

The American Conservative

Conservatism in Crisis

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When members of Young Americans for Freedom gathered at their convention on September 11, 1964, to hear an address by William F. Buckley Jr., they expected flights of eloquence hailing the looming glorious victory of Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater. But Buckley had other ideas. Goldwater's nomination, he said, "when we permit ourselves to peek up over the euphoria, reminds us chillingly of the great work that has remained undone." He added that a "great rainfall has deluged a thirsty earth, but before we had time properly to prepare the ground."

As his quizzical adherents sought to discern his meaning, Buckley dropped his penultimate sentence: "I speak of course of the impending defeat of Barry Goldwater."

Gasps could be heard in the audience. Then as silence returned Buckley defined the beginning of wisdom as fear of the Lord. "The next and most urgent counsel," he went on, "is to take stock of reality." It was wrong to assume they would overcome, he said; "and therefore it is right to reason to the necessity of guarding against the utter disarray that sometimes follows a stunning defeat." Further, he said, it was right "to take thought, even on the eve of the engagement, about the potential need for regrouping, for gathering together our scattered forces."

That was more than a half-century ago. Since then the country has seen the defeat of Goldwater, the tragedy of Nixon, the triumph of Reagan, the foreign policy and economic calamity of the second Bush, and the Trump emergence. The question for American conservatives now, at the conclusion of this momentous half-century, is: What is the state of the conservative movement? The answer is that conservatism is in crisis, and that suggests merit in recalling Buckley's admonition about taking stock of reality.

I speak of course of the failure of Reaganism.

To say that Reaganism has failed is not to deny Reagan's presidential greatness. The Gipper transformed the economic debate in America, particularly on tax policy. More than any other single Western figure, he brought about the demise of Russian Bolshevism. Throughout two generations no one articulated more forcefully or eloquently the dangers of a national government that is too large, too intrusive, and too voracious in absorbing civic resources. He

galvanized widespread popular support throughout the country and then held it long enough to maintain effective governance on a host of initiatives. He was the last president to tackle the hazardous issue of entitlement reform in any serious way. He kept the country out of debilitating wars. Once he got America beyond the economic morass he had inherited, he generated a robust economic expansion, including an average annual GDP growth rate of 3.86 percent.

And yet the Reagan legacy was more short-lived than those of other presidential greats who transformed the national debate and directed the nation to a new course. The political eras set in motion by Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and the two Roosevelts proved far more durable. The result is that it isn't entirely clear what conservatism amounts to these days, with new issues and new troubles roiling the nation and the major parties embroiled in identity crises. Conservatives today need to heed Bill Buckley's 1964 call for "regrouping" and "gathering together our scattered forces."

In his day, Reagan did just that through his 1980 election triumph, just 16 years after the Goldwater debacle. What's more, in consolidating conservative sentiment in the land, he made possible the emergence of a governing philosophy and a governing coalition under conservative auspices. It was a singular accomplishment in a nation dominated by liberalism for half a century.

Our assessment of the state of American conservatism begins with an exploration of the Reagan presidency—and what happened to his formula after his departure. How did conservatism in our time, rather like the conservatism described by Buckley in 1964, get into "utter disarray"?

Reagan's conservatism wasn't much different from Goldwater's. He advocated a sharp boost in military spending to bolster U.S. preparedness; concerted counterforce efforts against the Soviet Union wherever it sought to undermine Western interests around the world; smaller government, held accountable to the people; significantly reduced federal spending; and strict construction of the Constitution.



But there was one significant departure from the Goldwater formula, and we can discern today a flaw in his domestic agenda that undermined his legacy.

The departure was in fiscal policy. Reagan abandoned the old Republican harangues against deficit spending and sought to generate economic growth through tax-rate reductions within a streamlined tax code. It turned out that this was wise policy: it did indeed contribute to the robust economic expansion that characterized the last six years of the Reagan presidency. But it also served as underpinning for a particular brand of populism developed by Reagan. This wasn't any kind of pitchfork populism, full of anger and venom. It was much more sophisticated than that, directed primarily at expansive government.

It rested on two foundations: a faith in the ability of the people to order their economic affairs without undue governmental intrusions; and a distrust of institutional elites who control important economic matters through tax code and currency manipulations. This Reagan

populism contributed to his success among the so-called Reagan Democrats and younger voters. It animated his presidency and gave it force.

In policy terms, it led to his call for cuts in income tax rates, including the top rate; his elimination of many special-interest tax breaks through the 1986 tax reform measure; his tendency to favor entrepreneurial businesses over large established corporations; and his efforts in behalf of more stable currency exchange rates. In rhetorical terms, it gave Reagan a powerful message of economic growth and faith in a high-tech future loaded with opportunities. It also fortified him against Democratic efforts to portray him as a tool of the country-club rich and served to blunt Democrats' calls for income redistribution through tax policies. "Americans," he said at the height of his 1984 reelection campaign, "are rejecting the policies of something for nothing, rejecting politicians who try to divide us by exploiting envy America needs more high tech to modernize heavy industry. We need more take-home pay, more investment, more innovation and more jobs."

By way of illustration, consider the issue, during the Republic's early decades, of governmental land sales. The Federalists and later Whigs wanted to sell excess federal lands in the western territories at high prices to fill governmental coffers and fund federal public works projects such as bridges, roads, and canals. The idea was that the governmental elites, by managing these projects, would build up the country from above. The populist Democrats, particularly under Jefferson and Jackson, advocated giving away the land or selling at minimal prices so ordinary Americans could move west, develop the land, build communities, and push up the country from below. Similarly, Reagan's populist tax policies were based on the view that ordinary Americans, with government out of the way, would exploit the opportunity to push the country forward through entrepreneurial resourcefulness.

It was a resonant message in those days of robust economic growth. Reagan captured 525 electoral votes in 1984 to just 13 for his opponent, Minnesota's Walter Mondale. The popular vote distribution was 58.8 percent for Reagan, 40.6 percent for Mondale. American conservatism never before commanded such political force and hasn't since.



But Reagan never got control over the federal bureaucracy—the governmental/managerial class that, since FDR, had become one of the nation's most potent and entrenched power centers. Since Reagan's time, a conventional wisdom has emerged that the 40th president didn't really care much about budget deficits, subordinating that problem to his cherished defense buildup and tax cuts. But Reagan struggled year after year to rein in federal domestic spending. As a young reporter covering tax and budget legislation for the *Wall Street Journal* in the early Reagan years, I watched the president impose his will on congressional budgeters through his vaunted negotiating dexterity. He would stake out a tough position on budget cuts and then hold tight as increasingly flummoxed lawmakers inched their way, reluctantly and with squeals of anguish, toward his position. Then, when he figured he had gotten all he could from the increasingly agitated opposition (including Republicans), he would slap his hand down and take the deal.

It served him well in the budget wars. But you can't slash federal spending in any meaningful way without killing programs and eliminating departments and bureaus, and Reagan didn't do that. This was in part because he didn't try very hard after his first year in office and in part because, when he did try, Congress thwarted him. Thus he left intact that governmental/managerial bureaucracy that had become so powerfully entrenched in Washington, well positioned to chip away at the Reagan Revolution from day one.

And then came George Herbert Walker Bush. After ridiculing Reagan's fiscal advocacy during the 1980 primaries as "voodoo economics," Bush served his boss with utter loyalty for eight years as vice president. But Bush and those around him never truly appreciated Reagan or the roots of his presidential success. Upon taking power they set about to dismantle much of the Reagan legacy.

Most significantly, the new president never understood or appreciated the Reagan tax philosophy. This led Bush to renege on his campaign promise of "no new taxes." The result was a disaster, both economically and politically. In comparison to Reagan's robust economic growth rates following the recession of his early tenure, Bush's average annual growth rate barely cracked 2 percent.

Further, whereas Reagan's budget deficits came down steadily following the recession period, getting to a fairly manageable 2.87 percent of GDP in his final budget year (and proving that growth constitutes a major weapon against deficits), Bush's lackluster economic performance pushed his final-year budget deficit back up to 4.58 percent of GDP. Also during that year, unemployment rose to 7.5 percent from 5.3 percent in 1989.

These metrics posed a serious political challenge in themselves, but Bush's political standing suffered further from his abandonment of Reagan-style populism. He declined to position himself as a champion of working-class Americans struggling to make ends meet. His only serious growth issue was his call for a cut in capital gains taxes, which he pushed with intermittent enthusiasm. One result was that Bush became vulnerable to Democratic allegations that he and his party were "elitist," tools of the rich and unconcerned about the tribulations of the middle class. Those same allegations had been hurled at Reagan also, but they didn't stick because Reagan's populist impulses served as a kind of antidote. Bush had no antidote.

After Reagan had redefined his party by drawing votes from large numbers of Democrats, Bush induced many of them to return to the Democratic fold. His subsequent defeat in his 1992 reelection bid was not only a rejection of him but also, in the eyes of many, a rejection of Reaganism. It was a serious blow to the 40th president's legacy.



And yet Reaganism remained the country's dominant political force through the presidency of the next chief executive, Bill Clinton. This isn't surprising. The Franklin Roosevelt legacy still dominated American politics through the popular presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, some seven to 15 years following FDR's death. Eisenhower couldn't surmount Roosevelt's lingering political influence and didn't try. Clinton also couldn't erase Reagan's lingering influence,

though he did try. He declared at the beginning of his presidency that he intended to “repeal Reaganism.”

He pressed the high-voltage issue of gays in the military at a time when the country wasn't ready for such a policy. He installed as surgeon general a social-issue liberal prone to provocative statements that outraged many Americans. He raised taxes, though not by much, in a mild reversal of the Reagan tax philosophy. He fostered the family leave act and an assault weapons ban. Most significantly he brought forth a huge health-care initiative that would have greatly increased federal intrusion into a large segment of the economy. After all this, in 1994, Democrats suffered their greatest political setback in 50 years.



Clinton responded by fashioning a brilliant new political paradigm calculated to propel him through the thickets of divided government. “The era of big government is over,” he declared in an elaborate bow to Reagan's lingering influence. He expropriated carefully chosen Republican issues and gave his party a deftly calibrated center-left cast. The starkest example was his decision to sign the big welfare overhaul of 1996. No Democratic president since the Great Depression would have considered such an action. Also, many executive agencies began to shift their policies toward the right in a host of administrative decisions designed to blunt the force of the Republican Congress. And Clinton reversed decades of deficit economics. His new disciplined approach to spending, coupled with a growing economy, brought governmental shortfalls down steadily until he managed to give the nation four years of solid budget surpluses, including a \$236 billion overage in fiscal 2000. For the first time in decades, the government actually paid down on the national debt.

This achievement was possible in part because real per capita GDP growth through Clinton's second term approached 4 percent (though the economy began to sputter at the end of his presidency). Some of this is attributable to Reagan's tax policies, which had unleashed a burst of entrepreneurial activity, particularly in the technology sector, that generated in turn high productivity and accelerated business activity. Clinton exploited this ongoing gift to foster his own strong growth rates and eradicate the deficit problem.

From 1995 onward Clinton governed with an apparent appreciation for the fact that the country had seen no successful liberal president since Lyndon Johnson was forced into retirement in 1968. And the ghost of Reagan's presidency discouraged class rhetoric designed to mobilize ordinary Americans against the wealthy. The country didn't hear much of that kind of rhetoric during Clinton's presidency and certainly not during his 1996 reelection campaign.

Then came George W. Bush, whose presidency transformed the nation, the Republican Party, and conservatism. He essentially killed Reaganism as a viable political outlook, though he did push through Congress two tax-cut measures in his early tenure. Liberal critics have lambasted that tax policy as contributing seriously to subsequent runaway deficits, but it helped Bush move the country out of the economic sluggishness he inherited—an economic growth rate of only 1 percent in his first year. With his tax cuts in place Bush got growth up to 3.47 percent by 2004. That unquestionably contributed to his reelection that year.

But Bush rejected Reagan's legacy on two major domestic matters—constitutionalism and fiscal discipline. With his antiterrorism policies, Bush claimed unilateral power as commander in chief that outstripped the claims of any previous president—wiretaps without warrants, the seizure of terror suspects, brutal interrogation practices, the establishment of tribunal commissions for terror suspects with limited due process protections. As the Cato Institute's Gene Healy put it, "The breadth of the theory that they were articulating is as broad as any theory of presidential power offered by any administration in history."

Additionally, Bush employed "signing statements" with more aggressiveness than previous presidents. These are declarations that a president considers provisions of legislation he has signed to be unconstitutional and hence null and void. But presidents aren't granted the power to determine the constitutionality of legislative actions. The appropriate recourse for presidents who consider legislation unconstitutional is to veto it or take the matter to the courts. And critics considered Bush's actions in many instances to be tantamount to line-item vetoes, which the Supreme Court has ruled unconstitutional. During his presidency Bush issued 161 signing statements touching on 1,100 provisions of federal law. This isn't the greatest number for any president, but Bush used language that seemed designed to alter the balance of power between the government's legislative and executive branches.

On matters of fiscal discipline, Bush's performance was one of utter laxity. According to the Cato Institute, Bush gave the country an 83 percent increase in federal spending in eight years. Clinton's comparable figure, according to Veronique de Rugy of George Mason University, was just 12.5 percent. Entitlement spending contributed substantially to Bush's total, particularly his new Medicare drug entitlement, which added a 10-year price tag of some \$550 billion to the public fisc. But Bush was particularly promiscuous in discretionary spending, which soared by 48.6 percent in just his final term. De Rugy points out that Bush also added thousands of new federal subsidy programs. In 2008, she writes, there were 1,816 such programs distributing hundreds of billions of dollars annually to state governments, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and individuals. This represented a 30 percent increase over the 2000 number.

As Bush took office, the Congressional Budget Office projected that the government, then enjoying solid budget surpluses, would haul down a cumulative \$5.6 trillion in further surpluses between 2002 and 2011—assuming no major changes in the law or unanticipated economic travails. As it happened, deficits during that period added up to \$6.1 trillion. Two recessions contributed to that big fiscal swing, and the tax cuts may have had a small impact. But much of it stemmed from two things: wild fiscal promiscuity and Bush's aggressive war policies.



This brings us to American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, a time of entirely new global complications and challenges. We can't know how Reagan would have responded to these profound changes, but we do know that the post-Cold War foreign policy crafted by the second Bush was disastrous for America and the world. We know also that the American people soon grew weary of it.

Indeed, the biggest blow to conservatism since Reagan's political exit has been the Republican Party's capture by the so-called neoconservatives, bent on U.S. global hegemony and the remaking of other cultures in the American image. In this project the increasingly globalist Republicans were joined by humanitarian interventionists on the Democratic side. This formidable combination for years ignored popular sentiment as the electorate became increasingly queasy, then agitated, by this foolhardy foreign policy aggressiveness.

Reagan devoted his career to the molding and shaping of the conservative message to give it popular resonance. But the neocons and their humanitarian allies didn't care about that, much less about the human and financial costs of endless U.S. war-making. Nor did they seem to care much about the consequences of upending regimes, spreading chaos, and unleashing humanitarian blights in such places as Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Ukraine.

This isn't conservatism. In an influential 1957 essay entitled "Conservatism as an Ideology," political scientist Samuel P. Huntington listed fundamental elements of the conservative creed, embraced by nearly all of its proponents: society is the organic product of slow historical growth, and existing institutions embody the wisdom of previous generations; man is a creature of instinct and emotion as well as reason, and evil resides in human nature rather than in any particular societal institutions; the community is superior to the individual, and the rights of men derive from civic responsibility; except in an ultimate moral sense, humans are unequal, and society always consists of a variety of classes, orders, and groups; the settled schemes of government based on human experience are always superior to abstract experimentation.

Thus, wrote Huntington, conservatism differs from other ideologies (except radicalism) in that it lacks any "substantive ideal"—a vision of the perfect society. "No political philosopher," he said, "has ever described a conservative utopia."

George W. Bush was a utopian. No other word adequately defines his vision of a Middle East culture in which the ancient Bedouin sensibilities are wiped away in favor of Western values and structures. His stated resolve to "rid the world of evil" demonstrated a lack of any conservative sensibility on where evil resides. He certainly didn't manifest any understanding of society, particularly Middle Eastern society, as the organic product of slow historical growth. And he placed abstract experimentation over human experience in formulating this war policy rationale.

In exploring various theories of conservatism, Huntington favored what he called "situational" conservatism, which arises from a recurring type of historical situation in which a fundamental challenge is directed at established institutions and in which supporters of those institutions turn to conservatism in marshalling a defense. During the Cold War he urged liberals to temporarily embrace conservatism as the greatest bulwark against the threat of Soviet Communism, anathema to Western liberalism. America's liberals ignored him.

America today faces two threats that call for broadly conservative responses. One is the threat of Islamist radicalism, which is widespread within the world of Islam and which carries with it a fervent hatred of the West and of Western values. But a policy of employing American military might to upend Islamic regimes and destabilize their societies is precisely the wrong approach in confronting this threat. To plant the American flag in the heartland soil of Islam is an incendiary

action destined to lengthen and intensify the Islamic hostility to the West and hence the tensions spawning terrorist activity. The right approach would have been to seek the help of Middle Eastern regimes, including dictatorships (even brutal ones), in thwarting the emergence of this venomous anti-Western terrorism and maintaining as much stability as possible in those troubled lands.

More broadly, a conservative post-Cold War foreign policy would have leveraged America's superior military and economic might in behalf of balance-of-power diplomacy—accepting other nations' legitimate regional interests; employing “off-shore balancing” to maintain an equilibrium of power in key regions; eschewing unnecessary provocations such as NATO's eastward push toward Russia; entering foreign policy confrontations only when U.S. vital interests or threats to global stability clearly justify them; turning to war only as a last resort; and recognizing that war inevitably concentrates power in the executive branch, where conservatives don't want to see it enhanced.

The other threat calling for a conservative response is the specter of unchecked immigration and the breakdown of U.S. borders. Immigration rates in America have reached a historic peak, based on the most significant metric in assessing it: the percentage of foreign-born people in the country. In the 1970s it was around 7 percent; today it is double that. The previous time when it reached such a height, around the turn of the last century, the country reacted with restrictive policies in terms of both the magnitude of immigration and the background of people allowed in. The focus was on the country's ability to assimilate so many immigrants—and so many immigrants from different cultural backgrounds.

We have reached a point today when a similar sensibility has emerged within large segments of the U.S. population, and that sentiment can't be ignored as the country grapples with the ongoing crisis. The conservative outlook will play a role in future immigration debates, but don't expect the leadership on this matter to come from the Bush family. George W. began his presidency by vowing to create a “special relationship” with Mexico akin to the relationship with Great Britain. He advocated a path to legal status and eventual citizenship for illegals, and called for a guest worker program bringing in as many as 200,000 people a year. When Congress appropriated money for a border fence, Bush issued a signing statement saying he, and not Congress, would determine how the funds would be spent. And he issued numerous executive orders granting temporary stays of deportation and work authorization to undocumented immigrants. Jeb Bush explained the underlying sentiment for all this during his 2016 presidential campaign when he justified illegal entry into the country as an “act of love” on the part of heads of families toward spouses and children.



Thus do we see the assault on conservatism coming once again from within the Republican Party and particularly from the Bushes. But they aren't alone. A particular spectacle has been the actions of Senators John McCain and Marco Rubio, who talk tough on immigration when they face voters in seeking to perpetuate their careers but then, once reelected, revert to their true sentiment of amnesty for the 11 million or so illegals in the country.

Indeed, no issue in recent memory distills the politics of finesse as starkly as the immigration issue. Mainstream politicians running for president in 2016 all sought to keep it out of the campaign in hopes it could be handled later in a more controlled congressional environment. Republicans didn't want to stir up voters on the issue because that would impede their ability to slip some kind of modified amnesty into the eventual mix. Democrats figured that a few more years of finesse, with illegal entry continuing and legal entry rising, would settle the matter through changing demographics bringing an alteration in the political power balance. Some sought to stifle debate by hurling the epithet "racist" at those who felt immigration, both legal and illegal, had reached unsustainable proportions. Meanwhile, no one was willing to say what that percentage of foreign born in the country should be—18 percent? 23 percent? what?

But out in the country a realization was dawning that the issue represented a distillation of what has become the most powerful fault line in American politics—the split between the globalists of the American elite and the nationalists of the heartland. It had become the preeminent defining issue for America, which meant it could no longer be finessed.

Enter Donald J. Trump. For all of his crudity and lack of intellectual depth, he demonstrated a brilliance at seeing realities in American politics that nearly all other politicians missed or ignored. One was the developing political chasm between the globalist elites and the unwashed nationalists. Another was the unsustainability of the immigration finesse perpetrated by the country's political establishment. Another was the plight of the country's heartland working class, devastated by, among other things, unfair trading practices by U.S. trading partners, particularly China. Still another was the growing disenchantment among Americans about the foreign policy belligerence advocated by GOP neocons and Democratic Wilsonians.

What's intriguing about these Trump positions is that they didn't align with one party or the other but instead declared a pox on both houses. His most resonate issues were those that slammed the elites of both parties, particularly when they came together into cozy coalitions of elitist interest, as with immigration, foreign policy, and trade. And he always took the nationalist position against the globalist one whenever that fault line conflict emerged in the debate. One result was that Republicans, having abandoned Reagan's sophisticated brand of populism, got Trump's far more pugilistic and nasty populism instead.

It would be a mistake to label Trump as any kind of philosophical conservative. There's no evidence he has any discernible philosophy and certainly no conservative one when it comes to the scourge of runaway entitlement spending, the size of the federal government, or, it seems, the imperative of protecting the Constitution (though he has pleased constitutionalists with his court nominations).

Nevertheless, Trump's 2016 success suggests that the agitation against the globalist onslaught had been festering for some time, only to be obscured by the lack of any political champion willing to take on the cause. This raises some questions: Where was American conservatism as this growing concern about the definition of America was percolating in the electorate? If conservatives weren't willing to embrace American nationalism—under assault by open-borders

advocates, runaway war-making, industrial decline, and the bludgeon of political correctness—then who would?

The answer is that conservatism abandoned its roots on most of these issues, which isn't surprising since conservatism years ago gravitated to the globalist frame of mind in much of its thinking as it clustered into a highfalutin enterprise increasingly labeled "Conservatism, Inc."—meaning the establishment right-leaning publications, think tanks, and academics. In doing so conservatism abandoned most of the definitional elements of the creed identified by Sam Huntington back in 1957.



Where does the movement go from here? Neal B. Freeman, the conservative writer and entrepreneur long associated with Bill Buckley, suggests two possibilities. One is to "withdraw to the castle, pull up the drawbridge, and labor to defend share in what has become a tax-privileged and well-upholstered Conservatism, Inc." The other is to "recognize that the game has changed, thanks in large part to the inadvertent contribution of Donald J. Trump," who identified and pulled together a large constituency "previously unreachable by Conservatism, Inc."

Just so. One can't help thinking back to that remarkable Buckley speech of 1964, on the eve of the Goldwater cataclysm, and his admonition to "take stock of reality." Conservatism back then couldn't overcome the force of the liberal moment exemplified by Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, but ultimately it did. Today's conservatism hasn't been able to overcome the limitations of its own self-imposed misdirection. The imperative now is to build conservative resonance of the kind that Reagan crafted so painstakingly over so many years. Conservatism Inc. can't do it. But it's doable. It's time, in the words of Buckley, for "regrouping" and for "gathering together our scattered forces."