

## Cover Story

[cold fusion]

# Conservative Crack-Up

Will libertarians leave the Cold War coalition?

By W. James Antle III

ASK A ROOMFUL of well-read conservatives to identify the political theorists who most influenced them, and some of the following names are likely to come up: Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, Richard Weaver, F.A. Hayek, Russell Kirk, and Milton<sup>\*</sup> Friedman. That it would seem so natural for men from disparate philosophical traditions to appear together on such a list is a testimony to the success of the postwar American Right in forging a coherent national conservative movement out of traditionalist and libertarian elements.

This makes the emerging signs that this conservative-libertarian consensus is starting to unravel all the more problematic for the Right. The views expressed in most major American conservative periodicals reflect a combination of libertarian and traditionalist positions. In the not so distant past, even when compared to explicitly libertarian publications, there would be great similarity in subject matter (arguments for lower taxes, school choice, and Social Security privatization), contributors (Charles Murray, Thomas Sowell, and Walter Williams), and intellectual heroes (Hayek, Friedman, and Ludwig von Mises). There might be differences of emphasis, tone, and degree—the con-

servative magazines were much more concerned with political feasibility and the electoral fortunes of the Republican Party than their expressly libertarian counterparts—but also substantial agreement. The op-ed pages of conservative newspapers remain heavily populated by commentators affiliated with the libertarian Cato Institute, often described in the press as a conservative think tank.

Pick up copies of the mainstream conservative and libertarian magazines and compare them today. In their treatment of the Bush administration, Attorney General John Ashcroft, the Iraq war, and the Republican leadership, the libertarian magazines will read much more like the *Nation* than conservative outlets like the *Weekly Standard*. There have been increasingly testy exchanges taking place between the writers of *National Review* and *Reason* over such issues as the Patriot Act.

Also consider that in two recent cases where popular conservative figures have been embroiled in personal controversies—when the *Washington Monthly* and *Newsweek* reported on William Bennett's substantial gambling habit and Rush Limbaugh disclosed that he was addicted to painkilling drugs—libertarian commentators piled on with the

same relish as their liberal counterparts. FoxNews.com columnist Radley Balko lambasted Bennett as a hypocrite on his Web site: "Your vices—sinful, regretful, damnable. My vices—not so bad. The guy lost \$1.4 million in one two-month stretch. But he doesn't have a problem. Cancer patients who want to smoke marijuana—they're the ones who have problems." *Reason* editor Nick Gillespie wrote how conservative defenses of the pre-eminent radio talk-show host were ruining the "otherwise enjoyable story of Rush Limbaugh's exposure as a pill-popping hypocrite." This hostility is partly attributable to Bennett and Limbaugh's high-profile disagreement with libertarians over drug legalization and greater willingness to use government in the service of conservative ends in general. But it also shows the degree to which many conservatives and libertarians no longer see themselves as being on the same team.

The combination of libertarian and traditionalist tendencies in modern American conservatism was due in part to the need to gather together that ragtag band of intellectuals lingering outside the New Deal consensus who were opposed to the rising tide of left-liberalism. An alliance made out of political



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necessity, it drew some measure of intellectual consistency from the efforts of the late *National Review* senior editor Frank Meyer. He argued for the compatibility of innate individual freedom with transcendent morality, emphasizing that liberty has no meaning apart from virtue, but virtue cannot be coerced. Meyer saw libertarianism and traditionalism as two different emphases within conservatism, neither completely true without being moderated by the other. In fact, he held either extreme to be “self-defeating: truth withers when freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it; and free individualism uninformed by moral value rots at its core and soon brings about conditions that pave the way for surrender to tyranny.”

“Fusionism” was the name for Meyer’s synthesis, and while it was never without critics, it worked well enough for

most conservatives and for the development of an American Right that counted anti-statism and traditional morality as its main pillars, alongside support for a strong national-defense posture. When Ronald Reagan became the Republican presidential nominee in 1980, this even became the basis of the GOP platform: smaller government, family values, and peace through strength.

Yet a growing number of libertarians no longer think they are getting much out of the fusionist bargain. *Liberty* magazine editor R.W. Bradford called upon his fellow libertarians to cease thinking of themselves as operationally part of the Right. Writing in the September/October issue of that magazine, he argued that the mainstream conservative movement has abandoned “its claimed love of liberty and opposition to ever more powerful government” and instead have become “the greatest advo-

cates of an imperial foreign policy, of massive defense spending and of invading people’s homes in the names of the Wars on Crime, Drugs and Terrorism.”

Jeffrey Tucker of the Ludwig von Mises Institute has argued that “conservative” as a term for those who love liberty has gone the way of “liberal”—hijacked by statists so that it now means precisely the opposite. “We lost the word liberalism long ago, and only adopted the term conservative with the greatest reluctance. It is time to give it up too, neither describing ourselves as such nor allowing others to do so. We don’t take our marching orders from neocons. We don’t believe what we see on TV. We do not love the GOP. We are not nationalists. We believe in the idea of liberty. We are libertarians ...”

FoxNews.com’s Balko normally votes Republican and cast his ballot for George W. Bush in 2000 but now says

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he's "90 percent certain" he "won't be voting for President Bush in 2004." He further argues that the "right now poses a greater threat to freedom than the left." Jim Henley, a noted libertarian blogger, put it even more bluntly: "Having abandoned the substance of limited government since early in the Gingrich 'revolution,' conservatives increasingly eschew even the *rhetoric* of limited government. Animosity aside, they're just no use to libertarians any more."

### THE DECLINE OF CONSERVATIVE ANTI-STATISM IS ATTRIBUTABLE TO TWO FACTORS: POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND THE PERCEPTION THAT BIGGER GOVERNMENT WILL BUY BETTER SECURITY.

The rift between conservatives and libertarians is not merely an esoteric debate between dueling pundits; it has also has concrete political ramifications. In one of the hardest-fought races of the 2002 campaign, Republican John Thune lost to incumbent Sen. Tim Johnson (D-S.D.) by just 524 votes. Libertarian Party candidate Kurt Evans won more than 3,000 votes—even though he dropped out of the race and endorsed Thune—more than enough to alter the outcome of the election. Small-l libertarians voting for Libertarian Party nominees rather than Republicans helped cost Republican Slade Gorton of Washington his Senate seat in 2000 and helped Democrat Harry Reid of Nevada hold onto his in 1998.

Libertarians have not limited their support to third-party efforts. Some have begun contemplating support for a Democratic presidential candidate to oust the Bush-Ashcroft Republicans. The antiwar Howard Dean appears to be the favorite. Already a Libertarians for Dean blog site debating the merits of libertarian support for his candidacy has

been set up on the Web. While a Libertarians for Clark Web site appeared and quickly dissipated following Wesley Clark's declaration of candidacy, the Dean site is still going strong with those posting on it inclined to support him. The liberal *American Prospect* ran a piece by Noah Shachtman on its Web site citing several prominent libertarians, including *Reason* assistant editor Julian Sanchez and Cato Institute senior editor Gene Healy, at least willing to contemplate a vote for Dean over Bush.

Even libertarians less inclined to vote Democratic have been talking about tactical alliances with the Left. One example is *Reason's* science correspondent Ronald Bailey, who devoted an entire article to his decision to join the ACLU.

The Right's response so far has largely been silence. Some conservatives have noticed that they are losing libertarian support. *National Review's* John J. Miller wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* about the "GOP's Libertarian Problem." But his response was mainly that libertarians would vote Republican if they knew what was good for them, without acknowledging that the reason many do not is that even conservative Republicans have increasingly moved away from limited government. Others, like commentator and film critic Michael Medved, have ridiculed libertarian defectors as "losertarians."

Conservative intellectuals and journalists are no more interested in anti-statism than the politicians they back. In his recent essay for the *Weekly Standard*, Irving Kristol listed support for the welfare state and interventionism unre-

lated to concrete national interests as components of his neoconservative persuasion. Fred Barnes has written in praise of "big government conservatism," and while few of his colleagues would be so bold as to champion that phrase, a growing number clearly support what he considers to be the inherent trade-off that appears to guide the Bush administration's policy: "To gain free-market reforms and expand individual choice, he's willing to broaden programs and increase spending." This is why adding new government agencies, increasing federal expenditures, and running large budget deficits are acceptable to many of the Right's leading spokesmen and policy wonks as long as accompanied by modest—and potentially short-lived—tax cuts. It is therefore evident to libertarians that smaller government is no longer a serious political objective of the dominant forces on the American Right.

Although there are many reasons for this, the decline of conservative anti-statism is mainly attributable to two factors: political considerations and the perception that bigger government will buy better security against terrorism. Conservatives have come to the conclusion that cutting spending programs that benefit middle-class constituencies is a losing proposition at the ballot box. Spending cuts are as unpopular as tax increases, and while conservatives score points by raising the specter of higher taxes when campaigning against liberal Democrats, the liberals counter-attack by playing to fears that Republicans will cut funding for education, Social Security, and Medicare. Rather than continuing a fruitless effort to persuade the electorate that big government is economically and socially harmful, it is easier and politically more advantageous to play to the public's contradictory desire for both high spending and low taxes.

Things have only got worse since 9/11, as many conservatives now regard smaller government as incompatible with protecting the nation from terrorism. This has manifested itself not just in increased military spending but in new domestic expenditures as well. While Republicans were pledging to eliminate Cabinet departments as recently as 1996, the Bush administration has instead created a new one, the Department of Homeland Security, even though homeland security was something most Americans probably thought they had been getting from their spending on the Department of Defense.

Conservatives have been down this road before—during the Cold War. William F. Buckley Jr., whose tendencies over the years have been significantly more libertarian than those of today's neoconservatives, famously wrote in an article that appeared in *Commonweal* on Jan. 5, 1962,

[W]e have got to accept Big Government for the duration—for neither an offensive nor a defensive war can be waged, given our present government skills, except through the instrument of a totalitarian bureaucracy within our shores. ... And if they deem Soviet power a menace to our freedom (as I happen to), they will have to support large armies and air forces, atomic energy, central intelligence, war production boards, and the attendant centralization of power in Washington—even with Truman at the reins of it all.

Substitute militant Islam for Soviet power and Gephardt (or whichever establishment Democrat with presidential ambitions you prefer) for Truman and this is a fairly accurate representation of many contemporary conservatives' position on the size of government during the War on Terror. Viewing the

fight against international terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda as analogous to the Cold War struggle, they believe reinstating limits on the federal government is not just a lower priority but even a competing one.

Hence, many of today's conservatives accept the present cost and scope of the federal government as a given and are reluctant to control even its rate of growth. The Right's traditional pro-defense position is in the process of being transformed into neo-Wilsonian hubris and nation building. When combined with the fact that many topics that have long divided the Right along libertarian and traditionalist lines—homosexuality, pro-life issues, immigration—are becoming more salient, there is precious little to keep libertarians in the fold as a constituent group of an increasingly neoconservative American Right.

Can Meyer's fusionism be saved? This would be a challenging task now that growing numbers of conservatives eschew minimal government and a similarly high percentage of individualists have become "lifestyle libertarians" who reject moral orthodoxy. Indeed, it could even be argued that the mainstream Right today turns fusionism on its head by paying little more than lip service to either libertarianism or traditionalism.

But the combination of libertarian and traditionalist views among conservatives remains strong at the grassroots level. There is little evidence that the majority of those who consider themselves conservative have signed onto the project of building a "conservative" welfare state at home and projecting benevolent global hegemony abroad. The nannyism and predilection to view the state as a problem-solver of first resort that seem intrinsic to modern American liberals make any long-term relocation of libertarians to the left side of the political spectrum seem problematic. Libertarians with a deeper appreciation for the compatibil-

ity of liberty and traditional values like Lew Rockwell, Hans-Hermann Hoppe, and William L. Anderson have also been gaining in influence.

Perhaps we should look to the late 1960s and early '70s, the last time libertarians became disaffected with the Right and sought a unique political identity. One of the products of this period was the Libertarian Party, founded in 1971. This was back when the controversy over Vietnam raged and the issues were remarkably similar to those provoking conservative-libertarian tensions today—war, a Republican administration that was aggressively expanding government, and concern about civil liberties. The friction waned after libertarians enjoyed little success through their third-party movement and conservatives resumed railing against the depredations of big government. Republicans would in the ensuing years turn from Richard Nixon, whose legacy included wage and price controls, to Reagan, a candidate who favored tax cuts, deregulation, and spending restraint, while opposing peacetime conscription (although the independent libertarian identity was kept alive at least in part by Reagan's inability to reverse the growth of government once in office).

A return to first principles could restore the Right's fusionist consensus, but this would require that a vigorous challenge be mounted against the ideology now being represented as conservative orthodoxy. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks is often quoted as proclaiming, "We're all neoconservatives now." The impending breakup of fusionism shows that this is only true insofar as dramatic changes are made to the character of the American Right itself—changes many who have labored under its banner want no part of. ■

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