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## *An Oasis in an Arid Desert*

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**The Conservative Movement: Revised Edition**, by Paul Gottfried. *New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993. xxiv+214 pp. \$26.95 hardcover, \$14.95 paper.*

... If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope, will forward it; and then they who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate.

—Edmund Burke

*Thoughts on French Affairs* (1791)

Edmund Burke's oft-quoted reflection on the historical changes wrought by the French Revolution has almost equally often been misunderstood. While usually presented as Burke's attempt to make peace with an historically inevitable movement, this quote, as evidenced by his later writings on the French Revolution, is simply a

pessimistic view of the developments in France, and of their increasing acceptance in the minds of Englishmen. Burke never reconciled himself to the French Revolution; but he also held no great hope that the sweeping historical changes that it ushered in could be reversed, at least in the short run.

Paul Gottfried, in his revised and expanded edition of *The Conservative Movement*, expresses a similar short-term pessimism about political and cultural developments in the United States. While most of the book has a sociological air about it, the last two chapters, and other material scattered throughout the book, make it clear that Gottfried is more than just a disinterested chronicler of trends on the American Right. An active participant in the rising paleoconservative movement, Gottfried is at his best when criticizing the disaffected liberals who, under the name of neoconserva-

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tives, have come to dominate what passes for the right wing in current American politics.

Rejecting the view that the postwar conservative movement was derailed by the arrival of cold-war liberals starting in the late 1960s—a common view among paleoconservatives and, indeed, a principal assumption of the first edition of this book—Gottfried presents a convincing argument that the movement was “never a model of principled opposition to an intrusive and leveling welfare state.” The seeds of postwar conservatism’s destruction were present in its inception. From the beginning, the movement’s main concerns were less conservative—defending, preserving, and extending the best elements in the cultural heritage of America and Europe—than anti-communist—destroying communist systems, even at great cost to the traditional way of life in the United States.

[William F.] Buckley . . . insisted that the “thus-far invincible aggressiveness of the Soviet Union” required Americans “to accept Big Government for the duration.” An anticommunist war could only be waged “through the instrument of a totalitarian bureaucracy within our shores.” This meant, in practice, high taxes, a large military establishment, “atomic energy, central intelligence, war production boards and the attendant centralization of power in Washington.” Once the communist threat had been disposed of, so the argument ran, America could move toward restoring its original republican government.

Given this overriding emphasis on fighting communism, one wonders whether it is proper even to speak of a postwar conservative movement as this term is most commonly used. Although Gottfried’s own discussion of the coalition of traditionalists, libertarians, cold-war liberals, and social democrats which gathered under the banner of conservatism suggests that the “movement” was largely chimerical, he continues, paradoxically, to refer to it as a “conservative” movement, rather than simply an “anti-communist” movement. This problem of labels is one of the few flaws in an otherwise remarkable book, but it affects his entire discussion. For instance, the terms “neo-conservative,” “cold-war liberal,” and “social democrat” are often used interchangeably, although at other times Gottfried makes some distinctions between these terms. Likewise, the labels “Old Right” and “paleoconservative” are sometimes applied to the same person, even though Gottfried distinguishes between the “predominantly Catholic or High Church post-war Right” and the “mostly Protestant” paleoconservative right. One wishes that Gottfried had spent more effort on defining these terms, even if that entailed being more open and consistent in identifying neoconservatives as Cold War liberals. Especially in sections of this book held over from the first edition, Gottfried seems excessively deferential and attaches exaggerated importance to the intellectual stature of the neoconservatives. In this sea of labels, Clyde Wilson’s colorful quote is refreshing: “First of

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all, we [true conservatives] have simply been crowded out by overwhelming numbers. The offensives of radicalism have driven vast herds of liberals across the border into our territories. These refugees now speak in our name, but the language they speak is the same one they always spoke."

The penultimate chapter of the book, "Funding an Empire," is sure to open the eyes of many of Gottfried's readers. In this chapter, and in an earlier chapter entitled "Revolt of the Intellectuals: The Neoconservatives," Gottfried paints a picture of the neoconservative establishment which is far from flattering. Driven less by principles than by a desire for power, liberals who saw mainstream liberal institutions slipping from their grasp, and who felt out of place in the new liberal orthodoxy, made an alliance with conservatives, primarily around the issue of anticommunism. Once accepted into the conservative fold, however, they—often with the blessing of the movement conservatives—worked their way into positions of prominence in the major conservative foundations and philanthropic organizations. Today, neoconservatives control, or have strong footholds in, all of the major conservative think tanks. In addition, virtually all of the funding sources on the right are controlled by neoconservatives, who reward each other generously with munificent grants and extraordinary salaries.

Having tightened their grip on sources of conservative funding and political power, neoconservatives, so

Gottfried argues, have turned their attention to controlling culture.

. . . It may even be argued that neoconservatives have pushed the otherwise idle debate about the "end of history," through the *National Interest*, *New Republic*, and other magazines they control, to get back to the cold war liberal "end of ideology" discussion of the fifties. . . . For neoconservatives the only major struggles now to be waged, outside of the battle to contain Israel's Muslim expansionist enemies, are cultural: converting humanity, starting with American educators, to global democracy. While there are other reasons that neoconservatives now prefer education and cultural discussion over wide-ranging political debate, it is clear that they wish others to believe that they have already resolved all significant political questions. They have supposedly achieved this feat by laying down the proper policy positions and by offering themselves as administrators.

Gottfried suggests, however, that neoconservatives are unlikely to find the cultural battle quite as easy as the political battles of the past. Their main opposition this time is not from those further to the left, but a burgeoning "paleorealignment" on their right. Fed up with neoconservative dominance of foreign policy, economic, and cultural questions, "Old Right traditionalists, libertarians, and neomercantilist nationalists" have come together to form a new force on the right. Unlike the neoconservative abstractionists, who see the United

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States as founded on a set of "principles" (with "equality" foremost), the members of the paleorealignment are aware of the historical nature of political rights. They reject neoconservative crusades for global democracy and capitalism, not necessarily out of any philosophical objection to either (paleolibertarians, for instance, would prefer to see the establishment of capitalist economies world-wide), but rather out of a recognition that "democracy" and "capitalism" are not abstract systems that can simply be imposed upon recalcitrant societies. The members of the paleorealignment are united, Gottfried writes, in their recognition that "self governing societies must have cultural limits . . . liberty and self-government can only prevail in the context of some preexisting community."

This historical sense, however, runs deeper in some elements of the paleorealignment than in others. It can be argued that the disparate elements of the paleo movement are united only in their common opposition to neoconservative dominance of the "welfare-warfare state." Some prominent paleopopulists, most notably journalist Sam Francis, have seemed at times to suggest that the "welfare-warfare state" would be acceptable, as long as it were controlled by those who would redirect its resources to "Middle Americans." Paleoconservatives and paleolibertarians, however, insist that the "welfare-warfare" state is unacceptable, no matter who controls it. Even so, the paleoconservative alliance with paleolibertarians is also characterized by a

certain tension. Although particular paleolibertarians (Murray Rothbard, Lew Rockwell, and Ron Hamowy spring to mind) have a strong historical sense, paleolibertarianism as a whole is still characterized by a dedication to abstract rationalist principles and a predominantly economic (and hence, materialist) view of human nature which is ultimately incompatible with a truly historical conservatism. While common goals may unite the paleo movement in the short run, any measure of success will likely have the same disintegrating effect that the fall of communism had upon the postwar conservative movement. One fears that Gottfried's optimistic statement that the paleorealignment has "turned out to be far more durable than anyone could have imagined" was written too soon.

While Gottfried characterizes the current generation of paleoconservatives as having a sociological cast to its thought, any lasting conservative movement will likely arise around those members whose thought is characterized by its historicity. Gottfried implicitly recognizes the importance of historicity in a telling statement towards the end of the book: "The historical specificity that the paleoconservatives cherish can no longer be reconciled with the globalist ideals of the intellectual and business elites." And yet some of the thinkers with whom Gottfried allies himself for political purposes are lacking in an historical sense. An intellectually viable and hence lasting conservative movement can only arise if its members are willing to reexamine and, if

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necessary, reject the alliances of the past, and return to and creatively appropriate the conservative and historical tradition of thought which runs through European and American civilization. If they do, they may find, to their surprise (and perhaps dismay), that the political and economic battles upon which they have expended so much energy are far less important than they have believed.

Surveying the horizon, Gottfried seems to doubt that the paleoconservative movement will have any major impact over the next few years. At best, it may keep alive ideas and memories that the neoconservative and liberal establishment would like to lay to rest. Over the long run, however, Gottfried believes that those ideas and memories will triumph. In a passage reminiscent of Burke, he ends the book with a hope that can only be expressed by those who, ulti-

mately, believe in the redemptive nature of history:

In the end . . . there is one virtue shared by all authentic men of the Right, the combination of short-term pessimism with long-term optimism. No social order can endure for much longer than a few centuries, and the rise and fall of civilizations cannot be halted by propaganda, no matter how generously funded by foundation grants. America will one day be "one with Nineveh and Tyre," and all the particularities that conservatives have striven to maintain will disappear. Only the more general principles for which they struggled, if they are (as conservatives believe) an enduring part of a natural order ordained in Heaven, will reappear, when circumstances favorable to civilization return, like desert flowers after rain.