



The Rise of Conservatism since World War II

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## Dan T. Carter

## The Rise of Conservatism Since World War II

n the 1964 presidential election, Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater suffered a decisive defeat at the

hands of Lyndon Johnson. Goldwater, the dream candidate of his party's conservative wing, had offered a "choice not an echo" in his campaign and the American people seemed to have little doubt about their choice. Goldwater carried only his home state of Arizona and five Deep South states where opposition to the Civil Rights movement was at high tide. Johnson took the rest with sixty-one percent of the popular vote and his coattails increased the Democratic majority by thirty-eight House members and two new senators. By all the traditional measurements of American politics, the election of 1964 was a disaster for American conservatism. Not only was their choice decisively rebuffed by the voters, but the overwhelming Democratic victory gave Johnson the opportunity to enact his "Great Society" programs, collectively the most far-reaching liberal legislation

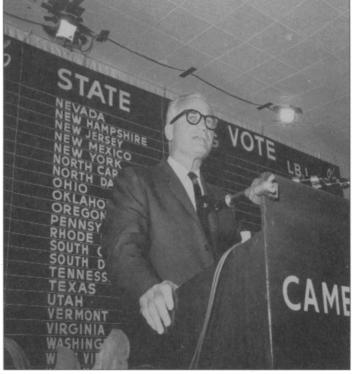
since Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

If 1964 was a decisive political defeat for Barry Goldwater, it was only a temporary setback in the steady growth of a conservative movement which would reach new heights in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the creation of a Republican majority in both houses of Congress in 1994. The complex story

of that conservative resurgence—centered politically in the Republican Party but extending throughout American society—is one of the most critical developments in the last half of

the twentieth century.

The rise of this conservative movement had its roots in the three decades before the Goldwater campaign, drawing upon two powerful and interrelated impulses. The first was an unambiguous defense of laissezfaire capitalism. Such conservative ideas ran deep in American history, but they had been badly discredited during the 1930s by the fact that most Americans attributed the Depression to the excesses of the capitalist system in general and the rapacious greed of corporate and business interests specifically. During the 1930s, most Americans seemed to accept the argument that the federal government had an obligation to protect the American people against those whom Franklin Roosevelt described as "malefactors of great wealth" by regulating and controlling these financial interests. At the same time, the establishment of a limited national welfare system—symbol-



Senator Barry Goldwater, in his first public appearance since his defeat for the presidency, faces journalists and television cameras at Camelback Inn near Phoenix, Arizona, 4 November 1964. His defeat allowed Lyndon B. Johnson to enact his Great Society programs. (AP photo)

ized most concretely by the Social Security Act of 1935—represented a new and expanded role for the national state.

Despite the popularity of these measures, a vocal and articulate minority of Americans maintained their hostility to the national government (1). Apart from their complaint that the welfare state led to idleness and undermined the work ethic of its recipients,

they argued that the heavy hand of government thwarted the wealth-producing force of individual entrepreneurs with its stifling red tape and burdensome taxes.

The second conservative impulse came from the linking of the "welfare state" (and the Democratic Party that created it) with fears of international communism. Since the Bolshevik Revolution, American conservatives warned of the threat of international communism, but in the aftermath of World War II, their arguments fell upon particularly receptive ears. Joseph Stalin's ruthless suppression of democratic governments in eastern Europe after World War II and their absorption behind the Iron Curtain, the Soviet Union's emergence as a nuclear power in 1949, and the victory of Mao Tse Tung's Communist forces China that same year stunned and alarmed Americans. At the same time,

the disclosure that a number of Americans had spied and passed on nuclear and other defense secrets, launched the great Red Scare of the late 1940s and 1950s. Anticommunism—most dramatically reflected in the emergence of Senator Joseph McCarthy—was undoubtedly inflamed by politics. Although there were spies and homegrown subversives operating within the United States, the heated political context of the Cold War vastly exaggerated their numbers. By charging that the "liberal" administrations of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman sheltered traitors and thus strengthened America's Cold War adversaries, conservatives could strike a blow at their political enemies.

But these arguments were more than simply crude political tools. In the decade from 1943 to 1953, conservative intellectuals—led by the Austrian born economist and social philosopher Frederick Hayek—argued that the flaws of "Rooseveltian" liberalism went far deeper than the question of spies or internal subversion. There was, argued Hayek, a *philosophical* affinity between any "collectivist" political movement (like the New Deal) and the forces of totalitarianism. Communism and German National Socialism were simply the mature results of all forms of "collectivism." As he argued in his brief but influential 1944 book, *The Road to Serfdom*, any attempt to control the economic freedom of individuals inevitably led (as his title suggested) to serfdom and barbarism (2). Hayek's book was one of several works that would prove to be critical in the thinking of a new generation of conservative intellectuals (3).

Even more important in creating an intellectual foundation for the new conservatism was the creation of the *National Review* magazine under the editorial leadership of William F. Buckley Jr. Founded in 1964 and bankrolled by wealthy business conservatives, the new magazine soon became the crossroads through which most intellectual and political conservatives passed. In the years that followed, there would



Eisenhower supporters shout "We Like Ike!" during a campaign stop in Baltimore. Eisenhower was a popular president, but did not appear to significantly challenge the Roosevelt/ Truman legacy. (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library)

be other magazines and other conservative institutions created, but the *National Review* remained, in many ways, the "Mother Church" of this new movement.

Still, the arguments of intellectuals did not create an electoral majority anymore than either businessmen's distaste for government bureaucrats or the angry passions of McCarthyism. While Republicans won the presidency in 1952 and again in 1956, it was not with their longtime conservative standard-bearer, Robert Taft of Ohio, but with the soothing and distinctly moderate war hero, Dwight Eisenhower. To the despair (and disgust) of the conservative faithful, Eisenhower made little effort to challenge the basic contours of the national state created during the Roosevelt and Truman years. While Richard Nixon, the unsuccessful 1960 Republican nominee, was more stri-

dent in his anticommunist rhetoric, he also expressed little interest in rolling back the changes of the previous three decades.

If the foundation for a conservative resurgence was being laid for the future (even as the national political movement suffered repeated political setbacks through the 1950s), conservatives usually captured the attention of the media and academics only in its most bizarre and extreme forms. There were the dozens of fanatical anticommunist ideologues, many combining religious enthusiasm with their hatred of the "Red Menace." At the violent fringe could be found Robert Pugh's Minutemen, with their storehouses of automatic weapons and their plans for guerilla war once the communists who controlled the United States government had removed the mask of liberalism and shown their true face. And there were the marginally more respectable spokesmen for the new Right and their organizations: the Rev. Carl McIntire's Twentieth Century Reformation, Dr. Fred Schwarz's Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, the Rev. Billy James Hargis's Christian Crusade, Edgar Bundy's League of America, Dean Clarence Manion's American Forum, Texas oilman H.L. Hunt's nationwide radio "Life Line" broadcasts and, of course, Robert Welch's John Birch Society. The title of three of the most influential works of this period give some sense of the perspective of what we might call "establishment" attitudes: The Radical Right, edited by Daniel Bell; Arnold Forster and Benjamin Epstein's Danger on the Right; and Richard Hofstadter's The Paranoid Style in American Politics (4).

These groups were, however, the extreme right of a far broader movement that was often unnoticed or, in many instances, simply described indiscriminately as "extremist." One critical building block for that new conservative movement was laid in the burgeoning suburban development of postwar America. In her study of Orange County, California, historian Lisa McGirr has given us a portrait of this emerging constituency—the "Suburban Warriors" of the new conservatism. Mainline political pundits of the

1950s had often described these new political activists as "antimodern." While it is true that they often rebelled against what they saw as the excesses of change, they were in fact products of suburban prosperity, "winners" for the most part who had benefitted from the Cold War prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s. In the case of McGirr's subjects, many, in fact, worked in the burgeoning defense industries of southern California.

The new suburban communities that surrounded declining inner cities offered a safe and relatively secure launching pad of privatized civic culture to attack the secular humanists and liberal social engineers who demanded much, notably higher taxes, and offered little: the charmless attraction of unruly public spaces and expensive public programs for what these new conservatives called the "undeserving poor." In these new communities, there

was little space for or interest in a "public sphere." Instead, conservative churches and a fierce political activism created a different kind of community of political and cultural activists dedicated to protecting the status quo.

The ideology of this New Right centered around the traditional conservative demands of the 1950s: rolling back communism abroad, rooting out "Reds" at home, and shrinking the welfare state. But there was also a distinctly religious and "traditionalist" aspect to these new "suburban warriors." The 1950s were a period of astounding religious resurgence; by one estimate, the number of Americans who described themselves as regular churchgoers increased more than seventy percent during the decade. Most of that growth could be attributed to evangelical and culturally conservative churchgoers, like Southern Baptists, who were profoundly unsettled over the social "liberalization" of society (5).

In part, the reason for the invisibility of this movement lay in the fact that much of it took place at the community level. Suburbia became the setting for new forms of community mobilization as middle- and upper-middle-class conservatives organized neighborhood meetings, showed "anticommunist" movies, launched petition drives to block sex education in the local schools, elected school board members who would guarantee the adoption of "pro-American" texts, and, in the case of Los Angeles, selected a school board superintendent who barred discussion of the United Nations in the classroom.

The opening that allowed the dramatic growth of American conservatism came in the 1960s. In part it was an almost inevitable response to the ambitious liberalism of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. Although liberals would deride the timidity and limited nature of the Johnson agenda, it did mark a substantial step in the expansion of the New Deal welfare state. Even before the Johnson landslide of 1964, he had persuaded Congress to enact the Economic Opportunity Act of

1964, the first measure of what he called an "unconditional war on poverty." In 1965 and 1966, he was even more successful in pushing through dozens of measures ranging from expanded public housing to the creation of the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, as well as education subsidies, consumer protection, and environmental preservation measures. The capstone of this sweeping legislative agenda was the creation of Medicare and Medicaid.

As one might expect, conservatives attacked the Great Society on both fiscal and philosophical grounds. It was too expensive, they charged, and it discouraged initiative by giving the poor "handouts" rather than forcing them to find work on their own. But Johnson's program was more than simply an expansion of traditional social welfare programs, it also plunged into the thicket of racial politics.

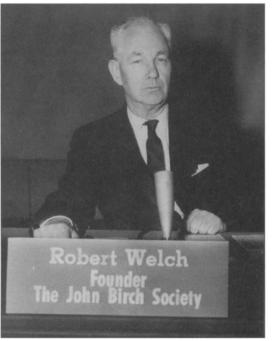
The New Deal had seen a shift in the allegiance of African Americans. Traditionally stalwarts of the party of Abraham Lincoln, black voters had turned to Roosevelt and then in even greater numbers to Harry Truman after he backed a strong civil rights plank in the 1948 Democratic Party platform. While the support of black voters in key northern industrial states proved critical to Truman's reelection, it also led to the creation of the third party "Dixiecrat Movement" and laid the foundation for the future defection of white Democratic voters in the South who had often backed their party's "liberal" economic agenda, but were adamantly opposed to the efforts of northern liberals to end segregation.

Nor had that racial backlash been confined to white southern Democrats. As a growing number of African Americans migrated to northern industrial cities, white urban working class and white-collar voters often reacted with growing hostility to what they perceived as "threats" to their neighborhoods and to their jobs. Urban

historians who have studied such cities have found a growing disaffection among these traditional white Democratic working-class and middle-class voters well before the 1960s (6).

But it was during the 1960s that this white backlash proved critical in the conservative movement. During the early 1960s, "respectable" conservatives made a conscious decision to distance themselves from the more extremist elements in the movement, an action symbolized by William F. Buckley Jr.'s decision to condemn John Birch Society founder Robert Welch for his claim that Dwight Eisenhower had been a "dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy. . . . " (7)

If leading conservatives also sought to distance themselves from the cruder forms of racism, there was broad opposition to the Civil Rights movement as it emerged in the l950s and 1960s. The more "extremist" conservative organizations such as the John Birch Society, and most of the prominent "anticommunist" leaders constantly linked movement leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.



Robert Welch, founder and president of the John Birch Society, is shown on 15 May 1961. (AP Photo)

with the international Communist movement, but more respectable mainline conservative groups were equally hostile to any attempts to use the power of government to protect the civil rights of African Americans. In an unsigned editorial in the *National Review* in 1957, Buckley told his readers that whites in the Deep South were the "advanced race" and thus entitled to take "such measures [as] are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally. . . ." Besides, he added, the "great majority of the Negroes of the South who do not vote do not care to vote and would not know for what to vote if they could (8)." When Barry Goldwater announced his opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was the logical culmination of a decade of fairly consistent conservative opposition to any federal action designed to protect the rights of African Americans (9).

Traditional antistatism, muscular anticommunism, a vague uneasiness over accelerating social change, and a hostility to federally supported civil rights may have furnished the foundations for the growth of conservatism, but it was the tumultuous and unsettling events of the 1960s that made millions of Americans more responsive to conservative arguments.

First, in the long hot summers of the mid-1960s, angry African American civil rights activists retreated into a militant "black power" movement and race riots erupted in dozens of American cities across the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Large scale upheavals in such cities as Newark, the Watts district of Los Angeles, Washington, and Detroit left dozens dead and thousands of

shops and buildings burned and looted. At the same time, American involvement in the Vietnam War accelerated from peaceful "teach-ins" in the nation's college classrooms to angry street demonstrations and confrontations with police.

As the signs of public disorder accelerated, conservatives bitterly attacked the Johnson administration for failing to quell "lawlessness" in American cities at home or to crush the North Vietnamese and Vietcong guerrillas abroad. These public manifestations of disorder increasingly reflected (in the minds of conservatives) a general social decay. Rising crime rates, the legalization of abortion, the rise of "out-of-wedlock" pregnancies, the increase in divorce rates, and the proliferation of "obscene" literature and films undermined traditional cultural symbols of conservatism and unnerved millions of Americans, an uneasiness reinforced by the new medium of television. For most Americans, their own community, their own neighborhood, might be relatively calm, but through the "immediacy of television," they

became angered and felt menaced. Who were these disrespectful and unpatriotic drug-crazed hippies angrily burning the American flag night after night on the flickering screen while American soldiers died in Vietnam for their country? Who were these armed black men in combat fatigues and dark sunglasses, exultantly brandishing their semi-automatic weapons as they marched out of college classrooms? Who were these brazen women, flaunting their sexuality, burning their bras and challenging traditional "family values." In another time, these threatening events, these threatening individuals, would have remained remote, even abstract. Now they came directly into America's living room in living color (10).

The general political impact could be felt in a growing anti-Washington rhetoric, for the federal government now seemed

complicit in these assaults on traditional American values. Conservatives charged that the United States Justice Department proposed that northern schools be integrated and that the federal courts "pandered" to criminals and banned state-sponsored prayer from the schools even as it opened the nation's bookstores to "filth and pornography." Spurred by fire-eating politicians and a powerful new communication network of right-wing talk show hosts, federal bureaucrats from Internal Revenue Service agents to forest rangers to Occupational Safety and Health Administration inspectors to Environmental Protection Agency enforcement officers to Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agents were increasingly depicted as



For most Americans, their own community might be relatively calm, but through the "immediacy of television," they became angered and felt menaced.

power hungry, arrogant, jackbooted thugs intent on harassing honest taxpaying citizens with mindless and unnecessary red tape while diverting their hard-earned dollars to shiftless and lazy undeserving poor and predominantly black people.

Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign marked the first major effort of post-New Deal conservatives to take the political highground. The boisterously crude 1968 campaign of Alabama Governor George Wallace reflected the tumult of the politics of the 1960s. Wallace had begun his national political career in 1964 on one issue: opposition to the Civil Rights Act of that year. When he launched his 1968 "American Independent" Party candidacy, Wallace couched his anti-civil rights message in a political rhetoric that avoided explicit racism, but his angry attacks on "bussing," "welfare abuse," and "civil rights professional agitators" skillfully exploited the growing hostility of many white Americans to what they saw as the excesses of the Civil Rights movement. At the same time, Wallace married his racial message to the "social"

issues of the 1960s, calling for the curbing of constitutional rights for "street hoodlums" and dramatic reductions in welfare expenditures. From race to religion (Wallace was the first national politician to call for a constitutional amendment restoring school classroom prayers), Wallace articulated the new conservative agenda. Six weeks before the November election, more than twenty-one percent of America's voters told pollsters that Wallace was their choice for president. Although his final vote faded to fourteen percent, he came within an eyelash of throwing the election of 1968 into the House of Representatives (11).

Richard Nixon had cautiously sought to exploit this growing conservative movement while depicting himself as a "centrist" candidate; he learned from his narrow escape. Between 1968 and 1972, guided by the advice of such advisers as Harry Dent of South Carolina and voter analyst Kevin Philips, Nixon worked

to make certain that those voters who had supported Wallace moved from his third party candidacy into the Republican Party. He did so by taking conservative views on a number of issues, particularly such controversial questions as bussing. Nixon's "Southern Strategy" was a critical factor in the electoral shift away from Democratic (and liberal) dominance. But his role in this process was cut short by the Watergate scandal, allowing the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976.

The last building block of the conservative movement fell into place during the Carter administration. By the 1970s, conservative evangelicals

built a powerful group of educational, publishing, and broadcasting institutions. During the 1960s, they became alarmed over what they saw as an increasing drift toward a liberal secularism that undermined "traditional" values in American society. The Supreme Court's decisions in 1962 and 1963 outlawing official school prayers were a key complaint, but the Carter administration's demand that church schools (because they were tax exempt) undertake affirmative efforts to secure minority students pushed many evangelicals into politics. After 1978, under the leadership of evangelical activists like Marion "Pat" Robertson and Jerry Falwell, religious conservatives mobilized around such hot-button issues as abortion, school prayer and the teaching of evolution, becoming critical partners in a new coalition of social, cultural and economic conservatives. Conservative Christians had become Christian conservatives.

In 1980, conservatives finally achieved the victory they had lost in 1964 as Ronald Reagan swept into the White House,

decisively defeating incumbent Jimmy Carter by promising dramatic tax cuts, a rollback of the federal government, a dramatic rebuilding of American military might, and a return to "traditional" American values. The eight years of the Reagan presidency left many of the staunchest conservatives dissatisfied. As one prominent spokesman of the New Right concluded, he had given little but symbolism to religious and social conservatives who wanted a return to "traditional" American values; he had done even less to slow the growth of government. Domestically, his only accomplishment was to dramatically cut taxes primarily for the well-off, thus creating such an enormous public debt that liberals in the future would be stymied in proposing any new additional government initiatives. Paul Weyrich's gloomy assessment was correct in many respects, but he underestimated the extent to which Reagan—notoriously uninformed on specific issues—had managed to create

Richard Nixon and George Wallace at an "Honor America" celebration, 18 February 1974 (NARA NLP-WHPO-MPF-E2233 [28A]). Nixon hoped to capitalize on Wallace's success in the South.

an "aura" of confidence. By the end of the Reagan years, conservatives had created a powerful and well-financed national constituency of small businessmen, suburbanites hostile to increasing taxes, religiously conservative evangelicals and traditional Catholics, gun owners passionately opposed to any control over firearms, and white blue-collar workers angry at affirmative action. Conservatives had also moved from the fringe to parity in the television media and dominance in the influential world of talk radio.

The decade of the 1990s saw both victories and defeats for conservatives. The victory of

Democrat Bill Clinton in 1992 and his ability to survive eight years in the White House was a source of deep disappointment to movement leaders. But the 1994 strong showing of Republican conservatives under the leadership of Newt Gingrich reflected the shift that had taken place in American politics. The failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, the defeat of welfare entitlement while the Democratic Clinton was in the White House, the gradual erosion of Affirmative Action and, in general, the increasing conservatism of the United States Supreme Court showed that the framework for shaping public policy had shifted further to the right through the 1980s and 1990s.

Still, it is not at all clear that there is a clear conservative hegemony. George W. Bush won the 2000 presidential election not by promising ultraconservative values, but by appealing to the American voters in a distinctly moderate tone. And yet he still did not capture a majority of the votes cast. In fact, by a popular margin of fifty-two to forty-eight percent, Americans supported a more

liberal Albert Gore and a decidedly more left-wing Ralph Nader. Conservatives today are united in their opposition to what they see as the excesses of American liberalism, but they remain divided between those who would emphasize libertarian approach to personal as well as economic behavior and those who believe it is the duty of the state to enforce strict standards of public morality and public order.

Finally, the conservative movement ultimately will be judged by the extent to which it creates a just as well as a free society. But the gap between rich and poor has grown steadily with the rise of American conservatism in the last quarter of the twentieth century. According to the statistics compiled by the Congressional Budget Office, the income of the poorest one-fifth of Americans fell twelve percent between the late 1970s and the end of the 1990s; the top twenty percent saw its income rise by nearly forty percent and the top one percent of Americans saw their after-tax income grow by one hundred twenty percent. (The income of Americans between the fortieth and eightieth percentiles changed very little). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States had become the most unequal society in the industrialized West. Although that growing inequality has been fed by many sources, it has clearly been reinforced by conservative priorities that have emphasized reducing the progressive nature of the federal income tax while holding the line or cutting back public services for the poor (12).

Not surprisingly, those who have benefitted from these policies and priorities have responded by opening their pocketbooks and by voting early and often. By one estimate, voters in the top twenty percent of the electorate cast as much as thirty percent of the votes in general elections and even more in local and off-year elections. Conservatives have traditionally accepted economic inequality as the price that must be paid for encouraging competition and economic productivity. But implicit in this postwar movement was the promise that conservatives would create a just as well as a moral and free society. Conservatives will ultimately succeed only if they move beyond their contempt for American liberalism and, in the words of a historian of the movement, "offer a model of political freedom that would protect the citizen against blind, impersonal economic forces, in which one man's freedom would not be another's subjection" (13).  $\square$ 

## Endnotes

- Gary Wills describes, from a critical perspective, this deep-seated antigovernment tradition in American culture in A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).
- Frederick Hayek, The Road to Serfdom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944).
- 3. While any list would be somewhat arbitrary, most historians of American conservatism would probably add Ayn Rand's best selling novel *The*

Fountainhead (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs Merrill Company, 1943); Richard Weaver, Ideas Have Consequences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); and Russell Kirk, The Conservative Mind, from Burke to Santayana (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1953). For an overview of the role played by these and other writers and intellectuals see George H. Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945 (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

Forster and Epstein, *Danger on the Right* (New York: Random House, 1964); and Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965). Hofstadter's essay, originally delivered as a lecture at Oxford University in the fall of 1963, was clearly triggered by the Goldwater movement.

- 4. Daniel Bell, ed., The New American Right (New York: Criterion Books, 1955).
- 5. This religious resurgence was not limited to evangelicals. One measure of the growth of the new piety may be gauged by the fact that the number of individuals entering the priesthood dramatically increased in the post-World War II era. See Winthrop S. Hudson, Religion in America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 396; Phillip E. Hammond, Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 114; Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society, (New York: Harmony Books, 1993), 4-7, 298-99.
- 6. Thomas J. Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964," *Journal of American History*, 82 (1995): 551-78.
- 7. While Buckley and most other mainstream conservatives disavowed Welch's assertion that Eisenhower was a communist agent, they did not attack the John Birch Society or other far-right groups. See Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 71-73.
- 8. National Review, 24 August 1957.
- 9. See, for example, the articles of November 1964 in the *National Review* on race and the election.
- Dan T. Carter, The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 375-77.
- 11. Dan T. Carter, From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996),19, 23, 35.
- 12. New York *Times*, 5 September 1999, 14; see also Frank Levy's *The New Dollars and Dreams: Americans Incomes and Economic Change* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998).
- 13. Godfrey Hodgson, The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 315.

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