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Review Essay: Whence Came the Modern American Right?

Bryan M. Santin

Matthew Continetti: *The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism*. (New York: Basic Books, 2022. Pp. ix, 484.)

John S. Huntington: *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. Pp. viii, 300.)

Edward H. Miller: *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. viii, 456.)

Gene Zubovich: *Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. Pp. xii, 391.)

For scholars of American political history, the 2016 election was a moment of methodological reassessment. After Donald Trump eviscerated his seemingly "respectable" GOP challengers in the Republican presidential primary and went on to win the general election, historians and theorists of the American Right rethought the reigning "ostracization thesis," a memorable phrase Edward H. Miller uses to describe a historiographical narrative grounded in the theory that American conservatives, led by Ronald Reagan, had prevailed in the 1980s by systematically purging their movement of extremists in the 1960s and 1970s (258). In 2017, Rick Perlstein, one of the most celebrated popular historians of the conservative movement, published an essay in the *New York Times* memorably titled "I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong." In it, he expressed regret for helping to forge this narrative in his first book, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (Hill and Wang, 2001). Cory Robin updated his influential book *The Reactionary Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2011; 2018) to account for Trump's ascendance. "Like most observers of American politics," Robin wrote in the preface to the second edition, "I was shocked by Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election." But if the 2016 election prompted a critical reassessment, then the 2020 election and its chaotic coda (i.e., the attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021) prompted a scholarly reckoning not only with modern American conservatism, but also with the broader narrative arc of

Concordia University Irvine, Irvine, California, USA

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twentieth-century American politics. The four recent books under review here, which were all published after the 2020 election, represent some of the first revisionist fruits of this reckoning.

Of these four books, scholars of American politics will likely find Matthew Continetti's *The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism* to be at once the most dazzlingly ambitious, the most popularly oriented, and the least argumentatively coherent. A senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a contributing editor to *National Review*, Continetti is a conservative intellectual and an outspoken critic of Trump, a destructive demagogue whom Continetti argues "divided the country [in the wake of the 2020 election] between Americans loyal to him and Americans loyal to the rule of law" (401). In his introduction, Continetti opens the book by describing his early days as a young conservative journalist working at the *Weekly Standard*, a now-defunct magazine that he characterizes wistfully as "the frontal cortex of the American Right" and a major intellectual outpost of the conservative establishment (1). Although he admits that he is "not an entirely disinterested observer," Continetti vows to write neither a propagandistic story of conservative triumph nor a disparaging story of conservative pathology (13). Essentially, Continetti sets up a difficult task for himself: to tell a convincing story culminating in Trump's presidential ascendance that acknowledges that while Trump was "no alien invader of American conservatism," he was also not, as the Left contends, the necessary "end point" of the conservative movement (388, 7).

To that end, Continetti identifies an overarching framework for understanding the American Right, an antagonistic crucible (hence, the "hundred-year war" embedded in the book's title) of "endless competition and occasional collaboration between populism and elitism" (5). At its core, Continetti argues, "the Right has toggled between an elite-driven strategy in both content and constituencies and a populist strategy that meets normal people where they are and is driven by their ambitions, anxieties, and animosities" (5–6). For readers sympathetic to Continetti's view, they will likely see this framework as an elegant heuristic that allows him to track the contributions of conservative intellectuals (i.e., conservative elites) without losing sight of the vast network of on-the-ground activists (i.e., conservative populists) ranging from Phyllis Schlafly to Rush Limbaugh. Instead of an esoteric intellectual history in the vein of George H. Nash's hagiographic *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (1976, but updated and reprinted in 1996 and in 2003), Continetti claims that his book "explains how the work of conservative intellectuals has interacted with, influenced, and been influenced by institutions, policies, politics, world events, and politicians" (5). For readers skeptical of Continetti's view, they will likely see this framework as a convenient euphemism that allows Continetti to celebrate conservative intellectual abstractions such as "limited government," but then disavow dark interpretations of those abstractions as "populist." To take just one example, Continetti writes that when William F. Buckley Jr.

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criticized George Wallace's prosegregationist rhetoric in the 1960s in the pages of *National Review,* "readers would send the magazine angry letters" defending Wallace's racist demagoguery (184). But Continetti stresses that Buckley and other *National Review* conservative intellectuals, such as Frank S. Meyer, repeatedly pointed out that Wallace also embraced the New Deal welfare state. At these moments in the book, Continetti seems to imply that the American Right functions best when reactionary populists are corrected and tamed by the movement's intellectual elites.

Regardless of how readers normatively evaluate the book's foundational elitism/populism framework, they will have a hard time denying the impressive breadth of Continetti's analytical summary of the interlocking arguments and events that shaped the American Right. Over the course of fourteen tight chapters, Continetti traces the long arc of American conservatism from roughly the 1920s to the early 2020s. In the book's introduction, Continetti points out that Trump's MAGA movement is, to put it charitably, characterized by a set of issues including "protectionism, immigration restrictionism, religiosity, and antipathy to foreign entanglements" (12). He shrewdly argues that to understand the Trumpist iteration of American conservatism, one must return to the earlier iteration of American conservatism that most resembles it philosophically: the Warren G. Harding–Calvin Coolidge conservatism of the 1920s. This is where Continetti starts his story, an authorial decision which is a welcome departure from many previous books on American conservatism that characterize it mostly as a post–New Deal phenomenon. Promising a "return to normalcy" after the twin upheavals of World War I and Woodrow Wilson's progressive presidency, Harding-Coolidge conservatism, Continetti writes in chapter 1, "stood for a popular mix of untrammeled commerce, high tariffs, disarmament, foreign policy restraint, and devotion to the constitutional foundation of American democracy" (21).

In the next five chapters, Continetti tells a familiar tale of American conservatism in the political wilderness, stretching from the Great Depression's devastating effects on free-market economic ideology and the Democratic Party's subsequent presidential dominance (i.e., March 1933 to January 1953) to Barry Goldwater's landslide loss in the 1964 presidential election and the massive expansion of the federal government under Lyndon Johnson. In these chapters, Continetti moves at a brisk pace, as he rapidly summarizes the interaction between conservative ideas and institutions from the rise of Roosevelt's New Deal to Johnson's Great Society in just over 130 pages. On the one hand, Continetti's method of rapid summarization compels him, at times, to produce succinct, insightful overviews of complex political phenomena. For instance, when writing about the 1930s, he observes that unlike right-wing political movements in other countries, "which attached [themselves] to established institutions such as throne, altar, and aristocracy, the American Right had no power base other than pockets of industry and parts of the enfeebled GOP. It tended to adopt an adversarial and catastrophizing attitude toward government [during Roosevelt's first term] that it never

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quite shook off" (39). On the other hand, some readers may suspect that Continetti races through this era of conservative history as a way to avoid diving too deeply into some of the Right's worst moments, especially in regard to racism. While he does note that Buckley's *National Review*, "to the [conservative] movement's enduring shame," supported elements of Jim Crow in the late 1950s, Continetti spends only about two pages on this topic, summing up the infamous moment with deodorized euphemism: "Resistance to civil rights crippled the [American Right's] argument for limited government by equating federal inactivity with the maintenance of white supremacy" (128, 130).

In the book's second half, Continetti narrates a standard account of American politics after the 1960s: the New Deal coalition's demise, the conservative movement's electoral victories in the 1970s and 1980s, the post–Cold War consolidation of a Reaganite political paradigm, and the increasingly populist bent of the GOP into the twenty-first century. For scholars of American history, and even for amateur political junkies, Continetti's story will be a routine synopsis. However, well-informed audiences will still encounter moments of perceptive analysis, as Continetti has a gift for descriptive aggregation and ideological comparison. For instance, he astutely points out that for all of Reagan's dogmatic conservative beliefs, his optimistic "understanding of human nature differed from that of many conservatives," not just in the philosophical Burkean mold, but also in the apocalyptic Trumpian mold (267). Later, when discussing the "third generation" of the New Right led by provocateurs such as Dinesh D'Souza, Continetti deftly compares them to New Leftists of the 1960s. "Both groups," Continetti points out, "shared a revolutionary mentality, a combative and confrontational edge, and a willingness to elicit outrage in order to gain publicity for their cause" (294). With the connoisseur-like knowledge of an insider, Continetti skillfully outlines the intra-ideological conflicts that roiled the American Right in the twenty-first century, as he explains how the Iraq War delegitimized the authority of conservative elites and set the stage for Trump's rise.

Ultimately, Continetti's book will be well-received by anyone sympathetic to the ongoing conservative movement, and it may even become the standard, "go-to" history for members of that movement, as back cover blurbs by George F. Will, Yuval Levin, and Rich Lowry seem to suggest. But for skeptics of modern American conservatism, Continetti's book will likely be seen as fundamentally incoherent. In his brief conclusion, Continetti serves up conservative elite boilerplate: "Over the course of the past century, conservatism has risen up to defend the essential moderation of the American political system against liberal excess" (412). Unable or unwilling to confront the extremist excesses that powered the conservative movement at key moments in its history, Continetti can only conclude that Trumpism was "a return of a repressed memory," an unfortunate recurrence of the outer fringe once again adulterating the core project of the "respectable"

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conservative elite (412). In the book's final paragraphs, Continetti shifts into a grandiose, nearly bathetic, prose style. He warns conservatives that they should not give in to MAGA-esque despair and thus "abandon America. . . . Why? Because the job of a conservative is to remember" (415). Undoubtedly, some will find Continetti's memory selective.

In many ways, John S. Huntington's *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* is a direct refutation of Continetti's sweeping history and his theory of Trump's rise. What makes Huntington's deeply researched and well-argued book a special, perhaps even landmark, study of the American Right is the metaphorical innovation at the heart of his argument. Instead of using the customary static metaphors of fringe/middle, edge/center, or extremist/respectable to dissect the conservative movement, Huntington uses a dynamic, propulsive metaphor (i.e., "vanguard") to show how certain reactionary figures led and others followed. Huntington finds that the individuals and groups in the conservative vanguard—what he characterizes as the "tip of the spear," in another motion-oriented metaphor—were not the mainstream conservatives, the intellectual conservative elites in Continetti's story, but rather the ultraconservatives, the radical dissenters and die-hard surrealists who were supposedly marginalized decade after decade by the so-called "respectable" American Right. In other words, Huntington's book upends the aforementioned "ostracization thesis" that once underpinned a great deal of historiography on the American conservative movement post-Reagan but pre-Trump.

As Huntington writes in his introduction, "the 'respectable' narrative laundered the history of American conservatism by casting the far right as a bit player or a troubling aberration rather than the base of the movement" (8). The unsettling reality, Huntington contends, is that the "difference between the radicals and the respectables was one of degree, not kind" (9). The upshot of Huntington's basic argument is potent because it prompts readers to see the existing fact pattern of American conservative history in new ways. Huntington does not deny that conservative intellectuals, led by Buckley at *National Review*, attacked anti-Semitic reactionaries such as Gerald L. K. Smith, atheistic free-market zealots such as Ayn Rand, or grand conspiratorial John Birchers such as Robert Welch, all in an attempt to make conservatism palatable to voters. Rather, Huntington argues that these "respectable" conservative elites functioned as "right-wing translators," not straightforward ostracizing gatekeepers, "who repackaged ultraconservative ideas for mainstream consumption" (8). For these right-wing translators, the goal was not to create fixed boundaries on a two-dimensional map between an extremist edge and a reputable center, but to apply "a respectable gloss to ideas outside of the mainstream" that had been introduced by the far-right vanguard, to act as a late-arriving rhetorical cavalry for the ultraconservative shock troops on a shifting, three-dimensional ideological battlefield (9).

In six long chapters, Huntington shows how "the far-right movement grew out of the same ideological seedbed that nourished the conservative

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mainstream" (8). Surveying the far-right from roughly the 1920s to the late 1960s, Huntington grounds his argument in an overlapping matrix of ultraconservative groups and political players that seem, at first glance, obscure and only marginally important. In lieu of deep dives into the well-trodden careers of Buckley, Nixon, or Reagan, Huntington focuses on a network of electoral losers and hyperbolic rhetoricians lurking in the shadows of American conservative history's main stage. Huntington's implicit rationale here is that these political actors often orbited the Democratic and Republican parties like satellites, sometimes strategically attempting to commandeer a major party apparatus and other times mounting third-party challenges. In the first two chapters, Huntington briefly discusses the roots of ultraconservatism stretching back to the final decades of the nineteenth century before moving on to the examination of two far-right groups (i.e., the Jeffersonian Democrats and the American Liberty League) that fought against Roosevelt's New Deal. A group that highlighted the internal feuds within the Democratic Party, the Jeffersonian Democrats were an anti-Roosevelt faction that sought to position Thomas Jefferson as the party's genuine founding father and they "cherry-picked anti-statist philosophies from Jefferson's political life to form their ideological core" (32). Established during Roosevelt's first presidential term, the American Liberty League was a similar organization that "illustrated an undercurrent of disgruntled conservatives within both major parties and among wealthy elites" (43). Although both groups failed to halt Roosevelt's progressive liberal revolution, Huntington argues, they "constituted critical nodes within the fledgling far-right network, weaving together a patchwork of conservative philosophies, electoral strategies, and right-wing leadership in an era dominated by [FDR-style] liberalism" (44).

In chapters 3 and 4, Huntington shows how the ideological "cauldron" of the Cold War boosted ultraconservatives and catalyzed the growth of their networks between the late 1940s and the late 1950s (79). Although Huntington frames these chapters by referencing more familiar figures and events such as Strom Thurmond's role in the Dixiecrat Revolt, Joseph McCarthy's Second Red Scare, and Robert Welch's creation of the John Birch Society, he focuses mainly on a constellation of lesser-known far-right movements and organizations: Billy James Hargis's anticommunist group the Christian Crusade, Willis E. Stone's anti-income-tax group the American Progress Foundation, Clarence Manion's founding of the America First Committee–inspired organization For America in 1954, James T. Coleman's third-party run in 1956, and the establishment of the extremist Constitution Party in 1956. It was out of this intertwined network, Huntington perceptively points out, that Buckley founded *National Review* in 1955, the future flagship magazine of the conservative movement that "overlapped significantly with the ultraconservative movement" in its early days (118). Like the leaders of other contemporaneous far-right groups, Buckley also opposed Dwight Eisenhower's presidential reelection and

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denounced the Republican Party's platform as "measured socialism" (119). Notably, Huntington's account of the birth of *National Review* is a far cry from Continetti's origin story, which frames the creation of Buckley's magazine as a return to the reasonable, erudite "set of beliefs dominant in the age of Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover" (117).

In chapters 5 and 6, Huntington explains the significance of two failed presidential runs: Barry Goldwater's 1964 candidacy representing the Republican Party and George Wallace's 1968 candidacy representing the far-right American Independent Party. In the early 1960s, Huntington writes, "Goldwater emerged as the premier right-wing translator, a person who legitimized ultraconservatism and established credibility within Washington *and* far-right circles outside the Beltway" (144). Surprisingly, far-right activists did not see Goldwater's loss as an overwhelming repudiation of their views. As Huntington shows, Goldwater's failure actually invigorated several groups, such as the John Birch Society, the Liberty Lobby, the Conservative Society of America, and For America, all of whom applauded Goldwater's twenty-seven million votes. But if Goldwater's defeat, "rather than sounding the death knell for conservatism, prompted a conservative surge," it also served as a warning sign to right-wing translators such as Buckley, who "increasingly viewed ultraconservatives as a clear and present danger to the nascent movement" (179). For ultraconservatives distrustful of Nixon in 1968, George Wallace's insurgent campaign was the answer; as Robert Welch himself noted, roughly eighty percent of Birchers "not only voted for but worked for Wallace" during the campaign (201). For right-wing translators such as Goldwater and Buckley, though, to vote for Wallace instead of Nixon in 1968 was to throw the conservative faction's progress down "a rathole," in Goldwater's memorable phrase (205). By the end of the 1960s, Huntington concludes, ultraconservatives "had failed to get a conservative purist in the White House," but their efforts were not entirely in vain; "they had created strategies and built a grassroots network that would form a foundation for conservative activists in the later decades of the twentieth century" (208). We should care about these old internecine conservative debates, Huntington reminds readers, because Trumpism is "the apotheosis of conservatism's far-right wing" (2).

Ultimately, the significance of Huntington's book for future scholarship on the American Right is profound. First, he makes the case that the static metaphors historians often use to define modern conservatism—and perhaps, by extension, other movements in modern American politics—are flawed. Second, his motion-oriented metaphor of a "far-right vanguard" implies that lesser-known reactionary figures and organizations are akin to an archival purloined letter, hiding in plain scholarly sight. Third, Huntington dismantles the "ostracization thesis" embedded in earlier conservative historiography and provides a plausible genealogy of our Trumpist present.

On the surface, the differences between Edward H. Miller's *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American*

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Conservatism and Huntington's *Far-Right Vanguard* are considerable. While Miller's book is a biography of one man, John Birch Society founder Robert Welch, Huntington's book is an interlocking study of various far-right networks and people. Miller writes short, opinionated chapters of the sort more commonly featured in books aimed at a popular audience; by contrast, Huntington writes longer chapters in the style of academic monographs, and he keeps his editorializing to a minimum. Despite these surface-level differences, Miller's book covers a similar timespan and converges on essentially the same fundamental argument. "We live in the age of Robert Welch," Miller declares dramatically in the book's opening sentence, setting up an argumentative framework that parallels Huntington's (1). According to both scholars, not only were far-right organizations the motive force behind the modern conservative movement's rise to electoral success in the twentieth century, but Trump's presidency was the apogee of ultraconservative activism and influence.

Miller's biography of Welch, the right-wing conspiracy theorist par excellence, is a comprehensive account of his life, ranging from his birth in 1899 to his death in 1985. Although Miller provides no formal sectional breakdown to punctuate the book's twenty-seven chapters, they can be grouped usefully into three main parts. The first part of the book consists of seven chapters and moves from 1899 to 1950. The second part covers the height of Welch's fame, from 1950 to 1966, and it unfolds over the course of sixteen chapters. The third part races through the nadir of Welch's life, covering nineteen years in only four chapters. At the outset, Miller's introduction encapsulates both the strongest and weakest dimensions of his writing. After exhaustively documenting Trump's most outlandish claims, Miller contends persuasively that Trump's "entire political career—and a great deal of his popular appeal—lay in conspiracism of a kind that owes something to Robert Welch" (1–2). When Miller includes these careful qualifications (i.e., "of a kind" and "something to"), his writing is clear and powerful. At other moments, though, Miller seems prone to overstatement and rhetorical insouciance. For instance, when he explains his genuine scholarly intervention, he writes: "Welch's story also needs to be told because historians have got the conservative movement all wrong" (9). From the vernacular verb "got" to the blasé phrasing "all wrong," Miller not only strikes a false note, but he also fails to acknowledge recent scholars of the modern Right who did not "get it all wrong." This example foreshadows later moments of authorial hyperbole. In the epilogue, when describing how online discourse in the 2010s resembles Welchian conspiracies, Miller writes: "Nobody trusted anything or anyone or any authority anymore. And nobody really had any reason to, either" (380). On the one hand, these passages contribute to the book's undeniable readability. On the other hand, though, they produce stylistic dissonance when juxtaposed with other passages marked by Miller's scholarly rigor and careful argumentation.

Notwithstanding minor issues regarding Miller's writing style, readers will find fascinating insights in his biography. Miller documents how Welch was a

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bona fide child prodigy, enrolling at the University of North Carolina when he was just twelve years old. Furthermore, as a teenager, Welch developed a deep love of literature, poetry in particular, and he even dreamed of "dedicating his life to intellectual inquiry" (35, 47). Miller's Welch was not born a rabid conspiracy theorist, but grew into one somewhat gradually. An anti-interventionist in the 1930s who supported the America First Committee, Welch descended into conspiratorial thinking in response to global events during World War II, from Hitler's surprise invasion of the Soviet Union to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (73–74). After the war, Welch was convinced that a vast communist conspiracy had engineered the "loss of China," the American stalemate in the Korean War, and the Soviet Union's acquisition of the atomic bomb (123). But as Miller astutely points out, Welch "was not the only American who believed that the Kremlin was running a master conspiracy. John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's secretary of state, and J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, were making the same case" (118–19). When understood in this context—especially when one includes the far-right popularity of Senator Joseph McCarthy at the time, whom Welch admired—Welch's views may seem unhinged, but they were not unusual in that postwar moment.

As the years progressed, of course, Welch's beliefs increasingly morphed into anticommunist surrealism. A fan of detective fiction, Miller notes, Welch came to see "the world like [a] good detective novel: a solvable riddle with good guys and bad guys" (199). For Welch, the founding of the John Birch Society was akin to the founding of a dedicated group of paraliterary readers, but instead of detective novels they read Cold War politics. Named after John Birch, a Baptist missionary who was killed by Chinese communists a little over a week after the end of World War II, the John Birch Society "saw evidence of a massive conspiracy and cover-up centered on the loss of China and treason by high-level American officials" (152). Infamously, Welch's totalizing hermeneutic framework would cast President Eisenhower in the role of a villainous communist, a claim that would cause Buckley and other *National Review* conservatives to attack the John Birch Society in 1959 and to continue attacking it for decades thereafter. During the upheavals of the 1960s, Miller humorously notes, Welch's interpretations of major events became so predictable that Bob Dylan recorded a song, "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues," satirizing a Bircher who sees communists in the government, under his bed, and in his toilet bowl (244). In Welch's fantastical imagination, Sputnik I was a communist hoax, the Vietnam War was a "phony war" orchestrated by the Kremlin, and the civil rights movement was a communist insurgency (7). Communists, Welch believed, had also been behind the assassinations of John F. Kennedy Jr., Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy (8).

If Miller's book ended here, Welch's overheated fantasies would still have presaged specific strains of twenty-first-century American conservatism. But in the book's final chapters, Miller makes an even stronger case for

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Welch's influence on the post-1960s American Right, chiefly owing to Welch's evolving conspiratorial worldview and to the John Birch Society's successful ad hoc campaigns. Pulling away from merely communist conspiracy theories later in life, Welch eventually concluded that a much larger conspiracy was afoot, an international plot by ominous "Insiders" first put in motion by the Bavarian Illuminati in the 1770s. "The Insiders were not Communists loyal to Moscow or Peking," Miller writes, but were instead "power-grasping billionaires [who] created Communism not as a movement for the downtrodden but for themselves" and their goal of global domination (305). Ironically, as Welch's conspiracy theories became more fantastical, the John Birch Society's political ambitions became more localized and issue specific. In the 1970s, which Miller convincingly argues was "the best decade in the John Birch Society's history," Birchers waged successful campaigns on behalf of the "threefold issues of sex education, abortion, and the [Equal Rights Amendment]" (344, 347). After the ERA failed to achieve constitutional ratification, for example, Welch and other Birchers saw it as "the greatest victory the John Birch Society ever had" (347). In the end, Miller paints a finely etched portrait of Welch as a true believer—it is noteworthy that Welch spent most of his fortune on the John Birch Society, and his wife had to sell their home for income after his death—and Miller's central contention that Welch "paved the way for the conservatism of the twentieth century, shaped events in the twentieth-first century, and will continue to do so far into the future" is as disturbing as it is compelling.

Although Gene Zubovich's superb book *Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States* only mentions Donald Trump once in the epilogue, Trump's overwhelming support among white conservative evangelicals is the contemporary background that illuminates Zubovich's powerful reconsideration of the assumed relationship between American Protestant Christianity and twentieth-century politics. "When we think about religion and politics in the United States today," the book's jacket copy states, "we think of conservative evangelicals." The fundamental project of Zubovich's book is to reveal the historical contingency of this reflexive, post–Moral Majority association between Protestant Christianity and the American Right. Surveying the extensive role that liberal Protestants played in shaping American politics, both domestically and internationally, from roughly the post–World War I era to the end of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, Zubovich advances three core arguments.

First, he claims that a robust understanding of American progressive liberalism is impossible without an equally robust understanding of ecumenical liberal Protestantism. "From the 1920s to the 1960s," Zubovich writes, "ecumenical Protestants headed a 'moral establishment' deeply intertwined with American political and cultural power" (4). Second, he argues that if one wishes to grasp fully American political liberalism during this pivotal fifty-year period, one needs to grasp the global dimension of liberal Protestant thought and activism. By the 1930s, an ecumenical Protestant

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establishment—consisting mostly of the "seven sisters" of American Protestantism, including Episcopalians, United Methodists, Northern Presbyterians, United Lutherans, Northern Baptists, Congregationalists, and the Disciples of Christ—shared a common vision of an interconnected world that Zubovich calls "Protestant globalism" (5). "The most important product of Protestant globalism was the new doctrine of human rights," Zubovich claims, since ecumenical Protestants "were central players in the invention and spread of human rights discourse and were decisive in bringing human rights to bear on American politics" (7). According to Zubovich, it was precisely this global vision of Protestantism that provided the necessary context for their domestic campaigns against poverty, racial segregation, and the Vietnam War. Zubovich's third main argument, and the one which puts his book in direct conversation with the three books reviewed above, aims to explain the religious roots of contemporary political polarization. "It is no coincidence that American conservatism and American evangelicalism rose together," Zubovich maintains, "just as it is not coincidental that American liberalism and American ecumenism had risen together at mid-century" (309). In their three-pronged fight against racism, poverty, and imperialism, liberal Protestants inflamed conservative evangelical Protestants and, unwittingly, helped lay the groundwork for the social divisions that would give rise to the religious Right.

Judiciously organized, *Before the Religious Right* is divided into two parts and consists of nine chapters. Comprising the first five chapters, part 1, "One World," is an international narrative about Protestant globalism's ascent; it follows ecumenical Protestants from the 1920s to the late 1940s as they fashioned new ideas and aspired to build a new world order grounded in social justice and human rights. In these chapters, Zubovich focuses attention on major Protestant figures such as G. Bromley Oxnam, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Henry Pitney Van Dusen as they translated their theological beliefs into the political ideology of Protestant globalism. Notably, Zubovich documents how the World Order movement would influence the creation of the United Nations and how an antiracist vision of human rights would grow out of World War II. Comprising the four final chapters, part 2, "Two Worlds," is a domestic narrative about liberal Protestantism's polarizing battles over American racism, economics, and foreign policy. These chapters detail how Protestant globalism's core message of human rights was brought home to American politics, eventually dividing American Protestants along today's liberal/conservative lines and widening the existing gap between progressive Protestant clergy members and their more conservative laity. As the social capital of American ecumenical Protestants diminished in the 1960s, the political power of evangelical conservatism increased. "The evangelical movement in the 1970s was the mirror image of ecumenical Protestantism," Zubovich explains; "It policed racial boundaries, attacked welfare programs, and voiced support for the Vietnam War and for South Africa's apartheid government on anti-communist

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grounds" (309). In many ways, Zubovich's light sketching of the ultraconservative reaction to ecumenical Protestantism bolsters Huntington's and Miller's examination of a conspiratorial far-right vanguard.

As a stand-alone piece of scholarship, *Before the Religious Right* is a trenchant examination of an overlooked dimension of American religion and politics; it is a much-needed reminder of the impact that twentieth-century liberal Protestants had on international political institutions, on the dismantling of legal segregation in America, and on the establishment of human rights discourse. However, as a political history published at approximately the same time as major revisionist histories of the American Right, Zubovich's book also hints at an emerging methodological paradigm for analyzing modern conservatism: a religio-political framework that can at once engage with various strains of Christian theology, with mythic tales of the nation-state, and with psychic moral anxieties, but without succumbing to simplistic condemnations of a pathological "fringe" on the right-wing's outer edge. In the books discussed above, Continetti, Huntington, and Miller observe the American Right's penchant for populist harangues against shadowy global elites. In the future, then, when scholars of conservatism interrogate the origins of far-right scapegoats, they should take Zubovich's scholarship into account. "Many of the ways in which we think and speak about race, poverty, and US foreign policy today," Zubovich reminds readers, "including the very language of human rights and human dignity, were initially fostered by this community" (12). The implicit upshot of Zubovich's scholarship is that when ultraconservatives invoked a biblical defense of Jim Crow segregation or a Protestant rationale for free-market ideology or a conspiratorial end-times prophecy to criticize the United Nations, they were actually reacting to ideas and institutions that had been forged by liberal Protestants. In other words, Zubovich's work shows that our present-day polarization is rooted in a century-long debate not between a mostly secular Left and a mostly religious Right, but between two competing political visions of mid-century American Christianity.

For the authors of the four books examined here, the tumultuous rise and fall of Trump's one-term presidency inspired unique reinterpretations of American political history. For ongoing scholarly efforts to understand that political past, especially in regard to the American Right, all of these texts should prove useful in one way or another. However, the specialist academic histories written by Huntington and Zubovich seem poised, at least in the short term, to spark the most important, innovative scholarship in the future.

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