

INTRODUCTION

IN EARLY 1936, Robert A. Taft, a president's son and almost always the smartest person in any room, thought that he was a liberal. Then he heard President Franklin Roosevelt explain to the American people that he and his administration were redefining liberalism. In 1776, the president said, liberals had "sought freedom from the tyranny of a political autocracy." Now, Roosevelt continued, liberals demanded not freedom from political tyranny but "against economic tyranny"—and in this fight, "the American citizen could appeal only to the organized power of government."¹

"The President has sought to appropriate to the New Deal," Taft fumed, "all the ideals of liberalism, and to brand his opponents as Tories, and tools of entrenched greed."² Taft clung for a brief period to the L-word, but by 1938, running for the Senate, he used, for the first time, another word to describe his politics: *conservative*. (The term had been used episodically before, but never regularly by American politicians of note.) Taft, modern conservatism's first major figure, understood that the New Deal had forced a new divide in American politics, one that pushed the politically minded to ponder two new disciplinary political orders, master categories that would for decades transcend party or region. In the late 1930s, politicians and their constituents began to sort themselves out as liberals or conservatives. What follows is a short history of political conservatives' evolving and contingent disciplinary order and the constituencies who embraced it, from the time of Robert Taft through the presidency of George W. Bush.

My central argument is that modern American conservatism is a disciplinary order generated by hostility to market restraints and fueled by religious faith, devotion to social order, and an individualized conception of political liberty. New Deal liberalism, in its most enduring form, insisted that the state needed to discipline the

capitalist system in order to ensure that working people (broadly defined) and their families could maintain their dignity and their buying power. It was, Franklin Roosevelt memorably said, the “hazards and vicissitudes” of the market economy from which the New Deal would protect the American people.³ Political conservatives responded to liberal claims by arguing that it was not the market that needed disciplining but individuals.

In the 1930s and 1940s, conservatives looked for that discipline primarily in the workings of capitalism, which they argued rewarded the worthy and punished the unworthy. They believed that government protection robbed individuals of their self-respect and autonomy. They also saw a moral hazard in liberal schemes to protect individuals from the discipline of the market: if irresponsible behavior carried no risk, too many people would behave irresponsibly. Many of these economically minded disciplinarians, including Taft, knew very well that a market-based economic system was a harsh master. Thus they argued that a certain kind of religious faith, a respect for enduring and thus tested social hierarchies, and a trust in cultural orthodoxy were necessary to enable individuals—as well as their families, communities, and the nation—to stay strong and to maintain a salutary moral stability in the face of the economic challenges and cultural risks a market economy would surely bring. These early conservatives did not clearly articulate all aspects of this emergent political field, nor did they all agree on the relationship between economic success, religious faith, and respect for long-standing social forms. Others would spell out those connections in the following decades, though not without serious disagreements and always in response to changing circumstances, their own particular talents, political opportunities, and the shifting political stands of their liberal opponents.

Over time, post-New Deal liberals insisted that market relations—as well as other major institutional structures in American life—needed further disciplining to promote not only economic equity but social and political equality as well. In embracing policies and positions that challenged traditional racial and gender inequalities, they also argued that cultural heterodoxy and social innovation were beneficial to the United States. Conservatives continued to insist

that economic liberty was the bedrock on which American prosperity, individual rights, and morality were based. Most conservatives, however, in claiming to protect economic liberty for individuals, proved willing to sacrifice civil liberties and to restrain rights-claims in order to maintain religious, moral, and social order. As William Buckley wrote, the liberal is “bewitched . . . with the value of [social] innovation,” whereas a conservative “urges conformity [to] ‘institutions’ of society.”⁴ Without such conformity, Buckley and many other conservatives believed, society becomes vulnerable to the undisciplined forces of consumer desire, modernist (atheistic) cultural relativism, and foreign threats to the American way of life. From the 1930s forward, liberals and conservatives reframed issues of equality and liberty within their respective disciplinary orders. Their efforts were most intense as they struggled with the challenges of civil rights, national security, and national identity.

In making this argument, I emphasize both the contingent nature of change and the role of individuals. I also feature the major role conservatives have played in politicizing civil society in behalf of their cause. Characteristically working outside the political party system, conservatives have been dedicated to forging new institutions capable of spreading their political message, organizing activists, and mobilizing voters. Liberals have worked a similar democratic vein but in part because conservatives for so long—even into contemporary times—have believed themselves to be shut out of mainstream institutions such as the mass media and universities, they have been particularly invested and inventive in creating a politically potent counterpublic.

I am also emphasizing, in a fashion rare among American historians, the centrality of the search for order in American politics. While an older generation of American historians used this rubric to explore the age of industrialization and progressivism, the notion that the desire for order and security have played a vital role in American political life, generally, has fallen out of fashion, at least among American historians. Instead, American historians have framed the national narrative most specifically around the struggle for equality. I agree that the struggle for equality is central to American history. But to understand the power and pull of political conservatism, I argue,

a counternarrative built on many Americans'—liberals and moderates, as well as conservatives—desire for order and stability needs to be constructed, as well. As I will relate, the struggle for equality and economic equity often stands in direct counterpoint to conservative or conservative-leaning Americans' political demand for order and stability. Americans' belief, half-hearted and conflicted as it often is, in equality; their ambivalent faith in individual economic liberty; and their desire for order, security, and stability create an inexorable political tension. The conservative politicians, social activists, and intellectuals I write about in this book have struggled to master those sometime contradictory desires. These heroes of the conservative order have done their best to convince Americans that conservatism provides the American people with a just and tested way to keep their families safe, their dreams alive, and their nation strong.

Each of the following six chapters is anchored by a well-known conservative actor: Robert Taft, William Buckley, Barry Goldwater, Phyllis Schlafly, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. I use each figure to emphasize a particular theme in the development of modern conservatism and to explain how and why conservatives crafted a disciplinary order that captured a segment of the American political imagination by claiming moral superiority, critiquing economic egalitarianism, relishing bellicosity, and embracing cultural nationalism.

This work differs from other recent interpretations of modern political conservatism because I link economic conservatives and social conservatives into the larger disciplinary political order I have sketched above. Rather than arguing that a majority of conservatives act in irrational opposition to their own best economic interest, or defining conservatism as a highly intellectual enterprise led by a small band of erudite figures, I am offering another explanation built on a larger, historically contingent framework. In so doing, I have the advantage of learning from the many dissertations and monographs produced in the past few years that effectively connect conservative grassroots political organizing to national political developments.

In chapter 1, I present the estimable Senator Robert A. Taft, whose historical legacy has only grown since his death in 1953. While giving Taft his due as a progenitor of modern conservatism, this chapter

also traces the formation of modern liberalism. My claim throughout the book is that conservatives define themselves in relationship to liberalism. Taft set the conservative political agenda for a generation and anchored labor-intensive industries, free market enthusiasts, and many small-business owners to the conservative cause. Taft feared that liberals did not understand what made America great. “Before our system can claim success,” he wrote, “it must not only create a people with a higher standard of living, but a people with a higher standard of character—character that must include religious faith, morality, educated intelligence, self-restraint, and an ingrained demand for justice and unselfishness.”⁵ Taft, a man before his time, set conservatism on its virtue-claiming course.

In chapter 2, I introduce the wit and wisdom of William Buckley. Through Buckley I explore the creation of a conservative counterpublic in the 1950s. Buckley created that counterpublic by linking intellectually oriented, devoutly religious Americans to the conservative political cause. He explicitly targeted liberals for opprobrium and articulated an overarching liberal-conservative divide in American political culture. In politics, individuals matter, and Buckley personified a new sort of American conservative: he was witty, free of conspiratorial zealotry, and always ready to joust with any liberal brave enough to engage him intellectually. Buckley made political conservatism fun, dashing, and intellectually respectable, even as he built the movement’s political culture around ideas of religious faith and deference to capitalist success and white men.

Chapter 3 brings us to Senator Barry Goldwater and his brand of cowboy conservatism. Here, I use Goldwater’s road to the 1964 Republican presidential nomination to explain how the senator taught millions of Americans—white southern voters, in particular—how and why they were conservative Republicans. Further, I examine how the Goldwater campaign produced movement conservatives who would become so central to the conservative takeover of the Republican Party and the institutionalization of conservatism in American public life. The Goldwater network, built from a multitude of single-issue organizations, nonpartisan conservative groups, and populist grassroots activists, became the “other” sixties movement.

In chapter 4, I explain how Phyllis Schlafly expanded the conservative movement by building new, activist cadres and linking religious traditionalists both to the conservative cause and to the Republican Party. Building on a loose network of grassroots conservative women who had been active in the anticommunist cause, the antiprogressive education movement, and the National Federation of Republican Women, Schlafly organized conservatives' attack on feminism, in general, and the Equal Rights Amendment, in particular. Put bluntly, Schlafly gave new life to a flagging conservative movement in the early 1970s by energizing a new base of activists: women who disapproved of the feminist agenda. These antifeminist women activists emboldened politicians who were worried about a "gender gap" to make "traditional values" (understood as keeping the "traditional" family safe from feminism and homosexuality) a key component of the conservative movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Chapter 5 focuses on the singular contributions of Ronald Reagan to modern American conservatism. Reagan made conservatism popular and conservatives nationally electable. In the face of sixties leftist activists and then the hard times of the late 1970s, Reagan convincingly portrayed conservatism as a forward-looking, optimistic faith in the American way of life (as he defined it). His sunny, good-natured faith infuriated liberals who believed Reagan to be either a mean-spirited cynic or a dunderheaded fool who did not know what he did not know. But Americans made him the first two-term president since Eisenhower. By 1988, at the end of his second term, for the first time since such polling data existed, more Americans identified themselves as conservatives than as liberals.

Chapter 6, the story of George W. Bush, marks the end of the conservative ascendancy. Bush took power backed by a strong and diverse conservative political movement. As political candidate and then president, George Bush, the Christian Texas businessman who was saved from his Ivy League "sixties lifestyle" when he found his personal savior, embodied the contradictions and the vibrancy of modern political conservatives. His administration, in its zealous war on "evildoers," its tax cuts for the wealthy, its embrace of a "culture of life," and its disregard for ecological stewardship, offered Americans

a vision in which success was measured by dominion on earth and heavenly salvation. Bush's muscular use of state power marked the apogee of conservatism as practical politics but its failure, in his hands, as a governing ideology.

The rise and fall of modern American conservatism does not run along a straight line. Robert Taft rejected free trade and the aggressive use of American military power abroad; later conservatives insisted on the centrality of free trade to their cause and the necessity of using American might to make the world more secure and more just. William Buckley worried that some economic conservatives failed to pay obeisance to the Christian verities, whereas Barry Goldwater was uncomfortable mixing religion and politics. Ronald Reagan insisted that the federal government needed to be systemically dismantled but did not seem to have the will or, finally, the inclination, to actually take on the power of the state. A dozen and more years later, Phyllis Schlafly and other prominent conservatives were sometimes mortified by President George Bush's vigorous use of state power both at home and abroad. And in the aftermath of the economic meltdown of 2008 and the presidential victory of Barack Obama, some conservatives even seemed uncertain about their absolutist faith in the free market.

Still, over the course of some seventy-five years, conservatives have adhered to a consistent belief in the need for a disciplined, well-ordered society. While liberals have insisted on the primacy of equality in the pursuit of justice and continue to argue that economic liberty and the free market must be restrained in order to assure that equality, conservatives have argued that a disciplined, well-ordered society can and must be built on the proven economic power of the free market, a firmly resolved patriotism, traditional religious faith, and long-standing cultural precepts. To repeat, in stark terms, what I have argued above: liberals believe in disciplining the free market; conservatives believe in disciplining the individual. American conservatives have done their best to win elections and strengthen American society by offering the American people that core political vision. In the historical account that follows, I trace the rise and fall of that conservative political order.