

A TIME FOR CHOOSING

The Rise of Modern American Conservatism

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2001

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INTRODUCTION

Stamping their feet and rubbing their hands to keep warm, the crowds patiently waited in line to enter the Dallas Memorial Auditorium. The night was unusually cold, with temperatures well below freezing. Yet the attendance was impressive, especially for southerners not used to the frigid air. Almost 6,000 Texans had turned up on that December evening in 1961 to hear one of America's most controversial figures. They would not leave disappointed.

As the applause erupted, Major General Edwin A. Walker strode to the middle of the stage, took his place at the podium, and turned to face his audience. Standing ramrod straight, Walker looked every part the general—except for his clothes. Coat and tie had replaced a chest full of medals accumulated since World War II. When the applause died down, Walker began to speak. Having spent thirty-four of his fifty-one years in the military, he knew how to command an audience. After some brief opening remarks—including a poetic homage to Texas and its soldiers—Walker began his sermon:

Tonight I stand alone before you as Edwin A. Walker. I have been charged with nothing. I have been found guilty of nothing. I have been punished for nothing. . . . I welcome the opportunity to stand before you as the symbol of the capability to co-ordinate the inspired and unchallengeable power of the people with the strength of our military forces. Such unity of purpose and spirit would cause an immediate capitulation of Reds and Pinks from Dallas to Moscow to Peking.¹

Walker's audience knew to what he referred: he had been admonished by President John F. Kennedy for indoctrinating his troops with anticommunist literature and, in response, had quit the corps he had loyally served most of his life. Nodding their heads in agreement, the members of the Dallas audience frequently interrupted Walker with applause. Television cameras relayed the speech to those who could not attend. After listening to an hour-long indictment of the Kennedy administration, liberalism, and the United Nations, the crowd erupted in a thunderous ninety-second ovation after which, invigorated, it filed out into the chilly Texas night.

In late 1961 Edwin Walker represented not just the apparent capitulation of American liberalism to the enemy but also the birth of a new kind of far-right conservatism, which the press, moderates, and liberals labeled "extremism." Extremism scared many Americans. Periodicals contained articles on such topics as "Military Control: Can It Happen Here?" and "Crackpots: How They Help Communism."² Walker even graced the cover of *Newsweek* with the warning, "Thunder on the Right."³

At the same time, however, Walker represented a dilemma for a burgeoning conservative movement. Those on the far Right demanded action and were willing to work for it. “Responsible” conservatives, however, wanted the Walker affair to disappear as quickly as possible. The threat to the Republican party was considerable, because if it became linked to Walker and others on the far Right, moderates and liberals within the party might flee to the Democrats. But conservative activists often were loyal, hard-working party members, a constituency crucial to any winning political operation. The conundrum that had developed by 1961, then, was whether a movement composed of the fraternal twins of responsible and extremist conservatism could remain intact and capture a presidential nomination. Not surprisingly, like modern American conservatism itself, extremists such as Walker were products of the postwar world.

Shortly after the end of World War II American conservatives launched a crusade to reverse the liberal political and social order prevalent since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inauguration in 1933. By the 1950s a handful of conservative intellectuals had delineated a tripartite ideology, out of which activists soon began forging the backbone of a political movement. In 1964 the Republican nominee, Barry Goldwater, was an avowed conservative who espoused ideology pioneered during the previous decade. In 1966 former actor and Democrat-turned-conservative-Republican Ronald Reagan became governor of the most populous state in the nation. And by 1968 enough Americans identified themselves as conservative to elect Richard Nixon as president.

Between 1957 and 1972 conservatives engineered their own revolution. Dissatisfied with what they perceived as a liberal Republican party, yet knowing they needed that same powerful vehicle to deliver their beliefs to the nation, conservatives built a movement from the ground up, intent on capturing the GOP. Just as liberalism comprised a wide range of ideas, organizations, and individuals, conservatism was also anything but monolithic.⁴ Confronting the New Deal Coalition in the mid-1960s—at the height of its renaissance as the Great Society—the conservative coalition included individuals and organizations that espoused ideas that ranged from outright reaction to pure libertarianism. Though some observers have argued that it was not until the 1970s that conservative critiques of liberalism became “the basis of an effective political movement by creating . . . a network of publications, think tanks, and political action committees that have come to rival and often outperform their powerful liberal counterparts,” conservatives clearly demonstrated otherwise.⁵

Out of the conservative ideological categories of traditionalism, libertarianism, and anticommunism, two broad branches of organized conservatism were conceived in the decade after World War II, and they challenged each other for control of what would eventually be a political and social movement. Mainstream or electoral conservatism relied on the Republican party as its vehicle in the two-party system and depended on time-tested methods for assessing, developing,

and entrenching power. The GOP served as a top-down conduit of information, regulations, and strategies. Lifting postwar conservative ideology directly from its creators, these activists initially altered it only slightly to appeal to voters.

Extremist conservatives, however, borrowed more heavily and energetically from anticommunism. Hoping to end (or at least circumvent) the “eastern Establishment’s” dominance of the Republican party, extremists sought to widen participation in the electoral process. The Republicans in power, they knew, would not be converted easily, since the upshot effectively meant dislodging the power structures that had for so long determined who could and could not guide America.⁶

Not all extremists were conspiracy theorists, and not all electoral conservatives believed in the power of the GOP. But each camp understood the importance of guiding conservatism in its battle against the ideology and practitioners of the New Deal Coalition. Franklin Roosevelt, through the accidents and opportunities created by the Great Depression, helped to create one of the most powerful and seemingly impregnable voting blocs in American history.⁷ Though Dwight Eisenhower had broken the two-decade-long Democratic lock on the White House, neither electoral nor extremist conservatives thought him conservative. Unable to challenge the New Deal Coalition, Eisenhower perpetuated the welfare state.⁸ Conservatives of both persuasions needed an alternative, although few existed prior to the early 1960s. Robert A. Taft had all the right credentials, although he had limited appeal to the middle of the party, but then he died young. Joseph McCarthy was too embroiled in controversy to mean more than he was—a lightning rod and symbol for the increasing frustrations of many conservatives across the country. Richard Nixon was almost the opposite: more politician than man, a chameleon eager to please. Not until Barry Goldwater would the two branches of the movement agree on a candidate. But then extremism reared its ugly head and forced the “responsible” or electoral conservatives to wonder what they had wrought. Still, Goldwater helped fuse the two movements into one, and his symbolic power enlivened the grassroots as well as the party proper. In effect, January 1965 marked two inaugurations: one for Lyndon Johnson’s first full term as president and the other for the conservative movement, recently defeated but pulsing with vitality.

Political movements are not easily defined. At a minimum they must possess a group consciousness, with members identifying with each other and with common political aims.⁹ Typically, members categorize themselves in a specific social stratum, preferring their own group and disdaining outsiders. Dissatisfaction with the group’s status, power, or material resources is frequently blamed on either specific individuals or the inequities of the social or political system.¹⁰ Taken together these components signify the birth of a movement, or that moment when participants refuse to continue accepting their lot and begin working together to correct perceived wrongs. Given the relatively weak political

position of conservatives between 1932 and 1960, it is not surprising that many self-professed conservatives in the late 1950s and 1960s acquired some or all of these belief components.

Political movements, however, are continually evolving. Democratically based movements, or movement cultures, often pass through four stages. First an independent institution is created in the form of a political party, organization, or other group to provide a context for new, oppositional interpretations. Next members formulate a tactical approach to recruit adherents. The institution then generates new explanations, which previously had held no legitimate place in society. Finally the group's ideas, now solidly in place, are made public with the aim of expanding the movement beyond its initial constituents.¹¹ The self-respect and confidence gained by members of a political movement—the ability to believe in themselves and their cause—is crucial, since they realize that their world can, in fact, change. Of course such a concept might be seen as inherently contradictory in describing conservatives. But when considering the political circumstances in America since the mid-1930s, conservatives could imagine themselves to be as beleaguered as any ideological minority in the twentieth century.

The conservative movement attained each stage of the sequence, and its participants gained confidence in their ability to alter the American landscape. The conservative movement, however, was also different from other democratic movements in that it relied on elites to provide an intellectual backbone and an organizational structure. Yet despite its top-down framework, the movement was supple enough so that the rank and file could enter and influence the nature and direction of the undertaking. Moreover the groundswell relied as much on impulse as official membership in any sanctioned organization. In other words since people believed they belonged to a movement, they did, thus adding to its political and social power. Much like a self-fulfilling prophecy, this increased momentum not only convinced activists they were succeeding but also helped draw in hesitant participants.

This book argues that in the 1950s conservatives initially created two distinct but overlapping movement cultures.¹² One advocated the development of party and electoral solutions to the problem of liberalism, while the other looked to private organizations to initiate the changes its members thought necessary to reform America. The latter, furthermore, relied heavily on the work of extremists, who believed it imperative to use not only electoral politics but also methods that invited confrontation with the “enemy.” This split in conservatism deepened in the early 1960s and reached its nadir in 1964 at the Republican National Convention, when Barry Goldwater threw down the gauntlet and challenged moderate Republicans to confront his wing of the party.

The division gave rise to two sets of strategies, tactics, and personalities. Still the divide was permeable, with cross-fertilization giving rise to new strategic and tactical strains. More important, in the wake of Goldwater's defeat, the Repub-

lican party reaped an unexpected dividend—the perception of ideological objectivity. As extremism was pushed out of the conservative equation, moderate Republicans who had backed Lyndon Johnson began to reassess their old party. Since extremism had been so intimately connected with conservatism, the *absence* of extremism meant that conservatism gained newfound legitimacy. In other words the lack of extremist influences signified that the GOP's stances were not tainted, so their policies were not only more “purely” conservative, they were also perceived as more balanced, responsible, and acceptable to larger numbers of voters.

Although the Republicans lost the election in 1964 in large part due to extremism, they learned to deal with the fringe elements that threatened their party far earlier and more effectively than did the Democrats. Republicans marginalized extremists in favor of the solid middle of the party, while simultaneously calculating how to retain extremists' loyalty. In this way the GOP learned how to act like a broker state or the informal regulatory system adopted during Franklin Roosevelt's administrations when competing interests fought for attention, favor, and the chance to influence the federal government. The GOP forced extremists to take their place alongside other conservative interest groups, which were also fighting for resources and supporters in their attempts to influence the party. Unable to continue circumventing the process obeyed by all other conservative bands, extremists found themselves unable to slip the noose—tied and adjusted by their conservative comrades—which slowly began to tighten. The best option left to the extremists, then, was acting like the other organizations that had contributed to the ideological solidification of the single movement. Extremists hoped that they would retain a proportional share of the influence (for example, if there were ten adjunct groups, extremists would wield one-tenth of the power), although party leaders felt differently.

The factionalism and internecine warfare among conservatives gave little indication that a robust and relatively united movement would emerge by the end of the 1960s. The individuals who shaped the contours of the rise of conservatism were a mixed lot; some were well known, while others labored in obscurity. How these people and the events they created and to which they reacted shaped the emergence of a vital conservative political force is the story of this book.

The history of this transformation has only been told in decidedly limited ways and has relied heavily on electoral politics and the most public of actors. Such approaches do a disservice not only to the events, ideas, and individuals of the time but also to the determination of the consequences of the era. The perennial underdog in national politics, prior to 1960 American conservatism had been an ideology accorded little respect by intellectuals. By 1968 everything was different. No longer did liberals set the agenda and force conservatives to react. Conservative ideology fused with political action and created opportunities for

dissatisfied Americans to express their disgust. Although conservative ideology was not created during the 1960s, its political components were, and the conservatism of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s is its direct descendant. To understand this period in the American political arena, it is crucial that the processes that created the progenitor and its offspring be unraveled.

As conservative theorist Richard Weaver notes, “ideas have consequences,” a bon mot that rings especially true when charting the course of the modern American conservative movement. In the first decade after World War II, such intellectuals as Russell Kirk, Friedrich A. Hayek, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Whittaker Chambers weighed in with important works that outlined the three powerful strands of conservatism: traditionalism, libertarianism, and anticommunism. These general categories remained flexible, and their lack of definition permitted widespread contradictions. By the early 1950s the three strands, anchored by anticommunism, began to be absorbed by a self-selected population. A number of speakers and writers on lecture circuits started contacting Americans who already held conservative beliefs and began to convey what the “new” conservatism looked like. In perhaps the boldest challenge during the first half of the 1950s, foreign-policy specialist James Burnham attacked the theory of containment and proposed a more aggressive strategy to win the Cold War, which set off debates in the Pentagon and raised questions about national security. As the second half of the decade began, conservative ideology, while still limited in its exposure to the general population, had made a strong showing around the country.

In the second half of the decade a series of events helped catalyze the conservative enterprise in America. Three Supreme Court decisions handed down on the same day in 1957 elicited howls of protest about the dangers of communist infiltration in the United States. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s visit in 1959 prompted some Americans to wonder if Eisenhower was simply capitulating to the enemy. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s book *Masters of Deceit* detailed a communist plot to overthrow the country from within. As part of Eisenhower’s attempt to thaw relations between the two superpowers, the United States displayed art in the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959. When the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) suspected that some of the artists had communist ties, the show became a conservative cause célèbre. Finally as HUAC continued its investigations into education, entertainment, and other areas of American life, in 1960 liberals challenged the committee’s very existence. After HUAC hearings in San Francisco disintegrated into a melee, conservatives in Congress and elsewhere produced a film that defended the committee, which renewed concerns over whether the country, now led by John F. Kennedy, would end up in the hands of the enemy. As the 1950s ended, conservatives saw the need for political solutions to social and cultural problems. Some thought that independent organizations would offer

the best answers, while others believed that the two-party system had to be hijacked and the GOP used to engineer a political revolution. Activists, however, tapped the reserves of conservative discontent first and gave birth to a number of independent factions.

To create groups populated by non-intellectuals, conservative ideology had to move from unproved theory to social and political action, where average Americans could be exposed to and understand what conservatism meant. Recently inspired Americans searched for places to manifest their newfound excitement. Filling the vacuum in the early 1960s were a number of extremist organizations, heretofore ignored or belittled by most chroniclers of the era. Led by Robert H. W. Welch, Jr.'s John Birch Society (JBS), far rightists turned to conspiracy theories to explain how the nation was aiding its own demise. Welch created a national organization to sell his particular brand of conservatism and in the process attracted almost 100,000 members and the attention of the Kennedy administration and the Republican party. Typically dismissed as a collection of "kooks," the JBS performed much like a third party: it forced the GOP, the Democrats, and conservatives of all types to respond to its agenda. Moreover the complex organizational hierarchy helped create a new kind of conservative activism. In neighborhoods and towns scattered across the country, small groups of Americans comprised the beginnings of what became a national protest movement, challenging the status quo and refusing to compromise. The JBS helped develop a conservative movement culture, or those components critical to a political movement or campaign that might not be expressly political. Rallies, letter drives, social events, and a variety of local projects all helped Birchers hone their skills, spread the word of conservatism, and become more deeply invested in American politics. For some members the society was an end unto itself, while for others it was a starting point, an introduction that led to much more.

As the number of Americans who turned to organizations such as the JBS swelled, episodes like the 1961 case of General Edwin A. Walker justified fears of anticommunism and conservatism gone amok. After being relieved of his army command in West Germany for indoctrinating his troops with anticommunist literature, Walker became an instant conservative symbol. Taking a stand on his actions could be interpreted as supporting the radical Right or acquiescing to the liberal establishment. Trying to rally around the general without alienating more moderate or liberal Republicans, conservatives appeared to support Walker wholeheartedly. In fact public solidarity masked private discontent among conservatives and camouflaged divisions within the movement. Moreover the Republican party's reluctance to criticize Walker or to purge extremists came back to haunt it three years later when leaders refused to oust extremists in the belief that the "big tent" could stand the strain. A window onto the conservative movement just before Barry Goldwater took the country by storm, the Walker inci-

dent illustrated the Right's essential dilemma: should conservatives of all stripes stick together, or should extremists who could alienate the center of the GOP be purged in order to win political power?

As action took precedence over ideology, a grassroots constituency emerged, which backed local and national candidates, created new circles in which to socialize, and developed a cultural component necessary to sustain the political apparatus. At the same time, however, extremists forced the responsible Right to react. Non-extremists faced a press and federal government made hostile by their brethren, but they also understood that to kowtow to the liberals meant, in effect, joining them. Events based on both liberal and conservative circumstances helped solidify conservatism's grip on a growing number of Americans, and in late 1961 a small number of political operatives realized that their chance to capture the GOP and perhaps the White House had arrived.

A full three years before the 1964 election, a group of well-placed conservative Republicans decided that they would nominate a "true" conservative and if that meant sacrificing the election in order to gain the party, so be it. Barry Goldwater, a senator from Arizona with rock-solid libertarian, anticommunist, and traditionalist credentials, became the rallying point for the nascent conservative movement. Grassroots efforts, including a number of extremist factions, sprang up to support the senator. Deciding that the party should suffer the kooks, Republican leaders decided not to purge those supporters on the far Right and hoped that the moderates and liberals would tolerate the newcomers in order to gain the White House. A combination of a badly run campaign, too much faith in ideology as a political product, and a candidate who eschewed pressing the flesh created a referendum on Goldwater, which helped Lyndon Johnson win an apparent mandate and truly inaugurated the Great Society.

Conservatives, however, did achieve a number of crucial goals with this campaign. They seized the party and legitimized the movement. Thousands of Americans were introduced to campaigning and politics, a commitment many sustained after 1964, and a vibrant political culture emerged. Conservatives pioneered new fundraising techniques, which solicited small contributions from millions of Americans, mirroring the shift from a GOP dominated by easterners to one that was beginning to penetrate the South and the Sunbelt. The Goldwaterites lost, but lessons were learned from the experience. Moderates and liberals could not be ignored were the party to form a powerful enough coalition to win. Something would have to be done about the radical Right. Ideology could only take a campaign so far. In short while the GOP had been pried open to include millions of new conservatives, it still needed charismatic salespeople to spread the gospel. Drafting Barry Goldwater was not, as it turned out, a conservative panacea. It did, however, expose problems the movement had to confront, namely what to do with extremists; how to recruit, coordinate, and satisfy volunteers; and how to sell an ideology to enough Americans to win a national contest.

It did not take long for conservatives to regroup from their devastating loss. Nationally publicized elections in New York City and California taught them how to manage campaigns that would attract moderate and liberal Republicans or conservative Democrats, without ostracizing the hardcore of the movement. Soon a test case presented itself to the conservative wing of the GOP: William F. Buckley, Jr.'s candidacy for the mayor of New York City in 1965. Conceived as a defensive maneuver to prevent liberal Republican John V. Lindsay from defiling the GOP, Buckley ran as much to test other Republicans as to apply the lessons of 1964. Like Goldwater, Buckley knew he had little chance of winning. Yet he never wavered from his stringent conservative stances, bringing a number of issues, such as race, education, employment, and the role of the government, to light for millions. Buckley was also the first conservative to take a solid stand against extremist support, which created a template other candidates would use in the future. Hoping to prove the vitality of conservative Republicanism, Buckley ran one of the most fascinating campaigns of the 1960s. Moreover he confirmed what 1964 had shown: that conservatives still had work to do, that the big tent was not yet erected, and that ideology had its political limits. But he also told Americans, millions of whom followed the campaign, that conservatism was not an overnight political tactic but a philosophy, which had developed over years and was unlikely to disappear because of one or two defeats. The conservative revival had begun.

The Goldwater debacle had served to open the party up to political novices, particularly in the South and West, allowing newly-made activist Americans to play a part in the democratic process. It was in California, with Ronald Reagan's 1966 gubernatorial campaign, that the tide turned for electoral conservatism in the post-Goldwater era. Here party and movement first merged smoothly; extremism was dealt with effectively (so effectively, in fact, that responsible conservatives accelerated its rapid demise); and factionalism was overcome. Reagan's candidacy was not without its difficulties: his acting career, lack of government service, connection to various extremists, and a seemingly superficial understanding of the issues could have left the California GOP hamstrung. Instead Reagan and his handlers mounted a brilliant campaign, defeating incumbent Edmund G. "Pat" Brown and confirming the state as a leader of political trends. Reagan's "Eleventh Commandment," which forbade one Republican to speak ill of another, papered over private and public differences. Moreover Reagan's agenda shored up those factions that suddenly found themselves co-opted by a reinvigorated party and helped them carry conservatism into the next decade. With Reagan's landslide victory, conservatism was reborn stronger than in 1964 and determined to emerge victorious before the end of the decade, a goal achieved a mere two years later.

By the late 1960s conservatives, still in control of the GOP, had managed to consolidate their efforts behind Richard Nixon, a man few conservatives fully

trusted, although most realized he was their best hope to capture the White House. A number of citizen groups—vestiges of the Goldwater campaign—maintained the momentum from one decade to the next and solidified the bond between party and movement. Four of these splinter groups in particular helped to carry the conservative agenda into the next decade. Americans for Constitutional Action, the Free Society Association, the American Conservative Union, and Young Americans for Freedom all worked to refine an ideological and programmatic agenda, raise money for candidates, and mount issue-based campaigns. Far more sophisticated than their forebears from the Goldwater campaign, these groups also provided an outlet for dispossessed extremists. Facing internal and external hostility, the John Birch Society and other far-right organizations shrank. The four main splinters, however, redirected some of that extremist energy into more constructive applications and, in the case of Young Americans for Freedom, even trained a new generation of conservative activists.

By 1980 the revolution was complete. With a true conservative as the party's nominee, conservative Republicans and Democrats threw their support behind Ronald Reagan without hesitation. Whether or not they knew that his policies had their roots in 1940s and 1950s ideology, they understood that they liked the man as much or more than what he represented.

Innumerable social and political movements were born—and died—in the 1960s. How many of those achieved their goals or even survived past infancy is debatable. It is only recently that some of the light shone upon the decade is striking actors on the Right. And yet, perhaps more than any other postwar political crusade, modern American conservatism, which experienced its formative years during the sixties, represents a successful pursuit of an ideological and programmatic agenda. Though the ideology proved to have its limitations, the enterprise never ventured far from belief systems rooted in a response to postwar society. Traditionalism, libertarianism, and anticommunism all offered something for those inclined to believe that the country needed to change, that the programs wrought by the New Deal hurt rather than helped. With a movement culture and a political culture supporting electoral efforts, such endeavors helped to attract millions of formerly politically apathetic Americans.

But if a conservative birth was inevitable, its growth into maturity and eventual triumph were not. Liberal failures alone did not ensure conservative success; conservatives themselves did and only after many failures of their own. Hazily defined and with too few activists in the 1950s, conservatism, which was never fully united, nonetheless split; its two main factions developed their own agendas, heroes, and villains. Joined behind Barry Goldwater, electoral and extremist conservatives tolerated each other as they hoped that the senator from Arizona would be the balm to heal their wounds. The party succumbed, but not the White House. In the election's aftermath the division between extremist and

electoral conservatives helped chart the movement's direction, often forcing it to tack an indirect path to its final destination. Reevaluating what it would take to win the White House, mainstream conservatives realized that only with a cleansed party did they stand a chance. At the 1960 Republican National Convention, Goldwater had told his fellow conservatives to "grow up."¹³ This is the story of how the movement did just that.

THE BIRTH OF

POSTWAR CONSERVATISM

In 1950 the literary and cultural critic Lionel Trilling said out loud what many American intellectuals silently believed about their country's political and social heritage: liberalism prevailed so completely that conservatism might be seen forever as illegitimate. "In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation."¹ After guiding America through almost two decades of difficult times, liberal leadership had proved, Trilling believed, that not only was the country better off politically but that society—particularly the culture—had progressed, which demonstrated the superiority of such a system. Moreover whatever conservative notions did exist were not worthy of discussion. They were "impulses" rather than "ideas": "the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in actions or in irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas."

During the first half of the 1950s a host of observers, including historians Louis Hartz and Richard Hofstadter; sociologists Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, Nathan Glazer, and David Riesman; and popular commentators writing in such journals as the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *Atlantic*, seconded Trilling's opinion. Even with Senator Joseph McCarthy's notorious Wheeling, West Virginia, speech on February 8, 1950, which opened an era that outlived its namesake, conservatism appeared destined to remain little more than a whining voice in the wilderness. McCarthyism seemed merely to add to liberal critiques of conservatism; the witch hunters were conservatives in their death throes, blindly lashing out in feeble attempts to hold onto some semblance of power. Moreover even though such respectable conservatives as Senator Robert A. Taft had stridently opposed communism before McCarthy's mudslinging began, the association with the junior senator from Wisconsin made the job of anticommunist liberals even easier.² All that remained, said Trilling and the others, were the last rites.

In 1955 a volume edited by Daniel Bell neatly summed up how many academics felt about the vestigial residues of postwar conservatism. In *The New American Right*, Bell and his colleagues assembled what they believed was a

careful and multidisciplinary critique of what Trilling had called conservative “impulses.” Not so immediately dismissive as Trilling, the authors acknowledged that some Americans *believed* in conservatism and took issue with the ideology’s core beliefs. In perhaps the most famous essay of the seven, historian Richard Hofstadter examined the growing discontent with liberalism and the legacies of the New Deal and pronounced the reaction “pseudo-conservatism.”³ Besides delivering the ultimate insult to such conservative theorists as Russell Kirk and William F. Buckley, Jr., Hofstadter sought to fortify what Trilling and others felt: that pseudoconservatives perceived themselves as victims of a changing world.⁴ Hofstadter acknowledged that there was good reason to fear international communism. Both Republicans and Democrats, in fact, denounced the American Communist party.⁵ But why, he asked, would some Americans blame their own government for the growth of communism? The answer lay in “the rootlessness and heterogeneity of American life, and above all, . . . its peculiar scramble for status and its peculiar search for secure identity.”⁶ In times of prosperity, Hofstadter said, “status politics” dominated the public’s attitudes toward politics. Discontent was voiced more often in “vindictiveness, in sour memories, in the search for scapegoats, than in realistic proposals for positive action.”⁷ Two groups were most susceptible to experiencing status anxiety: the old Yankee Protestant Americans, who felt crowded by the nouveau riche, and the recent immigrants, who had something to prove about their loyalty to their newly adopted country. To relieve their anxiety, these groups practiced a kind of “hyper-patriotism” and “hyperconformity,” values that Hofstadter also saw in prejudiced Americans. Focusing their hatred on the Dean Achesons, Alger Hisses, and Franklin Roosevelts of the country, the pseudoconservatives attempted to boost their status and ensure order between classes, which they hoped would guarantee their own place in the nation’s hierarchy.

According to Hofstadter pseudoconservatism had not appeared until the 1950s for four reasons. First the disappearance of the “automatic built-in status elevator” meant that one’s child might not be the next Horatio Alger. In the uncertainty of the postwar world, the expectation that a child would surpass his or her parents in level of education, type of employment, and material comfort was disappearing rapidly. (It is unclear, however, how Hofstadter reached the conclusion that social mobility was decreasing during an era of nearly unparalleled economic growth.) Second mass communication enabled average Americans to participate in politics in ways previously unthinkable, injecting their “private emotions and personal problems” into the mix. Third the long reign of liberalism gave rise to the increased frustration of those who felt disenfranchised by increased government activism and promoted more open combat between businessmen and supporters of the New Deal. Finally pseudoconservatives were frustrated by the continued but confusing war footing on which the country had

remained after World War II. Instead of returning to a time when individuals could focus on themselves and their families, Americans were forced—by their own government, many thought—to remain prepared for an unknown future. Although Hofstadter trusted that pseudoconservatism would not spread, Bell and the others feared that conservatives and pseudoconservatives were in desperate straits, and desperate people do desperate things.

To a degree the liberals—both academic and otherwise—were correct. Conservatives had not climbed out of the hole they had dug during the New Deal and in their isolationism prior to World War II. After fifteen years of government intervention in the economy, business was booming, and the United States was the world leader in manufacturing and consumption. After Roosevelt's charismatic leadership and Harry Truman's surprisingly inspired guidance, America, while not preventing Eastern Europe or China from falling into communist hands, had set the tone in world diplomacy. Most important, after a decade of economic uncertainty and the costliest foreign war in American history, most citizens were ready to return to predictable, stable lives in which government helped them when they needed it but otherwise remained invisible. Yet even in the wild success of the American war experience and its aftermath, there were rumblings of discontent that, shielded by their hubris, liberals either failed to hear or to take seriously. Moreover liberals' willingness to dismiss conservatism as a psychological phenomenon instead of recognizing it as a young but legitimate political and social ideology did the Left a disservice in the decades to come. They failed to anticipate the drastic changes that were to take place in the coming years.

Two years after Trilling's eulogy for what he claimed was a stillborn political philosophy, one of the men responsible for helping inspire a new liberal generation during the New Deal spoke to a group of Republican precinct workers in Cleveland. Raymond Moley, a professor at Columbia and one of the brain trusters brought to Washington by FDR to combat the depression, had had a change of faith and had become a Republican. By the late 1940s he had a reputation as an astute political and social analyst, penned a column for *Newsweek*, and frequently spoke to conservatives across the country. Trying to rally the troops for the 1952 election, Moley hammered home the idea that Republicans had lost since 1932 for one simple reason: they were outnumbered. In 1948, said Moley, 42 million eligible voters failed to go to the polls. These were the people who could help swing the country from the Left to the Right. He named the people for whom precinct workers should keep an eye out:

They are the people who have some property, who have some savings of their own, insurance policies, government bonds, and bank accounts. They are the people who are struggling to get on in the world, to educate their children and to live decent, respectable lives.⁸

Although Moley's Americans sounded suspiciously similar to the cast of a Frank Capra movie, he urged his audience not to view these people as a class or group but instead as a limitless constituency that, as the years passed, would welcome new members with each liberal misstep and new communist advance.

Over the next two decades the people Moley described—the targets of those Republican canvassers—would be responsible for creating and staffing the conservative movement in America. Yet prior to 1955 most conservative intellectuals concerned themselves with defining different types of conservatism and, if possible, offering prescriptions for changing the country to conform more closely to their visions. As one historian of the intellectual movement described it, “There is probably no better proof of the isolation of the conservative intellectual movement from American politics in the 1950s than its estrangement from the immensely popular President Eisenhower.”⁹ Operating in a vacuum that effectively shut out popular opinion, conservative intellectuals debated issues that Moley's audience (and its target constituents) considered esoteric. Yet they *did* transmit the issues to the populace, albeit slowly at first. The challenge to the liberal status quo, which came from both the intellectuals and the novice activists, help set the stage for a conservative revolution during the next two decades.

Between 1948 and 1955 conservatives formulated working definitions of their belief system, while simultaneously the nascent ideology invited participation by Americans searching for ways to halt what they perceived as increasingly dangerous trends: an overly strong central government, restricted individual rights, and a weakened presence abroad. While little progress was made that resulted in conservatives being elected or organizations being formed, during these seven years they confronted necessary dilemmas, including defining a common language, figuring out how to ford the ideological moats that isolated conservative camps, and deciding how to take the first tentative steps toward becoming an activist movement. The tenets intellectuals provided helped adherents identify each other more readily whereas before, when asked how to identify a fellow conservative, practitioners were often left wondering exactly what made a person “belong.”¹⁰ Yet even with tangible gains in a variety of arenas, including the Republican capture of the White House, conservatives in 1955 remained amateurs compared to liberals. For activists to emerge, rally, and recruit, they would need a coherent belief system around which to organize. Intent on formulating an assertive rather than reactionary ideology, conservative theorists searched for ways to integrate philosophical truisms with politically viable axioms. Intellectuals and practitioners who set their minds to the task, however, faced a formidable challenge. It would not be until the appearance of a handful of thinkers and provocateurs in the 1950s that conservatism began to take a discernible shape.

Russell Kirk and Postwar Conservatism

Conservatism after the war eventually meant something completely different than it had before 1945. Not the least difference was its lack of organization. Before and shortly after the war, such individuals as John T. Flynn and Albert Jay Nock wrote volumes of eloquent attacks on the government and its growing power, and politicians like Gerald Nye, Robert Taft, and John Bricker had substantial followings. But these individuals remained lone operators, and they rarely attempted to cross boundaries or form coalitions. What was missing was a definable ideology or, as one writer explained it, “the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence, through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day.”¹¹ Perhaps some of the aforementioned individuals could have described the vocabulary that they themselves used. But beyond this small coterie, most Americans were not familiar with a conservative lingua franca, and in the mid-1950s few Americans were investing themselves in determining what constituted conservatism.

One of the reasons that conservatism gained traction only hesitantly at first was the postwar variant’s lack of a single definition. Conservatism is based on a set of core beliefs, most frequently identified with the writings of Edmund Burke. Here, human nature is “unchanging and unalterable,” and there is “an objective moral order, independent of man’s knowledge or perception of it.”¹² These core ideas often manifest themselves in everyday life in a number of ways. For example, although freedom is an inalienable right, the same forces that demand one’s freedom also require that authority be exercised to regulate society so that an individual can, in fact, be free. Moreover since humans are essentially unchanging, the government—or any institution—oversteps its bounds by attempting such social engineering as welfare. Thus tradition—whether of limited government, responsibility for one’s self and one’s community, or a strong defense—is essential for a civil society. And yet, since humans are fallible, these traditions must be subject to change. One of the best attempts at distilling these core ideas into a single definition came in 1962 from M. Stanton Evans, who wrote, “The conservative believes ours is a God-centered, and therefore an ordered, universe; that man’s purpose is to shape his life to the patterns of order proceeding from the Divine center of life; and that, in seeking this objective, man is hampered by a fallible intellect and vagrant will.”¹³ Still, since such an explication allows for a wide range of interpretation in practical terms, a great deal of ideological diversity (within limits) has appeared in the conservative community.

Conservatism’s lack of a single definition was in part responsible for the rampant factionalism that brought it to its political nadir in the first half of the 1960s. At the same time that flexibility also allowed political operatives to capitalize on a growing constituency that, if handled correctly, could provide enormous elec-

toral dividends. Most immediately, however, the failure to agree on a single, universal definition resulted in the advent of several distinct though sometimes converging streams of conservatism.

Three main groups of conservatives eventually appeared from the intersection of postwar events and ideas: traditionalists, libertarians, and anticommunists. Traditionalism and libertarianism focused on preventing the state from meddling in an individual's affairs, while simultaneously they promoted a belief system that adhered to a universal moral code. American anticommunism, sanctioned by the federal government, emerged as a belief system at the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. Adopted by conservatives as a bulwark against America's newest enemy, anticommunism also bridged conservatism of the prewar and postwar eras. Since communism represented the antithesis of Burkean conservatism, anticommunism served not only to defend America and the West against its encroachment but also to promote conservative values at home. Although in the first few years after the war political leaders often focused only on containing communism abroad, conservative theorists quickly found anticommunism could help them promote traditionalism and libertarianism at home. American postwar conservatism, then, adapted prewar ideas to peculiar domestic circumstances and created a new ideology that nevertheless contained readily identifiable roots. This did not mean, however, that such foundations translated easily to the world of practical politics.

Beginning in the early 1950s and lasting for about a decade conservative intellectuals debated, often raucously, the interwoven problems of defining what made a person conservative and, if such a definition could be created, how the general population could eventually assimilate those beliefs, thus generating an ideology. Of the major conservative intellectuals in the immediate postwar era, Russell Kirk weighed in most dramatically as he defined the parameters of the debate and forever placed the conservative movement in a more easily recognizable context.¹⁴ Born in 1918 in Michigan, Kirk left his working-class background behind (his father was a railroad engineer) in favor of studying the theories of Edmund Burke and others.¹⁵ After a stint in the army during the war, Kirk received a doctorate at St. Andrews University in Scotland, where he honed his ideas about civilization and the roles of the individual and government in society. An open admirer of agrarianism, elites, and nonprogressive methods of education, Kirk swam against the tide of political philosophy in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1953 he published his groundbreaking work, *The Conservative Mind*, soon cited by all major American conservative thinkers as one of the most influential books in their lives.

In *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk outlined six truisms that guided conservative philosophy. The first, that a "divine intent rules society as well as conscience" and that "political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems," explained what would repeatedly confuse many liberals: although conservatives

believed in the sanctity of the Constitution, total separation of church and state would always be impossible.¹⁶ To acknowledge that God affected politics meant that politicians should consider “divine intent” when making decisions and that morality, while difficult to legislate, was present in legislation nonetheless. Second Kirk declared that conservatives had an “affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life, as distinguished from the narrowing uniformity and equalitarianism and utilitarian aims of most radical systems.” Here Kirk railed against totalitarianism in any guise and declared that life was not lived best when, as later conservatives would call it, engineered. But although Kirk declared that humans should respect the “variety and mystery of traditional life,” conservatives in the 1950s and after decided that “traditional” would supersede either “variety” or “mystery” when determining what lifestyles were acceptable. Third, said Kirk, “civilized society requires orders and classes,” and further “society longs for leadership.” Here Kirk began to get at one of the most vexing dilemmas for conservatives: the apparent contradiction between freedom and order. How society can achieve a balance between the two poles remains a problem for each new generation of conservatives. Fourth Kirk reminded readers that “property and freedom are inseparably connected, and that economic leveling is not economic progress.” Borrowing from the Founding Fathers as well as from English conservative thinkers, Kirk demonstrated that economic opportunity created freedom. But opportunity was very different from equalization, a utopian value that realists knew was impossible to attain. Fifth an individual must “put a control upon his will and his appetite”; it was only through “tradition and sound prejudice” that people would control their “anarchic impulses.” This desire to revert to a simple life spoke to the same concerns as Kirk’s third point, where the rhythms of the agrarian world had defined honesty, and similar environmental and internal restraints would ground the twentieth century in timeless values. Finally Kirk noted that conservatives needed to recognize “that change and reform are not identical.” For example, when liberals tried to level society economically or politically, they failed to comprehend that such change could never improve the whole as they hoped. Rather humans would become more dependent on one another, in effect violating the first, second, and fourth tenets of Kirk’s canon, and thus never achieve the independence of thought and action (aided by God and the distrust of too much freedom) that defined the apotheosis of a civilized society. Society could never—nor should it ever—be perfect. But following Kirk’s guidelines Americans could perhaps move the country in that direction.¹⁷

Appearing at a time when he could bridge the gap between prewar and postwar conservatism, Kirk laid the foundation for the next generation of conservative intellectuals—and politicians. Kirk did not remain embedded in the beliefs of the prewar old Right but instead chose to shine a new light on American political philosophy. Just as the aforementioned events affected millions of

Americans by showing them that the world had changed drastically, Kirk understood that the world was entering a new era, which required a reinvigorated set of guidelines. Moreover Kirk was also one of the first to show conservatives that one could remain an intellectual while still acting and thinking constructively about practical politics. In the years following the debut of *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk wrote a syndicated column about American politics, contributed a column called "From the Academy" to *National Review*, and served as an adviser to a number of politicians.¹⁸ Forty years after *The Conservative Mind*, one historian of the intellectual movement went so far as to say, "Above all, it stimulated the development of a self-conscious conservative intellectual movement in the early years of the Cold War. It is not too much to say that without this book we, the conservative intellectual community, would not exist today."¹⁹ Kirk helped provide the intellectual content for conservative popularizers to disseminate, which eventually proved that Americans could understand and adopt ideas formerly considered too esoteric and formal to enter the political mainstream.

The Conservative Mind influenced generations of conservatives, sparked a wave of interest among intellectuals, and led a number of new works that same year. Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community*, and Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* were all released in 1953, creating an instant required reading list for aspiring or committed conservatives.²⁰ Moreover these works showed conservatives that they could respond to liberals like Trilling and later Hofstadter. And yet, even with the declaration of canons by the most pedigreed conservative theorists in the country, most Americans did not know what conservatism was in 1955. The political philosophy was essentially new, and for all of Kirk's and others' implied permanence of their canons, in practical terms much of conservatism in the mid-1950s was defined by its opposition to liberalism. Nevertheless, with each argument created to counter liberal ideas, conservatives moved one step closer to more practical and applicable definitions of their ideology. Rather than simply accepting, for example, Kirk's definition of conservatism and then moving on, conservatives continued to search for methods by which they could apply his and others' theories. The fact that conservatives refused to accept a single interpretation of their philosophy meant that not only was it a dynamic and creative time to be a part of the intellectual and later the political forces, but it also served notice to those liberals who bothered to listen, giving them fair warning that here was a power with which they would someday have to reckon. Still no network linked the three strands of conservatism, and this lack of infrastructure appeared most obvious in the disjuncture between those who generated the theory and those who practiced it.

Unlike liberals, conservative intellectuals and political operatives did not work shoulder-to-shoulder. Among liberals, of course, Roosevelt had pioneered the

brain trust, drawing professors from Harvard and Columbia to Washington where they advised him on New Deal policies, which began a Democratic tradition that lasted for decades. But what intellectuals were publicly identified with, for example, Robert Taft? There is no single story of how conservative intellectuals and politicians began collaborating, although three discrete steps greatly contributed to the process. First the postwar events that signaled such a drastic change made an impact on intellectuals and politicians alike. Next such men as Kirk, Taft, Buckley, and William Rusher learned to traverse between areas traditionally reserved for either theoretical or political writing and action. Finally a small but growing number of individuals who made their living lecturing to and writing for a mass audience began to study and adopt the ideas of conservative intellectuals. These popularizers played a key role in disseminating information to audiences, whose members then helped spread the word even further. But as the events took place, it was left to Kirk, Buckley, and others to show that they were cognizant of immediate developments and had something to say about them. Conservatism was beginning to descend from the ivory tower.

Conservative Challenge to Containment

The decade between 1945 and 1955 was a pastiche of events that, when seen by conservatives, comprised a bleak picture: American influence abroad seemed to crumble before policymakers' eyes, and at home "un-American" activities and troubles multiplied with each new controversy. With the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War most Americans hoped to regain stability and predictability in their lives. For the previous sixteen years normalcy had been rare, upstaged by the depression, a new activist government that created a welfare state, and finally entry into World War II, ending a twenty-year period of unwavering isolationism. When the less-than-mythical Harry S. Truman replaced Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945, Americans came to realize that the postwar world would not be joined seamlessly to what had come before. Truman's dealings with the Soviets at Potsdam and his use of the atomic bomb three weeks later gave reason for optimism: shrugging off prewar isolationism, the United States, finally taking its proper place in world affairs, would lead the postwar world.

Little, however, seemed to go right. America "lost" China when the communist revolution led by Mao Tse-tung ended with the U.S. decision to curtail military aid to Chiang Kai-shek. Not only had the Democrats failed to live up to their purported vision of a democratic world, but they had let the planet's largest country fall victim to that vision's antithesis. Although Truman had issued in 1947 his Truman Doctrine, which stated that communism would be opposed on all fronts by using economic and military aid, hot spots still flared and real wars broke out. When North Korea invaded South Korea on June 24, 1950, the

United States became involved under the aegis of the United Nations, a strategy designed to avoid a direct confrontation with the Soviets.

Fears of communism manifested themselves in nearly all parts of society, trickling down to average citizens, who came to expect episodes like the Hiss trial or the Rosenberg case to present themselves on a somewhat regular basis. Politicians, most famously Joseph McCarthy, had exploited these fears, which led some observers to decry the “irresponsible” conservatives. But even responsible conservatives like Robert Taft were, as one friend recalled, “rabid on the subject of communism. Just the word would make him furious about it.”²¹ Yet anticommunism was a confused patchwork of opinions, sometimes contradictory or formed without an obvious rationale. By 1954 only 5% of Americans believed that communists could practice communism and remain loyal Americans.²² Conversely, less than 1% of those surveyed worried about the internal communist threat enough to mention it when describing what kinds of things worried them in their day-to-day lives.²³ And 87% of Americans felt they had never known anyone who was or who they suspected to be a communist.²⁴ Still Americans did not need to act rationally in order to justify their fears, and although most conservatives did not deliberately hope to increase paranoia surrounding communism, they took advantage of the anxiety nonetheless.

Perhaps the most important predicament that creators of postwar conservatism had to confront was how to reconcile so many different definitions of what outsiders thought was a single belief system. In other words, what was “conservatism,” and what might it look like in ten years? These questions mattered since most scholars—and many political operatives—believed that in the early 1950s conservatism was being *created*, whereas liberalism simply existed as (liberals believed) a combination of American heritage and the product of decades of Democratic rule. This “invention” of conservatism gave conservatives themselves a chance to figure out what they believed, and it was not long before a range of ideas found their place in the conservative pantheon. One opportunity to define the ideology more explicitly presented itself in 1950, when a relatively little known conservative challenged one of the luminaries of liberal foreign policy, George Kennan.

When the Cold War began at the end of World War II the question that dominated U.S. foreign policy was how to preserve American interests abroad and help free-market democracies expand across the globe while not pushing the Soviets too far. By 1947 the Truman administration seemed to have its answer: containment. First coined by State Department official George F. Kennan in his “long telegram” from Moscow and then in a *Foreign Affairs* article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” (which Kennan signed “X,” giving rise to its more common title, “The X Article”), containment was predicated on the belief that communism carried the seeds of its own destruction. If democracies around the

world could prevent its spread and restrict the ideology to those areas already possessed by the Soviets (and later Chinese), soon the red dominion would crumble under its own weight. Kennan became the darling of the liberals; not only was his analysis perceptive because it elegantly articulated what many State Department and foreign policy analysts had already been thinking, but it was also a strategy that did not seem to require America to go to war in order to oppose and eventually defeat communism. Many conservatives, however, believed that waiting was akin to appeasement, a comparison that invariably triggered memories of the 1938 Munich Conference, where the British and French acceded to Hitler's demands, which exposed their weaknesses and ensured the invasion of Poland.

The burden of the conservative response to containment fell on a young philosophy professor at New York University named James Burnham. Like some others who composed the intellectual Right in the early 1950s, Burnham had begun his political career as a member of the far Left during the 1930s. Born in 1905 and educated at Princeton and Oxford, Burnham worked with communist unions in Detroit and eventually became a hardcore Trotskyite. Toward the end of the 1930s, however, Burnham became disillusioned with Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union and simply could not accept Trotsky's explanation that the autocratic leader and the conditions he imposed were an "aberration."²⁵ The Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Soviet war with Finland both helped assure Burnham that he had assumed correctly, and his conversion from leftist to rightist continued for the rest of the decade. By the late 1940s he was satisfied that the ruthless communists would stop at nothing to achieve their goals, and by the early 1950s he was decidedly in the conservative camp.²⁶

In many ways Burnham was like Kirk: a transitional figure between the old and new Right. Decidedly not a libertarian, Burnham opposed military demobilization after the war and believed that conscription was necessary if the country were to resist the communists seriously. The government had a crucial role to play, decided Burnham, and if that meant impinging upon some people's rights in order to guarantee safety for the vast majority, then so be it. In his 1947 book, *The Struggle for the World*, Burnham urged the government to outlaw the American Communist party.²⁷ When Burnham turned his sights on Kennan's policy of containment, he continued moving in a direction that signaled increased reliance on concerted government power and a faith in leaders to make the right decisions. Burnham's refusal to join with the postwar isolationists and his willingness to apply the country's resources energetically meant that his ideas emerged as a viable alternative to Kennan or to what many conservatives thought of as an updated *sitzkrieg*.

The Coming Defeat of Communism spelled out Burnham's convictions about not only the present world political and military situations but also what needed to be done in the future to guarantee the survival of Western democracy. Now

that the war was over the world was at a crucial juncture: the United States was the only power left that could oppose the Soviets and Chinese. Germany, Japan, Great Britain, and France were all vanquished in one respect or another.²⁸ Since the war American foreign policy had avoided the absolute worst but had gained nothing for its caution. With the democracies of Europe in such a weakened state, could the United States really afford to maintain a defensive posture? Since containment was “a variant of the defensive,” and the “communist war for world control is not limited by formal declarations, but is continuous,” it was clear that a static strategy like containment could only mean disaster once the communists had started to overwhelm Europe.²⁹ America could not rely on Europe to defend itself; not only was it battered from the war, but in some cases it was questionable whether those democracies *wanted* to survive. A postwar openness toward fascism and communism in some countries forced Burnham to wonder how waiting for the Soviets to collapse—even as they used subversion to undermine neighboring countries’ governments and attitudes toward democracy—would be effective.

As an alternative to containment, Burnham suggested that the first acts of engagement be “untraditional” insurgency, using Soviet methods to beat them at their own game. Propaganda should be integrated into foreign policy as an essential element. In Soviet spheres like Poland and Czechoslovakia America should begin training and supplying guerrillas and recruiting refugees, exiles, and dissidents to spread unrest.³⁰ “Yielding, compromise, conciliation, always and invariably result in increased communist boldness, increased demands, further aggressions,” wrote Burnham.³¹ Although the “net trend” between 1946 and 1949 favored democracy, it remained to be seen what would happen next. It was America’s choice: “Does the United States *choose* to win? Can it make the necessary *decision*? Is it going to have, at the required tension, the *will* to survive?” Like much of the rest of his book, Burnham concluded on a hopeful note: “The defeat of communism, probable on the facts, is also *inevitable*, because there are enough determined men in the world—and their number grows daily—who have so resolved.”³² The implication, however, was clear: if the government did not change its strategy and instead kept those “determined men” hamstrung by the policy of containment, it would not matter how committed they actually were.

Although Burnham did not attempt to construct an ideological bridge between divisions of conservatism, the conservative and general community received his work favorably. In popular journals Burnham’s book created a stir. The *New York Times* devoted an interview to Burnham and two book reviews, including the front page of the *Sunday Book Review*. Most important, perhaps, was the work’s impact in the intellectual and foreign policy circles in Washington and New York. The *Washington Post* led off the debate with an editorial entitled “Burnham vs. Kennan.” Outlining Burnham’s argument, the editors praised his “incisive logic.”

Five months later the *Post* followed up with another editorial, this time detailing the split that had developed within the Departments of Defense and State between followers of Burnham and followers of Kennan. Francis P. Matthews, secretary of the navy, was a “Burnhamite,” while Dean Acheson, secretary of state, was an avowed “Kennanite.” At a speech in Boston Matthews reiterated Burnham’s theory of “preventative war” when he stated that the United States must be willing to pay “even the price of instituting a war to compel cooperation for peace.”³³ With the outbreak of war in Korea, said the editors, the Burnhamites must have felt that their argument had taken on new gravity. But the war did not change the editors’ opinions; it only served to strengthen their support for containment. Military actions should serve political ends, not the other way around, they said. But that was not what Burnham was really saying. He never claimed that diplomacy should be secondary to outright action. Rather if diplomacy failed or the enemy failed to heed warnings then action would have to be taken.

Not long after Burnham’s book was released in February 1950, the National Security Council drafted Document 68, which laid out the government’s Cold War aims and the solutions its authors thought would work best. NSC-68 called for a dramatic increase in the military budget and the provision of political and economic aid to free countries threatened by Soviet expansionism. The invasion of South Korea by North Korea seemed to validate the new plans, and soon the military budget began to skyrocket. By the fall of 1950 observers noticed that a new tone could be heard in the hallways of the Pentagon and in congressional offices. One of the first reports of such a change came in the *Wall Street Journal*, where the reporters seemed to have gotten wind of NSC-68 and the impact of Burnham’s theories on the NSC and other high-level decisionmakers. For many, the article implied, the Korean War had demonstrated that “it’s clear to us the Kremlin won’t hesitate to start a whole series of similar local fights. That could keep us on a war footing for decades. We’ve got to start pushing the iron curtain back, not just holding it steady.”³⁴

What worried policymakers most was the possibility of a protracted struggle that would cost Americans untold billions. In an unofficial Department of Defense study entitled “The Inadequacy of Containment,” the authors argued that containment relied too heavily on time and money, neither of which was a limitless commodity possessed by the West. The alternative was “aggressive containment,” which, when linked to an arms buildup, would possibly push the Soviets to economic and military crisis sooner rather than later. The Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were both based on Kennan’s theory of containment, argued the *Journal*, and now a new wave of officials looked to Burnham’s *Coming Defeat of Communism* as a potential solution to what could be a stalemate. Still Burnham’s theory contained one troubling aspect: his idea of preventative war was tough to defend, since no one could

suggest publicly that starting a war in order to prevent one was rational. Nevertheless Burnham had achieved his goal; his ideas had made it into the inner sanctum of military and political policy circles and finally had given conservatives an alternative to the liberalism of Kennan and containment.

Burnham's influence on the conservative community in the early 1950s is difficult to overestimate. His confidence in his ideas and his ability to tackle the symbol of the apotheosis of liberal foreign policy meant that nothing was out of reach. Senator Robert A. Taft echoed many of Burnham's ideas in his treatise on foreign policy published a year later, *A Foreign Policy for Americans*.³⁵ William Rusher, a young conservative who in the mid-1950s was about to embark on a long career as publisher of *National Review*, recalled that Burnham's book *The Web of Subversion*, published four years after *The Coming Defeat of Communism*, had a profound impact on him since it "put the facts of important Communist penetration of American life beyond serious doubt, regardless of one's opinion of Joseph McCarthy."³⁶ Throughout the early 1950s Burnham continued to influence policymakers, lecturing at the National War College, the Air War College, the Naval War College, and Johns Hopkins's School for Advanced International Studies. Burnham might also have worked for the Central Intelligence Agency; he at least served as a consultant for the agency, and he continued to write books and articles for such journals as the *American Mercury* and the *Freeman*.³⁷ And when Buckley decided to heed the advice of Kirk, Burnham, and others and begin a magazine to, in Burnham's words, reach "opinion-makers all over the country every week," Burnham was recruited as a senior editor of *National Review* with a regular column on foreign affairs, appropriately entitled "The Third World War."³⁸ By 1964, after Barry Goldwater's rise and electoral fall, Burnham could look back on the previous ten years and realize that an "idea in a few hundred heads" in the early 1950s now had millions of supporters.³⁹

Two Popularizers: Albert Wedemeyer and Raymond Moley

The first half of the 1950s was crucial to the formation of conservative attitudes toward the state, liberals, and the communist enemy. Although conservatives did not create a new activist agenda and formed few significant organizations designed to influence the Republican party, they did start building a system based on public gatherings built around a combination of intellectual exercises and shared knowledge of the ambient popular culture, creating, in effect, a nascent conservative political culture. Conservatives began stepping up their activities, hoping to bring their message to voters who perhaps had had enough of the New Deal and Truman. Some wrote for such periodicals as the *Freeman*, a libertarian magazine published by the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), and *Human Events*, originally published by isolationists beginning in 1944. Neither,

however, had large followings outside of a small group of intellectuals, but those who read either magazine were likely to be politically active. The constituency the postwar conservatives needed to reach consisted of those Republicans frustrated with the party's weaknesses who also realized that acting independently was futile or those Republicans who were minimally involved in the party yet felt that something was just not right about the country. Conservatives who wanted to change America could not target either postwar isolationists or libertarians; not only were both groups on the fringe of mainstream politics, but each was minuscule compared to the main body of potential conservatives. The question remained, then, how to energize dormant activists who could help usher in an era of politics the likes of which had not been seen for at least two decades.

To spread the word traditionalist conservatives turned to a method that had not only served them well for the past two centuries at least but also provided the face-to-face contact often necessary in the early stages of a political or social movement: they gave speeches. While talks were often keyed to a recent publication by a notable author or some other promotional gimmick, these conservatives took their jobs as town criers seriously. Speakers followed a circuit around the country; stopped in major cities, smaller towns, and college campuses; and addressed largely sympathetic audiences. The lecturers served to tie together percolating ideas while also reinforcing the notion that the listeners were on the right track. Anticommunism was the common bond among the speakers, cinching together events and theories that otherwise might have seemed disparate. There were exceptions, of course, but these political circuit riders knew they were on safe ground if they used communism as a common enemy.

In early 1952 Lieutenant General Albert C. Wedemeyer (U.S. Army, ret.) spoke to students of the University of Utah and Brigham Young University on the 102d anniversary of the creation of the University of Utah by Brigham Young. Wedemeyer, who was now serving as a vice president of a large corporation, had become familiar with virtually every important official in the U.S. government during his long and distinguished military career.⁴⁰ While Wedemeyer was still active in advising the military on matters like Korea, in public he had shifted his focus to examining the relationship between individual morality and political and social systems and what could be done to correct what he believed was a dangerous movement toward adopting ignoble positions vis-à-vis social relations and foreign policy. Not only was the enemy a threat, but so was the state. Here Wedemeyer faced the same dilemma conservative intellectuals did: how much power should be granted to the state, and how could it best be applied?

"The curse of our time," declared Wedemeyer, "is Caesarism—the usurpation by the State of the things belonging to the People."⁴¹ Incredibly Wedemeyer lashed out at his own government: "We must make our Government more responsive to the will of the people. We have suffered and sacrificed far too much under secret diplomacy and Government bureaucracy. All citizens must partici-

pate fully in all the processes of government, from the precinct to the White House and Congress.”⁴² Much of Wedemeyer’s vitriol, obviously, was aimed at the Democrats and the Truman administration—a thinly veiled call for Republicans to begin administering the country. Still, to hear such open criticism from a man who owed his career to serving a civilian government must have been surprising.

Wedemeyer’s philosophy was revealing in a number of ways. First and foremost his perception of the role of the federal government reflected how conservatives at this time balanced libertarianism and traditionalism in crude yet pragmatic ways. On domestic issues and the role of the military, the government was meant to stay out of the peoples’ way, letting citizens act as the check on “Caesarism.” But in terms of internal security and foreign policy, the government needed to remain strong and let its enemies know that it would not buckle under when challenged. The duality of libertarianism, or classical liberalism, and traditionalism demonstrated an uneasy coexistence with speakers like Wedemeyer trying to define where each belief system should be applied and under what circumstances. If anticommunism served as the glue joining the two types of conservatism, the bond held fast in some places, was tenuous in others, and was separating in others still. Yet, even though no one had told Wedemeyer to define conservatism, this speech—and many others like it—advanced the process a step or two. It would be up to other commentators to refine the relationships among traditionalism, anticommunism, and libertarianism, and often those pundits had, like Whittaker Chambers and Frank Meyer, traversed the range of political persuasions. Raymond Moley was one of those ideologues.

Following the publication of his book *How to Keep Our Liberty*, Moley embarked on a promotional tour, which coincided with the 1952 election.⁴³ As a professor of public law at Columbia in 1932, Moley was recruited by Franklin D. Roosevelt first to write campaign speeches and then to head up the brain trust, which set to work trying to solve the depression. In 1933 FDR appointed him as assistant secretary of state, a position he held for less than one year. Moley continued to assist FDR informally until 1936, writing speeches and advising the administration. Soon, however, Moley began to question the degree to which the government was trying to engineer society by controlling the economy, law, and social relations. The president, Moley realized, had concluded that in order to win reelection he would have to pander to urban voters and jettison the traditional rural constituency. But Moley must have known that American demographics were shifting; the 1920 census had registered the first urban majority ever, and interest groups such as African Americans and labor were increasingly demanding recognition and bargaining power. Equally important was the growth of the northern urban ethnic constituency during the 1920s and 1930s, when the children of nonvoting immigrants deepened the New Deal Coalition. Still in 1936 Moley made a decision that changed the rest of his life: “The sudden

shift in Roosevelt's policies and strategy in the 1935–1936 period meant to me the repudiation of Democratic Party principles of the past. Since I believed in supporting one of the two parties, I accepted the Republican Party as an alternative."⁴⁴ Moley returned to his position at Columbia and also became a columnist and contributing editor for *Newsweek*, a post that gained him a substantial following.

Moley railed against "planning," or trying to control the economy (and thus other aspects of society) by impinging upon the "natural" relations among businesses, employers, and employees and in the area of supply and demand. The temptation to control the economy often led to the "narcotic of authority," a delusion that Moley thought had captured Roosevelt and Truman and that led to the dangerous phenomenon of a loss of contrasting opinions within the White House. When a leader perceived himself to be without peer when making decisions, Moley believed, the propensity for "statism" increased but usually in the benign garb of welfare programs, controls on trade, and aid to interest groups (particularly unions), all of which guaranteed continued electoral support. Such corruption bred moral decay and contempt for authority, causing, obviously, a need to increase yet again the leader's control over the people. Moley believed that only a conservative response could challenge the increasingly powerful liberal ideology.

One month after Dwight Eisenhower's 1952 victory, Moley spoke to the National Coffee Association convention in Boca Raton, Florida, about "The New Conservatism."⁴⁵ Never one to mince words, Moley believed that not only were the Democrats driving the country into the ground, but that instead of economic downturns periodically endemic in a capitalist economy, the free-market system would be replaced by socialism, resulting not in immediate failure but in gradual and possibly permanent decay. Now that the Democrats had been ousted, however, what would help ensure the country's continued success and vitality? It was here that Moley invoked his "new conservatism."

According to Moley new conservatism meant "applying the best of the past," refusing alliances with minority factions, and realizing that it was in the best interest of conservatives to consolidate themselves into a single, powerful group. Leaving his audience with a series of observations about how conservatives could consolidate their power in the Republican party, Moley recommended that they look to President Eisenhower for leadership on all issues. Returning to the question his recent book posed, Moley asked conservatives how they expected to retain their liberty. Democracy entails some degree of risk, Moley reminded his audience, since "the very nature of liberty precludes a determination of exactly what will happen in the future," and while individuals may set goals for themselves, it was folly for a free society to try to achieve success by coercion. "The primary concern of conservatism—the old as well as the new conservatism—is to preserve human liberty that may be overlooked in our common use of the

term.” Liberty—as differentiated from freedom—has an intrinsic value separate from materialistic concerns. Without liberty, Moley advised, life itself has no value.

Although they could not know it, Moley’s audience had been treated to a forward-looking synopsis of much of conservatism’s direction over the next half decade or so. While Moley could not have predicted the events that coincided with the changes taking place on the right of the political spectrum (most immediately in response to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision), in broad, sweeping strokes he offered an outline of postwar conservative ideology in its infancy.⁴⁶ Like Wedemeyer, Moley had not been asked by anyone to attempt to define conservatism, yet he did just that. Both men not only suggested the range of popular conservative opinions circa 1952 but also analyzed which opinions did and did not jibe. The traditionalism the speakers articulated involved far more than just preserving the past and questioning the future. Its adaptation of libertarianism meant that even as the government was growing more complicated from the responsibilities it had assumed since the beginning of the welfare state in the 1930s, some Americans were rebelling against the trend of administrative growth that matched economic and demographic growth. The American experience in World War II had forever changed the country; the war alone cost twice as much as all government spending combined between 1789 and 1940. For the first time in its history the United States ran a deliberate deficit so that by the end of the war the government owed \$258 billion.⁴⁷ Conservatives questioned such Keynesian spending, however, and the Democrats’ willingness to continue what seemed like almost assured economic folly further strengthened their resolve to combat liberalism.

Conservatives’ fiscal restraint combined with a growing wariness toward the ever-increasing power of the state helped begin the process of integrating traditionalism and libertarianism, in which the individual remained the most important commodity.⁴⁸ Conservatives would have to prevail against encroachments by liberals, who hoped to continue expanding the reach of the government. And yet such invocations raised practical problems for the conservative community. How were they to oppose liberalism when they were far from united in their basic beliefs? Anticommunism could only take them so far before policies not involving internal or external security forced leaders to make decisions that would expose their various conservative leanings. The fact remained that in the early 1950s conservatism was not a political ideology with a number of equally legitimate interpretations, but it did possess a tiny grassroots base of support independent of that generated by the Republican party. Moreover the very act of Wedemeyer and Moley speaking to audiences symbolized the one-way, top-down nature of decisionmaking within conservative ranks. This is not to say, of course, that there *should* have been a grassroots conservative element at this time. That would signal a more united movement, something that did not yet exist. For all

intents and purposes conservatism at this time was an exercise reserved for politicians and intellectuals.

Wedemeyer and Moley, however, tested, applied, and revised conservative ideology, and they were surrounded by an array of intellectuals who kept them supplied with theories that could then be configured to sell to the mainstream public. But unlike other eras when intellectuals and activists conspired (either deliberately or by chance) to influence the masses, the circumstances of the Cold War reshaped both intellectuals' ideas and activists' implementation of those ideas. Sometimes the Cold War acted as a gatekeeper, limiting the public's exposure to certain ideas. At other times the standoff distorted circumstances, changing them to suit the needs of an administration or political party. In any case postwar conservatives continued to assemble the tools they needed to compete politically and socially with liberals, and as they gained confidence their dreams became more sweeping while their plans became more pragmatic.

Forced to grapple with such issues as how a conservative would be self-identified, what would define the differences among the various factions, and how they would create a movement to challenge liberals, conservatives took what had been older ideas, put them in relatively new packages, and tested them, preparing themselves for the struggles ahead. Liberals, on the other hand, did not face the equivalent challenges for another fifteen years. During the Eisenhower years they managed to make conservatives feel like illegitimate children, observers who merely commented on the action taking place in the main arena, which liberals controlled. As challengers, conservatives would need to define the terms of a new debate, something that could demonstrate how different the two ideologies really were. When such chances began appearing regularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, conservatives started seeking them out until, by the mid-1960s, they could choose their battles. In the early 1950s, however, opportunities were still rare.

Toward a Definition of Conservatism

A decade after the publication of *The Coming Defeat of Communism*, James Burnham took a blank sheet of paper and literally sketched out a contemporary political spectrum, diagramming where the country stood at the brink of a new decade. In the drawing's center, or "the Establishment," was Lyndon Johnson. To his immediate right was Eisenhower, and to his immediate left was Adlai Stevenson. Much farther to the left was John F. Kennedy, then Hubert Humphrey, after which Burnham grouped the socialists, communists, nihilists, and leftist anarchists. On the right, the equivalents were Harry F. Byrd and Barry Goldwater, followed by authoritarianism, fascism, racists, and finally, rightist anarchists.⁴⁹ Trying to define conservatism, Burnham then made lists: "conservative (in the full and conscious sense) persons," "conservative journals, newspapers,

magazines, and books,” and finally a set of “litmus propositions for Liberal-Conservative test.” While most of the people and publications named were predictable, Burnham’s litmus test was more interesting. Posing a series of true-false questions, Burnham hoped to clarify who was a liberal and who was a conservative by contemplating quandaries that indicated how one viewed the world. Such statements as “All forms of racial segregation and discrimination are wrong,” “Any interference with free speech and free assembly is wrong,” “There should be no interference with academic freedom,” “Everyone has the right to equal pay for equal work,” and “In deciding who is to be admitted to schools and universities, any quota system based on color, religion, family or similar factors is wrong” all attempted to define how people decided how society worked best. In Burnham’s opinion, “A full-blown Liberal will mark ever[y] one of these thirty-three sentences True. A consistent Conservative will mark many of them, probably a majority and possibly even all of them, False.”⁵⁰ Like his contemporaries, Burnham was still hard at work trying to define a set of beliefs that would allow conservatives to identify themselves and others, thus closing the political and cultural gap with liberals.

In their small circle Burnham and his colleagues had brought the battle lines into high relief. Not only were they refining what they believed, but they were beginning to agree with each other on a number of universalities and, perhaps most important, were looking for examples in America to justify their ideas. The gap between theory and reality was shrinking with each new addition to the canon. Moreover while many of the postwar conservative tenets remained consistent from year to year after their initial definitions, their authors and agents refused to let them stagnate, applying and reapplying them to situations everyday Americans confronted in their lives. Although circumstances did not conspire to provide optimal conditions until the late 1950s and early 1960s, conservatives were not deterred and continued to search for ways to demonstrate that their ideas had consequences. Burnham’s views of foreign policy were perhaps the most obvious examples of postwar conservatism and how it could revamp the way America responded to a changing world order. By the end of the 1950s conservatives were applying similar beliefs to domestic policy, and although their voices were quiet at first, within a few years the handful of advocates had garnered millions of adherents. While such conversions were still a relatively long way off in the early to mid-1950s the first steps had been taken, perhaps the most important being the willingness of the Establishment to take conservative ideas seriously. That Burnham became a contender against Kennan, Kirk against Louis Hartz, Buckley against Lionel Trilling (eventually), Chambers against Alger Hiss, and Moley against Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., meant that these alternatives to the status quo were beginning to be seen as *legitimate* alternatives.

Anticommunism sparked the birth of the postwar conservative movement. While the New Deal Democrats had run rampant over Republican challengers

for more years than any conservative cared to remember, without the pressure of communism threatening their way of life, conservatives could have continued living their quiet, isolated existences under Democratic rule. First in the early and mid-1950s and later again periodically events came in series, where their combined impact created a kind of synergy, which helped the parts add up to much more than the whole. Taken alone, any one of the occurrences was probably not enough to cause great alarm. But when one episode was followed within weeks or months by another, some Americans questioned the veracity of their leaders. In this intersection of policy, individual values, intellectual maturation, and the appearance of new leaders, conservatives began to understand that the waiting had to end and the action had to begin.

Ideologues set the stage in the first half of the 1950s. As their ideas became accepted by those who followed politics and were conservative, the fact that liberals gave battle to the pioneers meant that if average Americans decided to follow, they would not be seen as crackpots on the fringe. But what would activate those individuals about whom the intellectuals thought and wrote? While speeches and articles helped, they would never convince voters to do more than simply accept party politics. For a real conservative change to occur, something (or some things) would have to transform those voters from passive to active, would have to encourage them to demand a new agenda for a new America. While leaders for this movement were not quick to appear, the events that would help spark such a transformation were just around the corner.