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**BUREAUCRACIES, AND COMPETITIVE**  
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**Michael Kenney**

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**Rebel Yells**

Why I Turned Right:  
 Leading Baby Boom  
 Conservatives Chronicle  
 Their Political Journeys

Edited by Mary Eberstadt

*Threshold*. 304 pp. \$23.00

Reviewed by  
 Wilfred M. McClay

"THERE IS properly no history," said Emerson, "only biography." A vast overstatement, but one with a nugget of truth in it, especially when it comes to the world of ideas. Behind any influential idea there is always a personal story, or a set of personal stories. This may be particularly true of powerful political ideas, which are always reactions *against* something in particular as much as they are votes *for* something in general.

Hence the intrinsic interest of a book like this one, in which Mary Eberstadt, the author of *Home-Along America*, has collected the stories of twelve prominent younger intellectuals about their move to the conservative side of the political spectrum. As such, this is a kind of generational accounting by essayists of varied political colorations, ranging from the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, to Rich Lowry, the editor of *National Review*, to the writer-provocateur Dinesh D'Souza, and including Stanley Kurtz, Tod Lindberg, Joseph Bottum, Danielle Crittenden, P.J. O'Rourke, Richard Starr, Peter Berkowitz, Heather Mac Donald, and Sally Satel.

However varied the list, the con-

WILFRED M. McCLAY, who holds the SunTrust Chair of Excellence in the Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, contributed "Is Conservatism Finished?" to the January COMMENTARY. His latest book is *Figures in the Carpet: Finding the Human Person in the American Past*.

tributions are uniformly winsome. Contrary to widespread typecasting, these rising conservatives are a sunny, witty, skeptical bunch, supple writers with a strong sense of themselves accompanied by a healthy aversion to “big” transformative ideas, a strong belief in human limits, and a capacious conception of what conservatism means. There is not an inflexible ideologue or sloganeering monomaniac among them.

Their stories are intriguing, too. Richard Starr, deputy editor of the *Weekly Standard*, was goaded into conservatism by the foreign-policy ineffectuality of Jimmy Carter, “an immodest man with a lot to be modest about.” Danielle Crittenden, a novelist (*amandabright@home*) and essayist (*What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*), found all her presuppositions challenged in the process of working through feminism’s “false promises” and its pathological aversion to males, marriage, and motherhood. The psychiatrist Sally Satel was appalled by her profession’s insouciance toward common sense and individual responsibility, and by “the power of well-meaning institutions to create conditions that actually made people sicker.” Stanley Kurtz, an anthropologist, and Peter Berkowitz, a political philosopher, discovered themselves pushed to the academic margins for advocating “free and fair debate” and “old-fashioned liberal values” over fashionable groupthink. Joseph Bottum, the editor of *First Things*, made common cause with the “grim, dour” conservatives when the American abortion regime became too much for him to bear, and the need to take a stand against it eclipsed other causes. In every case, the move to the Right was occasioned by some excess of the Left.

THIS IS, in short, a book well worth reading. But before going further, I should register a quibble about the title. In the first place, the “turns” described here are really not very dramatic. Rich Lowry, for instance,

in “I Was a Teenage Conservative,” confesses that he “never was anything but Right”; Richard Starr makes a similar statement. As for the other essayists, none presents his or her intellectual development as involving a radical rupture with the past, comparable to the *volteface* undergone by a David Horowitz or, in an earlier age, Whittaker Chambers.

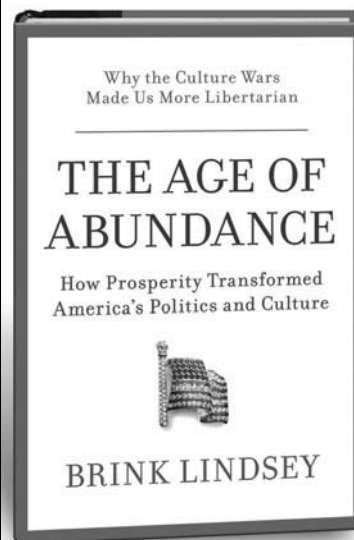
Indeed, these essayists are never tortured or conflicted; they do not lament “the god that failed,” or depict a painful breaking of ranks, or speak dramatically of a conversion or de-conversion. Their images are ones of evolution, or meandering, or fumbling along—or quite simply of growing up, discovering the existence of life’s limits and setting aside the illusions of youth. “I became a conservative,” the humorist P.J. O’Rourke nicely declares, when “my wife gave birth.”

Also questionable is the description of this group of writers as part of the “baby boom” generation. Actually, several distinct generational niches or streams are visible in the book’s pages, and several of the younger contributors define themselves *against* the baby boomers—represented for them by the likes of the Clintons or the people now running our universities. If there is any generational consciousness at work here, it is a post-boomer one.

This may illuminate some of what is different about the style of the essays. All are personal—and yet, in an odd way, less personal than one might expect. That might well reflect a generational reticence: a turn from the confessional mode that to boomers once seemed so new and irresistible but that now appears tired, phony, manipulative, and played-out. It was the post-boomers, after all, who resurrected the word “cool,” a word that applies to these essays. Everyone admits to having sinned in the past, but no one wants to get very specific about the sins themselves. After all, there are children present now, and a car-

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dinal feature of conservatism is the understanding that one *should* act differently when children are present. Surely that is all to the good.

THROUGHOUT this book, one is made aware of points of dispute among the authors themselves—of friction over feminism, homosexuality, abortion rights, religion, and other matters. That is also surely to

the good, a signal of the continuing diversity of contemporary conservatism. But what, one may wonder, holds a crew like this together? Do their stories have something, anything, in common?

In her lucid introductory essay, Mary Eberstadt persuasively identifies the common element. Nearly all of her contributors have been shaped in a decisive way by their

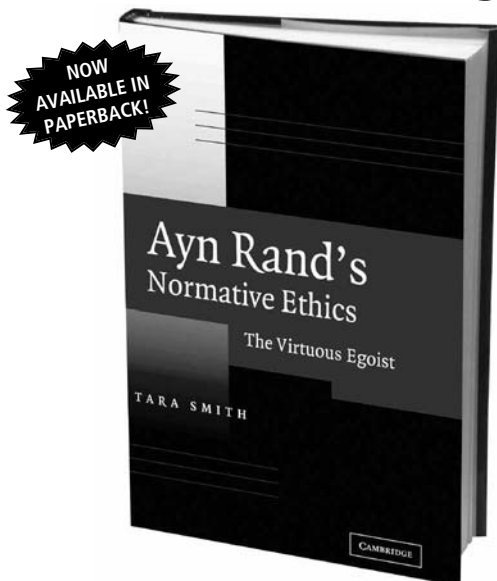
negative experiences as students in elite American universities, and by their encounters with the fashionable academic ideas that have come to infect political and professional practice. From Dinesh D'Souza's wild and entertaining tales of his days at the *Dartmouth Review*, to Heather Mac Donald's exasperated account of the nihilism of literary studies at Yale in the 1980's, to Peter Berkowitz's repeated encounters with the "knee-jerk contempt" accorded those who try to defend the liberal tradition against its illiberal practitioners, these writers have been formed by the high-handed intellectual monoculture that is American higher education, especially of the elite variety. As Eberstadt puts it, "The Left/liberal monopoly on campus has . . . inadvertently *created* some of the very political refugees whose work now fuels the world of conservative think tanks, journals, and ideas."

That this monopoly has been bad for the Left itself, for the same reason that monopolies are always bad for the monopolist, goes without saying. But has it been good for the vitality of conservatism? True, nothing brings people together like shared antipathies. But movements of ideas must ultimately be about more than antipathies. On this point, one would have wished these writers to be more venturesome, less careful and safe, a bit less modest, perhaps even a bit less reticent. There is no time like the present for the new generation of conservatives to start finding its voice.

The three best essays in the collection help point the way. David Brooks offers a strong argument for the distinctive balance of tradition and progressive innovation that, in his view, characterizes American conservatism. Joseph Bottum, approaching the same subject from a different angle, defines the enduring problem of American conservatism as the maintenance of a strict tension between biblical religion and Enlightenment rationality, one that

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does not yield to watering-down in either direction. And Peter Berkowitz (whose essay also contains the best short description of the work of Leo Strauss I have ever read) characterizes his own task as the defense of liberalism rightly understood, a cause that has willy-nilly pushed him to align himself with conservatives more often than not. These three essays should be required reading as a prolegomenon to all future American conservatisms.

LARGELY MISSING from the collection is, regrettably, a strong sense of the past as something that holds us and works through us and is a part of us. The critical side of conservatism is much in evidence, especially in the concern with the “fatal conceits” of planners and sociocrats. Less evident is the prescriptive side of conservatism, the one that instructs us to honor our fathers and mothers, both literally and figuratively. Joseph Bottum’s essay is a partial exception to this rule—and, interestingly, it is chock-full of quotations from the King James Bible, phrases that every American once knew and that shaped the oratory and thought of our greatest statesmen. No more, alas; which is why the reign of Bible-free education, deconstructed literary texts, and all the other multitudinous euphemisms and unspeakables of modern American discourse—not to mention “gender-neutral” and “dynamic equivalent” Bibles themselves—is so profoundly impoverishing. Not only do we suffer under a ridiculous and authoritarian regime of “political correctness.” We, including the newcomers among us, have also been deprived as a people of a sense of connection to our past, of our collective experience as members of a deep civilizational enterprise.

Restoring that connection is another essential part of conservatism. It may be that, now that the post-boomer cohort is beginning to emerge, it will have an incentive to

think about these matters. Maybe, as a generation, it is not yet done turning. What remains to be seen is whether it is going to measure up to the generation that preceded it, or be equal to the challenges that will face it in the years ahead. On the strength of this book I would be guardedly optimistic, if not yet completely convinced.

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