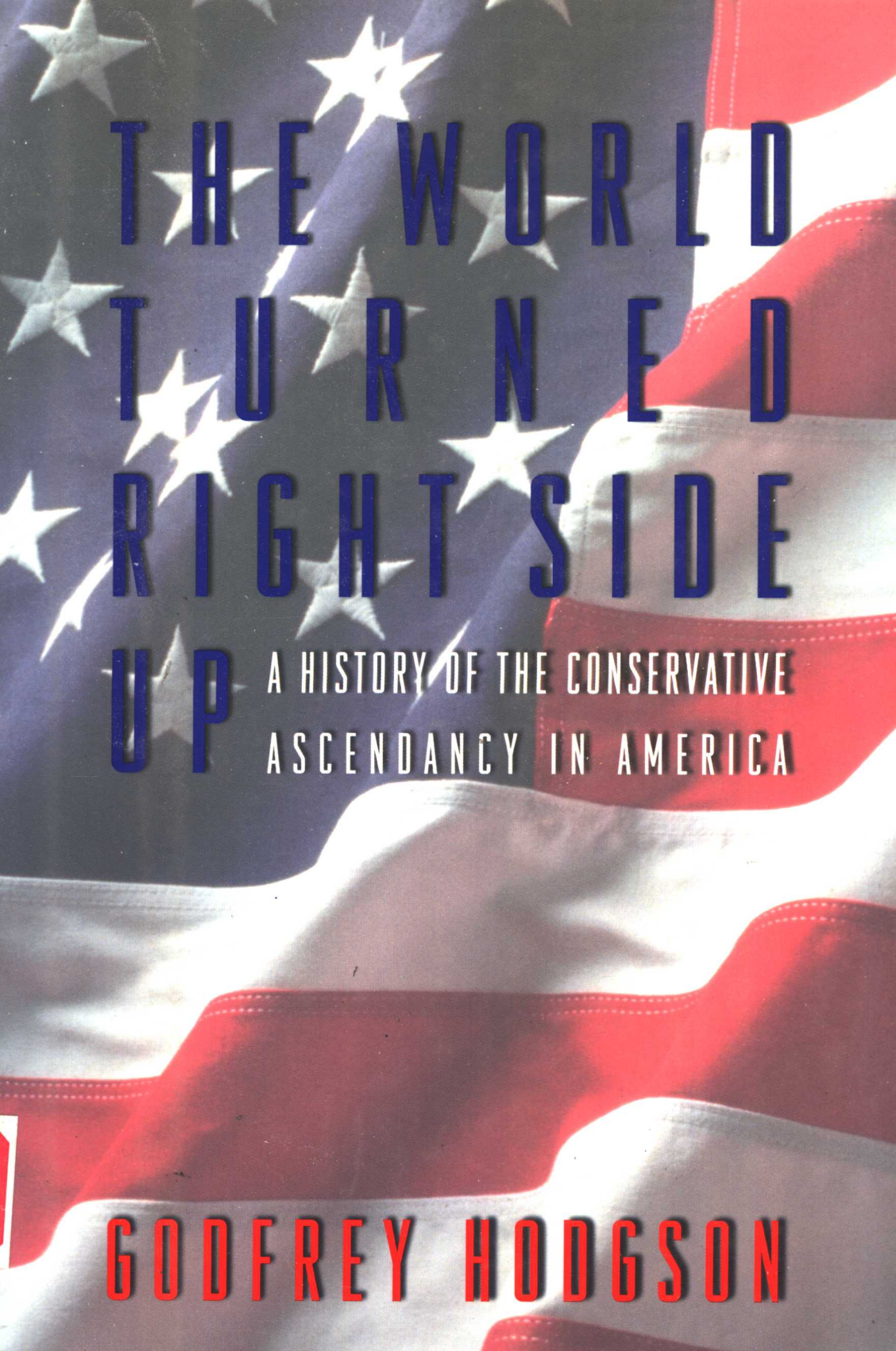
THE WORLD TURNED RIGHT SIDE UP
A HISTORY OF THE CONSERVATIVE ASCENDANCY IN AMERICA
GODFREY HODGSON

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Preface

THE USUAL POLITICAL PROGRESSION in individual lives is from left to right. When people are young, they are impatient with the old and the established. As they get older, most of them are not so keen to change things. They have acquired a certain stake in things as they are. So, with the passing years, they become, as we used to say, more conservative.

The drift in my own life has been in the opposite direction. I began as a conservative, and I have become — well, perhaps the best expression for my peculiar personal jigsaw of political attitudes, which emphasizes public and private liberty, respect for tradition, and skepticism about organized self-interest, is a deeply out-of-date word. I fear I may be a Whig.

I grew up, you might say, in the Middle Ages. Out of my window as a child I could see the medieval towers of York Minster. I was educated in quiet British places — Oxford, York, Winchester, and Oxford again — and in the ancient classical tradition. At the time, I found the aura of the past both benign and protective. Long-founded institutions seemed more civilized and society fairer than I can now see they were.

I grew up, too, in the generation — I was eleven years old when World War II ended — that feared and utterly rejected communism. Although some of my contemporaries embraced something they called "socialism," for a long time I could never quite rid myself of the suspicion that the word was a euphemism for various essentially unconstructive resentments.

I have since come to have great respect for some people who call themselves socialists, though I have never been convinced that public ownership is sensible for most kinds of enterprise. But it was not until I

went to the United States as a graduate student in the 1950s, and more especially not until I started work as a Washington reporter in the 1960s and 1970s, that I ceased to think of myself as a conservative.

I covered the civil rights movement in the South, the Kennedy and Johnson years, and the critical presidential election of 1968. In the process, I became aware of what I saw at the time as a certain emotional impoverishment as well as thinly veiled self-interest in traditional conservatism. I could see how it had acted as a shield for racism, class and money privilege, and sometimes for tyranny. At the same time, I was aware quite early of the hubris and the failure of the liberalism of the Kennedy-Johnson years. Indeed, in 1976 I published a book in which I tried to anatomize the assumptions made by what I called, rather loosely, "the liberal consensus," which I saw as "hardly to be distinguished from a more sophisticated and less resolute conservatism."

Of course I was also aware that a new yeast was at work in American conservatism. At the University of Pennsylvania I had been taught by a brilliant conservative, Robert Strausz-Hupé. I had read Russell Kirk and James Burnham, Peter Viereck and William F. Buckley. I had covered the Goldwater campaign and interviewed Senator Goldwater. In 1968, when I and a group of colleagues from the London *Sunday Times* wrote a book about the presidential election, we gave a good deal of attention to Nixon's "Southern strategy." At different times I reported on several arms of the swelling conservative movement, and eventually I spent most of a year making a television biography about Ronald Reagan.

Even so, when Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in Britain in 1979, and even more when Ronald Reagan won the presidential election in 1980, I found myself bewildered. It was not the fact of conservative victory. That seemed to be inevitable after the failures of British Labour and American liberals. What puzzled me was the incoherent cocktail of ideas that were being melded together and offered under the marketing label "conservative." In particular, I was baffled by excited proclamations that conservatism — passionately advocated by Wall Street arbitrageurs and tenured professors in large graduate schools — had somehow become a radical philosophy, while liberalism — a set of beliefs I had heard articulated by industrial workers in Detroit and by black schoolteachers in Alabama — was seen as the doctrine of the elite. There was something fishy here, I thought, and I wanted to understand how these improbably associated ideas had been fitted together.

As the years went by, I was sometimes irritated by a certain cliquishness about conservative intellectual life. Conservatives seemed forever to be demanding, "Are you one of us?" There was a propagandistic tone — "We're taking over!" — to so much of what they wrote. Still, I was more seriously annoyed by the failure of those who did not accept conservative oracles uncritically to take conservative arguments seriously. And I longed for someone to ask even the most basic questions about the Emperor's wardrobe.

So when, seven years ago, I was asked to write what turned into this book, I was delighted at the opportunity to attempt what I had already tried to do with the world of liberalism: to trace how ideas and events were plaited together to make a political tradition. There were to be delays and obstacles, most of them of my own making; but here at last is my best attempt to understand what has been, after all, a serious effort to transform the world.

I am not a political philosopher. Although I was trained as a historian, I am essentially a reporter. So in the first nine chapters of this book I have tried to report as clearly as I can how modern American conservatism grew from the despised and unfashionable set of ideas it was in 1945 until it captured the seats of power. The last two chapters describe what happened to the high hopes of 1981 in the course of the Reagan and Bush years. They pose what I think are the most insistent questions about this process: Was there a Reagan revolution? And how permanent have the changes been that were made in the name of conservatism? By implication, they also ask: How has it all turned out? I leave it to the reader to see how much he agrees with my verdict.

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The World Turned Right Side Up

I am a conservative because I'm for change.
— *Senator Roger Jepsen, Republican of Iowa*[1]

"THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN" was the name of the tune — a popular song of the day in London — that the band of the victorious American army is said to have played as Lord Cornwallis's Redcoats stacked their arms and surrendered at Yorktown.[2] "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive," wrote the young William Wordsworth of another revolution, only eight years later, when he read of the fall of the Bastille, "but to be young was very heaven." And from time to time since then other events have been inscribed in letters of red in the political calendar, not least among them the ten days of the Russian Revolution in St. Petersburg in 1917, which certainly did shake the world.

A conservative revolution sounds like a contradiction in terms. And certainly the arrival of Ronald Reagan in the White House in January 1981 was not revolutionary in style. No tumbrils carried white-faced aristocrats along Pennsylvania Avenue to their execution; there was no guillotine in Lafayette Square. If anything, it was the newcomers accompanying the Reagans to Washington who belonged to an American aristocracy of talent and money. At the six inaugural balls held to accommodate all the celebrants who had flocked to town, many observers commented on the pervasive smell of money lavished, for example, on dresses designed by the new First Lady's favorite and friend, Oscar de la Renta, and on the elaborate coiffures worn by both husbands and wives. Stretch limos, not tumbrils, were the vehicles of choice in Washington in January 1981.

Yet the day of President Reagan's inauguration, January 21, 1981, was generally understood to be a turning point in American political history. The language of revolution was freely applied to it, both by those who dreaded and by those who eagerly awaited the changes the new Republican administration was expected to introduce.

The purpose of this book is twofold: to show how conservatism, a despised and impotent political philosophy at the end of World War II, proved to be a spectacular ideological "comeback kid"; and to inquire why, fifteen years after the triumph and triumphalism of the Reagan years, as the Republicans confront President Clinton, conservatism has proved, on the whole, so confusing and disappointing as a guiding star for political action.

The margin of Reagan's election victory surprised the pundits and was not predicted by the polls.[3] In May the journalist Morton Kondracke wrote in *The New Republic*, which then still regarded itself as a liberal magazine, "Anyone betting on the outcome of the Carter-Reagan election would be foolish to wager very much, because the race gives every promise of being hard and close."[4] In the event, Reagan carried every region of the country, including the industrial Northeast and the South, the two sections to which Jimmy Carter had owed his victory in 1976. In the popular vote, Reagan won a lead of eight million votes, or 7 percent, overall. Experts noticed, in particular, the inroads he had made into the blue-collar, working-class neighborhoods, traditional heartland of the Democratic electorate. From the start, this was interpreted as an event of more than electoral significance. American presidential elections, after all, have always had two functions. They are obviously an opportunity to choose a president and some thousands of other office holders, but they are also a time to reflect on the nation's agenda and, if the majority of the electorate wants, to change it. Conservatives were quick to claim that this was indeed what the voters were saying: that they rejected liberalism and embraced conservatism as the public philosophy of America. "Reagan's victory in the 1980 elections completed the conservative ascent," wrote one historian.[5] "Gone were the dour tones and long looks of 1974." This was "the greatest victory for conservatism since the American Revolution" for Howard Phillips, leader of the Conservative Caucus. For John T. Dolan, of the National Conservative Political Action Committee, it was "the most massive political victory in the history of conservatism." "Conservatives don't have to be ashamed of what they profess in order to win elections," rejoiced Paul Weyrich, of the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress.[6]

Was Reagan's triumph in fact a true turning point, an irreversible break in the American political mood? Perhaps. That is precisely one of the questions this book will try to answer. But whether it was or not, it is worth recalling that it was not seen as inevitable or even especially likely at the time. Although public opinion surveys picked up a shift to Reagan in the last week of the campaign, virtually all of them predicted that the result would be close. Carter may have been damaged by Reagan's effective performance in the candidates' only debate, less than a week before the poll. He was certainly hurt by the presence in the race of a relatively liberal third-party candidate, John B. Anderson, of Illinois; and especially by the protracted agony of the Tehran hostage crisis. If the Iranians had released the American hostages before Election Day, then there might have been a conservative revolution — but it would not have been symbolized by a Reagan victory in 1980.

Reagan, however, conducted himself as though he did indeed carry the mandate of heaven. From the start, wrote the young conservative journalist Burton Yale Pines, the incoming president "behaved as if he was ushering in a new era."[7] The *Washington Post* spoke of a "tidal wave" and, even more vaguely, expressed its editorial conviction that "something of gigantic proportions" had occurred.

The paper's highly respected political expert, David Broder, said Reagan's inauguration was "the start of a new era" and "the biggest power shift in Washington since 1952." Within weeks, Broder's conservative rivals, Robert Novak and Rowland Evans, were at work on a book they called *The Reagan Revolution*.[8]

Memory, to be sure, foreshortens historical processes. In retrospect, it is easy to say that between November 5, 1980, when Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States, and January 23, 1981, the world was turned upside down. Conservatives, indeed, would prefer to say that the world, upended by decades of liberal error, was turned right side up.

In reality, those hectic weeks were simply the moment when changes which had been maturing for decades, and had acquired immense momentum over the preceding five years, were finally fulfilled. It was to be many years more before the full implication of Reagan's victory became plain. Fifteen years later, it is still possible to disagree on how deep and lasting the changes Reagan symbolized have been. Ironically, those who most want a conservative revolution to take place are those most likely to deny that there was anything that can seriously be called a Reagan revolution. Even today, there is no more important or urgent issue than

whether the American people want the changes symbolized by Reagan's occupation of the White House to continue. The 1996 presidential election is, among other things, a national referendum on the conservative agenda which Reagan brought with him to Washington.

Yet unmistakably, 1980 is remembered as one of those rare electoral realignments that shake the American political system as a child shakes a kaleidoscope, so that the existing elements are juggled into a totally new pattern.[9] Indeed, political mythology has already cast Reagan as the spearhead of an international ideological upheaval comparable with those of 1789 and 1917, and as the catalytic agent for ideas that would transform politics and society in the United States and far beyond. Like all myths, that idea contains elements of truth; it is also a gross oversimplification.

In the very month of Reagan's victory, George Gilder, one of the more excited prophets of a new conservative era, published his best-known book, *Wealth and Poverty*. Its first sentence pronounced that "the most important event in the recent history of ideas is the demise of the socialist dream."[10] Yet it was almost nine years before the communist regimes of Eastern Europe crumbled after the Soviet Union withdrew its support, and another two years before communism collapsed in the Soviet Union itself. In many parts of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, communists of one stamp or another are already back in power, and the same may well happen in Russia. Close to a quarter of the human race still lives under communist rule in China. Socialism as a dream may be dead; socialism as a political system has proved surprisingly durable.

On a close look, the idea of a worldwide conservative revolution in 1980 does not hold water.[11] Even in the United States, what happened was complex and more gradual than is often remembered. The ideas Reagan embodied had been spreading and gathering strength for close to half a century when he became president. Equally, his own impact on the political process did not happen all at once. "There is a tidal wave coming," wrote Republican Representative Jack Kemp in 1979, "equivalent to the one that hit in 1932, when an era of Republican dominance gave way to the New Deal. It's going to happen again, and we'll find millions upon millions of Americans surprising themselves by voting Republican . . . because they see in the GOP a better shot at the American Dream." In 1980, surprised at themselves or not, millions of Americans did just that. At long last the sixty-nine-year-old Ronald Reagan, who had seriously considered running for president in 1968 and

had come close to winning the Republican nomination in 1976, finally swept into the White House, with an overwhelming majority. Even then, though, some of the shrewdest political observers, while sensing that Reagan was a phenomenon and a portent, were not ready to concede conservative claims that the world had indeed been turned right side up.

On December 6, 1980, for example, a month after Reagan's victory, TRB, the veteran columnist in *The New Republic*, greeted the supposed conservative revolution in coolly dismissive terms:

> The fact is there are real questions these days, with accelerating and intensifying foreign and domestic problems, whether the fragmented system of divided government invented by the founding fathers hasn't reached the limit of tolerance . . . So the country elects an affable Hollywood actor whose whole art is communicating . . . How he will boost defense, cut taxes, end inflation, and balance the budget all at once nobody knows.[12]

That was an extremely pertinent question, as we shall see. TRB, however, went on to give Ronald Reagan, almost contemptuously, "a free ride for about six months." Not much different was the measured judgment of the *New York Times*'s bureau chief in Washington, Hedrick Smith, writing on Inauguration Day itself.[13]

> The nation today arrived at a fascinating and quite remarkable moment in its political history: A 69-year-old citizen-politician who spent most of his working life in another profession, has entered the White House and won the opportunity to lead a conservative political revolution.
>
> Or more precisely to lead a conservative reformation that seeks to redirect the role of government in American life and perhaps to reshape the national political landscape for the rest of the century.
>
> For Ronald Wilson Reagan . . . is a crusader, the first missionary conservative to be elected with the aim of reversing the liberal New Deal revolution of governmental activism and Democratic party dominance established by Franklin D. Roosevelt almost half a century ago.

Some Republicans, Smith conceded, went further and believed that an irresistible tide of conservatism had swept the land, and that the mood of the country had shifted irreversibly to the right. He quoted the irrepressible Kemp as interpreting the election as an opportunity for the

conservative Republicans to stay in power "for two generations." Yet Smith was not yet ready to concede as much as that. For the time being, the *New York Times* was ready to accept a Republican victory; it would not yet accept that a great historical transformation had taken place. Even two months later, the Gallup Poll, so far from recording evidence of a landslide for conservatism, found that only 59 percent of those questioned said they approved of Reagan's handling of the presidency, as against 65 percent for Nixon, 73 percent for Kennedy, and 75 percent for the recently humiliated Carter at the same stage of their respective presidencies.[14]

Less than two weeks after that, President Reagan was shot by a young man named John W. Hinckley as he left a meeting with labor leaders at the Washington Hilton Hotel.[15] Absurd and gratuitous as the shooting was, it touched a sore nerve in American sensibility, the one bared by the assassination of John F. Kennedy eighteen years earlier. Reagan himself, in the most natural and spontaneous way, set his sails to this warm wind. Close to his seventieth birthday, he behaved with a courage and grace that won over all but his bitterest opponents. Quipping like the debonair heroes of those classic Hollywood comedies he was old enough to have acted in, he brought back memories of a golden age not only for Hollywood but for the country.

Lyndon Johnson had enjoyed a vicarious political honeymoon after Kennedy's assassination. Reagan was fortunate enough to enjoy the reaction to his own shooting. Congress had gone along with Johnson when he asked it to pass a civil rights bill as a monument to Kennedy. Now the congressmen fell in behind Reagan's economic proposals. For only the second time in almost thirty years, a president found a favorable climate for his legislative proposals on Capitol Hill, and Reagan took full advantage. He persuaded Congress to pass the biggest spending and tax cuts in history; it slashed domestic social programs by over $130 billion while at the same time approving most of Reagan's increased military spending requests.[16]

It would no doubt be too much to say that Ronald Reagan owed his political successes in 1981 to John Hinckley. He earned them for himself. Still, the transformation of his political fortunes after the shooting was undeniably dramatic. People admired the way Reagan had confronted his trauma. You could say that Reagan had made his own luck. Politicians — and journalists — were quick to pick up the idea that to be critical of this pleasant man in his convalescence would not be clever.

For a few crucial months, the habitual rigor of Washington's scrutiny

was abated. By late July even the doubting Hedrick Smith was converted to admiration. In six months, he said, Reagan had wrought not only a dramatic shift in economic policies; he had also "swept to a political mastery of the Congress not seen since LBJ."[17] Though Reagan's personal ratings in the polls were to fluctuate for years to come, and though his personal shortcomings were analyzed with painful honesty in many a profile and editorial, after the shooting no politician and few journalists dared to ignore his popularity. In spite of ups and downs, his reelection by a landslide in 1984 was a foregone conclusion. By July 1986 *Time* magazine could say, in unusually unrestrained language:

> Ronald Reagan has found the American sweet spot. The 75-year-old man is hitting home runs . . . Reagan is a sort of masterpiece of American magic — apparently one of the simplest, most uncomplicated creatures alive, and yet a character of rich meanings, of complexities that connect him with the myths and powers of his country in an unprecedented way.[18]

In a study written for the Brookings Institution and published in 1985, John Chubb and Paul Peterson wrote:

> The American political system, during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, has been transformed to an extent unknown since the days of Franklin Roosevelt. The terms of political debate, the course of domestic and foreign policy, and the dominant line of political cleavage have all been fundamentally changed.[19]

So if it took some time for the idea to take hold that Reagan represented a revolutionary break with the course of American politics over the last half century, after his reelection the idea of a "Reagan revolution" became widely accepted. It became a cliché of political journalism. And it was perhaps the sincerest flattery that liberals, brows furrowed with anxiety, began to take seriously the idea that the country was embarked for the foreseeable future on a conservative course. Not a few of them, indeed, paid to conservatives a form of flattery even more sincere than imitation by crossing the ideological divide and joining them.

No one expounded the idea that a conservative revolution was taking place more consistently or with greater conviction than Martin Anderson, the Republican economist who had worked for the Nixon administration as well as Reagan's. Anderson did not make the mistake of suggesting that Reagan brought a conservative revolution to Washington with him overnight. The change came, he wrote in his book *Revolu-*

tion, "like a rising tide — silently, inexorably, gently lapping forward."[20] Only the political waves were noticeable, and they rushed in, then receded, each time reaching higher up the beach, first with Barry Goldwater in 1964, then with Richard Nixon in 1968, and finally, decisively, with Ronald Reagan in 1980. Anderson made a distinction that is vital for understanding what has happened in the United States in the past forty years: he pointed out the relation between political events and an underlying change in the world of ideas.

> The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and many of the events that followed were the political results of an intellectual movement building [in the United States] for many years and to a lesser extent throughout the world . . . That movement was no accident, but rather the logical outgrowth of policy ideas and political forces set in motion during the 1950s and 1960s, ideas and forces that gathered strength and speed during the 1970s, then achieved power in the 1980s, and promise to dominate national policy in the United States for the remainder of the twentieth century.[21]

In an interview in his office at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, Anderson expanded that idea. "There has been an intellectual revolution," he told me, "moving with the power and speed of a glacier." Glaciers move very slowly, but they move with irresistible force. "Every now and then the glacier comes up against a tree. As it gets closer and closer to fifty percent, everyone says there has been a sudden change. But in fact, underneath, the intellectual change is smooth and unstoppable. Ideas do move the world."[22]

"IDEAS," TO QUOTE the title of a book by the conservative philosopher Richard Weaver, "have consequences."[23] Ideas cause people to behave as they do, and the events they cause in turn change people's ideas. One of the purposes of this book is to illustrate this reciprocal relationship between ideas and events, and in particular to show how they interacted over the past fifty years to transform conservatism from a defeated, proscribed, and unpopular set of beliefs in America into a powerful operating ideology.

But it is hard to separate ideas from words, and words in political discourse have a way of shifting their meanings to meet the needs of politicians whose desire to persuade is stronger than their passion to explain. "With words," it is said, "we rule men." Three words, in particular, are critical to understanding what has happened in America since

1945: *republican, liberal,* and above all *conservative.* This is, after all, to put it at its simplest, the story of how liberal ideas were discredited and conservatives took over the Republican Party.

Each of those three words, as it happens, has had an unusually checkered and confused history. Each has changed its meaning over the years. Each has come to mean something close to the opposite of what it meant at an earlier period. The Republicans were once what we now call Democrats. Liberals were once believers in a kind of modern conservatism. And modern conservatives hold some of the views that conservatives once abominated. So it is worth looking back at how each of those three portmanteau words came to carry its modern baggage.

Republicanism had always been associated with the struggle against monarchy. Since the best-known republics in eighteenth-century Europe — Holland and Geneva — were also Protestant, and the Catholic Church was associated with absolute monarchy, it was natural for the leaders of the American Revolution, Protestants brought up on classical culture in the Age of the Enlightenment, to call the state they were forging out of thirteen rebellious colonies a "republic."

It was even more natural for Thomas Jefferson, who, with Governor Clinton of New York, was the founder of what was to become the Democratic Party, to call it the Republican Party, and so it remained until 1828.[24] The modern Republican Party did not come into existence until 1854; its origins are usually traced to a protest meeting convened by a certain Alvin E. Bovay in the Congregational church in Ripon, Wisconsin. It grew out of the outraged opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska bill by Free Soil men. The bill tore up thirty years of compromise between North and South by allowing slavery to enter the territories, and so shattered the existing party system. Instead of two national parties, the Democrats and the Whigs, each with a Northern and a Southern wing, half a dozen parties, embryo parties and political alliances — Whigs, Democrats, Know-Nothings, Free Soilers, Abolitionists, and "fusionists" — came into existence, and the politicians milled about among them. Out of this political cauldron the Republicans emerged as the party of Lincoln, champions of the Union, and emancipators of the slaves.

The Republican Party dominated Northern politics from 1868 until 1896. Like all great political parties, it was a coalition, reflecting the elements that had created it. As the party of Lincoln and of the Radical Republicans who had tried to reconstruct the South, it embodied both victory and emancipation. As the heir of the Know-Nothings, horrified at the mass immigration of Catholic Germans and Irish, it was the party