

Anti-establishment Conservatism: From Goldwater to the Tea Party

Introductory chapter

Robert B. Horwitz
Department of Communication
UC San Diego

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The Reverend Jerry Falwell, on the Christian Broadcast Network's "700 Club" television show, speaking about the reasons behind the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001: "The ACLU has got to take a lot of blame for this. And I know I'll be hear from them for this, but throwing God...successfully with the help of the federal court system...throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools, the abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked and when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad...I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who try to secularize America...I point the thing in their face and say you helped this happen."

A large billboard appeared in the downtown area of Mason City, Iowa in 2010. It compared President Barack Obama to Adolf Hitler and Vladimir Lenin. Ordered and paid for by the North Iowa Tea Party, the three-panel billboard presented large photographs of each political leader advocating "change" and labeled the respective photographs with the words "Democrat Socialism," "National Socialism," and "Marxist Socialism." Underneath, tying text and images together was the strongly worded lesson: "Radical Leaders Prey on the Fearful & Naïve."

Former US Senator and 2012 Republican presidential hopeful Rick Santorum addressed the topic of climate change on the June 18, 2011 Rush Limbaugh radio show. Santorum pointedly rejected "man-made climate change" as "patently absurd...junk science...a beautifully concocted scheme by the Left...an excuse for more government control of your life."

Of the 240-member Republican delegation to the House of Representatives of the 112th Congress, all but six signed the Taxpayer Protection Pledge promulgated by Americans for Tax Reform, the lobbying organization headed by Grover Norquist. Of the 47 Republican members of the Senate, just seven declined to sign the pledge: "I, _____, pledge to the taxpayers of the (____ district of the) state of _____ and to the American people that I will:

ONE, oppose any and all efforts to increase the marginal income tax rate for individuals and business; and TWO, oppose any net reduction or elimination of deductions and credits, unless matched dollar for dollar by further reducing tax rates.”

What we might call the “anti-establishment” right wing now defines American conservatism. It has by and large taken over the Republican Party. A movement long in the making, with roots in the Goldwater presidential campaign of 1964, anti-establishment conservatism achieved major success with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. It subsequently orchestrated the congressional opposition to the Clinton presidency in the mid-1990s, including shutting down the government and impeaching the President. Effectively securing the Executive branch in the George W. Bush era, it helped drive the country to war in Iraq in 2003. Out of the White House, anti-establishment conservatism has become the foremost face of the Republican Party, manifest in the populist rage of the Tea Party and the stunning obduracy of Republicans in Congress.

Instances of the anti-establishment right’s rigid, sometimes bewildering, positions are now legion. In debates involving matters of science, anti-establishment conservatism for example consistently ignores the overwhelming consensus among climatologists that human activity and industry are largely responsible for the perilous warming of the planet. Many conservatives of this tendency still hold out against Darwin’s theory of evolution in favor of “creation science,” and make every effort to get at least equal billing for creationism or intelligent design in high school biology class. In foreign policy, anti-establishment conservatism pressed relentlessly for the invasion of Iraq without proper regard to contrary evidence as to the existence of Saddam Hussein’s alleged weapons of mass destruction. The George W. Bush administration, epitomizing anti-establishment

conservatism in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, insisted on the direct link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda long after the claim had been refuted. By many credible accounts, the administration cooked highly equivocal intelligence to appear substantive and conclusive. It engaged in tortured legal logic to find that torture was not torture. And it fixed facts to support preconceived policy determinations in areas of particular interest to business and religious constituencies. Indeed, the administration effectively turned over certain government agencies or departments to select religious groups.

In our current moment, Congressional Republicans engage in an unbending, mantra-like advocacy of tax cuts and deficit reduction in the face of any and all economic conditions – showing that they do not have a real economic policy, but rather a canonical system of political beliefs. As became evident in the fraught congressional brawl over raising the federal debt ceiling in the summer of 2011, the Republican agenda revealed itself as a weird cross between duplicity and self-delusion, with demands for severe deficit reduction and balanced budgets after recent Republican presidents ran up, without objection, enormous budget deficits. Tea Party supporters insist that President Barack Obama is not an American citizen and is secretly a member of the Muslim faith. In their view the President is intent on ruining America through his “socialist” policies. They exclaim with urgent fury, “Keep the government out of my Medicare!” apparently not comprehending that Medicare is a program of the US Government.¹ At the same time, of

¹ At various rallies and town hall meetings in 2009, Tea Party supporters displayed protest signs and made statements about keeping the government out of Medicare. A poll conducted by Public Policy Polling in August of that year asked if respondents thought the government should “stay out of Medicare.” Thirty-nine percent said yes.

http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/surveys/2009_Archives/PPP_Release_National_819513.pdf

all the political actors on the stage during the 2008 financial crisis, it was the Tea Party that possessed the political vocabulary capable of expressing the disgust of the class bias and unfairness of the government bailouts of the banks, insurance, and mortgage companies responsible for the financial collapse.

What is going on here? What is anti-establishment conservatism and where did it come from? Why is it so dogmatic and sometimes even at odds with empirical reality? And how has it triumphed – at least in terms of capturing the Republican Party if not the political climate as a whole?

Conservatism embodies a venerable, coherent set of values rooted in a theory of individual freedom and property and of limiting the power of the state. Of fundamental concern is the power of the centralized state and its threat to liberty and property. In the conservative outlook liberty and property are inescapably linked. Property makes it possible for a human being to develop in mind and spirit, that is, for an individual to be free. Property in effect underlies personhood: it provides an individual with perspective, privacy, responsibility, and a concrete place in society. A person has the natural right to the possession and use of his or her property; indeed, private property is the most fundamental of the natural rights. Without property, a person has no concrete free existence. She is inevitably dependent on others, especially government, and thus essentially unfree. Against a liberal notion of equality, conservative thought declares human beings as essentially unequal in their natural gifts and abilities. Freedom can thus only consist in the ability of each person to develop without hindrance according to the

law and principle of his or her own personality. Property, thus, is a sacred moral value, the key to individual freedom and the prerequisite to a free society.²

While conservatism reaches back centuries, how its values manifest concretely has varied considerably. Like most belief systems, there are many versions that go under the label of conservatism. The distinct form of conservatism that is dominant in any given historical period depends on the conditions of that period and the other political philosophies with which conservatism does battle, including battles internal to the conservative creed itself. Our current dominant form of conservatism, which I have called anti-establishment conservatism, has a complex but readily traced historical pedigree. That lineage enables us to understand its profile and disposition.

American conservatism has always been different from its European counterparts in its virtually unalloyed embrace of individualism and capitalism, and its selective hatred of the state. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century American conservatism (then known as classical liberalism) was defined by its stout, repressive, and successful defense of laissez-faire capitalism and property rights, often legitimated by the ideology of Social Darwinism (the survival-of-the-fittest applied to human society).³ Interference with the invisible hand of supply and demand, even if well-intentioned, was understood to disrupt the natural negotiations in the marketplace that make the market function so well. If this meant suffering for those who lost in the free market struggle, it was the unfortunate price

² See, among others, Clinton Rossiter, Conservatism in America, the Thankless Persuasion (New York: Knopf, 1955); Louis Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955); Barry Goldwater, The Conscience of a Conservative (Shepherdsville, KY: Victor Publishing Co., 1960); George Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945 (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 1996).

³ Robert Green McCloskey, American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise, 1865-1910: A Study of William Graham Sumner, Stephen J. Field and Andrew Carnegie (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

of both liberty and productivity. The operative maxim: The government that governs best is that which governs least.

But the Depression weakened faith in American business and its sundry ideological supports. The New Deal ushered in various forms of state interventionism, some of which, pushed by a newly empowered labor movement, had a social democratic cast of mitigating inequality and of promoting basic public controls over markets. In the 1930s and 40s the Old Right, rooted in business and straddling the Democratic and Republican parties, set itself against the Roosevelt administration, decrying the New Deal as fostering economic collectivism and redistribution. For the conservatives of the 1930 and 40s, like their Gilded Age predecessors, the market was the democratic sphere of liberty. It was government that threatened freedom. Indeed, for conservatives the experience of the 20th century was that in the name of equality and with the professed aim of improving life for the masses, the state alarmingly accrued power and weakened property rights. In so doing the state undermined the fundamental condition of liberty that emanates from property and thus undercut freedom writ large. The Old Right thus called for the “rollback” of the New Deal. Its critique of the state in many respects extended to foreign policy. In the interwar period, American conservatives tended toward isolationism. They counseled avoidance of entangling political commitments – especially in European affairs, which, after the experience of the First World War, conservatives saw as intractable. And because spending on armies and armaments required higher taxes and thus inevitably produced inflation, the Old Right was convinced that a militarized foreign policy would lead inevitably to the dreaded concentration of governmental power.

Voters, however, did not agree. New Deal Democrats were consistently returned to office. (To be sure, the New Deal coalition had its own conservatives – on racial matters and labor unions, concentrated in the Democratic South.) By the early 1950s the Old Right – still anti-New Deal and isolationist – split more or less into two key factions. The dominant bloc essentially made its peace with the New Deal and with America’s postwar internationalist, interventionist foreign policy of the containment of communism. This dominant bloc was “establishment conservatism” or moderate Republicanism, centered (actually or metaphorically) in the Northeast, tied to Wall Street and large corporations, led initially by Dwight Eisenhower. In essence, establishment conservatism made its accommodation with liberals and with theory and doctrine in the overweening pragmatic effort to protect private enterprise and foster its advance. By and large establishment conservatism accepted what historians label the postwar “liberal consensus,” that is, the basic New Deal order of modest welfare state, Keynesian economics and the application of disinterested social science in pursuit of the national interest, and interventionist foreign policy of the containment – but a milder, less state interventionist, less expensive, less labor dominated, more business-friendly version.

Anti-establishment conservatism, the other faction that emerged from the dissolution of the prewar Old Right, developed as a movement in opposition not just to the liberal consensus of the postwar period, but to establishment conservatism as well. Located principally in small business and its political affiliates, geographically rooted in the Midwest and West, but also scattered amongst a welter of anti-communist and politically fringe groups (some of which identified as Christian religious organizations standing up for God and western civilization), anti-establishment conservatism continued

the call for the rollback of the New Deal – and for the ousting of the Republican establishment. Barry Goldwater, the Arizona Senator who emerged as one of anti-establishment conservatism’s prime leaders, denounced establishment conservatism as “me-too Republicanism.” “Me-too” conveyed sharp criticism of the established Republican Party’s collaboration with Democrats in the postwar liberal consensus. In contrast, anti-establishment conservatism advocated the rollback of the centralized New Deal state in favor of a principled individual liberty. The rollback metaphor also applied to foreign policy. This signaled a major ideological shift. By the early 1950s virtually all segments of the Old Right had turned away from isolationist foreign policy. But whereas establishment conservatism largely accepted the policy of containment, anti-establishment conservatism called for the military defeat of international communism. Anti-establishment conservatism denounced containment in favor of aggressive, muscular, if necessary, nuclear, action against the Soviet Union and its satellites. Roll communism back.

Anti-establishment conservatism thus carried on the prewar Old Right’s loathing of the New Deal but turned away from its foreign policy isolationism. It combined or “fused” two strains of thought: an economic libertarianism with a socially conservative Christian traditionalism. These strains resided in some tension. The libertarian form, derived from 18th and 19th century European liberalism (and particularly John Locke), was founded on principles of the freedom of the individual, limited government, a capitalist economy, and the social contract to protect private property.⁴ The market was a mechanism of virtue because of its efficiency and its promotion of individual freedom.

⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1690] 1988).

The traditionalist strain, rooted in a religious, essentially Christian sensibility, understood society as a community woven into a web of values and obligations that bind individuals to one another, united by belief in a transcendent being and an objective moral order. A particular reading of Edmund Burke formed the basis of traditionalism, that is, Burke's emphasis on order and social harmony, on the necessity to balance freedom with self-restraint and duty.⁵ What bridged the differences between the two strains of conservatism was a shared loathing of the New Deal and of communism. In the fusion of traditionalism and libertarianism, the moral force of property was understood to guarantee individual freedom, the traditional family, and communal virtue. The Bible and the Constitution were understood as textual guides. Known at the time as "fusionism," anti-establishment conservatism presented an ideologically charged version of customary conservative beliefs in laissez-faire capitalism and private property rights, limited government and low taxes, the defense of the traditional family, constitutional originalism, anti-communism and stout national defense. It adopted a peculiarly anti-statist statism, allowing the movement to support interventionist anti-communist foreign policy and the massive military-industrial complex that served it, while in the same breath condemning the growth of the federal government as a threat to individual liberty, personal responsibility, and self-reliance.

A right wing populist revolt against the postwar liberal consensus, including the consensus' Republican establishment supporters, fueled the Goldwater movement in the early 1960s. The revolt judged establishment conservatism's vigilance against communism, which included the New Deal itself as a form of proto-communism,

⁵ Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France; Thomas Paine, The Rights of Man (Garden City, NY: Dolphin Books: [1790] 1961).

woefully deficient. Of course, Goldwater lost big in the 1964 election. Diminished by the Goldwater defeat, the anti-establishment conservative movement didn't disappear; rather it went into rebuilding mode. It re-grouped, built institutions and recruited leaders, attracted money from right wing businessmen, mobilized conservative Christians politically, and, 16 years later helped bring Ronald Reagan to the presidency. Since that 1980 victory, anti-establishment conservatism has manifested in an effective, if somewhat discordant alliance of reenergized anti-New Deal business, the Christian or evangelical right (embodying social conservatism), neoconservatism (disillusioned liberal intellectuals who moved to the right in the 1970s), and the libertarian conservative tradition now embodied by the Tea Party movement. Anti-establishment conservatism has effectively become the new establishment. Conservatism today is of the anti-establishment variety. This book traces that development.

What are the features of contemporary anti-establishment conservatism? Principled to the point of being dogmatic, fundamentalist in style and inclination, anti-establishment conservatism brooks no compromise. Indeed, it derides the old maxim that politics is the art of the possible and deems those who live by that adage as weak, sellouts, traitors even. The old "me-too Republican" insult has been replaced by the RINO acronym – "Republican in Name Only." Politics is rather, for all intents and purposes, Manichean, a life or death struggle between good and evil. My use of religious metaphors when speaking of anti-establishment conservative politics is, plainly, by design. For, a convinced, intransigent, faith-based style of politics has become characteristic of contemporary American conservatism, one that seems to attack the very notion of a public good. The old hard-line libertarian saw, "taxation is theft," increasingly animates

conservative politics. In this view, taxation beyond some very restricted level of collective security is illegitimate, theft even, which makes the entire thrust of 20th century progressive politics essentially criminal. While this may be an extreme view on taxes, going far beyond the older, states rights-based conservative criticism of federal taxes as opposed to local ones, the extreme view seems now to pervade all contemporary conservative politics. For anti-establishment conservatives, taxes and government spending have become as much a moral matter as a political one. But when politics become ensconced within a deeply moralistic framework, negotiation and compromise become next to impossible. One's opponents do not just differ on policy matters; their very opposition is confirmation of their bad intent, perhaps, even, their evil nature. Contemporary conservatism tends to vilify its adversaries in a way that recalls religious battles. Their deeply held values tend to overwhelm inconvenient facts and evidence in a way that recalls religious fundamentalists explaining away the contradictions found in Scripture. Faith over facts.

Indeed, current-day conservatism puts the lie to the wry dictum attributed to Daniel Patrick Moynihan: "You're entitled to your own opinions; you are not entitled to your own facts." Virtually everything to them – facts, science, expertise – is politics; that is, unsettled, untrue, and open to contestation. Karl Rove, President George W. Bush's closest adviser, conveyed this perspective in a widely noted 2004 interview with the journalist Ron Suskind. In Suskind's retelling:

The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while

you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.⁶

Although in recent decades the right has attacked liberals and liberalism for their supposed relativism and lack of a clear moral center, Rove's comments in fact betray the right's affinity with the worldview – these days laid at the door of postmodernism – that reality and truth are not fixed. Rather, politics is the power to define reality, to make truth.

The anti-establishment right thus reveals itself to be a complicated mix of conservative principle, fundamentalism, and truth-creating voluntarism, engaged in a radical effort to overturn settled law and institutions. How has conservatism evolved into such a state, such that it seems at odds with its moderate and intellectually principled origins in the likes of Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Benjamin Disraeli, and even, in comparison to what we see today, William F. Buckley, Jr.? If conservatism is in historical and theoretical terms a political philosophy and practice tied to notions of continuity, prudence, and incrementalism, of securing restraints on human passions and creating social institutions that foster, in Burke's phrase, "public affections," how is it that current American conservatism has become so fervent, so furious, so revolutionary? How are we to understand the tension in anti-establishment conservative ideology between the ostensibly fixed knowledge provided by an inerrant Bible and US Constitution with the suggestion, by Karl Rove and others, that reality and truth are infinitely malleable? What explains the rage of the Tea Party movement and the elected

⁶ Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," New York Times Magazine (October 17, 2004).
<http://www.cs.umass.edu/~immerman/play/opinion05/WithoutADoubt.html>

representatives affiliated with it? And why has this brand of conservatism become so successful? These are the central questions this book tries to answer.

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One noted explanation for the dogmatic turn of conservatism is that of the “paranoid style in American politics,” originally formulated by the historian Richard Hofstadter in an effort to comprehend the popular movements around Joseph McCarthy and Barry Goldwater. In Hofstadter’s view there was legitimate debate to be had about American foreign policy and the danger of the Soviet Union, Keynesian economics and federal spending, the influence of labor unions and the like. What concerned Hofstadter was the style of popular conservatism at mid 20th-century. What he found so significant and disturbing about McCarthyism was the way the senator and his followers engaged in political argument (conspiracy mongering), expressed their political subjectivities (as rage), and understood themselves (as patriotic victims, in McCarthy’s old phrase, of “a conspiracy so immense”). And, in the end, it wasn’t a matter of simply style. The paranoid outlook affected substantive political content, transforming otherwise legitimate political disputes into fevered charges of betrayal and treason, the violation of natural law or God’s will, and resulted in a poisoned political climate and the widespread abuse of people’s rights. Hofstadter understood right-wing movements as manifestations of a periodic, punctuated upwelling of a permanent reservoir of anti-intellectualism, even mass irrationalism, in American life. Those drawn to the paranoid politics of McCarthyism and Goldwaterism were, in Hofstadter’s analysis, deeply distressed by the pace and direction of postwar social change, and judged their group position in American society to be under grave threat. They were convinced that “America has been largely

taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion.”⁷ Behind these convictions, Hofstadter submitted, was the powerful phenomenon of “status anxiety,” the psychological sense of loss of rank and place, of an intense feeling of victimhood, and the need to find and punish those responsible for the loss of status. The result was a curiously crude and almost superstitious form of anti-communism, which discovered in elites (even Republican presidents!) men of wholly evil intent who conspired against the public good, and found in the modest American welfare state alarming economic policies that posed an existential danger to the fabric of free society.⁸

Jump forward 40-plus years. The rage and conspiracy mongering following the election of Barack Obama – and the generally dogmatic tenor of conservative politics in the George W. Bush years – have prompted a Hofstadter revival of sorts. Again, the antipathy to taxes and government spending, the anxiety some people feel about what they perceive as the increasing control by the federal government over American life are, of course, familiar conservative themes, legitimate areas of even passionate political disagreement. What startled, again, was the style of conservative politics, particularly that manifest by the Tea Party movement but hardly confined to it: the rage and invective that accompanied the critique of government spending and the so-called nanny-state; the racist rhetoric and fantastical fixation on President Obama’s birth certificate, citizenship status, religious affiliation, and association with terrorists; the outraged claims, backed by

⁷ Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays (New York: Knopf, 1965), pp. 6, 23.

⁸ Idem, “Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited – 1965,” in The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays, pp. 71-73; idem, “Goldwater and Pseudo-Conservative Politics,” pp. 100, 117.

no evidence whatever, that the Democratic health care reform bill of 2009-10 called for “death panels”; accusations that the scientific consensus on climate change was a politicized hoax. It’s hard not to summon up Hofstadter’s concept of the paranoid style after encountering the ubiquitous Tea Party slogan, “We want our country back!” --Back from whom? --Back to what? --To a simpler, happier time when nice white Christian people ran an America that itself confidently ran the world? Indeed, Hofstadter’s description of the paranoid style of the early 1960s is so apt for our current moment it feels slightly uncanny.

In the paranoid style, as I conceive it, the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy. But there is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically against him; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself along but millions of others. Insofar as he does not usually see himself singled out as the individual victim of a personal conspiracy, he is somewhat more rational and much more disinterested. His sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation.⁹

But incisive description is not necessary adequate explanation. The problem with the theory of the paranoid style, as many of Hofstadter’s critics were quick to point out, is that the social psychological approach makes it easy to label as atavistic and irrational, or the symptom of personality disorder, those political actors and behaviors with which the researcher happens to disagree. At the end of the day Hofstadter’s analysis is a description of a political style, tied to a grand social psychological theory. Hofstadter

⁹ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” p. 4.

posed a macro argument (certain social structural conditions produce status anxiety) and a micro argument (people anxious of their place in the world exhibit a paranoid, conspiracy-mongering political style) – with nothing in between. A central flaw is the absence of a middle level of analysis to connect the two. There is a lesson here. What is necessary to explain the evolution and ascendance of dogmatic anti-establishment conservatism is this middle level of analysis, deeply rooted in history and culture, which traces the development of the concrete institutions responsible for mobilizing and channeling anger, anxiety, and ideas in particular directions, with particular kinds of analysis, and that produce particular kinds of political subjectivities and a distinct political culture. The development of ideas in the rough and tumble of politics in historical context, and an understanding of the concrete networks of money, media, and organizations that the anti-establishment conservative movement has built to channel those ideas over the last 40-plus years, is key.

With this middle level of ideas and institutions as the necessary analytical focus, of particular interest to this study are the Christian right and the neoconservatives, inasmuch as these particular groups developed the ideas and organizations that reenergized anti-establishment conservatism in the 1970s. Politics are often defined by what (and who) one hates. Arriving separately on the American political scene, the Christian right and neoconservatism each articulated deep loathing toward the worldview and politics of the cultural revolution of the 1960s. This abhorrence grew into an expansive critique of the modern liberal state, which Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals believed (with some justification) had turned against them, their institutions, and their values. The logic of the 14th Amendment's equal protection and due process clauses blossomed in the

1960s into the legal protection of pluralistic values in the public sphere. The “rights revolution” of the 1960s and its expansion into the legal protection of racial minorities against discrimination had the effect of challenging the relatively insular, protected world of conservative Christians particularly through tax, education, and labor policies. Fearful for their institutions (particularly their private schools and their lucrative radio and television networks), they denounced liberal government and the value system they believed lay behind it, labeling that value system “secular humanism.” Conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists were especially scornful of the federal judiciary that had begun to apply the 14th Amendment in cases involving Christian institutions. Although the story of fundamentalist insularity from the world is in many respects inaccurate and oversold, it is the case that by the late 1970s, conservative Christians, newly mobilized politically and brought into the Republican fold with the help of former Goldwater political entrepreneurs, became a key constituency in the Reagan electoral coalition. Since 1980 the Christian right has been acknowledged as the “base” of the Republican Party.

Neoconservatism was neither an electoral constituency nor a grassroots movement. Rather it was an influential intellectual inclination that began with a trenchant critique of government overreach and the unintended consequences of public policy. Although in general supportive of the New Deal, neoconservatives turned to the right because they believed the federal government by the late 1960s was guilty of engaging in social engineering. At the root of government overreach, epitomized in their view by the anti-poverty Great Society programs of Lyndon Johnson’s presidential administration, was a “New Class” of unproductive liberal public sector professional elites whose ill-advised

and costly endeavors to re-make social behavior served to fortify their own position and power. The New Class' will-to-power came largely at the expense of virtuous producers, that is, at the expense of those honorable members of society, including businessmen, who actually produced value and added to the real wealth of the nation. By implication, the New Class did not add value; indeed, its members were parasitic on those who did. Neoconservative New Class analysis represented a right wing turn in the anti-elitist politics historically identified with American populism.

Distinct movements, the Christian right and neoconservatism discovered they shared intellectual affinities and moral convictions. The neoconservatives' New Class analysis in many respects mirrored the Christian right's analysis of secular humanism. Both groups had come to believe that big government was to blame for the nation's ills and was imperiling private enterprise, which, of course, also served to align them with certain business interests. The Christian right and neoconservatism both also held that the United States was faltering in its leadership of the free world. They shared an appreciation of religion as providing the moral and cultural foundations for a wobbly, even endangered, liberal democracy. As leaders of the two groups began to interact, they increasingly came to share material networks and resources as well as ideas. Business was implored to help spread the ideas, and business responded generously. The same foundations and corporations and wealthy CEOs began funding neoconservative and religious initiatives, think tanks, advocacy organizations, symposia, and publications; Christian right and neoconservative leaders began attending the same conferences; their writings appeared in each other's newsletters and journals.

The corporate underwriting of right wing Christian and neoconservative ventures highlighted a third element in a reconstituted anti-establishment conservative alliance: big business. Having for the most part signed on to the postwar liberal consensus, big business ditched it in the 1970s in a revolt against regulation and tax policy and the accommodation with organized labor. Although the business mobilization against government was swift and consequential, business was in many ways a follower of the anti-establishment conservative zeitgeist formulated by the intellectuals associated with the Christian right and especially the neoconservative movement. Here the role played by the neoconservative essayist and organizer Irving Kristol was crucial.

Kristol et al's ideas were powerful. They spoke to a moment when the New Deal political coalition had begun to break down and the old liberal consensus policy tools had become less effective. The national Democratic Party's commitment to Civil Rights led to the defection of the white South from the party. Organized labor had already been transformed, beginning with the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, from a crusading social movement to just another interest group – and a diminishing one – of the Democratic Party. The Vietnam War split the party. The 1970s marked the beginning of the decline in American hegemony: the Vietnam War sapped American global political leadership and globalization had begun to lessen America's global economic preeminence. Together, the New Class and secular humanism critiques called into question a core principle of the modernist liberal consensus – that disinterested social science and policy expertise could be marshaled in the service of the national interest. Instead, neoconservatives and Christian evangelicals challenged – in their minds, exposed – everything as politics and power. The essence of the New Class critique was that

expertise was simply a masquerade for a particular kind of group self-interest. Liberal professionals in the government and non-profit sectors used their educational credentials and the language of expertise to gain power. This, too, had a deeper, historically pregnant religious dimension. The idea of a disinterested social science-based policy elite was in many respects the secular embodiment of the liberal Protestant Social Gospel. In that tradition, science, including social science, was a prime tool in achieving the kingdom of God on earth. At the time of the formulation of the Social Gospel around the beginning of the 20th century, building the kingdom of God meant civic action to rectify social problems – which entailed Christian engagement in the world largely for the betterment of the working class and the poor. By the New Deal, the goal had become secularized and generalized as the common or national interest. Elite values of nonpartisan, disinterested social science were to be mobilized in the service of the people.¹⁰ But fundamentalist Christians had been at war with the Social Gospel from the outset. The Social Gospel's assumption that humans, rather than God, could and should affect social outcomes was nothing short of blasphemy to fundamentalists.

When in the 1970s the new Christian right, echoed in a more secular way by neoconservatives, criticized government actions as anti-religious or as social engineering, they were channeling central elements of the old battle with the Social Gospel into the new fight with liberals over the nature of liberalism and, concretely, the expansion of the 14th Amendment-based rights revolution. To the Christian right and neoconservatives there was no such thing as nonpartisan, disinterested social science; that was simply a mask for liberal policy. This battle allied these newer constituents of the anti-

¹⁰ John Judis, The Paradox of Democracy: Elites, Special Interests, and the Betrayal of Public Trust (New York: Pantheon, 2000).

establishment right to the old Goldwater libertarians, and fueled what would become the conservative class war on expertise in general. The attack on expertise as a form of liberalism became a key element in what came to be called the “culture wars.”

The political figure that embodied the anti-establishment conservative outlook was Ronald Reagan. It was around Reagan’s 1980 candidacy that coalesced the interlocking sets of conservative issue groups, the mobilization of material resources, and the articulation of a powerful political ideology of victimhood. Government was the problem; the citizenry was its victim. Reagan famously declared his allegiance to the anti-establishment conservative alliance, saying to the August 1980 National Affairs Briefing of 15,000 religious leaders, “Now I know this is a nonpartisan gathering and so I know you can’t endorse me, but I only brought that up because I want you to know that I endorse you and what you are doing.”¹¹ Reagan is conservatism’s idol. But Reagan is also in some ways an ambiguous figure. Whereas he benefited from the populism of the newly mobilized Christian right to gain the presidency and satisfied that constituency with occasional policies, more often he offered mere rhetorical flourishes, and in the end Reagan’s presidency was not much beholden to them. The actual Reagan revolution was for the most part a capitalist revolution, a re-conquest that reconfigured the relationship between the state and the economy in the partial dismantling of the welfare state, the deregulation of many industries (and consequent decline of labor union power), the privatization of a number of public functions and services, and the partial transfer of risk from corporations and government to individuals – what has come to be labeled

¹¹ Cited in Jeffrey K. Hadden & Anson Shupe, Televangelism: Power and Politics on God’s Frontier (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), p. 28.

neoliberalism.¹² Reagan was a more complicated politician than was once thought, as several new scholarly books suggest. Denouncing taxes, Reagan raised them several times in the course of his presidency. Condemning government spending, his administration nearly tripled the federal budget deficit. Having supported on the campaign trail a constitutional amendment that would have prohibited all abortions except when necessary to save the life of the mother, in office Reagan did little about abortion. And ranting against the Soviet Union as the evil empire, Reagan engaged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in serious negotiations over massive reductions in nuclear arsenals and the possible sharing of missile defense technology.¹³ This is not to say Reagan was no conservative. Hardly. It was Reagan who readjusted the state toward the interests of business. But notwithstanding his top billing in the conservative pantheon and contrary to his own rhetoric, Reagan engaged in old-style give-and-take politics. Beyond well-timed rhetoric, Reagan did not much serve the interests of strict conservative ideologues or the Christian right or the neoconservatives. Still, the fact that Reagan is revered for anti-establishment right wing policies he often didn't carry out is telling. For, conservative politics since Reagan, endlessly invoking his legacy, has been largely of the anti-establishment variety.

Anti-establishment conservatism's broadest hopes and policies were realized in the post-9/11 George W. Bush administration. The terrorist attacks of September 11th set the

¹² See David Harvey, [A Brief History of Neoliberalism](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹³ See John Patrick Diggins, [Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History](#) (New York: Norton, 2007); Sean Wilentz, [The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008](#) (New York: Harper, 2008). Earlier, Lou Cannon, [President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime](#) (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Joshua Green, "Reagan's Liberal Legacy: What the New Literature on the Gipper Won't Tell You," [Washington Monthly](#) (January/February, 2003).

stage; the debacle of the Iraq war was the result. As neoconservatism evolved into its foreign policy-focused second generation, the intellectual movement came to share with the Christian right not just a harsh critique of liberalism, but the deep structure of millenarian utopianism. In foreign affairs this meant strong support for a confrontational policy legitimated by the belief in American exceptionalism, that is, in the conviction as to the beneficent, universal nature of the American values that necessarily accompany US military ventures abroad. American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is the embodiment of God's gift of freedom and constitutes the greatest earthly force for good the world has known, has always fused elements of nationalism and religion. Muscular versions of exceptionalism distinguished the thinking of the Christian right and neoconservatism, and figured heavily in the Bush administration's militaristic Middle East policy. Christian right support for the US wars in the Middle East proceeds in some significant measure from the belief in the "end-time," in which the world's destruction enables Christ's return and a new, perfect world to emerge. If not the anti-Christ himself, suggested conservative evangelical organizations and preachers, Saddam Hussein could well be a forerunner of the Evil One.¹⁴ In many evangelical readings of the Book of Revelation, the return of Jesus requires first that Jews return to the biblical boundaries of ancient Israel. War on Iraq would hasten this process. Thus many evangelicals regarded the invasion of Iraq as not simply an instance of a just war, but the realization of the prophecies of Revelation. Second-generation neoconservatism's utopianism lay in an

¹⁴ During the Persian Gulf War of 1991, for example, Jews For Jesus took out full-page newspaper advertisements declaring that Saddam "represents the spirit of Antichrist about which the Bible warns us." Paul Boyer, "When U.S. Foreign Policy Meets Biblical Prophecy" (February 20, 2003) <http://alternet.org/story/15221/>

analogous apocalyptic belief in the United States' ability to hasten universal democracy and a global free market through the creative fire of violence.

Christian right and neoconservative brands of conservatism, influential since the late 1970s, became fully joined and embraced by the Bush administration in the wake of the fear and heightened perception of risk following September 11th. President Bush himself said that he sensed a "Third [Great] Awakening" of religious devotion in the United States that coincided with the nation's struggle with international terrorists, a war he depicted as "a confrontation between good and evil."¹⁵ Fusing Christian right and neoconservative worldviews, Bush disclosed in a 2007 interview, "It's more of a theological perspective. I do believe there is an Almighty, and I believe a gift of that Almighty to all is freedom. And I will tell you that is a principle that no one can convince me that doesn't exist."¹⁶ The parallel millennial beliefs of the Christian right, neoconservatism, and the Bush administration coincided in the disaster of Iraq.

I have referred to the Iraq war as a debacle a few times, now. I am hardly alone in this judgment. Many prominent diplomats and scholars called it the worst foreign policy disaster in US history.¹⁷ The lineaments of this assessment are now well understood. Direct American combat role in the Iraq War proceeded for almost nine years, with nearly 4500 American military and at least 100,000 Iraqi civilian casualties at an

¹⁵ Peter Baker, "Bush Tells Group He Sees a 'Third Awakening'," Washington Post (September 13, 2006).

¹⁶ David Brooks, "Heroes and History," New York Times (July 17, 2007).

¹⁷ Those coming to such a consequential judgment included, among others, a retired Army general (William Odom), the preeminent conservative newspaper columnist (George F. Will), and a former Secretary of State (Madeleine Albright). Evan Lehman, "Retired General: Iraq Invasion Was Strategic Disaster," The Lowell Sun (September 30, 2005) <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article10488.htm>; George F. Will, "Inoculated for Exuberance?" Washington Post (November 10, 2006); Matthew Bigg, "Iraq Worst Disaster for US Foreign Policy: Albright," Reuters (February 22, 2007).

unknown cost (officially \$750 billion but estimated at far higher – well beyond \$3 trillion when long-term medical costs and replacement costs of troop and equipment are factored in), and the internal displacement of 2.7 million Iraqis and exile of another two million.¹⁸ The war siphoned off money, manpower, and attention from the military engagement in Afghanistan. The American military effort did remove the vile dictator, Saddam Hussein, from power. But as of this writing the viability of the Iraqi government remains in doubt, neighborhoods in major cities have been ethnically cleansed, infrastructure remains shattered and basic services such as electricity are marginal at best. Indeed, the very “state-ness” of the country remains a question, given the strong tendencies of Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish communities toward separation and perhaps partition. The resolution of this issue no doubt will be determined after a final American withdrawal. Contrary to the self-assured pronouncements of Bush administration policy-makers, there were no Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. And contrary to the hoary expectations of the backers of the war, a would-be democratic Iraq did not become a model for other Arab states. A severely weakened Iraq is no longer a regional counterweight to Iran; indeed, many analysts point to Iran’s heavy, if below-the-radar influence on Iraq’s ruling parties. US intelligence agencies concluded that the Iraq conflict was a prime source of recruitment

¹⁸ The conservative 100,000 figure for Iraqi casualties comes from confirmed casualty reports via Iraq Body Count <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>. That number was revised upward to 120,000 in the aftermath of the release of classified Pentagon information by the website WikiLeaks in October 2010 <http://wikileaks.org>. A far higher figure of 655,000 Iraqi casualties as of the end of 2006, published in The Lancet, includes deaths from worsening health and environmental conditions as well as violence. David Brown, “Study Claims Iraq’s ‘Excess’ Death Toll Has Reached 655,000,” *Washington Post* (October 11, 2006) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/10/AR2006101001442.html>. The cost figure comes from Joseph E. Stiglitz & Linda J. Bilmes, “The True Cost of the Iraq War: \$3 Trillion and Beyond,” *Washington Post* (September 5, 2010) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/03/AR2010090302200.html>. The Iraq internal displacement and exile figures come from the Brookings Institution Iraq Index (November 30, 2010) <http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex>.

for the global jihadist movement.¹⁹ In short, the Iraq war proved to be an utter fiasco, a dreadful monument to law of unintended consequences.

–And one that set in motion additional unintended consequences at home. The Iraq war was perhaps the most far-reaching political event of recent years, for two interrelated reasons. First, when combined with the large tax cuts the Bush administration enacted in 2001 – which lowered tax rates across the board on income, dividends and capital gains, and eventually eliminated the estate tax (and hence mostly reduced the taxes of America’s wealthy) – the huge expenditures on the Iraq war ballooned the federal budget deficit. Bush increased the budget deficit \$6.1 trillion, far more than any other administration in history. Thus when the housing collapse and financial crash ensued in 2008, the increased indebtedness meant that the US government had far less room to maneuver than it otherwise would have had. The high deficit/debt made Keynesian remedies under the incoming Obama administration much more difficult to sell politically. Worries about the (war-inflated) debt and deficit constrained the size and effectiveness of the stimulus.²⁰ And, of course, the effectiveness of a domestic stimulus package in an increasingly globalized economy already made its effectiveness less likely. Second, the crisis intervention spending remedies that were put in place to deal with the near economic collapse mobilized a ferocious conservative populist political reaction in the form of the Tea Party movement, reanimating the anti-establishment conservative

¹⁹ Declassified Key Judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate, “Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States” (April 2006)
www.dni.gov/press_releases/Declassified_NIE_Key_Judgments.pdf

²⁰ Joseph E. Stiglitz & Linda J. Bilmes, “The \$10 Trillion Hangover: Paying the Price for Eight Years of Bush,” *Harper’s* (January 2009); idem, “The True Cost of the Iraq War: \$3 Trillion and Beyond,” *Washington Post* (September 5, 2010) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/03/AR2010090302200.html>.

politics that had been temporarily discredited by the multiple failures of the Bush administration.

As stated previously, it was the Tea Party that proved most capable of expressing the disgust of the class bias and unfairness of the government bailouts of the banks, insurance, and mortgage companies responsible for the financial collapse. The government was seen as aiding the elites. –Which superficially is true inasmuch as the structural bias of the state causes it to engage in crisis management in ways that safeguard the accumulation function of a capitalist economy. But it is also true that the game is rigged on behalf of elites. Paradoxically, it is in part the very success of anti-establishment conservatism – the force that animates the Tea Party – that has made this so. After 35 years of hard ideological work, anti-establishment conservatism has succeeded in getting large sections of the American people to view government as the problem. This has consequences. When government is the problem, the public institutions historically built to check the power of structurally powerful entities, business corporations first among them, become eroded, hollowed out, and corrupted – and subject then to legitimate contempt and calls for their elimination. And in point of fact, since the 1970s and economic globalization, the old Keynesian solutions have proved less effectual and the old New Deal social democratic ideal more financially problematic. The conservative triumph does not come in a political vacuum, after all. But when the very idea of disinterested social science policy in the national interest is in doubt, there is no reason for the actual policy elite to pursue its activity in the pursuit of a non-existent ideal. The governmental elites then become the personification of what is held in

contempt. If government is by nature ineffective and oppressive, even perhaps evil, why not, then, try to drown the beast?

* * *

Readers will have not missed, by now, that I am not a partisan of the anti-establishment right (although I may share some affinity for aspects of a broader American populism, skepticism about elites, etc). My effort here is not to condemn anti-establishment conservatism but to understand its emergence and success – and to do so in a way that conservatives will recognize themselves in what I write and will judge their views and values to have been fairly presented. In the end, I hope that anti-establishment conservatives and their political adversaries will both learn something here about the conservative movement and where it fits into larger American traditions.

The scope of the book by chapter

If this, chapter one, sets the stage, chapter two addresses the birth and development of modern American conservatism. It surveys the post-World War II political landscape, in which the Old Right found itself having to adapt to the liberal consensus of the New Deal and the interventionist, but bounded, foreign policy of containment of communism. The Old Right had been anti-New Deal and isolationist in foreign policy. One faction of the Old Right effectively joined the postwar liberal consensus, though always sought to rein in New Deal institutions, reduce government spending, and improve the operating conditions for business. This was, to repeat, establishment conservatism or moderate Republicanism, tied to Wall Street and big business. The other key fragment of the Old Right, located principally in small business and its political affiliates but also among

populist anti-communist groups, called for a double rollback: of the New Deal and of international communism. Anti-establishment conservatism, best articulated by William F. Buckley, Jr. and his National Review, fused a religiously inflected traditionalism with libertarianism. Its anti-statist statism allowed the movement to support interventionist anti-communist foreign policy and a powerful presidency while in the same breath condemning the growth of the federal government as a threat to individual liberty and personal responsibility. Anti-establishment conservatism's grassroots, located largely in the west and later in the south, were nurtured on this ideology while sustained materially by massive government spending on defense. Barry Goldwater, anti-establishment conservatism's early champion, was defeated handily in the 1964 presidential contest. But the forces set in motion by Goldwater's defeat, in conjunction with the erosion of the New Deal coalition due to Civil Rights and the Vietnam War, laid the ideological and institutional groundwork for the victory of Ronald Reagan sixteen years later.

The central task of chapter three is to account for the rise of the new Christian right. In order to do this, the chapter reconstructs a condensed history of evangelical Protestantism in America, the split between church modernists and fundamentalists, the supposed withdrawal of the latter from the world, and their reemergence to the realm of politics in the 1970s. Although I challenge the usual story about fundamentalism's insularity, it is the case that conservative evangelicals believed – correctly – that their institutions had come under attack from the federal government as the 14th Amendment due process revolution unfolded in the 1960s and 70s. The conventional sociological wisdom that secularization would cause the retreat of religion to the private sphere was wrong, in large part because the processes of secularization itself caused conservative

religionists to fear for their values and to fight for their institutions in the public arena. Secularization and pluralism, in the form of the counterculture of the 1960s, upended the fixed moral truths that essentially had been embedded in American society by virtue of its Protestant-based civil religion. Conservative Christians, seeing themselves as victims of secular humanism, became politically active in order to battle that “elitist” creed. They voted for Reagan in 1980 and emerged as a principal bloc in the Republican electoral base thereafter, their issues and concerns increasingly influential inside the GOP. The chapter explains how that came to be. Along the way, the chapter delves into debates and political consequences of pre-and post-millennial convictions. Premillennialism, the belief that the earth faces end-times and Armageddon, had impact on Bush foreign policy and constituted one vein of legitimation of the Iraq war.

Chapter four discusses the evolution of neoconservatism from its roots in the skeptical social scientific assessment of Great Society government programs to an embrace of American exceptionalism and war as the preferred means to defeat America’s external enemies and spread democracy to blighted parts of the world. The second generation of neoconservatives ignored its forbears’ watchword of the dangers of social engineering and unintended consequences of public policy in favor of utopianism and the cleansing fire of violence in foreign affairs. Neoconservative influence from the 1970s, first in hawkish foreign policy lobbying organizations and later dominance of defense policy institutions, put the movement in a strong position when the fear and sense of risk became amplified by the attacks of September 11, 2001. The chapter examines the neoconservative role in setting policy for the war in Iraq. The chapter traces the intellectual affinities and institutional connections between neoconservatism and the

Christian right. The networks of foundations, think tanks, and media increasingly bound the two movements, materially as well as ideologically. The Christian right's denunciation of secular humanism merged substantially with the neoconservative critique of the "New Class" of liberal public sector professional elites. Together, these critiques of elitism and expertise set the terms of the culture wars, eventually calling into question the idea of a disinterested public good.

The critique of the New Class underlies the sense of victimhood that propels the populist rage of the Tea Party movement, the latest manifestation of anti-establishment conservatism and the central focus of chapter five. Neoconservatism may be on the outs in the current Tea Party moment because of its identification with the debacle of the Iraq war, but its analysis of the New Class lives powerfully on. The Tea Party is a continuation of the revolt against "elites." That revolt is a genuine expression of grassroots discontent, but it is sustained by the ever-more powerful networks of elites of a different sort from Tea Party ire, namely, the foundations, think tanks, and media that have been so important to the conservative movement over the last 35 years. The Tea Party movement has renegotiated the terms of conservative fusionism in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 economic crisis and the election of Barack Obama as President. If the traditionalist, or church-linked social conservative face of anti-establishment fusionism was dominant since Ronald Reagan won the White House in 1980, it is the libertarian face that is now ascendant. In its opposition to federal spending and government control of peoples' lives in general, the Tea Party has re-energized the old opposition to the New Deal. But this remains an anti-establishment conservative fusion; any notion that the Christian right has gone away is mistaken. The current Christian right and the

libertarians have the identical long-term political goal: to shrink support for and dismantle government.

The rage, obdurate politics, racism, and conspiracy mongering of the Tea Party have raised concerns and anxieties, resurrecting the analysis of the paranoid style in American politics introduced in the 1950s by the eminent historian Richard Hofstadter. For all its problems, the paranoid style analysis remains salient because of the style of this kind of conservatism. After all, what explains the conspiracy thinking? What explains the outsized rage, the rejection of inconvenient facts and actual evidence, the occasional public spasms of racism with regard to President Obama? And why is it that the current popular response to crisis the Tea Party rather than a liberal or radical leftist one? The “Occupy Wall Street” movement that emerged in the fall of 2011 may complicate any presumption of the triumph of anti-establishment conservatism. Nonetheless, it is clear that anti-establishment conservatism has succeeded in taking over the Republican Party, and for that reason is not going away anytime soon.