How conservatism conquered America — and corrupted itself

The past month's conservative victories were decades in the making. Three books about the right reveal what it cost the movement.

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Demonstrators gather in front of the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, to protest the ratification of Joe Biden's Electoral College victory over Trump in the 2020 election. A pro-Trump mob later stormed the Capitol, breaking windows and clashing with police officers. | Brent Stirton/Getty Images

The **January 6 committee** has been investigating, among other things, how it is that such a grievous attack on the Capitol could have happened in the first place. A key answer to that question will be found not in White House call records or intercepted Proud Boys texts, but in a document released publicly last week: the Supreme Court's **ruling** overturning *Roe v. Wade.*

That Donald Trump would incite violence in pursuit of power was not only predictable but predicted — **including by his Republican opponents in the 2016 primary**. Yet Republicans elevated him to the world's most important job, and have made no secret of why. "The first thing that came to my mind [after Trump's general election win] was the Supreme Court," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell **told the Washington Post** in a recent interview.

With Trump's election, the conservative establishment succeeded in cementing its control over the Court. But this victory required that they cede control over their movement to an unstable demagogue.

American conservatism is thus simultaneously ascendant and in crisis. The right has extraordinary political power, but its traditional leadership seems less capable than ever of imposing limits on how it is wielded. The GOP's future belongs to the radical forces represented by Trump and the members of the establishment most willing to cater to them. Those few Republicans in power willing to stand up to the rot of Trumpism — like Rep. Liz Cheney, Rep. Adam Kinzinger, and Sen. Mitt Romney — find themselves on the outside looking in.

This state of affairs is perhaps the inevitable endpoint of the American right's decades-old strategy for attaining power. Conservative doctrine never truly captured the hearts of a mass audience; to attain power, the movement needed to ally itself with forces of far-right reaction who raged against the idea of equality at the heart of modern democracy.

American conservatism was an attempt to tame the untamable: to domesticate this reactionary impulse and channel it into electoral politics in service of an elite-driven agenda. Its leaders managed to exercise some control over radicals in the specific context of Cold War America — but the effort was fated to fail eventually.

And now it's threatening to **bring American democracy down with it**.

The dark heart of reactionary politics

Modern democracy is, at heart, premised on the liberal ideal of equality: that because no person is inherently superior to any other, all deserve to help shape the rules that govern society as a whole.

That this idea will strike many readers as banal speaks to the success of the liberal democratic project, which has taken a premise that challenges every historical hierarchy and elevated it to the level of received wisdom.

These hierarchies, however, are not without their defenders. Anti-egalitarian politics have regularly proven to be politically potent, with many citizens in seemingly advanced democracies repeatedly showing themselves willing to support political factions that challenge liberalism's most cherished ideals.

Matthew Rose's recent book ***A World after Liberalism*** tells the story of a handful of "radical right" thinkers who built intellectual foundations for anti-egalitarian politics. The writings of the people he highlights — German cultural essentialist Oswald Spengler, Italian quasi-fascist Julius Evola, American Nazi sympathizer Francis Parker Yockey, French philosopher Alain de Benoist, and the proto-Trumpian pundit Sam Francis — range from mystical treatises about cultural symbology to conspiracy theorizing to more conventional political journalism.

But according to Rose, **a scholar of religion** by background, they share key traits in common: most fundamentally, a belief in the group as the primary unit of political life. The group they champion happens to be European peoples or, for some, the white race.

Liberalism centers individuals, treating them as equals and granting them rights against the state in order to be able to live their lives in the way they choose. Radical right theorists see this as a terrible mistake.

Supporters stand for a prayer during a rally for Donald Trump in Charlotte, North Carolina, on March 2, 2020. | Brian Blanco/Getty Images

"Liberalism is evil in principle because it destroys the foundations of social order," Rose writes, summarizing his subjects' views. "Political life does not depend on truths or values that transcend our identities [but rather] recognizing that human identity, at its most primordial level, is something inherited."

Their reasons for arriving at this conclusion differed, but virtually all venerated Western culture and deplored its alleged corrosion by liberal thought.

Evola's pre-World War II work, for example, argued that humans by their nature require rituals and a sense of the sacred to achieve meaning in their lives. He believed that liberalism destroyed this most profound source of human significance by subjecting what Evola called capital-T Tradition to rational scrutiny and arguing for the political equality of all persons.

Meanwhile, Yockey, writing in the late '40s and '50s, argued that rationality is an expression of Western man's most fundamental feature: a drive toward mastery and domination. He blamed a deformed "Jewish" form of reason, embodied in the work of Marx and Freud, for corrupting the West — seeding a corrosive self-doubt about its own heroic past that has put Europe and North America on the road to cultural suicide.

Such ideas may seem far removed from the mainstream, but you hear their echoes in today's berserk politics. Steve Bannon has cited Evola as an influence; Rose sees in Yockey's writing the seeds of the "cultural Marxism" theory popular on the culture warrior right.

More importantly, a dive into their work reveals that these thinkers capture something real: a politics that's felt, on a more instinctual level, by millions of ordinary people across the Western world.

We have **ample evidence** from **social science** that large swaths of the white population across Europe and North America find cultural and demographic change unsettling. This sense of cultural displacement has powered the rise of a particular kind of reactionary nationalism, from Trump to Brexit to the continental far-right.

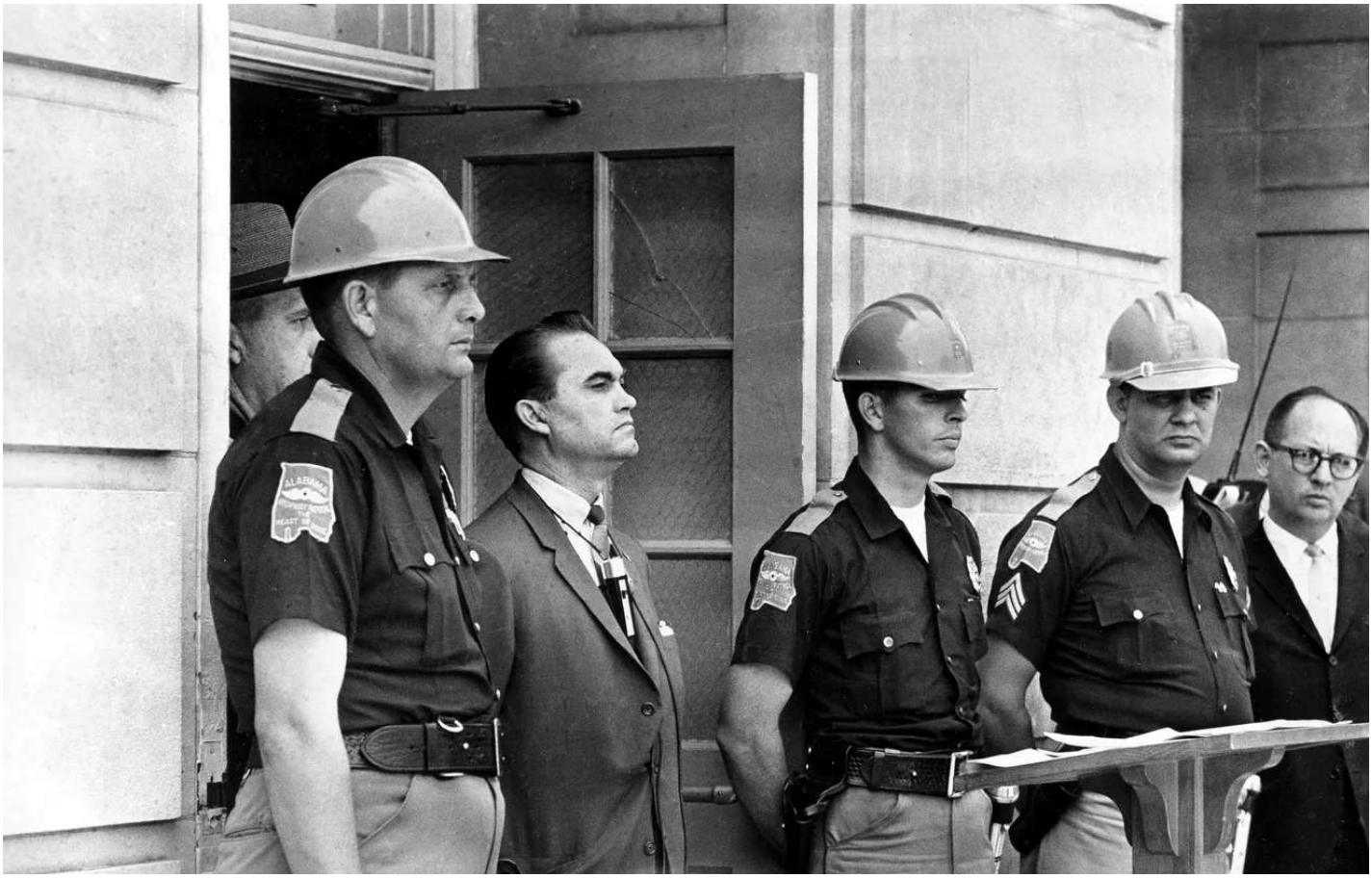
The thinkers of the radical right were at once too intellectual, too bizarre, and too unfashionable to ever really gain a mass following in their lifetimes. But they intuited something that many mainstream thinkers failed to see — that there is a persistent constituency for illiberal cultural politics in advanced Western democracies.

This insight comes out most clearly in Rose's chapter on Sam Francis, an American political writer who died in 2005. Francis was once a member in good standing of the mainstream conservative movement. Yet Francis came to see the Reaganite GOP as a sham opposition — "**beautiful losers**" unable to grapple with the looming demographic threat to American civilization posed by a rising non-white population.

"The civilization that we as whites created in Europe and America could not have developed apart from the genetic endowments of the creating people, nor is there any reason to believe that the civilization can be successfully transmitted to a different people," he **said at a 1994 white nationalist conference**.

This racism got him booted from the ranks of mainstream conservatism; Rose describes a 1995 op-ed Francis wrote offering a "biblical defense of slavery" as the breaking point. Yet Francis's viciousness also made him perversely prescient. He believed that, for Republicans, "trying to win non-whites, especially by abandoning issues important to white voters, is the road to political suicide."

Instead, he argued that the GOP would need to awaken the slumbering consciousness of the so-called "Middle American Radicals" — middle- and lower-class white voters who were core supporters of right-wing extremists like Joseph McCarthy and George Wallace.



Gov. George Wallace blocks the entrance to the University of Alabama as he turns away a federal officer attempting to enroll two Black students at the university's campus in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on June 11, 1963. | AP

The best way to do so, Francis argued, was "to make use of a Caesarism and the mass loyalties that a charismatic leader inspires."

The American right's long ride on the reactionary tiger

When Donald Trump first came down **that golden escalator** in 2015 to announce his candidacy, most observers dismissed him as a joke. As he rose in the polls, the mainstream right saw him as less funny and more of a threat. In January 2016, the flagship conservative magazine National Review dedicated an entire issue, titled "**Against Trump**," to reading him out of the movement.

But as we came to learn, elite disapproval proved unable to withstand Trump's ability to harness the rage of Francis's Middle American Radicals. The conservative movement, conquered, bent the knee — bringing the radicals out from the shadows and into positions of power.

A few lifelong conservatives have since come to ask themselves: "How did it come to this?"

Matthew Continetti has an insider's perspective on this question. Founder of a right-wing news site called the Washington Free Beacon, he is currently a senior fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. The conservative movement is not just his professional career, but also personal: he is the son-in-law of Bill Kristol, a leading light of the movement turned Never Trumper.

Continetti's new book ***The Right***, a history of (as the subtitle puts it) "the hundred-year war for American conservatism," tells the story of a mainstream conservative movement that tried to include the far right in its political coalition while maintaining control — a balancing act that started failing the second Trump began running.

For his part, Continetti has played the Trump ascendancy coyly. He has both effusively praised Trump, writing in 2018 that "**for Republicans, it doesn't get much better than this**," and called for the president's impeachment **after the events of January 6** — making him the embodiment of the internal conflict at the heart of his book.

The bulk of *The Right* is devoted to explaining how modern conservatism rose to challenge the hegemonic liberalism of FDR, eventually emerging as a dominant force in American politics. Scholars like libertarian economist Friedrich Hayek developed the raw intellectual materials for what would become conservatism. Popularizers like National Review founder William F. Buckley synthesized these ideas into a coherent whole and brought them into the political realm. Leaders like Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan applied conservative doctrine to the political realm, seizing the reins of one of America's two major parties.

In broad strokes, this is the fairly standard origin story that conservatives tell about themselves. What sets Continetti's account apart is a willingness to engage more honestly with the darker side of the movement — how a movement that claimed to venerate the American founding and Constitution repeatedly aligned itself with forces that stood against some of its most cherished principles.

Take Joe McCarthy, the communist-hunting demagogic senator. At the height of McCarthy's powers in 1953, Buckley and co-author L. Brent Bozell wrote a book — titled *McCarthy and His Enemies* — that criticized his excesses but mostly defended him from his critics. Years after McCarthy's fall from grace, in 1968, Buckley still described him as a man ultimately pushing a decent anti-communism.

Sen. Joe McCarthy displays a copy of the Daily Worker, a Communist Party newspaper, during a session of the Army-McCarthy hearings on June 2, 1954. | AP

In one of Continetti's deftest passages, he draws a subtle equivalence between the reasoning behind the conservative defense of McCarthy and its contemporary embrace of Trump:

> McCarthy had enveloped the Right in his elaborate conspiracy theory. He fed off conservative alienation from government, from media, from higher education. For a time, it seemed as though this strategy of condemning American institutions as irrevocably corrupted was popular and might succeed. It could not, of course. Ultimately fantasies cannot withstand the pressure of reality.

Here Continetti exposes a central danger for the conservative movement: Its alliance with the radical right over shared antipathy to the mainstream tends to bleed over, inexorably, into outright sympathy for the radicals.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the John Birch Society — a grassroots radical right organization that pitched a McCarthy-style conspiracy theory about a creeping communist takeover — emerged as a potent political force.

At first, conservatism's most prominent leaders chose to tolerate the organization. Barry Goldwater said he disagreed with Birchers on some issues but saw "no reason to take a stand against" them; Buckley said he hoped the group "thrives" (with the caveat that they tone down conspiracy theories directed at Republicans like Eisenhower). In private, Continetti records, these men would admit that the Birchers were absurd and dangerous — but necessary for the movement's cause.

Conservatives did eventually break with the Birchers after using them to gain a political foothold. And for some time, they really did have success channeling the radicals without succumbing — keeping the fringe "cabined off," as Continetti puts it, due in no small part to America's rivalry with the Soviet Union.

But almost immediately after the Cold War, the equilibrium began to wobble. In 1992 and 1996, Pat Buchanan — an anti-immigration extremist who had held important positions in the Nixon and Reagan White Houses — ran for the Republican presidential nomination. Those radical right campaigns, **both advised** by Buchanan's friend Sam Francis, were more successful than many expected.

"There was no doubt that Buchanan connected with large numbers of grassroots conservatives and GOP voters," Continetti writes. "That Republican leaders sought to handle him with kid gloves ... signified a malaise within conservatism."

This is an admirably frank assessment, but one that also lets the conservative center off a little too easy — treating them as merely accommodating illiberal forces rather than acting illiberally themselves, as they frequently did in the post-Cold War era.

In 1994, a new crop of hard-right conservatives entered Congress and, under House Speaker Newt Gingrich, reoriented the party toward a **no-holds-barred legislative style scornful of historic norms**. In *Bush v. Gore*, the Supreme Court's conservatives **embraced dubious legal logic** to elevate George W. Bush to the presidency; once in office, Bush proceeded to **shred civil liberties in the name of fighting terror**. After Barack Obama's election, the rise of the Tea Party led to **another far-right resurgence in the Republican Party** — one embraced, despite **its clear racist overtones**, by the party leadership.

Mainstream conservatives were not pure victims of a hostile radical right takeover: Their in-principle commitment to democracy and liberal rights was always thinner than their paeans to the Constitution made it seem. A movement with a history of sacrificing

democratic principles in pursuit of policy and political victories was always vulnerable to a demagogue — as Donald Trump would prove in 2016.

Continetti seems to condemn the Trump presidency in the book's penultimate chapter, but his assessment is colored by the tendencies in conservatism he himself diagnosed. In Continetti's view, the Trump presidency was not necessarily rotted from the core, but was a largely successful enterprise ruined almost single-handedly by the Capitol riot:

> If Trump had followed the example of his predecessors and conceded power graciously and peacefully, he would have been remembered as a disruptive but consequential populist leader who, before the coronavirus pandemic, presided over an economic boom [and] reoriented America's opinion of China ... Instead, when historians write about the Trump era, they will do so through the lens of January 6.

President Donald Trump's face appears on large screens as supporters rally before marching to the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. | John Minchillo/AP

In the final chapter, he argues that the future of conservatism rests in a kind of Trumpism without Trump: one that incorporates "the modifications to conservative policy positions

that Donald Trump forced on the movement [while] untangling the Republican party and conservative movement from Donald Trump."

Continetti's faith in the movement's power to channel the forces behind Trumpism, even after January 6, is an unintentional vindication of one of his book's core lessons: that riding the radical right tiger is fundamental to conservatism's political strategy.

How power corrupted conservatism

Unlike Continetti, Tim Miller has made a decisive break with Trump and the Republican Party. A longtime Republican campaign operative who worked for John McCain in 2008, the Republican National Committee in 2012, and Jeb Bush in 2016, he was one of the authors of the now-infamous "**Republican autopsy**" after the 2012 election, which argued that the party should embrace a more socially moderate agenda (especially on immigration) to win over younger voters and people of color.

Miller's just-released book ***Why We Did It*** attempts to tell the story of how he went from Republican stalwart to Never Trumper — and why the overwhelming majority of his friends and coworkers did not.

Miller points to the strategy laid out by Continetti as a key source of rot: that decades of courting far-right supporters helped convince Republicans that they could stoke reactionary fervor while simultaneously controlling their real-world influence.

"Those of us at the Republican National Committee, on the Hill, and throughout various GOP campaign high commands were under the impression that we were wise enough to be the self-imposed limits on the base's excesses," he writes.

Miller uses himself as an example of the psychology at work — a long-closeted gay man who worked for a party that opposed his fundamental rights. He describes himself, and most political operatives, as coping with such tensions by treating politics as more of a game they played for a living than something with real-world stakes.

Once you start playing the game, it's very hard to quit. Your professional success and financial well-being depend on continued advancement in the party. The demanding nature of the job leaves limited time for socializing and hobbies. Your coworkers become your social circle, your job your entire identity.

When your entire life centers on the party, you contort your own psychology to justify unconditional allegiance — even when someone you despise becomes its leader. Miller illustrates the power of this psychology, and the way in which it contorted the entire Republican Party, through a series of vignettes and case studies of high-profile Republicans he knows personally.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, center left, applauds as President Donald Trump arrives at a campaign rally in South Carolina, on February 28, 2020. | Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty Images

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) — who Miller recalls cornering him and Jeb Bush in a New York bar for hours to rant about Trump — believed converting to Trumpism would better position him to influence key decisions. Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY), the formerly moderate lead author of the GOP autopsy report, correctly judged Trumpism to be the best way to advance her career.

The most affecting such portrait in Miller's book is of his formerly close friend Caroline Wren, a top Trump fundraiser who **helped plan the January 6 rally**. Miller describes Wren

as kind and empathetic; in 2015, she was so affected by the Syrian refugee crisis that she flew to Germany to help resettle children seeking asylum.

Yet this person, somehow, ended up as an enabler for Donald Trump. Today, she still refuses to admit that Biden won the election.

When Miller presses her on why, she says her attraction to Trump was "probably all negative" — that she had come to despise liberals so much that she was willing to help Trump burn it all down. This idea, that America's greatest enemy is overweening liberalism, is what justified the political alliance with the far right even among the most high-minded conservative intellectuals.

Joe McCarthy had the right enemies, so his excesses could be forgiven. The Birchers could help fight the liberals, so they needed to be tolerated and even appeased (for a time). Trump may have tried to undermine democracy, but at least he can give us the Supreme Court.

In creating or capturing a series of institutions — think tanks, magazines, activist groups, and above all the Republican Party — the conservative movement built a political entity that could help it challenge liberalism. But this body was so oriented toward anti-liberal politics that it could muster little resistance against a radical right infection; once a serious enough case presented, the virus swiftly consumed the host. And after it did, the social and professional structure of these institutions compelled nearly everyone involved to get with the program — even at the cost of abandoning democratic institutions.

The Supreme Court's rulings on abortion, guns, and religion may have many conservatives thinking it was all worth it: Despite the indignities, their partnership with Trump got them the policy victories they wanted. And with Trump facing **mounting legal trouble** while Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis **continues rising in the 2024 primary polls**, they may believe in their power to **create a Trumpism without Trump**.

But the split screen last week between the January 6 hearings and the Supreme Court's seismic decisions couldn't have been more instructive on the dangers of this belief — twinned reminders of what the Republicans were willing to countenance and what it won in the process. The only two Republicans who dared to join the January 6 committee, Reps. Adam Kinzinger and Liz Cheney, are (respectively) retiring and **facing a daunting primary challenge.** A Republican who stood up to Trump's lies — Arizona House Speaker Rusty Bowers — nonetheless affirmed **he'd still vote for the former president in 2024**.

What America faces now is a conservatism unbounded. While the movement of the past regularly partnered with the radical right, and even shared some of its beliefs, it also would on occasion police it — belatedly turning out the Birchers and Sam Francis. Today's conservatism has jettisoned that modicum of caution. It's a conservatism that isn't conservative but downright revolutionary.

And having had a taste of victory, there is no sign that the Republican Party is willing, or even capable, of reimposing the limits that once made it safe for democratic politics.

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