

An Exaggerated Death

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By Peter Berkowitz

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In proclaiming the death of conservatism, Sam Tanenhaus misses several marks.

In contrast to progressives, who converge in believing that the top priority of politics should be more equitable government distribution of opportunities and goods, conservatives differ, sometimes sharply, about the aims of politics. While almost all conservatives in America affirm the centrality of individual freedom, social conservatives concentrate on protecting religion and morality, economic conservatives on limiting government's scope and size in accordance with free-market tenets, and neoconservatives on preserving the principles of sound government embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Often, conservatives exhibit a mix of these competing but overlapping concerns. Ever since the rise of modern conservatism in the 1950s, they have been arguing about what is most in need of conserving.

This argument embraces questions about faith, morality, government's competence, the impact of political and economic institutions on citizens' conduct and character, the roots and scope of equality, and, looming over all, the complicated relation between liberty and tradition. The argument is a defining feature of the conservative movement in America. Conserving and improving it require liberal endowments of learning and imagination.

If Sam Tanenhaus is right, that argument has come to an ugly end, in no small measure because for eight disastrous years George W. Bush governed in accordance with the worst in modern movement conservatism. Movement conservatism has died, Tanenhaus proclaims in this brief polemic, and movement conservatives killed it. By turns sophisticated, superficial, savvy, and sanctimonious, like the *New Republic* essays on which it is based, *The Death of Conservatism* does offer hope. Conservatism can rise from the dead and perform its critical role of clarifying our connection to the past, contends Tanenhaus — editor of the *New York Times Book Review* and of the *Times's* Week in Review section — provided that it recognizes its flagrant betrayal of the principles of “classical conservatism” and summons the wisdom, as it did for a brief golden era in the 1960s and 1970s, to embrace them.

Overseeing two of the nation's hallowed sources of left-liberal establishment opinion, Tanenhaus may seem an unlikely physician for the conservative soul. Yet he brings impressive credentials to the task. He authored an acclaimed biography of Whittaker Chambers, whose public renunciation of Communism, testimony implicating Alger Hiss as a

Soviet spy, and autobiographical masterpiece *Witness* became mid-century landmarks in the making of modern American conservatism. And Tanenhaus is writing an authorized biography of William F. Buckley Jr., modern conservatism's most influential figure.

Consistent with these credentials, his book illuminates the gyrating political fortunes of post-1950s American conservatism. He is right that, all too often, American conservatives have exhibited complacency about social and political ills and eschewed prudent reform in favor of rabble-rousing denunciations or quixotic longings for a bygone era. He is right that conservatives today need "to rethink and reevaluate." And he is right that conservatives would profit from reconsidering the writings and political careers of Edmund Burke and Benjamin Disraeli, founding fathers of that form of modern conservatism devoted to conserving the moral and political conditions of freedom.

At the same time, consistent with Tanenhaus's leading role in the formation and dissemination of left-liberal opinion, his critique is plagued by tendentious interpretation of contemporary politics, as if he relied exclusively on the *Times* for his news and analysis. His one-dimensional portrait of classical conservatism suggests that he prefers flattering the Left's vanities and stigmatizing the Right to elevating the quality of public discussion by learning from the past. And his diagnosis and prescription are compromised by a failure of imagination. Having taken upon himself the solemn responsibility of pronouncing life-and-death judgments about conservatism, a responsibility heightened by his powerful position as a preeminent gatekeeper of progressive sentiments and ideas, Tanenhaus proves unable to render accurately or vividly the contours of the conservative soul. And this is in part because he neglects salient features of the liberal soul.

Written quickly to capitalize on Barack Obama's historic victory — and dated before publication by its characterization of the new president as a moderate with a mandate for big change — Tanenhaus's book begins portentously: "We stand on the threshold of a new era that has decisively declared the end of an old one." The old era refers to that of "movement conservatism, the orthodoxy that has been a vital force in our political life for more than half a century and the dominant one during the past thirty years, vanquishing all other rival political creeds until it was itself vanquished in the election of 2008." In the 1950s and up to the 1980s, conservatives "spoke to the deepest issues of culture and society." Their present decline could not be more complete: "Today's conservatives resemble the exhumed figures of Pompeii, trapped in postures of frozen flight, clenched in the rigor mortis of a defunct ideology."

Tanenhaus recognizes that "conservatism has fallen on hard times before — and been declared dead — only to translate presumed defeats into starting points for future triumphs." In response to the dramatic discrediting of McCarthy in 1954, Goldwater's resounding loss in 1964, and Nixon's self-immolation in Watergate in 1974, conservatives could plausibly argue "that their vision had not been rejected so much as denied the opportunity to be tested."

Not this time: “During the two terms of George W. Bush conservative ideas were not merely tested but also pursued with dogmatic fixity.” This account of the Bush years — essential to Tanenhaus’s claim that movement conservatism is deservedly dead — will seem obviously correct to many faithful *Times* readers. But to those who, following John Stuart Mill’s strictures on the importance of considering the many sides of moral and political matters, draw on a variety of sources for information and opinion, it will seem a conventional caricature.

For starters, many conservatives — foremost among them William F. Buckley Jr. — reasonably saw in Bush’s free-spending ways, signature expansion of federal responsibility for education with the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, signing into law in 2003 of a huge Medicare prescription-drug benefit, and, after the Iraq invasion, advocacy of democracy promotion as a leading goal of American foreign policy significant departures from conservative principles. Indeed, black and white, Tanenhaus’s favorite colors for depicting the Bush administration’s domestic and foreign policy, prove quite inadequate.

For example, Tanenhaus deplores the Bush administration’s “aggressively unilateralist foreign policy.” But before invading Iraq, the Bush administration sought and won in September 2002 a bipartisan congressional authorization to use military force, and then sought and won a month later a unanimous UN Security Council resolution requiring Saddam to account for and give up his weapons of mass destruction or face “serious consequences.”

Tanenhaus derides the Bush administration’s “blind faith in a deregulated, Wall Street–centric market,” as if President Bush had not signed into law the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, which imposed extensive new regulations on the nation’s securities markets; as if lax congressional oversight of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and lax oversight of Wall Street by the then head of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Timothy Geithner, were irrelevant to the proliferation of toxic assets and the epidemic of reckless leveraging; and as if intrusive congressional regulation, supported by both the Clinton administration and the Bush administration, requiring banks to loan money for home purchases to low-income applicants previously thought unable to afford to own played no noteworthy role in pushing the nation’s financial system to the brink.

And Tanenhaus accuses the Bush administration of prosecuting a “harshly punitive ‘culture war’ waged against liberal enemies,” without offering evidence and without acknowledging, for example, that under President Bush the National Endowment for the Arts, led by poet Dana Gioia, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, led by art historian Bruce Cole, provided models of apolitical support of cultural achievement.

Tanenhaus’s scornful sketch of the Bush administration — disagreement with which he highhandedly insists provides further proof of conservatives’ proclivity to bury their heads in the sand and will only extend their exile in the political wilderness — is symptomatic of his

unbalanced assessment of conservatism's past and prospects.

So is his presumptuousness in admonishing conservatives that they should prepare to play a subordinate role in the new progressive era inaugurated by Obama's presidency. Noting that, over the last century and a half, power has tended to shift back and forth between the major parties at intervals of 30 years or so, Tanenhaus infers, as if historical laws were like physical laws and politics were like geometry, that the Left now has a lock on government and that conservatives are fated to either "shine in reflected radiance or spin futilely on their lonely unlit orbit."

To retain relevance in the ministerial role to which he believes history has consigned them, Tanenhaus counsels conservatives to renew their appreciation of classical conservatism. This apparently friendly suggestion will require an extreme change of course, because "the paradox of the modern Right" is that "its drive for power has steered it onto a path that has become profoundly and defiantly *un-conservative* — in its arguments and ideas, in its tactics and strategies, above all in its vision." To the extent Tanenhaus is correct, this is less a paradox than a truism, and a conservative truism at that: Power tends to corrupt. More paradoxical, and certainly more perverse, is that the classical conservatism to which Tanenhaus invites conservatives to return is one he has bleached of its passion for conserving.

Genuine conservatism, according to Tanenhaus, is the classical conservatism of the great 18th-century Whig Edmund Burke and the great 19th-century Tory Benjamin Disraeli. It is distinguished, Tanenhaus maintains, by opposition to ideologies of all sorts and extremism of every kind, and a devotion to achieving political stability through prudent and balanced reform of the existing order. This is correct insofar as it goes, but it goes so little of the way toward saying what needs to be said about classical conservatism as to be deeply misleading.

Although rightly celebrating Burke and Disraeli as prudent reformers, Tanenhaus says next to nothing about the standards or the goods in the light of which they believed prudent reform must be carried out. He credits Disraeli for recognizing that modern conservatism must serve "the interests, needs, and rights of the entire population." And he observes that for Burke "the task of statesmen was to maintain equilibrium between 'the two principles of conservation and correction.'" Yet Tanenhaus does not maintain equilibrium in his analysis of these principles, attending sympathetically to conservatism's correcting function while neglecting its conserving imperative. The religious faith, moral virtues, customary practices and associations, and limits on government power that conservatives, following Burke and Disraeli, seek to conserve barely figure in his book. Nor does Tanenhaus notice, much less explore, the crucial conviction, common to Burke and Disraeli, that the conservation of these goods is not only good in itself but essential to preserving liberty under law. And Tanenhaus's presentation entirely overlooks the classic account in *The Federalist* of the principles of sound constitutional government, and Tocqueville's classic account in *Democracy in America*

of both the dangers to freedom posed by democratic manners and morals and the appropriate remedies consistent with democratic justice. Both these accounts are crucial to any balanced assessment of the sustaining sources of conservatism in America.

By means of these truncations and omissions, Tanenhaus performs the amazing feat of transforming classical conservatism into progressive pragmatism. This prepares the way for his sensational claim that Bill Clinton and Barack Obama have been the leading political embodiments over the last two decades of a Burkean or classically conservative sensibility. One might as well argue that since for Marx all human beings are by nature free conscious producers and since politics depends on economics, Milton Friedman belongs among the outstanding Marxist intellectuals of the past half-century.

Imbalanced also is Tanenhaus's reduction of movement conservatism in America to a contest between realists and revanchists. Tanenhaus's realists, led by the mature Buckley, were the pragmatists who made their peace with the New Deal and sought to work within and correct the welfare state. They prevailed after Goldwater's loss and until Reagan's victory.

Following in the footsteps of the Old Right, Tanenhaus's revanchists seek to negate, tear down, and destroy the New Deal order. They brought modern conservatism into existence in the 1950s, triumphed with Reagan's election, overreached in the 1990s under Gingrich's leadership, and then in and through the Bush administration turned conservatism into the very thing Burke famously opposed, making themselves "heirs of the French rather than of the American revolution."

This would be damning if true. Certainly, revanchists or reactionaries there will always be. Yet it's ridiculous for Tanenhaus to liken Bush-era conservatives – who at best managed to reduce the speed at which government grew and who, like Gingrich and Reagan, defended limited government by appeal to principles grounded in the American Constitution — to revolutionaries armed with a novel theory and determined to overthrow an established political order and inherited way of life and replace them with something brand new.

Similarly, Tanenhaus gives great weight to unlovely impulses — opposition to social and political change, callous indifference to the suffering of ordinary people, and hypocritical defense of arbitrary privilege — as motivations for modern conservatism's original critique of FDR's enormous increase of government responsibility for regulating social and economic life. Social conservative Russell Kirk was indeed guilty of overheated rhetoric in the 1950s when he "denounced federally sponsored school lunch programs as a 'vehicle for totalitarianism' and Social Security as a form of 'remorseless collectivism.'" But to accuse him, as Tanenhaus, following Arthur Schlesinger Jr., does, of abject deference to the interests of big business is way off target, to say the least. An informed and fair assessment would reveal that Kirk's critique was animated by Burkean opinions about the threats that centralized state power poses to liberty and tradition, and that his rhetoric was inflamed by

elite opinion's derision of legitimate fears that, at that tense and dangerous moment in the Cold War, excessive centralization would push the United States dangerously in the direction of Soviet Communism, the greatest threat to liberty and tradition at home and abroad.

It is certainly fair for Tanenhaus to observe that conservatives, being skeptical of change, tend initially to resist even salutary reform. But it is remarkable that having offered classical conservatism as a cure to contemporary conservatism, and though noting that by 1966 "Conservative alarms about the New Deal were beginning to sound like prophecies about Great Society hubris," he should fail to give their due to the good classical-conservative grounds for fearing the growth of state power. Even as he purports to discern in Obama's progressive political agenda the work of a "temperamentally conservative" president, Tanenhaus recognizes little contemporary relevance for classically conservative concerns that an aggressively expanding central government will overleap constitutional boundaries, reduce individual freedom, undermine individual responsibility, straitjacket the economy, sap citizens' energy and initiative, weaken the family, erode community and local associations, and generally dissolve traditional sources of discipline and restraint without providing viable substitutes.

Neoconservatism, in Tanenhaus's view, is today a major part of the problem. He gives it credit for originating in the 1960s among disaffected liberals as a valuable corrective to progressive reluctance to examine the empirical consequences of Great Society social programs. While approving of Irving Kristol's 1970 Burkean invocation, in a special issue of *The Public Interest* devoted to capitalism, of a "combination of the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal," Tanenhaus dismisses Kristol's 1980s support for Reagan's economic program as the triumph of ideology over ideas. And he disdains contemporary neoconservatism, singling out *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol for special opprobrium.

According to Tanenhaus, Kristol's 2008 stint as a *Times* columnist illustrates how "conservative intellectuals recognize no distinction between analysis and advocacy, or between the competition of ideas and the naked struggle for power." For Kristol and his ilk, "the Democratic Party and all manner of liberals are simply the enemy, and if the majority of the country joins the 'wrong' side, then they are the enemy, too, or its manipulated pawns." I will confess that I have detected over the years partisan and polemical currents coursing through Kristol's writings — even, horror of horrors, in his *Times* columns. Still, it is amusing for Tanenhaus to denounce Kristol for having "debased" precious *Times* space by advancing a narrow political agenda given the daily diet of seething contempt for all things Republican and conservative served up by Tanenhaus's editorial-page colleagues at the *Times*, and by the paper's star op-ed columnists Frank Rich, Paul Krugman, Maureen Dowd, and Bob Herbert.

Tanenhaus's partisan and polemical condemnation of conservative partisanship and polemics will drive away conservatives and reinforce progressive prejudice. He will have himself to blame for obstructing both sides from taking to heart his crucial point about the

need to prudently balance conserving and reforming. To have achieved a prudent and balanced and thereby effective praise of prudence and balance, Tanenhaus would have needed, among other things, to go beyond affirming in passing “the vital contributions that conservatism has made over the decades” and show some interest in, engagement with, and knowledge of the competing goods conservatives seek to conserve.

In a concluding attempt to honor conservatism, Tanenhaus manages to insult it. It is “a central truth of human nature,” he asserts, that “most of us are liberal *and* conservative.” But echoing then candidate Obama’s behind-closed-doors remarks to wealthy San Francisco Democratic-party donors explaining the true source of small town Pennsylvanians’ and Midwesterners’ attachment to guns and religion, Tanenhaus asserts that most of us are conservative in that “we cling to the past.” Clinging to the past, however, does not a conservative make.

Indeed, so conceiving of conservatism exhibits the typical failure of the liberal imagination to grasp the passions, experiences, and opinions that compel the conservative soul to preserve our precious inheritance. As Burke pointed out, such preservation involves choice, because tradition is multilayered, yields conflicting instructions, and must be adapted to contemporary circumstances. And since in America, as in Burke’s and Disraeli’s England, tradition assigns paramount political importance to individual freedom, this involves a constant and unending search for a prudent balance that recognizes the mutual dependence and mutual antagonism of freedom and tradition.

The liberal imagination’s lapses in bringing into focus conservatism’s complexities derive, in significant measure, from its overestimation of the plasticity of human nature and its tendency to conceive constraints — including those of faith, virtue, family, duty, community, and order — as always hostile to freedom and never as enhancing or disciplining it.

The liberal imagination can do better. In contrast to progressive partisans jockeying for preeminence and power, friends of freedom have every interest in carefully seeking to understand conservative convictions and aspirations, not least because of conservatism’s special interest in safeguarding venerable principles and abiding goods indispensable to the well-being of liberal democracy in America.

— *Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.*