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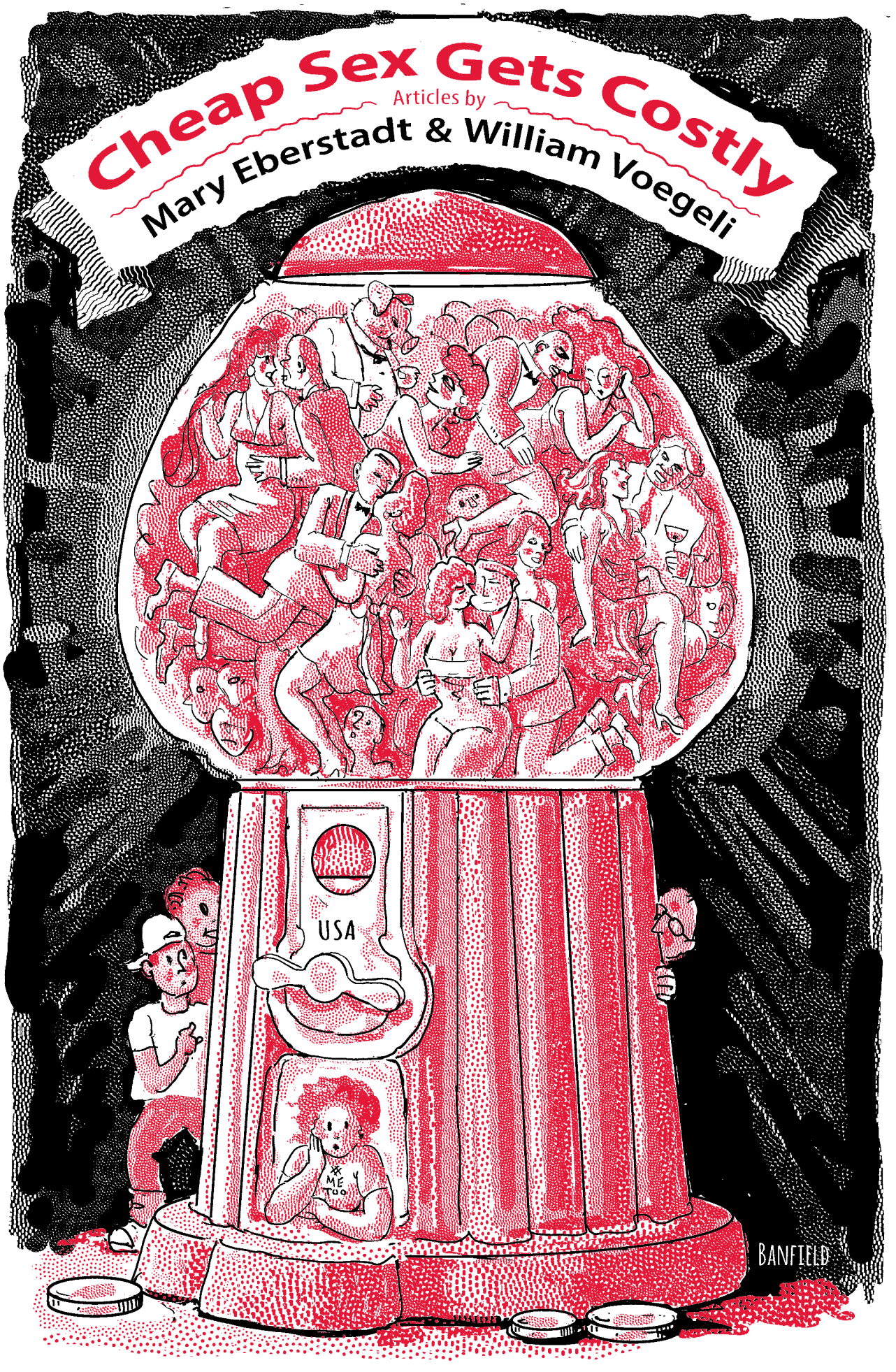

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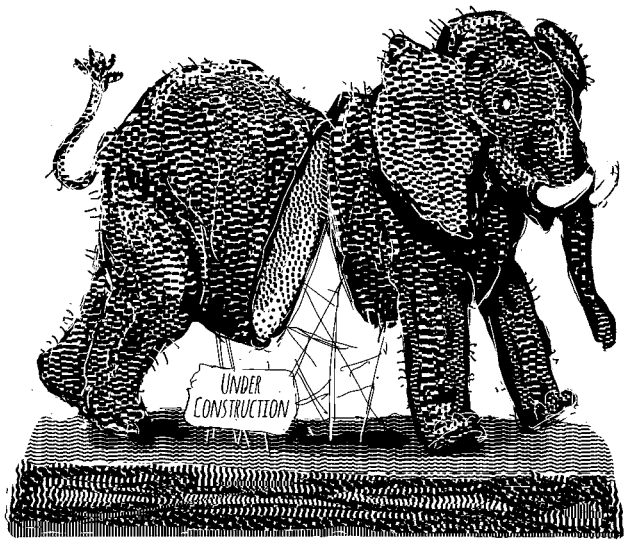
Book Review by Michael A. Needham

Trumping Reagan?

Conscience of a Conservative: A Rejection of Destructive Politics and a Return to Principle, by Jeff Flake.
Random House, 160 pages, $27

The Working Class Republican: Ronald Reagan and the Return of Blue-Collar Conservatism, by Henry Olsen.
Broadside Books, 368 pages, $27.99



Evidence and logic go only so far in democratic politics. To see things as they are, rather than as we wish they were, is to recognize the importance of rhetoric and myth in shaping public sentiment. In the Left's myth, the arc of progress points toward justice not yet attained. Progressivism deprecates the idea that justice is already inherent in our system in favor of the better future's truly just polity, which liberals are forging. As opponents of this myth, conservatives defend not merely our own preferences but the republic itself.

Conservatism's counter-narrative centers on the Barry Goldwater-Ronald Reagan legacy, a realignment that repudiates progressivism in favor of timeless constitutional principles. Conservatism's success depends, therefore, on that narrative's resonance. Is the Goldwater-Reagan myth, in essence, true? Does it speak to our present moment? Does conveying it require altering its finer points? And how does it account for Donald Trump?

Two recent books offer different answers to these questions about the meaning of Trump and conservatism. The authors' competing approaches show that the choice of embracing or rejecting Trump will shape conservatism's future course, but also the interpretation of its past. Deciding how to regard Trump and Trumpism requires conservatives to ponder the meaning of conservatism itself.

Senator Jeff Flake's history of conservatism in *Conscience of a Conservative* is familiar: Barry Goldwater offered renewal to an intimidated, marginalized Republican Party. Instead of being the tax collector for the Democrats' welfare state, the party could offer a libertarian alternative to the big-government status quo. Sixteen years later, after all the votes were counted, as George Will quipped, Goldwater's 1964 campaign was ultimately victorious via Reagan's election in 1980. The principles of limited government and economic freedom fueled not only his campaign but also the modern conservative movement. This revolutionary movement advocated extremism in defense of liberty, which the country embraced on the rare occasions the GOP offered a choice, not an echo. Because conservatism remains a movement of timeless ideas, its time has not yet come and gone.

Subsequent events have only underscored the original lesson, Flake argues. When Republicans stand for conservative principles, they win hearts, minds, and elections: the White House in 1980; the House of Representatives in 1994 and 2010. And when Republicans stray from those principles, they suffer electoral defeat, as in the backlash in 2008 after George W. Bush. Flake fears the backlash yet to come, after four or eight years of a big-spending, big-government Trump Administration disdainful of conservative principle.

For all that, Flake is an unlikely Goldwaterite. A conservative House member from Arizona who led the successful campaign against earmarks, Flake made a sharp pivot to the politics of *bien pensant* respectability upon election to the Senate in 2012. In recent years, he has seemed more devoted to scoring media points by reaching out to Democrats than to advancing libertarianism. In October, he announced his retirement from the Senate with a showy speech denouncing the president.

Conscience of a conservative conveniently follows in this vein, bemoaning all manner of liberal bogeymen. But Flake knows well that America's elites, now his primary audience, will not merely tolerate but embrace some renditions of liberty: mass immigration understood as a universal quasi-right, and the free trade orthodoxy that Donald Trump attacked in 2016. Thus, the free flow of labor and goods plays an outsized role in Flake's account of the essence of

conservatism, standing in for a more broadly libertarian agenda. Trump's protectionism, Flake tells us, is of a piece with his general openness to big government. This argument reduces the fight against big government to the defense of globalism.

The belief that the rising tide of global GDP lifts all boats by no means defines pre-Trump conservatism, but it does represent the sort of abstraction that characterized the movement Goldwater founded. Trumpism succeeded by rejecting the universal and abstract for the particular and concrete: the particular communities harmed by trade; the particular workers losing jobs to immigrants; the elevation of concrete issues like joblessness, crime, and the opioid crisis over the abstract goal of shrinking government. Flake may not be an ideal representative of his brand of conservatism, but he is among the few in its ranks willing to take on Trumpism so publicly. He is not wrong to recognize Trumpism for what it is: an existential threat to a conservatism that begins and ends with reducing "big" government.

In the broader view, conservatism is prudent, not defined by and limited to libertarian abstractions. Where Flake chooses Goldwater as the lodestar for American conservatism, Henry Olsen chooses Ronald Reagan in his revisionist history, *The Working Class Republican*. Many movement conservatives would regard this as a distinction without a difference. To the contrary, says Olsen: Reagan's conservatism succeeded because he transcended rather than perpetuated Goldwater's ideas.

Working Class Republican casts Reagan as a legatee not of Goldwater but of Franklin Roosevelt—a controversial, counter-intuitive thesis. A senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Olsen disputes what "everybody knows" about Reagan: that Reagan's conservatism was libertarian, that the essence of his philosophy was the reduction of government's size and scope; that he would today join those who decry most of modern government as unconstitutional overreach. Even "ultraconservative" readers, to use Reagan's parlance, will find it difficult to dismiss Olsen's reinterpretation of Reagan.

Olsen makes his case by drawing attention to Reagan's frequent departures from the small-government ideology routinely ascribed to him. For example, Reagan's "There you go again" retort during the 1980 presidential debate set up remarks on his support for an alternative to Medicare that would have provided federal financial assistance to states to establish old-age insurance programs. Even in his 1964 "Time for Choosing" speech Reagan claimed, "We're for a provision that destitution should not follow unemployment by reason of old age, and to that end we've accepted Social Security as a step toward meeting the problem." Olsen traces similar concessions throughout Reagan's career, disabusing us of the notion that such apostasies were outliers rather than fundamental beliefs.

These brushstrokes portray a reaganism that rejects more than it affirms conservative orthodoxy. Rarely did Reagan argue that any ongoing or proposed government intervention in the service of a worthwhile goal was constitutionally or philosophically illegitimate. Moreover, his objections to government programs often focused on flawed execution rather than illegitimate ends. Mostly absent and never central in Reagan's lexicon, *contra* Flake, were buzzwords like "liberty." Arguments about federalism were more prominent, but never as dispositive considerations against some government action in the service of a legitimate need.

But Olsen's Reagan is not without principles. His philosophy, embodied in Reagan's "Creative Society" speech delivered in 1966 when he was running for governor of California, boils down to three emphases: self-

government coupled with interpersonal obligation, serving as a bulwark against central control; the identification and addressing of public needs; and human dignity.

Olsen argues persuasively that Reagan's conservatism is best understood in terms of the human concerns it addressed in his day, not the small-government abstractions he is known for. It was a conservatism that spoke to concrete problems rather than from philosophical axioms. Though fully aware of the dangers of government overreach, it never substituted concern about government's size for concern for human flourishing.

Reaganite conservatism, as Olsen understands it, shares an enemy—big government—with libertarianism but defines that enemy differently. The issue is not the size of government's footprint but the bureaucratic control and micromanagement that stifle Americans' aspirations. Its antipathy for government, therefore, is contingent not on government's size but on its nature. For such a conservatism, the character of the elites who operate the machinery of government—precisely the ones Flake appeases in his alternative vision—matters at least as much as the size and scope of government. The contrast with Flake's low regard for populism—cast as an enemy of conservative principle—could not be clearer.

Working class republican will be embraced or scorned by most conservatives based or whether they feel it carries Reagan's openness to government too far and underestimates his role in creating the anti-government image that has animated the conservative movement since 1989. Olsen's new account, that Reagan had more in common with Roosevelt than with Goldwater, is not fully persuasive. But whether he has captured the essence of Reagan matters less than his critique of the story he aims to supplant, of a doctrinaire conservatism that Republican primary voters, supposedly its strongest enthusiasts, rejected last year in favor of something radically different.

That rejection should not be over-interpreted: for most of the prolonged Republican primary contest Trump secured pluralities, not majorities, against an array of more conventionally conservative challengers. Still, the numbers reveal two groups of voters, divided not by conservatism versus moderation but on the basis of two different conservatisms—the ones on offer from Flake and Olsen.

The best insights available on that coalition come from another project of Olsen's—the Democracy Fund's Voter Study Group—to which I served as an advisor. It has provided the most comprehensive longitudinal study yet produced of the attitudes that drove Trump's surprise victory. As described at VoterStudyGroup.org,

> The 2016 VOTER Survey (Views of the Electorate Research Survey) was the study group's first original research. In partnership with YouGov, it polled 8,000 adults—most of whom had participated in similar surveys in mid-2016, 2012, and 2011, which allowed for a unique longitudinal data set and deep exploration into many hotly-debated subjects of the election.

Of particular interest is the analysis of Trump's voters conducted by Emily Ekins of the Cato Institute. On one side of the Trump coalition, she found, are two subgroups often lumped together in the "conservative" column. There are the "staunch conservatives" at 31%, who are what we tend to think of when we talk about conservatives: loyal Republicans who are anti-tax, pro-gun, and socially conservative. Then there are the "free marketeers" at 25%, conservative on economics but moderate to liberal on cultural issues and identity politics. Together, these two groups establish a majority intra-

Republican voting bloc for free-market messages. These are the voters who might have voted for the sort of candidate Flake admires. But they are not the whole of the Republican coalition, nor do they represent anything close to a national consensus for a drastically downsized federal government.

On the other side are three Trump-voting subgroups whose politics are far less traditionally Republican—and that therefore proved far more decisive in Trump's victory. First, at 20%, there are the "American preservationists," who fear cultural change but otherwise support liberal economic policies. Then there are the "Anti-Elites," some 19% of Trump voters, who are less skeptical of cultural change and immigration than American preservationists are, but incline toward a populism of compromise and asking more of the rich. The remaining 5% are disengaged, politically uninformed, and alienated from our political debates.

These three groups may not be the majority of the Republican Party, but they are a sizable enough chunk of its voter base that victory is impossible without them. Donald Trump, who received somewhere between 11% and 15% of his votes (depending on which study you consult) from people who voted for Barack Obama in 2012, would not be president without these defections.

The question republicans now face is how to keep and incorporate these voters. Flake's conservatism, which would have Republicans basically dismiss their concerns, barely commands a majority of Republican voters, and so offers little hope of securing majorities from the entire electorate. Perhaps this explains Flake's paeans to bipartisanship. Unhappy with his party and its coalition, he cannot explain how to promote an ideology with too narrow a constituency to govern.

A coalition this divided needs a new public account of itself if it is to maintain political power. The 2016 election saw a fractured governing coalition that opposed the right-side-of-history myths that looked so ascendant in the Obama years with a new story of its own, one that reclaimed the true Reagan (if you believe Henry Olsen), or moved beyond him (if you don't). Yet it's unclear whether Trump or Trumpism actually points toward durable principles of governance or whether Trump's victory is best attributed to his own singular appeal. If a new account is centered entirely on one man, it is a cult of personality destined to fracture when he departs the scene.

We do see in trump's rhetoric about globalism versus nationalism the effort to build a Trumpism that might prove more durable. But Trump himself seems to approach his takeover of the Republican Party as a transactional arrangement rather than an effort to offer anything new. At times his rhetoric seems merely for show: the real work is in brokering deals among the GOP's factions, which have been left unchanged by his election.

Many conservatives are mostly happy to have it this way. Trump, they believe, owes them for their votes, without which he would not have won the presidency, and they expect to collect his support for their priorities. They did not elect Trump to rewrite their agenda, and with a new president eager to put victories on the board, they see no reason to do so. All they needed was a president who would sign Obamacare repeal and corporate tax reform into law. As it turned out, the main obstacle they faced was not the Trumpist realignment but their congressional leadership's incompetence and the intransigence of moderates, whose long tenure in Washington rendered them averse to draining its swamps.

Although proponents of this view had several successes to celebrate in 2017—the elevation of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, an inspiring deregulatory agenda, and the passage of a massive tax cut—they also run into the harsh reality of the failure to repeal and replace Obamacare. Absent a modern governing majority, conservatism's policy aspirations can be achieved only through parliamentary sleights of hand or executive actions temporarily free from the constraints of public opinion. Successfully building a governing coalition will require something more: making the non-ideological half of the Trump coalition inhabitants in, rather than visitors to, the GOP.

What have these voters received since Trump's election? Proposals to end the trade deals Trump told them were stealing away their jobs have been downgraded to "renegotiations" and are likely to be downgraded, again, to rebranding. Core Trumpist priorities like ending President Obama's illegal amnesty seem to be little more than bargaining chips to be thrown away to Chuck Schumer with the hope of preserving the construction of some physical structure at the border. For all his time as president, the most tangible achievement Trump can point to on their behalf was the Carrier deal inked before he took office, financed not by any Trump Administration initiative but by then-Governor Mike Pence's Indiana state government.

For some, Trump's inability to translate his rhetoric into results validates the pre-Trump conservative worldview. It would be more productive, however, for thoughtful conservatives to apply conservative principles to the challenges Trump diagnosed. Conservative think tanks and publications exist for just this purpose—to equip conservative and Republican office-holders to succeed. Trump's presidency proves the importance of these institutions and their work: to specify and justify an agenda that produces tangible results.

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