

Toward a Hard Right

What is the meaning of the election of 2004 for the American Hard Right? The question, of course, presupposes that there is such a thing as a “Hard Right” distinct from the Mossad’s Station Pentagon, or the “moral values” evangelicals, or the Girly Boys’ Jamboree. By “Hard Right,” in this context, I mean neither what has by now evolved into the establishment conservatism of the neocons and their Christian Right allies nor the collection of conspiracy-mongers, captives of various ethnic and class resentments, and neck-twitchers of all descriptions whose bottomless buckets of e-mails seem magnetically attracted to my inbox. I mean, rather, a still amorphous but definitely existing formation of dissident conservatives and rightists (some savory and some not, depending on one’s tastes) that finds itself alienated not only from the direction in which America as a nation and a civilization appears to be going but from the mainstream of American “conservatism,” a body of opinion that now merely defends and reflects this direction. I will not name all the elements of this movement that I think belong in it (since the first response to doing so would be for most of those I named to denounce and reject association with the others), but most of the readers with whom I communicate, many of whom I regularly encounter at public conferences and speeches, will know exactly which individuals and which groups I am talking about. The Hard Right is not defined (at least not yet) by any coherently stated ideology or program or any formal organization (there are several, sort of), but those who are drawn to it know it when they see it, and those who don’t are people for whom it probably doesn’t really matter if they know it or not.

Regardless of the groups, publications, websites, and individuals who make up the Hard Right, there are three main issues that so far define it: immigration control, the war in Iraq (and, a bit more broadly, U.S. foreign policy), and what we shall call (perhaps a bit demurely) the Cultural Issue—namely, what kind of country is this going to be, and who’s going to be in charge of it? The Cultural Issue is only in part (and only a rather thin

part) about such matters as “homosexual marriage” or abortion or display of the Ten Commandments on the courthouse lawn, or similar moral-social (or constitutional) issues. Those issues all have conservative champions in the mainstream, and few in the Hard Right are much interested in them explicitly. The candidate who carried those issues more than any other in the last election was not President Bush, who did his best to avoid them but wound up with all the credit for them anyway, but the Constitution Party’s Michael Peroutka, whose valiant efforts were barely noticeable in the final returns (a bit more than 100,000 votes). One reason he did not fare better, perhaps, is that President Bush and the Republicans actually did stroke those issues enough to be able to draw away whatever support he might have gained from them.

The Moral Issue, in that sense, is not the same at all as the Cultural Issue, of which immigration should properly be considered a part. The Cultural Issue concerns matters on which religious and ethical beliefs in themselves are silent: For example, Should we display the Confederate Flag or similar symbols? Or, What should your children learn at school about George Washington or Christopher Columbus, as opposed to Red Cloud and Nat Turner? Ultimately, of course, the Cultural Issue comes down not just to procedural questions about what public schools should teach and on what public funds should be spent but to the bottom line: Was the Confederacy right, or at least defensible? Were whites right to take the country from the Indians? Were white Southerners right to keep slavery as long as they did? Throughout most of American history, the answers were clear enough to all Americans who mattered. Today, thanks in large part to the managed collapse of the traditional cultural envelope, they are not, and the answers that are emerging (again, through managed construction) are what help create the Hard Right.

To return, then, to the question raised, What was the effect of the 2004 election on the American Hard Right? My original inclination, both before and after it became clear that George W. Bush had



won, was that its impact was disastrous. Now, that may not be the case.

The reason a Bush victory seemed disastrous (for the Hard Right specifically, as opposed to all the other reasons it is disastrous) is that it effectively prevents the conservative consciousness-raising that is needed if Americans who now think of themselves as “conservatives” (and believe, as conservatives do, that everything’s OK) are ever going to grow up and recognize that they need to be Hard Right (adherents of which know that things aren’t OK). What happened in 2004 is what has happened in every election year since George Wallace ran against Richard Nixon in 1968. The Democrats are just sooooo bad! Humphrey or McGovern or Clinton or Gore or Kerry or (fill in the blank) is sooooo dangerous, we’ve just got to vote for Nixon or Ford or Bush or Bush or whoever it might be to keep him out. With all his flaws, the Republican is always the lesser of the two evils.

Not surprisingly, of course, the logical consequence of this “strategy” of the Lesser of Two Evils is that the lesser evil becomes increasingly evil. Not only does it offer a blank check to the Republican incumbent to do whatever he wishes after he once again gulls the conservative cattle into the proper voting corrals, but it does nothing to develop conservative strength within the party itself as a base from which it could ever recover its position. The natural result of the perpetual Lesser of Two Evils strategy is the permanent marginalization of conservative forces within the GOP. Today, to say they have been “marginalized” is problematic. It is not clear that they even exist.

Suppose, however, that conservatives had decided to vote against Bush this time and allowed Kerry to win? Would this have been any better? Probably not.

The reason is that conservatives in-

side the GOP would not have used the opportunity to take over and construct a serious conservative (let alone a Hard Right) party but would have done exactly what they did when Bill Clinton won the White House in 1992. For the next eight years, we had to listen to every Clinton panty-raid story and murder theory the professional conservatives could come up with. We enjoyed only a brief whiff of this same brew during the Swift Boat controversies last summer, but we would have spent the next four years listening to how Kerry stole the election and the most lurid gossip about his sex life, financial deals, military records, and legal and political scandals. As under Clinton, there would have been no substantive discussion of public issues—mass immigration, foreign policy, or culture—and whatever leftist agendas a President Kerry might have inflicted on these fronts during his tenure would have been dumbly and unconsciously swallowed by the “respectable” and mainstream right. A Kerry victory last year would have done nothing to develop the Hard Right as a mature political and cultural movement. It would have benefited only Mr. Kerry and his allies and his adversaries.

What I am calling the Hard Right is not, properly speaking, a political movement at all in the narrow sense of politics—that is, in the sense of entering elections, running campaigns, and winning votes. It is not even close to being able to do that. Previous efforts of hard-right movements to enter the political lists have always turned out to be disastrous for the simple reason that the culture into which they are venturing is not at all prepared to receive or understand them. They immediately are pegged as “extremist” or “fringe” or not serious because they come across as purely ideological or single-issue movements—and so they are. What they invariably need to do, and never have the patience or skill to do, is engage in what Antonio Gramsci called “prefiguration,” the preparation of the public culture for the reception of the new materials and ideas. Running for office is one way to do that, but there are usually cheaper and more effective ways to do so. Most hard-right movements wind up as dead-end “third parties” in the elephants’ graveyard where thousands of such efforts lie buried because they run for office and then never do anything else until the next election. For the same reason that Sun Tzu said the greatest skill lies in winning the battle before the fighting,

the election should be won well before the campaigning starts.

The Hard Right, in other words, is, by definition, a cultural movement rather than a political one, and its proper purpose ought to be to prepare the American political culture for the reception of its issues and ideas. There is a good deal of evidence that a breakthrough of some kind is about to happen concerning immigration, at least in reaction to Bush’s amnesty plan for illegal aliens, and that, in turn, clearly connects to the Cultural Issue. The war, as should be obvious enough to most *Chronicles* readers, will soon make itself into an issue, whether the administration wants it or not. There is little doubt, then, that all the issues that now define the Hard Right are alive and kicking. What is important is for the Hard Right to be the force that defines their discussion.

As its issues do enter the discussion forums of the mainstream, maintaining control of them will not be easy. On immigration, for example, after decades of ignoring and denying its significance, mainstream-conservative organizations are now trying to raise money off it. They often have the mailing lists and resources and illusion of impact that can take the issue out of the control of those Hard Right (largely small-scale-populist) efforts that have long been reporting on and developing the immigration issue in different ways. Of course, the larger conservative organizations will drop the issue once it ceases to make them money or will settle for partial remedies where only radical (Hard Right) measures will work. The same thing happened to Wallace himself to an extent, as Nixon began to grasp that his fierce opposition to bus-ing, forced desegregation, judicial tyranny, and crime were paying off. A further reason there can be no effective third party in this country is that the mainstream parties will simply steal its issues if they ever threaten to acquire significant political followings.

What is more important for the Hard

Right to do now is not to start licking its chops over all the votes it will gain and elections it will win but to forget campaign politics and start what the European New Left used to call the “long march through the institutions,” yet another concept from Comrade Gramsci. Hard Rightists need not only to develop their own identity as a movement and their own institutions but to shape those of others—to force their enemies to respond to them, to force them as much as possible to live with the political consequences of their own policies, and to establish a “dialogue” that will carry Hard Right ideas and values into the mainstream. All of that, of course, appears much easier said than done, but the second Bush administration seems to be shaping up as a far-more-favorable environment for the emergence of a Hard Right than even the first one was. With no reelection concerns, with majorities in both chambers of Congress, the administration can offer no more excuses to its conservative base, and the base can offer no further excuses to itself as to why it should remain conservative rather than Hard Right.

What is not clear about the future of the Hard Right is not whether it will exist or will become a more clearly defined political movement but whether it can attract enough citizens who share its discontents and aspirations to make it an effective force. What the election of 2004 seems to tell us more than anything else is that most Americans who now see themselves on the political (and cultural) right are perfectly happy with President Bush and what he is doing. They like his cheery grin and friendly arm-waving; they like his cute wife and daughters and their toasty religious and family-values rhetoric. They like his “Standin’ up for America” bluster. The Bushes tell them everything’s OK, and that’s what conservatives always want to hear. Let them stay where they are. They are not what the Hard Right needs, and their involvement in it would only retard its emergence as a new cultural and political force. c

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If We Make It Through December

From oracles to astrology to double predestination, men throughout history have sought hope in a glimpse of their future. As the Greeks well understood, however, foreknowledge is usually at the root of tragedy, and even Saint Augustine warned against consulting astrologers not because astrology is mere superstition but because of the possibility that the astrologers' forecasts might be right. We cannot properly live our lives day to day when we know how they are destined to end.

The same is true of the lives of cities and of nations. Knowing that our time on earth must someday draw to a close is essential to being human; knowing—or wanting to know—the day and the hour and the circumstances is likely to lead us only to despair.

I have written here before that Rockford is dying, and I don't intend to take back those words. Some clarification, however, might be in order. The city of Rockford may survive as long as the United States does; indeed, it may well exist long after this unwieldy continental empire has crumbled. It won't, however, be the city that we know today—a solidly middle-class, Middle American, European-derived community built on manufacturing. The growth of Rockford's population over the past decade was entirely the result of Hispanic immigration; the white population is declining. Today, healthcare and public education "contribute" more to Rockford's economy than manufacturing does. And as I write this just a week before Christmas, Rockford is set to lose another 1,000 manufacturing jobs before the year ends.

Got laid off down at the factory
And their timing's not the greatest
in the world.
Heaven knows I've been working
hard.
Wanted Christmas to be right for
Daddy's girl.
I don't mean to hate December.
It's meant to be the happy time of
year.
But my little girl don't understand
Why her daddy can't afford no
Christmas cheer.

The narrator of Merle Haggard's plaintive song has "Got plans to be in a warmer town come summertime," and on this, the coldest day of winter so far, some of those 1,000 workers are undoubtedly trying to figure out where they should go. Knowing their fate for most of the year, as the 400 workers at Atwood Mobile and the 100 at Amerock and the 300 at Textron have, has helped very little. Few comparable jobs are being created within commuting distance of Rockford, and President Bush's campaign promises aside, most of these workers will not have the time or resources to be able to take advantage of retraining so that they can get positions in, say, the healthcare industry. They are going to be too busy working two or three part-time jobs just to pay their mortgages and heating bills.

These factory closings and layoffs are coming just days after President Bush's joint press conference with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi at the White House on December 15. Responding to Berlusconi's concern about the weakness of the dollar (the euro currently hovers around \$1.33; the British pound has gone as high as \$2.00), the President lectured the assembled reporters on deficits, skipping over the budget deficit with barely a mention, dwelling on the Social Security deficit ("I campaigned on the issue"), and dismissing the trade deficit. You can almost see the smirk on his face as you read the transcript: "There's a trade deficit. That's easy to resolve; people can buy more United States products if they're worried about the trade deficit."

The President didn't say whether the people he had in mind were Berlusconi's fellow Italians or his fellow Americans, but it really doesn't matter: What he meant was that, while others might be concerned about the trade deficit, he and his administration don't view it as a problem. That the trade deficit continues to balloon even as the dollar has sunk to historic lows, however, is a serious indication of the hollowness of the American economy. And it portends further trouble for American agriculture and for manufacturing centers such as Rockford.

If the dollar recovers, as President Bush claims he wants it to ("The policy of my



government is a strong dollar policy"), the effect will be to make American products more expensive, decreasing American exports. If American manufacturers cannot compete in the "global marketplace" today, how will they survive when exchange rates return to something closer to normal?

The problem that President Bush does not want to acknowledge, but which is obvious to those who have observed the decline in American manufacturing, is that we are rapidly approaching the point where concerned Americans or beneficent Italians simply could not wipe out our trade deficit if they tried. Many small manufacturers in Rockford would gladly buy American-made steel, and they would probably even be willing to pay a small premium for it (despite their ever-falling profits), but the United States doesn't produce enough steel to meet domestic needs. Some union workers still take "Buy American" campaigns seriously, but in most areas of the country, it is next to impossible to outfit a family entirely in American-made clothes, regardless of the price you're willing to pay. Forget about locally grown or organic produce; can you even feed your family a balanced diet without purchasing imported goods? (In his final press conference, outgoing Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson expressed amazement that terrorists hadn't taken advantage of our reliance on foreign foodstuffs: "For the life of me, I cannot understand why the terrorists have not attacked our food supply because it is so easy to do.")

If we make it through December, we'll be fine. America and Rockford and most of the newly unemployed Rockfordians will make it through December, but, Merle notwithstanding, the coldest time of winter here is usually January. What happens then?