The American Conservative

Twilight of the Right

When conservatism became a movement, it lost its soul.

By Alan Pell Crawford
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It is the night of August 15, 1973. I'm at Washington's Sheraton-Park Hotel, now the Marriott-Wardman. The occasion is the annual convention of Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), formed 12 years earlier by, among others, William F. Buckley Jr. While nearly 1,000 YAFers are elsewhere in the building, I, by special invitation, am at a reception hosted by R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr. Tyrrell—who had been kind enough to help me land an internship that summer at the right-wing weekly *Human Events*—was then the dashing editor of *The Alternative*, a magazine for undergraduates with Tory sensibilities.

The Alternative in time was renamed *The American Spectator*, and as Tyrrell became more enmeshed in conservative-movement politics, it would move uptown to the Washington, D.C. suburbs. But back then, *The Alternative* was edited in a farmhouse outside Bloomington, Indiana, home to Indiana University. It was at Indiana, as an undergraduate who had consumed a heady concoction of two parts Mencken and one part Edmund Burke, that I became an occasional contributor to *The Alternative*. Its publisher, the man we called "Baron" Von Kannon, is now a vice president at the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing think tank established that same year.

Deciding it was important for *The Alternative* to "make a strong showing" at the YAF convention, Tyrrell had taken it upon himself to pay my YAF dues. Then he dunned me for reimbursement. At the time, I considered this a gross imposition, but I was soon glad he did it. By attending I get my first glimpse of the great Buckley himself, and for a kid from a 50-acre farm in southern Illinois, this is some thrill.

There is free beer in Tyrrell's "hospitality suite," and the required atmosphere of Menckenesque bonhomie. There is also, amid the boozy geniality, a sense that we are watching the newsreel of history flicker before us. Richard Nixon, up to his beady eyeballs in Watergate, is to deliver his second televised address on the subject. Tyrrell turns on the TV, and we watch as our president squirms through another futile defense. No matter how much movement conservatives disapproved of Nixon on other grounds—China, wage and price controls, revenue sharing, the

Family Assistance Plan, etc.—Watergate was one thing they liked. M. Stanton Evans, a long-time advisor to YAF and a mainstay at their conventions, put it this way: "If I'd known he'd been up to all that stuff, I'd have been for Nixon all along."

While Nixon accepts "full responsibility" for his underlings' misdeeds, Tyrrell provides color commentary. Nixon's nose, Tyrrell says, doing his best W.C. Fields, "looks like a penis." We all chortle politely.

I have one other vivid memory of that night, which suggests I was a witness to history in another way. Sitting wide-eyed at Tyrrell's feet is a scrawny Harvard undergraduate. This, I am told, is "Billy" Kristol, real-life son of the actual editor of *The Public Interest*. Although I had never been able to finish reading an article in *The Public Interest*, I had heard of Irving Kristol, and this encounter left me deeply moved. This was clearly the correct response, as I would discover when I read Tyrrell's 2010 book, *After the Hangover: The Conservatives' Road to Recovery*. Irving Kristol might have made scholarly contributions to our nation's understanding of itself, Tyrrell wrote, but the speedy Kristol *fils* "got to conservatism first." Poor Irving remained hopelessly mired in drab neoconservatism, but "even as a boy," the future editor of the *Weekly Standard* was "pretty much a movement conservative, exuberantly to the right of his father."

Buckley, Evans, Tyrrell, Kristol: it was my great good fortune, I now realize, to be getting a glimpse of American conservatism's past, present, and future. And this was on the high end of things. That night, and in many days and nights to come, I would be, as we would say at that old farmhouse in Indiana, "among the intellectualoids."

But this was only the beginning. I would soon be getting an up-close-and-personal look at another aspect of the "conservative movement" as it was taking form. This was its machinery—its fundraisers, lobby groups, political action committees, campaign managers, and propagandists. These were the people who "put it down where the hogs can get to it," as one of them said when explaining what he did, and they were good at it.

Stan Evans in 1977 started the National Journalism Center (NJC), which has since become a project of Young America's Foundation. Young America's Foundation was itself an offshoot of Young Americans for Freedom and is today presided over by Ron Robinson, whom I worked with back when I briefly edited *The New Guard*, YAF's magazine.

There was Morton Blackwell, whose Leadership Institute, established in 1979, "has trained more than 128,000" young conservative activists. David Keene, a national chairman of YAF and the American Conservative Union, eventually became president of the National Rifle Association. Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform in those days roomed on Capitol Hill with one of my close friends. Terry Dolan was a founder the National Conservative Political Action (NCPAC) in whose office was a plaque that read, "SUE THE BASTARDS." Terry died in 1986 of complications from AIDS.

Then there was Richard Viguerie. He's the genius who figured out how to raise millions of dollars by writing scary letters to total strangers. Viguerie, who had also worked for YAF, was a Texan whose political commitment, as he once explained, was "cemented by Joe McCarthy."

Viguerie's letters were screams of panic that would turn Chicken Little green with envy. His copywriters wrote the way Glenn Beck talks, and the hysterical tone of Viguerie fundraising appeals is now heard everywhere, on talk radio and cable TV and in Congress, even. Viguerie was that rare case—a reactionary who was ahead of his time.

When I first came to Washington, you could cram all self-identified movement conservatives into one Capitol Hill townhouse. This was frequently done, in fact, on the nights of the 1976 presidential primaries when Ronald Reagan was challenging Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination. Before long, thanks to understandable discontent with Jimmy Carter's presidency, Viguerie was raising pots of money, conservative groups were springing up all over town, and you'd need a ballroom just to hold all the right's clerk typists. Almost overnight, Washington was crawling with these eager beavers, and they were changing not only the nature of American conservatism but the face of American politics.

Present at the creation, sort of, I wrote a book about what I was seeing, called *Thunder on the Right: The 'New Right' and the Politics of Resentment*, published in 1980. After the book came out, Reagan won the White House and five Democratic senators targeted by NCPAC and other New Right groups—including George McGovern and Birch Bayh—were defeated. The upstart who beat Bayh was Dan Quayle. I had worked for him when he was still in the House.

The sudden emergence of New Right came as something of a shock, and people who wanted to understand it found *Thunder on the Right* helpful. In that way, it was a success. I never regarded it as such because my hopes for it—admittedly grandiose—were not other peoples'. I foolishly expected other conservatives to read what I had written, stroke their chins in a meditative way, accept my critical assessment and proceed to clean out their stables.

Thirty-plus years later, it is beginning to dawn on me that I just might have been mistaken.

Maybe it started with an early interest in the Scopes Trial and a nagging sense that there just might be another side to that story. I had gobbled up H.L. Mencken's coverage of that signal event in American liberal mythology, and my reaction bordered on the schizophrenic. I was captivated by Mencken's libertarian spirit and bouncy prose but also deeply troubled by the man's contempt for the "booboisie."

For some reason, I had a sense that ordinary men and women living quiet, decent, and productive lives were not simply the Great Unwashed. Maybe, it occurred to me, the real fools were those "discontented men of quality," in Edmund Burke's words, who, "puffed up with personal pride and arrogance," disdained their less enlightened neighbors. By the time I'd gone to college in the early 1970s, Burke's seemed a fair description of the way campus radicals regarded the George Babbitts and Archie Bunkers back home who were paying for their ungrateful children's educations.

So I gravitated to others who felt somewhat as I did. This meant the rowdies around *The Alternative*, a.k.a *The American Spectator*—Neil Howe, Tyrrell, Von Kannon, and Ron Burr—

but not many others. If there had been enough of us to form a YAF chapter, they probably would have done so. Maybe they did, but as my interests were more journalistic than political, I didn't know about it.

I had become aware of Buckley earlier, back in 1968, when he debated Gore Vidal during the party conventions. So I knew there was such a thing as conservatism, and that it challenged the conventional wisdom of the day. I read and enjoyed Russell Kirk, realized early on that Ayn Rand was impenetrable, and discovered that John Randolph of Roanoke can exert a creepy allure.

Those were the characters that spoke to me—writers and orators, not workaday politicians, important as they are. Randolph, Disraeli, and Churchill were interesting as transmitters of "the permanent things," in Kirk's words, not as promoters of specific policies. If, as I believe, conservatism is a sensibility and a temperament, and not a program, it cannot be reduced to economics, foreign policy or social "issues." So, meaning no disrespect to Barry Goldwater or his followers, I moved to Washington in 1973 to observe our politicians and write about them, not devote my professional life to the furtherance of their ambitions. I had no interest in becoming a "spokesman" for someone's idea of a "movement," and I wasn't any good at it on the occasions that I tried.

What the conservative movement would become over the next three decades might surprise people who spent decades promoting it and deriving their livelihoods from it, but it seems perfectly predictable to me. A few months back Bruce Bartlett, whom I came to know in the 1970s, recalled his own experiences. Bartlett had worked for Ron Paul (as did I, a little later), Jack Kemp, Heritage, the Cato Institute, the National Center for Policy Analysis, and President George H.W. Bush.

"For more than 30 years," Bartlett wrote, "I was very comfortable within the conservative wing of the Republican Party." It wasn't until the presidency of George II that Bartlett "developed an uneasy feeling" about that administration's direction. Shocked by Bush's economic policies, Bartlett was even more astounded by the movement's support for them. He was "flabbergasted" by "how closed the right-wing mind had become." Movement conservatives "lived in their own bubble where nonsensical ideas circulated with no contradiction."

For a certain kind of person, the conservative movement can function as a kind of labor union or tenured professoriate. It offers job security, provided you don't ask too many questions. Maybe I was never "comfortable" in the movement because I was always bit of a malcontent. I bounced around a bit in those days, sometimes by my own choice and sometimes by my employers'. I worked for Viguerie's defunct *Conservative Digest*, for YAF, for Sen. James Buckley, for Quayle and for Paul. But I wrote for *National Review* and the *Nation* at the same time and never found that odd. I befriended Peter Viereck and Nicholas von Hoffman alike.

Finally, I wrote *Thunder on the Right*. In it I "named names." This, I now realize, was an act of breathtaking indiscretion, inconceivable in someone with the slightest sense of personal loyalty or even mature judgment. I torched the few rickety bridges over which, on moonless nights, I

was still allowed to tiptoe. I won't complain that people no longer invited them to my parties—I can hardly blame them.

Still and all, it had to be done. "Every great cause," Tyrrell quotes Eric Hoffer in *After the Hangover*, "begins as a movement, becomes a business, and eventually degenerates into a racket." The conservative movement underwent this transmogrification with blazing speed. Maybe it had been something admirable when Buckley, Kirk, Willmoore Kendall, and others, informed by such minds as Friedrich Hayek and Richard Weaver, were formulating a much needed response to the Great Society liberalism of the 1960s. But by the late 1970s, the organizations formed to translate this critique into politics were being hijacked by a posse of faux populists with only the most passing interest in the more humane, attractive, and civilizing features of conservatism.

Whether conservatism can or should ever be a "movement" is open to question. But there was no doubt in my mind that political operatives whose abiding concerns were personal advancement and financial gain were taking the controls. These were not their only attributes, of course. They also had a taste, or at least high tolerance, for political infighting, which they would put to effective use. Someone needed to say something, and no one else would.

Almost nothing I wrote then seems unduly harsh today, though I wish I had treated some individuals with greater kindness, gratitude, and generosity. I do believe I was very much mistaken in one particular. In making my case, I distinguished between the emergent New Right, (a term of theirs, not mine) and a "responsible" remnant of Old Right conservatism. By Old Right, I meant conservatives who actually sought to conserve—who brought to their politics a reverence for the institutions of government they had inherited, who cared about means as well as ends, who fought hard for their beliefs but fought fairly.

My kind of conservatives, at least as they existed in my fantasies, provided responsible guidance to their constituents. When their constituents were aggrieved, they sought reforms that held some promise of relieving their distress. The conservatives I conjured up would respect the people who looked to them for leadership; they would not pounce on fears and anxieties just to inflame them. They would treat their political opponents, likewise, with respect and even forbearance. Being conservatives, they realized that impatience in politics was a vice, not a virtue. Leaders like this, of course, are rare, but Robert A. Taft seemed to fit the bill. With the research arm of a think tank behind me, I'm sure I could find a few others—but not many. By the mid-1970, the "movement" seemed bereft of such worthies, and the few who still gave lip service to Burke and Kirk also sneered at Viereck and took their cues, politically, from Joe McCarthy.

The New Right operatives were simply more impatient than those who were running some of the organizations they wished to commandeer, and my belief that there existed an Old Right to offer resistance proved wishful thinking. By the 1980s, as would become apparent, the few who had ever grumbled about the New Right's crude tactics were keeping their comments to themselves. Reagan was president, conservatives had White House jobs, and money was pouring in from more established sources than upstart direct-mail houses. The movement's lobby firms, polling

organizations, propaganda mills and broadcast outlets rivaled those of the GOP itself or merged with it. Ambitious people who enjoyed unimagined access to power discovered they could make sizeable sums as influence peddlers. They could do so, moreover, while telling themselves they were advancing the cause of individual liberty, free enterprise, national defense, traditional marriage, etc., etc.

The generation of conservatives who came to Washington in the years after *Thunder on the Right* eagerly seized the career opportunities dangled before them. They were only human. Insiders when Reagan and Bush the First were in power, they became happy outsiders as soon as Bill Clinton arrived. For the first time in years, right-wingers could position themselves as a "conquering army of righteousness" (Robert Nisbet's phrase) out to depose a decadent political establishment. During this period, conservatives played their parts enthusiastically, if not always well. They deserve high marks just for managing to keep up this pose as the Abramoff blister burst and Bill Bennett was unmasked as a high-stakes gambler on the Vegas strip. (Note to self: In any new edition of *Thunder on the Right*, devote entire chapter to "virtue" as a business.)

Long years in official Washington render careerists complacent and therefore vulnerable. This explains why they were so caught off-guard by the only really interesting political developments to take place in the Republican Party since Reagan himself joshed his way onto the scene. One was the rise of the Tea Party, which resembles in many ways the New Right of the 1970s, except it seems a more genuinely bottom-up rebellion.

The strong resemblance—the ginned-up sense of resentment and grievance, coupled with a lack of any examined program—explains why the GOP's accommodation with it seems to have been accomplished with relative ease. Because both sides operate on the assumption that the most extreme statement represents the most principled position and there can be no enemy to the right, the accommodation is simple, if ultimately suicidal for the GOP. The Republican Party simply escalates its rhetoric to match that of the Tea Party and absorbs its politicians into its leadership. It might not be smart politics in the long term or prudent public policy, but it's great for fundraising.

The second challenge is more difficult. That is the strong support, mostly from young voters, for Ron Paul and now Rand Paul in their dissent from conservative orthodoxy on foreign interventionism and civil liberties. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1990, there was talk that the fragile "Reagan coalition" could collapse as well. This might have happened were it not for 9/11, which provided in "Islamofascism" a convenient stand-in for the Soviet Union. No matter how much lip service movement conservatives pay to the defense of individual liberties, they put "national security" first. "American exceptionalism," to them, boils down to not much more than the notion that there is no problem outside of our own borders that the heavy hand of our federal government cannot fix. There is always another enemy to fight, which means an ever-larger military budget, no matter the condition of our economy.

As different as they might be, Pat Robertson, Charles Krauthammer, Rush Limbaugh, Mitt Romney, Dick Cheney, Mitch McConnell, Lindsay Graham, Newt Gingrich, and even our old

friend Bob Tyrrell agree: America's "survival" always hangs by a thread, and our "interests" are forever threatened. There is no war these chicken hawks are not eager to fight, as long as somebody else's sons and daughters do the dying.

This attitude has become so reflexive—those who strike it so comfortably removed from its real-world consequences—that here too they were unprepared for the Pauls, *père* and *fils*, and their challenge to it. The movement's discomfort with this affront is the result of its resolute refusal to acknowledge, much less reconcile, the contradictions between its professed belief in limited government and its support for a "global war on terror" in its endless bloody explosions.

Sam Tanenhaus in his 2009 study *The Death of Conservatism* recalls how in 1968 William F. Buckley Jr. lamented the New Left's attacks on Lyndon Johnson for his prosecution of the Vietnam War. "We are being invited" by LBJ's critics, Buckley wrote, "to despise not merely Johnson's policies, not merely Johnson's style, but Johnson's person. And to feel proud of ourselves for doing so."

Movement conservatives, as long as I have known them, have exhibited precisely the same attitudes toward those with whom they disagree. The objects of their scorn, moreover, increase in number by the month. So does the intensity of their disdain. The Great Recession, of course, has made Americans jittery, and on top of concerns about terrorism these anxieties have made it easier for demagogues to inflame otherwise decent people already troubled by the condition of public education, changes in the family, the costs of medical care, and the arrival immigrant job seekers who have not gone through proper bureaucratic channels.

All this unseemly rabble-rousing has been possible thanks in part to changes in the news business. Some of these changes are to be welcomed. But the availability of alternative sources of information and opinion has also created new opportunities for alarmists who had once been unlikely to build much of a following. The idea that any of the Breitbart clones could have been published in the *National Review* of the 1970s seems laughable. Buckley had his clones, too, and some of the young conservatives of 40 years ago could be mannered, pretentious, and even sort of embarrassing to be around. But at least they were not guilty of the labored frat-boy jokiness of the *Washington Free Beacon*.

It's of historic importance that the most thoughtful observers among American conservatives—those whose essays do not read like Viguerie's fundraising letters—have little or no truck with the movement. They don't even write for its publications. Their work is more likely to appear elsewhere, even in the dread "liberal media," and they are deeply distrusted by the movement that claims a right to define what is conservative and what is not. Rod Dreher, Andrew Sullivan, Conor Friedersdorf, and Bill Kauffman are mostly ignored. They raise concerns that movement types don't want to think about. People who say interesting things, as Bruce Bartlett can tell you, get drummed out of the ranks, which is why people likely to have anything of much value to offer don't enlist. That still strikes me as a peculiar atmosphere for a movement that claims to stand for individual freedom, but decade after decade that is the air they breathe.

I'd like to think that a movement incapable of critical self-examination is doomed, but I have been wrong before. As late as 1992, I wrote in the *Washington Post* that the Reagan years were a period in which conservatism "was transformed from a philosophy of cautious stewardship into an ideology that encourages individuals to pursue self interest, whatever the consequences to others." This, again, was probably wishful thinking. I'm no longer persuaded that American conservatism as it has existed for half a century has ever been a "philosophy of cautious stewardship." I'm not even sure, given the magnitude of this country's challenges, that "cautious stewardship" will be good enough.

So, in light of my sorry record, I will not hazard a guess to the movement's future. But I have been to a few Conservative Political Action Conferences through the years, and these annual hootenannies offer some perspective on how conservatism is faring. I attended my first in 1975, if memory serves, and the most recent in 2013. I get to observe how the movement is changing—there are ever bigger crowds—and to see old acquaintances, if not exactly friends, and always admire the orators' ability to strike a balance between scaring their audiences half to death and assuring them that, with hard work, they will completely annihilate their enemies.

There are always the usual chicken hawks, of course, but I have also noticed, as some of the veterans of these events get up in years, something comparable to chicken hawks on the domestic side. There are the people who don't go to church themselves but think religion is necessary for others. There are serial monogamists like Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich who express deep-felt concerns about the institution of marriage. There's the divorced and childless old *roué* who worries that other white people aren't reproducing in sufficient quantities to maintain their positions of privilege and influence.

But at last year's CPAC, the venerable Stan Evans offered these worry warts cause for hope. Conservatives might not be having babies fast enough, he said, but liberals "are aborting themselves out of existence." I am still figuring out whether conservatives should think this is a good thing. If it's true, they should be able to relax and let the demographics work their will, though that seems a rather Darwinian way to get the job done. I also wonder how it might factor into their "pro-life agenda."

I'm not sure Evans or his cohorts have given the matter serious thought. But this grisly nightmare vision might well represent the nadir of a "movement" that in its opposition to totalitarianism once claimed a more humane approach to politics, rooted in a respect for the dignity of the individual. This disintegration was many things—but not unpredictable.