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TWO NEW RIGHTS DO NOT MAKE A WRONG

by Charles R. Kesler

THERE ARE MANY REASONS TO SYMPATHIZE WITH YOUNG CONSERVATIVES who have grown up in modern, or worse, in postmodern, America. Surrounded by on-demand and even no-demand pornography, the Muzak of their era, and schooled on the supercilious condemnation of virtue, white males, and American history in particular, they are barely acquainted with the America that decades ago enjoyed a much healthier moral and intellectual culture.

No wonder, then, that the leading characteristic of the so-called New Right is its simultaneous alienation both from woke liberalism and from what used to be called “movement conservatism.” The latter it disdains as Conservatism, Inc., the “beautiful losers” (Sam Francis’s haunting phrase) who didn’t try to win because they didn’t even want to win. Why struggle to dethrone cultural liberalism when it pays so well to faux-fight it forever?

All strains of the New Right—MAGA enthusiasts, National Conservatives, post-liberals, neo-integralists, Bronze Age-revivalists, and many others—seem to agree that the old conservative movement, Bill Buckley, Barry Goldwater, and Reagan’s movement, whatever its initial successes (about which the critics disagree), had failed by the end of the 1980s to attain its own highest goal, to replace liberalism as the dominant public philosophy. That would not be news to Reagan, who admitted as much in his farewell address.

Most of the New Rightists blame movement conservatism’s failure on its bad or insufficient theory, which Frank Meyer at *National Review* had christened fusionism—the happy melding of traditionalism and libertarianism. The New Right argues that this conservative combo valued libertarianism too highly, giving economic conservatism the whip hand over social conservatism, unhappily condemning the Right to decades of defeats against social or cultural liberalism on questions ranging from obscenity to immigration to affirmative action. So long as taxes remained low and the Fortune 500 prospered, who cared about the social issues?

There is some truth in this account. It’s true, for example, that the traditionalist-libertarian fusionism of old is no longer what we in California would call an active fault line. It’s not where the beating heart of conservatism is anymore. But I’m not sure it was there in the 1960s either, despite all the books and conferences devoted to the subject.

Fusionism was always a better description of the conservative intellectual movement than of the conservative political movement. Most right-wingers back then, after all, were both social and eco-

nomic conservatives, and something more—what John Fonte calls patriotic conservatives. They were anti-tax and pro-school prayer, and anti-Communist and pro-America all at the same time. And that *tertium quid* predated neoconservatism, which nevertheless liked to claim credit for it.

THE POLITICAL DRAMA OF BUCKLEY-REAGAN CONSERVATISM lay not in the formulas of fusionism, handy as they were, but in the rollicking political battles that the nascent conservative movement fought—and by which it defined itself—against the liberal “establishment.” To name some examples: the battle over McCarthyism and internal security and corruption, which meant over the evil of Communism and the goodness of America—not so far, really, from today’s debate over wokeness. Then the long struggle over the civil rights revolution, beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act in 1964-65, then on to busing for racial balance, affirmative action, and diversity. Again, complicated and inflammatory questions that went to the very meaning of America. And who remembers that Phyllis Schlafly stopped the “inevitable” ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in its tracks?

These kinds of battles are far from the apolitical or anti-political libertarianism that the New Right holds to be the essence of the older conservatism. In fact, they suggest a certain continuity between the conservative situation then and now, despite the vast differences between, say, Bill Buckley and Donald Trump.

As Buckley put it in 1959, criticizing President Eisenhower for his excessive “modulation”: when “encompassed by the blandness of Modern Republicanism [Ike’s slogan], the stimulation of intellectual and political resistance to the continued liberal offensive is all but impossible.” Hence the need to “tell it straight,” as in his campaign for New York City mayor in 1965, when he called for a one-year residency requirement for city welfare benefits and for “deporting” chronic welfare cases to outside the city limits. As he phrased it: “It is as obvious to me as it is to you that no American should be permitted to starve to death. But I do not believe that people should be encouraged to schedule their own starvation to begin immediately upon arriving in New York City.”

The New Right, meet “the new conservatives” of the 1950s and beyond.... You may have something in common besides your name. You may even have something to cheer.

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