

# No Right Turn



## CONSERVATIVE POLITICS IN A LIBERAL AMERICA

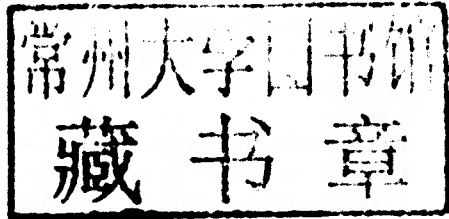
David T. Courtwright

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CONSERVATIVE POLITICS  
IN A LIBERAL AMERICA

David T. Courtwright



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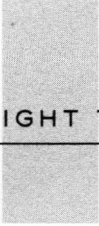
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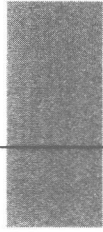
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**To Andrew Courtwright and the memory of Bob Loftin**



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## CONTENTS

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1	How to Think about the Culture War	1
2	Like It Was When I Was a Boy	20
3	Overcome	45
4	Twenty Percent of What the Nuts Want	70
5	Cheerleaders for the Rev	96
6	Babe in Christ	120
7	Act Right	144
8	Robert Bork's America	173
9	Like Battling the Devil	198
10	Referendum on the 1960s	222
11	The Illusion of Conservatism	249
	<i>Abbreviations</i>	275
	<i>Notes</i>	277
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	321
	<i>Illustration Credits</i>	323
	<i>Index</i>	325

Richard Nixon liked to talk politics. Three weeks before the 1972 election he called up Chuck Colson, a political aide so attuned to the president that the two men often finished one another's sentences. The rest of the White House staff, Nixon told Colson, didn't understand the average voter. "The gut issue is amnesty, it's abortion, it's parochial aid to get to these people," he complained. "I mean, they're not appealed to by *revenue sharing*. Everybody wants me to go and make a big goddam speech about revenue sharing. Nobody gives a goddam."

"They really don't, Mr. President," Colson said. "You have to take issues that affect the person individually. First of all, you have 'Is the country safe?' That's the first thing people think of. The next thing after is it safe, is pride in the economy."

"Right."

"Then they begin to get to the issues like, 'Goddam, I don't want to be working hard and paying all this money to have . . .'"

"These welfare bums," Nixon interrupted.

"These welfare bums."

"Another thing is," Nixon said, "I served, four and a half million of our kids served, and these bright intellectuals sent their kids off to Canada."

"Off to Canada, by God."

"To hell with them."

"That's exactly . . ."

"Oh, I know."

"And then," Colson said, "with some of the Catholic groups that we're winning, you get the parochial aid, and you get the abortion . . ."

"That's right."

"They're meaningful, basically, because . . ."



“You know what it all gets down to?” Nixon said. “It gets down to character, the national character. McGovern is for softening the character and I’m for toughening it up. And that’s a big issue of this campaign.”<sup>1</sup>

Nixon spoke a larger truth than he knew. The question of national character was an issue, not only in 1972, but in every presidential campaign from 1968 to 2008. It became the rallying cry of the counterrevolution against the legacies of the 1960s that transformed American politics. And it created problems for Democrats well beyond their McGovern miscue.

From the late 1960s Republican strategists sensed the potential for realignment. Democratic voters who had supported independent candidate George Wallace in 1968 were halfway out of the party. Defense, busing, crime, and welfare dependency might yet coax them into the Republican fold. Adviser Patrick Buchanan thought Nixon could meld blocs of historically hostile voters—eastern Republicans, southern Protestants, northern and western Catholics—into an unbeatable New Majority. If Nixon could raise his share of Catholic voters from 25 to 40 percent, he would gain more votes than if he went from 0 to 100 percent of Jewish voters. If he was going to give fifty Phantom jets to Israel when the Jews weren’t going to support him anyway, why not at least help the Catholics bail out their school system?

Buchanan knew that southern Protestants disliked federal aid to northern parochial schools. But he sensed that American politics had reached the point where social conservatism counted for more than nativism. Anti-Catholicism, still potent in 1960 when John Kennedy squeaked into the White House, was a spent force. Two Catholics, Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, had run for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968. Edmund Muskie, the son of Polish Catholic immigrants, had come close to the nomination in 1972. Another Catholic, Edward Kennedy, missed the prize when he drove off a Chappaquiddick bridge and left his blonde passenger to her fate. Character was decisive. Protestantism was not.

Yet the wrong religious *temperament* could alienate voters. Rank-and-file Catholics had shunned Eugene McCarthy in 1968, Buchanan thought, because he was a snobbish liberal who hobnobbed with peaceniks and radicals. Catholic working stiffs were “Dick Daley men.” McGovern’s softness on crime, abortion, pornography, and pot would make them Dick Nixon men. Already moving from their old ethnic neighborhoods into the suburbs, they were poised to move out of their old party,

making common cause with morally conservative Protestants. “Working class types care about ‘symbols,’ such as Roosevelt’s comparison of the Wall Street boys with the money-changers,” Buchanan pointed out. Nixon could work the same populist magic with conservative social causes.

Which he did, winning every state but Massachusetts in the 1972 presidential election. Yet Nixon’s coattails were short. Democrats still competed well on bread-and-butter issues. Liberals held sway in the Congress, the state capitols, the city halls, the courts, the bureaucracy, the media, and the universities. What Nixon had to do next, Buchanan argued, was lay siege to the liberal establishment. Appoint strict constructionists to check judicial activism. Fill jobs with political loyalists. Clean out the nest of vipers in public television. Gut the poverty programs, or at least send the research money to allies at Fordham and Brigham Young. Hammer the liberal media. Build a network of foundations to nurture conservative talent. The future beckoned. Nixon could be “the Republican FDR,” the founder of a new political dynasty that would last well beyond his second term.<sup>2</sup>

Though the Watergate scandal would keep Nixon from realizing this ambition, Buchanan had glimpsed the future. In the 1980s and 1990s, the strategy of uniting religious, racial, and economic conservatives by attacking liberalism, moral root and institutional branch, made the Republicans the dominant national party, competitive in every region of the country. The strategy paved the way for the success of Ronald Reagan, the man who did become the Republican FDR, as well as George H. W. Bush, Newt Gingrich, George W. Bush, and Buchanan himself, still bashing liberals long after his boss boarded Marine One, spread his arms in a last salute, and departed the White House.

### No Right Turn

This book describes the origins, politics, personalities, and outcome of the long national struggle over morality commonly called “the culture wars” or “the Culture War.” (The plural evokes the many particular battles, the singular the underlying, epochal clash of worldviews.) Though its roots extend back to the Enlightenment, the Culture War only became politically consequential in the second half of the 1960s, when Republicans began using wedge issues like crime and permissiveness to pry blocs of morally conservative voters away from the Democratic Party, said to

be controlled by the same liberal elite that dominated the press, schools, and judiciary. As best as I can tell, Daniel Patrick Moynihan first described the situation as a Culture War (“*Kulturkampf*”) in a 1970 memo to Nixon. I have made do with plain English to describe the era and the trend, the transformation and embitterment of politics by fundamental moral disputes that both parties, but especially the Republicans, exploited for their own ends. Those disputes did not end with the GOP’s defeat in 2008. Like a hurricane downgraded to a tropical storm after making landfall, the Culture War has continued to disturb the nation’s political weather. But that is the pundit’s domain. My aim is to recreate the hurricane’s path, and to show what happened to those caught in it.<sup>3</sup>

I also mean to solve a mystery. I found the culture warriors’ motives and tactics easy to describe, but puzzled over the outcome of their struggle. For all their energy and political success, moral conservatives failed to win on their key issues, much less recapture the culture. They filled the airwaves with angry talk, the prisons with criminals, and the legislatures with Republicans. But they made little progress on abortion and school prayer, and lost ground on obscenity, gay rights, and legalized gambling. Popular culture kept getting raunchier. In protest-filled 1969, the televised Super Bowl entertainment consisted of the Florida A&M University Marching Band and a sideline interview with comedian Bob Hope. In placid 2004, with Republicans everywhere in power, Janet Jackson flashed her nipple ring during the halftime show. She was followed by a streaker with the name of an Internet gambling site emblazoned on his backside. What was going on?

This is a puzzle because revolutions and counterrevolutions driven by social and religious issues normally reshape cultures. Daily life changes, along with the faces in the palace. The theaters reopened after the English Restoration—and closed after the Iranian Revolution. The Republicans’ Revolution of 1800 marked the end of the Federalists’ gentlemanly cultural dominance as well as their hold on the presidency. The path from Thomas Jefferson to Andrew Jackson is easy to follow. The path from Richard Nixon to Janet Jackson is not. Somehow, the moral revolution of the 1960s became so entrenched that it defied the most determined attacks by its most politically successful enemies. They declared no truce, yet won no decisive victory. It was maddening. The more the liberals lost at the polls, the more their wicked works seemed to prosper. Why?

Answering that question required something more than the familiar definitions of liberalism and conservatism. Two distinct constellations of issues divided Americans and defined their domestic politics in the late twentieth century. The first involved moral questions like abortion, the second economic questions like taxation. Rather than being simply left or right, Americans evolved a politics in which it was possible to be morally left but economically right, or vice versa. Two major shifts, the moral one of the 1960s followed by the economic one of Reaganism, occurred within a single generation. By the 1990s American voters were more secular and permissive than their counterparts of the 1940s, but also more suspicious of the government's size and interference with market forces, at least when it involved something other than middle-class entitlements. Though seemingly opposed—the 1960s being more congenial to liberals, Reaganism to conservatives—these two revolutions of the self turned out to be mutually supportive, especially for baby boomers. The unfettered, high-tech capitalism and renewed prosperity of the 1980s and 1990s frustrated religious conservatives' efforts to reimpose traditional morality.<sup>4</sup>

The peculiarly American twist to this familiar story was the two-party system, which diminished the leverage of the resurgent religious voters. Unlike members of the religious parties in, say, Israel's Knesset, where the loss of a handful of seats could break a coalition, religious conservatives in America lacked institutional bargaining power. As Nixon foresaw, they had no practical alternative to the Republican Party once the Democratic Party made itself unavailable to them. The Republican strategy, said political scientist Earl Black, was to have the likes of Reverend Pat Robertson *on* the bus, not driving the bus. Once on board, religious conservatives found themselves seated well to the rear. From the late 1970s onward, Republicans made tax reduction and deregulation the core of their party's domestic program.<sup>5</sup>

The party's market wolves did not always feast at the expense of its religious lambs. Economic conservatives—the principled ones, anyway—had cause to be disappointed by free-spending Republicans. Yet, with three major domestic-policy exceptions—crime, drugs, and welfare—Republican politicians paid less attention to reactionary moral causes than to economic ones. The exceptions are important because they map America's racial and class fault lines. But when the object was something other than controlling the underclass, protecting the middle class, or disciplining the

undeserving poor, moral conservatives usually stood at the back of the GOP line.

Many journalists and scholars have embraced the idea of a national “right turn” to describe political and social changes during the Culture War. A turning there was, but one full of switchbacks and dead ends, with resistance all along the way. A better metaphor would be the western front in 1914–1917. After a spectacular offensive and counteroffensive, the Great War bogged down into a stalemate, one that left the attackers in possession of much of the territory they had conquered. During the Culture War conservatives had the satisfaction of seeing liberals turned out of office, the top tax rates decline, and the Soviet Union collapse. But economic conservatives failed in their ultimate objective, to unravel the New Deal and bring federal spending under control. Moral conservatives failed in their ultimate objective, to wring permissiveness from the 1960s-saturated culture. Their counteroffensive failed to push the front back to Eisenhower, let alone to Hoover.

Republican politicians covered conservatism’s strategic failures with optimistic slogans like “morning in America” and half-truths like “the Reagan Revolution.” Confusing matters further, left-liberal activists seized on the myth of imminent conservative victory to rally their troops and fill their own war chests. But tactical alarmism did not mean that conservatives had won the Culture War. What they did win were enough battles to create a frustrating deadlock. That deadlock soured voters, imprisoned millions, drained the Treasury, stoked partisanship, stymied reform, and besmirched American democracy, or what was left of it in an age of media politics. There was something not right about Culture War politics, in all senses of the term.

### Religious Temperaments

Behind its political façade, the Culture War was fundamentally a religious war, though not in the usual sense of combat between rival faiths. Battle lines formed within denominations. When, for example, Buchanan urged Nixon to go after Catholic voters, he meant the sort of Catholics who went on retreats, fought abortion in the state legislatures, and sent their kids to parochial schools. Though ethnic and often blue-collar, they respected the president’s values. Nixon’s name meant something to them. Liberal Catholics were hopeless, worse than the *Times* crowd. “There is a deep division in the Catholic community,” Buchanan argued.

“We should be working the Catholic social conservatives—the clear majority.”<sup>6</sup>

Historian Philip Greven gave a name to what Buchanan was describing. Greven said that all members of a religious group manifested *temperaments*, personal conceptions of God, self, sin, and duty that cut across denominational lines. Until the early nineteenth century, most Americans of European descent displayed one of three Protestant temperaments, Evangelical, Moderate, or Genteel. (He capitalized them to emphasize their common features, as I do.) The inner experience of the Evangelicals was one of self-suppression. They believed that humans were deeply flawed and that those who thought otherwise, and who satisfied themselves with earthly pleasures, were likely headed for hell. Evangelicals hoped to escape this fate because they had undergone a conversion rooted in the conviction of personal sinfulness and a resolve to subjugate their wills to God’s. Moderates thought the self needed to be controlled rather than annihilated. They believed in sin, but not that everything worldly was sinful. Grace might come to an individual gradually, in the course of a restrained and dutiful life. The Genteel led a more self-indulgent existence. They took their state of grace for granted, confident that the church and sacraments would suffice for personal salvation. Raised by affectionate parents inclined to spare the rod, they had relaxed consciences, a benevolent conception of God, and a notion that church was a good place to catch up on gossip.<sup>7</sup>

The three Protestant temperaments formed a spectrum of attitudes toward the self, running from Genteel self-assertion on the left to Moderate self-control in the middle to Evangelical self-suppression on the right. These Protestant types persisted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even as immigration made America a more diverse nation. The growing non-Protestant population evolved its own religious temperaments. Call these Devout, Observant, and Selective for the Catholics, and Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform for the Jews.

Devout Catholics involved themselves in numerous devotional practices, attended Mass daily, and confessed their sins weekly. The Observant were less involved in devotional practices, but attended Mass weekly and confessed at least once a year. The Selective graced their parish churches at Easter or Christmas and confessed rarely, if at all. Among Jews, the Orthodox punctiliously observed the Torah as God’s binding Law. Conservative Jews minded the Law but worried less about pious comportment or avoiding Gentiles. Reform Jews regarded the Law as a

product of human history, to be selectively obeyed while going about their affairs.

Then there were Americans who belonged to no church or synagogue and who professed no creed. They comprised a fourth, nonreligious category in which the self had become dominant. The nonreligious did not always think or act selfishly. Some embraced communitarian ideals and committed themselves to philanthropic sacrifice to alleviate suffering. But they acted out of a sense that whatever meaning or pleasure life holds was to be realized in this world, not in the next. They identified with no religion and often doubted or denied the existence of God. In 1957 the number of persons willing to admit such beliefs to pollsters was very small, 3 percent of the population. But their ranks expanded during the later 1960s and kept on growing, reaching 15 percent of the population in 2008. The typical nonbeliever was a highly educated male baby boomer living in a northeastern or west coast “blue state,” though no region was without its skeptics and village atheists.<sup>8</sup>

“We do not see things as they are,” one of Anais Nin’s characters reflects, “we see them as we are.” For the nonreligious, reality centered on the dominant self. Those of Genteel, Selective, or Reform temperament displayed more circumspect forms of self-assertion. Moderate, Observant, and Conservative believers showed more self-control, though not the self-suppression that marked the Evangelical, Devout, or Orthodox. The same spectrum ran through other faiths. There were apostate and progressive Muslims, as well as traditional and fundamentalist Muslims. There were ex-Mormons and “jack Mormons,” as well as temple-endowed and zealous Mormons. For shorthand purposes, those most intent on reining in the self were on the “moral right” of a given faith tradition, those least intent on the “moral left.”<sup>9</sup>

A philosopher would object to conflating the moral right and the religious right, or to using the terms interchangeably. After all, a person can arrive at a morally conservative position without appealing to supernatural belief. Two famous opponents of abortion, Bernard Nathanson and Nat Hentoff, were Jewish atheists when they decided, after careful reflection, that they could not justify killing the unborn. As a practical matter, though, most Americans (unless suffering through a philosophy essay exam) did not resort to formal ethical reasoning to settle moral questions, above all questions of sexual morality. Their views on these things hinged on their temperaments, the convictions about self, sin, and the world that were central to their identities. In Nathanson’s case, pro-life



conversion proved to be the first step in a spiritual journey that ended at the baptismal font.<sup>10</sup>

Religion shaped personal identity in other ways, such as separating in-groups from out-groups. Cuban-Americans who had not attended Mass in years still regarded their Catholicism as a mark of superiority to disciples of Santería. Jewish birth was hardly irrelevant to the social lives of nonreligious Jews. But religion's worldly uses should not obscure the psychological reality of belief, or its influence on behavior. "Religion is at the root of morality," as Buchanan put it, "and morality is the basis of law." Many secular intellectuals agreed with him. Marxists and Straussians both emphasized religion's moral influence, differing only as to its desirability. The Straussians regarded it as an indispensable source of moral guidance for the masses, if not for the elites who ruled them.<sup>11</sup>

Why did religious temperaments vary? Grevin thought early upbringing determined religious outlook. Those who were raised by Evangelical parents, who had been severely disciplined as children, were more likely to submit to the Divine Parent later in life. They were also more likely to behave in puritanical and extremist ways, and to vent their suppressed anger against unholy outsiders, not to say their own bruised and welted offspring. Moderate parents who combined discipline with love and respect for autonomy produced even-tempered children who thought selfish impulses needed to be controlled, not annihilated. Genteel, indulgent parents got worldly, self-assertive children.<sup>12</sup>

George Lakoff, a linguist with a taste for politics, made a similar argument about unconscious worldviews. Liberals derived their outlooks from "Nurturant Parents," conservatives from "Strict Fathers." Moral preferences in politics reflected moral attitudes in families. Scratch a Clinton-impeachment supporter, find an authoritarian who thought naughty boys ought to be spanked. For Lakoff, the parent who let the baby cry through the night was more likely to be, and to raise, a moral conservative, other things being equal.<sup>13</sup>

Except that other things did not stay equal. Puberty, peers, and professors reshuffled childhood's deck, which was why religious parents worried about all three. Anything could happen. Alfred Kinsey and Hugh Hefner grew up in strict Methodist homes. *Penthouse* publisher Bob Guccione was an ex-seminarian. Madonna toed the line until she discovered boys. So did Andy Warhol, who finessed his homosexuality with a Devout to Selective Catholic switch. Conversely, Thomas Merton fathered an illegitimate child and flirted with communism before he converted to



Catholicism and became a Trappist monk. Temple Morgan was a blue-blooded Harvard student who fell under the spell of a Jesuit homilist named Leonard Feeney. In 1947 Morgan quit Harvard and embraced Rome, scandalizing Boston's Protestant establishment. The novelist Mary Gordon's father, another Harvard man, was a Jewish convert to Catholicism who came to admire Spanish dictator Francisco Franco and hate Protestants. Yet Mary Gordon herself became a Selective Catholic.<sup>14</sup>

### Moral Right and Left

Though individuals could change their beliefs over a lifetime, they usually manifested a single temperament at any one point in time. Broadly speaking, the further they were to the right of a given faith, the more likely they were to believe in free will, sin, punishment, and absolute moral standards grounded in sacred scriptures. To violate these standards was to provoke God and to invite his punishment, as well as that of civil authorities. Moral rightists supported state action to suppress gambling, prostitution, obscenity, intoxication, sodomy, and abortion. Such legislation was both symbolic and instrumental in that it conferred official status on conservative norms and discouraged behavior that offended God and subverted family life.

For moral rightists, the patriarchal family was the basic unit of society. Strong families required clear gender roles, which doubled as firewalls against homosexuality and feminism. That was why gay Mormons, or Evangelical women who discovered feminism, went through hell. The churches they loved were unembarrassed about policing heterosexual norms or rebuking women who stepped outside of maternal roles. Threats to traditional roles were threats to the social order and to the idea of a divinely ordered cosmos, the psychological bedrock of all faith. God knew what He was doing when He made the world hierarchical and spelled out the rules. Individuals had to subordinate their desires to the wishes of familial, community, state, and other authorities, provided only that their orders did not countermand His Law.<sup>15</sup>

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt has compared our moral feelings to an audio equalizer with five sliding switches: caring, fairness, in-group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity. Moral rightists liked their music with all five tuned up. Moral leftists liked only the first two, caring and fairness. "Justice," as Abbie Hoffman put it, "is all you need." He meant