

# Counterfeiting Conservatism

Are you sure you want a revolution?

By Patrick J. Deneen

CONSERVATISM IS THE “ISM” that came into being to resist the existence of “isms.” This makes for potentially insurmountable challenges: How to evince a political belief that avoids the rigidity of ideology? Can one take a political position without becoming a political program? Can the principled stand against a politics based upon the application of universalized principle avoid becoming universalized?

From the first moment that conservatism was articulated as a philosophy—Edmund Burke’s critique of the “mechanic philosophy” of the French Enlightenment that sought the creation of a new society along stiff geometric lines—a philosophy of tradition was born, distinct from the unconscious practices that make up any given tradition. Even as Burke cautioned against a revolutionary spirit that sought to unclot the mysterious origins and meanings of practices, conservatism was itself forced to call attention the very existence of the thing it wanted to keep shrouded from inspection.

Conservatism—*qua* “ism”—was thus defined by its opposition to a radical adversary. The dangers of various ideologies to traditional practice forced conservatism to articulate itself in ways that were distinctively unconservative. Even as Burke—and after him, thinkers like Michael Oakeshott and Bertrand de Jouvenel—denounced “theoretical” approaches to politics, the defense of tradition itself required theoretical articulation. Ironically, every time conservatism scored a point intellectually or

politically, it lost ground, since its very articulation depended on terms set by its opponent.

Given that conservatism originated in ways that cut against the conservative temperament, over time it’s hardly surprising that conservatism has begun to resemble non- and even anti-conservative positions not only in tactics but in content. Because conservatism defines itself relative to the current position of its more liberal opponent, it has come occupy space that has been abandoned by a leftward-moving opposition.

This is particularly true in contemporary American politics, where conservatism has not only crystallized into an “orthodoxy”—as Sam Tanenhaus argues in his recent book *The Death of Conservatism*—but into a political movement that employs scorched-earth political tactics in defense of ends and policies that stand to conserve very little. This is hardly a new development in response to the election of President Obama: in the 1980s, it was barely noted as peculiar that one of Ronald Reagan’s intellectual heroes was Thomas Paine—Edmund Burke’s *bête noire*—or that a subsequent generation of conservatives have defined themselves almost exclusively by their devotion to the revolutionary principles of the Declaration of Independence. Increasingly, political conservatism has stood less for a defense of the principles articulated by Russell Kirk—custom, variety, prudence, imperfectibility, community, and restraint of power—and has instead allied itself with national and even inter-

national objectives destructive to custom, variety, and community. Conservatives increasingly demand support for the expansion of military and economic power, resource exploitation with little discussion of impact upon future generations, a globalized market, a standardization of law that is increasingly based in Kantian (rather than common-law) reasoning, “democratization” abroad, federal rather than local allegiances, mobility, and a close affiliation with corporations and the financial industry—hardly hotbeds of conservative practice. The movement’s tactics—demanding obeisance by those who would adopt its label and destruction of those who would oppose it—strike one as more Alinsky than Kirk or Oakeshott.

How this has come to pass would require a lengthy treatise, but perhaps a few discrete causes can be delineated. In diagnosing the transformation of contemporary American conservatism into increasingly a monolithic and even ideological movement, I would point to three developments that move from the institutional to the philosophical to the theological. First, changes in electoral politics, especially the primary system, have rewarded ideological purity over prudential reasoning and due regard for particularity. Second, in response to increasingly nationalized and radicalized forms of liberalism, conservatism has tended over time to occupy the space abandoned by that leftward trajectory. While more “conservative” than its liberal counterpart, conservatism has thus become more ideologically liberal.

And lastly, in its political incarnation, conservatism has embraced versions of old religious heresies, particularly Manicheanism and Gnosticism. It may be that conservatism was all along doomed to travel this course.

The direct primary was an innovation of the Progressive movement during the early 20th century. Aimed at removing the power of nomination from party bosses huddled in smoke-filled backrooms, it was hoped that the direct primary would open the process to the people. Progressives of both parties—whether Democrats such as Woodrow Wilson or Republicans such as Theodore Roosevelt—supported the idea.

But in a prescient article entitled “The Direct Primary” written in 1909, during the high-water mark of Progressive enthusiasm for reform, Princeton political scientist Henry Jones Ford warned that the direct primary might take power out of the hands of party chiefs, but it would not result in a paradisaical people’s democracy. Instead, he warned that power—which he considered ineliminable in politics—would flow to other places that would systematically benefit from the new arrangements. In particular, he foresaw the replacement of party operatives, who had historically chosen candidates on the grounds of local circumstance, experience, and party loyalty, with a “plutocracy” of monied interests that would increasingly be needed to finance expensive primary races. His analysis—prescient by dint of its conservative inclination to consider “unintended consequences,” a form of analysis that was not embraced by the more influential Progressives, such as his Princeton colleague Woodrow Wilson, who was responsible for hiring Ford—intimates why ideology would begin to replace broadly political considerations in the nominating, and subsequent governing, process.

Elections are increasingly financed by

advocacy groups with national agendas. In many cases, the lion’s share of funding for Senate—and increasingly House—races comes from out-of-state or out-of-district sources. The plutocracy about which Ford warned tends to reward candidates of ideological purity as they most neatly reflect a set of nationally defined partisan priorities. Their influence has been magnified by the low voter turnout in primary elections and the fact that highly motivated ideological or single-issue voters are the ones that turn out. In the case of conservatives, this means that primaries have become the loci where “impure” candidates can be eliminated from electoral consideration.

Unsurprisingly, partisan rancor in Washington has risen to fever pitch, with representatives of each party conscious that efforts to compromise, or bring to bear local concerns that might put them in tension with the national agenda, will result in calls for a primary challenge. Thus the Progressive reforms intended to make the Ameri-

alization of politics and thereby the rise of ideology as a major factor in electoral politics.

It is easy to forget that it was a Progressive ambition to orient the devotion of the American public to the nation and away from their localities. The “Pledge of Allegiance”—now cherished by conservatives as a traditional civil prayer—was written in 1892 and advocated by Francis Bellamy, a Christian socialist, cousin of socialist utopian Edward Bellamy. Such advocates of nationalism saw particular and mediating allegiances—especially those of immigrant groups like the Irish and Italians—as a danger to liberal democracy and instead advanced efforts to instill fealty to the *idea* of the nation. Thus, American history increasingly became focused on learning about the Declaration and the Constitution rather than particular people of achievement such as Paul Revere, Betsy Ross, and Nathan Hale (people with strong local affiliations, to boot).

Nationalism was understood to be a

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can system more democratic have made representatives more likely to respond to a small but vocal group of ideological activists rather than to negotiate between the varied voices of their particular districts or states and national priorities. The party system was assaulted not only for being corrupt but more fundamentally for being an obstacle to the creation of a national political system. The direct primary—along with the 17th Amendment, which provided for the direct election of senators—led to the nation-

necessary step in liberating individuals from local cultures that put limits upon the full expression of a more universal self-understanding, as well as the goals of personal autonomy and upward mobility. Thinkers such as Herbert Croly and John Dewey, writing for the appropriately titled *New Republic*, called for a new religiously-tinted devotion to the nation as the source of individual liberation and national greatness. President McKinley—having defeated the populist William Jennings Bryan in the 1896 election—set the country on an imperialistic

course, one later approved by Progressives (irrespective of party). Conservatives such as, arguably, Bryan himself at this point tended to defend the particularities of their states, defended the idea of a modest Republic based in self-sufficient family-farming or small-scale ownership of business, and were deeply wary of the nationalizing and imperialistic proclivities of the elite coastal classes. Conservatism, even if imperfectly, was less a program than a disposition and set of varied local practices that eschewed a monolithic and ideological orientation.

It is instructive to consider how the various stances of Progressives came to be occupied by conservatives and thereby how in substance contemporary conservatism now provides succor to liberal ends. Throughout the 20th century, almost every matter of public interest—economic, civic, moral—came under the purview of national authority. Some of these policies were affected through the Congress and the presidency, particularly during the New Deal in regard to economic matters. But in the realm of social policy, a watershed moment occurred in 1973 with the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which not only identified a constitutional right to abort but invalidated a variety of state laws.

The demand to fashion a national response, combined with changes in the party system that facilitated that nationalization and sharpened partisan edges, led conservatives to increasingly abandon local and regional affiliations and to regard the national stage as their natural battleground. But not until the 1960s, with the radicalization of the Democratic Party—its friendliness to socialism at home and Communism abroad—did the Republican Party embrace the label of “conservative” and begin to define this “ism” as a distilled ideology. The space they found attractive had been aban-

doned by Progressives. If the Left flirted with the idea of a world state, conservatism would counter with fulsome nationalism. If the Left showed signs of increasing secularity, conservatism would embrace a civic religion that propounded the idea of America as Redeemer Nation. If the Left became disdainful of the American and Western traditions, conservatism would demand loyalty to the idea of America as articulated in the Declaration and rationalist political philosophy. If the Left moved in the direction of economic socialism, conservatism would embrace the free-market ideology of libertarian economics, despite the fact that thinkers like Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and James Buchanan rejected the label “conservative.” If the Left became increasingly pacifistic, conservatives would respond with a strong assertion of militarism. If the Left's pacifism led it to withdraw from the difficult military challenges presented by tyrants, conservatism would become the Wilsonian defender of a movement toward worldwide democratization.

Conservatism thus came to embody the opposite of Kirk's conservative principles: custom became economic monoculture (i.e., globalization); variety became nationalism; prudence became Kantian jurisprudence; imperfectibility became a religion of secular redemption; community became mobility; and restraint of power became lust for power, particularly control of the national agenda. It lost its moorings by tracking its opponent, and with every victory only fueled the further evisceration of the folkways, traditions, and commitments that an originally conservative disposition arose politically to defend.

On the gravestone of its hero—Ronald Reagan—is an epithet that suggests how far modern conservatism has traveled from its original basis in theo-

logical humility and acknowledgment of original sin: “I know in my heart that man is good.” The substance of Burkean conservatism is ultimately derived from deeply Augustinian sources—the sure knowledge that our existence on earth is not perfectible and that all political societies, like all humans, are flawed and imperfect vessels. The idea that politics can be subject to definitive answers based in ideological or scientific thinking—what de Jouvenel called “the myth of the solution”—lies at the heart of the modern ideologies that conservatism arose to combat. But as it has moved to occupy the ideological space vacated by a leftward-tilting liberalism, it has increasingly adopted aspects of the theological heresies true conservatism rejected.

It has become Manichean in its division of the world into good and evil, sacred and profane. This dualism avoids more complex theology in which evil and sin must be explained not by some external actor but as sown into the nature of postlapsarian human reality. This is a theology that allows for the easy assignment of blame—namely, to agents who are the embodiment of evil—and eschews the sort of self-examination that reveals our own complicity. Recall George W. Bush's Second Inaugural call to eliminate evil from the world. Or listen to conservative talk radio, where even a few minutes reveal a deep and pervasive Manicheanism in which all that is objectionable is the consequence of liberal policies and redemption is only a conservative political victory away.

Further, conservatism has come to reflect a contemporary form of Gnosticism, the heresy based upon a hatred of the given and created world. Conservatives today are as likely as liberals to invoke the goals of “progress” and “growth,” seeing especially in the eco-

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## Failure to Launch

Did Robert Gibbs let the cat out of the bag? Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is telling the world that Iran, unable to get fuel rods from the West for its U.S.-built reactor, which

makes medical isotopes, had begun to enrich its own uranium to 20 percent.

From his perch in the West Wing, Gibbs scoffed: "He says many things, and many of them turn out to be untrue. We do not believe they have the capability to enrich to the degree to which they now say they are enriching."

But wait a minute. If Iran does not "have the capability" to enrich to 20 percent for fuel rods, how can Iran enrich to 90 percent for a bomb? What was Gibbs implying?

Is he confirming reports that Iran's centrifuges are breaking down or have been sabotaged? Is he saying that impurities, such as molybdenum, in the feed stock of Iran's centrifuges at Natanz are damaging the centrifuges and contaminating the uranium?

What explains Gibbs's confidence? Perhaps this: according to a report last week by David Albright and Christina Walrond of the Institute for Science and International Security, "Iran's problems in its centrifuge programme are greater than expected. ... Iran is unlikely to deploy enough gas centrifuges to make enriched uranium for commercial nuclear power reactors (Iran's stated nuclear goal) for a long time, if ever, particularly if (UN) sanctions remain in force."

Thus, ISIS is saying Iran cannot make usable fuel for the nuclear power plant it is building, and Gibbs is saying Iran lacks the capability to make fuel rods for its research reactor. Which suggests Iran's vaunted nuclear program is a busted flush.

ISIS insists, however, that Iran may still be able to build a bomb. Yet to do that, Iran would have to divert nearly all of its low-enriched uranium at Natanz, now under UN watch, to a new cascade of centrifuges, enrich that to 90 percent, then explode a nuclear device.

Should Iran do that, however, it would have burned up all its bomb-grade uranium and lack enough low-enriched uranium for a second test. And Tehran would be facing a stunned and shaken Israel with hundreds of nukes and an America with thousands, without a single nuke of its own.

Is Iran running a bluff? And if Gibbs and Albright are right, how long can Iran keep up this pretense of rapid nuclear progress? This brings us to the declaration by Ahmadinejad on the 31st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, which produced this headline in the *New York Times*: "Iran Boasts of Capacity to Make Bomb Fuel." Accurate as far as it went, this headline was so incomplete as to mislead. For here is what Ahmadinejad said in full: "When we say that we don't build nuclear bombs, it means that we won't do so because we don't believe in having it. ... The Iranian nation is brave enough that if one day we wanted to build nuclear bombs, we would announce it publicly without being afraid of you."

"Right now in Natanz we have the capability to enrich to more than 20 percent and to more than 80 percent, but because we don't need to, we won't do so."

Ahmadinejad sounds like Ronald Reagan: "We believe that not only the Middle East but the whole world should

be free of nuclear weapons, because we see such weapons as inhumane."

Now if, as Albright suggests, Tehran cannot produce fuel for nuclear power plants, and if, as Gibbs suggests, Iran is not capable of enriching to 20 percent for fuel for its research reactor, is Ahmadinejad, in renouncing the bomb, making a virtue of necessity? After all, if you can't build them, denounce them as inhumane.

Last December, the *Times* of London reported it had a secret document, which "intelligence agencies" dated to early 2007, proving that Iran was working on the final component of a "neutron initiator," the trigger for an atom bomb.

If true, this would leave egg all over the faces of 16 U.S. intelligence agencies whose December 2007 consensus was that Iran stopped seeking a bomb in 2003.

The *Times* credited an "Asian intelligence service" for having ably assisted with its story.

U.S. intelligence, however, has not confirmed the authenticity of the document, and Iran calls it a transparent forgery. When former CIA man Phil Giraldi sounded out ex-colleagues still in the trade, they, too, called the *Times'* document a forgery.

Shades of Saddam seeking yellowcake from Niger.

Are the folks who lied us into war on Iraq, to strip it of weapons it did not have, now trying to lie us into war on Iran, to strip it of weapons it does not have? Maybe the Senate should find out before voting sanctions that will put us on the road to such a war, which would fill up all the empty beds at Walter Reed. ■

