

The Right Lesson

Conservatives moved to the middle after Goldwater. That was a mistake.

By Paul Gottfried

BARACK OBAMA'S VICTORY has left the Republican Party and its allies reeling, groping frantically for a path back to power. Luckily, or not, the conservative establishment already has a handful of recently published critical works to guide its meditations. These include David Frum's *Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again* and Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam's *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream*, as well as columns by the *New York Times'* house conservative, David Brooks. All of these emphasize the need for a new social direction for the GOP and conservative movement.

These sources teach that Republicans have foundered because they have failed to move with the times. Whether it is Brooks asking us to treat homosexual marriage as an expression of "family values," Frum exhorting the GOP to ditch the Religious Right on abortion and gay rights—but obviously not on Zionism—or Douthat and Salam pushing for government subsidies for the working poor and "earned legalization programs" for undocumented aliens, the common theme is that the Right and the GOP should downplay, if not concede, contentious social issues and engage more purposefully in income manipulation. This move would supposedly help the Right get into sync with voters.

What is most striking here is that these authors are advocating more of the same. They are trying to push the conservative movement farther in the direction in which it has been going

since the mid-1960s. Frum, Douthat, Salam, and Brooks would keep the GOP essentially in its present mold as a provider of social programs, a pale, albeit more militaristic, imitation of the Democratic Party. Yet this trend already belongs to the past. It took off more than 40 years ago, after the crushing defeat of presidential candidate Barry Goldwater in 1964, a rout that dragged down many Republican congressmen and looked very much like the most recent election.

McCain may hold the Senate seat that was once Goldwater's, but he is in no way his philosophical successor. The 2008 election was a contest between two varieties of the Left—between an actually left-wing candidate, Barack Obama, and a spurious, one might say "adjusted," right-winger, McCain. By contrast, 1964 was the real thing. As a critic of the New Deal and a passionate opponent of any attempt to expand it, Goldwater questioned the rationale for an American welfare state. Even more ominously, he combined his known desire to privatize Social Security, the TVA, and other federal projects with a strong Cold War posture. He not only spoke about the importance of defending the U.S. against Communist aggression, he famously—or infamously—wished to support anti-Communist insurgencies, and he hinted at the possibility of using nuclear weapons to end the incursions of North Vietnamese armies into the south. Only in his readiness to resort to force has McCain followed in Goldwater's footsteps.

The Republican candidate of 1964, significantly to the right of McCain, faced much greater vilification. He had the full power of the press and world opinion arrayed against him. Typical of this hostility was the remark by Martin Luther King, which was seconded by Gov. Pat Brown of California, that "we see dangerous signs of Hitlerism in the Goldwater campaign. All we need to hear [at the Republican convention] is 'Heil Hitler.'" By fall 1964, when Johnson ran a television ad featuring a small girl picking flowers juxtaposed with images of a nuclear catastrophe caused by Goldwater's foreign policy, the election was already all but over.

But movement conservative interpretation of the 1964 campaign, as found for example in Lee Edwards's *The Conservative Revolution*, is that Goldwater's landslide defeat was in no way conclusive. Indeed, it became the prelude for much greater things. A Goldwater backer who broke into GOP politics because of his support for the Arizona senator, Ronald Reagan, went on to become president. And Reagan allegedly picked up where Goldwater left off, advancing the "conservative revolution" against the New Deal and achieving victory in the Cold War, which had been Goldwater's explicit aim. Such movement stalwarts as William F. Buckley Jr., Russell Kirk, F. Clifton White, and Milton Friedman moved from backing Goldwater to endorsing Reagan. Certainly some argument for continuity can be made here, even if one hesitates to go all the

way with Edwards's proclamation of an unbroken tradition uniting Reagan and Goldwater to Robert Taft.

In point of fact, however, Goldwater's defeat did not lead to a "Reagan revolution." Instead, the fate of Goldwater and his movement in 1964 caused the American Right to move leftward over the next two decades and encouraged the GOP to fall back into its customary country-club avoidance of tough choices. After 1964, as Jonathan M. Schoenwald persuasively argues in *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Neoconservatism*, the conservative movement's leaders came up with a blander, more mainstream version of their beliefs and policies. Because of his leftist bias, Schoenwald presents this process in a positive way, stressing how the post-Goldwater conservatives "deflated their extremism," "cut off the extremist millstone," and "shifted from pure ideology to electoral pragmatism." Thus Reagan, when he became governor of California in 1966, did not make the rash budget cuts that some had expected, and he subsequently signed a very liberal abortion bill into law.

Schoenwald notices that after 1964 conservatives abandoned their opposition to the Civil Rights Act that had passed that year and stopped talking about getting rid of Social Security as opposed to "privatizing" a certain percentage of it. Harry Truman and FDR went from being conservative punching bags to being admired, even worshipped, figures in the ensuing 20 years. While the Right remained anti-Communist, it gave up its earlier postwar anti-Soviet rhetoric and took over certain Cold War liberal themes. These included attacks on the Soviets' resistance to allowing Russian Jews to emigrate to Israel and long, drawn out comparisons between Soviet and fascist opposition to independent labor union movements.

Such a revamping of the conservative movement, Schoenwald suggests, came

before the neoconservative ascendancy of the 1980s and in fact laid the groundwork for it. In 1968, *NR* endorsed the centrist Republican Richard Nixon as a presidential candidate, someone who supposedly represented "the conservative mainstream." In June 1969, one of *NR*'s senior editors, Jeffrey Hart, who this year supported Obama as a "Burkean conservative," responded in a commentary to both traditionalists and libertarians who had complained about the magazine's drift into the Nixon fold: "We have got in America what we have got. It is not what we would have but neither is it as bad as what we might have." When in July 1971 the editors "suspended support of the administration," their main reason was not that Nixon had embraced affirmative action and highly interventionist economic policies. Rather, they objected to Nixon's pursuit of détente with Soviet Russia. In the 1980s, neoconservatives could take the commanding heights in conservative institutions because the movement had already embraced a weaker form of their social-democratic domestic policies.

Steps in this direction were deftly hidden by referring to an unchanging conservative substance, in the form of "permanent things" or "values." Besides, even if the welfare state continued to grow under Republicans and Democrats alike, that would only remain the case—or so the faithful were assured—until conservatives obtained positions throughout the federal bureaucracy. Then right-wing bureaucrats would rescue taxpayers from all the other federal employees. Needless to say, this didn't happen. Instead, under Nixon and Reagan the rescuers grew fat feeding at the public trough.

According to Larry M. Schwab in *The Illusion of a Conservative Reagan Revolution*, continuities between the Carter and Reagan administrations were far

greater than either liberals or conservatives wished to admit. Reagan's military budget during his first year in office was only slightly higher than the one passed in the last year of the Carter administration. Far more important, however, Reagan did nothing significant to reduce the size of the welfare state or the entitlement programs that he had inherited from his predecessor.

Admittedly, Reagan achieved some good for the Right by upping the ante on the Soviets and hastening the collapse of the financially decrepit Evil Empire. He also appointed fewer left-leaning federal judges than a Democratic president would have selected, and he made modest cuts in the federal bureaucracy. But he did not reverse the New Deal or the Great Society, and he left us with neoconservatives cluttering the Department of Education and the State Department. And even more fatefully, his vice president and heir apparent, George H.W. Bush, endorsed the Americans With Disabilities Act and a new Civil Rights Act, which came replete with minority quotas and set asides.

After Goldwater, the conservative movement made its peace with the New Deal and the leftward drift of the country. Despite their occasional moments of good sense, Douthat, Frum, and their friends would not change that direction. Indeed, they urge conservatives further and faster down that road. Not that they are entirely wrong when they claim to be offering the GOP a chance to survive. Republicans might benefit at least in the near term by adopting some of their policy suggestions, such as inflation-indexing the tax credits for children, wage subsidies for low-income families, awarding points to immigration applicants for learning English, and the creation of a national identity card. Frum, moreover, is to be congratulated for ridiculing the GOP's frenzied, sporadic attempts to reach out to black voters.

He also notes that it would be counterproductive for Republicans to get behind amnesty for illegal immigrants, a policy that would turn red states blue.

Frum thinks the GOP should be working to hold on to—or recover—the broad middle class by structuring taxes and public benefits in their favor. Douthat looks to a different stratum as the mainstay for a reinvigorated Republican Party. His proposals are aimed mostly at a working poor, but he also wishes to expand exurbia into the “wide open spaces” of the country through government subsidies. Somehow, according to Douthat, moving populations away from urban cores will make them more communal and more likely to vote Republican. Frum’s idea for scoring points among soccer moms and religiously liberal white Christians for the GOP is to adopt more liberal attitudes toward homosexuality and abortion. Republicans apparently don’t need to worry about the Religious Right, whose younger members are moving left with their age cohort and whose older members may have no choice but to go on voting Republican.

There was nothing inevitable about the conservative movement’s leftward swerve after Goldwater’s defeat, however, and there may be alternatives to that course today. Possibilities might include real devolution of power from the federal administration to state and local bodies, abandoning the idea of the “living constitution,” identifying national security with protecting our national borders rather than exporting democracy, and other proposals now coming almost exclusively from the ostracized paleo-Right.

The catalyst for changing course will not come from the compromised conservative movement. Getting rid of what

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Representative Failure

Pelosi and Reid: the GOP’s best hope for 2010.

By W. James Antle III

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT that John McCain had won the presidency. Once the chills pass and the surf-music sounds of “Bomb, bomb Iran” fade, think about what this outcome would have required of the electorate. An unpopular incumbent party with abysmal approval ratings would have been rewarded with additional years in power. The American people would have ignored their intense conviction that the country is on the wrong track—a view held by 76 percent in the exit polls—and stuck with the devil they knew over the change agent they didn’t. A stunning upset, the “Dewey Defeats Truman” headline on steroids.

Yet when the Democratic Congress was returned to power with increased majorities in both houses, hardly anyone batted an eye. The single remarkable thing the Capitol Hill knitting circle led by Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid accomplished over the last two years was a negative: they managed to become even less popular than President Bush. That’s no easy feat. Since late 2005, Bush’s approval ratings have seldom budged above the low 30s. Only 27 percent of those who turned out on Election Day told exit pollsters they approved of the president’s performance in office.

Heading into the election, a Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll pegged Congress’ approval rating at 18 percent. This is not some partisan scheme by Rupert Murdoch or Roger Ailes to embar-

ass the Democratic majority. An earlier CBS News/*New York Times* poll found a 15 percent congressional approval rating, with net disapproval standing at an eye-popping 60 percent. Back in May, Gallup reported, “Approval of Congress has dipped below 20% for only the fourth time in the 34 years Gallup has asked Americans to rate the job Congress is doing.”

Republicans predictably hate the Pelosi-Reid Congress. More surprisingly, Democrats and independents do, too. If there is intelligent life in outer space, it probably thinks the House and Senate are doing a lousy job. It’s easy to understand why: the Congress that was elected in 2006 has given everyone a reason to hate it.

It has tried to do enough liberal things to raise conservative ire—increase taxes, expand taxpayer funding of embryonic stem-cell research while extending it to abortion, block offshore drilling, boost the minimum wage, pass a bloated farm bill, enlarge the federal government’s role in healthcare. It has, as much through its own leadership’s fecklessness as Republican obstructionism, failed to do enough of these things to outrage liberals. And while independents claim to love divided government, they also dislike the “Do-Nothing” Congresses that tend to result. (Before Republicans get too carried away with all this, they might remember another reason voters hate the Democratic Con-