



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

## Beautiful Losers

### The Failure of American Conservatism

by Samuel Francis

When T.S. Eliot said that there are no lost causes because there are no won causes, he probably was not thinking of American conservatism. Nearly sixty years after the New Deal, the American right is no closer to challenging its fundamental premises and machinery than when Old Rubberlegs first started priming the pump and scheming to take the United States into a war that turned out to be a social and political revolution. American conservatism, in other words, is a failure, and all the think tanks, magazines, direct mail barons, inaugural balls, and campaign buttons cannot disguise or alter that. Virtually every cause to which conservatives have attached themselves for the past three generations has been lost, and the tide of political and cultural battle is not likely to turn anytime soon.

Not only has the American right lost on such fundamental issues as the fusion of state and economy, the size and scope of government, the globalist course of American foreign policy, the transformation of the Constitution into a meaningless document that serves the special interests of whatever faction can grab it for a while, and the replacement of what is generally called "traditional morality" by a dominant ethic of instant gratification, but also the mainstream of those who today are pleased to call themselves conservatives has come to accept at least the premises and often the full-blown agenda of the left. The movement that came to be known in the 1970's as "neoconservatism," largely Northeastern, urban, and academic in its orientation, is now the defining core of the "permissible" right—that is, what a dominant left-liberal cultural and political elite

recognizes and accepts as the right boundary of public discourse.

It remains legally possible (barely) to express sentiments and ideas that are further to the right, but if an elite enjoys cultural hegemony, as the left does, it has no real reason to outlaw its opponents, and indeed encouraging their participation in the debate fosters the illusion of "pluralism" and serves to legitimize the main leftward trend of the debate. Those outside the permissible boundaries of discourse are simply "derationalized" and ignored—as anti-Semites, racists, authoritarians, crackpots, crooks, and other kinds of illicit and irrational fringe elements not in harmonic convergence with the *Zeitgeist* and therefore on the wrong side of history. That is where the *de facto* alliance of left and neoconservative right has succeeded in relegating those such as journalist Patrick J. Buchanan who dissent from their common core of shared premises and who seriously and repeatedly challenge their hegemony.

Neoconservatism today is usually called simply "conservatism," though it is sometimes known under other labels as well: Fred Barnes' "Big Government conservatism"; HUD Secretary Jack Kemp's "progressive conservatism"; Representative Newt Gingrich's "opportunity conservatism"; Paul Weyrich's "cultural conservatism"; or, most recently, "The New Paradigm," in the phrase coined by White House aide James Pinkerton. Despite the variations among these formulas, all of them envision a far larger and more active central state than the "Old Republicanism" embraced by most conservatives prior to the 1970's, a state that makes it its business to envision a particular arrangement of institutions and beliefs and to design governmental machinery to create them. In the case of "neoconservatism," the principal goal is

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the enhancement of economic opportunity through one kind or another of social engineering (enterprise zones, for example) and the establishment of an ethic that regards equality (usually disguised as “equality of opportunity”), economic mobility, affluence, and material gratification as the central meaning of what their exponents often call “the American experiment.”

Such goals are not conceptually distinct from those of the Progressivism and liberalism athwart which the American right at one time promised to stand, though the tactics and procedures by which they are to be achieved are somewhat (but not very) different. Indeed, much of what neoconservatives are concerned with is merely process—strategy, tactics, how to win elections, how to broaden the base of the GOP, how to make the government run more effectively, how to achieve “credibility” and exert an “impact”—and not with the ultimate goals themselves, about which there is little debate with those parts of the left that also lie within the permissible range of “pluralistic” dialogue. Given the persistent cultural dominance of the left, a conservatism that limits itself merely to procedural problems tacitly concedes the goals of public action to its enemies and quietly comes to share the premises on which the goals of the left rest. Eventually, having silently and unconsciously accepted the premises and goals, it will also come to accept even the means by which the left has secured its dominance, and the very distinction between “right” and “left” will disappear.

It was this kind of silent acquiescence in the premises of the left that James Burnham identified as a salient characteristic of neoconservatism when it first began to appear in the early 1970’s. In an exchange with neoconservative Peter Berger in *National Review* (May 12, 1972), Burnham noted that though neoconservatives had broken with “liberal doctrine,” finding it “both intellectually bankrupt and, by and large, pragmatically sterile,” they retained “what might be called the emotional gestalt of liberalism, the liberal sensitivity and temperament,” the ideo-neurological reflexes and knee jerks of the left. Since that time, those reflexes have not only been recircuited but have been reenforced, so that today the neoconservative “right” almost explicitly accepts and defends the New Deal and its legacy, seeking only to spruce them up and administer them more effectively and more honestly, but not to reverse them or transcend them—Old Right goals are routinely dismissed by the neoconservative right as “impractical.”

But Burnham also remarked that “much of conservative doctrine . . . also is, if not quite bankrupt, more and more obsolescent,” and the failure of conservatism and its eventual displacement by neoconservative formulas is closely related to its bankruptcy. The survivors of the “Old Right” today spend a good deal of their time complaining about their dethronement by pseudo-conservatives, but those Old Rightists who survive are only the hardiest of the species, ever vigilant for camouflaged predators who slip into their herds. For the most part, their predecessors in the conservative movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s were not so careful, and indeed many of them failed to understand the ideological dynamics of liberalism, how the liberal regime functioned, or how to distinguish and insulate their own beliefs and organizations against the left. That error was perhaps at least part of what Burnham meant by the

“obsolescence” of conservatism. It was an error that was the principal weakness of conservatism and it permitted the eventual triumph of neoconservative forces and the assimilation of the right within the dominant cultural apparatus that serves the left’s interests.

The Old Right, composed mainly of the organized conservative resistance formed in the mid-1950’s and centered around *National Review*, failed to understand that the revolution had already occurred. Conventional Old Right doctrines revolved around the ideas of a constitutionally limited central government, largely independent local and state government, an entrepreneurial economy of privately owned and operated firms, and a moral and social code of individualism in politics, economy, art, religion, and ethics. These doctrines reflected the institutions and beliefs of the bourgeois elite that had gained political power in the Civil War and prevailed until the dislocations of 20th-century technological and organizational expansion brought forth a new managerial elite that seized power in the reforms of the Progressive Era and the New Deal. These reforms constituted the revolution, not only in the political power of Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and the Democratic Party, but also in the construction of an entire architecture of economic and cultural power, based on bureaucratized corporations and unions, increasingly bureaucratized universities, foundations, churches, and mass media, and fused, directly or indirectly, with a centralized bureaucratic state.

Since the revolution occurred legally and peacefully and assimilated traditional institutions and symbols to its use, it was not immediately apparent that it had taken place at all, that the dominant minority in the United States had circulated, that the bourgeois elite no longer called the shots, or that those who continued to adhere to Old Right doctrines were no longer in a position to “conserve” much of anything. But while the Old Right of the 1950’s was in principle aware and critical of the new power structure, it continued to regard itself as essentially “conservative” of an established or traditional order rather than frankly acknowledging its counterrevolutionary mission.

Hence, the entire strategy of the Old Right of the 1950’s was to seek accommodation with the new managerial-bureaucratic establishment rather than to challenge it. George H. Nash writes that William F. Buckley, Jr.

forcefully rejected what he called “the popular and cliché-ridden appeal to the grass-roots” and strove instead to establish a journal which would reach intellectuals. Not all conservatives agreed with this approach, but the young editor-to-be was firm. It was the intellectuals, after all, “who have midwived and implemented the revolution. We have got to have allies among the intellectuals, and we propose to renovate conservatism and see if we can’t win some of them around.”

Yet while Buckley seemed cognizant of the “revolution” that had transpired and was in fact successful in attracting a number of intellectuals, he failed to see that the new intellectual class as a whole, which had indeed “midwived and implemented the revolution,” could not become conservative. It could not do so because its principal social

function and occupational calling in the new order was to delegitimize the ideas and institutions of conservatism and provide legitimization for the new regime, and its power and rewards as a class depended upon the very bureaucratized cultural organizations that conservatives attacked. Only if conservatism were “renovated” to the point that it no longer rejected the cultural apparatus of the revolution could very many intellectuals be expected to sign up.

Moreover, by focusing its efforts in Manhattan, Washington, and the major centers of the intelligentsia and other sectors of the new elite, Buckley and his conservative colleagues isolated themselves from their natural allies in the “grass roots.” While there was clearly a need for intellectual sophistication on the right, the result of Buckley’s tactic was to generate a schism between Old Right intellectual cadres and the body of conservative supporters outside its Northeastern urban and academic headquarters. Among these supporters in the 1950’s and 1960’s there flourished an increasingly bizarre and deracinated wilderness of extremist, conspiratorialist, racist, and even occultist ideologues who loudly rejected both the Old Right mainstream and the Old Right’s new friends in the intellectual and cultural elite, but who failed to attract any but the most marginal and pathological elements in the country and exerted no cultural or political influence at all. At various times in its history, *National Review* has found it necessary to “purge” itself of such adherents, and each catharsis, no matter how prudent, has rendered its “renovated” conservatism less and less palatable to ordinary Americans and more and more acceptable to the Manhattanite intelligentsia *NR* has always sought to attract.

In any case, the Old Right intellectuals for the most part had few links with the “grass roots,” the popular, middle-class, and WASP nucleus of traditional American culture. *National Review* itself was not only Manhattanite but also Ivy League and Roman Catholic in its orientation, as well as ex-Communist and ethnic in its editorial composition, and not a few of its brightest stars in the 1950’s were personally eccentric, if not outright neurotic. Moreover, few of them reflected the “Protestant Establishment” that by the end of World War II had largely made its peace with the new regime and was scurrying to secure its own future within the managerial state, economy, and culture. Of the 25 conservative intellectuals whose photographs appear on the dust jacket of George H. Nash’s *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, four are Roman Catholic, seven are Jewish, another seven (including three Jews) are foreign-born, two are Southern or Western in origin, and only five are in any respect representative of the Anglo-Saxon (or at least Anglo-Celtic) Protestant strain in American history and culture (three of the five later converted to Roman Catholicism). Theological meditation competed with free market economic theory as the main interest of many Old Right intellectuals to a far larger degree than had been the case with such pre-World War II skeptics of Progressivism as Albert Jay Nock, H.L. Mencken, or the “America First” opponents of foreign intervention.

The religious, ideological, and ethnic differentiation of the Old Right from the country’s Protestant Establishment may have helped push the right’s leaders in a more radical direction than they were inclined to go, but it probably also

served to cut them off from both the Establishment’s declining leadership as well as from the rank and file of Americans outside it. The Old Right could not help but remain an isolated circle of intellectuals and journalists, absorbed in rather esoteric theory, despised by the intellectual elite they hoped to impress and convert, and ignored by most Americans and their political leaders.

The Old Right’s political aspirations were no less grotesque than its desire to win acceptance among the intellectuals and followed much the same strategy. Although the remnants of the bourgeois elite retained an important political base in congressional districts remote from the centers of the new regime, they could serve only as a brake on the regime’s power and were unable to control either Congress or the presidency. Their inability to do so was directly related to their lack of cultural power, and even when Old Right forces were able to capture the Republican Party in 1964, the disastrous result of Barry Goldwater’s candidacy was in large part due to his supporters’ lack of access to the national organs of culture and opinion. Subsequent Old Right political efforts concentrated on attempts to gain influence within the political domain of the elite by means of endless searches for suitable presidential candidates who could seize national power at a single blow and through a kind of Fabian tactic of permeating the federal bureaucracy. As a result, there has now emerged an entire generation of what might be called “court conservatives” who devote their careers to place-seeking in the federal government and favor-carrying with whatever President or satrap is able to hire them and who have long since abandoned any serious intention of challenging the bureaucratic organism they have infected with their presence.

In the absence of a significant cultural base, such political efforts not only were bound to fail but also had the effect of drawing the right further into the institutional and conceptual framework of the liberal regime. Political maneuver by its nature is a process of bargaining, and the more conservatives have engaged in political action, the more they have found themselves bargaining and compromising with their opponents, who often do not need to bargain at all. Since their opponents on the left, in Congress or the executive branch, have ready access to and sympathy from the mass media, they are able to discredit the men and measures of the right that will not bend to their manipulation. Moreover, the right’s preoccupation with the presidency also forces it to seek acceptance by the national media and the dominant culture of the left and focuses its efforts on an institution that is far less susceptible to grass roots influence than Congress. The modern presidency, as the lesson of the hapless Reagan administration shows, is less the master of the bureaucratic elite than its servant, and while a powerful President could subdue and circumvent his own bureaucracy, he could do so consistently only if he were able and willing to mobilize mass support against it from outside the elite.

The political weakness of the Old Right and its failure to understand that it really represented a subordinate and displaced elite rather than a dominant incumbent one were instrumental in its gradual assimilation by the liberal regime. The crucial episode in the assimilation occurred during the Vietnam War, which the Old Right in general supported on

the grounds of anticommunism. The war itself was a result of misconceived liberal policies and was effectively lost by liberal mismanagement, and there was no good reason for the right (even the anticommunist right) to support it. Yet, as the New Left mounted an attack on the war and broadened the attack to include the bureaucratized university and parts of the leviathan state, the right's response was to defend not only the war itself and sometimes even the liberal policies that were losing it, but also the liberal power centers themselves. The Old Right critique of containment, mounted by anti-interventionists such as Robert Taft and John T. Flynn and by anticommunist interventionists such as Burnham, was forgotten, as was much of the Old Right cultural critique of the domestic liberal regime, which mirrored its globalist regime. It was at this point that the Old Right began to join forces with emerging neoconservative elements, whose concern was entirely with defending the liberal managerial system, foreign and domestic, and which never had the slightest interest in dismantling it. The result of the coalition between the Old Right and neoconservatism has been the adoption by the right of Wilsonian-Rooseveltian globalism and its universalist premises, the diffusion of those premises within the right in defense of what are actually the institutions and goals of the left, and the gradual abandonment of the Old Right goals of reducing the size and scope of centralized power. By swallowing the premises of the left's globalist and messianic foreign policy, the right has wound up regurgitating those same premises domestically. If it is our mission to build democracy and protect human rights in Afghanistan, then why should we not also enforce civil rights in Mississippi and break down the barriers to equality of opportunity everywhere through the sledgehammer of federal power? Conservatives do not yet advocate sending the Special Forces into Bensonhurst and Howard Beach, but the story is not over yet.

To say that the conservatism of the Old Right failed is not to dismiss the important contributions its exponents made to a critical analysis of liberal ideology or all of its work in political theory, international relations, economic and social policy, and religious, philosophical, and cultural thought. The Old Right intelligentsia as a whole was a far more exciting group of thinkers and writers than the post-World War II left produced. Nor does pointing to its failure mean that a serious right was not or is not possible. It is merely to say that the Old Right fundamentally misperceived its own position in and relationship to the emerging managerial regime and that this misperception led it into a mistaken strategy of seeking consensus rather than conflict with the dominant elite of the regime.

**I**t remains possible today to rectify that error by a radical alteration of the right's strategy. Abandoning the illusion that it represents an establishment to be "conserved," a new American right must recognize that its values and goals lie outside and against the establishment and that its natural allies are not in Manhattan, New Haven, and Washington but in the increasingly alienated and threatened strata of Middle America. The strategy of the right should be to enhance the polarization of Middle Americans from the incumbent regime, not to build coalitions with the regime's defenders and beneficiaries. Moreover, since Middle Ameri-

ca consists of workers, farmers, suburbanites, and other non- or post-bourgeois groups, as well as small businessmen, it is unlikely that a new right will make much progress in mobilizing them if it simply repeats the ideological formulas of a now long-defunct bourgeois elite and its order. The more salient concerns of post-bourgeois Middle Americans that a new right can express are those of crime, educational collapse, the erosion of their economic status, and the calculated subversion of their social, cultural, and national identity by forces that serve the interests of the elite above them and the underclass below them, but at their expense. A new right, positioning itself in opposition to the elite and its underclass ally, can assert its leadership of alienated Middle Americans and mobilize them in radical opposition to the regime.

A new, radical Middle American Right need not abandon political efforts, but, consistent with its recognition that it is laying siege to a hostile establishment, it ought to realize that political action in a cultural power vacuum will be largely futile. The main focus of a Middle American Right should be the reclamation of cultural power, the patient elaboration of an alternative culture within but against the regime—within the belly of the beast but indigestible by it. Instead of the uselessness of a Diogenes' search for an honest presidential candidate or a Fabian quest for a career in the bureaucracy, a Middle American Right should begin working in and with schools, churches, clubs, women's groups, youth organizations, civic and professional associations, the military and police forces, and even in the much dreaded labor unions to create a radicalized Middle American consciousness that can perceive the ways in which exploitation of the middle classes is institutionalized and understand

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how it can be resisted. Only when this kind of infrastructure of cultural hegemony is developed can a Middle American Right seek meaningful political power without coalitions with the left and bargaining with the regime.

Eliot may have been right that no cause is really lost because none is really won, but victory and defeat in the struggle for social dominance have little to do with whether the cause is right or wrong. Some ideas have more consequences than others, and those that attach themselves to declining social and political forces have the least consequence of all. By allowing itself to be assimilated by the regime of the left, American conservatism became part of a social and political force that, if not on the decline, is at least confronted by a rising force that seeks to displace it, even as the regime of the left displaced its predecessor. If the American right can disengage from the left and its regime, it can assume leadership of a cause that could be right as well as victorious. But it can do so only if it has the wit and the will to disabuse itself of the illusions that have distracted it almost since its birth. ◊

# Conservative Movement R.I.P.?



Anna Myreck-Wodecki

## WICK ALLISON

When one is asked about the future in the context *Chronicles* has set, the obvious response is to talk in political terms. But conservatism is not a political phenomenon. I have always been uncomfortable with references to the “conservative movement” when I read the political press or some of my favorite columnists. It seems like an oxymoron.

Conservatism is a philosophical attitude. To be a conservative is to accept the fallibility of man and the imperfectibility of human institutions. It is an odd kind of skepticism, because it is a skepticism based on, finally, faith. If God created man to be the creature he is, then it is not for us only to accept man as he is but to try to understand man as he is—and to understand joyfully. That requirement for joyful understanding gives the positive dimension to conservatism. In fact, it makes it kind of fun.

The Founders, despite their differences, were almost uniformly conservative in contemporary terms. Their knowledge of history was deep, and therefore they were not optimistic about the construction of a government that would both preserve liberty and promote the growth and expansion of the common wealth.

In some conservative circles today their lack of optimism translates into pessimism. I would argue there is a profound difference. Pessimism is a surrender of faith, a spiritual shrugging of the shoulders. But the Founders, looking back over five thousand years of history, were not pessimistic; they were realistic about the limitations of human reason and human accomplishment.

Looking forward, our attitude should be the same. Conservatives will never besiege a Bastille, storm a Winter Palace, parade into Havana. We’ll simply go about the business of being normal. That means we’ll spend a great

deal of time reminding our fellow citizens and arguing with our fellow Republicans about what government can be expected to do and what our culture ought to preserve and pass on. If all goes well, we’ll keep this magnificent experiment called America going for another century or two. If I’m supposed to have aspirations, that’s about the best I can come up with.

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## CHARLEY REESE



To look at the present out of which the future grows one must conclude that American conservatism is now only a footnote in the history of the rise and fall of the American Republic. It has been reduced to a remnant of the body politic.

At the national level, most prominent people who call themselves conservative are not. They are either Republican partisans, like Representative Newt Gingrich, trying to compete for votes by painting the old welfare state with new rhetoric, or they are an American imitation of the British Tory, imperialist to the bone and elitist to the marrow.

The only powerful political movement left in the present is imperialism, or transnationalism. It encompasses both Democrats and Republicans, both those who label themselves liberal and conservative, both the New Right and the