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Introduction I

Postmodern America

*A New Democratic Order
in the Second Gilded Age*

ANYONE WHO teaches the history of the United States in the last quarter of the twentieth century knows the available historiography is thin indeed. These decades have seen constant change and contestation in all areas of historical inquiry, covering the gamut of diplomatic, political, social, cultural, business, women's, labor, and intellectual history. During the 1990s it became common to speak of dizzying technological and cultural revolutions that had occurred since one was a child. Yet the teacher of the nearly three decades since the falls of Richard Nixon in August 1974 and Saigon nine months later—as close to a historical break as one can find—must rely upon books by journalists, political scientists, and sociologists. When it comes to historical scholarship, there are few studies that treat the 1970s or 1980s, let alone the Clinton era.

Why is there little serious history yet written about a generation of vast demographic, economic, and cultural shifts, including the greatest surge in immigration in a century, the transition to a postindustrial economy, and the eclipse of the normative patriarchal family? One explanation can be found in Richard Moser's introduction to this book, which examines the apocalyptic tendency written into U.S. culture; he and I characterize this type of history as *declensionist*, following Perry Miller's analysis of how the Puritans mythologized their own trajectory. In this scenario, the Sixties failed in their millenarian purpose and now Americans have stepped outside their own history, lost their groove, and forgotten what Todd Gitlin called their "common dreams."¹ Thus there is no real need for ongoing historical exploration, for the case studies, revisions, new syntheses, and rediscovery of old arguments leading to a dense, overdetermined series of explanations—a historiography.

Another reason for the dearth of history writing is the absence of any accepted periodization. Historians have not yet agreed that the decades since the Nixon presidency constitute a historical period equivalent to the post-1945 "long boom" that mutated into the high Sixties of 1966–74, or the Depression and World War II era framed by the crash in October 1929 and Hiroshima in August 1945. This is underlined by the problem of naming: If the period is a coherent whole, what should we call it, what are its defining features, and when does it end? Some of us get by with makeshift phrases like "post-Sixties," "late" or "post-Cold War" America, but they lack explanatory weight and carry no evident associations, unlike "the Progressive Era," "Depression," "the New Deal" or "Cold War America." Given this historiographical limbo, recent decades become just "the present," and there are few things more likely to warn historians off than the possibility of being proved wrong by "current events." Certainly, the events of September 11, 2001, are likely to make historians very wary. Was this the close of one period and the beginning of another, or just one terrible moment in a long post-Cold War era of U.S. hegemony stretching far into the future?

Above all, there is the professional inclination of historians to let the dust settle. One suspects the same complaint was made in 1965, when scholars were just beginning to examine the vast changes since D-Day. Even now, many U.S. historians do not teach past 1968 or 1976, and the final chapters of U.S. history textbooks rely on summaries derived from the essays and polemical accounts of journalists like Haynes Johnson, Kevin Phillips, Thomas Byrne Edsall, and Sidney Blumenthal.²

This book's purpose is to initiate scholarly debate and begin filling in the blanks for the end of the American Century. Our hope is that combining case studies of particular places with synthetic arguments about longer-term political shifts will stimulate further research and productive arguments. This introductory essay's goal is to propose a periodization of, and a name for, the historical time since the Sixties "ended," looking closely at what constitutes current historiography. A central focus will be to challenge the assertion of a "Reagan" or "conservative" revolution, since the claim of a decisive shift to the right is a constant in both textbook and journalistic accounts of what I call "Postmodern America." It starts with questions, rather than premises. First, from 1980 on, have the politics, society, and culture of the United States been realigned in a conservative direction, and if so, what are the results?

Second, what was the New Right, stripped of its pretensions? Third, what happened to the New Left, the pluralist “movement of movements” that some claim “died” circa 1970, but whose legacies and effects surround us?³

LOCATING POSTMODERN AMERICA

Why use the ubiquitous, much-abused term “postmodern?” In this case, both its negative and positive connotations are appropriate. Whereas the modern age assumed a driving imperative of industrial development and progress, “postmodernism” has come to signal drift, fragmentation, and the sense that no center can hold. In that sense, the United States after Vietnam is the epitome of a postmodern capitalist-democratic state, where an extreme liberalism regarding personal liberty coexists with a rigorous corporate-driven regime of consumption. The visceral impulse of such a society is to plunder its own past for styles and cultural artifacts that can be marketed to precisely defined niches of the public. This is the face that America presents to the world—the truncated kind of freedom promised by “have it your way.”

There is an undeniable reality to this image of a strip-mall America that is homogenized, alienated, and selling itself off to the highest bidder. Much that was authentic or at least “local” has faded fast in the past generation under the onslaught of Wal-Mart and other chains. Nor is this sense of commodified uniformity and vulgarity restricted to what we see, hear, wear, buy, and eat. The ambience of dislocation reaches into the core of our politics and is barely touched by the post-9/11 crisis and official calls for a renewed spirit of national sacrifice. What passes for public life at the millennial moment has a cartoonish cast, a cheapness symbolized by the descent in scale and gravity from one impeachment to another. However frightening and sordid, Watergate was about genuine abuses of power that amounted to a slow-motion coup, as government police agencies were corrupted to neutralize the political opposition at the president’s direct order.⁴ Contrast that with the attempted removal of another president for lying about his sexual dalliance with an intern, which threatened no one. Of course, the Monica Lewinsky affair raised the question of post-Sixties sexual libertinism and the supposed corruption of our culture, but it did so in prurient, pornographic terms dictated by Kenneth Starr and the ham-

handed Republican inquisitors, which explains why large majorities rallied to the Clintons' side—few Americans of any background welcome someone poking into their sex lives.

But defining late-twentieth-century America as “postmodern” has other resonances that are more positive. To start with, the “diversity” and fracturing of experience that a postmodern, fiercely pluralist United States fosters in schools, churches, workplaces, and even the armed forces is more than a slogan. It is a reasonable representation of one of history's most ethnically complex societies, now changing before our eyes as urban (and some rural) areas teem with new Americans from Asia and Latin America. The politics of “diversity” and “multiculturalism” may be amorphous and hypocritical, submerging differences and inequalities into a mass of deferential mutuality—lists of religious and ethnic holidays, each with its own food. But hypocrisy is, after all, the tribute that vice pays to virtue. The recognition of diversity and the constant evocation of multiculturalism are the public faces of our highly unequal society's accommodation with a kind of “social” democracy, one too hard-won to be sneered at.

Second, it is true that postmodern pluralism defines Americans as consumers first and citizens second. Many citizens have simply opted out of “politics,” with only a minority bothering to vote in presidential elections, and old-style radical “mass movements” like those of the Sixties seem unimaginable now. Yet the dense, fluid networks of age, taste, and polycultural identity possible under postmodern conditions provide constant opportunities for political organizing.⁵ These nooks and crannies may be less familiar than those of the recent past, but they are fully equal to the ethnic lodges, saloons, union halls, and parish churches of the old industrial America, circa 1877–1948. The long-building upsurge against corporate neoliberalism that broke into the open at the November 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, and earlier global solidarity movements for southern African and Central American liberation during the 1970s and 1980s, have all relied on new technologies and multiplying avenues for communication across borders and hemispheres that sharply distinguish the post-Sixties era. Certainly the New Right has never accepted that “postmodern” meant “postpolitics,” which is why it has generated a series of genuine mass movements via these technologies.

Thus we arrive at this book's central argument: *a primary reason for the fragmentation and alienation of Postmodern America is that we are more dem-*

ocratic than any America that came before. Since the 1960s, conservatives have dismissed the civil rights movement, feminism, and even, on occasion, gay rights as the latest stage in a “natural” progress toward toleration, while appealing via coded language (“law and order” and, later, “family values”) to resentment of these movements. But manipulation by the Right, resentment among sections of the public (especially white men), and weariness on the Left cannot obscure the fact that we live in a world the Sixties made. We are still fighting over that legacy in ways that matter deeply, no matter how mindlessly partisan and trivialized those struggles sometimes appear. It behooves us, therefore, to examine those huge changes.

Given this country’s origin in slavery and the extermination of native peoples, any discussion of democracy and its limits should begin with race. On this front the second half of the twentieth century marks a political and cultural revolution both unfinished and undefeated.⁶ Within the memory of the majority of Americans, any person of color faced open, rampant discrimination in schools, housing, employment, and all aspects of the public sphere, *de facto* or *de jure*, and the threat of violence by agents of the state or other groups acting with impunity. No one could claim this castelike burden has disappeared, and in some respects the complex of racial oppression has intensified in perverse, insidious ways. So what has changed? First, since the 1970s (for the first time since Reconstruction) this society has proclaimed an enforceable equality before the law, while acknowledging that that equality does not yet exist. Pronouncements by themselves mean little, however. Far more important is that legislatures, judiciaries, police forces, and the administrative apparatus of local, state, and federal governments are now filled by people whose assumed origins once guaranteed their exclusion. The rise of a “prison industrial complex” focused on incarcerating black men, the constant threat of “profiling” that leads to police brutality, and persisting discrimination in education, housing, and the workplace cannot obscure the fact that white supremacy must hide its face, and the assertion that this is a “white man’s country” can no longer be made in mainstream venues. “More democratic than any America that came before” may be setting the bar very low, but it also recognizes how far we must advance to overcome a legacy written into our national identity as a settler and slaveholding republic.

The same argument for a sweeping democratic transformation can be made, from a different angle, for the newest recognized “minority,” gay

and lesbian Americans, who have moved from the lowest possible status as a despised medical and criminal category to a contested but potent level of recognition.⁷ By their insistence not on assimilation but on the right to be, and be visible, across all the usual boundaries of race, ethnicity, and class, homosexuals have confronted our assumptions about how to categorize people. Lacking any radical past, any nineteenth-century symbols equivalent to Frederick Douglass, Seneca Falls, or the Knights of Labor, the “out” presence of gay women and men may be the sharpest indicator of how radically this country has changed.

Last and most obvious is the profound democratization of relations between the sexes, brought about by one of the longest-lived movements in U.S. history, the second-wave feminism that germinated from the 1940s on, burst forth between 1968 and 1972, and continues into the new century.⁸ Nothing remains more fought over, as conservative politicians bob and weave around the distinctions between equality and difference, celebrating women’s slow ascent to political leadership and workplace parity while invoking the tattered shreds of “separate spheres” ideology. No one can claim that the female majority has gained its fair share of power, and basic feminist tenets remain more prescriptions than accurate descriptions of how family and sexual lives are led. Yet the tide has turned—like Humpty Dumpty, it is exceedingly difficult to see how patriarchy could be restored, short of a counterrevolutionary scenario like that in Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*.⁹

If there has been a revolution that changed the lives of the majority—women, gays, lesbians, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians Americans—why is it still constantly asserted that “the Sixties” failed and we live in a conservative era? Here’s why: The hope of generations of radicals, socialists, and progressives was that a new democratic, revolutionary order would strike at the basis of state and private power in the capitalist system. Self-evidently, nothing like that has transpired. Defying predictions, “late” capitalism proved capable of accommodating, absorbing, and even welcoming revolutions in racial, sexual, and gender relations. Indeed, the essence of Clintonism and the boom times of the 1990s was to represent that enthusiastic accommodation. Disturbed by this surprising resilience, some pundits on the Left assert that the still-roiling democratic upsurge of our era is nothing more than “identity politics,” affecting various subsets of the population but not, presumably, the real America, which is white, heterosexual,

and politically moderate. Some even argue that post-Sixties struggles over race, gender, and sexuality—the “cultural war” named by Pat Buchanan in his infamous speech to the 1992 Republican Convention—are neither progressive nor democratic, instead only dividing the majority of the country so it can better be conquered.¹⁰

The term “identity politics” stood for a transitional moment, but, like “politically correct,” it has turned into a meaningless pejorative. We suggest that “democratic politics” is more useful, and that the coming forward of new political communities claiming their own social, cultural, and political identities constitutes the birth of a *new democratic order*, which in the early twenty-first century is reaching maturity after a generation defending the fragile egalitarianism catalyzed by the New Left of 1955–75.¹¹

Of course, we are aware of the dangers of a neo-Whig history that asserts the best of all possible worlds is just around the corner. Rather than vindicating the Sixties, we seek a judicious balance. Our responsibility in this volume is to avoid the twin pitfalls of an unwarranted progressivism, seeing only sunny vistas and final victories, and that romantic declensionism which does not bother to investigate the reality of politics since 1975 (or even 1968). There have been powerful reactionary currents since the Sixties, impressively assembled under the big tent of Reagan Republicanism. But it is profoundly wrong to suggest the New Left led to a resurgence of racism, greater sexism, more oppression of homosexual people, or increased imperialism. All of these dynamics were there all along, part of the warp and woof of Americanism, and the success of “the Sixties” was to make visible and vocal what was largely unseen or ignored. Such visibility produces discomfort, and not only among self-defined conservatives.

We are also conscious of the risk in characterizing this transitional period as similar to the first Gilded Age in terms of the fallout from a bitter revolutionary war combined with sweeping political-economic shifts at all levels of society.¹² But the more one extends the analogy of “a second Gilded Age” into the practicalities of partisan politics, the more apt it seems. The late-twentieth-century Democratic Party strongly resembles the old post-abolition, post-Reconstruction, nominally antiracist and thoroughly probusiness Republicans after 1877, while the GOP has taken up the mantle of the solid (white) South. Like the late nineteenth century, this is a period of partisan stalemate, with control of Congress shifting back and forth as presidents eke out pluralities while

trying to squelch third-party schisms within and around their own parties. One notes also the avoidance of debate over the political economy in favor of unchallenged nostrums (Herbert Spencer then, Francis Fukuyama now). Finally, there is the power of certain totems, whether “free silver” as a common man’s panacea then, or “free choice” as a leit-motif for the most recent wave of women’s sexual liberation. It remains to be seen whether this second Gilded Age will continue or will fall prey like the first to a depression and another great wave of reform. Or did it end with the crash of the Twin Towers? Only time will tell.

THE END OF THE SIXTIES: LIBERALISM BREAKS RIGHT AND LEFT

Historians may be wary of periodizing the years since 1968, but most accept the argument that in 1980, with Ronald Reagan’s election, the United States took a major shift rightwards for the first time since the 1920s. This is the premise of the most influential work of historiography on twentieth-century America published in the past twenty years, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980*.¹³ But the endpoint of that book’s title suggests the problem with this argument. Just as one cannot end an assessment of the New Deal with the realigning election of 1936 and the epochal reforms of 1935–37 (social security, the Wagner Act and so on), one should not make claims about the New Right’s rise without extending the narrative forward into the 1980s and 1990s. To accomplish this requires clarity about what came before, and the radical shifts *to the left* in U.S. politics and culture in the long decade from 1964 to 1976, in many cases institutionalized even further during Jimmy Carter’s presidency, 1977–1980. A brief reprise is in order.¹⁴

From the mid-1960s through Nixon’s presidency, liberal government steadily expanded its scope and reach, because of continuous pressure from grassroots social movements and the unleashed inclinations of a governing class raised on the premises of the New Deal. Old hopes of the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties became realities in the early 1970s, including a massive influx of black voters’ upending of the South’s white power structure, and the new environmentalist movement challenging big business’s prerogatives in the name of the whole citizenry.

But liberal government faced sharp challenges on its ideological flanks. Best known is the repudiation of “corporate liberalism” by the

movements grouped under the New Left's banner. Even as the Nixon administration introduced affirmative action, the Democratic Party was democratized, opening doors to blacks and women, and environmental, gay, and antiwar activists. Outside of Congress and partisan politics, numerous social movements pushed beyond liberal premises and began to talk openly about issues that New Deal left liberals had never considered: the division of labor in the family, whether black people constituted a "nation within a nation" and should separate themselves, the right of homosexuals to live as couples with the same legal protections as heterosexuals.

The catalyst to this cascading radicalism moving the political center leftward from 1964 to 1976 was the Vietnam War, the "liberals' war," as it was dubbed. For a significant minority, there could be no common cause with leaders who countenanced the year-in, year-out bombing of a peasant country half a world away to maintain geopolitical credibility. This insurgency turned the Democratic Party into an ideological free-for-all. By 1972, two remarkably opposing figures competed as its leading presidential candidates—Alabama governor George Wallace, avatar of white pseudopopulism, and South Dakota senator George McGovern, leader of antiwar forces in Congress, with former vice president Hubert Humphrey (once the shining star of Cold War liberalism) caught in the middle as a late-blooming afterthought. Analogous to such a split would be the Republican Party in 2004 choosing between a feminist and a conservative evangelical Christian.

In short, the static version of liberalism that held sway from 1948 to 1968 was overturned, and the guardians of Cold War liberalism became a disgruntled center-right rump in a party splitting at the seams. The submerged "progressive" liberalism that had been a major bipartisan current in the century's first half, with its crusading style and preference for single-issue "causes," resurfaced via Eugene McCarthy's candidacy in 1968, McGovern's in 1972, and the profusion of liberal champions whom the centrist Jimmy Carter edged out for the 1976 Democratic nomination (including Morris Udall, Fred Harris, Birch Bayh, Frank Church, and Jerry Brown). Carter's presidency awaits proper historical consideration and was too contradictory and amateurish to summarize here. But the efforts to incorporate activists connected to social movements into high-level administration posts (Andrew Young, Pat Derian, Virginia Apuzzo, and Sam Brown are among the best known), the im-

mediate amnesty for draft resisters, and the global "human rights policy" all suggested a recognition that "the Sixties" must be accepted, and the past expiated.

At the same time, a deep-rooted conservative movement based in opposition to the waves of reform from the Progressive Era on also garnered new adherents and political power. In the later 1970s and 1980s, this movement took over parts of the Republican Party, elected as president the charismatic orator Ronald Reagan, and passed legislation reversing much of the New Deal and the Great Society. Ever since then, scholars and commentators have dissected the "New Right," the "Religious Right," the "Neoconservative Right," and so on, trying to untangle the origins of the Reagan Revolution.

THE INTENTIONS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE REAGAN REVOLUTION

That U.S. politics underwent a watershed in the 1980s is not in question. The premises of liberal "big government" fell into disrepute, and a right-wing administration and party dominated governance for the first time since the 1920s. But what the Reagan Revolution actually accomplished and the extent of its revolution, and how it took power in the first place, are still in dispute. The safest assertion is that Reaganism responded to a genuine mobilization and represented a significant social base—the primacy of one group over another (southern white evangelicals versus northern white "ethnics"; "paleoconservatives" of the Old Right versus cosmopolitan, often Jewish neoconservatives) remains murky, as political disputes muddy the water. What makes the Reagan Revolution most difficult to interpret is that it is hardly over. The 1994 Republican sweep of Congress and a majority of statehouses represented a more complete "realignment" of electoral power than Reagan ever achieved. Then Clinton handily turned back the Republican drive on the White House in 1996, and cut deeply into their congressional majorities, sparking a counter-attack on his physical person led by Kenneth Starr, which in turn mobilized core Democratic constituencies (African Americans and pro-choice women) to flock to the polls. The bizarre 2000 election only confirmed the partisan stalemate and the unrelenting conservative push for power by any means necessary, but in 2001 this sparked a one-man insurgency within the Senate itself, as Vermont Senator James Jeffords, "the last of the Mohicans" of New England

liberal Republicanism, left his party and returned the majority to the Democrats, only to see control shift back after November 2002.

As the new century unfolds, political gridlock persists. No new progressive model of governance has emerged to challenge the promise of Reaganism—to “get government off the backs of the American people”—but the Republicans appear unable to assemble a durable electoral majority.

To understand what conservative organizers, Republican Party leaders, and Ronald Reagan himself hoped to accomplish, we need to step back to the post-World War II era, when New Deal policies and Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s posthumous presence dominated American political life. Ironically, this liberal golden age became a touchstone for the New Right of the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁵ America was at the peak of its global economic, military and political power, and domestically conservative cultural values seemed triumphant. In 1945, the U.S. had more than half of the world’s industrial capacity, and over the next twenty years the average American family doubled its real income because of that economic supremacy. Until the late 1950s the U.S. faced no serious competition in the nuclear arms race, and the CIA routinely fixed elections and overthrew governments outside the Soviet orbit. Rather than competitors, the Western Europeans and Japanese were suppliants, desperate for Marshall Plan aid to rebuild their countries. The idea of peasant guerrillas stalemating the U.S. Army would have seemed absurd: the U.S. waged effective “counter-insurgency” in the Philippines, as did our British allies in Kenya, Malaysia and elsewhere. Few could imagine the rise of Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and the “Third World.”

At home, the social order seemed unassailable, as none of the New Left’s insurgencies were yet visible. Though segregation was clearly a problem that was tearing at the Democratic Party as early as 1948, hardly anyone in white America imagined that within a few years hundreds of thousands would march, tens of thousands would be arrested, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would become the greatest American leader of his time. To most whites, black Americans were invisible, a troubling side issue at best. Even harder to imagine was a feminist renaissance, as vast new suburbs and a flight from Depression and wartime insecurity re-established the patriarchal nuclear family, where husbands went to work and women raised children and kept house. The clearest marker of the Fifties, however, was the position of homo-

sexual men and women. Black people and women could evoke earlier struggles and partial victories. Gays and lesbians had no such history and barely existed as a recognized social group until after World War II, when their presence in urban areas was seized upon as evidence of decadence and cultural degradation. No one in America, and few gays, could imagine that they would emerge as a recognized community within a few decades.

The intentions of Reaganism can be summed up as restoring this vanished world of the Fifties. Its political genius lay in evoking both the imagined past *and* its chaotic coming apart, not just an argument about what should be, but a vision of what had been, tying its destruction to Democratic liberals' capitulation to radicalism. Over and over, Reagan and his followers hammered away, finding specific policies and people to blame. Indeed, this appeal to resentment first surfaced at the 1960s' climax, in the 1968 presidential campaign when Richard Nixon and George Wallace between them took 57 percent of the vote, with Nixon offering a kindler, gentler version of Wallace's racialized call for "law and order."

Reaganism offered three solutions to the uncertainties and change faced by Americans in the 1970s and 1980s. First, it promised to restore America as a dominant world power, no longer accepting military parity with the Soviet Union, defeat at the hands of revolutionary guerrillas, or disrespect from NATO allies and the Japanese. Second, it promoted the idea of an older moral order, based explicitly in the heterosexual, patriarchal family and (slightly less openly) in the cultural authority of white Americans. Finally, it promised to sharply limit the federal government's role as a re-distributor of wealth and regulator of business—functions crucial to the legitimacy of the New Deal Order consolidated by Franklin Roosevelt and extended by Lyndon Johnson. The scope of these claims exceeded those of any of Reagan's predecessors. Neither FDR nor LBJ, nor Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson earlier, asked for a sweeping mandate to remake the nation. Unlike Reagan, all of these presidents styled themselves progressives, and the conservative has a great advantage in offering the familiar past rather than an uncertain future.

To what extent did the Reagan Revolution meet its aims? Conservatives still argue over that question, masking their disputes in veneration of Reagan the man. That the Reagan Administration and a bipartisan majority in Congress diminished government's role as an agent of social equality by shifting the focus of federal spending cannot be

doubted. Between 1980 and 1988, spending on all domestic social programs dropped by more than a third, while military spending skyrocketed, to nearly half-a-trillion dollars per year (in 1999 dollars). The tax cuts of 1981 and subsequent economic policies constituted a massive deregulation in favor of business, which encouraged a shift in income to the wealthy without precedent in American history. In that sense, the Reagan Revolution was successful: it got government “off the backs of” American capitalism, while maintaining the panoply of corporate welfare via the military-industrial complex. The rich and to a lesser extent the 20 percent of the population that Kevin Phillips designated “Upper America” got a lot richer, the working classes and poor got a lot poorer, and the middle classes barely hung on. By one basic measurement, the New Deal was reversed, as the shares of national income held by the top and bottom 20 percent of the population returned to the levels of inequality of the 1920s.¹⁶

It is inaccurate to claim, however, that Reaganism abolished the welfare state, as “movement conservatives” had hoped. However straitened, the host of liberal programs mainly lived on, either because of wide middle-class popularity (Social Security, Medicare, the Clean Water Act, Pell Grant college scholarships) or through stubborn resistance by activists and their congressional allies (Legal Services, Head Start, Food Stamps). In that sense, rather than a “revolution,” Reaganism was one more wave of reform, in this case backwards instead of forwards. The depths of disillusionment can be seen in Newt Gingrich’s bitter gibe in the late 1980s that Senate Majority Leader and Republican stalwart Robert Dole was merely the “tax collector for the welfare state.”

If Reaganism enjoyed success at home, by reversing a half-century of federal policy aimed at regulating capitalism, it also claimed victory internationally. Invoking a passionate anti-Communism stretching back to the 1917 Russian Revolution, it celebrated the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1989–1991. The president and his supporters claimed all the credit, and without doubt the arms race of the 1980s intensified the economic strains destabilizing the Soviets, though their system had been declining for decades, and a Democrat might just as easily have presided over the “victory.” Yet the ambitious foreign policy of the Reagan years, intended to “roll back” Communist revolution around the globe, produced numerous calamities, which threatened Reagan’s presidency and consolidated significant domestic opposition.

For reasons ranging from geopolitical credibility to wounded imperial pride, the Reaganites wanted to re-fight the Vietnam War in this

hemisphere, making a test case of Central America. When Reagan took office in January 1981, leftist guerrillas had taken power in Nicaragua and threatened the military dictatorships in Guatemala and El Salvador. Throughout the 1980s, the Reagan and Bush Administrations invested enormous political capital in winning these proxy wars and proving they could defeat Marxist revolutions. Ultimately, Reagan overplayed his hand, illegally circumventing Congress and the Constitution by funding “Contras” trying to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The resulting Irangate scandal of 1986–87 tarnished Reagan’s authority, and high Administration officials faced trial and conviction. Aid to the anti-Sandinista opposition produced a pro-U.S. government in Nicaragua’s 1990 elections, but the Bush Administration was shaken by a 1989 rebel offensive in El Salvador, and deferred to a United Nations-brokered peace settlement that ended death-squad rule and brought the guerrillas into the political system. After a decade of war, hundreds of thousands of civilians killed by U.S.-supported militaries, and widespread protest and solidarity movements, few could say that the Vietnam Syndrome had bit the dust.¹⁷

Nor was the Central American debacle the only major defeat in foreign policy. Despite their success in expanding the military-industrial complex through expensive new weapons systems, the New Right was hamstrung in its ability to exert force and rearrange the geopolitical order. In the early 1980s, a trans-Atlantic movement for a “nuclear freeze” made arms-control a political imperative, and it is an irony of the Cold War that Ronald Reagan and then George Bush pushed through major treaties with the Soviets reducing weapons of mass destruction. Despite the desire of the U.S. Right for a “constructive engagement” with South Africa’s anti-communist *apartheid* regime, the liberation struggle there crested in the late 1980s, in large part because millions of Americans believed they were carrying forward the civil rights movement by insisting on economic sanctions that forced the Africaners to give up power. The Reaganites did trumpet a clear win in CIA funding and direction of the bloody Afghani war of resistance against Soviet occupation, but it was an odd kind of victory, consolidating an international network of well-trained Islamic militants that came back to haunt the United States in the late 1990s (and perhaps for the foreseeable future).

The greatest failure of Reaganism came at home, however, not in the electoral or legislative arenas, but in the ordinary give-and-take, the “personal politics,” of daily life and mass culture. Despite the cant of traditional morality and “family values,” American culture became more

tolerant of difference of all kinds, more genuinely polycultural, and more liberated (or just libertine) in its sexual mores. Even if all one did was watch television or movies, it would be impossible to call this a conservative era. Some scholars and conservatives have concluded therefore that the Reagan Revolution was a sham, and that religious and “social” conservatives were simply manipulated. The truth seems more complex. In practical terms, the votes were simply not there for overturning the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion, or weakening Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. However haltingly, people of color, women, and gay people continued to advance as distinct political constituencies, and the most canny conservatives recognized this political reality. Whenever they needed reminding, the voters provided incentives, as in the sweeping repudiation of the Republican Party by Latinos following California Governor Pete Wilson’s leadership in passing a ballot initiative that sharply restricted immigrants’ rights to public services. In terms of policy-making, the New Right could claim success for its fiscal, regulatory and economic policies, while suffering significant defeats in its efforts to reverse the liberalism of American culture and the official egalitarianism written into American society in the Sixties.

The best indicator of this failure is the focus of George W. Bush’s campaign, from 1998 through the post-Labor Day 2000 endgame (when it eroded Al Gore’s solid majority through relentless blandness), on banishing the image of the Republican Party as a collection of ideological zealots. Bush’s strategists emulated Bill Clinton’s opportunistic manipulation of multiculturalism, though relying more on gestures and tableaux than the apparatus of patronage that kept the Democratic Party running in the 1990s. Thus radical intellectuals were blind to the central role of Colin Powell’s speech to the July 2000 Republican Convention, and the insistence on giving the podium to the one openly gay Republican congressperson, Jim Kolbe of Arizona, while Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan, James Dobson, Bob Barr, Newt Gingrich and other heroes of the hard Right were put out of sight. It may be a bitter pill to call “compassionate conservatism” a tribute to the Left, but that is the practical reality of U.S. politics.

INTERPRETING THE NEW RIGHT

The best-known account of Reaganism focuses not on where it came from, but what it did: Kevin Phillips’ *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth*

and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath. The former Republican strategist charts the extent to which Reaganism succeeded in eliminating taxes and regulations upon the very wealthiest in American society, and the extent to which the top ten percent of Americans profited during the 1980s because of the speculative fever instigated by right-wing resurgence. Phillips's arguments became foundational for everything written about the rise of the Right, since he demonstrated irrefutably the probusiness perspective that drives conservatism. But Phillips had little to say about the movements that placed Reagan in power, or the complex ideologies regarding race, gender, culture, sexual morality, and the world that drove those movements. His is a balance-sheet, bottom-line traditional kind of muckraking about results rather than causes.

Godfrey Hodgson's *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* offers the "movement" perspective of the New Right's rise.¹⁸ Hodgson focuses on how disparate streams of conservative thought, from antistatist libertarianism to Burkean social conservatism, fused in the 1950s and 1960s into a simple, effective electoral message. His willingness to take conservatives seriously as rational political actors rather than provincial reactionaries makes the book very useful. But he ignores the rawer, antidemocratic aspects of the U.S. Right—its deep roots in northern (especially Midwestern) nativism and antisemitism and the southern commitment to white supremacy. Leaving the hard Right out of the story of conservatism is equivalent to leaving Communists and other leftists out of the New Deal, or confining the story of the black freedom struggle to Dr. King while pretending Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael did not exist. It misses the importance of uncompromising militancy in redefining the terms of debate.

Thomas Byrne Edsall's account in *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* is similar to Hodgson's in positing that the Right rose to power through a process of accretion, layering constituencies into a working electoral majority.¹⁹ But Edsall puts Democratic Party radical liberalism at the center. In his view, the Democrats' errors are the cause of conservative resurgence because, since the 1960s, Democrats have stepped away from an inclusive politics based on class interests and taken the side of various minorities, particularly black people, against the interests of working-class white Americans. Identifying themselves with racial minorities, feminists, gays, and antiwar activists, says Edsall, the Democrats destroyed the New Deal's electoral majority and handed power to a "top-down coalition" of conservatives.

There is an overriding problem with Hodgson and Edsall, located in their evasion of the centrality of race to U.S. politics. Hodgson does not see how racialized fears inform nearly all organizing on the Right, perhaps because since the 1970s these fears are conveyed in a “code” (crime, drugs, immorality, shiftlessness, and so on versus traditional or “American” values). Edsall’s version is superior to Hodgson’s because race dominates his narrative, as the wedge breaking up the New Deal coalition in which whites and blacks had submerged their differences. But Edsall matches Hodgson in his inability to acknowledge the depth of racism among white people, including the working-class “Reagan Democrats” whom he considers the lost protagonists of U.S. politics. This myopia is clearly delineated in each author’s assertion that northern whites supported equality for blacks until the supposed excesses of black militants frightened them away. The unavoidable conclusion is that, however laudable morally, the Democratic Party’s association with the civil rights movement was a political disaster—and *should have been avoided*.

Recent studies provide useful foils to the conventional narratives just described, showing that the roots of the Right’s resurgence go back much further, to the early Cold War years—long before the emergence of civil rights, black power, Vietnam, women’s liberation, gay rights, and other radical causes commonly cited as provoking a conservative reaction. Each of these books also shares a common taproot in the recognition that whiteness itself (as fear, as pride, as a cross-ethnic “Americanism”) was a basic organizing principle for right-wing politics.

The starting place for conservative politics as a postwar social movement is the career of George Corley Wallace, the charismatic southern Democrat who was governor of Alabama and a four-time presidential candidate (running in the Democratic primaries in 1964, 1972, and 1976, and as an Independent in the general election in 1968). Dan Carter’s recent biography examines his enormous influence on both Democrats and Republicans.²⁰ By demonstrating the nationwide appeal of a message that combines anti-elite and racist sentiments, Wallace inserted a new dynamic. He broke the mold, and in his wake followed Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, and a host of others repeating the same message in quieter tones.

Carter’s insistence on the centrality of unreconstructed white supremacy among white Southerners and others is complemented by Sara Diamond’s *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*, which makes a striking contrast to Hodgson’s

book covering the same period.²¹ Though he gingerly covered the John Birch Society, Hodgson ignored the web of profascist and extremist groups that dated from World War II and persisted into the postwar era, forming the infrastructure of Wallace's campaigns. The anti-Semite Willis Carto's Liberty Lobby, the constellation of Ku Klux Klan groups, and the proliferating "Christian Identity" networks, with their violent offshoots like the Aryan Nation and the so-called "militias," are all carefully examined by Diamond.

Two major studies of the Barry Goldwater phenomenon show how the New Right incubated outside the traditional Deep South, in the "old America" of the Midwest and the nouveau southwestern terrain later dubbed the Sunbelt. Rick Perlstein's definitive biography of the Arizona senator places his movement's extraordinary takeover of the Republican Party between 1959 and 1964 into a larger cultural context that stretches back to the New Deal, while Lisa McGirr's study of Orange County, California's "suburban warriors" is the first in-depth study of "movement conservatives" in their natural social location, the postwar suburbs.²²

A notable revision of conservatism's rise is Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.²³ Until Sugrue, scholars of the northern, white working and lower-middle classes assumed that racial anger expressed electorally was a distinctive feature of the late 1960s on, a response to the civil rights movement. Sugrue turns this hypothesis on its head. In Detroit, the heartland of blue-collar politics in the 1930s and 1940s via the United Auto Workers, white aggression against black assertions of equality surfaced violently during World War II and increased steadily throughout the postwar era. Focused on the issue of "open housing," it spawned a massive movement, recruiting thousands of whites into homeowners' associations and electing a mayor committed to protecting white privilege. Year after year, organized mobs protected racial turf by driving out new black residents with little police intervention.

If white working-class communities shared and acted on a fear and hatred of blacks *before* the civil rights movement, then the New Deal was founded not on common interests but on black submission and was inherently fragile. The sad story of Detroit also explains what white politicians and journalists have long proclaimed irrational: the insurrections that shook northern African American "ghettoes" just as the civil rights movement reached its peak of influence between 1964 and 1968. Just when blacks had the greatest sympathy from white America,

goes the story, they threw it all away by burning and looting and following “extremists” like the Black Panther Party. Sugrue shows how decades of “white flight,” continued residential segregation, acute housing shortages for African Americans, and deindustrialization—removing the unionized factory jobs that provided black men a route to security—made cities like Detroit into tinderboxes of mutual resentment. Certainly, the Great Society and practical assertions of black power mattered, especially the breakthroughs in black electoral representation, but these were not catalysts of legitimate white resentment against a loss of status (as Edsall, Jonathan Rieder, and others argue) but rather the latest stages in an explicitly racial war for urban control in which whites were the aggressors.

THE WHITE PARTY

Taken together, this historiography suggests that the conservative triumphs after 1980 are the product of a long germination, rather than a response to immediate conditions. Looking back over modern America since the Civil War, it is clear that the preservation of white privilege is a defining resentment knitting together disparate classes, ethnicities, and regions. This requires overturning the shibboleth that the “liberal” New Deal smashed traditional conservatism, and only periodic appeals to crude anticommunism combined with the liberal Republicanism championed by figures like Thomas Dewey, Dwight Eisenhower, and Nelson Rockefeller allowed the Republicans to maintain electoral power after World War II. *The New Deal itself, as a Democratic Party–led coalition, contained within it the core ultraconservative constituency of twentieth-century U.S. politics—the white supremacist voters and political apparatus of the South.* They briefly went along with the activist national state and radical reforms of the 1930s because of dire economic necessity, as long as their regional power was unchallenged. Once postwar prosperity took hold, the Democrats were forced to confront their contradictions because of pressure from the emerging bloc of northern black voters. From 1948 to 1964, in fits and starts and motivated by a potentially crippling black swing to the Republicans, the Democrats gave up their historic identity as a “white man’s party.” In response, the solid South began a long migration that over time birthed a new conservative coalition, built from a southern base and using “southern” methods of cross-class racial mobilization. In 1948, Mississippi governor Fielding Wright

led his state's delegation out of the Democratic National Convention when a pro-civil rights plank was adopted. The Mississippians organized their own convention, never acknowledging they had bolted the party, and ran South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond as a "states rights Democrat" (or "Dixiecrat"). He carried the four states where he was listed as the official Democratic candidate, a premonition of the New Right to come decades later, as the South moved into the Republican column.

By itself, however, the possible defection of southern Democrats did not guarantee a new conservative alignment. Northern Republicans had a deep antipathy to associating with the Confederacy's heirs (and vice versa). The historic identification as the "party of Lincoln" still meant something, not primarily as a commitment to black equality—though until 1965, northern Republicans joined Democrats in bipartisan support for civil rights bills, and the twentieth century's first African American senator was Massachusetts Republican Edward Brooke, elected in 1966—but because of inherited sectional hostility. The white South stood for backwardness, corruption, ignorance, and lawlessness. Therefore a central concern of New Right operatives, the little-known professionals who infiltrated the Republican Party in the 1960s, was reconciling the historic division between conservative constituencies.²⁴ In the postwar era, there were two regionally defined right-wing voting blocs: segregationists defending their white supremacist fortress, and traditional Midwesterners who anchored the Republican Party but did not control it, losing out every four years in the presidential selection process to the "eastern establishment" identified with Wall Street and elitist liberalism, personified in the 1960s by New York governor Nelson Rockefeller. Assembling a new majority required moving all of these natural allies into a single ideological home, breaking down the traditional overlap of liberals and conservatives spread across both parties.

The Goldwater presidential campaign of 1959–64 was a failed attempt at this new conservative coalition. Goldwater as a "man of the West" could transcend old regional and partisan divisions, it was hoped. He repudiated the New Deal but in language that suggested a newfangled individualism, not just old-fashioned fiscal probity. The core of Goldwater's message was not racial but political: anticommunism married to antistatism as a holy cause. During the Fifties, this was the creed that drew together the scattered fragments of intellectual conservatism, especially the cadre of polemicists, fundraisers, and organiz-