



Politics & Culture

Nash's New Book More Reprise than Reappraisal

By Daniel McCarthy

George H. Nash made his mark as a historian with the 1976 publication of *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, a book that remains indispensable as one of the few scholarly volumes to take postwar conservatism seriously as a philosophical (and not merely political) force.

Reappraising the Right (ISI Books 2009) serves as a postscript to that earlier work. It collects thirty-two essays on individual conservatives (ranging from Richard Weaver to John Chamberlain to Ronald Reagan), trends within the Right (such as the growth of think tanks), and the prospects for conservatism. Herbert Hoover, of whom Nash wrote a three-volume biography, receives extended treatment, as does the topic of Jews and the American Right.

Nash is first, if not foremost, a meticulous researcher who has spent years mining the archives of his subjects, from such overlooked right-wing intellectuals as Willmoore Kendall and Francis Graham Wilson to the thirty-first president of the United States. Yet Nash is most significant as the

scribe who recorded the conservative movement's creation myth.

The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945 is not only an impressive compendium of research, it is also an interpretive lens through which the conservative movement understands itself.

Before 1976, conservatives had long told a story of uniting disparate right-wing elements—religious traditionalists, free-market libertarians, and ex-Communists turned anti-Communists—into a coherent movement. Nash's book gave this account the weight of historical scholarship. He retold the story conservatives had been telling about themselves, and in the process he thickened the narrative into something convincing—a usable past.

"*Reappraising the Right* is not a manifesto," Nash announces in his introduction. "It is a work of scholarship and reflection intended for readers of all persuasions." Yet it is also, at least in part, a catechism: "perplexed conservatives especially may decide to turn to its pages," the author writes, "in search not of instant formulas for success but of something deeper and more sustaining: enhanced perspective on who they are, where they came from, and what they believe."

What readers will actually find in this volume

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Epistulae (ə-pis-tū-lā), Latin (n., pl.): letters or correspondence. An occasional publication of the National Humanities Institute, *Epistulae* seeks to provide clarity and insight on significant issues of our time. While addressed to the educated public, it aspires to high scholarly standards.

is not a reappraisal of the right, but reaffirmation and reiteration of the narrative employed in *The Conservative Intellectual Movement Since 1945*.

In places, the new book rises to the heights of the old. Two essays collected here, “Jews for Joe McCarthy: The Rise and Fall of the American Jewish League Against Communism” and “Forgotten Godfathers: Premature Jewish Conservatives and the Rise of *National Review*,” are exceptionally valuable for their discussion of the overlooked history of the Jewish Right. The essays on Willmoore Kendall and the influence of Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* upon conservative thought can also be singled out for praise.

Indeed, many of the biographical studies here are as rich as anything in *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*. Nash’s pellucid prose ensures that scholars and laymen alike will profit from these pieces. They are a joy to read and fine specimens of the historian’s craft.

But for all that is admirable about Nash’s art, he is by inclination a historian of continuity and consensus, and this forecloses many avenues of investigation. He acknowledges dramatic changes that have come to the Right in the past thirty years—“it may fairly be said of today’s mainstream Right: ‘We are all neoconservatives now,’” “the Reagan presidency coincided with a profound generational shift in American conservatism”—only to minimize their implications.

Since the publication of *The Conservative Intellectual Movement* two new factions have joined the old complex of libertarians, traditionalists, and anti-Communists. The newcomers are the neoconservatives and the religious right. What they have in common is a revulsion against the hedonistic and critical—they would say anti-American—ethos of the 1960s.

Nash presents these new forces as adding to the existing coalition. Yet there is an argument to be made that they have not supplemented the conservatism of old so much as supplanted it.

“The most important fact to assimilate about modern American conservatism is that it is not, and has never been, univocal,” Nash argues. “It is a coalition, with many points of origin and diverse tendencies that are not always easy to reconcile with one another.”

What goes unasked in this account is the question of how the coalition is structured: are the

partners equal? Has the balance of power between them shifted over time?

Twice Nash likens conservatism to a river fed by many tributaries. But a river is a natural phenomenon; it does not require explanation in terms of human action. The conservative movement is artificial—it is not a river, but a system of canals, dams, and locks.

Nash’s metaphor draws attention away from the engineering of the system. Yes, conservatism is a coalition—but who decides who is to be part of the coalition? Who sets the agenda? To raise these questions is to call attention to the dynamic element within the conservative intellectual movement.

A problem for the consensus narrative, one Nash touches lightly upon, is the widening gulf between the institutional continuities of the Right—organizations such as *National Review* and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute have been around for more than half a century now—and philosophical discontinuities.

Bluntly, to the extent there is a conservative movement today, it bears little genealogical resemblance to the intellectuals studied in Nash’s first book. And to the extent those intellectuals remain active today, they increasingly find themselves at odds with the movement.

This point is made clear in Jeffrey Hart’s *The Making of the American Conservative Mind* (which Nash wrote about for *National Review*; his review is included in *Reappraising the Right*).

Hart himself is a symbol of the change: he was a senior editor of *National Review* from the 1960s until 2008, and in the 1970s and 1980s often served in William F. Buckley’s absence as chief editor of the magazine. He was removed from its masthead in 2008, at the same time that Buckley’s son, Christopher, was dismissed and apparently for the same reason: Hart and the younger Buckley had endorsed Barack Obama.

The Obamacon phenomenon of 2008 was symptomatic of deeper changes. Leading conservative intellectuals such as Claes Ryn, George Carey, George Will (to some extent), and before his death William F. Buckley, Jr., himself made their displeasure with the Bush administration and the drift of the conservative movement abundantly clear.

These were not the Buchananite “paleoconservatives” of the 1990s; they were no-prefix conser-

vatives who had once been within the mainstream of the movement. But by 2008 the current of conservatism was flowing in another direction.

To Nash, this dissension is all much like the tensions between libertarians and traditionalists that characterized the conservative movement in its earliest days. "Conservatives had survived and transcended these tensions for decades," and they could "continue to prosper" by "remember[ing] the ecumenism of Reagan" and "resist[ing] the temptation to fragment."

This begs the question of whether a coalition is worth preserving at all when its wisest minds have been marginalized.

The conservative movement is not a coalition of equals; it is a hierarchy with neoconservatives and

tenured editors and think-tank administrators at the top. The history of the intellectual Right over the past three decades is the story of how the old fusion of libertarian, traditionalist, and anti-Communist intellectuals gave way to a new ideological apparatus.

Nash is a genteel and charming writer, fair-minded, and a meticulous researcher. *Reappraising the Right* would be worth purchasing for the chapters on Jewish conservatives alone, and historians of twentieth-century intellectual thought will find much to value in this book.

But the author hews to a narrative framework that fits the development of the Right since the 1970s not at all. *Reappraising the Right* is not a reappraisal but a restatement.