

# A historical debate about the shift towards conservatism:

American politics and society in the  
1970s and 1980s

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The 1970s and 1980s are associated with a shift towards conservatism, also known as the political Right, in the United States. So strong was the connection that Paul Gottfried, a former history professor, and Thomas Fleming, editor of *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, described 1980 as the ‘*anno domini*’ of American conservatism.<sup>1</sup> While a tendency towards economic and social conservatism was not new to the U.S., the political, social, and economic circumstances of the Twentieth Century seemed to not only draw in new conservatives, but also raised the voices of existing ones so that it became a viable political force. Additionally, given unprecedented liberalism in the 1960s, the turnaround in politics and society within two decades makes for a fascinating and important study. The following discussion aims to provide a cohesive examination of what happened by looking at the myriad of factors historians have presented as accountable for this shift. While each reason provided is likely to have made its own contribution, what is more likely is that the shift towards conservatism during this period was a result of all of these various causes combined. That being said, there is now greater acknowledgement that certain factors may have had less of an impact on the shift towards conservatism than others, and this view will be briefly addressed.

Firstly, an explanation of what is meant by *conservative* in this context is necessary. Conservatism is difficult to define precisely, but can be seen as an umbrella term which consists of various denominations.<sup>2</sup> To complicate matters further, these denominations, or subgroups, have been given a range of differing labels because they are neither necessarily homogenous nor mutually exclusive. Since this discussion will examine the 1970s and 1980s, the focus will remain on the two conservative groups that gained particular prominence during this time: the economic liberals

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1 Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming, *The Conservative Movement*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 96.

2 Melvin J. Thorne, *American Conservative Thought Since World War II: The Core Ideas*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 1.

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and the social conservatives.<sup>3</sup> These groups had different priorities but both believed in using *traditional* values to achieve their aims. Economic liberalists were concerned with the classic liberalist notions of freedom and liberty, which they interpreted as the need to maintain a small national government so that individual pursuit of economic advancement would not be hampered. Social conservatives also preferred small national government, but largely because they believed that society should be centred on religion, chiefly Protestantism, and community. However, they did think that the government should shoulder responsibility for maintaining a sense of moral order and, as such, were far from averse to lobbying for legislation that would support their opposition on a range of issues such as abortion, pornography, and homosexuality. It is important to note that such views were not unique to the 1970s and 1980s and have always been pervasive, if not prevalent, in the U.S.<sup>4</sup> What was unique to this era was the conscious, outward advocacy of conservatism that came to dominate the social, and in particular, political landscape.<sup>5</sup>

In order to understand what happened in the 1970s, it is necessary to discuss the events of the 1960s. This was the era of unprecedented liberalism in America, the decade of civil rights movements, free love, anti-Vietnam war protests, and student radicalism, to name a few examples. However, historians such as James Hijiya have increasingly recognised that this image represented only one side of the 1960s and has attracted more attention precisely because it *was* the counterculture.<sup>6</sup> In hindsight, it is unsurprising that the conservative backlash toward the counterculture commenced not after its demise, as was previously believed, but from its very onset.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the early 1960s has been described as ‘an explosion of conservative activity’ by Justin Himmelstein, a sociologist and American conservatism specialist.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, historian Lisa McGirr, recently provided a detailed account of the predominantly white, middle-class, ‘suburban’ conservative ‘warriors’ of Orange County, California. They were driven not only by ideology, but also self-interest: having reached a comfortable level of affluence, they were unwilling to see their wealth spent on President Lyndon Johnson’s welfare programmes. Here, the blurred distinctions between conservative denominations also become apparent. These Orange County residents combined economic liberalist values with Protestant morals to systematically pursue support for their political agenda.<sup>9</sup> Thus, they saw that the purpose of government was to maintain social order without meddling in personal economic affairs.

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3 Jerome L. Himmelstein, ‘The New Right,’ in *The New Christian Right: Mobilisation and Legitimization*, ed. Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow, (Hawthorne, N. Y.: Aldine Publishing Co., 1983), 15-16.

4 Brian Farmer, *American Conservatism: History, Theory and Practice*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), 13, 35, 47, 50.

5 Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8.

6 James A. Hijiya, ‘The Conservative 1960s,’ *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (2003), 201.

7 Alan Brinkley, ‘The Problem of American Conservatism,’ *American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 2, (1994), 425.

8 Jerome L. Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 70.

9 Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4, 32.

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Similarly, the fact that the right-wing Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) was founded in 1960 – the same year as the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – demonstrates that mobilisation of conservative sentiment took place early.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, YAF's conference in Sharon, Connecticut, was attended by almost one hundred people; not at all bad for a newly-founded organisation. More importantly, the attendees came from all over the country and a wide range of institutions, including the prestigious universities of Harvard and Yale.<sup>11</sup> By 1970, membership had swelled to 50,000.<sup>12</sup> After contrasting the activities of the left- and right-wing organisations of the 1960s, Hijiya concluded that although the latter were quieter, they were far more organised and made long-term plans to implement their vision of a conservative America. The actions of these groups had far-reaching implications for the conservative movement of the 1970s. While many of the left-wing students took up blue-collar jobs or careers in social services, as consistent with their beliefs, their right-wing counterparts established themselves firmly in politics, business, and other positions of power.<sup>13</sup>

Importantly, conservatism gained new support with the rise of neo-conservatives.<sup>14</sup> American historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued that American history operates in cycles, with inevitable alternations between widespread endorsement of liberalism and conservatism.<sup>15</sup> However, scholars such as McGirr and Philip Jenkins have conceded that conservatism does not seem to be abating in America.<sup>16</sup> This may very well be due to the unprecedented endorsement of conservatism in the late twentieth century by intellectual thinkers.<sup>17</sup> Labelled neo-conservatives, a majority of these academics were former liberals who had realigned themselves as conservative Republicans in reaction to the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, they found the radicalism of the student protest movements to be alienating and insulting to academia.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, they resented welfare and affirmative action policies, which they felt undermined the value of hard work and merit. Many of them were second-generation Jewish migrants who had worked conscientiously to move up the social ladder.<sup>20</sup> As a result, they found themselves increasingly drawn to economic liberalist ideas, where success was – in theory at least – determined by individual responsibility alone, with no place for government handouts. Prominent neo-conservative Russell Kirk summed up these sentiments: 'Our modern peril ... is that the tradition of civility will be swallowed up in the rush of appetite

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10 Gottfried and Fleming, *The Conservative Movement*, 22.

11 Young Americans for Freedom, 'Attendees, Sharon Conference,' in *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics*, by John A. Andrew III, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 223-231.

12 Himmelstein, *To the Right*, 70.

13 Hijiya, 'The Conservative 1960s,' 205, 207.

14 David J. Hoeveler, *Watch on the Right: Conservative Intellectuals in the Reagan Era*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 9.

15 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Cycles of American History*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 30.

16 McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 5. Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2.

17 Peter Lawler, *American Views of Liberty*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 148.

18 Thorne, *American Conservative Thought Since World War II*, 25.

19 Gottfried and Fleming, *The Conservative Movement*, 40.

20 Hoeveler, *Watch on the Right*, 11.

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and will.<sup>21</sup> As intellectuals, neo-conservatives were in a unique position to circulate their views via journals; *Commentary* and *National Review* were published for this purpose.<sup>22</sup> For example, the neo-conservative writer Norman Podhoretz used *Commentary* as a platform to denounce the counterculture and described it as ‘pretentious’, ‘arrogant’, and ‘vulgar’.<sup>23</sup> As the readership grew, these publications cultivated a new generation of conservatives in the 1970s. In essence, the propagation of conservative ideals by intellectuals provided the movement with a sense of greater legitimacy.<sup>24</sup>

Considering the former isolationist stance of the U.S., it was somewhat ironic that conservatives took foreign policy issues to heart. To an extent, anti-communist sentiment forged a bridge between economic liberalists and social conservatives. Both groups opposed communism since it was perceived as a threat to their respective interpretations of the American way-of-life. For economic liberalists, the collectivist aims of communism directly opposed their desire to see individual economic pursuit unhindered.<sup>25</sup> Social conservatives were more mortified by the threat of a competing godless ideology.<sup>26</sup> In this way, strong anti-communist sentiments also came to characterise conservatism.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, YAF’s Sharon Statement was laden with anti-communist overtones. Moreover, the statement exemplified the growing link between economic liberalism, American nationalism, and anti-communism. To illustrate, the statement declared that ‘the market economy’ was ‘the single economic system compatible with the requirements of personal freedom and constitutional government’ and that, to protect it, the U.S. needed to ‘stress victory’ over communism.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, the general consensus amongst conservatives was that the most effective way to counter communism was to use militant force.<sup>29</sup>

Significantly less headway was made by liberals in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> This is evident on the political front with the successive presidential elections of Republican, Richard Nixon, in 1969 and 1974, and conservative Democrat, Jimmy Carter, in 1977. However, as with the previous decade, the events that unfolded in the 1970s only served to reinforce the idea that greater conservatism was needed – not less. Firstly, Nixon’s Watergate scandal in 1972 gave fuel to the notion that big government was inherently a bad idea. Social conservatives were also shocked by his profanity when private tapes were made public. Secondly, conservatives were unimpressed with the more relaxed nature of

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21 Russell Kirk. Excerpt from ‘Norms, Conventions, and the South,’ in Melvin J. Thorne, *American Conservative Thought Since World War II: The Core Ideas*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 343.

22 Gottfried and Fleming, *The Conservative Movement*, 59.

23 Norman Podhoretz, ‘The Idea of Crisis,’ *Commentary*, November, 1970, accessed 23 October 2010, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/the-idea-of-crisis-4845>.

24 Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of Conservative Ascendancy in America*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 136-137.

25 Rebecca E. Klatch, *Women of the New Right*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 5, 8.

26 McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 56.

27 Klatch, *Women of the New Right*, 8.

28 Young Americans for Freedom, ‘The Sharon Statement,’ in *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics*, by John A. Andrew III, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 221-222.

29 Himmelstein, ‘The New Right,’ 17.

30 *Ibid.*, 63.

Nixon's foreign relations with the Soviet Union and China.<sup>31</sup> Overall, Nixon's presidency shattered public trust in the federal government. Indeed, Gallup polls showed that in 1970, 31 per cent of people felt that the government wielded too much power; by 1976 this figure had risen to 49 per cent.<sup>32</sup> At the next election, conservatives thought that they had found the right man in Carter. Not only was he a Baptist from the south, he also opposed social-welfare. In terms of legislation however, he proved to be a disappointment. In addition, he had inherited a severe budget deficit. The ensuing high oil prices and double digit inflation drove greater focus on personal financial wellbeing or, in other words, economic liberalism. Finally, the Iran Hostage Crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s fuelled right-wing feelings that the U.S. needed to take a more militant and defensive stance in foreign affairs.<sup>33</sup>

The mid-to-late 1970s presented its own set of social challenges that paved the way for even more conservatism. These have been documented in detail by Jenkins in his work *Decade of Nightmares*. The legalisation of abortion in 1973, for example, unsurprisingly sparked much furor amongst conservative Christians.<sup>34</sup> However, the Hyde Amendment of 1976, which severely restricted Medicaid funds for abortion, was probably a reflection that conservative voices were becoming increasingly heard. Moreover, Jenkins highlighted that the growing realisation about the widespread nature of child abuse around this time, widely covered by the media, fed into Puritan ideas that the evils of the world needed to be countered by a lifestyle centred on religion and community.<sup>35</sup> As such, campaigns calling for the teaching of Creationism in schools were amassed.<sup>36</sup> It is no coincidence then that the end of the 1970s saw the rise of the New Christian Right, whose main concern was to ensure that their evangelical teachings were adopted by the wider American population.<sup>37</sup> Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell called on America to 'Listen...!' as he launched tirades against communism, homosexuality, pornography, drugs and alcohol, and upheld family as the basis of society.<sup>38</sup> As with other conservative groups, the emergence of the New Christian Right was not abrupt. McGirr estimated that they had been at least a decade in the making but gained greater prominence with the seeming moral breakdown of society.<sup>39</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, a reporter and self-confessed former conservative, also noted that what set these evangelical Christians apart from their predecessors was their active involvement in politics.<sup>40</sup> Previously, they had not been known to participate in presidential elections, but a majority went to vote for Ronald Reagan in 1980. Like YAF, conservative Christians further sought to invoke change

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31 Farmer, *American Conservatism*, 287, 300-303.

32 The American National Election Studies, 'Trust the Federal Government,' in *The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behaviour*, accessed 20 October 2010, [http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab5a\\_1.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab5a_1.htm).

33 Farmer, *American Conservatism*, 307-308, 320.

34 McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 234.

35 Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 108.

36 Charles W. Dunn and J. David Woodard, *American Conservatism from Burke to Bush*, (Lanham: Madison Books, 1991), 10.

37 McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 239.

38 Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).

39 McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 239.

40 Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up*, 160.

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by assuming positions of power. Although members of fundamentalist Protestant churches only made up a quarter of the population, they soon came to form the majority of the Republican Party.<sup>41</sup>

What has been seen as the final factor contributing to the shift to conservatism was the election of Reagan, who rhetorically espoused, and on the surface seemed to address, the needs of both classic liberalists and social conservatives.<sup>42</sup> In the presidential debate of 1980, Reagan appealed to the one fear that seemed to unify conservatives: an irresponsible and constantly interfering central government.<sup>43</sup> Agreeing with former President ‘Teddy’ Roosevelt that the Presidency was a ‘bully pulpit’, Reagan went on to explain that ‘we don’t have inflation because the people are living too well. We have inflation because the government is living too well, taking money away from the people by increasing taxes.’<sup>44</sup> Having been a Hollywood actor, the motivation behind his support of economic liberalism probably did not differ from the residents of Orange County; that is, the ‘freedom’ to amass and maintain individual wealth.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Reagan was extraordinarily good at using the American values of ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’ to frame and promulgate the wide and varied concerns of the conservatives. This was exemplified in his speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference of 1985. Reagan first described the ‘average’ American as a moral, family-raising, church-goer, before calling on these ‘good’ people to help bring about a ‘golden age of freedom.’<sup>46</sup> It was only then that he got to the greater crux of the matter: support for his proposed ‘fair’ tax system which aimed to reduce tax rate differences, and his Strategic Defense Initiative to help the U.S. and other ‘small islands yearning for freedom.’<sup>47</sup> Thus in one speech, Reagan had melded social conservatives, economic liberalists, and anti-communists into one entity, so that to support one stance was to support all three. Finally, by describing the Democrats as essentially snobby ‘intelligentsia’, he gave credence to the increasingly growing idea that to be an ‘average’ American meant to automatically be a conservative and a supporter of the Republican Party.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, from 1980 onwards, the American south virtually became Republican territory.<sup>49</sup> Public political discourse had also taken on a significantly more conservative tone. While former Presidents John F. Kennedy and Johnson had talked about the liberal aim of eliminating poverty both at home and abroad in their inaugural addresses, Reagan had focused on the injustice of government taxes.<sup>50</sup>

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41 Farmer, *American Conservatism*, 334.

42 Gottfried and Fleming, *The Conservative Movement*, 96.

43 ‘Presidential Debate in Cleveland,’ accessed 16 October 2010, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29408>.

44 Ibid.

45 Farmer, *American Conservatism*, 309. McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 4.

46 Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Conservative Political Action Conference,’ accessed October 16, 2010, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=38274>.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Farmer, *American Conservatism*, 320.

50 Lyndon Johnson, ‘The President’s Inaugural Address,’ accessed 24 October 2010, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=26985>. John F. Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address,’ accessed 24 October 2010, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8032>. Ronald Reagan, ‘Inaugural Address,’ accessed 24 October 2010, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=43130>.

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Thus far, a range of reasons have been given to account for the rise of conservatism in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s. Given the initial assertion that conservatism has always been a pervasive part of U.S. society and that much conservative activity took place in the 1960s, it now seems more appropriate to speak of a *rise* in American conservatism rather than a *shift* towards it. As discussed, explanations provided have covered: the reaction to the counterculture of the 1960s, the perceived unfairness of civil rights and welfare programmes, the renunciation of liberal ideals by neo-conservatives, the effective mobilisation of conservatives into powerful organisations, the impact of communism, the disenchantment with government after Watergate, economic concerns, the perceived moral degradation of society, the appearance of evangelical Christians in politics, and the ability of Reagan to bring together the disparate priorities of the conservatives. Although some historians have provided detailed studies on specific cases, such as McGirr on the organisation of suburban conservatives and Jenkins on the social issues debated in the 1970s, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which these factors contributed to the rise of conservatism in this period. It appears that scholars have tended to place higher priority on their own investigative areas. For instance, McGirr described Orange County as the 'nucleus' of conservative activity in America, while Jenkins paid greater homage to the social decadence of the 1970s.<sup>51</sup> The combined power of all of these factors was probably more responsible for the conservative rise than any one in isolation. Indeed, the discussion thus far has demonstrated that these factors frequently blended together and are difficult to disentangle. Nevertheless, some are sure to have been less significant than others. Hodgson's assertion that the values of the New Christian Right did not have as much leverage as the literature has given them credit is one example that this discussion will address.<sup>52</sup>

There can be no denying that certain individuals would have been compelled by the stance taken on moral issues by social conservatives. For example, Beverly Cielnicki of Orange County was a former Democrat who re-identified herself as a Republican due to her pro-life stance on abortion.<sup>53</sup> Overall however, it appeared that by the 1980s the majority of Americans had more pressing priorities. A Gallup poll showed that for the 1980 presidential debate, people were least interested in hearing about race relations and minority rights, abortion, and women's rights (two per cent each). Instead, they were far more interested in economic issues including the cost of living and inflation (51 per cent), unemployment (15 per cent), and tax cuts (12 per cent), as well as foreign affairs (17 per cent).<sup>54</sup> It was also probably no coincidence that Reagan dramatically took over the opinion polls after he closed the debate with a statement on domestic economic concerns embodied in the iconic 'are you better off than you were four years ago?' speech, which was in contrast to Carter's emphasis on world affairs.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, only one per cent of people cited the issue of abortion as having been decisive in their vote, compared to the six per cent who voted because they liked Reagan's economic policy.<sup>56</sup> Thus, it does appear that the conservatism of the late 1970s was driven more by economic rather than moral concerns. This would also explain Reagan's landslide

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51 Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 85. McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 4.

52 Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up*, 282.

53 McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 233.

54 Gallup polls. 'Anderson-Carter-Reagan: September 12-16, 1980,' in *Presidential Debates: 1988 and Beyond*, ed. Joel L. Swerdlow, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1987), 169-170.

55 Farmer, *American Conservatism*, 320. 'Presidential Debate in Cleveland'.

56 Gallup polls, 'Anderson-Carter-Reagan: November 7-10, 1980,' in *Presidential Debates: 1988 and Beyond*, ed. Joel L. Swerdlow, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1987), 170-173.

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re-election in 1984, despite having barely implemented any overtly socially conservative policies.<sup>57</sup> Essentially, the New Christian Right may have attracted attention and new supporters, but their brand of social conservatism did not seem to be widely taken up by the U.S. as a whole.

The U.S. did not so much shift towards conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s but rather, experienced a continued rise exacerbated by a backlash towards the liberalism of the 1960s. A wide range of explanations have been presented in this article as reasons for this ascension covering social, political, religious, moral, and economic issues. Additionally, there were many aspects unique to this conservatism that allowed it to achieve its unprecedented prominence in American politics and society. Firstly, it drew support from people of all classes of society, from well-to-do middle-class Whites to Jewish intellectuals. Secondly, these disparate groups with differing priorities were generally able to coalesce as supporters of small government, anti-communism, and individual economic freedom. This was further aided by Reagan's propagation of all these values being representative of and synonymous with the Republican Party's values, which, in turn, saw having the same political party preference as also being a unifying force. However, I have argued that not all of the varied reasons provided could have possibly had an equal degree of impact. In particular, the New Christian Right appears to have had less influence on the course of American politics and society than previously thought. While they certainly made their voices heard over what they perceived to be a moral degradation of society, the rise of conservative attitudes in the 1970s and 1980s seems to be primarily of an economic liberalist nature, propagated by high costs of living, budget deficits, and inflation.

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<sup>57</sup> Farmer, *American Conservatism*, 330.

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