

The Devolution of Conservatism: From Edmund Burke to Donald Trump

There is much talk these days about the need to find unity and common ground in our politics so we can come together and “get things done” for the American people. But for this talk to be anything more than facile, we need to delineate the ideological viewpoints that are in need of communicative discourse. In this article I focus on conservatism, with an eye toward understanding how the type of conservatism advanced by Edmund Burke, who is regarded as its philosophical founder, has little to do with the conservatism that has come to dominate the contemporary Republican Party.

Let us begin with the influential essay titled “Conservatism is Dead,” published by historian Sam Tanenhaus in *The New Republic* in February 2009, just a month after Barack Obama was inaugurated as president.¹ “What passes for conservatism today,” wrote Tanenhaus, “would be incomprehensible to its originator, Edmund Burke.”² The Dublin-born Burke, who served in the British House of Commons from 1766 to 1794, had a distrust of totalizing ideologies and warned against the “destabilizing perils of revolutionary politics” that “placed an idea of the perfect society over and above the need to improve society as it really existed.” Yet, he believed that “governments were obligated to use their powers to meliorate intolerable conditions” and that “a state without the means of some change is without the means of conservation.” As Burke said, those who aspire to be statesmen must be able to combine “a disposition to preserve and an ability to improve.”³

In his essay, Tanenhaus identifies two main strains of conservatism in the United States. In the tradition of Burke, a consensus-driven “realist” strain that believes in compromise and understands government as playing a positive role in adjusting to changing conditions, and a “revanchist” strain that has a profound distrust of government and is dedicated to sowing social

division by mobilizing grievances and resentments about a lost past. The former seeks to “conserve,” while the latter seeks to “destroy.”

Revanchism is a concept derived from the French term for revenge and connotes the desire to regain lost territory. It is akin to “reactionary,” which Andrew Sullivan describes as an acute despair with the present historical moment and a desire to reverse course backward, a counterrevolution, to an imagined golden age before “everything went to hell. ... It is not simply a conservative preference for things as they are, with a few nudges back, but a passionate loathing of the status quo,” resentment toward those who they think maintain it, and a desire to blow everything up before the old order can be reinstated.⁴

According to Tanenhaus, conservatism at its best serves “the vital function of clarifying our shared connection to the past and of giving articulate voice to the normative beliefs Americans have striven to maintain even in the worst of times.”⁵ It asserts that a large majority of Americans have a deep attachment to the existing society and will be resistant to challenges to its legitimacy. E. J. Dionne adds that a healthy democratic society “needs conservatism’s skepticism about the grand plans that progressives sometimes offer, its respect for traditional institutions, and skepticism of those who believe politics can remold human nature.”⁶ However, that temperamental wariness of dramatic change is not inflexible and is open to ideas for correcting flaws in the social order. As Dionne suggests, “a conservatism that accepted the responsibility of conserving the genuine achievements of progressive reform ... [and] government programs that have stood the test of time ... would be truer to its own tradition than a reform of reaction dedicated to rooting out all vestiges of the liberal government that now exists.”

We should recall that the Republican Party originated as the party of Abraham Lincoln and includes progressives like Theodore Roosevelt and moderates like Dwight Eisenhower.

What Eisenhower called the “Middle Way,” in his words, “between untrammelled freedom of the individual and the demands of the welfare of the whole Nation ... [that] is the proper function of the federal government,” comes closer to describing Democrats like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama than to most Republicans today.⁷ Dionne notes that Democrats have “taken over the role that was once played by moderate and liberal Republicans,” with the effect of pushing the contemporary Republican Party “toward ever greater philosophical homogeneity” on the far-right end of the political spectrum.⁸ Indeed, research finds that the shift in the so-called “center” of American politics has been asymmetrical, that is, it is accounted for more by an actual rightward shift of the Republican Party rather than by a purported leftward shift of the Democratic Party.⁹

Obviously, Burkean conservatism is not the strain that is flourishing in the Republican Party of Donald Trump, nor has it been for a long time. This is why so many Republicans—derisively dubbed RINOS (Republicans in Name Only) by the revanchists—have abandoned their former political home. Stuart Stevens, one of the most successful Republican consultants of his generation, is one of the disaffected. He was even compelled to write a book, *It Was All a Lie*, published in 2020, which is a lament about the political party he once thought actually stood for a set of conservative principles that he now thinks are mere “marketing slogans.”¹⁰

Importantly, Stevens admits, “There is nothing strange or unexpected about Donald Trump. He is the logical conclusion of what the Republican Party became over the last fifty or so years.” Moreover, writes Robert Reich in *The Common Ground*, “Trump has brought us back to first principles ... [and] got us talking about democracy versus tyranny. ... [B]y dint of his pugnacious character and the divisiveness he has fueled, [he] raises the question of what connects us, of what we hold in common.”¹¹

In this article, I consider how this all came to be, with a focus on contemporary conservatism's component parts: its economic, racial, religious-cultural, national security, and politically strategic elements. Taken as a whole, this account constitutes an examination of what some call "Movement Conservatism," a coalition of diverse interest groups and ideological dispositions united in the conviction that the growth of "big government" constitutes the most serious problem of our time.¹² As President Ronald Reagan famously said in his first inaugural address in 1981: "Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem. ... It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the federal establishment and to demand recognition of the distinction between the powers granted to the federal government and those reserved to the states or to the people."¹³

The Resurrection of Laissez-faire Capitalism

One of the core components of contemporary conservatism are the business elites who want to dismantle the federal regulatory structure and support for worker rights that were implemented during the Progressive and New Deal eras of the early twentieth century, which had enjoyed a fair degree of bipartisan consensus until the 1970s. In its place, these elites want to resurrect the laissez-faire "free market" economy of the late nineteenth century, a time of growing corporate consolidation and economic inequality, a type of capitalism that tends to disregard the moral and human costs of unchecked avarice and permits individual self-interest to run amok. This entails opposition to any form of centralized economic planning—whether in a government-interventionist capitalist system or a communist system—because in their view the former is a slippery slope to the latter. It also rejects the insights first advanced by British economist John Maynard Keynes, that government spending can be viewed as an investment of public resources that are useful for stimulating economic activity when capitalist markets on their own do not provide sufficient employment and income for working people.¹⁴

A seminal document of this movement is the 1971 memo prepared by Lewis Powell for the US Chamber of Commerce titled “Attack on American Free Enterprise System.” Powell was a corporate lawyer with ties to the tobacco industry who was soon to be appointed by President Richard Nixon to the US Supreme Court. His memo was a clarion call to the business community to mobilize with organized joint funding a counter-ideological “guerrilla war” to recapture public opinion away “from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences ... [and] politicians” that were undermining the capitalist system.¹⁵

Arguably the intellectual center of this economic conservatism has its origin among economists at the University of Chicago who were influenced by the work of the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek. In the midst of World War II, Hayek published *The Road to Serfdom*, in which he warned about the perils of too much centralization of economic activity under the auspices of a national government.¹⁶ This line of thinking was further advanced by University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman. In his book *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman argued that the preservation of free market capitalism was necessary for the maintenance of political freedom and that regulated markets were a threat to individual liberty.¹⁷ This view actually derives from the *classical liberalism* of the nineteenth century, although the invocation of liberalism to contemporary American ears will be confusing since it is typically understood to mean a political position that is left of center.

Other terms that complicate the conversation about conservative economics are *libertarianism* and *neoliberalism*. Libertarianism is a term that may connote advocacy of personal choice in areas such as recreational drug use, for example, but its economic theory is laissez-faire capitalism, while neoliberalism is a term that is advanced by progressive critics of this economic system. Robert Kuttner believes it is important to appreciate that pure laissez-faire

economics is rather “nonsensical” insofar as it is the government that establishes the rules of the market in areas such as credit, contracts, bankruptcy, patents, taxation, and so forth.¹⁸ “The political question is who gets to make the rules, and for whose benefit.”¹⁹ For Kuttner, neoliberalism connotes a comprehensive political agenda for deregulating the economy, weakening unions to lower the cost of labor, and privatizing public services. It also entails international rules by which cross-national commerce is conducted.

Whatever it is called, it is noteworthy that free market or free enterprise capitalism is also the system mythologized in the novels of the Russian-American immigrant Ayn Rand, who is much admired by conservatives such as former Wisconsin Congressman Paul Ryan, who served in the House of Representatives from 1999 to 2016, was Mitt Romney’s vice presidential running mate in 2012, and Speaker of the House from 2015 to 2019.²⁰ In her novels, in Stevens’s words, Rand offered a “vision of strong men fighting against the burdensome yoke of collectivism and government oppression.”²¹ Rand, like her fellow travelers, believed that the freedom of individuals to pursue their economic self-interest unimpeded by government will benefit the overall well-being of society, a view that goes back to the British economist Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in the late eighteenth century.²² Rand went so far as to say that selfishness is a higher moral calling than altruism.

It is important to underscore the Social Darwinist ideology associated with this line of economic thinking. Social Darwinists believe that government should not interfere in the age-old “survival of the fittest” evolutionary struggle, and they justify economic and racial inequality by attributing it to people’s natural abilities (or lack thereof) to compete for scarce resources. In other words, the elites and plutocrats of the world have earned their positions of wealth and power because they possess superior abilities, while those with inferior abilities are deserving of their lesser status. Moreover, government attempts to help the undeserving only creates

disincentives for them to work hard to improve their lot in life. This is but one indication of the cruel world envisioned by this revanchist strain of contemporary conservatism.²³

Social Darwinism aside, it is also important to understand the assumptions made by conservative economists who justify this type of economic order, assumptions that Joseph Stiglitz, one of their most cogent critics, thinks are “in accord with neither reality nor modern advances in economics.”²⁴ These economists presume that private markets are self-regulating and the most efficient means of allocating goods and services, and that government interference introduces inefficiencies, distorts the laws of supply and demand, and stifles innovation. Stiglitz disputes these premises, noting that they presuppose the existence of markets that are *competitive* (rather than dominated by monopolies and oligopolies), that economic actors have *equal access to information* about market conditions (they do not), and that the consequential actions are without *externalities* (negative side effects) such as inequality, poverty, workplace hazards, harmful products, and environmental degradation. Moreover, both Smith and Hayek believed—unlike those who justify their views in their names—that government has an important role to play in regulating markets and ensuring that private gain is aligned with the broader public good. As Hayek wrote in his *Constitution of Liberty* (1960), “Probably nothing has done so much harm” to the profession of economics as the “wooden insistence ... [on] the principle of *laissez-faire* capitalism.”²⁵

The Question of Race

Another core element of Movement Conservatism revolves around the question of race, and exploitation of this issue has been a key element of the Republican Party’s turn to revanchist conservatism since the 1950s. It is worth recalling that the landmark US Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which ruled that school desegregation was unconstitutional, was a unanimous decision of the Court during the tenure of Chief Justice Earl

Warren, a Republican governor who was appointed by Eisenhower. Until that time, White supremacists who opposed racial equality had found a home in the southern Dixiecrat wing of the Democratic Party, which had been part of the New Deal coalition (as long as it maintained White supremacy). Now this fealty to the Democratic Party, tied to the legacy of opposition to Lincoln Republicanism, began to wane.²⁶

In 1955, the *National Review* magazine was established with the goal of advancing, systematizing, and making conservative intellectual thought respectable. William Buckley, its founder and first editor, was a staunch segregationist. In 1957 he wrote, “The central question that emerges ... is whether the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas in which it does not predominate numerically? The sobering answer is Yes—the White community is so entitled because, for the time being, it is the advanced race.”²⁷ Stevens puts this statement in stark relief: “The *National Review*, as the unofficial beating heart of the American conservative movement, was committed to the principle that a ‘white’ culture was superior to all others.”²⁸ Today, the conservative position seems to be that “race doesn’t matter” any more, that anyone can succeed, and that “being black in America is actually an advantage because government and society treat blacks with a differential preference.”²⁹

In the early 1960s, when Democratic presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson lent their support to the burgeoning civil rights movement, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, the Republican nominee for president in 1964, led a party that was opposed to this Burkean correction to the existing racial order. This assertion of White supremacy was framed in the coded language of “state’s rights,” but the endorsement of segregation was clear. Goldwater believed, in his words, that it was “the responsibility of the states,” not the federal government, to decide whether or not to racially integrate schools. “I am firmly convinced not only that

integrated schools are not required but that the Constitution does not permit any interference whatsoever by the Federal government in the field of education.”³⁰

When President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he told an aide, Bill Moyers, “I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come.”³¹ Johnson, who hailed from Texas, knew his fellow southerners, and hence began the mass exodus of the South from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party.

During the presidential campaign of 1968, campaign aides to Republican candidate Richard Nixon encouraged him to pursue a “southern strategy” for winning the election by appealing to the racial views of the region. Following a period of urban riots by Black Americans who were angered and frustrated about police brutality and thwarted expectations for racial equality, Nixon exploited a coded message of “law and order” to persuade Southern Democrats (and voters across the country) that the Republican Party was now the party that supported their interests. In that election, American Independent Party candidate George Wallace, a Democratic governor from Alabama, received 13.5 percent of the national vote while explicitly advocating for racial segregation. Nixon won the election over the Democratic candidate, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, by less than one percent of the vote, but without the Wallace candidacy, Nixon would have won by a landslide. From this point on, especially as the Democratic Party pursued involuntary busing of school children and affirmative action as part of its civil rights agenda, the Republican Party positioned itself to appeal to White voters who opposed this program.³²

More recently, in the age of Donald Trump, the populist base of the Republican Party has become a revanchist constituency motivated largely by White grievance. Whiteness is viewed as a birthright that is under attack by multicultural forces using political correctness, cancel culture, and bogus claims about social justice to usurp the rights of White people and undermine

American society. Nonwhite immigrants and other undeserving racial minorities are “cutting in line,” gaining unfair advantages, and taking opportunities away from hardworking White Americans who have been waiting patiently for their share of the American dream.³³

Moreover, the White supremacist orientation of this movement, and its connection to armed militia groups and the so-called Alt-Right, have become more visible.³⁴ Through his coded and explicit rhetoric, Trump has made bigotry more acceptable and lent his endorsement to White supremacists. Let us recall the murder of antiracist protestor Heather Hyer by White supremacists shouting “Jews will not replace us,” and Trump’s reference to the “good people” who were on both sides of the Charlottesville, Virginia, rally in August 2017. Then there was the October 2020 presidential debate in which he told the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by.” These Trump supporters have shown they will not hesitate to use violence, as witnessed by the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection. Even before then, in October 2018, there were the attempted mass murders by Cesar Sayoc Jr., who mailed pipe bombs to fifteen prominent liberals (with plans to send more to others), including Barack and Michelle Obama, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and George Soros. That same month, Robert Bowers killed eleven Jewish worshipers at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh. Although Bowers appeared to be critical of Trump for being a “globalist,” in the closing days of the November 2018 midterm Congressional campaign, Trump took great pains to clarify that he was not a “globalist” but a “nationalist.”

Race and Economics in the World of Ronald Reagan

Goldwater lost the 1964 election to President Johnson by a wide margin, but his supporters were in it for the long haul. Ronald Reagan was the standard bearer, and he brought the Goldwater agenda into the mainstream of American politics and the US government when he won the presidential elections of 1980 and 1984. Importantly, Stevens believes “there is a direct

line from the more genteel prejudice of Ronald Reagan to the white nationalism of Donald Trump.”³⁵

In his unsuccessful bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976, Reagan introduced his now infamous attack on “welfare queens” that was not too coded language, writes Stevens, when “white voters heard it and understood the unspoken accusation just as they did when George Wallace did the same.”³⁶ The welfare queen in Reagan’s story was a Black woman in Chicago who, in Reagan’s words, “used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans’ benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year.”³⁷

Stevens assumes that Reagan learned of this woman from articles that had appeared two years earlier in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Jet* magazine. As it turns out, this woman had “used four, not eighty names, and the total fraud was \$8,000—but when four becomes eighty and \$8,000 total becomes \$150,000 a year, Reagan is just lying.”³⁸ In fact, “the majority of all welfare goes to white Americans and always has, but the specificity of a woman in Chicago makes the racial appeal clear.” More broadly, and herein lies the view later espoused by the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party, hardworking (White) people are being stuck with a tax bill to pay for unearned entitlements of undeserving “freeloaders.” In contrast, deserving (White) people who receive Social Security and Medicare benefits earned through a lifetime of hard work are entitled to what is coming to them.³⁹

Beyond his racial views, Reagan was a staunch advocate of free market capitalism and the policies that benefit the wealthy and plutocratic class. When Reagan asserted that “government is not the solution to our problem ... [but] is the problem,” he set about reversing the moral message of *It’s a Wonderful Life*: Capitalists are not the nefarious Mr. Potters of the

world but the heroes.⁴⁰ When rich people get rich everyone prospers; the benefits “trickle down.” The academic bedfellow of this view is “supply-side” economics, which George H. W. Bush once called “voodoo economics.” In this view, it is not consumer demand that stimulates the economy, as Keynes had asserted, but capitalists who supply the jobs, goods, and services. (Years later, Republican consultant Frank Lutz coined the term “job creators.”) Increasing these capitalist investments requires lower taxes and elimination of burdensome and unnecessary government regulations.⁴¹

To be sure, these policies have not been the exclusive province of the Republican Party. Matt Stoller reminds us that it was Lloyd Bentsen, a Texas Democratic Senator, who first introduced supply-side economics into government circles in a 1980 report of the Joint Economic Committee called “Plugging in the Supply Side.”⁴² (Eight years later, Bentsen was the Democratic nominee for vice president on the ticket with Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis.) Nor was it Republicans alone who called for the end of “big government.” As Bill Clinton said in his State of the Union address in 1996, “the era of big government is over,” though he did add that neither can we “go back to the time when our citizens were left to fend for themselves.”⁴³ It was Clinton, too, who worked with a Republican Congress to eliminate an important financial regulation of the New Deal by repealing the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933, which had created a wall of separation between commercial banks and investment banks.⁴⁴

Be that as it may, the main problem with tickle-down/supply-side economics is that it does not work. A solid body of research has demonstrated that cutting taxes for corporations and the wealthy has not translated into benefits for all but rather has increased economic inequality.⁴⁵ Putting more money into the hands of elites leads to more high-end consumption by the privileged few, exorbitant pay increases for corporate executives, and stock market speculation. In the 1950s, corporations paid for about a third of what it takes to run the federal government;

today that share has dropped to well under 10 percent.⁴⁶ Sometimes corporations use the extra money to buy up other companies, increasing the monopolization of the economy. At the same time, government revenues for needed programs have been reduced and the national debt has increased.

These externalities notwithstanding, Reagan and his disciples developed what Stevens describes as an almost “spiritual” attachment to tax cuts, which comes “about as close as it can be to a definitional core belief” of the Republican Party.⁴⁷ One of the byproducts of this attachment is the group led by Grover Norquist called Americans for Tax Reform, which was founded in 1975 with Reagan’s backing. It was Norquist who developed the infamous “Taxpayer Protection Pledge,” which asks Republican candidates and officeholders to commit themselves to opposing *all* tax increases.

Of course, when taxes don’t keep up with government spending, the federal budget deficit and long-term debt increase. Although Republicans claim to be the party of fiscal restraint, deficits have risen more during Republican than Democratic presidential administrations.⁴⁸ Moreover, Stevens writes, “any pretense that the Republican Party, if only given complete control of all three chambers of power, would focus on the deficit was just one of the many myths shattered in the first two years of the Trump presidency”—when a tax cut for the wealthiest of Americans inevitably lead to a substantial increase in the deficit and debt.⁴⁹

God Bless America

Another part of the Movement Conservative coalition is the group of religious adherents variously known as the Christian right, evangelicals, or fundamentalist Christians. Three of the leaders who were influential in linking this constituency to the contemporary Republican Party and plutocratic class were Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Ralph Reed.⁵⁰

Some of the elites in this Christian movement subscribe to an ideology of “biblical capitalism,” a derivative of sixteenth century Calvinism, which postulates that the capitalist system and the people who succeed in it are favored by God.⁵¹ They also tend to take a Machiavellian “ends justifies the means” approach to politics. More generally, this strain of conservatism asserts that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, that the constitutional constraint imposed by the First Amendment prohibition against the establishment of religion applies only to the federal government, and that it is permissible for individual states to endorse Christian beliefs and values as a matter of public policy.⁵²

It is noteworthy that the populist rank-and-file of this movement consists largely of people who hold the hitherto mentioned racial views that comprise the base of the contemporary Republican Party. It is also a group that tends to live in rural communities and small towns, a population that is more likely to be White and Christian than its urban counterpart, as well as older and less formally educated.⁵³ Additionally, rural folks are more likely to own guns, enjoy hunting as a pastime, and believe that gun control is a slippery slope that will inevitably lead to loss of their Second Amendment rights. They are more likely to harbor resentments toward those they view as arrogant and condescending liberal elites—the class of people who work in government bureaucracies, institutions of higher education, and the mainstream news and entertainment media—who they think are out of touch with ordinary working people, rural values, and the rural way of life. (In all fairness, liberal arrogance and condescension is a real thing.) These are the people whom Sarah Palin, John McCain’s vice-presidential running mate in 2008, described as the “best of America.” As she said during a campaign visit to Greensboro, North Carolina, “We believe that the best of America is in these small towns ... and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America,” the home of hard working, patriotic, and “pro-America” people.⁵⁴

In the aftermath of the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection, where some of the insurrectionists invoked the name of Jesus Christ, Texas lieutenant governor Dan Patrick said that “every problem we have in America has a solution in the Bible.”⁵⁵ But the Bible contains contradictory passages, mixed messages, and different emphases that can be interpreted selectively for different ideological purposes. The version of evangelicalism associated with the contemporary Republican Party tends to focus more on belief in a Jesus who saves personal lives through embracement of him as the Lord and Savior and who offers true believers the promise of eternal salvation. It is not the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, Beatitudes, or Good Samaritan who teaches about social justice and empathy toward others, especially the downtrodden.⁵⁶

A primary concern of conservative Christians is the purported *moral* decline of the nation, which can only be remedied by recommitting the country to Christian values. Often this agenda is couched in the language of *family* values—that is, *patriarchal* family values.⁵⁷ The themes and policies that fall under this rubric presume the natural superiority of male-dominated, heterosexual two-parent marriages, view non-heterosexuality as unnatural, and oppose abortion and non-abstinence sex education for youths. The advocates of this agenda claim to be cultivating personal responsibility and virtuous character, but the hypocrisy among some of the leaders has been apparent for a long time—whether it’s been the sexual predilections and gift-taking of evangelical ministers or the financial corruption of Christian lobbyists.⁵⁸ This was all before the embracement of Donald Trump, whom Stevens describes as “the ultimate white megachurch preacher.”⁵⁹ Stevens thinks that the “larger-than-life flaws and sins” of Trump’s evangelical predecessors has served to “convince the flock that they are unworthy to judge” powerful men. They claim to favor “authenticity” in their leaders but are “drawn to the most elaborately artificial” personalities. Needless to say, there is also a disconnect between the desire

for religious and personal liberty that is espoused by the Republican Party and the desire for government regulation of people's—especially women's—bodies that is part of this agenda.

In an earlier era, some Christian conservatives, including President George W. Bush, were concerned that parts of the Republican coalition were projecting a heartless attitude toward the poor and others in need. Their solution was to promote the notion of “compassionate conservatism.” However, the primary mechanism for putting compassion into practice was not the government but local groups that are closer to the people—religious and other voluntary community organizations. All this is well and good, but putting a compassionate face on the Republican Party, as Dionne observes, is “not the same as transforming it”—whether it's a genuine compassion for the plight of the less fortunate or a change in attitudes about the ways in which government can help people.⁶⁰

One enduring policy outcome of compassionate conservatism has been the creation of the White House Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives, now the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (OFBNP), during the George W. Bush administration. Its main function has been to facilitate the distribution of federal grants to faith-based organizations that are engaged in public service, a goal that is controversial enough given the First Amendment. But the Bush office was also plagued by scandal regarding the distribution of grants for the purpose of shoring up the president's evangelical base. Though no scandals were forthcoming from the Obama administration, during the first two years of the Trump administration the OFBNP remained without a director, and then it was replaced with a new White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative designed to put faith-based organizations on an equal footing with secular organizations when applying for federal funds. Under Joe Biden, the OFBNP has been reestablished under its previous leadership.⁶¹

National Security and the Deep State

Since the 1950s, one of the hallmarks of the Republican Party has been its hawkish approach to national security, especially its foreign policy vis-à-vis the former Soviet Union. Taken to its extreme, this posture led to the malicious anticommunist crusade of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, which was wholeheartedly endorsed by William Buckley. In his book *McCarthy and His Enemies*, co-authored with Brent Bozell, Buckley castigated not only communists but also liberals who were in his eyes insufficiently opposed to communism.⁶² He also conflated Soviet-style communism with the New Deal.

Robert Welch, founder of the John Birch Society, was another anticommunist of that era who played an important role in spreading these pernicious ideas and promoting conspiratorial thinking more generally. Birch was an American Baptist missionary and military intelligence officer who was killed by Chinese communists in 1945. Welch spread the myth that it was the US State Department that assassinated Birch to keep him from exposing the communist plot to take over China, and that the Eisenhower administration had been infiltrated by communists. These claims were a little too far for Buckley, who used the *National Review* to distance Movement Conservatism from the John Birch Society, which he also denounced as anti-Semitic. Nonetheless, the seeds of conspiracy thinking that imbues the contemporary Republican Party were planted in this earlier period.⁶³

Of course, the Republican Party of Donald Trump is anything but anti-Russia. I will not in this space delve into the details of Trump's ties to Russian oligarchs, or his admiration for autocratic leaders throughout the world,⁶⁴ but I will note the similarity of the "Trump doctrine" to the "America First" movement of the 1940s, an isolationist movement opposed to US involvement in World War II and the fight against European fascism. In some ways, Trump's "soft on Russia" stance, criticism of NATO, and desire to withdraw US troops from Europe are

of a kind with this orientation and one reason he has been opposed by hawkish *neoconservative* Republicans like William Kristol, who believe that the United States should assert its power in international affairs, including through the use of military force. The Trump doctrine also entails revanchist hostility toward international initiatives and institutions more generally, as witnessed by the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, Iran nuclear deal, and the World Health Organization.⁶⁵

In the world of Trump, it is not communism or even terrorism that is threatening the United States but the so-called “deep state” festering in the bowels of the federal government. As such, Trump dedicated himself to depriving the government of its diplomatic, scientific, and managerial personnel.⁶⁶ Michael Lewis describes this group of skilled experts as the people who administer a complicated “portfolio of risks” in the areas of national security—broadly construed to include foreign policy, terrorism, cybersecurity, natural disasters, and public health, including pandemics—that no private person or corporation can handle on its own.⁶⁷ Moreover, the Trumpian approach was a policy of willful ignorance, that is, “the desire not to know. ... If your ambition is to maximize short-term gain without regard to long-term costs, you are better off not knowing the cost.” Besides, capitalist entrepreneurs will take care of everything if they are just left alone. Government should get out of the way and let the free market perform its magic.

Politics as Blood Sport and the Degradation of Democracy

Before Donald Trump, the “take no prisoners” politics of Joe McCarthy found one of its most influential heirs in Georgia Congressman Newt Gingrich, who served in the House of Representatives from 1979 to 1999 and as Speaker of the House from 1995 to 1999. This decidedly anti-Burkean conservative once described himself as “the most serious, systematic revolutionary of modern times” and told a gathering of college Republicans that “one of the great problems we have in the Republican Party is that we don’t encourage you to be nasty.”⁶⁸

According to Gingrich, Republicans needed to learn to “raise hell” and realize that politics is a cutthroat “war for power” where compromise is a sign of weakness that grants the Democratic opposition legitimacy and muddles the contrast Republicans need to make between the two sides. Local and state elections should be thematically nationalized by leveraging social divisions, grievances, and resentments to build a coalition for obtaining political power. Once in power, in the words of McKay Coppins, “blow up the bipartisan coalitions that were essential to legislating, and then seize on the resulting dysfunction to wage a populist crusade against the institution of Congress itself.”⁶⁹ In this way, anti-government rhetoric that claims that government does not work becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Outside of tax cuts for corporations and plutocrats and appointments to the federal judiciary, political power at the national level is to be gained in order to nullify federal authority and return power to the states.

Under Gingrich’s tutelage, the Democratic opposition was to be demonized as the enemy, and vilification of them a normative form of political debate. In this vein, Gingrich encouraged the use of nicknames, such as the “loony left” or “Daffy Dukakis,” that is the calling card of Donald Trump. Gingrich’s goal, Coppins observes, “was to reframe the boring political debates in Washington as a national battle between good and evil ... a fight for the very soul of America.”⁷⁰ In this way, too, the stage was set for President George W. Bush to assert that “if Democrats win, the terrorists win,” and for Sarah Palin to accuse Barack Obama of “palling around with terrorists.”

Of course, this blood-sport style of politics has been put on steroids by the rise of right-wing talk radio, cable television, and digital media, which Al Gore describes in *The Assault on Reason* as “a new generation of media Machiavellis”—the most historically influential of whom have been Rush Limbaugh, Rupert Murdoch, and Roger Ailes.⁷¹ Working in tandem with these media are the hyper-partisan “think tanks” funded by libertarian plutocrats such as Richard

Mellon Scaife, Lynne and Harry Bradley, John Ohlin, and Charles and David Koch. These organizations, writes Jane Mayer in *Dark Money*, attempt to sow doubt about “areas of settled academic and scientific scholarship” and undermine “genuinely unbiased experts” in order to give pundits and “politicians a menu of conflicting statistics and arguments from which to choose.”⁷²

In this media ecosphere, there are always two sides to every issue regardless of the evidence or distortions and outright lies. Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s famous aphorism, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts,” has become a quaint notion that has dissolved into the presentation of alternative facts, half-truths, fanciful conspiracy theories, and “big lies”—most recently that the election was stolen from Trump—that are circulated and regurgitated with impunity. Clearly, a democracy cannot function under these conditions. As historian Tim Snyder writes in *On Tyranny*, “To abandon fact is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.”⁷³

It is a challenge, to say the least, for those who are committed to the discovery of what Carl Bernstein described as “the best obtainable version of the truth” to negotiate a communication environment in which the mainstream media is rebranded by Sarah Palin and her ilk as the “lame stream media.” But, Stevens asks, “What is the mainstream media? It’s the journalism that believes in standards, strives to report facts, and has a professional standard to correct errors.”⁷⁴ In contrast, in the world of Trump and his allies, we are being asked in Orwellian fashion to deny what we see before our very eyes. In other words, we are being lied to in plain sight and dared to do something about it. Stevens believes that most of the Republican office holders who pretend to go along with this “are not stupid men and women, though more than a few do a fair imitation. They all have their own justifications that amount to a personal

Faustian bargain predicated on the self-delusion that some particular issue or cause is more important than their oath of office.”⁷⁵

This brings us to the Tea Party, which emerged almost as soon as Barack Obama was inaugurated as president and was forced to embark on a massive government spending program to bring the country back from the brink of the financial collapse that was inherited from the Bush administration.⁷⁶ The initial purported goals of the Tea Party were essentially a rebranding of traditional Republican opposition to taxes and calls for reducing the size of the federal government. This was the main agenda of the libertarian plutocrats who funded the movement, but the populist appeal was based more on racial animas fueled by the election of a Black president, prejudice against racial and ethnic minorities, and xenophobic opposition to immigration. It was a movement, as Palin had asserted, of “real Americans” who were fighting to save the country from those they claimed were destroying the nation. From here it was only one small step to supporting a demagogue who wanted to “Make America Great Again,” who spread the racist lie that Obama was not born in America, and who declared that illegal aliens composed of criminals and rapists were invading the sovereign borders of the United States.

Even more dangerously, this revanchist politics of grievance and resentment has been leveraged by Trump and his Republican allies to undermine democracy itself. It is not an exaggeration to say that the primary electoral and governing strategy of the contemporary Republican Party has been to maintain power, not by offering policies that garner the support of a majority of voters, but by making it more difficult for Democratic constituencies to vote—the poor and people of color, those who change residential addresses, and college students.⁷⁷ Restrictions on early voting and mail ballots have now been added to this agenda. Moreover, radical gerrymandering and opposition to impartial methods of drawing legislative districts all

too often mean that Republicans are able to garner a solid majority of Congressional and state legislative seats even when Democrats receive a majority of votes in these elections statewide.

In their book *How Democracies Die*, political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Liblatt point to a number of nominally democratic nations around the world that have become de facto authoritarian one-party states not as a result of a military coup but of the gradual erosion of democratic norms and practices.⁷⁸ In addition to the concerted program of voter suppression that is being pursued by the Republican Party, the United States has now even witnessed a violent insurrection, incited by an outgoing president, to overthrow a legitimate election. This insurrection was unsuccessful, but the country is by no means out of the woods. Even before the Capitol riot, Levitsky and Liblatt were concerned that Trump's continued denial of his defeat, aided and abetted by his Republican allies, and the plethora of lawsuits filed by his attorneys, were ways to probe for fault lines in our constitutional structure.⁷⁹ They worry that the whole post-election process has been a "dress rehearsal" for more to come and that we cannot have a democracy in a two-party system when one of the parties is not fully committed to this form of government. Fintan O'Toole puts it this way: "How do you govern where one of the two main parties is incapable of escaping its own willing embrace of despotism and anarchy, and where such a party—through the system of grossly unequal representation in the Senate, the gerrymandering of House districts, the packing of the courts, and the suppression of voters—is able to embed itself as a minority that can frustrate the will of the majority."⁸⁰

Not surprisingly, the rise of Trumpism in American politics and its association with White supremacy has raised the question of fascism, with scholars having a sobering debate about whether what we've been witnessing constitutes the real deal.⁸¹ To be sure, fascism as a term has been bandied about in a rather careless manner, and authoritarianism might be a more judicious concept to use. This is not the place for a full deliberation of this issue, other than to

note historian Robert Paxton's observation that fascism should be understood as a *process* that moves through successive stages—from an incipient social movement to a full-blown fascist state.⁸² While comparisons are often made to the European-style fascism of the twentieth century, Paxton suggests that “the earliest phenomenon that can be functionally related to fascism is American: the Ku Klux Klan.”⁸³ Paxton does not think that contemporary fascism should be expected to resemble classical European fascism “in its outward signs and symbols. ... While a new fascism would necessarily diabolize some enemy, both internal and external, the enemy would not necessarily be Jews. An authentically popular American fascism would be pious, antiblack, and, since September 11, 2001, anti-Islamic.”⁸⁴ It would not be cloaked in a swastika but in the American flag.

Conclusion

In this article, I examined the component parts of Movement Conservatism—the economic, racial, religious-cultural, national security, and politically strategic—that comprise a diverse coalition of interest groups and ideological dispositions united in the conviction that “big government” constitutes a serious threat to American society and that political power needs to be devolved from the federal government to the states. There are both elite and populist elements to this movement, which join the economic interests of corporations and plutocrats with the grievances of common folks, also known as “the base.” The economic policies that have benefited these moneyed interests have not helped the populist rank-and-file, but this constituency still has other groups to scapegoat and cultural concerns that distract them from economic issues.

In this context, one of the central challenges for healing our politics is the restoration of people's faith that the federal government can work for them. This is no small task given the polarization of the electorate, inflamed by partisan media, where political parties have become

symbolic tribal markers of personal and collective identities.⁸⁵ Here we have the politics of identity, a desire for recognition and dignity that cannot be reduced to economics, which has come to dominate the discourse of both the right and the left. This type of politics moves us away from universal principles that are capable of binding people together toward disparate group grievances and competing demands. Francis Fukuyama thinks that the remedy for this dilemma “is not to abandon the idea of identity, which is too much a part of the way modern people think about themselves and their surrounding societies ... [but] to define larger and more integrative national identities that take account of the de facto diversity” of our nation and articulate how this diversity can serve common ends.⁸⁶ He believes that the notion of nationalism or national identity has gotten a bad name because it came to be associated with White supremacy, but it can also be built around democratic values and the pursuit of equality, justice, and the common good.

In his book, *Our Divided Political Heart*, E. J. Dionne notes that the founders of the US Constitution understood that the individual liberty they so cherished was dependent on a federal government that was capable of promoting the public good, or in the words of the Preamble to the US Constitution, “the general welfare.” It is not a matter of more or less government, but of who is elected to government and of how government makes decisions and for whom. The founders “had confidence that government could be made to work and ... could accomplish great things.”⁸⁷ We may have been disabused of the notion that we have created a “more perfect Union,” but it is the true patriot, Tim Snyder believes, who “wants the nation to live up to its ideals. ... A patriot has universal values, standards by which he judges the nation, always wishing it well—and wishing it would do better.”⁸⁸

As I noted at the outside, quoting Robert Reich, Trump has taken us back to first principles and forced us to think about the difference between democracy and tyranny.⁸⁹ Snyder

adds that democracy has failed in the past and is failing “in many parts of the world today. It is that history and experience that reveals ... the dark range of our possible futures.” People may say that “it can’t happen here. ... A patriot says that it could happen here, but that we will stop it.”⁹⁰

In this endeavor, there is little prospect for productive dialogue with the revanchist strain of conservatism. But there is hope of communicative engagement with the descendants of Edmund Burke, thoughtful people who are searching for a home in today’s political environment. This strain of conservatism maintains a healthy respect for traditional institutions and is cautious about dramatic change. It is not, however, intransigent to change, is willing to compromise, and is desirous of consensus.

Stuart Stevens, for one, is not optimistic that the Republican Party he spent so many years fighting for will rediscover its Burkean tradition. As he writes, “Trump has made it impossible to ignore long-developing fault lines and failures of the Republican Party. ... This moment should signal a day of reckoning for ... all who claim it as a political identity. ... I’d like to say I believe the party ... could rise to that challenge. But that would be a lie, and there have been too many lies for too long.”⁹¹ That is a grim thought indeed.

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