

# Victors' History

Neocons have airbrushed the Old Right out of our past.

By Paul Gottfried

SOMEONE OUGHT TO write a book called *Down the Memory Hole*. It would discuss the multifarious beliefs that American conservatives held until the second half of the 20th century but subsequently gave up without fuss or embarrassment. Conservative leaders have not only abandoned their forebears' understanding of such events as the Civil War, World War I, and the civil rights movement, they have imposed on their followers exactly opposite views. A case in point is the revisionist historiography of Larry Schweikart, coauthor—with Michael Allen—of *A Patriot's History of the United States*.

Schweikart, a regular on Fox News, takes to task "leftist" historians who disparage America's past or glorify the expansion of public administration. In the latter respect, he offers a useful antidote to the mainstream liberal history of my youth, particularly to exaggerated claims about FDR pulling us out of the Depression. Schweikart also tells the truth about such productive, non-activist presidents as Calvin Coolidge and Dwight Eisenhower, who have long been treated by left-leaning court historians as inferior to the leaders who built the welfare-warfare state. Schweikart notes the integrity of Grover Cleveland—one of our most morally upstanding but largely ignored chief executives—and dares bring up the discomfiting fact that most of those in the State Department whom Joe McCarthy deemed to be security risks were exactly that.

Yet many of the views that this patriotic historian considers far leftist are

actually those of the Old Right. And notably, war and the social upheavals associated with it are the subjects where the revisionism is most glaring. Schweikart and other historians attached to the conservative movement define patriotism as defending wars that our government involved us in—or, beyond that, affirming that America is "the greatest country that ever existed."

Presumably, if America is now the most admirable country of all time, the devastations that got us where we are must all be celebrated. American pride has come to center on praising the present, which is supposedly under siege from the anti-American Left. The problem here is that the Left has even more reason than the patriotic Right to be proud of the American present. After all, culturally and politically, the Left has created American history as we now know it—a narrative of ever greater progress toward personal and group emancipation, which culminates in our offering the fruits of democracy to the world. To question the price of this achievement in war and bloodshed is to be unpatriotic as well as politically incorrect.

Conservatives' understanding of history changed profoundly between the 1950s and the 1980s—not because of superior evidence coming to light and forcing a re-evaluation but because of new political agendas. As neoconservatives migrated from Left to Right, they brought with them what in the 1950s had been thought of as the Cold War liberal or "consensus" interpretation of history. Between the 1960s and 1980s, neoconser-

vative and Old Right views of history clashed, particularly in the vituperative disputes over Lincoln's place in the American pantheon. Willmoore Kendall, Frank Meyer, and M.E. Bradford saw Lincoln as our own Caesar, and Kendall warned of "an endless series of Abraham Lincolns ... each prepared to insist that those who oppose this or that new application of the equality standard are denying the possibility of self-government, each ultimately willing to plunge America into Civil War rather than concede his point." By contrast, Harry Jaffa, a Lincoln enthusiast, declared that views like Kendall's amounted to "a distinctive American fascism, or national socialism."

The Jaffaites prevailed. Today, hardly anyone in my heavily Republican region of Pennsylvania can imagine criticisms of Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, or FDR's prosecution of World War II as anything other than anti-American.

Among the perspectives that no longer belong to the establishment Right but that could once be found regularly in the *American Mercury*, *Human Events*, *National Review*, and other conservative publications are the following: Woodrow Wilson and his outspokenly Anglophile secretary of state, Robert Lansing, maneuvered us into World War I by treating the two belligerent sides unequally and excusing the British blockade of Germany, which was illegal under international law and starved German civilians. FDR behaved recklessly in dealing with imperial Japan in 1941, and whether he willed it or not, his actions were bound to lead to a Japanese

attack. After Pearl Harbor, the U.S., led by such liberals as FDR and California governor Earl Warren, stripped American citizens of Japanese ancestry of their property and freedom as part of an attempt to frighten Americans into submission to the central government. (Significantly, Robert Taft was the sole Senate vote against internment.) The Nuremberg trials were an example of victor's justice that had no legal basis outside of the will of the antifascist winners, including Stalin. Moreover, World War II could have ended without insisting on "unconditional surrender" from the Axis powers; dropping atomic bombs on the Japanese was unnecessary for bringing about a just peace.

Nowadays, Richard M. Weaver's characterization of Allied behavior during World War II would surely get him branded as an "unpatriotic conservative":

Our nation was treated to the spectacle of young boys fresh out of Kansas and Texas turning nonmilitary Dresden into a holocaust which is said to have taken tens of thousands of lives, pulverizing ancient shrines like Monte Cassino and Nuremberg, and bringing atomic annihilation to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. ... Such things are so inimical to the foundations on which civilization is built that they cast into doubt the very possibility of recovery.

Neoconservative historiography prevailed against the Old Right because it could build on the Left's moral assessments—treating Lincoln and General Sherman as great emancipators, for example—while at the same time tapping into the patriotic, pro-military sentiments of American Republicans and Fox News-viewing conservatives. From the liberal establishment's perspective, American history's new "patriotic"

heroes—war presidents Lincoln, Wilson, FDR, and Truman—are a vast improvement over cantankerous Old Right figures like Robert LaFollette and Robert Taft.

Widespread historical illiteracy may also help explain the success of the new historiography. Selling young Republicans on myths, like Martin Luther King being a "conservative Christian," is remarkably easy. Indeed, it must be exhilarating to learn, as one of my Republican students announced in a senior seminar, that "all those people the Democrats like were really conservatives."

The neoconservative picture of our past was already so pervasive by the 1980s that even otherwise sound conservatives fell prey to it. From 1983 until 1988, Sen. Jesse Helms, whom one could not plausibly accuse of being an FDR worshipper, opposed giving even nominal redress to Japanese-Americans who had been interned during World War II. Through most of this period, Helms enjoyed the support of the onetime New Dealer Ronald Reagan, who finally gave in and signed a bill sponsored by two Japanese-American Democratic congressmen. It is a sign of historical madness that liberals in the party of FDR were able to put themselves at the head of this movement to atone for leftist, antifascist sins, while the arch-conservative Helms attacked it endlessly as "unpatriotic." Had Helms known the truth, he would have sponsored his own bill and asked Norman Mineta and Robert Matsui to disavow FDR and his radical leftist destruction of civil liberties for Japanese-American citizens in good standing.

Ironically, the older Left and the Old Right occasionally agreed in their interpretations. The socialist literary critic Edmund Wilson in *Patriotic Gore* indignantly criticized the Union side in the Civil War for devastating the American South. And one of the most prominent

critics of Woodrow Wilson was the Marxist historian William Appleman Williams, whom the antiwar Right still cites as an authority. As late as 1956, when Ted Sorenson ghostwrote *Profiles in Courage* for the soon-to-be Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, liberal Democrats could still extol figures and deeds that neoconservatives and neoliberals today would never tolerate. Sorenson included Robert A. Taft, for example, as a profile in courage for his opposition to the Nuremberg trials.

Today's academic and journalistic Left would never applaud such politically incorrect heroism—nor would movement conservatives. Except for American participation in the Cold War, the modern Left and the patriotic Right celebrate most of the same milestones on the American path to progress. Looking at Sean Wilentz's well-received *The Rise of American Democracy: From Jefferson to Lincoln*, it is difficult to find critical points over which the self-described liberal Democrat and Princeton luminary and his neoconservative readers might disagree. Although Wilentz and the patriotic school might wrangle over some aspects of FDR's New Deal policies, they would see eye to eye on most things, including the Civil War, Reconstruction, Wilson's presidency, U.S. conduct in the Second World War, and the civil-rights revolution. This broad area of agreement about heroes and villains—and about how we reached the glorious present by overcoming the prejudices of the past—unites the liberal and patriotic versions of American history. This is the new consensus history, and it leaves little room for the Old Right's take on the past to get a fair hearing. ■

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# Rule of Lawlessness

LESS THAN A YEAR after reversing course and backing compromise FISA legislation—which he had previously vowed to filibuster if it contained immunity for telecoms that cooperated with illegal federal surveillance—President Obama continues to demonstrate his support for expansive executive power. The cloak of national security to hide government crimes knows no party affiliation. “Is Obama Channeling Cheney?” the *Washington Independent* asked.

In *Al-Haramain v. Obama*, one of the first cases to challenge the Bush administration’s warrantless-wiretapping program, the Obama Justice Department petitioned the 9th Circuit for immediate dismissal on the grounds that proceeding would violate the president’s state secrets privilege. The opposing lawyers needed access to a classified document proving that their client was one of the program’s targets. (They had already seen the document, which was accidentally turned over in 2004, and had agreed not release it publicly.)

The court ruled against the administration. Yet Obama’s DOJ maintains that “the Court does not have independent power ... to order the Government to grant counsel access to classified information when the Executive Branch has denied them such access.”

This is not the first time that the Obama administration has fought to preserve the most outrageous claims of its predecessor. In the case of *Mohamed v. Jeppesen Dataplan*, involving the rendition and torture of five individuals, the Bush administration invoked the state secrets privilege, as it had over 20 times before. It contended that rendition itself is a state secret, though the practice has been the subject of public statements by successive CIA directors. Still, the gov-

ernment filing maintained, “The sensitivity of the information at issue in this litigation, and the serious harms that would result from its disclosure, compel the Government to assert the state secrets privilege.” The Obama administration maintains that position.

It also weighed in against Ali Al-Marri, a U.S. resident detained by the Bush administration, designated an enemy combatant, and held for the past five and a half years in a Charleston brig. The president ordered that he be transferred from military to civilian custody to face federal charges of conspiracy and providing support to terrorists. Thus his Justice Department argued that Al-Marri’s lawsuit challenging his detention without charges was “moot.” The Supreme Court agreed and dismissed the case.

The Al-Marri case sets a particularly chilling precedent, as it creates an opening to detain suspects without charges for years on end and then head off any legal challenge by filing formal charges at some point in the distant future. The executive still claims the arbitrary power to imprison indefinitely anyone it rules an enemy combatant. In some ways worse than invoking secrecy privileges to thwart legal remedies, Obama’s position on detention is the clearest example of continuity with executive abuses under the previous administration.

As new director of the CIA, Leon Panetta has made clear that there will be no prosecutions of officers involved in interrogation abuses under President Bush. Obama himself has shown no interest in criminal investigations of any members of the former administration, and he has not expressed much support for the modest “truth commission” being organized by Vermont senator Patrick Leahy. Apparently holding government officials

accountable and enforcing the rule of law do not figure in the president’s plans for transforming Washington.

As disturbing as it is, the new administration’s embrace of national-security ideology should not come as any surprise. In the Senate, Obama was a reliable supporter of the Patriot Act. The presidential heroes he reveres, Lincoln and FDR, were notorious shredders of constitutional protections under the cover of addressing national emergencies. As Andrew Bacevich has written in *The Limits of Power*:

The ideology of national security ... functions the way ideology so often does—not to divine truth or even to make sense of things, but to provide a highly elastic rationale for action. In the American context, it serves principally to legitimate the exercise of executive power. It removes constraints, conferring upon presidents and their immediate circle of advisers wide prerogatives for deciding when and how to employ that power.

It was to some extent unavoidable that someone seeking to head the executive branch would embrace the ideology that grants him the most power.

Despite small promising signs to the contrary, in the first few weeks of the new administration, terror-related transgressions against civil liberties remain, and the perpetrators are effectively beyond the rule of law. The distortions of our political system created by the so-called Long War are not going to be solved simply by changing administrations but must be eliminated at their roots, starting with our national readiness to defer to the executive whenever it invokes national security. ■