
INTRODUCTION

The Party of Ideas?

We are the party of ideas.

—George W. Bush, 2000

THESE WORDS ROLLED OFF THE LIPS of a man who calls himself a “gut player.” A man who when asked by the conservative journalist Tucker Carlson back in 1999 to name a weakness said: “sitting down and reading a 500-page book on public policy or philosophy or something.” A man who later shocked people and made headline news by reading a book by French existentialist Albert Camus. A man who toned down his prep school roots and campaigned as a Texas populist and who, in the words of one journalist, “has been quick about cracks about intellectuals and criticisms of institutions like his own alma mater, Yale University.” A man whose own speechwriter called him “uncurious and as a result ill-informed.” A man famous for mispronouncing words and looking flummoxed when off-script at press conferences. This president—a man whom many describe as the most anti-intellectual president in postwar America—said he led a party of ideas.¹

Odd? Not necessarily. It tells us a great deal about the state of conservative ideas today, or at least it *should*. Consider the array of books about President Bush by conservative intellectuals. These men of ideas and arguments portray Bush as a tough-ass rebel, a populist hero, and a president who pisses off the liberal establishment every chance he gets. Case in point: Fred Barnes’s book, *Rebel-in-Chief: Inside the Bold and Controversial Presidency of*

George W. Bush, written before Bush plummeted in the polls and faced the brunt of the midterm elections of 2006. Barnes is one of America's quintessential conservative intellectuals who gravitated to the *Weekly Standard* during the 1990s and cut his teeth in the scream-fest of cable television talk shows. As his book title suggests, Barnes does not see Bush as a statesman (or as stately); rather, his idealized president looks like Marlon Brando mounting his motorcycle and raising hell in the iconic 1953 film *The Wild One*. For Barnes, Bush is "defiant of the press, scornful of the conventional wisdom, and keen to reverse or at least substantially reform long-standing policies." The president is "edgy" and "blunt"; he leads an "army of insurgents." He has, like most rebels, a "cool optimism" and "pugnacity" at the same time. He is certain of his cause and ready to clash with a conformist society scared of change; he is a rebel intent on remaking the world according to his own ideals, possessing an authenticity society might fail to understand but that right-wing intellectuals like Barnes *adore*. He appears, it would seem, as the true inheritor of the radical and utopian spirit emanating from the 1960s. And, as a onetime colleague of Barnes put it, President Bush has pioneered this style of rebellion all the while driving "liberals"—meaning those fuddy-dufs and establishment types—"insane."²

This populist aggression is found everywhere among conservatives, not just among intellectuals touting the president's verve. Indeed, the aggressiveness is hard to miss no matter where you turn. It emanates from the airwaves every time Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, or Sean Hannity get on to thump their arguments out. You watch it in the crazy world of political talk shows on cable television—with Bill O'Reilly's and Ann Coulter's acerbic style. And any quick look at recent conservative book titles suggests the same: *Liberalism Kills Kids*; *The Party of Death: The Democrats, the Media, the Courts, and the Disregard for Human Life*; *Liberal Fascism: The Totalitarian Temptation from Mussolini to Hillary Clinton*; *Godless: The Church of Liberalism*; and *The Enemy*

at Home: The Cultural Left and Its Responsibility for 9/11. These titles indicate that conservative writers still see themselves—even after conservatives have won every level of political office in the United States during the early twenty-first century, created numerous conservative media outlets, and turned the Supreme Court in a conservative direction—as embattled populists ready to combat a monstrously powerful liberal elite. *Rebels all*.

Conservative style today is tough, brash, and by many accounts, not very *conservative* sounding. After all, isn't conservatism supposed to be about maintaining standards, upholding civility, and frowning on rebellion? There is a distinctly *American* feel to Bush and his intellectual defenders. The style is obviously populist, its pizzazz and brashness playing well to a culture of entertainment, to an audience ready to boo and jeer more than listen contemplatively. Though it purports to be traditionalist, this brand of conservatism seems more inclined to embrace rebellion and to throw away the old order. It is “bold” and daring in its pronouncements and profoundly distrustful of intellectual sophistication, typically seen as a cover for elitism or simply the doubtfulness of sissies unwilling to embrace risk. At the same time, it loves power and a sense that the world can be remade when power is acquired. It is aggressive, confrontational, and strangely utopian.

The style seems so confrontational, so—dare I say it?—akin to student protestors of the 1960s who marched with self-righteousness and self-assuredness that they were bringing utopian transformation to America. It is the party of conservatives today—not the Left—that has inherited the spirit of rebellion born during the sixties. Take President Bush and his boldest move ever. When he announced the invasion of Iraq, he seemed to suggest to Americans: *Yes, we can go into Iraq and create a perfect democracy, a new city on the hill in the Middle East, without even working very hard at it*. But it did not stop there; there was a domestic side to this vision. Bush the rebel suggested: *Yes, we can cut taxes*



while avoiding deficits and still fund the military. Yes, all would prosper if we had a society of free markets and small government (the ownership society), as human nature tends toward the good, and all will do well without help or assistance or any of those meddling social programs. Yes, we can remake the world with the ideals of democracy and freedom first and foremost. Those who doubt such things are cynics lacking moral insight, naysayers stuck in the rut of reason, or those holding up progress with their sideways and backward glances.

Bush's infectious utopianism explains the weirdest act of intellectual apostasy during the Iraq War—the self-transformation of Christopher Hitchens from revolutionary socialist to Bush supporter. Though berated by the Left today as a drunken buffoon, he is an iconic symbol for our times, especially in the world of ideas and politics. Hitchens, once a writer for the *Nation* who denounced Bill Clinton as too centrist, finds himself now supporting the Iraq War and rubbing elbows with fanatical conservatives like David Horowitz and Grover Norquist, as well as the editorial board of the *Weekly Standard*. The transition is not so strange as some would think. After all, Hitchens described missing the “Paris uprisings of 1968” as “a big regret of my life.” Now he feels he can live that revolutionary enthusiasm in the quick deposing of Saddam Hussein and the utopian dream of a democracy springing forth out of tyranny overnight. He reported loving the sound of gunfire in the streets of Baghdad after Hussein's sons were found dead; no doubt, it reminded him of the students and workers throwing rocks at the cops and denouncing the French government and higher education bureaucracies in 1968. His full-throated cry in support of the war, even as late as 2006, suggests that the true spirit of the 1960s lives more on the Right today than it does on the Left. To become a radical utopian thinker, you must move right—to where the radicalism and utopianism seem to be happening.³

So, the conservative of today is a utopian rebel. And this too: today's conservatives see themselves as hip and cool, taking their

cues, as does Bush, from Marlon Brando more than from the man in the gray flannel suit. During the 1960s, Nathan Glazer could refer to the “hip conservatism of the *National Review*.” Such a statement might have sounded odd back then, but not today. Numerous liberal critics complain that conservatives have overpowered the Left by being more humorous and cool. John Powers, for instance, once called the conservative *Weekly Standard* “breezy,” with “enjoyable writers” and “funny articles.” The prospect of reading the left-wing *Nation*, on the other hand, feels “less like a treat than an obligation” to him. Echoing this sentiment, conservative critics today write entire books about how they enjoy watching *South Park* or wearing hip clothing; others treasure trendy health foods and organic coffee. Hipness and coolness, like rebellion, are no longer the property of the Left. George W. Bush’s Marlon Brando is echoed in the conservative movement’s numerous James Deans—the grassroots “hipublicans.”⁴

Conservative intellectuals today can even sound “post-modern,” making arguments that you would expect from an English professor stoked up on deconstruction and relativism. For instance, David Horowitz, the key organizer behind a “student bill of rights” that would empower state legislatures to police classroom content for liberal indoctrination, does not sound conservative when he talks about defending right-wing students from left-wing bias on U.S. college campuses. He talks about “diversity.” To justify his initiative, Horowitz writes as follows: “Human knowledge is a never-ending pursuit of the truth” because “there is no humanly accessible truth that is not in principle open to challenge, and that no party or intellectual faction has a monopoly on wisdom.”⁵ When conservatives argue against evolution being taught exclusively in schools and in favor of intelligent design (ID) today, they too sound rather postmodern. It’s all about offering different “paradigms” to students. The leading intellectual exponent who argues that ID should be

taught equally with evolution, points out that his thinking is “dead-bang mainstream” in “academia these days.”⁶ Both Horowitz and the ID proponents rebel against the oppression of liberal hegemony, and they sound like the hipster literary critics who populate America’s English departments.

THE GOOD OLE DAYS?

This new style of rebel conservatism must have burst forth in the 1990s, or so some might think. Numerous observers on the Right have argued that Bush has perverted conservatism from what it once was. Listen, for instance, to Jeffrey Hart. He is a man of reserve, prudence, and humility, and he does not like what he sees in the presidency of Bush. He wrote a fine book about the history of conservative ideas, focusing his attention, rightfully, on the *National Review* and its editor, William F. Buckley. Toward the end of the book, he worries openly about Bush’s “military Wilsonianism” and an evangelical dogmatism that hopes to remake the world. For Hart, as for some other conservatives, Bush’s policies are not really conservative. With his command of the past, Hart finds it easy to tell a tale of declension. Put simply, the tale goes thus: We conservatives were once great in the golden, early days of the *National Review* when we had good ideas, and now we have fallen. Hart then made this implicit claim explicit in a recent piece, written for a liberal magazine. Here he argues that Bush’s desire to remake the world misses the point of William Buckley’s more intellectually principled “conservatism” that defined itself, following the teaching of the great European social philosopher Edmund Burke, as a “politics of reality.” Hart chafes at the utopian and ideological ideas expounded by America’s rebel-in-chief.⁷

Hart’s argument resonates because it is part of a mantra heard on the Right. More and more conservatives are recoiling from George W. Bush, especially after the midterm elections dealt him a serious blow or at least made his lame duck presidency lamer.

There is now a growing chorus of voices that suggest something called a “conservative soul” has been lost, that declension explains all. The talk is of “hijacking.” Christine Todd Whitman, Andrew Sullivan, and John Dean offer us this story of declension—a tale of falling from an original state of conservative grace. They act taken aback by the stridency of today’s conservative movement and Bush’s utopian radicalism. They recoil from the brash tones of Ann Coulter who thumbs her nose at civility. John Dean writes: “Contemporary conservatives have become extremely contentious, confrontational, and aggressive in nearly every area of politics and governing.” The backdrop to such a statement is that it was not always so. There was a time when the conservative soul was brighter and healthier. Andrew Sullivan, for instance, suggests he is “rescuing conservatism” from its present ill-conceived fate.⁸

The declension thesis just does not work, however. There is no betrayal of the conservative mind or soul going on today. We are witnessing instead an indigenous form of conservative thinking started more than fifty years ago that, since then, has become a permanent feature of what I will call the postwar conservative mind. Let me offer a brief example to make my point: consider a quick comparison of Ann Coulter and William Buckley. Coulter is the Right’s most noticed pundit today, whose books sell out when they hit the shelves; Buckley is the most important and high-profile intellectual, whose influence, following Hart’s own analysis, peaked in the 1950s and 1960s when the magazine he formed, *National Review*, was in its salad days. If Hart is right, you might expect a gulf between them. Coulter would play the ideological and utopian fanatic to Buckley’s staid and aristocratic conservatism and “politics of reality.” Such an interpretation could follow from the fact that Coulter was fired from Buckley’s magazine for being too controversial.

For sure, there is a difference between the two thinkers. Coulter is more snarky, and Buckley is more pleasant. Coulter is

more ignorant, Buckley is more learned. Buckley had drawn together a group of conservative thinkers to form the *National Review* when conservatives were not as popular as they are now. It is hard to imagine Coulter worrying about alliances or much of anything besides her own popularity. And it is hard to imagine Buckley saying something as wild as Coulter did about the war on terror and America's appropriate attitude toward Muslims: "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity." This too: Coulter, as much as she might think otherwise, has benefited from the 1960s, including the decade's feminism and even the decade's countercultural rebellion (she was, after all, once a Deadhead, the perfect icon of the countercultural past). And yet, with all of this in mind, Coulter is best understood as pushing the intellectual inheritance she got from Buckley one step further to make it fit a new popular culture.⁹

Buckley pioneered the conservative style of going for shock—for saying things that made readers blush. In writing *God and Man at Yale*, his first, controversial book, Buckley pooh-poohed the "so-called conservative" who was "uncomfortably disdainful of controversy." The book argued, from the perspective of a student who had recently graduated, that certain Yale professors should be "discharged" and that academic freedom was merely a "superstition" that merited little concern. Buckley could brush such temperate thinking aside and call for the overthrow of a well-established practice at one of America's oldest higher education institutions—again eliciting the idea of the conservative as rebel more than as defender of the status quo. He was ready and willing to wage war on his elders. He quoted Arthur Koestler, who encouraged people to "write ruthlessly" and then said he was not worried about the "the antagonism" his book would "evoke." Buckley knew and was right in knowing that to call for revolutionary change at Yale would paint him as a "radical" and young upstart. So be it, he suggested, because

“too many conservatives are holding back because they regard as futile the espousal of any radical measure.” In many ways, Buckley’s spirit drew from a culture in which young, white males stood disaffected from a conformist and complacent society during a decade that produced Brando and Dean and the Beats as much as men in gray flannel suits. Buckley’s message to future conservatives was this: be bold, shocking, daring, and rebellious. America’s public sphere courted controversy and wildness, values that would seem to rub up against a Burkean intellectual upholding dignified and civilized discussion. And so Buckley fired a shot heard throughout the history of the conservative mind.¹⁰

Playing to the loud and cacophonous feeling of American popular culture has served the conservative mind well. The liberal journalist James Wechsler, who debated Buckley a great deal during the 1950s, described their act as one of “vaudeville performers” for cheering and booing crowds.¹¹ The persona was solidified when Buckley created *Firing Line*, the first true pundit talk show on television back in 1966. Buckley’s model suggested that conservative intellectuals should dish out shocking and explosive fare for a culture of entertainment that would only continue to demand more. And Buckley bequeathed such a role to Coulter.

Coulter’s “vaudeville” performance has become so extreme and so shaped by the blitzkrieg world of cable television that many are not sure if they should take her seriously. After all, most intellectuals are not so quick as to design their own action figure doll. Not so Coulter. When you pull the string, the doll repeats statements she made in the past, such as: “I think we ought to nuke North Korea right now just to give the rest of the world a warning. Boom!” or “We need to execute people like John Walker [Lindh] in order to physically intimidate liberals.” As *Time* magazine pointed out, “Coulter goes on actual news programs and deploys so much sarcasm and hyperbole that she



sounds more like Dennis Miller than Limbaugh.” Her extreme stance and performative style *constitute* her intellectual substance. We witness in Coulter the culmination of the conservative intellectual movement, the “vaudeville” performance updated for the postmodern present. But, no matter what Hart suggests, reading back from Coulter to Buckley is not as difficult as some might think.¹²

Coulter and Buckley’s shared style is remarkable enough. But consider also their shared substantive concerns. They pressed themselves into similar intellectual corners. Both wrote books that, against liberal critics, defended Senator Joseph McCarthy’s search for communists. Both embraced McCarthy’s gruff attack-form of political combat, the tough guy taking it to the effete snobs and communists. Buckley scoffed at liberal characterizations of McCarthy’s “reign of terror.” Coulter echoed the sentiment in her book *Treason* and turned it up a notch. Both Buckley and Coulter described liberals as vicious attack dogs in a way that sounded vicious itself. Or else they attacked liberals as elitists who refused to debate their opponents but gave little reason to believe that they wanted to debate more than they wanted to throttle their enemies. Buckley could say that “American Liberals are reluctant to co-exist with anyone on their Right.” The statement does not sound all that different from Coulter’s arguing in *Slander* that “liberals don’t try to win arguments, they seek to destroy their opponents and silence dissident opinions.” Reading Coulter does not differ from reading Buckley as much as those who espouse declension might suppose. For sure, Coulter is more zany and confrontational, but she appears in other ways just louder and more hysterical, more appropriate for a world of blogs and cable television—a world that came after Buckley’s heyday but whose birth could certainly be seen in his own brainchild, *Firing Line*.¹³

Buckley and Coulter’s similarities encapsulate a major theme in this book. Realizing that the intellectual terrain has changed,

one can say that something called a conservative mind that has persisted throughout the years with some incessant features. This is a book that contains a tale both of continuity and change. Things like rebellious anti-intellectualism remain throughout, but an emphasis on evangelical religion grows stronger as we move toward the present. Apocalyptic rhetoric is there from the first years after World War II, but that rhetorical style amps itself up as the world of cable television and blogs become more of a reality. The conservative mind acted on history, remaining steadfast, but it was also acted on *by* history, changing in certain ways.

It might sound unfashionable to write about a conservative mind—something that sounds too metaphysical for our ears. Many would suggest a trendier term like “discourse.” But the term “mind” is more appropriate for what I want to describe here. The conservative mind, with its synapses and capacity for holding together disparate ideas, is just what I want to discuss here. As historians like George Nash have shown, the conservative mind is made up of divergent beliefs, including free-market libertarianism, traditional beliefs in religion, and a belief that the United States must act aggressively in the world. The conservative mind holds these divergent values throughout the postwar period in American history and welds them together into a unity—a unity of conflict and tension but a unity nonetheless. It provides a scaffolding on which dreams and hopes for the future are hung.¹⁴

THE CONSERVATIVE MIND AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Buckley pioneered the conservative mind and Coulter has perfected it, making it fit the increasingly brash tones of our contemporary popular culture. What critics like Hart pine for, in contrast, is a conservatism that draws on Edmund Burke, a conservatism of wisdom and tradition deeply rooted in a European context, the sort of conservatism that he is correct in assuming

George W. Bush knows very little about. It is a conservatism that others have dreamed about. Russell Kirk, for instance, seemed to yearn for it at moments. But it is the sort of conservatism that has never taken hold in America and the sort of conservatism that even Russell Kirk, as we will see, did not really hold to all the time. That's because it is a conservatism that could never work in a country where populism, democracy, and showboating entertainment are too much a part of the national identity.

It is old hat to say that America does not have the tradition or hierarchical features that Europe did and therefore cannot reproduce its style of conservatism. Liberals reminded readers of the point when criticizing Buckley and his fellow conservatives at the *National Review* during the 1950s. But what the criticism misses is how this very lack of tradition and hierarchy is a *constitutive element* of the conservative mind that *has* in fact grown up in the United States. An American love of the new and of the rebellious and confrontational (impossible to miss in our popular culture today) is a foundational feature of the nation's conservative mind. And the conservative mind has even helped contribute to the making of this culture by trying to build on it and by adding to its rebellious and populist disdain for serious and civilized argument. After all, conservatives too have learned the art of thumbing their noses at authority and cheering and booing on demand.

To get a sense of conservative dynamism, consider how many right-wing intellectuals—including some who might have wanted to become the American equivalent of Edmund Burke—are the furthest thing from traditionalists themselves. Their own lives reflect radical dynamism and change. This is clearest in a repeated narrative of conservative intellectual biography—a move from radical left to radical right. Extremism becomes the only constant for many conservative intellectuals; the virtue of vigor wins out over all others. Consider the first generation of postwar conservatives: Whittaker Chambers, Frank Meyer,

James Burnham, and Willmoore Kendall. All of them would become editors at the *National Review* (and will be discussed in chapter 1), and all moved from communism to conservatism. Or consider the neoconservatives of the 1960s and 1970s, many of them beginning as Trotskyists during the 1930s (Irving Kristol, the editor of the *Public Interest*) or “new radicals” in the 1950s (Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*). Also consider a later generation: David Horowitz (who compared himself to Chambers) and Peter Collier, as well as the editor of *First Things*, John Richard Neuhaus. All of them embraced radical politics during the 1960s and now are born-again conservatives. That is why their conservatism sounds like a carryover from their past; the *style* of 1960s rebellion serves as an excellent vessel for conservative ideas. Horowitz’s move from endorsing the Black Panther Party to saying that blacks should be grateful about slavery because it brought them to America—that trajectory serves conservative intellectuals well today. A penchant for shock is part of the conservative mind and a central feature of its makeup, producing a willingness to become “men of apocalypse,” a term Arthur Schlesinger Jr. applied to conservatives during the Cold War.¹⁵

This book assumes that conservative arguments have played a role throughout the American past, even though they became much more important in the postwar period. To say this is to give conservatives their due credit. I have heard numerous conservatives complain that they have been excluded from the central narrative of our country’s past, their contributions ignored. That should no longer be allowed to happen. But it comes at a critical price to people like Jeffrey Hart and those bemoaning the death of a “conservative soul.” For to say that the conservative mind should be at the center of American history is also to say that conservatism has ingested central features of American culture: a love of the new and rebellious, a distrust of sophistication and intellectualism, an embrace of populism that makes

“the people” the basis of all things good, a love of popular culture and its penchant for sensation and celebrity over substance. And to put the conservative mind at the center of American history—to see how it both creates and is transformed by American popular culture—is to see new contradictions and problems. To understand these contradictions and problems is central to the story I tell here.

To say that conservatism is central to American history can still pose problems for American historiography. After all, we have inherited a historical myth from the 1950s and 1960s that there really was no conservatism in postwar American history. In 1950, Lionel Trilling famously wrote that “liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition” in America. Certainly, Trilling argued, there was a “conservative impulse,” but that impulse did not “express” itself “in ideas.” Trilling, as we now know, was inaccurate. There were plenty of ideas available on the Right, and they would grow increasingly influential. If Trilling was wrong, New Left critics during the 1960s were even more wrong when they attacked liberalism as if it was the only game in town. For instance, the editors of *Studies on the Left*, one of the leading journals of the New Left, asserted in 1966, two years after Barry Goldwater’s run for the presidency, that “liberalism will remain the dominant political ideology of the large corporations and the socially disruptive programs of the ultra-right will continue to be rejected.” Rereading this statement makes most of us roll our eyes, realizing, as we do, that these authors would be proven very wrong very soon.¹⁶

Scholars have worked hard to correct this view of the past. For instance, several recent histories of the 1960s put conservatives smack dead center in the middle of the decade, showing that they were the ultimate victors in the end and that they had been building power for quite some time throughout the decade. This “revisionist” take on the past deserves to be expanded.

Anyone who casts a quick glance realizes that there have *always* been conservative ideas in the past—faith in free markets, religion, and a strong role for the United States abroad. Those ideas were present from the nineteenth century to President Bush’s administration today. You can see a streak of conservatism running through American intellectual history—moving, say, from Jonathan Edwards to some anti-Federalists to John Calhoun to the Southern agrarians of the 1930s. But something happened when America crossed over into the postwar period, and it is important to set this out at the beginning of this story.

The conservative mind greeted the postwar years with a feeling of confidence—the sort of confidence that nurtured its radicalism and conviction. There was a belief that political and cultural transformation—even of the most radical kind—was possible. This book opens with a transitional period, when conservatives were first starting to gain that assurance. In the postwar years, there were still some conservative writers who were pessimistic about Americans’ ever really accepting their brand of conservatism. Whittaker Chambers, the man who outed Alger Hiss as a communist spy, seemed gloomy about the prospect and still spoke about conservatives preserving “remnants” that might live on but would never attain power. But already by the 1950s, Chambers’s attitude seemed old and less relevant than Buckley’s optimism. And then by the 1960s, there was no room left to question. Marching ahead with certitude seemed the only legitimate roadmap for the future.

This theme becomes clearer when we compare Buckley and the *National Review* crowd (the foundational period of this story) with the last identifiable prewar conservative movement—the Southern Agrarians. Famous for their collected set of essays, *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), these writers believed that an agrarian way of life, closely associated with the Southland, was superior to industrial capitalism. The latter operated on the basis of science and technology or, more generally, the ideal of progress.

Southern Agrarians like John Crowe Ransom upheld “antique conservatism” that challenged the “progressive” ideal of life. Ransom began his essay in the book with this evocative sentence: “It is out of fashion in these days to look backward rather than forward.” But backward these thinkers looked. If their ideals were to be beaten by the machine, they would, as the historian Richard Pells put it, announce “their secession from the dominant assumptions of industrial America.” These thinkers seemed reactionary in the deeper sense of that word, hoping to turn the clock back and suspicious that the future was likely not to be promising. If their dreams had to die as remnants, so be it; they would at least have imagined an ideal of the South as a bulwark of conservative ideas—an ideal that would last through the postwar period, but one that would change its tone and hues after the war by standing more firmly and merging with a growing sense of conservative confidence that looked forward more than it looked back.¹⁷

Richard Weaver would do the most to bring the Southern Agrarian teachings into the postwar period. But he would change them for the times. There was less talk about the South providing an alternative to industrial capitalism, more about how the South could put up a fight against civil rights legislation and the growth of federal power. That after all, was the big crisis conservatives faced during the 1950s. There was a move from the Southern gentleman ideal to the rebel yell in the 1950s. And Richard Weaver would find support for his arguments against the civil rights movement and for Southern resistance in William Buckley, who would push the rebel yell with the conviction that it could transform things for the better. Buckley, the rebel, was no remnant. He was bursting with confidence. The whole purpose behind the *National Review* was to convert the entire community to conservatism. Buckley described how his magazine would aim “at thoughtful people, at opinion makers. We feel that before it is possible to bring the entire nation around politically,

we have got to engage the attention of people who for a long time have felt that the conservative position is moribund.” To “bring the entire nation around”—that sort of project obviously took confidence, not looking backward nostalgically but forward, energetically and not debilitated with worries.¹⁸

Dumping the backward glance of the Southern Agrarians, the conservative mind also became more unified and self-conscious, willing to attack liberalism as pervasive and monolithic. With the Cold War, conservative intellectuals like William Buckley ditched their prior isolationist tendencies (which had expressed doubts about America’s capacity to do good abroad and thus was a rather gloomy and pessimistic view) for an activist foreign policy. Championing America’s role in the world required adopting the eternally optimistic spirit of America too—not the dour doubting of isolationists. Communism demanded muscular aggression; so conservative thinkers argued. By climbing out of the cramped quarters of American isolationism and throwing out nostalgia, conservative intellectuals climbed out of much more as well. The world opened up for them.

This is why, as Jeffrey Hart and others continue to point out, William Buckley is so important and why the *National Review* is the beginning of so much to come. Confidence—toughness, assuredness, and a willingness to trust that “the people” were in their camp—became the tone of the conservative mind from that point onward.

That Buckley and the *National Review* serve as the beginning of my story suggests that my story’s contours have been traced before. I will not pull any zingers here by dramatically changing the cast of characters that populate existing histories of conservative political thought. A few years ago, some suggested that everything about conservative thinking could be explained by understanding the ideas of Leo Strauss—a name only a few historians and political theorists recognized at the time. As with any claim that a major movement boiled down to one previously

obscure name, this was foolish. I will certainly emphasize some figures over others. My intent, though, is to change the lens through which we see the cast of characters we recognize as laying the ground for modern conservatism. This book intends to challenge the way we think about this movement by focusing on certain themes, not new names.¹⁹

THE CROOKED PATH OF THE
CONSERVATIVE MIND

I will begin by examining the founding generation of thinkers gathered around the *National Review*—what is sometimes called the “Old Right.” This first generation was free to think about ideas broadly and openly and helped nurture one of the most creative periods in the formation of the postwar conservative mind. My attention then gravitates toward the “neoconservatives” of the mid-1960s and 1970s—a group of thinkers who offered different ways to confront the legacy of the 1960s, one path led by Irving Kristol, the other by Norman Podhoretz, the first rejecting the spirit of that age, the latter more open to the decade’s “new sensibility.” Neoconservatives are important, and their story needs to be discussed here, but predominantly in terms of how their ideas did not fit the paths trod by the postwar conservative mind up until this point and later. Finally, after the neoconservatives, I turn to the New Right and its intellectuals—with their central credo of populism and their turn back to the path trod by the Old Right—and then finish by examining “postmodern” conservatives, the true inheritors of the utopian, radical, and (in my mind) destructive elements of the 1960s. My particular emphasis here is on prominent, public intellectuals—not academics or lower-profile thinkers. I am as interested in how these intellectuals made their ideas accessible to the wider public as I am in the ideas they were thinking about. To a large extent, I focus on style as much as substance. After all, this is a story that hopes to explain the success and

appeal of the movement—that is, how conservative ideas moved to the forefront of the American identity.

Some cautions about this book are in order. Being a book about ideas, this work does not go into great detail about the grassroots movements that were often very important in launching conservative ideas into the mainstream. With that said, these movements *will* be brought into the narrative. After all, the movements clearly informed the intellectual developments (most explicitly Senator Barry Goldwater's grassroots campaign for the presidency in 1964 and then the rise of the New Right during the 1970s). Just like leftist intellectuals, conservative intellectuals hungered for some form of agency that could help transform their ideas into reality. During the 1960s, they obviously got a sense of how this would happen, and so chapter 2 will examine Barry Goldwater's ideas. Chapter 3 will take a quick look at the New Christian Right. Still, my focus throughout this book will be on a project that, though ironically tinged with anti-intellectualism, was still overwhelmingly a project of books, articles, and arguments.

In writing a book about conservative ideas, I am not arguing that these ideas determined history. Conservatives did not seize power from the 1960s onward because of their ideas, no matter what George W. Bush or the funders of the American Enterprise Institute might proclaim. Ideas alone do not win political power; foot soldiers do, and strong candidates and good media campaigns and, most important of all, the right historical conditions (as well as weak political foes). But in pointing this out, some who emphasize politicians and movements take their arguments too far. Public intellectuals on the Right have helped push many ideas into the mainstream, transforming our national discussions in the process. Some critics downplay the role of ideas, forgetting that arguments and ideals *do* matter. And when placed in context, ideas tell us something about a wider movement. So this history of the conservative mind is presented,



grandiose as this might sound, as an explanation of conservatism writ large.

Another point about recent treatments of conservative ideas deserves mention here. It has been especially easy to dismiss and even ignore conservative ideas by reducing them to economic self-interest. In numerous political analyses done by the Left and in some intellectual histories of postwar conservatism, emphasis is placed on think tanks and the big money that flows into them. We hear how corporations look for lackeys to provide intellectual heft for tax cuts and procorporate policies. Conservatism is probusiness for sure and is certainly opposed to government regulation on principle, but it is also about cultural ideas and values that need to be taken seriously. It is the conservative mind that weaves these different ideas together. Though money certainly matters to conservative thought and can never be overlooked, ideas and arguments are still about more than money. To argue that conservative ideas are simply a reflection of economic self-interest is a profoundly limited perspective that this book hopes to correct.²⁰

With that said, I should make clear my own perspective about the history discussed here and put my own cards on the table. I am a liberal writing a book about conservative ideas. That poses a certain challenge, as I am well aware. Many histories of conservative thought have been written by sympathizers. Perhaps that was necessary. It required partisans to fight for their ideas to be taken seriously. But today, I think liberals must start to engage these ideas themselves. During the 1950s, liberals like Arthur Schlesinger Jr., John Kenneth Galbraith, and James Wechsler debated conservatives like William Buckley, James Burnham, and Whittaker Chambers. Though sometimes fruitless, as Wechsler himself suggested, the dialogue highlighted significant disagreement in American political culture and helped define two important set of ideas. Though it is more difficult to reenergize this debate today, owing to the shrillness of so much conservative

rhetoric—one of Coulter's books is titled *How to Talk to a Liberal (if You Must)*—liberals must try. This volume is a small step in that direction.

This book has been written during a period of conservative ascendancy. Though it focuses on how this ascendancy took place—how the conservative mind made itself appealing—it also points to some problems endemic to the conservative mind. As a liberal historian, I will do my best to treat conservative ideas fairly. But I will also make clear what conservatives have gotten wrong about the tradition that I write from—the American liberal tradition. I should point out that I have done the same thing in previous treatments of the radical Left and its criticism of liberalism. I do so because I have never believed that the roles of historian and critic can or should be sharply divided. And this is especially true when one side of a debate has won so much influence over the years. Explanation and criticism should act in concert. My book will treat the intellectual tradition with the level of seriousness it deserves—enough seriousness, I believe, to show where it has succeeded on its own terms and failed on others, and where it has helped transform our view of our political future.