Conservatism has almost as many definitions as it has opponents. In deferential response to those opponents, Samuel Huntington (1957) modestly defined conservatism as a “positional ideology,” meaning it was not an ideology at all but an ad hoc, pragmatic stance against dangerous excesses. Huntington’s was a definition and a defense of conservatism fit for an age when the ruling liberals celebrated their own “end of ideology,” a development that they equated with maturity, sobriety, responsibility, and the like. Albert Hirschman (1991) has much more fun boiling two hundred years of conservative thought down to three dazzlingly clear reactions: Perversity! (liberal proposal X will be counterproductive); Futility! (it will not work at all); and Jeopardy! (if it did work, it would destroy the values and institutions liberals depend on). Stephen Holmes (1993) applies a hotter flame, reducing conservatives and other “non-Marxist antiliberals” to uninformed, unconstructive naysayers. Without grounding in monarchy and an established church, Holmes believes, conservative impulses are either incoherent or crypto-fascist. Jerry Muller (1997), with greater patience, makes a useful historical case that the phrase “historical utilitarianism” fits most conservatism most of the time better than other definitions. Like most thoughtful students, however, Muller emphasizes that conservatism lives only because it changes; it retains conservative bona fides and self-respect by changing more carefully than liberalism and radicalism. So its definition changes and will keep changing.

So far, these definitions have to do with how conservatives work and what they reject. Does conservatism have positive content? All the definitions that ring true for late twentieth-century America have in common some fundamental value akin to “ordered liberty” or “balanced authoritarianism,” as John Judis (1988) calls it. Either way, conservatives do not merely attack the left and center. Like liberals, conservatives defend liberty, at least their own. Unlike liberals, conservatives resist social experiments with untested ideals, which they fear will deplete the supply of liberty. Anxious to avoid liberty shortages, conservatives also dread gluts. They tend to see programs to expand liberty as latitudinarian and licentious rather than realistic and responsible. Conservatives think that “order” – whether its source be the bourgeois family or religious tradition or the state’s police power or “the discipline of the market” – needs as much attention as liberty.
The greatest distinction between liberal and conservative has to do with equality. From the French and Industrial Revolutions through the end of the Cold War, conservatives have seen earthly equality as the most pernicious untested ideal. Most of them grant, however, that certain popular steps toward equality, such as public housing, Social Security, equal civil and voting rights, are not worth attacking and may even be worth defending. Still, the word "conservative" represents something more specific in American political culture in the last half-century, namely, reluctance to accept the surviving achievements of the New Deal, and then opposition to the Great Society, especially the anti-poverty programs, and concomitant judicial innovations, especially the loosening of restraints on criminal and sexual activity, and the post-1965 "rights revolution." "Ordered liberty," or any other shorthand for conservatives' program, must take into account a threefold division that nearly all writing on postwar American conservatism identifies: moral, often religious, traditionalism, libertarianism, and anti-communism, with the last acting as a glue to hold the first two together until 1989.

These three elements – traditionalism, libertarianism, anti-communism – are logically irreconcilable. But that is perhaps a mark of conservatism’s strength rather than a puzzle to be solved. After all, without self-contradiction, none of the following could have had such powerful appeal: the Christian Trinity, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” the Marxist alliance of utilitarianism and Romantic utopianism, or the feminist cohabitation of equality with difference. Ideologies ease the pressure of conflicting desires by borrowing heavily from the future.

Apart from intrinsic incompatibility, libertarianism and anti-communism also borrowed heavily from liberalism, as critics of the right often point out. Yet understanding conservatives requires understanding that they made sense to themselves. They told themselves that they were conservative, which was to say, not liberal, which was to say, for all but eight years from 1932 to 2000, not in power. As liberals could not avoid the arrogance of power, so conservatives could not avoid the irresponsibility of powerlessness. Conservatives tended to see those in power as liberals, including Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, Carter, and Clinton, all of whom were, arguably, conservative. Conservatives saw anything that went wrong in America – even overseas – as an indictment of liberal policies. They ultimately attracted masses of dissatisfied voters because they were able to pretend more convincingly than the left that they had a realistic alternative to the status quo. Conservatives managed to define the status quo as liberal, taking great advantage of whatever contradictions and compromises power imposed upon liberals.

Liberalism was already greatly weakened by 1945. Two of the most thoughtful books on the ideological content of the New Deal (Hawley, 1966; Brinkley, 1995), for example, argue that liberals’ once popular crusade to demonize and restrain big business had run out of confidence and enthusiasm by the 1937 “recession.” When war brought recovery, voters no longer craved reform. Surviving liberals reined in their ambitions, confining themselves to esoteric plans for economic growth and incremental expansions of individual rights. In 1948, liberals bent on retaining power in the Cold War turned ruthlessly against less realistic liberals – those who took too long to become disillusioned with Stalin’s murderous manipulation of the Popular Front and Grand Alliance. Successfully refocusing liberalism against communism,
lifers like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1949) and Richard Hofstadter (1948, 1963) devoted brilliant careers to demonstrating that liberals had finally become responsible. But what turned out to be decisive is that they would be held responsible.

Weakened as they were, postwar liberals made an attractive target. Their blindness and bluster made them more attractive still. When conservatives of the 1980s–1990s looked back on the 1940s, many remembered a line from Lionel Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination* (1949) as a provocation. One of the great liberal minds of the 1940s, Trilling wrote in his famous preface, “Liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition.” It was just a “plain fact” that “there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation.” Conservatives only had “irritable mental gestures” that sought “to resemble ideas.” It may not be fair to Trilling that later conservatives took this as such an insult. Trilling was trying to warn his fellow liberals that they lacked emotional appeal, hence were defenseless against conservatives, who, Trilling believed, were more insightful and realistic about the emotional wellsprings of political action. But it galled conservatives to be told that they had no ideas, and they were told this all the time. Trilling understood and respected conservatism’s cultural sophistication. But other liberals never imagined the battle against the right would be intellectually demanding. Perhaps they were too busy fighting off their enemies to the left.

The political right nonetheless got most of the credit – and most of the blame – for fighting communism. Even Lee Edwards (1999), in an otherwise thoughtful chronicle of the resurgence of the right, indulges in tacky partisanship when claiming right-wing credit for the defeat of communism – credit that is irreconcilable with right-wing blame of liberals for everything else that happened. Conservatives may have been more sensitive and fanatical about communism before 1947 or so, but until Vietnam most liberals with viable public careers had been Trumanized on the issue. During the postwar years, the main institutional vehicle of conservatism was the Taft wing of the GOP, in a “conservative coalition” with southern Democrats. Robert Taft, a brilliant and effective politician, surprised many conservatives by supporting public housing legislation, which probably would not have passed without his support. The real estate lobby branded him a traitor and “socialist” (Patterson, 1972). The conservative coalition was most effective when passing the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. The act halted the political progress of unions, which directly threatened southern Democrats and business-oriented Republicans. The coalition was also successful, until 1964–5, in blocking any effective reenfranchisement legislation, which directly threatened southern Democratic members of Congress. Logrolling and business opposition to federal power pretty well explain Republican complicity. Some Republicans may also have feared that Republican efforts to win black voters back to the Party of Lincoln were futile after Harry Truman and Hubert Humphrey’s desegregation initiatives in 1948.

McCarthyism is hard to sort out: it seemed at first to threaten the liberal coalition severely. There is too much excellent work on this strange person and his strangely personalized “ism,” much of it with excellent bibliography (e.g., Oshinsky, 1983; Hixson, 1992; Shrecker, 1998). Some writers (beginning with Carey McWilliams, *Witch Hunt*, 1950) suggest that Harry Truman – whom liberals generally disliked – brought the Red Scare down on his party with his loyalty program, though Truman saw it as an effort to ward off intrusive, politically motivated investigations. Partisan opportunism
clearly played a role in the machinations of Nixon, who captured the headlines with his indignation over the Alger Hiss trial in 1950, and in the machinations of McCarthy, who joined the anti-communist crusade rather late. McCarthy’s wild accusations were encouraged by the Taft wing of his party. Few Republicans challenged McCarthy, not even Eisenhower, who was disgusted by the Wisconsin Senator and had the position and popularity to condemn him with impunity.

But the general climate of anti-communism makes it difficult to distinguish conservative from liberal within it. Liberals who, along with all Americans and their allies, had benefited greatly from the Soviet alliance, felt genuinely betrayed by Stalinist impositions in Eastern Europe after the war. Trotskyites, socialists, and social democrats eagerly joined liberals and conservatives in what Franklin Roosevelt had once dismissed as “red-baiting”: they joined in partly because the Kremlin’s influence became an unmistakable and irreversible threat to freedom, indeed to socialism, outside the USSR, and partly because their own hopes for influence over various international socialist movements, not to mention American liberalism, had evaporated with the Popular Front.

Who benefited most from the Red Scare, liberals or conservatives, Republicans or Democrats? Democrats regained control of Congress in 1954; a liberal Republican remained in the White House for the rest of the decade. Taft died in 1953; McCarthy was silenced a year later. The political right languished in the rather ineffectual hands of Senators John Bricker, William Jenner, and William Knowland, all defeated or withdrawn from politics in 1958. If Nixon represented the right, he was defanged by his vice-presidency under Eisenhower. At any rate, as many conservatives hated Nixon as liberals did. Liberals who embraced the Americans for Democratic Action and Harry Truman, on the other hand, proved more tenacious and more popular, especially in the unions, than those who embraced the Progressive Citizens of America and Henry Wallace. The surviving union leaders became a great source of Democratic votes and funds, defining themselves as anti-communist liberals. Anti-communism rallied working-class Americans – and not just Catholics and those with Eastern European roots – around Truman and “defense” spending, which in turn provided generous employment. Military Keynesianism provided the only form of social welfare spending that elected leaders could sustain. Liberals like Schlesinger were confident that big business was on their side along with big labor. Anti-communism was not only the glue that held disparate right-leaning strands together, but a protective shell that hardened around liberalism.

Of greater long-term import than McCarthyism itself was the energy liberals devoted to understanding – or rather, to dismissing – McCarthyism. Daniel Bell’s collection, The New American Right (1955), has turned out to be even more of a provocation to conservatives than Trilling’s preface. It made a point similar to Trilling’s: McCarthy’s supporters and related right-wingers were not rational. Lacking the discipline of poverty as well as the self-confidence and mental clarity of inherited affluence, Bell’s “new” right-wingers were acting on resentment about their perceived social “status,” rather than a true understanding of their “interests.”

Perhaps nostalgic for the New Deal, when poverty taught simple-minded majorities to vote liberal, Bell and his colleagues resented the affluence that drove ordinary people, ungratefully, to abandon liberalism. What Bell could not grasp, or could not respect, was that the widespread shame of poverty during the New Deal was hard to
translate into long-term gratitude. Mass support for well-off leaders who insist that people cannot help themselves is intrinsically hard to muster. Like businessmen, ordinary folk who rose from poverty often resented the government aid they once needed, and like businessmen they hated to be reminded of it. Yet Bell and his colleagues could only see such resentment as a pathetic denial of reality. Thus Bell listed the anti-liberal order of battle:

a thin stratum of soured patricians like Archibald Roosevelt, the last surviving son of Teddy Roosevelt, whose emotional stake lay in a vanishing image of a muscular America defying a decadent Europe; the “new rich” – the automobile dealers, real estate manipulators, oil wildcatters – who needed the psychological assurance that they, like their forebears, had earned their own wealth, rather than accumulated it through government aid, and who feared that “taxes” would rob them of that wealth; the rising middle-class strata of the ethnic groups, the Irish and the Germans, who sought to prove their Americanism, the Germans particularly because of the implied taint of disloyalty during World War II; and finally, unique in American cultural history, a small group of intellectuals, many of them cankered ex-Communists, who, pivoting on McCarthy, opened up an attack on liberalism in general. (1955, pp. 14–15 [1962, pp. 48–9])

The anger and condescension of Bell and his co-authors are evident in their portrayal of their enemies. That the anger was often justified is beside the point: these liberal opinionmakers, feeling besieged and threatened, failed to see the moral appeal their opponents had. The Bellites saw the justice in any attack on communists; none in any attack on the liberal establishment.

Yet it was precisely their lack of humility that made liberal opinion, with its nostalgia for the Depression, so galling. In the Bell volume, and in Hofstadter’s later essays, “anti-intellectualism” was interchangeable with anti-liberalism: you had to be uneducated, backward, provincial, xenophobic, to oppose liberalism. The danger of such tunnel vision – the extremism of the vital center – is not simply that it made centrists incapable of co-opting and dividing their enemies. It also failed to prepare centrists to fight their enemies’ ideas with ideas. Scholars who tried to test Bell’s and Hofstadter’s assumptions about the social origins of right-wing politics in the 1950s–1960s found that the available data did not support them. Michael Paul Rogen (1967) made this unmistakably clear, though historians proved generally immune to the lesson for another twenty-five years. The fatal error, however, was not so much Bell and others’ analysis of McCarthyism, but liberals’ general belief that all attacks from the right would resemble the McCarthyite one (Bell et al., 1962; Hofstadter, 1963, 1965; Lipset, 1970).

Liberal social scientists’ pathologization of American conservatism justified the historical profession’s disposition to ignore it – one of the most tragic blindspots the consensus liberals bequeathed to their children in the New Left. There were exceptions to the rule among historians: fine writers like Russell Kirk (1953) and Clinton Rossiter (1955) found modern American conservatism intellectually serious – and real – enough to throw full-length books about it into the teeth of the Bellite consensus. Rossiter’s book was a program for the conservatism that Trilling believed liberals needed for target practice. Like Trilling, Rossiter hungered for a vigorous opposition and defined conservatism as essentially negative – a response above all to the “decisive factor” of Franklin Roosevelt. Rossiter was a lot less formulaic about
this, however, than Huntington or later anti-conservatives like Hirschman and Holmes. Rossiter understood the importance of libertarianism, but, like Kirk, saw conservatism per se as depending on religion, with an organic theory of society at its core.

Kirk’s history of conservative ideas, disguised as a polemic by one who embraced the conservative cause, did not deny the truth of Trilling’s observation. All ideas were, to Kirk, the province of an aristocracy, of what scholars today would imprecisely (and hypocritically) call an elite. Like many aristocratic minds, Kirk had great faith in the common people, adopting Edmund Burke’s admiration of their strong, prerational “prejudices” – a word that liberals had made dirty. To Kirk as to Burke, the common people were like the cattle under the English oaks, “deaf to the insects of radical innovation.” (Modern conservatives and radical historians are still fighting over the noble savage legacy bequeathed to them by Montaigne and Rousseau.) It was the aristocracy’s duty to articulate the people’s sound conservative instincts in the form of ideas and to defend those ideas in politics. An unexplored issue in our cultural history is the extent to which the liberal-sponsored spread of higher learning after World War II brought the naturally conservative masses into a position where they demanded, and got, an increasingly articulate and literate culture. The greater participation of American masses in college and university experience may, contrary to all expectation, help explain why they have become the most religious and conservative masses in the world.

Most liberals in the 1950s were convinced that they were more educated and sophisticated than their enemies. They did not grasp that being correct about such things mattered little: what liberals needed was to cultivate their popular support. Instead, they threw their support to Adlai Stevenson, not because he was devoted to expanding the New Deal, civil rights, or the unions (he was not), but because he was an urbane and witty egghead who shared their contempt for the rubes and yahoos of the American heartland. (Republicans were trying “to replace the New Dealers with car dealers,” Stevenson said [Siegel, 1984, p. 100].) Liberals’ fatal assumption that conservatives were unsophisticated by nature seems to have driven them, illogically, to the inverse assumption that people who were sophisticated must be liberal. They were not preparing to fight a conservative resurgence, it seemed, but simply waiting for their opponents to die off.

Meanwhile, the right was proving its own cosmopolitanism and intellectual prowess with the influx of anti-Nazi and anti-socialist refugees from Europe, like Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Eric Vogelin, Willi Schlamm, and Leo Strauss, not to mention thoughtful first-generation Americans like Peter Viereck (1949) and Frank Chodorov. It was proving its sophistication with lyrical writers like Whittaker Chambers and dazzling professors like Yale’s Wilmoore Kendall; its wide-ranging knowledge of history and social thought with John Chamberlain and Robert Nisbet (1953); its philosophical depth with Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver (1949). Stewing in isolation, often desperate for an audience, such figures were impelled to work together.

The right from the mid-1950s on was every bit as learned and worldly as the left – more so, arguably, as the right was filling up with matured leftists who knew their enemy well. To be sure, the liberal center attracted matured leftists too, Reinhold Niebuhr and Dwight Macdonald among the most brilliant. But Max Eastman, James
Burnham, Frank Meyer, John Dos Passos, and others got a warmer welcome from the right (Diggins, 1975; Nash, 1976; O’Neill, 1982; Wald, 1987), and it must be said that their dark insights were more thoroughly honored and assimilated by their new right-wing allies than Niebuhr’s or Macdonald’s – or Trilling’s – ever were by the vital centrists, who applied their pessimism only to communists.

Conservative periodicals struggled along to provide a voice on the right of the vital center. *Human Events*, founded by Henry Regnery in 1944, was often esoterically libertarian. It was anti-Nazi but campaigned against the Nuremberg trials, thinking post-Nazi Germany a bulwark against Russia. Like much of the “Old” Republican right, it clung to isolationism, which made it unpopular in the early Cold War. The *Freeman*, founded in the 1920s by the brilliant Albert Jay Nock, who loved aristocracy and hated the modern state, was revived and combined with Isaac Don Levine’s anti-communist *Plain Talk* in 1950 under the editorship of John Chamberlain. Plagued with financial troubles, *Freeman* had a circulation of only 20,000 in the early 1950s. Yet it published such renowned writers and thinkers as John Dos Passos, Raymond Moley, George Sokolsky, and Virginia Senator Harry Byrd. Financial salvation from Leonard Read, a fanatical convert to libertarianism, deprived the magazine of vitality, and its best writers grew bored with it. Chamberlain and most of the rest of *Freeman*’s talent resigned in 1953. H. L. Mencken’s famous old *American Mercury* (circulation: 90,000) became a bastion of literate conservatism in the early 1950s under the editorship of William Bradford Huie. But financial troubles made it dependent on an eccentric backer, too. The sponsorship of Connecticut millionaire Russell Maguire, a vicious anti-Semite, led all editors, including, after some delay, Huie, to resign. The magazine descended into disgraceful obscurity, read only by a paranoid cult and by vigilant liberals and FBI agents on the lookout for subversives. John Judis, in his indispensable biography of William Buckley (1988), observed that the decline of these magazines left an intellectual vacuum.

The forces that gathered around Buckley soon filled that vacuum. Son of a rich businessman, Buckley gained fame with *God and Man at Yale* (1951), which challenged alumni to take control of his alma mater. Buckley told alumni they held Christian and individualist principles in their hearts and should force faculty to indoctrinate students with those principles. Financed by Buckley’s father and other rich sympathizers, the book became astonishingly popular. Readers who cared nothing about the future of Yale liked a good exposé of decadence and hypocrisy in institutions of privilege – an important lesson, which anti-red propagandists had learned in their attacks on the State Department and Hollywood. After dabbling in the CIA, Buckley set out to create a new institution to bring America back to the principles he believed his father and Yale alumni shared with most Americans. He founded the *National Review* in 1955, which became the greatest voice of American conservatism in the twentieth century.

Innocent of introspection and self-doubt, Buckley used his wealth, education, and debating skills as weapons against liberalism. Rare among modern intellectuals, he never seems to have questioned the basic truths he learned from his father – except the anti-Semitic ones. The younger Buckley shunned the paranoid Jew-baiting of the right-wing fringe groups on which Daniel Bell and his colleagues concentrated their fire. His editors and contributors included Jews like Willi Schlamm, Frank Meyer, Frank Chodorov, and Ralph de Toledano; *NR* drew anti-Semitic fire from such
celebrated nuts as Gerald L. K. Smith (Judis, 1988, p. 30). Buckley tried to curtail bigotry on the right – not out of a patronizing desire to avoid offending minorities, but out of realism. He knew that ethnic prejudices only limited conservatism’s appeal. Buckley could be as insensitive to black people as any liberal or conservative of his day. But he almost always couched his opposition to expansion of civil rights in the pragmatic and respectable defense of constitutional state rights.

Buckley also shunned the paranoid anti-communism of the John Birch Society and did his best to marginalize its influence (Judis, 1988; Edwards, 1999). He shared the Birchers’ disdain for Eisenhower, but like most literate conservatives, Buckley could not countenance the Birchers’ claim that Ike was an actual communist agent. It was hard enough to insist that the president was a liberal.

More than any other single force, Buckley’s magazine unified the three strands of conservatism – traditionalism, libertarianism, anti-communism. Buckley was untroubled by the inconsistencies among his adherents because he only wanted to destroy their common enemy: the establishment that had rejected his father’s values. Buckley was on the attack, his protégé Garry Wills recalled in a gripping memoir (1979), defining liberals as “The Enemy,” and vice versa. Traditionalism (especially that of Richard Weaver, intellectual heir of the Nashville Agrarians) was useful against some liberal weak spots, libertarianism against others. With no policy to defend in practice, NR exposed liberalism to a confusing and easily ignored barrage. Buckley’s genius, or his good luck, was to see the vast democratic appeal of his various positions, and their incompatibility with actually existing liberalism. Their incompatibility with one another did not matter until the 1980s, when conservatives finally tried to govern.

Buckley managed to appear both effete and pugilistic at the same time, giving conservatives an egghead they could call their own. He fought liberal pomposity with his own, becoming the champion of those who somehow felt left out before Buckley appeared as the token opponent of the expansive state on radio and TV talk shows. Buckley helped inspire a whole generation of student conservatives, who idealistically dreamed of taking over the party of Eisenhower and the eastern establishment. They would invigorate it with new ideals while avoiding the stigma of McCarthyism and the Birchers. With Buckley’s encouragement, students David Francke and Doug Caddy, aided by former communist Marvin Liebman, formed the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) in 1960. Soon the electoral machinery was bloated with baby boomer Republicans.

A different kind of threat the liberals should have recognized in the 1950s was the vast popularity of Billy Graham – the center of a religious revival that filled stadiums as reliably as rock and roll or football. Liberals, having defeated the fundamentalists in the 1920s, could not imagine that conservative religion could flourish in the modern world. Joel Carpenter, one of the best historians of the evangelical resurgence that began during the economic recovery of World War II, notes that scholars have been “misled repeatedly about the character, thrust, and long-term prospects of evangelical Christianity because of one overriding assumption: Modernization always produces secularization” (Carpenter, 1997, p. 234). That assumption is at the heart of liberal faith in the ultimate triumph of human reason over superstition and “prejudice.” Yet anybody who bothered to look very closely could see what Martin Marty saw, “a symbiosis between unfolding modernity and
developing Evangelicalism” (Carpenter, 1997, pp. 234–5; Marsden, 1980; also Ammerman, 1987). Evangelicalism and modernity grew together.

Fundamentalism – like political conservatism – is a modern philosophy, which could not have become popular before the triumph of secular authority in Western politics and culture. Fundamentalism may look to the past, but it looks to a past that was invented largely by liberals, who were bent on justifying (and exaggerating) their own triumph over superstition. It looks to an imaginary past, that is, in which the church was unified, uncritically respected, and hostile to all skepticism and critical thinking. Fundamentalists shared the mythic liberal view of the past. They were as incapable of reviving that past as liberals were of convincing ordinary Christians that it needed to be outgrown. Fundamentalists after World War II were (until their late 1970s resurgence) hopelessly schismatic, their leaders absorbed in fratricidal disputes (see C. Allyn Russell, 1976).

The real Christian threat to liberal hegemony in the 1950s was not fundamentalism, but the broader based, more respectable, more intellectually astute, more politically moderate, and more organized evangelicalism (Ammerman, 1987; Marsden, 1991; Carpenter, 1997). Liberals, however, could not see the difference – they only saw crowds of backward, bigoted, small-minded fanatics. David Riesman, updating his contribution to Bell’s collection in 1962, wrote, “The rich and poor fundamentalists have this much in common: they fear the way the world is going, at home or abroad; they resent those more cosmopolitan people who appear to understand the world less badly and who seem less ill at ease with all the different kinds of people who mingle in our big cities or at the United Nations” (in Bell, 1962, p. 125). Yet evangelicals were growing in the cities, and in missions abroad, because, like political conservatives, they did not assume that time was on their side: they evangelized, they syncretized, they grew.

Like Buckley, Billy Graham recognized that crude prejudices only hurt his organization – not just in his African missions, but also at home. After some waffling, Graham consistently desegregated his crowds, even in the deep South, from 1954 on – the year the Supreme Court tried, less successfully, to desegregate the government-controlled schools. Graham desegregated without fanfare but with impunity: though extreme segregationists called him a communist dupe, the southern white press on the whole dared not attack such a revered and popular figure. Segregationist editors nearly always gave Graham front-page treatment, omitting to mention that his crowds and ushers were, at Graham’s insistence, desegregated. Crowd photos conveniently concealed the skin color of individual worshippers. Many black preachers, including Martin Luther King, recognized Graham’s value, and cooperated with him. Fundamentalists like Bob Jones, who was happy to have racist support, hated evangelicals like Graham (Martin, 1991; Chappell, forthcoming).

Graham’s popularity was far greater than that of the racially exclusive white fundamentalists. This seems surprising only to those who assume that the vast masses of Christian conservatives are more devoted to racism than other Americans. Working up a publication empire as formidable as Buckley’s, centered around the popular ecumenical magazine, Christianity Today, Graham’s evangelicals revitalized American religious culture with conservative alternatives to the mainline liberal Christian Century.

Ideological combat took place within institutional realities, of which a peculiar form of corporate capitalism seems the most important. Money, that is, shaped the
battle of ideas, but a specific kind of money. America’s foreign competitors were flattened by World War II and then restrained by their dependence on American largesse during much of the Cold War. American corporations grew fat on government subsidies in World War II and the Cold War. Corporate bureaucrats turned against “government,” not so much out of a perverse desire to bite the hand that fed them as out of a rational recognition that the hand that fed could also restrain. Unlike individual recipients of welfare, corporate beneficiaries recognized that the hand needed to feed more often than they needed to eat. They bit selectively, gnawing the regulatory nails, but leaving the tendons of protection and the arteries of subsidy intact.

More work needs to be done on how corporate money organized the production and consumption of political opinion after World War II. Most newspapers opposed FDR, but that did not stop him from being wildly popular. Colonel McCormick’s Chicago Tribune, and notorious right-wing editors in Texas, aggressively sought to move American opinion to the right. Millionaires like Sun Oil’s J. Howard Pew funded Christianity Today, as well as political organs, like Human Events, and causes, like YAF (Viguerie, 1980, p. 27), and the Goldwater movement to capture the GOP (Goldberg, 1995). (Pew had also been part of the Liberty League in the 1930s.) Precisely what did corporate money buy? Not necessarily conservatism: the Ford and Carnegie foundations were consistent targets of right-wing attack; in recent years, the Pew millions have drifted into the right’s target range, and the heirs of GM and Weyerhauser have long been financial underwriters of left-wing opinion. But corporate funding of conservative thought and culture was and is significant. Along with Pew, Henry Regnery, the Milliken brothers (South Carolina textile magnates, who recently showed up among Ralph Nader’s funders), and New York financier Jeremiah Milbank invested in a broad range of anti-liberal publications in the 1950s, hoping to legitimate more tactics and breed more tacticians. Many writers detect a split between old eastern establishment conservatism and southwestern “cowboy” money – from speculation in mining and oil – which financed a more ruthless or reckless conservatism. Yet the most important Texas oilman, H. L. Hunt, refused to fund Buckley’s magazine, a refusal Buckley attributed largely to Hunt’s anti-Catholicism.

Elizabeth Fones-Wolf (1994) paints the most important part of the picture: the self-conscious promotion – the selling – of a pro-corporate ideology in the 1950s, which equated the interests of major corporations with “America” or with “the Free World,” depending on whether the audience was feeling defensive or generous. Fones-Wolf emphasizes the appeal of this ideology to the labor rank and file, a different explanation from Gary Gerstle’s more parochial but more influential explanation, which emphasizes traditional Catholic affinities for key elements in America’s Cold War-era nationalism (Gerstle, 1989). Equally important, however, was the campaign’s success in channeling the disgruntlement of small businessmen into anti-government rather than anti-corporate channels.

In various ways, money provided conservative strategists the luxury to explore every angle of attack, breed a variety of attackers, and develop resilient institutions. Unlike the emerging student left, conservatives had leaders who were well-heeled and shameless enough to teach followers the need for party discipline. Youthful idealism was not enough. Money, and the organization and self-confidence it helped to buy, were keys to the right’s increasing prominence in American culture. Prominence
in politics was a trickier matter. Barry Goldwater blazed the right’s trail to electoral power.

Like Buckley, Goldwater was a self-conscious ideologue, extreme in his conservatism and in the intelligence and energy he applied to it. Unlike Buckley (and unlike his right-wing political predecessors, Taft, Jenner, Bricker, and Knowland), he developed a reputation as a useful partisan vote-getter and unifier. Here Goldwater resembled the conservative evangelicals who, unlike fundamentalists, remained within their denominations and helped them grow, thus being better positioned to take them over. Goldwater worked indefatigably on GOP campaigns in the late 1950s. Though known as a conservative, he did his best to cover up his disagreements with President Eisenhower, voting with the administration 66 percent of the time in 1955–6 (Goldberg, 1995). He was Republican campaign committee chairman 1955–6 and 1959–62, during which time he made over two thousand speeches and developed ties with party activists all over the country. Goldwater’s The Conscience of a Conservative (ghost-written by Buckley’s partner Brent Bozell, and subsidized by a Birch Society board member, Clarence Manion) became a bestseller in 1960. His literary success solidified his relationship with right-wing ideologues, but also lessened his dependence on them.

In 1960, Goldwater was as hostile as liberal Republicans were to the nomination of Richard Nixon. But unlike the liberals, Goldwater campaigned with impressive vigor for Nixon: nobody could blame the GOP’s defeat on the one prominent conservative ideologue in it (Rae, 1989; Brennan, 1995; Goldberg, 1995). Soon after the GOP defeat of 1960, the smart conservative money — again Pew and the Millikens were important — bet on Goldwater, beginning a “Draft Goldwater” movement. This drew on the YAF and other grassroots organizations, some of which, like the Birch Society, were filled with fanatical anti-communists. (Anti-Semites never helped Goldwater, who was half-Jewish.)

Goldwater used the fanatics, and their money (H. L. Hunt’s especially), but he tried to discipline them. He sternly dissociated himself, as Buckley did, from the Bircher’s Robert Welch. His 1960 convention speech urged conservative activists to “grow up” and make realistic moves to take over their party. The speech was a turning point in conservative history, more important than Reagan’s more famous speech four years later. Goldwater made it clear he had no use for conservative activists if they would not capture the local offices that would give them a power base. While tempering the ideologues, Goldwater maintained enough support among the GOP regulars, through his connections in the Senate and his speaking engagements at partisan as well as ideological occasions.

Goldwater also maintained legitimacy by rejecting the outright racism that some of his southern white supporters were inclined to indulge in during campaigns. Clearly southern racists, when they were drawn to Republicans at all, were more drawn to conservative Republicans than to liberal ones: they had a common boogeyman in the federal government, and a common way to insulate themselves from charges of bigotry and lawlessness by adopting the “state rights” slogan — a slogan with a serious constitutional pedigree, not at all confined to racists or the right. Goldwater strongly supported black voting rights (Goldberg, 1995), while trying to avoid alienating his supporters in the white South. That was exactly the position John F. Kennedy took until Birmingham police and firemen obliged black protesters with a widely photographed showdown that embarrassed the nation.
Nicol Rae makes clear how the ineptitude and complacency of the liberal GOP made it easy for the Goldwaterites to capture the nomination in 1964:

The liberals had possessed a superb campaign organization, constructed by [Thomas] Dewey and Herbert Brownell, but even they had great difficulty in defeating Taft in 1952 with a national hero as their candidate. By the early 1960s, Dewey, Brownell, and the other major figures in the Eisenhower campaign organization had retired from active politics, and the machinery had atrophied. (Rae, 1989, p. 00)

Mary Brennan points out that the GOP leaders foolishly discounted Goldwater’s growing popularity in 1960, ignoring the importance of grassroots organizations (Brennan, 1995). Lisa McGirr (2001) amplifies and clarifies the importance of grassroots in her recent study of southern California.

Rather than shore up their popular support, GOP liberals began betting their lives on Nelson Rockefeller’s candidacy, on the “very tenuous foundation” of Rockefeller’s popularity in opinion polls. That foundation crumbled after the divorced Rockefeller’s second marriage to Happy Murphy in June 1963. Needing votes, the GOP poured resources into Operation Dixie – a far more effective invasion, interestingly, than that attempted under the same code-name by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) twenty years earlier. But liberal leaders failed to grasp the significance of the rising southern presence, which they had lost their ability to control in the traditional manner of federal patronage after the GOP’s departure from the White House in 1961. They also failed to appreciate the changing convention rules, which amplified the power of volunteer activists (Rae, 1989).

Liberal Democrats made parallel errors. They probably never realized how much they depended on the GOP liberals to keep a leash on the right. They probably even believed their own propaganda as to how southerners in their own party – like LBJ and Sam Rayburn – were as bad as Republicans. In fact, many were to the left of Adlai Stevenson. (Like liberal Republicans, Brennan notes, Democrats “lumped all conservatives together” [Brennan, 1995, p. 50].) This is the key point in the entire history of liberal blindness. Democratic liberals, pressured by ingenious black southern preachers, had just managed their greatest post-FDR achievement by reaching across party lines and defeating the southern Democratic filibuster: they reconstructed the South, with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 and the Twenty-Fourth Amendment. But that was all they could do; had liberal Democrats been less complacent about Goldwaterites, they might have helped their indispensable allies in the GOP to stave off further revolt. Instead, liberal Democrats let the GOP conservatives destroy the old GOP, without realizing that the GOP conservatives had larger prey in their sights – and enough strength to shoot effectively as soon as liberalism faltered. That did not take long.

Democratic liberal failures have to account for most of the perceived rightward drift of Nixon: he drifted in the direction the electorate was drifting, and the electorate ultimately chose him in a very close election in 1968. The liberals’ greatest weakness in the 1960s was their contempt for Lyndon Johnson, their strongest leader. Though liberals always opposed and distrusted Johnson, he showed himself the truest heir of FDR by enacting more of the unfinished business of the New Deal than anyone thought possible. In one vital way, Johnson moved to the left of FDR:
he was willing and able to welcome black voters into the party in droves, and to reward them with a more severe commitment to civil rights than any president since Lincoln – and so far a more durable one. With Medicare and Medicaid, Johnson even made a dent in the pharmaceutical-medical-insurance industry’s armor, something no other American politician has ever been able to do.

Turning against the war they had done so much to expand in Vietnam, liberals blamed Johnson (who was far more interested in domestic policy) essentially for continuing Kennedy’s policies there. But northern liberals’ hostility to the South, and their bigoted equation of bigotry with southern styles of speech and manners, hurt Johnson more than Vietnam: he might have been able to weather the controversies over that war, had radicals and centrists in his own party rallied behind him. Instead, the radicals made kamikaze attacks on the only viable trustee of the New Deal coalition, and the only politician – ever – who was able to support civil rights and retain nationwide popularity at the same time. The centrists failed to defend him. Ralph Ellison’s estimate was that black Americans understood Johnson better than the liberals. LBJ would go down in history as a great president in the eyes of black Americans, Ellison said, the greatest since Lincoln, who paid an admittedly higher price.

Next, young activists began driving regular Democrats away from their exhausted party. Eugene McCarthy, the failed 1968 candidate of the anti-war movement, waited until October to endorse, half-heartedly, the Democratic nominee, Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey was a devoted liberal with the longest, most distinguished civil rights record of any member of Congress in the twentieth century, and one of the strongest pro-labor records. McCarthy and followers had failed to learn the lesson Barry Goldwater had taught Republican conservatives in 1960: that an ideological extremist is a guest and must earn his keep in a political party, which is devoted above all to its own electoral survival. Disgruntled McCarthyites nonetheless tried to seize the convention machinery. Surprisingly, they succeeded, instituting a radical form of affirmative action in delegate-selection rules, replacing old-ward heelers with young people and members of hitherto unrepresented minority groups. Whatever the symbolic justice of the new diversity, it filled the party with inexperienced people and cut out millions of loyal vote-getters. As Chicago columnist Mike Royko observed, the Democratic Party’s decision to start reform this way was like a man starting a diet by shooting himself in the stomach. Historians often quote Royko now. But no liberal ever admitted what a dumb idea it was to give eighteen- to twenty-year-olds the vote, with the Twenty-Sixth Amendment of 1971.

When Nixon took over in 1969, he shrewdly began forcing liberal Democrats (especially judges) to defend his civil rights initiatives, including his aggressive enforcement of affirmative action in employment law, the revived “Philadelphia Plan,” of 1969, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 (Graham, 1990). Nixon knew that affirmative action would force historically Democratic union members to start choosing between their own hard-won seniority rights and the rights of black workers. This would break the bond between the majority of workers and the civil rights lobby, the bond on which liberal strength in Congress depended. Nixon’s bureaucrats also raised the cost to unions by forcing not just black workers on them, but “Oriental, American Indian, and Spanish Surnamed” workers. Then during the 1972 campaign, Nixon ostentatiously halted enforcement of busing orders, which had become a symbol of affluent liberal judges’ contempt for white
people who could not afford private schools or escape to the suburbs: the key Demo-
cratic constituencies of the ethnic urban working class and white southerners. Again
and again, “limousine liberals” had to defend “minority rights” at the expense of
broad popular support. As Hugh Graham observed, “Nixon’s civil rights victories
ironically freed him to run for re-election by taking a stand against the school inte-
gration orders and minority quota requirements that he had done so much to further”

Nixon’s virtuosity in political opportunism helped the Republicans and the grass-
roots conservatives, who got tied to one another in the 1970s much as the Demo-
crats had gotten tied to the unions in the 1930s. Indeed, the expansion of the
Republican Party fed off the disillusionment of many union members, who, along
with others in the lower middle and working classes, felt the Democrats, and allied
union leaders, had abandoned them.

Opportunism requires opportunity, and rightward-drifting Republicans like Nixon
were among the luckiest in history. Rising crime, inflation, taxes, and a costly and
controversial war all hit the American voter-consumer simultaneously, on the liberal
Democrats’ watch (Lukas, 1985; Rieder, 1985; Edsall and Edsall, 1991). Supreme
Court justices and other prominent authorities – from Dr. Spock to the Kerner Com-
mission – seemed intent on protecting and rewarding anti-social behavior. Liberals
had assumed that affluence would guarantee social order, but in many ways it
appeared to have done the opposite. At any rate, affluence seemed suddenly in jeop-
ardy, too, at least for the white voters who were still new to affluence. The rising
crime and rising taxes of the 1960s formed as potent a juxtaposition as the destruc-
tion of crop surpluses and widespread hunger had formed in the Depression. High
crime and taxes were further juxtaposed with a cultural rebellion – largely created by
Madison Avenue, though nobody knew that at the time (Frank, 1997) – which
brought millions of baby boomers into the streets, rejecting sexual restraint and
manners, and the values of their parents, if not authority and order altogether. There
were more young adults per capita than ever before or since. Just as important, the
boomers’ adolescent freedom from work, class consciousness, and other future-
oriented concerns, was prolonged – by the economic boom, by the expansion of
higher education, and by their parents’ understandable but tragic desire to spare them
the hard work and discipline they had endured before the boomers were born. All
these were opportunities for Republican campaign managers, as poverty and unem-
ployment had been for their Democratic predecessors in the realignment of 1929–32.

The right profited from liberals’ insistence that they could cure social unrest
without cracking down on the civil liberties of defendants or rioters, and from lib-
erals’ belief that they could have both guns (escalation in Vietnam, continuation of
the arms race) and butter (expansion of the welfare state, plus health, education, and
retirement subsidies for the affluent). Liberals underestimated the shrewdness, and
the dumb luck, of their enemies.

Judges, recoiling from judicial excesses, helped do the liberals in: they refused to
extend desegregation to the suburbs, which grew from “white flight” as the cities
deindustrialized. Many cities dropped into a vicious cycle of declining tax bases, which
undermined schools, street and transportation repair, police protection, and other
basic services, hastening a considerable black flight of teachers and other noncrimi-
nal role models (Harrison and Bluestone, 1982; Lukas 1985; Wilson, 1987). Real
estate speculators made out like bandits, driving selling prices down for panic-stricken white owners who wanted to flee “transitional neighborhoods,” and buying prices up for equally panic-stricken black buyers, who found the urban homes that white people abandoned to be a hopeful step, for a while (Sleeper, 1990). Liberals got blamed, however, for their failure to squelch urban unrest, and for forced busing, inflation, and taxes. Liberals desperately clung to their conviction that the beleaguered white people who turned against busing, along with the white southerners who began to jump off the sinking Democratic ship a little earlier, were just backward racists (Lukas, 1985; Rieder, 1985; Sleeper, 1990). Historians have refined but not abandoned liberals’ assumption that right-wing growth depended on racism (Berman, 1994; Carter, 1995, 1996; Wolters, 1996).

A new intellectual insurgency, known as neoconservatism, came to the fore in the 1970s. Disillusioned with the hasty and careless quality of much of the Great Society, some of the most thoughtful liberals – including Daniel Bell – were drawn toward a group that coalesced around the magazine, the Public Interest: Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Robert Nisbet, among others. A similar coalescence around Norman Podhoretz’s Commentary broadened the movement. Very telling was the neoconservative welcome extended to some of the most gifted black intellectuals, including Glenn Loury and Bayard Rustin, whose sincere dissent from the strategies of the civil rights lobby (no longer a mass movement) added to a vigorous debate on liberalism’s abandonment of the black masses, a debate whose history has yet to be written.

Many of the “neocons” claimed, as libertarians had done earlier, that they were the true liberals – that government bureaucracy and the Democratic Party had spun away from liberalism. The neocons, if they had any common values, were not libertarians: they believed the state had a strong, positive role to play in creating opportunity for the unfortunate. But they believed the liberals in power in the 1960s had gone too far to appease the young radicals in the streets, along with urban rioters and other criminals. They argued that liberalism and government had in effect become captives of anti-social forces. Kristol emphasized the need to defend capitalist institutions, on which economic growth and therefore civilization depended. He also emphasized the need to reinvigorate the spiritual and cultural values of bourgeois society. Too much of the bourgeoisie, he believed, had devoted itself too persuasively to discrediting those values – especially the young, whose cultural leadership Kristol regretted (Moynihan, 1969; Banfield, 1970; Kristol, 1978; Podhoretz, 1979; Steinfelds, 1979; Ehrman, 1995). No doubt many parents did too. The youth rebellion of the 1960s has often been viewed as a mass Freudian struggle against parental authority. The rightward reaction of the 1970s makes sense as parents’ itch for the switch they had set aside during the boom – with the bestselling Dr. Spock’s reassurance.

Much of what Kristol defended had a liberal ring. So too, Moynihan. Bell defined himself as liberal in politics, conservative in culture, and socialist in economics (1976). Strong among neocons were the followers of Leo Strauss, who enjoyed an academic and popular revival, represented by the bestselling success of the greatest – and least populist – American conservative book since Kirk’s, Allan Bloom’s Closing of the American Mind (1987). The neocons’ views on foreign affairs were as complex and as important as their views on domestic policy. Though most neocons had objected
to American policy in Vietnam, they resisted what they saw as liberals’ general turn away from responsibility in international affairs, particularly when it came to attacking Soviet influence and defending Israel. This influential and creative group of thinkers helped legitimate “conservatism” further, again by defining liberalism as the incoherent jumble of compromise and failure that had dominated Washington during the late 1960s and 1970s. Since many neocons were ethnic Jews and Catholics, and since many had established records in liberal journals and universities, they lent a cover of respectability to the sometimes reluctantly rightward-moving population.

The politicization of evangelical Christians was as big and important a surprise as the disappearance of the liberal wing of the Republican Party. This was in part a response to the rising street crime of the late 1960s, and the simultaneous increase (by the standards of those days) in public expression of sexual tastes, particularly of ones that were taboo. It was also a response to a perceived politicization of “secular humanism,” which evangelicals made into another popular synonym for liberalism. Evangelical Christians overwhelmingly favored separation of church and state, but they saw the Supreme Court’s decisions banning voluntary school prayer and Bible reading in 1962 and 1963 as extreme: the justices had sacrificed the First Amendment’s protection of free exercise to an overzealous interpretation of its establishment clause (as Potter Stewart wrote in dissent).

The later reaction to the Supreme Court’s compromise on abortion, in 1973, gave an opportunity to mobilize what a substantial and militant minority believed was disrespect for the sanctity of human life. Female anti-abortion activists tended to have less attractive job opportunities than their “pro-choice” sisters: they saw involuntary motherhood as a basis for their demand that society protect them against loss of dignity and freedom in the job market (Luker, 1984). Abortion gave a significant anti-liberal culture a new way to stand for generosity and compassion, and to commandeer all the cachet of “rights talk.”

More surprising than the political militancy – and increasingly open Republican partisanship – of leaders like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell was the new solidarity of conservative Protestants with conservative Catholics and Jews. This was based on a whole range of social issues but especially abortion (Wuthnow, 1988; Hunter, 1991). Pro-lifers, as the most visible conservatives in America, were a walking refutation of the liberal equation of conservatism with bigotry, though liberals certainly scored points by outing the bigots who remained (including the anti-Semitic Robertson). Large numbers of black leaders also identified themselves as pro-life, including Jesse Jackson, before he decided to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984. Jackson helped conservatives next by reminding America that anti-Semitism was far from dead on the left.

Political strategists like Richard Viguerie popularized a moralistic conservatism in the 1970s, mobilizing voters directly on behalf of conservative political candidates, including Ronald Reagan. Viguerie developed the use of direct mail for fundraising and the targeted dissemination of ideas. This was a form of technological populism similar to that of the televangelists: it allowed direct contact between a central leader, or small cabal, and millions of scattered individual supporters, who never met one another. Technopopulism gave new leaders the power to tell millions of disaffected voters (and nonvoters) that they had a voice. That was not the same as giving them a voice, but it seemed enough of an improvement to generate millions in political
cash. The means to centralize and mobilize popular resentment against liberalism – by now a synonym for the status quo – were now overwhelming. Republicans seized those means, their efforts culminating in the overwhelming popular support for Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984.

Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter, who had been elected not simply, as many writers assume, because the “Watergate interlude” made a rightward-turning electorate pause before plunging off the cliff with the Gipper. Democrats in 1976 did not take public revulsion with the Nixon scandals for granted – or Ford’s ineptitude, or the inflation that ran away with the public’s savings on Ford’s watch. The Democrats finally learned the lesson of the 1960s that year, and they tried with some plausibility to jump on the rightward bandwagon: they nominated a conservative, southern, born-again Baptist, who campaigned as a homespun farmer who was completely alien to Washington, DC. Republicans, who hesitated to go too far to the right after Watergate, nominated Ford, and lost. But Carter could not shake the stigma of failure and liberalism any more than Ford could shake the stigma of Nixon’s crookery. The press, having filled a certain authority-vacuum during Vietnam and Watergate, was still smelling blood through the 1970s, and somewhat indiscriminately undermined Ford and Carter. After Carter’s bad luck in Iran, the press changed its tack – recognizing that it, too, needed to cultivate public support. Having effectively savaged LBJ, Nixon, Ford, and Carter, the press greeted the popular Reagan with fawning, uncritical coverage.

Many Democrats supported Reagan’s tax cuts for the rich. More generally, as Democrats’ union support continued to fail them in the 1980s, and the unions continued to decline in any case, Democrats could not make up their minds what to do – nominating the Humphrey-clone Walter Mondale in 1984 and the technocrat Dukakis in 1988. (Like Gary Hart and Bill Clinton, Dukakis borrowed the neocons’ agenda and cachet; the press called him neoliberal, which meant, more or less, neo-conservative.) The left of the party, meanwhile, wasted its energy in moralistic hand-wringing about military expansion, which it rightly observed was strategically unnecessary. But it failed to respect how politically beneficial the military was, as the world’s largest socialized housing program and one of the largest socialized medicine programs. The military kept unemployment in check, offering opportunity to thousands of capitalism’s casualties. Indeed, the post-Vietnam all-volunteer military, for all its waste, came closer than any political movement in world history to fulfilling the old red slogan, Arm the Proletariat.

The Democrats’ aimlessness may not have mattered, as long as the Republicans had the most popular leader since FDR carrying the ball. But by the late 1980s, following Bill Clinton’s Democratic Leadership Council, Democrats were moving further and further to the right – only “diversity,” environmentalism, and unlimited abortion rights remained of the “liberal” agenda – all symbolic issues that had been added after the Great Society. These issues either cost the taxpayers nothing or appealed to affluent voters who were otherwise likely to vote Republican. (Clinton’s unsuccessful health proposals were radically pro-business by worldwide standards. They looked liberal only because the health industry was strong enough to demonize any encroachment on its power, and because the Clintons made the mistake of trying to appease that industry. Medical insurers did not bite the hand that tried to feed them, they amputated it.)
Republican politicians exploited the compassionate imagery of their “new abolitionism” on abortion as shrewdly as Democrats exploited their support for affirmative action and racial gerrymandering: both issues secured a key demographic base without asking much financial sacrifice from voters. Neither required much follow-through from elected officials, who shunted the most difficult decisions off onto unelected judges. Democrats and Republicans, both dependent on corporate support, converged on economic issues, with the Clinton administration adopting GOP positions on welfare reform and free trade. Republicans rightly but pathetically complained that Clinton hit the jackpot with their nickel. Clinton cut the debt that Reagan’s deficits had piled up and enjoyed a boom on Wall Street, as speculators cashed in on the taxpayers’ investment in new technology. Thus Clinton earned the support of the “centrist” lobbyists and campaign financiers without the ideological baggage that extreme right-wingers, like Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich, asked their party to carry. Though Gingrich was forced to retire, the future of conservatism looked bright at the end of the twentieth century, with both major parties in the most powerful, most technologically advanced nation shunning the liberal label and doing their best to reduce government spending on behalf of the poor and unemployed.

On the other hand, there were clouds on conservatives’ horizon. In the aftermath of the Reagan Revolution, there was much disappointment and disillusionment on the right, documented by thoughtful conservative partisans like R. Emmett Tyrrell (1992) and David Frum (1994), as well as by scholars (e.g., Steve Bruce, 1988; Michael Lienesch, 1993; Kenneth Heineman, 1998). Disillusionment was particularly strong among the religious right, which recognized Reagan’s exploitation of it. Reagan’s failure to deliver on abortion and school prayer made many realize that he had not made much effort, though many to this day continue to think of Reagan – an enigmatic popular leader like his early hero, FDR – as a personal symbol of hope. Conservatives’ nostalgia for Reagan now echoes liberal Democrats’ nostalgia for FDR. To some extent, the religious right retreated from politics – bruised by the “telescandals” of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker, and by Jerry Falwell’s unseemly opportunism in response to the latter, as well as Pat Robertson’s exposure as (among other things) an anti-Semite after all. Ralph Reed, following the pragmatic tendency long denounced by religious conservatives, revitalized the Christian Coalition as a political force during the Clinton years, but perhaps eroded its bonds with its constituency. Reed’s move echoed Goldwater’s move of 1960: if conservatives want to be taken seriously, they had to become more ruthless and unprincipled in seizing and retaining state power – as ruthless and unprincipled as post-FDR liberals had been.

The judicially assisted capture of the White House by George W. Bush suggests that conservatives may be following Reed’s path. The younger Bush, the remarkable scion of an old eastern establishment family – the sort whom conservatives held in contempt in the 1950s – has a more genuine affinity for the religious conservatives than Reagan ever did. Though W’s enemies like to call attention to his sodden past, and the possibility of his backsliding, his personal tribulations make him a familiar character in a story much loved by the born-again. His struggles, and the uncharitable abuse of those who cannot understand and forgive, may actually solidify his relationship with a constituency that believes in the reality of sin and the need to
struggle, dramatically and publicly, against it. W admitted his weakness as readily as Jimmy Carter or Jesse Jackson.

The future of conservatism will probably depend on its ability to deal with its weaknesses. It is a great sign of the right’s resiliency that it produces and apparently consumes such invigorating and candid works of self-criticism as Frum’s and Tyrrell’s – and that its young generation of writers shows vitality, resourcefulness, even humor. It is an equal and opposite sign of the left’s morbidity that books like Michael Tomasky’s *Left for Dead* – an earnest effort to take responsibility for the rout the left has suffered since 1968 – are greeted with such resistance by the left, and are so few and far between.

The causes of the great conservative resurgence in America are complex, involving many questions that historians have barely begun to turn loose on the evidence. Liberals’ overweening self-assurance appears to be the most important single reason for their fall. That trait stands out, in part, because it is responsible for the historical ignorance of conservatism among educated Americans in the 1950s–1970s, when liberals dominated the writing and teaching of history more than they dominated politics. Louis Hartz’s reading of a Lockean consensus back into American history was shared by most of the prominent historians of his generation, even those who, like Daniel Boorstin, emphasized a conservative side of the consensus. Hartz expressed a belief equivalent to liberal Manifest Destiny or liberal divine right. A ruling faction that cannot see – cannot imagine – an enemy, even in the past, is in obvious trouble, even in a society that lacks representative government.

Exceptions poked their heads above the parapet of the liberal consensus. John Higham’s famous essay on the “consensus school” (1959) provided a rallying cry and a program for a generation of historians growing impatient with liberalism. At first, the rebels who got attention lined up on the left; they dug into the lives of the downtrodden and excluded, the poor and oppressed, providing these hitherto inarticulate subjects a leftish voice. In the process, they redefined left (with the help of E. P. Thompson) as a kind of traditionalism, and even, sometimes, Americanism. No right-wing historiographical school developed, but along the way, William Nelson came out with a solid account of American anti-revolutionaries (1961) and David Hackett Fischer (1965) with a solid account of the first conservative party in America. Rossiter produced an important revised edition (1966). Rogin, affiliated with a non-history department, severed the connection Hofstadter had drawn between McCarthy’s supporters and the “real” late nineteenth-century Populists. Rogin led his generation of left-leaning historians in defining the right-wingers of McCarthy’s grassroots as lacking historical pedigree altogether, and in redefining the true Populists (after Vann Woodward’s more profound and less influential attempt) as left-leaning. Eugene Genovese (1969) brought southern conservatism, with its romantic, anti-capitalist drive, to almost blinding light, eventually connecting that conservatism with twentieth-century survivals. Linda Kerber added depth and cultural context to the Federalists Fischer had brought back to life (1970). Working closer to his own lifetime, James Patterson deserves great credit for his scholarly work on Taft (1972) and the congressional conservatives (1967) who set the stage for the anti-FDR reaction. George Nash (1976) probably did more than anybody to rescue American conservatives from the massive condescension of the professional managers of posterity. John Lukacs (1961, 1968, 1984, 1990), one of the great historical
minds who worked in English in the twentieth century, elaborated (at times, single-handedly) a philosophy of history that was conservative in the historic, European sense, rather than the corporate or libertarian boosterism that wears the label in America.

Great journalists wrote a lot of the history that professional historians could or would not write: Thomas and Mary Edsall, a superb history (1991) of the connections among various elements of conservatism; John Judis, one of the most important intellectual biographies (1988) of his generation; and Godfrey Hodgson, probably the best overall history (1996) of America’s turn to the right. There were others. Before the 1990s, historians tended not to assimilate all this work, but they could not ignore its growing weight and high quality.

Historians were also influenced by the cognitive dissonance injected into liberal-consensus historiography – not just by leftists who wanted (like Staughton Lynd) to find an American “radical tradition,” but by less obviously present-minded historians like Caroline Robbins and Bernard Bailyn, who set in motion a reconsideration of America’s ideological origins. Robbins’s and Bailyn’s discovery of what came to be called classical republicanism had a momentum of its own.

The Robbins/Bailyn trend culminated in J. G. A. Pocock’s *Machiavelian Moment*, and the proliferation of republicanism studies in unpredictable areas, including labor history. Coming with a more complicated, more Christian or more virtue-oriented liberal tradition. That revised liberal tradition strained the credibility of Hartz’s tradition as much as the discovery of a distinct and powerful republican tradition. Less fruitful, but equally important for a while, was the rediscovery of Scots common-sense realism and its important, often illiberal, role in American political culture in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries.

But what really brought home the need to study conservatism was the overwhelming political reality in historians’ own lifetimes: the utter rout of the left and center. When Ronald Reagan stood up in their soup, historians finally got around to finding out what conservatism might look like on a significant scale. Most important was the amazing proliferation of studies of the Klan of 1920s, a time when extremism seemed to go mainstream. Building on earlier work by Kenneth Jackson (1968), scholars like Robert Goldberg (1981) and Nancy MacLean (1994) found a complicated Klan, very different from the Klan of Reconstruction, from the Klan that “revived” after World War II, and from the radical right that Bell and Hofstadter had projected onto America. All that fine work finally begged the question whether “extreme” was really the right word for the Klan in a decade of “normalcy.” Alan Brinkley followed the same impulse with great success (1982), finding that the populist-style leaders Huey Long and Charles Coughlin were more understandable and human than pathological. In 1992, Michael Kazin called for a general reassessment in the *American Historical Review*, followed two years later by a similar call in the same journal by Brinkley, and one by Leonard Moore in *Reviews in American History* (1996).

The ultimate determinant of the Bell–Hofstadter view was the McCarthy–Goldwater period, however, and there recent historians seem less sure-footed. Gary Gerstle (1989) tried to account for an ethnic Catholic, working-class cold warriorism and nonfascist corporatism in Massachusetts. Gerstle did not exactly throw off the massive condescension of posterity (to use Thompson’s phrase), which in America has applied to conservatives. But he bristled defiantly under it – even if, in doing so,
he sidled quaintly close to an Ortega-like fear of the rootless, anomic “mass man” who is ever drawn toward ever more frightful modern substitutes for community.

Historians of conservatism might, like most historians since the 1960s, be missing the forest for the grassroots. There are other things a full historical investigation should cover. Perhaps most important, historians have not heeded the basic principle of investigative journalism, detective fiction, and indeed all the higher forms of common sense: to follow the money. We know very little about the Milliken brothers, H. L. and Nelson Bunker Hunt, J. Howard Pew, Henry Regnery, Carleton Putnam, Richard Mellon Scaife. The left, in a more conspiratorial and political era when scholars like G. William Domhoff were prominent, paid attention to the political investments of such men and their tax-dodging foundations. Money and grassroots became blurred by the technological populism of televangelism and direct mail (were already blurred by earlier forms of populism, especially those that lean toward authoritarianism). Historians need to unblur them. More related to the connection between grassroots and what appears above the ground in politics, historians need to explore the rise of political mercenaries (see Blumenthal, 1980; Sabato, 1981), who often determine who wins and loses, and the growing role of rich lobbyists in making policy (see Philip Stern, 1987, 1992, and the vital website of the Center for Responsive Politics).

But even remaining tangled within the grassroots, historians seem to be missing issues at that level, for example, the assimilation of ethnic “minorities” – especially Catholics and Jews. Immigrants were always welcomed by the Democratic Party. As that party evolved into its “liberal” phase – in our social democrat/Progressive-New Deal-Great Society sense of the term – it helped promote the independence of neighborhoods, parishes, families, and individuals who sought assimilation and respectability (which too many historians reductively and condescendingly write off as “whiteness”). It gave them something to be conservative about. Very late in the game, northern Democrats began stealing the black bloc from the GOP, and offering “the Negro” a road to respectability, too. That vote-getting project was intertwined so much with postwar liberalism (not with prewar liberalism) that it is hard to disentangle the liberalism from the opportunism. But the point is that historians need to look at black conservatism – at least the so-called social conservatism that shows up in opinion polls on abortion, crime, “school choice,” homosexuality; in membership in organizations like the Promise Keepers and the Nation of Islam; and in attendance at theologically and socially anti-liberal churches, which are often (especially in the Pentecostal wing) racially integrated. (Angela Dillard, 2001, has made a start by looking at black conservative intellectuals.) The missionary efforts of evangelical churches – plus the Mormons and, in recent years, American Muslims – in the decolonizing “third world” may have a lot to do with the attraction of recent immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America to the most conservative social institutions here. If these institutions are politicized, they could provide a great windfall for the shrewd Republican or Democrat willing to campaign and patronize for their vote.

The rise from poverty after the 1930s affected most Americans – not just the assimilating ethnic groups. Whether that rise was embourgeoisement of the working class or proletarianization of the middle class, or both, conservatives simply had to point out that most Americans now felt they had something to lose – something to con-
serve. Barbara Ehrenreich evoked the rising class consciousness of the professional-managerial class in the late 1970s – its awakening from the boom-generated illusion that it lived in a classless society (1989). American historians love to use the word class, but they lack Ehrenreich’s supple way of recognizing its wily manifestations in social and political life, and do not respect its fundamental (definitional) distinctiveness from more popular classifications like gender and race.

Historians are much better than they used to be at handling the wily manifestations and fundamental distinctiveness of religion. Patrick Allitt (1993) and Lisa McGirr (2001) are good at incorporating the restructuring of American religion into their accounts, but few other historians are considering the possibility that religion – belief in the day-to-day presence in our world of a transcendent, personal, and all-powerful Other – may, with some independence of economic interest or ethnic identity, determine political and social action. Historians need to look into that possibility more.

Much scholarship remains infected with the pathologizing tendency of Bell and Hofstadter’s early work, in other words, with liberal hubris. The very focus on grassroots – i.e., on extreme – conservatism denies conservatism the central place that historians like Rossiter and Kirk tried reasonably to give it. Lisa McGirr’s grassroots history is exceptional, in that it defines the conservative masses as middle class, and not particularly racist, not particularly violent, paranoid, stingy, not particularly – to use that most evasive term – anti-modern: in other words, as average, mainstream Americans. She goes so far in depathologizing the right that one comes away from her book wondering how there could be any liberals. The key question she raises but does not answer is, what sometimes makes the rest of America vote the way Orange County always votes?

Grassrooting is a complex move by historians, who tend to lionize and apotheosize whatever they deem marginal: are they condescendingly looking down or patronizingly groping their way toward respect – or toward realism? Is conservatism now as American as Hartz thought liberalism was? In other words, has conservatism – still defined as a negative reaction to the status quo – become a catch-all term for all the various brands of cranky opposition to authority (Protestantism, Republicanism) that helped to motivate, if they did not determine, the transatlantic migrations that defined America – and that animated great social and political movements from the frontier and back-country revivals, to the Boston Tea Party, to the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian “revolutions,” the occasional slave rebellion, the greenback labor and Agrarian movements, to some forms of Progressivism and tenant farmer agitation, and finally to the Dionysian cultural ecstasies of the Jazz and Rock and Roll eras? In the most liberal nation in the world – a nation without inherited social distinctions or an established church – is rebellion, and thus historical change, always going to draw on something like conservatism?

REFERENCES

Ehrenreich, Barbara: *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).
Goldberg, Robert: *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).


Rae, Nicol: *Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans from 1952 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).


Viereck, Peter: *Conservatism Revisited* (New York: Scribner’s, 1949).

Viguerie, Richard: *The New Right: We’re Ready to Lead* (Falls Church, Va.: Viguerie, 1980).