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The Triumph of the Right

I. Introduction

Activist Phyllis Schlafly campaigns against the Equal Rights Amendment in 1977. Library of Congress.

Speaking to Detroit autoworkers in October 1980, Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan described what he saw as the American Dream under Democratic president Jimmy Carter. The family garage may have still held two cars, cracked Reagan, but they were "both Japanese and they're out of gas."[1] The charismatic former governor of California suggested that a once-proud nation was running on empty. But Reagan held out hope for redemption. Stressing the theme of "national decline," he nevertheless promised to make the United States once again a glorious "city upon a hill."[2] In November, Reagan's vision triumphed.

Reagan rode the wave of a powerful political movement referred to by historians as the New Right. More libertarian in its economics and more politically forceful in its conservative religious principles than the moderate brand of conservatism popular after World War II, the New

Right had by the 1980s evolved into the most influential wing of the Republican Party. And it could claim increasing credit for Republican electoral successes. Building on the gradual unraveling of the New Deal political order in the 1960s and 1970s (see Chapter 28), the conservative movement not only enjoyed the guidance of skilled politicians like Reagan but drew tremendous energy from a broad range of grassroots activists. Countless ordinary citizens—newly mobilized Christian conservatives, in particular—helped the Republican Party steer the country rightward. Enduring conflicts over race, economic policy, sexual politics, and foreign affairs fatally fractured the liberal consensus that had dominated American politics since the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, and the New Right attracted support from Reagan Democrats, blue-collar voters who had lost faith in the old liberal creed.

The rise of the right affected Americans' everyday lives in numerous ways. The Reagan administration's embrace of free markets dispensed with the principles of active income redistribution and social welfare spending that had animated the New Deal and Great Society in the 1930s and 1960s. As American liberals increasingly embraced a "rights" framework directed toward African Americans, Latinos, women, lesbians and gays, and other marginalized groups, conservative policy makers targeted the regulatory and legal landscape of the United States. Critics complained that Reagan's policies served the interests of corporations and wealthy individuals and pointed to the sudden widening of economic inequality. But the New Right harnessed popular distrust of regulation, taxes, and bureaucrats, and conservative activists celebrated the end of hyperinflation and substantial growth in GDP.

In many ways, however, the rise of the right promised more than it delivered. Battered but intact, the social welfare programs of the New Deal and Great Society (for example, social security, Medicaid, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children) survived the 1980s. Despite Republican vows of fiscal discipline, both the federal government and the national debt ballooned. At the end of the decade, conservative Christians viewed popular culture as more vulgar and hostile to their values than ever before. And in the near term, the New Right registered only partial victories on a range of public policies and cultural issues. Yet from a long-term perspective, conservatives achieved a subtler and more enduring transformation of American politics and society. In the words of one historian, the conservative movement successfully "changed the terms of debate and placed its opponents on the defensive."[3] Liberals

and their programs and policies did not disappear, but they increasingly fought battles on terrain chosen by the New Right.

II. Conservative Ascendance

The Reagan Revolution marked the culmination of a long process of political mobilization on the American right. In the first two decades after World War II the New Deal seemed firmly embedded in American electoral politics and public policy. Even two-term Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower declined to roll back the welfare state. To be sure, William F. Buckley tapped into a deep vein of elite conservatism in 1955 by announcing in the first issue of *National Review* that his magazine "stands athwart history yelling Stop."[4] Senator Joseph McCarthy and John Birch Society founder Robert Welch stirred anticommunist fervor. But in general, the far right lacked organizational cohesion. Following Lyndon Johnson's resounding defeat of Republican Barry Goldwater—"Mr. Conservative"—in the 1964 presidential election, many observers declared American conservatism finished. *New York Times* columnist James Reston wrote that Goldwater had "wrecked his party for a long time to come."[5]

Despite these dire predictions, conservatism not only persisted, it prospered. Its growing appeal had several causes. The expansive social and economic agenda of Johnson's Great Society reminded anticommunists of Soviet-style central planning and deficits alarmed fiscal conservatives. Race also drove the creation of the New Right. The civil rights movement, along with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, challenged the racial hierarchy of the Jim Crow South. All of these occurred under Democratic leadership, pushing white southerners toward the Republican Party. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black Power, affirmative action, and court-ordered busing of children between schools to achieve racial balance brought "white backlash" in the North, often in cities previously known for political liberalism. To many white Americans, the urban rebellions, antiwar protests, and student uprisings of the late 1960s signaled social chaos. At the same time, slowing wage growth, rising prices, and growing tax burdens threatened many working- and middle-class citizens who long formed the core of the New Deal coalition. Liberalism no longer seemed to offer the great mass of white Americans a road map to prosperity, so they searched for new political solutions.

Former Alabama governor and conservative Democrat George Wallace masterfully exploited the racial, cultural, and economic resentments of working-class whites during his presidential runs in 1968 and 1972. Wallace's record as a staunch segregationist made him a hero in the Deep South, where he won five states as a third-party candidate in the 1968 general election. Wallace's populist message also resonated with blue-collar voters in the industrial North who felt left behind by the rights revolution. On the campaign stump, the fiery candidate lambasted hippies, antiwar protesters, and government bureaucrats. He assailed female welfare recipients for "breeding children as a cash crop" and ridiculed "over-educated, ivory-tower" intellectuals who "don't know how to park a bicycle straight."[6] Wallace also advanced progressive proposals for federal job training programs, a minimum wage hike, and legal protections for collective bargaining. Running as a Democrat in 1972, Wallace captured the Michigan primary and polled second in the industrial heartland of Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. In May 1972, an assassin's bullet left Wallace paralyzed and ended his campaign. Nevertheless, his amalgamation of older, New Deal–style proposals and conservative populism represented the rapid reordering of party loyalties in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Richard Nixon similarly harnessed the New Right's sense of grievance through his rhetoric about "law and order" and the "silent majority."[7] But Nixon and his Republican successor, Gerald Ford, continued to accommodate the politics of the New Deal order. The New Right remained without a major public champion.

Christian conservatives also felt themselves under siege from liberalism. In the early 1960s, Supreme Court decisions prohibiting teacher-led prayer (*Engel v. Vitale*) and Bible reading in public schools (*Abington v. Schempp*) led some on the right to conclude that a liberal judicial system threatened Christian values. In the following years, the counterculture's celebration of sex and drugs, along with relaxed obscenity and pornography laws, intensified the conviction that "permissive" liberalism encouraged immorality in private life. Evangelical Protestants—Christians who professed a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, upheld the Bible as an infallible source of truth, and felt a duty to convert, or evangelize, nonbelievers—composed the core of the so-called religious right.

With increasing assertiveness in the 1960s and 1970s, Christian conservatives mobilized to protect the "traditional" family. Women composed a striking number of the religious right's foot soldiers. In 1968 and 1969 a group of newly politicized mothers in Anaheim, California, led a

sustained protest against sex education in public schools.[8] Catholic activist Phyllis Schlafly marshaled opposition to the ERA, while evangelical pop singer Anita Bryant drew national headlines for her successful fight to repeal Miami's gay rights ordinance in 1977. In 1979, Beverly LaHaye (whose husband, Tim—an evangelical pastor in San Diego—later coauthored the wildly popular *Left Behind* Christian book series) founded Concerned Women for America, which linked small groups of local activists opposed to the ERA, abortion, homosexuality, and no-fault divorce.

Activists like Schlafly and LaHaye valorized motherhood as women's highest calling. Abortion therefore struck at the core of their female identity. More than perhaps any other issue, abortion drew different segments of the religious right—Catholics and Protestants, women and men—together. The Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling outraged many devout Catholics and evangelicals (who had been less universally opposed to the procedure than their Catholic counterparts). Christian author Francis Schaeffer cultivated evangelical opposition to abortion through the 1979 documentary film *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, arguing that the "fate of the unborn is the fate of the human race."[9] With abortion framed in stark, existential terms, many evangelicals felt compelled to combat the procedure through political action.

Grassroots passion drove anti-abortion activism, but a set of religious and secular institutions turned the various strands of the New Right into a sophisticated movement. In 1979 Jerry Falwell—a Baptist minister and religious broadcaster from Lynchburg, Virginia—founded the Moral Majority, an explicitly political organization dedicated to advancing a "pro-life, pro-family, pro-morality, and pro-American" agenda. The Moral Majority skillfully wove together social and economic appeals to make itself a force in Republican politics. Secular, business-oriented institutions also joined the attack on liberalism, fueled by stagflation and by the federal government's creation of new regulatory agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Conservative business leaders bankrolled new "think tanks" like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute. These organizations provided grassroots activists with ready-made policy prescriptions. Other business leaders took a more direct approach by hiring Washington lobbyists and creating political action committees (PACs) to press their agendas in the halls of Congress and federal agencies. Between 1976 and 1980 the number of corporate PACs rose from under three hundred to over twelve hundred.

Grassroots activists and business leaders received unlikely support from a circle of neoconservatives—disillusioned intellectuals who had rejected liberalism and the Left and become Republicans. Irving Kristol, a former Marxist who went on to champion free-market capitalism as a *Wall Street Journal* columnist, defined a neoconservative as a "liberal who has been mugged by reality."[10] Neoconservative journals like *Commentary* and *Public Interest* argued that the Great Society had proven counterproductive, perpetuating the poverty and racial segregation that it aimed to cure. By the middle of the 1970s, neoconservatives felt mugged by foreign affairs as well. As ardent Cold Warriors, they argued that Nixon's policy of détente left the United States vulnerable to the Soviet Union.

In sum, several streams of conservative political mobilization converged in the late 1970s. Each wing of the burgeoning New Right—disaffected northern blue-collar workers, white southerners, evangelicals and devout Catholics, business leaders, disillusioned intellectuals, and Cold War hawks—turned to the Republican Party as the most effective vehicle for their political counterassault on liberalism and the New Deal political order. After years of mobilization, the domestic and foreign policy catastrophes of the Carter administration provided the headwinds that brought the conservative movement to shore.

III. The Conservatism of the Carter Years

The election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 brought a Democrat to the White House for the first time since 1969. Large Democratic majorities in Congress provided the new president with an opportunity to move aggressively on the legislative front. With the infighting of the early 1970s behind them, many Democrats hoped the Carter administration would update and expand the New Deal. But Carter won the presidency on a wave of post-Watergate disillusionment with government that did not translate into support for liberal ideas.

In its early days, the Carter administration embraced several policies backed by liberals. It pushed an economic stimulus package containing $4 billion for public works, extended food stamp benefits to 2.5 million new recipients, enlarged the Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income households, and expanded the Nixon-era Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA).[11] But the White House quickly realized that Democratic control of Congress did not guarantee support for its initially

left-leaning economic proposals. Many of the Democrats elected to Congress in the aftermath of Watergate were more moderate than their predecessors, who had been trained in the New Deal gospel. These conservative Democrats sometimes partnered with congressional Republicans to oppose Carter, most notably in response to the administration's proposal for a federal office of consumer protection.

Events outside Carter's control certainly helped discredit liberalism, but the president's own temperamental and philosophical conservatism hamstrung the administration and pushed national politics further to the right. In his 1978 State of the Union address, Carter lectured Americans that "government cannot solve our problems . . . it cannot eliminate poverty, or provide a bountiful economy, or reduce inflation, or save our cities, or cure illiteracy, or provide energy."[12] The statement neatly captured the ideological transformation of the county. Rather than leading a resurgence of American liberalism, Carter became, as one historian put it, "the first president to govern in a post–New Deal framework."[13] Organized labor felt abandoned by Carter, who remained cool to several of their highest legislative priorities. The president offered tepid support for a national health insurance proposal and declined to lobby aggressively for a package of modest labor law reforms. The business community rallied to defeat the latter measure, in what AFL-CIO chief George Meany described as "an attack by every anti-union group in America to kill the labor movement."[14] In 1977 and 1978, liberal Democrats rallied behind the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment and Training Act, which promised to end unemployment through extensive government planning. The bill aimed not only to guarantee a job to every American but also to reunite the interracial, working-class Democratic coalition that had been fractured by deindustrialization and affirmative action.[15] But Carter's lack of enthusiasm for the proposal allowed conservatives from both parties to water the bill down to a purely symbolic gesture. Liberals, like labor leaders, came to regard the president as an unreliable ally.

Carter also came under fire from Republicans, especially the religious right. His administration incurred the wrath of evangelicals in 1978 when the IRS established new rules revoking the tax-exempt status of racially segregated, private Christian schools. The rules only strengthened a policy instituted by the Nixon administration; however, the religious right accused Carter of singling out Christian institutions. Republican activist Richard Viguerie described the IRS controversy as the "spark that ignited the religious right's involvement in real politics."[16] Race sat just

below the surface of the IRS fight. After all, many of the schools had been founded to circumvent court-ordered desegregation. But the IRS ruling allowed the New Right to rain down fire on big government interference while downplaying the practice of segregation at the heart of the case.

While the IRS controversy flared, economic crises multiplied. Unemployment reached 7.8 percent in May 1980, up from 6 percent at the start of Carter's first term.[17] Inflation (the rate at which the cost of goods and services increases) jumped from 6 percent in 1978 to a staggering 20 percent by the winter of 1980.[18] In another bad omen, the iconic Chrysler Corporation appeared close to bankruptcy. The administration responded to these challenges in fundamentally conservative ways. First, Carter proposed a tax cut for the upper middle class, which Congress passed in 1978. Second, the White House embraced a longtime goal of the conservative movement by deregulating the airline and trucking industries in 1978 and 1980, respectively. Third, Carter proposed balancing the federal budget—much to the dismay of liberals, who would have preferred that he use deficit spending to finance a *new* New Deal. Finally, to halt inflation, Carter's appointed chair of the Federal Reserve, Paul Volcker, raised interest rates and tightened the money supply—policies designed to reduce inflation in the long run but which increased unemployment in the short run. Liberalism was on the run.

The decade's second "energy crisis," which witnessed another spike in oil prices and oil shortages across the country, brought out the southern Baptist moralist in Carter. On July 15, 1979, the president delivered a nationally televised speech on energy policy in which he attributed the country's economic woes to a "crisis of confidence." Carter lamented that "too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption."[19] The country initially responded favorably to the push for energy conservation, yet Carter's emphasis on discipline and sacrifice and his spiritual diagnosis for economic hardship sidestepped deeper questions of large-scale economic change and downplayed the harsh toll inflation had taken on regular Americans.

IV. The Election of 1980

These domestic challenges, combined with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the hostage crisis in Iran, hobbled Carter heading into his 1980 reelection campaign. Many Democrats were dismayed by his policies. The president of the International Association of Machinists dismissed

Carter as "the best Republican President since Herbert Hoover."[20] Angered by the White House's refusal to back national health insurance, Massachusetts senator Ted Kennedy challenged Carter in the Democratic primaries. Running as the party's liberal standard-bearer and heir to the legacy of his slain older brothers, Kennedy garnered support from key labor unions and left-wing Democrats. Carter ultimately vanquished Kennedy, but the close primary tally exposed the president's vulnerability.

Carter's opponent in the general election was Ronald Reagan, a former Hollywood actor who had served two terms as governor of California. Reagan ran as a staunch fiscal conservative and a Cold War hawk, vowing to reduce government spending and shrink the federal bureaucracy. Reagan also accused his opponent of failing to confront the Soviet Union and vowed steep increases in military spending. Carter responded by calling Reagan a warmonger, but the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the confinement of 52 American hostages in Iran discredited Carter's foreign policy in the eyes of many Americans.

The incumbent fared no better on domestic affairs. Unemployment remained at nearly 8 percent.[21] Meanwhile the Federal Reserve's anti-inflation measures pushed interest rates to an unheard-of 18.5 percent.[22] Reagan seized on these bad economic trends. On the campaign trail he brought down the house by proclaiming: "A recession is when your neighbor loses his job, and a depression is when you lose your job." Reagan would then pause before concluding, "And a recovery is when Jimmy Carter loses his job."[23]

Social and cultural issues presented yet another challenge for the president. Although a self-proclaimed "born-again" Christian and Sunday school teacher, Carter struggled to court the religious right. Carter scandalized devout Christians by admitting to lustful thoughts during an interview with *Playboy* magazine in 1976, telling the reporter he had "committed adultery in my heart many times."[24] Although Reagan was only a nominal Christian and rarely attended church, the religious right embraced him. Reverend Jerry Falwell directed the full weight of the Moral Majority behind Reagan. The organization registered an estimated two million new voters in 1980. Reagan also cultivated the religious right by denouncing abortion and endorsing prayer in school. The IRS tax exemption issue resurfaced as well, with the 1980 Republican platform vowing to "halt the unconstitutional regulatory vendetta launched by Mr. Carter's IRS commissioner against independent schools."[25] Early in the primary season, Reagan condemned the policy during a speech at

Jerry Falwell, a wildly popular TV evangelist, founded the Moral Majority in the late 1970s. Decrying the demise of the nation's morality, the organization gained a massive following and helped to cement the status of the New Christian Right in American politics. Wikimedia.

South Carolina's Bob Jones University, which had recently sued the IRS after the school's ban on interracial dating led to the loss of its tax-exempt status.

Reagan's campaign appealed subtly but unmistakably to the racial hostilities of white voters. The candidate held his first post–nominating convention rally at the Neshoba County Fair near Philadelphia, Mississippi, the town where three civil rights workers had been murdered in 1964. In his speech, Reagan championed the doctrine of states' rights, which had been the rallying cry of segregationists in the 1950s and 1960s. In criticizing the welfare state, Reagan had long employed thinly veiled racial stereotypes about a "welfare queen" in Chicago who drove a Cadillac while defrauding the government or a "strapping young buck" purchasing T-bone steaks with food stamps.[26] Like George Wallace before him, Reagan exploited the racial and cultural resentments of struggling white working-class voters. And like Wallace, he attracted blue-collar workers in droves.

With the wind at his back on almost every issue, Reagan only needed to blunt Carter's characterization of him as an angry extremist. Reagan