

First Words

In theory, being 'conservative' means defending tradition against rapid societal change. In practice, America's conservatives are clamoring to radically reshape the nation. By Jane Coaston

Stop Motion

In 1953, a weathered journalist named Frank Chodorov founded the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists, an organization intended to halt the march of progressive ideas on American campuses. It's still around, known today as the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, dedicated to promoting things like limited government, "personal responsibility," a free-market economy and traditional values. ¶ It was the I.S.I. — through a group called the Collegiate Network — that supported the conservative student newspaper where I worked while at the University of Michigan. I was, at the time, interested in how much of a role the state seemed to play in my life, and how all our lives could be freer, more self-contained. I wanted to explore the underpinnings of conservatism with other believers. The paper I joined was perhaps more libertarian than traditionally conservative, but the I.S.I. paid our publishing costs and sent us to editors' conferences; as far as I knew, that meant that the people who paid for my first trip outside the Eastern time zone voted for George W. Bush and thought the Iraq war was a good idea.¶ Chodorov, I'd later learn, was not this kind of

conservative. He vigorously opposed all forms of military intervention and spent one 1938 essay reminding readers “that war is caused by the conditions that bring about poverty; that no war is justified; that no war benefits the people.” In the 1950s, he differed strongly with William F. Buckley Jr. — his handpicked choice as the first president of the I.S.I. — out of a belief that conservatives’ efforts to combat international Communism would be more dangerous than Communism itself. The man whose organization was meant to ensure I became a rock-ribbed conservative seemed to exist far away from what the group was sponsoring half a century later. “Conservatism,” I learned, can be a slippery thing — flexible in its ideas, and something else entirely in practice.

For centuries, conservative politics has considered itself a means of preserving something — a culture, a way of being, an imagined notion of what once was and should be again. For Edmund Burke, the Irish statesman credited with some of conservative thought’s earliest underpinnings, to be a conservative was to avoid the human temptation to progress too far beyond our bounds. “The great error of our nature,” he wrote in 1756, “is not to know where to stop” and ultimately “to lose all we have gained by an insatiable pursuit after more.” Burke wanted to preserve the cultural legacy of European monarchies, writing during the French Revolution: “We fear God, we look up with awe to kings; with affection to parliaments; with duty to magistrates; with reverence to priests; and with respect to nobility. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is *natural* to be so affected.” To be a conservative, for him, was to obey a “natural” order, rather than trying, in our hubris, to conceive of a better one. Conservatives have tried to preserve religious values, class-based social systems, the concept of the “Western democratic order.” They gave the oldest political party in England its name. In America, freed from lies to monarchy or aristocracy, they tried to cast in amber the ideals they believed animated the nation’s founding. Conservatism has told us again and again that what came before us was most likely better than what will follow, and that old ideals are the basis of who we are as a people. Buckley, the founder of National

Review, was a self-described conservative, believing that, as the conservative theorist Peter Viereck once wrote in *The Times*, “freedom depends on the traditional value-code of the West.” So is Speaker of the House Paul Ryan. So is Mitt Romney, who during the 2012 presidential campaign called himself “severely conservative.”

Is Donald Trump? As of last year’s Republican primaries, an array of “Never Trump” conservatives were arguing that the candidate wouldn’t merely be a bad president but a liberal one, ramping up the federal deficit and taking leftist stances on health care, L.G.B.T. rights and foreign policy. His very temperament, with its lack of humility or restraint, was said to go against the fabric of conservatism. But many voters didn’t share these worries: In Election Day exit polls, 81 percent of those who described themselves as “conservative” said they had voted for Trump. The modern licentiousness that conservative figures used to condemn, the promises to

Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

**Conservatism
has long had
two faces
— one for
its ideological
elites and
another for
its voters.**

use government power in ways that would normally unsettle conservative ideologues — voters could embrace these, so long as it appeared to benefit them. Their politics weren’t those of William F. Buckley; they were those of Donald J. Trump.

What my time at that student paper taught me is that conservatism has long had two faces — one for its ideological elites and another for its voters. Its intellectual class debates free markets and constitutional law, but the message for voters is consistently different, full of sinister socialist plots and black welfare recipients soaking up tax money. The conversations I had in our office on Sunday afternoons took place against a backdrop of complaints about “liberal fascism,” of unceasing racial rhetoric in every publication and comments section, of the national anti-liberal student group Young Americans for Freedom planning a gathering in the center of our campus for “Catch an Illegal Immigrant Day.”

Trump rejected only half that equation: the elites who believed their ideas determined the trajectory of conservative thought. He excised the ideological middlemen and spoke directly to voters, who did not need to wrestle with coherent principles or define the nature of the relationship between citizen and state. They were free to decide that universal health care and copious use of executive orders were conservative values after all — and when they did, the very people whose entire careers had depended on carefully defining and nurturing the conservative movement would come to look like liberal shills. As Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona said late in October, announcing that he would not seek re-election: “It is clear at this moment that a traditional conservative” — a believer in free trade, limited government and all the rest — “has a narrower and narrower path to nomination in the Republican Party.”

In his mission statement for National Review, published in 1955, Buckley imagined a magazine that “stands athwart history, yelling stop”; its conservatism wanted to hold the reins of societal change, stopping it in its tracks. But even this vision of conservatism had to distance itself from others. The John Birch Society was too conspiracy-minded. Obstinate segregationists, like the Alabama governor George Wallace, were frowned upon. Ayn Rand was a bellicose atheist. Those elements, though, still saw *themselves* as conservative — sometimes more conservative than those who wanted to displace them. When National Review repudiated the head of the John Birch Society, Buckley received piles of letters. “I have always believed you to be a true conservative,” said one. “However, since you seem categorically to accept most of the left-wing programs, I’m beginning to doubt your sincerity.”

These other conservatives would fight efforts to integrate schools long after mainstream conservatives gave in. They would power right-wing talk radio and support the Moral Majority. They would eventually create the Tea Party, send Ted Cruz and Tom Cotton to Capitol Hill and help elect Donald Trump to the highest office in the land — all without much input from Buckley, or Ryan, or Mitch McConnell, or Commentary.

More important, they didn’t fear change; they desired it. Their imaginings

ran not toward the stopping of history but toward constitutional conventions and civil wars. The emergence among them of the “alt-right” wasn’t a reaction to progressive threats but to a perceived lack of radical action from conservative leaders. Such voters no longer wanted to preserve an America that was going astray; they wanted to raze and remodel it, with Trump as head of demolition. As the Fox News host Tucker Carlson wrote in Politico, early in 2016, Republican voters “seem to know a lot about Trump, more than the people who run their party. They know that he isn’t a conventional ideological conservative. They seem relieved.”

But this dynamic had been clear for at least a decade. From my first year of college to the weeks in which, as editor in chief, I closed my final edition of the paper, I came to a realization: Whatever conservatism told me it was intellectually — whatever ideas we discussed,

Whatever conservatism told me it was intellectually could never compete with what conservatism was in practice.

whatever policy papers I read — could never compete with what conservatism was in practice. At the conferences the Collegiate Network sent me to, no one was discussing tax policy or the nature of effective governance; they were debating whether Barack Obama was a “real” American and whether Sarah Palin could unseat him in 2012, based on pure and unfettered loathing. Nothing was being conserved.

Conservative voters have known this for some time. This is why they voted last year for a president who swore not to preserve but to upend. Since Barry Goldwater’s 1964 campaign for the presidency, Republicans have worked to maintain a two-tiered party — one for the ideologues who believed in Burke and Buckley, free markets and free minds, and one for the voters, who are often moved less by a system of ideas than by id and grievance. It was always the voters, though, who really mattered. And it was the voters who won. ♦