

neither the revolutionary nor the reformer; it is the old regime itself or, to be more precise, the defenders of the old regime.⁸ They simply lack the ideological wherewithal to press the cause of the old regime with the requisite vigor, clarity, and purpose. As Burke declared of George Grenville, in the very different context of Britain's relationship with its American colonies:

But it may be truly said, that men too much conversant in office, are rarely minds of remarkable enlargement. . . . persons who are nurtured in office do admirably well as long as things go on in their common order; but when the high roads are broken up, and the waters out, when a new and troubled scene is opened, and the file affords no precedent, then it is that a greater knowledge of mankind, and a far more extensive comprehension of things, is requisite, than ever office gave, or than office can ever give.⁹

Later conservatives will make this claim in various ways. Sometimes they'll accuse the defenders of the old regime of having been cowed by the revolutionary or reformist challenge. According to Thomas Dew, one of the earliest and most aggressive apologists for American slavery, the Nat Turner rebellion destroyed "all feeling of security and confidence" among the master class. So frightened were they that "reason was almost banished from the mind." It wasn't just the slaves' violence that frightened them. It was the moral indictment leveled by the slaves and the abolitionists, which had somehow insinuated itself into the slaveholders' minds and made them unsure of their own position. "We ourselves," wrote William Harper, another defender of slavery, "have in some measure pleaded guilty to the impeachment."¹⁰

More than a century later, Barry Goldwater would take up the same theme. The very first paragraph of *The Conscience of a Conservative* directs its fire not at liberals or Democrats or even the