
How the Right's Gone Wrong

Gerald J. Russello

Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right, by Paul Gottfried. *New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. 208 pp. \$39.95.*

Former presidential speechwriter David Frum wrote an infamous piece in *National Review*, titled "Unpatriotic Conservatives," that tried to write conservative opponents of the war in Iraq out of the "movement." Now that conservative opinion is openly split between pro and antiwar factions, witnessed among other things by the groundswell of support for Ron Paul, a formerly obscure congressman, for the Republican nomination for President in 2008, Frum's piece seems in retrospect more than the simple smear article it appeared to be. For the piece is an implicit acknowledgment that conservatism, in the form it has increasingly taken since at least the 1970s, has split almost beyond repair. On the one side is the "movement," clustered in Washington and New York, dominated by the group of writers known as the neoconservatives and numerous publications, think tanks, and public policy institutes. On the other side is an assortment of groups that resemble more the disorganized pre-World War II Old Right than the Reagan Coalition or the Moral Majority.

American conservatism split beyond repair.

In this new book Paul Gottfried avoids the groupthink and just-so stories in his search for the roots of contemporary conservatism. Too much writing on conservatism is revisionist history or the gentle effacement of actual differences among groups vy-

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ing to speak for conservatives. In contrast, Gottfried thoroughly searches out the source materials that trace the demise of the antiestablishment, or “Old,” Right and its replacement with what has variously been described as “big government conservatism,” “national greatness conservatism,” or, more generally, neoconservatism. Based on scrupulous citation, Gottfried concludes, for example, that *National Review*’s positions are not what they were thirty, or even twenty, years ago, that what seems “conservative” now would not have been so considered then, and that even the neoconservatives have shifted their positions on their way to influence. Further, *Conservatism in America* tries to explain what Gottfried describes as the “irresistible fluidity” of conservative principles.

*Leftist
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Gottfried makes two core claims about modern conservatism. First, he argues that the conservative movement accommodates its “talking partners on the Left” rather than offering an actual ideological opposition. In turn, the Left treats this ersatz conservatism as the real thing, rewarding those who play the game but excluding true conservative opposition to the Left’s policies. This bipartite structure has been in place especially since the rise of the neoconservatives, who were originally of the Left themselves, in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, William Kristol, long a neoconservative strategist and a supporter of the Iraq war, smoothly joins David Brooks as a “conservative” columnist at *The New York Times*, while the significant conservative opposition to the war is ignored. In reality, the positions of the two men are largely indistinguishable from those of the liberal establishment they putatively oppose; Brooks, for example, supports gay marriage, for ostensibly conservative reasons. As Gottfried sourly notes, “it is only shifting taxonomy that allows [Brooks] to be called a ‘conservative.’” The result has been the undermining of real conservative opposition and the marginalization of conservative voices.

As in his previous work, Gottfried is critical of the neoconservative project. Gottfried attributes the neoconservatives’ success mostly to their relentless self-promotion and what in the business world is called cross-selling, massive fundraising efforts, and their close ideological (and, in some cases, personal) connections with the liberal establishment. “Neoconservatives affirm the status quo as the best of all possible worlds,” not objecting too much so long as they remain close to the halls of power. The neoconservatives

also took advantage of a conservative leadership gap in the 1970s and early 1980s, when many of conservatism's first generation were either passing away or expressing no interest in leading the Reaganite cadres. The neoconservatives—skilled in verbal combat and presenting a united front while not opposing too sharply the large government programs and civil rights entitlements favored by the Left—quickly moved in.

The author's claims about neoconservative influence are supported in a chapter entitled "Top of the Heap," and they build on work Gottfried published in his landmark 1993 book *The Conservative Movement*. Prominently cited is a 2003 article by Irving Kristol which noted that "the historical task and political purpose of neoconservatism would seem to be this: to convert the Republican Party and American conservatism, generally against their wills, into a new kind of conservative politics." This kind of conservative politics, Gottfried concludes, "differs in kind from any European or American conservatism that has hitherto existed." Despite such explicit telegraphing of their intentions, the neoconservatives took control of conservative institutions and the Republican Party, which since the 1970s had been the political expression of American conservatism.

Converting conservatives and Republicans "against their wills."

Gottfried acknowledges that neoconservatives have attracted a following beyond the New York–Washington echo chamber and properly credits their organization and coordination. He even suggests that the paleoconservative tradition he favors would not have been as successful in bringing conservative ideas, however attenuated, into the mainstream. Gottfried, however, does not fully explore the reasons for the public support neoconservative policies have garnered. For example, neoconservatives have long argued that enforcing equality here and exporting it abroad is central to the American experiment, a view that had little previous support among conservatives of any stripe. In other words, the support for endless military campaigns or crusades for universal human rights—most recently against "Terror"—seem to have little connection to traditional American forms of self-government. Yet the public was until recently solidly behind the adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq and still seems rather indifferent to outrages such as the secret prisons run by the CIA or the erosion of civil liberties within the United States. Similarly, Reagan remains revered as a conservative figure, despite the big-government programs and bureaucratic

*Abstract
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explosion that occurred during his terms of office. And, as Timothy Noah has recently noted in a review of Jacob Heilbrunn's book on the neoconservatives, prior to his election George W. Bush would not have been seen as a neocon fellow traveler. Gottfried goes a long way toward explaining how neoconservatives created an intellectual and political network that allowed them to come to power. Yet one uncomfortable inference from their success is that—contrary to what many traditionalists have long held—perhaps Americans do find their abstract universalism and American exceptionalism attractive.

The neoconservatives, in Gottfried's telling, simply appear on the scene and infiltrate the foundations, think tanks, newspapers, magazines, and the Republican Party. But, as the preceding paragraph suggests, power clearly flowed the other way as well. That is, some of the Republican "base" supported the neoconservatives, who were expressing the base's views by means of policy papers and political programs. Gottfried writes that, in the neoconservative ascendancy, "at stake was not the future of a real social class but competition among foundations and newspapers to influence public policy." Perhaps partly so, but the ebb and flow of social and political power within the Right is just as much an explanation for the change in view as neoconservative infiltration and publicity. Over the last forty years, neoconservatives have reflected a changing public consensus as well as shaped it. Gottfried notes these shifting views and attributes them to the neoconservative instinct for acquiring power, but he does not fully explore connections among neoconservative positions and those of other, if often kindred, elites, the public, or larger social trends. Long-term historical factors, such as urbanization and the enormous dislocations and perceived successes of "the American way of life" after the Second World War, which Gottfried alludes to, might help to explain why the pre-War Right, including such once popular figures as Charles Lindbergh and Garet Garrett, disappeared from the conservative memory bank.

Gottfried's second core claim in this book is that the conservative movement was tainted even before the rise of the neoconservatives because of its suffusion of "values talk" into its rhetoric.

I argue that the conservative movement's appeal to values has protected it from having to look more deeply at its own problems, most particularly its lack of connection to an older and more genuine conservatism, and its general tendency to move leftward to

accommodate those with whom it shares the public spotlight. By claiming to stand for “permanent values,” the movement can treat its opportunistic policies as less significant than its allegedly enduring moral compass.

The transmutation of conservatism into a vessel for empty values-talk has an unlikely source: traditionalist conservative Russell Kirk. How Gottfried believes that we get from Kirk to the neoconservatives is an interesting story. Gottfried initially compares European and American conservatives, and argues that conservatives such as the German Adam Muller, in his best work, articulated a defense of the old aristocratic Europe against the looming bureaucratic state. In this he follows the sociologist Karl Mannheim, who rehabilitated conservatives from the charge that they were romantics whose reactionary zeal was merely the latest “object of delight” after abandoning the initial *frisson* of the French Revolution. Conservatism, in this view, is composed of the “militant response to the French Revolution and its doctrine of universal rights”; in contrast, what Gottfried calls the Right “emerged in the twentieth century in reaction to the progress of the Left.” In both instances, historically rooted classes provide the structural support for a rejection of the political and social revolutions sought by the Left.

Gottfried suggests that, in contrast to their European counterparts, American conservatives have no aristocratic tradition upon which to base a defense of conservatism, a critique that has been standard since the 1950s. Despite the strengths of conservative writers such as Kirk or the sociologist Robert Nisbet, “their work has not played a key role in any social confrontation.” This intellectual background explains for Gottfried the dissonance between American and European conservatives and the implication that any real alliance between them is ultimately futile. The rise of neoconservatism has shown Europeans that the American Right is “alien to their experience of conservative thought and indeed has nothing in common with it.” Nor does the tradition espoused by Kirk close the gap, even though Kirk consciously evoked British and European models. There is in America, Gottfried contends, no alliance of aristocratic remnants with a bourgeois class seeking stability like the one that until recently had fueled the European Right since the nineteenth century; in the postmodern service economies of the West, those classes have disappeared even from Europe.

Kirk was one of the first to transform conservative principles into conservative “values,” Gottfried argues, by subtly shifting his famous “canons” of conservative thought to accommodate the ambitions of the larger conservative movement. Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* (1953) was the right book at the right time: it supplied a European ancestry for American conservatives looking for a history that was “different from attributing humble New World antecedents to oneself and one’s companions.” Conservatism was no longer a question of birth or social standing; “it was a matter of agreeing with certain sentiments and with passing a self-administered quiz on values.” More importantly, Kirk’s conservatism, though it reads aristocratic, was in practice democratic: “Kirkean conservatism can be compared to American low-church Protestantism, which is equally democratic and equally open to those who subject themselves to certain experiences.” Kirk’s conservatism was a type of “values” conservatism because it was somewhat ahistorical, despite Kirk’s obeisance to the Adamses and the Southern planter class. Gottfried is careful (and correct) to note, however, that Kirk did not foresee, and would not have condoned, the path conservatism later followed.

Kirk’s conservatism, rooted as it was to a permeable set of “permanent things,” was, for Gottfried, ultimately insufficient to withstand the slide of conservatism to the left. Once the door was open to the assertion that conservatism stood for “values” untethered to any social consensus (contrary, in Gottfried’s view, to the position Edmund Burke assumed in his counterrevolutionary writings), there could be no basis for resisting other values, such as global democracy or universal equality, which came to be championed as conservative truths by the neoconservatives. Gottfried examines in detail the work of Straussians such as Harry Jaffa to show how the notion of eternal truths espoused by conservatives quickly became a cover for opportunistic political or social advantage.

In the end, *Conservatism in America* discounts what it regards as the two standard accounts of American conservatism, the neoconservative one and the traditionalist one. Rather than saving conservatism, Gottfried argues, the neoconservatives usurped it, using it as a power base to mount their own attack on the institutions of power. But, he adds, traditionalists such as Kirk have no historical foundation upon which to base their rejection of the modern managerial state and so have little chance of success.

Traditionalist conservatism described as ineffectual.

Yet are these the only alternatives available to conservatives? Gottfried does not consider other possibilities. Has he even fairly rendered Kirk's traditionalist point of view? The assertion that America has never had anything corresponding to traditional European elites and that therefore Kirk's conservatism lacks a historical base is strained and easily challenged. There may be an element of awkwardness in Kirk's evocation of an aristocratic past in democratic America, but Gottfried glosses over Kirk's insights about that history. More importantly, Gottfried ignores how individuals can imaginatively transform that history into a living tradition. Also, his term "values" is too nebulous. Surely, it is not insignificant that Kirk's understanding of "values" differed greatly from the ahistorical "principles" of Straussians and neo-conservatives. As important, Gottfried fails to appreciate Kirk's larger point: that the Western conservative tradition need not be the preserve of any one social class, such as Kirk's own Protestant bourgeoisie. Kirk, like Burke, viewed a capacity for adaptation to changing social and other circumstances as a strength of genuine conservatism. If Gottfried were correct that traditional conservatism lacks a social foundation in America, that would seem to present an even greater problem for his own class-based conception of the Right. At least Kirk sought to transcend the confines of class and provided possible sources of inspiration for the creation or recreation of civilized elites. Given Gottfried's view of America, it is not clear what would be the historical basis for the "social confrontation" that he deems desirable.

Kirk's insights glossed over.

In addition, writers like Claes Ryn have critiqued Gottfried's sociologically and naturalistically biased notion of society and the Right, taking aim not least at his notion of "class" as being too abstract and heavy-handed. According to this view, Gottfried is insufficiently attentive to the power of ideas and culture and the way values or what can be called the thought-world of a society permeate all social groups, not just the elites. This criticism is based on a more humanistic and philosophical approach to understanding politics and society that encompasses the role of the imagination and the mind in shaping human conduct and the course of history. In pointing to the complexity of the development of social values and power relations, philosophy of this kind differs in crucial respects from Gottfried's account.

Role of the mind and imagination in shaping conduct largely missed.

Such possible criticisms notwithstanding, *Conservatism in*

America makes a contribution to understanding conservatism as both a set of ideas and as a movement. It demonstrates again Gottfried's scholarly range and why his ideas deserve consideration.