

Middle American Mellow?

by Samuel Francis

America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters

by Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers
New York: Basic Books; 232 pp., \$25.00



Since the 1960's, American politics at the national level has primarily consisted of an endless search for a new majority. The Democratic Party's embrace of the civil-rights movement kicked off the quest by undermining the New Deal coalition that combined white Southerners with white, ethnic, Northern union members, allowing the Republican Party to invade the South and even swipe many of their rivals' voters in the North. The Democrats, in return, got the black vote and kept (usually) most of the union vote, but as the victories of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan attest, the GOP got the better deal. Ever since, the Democrats have been seeking to rebuild the coalition they lost without having to abandon the eccentric positions to which both their ideological preferences and new electoral base wed them. The best tactic they have devised is to nominate white Southern candidates, such as Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore, who never jeopardize the structural basis of the left's hegemony in state, economy, and culture but can plausibly masquerade as less leftist than the party and its true bosses really are. This strategy has indeed fooled some of the people some of the time, but it cannot work in the long run because the party's radicalism cannot be concealed forever, and when it comes out, white middle-class voters will defect.

The perennial quest of the Democrats, therefore, is to steal back the voters who, over the years, have been known as "Wallace voters," the "Silent Majority," "Reagan Democrats," or "Perot voters," all of whom are more or less synonymous with the white (and largely male) working- and middle-class base the Democrats lost in the 60's. The Republicans, however,

managed to win enough of these voters, at least through 1988, to keep the White House, although in 1992 and 1996 the combination of Clinton and Perot on the ballot, coupled with the Stupid Party's own lack of understanding of why white men vote for it, endangered continued GOP control of this key sector of the electorate. In recent years, political analysts on both sides of the fence have claimed that alternative voting blocs—"soccer moms" in the suburbs, Hispanic immigrants in the West and Southwest—have begun to play the strategic role white males played for the last 30 years. Hence, both parties have neglected white males and their interests and concerns, which is why they have become the "Forgotten Majority" (about 55 percent of the total electorate) in the title of this slim new study.

America's Forgotten Majority is a convincing restatement of the continuing significance of white male working- and middle-class voters in national elections. Both Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers are political scientists of leftist orientation, however, and it is their thesis as well as their hope that the "Forgotten Majority" is no longer the right-wing power base it has been since the 1960's, that it has now mellowed enough to be able to serve as the new base of a resurgent liberalism which "can revive active, strong government and build a 21st-century prosperity that is truly inclusive of all Americans."

Aside from the thinly disguised agenda of their book, in many respects Teixeira's and Rogers' analysis is almost identical to the one advanced in 1976 by the late Donald Warren, whose study of the Wallace voters in the late 1960's and early 1970's led to his coining the term "Middle American Radical" (MAR)—a concept that both Kevin Phillips and I have used to describe the Wallace-Nixon (and later Buchanan) voting base. MARs, in Warren's analysis, were not only characterized by their middle-income status but by their association with a distinctive worldview: that "the rich" (or the powerful) give in to the demands of "the poor" at the expense of the middle class. It was this belief that accounted for their "radicalism" (their distrust of government, the rich, and establishment authorities in virtually every field) and made them recep-

tive to alternative leadership from the anti-establishment, populist right. MARs saw themselves as exploited by an alliance between the ruling class and the underclass, and they rejected both the pro-underclass policies favored by the conventional left as well as the pro-ruling class policies championed by the mainstream right. As Wallace showed in his campaigns, MARs were entirely open to a "third way" that sought to synthesize the cultural beliefs of the right (patriotism, moral and religious traditionalism, racial and class identity) with some of the economic ideas of the left (middle-class safety nets, health, employment, and retirement benefits).

Teixeira and Rogers never refer to Warren and his work; they mention George Wallace on only one page and Pat Buchanan not at all, but their description of the Forgotten Majority resembles, with some differences, Warren's description of MARs. Economically, Forgotten Majority types tend to be "low-level white collar and service workers" rather than the blue-collar factory workers of the 60's and 70's. Only about 17 percent hold factory jobs today. Their median family income is about \$42,000, as opposed to MARs' \$3,000 to \$13,000 family income in the early 1970's. They live in the suburbs and are better educated than the older working class: Four-fifths hold high school diplomas and around two-fifths have some education beyond high school. As Teixeira and Rogers argue, "the typical blue-collar or low-level white-collar worker was on a rapid escalator to the middle class until 1973, but after that had to work hard simply to maintain his or her hold on the income necessary to maintain a middle-class lifestyle."

The result has been a "disjuncture" between the core values of the Forgotten Majority, its belief in what the authors describe as "freedom, equality before the law, equality of opportunity, fairness . . . achievement and hard work . . . patriotism, democracy, American exceptionalism . . . caring beyond the self, religion, and luck," and, on the other hand, its economic experience as its values have ceased to bring the expected material rewards. "The failure of activist government to restart that escalator, combined

with its apparent concentration on the problems of others (minorities, the poor, gays, even criminals), convinced Forgotten Majority voters that government was more part of this values-experience disjuncture than its solution. The direct result is the sour and skeptical attitude toward government we still see today.” This “sour and skeptical” view of government is very close to, if not identical with, the distinctive MAR view of government as being on the side of the rich and poor against the middle class, and it is the basis of the swing of the white middle-class toward Republican and right-wing populist candidates since the early 1970’s.

Teixeira and Rogers, however, question whether this right-leaning inclination still exists. In their view, the right-wing interlude is now coming to a close, and there is an opportunity for the Democrats to reclaim the Forgotten Majority by redirecting government in its interests, while abandoning support for race-based integration and affirmative action (they propose class-based versions) and muting the more offensive expressions of countercultural liberalism. They are not the first to make such recommendations; what *is* new, however, is their argument that the white middle class is now ready to turn at least moderately left—that the “pragmatic conservatism” that has characterized the Forgotten Majority in the past “has softened considerably” (polling data are said to show that Middle Americans now favor more federal spending on education and health care and are less “intolerant” than before on such issues as abortion, homosexuality, and race), and that clever Democratic political architects can construct a coalition using “universalist, transracial issues” to mobilize Forgotten Majority whites, as well as blacks and Hispanics.

Rogers’ and Teixeira’s argument for the political mellowing of the Forgotten Majority is somewhat tendentious, relying on both their subjective interpretations of Majoritarian “values” as reported in polls and the lack of interest these voters displayed in recent Republican proposals such as the Contract for America, or the politically driven moralism that Republicans affected during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Nevertheless, they may well have a point: If the rightist social and cultural proclivities of Middle Americans are not constantly fostered by political leadership, they are likely either to wither or be converted into left-wing radicalism. With the triumph, in the last

two decades, of a milkish neoconservatism over the more militant populist conservatism that began to flourish in the 1970’s, there has been little, if any, reinforcement of Middle American radicalism on the right. The culturally conservative views of white Middle Americans may be decaying simply because no prominent Republican leader, and virtually no major conservative journalist or cultural leader today, voices views such as those routinely expressed in the 1960’s and 70’s by Wallace, Nixon, Spiro Agnew, Reagan, and others. In recent years, Pat Buchanan and (to some extent) Rush Limbaugh have been the only major figures to reinforce such views.

The anti-establishment rightism of MARs and their alienation from the establishment left was based less on any firm philosophical grasp of, or commitment to, conservatism of any character than on three other factors. First, Middle Americans are far more exposed and vulnerable to the dangerous consequences of big government and the social engineering promoted by liberalism than are economic elites. (MARs are the ones who have to walk the streets that the left refuses to police, whose social and moral values elicit only snickers and sneers from the establishment media, and whose jobs are the first to be shipped off to Mexico and Thailand by the globalist policies favored by both wings of the establishment.) Second, Middle Americans are less assimilated into the dominant value-system of the left, mainly because they are not so likely as more upwardly mobile people to attend college and are less open to the ideological content of the garbage that pours out of Hollywood, television, major publishers, and the news media. Finally, Middle Americans are less vulnerable to most of the punitive measures the ruling class uses to enforce ideological and political orthodoxy: A corporate executive, a journalist, a college professor, a lawyer, or a doctor is far more likely to be harmed professionally and socially by being publicly denounced as politically incorrect than a plumber or construction worker would be. Hence, political dissidence from the right is more likely to flourish among blue-collar, Middle American occupations than in the professional classes.

Some of these conditions, however, may no longer apply. Teixeira and Rogers emphasize that Forgotten Majority members are typically better educated than the blue-collar workers of the older

Middle America, and that the increasing totalization of ruling-class cultural disciplines may mean that Middle Americans are now much more assimilated into, and controlled by, the dominant system than they used to be; as a result, Middle American Radicalism is dying or dead. If that is the case, then the right—whether paleo or neo, populist or establishment—is in trouble, and it may be possible for the left to mobilize Middle Americans to preserve its hegemonic power, thus accelerating its political agenda in a way it has been unable to do since the time of the Great Society.

By the end of their book, Teixeira and Rogers are openly pushing for that outcome and advising the Democratic Party how to accomplish it. What they want is little more than the elaboration of the managerial state through national health insurance, national control of education, and a national retirement policy, and the further entanglement of Middle Americans within that state. They do concede that Republicans also could make use of the Forgotten Majority, but only if they discard the “ideological anti-government stance” and the “intolerant social conservatism” that they believe characterizes the party today, and that has driven the party’s major electoral victories since the 60’s.

What will not help either party, however, is an effort to rely on, and to increase their share of, black and Hispanic voters to make up for the white male voters both Democrats and Republicans have neglected. Teixeira and Rogers insist that neither black nor Hispanic voters turn out in sufficient numbers to compensate for the Democrats’ loss of white voters, and only by the year 2020 will Hispanics constitute 15 to 20 percent of the voting age population, which “might increase the Hispanic proportion of the voting electorate to about 8 percent.” Republican efforts to win more black voters “would, in all likelihood, be wasted,” because of deep-seated black hostility to the Republican Party and loyalty to the Democrats, while the potential for Hispanic support for the Republicans “will remain small” on the national level: Pro-immigration conservatives who have demanded that the GOP abandon immigration control for fear of alienating the Hispanic vote need a new argument.

Although Teixeira and Rogers may be correct that the white middle-class voter has become more socially liberal than he was in George Wallace’s day, it’s doubt-

ful the Forgotten Majority has changed as much as they claim. Popular support for Bill Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal was due not to approval of the President's *outré* sexual habits but to the economic well-being of the nation and perhaps also to a reaction against the transparent political partisanship of the Republican attack on him. It may well be that white middle-class voters desire more government spending on health care, education, and Social Security, and since the Republicans have done nothing to help their most loyal supporters in these areas, it would hardly be surprising if they bolted to the Democrats or some third-party candidate who does offer help.

Teixeira and Rogers, therefore, may not be correct about the mellowing of Middle America; it is far more likely that emerging cultural and racial threats to Middle Americans in schools, suburbs, and occupations—as well as government policies favoring uncontrolled immigration, globalization, and multiculturalist radicalism—will keep the right-wing edge on the Middle American saber, especially if a political and cultural leadership emerges to keep that edge sharp. Nevertheless, both the Democrats and the Republicans could learn something important from *America's Forgotten Majority*, although it's doubtful either will. The Democrats cannot afford to dilute their commitment to the radical agendas of the constituencies on which they depend by seeking Forgotten Majority support; the Republicans can always gain a good deal of that support by invoking the specter of the Democrats' cultural radicalism to frighten the majority away from

their rivals, while at the same time avoiding policies that would serve Middle American interests or reinforce Middle American cultural beliefs and institutions. Until a leader emerges who can convincingly combine appeals to cultural traditionalism and right-wing radicalism with attention to Middle American economic interests and anxieties, American politics will continue to swing between two false poles that help keep each other empowered by their joint mastery of the art of fooling some of the people some of the time.

Samuel Francis is a nationally syndicated columnist.

Crowned With Thorns and Glory

by Thomas Fleming

Jefferson Davis: Unconquerable Heart

by Felicity Allen

Columbia: University of Missouri Press; 808 pp., \$34.95



“As the tug bore him away from the ship, he stood with bared head between the files of undersized German and other foreign soldiers on either side of him, and as we looked, as we thought, our last upon his stately form and knightly bearing, he seemed a man of another and a higher race, upon whom ‘shame

would not dare to sit.”

Felicity Allen begins her superb biography of Jefferson Davis with this portrait, supplied by his wife, of the captured Confederate President as he was being conveyed to Fortress Monroe, where he was forced to endure indignity and mistreatment designed to kill his body and destroy his soul. The opening chapter reads more like a novel than what we have come to expect from a biography with nearly 200 pages of notes and bibliography. With the sure instinct of a good novelist, Mrs. Allen understands that Davis made his greatest impression on the world in defeat, and the rest of her magnificent book unfolds with something of the sense of inevitability conveyed by the novels of Thomas Hardy, with this important difference: Hardy's tragic heroes get what they deserve.

From the first page of *Jefferson Davis: Unconquerable Heart*, the modern reader knows he has strayed into alien territory, into that strange world of loyalty, courage, and honor that we used to know as America. Many will shrink away from the experience with fear and loathing, as at least one merely academic historian has done in a thoroughly dishonest review, suggesting that, because the latest bibliographical entry is from the 1980's, Mrs. Allen has not done her homework, that her work is somehow tendentious. In fact, the truly remarkable accomplishment of this book is the fine interweaving of documents and quotations into a narrative that is always coherent and sometimes very beautiful. Unlike so many modern biographers who insist on putting themselves into their books, Mrs. Allen has modestly stayed out of the story.

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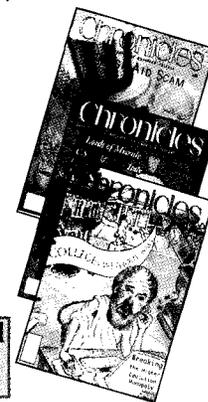
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