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Making Sense of the American Right

Paul Edward Gottfried

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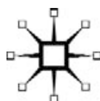

CONSERVATISM IN AMERICA: MAKING SENSE OF THE AMERICAN RIGHT

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2007 978-1-4039-7432-7

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First published in 2007 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS.
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-0-230-61479-6 ISBN 978-0-230-60704-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230607040

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gottfried, Paul.
Conservatism in America : a study in changing permanent things / Paul Edward Gottfried.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Conservatism—United States—History—20th century. 2. Right and left (Political science) 3. Political parties—United States—History—20th century. 4. United States—Politics and government—20th century. 5. United States—Politics and government—2001– I. Title.
JC573.2.U6G68 2007
320.520973—dc22 2006053296

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Scribe Inc.

First edition: July 2007

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Acknowledgments

Duty and affection both require that I acknowledge friends and relatives without whose aid this book would still be unfinished. Professors Michael Long, David Gordon, David Brown, W. Wesley McDonald, Will Hay, and Matthew Woessner all examined various drafts of my chapters. Not all of their suggestions were taken, but I was gratified that my friends responded to my e-mail attachments with informative comments. Dr. Christopher Woltermann prepared the index and read a provisional draft from beginning to end; without his corrections, the following book would have been less comprehensible and certainly less felicitously worded. Chris convinced me to take my literary tics out of an earlier draft, and I take full responsibility if, contrary to his advice, some of these crept back in. Also worthy of mention is my daily German correspondent, Stefan Herrold. His detailed messages provide continuing insight into European politics. The librarians at Elizabethtown College graciously provided articles and references that were not easily accessible. Without their computer skills and those of Professors McDonald and Kathy Kelley and our house sitter Sara Robinson, I would still be struggling with the notes. I am also indebted to the Earhart Foundation, which has continued to fund my research after thirty years of support.

To my wife, Mary, I owe a special debt for putting up with my inattentiveness while I was researching this book. I shall henceforth try to spend less of my flextime at home on the word processor. To my older son Joseph, I remain grateful for the flak that he gave me for undertaking this project. Unlike his father, Joseph usually agrees with FOX News and the current conservative movement, and he believes that my book is disputing a truism. Indeed, those who call themselves "conservatives" are precisely what they say they are—as opposed to "liberals" or "extremists." Without our often-heated discussions, I would have felt less driven to formulate

my response to interpretations that differ from mine. Note this book was written, among other reasons, to open a dialogue on the "conservative movement" with those who are willing and able to participate. It is unlikely, as my text makes clear, that those who would join this hypothetical discussion will emanate from either "conservative" organizations in the New York-Washington corridor or the neoconservative media.

A special acknowledgement is due to an intellectual tradition that cultural critic Allan Bloom calls the "German connection." Despite Bloom's admonitions, which are still in favor among American conservatives, I have happily drawn my insights from dead German thinkers. Their ideas have molded my approach to contemporary and chronologically more distant history; and instead of hiding my debts to Bloom's hated "historical relativists," I have chosen to acknowledge them openly. The rejection of such figures and their thought has been characteristic of the present generation of American conservatives, who seem invincibly ignorant of the sociohistorical dimension of their values. Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset observed about his fellow Europeans in the 1930s that their present-mindedness betokened mass barbarism. Such a condition, far from being an indication of the quest for transcendent truth, is rather a mark of intellectual and cultural laziness. It is hard to think of any group that would benefit more thoroughly than self-described American conservatives from the historical-mindedness that they continue to oppose.

There are also sizeable debts that I owe to non-Germans for the concepts that enriched this book. Among these inspirations were Robert Nisbet, Eugene Genovese, M. E. Bradford, John Lukacs, Thomas Fleming, and Clyde N. Wilson, all of whom shared with me their valuable social perspectives. I also wish to acknowledge Samuel T. Francis, Paul Piccone, and Donald Livingston, whose social and ethical commentaries I read with profit, and Claes Ryn, George H. Nash, Murray N. Rothbard, and George Carey for their luminous insights about the American conservative movement. I should also respectfully mention my students, who discussed with me the major themes of this work while it was in progress. How I have chosen to use the ideas of others has more to do with my judgment than with theirs.

Paul Edward Gottfried
Elizabethtown, PA

Introduction

This book deals with the evolution of the American conservative movement from the 1950s to the present. The work highlights its successes and defects, examines what produced both, and explores how the two were related. Contrary to historian Clinton Rossiter's memorable 1962 description of American conservatism as the "thankless persuasion," today's conservative celebrities enjoy media access, personal wealth, and publishing fame.[1] Popular conservatives have at their disposal a widely available TV news channel and numerous heavily subsidized magazines. Their radio talk show hosts, typified by Rush Limbaugh, have made fortunes for themselves while dispensing their deeply felt views over the airwaves. Our Republican president loads his speeches with references to "values," which is a conservative movement buzzword; and the moral justification he gives for the American occupation of Iraq, when he talks about America's responsibility to implant its democratic institutions elsewhere, comes from "conservative" advisors and speech writers.

In contrast to these successes, which would have been inconceivable to earlier incarnations of the movement, it is necessary to take a closer look at the shadow side of the "conservative ascendancy." By doing so, we are dealing with an aspect of that ascendancy that the establishment press has generally ignored. This neglect has been the result of many factors, among them the liberal media's desire to push the conservative movement further in their direction. This is the source of the oft-heard complaint that the conservative movement has not moved far enough toward the liberal Left or that it remains insufficiently sensitive to designated minorities (blacks, Latinos, women, and gays).

This book approaches its subject from an entirely different angle by observing how frenetically the conservative movement has worked to accommodate its talking partners in the Left-Center. Although this has not always been apparent in the partisan tone of debates, it is certainly true for the conservative embrace of democratic egalitarian ideals and the current conservative appeal to great reforming presidents and to the lessons of the civil rights

movement. Conservative leaders have marginalized their own right wing more than once as they have presented their movement as suitable for a dialogue with "moderates" on the other side. Therefore, we have reached a point where the widely respected conservative journalist and *Weekly Standard* senior editor David Brooks lavishes kind words on the "centrist" Hillary Clinton in the *New York Times* (May 11, 2006) while criticizing Republican conservatives for resisting moderate candidates John McCain and Rudolph Giuliani.[2]

For years the conservative movement has tried to appeal to its media talking partners by smoothing the movement's rough edges. It has tried to find common purpose with the liberal establishment by avoiding any appearance of extremism. Its affluent spokesmen have separated themselves from those who seem more "conservative" in their principles than the goal of bridge-building might render acceptable. Mainstream conservatives, especially those identified with foundations, have pursued this course not only to reassure liberal media colleagues but increasingly in recent decades to improve their place in the Republican Party. Since the 1980s, the conservative movement's association with the Republican Party has grown so tight that it is hard to imagine the movement surviving in the Washington Beltway without it.

The aforesaid changes in the movement have not always been clear to either outside observers or movement members. Although there is more than one reason for this blindness to change, one factor that this book accentuates is the use of values to create a sense of permanence. In this work I argue that the conservative movement's appeal to values has protected it from having to look more deeply at its own problems, most particularly its lack of connection to an older and more genuine conservatism and its general tendency to move leftward to accommodate those with whom it shares the public spotlight. By claiming to stand for "permanent values," the movement can treat its opportunistic politics as less significant than its allegedly enduring moral compass.

A survey of the American conservative movement in the twentieth century is neither needed nor provided here. I as well as others have prepared surveys for anyone seeking such a study. Moreover, the expanded (second) edition of George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 1996) offers the most comprehensive and most balanced investigation of the subject. Readers cannot find a better general history of the conservative movement since 1945

than this work. Another useful source on the same theme is the anthology of readings introduced with informative commentaries by Gregory L. Schneider, *Conservatism in America Since 1930* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Schneider picked his texts carefully to cover all historically significant conservative schools of thought, starting with those well before the rise of the *National Review* circle. Still one more reference work that readers ought to consult is the Intercollegiate Studies Institute's recently published *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*. Although it is possible to challenge the applicability of a "conservative" label for everything herein included, there is no disputing the volume's comprehensive and even-handed discussion of its chosen topics.

In addition to these studies, there are many impassioned examinations of sundry strains of the American conservative movement, particularly of those groups that battled each other for control in the 1980s. These books, most of which are highly polemical, suggest the presence of a highly contentious Right at a time when it was still open to exciting disputes. I do not retread the ground covered by these earlier studies. Rather, I seek to make sense of the movement as a whole by examining both how its adherents have defined their identity and what they have claimed about themselves as self-styled conservatives over the last fifty years.

The American conservative movement reveals far more ideological breaks than continuities. Much like the kingdom of ancient Egypt and the Byzantine Empire in the Middle Ages, it has developed a talent not only for presenting takeovers as the serene march of the past into the present but also for treating a general retreat from its original positions as a progression of victories. Like Egyptian or Byzantine chroniclers trying to make a series of invading rulers fit the story line of a steady dynastic succession, conservative movement historians emphasize the relentless progress of what we are told are timeless, ahistorical ideas. Despite the patent fact that the political landscape has been moving generally leftward since the fifties, conservatives celebrate a "Reagan revolution" while turning out books that hail their imagined transformation of American society. And while conservatives lunge toward many positions once held by the moderate Left, they make it appear as if they alone are standing up for "permanent values."

Nothing could be further from my intention than to denigrate the movement I discuss. I am simply trying to get to the bottom of a subject that has preoccupied me for decades. To some extent, this subject is autobiographical in that it encapsulates my

own critical engagement with a persuasion to which I was once drawn in the past. My break from that movement was gradual but also so personally and professionally unsettling that it has left scars that continue to affect my social relations. Since the mid-eighties, I have written several books, starting with *The Search for Historical Meaning: Hegel and the Postwar Right*, in which I have focused on the perceived defects of the American Right. My original criticism, which social theorist Robert Nisbet examined in a detailed commentary for *National Review* (May 22, 1987), was that conservative theorists have abandoned the sense of a living historical past.[3] This legacy of Edmund Burke and of nineteenth-century conservatives had given way to the current preoccupation, which is particularly strong among neoconservatives, with "abstract universals," and this fateful turning has led to an association of American conservatism with certain eighteenth-century French revolutionary ideals. My concluding chapter, "A Conservative Farewell to History," earned the high praise of my book's illustrious reviewer and, later, former president Richard Nixon.[4] But contrary to Nisbet's impression that I had made definitive critical statement, I expanded my strictures in the second edition of my survey in 1993 to deal with the conservative movement's problematic beginnings and its decline into robot-like conformity. Although the earlier work seemed, in Nisbet's judgment, to be "the best and most provocative treatment of postwar conservatism yet written," the later work was still more "provocative."

By then in exile from the American Right, and increasingly banned from publishing in its magazines, I began to consider those peculiarities of my former comrades-in-arms that my earlier writings had missed. Why, for example, had there been so little internal resistance to the Right's occupation by neoconservatives, who had aroused no more than scant opposition against themselves as "interlopers"? Certainly the neoconservatives' views on a wide range of social and constitutional questions, and their hostility against those they could not drag over to their side, should have evoked more suspicion against their leadership than it did. If partisans on the Right had wished to be Truman Democrats, admirers of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and relentless critics of southern conservatives and Taft Republicans, they could have become cold war liberals in the fifties or sixties. Why had they waited until the eighties to take over these positions held by the other side, and then under its highly imperious supervision, while claiming counterfactually that these had always been their views?

It was also obvious that there was a vigorous American Right before the 1950s, when William F. Buckley had reconfigured it around his newly founded fortnightly, *National Review*. My reading and my meetings with the aging representatives of the anti–New Deal Right convinced me that the shake-up of the eighties was not the first time self-described people of the Right had been "thrown off the bus." This practice, which I investigate in chapter 6, was formative for the movement that took shape in the fifties. What was less apparent was that those who had been hurled out of the movement suffered their fate as "extremists." They were, in most cases, the victims of a rewriting of history carried out by the movement in cooperation with its critics on the Left-Center. By branding ousted members of an older and more libertarian Right as "bigots" and "kooks," one could impose discipline on a movement that came to value this virtue above all others.

This book applies two distinct approaches to go beyond my earlier studies of what passes for the American establishment Right. One approach expands the frame of reference by contrasting the contemporary Right to its antecedents some fifty to seventy years ago. This analysis exposes fundamentally changed "conservative" tenets underlying a tendentious sense of continuity. My second approach examines the respectable Right in the United States in relation to other Rights and, even more revealingly, to the classical conservatism of the early nineteenth century. These comparisons are by no means arbitrary, for well into the sixties and seventies American conservative writers attempted to link genealogically their own movement to what European conservatives had espoused in the past. These extended comparisons make clear the utter futility of this enterprise. The evidence shows how little the American model shares with its alleged European antecedents.

In chapter 4 I aim to achieve terminological and historical clarification by dealing with the "Right" as something independent of both classical conservatism and its American namesake. The Right, as defined in this chapter, is a predominantly bourgeois reaction, explicitly against social and political radicalization, that has taken many forms. But these forms arose in societies in which the *ancien régime*, to which classical conservatism had rallied, was already tottering or had never existed. Whether one is discussing Italy on the eve of Mussolini's march on Rome in 1922 or the resistance to the New Deal, one is looking at postconservative bourgeois reactions to unwelcome changes or the threat of social

disruption. Although this Right has survived as a weakened presence in the West, conservatism is no longer an option there, principally because of a multitude of social changes that have occurred since Burke inveighed against the French Revolution in 1790. The anti–New Deal Right defended bourgeois liberalism in its American form, against a centralized public administration that was bringing about a larger welfare state. Those who led this opposition described themselves as "Jeffersonians" and never pretended to be upholding European conservative traditions.

It was the decision of the postwar conservative movement, or its leaders, to construct some linkage between themselves and the Middle Ages or the European counterrevolution that led to their movement's convoluted history. Recognition of this fact does not require us to disparage what was borrowed. In fact, it may be hard to read my collected works without perceiving my sympathy for medieval and conservative ideas. My arguments here have nothing to do with their intrinsic merit. I address something vastly different, namely, the merging of anti-Communist and pro–free-market sentiments with a contrived "conservative" pedigree to produce a fictitious foundation for a political movement. That merger is fictitious in two senses: it has no firm social base and it rests on the claim of being "conservative" by virtue of standing above classes, tribes, and even nations. It is precisely the opposite of that which characterizes not only classical conservatism but also all genuine social and political movements, including European Communism and bourgeois liberalism.

This floating quality is nonetheless rendered tolerable by the fact that the "conservative movement" has a situational function, that of framing policies for the Republican Party and contributing to the administrative staff of Republican administrations. The movement also runs newspapers, Foxs News channel, and gargantuan think tanks—thanks to generous benefactors—and disseminates a recognizable kind of discourse, which this book examines. No matter how crudely partisan or rudely contemporary it may be, this rhetoric purports to be about eternal "values." It claims to reflect the moral high ground that movement conservatives supposedly occupy but that their opponents are viewed as ignoring or even scorning. These opponents suffer dismissal as "moral relativists" who favor permissive attitudes because, in contrast to conservatives, they cannot agree on the nature of the good.

The identification of conservatism with "values" and of the other side with "nonvalues" goes back to the structural weakness

of the conservative cause, which is neither conservative nor an authentic historical movement. It is a collection of Republican Party partisans, think tank employees, and journalists who belong to one side of a changing political spectrum and political dialogue. Lacking either a stable social base or any tie to classical conservatism, self-styled conservatives champion "values" as a kind of moral glue for their network of associations. They also present their opponents as being without a moral position, which is a doubtful premise. As participants in the prevalent cultural strife in the United States and Western Europe, those on the Left have defined an identifiable post-Christian moral stance.

Value conservatism, which is the major theme of this book, arose to address one situation but has come to satisfy other needs. Its original function was to supply a base for a misnamed conservatism by decorating it with antirevolutionary and anti-Communist principles and rhetoric. This movement, quite broadly understood, did take on a certain gravitas as it tried to incorporate Catholic and Anglo-Catholic natural law thinking into its corpus of ideas. But that was generally a sideshow. Being part of the political conversation that took place in the media remained paramount for "conservatives" who could not identify themselves too closely with the Catholic Right without losing the possibility of broadening their political appeal. Moreover, there were Catholic philosophical and legal journals that treated ethical matters quite independently of the conservative movement.

Values were useful for giving conservative journalists and policy experts a leg up in the competition for political acceptance and popularity. By attaching "value permanence" to whatever one proposed, one could help make sympathetic political candidates and their electoral positions look venerable and high-minded. Even then one had to tailor one's "permanent values" to make them fit an increasingly less traditional and at least theoretically more egalitarian society. The style of debate nonetheless became so fixed that one's opponents routinely suffered depiction either as being less committed than oneself to values or as being prone to relativism. This style became all the more important as think tanks, many of them professing to be "conservative" or "value conservative," morphed into power centers in American and European political life. Berkeley's Manuel Castells, who has documented the shift of political decision making toward foundations and institutes generating "policies," has written widely on this trend.[4] One advantage over their opponents enjoyed by think

tanks designating themselves as being on the Right is the effective use of value language. This exemplifies the practice of turning a onetime liability into an asset. A movement that has strayed opportunistically from its original ideological base has survived partly as a value construct. Its survival likewise reflects the accumulation of other strategic assets, including funding, access to the media and to politicians, and an unfailingly cooperative army of workers.

Lest anyone claim that I find nothing of merit in the subject of my study, I must note that some of the movement's byproducts have proved beneficial. Particularly in its early years it provided a forum for such outstanding political and social thinkers as Nisbet, James Burnham, M. E. Bradford, Forrest McDonald, and Frank Meyer. It also enabled Henry Regnery, an America First veteran of the anti–New Deal Right, to establish a publishing house that allowed Russell Kirk, Albert Jay Nock, Irving Babbitt, and other worthwhile men of letters to reach a larger public than otherwise might have been the case. The movement-affiliated Intercollegiate Studies Institute also engages in similar acts of cultural recovery, and its publications make available to students a variety of writings that politically conformist professors are not likely to put into their hands. It is also possible to find situations in which neoconservative-controlled think tanks have promoted freedom rather than spread democracy through war. From time to time, a member of the pre-Buckleyite Right may discover that he agrees with a position or string of positions held by the movement's power players in the New York–Washington axis. When he does not, he nonetheless learns from reading "conservative position papers" that the movement needs allies to "fight terror," or that Republicans have to be reelected, or else that we now live in the best of all worlds, a "democratic welfare state."

Nothing in the value critiques that punctuate this work should be read incorrectly as either a defense of "relativism" or a general attack on moral reasoning. The object of my criticism is partisan appeals to moral truth, which only rarely amount to ethical arguments with any substance. Indeed, most of time, the often cited "value game" never rises above the kind of name-calling heard from talk show hosts. Although those who choose to be honored as value-conservative intellectuals may wish to distinguish themselves from the vulgarizers, they typically bear a family resemblance to those whom they presume to disdain. This is because

they both belong to the same movement, which provides financing and often mercenaries for electoral politics.

My conclusion asks whether some other opposition to the social democratic and later multicultural Left could have been possible. Certainly I would have preferred such an outcome. But any such hypothetical alternative might not have reached even the limited successes of the present version of the conservative movement. A strict constitutionalist Right, one that had stood where Senator Robert Taft did in 1950 and Congressman Ron Paul of Texas does today, might well have opposed the liberal Left even less effectively than the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute do today. Although this idea will not please the remnants of a more genuine American Right, it is one that honesty requires us to consider.

Historical circumstances, namely, the establishment of a popular, expanding, and highly centralized public administration, may have foredoomed any attempt to keep alive an alternative American Right. By the same token, the recognition of this historical probability does not rule out the need to underscore the gulf between the achievements ascribed by the present conservative movement to itself and those misrepresentations from which it has benefited. Finally, one might note that the insertion of critical political variables into American life has altered the political discussion and the determination of policy. It is worth considering how political life in the United States might have differed had the neoconservatives not become the respectable Right in the eighties. Let us imagine, for example, a Right whose major concern was not a neo-Wilsonian foreign policy but rather restraint of the growth and reach of the central government. Such a Right, if it had taken off, might have contributed to a very different political debate from the one we now witness.

A qualifier is in order about the assertion, which I admit to having made in the past, that the postwar conservative movement has no real link to its beginnings. To be more accurate, the present media think tank movement does preserve or replicate the constructivist character of its postwar source. It is an artificial movement whose unity and support derive partly from manufacturing values. It also imposes solidarity by coming down hard on dissent, a practice it began in the fifties. In a sense then it continues, in altered circumstances and with new custodians, the attempt launched

in that decade to fashion an anti-Communist Right, one that was intended to be more dynamic and timely than its anti–New Deal predecessor.

But that initial attempt did not entirely eradicate the older American Right, which penetrated the new structure. Not even bans of excommunication could keep this from occurring, and it took over a generation before the new in this case obliterated the traces of the old. If one searches through the views of Russell Kirk and Nisbet, both celebrities of the postwar conservative movement, one encounters the older tradition of anti–New Deal Republicanism ready to rise to the surface. That was the historically grounded American tradition from whence they and others whom Buckley drew into the New Covenant had come—and to which they periodically returned. Aside from misleading references to the "Far Right," Nisbet was speaking out of that older tradition, which was his own, when he penned this memorable passage in the eighties:

> The Far Right is less interested in Burkean immunities from government power than it is in putting a maximum of government power in the hands of those who cannot be trusted. It is control of power, not diminution of power that ranks high. Thus when Reagan was elected conservatives hoped for the abolition of such government "monstrosities" as the Department of Energy, the Department of Education, and the two National Endowments of the Arts and Humanities, all creations of the political Left. The Far Right in the Reagan Phenomenon saw it differently, however; they saw it as an opportunity for retaining and enjoying the powers. And the Far Right prevailed. It seeks to prevail also in the establishment of a "national industrial strategy," a government corporation structure in which the conservative dream of free private enterprise would be extinguished.[5]