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## QUESTIONING CONSERVATISM'S ASCENDANCY: A REEXAMINATION OF THE RIGHTWARD SHIFT IN MODERN AMERICAN POLITICS

Daniel K. Williams

**Sean P. Cunningham.** *Cowboy Conservatism: Texas and the Rise of the Modern Right*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010. xvi + 293 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00.

**David Farber.** *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010. x + 296 pp. Notes and index. \$29.95.

The latest histories of postwar American conservatism challenge the notion that there was anything inevitable—or even predictable—about the movement's political triumph in the late twentieth century. Until now, most historians of modern conservatism have portrayed the movement as a product of long-term structural causes, including deeply ingrained racial and religious attitudes, demographic changes, and global economic trends. Such interpretations have deemphasized the importance of individual conservative politicians such as Ronald Reagan because the factors that produced conservatism's success at the polls transcended the contributions of any single person. Since historians believed that conservatism was a product of long-term social processes, they did not foresee any immediate end to the "conservative ascendancy."<sup>1</sup> But some of the most recent studies, produced in the wake of President Barack Obama's election victory, suggest that the supposed triumph of American conservatism may have been much more ephemeral, and its sustainability much less certain, than many had thought. Contrary to previous interpretations, several historians have posited that perhaps conservatism's short-term victories depended more on the fortuitous decisions of a few individual political actors than on long-term social and cultural developments.<sup>2</sup>

Sean Cunningham's *Cowboy Conservatism* and David Farber's *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism* represent this new interpretive approach. Researched and written during the final years of the Bush administration, when it appeared that the postwar conservative coalition was collapsing, and published a year after Obama's election, when it seemed that a new era in

American politics had begun, the studies by Cunningham and Farber emphasize the conservative movement's self-contradictory elements and potential for collapse, while suggesting that its brief moment in the sun depended more on perception than substance. Conservatism's short-term electoral triumph, they claim, was shaped more by a few key individuals than by long-term social or economic trends. Cunningham's work argues that conservatives may have triumphed for a short period only because of their successful manipulation of media image, not because of large-scale demographic and policy changes. Farber argues that conservative ideology, which he suggests was given its current shape by a few key ideologues and politicians, contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction and, as a result, is now a declining political ideology.

Cunningham's *Cowboy Conservatism* reaches its novel conclusions by focusing on a state that has received a surprising lack of coverage in studies of postwar conservatism. Previous historians' neglect of the Lone Star State is unfortunate because Texas—the state that launched the political careers of Lyndon Johnson, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush—offers an ideal case study of the shift from liberal Democratic politics to moderate Republicanism and finally to the conservative wing of the GOP. The state has often been a harbinger of political trends. When Texas sent John Tower to the Senate in 1961, it became the first Southern state to renounce the tradition of “yellow dog” Democratic voting and to elect a Republican in a statewide race. Texas provided critical support to Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign in 1976. Some of the state's politicians, such as Tom DeLay, were leaders in the conservative Republican takeover of Congress in the 1990s. And because of its Hispanic minority, Texas fostered a multiethnic approach to politics—reflected in George W. Bush's outreach to Hispanic voters—long before that became necessary in other regions of the country. A study of Texas politics offers an opportunity to study in microcosm trends that have affected the rest of the nation.

Cunningham argues that, although Texas politics have always included a certain strand of conservative populism, the state has experienced a dramatic shift to the right in the last five decades. The current Republican officeholders in Texas are not simply old conservative Southern Democrats in new partisan garb. In fact, even the first Republicans elected in Texas in the 1960s, such as Tower and the elder Bush, were quite moderate compared to the next generation of conservative Republican politicians. There were moments in the 1960s when Texans decisively rejected conservative politics, as they did when they voted overwhelmingly for President Lyndon Johnson over Barry Goldwater. Conservatism, at least in its current form, was not a deeply ingrained political tradition in Texas, so Cunningham's question is why Texans eventually embraced this ideology.

Like most other political analysts, Cunningham locates the electorate's rightward drift in the events of the late 1960s and 1970s. But unlike many

previous scholars, Cunningham does not believe that race and civil rights policy were primary catalysts for the shift, despite Lyndon Johnson's claims to the contrary. Nor does Cunningham give much weight to other standard explanations of partisan realignment such as religion and the culture wars, reaction against high taxes and social welfare spending, or demographic shifts to the Sunbelt and the growth of the defense industry. Instead, what mattered was the image that voters had of each party. The Republicans successfully portrayed "liberals"—which they identified as Democrats—as weak and out of touch with local values. In response, voters shifted to the political right. Cunningham's top-down view of the partisan shift and his view that cynical political operatives used television advertising and other media outlets to effect a change in public voting behavior by creating a negative image of "liberals" echo the arguments of Thomas Frank, Rick Perlstein, and others who have claimed that conservatives used image manipulation to trick voters into casting ballots against their own self-interest.<sup>3</sup> But Cunningham pushes this analysis further than Frank and Perlstein do, presenting a detailed study of the importance that advertising images of independence and virility played in Texas politics.

Cunningham presents a detailed analysis of several major campaigns in Texas to support his argument that political image mattered more than public policy in determining voters' choices. He begins with the election of the Republican candidate John Tower to the Senate in 1961. As the first Republican to win a statewide race in the South during the postwar era, Tower proved to be a harbinger of realignment in the region, so an analysis of his campaign could potentially provide important insights into the reasons the Sunbelt eventually became solidly Republican. Cunningham argues that Tower won primarily because he "project[ed] an overall image as the candidate most in tune with Texans' basic attitudes, morals, and values" (p. 37). Cunningham returns to this theme in his analysis of each subsequent race, emphasizing voters' perception of a candidate's image, rather than a party's policy proposals, as the decisive factor in their political choices. In 1964, Goldwater failed to win Texas, Cunningham argues, because Texans viewed his image as too extreme, regardless of his actual policy positions. In the late 1960s and 1970s, they began to view liberals as flaccid on issues of crime, foreign policy, and the defense of American values at home and abroad. Their disagreements with liberal Democratic policies mattered less than their perceptions of the liberal Democratic image, which was why candidates who projected an image of strength and virility while speaking out against liberal weakness could win elections regardless of their actual policy positions. The person who ultimately proved most successful in doing this was not a Texan at all, but was instead Ronald Reagan, a Californian who capitalized on his Western image and confident persona to win strong support in Texas in his race for the White House.

Cunningham's postmodern emphasis on the importance of image over substance is intriguing, but his analysis would probably be stronger if it included more discussion of the political operatives who created the negative media images of liberals that were so influential in shifting voters' opinions of the Democratic Party. Who were the Karl Roves and Lee Atwaters of Texas politics in the 1970s? Why did Texas voters decide that liberal Democrats such as Ralph Yarborough and George McGovern—and eventually moderate Republicans such as Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush—were weak and vacillating, and that conservatives such as Reagan were strong? Cunningham presents his discussion of the changing public image of liberals and conservatives as though it were simply a logical response to the stagnant economy, the failures in Vietnam, or Carter's ineffective energy policy, or as a foregone conclusion given the failure of Democrats and moderate Republicans to present an effective counter-response to Reagan's presentation of himself as a freedom-loving, patriotic cowboy. But media images are not self-creating. More attention to the political operatives who invented such images would enhance Cunningham's argument.

Nevertheless, *Cowboy Conservatism* is worth reading for the insight it gives into the way in which public images of liberalism operated in pivotal local political races that are often overlooked. Cunningham's analysis of the reasons George W. Bush lost his congressional race to Kent Hance in 1978 is very well done, as is his study of the changing political fortunes of John Tower. His examination of Reagan's popularity among Texans is also quite astute. Cunningham also presents an impressive analysis of campaign rhetoric, a subject that has often fascinated journalists but that too many historians of modern American politics have ignored. Cunningham emphasizes the contingent nature of conservatism's triumph and suggests that individual campaigns matter, an idea that perhaps too many scholars have dismissed in their insistence that economic or social trends can predict the outcome of elections. *Cowboy Conservatism* is a careful study that avoids polemics and oversimplifications while still presenting a clear, focused argument. Cunningham's postmodern analysis of public image as a force for political change offers an insightful challenge to the existing paradigm of conservative studies—and one that many will no doubt find persuasive in an age of media consultants and the cable news cycle.

David Farber's *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism* likewise emphasizes the contingent and transitory nature of the conservative coalition. The book adopts a biographical approach by tracing the trajectory of postwar American conservatism through vignettes of six of its representative leaders—Robert Taft, William F. Buckley, Barry Goldwater, Phyllis Schlafly, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. Farber could have used the selection, which represents a cross-section of the conservative movement, to discuss the

movement's tensions and factionalism, a focus of other histories of modern conservatism. Goldwater, for instance, is usually portrayed as a libertarian, averse to the politics of cultural conservatism that Schlafly represented. Bush, a gregarious backslapper and tax-cutter who became best known for his championship of the neoconservative quest to remake the Middle East, seemingly had little in common with the dour, isolationist, and deficit-wary Taft. But rather than focus on the differences between conservatives, Farber highlights their shared goals. While previous scholars have often viewed the alliance between libertarians and social conservatives as an uneasy marriage of convenience, Farber portrays conservatives from all wings of the movement as adherents of the same creed. All conservatives, he argues, believe in social order, patriotism, and the primacy of property rights over individual rights. Rather than believing that government should discipline markets, as did twentieth-century liberals, they think that unregulated markets perform a useful social function by disciplining the individual.

Farber's view of the essential unity of the conservative movement allows him to highlight shared values among conservatives that many previous analysts missed. Scholars have often portrayed Reagan as ambivalent toward the Religious Right's demands, giving social conservatives rhetorical support while denying them substantive policy achievements. Farber, by contrast, portrays Reagan as a true believer in the Christian Right's cause; the demands of conservative evangelicals were in perfect accord with Reagan's own desire for moral order in society. Farber correctly notes the centrality of moral themes in Reagan's gubernatorial campaign of 1966, and he discusses the ways in which he used judicial appointments and presidential declarations to curb abortion rights during his presidency. Similarly, he points out that Reagan, like his evangelical supporters, saw the Cold War in moral terms. In Farber's book, even Goldwater, who is often portrayed as the quintessential libertarian Republican, becomes a crusader for moral order as well as property rights.

Farber's study is primarily a synthesis of information from secondary sources, so the information it presents does not break new ground, but its analysis is original and thought-provoking. Farber's biographical approach, which is rare among surveys of the conservative movement, allows him to examine the mindset of each of the conservatives he portrays and to delve into the question of why each of them adopted a particular set of political values. He portrays each of his characters sympathetically and judiciously, even while disagreeing with their philosophies and discussing their various foibles. Reagan, he points out, was much more intellectually curious than his opponents realized. Even Bush, whom Farber portrays as a failed president, was at least a true believer in the "compassionate conservatism" that he preached on the campaign trail in 2000.

Farber believes that the conservative movement has not lacked for talented intellectuals to present its ideas. If Taft, despite his intellectual brilliance, was an uncharismatic spokesperson for the conservative cause, he was succeeded by others, starting with Buckley, who were able to present a similar message in a far more winsome and engaging manner. Each person Farber profiled succeeded in expanding the conservative base. Buckley brought social conservatives into Taft's coalition of Midwestern businessmen. Goldwater brought Southern segregationists into the fold. Schlafly mobilized conservative women. Reagan turned the conservative movement into a national majority. Bush, at least in his early political career, enlarged the coalition to include Hispanics and suburbanites who had been turned off by the Republican Party's image on racial issues.

But Farber also argues that conservative ideas have failed, as Bush's second term in office demonstrated. For nearly seventy years, conservatives argued that social order rested on absolute values, property rights were paramount, and unregulated markets provided social discipline. In 2008, Americans discovered that unregulated markets produced a national financial crisis, tax cuts produced rising deficits, and a relentless focus on fighting the "evil" of terrorism led to protracted wars that appeared to be unwinnable. Government, some voters thought, was not necessarily the "problem" that Reagan had claimed it was. The conservatives' attacks on government had led not to a more efficient society, but to an inability to deal with societal crises, as the Bush administration's disastrous responses to Hurricane Katrina indicated. Because Farber views the Bush administration's policies as the epitome of conservative ideology, he treats voters' repudiation of Bush as evidence of their rejection of conservatism.

Farber's emphasis on conservatism's "fall," written in the aftermath of Obama's election victory but before the rise of the Tea Party, may seem overly naïve after the 2010 midterm elections or the continued salience of conservative punditry on the Fox News Channel. Farber's willingness to offer a fifty-page assessment of George W. Bush only a few months after he left office may also seem unusually audacious for a historian. But that should not distract readers from the larger significance of this book's analysis. Farber has produced a compelling work that explains the coherency of the conservative message. While not shying away from analyzing the importance of race in the conservative movement's formation—indeed, this is a central theme in Farber's chapters on Goldwater and Reagan—Farber nevertheless explains why the rise of the conservative movement depended on much more than race, and why racial conservatism fit into the conservative movement's larger emphasis on property rights over human rights. Farber's work may prompt historians to look at the relationship between libertarians and social conservatives in a new way, and his engaging narrative will appeal to instructors looking for a concise text on conservatism to assign to an undergraduate class.

The studies by Cunningham and Farber approach the study of conservatism from different angles, but each book emphasizes the power of rhetoric and image to mobilize voters, and questions the paradigm of a conservative "ascendancy" that has dominated the field of conservative studies for the past decade. The conservatives' success at the ballot box may not have been based entirely on smoke and mirrors, but according to the latest round of studies, it was a great deal less substantive or enduring than many once supposed. Whether this interpretation ultimately proves persuasive will depend largely on the future of conservatism. If conservatives never again experience the heyday that they enjoyed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, future scholars may well look back on these studies as prescient analyses. On the other hand, if conservatism experiences another resurgence at the polls, perhaps the current prognostications of its death will seem greatly exaggerated.

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1. See, for instance, Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (2007). Some of the many studies that portray postwar American conservatism as the product of long-term demographic trends, economic developments, and racial attitudes are Thomas Byrne Edsall with Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (1991); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2001); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (2005); and Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (2007).

2. For other recent studies that suggest the contingent nature of the conservative triumph or that question the idea of a "conservative ascendancy," see David T. Courtwright, *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics in a Liberal America* (2010); and Timothy Stanley, *Kennedy vs. Carter: The 1980 Battle for the Democratic Party's Soul* (2010).

3. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004); Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (2008).