



October 2022 Issue

BOOKS

# The Long Unraveling of the Republican Party

Three books explore a history of fractious extremism that predates Donald Trump.

By Kim Phillips-Fein



Illustration by Paul Spella\*

**I**N 1992, PAT BUCHANAN made a campaign stop at the San Diego–Tijuana border. As a few white-power activists who had tagged along milled in the background, he called for the United States to build a wall—a 200-mile-long physical boundary between the U.S. and Mexico. At the time, Buchanan was seeking the Republican nomination for the presidency, the first of two consecutive efforts that were rebuffed by party voters and leaders alike. Buchanan and his politics seemed to be on the verge of being drummed out of the GOP altogether. (When he made one last try for the White House, in 2000, he ran on the Reform Party ticket.) From the start of the 1990s, his hostility toward free trade and NATO, his extremist proposals on immigration, and his jeremiads against cultural decline marked him as an outlier. Communism was over, the stock market was rising, Silicon Valley was just taking off, and few were interested in Buchanan’s grim vision of a looming “illegal invasion.”

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Three decades later, Buchanan’s ideas may still seem fringe, but they are no longer marginal. His call for a barrier at the border has become a staple of Republican platforms, as have his denunciations of cultural decadence, his skepticism about free trade, and his warnings about the dangers of the “global elite” and of immigrant incursions. As the midterms approach, Donald Trump’s conspiracy-laced version of those views shows no sign of flaming out, which forces the question: Is this ethno-nationalism and pugnacious stance toward cultural “elites” going to be the signature of the Republican Party from now on? And if so, what happened? Not all that long

ago, the GOP was the party of Big Business, free markets, “traditional” family values, and anti-communism. Now it has become the party of election denial and the Wall.

When Trump first surfaced as a 2016 presidential candidate, his dizzying ascendance, seemingly out of nowhere, fueled the sense that he was hijacking a GOP theretofore rooted in the confident optimism that had come out of the Reagan era. Historians have considered Ronald Reagan’s presidency, and the adoption by the Democratic Party (especially under Bill Clinton) of Reagan’s end-of-big-government-and-big-labor-and-high-taxes ideology, as the formative development of the last quarter of the 20th century—the vision that laid out the parameters for American politics in the new millennium.

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## Conservatism was fraught with tensions long before Donald Trump’s emergence.

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Yet the recent trajectory of the Republican Party, and its turn against many of the key precepts of Reaganism, calls for a reassessment of this perspective. That is precisely what the historian Nicole Hemmer offers in *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s*. She is joined in rethinking the evolution of conservatism by two journalists who approach the subject from different places on the political spectrum. Dana Milbank, the author of *The Destructionists: The Twenty-Five-Year Crack-Up of the Republican Party*, is a liberal *Washington Post* columnist. Matthew Continetti, the author of *The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism*, arrived at *The Weekly Standard* as a 22-year-old in 2003 and is now a Never Trumper at the American Enterprise Institute and a contributing editor to *National Review*. All three books portray a conservatism that was fraught with tensions long before Trump’s emergence. Their goal is to explain why the current incarnation of the GOP shouldn’t come as a surprise. In showing the deep roots of

our present crisis, their analyses also suggest the limits of any politics focused on a dream of salvaging the Republican Party.

**T**HE CONSENSUS among political historians of the post–World War II years is that the conservative movement of the period was driven by two connected concerns: the desire to constrain the welfare state and the labor unions that had been created during the New Deal, and the imperative to fight international communism. In pursuit of both goals, conservatives embraced the ideology of the free market—as articulated, most notably, by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman—and rejected the isolationism and “America First” mentality that had prevailed among many on the right prior to the war. This was, as Continetti argues, a major political shift: In the 1920s, the American right had been split between open elitists in the intellectual world, such as the journalist H. L. Mencken, who warned in a 1919 essay that “all government ... is a conspiracy against the superior man,” and the grassroots mobilization of the Second Ku Klux Klan, which strove through mass rallies and political campaigns to maintain the purity of “the old pioneer stock.”

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## Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s

NICOLE HEMMER, BASIC BOOKS

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## The Destructionists: The Twenty-Five-Year Crack-Up of the Republican Party

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## The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism

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During the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, the fight against the New Deal and the Soviet Union gave the right a new energy. Under the broad umbrella of opposing socialism and communism and defending freedom, all kinds of policies that might otherwise have appeared narrowly self-interested—free-market economics, anti-tax measures, opposition to unions, an aggressive interventionism in Vietnam and elsewhere—acquired an idealistic gloss. Even the ugliest aspects of postwar conservatism, such as its opposition to the civil-rights movement, could be portrayed as a principled defense of localism, or even as part of the anti-communist project: Some conservatives suspected that key advisers of Martin Luther King Jr. were secretly in league with Moscow, and that the entire civil-rights movement was riddled with communist sympathizers.

But this brand of conservative politics—while garnering substantial support, especially from midsize-business owners and prosperous suburbanites, as well as southerners—failed to gain enough traction to win national elections in the '50s and '60s. Victories came only in the '70s, as postwar economic growth faltered and the conservative coalition expanded. Now it included working-class white voters in the North and South animated by resentment, fear, and racism in the aftermath of civil-rights successes. The movement also tapped into a new wave of organizing among evangelical churches, which were able to make common cause with anti-government conservatives in opposing such policies as the IRS denial of tax-exempt status for Christian schools found to be racially discriminatory. For their part, conservatives signed on to much of the evangelicals' cultural crusade against abortion access and gay rights.

[Read: How the GOP surrendered to extremism](#)

Yet these new recruits and the business-oriented conservative establishment, all three authors argue, never fully merged. The New Right, which gathered momentum in the '70s, remained at arm's length from the elite intellectual organizations of conservatism, such as the American Enterprise Institute and the libertarian Cato Institute. Its key activists lacked the establishment's intense focus on economic issues, and were angry that their own zealous focus on cultural issues (strictly limiting abortion, banning gay teachers from public schools) wasn't shared. The schism and the fractious extremism at the core of the party, in tone as well as policies, were masked, however, by Reagan's cheerful persona—that of an avuncular, old-school movie-star gentleman whose politics embraced, Hemmer writes, “flexibility and optimism, making movement conservatism genuinely popular for the first time in the Cold War era.”

## RECOMMENDED READING

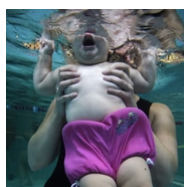
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Frank and Steven's Excellent Corporate-Raiding Adventure

FRANK PARTNOY AND STEVEN DAVIDOFF SOLOMON

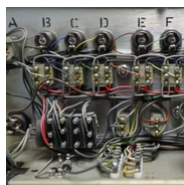
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QUINN NORTON

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Not that Reagan, despite the unifying power of his presidency, was a moderate. He had a long history of warning against the “encroaching control” of the liberal state, and his administration’s harsh attacks on welfare policies, unions, and busing were extreme; so was his support for his “Star Wars” defense initiative and for violent anti-communists in Central America. But anti-communist internationalism on the right also helps explain Reagan’s comparatively genial stance on immigration. As he put it during his 1980 campaign, “You don’t build a nine-foot fence along the border between two friendly nations.” An early draft of the speech went further still: “We cannot erect a Berlin Wall across the southern border.”

The collapse of the Soviet Union and decline of communism in the early ’90s shook the political world of the right. Suddenly, the lack of common ground between religious and cultural conservatives on the one hand and the libertarian-leaning establishment on the other was exposed. Already, anti-communist hard-liners had denounced Reagan for meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev, and evangelicals had been chafing at his failure to do more to outlaw abortion. In the 1988 presidential race, Hemmer reminds us, the television host Pat Robertson had challenged George H. W. Bush in a campaign that tapped into conservative dissatisfaction with Reagan.

Despite the apparent triumph of capitalism in the Cold War, many conservatives in the 1980s and early ’90s were gripped by what Continetti calls a “deep-seated pessimism.” They had managed to take control of the White House for eight years, yet were unable to shrink the state, had trouble holding Congress, and felt unwelcome in Hollywood and academia. A gloomy, bitter conservatism began to spread, from above and from below. Its rhetoric was tinged with loss and preoccupied with themes of masculinity, race, and immigration, a far cry from Reagan’s upbeat invocations of freedom and morning in America. The journalist Peter Brimelow’s 1995 best seller, *Alien Nation*, for example, opened with the suggestion that the country had been defined by a “specific ethnic core” that “has always been white”—and was now in danger of being replaced.

From the March 2018 issue: Boycott the Republican Party

The transformation on the right was stylistic as well as substantive. It's hard to imagine Reagan leading cheers of "Lock her up!" or inventing Trump-style nicknames for his enemies. But this jeering patois would have been familiar to followers of Rush Limbaugh, whose nationally syndicated conservative talk-radio program started broadcasting on AM stations in 1988. Limbaugh was a college dropout who had read Pat Buchanan's newspaper columns when he was growing up in Missouri and then found his way to radio, getting his break when Morton Downey Jr. was fired for using openly racist language on the air. Limbaugh immediately began to develop his own style, one that anticipated the bullying sarcasm of Twitter: Rather than harangue his audience or engage in high-minded exegeses of Friedrich Hayek or other conservative thinkers, he set out to "ridicule the left," as Hemmer puts it. Limbaugh routinely insulted Democratic politicians—Ted Kennedy was "The Swimmer"; Robert Byrd was "Sheets" (referring to his Ku Klux Klan past)—and when critics phoned in to his show, he would cut them off with what he referred to as a "caller abortion" (a loud vacuum-cleaner noise followed by a scream before the line went dead).

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In the "Brooks Brothers Riot" in Florida after the 2000 election, Republican operatives in suits mobbed the recount proceedings, shouting "Stop the count! Stop the fraud!"

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A similar shift took place on Capitol Hill, where a program of tax cuts and deregulation was supplemented by constant hyperbolic invective. Newt Gingrich's crusade to rally congressional Republicans to build their base by explicitly embracing political language that demeaned their political opponents is well known. Even so, the intensity of some of this rhetoric—and the ways in which it foreshadowed the style on the right today—remains surprising. Milbank describes the 1990 memo that Gingrich's political-action committee circulated to Republican candidates. Titled



“Language: A Key Mechanism of Control,” it instructed them in how to “speak like Newt,” using words such as *sick*, *corrupt*, *bizarre*, *pathetic*, *destroy*, and *decay* when characterizing Democrats. Gingrich himself deployed this strategy incessantly, describing Democratic politicians as the “enemy of normal Americans” and calling for a “war” against the left to be fought with “a scale and a duration and a savagery that is only true of civil wars.”

Meanwhile, conspiracy theories acquired new salience in the movement, having long proliferated in less public ways on the right. (The John Birch Society, for example, specialized in anti-communist paranoia and continued to attract members well after it was repudiated by William F. Buckley and *National Review* in the 1960s.) Stoking doubts about whether Vince Foster, who had been deputy White House counsel to President Clinton, had really died by suicide in 1993 proved popular. Helen Chenoweth, the three-term Idaho representative in the '90s, catered to militia supporters and the far right with claims that the United Nations was secretly plotting to institute a “one world” government, a mission enabled by federal agents in “black helicopters” flying over Idaho.

Hemmer and Continetti make the case that the Republican establishment still held sway as late as the George W. Bush years. Hemmer calls Bush “the last Reaganite,” intent on pursuing free-trade agreements and tax cuts, while Continetti describes Bush as adopting a principled “freedom agenda” in the War on Terror and notes his efforts at immigration reform. Milbank, by contrast, sees the entire Republican establishment lurching to the right over those same Bush years. In his account, gerrymandering, campaign-finance scandals, and the “Brooks Brothers Riot” in Florida after the 2000 election (in which Republican operatives in suits mobbed the office where a recount was taking place, shouting “Stop the count! Stop the fraud!”) all anticipate the naked power grabs of the contemporary right. Milbank himself became the target of Karl Rove’s rage after writing a 2002 article headlined “For Bush, Facts Are Malleable,” about the administration’s efforts to stoke support for the Iraq War; after it appeared, Rove telephoned Milbank’s boss and requested that he be removed from the White House beat.

As the authors get closer to the present and to Trump-era chaos, the reading experience becomes disorienting. One source of overwrought, outlandish outrage is rapidly overtaken by the next; any given departure from evidence-based rational assessment is topped by another, as denial of Barack Obama's American citizenship is joined by climate-change denial, COVID denial, and 2020 election denial, while the base declares faith in QAnon and ivermectin. Each dispiriting set of characters gives way to a yet more demoralizing array. Glenn Beck is followed by Tucker Carlson; Ann Coulter and Sarah Palin by Elise Stefanik; the Tea Party by the Oath Keepers. One moment Lou Dobbs is insisting that he's "just asking questions" about Obama's birth certificate; the next, he's been thrown aside for being insufficiently anti-immigrant. Revolutions "devour their own children," goes the truism (credited to a skeptic of the French Revolution)—but among conservatives today, the journey from hero to apostate seems to happen at warp speed. So, among almost all the Republicans in the legislative branch, did the journey from momentarily denouncing Trump, on January 6, to swearing fealty once again.

**W**ILL THE Republican Party continue to move ever further to the right? And if so, what does this portend for American politics? Taking the longest view, Continetti sees the current struggles on the right as the latest manifestation of a 100-year battle between the "forces of extremism" and those who have sought mainstream acceptance for conservative ideas—the establishment wing to which he has devoted his life. One imagines that he is looking for models when he approvingly refers to Senator Margaret Chase Smith's 1950 castigation of Joseph McCarthy, and her warning that "certain elements of the Republican Party" had chosen to manipulate their way to "victory through the selfish political exploitation of fear, bigotry, ignorance, and intolerance."

But reading these books together does not inspire confidence. For one thing, as Continetti is honest enough to admit, the distinctions between the extremists and the respectable right have never been all that clear-cut. The postwar conservative movement was entwined with opposition to the civil-rights movement from the outset. Such luminaries as Buckley used *National Review* in its early days to argue against federal troops going to Little Rock, Arkansas, to protect Black schoolchildren;

he did so on the grounds not only that the “Southern dilemma” was a matter for local control but that white people remained the “advanced race” and thus should be able to discriminate. Given this history, which predates the 1990s by decades, resurrecting an American conservatism free of the taint of racism—and deeply committed to democratic political engagement—is a formidable challenge.

Nor is it so easy to absolve “classical liberalism” and Reagan’s free-market policies of responsibility for our current travails. What you won’t find in these accounts, focusing as they do on the ideas and programs of conservatives in positions of power in politics and the media, is much sense of the social history of the United States over the past three decades, as the legacies of the Reagan years became clear. The radical tax cuts, hostility toward labor, and deregulation that marked the 1980s facilitated the rapid deindustrialization of American cities and the rise of finance and services as the motors of economic life in the United States. The unionized jobs that had provided meaningful upward mobility for many in the postwar years all but disappeared.

Reagan promoted these shifts, even if they did not originate with him. And as Clinton’s presidency went on to demonstrate, the laissez-faire economic agenda of the 1980s and ’90s became a largely bipartisan one: It promised a vision of a newly dynamic, globally plugged-in America rescued from boom-and-bust economics by low tax rates and the light hand of regulation. Pursued with a blithe insistence that all would be better in this best of all possible worlds, that agenda helped seed the social chaos and despair that have been such fertile ground for the right.

It has also helped create an economic elite with little connection to the rest of American society. Having benefited from low taxes and tax evasion, this elite has also been well served by the weakening of the public sector and the labor movement, and has every interest in the continued erosion of both. Tracing the history that illuminates Trump’s success in commanding popular attention and support is important, even if evidence of a wholesale shift of working-class voters to the Republican Party is far from conclusive. Yet more surprising, in certain ways, is watching those factions of the political and economic elite that have thrown in their lot with Trump and the broader agenda he represents. They have been willing to do

more than back candidates who are openly skeptical of democracy, and to continue funding election deniers after promising to cut off support. Abandoning traditional corporate imperatives, especially the desire for stability, some in these circles have relied on the least democratic features of our system (the Supreme Court, the filibuster, the Electoral College) to advance their ends, and made this reactionary politics far more dangerous in so doing.

How best to counter the politics of a Republican Party in thrall to Trump is not obvious. Milbank pleads with the republic to vote (presumably for Democrats), suggesting that the Republican project is an antidemocratic one that speaks for a declining rural white minority and will inevitably be defeated. Continetti rallies conservatives not to flee the scene but to stay and fight for the principles of classical liberalism. Only Hemmer proposes that the Democratic Party might also bear some culpability for the transformation of the partisan landscape—which implies that an overhaul of moral and political vision is crucial.

One of the challenges of our moment is that so many forces seem poised to drive people out of what remains of public life. At some point, arguing with opponents galvanized by a completely different political calculus becomes enervating. It feels like shadowboxing, at a time when the issues our society confronts—the pandemic, climate change, the international role of the United States, stark economic inequality—have never been more pressing. The way forward is daunting because it calls for a new kind of politics that can generate the courage and strength to push back against a politics of fear and demonization. With all due respect to Margaret Chase Smith, the path doesn't lie in trying to reconstruct the old order that helped open the door to our current crisis.

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*\*Lead image: Illustration by Paul Spella. Sources: Charles O. Cecil / Alamy; Independent Picture Service / Alamy; Grant Peterson / Fairfax Media / Getty; Everett Collection Historical / Alamy; Mark Reinstein / Corbis / Getty; Catechetical Guild; Wally McNamee / Corbis / Getty; Fotosearch / Getty; Interim Archives / Getty; Universal History Archive / Getty; Scott Olson / Getty; Jose More / VWPics / Alamy; Ron Galella / Getty.*

*This article appears in the October 2022 print edition with the headline “The Roots of Republican Extremism.”*

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