



## **The Death of Conservatism**

### **Book Review**

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**Book: The Death of Conservatism**

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The main thesis of this essay is that US conservatism, for about a quarter of a century, has been split between two factions: consensus-driven "realists" whose participation in polity is based on the belief that people need government to change their conditions, and "revanchists" who reject or distrust government and society.

From the outset, the author notes not only a retreat in movement conservatism, but also a regression which he describes as "outmodedness" (p.4). Attending a panel luncheon of prominent conservative magazine editors in the spring of 2009, he heard some of them urging "to take back the culture," (p.6) while others were accusing Obama of threatening America's economic "freedom."

These were typical attacks of the Right. Along the pages of this book, Tanenhaus argued that instead of giving positive solutions while opposing Liberals, the Right used to destroy everything positive just because the Liberals are its proponents. For instance, the GOP escaped responsibility for the mess G.W. Bush administration made of the economy, and when we wonder why? The answer is: because complacency is its new feature. Today's conservatives, he contended, have lost connection with the reality to the point that they "resemble the exhumed figures of Pompeii, trapped in postures of frozen flight, clenched in the rigor mortis of a defunct ideology"(p.7).

If the Right had had some days of glory, it had had also a bitter history of failures (McCarthy, Goldwater, etc). For Tanenhaus, Bush II was a failure not because he betrayed the movement ideology, but because he pursued it with such rigidity that it became doomed. Goldwater found a second life in Bush's strategy of pre-emption (p.10).

The failures of the Right emanate from its own self-destructive extremism. The point is the conservative movement cannot win with Rush Limbaugh's extremist talk about the enemy "within" and the "treason." As history proves, the movement wins when its centrists prevail, rejecting purism for pragmatism and revanchism for realism. In his view, the movement is not ready for this today, not with *Commentary*, *National Review*, and *the Weekly Standard*, "once sophisticated publications," now acting as "mouthpieces of the Republican Party at its most revanchist" (p.13).

Tanenhaus went on to say that there are two kinds of Republican Presidents: ideologically-driven (Nixon, Reagan, and G.W. Bush), and politically-driven (Eisenhower, Ford, George H.W. Bush). In his opinion, today's conservatism has strayed away from conservative ideals, to the point that it would seem "incomprehensible to the great originator of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke..."(p.16). While the Burkean ideal of "replenishing civil society by adjusting to changing conditions" (p.20) has been repelled and realism is thus more and more rejected, revanchists took over the movement, betting on oppositionism as a strategy and the "return of pre-modern family values"(p.20). Their powerful tool is rhetoric: "Anti-union laws become 'right to work'; national health insurance becomes 'socialized medicine..." (p.22) and Obama himself is a "socialist."

At the same time, and contrarily to the GOP's preference for ideologically committed presidents, the Democratic Party's recent history shows that centrist, explicitly non-ideological presidential candidates are much preferred (Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, Clinton, Obama). But on the other side, when orthodoxy prevails on realism, the ideologues disdain consensus, and the way is then open to "the darkest legacies of American Character - narrow-mindedness, provincialism, anti-intellectualism, cold-heartedness, bigotry," etc... (p.27). This is what the author labels: the decay of conservatism.

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In the second chapter, the author raises an interesting question: "Why has movement conservatism pursued so destructive a course (p. 29)?" The answer he provides goes back to the New Deal period,

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in which he sees the origins of the modern Right. The New Deal as it was called refers to the “boldly regulatory measures Franklin D. Roosevelt took to tame the furies of a ravaged economy through the proliferation of federal agencies and programs...” (p.29). Much of – if not all- these measures caused a repulsive reaction of the Right, whose ideologues saw in them, dictatorship, political racket, and even some kind of communism. Today, we hear similar accusations being mouthed in the talk-shows and speeches of the right-wing ideologues against Obama. Example: Ron Paul, the Texas Congressman said: “We now have moved a major step in the direction of socialism. We are close to a fascist system where the government has control of our lives and our economy” (p.32).

Tanenhaus argues that just like the Old Right attacks on the New Deal expressed the anxiety of those who could not find answers to the changes American society was going through, today’s Right might feel the same way. The main argument against the New Deal was presented by James Burnham who, in *the Managerial Revolution*, argued that in terms of economic, social, political, and ideological changes from traditional capitalism, the New Deal moves in the same direction as Stalinism and Nazism”(p.37). Thus, it was Burnham, the ex-Trotskyist, who gave movement conservatism its impulse, and soon other ex-communists will join the movement, and some of them will form the neo-conservative persuasion inside the Right. “The complication is that Rooseveltism worked” (p.37). But carried up by revanchism and with the Cold War helping, the Right settled down in the politics of protest, suspicion and paranoia: it was the days where McCarthy and Taft started a campaign to purge the nation from the “enemies within.” Populism grew against big government and “Washington bureaucrats.” McCarthyism was in this context a form of dissent and a foretaste of “culture wars.”

“McCarthy,” says Tanenhaus, “was the author of what would become a staple of GOP politics over the next half century: the raid on government mounted from within government itself” (p. 42). The list of those who indulged in such practice encompasses Presidents (Nixon, Reagan, W. Bush) as well as congressmen. The liberal elite were seen as usurpers and subversives. Better: “McCarthy’s rise and fall (...) completed the movement’s adoption of insurgency as a style of politics” (p.45). This spirit was also reflected by the Right’s organizations, such as *National Review* that decreed in 1957 that liberalism is the enemy, or the Birch society for whom Eisenhower was member of the communist party, preparing”

the economic and political structure of the United States [so] that it can be comfortably merged with Soviet Russia”(p.57).

Hence, Goldwater’s promise to dismantle the Welfare State. Yet, his electoral defeat did not end his legacy still felt in today’s Rightist politics.

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The third chapter begins with the observation that the threat to the Republican Party comes from its right-wing, which may marginalize the party as it actually did when Goldwater was defeated. Significantly, the chapter is titled: Tangled pathologies. For it is certainly not a sane behaviour for a magazine like *National Review*, for example, to endorse racial superiority siding with Jim Crow, which they did in 1954. About nine years later, the same magazine urged conservatives to seek the votes of “disaffected southern whites,” (p.69), guiltlessly.

The “southern strategy” – as it was dubbed – was developed (first by Goldwater, then by Nixon) in concert with anti-government attacks making the Liberals responsible for cities rioting. The sixties weakened the belief in the capacity of authority to maintain social order. That became the new goal of the conservatives. But how? The answer Tanenhaus provided is: “The Right had become the guardian of all it had once pledged to undo” (p.89). Why? Because liberalism was also for about 40 years “the governing form of the social order” in the USA. Would the Right destroy everything?

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The fourth chapter gives an answer to the previous question: it is easier to denounce Big government when the denouncers did not exert power for about a 36 cycle of eclipse than to govern the country according to these very ideas.

So, after all, they will discover that they could not run office with just insurgent politics. They will try then to combine “reforming spirit with the conservative ideal,” as put it Irving Kristol (p.94), in search for a new consensus, before Nixon blew it up, destroying definitely the little trust his conservative-fellows had in the federal government. However, we can see the search for this new consensus for instance in Kristol's suggestion that the conservatives should give an answer to the question: “what a conservative welfare state would look like (p.96)?” That was not exactly the purpose of the conservative movement initially; far from it. And this is perhaps the reason why some of them felt betrayed when Nixon “created the Environmental Protection Agency, instated affirmative-action hiring programs, and openly endorsed Keynesian stimulus” (p.97).

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His actions looked likely opportunistic or heretic and treacherous to movement conservative, above all when he created the Family Assistance Plan, proposing a national “minimum floor” income. But five years later, he will be forced to resignation, vanquished by Watergate. “In Nixon revanchist impulses collided with realistic ones,” asserted Tanenhaus, “and overwhelmed them” (p.99).

Yet, despite Nixon lost the confidence of the conservative ideologues, and maybe they never trusted him as Tanenhaus affirmed - “in fact (they) viewed him as an impostor, a secret liberal...” (p.99) – they argued that he was “at the mercy of the federal bureaucracy,” (p.100) inferring that he was its victim, as he was the victim of “the liberal-left bias of the major media” (p.101). In other words, it was a conspiracy against the moral and social order the conservatives still claimed to be the guardians.

For Tanenhaus, “Watergate secured the ascendancy of movement revanchism,” (p.102) for the period of twenty years (1968-1988) in which the Republicans won four on five presidencies. Despite this amazing vigour in conquering power, the New Right is said to be delusional. The author cites Jeane Kirkpatrick's assessment of these delusions (p.103), which we summarize as beliefs in:

- a hidden conservative majority in the electorate;
- the most important social division is between the liberal elite and everybody else, not between “haves” and “have-nots ;”
- the necessity and likability of two ideologically homogeneous groups expressing the partisan life;
- the possibility of abandoning the Republican Party because of its inability of expressing true conservative ideals;
- the media monopolies as an obstacle to the conservative cause...

In the same context, we are reminded that the non-ideological “reforming spirit” once expressed by Irving Kristol vanished when he joined the New Right and identified a “new class” of liberal enemies. The anti-institutionalism came back again to demonize society and government, and it will be thirty years of cultural hostility, reaching a climax with Ronald Reagan as a tribune of the new polarity and a unifier of the Right. But Reagan surprised those

who supported him when he strode away from ideology to pragmatism and was ridiculed by C. Krauthammer and denounced by Norman Podhoretz as a fraud (p.107). The turn of the 1990's announced that the erosion of conservative movement has gone a long way: "In fact, it was disappointment with Reagan and anger at the presumed betrayals of his successor, George H.W. Bush – chosen by Reagan himself- that fed the bitterness of the 1990s, when conservatism entered its most decadent phase"(p.108).

The "culture wars" took over during the Clinton years; but "intellectual conservatism" was already announced dead by the neoconservative thinker Michael Lind (1995). And it seems as if in a final spurt of effort, the rescue would come from the neocons and the alliance with evangelicals. Indeed, as Tanenhaus observed, G.W. Bush would reveal to be ideologically more devoted to the movement than Reagan, in his "war (...) against the federal bureaucracy" and his attacks against "liberal-left bias of the major media" (pp.110-111).

Nonetheless, the results of his era were not so conclusive and movement conservative was unable to win the confidence of a population deeply worried about the economical crisis and the outcome of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. So if America is deeply conservative, as some observers theorize, it is Obama who seemed more representative of "conservation and correction than any significant thinker or political figure of the right today," (p.112) concluded the author.

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That was rather an amazing conclusion, for the Liberals would never acknowledge that Obama choices – or at least some of them - are concessions to the Right. Yet, if consensus is the goal of all great leaders, from the Right or the Left or the Centre, and if Obama is one of those leaders, seeking compromise and unity is also his goal. And if we look closely at this idea of Tanenhaus, we would find it coherent with his thesis: since conservatism is dead, any other thought would take over the vacuum, unless an "afterlife" (title of the fifth chapter) is accorded to conservatives through a compromise with Obama as a representative of realism and consensus – two political keys that every time the conservatives sought them, striding away from revanchism, they won the elections. However, this is easier said than done. For the political battle is not just about ideas, but also about interests, and more precisely: partisan interests. So, in the last resort, whatever the choices, every politician would have to go back to his political

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“community” (Party) and to account for his performance. Thus, as polarity is maintained in politics, the final choices are always those of the Party. One may also assume that conservatism is changing, and maybe not to the better, if all what conservatives have to offer is contained in the Tea Party’s agitation.

Today, “classical conservatives have all either deserted the Right or been evicted from it” (p.114). Staying “stuck in ideology” (the expression came from Schwarzenegger), the anti-government cabal continued, despite they know that many of their adversaries – to begin with Obama – come from what Sarah Palin called “real America.” Being “stuck in ideology” means not to be able to listen to the arguments put forth from the other side, a lesson that liberals like Clinton and Obama have well understood. That's why to the question “what conservatives should do?” The author advises: follow the example of the liberals.

Indeed, it doesn't help to depict Obama as a radical or a socialist, when at the first serious examination these accusations fall apart. Besides, even if ideology matters, some of Obama's decisions would please classical conservative thinkers: his plan of health coverage is “pure Disraeli,” (p.117) asserts Tanenhaus; his fortification of the banking system was advised by Wall street conservative economists; and his foreign policy (Iraq and Afghanistan) is seen as a repudiation of the imperial power....

The conclusion is that Obama's policy represents “a central truth of human nature.” To use Tanenhaus’s expression: “Most of us are liberal and conservative.” The centre is therefore where our human nature leads us, when it is ridden from clusters of extremism, revanchism and resentment.

The fact that the conservatives won several presidencies when they were guided by realism and search for compromise and consensus confirms that power cannot be conquered by betting on the dark side in the human being, and that every time that happens in history, dark forces are unleashed, and the consequences are never happy.

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