

Beyond Conservatism

The Resistance Takes Shape

by Samuel Francis



“Paleoconservatism” is an awkward word, but then what it purports to describe is an awkward thing. The word in the English language that it most resembles is “paleontology”—the scientific study of fossils—and a fossil is precisely what most of the enemies of paleoconservatism accuse it of being. Coined in 1986 or ’87, the word was originally supposed to characterize an intellectual and political movement that continued what George Nash called the “conservative intellectual movement” after World War II, and to distinguish it from the newer neoconservatism. As the fissure between neoconservatism and what Paul Gottfried called the “Second Generation” of the “Old Right” widened, however, it soon became evident that the latter was not quite the same thing as the school of writers gathered around *National Review* and its sister institutions in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Nor were its exponents exactly specimens of the “New Right” of the 1970’s and 80’s. “Paleoconservatism” eventually developed into a distinctive movement with an identity of its own, quite different from postwar intellectual conservatism, neoconservatism, libertarianism, New Rightism, and other schools of the American right.

There is not much question that paleoconservatism is distinct from most of these other identities of the right, but there remains a good deal of confusion regarding it and the “traditionalist” wing of the postwar “conservative intellectual movement.” That is entirely understandable, since paleoconservatism has been deeply influenced by the thought of that generation, especially by James Burnham and Richard Weaver, and in its beginnings was supported by two major adherents of the postwar traditionalist right, the late M.F. Bradford and the

late Russell Kirk. But while there remain many beliefs and themes common to both contemporary paleoconservatism and postwar traditionalism, there are important differences as well, and these are not due merely to the emergence of different political and cultural issues today in place of those with which the traditionalists were confronted. Differences in issues—and in enemies—have forced a subtle yet far-reaching metamorphosis of paleoconservatism in some of its basic assumptions and attitudes, to the point that the very word “conservatism,” let alone the combining form “paleo,” is probably no longer an accurate or useful label.

This fall, when the quadrennial demonization campaign against Patrick J. Buchanan was again cranked up as he discussed his break with the Republican Party and as his new book, *A Republic, Not an Empire*, was published, a host of neoconservatives began saying that Buchanan no longer belonged in the GOP at all or even in the ranks of “movement conservatism.” They were largely right, but for the wrong reasons. Buchanan remains far closer to the mainstream conservatism that prevailed from the 1950’s through the 1970’s than any figure now associated with “movement conservatism,” and, as paleos know, it is difficult to find very many fundamental ideas of the contemporary conservative movement with which they are in sympathy. Ironically, Buchanan’s expulsion from “Conservatism, Inc.,” was due to his very adherence to something close to the more authentic conservatism of the 1950’s that the contemporary “right” has abandoned. But his decision to leave the GOP and the “conservative movement” as it currently defines itself was also due to *their* defection from the premises and fundamental ideas that shaped the right with which Buchanan continues to identify. Buchanan’s separation from the contemporary movement, whatever its immediate or long-term political

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consequences, is entirely welcome and somewhat overdue, since it now offers an opportunity for him and paleoconservatives generally to purge themselves of a good deal of ideological baggage carried over from the traditionalism of the 1950's, from what Murray Rothbard called the "official" conservative movement as it exists today, and from the Republican Party. It is largely that baggage that has retarded a more complete emergence of an intellectually mature and politically serious movement of the right.

Paleoconservatism remains conservative in the sense that it incorporates the philosophical content of the "classical conservatism" of the 19th century and draws important lessons from the 1950's traditionalists, but the lessons it draws and the uses to which it applies them are rather different. Unlike the 1950's traditionalists, who saw themselves as the defenders of a legitimate postwar political system in resistance to totalitarianism, paleos increasingly reject the legitimacy of the current system of rule in the United States, increasingly perceive the falseness of its claims to be a representative political order, and increasingly anatomize and unmask its political and cultural pretensions—the "two-party system" (which is really one party), the "free-enterprise" economy (which is really a highly regulated and oligopolistic economy fused with the bureaucratic state), the "open society" (which is open to no one but its own defenders and apologists), the "Judeo-Christian tradition" (which is neither Judaic nor Christian), "tolerance" and "diversity" (which are in fact merely licenses for the demonization and even the physical brutalization of white, Christian, heterosexual males and their traditional institutions and values), "global democracy" (which slaughters *en masse* or starves to death entire civilian populations that have never even thought about harming the United States or its citizens), and a dozen other impious frauds built into the regime and its public formulas. Increasingly, paleoconservatives approach these formulas and the structures of power they mask and serve in much the same way that postmodernist critics approach literary texts—as defensive armor that needs to be deconstructed before it can be penetrated and discarded. So far from taking Burke and Metemich as their icons, the paleoconservatives of the 1990's are more likely to adopt Antonio Gramsci as a more reliable guide to understanding and undermining the hegemonic cant of the regime.

Moreover, what the 1950's traditionalists, regarding themselves as a *soi-disant* aristocratic right, sniffed at as "the masses," more populist-oriented paleoconservatives today see as a still-structured middle class that is the only available social base for political resistance from the right. The distrust of the "masses" that 1950's conservatism affected, as Willmoore Kendall and James Burnham came to see, presented an obstacle to any alliance of the right with working-class social conservatives; and long after the hatred for cultural tradition among incumbent elites became obvious, the archaic conservatism of the 1950's continued to posture and moon about the beauties of "aristocracy" and the repellent dirtiness of "populism." Eventually it became simply irrelevant, as issues and threats to the nation, its people, and its civilization arose that conservative traditionalism either failed to recognize or refused to confront.

What paleoconservatives incorporate from classical conservatism is less the latter's preoccupation with legitimating the incumbent system and its aristocratic ideology and rejection of populism than its critique of social-contract doctrine and the

cultural and political universalism of the Enlightenment. Paleoconservatives today are perhaps less attracted to Ortega's ominous rumblings about the "revolt of the masses" than to Joseph de Maistre's sardonic dismissal of universalism in his *Considerations on France*: "During my life, I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, and so on . . . but I must say, as for *man*, I have never come across him anywhere; if he exists, he is completely unknown to me." This dismissal, of course, is the counterpart to the particularity—in nation, region, family, race, ethnicity, and religion—that most paleoconservatives affirm in one way or another.

It is true that many paleos still have not entirely rid themselves of the archaic models, rhetoric, and preconceptions of 1950's traditionalism, but as American society becomes increasingly polarized and destabilized by the existing power structures, the archaism that some versions of paleoconservatism affect will continue to wither and to be replaced by a more radical and more popularly based movement.

As for the separation of paleoconservatism from the contemporary conservative movement, the differences are far more clear than those with its traditionalist mentors of the 1950's. The obvious differences lie in radical disagreements on practical policies—immigration policy, trade policy, and foreign policy most significantly, but also civil-rights issues and the larger issue of federalism and states' rights as opposed to the "Big Government Conservatism" of Jack Kemp, Newt Gingrich, and George W. Bush. Almost all of these differences can be resolved into the conflict between particularism and universalism, with the paleos on the side of the former and the neos and mainstreamers (insofar as there is a difference anymore) allied with universalism. Yet that differentiation implies other, perhaps less obvious, differences as well.

One such difference revolves around the paleoconservative view that liberty and rights are rooted in the cultural, historical, and institutional fabric of a society. Liberty is not a "natural right" in the sense that it exists independently of, or prior to, the social fabric; if the fabric withers and vanishes, liberty will vanish with it. The alternative view common today among "conservatives" (neo or not) is that liberty is a natural right, with universal claims in time and space; those claims ("human rights") are absolute throughout the world and so distinct from particular cultural and historical expression that even Third World im-

Christmas

by Brian Kirkpatrick

This storyteller knows us well:
the cold and hunger, dust of the road,
the tired, frightened pregnant girl,
eternal warmth and light
obscured by misery.
This is what we need:
to make the sacred bearable
by hiding it in the profane.