

## The Death of Conservatism-and Other Vital Center Illusions

*The Death of Conservatism*

By Sam Tanenhaus

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*By Andrew Hartman*

“American politics has often been an arena for angry minds. In recent years we have seen angry minds at work mainly among extreme right-wingers, who have now demonstrated in the Goldwater movement how much political leverage can be got out of the animosities and passions of a small minority.”[\[1\]](#)

Richard Hofstadter wrote this in the shadow of Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign, which cemented movement conservatism’s hold on the Republican Party. Hofstadter labeled this brand of politics “pseudo-conservative,” and coined the psychological designation “paranoid style,” still in vogue, to describe its methods. Rather than *conserve*, pseudo-conservatives wished to *destroy*, often in the name of a liberty imagined to have disappeared under the weight of a government collectivism ushered in by liberals during the 1930s.

Hofstadter’s pseudo-conservatives are alive and well in 2009, injecting the paranoid style into town-hall meetings across the country. By airing conspiracies about the president being a secret foreigner or militant Muslim, or well-worn concerns about his policies being socialist or even fascist, these “extreme right-wingers” inflict real damage, and not just to Obama’s proposed health-care legislation.

Media personalities such as Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, and Mark Levin, by attending to “the animosities and passions of a small minority,” have helped reverse any momentum Obama gained by his historic victory. These pseudo-conservative ideologues mimic Goldwater by invoking liberty in their nostalgic recounting of a lost time when Americans were free from the tyranny of the liberal state. In Levin’s current *New York Times* bestseller, *Liberty and Tyranny*, he writes, for example, that the “Modern Liberal believes in the supremacy of the state, thereby rejecting the principles of the Declaration of Independence . . . .” The liberal, according to Levin, also encourages “a soft tyranny, which becomes increasingly more oppressive, potentially leading to a hard tyranny (some form of totalitarianism).”

If Sam Tanenhaus's new little book is any guide, Hofstadter's analysis of 45 years ago has retained its relevance. Tanenhaus, editor of *The New York Times Book Review* and the newspaper's "Week in Review" section, updates the Hofstadter school of thought for our moment in *The Death of Conservatism*, which, in turn, expands upon an [essay](#) he wrote in February 2009 for *The New Republic*. As did Hofstadter, Tanenhaus divides conservatives into two categories: real and pseudo, or, in Tanenhaus's terminology, "realist" and "revanchist." He argues that realistic conservatism is dead at the hands of revanchists, and that the nation is the worse for it. This explains his somewhat misleading title, for Tanenhaus is obviously aware of the persistent right-wing opposition to Obama, which implies that revanchist-brand conservatism is far from dead.

Tanenhaus's argument is seductively straightforward. Most people who call themselves conservatives, especially those who reside in the Republican Party, are no longer relevant. They are "outmoded," not because they lost the 2006 and 2008 elections, but because their ideas and arguments are "glaringly disconnected from the realities now besetting America." Conservative intellectual discourse is "meaningless, the clatter of a bygone period, with its 'culture wars' and attacks on sinister 'elites'." Tanenhaus writes, with flair, "Today's conservatives resemble the exhumed figures of Pompeii, trapped in postures of frozen flight, clenched in the rigor mortis of a defunct ideology".

Tanenhaus separates good conservatives from bad ones by comparing them to their intellectual progenitors: Edmund Burke, the Scottish philosopher most famous for his scathing critique of the French Revolution, and Benjamin Disraeli, the 19th-century British prime minister who helped found the Conservative Party. Those who compare favorably are realists; those who do not are revanchists, or, counterrevolutionaries in their "urgent call to take back the culture." In the process, Tanenhaus narrates a lively history of this battle for the soul of American conservatism. It's this history that gives his argument life. Tanenhaus writes:

The story of postwar American conservatism is best understood as a continual replay of a single long-standing debate. On one side are realists who have upheld the Burkean ideal of replenishing civil society by adjusting to changing conditions. On the other are revanchists committed to a counterrevolution, whether the restoration of America's pre-New Deal *ancien régime*, the return to Cold War-style Manichaeanism, or the revival of premodern 'family values'.

Here again we sense the ghost of Hofstadter and his like-minded contemporaries—variously remembered as "consensus historians," "pluralist theorists," or the "vital center." The preceding passage could easily have been ripped from the pages of *The New American Right*, a 1955 anthology of pluralist analysis, edited by Daniel Bell. The book sought to explain McCarthyism as a vestige of an atavistic, premodern world, where irrationalism reigned supreme.

Tanenhaus likens Whittaker Chambers, the ex-communist-turned-Alger Hiss-informant-turned-conservative intellectual, to Burke and Disraeli in his begrudging

acceptance of the modern order, namely, that of the New Deal (it is probably no coincidence that Tanenhaus emphasizes Chambers, whose biography he authored). Chambers, too, according to Tanenhaus, was a realist who believed that politics demanded flexibility and stability. In 1957, writing as a semi-heretic in the *National Review*—at that time a revanchist redoubt—Chambers made arguments easily characterized as . . . well, liberal. He praised, for instance, John Kenneth Galbraith’s fiery critique of the “affluent society,” and dismantled Ayn Rand’s libertarian manifesto-novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, for its shrill certainties. In sum, it seems that Tanenhaus most appreciates those conservatives who were a tad liberal. To this extent, Tanenhaus ignores a glaring problem of historical context. “Conservative” clearly meant something different in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain than it does in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century America. To expect our conservatives to think in the manner of Burke or Disraeli is anachronistic, or wishful thinking, or both.

This criticism aside, Tanenhaus’s historical theories about the trajectory of conservatism, and the American political spectrum more broadly, are solid, if sparse. He argues that movement conservatism was predominantly a reaction against the New Deal and liberal dominance. Some of the intellectual life of the early movement was compelling, perhaps even necessary, in its insistence in calling out liberal dogma. But Tanenhaus describes most mid-century conservative thought as revanchist, seen in the writings of a libertarian like Albert Jay Nock, who equated the welfare state with fascism, and federal officials with a “professional-criminal class.” Tanenhaus also detects unrealistic, revanchist elements in the writings of James Burnham, a Trotskyite influential in the early conservative movement. In his 1941 book, *The Managerial Revolution*, Burnham argued: “No candid observer, friend or enemy of the New Deal, can deny that in terms of economic, social, political, and ideological changes from traditional capitalism, the New Deal moves in the same direction as Stalinism and Nazism.” Such ideas die hard.

In opposition to Nock and Burnham, true conservatives—in the mold of Burke and Disraeli—understood that Franklin Roosevelt’s reforms preserved capitalism. Much of the New Deal deserved to be defended as the new status quo, as the guarantor of stability. Aside from Chambers, the conservative who best represented such views in the 1950s was President Eisenhower. Tanenhaus rates Ike, alongside Clinton, the best and “true conservative” president of the postwar era, though Ike’s conservative contemporaries rated him somewhat of a liberal.

Tanenhaus’s historical argument rests on a crucial turning point: in the mid-1960s, he believes conservatism underwent a realist transformation that made it relevant and consensus-driven at a time when liberalism had fallen into dogma and orthodoxy. William Buckley, Jr. serves as the case study for this conservative metamorphosis (again, it appears to be no coincidence that Tanenhaus has long been working on a biography of Buckley.) In the 1950s, Buckley displayed revanchist qualities akin to Senator McCarthy, and was to the academic establishment what McCarthy was to the Washington establishment. In his notorious *God and Man at Yale*, published in 1953, the young Buckley, a recent Yale graduate, went to battle against its dons, accusing them of

propagating “one of the most extraordinary incongruities of our time: the institution that derives its moral and financial support from Christian individualists and then addresses itself to the task of persuading the sons of those supporters to be atheistic socialists.”

Buckley’s next book, *McCarthy and His Enemies*, which he co-wrote with his brother-in-law, Brent Bozell, repeated Burnham. “Some day, the patience of America may at last be exhausted, and we will strike out against Liberals,” the two revanchists wrote, “because, with James Burnham, we will conclude ‘that they are mistaken in their predictions, false in their analyses, wrong in their advice, and through the results of their actions injurious to the nation.’” In his critique of Buckley as McCarthy’s defender, Tanenhaus ignores that *McCarthy and His Enemies* was one of the few intellectually coherent defenses of McCarthy. Buckley and Bozell correctly posited that McCarthyism was a *de facto* social sanction, and that all societies sort out who belongs, and who doesn’t, in similar fashion. But, for Tanenhaus, siding with a demagogue like McCarthy was simply a sign of irresponsibility—endemic to revanchist pseudo-conservatism.

By 1965, Buckley shifted gears, according to Tanenhaus, and became more of a realist. Just as intellectuals, such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, worked to guide liberalism to the center, Buckley pushed fellow conservatives toward moderation. The symbolic act of this transformation occurred when Buckley purged the John Birch Society from the ranks of respectability in the pages of his *National Review* in 1965. His New York City mayoral run in that same year also helped cement his realist credentials. During the campaign he was forced to grapple against real world issues, such as traffic congestion, with no ready-made ideological solutions. From then on, Buckley emphasized that government should, first and foremost, provide stability. Tanenhaus claims Reagan made a similar transition as governor of California, citing Richard Goodwin, who wrote in 1966 that Reagan’s voters “command the government to restrain any social turbulence which seems to threaten their personal position.”

In Tanenhaus’s view, conservatism was great when it protected the affluent society from angry protestors and rioters. “In the disorderly 1960s,” he writes, “it made no sense for conservatives to attack ‘statism’ when it was institutions of the state that formed the bedrock of civil society.” In this light, it’s not surprising that Tanenhaus respects Nixon’s presidential record, Watergate aside, as realism exemplified. Of course, Watergate was no mere aside. But Tanenhaus seems perfectly willing to boil complex contradictions down to simplistic bifurcation. Hence Watergate is explained thusly: “In Nixon revanchist impulses collided with realistic ones—and overwhelmed them.”

Tanenhaus’s historical narrative, which is coherent, if sporadic, up through Nixon, gives way to an extremely spare retelling of conservatism since the 1980s, “when conservatism entered its most decadent phase.” This is disappointing, because he does not offer any evidence that conservatism underwent another shift, back to pseudo-conservatism, other than some glib pronouncements about George W. Bush. Initially advertised as a “compassionate conservative,” Bush was actually a revanchist president-extraordinaire. Tanenhaus might have addressed the glaring contradictions of a movement that came to power on the rhetorical wave of anti-statism, and once in power

grew the government and the deficit at rates that made big government liberals blush. Was this a fatal flaw in pseudo-conservative ideology? Mere hypocrisy? Or was it even more sinister, as Thomas Frank has written—did those conservatives like Jack Abramoff preach against government while getting rich off of it, in ways legal and illegal? That these questions go unanswered stems from Tanenhaus's too-sparse treatment of the period between Nixon and George W. Bush, and from a lack of deeper inquiry into Bush's policies.

Perhaps such omissions are for the best, since, even where Tanenhaus offers details, his relevant evidence is too flimsy to make a very strong case. On what proof does his “golden age” of responsible conservatism rest? On the way William Buckley, Jr. reframed his worldview, even though revanchists continued to consider him a hero? On Reagan's response to unrest, which was wildly popular among John Birchers, the quintessential revanchists? On Nixon's contradictory presidency? Tanenhaus's version of Burkean conservatism did not die; it was never alive.

It's facile but wrong to divide conservatism as Tanenhaus does. Yes, there have been plenty of conservatives who have been more moderate in their temper than Robert Welch, the conspiracy-driven founder of the John Birch Society. But they tended to have a great deal in common with Welch, in terms of political ideals. And Tanenhaus knows as much: he recognizes that the respected conservative intellectual Russell Kirk, who touted Burke and Disraeli as his heroes in his philosophical work, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana*, was as anti-statist as they came in many of his actual policy positions. For instance, Kirk called federally subsidized school lunch programs “a vehicle for totalitarianism.”

The weaknesses of Tanenhaus's historical and political analysis stem from his view of how politics is appropriately practiced. In prefacing *The Death of Conservatism* with a Daniel Patrick Moynihan quote, “God preserve me from ideologues,” he implies politics is at its best when its actors are not beholden to the passions of ideology. In this, again, he is a throwback to the early Cold War, as his book mildly resembles Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s famous 1949 manifesto, *The Vital Center*. In separating America's political assumptions from its enemies past and present—the Nazi fascists and the Soviets communists—Schlesinger argued that liberal democracy could only exist within the narrow political space between right and left. Communism, fascism, and fellow-traveling dripped with ideology and illusion. Liberal democracy, on the other hand, stood for flexibility, pluralism, and consensus—the cornerstones of a stable democracy, where political freedom could flourish.

Schlesinger and his fellow pluralist thinkers tended to confuse their hopes for American politics—pluralism, moderation, and consensus—with an accurate description of US political history. As such, Schlesinger, Hofstadter, Bell and the rest believed that the “paranoids” amongst them were not long for this world. It goes without saying that Tanenhaus wrote *The Death of Conservatism* in a much different world than the one Schlesinger inhabited when he wrote *The Vital Center*. Tanenhaus, having experienced and studied the tumultuous political history of the last fifty years, is not so naïve as to

believe in a tidy American history untainted by violence, ideology, and passion. He recognizes that the pseudo-conservatives are here to stay. But this makes his vital centrism all the more inexplicable.

Typical of vital centrism, Tanenhaus conflates means and ends. Thinking himself a modern-day Burke, he likens the Jacobin desire to remake society to contemporary pseudo-conservatism. “The movement conservatives of our time seem the heirs of the French rather than of the American Revolution.” Tanenhaus extends the analogy to compare Obama favorably to Burke. Just as Burke stood opposed to the Jacobins, so now is Obama squared off against the revanchists. Obama is “a president who seems more thoroughly steeped in the Burkean principles of ‘conservation’ and ‘correction’ than any significant thinker or political figure on the right today.” This comparison is far more plausible than the Jacobin-revanchist analogy, as Obama does, indeed, come across as a conservative in the realist vein, right-wing howls of “socialism” notwithstanding. But whereas Tanenhaus thinks this a good quality, befitting our times, the opposite is more likely true.

Tanenhaus argues that Republicans enthralled by rigid movement principles should heed lessons learned by Democrats of a generation ago, who supposedly rejected the identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s for majoritarian policies exemplified by Bill Clinton. But, if the financial crisis and the Great Recession teach us anything, it’s that many of the policies of Bill Clinton were anything but beneficial to the majority. Free market fundamentalism and deregulation, the quicksand upon which the crisis was built, stain Clinton’s record at least as much as Bush’s. Tanenhaus is correct to assert that revanchist “attempts to depict Barack Obama as a radical or socialist dissolve under the most rudimentary examination of the facts. The decision by his team of conservative, Wall-Street-inflected economists to fortify the banking system and improve the flow of credit is patently an attempt to salvage the free market . . . .” But, if this is Burkean realism—conserving those elements of the past, namely the banks and financial institutions that wrought so much destruction—then perhaps what we really need is a dose of Jacobinism. Or, at the very least, we need a return to FDR, who, unlike Obama (at least so far), relished passionate and ideological conflict with the “economic royalists” when it meant serving the majority.

*The Death of Conservatism* is a compelling and bracing read, and recommended. But vital centrism, as analysis, and as prescription, is no better now than it was in 1949. In fact, it’s a whole lot worse.

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[1] Richard Hofstadter, [“The Paranoid Style in American Politics,”](#) *Harper’s*, November 1964.