

A Quick History of the Conservative Movement in Minnesota and the Nation: Further Proof That Books, Magazines, Think Tanks, and Other Ideas Have Consequences

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The following essay is adapted from a speech Mitch Pearlstein gave in November to Mindstretch, a St. Paul-based group of retired executives, judges, scholars and other leaders. Pearlstein is Center of the American Experiment founder and president emeritus.

Working Premise

You kindly asked that I speak about the rise of the conservative movement in Minnesota and the rest of the United States since the turn of mid-century. Before tracing that fifty- to sixty-year history, though, it's essential to briefly—which is not to say, simply—define what I mean by “conservatism.” Here are a few, not always consistent conceptions of that idea, ideology, and spirit.

Russell Kirk's 1953 book, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, was one of the early movement's seminal and cohering events. Of the very nature of conservatism, Kirk wrote this:

Any informed conservative is reluctant to condense profound and intricate intellectual systems to a few pretentious phrases. . . . Conservatism is not a fixed and immutable body of dogma, and conservatives inherit from Burke a talent for re-expressing their convictions to fit the times. As a working premise, nevertheless, one can observe here that the essence of social conservatism is *preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity (emphasis added)*.^[1]

This “working premise” almost certainly rings true with what most people (to the extent they think about it) understand conservatism to be about: respect and preservation of what has come before.

Building on that foundation a third of a century later, Kirk, in the foreword to a 1986 edition of his book, cited these two wonderful lines by Robert Frost:

Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.^[2]

I resonate to Frost's insight, as it perfectly reflects one of the key lessons from American Experiment's first few years in the early 1990s. I had grandly and naively assumed that the center would, every six weeks or so, come up with a brilliant idea for fixing a tough social or economic problem by taking advantage of a brand-new, free market, or otherwise conservatively sculpted idea. I exaggerate, but not by much.

What I quickly learned, however, was that there just weren't that many brand new (much less new and *brilliant*) ideas out there to be had. Rather, what I rapidly came to realize was that our major contribution as a conservative and free market organization was in re-stating and elaborating on *old* truths more so than in scrounging for new-fangled ones.

This respect for the past applied most obviously to our work regarding the breakdown of families from the 1960s onward as manifested by exploding out-of-wedlock and divorce rates. Writing and speaking ceaselessly, for example, about how children need two parents, both a mother and a father, was not exactly revolutionary thinking on our part. But given how timid many otherwise smart and brave observers had become because of politically correct intimidations, the center's well-publicized tenacity in advocating what had been commonly understood as commonsense verities was seen by many in the state and nation as positively courageous. Many people criticized us for such traditionalism, though many more applauded us—never mind that much of what we did back then was little more complicated than intellectually dressing up what most grandmothers would say intuitively about raising kids.

Just this past year, two British journalists, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, in their very good book, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*, continued fleshing out the idea of a uniquely American brand of conservatism this way:

The creed of Edmund Burke . . . can be crudely reduced to six principles: A deep suspicion of the power of the state; a preference for liberty over equality; patriotism; a belief in established institutions and hierarchies; skepticism about the idea of progress; and elitism. .

To simplify a little, the exceptionalism of modern American conservatism lies in its exaggeration of the first three of Burke's principles [suspicion of the state, preference for liberty, patriotism] and contradiction of the last three [belief in established institutions and hierarchies, skepticism about the idea of progress and elitism].^[iii]

One of the best examples of how modern American conservatism is incompletely aligned with Burke's principles was Ronald Reagan's optimism. Rather than being skeptical about the "idea of progress," one of Reagan's signature contributions was putting a sunny face on conservatism. It's "Morning in America," his commercials said. "We are the change," he said at the end of his presidency, referring to how the right, much more than the left, was eager to grapple with old problems in new ways.^[iv]

Other definitional complexities abound.

Reagan may have nixed a dour face, but that doesn't mean that less exuberant gentlemen like Judge Robert Bork aren't conservatives in good standing.

Differences on major policy issues between and among different schools of thought on the right are often profound.

The Wall Street Journal editorial page, for instance, has a markedly more laissez faire view of immigration than *National Review*.

Libertarians tend to have a radically different view of drugs and the “war” against them than, say, Bill Bennett, who once served as the first President Bush’s drug czar.

And when it comes to foreign policy, the gulf between bona fide conservatives such as the supposedly “neoconservative” Richard Perle and the neo-isolationist Pat Buchanan resembles the Persian Gulf itself.

Intricacies and varieties like these notwithstanding, my own definition of who’s conservative is neither demanding nor exclusive. Beyond being someone who is respectful of tradition; dutiful to the lasting cogency of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; jealous of freedom and my preferred locution of “ordered liberty”; mindful of something powerful in the social air called “culture”; and skeptical of the ability of government to regularly accomplish what liberals think ought to be a snap 24/7, I’m fine with the idea that a conservative is just about anyone who chooses to call himself one. The same holds for just about anyone who gravitates more to conservative books and magazines than to other kinds. Or men and women who have at least a sneaking suspicion that life in most Red States is saner and more felicitous than life in most Blue States. No hard or orthodox litmus tests; doors to the club swing freely.

Roots

The United States has always been conservative in various ways. Compare, for example, the American and French revolutions for early evidence of a distinctive order and stability on this side of the Atlantic. This is not to say, however, the term “conservative” itself has always been viewed in the comparatively positive way it currently is.

Herbert Hoover, for example, considered himself a “true liberal,”[v] though it must be understood that in economics, what is today often defined as “conservative” —a belief in freest possible markets – previously was called “classical liberalism.” I don’t know what Calvin Coolidge called himself.

Here are Micklethwait and Woodridge again:

When Dwight Eisenhower came to power in 1952, the American right was on the wane. Its two great ideas – laissez-faire at home and isolationism abroad – had been put to flames by the Great Depression and the Second World War. The Republican party was in the hands of the Northeast’s patrician establishment – the party of Henry Cabot Lodge, Nelson Rockefeller, and a self-proclaimed “moderate progressive” senator, Prescott Bush, who would found a political dynasty. Eisenhower prided himself on being above ideology (“His smile was his philosophy,” a contemporary observed), and he appointed Earl Warren, a notoriously liberal Republican to the Supreme Court. Richard Nixon and Jack Kennedy ran on almost identical platforms in 1960.

Going back not very long ago to the 1970s and '80s, neoconservative scholars (more on this subspecies in a moment) such as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz strove to cleanse and resurrect the word “capitalism,” which had fallen on hard and unappealing times in many precincts. Not unrelated, I served on Gov. Al Quie’s staff in 1981-82 and I recall the conscious decision made in the administration to talk specifically about improving Minnesota’s “Jobs Climate” as opposed to its “Business Climate,” as the latter was thought to be much less politically attractive to many rank-and-file voters during those tough economic days. Such sensitivity and nervousness about all-American words and ideas such as “business” and “capitalism” are no longer the case and haven’t been since the economy started rolling under Ronald Reagan a very short time later.

A conservative “movement,” however, is different from a nation or a state’s conservative backdrop and atmospherics, and I’ve been asked to talk specifically about what has come to be known as the conservative *movement* since approximately World War II. One definition of a political or social movement is a “conscious, collective, organized attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by noninstitutional means.”^[vi] A movement, in other words, is more than business as usual. It’s more than the persistence of venerable ideas—be they right, left, or in-between. A movement is driven in the two main senses of the term.

It might be useful to think here in terms of “upper case” and “lower case” conservatives. The former refers to the passionate and purposeful men and women—the officers and devoted troops—who continue to push hard for conservative policies and politicians. They’re the essential activists. The latter term, lower-case conservatives, refers to the many millions of citizens whose participation in the cause is mostly limited to voting for conservative policies and politicians. I’m thinking here specially of voters, starting with the Reagan campaign in 1980, who have warmed up to conservative candidates and ideas in ways they and their parents would have thought impossible—oftentimes politically traitorous—not terribly long ago. Or, at the very least, I’m picturing voters who are not put off and frightened by conservative stands in ways they often were previously. The conservative movement that has reshaped American politics and shoved its center of intellectual gravity to the right has needed both upper-case and lower-case partisans: leaders and followers, in what has been a remarkable redefining and rerouting of a fringe current to mainstream.

Three Streams

Speaking of streams, I’m indebted to Irving Kristol for the following conceptualization of the three main waves and schools of American conservatism since the Second World War.^[vii]

First, he writes, was the “renewal of what might be called traditional conservatism, centered around William F. Buckley’s *National Review* and having the goal [as noted above] of reprogramming the Republican party into a solidly conservative political instrument.” This led to Barry Goldwater’s presidential run in 1964 and what Kristol describes as the “ensuing electoral debacle.” That crushing defeat, however, “had the

result of consolidating and expanding conservative influence within the Republican party.” Much in the same way, Kristol points out, that George McGovern’s massive loss in 1972 has shaped the Democratic Party ever since—though not nearly as victoriously.

Second, he writes, was the “influence of the neoconservative impulse.”

Originally, adherents of this take on the world “looked to the Democratic Party for political expression,” but realized by the mid-1970s that that was a “difficult” expectation to sustain, and they began a gradual, often reluctant, shift toward the Republican Party. The quarterly journal *The Public Interest* was the “focal point” of this neoconservative impulse, “though much of its impact was the result of its influence on the younger men and women who were ensconced in the editorial and op-ed departments of the *Wall Street Journal*.”

And third, has been the “emergence, over the past decades of religion-based, morally concerned, political conservatism.” In the long run, Kristol argues, this may be the most important stream of all. “Though the media persist in portraying the religious conservatives as aggressive fanatics, in fact their motivation has been primarily defensive – a reaction against the popular counter-culture, against the doctrinaire secularism of the Supreme Court, and against a government that taxes them heavily while removing all traces of morality and religion from public education”

Let me expand briefly on each.

1. *Traditional Conservatism*

The best place to start is with William F. Buckley’s Publisher’s Statement from the first issue of *National Review* magazine in 1955, when he famously talked about standing “athwart history.”[viii] Please note several themes on which present-day politicians and others still dwell.

The launching of a conservative weekly journal of opinion in a country widely assumed to be a bastion of conservatism at first glance looks like a work of supererogation, rather like publishing a royalist weekly within the walls of Buckingham Palace. It is not that, of course; if *National Review* is superfluous, it is so for a very different reason: It stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it.

Buckley saw the ethos and temper of the times as liberal (which is not to say classically liberal).

Conservatives in this country—at least those who have not made their peace with the New Deal, and there is serious question whether there are others – are non-licensed nonconformists; and this is a dangerous business in a liberal world, as every editor of this magazine can readily show by pointing to his scars.

The statement finishes this way:

[We offer], besides ourselves, a position that has not grown old under the weight of gigantic, parasitic bureaucracy, a position untempered by the doctoral dissertations of a generation of Ph.D.s in social architecture, unattenuated by a thousand vulgar promises to a thousand different pressure groups, uncorroded by a cynical contempt for human freedom. And that, ladies and gentlemen, leaves us just about the hottest thing in town.

I've long been fascinated by Bill Buckley. Growing up in Queens, I worked in his campaign for mayor of New York City in 1965. Since I was seventeen at the time and Buckley didn't get close to winning, I obviously didn't have much of an impact. Still, my participation was enough to make a strong impression, not just on me, but also my family, who assumed—or at least hoped—that I was only going through a phase.

My appreciation for him and his career falls into two categories.

The first has to do with his bravery and success in defining a modern conservative movement that has no place or patience for racists, anti-Semites, and other assorted bigots and crackpots. Now, it goes without saying that bigots and crackpots have never been members in good standing of any decent American movement or school of political thought, be it right, left, or sideways. But Buckley performed a pivotal service, starting at mid-century, by making it clear that anyone who thought that President Eisenhower, for example, was an active agent of the Soviet Union, as well as anyone who exhibited inordinate interest in international bankers, particularly of the Jewish variety, need not apply to any club he was in the midst of organizing.

The second set of reasons why Buckley has been critical flows from his civility. If the question is how I—and, by extension, American Experiment—have profited most of all from his work, it may well have to do with the hospitality he has extended to those holding other points of view. Needless to say, many of those viewpoints, after an hour of slow cooking on his old *Firing Line* television show, emerged fricasseed. But the men and women who came bearing those other ideas were always welcomed as guests and good friends, not as the main course itself.

Overall, Buckley has correctly understood what conservatism ought to be about: not just economics, but faith; not just policy, but the very culture we breathe. He deserves to be understood as one of the two most important architects of modern American conservatism. Ronald Reagan, *surprise*, being the other.

Another very good source for understanding the rise of the conservative movement in the first two decades after WW II is *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, an excellent and very fair book by a political liberal, Rick Perlstein, who's no relative (he spells his name wrong), though I would be pleased if he were.[ix] Perlstein's subject is captured perfectly in two opening epigrams.

“Politics ain't bean bag,” by a Mr. Dooley.

And Jonathan Swift's stricture (talk about recent themes again):
“It is the folly of too many to mistake the echo of a London coffee house for the voice of the kingdom.”

Perlstein offers quotes like these from otherwise bright people after Goldwater's defeat.

“He has wrecked his party for a long time to come.” Scotty Reston in the *New York Times*.

“The election has finished the Goldwater school of political reaction.” Richard Rovere in *The New Yorker*.

“This is as surely a liberal epoch as the late 19th Century was a conservative one.” James MacGregor Burns.

“The election results of 1964 seemed to demonstrate Thomas Dewey's prediction about what would happen if the parties were realigned on an ideological basis: ‘The Democrats would win every election and the Republicans would lose every election.’” Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

As Perlstein puts it, all this fundamentally wrongheaded analysis, was “one of the most dramatic failures of collective discernment in the history of American journalism.”[x] In the history of academic scholarship, too.

In a 2001 interview on C-SPAN's *Booknotes*, Perlstein said the following about what might be described as a hard-clenching ideological bite that persists in the movement.

Conservatism [during the Goldwater period] was a crusade. It was a struggle for the soul of Western civilization. . . . Lyndon Johnson might have had a mile wide of popularity, but it really was ultimately an inch deep, whereas people would send Goldwater telegrams as he was preparing for the [1964] convention: “I'd give my marrow, my bones for you. I'll stand by you like a soldier in combat.” These were people who believed that liberalism had to be stopped, that we needed to take a firm, belligerent stand against the Soviet Union. They didn't think it was just a matter of personal preference, but, literally, a matter of the survival of Western civilization. If you believe that, you have no problem licking a couple of envelopes to help the cause.[xi]

The 1950s and '60s were notable for confirming the intellectual and very practical conviction that ideas have consequences – with that tradition very much continuing. In addition to Buckley's work, several books defined and propelled a nascent conservative movement. These included the anti-statist, classically liberal, libertarian (take your pick) *The Road to Serfdom* by the Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek, which actually was originally published in wartime England in 1944.[xii] Similarly, *Capitalism and Freedom*, by the American economist Milton Friedman, with its seminal discussion of school vouchers.[xiii] Whittaker Chambers's huge (in various senses of the term) anti-communist autobiography, *Witness*.[xiv] According to one of his biographers, Chambers “was not just the witness against Alger Hiss, but was also one of the articulators of the modern conservative philosophy, a philosophy that has something to do with restoring the spiritual values of politics.”[xv] And as mentioned, *The Conservative Mind*,

by Russell Kirk, which put American conservatism in historic context. At least that's what a jacket blurb says, as I can't say I've ever read it myself. Kirk's just not my style.

One should also add here *Conscience of a Conservative*, which was billed as written by Barry Goldwater, but was really ghosted, and which sold more than three million copies by the time of Goldwater's presidential run in 1964.[xvi]

2. *Neoconservatism*

A significantly different strain of conservatism, tagged "neoconservatism," emerged in the 1960s and '70s. While few of the so-called neoconservatives of the period ever seemed to welcome the label, it was a more helpful than confusing one.

As teased above, neoconservatism is associated with the intellectuals who either started or were soon-after involved with *The Public Interest*, which started in 1965. People like Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Pat Moynihan, and James Q. Wilson. Men and some women, more precisely, who were old-time liberals and even quite leftist in their youth; disproportionately Jewish and originally from New York; and social scientists by profession. According to Irving Kristol (the chief editor), they had no real affinity for *National Review's* approach to conservatism, which they saw as too anti-New Deal. Still, they had grown increasingly skeptical of many of the assumptions that guided Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the War on Poverty. They also were angered by what was happening on campuses at the time and what was happening in the culture more broadly. "The Zeitgeist of the 1960s," Kristol has written, "was, in retrospect, really quite bizarre." [xvii] He also has been credited with this exquisite definition: "A neoconservative is liberal mugged by reality." [xviii]

Roughly during this time, Norman Podhoretz, and, thereby, *Commentary*, the monthly magazine of political and cultural affairs he then edited, were also moving right. It was in *Commentary*, for example, in 1979, that Jeane Kirkpatrick, a Georgetown University political scientist and Democrat, wrote her celebrated essay, "Dictatorships & Double Standards." [xix] Goes the story, the piece brought her to the attention of presidential candidate Ronald Reagan, who, not much more than a year later, named her U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Barely minutes after that, she was a full-fledged conservative folk hero.

Kirkpatrick wrote "Dictatorships & Double Standards" when many on the left viewed the United States as perhaps the greatest source of evil in the world instead of its greatest source of good. (Much like now.) In Iran, the Shah had just fallen, though Islamist radicals had not yet kidnapped scores of Americans at the U.S. embassy in Tehran, holding them hostage until the very day, 444 days later, that Ronald Reagan succeeded Jimmy Carter as president. War was under way in Nicaragua between the seriously flawed but American-aligned Somoza regime and the Moscow- and Havana-backed Sandinistas. The Soviets were expanding their reach and influence, not just in Central America, but also in the Caribbean, Afghanistan, South Africa, and the Horn of Africa. All the while, according to Kirkpatrick, the United States, under the Carter administration, had "never tried so hard and failed so utterly to make and keep friends in the Third World." Here's one quote from her essay:

Inconsistencies are a familiar part of politics in most societies. Usually, however, governments behave hypocritically when their principles conflict with the national interest. What makes the inconsistencies of the Carter administration noteworthy are, first, the administration's moralism – which renders it especially vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy; and second, the administration's predilection for policies that violate the strategic and economic interests of the United States. The administration's conception of national interest borders on doublethink: it finds friendly powers to be guilty representatives of the status quo and views the triumph of unfriendly groups as beneficial to America's "true interests."

Staying with foreign policy, a half-dozen years later in 1985, Irving Kristol once more – along with advisory board colleagues such as Jeane Kirkpatrick, Henry Kissinger, and Harvard's Samuel Huntington—started another journal, this one focusing on American foreign policy, called *The National Interest*. Its editors described its purpose this way: *The National Interest* will be characterized as conservative. And so it is, though only in the sense that, these days, the assumptions from which it proceeds are more congenial to conservatives than to anyone else. These assumptions are:

[T]he primary and overriding purpose of American foreign policy must be to defend and advance the national interest of the United States (an interest that encompasses the values and aspiration of the American people, as well as their security from external threat and their material well-being).

[For] better or worse, international politics remains essentially power politics, and that the efficacy of military power in the conduct of foreign policy remains undiminished.

[And] the Soviet Union constitutes the single greatest threat to America's interests, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Kristol and his associates went on to write: "As recently as two decades ago, there was a consensus on these assumptions. Indeed, they were regarded as truisms. Today they are not. Over recent years each has been rejected or challenged." For instance, the idea of the "national interest" has been challenged in the name of allegedly higher goals such as "peace, world order, human rights, and the global abolition of poverty."

A final word is needed on how the term neoconservative has taken on a more restricted meaning during the George W. Bush years. The label, which initially had a mainly domestic quotient, is now used mostly in reference—rarely with admiration—to supporters of the president's aggressive approach to fighting terror internationally. People like Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Elliott Abrams, and Bill Kristol, the latter of whom doubles as Irving's son and the editor of the

influential magazine *The Weekly Standard*.

The intellectual patron saint of the current, relatively younger wave of neoconservatives is often said to be Leo Strauss, a German-born political philosopher who taught at the University of Chicago in the 1950s and '60s and who died in 1973. Nasty critics say things such as this: “Strauss believed that the essential truths about human society and history should be held by an elite, and withheld from others who lack the fortitude to deal with truth. Society, Strauss thought, needs consoling lies.”[xx]

Less-conspiratorial observers say things such as this: “The *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Boston Globe*, among others, have sounded the alarm: The Bush administration, particularly its foreign policy team, is in the grip of a coterie of neoconservative intellectuals who are themselves in the grip of the antidemocratic and illiberal teachings of Leo Strauss . . . [Accusations like these] are nonsense, and in part vicious nonsense. Yet the ideas that the accusations pervert are those of Strauss, and when those ideas are restored to their true shape they can be seen as articulating core neoconservative convictions. Strauss was not an elitist – but he was a lover of excellence.”[xxi]

Strauss has been influential, sure enough. But put me with the non-cabalist crowd.

3. *Religious (and Social) Conservatism*

Given that the United States is often described as the most religious democracy in the world, or that G. K. Chesterton famously said that America is a nation with the “soul of a church,” it’s not surprising that one of the main currents in the rise—or re-emergence—of American conservatism can be described as religious (or sometimes social or cultural) in inspiration, shape, and feel.

Still drawing on Irving Kristol’s analysis, religious conservatives in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s—who often were mistakenly categorized as exclusively evangelical and fundamentalist Christians—responded negatively and angrily to many of the same excesses that got neoconservatives (who tended to be more secular in spirit) all revved up: too much governmental spending; too much family breakdown; too many wild and crazy college campuses; too much cynicism about America’s inherent virtue; and too much blindness about the freedom-enhancing role the United States plays in the world.

But religiously animated activists and voters also were deeply offended by court decisions regarding school prayer, abortion, pornography, crime, and other issues. They were mad—and remain so—that “progressives” think it’s a super idea, for instance, to have condoms on display in public schools—but a perfectly horrid one that the Ten Commandments might be. Conservatively inclined men and women (both religious and more secular) grew increasingly angry that, no matter how hard they tried, their chances grew smaller and smaller when it came to erecting a firewall between their kids and what had become an all-pervasive and radically age-inappropriate popular culture. One of my favorite shorthand descriptions of this is by the talk show host and “Cultural Crusader,”

Michael Medved, who said at an American Experiment program several years ago, that no matter how much parents might try, when it comes to their protecting their children's innocence, there's no escaping Madonna. "I guarantee you there are Amish kids in Pennsylvania, there are Hasidic kids in Brooklyn who know who Madonna is." [xxii]

About this portion and stream of the story, Micklethwait and Woodridge write:

Evangelicals initially resisted the temptation to interfere in Caesar's world. In the early 1970s, ministers taught the importance of individual salvation, not collective action. "Preachers are not called to be politicians, but soul-winners," said Jerry Falwell. But Falwell and his cohorts found themselves dragged deeper and deeper into politics, provoked, as they saw it, by the country's downward spiral. "Satan had mobilized his forces to destroy America," Falwell explained later. "God needed voices raised to save the nation from inner moral decay." [xxiii]

It should be noted that until the mid-1970s, Christian Evangelicals had closer ties to the Democratic Party than to the Republican Party. Jimmy Carter, for instance, received more votes from evangelicals than did Jerry Ford. But according to Micklethwait and Woodridge, such religious conservatives "chafed at the Democrats' leftward drift."

Minnesota Conservatism

The last section on religious conservatism was shorter than the previous two on traditional conservatism and neoconservatism only because its segue to Minnesota conservatism is so direct. To the prairie we now go.

As opposed to a growing body of literature about the history of the conservative movement nationally, there is very little written about the rise of the movement in Minnesota. My search was by no means exhaustive, but the best I can figure, no one has ever written a reasonably comprehensive history of Minnesota conservatism that spans the last half-century. At least no one I've spoken to knows of any such study. And in preparation for this presentation, I've spoken to upwards of a dozen insightful men and women who have lived much of that history hands-on. [xxiv] Might they—despite the wide gamut of their respective right-of-center views—decipher a dominant thread in the birth and growth of the conservative movement in Minnesota? They very much do.

Cited constantly in our conversations was a clear-cut tie between the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 decision unilaterally legalizing abortion in *Roe v. Wade* and the takeoff of a particularly crisp (critics have other adjectives) conservative movement in Minnesota. Take away *Roe*, and conservatism in this state would have taken on a much different shape and edge over the last three decades.

Another frequent theme in our conversations dealt with Watergate. The analysis goes this way: because the Republican Party in Minnesota was so weakened at the time by Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, its infrastructure was ripe for a takeover by more conservative players energized by *Roe* and other events and ideas.

From the World War II era through much of the 1970s, the Minnesota Republican Party starred moderates such as Harold Stassen, Walter Judd, Elmer Andersen, Harold LeVander, Bill Frenzel, and Nancy Braatas. Middle-of-the-road party officials and activists like them, for example, delivered the state to President Jerry Ford when he was challenged by Ronald Reagan at the 1976 Republican National Convention.[xxv] Four years later, Minnesota was a solid Reagan state at the Republicans' national gathering in 1980.

Before *Roe* and its aftermath, several of the people I met with described conservatism in Minnesota in terms such as “anti-statist,” “disorganized,” not very concerned with social and “moral” issues, and truly not a “movement” in the high-threshold way we’ve been using the term. Rather, they described conservatism in the state back then as “green-eyeshaded” and “plain old commonsensical.”

Here’s where the story gets especially good. Recall the comment a few moments ago about how Christian evangelicals, through much of the 1970s, had closer ties nationally to Democrats than Republicans. The Minnesota analogue is that before *Roe*, the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party was just as likely to be hospitable to pro-life people as the Minnesota Republican party. Actually, the DFL might have been more so.

Consider – and if you didn’t live through it, be amazed by—this passage from *Minnesota Politics and Government*:

Before the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, Minnesota’s DFL party, with its heavily Roman Catholic base, was vaguely antiabortion in its platforms, while the Republican Party was assertively in favor of birth control and sex education in the schools. In 1974 the DFL reached agonizing ambivalence about abortion. One plank in that year’s platform declared support for a constitutional amendment recognizing “equal protection under the law to all human life from the moment of conception.” Two minority reports were filed with [this] ‘Human Life Amendment’ statement, one affirming support for *Roe v. Wade*, the other suggesting that abortion was too volatile for Democrats to talk about. Thus, in 1974, the DFL party’s position on abortion was “Yes,” “No,” and “Don’t talk about it.” Eventually, the ongoing stand of the Minnesota Republican party was firmly pro-life, whereas the DFL was just as firmly pro-choice.[xxvi]

Take Allen Quist, for example, the farmer and former legislator who unsuccessfully sought the governorship several times in the 1990s as a Republican, decisively outflanking much more old-school Republicans like Arne Carlson on the right each time. What politically provoked Quist twenty years earlier? The *Roe* ruling, most surely. But in a recent conversation, he said it wasn’t merely the matter of abortion itself, but what he and many neighbors in southern Minnesota condemned as the Supreme Court’s usurpation of state and local rights in making that and other decisions; what they saw as the unconstitutional activism of the High Court. Or more to the triggering point of his own activism, what he described as its “judicial tyranny.”

Quist said he went to his very first political caucus in 1974, just a year after *Roe*, and he estimates that fully two-thirds of the men and women there were attending their

first one, too. It was a Republican caucus, as they saw the pro-life faction in the DFL as too weak.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s he and a sizable number of other hard-driving conservatives had been elected to the Minnesota Legislature. I personally recall this period well, as I was on Gov. Al Quie's staff back then. And while, by any accepted standard, Al Quie was a conservatively inclined fellow, the new breed of conservatives I'm talking about here—people like Quist, Cal Ludeman, Glen Sherwood, and an earlier version of Dave Jennings – often gave the Republican Quie the hardest of times. This was especially the case as he sought to rescue the state from budget shortfalls that, in their inflation-adjusted size and timing, may have been more staggering than anything faced by Tim Pawlenty in his first two years as governor.

Once *Roe* raised the salience of abortion and related “life” issues, and as the ideological differences between the two parties, both nationally and in Minnesota, grew larger, pro-life people unsurprisingly found a more comfortable home in the Republican Party. Equally unsurprising, pro-choice voters found a more comfortable home in the Democratic Party. As a product of these shifts, conservatives, along with their movement, came to stand out more powerfully and concentrated on the political landscape. But if, in the sweep of American history, a few decades are not much time at all, it was not very long ago when a presumed liberal victory (*Roe*) led paradoxically to a long and continuing streak of conservative wins. We'll return to a not unrelated irony, about same-sex marriage, below.

A Half-Dozen Concluding Points

A fast half-dozen reinforcing and amending points to close.

- On occasion, I'm asked why I'm conservative. This is not the spot for anything approaching an adequate recitation, but I've long been of the mind that right-leaning scholars and other observers are much more likely than their left-leaning counterparts to deal bravely and realistically with tough and politically sensitive social issues such as those embracing poverty, race, academic failure, and family breakdown. Conservatives, in other words, are generally more likely than liberals to recognize the importance of personal responsibility and less likely to drown in victimology and other forms of politically correct quicksand.[xxvii]

- Who on the left, for example, has written books over the last generation that (1) have been as acute in grasping the true roots and contours of vexing social problems; (2) who have been as effective in changing elite and popular assumptions about such problems; and (3) who have been as influential in shaping legislation and policies than conservative writers like Charles Murray,[xxviii] Myron Magnet,[xxix] and Marvin Olasky?[xxx] Murray's *Losing Ground* was a strong and enlightened spur to effective welfare reform finally signed into law by Bill Clinton in 1996. And Magnet's *The Dream and the Nightmare* and Olasky's *The Tragedy of American Compassion* have had much to do with sculpting George W. Bush's beliefs about the importance of faith-based pro-

grams in helping people in often severe need. On questions of race, who has been more acute and ultimately helpful than right-of-center scholars such as Thomas Sowell,[xxxii] Shelby Steele,[xxxiii] and John McWhorter?[xxxiiii]

• Staying a moment with matters of race, ethnicity, sex, and the like, I was struck—albeit not surprised—by the lineup of conservative writers that beat the stuffing out of Sen. Trent Lott two years ago when he said that the United States would have been better off if Strom Thurmond, then a segregationist, had been elected president in 1948. It was an abysmally dumb and racially suspect thing to say.

Two things in particular need to be said about the conservative columnists and op-writers who wrote there was no excuse for what Lott said and that he should resign as Senate majority leader, which he did soon after. The first is that with few exceptions, right-of-center writers routinely agreed that he had to go. Contrary to liberal articles of faith and prejudice, good conservatives were every bit as offended by Lott's comment as were good "progressives."

The second thing to say about the conservative writers who criticized Lott was that so many of them were women and minorities of various sorts themselves. In this instance, assaulted was the stereotype that conservative intellectual leadership is mainly the province of waspish males, the crustier the more likely. Here, for example, is an incomplete listing of perhaps unexpected other columnists whose work is regularly disseminated by TownHall.com, an invaluable daily source of conservative commentary (www.TownHall.com). Since it would be in bad taste for me to pinpoint who, exactly, is African-American, Hispanic, Asian, Jewish, etc., you're on your own.

In alphabetical order: Mona Charen, Linda Chavez, Ann Coulter, Larry Elder, Suzanne Fields, Jonah Goldberg, Paul Greenberg, Rebecca Hagelin, Jeff Jacoby, Charles Krauthammer, Michelle Malkin, Kathleen Parker, Star Parker, Debra Saunders, Phyllis Schlafly, Ben Shapiro, Thomas Sowell, Diana West, Armstrong Williams, and Walter Williams. Locally, add women like Cheri Pierson Yecke and Katherine Kersten who have written some of the most important things ever published by *American Experiment* and its clearer still that conservatism in Minnesota and the nation is being defined every day by a much wider spectrum of writers and activists than many critics on the left might assume.

• By definition, an essay as brief as this one about any movement's rise will leave out much more than it includes. In this instance, while I've had a fair amount to say about books and serious journals, I've said nothing about other key media, particularly talk radio, talking-head television (notably on Fox), and now the blogosphere. Suffice it to say, it's impossible to understand the growth and maturation of conservatism in recent decades without appreciating the contribution of Rush Limbaugh, Michael Medved, Dennis Prager, and other radio personalities—who double as very real players—on the right.[xxxiv]

As for blogs, the fact that I don't spend very much time reading them doesn't mean millions of others don't. Or, for example, that PowerLine, the blog run by my American Experiment colleagues John Hinderaker and Scott Johnson—and recently named “Blog of the Year” by Time magazine—didn't have a stunning effect on last year's presidential race after alerting the nation that documents “discovered” by Dan Rather demeaning President Bush's military service were fakes and frauds. [xxxv]

- The same can be said about the thinness of anything in this piece so far about the enormous role played by think tanks and other policy organizations.[xxxvi] American conservatism would be much less substantial intellectually and much less potent politically if not for conservative and free market think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, the Hudson Institute, and the Hoover Institution. Virtually every state in the nation now has a “state-based,” non-partisan conservative and free market think tank along the (rough) lines of American Experiment. We're all absolutely independent of one another, though we have been known to talk to each other. Add more activist national organizations such as Focus on the Family and the Christian Coalition, and local groups such as the Taxpayers League of Minnesota and the Minnesota Family Council, and it's clear that a formidable conservative infrastructure has emerged with relative speed.

As for individuals who have been instrumental in giving birth and propelling the conservative movement in Minnesota, any fair history would cite the likes of Vin Weber, Rudy Boschwitz, Bob Brown, Jack Meeks, John Frydenlund, Tony Trimble, and others of whom I'll be reminded and who might just appear in any future iterations of this essay.

- And somehow, I've not said nearly enough about Ronald Reagan. Suffice it here to say that no one over the second half of the twentieth century did more to popularize and advance conservatism than he did, starting with his speech—“The Speech” —on behalf of Barry Goldwater in the final days of the 1964 presidential race. No one was nearly as talented in blurring (in the most politically effective sense of the term) the often deep differences separating partisans of various schools of conservative thought: traditional conservatives from neoconservatives; libertarians from cultural conservatives; Main Street conservatives from Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson's friends. Better yet, no one, regardless of where they stood ideologically, changed the world more for the better over the last generation.

George W. Bush, in many ways, shares Reagan's gift of electoral ecumenism—at least when it comes to political churches and temples of the right.[i] As was the case with Reagan, many on the left view Bush as anything but a pluralistic and hospitable fellow. Which is a shame, because President Bush is as decent a man to serve in the office as anyone in my lifetime.

- One last point. I mentioned above how the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* deci-

sion in 1973, while viewed in most quarters at the time as a watershed liberal victory, wound up strengthening conservatism in this state and nation much more than it did liberalism, as it awakened millions of people from political slumbers. It's no leap to imagine much the same happening in response to the decision by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts in 2004 to officially bless same-sex marriages. What superficially appeared as a breakthrough for the left only galvanized already widespread opposition to gay marriage, as witness the way every statewide referendum on the question across the country, upwards of a dozen, has been voted down convincingly ever since.

The lesson here is not that a majority of citizens are anti-gay, because they are not. Rather, the pertinent lesson—beyond the fact that most people oppose same-sex marriage honorably—is that it can be deeply angering and contentious when courts, instead of popularly elected legislatures, radically rewrite American law and custom. Doing so is out of step with a rooted measure—a conservative ethos—that defines the United States like no other nation. This is especially the case when the issue in the dock cuts spiritually to the core.

I wish it weren't so, but because of the radical disregard by judicial and other elites for common sensibilities, I'm afraid that same-sex marriage is destined to become as divisive an issue over the next generation as abortion has been over the last one—and as it very much continues to be.

Notes

[i] Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1953; 1985), p. v.

[ii] *Ibid.*, pp. xx.

[iii] John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 13.

[iv] Allen Quist, a former Republican state legislator and candidate for governor in Minnesota, has written the following about conservatively animated change: “I was once asked on the floor of the House to explain why I, as a conservative, was always trying to change things. [My questioner] stated that conservatives, by definition, do not want to make changes, and yet he had no doubt that I was a conservative. He asked me to answer the paradox. My reply was that conservatives were committed to the principles of our nation as stated in the Declaration of Independence. Those principles are what conservatives want to conserve. The degree to which we wish to make changes, I explained, is the degree to which we have departed from those foundational principles, which is considerable.” Personal correspondence. Writing about Democrats and change, columnist Michael Barone recently said this: “Looking back on election year 2004, I am struck by how many of the constituencies supporting Democratic candidates oppose, rather than seek, change – how they are motivated not by ideas about how to

change the future, but by something like nostalgia for the past.” Cited in www.town-hall.com, December 27, 2004.

[v] Micklethwait and Woodridge, p. 8.

[vi] Wade F. Horn, “Did You Say ‘Movement?’” in *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action*, edited by Wade F. Horn, David Blankenhorn, and Mitchell B. Pearlstein (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), p. 4.

[vii] Irving Kristol, “American Conservatism 1945-1995,” *The Public Interest*, Fall 1995, pp. 81-91.

[viii] William F. Buckley Jr., “Publisher’s Statement,” *National Review*, November 19, 1955. p. 5.

[ix] Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

[x] *Ibid.*, p. 516.

[xi] Rick Perlstein, *Barry Goldwater and the Rise of Conservatism, Booknotes on American Character: People, Politics, and Conflict in American History*, by Brian Lamb (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), pp. 157-62.

[xii] F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944; 1994).

[xiii] Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962; 2002).

[xiv] Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1952).

[xv] The reference is to Sam Tanenhaus.

[xvi] Barry Goldwater, *Conscience of a Conservative* (Shepherdsville, KY: Victor Publishing, 1960).

[xvii] Kristol, p. 85.

[xviii] A number of years later politicians like Gary Hart and even Bill Clinton sometimes were referred to as “neoliberals,” who have been defined as “liberals who have been mugged by reality – but who refuse to press charges.”

[xix] Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships & Double Standards,” *Commentary*, November

1979, pp. 34-45.

[xx] William Pfaff, “The Long Reach of Leo Strauss,” *International Herald Tribune*, May 15, 2003.

[xxi] Peter Berkowitz, “What Hath Strauss Wrought?” *The Weekly Standard*, June 2, 2003.

[xxii] Michael Medved, “Hollywood vs. Amercia: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values,” *Center of the American Experiment*, May 4, 1993, p. 9.

[xxiii] Micklethwait and Woodridge, p. 84.

[xxiv] My great thanks to all of them. Not that anyone said anything that would get him or her into (too much) trouble, but with the exception of my conversation with Allen Quist, I’ve chosen to keep their identities top secret. Deniability and all that. As for my own sometimes direct, sometimes peripheral, participation in these events, I moved to Minnesota in 1974; worked for Gov. Al Quie in 1981-82; was an editorial writer and columnist for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* from 1983 to 1987; worked in the U.S. Department of Education from 1987 to 1990 during the tail end of the Reagan administration and the beginning of the Bush I term; and started *Center of the American Experiment* in 1990.

[xxv] According to Chuck Slocum, who served as chairman of the Minnesota Republican Party during the Watergate years, a survey in 1968 showed that the most popular national politician in the state at the time was Nelson Rockefeller, New York’s moderate Republican governor. According to Slocum, Rockefeller polled better here (during admittedly rancorous Vietnam years) than either Hubert Humphrey or Eugene McCarthy, both Minnesota icons. Personal correspondence.

[xxvi] Daniel J. Elazar, Virginia Gray, and Wyman Spano, *Minnesota Politics & Government* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 75.

[xxvii] It occurred to me a long time ago that to the extent social problems were attributed almost exclusively to institutional racism and other “systemic” and miasmatic forces – rather than to individual responsibility in any realistic way – little would ever improve sufficiently. This would be the case, bluntly put, because believers of such distorted and defeatist views generally see scant reason to personally work hard enough in school and other settings to overcome and improve their lot. What’s the point, after all, of extra-duty exertions and high expectations for the future if a supposedly sinister system is immutably aligned against them? In terms of foreign policy, with the exception of isolated moments during the war in Vietnam I’m not terribly proud of, I’ve always believed that the United States to be the greatest source for freedom and good in the world. These are the two examples – one domestic, the other international – I’m usually quick-

est to cite when asked why I'm conservative.

[xxix] Myron Magnet, *The Dream and the Nightmare: The Sixties Legacy to the Underclass* (New York: William Morrow, 1993).

[xxx] Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1992).

[xxxii] For example, see Sowell's *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality* (New York: William Morrow, 1984).

[xxxiii] For example, see Steele's *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998.)

[xxxiiii] For example, see McWhorter's *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

[xxxv] For a discussion of what he sees as the democratically benign effects of talk radio, see "Talk Radio: Is It Good for the Soul of the Nation?" by John Fund, *American Experiment Quarterly*, Spring 1999, pp. 21-33.

[xxxvi] Please note that while American Experiment's website (www.amexp.org) links to Power Line (www.powerlineblog.com), the two enterprises are entirely separate from one another. The center's website, for instance, also links to organizations as varied (or not so varied) as Minnesota Public Radio, the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota, the City of St. Paul, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

[xxxvii] My inadequate excuse here is I was asked by my hosts to give a dispassionate presentation on American and Minnesota conservatism; not a polemic on behalf of conservative politics or a commercial for Center of the American Experiment. In downplaying the vital role American Experiment and other think tanks, hindsight suggests I over-compensated.

[xxxviii] This is different from Bush's time as governor of Texas, when he was frequently saluted as earning the respect and affection of politicians and other Texans of many different stripes and beliefs, not just Republicans and right-of-center ones. ■