

Thunder on the Right: The Roots of Conservative Victory in the 1960s

Four scenes from the spring and summer of 1963: In Florissant, Missouri, not far outside St. Louis, 500 protesters hold up a forest of picket signs and chant angry slogans: another disruptive Sixties protest. The state legislature has refused the activists' demands concerning the local schools, and the activists have responded by trying to shut the schools down. They are demonstrating for busing. Only none of the demonstrators are black. They are parents of children in Catholic schools, and the legislature, citing the First Amendment's proscription against the mixing of church and state, has refused their request for the same bus service that public school families receive. They sing the same "freedom songs" they have recently heard Martin Luther King's demonstrators sing in Birmingham, Alabama. "I am here as a taxpayer," one mother tells the press. "An irate, angry, and broke taxpayer."

In northern California, eighty-seven rampaging radicals barge into a private home and take over a chapter meeting of the California Republican Assembly, a party volunteer group, by force and intimidation. They leave, the hostess says, "a trail of filth and destruction in their wake." The marauders are also Republicans. But their primary loyalty, the hostess suspects, is to the John Birch Society—a group that holds that the moderate Republicans controlling the California Republican Party are just one more unaccountable elite either quiescent in the face of, or actively complicit in, the takeover of American institutions by Moscow-directed subversives. So, believing themselves on the defensive, they countersubvert: overwhelming the fifteen regular members, taking over the meeting, voting out the previous officers and installing their own, and absconding with the club records and checkbook.

In Rogers, Indiana, clamoring members of the conservative activist group Young Americans for Freedom hurl wicker baskets into a raging bonfire. "Rogers Defends Liberty," read their signs. The baskets, they say, have been manufactured behind the Iron Curtain.

Finally, in a massive Washington, D.C., armory, on a sweltering

July 4th, an event that sought to focus the political energies behind all these disparate phenomena towards a single political goal. The only time it had been filled to capacity before was for the Eisenhower and Kennedy inaugural balls and a Billy Graham crusade. Now it was packed for a rally to draft Barry Goldwater for president. It resembled a national political convention, right down to the brass band, flags, costumes, and screaming throngs, though the guest of honor did not even show up. Goldwater was back in his home state of Arizona. The massive upsurge of conservatives who seemed willing to endure any hardship to make him president rather spooked him. There had never been anything quite like it in American political history.

Conservatism is a movement come of age these days, in an era of right-wing dominance of the Republican Party, and Republican dominance of every branch of the federal government. The story of the Right's rise to power has traditionally been told in one of two ways. From the left, its popularity has been imagined as a function of the manipulation of ordinary people by elites, exploiting mass prejudice and credulity to aggrandize their own social power. From the right, the movement's own court historians and apologists prefer to narrate their rise as a movement of ideas: conservative philosophers toiling away in lonely study carrels during the high tide of the New Deal, disseminated by brilliant publicists like William F. Buckley, inspiring



Campaign items from Barry Goldwater's failed 1964 bid for the presidency. (Image courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.)

the activist cadres who swept away an enervated and unprincipled Republican establishment by the sheer force of their conviction and tireless organizing. In the liberal story, the scenes of the angry Young Americans for Freedom bonfire above, or the ruthless storm trooperism of fanatical John Birchers, predominate, and the talk of “conservative intellectualism” is the patina obscuring a Republican exercise of power interested in keeping wages low and the rabble in line. The conservative story also gives pride of place to the college conservatives in Young Americans for Freedom. But the focus is on their manifestos and magazines, how they read twice as much as the unsuspecting liberals they bested in ideological debate. The emphasis is on how a self-conscious movement prepared the way for conservative ideas to come to power through the capture of the Republican Party. Beginning first with the failed Goldwater campaign and ultimately with the rise of Ronald Reagan, the movement itself served as the Republican Party’s permanent conscience: a brake on the temptations that power provides and a vehicle for purging crazies like the John Birch Society.

Neither of these neat stories make much room for the upsurges that come at no organized movement’s bidding—like the picketers in Florissant, who likely did not see themselves as part of any political movement at all, just hard-working American citizens fighting for what they had learned to think of as the “American dream”: the right to quiet homes in safe neighborhoods with good schools close by.

Seeing conservatism as a *social movement*—or rather as a complex set of intersecting social movements—allows for a more capacious view. The rubric of “social movement” allows for phenomena both spontaneous and carefully calibrated, for street protests and actions more aimed at victory at the ballot box, at any collective action, no matter how inchoate, aimed at changing the circumstances in which people find themselves. Americans organized in the 1960s to move their society to the “right,” just as others were simultaneously organizing to the “left.” The scenes above point to facets of a complex and still neglected social movement.

Defense of homeowner prerogative was the most deep-rooted, active, and influential site of right-wing organizing, even if there never was any single, self-conscious “homeowners’ movement” that called itself by that name. The notion that any true American should aspire to inhabiting a single-family house on its own plot of land began life as a marketing proposition. White ethnic immigrants enjoying the fruits of the post-World War I economic boom, eager to get out of rattletrap urban tenements, were induced by an “Own Your Own Home Movement.” Organized by the National Association of Real Estate Boards, the movement promoted the belief that nothing was more healthful and wholesome for a growing family than owning a plot of one’s own. It coincided with a golden age in the design of affordable housing. In 1920s Chicago, you could buy a stake in the burgeoning “bungalow belt”—squat, solid, one-and-a-half-story single-family homes in sturdy brick, with overhanging roofs and garden plots in front, each one a happy marriage of community-building uniformity and dignity-enhancing individuality—for just \$20 a month. For those who could afford it, a virtuous circle was in spin: the housing boom generated a high-volume market for affordable decorative elements, better



Business owner and community activist Dorothy Thierolf protests the closure of a nearby beach by the state government in 1972. The beach was closed to protect clam beds. (Image courtesy of the National Archives, ARC Identifier: 545253.)

plumbing and heating, and modern electrical conveniences. Another part of the virtuous circle was that the federal government recognized single-family home building as a powerful economic stimulus. The 1934 Federal Housing Act provided government insurance for loans for any federally approved building plan.

As with other social revolutions, the real watershed was World War II. Millions of returning servicemen eager for the comforts of domesticity produced a historic baby boom. In 1944, the Veterans Administration authorized a home loan for veterans that made their down payments practically free, and let them stretch out their mortgages for decades. Home ownership exploded—and came to be understood as a core component of respectable Americanism. A huge mortgage certainly was a core component of most growing families’ financial profiles. The social and psychological stakes in home ownership became enormous.

The revolution, however, was also bounded by race. The FHA was quite explicit in advising banks on proper mortgage candidates, that whites (specifically, “English, Germans, Scotch, Irish, Scandinavians”) were better investments than (in descending ranking) “North Italians,” “Bohemians or Czechoslovakians,” all the way down to “Negroes” at number 9 and “Mexicans” at number 10. In a sub rosa, and sometimes not so sub rosa manner, assuming the prerogative to control the racial composition of one’s neighborhood became second nature. In northern industrial cities, the areas where blacks were allowed by custom to live were crowded and dilapidated. Making sure blacks stayed within these areas—making sure the home-building boom stayed limited to single-family houses, especially in the suburbs—became a site for political organizing. What the historian George Lipsitz called “the possessive investment in whiteness” midwived a social movement.

“The only thing that has kept 10,000—aye, 20,000 Negroes from coming here is the lack of housing,” the head of the Milwaukee County Property Owners Association said in 1952, boasting of his group’s work lobbying for strict limits on low-rent buildings. The specter of a neighborhood “tipping”—attracting enough nonwhite buyers that, as

the folklore had it, the value of its houses would plummet—was the catalyst for the formation of numberless neighborhood organizations and block clubs. It also generated violence. In 1949, the presence of blacks at a union meeting in the Chicago neighborhood of Englewood sparked a rumor that a house was being “sold to niggers.” Ten thousand whites rioted to keep that from happening. Such riots were not uncommon in Chicago, though they received little publicity. One of the jobs of the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations was to make sure they did not make any of the city’s six daily papers. This was a social movement below the political radar, even as it chugged along consistently through the 1950s and into the 1960s.

This social movement had political consequences. For most organs of established opinion in the United States, Goldwater’s crushing loss to the liberal Lyndon Johnson in the presidential election in 1964 was the end of the line for the organized right wing in America. They breathed a sigh of relief that the undercurrent of reaction against civil rights and social progress generally had apparently proved so evanescent. “White Backlash Doesn’t Develop,” a *New York Times* subhead on the election results ran, almost triumphantly. But a white backlash *had* developed. The *Times* just ignored the signs. In California, which Lyndon Johnson won by a million votes, a ballot initiative, Proposition 13, won by about the same margin. Prop 13 struck down the state’s “open housing” law—a law that made it illegal to discriminate in the selling and renting of real estate on the basis of race. The successful Prop 13 campaign—the Prop 13 *social movement*—was led by the California branch of the National Association of Real Estate Boards: the same organization that led the “Own Your Own Home Movement” in the 1920s.

In 1966, NAREB massed its forces for an even greater accomplishment: defeating the 1966 civil rights bill, whose centerpiece, Title IV, was federal open housing legislation. Playing similar roles, but on opposite sides, realtors mobilized opposition to the bill as Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference mobilized support. They stirred the grassroots. Congressmen marveled that they had never received so much mail on an issue in their lives. It poured in from the Catholic, white-ethnic southwest side of Chicago—where King was marching for open housing past heckling white crowds who threw rocks at him—to the pro-civil rights Democratic senator Paul Douglas, who was up for reelection. The messages point up just how profoundly middle-class Americans had bound up their very identities with a sense of their right to control their own neighborhoods: “As a citizen and a taxpayer I was very upset to hear about ‘TITLE IV’ of the so-called civil rights Bill S. 3296. . . We designed and built our own home and I would hate to think of being forced to sell my lovely home to anyone just because they had the money.” On August 5, 1966, Douglas, who lost reelection, received upwards of a dozen letters posted from consecutive addresses on the same street: a political block party. This was the coordinated response of a *community*—even, a historian might puckishly argue, if it were not for the bricks thrown at the nuns



Ronald and Nancy Reagan celebrate his election as governor of California at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, November 11, 1966. (Image courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Library and Museum, Serial Number: H99.)

and priests marching with Martin Luther King, an exemplification of the kind of warm mutuality formed in social struggle that civil rights activists called the “beloved community.”

Chicago fit a pattern. The activists of the more famous antiblack right-wing social movement—southern “massive resistance” against civil rights—loved to bait self-righteous northern liberals by arguing that once the impulse to desegregate encroached upon their backyards, the North would prove just as “racist”. When he ran for president on the “Dixiecrat” ticket in 1948, Strom Thurmond, the segregationist leader, came North and taunted, “If you people in New York want no segregation, then abolish it and do away with your Harlem.” In 1957, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, after forcing President Dwight Eisenhower to call out federal troops to segregate Little Rock’s Central High, triumphantly held up a newspaper front page from far off New Hampshire (“The Iron Fist in ‘Free’ America”) lionizing him as a hero. Indeed, in 1959, Orval Faubus was listed as one of the ten most admired men in Gallup’s annual national poll. The hunch that “massive resistance” was not merely a southern impulse was vindicated as the Sixties progressed. City councils in

places like Seattle, Phoenix, Detroit, and Akron—even in supposedly liberal Berkeley—passed municipal open housing ordinances, only to find them reversed by whatever directly democratic means the citizens had at their disposal. Such initiative campaigns indeed had the flavor of social movements: signature gathering, grassroots, and word-of-mouth promotion.

The political art of *organizing*—the kind it took to get thousands of people to a National Guard Armory for a political rally on a sweltering July day, the kind it took for activists to take over California Republican Assembly chapters through fair means or foul, the kind it took to get conservative instead of moderate delegates elected to state Republican conventions, the kind it took to get everyone on one’s block to pressure a politician with a letter—was, along with the backlash mood, another neglected legacy of that supposedly “failed” Goldwater campaign. The political shocker of 1966—the nomination, then election of the right-wing actor Ronald Reagan as governor of California—could never have happened without getting such a grassroots infrastructure built in 1964, and then self-consciously preserving it through 1965. Another strength of the conservative infrastructure was its coordinated and disciplined volunteers. Goldwater campaigners, a Republican official observed of the Reagan canvass, “would ring a doorbell, and if the man answering it said he didn’t like Goldwater they had the impulse to grab for his throat. You don’t find that today.” More importantly, however, the Goldwater volunteer did not, in fact, grab the man’s throat. Whether the nineteenth-century Chartist movement or the rise of the CIO, successful social movements develop from the marriage of bottom-up passion and top-down discipline.

As the 1960s progressed, right-wing passions were continually fueled by events on the ground—the extraordinary flowering of antiestablishment and antitradition attitudes and opinion leaders who

were often surprisingly sympathetic to them. It made for a steady drumbeat of single-issue social movement ferment on the right. Out of southern California, the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States received a thousand inquiries for its antisexual education materials in 1965 alone; by the 1969-1970 school year (the one that followed the Woodstock festival), districts around the country were embroiled in all-out war over the issue—even as moderate and even moderately conservative organs of opinion, from *Good Housekeeping* to *Reader's Digest*, insisted that the new openness in sexual affairs should be uncontroversial. For instance, a 1967 *Time* cover story on “the Pill” argued, “If the pill can defuse the population explosion, it will go far toward eliminating hunger, want, and ignorance.” The writer did not offer moral objections until the twenty-sixth paragraph of the article, and then it was only to dismiss those concerns.

There was never a moment in the 1960s and 1970s when the grassroots right was not able to build its organizational capacity by organizing from the ground up around “liberal” outrages like these, often without the Establishment noticing at all. The same year *Time* ran the cover story on the pill, the newsweekly ran an article about abortion, which was illegal in most states, with laws being loosened in a few. It was a short article—almost a throwaway—but the magazine was so overwhelmed with mail from readers disgusted at the thought of abortion law reform they ran letters about it for several issues in a row.

While objections to abortion possessed religious overtones, the role of religion in the rise of the Right as a social movement is complicated and not as straightforward as one might expect. On the one hand, American culture between World War II and the mid-1960s was suffused with popular religiosity. The words “under God” were added to the Pledge of Allegiance; politicians rarely campaigned on Sunday for fear of offending the religious; Billy Graham regularly filled arenas and stadiums with his traveling crusades.

Yet, on the other hand, religion in the public sphere increasingly came under fire from multiple sources in the 1960s. The Supreme Court, in two massively unpopular decisions, outlawed official prayers and Bible reading in public schools. Intellectuals challenged the compatibility of biblical faith with a progressive society based on reason—a view that hit the mainstream in the spring of 1966 when *Time* magazine ran a controversial essay announced in stark red letters on its cover: “Is God Dead?” Meanwhile, many interpreted the new ferment against traditional mores as an affront to religion as well.

Despite the “threats,” however, many Americans were reluctant to link politics and religion. In other words, the integration of these concerns into a properly *political* partisan movement was slow. Part of the reason was theological. Most evangelical Protestants argued that involvement in politics was not biblically appropriate—that, as the rising young preacher Jerry Falwell put it, though speaking in the context of church support for the civil rights movement, “preachers are not called to be politicians but soul-winners.” Despite the continued popularity of such antiliberal radio preachers as Billy James Hargis and Carl McIntyre, it was hard in some particularly devout precincts to get the most avid churchgoers to vote, whether for Democrats or Republicans, because voting was inappropriately “worldly.”

Reluctance to politicize religion raises another complication that slowed the rise of a properly political “religious right.” In the 1960s, many of the politicians most concerned with what we would now call “social conservative” issues were not conservatives. Often they were liberal Democrats, frequently Catholic ones. The two politicians most associated with the crusade against “immoral” popular culture were Democrats, Arkansas senator John McClellan—a relatively liberal southern senator—and Indiana governor Matthew Welsh.

Slowly, however, the situation changed. The story is a complicated one, and has not fully been told. But most agree that the watershed was the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. The evangelical theologian Francis Schaeffer preached the doctrine that Jesus would never come back until iniquity was conquered on earth. Newly politicized evangelicals joined in coalition with Catholics for whom intervention in worldly public affairs was second nature—and who now more and more identified themselves, in an increasingly liberalized culture, as *conservatives*. Both groups increasingly identified with a Republican Party more and more defining itself, with the aid of national leaders like Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms, with what now became known as the “religious right.” The pieces were in place for these social movement stirrings to begin to reconfigure the American political landscape. The organizational capacity of right wing social movements continued to grow.

When they helped elect a right-wing president in 1980, liberals felt as if it had come practically from nowhere. A rage for moral and social order—expressed often in disorderly ways—was the hidden variable in American political culture in the 1960s and 1970s. It is a history we are only now beginning to understand. □

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