

PREFACE

I WROTE my doctoral dissertation during the Reagan years on an aspect of American conservative history. Not many historians were studying conservatism then, even though it was becoming central to American political life. Since 1990 many excellent books have appeared, detailing and explaining elements of conservative history, philosophy, and politics. However, only one author, Robert Muccigrosso, has attempted to tell the whole story of American conservatism from the Revolution to the present, and his account is severely compressed. When Yale University Press invited me three years ago to write a much bigger history of American conservative ideas, I accepted gladly, in the belief that such a book would be interesting to research and would fill a gap in the historical literature.

As it turned out, there was a lot more to say than I had space for, and I have been forced to touch only lightly, or pass over in silence, many deserving subjects and personalities. I hope, nevertheless, that this book will be of use to students and general readers interested in the long history of American conservatism. The skeleton of the whole story is here, along with an explanation of its main themes. I introduce a large cast of characters, some of whom espoused ideas that are abhorrent by current standards. Whatever they believed, I have tried to give them at least a provisional hearing, presenting their ideas in context to show why, in their time,

they were plausible and—to some readers—attractive. I extend the same courtesy to their critics.

I have tried not to read contemporary issues into the past and to keep my own opinions as far in the background as possible, in the hope that the book will be of use to readers from all points on the political compass. I am not arguing on behalf of conservatism or against it; neither do I assert that one of the many strands of American conservatism is somehow more genuine than others. My intention is to keep the rhetorical temperature low and to take each group—at least provisionally—on its own terms.

I am grateful to my editors at Yale University Press, Lara Heimert and Chris Rogers; to my agent, Jeri Thoma; and to my colleagues at Emory University, especially David Abraham, Joseph Crespino, Brooks Holifield, Frank Lechner, Jeffrey Lesser, and Daniel Spillman. Thanks also to my favorite readers elsewhere: Jim Fisher, Ernie Freeberg, Darryl Hart, Christine Rosen, Howard Seftel and the two very helpful anonymous peer reviewers for Yale University Press, one of whom, Leo Ribuffo, threw off the veil of secrecy. The dedication is to my much beloved sister and brother.

Introduction

FROM THE LATE 1970S to the early twenty-first century, American conservatism was constantly in the news. Conservative intellectuals challenged nearly all the liberal verities of the 1950s and 1960s. Powerful conservative think tanks served up a steady stream of policy proposals, and politicians from both major parties took notice. New media outlets like CNN and Fox began to approach the news from an openly conservative vantage point, and by the 1990s some politicians were disavowing liberalism because even use of the “l word” appeared to cost them popular support.

At the grassroots level such organizations as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition brought out the vote for conservative candidates. In domestic policy, support for the traditional family and for religion in public life, along with opposition to gay rights, abortion, welfare, and affirmative action, all won sympathetic conservative attention. Government began to dismantle decades-long welfare and busing programs. A succession of appointments under presidents Reagan and the two Bushes changed the character of the Supreme Court. In foreign policy, conservatives theorized the exhaustion of the Soviet Union, then celebrated the end of the Cold War, before looking ahead to new geopolitical challenges.

As the media charted this era of conservative dominance, however, it also noticed divisions within the conservative movement. Some

conservatives wanted a vast defense establishment able to nullify all threats, to take on opponents anywhere in the world, and to spread the gospel of democratic capitalism worldwide. Others, especially after the Cold War, wanted a retreat to the historic American policy of isolation, leaving the rest of the world to its own affairs. At home, some conservatives favored a drastic reduction of the federal government, while others saw new opportunities for government intervention. Occasional well-publicized splits in conservative groups and among conservative politicians bespoke philosophical as well as pragmatic differences.

Where did American conservatism come from, what are its intellectual sources, and why is it internally divided? This book is dedicated to answering those questions, not just with regard to recent decades but throughout the history of the republic. Conservatism was not always a high-pressure “inside the Beltway” affair, and at times it almost vanished from American public life, becoming merely the preserve of scattered intellectual groups. There is, however, a strong, complex, and continuing American conservative tradition. Understanding it helps us understand the nation’s history as a whole.

It is important to emphasize at the outset that before the 1950s there was no such thing as a conservative *movement* in the United States. Writing about conservatism throughout American history therefore creates organizational and semantic problems. Before the twentieth century, it was unusual for Americans to refer to themselves politically as *conservatives*, though many used the term as an adjective (as in “I take a conservative view of this issue”). I make the case that certain people throughout American history can be understood as conservatives, but with the important caution that this was not a noun most of them used about themselves.

For more than a century one of the major political parties in Britain has called itself Conservative. In the United States, by contrast, neither of the two parties has monopolized the political expression of conservatism. Here I argue that conservatism is, first of all, an *attitude* to social and political change that looks for support to the ideas, beliefs, and habits of the past and puts more faith in the lessons of history than in the abstractions of political philosophy. The attitude long predated the movement. Conservatives were skeptical and anti-utopian. They doubted the possibility of human, social, or political perfection. Their attitude toward politics was

comparable to the religious idea of original sin: people are unable to act entirely rationally or selflessly, human plans will go awry, well-meant actions will have unintended bad consequences. Planned societies are therefore impossible, and the attempt to create them will probably lead to chaos or tyranny. Similarly, they thought that human imperfection made war a permanent part of the human condition so that hopes for a world free of conflict were delusional. They thought of progress as possible, but not inevitable, and worried that ostensibly progressive changes were really sources of degeneration and decay. When they advocated reforms, they appealed to tradition, national heritage, or the wisdom of earlier generations, sometimes claiming that their apparent innovations were really a way of restoring the conditions of a better time in the past.

Writers about American conservatism have often observed that the word itself has meant different things at different times and that there is no consistency in conservatives' beliefs about what should be conserved. This truth need not be surprising; conservatives have generally taken an antitheoretical approach to their world. American conservatism, moreover, has often been *reactive*, responding to perceived political and intellectual challenges. As the challenges and threats changed, so did the nature of the conservative response. Beliefs that once seemed radical later came to seem conservative. Arguments for the free market, for example, seemed radical in the era of the American Revolution, but arguments for the free market since 1917, when Soviet communism proposed a fully planned and centrally directed economy, have had a strongly conservative flavor.

Certain ideas and themes recur throughout the book. One is a suspicion of democracy and equality. In the early republic, democracy seemed threatening to many property owners and members of the educated elite. The Constitution had created a republic, but it did not mention democracy; to the privileged of that era, the spread of democracy could feel unsettling. They denied that all men are equal, except perhaps in the eyes of God, and they believed that mass participation in politics, far from enhancing liberty and justice, would be more likely to degrade the republic and replace virtuous leaders with demagogues. By the late nineteenth century, to argue openly against democracy was becoming difficult, but conservatives kept up a steady drumbeat of criticism against egalitarianism.

Along with doubts about democracy and equality, American conservatives generally shared the view that civilization is fragile and easily disrupted. Every generation must learn anew the importance of restraint, manners, deference, and good citizenship; the survival of the republic presupposes the virtue of its citizens. For more than two centuries, influential conservative writers have emphasized these qualities and argued for a highly educated elite as guardians of civilization.

Throughout conservative history, further, it is possible to trace recurrent fears about social dissolution. At times such fears became acute and led conservatives to call for drastic remedies. In the late 1850s, for example, many otherwise sober Northern conservatives became convinced that the republic was threatened by a vast slaveholders' conspiracy. At the same time Southern conservatives feared that the Republican Party planned to eliminate the slave system on which their society was built. The two groups, both acting on what might be thought of as conservative fears, brought about disunion and war. In the 1960s, similarly, conservative opponents of radical activism declared themselves the guardians of law and order and argued for a heavy-handed government policy that, in calmer times, they would have deplored.

On many other issues conservatism has meant different things at different times. The conservative attitude to the proper role of government, for example, has varied according to circumstances. Alexander Hamilton, as first secretary of the treasury, wanted to strengthen federal authority to supervise the nation's finances and to nurture economic growth. In the 1790s Federalists like Hamilton and John Adams dreaded the possible spread of the French Revolution to America. This unease led them to seek a closer diplomatic relationship with France's principal enemy, Britain. During the New Deal of the 1930s, by contrast, conservatives were men who *feared* big government, especially if it meant federal intervention in the running of the economy; in addition they favored isolation from European conflicts. The very thing Hamilton had tried to ensure, with a conservative end in view, was the thing a later conservative generation tried to forestall. American history provides numerous occasions when the most identifiably conservative Americans favored a strong and active national government and others when *opposition* to a strong national government seemed essential. Similarly, there have been eras when conservatism was

almost synonymous with a posture of isolationism, and others when it went hand in hand with bold intervention abroad.

It is not unusual to find figures who can be thought of as conservatives on both sides of great conflicts. The pre-Civil War rivals Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun, for example, each had the conservation of a cherished old thing in view (the Union for Webster and the tradition of limited government plus Southern slavery for Calhoun). The Civil War itself can easily be seen as the conflict of two conservatisms, with Webster's and Calhoun's principles and rivalry represented by the two sections and ratcheted up to a deadlier pitch. But if it began as the encounter of two incompatible conservatisms, pressure of events and the imperative to win led both sides to take dramatic and transformative steps—such as Emancipation, conscription, and the suspension of habeas corpus—that were anything but conservative in practice.

Conservatism throughout American history has often entailed the defense of privilege by the holders of privilege and has always been vulnerable to the accusation that it is really just the self-interested special pleading of men who have a lot to lose. At its worst it has indeed been little more than rich men's defense of their material advantages; conservatism's characteristic vices have been pessimism and complacency. When it is only special pleading, conservative writing is neither convincing nor interesting. When, on the other hand, it comes as part of a broader understanding of the world, embodying hidden or neglected insights about the human condition, conservatism becomes engaging. We so rarely hear arguments in favor of human inequality, for example, that we are in danger of forgetting that, for most of world history, inequality has been regarded as almost too obvious to require any justification. Likewise with democracy; the arguments against it are rarely voiced in public American settings today, so that it becomes easy to think of democracy as a natural or default situation rather than as an extremely unusual historical achievement. Yet conservative arguments against equality and against democracy were persuasive and influential to intelligent readers in many eras of American history, as were arguments in favor of slavery. We do not have to believe them, but if we are fully to understand the American past we should remember that serious people took them seriously.