

[*Why I Turned Right: Leading Baby Boom Conservatives Chronicle Their Political Journeys*, Mary Eberstadt, ed., Threshold Editions, 291 pages]

## Leaving the Left Bank

By Richard B. Spencer

THE ATTACHMENT to conservatism by a broad swath of the American public has confused many a concerned Leftist. As Mary Eberstadt notes in the introduction to her enjoyable new collection of essays, *Why I Turned Right*, the enlightened often ask themselves, “How can so many supposedly rational fellow citizens out there believe all that backward reactionary stuff?”

In answering this question, Eberstadt turns directly to culture (and not GOP personalities and policies), which she views as the source of conservative ascendancy. It is true that America is the incubator of much that is vulgar in global consumer culture, and our everyday manners continue to descend into brashness and crudeness. Still Eberstadt’s general point holds, at least with regard to political, social, and religious values. Republicans may lose more elections and Britney and Paris may continue to dominate the airwaves, but a deeper, rooted conservatism will remain.

In addressing this phenomenon, Eberstadt focuses on the personal, soliciting a number of “baby boom conservatives”—major opinion-makers, scholars, and public intellectuals—to “chronicle their political journeys.” The list includes Peter Berkowitz, Joseph Bottum, David Brooks, Danielle Crittenden, Dinesh D’Souza, Stanley Kurtz, Tod Lindberg, Rich Lowry, Heather Mac Donald, P.J. O’Rourke, Sally Satel, and Richard Starr.

All of the essays are autobiographical, and Eberstadt counseled the authors to adopt an anecdotal, sometimes even confessional, tone. All but a few are

former leftists or liberals, and much of the volume reads as a series of “conversion stories”—accounts of the very moment the author “turned right.” O’Rourke is the most specific, announcing that he became a conservative at 11:59 p.m. on Dec. 4, 1997, when his wife gave birth to the couple’s first child. For a parent, “every change reeked of danger or, in the case of diaper changes, just reeked.” Resistant to leftist innovation,” O’Rourke wants to “stand with Bill Buckley athwart the tide of history shouting, ‘Don’t swallow the refrigerator magnet!’”

*Why I Turned Right* is a collection of elite opinion, but, as the O’Rourke example indicates, many average Americans find conservatism meaningful for the very same reasons that the contributors do.

As the essays are often conversion stories, one gets the impression that some authors did not really leave the Left, but the Left left them. The *New York Times* columnist David Brooks boasts of being a “progressive, national greatness” conservative, an orientation that seems indistinguishable from a “Great Society” liberal (even if Brooks is willing to criticize the harmful “unintended consequences” of LBJ’s welfare state).

Not surprising for a “progressive,” Brooks still thinks the invasion of Iraq is “one of the noblest endeavors the United States, or any great power, has ever undertaken”—despite his newfound conservatism that leads him to doubt, momentarily, the ability of conservatives to transform the Middle East into a liberal democracy.

Some of the best essays are focused on young adulthood, when the contributors were first becoming intellectually aware. As Eberstadt ironically notes, politically correct academia “may turn out to be the real cradle of conservatism as we know it—in a purely negative sense, that is.” It is no coincidence that all but one contributor remember their college experience as forming their political identities.

Most of the contributors had liberal parents and were vaguely “on the Left”

when they entered college, but they reacted viscerally to the carefree nihilism of antiwar protestors, the militancy of “black power,” the dogma of campus feminism—Dinesh D’Souza remembers that one professor was disturbed by the phallic architecture of Dartmouth’s Baker Library—and the illiberalism of affirmative action.

D’Souza’s chronicling of his undergrad days at Dartmouth is one of the most lively essays. Arriving in New Hampshire as a shy international student, he began to turn right when, at freshman convocation, the college chaplain announced that one in three members of the incoming class would “have a homosexual experience to climax” before graduation.

D’Souza was an undergrad during the ascendancy of the “tenured radicals” in the early ’80s and recognized immediately that there was little about academic culture that a conservative would want to conserve. It was thus necessary for the Right to become radical itself. D’Souza joined the *Dartmouth Review*, a student paper advised by a sympathetic English professor, Jeffrey Hart. Long before affirmative action bake sales, the *Dartmouth Review* wrote the book on right-wing hijinx. What campus paper today would be willing to publish a transcript of the idiotic rantings of an affirmative-action hire or offer an article speculating whether campus activists were actually protesting against their own ugliness?

Others who eventually turned right were initially seduced by the sirens’ song of the academic Left. O’Rourke remembers that at Miami of Ohio in the ’60s, there was a main street with two types of bars on opposite sides. On the right sat buxom sorority sisters with whom a guy like him had no chance. On the left, a different crowd—variously hippy and urbane—who drank beer from the bottle and mouthed “Marx, Mao, and Marcuse.” O’Rourke contemplated to himself, “I’ll bet those girls do it.” They did, and without ever seriously studying Marxism, O’Rourke became a commie to meet chicks.

It was only after he left the safe confines of academia and prolonged adolescence that he became conservative. In O'Rourke's charming and self-deprecating account, his turn right was just as emotional and nonintellectual as his turn left had been: he experienced the sting of giving away hard-earned money in taxes; he felt embarrassed when he failed the Army's physical exam for the draft while clean-cut working-class kids were marched off to war; and, finally, he shuddered at the joy and responsibility of the aforementioned birth of his child.

While at Yale in the '70s, Heather Mac Donald was far too intellectual to be seduced by hippies, drugs, and sex. Instead, she was taken in by the fascinating and mysterious literary theories of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. Not a particularly political form of leftism, deconstructionism was based on demonstrating that there is no connection between a text and any single meaning. While such a philosophy might seem to inspire interpretative richness (and this is sometimes the case), in the hands of the Derrida devotees, it became a license for great works to mean just about anything. Mac Donald turned right when she exited the inconsequential realm of deconstruction and made the "reality of life outside the text" her object of study.

As Mac Donald's education suggests, there is also a certain value in conservatives confronting the grand theory of the Left. Peter Berkowitz, a law professor and scholar of philosophy, views this as indispensable for forging a conservative philosophy. Berkowitz's model is Leo Strauss, who confronted and attempted to overcome those thinkers who, he felt, represented the most destructive aspects of the modern age.

Sadly, today's "theory" is not nearly as productive. As Mac Donald notes, whatever their failings, deconstructionists had the good taste to analyze the "dead white male" masterpieces of the canon. Since Jesse Jackson's call, "Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Western Civ has got to go!," Shakespeare has become optional, and mind-numbing identity politics manda-

tory. Fewer and fewer undergrads are intellectually equipped to turn right or any other direction not proscribed by campus gurus.

Mac Donald's realist sensibility is similar to that of Sally Satel, a psychiatrist who brought upon herself the ire of her highly placed colleagues when she dared to write about how political correctness is corrupting medicine. Satel does not really think of herself as a conservative—she is pro-choice and has little sympathy for conservative Christians. Still there is much to admire in Satel: "I am eager to expose muddled thinking; does this make me a 'conservative psychiatrist'?"

Being "no nonsense" is a requisite but an inadequate basis for a political philosophy. While the volume offers many accounts of "why conservatism?," I'm still left wondering what contemporary American conservatism actually is.

Many of the contributors describe American conservatism as based on the classical liberalism of Adam Smith and J.S. Mill or a proper balance between the Enlightenment and the Bible. Joseph Bottum, the editor of the theologically minded journal *First Things* claims, "real conservatism usually begins when you find in yourself a limit, a place beyond which you will not go." For Bottum, this is abortion, and "all the rest is just a working out of the details." It is true that prominent strands of the conservative tradition emphasize individual liberty, the absolute value of human life, and realism. Yet these are only partial answers to the question of what kind of political Right and conservative culture we want in the future.

Most will probably sympathize with O'Rourke in observing that one generally becomes more conservative when one gets a job and has kids. Yet none of this explains why O'Rourke, the responsible family man, would support the invasion of Iraq and a host of other activist positions.

In these pages, Eberstadt has opined that, although there are serious disputes within the Right—"democratists" vs. foreign-policy realists, immigration

restrictionists vs. open-borders advocates being the most prominent—there is an enduring conservative core greater than these issues. This might be true. And yet, I wonder if unending foreign intervention and unchecked Third World immigration might be exactly the things that fracture not only the GOP but, more importantly, America's conservative consensus.

*Why I Turned Right* is a thoroughly readable and pleasurable account of the personal experience of recognizing "I'm conservative." As such it is invaluable. Nevertheless, before further expounding on our conservative epiphanies, we need to seriously re-think what being on the Right means in the 21st century. ■

[*Terror In The Balance*, Eric A. Posner and Adrian Vermeule, Oxford University Press, 328 pages]

## State of Emergency

By Bruce Fein

The 9/11 abominations pulverized not only the Constitution's time-honored checks and balances but the scientific method for arriving at political wisdom and justice. In *Terror in the Balance*, law professors Eric A. Posner and Adrian Vermeule celebrate the pulverization. The two academics maintain that both history and reason justify concentrating unchecked power in the executive to address ostensible emergencies; that presidents can be trusted to act like statesmen; that their national-security motives will be unsullied; that judges should be sidelined; that jurists have nothing constructive to contribute in responding to external dangers; and that after the emergency ceases, checks and balances will return in full bloom. All's well that ends well. The post-9/11 aggrandizement of the White House is unworrisome.