

Conservative Contradictions

American conservatism has many mansions and sects, but few conservatives can reconcile their yearning for an ordered, sometimes sacred, liberty with their obeisance to nearly every whim of capital. Far from being the Lockean expression of individual, creative work that conservatives claim it is, today's corporate consumer capitalism pacifies and degrades individuals, and it subverts civic-republican dispositions and traditions more quickly than the left ever dreamed of doing. It also dissolves national sovereignty with a speed that confounds most conservative understandings of patriotism.

Whittaker Chambers told William F. Buckley in 1970 that one can't build a clear conservatism out of capitalism because capitalism disrupts culture. Chambers wouldn't have blamed this on the American conservative movement's noxious neo-conservative cheerleaders, accelerants of republican decay though they may be, but on the central contradiction he'd identified within conservatism itself.

Libertarians may dismiss a lot of the "order" that other conservatives consider necessary; orthodox religious conservatives may work to impose doctrinal order on a fallen world, sighing occasionally like Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor about the sordid, often brutal consequences. But most of Americans aren't like them and don't like them.

Most conservatives keep on trying to reconcile capitalism and community values in symposia at elegant redoubts such as the Harvard Club of New York or the Hoover Institution at Stanford or by teaching the classics opportunistically, as in the Grand Strategy program at Yale, which I criticize obliquely in *The Yale Politic* below.

But most often these days, conservatives just wind up projecting their central contradiction, and the bourgeois self-loathing it often prompts, onto scapegoats, at home and abroad.

Capitalist markets should be honored in their place, as determined by a sovereign polity exercising republican vigilance. Profit-maximizing multinationals inevitably subvert such vigilance, and republics themselves, through anarchic consumer marketing and the seduction, corruption, and control of politicians, Republican and Democrat alike. (Not surprisingly, that makes Democrats easy targets for charges of hypocrisy, although, when you think about it, they're not the real problem.)

Contradiction conservatives cannot and will not face the real problem. The tragedy is that many of them mean better. When honorable conservatives vow to rescue liberal education and liberal democracy from liberals, they intend sincerely to defend a classical, 18th-century liberalism that balances individuals' rights to life, liberty, and property with the same individuals' responsibilities as republican citizens, loving and self-disciplined enough to rise above narrow self-interest to care for the good of the whole.

Such conservatives know that a balanced society, like a healthy individual, strides on both a left foot of social education and security -- without which conservatives' cherished individuality couldn't flourish -- and a right foot of irreducibly individual freedom and responsibility -- without which even the best social engineering turns persons in to clients, cogs, or worse.

A decent society shelters the spark and flame of individual dignity and conscience, but it cannot light that flame in the first place -- or extinguish it, even if it kills the body. Readiness to light that flame originates in some kind of faith or natural law which even a republic's "civil religion" cannot create or, ultimately, control.

Conservatives charge that liberals have lost sight of this sublime truth and have over-emphasized public provision, swelling the left foot and hobbling everyone's stride. Most liberals haven't a credible answer to this. The upscale among them have done too well by the system as it is to attack its growing inequities with more than symbolic, moralistic gestures or subsidies that don't resolve the problem. Yet they can't bring themselves to defend the corporate dispensation wholeheartedly, either.

Sensitive to individual rights and sufferings, liberals want to strengthen the left foot of social provision without prescribing personal responsibility to society. For that they rely on outside incubators of virtues and beliefs which the liberal state itself cannot nourish or even enforce, committed as it is to liberal autonomy.

But that is the problem, too, of conservatives, who in America are really classical, "individual rights" liberals. However dysfunctional the left foot of social provision, the social mayhem rising all around us is driven by the seductions and stresses of corporate consumer marketing and employment. Today's capitalism forgets or only opportunistically invokes Adam Smith's theory of the moral sentiments and a civic-republican nationalism that might reasonably be elevated by serious "liberal education."

Instead of taking these things as seriously as they claim to, conservatives careen incoherently between loyalty to a national-security state and subservience to a post-nationalist global capitalism that, far more than terrorism, is dissolving both the state and the republican virtues on which it depends.

Call Jesse Jackson and Hillary Clinton insufferable scolds, if you wish, but there *is* such a thing as "economic violence" that *does* eviscerate the villages that raise the children. Wall Street does subvert Main Street and morals.

[Half-Right](#), *Commonweal*, Feb. 13, 2009. Review of Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam's *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream*.

[The Neo-con Merry-Go-Round Runs Down.....](#), *TPMCafe*, October 17, 2008. Tortured defections from McCain just weeks before the Nov. 4 presidential election tell the tale. "Gip, Gip, Hooray!"

[How Ronald Reagan administered a glorious euthanasia to the civic-republican spirit](#), -- or tried to. *New Haven Review of Books*, 2007

[Neoconservatives and the American Republic](#). From a talk at Georgetown University, March, 2005.

[So Near, and Yet so Far](#). *TPMCafe*, July 16, 2008. Two young conservative writers think that Republicans can earn the trust and support of American workers by changing their philosophy and governance. I ask, why not call, then, for a new alignment that transcends both main parties?

["By Gradual Paces,"](#) *The American Prospect*, 2004; how conservatives are betraying the founders' original intentions for the American republic.

[Thecydiots](#), *The American Prospect*, 2004;

["Humanists and Warriors,"](#) *The Yale Politic*, 2007. How conservatives misconstrue the humanities and leadership training for a national security state within American republic.

[Conservatives' Conundrum -- and Ours](#), *TPMCafe*, June 18, 2008. What's gotten into George Packer? His account of "The Fall of Conservatism" in the May 26 *New Yorker* shows mainly how the chattering classes, liberal as well as conservative, avoid reckoning our civic-republican decline. "Behind the Deluge of Porn, a Conservative Sea-Change," 2006.

This essay about what I called "the pornification of public space," written for the 40th anniversary issue of the quarterly [Salmagundi](#), was reduced and adapted for the [Dallas Morning News](#), where it got a lot of reaction from members of the Christian right, a lot more of it positive than I'd have expected.

[Neoconservative chickens coming home to roost](#), *The Guardian*, 2007, a potted history of their misconceptions and missteps, occasioned by some essays and a lecture by *New York Times Book Review* editor Sam Tanenhaus late in 2007.

["American Conservatism's Original Sin."](#) I wrote in *TPMCafe*, 2007, grows from its inability to reconcile its yearning for a sacred, ordered liberty with its obeisance to every whim of capital.

["Allan Bloom and the Conservative Mind."](#) *New York Times Book Review*, 2005.

[How Norman Podhoretz conflates America with himself](#), *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 2000

["The Manchurian Columnist"](#) and ["The Two Brookses,"](#) *History News Network and The American Prospect*, 2006. How David Brooks, purveyor of neoconservative wisdom to *New York Times* liberals, gets himself more tangled up than Houdini.

["The Wiley E. Coyote Conservatives,"](#) *The American Prospect*, 2006 What will it take for conservative-movement pundits in pursuit of liberal subversion on campuses to realize they've fallen off the cliff? This was posted as well on CBS News' website.

[When the neo-cons fell silent.](#) *The Bennington Review*, 1982. Anyone who has followed neoconservative drumbeating for an aggressive American foreign policy will be amused but also outraged by this 1982 account of their complacency about a brutal, anti-Semitic dictatorship's violations of human rights.

[War hawks and the ghosts of left-liberalism past.](#) *TPMCafe*, , a rebuke to both conservative and liberal champions of the Iraq war who can't stop blaming their blunders on a powerless left. See also ["Hawking War Guilt,"](#) *The Nation*, November 12, 2007

[Arthur Sulzberger's Cracked Kristol Ball](#), *TPMCafe*, 2008 and [At Times Op Ed, the Plot Sickens./a> About what neoconservative field marshal William Kristol brings to the Times opinion page.](#)[Condom capers and parents' rights.](#) *Daily News*, 1994

[The perils of pro-life violence.](#) *Daily News*, 1995 See also, "Book Reviewing as Ideological Policing," in the section, "News Media, the Public Sphere, and a Phantom Public" on this site.