CURRENT BOOKS

Conservatism at Wit's End

DEAD RIGHT. *By David Frum. New Republic/ Basic Books. 256 pp. $23*

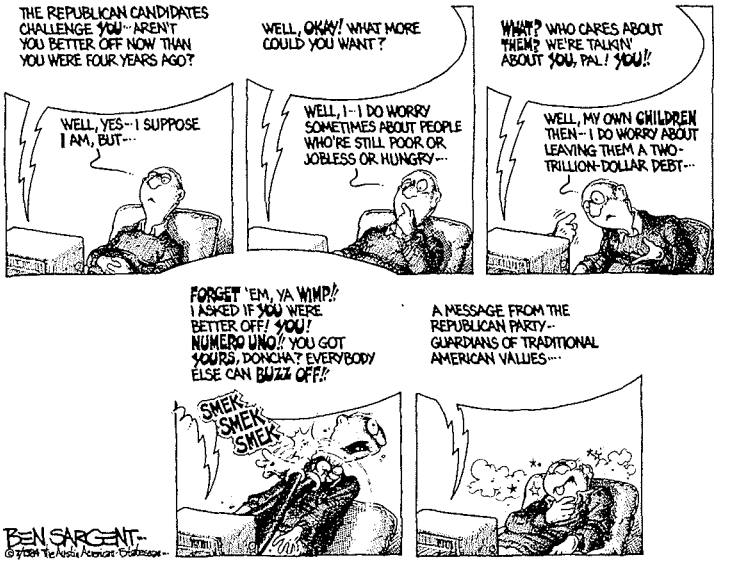
The conservatism that came to dominate the Republican Party during the Reagan era was an amalgam of ideas, a brilliant philosophical cut-and-paste job aimed at satisfying the various groups that might come together to produce a national political majority. But like most cut-and-paste jobs, this one could cohere for only so long. David Frum, who has strong conservative credentials (including past service as an editorial page editor of the *Wall Street Journal*), offers a fresh explanation for why conservatism broke down during the Reagan-Bush era. Unlike many contemporary conservative intellectuals and pundits, Frum resists blindly celebrating Ronald Reagan or demonizing George Bush. Nor does he blame only the Democrats for deficits and big government. Instead, Frum forces conservatives to confront their contradictions and failures, both of thought and of deed, and then offers his allies a more rigorous philosophical program for future action.

Until the 1950s, America had no self-consciously conservative intellectual movement. It had long had a conservative disposition, traceable to the writings of Edmund Burke, the Federalists Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, and the southern Bourbons and aristocrats. After World War II, two sets of ideas emerged that came to be known as "conservative." On the one side was "traditionalism," which was rooted in an old-fashioned reverence for family, neighborhood, and the values passed on through generations. This conservatism was pessimistic, or perhaps realistic, about human nature. It was, in any event, without illusions about the destruction human beings could unleash absent the guidance of religion and the constraints imposed by families and communities. Two of the more important traditionalist prophets were Russell Kirk, whose book *The Conservative Mind* (1953) played a major role in the postwar conservative revival, and sociologist Robert Nisbet, author of *The Quest for Community* (1952), which is now popular among those attempting to stage a new revival on the right. Traditionalists were critical of modern liberalism's veneration of the national state over localism and of its willingness to let social experimentation run roughshod over settled values and customs. As Frum explains, traditionalists often supported the free-market economy as a superior alternative to centralized state power, but they did not revere the market and were sometimes critical of its workings. Markets alone did not create values, virtue, or social order. To traditionalists, conservatives who said that adults should be free to trade pornography in the open marketplace were not true conservatives: They did not value the truly important things.

The other school of conservatism that arose after the war proceeded from different assumptions. Libertarian conservatives were animated less by worries over the destruction of old values than by a fear of the overweening modern state. In many ways libertarians were simply classical liberals who used John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and John Stuart Mill to justify their faith in a minimal state. To libertarians, the market was everything, or almost everything. Friedrich von Hayek, the great architect of modern libertarianism, argued that any level of central economic planning could lead to totalitarianism, since planning inevitably centralized power in the hands of a small group claiming special authority based on alleged expertise. Some libertarians extended their critique of the state to the military; others came to justify an assertive American foreign policy in the name of containing communism. But to all of them, the rights of

the individual, not reverence for tradition, occupied the hallowed place in politics.

After World War II, the simultaneous rise of these two varieties of conservatism posed a direct challenge to what was called the American liberal consensus. The contradictory strains of conservatism were able to come together because they shared a common enemy: President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. The job of conservative journalists and philosophers was to paper over the intellectual differences between the two sides. This was done brilliantly by the writers whom William F. Buckley, Jr., had drawn to the *National Review*, particularly Frank Meyer, a former Communist who wrote a regular column on conservative doctrine. It was Meyer who coined the term "fusionism" to describe the linking of the two philosophies. Meyer's insight was that the United States was, at heart, a traditionalist society. Therefore, American conservatives could use libertarian means to traditionalist ends. To dismantle big government was to empower family, church, and neighborhood.



For all its problems, fusionism carried conservatives right through the Reagan Revolution and provided Ronald Reagan with his basic principles. It is notable that Reagan's own practice of conservative politics was remarkably free of the resentments and angers that characterized significant segments of the right wing, most especially Joe McCarthy, George Wallace, and (depending on what face he was putting on his politics) Richard Nixon. Reagan almost never indulged in the "paranoid style" that is ascribed to what came to be called the New Right, although it, too, was part of his winning coalition. Fusionism worked for the conservative movement as long as there was a visible liberal enemy to rout—a national government seen as both a meddler and a purveyor of bad values. It continued to work for a while under Reagan as long as the economy grew and produced "Morning in America."

But sometime during Reagan's second term fusionism's happy synthesis began to break down, and the hard questions had to be confronted. Did liberty matter more than virtue, freedom more than tradition? Or was it the other way around? What about abortion? Was this an issue about personal liberty, as most libertarians would have it, or about morality, as traditionalists insisted? And what were conservatism's priorities? During the Reagan years, tax cuts took priority over school prayer and a host of other traditionalist issues. Yet the defense build-up was more important than smaller, more frugal government, and winning elections took priority over seriously trimming the welfare state. And what if the American people weren't as traditional as Meyer thought them to be? What if the rate of out-of-wedlock births kept rising under conservative rule, which is what happened in the Reagan years? What if violent crime went up, as it also did? And how could an increasingly fractured alliance hold together if economic times went bad, as they

eventually did after George Bush took over?

The fact that Reaganism blew up not during Reagan's presidency but during George Bush's led conservatives to the obvious strategy: Blame Bush First. Frum, to his credit, will have none of this. His central thesis is that conservatism failed right off under Reagan because conservatives lost their nerve—or never really found it. They lost their nerve because they understood, even without always admitting it, that the voters rather liked government:

> However heady the 1980s may have looked to everyone else, they were for conservatives a testing and disillusioning time. Conservatives owned the executive branch for eight years and had great influence over it for four more; they dominated the Senate for six years; and by the end of the decade they exercised near complete control over the federal judiciary. And yet, every time they reached to undo the work of Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon—the work they had damned for nearly half a century—they felt the public's eyes upon them. They didn't dare, and they realized that they didn't dare. Their moment came and flickered.

Particularly disconcerting, Frum notes, was the fact that programs with conservative constituencies—farmers, veterinarians, the elderly, for example—increased greatly during the Reagan presidency. Frum concludes that "the conservatives who had lived through that attack of faintheartedness shamefacedly felt they had better hurry up and find something else to talk about."

Frum sees three major strains of conservatism competing to replace (or revive) Reaganism. The closest to pure Reaganism are the "optimists" gathered around Jack Kemp, whom Frum describes as "wrong but wromantic." Frum praises Kemp for his openness, but questions how his firm commitment to lower tax rates squares with his equally staunch support for programs to improve the inner city. The "moralists," well represented by William Bennett, want to instill virtue in the citizenry, but they don't always see the contradictions involved in condemning big government and hoping nonetheless that the state can promote virtue. The "nationalists," foremost among them Pat Buchanan, share many of Bennett's attitudes on moral issues but would take conservatism in a very different direction—protectionist on trade, isolationist on foreign policy, and aggressive in defense of the interests and values of the white middle class. In pursuit of their own version of "left-wing identity politics," Frum notes, the Buchananites are "truly multiculturalism's children."

Frum proposes a profoundly different, largely libertarian, path and seems to be willing to lose elections if that is what it takes to be consistent. He wants conservatives to make the case for lean government—in both the economic and the social realms—knowing that this case will not always be popular. He does not, like Meyer, believe that Americans are inherently traditional. But he argues that smaller government can promote virtue, or at least certain virtues—among them frugality, hard work, and self-control—by forcing individuals to rely on their own resources. In Frum's view, the welfare state has become the largest enemy of virtue.

Frum's suggestion is certainly more intellectually rigorous than much of what passes from the lips of most conservative politicians. But while he admits that government remains a popular force, what he can't fully acknowledge is that government is popular for sound reasons. The democratic alternatives to conservatism—New Dealism and social democracy—have endured despite numerous practical difficulties and intellectual inconsistencies because majorities in most free electorates simply do not accept that market outcomes are automatically blessed. Free markets are useful and practical but not sanctified. If the market does not make health care affordable or available to all, voters will eventually come around to demanding it from government. That is why Medicare was passed. It's also why polls

show that despite President Clinton's problems on health care, most Americans favor government action to guarantee coverage for everyone. Voters may criticize government in the abstract, but they will turn to it to keep the air and water clean, the streets safe, and poor children fed.

Similarly, people value the communities that traditionalist conservatives so extol, but they also recognize that such communities can be disrupted or destroyed by economic change. So, in the name of conservative values, those who treasure these communities often turn to the state for protection or relief. What the moderate Left has always understood—and what conservatives usually try to deny—is that capitalism, in effect, socializes its problems. The state steps in to resolve difficulties that capitalism can't. Where there is no money to be made, capitalism moves on. Government necessarily cleans up after it.

Political debate in the United States would certainly be more bracing if conservatives followed Frum's formula, for he proposes a clear contest between those who believe in government and those who do not. But I doubt very much that a majority will rally to his cause. Even among conservatives, as Frum well knows, the minimal state is destined to be a very hard sell.

—E. J. Dionne, Jr., a Wilson Center Fellow, is a columnist for the Washington Post, *and is the author of* Why Americans Hate Politics *(1991).*

The Revenge of Nationalism

BLOOD AND BELONGING: Journeys into the New Nationalism. *By Michael Ignatieff. Farrar, Strauss. 263 pp. $21*
THE FUTURE OF GERMAN DEMOCRACY. *Ed. by Robert Gerald Livingston and Volkmar Sander. Continuum. 168 pp. $19.95*
CIVIL WARS: From L.A. to Bosnia. *By Hans Magnus Enzensberger. New Press. 144 pp. $18*

Until recently, it was fashionable in many academic and some political circles to assert that nationalism was finished. Indeed, for nearly two decades, a number of influential historians and social scientists on both sides of the Atlantic argued that nations had precious little to do with ethnicity or territory, that the symbols of nationhood—stamps, flags, national anthems—were old stage props dusted off for use in the "invention of tradition." A nation was really little more than a social "construct" of fairly recent manufacture, an "imagined community" that was now destined for the rubbish heap of history. What the future held in store was a global community in which civilized, multiethnic societies would peacefully coexist.

The post–Cold War era has therefore come as something of a shock. To be sure, the most distinguishing characteristic of the new world disorder has been the disintegration of nation-states. But the process has in no way resembled what the imagined-communities scholars imagined. From Bosnia to Somalia, territorial demands have led to ethnic cleansing and mass refugee flights—hardly a basis for global harmony and peace. Even the dream of a single, federalist Europe run by bureaucrats sitting in Brussels has been shattered by