
Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

Are We Decadent?

If there is one premise that serves to unite the Old Right, it is that the West—or America, or Christendom, or whatever label and identity they want to specify—is in trouble, has been in trouble for a long time, and is probably not going to get out of trouble for quite a while, if ever. In a famous but overdone synopsis of the course of modernity, Richard Weaver saw the decline beginning with the 13th-century nominalism of William of Ockham and proceeding logically to the nihilistic existentialism of the current era. Friedrich Hayek believed the age was lurching merrily down the “road to serfdom”; Whittaker Chambers was convinced that the side he had joined when he deserted communism was the losing one; and James Burnham warned that the liberalism that dominates Western culture and politics would facilitate the “suicide of the West.” From Oswald Spengler to Robert Bork, virtually everyone on “the right” has prophesied a steady descent into Avernus and a relentless disintegration of Western morals, religion, social institutions, cultural traditions, political freedom, economic affluence, and civil order. Only in the last few decades, with the electoral victory of Ronald Reagan and the collapse of the Soviet Union, have people calling themselves “conservatives” begun to chirp and coo about the “victory” of the right and the triumph of the “Conservative Revolution.” But most of those are simply the hired hacks and professional cheerleaders of partisans. The intellectually serious right—conservative, counter-revolutionary, or reactionary—entertains no illusion that any such triumph is on the horizon, or even over it.

Yet the visions of decadence and decline may be exaggerated. Those versed in world history know that epochs that appear to one historian as periods of collapse are viewed by others as periods of rebirth and regeneration. What the secularist Edward Gibbon saw as the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and the pagan classical civilization it ruled, the Catholic Christopher Dawson saw as the rise of Christian Europe. Virtually the same stretch of time in which Jacob Burck-

hardt perceived the civilization of the Renaissance, Johan Huizinga understood as the waning of the Middle Ages. The principle is nothing more complex than what every schoolchild knows: Whatever goes up must come down, and whenever one thing is coming down, another is probably going up, if only we have the eyes to see it rising.

In the case of civilizations, the things that are rising and declining are elites or ruling classes. As James Burnham put it years ago in *The Machiavellians*:

A nation's strength or weakness, its culture, its powers of endurance, its prosperity, its decadence, depend in the first instance upon the nature of its ruling class. More particularly, the way in which to study a nation, to understand it, to predict what will happen to it, requires first of all and primarily an analysis of the ruling class. Political history and political science are thus predominantly the history and science of ruling classes, their origin, development, composition, structure, and changes.

The transition from pagan Roman imperialism to Christian Greco-Roman imperialism occurred not because most people in the Roman Empire suddenly got right with Jesus but because a new, Christian ruling class displaced the old, pagan ruling class. I do not question the honesty or devotion of the converts, but Christianity offered advantages for rationalizing the political regime and mobilizing the loyalty of its subjects that an exhausted paganism no longer possessed. At the risk of sounding cynical, I suspect it was the political and other secular advantages of Christianity as an imperial public orthodoxy, rather than its purely spiritual appeal, that enabled it to become the animating faith of a new civilization.

The same seems to be true of the end of the Middle Ages, whether we see the era as one of “waning” or of “renaissance.” The emergence of new ruling classes based on commercial wealth, humanistic learning, scientific and technological advances, and the growth of cities demanded a new civilization—one

marked by what we now call individualism, secularism, rationalism, and continuous innovation—in opposition to the medieval civilization created by the older feudal elites whose power was based on land and its products. Fix your eyes only on the medieval dimension, and all you will see is its gradual decline. If, on the other hand, you fix your eye on emerging social and political forces, you will probably see something else.

So it is today. Most of the exponents of the Old Right I have cited wrote from the perspective of the civilization of which they were members and of the ruling class whose dominance they approved, and, as a result, what they saw was indeed the long, slow, and painful historical process of “waning,” what Spengler so poetically called the “Undergoing of the Evening Lands.” The ruling class being displaced was the descendant of the class that rose to power at the close of the Middle Ages, the bourgeois elite, and the remnants of the feudal aristocracies with which it had allied. From the perspective of the interests, values, and ideologies of that elite, the erosion of the family, the sexual revolution, the decline of traditional religious beliefs, the emergence of mass democracy, and what Robert Nisbet called the “racial revolution” of the 20th century are all self-evident signs of decline, not only of their civilization but probably all civilization.

But this is simply not so. New elites displaced the old bourgeois class, and the “civilization” they “created” (I am sufficiently bourgeois as to be unable to speak of them without quotation marks) is the managerial system that has been slouching toward, if not Bethlehem, then at least New York and Washington to be born. From the standpoint of the older elites and those traditional conservatives who express their values, it is no civilization at all, merely a jungle of moral, aesthetic, and social anarchy, frequently punctuated by periods of actual political anarchy and occasionally relieved by other periods of political repression. The late Allan Bloom's complaints about the prevalence of “relativism” among his students illustrate a typical conservative (although neoconservative) criticism of our age. “Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes,

that truth is relative," Bloom wrote in *The Closing of the American Mind*, and relativism was to him the certain sign of the uncertain future of civilization.

Regardless of what Bloom's students believed or said they believed, virtually no one other than professional philosophers truly espouses relativism, any more than anyone really acknowledges that he is "decadent." Students may profess relativism when they wish to question the morality of a punishment they don't want to suffer or of a war they don't want to fight or of any duty they don't want to perform, but they never invoke relativism when their own interests and preferences are at issue. Nor is the ruling class of the managerial regime relativist, for all its chatter about the obsolescence of sexual morality, the equality of races and cultures, and the impossibility of knowing the truth about God, the universe, and good and evil. Neither the managerial elite nor their offspring who idled away their youths listening to Professor Bloom are relativists when it comes to punishing John Demjanjuk, General Pinochet, or Timothy McVeigh. When inner-city blacks riot, the pet journalists and commentators of the managerial class whine and whimper for weeks afterward about the need to explore the "roots of the rage," but when suburban whites resist forced integration and busing, or a white separatist in Idaho refuses to answer a court summons, it's time to call in the troops and shoot to kill. College students may embrace relativism when they want to shack up with their girlfriends, but they are not relativists about "hate crimes," "racism," "sexism," "homophobia," or any of the other high crimes and misdemeanors that managerial morals condemn and which the managerial class does not hesitate to denounce, punish, and try to extirpate. It is simply not true that the current ruling class recognizes no morality and standards, and

since it does recognize and try seriously to enforce the morals, standards, and rules that reflect its interests as an elite, it cannot be said to be decadent or to preside over a decadent society.

What has been happening in the advanced industrial countries of the West for the past half-century is not merely the decline of civilization but the decline of one civilization and the emergence of another, as the ruling class that serves as the core of one civilization wanes and the class that forms the core of the other civilization waxes. The old "bourgeois" elite is in decline, not only in its influence and wealth in local and regional power bases and in owner-operated entrepreneurial firms, but in the values, moral codes, political formulas, and ideologies that reflect its worldview, its identity, and its sociopolitical interests. It is precisely because the old elite is in decline and being replaced by a new elite that the old civilization that formed the bulwark of the old elite is also disappearing, that its values are discarded as obsolete and repressive and its institutions, symbols, and heroes are eradicated or redefined as evil and tyrannical. So did Christianity redefine the pagan gods as demons, while converting pagan temples and festivals to Christian churches and holy days.

Nevertheless, it is preposterous to compare the pathetic artifices of "managerial civilization" with the edifice of medieval Christendom or even with the vast civilizational leviathan of postmedieval modernity. Unlike both Christendom and modernism, managerialism has a serious problem: It has been unable to formulate a myth or a coherent worldview that represents the interests of its creators and rulers in the managerial class and also appeals to and mobilizes the loyalties and actions of its subject classes. Since it is militantly secularist, it cannot make much use of Christianity or any other traditional religion that acknowledges the reality of transcendence. Managerial religion is simply humanitarianism flavored with a bit of syrup siphoned off from Marxism and Third World ethnicity. Indeed, managerial society cannot make much use of myth at all. It is the nature of myth to be fundamentally irrational, and the rationalism of managerial society persists in refuting and exploding every myth that the managerial mythographers can manufacture. How many more managerial gods must fail before the whole pantheon and the empire it supports collapse?

It may be that managerial society will eventually articulate an effective rationalization of the social and political domination of technocracy. But so far, all that the managerial class has been able to come up with is the claim that what it has to offer is materially and economically superior to any alternative. In the managerial capitalism of John Kenneth Galbraith's "New Industrial State," you can make more money, buy more stuff, cure more diseases, have more facelifts, play with more toys, get more vacation time, and enjoy more orgasms than in medieval Christendom or the dour, frugal, and hardworking modernity that replaced it. The justification, at least so far, of the managerial regimes that prevail in the West is nothing more sophisticated than the kitchen debate between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev at the World's Fair in 1960: We're better than you because we have dishwashers and you don't. The communist branch of managerial society offered exactly the same answer, except that it was unable to produce the dishwashers.

Of course, a civilization that can think of no better justification for itself than dishwashers and higher living standards can hardly be called a civilization at all. However useful its appeal to materialism may be in prosperous and successful times, it won't be able to use that appeal to justify the sacrifices and risks that real civilizations demand, sooner or later, in the course of their histories. How can it justify the wars it will have to fight, the lives it will have to lose, the failures and defeats that it, like all human enterprises, will inevitably have to experience? How, for that matter, can it even justify the disciplines that it has to impose on children, criminals, and internal enemies?

What appears to be the decadence of America or of Western civilization is in fact the result of a combination of two different phenomena, the real decadence of one elite that no longer understands or even believes in the civilization its forebears created and ruled and which it is now unwilling and unable to defend and transmit, and the moral and cultural emptiness of what purports to be the civilization destined to replace the one in decline. The first is dying and cannot be salvaged; the second is up for grabs, and whoever is able to press his hand on the wax of its animating myths will determine and define its content for as many millennia as the new civilization endures.

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Letter From Michigan

by Greg Kaza

They Are Coming, Father Abraham



Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush says that immigration "is not a problem to be solved. It is the sign of a successful nation. New Americans are to be welcomed as neighbors and not to be feared as strangers." In 1996, the Republican platform advocated an end to granting automatic citizenship to children born to illegal aliens. Under Bush, the 2000 platform does not mention "illegal immigration" or illegal aliens. As the Texas governor puts it: "Family values do not stop at the Rio Grande."

Yet immigration could emerge as a sleeper issue in Michigan, where freshman Republican U.S. Sen. Spencer Abraham is locked in a close race with Democratic U.S. Rep. Debbie Stabenow. As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee's immigration panel, Abraham supported a controversial increase in the number of skilled H1B visa workers from 65,000 to 115,000 per year. He later told the *Detroit News* that even more H1B visas should be granted to noncitizens. "I know some people criticize these visas," Abraham said. "But if we can't have those workers here, you can bet they'll go to their native countries and create competition." The odds favor Abraham in November: he has the power of incumbency and a substantial fundraising advantage over Stabenow, whose main claim to fame is that she is a career politician first elected to office in 1976. The grandson of Lebanese immigrants, the Harvard-educated Abraham is likely to benefit from a crossover vote among the country's largest bloc of Arab-Americans, based in metro Detroit, who tend to vote Democratic.

Abraham's position on immigration has been criticized by the Federation for

American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which has been airing advertisements in Michigan. The FAIR ads contend that Abraham's legislation, S. 2045, would harm American high-tech workers by granting employers an unfair advantage over citizens who work in the industry. FAIR maintains that the bill contains no protection for the jobs or wages of native workers, and that it would permit employers to hire guest laborers instead of citizens and legal immigrants. Abraham's campaign has responded by calling the FAIR ads the work of "hate groups."

In 1994, Abraham was elected with 52 percent of the vote, defeating Democratic U.S. Rep. Bob Carr. The contest was a three-man race until the final ten days. Libertarian Jon Coon mounted a serious campaign based upon Second Amendment rights, blanketing Michigan with thousands of orange hunter signs. Abraham's supporters responded by airing electronic ads by rock star Ted Nugent, a staunch hunter/Second Amendment advocate. Coon still received about five percent of the vote.

This year, Abraham faces Stabenow, Libertarian Michael Corliss, and the Reform Party's Mark Forton, former chairman of the Republican Party in Macomb County, home of the Reagan Democrats. Among the candidates, only Forton opposes unlimited immigration. "If our population doubles in the 21st century as a result of immigration," Forton says, "America as we know it will not survive. We will lose our freedoms, our constitutional rights." He advocates a five-year moratorium on new immigration; making English the official language; repealing taxpayer benefits for illegal aliens, and restricting the influx of immigrants to "180,000 to 250,000 annually," the traditional norm.

Forton links open immigration to multilateral trade agreements such as NAFTA and GATT, charging that both have driven down the real wages of middle-class Americans. An autoworker for 35 years, Forton echoes Reform Party presidential nominee Pat Buchanan, who ran well in Michigan in the 1992 and 1996 Republican primaries. "Many corporations," Forton argues, "have become so immoral, so corrupt, that their first loyal-

ty is no longer to America. They would rather pay a Third World worker a dollar a day than pay a working mother in America eight dollars an hour." Abraham's policies are "bringing Third World immigrants into this country to provide a source of cheap labor for corporations that make large campaign contributions," says Forton. "It's not just the automobile industry. It's most of America's high-paying manufacturing jobs." Michigan, he believes, "needs a U.S. senator from Michigan, not California."

The Republicans are ignoring Forton; there is little evidence that he is mounting as serious a campaign as Coon did in 1994. Although immigration could still emerge as a sleeper issue in debates, it is more likely to play a factor in the 2002 reapportionment. In a clever yet overlooked essay in the September 6 issue of *Inside Michigan Politics*, editor Bill Ballenger (a former Republican state senator) writes that the "Problem is, Abraham's approach to immigration has produced two results: Michigan is more likely to lose another seat in Congress after the next Census; and the Republican party will probably lose seats in the U.S. House it now holds to new districts in the South and West that will be won by Democrats, costing the GOP its hard-won majority." Ballenger cites the work of Stephen A. Camarota, a resident at the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, D.C., who found, in a study coauthored by Texas A&M professor Dudley L. Boston, Jr., that the number of immigrants living in the United States has nearly tripled from 9.5 million (five percent of the population) in 1970 to 27 million (or ten percent) today. Seventy-five percent live in only six states, including California. To estimate the political impact of immigration, Camarota and Boston analyzed the 1990 census count and 2000 projections and then recalculated the apportionment of House seats. Industrial states such as Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania will lose seats, while immigrant-rich California will likely gain nine seats, making its electoral significance even greater.

Ballenger observes, "A cynic might opine that Abraham has already calculated that the Congressional seat Michigan may lose after 2000 is likely to be one