

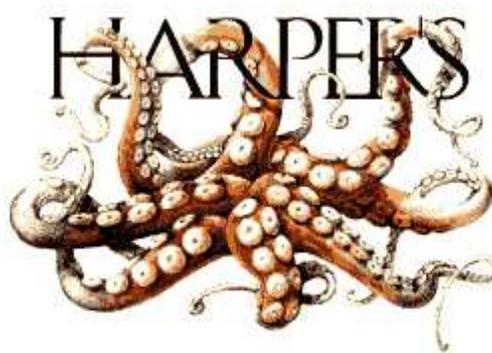
# Tentacles of Rage

## The Republican propaganda mill, a brief history

LEWIS H LAPHAM / [Harpers Magazine](#) v.309, n.1852, September 2004 1sep04

*When, in all our history, has anyone with ideas so bizarre, so archaic, so self-confounding, so remote from the basic American consensus, ever got so far? —Richard Hofstadter*

In company with nearly every other historian and political journalist east of the Mississippi River in the summer of 1964, the late Richard Hofstadter saw the Republican Party's naming of Senator Barry Goldwater as its candidate in that year's presidential election as an event comparable to the arrival of the Mongol hordes at the gates of thirteenth-century Vienna. The "basic American consensus" at the time was firmly liberal in character and feeling, assured of a clear majority in both chambers of Congress as well as a sympathetic audience in the print and broadcast press. Even the National Association of Manufacturers was still aligned with the generous impulse of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, accepting of the proposition, as were the churches and the universities, that government must do for people what people cannot do for themselves.\*



*\* With regard to the designation "liberal," the economist John K. Galbraith said in 1964, "Almost everyone now so describes himself." Lionel Trilling, the literary critic, observed in 1950 that "In the United States at this time, liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition." He went on to say that "there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation," merely "irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas."*

And yet, seemingly out of nowhere and suddenly at the rostrum of the San Francisco Cow Palace in a roar of triumphant applause, here was a cowboy-hatted herald of enlightened selfishness threatening to sack the federal city of good intentions, declaring the American government the enemy of the American people, properly understood not as the guarantor of the country's freedoms but as a syndicate of quasi-communist bureaucrats poisoning the wells of commercial enterprise with "centralized planning, red tape, rules without responsibility, and regimentation without recourse." A band played "America the Beautiful," and in a high noon

glare of klieg light the convention delegates beheld a militant captain of capitalist jihad ("Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice!") known to favor the doctrines of forward deterrence and preemptive strike ("Let's lob a nuclear bomb into the men's room at the Kremlin"), believing that poverty was proof of bad character ("lazy, dole-happy people who want to feed on the fruits of somebody else's labor"), that the Democratic Party and the network news programs were under the direction of Marxist ballet dancers, that Mammon was another name for God.

The star-spangled oratory didn't draw much of a crowd on the autumn campaign trail. The electorate in 1964 wasn't interested in the threat of an apocalyptic future or the comforts of an imaginary past, and Goldwater's reactionary vision in the desert faded into the sunset of the November election won by Lyndon Johnson with 61 percent of the popular vote, the suburban sheriffs on their palomino ponies withdrawing to Scottsdale and Pasadena in the orderly and inoffensive manner of the Great Khan's horsemen retiring from the plains of medieval Europe.

### **\$2 BILLION ASSETS CONSERVATIVE FOUNDATIONS (2001 ASSETS)**

	(in \$ Millions)
The Bradley Foundation	584
Smith Richardson Foundation	494
Scaife Family (Four Foundations)	478.4
Earhart Foundation	84
John M. Olin Foundation	71
Koch Family (Three Foundations)	68
Castle Rock (Coors) Foundation	50
JM Foundation	25
Philip M. McKenna Foundation	17.4

Departed but not disbanded. As the basic American consensus has shifted over the last thirty years from a liberal to a conservative bias, so also the senator from Arizona has come to be seen as a prophet in the western wilderness, apostle of the rich man's dream of heaven that placed Ronald Reagan in the White House in 1980 and provides the current Bush Administration with the platform on which the candidate was trundled into New York City this August with Arnold Schwarzenegger, the heavy law enforcement, and the paper elephants.\* The speeches in Madison Square Garden affirmed the great truths now routinely preached from the pulpits of Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal*—government the problem, not the solution; the social contract a dead letter; the free market the answer to every maid-en's prayer—and while listening to the hollow rattle of the rhetorical brass and tin, I remembered the question that Hofstadter didn't stay to answer. How did a set of ideas both archaic and bizarre make its way into the center ring of the American political circus?

*\* The rightward movement of the country's social and political center of gravity isn't a matter of opinion or conjecture. Whether compiled by Ralph Nader or by journalists of a conservative persuasion (most recently John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge in a book entitled The Right Nation) the numbers tell the same unambiguous story—one*

*in five Americans willing to accept identity as a liberal, one in three preferring the term "conservative"; the American public content with lower levels of government spending and higher levels of economic inequality than those pertaining in any of the Western European democracies; the United States unique among the world's developed nations in its unwillingness to provide its citizens with a decent education or fully funded health care; 40 million Americans paid less than \$10 an hour, 66 percent of the population earning less than \$45,000 a year; 2 million people in prison, the majority of them black and Latino; the country's largest and most profitable corporations relieved of the obligation to pay an income tax; no politician permitted to stand for public office without first professing an ardent faith in God.*

About the workings of the right-wing propaganda mills in Washington and New York I knew enough to know that the numbing of America's political senses didn't happen by mistake, but it wasn't until I met Rob Stein, formerly a senior adviser to the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, that I came to fully appreciate the nature and the extent of the re-education program undertaken in the early 1970s by a cadre of ultraconservative and self-mythologizing millionaires bent on rescuing the country from the hideous grasp of Satanic liberalism. To a small group of Democratic activists meeting in New York City in late February, Stein had brought thirty-eight charts diagramming the organizational structure of the Republican "Message Machine," an octopus-like network of open and hidden microphones that he described as "perhaps the most potent, independent institutionalized apparatus ever assembled in a democracy to promote one belief system."

It was an impressive presentation, in large part because Stein didn't refer to anybody as a villain, never mentioned the word "conspiracy." A lawyer who also managed a private equity investment fund—i.e., a man unintimidated by spread sheets and indifferent to the seductions of the pious left—Stein didn't begrudge the manufacturers of corporatist agitprop the successful distribution of their product in the national markets for the portentous catch-phrase and the camera-ready slogan. Having devoted several months to his search through the available documents, he was content to let the facts speak for themselves—fifty funding agencies of different dimensions and varying degrees of ideological fervor, nominally philanthropic but zealous in their common hatred of the liberal enemy, disbursing the collective sum of roughly \$3 billion over a period of thirty years for the fabrication of "irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas."

The effort had taken many forms—the publication of expensively purchased and cleverly promoted tracts (Milton Friedman's *Free to Choose*, Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*, Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*), a steady flow of newsletters from more than 100 captive printing presses (among them those at The Heritage Foundation, Accuracy in the Media, the American Enterprise Institute and the Center for the Study of Popular Culture),

generous distributions of academic programs and visiting professorships (to Harvard, Yale, and Stanford universities), the passing along of sound-bite slanders (to Bill O'Reilly and Matt Drudge), the formulation of newspaper op-ed pieces (for the *San Antonio Light* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* as well as for the *Sacramento Bee* and the *Washington Times*). The prolonged siege of words had proved so successful in its result that on nearly every question of foreign or domestic policy in this year's presidential campaign, the frame and terms of the debate might as well have been assembled in Taiwan by Chinese child labor working from patterns furnished by the authors of ExxonMobil's annual report.

No small task and no mean feat, and as I watched Stein's diagrams take detailed form on a computer screen (the directorates of the Leadership Institute and Capital Research Center all but identical with that of The Philanthropy Roundtable, Richard Mellon Scaife's money dispatched to the Federalist Society as well as to The *American Spectator*), I was surprised to see so many familiar names—publications to which I'd contributed articles, individuals with whom I was acquainted—and I understood that Stein's story was one that I could corroborate, not with supplementary charts or footnotes but on the evidence of my own memory and observation.

The provenience of the Message Machine Stein traced to the recognition on the part of the country's corporate gentry in the late 1960s that they lacked the intellectual means to comprehend, much less quell or combat, the social and political turmoil then engulfing the whole of American society, and if I had missed Goldwater's foretelling of an apocalyptic future in the Cow Palace, I remembered my own encounter with the fear and trembling of what was still known as "The Establishment," four years later and 100 miles to the north at the July encampment of San Francisco's Bohemian Club. Over a period of three weeks every summer, the 600-odd members of the club, most of them expensive ornaments of the American haute bourgeoisie, invite an equal number of similarly fortunate guests to spend as many days as their corporate calendars permit within a grove of handsome redwood trees, there to listen to the birdsong, interest one another in various business opportunities, exchange misgivings about the restlessness of the deutschmark and the yen.

In the summer of 1968 the misgivings were indistinguishable from panic. Martin Luther King had been assassinated; so had Robert Kennedy, and everywhere that anybody looked the country's institutional infrastructure, also its laws, customs, best-loved truths, and fairy tales, seemed to be collapsing into anarchy and chaos—black people rioting in the streets of Los Angeles and Detroit, American soldiers killing their officers in Vietnam, longhaired hippies stoned on drugs or drowned in the bathtubs of Bel Air, shorthaired feminists playing with explosives instead of dolls, the Scottsdale and Pasadena sheriffs' posses preparing their palomino ponies to stand firm in the face of an urban mob.

Historians revisiting in tranquility the alarums and excursions of the Age of Aquarius know that Revolution Now was neither imminent nor likely—the economy was too prosperous, the violent gestures of rebellion contained within too small a demographic, mostly rich kids who

could afford the flowers and the go-go hoots—hut in the hearts of the corporate chieftains wandering among the redwood trees in the Bohemian Grove in July 1968, the fear was palpable and genuine. The croquet lawn seemed to be sliding away beneath their feet, and although they knew they were in trouble, they didn't know why. Ideas apparently mattered, and words were maybe more important than they had guessed; unfortunately, they didn't have any. The American property-holding classes tend to be embarrassingly ill at ease with concepts that don't translate promptly into money, and the beacons of conservative light shining through the liberal fog of the late 1960s didn't come up to the number of clubs in Arnold Palmer's golf bag. The company of the commercial faithful gathered on the banks of California's Russian River could look for succor to Goldwater's autobiography, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, to William F. Buckley's editorials in *National Review*, to the novels of Ayn Rand. Otherwise they were as helpless as unarmed shepherders surrounded by a Comanche war party on the old Oklahoma frontier before the coining of the railroad and the six-gun.

The hope of their salvation found its voice in a 5,000-word manifesto written by Lewis Powell, a Richmond corporation lawyer, and circulated in August 1971 by the United States Chamber of Commerce under the heading *Confidential Memorandum; Attack on the American Free Enterprise System*. Soon to be appointed to the Supreme Court, lawyer Powell was a man well-known and much respected by the country's business community; within the legal profession he was regarded as a prophet. His heavy word of warning fell upon the legions of reaction with the force of Holy Scripture: "Survival of what we call the free enterprise system," he said, "lies in organization, in careful long-range planning and implementation, in consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available only through joint effort, and in the political power available only through united action and national organizations."

The venture capital for the task at hand was provided by a small sewing circle of rich philanthropists—Richard Mellon Scaife in Pittsburgh, Lynde and Harry Bradley in Milwaukee, John Olin in New York City, the Smith Richardson family in North Carolina, Joseph Coors in Denver, David and Charles Koch in Wichita—who entertained visions of an America restored to the safety of its mythological past—small towns like those seen in prints by Currier and Ives, cheerful factory workers whistling while they worked, politicians as wise as Abraham Lincoln and as brave as Teddy Roosevelt, benevolent millionaires presenting Christmas turkeys to deserving elevator operators, the sins of the flesh deported to Mexico or France. Suspicious of any fact that they hadn't known before the age of six, the wealthy saviors of the Republic also possessed large reserves of paranoia, and if the world was going rapidly to rot (as any fool could plainly see) the fault was to be found in everything and anything tainted with a stamp of liberal origin—the news media and the universities, income taxes, Warren Beatty, transfer payments to the undeserving poor, restraints of trade, Jane Fonda, low interest rates, civil liberties for unappreciative minorities, movies made in Poland, public schools.\*

*\*The various philanthropic foundations under the control of the six families possess assets estimated in 2001 at \$1.7 billion. Harry*

*Bradley was an early and enthusiastic member of the John Birch Society; Koch Industries in the winter of 2000 agreed to pay \$30 million (the largest civil fine ever imposed on a private American company under any federal environmental law) to settle claims related to 300 oil spills from its pipelines in six states.*

Although small in comparison with the sums distributed by the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, the money was ideologically sound, and it was put to work leveraging additional contributions (from corporations as well as from other like-minded foundations), acquiring radio stations, newspapers, and journals of opinion, bankrolling intellectual sweatshops for the making of political and socioeconomic theory. Joseph Coors established The Heritage Foundation with an initial gift of \$250,000 in 1973, the sum augmented over the next few years with \$900,000 from Richard Scaife; the American Enterprise Institute was revived and fortified in the late seventies with \$6 million from the Howard Pew Freedom Trust; the Cato Institute was set up by the Koch family in 1977 with a gift of \$500,000. If in 1971 the friends of American free enterprise could turn for comfort to no more than seven not very competent sources of inspiration, by the end of the decade they could look to eight additional installations committed to "joint effort" and "united action." The senior officers of the Fortune 500 companies meanwhile organized the Business Roundtable, providing it by 1979 with a rich endowment for the hiring of resident scholars loyal in their opposition to the tax and antitrust laws.

The quickening construction of Santa's work-shops outside the walls of government and the academy resulted in the increased production of pamphlets, histories, monographs, and background briefings intended to bring about the ruin of the liberal idea in all of its institutionalized forms—the demonization of the liberal press, the disparagement of liberal sentiment, the destruction of liberal education—and by the time Ronald Reagan arrived in triumph at the White House in 1980 the assembly lines were operating at full capacity. Well in advance of inauguration day the Christmas elves had churned out so much paper that had they been told to do so, they could have shredded it into tickertape and welcomed the new cowboy-hatted herald of enlightened selfishness with a parade like none other ever before seen by man or beast. Unshredded, the paper was the stuff of dreams from which was made *Mandate for Leadership*, the "bible" presented by The Heritage Foundation to Mr. Reagan in the first days of his presidency with the thought that he might want to follow its architectural design for an America free at last from "the tyranny of the Left," rescued from the dungeons of "liberal fascism," once again a theme park built by nonunion labor along the lines of Walt Disney's gardens of synthetic Eden.

Signs of the newly minted intellectual dispensation began showing up in the offices of *Harper's Magazine* in 1973, the manuscripts invariably taking the form of critiques of one or another of the absurdities then making an appearance before the Washington congressional committees or touring the New York literary scene with Susan Sontag and Norman Mailer. Over a period of several years the magazine published articles and essays by authors later to

become well-known apologists for the conservative creed, among them George Gilder, Michael Novak, William Tucker, and Philip Terzian; if their writing in the early seventies was remarkable both for its clarity and wit, it was because they chose topics of opportunity that were easy to find and hard to miss.

*\* Paul Weyrich, the first director of The Heritage Foundation, and often described by his admirers as "the Lenin of social conservatism," seldom was at a loss for a military analogy: "If your enemy has weapons systems working and is killing you with them, you'd better have weapons systems of your own."*

The liberal consensus hadn't survived the loss of the Vietnam War. The subsequently sharp reduction of the country's moral and economic resources was made grimly apparent by the impeachment of Richard Nixon and the price of Arab oil, and it came to be understood that Roosevelt's New Deal was no longer on offer. Acting on generous impulse and sustained by the presumption of limitless wealth, the American people had enacted legislation reflecting their best hopes for racial equality and social justice (a.k.a. Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society"), but any further efforts at transformation clearly were going to cost a great deal more money than the voters were prepared to spend. Also a good deal more thought than the country's liberal-minded intelligentsia

were willing to attempt or eager to provide. The universities chose to amuse themselves with the crossword puzzles of French literary theory, and in the New York media salons the standard-bearers of America's political conscience were content to rest upon what they took to be their laurels, getting by with the striking of noble poses (as friends of the earth or the Dalai Lama) and the expression of worthy emotions (on behalf of persecuted fur-seals and oppressed women). The energies once contained within the nucleus of a potent idea escaped into the excitements of the style incorporated under the rubrics of Radical Chic, and the messengers bringing the good news of conservative reaction moved their gospel-singing tent show into an all but deserted public square.

### NATIONAL "THINK TANKS" (2001 BUDGETS)

	(in \$ Millions)
The Heritage Foundation	33
American Enterprise Institute	25
Hoover Institution	25
Cato Institute	17.6
Hudson Institute	7.8
Manhattan Institute	7.2
Citizens for a Sound Economy	5.4
Reason Foundation	4.9
National Center for Policy Analysis	4.7
Competitive Enterprise Institute	3.2
Free Congress Foundation	2.7
Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis	2.5

Their chief talents were those of the pedant and the critic, not those of the creative imagination, but they well understood the art of merchandising and the science of cross-promotion, and in the middle 1970s anybody wishing to appreciate the character and purpose of the emerging conservative putsch could find no better informant than Irving Kristol, then a leading columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, the author of well-received books (*On the Democratic Idea in America* and *Two Cheers for Capitalism*), trusted counselor and adjunct sage at the annual meetings of the Business Roundtable. As a youth in the late 1930s, at a time when literary name and reputation accrued to the accounts of the *soi-disant* revolutionary left, Kristol had proclaimed himself a disciple of Leon Trotsky, but then the times changed, the winds of fortune shifting from east to west, and after a stint as a CIA asset in the 1950s, he had carried his pens and papers into winter quarters on the comfortably upholstered bourgeois right.

On first meeting the gentleman at a literary dinner in New York's Century Club, I remember that I was as much taken by the ease and grace of his manner as I was impressed by his obvious intelligence. A man blessed with a sense of humor, his temperament and tone of mind more nearly resembling that of a sophisticated dealer in art and antiques than that of an academic scold, he praised Harper's Magazine for its publication of Tom Wolfe's satirical pieces, also for the prominence that it had given to the essays of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and I was flattered by his inclination to regard me as an editor-of-promise who might be recruited to the conservative cause, presumably as an agent in place behind enemy lines. The American system of free enterprise, he said, was being attacked by the very people whom it most enriched i.e., by the pampered children of privilege disturbing the peace of the Ivy League universities, doing lines of cocaine in Manhattan discotheques, making decadent movies in Hollywood—and the time had come to put an end to their dangerous and self-indulgent nonsense. Nobody under the age of thirty knew what anything cost, and even the senior faculty at Princeton had forgotten that it was none other than the great Winston Churchill who had said, "Cultured people are merely the glittering scum which floats upon the deep river of production."

In the course of our introductory conversation Kristol not only referred me to other old masters whom I might wish to reread (among them Plutarch, Gibbon, and Edmund Burke); he also explained something of his technique as an intellectual entrepreneur. Despite the warning cries raised by a few prescient millionaires far from the fashionable strongholds of the effeminate east, the full membership of the American oligarchy still wasn't alive to the threat of cultural insurrection, and in order to awaken the management to a proper sense of its dire peril, Kristol had been traveling the circuit of the country's corporate boardrooms, soliciting contributions given in memory of Friedrich von Hayek, encouraging the automobile companies to withdraw their advertising budgets from any media outlet that declined to echo their social and political prejudices.

"Why empower your enemies?" he said. "Why throw pearls to swine?"

Although I didn't accept Kristol's invitation to what he called the "intellectual

counter-revolution," I often ran across him during the next few years at various symposia addressed to the collapse of the nation's moral values, and I never failed to enjoy his company or his conversation. Among all the propagandists pointing out the conservative path to glory, Kristol seemed to me the brightest and the best, and I don't wonder that he eventually became one of the four or five principal shop stewards overseeing the labors of the Republican message machine.

It was at Kristol's suggestion that I met a number of the fund-raising people associated with the conservative program of political correctness, among them Michael Joyce, executive director in the late seventies of the Olin Foundation. We once traveled together on a plane returning to New York from a conference that Joyce had organized for a college in Michigan, and somewhere over eastern Ohio he asked whether I might want to edit a new journal of cultural opinion meant to rebut and confound the ravings of *The New York Review of Books*. The proposition wasn't one in which I was interested, but the terms of the offer an annual salary of \$200,000, to be paid for life even in the event of my resignation or early retirement—spoke to the seriousness of the rightist intent to corner and control the national market in ideas.

*\* Henry Ford II expressed a similar thought on resigning as a trustee of the Ford Foundation in late 1976. Giving vent to his confusion, annoyance, and dismay, he took the trouble to write a letter to the staff of the foundation reminding them that they were associated with "a creature of capitalism." Conceding that the word might seem "shocking" to many of the people employed in the vineyards of philanthropy, Mr. Ford proceeded to his defense of the old ways and old order:*

*"I'm not playing the role of the hard-headed tycoon who thinks all philanthropoids are Socialists and all university professors are Communists. I'm just suggesting to the trustees and the staff that the system that makes the foundation possible very probably is worth preserving."*

The work went more smoothly as soon as the Reagan Administration had settled itself in Washington around the fountains and reflecting pools of federal patronage. Another nine right-thinking foundations established offices within a short distance of Capitol Hill or the Hay-Adams hotel (most prominent among them the Federalist Society and the Center for Individual Rights); more corporations sent more money; prices improved for ideological piecework (as much as \$100,000 a year for some of the brand-name scholars at Heritage and AEI), and eager converts to the various sects of the conservative faith were as thick upon the ground as maple leaves in autumn. By the end of Reagan's second term the propaganda mills were spending \$100 million a year on the manufacture and sale of their product, invigorated by the sense that once again it was morning in America and redoubling their efforts to transform their large store of irritable mental gestures into brightly packaged policy objectives—tort

reform, school vouchers, less government, lower taxes, elimination of the labor unions, bigger military budgets, higher interest rates, reduced environmental regulation, privatization of social security, down-sized Medicaid and Medicare, more prisons, better surveillance, stricter law enforcement.

If production increased at a more handsome pace than might have been dreamed of by Richard Scaife or hoped for by Irving Kristol, it was because the project had been blessed by Almighty God. The Christian right had come into the corporate fold in the late 1970s. Abandoning the alliance formed with the conscience of the liberal left during the Great Depression (the years of sorrow and travail when money was not yet another name for Jesus), the merchants of spiritual salvation had come to see that their interests coincided with those of the insurance companies and the banks. The American equestrian classes were welcome to believe that slack-jawed dope addicts had fomented the cultural insurrection of the 1960s; Jerry Falwell knew that it had been the work of Satan, Satan himself and not one of his students at the University of California, who had loosed a plague of guitarists upon the land, tempted the news media to the broadcast of continuous footage from Sodom and Gomorrah, impregnated the schools with indecent interpretations of the Bible, which then gave birth to the monster of multiculturalism that devoured the arts of learning. Together with Paul Weyrich at The Heritage Foundation, Falwell sponsored the formation of the Moral Majority in 1979, at about the same time and in much the same spirit that Pat Robertson, the Christian televangelist, sent his congregation a fundraising letter saying that feminists encourage women to "leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians." Before Ronald Reagan was elected to a second term the city of God signed a nonaggression pact with the temple of Mammon, their combined forces waging what came to be known as "The Culture War."

*\* The proposed journal appeared in 1982 as The New Criterion, promoted as a "staunch defender" of high culture, "an articulate scourge of artistic mediocrity and intellectual mendacity wherever they are found." Joyce later took over direction of the Bradley Foundation, where he proved to be as deft as Weyrich and Kristol at what the movement conservatives liked to call the wondrous alchemy of turning intellect into influence.*

## **MASS MEDIA DISTRIBUTION**

### **\$300M CONSERVATIVE MESSAGE MACHINE**

- TELEVISION
  - Pat Robertson's *700 Club*
  - Fox News Channel
  - MSNBC's *Scarborough Country*
  - Oliver North's *War Stories*

- RADIO

*The Rush Limbaugh Show*

*The Cal Thomas Commentary*

*Radio America*

- PUBLISHING

Eagle Publishing, Inc.

- NEWSPAPERS

*The Washington Times*

*The Wall Street Journal*

- WEBSITES

Townhall.com

AnnCoulter.com

The Cold War against the Russians was fading into safe and nostalgic memory, and the tellers of the great American fairy tale (the one about the precious paradise ever in need of an invincible defense) found themselves in pressing need of other antagonists to take the place of the grim and harmless ogre in the northern snow.

The Japanese couldn't play the part because they were lending the United States too much money; the Colombian drug lords were too few and too well connected in Miami; Manuel Noriega failed the audition; the Arab oil cartel was broke; and the Chinese were busy making shirts for Ralph Lauren.

In the absence of enemies abroad, the protectors of the American dream at home began looking for domestic signs of moral weakness rather than foreign shows of military strength; instead of examining the dossiers of distant tyrants, they searched the local newspapers for flaws in the American character, and the surveillance satellites over Leipzig and Sevastopol were reassigned stations over metropolitan Detroit and the Hollywood studios filming *Dynasty* and *Dallas*. Within a matter of months the conservative committees of public safety rounded up as suspects a motley crowd of specific individuals and general categories of subversive behavior and opinion—black male adolescents as well as elderly female Buddhists, the *New York Times*, multiculturalists of all descriptions, the 1960s, welfare mothers, homosexuals, drug criminals, illegal immigrants, performance artists. Some enemies of the state were easier to identify than others, but in all instances the reactionary tellers of the tale relied on images seen in dreams or Arnold Schwarzenegger movies rather than on the lessons of their own experience.

For a few years I continued to attend convocations sponsored by the steadily proliferating agencies of the messianic right, but although the discussions were held in increasingly opulent settings—the hotel accommodations more luxurious, better food, views of the mountains as well as the sea—by 1985 I could no longer stomach either the sanctimony or the cant. With the

coming to power of the Reagan Administration most of the people on the podium or the tennis court were safely enclosed within the perimeters of orthodox opinion and government largesse, and yet they persisted in casting themselves as rebels against "the system," revolutionary idealists being hunted down like dogs by a vicious and still active liberal prosecution. The pose was as ludicrous as it was false. The leftist impulse had been dead for ten years, ever since the right-wing Democrats in Congress had sold out the liberal portfolio of President Jimmy Carter and revised the campaign-finance laws to suit the convenience of their corporate patrons. Nor did the news media present an obstacle. By 1985 the *Wall Street Journal* had become the newspaper of record most widely read by the people who made the decisions about the country's economic policy; the leading editorialists in the *New York Times* (A. M. Rosenthal, William Safire) as well as in the *Washington Post* (George Will, Richard Harwood, Meg Greenfield) ably defended the interests of the status quo; the vast bulk of the nation's radio talk shows (reaching roughly 80 percent of the audience) reflected a conservative bias, as did all but one or two of the television talk shows permitted to engage political topics on PBS. In the pages of the smaller journals of opinion (*National Review*, *Commentary*, *The American Spectator*, *The National Interest*, *The New Criterion*, *The Public Interest*, *Policy Review*, etc.) the intellectual décor, much of it paid for by the Olin and Scaife foundations, was matched to the late-Victorian tastes of Rudyard Kipling and J. P. Morgan. The voices of conscience that attracted the biggest crowds on the nation's lecture circuit were those that spoke for one or another of the parties of the right, and together with the chorus of religious broadcasts and pamphlets (among them Pat Robertson's *700 Club* and the publications under the direction of Jerry Falwell and the Reverend Sun Myung Moon), they enveloped the country in an all but continuous din of stereophonic, right-wing sound.

The facts seldom intruded upon the meditations of the company seated poolside at the conferences and symposia convened to bemoan America's fall from grace, and I found it increasingly depressing to listen to prerecorded truths dribble from the mouths of writers once willing to risk the chance of thinking for themselves. Having exchanged intellectual curiosity for ideological certainty, they had forfeited their powers of observation as well as their senses of humor; no longer courageous enough to concede the possibility of error or enjoy the play of the imagination, they took an interest only in those ideas that could be made to bear the weight of solemn doctrine, and they cried up the horrors of the culture war because their employers needed an alibi for the disappearances of the country's civil liberties and a screen behind which to hide the privatization (a.k.a. the theft) of its common property—the broadcast spectrum as well as the timber, the water, and the air, the reserves of knowledge together with the mineral deposits and the laws. Sell the suckers on the notion that their "values" are at risk (abortionists escaping the nets of the Massachusetts state police, pornographers and cosmetic surgeons busily at work in Los Angeles, farm families everywhere in the Middle West becoming chattels of the welfare state) and maybe they won't notice that their pockets have been picked.

So many saviors of the republic were raising the alarm of culture war in the middle eighties that I now can't remember whether it was Bob Bartley writing in the *Wall Street Journal* or William Bennett speaking from his podium at the National Endowment for the Humanities

who said that at Yale University the students were wallowing in the joys of sex, drugs, and Karl Marx, disporting themselves on the New Haven green in the reckless manner of nymphs and satyrs on a Grecian urn. I do remember that at one of the high-end policy institutes in Manhattan I heard the tale told by Norman Podhoretz, then the editor at *Commentary*, the author of several contentious books (*Making It* and *Why We Were in Vietnam*), and a rabid propagandist for all things antiliberal. What he had to say about Yale was absurd, which I happened to know because that same season I was teaching a seminar at the college. More than half the number of that year's graduating seniors had applied for work at the First Boston Corporation, and most of the students whom I'd had the chance to meet were so busy finding their way around the Monopoly board of the standard American success (figuring the angles of approach to business school, adding to the network of contacts in their Filofaxes) that they didn't have the time to waste on sexual digressions either literal or figurative. When I attempted to explain the circumstance to Podhoretz, he wouldn't hear of it. Not only was I misinformed, I was a liberal and therefore both a liar and a fool. He hadn't been in New Haven in twenty years, but he'd read William F. Buckley's book (*God and Man at Yale*, published in 1951), and he knew (because the judgment had been confirmed by something he'd been told by Donald Kagan in 1978) that the college was a sinkhole of depraved sophism. He knew it for a fact, knew it in the same way that Jerry Falwell knew that it was Satan who taught Barbra Streisand how to sing.

If Kristol was the most engaging of the agents provocateur whom I'd encountered on the conservative lecture circuit in the 1980s, Podhoretz was the dreariest—an apparatchik in the old Soviet sense of the word who believed everything he wished to prove and could prove everything he wished to believe, bringing his patrons whichever words might serve or please, anxious to secure a place near or at the boot of power. Unfortunately it was Podhoretz, not Kristol, who exemplified the character and tone of mind that edged the American conservative consensus ever further to the right during the decade of the 1990s.

The networks of reactionary opinion once again increased their rates of production, several additional foundations recruited to the cause, numerous activist organizations coming on line, together with new and improved media outlets (most notably Rupert Murdoch's Fox News and Weekly Standard) broadcasting the gospels according to saints Warren Harding and William McKinley. By 1994 the Conservative Political Action Conference was attracting as many as 4,000 people, half of them college students, to its annual weekend in Arlington, Virginia, there to listen to the heroes of the hour (G. Gordon Liddy, Ralph Reed, Oliver North) speak from stages wrapped in American flags. Americans for Tax Reform under the direction of Grover Norquist declared its intention to shrink the federal government to a size small enough "to drown," like one of the long-lost hippies in Bel Air, "in a bathtub."

### **STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS (2001 ESTIMATES)**

	(in \$ Millions)
George Mason University	7
Harvard University	6
Intercollegiate Studies Institute	5.8

University of Chicago	5
Yale University	5
Washington University	4
Stanford University	3
Institute for Humane Studies	2.9
National Association of Scholars	1.2

Although as comfortably at home on Capitol Hill as in the lobbies of the corporate law firms on K Street, and despite their having learned to suck like newborn lambs at the teats of government patronage (Kristol's son, William, serving as public-relations director to Vice President Dan Quayle; Podhoretz's son-in-law, Elliot Abrams, a highly placed official within the Reagan Administration subsequently indicted for criminal misconduct), the apologists for the conservative cause continued to pose as embattled revolutionaries at odds with the "Tyranny of the Left." The pretense guaranteed a steady flow of money from their corporate sponsors, and the unexpected election of Bill Clinton in 1992 offered them yet another chance to stab the corpse of the liberal Goliath. The smearing of the new president's name and reputation began as soon as he committed the crime of entering the White House. *The American Spectator*, a monthly journal financed by Richard Scaife, sent its scouts west into Arkansas to look for traces of Clinton's semen on the pine trees and the bar stools. It wasn't long before Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr undertook his obsessive inspection of the president's bank records, soul, and penis. Summoning witnesses with the fury of a suburban Savonarola, Starr set forth on an exploration of the Ozark Mountains, questioning the natives about wooden Indians and painted women. For four years he camped in the wilderness, and even after he was allowed to examine Monica Lewinsky's lingerie drawer, his search for the weapon of mass destruction proved as futile as the one more recently conducted in Iraq.

Although unable to match Starr's prim self-righteousness, Newt Gingrich, the Republican congressman from Georgia elected speaker of the House in 1995, presented himself as another champion of virtue (a self-proclaimed "Teacher of the Rules of Civilization") willing to lead the American people out of the desolation of a liberal wasteland. Like Starr and Podhoretz (also like the newscasters who now decorate the right-wing television studios), Gingrich had a talent for bearing grudges. During his sixteen years in Congress he had acquired a reputation (not undeserved) for being nasty, brutish, and short, eventually coming to stand as the shared and shining symbol of resentment that bound together the several parties of the disaffected right—the Catholic conservatives with the Jewish neoconservatives, the libertarians with the authoritarians, the evangelical nationalists with the paranoid monetarists, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition with the friends of the Ku Klux Klan. Within a few months of his elevation to the speaker's chair, Gingrich bestowed on his fellow-plaintiffs his Contract with America, a plan for rooting out the last vestiges

of liberal heresy in the mind of government. As mean-spirited in its particulars as the Mandate for Leadership handed to Ronald Reagan in 1980, the contract didn't become law, but it has since provided the terms of enlightened selfishness that shape and inspire the policies of the current Bush Administration.

During the course of the 1990s I did my best to keep up with the various lines of grievance

developing within the several sects of the conservative remonstrance, but although I probably read as many as 2,000 presumably holy texts (Peggy Noonan's newspaper editorials and David Gelernter's magazine articles as well as the soliloquies of Rush Limbaugh and the sermons of Robert Bork), I never learned how to make sense of the weird and too numerous inward contradictions.

## **EIGHT INFLUENTIAL BOOKS AND THE FOUNDATIONS WHO SPONSORED THEM**

- *Free to Choose*, Milton Friedman — Scaife Foundation Olin Foundation
- *The Naked Public Square*, Richard John Neuhaus — Lilly Endowment Bradley Foundation Olin Foundation
- *The Dream and the Nightmare*, Myron Magnet — Scaife Foundation
- *Losing Ground*, Charles Murray — Olin Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation
- *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington — Bradley Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation
- *Illiberal Education*, Dinesh D'Souza — Olin Foundation
- *Politics, Markets & America's Schools*, John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe — Olin Foundation
- *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, Marvin Olasky — Bradley Foundation

How does one reconcile the demand for small government with the desire for an imperial army, apply the phrases "personal initiative" and "self-reliance" to corporation presidents utterly dependent on the federal subsidies to the banking, communications, and weapons industries, square the talk of "civility" with the strong-arm methods of Kenneth Starr and Tom DeLay, match the warmhearted currencies of "conservative compassion" with the cold cruelty of "the unfettered free market," know that human life must be saved from abortionists in Boston but not from cruise missiles in Baghdad? In the glut of paper I could find no unifying or fundamental principle except a certain belief that money was good for rich people and bad for poor people. It was the only point on which all the authorities agreed, and no matter where the words were coming from (a report on federal housing, an essay on the payment of Social Security, articles on the sorrow of the slums or the wonder of the U.S. Navy) the authors invariably found the same abiding lesson in the tale—money ennobles rich people, making them strong as well as wise; money corrupts poor people, making them stupid as well as weak.

But if a set of coherent ideas was hard to find in all the sermons from the mount, what was not hard to find was the common tendency to believe in some form of transcendent truth. A religious as opposed to a secular way of thinking. Good versus Evil, right or wrong, saved or damned, with us or against us, and no light-minded trifling with doubt or ambiguity. Or, more

plainly and as a young disciple of Ludwig Von Mises had said, long ago in the 1980s in one of the hospitality tents set up to welcome the conservative awakening to a conference on a beach at Hilton Head, "Our people deal in absolutes."

Just so, and more's the pity. In place of intelligence, which might tempt them to consort with wicked or insulting questions for which they don't already possess the answers, the parties of the right substitute ideology, which, although sometimes archaic and bizarre, is always virtuous.

Virtuous, but not necessarily the best means available to the running of a railroad or a war. The debacle in Iraq, like the deliberate impoverishment of the American middle class, bears witness to the shoddiness of the intellectual infrastructure on which a once democratic republic has come to stand. Morality deemed more precious than liberty; faith-based policies and initiatives ordained superior to common sense.

As long ago as 1964 even William F. Buckley understood that the thunder on the conservative right amounted to little else except the sound and fury of middle-aged infants banging silver spoons, demanding to know why they didn't have more—more toys, more time, more soup; when Buckley was asked that year what the country could expect if it so happened that Goldwater was elected president, he said, "That might be a serious problem." So it has proved, if not under the baton of the senator from Arizona then under the direction of his ideologically correct heirs and assigns. An opinion poll taken in 1964 showed 62 percent of the respondents trusting the government to do the right thing; by 1994 the number had dwindled to 19 percent. The measure can be taken as a tribute to the success of the Republican propaganda mill that for the last forty years has been grinding out the news that all government is bad, and that the word "public," in all its uses and declensions (public service, citizenship, public health, community, public park, commonwealth, public school, etc.), connotes inefficiency and waste.

The dumbing down of the public discourse follows as the day the night, and so it comes as no surprise that both candidates in this year's presidential election present themselves as embodiments of what they call "values" rather than as the proponents of an idea. Handsome images consistent with those seen in Norman Rockwell's paintings or the prints of Currier and Ives, suitable for mounting on the walls of the American Enterprise Institute, or in one of the manor houses owned by Richard Mellon Scaife, maybe somewhere behind a library sofa or over the fireplace in a dining room, but certainly in a gilded frame.

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