



Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 20, 2016

Published in the June 20, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 12

What It Means to Be “Right Wing”

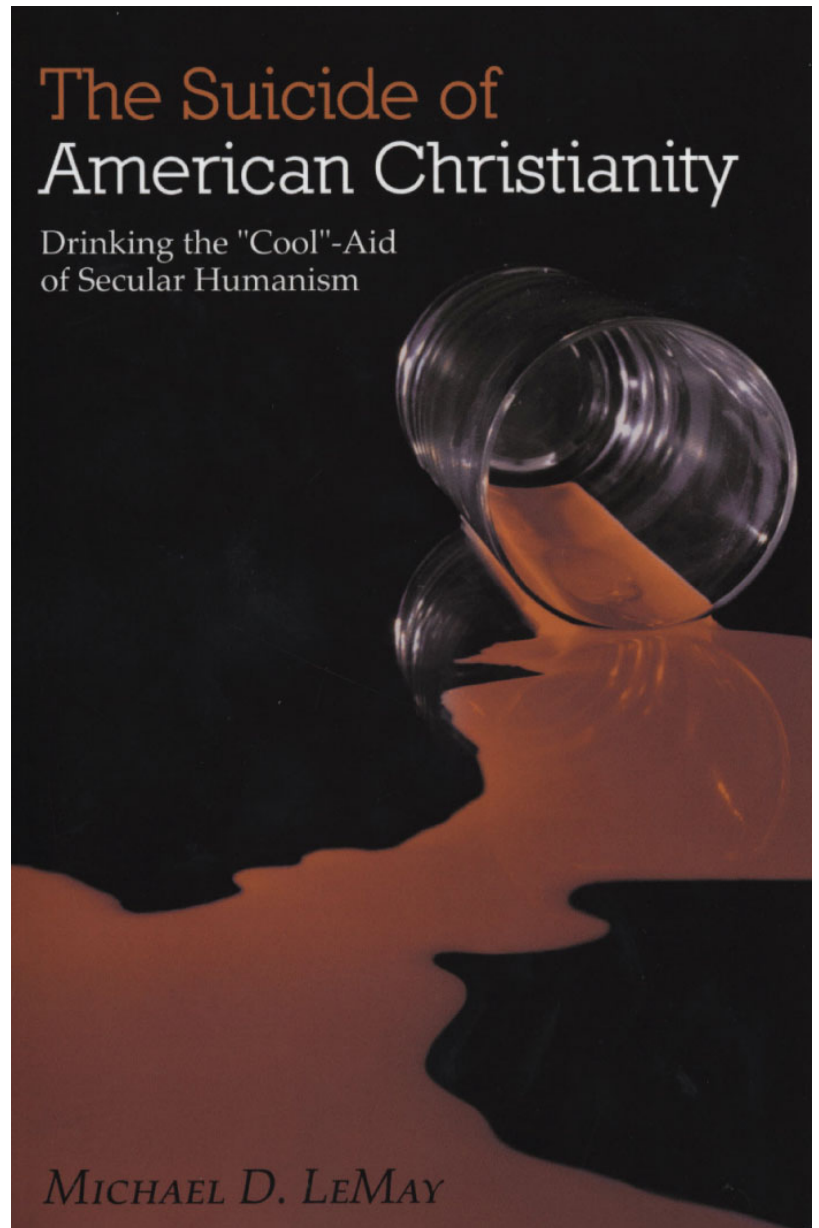
Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism, by George Hawley, Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2016, 366 pages, hardcover.

The history of “American Conservatism” in the 20th and 21st centuries is one that is marked by internecine strife, and so any effort to recount that history is destined to raise the hackles of anyone who has lived part of that history, or who at least has a fixed understanding of the nature of the movements, organizations, and individuals who shaped that history. One must presume that George Hawley, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Alabama, understood the controversy he could unleash when he authored *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism*; in the author’s own words, he “sought to provide a new interpretation of the conservative movement in America — one that differs both from the narrative the movement provides itself, and the narrative promoted by its progressive critics.”

Within the body politic, certain assumptions regarding the general content of conservative thought have been shaped and disseminated by publications that have presented themselves as the bastions of “conservatism.” As Hawley notes in his chapter “The Twilight of the Old Right and the Birth and Rise of the American Conservative Movement”:

In the contemporary context, when we describe an American as politically conservative, we typically mean that this person favors limited government intervention in the economy, adheres to a traditional religious faith and believes these religious values should influence public policy, and generally favors a strong military presence abroad. Without knowing any context, there is no a priori reason one would infer that these three attributes are correlated with each other, or even that they are necessarily right wing.

Hawley’s interest is in the array of individuals and movements who have fundamentally challenged one





Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 20, 2016

Published in the June 20, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 12

or more aspects of this equation, or which have been “excommunicated” from a purported “mainstream” of conservatism because of their position on one issue or another. Conservatism once meant, for example, a non-interventionist foreign policy, as advocated by (say) Robert Taft in the 1950s or The John Birch Society (the parent organization of this magazine), not “a strong military presence abroad.” From the outset, Hawley acknowledges that the central problem is one of definition: Defining both “liberalism” and “conservatism” is not as easy as many people might imagine. Part of the problem with “American Conservatism” is that the days are long past when conservatism wisely defined itself according to Russell Kirk’s “ten conservative principles.” After weighing a range of definitions offered by various thinkers from across the span of the movement under consideration in his book, Hawley settles on the following definition:

In this volume, the right will be defined as encompassing all of those ideologies that, while not necessarily rejecting equality as a social good, do not rank it at the top of the hierarchy of values. The right furthermore fights the left in all cases where the push for equality threatens some other value held in higher esteem.

This expansive definition allows for a wide range of intellectual and political movements to fall into the category of right wing. A person may rank any number of social values above equality: individual liberty, job creation, traditional religion and morality, national security, strong communities, social harmony, honor and martial glory, or racial supremacy and purity. While relying on this definition one is able to accurately describe such disparate writers as Wendell Berry, Murray Rothbard, Alain de Benoist, and Patrick Buchanan as thinkers and activists on the right.

Hawley traces the roots of what he calls “American Conservatism” to a circle of seminal thinkers and their books, including Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), Russell Kirk’s *Conservative Mind* (1953), James Burnham’s *Suicide of the West* (1964), and Whitaker Chambers’ *Witness* (1952). It would be these men, together with William F. Buckley and Frank Meyer, who would play the formative role in defining “American Conservatism” when Buckley established *National Review* in 1955. Whatever their initial intentions, the “fusionism” of Frank Meyer (which pushed for a definition of conservatism that manifestly excluded the form articulated by Russell Kirk and later defended by paleoconservatives) in service of Buckley’s penchant for excommunicating various elements of the conservatism that would not conform to his vision for the American Right forms the backdrop for Hawley’s book.

Hawley’s examination of dissenting conservative traditions runs to 10 chapters, beginning with the Old Right and an introduction to the Buckleyite purges, and proceeding through an examination of various libertarians (both “mainstream” and “radical”), paleoconservatives, agrarian conservatives, secular conservatives, and more outlying influences, such as the European “New Right.” Hawley does include a chapter on “White Nationalism in the United States,” but unlike various leftist organizations that endeavor to smear conservatives with the broad brush of racism, Hawley is careful to delineate very carefully between conservatives of the various types outlined in other chapters and white nationalists, who are often implacable foes of the types of conservatives who trace their roots to the origins of the 20th-century movement.

In his chapter on paleoconservatives, Hawley seems to have spoken too soon when he declares, “Despite making an impressive showing in the 1990s, paleoconservatism presently appears to be a spent force.” Hawley focuses on men such as Pat Buchanan, Thomas Fleming, M.E. Bradford, and Sam Francis to define the beliefs of the paleoconservatives, and he maintains that as the one-time leadership



Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 20, 2016

Published in the June 20, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 12

of the paleoconservatives continues to age and pass away, the movement itself is passing from the scene, with the concluding comment that, “as a result they ultimately became little more than a footnote in American ideological history.” At the moment, however, political commentator Sam Francis’ prognostications concerning the populist anger of Middle American Radicals (MARs) may find a new life, as the concerns that Francis once associated with the MARs appears to be finding a spokesman in the candidacy of Donald Trump, with his apparent appeal to strict immigration control, a balancing of the trade deficit, and a more measured foreign policy.

One point of disappointment is in Hawley’s treatment of The John Birch Society, which perpetuates the clichés and stereotypes that are commonly brought out against the Society, blaming “[Robert] Welch’s personal paranoia” as “the primary source of contention between Welch and other conservatives.” However, Hawley does at least note the existence of John F. McManus’ 2002 book, William F. Buckley: *Pied Piper for the Establishment*, “which asserted that Buckley was largely responsible for the nation’s statist, leftward turn and that blamed him for the degree to which the conservative movement had become ineffectual.” It is a shame that Hawley did not give more attention to McManus’ arguments. Instead, Hawley’s apparent ignorance of the effective infiltration of the federal government by Soviet agents of influence leads him to tar Buckley and Welch with the same brush:

Although the contemporary reader will likely find Robert Welch’s comments about the communist conspiracy bizarre and even unhinged, it is important to remember the social context in which the JBS was a powerful political force.... Buckley was furthermore not a consistent opponent of anticommunist fearmongering — he actually coauthored a book defending McCarthy. Thus it may not be fair to characterize Buckley and his allies as reasonable and thoughtful conservative counters to the irresponsible and radical members of the JBS.

Such dismissive treatment of efforts by Senator Joseph McCarthy and others to expose the communist threat ignores the growing literature which proves that, if anything, the anti-communist “witch hunts” underestimated the influence and infiltration perpetrated by Soviet agents and their “useful idiots.” Anatoliy Golitsyn’s *New Lies for Old* (1984), M. Stanton Evans’ *Blacklisted by History* (2007), Ralph de Toledano’s *Cry Havoc!* (2006), and Diana West’s *American Betrayal* (2013) are just a few of the many works that have demonstrated that there was nothing “paranoid” about being very concerned about communist infiltration of the American government in the post-War period. What has happened is that a rising generation of academics is largely ignorant of this history, and they (among others) fail to recognize that the decades-long growth of statism is moving America in a communistic direction, though of course it is not happening under the banner of communism.

Criticism of various aspects of Hawley’s analysis aside, it is hard to object to the core assessment that he makes in his conclusion: “There is not a single ideological principle that unifies the right” — if by this one means the ideology that the neoconservatives have shaped and reshaped and sold as “American Conservatism” through outlets such as *National Review*.

Although conservatives who are likely to identify with the individuals and groups described in *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* may find occasion to take issue with Hawley’s treatment of various aspects of a complicated history, it would be hard to find another work that is comparable in scope. Its narrative is far from flawless, but this is a book that breaks through the decades of damage done by the Buckleyite purges, and allows the reader to contemplate the conservatism that once was, and that could be again.



Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 20, 2016

Published in the June 20, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 12

Subscribe to the New American

Get exclusive digital access to the most informative, non-partisan truthful news source for patriotic Americans!

Discover a refreshing blend of time-honored values, principles and insightful perspectives within the pages of "The New American" magazine. Delve into a world where tradition is the foundation, and exploration knows no bounds.

From politics and finance to foreign affairs, environment, culture, and technology, we bring you an unparalleled array of topics that matter most.



[Subscribe](#)

What's Included?

- 24 Issues Per Year
- Optional Print Edition
- Digital Edition Access
- Exclusive Subscriber Content
- Audio provided for all articles
- Unlimited access to past issues
- Coming Soon! Ad FREE
- 60-Day money back guarantee!
- Cancel anytime.