"The smartest book written from the inside about the American conservative movement."—Frank Rich, New York Times

DEAD RIGHT

A new Republican era has dawned . . . or has it? Will the Right do what it must to shrink government and strengthen family values?

DAVID FRUM

"As slender as a stiletto and as cutting."—George Will, Newsweek

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Preface to the Paperback Edition

A cynical cartoonist once depicted a bratty boy urging his younger brother to look for Christmas presents in the basement. "But last time I did that, you locked me in the cellar for three hours!" the little brother protests. The older boy suavely replies: "This time I won't."

I kept thinking of that exchange in the aftermath of the Republican congressional victory in 1994. Make no mistake: I cheered the results of that election as lustily as any Young Republican with a file folder full of resumes to mail. But conservatives tempted to suppose that the Republican breakthrough in Congress portends a dramatic reduction in the pretensions of the federal government need to keep their eyes on the cellar-door latch as they rush downstairs.

The danger is not that history will repeat itself, that the mistakes and disappointments of the Reagan years will be replicated by the new Republican Congress. The medieval historian Robert Lopez used to tell his graduate students: "History never repeats itself. It only seems to, to those who don't know the details." The danger instead is that conservatives and Republicans will make new mistakes and encounter new disappointments so long as they continue to succumb to the great temptation of the Reagan years: to attempt to use government for conservative purposes rather than to push it back within its proper limits.

The message of *Dead Right,* in one paragraph, is this: the conservative movement was born in revolt against the size, cost, and arrogance of the modern state. Over the past two decades, as part of the price for its emergence as America's dominant ideology, conservatism has quietly walked away from that founding principle. Instead, all too many conservatives have developed a startling tolerance for the use of government power to reform society along traditionalist lines. Unfortunately for conservatives, using government in this way is a doomed project. Modern government, like a twisted knife, necessarily cuts to the left.

How much of the book's argument remains standing in the wake of the stunning Republican triumph of November 8, 1994? Virtually all of it.

The Contract with America that the Republicans campaigned on in 1994 promised to streamline and rationalize the federal government, not shrink it. In fact, the Contract actually pledged to repeal President Clinton's single largest spending cut, the clawback of Social Security payments to higher-income pensioners. And this was astute. It wasn't Medicare or an overzealous Occupational Safety and Health Agency that galvanized Republican voters. It was anger against illegal immigration and disgust with welfare. It was dislike for a president who held steadfast to his promise to end the ban on gays in the military, while breaking his word on a middle-class tax cut. It was resentment of state-enforced racial preferences and a steadily rising level of contempt for a government that seemed actively hostile to religion and morality. In other words, and as predicted in chapters 5 and 6, the Republicans ran and triumphed less as a libertarian party than as a moralist and nationalist party.

That's why the most dramatic Republican surge was recorded among white male voters earning between $15,000 and $30,000 a year and, to a slightly lesser extent, their wives. These voters felt that the values they treasured, the culture they had grown up in, and their own economic prospects were

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under attack. They felt that their government ignored them, and that it supported and protected people—from the lewd surgeon general, to the condom-distributing teachers at the local school, to the self-righteous artists subsidized by the National Endowment for the Arts—who despised them.

During and after the election, Democratic politicians and liberal-minded commentators expressed great irritation with the voters' mutiny against liberal cultural values. They complained that the voters were caught up in mindless negativism, that they were—as Peter Jennings put it in an editorial on ABC radio—indulging in the political equivalent of a preschooler's temper tantrum. Even if true (and it wasn't), this complaint was beside the point. Democracy is based on the insight that the foot knows best where the shoe pinches. The people are entitled to be bothered by whatever bothers them.

On the other hand, democracy does not require us to believe that the foot knows how to cobble shoes. It's the responsibility of political elites to hearken to popular grievances, to devise principled and constitutional remedies, and to persuade the voters to adopt them. *Dead Right* is concerned above all with the responsibilities of conservative political elites. Conservatives noticed long ago that the public responds to conservative themes, but not to conservative policies. A wonderful example is the (sadly, probably apocryphal) story told among journalists of the old lady who opposed the Clinton health plan because she didn't want the government interfering with her Medicare. What could be more tempting to conservatives than to stick to the themes and forget the policies? Conservatives are going to be mightily tempted over the next few years to campaign on a program of middle-class tax cuts, welfare reform, curbs on immigration, and the abolition of affirmative action while maintaining a discreet silence about Social Security, Medicare, farm programs, student loans, and the other colossal middle-class benefits. This moralist, nationalist, and statist conservatism could prove a big winner: indeed, activist pro-business government, enforcement of moral standards, and the imposition of an Amer-

ican identity on more or less reluctant groups have been the winning formula in American politics for close to 200 years.

But conservatives know, or should, that the problems they care most about are intimately related to big government. Big government has to be paid for, and its immense costs have relentlessly forced taxes on the middle class upward. Big government instills in middle-class pensioners and hospital patients and farmers and college students the same greedy sense of entitlement that conservatives deplore in the poor. Big government, by relieving families of responsibilities for child and elder care that they once discharged for themselves, weakens family bonds. In other words, conservatives might have been expected to seize on the widespread perception of cultural decline not merely as an opportunity to win elections, but as an invitation to teach conservative doctrine in its entirety. Even in 1994, though, Republicans shied away from the unpopular task of telling the voters the full truth about the conservative critique of government.

The full truth doesn't include closing the fire department. Conservatives aren't anarchists. They don't want to abolish police, parks, or public libraries. Nor do they regard the right to do precisely as one pleases as the supreme political good. Chapter 7 explains why it's wrong to accuse conservatives of inconsistency for refusing to equate sexual permissiveness with economic and political liberty. What conservatives do believe, or should, is that the cultural conservatism that most Americans seem to want can be achieved only by means of the economic conservatism they still rather mistrust. Cultural conservatism is like happiness: you can win it only indirectly, as the by-product of seeking something else.

The eager acceptance of that last claim among conservatives since the initial publication of *Dead Right* has been immensely encouraging. Still, it must be confessed that the book's subordination of cultural conservatism to economic conservatism irked many critics on the right. Those critics complained that *Dead Right* laid too much stress upon the morally

and culturally corrosive effects of big government. Cultural corruption has many causes, they said, and it is simpleminded to blame government alone. That's right enough, so far as it goes. The trouble is, the other causes those critics cited—from the decline of religious faith to TV—extend well beyond anyone's ability to control, and certainly beyond anyone's ability to control by means of political action. By all means, conservatives outraged by cultural trends they deplore should write articles or preach sermons against them. But that's not politics. Politics is a debate about what the state should and shouldn't do. And conservatives involved in the practice of politics or who write about politics need to recognize that there's not much the state can do to stop networks from broadcasting comedies in which children smart-mouth teachers. What you can do through politics is shrink the power of the federal octopus so that local schools that want to expel smart-mouthed students don't get dragged into federal district court on due-process charges. The chicken-and-egg question—whether it's culture that influences politics or politics that forms culture—raises many fascinating intellectual questions. For conservatives, though, the only plausible hope of reforming the culture is by eliminating state-created and state-funded incentives to misconduct.

Must conservatives who want to practice consistency therefore hare off in doomed pursuit of some laissez-faire utopia that never was? Happily, they needn't. The results of 1994 suggest that voters have come to accept at least two conservative ideas: that modern government is hugely wasteful, and that at least some of its programs corrode important values among vulnerable people. As a result, a majority of the congressional electorate seems to believe that government could do significantly less than it now does without inflicting harm on anyone. More than that, a majority of the electorate now seems to believe that eliminating many of government's functions might even help others, by removing programs that lure them into or keep them in destructive ways of life.

Sooner or later, the voters would notice that real budget

cutting means taking real money away from real people who have come to expect it. It's possible that that would bring the budget cutting to a screeching halt. On the other hand, politics is a dynamic business, and acting on one opportunity often brings others into being. Franklin Delano Roosevelt—the architect of the modern American state—had intended only to slap a few patches onto the American economy. But as each repair exposed another defect, he was forced to hammer and saw and plaster until the entire structure had been renovated beyond recognition. And, impelled by the logic of the situation, the public went along with him until, in the end and without ever consciously intending it, it found itself living in a brand-new political home.

Obviously the discontent Americans feel today can in no way be compared to the misery of the 1930s. But the dynamic qualities of politics have not changed. A serious welfare reform has to raise questions about middle-class welfare. Widespread acceptance of the premise that government largess has shattered the stability of the black family must, as I argue in chapter 8, lead to an inquiry into the causes of the crumbling of the divorce-wracked white family. And as we start to withdraw the lures and snares that have helped tempt people into the conduct that has led so many Americans to despair of the moral health of their society, we will find ourselves—just as Roosevelt did—building, willy-nilly, a new kind of state for the next century.

What would such a state look like? Here's my vision.

Government should protect people only from risks they cannot easily protect themselves against: unemployment, disability, natural disasters, and catastrophic illnesses. Social welfare programs should not protect nonindigent people against the predictable results of their own actions or the inevitable cycles of life: the costs of retirement and college, the regular fluctuations of farm and factory prices, the miseries caused by idleness and addiction. Obviously, any changes in the pension system and Medicare would have to be phased in slowly. Rep. Chris Cox, who sits on Sen. Bob Kerrey's entitlements reform

commission, has speculated that one way to do that would be to halve the Social Security tax on workers under forty, and let them pay the money into IRAs instead. But the sums at stake are so colossal that even relatively modest reforms would yield breathtaking results. The Social Security Administration says it does not keep track of the dollar value of the benefits it pays to middle- and high-income households. It can say, though, that in 1994, the U.S. put a total of some $300 billion into the households of pensioners, about one-fifth of whom enjoy incomes of $30,000 or more.

Sickness is almost as predictable as old age, but the second largest domestic program, Medicare, spent some $140 billion in 1994 to protect the nonindigent elderly against routine medical problems. At the same time, Medicare fails to protect the elderly against the catastrophic medical expenses for which government help is most needed and most justifiable. Medicare's elaborate system of deductibles and co-payments was supposed to induce some awareness of costs and some sense of responsibility in its beneficiaries, but nearly 80 percent of the elderly now purchase private insurance to cover this "gap" or else receive it free, courtesy of Medicaid. Four-fifths of older Americans therefore have sloughed virtually all the costs of health care off their own shoulders—in the process raising their medical expenses, according to one careful estimate, by about 18 percent. At the same time, the existence of Medicare makes impossible the best and most obvious solution to the health care problem: that people should buy (either through their employers or on their own) a single health insurance policy when they enter the workforce, which would charge them the same annual premium from their early twenties until death, just as a life insurance policy does. Instead, and because of Medicare, workers and their employers insure themselves only up to retirement age, leaving the bills beyond that point to be paid by the taxpayer.

Pensions and Medicare together amount to a $440 billion annual expenditure. But even the relatively small programs that would get the ax under a predictability test are large enough by

non-Washington standards: nearly $13 billion for student loans, a little more than $10 billion for agricultural supply management programs, $11 billion for low-income housing and energy assistance. To be sure, a welfare state that protected people only against unforeseeable disasters would not be small. And it would probably continue to take responsibility for an irreducible minimum of antipoverty programs as well: food stamps, supplemental Social Security, childhood immunization, and school lunches. Even so, a predictability test holds out the hope of a one-third reduction in the cost of the federal government's domestic programs as the current generation of retirees passes from the scene.

In the past, culturally minded Republicans have rebelled whenever economic conservatives spoke too enthusiastically about practicing a little liposuction on the body politic. They believed that Nixon and Reagan had created a New Majority out there, made up of "conservatives of the heart," as Patrick Buchanan called them. This New Majority was patriotic and religious, but it still hearkened after the protection of the social welfare system built by Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. For goodness' sake, they reasoned, why alienate them with radical economics? Stick to invectives against artists who dip crucifixes in urine.

Cutting government benefits that protect people against predictable risks is, however, one economic program that cultural conservatives ought to be able to support. The central preoccupation of cultural conservatives is the eclipse of one type of American personality—self-reliant, self-controlled, hardworking, and patriotic—and its apparent replacement by another—dependent, hedonistic, narcissistic, and whiny. In the past, there has always yawned a chasm between the magnitude of the problem that cultural conservatives observed and the radicalism of the solutions they were prepared to contemplate. Getting rid of the National Endowment for the Arts won't take MTV off the air.

If cultural conservatives would recognize that the tough old American character they mourn was a rational response to the

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toughness of American life, they would find their differences with economic conservatives evaporating. Victorian personalities do not flourish in a world of Great Society welfare programs. Cultural conservatives now recognize that AFDC and other antipoverty programs have stifled self-reliance among the poor. They concede that government-mandated racial preferences have exacerbated intergroup animosity. They should be able to perceive that the Federal Housing Authority and student loans and Social Security bear at least some of the responsibility for corroding the character of the middle class. And they should be teaching the electorate to perceive it too.

A textbook example of how this ought to be done: in the last Congress, Sen. Phil Gramm (R.-Tex.) introduced legislation to delete $126 billion from the nutrition, housing, and health budgets and to use the money to finance a doubling of the per-child tax exemption, from its then-level of $2,350 to $4,700. Gramm's message was simple but powerful: Republicans do not want to change the amount spent on feeding, housing, and caring for children; they want to change the identity of the spender. The proposal didn't pass, nor was it seriously meant to. It was meant to teach, and the lesson should be repeated.

Another example: Medicaid, the medical care program for the poor that ranks as the third biggest program in the federal budget, is actually operated by the states. Medicaid expenditures have been growing at a nightmarish rate, up from less than $17 billion in 1981 to nearly $100 billion in 1994. One state, New York, bears much of the blame: with 7 percent of the U.S. population and 9 percent of Medicaid patients, New York consumes 18 percent of federal Medicaid dollars. Republicans should propose eliminating federal Medicaid grants to the twenty-five states with above-average incomes in exchange for more generous federal tax credit for state and local tax payments. Let out-of-control local spending be those localities' problem—and let voters nationwide understand where the blame should fall.

One reason for the intractability of Social Security spending is that a depressing number of American pensioners sincerely believe they are merely receiving back what they paid into the system's trust funds. Before constructing a more rational, and individualistic, pension plan, Americans will have to be disabused of this illusion—by, for example, including with each Social Security check a statement of the amount paid in contributions during the beneficiary's working life versus the total amount paid thus far in benefits.

Attention to overspending was often derided in the early 1980s as "root-canal Republicanism"—a mindless determination to inflict economic pain. Whether or not that label was deserved in the past is a debatable proposition. What ought to be clear now, however, is that it is no longer politically or morally feasible to deliver the broad middle-class tax cuts that virtually all Republicans favor without also excising large portions of the functions of government. The public reaction against the Clinton health plan offers realistic hope that the voters can be made to understand that. More to the point, the public reaction against the Clinton crime bill and its lavish social spending offers realistic hope that the voters have also come to understand the connection between overgovernment and America's social failures: violence on the streets, welfare dependency, illegitimacy, and family breakup.

And if Republicans will not take on overgovernment, at this uniquely favorable opportunity, they need to ask themselves what their party stands for instead. Twice in two years, American voters have shattered seemingly indestructible political dynasties: first, the three-term succession of Republican presidencies, and now the Democratic dynasty on Capitol Hill. If that does not signal smoldering discontent among voters with America's existing political arrangements, it's hard to know what more the public will have to do—march on Washington with sharpened pitchforks and burning hayricks? After the disillusionment and disappointment of the Bush administration and the later Reagan years, the voters have been indulgent enough

to extend Republicans a second chance. But humility is called for: the GOP's hold on America's affections does not look much less precarious than the Democratic Party's. It's hard to measure exactly what the voters want from their new Republican legislators—perhaps they themselves don't fully know. But the opportunity is there for conservatives to enact a good dose of their remedy for the social ills that alarm Americans, in the hope of setting in motion a dynamic that will lead to substantial political reform in a conservative direction. When should they start? What better time could there be than right now?

—*January 1995*

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