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THE COMING CONSERVATIVE CRACK-UP

As the Administration loses steam, we ask: Was it foreordained?
Will life sour still more for conservatives?

In a hair-raising essay on Ronald Reagan, Professor Garry Wills heaved off what was the Liberals' stock perception of the Reagan Administration four months into its present trials. That the perception was widely accepted cannot be doubted: *Time* magazine had commissioned Dr. Wills. According to him, "Ronald Reagan did not build a structure; he cast a spell. There was no Reagan revolution, just a Reagan bedazzlement. The magic is going off almost as mysteriously as the spell was woven in the first place." After this infantile prelude, Dr. Wills discoursed on the political phenomenon of Ronald Reagan for two full pages, mentioning the Nuremberg rallies three times! Always, however, he returns to his belief that the Fortieth President beguiled us with magic. Yes, it has come to this: the Liberals attribute their arch enemy's political triumph to savorings of the marvelous. Well, I do not want to incur Dr. Wills's displeasure, but there is no such thing as magic.

Nonetheless, I am not surprised by his resort to superstition. Throughout Reagan's Administration its opponents have steadfastly refused to acknowledge the forces that thrust them out into the cold. In ignoring the reality of a conservative political ascendancy they have also left the conservatives unexamined, their weaknesses unreported. For all the years of the Reagan presidency, the Liberals and those who repair to them for wisdom have been giving false testimony as to the failings of the left and the right. Consequently the political future, which will be decided on election day 1988, is murkier than need be. For a hint into

that future we must understand the recent past.

The real explanation for the political reign that began to falter so badly last November reposes in the fact that by 1980 the Liberals had played out their hand. They had no plausible policies left to perpetrate on the American people. Anon, they radicalized themselves beyond the wildest dreams of Franklin Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy. The Liberal coalition in the late 1970s had cracked up into a riot of enthusiasts thumping for feminism, income redistribution, neo-isolationism, small-is-beautiful economics, minority preoccupations and other manias, all existing in very uneasy alliance. Historian Kenneth Lynn has pointed out that the Liberal political model that in the early 1960s was expected to bring peace abroad, tranquillity and justice at home, and pandemic compliments to its progressive statesmen came to ruin in an endless Southeast Asian war, proliferating grievances from students and minorities at home, and a sick economy. The Liberal model had taken America as far as it could. Many Liberals, unappeased by this progress, took up radical causes and dreamed of a New Age.

Jimmy Carter's presidency revealed the futility of New Age Liberalism. He adopted its foreign policy and many of its domestic bugaboos. The foreign policy of George McGovern and the domestic aspirations of Ralph Nader and *Ms.* magazine set his agenda. Consequently, Jimmy Carter, who is admittedly a very bright fellow, will probably go down as the worst President of this century.

Thrust Dr. Wills from your mind and recall the Carter revels. Jimmy Carter presided over a foreign policy that, notwithstanding all the poetry about superior American values, was actually returning America to isola-

tionism. By 1980 inflation had raced to 12.4 percent, the prime rate was at 15.2 percent, productivity was rising not at all and in some instances falling. Unemployment was at 7.1 percent. The average American had been appreciably impoverished by rising taxes and eroding purchasing power. Nicaragua and Iran had fallen to anti-American regimes. The Soviets were taking SALT I *cum grano salis* and sending forth a vast array of missiles to unbalance the nuclear equation, particularly in Europe. Finally, the Soviets, loyally assisted by Fidel Castro, were rapidly endangering American security interests in the Third World and even along our coast.

Those who speak of the Reagan magic ignore all this. They ignore that in 1980 Americans rejected New Age Liberalism. A standard rule of American politics is that elections are for the incumbent to lose, not for the challenger to win. The electorate rejected a Liberal Administration in 1980, accepting Ronald Reagan's conservatives warily. Nonetheless, now the conservatives' hour was at hand. Had they arrived in the White House any earlier, bellicose minorities still holding to Liberalism's old beliefs and bugaboos would have mired them in controversy, but by the late 1970s New Age Liberals were in disarray. Some, like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., were fleeing from Jimmy. Others were dreaming up still wilder pipe dreams. The American voters washed their hands of all of them. Magic was not needed.

In came the conservatives with an agile political leader and a handful of timely ideas. America was ready for military rebuilding, tax cuts, deregulation, a slow-down in the government's growth-rate, and the projection beyond our borders of power rather than mere pious bulls. Contrary to Dr. Wills, the Reagan Administration did build a structure. With adequate staff work, a keen sense of timing, artful compromises, and an ability to focus on

most of the urgent problems of the hour, President Reagan implemented most of his prized policies by 1986.

Then came failure, not the failure of his magic but the failure of Ronald Reagan's conservatives. The Liberals' failure was in their weakness for the wild thrills of radicalism. The conservatives, too, had a weakness that they did not overcome.

Ronald Reagan's rise is explained by Liberalism's crack-up. His present problems are explained by conservatism's subtle weakness. The weaknesses of both New Age Liberals and conservatives are notable, for both groups have enormous influence on presidential politics. The Democrats may lose the 1988 election if their New Age Liberals force the Democratic candidate to carry all the weird ideological baggage that they have acquired in recent years. The Republicans may lose if their candidate is devoid of conservative ideas. Yet within the Republican party the conservatives have become so impotent that it is likely the Republican candidate will get through his convention uncontaminated by their good ideas.

The conservatives' weakness is not radicalism or extremism but parochialism. The ordinary conservative looks within himself and purrs. The ordinary New Age Liberal lets out a roar, organizes ad hoc committees, fires off letters to the editor. He is political, outgoing, and, by my lights, a public nuisance. The conservative rarely reaches out. He is only sporadically political. Often he is hardly social. Conservatives, alas, are narrow.

I have been among them for years. Each has one or two solutions to the Republic's problems: Supply-side Economics! Traditional Family Values! The Eternal Verities! Economic Education! Beyond their one or two wonder cures they lose interest. Moreover, they can see only one or two ways to get

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these solutions across to their fellow Americans: Seminars! Position Papers! Political Action!

Owing to their parochialism they have never quite succeeded in creating a political community comparable to the Liberals' community, and they have no idea of a cultural community. In America New Age Liberalism is our culture. There is no alternative. From the fantasy of *Hair* to the fantasy of *Platoon*, New Age Liberalism has served up its sentimental pifflings and all Americans either savor them or take their leave.

Conservatives simply do not take much interest in the world around them. They do not even take an interest in each other's work; and so they rare-

al businessmen buy and support publications all the time. Not so conservatives. Most would rather retire from the fray and whine about Bias In The Media! The consequence of this piece of narrowness is far reaching. It denies conservatives a place not only in the national debate on issues but also in shaping culture and in creating a political community.

Thus after the political victory of Ronald Reagan has come the conservative failure. The conservatives were not resourceful enough to insulate their President against dissolving into sentimental appeasement toward his Iranian foes. In six years of presidential

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ly have acknowledged leaders in politics, journalism, the academy, or even business—and they are supposed to be the ideology of business. Today their political leader should, based on the issues and long service, be Congressman Jack Kemp. Yet his candidacy flounders; conservatives are timid about reaching out to Kemp and there is a curious guardedness about him. The conservatives' intellectuals have the most innovative suggestions for public policy, but for six years they have failed to engage Liberals or even hold a significant place in public forums. With a few exceptions such as the Heritage Foundation, the conservatives in their parochialism keep to themselves. Many conservatives in Washington take pride in existing apart much as black activists pride themselves in remaining out of the mainstream. Since I brought *The American Spectator* to Washington two years ago, the most oft-repeated witticisms directed at me by conservative friends have been variations on the theme that in Washington I shall be "corrupted." But New Age Liberalism is not immoral. It is infantile, and I have no yearning for a second childhood.

Conservatives are forever complaining about how they are barred from media and the universities. There is truth to their charge, but despite their wizardry at raising funds there is little evidence that the businessmen among them have ever attempted to purchase publications or broadcast media. Liberals gobble them up. When *U.S. News & World Report* went on the block it was bought by a Liberal. Liber-

power the conservatives never significantly affected the climate of American ideas. They respond to Liberal sallies, they never leave their name on a desirable issue. Proof that the conservatives have failed to establish a political community, which is to say a hierarchy of influential organizations and leaders, came in 1985, when in pursuit of public support of the White House's Central American policy Lt. Col. Oliver North could bypass all conservative leaders and turn to charlatans such as Mr. Carl "Spitz" Channell, a man who rose without a trace. More proof came in 1987 when a beleaguered President had to turn to Howard Baker, an admirable fellow but no self-conscious conservative.

Throughout the Reagan years the conservatives have been off pursuing their one way to save the Republic: The Seminar! The Commemorative Banquet! Fund Raising! The narrowness of America's conservatives is a mystery. I have seen it retard fuddy-duddies like Russell Kirk and the libertarians, who can become violent at the first departure from orthodoxy. But it also overcomes conservatism's new recruits, the neoconservatives who gave up on Liberalism when its utopianism became intolerable. The neoconservatives too adopt one way to save the world: The Quarterly Journal! The News Letter! Anti-Communism! Economic Growth!

The result is a conservatism composed of conservatives who do not integrate their narrow values into the broad range of human experience. Their views are sound enough but each

is only one recipe on life's menu. Coq au vin is delicious and good for you, but man cannot live by squiffed chicken alone. Too often conservatives have insisted that only their favorite dish leads to good health. In this they are as bizarre as vegetarians and as unwholesome.

The conservatives have not adapted to an era that is moving beyond the problems of the early 1980s. They have not even thought of maintaining enduring institutions comparable to those of the Liberals. There is something decidedly shaky and ephemeral about all their think tanks, their magazines, their activist groups. The conservatives of Great Britain have institutions that have been around for decades. The British media have the diversity of a robust left and right. America has a one-party media, and conservatives have done little to change it.

We are now more than six years into the Reagan Revolution. They have been years of achievement, but only in terms of a few salutary policies. Otherwise the conservatives have lost their heft. They could not overcome their parochialism and coalesce into a political community. If they do not do so soon I can see a book on the subject. Call it *The Conservative Crack-Up*. □

TOM BETHELL

There is a serious problem with foreign policy. Conservatives think that because Communism is a menace, the appropriate response is to block it with military armor, troops stationed abroad, bases dotted about the globe, and anachronistic talk of sea lanes, choke points, strategic minerals, and warm water ports.

Conservatives have largely succeeded in imposing this policy on the nation because the visible alternative to it comes from the left, now in control of the Democratic party. In this alternative view, Communism is regarded more as a promise than a threat.

As a result, conservatives have been permitted to saddle the country with a kind of policy board game called "Sea Lane" ("choke points" trump "strategic minerals," and so on). Its underlying rules really date from the eighteenth century when buccaneers ran up the Jolly Roger and seized ships on the high seas.

As the liberals sometimes say, Communism really is an "indigenous" phenomenon. Trying to blockade it with warships is like trying to ward off a virus with a suit of armor. In fact, it is democracy that confers immunity on a country exposed to this virus; and as the world becomes increasingly democratic the U.S. must respond by withdrawing its hardware and its destructive dollars from around the globe. This is not weakness nor isola-

tionism but necessary adjustment to a changing world. The young democracies will become stronger if they are not forced to hobble about on American crutches.

The notion of U.S. "leadership" is also outmoded. Nations that are self-governing don't need to be U.S.-led. Conservatives painfully learned to purge themselves of elitist domestic-policy views. Now they must do the same in foreign policy.

Accordingly the U.S. should remove its troops from Western Europe and from South Korea (now easily able to defend itself against Kim Il Sung's slaves). The U.S. should also start talking about closing its bases in the Philippines. We should remind the Japanese that World War II now really is over and that how much they spend on defense is their decision to make and should not be influenced by constitutional provisions imposed by U.S. victors in 1945.

Aid to anti-Communist groups, such as the contras, is a U.S. political decision. The lesson of the Reagan years is that Congress *will* support such payments, but only if the President has the courage to take his case to the American people (via the news media) and lobby for it. Reagan didn't get around to doing this until 1986. Republicans must learn to believe that their policies can be popular if advocated publicly, but look terrible if implemented covertly. Perhaps after Iran-contra they will finally learn this. All covert operations should cease forthwith.

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RICHARD BROOKHISER

Are we, too, headed for a crack-up?

Politically, it may seem so. The Senate has finally slipped away from the Republican party. Worse, the political agenda has slipped away from us. Instead of engaging the nation in a debate on the security of Central America, or of our nuclear defenses, conservatives find themselves sniping at the Boland Amendments and the impending INF pact.

But doldrums aren't Gotterdammerung. We will regain the initiative the same way we gained it in the first place—by telling Americans that we have what they need. Besides, it's not as if we're up against Franklin Roosevelt. When the Democrats come forward a year from now with a dwarf at the top of the ticket, and a man at the bottom whose only qualifications are that he is (a) black and (b) not Jesse Jackson, things will look up.

Culturally, the situation is more serious. Conservatives are no better integrated into what might be called the cultural second echelon—the lower arts