

Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

If the American Republic is defunct, and if most Americans no longer subscribe to the classical republicanism that defined the Republic as its public orthodoxy, what is the principal issue of American politics? Ever since the Progressive Era, the issue that has divided Americans into the two political and ideological camps of “right” and “left” has been whether or not to preserve the Republic. The Progressives (at least their dominant wing) argued that the small-scale government, entrepreneurial business economy, and the localized and private social and cultural fabric that made a republic possible was obsolete at best and at worst repressive and exploitative. They and their descendants in New Deal-Great Society liberalism pushed for an enlarged state fused with corporations and unions in the economy and with massive, bureaucratized cultural and educational organizations. In contrast, the “right” pulled in the opposite direction, defending the Republic and the social and economic structure that enabled republicanism to flourish, but with less and less success and with ever-diminishing understanding of what it was doing.

Today the conflict over that issue is finished. The Progressivist empire has replaced the old American Republic, and even on the self-proclaimed “right” today, virtually no one other than the beleaguered paleoconservatives defends republicanism in anything like its pristine form. The collapse of the conflict over republicanism is the main reason why the labels “left” and “right” no longer make much sense and also why—much more than the end of the Reagan administration and the Cold War—the “conservative coalition” of the Reagan era is falling apart. Mr. Reagan’s main legacy was to show his followers, who for decades grouched and griped against “Big Government,” that they too could climb aboard the Big Government hayride and nibble crumbs at its picnic. With such “conservatism” now centered mainly in Washington and its exponents happily dependent on the federal megastate, the historic *raison d’être* of the American “right” has ceased to exist. Such con-

servatives no longer even pretend to want to preserve or restore the old Republic, and it now turns out that even when they said they did, it was all pretty much a charade anyway.

Nevertheless, the end of the conflict over the Republic and of the battle between left and right does not mean that there are no conflicts at all. Indeed, the American imperium, having few roots in the population except insofar as it can feed its client constituencies, is riven by conflicts. The empire might be able to strike back, but it has never been able to formulate its own orthodoxy that would distinguish it from traditional republicanism and provide a consensus that could discipline conflicts. That indeed is why the megastate has retained the forms of republicanism. Unable to legitimize itself through the ideology of Progressivist liberalism, it steals the clothes of its republican predecessor to justify its revolutionary agenda.

At the heart of the empire—or megastate, or managerial regime, or leviathan, or whatever you want to call it—there is a vacuum, and the main issue of the last decade of this century and the first decade of the next will be over what is going to fill that empty space. The ability to fill it, to articulate a public orthodoxy for the country, is in large part what it means to be master of the imperium, for whoever is able to acquire enough cultural power to define what the megastate is supposed to do and for whom it is supposed to do it will achieve Antonio Gramsci’s “cultural hegemony” and will carve his own initials on the blank slate of the empire.

One of the principal contestants for hegemony in the megastate will be the largely Middle American constituency of the now-decapitated American right. The end of the left-right conflict and the absorption of its leadership within the megastate means that the mass following of the right has become a body without a head. That following thus finds itself, its interests and values, unrepresented in the contest for control of the megastate of the next century, and that situation cannot last. Sooner or later, if Middle Americans are not to become extinct, they will generate a new, independent social and political

identity or consciousness and will construct a movement based on that consciousness that will demand not only representation in, but also dominance of, the regime.

But they will not, as their forebears did, demand republicanism. Middle Americans are a diverse bunch, consisting of small businessmen in manufacturing, small farmers burdened with debt and confronted with absorption by agribusiness, and white ethnic blue-collar workers who find their jobs disappearing because of foreign competition and their advancement thwarted by megastate-mandated racial and gender quotas. What these and similar groups share, despite their diversity, is a common frustration with the megastate in its present structure, along with a seemingly paradoxical dependence on it.

Their frustrations might lead them toward a revival of classical republican, small-government conservatism, but their dependence on the state forbids it. Middle Americans are as much wrapped up in the tentacles of the megastate as the elite that runs it or the underclass that is its main beneficiary. Middle Americans buy their homes with loans provided by the federal government. They educate their children in public schools and send them to colleges, themselves recipients of federal funds, with federal student aid. They work for corporations regulated by and linked to the state and are members of labor unions protected by federal laws. They receive federal farm subsidies, and the food they produce and eat, the highways on which they travel, the air they breathe, and the television they watch all are subject to the laws and regulations of the federal megastate. Most Americans, Middle or not, lodge few objections to this kind of regimentation; what they do object to is that it doesn’t work all that well—that is, that they don’t get from it as much as they want or expect—or that federal regimentation often seems to help others more than it helps them. Middle Americans don’t object to the megastate in principle, but they do object to it in practice.

Hence, the agenda of an authentic Middle American political consciousness would include retaining many of

the structures and functions of the megastate, and in this respect it would not be attractive to most paleoconservatives or paleolibertarians. Middle Americans would insist on a state that protected their material security — through such “middle-class welfare” programs as health insurance, unemployment benefits, pensions, and labor regulations, as well as economic policies intended to secure their jobs, farms, and businesses.

Yet, at the same time, a Middle American agenda would involve a fairly radical dismantlement and restructuring of the megastate. As it is presently constituted, the megastate exists for the purpose of social manipulation. Its elite, trained in the techniques of social engineering and social therapy, gains power and budgetary resources by inventing social “problems” and “crises” and then designing and applying “solutions” for them. Obviously, every “solution” creates yet another “problem,” so the mission of the bureaucratic elite (and its cousins in universities and think-tanks) is never complete. The solutions are characteristically egalitarian and redistributive and assist the elite in delegitimizing, reconstructing, and otherwise manipulating traditional Middle American institutions and beliefs.

Moreover, most of the “problems” the elite invents are located within or about the underclass — racism, poverty, crime, cities, AIDS, drugs, illiteracy, illegitimacy and family breakdown, infant mortality, the lack of underclass political representation, etc., etc. — so that a vast amount of money, energy, and attention is devoted to the underclass, not to Middle Americans, who nevertheless are expected to pay for the underclass as well as for the elite and the programs that support it. The megastate, then, in its current form, is an apparatus that largely serves the interests of the elite and its underclass ally, at the expense, material and cultural, of the middle class.

A serious Middle American political consciousness would therefore reject and seek to excise the problem-solution ratchet that is the motor of the present regime as well as other functions intended to manipulate and deconstruct traditional institutions. Thus, the preoccupation of the incumbent elite with racism, sexism, “civil

rights,” social “pathologies” that are little more than normative Middle American institutions and beliefs, and the whole apparatus in state and culture by which white male “hegemony” is challenged and undermined would have to go. This would involve more than simply formulating new policies and punching a few buttons on the megastate’s control panel. It would involve ripping the entrails out of the elite itself by eliminating much of the bureaucracy and its agencies and decoupling the elite of the megastate from its Siamese twins in the cultural organs. Abolishing tax-exemptions, subsidies, and federal contracts for the universities and foundations where manipulative social policy is born would be a practical way to begin.

It is the radicalism of such a Middle American consciousness that definitively separates it from both New Deal-Great Society liberalism and from the “Big Government conservatism” and neoconservatism that flourish today. The real goal of the liberal megastate was not to secure the well-being of Middle America but to level and destroy its distinctive cultural identity by identifying it as the “social environment” that bred pathologies and dysfunctions. The real goal of “Big Government conservatives” and neoconservatives has never been to dismantle the structures of the megastate and redesign its functions, but simply to capture them and make them work more efficiently, with “efficiency” implicitly defined as the more practical realization of their liberal goals. “Big Government conservatives” do nothing to challenge the orientation of the megastate toward the interests of the elite and its tame underclass, and their whole agenda seems to be centered on locking that orientation into place.

Middle Americans have long piggy-backed on mainstream conservatism, but they have done so only by obscuring (or failing to understand completely) the differences that distinguish their interests and aspirations from the increasingly rootless and fruitless fixations of the conventional right. With the collapse of the right and the obsolescence (not to say the fraudulence) of its republican ideology, Middle Americans have an opportunity — and, indeed, face the necessity — of articulating a consciousness that more

accurately reflects their material interests and their cultural identity.

For those who still adhere to classical republicanism, the emergence of a Middle American radicalism would no doubt be distasteful, but their own long lack of success in reviving their political ideals ought perhaps to induce a certain humility among them, as well as a willingness to postpone displays of ideological passion in order to consummate later an eventual and more enduring fulfillment. If the classical republican ideal is ever to rise from its ashes, it can do so only among those who retain even now the vestigial moral and social discipline that renders republican government possible. The only remaining locus of such republican discipline in the United States at the end of the 20th century is the Middle American stratum that is now a hammer without a head. If it can construct its own head, it may be able to forge a new civil order from which a republican phoenix can someday be reborn. 

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Sermon for William Anderson

by *Thomas Fleming*

"In every part of every living thing
is stuff that once was rock."

—*Lorine Niedecker, "Lake Superior"*

After forty years of dying the world is new;
the sky above all metaphor is blue,
houses a bleed of brush-strokes on this street
I once walked down to school and back in sleet-
disheveled October dawns and bee-bumbling spring
vacation Fridays for nine years: Wyoming
Avenue, which dwindles to a track,
running out to the woods; and past the woods the lake
stretched unfretted beneath the wind-gnarled rock
the glacier thrust. On this familiar walk
to school I read the graduate dean's decree:
"Fleming: Please be advised your Ph.D.
in classics is suspended till you pass,
with grade of B or better, a sixth grade class
in social studies you did not complete."
After thirty years the teacher must be dead—
still parroting her paradigms underground—
and I was sure they'd pulled the old school down,
but I (or everything else) must be wrong:
I see the red brick building, which so long
had fouled itself with smoke from the soft coal
the School Board fed the furnace with.

The roll
was being called by now, and late for class
I cut across the pupil-worried grass
and down the oak floors meant to dignify
the sweated fact and oft-repeated lie
that stands in for the truth with half the risks,
the sums told off on fingers under desks,
the photo exposés of Greece and Rome.
Searching beneath the desktop for the gum
I planted, I find the initials carved: TF.
After a filmstrip on Prokofiev—
attacked by Stalin's music commissar
on his return to the U.S.S.R.—
the pupils, kids I must have seen somewhere,
stare past Gulliver squeezed into his chair,
while teacher reads the new curriculum:
"Athens— with capital A, the ancient home
of Plato, Thales, Homer, Pericles,
was first of all the world's democracies.
(Thales, you remember, fell down a well