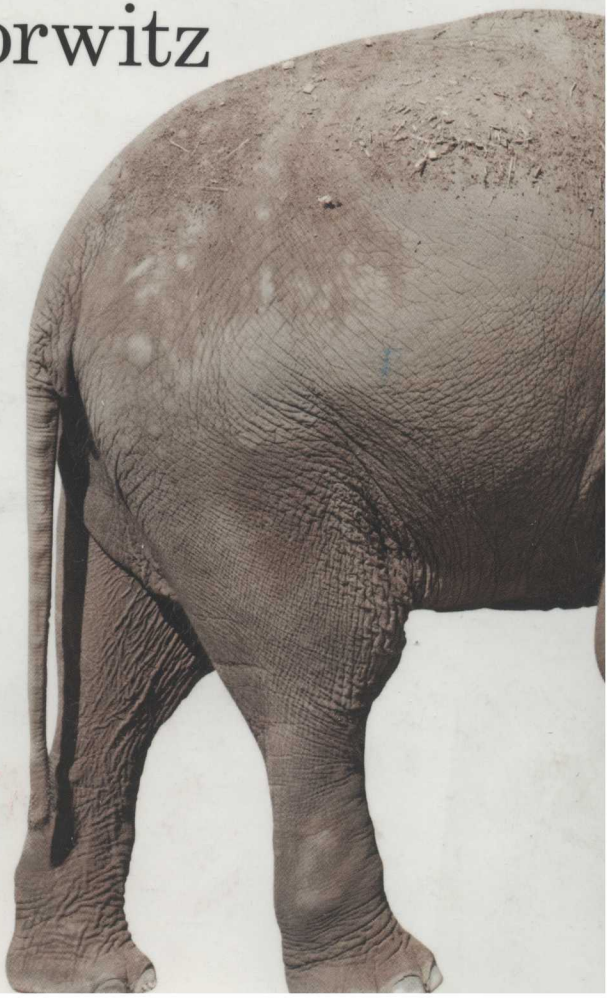
America's Right

Anti-establishment Conservatism from Goldwater to the Tea Party

Robert B. Horwitz



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PREFACE

Conservatism has been the most important political doctrine in the United States for nearly four decades. It has dominated the intellectual debate and largely set the national policy agenda, even during years of Democratic electoral control. But twenty-first-century conservatism has moved far beyond even the "Reagan Revolution" of small government, lower taxes, and a respect for tradition. Contemporary American conservatism practices a politics that is disciplined, uncompromising, utopian, and enraged, seeking to "take back our country." An unlikely alliance of libertarians, neoconservatives, and the Christian right has launched anxious and angry attacks on the purported homosexual agenda, the "hoax" of climate change, the rule by experts and elites, and the banishment of religion from the public realm. In the foreign policy arena it has tried to remake the world through the cleansing fire of violence.

This is *anti-establishment conservatism*, whose origin can be traced back to the right wing that battled both the reigning post-World War II liberal consensus and the moderate, establishment Republican Party (also known as the Grand Old Party or GOP). This book examines the nature of anti-establishment conservatism, traces its development from the 1950s to the Tea Party, and explains its political ascendance.

Books on conservatism litter the journalistic and academic landscapes. Indeed, the treatment of conservatism has become somewhat of a scholarly cottage industry. What is different about *this* effort is its attention to both domestic and foreign policy, and the weaving of these two facets of anti-establishment conservative thought and action into one coherent narrative of change over time. *America's Right* also revisits and reassesses some of the older, dismissed theoretical assessments of the conservative movement, most notably that of the mid-twentieth-century historian Richard Hofstadter. This

revisit allows students of conservatism to circle back to the 1950s to see how public intellectuals and scholars like Hofstadter interpreted a moment of political ferment not unlike our own. *America's Right* then applies and adjusts some of those interpretations to help make sense of the current conservative moment.

The book begins in the 1950s, when conservatism shifted from its pre-World War II isolationism to embrace a double "rollback": of the New Deal and of international communism. Anti-establishment conservatism's fusion of libertarian and traditionalist principles found its political expression in the candidacy of Barry Goldwater, GOP standard-bearer in the 1964 presidential election. Goldwater's crushing defeat did not subdue anti-establishment conservatism; its political entrepreneurs built the institutions that served to channel the ongoing discontent with liberalism. *America's Right* analyzes these institutions and how they helped facilitate the reemergence of anti-establishment conservatism in the late 1970s. It examines the two movements most responsible for this rejuvenation: the new Christian right and neoconservatism. The millenarian underpinnings of anti-establishment conservatism came to the fore after the 9/11 attacks, and informed the rationale for the George W. Bush administration's invasion of Iraq in 2003. Finally, the book explores the most recent manifestation of anti-establishment conservatism: the Tea Party.

While *America's Right* is broadly sourced, it is written for the general serious reader. I have tried hard not to use academic jargon or assume great familiarity with social and political theory. Where I employ big concepts – such as secularism, pre- or post-millennialism, American exceptionalism, and the like – I endeavor to define them simply and clearly. Where I explore a theory – such as Hofstadter's "paranoid style" – I try to explain it straightforwardly and with rich context. The vast majority of the notes are bibliographic citations, although I do employ the occasional textual note where it aids in explaining an issue in the main body of the text. Readers who wish to see a comprehensive bibliography can go to my webpage on the University of California, San Diego Department of Communication website: *http://communication.ucsd.edu/people/faculty/robert-horwitz.html*.

Because of the topic and the writing pitch and style, I hope the book will have some general audience readership. As a synthetic overview of history and political sociology that spans the politics of the post-war period and ends with the Tea Party movement, this volume is, I think, of contemporary topical interest and will have a decent shelf life for students interested in a longer perspective on American politics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people generously contributed to the formulation, writing, and final production of this book. I was fortunate to present two of the draft chapters to the University of California-San Diego (UCSD) Conservative Movements workshop, and received much advice and useful criticism. I taught pieces of the research in undergraduate and graduate courses as the research was unfolding, and thank those students for allowing me to explore. I especially thank three graduate students in the Department of Communication: Muni Citrin, Stephanie (Sam) Martin, and Reece Peck.

Several friends and colleagues read large parts or the entire manuscript in one of its draft forms, including Patricia Aufderheide, Amy Binder, Amy Bridges, Peter Dimock, John Evans, Michael Evans, Lew Friedland, Jeffrey Minson, and Michael Schudson.

Introduced to me by my mother-in-law, former professor of theology Jack Rogers generously and patiently gave me much-needed help in my sections on religion. Charles Drekmeier, my undergraduate mentor forty years ago and as sharp as ever, provided a critical reading of the early chapters.

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I could not have written the book without the help of my dear friend and colleague Val Hartouni. She read the entire manuscript more times than I'm sure she cared to, offering engaged discussion, keen insight, comradely criticism, and encouragement. She is a treasure.

The final editing push and manuscript preparation could not have been done without the expert writing and editorial flourish of my wife, former bookkeeper, auto mechanic, newspaper journalist, and elementary school teacher Libby Brydolf.

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INTRODUCTION

Press Association

North Iowa Tea Party billboard, Mason City, Iowa, 2010.

The ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] has got to take a lot of blame for this [the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001]. And I know I'll hear from them for this, but throwing God . . . successfully with the help of the federal court system . . . throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools, the abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked and when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. . . . I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an

alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who try to secularize America . . . I point the thing in their face and say you helped this happen.

The Reverend Jerry Falwell, on the Christian Broadcast Network's *700 Club* television program (September 13, 2001)

Man-made climate change is "patently absurd . . . junk science . . . a beautifully concocted scheme . . . by the left . . . just an excuse for more government control of your life.

Former U.S. Senator and 2012 Republican presidential hopeful Rick Santorum, on the Rush Limbaugh radio show (June 8, 2011)

I, _____, pledge to the taxpayers of the (_____ district of the) state of _____ and to the American people that I will: ONE, oppose any and all effort to increase the marginal income tax rate for individuals and business; and TWO, oppose any net reduction or elimination of deductions and credits unless matched dollar for dollar by further reducing tax rates.

Taxpayer Protection Pledge signed by 234 of 240 Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and 40 of 47 Republican members of the U.S. Senate in 2011. Authored by Americans for Tax Reform, a lobbying group headed by Grover Norquist

What we might call the "anti-establishment" right wing now defines American conservatism. It has by and large taken over the Republican Party. A movement long in the making, with roots in the Goldwater presidential campaign of 1964, anti-establishment conservatism achieved major success with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. It subsequently orchestrated the congressional opposition to the Clinton presidency in the mid-1990s, including shutting down the government and impeaching the president. Effectively securing the executive branch in the George W. Bush era, it helped drive the country to war in Iraq in 2003. During the years of the Obama presidency, anti-establishment conservatism has become the foremost

face of the Republican Party, manifest in the populist rage of the Tea Party and the stunning obduracy of Republicans in Congress.

Instances of the anti-establishment right's forthright positions are now legion. In debates involving matters of science, for example, anti-establishment conservatives, such as Rick Santorum in the epigraph above, consistently ignore the overwhelming consensus among climatologists that human activity and industry are largely responsible for the perilous warming of the planet. Many conservatives of this tendency still hold out against Darwin's theory of evolution in favor of "creation science," and make every effort to stop "God being thrown out of the schools" (to paraphrase the Reverend Jerry Falwell in our opening epigraph) by getting at least equal billing for creationism or intelligent design in high school biology classes. In foreign policy, anti-establishment conservatives pressed relentlessly for the invasion of Iraq without proper regard to the actual evidence of the existence of Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction. The George W. Bush administration, epitomizing anti-establishment conservatism in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, insisted on the direct link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda long after the claim had been thoroughly refuted. By many credible accounts, the administration cooked highly equivocal intelligence to appear substantive and conclusive. It engaged in tortured legal logic to find that torture was not torture. And it fixed facts to support preconceived policy determinations in areas of particular interest to business and religious constituencies. Indeed, the administration effectively turned over certain government agencies or departments to select religious groups.

In our current moment, congressional Republicans engage in an unbending, mantra-like advocacy of tax cuts and deficit reduction in the face of any and all economic conditions – showing that they do not have a real economic policy, but rather a canonical system of political beliefs. As became evident in the fraught congressional brawl over raising the federal debt ceiling in the summer of 2011, the Republican agenda revealed itself as a weird cross between duplicity and self-delusion, with demands for severe deficit reduction and balanced budgets notwithstanding the enormous, and unopposed, deficits run up by recent Republican presidents. Republicans failed to defeat President Obama in the 2012 election in a campaign replete with intemperate flights of fancy on the right. The GOP also failed to retake the Senate. Some Tea Party movement supporters insisted that President Barack Obama was not an American citizen and was secretly a member of the Muslim faith. In their view the president

was intent on ruining America through his "socialist" policies – with the North Iowa Tea Party even equating Obama's "Democrat Socialism" with Hitler's "National Socialism" and Lenin's "Marxist Socialism" in the notorious billboard pictured at the opening of this chapter. One Tea Party-identified candidate for the Senate in 2012 declared that a woman could not become pregnant from "legitimate" or forcible rape because under such circumstances "the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down." During the debate over President Obama's healthcare bill, Tea Party supporters exclaimed with urgent fury, "Keep the government out of my Medicare!" – apparently not comprehending that Medicare is a social insurance program administered by the U.S. government.[1] At the same time, of all the political actors on the stage during the 2008 financial crisis, it was the Tea Party that possessed the political vocabulary capable of expressing the disgust of the class bias and unfairness of the government bailouts of the banks, insurance, and mortgage companies responsible for the financial collapse.

What is going on here? What is anti-establishment conservatism and where did it come from? Why is it so dogmatic and sometimes even at odds with empirical reality? And how has it triumphed – at least in terms of capturing the Republican Party, if not the political climate as a whole? The latter assertion may seem overstated in the wake of Obama's reelection, but it is the case that the right has pretty much set the political agenda in the United States for almost four decades. The answers are rooted in conservatism itself, especially its American version.

Conservatism embodies a venerable, coherent, if sometimes conflicted set of values rooted in an appreciation of the importance of tradition and the social world we inherit, a theory of individual freedom and property, and a deep suspicion of the power of the state. European conservatism has typically been oriented toward the concern with tradition and cultural inheritance. In contrast, American conservatism, born of classical liberalism's focus on the individual, has usually gravitated toward theories of freedom and property. In this outlook, liberty and property are inescapably linked. Property makes it possible for a human being to develop in mind and spirit, that is, for an individual to be free. Property in effect underlies personhood: it provides an individual with perspective, privacy, responsibility, and a concrete place in society. A person has the natural right to the possession and use of his or her property; indeed, private property is among the most fundamental of natural rights. Without property, a person has no concrete free existence. He or she is

inevitably dependent on others, especially government, and hence essentially unfree. Property, thus, is a sacred moral value, the key to individual freedom and the prerequisite of a free society. Against the modern liberal notion of equality, conservative thought declares human beings as essentially unequal in their natural gifts and abilities. Freedom can thus only consist in the ability of each person to develop without hindrance according to the law of his or her own personality. Hence of fundamental concern to conservatism is the power of the centralized state and its threat to liberty and property.[2]

While conservatism reaches back centuries, how its principles manifest concretely has varied considerably. Like most belief systems, there are many versions that fall under the label of conservatism: some have to do with the view of human nature; others focus on the lessons drawn from history (originally the lessons drawn from the shock of the French Revolution). The distinct form of conservatism that is dominant in any given historical period depends on the conditions of that period and the other political philosophies with which conservatism does battle, including battles internal to the conservative creed itself. Our current dominant form of conservatism in the United States, which I have called anti-establishment conservatism, has a complex but readily traced historical pedigree. That lineage enables us to understand its profile and disposition.

American conservatism has always differed from its European counterparts in its virtually unalloyed embrace of individualism and capitalism, and its selective hatred of the state. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American conservatism (then known as classical liberalism) was defined by its stout, repressive, and successful defense of laissez-faire capitalism and property rights, often legitimated by the ideology of Social Darwinism (the "survival of the fittest" applied to human society).[3] Interference with the invisible hand of supply and demand, even if well intentioned, was understood to disrupt the natural negotiations that make the market function so well. If this meant suffering for those who lost in the competitive struggle, it was the unfortunate price of both liberty and productivity. The operative maxim was: the government that governs best is that which governs least.

But the Great Depression weakened faith in American business and its sundry ideological supports. The policies initiated under the Democratic presidency of Franklin Roosevelt – known as the New Deal – ushered in various forms of state intervention, some of which, pushed by a newly empowered labor movement, had a social democratic cast of mitigating inequality and of promoting basic public

controls over markets. In the 1930s and 1940s, what we might call the "old right," rooted in business and straddling the Democratic and Republican parties, set itself against the Roosevelt administration. The old right decried the New Deal as fostering economic collectivism and redistribution. For the conservatives of the 1930s and 1940s, like their predecessors in the "Gilded Age" from the late 1860s to the mid-1890s, the market was the democratic sphere of liberty. It was government that threatened freedom. Indeed, for conservatives the experience of the twentieth century was that in the name of equality and with the professed aim of improving life for the masses, the state alarmingly accrued power and weakened property rights. In so doing, the state undermined the fundamental condition of liberty that emanates from property, undercutting freedom writ large. The old right thus called for the "rollback" of the New Deal. Its critique of the state in many respects extended to foreign policy. In the period between the two world wars, American conservatives tended toward isolationism. They counseled avoidance of entangling political commitments – especially in European affairs, which, after the experience of World War I, conservatives saw as intractable. And because spending on armies and armaments required higher taxes and thus inevitably produced inflation, the old right was convinced that a militarized foreign policy would lead inevitably to the dreaded concentration of governmental power.

Voters, however, did not agree. New Deal Democrats were consistently returned to office. (To be sure, the New Deal coalition had its own conservatives – on racial matters and labor unions, concentrated in the Democratic South.) By the early 1950s, the old right – still anti-New Deal and isolationist – split more or less into two key factions. The dominant bloc essentially made its peace with the New Deal and with America's post-war internationalist, interventionist foreign policy of the containment of communism. This dominant bloc was "establishment conservatism" or moderate Republicanism, centered (actually or metaphorically) in the Northeast, tied to Wall Street and large corporations, led initially by GOP 1944 and 1948 presidential nominee Thomas Dewey, and then Dwight Eisenhower. In essence, establishment conservatism made its accommodation with liberals and with theory and doctrine in the overweening pragmatic effort to protect private enterprise and foster its advance. By and large, establishment conservatism accepted what historians label the post-war "liberal consensus": that is, the basic New Deal order of modest welfare state, Keynesian economics (i.e., a fiscal and monetary policy of government spending to increase aggregate demand) and

the application of disinterested social science in pursuit of the national interest, and interventionist foreign policy of containment of communism – but a milder, less state interventionist, less expensive, less labor-dominated, more business-friendly version.

Anti-establishment conservatism, the other faction that emerged from the dissolution of the pre-war old right, developed as a movement in opposition not just to the liberal consensus of the post-war period, but to establishment conservatism as well. Located principally in small business and its political affiliates, geographically rooted in the Midwest and West, but also scattered amongst a welter of anti-communist and political fringe groups (some of which identified as Christian religious organizations standing up for God and western civilization), anti-establishment conservatism continued the call for the rollback of the New Deal – and for the ousting of the Republican establishment. Barry Goldwater, the Arizona Senator who emerged as one of anti-establishment conservatism's leaders, denounced establishment conservatism as "me-too Republicanism." "Me too" conveyed sharp criticism of the established Republican Party's collaboration with Democrats in the post-war liberal consensus. In contrast, anti-establishment conservatism advocated the rollback of the centralized New Deal state in favor of a principled individual liberty. The rollback metaphor also applied to foreign policy. This signaled a major ideological shift. By the early 1950s, virtually all segments of the old right turned away from isolationist foreign policy. But whereas establishment conservatism largely accepted the policy of containment, anti-establishment conservatism called for the military defeat of international communism. Anti-establishment conservatism denounced containment in favor of aggressive, muscular, and – if necessary – nuclear action against the Soviet Union and its satellites. Roll communism back.

Anti-establishment conservatism thus carried on the pre-war old right's loathing of the New Deal but turned away from its foreign policy isolationism. It combined or "fused" two strains of thought: an economic libertarianism with a socially conservative Christian traditionalism. These strains resided in some tension. The libertarian form, derived from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European liberalism (and particularly the English philosopher John Locke), was founded on principles of the freedom of the individual, limited government, a capitalist economy, and the social contract to protect private property.[4] The market was a mechanism of virtue because of its efficiency and its promotion of individual freedom. The traditionalist strain, rooted in a religious, essentially Christian sensibility,

understood society as a community woven into a web of values and obligations that binds individuals to one another, united by belief in a transcendent being and an objective moral order. A particular reading of Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century British parliamentarian and political philosopher, formed the basis of traditionalism. Burke emphasized order and social harmony, the necessity to balance freedom with self-restraint and duty. We have obligations toward those from whom we inherited our world, Burke maintained. Likewise, we have obligations toward those who will inherit the world from us.[5]

What bridged the differences between the two strains of conservatism was a shared loathing of the New Deal and of communism. In the fusion of traditionalism and libertarianism, the moral force of property was understood to guarantee individual freedom, the traditional family, and communal virtue. The Bible and the U.S. Constitution were understood as textual guides. Known at the time as "fusionism," anti-establishment conservatism presented an ideologically charged version of customary conservative beliefs in laissez-faire capitalism and private property rights, limited government and low taxes, the defense of the traditional family, the original meaning of the Constitution, anti-communism, and stout national defense. Best articulated by William F. Buckley, Jr.'s *National Review* magazine, fusionism adopted a peculiarly anti-statist statism, allowing the movement to support interventionist anti-communist foreign policy and the massive military-industrial complex that served it, while in the same breath condemning the growth of the federal government as a threat to individual liberty, personal responsibility, and self-reliance.[6] Anti-establishment conservatism's grassroots, located largely in the West and later in the South, were nurtured on this ideology while sustained materially by massive government spending on defense.

A right-wing populist revolt against the post-war liberal consensus, including the consensus's Republican establishment supporters, fueled the Goldwater movement in the early 1960s. Establishment conservatism's vigilance against communism, which included the New Deal itself as a form of proto-communism, was judged by the revolt to be woefully deficient. Winning only 38.5 percent of the popular vote, Goldwater lost big in the 1964 presidential election, but the forces set in motion by his defeat laid the ideological and institutional groundwork for anti-establishment conservatism's subsequent ascendance. Diminished by the Goldwater defeat, the movement didn't disappear; rather it went into rebuilding mode. It re-grouped, built

institutions and recruited leaders, attracted money from right-wing businessmen, mobilized conservative Christians politically, and, sixteen years later, helped bring Ronald Reagan to the presidency. Since that 1980 victory, anti-establishment conservatism has manifested in an effective, if somewhat discordant alliance of reenergized anti-New Deal business, the Christian or evangelical right (embodying social conservatism), neoconservatism (disillusioned liberal intellectuals who moved to the right in the 1970s), and the libertarian conservative tradition now embodied by the Tea Party movement. Anti-establishment conservatism has effectively become the new establishment. Conservatism today is of the anti-establishment variety. This book traces that development.

What are the features of contemporary anti-establishment conservatism? Principled to the point of being dogmatic, fundamentalist in style and inclination, apocalyptic in rhetoric, anti-establishment conservatism brooks no compromise. Indeed, it derides the old maxim that politics is the art of the possible and deems those who live by that adage as weaklings, sellouts, even traitors. The old "me-too Republican" insult has been replaced by the RINO acronym – "Republican in Name Only." Politics for anti-establishment conservatives is, for all intents and purposes, Manichean, a life or death struggle between good and evil. My use of religious metaphors is, plainly, by design, for a convinced, intransigent, faith-based style of politics has become characteristic of contemporary American conservatism, one that seems to attack the very notion of a public good. The old hard-line libertarian saw, "taxation is theft," increasingly animates conservative politics. In this view, taxation beyond some very restricted level of collective security is illegitimate, which makes the entire thrust of twentieth-century progressive politics essentially criminal. While this may be an extreme view, going far beyond the older, states' rights-based conservative criticism of *federal* taxes as opposed to *local* ones, the extreme seems now to pervade all contemporary conservative politics. The Taxpayer Protection Pledge referred to in the opening epigraphs to this chapter conveys this outlook. For anti-establishment conservatives, taxes and government spending have become as much a moral matter as a political or economic one. Government, in this moral calculus, squanders hard-earned taxpayer dollars on programs that reward bad behavior. But when politics become ensconced within a deeply moralistic framework, negotiation and compromise become next to impossible. One's opponents do not just differ on policy matters; their very opposition is confirmation of their bad intent, perhaps, even, their evil nature. Contemporary