

David Brooks' Requiem for Conservatism's Most Recent Death

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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Bolstered by Barack Obama's historic 2008 presidential run, leading pundits — [George Packer](#) in The New Yorker, [E.J. Dionne](#) in the Washington Post, and [Sam Tanenhaus](#) in The New Republic — proclaimed the death of conservatism. Such announcements are back in fashion and no less suspect.

Then as now, the Republican Party, and America itself, faced grim times. After eight years of George W. Bush's presidency, the United States remained bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan. An epic economic meltdown erased savings, wiped out jobs, and subverted confidence in the free market. Bush hatred tormented progressive minds. And the old Reagan synthesis — cut taxes, deregulate, respect the religious right's concerns, and stand tall against the Soviet challenge — did not readily translate into policy prescriptions for the perturbations afflicting early 21st-century Americans.

Meanwhile, the country's first African American president presented seemingly grand opportunities for national renewal. During his first month in the White House, Barack Obama's [job-approval numbers](#) reached the mid-60% range. A sizeable majority of Americans — including many who had not voted for him — were eager to give the new president a chance. They wished to show themselves, their fellow Americans, and the world that the United States was a tolerant and pluralist society in which character, intelligence, and policies rather than race determined fitness for high office.

To some of America's best and brightest political commentators, all this spelled the terminal decline of America's post-World War II conservative movement. But their conviction that its supposed death was well-deserved distorted their judgment about conservatism's capacity to adapt to new circumstances and reinvigorate its appeal. Likewise, a hostility to conservatism also inflated progressives' confidence in their side's ability to govern wisely and maintain popular support.

Within a few months, the Obama administration's overreach amid the economic crisis — epitomized by a massive stimulus package that provided little stimulus and an expensive attempt at comprehensive health-care reform instead of the incremental steps that would have received bipartisan support — energized the nascent Tea Party. A grassroots movement committed to individual freedom and limited government, the Tea Party injected energy and organization into conservatism. In the 2010 midterm elections, Tea Party activists drove a decisive rebuke to the Obama administration. Republicans seized control of the House with a 63-seat gain. In the Senate, the GOP added six seats though the Democrats held on to their majority in the upper chamber.

Conservatism was back, if with a decidedly populist aspect. Obama won reelection in 2012, but the IRS's 2013 admission that it had targeted conservative organizations associated with the Tea Party — denying or slow-walking their applications for tax-exempt status — stoked conservative distrust of the federal bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. In 2014, Republicans regained control of the Senate. And in 2016, the discontentment of working-class and middle-class Americans that propelled the Tea Party found an unlikely tribune in billionaire businessman and reality-TV star Donald Trump.

For many progressive intellectuals, Trump's ascendancy within the GOP, his mobilization of blue-collar workers and those without college degrees against the Republican as well as the Democratic establishment, and his continued support among the base despite his loss to Joe Biden last year sounded again the death knell of conservatism. Yet an alliance with ordinary people — non-

intellectuals and instinctive patriots — has been [an essential feature of modern conservatism](#) from Burke to William F. Buckley, Irving Kristol, and beyond.

In the current issue of *The Atlantic*, David Brooks offers another eulogy for conservatism. But this one is darker and angrier than those following the George W. Bush era. In contrast to Packer, Dionne, and Tanenhaus, Brooks argues that conservatism has not so much collapsed or ended as it has come back to life as a rampaging Frankenstein monster. “To be a conservative today,” contends Brooks in “[What Happened to American Conservatism?](#),” “you have to oppose much of what the Republican Party has come to stand for.”

Jeffrey Goldberg left no room for doubt in his [Editor’s Note](#) to *The Atlantic*’s January/February 2022 issue — which, in addition to Brooks’ essay, featured several more along the same lines — that the Republican Party, the principle vehicle of conservatism in American politics, represents an existential menace. “It is enough to say that its most recent, and most catastrophic, turn — toward authoritarianism, nativism, and conspiracism — threatens the republic that it was founded to save,” wrote Goldberg. Because “[t]he leaders of the Republican Party — the soul-blighted Donald Trump and the satraps and lackeys who abet his nefarious behavior — are attempting to destroy the foundations of American democracy,” the *Atlantic*’s editor in chief sermonized, we are “closer than most of us ever thought possible — to losing not only our democracy, but what’s left of our shared understanding of reality.”

Brooks laments the hideous deformations undergone, in his eyes, by the school of thought he loved as a young man. Three decades ago, while learning the ropes as a politics and crime reporter in Chicago, he found in the Burkean conservatism of the movement’s intellectuals “a deeper and more resonant account of human nature, a more comprehensive understanding of wisdom, an inspiring description of the highest ethical life and the nurturing community.” That conservatism stressed the limits of reason; the complexity of social affairs; the hubris and dangers of central planning; the

benefits of gradual, incremental reform; and the dependence of free and democratic institutions on the moral sentiments cultivated by tradition, family, faith, and community.

These days, however, “what passes for the worldview of ‘the right’ is a set of resentful animosities, a partisan attachment to Donald Trump or Tucker Carlson, a sort of mental brutality,” according to Brooks. “The rich philosophical perspective that dazzled me then has been reduced to Fox News and voter suppression.”

Worse, Brooks asserts, American conservatism’s embrace of Trump reflects not merely deviation from Burkean principles, but also fundamental flaws inscribed in conservatism’s core convictions. First, Brooks maintains, American conservatism seeks to preserve “America’s racial arrangements,” which, he writes, “are fundamentally unjust.” Second, American conservatism focuses on economic self-interest and enlarging freedom at the expense of the welfare of citizens’ souls. Third, American conservatism exploits the decay of national confidence to prosecute a “holy war” in the service of a “Trumpian authoritarianism” revolving around “hatred of the Other.”

Despite his professed loyalty to the best in Burke, there is nothing of the English statesman’s appreciation of the complexity of social and political life in Brooks’ dyspeptic characterization of conservatism in America today.

Yes, Trump is vain and thin-skinned. Yet rather than adopt an authoritarian agenda, the 45th U.S. president cut taxes, curtailed regulations, restored the rule of law to America’s southern border, appointed judges committed to interpreting rather than rewriting the law, and gave states room to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yes, some thugs and kooks rallied around Trump. Meanwhile, other thugs and kooks gravitated to the Democratic Party. The swing voters who were decisive in Trump’s 2016 victory, moreover,

supported him not out of “hatred of the Other” but in self-defense against the scorn that progressive elites directed at them, their communities, and their faith.

And yes, many conservatives feel embattled. But not, as Brooks ridiculously alleges, because “they need to continually invent existential foes — critical race theory, nongendered bathrooms, out-of-control immigration.” Conservatives and Trump voters feel embattled because, even as a New York Times columnist writing in *The Atlantic* dismisses their political concerns as a matter of benighted and feverish imaginations, they can see with their own eyes that schools [indoctrinate students in critical race theory](#); that progressive elites make transgenderism a signature cause not to protect the basic rights of a tiny minority but as a lever to overturn traditional moral limits and teachings; and that since Joe Biden entered the White House, soaring numbers of migrants have illegally crossed the nation’s southern border.

Not the least reason to cultivate the conservative spirit is to counter the extraordinary excesses on the left to which progressives, in their recurring rush to bury conservatism, blind themselves and the nation.

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