

The Right Stuff

The Right: The Hundred Year War for American Conservatism,

Matthew Continetti, Basic Books, 2022, pp. 485, \$32.00 hardbound.

Edward S. Shapiro

“The conservative movement has been for me more than an abstraction,” Matthew Continetti noted. “It has been my life.” He is a member of the conservative movement’s royalty, or at least of its neoconservative version, having married a daughter of William Kristol and granddaughter of Irving Kristol. Continetti’s association with conservatism began while he was an undergraduate history major at Columbia University where he read widely on the movement. After graduation he moved to Washington where he became the opinion editor of the *Weekly Standard* and the founding editor of the *Washington Free Beacon*.

He now holds the Patrick and Carlene Neal Chair in American Prosperity at the American Enterprise Institute, one of America’s leading conservative think-tanks.

Continetti admits that he is “not an entirely disinterested observer” when it comes to chronicling the history of the conservative movement. He publishes frequently in conservative magazines such as *Commentary* and the *National Review*, as well as in the *Atlantic*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, and his writings have increasingly been concerned with the threat to traditional conservatism he perceives coming from Donald Trump and populism. “The triumph of populism,” he wrote in October, 2016, a month before Trump’s election, “has left conservatism marooned, confused, uncertain, depressed, anxious. We might have to return to the beginning to understand where we have ended up.” *The Right* is his contribution to alleviating conservatism’s contemporary discontents, and for him

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the beginning is the 1920s with the presidencies of Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge followed by the conservative eclipse during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s.

Readers expecting a history of conservative ideas in America will be disappointed by *The Right*. Rather, it is a lively, well-written, and engrossing chronicle written for the general reader of the interactions between conservative intellectuals such as William F. Buckley, Jr., Russell Kirk, Whittaker Chambers, Norman Podhoretz, Milton Friedman, Leo Strauss, and Irving Kristol, and conservative politicians such as Robert Taft, Dwight Eisenhower, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush.

The Right exhibits some of the challenges historians have faced in analyzing American conservatism. The most important of these is showing that "American conservatism" is not an oxymoron. What, sceptic ask, do conservatives seek to conserve in the most dynamic, technologically oriented, individualistic, democratic, and capitalistic of all major advanced nations? Conservatives supposedly respect the past and

revere hallowed institutions, but Americans venerate motion, movement, and change. Are not the lessons of the past irrelevant for a nation which prizes newness? What relevance could conservatism possibly have for such a nation? In 1950 a man was arrested in the Midwest for creating a public commotion. A witness stated that his offense was "using abusive language, calling people conservative and all that."

The idea that conservatism was un-American was famously captured in Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1841 lecture "The Conservative." Emerson identified conservatism with "the reverend hierarchies and monarchies of the most ancient world," while, in contrast, America was a land of "innovation" and innovators. This dichotomy between conservatism and innovation "is the opposition of Past and Future, of Memory and Hope, of the Understanding and the Reason. . . . Innovation is the salient energy; Conservatism is the pause on the last movement." "There is always a certain meanness in the argument of conservatism," Emerson concluded. Conservatism "is always apologizing, pleading a necessity, pleading that to change

would be to deteriorate,” while “innovation is always in the right, triumphant, attacking, and sure of final success.” “Conservatism goes for comfort, reform for truth. . . . Conservatism makes no poetry, breathes no prayer, has no invention; it is all memory.”

This belief in the irrelevance of American conservatism has been particularly strong within the American academy. In his 1950 book *The Liberal Imagination*, the prominent literary critic Lionel Trilling famously claimed, “In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation [T]he conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.” Ironically, Trilling wrote these words at the same time that the post-World War II conservative intellectual revival was occurring. This revival

did not convince those for whom American conservatism was an anachronistic import.

Among these was the historian Richard Hofstadter, a Columbia University colleague of Trilling. His famous article analyzing the condition of American conservatism, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” appeared in November, 1964, the same month that Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate for president, suffered the greatest presidential electoral defeat in American history. Hofstadter argued here that the conservatism espoused by Goldwater and his supporters was part of a fringe movement comprised of psychologically damaged individuals. “For Hofstadter,” the historian Jennifer Mittelstadt recently noted, conservatives were “errant quixotic figures” and “the language and thoughts of the right stood on the ideational margin—not just the far end of a political spectrum or psychology, but of American life, where frustrations, failures, left-behind-ness relegated them to the edges of American society and influence.”¹ Americans on

1 Jennifer Mittelstadt, “The Metaphor of the Fringe in the Historiography of the American Right,” *Reviews in American History*, 50 (June, 2022): 227-31.

the far left, by contrast, have not been subjected to such psychologizing. It is thus not surprising that when Clinton Rossiter published in 1982 a revised edition of his 1955 history of American conservatism, he gave it the following subtitle: "The Thankless Persuasion."

The second problem facing historians of American conservatism is one of definition. For European conservatives from the French Revolution on, conservatism has meant defending the *ancien regime* and the rights and privileges of aristocrats, monarchs, clerics, and various economic interests. This can hardly be the mission of any American identifying as a conservative. Rather, Continetti argues, American conservatives have had two roles. The first has been to alleviate the maladies caused by liberal excesses, to rescue liberalism "from weakness, woolly-headedness, and radicalism." The second has been to defend the original meaning of America as embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address. "The preservation of the American idea of liberty and the familial, communal, religious and political

institutions that incarnate and sustain it," he claims, "is what makes American conservatism distinctly American." In other words, American conservatism is conservative because it defends the liberal principles of 1776 and is an amalgam of "anti-statism, constitutionalism, patriotism, and anti-socialism."

The fluid meaning of the word "conservative" poses another challenge to historians of American conservatism. An insider joke among conservatives is that the definition of a conservative is anyone who is concerned with defining conservatism. A century or so ago conservatives such as Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio looked askance at foreign entanglements which, they feared, could drag America into European wars, increase taxes, expand government controls over the economy, and threaten civil liberties. Today, by contrast, self-styled conservatives such as the editorial writers of the *Wall Street Journal* are among the biggest cheerleaders for expanding the Pentagon budget and involving America in foreign quarrels. The meaning of liberalism has also changed. In the nineteenth century a liberal believed in

small government, opposed tariffs and other restraints on commerce, and were staunch individualists. Today's liberals favor high taxes, the expansion of centralized government, group rights, and an ever-expanding list of social welfare programs.

The diversity within conservative ranks poses the final challenge to historians of American conservatism. Continetti is well aware of the problem of defining conservatism and notes that there "is not one American Right; there are several." American conservatism has contained a host of competing and often irreconcilable factions, each claiming to be the authentic voice of conservatism. George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (1976), the starting point for anyone seeking to understand post-World War II American conservatism, argues that modern American intellectual conservatism in the decades immediately after World War II consisted of three major groups: Cold War warriors, libertarians, and social conservatives. The libertarian emphasis on the freedom of the individual clashed with the social conservatives' stress on tradition, moral norms,

and religion, with the former seeking to create a free society and the latter seeking to create a virtuous society. Another division was between the Cold War warriors who demanded a strong military to confront the Soviet Union and the libertarians who wanted to reduce military expenditures and shrink the political and military bureaucracy of Washington.

When it came time to publish a revised edition of Nash's book in 1996, the cacophony among conservatives had become even louder with the addition of paleoconservatives, neoconservatives, and the Religious Right. The conflict between the paleoconservatives and neoconservatives, for example, involved the extent to which conservatives should accept the reforms of the New Deal and the Great Society and support efforts to spread the benefits of democracy and capitalism to other parts of the globe. The paleos said no to both.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 intensified conservative discord even more. Conservative intellectuals were now divided between anti-Trump conservatives who wrote for the *National Review*, *Commentary*, and the

Wall Street Journal and the pro-Trump nationalist populist conservatives who published in the *Claremont Review*. For Continetti, this is simply the latest manifestation of a century-long struggle between traditional conservatives and the faux conservatives of the populist camp, and he does not shy away from discussing the darker strains within the American Right stemming from populism. Prior to World War II the fundamental division between America's political conservatives had been between nationalists such as Theodore Roosevelt, who supported the conservation movement and industrial tariffs, and free market purists suspicious of government involvement in the economy. Populism within conservatism did not rear its head until decades after the end of World War II, and it is questionable whether the populist impulse, which plays so large a role in Continetti's historical schema, deserves to be included in any history of conservatism. George Wallace, Huey Long, and Rev. Charles Coughlin were hardly conservatives, and neither, for that matter, is Bernie Sanders, who speaks for the populist left. The conservative

credentials of the other populists discussed by Continetti are equally suspect.

Continetti's contempt for Trump, whom he sees as the doyen of today's populism, is visceral and at times intemperate. He noted in 2016, for example, that Trump was "a misogynist and bigot, an ignoramus and doofus," and the latest in a long line of populist political figures who have undermined the intellectual credibility of conservatism and reduced its electoral appeal. He is justly skeptical of Trump's conservative bona fides and believes that "not only educated elites but also a majority of the American people" view him with "contempt." Continetti sees Trump as intellectually vacuous, ignorant of history, and slothful, and believes his disdain for fellow Republicans, certain religious figures like the Pope, and other important American institutions is disqualifying for anyone calling himself a conservative politician. One wonders to what extent Continetti's derision of Trump has been due to the marginalization of neoconservatism after the 2016 election.

Continetti's indictment of Trump is powerful, but it fails

to place him within the proper historical context, and he is silent on those factors which have made Trump attractive to a minority of Americans. Trump was hardly an ideological conservative, but many of his actions pleased conservatives, particularly his three nominations to the Supreme Court, his reluctance to become involved in foreign entanglements, his withdrawal of the United States from the Paris climate agreement, his opposition to affirmative action and the 1619 Project, his support of the efforts of this Department of Education to rein in the excesses of Title IX, and his canceling of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action regarding Iran's nuclear program. The historical context which explains the rise to power of Trump and Trumpism was not populism but more recent factors such as the exporting of much of America's industrial infrastructure overseas; the growing "woke" disdain toward traditional American values regarding religion, work, sex and gender, the family, law enforcement, and the military; and the seemingly endless wars which have placed the sons, husbands, wives,

sisters, and brothers of blue collar America at risk.

Continetti believes that Trump's penchant for agitation, demagoguery, and general mayhem has left conservatism in a deep funk. Trump left office in 2021, Continetti writes, with

“the Republican Party out of power, conservatism in disarray, and the Right in the same hole it had dug with Charles Lindbergh, Joe McCarthy, the John Birch Society, George Wallace, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Buchanan. Not only was the Right unable to get out of the hole; it did not want to.”

Historians, he predicts, will look back on the Trump era through the lens of the Capitol riot of January 6, 2021 (which Continetti calls the “insurrection”) and will emphasize Trump's “tortured relationship with the alt-right, his atrocious handling of the deadly Charlottesville protest in 2017, the rise of political violence during his tenure in office, and his encouragement of malevolent

conspiracy theories.” Historians are not known for the accuracy of their predictions, and, as the Talmud warns, after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem prophecy became the province of children and fools.

The 2022 midterm election, however, indicated that the status of American conservatism is not as bleak as Continetti suggests. Republican candidates for office supported by Trump did poorly, while his opponents, or potential opponents, did much better than expected. While Trump remains the leading Republican candidate for president, within the American Right there seems to be extensive disdain for the depredations of Trump and widespread support for a sensible political conservatism. Entangling the conservative movement from Trump and Trumpism won’t be easy, but, Continetti argues, it is necessary if American conservatism is to have any future.

Continetti says in the last sentence of his book that “the job of a conservative is to remember.” But the crucial question is what should be remembered besides the basic American political texts? Should it be Adam Smith’s

The Wealth of Nations or Louis de Bonald’s *The True and Only Wealth of Nations; I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* or Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*; the first amendment to the United States Constitution or R. R. Reno’s *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*; James Burnham’s *The Coming Defeat of Communism* or Pat Buchanan’s *Suicide of a Superpower*; Marvin Olasky’s *The Tragedy of American Compassion* or Irving Kristol’s *Two Cheers for Capitalism*.

Remembering should certainly include recalling those conservative revivals coming after conservatives had been relegated for long periods of time to the political wilderness. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984, the founding of various conservative think-tanks throughout the length and breadth of the United States, the presence of respected conservative politicians in Washington, state legislatures, and governors’ mansions, and the publication by conservative scholars of serious books in the humanities and the social sciences should encourage conservative devotees to carry on despite recent defeats that Continetti attributes to Trump