

# Every Which Way But Up

by Samuel Francis

*"The most perfect political community is one in which the middle class is in control, and outnumbers both of the other classes."*

—Aristotle

## Up From Conservatism: Why the Right is Wrong for America

by Michael Lind  
New York: The Free Press;  
295 pp., \$23.00

Readers of *Chronicles* may vaguely recall Michael Lind as the contributor of a few articles to this magazine in the late 1980's and early 90's, but they should have no problem recognizing many of the ideas that inform his new book. The most valuable derive directly from ideas this magazine has developed over the last decade, and as long as Mr. Lind sticks to those foundations, even without acknowledging where he got them, he stands on pretty solid ground. When he departs from them, however, and begins to think for himself, he immediately runs into trouble, and by the end of this, his second book in a year, he is way over his head.

*Up From Conservatism* is both an autobiographical explanation of why Mr. Lind ceased to be a conservative and an effort to expose the weaknesses of contemporary conservative thought and practice. As far as the first is concerned, it is never clear why anyone other than Mr. Lind should care why he was a conservative at all or why he stopped being one, and the reader quickly tires of the zest with which he chronicles the vapidty of a movement too dense to appreciate the genius he was offering and too dishonest to make use of his own virtue. As for the second, Mr. Lind is sometimes right and sometimes wrong in his criticisms, and—also quickly—it becomes apparent from his incessant sarcasm and his inability to grant an iota of good will or good sense to the conservatives with whom he used to hang out that he sports

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a rather large chip on his shoulder. Moreover, despite his expropriation of ideas from others without acknowledgment, it is also clear that he either misunderstands those ideas or has deliberately recast them to fit the "national liberalism" he now finds it convenient to espouse.

"National liberalism," he argues, is the tradition of Hamiltonian-Federalist-Republican Party nationalism, elevated by the "vital center" liberalism of Arthur Schlesinger, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and Martin Luther King. It is a political persuasion that Lind imagines is virtually defunct in the United States today, having been discarded in "a realignment and a revolution" that is "bipartisan conservative" in

its ideology. This "social revolution" consists in "the growth in the relative wealth, power, and prestige of the overclass."

The "overclass," a term Lind used in his first book but which he here attributes to Gunnar Myrdal, is the new national ruling class that he defines as "the credentialed managerial-professional elite, consisting of Americans with advanced degrees . . . and their spouses and children." Distinguishing the "overclass" from the neoconservative idea of the "new class," he later acknowledges that "the only postwar conservative who got matters right was James Burnham . . . [who] argued that the old bourgeois-capitalist order was giving way to a new system of managerial capitalism." Lind's "overclass," then, is merely an adaptation of Burnham's managerial elite, though Lind misses the point of the most important feature of Burnham's analysis of it.

Lind's thesis is that contemporary conservatism (he means what writers in *Chronicles* usually call "neoconservatism" and its variations) is really a formula that appeals to "radicalism," "populism," and "revolution" in order to advance overclass interests. "The chief beneficiaries of the radicalism of the right . . . are the small number of individuals and families that constitute the economic elite of the United States. . . . The costs of further artificial enrichment of the American overclass by the conservative program will be borne by the American middle class." There is a good deal of truth in this view, though in his elaboration of it Lind reveals a profound misunderstanding of both the nature of the overclass and the real meaning of the "conservatism" he has come to despise so much.

Lind misunderstands the overclass because (a) despite his endorsement of Burnham's 1941 analysis of it, he quickly forgets that the overclass is not new, and

(b) he therefore never betrays the slightest inkling that the power of the overclass is rooted, as Burnham understood, in the centralized managerial state constructed by the very “national liberals” whom Lind takes as his heroes. The overclass or managerial elite could not exist as a dominant group apart from its dependence on the federal government (and mini-leviathans at the state and metropolitan levels), the large corporations, and the managerial intelligentsia in the mass media and academic institutions that give the elite its credentials and technical training and also serve to redesign and discipline national culture on behalf of the elite’s interests. The iron triangle among state, corporation, and intelligentsia distinguishes the overclass from the earlier elite of the bourgeois-capitalist order, which used the state only as expedient and always regarded governmental power as a potential threat to its interests.

Because it depends on the central state, the overclass cannot support a political ideology that seeks to restrict the powers and size of the state. Lind, however, imagines that the overclass is doing exactly that by its embrace of contemporary conservatism, which he also imagines is seriously committed to restricting the state; and he can sustain this argument only because either he knows very little about organized conservatism in this country today, or his thesis requires that he distort what he does know.

The “conservatism” that Lind seeks most to pulverize is neoconservatism and its allies in the Christian Coalition and the mainstream conservative movement it has come to dominate; the targets of his wrath are such neoconservative idols as supply-side economics, the “culture war” that neoconservative gurus claim is rooted in the “new class,” the “Confederate Theory of the Constitution” as articulated by such paragons of juridical erudition as Clarence Thomas, and the “racism” and “new Social Darwinism” he spies in various recent books by conservative or neoconservative writers. The problem is that almost none of his targets seriously seeks the restriction of state power; at best most of them seek merely an “amelioration” of the existing state apparatus rather than a real restoration of authentic federalism. So far from conforming to the supposed need of Lind’s overclass to restrict state power, the neoconservative

part of the overclass seeks the preservation of the managerial state. That, indeed, is why it can plausibly be called “conservative” at all: what it wants to conserve is the managerial state constructed by the national liberalism that Lind adores and the overclass domination of American society that the managerial state makes possible.

But among others on the American right—the Old Right, the Hard Right, and the Far Right—there is a much more authentic opposition to the state; and, in part to sustain his thesis that the American right as a whole is dedicated to restricting the power of the state and in part to vent his own resentments at being ignored by it, Lind must lump them all together with the neoconservatives, arguing that the right in its entirety is a unitary movement controlled by the overclass. He correctly acknowledges that “in the 1990’s, conservative intellectuals, bereft of a social base, continue to exist as a group only because of subsidies from foundations and corporations for their little magazines and think-tank careers. They are generals without an army.” Hence, he argues, they have to conscript the only segments of the right that do have a mass following, which just happen to be those that are authentically opposed to the present size, scope, and extent of federal power. It is the Hard Right, not its neoconservative rivals, that does indeed seek revolution of a kind, against the overclass, the managerial state that keeps it in power, and the ideological vehicles that provide justifications for it, whether “national liberalism” or its cousin, neoconservatism; but because Lind never grasps the differences between the two warring camps of the right, he manages to miss entirely the class struggle that underlies their conflict. The war between the Hard Right and the neoconservative Soft Right is really a social and political struggle between Middle Americans and the overclass or managerial elite.

Unable to identify much support from baronets of the managerial regime like Bill Kristol, Bill Bennett, or Jack Kemp for any genuine reduction of state power, Lind must pack them all in the same basket as the emerging populist right, both violent and nonviolent, and it is at this point that he takes blithe wing into the happy skies of political paranoia.

The contemporary American far right has both public, political

wings (the Christian Coalition, the National Rifle Association, Project Rescue) and its covert, paramilitary, terrorist factions. Although the Christian Coalition and Operation Rescue officially denounce violence, the fact remains that a common worldview animates both the followers of Pat Robertson and Pat Buchanan and the far-right extremists who bomb abortion clinics, murder federal marshals and county sheriffs, and blow up buildings and trains.

The “common worldview,” it turns out, is “summed up” as “ZOC”—the label that the violent and anti-Semitic fringe of the extreme right uses to designate the “Zionist Occupied Government.” Lind merrily identifies ZOC with Buchanan’s “Israel’s amen corner” (a reference to the Israeli lobby, not the government) and Robertson’s “New World Order,” neither of which has anything to do with it. Indeed, in his sedulous researches to show that everyone on the American right from Norman Podhoretz to Gordon Kahl is an anti-Semite or a covert neo-Nazi fellow-traveler, Lind lapses into ranting.

Thus, his chapter on the “new Social Darwinism” claims that Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein, Peter Brimelow, and Dinesh D’Souza are all part of a conservative-movement plot to revive racialism, but he ignores how the books of these writers were received, as well as what the books themselves actually say. Murray and Herrnstein’s *The Bell Curve* became a best-seller without the help of neoconservatives, who failed to promote it as they did Murray’s earlier book *Losing Ground*, and who in fact were quick to drop it when it ran into frenetic denunciations from the left. Brimelow’s *Alien Nation*, arguing for immigration restrictions, also was not well received by the neoconservatives and the mainstream right, which continue to be just as wedded to uncontrolled immigration as ever. D’Souza’s book prompted the immediate resignation of two black colleagues from the American Enterprise Institute, and soon vanished from the neoconservative Christmas reading list. Moreover, of the three books, neither D’Souza’s nor Brimelow’s makes genetic arguments about race; only *The Bell Curve* does so—gingerly. Lind has nothing of substance to say in response to Murray’s and Herrnstein’s argument,

merely regurgitating left-wing efforts to smear it as “pseudo-science” and “neo-Nazi.” In any case, it is hard to see anything “Darwinian” about books that never invoke biology or genetics; while their timid reception by neoconservatism, once the left denounced them, demonstrates how neoconservatives continue to slobber when the left rings its bells, not how hell-bent they are on reversing all that the left has constructed.

Lind is even farther out to sea in his diatribe against Pat Robertson’s book *The New World Order*, which he claims is a thinly disguised anti-Semitic tract. I confess to not having read Robertson’s work, and have no disposition to defend it, but while Lind may be correct in arguing that *The New World Order* offers a simplistic and unsubstantiated conspiracy theory of history centered on “European bankers” as the moving agents behind the “New World Order,” he nowhere produces a single quotation from it to support his claim that Robertson’s conspiracy theory is directed against Jews. It seems true that Robertson (or his ghostwriter) made use of various books that are explicitly anti-

Semitic and repeat various Jewish conspiracy theories that have floated around on the European and American right and left for centuries, but the many passages from Robertson’s own book that Lind adduces, so far from identifying the Rothschilds or the Warburgs as Jewish, routinely refer to them as “German bankers” or “European powers.” Lind himself acknowledges this without offering a glimmer of its significance. “Throughout *The New World Order*, as I shall show in further detail below,” he puffs, “Robertson uses ‘German’ or ‘European’ where his anti-Semitic sources have ‘Jewish.’” The point is that Robertson seems deliberately to avoid identifying the villains of his conspiracy theory as Jews. To him the point is not their Jewish, German, or European background, but rather their banking connections.

Nevertheless, Lind does raise a compelling question about the treatment of Robertson by such paladins of the Establishment right as William F. Buckley, Jr., and Norman Podhoretz, who strongly defend Robertson against Lind’s accusations. Buckley and Podhoretz have never failed to denounce and purge even the

most innocuous whiffs of anti-Semitism and crackpottery on the right, so “why have the mainstream conservatives who broke with the conspiracy-mongering leader of the John Birch Society apologized for the even more extremist leader of the Christian Coalition in the 1990’s?” While Lind fails to make his case that Robertson is an anti-Semite, he is probably correct that Robertson’s book is far more closely connected to anti-Semitism and bizarre historical views than is anything Buckley’s and Podhoretz’s previous targets ever uttered. Why, then, do they not denounce Robertson as well?

Lind’s answer, and he is probably correct about this too, is that Robertson is strongly pro-Israeli (as Podhoretz acknowledges), as well as being far more powerful than the Birch Society. With one-third of the Republican Party identifying itself as the “Christian Right,” any attack on Robertson from such “responsible conservatives” as Buckley and Podhoretz would probably backfire on them and wind up marginalizing the watchdogs themselves. Their smug determination to smother any breath of irresponsibility on the right is conveniently suspended when it runs up against “extremists” who happen to be more powerful than they, and who support some of the same goals.

Despite the validity of many of Lind’s exposures of the intellectual poverty, dishonesty, and politically convenient acrobatics of mainstream conservatism, which he mainly derives from unacknowledged paleoconservative critics of the mainstream right, his book is too flawed in concept and execution to be either a reliable critique of the contemporary right, or a sound analysis of overclass political and social power. In fact, by its defense of the “national liberalism” on which the dominance of the overclass rests and its disguise of the close relationship between the overclass and the managerial state that Lind worships, *Up From Conservatism* does nothing to challenge overclass power, and much to bolster it. Yet, if the overclass cannot produce a more persuasive defense of itself than what Mr. Lind offers, its ability to resist the emerging challenge from more authentic Middle American adversaries of the managerial state may be less than most observers are prepared to admit, or most of its own members care to believe.

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# The Stupid Country

by Herbert I. London

**Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip-Mining of American Culture**

Edited by Katharine Washburn  
and John Thornton  
New York: Norton;  
329 pp., \$25.00



According to a recent Roper poll, only 13 percent of the college graduating class of '96 could pass a simple quiz on material suitable for elementary school students. Ninety-two percent of those taking this quiz failed to identify the author or the document that is the source of the phrase, "Government of the people, by the people, for the people."

At his "Million Man March," Louis Farrakhan claimed he was beamed up to a spaceship where he was provided with insights about life on earth.

A leading environmentalist said if the Amazon rain forest is destroyed there will be no oxygen left on earth, even though 98 percent of the oxygen is produced at sea.

A Senate committee on agriculture asked Jane Fonda, Jessica Lange, and Sissy Spacek to testify because they had appeared in films about farmers.

These items are not offered as definitive proof of social depreciation, but as the authors of the essays in *Dumbing Down* well realize, they are testimony to the direction we are headed. While this book does not identify a single culprit for our cultural decline, speculations on the passing of civility, on anti-elitism, undifferentiated educational standards, and slovenly speech point to radical egalitarianism as the primary villain. In a remarkable turn of events, equal opportunity has been transmogrified into equality of result, and equality before the law has been translated into equality of guilt and innocence. In no institution are these conditions more demonstrable

than our schools, where, as Heather MacDonald explains, teachers of English composition emphasize the cultivation of "self esteem over competence and of self expression over the discipline of syntax." Gilbert T. Sewall writes movingly of the insinuation of relativism into every crevice of basic education.

This American disease of the spirit is not entirely surprising. As George Kennan points out, Alexis de Tocqueville argued in the 19th century that excellence would be the casualty of advancing egalitarianism. It is now taken for granted that elitism is a pejorative, a sign of having lost touch with the common man. Mass culture is the instrument of egalitarianism, turning everything in its path into homogenized pabulum digestible by all people, satisfying to all tastes. High culture has been crucified on the cross of democratization.

While the essays in this book are uniformly lively, and some of them are exceptionally good—such as Cynthia Ozick's "The Question of Our Speech: The Return to Aural Culture" and Armstrong Williams' "I Feel Good to be a Black Male"—several suffer from misplacement and others from questionable judgment. John Simon, for example, challenges Joseph Epstein's argument for discontinuing the National Endowment for the Arts by noting, "Any support, even to the wrong artists, is better than none; at least it stirs up controversy, and makes an inert public more aware that the arts exist and matter." Really? I prefer to buy my own tickets rather than have some government bureaucrat tell me how tax dollars should be spent on the arts. Sven Birkerts criticizes the Internet as a virtual world cut off from reality, atomizing relationships and the natural rhythms of life. Here again, my own experience is different. Without exaggerating the importance of the Net, which houses as much trash as archival emeralds, a communications instrument touching millions of lives could be accessible in every home to break the communications monopoly that once impeded the free exchange of opinion.

David Klinghoffer offers a persuasive argument against kitsch religion—reli-

gion that is so secularized it regards *New York Times* editorials as more spiritual than the Bible or the Torah. But if mainline Protestant religions and Reformed Jews are losing congregants to orthodox faiths, as is the case, this trend would seem to run counter to the book's thesis. Similarly, Carole Rifkind's piece on "America's Fantasy Urbanism: The Waxing of the Mall and the Waning of Civility" conflates a diminished sense of citizenship with private and commercial values. I would make almost exactly the opposite point: private property is continually encroached on by the spread of public space, usually under the banner of environmentalism, thereby challenging the traditional nature of citizenship. And I am startled to read the claim that "eating out is normally not at its best in America today." Nahum Waxman, who makes this point, must be living in another country. Sure McDonald's and Burger King are nothing to brag about, but in my judgment there are more fine restaurants, more gourmet treats available in modern America than was ever the case anywhere in history.

My difference of opinion with several essays has not diminished my heartfelt appreciation for a book that tackles America's "dirty secret" directly. As someone who has taught in the academy for three decades, I am well aware of the social signs that bear testimony to a diminishing sense of genuine accomplishment. In far too many academic quarters, ideology has replaced critical judgment and democratization of the spirit has undermined good breeding and character. My ears are sensitive to the sound of student grunts and "ya know," and I long for the day when language will be the inspiration for uplifting ideas. But that is not a day I will soon see. The inertial force of dumbing down is an avalanche that will not retreat on its own. All one can do is avert one's gaze, dream of noble moments, and hope for the best.

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