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## You Say You Want a Revolution?

**The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics**

John A. Andrews  
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Nick Salvatore

America's rich and varied dissenting traditions have been profoundly marked by a millennial vision that anticipates the creation of a new, more perfect society as the very fulfillment of America's national destiny. In 1776, when Thomas Paine penned *Common Sense*, the singular pamphlet that gave voice to the revolutionary expectations of so many Americans in that turbulent year, he urged the people to overthrow the British monarchy in the name of a common fraternity and proclaimed, in a sentence now famous for its intense imagery: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again."

Although Paine was his era's quintessential secular humanist, the millennial tones throughout *Common Sense* echoed another American cultural tradition as well. In his call for the creation of a new world, and in the Biblical language that permeated the pamphlet, Paine's message reflected, if not necessarily his, then the culture's deep religious ethos. As far back as the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, when John Winthrop delivered his sermon to those immigrants before they disembarked in Boston harbor, a yearning for spiritual regeneration intertwined itself with a particular faith in the colony as an instrument of God's will. In what is perhaps the oldest and most lasting metaphor defining American identity, Winthrop proclaimed that if his people honored their sacred covenant with their God, then "we shall be as a city upon the hill, the eyes of all the world upon us."

Paine's millennial views also foreshadowed those of generations yet to come although he, of course, could not have known that. The widespread religious revivals of the early decades of the nineteenth century led many to claim their personal salvation and simultaneously to dedicate themselves to achieving the nation's salvation as well. The conviction that the Kingdom of God could be realized on this earth, if only we might cleanse the nation of sin, fueled efforts at abolition and many other reform causes. So deeply did this religious impulse permeate American reform efforts, that, for many, the distinction between the religious and the secular became quite blurred. John Winthrop's fear that, if his people did not keep their spiritual covenant with God, "We shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it," receded in the minds of those Americans increasingly bent on creating a decidedly secular New Jerusalem.

In the expectations of a Eugene Victor Debs, searching for the promised land in the socialist revolution he believed would fulfill the potential of 1776, one can see a secular millennialism that touched many. In an odd fashion, the technological millennialism of a Frederick W. Taylor, the promoter of scientific management, derived from a different yet recognizably common vision. Indeed, in the experiences of the Knights of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the initial organizers of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, this adaptation of the American millennial



Jack Sherman

prospect continued. The most famous anthem of both the American left and the American labor movement throughout the twentieth century captured this continuity poignantly. In the words of the last stanza of "Solidarity Forever," written in 1915 by Ralph Chaplin, an IWW organizer, generations of American dissenters have proclaimed with religious fervor and a decidedly secular conviction that "We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old! For the union makes us strong."

The American labor movement has fallen on hard times since it reached its pinnacle of strength in the mid-1950s, and it never approached the messianic end Chaplin and so many others envisioned. Yet the millennial impulse so integral to the American experience did not therefore disappear. During the 1960s, for example,

expectations of a profound restructuring of American life again dominated the politics and the aspirations of a significant number of Americans. But unlike earlier moments in this tradition, this sense of engagement in pursuit of social justice was largely identified with that decade's youth. It was not that youth had been uninvolved in earlier movements, or that people over thirty were idle in the 1960s — think, for example, of Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, David Dellinger, Dorothy Cotton, or Staughton Lynd, to name but a few influential "adults" active during that decade. Rather, in the 1960s, what was notable was the number of young people who flocked to organizations founded by their peers that were critical of contemporary American life. That political impulse, inseparable from a wide-ranging cultural challenge to the official mores of a more staid America, defined the decade as one of youthful rebellion in both the mass media and in the inner eye of many activists themselves.

From the picture of those four black students occupying the Woolworth's counter in Greensboro, North Carolina in February 1960 to the pain-wracked image of a young woman pleading with the heavens over the body of a dead Kent State student in 1970, the decade seemed defined by its youthful dissenters. In 1960, the largely black Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) emerged from Reverend King's adult ministerial alliance to affirm nonviolence, emphasize the importance of local community involvement in ending segregation, and to assert that the "redemptive community supersedes immoral social systems." Two years later, the largely white Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), itself an offshoot of an older social-democratic organization, released a founding statement written at Fort Huron, Michigan. Insisting on the individual human potential they held contemporary society smothered, and proclaiming the need for a genuine par-

continued on page 5

# You Say You Want a Revolution?

continued from page 1

participatory democracy to restructure American society, these student radicals wrote: "We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit." The chasm that would grow between the two movements, as potent fantasies of black power revolutionaries and white guerrilla warriors careened crazily against each other and the police, was still in the future and, in 1964, it was yet possible to envision joint effort across racial and even class divides in constructing the desired new world.

That, at least, was the message of Mario Savio, the passionate intellectual student leader at the University of California, Berkeley, who fired this mix of ideas into their purest form: "America is becoming even more the Utopia of sterilized, automated contentment," Savio stated that year, after returning from a stint with SNCC in Mississippi. "The 'futures' and 'careers' for which American students now prepare are for the most part intellectual and moral wastelands. This chrome-plated consumer's paradise would have us grow up to be well-behaved children. But," Savio insisted, in an expression that caught the essence of these emerging student radicals, "an important minority of men and women coming to the front today have shown that they will die rather than be standardized, replaceable and irrelevant."

The path from SNCC's "redemptive community" or Savio's moral minority to the paranoid fantasies of violent revolution in the late 1960s is strewn with the fractured expectations of the Civil Rights movement and the growing outcry against the Vietnam War. But what was common for this generation of activists across the era's tumultuous divisions lay less in their specific actions than in the fundamental principles of their critique of American society. A testy dismissal of adult "hypocrisy" in not living up to American ideals quickly grew into a total attack on American liberalism and the political culture it spawned. Liberalism was structurally flawed, SNCC organizers in Mississippi came to argue, for there was no mechanism by which non-elites could counter the concentrated economic and political influence wielded by the white establishment. SDS activists, on campus and in the few urban organizing projects they started, came to similar conclusions. Even the labor movement, long considered by the American left as the crucial vehicle for any serious reform, to say nothing of revolution, was dismissed as hopelessly compromised, fatally attracted to a politically enervating materialism, and rendered impotent as an agent of change by its internal hierarchical and race-conscious structures. Above all, liberalism was corrupt, a

morally suspect system that under the guise of providing for a common good was in fact organized around achieving the self-interest of the powerful.

As these components of what would become a New Left critique developed, the movement turned, with perhaps less confidence, to projecting the outlines of the society that would replace failed liberalism. At the core was the concept of participatory democracy, that individuals would organize in their given communities largely without outside interference and define for themselves their aspirations and the principles by which they would achieve them. If, as James Tracy has suggested in his book, *Direct Action*, participatory democracy proved of limited benefit the less internally cohesive and compact a group of citizens were, that was a point not yet understood by these student activists. Indeed, grassroots organizing, the political tool essential to participatory democracy, became a catch-all slogan, perhaps especially among those who had not spent life-threatening days of raw tension trying to do just that. Out of this mix, it was hoped, the people themselves would define the parameters of the new society that would emerge.

Variations on this story have dominated public discussions of the period. While there have been disagreements, at times bitter, among authors concerning the aptness of past tactics, strategy, and guiding principles of various groups, all agree the real story of the era rests with the youthful dissenters and their struggle with the liberal political system. This is true for the best of the works such as James Miller's *Democracy Is in the Streets*, or Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, as it is for the numerous documentary readers that define the decade solely from the perspective of the New Left activists. There is even now something of a cottage industry in the academic journals, dissertations, and books that assert a continuity of principle and practice by former activists despite the fate of the New Left after 1970. The title of Lauren Kessler's interesting volume captures this spirit perfectly: *After All These Years: Sixties Ideals in a Different World*.

But, one might wonder, what is that different world and how did it come about? Was the New Left a premature revolution, the fruits of which must await a future set of proper conditions to develop? Or was it more a victim of a giant government conspiracy that crushed a vibrant and growing oppositional tendency? Adherents of these and similar interpretations thus can explain the demise of the New Left while protecting its image as a tribune of a people in inevitable, if slow, political motion. But a perspective less protective of the

New Left might reveal more. Perhaps treatments of that era have never fully captured either the complex turnings of America's political and religious history or the complete portrait of dissident youth during and after that decade. The importance of John A. Andrew's recent book, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics*, is that he attempts to understand how the new, different world of the quarter-century since 1970 in fact emerged from, if not the ashes, then the fissures of the old.

Andrew, a professor of history at Franklin and Marshall College, takes as his starting point the rather simple proposition that SNCC and SDS were not alone among the important youth groups with roots in the 1960s. While those two groups garnered most of the newspaper coverage, underscoring once again the symbiotic relationship between youthful dissidents and the mass media locked in an increasingly sensational search for "good copy," there was yet a third group of major political significance with origins in that decade. Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), a hierarchically structured group with a decidedly buttoned-down self-image, helped spawn the most far-reaching and fundamental transformation of American political life of any of the dissident youth groups. The image should not obscure the key fact: they considered themselves dissenters who possessed a serious critique of, and the outlines of an alternative to, contemporary American liberalism and its political culture.

On September 9, 1960, 97 college-age men and women gathered at Great Elms, the family estate of William F. Buckley, Jr. in Sharon, Connecticut. Buckley was already a conservative thinker of national

repute, having authored two books (*God and Man at Yale* and *Up From Liberalism*) during the previous decade and founded the leading conservative political weekly, *National Review*. While Buckley and other older conservatives such as William Rusher and M. Stanton Evans played important roles in organizing young conservatives, the group that met at Great Elms very much defined itself generationally: "In this time of moral and political crisis," the Sharon Statement, YAF's founding document began, "it is the responsibility of the youth of America to affirm certain eternal truths." If the prologue eerily foreshadowed the moral tones of the Port Huron Statement,

continued on page 6

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# You Say You W

continued from page 5

what followed was far briefer and diametrically different in philosophical and political orientation. "[A]s young conservatives," the founders identified "the individual's use of his God-given free will" as the "foremost among the transcendent values" to be honored and protected, for that guaranteed the individual's right to be "free from the restrictions of arbitrary force." YAF extolled a concept of government limited to preserving order and liberty; affirmed the essential unity of political and economic freedoms; and proclaimed the market economy as the most compatible "with the requirements of personal freedom and constitutional government" even as it remains "the most productive supplier of human needs." Not surprisingly, government interference in the operation of the economy, be it by the liberal state at home or by a communist government abroad, was condemned; and international Communism identified as the "greatest single threat" to American liber-

ty. This emphasis on individual freedom as the source of liberty served notice that YAF had a different philosophical premise than did the other major student groups. The fountainhead of liberty required protection precisely because it could be trampled by the forces of evil. For these conservative youth, to search for the secular millennium on earth was to avoid the central problem of human evil. Many of them traced their understanding of this human dilemma back to St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and they reacted with a scorn touched with real dismay at their liberal/left opponents' attempts to construct the perfect society with such flawed material. If at times they might reduce a complex understanding of human nature to an anti-communist shibboleth, it was also true that their deeply grounded emphasis on man's sinful nature had unexpected political consequences. In the post-1945 decades, as this society embraced what is arguably its fourth major period of religious revival, that more somber theological and political tone provided these young conservatives with access to many Americans who, touched by the burgeoning Pentecostal and evangelical religious movements, had themselves restructured their moral lives through a profound conversion experience. In time they too came to search for an America that reflected their deepest beliefs.

Not surprisingly, the philosophical chasm that separated conservative youth from their liberal/left peers had its practical meaning as well. Where the emerging student radicals of the left protested the anti-Communist hearings conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee and the governmental demand that university teachers sign loyalty oaths, conservative students formed the National Student Committee for the Loyalty Oath and praised FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, for his vigilance against communism. The most important practical difference, however, had less to do with particular political positions than with a fundamental difference over how each might transform American society. Where the liberal/left students came to embrace participatory democracy, community organizing, and massive demonstrations in their effort to restructure American politics, conservatives from the very beginning applauded the constitutional foundations of American political culture but sought to control its direction according to their own lights. In short, they appreciated the sources of political power and saw little need to devise new forms of political process.

For the students who would create YAF, the source of political power lay within the Republican party. From their point of view, the party had lost its moorings in the deluge of New Deal liberalism and in the

exigencies of a world war. The long-held demand for limited government and for a religiously-based moral order that provided a defense of tradition and a critique of contemporary secular and materialistic society — the core of a conservative critique for more than a century — seemed to them dismissed in the claim of the Eisenhower Republican party that it stood for a "modern Republicanism." To what was then a rump caucus within the party, President Eisenhower's view that the American people "are going to demand that the government do something to give them an opportunity to live out a satisfactory life" indicated to conservatives of all ages just how irrelevant were their principles to both parties as then constituted: liberty itself was threatened when the leader of the party of ideological conservatism so easily projected such an expanded role for government. To such a conservative, the threat of communism was even more sinister. For conservatives young and old, communism was indeed the anti-Christ — the very antithesis of their understanding of liberty and freedom — which could only be vanquished, not reformed. So pronounced was this battle imagery and so suspicious was any appeal for expanded government, that many thought the Eisenhower administration was, however unwittingly, little more than a Trojan horse that bore within it the virulent seeds of socialist disorder. From within such a world view there could be no millennium before Armageddon.

So the conservative students conducted grassroots organizing on campus and within the Republican party. No office, however insignificant it seemed when framed against national politics, was too

minor to contest; and the endless rounds of knocking on doors in assembly districts and campus dorms yielded results even before YAF formed. By 1959, conservative Republican students and their adult allies largely dominated the Young Republican apparatus within the party, and they mounted a vigorous campaign to have Barry Goldwater, the United States Senator from Arizona, nominated as Richard Nixon's vice-presidential candidate in 1960. While they failed in this, as they did in pressuring Nixon to embrace conservative principles, the effort did create a national, self-consciously conservative, student network. Thus the call for the Sharon conference stressed the importance of broadening the campus-based conservative youth movement and orientated those students toward action on and off the campus. "By action," the call to meeting insisted, "we mean *political action!*" John F. Kennedy, of course, beat Nixon in 1960 but as the Republican standardbearer was never the candidate of the conservative youth, they saw in his defeat an internal power vacuum that might allow them another opportunity to transform the Republican party itself. Although the conservative movement was anything but unified — indeed, its early organizational history reads surprisingly familiar to anyone who has plowed through discussions of left factional fights in this country — its members did share a common goal nonetheless: to capture the 1964 Republican presidential nomination.

In the four years following Nixon's loss to Kennedy, two older men remained instrumental in the conservative movement's growth even as the students continued their organizing. If Goldwater's failed nomination as vice-president had galvanized the students, the January 1960 publication of *Conscience of a Conservative*

defined a political faith for that era. While liberals snickered that L. Brent Bozell, a conservative writer, had ghostwritten the book (they had yet to discover that John F. Kennedy's 1956 Pulitzer prize-winning *Profiles in Courage* was the effort of a poorly paid and later ignored writer), *Conscience of a Conservative* was a bestseller. In it Goldwater explained the moral and political principles of the conservative faith in a rather direct fashion. Centralized government undermined individual liberty, he wrote, and violated the "legitimate functions of government [that] are actually conducive to freedom": the maintenance of domestic order; protection from foreign foes; administration of justice; and "removing obstacles to the free exchange of goods." Written in an accessible style that reflected Goldwater's public speech, the book almost immediately fulfilled the author's goal. "Our objective," Goldwater wrote a conservative friend in January 1960, "is to take the onus from the word 'Conservative' and make it acceptable to people who shy away from it today.... If [we] can do this in a philosophical way, then we can attach the definitions and expositions to the concrete subjects of legislation." From the perspective of almost forty years later, Goldwater's effort yielded an immense harvest.

The second major figure guiding the young conservatives was William F. Buckley. Too erudite and viciously witty for practical politics, Buckley acted as the intellectual catalyst whose books and articles, television shows, and independent political action (he ran for mayor of New York City in 1964, and in losing helped establish the Conservative party as a factor in state politics) gave the conservative cause intellectual respectability and recognition. Buckley was especially popular among young, college-educated conservatives. As Patrick Buchanan remembered,



Jack Sherman

# t a Revolution?

talking of his days as a youthful Goldwater supporter:

It is difficult to exaggerate the debt conservatives of my generation owe *National Review* and Bill Buckley. Before I read *NR*, there was virtually nothing I read that supported or reinforced what I was coming to believe....For us, what *National Review* did was take the word conservatism, then a synonym for stuffy, orthodox, Republican stand-pat-ism and economic self-interest, and convert it into the snapping pennant of a fighting faith.

To have his ideas so influence even the grubbiest of electoral politics remains no small accomplishment for the Yale-educated, patrician son of an elite Connecticut family.

By 1964, the efforts of Goldwater, Buckley, and the hundreds of original YAF activists had produced tangible results. YAF claimed some 350 chapters nationwide, with a membership of approximately 30,000. (SDS, in 1963, claimed 750 members.) While no one could check those figures, both Irving Howe and Michael Harrington, socialists and incisive critics of conservatism, confirmed in separate 1962 articles that conservative students, while still a minority, were increasingly important on college campuses. Who, then, were these students? According to Andrew, who relied on a 1966 study of 120 YAF activists, the answers might have surprised students in SDS. YAF members came from families they themselves defined as strict and hierarchically structured, where parents were Republicans or Independents (of whom only 6.3% identified with the radical right), and which were predominately working class. Significantly, a third were from Catholic families, a figure considerably higher than SDS's 9.6% or even the Young Republicans' 19.2% of members from Catholic households. Without setting out to do it, YAF assembled among its early activists representatives of precisely the demographic and ideological groupings that would largely revolutionize American politics over the ensuing three decades. It was a lesson that, as they grew into their majority, the liberal/left students would deeply regret they did not heed themselves.

At first, however, just the opposite seemed the case. Thanks in no small part to the efforts of conservative youth, Goldwater won the 1964 Republican presidential nomination in an astounding rout of the Republican moderates. In control of much of the party machinery, a result of those long hours of grassroots organizing, conservatives cheered wildly as Goldwater proclaimed in his acceptance speech that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice" and that "moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." The enthusiasm soon waned as Lyndon Johnson won all but six states, defeating Goldwater by some 16 million votes. But where political opponents saw in the defeat conservatism's final curtain call, conservatives themselves witnessed only the end of the first act. The basic problem Goldwater and his supporters had encountered, F. Clifton White, a conservative Republican, wrote in an election post-mortem, was that "in the latter half of the twentieth century practically everyone wanted, indeed expected, something from the government.... [Thus] Lyndon Johnson was a conservative defending the established order while Barry Goldwater, the true conservative, became a 'radical' bent on upsetting the apparatus of peace and plenty." For conservatives, then, the question became how to learn to "birth a new world from the ashes of the old."

Unfortunately, but understandably, *The Other Side of the Sixties* essentially stops with the 1964 election. In his detailed

examination of the factional battles within YAF, and between YAF and other extremely conservative groups such as the John Birch Society and the Minutemen, John Andrew explains and analyzes with clarity and purpose. We learn much as well about YAF's critique of the New Deal legacy concerning labor law and social security, and we come to understand something of the consistency in political philosophy in some of the more honorable conservative politicians and thinkers. In a suggestive but limited final chapter, Andrew sketches the legacy of YAF's early years, noting that it was there, in the Goldwater struggle, that future leaders of American conservatism such as Buchanan, Richard Viguerie, and Howard Phillips cut their political teeth. But more is needed, for the impact of this conservative youthful activism has gone well beyond its personal meaning for a handful of participants.

In 1961, for example, when he wrote *Revolt on the Campus*, M. Stanton Evans may have been excused for his partisan enthusiasm when he proclaimed that "historians may well record the decade of the 1960s as the era in which conservatism, as a viable political force, finally came into its own." For most people at the time student activists were identified with a decidedly liberal/left politics. From the perspective of the 1990s, however, what demands explanation is precisely that Evans' prophecy has become such a commonplace, while the New Left has long lost political meaning.

To understand this transformation one must take seriously both the ideological and social meaning of the conservative movement. For all their internal dissension, conservatives as a group have been able to appeal to American voters because their ideas resonate deeply in this culture. Theirs is a language of individualism, of protecting freedom from incursions by powerful elites accountable only to themselves, and it is at its core a language of patriotism. Irving Howe appreciated something of the power of this message when he wrote almost forty years ago that in the conservative students' "concern for the preservation of personal initiative in a bureaucratic society there is something an intelligent radical ought to accept." While some conservatives became at times paranoid in their fear of communist subversion, the history of opposition to the state in the former Soviet Union suggests the dimensions of the problem Howe alluded to. More to the point, the conservative defense of individual liberty reflected a major strain of American political culture. While the political consequences were indeed different if one invoked Thomas Jefferson, John C. Calhoun, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Horatio Alger as a nineteenth-century antecedent, each could nonetheless lead a twentieth-century activist into conservative thought. The transformation of those idealistic YAFers in the 1960s into the enormously successful and far more pragmatic conservative political operatives of the 1980s is precisely what needs analysis.

The social meaning of the movement bears attention as well. While much of the student left (with copious media encouragement) indulged itself with the expectation that, during its decade of the 1960s, it would "begin the world over again," others experienced a quite different era. Imagine, for example, a Chicago kid, age 12 in 1956,

attending the local Catholic parochial school, the grandchild of immigrants from Central or Eastern Europe, working-class or perhaps the son of a working-class father now a member of the white-collar, lower-middle class. For such a person, the political awakening of his decade may have begun in 1956, with fervent prayers at school and at home over the failed Hungarian Revolution and the fate of Catholic Hungary's beloved Jozsef Cardinal Mindszenty. It may also have ended in 1968 when Russian tanks crushed Prague's Spring. From this perspective, the New Left's disruption of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in the summer of 1968 was anything but a liberating experience, especially if Vietnam had touched this imagined kid now grown to adulthood. Ethnicity, religion and class, nurtured in the intertwined networks of an urban neighborhood developed over the critical developmental years in an individual's life, more often than not moved such "kids" away from the politics of the student left, even if aspects of the counter-culture proved attractive.

Vietnam also played a role, of course, in creating a conservative movement among young people. Some were attracted by the patriotism of the movement, by the fierce commitment to anti-communism. But others,

especially from working-class and poor families, also watched with growing anger as more New Left activists than now care to remember quietly signed the papers or took the tests to gain a student deferment from the military draft. Largely without those options, it was the black and white working-class kids who answered the government's call and suffered the consequences. In the moral language of the era, it was the hypocrisy of those liberal/left students that helped prepare many a white working-class youth for the conservative cause.

Finally, race played a central role in expanding the conservative movement. In part, many in the white, urban working class resented enormously liberal politicians' manipulation of school redistricting, for example, which preserved the isolation of the more elite suburban districts while forcing urban schools into fierce racial and class conflicts. In Anthony Lukas' *Common Ground*, Jim Sleeper's *The Closest of Strangers*, and Jonathan Rieder's *Canaris: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism*, the movement of white working people away from a liberalism experienced as a forced, elite-driven, social experiment is evident; and conservatives quickly capitalized on the opportunity to bring into their fold these working-class, New Deal Democrats. Thus the phenomenon of the "Reagan Democrats" during and after the 1980s, and the simply stunning *New York Times* exit poll result that showed, for the 1984 presidential election, that nearly 40% of identified trade union voters chose to re-elect Ronald Reagan — this after the PATCO strike, Solidarity Day, and an intense anti-Reagan drive by the unions themselves.

But conservatives were not simply opportunists, corraling voters where they could in the manner of politicians throughout the democratic world. As early as 1964, Ralph de Toledano, a conservative writer and activist, argued that the message of Goldwater's defeat was in fact

the breakup of the New Deal coalition. Goldwater had taken five southern states, largely due to white anger over civil rights, and conservatives sought to capitalize on that fissure. By 1968, conservative analyst Kevin Phillips developed for the first Nixon campaign a formal "southern strategy," which consciously pitched its political message to attract those whites resentful at the "gains" African Americans made in ending American segregation. This was quickly adapted by the conservative movement in general. Unwilling, following Goldwater's defeat, to publicly stand for dismantling major portions of the New Deal government, conservatives instead merged the twin images of welfare cheats and black Americans into a potent racial appeal. In a consistent thirty-year effort, conservatives have successfully belittled Lyndon Johnson's Great Society legislation, particularly its welfare and civil rights provisions. That may be "fair" in politics, but intrinsic to that process was the demonization of black men and women as "welfare queens," hustlers, and shiftless, irresponsible people. Thus Goldwater's consistent (if wrongheaded) position in favor of full civil rights for black Americans without increased governmental action had degenerated within a decade into an ugly manipulation of the worst elements in human nature. That this was done on behalf of a cause so philosophically sensitive to the problem of good and evil in human experience makes even greater the burden of responsibility conservatives carry for the consequences of such destructive behavior.

In an ironic way, 1960s student radicals of both the left and the right actually achieved part of their goals. Liberalism, as a widely-shared political vision that addressed common goals for a great number of Americans, barely limped out of the decade. Yet it remains unclear what has taken its place. The New Deal coalition no longer exists, but the "Reagan Revolution" itself has devolved into a two-term Clinton presidency. American politics has shifted demonstrably to the right, with limited government, balanced budgets, and welfare reform prominent in the political rhetoric of politicians of both parties. Yet voters fail to turn out for either party in near-record numbers every four years. Contributing to the state of our civic life has been the revival of religion, perhaps the most widely-experienced American social movement in all of the twentieth century. For some, the power of their conversion obliterates consideration of political life, as the expectation of the coming glory dismisses all else before it. For others, such as those in the Christian Coalition, to be born-again is to become a soldier of the Lord in the political as well as the religious realm. While conservatives have indeed gained in the short term from these developments, that gain may actually obscure a more fundamental process. As happened during revivals in earlier centuries, the process of religious rebirth is again accompanied by a sharp, even antagonistic, critique of existing religious leaders and institutions.

That two of the basic structures of this society have been in such flux makes clearer the dimensions of the broad crisis of authority that has framed American life over the past three decades. The conservative "victory" is suspect, primarily because its adherents have been unable to consolidate it philosophically or politically. Far more important than the politics of this group or that tactic is the possibility that this crisis of authority in American society may be the key to comprehending the legacy of the 1960s.

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