About The Author:
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General Overview:
Modern conservatism is a relatively recent political order, stemming from a divide forced by the New Deal. In The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism, Farber examines the history of conservatism by focusing on the lives and careers of six leaders at the heart of the modern conservative movement: Robert Taft, William Buckley, Barry Goldwater, Phyllis Schlafly, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. By examining the work of these figures, Farber argues that while liberals have insisted on the primacy of equality in the pursuit of justice and argue that economic liberty and the free market must be restrained to assure that equality, conservatives instead have believed that a disciplined, well-ordered society can and must be built on the proven economic power of the free market, a firm patriotism, traditional religious faith, and long-standing cultural precepts.

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Robert Taft: The Gray Men of Modern Conservatism and the Rights of Property

As the age of Roosevelt ended in the 1930s and 1940s, conservative politics and policies were championed by politicians who were men of good fortune – rich, privileged, talented, and accomplished. Senator Robert Taft stood at the forefront of this conservative corps. The son of President William Howard Taft, he castigated the New Deal for its big-government, welfare-state, market-regulating ways. He insisted that economic liberty was Americans’ constitutional birthright.

Taft found his moment in the years after World War II, when he led the effort to stop the expansion of the New Deal state and forge an outspoken conservative, anti-liberal Republican Party.

Taft believed that the Constitution aimed, above all, to protect property from the machinations of economic levelers or financial manipulators. In a speech made while he was running for Senate in 1938, Taft blasted New Dealers for disregarding the Constitution in their reckless pursuit of socialistic measures. He intertwined three critical themes of modern conservatism: fealty to the property-preserving original intent of the Constitution, contempt for social-experiment-loving intellectual elites who would disregard tradition, and a reverence for the “Anglo-Saxon race.”

By the early 1940s, the Taftian persuasion was primarily, but not solely, a Republican one. Both Democrats and Republicans were internally debating the reach of the federal government in the American economy. However, most Democrats broadly agreed that Washington should play a major role in safeguarding Americans’ economic security and prosperity. Taft was disgusted by Roosevelt’s and the Democrats’ presumption. As Taft understood it, conservatism was a political philosophy that championed individual liberty. By “liberty,” Taft meant that the government should give broad freedom to individuals, whether worker or employer, to pursue their economic interests if they were able enough to take advantage of free market opportunities.

In 1938, Taft ran for the U.S. Senate in Ohio and trounced the pro-New Deal Democratic incumbent. He was one of eight new Senate Republicans, but conservatives were still a decided minority at the end of the 1930s. With the outbreak of World War II soon after taking office, Taft took center stage as an advocate for keeping America out of the conflagration. An economic unilateralist, he opposed free trade and felt the country could and should go it alone economically.

When Roosevelt died and the war ended, the nation faced a time of uncertainty as to whether America would slip back into recession. Taft and his fellow conservatives saw political opportunity amid this uncertainty and targeted organized labor. As thousands of strikes broke out, Taft did his best to link President Truman and his fellow liberals to the labor unrest. The 1946 election saw the return of the Republican Party to congressional control after fourteen years.
Taft was a politician, not an ideologue. He did not want to destroy unions, but he did want to reduce their strength by increasing the power of employers. His legislation, the Taft-Hartley Act, outlawed organized labor tactics such as the secondary boycott and unionizing of shop foremen. It also gave employers increased tools to fight unionization campaigns. The Act served as a symbol of the shifting relationship between the unions, the state, and the corporations at the dawn of the postwar era.

William Buckley: Building the Conservative Political Culture

After Robert Taft died in 1953, no single figure in the political establishment carried the political torch. Americans seemed under the sway of moderate, middle-of-the-road politics. William Buckley was just 28 at the time of Taft’s death, but had already published a book attacking secular liberalism, *God and Man at Yale*.

Buckley is vital to the evolution of modern conservatism for four reasons. First, he began to disengage intellectual conservatism from the realm of elitists and reactionaries and more into the public. Second, he marketed his charming self in the national media and gave conservatism a human face. Third, he was an institution-builder who helped to create a public arena where conservative ideas and policies could be thought about and where personalities could be presented as models. Fourth, and most important, he found ways to link devoutly religious, educated Americans to the conservative political cause.

By the 1950s, most Americans had joined the anticommunist bandwagon. The question for several decades to come revolved around how to fight the communist enemy.

Conservatives, and Buckley, believed that war at home against the Left was at least as important as the battle abroad. Buckley was a firm supporter of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s efforts. In Buckley’s book, *McCarthy and His Enemies*, he articulated the position that he would hold over the next several decades: that the war at home was not so much between communists and anticommunists as it was between weak-willed naïve liberals and stout, principled conservatives. By the time the book was published, however, McCarthy had lost his hold on the American public, so Buckley’s book was perceived as zealous McCarthyism by Republican moderates.

After marrying the heiress Pat Taylor and working brief stints in both the CIA and for the conservative *American Mercury* magazine, Buckley launched America’s great magazine of conservative opinion, *National Review*. His goal with the magazine was not to
grow a grass-roots constituency, but to influence the opinion makers. He crafted an ironic tone for the magazine that made conservatives appear dashing and clever. But, he had to protect that brand of intellectually respectable conservatism from a zealotry that certain elements of the Right-wing anticommunist forces had brought to the fray, such as Robert Welch and the John Birch Society, who alleged that President Eisenhower himself was an agent of the Communist conspiracy.

Similarly, although Buckley opposed the Civil Rights Movement and supported segregationists, he and the *National Review* team generally dismissed arguments that used white supremacism to legitimate racial discrimination. Instead, they supported whites’ right to segregate and discriminate on racial grounds because the federal government had no right to meddle in the lives of individuals or the states.

All through the 1950s and 1960s, Buckley maintained and deepened conservatives’ long-standing faith in unrestrained free market economics. He took conservatives’ narrow economic policy and contributed a culture to their cause. He built cultural platforms and constituencies that gave form and substance to the more forthrightly political movement that was ready to charge forward in the early 1960s.

**Barry Goldwater: Cowboy Conservatism, Race Politics, and the Other Sixties**

Barry Goldwater helped invent modern, populist conservatism. For Goldwater, conservatism wasn’t as much an intellectual political philosophy as it was a matter of common sense: America faced dangers at home and abroad, so if you loved America, communism had to be stopped and liberty had to be preserved.

Two issues dominated national politics in the early 1960s: the threat of Soviet communism and the fight against racial injustice. Before 1960, there was little difference between conservatives and liberals on these issues.

Goldwater took things back to basics. He warned that the nation must reject big government and soft-on-communism liberals and “return to the faith in the flag, Bible, family, and self.” In 1960, Goldwater wrote (with a ghost writer) a book outlining his conservative political beliefs. His book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, surprised everyone by becoming a massive bestseller and it made Goldwater a major public figure.

The book neatly summed up three conservative virtues of the time:

1) Champion economic liberty by fighting communism, labor unions, and federally-mandated business regulation.

2) Respect tradition, even if it meant supporting segregationists.

3) Demand public order, including criticizing the disruptive protests of the Civil Rights Movement.

Between 1960 and 1964, conservatives organized in an unprecedented way to gain the presidential nomination for Goldwater. Conservatives had to beat back the efforts of the party’s Northeastern wing to select a more middle-of-the-road candidate, so Goldwater’s team had to unify and politicize a grass-roots activist base.
After President Kennedy’s assassination, President Lyndon Johnson told the American people that they could best honor Kennedy by passing national civil rights legislation. Overwhelmingly, Republicans endorsed the measure, reminding civil rights activists that the GOP was the traditional party of civil rights. Goldwater, however, disagreed, stating that the Civil Rights Act would make the federal government into a “police state,” and lead to “the destruction of a free society.” Still, the Civil Rights Act passed overwhelmingly.

A few weeks later, the 1964 Republican National Convention opened. Goldwater had the nomination in the bag. Among the groups active in the nomination fight for Goldwater were the Young Americans for Freedom and the John Birch Society.

Anti-communism, broadly understood, united most of the Goldwater volunteers. As Goldwater accepted the nomination, he had harsh words for the liberals and moderates within his own party and welcomed the Right-wing activist John Birch Society members, saying, “I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice.”

Goldwater lost big in the presidential election against Johnson, winning just six states, five of which were in the Deep South. But despite the election blowout, a powerful grassroots conservative movement aimed at national power had taken shape in his name. More than one million men and women had contributed money to the campaign or been mobilized to help.

Goldwater reduced the power of the liberal Republicans and essentially ensured that moderate Republicans would begin to lean toward the conservative movement activists. Every Republican presidential candidate after Goldwater would reach out and seek to expand the new, white conservative base in the South that Goldwater had helped to create. He inspired a generation of conservative activists and showed them the grit and political power of “old bare-knuckles frontier conservatism.”

Phyllis Schlafly: Domestic Conservatism and Social Order
Born in 1924, Phyllis Schlafly’s parents experienced economic hardship during the Depression, but scorned New Deal work relief programs. Schlafly earned a M.A. in political science from Radcliffe before even turning 21, and afterward became a researcher at the American Enterprise Association, a pro-business conservative think tank. After a year there, she returned to St. Louis, where she began to work on Republicans’ campaigns. When she married Fred Schlafly in 1949, she quit work and began having children, six in all. While a stay-at-home mother, she continued her political work with her husband’s blessing and in 1952 ran for Congress as a housewife candidate. She lost that race in the general election, but threw herself into the fight against communism.

In the anticommunist movement, women filled the grassroots, activist base. These wives and mothers dedicated themselves to ridding their children’s schools of teachers and textbooks they perceived to be threats. In 1958, Schlafly, her husband, and her sister-in-law formed a national Catholic organization, the Mindszenty Foundation, dedicated to fighting communism. Schlafly oversaw its education programs and warned followers
through its publications to beware of communist influences in television, movies, and public institutions.

In the late 1960s, after Goldwater’s failure, feminism trumped anticommunism as the new cause. While a general notion of gender equality unified most feminists, by the early 1970s there was much that divided and factionalized the women’s liberation movement, including the roles of capitalism, religion, sexuality, and family life. Nearly all feminists, however, supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) for women.

Between the House and Senate’s vote on the ERA, Schlafly denounced the proposed Constitutional amendment. She argued that since women have babies and men don’t, society is thus organized to protect women so that they may properly raise their children. She argued that the ERA would destroy America by (1) making women subject to be drafted into the military; (2) end women’s rights to financial support from their husbands, making it possible for a husband to demand his wife go to work; and (3) end a woman’s near-automatic right to custody of her children in the event of a divorce.

Schlafly worked with members of Congress, but knew that the real battle was at the state level, where the ratification fight would be waged one state at a time. She held workshops, set up chapters of her STOP ERA organization, and traveled from state to state. She taught these new conservative activists how to raise money, get publicity, make politicians pay attention, and connect with other women who had never done anything political before.

While fighting the ERA, Schlafly was creating a powerful activist base for the larger conservative movement. By the late 1970s, Schlafly and her supporters had stopped the forward progress of the ERA and successfully lobbied several state legislatures to rescind previous passage of the amendment. She also worked to join her legions’ battle against the ERA to other cultural battles, including the legalization of lesbian and gay marriage.

**Ronald Reagan: The Conservative Hero**

Before Ronald Reagan, the biggest champions of modern conservatism were naysayers who talked of fear and even doom. Reagan, however, pictured conservatism as a forward-looking and optimistic crusade, which made him the most successful conservative of them all.

Reagan was born of poor beginnings, but made his own luck and embraced the world as he found it. From the late 1930s to the early 1950s, Reagan was a liberal Democrat, a “New Dealer to the core.” How, then, did he turn to conservatism?

In the beginning, there was the anticommunist cause. Most liberals in the late 1940s were just as anticommunist as most conservatives. But even early on, Reagan was disappointed by the reticence of his liberal allies in taking on the communists more aggressively.
Reagan’s walk away from liberalism gained momentum in the 1950s as his career accelerated. He began to make big money in the movies and he felt too much was being siphoned off for taxes. He began to look at the economy from the perspective of a self-made millionaire, and for the first time ever, in 1952, he voted Republican for Eisenhower.

In the mid-1950s, Reagan signed on with General Electric to host General Electric Theater. This job made him a welcome, authoritative TV figure, and directly contributed to his growth as a conservative political figure. As part of his job, he toured GE’s many plants and began to mix more and more commentary about national politics into his speeches, trying to make the anti-tax message a populist one.

In the 1960s, Reagan was the co-chair of Barry Goldwater’s campaign in California. When Goldwater had to cancel a fund-raising speech at the last minute, Reagan filled in, giving a variation of his GE speech. Republicans asked him to repeat the speech on national television. The speech laid out his new core principles: anti-tax and anti-big government.

As a result of this speech, powerful conservative businessmen in California approached Reagan about running for governor. He expected to run on the same issues as he’d made in his speech, but also campaigned on the challenge student protestors were making against the social order. He, as much as anyone, made the crackdown against leftist social change movements of the sixties a core aspect of conservative politics. He also took on racial justice, condemning the Fair Housing Act as it restricted people’s rights to sell their homes to whomever they wanted.

Reagan was governor of California from 1966 through 1974, becoming one of the nation’s best known opponents of social change movements. His rhetoric, however, remained light, making him a populist hero for the way he made a mockery of what people feared.

During Reagan’s governorship, three issues stood out: taxes, welfare reform, and the politics of abortion. While Reagan’s number one priority was to cut taxes, his first major act in office was to call for the largest tax increase in California history, in order to move the state budget back into the black. He worked with Democrats to reduce welfare rolls (his goal) while increasing payments for most of those who remained (the liberals’ goal). As far as abortion politics went, in 1967, the California legislature passed a bipartisan measure allowing therapeutic abortions in the case of incest, rape, risk to the mother’s health, or if the fetus showed signs of serious abnormalities. Reagan instinctively opposed the bill, but allowed it to pass with the stipulation that the “serious abnormality” clause be deleted. Thanks to Reagan, Californian women had more access to legal abortions than almost any state in the country.

Between 1976 and 1980, Reagan organized for the 1980 presidential election. He easily won the Republican nomination, and then the general election.
During his presidency, Reagan’s major domestic policy successes came in the area of economics. He advocated tax cuts for all Americans, optimistic that supply-side principles would result in so much economic growth that budget deficits would take care of themselves. He experienced more difficulty trying to cut big government, since Americans did not, in reality, want to see programs they favored get the axe.

In terms of foreign policy, Reagan initially rejected détente with the Soviet Union and launched a war of words against the Soviets. He began to rethink this position after learning that some people in the Soviet Union believed this fierce anticommunism and strident rhetorical attacks were leading to an actual military confrontation. When Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power, he and Gorbachev began working together, eventually signing a treaty to reduce the number of nuclear weapons.

Throughout his presidency, Reagan took the dreams and ideas of the conservative movement that had been in the works for decades and made them conventional wisdom and the law of the land. He transformed American politics, but also contributed to the growing polarization of the American people. His social policies remained enormously divisive as liberals believed his indifference to the plight of the poor and the growing economic inequality in the United States were terrible wounds to the body politic. Even with this, however, Reagan left the conservative movement far stronger than he had found it.

**George W. Bush: The Conservative Calling and the Great Crack-Up**

When George W. Bush assumed the presidency, he inherited a massive, confident, and powerful conservative movement. Conservatives owned the Republican Party and dominated Congress and the policymaking landscape. Bush, however, was an unusual conservative leader. He found the core of his conservative values not in free-market economics but in the word of God as revealed in the Bible. During his presidency, he pursued the conservative agenda and cast aside those cultural and legal norms that he believed handcuffed America in its battle against evildoers.

While Bush’s beginnings were far from humble, he affected no sense of snobbery or exclusivity. He also turned the troubled years of his early adulthood, marked by heavy alcohol use, into a politically compelling narrative of spiritual uplift. In 1985, at 39 years of age, Bush joined the Community Bible Study group in Midland, Texas. This new faith became his bedrock. His discovery of that faith also gave Bush and his political allies a way to narrate his life, putting a positive spin on an otherwise undistinguished record.

This new image helped Bush win the governorship in Texas in 1994 over Ann Richards. He focused on tort reform in his campaign, which would become a staple conservative cause. He also focused on education reform and vowed to harden the state’s juvenile justice system. He won the election handily and a majority of Texas voters, including Hispanics, liked what he did as governor enough to reelect him in 1998.

As Bush geared up for a presidential run in 2000, he sought to soften the sometimes exclusionary language of the conservative movement to reach uncertain voters. He made
Clinton’s character a major theme of his campaign, even though he was running against Al Gore.

Despite the closeness of the Gore-Bush election results, the conservative coalition formed in the Reagan years mainly held.

In his first term, Bush kept his promise on taxes, signing the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001. Big oil and other traditional energy businesses achieved major victories as well.

Bush’s first term was running along predictable conservative lines until 9/11/2001. After 9/11, however, the Bush presidency became almost singularly focused on fighting what Bush called the Global War on Terror. He believed that the American war against “evil-doers” served a purpose far greater than basic security and that it would essentially bring the nation back to a new culture of responsibility.

Bush allied himself with an influential group of neoconservatives (“neo-cons”) who insisted that the United States had the right to act unilaterally against any and all international threats, and that the United States had a mission to spread the virtues of liberty. Bush was entranced by this vision – an opportunity to remake the Middle East – and in March 2003, went to war against Saddam Hussein. He ran for reelection focusing on the war in Iraq and narrowly won against John Kerry.

After his reelection, however, one debacle followed another.

His first failure came when he tried to privatize the Social Security system. A few months later, Hurricane Katrina hit, and the Bush administration’s inadequate response caused some Americans to wonder if conservatives’ anti-government rhetoric had gone too far.

By 2008, a majority of Americans had lost faith in the president’s decision to wage war and were disgusted by the harsh measures the Bush administration had taken against “enemy combatants.”

The last straw was the crash of the financial market, caused by a relatively unrestrained and unregulated free market.

Bush had given modern conservatism a two-term presidency, but his military, international, domestic, and economic failures dealt the modern conservative movement a mighty blow. His policy failures were conservative failures and in the eyes of many, the modern conservative movement had fallen.