David Farber, The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History.

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In the wake of the recent mid-term elections, this book makes interesting reading. David Farber's overall argument here, as emphasised by the title, is that conservatism as a recognisable political movement, ranging from Robert Taft in the 1930s through to George W. Bush in the 2000s, has entered a period of decline. This could be a strong dose of (academic, liberal) wishful thinking, or, possibly, the author is on to something, but the American voter hasn't realised it yet. The crucial point is of course the rise and fall of American conservatism, as if this movement, originating essentially in opposition to the New Deal, is now largely spent. In the conclusion the author comments: “As I write these last sentences, the conservative political movement, some seventy years in the making, is in disarray, waiting for new champions or, perhaps, simply changing circumstances” (261). But the book is in no way made obsolete by recent Republican successes. On the contrary, it puts things in a new perspective.

Farber approaches the topic by homing in on six individuals central to the conservative cause: Taft, William Buckley, Barry Goldwater, Phyllis Schlafly, Ronald Reagan, and Bush. The starting point for this investigation is, in Farber's words, “the search for order in American politics,” a motif that he admits is rather unfashionable among American historians more attuned to examine the “the struggle for equality” (3). The two strands of thinking, and of political motivation, have often been at loggerheads...
over the past 80 years, and they remain so to the present day. Farber's claim that conservatism is in disarray therefore bears examination.

3 The story begins with Taft – or, rather, with Franklin Delano Roosevelt, since it was FDR's New Deal that triggered the birth of modern conservatism. Taft first used the term 'Conservative' in 1938 when running for the Senate, and it was a term that he clung to thereafter, it coming to refer to three principle themes: support for property-owners in particular and economic liberty in general against an overbearing government; opposition to liberal intellectual elites and their desire to change US society 'for the better'; and, although not paramount, nevertheless a racial outlook on US society that foreswore the qualities of the “Anglo-Saxon race.” Individual responsibility and ingenuity were the keys to the success of American society – claiming hardship because of race or class was for Taft (and for most of the conservatives who came after him) only directing energies down an ill-chosen path, and opening doors to let in new forms of tyranny. This led him to oppose US involvement in World War II: It was not for Americans to fight for the freedom of others, and neither did economics require US intervention abroad. This put him out of step with many of his business supporters, although he recovered this lost ground through the seminal piece of anti-union legislation, the Taft-Hartley Act, in 1947. But even then he remained an outsider in his own party, unable to combine his conservative message with a campaign convincing enough to position him as a credible presidential candidate. In 1952, in his final attempt, East coast internationalist Republicans rejected Taft's semi-isolationist rhetoric and went instead for the moderate Dwight D. Eisenhower.

4 Taft may have laid the ground for a conservative movement in US politics, but his legacy was not immediately taken up by others on Capitol Hill. Instead, Farber shifts his attention to William Buckley, the suave Yale graduate who took everything Taft had stood for – individual liberty, a pro-business anti-union outlook, a rejection of Civil Rights – and added another ingredient that would be decisive later – Christianity. Religion is an essential element to the careers of several of these conservatives – Buckley and Schlafly were Catholics, while Reagan and Bush would become born-again Protestants – as it gave extra meaning to their cause, as well as a useful basis for arguing against 'godless liberalism', atheistic communism, and their tampering with the natural order of things (for most conservatives in this book, liberalism and communism were pretty much the same thing). But instead of running for office, Buckley bequeathed a vital new string to the conservative bow – an understanding of the need to build an intellectual base, give the movement a serious face, and lay the ground for electoral success one idea at a time. This he did via the National Review and, later, the Young Americans for Freedom.

5 Farber is very good in delineating the painful borders of this nascent conservative movement. Thus Buckley supported McCarthy for laying bare the weaknesses of liberal anti-communism, and he tried to “tiptoe” around the farthest reaches of the American Right, careful not to alienate potential supporters of a future winning conservative coalition, such as the John Birch Society and white segregationists. Christian morality, clearly, did not go so far as to recognise injustice in one's own backyard. The Federal government had no right to determine what states could legislate, and this belief remained solid, even it meant condoning racism (or, better said, never addressing racism directly). The author is also good at linking the outlook of these six individuals
with broader tides washing up through US society, and how the two would connect. Farber chronicles how various religious demagogues and anti-communist ranters plied their trade through the 1950s and 1960s, giving an idea of how they linked, via these seminal figures, with the national political scene. The role of business is a constant active interest group in this narrative, from Taft’s original backers in the anti-New Deal American Liberty League through to the Coors-funded Mountain States Legal Foundation that supported Schlafly. The publishing house Henry Regnery Company also makes several appearances as an important conservative platform.

Although Farber links Buckley with Goldwater, Buckley’s closest conservative compatriot in this book is probably Schlafly, for the reason that they both sought to mobilise the conservative grassroots across US society instead of running for office themselves. Buckley’s most lasting creation, the Young Americans for Freedom, mobilised for Goldwater’s presidential bid in 1964, and his National Review benefactor, textile boss Roger Milliken, backed it as well. When Goldwater was pummeled at the polls in 1964, the last hurrah of the New Deal coalition, it was Schlafly who kept the light burning, first in the National Federation of Republican Women and then, in the 1970s, in her remarkable (and successful) campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment. In many ways Schlafly’s story makes this book, because of how she was able to shift the argument away from the merits of gender equality onto the ground that women are different, and they shouldn’t be equal in order to be women. FDR’s shadow again hangs over the book (and US conservatism in general) when Farber recounts Schlafly’s alterantive “four most vital freedoms: Freedom to Keep our Religious Heritage, Freedom from Obscenity, Freedom from Criminal Attack, and Freedom from Communist Conspiracy” (Farber is good in suggesting that, despite her talents, Schlafly was not always so very far away from the “nut fringe”).

Goldwater’s greatest legacy however comes from the Republican shift towards the South to take advantage of an anti-civil rights backlash against the Democrats, and this linked him most with Reagan, who despite his moderation on race still went so far as to open his presidential bid in December 1979 with a speech in notorious Neshoba County, Mississippi, site of the murders of three civil rights workers in 1964, which emphasised states’ rights and little else. It was an unnecessary and opportunist slap on the back for white racism, and fortunately Reagan never ventured that low for votes again. Reagan is the anomaly in Farber’s group because (again the shadow) he voted for FDR four times and was an avowed liberal up to the early 1950s – in his own words, “a New Dealer to the core.” (165). Significantly, it was taxation that turned Reagan to the Right more than anything, with religion and anti-communism only later adding to his particular conservative mix. Goldwater also played a role – as co-chair of the presidential campaign in California, Reagan delivered a watershed speech entitled ‘A Time for Choosing’ in Los Angeles that would mark his entry into politics as a serious contender, and he would prove a far more able communicator than Goldwater ever was. And by 1980 the Christian Right was a formidable electoral force, something that Reagan was able to capitalise on.

By the time we reach Bush, the conservative tidal wave, according to Faber, is already coming apart due to its inconsistencies. In the beginning opposed to too much involvement abroad, Bush ended with two major wars on his hands, coupled with two (failing) attempts at large-scale nation-building. A free market tax cutter to the core, Bush saw the US economy nose-dive in 2007-2008 due to a desperate lack of regulation.
Farber emphasises the impact of faith as the basis of the Bush world-view, more so than on that of Reagan, but he is less good on the rise of neoconservatism, giving it no more than a paragraph (246). Whereas the chapters on Taft, Buckley, Goldwater, and Schlafly did not have to deal with policy-making, those with Reagan and Bush do, and this makes it difficult for the author to cover a lot of ground in order to assess not only the standpoint of his subjects but also their policy record. Nevertheless the book remains readable throughout.

There is a theme running through the narrative from Buckley to Bush that is crystal clear – America is constantly faced with all-encompassing threats to its values and well-being, be that communism, or civil rights, or feminism, or gay rights, or taxation, or terrorism, and it is up to the conservative s ever to bring that message home to the people in order to open their eyes and lead them to salvation, whatever the cost. As Goldwater put it so succinctly, “I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue” (111). With the Tea Party in mind it would be easy to say Farber is grossly mistaken in his 'rise and fall' thesis, but then again, his point is that modern US conservatism developed a set of beliefs that did come crashing down under Bush. What we see now is no more than a destructive politics of opposition, an unwillingness to compromise on anything because compromise is weak. This is a far cry from the origins of the movement under Taft. Whether the disparate positions of the Tea Party and the Republican Right develop into something coherent and constructive remains to be seen.

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