

## Reappraising the Right

*The Past and Future  
of American Conservatism*

by George H. Nash

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The historian George H. Nash begins his invaluable collection of essays on conservatism's origins, current predicaments, and future challenges by noting that, following the historic election of Barack Obama last November, the demise of conservatism was widely reported. Leading progressive thinkers including *New Yorker* staff writer George Packer, *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne, and *New York Times Sunday Book Review* editor Sam Tanenhaus were quick to proclaim that modern conservatism was dysfunctional and decadent and was rapidly descending into a death spiral. Not a few prominent conservatives worried that they might be right. A senior fellow at the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, and an associate of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies, Nash provides good reasons to think that they are wrong. He argues that the Bush presidency, which demoralized many conservatives, is fading into the past; conservatism has become institutionalized in a "burgeoning infrastructure of alternative media, foundations, research centers, think tanks, publishing houses, law firms, homeschooling networks, and more"; and most important, the original factors that gave birth to modern conservatism—dramatic expansion of the federal government, menacing foreign threats, and a popular culture hostile to faith and traditional morality—have never gone away, or have resurfaced in new guises. To be sure, Nash adroitly investigates the tensions and strains within modern conservatism. But his sobering and steadying book shows that the death of conservatism has been greatly exaggerated.

Despite having earned a Harvard doctorate, and having performed prolific scholarly labors for several decades, Nash for the most part has worked without a conventional university appointment. The author, among his six other books, of the landmark study *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (1976) and a three-volume biography of Herbert Hoover (the last of which appeared in 1996), he writes with an all-but-unparalleled command of the figures and forces that mark American conservatism. This new book may provide the single most lucid analysis available of the varieties of American conservatism and their common convictions, mutual opponents, and underlying antagonisms. It effectively illustrates that conservatism in America is, and has been since its emergence in the 1950s, "a wide river with many tributaries." And it persuasively argues that to persevere today, conservatives must learn in changed circumstances how to preserve its sources and navigate its crosscurrents.

Nash in no way minimizes the conundrums that the conservative coalition confronts. He knows that "intramural squabbling" runs deep. He appreciates that hard choices must be made: Some conservatives want to "go 'back to basics' and proclaim their principles with renewed fervor after the frustrations and muddled compromises of the past eight years." Others insist that conservatives ought to "calm down and concentrate on devising fresh public policy initiatives designed to attract a putatively centrist and pragmatic electorate." He recognizes that conservatives who put limited government first, those who put culture, morals, and religion first, and those who put national security first, are having a difficult time agreeing on priorities. And he realizes that whatever path conservatives choose, if they are to regain the confidence of a majority of Americans, they will have to develop a positive agenda and devise a compelling language appropriate to the controversies and adversaries America faces as it enters the second decade of the 21st century.

This urgent need to adjust to a changing and threatening world is, in fact, a common condition for conservatism. Nash reminds that, more than a half-century ago, Whittaker Chambers observed that, "Those who remain in the world, if they will not surrender on its terms, must maneuver within its terms." For those who seek to defend eternal truths and enduring virtues, and who also recognize an obligation to take a share of responsibility for the conduct and the direction of public life in a free society, balancing the good and the necessary is a constant imperative. Because that balancing must be artful, judicious, and not in flight from but in the service of principle, it is also a daunting task.

From the beginning, the variety of principles at play compounded the difficulties. Modern American conservatism emerged after World War II as a coalition of competing schools united by a common opponent: "There was not one right-wing renaissance but three, each reacting in diverse ways to challenge from the left."

The first renaissance, sparked by the 1944 publication of Friedrich von Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, "consisted of libertarians and classical liberals, resisting the threat of the ever-expanding State to individual liberty, free market capitalism, and the individual initiative in the economic realm." It was carried forward by, among others, Milton Friedman, Thomas Sowell, the Chicago school led by Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker, and the supply-side theorists of the 1980s.

The second renaissance was that of the "new conservatism" or "traditionalism." Alarmed by secularization and the spread of mass industrialized society, these thinkers "urged a return to traditional religious and ethical absolutes and a rejection of the moral relativism that had allegedly corroded Western values and produced an intolerable vacuum filled by demonic ideologies." Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948) and Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953) serve as foundational texts. Although neither is properly classified among the traditionalists, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin both provided intellectual support

for the new conservatives by producing ground-breaking scholarship that exposed weaknesses and blind spots inhering in modern philosophy and discovered reservoirs of wisdom in ancient and medieval thought.

The third conservative renaissance was led by anti-Communists, many of whom were ex-Communists and ex-Trotskyists. They "brought to the postwar American right a profound conviction that America and the West were engaged in a titanic struggle with an implacable adversary-communism-which sought nothing less than the conquest of the world." The towering figure among them was Chambers, whose testimony was crucial to the conviction for perjury of Alger Hiss, a distinguished member of the liberal establishment and, as the opening of the Soviet Union's archives indisputably established, a Soviet spy. Chambers's masterpiece memoir, *Witness*, examines not only the momentous military confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, but the decisive contest over man's spiritual life contained in the contest between liberal democracy and communism.

Nash enlivens his account with portraits of an intriguing cast of relatively forgotten journalists and scholars who made substantial contributions to the post-1945 conservative renaissance. These include John Chamberlain, a daily book reviewer in the 1930s for the *New York Times* who, 20 years later, became *National Review's* lead book reviewer; the brilliant and iconoclastic political theorist Willmoore Kendall; historian Forrest McDonald, a pioneer in the recovery of the Founders' intellectual outlook and political achievement; E. Victor Milione, whose leadership at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute over the course of several decades enabled it to become a home to both libertarians and traditionalists; social scientist Ernest van den Haag, who developed a conservatism that was empirical and skeptical, "grounded not in religious faith but upon a recognition of the limits of reason in the pursuit of social betterment"; and the political scientist Francis Graham Wilson, author in the early 1950s of *The Case for Conservatism*, which took issue with the already well-established consensus among university professors and throughout the elite that New Deal liberalism was self-sufficient and the only intellectually respectable alternative to communism.

At the same time, Nash makes emphatically clear that no one contributed more to the conservative renaissance than William F. Buckley Jr. Columnist, author of dozens of books of fiction and nonfiction, long-running TV talk show host, bon vivant and, most influentially, founder in 1955 of *National Review*, the flagship organ of modern American conservatism and editor in chief from its inception until 1990, Buckley robustly united in his own larger-than-life personality modern conservatism's free market, traditionalist, and anti-Communist strands. And critically, as Nash recounts, Buckley provided at the office, and in the pages, of *National Review* a welcoming home to representatives of conservatism's disputatious factions. Buckley was able to fuse them not only through the force of his extraordinary gifts but because, at bottom, they shared the conviction that 20th-century liberalism generated urgent threats to freedom at home, and blinded its proponents to grave threats to freedom abroad.

The 1960s and '70s saw the addition of two more components to the conservative coalition. Neoconservatism arose among disaffected liberals in response to the excesses of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs; the tendency on the left, which received loud expression during the Vietnam war, to blame the world's ills on America first; and the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. Nash deftly analyzes the intellectual trek made by a small but influential group of liberals led by *Public Interest* editor Irving Kristol and *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz from left to center to right. At the same time, he describes sympathetically the obstacles that original components of the conservative coalition confronted (and still confront) in welcoming into the fold those who, while opposing the left's intellectual predilections and public policies, still wish to conserve key elements of the welfare state and energetically promote liberty and democracy abroad.

A fifth component, the religious right, emerged in the 1970s and became politically potent in the '80s. Nash takes care to distinguish their perspective from that of traditionalist conservatives, with whom they share much. Whereas the traditionalists were predominantly intellectuals criticizing mass society, the ranks of the religious right are composed of ordinary people rebelling against what they regard as the pretensions and usurpations of a secular cultural elite, particularly on social issues, especially abortion. And whereas the traditionalists were disproportionately Roman Catholic, the religious right, while including Catholics and Orthodox Jews, has been predominantly a movement of evangelical Protestants.

The several essays he devotes to Herbert Hoover, a "neglected conservative sage," advance Nash's overarching argument that conservatism's vitality depends on its capacity to achieve a prudent balance. Entering the college at Stanford University the year it opened its doors in 1891, and graduating in the class of 1895, Hoover was trained as a mining engineer and prospered in business ventures in Australia and China. He turned to public life at the beginning of World War I, concentrating on relief efforts until his appointment by Warren Harding as secretary of commerce in 1921. It will come as a surprise to many readers to learn from Nash that, thanks to "his far-flung humanitarian endeavors," Hoover "was responsible for saving more lives than any person who has ever lived." Elected to the presidency in 1928 as a progressive Republican, he presided over the greatest economic catastrophe in American history and was unable, before Franklin Roosevelt defeated him in 1932, to find a way out of it. After leaving office, he became a preeminent critic of the New Deal for its massive expansion of government, and kept up his defense of individual freedom until his death at 90 in 1964.

Nash examines its many parts and shows that Hoover's career presents an "idiosyncratic blend of progressivism and antistatism" and provides a surprisingly compelling model of how to combine a passion for reform with a commitment to limited government. In what Hoover said of "true liberalism"-that it "is found not in striving to spread bureaucracy but in striving to set bounds to it"-Nash discerns an attainable and worthy goal for a true conservatism today.

But important as such a goal is, conservatism, in Nash's assessment, can hardly be limited to limiting government bureaucracy. Limited government is a means to securing individual freedom-the larger goal, Nash admiringly observes, to which America's experiment in self-government is dedicated. But neither the dedication to political freedom nor the wherewithal to maintain it and enjoy its many blessings can be assumed. So conservatives seek means, consistent with limited government and individual freedom, to nourish the taste for freedom and discipline its exercise. In other words, they appreciate the mutual dependence of freedom and virtue. Not all conservatives will agree with Nash, who embraces Tocqueville's contention, which echoes Washington's Farewell Address, that liberty "cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith." It is, however, incumbent on those who disagree to explain from where, if not in morality and faith, the virtues on which freedom depends will emerge.

However that question is decided, if it wishes to prosper and preserve freedom, a free society can neither neglect virtue nor legislate it directly. That's one important reason why "American conservatism at its Reaganite best is a combination of impulses-of realism and idealism, of prudence and hope, of worldly sobriety and faith-based aspiration." Nash's graceful and incisive exploration of the history of conservatism in America demonstrates that the need to achieve balance among rival principles and competing goods is nothing new, and in a free society, will always go to the heart of the matter.

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