

Why the New Right Lost

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IN THE years between 1969 and 1975 Kevin Phillips, William A. Rusher, Patrick J. Buchanan, and Richard J. Whalen all wrote books* assessing the strengths, weaknesses, and prospects of the American conservative movement as they understood it and recommending strategy and tactics for 1976. These writers do not represent *the* conservative position—there is no such thing. Indeed, they are considered by some, especially among the “Old Right,” not to be conservatives at all, but neo-populist pseudo-conservatives. Yet because they are articulate in formulating and vocal in justifying a position which has frequently lacked defenders among American intellectuals, their views have had an important influence on the way the conservative movement is perceived by other observers of American political life.

Although there are differences in approach, style, and strategy among these writers, they share certain qualities characteristic of what has come to be called the “New Right.” Many of their perspectives are common to all conservatives: preoccupation with the nation’s waning self-confidence; concern over the decline of such traditional values as discipline, restraint, consensus; rejection of guilt-ridden liberalism, of judicial decision-making, of social engineering, and burgeoning bureaucracy; commitment to patriotism and a strong national defense.

In addition, however, the New Right holds certain other beliefs which may or may not be shared by other conservatives. Among these are the idea that there exists in the electorate a hidden conservative majority; that the social division with the greatest potential political significance is not that between “haves” and “have-nots” but between the liberal elite and everybody else; that a realignment of the parties into two ideologically homogeneous groups is both desirable and likely; that the Republican party may not prove an effective institutional channel for the expression of truly conservative politics and should perhaps be abandoned; and that the principal obstacles to the conservative cause are the nation’s media monopolies through whose “distorting lens” is filtered

“almost every scrap of information Americans receive of their national government, its programs, policies and personalities” (Buchanan).

THE conviction that there exists out there in the electorate a permanent conservative majority is a basic article of faith for the new conservative intellectuals. Yet given the fact that George Wallace succeeded in winning only 13.6 per cent of the vote in 1968, and that Barry Goldwater—the only major party candidate to present himself unambiguously as the leader of a conservative coalition—was buried in Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 landslide, the case for the existence of a conservative majority is not self-evident. It requires interpreting the notion of a conservative broadly, to include all persons who are attached to traditional values and conventional practices; *or* who are hostile to the bureaucratization of society; *or* who favor a strong military establishment, an anti-Communist foreign policy, and an aggressive defense of the national interest; *or* who stress liberty as against equality; *or* who desire to preserve the framers’ vision of the constitutional system against transformation. Theorists of the hidden conservative majority do indeed count all such persons as conservatives. They also take comfort from the successive public-opinion polls which have revealed that when asked whether they are liberals or conservatives, the proportion of adults who describe themselves as conservative has increased, while the percentage of self-described liberals has declined. Thus, though conservatives still do not constitute a majority, they are considerably more numerous than liberals. The conservative advantage is further expanded when it is (dubiously) assumed, as Rusher for example does, that persons who are “undecided” as to whether they are liberal or conservative would divide in the same manner as persons with an opinion.

The preferred data on the existence of a conservative majority are the elections of 1968 and, especially, 1972. In his *The Emerging Republican*

* *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969) and *Mediocracy: American Parties and Politics in the Communications Age* (1975), by Kevin Phillips; *The Making of a New Majority Party* (1975), by William A. Rusher; *Conservative Votes, Liberal Victories: Why the Right Has Failed* (1975), by Patrick J. Buchanan; *Catch a Falling Flag* (1972) and *Taking Sides: A Personal View of America from Kennedy to Nixon* (1974), by Richard J. Whalen.

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Majority (1969), Kevin Phillips described 1968 as a turning-point in the American party system comparable to 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932. He argued that in Nixon's narrow victory against Humphrey the shape of the future could be discerned. Having fallen victim to "the ideological impetus of a liberalism which had carried it beyond programs taxing the few for the benefit of the many (the New Deal) to programs taxing the many on behalf of the few (the Great Society)," the Democratic party was being deserted by blue-collar ethnics and middle-income taxpayers. The result, Phillips argued, was an emerging Republican majority based "in the heartland of the South and California against a minority Democratic party based in the Northeast and the Pacific Northwest (and encompassing Southern as well as Northern Negroes)."

Gratifying as the outcome in 1968 was to theorists of the conservative majority, their pleasure in 1968 paled beside that of 1972—not because it brought a landslide for Richard Nixon, about whom they had great doubts, but because it seemed to them to have provided the electorate with a clear choice between ideologically distinct alternatives and to have resulted in a grand coalition of "conservatives." Never mind that Nixon had already (in Rusher's words) "systematically and cynically abandoned between 1969 and 1972 most of the conservative principles that justify participation in politics"; or that, as Whalen observed, the bureaucracy, terrified in 1968, had learned by 1972 that Nixon planned no dismantling of big government; or that Nixon had, in Buchanan's view, "made a conscious decision [after 1968] to shift leftward on domestic and social policy—to appease those who most opposed him." Despite all this, it was still possible for Rusher to conclude that in 1972 "the conservative majority, united at last, had won overwhelmingly," and for Buchanan to assert that "in the 'new majority' mustered together by President Nixon remain the constituent elements of conservative victory."

BUT faith in the existence of a conservative majority did not depend only on public-opinion data and electoral victories. More importantly, the theory rested on an interpretation of contemporary society which postulated "objective" social factors. Thus Kevin Phillips argued in *The Emerging Republican Majority* that while the old political alignment reflected a community of economic interests among the largely white urban working class and the South, the new alignment would reflect the heightened ethnic consciousness of Catholic and blue-collar voters, the greatly increased political role of blacks, and the conservative inclinations of the dramatically enlarged Sun Belt.

In the wake of the 1972 election, however, a new interpretation began taking shape which

deemphasized demographic factors. What was now stressed instead was the emergence of a new socio-cultural class structure and with it a new class struggle. This new class struggle—which was variously described as pitting "producers" against "non-producers" (Rusher's formulation), or as pitting a new liberal elite based in the "knowledge sector" against the working and middle classes (Phillips's formulation)—drew heavily on the theory of post-industrial society enunciated by Daniel Bell, Ralf Dahrendorf, and others. Common to all these formulations was a conviction that the economic divisions which traditionally separated the "haves" from the "have-nots" (and were reflected in the Roosevelt coalition) had been superseded by the rise of a privileged liberal elite whose interests as a group were said to be concealed and served in an ideology favorable to the transfer of more and more power from the private to the public sector. As Buchanan wrote:

Is it not the liberals' artistic and academic friends who get the grants from the federal endowments for arts and humanities? Is it not journalists of their persuasion who are given the large salaries and big fees for pontificating on "public television"? Is it not their children [who are] lured by Vista and the Peace Corps, and selected for Reggie Heber Smith fellowships to work out their ideology in Legal Services? Is it not their Naderite collaborators who will wind up with the positions of authority in a new federal consumer protection agency? Has it not been the professional bureaucrats, planners, consultants, and professors whose power, prestige, and income have grown directly proportional to the growth in federal power the last decade and a half?

In a similar vein, by the time he wrote *Mediocracy* (1975), Kevin Phillips's version of a liberal establishment which served its private interests by promotion of "sociological jurisprudence, moral permissiveness, experimental residential, welfare, and educational programming, and massive federal spending" had been revised to emphasize the role of the "knowledge sector," especially "academicians, journalists, urban planners, consumer advocates, welfare workers, and related occupations."

The belief that there has appeared in American politics an intelligentsia (often called the New Class) hostile to bourgeois culture and institutional practices is, of course, shared by many persons not associated with the New Right. However, Lionel Trilling, Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, Midge Decter, Michael Novak, and other intellectuals affiliated with the Democratic party who have emphasized the rising political importance of the New Class *do not identify it with the welfare state*. These Democratic intellectuals see an important distinction between traditional welfare-state politics which aim at providing all with a minimum share of economic well-being, respect, and political power, and the so-called New Politics, which aims less at the diffusion of power than

its concentration in the hands of the New Class.

As conceived by the New Right, in any case, the new divisions between classes are based neither on an "objective" relation to the means of production (as Marx believed them to be), nor on disposable income and resources, but on occupation and culture. While occupation does not determine culture (else Phillips, Buchanan, Rusher, Whalen, and their allies would themselves all be members of the liberal elite), persons associated with the knowledge sector and the bureaucracy are seen as the likely carriers of post-industrial morality and elitist politics, and as hostile to the interests and values of workers, businessmen, and farmers who are still engaged in the production of material goods and the frank pursuit of material advantage.

In this clash of cultural perspectives, no group is thought to have greater importance than the "media monopolists," or "media moguls" of the Washington-New York axis in whose hands rests the power to focus attention, filter information, set the nation's agenda, make and break politicians. By 1970 hostility to "big media" had become a basic tenet of most conservatives and was held with special intensity by the New Right. The progressive concentration of power in the major networks and wire services and the growing number of one-newspaper cities had, it was argued, given control over the formulation and distribution of news into the hands of "a small group of men," in Agnew's famous characterization, who "decide what forty to fifty million Americans will learn of the day's events in the nation and the world." From the point of view of the New Right, the danger of such a concentration of power was rendered even greater by the liberal perspective of the media moguls which focused on negative and problematic aspects of the society, manufactured endless "crises," and eroded confidence in the nations' institutions and leaders.

OBVIOUSLY, the class divisions described by Rusher, Phillips, and Buchanan have a great deal in common with those postulated and exploited by George Wallace. There is hardly—as Wallace might have put it—a dime's worth of difference between Rusher's elite bent on busing at any price, or Buchanan's man of government who wants mass transit instead of automobiles because "that would mean government, rather than individuals, would dictate how people travel in America," and George Wallace's pointy-headed bureaucrats whose spendthrift schemes squander the taxes of working people to finance unworkable programs which, instead of solving problems, compound them.

Indeed, the theorists of the New Right noted what many liberal commentators, eager to dismiss the Wallace movement as racism, ignored: that the appeal of George Wallace grew out of the same process of cultural and social polarization

which fed the candidacies of Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern. Out of that process of polarization, which drew into the political arena questions of morals and of legitimacy on which there has traditionally been broad consensus, two extreme positions developed: a McGovernite Left closely associated with the counterculture, and a Wallaceite Right committed to a comprehensive defense of the traditional culture. On this spectrum, voters were not arrayed according to their views of the welfare state, but on the basis of their attitudes toward the traditional society and culture. It was Wallace who, in 1968 and 1972, mounted the most aggressive, unembarrassed defense of nationalism, patriotism, law and order, and the work ethic, as well as of that other darker underside of the traditional culture—white racism. Wallace's success in attracting portions of the white working class was surprising only to those who *assumed* that the political world could be placed on a political spectrum dominated by economic issues. But the postulated "new" conservative majority which integrated neo-populist Wallaceites and Republican business perspectives could come into being if and only if the economic issues on which the traditional political cleavages were based remained less salient than the social and cultural issues of the late 60's. Theorists of the New Right believed that the cultural cleavages were here to stay.

Here, then, was an opportunity to build a new ideologically homogeneous party uniting all those who considered themselves conservatives in a grand alliance against those who considered themselves liberals. The intellectuals of the New Right were attracted to the idea of a new party because most of them were, and are, extremely ambivalent in their feelings about the Republican party. Interested above all in an institutional vehicle for the expression of conservative principles, they were offended by the continuing presence in the Republican party of a liberal minority which, ideologically speaking, belonged on the other side, by party professionals who in their relative unconcern with ideology belonged on no side, and by upper-class devotees of the "Old Right" who had as much in common with the liberal elite as with the conservative masses. Why, asked the New Right intellectuals, should the Republican party attract the loyalty of less than a fourth of the electorate when nearly half of all adult Americans considered themselves conservatives? Why should it fail to attract new voters—even those not attracted to the Democrats? Why could it not hold the support of those Southerners and Catholics and blue-collar voters who had crossed party lines to support Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and even, in the Deep South, Barry Goldwater?

To Phillips and Rusher, the answer was that the Republican party was contaminated—by liberals, opportunists, ideologically neutral professionals, and crooks—and was a likely candidate for extinction. Rusher advocated a "new, broadly based

major party" which would be called the "Independence" party and would include the "populist" followers of George Wallace and the "conservative" Republicans. Richard J. Whalen thought that conservatives might be more comfortable in a Democratic party led by Henry Jackson. Kevin Phillips, who is sometimes described as "hating" the Republican party, expressed doubt about the capacity of either party to adapt to continuing social changes, and noted that the functions of parties were, in any case, being progressively taken over by the communications industry. Even Patrick J. Buchanan, the most "Republican" of the leading conservative intellectuals, thought it possible that "when the crunch comes in the summer of 1976" conscience might require conservatives to abandon the GOP in favor of a third party which would state the conservative case in an unambiguous and aggressive fashion. Buchanan, however, also reminded his readers of the dangers of rule-or-ruin politics, and noted that the refusal to support an inadequately conservative Republican party would probably result in the election of more liberal Democratic candidates.

New Right theorists and conservative intellectuals of activist bent approached the 1976 presidential season with plans and determination. Conservative sectarianism intensified, organizations and committees crystallized around the candidacies and potential candidacies of Ronald Reagan, George Wallace, John Connally, and Gerald Ford. The American Conservative Union, the Young Americans for Freedom, and the *Human Events* and *National Review* "crowds" joined the Reagan campaign; most of the Republican leadership—including even Barry Goldwater, John Tower, and, eventually, Mississippi's Clark Reed—supported the nomination of Gerald Ford; and Wallace loyalists rallied behind Wallace.

But the hopes for a "pure" conservative party died as George Wallace dropped out of contention, as Ronald Reagan lost his bid for the Republican nomination, and, finally, as Lester Maddox and his segregationist allies captured control of the American Independent party. No new party emerged, no realignment took place, the Grand Coalition of white working-class Democrats and middle-class Republicans fell apart, the Sun Belt was split down the middle as the South went home to the Democrats, the conservative majority did not materialize, and even Gerald Ford was ultimately defeated. What happened constitutes, in itself, an instructive critique of the New Right theory of American politics.

This theory is mistaken, first, because it is based on an oversimplified conception of ideology in contemporary American politics; second, because it overestimates the electorate's ideological inclinations; and third, because it misunderstands the nature of political organization. Each of these errors helps to explain why the ex-

pectations of the New Right intellectuals were disappointed in 1976 and also why their disappointment is probably a chronic condition.

It seems quite clear that at least three dimensions have been involved in American politics over the last decade: an economic dimension which includes attitudes toward private property, the distribution of wealth, private ownership, and governmental control; a cultural dimension which includes attitudes toward tradition, order, authority, the deferral of gratification, and the moral bases for the allocation of resources; and a foreign-policy dimension which includes attitudes toward nationalism, defense and the use of force, the Third World, and détente and related matters.

Most of the political debate of recent decades has involved the economic dimension, which was, of course, central to the New Deal alignment. From the entry of the U.S. into World War II until roughly 1966, a "bipartisan" foreign policy kept most questions of foreign relations and defense out of the political sphere, much as widespread consensus on the legitimacy of government and the public order precluded serious debate on these questions outside the little magazines and the fringe press. From World War II to the collapse of the Vietnam consensus, American politics was virtually unidimensional and the liberal/conservative spectrum measured the kind of more/less questions which can be compromised in such a fashion that everyone gets something of value. The result was a style of "marketplace" or "broker" politics which conformed to the expectations of the Founding Fathers and to which the system was admirably suited.

The 60's changed all that by introducing questions of culture and of foreign policy into the electoral sphere. Popular reaction to the disorders of the late 60's—urban rioting, student rioting, massive violent protests and demonstrations, draft evasion—made it unambiguously clear that a large majority of American adults are conservative in the sense that they are attached to the existing society and will support it against challenges to its legitimacy. Nixon's 1972 landslide surely did demonstrate the presence of such a majority, but *only* as against a candidate who was perceived as the spokesman for a counterculture and at a time when violent assaults were being mounted against the existing social and political order. Under other circumstances—such as obtained, for example, in 1976—whether a voter votes his "conservative" views on a particular question will depend on its salience in a given contest as compared with other issues, on the ideological clarity of the choice offered in the election, and on the pull of non-ideological factors like personality, regionalism, and party.

Most of the misunderstanding concerning what it is to be a liberal or conservative today grows out of the attempt to treat this multidimensional political universe as though it all hung together. Yet

while it is possible to find persons who take "conservative" positions on every issue (assuming one can decide what a conservative position is on every issue), both public-opinion data and electoral behavior make it entirely clear that a great many voters support an active role for government in the economic sphere, oppose challenges to the authority of government, distrust the Soviet Union and support a strong defense posture, or adopt some other combination of "liberal" and "conservative" positions.

The New Right belief that the large majorities who support traditional values and practices would vote conservative in presidential elections if only the conservative candidate provided adequate leadership, might be correct if all elections featured one candidate who identified with a sectarian attack on the traditional social order and another who came to its defense. But most elections do not and cannot be expected to gratify the New Right by offering so easy a contest.

THE New Right theory of politics is not only wrong because it assumes that people who are conservative on one issue are "conservatives"; it also errs in assuming that voters are more ideological than they in fact are.

Those who believe in the conservative majority argue that it can be mobilized for the purposes of electoral victory by a leadership that articulates the "basic" disagreements separating liberals and conservatives in our time. Ronald Reagan has stated this position repeatedly in the post-election period, arguing that the Republican party can be revitalized only as its leaders commit it to a clear-cut conservative position. And Buchanan counsels: "Conservatives should seek out, not avoid, political conflict with liberals of both parties. . . . We have nothing to lose by confrontation politics."

Experience with this strategy ought to be more discouraging than it is to the advocates of ideological polarization. It is an undeniable *fact* that each party has tried the strategy out in the recent past, and that the two candidates—Goldwater and McGovern—who provided the desired kind of leadership were overwhelmingly defeated by opponents who advocated and practiced consensus politics. The "moral" of the Goldwater and McGovern debacles is not that the American electorate is neither as "conservative" as Barry Goldwater nor as "liberal" as George McGovern, but that the voters will repudiate candidates who offer a narrowly ideological rhetoric and a divisive appeal.

The desire for ideologically homogeneous, disciplined, cohesive parties; for campaigns which pose a clear choice between mutually exclusive programs; for leaders who "stand for" ideas—all this flies in the face of the voters' proclivity to choose their leaders not simply because of the "ideas" they represent, but because of the kind of men they are or seem to be, the party labels under

which they run, and the kind of men they are running against. Neither does it take account of the ideological complexity of the political world, and the ideological cross-pressures which derive from the variety of roles any individual voter may play (occupational, regional, racial, religious, etc.).

The situation is further complicated by the fact that candidates are also likely to have complex ideological commitments and identifications themselves. Jimmy Carter was the prototype of such a candidate. The ideological ambiguity which characterizes his image to this day was a source of strength in both the primaries and the election. In Massachusetts, likely Democratic primary voters split almost evenly on whether Carter was a liberal (15 per cent thought so), a conservative (18 per cent believed this to be the case), or a moderate, as another 18 per cent thought; and Carter's supporters were also drawn from across the political spectrum (25 per cent conservative, 24 per cent liberal, 45 per cent moderate). In Florida, the pattern was similar: 19 per cent of likely Democratic primary voters thought of him as conservative, and 22 per cent as a liberal. Although the selection of Senator Mondale as his running mate, and other openings to the Left, persuaded a good many voters of Carter's liberalism, substantial uncertainty concerning his ideological identity persisted through the campaign. The New York *Times*/CBS poll revealed that, early in the nominating contest, roughly equal portions of a nationwide sample of voters perceived Carter as liberal and conservative (20 per cent each), while 30 per cent perceived him as a moderate. As the campaign developed, the number of people who believed him a liberal rose to 37 per cent, but 28 per cent and 19 per cent respectively continued to see him as a moderate and a conservative. Carter's narrow electoral success obviously owed a great deal to his ability to preserve a conservative-to-moderate image among the Democratic identifiers who see themselves as moderate or conservative, while at the same time consolidating the support of Democratic liberals.

Finally, the New Right theorists misunderstand the nature of political organization. Like their counterparts on the Left, these conservative theorists seem to believe that organizations can and should be only vehicles for the expression of political ideas. But in fact, students of organizational behavior know that all political organizations have some characteristics and requirements independent of ideology, that a variety of skills and temperaments are needed to perform their functions, that they can be maintained only as people develop attachments to the organization itself.

Research has established that the party regular is attached to politics by social as well as ideological incentives (and sometimes also by material incentives) and that such attachment encourages the virtues of the good team member: cooperation, perseverance, loyalty, service, and the will to

win. The ideological perspective, in contrast, is hostile to the construction and maintenance of organizational solidarity, for several reasons: first, because persons attached to politics by ideology do not identify themselves with organizations but with a point of view, and their commitment to organizations is therefore weak, instrumental, conditional; second, because persons attracted to politics by ideological incentives tend to hold relatively extreme and intense views and to have relatively comprehensive ideological orientations which encourages them to see particular questions as part of larger wholes. This in turn means that virtually any policy or issue can be perceived as involving "fundamental" questions of conscience which cannot be compromised without a sacrifice of "principle."

The ideological perspective in politics thus breeds intolerance of diversity, impatience with compromise, and the kind of intransigence characteristic of sectarian, rule-or-ruin politics. Ideological purists encounter persistent and probably insurmountable difficulties in building institutions through which to achieve their political goals, not only because their clearly defined programs cannot attract more than a minority, but also because their inclinations and habits are the opposite of those required to maintain large, inclusive democratic political organizations.

The intellectuals of the New Right understand, at least in theory, that compromise is required if a majority coalition is to be assembled: Rusher in particular stresses this point. But the difficulties they and their followers have displayed in accepting actual compromises with Republican loyalists like Gerald Ford who share *most* of their conservative views, provide little reason to suppose that hypothetical compromises with Wallaceites would prove more palatable if they ever became a concrete possibility.

THERE are some suggestive similarities between the theory of the New Right and the theory espoused by votaries of the New Politics at the other end of the political spectrum. The hidden conservative majority has its analogue in the army of the alienated—the poor, the young, the oppressed, the idealistic, the Wallaceites, the elderly—whom McGovern expected to rally behind his banner. The New Right version of class struggle based on "producers" and "non-producers" (or some functional equivalent) is a mirror image of the division postulated by the New Politics between the comfortable and the smug on the one hand, and the alienated and their champions on the other. There is, furthermore, general agreement about the geo-cultural bases of these classes:

both Kevin Phillips and Kirkpatrick Sale have located the Left in Wasp New England and the nation's major universities, and the Right in the culturally conservative, demographically ascendant Sun Belt. (Sale termed these groups the Yankees and the Cowboys.) And there is, finally, in the case both of the New Right and the New Politics, an imperviousness to empirical disproof. Defeat of their position never demonstrates that the putative hidden majority does not in fact exist; it only proves that the cause was sabotaged by the media and betrayed or at least failed by its leaders. The belief in a hidden majority, indeed, puts an especially heavy burden on leadership, while sustaining partisans in the face of repeated losses and providing a sense of solidarity with "the people."

But there are also interesting parallels between the New Right in 1972-76 and the "Radical Right" associated with the late Senator Joseph McCarthy. As analyzed by Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter, Nathan Glazer, Seymour Martin Lipset, and others, the Radical Right of the 1950's was itself the product of a "new politics" which cut across partisan and ideological alignments, uniting persons of diverse economic interests in a novel coalition based on shared "status aspirations" and "status anxieties" against liberals, left-wingers, intellectuals, conformists, suspected and real Communists.

While these analysts of the Radical Right sometimes sounded embarrassingly like embattled defenders of a threatened aristocracy (the Radical Right was, they thought, a revolt by lower- and middle-class Americans against their betters), and while at other times they wrote as though major strains of American history were some kind of disease (there was much talk of authoritarian personalities, projections, and paranoia), they did not dismiss the new dissidents as insignificant. Instead, they saw the Radical Right as, in Hofstadter's words, "one of the long waves of 20th-century American history and not a momentary mood."

To read such analyses today is to be reminded that the New Right is not really new at all, but represents a strain of nativist populism whose roots are deep in American history and which has already played a highly important role in American politics, especially in the South and Southwest. As such, it is no more likely to disappear from the contemporary political scene than it is to become the center of a new majority party. It will fail in its current version because of its hostility to another deeply rooted aspect of contemporary politics—the welfare state, whose benefits no majority in any democratic country has yet foresworn. Nevertheless, in one form or another, it will remain with us for a very long time to come.