincoln is in, Theodore Roosevelt, candidate of the Progressive Party for president in 1912, is out. Straussian scholars, many of them associated with the conservative Claremont Institute, have argued that both TR and Woodrow Wilson betrayed the ideals of the American Founding in favor of historicist and relativist philosophies imported from Bismarck’s Germany. Glenn Beck helped to transmit this theory from the classrooms to the chat rooms.

According to the new conservative consensus, the Founders and Lincoln are heroes of “constitutional conservatism.” The ideals of the American Founding and Lincoln’s second Founding, having earlier been betrayed by proslavery Southerners, were betrayed again by Republican and Democratic Progressives alike. American history took a wrong turn with the election of 1912, in which a majority of Americans voted for one of two progressive candidates, Roosevelt and Wilson.

Shorter Straussian history: Yay 1776! Yay 1865! Boo 1912!

As “usable pasts” go, the new conservative history is commendably simple, coherent and straightforward. But as an ex-conservative known for kindly, constructive criticism of the right, I feel obliged to point out a major weakness.

If your theory as a conservative is that everything after the Progressive Era and the New Deal has been a disaster, and you don’t want to idealize the Old South, then you are stuck with making the period from 1865 to 1912 your glorious past. In other words, the Golden Age was the Gilded Age.

It’s not impossible to rehabilitate some of the so-called “robber barons” of the “Gilded Age” (a phrase taken from a satirical novel by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner). **I have tried to do so myself**. For all their unscrupulous business deals and hostility to unions, the Rockefellers and Carnegies and Morgans were far more enlightened and contributed more to America than the Southern slaveowners who dominated American politics most of the time from the Founding to the Civil War. Indeed, by the standards of the modern right, J.P. Morgan—who supported TR and then Wilson, and favored arbitration of disputes between business and labor—was practically a liberal.

Franklin Roosevelt, in his 1932 **address to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco**, drafted in part by Adolf Berle, argued that, while the time for major reforms had come, the earlier robber barons had done more good than harm:

So manifest were the advantages of the machine age, however, that the United States fearlessly, cheerfully, and, I think, rightly, accepted the bitter with the sweet. It was thought that no price was too high to pay for the advantages which we could draw from a finished industrial system. The history of the last half century is accordingly in large measure a history of a group of financial Titans, whose methods were not scrutinized with too much care, and who were honored in proportion as they produced the results, irrespective of the means they used. The financiers who pushed the railroads to the Pacific were always ruthless, we have them today. It has been estimated that the American investor paid for the American railway system more than three times over in the process; but despite that fact the net advantage was to the United States. As long as we had free land; as long as population was growing by leaps and bounds; as long as our industrial plants were insufficient to supply our needs, society chose to give the ambitious man free play and unlimited reward provided only that he produced the economic plant so much desired.

Here is the problem with the new conservative consensus history: there’s a mismatch between today’s conservative ideology and their new Golden Age of post-Civil War, pre-Progressive America.

Today’s right denounces “crony capitalism.” The Republicans of that era exemplified it. They may have been pro-business and anti-union but they were not free-market libertarians. The

government subsidized the railroads with land grants and other bounties and protected American industries with high tariffs.

Today's conservatives prefer state and local government to the federal government. But in the Gilded Age, in the name of "substantive due process" the federal courts struck down state and local economic regulations on behalf of national corporations.

Today's right favors efforts to restrict the right to vote and generally opposes federal civil rights laws. But many late 19th century Republicans favored federal legislation to enforce the right to of Southern blacks to vote.

Contemporary conservatives want to dismantle the post-New Deal welfare state, by privatizing Social Security and turning Medicare and Medicaid into state-based voucher programs. Gilded Age Republicans presided over the first great federal welfare program, the pension for Civil War veterans and their families, and made it progressively more generous over time.

Last but not least, today's Republican Party is made up disproportionately of white Southerners—that is, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of people who thought that the period of 1865-1912, the very era now adopted as the Golden Age of the American Right, was a nightmare of semi-colonial exploitation of the South by Yankee carpetbaggers and industrialists and Wall Street financiers.

There is a pretty poor fit, then, if not a total mismatch, between the Right's Gilded Age Golden Age and the values and constituents of today's conservatives.

All is not lost, however. In a spirit of constructive criticism, may I suggest to the ideologues of the right that they embrace, as their official Golden Age, not the Gilded Age North but the "New South" between Reconstruction and the Progressive Era.

Unlike the North between Lincoln and Wilson, the South of that era provides many parallels with today's American right:

In the New South, politicians generally favored free trade in the interest of agricultural and raw material exports, not federal policies to protect and promote American industry. Check.

In the New South, as in the Old South, local elites defended states' rights against federal authority. Check.

In the New South, political and economic elites sought to use voting rules to disfranchise blacks and many low-income whites. Check.

In the New South, state governments blocked unionization and kept state and local welfare systems miserly. Check.

In the New South, state governments lured out-of-state corporations with a mix of cheap, non-union labor, low taxes and sometimes subsidies. Check.

Problem solved. Let 21st century American progressives tout their Golden Age between Woodrow Wilson and Lyndon Johnson. Conservatives can try to inspire the American people with their alternative ideal: Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia and Texas, between Reconstruction and World War I. We'll see whose Golden Age has more appeal.