
Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

A New Majority?

“This way to the egress,” P.T. Barnum used to direct the stooges stupid enough to buy tickets to his traveling shows of bunco and blather. The “egress,” of course, was the exit to the street, where the stooges should have stayed. Would that we had a P.T. Barnum today who could direct us to an egress from the political hall of mirrors in which we have foolishly allowed ourselves to be trapped.

The latest clown to dance through the hall is Sen. John McCain of Arizona, who entertained the nation and quite befuddled much of its political class with his antics during the presidential primaries last winter. Before McCain’s victory in New Hampshire over Texas Gov. George W. Bush, most observers predicted he would indeed win there but nowhere else, though no one anticipated a victory as smashing as the one he actually pulled off. No sooner had the Arizona solon won in New Hampshire than an entire regiment of journalists and commentators fell into a swoon. Mr. McCain beat Mr. Bush by an impressive 18 percentage points, and by the following day, some pundits—particularly neo-conservative chatterbox Bill Kristol—had glimpsed nothing less than the bright dawn of political revolution.

Writing in the *Washington Post* the very day after the New Hampshire primary, Mr. Kristol announced that “It is John McCain and Bill Bradley who each now have a chance that occurs only once a generation—to articulate a new governing agenda for a potential new majority.” So much for the prophetic insights of Mr. Kristol, but while he was almost unique in thinking Bill Bradley could shatter the Clinton-Gore juggernaut, he was by no means alone in trumpeting what Mr. McCain was about to accomplish. A few days later, his fellow neoconservative Charles Krauthammer also started booming Mr. McCain, assuring us that, although Mr. Bush was “more reliably conservative,” it was Mr. McCain who was the sure winner. To the neocon mind, of course, that pretty much clinched it. Why the hell would anyone support a candidate he actually agrees with on principles when he can go with an alter-

native who’s sure to grab the power? “The question for Republicans,” the intrepid Krauthammer assured us, “is not who will make the better president but who is more likely to *be* president.”

The neoconservative fascination with Mr. McCain, however, had only just begun. As the Mother of All Neocons herself, Midge Decter, told a writer for the *New Republic*, “We decided that we liked McCain, then we came up with our justifications.” Nor indeed was it only the neocons who signed on with the McCain fan club. Liberal John Judis was soon scribbling in the *New Republic* about the “new voting bloc” that Mr. McCain had uncovered that could carry the country to a wave of “reforms” analogous to those of the Progressive era. In the *Washington Post*, political reporter Thomas Edsall glowed that the McCain campaign “has revealed the weakening of the conservative Republicanism that dominated national politics from the late 1960’s into the mid-1990’s, according to a growing number of GOP strategists.” The first such “strategist” Mr. Edsall quoted to prove his point was none other than Mr. Kristol himself, followed by a McCain supporter and the ubiquitous Paul Weyrich, who last year was advising conservatives to get out of politics altogether. By the time of the South Carolina primary, the chatterpunks of the Beltway had not only all but convinced themselves that Mr. McCain would be the next president but also written the epitaph of the American right.

But as South Carolina proved, the epitaph was rather premature. Mr. Bush smashed Mr. McCain there precisely by relying on the very “conservative Republicanism” that supposedly had vanished into the political gloaming. He declined to demand the removal of the Confederate flag from the state capitol building, while Mr. McCain blundered, at first denouncing the flag as a “symbol of racism and slavery” and then more or less retracting that remark and agreeing with the Texas governor. (The retraction did not help; exit polls showed that 61 percent of South Carolinians who support the flag voted for Mr. Bush.) The governor also huddled close to the religious right that has remained more powerful in South Carolina than in many other ar-

reas, and he constantly depicted himself as the “real conservative” and his rival as a “liberal” interloper. Mr. Bush, of course, is no more a serious conservative than Mr. McCain or even Mr. Gore, but his own political image was still sufficiently malleable that he and his shape-shifters could twist and mold it into the forms they wished to be perceived. In the event, the voters saw what they were shown, and subsequent exit polls in later primaries showed that Mr. Bush consistently won the rank-and-file members of his own party. Mr. McCain did well for a few more primaries only because he managed to attract some union members and independents, but his claims of constructing a “new coalition” or a “new majority” fell flat. As political pollster Andrew Kohut wrote in the *New York Times*, “Across the country, McCain backers do not share values or care strongly about the same issues, and they are not drawn from a common demographic base.” Indeed, “moral values” were more of a concern for Mr. McCain’s supporters in New York than his much touted (and imitated) “campaign finance reform.” The “conservative Republicanism” that Mr. Edsall had embalmed so easily remained sufficiently powerful to reject Mr. McCain decisively and communicate to any politician or pundit willing to hear it that the American right at the grassroots level remains so strong that it cannot safely be ignored or dismissed.

Nevertheless, the epitaph writers did have a point. In his op-ed in the *Washington Post* the day after New Hampshire, Mr. Kristol remarked: “leaderless, rudderless, and issueless, the conservative movement, which accomplished great things over the past quarter-century, is finished.” Mr. Kristol is usually wrong, but this time he was actually half right. If the primaries proved anything, it was that the “conservative movement” is indeed dead, though the world hangs breathless to learn of the “great things” it ever accomplished. As Mr. Kristol remarked, the three GOP candidates identified with the “conservative movement” this year—Gary Bauer, Alan Keyes, and Steve Forbes—all together received fewer votes in New Hampshire than Mr. Bush won in second place, and most of them dropped out in the next few weeks. In lat-

er remarks to the *Post*, Mr. Kristol repeated the same sentiment—"The orthodox conservative movement has collapsed," he told Mr. Edsall, and "if there is to be a conservative future, which I for one hope there is, it's not going to be shaped by the old conservative movement." Let us leave aside for the nonce the subject of what kind of "conservative future" Mr. Kristol hopes for as well as the very interesting matter of the crucial role he and his fellow neoconservatives played in causing the collapse of a coherent, intellectually sophisticated, and politically serious conservatism, and dwell instead on the larger point that the "movement" is indeed defunct.

Yet the dismal performance of "movement conservatives" in the primaries this year was by no means the first time they had flopped. In 1996, the campaign of "movement" favorite Phil Gramm collapsed before it even arrived in New Hampshire, while other "movement" stallions—Jack Kemp, Bill Bennett, Newt Gingrich, Steve Forbes, Pat Robertson—either never got out of their stalls or stumbled and fell quickly. Mr. Kemp was momentarily resuscitated for the Dole campaign, but he proved to be just as much of a dud as his critics had always predicted.

Mr. Kristol, then, is entirely correct that the "conservative movement" is no longer, if it ever was, a serious national political force, though he seems to be wrong about why it is not. The reason he offers for its collapse is the disappearance of the voting bloc on which it was based and the emergence of the "new political majority" that he spies trampling down the vineyards behind Mr. McCain. This "new political majority" is not attached to the principles of the "movement" and will not support candidates reflecting those principles. Instead, it will drive the campaigns of "reformers" like Mr. McCain, who began charting "a new governing agenda" that, as Mr. Kristol and his sidekick David Brooks described it in the *Weekly Standard*, was far more friendly to Big Government and hostile to religious commitment than the old conservatism had ever been. In the course of their description, it became clear that they were merely ascribing to Mr. McCain and to his largely fictitious "new majority" what they as neocons desperately wanted to see.

The major political problem that neo-conservatism has always faced has been its own lack of a mass following. Since

the late 1970's, the neocons have proved themselves expert in the courtly arts of intrigue, back-stabbing, and palace politics, and once they had attached themselves to Ronald Reagan and, through the gullibility of "movement conservatives," had been welcomed within the palace itself, they advanced quickly to dominant positions in the foundations, magazines, and think tanks that managed and financed Conservatism, Inc. But it was Reagan or the senior George Bush or the Republicans who actually attracted the mass following that kept the neocon courtiers employed and enjoying at least the semblance of political power. As long as they remained attached to a successful political figure who could get elected without their assistance, they remained also at his mercy and were unable to achieve the total dominance their passion for power craved. Now, with Mr. McCain galloping on the horizon with his supposed "new political majority" behind him and a "new governing agenda" dangling at his hip that excluded the anti-Big Government conservatives, the religious right, and the neo-isolationists, it suddenly seemed that the days of dependence were nearly over and the hour of the neoconservative beast had come round at last.

The collapse of the McCain crusade dashed these dreams. Mr. McCain's temporary success in New Hampshire did not prove that there was such a majority nor that the political right was dead, though the lackluster performance of the "movement" candidates did reveal their own political irrelevance and that of the "movement" from which they sprouted. Mr. Bush's success, on the other hand, based as it was on his appeal to the right, shows that—at least at the grassroots level where voters really vote and never a neocon trod—the right remains very much alive. To say the "conservative movement" is dead, defunct, and politically irrelevant, on the one hand, and that the political right at the unorganized, grassroots level remains alive, strong, and even essential for political victory, on the other, is not contradictory. On the contrary, movement conservatism failed to become a serious political force not because it missed the boat captained by any "new majority" or "new coalition" but because it failed to recognize the real political majority that still exists and which Mr. Bush manipulated to gain the GOP nomination.

The real majority—it is not literally a majority of the voting population but a

large block of it—is simply the white, mainly ethnic, working- and middle-class ranks of American society, and the way to win it is not by invoking the deathless platitudes and banalities of "movement conservatism" or the tendentious "Inside Manhattan" policy-wonkery offered by the neoconservatives. The way to win Middle Americans is to communicate to them that you, as a candidate and a public leader, understand that they and their way of life are under siege, that the ruling class of the country in alliance with its underclass is besieging them, and that you are willing to ally with them against their enemies. Neoconservatives don't get this and never will, which is why they do not and never will have a mass following of any kind. Movement conservatism never got this either, because it and its spokesmen were more interested in proving their pet points about their various idols than in doing something useful to protect and conserve the people and culture of the nation. Joe McCarthy, for all his shortcomings, did get it, as did George Wallace. Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan also got it, at least to the extent that they understood how to use it to get themselves elected. Young Mr. Bush, if he did not understand it before the recent primaries, should have learned it by now, though it will not be surprising if he failed to do so. Since Reagan, no successful political leader on the right has shown that he understands it, and today the entire political class, right as well as left, has schooled itself to miss it and to talk about just about anything other than the class and cultural war that is being waged against Middle America.

The blunt and brutal truth is that if no one is willing or able to wage war back, then the war will be lost, and that may in fact be happening. The abandonment of issues relevant to Middle American survival by most political leaders and opinionmakers means that the war is not being fought and the issues within it are not being defined adequately. There is still a chance in this last election of the century that someone will emerge who is able and willing to fight the war. But if he doesn't emerge this year, the best plan for Middle Americans and those who side with them in the future will be to look for the egress and run like hell for it. c

MOVING ?

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Letter From Paris

by Curtis Cate

Exhibitionism as a Way of Life



In mid-January, those Parisians (like myself) who are still interested in literary matters were aroused from the smug complacency in which we had been wallowing for several weeks, as dazed survivors of the millennial earthquake and the pyrotechnic cancan put on by a shameless Eiffel Tower, by an unexpected thunderclap. The thunderclap was ignited by Jean Daniel, founder and editor-in-chief of France's leading left-wing weekly, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, with a sensational cover informing us that "After twenty years of Purgatory SARTRE (in huge red letters) is coming back." But—and this was not the least paradoxical feature of this surprising resurrection—the photo illustrating this affirmation showed a somewhat stooped Jean-Paul Sartre, as though burdened by the sheer weight of his existential cogitations, trudging away from, rather than toward, the reader.

The prime mover of this literary "happening"—its Vulcan, if not its Jupiter—was not Jean Daniel, the self-crowned king of France's "progressive" intelligentsia, but rather its most flamboyant spokesman, the most dazzling of the country's once new and young but now increasingly middle-aged *philosophes*, a virtuoso of epistemological dialectics, and (if I may be forgiven for lapsing into French) a veritable *saltimbanque de l'exégèse* (an acrobat in the sleight-of-hand art of exegesis) named Bernard-Henri Lévy. And the thundering bolt with which he aroused us from our after-the-binge somnolence was a 650-page book entitled *Le Siècle de Sartre* ("Sartre's Century"), most curiously illustrated on the cover—one more paradox!—by a photograph of the famous philosopher, shown about to remove an inseparable cigarette from that garrulous mouth, for once elegantly dressed with a white shirt collar and dark tie, and, not least of all, an impeccably cuff-linked shirtsleeve: as

though to remind us that this *enfant terrible* of modern philosophy and self-proclaimed advocate of the cause of the downtrodden and oppressed was, after all, or perhaps one should say *before* so much else, a bourgeois—like the best (or the worst) of us.

In literary, as in political, matters, it is always hazardous to speak of "inevitable" happenings. Particularly when what is involved is a 660-page book that even a genius could not have put together in a couple of months, and which, by the author's own admission, was the product of an intense intellectual "cohabitation" lasting all of three years. But from the moment (I think it was in late summer of last year) that some dimwits working for *Time* magazine decided that the looming *fin de siècle* could not be celebrated properly without the collective "wisdom" of its editors and readers selecting a single "Man of the Century," it was inevitable that some frustrated French super-patriot would come up with a French candidate for this grotesque distinction. And sure enough, that master of the political platitude, President Jacques Chirac, whose simplest statements now have to be read from a prepared text rather than uttered off-the-cuff, again demonstrated his genius for the commonplace by promptly proposing—yes, you have guessed it!—Charles de Gaulle. It was no less inevitable that, faced with the catastrophic prospect of a major cultural devaluation, someone else should come up with the name of a Frenchman capable of symbolizing the luminous intelligence of the 20th century. And so, out of his magician's sleeve, Bernard-Henri Lévy pulled an authentically French rabbit: Jean-Paul Sartre.

If the January 13 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, containing an interview with the author and a number of extracts from "Sartre's Century," was the first thunderbolt launched in this mediatic blitzkrieg, it was quickly followed by a second and even louder bang, when the author-conjurer was invited to take part in a special program exclusively devoted to Sartre by France's most prestigious literary talk show, *Bouillon de culture*.

In France, as in the United States, literary reputations (many of them bogus) are now made on the basis of histrionic

ability, talent for self-advocacy, and, of course, the quick-witted *esprit* that is particularly appreciated in the land that produced Voltaire. The successful author, like so much else in this age of self-serving theatricality, must become an actor, a salesman, a dramatic simplifier, and peddler of his (or her) wares. I must confess that I often find these talk-show sessions excruciatingly painful, so visibly embarrassed are the timid souls (novelists in particular) who, in a couple of minutes, have to provide fast-food résumés of their tales, plots, or themes, and so insufferably pleased with themselves are those who are narcissistically inclined. This said, I must take my hat off to one Frenchman, Bernard Pivot, a talk-show wizard who, over a period of 30 years or more, has raised many of these sessions to the level of high interrogative art.

Years ago, when he began his Friday-evening *Apostrophes* talk show on France's second (partly state-subsidized) channel, Pivot had no idea of what a standard feature it would soon become in the landscape of French literature. The main reason is that, unlike others who have tried their hand at this game, Pivot actually reads (or has clever assistants read) the newly published books of the authors he interrogates (usually four or five at a time). How he manages to read so many books without becoming dazed or dizzy from overwork, and how he manages, with the aid of a few slips of paper, to extract the most pertinent quotations from each book discussed, is a recurring mystery, not to say a weekly miracle. But manage it he does—with the most extraordinary aplomb. And, indeed, with such authority and prestige that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once invited him to come and interview him at his home in Vermont.

When, after 20 years of literary interrogations, Bernard Pivot decided that he had had enough, he chose to end his long *Apostrophes* series with a one-man interview accorded to a self-sacrificing non-author: Georges Lubin, the meticulous collector and editor of George Sand's letters (4,000 inventoried letters when he began; 18,000, published in 25 volumes, by the time he was through). It was a fitting finale and a well-earned tribute to painstaking scholarship. But the