

Vox

What the Weekly Standard meant to conservatism

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The first issue of the Weekly Standard was published on September 18, 1995. Arriving soon after the so-called Republican Revolution of 1994 — when Republicans gained control of the House and the Senate, getting a majority in the House for the first time since 1952 — the cover featured then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich espousing his goal of putting the Republican Party on “permanent offense” against Democrats.

But 23 years later, **the Weekly Standard is no more**. It’s a particularly striking moment because it was the rare conservative media outlet that confronted Donald Trump, rejecting some of his worst personality traits and attitudes.

As Charlie Sykes, a Weekly Standard contributor, told me, “We’ve just lost an important, principled, and independent voice, and it will leave a huge void not just on the right, but in our political discourse as a whole. ... It’s hard to overstate the courage it took to stand athwart Trumpism in a reasoned, fact-based, principled way.”

The Standard was at odds with many on the right over its anti-Trump attitudes, which was a reason some thought they were being shut down. But in my reporting and in conversations with staffers, far more was made about the adversarial relationship senior editors had with ownership, **which wanted to “strip-mine”** the publication for its subscriber list.

The Standard’s initial staff roster featured some of the biggest names in conservative media, names that would go on to become major figures not just in conservative media but in mainstream media and politics more broadly — from a pre-television Tucker Carlson to David Frum to David Brooks to **Charles Krauthammer** to Neomi Rao, then a reporter for the Weekly Standard and **recently nominated** to replace Brett Kavanaugh on the DC Circuit Court. As one TWS staffer told me, that masthead was “one of the greatest collections of writerly talent every put together outside the New Yorker.”

But the story of the Weekly Standard is the story of a publication that was not just important because of what it published, or whom it published, but why it published. It’s that “why” that made it matter, and it’s that why that is making many mourn its loss, and others **celebrate its passing**.

Why the Weekly Standard mattered for conservatism

For 23 years, the Weekly Standard was a voice for a particular kind of conservatism that sparred constantly with others within the Republican Party and the conservative movement, itself a larger tent than many would expect, with its own factions and factional infighting.

Much of the magazine's ideological focus was on neoconservatism, which Bill Kristol **described in 2003** as being less of a movement than a "persuasion." In Kristol's view, neoconservatism was "hopeful, not lugubrious; forward-looking, not nostalgic; and its general tone is cheerful, not grim or dyspeptic."

Neoconservatives, in Kristol's view, viewed Presidents Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan as heroes, emphasized tax cuts, and believed firmly that a larger nation should have "extensive" international interests. "Barring extraordinary events, the United States will always feel obliged to defend, if possible, a democratic nation under attack from nondemocratic forces, external or internal," Kristol wrote in August 2003, five months after the launch of the Iraq War (which Kristol and the Weekly Standard **wholeheartedly supported.**)

Neoconservatism reached its ascendancy in the Bush administration, and to many on the left, the Weekly Standard was the mouthpiece for everything deeply wrong with neoconservatism and the Republican Party. I spoke with Glenn Greenwald, co-founder of the Intercept and a longtime critic of neoconservatism and Kristol, who told me that during the Bush years, "Everything that anybody in [the center left or left] found not just objectionable or disagreeable but immoral and criminal and evil was advocated by the Weekly Standard."

Pointing out Kristol's background, including his involvement with the organization **Keep America Safe** (which the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute described as **McCarthyist** for its efforts to get Justice Department lawyers who had represented Guantanamo detainees fired), Greenwald told me that neoconservatives like Kristol and former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz were "the worst, most toxic influence in our political discourse forever."

And some on the right agreed.

Many of the biggest critics of neoconservatism — and figures like Kristol — were and are supporters of Trump's brand of conservatism, with outlets like Breitbart **describing** neoconservatives as people "who believe in open borders, non-reciprocal free trade, and unnecessary wars unrestrained by U.S. national interest" during the 2016 presidential election.

But for other conservatives, Kristol and the Weekly Standard were standing up for America's virtues, and against foreign policy "realists" who advocated for more isolationist positions. As Matthew Walther **wrote** in the Week on Friday, "Whether she wanted it or not, [America] has inherited an imperial destiny. It cannot be denied that in winning the Cold War America was a force for good in the world. In the post-1989 era, this has been the case far less often — not, alas, for lack of trying."

To many on the right, the Weekly Standard represented an almost eternal conservatism — one that was intended to be above the petty fighting and personalities of day-to-day politicking (**with some notable exceptions**) and more focused on what conservatism could be, and why. The magazine published **lengthy film** and **art criticisms**, featuring a piece on the film "Kids" written by Lynne Cheney, wife of former Vice President Dick Cheney, in its very first issue. The magazine talked about music, and hobbies, and everything not having to do with politics alongside discussions of economic policy and arguments over defense budgets.

The Weekly Standard's version of conservatism was one that was supposed to be untethered — to candidates or specific matters of policy or even to the brass tacks of politics itself. It was supposed to be a conservatism built to last.

The Weekly Standard in the era of Trump

The magazine's stand against Trump was not intended to be a stand against conservatism, but one for conservatism, *real* conservatism, which its editors and publishers believed Trump not only did not represent but posed a real danger to.

Bill Kristol's opposition to Trump — which **came** after then-candidate Trump said that the late John McCain wasn't a war hero ("I like people who weren't captured") — became, for him, and for the publication, part of a larger process of determining what exactly conservatism was with Donald Trump as Republican president. While the magazine was supportive of efforts to nominate conservatives to the Supreme Court and cut taxes, the magazine never embraced Trumpism's trade priorities or purported isolationism, and decidedly never embraced Trump himself. As Jonathan V. Last **wrote** in January 2018, "To assume that Trump is "worth it" because of his Supreme Court selections, moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, or anything else, "is amazingly, willfully, shortsighted."

When **I spoke with Kristol** in December 2017, he told me that while he hoped progressives would reconsider leftism, Trump posed just as many questions for the right. "The fact of Trump is a big fact. You'd be foolish not to rethink your judgment of some aspects of conservatism, insofar as it's enabled Trump, insofar as so many conservatives are enabling Trump," he said. "It has made me rethink certain aspects of conservative doctrine and dogma."

Conservative writer John Podhoretz, who was among the initial founders of the publication, **wrote Friday** that the Standard was created to "reflect an expansive conservative vision of America and the world and would evaluate the politics of the present moment as honestly as its writers and editors knew how. It would speak to, and from within, the conservative movement without being a Republican Party sheet."

And now, because of the vagaries of corporate media — and a changing political landscape — it is gone.