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[Bruce Bartlett, David Frum, and the Closing of the Conservative Mind](#)

Posted by MICHAEL STICKINGS, Assistant Editor in [Politics](#).

Mar 26th, 2010 | [View Comments](#)

[Bruce Bartlett](#) has had a long career in Republican politics. He worked for Ron Paul and Jack Kemp. He was a fellow at the Heritage Foundation. He was a senior policy analyst in the Reagan White House, working for Gary Bauer, later a Treasury official under Bush I. He worked at the Cato Institute.

Starting in 1993, he was with the right-wing National Center for Policy Analysis in Dallas... until it fired him for being too critical of Bush II. As he [puts it himself](#), he was fired “for writing a book critical of George W. Bush’s policies, especially his support for Medicare Part D.” And that, it seems, was it. The scarlet letter was applied. “In the years since,” he laments, “I have lost a great many friends and been shunned by conservative society in Washington, DC.”

All because he broke ranks and spoke out, putting principle before partisanship. No matter his long record, an entire career, of committed conservatism.

In related news, David Frum, the former Bush II speechwriter who has been deeply critical of the GOP over health-care reform and other issues, and the right-wing American Enterprise Institute (AEI) have parted ways. Was he fired? He [claims not](#), and he very well may not have been, but Bartlett, responding to the news, and taking it for granted that Frum was fired, launched a [sound criticism](#) of the current state of American conservatism:

I have always hoped that my experience was unique. But now I see that I was just the first to suffer from a closing of the conservative mind. Rigid conformity is being enforced, no dissent is allowed, and the conservative brain will slowly shrivel into dementia if it hasn't already.

I wanted to say that this is a black day for what passes for a conservative movement, scholarship, and the once-respected AEI.

Even if Frum wasn't [fired](#), even if the parting of ways was mutual, or perhaps a cost-cutting measure (Frum claims that he was invited to stay at the AEI on a "non-salary basis"), Bartlett, I think, is right. Conservatism these days is about either a) blind loyalty to the Republican Party, b) anti-government teabagging extremism, or c) theocracy — or d) some contorted combination of the above.

What's more, both the Republican Party and the conservative movement, to the extent there is one anymore, are about [purging](#) and [purifying](#), with dissenters, even conservative ones like Bartlett, even the occasionally bipartisan likes of Sens. John McCain and [Lindsey Graham](#), ignored, alienated, or excommunicated. Simply put, in Dear Leader Rush's party, in a movement dominated by the Hannitys and the Malkins, all that is acceptable is the narrow ideological fringe of the increasingly extreme right.

The title of this post refers back to the title of Bartlett's post at [Capital Gains and Games](#), which, of course, refers back to the title of [Allan Bloom's](#) famous book, [The Closing of the American Mind](#). Bloom, as you may know, was a Straussian, a follower of [Leo Strauss](#), and I, who studied at the University of Toronto with two of Bloom's leading students, am also one.

Yes, I remain one now, despite my liberalism and objections to neoconservatism (which, through Bill Kristol and others, is linked to Straussianism), and I still think there is a great deal to like about Strauss, an amazing political philosopher in his own right, and his immediate followers, including Bloom (who taught at Chicago and Toronto), whose translation and textual analysis of Plato's *Republic* are simply magnificent, as is so much else of what he did academically.

There is even a lot to like about *The Closing of the American Mind*, which tells some difficult truth about the intellectual decline of America as a modern liberal state. Anyone who pays attention to contemporary popular culture with a critical mind, even a generally open-minded liberal who welcomes new things and finds Bloom's occasionally reactionary conservatism distasteful, should agree that all is not well with the American mind. The decline of standards not just of excellence but even of goodness is all too apparent. Liberals like me argue that the benefits of progressive politics and an opening society far outweigh this decline in terms of importance — I hardly think that returning to the narrow, oppressive elitism of the past, a bigoted world ruled by privileged white men, is desirable — but we should nonetheless be seriously concerned about what has happened, and is happening, not just in America but in liberal democracies everywhere.

For more on Strauss, and on the possibility of reconciling Strauss and liberalism, see a pair of posts I wrote at my place way back in April-May 2005:

- [Education and liberation: What it means to be a Straussian, Part I](#); and
- [Diversity and conformity: What it means to be a Straussian, Part II](#).

I would add here that Allan Bloom himself was a lifelong Democrat — unlike most Straussians, who tend to be Republican and generally on the political right. I hope that he, of sound and acute mind, would have objected to what is happening in the Republican Party and in American conservatism generally.

The American mind may very well still be closing, in a cultural way, despite the incredible advances of recent

years (such as the growing recognition of gay rights, a greater appreciation for human rights, despite the barbarism of the George W. Bush administration, and the election of a black man to the presidency), but the conservative mind, now decaying, seems to have been shut down altogether, the Great Purge, of which both Bartlett and Frum have been victims, showing no signs of abating anytime soon.

(Cross-posted from [The Reaction](#).)

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DLS 3 days ago

I knew one of the contributors (if not several) would report this, eventually.

Of course Frum was fired. Well, he could stay but not be paid for his services any longer, so we hear.

The lefties can make fools of themselves about this all the way. Me, I'll wait and see if Frum joins either David Brooks (an "acceptable conservative" to liberals and DC parasites) or Thully over at the Atlantic.

[Flag](#)



Brian Allen 3 days ago

6 people liked this.

It appears you can't make a living as an honest conservative any more.

The right-wing fantasy just keeps shrinking. That's good news for the Democrats.

[Flag](#)

DaGoat 3 days ago [in reply to DLS](#)

3 people liked this.

DLS I'm not following your comment very well. You are agreeing Frum was fired but don't agree that it reflects a closed mindset on the part of conservatives?

I don't agree with Mr. Stickings very often but I think I do this time. Conservatives will be better off with some dissenting voices, and AEI was better off with Frum.

[Flag](#)

shannonlee 3 days ago

2 people liked this.

I wonder if the new Rep leadership committee is becoming the next Politburo.

[Flag](#)

Don Quijote 3 days ago

4 people liked this.

[David Frum and the Closing of the Conservative Mind](#)

Since, he is no longer affiliated with AEI, I feel free to say publicly something he told me in private a few months ago. He asked if I had noticed any comments by AEI "scholars" on the subject of health care reform. I said no and **he said that was because they had been ordered not to speak to the media because they agreed with too much of what Obama was trying to do.**

ROTFLMAO...

[Flag](#)



DLS 3 days ago [in reply to DaGoat](#)

"You are agreeing Frum was fired but don't agree that it reflects a closed mindset on the part of conservatives?"

I'm pointing out that Frum is no innocent lamb. His firing may not be an instance of a closed mindset, just an excuse for a building desire by some there at AEI to get rid of him.

That AEI is choosing to be more authentically conservative (extremists on the Left will say "far right") or more partisan "purist" Republican (which is the more likely and more remarkable of the two at the same time, in my view) is actually not surprising. Don't forget that the problem in 2006 and 2008 with the Republicans is that they were too much like the Dems, and most non-liberals don't want to see a token, laughable, comic-book "acceptable" [to libs and Dems] continued Dems Lite Republican party and "conservatism." There remains the split between removed, disgusted "economic conservative" libertarians and the social conservatives (and perhaps rigidly partisan, too) who are in the news most as being disenchanted (hence, Tea Party) and who are seen as the core of the party now. Most are sick of Dems Lite, and here is Frum who is happy with that and wants more of that. (While, coincidentally, making him look better and keeping happy there in DC.)

"I don't agree with Mr. Stickings very often but I think I do this time."

Certainly he's right in that there's continued retrenchment and defensiveness among conservatives and traditionalist or authoritarian Republicans (social cons, Tories as Etzioni calls them, versus the libertarian Whigs who remain disenchanted, on the sidelines, out of the news largely, don't forget). I actually consider this phenomenon more substantive, more important than the current collapse of the Republicans in Congress. It's not necessarily a closed mindset of all, but a struggle against concession to liberalism and being more Dems Lite. Clumsy, harsh, maybe, but understandable.

Related (various views):

http://theweek.com/article/index/201236/Is_Davi...

neglecting the Whigs, who aren't beholden to voting Republican (don't ask me, ask Boaz)

"The big problem for Republicans last November was the loss of moderate, independent, and libertarian voters to Democratic candidates."

http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=7544

As far as what Frum has advocated, a recent work of his is the best source. (Note the link!)

He's happy with big government, presumably when it's acceptable to him and it wins votes. Ugh.

<http://www.aei.org/book/917>

[Flag](#)



mariaycorazon 2 days ago

2 people liked this.

A well articulated and intelligent article. I would add two older books from the 60's to "The Closing of the American Mind" and that predicted our current dilemma and those were: "A Nation of Sheep" and "The Medium is the Message." In other words this country's population has been brainwashed and educated to the level of a 3rd grade mind...this is why voters have trouble discerning the truth. I have seen the mis-education of our youth through "no child left behind" and other standardized assessments create a non-thinking public. I should know I am a former educator.

[Flag](#)

JSpencer 2 days ago

3 people liked this.

Alternate reading for another point of view:

<http://www.balloon-juice.com/2010/03/25/may-be-i...>

You're welcome. :-)

[Flag](#)

DLS 2 days ago [in reply to mariaycorazon](#)

1 person liked this.

"'The Closing of the American Mind' and that predicted our current dilemma and those were: 'A Nation of Sheep' and 'The Medium is the Message.' In other words this country's population has been brainwashed and educated to the level of a 3rd grade mind...this is why voters have trouble discerning the truth"

They look to Washington for it, just as they see the federal government as their parent, not merely a service agency rather than a real (much less federal, not national) government, and as Santa Claus or their Fairy Godmother ("democracy"). To them, the federal government is their brain and their soul.

Totalitarian democracy -- Democratic totalitarianism

And, related DC-centric elites like Frum believe the people should be looking (up) to them, too. They're not peripheral; they're central and essential! [scowl]

[Flag](#)



The_Ohioan 2 days ago

Many Democrats have been moved to move to another party; most notably Ronald Reagan, Strom Thurmond, Jesse Helms, Trent Lott, Eliz. Dole, Condi Rice, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Wm. Bennett. Though as far as I know, not through firing. And of course whack-a-mole A. Specter.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party_switching_in...

Whether this was because of party discipline is debateable - unlike Mr. Frum's case.

[Flag](#)

JSpencer 2 days ago

1 person liked this.

and as Santa Claus or their Fairy Godmother ("democracy"). To them, the federal government is their brain and their soul

DLS, I think it's time for you to come up for air. Your comments are starting to take on that raving quality . . . again.

[Flag](#)

VeratheGun 2 days ago [in reply to JSpencer](#)

1 person liked this.

You're actually reading DLS's comments?

[Flag](#)

superdestroyer 2 days ago

The only reason that liberals are even mentioning Frum is that he has made a career the last year of saying bad things about Republicans. Has everyone forgotten that Frum was an enabler for the incompetence, stupidity, and failures of the Bush Administration. Conservatives would be much better off if everyone associated with the Bush Administration or the GOP Congress 2001-2208 would get out of politics and stay out. Until conservatives and the Republicans figure out a way to deal with the failed Bush Administration, there is no moving forward.

Of course, maybe of the reason that no one other than failed Bush Staffers are still interested in Republican politics is that everyone else has realized that demographics will soon make the Republicans irrelevant.

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VeratheGun 2 days ago [in reply to superdestroyer](#)

1 person liked this.

Why do I get the feeling you cry into your pillow every night?

[Flag](#)

JeffersonDavis 2 days ago

1 person liked this.

"b) anti-government teabagging extremism,"

I'm getting really really tired of this, Michael.

For the umpteenth time (and please listen this time):

Tea Parties are NOT anti-government - they are anti-BIG-government.

They are not extremists, they simply want adherence to the Constitution. If you don't like it, change it - but live within in it until you do.

Tea Partiers want their elected representatives to HEAR them, not ignore them or marginalize them.

They want Constitutional taxes, laws, and governance.

Is that so much to ask from EITHER party?

[Flag](#)

JeffersonDavis 2 days ago [in reply to superdestroyer](#)

"maybe of the reason that no one other than failed Bush Staffers are still interested in Republican politics is that everyone else has realized that demographics will soon make the Republicans irrelevant."

ESPECIALLY after the democrats use amnesty to acquire 10 million more voters with Spanish ballots. I think that both Republicans and Democrats are quickly becoming irrelevant. They both are partisan self-serving disgraces to this nation.

[Flag](#)

JSpencer 2 days ago [in reply to VeratheGun](#)

Every now and then I try to sift the wheat from the chaff, and every now and then it's worth it. Lately there's been way too much chaff. It seems to go in cycles. ;-)

[Flag](#)

DLS 1 day ago

Not everybody is averse to learning all the time.

[Flag](#)

DLS 1 day ago [in reply to JSpencer](#)

I just have struck a raw nerve. Tsk, tsk.

[Flag](#)

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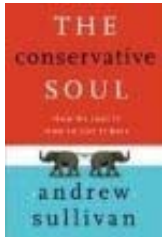
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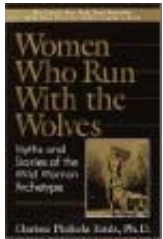
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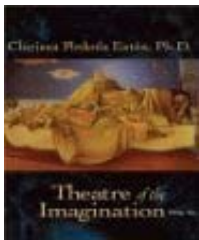
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