



## Where Did Trump Come From?

**A new history of the American right sheds light on the GOP in 2016.**

Jay Kinney

September 4, 2016

George Hawley appears to have completed *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* before Donald Trump began his rise, which makes it all the more surprising that this scholarly tome is the best guide we're likely to find to the bizarre reality of the 2016 GOP.

As Hawley, a political scientist at the University of Alabama, points out in considerable detail, the post–World War II conservative movement has never been a monolithic bloc. Many of its left-wing critics have perceived it that way, but those who Hawley calls its right-wing critics have known better—particularly the ones who were purged and consigned to the ideological equivalent of Siberia. The movement has always been beset from within and without by dissension, even as its leaders have tried to fashion a sense of unity.

Even the definition of "right-wing" is up for grabs. In Europe, conservatives have historically defended a hereditary aristocracy, an established church, and other fixed social hierarchies. ("The men who supported King Louis XVI during the French Revolution," Hawley notes, "would have had no interest in wars to spread liberal democracy in the Middle East, a free market capitalism that recognizes no social distinctions, or a populist form of evangelical Christianity.") Not so in America. "From the major figures of the conservative movement," he writes, "we consistently hear the same values advanced: limited government, strong traditional families, and strong national defense."

But *conservatism* is not always identical to *the right*, more broadly defined. If the left is characterized by holding social and economic equality as its primary value, the right is characterized by its skepticism toward—or outright opposition to—equality as a political goal. Hence Hawley's compact definition of the right as "all of those ideologies that, while not necessarily rejecting equality as a social good, do not rank it at the top of the hierarchy of values. The right furthermore fights the left in all cases where the push for equality threatens some other value held in higher esteem."

In similar fashion, the right-wing critics of the present conservative movement criticize it for what they see as its ongoing capitulation to the left's values. Almost without exception, those "purged" from the conservative movement have been so for being too far to the right, not too far to the left.

Hawley's overview begins with the Old Right of the 1930s and earlier. Anti-New Deal, anti-interventionist, and pro-states' rights, the Old Right was not cohesive enough to be called a "movement." It was also not exclusively Republican, as there was considerable overlap with many conservative southern Democrats (the so-called Dixiecrats), the GOP having been associated with the unpopular Reconstruction policies that followed the Civil War. The Old Right had a perhaps unfair reputation for a lack of intellectual depth, despite the presence of colorful and insightful figures in its ranks, from H.L. Mencken to the Southern Agrarians who wrote *I'll Take My Stand*.

Enter William F. Buckley and Russell Kirk, perhaps the two most influential and iconic conservatives to gain a public hearing in the early 1950s. Kirk's 1953 book *The Conservative Mind* aimed to give his worldview a pedigree, tracing conservatism back to Edmund Burke. Buckley, first with his 1951 book *God and Man at Yale* and then with the 1955 launch of the magazine *National Review*, took on the task of publicizing conservative ideas and laying the groundwork for what would later coalesce into the current conservative movement.

*National Review* brought together a mix: a few Old Right survivors, a few ex-communists, a few proto-libertarians, and a good number of traditionalists. The initial glue that held them together was the Cold War, which effectively minimized anti-interventionism as a component of conservatism—much to the chagrin of the libertarian economist Murray Rothbard, who was initially a part of the *National Review* coalition but fell away quickly because of his anti-war views.

Over time, Buckley took on the role of gatekeeper in chief, reading problematic groups and individuals out of the growing movement. Hawley describes early targets, such as the John Birch Society and the Objectivists, as well as later ones, including various "paleocons" (among them Pat Buchanan, Joseph Sobran, Sam Francis, and Mel Bradford) and others deemed racist or anti-Semitic. Even after Buckley's death, *National Review* has continued to boot former contributors, such as John Derbyshire and Peter Brimelow, whose so-called "race realism" was considered unacceptable.

Frank Meyer, a *National Review* editor, championed the idea of "fusionism," an attempt to wed a libertarian emphasis on individual freedom with traditional conservative values. The fruits of this effort included both Young Americans for Freedom and Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign. But fusionism spun apart in the maelstrom of the 1960s: Most conservatives supported the Vietnam war, while figures like Rothbard not only opposed it but attempted to make common cause with New Left groups such as Students for a Democratic Society. Add conflicts over conscription, the counterculture, Black Power, and other issues, and fusionism unraveled; libertarians began to establish their own institutions and organizations, from which the present movement has grown.

Hawley devotes two substantial chapters to the ups and downs of libertarian influence on the conservative movement. The first chapter covers those he dubs mainstream libertarians, by which he means those willing to push for incremental changes in a libertarian direction within mainstream politics and culture. These include Milton Friedman (whom he describes as "conservatism's favorite libertarian"), the Koch brothers, the Cato Institute, **reason**, the Paul family, and various libertarian youth organizations. The second chapter covers radical libertarianism, which Hawley defines by its purity of principles and its insurgence against the state. Hawley cites the 19th century individualist anarchists Josiah Warren, Lysander Spooner, and Benjamin Tucker as early examples of this impulse; in the *National Review* era, he mentions Rothbard and Karl Hess.

In the late '80s and the '90s, long after the New Left dissolved, Rothbard returned to the right to attempt a new fusionism of his own, along with Llewellyn Rockwell Jr., steward of the libertarian Ludwig von Mises Institute in Auburn, Alabama. The goal was to ally with "paleoconservatives." That term—reportedly coined by the conservative historian Paul Gottfried—was a play on "neoconservative," a term applied to Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and other former leftists and liberals who had not just joined the right but brought along baggage (support for global military crusades, greater tolerance for the welfare state) that the paleocons opposed.

Embodied most memorably in the *Rothbard-Rockwell Report*, a monthly newsletter that spanned much of the '90s, the "paleolibertarian" alliance combined free market economics with Rothbard's cultural conservatism, which had little patience for gay rights and other liberation movements championed by the mainstream libertarians. Rothbard's death in 1995 cut this initiative short, however, dooming yet another effort at libertarian-conservative fusion.

Hawley isn't just interested in libertarian critiques of conservatives. (If that were the case, he wouldn't have much to tell us about the Trump moment.) Hawley breaks form with most summaries of American conservatism by devoting a chapter to the European New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*), a predominantly French intellectual movement spanning the late '60s to the present. The "New Right" label was chosen not by the movement's participants but by its critics (many of whom consider it neofascist), and in many ways the movement is neither left nor right, instead combining elements from all over the ideological spectrum: pan-Europism, anti-colonialism, a critique of egalitarianism and democracy, a nod toward polytheism, and so on.

Rather belatedly, the works of New Right writers such as Alain de Benoist and Guillaume Faye are being translated into English and finding an American readership, particularly on the "alternative right," a largely online milieu of white nationalism and opposition to multicultural immigration. Hawley's New Right discussion thus dovetails with his following chapter, which is about white nationalists—perhaps the most vociferous right-wing critics of mainstream conservatism.

Hawley notes that while the internet has enabled an explosion of racist websites and blogs, many "offline" membership organizations, such as the National Alliance, Aryan Nations, and the Ku Klux Klan, have fallen by the wayside, and it is difficult to tell who is a genuine leader in this political niche and who is "simply a lone blogger, broadcasting his or her ideas to no one." One suspects that a tech-savvy teaching assistant might have been able to direct Hawley to available

web ranking data, but that's neither here nor there. The fact remains that even a wildly popular website (or network of aligned sites) does not constitute a social movement per se.

In the book's concluding chapter, Hawley touches on the so-called Dark Enlightenment, the online neoreactionary crew who have spent considerable time and energy dissecting "the Cathedral," their term for the egalitarian values upheld by both the American left and the mainstream American right. Hawley concludes: "At this point, the Dark Enlightenment is predominantly interesting because of its unique style and lingo, but it adds relatively little to the political debate that is truly inventive." Perhaps I'm just a sucker for unique styles and lingo, but I've found the milieu to be at least entertainingly provocative if not truly inventive—and the neoreactionary belief that the antidote for democracy's failures is a return to monarchy does strike me as inventive, if unconvincing.

Hawley has captured the present moment surprisingly well, even though his book was researched and written before Trump's candidacy arrived. That Trump has proven popular with some of the movements described here—all but the libertarians, basically—is unsurprising, as he has given voice to many opinions shared by those who criticize conservatism from the right.

Whether it be his opposition to unconstrained and illegal immigration, his argument that free trade agreements facilitate the offshoring of Americans' jobs, his sporadic skepticism toward foreign entanglements, or his refusal to kowtow to P.C. truisms, Trump has leap-frogged over the mainstream right and landed in the proximate zone of the dissident right. This is not to say that he has done so with conscious calculation. His off-the-cuff bluster seems more an instinctual feel for topics that have been taboo in the well-policed conservative movement than a self-conscious pivot to the far right. In that sense, his campaign is less an expression of his own giant ego than an eruption of the national id.

Hawley notes in his concluding sentence that "the day may be approaching when one or more of these other right-wing movements is given the opportunity to make its case, and it is therefore important to know what that case will be, even if such knowledge is used only to refute their arguments." That day may be already upon us, making Hawley's book more timely than even its author could have anticipated.