

## **RIGHT-WING CRITICS OF AMERICAN CONSERVATISM**

(GEORGE HAWLEY)

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This is an excellent book, doubly excellent in that the writer, George Hawley, has written a book both even-handed and superbly accurate in detail about a difficult and controversial topic. I am personally deeply familiar with nearly all the facts covered in this book, and Hawley has not fallen into any significant error. Moreover, his analysis is generally excellent, so as a package, this book is a valuable contribution to understanding what I call the Great Fragmentation—the splintering, and reforming, of what until recently was the relatively monolithic instantiation of mainstream American conservatism. Finally, this book implicitly poses a fascinating question—should the Right adopt a new principle, in imitation of the Left, that there are no enemies on the right?

Hawley’s project is three-fold. One part is to parse and narrate different groupings, historical and otherwise, that are not within the conservative mainstream. The second is to discuss, if it is applicable, how and why they were removed from the conservative mainstream. And the third is to offer thoughts about the future of conservative electoral politics. The author, a professor at the University of Kansas, appears to have positioned himself as an expert on the numerous movements that constitute “conservatism.” *Right-Wing Critics* was published in 2016, but written in 2015, so Donald Trump does not appear at all, and the so-called alt-right was not yet perceived as a grouping. This may seem like a lack, but it is not. “Alt-right” was popularized in 2016, as all admit, as a propaganda term of infinitely flexible meaning, magicked up to aid Hillary Clinton. Since then, though, it has evolved to roughly accurately characterize the modern incarnations of some of the “right-wing critics” Hawley profiles in this book, so really, Hawley prefigures today in this book. In fact, since 2016 (a short time, but life comes at you fast), Hawley has published a book I have not read, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, presumably bringing some of the open topics in this book forward in time and updating his analysis.

Hawley begins with definitions, something critical in a book of this nature. He assumes minimal knowledge on the reader’s part, a smart

move, since most readers of this book are going to be liberal. He also sketches a long-term history of American conservatism, pointing out that European-type conservatism has always been very different, and that a country born largely of the Enlightenment was bound to have a different path in political philosophy. Outlining his own thoughts, he notes Thomas Sowell's crucial distinction between progressives (Hawley's chosen general term for the Left, because of ambiguity in "liberals") and conservatives as having either an unconstrained or a constrained vision of man and the world, and he discusses other attempts to distinguish the two. The author settles on "the political Left will be defined as containing all ideological movements that consider [universal] equality the highest political value." He explains why at length, but I think this is an excellent definition. Critically for some thoughts of mine below, the Left may disagree on methods and speed, but all elements share that ultimate goal. Conservatives, in this taxonomy, are those who "while not necessarily rejecting equality as a social goal, do not rank it at the top of the hierarchy of values. The right [therefore] fights the left in all cases where the push for equality threatens some other value held in higher esteem." Again, this definition works well—it may not be perfect, and it calls some people "conservative" who would reject the label themselves, but for the book's purposes, it is well-done.

Next Hawley turns to the general structure of modern American conservatism. Prior to the 1950s, there was a heterogeneous grouping of men lacking political power, the "old Right." By this term, Hawley does not mean the people the Left prefers to talk about from this period, like Charles Coughlin, because he believes they do "not appear to have much influence on the later conservative movement," although a better reason would be that Coughlin was a strong supporter of Franklin Roosevelt and a socialist, hardly someone opposed to universal equality, at least in the economic sphere, and his anti-Semitism is more a characteristic of the modern Left than Right. Instead, Hawley means men like Albert Jay Nock and Ralph Adams Cram; he also notes José Ortega y Gasset's influence. But around 1950, several people of crucial later importance to the conservative movement began writing, notably Richard Weaver, who wrote the extremely influential *Ideas Have Consequences* in 1948; Russell Kirk, who published *The Conservative Mind* in 1953; and William Buckley, who published *God and Man at Yale* in 1951. These men began

the modern movement, whereas the old Right had little lasting impact. Hawley incisively parses their and others' basic ideas, then moves on to sketching neoconservatives and their history, touching on Irving Kristol, Allan Bloom, and Leo Strauss. Then he discusses political impact, beginning with Barry Goldwater and continuing through the 2014 midterm elections, concluding "At present, the neoconservatives remain a dominant power within the Republican Party and the broader conservative movement." As I say, life comes at you fast.

Here and throughout the book, I find it a little difficult to summarize what Hawley says, not because his writing is bad, but because I already know everything he says, and more, so it is hard for me to tell what might interest a non-expert. This is because for thirty-five years, since my early teens, I have been intimately involved in the conservative movement, both on an intellectual level and, in my earlier years, as an activist. I have read most of the books Hawley mentions (well, not *The Turner Diaries*). I was a passing acquaintance of Russell Kirk as a very young man and met many of the figures in this book. I was also a national board member and state director of Young Americans for Freedom—I started and ran what at that time, in the late 1980s, was one of the largest chapters of that organization in the country. So when pulling out instances to summarize Hawley's thought, it's a bit hard for me to pick what to relate to those who don't know anything about the topic. I can also say that though Hawley entirely omits quite a few individuals in his discussion, as he freely admits, I think the choices he made of whom to cover are precisely right, and a longer book would not have been a better book.

Anyway, next Hawley turns to "Defining Conservative Boundaries," where he introduces the most important theme of his book, the purging by conservatives of unacceptable beliefs within the movement. This, of course, distinguishes the Right from the modern Left, whose bedrock principle (which I discuss below) has always been "No enemies to the left." (Purges have characterized most ideological movements, most famously in the original Terror of the French Revolution, but the modern Left has, for somewhat opaque reasons, avoided such self-immolation.) Hawley notes that "fusionism," the association of otherwise disparate beliefs but only within certain limits, characterized the Right's gradual modern rise to political power. (Oddly, it is spelled "fushionism" throughout the

book—I don't know what's up with that.) He expertly talks about Robert Welch and the John Birch Society; Ayn Rand and Objectivism; arguable racists like Mel Bradford; certain racists like David Duke; and outriders like Sam Francis (who appears a lot in this book) and Joseph Sobran. In all these purges, the key element was William Buckley, who acted as judge, jury, and executioner, from his perch atop *National Review*. As to more recent times, Hawley covers Pat Buchanan, the 2003 attack by neoconservatives on “unpatriotic” conservatives who opposed the Iraq War, and the purging of individuals such as John Derbyshire—although today's purges of individual writers are less complete and final in these internet days. All this is excellent, and while I might have small quibbles, Hawley's basic points and analysis are completely sound.

Hawley also addresses why conservative leaders felt it necessary to conduct these purges. This is often debated, with some believing it was to curry favor with the socially dominant, and others believing it was necessary for conservatives to maintain any political influence and avoid marginalization. I tend to favor the former explanation, which still holds true today—since who is in society's Inner Ring (in the C. S. Lewis sense) is determined by the Left, and has been since the 1920s (Hawley notes Lionel Trilling's famous dismissal of conservatism as lacking any intellectual basis), and Buckley and his lineal successors have always lived in big cities where the social scene is dictated by the Left. Since nobody likes to be an outcast pariah, spat on by those one regards as one's peers, the Left has always been able to dictate the limits of acceptability—the basic principle being the Right can have enough power to be a lightweight opposition, but not enough that it might actually threaten any Left interest or prevent any fresh Left demand. Hawley favors the latter explanation, that purges were necessary to avoid being marginalized, to attract those moderately to the left of the mainstream Right. But that answer is begging the question, since we never found out whether conservatives would have had more influence had they not continually purged their movement. I think there is another explanation, too—the haughty moral sense that tends to characterize many conservatives is fed by deciding that some people are too immoral to be one's compatriots, and the Left, on the other hand, has almost no moral sense that dictates they do anything other than fulfil their desires, so the morality of compatriots is by definition irrelevant to the Left.

From this history, Hawley turns to “right-wing critics of conservatism” relevant today who are generally acknowledged to still be part of the conservative movement. The group first up is localists, a disparate team that includes Southern Agrarians, Wendell Berry, Robert Nisbet, Christopher Lasch, Wilhelm Röpke, E. F. Schumacher, and more recently Rod Dreher. Naturally, these men had many differences; what links them is a focus on the “alienating effects of modern life” and a focus on decentralization, which generally implies a hostility to strong central government and the militarized state, and a fondness for rural and small-town life, or at least their virtues. They also tend to be hostile to crony capitalism and giant corporations in general, and in some cases are associated with the Left to a degree for that reason, though in Hawley’s taxonomy they are clearly Right, since equality is not the highest goal for any of them.

After a brief chapter on atheist conservatives, ranging from George Will to Charles Krauthammer, and their sometimes tense relationship with the usually religious, or at least pseudo-religious, broader conservative movement, Hawley turns to libertarians, noting that among the challenges conservatism has always faced is how to “find the correct balance between liberty and order.” He covers mainstream libertarians first: Milton Friedman; the Mont Pelerin Society; the Koch brothers and their funding of libertarians; the Cato Institute and *Reason* magazine; Ron and Rand Paul; Young Americans for Freedom; and the Tea Party (with the conclusion, as to the last, that it is a mainstream conservative movement, and therefore not a focus of this book). Then he covers less mainstream libertarians, more aggressively opposed to the state: Robert Nozick, Murray Rothbard, Hans-Herman Hoppe, and Lew Rockwell, thought that shades in the direction of “right-wing anarchism.” He also covers the relationship of Austrian economics to libertarians and organizations such as the Libertarian Party and the Ludwig von Mises Institute. Again, both history and current influence are skillfully and accurately described.

Next up are paleoconservatives, including Pat Buchanan, Thomas Fleming and *Chronicles* magazine, Sam Francis, Joseph Sobran, and Paul Gottfried. Hawley’s take is that paleoconservatives have certain radical beliefs, including a tendency to reject modern society root and branch, and “thus it is necessary to take a revolutionary stance that attacks

the entire governing regime." This also allowed paleoconservatives to undertake an ultimately failed alliance with radical libertarians, and is why Russell Kirk does not count as a paleoconservative, because of his "emphasis on slow, organic change."

From here, Hawley goes farther afield. He covers the "European New Right," which he acknowledges has had little influence in America, given few points of historical commonality and a tendency to be anti-Christian and overtly anti-American. European rightists reject many of the premises of American conservatives, including most or all of Enlightenment thought. But I think Hawley is correct that in the Great Fragmentation, some of this thought is likely to have increasing influence in America, and it already does in movements like the so-called Dark Enlightenment (though at the end of his book Hawley rejects the Dark Enlightenment as having no apparent importance or influence, a conclusion with which I agree). Here Hawley covers Carl Schmitt, Oswald Spengler, Ernst Jünger, and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck. He also covers those even farther from the American mainstream, including René Guénon, Julius Evola (of whom Steve Bannon was accused of being an admirer), Alain de Benoist, Guillaume Faye (creator of Archeofuturism), and Alexander Dugin, who some say is Vladimir Putin's evil genius. While they seem edgy or bizarre, and I doubt if I agree with much they have to say, these various writers actually sound fairly interesting in Hawley's telling. Unlike the Americans, I have not read any of these men (except Jünger's *Storm of Steel*, about World War I), but maybe I should change that.

Finally, going even farther afield, Hawley covers "white nationalism," today's boogeyman of the Left, concluding that, unlike the other movements he covers, it is very difficult to determine who the leaders are or even if the movement really has any substantial amount of followers or influence. (Hawley also daringly and correctly notes that white supremacy, in the form of eugenics, was earlier in the twentieth century an ideal of the Left, though he is wrong that "the contemporary left rejects all eugenic and white supremacist thought"—he apparently missed Ruth Bader Ginsburg's admission a few years ago that *Roe v. Wade* should be celebrated because it allowed more babies to be killed from "populations that we don't want to have too many of.") White supremacy may be a nothing movement, or it may be a strong movement—it looks the

same on the internet, after all. My bet is that there a lot of overt racists out there, but most of them are high on meth most of the time, so they are not likely to come out to play competently in the political arena. (In March of this year, what I am told was one of the most important “white nationalist” groups, the Traditionalist Workers Party, imploded when one of the two founders attacked the other because the attacker was sleeping with the attacked man’s wife. The wife attacked her husband, too. In front of their small children. Where the cuckold was the other man’s stepfather. In the trailer park where they all lived. I rest my case.)

Hawley’s conclusion is that there is a “Crisis of Conservatism.” It is God’s truth that “the previous generation’s conservatism may appear increasingly anachronistic and out of touch in the years ahead.” But, most likely, that does not imply the death of conservatism, but its rebirth in a new, relevant form. We have certainly seen a boiling up of change in that direction since this book was written. Thus, the triumphalist approach that Hawley notes characterized the Left in 2014 has already been shown to be misplaced. Mostly this belief in inevitable Left victory revolves around supposed demographic challenges, where it is said that the groups growing in relative population in America tend to vote progressive. (Hawley somewhat elides the distinction between conservative intellectual thought and conservative electoral politics, though obviously the two are closely related.) For this, Hawley relies heavily, to the extent he relies on a particular source, on the 2002 book by John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. What he could not have known was that in September 2017, Judis announced “I was wrong.” Hawley also ignores that conservatives, or at least Republicans, are utterly dominant and increasingly so at the state level, and that Democratic power is more and more concentrated in tiny geographic areas with dense populations. Nor are his predictions accurate: “I argue that moderate and mainstream libertarianism is the right-wing ideology most likely to enjoy greater influence in the coming decades.” But predictions are hard, and Hawley is careful not to make many, a wise choice.

Still, that is electoral politics, and politics is downstream of culture, and ideas. Hawley is correct that “In America, liberty is the value that competes with equality for ideological dominance.” Or he is right that conflict characterized the past. Part of determining the future is whether this conflict will continue to be the defining conflict, or something new,

such as the conflict of equality with, say, more traditional, confining and hierarchical ideas, if liberty (in its atomizing Enlightenment sense) has reached its logical end of forced equality that consists of complete autonomy in all approved areas being enforced by the Leviathan state against all individuals and actions that might limit liberty, Ryszard Legutko's "coercion to freedom." Hidden behind this point, of the historical competition of liberty and equality in America, Hawley hints at the crucial hinge for his analysis—all the conservatives profiled here, both those exiled to the outer darkness and those who putatively gained political power, have merely fought Tolkein's Long Defeat, except for a few policies, really neoliberal policies, not conservative policies, that have achieved permanent status—tax rates, perhaps, and free trade. If, as a conservative, one realizes that the wheel of time has turned, and that a century of failure is, after all, a century of failure, it is the moment to try something new.

Hawley does a good job, too, on avoiding loaded language. I have little doubt that Hawley himself is liberal, but it's not evident from his writing. He completely avoids loaded terms usually found in progressive descriptions of conservative thought, such as "backlash" and "nostalgia." Oh sure, there are occasional missteps. The odious hate group the Southern Poverty Law Center is more than once cited as an objective source, rather than as what it now is, a far-Left propaganda machine wholly dedicated to the destruction of political opponents of any stripe, and directly responsible for inciting numerous attempted murders of conservatives. Hawley probably overrates the importance of *National Review* today—when that magazine "purges" someone, such as Ann Coulter, nobody notices or cares. "Nor do I claim to know what, if any, kind of right-wing ideological movement will fill the void if *National Review*-style conservatism loses its credibility and influence." Well, it lost that credibility and influence some time ago, but in any case, we now have a preliminary answer to that question, thanks to Donald Trump. And for some reason Hawley just can't spell names. It's Charles C. W. Cooke, not Cook. R. Emmett Tyrell, not Emmett. Small beans, though, and correctable in the next edition!

So this is an excellent book, well worth reading for anyone interested in these topics. Beyond what Hawley says, though, I want to address a topic that is implicit here, but never discussed—why is it that an absolute



core principle of the Left is that there are no enemies to the left, whereas the opposite principle characterizes the American Right, which is the entire point of Hawley's book? The Right adheres to a purity standard, moreover, which changes constantly—to move always Left. The final leg of this bizarre triangle is that this evolving purity standard, while enforced by the Right, is largely dictated by the Left. For example, you can see this process today, in the attempts to require that opposition to the homosexual agenda be viewed the same as racism, including opposition that five years ago was the universal position of the mainstream Left. Already, many conservatives, including all prominent coastal conservatives (Jonah Goldberg comes to mind) and those with any large public platform, have toed the line and agree that, say, acceptance and celebration of same-sex marriage is, indeed, a new part of the purity test on the Right. But specific issues are not my point—my question is whether the Right should abandon this rule, and adopt a big tent approach, of no enemies to the right. Not only would this increase the Right's reach and power, it would also eliminate a crippling energy drain not found on the Left, as well as destroy a tool that the Left uses to beat the Right and to change the topic whenever traction is being gained in some criticism of the Left.

There is some precedent for the Right taking this position. When Ronald Reagan was endorsed by the John Birch Society in the race for governor of California, he merely said he welcomed support from anyone, but that their endorsement was simply proof that he had “persuaded them to accept my philosophy, not my accepting theirs.” Reagan was probably unique in his ability to flip his opponents with jujitsu moves, however, and the John Birch Society was mostly regarded as weird, not evil. I am not wondering about whether the Right should work with, say, conspiracy-monger Alex Jones, but rather with far less palatable ideologies on the Right, and there is no historical example of that happening, at least on a scale broader than local.

On the surface, the answer is obviously yes. Why should the Left get the advantages of never having to exclude any group from its power coalition? True, part of this is that the news-setting media is uniformly Left, so no focus is permitted on the presence of the odious elements of the Left coalition, making it easier for the Left to ignore the matter. But it is much more than that—this principle has characterized, and been

of key importance to, the Left for more than a century, long before the media was captured by the Left. So, the obvious facile answer is that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, and the Right should welcome cooperation not only with, for example, anarchist libertarians, but even with racists and other types traditionally rigidly excluded. That is, they should, logically it would seem, cooperate in achieving electoral and other power goals, where those goals align, simply ignoring ideological differences where those are irrelevant to the goals at hand.

My first cut response is that this possible change ignores a key difference between the Left and Right, one Hawley identifies when he is defining terms—that the Left has a unifying goal lacking on the Right. If the litmus test on the Left is exaltation of equality, and that goal itself is not regarded as dubious, it makes it more possible to ignore pernicious ideological elements, where the ideologues themselves share the same basic goal. The Right does not share the same basic goals; what, for example, do Rand Paul and the American Nazi Party (if there is still such a thing) have in common? Therefore, detestable beliefs interfere with cooperation more easily on the Right.

But my first cut response is not robust, for it too easily excuses the Left and glosses over the reality that Rand Paul and the ANP do, actually, have a lot of goals in common. As to the Left, it is happy and eager to cooperate with a rogue's gallery of racists, killers, and fools, and commonality of goals should not be used to conceal that basic fact. And it's not only in order to gain power, while holding their nose. The Left never holds its nose when consorting with evil people, foreign or domestic. They eagerly socialize with them, and travel together in the same national and global circles. Let's take, for example, admitted terrorist Bill Ayers, a man whose ideology on the Left is objectively at the same relative position on the political spectrum as, on the Right, David Duke, combined with the practice of a less competent Timothy McVeigh. Ayers would die in ignominy and poverty, probably in prison, if he was, in fact, on the Right. Instead, for decades he has been a fixture in the most rarefied social circles, a tenured professor at a top university, and the toast of the global Left, and in addition was a close friend, advisor, and confidant of the man who was President of the United States for eight years. He is also married to that vile woman Bernadine Dohrn, whose career exemplifies a similar arc, including abetting terrorism, and who

thereafter worked for the ultra-prestigious white shoe law firm Sidley & Austin for five years, even though she had not passed the bar and had graduated law school seventeen years prior, and then was hired as a law professor by one of the top schools in the country. True, Ayers wants equality, like all the Left. If you are in bed with killers who claim to exalt equality, their claim may be wholly accurate. It probably is. But they are still killers, and should suffer the pertinent Mosaic punishment. And whatever their declared goals, in practice killers is primarily what the Left offers—Communism alone has killed a hundred million people, and Communists, specifically, are openly welcomed not only by the Left, but by the Democratic Party. Moreover, it's not just historical killing, or theoretical killing—in recent months, the Left has been only too happy to endorse fresh violence, while the Right rejects it, and will continue to—until it doesn't. Nor are plenty of racists and anti-Semites lacking in the Democratic Party. But we are getting off topic.

So what would “no enemies on the right” look like in practice? Let's take the most extreme example—let's imagine the American Nazi Party was not a bunch of clowns and had significant, if minor, political power, such as two percent of the national vote, more in some geographic areas. Should the Right, defined as conservatives who are not Nazis or fellow travelers, cooperate with the ANP in order to gain power through the democratic process? My, and I imagine your, first reaction is to recoil incredulously—how could such a thing be conceived? Nazis are grossly immoral people responsible for the deaths of millions. But is that just conditioning of seventy years of purges within the Right combined with barrages of propaganda from the Left? (Related to this is the successful Left propaganda demand that all conservatives permitted to engage in public discourse abase themselves with continual preemptive apologies if anything they are saying is connected in any way, or can be falsely connected in any way, to identifiable past bad behavior of the Right, while the Left never apologizes for anything, preemptively or otherwise.) Communists and people like Bill Ayers are grossly immoral people responsible for the deaths of millions, and nobody finds it incredible that they are active participants, as Communists, in all organizations of the Left and in the Democratic Party. Still, if I were working in electoral politics, I would not want to share the same political or physical space

with the ANP. Why the Right should feel that way, and the Left not in an exactly equivalent situation, is unclear to me, and there's the rub.

The undeniable reality is that Rand Paul and the ANP do have a tremendous amount in common, as far as political goals. According to Paul's official website today, listing his priorities, we should cut government spending, eliminate NSA spying, cut taxes, impose term limits, audit the Fed, cut regulation, cut immigration, harvest energy, kill Obamacare, and require that only Congress can declare war. I'd be surprised if the American Nazis couldn't get behind all of those. And let's not forget that Rand Paul in the past opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as an infringement on individual rights (though he walked that back). I guarantee that Rand Paul isn't racist—but that doesn't change that the Nazis don't like the Civil Rights Act either. My point is that if one is purely working for political goals, and not instead looking to impose one's moral views or feel morally superior, it's pretty clear that the Nazis and Rand Paul, or pretty much any Republican, could, and tactically should, work closely together—just as the Democratic Party works with Communists, “democratic socialists,” and other people equally morally foul as Nazis, or more so. Certainly Donald Trump has meandered in this direction; whether by happenstance or plan, I am not sure.

Now, you can't always ignore big differences in ideology forever. They come to the fore, in the normal course of things. But, perhaps, as I say, the key is that the different elements of the Right don't share a common goal like “equality,” so there cannot be overmuch cooperation. That is, though they may share some immediate political goals, maybe this lack of a unifying uber-principle means conservatives (except for the brief minor successes of fusionism) can't allow too big a tent, or they will be unable to pull in harness, unlike the Left, which can perch Equality before all comers like a rabbit is placed before a racing greyhound, and figure they can worry about purging each other after they gain complete power. Or, alternatively or also, it's that the Right has standards and morals, viewing virtue as a political necessity, and the Left is only interested in power to achieve its goal of equality (leaving aside that the end state of that goal is, more or less, East Germany). It is not clear there even is an end-state for the Right; Hawley cites Arthur Moeller van den Bruck to the effect that “conservatives must recognize

that they must win and re-win their battles every generation,” though he also believed, also correctly, that “conservatism had the advantage of being congruent with nature, whereas ‘revolutions have eternity against them.’”

Whatever the exact impact of such a change, my prediction is that this is the future, and from the crumbling of the Republican Party will rise a quite different big-tent conservative party, from which the neoconservatives have fled to the Democrats (as most already have—bye, Bill Kristol!) That party will receive the unalloyed scorn of those who command the social and business heights, and the conflict will, therefore, burst the channels that confined political discourse for the past seventy years. Purges on the basis of ideology will largely become a thing of the past on the Right, and I predict the result will be more power accruing to the Right—and a lot more people participating on the Right who have traditionally been viewed as unpleasant. I’m not sure if that’s good or bad. Probably it’s mostly good, if the goals of conservatives are accomplished and cemented, and the Left permanently broken on the wheel. But at least it’ll be different.