

**Mark L. Melcher** Publisher  
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

**Stephen R. Soukup** Editor  
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

## THEY SAID IT

If we attach more significance to feeling than to thinking, we shall soon, by a simple extension, attach more to wanting than to deserving....It clarifies much to see that socialism is in origin a middle-class and not a proletarian concept. The middle class owes to its social location an especial fondness for security and complacency....Loving comfort, risking little, terrified by the thought of change, its aim is to establish a materialistic civilization which will banish threats to its complacency....Thus the final degradation of the Baconian philosophy is that knowledge becomes power in the service of appetite. The state, ceasing to express man's inner qualifications, turns into a vast bureaucracy designed to promote economic activity. It is little wonder that traditional values, however much they may be eulogized on commemorative occasions, today must dodge about and find themselves nooks and crannies if they are to survive at all....The dullest member of a conservative legislative committee, seeking the source of threats to institutions, does not fail to see that those doctrines which exalt material interests over spiritual, to the confounding of rational distinctions among men, are positively incompatible with the society he is elected to represent. For expressing such views, he is likely to be condemned as ignorant or selfish, because normally he does not express them very well.

Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 1947.

## NO CONSERVATIVE TO VOTE FOR? WHO DIDN'T KNOW?

In what has become a quadrennial tradition in and around Washington, the first two primary contests are completed and conservatives have concluded that the world is coming to an end. It's not just that one or two candidates make their skin crawl. It's not just that the "wrong" guy won Iowa, or New Hampshire. It's not just that it looks as if the Republican Party will nominate a candidate who deviates from conservative orthodoxy on one or more issues. It's all of these things and more. Conservatism itself is threatened. It's dying. *All* the candidates are horrible and the movement is irredeemably crashing in upon itself.

So what else is new? The party *is* in danger of nominating a conservative apostate. All of the candidates *are* at variance with some aspects of conservatism. The conservative movement *is* at risk of collapsing. It always is. It always has been. Allow us to explain.

Ever since John McCain's victory last Tuesday in New Hampshire, conservative critics, from within the party and especially in the conservative media, have been beside themselves, apoplectic at the idea that someone as occasionally disdainful of conservative orthodoxy as McCain has emerged as the frontrunner for the

### In this Issue

No Conservative to Vote For?  
Who Didn't Know?

Some Thoughts on Conservatism.

Subscriptions are available by contacting:

The Political Forum LLC 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842  
Phone 540.477.9762 Fax 540.477.3359 melcher@thepoliticalforum.com www.thepoliticalforum.com

Republican presidential nomination. The conservative lawyer, author, and talk radio host, Mark Levin, was among the first to complain about McCain. Levin grumbled that McCain has stolen “class warfare rhetoric...right out of the liberal playbook,” that he is “awful” and “disingenuous” on immigration, that he is arrogant and condescending, that his policy positions might be closer to Franklin Roosevelt’s than to those of McCain’s professed hero, Teddy Roosevelt. And on and on and on . . .

Levin is hardly alone. Andrew McCarthy, the prosecutor on the first World Trade Center bombing case and the director of the Center for Law and Counterterrorism at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, has hit McCain repeatedly, on everything from abortion policy to even national security matters, questioning, among other things, McCain’s opposition to “harsh” interrogation techniques and his opposition to the terrorist prison camp at Guantanamo Bay.

Over the weekend, George Will, the erstwhile journalistic arbiter of all things conservative, slammed both McCain and Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee in a piece in which he called on Republicans to fall on their proverbial swords and to nominate a real conservative (in the tradition of Barry Goldwater), electoral consequences be damned. “Republicans should try to choose the next president,” Will wrote, but “They cannot avoid choosing how their party will define itself, even if by a loss beneath a worthy banner.”

Even columnist Mark Steyn, with whom The Political Forum nearly universally agrees, had harsh words for Senator McCain (and Mike Huckabee). To wit:

John McCain demonizes Big Pharma – i.e., the private pharmaceutical companies that create, develop, and manufacture the drugs that all these socialized health-care systems in every corner of the planet are utterly dependent on. He voted for Sarbanes-Oxley, a quintessential congressional

overreaction (to Enron) that buries American companies in wasteful paperwork and hands huge advantages to stock exchanges in London, Hong Kong, and elsewhere.

But why stop there? McCain is also gung ho for all the most economically disruptive Big Government solutions to “climate change.” Apparently, that’s the only change these candidates aren’t in favor of. When it comes to the climate, McCain and Hillary are agents of nonchange. McCain has an almost [John] Edwardsian contempt for capitalism, for the people whose wit and innovation generate the revenue that pay for your average small-state senator’s retinue of staffers worthy of a Persian Gulf emir.

Now, before we address this outpouring of unhappiness by some of conservatism’s best and brightest, we should note one thing: they’re right. Every one of them is right. John McCain is no conservative. Neither is Mike Huckabee. By most standards, neither is Rudy Giuliani. Nor Mitt Romney. There’s not a true, full-blooded conservative in the bunch. About this there can be little question.

As we noted in last week’s preview piece, we have no brief for the frontrunner McCain and, indeed, have had our own beefs – personal and political – with him. We thought he was wrong to oppose the Bush tax cuts. He was and is unquestionably wrong on global warming. He is so stubborn as to make the current occupant of the White House appear pliant and impressionable by comparison. And as long-time readers may recall, we have written at least half-a-dozen pieces over the years noting his reality-denying obstinacy and ignorance on the matter of “campaign finance reform.” In short, then, we agree that McCain is a deeply flawed “conservative.” Moreover, we have never argued otherwise.

But so what?

What always sort of amazes us is that these analysts and pundits, who are dedicated and talented defenders of “market forces,” can’t seem to understand that there is a reason why there is no conservative running for president or why conservatives can’t seem to make any headway in controlling the federal Leviathan. It’s simple really. There is no market for conservative politics. The electorate doesn’t want it, won’t embrace it, can’t support it. Like Steyn and Will, we think it’d be great if there were a true conservative candidate whom the GOP could nominate. But the voters, the *consumers* of retail politics, if you will, appear not to agree with us.

Take, for example, the case of Fred Thompson. Now, by many accounts Thompson is the real deal. He may well be, as Jonah Goldberg put it yesterday, “a solid, traditional, mainstream conservative. He’d be equally comfortable at an American Enterprise Institute conference, a Federalist Society luncheon or a county fair. Taken at his word, Thompson is a card-carrying Reaganite, favoring low taxes, a strong defense and a shrunken role for the federal government.”

Some of our favorite people in the world, the smartest and most experienced conservatives we know, are supporting and/or working for Thompson. He’s assembled a fine policy team, in addition to his dogged campaign staff. And yet after his intensive last-minute blitz in Iowa, Thompson finished a distant third. And after his intensive last-minute blitz in New Hampshire, Thompson’s message resonated with a whopping 1.2% of voters, 6.5 points behind Libertarian wack job Ron Paul, who garnered roughly *seven times* the number of votes that Thompson did. Indeed, in the “nation’s first” primary, Thompson finished nearly a full percentage point behind “others.”

To be fair, polls in South Carolina and nationally show Thompson’s support trending upward. But thus far at least, that hasn’t translated into real votes. Thompson may or may not be selling true conservatism. But either way, so far, voters aren’t buying it.

The reason voters aren’t buying it – from Fred or anyone else – is that they don’t want it. Poll after poll in Iowa prior to the caucuses showed that voters

there (and presumably elsewhere) are slowly but surely turning against free trade and free markets. They want government to take care of them and address their “needs.” They’re not particularly interested in the benefits of smaller government. As the aforementioned Jonah Goldberg noted this weekend:

By 2005, it [Pew Political Typology] had found that so many self-described conservatives were in favor of government activism that they had to come up with a name for them. “Running-dog liberals” apparently seemed too pejorative, so the survey went with “pro-government conservatives,” a term that might have caused Ronald Reagan to spontaneously combust. This group makes up just under 10 percent of registered voters and something like a third of the Republican coalition. Ninety-four percent of pro-government conservatives favored raising the minimum wage, as did 79 percent of self-described social conservatives. Eight out of 10 pro-government conservatives believe that the government should do more to help the poor and slightly more than that distrust big corporations.

There are any number of explanations for this apparent dissatisfaction with traditional conservatism. Some conservative authors blame George W. Bush, arguing that his “compassionate conservatism” destroyed the old Reagan coalition and made all Americans – conservative or otherwise – more dependent on government. There may be some truth to this, of course. But it seems to us that these folks forget that President Bush ran for re-election on a platform that abandoned compassionate conservatism altogether, replacing it with the more traditionally conservative “ownership society.” To say that the ownership society concept flopped with voters would be an understatement. Bush was re-elected exclusively based on his national security *bona fides*. And after his re-election, Bush’s push for the ownership society was what cost him all of his political capital early in his second term. Want to know what happened to Bush’s “ownership society”? Think “Social Security reform” and that should just about answer all your questions.

Others, ourselves included, have argued that another big part of the problem is that the candidates to replace George Bush are themselves incredibly uninformed about conservative principles and thus unable to make the case for those principles to the voters. Moreover, these candidates are anything but unique. They are simply representative of Republican politicians in general, who find making the case for conservatism to be too much of a chore and too much of a political risk.

A couple of months ago, the online political clearinghouse *The Politico* ran a story about global warming and, specifically, about Republicans coming to grips with the problem. The story began thusly:

Rep. Bob Inglis (R-S.C.), once a skeptic of global warming, got a hint that the political winds might be shifting when a longtime supporter warned that he might vote against Inglis if he “didn’t clean up his act on the environment.”

The warning came from Inglis’ eldest son, Robert Jr., now 22.

His daughter was no less blunt about the congressman’s refusal to embrace the view that global warming was being caused by human actions and that a serious response is needed. “I have three more kids coming up – and they seem to share the same view,” Inglis said.

We don’t know Bob Inglis, and for all we know he may be just a supery-dupery wonderful guy. But our instinctive reaction to this story was, “For crying out loud. If this guy can’t even keep his own kids in line, if he can’t even convince them, then how in the world is he going to convince anyone else?” The problem, of course, is that he’s *not* going to convince anyone else. He’s just going to give in. According to *The Politico*, Inglis “now believes the science behind global warming.” Well, that’s just great. But even if he does, he should know better than to think that

government can or should try to solve the problem at a cost of trillions of dollars in regulation and foregone economic growth. At least he would know better if he were a conservative. But he’s not.

Sadly, Inglis isn’t alone. Far from it, in fact. Most Republican politicians these days are easily swayed it seems. And those who aren’t find it easier just to “go along to get along.” All of which is to say that the frailty of today’s alleged conservative politicians is, indeed, part of the explanation for the collapse of conservatism.

But there is a bigger issue here. We would argue and, in fact, have argued recently that this concept of a collapsing conservatism is somewhat misleading. Conservatism, as described by the wistful, mournful commentators, quite possibly never existed.

Don’t get us wrong. We most definitely agree that there has been a conservative intellectual renaissance in this country over the last half century or so, as the second piece in this week’s newsletter quite clearly shows. We further agree that there has been a gradual rightward-shift in voting patterns and policy preferences over the last thirty-five years. It’s hard to argue with the numbers. Despite the GOP’s setbacks last year, Republicans recently controlled Congress for a dozen years, for the first time in more than half a century, and the Republican candidate has won seven of the last presidential elections. Clearly, the right has controlled much of the political debate of late.

But has there ever really been a small-government conservative majority? We’re not so sure.

George Will looks back longingly at the creative destruction unleashed upon the Republican Party by the brave and principled landslide endured by the party in 1964. “Barry Goldwater’s loss of 44 states served a purpose,” Will writes, “the ideological reorientation and revitalization of the party.” In this telling of the story, Goldwater sparked the revolution, which culminated in the landslide victories of Ronald Reagan, the heir to Goldwater’s message.

Again, there are grains of truth here, but the electorate that carried Reagan to victory in '80 and '84 was hardly Goldwaterian. We like Will's story, but we are actually more inclined to agree with folks like Father Richard John Neuhaus, who has rather conclusively argued that for all the "reorientation and revitalization" initiated by Goldwater, the GOP did not become the nation's majority party until the Southern Baptist Convention officially decried abortion and threw its political weight behind those politicians who oppose the practice.

While Will and others see Reagan as the heir to Goldwater, a more accurate description would be that Reagan was the first politician who was able satisfactorily to address the concerns of both economic and cultural conservatives. Reagan's famous complaint that he didn't leave the Democratic Party but that it left him resonated with all sorts of voters: those who were appalled by the Democratic Party's creeping socialism; those appalled by the Democrats' coddling of Communist tyrants; and those appalled by the Democratic Party's confusion between liberty and libertinism and its glorification of perversity. Those voters didn't necessarily agree with each other on everything and actually disagreed on much. But they all found someone in whom they could believe in Ronald Reagan.

Beyond Reagan, though, there's not much to support the idea of a "lost" conservative majority. Conservative icon Calvin Coolidge left office nearly eight decades ago. And since he did, the nation has elected only one conservative, the aforementioned Reagan, who benefited from a confluence of circumstances, including the Democratic Party's overreach, the disaster that was the Carter presidency, and his own unique gift for communication and connection with voters. We hate to concede this, but it strikes us that Reagan represented a "one-off" event, not likely to be repeated.

A few weeks ago, in our own temper tantrum against the state of the GOP presidential field, we noted that "the old tension between 'big government' and 'small government' no longer exists; that in the battle of big government vs. small government, big government

won." Moreover, we argued that it was probably inevitable that big government would win, since the constituency favoring small government was always a minority, even as Ronald Reagan was winning 49 of 50 states.

Like all of the rest of the conservative critics who are unhappy with the state of the Republican presidential campaign, we'd love it if a Reaganesque figure were to appear and re-unite all the factions in the quickly collapsing Big Tent. We don't see that happening, though. As we put it just under a month ago:

If there were anything to be gained politically by embracing/pandering to the small-government devotees, you can rest assured that somebody else would be doing so. In short, if the market existed for a viable small-government candidate, one of the frontrunners would fill that niche. But it doesn't exist.

Who knows? Maybe we'll be surprised. Maybe one of the candidates will emerge into full-throated conservatism and reunite the party. Maybe Fred Thompson will live up to his potential and will begin resonating with actual voters rather than just columnists. Maybe. But we won't hold our breath.

## SOME THOUGHTS ON CONSERVATISM.

The post-World War II conservative renaissance began in the United States in 1947 with the publication of a little book entitled *Ideas Have Consequences* by Richard Weaver. Russell Kirk, who is himself often described as the father of modern day conservatism, called this book "the first gun fired by American conservatives in their intellectual rebellion against the ritualistic liberalism that had prevailed since 1933, and which still aspires to domination over this nation."

Fast on the heels of Weaver's *Ideas* came Peter Viereck's *Conservatism Revisited* (1949), Bill Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* (1951), *Whittaker Chambers's*

Witness (1952), Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953), and Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community* (also 1953).

Each of these books was a warning cry by the author that leftist collectivism, which had gathered a huge head of steam during the Roosevelt years, represented a growing danger to American society. Weaver said this most directly in the opening sentence of the introduction to *Ideas*, where he announces quite simply, "This is another book about the dissolution of the West."

It is important to understand that the conservative renewal that these and other men began was not a political "movement," in any real sense. It had no leader to whom all others looked for guidance. Indeed, many of its most prominent voices disagreed strongly with each other on a variety of substantive issues ranging from the philosophical to the theological to the political. For the most part, they all found a political home within the Republican Party, but that Party was also the home at the time to a large liberal establishment that strongly resented the presence of these new "conservatives" within their ranks.

Nor could this newly invigorated conservatism be described as an ideology. It honored no manifesto. It did not spring forth fresh from the agitated mind of some zealot like Rousseau or Marx. It made no grand promises of a world made better by new fangled feats in social engineering.

In fact, there was nothing new-fangled about the principles, values, standards, and convictions of this crowd. Their beliefs were based on lessons learned from history and revealed truths, on the wisdom of the ages as passed down from generation to generation, beginning in ancient times and contained in the literature of both the West and the East, in Herodotus, Homer, Aeschylus, Virgil, Marcus Aurelius, Cicero, in the Old and New Testaments, the Analects of Confucius, the Tao, in the Bhagavad-Gita and the Epic of Gilgamesh.

This newly inspired conservatism was not of the nature of a fine meal, each course created and prepared by a master chef as an integral part of a grand dining experience, pleasing to both the pallet and the esthetic sensitivity of the diner. It was, instead, a very practical dish, meat and potatoes for the body and the soul.

The essence of this dish was that the great World War was over and the country needed to get back to the basics, back to the realities that made the nation great in the first place, to shun the ideas and notions of such men as Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, which were, in reality, nothing more than ideological manifestations of what a little German madman named Nietzsche had described as a "will to power."

Needless to say, this pedestrian meal has never really sold very well. Barry Goldwater made it the blue plate special on the menu he presented to the American people when he ran for president in 1964, a race that he lost by a landslide to Lyndon Johnson, who was the Rachel Ray of the kind of big government liberalism that Franklin Roosevelt had so successfully served up to the American people 30 years earlier. Tripe in 30 minutes.

In his trenchant little book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, published in 1960, Goldwater had given the following explanation of what he thought it meant to be a conservative.

Surely the first obligation of a political thinker is to understand the nature of man. The Conservative does not claim special powers of perception on this point, but he does claim a familiarity with the accumulated wisdom and experience of history, and he is not too proud to learn from the great minds of the past.

The first thing he has learned about man is that each member of the species is a unique creature. Man's most sacred possession is his individual soul—which has an immortal

side, but also a mortal one. The mortal side establishes his absolute differentness from every other human being. *Only a philosophy that takes into account the essential differences between men, and, accordingly, makes provision for developing the different potentialities of each man can claim to be in accord with Nature* (emphasis in original.) We have heard much in our time about “the common man.” It is a concept that pays little attention to the history of a nation that grew great through the initiative and ambition of uncommon men. The Conservative knows that to regard man as part of an undifferentiated mass is to consign him to ultimate slavery.

Secondly, the Conservative has learned that the economic and spiritual aspects of man’s nature are inextricably intertwined. He cannot be economically free, or even economically efficient, if he is enslaved politically; conversely, man’s political freedom is illusory if he is dependent for his economic needs on the State.

The Conservative realizes, thirdly, that man’s development, in both its spiritual and material aspects, is not something that can be directed by outside forces. Every man, for his individual good and for the good of his society, is responsible for his own development. The choices that govern his life are choices that he must make: they cannot be made by any other human being, or by a collectivity of human beings. If the Conservative is less anxious than his Liberal brethren to increase Social Security “benefits,” it is because he is more anxious than his Liberal brethren that people be free throughout their lives to spend their earnings when and as they see fit.

So it is that Conservatism, throughout history, has regarded man neither as a potential pawn of other men, nor as a part of a general collectivity in which the sacredness and

the separate identity of individual human beings are ignored. Throughout history, true Conservatism has been at war equally with autocrats and with “democratic” Jacobins. The true Conservative was sympathetic with the plight of the hapless peasant under the tyranny of the French monarchy. And he was equally revolted at the attempt to solve that problem by a mob tyranny that paraded under the banner of egalitarianism. The conscience of the Conservative is pricked by anyone who would debase the dignity of the individual human being. Today, therefore, he is at odds with dictators who rule by terror, and equally with those gentler collectivists who ask our permission to play God with the human race.

Such was the popularity of government activism in 1960 that this seemingly inoffensive expression of beliefs earned Goldwater a remarkable share of enmity both in the press and among the general public, along with the title of “reactionary.” When used in the context of politics, this was, and still is considered to be, a pejorative term. The Jacobins were the first to use it – *réactionnaires* – to describe their political opponents. The implication, then and now, is that the principal consequence of conservatism’s attachment to the past is to support and protect the privileges of a corrupt social, religious, and political elite.

This is debatable, of course, but we would argue that any fair analysis of conservative books and speeches, since Burke laid the foundations for modern day conservatism in 1790, would have to conclude that the impetus behind all of the great literary works of modern day conservative thought was not a desire to protect the ruling elite from change, but to protect society from the kind of ill-advised, politically induced change that wisdom, experience, and a knowledge of human nature and history would indicate are likely to do more harm than good.

Nevertheless, the term reactionary does in fact help to illuminate the unique nature of the conflict between “the left” and “the right,” which defined and gave form to American politics throughout much

of the 20th Century. Like Hans Brinker, the “brave Dutch boy” in the legend, who prevented the flood of Haarlem by sitting up all night with his finger in the dyke, these individuals and groups “reacted” vigilantly and courageously for decade after decade to hold back the destructive tide of liberalism that threatened the foundations of the civilization that they knew and cherished.

These forces of “reaction” included Burkean conservatives, neo-conservatives, paleo-conservatives, Hayekian conservatives, libertarian conservatives, big-business conservatives, gun totting conservatives, and conservatives who, for whatever reason, just don’t like liberals. They were the paladins of a variety of causes, including private enterprise, the sanctity of life, fiscal responsibility, religious freedom, less government intrusion into their lives, property rights, freedom of speech, a strong and aggressively national defense, all seeking guidance and inspiration from that which Nathan Hale described as “the lamp of experience.”

Occasionally they won a victory. But the cruel fact is that they lost the war. There are, of course, still a few real conservatives around who continue to fight on behalf of some cause they cannot let die. But most have “gone over” to the other side, either tacitly or directly buying into the liberal dream that government not only can right all wrongs, but has an obligation to do so.

So complete has been the left’s victory in the war of ideas that most of those who today call themselves “conservatives” are virtually indistinguishable from the early liberals of yesterday. Indeed, the Republican Party has, for all practical purposes, become a carbon copy of the Democratic Party of Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey, constantly seeking to expand the power and reach of Washington, both at home and abroad, via a heady combination of guns, butter and easy money.

And ironies of ironies, yesterday’s liberals have become today’s reactionaries, desperately fighting a rear guard action to protect a host of financially and morally bankrupt New Deal and Great Society programs, from Social Security to Medicare to a corrupt United Nations to a failing unionized public education system, from any efforts at all to bring them into the realities and necessities of the 21st Century, while all the time fighting frantically to keep their young, net roots spawn from destroying their beloved Democratic Party via the process of “change.”

Copyright 2008. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved.

Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.