
Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

Politics Without a Right

It took only a few days after the rout of the Republicans in their battle to drive Bill Clinton from office for the leaders of the Beltway Right to decide that the war was over and the only thing left to do was announce surrender. Four days after the Senate “acquitted” the President of the two charges on which he had been impeached, the grand marshal of the Beltway Right himself, Paul Weyrich, seemed ready to limp toward Appomattox. In a letter privately circulated to friends and allies, Mr. Weyrich declared that the political conservatism he has led since the 1970’s has been a failure and that the premises on which it was founded are now (if they had not always been) wrong. The news that Mr. Weyrich had given up was in fact somewhat exaggerated, but that was the conclusion to which the left and not a few on the right immediately leapt, and frankly there was not very much in Mr. Weyrich’s letter to contradict it.

Paul Weyrich, of course, was a major founder and leader of the “New Right” of the 1970’s, a movement that sought to differentiate itself from the “Old Right” by devising a populist political strategy, invoking explicit moral and religious issues, shunning (or at least de-emphasizing) philosophical rigor and sophistication, and insisting that political victory was not only possible but also necessary and sufficient for the achievement of conservative goals.

Under Mr. Weyrich’s direction or with his collaboration, the New Right actually did accomplish a good deal more, on a practical political level and for a brief time, than the right associated with Robert Taft, Barry Goldwater, and the “conservative intellectual movement” had in previous decades. Yet the 15 minutes of fame the New Right enjoyed came to an end rather more quickly than most of its apostles expected and certainly sooner than they wanted.

The main problem with the New Right, as with most political movements that bark their contempt for serious thought, was its intellectual shallowness. I distinctly recall, in the late 1970’s, talking to a young lady closely associated

with the New Right who had recently returned from her first visit to the Philadelphia Society, at that time one of the more intellectually interesting organizations of the Old Right. She told me she had enjoyed the visit and meeting the nice people there, but she didn’t understand the point of “sitting around talking about whether Edmund Burke would have agreed with Thomas Aquinas and that sort of stuff.”

No, indeed, the New Right had no time for such idle froth as Burke and Aquinas. Its leaders were made of sterner stuff than the limp-wristed eggheads who were always gushing quotations from dead Greek philosophers. There were congressional and presidential elections to win, policies to implement, and legislation to pass, and, as one prominent New Right leader announced publicly soon afterward, “There’ll be time enough for reading books when we’re all in jail.”

One result of the New Right’s contempt for intellectualism, of course, was that neither its leaders nor its followers ever thought through the slogans and truisms they spouted well enough to understand that they often were implicitly jettisoning or undercutting other ideas of the right or that their own pronouncements might soon become obstacles to fulfilling other, longer-term goals and political and cultural objectives. Another result, arising from the first, was that the whole New Right movement was rather quickly captured by the neoconservatives, at least insofar as the latter wished to absorb it. Lacking the intellectual foundations for perceiving, let alone resisting, the far less radical ideas of neoconservatism and scornful of anyone who suggested laying such foundations, the New Right, by the mid-1980’s, had ceased to exist as a distinct political movement. In 1984, when Irving Kristol’s manifesto of neoconservatism, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, was published, it was Mr. Weyrich himself who, reviewing it in the Heritage Foundation’s *Policy Review*, hailed the book as “a vital moral force in America” and crowed that several passages “come closer to a general statement of what some in the New Right strain of conservatism believe than anything else in popular print.” If there was any one broker of the

marriage of the New Right with neoconservatism, it was Mr. Weyrich himself.

Today, after 15 years of neoconservative dominance of almost the whole of the American right, Mr. Weyrich bellies up to the bar to inform us that the war is over and “we” lost. The reason “we” lost, he tells us in his February letter,

is that politics itself has failed. And politics has failed because of the collapse of the culture. The culture we are living in becomes an ever-wider sewer. In truth, I think we are caught up in a cultural collapse of historic proportions, a collapse so great that it simply overwhelms politics.

Whether “we” have lost or not, however, Mr. Weyrich is in large part correct in what he says about the relationship of culture and politics, and indeed no magazine has drummed that message more than *Chronicles*. In 1991, I wrote in this magazine that “in the absence of a significant cultural base,” conservative political efforts “were bound to fail.” I do not quote this passage to prove that I was right while Mr. Weyrich was wrong (in fact, Mr. Weyrich was talking about the importance of “cultural conservatism” in the late 1980’s) but mainly to show that the failure of the right he now laments and acknowledges was predictable years before it actually occurred. Perhaps (indeed, probably) Mr. Weyrich himself saw or was beginning to see that some time before he wrote his letter last February, but most others did not, and many still don’t. Some conservatives even continue to imagine that their “movement” has actually won. As Paul Gottfried has written, if this is “victory,” I really don’t want to see what defeat is like.

I have no disagreement with Mr. Weyrich, then, in his conclusion that the right has lost and that it lost because it failed to find or create an adequate cultural base for political success. I would perhaps go further than he and suggest that the reason it has failed to do so is that (partly through Mr. Weyrich’s help) the right fell under the control of neoconservatism, and neoconservatism has never been willing to break with the dominant culture definitively or to ally itself with-

out reservation to the authentic American culture that the super-culture dominates and seeks to destroy. Hence, any suggestion of cultural and political radicalism by the Old Right or the New toward the goals of uprooting the dominant culture has been greeted by the neoconservatives as “extremist,” “reactionary,” “racist,” “antisemitic,” or “anti-American.” That is how they greeted *Chronicles*, as well as Pat Buchanan in the 1980’s and 90’s. That is also how they greeted their own colleague Fr. Richard John Neuhaus and the symposium his magazine *First Things* published in 1996 on the “end of democracy,” and, not surprisingly, that is how they greeted Mr. Weyrich’s letter last February.

Thus *Wall Street Journal* neocon columnist Paul Gigot, in a column entitled “New Right Now Sounds Like Old Left,” calls Mr. Weyrich’s letter “anti-American” for suggesting that American culture is corrupt and for “blaming America first.” When neocons talk about “America,” what they mean is the soft managerial regime that has evolved since the New Deal, what the late Murray Rothbard called the “welfare-warfare state,” and when they compare people on the right to the “Old Left” (the same charge was made against *Chronicles* and later Pat Buchanan), they mean that the right is as anti-American as George McGovern and Ramsey Clark. While they may dislike or have some reservations about the exact contours and content of the next metamorphosis of the managerial state into the New World Order, neoconservatives generally have much more of a problem with radicals of the right working to reverse the direction of history than with forces of the left pushing history “forward.”

Mr. Weyrich, however, appears to think that political conservatism has failed not because it has neglected the authentic American culture but because that culture itself is corrupt or has withered. He now asserts that “I do not believe that a majority of Americans actually shares our values” and that “if there really were a moral majority out there, Bill Clinton would have been driven out of office months ago.” But the failure to dump Clinton proves very little, and there are several other reasons why it occurred. Mr. Weyrich himself acknowledges one—“the lack of political will on the part of Republicans”—but there are others: the inability of the “moral major-

ity” (if that’s the right term for it) to mobilize its political will in a society where national political expression has become largely a monopoly of the dominant culture; the fact that many Americans, while not approving of Mr. Clinton’s sex life, believe he has been a good President who has kept the economy strong; and lastly, the failure of the self-proclaimed opposition to Mr. Clinton—the conservative movement—to persuade most Americans that the President should be dumped.

Two reflections emerge from considering Mr. Weyrich’s lamentations about the Waterloo of the right. In the first place, almost every complaint he lodges against what he thinks is the moral wreckage of American society, the “ever-wider sewer” in which he seems to think most Americans are wallowing, is in fact a complaint against the dominant culture. “Even now,” he writes, entirely truthfully,

for the first time in their lives, people have to be afraid of what they say. This has never been true in the history of our country. Yet today, if you say the “wrong thing,” you suddenly have legal problems, political problems, you might even lose your job or be expelled from college. Certain topics are forbidden. You can’t approach the truth about a lot of different subjects. If you do, you are immediately branded as “racist,” “sexist,” “homophobic,” “insensitive,” or “judgmental.”

But as correct as this passage is, it is still a complaint against the dominant culture, not the traditional one. People get fired for expressing forbidden thoughts in universities, corporations, TV networks, and newspapers, but not at locally owned and operated farms, schools, and businesses. Mr. Weyrich does not cite a single instance to support his claim that “Americans have adopted in large measure the MTV culture that we so valiantly opposed just a few years ago.”

Secondly, one should also reflect that, among the alternative reasons suggested above for the failure to dump Clinton, the most important have to do simply with the failure of the political right. The “majority,” whether moral or not, never does much of anything; elites—minorities—always rule, and this is as true of organized conservatism as of or-

ganized socialism and communism. The elite of organized conservatism in the United States for the last 20 years has been the neoconservative-dominated “conservative movement,” in which Mr. Weyrich and his New Rightists were captains, and when he complains that “Americans have adopted the MTV culture” and ceased to be moral, one has to suspect that the problem is not that the majority of Americans have ceased to be moral but that the majority just doesn’t pay much attention to Paul Weyrich and the “movement” he helped create. The majority has paid little attention to the movement’s insistence that it was Ronald Reagan, not Bill Clinton, who fixed the economy and destroyed communism so that we no longer have to go to war against it; the majority has paid little attention to the concoction of conspiracy theories, pornographic speculation, and thinly masked partisan gloating that has characterized the clumsy conservative crusade against Mr. Clinton; and the majority has displayed very little interest in submitting to the political leadership of the “conservative movement” or anyone associated with it. The majority, to put it quite bluntly, pays no attention whatsoever to organized conservatism, and it does not do so for a very good reason: The kind of conservatism that has come to prevail in the United States over the last generation—neoconservatives and their unemployable children and in-laws, the Beltway Right, and the flying squadrons of semi-literate “New Right” bumpkins—has virtually nothing to say worth paying attention to.

If the campaign to dump Bill Clinton is a flop, that’s too bad, but the nation will survive it. What the nation cannot survive is a politics without a right—at least a right in opposition but, one would hope, also a right that is able to become the dominant force in national politics and culture. Mr. Weyrich is correct that today the nation doesn’t have a right of that kind and that the one it does have is a total and absolute dud. He’s not correct that the absence or failure of the right is the fault of the American majority or proof of the collapse of the real American culture: It’s the fault of the right itself and of the course on which the organized right has been traveling for the last decade. Mr. Weyrich himself helped place it on that course. If he has now learned how to redirect it onto a more fruitful one, he will have something useful to tell us in the future. ◊

Letter From Banausia

by Michael McMahon

The Aptly Named Woodhead



Lovers of Gilbert and Sullivan will not need to be reminded that the second act of *The Gondoliers* is set in “Barataria,” a fictional land which is ruled by “a monarchy that’s tempered with republican equality.” The opera satirizes the inflexible social order of Victorian society by turning it on its head and mocking the no-less-absurd result. The plot, of course, is resolved by events as improbable as they are comic: Everyone is happy at the end.

Lovers of learning could be forgiven for thinking that, if W.S. Gilbert were alive today, he would surely write a story set in “Banausia,” a tyranny that’s tempered with—and mediated through—the illusion of educational equality. That, too, would be the story of a world turned upside-down, intellectually and culturally. It would be the story of contemporary English education. And Gilbert would have to strain his comic vision to its limit to come up with a happy ending.

Why “Banausia”? Because in an exact inversion of the values of ancient Athens, those who rule contemporary Britain have respect only for the practical outcomes of education. In fact, for all their use of the E-word—the prime minister’s scriptwriters have instructed him never to mention it without repeating it twice thereafter—few contemporary politicians of any influence show any sign of having the faintest idea what it means. When Mr. Blair says—again, and again, and again—that his priorities are “Education, Education, Education,” he is not speaking about education at all, but of training: of drudges, by drudges, for drudgery.

If anyone were ever to doubt this, he need only look at the brass plate on the front door of what used to be called the Ministry of Education. It is now styled the “Department for Education [as if, on

the evidence, anyone might think it was agin’ it] and Employment.” The question “Why do we have education?” is both posed and answered on that plaque. Is it to liberate the mind, to hand on the cultural inheritance, and to pursue knowledge and understanding for its own sake? No: It is to prepare our children for work. That’s why double-minister David Blunkett is flogging a utilitarian two-horse chariot, and that is why the elegant, independent-spirited thoroughbred of Learning has been put out to whatever scant grass it can find.

But things are far worse than this. What has happened in England is not just the debasement of education. It has not merely been diminished; it has been perverted—skillfully, and for a political purpose. Education is no longer an independent field of human activity supported and encouraged by the government, but a tightly controlled medium through which that government exercises power—over the future, as well as the present. Alan Ryan, warden of New College, Oxford, puts it concisely: “It’s all about control, punishment, inspection, telling people how to do things.” There is still an educational elite, of course, though it is no longer made up of the learned, but of the powerful—those who control education from without. Learning has fallen victim to a kind of secular Erastianism in which the greater is subordinated to the lesser. Schools are no longer expected to be self-renewing fountains of learning, where educated teachers re-invest their knowledge and wisdom in society; they are to be anti-intellectual boot camps in which a state-scripted curriculum is delivered.

In every primary school in the land, an hour is now spent teaching “literacy”—what we used to call reading and writing—from a script so detailed that almost the only variation permitted is in the names of the children in the class. Starting next year, mathematics will be taught in the same way. Throughout the rest of primary and secondary schooling, the national curriculum dictates precisely what will be taught, and the omnipotent, inquisitorial malice of the inspectorate makes sure it is taught in precisely the way the government wants.

This passion for centralized uniformity is boundless. At one comic extreme, the government has commissioned a

normative scheme of decoration and furnishing for staff rooms—even though teachers these days hardly have time to enter them except to clear their bulging pigeonholes of obscenely wasteful quantities of paperwork. At the other, more sinisterly, it has allocated one billion pounds to a computerization program (“one of the largest committed by any government in the world”) that will connect every school to what it calls a “National Grid for Learning,” so that teachers and pupils can access Whitehall-approved lesson plans and learning materials. Launching the scheme last November, ministers were anxious to point out that they were not trying to use this new technology to “seize control of information that could be used in the classrooms,” but the practical outcome, of course, will be precisely that. For despite its pitiful deference to the Mammon of market forces, New Labour is carefully nationalizing the one commodity the market cannot control: thought.

But the introduction of the National Grid for Learning marks more than the totalitarian reprogramming of the national machinery of education. This, the definitive system of teaching by numbers, also has the advantage of cutting out the middleman—the teacher. At least, it reduces him or her to the status of a mere classroom assistant, whose job is to wander round the room in which the children are latched on to their computers like so many piglets on the fat sow of the state, picking up and re-attaching those that drop off. This is a timely development. It will hardly surprise the reader to learn that secondary-teacher recruitment in England is on the very brink of collapse. Despite the government’s recent (and offensively facile) advertising campaign—“Nobody forgets a good teacher!”—almost nobody wants to be one anymore. There are massive shortfalls in most major subjects, with so few candidates offering themselves to be trained to teach mathematics or science that the government has been forced to offer a £5,000 bonus to those that do.

And yet, incredibly, the government recently reduced the target figure for this year’s recruitment of putative teachers, even though colleges failed wretchedly to meet the one that was set for 1998. The announcement of this cut (of 13 percent) was made under cover of the