

Government is the problem: Symbolic trajectories of the contemporary conservative movement

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Government is the problem: Symbolic trajectories of the contemporary conservative movement

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Abstract

The rightward shift of the contemporary conservative movement represents one of the most significant developments in American culture and politics over the last forty years. While numerous studies in rhetoric have tackled case studies of specific events, speeches, and texts, there is not yet a longitudinal study that traces the symbolic developments of the conservative movement over this period. In this dissertation, I fill that gap in rhetorical studies by arguing that the contemporary conservative movement was entelechialized by a limited government worldview, leading conservative Republicans to refuse compromise even when that refusal posed grave political risks. In four case studies, I analyze a number of key influences on the symbolic trajectories of the conservative movement, including Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, Newt Gingrich, Patrick Buchanan, and contemporary conservative opinion media.

Keywords: Rhetorical Trajectory; Entelechy; Conservatism; Big Government; Ronald Reagan

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Chapter 1 - Introduction to the symbolic trajectories of contemporary conservatism

One of the most significant political developments of the last forty years has been the rightward shift of the conservative movement in general and the Republican Party in particular. This shift is continuing. Despite the Republican Party “moving right quite steadily . . . the public have still asked their party to move more conservative, rather than more moderate” (Rosenberg, 2015). Although there are a number of possible reasons for this rightward shift, one key explanation is ideological conservative pushback against “giving in too much to big government” (Rosenberg, 2015). The conservative struggle to limit the size and scope of government represents the logical endpoint of ideological sorting between the two major political parties in the United States that has accelerated since 1980.

In the mid-twentieth century, the two major political parties of the United States were ideologically diverse. In the Southern U.S., for example, a number of conservative or Blue Dog Democrats enjoyed political success by advocating for positions now typically associated with the Republican Party, such as states rights. Similarly, a number of northern Republicans occupied the moderate or liberal wing of the party by supporting federal programs in the nation’s social safety net, such as Social Security. In fact, during this time, “liberal Republicans had trouble distinguishing themselves from Kennedy-style liberals” (Dallek, 1995).

During the 1950s, for example, Dwight Eisenhower’s presidential platform was characterized by “Moderate Republicanism,” including legislation supporting raising the minimum wage, government construction of low-income housing, and the creation of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (“Dwight Eisenhower”). In the lead up to the 1960 presidential election, Republican frontrunner Richard Nixon reached out to then New

York Governor Nelson Rockefeller “to win moderate-Republican support,” a gesture Nixon saw as necessary to secure the Republican nomination and win the election (Dallek, 1995). The 1960 Republican Party platform was consistent with Nixon’s view. It notably included the phrase “We have no wish to exaggerate differences between ourselves and the Democratic Party” (Fisher, 2012).

When Nixon was elected in 1968 his policy agenda infuriated the conservative wing of the Republican Party. Among conservatives’ frustrations, “Nixon strengthened social security benefits, supported elements of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, and was instrumental in the creation of both the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 1970” (Henderson, 2013). Furthermore, in 1974, Nixon struck a deal with Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy that resulted in a proposal for a healthcare reform, though the Watergate scandal prevented it from becoming a reality (Henderson, 2013). This was not the first time the Republican Party advocated for healthcare reform. In 1965, “13 Senate and 70 House Republicans joined Democrats to pass the Social Security Amendments that created Medicare and Medicaid,” culminating in “the largest expansion of government health care coverage in American history” prior to the Affordable Care Act (Zelizer, 2017).

However, towards the end of the 1970s, the two political parties grew increasingly sorted by ideology. The liberal and moderate wing of the Republican Party either switched to the Democratic Party or adopted a more conservative worldview, while the conservative wing of the Democratic Party largely switched to the Republican Party. “Right around 1975,” according to Ingraham (2015), “the Republican party sharply turned away from the center line and hasn’t looked back.” Still, the ideological sorting process was gradual. In the 1980s,

a period marked by divided government, “a quarter of the electorate voted for president one way and the House or Senate another way” (Balz, 2013). By 2012 only “about 11 percent” of the electorate split their tickets (Balz, 2013). As a consequence, by 2012 it seemed “Conservative Democrats or liberal Republicans no longer exist in Congress” (Holland, 2013). The rise of the Tea Party in 2010 is strong evidence of this ideological sorting, as it reflected the “rightward drift among Republicans,” establishing a “powerful organizational mechanism” that now largely defines the Republican Party (Zelizer, 2017).

A host of studies in rhetoric, political science, sociology, and history offer a rich understanding of modern conservatism, particularly its development during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Yet, there are few studies, particularly in the field of rhetoric, that analyze the movement of conservatism to the right beyond the Reagan years. Since 1980, the broader conservative movement has shifted to the right at an accelerated pace, fundamentally transforming the makeup of the Republican Party. Key to understanding this development is burgeoning hostility to big government. The “central dimension” of contemporary conservatism, in sharp contrast to the Republican Party of the mid-twentieth century, is “an ideological faction that wants a smaller size and scope of government” (Rosenberg, 2015). The ideological shift to the right is well known. What is not known is how the symbol systems defining conservatism gradually shifted to the right and became increasingly calcified, reflecting an anti-government worldview.

In this study, I trace the symbolic trajectories of conservatism from the 1980s into the 21st century. The small government agenda of the conservative movement in the 1980s has functionally become a nearly no government agenda, with the goal of eliminating government involvement in issues other than law enforcement and national defense.

Shrinking the scope and size of government has become the central goal of conservatives, leading them to reject compromise even when that refusal poses grave political risks.

Such a study is vital for at least two reasons. First, the ascendance of anti-government conservatism has profound implications for political communication. It is important to understand how and why the conservative movement gradually evolved to embrace ever more conservative positions. Such positions have produced “strategic agenda-setting and voting, even on issues with little or no ideological content and a tribalism that is now such a prominent feature of American politics” (Mann, 2014).

Second, the sorting of liberal and conservative ideology along party lines has grave consequences for the health of American democracy. One result of the move to the right has been heightened polarization. As a consequence, unprecedented congressional gridlock developed (Mann, 2014). The two major political parties in Congress are more polarized than ever before. We are now witnessing “an unprecedented gulf” between parties, a level of ideological polarization that exceeds the hostile political environment following the Civil War (Balz, 2013). According to Thomas Mann (2014) of the Brookings Institute, “the health and well-being of our democracy is properly a matter of great concern” because “Congress has ceased to operate as an effective legislative body” and “Deliberation and compromise are scarce commodities, not the coin of the realm.”

While studies across a variety of disciplines have described the rightward movement of conservatism, there is no study explaining development of the symbolic trajectories of conservatism since the 1980s. In what follows, I first review relevant literature on contemporary conservatism. Then, I introduce the theory and methodology that will guide

this project. Finally, I propose a series of chapters to describe the evolution of contemporary conservatism.

Review of literature

Existing longitudinal studies of conservative rhetoric typically focus on a period spanning from the conclusion of World War II through the end of the Reagan years. In *Creating Conservatism*, for example, Michael J. Lee (2014) analyzed a “canon” of postwar texts that provided mid-twentieth century conservatism with “a storehouse of symbolic capital,” fundamental to the conservative movement entering the political mainstream (p. 19). Lee’s description of 20th century conservatism is insightful because it treats conservatism not as simply a political philosophy, but also a social movement. In Lee’s (2014) view, the conservative movement is not monolithic and has its factions and disagreements, but the influence of canonical texts has effectively managed those tensions. Rather than treating conservative factions as different in kind, Lee’s exploration of the movement’s development suggests they ought be treated as different in degree. Although Lee has an occasional flash forward to contemporary examples of conservative rhetoric, the focus is on how canonical texts transformed the conservative movement of the postwar environment into a powerful political force.

Rhetorical studies of contemporary conservatism have covered a variety of key figures and topics. While we know a great deal about specific rhetorical actors and moments in contemporary conservatism, what we do not know is how the broader symbolic development of the conservative movement has occurred. In order to analyze how the small government conservatism of the postwar environment snowballed into the nearly no government conservatism that is now a cornerstone of the Republican Party, prior rhetorical

analyses require a supplement that traces the longitudinal evolution of the conservative movement.

One important area of research in rhetorical studies is the significance of Ronald Reagan. Scholars have studied Reagan's rhetoric in a number of contexts. While these studies are insightful and help to inform the current project, they tend to focus on specific events, speeches, and strategies. For example, a number of critics have analyzed Reagan's rhetoric as it relates to the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Some notable examples include Travis Cram's (2015) work on Reagan's pragmatism during the Cold War, Tom Goodnight's (1986) essay on Reagan's reformulation of war rhetoric, Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones' (2010) book on *Reagan at Westminster*, and Mary E. Stuckey's (1990) collection on Reagan's foreign policy rhetoric (see also Rowland & Jones, 2006; Rowland & Jones, 2016).

Another significant avenue of research on Reagan centers on his rhetorical legacy. Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven R. Goldzwig (2005) have noted that Reagan's appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr. on civil rights has resulted in a conservative legacy of "dismantling of federal civil rights laws and social programs" and an exclusion of "government intervention in the economy, education, and other arenas" (p. 662). Bostdorff and Goldzwig (2005) argued that several contemporary conservatives, including George W. Bush, have invoked Reagan's rhetorical legacy on civil rights. Amos Kiewe (2007) argued that Reagan's radio addresses in his final years as president were harnessed to "rhetorically instruct, educate, guide, and motivate" the American public (p. 251). Kathryn M. Olson (1993) analyzed Reagan's attempts to "recover" Barry Goldwater's rhetoric of conservatism in the 1960s by taking a "rehistoricizing turn" to meet the situational demands of the 1980s (p. 314).

Another area of research centers on the various rhetorical strategies Reagan used during his presidency and beyond. Ernest Bormann (1982) conducted a fantasy theme analysis of Reagan's first inaugural address to illustrate how Reagan's televised presidential rhetoric was "a major source of social knowledge," arguing that "rhetorical critical study of such knowledge can make a large contribution to the understanding of communication in a mass media society" (p. 145). Bonnie J. Dow (1989) described how Reagan carefully navigated between epideictic and deliberative strategies during the Libya crisis. Jones and Rowland (2005) noted how Reagan's post-presidential rhetoric relied on careful ideological appeals that called for reform of conservative doctrine. Amos Kiewe and Davis W. Houck (1991) published a book on Reagan's economic rhetoric from his time as Governor of California through the end of his presidency. Martin J. Medhurst (1984) described how Reagan successfully paid lip service to the conservative movement on its social agenda while focusing on economic issues and Soviet policy. One last notable example of research on Reagan's rhetorical strategy is Rowland's (1986) essay on the 1980 Carter-Reagan debate, where he argued that, contrary to public opinion at the time, Reagan had the superior substance in the debate against the incumbent Carter.

Finally, rhetorical critics have researched Reagan's influence on the development of contemporary conservatism. Colleen J. Shogan (2006) argued that Reagan's vision of conservatism drew on Calvin Coolidge and helped to inspire the growth of the conservative movement. Rowland and Jones (2001) contrasted Reagan's rhetoric with Patrick Buchanan to illustrate the competing symbolic trajectories of contemporary conservatism. Jones and Rowland (2015) also wrote that Reagan's first inaugural established an ultimate definition for the proper role of government, a definition that has been entelechially extended since the

1980s. Finally, Craig R. Smith (2017) argued that Reagan breathed new life into the conservative movement by rhetorically re-inventing it. While prior studies of Reagan's rhetorical influence on contemporary conservatism are insightful and will help guide this project, those studies focused either on particular speeches or exclusively on Reagan.

Jack Kemp, an important conservative figure in the 1980s, illustrates the importance of studying conservatism beyond Reagan. According to Gage Chapel (1996), Kemp's rhetoric on the American Dream displayed "a synthesis of conservative and liberal political philosophies" that engaged an important conversation "concerning the viability of traditional conservatism and traditional liberalism to effectively address the growing problem of political fragmentation" (p. 360). While Chapel (1996) demonstrated that Kemp was able to bridge some divisions between conservatives and liberals, what is less clear is how Kemp's rhetorical synthesis of the competing political philosophies contributed to long-term developments of contemporary conservatism.

Scholars have also studied the rhetorical presidency of George H. W. Bush. Several essays on Bush reveal that he was seemingly disconnected from the conservative movement. For example, Holly G. McIntush (2006) argued that Bush's rhetoric and major initiatives on education were revealing because "a Republican who believed in a limited role for the federal government" could not succeed if "his goals and the desires of the nation were incompatible" (p. 102). According to Catherine L. Langford (2006), Bush was labeled by conservatives as "too practical or pragmatic," especially when compared to his predecessor (p. 19). Amy T. Jones (2006) echoed this argument by illustrating how the Religious Right vocalized opposition to the Bush administration for "becoming too moderate" (p. 151). While these studies demonstrated a gap between Bush and the conservative movement, they did not

systematically discuss the more general issue of what contributed to the Republican Party's gradual move to the right.

While some scholars have drawn comparisons between Reagan and George H. W. Bush, others have identified similarities between Reagan and George W. Bush. For example, Rebecca A. Kuehl (2012) argued that Reagan's focus on small government "set a precedent," supporting an "ideology based in individualism" that George W. Bush adhered to during his presidency (p. 332). Carol Winkler (2007) explained how George W. Bush and Reagan both "justified the preemptive use of force against the nation's terrorist enemies" (p. 325; see also Bostdorff, 2011). Clearly Bush and Reagan shared many rhetorical themes, but what scholars have not done, according to Kuehl (2012), is analyze "Bush's speeches across his entire presidency" or specifically study "his ideologically based rhetoric of individualism" and how it contributed to the evolution of contemporary conservatism (p. 332). In addition, Bush is well known for advocating "compassionate conservatism," a rhetorical strategy that was "cemented" in the early 2000s "by the significant extent" that it "resonated with the American public" (Kuypers, Hitchner, Irwin, & Wilson, 2003, p. 24). However, while at the time it appeared that compassionate conservatism would cause "a major shift in conservative rhetoric," we now know that did not occur (Kuypers, Hitchner, Irwin, & Wilson, 2003, p. 25).

A number of scholars have also studied the role that media has played in the development of contemporary conservatism. Susan Currie Sivek (2008) argued that the *National Review* played a significant role over the past 40 years in mobilizing the conservative movement and increasing its membership. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella (2008) explored how Rush Limbaugh and the rise of conservative radio

contributed to heightened political polarization and the creation of echo chambers among conservatives. Joshua D. Atkinson and Suzanne Valerie Leon Berg (2012) explained how the Tea Party galvanized “alternative media” that much of the contemporary conservative movement utilizes to combat big government and liberal activists (p. 519; see also Johnson, 2013). Though these studies detail strategies used by conservative media, they do not systematically analyze how such media contributed to the broader symbolic development of the conservative movement since 1980.

In order to more fully understand the evolution of nearly no government conservatism since 1980, a wider net must be cast that tells the story of the evolution of the conservative movement. Lee (2014) argued “conservatism’s dynamic language becomes evident not by examining the meaning of conservatism in a single historical moment but, rather, the recalibration of conservatism in different ones” since “the dominant expressions of conservatism can be prudently adjusted to historical circumstances” (p. 200). In this arena of study, rhetorical scholarship has lagged behind other disciplines.

Historians have written at great length about the conservative capture of the Republican Party. We know that “The Right’s capture of the Republican Party fully legitimized conservatism” by the end of the 20th century as the party’s political philosophy (Brennan, 1995, p. 140). It is also clear that Reagan’s advocacy of small government ideology played a key role. “Reagan’s support of market-oriented policies and smaller government was part of a larger cultural shift” that was carried out by the conservative movement (Jacobs & Zelizer, 2011, p. 22). He “offered a template for governance that set the terms of political rule for the generations that followed” (Jacobs & Zelizer, 2011, p. 55). At the same time, however, Robert Self (2015) argued, “a range of conservative critics launched

into open revolt” during Reagan’s presidency “against what they saw as the president’s tepid commitment to their still-unfinished ‘revolution’” (p. 76). It was conservative backlash against Reagan’s pragmatic approach to governing that led to a “period of intensive right wing protest and mobilization between 1988 and 1994 . . . the right’s ‘days of rage’” that witnessed the rise of Newt Gingrich and the Conservative Opportunity Society (Self, 2015, p. 76). While historians conclude that Reagan played a key role in the symbolic development of contemporary conservatism, what is less clear is how conservatives’ “narrative of betrayal” in response to Reagan’s pragmatism contributed to the rise of anti-government conservatism of the late 20th and early 21st century (Self, 2015, p. 77). We know that conservative backlash to Reagan was “an essential feature of that movement and a spur to future mobilization” that “institutionalized a particular brand of internecine warfare in the Republican Party,” but we do not yet know how conservative symbol systems gradually shifted in that direction (Self, 2015, p. 77).

Sociologists have argued that expansion of government since 1980 directly contributed to the growth of nearly no government conservatism. Paul Pierson (2007) argued that “since as early as 1980,” expansions of government in areas of public spending, regulation, negative rights, and tax subsidies have yielded more extremist tendencies within the conservative movement, particularly hostility towards government (pp. 36-37). Opposition to government expansion clearly played a major role in the conservative movement and simultaneously enabled members of the movement to “organize and fund new (or newly active) professionally run advocacy groups, think tanks, and foundations,” appeal to “*interconnected sets* of ordinary people,” and provide “a steady staccato of highly charged interventions” (Skocpol, 2007, p. 55, emphasis in original). Clearly, government expansions

of the late 1980s and 1990s made it easier “for conservative organizers to draw people into political movements” (Skocpol, 2007, p. 55). Although it is clear that expansions of government provided grounds for the conservative movement to lurch further to the right, what is less clear is how the movement’s rhetorical strategies capitalized on the growth of government to augment its membership and reach. It is also notable that a period of government expansion occurred during Reagan’s presidency.

Scholars in sociology have provided a wealth of evidence that the 1990s was a turning point for the conservative movement. During this time, one of the movement’s leaders, Newt Gingrich, formed the Conservative Opportunity Society “as a vehicle to promote their message and to design legislative strategy;” creating an organization defined “in opposition to the liberal welfare state” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 117). The Conservative Opportunity Society presented the conservative movement with “a network of supportive interests” that was utilized to “to weaken liberalism’s insulated power in the universities, professions, media, and bureaucracy” (Teles, 2007, p. 161). It is clear that the 1990s were a period when the conservative movement was active in “shaping the raw material of the policy process” (Teles, 2007, p. 278), but what is less clear is how the symbolic trajectories developed over this period (Zelizer, 2007, p. 126).

Political scientists have claimed that the year 1980 marked the beginning of a “philosophical realignment” that “fundamentally shifted the terms of debate in American politics” (Busch, 2001, p. 261). We know that “conservative discontent” with big government during the 1980s was extended with “ideological fervency,” and became the “lifeblood of party politics and political activism” (Hayward, 2009, p. 146). In fact, according to data from Kenneth Poole and Howard Rosenthal, “Republicans in the Senate

and especially the House have drifted away from the center far more rapidly than Democrats [resulting in a situation in which] . . . in the most recent Congress nearly 90 percent of Republican House members are not politically moderate. By contrast, 90 percent of Democratic members are moderates” (cited in Ingraham, 2015). What we do not yet know is how particular symbolic developments in the conservative movement over the past forty years produced “a fundamental asymmetry between the parties” (Rosenberg, 2015). There is clear evidence that, since 1980, “Changing Republican Party positions on taxes, Keynesian economics, immigration, climate change and the environment, healthcare, science policy, and a host of cultural policies” reflect dramatic shifts toward a nearly no government approach to conservatism (Mann, 2014). However, there is not yet a rhetorical analysis tracing the Republican Party’s transformation into what Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein (2012) described as “a radical insurgency—ideologically extreme, contemptuous of the inherited policy regime, scornful of compromise, unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of their political opposition” (p. xiv).

Another key observation political scientists have made is that Republicans have shifted rightward at a much quicker pace than Democrats have shifted to the left. This phenomenon has occurred not only in politics, but also among ordinary citizens. According to “the largest study of US political attitudes ever undertaken by the Pew Research Center . . . ordinary voters are almost as sharply divided as the lawmakers who represent them” (Holland, 2014). While Democrats have moved to the left, Jacob Hacker noted that, “Republicans have moved twice as far to the right as their Democratic counterparts have moved to the left” (cited in Holland, 2013). The ascendance of the Tea Party illustrates how far the Republican Party and its constituents have shifted rightward. Since the Tea Party’s

inception, “The line between the Republican establishment and the Tea Party has blurred,” forcing establishment Republicans to compete with Tea Party politicians by taking positions that include “denying human-caused climate change, opposing an increase in the federal minimum wage and advocating the elimination of the Department of Education” (Schneider, 2014). What is not yet clear, however, is how particular symbolic developments since the end of the 1980s produced “an epistemological cocoon” that resulted in the rise of anti-government conservatism (Roberts, 2012).

While a number of academic disciplines have identified the rightward shift of the conservative movement in general and the Republican Party in particular, prior studies have not exhausted study of how the small government conservatism of the 1970s and early 1980s snowballed into a nearly no government form of conservatism. This study bridges this gap. To demonstrate how this study fills that gap, I now turn to the theoretical constructs and methodology that will tell the story of the evolution of rhetoric of the contemporary conservative movement and the nearly no government ideology that has developed over the last forty years.

Theory and methodology

In order to connect prior rhetorical studies of specific conservative figures, speeches, and events with the observations made by historians, sociologists, and political scientists about the rightward movement of the conservative movement, a set of tools is needed to trace long-term symbolic developments in the conservative movement. My analysis is informed by three key concepts borrowed largely from Kenneth Burke and scholars applying his critical approach: terministic screens, symbolic trajectory, and entelechy. Although each of these

terms can provide insight on the evolution of contemporary conservatism, a synthesis of the terms is necessary to fully understand how that evolution occurred.

Terministic screens are *filters* that reveal different features of the symbolic environment. They function as groups of terms that together shape the worldview of those using them. Burke likened them to “*different* photographs of the *same* objects” that show different attributes depending on the colored filter used to shoot them (Burke, 1966, p. 45, emphasis in original). These filters “provide a grammar for interpreting reality” (Eisenstadt, 2018, p. 3). According to Burke (1966), any given terminology is “a *reflection* of reality” but simultaneously is “a *selection* of reality; and . . . must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (p. 45, emphasis in original). All communicative acts include terministic screens, as Burke (1966) noted, “We *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another” (p. 50, emphasis in original).

The conservative movement’s view of government is a terministic screen that has become more and more anti-government over time. For example, Paul E. Johnson (2013) argued that the Tea Party ascended to political prominence by engaging a particular idea of *the people*, a terministic screen that reflected an extremely negative view of big government. This development can be studied through an analysis of terministic screens since those screens function as “ideological enthymemes,” setting the “terminological system limits” that shape specific argumentative choices for conservatives (Kirk, 2015, p. 679). My analysis will extend on this research by arguing that contemporary conservatism is oriented by a terministic screen resisting big government.

Leland M. Griffin (1984), building off of Burke's discussion of qualitative progressions, developed the second analytical tool for this study, *rhetorical trajectory* (see also Burke, 1968). According to Griffin (1984), a rhetorical trajectory illustrates how "we are moved by our rhetoric as our rhetoric is designed to move others" (p. 127). In Griffin's (1984) view, by tracing "the terminological trajectories in the rhetoric of an individual or a collectivity we may gain understanding as to how a particular state of readiness is achieved" (p. 127). A rhetorical trajectory will follow a specific "curve of development" (Griffin, 1984, p. 124). The curve for the trajectory of a movement is "essentially political, concerned with governance" and involves "essentially moral—strivings for salvation, perfection, the good" (Griffin, 1984, p. 112). The idea of a rhetorical trajectory is a useful tool for studying the evolution of symbolic practice over time in social and political movements that consist of disaffected outsiders, upset with the status quo and desiring an ideal New Order. That "New Order" in turn "exerts a potent rhetorical force" that leads the movement to action (Griffin, 1984, p. 123).

Two of Griffin's students have extended his work on rhetorical trajectories. Writing with George N. Dionisopolous, Victoria J. Gallagher, and Steven R. Goldzwig, David Zarefsky (1992) called for rhetorical critics to apply Griffin's rhetorical trajectory "to rhetorical discourse at the level of the social/political movement" (p. 95). The rhetorical trajectory of a social/political movement is significant because it will "bring about development in one direction rather than another, to ensure emphasis of certain ideas and visions rather than others" (Dionisopolous et al., 1992, p. 95). Tracing the symbolic trajectory of a movement "provides an understanding of the constraints as well as the possibilities of rhetorical invention which, in turn, shape and reflect a speaker's choices and

motives” (Dionisopolous et al., 1992, p. 95). Rhetorical trajectory, then, “provides a strong imagistic and analytic metaphor for investigating symbolic influence” (Dionisopolous et al., 1992, p. 94; also see Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, & Tutzauer 1984; Rowland & Frank, 2002).

Robert C. Rowland, writing with John M. Jones (2001), also extended Griffin’s work on rhetorical trajectory. They argued that, “symbols move in a definable trajectory” (Rowland & Jones, 2001, p. 57). In their view, “The symbol system may rise, fall, stay in a flat line, or move in a combination of those paths” (Rowland & Jones, 2001, p. 57). Two indicators of a definable rhetorical trajectory are that a symbol system has “become part of the dominant political vocabulary” and that there is evidence of its “long-term influence” (Rowland & Jones, 2001, p. 57). As Rowland and Jones (2001) argued, the symbolic pattern that “continues to dominate conservative talk” includes calls to “cut back on the size of government, get government out of people’s lives, and act in other ways to maximize human freedom” from an oppressive State (p. 59). My analysis will extend and build on prior studies of symbolic trajectory by connecting the specific rhetors, speeches, and events in contemporary conservatism to illustrate how it has evolved into the nearly no government worldview that now defines the conservative movement in general and the Republican Party in particular.

The final guiding term of this study is entelechy. Burke’s work on entelechy borrows from and builds on Aristotle’s use of the concept. While Aristotle defined entelechy in biological terms, explaining how immature objects such as seeds proceed to maturation, Burke applied the term to the symbolic realm. According to Burke (1966), “A given terminology contains various *implications*, and there is a corresponding ‘perfectionist tendency’ for men to attempt carrying out those implications” (p. 19, emphasis in original).

The perfectionist principle is so powerful that individuals will be willing to carry out the implications of their worldview even if they “contain risks of destroying the world” (Burke, 1966, p. 19). Stan A. Lindsay (1999) described this type of extreme action as “psychotic entelechy,” or “the tendency of some individuals to be so desirous of fulfilling or bringing to perfection the implications of their terminologies that they engage in very hazardous or damaging actions” (p. 272). This human tendency can therefore create what Burke (1966) called a “terministic compulsion” (p. 19). In this view, according to Rowland and Jones (2001), “humans not only use symbols, but they are, in another sense, used *by* them since the symbol both motivates action and continued symbolic development” (p. 57, emphasis in original). A terministic compulsion has the potential to unite individuals who may otherwise disagree. Burke (2003) commented that a terministic compulsion could bring “a whole group of initiates under the same head,” thereby transcending “their nature as individuals” (p. 131).

I will utilize and build on prior studies of entelechy by demonstrating how its product, a terministic compulsion, became the force that shaped the arc of the conservative movement’s symbolic trajectories over the last forty years. I synthesize the three aforementioned terms by showing how the conservative movement has evolved from a small government worldview to a nearly no government worldview.

In this study, I describe multiple trajectories of the conservative movement by focusing on key moments of transition and the symbol systems developed by opinion leaders. While the evolution of the conservative movement from 1980 onward centered on the size and scope of government, particular strains of rhetoric developed that shape the contemporary conservative movement. These strains are the product of increased hostility to a large federal government, a strong nationalist and religious identity among social

conservatives, a refusal for compromise, and the rise of conservative opinion media. By the end of the 20th and century and beginning of the 21st, the trajectories of conservative rhetoric became a potent force, one that continues influencing the conservative movement and Republican Party.

Proposed trajectory of chapters

It is important to chart the arc of contemporary conservatism from the principled but also pragmatic small-government approach of Reagan (Rowland & Jones, 2001) to the increasingly anti-government worldview of the Tea Party and mainstream conservative leaders of the 21st century. In Chapter 2, “The conservative 1980s: A zeal for anti-government purity in the Reagan Revolution,” I lay the foundation for the development of contemporary anti-government conservatism. I show that, for as much praise as Reagan received from conservative followers, he was also the target of many conservatives’ frustrations. Facing the practical realities of governing the nation, Reagan’s actions did not always match his rhetoric, particularly on taxes and the concerns of social conservatives. At the same time, Reagan’s (1981a) framing of government as *the problem* in the First Inaugural crystalized a rhetorical form that was symbolically extended by the conservative movement, often resulting in criticism of Reagan for failing to achieve the tenets of the Reagan revolution.

In Chapter 3, “The Gingrich revolution: Scorched earth conservatism and an opportunity society to topple the liberal welfare state,” I tell the story of how Gingrich and other young, maverick, conservatives seized control of the Republican Party during the 1990s and transformed it from the party of small government into the party of nearly no government conservatism. In this period, Gingrich relied on a deceptive rhetorical pose of

bipartisanship, masking his scorched earth conservative agenda to cut federal spending and eliminate government assistance programs to the truly needy. Gingrich executed this strategy by proposing an opportunity society to replace the liberal welfare state, providing him with a positive rhetorical frame that movement conservatives lacked during the 1980s.

In Chapter 4, “Patrick Buchanan and the Buchanan-Brigades: Winning the culture war for the soul of America,” I demonstrate that Buchanan reflected an evolution in contemporary conservatism by adopting an isolationist and cultural nationalist rhetoric. Buchanan criticized government for participating in what he saw as an immoral liberal culture and prioritizing international interests over those of American citizens. Although Buchanan’s ideological views remained constant, they were inconsistent with the Republican Party at the time, eventually leading to his departure from the GOP. However, as I show, Buchanan’s conservatism laid the foundation for the symbol system that defines conservatism in the era of Donald Trump.

In Chapter 5, “A Rush to out-Fox the mainstream: The rise of contemporary conservative opinion media,” I analyze the ascendance of Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, and other conservative opinion media that created an echo chamber strain of conservatism, where members of the movement became less interested in reasoned discourse and were driven primarily by anger. I show that the symbol system defining the rhetoric of conservative opinion media contributed to citizens’ distrust in the mainstream media, produced a description of a conservative utopia, and enacts the paranoid style. I analyze Limbaugh’s radio coverage of Hurricane Katrina and Fox News coverage of the Iraq War to reveal the power of this symbol system and its influence.

In Chapter 6, “When trajectories collide: Reflections on the status of contemporary conservatism,” I draw conclusions about the symbolic trajectories of the anti-government conservative worldview. These conclusions reflect the significance of the trajectories for argumentation, political communication, and rhetoric, and also for understanding the health of American democracy. In particular, I show that the symbolic trajectories of contemporary conservatism help explain the asymmetry between the nation’s two dominant political parties and the difficulty of enacting policy change in the public sphere. While this study focuses primarily on late 20th century conservatism, it also lays the groundwork for an extension of the research into the George W. Bush years and beyond.

Chapter 2 - The conservative 1980s: A zeal for anti-government purity in the Reagan Revolution

Ronald Reagan's victory over Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election marked the beginning of a new era for conservatives. For the first time, a proponent of significantly curtailing government had reached the White House. The modern conservative movement had been growing for nearly thirty years. William F. Buckley Jr.'s *National Review* was established in 1955 and is widely accepted as the first conservative magazine to achieve mass circulation among the public. While the *National Review* represented an important moment for the small government conservative movement, it was not until Reagan's election victory in 1980 that "the right had reached rough parity with the left in its capacity to get commentary, analysis, and advocacy into the hands of interested readers" (Smith, 2007, p. 84).

On the chilly afternoon of January 20th, 1981, Ronald Reagan delivered his first inaugural address. In that address, Reagan argued that his conservative vision was the antidote to the Carter malaise of the 1970s. As a foundation of his vision, Reagan (1981a) famously declared that, "government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem." Reagan made his small-government agenda clear, and "successfully reintroduced a conservative governing ideology into American political discourse and revitalized the Republican Party" (Shogan, 2006, p. 226). Reagan's first inaugural is "widely recognized as a foundational statement" of this governing philosophy in contemporary conservatism (Jones & Rowland, 2015, p. 691). In fact, Reagan's first inaugural is considered a pillar of "the most important moment in the history of the struggle to limit government in the United States" (Samples, 2010, p. 115).

When Reagan proclaimed that government was the problem, it was a “shining moment for conservatives” (Kaye, 2013). Kaye (2013) argued, “Those words were the apotheosis of a conservative line of argument championed by the likes of William F. Buckley and Russell Kirk for over 30 years,” offering “a rallying cry for conservatives.” That rallying cry functioned as “the ideological glue that holds the Republican electoral coalition together” (Amy, 2011) and “changed the face of Conservatism” (Van Til, 2004). “Without doubt,” Van Til (2004) argued, Reagan shaped conservative “ideology and direction more than any other person in the 20th century.” George Nash (1986) commented that the “Reagan Revolution” took a diverse conservative “movement of ideas” and transformed them “from theory to practice.”

Reagan’s communication skills helped conservative theory become practice because he made the conservative movement’s ideas coherent and palatable to the public. Not only did he succeed in moving “the conservative cause from the fringes to the mainstream,” but he also shifted “American politics from left to center right,” and did so while pulling “anti-Communists, libertarians, economic conservatives, traditionalists, the Christian right, and even neoconservatives into a powerful coalition” (Regnery, 2008, p. 284). Key to unifying conservatives and bringing conservative thought to the mainstream was Reagan’s challenge to a common enemy among conservatives, “big government,” and by issuing that challenge Reagan assumed the role of the conservative David “against the Goliath of liberalism” (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 59).

However, in one way, it is strange that Reagan’s first inaugural was so foundational for the anti-government conservative cause. Although Reagan’s rhetoric in defense of limited government was powerful, he was much more pragmatic as a policymaker than other small

government advocates. For example, Reagan agreed to raise taxes several times, supported immigration reform, and believed that a social safety net was necessary for the truly needy. In these examples, Reagan's decision-making was sharply contrasted with "extreme anti-government conservatives" (Rowland & Jones, 2001, pp. 75-76). Not only did Reagan act pragmatically in many of his domestic policies, but the attack on government line in his first inaugural "was preceded by a qualification: 'In this present crisis'" (Linker, 2016). The "present crisis" Reagan was referring to was the dire condition of the U.S. economy after the tumultuous 1970s, which included the Vietnam War, the oil crisis, inflation, and cascading layoffs by domestic businesses.

Reagan was a proponent of limited government, but his actions clearly suggest he did not believe there ought be *no* government. Despite the tendency for conservatives to interpret Reagan's first inaugural as "indicting government as a whole" (Kaye, 2013), Reagan was against abolishing social programs altogether or minimizing the size of government to the courts, the military, and law enforcement. Indeed, Reagan (1981a) claimed his intention was not only "to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment," but also reform government programs:

Now, so there will be no misunderstanding, it's not my intention to do away with government. It is rather to make it work -- work with us, not over us; to stand by our side, not ride on our back. Government can and must provide opportunity, not smother it; foster productivity, not stifle it.

As scholar of the presidency George Edwards (2003) explained, "once Reagan was in the White House, there was a movement away from conservative views that he did not agree with" (p. 66).

When Reagan acted pragmatically and supported some expansions of government, activists felt betrayed and aired their grievances with him. This was evident in two types of conservative commentary. First, conservative think tanks that once fully supported Reagan began to distance themselves from him, particularly after he raised taxes in 1982. The Heritage Foundation and other think tanks alike could now “sell their various identities in the marketplace of ideas by *disagreeing* with Reagan—as now they could simply argue that Reagan was not a true conservative” (Stahl, 2016, p. 123, emphasis in original). For example, in a 1984 Heritage symposium titled “What Conservatives Think of Reagan,” Paul Weyrich argued, “The radical surgery that was required in Washington was not performed” and government had only grown more excessive (“What Conservatives Think,” 1984, p. 19). Second, conservative commentary in newspapers and magazines expressed frustration with Reagan’s failure to limit government and accused him of backsliding on his campaign promises. In a *Wall Street Journal* opinion editorial, Edward Crane (1983) argued that, “Ronald Reagan, the great champion of limited government,” was quickly proving himself as more of “a big government ally” and less of a leader for the conservative movement (p. 12). “In response to this failure to fulfill expectations,” Martin Medhurst (1984) noted, “the Republican right began to depict the President as engaged in the process of *modifying* his earlier, hardline stands” (p. 263, emphasis in original). John Lofton, the former editor of *Conservative Digest*, proclaimed conservatives had a responsibility to “hold Ronald Reagan’s feet to the fire Ronald Reagan lighted” (cited in Medhurst, 1984, p. 263).

Reagan’s attack on big government is universally recognized as foundational for the development of contemporary conservatism. Although we know a great deal about Reagan and conservatism, what remains untold is the story of how Reagan’s small government

rhetoric was extended by conservatives during the 1980s into a powerful worldview that continues influencing contemporary conservatism. In this essay, I tell that story by tracing the development of Reagan's vision of small government as it developed into a more extreme anti-government worldview among the conservative movement. The irony is that Reagan did not oppose government in all cases and in fact often disappointed conservatives. In what follows, I trace Reagan and George H. W. Bush's rhetoric alongside that of conservative activists during the 1980s and early 1990s to show how the message developed into a more extreme anti-government worldview.

Reagan's enduring anti-government rhetoric

Beginning with Reagan's first inaugural address, three dominant themes defined his limited government rhetoric. These three themes, that government was the problem, that American citizens were the nation's heroes, and government should follow a pragmatic approach to policymaking, helped form the palatable and coherent message that Reagan's conservative vision of government would restore the nation. Taken together, the three themes illustrate that Reagan's approach to limited government proved much more pragmatic than the worldview it produced for the conservative movement.

The first theme was a commitment to limiting big government and that government was the problem. Reagan's message that government was the problem was enduring. In Reagan's (1982a) first State of the Union address, he claimed that government had become "more pervasive, more intrusive, more unmanageable, more ineffective and costly, and above all, more [un] accountable." That same year, in an address to business leaders, Reagan (1982b) continued his attack on big government by claiming that the nation had gotten into trouble for "looking to government for too many answers," and concluded that, "the best

view of big government is in the rearview mirror as you're driving away from it.” When Reagan (1984) delivered his third State of the Union address, he argued, “The problems we're overcoming are not the heritage of one person, party, or even one generation. It's just the tendency of government to grow, for practices and programs to become the nearest thing to eternal life we'll ever see on this Earth,” and the key to solving those problems was to “begin by limiting the size and scope of government.” This message was a major theme of Reagan’s presidency, one he remained dedicated to throughout both of his terms. In an address Reagan (1988) delivered near the end of his second term, he reaffirmed that his administration was “deeply committed to decreasing the power of the Federal government to its intended scope and to increasing the power of individuals.”

The second theme of Reagan’s limited government rhetoric was that American citizens, and not government, were the nation’s heroes who could realize the American Dream. In his first State of the Union address, he noted “We don't have to turn to our history books for heroes” (Reagan, 1982a). Reagan (1982a) argued, “They're all around us.” Each and every citizen had heroic potential because they were hard working Americans,

There are countless, quiet, everyday heroes of American life--parents who sacrifice long and hard so their children will know a better life than they've known; church and civic volunteers who help to feed, clothe, nurse, and teach the needy; millions who've made our nation and our nation's destiny so very special-unsung heroes who may not have realized their own dreams themselves but then who reinvest those dreams in their children. Don't let anyone tell you that America's best days are behind her, that the American spirit has been vanquished. We've seen it triumph too often in our lives to stop believing in it now.

Reagan (1982b) believed that American citizens were the true heroes, and limiting government so that citizens had the opportunity to reach their potential were “not Republican or Democratic principles; they're American principles.” Citing John F. Kennedy, Reagan (1982b) argued,

Only by doing the work ourselves can we hope in the long run to maintain the authority of the people over the state. Every time that we try to lift a problem from our own shoulders and shift that problem to the hands of government, we are sacrificing the liberties of the people . . . We must reaffirm our faith in the people and put America's future back in their hands.

“The big story about America,” its heroic tale, was “the way that millions of confident, caring people—those extraordinary ‘ordinary’ Americans who never make the headlines and will never be interviewed—are laying the foundation, not just for recovery from our present problems but for a better tomorrow for all our people” (Reagan, 1983).

The third theme of Reagan’s limited government approach was a pragmatic worldview that helped him achieve major legislative victories. In this worldview, government was the source of many problems, but had several important functions and could not be outright rejected. Instead, Reagan sought to reform government to work for and by the people, not over the people. In his first State of the Union address, Reagan (1982a) proposed “a new spirit of partnership between this Congress and this administration” in order to reform government and “achieve the oldest hopes of our Republic.” Critics of Reagan argued that left unchecked, the conservative agenda would leave the truly needy without government assistance. However, Reagan (1982a) argued of his economic plan, “this administration has not and will not turn its back on America's elderly or America's poor. Under the new budget,

funding for social insurance programs will be more than double the amount spent only 6 years ago . . . it would be foolish to pretend that these or any programs cannot be made more efficient and economical.”

Key to Reagan’s goal of reforming government was to develop bipartisan policies that simultaneously encouraged economic growth and maintained national welfare programs. For example, in Reagan’s (1983) second State of the Union address, he argued that a cooperative and pragmatic approach to governing would ensure that “The integrity of the social security system will be preserved” because “men and women of both parties, every political shade,” would “concentrate on the long-range, bipartisan responsibilities of government, not the short-range or short-term temptations of partisan politics.” His call for a “commitment to fairness” included “legal and economic equity for women,” an “extension of the Civil Rights Commission,” and “enforcement of our nation's fair housing laws” as guarantees of equal opportunity for all (Reagan, 1983).

While each of the three themes was evident throughout Reagan’s presidency, in what follows, I focus on two particular speeches to illustrate how the themes cohere to form a pragmatic limited government agenda. These two speeches demonstrate that though Reagan’s rhetoric signaled a commitment to a more limited government, they also reflected the necessity to govern cooperatively and pragmatically in order to maximize the potential for government to serve the people. For the conservative movement, however, Reagan’s approach to limited government laid the foundation for a more extreme manifestation of an anti-government worldview.

April 28, 1981, Joint address to Congress

Shortly after his first inaugural, Reagan put his economic plan to limit government in motion. On April 21, Reagan delivered a joint address to Congress proposing his economic plan. In this address, all three themes were present as Reagan carefully argued that the first step to restoring government to its proper role was to slash taxes and reduce government spending. For Reagan (1981b), “the all-important subject” was to “bring government spending under control and reduce tax rates.”

Reagan argued that excessive government spending and taxation were to blame for many of the nation’s hardships. The trajectory government was on promised a grim future defined by “more of the same” policies of the 1970s, guaranteeing prolonged “hardship, anxiety, and discouragement” of the American people (Reagan, 1981b). He argued that due to this trajectory, the nation had become a “sick society” (Reagan, 1981b). As long as the nation continued spending beyond its means and taxing citizens to fund its pursuits, America could not accomplish the types of great feats that it was known for across the globe. “Sick societies,” Reagan (1981b) proclaimed,

. . . don't produce men like the two who recently returned from outer space . . . don't produce young men like Secret Service agent Tim McCarthy . . . don't produce dedicated police officers like Tom Delahanty or able and devoted public servants like Jim Brady. Sick societies don't make people like us so proud to be Americans and so very proud of our fellow citizens.¹

¹ Tom Delahanty, a police officer in the District of Columbia, Tim McCarthy of the Secret Service, and Jim Brady, the White House Press Secretary, were all wounded during an assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan’s life on March 30, 1981.

The problem, in Reagan's (1981b) view, "was very simple. Our government is too big, and it spends too much." To solve the nation's problems, Reagan (1981b) claimed his economic plan was "the cure which must come." "The answer," the ultimate cure "to a government that's too big," he said, "is to stop feeding its growth" (Reagan, 1981b). He claimed of government, "it's time to change the diet and to change it in the right way" (Reagan, 1981b). "A gigantic tax increase has been built into the system," but Reagan (1981b) assured the nation with a pragmatic message, that "We propose nothing more than a reduction of that increase. The people have a right to know that even with our plan they will be paying more in taxes, but not as much more as they will without it."

In addition to arguing excessive government was to blame for the nation's poor conditions, Reagan tied his economic proposal to the heroic aspirations of American citizens. He called for the nation "to work as a team, to join in cooperation so that we find answers which will begin to solve all our economic problems and not just some of them," that together, "the people you and I represent are ready to chart a new course" (Reagan, 1981b). Citing poet Carl Sandburg, Reagan (1981b) said, "The republic is a dream. Nothing happens unless first a dream," but that was precisely what "makes us, as Americans, different. We've always reached for a new spirit and aimed at a higher goal. We've been courageous and determined, unafraid and bold." A failure to chase those dreams, to cure the sick society, would "say we no longer have those qualities, that we must limp along, doing the same things that have brought us our present misery" (Reagan, 1981b). "All we need," Reagan (1981b) concluded, "is a dream that we can do better than before. All we need to have is faith, and that dream will come true. All we need to do is act, and the time for action is now."

Reagan harshly criticized excessive growth of government, but his solution was not to abandon government. It was to reform it. To “lift the crushing burden of inflation off of our citizens and restore the vitality to our economy,” Reagan (1981b) called for “extraordinary cooperation . . . on both sides of the aisle,” defined by “a spirit of candor, openness, and mutual respect.” His proposal included “a budget resolution supported by Democrats and Republicans alike,” and Reagan (1981b) promised to fully support a bipartisan agenda that would “achieve all the essential aims of controlling government spending, reducing the tax burden, building a national defense second to none, and stimulating economic growth and creating millions of new jobs.” The proposal was a careful balance between stimulating economic growth and maintaining the social safety net for the truly needy.

On July 29, Congress passed the Economic Recovery and Tax Act as well as the Omnibus Reconciliation Act, both of which Reagan signed into law on August 13th. Combined, these two pieces of legislation reduced government spending, slashed taxes, made sweeping changes to the tax structure, and halted new federal regulations to energize the private sector.

October 22, 1986, remarks on signing the Tax Reform Act of 1986

The Tax Reform Act of 1986 was a landmark victory for the Regan Administration. Enacted on October 22, 1986, the Tax Reform Act was designed to simplify the tax code, broadening the tax base, and eliminating several tax shelters that had burdened taxpayers. Each of the three themes of Reagan’s limited government approach was evident in a speech he delivered celebrating the passage of the law.

Reagan defended the Tax Reform Act of 1986 as a part of an effort to curtail and reform government. “As government's hunger for ever more revenues expanded,” he argued,

“the oppressive hand of government” had fallen “most heavily on the economic life of the individuals” (Reagan, 1986). The primary manifestations of government’s hunger for revenues, Reagan (1986) noted, were “inflation and taxes that have undermined livelihoods and constrained their freedoms.” The Tax Reform Act was a solution to the problems big government had created because it would begin realigning the nation with its founding principles. He began by arguing, “for all tax reform's economic benefits, I believe that history will record this moment as something more: as the return to the first principles” (Reagan, 1986). These first principles, Reagan (1986) claimed, were those of the Founding Fathers, that the nation “was founded on faith in the individual, not groups or classes, but faith in the resources and bounty of each and every separate human soul.”

By enacting tax reforms, Reagan claimed the nation could move closer to achieving the American Dream. He said, “We should not forget that this nation of ours began in a revolt against oppressive taxation. Our Founding Fathers fought not only for our political rights but also to secure the economic freedoms without which these political freedoms are no more than a shadow” (Reagan, 1986). Reagan cast government as secondary to the work of the people. It was crucial to recognize that “ultimately the economy is not made up of aggregates like government spending and consumer demand, but of individual men and women, each striving to provide for his family and better his or her lot in life” (Reagan, 1986). According to Reagan (1986), the passage of the Tax Reform Act was evidence that “the pessimists left one thing out of their calculations: the American people.” In his view, it was the work of the American people, the nation’s heroes, that allowed “the dream of America's fair-share tax plan” to become a reality. It was because of citizens’ “faith in freedom and love of country that sustained us through trials and hardships and through wars,

and it was their courage and selflessness that enabled us to always prevail” (Reagan, 1986). Reagan (1986) proclaimed that the Tax Reform Act of 1986 was a clear sign that “You can’t put a pricetag on the American dream. That dream is the heart and soul of America; it’s the promise that keeps our nation forever good and generous, a model and hope to the world.”

Reagan’s remarks on the Tax Reform Act described American citizens as the heroes who could help turn the nation around, but he also made a pragmatic argument that the law would benefit each and every citizen by reforming government rather than abandoning it altogether. “When I sign this bill into law,” he said,

America will have the lowest marginal tax rates and the most modern tax code among major industrialized nations, one that encourages risk-taking, innovation, and that old American spirit of enterprise. We’ll be refueling the American growth economy with the kind of incentives that helped create record new businesses and nearly 11.7 million jobs in just 46 months. (Reagan, 1986)

“Fair and simpler for most Americans,” Reagan (1986) claimed the Tax Reform Act was specifically “designed to take us into a future of technological invention and economic achievement, one that will keep America competitive and growing into the 21st century.”

In response to the Tax Reform Act’s reforms, Reagan argued that citizens would experience sweeping changes. He said,

Millions of working poor will be dropped from the tax rolls altogether, and families will get a long-overdue break with lower rates and an almost doubled personal exemption. We’re going to make it economical to raise children again. Flatter rates will mean more reward for that extra effort, and vanishing loopholes and a minimum

tax will mean that everybody and every corporation pay their fair share. (Reagan, 1986)

Reagan (1986) proclaimed he was “certain” that the Tax Reform Act was “not only an historic overhaul of our tax code and a sweeping victory for fairness,” but also “the best antipoverty bill, the best profamily measure, and the best job-creation program ever to come out of the Congress of the United States.” Because of a “Herculean effort” and the “courageous leaders in the Congress,” the nation was winning a “battle against overwhelming odds” to restore government, ensuring that it worked for and by the people (Reagan, 1986). And this is why, Reagan (1986) eloquently summarized, “This tax bill is less a freedom -- or a reform, I should say, than a revolution.” His pragmatic and cooperative approach was a clear sign that Reagan was not simply anti-government, but believed that government had a necessary role in achieving the American Dream.

Although the revolution Reagan referenced is commonly referred to as the “Reagan Revolution,” in the view of the conservative movement, he did not remain its fearless leader. Reagan’s small government rhetoric was a persistent feature of his presidency, but his actions frequently reflected a pragmatic and cooperative approach to governing, rather than an anti-government perspective. During his two terms as president, Reagan signed tax increases every year between 1982 and 1988. This was in part because “Reagan knew that most Americans valued social spending by government that gave the average person security in retirement and all Americans protection against undeserved poverty” (Olsen, 2017, p. 190). Conservative activists were aghast at this and other pragmatic actions by Reagan, signs that he had moved away from his conservative principles.

Conservatives criticize Reagan on his commitments

When Ronald Reagan won the 1980 election, the Heritage Foundation released a 3,000 page manuscript, *Mandate for Leadership*, “that sought to cover every policy area imaginable for the incoming administration” (Stahl, 2016, p. 109). The book became a cornerstone for the conservative agenda, marking “Heritage as the premier up-and-coming conservative think tank” (Stahl, 2016, p. 108). The *Washington Post* listed *Mandate* as “the bible of the Reagan transition” and Heritage quickly became “the main policy ad agency for the conservative movement and the Reagan administration” (cited in Stahl, 2016, pp. 110-111).

However, that changed in 1982. Just one year after Reagan signed the “largest tax cut in history,” he signed the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 (TEFRA) into law, that according to economist Bruce Bartlett was “the largest peacetime tax increase in American history” (cited in Sanders, 2015). Reagan would go on to sign tax increases in each year of his presidency, from 1983 to 1988. By 1983, Heritage was no longer described as the author of the bible of the Reagan administration. Rather than the play-by-play handbook for President Reagan, Heritage was cast as the “*real* conservatism” that “had never been tried” (Stahl, 2016, p. 125). Other conservative newspapers and magazines followed suit, flocking to the idea that Reagan had betrayed conservatives and failed the anti-government cause.

Two key themes emerged among conservatives in response to Reagan’s pragmatism. The first theme was that Reagan had no interest in truly curtailing government and instead was an overly pragmatic proponent of compromise. Conservatives perceived Reagan’s tax hikes as a betrayal of his commitment to shrinking government, leading many to openly attack him. In a *New York Times* article, for example, several conservatives were quoted as saying that “The President lacks the courage of his convictions” (Pear, 1983). Activists

perceived Reagan not as an agent of “conservative revolutionaries but pragmatists” (Pear, 1983).

The second theme was frustration among conservatives with Reagan’s inattention to social issues. Ranging from abortion to voluntary school prayer, Reagan’s rhetorical commitments to these ideas were rarely matched by his actions. Due to his inaction on social issues, conservatives claimed that Reagan’s policymaking was “insufficiently pure in its conservatism” (Weaver Jr., 1982). Conservatives agreed that Reagan was “Not incompetent as an actor or ideological preacher or political salesman,” but that he did not “care about most of the policy issues before him, he intentionally stays out of focus, he is fully absorbed by only one element of the presidency—his public performance” (Greider, 1982).

Combined, these two themes were representative of the larger conservative reaction to the sharp contrast between Reagan’s rhetoric and his actions. Although these themes were prevalent throughout Reagan’s presidency, I focus on the development of the two themes during Reagan’s first term. During Reagan’s second term, much of the focus on domestic issues was overshadowed by foreign policy issues, including the Iran Contra scandal, instability in Libya, and the Cold War.

During Reagan’s first term, conservative frustrations with the President’s failure to curtail government and his inattention to social issues were circulated through two key channels. First, the meteoric rise of conservative periodicals during the 1980s helped organize activists’ ideas, agendas, and criticisms. Many of these periodicals dedicated several issues and editorials to expressing discontent with Reagan. Periodicals highlighted how conservatives were angry with Reagan “about a range of issues from the proposed tax hike to supposed failures to push the social conservative agenda” (Olsen, 2017, p. 201). One

periodical in particular stood out. *Conservative Digest*, a magazine that achieved considerable circulation during Reagan's presidency, is well known for harshly commenting on Reagan's betrayal of the conservative movement. In fact, Richard Viguerie, the founder of *Conservative Digest*, devoted "the entire July 1982 issue of his magazine . . . to attacking Reagan for his alleged leftward drift" (Olsen, 2017, p. 201). Joel M. Skousen, the executive editor of the magazine, explained that the special issue was published because Reagan was "seen as untrustworthy by many conservatives who believe he has betrayed his own principles in an effort to appease his critics" on domestic issues (cited in Pear, 1982).

The second channel of criticism toward Reagan emerged from conservative think tanks that had previously unconditionally supported him. For example, in late 1984, the Heritage Foundation's widely circulated symposium titled "What Conservatives Think of Reagan" contained interviews with eleven "conservative activists, intellectuals, and politicians to assess the president's principal achievements and errors" ("What Conservatives Think," 1984, p. 13). Although a few of those interviewed expressed continued support for Reagan, the vast majority harshly criticized him for what they perceived as a failure to achieve the limited government agenda he had proposed in his first inaugural address. I now illustrate how members of the movement were united in lambasting Reagan for his failure to follow conservative dogma.

Compromise and pragmatism over curtailing government

The broad conservative movement was outraged at Reagan's willingness to compromise on questions crucial to the size and scope of government. Conservatives were "infuriated by what they perceive as Mr. Reagan's unwillingness to do battle with the Washington establishment," or to cut "runaway entitlements programs" ("What

Conservatives Think,” 1984, p. 12). “Alarm bells” were going off among conservatives because “The sad truth is that disenchantment with the Reagan presidency is now real and widespread. It is felt by conservatives of every stripe, from every element of the broad conservative coalition” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 5).

Disenchantment among conservatives was most evident in the collective response to Reagan’s tax hikes and budget compromises. Conservatives could “hardly find a good word for Mr. Reagan,” primarily because of his “his repeated budget compromises with Congress” (“What Conservatives Think,” 1984, p. 12). This led conservatives to two conclusions, that Reagan’s betrayal had created a crisis for the movement and its ambitions, and that Reagan had paved the way for a stronger central government rather than a reduced government in line with conservative philosophy.

Much of the anxiety about Reagan’s failure to curtail government stemmed from his willingness to compromise with Democrats and moderate Republicans that ultimately produced TEFRA, which passed in September, 1982. For conservatives, the debates preceding TEFRA were the first major indication Reagan would act as a pragmatist, not as an unapologetic conservative committed to shrinking government. Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina claimed Reagan’s olive branch to Democrats and moderate Republicans over taxes was “a compromise with Marxism” that espoused not conservative values “but half-hearted values of revolutionary radicalism” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 6). Compromise would not only harm conservatives’ perception of Reagan, but also the overall image of the conservative movement. Arthur B. Laffer, a Professor of Economics at the University of Southern California, noted, “Reagan is showing signs of weakening. If the President’s adversaries on the tax front succeed in increasing tax rates, the prospects for the

remainder of this decade will be clouded” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 13). Gordon Nelson, a Republican National Committeeman, argued that Reagan risked permanently stigmatizing his own presidency and the public’s perception of the movement. He said, “The Reagan administration is destroying the credibility of the Republican party and the conservative movement by tolerating outrageous annual budget deficits of over \$100 billion for several years,” and concluded, “how foolish we suddenly look” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 20)!

Conservatives complained that Reagan was sending a signal that there was no substantive distinction between the conservative movement and New Deal liberalism. Reagan’s “preemptive compromises” on his limited government agenda signaled that he chose to “shirk confrontation and to placate his liberal opposition” rather than pursue the vision he had called for in his first inaugural address (“What Conservatives Think,” 1984, p. 12). Edward Crane (1983), then president of the Cato Institute, argued, “politics these days might seem to make no sense at all” because “Ronald Reagan, the great champion of limited government,” was responsible for government spending increases that “outstripped even the projections of Jimmy Carter’s spendthrift administration.” In Crane’s (1983) view, although Reagan’s rhetoric was ripe with “dazzling feats of free-market sloganeering” that “transfixed” both the media and public, in truth, his actions suggested he was nothing more than a “big government ally.” If Reagan proved to be more of an ally than an adversary of big government, Crane (1983) asked, “Can modern conservatism any longer be considered an ideology? Is there really any fundamental philosophical difference in the legislative agendas of liberals and conservatives when the most conservative president in generations gives us the largest federal deficit ever?” For all his promises of a return to the principles of limited

government, “Mr. Reagan’s battles are mostly cosmetic, fought over appearance and tone, rarely over principle,” leading Crane (1983) to conclude, if Reagan was a representation of true conservatism, then conservatism and New Deal liberalism were “two peas in a philosophical pod.”

In response to the perception that Reagan was blurring the lines between conservatism and liberalism, conservatives began calling for the movement to move forward without him. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak commented, “Crusading for conservative causes is now more promising outside than inside the White house” because Reagan’s choice to “follow the guidance of the permanent government” resulted in “alienation of his true constituency” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 10). To conservatives, Reagan’s “\$122 billion tax increase did not faze Democrats but drove his most loyal supporters in the administration and on Capitol Hill close to despair,” implying “that the President agrees with [Tip] O’Neill that something about his tax cut is what’s really wrong with the economy” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 10). It appeared as if Reagan was more willing to listen “to advisers who long have rejected the economic foundations of the Reagan Revolution” than the members of the revolution itself (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 10).

Many argued that moderate Republicans and liberal Democrats had taken Reagan and the White House hostage to halt the conservative agenda. Medford Stanton Evans, the director of the National Journalism Center, observed, “Ronald Reagan is close to being captured by ‘moderate’ Republicans who opposed his presidential aspirations,” giving the White House “a distinctly non-conservative look” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 11). Robert Emmet Tyrrell, Jr., the founder and editor-in-chief of

The American Spectator, agreed, claiming, “I have watched the President become less and less the Ronald Reagan of campaign ’80 and more and more the captive of Republicans” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 11). “Pragmatic Republicans,” Tyrrell, Jr. argued, “have pretty successfully isolated him from his former allies, and they want him to utter no agitating thoughts about ‘getting government off our backs’ . . . They want him to fudge on still more of his campaign promises” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 11).

Other conservatives echoed these claims by labeling pragmatism a disease and arguing that Reagan had become infected. Pat Buchanan claimed Reagan had been “afflicted with the crippling disease common to the moderate Republican: a yearning . . . for acceptance by the Washington elite” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 8). In Buchanan’s view, Reaganism was “being drained of philosophical content,” making the President “a traditional, middle-of-the-road pragmatic Republican president” instead of “a pivotal and revolutionary figure in American politics” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 8).

If Reagan was willing to compromise with his political adversaries over taxes, the broader conservative struggle to limit government was also threatened. Critics worried that Reagan’s pragmatic approach would cement big government for the foreseeable future. William Safire, a columnist for the *New York Times* and former presidential speechwriter claimed, “Here in Washington, a moral paralysis is gripping the government,” with Reagan stuck wallowing “in the sort of helpless tut-tutting” that largely defined the Carter administration (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 9).

Rather than a conservative revolutionary, Reagan was increasingly perceived as an establishment Republican who would maintain the status quo and do little to advance the movement's vision of a limited government. Conservatives started comparing Reagan to his moderate Republican predecessors. Jude Wanniski exclaimed, "I will be blunt: if it (the isolation of the President) continues, President Reagan will begin to look and sound like Jimmy Carter, Jerry Ford, and Richard Nixon" ("Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives," 1982, p. 13). Evans made a similar claim, that Reagan's presidency was "essentially another Ford administration," defined by "business as usual, not much different from any other Republican administration in our lifetime" ("What Conservatives Think," 1984, p. 15). Rather than limiting government, in Evans' view, Reagan had simply continued "managing large government institutions, with the result that there has been no Reagan revolution" ("What Conservatives Think," 1984, p. 15). John Terry Dolan agreed, noting "The question when Reagan got elected was whether he was going to be closer to Eisenhower as a caretaker or to Roosevelt as a revolutionary. He's been generally closer to Eisenhower, preserving a status quo established by previous liberal administrations" ("What Conservatives Think," 1984, p. 15).

The conservative commentary illustrates a significant disconnect between the anti-government conservative worldview and Reagan's pragmatic approach to governing. Conservatives had "widespread concern that Mr. Reagan had no strategy for dominating the political agenda" and the president had sputtered on "putting forth a world view, a bold vision of the future" devoid of big government ("What Conservatives Think," 1984, p. 13). Paul Weyrich (1982) argued Reagan's presidency had thus far been defined by "acceptance of the existing welfare state tempered with occasional implementation of conservative

principles,” Newt Gingrich claimed, “Political debate was once again totally enmeshed in the rhetoric and values of the liberal welfare state. If Reagan represents no more than a right-of-center version of the welfare state, he doesn’t represent change; he simply represents cheap government” (“What Conservatives Think,” 1984, p. 16).

Lip service to social issues

While many conservatives were primarily angered by Reagan’s tax compromises, others were more focused on the President’s inaction on social issues. Conservatives expressed outrage over Reagan’s failure to act on issues including abortion, voluntary school prayer, and eliminating the Department of Education. Dr. John Willke, the President of the National Right-to-Life Committee, argued that the official position of the Reagan administration was that “social issues should be put on the back-burner” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 18). Demanding more than lip service, Willke asked, “Will there be only words of encouragement or will there be active administration support and arm-twisting? Perhaps this will be the true indication of how high on the administration’s priority list our issue actually is” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 18).

In general, social conservatives supported Reagan’s economic policies that cut taxes or slashed federal funding. However, they increasingly perceived these endeavors as an unnecessary trade off with the social agenda. For example, Paul Weyrich noted that although he fully supported Reagan’s plan to cut taxes and reduce federal spending, a failure to tackle social issues meant, “The radical surgery that was required in Washington was not performed” (“What Conservatives Think,” 1984, p. 19). He concluded that “Reagan was correct to stress tax cuts and defense, but not to the exclusion of everything else” and that

Reagan's economic victories were for naught if the president ignored that "82 percent of the public supports voluntary prayer in schools" ("What Conservatives Think," 1984, p. 19).

Howard Phillips, the national director of the Conservative Caucus, claimed Reagan's presidency had "been more like Ford's presidency than a real revolution" ("What Conservatives Think," 1984, p. 17). In spite of Reagan's initial victories with his 1981 economic plan; Phillips argued that Reagan had only been able to garner support for economic initiatives, leaving social issues on the back burner. He said,

The American people can be rallied, but not if it looks like you're in hock to the banks . . . There are practical things Reagan could have done on moral issues that he didn't do. He could have taken away federal money going to Planned Parenthood, he could have cut off subsidies for homosexual and feminist groups. ("What Conservatives Think," 1984, p. 17)

Some social conservatives were even more direct in their criticisms, including pro-life conservatives and those supporting significant changes to education.

Pro-life conservatives were increasingly upset by the President's failure to act on the issue. Some pro-life conservatives claimed they would not support Reagan's other ambitions if he continued ignoring their calls for action. Cal Thomas, the Vice President of communications of the Moral Majority, argued, "If we balance the budget and we still keep murdering a million and a half babies every year, there's no way we can say we're better off than we were four years ago. Reagan always says the right things when he talks to conservative leaders, but he doesn't follow through relentlessly" ("What Conservatives Think," 1984, pp. 18-19).

Judie Brown of the American Life Lobby and Paul Brown of the Life Amendment Political Action Committee argued, “We are tired of lip service. 4,000 children are dying every day,” and added that Reagan’s failure to act on abortion was alienating “the very constituency” that got him elected in the first place (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 19). By ignoring the calls for pro-life legislation, Reagan was sending conservatives “a clear signal” that he considered “the pro-life constituency as a throw-away that can be scorned and discarded” (Fisher, 1982, p. 22). Fran Watson, a State Committeewoman for the New York Right-to-Life Party argued Reagan “had failed to demonstrate any positive pro-life actions yet obtained right-to-life support in most states because of the unfortunate naiveté of most of the movement” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 19).

Abortion was not the only topic crucial to social conservatives. Lottie Beth Hobbs, the National President of the Pro-Family Forum, lambasted Reagan for ignoring his campaign promise to reduce federal involvement in education. She said, “Many ardent Reagan supporters are indeed distressed and disappointed . . . Centralized education is one hallmark of totalitarianism” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 19). Reverend Jerry Falwell, the founder of the Moral Majority, added “It is absolutely imperative that the President aggressively address the social issues which were such a major part of his campaign in 1980,” calling particularly for “anti-abortion legislation, the constitutional amendment to return voluntary school prayer to public schools, and tuition tax credits be put on the front-burner” (“Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives,” 1982, p. 19).

Reagan’s apparent failure on social issues created a widely held perception among conservatives that he would not only maintain liberal government, but would strengthen it. A

widely circulated letter by Clymer L. Wright, Jr., Reagan's Texas Finance Chairman during the 1980 election, harshly criticized Reagan for his inaction on social issues. He said Reagan's image among members of the conservative movement had become that of "a vacillating President who can't formulate a program and stick to it" (Wright, Jr., 1982, p. 34). In addition, Viguerie (1982) published an open letter where he accused the President of practicing "a policy of détente with liberals" that came at the expense of his "long-time conservative supporters" (p. 46). Reagan's willingness to make pragmatic compromises meant he was "pouring hundreds of millions of federal (taxpayer) dollars each year into liberal and left-wing organizations," that adversaries of the conservative movement could use "to the defeat of you, all conservative candidates, and most all of your policies" (Viguerie, 1982, p. 46).

Conservatives' response to Reagan's evolving policies and rhetoric illustrated a zeal for ideological purity within the movement. Initially, conservatives believed Reagan would lead the movement to major cuts in government and action on social issues, but that belief faded as Reagan proved to be willing to compromise over issues fundamental to the anti-government worldview. Members of the movement were driven to carry out the vision of limited government to its logical endpoint and were willing to do that even if it meant acting without the president. To illustrate how the anti-government worldview was extended beyond Reagan, I now turn to the battle between activists and George H. W. Bush for dominance within the conservative movement.

George H. W. Bush and a gentler, kinder conservatism

Though some commentators declared the 1988 election was a sign that "Reagan won again" (cited in Greene, 2015, p. 49), George H. W. Bush was never seen as a movement

leader by conservatives and was generally perceived as a moderate and a pragmatist. During the Reagan administration, conservative critics argued that if the future of the movement was defined by “Bush-style ‘moderates,’” then “There will be no Reaganism” (“Ronald Reagan Won,” 1982, p. 2). Carl P. Leubsdorf (1982) commented that Bush’s conservatism would cause the Reagan Revolution to be “Bushwhacked” (p. 12). These criticisms were not necessarily unfair. Bush’s variant of conservatism significantly pushed back against Reaganism. “Rather than run as Reagan’s heir,” Greene (2015) explained, “Bush effectively ignored his connection with Reagan . . . a point that did not go unnoticed by many of the conservatives who were only begrudgingly supporting” the incoming president (p. 49). Bush made it clear, “he did not intend to operate in the shadow of a Reagan presidency” (Greene, 2015, p. 55). In fact, the overarching theme of Bush’s conservatism was not limiting government, but drastically increasing support for it. During Bush’s term, “there was a series of historic expansions in the scope of government, including the Civil Rights Act of 1989 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 122). To illustrate this development, I now briefly turn to Bush’s most notable speech, his acceptance address at the 1988 Republican National Convention.

In his acceptance address at the 1988 Republican National Convention, Bush (1988) argued he was on a “mission” to become president “for a single purpose,” and that purpose was “to build a better America.” Some parts of Bush’s mission were consistent with the conservative agenda. For example, Bush (1988) promised to keep the economy “out of reach of the big spenders,” ensuring economic growth “by keeping government spending down, and by keeping taxes down.” The most memorable line of the address was entirely in sync with the Reagan Revolution, “Read my lips: No new taxes” (Bush, 1988). As a matter of

principle, Bush (1988) assured citizens he would “see to it that government intrudes as little as possible in the lives of the people.”

However, the harmony between Bush’s mission and the conservative movement ended there. Much of the rest of his RNC acceptance address established a sharp contrast between Bush and Reagan. Where Reagan’s rhetoric appealed directly to the conservative movement by blaming government for the nation’s problems, Bush viewed government as a source of community building, necessary to achieve the nation’s goals. Bush (1988) made clear that at the end of Reagan’s presidency, “Things aren't perfect in this country.” Moving forward, he urged citizens to “be responsible -- and compassionate . . . to stand for a new harmony, a greater tolerance” that could bring the nation together and heal the wounds of the past decade (Bush, 1988). For Bush, government played an indispensable role in this task. He asked, “Does government have a place?” and quickly answered, “Yes. Government is part of the nation of communities . . . And I do not hate government” (Bush, 1988). To “keep America moving forward, always forward -- for a better America, for an endless enduring dream and a thousand points of light,” citizens needed to come together and government provided them an opportunity to do so. In response to the political divisions that defined the 1980s, Bush (1988) said, “I wonder sometimes if we have forgotten who we are,” leading him to ask, “where is it written that we must act as if we do not care, as if we are not moved?” Bush (1988) did not want a continuation of the polarizing political landscape that preceded him; he wanted “a kinder, and gentler nation.” In Bush’s view of government, it was not the problem, but a major part of the solution.

Bush campaigned as a conservative but, after being elected, clearly preferred to act as a pragmatist. If Reagan had been forced to accept the pragmatic reality of governing the

nation, Bush embraced it. The most telling example of Bush's pragmatism occurred in 1990. Though he had promised not to raise taxes, "faced with pressure from Republican and Democratic budget hawks, Bush agreed to raise taxes in exchange for spending cuts" (Zelizer, 2007, p. 123). This budget agreement, Bush argued, was a necessary compromise. In his remarks on the agreement, Bush (1990) urged conservatives to understand "This is priority for our nation. This is something that the country is calling out for and world markets are looking for." He argued though the agreement was unpopular, it was necessary, "Sometimes you don't get it just the way you want, and this is such a time for me, and I expect it's such a time for everybody standing here. But it's time we put the interest of the United States of America first and get this deficit under control" (Bush, 1990). Well aware that "compromise" was likely to spark "deep disagreements over values, the role of government, and the fairness of our taxes," Bush (1990) responded that "the American people and our national leaders -- must accept the responsibilities of the day." A failure to compromise, Bush (1990) concluded, would "continue to mortgage the futures of their children and their grandchildren."

Conservatives react to Bush

Conservative disaffection with Bush reached new heights after he signed the 1990 federal budget agreement. From the moment the agreement was announced, Bush's presidency was inescapably "characterized by growing alienation among many conservatives" (Zelizer, 2004, p. 717). In the aftermath, two themes emerged in responses from members of the movement. The first theme was that Bush had abandoned the Reagan Revolution. The second theme was a sense among conservatives that for the movement to survive, activists would need to double down on efforts to limit government. Taken together,

the two themes show once more how powerful the limited government worldview had become as a foundation of the conservative movement.

Prominent conservatives believed Bush had all but destroyed any hope of the conservative movement's aspirations for the White House. Paul Weyrich declared that the 1990 federal budget agreement was proof "The Reagan-Bush coalition is dead. The movement that existed has been shattered" (cited in Brookhiser, 1992). Bush's earlier proclamation, "Read my lips, no new taxes," the "bedrock" of his campaign, had now become a lie, "breaking not a routine promise but a sacred compact" with the conservative movement (Schmalz, 1992). Conservatives' shared general dissatisfaction with Bush was now "compounded by a sense of betrayal" (Brookhiser, 1992). Bush's agreement to raise taxes was no ordinary betrayal; it "represented betrayal on an essential, because cutting tax rates had been a winning issue for twelve years" (Brookhiser, 1992). An insurgent Newt Gingrich was "'bouncing off the wall' and 'ranting about the supreme stupidity'" of Bush's decision (Balz & Devroy, 1990). Gingrich described Bush's budget compromise as "the fiscal equivalent of Yalta" (cited in Zelizer, 2007, p. 123). In Rush Limbaugh's view, "the incumbent president had betrayed conservatives and made a political mistake" that signaled no less than "George Bush's abandonment of the Ronald Reagan legacy" (cited in Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, pp. 106-107).

Conservative think tanks were "seething at" Bush's failure to defend conservative dogma and his abandonment of the Reagan Revolution (Stahl, 2016, p. 155). Edwin J. Feulner, the president of the Heritage Foundation, argued, "George Bush has shown he is no Ronald Reagan" (cited in West, 1991). Feulner claimed Bush's pragmatism had undone every major victory the conservative movement achieved in the 1980s,

Only in America as we enter 1991, are advocates of bigger, more-intrusive government on the ascendancy again. It's not because conservative ideas have been found wanting. It's because George Bush decided to become a consensus politician in 1990, and technocrats within his administration and the tax-and-spend crowd on Capitol Hill wasted no time in taking advantage of it. (cited in Stahl, 2016, p. 155)

Feulner's criticisms of Bush grew more intense during the election cycle in 1992, and he issued "a 'vote of no-confidence in the president,'" arguing that "conservatives supported George Bush and they got Michael Dukakis" (cited in Stahl, 2016, p. 155). Patrick Buchanan, who challenged Bush for the Republican nomination in the 1992 election, ran "extensive television commercials" in the lead up to the primaries "that merely showed Mr. Bush speaking over and over, 'Read my lips: No new taxes'" (Schmalz, 1992). During the primaries, Buchanan grew increasingly hostile, at one point stating, "George Bush, if you'll pardon the expression . . . has come out of the closet as an Eastern Establishment liberal" (cited in Zelizer, 2007, p. 123).

The second theme that emerged in conservatives' response to the 1990 federal budget agreement was that the movement needed to increase its efforts to limit government. According to Norman Podhoretz, conservatives were "suffering from an anxiety attack" after receiving the news of Bush's compromise on taxes and immediately began planning for the future beyond his presidency (cited in Brookhiser, 1992). Bush's decision to raise taxes ignited newfound "cynicism about government" during the 1992 election season among conservatives (Schmalz, 1992). His reversal on the no new taxes pledge was considered "a visceral issue for many voters. They think they were lied to, and that's it. And this was no

ordinary promise. The slogan made for the most memorable moments” of Bush’s campaign in the 1988 election, a slogan that he had affirmed “time and time again” (Schmalz, 1992).

Though conservative criticisms of Bush was a continuation of the “standard project of critiquing Republican politicians from the Right for not being conservative enough” (Stahl, 2016, p. 155), the decision by think tanks and conservative periodicals “to go public with such sharp criticism of the administration was viewed as a milestone by fellow conservatives” because it was a clear “indication of their constituency's disaffection” with the president (West, 1991). This disaffection did not spell the end for the conservative movement. On the contrary, “Frustration with Bush further energized congressional Republicans” and resulted in conservatives maintaining “tremendous discipline” to advance the conservative cause (Zelizer, 2007, p. 123). In fact, conservative outrage with Bush spawned “the period of intensive right-wing protest and mobilization” that was deemed the right’s “days of rage” (Self, 2015, p. 76). Driven by a zeal for purity, the right had concluded that a true conservative must reject compromise and remain committed to anti-government dogma.

The conservative conundrum

After the Reagan and Bush administrations, the movement was at a crossroads. Two forces that had earlier preserved ideological consensus among movement conservatives had begun to fade. A “symbolic split at the heart of conservative ideology” can be explained by “two critical situational factors,” the end of the Cold War and the perceived success of movement efforts to downsize government (Rowland & Jones, 2001, p. 58). Although conservatives had not achieved all of their aspirations with regards to the size and scope of

government, Ronald Reagan's presidency challenged the movement's narrative that it was excluded from the mainstream and the political process.

In addition to conservative inclusion in the mainstream, the end of the Cold War created a troubling situation for the movement. During the height of the Cold War, conservatives formed a "powerful and recognizable" movement by centering "on the right wing of America's cold war internationalist consensus -- a consensus based on the idea that democratic America was the leader of a free world alliance against world communism" (Judis, 1992). The struggle against Communism was portrayed "as an apocalyptic battle of good against evil and God against Satan" and cemented "an intimate connection between the struggle against communism and that against Democratic liberalism" (Judis, 1992). Although the Cold War presented conservatives with a unifying message, it eventually dissipated.

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War began to thaw. Prior to that time, various factions of the conservative movement were "subordinated to the larger anti-Communist, anti-liberal consensus" (Judis, 1992). Consequently, one of the unifying devices that cohered the movement's identity started to disintegrate, and "the end of the Cold War removed the movement's underlying focus and rationale" (Judis, 1992). Without the priority of defeating the communist threat, "existing squabbles over federal spending, appointments, arts policy, and school prayer suddenly became major conflicts" (Judis, 1992). It was never uncommon for conservatives to disagree about domestic priorities, "but with the Cold War gone, a typical movement turf battle escalated into an all-out war" (Judis, 1992).

Movement conservatives were particularly at odds over whether their agenda ought to prioritize economic or social issues. On the one hand, some conservatives identified with the religious right's "fundamentalist critique of modern society," arguing that the nation's

Christian identity was threatened by liberal progress (Judis, 1992). On the other hand, “younger conservatives on campus and on congressional staffs” tended to view the religious right as a “distinct liability” that served to distract from the movement’s economic agenda (Judis, 1992). Spats between factions signaled that conservatism had “slipped back into the chaos and impotence that prevailed before the mid-‘50s” and that “the movement had no agreed-upon national leader” to keep its message coherent (Judis, 1992).

Conservatives recognized that the broader movement had “lost its moorings,” but few had “any clear answers about what to do next” (Judis, 1992). By the end of George H. W. Bush’s term, conservatives lacked a “coherent national agenda,” and although they initially “provided both policy and agenda” for the Reagan and Bush administrations, the movement was losing its grip on Washington (Judis, 1992). It appeared the movement that brought conservatism into the mainstream during the 1980s had “dissipated into various cantankerous and confused factions” (Judis, 1992).

Conclusion

The response to the evolving rhetoric and policies of Reagan and Bush shows that the conservative movement had rejected pragmatism and compromise in favor of treating small government orthodoxy as a quasi-theological doctrine. Conservatives of the 1980s witnessed the movement evolve “from fringes to mainstream, from exile to acceptance, from the pages of small-circulation journals of opinion to the big top of presidential politics” (Brookhiser, 1992). This exponential growth of the movement as a powerful political force highlights the potency of an entelechial motive and the dangers associated with attempting to carry out its implications at any cost.

A rhetorical trajectory that characterized government as the ultimate enemy demanded that government be reduced, in the words of Grover Norquist, to a size where it could be drowned in a bathtub. As Reagan and Bush both discovered, the practical need for government created conflict with conservatives. However, the failures of Reagan and Bush proved to be a launch pad from which conservatives could further galvanize the movement in its struggle to limit big government because they could claim true conservatism had yet to be tried. This helps explain how the modern conservative movement developed an increasingly extreme anti-government worldview.

In the next two chapters, I show how conservatives adapted the nearly no government worldview of the 1980s to account for the domestic failures of Reagan and Bush and the end of the Cold War. The evolution of conservative symbols and ideas took two prominent forms. Each form shifted the symbolic trajectory in a different direction. One trajectory was defined by a libertarian approach to government that sought to dismantle the welfare state while maximizing economic growth by utilizing strong leadership in the House of Representatives. The other trajectory was defined by a cultural critique, advanced by the paleoconservative alliance. That alliance centered the conversation on government around a perceived moral decay and the need for an inward turn away from international activity.

Chapter 3 - The Gingrich revolution: Scorched earth conservatism and an opportunity society to topple the liberal welfare state

Despite Bill Clinton's victory in the 1992 presidential election, conservatives mobilized into an even more powerful force in the 1990s than they had been in the prior decade. Republicans "seized on the perceived failure of the Clinton presidency, the effects of the 1990 reapportionment, the unusually large number of Democratic retirements in 1992-1994, the recruitment of excellent Republican candidates, and the [Newt] Gingrich-inspired legislative covenant with the voters" (Critchlow, 2004, p. 719), and in 1994, regained majority control of the House of Representatives for the first time since 1952. It was clear that "disenchantment" with government and the "moral hazard" of liberal social programs was still creating "real momentum to seriously reduce the size and scope of central government activities in America" (Gayner, 1995). What is not clear, however, is how the symbolic developments of conservatism in the 1990s allowed the movement to thrive despite clear disagreements and tensions between its various factions.

In this chapter, I argue that one aspect of the symbolic trajectory of conservatism in the 1990s emphasized limited government, particularly government assistance to the nation's poorest citizens. This trajectory was a more extreme, entelechialized version of Reagan's small government philosophy. During the 1990s, conservative factions shifted the terms of that worldview to account for the end of the Cold War in addition to the perceived domestic failures of the Reagan and Bush administrations, keeping economic conservatives a potent force in American politics.

Young, maverick conservatives challenged big government by changing political tactics to focus on congressional leadership. Conservatives in the House of Representatives focused their critique of big government on the *liberal welfare state*. Because the

conservative wing of the Republican Party controlled the House, they could push their economic agenda without the obstacle of compromise with Democrats or any remaining establishment Republicans, forces that had stalled the movement during the Reagan and Bush administrations.

In what follows, I tell the story of how the trajectory reflected the conservative movement's shift toward a more extreme anti-government worldview. Although conservatives disagreed about the best approach to limiting government and which social issues to prioritize, symbolic evolutions in the 1990s centered on the threats posed by big government in general and the welfare state in particular. First, I explain how movement conservatives capitalized on the perceived failures of the Bush and Clinton presidencies in order to achieve landslide victories in the 1994 midterm election. Second, I trace the evolution of conservatives' resistance to the liberal welfare state by drawing on themes from Newt Gingrich's rhetoric. Finally, I draw conclusions about the significance of the trajectory and how it reflected the transformation of the Republican Party into a party that largely "abandoned a political system that runs on compromise" (D'Antonio, 1990). I show that the political tactics of the Gingrich revolution represented the evolution of conservative ideas that remain a dominant force in contemporary conservatism and its treatment of government assistance programs.

The Gingrich revolution

The domestic policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations were perceived by many movement conservatives to have been a failure. As I explained in the previous chapter, both presidents agreed to tax increases, supported moderate or liberal policies that resulted from compromise with Democrats in the Congress, and ignored or betrayed the movement's

social agenda. With Bush's loss in the 1992 presidential election, "The GOP and the conservatives had become liberated" (Shirley, 2017, p. 318). Consequently, many conservatives decided a change of tactics was necessary to advance their political goals. Rather than relying on the White House to carry out its mission, movement conservatives "proclaimed the dawn of an era of Congressional government," and "the President became the opposition" (Clymer, 1996). Just as liberal and moderate politicians had "effectively thwarted" the Reagan agenda during the 1980s, conservatives recognized that while "the President could lead . . . a Congress controlled by the opposition did not have to follow" (Gayner, 1995).

Key to the new strategy was to form a worldview that targeted both the size of government and its scope of involvement in social issues. During the 1990s, many conservatives honed their attacks on big government by initiating a focused assault on federal welfare programs and other policies that they argued did not benefit the middle class. This strategy was widely popular in the movement. Jacob Hacker (2004) argued that during the 1990s, "Proposals for major structural reform of public programs gained ground, liberals found themselves vying with conservatives over the depth of their commitment to make welfare recipients work, tax cuts that threatened future social spending passed into law, and calls for the creation of new social interventions all but vanished from public debate" (p. 251).

Conservatives' success in targeting said programs was evident in the results of the 1994 midterm election. At the conclusion of the election, the *Washington Post* acknowledged that "the huge Republican gains also marked a clear shift to the right in the country as attacks on big government and taxes and calls for a return to family values resonate for GOP

candidates in races at all levels” (Balz, 1994). The election results signaled “a continuing embrace of Reaganism,” although the GOP candidates that “had unabashedly campaigned as conservatives” did so on platforms “even further to the right than Gipper himself” (Shirley, 2017, p. 419). A wave of conservative victories in the midterm was aided by the Contract with America, a list of ten conservative policy goals that the 367 Republican candidates for the House of Representatives used as a platform for their campaigns. Those ten policy goals centered on balancing the federal budget, slashing taxes and spending for welfare programs, cracking down on criminal activity, and establishing congressional term limits. “Never before had so detailed a document become such an integral part of a congressional election campaign,” and its “revolutionary character” symbolized “the most profound change in the American political landscape” during the 20th century (Gayner, 1995). The Contract “pivoted around the fundamental questions concerning the role of government in society” and was portrayed as a platform that would “determine the character of American government well into the 21st century” (Gayner, 1995).

Newt Gingrich, who authored the Contract, became the first Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives since the 1950s. Gingrich was supported by a conservative majority in the House that believed they had reached “the defining moment in the transformation of the responsibility for government in the United States away from the central government” (Gayner, 1995). While conservatives’ agenda faced major opposition, the Contract “provided the mechanism to move from vague political rhetoric to creating a specific political program” that appeared to resonate with a significant portion of the movement (Gayner, 1995). Conservative activists and think tanks flocked to the Contract, creating “extensive interaction between the new, more aggressive conservative Congressmen

and the emergence of an extensive network of conservative think tanks” (Gayner, 1995). Polling data showed that the majority of citizens supported the ideas contained in the Contract, engendering “popular momentum that could eventually lead to confronting more contentious issues” that had split conservatives on domestic policy after or at the end of the Cold War (Gayner, 1995).

Not only did the Contract state a conservative policy agenda, it also made Gingrich a national leader of the movement. Gingrich quickly became known as “the most assertive Speaker” in the nation’s history and established a new “upper limit” for strong, activist guidance as a congressional leader (Strahan & Palazzolo, 2004, p. 93; also see Kennedy & Benoit, 1997). Unlike other speakers, Gingrich saw the position foremost as a way to lead the conservative movement (Strahan & Palazzolo, 2004, p. 97). What made Gingrich a particularly powerful Speaker was that he refused to “bend” on issues; in fact, when his own party disagreed with him, he “was able to persuade a large bloc of Republican members to change their policy goals, or at least change the policy outcome for which they were willing to vote” (Strahan & Palazzolo, 2004, p. 107). “The great advantage of having a leader as powerful as Gingrich,” according to Ron Haskins (2006), was that “under his leadership, nearly all Republicans could be made to pull in the same direction—gladly or not” (p. 89). One key example of Gingrich’s leadership style was the government shutdown between December 16, 1995, and January 6, 1996. The cause of the shutdown was “an entirely domestic political conflict over the federal budget” between Gingrich and Bill Clinton (Patashnik, 2004, p. 668). Energized by Gingrich, House Republicans “sought to use the congressional budget process as a vehicle for remaking federal domestic policy in a conservative image” (Patashnik, 2004, p. 668).

Conservatives were attracted to Gingrich because he represented a sharp contrast with the Bush years and a return to Reagan's worldview. According to Craig Shirley (2017), "Gingrich understood as few did how revolutionary the Era of Reagan had been. It radically changed how citizens viewed their world and their government" (p. 192). Gingrich was responsible for the creation of "a new conservative credo and a powerful antigovernment message" that "absorbed and synthesized different strands of conservative thought, which he wove together to create a tougher, more focused message for the Right" (Gillon, 2008, p. 81). Gingrich's mission was not only to cut the size of domestic programs, but also to develop "a tougher, more partisan style of conservatism" in general (Gillon, 2008, p. 81). In doing so, he displayed "a larger and longer purpose to refashion both parties with the Democrats as the organizer of big government and the GOP as the instruments of less government and less taxes, in line with the Reagan model" (Shirley, 2017, p. 270).

In order to more fully understand the evolution of the conservative worldview of limiting government's involvement in social affairs, it is important to flesh out the themes of Gingrich's rhetoric that appealed to "a particularly receptive audience" by capitalizing on "Profound disillusionment within the American political system" (Gayner, 1995). Two trends are evident in Gingrich's rhetoric that reflected the evolution of conservatism toward tactical extremism and ideological purity. The first trend was a repeated call to replace the liberal welfare state with an *opportunity society*. Gingrich rationalized taking away federal welfare programs by arguing those programs were harming the people they were designed to help. To accomplish this, Gingrich needed to create anxiety and concern among citizens, since "the worse the crisis, the better for Gingrich; the greater the insecurity and despair, the more seductive his veiled scapegoating, his absolutism, and his messianism would become"

(Bruck, 1995). For example, in an interview with *Time*, Gingrich proclaimed, “What kind of safety net is it that destroys you? You have a man-eating safety net and a child-eating safety net” that composed the liberal welfare state (cited in Stacks & Goodgame, 1995). However, Gingrich needed to supplement his negative tone and pessimism with “an affirmative alternative vision” that informed his opposition to welfare programs (Connelly, Jr., 1999, p. 111). That “positive formulation,” according to Connelly, Jr. (1999), was “to replace the welfare state with a ‘conservative opportunity society’” (p. 111).

The second trend was *scorched earth conservatism*. Gingrich emphasized an absolutist, uncompromising approach to policy, masked by language calling for bipartisanship and cooperation. Sometimes Gingrich appeared pragmatic and reasonable. However, at other times, he was ruthless in his rejection of compromise with Democrats. In these instances, Gingrich adopted a “take-no-prisoner politics of confrontation and obstruction” (Mann & Ornstein, 2016, p. 43). This explains why the *New York Times* described Gingrich as “absolutist, aggressive, hyperbolic,” and “unpredictable . . . in his use of supercharged symbolic language” (Seelye, 1994).

At the end of the Reagan and Bush years, it appeared the conservative movement was at an impasse. As I explained in the previous chapter, cutting government programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, that provided basic services, or programs that directly aided Republican constituents, such as education and environmental programs, proved unpopular and therefore politically infeasible. Conservatives were left with three alternatives during the 1990s. They could redefine their ideological worldview entirely, they could cooperate with Clinton and his New Democrat agenda, or they could mask their ideology with a positive recasting of small government conservatism. Gingrich ultimately chose the third option.

One of the key examples of Gingrich's rhetoric is his opening address to the 104th Congress. In that address, Gingrich struck a rhetorical pose of bipartisanship and cooperation with the Democrats to restore government to its proper role and reform the welfare system. As I show, however, even in Gingrich's calls for compromise, there are clues that his vision of cooperation was "bipartisanship" on his own terms, in which the Democrats surrendered to his conservative agenda. Another key example of Gingrich's rhetoric can be found in *To Renew America*, a book published in 1995 that espoused his extension of Reagan's small government philosophy as the opportunity society. Finally, Gingrich's comments on particular policy issues and events reveal his scorched earth politics. To explore Gingrich's small government philosophy and his scorched earth conservatism, I now analyze representative examples of Gingrich's rhetoric, and explain how it produced the "Gingrich effect," what can be understood as the extension of small government conservatism into a more extreme anti-government symbolic system (Strahan & Palazzolo, 2004, p. 93).

Gingrich's government: An opportunity society

In many ways, Gingrich shared Reagan's small government philosophy. Gingrich believed that a large, centralized government was responsible for the nation's social ills. To remedy the problems with big government, Gingrich developed a positive recasting of Reagan's small government philosophy by repeatedly calling for the development of an opportunity society. Gingrich (1995a) declared that efforts to create an opportunity society responded to the "moral urgency" faced by the 104th Congress, which was "coming to grips with what is happening to the poorest Americans."

Four sub-themes are evident in Gingrich's calls for establishing the opportunity society. The first sub-theme was a redefinition and extension of Reagan's small government

philosophy by framing small government as the opportunity society. The second sub-theme was that big government led to immorality and inaction, resulting in many of the nation's hardships. Third, a small government in the form of an opportunity society paved the way for innovation and could lift the nation out of poverty. Finally, Gingrich's rhetoric reveals that he believed all citizens were on a level playing field and there was no need for government intervention. The only barrier to citizens getting good jobs and succeeding was that government assistance programs held them back. Combined, the four themes masked the consequences of eliminating federal welfare programs by portraying the opportunity society as a solution to the nation's social ills. Gingrich's decision to focus on welfare programs and other programs that did not aid the middle class, rather than entitlements such as Medicare and Social Security, allowed him both to scapegoat the poor, who voted at a lower rate than other groups, and avoid alienating other voters. It was a deliberately canny but divisive choice. I now treat each sub-theme in turn.

Small government as an opportunity society

The first sub-theme was Gingrich's recasting of small government conservatism as about creating opportunities. Small government conservatism often focused on the need to cut programs, which can come across as a negative vision. Gingrich used the idea of the opportunity society to recast the negative vision into a positive one. While Gingrich shared Reagan's small government philosophy, he believed that conservatives had not produced an appropriate view of government that reflected its proper size and scope. Gingrich argued that the opportunity society was a "break with traditional conservatism" insofar as the movement's existing view of government "Had little positive to offer" (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 26). Conversely, Gingrich's approach would end the Aid to Families with Dependent

Children program, require welfare recipients to obtain work within two years, enhance enforcement of child support, withhold welfare from immigrants, and end welfare as an entitlement program. He claimed all these actions would produce a positive result, the opportunity society.

Restoring government to its proper size and scope depended on decentralizing government involvement in social affairs, slashing costly and unnecessary programs, and returning responsibility to the states for ensuring needy and poor citizens were cared for. Gingrich (1995c) argued “the tax code, the welfare laws, and the rules of the bureaucracy all add up to a system that is antiwork, antifamily, and antiopportunity. We have to rewrite these laws so they do not punish people for taking responsibility” (p. 79). Unlike the existing federal system, the opportunity society would limit government by slashing costly programs that Gingrich claimed actually harmed the citizens that they were designed to help. He argued that the opportunity society would enable policymakers “to get this Government in order” and ensure only the necessary federal programs continued receiving funding (Gingrich, 1995a). Eliminating federal assistance programs, Gingrich (1995c) claimed, was an obligation “to all young Americans in every neighborhood to save them from a system that is depriving them of their God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. There can’t be true liberty while they are trapped in a welfare bureaucracy” (p. 73).

In Gingrich’s view, shifting responsibility for government assistance back to the states was necessary to give all Americans the opportunities they deserved. He argued that this was a simple remedy for the problems government had caused for the needy and poor. “What we really want to do,” Gingrich (1995c) said, “is to devolve power all the way out of government and back to working American families. We want to leave choices and resources

in the hands of individuals and let them decide if they prefer government” (p. 105).

Returning responsibility to the states would allow legislators “immediately to do things better, to reach out, break through the bureaucracy and give every young American child a better chance” (Gingrich, 1995a). Rather than relying on the federal government, he said, “In the 21st century, we have to create our own safety nets” (Gingrich, 1995a). Focusing on opportunity instead of welfare would ensure “every child of every background in every neighborhood in America has a full opportunity to pursue happiness” (Gingrich, 1995b). Clearly, Gingrich was “determined that whatever emerged from the Congress would end welfare as an entitlement program and turn it over to the states” (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 143).

Big government, immorality, and inaction

The second sub-theme of Gingrich’s calls for an opportunity society was that a large, centralized government created the conditions for an immoral society and citizen inaction. Gingrich (1995b) claimed that big government, particularly federal assistance programs, preserved “a cheap welfare state,” and he had “no interest in running a cheap welfare state that destroys lives.” “If we fail to reform,” Gingrich (1995c) argued, “the consequences will be incalculable. The underclass of poverty and violence will continue to grow” (p. 4).

Gingrich (1995c) claimed that eliminating federal welfare programs reflected “The greatest moral imperative” of the 1990s (p. 71). “For every day that we allow the current conditions to continue,” he said,

We are condemning the poor—and particularly poor children—to being deprived of their basic rights as Americans. The welfare state reduces the poor from citizens to clients. It breaks up families, minimizes work incentives, blocks people from saving

and acquiring property, and overshadows dreams of a promised future with a present despair born of poverty, violence, and hopelessness. (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 71)

Furthermore, Gingrich argued that eliminating welfare programs was necessary not only to lift the nation's poorest out of poverty, but also to prevent future generations from being born into the same fate. In one interview, he said Democrats who supported entitlement programs were living in a "liberal fantasy" that would not ease "unending" federal spending and instead "crush your children in debt" (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 326). These arguments relied on racist depictions of the poor. For example, Gingrich (1995c) claimed that, "Almost every public housing project in the United States has the same underground economy of people working for cash or barter without securing government licenses or paying taxes," and that since "these neighborhoods pay almost no taxes," the people living in them "drain the public treasury through welfare payments" rather than contributing to the nation's economy (p. 80).

In addition to the financial consequences of big government, Gingrich argued that welfare programs encouraged laziness, inaction, and immorality. "Too many Americans," Gingrich (1995c) claimed, "are bound in bureaucracies and antihuman regulations by which families are being destroyed, the work ethic is undermined, male responsibility is made irrelevant, and young mothers find themselves trapped in a world where 'income maintenance' replaces opportunity" (p. 8). An opportunity society could alleviate citizen immorality and inaction by providing incentives to put Americans to work.

For example, Gingrich's opportunity society would reinstitute the use of orphanages for children born out-of-wedlock. The justification for these proposals relied on implicit racial stereotypes of welfare recipients, based on their behaviors and their living arrangements. In Gingrich's (1995c) view, supervised housing for children born out-of-

wedlock could save them from living in “an environment that is saturated with pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers, and violence” (p. 73). He cited Washington, D. C., as the “prime example” of why such a move was necessary (Gingrich, 1995b). “Cities like the District of Columbia,” he argued, are “the reason we have to rethink public housing, the reason we have to dramatically change education in the inner city” (Gingrich, 1995b).

The worldview Gingrich presented was dominant in the small government wing of the conservative movement. There was widespread agreement that the welfare state was responsible for what was seen as immorality and encouraged citizens to remain dependent on government handouts. For example, Vin Weber, a close friend of Gingrich’s, said,

If you get to the point where you’ve had a serious discussion of the need for orphanages, you have destroyed the standing of the welfare program. It highlights the worst problems of the welfare system. Conservatives believe that the heart of the welfare system is that it’s encouraging out-of-wedlock births, and that those children have a lot of pathology. (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 46)

Similar to Gingrich’s comments on the topic, these claims relied on racial stereotypes of welfare recipients. Others embraced the same worldview. For example, Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation argued that cutting off housing assistance to young mothers “would make having illegitimate children less attractive” and they “would have no walking-around money for cigarettes, booze, clothes” (cited in O’Mara, 1994). Furthermore, Rector claimed, young single mothers “would have to take parenting classes, finish high school and have a curfew. The bottom line is, this would be the only option for these women” (cited in O’Mara, 1994).

Big government, in Gingrich's view, also encouraged immorality because of welfare programs that funded the arts. Rather than aid the nation's poor, Gingrich argued that programs such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) were "eating taxpayers' money" and run by "rich upper-class people" (cited in Pear, 1995). At best, Gingrich claimed, the NEA promoted "self-selected elites using your tax money and my tax money to pay off their friends" instead of helping the truly needy (cited in Pear, 1995). His supporters agreed, arguing, "Few programs were more worthy of outright elimination than the National Endowment for the Arts" (Javik, 1997). Conservatives claimed that the NEA was nothing more than "welfare for artists" and "an unwarranted extension of the federal government into the voluntary sector" (cited in Javik, 1997).

In addition to claiming that the NEA served as "patronage for an elite group," Gingrich and his followers argued that government-sponsored art programs contributed to the nation's moral decline (cited in Rich, 1995). For example, Senator Jesse Helms claimed that the NEA "denigrates religion" and made "excretory or sexual organs or activities" the norm in art (cited in Haithman, 1995). Roger Kimball argued that the NEA was "A radical virus of multiculturalism" (cited in Javik, 1997). Rather than "help underprivileged youth to fight violence and drugs," conservatives believed the NEA encouraged violent and pornographic content, including "featured works containing sexual torture, incest, child sex, [and] sadomasochism" (Jarvik, 1997). That was why, Gingrich (1995c) argued, "We simply must abandon the welfare state and move to an opportunity society" (p. 9).

Small government and innovation

The third sub-theme of Gingrich's calls for an opportunity society was that it could lift the nation out of poverty by putting federal funds back into citizens' pocketbooks and

stimulating innovation at the local level. He claimed that conservatives had already built the foundation for that process,

We promised to begin cutting congressional committee staffs, and we did cut them by 30 percent to keep our word to you. We began to shrink the number of committees.

We are right now in the process of privatizing one building and two parking lots. We just privatized the barbershop. We are going through a series of things that, for

Washington, are so radical they do not believe they are happening. (Gingrich, 1995b)

However, in Gingrich's view, there was much more work to be done before true innovation could occur.

In *To Renew America*, Gingrich (1995c) claimed that, because of big government, readers "should be worried. I want you to understand that your future, your children's future, and your country's future is at a crossroads" (p. 246). He warned that citizens needed "to be a little anxious," and they needed to "turn that anxiety into energy. We will create a better future and renew America only if enough people decide that there is a problem and that we can do something about it" (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 247). "The challenge," he claimed, was "to get government and bureaucracy out of the way and put scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, and adventurers back into the business of exploration and discovery" (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 192).

An opportunity society was needed to stimulate growth and innovation that would ensure future generations the pursuit of their inalienable rights. "We are going to continue to fight for real welfare reform," he said, for an opportunity society "emphasizing work and family. We believe that the American people want that kind of change" (Gingrich, 1995b). "Our challenge," Gingrich (1995b) argued, "is to rise to the occasion," and establishing the

opportunity society would do so by building “the necessary bridge to the next generation having freedom.” Achieving that challenge required an opportunity society because “The story of America has been that freedom starts by maximizing local initiative and local resources. [Alexis] De Tocqueville’s description of voluntary organizations as the backbone of America would remain true today if these efforts were not completely overshadowed by a gigantic federal bureaucracy” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 103).

With the opportunity society, the barriers imposed by government bureaucracy would be replaced with a renewed spirit of volunteerism and citizen leadership. “We believe in volunteerism and local leadership,” Gingrich (1995c) exclaimed, “We believe that a country with ten million local volunteer leaders is stronger than one with a thousand brilliant national leaders. Our model puts a premium on diversity, creativity, and the ability of free people to invent different ways of solving problems” (p. 106). By slashing taxes and eliminating federal entitlement programs, Gingrich promised that families would have more money in their pockets to care for their needs. He said, “We’d rather parents have the money than bureaucrats” (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 181).

Not only would Gingrich’s opportunity society return money being spent by government to families, it would also yield the type of rugged individualism responsible for the nation’s greatest innovations. It would create “enormous opportunities in technology, in entrepreneurship, in the sheer level of human talent we can attract to the purpose of pursuing happiness and the American dream” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 247). “If we can take the energy aroused by danger and opportunity and channel it into useful efforts,” Gingrich (1995c) claimed,

We may be astounded at the excitement and progress we will find in the twenty-first century. If we do our job right, the twenty-first century could be an age of freedom, an age of exploration, an age of discovery, an age of prosperity. More people will have more opportunities to pursue more happiness in more different ways than at any time in human history. (p. 247)

“America is a land of opportunity,” and an opportunity society would “renew America” by simply convincing “ourselves that our country, our freedom and our children’s futures are worth a little extra effort. To renew or to decay, that is the choice that each of us makes, one at a time, day by day” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 248).

A level playing field for all

The final sub-theme in Gingrich’s calls for an opportunity society was that there was no need for government intervention in social affairs because the playing field was already equal for all citizens. He claimed that, “America is about a dynamic, shifting, mobile world of opportunity where everyone has a chance to build a better mousetrap or bake a bigger pie,” and that the existing welfare system encouraged “a static world in which limited resources have to be carefully allocated by government” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 153).

Gingrich’s claims about a level playing field relied on an utterly false and racist premise that all citizens already had equal opportunity, but welfare recipients had simply neglected those opportunities and chose instead to be lazy and inactive. He said, “People can create jobs as well as find jobs,” and added:

Anyone with a little money, some free time, and a willingness to learn marketing can make money. It is just as important to convince the poor that they can create their own jobs as it is to help them find jobs. We want to arouse an entrepreneurial spirit. A

generation of small-business creation among African and Hispanic Americans would transform everything. If there were five Steve Jobses or one Bill Gates in Harlem, the entire nature of the community would change. (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 80)

In his assessment, a shift away from welfare would ensure that “every child of every background in every neighborhood in America has a full opportunity to pursue happiness” by forcing welfare recipients to act on their opportunities and productively contribute to the nation’s needs (Gingrich, 1995b).

Gingrich claimed that all citizens had an equal opportunity to succeed if they capitalized on their talents. He said, “Democracies rely only on the unique spark of each person’s God-given talent,” and all Americans possessed equal opportunities to act on that talent (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 247). The question was whether citizens would realize their talents or if they would remain inactive and reliant on welfare. When citizens chose to put themselves to work and stopped depending on government handouts, they would meet the demands of the “heroism we need” to make the nation productive (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 247). What was needed, in Gingrich’s (1995c) view, was “the quiet steady work of millions—parents, teachers, volunteers, cab drivers, government officials, individual citizens—each making his or her own contributions with his or her own talents” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 247).

Gingrich argued that the only way to maintain a level playing field for citizens was to wean them off welfare and put them to work. “If we can reform” the welfare state, he claimed, “there is every reason to believe our best days are still ahead” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 5). “An America that has replaced the culture of poverty and violence with a culture of opportunity,” he said, “would be the safest, most prosperous place on the globe” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 5). However, a failure to establish the opportunity society would produce

“substantial dangers that could undermine our civilization, weaken our country, and bring misery into our lives” by keeping the nation’s truly needy dependent on government handouts and out of work (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 247). In Gingrich’s view, either the nation would shift from welfare to opportunity or experience vicious cycles of structural inequity. He said, “The choice between these two futures is stark and decisive. Either we will pull ourselves together for the effort or we will continue to decay. There is virtually no middle ground” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 5).

An opportunity, for Gingrich

While Gingrich portrayed the opportunity society as an alternative to a centralized government that had stifled innovation and encouraged welfare dependence and immorality, his small government philosophy was a smokescreen for advancing the conservative agenda at the expense of the very citizens he claimed he was helping. In Weber’s words, “He [Gingrich] wants the country to think of the Republican Party as attacking social ills. If it does, the realignment is complete” (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 16). Gingrich recast small government conservatism as the opportunity society and focused on the welfare state because it enabled him to capitalize on general cynicism toward federal welfare programs, and this strategy avoided threatening the middle class with cuts to crucial entitlement programs. In truth, “welfare constituted a tiny portion of the federal budget” and was not the primary cause of the nation’s social ills (Drew, 1996, p. 88). However, the existing welfare system “had almost no defenders, and the seeming futility of all efforts to brake the increase” in the number of welfare recipients, combined with “the horror stories perpetuated by those trying to destroy the system, made welfare a highly emotional and political issue” (Drew, 1996, p. 88). The four sub-themes evident in Gingrich’s rhetoric calling for the opportunity society

reveal his commitment to small government conservatism, but mask the effects of program cuts by creating a positive frame of reference for curtailing government assistance to the truly needy.

By claiming that welfare programs fostered immorality and dependence on government assistance, Gingrich galvanized support among his followers for the opportunity society. Gingrich supported this effort with a focus on morality. Gingrich and conservatives “were bent on shifting the welfare debate from one concerning work to one concerning illegitimacy” (Drew, 1996, p. 46). Joseph Loconte (1997) of the Heritage Foundation, for example, said that Gingrich’s opportunity society was the only remedy to the “‘seven deadly sins’ of government.” Reverend Phillip Earley claimed Gingrich’s plan could finally help government abandon “the cookie-cutter approach to treating people” and instead fund programs that actually helped needy and poor citizens (cited in Loconte, 1997).

In fact, welfare reform had a devastating impact, as “the Republican proposal provided no funds for job training or creating jobs,” leaving the truly needy without welfare or a path to a job (Drew, 1996, p. 90). In this effort, “The Republicans played to their own constituencies, which did not include the poor” (Drew, 1996, p. 327). Effectively, “The Republicans were pretending to be ‘reforming’ a program they were trying to destroy” (Drew, 1996, p. 149). One key element in their efforts was a shift to a more extremist political attack on government, scorched earth conservatism.

A scorched earth, a fiery Newt

Gingrich praised the incoming 104th Congress as a group that would act together to advance policies that would reform the tattered welfare system and balance the federal budget. However, his praise for bipartisanship masked his true endeavor, which was to

launch a series of political attacks on government. In doing so, conservatives could blame Clinton and congressional Democrats for inaction on the nation's most pressing issues. Two sub-themes are evident in Gingrich's scorched earth conservatism. The first sub-theme was a rhetorical pose that called for both bipartisanship and also a demand for honesty and transparency between Democrats and Republicans in the policymaking process. The second sub-theme was just the opposite, that conservatives should refuse to compromise with Clinton and the Democrats, and that any inaction on key policy issues was because the Democrats were unwilling to adopt Gingrich's version of those policies. Combined, the two sub-themes allowed conservatives to position Democrats as the cause for obstruction, forcing Clinton to support several of Gingrich's policy proposals.

Bipartisanship in the 104th Congress?

The first sub-theme of Gingrich's scorched earth conservatism was a rhetorical pose that called for bipartisanship, honesty, and transparency among elected officials. Gingrich hailed the incoming Congress as a group of politicians dedicated to working together on policy issues that had been contentious in the past. For example, in the opening address of the 104th Congress, Gingrich (1995a) said, "Here we are as commoners together, to some extent Democrats and Republicans, to some extent liberals and conservatives, but Americans all." A commitment to working "on a bipartisan basis" was "an absolute obligation," and that is why Gingrich (1995a) said "to our friends in the Democratic Party that we are going to work with you." Working in bipartisan fashion could enable "a dialog and an openness that is totally different than people are used to seeing in politics in America" (Gingrich, 1995a). "If we could build that attitude on both sides of this aisle," Gingrich (1995a) argued, "we would be an amazingly different place, and the country would begin to be a different place. We have to

create a partnership.” “Together we can replace the culture of poverty and violence,” he said, “Together we can replace the welfare bureaucracy. Together we can create a generation of hope and opportunity for all Americans” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 85). “All I can do is pledge to you [that] if each of us will reach out prayerfully and try to genuinely understand each other, if we will recognize that in this building we symbolize America, and that we have an obligation to talk with each other, then I think a year from now we can look on the 104th Congress as a truly amazing institution without regard to party, without regard to ideology” Gingrich (1995a).

At first glance, it appeared Gingrich was more than willing to work with Clinton and the Democrats. This was not the case. Even in his calls for bipartisanship and compromise, there were clues that Gingrich had struck a rhetorical pose, masking a scorched earth politics beneath the veneer of cooperation. For example, while reciting a portion of the Contract with America during the opening address of the 104th Congress, Gingrich (1995a) said “I don't mean this as a partisan act, but rather to remind all of us what we are about to go through and why.” Despite his claim that reciting portions of the Contract was a nonpartisan act, he immediately followed with the claim that Democrats would not be a part of the process. Rather than working with Democrats, Gingrich (1995a) argued that it was “the new Republican majority” that was about to “immediately pass the following reforms aimed at restoring the faith and trust of the American people in their government.” Rather than cherry picking which government programs to preserve, Gingrich (1995a) said, “to my friends on the left who believe there has never been a government program that was not worth keeping, you cannot look at some of the results we now have and not want to reach out to the humans and forget the bureaucracies.” Shortly after the opening of the 104th Congress, it would

become clear that Gingrich's form of bipartisanship would not be defined by compromise, but instead with engaging in tactics that forced Democrats to succumb to the conservative policy agenda.

A refusal to compromise

The second sub-theme of Gingrich's scorched earth conservatism was a refusal to compromise with Democrats, a strategy that in turn enabled conservatives to blame Clinton for inaction on the most pressing policy issues. By arguing that Democrats would not compromise with Republicans, it allowed Gingrich and his allies to do the same, while justifying that refusal by claiming Democrats would not incorporate Republican policy proposals and instead sought to preserve the status quo. "One reason why Democrats have gotten away with so many things for so long," Gingrich (1995c) argued, was that, "Again and again the Democrats would try to undermine or delay a bill through procedural moves . . . They knew there was too much popular support for them to be on the record in opposition. But they did their best to gut these bills anyway" (p. 129). In Gingrich's (1995c) view, "liberal Democrats understood they did not represent most Americans," but they had "rigged" politics "to make popular opinion dramatically less important" (p. 236).

Although Gingrich (1995a) asked members of the Congress "to dedicate ourselves to reach out in a genuinely nonpartisan way," he was quick to distinguish himself and his supporters from Democrats on the two key issues of his agenda, balancing the federal budget and eliminating federal welfare programs. According to Gingrich (1995c), Democrats were "defenders of the status quo" who "should be ashamed of themselves" for their failures to reform the welfare system and balance the federal budget during the two year period where they controlled both congressional houses and had a Democratic President (p. 72).

Consequently, Gingrich (1995c) told his supporters that in the new Congress, Democrats would “use every parliamentary trick in the book to slow business to a crawl,” requiring them to adamantly and actively pursue their agenda (p. 124). “The liberal model,” according to Gingrich (1995c), “is that an enlightened national capital will establish the correct laws and hire the bureaucrats to enforce them . . . It is the identical theory that is behind every centralized bureaucracy of the Great Society” (p. 106). Conversely, Gingrich (1995c) claimed, “Republicans envision a decentralized America in which responsibility is returned to the individual” (p. 106).

From the beginning of his tenure as Speaker, Gingrich obstructed compromise and made enemies instead of allies. On the very same day he delivered the opening address to the 104th Congress where he called for bipartisanship, Gingrich vowed to defeat the Democrats at every turn. In an interview with the *Washington Times*, he said his goal was “to destroy the entire force behind the idea of an activist federal government” (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 26). He added, “What I can do between now and Easter is break up the Washington logjam, shift power back to the fifty states, break up all the liberal national organizations—and make them scramble” (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 26).

Rather than compromise with Democrats, Gingrich treated them as the enemy. He created a list of terms for conservatives to use whenever “talking about the Democratic enemy,” including: “betray,” “bizarre,” “decay,” “anti-flag,” “anti-family,” “pathetic,” “lie,” “cheat,” “radical,” “sick,” “traitors,” and more (cited in Hertzberg, 2011). Gingrich argued that Democrats were to be treated “as great a threat to America as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union” (cited in Hertzberg, 2011). In order to “get even” with Clinton and the Democrats for imposing “Stalinist” policies and ideas on the public, Gingrich exclaimed that

Clinton Democrats were to be portrayed as “the enemy of normal Americans” (cited in Devory & Babcock, 1994).

Gingrich viewed the Contract and its conservative policy agenda as a vehicle for disrupting the failed strategy of compromise with Democrats. By centering on issues outlined in the Contract, Gingrich believed that conservatives could take “effective charge of the government” and implement “a sweeping policy revolution” that directly “confronted Clinton and challenged established policies at every turn” (Mann & Ornstein, 2016, p. 41). In Gingrich’s vision, the Contract would allow conservatives to establish “the House almost as a parallel government, challenging the president and his policy initiatives—and his very ability to shape the agenda” (Mann & Ornstein, 2016, p. 40). For example, Gingrich (1995c) claimed that the Contract’s mandate for congressional term limits would make Democratic leadership in Congress “deeply and bitterly concerned” because “They knew term limits was a dagger aimed at their hearts” (p. 237). Additionally, the tax cuts outlined in the Contract would take funds away from government bureaucrats and instead give money directly to citizens. Gingrich argued that conservatives sought to improve the financial conditions of citizens, while Democrats were concerned with putting more money in the hands of government officials. He said, “Our liberal friends believe the bureaucrats deserve the money more than the parents . . . We believe the family budget is primary, the liberal Democrats believe the federal budget comes first” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 134).

Gingrich argued that compromise with Democrats had proven a failed strategy to balance the federal budget and reform the welfare system because Democrats sought only to enact policies that continued the status quo. He said,

The fact is this – I watched Jimmy Carter try to reform the system. I watched Ronald Reagan try to reform the system. I watched George Bush try to reform the system, and now I am watching Bill Clinton. President Clinton had a Democratic House and a Democratic Senate for two years. They could not pass reform. (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 294)

In each of the previous administrations, compromise ultimately doomed the conservative agenda. He argued, “I watched the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations talk themselves into tax increases to ‘fight the deficit,’ and each time the liberals simply took the new revenues as an excuse for even higher spending” (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 89). It was time for a new strategy. “In 1994,” Gingrich (1995b) claimed, “the message we heard very clearly all spring and summer was that there are millions of Americans who want real change and they want Washington to quit behaving like an empirical capital that lorded over them.” The key to the real change Gingrich spoke of was to ensure that conservatives advanced their agenda, with or without Clinton and the Democrats. “The Democrats’ reflexive opposition to the Contract,” Gingrich (1996) claimed, illustrated “how ideologically opposed they were to any change in the status quo and how far out of touch they had become with the American people” (p. 118).

Gingrich was confident that conservatives would have their day because he had ignited a revolution. He said,

One of my key decisions in November of 1994 was to launch a revolutionary rather than a reformist effort. A revolutionary launches sixty battles. Two things happen: each battle attracts its particular group, so you can increase your total energy level enormously, and you spread the opposition—the establishment, the decaying old

order. You spread their attention so they can't focus. They can beat you on any five things. They can't beat you on sixty. You want to launch every possible fight simultaneously so that they are so distracted, and then they get together in a room because they're an organized establishment. We are a disorganized revolution. (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 276)

The revolution, in Gingrich's view, was most likely to succeed if conservatives rejected compromise at every turn, even when Clinton's New Democrat agenda was closely in line with that of Gingrich. Gingrich told his followers that if they fought "on our terms rather than Clinton's, we'll win" (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 300).

The Gingrich revolution sought to destroy liberal government. "America is too big, too diverse, and too free," Gingrich (1995c) said, "to be run by bureaucrats sitting in office buildings in one city. We must replace our centralized, micromanaged, Washington-based bureaucracy with a dramatically decentralized system more appropriate to a continent-wide country" (p. 9). Gingrich believed that the first step to accomplish that goal was to reject the Democrats' budget proposals. He chastised Democrats for failing to curtail the federal budget, claiming they should be "ashamed" for their willingness to "defend a system that has clearly failed at incalculable human cost" (Gingrich, 1995c, p. 72). In Gingrich's opinion, it would be better to let the government shut down than to give Clinton and the Democrats a legislative victory on the budget. He exclaimed "he would never let a centrist budget get to the House floor," and true to his word, the stalemate on the federal budget resulted in two government shutdowns between December 1995 and January 1996 (Drew, 1996, p. 328). Prior to the first shutdown, when asked in an interview in *The New Yorker* if he "was really serious about forcing the President into a choice between supporting the conservative agenda

and shutting down the government,” he replied, “We are going to make sure our stuff gets signed, and we are going to take what steps we have to take to do that” (cited in Kelly, 1995). Gingrich believed this strategy would allow conservatives to blame Clinton for inaction on key policy issues, particularly welfare reform. He said,

We were elected by a country that wants dramatic change, so, no, we will not back down. We will pick our fights pretty carefully, to make sure they are over something the country wants—welfare reform, for example. And I’m not sure the President will want to be in the position of shutting down the government in order to block something that most of the people in the country want. (cited in Kelly, 1995)

Though the government shutdowns ultimately backfired, “House Republicans tried to use the threat of a breach in the debt limit and of shutdowns in major parts of the government to bludgeon the president into accepting their demands to cut spending and cut regulations and taxes” (Mann & Ornstein, 2016, p. 41).

On both the federal budget and welfare reform, Gingrich instructed conservatives to toe the line, even when Democrats offered to compromise. Clinton tried on multiple occasions to incorporate a portion of Gingrich’s policy proposals into his agenda. For example, when “Republicans proposed over \$1 trillion in spending cuts over a seven-year period, as well as \$353 billion in tax cuts and increases in defense spending,” the Clinton administration “responded by calling for \$1.1 trillion in spending cuts over ten years and a much smaller tax cut that would only benefit the middle class” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 127).

Clinton’s capitulation to Gingrich’s policy proposals was perceived as not only insufficient, but also insulting. Gingrich said, “The White House . . . has crossed the line. We want them to understand that if they want a long-term stand-off, we are prepared to stay the

course for as long as it takes” (cited in Zelizer, 2007, p. 127). Gingrich unwaveringly insisted there would be no compromise on the budget or welfare reform, allowing his conservative allies to again criticize Clinton for inaction. John Boehner, for example, said, “We’ve finally found something that Bill Clinton stands for: he doesn’t want to balance the budget” (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 335). John Kasich argued that when it came to deciding the federal budget, “We’re not going to budge. We’re not going to change” (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 339). Conservatives’ strategy was simple, in Gingrich’s view, “if we don’t provide the money, in the end they run out of options” (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 336). It was this sort of tactical extremism that Gingrich considered “the real revolution” (cited in Drew, 1996, p. 256). Gingrich believed that the result of this strategy would be that Clinton and the Democrats would be forced to adopt Gingrich’s policy proposals entirely, including legislation that required balancing the federal budget by 2002 and enacting welfare reform. He was mistaken.

Gingrich convinced movement conservatives that an unapologetic refusal to compromise would bring the policies of the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Clinton administration crashing down. Activists “saw themselves as GOP firebrands out to stop their party from aiding and abetting the liberal Democratic agenda” (Critchlow, 2004, p. 703). Haley Barbour, the head of the Republican National Committee, argued, “Compromising with Democrats is like paying the cannibals to eat you last” (cited in Critchlow, 2004, p. 704). Robert L. Livingston, then a Republican representative from Louisiana, went farther, stating, “We are going to be revolutionary. This is not patty cake, this is not pick-up sticks. This is serious. We’re going at their [the Democrats’] throats” (cited in Critchlow, 2004, p. 704).

Gingrich justified the use of scorched earth tactics based on the idea that ideological realignment was at hand. According to Weber, Gingrich sought to “change the political dynamic that was in motion at the time of the New Deal” (cited in Drew, 1996, pp. 26-27). Weber added that Gingrich “believes that to triumph politically you have to smash ‘tax-and-spend liberalism,’ which has dominated our domestic politics for sixty years” (cited in Drew, 1996, pp. 26-27). The goal of political realignment, in the view of Gingrich and his subordinates, required a scorched earth politics. He used politics to label Democrats as “defenders of the ‘old order,’ of the ‘welfare state,’ of the status quo” (Drew, 1996, p. 49).

Gingrich’s revolution, a scorched earth conservatism defined by refusal to compromise with the Clinton administration, produced both political benefits and problems. On the one hand, the conservative coalition Gingrich created was labeled “Newt’s Frankenstein monster,” and the media turned on Republicans “by presenting them as unwilling to compromise and as prepared to abandon popular government services” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 127). On the other hand, it was clear that by adopting an absolutist and uncompromising approach to policy, “Gingrich had set the agenda” (Drew, 1996, p. 283). Drew (1996) added,

The Senate and the President had acquiesced in his proposal to produce a balanced budget within a fixed number of years—a decision from which a great deal else followed. Now Clinton and the Senate were working within Gingrich’s frame of reference. The direction of the government had been turned around. (p. 283)

Even when Clinton and the Democrats did not bend to Gingrich’s will, conservatives turned to the appropriations process in order to force policies through the Congress without Democratic support. This strategy highlighted the ideological tension among “competing

philosophies about the role of government,” resulting in “the kinds of sophisticated cuts that furthered conservatives’ purposes, but were all but invisible to the public” (Drew, 1996, p. 268).

Conclusion

Fundamentally, Gingrich did not change conservative ideology, but he did change how it was defended and he did so in a dishonest fashion. Gingrich defended the same small government worldview endorsed by Reagan’s critics. He did so with a sunny, Reagan-esque rhetorical vision, but without any of Reagan’s pragmatism (Shirley, 2017). Even when Gingrich appeared to act in a pragmatic way, it was clear that he was planting the seeds for an absolutist rejection of compromise with Democrats and establishment Republicans. This strategy allowed conservatives to blame Democrats for inaction and forced Clinton to eventually accept Gingrich’s proposals on the federal budget and welfare reform. One might object that this revealed how “Clinton was ideologically flexible and strategically sophisticated enough to simply co-opt their ideas, including balanced budgets and welfare reform” (Lewis, 2016, p. 47). However, in reality, it was evidence that “Bill Clinton figured out he was still operating under a conservative paradigm” (Lewis, 2016, p. 47). Both Gingrich and his supporters in Congress and the conservative movement “were much more extreme than their predecessors in their refusal to learn how to work in the political system or to build any kind of coalitions” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 125). Instead, Gingrich struck a Machiavellian rhetorical pose of bipartisanship, masking a scorched earth politics that demeaned the poor and minorities while claiming to save those very groups.

Where conservatives believed Bush’s presidency “had been mostly marked by failures and reversals,” Gingrich “got things done” (Shirley, 2017, p. 423). Conservatives

called the 104th Congress the “Gingrich Revolution” because, unlike Bush, “Gingrich and the incoming Republican class jubilantly gave the middle finger to the ultra-leftists and organized their own orientation” toward the federal budget and welfare programs (Shirley, 2017, p. 424). To many conservatives, Gingrich had led the movement “into the Promised Land,” a time and place where the liberal welfare state could be dismantled (Haskins, 2006, p. 89). Though the Reagan Revolution had been “cast aside in 1988,” it was “rekindled” by Gingrich; conservatives “turned to Reaganism once again and Gingrich presented it in the form of the ‘Contract with America.’ He knew Washington bureaucrats were the real enemy of freedom and innovation” (Shirley, 2017, p. 419).

Gingrich had a profound impact on American politics in general and the conservative movement in particular. By transforming the speakership into “unprecedented instruments of personal and political power,” Gingrich “changed the center of gravity” in American politics and disrupted “the grand centralizing legacy of New Deal and Great Society” policies (Morrow, 1995). Commentators argued that he had “killed the old order of American politics,” as was evident when President Clinton accepted conservative policy proposals “that [previously] would have seemed like political suicide” for a Democrat (Gibbs & Tumulty, 1995). Ultimately, Gingrich’s tactical extremism accomplished two major goals. In January 1996, “Clinton sent a message to Congress with a plan to balance the budget by 2002, thereby adopting a central platform of the Republicans in the budget battles” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 128). Additionally, “in 1996 Clinton agreed to sign legislation that ended the federal welfare program . . . which seemed to confirm the ideological message of the conservative movement” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 128). On August 22nd of that year, Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, a clear indication

that the Gingrich revolution had shifted American politics to the right. Perhaps more fundamentally, the Gingrich revolution played a role in forcing Clinton (1996) to admit that, “the era of big government is over.”

Gingrich’s rhetorical leadership encouraged conservatives to engage in extremist tactics, leading the movement toward ideological purity. His aggressive leadership “just about finished off the political consensus initiated 60 years ago by Franklin D. Roosevelt” by feeding on “the smoldering anger of a nation suffering from stagnant wages, chronic overspending by the Federal Government, the failure of the public schools, the decline of public decency and the stubborn inability of the American underclass to rise out of poverty” (Stacks & Goodgame, 1995). The road to the 21st century, as told by Gingrich, was simple: “tear down the liberal welfare state, cut taxes, cut government spending, reduce entitlements, balance the budget, sign the Contract with America, dump Clinton and his liberal friends, give power to the states” (Stacks & Goodgame, 1995). This was a potent rhetorical formula because Gingrich had “concocted a stew of beliefs that blends the sunny economics of Ronald Reagan and Jack Kemp, the stern moralism of the Christian right and enough giddy futurism either to excite or to frighten his followers” (Stacks & Goodgame, 1995). Whereas Reagan (1981a) saw government generally as “the problem,” Gingrich focused his criticism and saw “the welfare programs” as the root of the big government problem (cited in Stacks & Goodgame, 1995).

By adopting new political tactics, particularly a scored earth conservatism and the promotion of the opportunity society, Gingrich’s “conservative revolution” succeeded insofar as it broke “the intellectual gridlock in Washington” and made a strong case that “The liberal welfare-state model of American government has run its course; it has not ended poverty and

has lost the faith of the American people” (Stacks & Goodgame, 1995). Democrats had extraordinary difficulty competing with Gingrich’s budget and welfare reform plans. “The heart of the matter,” Drew (1996) argued, “was that the Democrats had failed to come up with an alternative vision. They were reduced to opposing what the Republicans were doing—making themselves vulnerable to Gingrich’s charges that they were the forces of the status quo, the protectors of the welfare state” (p. 181). The payoff of Gingrich’s approach was especially clear with the passage of both a plan to balance the federal budget by 2002 and welfare reform. Gingrich’s welfare reform policy “coalesced multiple ideological strands protecting private property, maintaining traditional gender roles and protecting the family, and playing to encoded racism. It also provided a mechanism for recruiting many people and groups that had not been part of the Right in the past” (Williams, 1997, p. 17).

Conservatives praised Gingrich’s successful push for welfare reform as the beginning of an American revival. However, the landmark welfare reform bill did little to help the nation’s poorest citizens, who were supposedly in marginalized conditions because of the New Deal and Great Society policies that formed the liberal welfare state. In fact, it made life drastically worse for the very people it claimed to help. Overall, welfare reform had devastating effects. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the passage of welfare reform served to “shroud many disturbing realities for millions of current and former welfare recipients” (Boushey, 2002). For example, “A single parent with two children needs about \$30,000 to afford the basic necessities of life,” but after the passage of welfare reform, mean earnings for welfare recipients remained stagnant at “between \$10,000 and \$14,000 annually . . . well below the amount a family needs to purchase adequate housing, food, health care, child care, and other basic necessities (Boushey, 2002). Moreover, impoverishment

“deepened for those who remain poor” (Boushey, 2002). This was especially the case for households headed by single mothers, who were “deeper in poverty than such families were in 1995” (Boushey, 2002). Despite marginal improvements to the overall economy, “declines in the effectiveness of the safety net in reducing poverty among families headed by working single mothers offset the effect” (Boushey, 2002). In addition to reducing the quality of life for former welfare recipients overall by keeping them below the poverty line, the welfare reform bill impacted particular communities.

Immigrants, both legal and undocumented, were also harmed. They were suddenly deprived of basic government assistance. In addition to new immigrants losing access to government assistance (Padilla, 1997), “the process of taking the half-million immigrants already receiving food stamps off the rolls . . . caused delays, confusion, and turmoil within the welfare bureaucracy” rather than stabilizing it (Consenza, 1997, p. 2066). Welfare reform also imposed “official value judgments” on mothers, forcing them to “surrender basic constitutional and human rights as a condition of receiving economic assistance for their families,” such as privacy and reproductive rights (Thomas, 2001, p. 180). It codified the “*a priori* presumption” that:

Poverty and the need for public assistance are not the product of misfortune or discrimination or the structural constraints operations on women’s lives, but the willful result of single motherhood borne of women's deficient values and attitudes toward work, marriage and childbearing: women's inability or unwillingness to work for wages; their refusal or inability to control their fertility; and their inability or unwillingness to get married and stay married. (Thomas, 2001, p. 180, emphasis in original)

Rather than help women earn livable wages, welfare reform invaded “rights that in other contexts are shielded as fundamental: procreative liberty, vocational choice, marital freedom, and the right to the care and custody of one's own children” (Thomas, 2001, p. 181).

Welfare reform was also highly racialized. The “ostensibly race-neutral policies” contained in the welfare reform bill did not help minorities; rather they served “the interests of white elites” (Limbert & Bullock, 2005, p. 255). Gingrich’s push for welfare reform is a prime example of “how elites distance themselves from the hardships of poverty and deny responsibility for socially constructed inequities (e.g. class, race/ethnicity, and gender hierarchies) and oppressive welfare policies” (Limbert & Bullock, 2005, p. 257). Key to conservatives’ success on welfare reform was “the selling of the American public on the notion that dramatic increases [sic] in illegitimacy is a central problem in the US” (Williams, 1997, p. 14). The policy appealed to the “significant proportion of the US population” that regards “work as an antidote to welfare-induced ‘dependency,’” enabling conservatives to liken “welfare mothers to wild animals who become artificially dependent when given ‘handouts,’” especially if those mothers are not white (Limbert & Bullock, 2005, p. 259). According to Lucy Williams (1997), “By articulating a definition of poverty that associated it explicitly with illegitimacy, then associating illegitimacy with race, the Right made it acceptable to express blatantly racist concepts without shame” (p. 15).

Finally, welfare reform significantly impacted healthcare for the working class. The welfare bill did not result in “sudden prosperity among the poor,” but instead “the creation of elaborate barriers to assistance” (Rosenbaum & Maloy, 1999, p. 1469). Even if welfare reform had accomplished the idealistic goals promised by Gingrich and his allies, it still “would not negate the need for public insurance” (Rosenbaum & Maloy, 1999, p. 1469).

Because the existing Medicaid program relied on eligibility standards and enrollment procedures that were tied to the repealed Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, “Health insurance coverage among the working poor” remained abysmal, and Medicaid was largely “incompatible with the new welfare system” (Rosenbaum & Maloy, 1999, pp. 1469-1470). As a result of being “enacted in haste and in a superheated political atmosphere, when reasonable discourse was minimal,” the welfare reform bill was a clear sign that, “maneuvering for political gains at the expense of the poor was both accepted and indeed lauded” (Rosenbaum & Maloy, 1999, pp. 1470-1471).

While Gingrich received strong praise from some conservatives for his attacks on the liberal welfare state, he was not universally popular. In fact, many conservatives despised him for not going far enough in cutting government. Conservative critics viewed Gingrich as a continuation of the movement’s failed attempts rather than a revolutionary, Irving Kristol argued, “We’re not in the midst of any kind of revolution,” and added that Gingrich “may have been misled by the rhetoric of revolution, having an exaggerated sense of what can be accomplished” (cited in Kamlani, 1995). Alan Brinkley agreed, “I don’t think what Gingrich is talking about is a revolution. I don’t think he has any vision of overturning the fundamental institutions of our society” (cited in Kamlani, 1995). Moreover, other conservatives believed Gingrich had not succeeded in advancing the movement’s goals and had instead only strengthened the liberal welfare state. Ron Paul (1995) argued, for “All this talk of revolution and radical change,” Gingrich and the Contract with America “scuttled the recent window of opportunity for cutting government” (pp. 6-7). In fact, Paul (1995) concluded, the likes of “Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole are two peas in a big-government pod” (p. 8).

One significant detractor of Gingrich was Patrick Buchanan. On the one hand, Buchanan shared Gingrich's disdain for the liberal welfare state. In *Right From the Beginning*, Buchanan (1990a) argued, "Washington is another city, a city where more than half of pregnancies end in abortions, more than half of all live births are out of wedlock—a city where the 'welfare culture' has consolidated its beachhead, and narcotics and crime are always with us" (p. 123). On the other hand, however, Buchanan believed the Gingrich revolution "had done nothing to stop the decline of the culture" (Stanley, 2012, p. 127). In fact, Buchanan referred to Gingrich as a "Big Rock Candy Mountain conservative" for his belief "that social ills could be cured by tax cuts and technological innovation" (cited in Stanley, 2012, p. 224). Instead of the Gingrich revolution, centered on empowering congressional activism, Buchanan called for a "new conservatism . . . not about any ideology or paradigm of empowerment. It is about old things, the permanent things—about a moral vision of man rooted in the Judeo-Christian revelation and 2,000 years of Western history" (cited in "Buchanan, Allies," 1993). In the next chapter, I explore a second symbolic trajectory of conservatism that emerged in the 1990s, largely inspired by Pat Buchanan's paleoconservative alliance and defined by a quasi-theological cultural nationalism.

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Chapter 4 - Patrick Buchanan and the Buchanan-Brigades: Winning the culture war for the soul of America

Many conservatives of the 1990s espoused a vision that low taxes, deregulation and cuts in social programs would produce strong economic growth. In the previous chapter, I explained conservatives' view that fulfilling the tenants of Newt Gingrich's Contract with America and adopting the opportunity society would produce strong growth. They believed that free market would produce technological innovations, keeping the nation in front of its international competitors. However, not all movement conservatives were certain that the Gingrich revolution could accomplish these goals. In fact, some believed that Gingrich and his allies would actually expand government.

Patrick Buchanan represented one such strain of conservatism. Buchanan believed that Gingrich and others were actually advocates of big government. With the end of the Cold War, tensions in the conservative movement became apparent, a point evident in Buchanan's comment, "Before true conservatives can ever take back the country, they are first going to have to take back their movement" (cited in Durham, 2000, p. 149). According to the *New York Times*, Buchanan exposed "fault lines in the conservative movement at a time when the twin epoxies that bound conservatives -- Ronald Reagan and international communism" had faded (Holmes, 1992). Buchanan's conservatism was rooted in nostalgia for a time without what he saw as a morally insidious, powerful centralized government and when Christianity guided the nation (Stanley, 2012, pp. 141-142). In addition, Buchanan represented "a politics that rejected the economics-centered conservatism of such figures as [Jack] Kemp and Gingrich," and also "was unashamed in calling for the defence of an endangered white race" (Durham, 2000, pp. 154-155).

In this chapter, I argue that a second symbolic trajectory emerged in the 1990s alongside that of the Gingrich revolution. This trajectory, championed by Buchanan, was defined by a *quasi-theological cultural nationalism* based on ideas more extreme than the Gingrich revolution. Buchanan represented a clear evolution of conservative ideas that lacked not only Reagan's pragmatism, but also his optimism. Unlike the optimistic views of Reagan, Bush, or even Gingrich, "Buchanan's notion of a country in danger gave a particular meaning to his social conservatism . . . in the post-Reagan era" (Durham, 2000, pp. 151-152). He was "engaged in a battle not only to define America, but to define conservatism; not only to argue who or what could enter a nation, but who or what belonged inside a movement" (Durham, 2000, p. 167). Buchanan claimed that many members of the movement had sold out to big government and were contributing to the nation's moral decay and surrender to the New World Order globalist regime.

In what follows, I tell the story of how Buchanan and his followers moved to the right toward an extremist rejection of government in both domestic and international affairs. Buchanan's followers perceived him as "the standard-bearer of a new movement, emerging out of the crisis of conservatism that, from its inception in the mid-1950s, had never come to understand the need not to preserve but to overthrow the existing order" (Durham, 2000, p. 158). First, I describe the symbolic system of Buchanan's conservatism and explain how he forged an alliance between traditionalist, Christian, paleoconservative, and paleolibertarian activists. This group became known as the Buchanan-Brigades. Second, I trace the evolution of a quasi-theological, cultural nationalist conservatism in the 1990s by drawing on themes from Buchanan's rhetoric, particularly from his three failed attempts to become President of the United States.

Igniting the culture war for the soul of America

Though he was not fond of the label, Buchanan's views were consistent with paleoconservatism. He was, in fact, "widely seen" as the leader of the paleoconservative turn for adopting the phrase "America First" as a principle of his philosophy on government (Ashbee, 2000, p. 75). Paleoconservatives consisted of "a ragtag army of conservative misfits," joined together by opposition to the "Liberal administrations of the 1960s and 1970s" that in their view "used big government to promote socialism and secularism" (Stanley, 2012, p. 141). Buchanan and his followers believed the nation was in moral decay and supported a neo-isolationist foreign policy. Critics lambasted Buchanan for these beliefs. For example, Wilbert A. Tatum (1996) described Buchanan as:

A right-wing conservative without apology. A protectionist with an attitude. An isolationist with glee. A racist with hatred in his soul. A religious zealot with the kind of charismatic stridency that can deliver the nation into hopelessness and fear . . . the man to beat as Republicans marched toward their goal of reinventing this nation as the new last bastion of white supremacy in the world. (p. 12)

This strain of conservatism formed an "uneasy," quasi-theological alliance between traditionalist, paleoconservative, paleolibertarian, and religious social conservatives (Antonio, 2000, p. 64). Buchanan's rhetoric acted as a "resonance machine" that did not require its major constituencies to "always the share the same religious and economic *doctrines*" (Connolly, 2005, p. 871, emphasis in original). A "resentment against cultural diversity, economic egalitarianism, and the future" convinced conservatives who otherwise might have disagreed to band together against "similar targets of hatred and marginalization, such as gay marriage, women who seek equal status in work, family and business;

secularists, atheists, devotees of Islamic faith, and African American residents of the inner city” (Connolly, 2005, p. 879).

Buchanan’s cultural critique was widely supported by Christian conservatives. His “ferveant nationalism” may have isolated him from conservatives associated with the Gingrich revolution and establishment Republicans, but “tensions between sections of the movement and the Republican hierarchy substantially increased Christian Right support” for Buchanan’s cause (Durham, 2000, pp. 160-161). Christian conservatives were particularly attracted to the anti-intellectual aspects of Buchanan’s rhetoric. To Buchanan and his religious supporters, the “real enemy” of the conservative movement was “multiculturalism in all its forms” (Alterman, 1995). He led a “nationwide right-wing jihad against art and public culture” and was “suspicious of federal participation in cultural and educational issues” (Alterman, 1995). The country, according to Buchanan, had to be defended “against those who indoctrinated children with ‘moral relativism’ and ‘an anti-Western ideology’” (cited in Durham, 2000, p. 153). Because of his success courting religious conservatives, Buchanan “convinced many conservatives to close ranks around the evangelicals’ view of women and the family” (Judis, 1992).

In addition to his Christian worldview and focus on white Americans, Buchanan supported an anti-globalist ideology. Where some conservatives believed the U.S. had an obligation to intervene in foreign affairs and that doing so could yield economic benefits, Buchanan consistently argued for an economic and cultural nationalism and claimed that meddling overseas would only serve to drain the nation’s resources while simultaneously strengthening corporate and international influence over American politics. Buchanan’s nationalist philosophy of government was also defined by a highly racialized critique of

immigration. His “calls for a nationalist economic and foreign policy were joined to an argument about immigration and American identity” (Durham, 2000, p. 153). He “praised anti-immigration campaigners for raising the question of America’s right to protect its character as a predominantly white society,” even proclaiming that America would “become ‘a Third World country’ if it did not ‘build a sea wall against the waves of immigration rolling over our shores’” (cited in Durham, 2000, p. 153). Buchanan was also well known for making “anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi comments” and recruiting “extremist staffers” associated with “white supremacy groups and militias” (“Pat Buchanan’s Skeleton Closet”). In fact, during the 1990s, Buchanan was considered “the most prominent defender of accused Nazis in America” (“Pat Buchanan’s Skeleton Closet”).

Two events of the early 1990s built support for Buchanan’s quasi-theological, cultural nationalism. First, when George H. W. Bush (1991) addressed the nation on the invasion of Iraq on January 16, 1991, he called for a “new world order” where the U.S. would cooperate with the United Nations and other international institutions to ensure world peace. In Buchanan’s (1996) view, the New World Order would only result in “surrendering the national sovereignty of the United States of America.” Second, from late April to early May of 1992; a series of riots took place in Los Angeles that responded to unjust police brutality, particularly the assault on Rodney King. To Buchanan (1992a), this was a sign that moral decay was crushing the nation, and he called for conservatives to “take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country.”

In part because of Buchanan’s harsh, unapologetic rhetoric, the culture war of the 1990s ignited a battle between the Buchanan-Brigades, liberals, establishment Republicans, and the remainder of the conservative movement (Alterman, 1995). To save the nation,

Buchanan espoused a quasi-theological, cultural nationalism that established a symbol system in competition with the Gingrich revolution and other movement conservatives. Two major trends emerged in this symbolic trajectory. The first trend was a *return to the past* that rejected what Buchanan perceived as a dystopian society resulting from cultural decline. Buchanan argued that a drift away from Christian values and the old order of Republican government had left the nation embroiled in a religious and cultural war, pitting the nation's innocent citizens against the sinners defending liberal progress. For example, Buchanan (1999) released an editorial on his website during his third presidential campaign, where he argued, "The counterculture of the 1960s is now the dominant culture . . . What our leaders once believed to be symptoms of social decline many now celebrate as harbingers of a freer, better society. What was once decried as decadence is now embraced as progress."

The second trend was support for an agenda including a restoration of American sovereignty by adopting an isolationist view of foreign policy and a rejection of U.S. participation in free trade and international institutions such as the United Nations or International Monetary Fund. For example, during his third presidential campaign in 2000, Buchanan (2000) delivered an address in which he called for "New Patriotism, where America's sovereignty is wholly and fully restored." In that same address, Buchanan (2000) stated that he intended "to isolate America from the bloody territorial and ethnic wars of the new century" because "By my reading of the Constitution, the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who take an oath of loyalty to the United States, are never to be used as the imperial troops of anybody's New World Order." In an earlier address at the 1995 United We Stand America conference, Buchanan (1995b) said, "I want to say to all the globalists and internationalists . . . when I raise my hand to take the oath of office, your New World Order

comes crashing down. It is time we begin looking out for our own country and our people first for a change.”

Both trends were prevalent in Buchanan’s rhetoric during his three failed attempts to win the presidency. Buchanan first attempted to become president in the 1992 election, competing against George H. W. Bush during the primaries. In his campaign, Buchanan linked Bush with conservatives who had sold out to the liberal agenda and globalist regime. He claimed Bush was a “globalist,” and stated that Buchanan (1992a) and his followers were “nationalists” who would “put America first.” However, after an unsuccessful campaign in the 1992 primaries against the incumbent, Buchanan recognized that the only way to advance his agenda would be to encourage his followers to support Bush. “Having battled and been ultimately defeated by George H. W. Bush,” Buchanan recognized he could “keep the party from coming unglued by urging them to co-opt at least part of his message” (Lewis, 2016, p. xv). He ran twice more in 1996 and 2000, and in each attempt, his campaign rhetoric tried to transform the Republican Party based on his ideological vision. The failures of this effort eventually lead him to leave the Republican Party. Over time, Buchanan’s ideas became increasingly out of line with the mainstream conservative movement.

Combined, the two trends produced a symbolic trajectory of conservatism that extended small government conservatism toward a more extreme anti-government perspective that also smacked of anti-intellectualism, discrimination, and isolationism. Over time, Buchanan’s views became an outlier of the Republican Party, resulting in his departure from the GOP in 2000. In what follows, I analyze representative examples of Buchanan’s campaign rhetoric to illustrate how his quasi-theological, cultural nationalism pushed the conservative movement much farther to the right.

A return to the past: Restoring American culture

Buchanan's small government philosophy was defined by a quasi-theological nostalgia that sought a return to an old order where the nation was guided primarily by Christian ethics. Unlike his conservative predecessors, Buchanan did not share a positive or optimistic view of the future. Rather, Buchanan (1992b) emphasized the "Old America," as an antidote to the cultural conditions in which moral "standards are gone," leading to a cultural dystopia. A return to the past meant preserving "the idea of Americans as one nation, one people . . . the good, old idea that all Americans, of all races, colors and creeds, were men and women to whom we owed loyalty, allegiance and love" (Buchanan, 1995a).

Two sub-themes emerged in Buchanan's calls for a return to the past. The first sub-theme was that the nation was embroiled in a cultural war for the soul of America. In his view, moral dystopia had germinated from liberal ideology and the counterculture, threatening the nation. The second sub-theme was that the nation was Christian and that the government should reflect that fact. I now treat each sub-theme in turn.

A culture war in a moral dystopia

The first sub-theme of Buchanan's nostalgic conservative philosophy was that years of liberal governance had plunged the nation into a moral dystopia, igniting a cultural war for the soul of America that conservatives were obligated to fight. Engaging in a cultural war was necessary because liberal values had already infected the nation in multiple arenas, ranging from government assistance programs to popular culture and education. In his 1992 presidential campaign announcement address, Buchanan declared that the welfare state had destroyed the nation's sense of morality. He demanded that it was time "to take a hard look at the welfare state" (Buchanan, 1991). Buchanan (1991) argued government had "poured

hundreds of billions of dollars into Great Society programs” that not only imposed severe financial costs, but also social costs. “Whatever the motives of those who built this mammoth state enterprise,” he said, “our financial loss has been exceeded only by the social catastrophe it created” (Buchanan, 1991).

According to Buchanan, federal social programs exacerbated social ills rather than reducing them. For example, Buchanan (1991) argued, because of welfare programs, “High school test scores drop almost every year, as the levels of violent crime reach new heights. Narcotics have ravaged a generation.” In addition, the liberal values imposed by government assistance programs had impacted the nation’s culture. “Our popular culture of books, movies and films is as polluted as Lake Erie once was,” Buchanan (1991) exclaimed, “The welfare state has bred a generation of children and youth with no fathers, no faith and no dreams - other than the lure of the streets.”

Although Buchanan was unsuccessful in ousting Bush during the primaries, he recognized that the alternative to a second Bush term was Bill Clinton. If Clinton became president, in Buchanan’s opinion, the nation’s popular culture and system of education would be irreversibly poisoned by the liberal counterculture. Consequently, Buchanan (1992a) told his supporters that though they “disagreed with President Bush” at times, “the right place for us to be now . . . is right beside George Bush.” Even if Bush represented an imperfect conservatism, his reelection was necessary for the conservative movement to win the culture war. Buchanan said choosing to stand beside Bush meant,

The freedom to choose religious schools, and we stand with him against the amoral idea that gay and lesbian couples should have the same standing in law as married men and women. We stand with President Bush -- We stand with President Bush for

right-to-life and for voluntary prayer in the public schools. And we stand against putting our wives and daughters and sisters into combat units of the United States Army. And we stand, my -- my friends -- We also stand with President Bush in favor of the right of small towns and communities to control the raw sewage of pornography that so terribly pollutes our popular culture. (Buchanan, 1992a)

Buchanan (1992a) adamantly urged his supporters to come to Bush's aid because ensuring Clinton's defeat was an obligation necessary for conservatives to "take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country."

The 1992 presidential election represented a significant moment for Buchanan and his followers because of the president's influence on the nation's moral compass. Citing Harry Truman, Buchanan (1992a) told listeners that the presidency was "preeminently a place of moral leadership." According to Buchanan, the Clinton/Gore ticket represented "unrestricted abortion on demand" and "the most pro-lesbian and pro-gay ticket in history" (Buchanan, 1992a). Buchanan (1992a) argued what Americans would get with the Clintons and Gore was "radical feminism." He added,

The agenda that Clinton & Clinton would impose on America: abortion on demand, a litmus test for the Supreme Court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat units. That's change, all right. But that's not the kind of change America needs. It's not the kind of change America wants. And it's not the kind of change we can abide in a nation we still call "God's country." (Buchanan, 1992a)

In Buchanan's view, the nation's culture was not compatible with the Democrats' radical feminism.

For Buchanan, there were no alternatives to a fully-fledged war on liberal ideology and the counterculture. He said, “We Americans are locked in a cultural war for the soul of our country” (Buchanan, 1992b). Buchanan (1995b) argued a Clinton administration was likely to provide unrestricted access to abortion, which he viewed as “the benchmark of a society literally hellbent on suicide.” If conservatives could reelect Bush, then the country had a chance of dodging “The Bosnia of the cultural war” (Buchanan, 1992b). Additionally, a Clinton presidency would “elevate gay liaisons to the same moral and legal plane as traditional marriage,” which was “morally wrong and medically ruinous” (Buchanan, 1992b). “Let me be blunt;” Buchanan (1992b) exclaimed, “to force it [liberal culture] upon us is like forcing Christians to burn incense to the emperor.”

Buchanan (1992a) claimed that, “This election is about who we are. It is about what we believe and what we stand for as Americans.” Americans had a choice. If they elected the Clintons and Gore, the “religious war going on in this country” would be certain to end in defeat (Buchanan, 1992a). It was no ordinary conflict, but in fact a “cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America” (Buchanan, 1992a). “And in that struggle for the soul of America,” Buchanan (1992a) argued, “Clinton & Clinton are on the other side, and George Bush is on our side. And so to the Buchanan Brigades out there, we have to come home and stand beside George Bush.”

A return to the old order

The second sub-theme of Buchanan’s nostalgic conservative philosophy was that a return to the origins of American Republicanism was the only route the nation could take to escape the moral dystopia that defined the 1990s. In his view, conservatives needed to ensure

the liberal counterculture would be replaced with traditional Judeo-Christian values. For Buchanan, a return to those principles was necessary to preserve values and ideas that made the country exceptional. A return to the past meant for Buchanan (1991) “that our Judeo-Christian values are going to be preserved, and our Western heritage is going to be handed down to future generations, not dumped onto some land fill called multi-culturalism.”

At the 1992 Republican National Convention, Buchanan (1992a) praised Bush as a “defender of right-to-life, and a champion of the Judeo-Christian values and beliefs upon which America was founded.” If Buchanan’s (1992a) supporters did not help Bush get reelected, the alternative was a “slick” version of “the discredited liberalism of the 1960s and the failed liberalism of the 1970s” that would prevent the nation from preserving the most important aspects of its heritage. A victory for Clinton meant a victory for the counterculture and an endorsement of a presidential candidate who “had become the purveyor of a destructive, degenerate, ugly, pornographic, Marxist, anti-American ideology” (Buchanan, 1992b). “The secularists who have captured our culture have substituted a New Age Gospel,” Buchanan (1992b) concluded, with governing axioms that “There are no absolute values in the universe; there are no fixed and objective standards of right and wrong. There is no God.”

A return to an old order meant restoring schools to their proper function of not only educating the nation’s youth, but also instilling them with Christian ethics and emphasizing the importance of religious adherence. For example, in his second presidential campaign announcement address, Buchanan (1995a) said, “When many of us were young, public schools and Catholic schools, Christian schools and Jewish schools, instructed children in their religious heritage and Judeo-Christian values, in what was right and what was wrong.

We were taught about the greatness and goodness of this land we call God's country, in which we are all so fortunate to live.” However, that was no longer the case. He added,

But today, in too many of our schools our children are being robbed of their innocence. Their minds are being poisoned against their Judeo-Christian heritage, against America's heroes and against American history, against the values of faith and family and country. Eternal truths that do not change from the Old and New Testament have been expelled from our public schools, and our children are being indoctrinated in moral relativism, and the propaganda of an anti-Western ideology. (Buchanan, 1995a)

“Parents everywhere are fighting for their children,” and to those parents, Buchanan (1995a) said, “This campaign is your campaign. Your fight is our fight. You have my solemn word: I will shut down the U.S. Department of Education, and parental right will prevail in our public schools again.”

In addition to preserving Christian ethics in schools, Buchanan believed it was crucial to return the broader culture to its founding values. “America’s culture” overall, its “movies, television, magazines, music” was “polluted with lewdness and violence” (Buchanan, 1995a). In fact,

Museums and art galleries welcome exhibits that mock our patriotism and our faith. Old institutions and symbols of an heroic, if tragic past—from Columbus Day to the Citadel at South Carolina, which graduated Captain McKenna, from Christmas carols in public schools to Southern war memorials—they are all under assault. (Buchanan, 1995a)

If elected president, Buchanan (1995a) promised, “to defend American traditions and the values of faith, family, and country, from any and all directions” and “chase the purveyors of sex and violence back beneath the rocks whence they came.”

While the nation was embroiled in a cultural war at home, it also faced severe problems abroad. Buchanan emphasized nationalist and isolationist themes. These themes collectively formed arguments that the nation needed to sever ties with international institutions and halt free trade. I now turn to the second trend in the symbolic trajectory of conservatism championed by Buchanan.

A new nationalism

In addition to a quasi-theological nostalgia, Buchanan argued that commitment to economic nationalism was necessary to recapture the nation’s sovereignty. When Buchanan (1991) sought the Republican nomination in the 1992 presidential election, his primary gripe with Bush was that the incumbent’s “New World Order” would “trade in our sovereignty” and leave the nation unprepared to deal with “The dynamic force” of nationalism. Instead, Buchanan (1991) called “for a new patriotism, where Americans begin to put the needs of Americans first, for a new nationalism” that would allow citizens to “recapture our capital city from an occupying army of lobbyists, and registered agents of foreign powers hired to look out for everybody and everything except the national interest of the United States.” To “take America back,” citizens needed to leave Bush’s New World Order philosophy behind, since the New World Order placed faith in the idea of “Pax Universalis” (Buchanan, 1991). Conversely, Buchanan (1991) argued that conservatives needed to “believe in the Old Republic” and “put America first” rather than “put American's wealth and power at the service of some vague New World Order.”

Two sub-themes are evident in Buchanan's support for economic nationalism. The first sub-theme was that the nation had an obligation to put America first. If the nation continued draining its resources by becoming involved in international affairs and offering support to international institutions, America would surrender its sovereignty. The second sub-theme was that government was corrupted by the New World Order-inspired globalist regime. While Buchanan shared a disdain for the welfare state with other conservatives, his reasoning was that federal social policies strengthened a corporatist regime whose policies would bankrupt the country. In order to steer the nation on the right path, government officials who supported such policies had to be removed from office. I now treat each sub-theme in turn.

America first

The first sub-theme of Buchanan's economic nationalism was a need to put America first. "What we need," he said, "is a new nationalism, a new patriotism, a new foreign policy that puts America first, and, not only first, but second and third as well" (Buchanan, 1990b, p. 82). Putting America first meant stopping costly and unnecessary military operations, securing the nation's borders, cutting international aid, and opposing free trade.

In Buchanan's view, for too long, America had fought the battles of other nations. Buchanan (1990b) argued, "America can only lead the world into the twenty-first century if she is not saddled down by all the baggage piled up in the twentieth. For fifty years, the United States has been drained of wealth and power by wars, cold and hot" (p. 81). In order to restore the nation to its true superpower status, Buchanan argued America could no longer intervene on behalf of its allies. "Let us go back to a time," Buchanan (1990b) exclaimed, "when the establishment wanted war, but the American people did not want to fight" (p. 78).

Rather than recklessly entering conflicts, “We must begin asking why some walls were built, and whether maintaining them any longer serves *our* interests” (Buchanan, 1990b, p. 80, emphasis in original).

Buchanan (1990b) argued that one reason for military “disengagement” was that the financial cost outweighed any benefit (p. 79). In his view, a policy of disengagement would not threaten our allies, since they were well equipped to defend themselves. “Would America be leaving our NATO allies in lurch? Hardly,” he argued, “NATO Europe contains fourteen states, which, together, are more populous and three times as wealthy as a Soviet Union deep in an economic, social, and political crisis” (Buchanan, 1990, p. 79). What we cannot do, Buchanan (1990b) concluded, was “permit endless transfusions of American capitalism into the mendicant countries and economic corpses of socialism, without bleeding to death” (p. 81).

Another necessary step to put America first was to focus the nation’s defense on threats closer to home. A part of that struggle would require a drastic cut in immigration. Buchanan depicted immigrants as dangerous and evil. According to Buchanan (1995a), “Every year millions of undocumented aliens break our laws, cross our borders, and demand social benefits paid for with the tax dollars of American citizens.” The result of undocumented immigration, Buchanan (1995a) claimed, was that “California is being bankrupted. Texas, Florida and Arizona are begging Washington to do its duty and defend the states as the Constitution requires” to no avail.

Another necessary step for prioritizing American interests was to cut international aid. “Americans are the most generous people in history,” Buchanan (1990b) claimed, “But our altruism has been exploited by the guilt-and-pity crowd. At home, a monstrous welfare

state of tens of thousands of drones and millions of dependents consumes huge slices of the national income. Abroad, regiments of global bureaucrats siphon off billions for themselves, their institutions, their client regimes” (p. 81). Buchanan (1990b) argued, “How other people rule themselves is their own business. To call it a vital interest of the U.S. wealth and power into crusades and causes having little or nothing to do with the United States is to contradict history and common sense” (p. 81). Even if there was such an interest, the nation simply lacked the resources to sustain such international engagement. Buchanan (1990b) claimed, “For the Republic to seek to dictate to 160 nations what kind of regime each should have is a formula for interminable meddling and endless conflict” (p. 81). He then added, “it is a textbook example of that ‘messianic globaloney’ against which Dean Acheson warned; it is, in scholar Clyde Wilson's phrase, a globalization of that degenerate form of Protestantism known as the Social Gospel” (Buchanan, 1990b, p. 81). Rather than more foreign aid, Buchanan (1990) concluded, “Our going-away gift to the globalist ideologues should be to tell the Third World we are not sending gunboats to collect our debts, but nor are we sending more money. The children are on their own” (p. 81).

Finally, putting America first meant an unwavering rejection of free trade. In Buchanan’s view, the New World Order threatened the American way of life as long as it promoted trade agreements that stunted domestic innovation and growth. “We’ve gotta oppose these trade deals,” Buchanan (1996) claimed, “because they are costing us something more precious than money itself. They are gradually surrendering the national sovereignty of the United States of America to institutions of what they call the New World Order.” Buchanan (1996) demanded that conservatives “provide a voice for the working men and women of this country . . . whose jobs are being sold out in trade deals for the benefit of

multi-national corporations without any loyalty to their country or any allegiance to their workers!”

America must start “recapturing our lost national sovereignty,” Buchanan (1995a) argued. He then added, “The men who stood at Lexington and at Concord Bridge, at Bunker Hill and Saratoga, they gave all they had, that the land they loved, might be a free, independent, sovereign nation” (Buchanan, 1995a). He believed the sovereignty of the nation was threatened. Buchanan (1995a) stated, “Today, our birthright of sovereignty, purchased with the blood of patriots, is being traded away for foreign money, handed over to faceless foreign bureaucrats at places like the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the U.N.” “To those who want to make our country America the beautiful again,” Buchanan (1995a) claimed, “nothing can stop us from going forward to a new era of greatness, in a new century about to begin, if we only go forward together, as one people, one nation, under God.”

American government, un-American politics

The second sub-theme of Buchanan’s economic nationalism was that many elected officials, including Republicans, had sold out to the New World Order. Buchanan argued that many conservatives along with Democrats and establishment Republicans were surrendering American sovereignty. He called upon the movement to either force those elected officials to change course or remove them from office. For example, in his second presidential campaign announcement address, Buchanan chastised Republicans for failing to act on immigration. “Our leaders,” Buchanan (1995a) claimed,

timid and fearful of being called names, do nothing. Well, they have not invented the name I have not been called. So, the Custodians of Political Correctness do not

frighten me. And I will do what is necessary to defend the borders of my country even if it means putting the National Guard all along our southern frontier.

“To the people of California, Florida, Texas and Arizona being bankrupted paying the cost of Washington's dereliction of duty, to that brave Border Patrol agent and the men and women who serve with him, and to that woman who lost her boy because her government would not do its duty,” Buchanan (1995a) exclaimed, “This campaign is about you.”

Although Buchanan was unsuccessful in his first presidential campaign, he was confident that he and his supporters could gain control of the Republican Party the second time around. Buchanan (1995a) assured his followers that they had “won the battle for the heart and soul of the Republican Party.” Unlike so-called conservatives that he saw as saying “no to tax hikes and no to quota bills and no to affirmative action” but then reneging on those promises, the “Buchanan-Brigades” were not “leap-year conservatives” (Buchanan, 1995a). It was time “to resume command of the revolution that we began here three years ago—because we intend to lead that revolution to triumph and into the White House in 1996” (Buchanan, 1995a).

Buchanan attacked Republicans in particular for prioritizing international interests over those of Americans. Buchanan's (1995a) second presidential campaign, he promised, would take “America forward toward the dream of a Constitutional Republic that first stirred in the hearts of the boys who stood their ground on the Lexington Green and the men who held at the Concord Bridge.” The future under the helm of a Buchanan (1995a) presidency would reflect “an America that once again looks out for our own people and our own country first.” However, the status quo was defined by “a government that is frozen in the ice of its own indifference, a government that does not listen anymore to the forgotten men and

women who work in the forges and factories and plants and businesses of this country” (Buchanan, 1995a). Rather than support the values of the founders, Buchanan (1995a) stated, “We have, instead, a government that is too busy taking the phone calls from lobbyists for foreign countries and the corporate contributors of the Fortune 500.” Buchanan (1995a) argued, “When I am elected president of the United States,” he said, “there will be no more NAFTA sellouts of American workers. There will be no more GATT deals done for the benefit of Wall Street bankers. And there will be no more \$50 billion bailouts of Third World socialists, whether in Moscow or Mexico City.” He argued, “In a Buchanan White House, foreign lobbyists and corporate contributors will not sit at the head of the table. I will” (Buchanan, 1995a). Additionally, he stated, “We're going to bring the jobs home and we're going keep America's jobs here, and when I walk into the Oval Office, we start looking out for America first” (Buchanan, 1995a).

Buchanan’s long goodbye to the Republican Party

During his three failed presidential campaigns, Buchanan consistently attacked what he saw as the Republican Party’s commitment to free trade and international institutions. Buchanan (1996) concluded, “we need a new party, a new party struggling to be born, and it is the party, I think, that can be the party of America’s future.” “Our country faces some terrible trials ahead,” he stated, but with “two great bulwark documents of the past to guide us . . . one of those is The Constitution of the United States and the other is The Bible, the Old and New Testament,” the Buchanan-Brigades could save the nation and “the truth that’s crushed to earth, is gonna rise again” (Buchanan, 1996).

In 2000, Buchanan ran as an Independent for the Reform Party. Buchanan (2000) had lost faith in both mainstream political parties because neither “fights today with conviction

and courage to rescue God's country from the cultural and moral pit into which she has fallen." In his view, the Reform Party represented true conservatism. "The backsliding toward hyphenated-Americanism must end," Buchanan (2000) argued. He then added, "Let us abolish quotas and set-asides, these un-American devices that reward individuals based on what color they are, or what continent their kinfolk came from" (Buchanan, 2000). A Reform Party-controlled government would "abandon a sterile and futile politics of victims-and-villains, and rediscover what brings us all together as one nation and one people" (Buchanan, 2000). It would require all Americans to "learn our English language" and to "know our common history, heritage, and American heroes" (Buchanan, 2000). Buchanan (2000) called for restoring "The old patriotism, a popular culture that undergirded the values of faith, family, and country, the idea that we Americans are a people who sacrifice and suffer together, and go forward together, the mutual respect, the sense of limits, the good manners."

Buchanan (1996) strongly attacked the Republican Party, arguing that, "As our society and country are approaching a great crossroads . . . Our party is approaching a crossroads" as well. He added, "this cultural struggle, and this struggle for the soul of our country is going to continue, and we are going to repair the mistake America made in 1992, we're going to repair it in 1996 in this country" (Buchanan, 1996). He claimed that the nation had "entered a new era,"

The era of the tough anti-communism that took us to victory in the past, that was the conservatism of my generation. But America needs a new conservatism of the heart, a conservatism of the heart provides a voice for the voiceless, not only for the innocent pre-born, but for the elderly, the men and women that brought us through the depression, and World War II. (Buchanan, 1996)

By 2000, Buchanan was convinced that Republicans and Democrats were two peas in a liberal, globalist pod. Democrats and Republicans alike had demonstrated that “our vaunted two-party system is a snare and a delusion, a fraud upon the nation” (Buchanan, 2000). In fact, Buchanan (2000) claimed, “Our two parties have become nothing but two wings of the same bird of prey.” He argued, “On foreign and trade policy, open borders and centralized power, our Beltway parties have become identical twins” (Buchanan, 2000). Real conservatives, the Buchanan-Brigades, would need to “choose not to play our assigned role in their sham election,” else they would sacrifice “our last chance to save our republic, before she disappears into the godless New World Order that our elites are constructing in a betrayal of everything for which our Founding Fathers lived, fought, and died” (Buchanan, 2000). Only the conservatives of the Reform Party could “isolate America from the bloody territorial and ethnic wars of the new century” (Buchanan, 2000). These conservatives could “start looking out for the forgotten Americans,” by supporting “A New Patriotism, where America's sovereignty is wholly and fully restored” (Buchanan, 2000).

Conclusion

Buchanan’s quasi-theological cultural nationalism represented a dramatic evolution of conservative ideology that sharply contrasted with Reagan, Bush, Gingrich and other conservatives. Unlike Reagan, Bush, or Gingrich, he exhibited a pessimistic view of the world. The only hope for a better tomorrow was to turn the clocks back and return to an old order, defined by embracing Christian values, prioritizing American interests, and withdrawing from the world to put America first. In Buchanan’s view, the nation was not one community or a shining city on a hill, as it was for Reagan. Instead, the nation was divided

between morally righteous conservatives and a liberal counterculture that sought to engulf America in sin. Conservatives could not be trusted unless they embraced his worldview.

Ultimately, Buchanan distanced himself from the Republican Party. Just as Reagan claimed it was the Democrats who had left him, Buchanan argued that Republicans had done the same to him. Announcing his third presidential campaign in 2000 as an Independent with the Reform Party, Buchanan (2000) proclaimed, “Today, I am ending my lifelong membership in the Republican Party.” “The Republican party has been good to me. And I have tried to be loyal to it,” Buchanan (2000) said, but “Sometimes party loyalty asks too much. And today it asks too much of us.” Republicans had failed to advance the cause of the conservative movement and win the culture war; they had failed to reign in the globalist regime of the New World Order.

In the early years of the 21st century, it appeared that Buchanan had not strongly influenced the conservative movement. After all, George W. Bush was elected in 2000, a conservative who “was worlds apart from Patrick Buchanan and the social-conservative wing of the Republican Party that wanted to restore America to its imagined Anglo-Saxon and Celtic glory” (Dionne, Jr., 2016, p. 219). George W. Bush used language similar to Reagan and even supported immigration reform. Buchanan, in contrast, remained committed to his America first platform and criticized immigration policy, arguing, “The bad Americans were outbreeding the good. Time is short” (cited in Stanley, 2012, p. 354). He added, “Unless the conservative movement does something drastic soon, it will lose the old republic for good” (cited in Stanley, 2012, 354). “Year by year,” Buchanan exclaimed, “Latino immigration and dependence on the welfare state put more people in the liberal column. Abortion,

contraception, feminism, and homosexuality reduced the number of potential newborns in the conservative column” (cited in Stanley, 2012, p. 354).

However, Buchanan’s impact on contemporary conservatism was much larger than it appeared in 2000. As it turned out, “Buchanan’s culture war thesis was perfectly suited to the politics of the new millennium . . . For many conservatives, politics became about a clash of civilizations; an end-times battle between good and evil, right and left” (Stanley, 2012, pp. 355-356). His quasi-theological, cultural nationalism reflected the “slowly building rage on the right end of American politics” (Dionne, Jr., 2016, p. 68).

The irony of Buchanan’s exit from the Republican Party is that, had he waited, he might have found many allies. First, Buchanan’s culture war was highly influential in the formation of the Tea Party. Certainly, the Buchanan-Brigades and the Tea Party had their differences. The Tea Party revolted against “profligate spending, not free trade,” and its foreign policy agenda was “comparatively neoconservative and pro-Israel” (Stanley, 2012, p. 362). However, culturally and demographically, the Tea Party and the Buchanan-Brigades were “cut from the same cloth” (Stanley, 2012, p. 362).

For example, Sarah Palin, the Vice Presidential nominee in 2008 on the Republican ticket, “was a Buchanan brigadier in style and spirit” (Stanley, 2012, p. 361). “Palin and Buchanan’s constituencies were identical,” and “many of Buchanan’s former activists claim responsibility for the Tea Party” (Stanley, 2012, pp. 361-362). Much like the Buchanan-Brigades, the Tea Party’s message was about “god and guns and the death of our culture” (Stanley, 2012, p. 362). “By defining the culture war so well in the 1990s,” Buchanan helped shape “the worldview from which the Tea Party emerged: us vs. them, small vs. big, Christian vs. atheist, straight vs. gay, hardworking vs. work shy, conservative vs. liberal”

(Stanley, 2012, p. 363). Tea Party activists were indebted to Buchanan because he “helped foster a conservative identity that was folksy and working class. To the permanent annoyance of liberals, the cultural politics he spawned continues to attract people to the Republican Party” (Stanley, 2012, p. 363).

Second, there is an obvious and remarkable parallel between Buchanan’s message and that of Donald J. Trump during the 2016 presidential election. Buchanan consistently constructed a narrative of moral and national decline, of threatened national identity in the face of multiculturalism, of the dangers of free trade and globalization, and demanded support for a new quasi-theological, cultural nationalism that put American interests first. According to Jeffrey Greenfield (2016),

Just about all of the themes of Trump’s campaign can be found in Buchanan’s insurgent primary run a quarter-century ago: the grievances, legitimate and otherwise; the dark portrait of a nation whose culture and sovereignty are threatened from without and within; the sense that the elites of both parties have turned their backs on hard-working loyal, traditional Americans. The limits of that campaign—and the success of Trump’s, in seizing the nomination of a major political party—are a measure of just how much our politics have changed in the past 25 years.

Similar to Buchanan, Trump also utilized “the argument of bipartisan betrayal: They both used their pulpit to excoriate elites in both parties for leaving more vulnerable, working-class Americans behind” (Greenfield, 2016). Buchanan’s highly divisive rhetoric “not only provided a template for Trump’s campaign, but laid the foundation for its eventual success” (Alberta, 2017). Buchanan has mentioned in interviews that, “the most lasting aspect” of his legacy “was being Trump before Trump was Trump” (cited in Alberta, 2017). According to

Buchanan, Trump's presidential campaign was clear evidence that "The anger and alienation that were building then have reached critical mass now . . . the revolution is at hand" (cited in Cilliza, 2016).

The similarities between Buchanan, the Tea Party, and Trump are illustrative of how the symbolic trajectories of contemporary conservatism have become entelechialized, particularly in their treatment of government-sponsored social programs and international activities. At the turn of the 21st century, "Buchanan was cast out of the party and treated as a fringe candidate with ideas unfit for polite company" (Clift, 2016). "When Pat Buchanan first proposed building a fence on the Mexican border, the Republican establishment was shocked," but support for a wall is now standard conservative doctrine (Clift, 2016). Trump's governing philosophy appears to have come "straight from Buchanan's playbook" (Clift, 2016). Buchanan (2018) declared that, "President Trump is the leader of America's conservative party" because he went to "war with the progressives who have co-opted American civil society" and being "willing to go further than any other previous conservative to defeat them."

If the Tea Party and Trump borrowed from Buchanan's rhetorical playbook, why were they so much more successful? A key to answer that question lies in tracing the development of conservative opinion media. One reason Trump's message was far more potent than Buchanan's was "the speed at which a powerful, even divisive idea can travel from one like-minded individual to another" (Greenfield, 2016). According to Greenfield (2016), "The rise of talk radio, cable networks and an online echo chamber for political discourse has changed the game for people with an outsider message."

For better or worse, “The kinds of attacks Buchanan leveled, alone, at his own Republican Party have become normal political chatter on the right these days, amplified enormously by the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity and company” (Greenfield, 2016). Buchanan, who started his political career as a journalist, wholeheartedly supported Trump’s treatment of the mainstream media. He, like Trump, firmly believed “undermining the media’s legitimacy is essential to winning popular support for the president’s agenda” (cited in Alberta, 2017). It was not freedom of press that conservatives were concerned with, “but rather the moral authority and legitimacy of co-opted media institutions” (Buchanan, 2018). In the next chapter, I explore how the rise of conservative opinion media shifted the symbolic trajectories of the conservative movement much farther to the right, resulting in some of the most extreme right-wing views of the early 21st century.

Chapter 5 - A Rush to out-Fox the mainstream: The rise of contemporary conservative opinion media

There is widespread agreement that conservative opinion media played a significant role in the symbolic trajectory of the conservative movement, particularly since the late 1990s. In the previous chapter, I explained that the meteoric rise of conservative opinion media was one of the key differentiating factors between Patrick Buchanan's failed attempts to win the presidency and Donald J. Trump's success in the 2016 election. Although Buchanan and Trump adhered to nearly identical rhetorical strategies, the accessibility and availability of conservative talk radio, the 24-hour news cycle, and the Internet made the latter much more successful. Trump possessed a key advantage that Buchanan did not have in the early 1990s, a massive media ecosystem promoting "broad appeals to conservative symbols, and pugnacious antipathy toward liberals and liberalism" (Grossman & Hopkins, 2018, p. 23).

The rise of conservative opinion media has impacted symbolic developments of the conservative movement in at least three key ways. First, it increased the scope of the movement's audience while maintaining ideological consistency, relying on an "us-them rhetoric" that allowed for "conflict, victimization, and scapegoating" of the left (Jones, 2012, p. 182). Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella (2008) note that, "Despite their occasional differences, the conservative media feature a common rogues' gallery of enemies. These include 'liberalism' and its outward expressions," predominantly as various forms of "big government" (p. 59). In doing so, conservative opinion media have created "a powerful rhetorical vehicle for minimizing the cleavages in the Republican voting coalition" (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 55). According to Jeffrey P. Jones (2012), contemporary news networks reflect "the transformation of media businesses from content companies to audience

companies” (p. 180). Conservative opinion media therefore act as “a form of political representation through ideology” (Jones, 2012, p. 181).

Second, conservative opinion media provide a narrative countering the mainstream media. Conservative political commentators claim they are a counter-weight to the liberal/elite mainstream media. During the 1990s, poll data showed “a remarkable increase” in the number of citizens who believed there was “a liberal ideological slant in news content” (Domke et al., 1999, p. 36). One explanation for this phenomenon is that “Citizens, rather than personally monitoring news media for partisan leanings, have been ‘taking cues’ from conservative elites in forming perceptions of a liberal media bias” (Domke et al., 1999, p. 36). According to Jamieson and Cappella (2008), “Conservatives are at war with what they call the liberal media in part because, they argue, it is an elite transmission belt that perverts the public’s understanding of conservatism’s successes and proffers a false account of liberalism’s record” (p. xii). For example, Fox News Channel “defends its conservatism by contending that it serves as a ‘counterweight’ to the liberalism of mainstream media outlets” (Jones, 2012, p. 179). Jamieson and Cappella (2008) add that, “One way the conservative opinion media consolidate the Republican base is by summoning their readers, watchers, and listeners to fend off these adversaries. Accordingly, they champion a version of the past that asserts conservatism as David against the Goliath of liberalism” (p. 59).

Finally, conservative opinion media employ glandular terms to keep its wide audiences angry and energized to act. According to Matt Grossman and David A. Hopkins (2016), “the modern conservative media universe . . . holds considerable and increasing power within the Republican Party and, by extension, the political world as a whole” (p. 11). They add, “Talk radio, right-leaning Internet outlets, and Fox News Channel have become

highly influential forces in Republican politics over the past 25 years by promoting conservative views, mobilizing Republican voters, and enforcing ideological loyalty among the party's candidates and elected officials" (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016, p. 11). Political scientists have charted this phenomenon in electoral voting patterns. David Brock and Ari Rabin-Havt (2012) note, "Towns with Fox News have a 0.4 to 0.7 percentage point higher Republican vote share in the 2000 presidential elections, compared to the 1996 elections. A vote shift of this magnitude is likely to have been decisive in the 2000 elections" (p. 17). Conservative opinion outlets, "through a variety of narratives, visuals, interviews, guests, sound bites, and so forth," have thus created a media environment where "viewers are linked to an ongoing struggle, one they can ritually participate in through their repeated viewing. What is more, such conflict—in ideological terms—leaves committed viewers with little choice but to care, to be concerned, to be outraged" (Jones, 2012, p. 183).

The importance of conservative opinion media in American politics is widely understood. Movement conservatives "lacked a large broadcast infrastructure until the rise of Rush Limbaugh and his imitators in the 1990s and the subsequent founding of the Fox News Channel network" (Grossman & Hopkins, 2018, p. 11). "From the beginning" of the 1990s conservative media explosion, however, movement conservatives successfully "adopted a strategy of criticizing mainstream sources as tainted by liberalism and thus untrustworthy, positioning themselves as the sole source of legitimate information and promoting conservatism as a salient political identity" (Grossman & Hopkins, 2018, p. 10). "Practically since the launch of his show," media reports indicate that Rush Limbaugh has consistently had "between 13.5 and 20 million listeners" (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 46). Within seven years of its launch, Fox News Channel reached more than 80 million American

households (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). “A 2004 Pew Center for the People and the Press survey found that 22% of those in the United States get most of their news from Fox,” earning the network “a higher average number of viewers than any of the [48] other cable outlets” in the United States (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 47). Conservative opinion media dominates the news industry. In fact, according to Grossman and Hopkins (2016), “Though some enterprising liberals have attempted to build a corresponding infrastructure on the left, it has never approached the visibility and popularity of conservative media and has not demonstrated the capacity to motivate mass participation or exert significant leftward pressure on Democratic leaders” (p. 11). The danger in this trend, Susanna Dilliplane (2011) argued, is that “a healthy democracy requires a citizenry that is exposed to and engages with diverse viewpoints” (p. 287). With a plethora of available news sources and the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, the news ecosystem of the 21st century “poses a challenge to ideals of deliberative democracy if people who consume politically likeminded news disproportionately populate the electoral process, while those presumably reaping the benefits of exposure to more diverse views in the news (e.g. more informed, tolerant attitudes) withdraw from politics” (Dilliplane, 2011, p. 288).

What is not yet clear is how the symbol system of contemporary conservative opinion media developed. In this chapter, I argue that this development was not gradual, but instead was an immediate entelechialization of conservatism to some of its most extreme forms. In what follows, I first build a theory to explain symbol system development in contemporary conservative opinion media. The symbol system has three characteristics: demonization of liberal/mainstream media and valorization of conservative media, description of a liberal dystopia and a conservative utopia, and an enactment of the paranoid style. Second, I analyze

two representative examples of conservative media and show how they possess the three defining characteristics, Rush Limbaugh's radio coverage of Hurricane Katrina and Fox News Channel's televised coverage of the Iraq War. Finally, I demonstrate that the three defining characteristics of the symbol system apply to contemporary conservative opinion media in general.

Symbolic system developments of conservative opinion media

The contemporary conservative opinion media symbol system has three defining characteristics. First, conservative opinion media demonizes liberals and the mainstream media, while valorizing conservatism and touting itself as a necessary counter-weight to the liberal/elite media bias. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) argue conservative media "reinforces conservative values and dispositions" while also distancing "listeners, readers, and viewers from 'liberals,' in general, and Democrats, in particular" (p. x). For example, Fox News Channel simultaneously presents "politically biased (that is, overtly ideologically conservative) news and opinion while also branding itself with slogans such as 'Fair and Balanced' and 'We Report, You Decide'" (Jones, 2012, p. 179). These slogans enthymematically argue that conservative opinion media provides an accurate and fair representation of the news, while the mainstream media does not. In reality, Fox News Channel "'picks sides' in political and social struggles" and attacks the liberal/mainstream media through "a consistent set of narratives that threaten or embolden core values and beliefs" (Jones, 2012, p. 182).

Second, conservative opinion media construct a liberal dystopia defined by cynicism and pessimism, while simultaneously describing a conservative utopia. Fox News Channel, for example, frequently describes the liberal/mainstream media as "all doom, all gloom, all

the time” (“Why the Doom and Gloomers Got It Wrong,” 2005). Rush Limbaugh (2005b) has criticized “the apocalyptic nature” of reporting by the liberal and mainstream media, arguing that it can be summarized by headlines such as “Doom and gloom there! Doom and gloom on oil prices! Doom and gloom on everything!” In response, conservative commentators claim they serve to expose the lies of liberal pessimism in the mainstream media and offer a positive and realistic worldview, defending their talk shows “as *the place*” where viewers can find the truth, devoid of the apocalyptic views of the mainstream media (Jones, 2012, p. 183, emphasis in original).

Finally, contemporary conservative opinion media performs a particular enactment of the paranoid style. In his foundational essay on the paranoid style, Richard Hofstadter (1965) described a communication pattern in American politics defined by “the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (p. 3). Extremist or entelechial language, a barrage of “evidence” that obscures a lack of sound data, and a rejection of rational standards for testing claims that enables commentators to reach fantastic conclusions define this enactment. The “central image” of the paranoid style is “a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 29). For conservatives, the liberal and mainstream media functions as a vast conspiracy, “*the motive force*” that defines “whole political orders” in “apocalyptic terms” and seeks to destroy the conservative way of life (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 29, emphasis in original). Hofstadter (1965) claimed that “What is felt to be needed to defeat” the conspiratorial force is “an all-out crusade” (p. 29). Conservatives carry out this crusade by engaging in “heroic strivings for ‘evidence’ to prove that the unbelievable is the only thing that can be believed” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 36). This barrage of “evidence” offered by

conservative opinion media is provided by “a parade of experts, study groups, monographs, footnotes, and bibliographies” that make claims consistent with the conservative worldview (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 37). The rhetoric of conservative “experts” therefore functions as “a partisan wedge” against the “dominant regime” of the mainstream media (Neville-Shepard, 2018, p. 122).

One may argue that the simple solution is to reject ideas from conservative opinion media that are out of touch with reality. However, to treat conservative media as simply irrational or factually incorrect is both counterproductive and misses the key point. Such a conclusion, according to Ryan Neville-Shepard (2018), “too quickly dismisses those sympathetic to such narratives as crazy or delusional” (p. 120). This line of argument also ignores the massive following conservative opinion media have gained. “Because of the historical frequency of [conservative] conspiracies,” Brett J. Bricker (2013) argued, “the current need is not to label the rhetoric as paranoid but to understand its power” (p. 221). In fact, as Neville-Shepard (2018) concluded, this type of rhetoric functions as, “a new ideological glue for broader political coalitions, and the ‘truths’ that they speak beyond the facts of their narratives” are “the latest political weapon” of the conservative movement (p. 130; also see Stewart, 2002).

Up to this point, I have argued that the conservative opinion media symbol system plays a significant role for the contemporary symbolic trajectory of the movement. Additionally, I have identified three characteristics that define the symbolic structure of conservative opinion media. To demonstrate the theory, I now turn to two representative examples of conservative opinion media, Rush Limbaugh’s radio coverage of Hurricane Katrina and Fox News’ televised coverage of the Iraq War.

Rush Limbaugh and Hurricane Katrina

On August 25, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit American soil as a Category 5 storm. The hurricane had devastating effects. A report released by the White House deemed Hurricane Katrina “the most destructive natural disaster in U.S. history” (“Katrina In Perspective,” 2006). Katrina caused “apocalyptic damage to New Orleans, a city of 485,000 people, most of whom live below sea level” (Whoriskey & Gugliotta, 2005), producing 100 billion dollars in damage and “completely destroying or making uninhabitable an estimated 300,000 homes” (“Katrina In Perspective,” 2006). By conservative estimates, “1,330 people were dead as a result of the storm,” and an additional 770,000 people were displaced for months. (“Katrina In Perspective,” 2006).

Emergency response to Katrina was slow and insufficient. The National Guard was “depleted and dispersed” (Borger & Campbell, 2005). According to Phillip Crowley, director of homeland security at the Centre for American Progress, “the fact there were so many National Guardsmen from the area in Iraq inevitably affected the response” (cited in Borger & Campbell, 2005). In addition, communication breakdowns prevented local and national agencies from effectively cooperating. Authorities in New Orleans were “increasingly at loggerheads with federal disaster relief officials over what to do with the thousands of people” trapped by the storm. Many argued the delay was due to racial politics. Members of the Congressional Black Caucus and NAACP “charged that the response was slow because those most affected are poor” (Alfano, 2005). In effect, Katrina “provoked new debates about tough public policy decisions, the nation's troubled racial history and the racial and economic barriers that still separate Americans” (Alfano, 2005).

As the storm ravaged the southern United States, Rush Limbaugh covered Katrina over the course of several episodes of his talk radio show. Limbaugh painted a very different picture than other news sources of events transpiring along the Gulf Coast during the hurricane. In his commentary on the storm, Limbaugh displayed each of the three characteristics defining the rhetoric of the contemporary conservative opinion media symbol system.

The first characteristic of the conservative opinion media symbol system is a demonization of liberals and the mainstream media and a valorization of conservatism and conservative opinion media. Limbaugh (2005a) described mainstream news coverage of Katrina as “absolutely ludicrous” and claimed that the liberal media was “out of touch” with reality. Although Limbaugh (2005b) agreed that Katrina was “wreaking havoc” on the Gulf Coast, he claimed that Democrats were incorrectly arguing that it was “Bush’s fault that there aren’t enough emergency services personnel.” He added that although Democrats and the mainstream media claimed, “the government hadn’t spent enough federal money in building a greater industrial base for Louisiana,” these arguments were evidence that “the libs” were “going to use this hurricane to advance all of the wacko aspects their agenda, global warming and you know what else” (Limbaugh, 2005b).

Limbaugh said that he would not sit idly by while the mainstream media blamed Bush and Republicans for inadequate preparation and response to Katrina. He stated, “I cannot watch this drivel and bilge on television day in and day out, hour after hour, where I see this administration once again savaged and attacked, this administration blamed with all kinds of outrageous attacks” (Limbaugh, 2005c). The state of Louisiana, not the federal government, was to blame, he said. Limbaugh (2005c) argued, “if the elite media is going to start pointing

fingers, well, then, by God, folks, we're going to point them in the right direction — and pointing them in the right direction points right to . . . the State of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans, no matter what how you slice this.”

In Limbaugh's (2005e) view, the majority of news coverage on Katrina was evidence of “a huge media scandal brewing.” Rather than accurately reporting the consequences of the storm, Limbaugh (2005e) claimed Democrats and the mainstream media were simply “complaining” and “whining” while “drumming up negatives for President Bush.” To Limbaugh (2005e), this was unsurprising, since in his opinion, “The Democrats are who they are, and they're a known quantity, and they're going to behave in very predictable ways.” Limbaugh (2005b) argued the mainstream media was going “full speed into their agenda blaming Bush for it [Hurricane Katrina]” as a distraction, and to promote “full-fledged liberalism . . . to fix everything that has been broken and replace things that have been destroyed.”

The second characteristic of the contemporary conservative opinion media symbol system is the construction of a liberal dystopia and a conservative utopia. In Limbaugh's (2005a) outlook, the mainstream media was fabricating a “domino effect,” a perspective that “with each new hour comes information, findings of even more disaster, and the news gets even more startling.” “On the other hand,” he claimed, “You also see the real heroes of America banding together” to weather the storm (Limbaugh, 2005a). Limbaugh (2005a) referenced a series of *New York Times* articles that tied Katrina to climate change, and stated that those reports were outlandish. He said, “this stuff that the left does is just so predictable, you have to laugh at it” (Limbaugh, 2005a). Unlike the mainstream media, Limbaugh

(2005a) argued he was “firmly grounded in reality” and recognized “a whole bunch of positive opportunities” that would come from Katrina.

Limbaugh criticized the mainstream media for reports that Katrina had impacted both poor and rich communities. Rather than simply acknowledging the carnage caused by the hurricane, Limbaugh (2005a) chastised other news outlets for bringing “the haves and have-nots” into the conversation. He added that this was “how liberals define equality. As long as everybody is miserable, then everything is okay” (Limbaugh, 2005a). In Limbaugh’s (2005a) opinion, “You have to have some kind of a warped worldview to even look at this and see it in that regard.” As a response to reports by news outlets such as the *New York Times*, Limbaugh (2005a) argued he would take “The exploitation of this natural disaster” head on. And “who better than I to deal with it?” he asked (Limbaugh, 2005a). Limbaugh (2005a) argued “the left” was developing a narrative about Katrina with “so much BS,” that it was proof they had “lost their rationality” and that “kook groups” now composed “the mainstream of the Democratic Party”.

To Limbaugh (2005a), it was standard practice for the liberal media to report “doom and gloom” instead of what was actually happening. Rather than succumbing to this type of reporting, where “Everything is a political issue,” Limbaugh (2005a) argued he would “be out of in front it” and tell his listeners the truth about Katrina. While other news sources claimed Katrina was causing mass destruction, Limbaugh (2005a) accused the media “of fatalism” that defied “what this country is . . . and I will bet you that the people affected by all this don’t come out of this all defeated and doom and gloom.” Citizens on the Gulf Coast had nothing to fear, he said, because there would soon be “a nationwide effort here to try to rebuild the areas that have been destroyed or damaged severely by this storm, and in many

cases what goes up is going to be better than what went down” (Limbaugh, 2005a). The aftermath of Katrina would not be devastating, Limbaugh (2005a) claimed, but instead “something that is quintessentially American” that would allow for “celebrating the American spirit here and understanding the cheerful, optimistic nature . . . in the midst of such destruction.” Mainstream media sources were simply ignoring the positive aspects of Katrina, he concluded, since “amidst all of the desperation here that is being cited . . . You can find positives anyplace that you want to look for them, and in this case we had plenty of warning” (Limbaugh, 2005a).

Democrats and the mainstream media capitalized on Katrina by evoking the same type of alarmist reports that followed 9/11, Limbaugh argued. He stated, “For the left, the aftermath of Katrina has proven to be a godsend” because they had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to “jump on Bush’s case as being ill-prepared, unprepared, lousy, having done nothing, make the case for bigger government, roll out all the video of all the disasters and misery” (Limbaugh, 2005d). Limbaugh (2005d) accused liberals of being “excited in the midst of a national disaster where many of their own constituents were harmed and maybe killed,” going as far as to claim that they were “dancing on the graves of black people.” He added, “The anger and hate that would be bred by showing the maggoty corpses left behind by a man-made disaster are perfectly alright as long as that anger and hate is directed at George Bush. After all, from the left’s perspective, if you can’t use images of a rotting cadaver for the ultimate good of making George Bush look bad, why bother” (Limbaugh, 2005d)?

Limbaugh also claimed that the liberal dystopia constructed by the mainstream media was based on an exaggeration of the damage and death toll caused by Katrina. In an

exaggeration of his own, Limbaugh (2005e) blasted the mainstream media for outlandish reports of “25,000 body bags” and utilizing deaths from the hurricane as “a fast route to George W. Bush who, as a Republican, automatically is a racist.” Conversely, Limbaugh (2005e) argued, “the death toll now is a little more than 400 . . . It’s not total destruction, it doesn’t even rank as we speak today in the top ten deadliest natural disasters in the country, not even close.” Given the damage inflicted by Katrina, Limbaugh could not describe an existing conservative utopia and therefore focused on attacking the liberal dystopia.

The third characteristic of the conservative opinion media symbol system is an enactment of the paranoid style that utilizes entelechial language and a barrage of “evidence” while rejecting rational tests of argument. First, Limbaugh used extremist language to describe the liberal and mainstream media narrative being told about Katrina. Limbaugh (2005a) argued that, “this disaster is looked upon as an opportunity for political gain by the left, and that particular political gain actually results in a decline of Western lifestyles.” Moreover, he claimed, the mainstream media was chock full of “asinine, ridiculous statements, and they have to be responded to and reacted to” (Limbaugh, 2005a). In order to politicize Katrina, Limbaugh (2005b) claimed the left would argue “We [conservatives] caused the hurricane,” and that the Bush administration was to blame for “not taking global warming seriously.” However, Limbaugh (2005b) asserted that a host of unnamed “Experts have looked at this,” and the truth was that “if global warming had an effect on hurricanes, it would be to reduce them, because the warming would take place in the polar spheres, the polar areas of the planet, and that would not affect temperatures elsewhere.” Of course, climate scientists actually predicted climate change would “increase the number and severity” of extreme weather events, including hurricanes (Harrington, 2016, p. 492).

Limbaugh also asserted he had obtained evidence of a government conspiracy to augment the welfare state. He announced that he had gotten access to secret government plans regarding the response to Katrina. According to Limbaugh (2005c), the federal government planned “to dole out debit cards worth \$2,000 each to victims of Hurricane Katrina.” Although this program had “not been publicly announced,” Limbaugh (2005c) chuckled, “Well, it has now. Heh-heh-heh.” In Limbaugh’s (2005c) view, liberals and the mainstream media would be supportive of the relief program because they were of the opinion that “Well, this is really great. Why not just pile the welfare state on top of a welfare state, Rush?” He then warned his listeners to “wake up on this” because the hurricane relief program was an example of “what governments do, especially if they find themselves or think themselves to be beleaguered and embattled. The power of the federal purse to calm an angry citizenry is something that’s always been in the hip pocket of people that run the federal government” (Limbaugh, 2005c).

Because Limbaugh claimed he and his unnamed experts had a mountain of evidence that contradicted other news reports, he was convinced of the unwarranted conclusion that liberals and the mainstream media were capitalizing on Katrina to expand government. He claimed, “they’ve [the left] had this in the works. They’ve had it in the works and they’ve tried and they’ve grown impatient” (Limbaugh, 2005d). Limbaugh (2005d) claimed that although liberals would have preferred a terrorist attack to advance their agenda, “Katrina hits and they salivate, and they rub their hands together, and they say, ‘You know what? This is it,’ and so they put the plan into motion, and then they got an added bonus here with the pictures.”

Limbaugh also advanced an argument that liberals were utilizing the hurricane to initiate a conversation about race and used extremist language to describe critical reflections in the mainstream media about racial politics. He said, “Since race is one of the central sections of the playbook, here they come” (Limbaugh, 2005d). Moreover, Limbaugh (2005d) claimed that Katrina would “warm the cockles of liberals” because “There’s just something about communist thugs that brings a smile to the face of an American lefty and makes their hearts go pitter patter.” In Limbaugh’s (2005d) assessment, Katrina “emboldened” the left “to advance every crack pot theory on race and class that has poisoned American politics for going on forty years . . . celebrating the exploitation of a political opening brought about by the incompetence of relief efforts in the largely black neighborhoods of New Orleans.” Furthermore, by claiming inaction on Katrina was motivated by race, Limbaugh (2005d) asserted liberals were “dancing the Cajun Reel with the thousands of grinning skeletons.” Adding to his use of extremist language on the subject, he accused reporters documenting racial tensions of being “the hate-America crowd” and “the blame-America-first crowd” that were “self-loathers,” holding the view that “America is evil because America is unjust because capitalism assigns winners and losers” (Limbaugh, 2005e).

Additionally, Limbaugh advanced an argument that reporting on Katrina was a cover for a big government conspiracy to raise taxes and push conservatives out of office. He claimed, “If anything is on display here, it is how big bureaucratic government is sort of an albatross” (Limbaugh, 2005e). This was because, according to Limbaugh (2005e), the mainstream media was using Katrina as a “big smoke screen” for “not making [Bush] tax cuts permanent” in order to pay for the damages. Limbaugh blasted liberals for claiming the inadequate response to Katrina was due to a conservative takeover of government. In

response, Limbaugh (2005e) said, “the idea that conservatives have taken over the government and the government has gotten smaller and the conservatives have something to prove or something to answer for in this hurricane aftermath is absolute, total BS.” As a matter of fact, he argued, “The government has grown and grown and grown. There aren’t any budget cuts. Nothing’s gotten smaller. We’ve added bureaucracy layers upon other layers. It’s silly” (Limbaugh, 2005e). Furthermore, Limbaugh (2005e) said, “The real question ought to be this. All the big-government types ought to be asking, you know, are the people here that were not well served by government going to be as supportive of government in the future?”

Limbaugh’s radio coverage of Hurricane Katrina demonstrates how the three symbolic characteristics of conservative opinion media entelechialize conservative ideas. He demonized liberals and the mainstream media by criticizing them for politicizing the storm and placing the blame on the Bush administration. Instead, Limbaugh consistently forwarded the argument that citizens along the Gulf Coast were to blame, playing into “pre-existing racist biases” about how the poor were too dependent on big government to flee their homes (Wise, 2005). This line of argument reinforced “negative and racist stereotypes, to the utter exclusion of accuracy and fair-mindedness” (Wise, 2005). Additionally, Limbaugh attacked the mainstream media as fatalistic and defended his talk radio show as a more honest report of the situation. His depiction of Katrina was one that called for celebration of the American spirit, and he argued that the aftermath of the hurricane would leave the Gulf Coast in better condition than it was prior to the storm. Finally, Limbaugh exclaimed that liberals and the mainstream media were utilizing the storm as a front for a big government conspiracy. He referenced unknown experts who had concluded that there was no connection between

Katrina and climate change, and argued that the storm was being used to justify expansions of government such as tax increases and environmental regulation. Realistically, Limbaugh's arguments defied the reality of the situation that was unfolding, and mainstream media coverage of Katrina had "nothing to do with the welfare state, or liberal social policy more generally" (Wise, 2005). To further demonstrate how the three characteristics of the symbol system move conservative ideas much farther to the right, I now turn to Fox News coverage of the Iraq War.

Fox News and the Iraq War

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq began on March 20, 2003. Advocates of the Iraq War, such as Donald Rumsfeld, claimed a "shock and awe" approach would quickly win the war and protect "Americans against Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, ridding the Gulf country of such illegal weapons, liberating the Iraqi people, and ending the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein" ("Shock and awe campaign," 2003). Military invasion was also justified by claims that Saddam Hussein was linked to the 9/11 attacks and that he refused to surrender and leave Iraq. Although Americans were initially supportive of the war, that support waned over time.

By 2005, public opinion turned "solidly against the war in Iraq" (Roberts, 2005). More than half the public believed the war had not made America safer; nearly three quarters of citizens believed American casualties were unacceptable; sixty percent believed the war was not worth fighting, and forty percent believed U.S. presence in Iraq was becoming analogous to the failures of the Vietnam War (Milbank & Deane, 2005). American pessimism about the conflict had "reached a dangerous level" (Milbank & Deane, 2005). According to retired Army Col. Andrew J. Bacevich, it appeared that Americans were

coming to the realization that the war in Iraq was “not being won and may well prove unwinnable” (cited in Milbank & Deane, 2005). James Burk, a sociologist at Texas A&M University, said that there appeared to be a “disjuncture” between “upbeat administration rhetoric and realities the public perceives” (cited in Milbank & Deane, 2005). The American public increasingly saw the war in Iraq as “distinct from the fight against terrorism,” and believed that Iraq had little to do with the 9/11 attacks (Hulse & Connelly, 2006). Additionally, by 2006, more than twice as many Americans had been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan than in the 9/11 attacks (Hulse & Connelly, 2006).

From 2003 to 2006, a number of Fox News talk shows and news segments provided coverage that was at odds with reporting from the mainstream media about Iraq. These shows included Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes’ *Hannity & Colmes*, Bill O’Reilly’s *O’Reilly Factor*, Brit Hume’s daily segment, and the nightly *Talking Points Memo*. Each of the television broadcasts defied mounting evidence of the failures in the war, maintained that the conflict was justified, and claimed that the U.S. was winning despite increasing public skepticism. A survey of transcripts from these televised broadcasts reveals how Fox News consistently displayed the three defining characteristics of conservative opinion media symbol system.

The first characteristic of the conservative opinion media symbol system is a demonization of liberals and the mainstream media and a valorization of conservative ideas and media commentary. Leading up to the war, David Bossie, the president of Citizens United, told Fox News in an interview that, “We decided we can't sit idly by while President Bush's agenda, specifically his continuing efforts on the war on terror, specifically Iraq ... while they ... Democrats, the left wing and Hollywood ... conduct a well-coordinated, well

organized, well-financed effort to undo the president and really to destroy him, because that's their goal" (cited in "Pro-War' Movement," 2003). In the same news segment, David Weigel argued that the mainstream media was promoting an "anti-American" movement, making it "very easy for American reporters to just toe the anti-American line" (cited in "Pro-War' Movement," 2003).

Shortly after the beginning of the invasion, Brit Hume (2003) made reference to a "top secret" government memo that detailed "more than a decade of intelligence indicating an operating relationship between Al Qaeda and Iraq," and argued "it has been almost entirely overlooked by major media." He then added, "*USA Today* has completely ignored it. The *New York Times* has yet to mention it on its news pages" (Hume, 2003). Fox commentators claimed that the mainstream media was filled with "fanatical ideologues," a bunch of "far-left bomb throwers" who were making "unfounded charges leveled against the Bush administration" about whether Iraq possessed WMDs ("Lies and the Liars," 2004). Sean Hannity argued it was impossible to have a dialogue about Iraq's WMDs with liberals or commentators from the mainstream media, because although he sought "an intelligent conversation," it was "a one-way street" with liberals who continued forwarding "bizarre conspiracy theories" about the war (cited in "Late Soldier Pat Tillman," 2004).

In an interview with Ann Coulter, Hannity and Colmes discussed how conservatives ought to engage with liberals on Iraq. Hannity claimed that his coverage of the war had abided by Coulter's "ten rules on how to argue with liberals," including rules such as "Don't surrender out of the gate. You don't need to be defensive. And . . . outrage the enemy" (cited in "Ann Coulter Explains," 2004). According to Coulter, the objective of the segment was "to get Alan to storm off" the show since, "You must outrage the enemy. If you don't leave

liberals in a sputtering impotent rage, you're not doing it right" (cited in "Ann Coulter Explains," 2004). Coulter and Hannity accused Colmes and other liberals of providing false information about the war. Coulter said to Colmes, "You always talk about how Republicans are the ones who are engaged in, you know, spin and style. To the contrary, that is — what we want to know is the information . . . We prefer facts and logic" (cited in "Ann Coulter Explains," 2004). Hannity and Coulter agreed that if "the media is not going to do its job," it was up to conservative commentators to provide citizens with the truth about the war (cited in "Ann Coulter Explains," 2004). Rather than "show graciousness toward a Democrat," Coulter claimed there was little use in arguing with a "knuckle head" like Alan Colmes (cited in "Ann Coulter Explains," 2004).

Fox News analysts claimed they offered "A no-spin look at Iraq," telling "the truth" that citizens would not find in liberal news outlets ("How is the USA Handling the Conflict in Iraq," 2005). Mainstream media outlets, according to Fox commentators, were engaging in "extremism" and wanted "the USA to lose this fight in Iraq" ("How is the USA Handling the Conflict in Iraq," 2005). Unlike Fox, they claimed, the mainstream media was defining the Iraq War "in ideological terms" ("How is the USA Handling the Conflict in Iraq," 2005). According to the analysts, the mainstream media approach to the war was "absolutely putting U.S. troops in danger" by criticizing military operations and falsely claiming the public did not support the conflict ("Putting Americans in Danger," 2005). To the Fox reporters, this appeared to be an orchestrated effort by the mainstream media, a "revolting quest" taken up by "CBS and NBC, The *New York Times*, The Hearst Corporation, The Tribune Company," and "a bunch of other journalistic organizations" ("Putting Americans in Danger," 2005). In the same segment, the analysts argued, "At least FOX News" had the "common sense to put

the safety of the nation over freedom of press theory” (“Putting Americans in Danger,” 2005).

On another episode of Hannity & Colmes, Fox commentator Ollie North and military general Tommy Franks joined the two hosts to discuss the bias of mainstream media coverage on Iraq. When Colmes charged that Fox coverage of the war was “just open to conservatives,” North retorted that Fox was “nonpartisan” and the only place where citizens could get accurate information about developments in Iraq (cited in “U.S. Military Heavyweights,” 2005). In an argument about survey data concerning citizen support for the war, General Franks claimed that the mainstream media provided slanted polls to undermine public support. Colmes asked, “You’re going to blame — is it the media’s fault” (cited in “U.S. Military Heavyweights,” 2005)? Franks replied, “The fact of the matter is — well, the fact that we’re looking at the sort of poll number that you just described, yes, I attribute that to the media, sure, yes” (cited in “U.S. Military Heavyweights,” 2005). What was needed, Franks concluded, was more coverage on the war from Fox, “without all the hyperbole that, you know, we seem to see on TV” (cited in “U.S. Military Heavyweights,” 2005).

Conservatives also used Fox News segments to accuse the mainstream media of slanted coverage of Iraq for political gain in the 2006 midterms. One critic blasted the *New York Times* for adopting “The philosophy of outfits like the ACLU,” a philosophy that espoused, “hate politics” to smear conservatives and gain Democratic votes (“The Politics of Hate,” 2006). According to news anchors for the *Talking Points Memo*, Fox presented “smart, methodical leadership, not foolish ideology” that was being spread by the mainstream media (“The Politics of Hate,” 2006).

In an interview on the *O'Reilly Factor*, Bill O'Reilly discussed the anti-war bias in the mainstream media with Laura Ingraham. O'Reilly asked, "Do you believe NBC News is anti-war, anti-Iraq war?" and Ingraham replied, "I think there's not really any doubt at this point that the media today has pretty much concluded that this is a loser" (cited in "Laura Ingraham Catches Heat," 2006). According to Ingraham, "FOX is not part of that" but "CNN probably and the mainstream, so-called mainstream newspapers. I think they think Bush has really screwed this whole thing up" (cited in "Laura Ingraham Catches Heat," 2006).

The second defining characteristic of the conservative opinion media symbol system is the construction of a liberal dystopia and a conservative utopia. In the case of the Iraq War, conservatives on Fox argued that liberals and the mainstream media consistently forwarded a doom and gloom depiction of the war and ignored that had the war not been initiated, the nation would have suffered a massive attack. During a *Talking Points Memo* segment, political cartoonist Gary Trudeau was criticized for publishing an image of a soldier who had lost a limb. Fox analysts blasted Trudeau, arguing, "There is a line that all commentators should not cross. That line is using someone's personal tragedy to advance a political agenda" ("Using Wounded Warriors," 2006). Moreover, the Fox analysts claimed Trudeau's cartoon was an inaccurate reflection of the war that sought to harm U.S. efforts in Iraq. They argued, "Once the personal suffering of the military during a war is introduced as a tool to undermine the conflict, a boundary has been crossed" ("Using Wounded Warriors," 2006).

Fox analysts agreed that the mainstream media had overblown the negative consequences of the war. One analyst said, "NBC News has declared that there is indeed a civil war in Iraq. Now that's not shocking, because NBC is the most aggressive anti-Bush network these days, as they have made a calculated effort to woo left-wing viewers" ("Is it

Civil War,” 2006). Rather than reporting on the progress in the war in Iraq, Democrats and the mainstream media were accused of “cherry-picking” information and “fictionalizing the intelligence” that had been gathered overseas (“Was Pre-Iraq War Intelligence Manipulated,” 2012).

Fox News coverage of the war also forwarded claims that Democrats and the mainstream media were living in a cynical liberal fantasy that ignored how crucial the Iraq War was in confronting the nation’s enemies. On *Hannity & Colmes*, Ann Coulter blasted John Kerry for what she claimed was his anti-American, anti-war beliefs. In Coulter’s opinion, if Kerry and the left “were authentic patriots,” they would recognize the necessity of the war (cited in “Ann Coulter Explains,” 2004). She then added, “They never want to fight a war to defend America,” and noted that without conservative support for the war, “that great statesman, Saddam Hussein, would still be in power” (cited in “Ann Coulter Explains,” 2004). During an episode of the *O’Reilly Factor*, O’Reilly argued, “the far left want the USA to lose the war in Iraq” and failed to recognize the significance of invading Iraq for winning the War on Terror (cited in “Do Democrats Really Want to Win,” 2005). *Hannity* claimed that if Kerry and the liberals had things their way, “we wouldn’t have most of the major weapons systems we now have — that comprise our modern military” and the nation would be left with “weak intelligence” that would guarantee a failure in the War on Terror (cited in “Ann Coulter Explains,” 2004).

The third defining characteristic of the conservative opinion media symbol system is an enactment of the paranoid style. When covering the Iraq War, Fox News consistently asserted that liberals and the mainstream media not only wanted the U.S. to lose the war, but also that they were both explicitly and indirectly aiding enemy forces. Mainstream media

sources were described as “a leftist hotbed, bent on encouraging a liberal agenda” (“Lies and the Liars,” 2004). Hannity asserted an unfounded claim that if the government had listened to the mainstream media, “we would only be attacked again. And innocent Americans, even young liberals like you, would have been killed as well” (cited in “Late Soldier Pat Tillman,” 2004).

Fox analysts accused Democrats of politicizing the war by linking liberal commentators and the mainstream media with the far left. In an interview with former Clinton administration official Nancy Soderberg, O’Reilly asked if “Democrats are rooting for the Bush administration to lose in Iraq and, indeed, even in the War on Terror” (cited in “Do Democrats Really Want to Win,” 2005)? When Soderberg replied, “I actually think that Democrats very much want George Bush to succeed,” O’Reilly interrupted and exclaimed, “All right. Let — let me stop you there. So you think Michael Moore, Barbra Streisand, The *New York Times*, the *L.A. Times*, Stuart Smalley, the Air America crew all want President Bush to succeed in Iraq in the War on Terror? Really” (cited in “Do Democrats Really Want to Win,” 2005)?

The clearest evidence of the paranoid style in Fox coverage of the Iraq War was the suggestion by analysts that liberals and the mainstream media were participating in an international conspiracy, assisting enemy forces in the conflict. These claims relied on an assertion of evidence yielding fantastic conclusions, equating support for liberal organizations with aiding terrorist suspects. A dialogue between O’Reilly and Laura Ingraham illustrates this point. O’Reilly began by blasting Democrats and the mainstream media for “Actively helping the enemy” (cited in “What to do with Americans,” 2006). According to Laura Ingraham, this was not some small group conspiracy against America,

but a force powered by International ANSWER, “the big anti-war, Bush-hating, America-bashing group that organizes all of the anti-war rallies” (cited in “What to do with Americans,” 2006). Ingraham then added, “International ANSWER is kind of the umbrella under which all of these other organizations gather” (cited in “What to do with Americans,” 2006). Fox analysts also attacked Amnesty International. The analysts argued, “There's no question that A.I. is a far left outfit,” and that “it has become . . . openly hostile to the USA on the terror issue” (“Amnesty International Declares War,” 2005). The evidence for this claim was that “Amnesty International's executive director, Mr. Schultz, was on the board of Planned Parenthood and the People for the American Way, two very far left organizations” and “that Amnesty International works with the International Red Cross and the left wing American media to subvert the Bush administration's terror war strategies. Everybody should know that” (“Amnesty International Declares War,” 2005). Moreover, the Fox analysts accused Amnesty International of being “a far left outfit that sympathizes with people who kill Americans . . . in effect taking the side of the terrorists” (“Amnesty International Declares War,” 2005).

Additionally, O'Reilly argued that the mainstream media was indirectly helping enemy forces in Iraq. He said,

I think when the enemy sees the reaction in the United States, not of unifying to defeat them, but of picking apart every aspect of what we're trying to do there, when those soldiers get treated the way they did. I think they are absolutely emboldened. They're very savvy. They're on the Web sites. They watch CNN International and any other broadcast they can get their hands on. And you better believe it has to embolden the people who want to do us harm. (cited in “What to do with Americans,” 2005)

Hannity echoed O'Reilly, arguing that the mainstream media was undermining troop morale because, "leading Democrats repeatedly say our president lied to put them in a position that they're in harm's way, that he hyped, that he misled purposefully" (cited in "U.S. Military Heavyweights," 2005). When Democrats objected to these claims, they were met with patently false responses that they were "Without any evidence, proof or substantiation" (cited in "Late Soldier Pat Tillman," 2004).

Coverage of the Iraq War on Fox News supports the claim that the symbolic system of conservative opinion media was defined by the three characteristics discussed earlier. Commentators on a variety of news segments lambasted liberals and the mainstream media for providing what they believed was an inaccurate characterization of the war and defended themselves as purveyors of the truth. Analysts such as Sean Hannity, Brit Hume, and Bill O'Reilly claimed the mainstream media was constructing a pessimistic view of the conflict that ignored both the progress made in the war and the necessity of fighting terrorism, while also forwarding arguments about how Fox provided a fair, balanced, and positive view of what was happening in Iraq. Finally, Fox News anchors accused liberals and the mainstream media of promoting an anti-war effort, cooperating with enemy forces, and asserting in a manner similar to Joseph McCarthy that they had evidence supporting such accusations, without referencing any actual evidence. In order to demonstrate the generalizability of the three defining characteristics of the symbol system, I now show that the three characteristics were found quite broadly in conservative media.

Beyond Katrina and Iraq

Although coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq War are representative examples of the symbol system present in conservative opinion media, several other instances can be found throughout the conservative media ecosystem.

Demonize liberal media, valorize conservative media

The first defining characteristic of the conservative opinion media symbol system is a demonization of liberals and the mainstream media and a valorization of conservative media. Conservative media outlets defend themselves as a bulwark against liberal dominance in the mainstream media. On an episode of the *Talking Points Memo*, a Fox News analyst was asked about whether there was a liberal bias in the media. In response, the analyst argued, “Rush Limbaugh does not have a liberal bias. Oliver North does not have a liberal bias. The *Washington Times* does not have a liberal bias,” but “CBS Evening News or the NBC Nightly News or ABC World News Tonight is more an agenda than a catalogue of the day’s occurrences, then it is cynicism that is being disseminated, not information” (“Bias, Witting and Unwitting,” 2001).

Some conservatives argued that big government was responsible for the liberal bias in the mainstream media. For example, when covering the Enron scandal, Glenn Harlan Reynolds (2002) argued that, “the facts probably won’t matter much anyway” because of government’s “ability to manipulate the press and the appearance-game that passes for political ethics in Washington.” He then added that it “should come as no surprise” that “people who take part in those discussions are so invested in big government . . . that they find it hard to acknowledge the role that government size and intrusiveness play in

government corruption” (Reynolds, 2002). Similarly, Ann Coulter claimed that liberals were “cult-like” for “spewing propaganda through the mainstream media” to advance their agenda (cited in Donaldson-Evans, 2002).

Conservative commentators also discussed at length what they saw as immense Democratic influence on the mainstream media. Rush Limbaugh said that on “the question of media bias,” he had gone through “example after example” and concluded that, “it's overwhelmingly Democrat” (cited in “Interview With Rush Limbaugh,” 2002). Other conservative critics agreed. One commentator argued that, “The *New York Times* is ground zero for the elite media and you would think executives at that paper would understand how detached from American reality it has become” (“Defining the Elite Media,” 2004).

Conversely, the same commentators claimed that they were not a part of the elite mainstream media because they stood for conservative ideas. One critic argued, “Think back eight years ago when the Fox News Channel did not exist. Outside of *The Wall Street Journal*, which puts forth a conservative philosophy, the elites had the national information flow pretty much to themselves and no one could stand up to them” (“Defining the Elite Media,” 2004). With the addition of Fox News Channel to cable television, the critic claimed, “our competitors at NBC and CNN still can't figure out how Fox News has become so powerful, it's very simple: We are not the elite media . . . we give voice to all points of view” (“Defining the Elite Media,” 2004).

Liberal dystopia, conservative utopia

The second defining characteristic of the conservative opinion media symbol system is the construction of a liberal dystopia and a conservative utopia. Generally, conservative commentators claim that “the liberal message” is “doom and gloom,” a perspective that puts

“the institutions and traditions that have made the country great constantly under attack” (“Interview With Rush Limbaugh,” 2002). A number of specific issues can be cited to illustrate this trend. Consider conservative opinion media coverage on climate change. According to Fox News analyst Steven Milloy (2002), liberals had formed a “climatology” that circulated alarmist reporting to create a “political excuse” to advance the Democratic agenda, such as ratifying the Kyoto Protocol. The danger, Milloy (2002) argued, was that this sort of “fantasy of manmade global warming . . . might just encourage policy makers to pay more attention to the junk science.” On an episode of Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio show, a caller asked Limbaugh “How can you say you’re grounded in reality when you keep denying the issue of global warming” (cited in Limbaugh, 2005g)? In reply, Limbaugh (2005g) argued, “There is no evidence of that, zilch, zero, nada. There’s nothing more than a 25-year shrill campaign to . . . prove that man is causing it.” Limbaugh (2005g) then added that arguments defending human-induced climate change were “designed to advance the liberal agenda,” which in his view, was “destructive; it’s damaging, and it doesn’t do anybody any good.” The conservative solution to climate change, Limbaugh argued, was to stop believing that there was a problem to begin with. He said, “I’m not going to accept your premise that there is man-made global warming. And therefore what’s the conservative solution? Everything does not have a solution. Everything is not a problem” (Limbaugh, 2005g).

Commentators also argued that liberals ignored the achievements of the Bush administration. Rush Limbaugh (2005f), for example, argued, “the Democrats have come up with a new talking point or a focus group line, and that is the Republicans’ quest for ‘absolute power,’ ‘mad dash for power,’ ‘consolidating power,’ ‘abuse of power,’” a talking point “Mrs. Clinton is using . . . and all the other Democrats are” as well. Fortunately,

Limbaugh (2005f) added, Democrat's "pure psychobabble" would not last because "They [the mainstream media] don't have a monopoly anymore. Their power is dwindling — by the day." In fact, Limbaugh (2005f) concluded, "there's such a tremendous opportunity here to breathe new energy into the administration and the whole conservative movement now to take down the liberals."

The paranoid style

The final defining characteristic of the conservative opinion media symbol system is an enactment of the paranoid style that utilizes entelechial or extremist language, a barrage of unsound evidence to reach fantastic conclusions, and a rejection of rational standards for testing arguments. There are a plethora of examples that demonstrate how conservative opinion media constructed conspiracies that relied on an assertion of irrefutable evidence and blamed liberals and the mainstream media for impending crises.

For example, conservative commentators accused liberals and the mainstream media of participating in an eco-imperialism scheme to advance climate change legislation. Steven Milloy (2003) argued in a segment on Fox News that "the ideological environmental movement -- essentially comprised of wealthy, left-leaning Americans and Europeans -- wants to impose its views on billions of poor, desperate Africans, Asians and Latin Americans." Specifically, Milloy (2003) claimed, the environmentalist movement "has repeatedly used the alleged threat of global eco-catastrophe -- e.g., global warming -- to override the wishes of people who most desperately need energy and progress." In a later Fox News segment, Milloy (2004) accused the mainstream media and liberal filmmakers of trying "to scare us into submitting to the Greens' agenda: domination of society through

control of energy resources.” Without citing any evidence, Milloy (2004) then asserted that, “there’s no credible evidence humans are altering global climate in any measurable way.”

Conservative opinion media also capitalized on the fear of terrorism in the post-9/11 environment to promote conspiratorial arguments that lacked sound evidence and reached dramatic conclusions. For example, in an interview with Fox News, Frank J. Gaffney, Jr. argued that Saddam Hussein was directly implicated in the April, 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. He said there was “compelling, if circumstantial, indications that Iraqi operatives helped to plot, prepare and execute murderous attacks in Oklahoma City” (Gaffney, Jr., 2002). Gaffney, Jr. (2002) then asserted, “Oklahoma City was not, as prosecutors claimed, simply the homegrown handiwork of two violently disaffected U.S. citizens.” Rather, Gaffney, Jr.’s (2002) circumstantial “evidence” served “strongly to reinforce a reality of which President Bush has long and repeatedly warned: We will enjoy no relief from Saddam's predations unless and until he and his ilk are removed from power in Iraq.” Using only what Gaffney, Jr. described as testimonial evidence from eyewitnesses, he came to the dramatic conclusion that Iraq was intimately involved with the bombing in Oklahoma City. Similarly, Rush Limbaugh (2006) claimed that “the ACLU and other left-wing legal groups” were actively aiding terrorist suspects by “using the information they get to represent these dirt bag terrorists in court, and they’re doing all of this so as to force changes in US war policy.” In fact, Limbaugh argued that there was a massive liberal conspiracy to sabotage the War on Terror. He said, “the left, no matter how inept they appear to be at the Democratic Party level, the ACLU and these human rights groups, activist judges are hell-bent on undermining this war effort, folks. It’s not just Iraq. It’s the war on terror. They’re doing

everything they can to see to it that this war on terror, I don't care where it's waged, is sabotaged" (Limbaugh, 2006).

Yet another example can be found in conservative opinion coverage of immigration, which linked undocumented immigration with cultural destruction and terrorism. These claims relied on extremist views of immigration and asserted a mountain of evidence existed that enabled the commentators to reach outlandish claims. On an episode of the *Talking Points Memo*, Jack Martin, special projects director for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, asserted that undocumented immigration would destroy the American way of life. He argued, "with a calculated 500,000 illegals entering the borders each year, the U.S. economy, and the country as a whole, can't sustain itself" (cited in "Immigration's Effect on the Economy," 2006). Furthermore, Martin claimed, "The current wave of immigration is actually chipping away at the underpinnings of society, an expense that is incalculable in dollar terms" (cited in "Immigration's Effect on the Economy," 2006). To be clear about his position on the issue, Martin warned of a dramatic "cultural intrusion" and "a growing class divide in the United States" due to undocumented immigration, though he presented no data to support his claims (cited in "Immigration's Effect on the Economy," 2006). On an episode of *Hannity & Colmes*, Hannity interviewed Pat Buchanan. Hannity began by echoing the comments Martin made, claiming, "America is being invaded by millions of illegal immigrants every year, and it threatens the future of the country" (cited in "Pat Buchanan Defends," 2006). He then clarified by adding, "Arabic-speaking individuals are learning Spanish, integrating into the Mexican culture. And smugglers are sneaking them into the U.S." (cited in "Pat Buchanan Defends," 2006). Citing a consensus of unnamed "intelligence agencies," Buchanan agreed, arguing, "Al Qaeda is sending them in. Al Qaeda

folks have talked about coming in through Mexico” (cited in “Pat Buchanan Defends,” 2006).

In each case, conservative opinion outlets enacted the paranoid style by endorsing extremist language and outlandish conspiracy theories that they argued were proven by an asserted collection of evidence. For example, conservatives charged that the Democratic Party is responsible for the “degree of dependence, this degree of unproductivity, this degree to which people’s lives, in their own minds, are miserable and they’ve got no way out, has been created by the very party that has sought all these years to be their benefactors” (Limbaugh, 2008). According to Limbaugh (2008), this was no accident, “The Democrats have created this, and the dirty little secret is, they’ve done it on purpose. They have sought to take people who otherwise would have been productive and could have realized their dreams . . . and they destroyed all that for the express purpose of making them wards of the state, owing their existence to the Democrat Party.” This enacted the paranoid style by making extremist claims about Democrats and reaching unfounded, unproven conclusions about the Democratic Party.

Conclusion

Conservative opinion media became immensely powerful at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Conservative opinion media outlets such as Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio show and Fox News Channel presented a worldview defined by entelechial conservative ideas.

Significant implications can be drawn from this analysis. It is clear that conservative talk show hosts and news analysts played a substantial role in shaping conservative ideological views. My analysis confirms Jamieson and Cappella’s (2008) suggestion that

“The conservative media perform functions once associated with party leaders. In this role, they reinforce a set of coherent rhetorical frames that empower their audiences to act as conservative opinion leaders” and reduce the power of the mainstream media (p. xiii). In fact, “Republican elites, activists, and voters now rely on conservative media, even sometimes empowering Fox News Channel, talk radio, and conservative websites over party leaders” (Grossman & Hopkins, 2018, p. 1). This also suggests that in addition to “a constellation of factors related to diminishing public confidence in the government and press . . . The rising public perception of a liberal news media may be the result of ideologically inclined individuals internalizing the claims of conservative political elites” (Domke et al., 1999, p. 36). Grossman and Hopkins (2018) add that, “Today’s multimedia conservative infrastructure reflects the conscious efforts of activists to mobilize shared values to move the country rightward and to counteract a mainstream media perceived as hostile to their beliefs” (p. 3). In a short period of time, the conservative opinion media symbol system produced “a fundamental reconfiguration and reconceptualization of the role, purpose, and function of television news” (Jones, 2012, p. 184).

By “activating the deep well of symbolic conservatism in the American electorate,” conservative opinion media succeeded in “uniting and rallying citizens who identify as conservatives against a common set of ideological enemies” (Grossman & Hopkins, 2018, p. 7). This strategy succeeded by focusing on themes rather than specific policy details. Grossman and Hopkins (2018) note, “Conservative talk radio and television hosts . . . emphasize broad symbolic themes that resonate with large sectors of the public rather than focusing on conservative policy details” in order to “advance the view that conservatives are perpetually on the edge of losing an existential fight with the Left— even during periods of

unified Republican control of the federal government” (p. 14). Unlike elected officials, conservative talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Bill O’Reilly “are never forced to make the inevitable compromises of governing that face Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell,” allowing them to “maintain a perfectionist stance” (Grossman & Hopkins, 2018, pp. 17-18).

Chapter 6 - When trajectories collide: Reflections on the status of contemporary conservatism

The conservative movement in general and the Republican Party in particular have shifted far to the right over the last forty years. In the mid-twentieth century, the Republican Party included a moderate wing that recognized the importance of a strong central government and advocated for government-sponsored assistance to citizens. As of 2018, the breed of moderate Republicans that once populated the party is all but extinct. Contemporary movement conservatives and elected officials in the Republican Party are motivated by a terministic compulsion, a worldview that denounces big government. Although this worldview is not universal, a series of interrelated symbolic trajectories developed among conservatives since 1980 that rejects government for a variety of reasons, whether because government intrudes in Americans' daily lives, supports social programs, imposes high taxes and spends too much money, or overregulates. Over time, this worldview and its corresponding symbol systems have become more extreme and reached a broader segment of the population, indicating a rightward lurch in American politics.

As well as outlining the defining characteristics of contemporary anti-government symbol systems, each case study provided a necessary rhetorical backdrop for Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein's (2016) argument that the Republican Party "has become an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition" (p. xxiv).

In chapter two, I analyzed the conservative 1980s, and pointed to the dramatic influence of Ronald Reagan's small government philosophy that was outlined in his first inaugural address. The discourse of movement conservatives and think tanks during the

1980s demonstrated how the phrase, “government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem” was entelechialized (Reagan, 1981a). When Reagan and George H. W. Bush acted pragmatically, they were heavily criticized for not being true to conservative ideals. The rhetoric of Newt Gingrich, analyzed in chapter three, showed that conservatives were willing to use deceptive strategies to cut government. Policies that were proposed using these strategies were premised on racist assumptions and claimed to aid the very people they harmed, such as cutting government spending and the elimination of federal assistance programs. Chapter four explored the symbolic trajectory of Pat Buchanan’s conservatism, tracing the rise of a worldview that endorsed isolationism and rejected government for participating in an immoral liberal culture. Finally, chapter five provided insight on the rise of conservative opinion media and its corresponding symbol system that labeled liberals as unpatriotic and anti-American, treated conservatives as heroic defenders of the nation, and utilized the paranoid style. Although each case study independently provides insight on the contemporary conservative symbol system, the study as a whole clarifies how “rhetorical transformation occurs within political power structures,” adapting to specific historical circumstances (Ray, 2008, p. 67). By charting the rhetorical arc of various sub-sets of the contemporary conservative symbol system, I have demonstrated how “accounting for the changes in [a] discourse over time will reveal important insights” that studying independent events or texts will not (Goldzwig & Dionisopoulos, 1989, p. 189).

In this final chapter, I expand upon and clarify the consequences of these trajectories, offer potential rhetorical correctives, and discuss the limitations of the study as well as provide a plan for future research. This chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I outline key implications of the project, which include political party asymmetry due in part to the

conservative anti-government worldview. Second, I offer potential correctives for both rhetorical critics and citizens. Finally, I conclude with the limitations and propose a plan for future research.

Key implications

This study examined a series of symbolic trajectories in the conservative movement between 1980 and the early 21st century. Tracing the terminological developments of the movement in this period, four key implications became clear. The four implications are the calcification of the contemporary conservative symbol system and growing asymmetry between the two dominant political parties, the resulting difficulty of making sensible policy changes in the public sphere, the power of opinion media in shaping the political landscape, and the normalization of negative stereotypes in American politics.

The first implication is the gradual calcification of the contemporary conservative symbol system. This study shows that a cluster of key terms formed a terministic screen, producing an entelechialized anti-government worldview that is now the ideological glue holding the Republican Party together. Each key term reflects Kenneth Burke's (1945) argument that God and Devil terms function as a powerful source of motivation to act. Since 1980, four key terms emerged as the dominant symbols that define contemporary conservatism. First, the term *government* was frequently invoked as a devil term by the movement, motivating its members to take whatever action necessary to shrink its size and scope. Second, the terms *liberal* and *conservative* functioned enthymatically to present two competing visions of the world, the former functioned as a dystopia that threatened the nation's morals and founding principles and the latter as a utopia that promised to resolve the threats posed by liberals and big government. Third, the term *welfare* was invoked to reflect

the dangers of excessive government, including a citizenry that was too dependent on government assistance. In some cases, an alternative to welfare was offered, such as the opportunity society. Finally, the *mainstream media* was invoked as an enemy that functioned to keep conservatism on the fringes of society and preserve the liberal worldview. Combined, these four terms gradually calcified the contemporary conservative symbol system and contributed to the tribalism of the Republican Party that is now a prominent feature of American politics.

The calcification of the anti-government conservative worldview and the conservative movement's terministic compulsion to cut government also explains a puzzle about growing asymmetry between the two dominant political parties, making compromise a third rail in American politics. A key factor in the growing asymmetry between the two parties is that the Democratic Party favors practical policymaking while the Republican Party sticks to ideological principles, primarily principles that defend cutting government. According to Matt Grossman and David A. Hopkins (2016), "Democrats emphasize practical achievement over doctrinal devotion" and "Whether in or out of government, Democratic actors tend to remain respectful of empiricism and expertise, open to incrementalism and compromise" (p. 323). Additionally, the majority of the Democratic Party has maintained a centrist governing philosophy.

The Republican Party, however, has shifted far to the right. This is in part because the conservative anti-government worldview demands a commitment to a quasi-theological doctrine that requires cutting government, regardless of the policy details. Grossman and Hopkins (2016) note that several developments in contemporary conservatism are responsible for the "deep roots in the enduring imbalance between the two parties," including

“the construction of the conservative media universe . . . the procedural intransigence of congressional Republicans, and the rise of the Tea Party movement” (p. 316).

As I have shown, the conservative worldview was not always anti-government, and many conservatives of the 1980s would be considered pragmatic and liberal in the current political climate. To this day, “Ronald Reagan remains the closest thing the Republican Party has to a secular saint” (Cannon, 2014, p. 82). However, there is “an irony in the idolization of Reagan” that conveniently ignores a widening rift between the political philosophies of Reagan and contemporary conservatives (Cannon, 2014, p. 83). Reagan was optimistic, pragmatic, and principled (Rowland & Jones, 2001; Rowland & Jones, 2006). Conservatives have frequently invoked the phrase “government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem” in order to justify the anti-government worldview (Reagan, 1981a). Not only did Reagan’s first inaugural address refute the claim that government is never the solution to the nation’s problems, but his policies also demonstrated a faith in government to serve the people. If a conservative today proposed appointing a Supreme Court justice like Sandra Day O’Connor or proposed an immigration reform policy that included a path to citizenship, he or she would be instantly labeled as a liberal and rejected by the movement. As Lou Cannon (2014) argued, “If Reagan were to take the measure of the Tea Party . . . he might conceivably turn and flee” (p. 82).

This study makes clear the evolution from Reagan’s small government philosophy to the nearly no government philosophy that defines contemporary conservatism. Following Reagan’s presidency, George H. W. Bush signed into law both a reauthorization of the Civil Rights Act in 1989 and the Americans with Disabilities Act. This pragmatic action and stance is in stark contrast to the conservative movement of the 21st century, which supported

President Donald Trump’s attempts to ban Muslims from entering the country and ban trans people from serving in the military. In 2017, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos “rescinded 72 policy documents that outline the rights of students with disabilities as part of the Trump administration’s effort to eliminate regulations it deems superfluous” (Balingit, 2017). The contrast between the entelechialized worldview of 21st century conservatives and that of Reagan is striking.

The second implication is that it has become much more difficult for elected officials to enact sensible policy changes in the public sphere. Since the end of the 1980s, rightward drift has led to congressional gridlock, save for the rare cases when proposals were either significantly watered down or jammed through under a reconciliation process to avoid a filibuster. For example, mass shootings in the United States frequently reignite congressional debates on gun control. However, the National Rifle Association has repeatedly demonstrated the power of the anti-government worldview to halt regulatory law from being enacted. According to E. J. Dionne, Jr. (2016), “The radicalization of the NRA is of a piece with the radicalization of the rest of the right, and the gun issue has provided a way for opponents of regulations of all kinds—environmental, financial, workplace safety, consumer protection—to create a mass libertarian base ready to go on the attack at the hint of government action” (p. 389).

While the preceding case studies make clear that anti-government themes resonate with a significant portion of the population, the corresponding policy proposals have proven unpopular. This is in part because the entelechialized worldview of contemporary conservatism is incompatible with the practical realities of governing the nation. The underlying problem is that one of the two political parties simply promotes an anti-

government message without reference to the actual work of government. That message resonates in the conservative ecosystem where opposing the anti-government worldview results in accusations of heresy, not a set of arguments that need to be confronted, debated, and deliberated.

Conservatives' response to the Affordable Care Act demonstrates this point. On the same day Barack Obama signed the Affordable Care Act into law, Republicans attacked the measure "as an example of big government run amok" (Stolberg & Pear, 2010). For example, John Boehner argued, "By signing this bill, President Obama is abandoning our founding principle that government governs best when it governs closest to the people" (cited in Stolberg & Pear, 2010). In the years following, Republicans tried tirelessly to repeal the ACA, failing in each attempt. The closest Republicans came to a repeal was the repeal of the Individual Mandate, as a portion of the Trump administration's tax cut bill in late 2017.

There are at least two key reasons that Republicans failed to fully repeal and replace the ACA. First, although Republicans amassed public support for rejecting the ACA in principle, each of the proposed alternatives was wildly unpopular since they would include "the specter of over 20 million Americans stranded without health insurance" (Reich, 2017). When the Trump administration and a Republican-majority House and Senate attempted to repeal the ACA, public support "reached its highest level on record" (Fingerhut, 2017). There was no viable conservative replacement for the ACA because "Obamacare, in its basic structure, *is* the conservative plan for health care reform" (Dodge, 2017, emphasis in original). The ACA was already the "most conservative approach of obtaining near-universal coverage" and "was proven to work after then-governor Mitt Romney adopted a similar system in Massachusetts in 2006" (Dodge, 2017; see also Kirk, 2015). Democrats chose this

option for a healthcare law because the policy “poached from the conservative Heritage Foundation” would have the best chance for obtaining bipartisan support (Dodge, 2017).

Conservatives’ resistance to the ACA highlights the difficulty of translating the movement’s entelechial worldview into public policy. It also makes clear that if a policy could result in a political victory for Democrats, conservatives were motivated to link the policy to big government and oppose it, even when the policy clearly reflected conservative ideals. In the case of the ACA, “Many Republicans oppose Obamacare not because it is ineffective, but because it is effective in ways conservatives do not like,” such as making Medicaid available to a wider portion of the population (Bacon, Jr., 2017). Even though the ACA was based on a Heritage Foundation proposal, the perception that the ACA expanded government led conservatives to oppose the policy.

The third implication is that while elected conservatives were constrained by the practical realities of governing the nation, the conservative opinion media ecosystem was not bound by such constraints. Consequently, conservative commentators such as Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Bill O’Reilly maintained the perfectionist anti-government worldview without being held responsible for the daily tasks performed by government. This enabled public figures in the conservative movement to keep its followers angry and energized to act. It also reinforced the difficulties I have identified in actually making effective public policy.

The fourth implication is that the contemporary conservative anti-government symbol system justified a series of nativist, racial, and sexist stereotypes in American political discourse. Conservative criticisms of big government reinforced hostility toward immigrants, the nation’s poor, minority groups, and welfare recipients. What is most striking about these

developments is how common such arguments became in public discourse in the Trump years. This type of rhetoric was inconsistent with the values espoused by Reagan and H. W. Bush, but quite consistent with the rhetoric of Donald J. Trump.

Given the power of anti-government conservatism in American politics, the problem may seem daunting. After all, “The institutional changes needed to cope with America’s serious governing problems face powerful resistance from the same political forces that exacerbate its difficulties in trying to govern effectively” (Mann & Ornstein, 2016, p. 178). However, by charting the evolution of contemporary conservative ideas and explaining how those symbolic developments have impacted the Republican Party and the American political system, there is the possibility for prescribing rhetorical correctives.

Correctives for critics and citizens

I identified rhetorical problems presented by the entelechial anti-government conservative worldview at a number of levels. In what follows, I offer two potential correctives. First, there is a need for a stronger narrative defending government. The contemporary conservative symbol system gives the conservative movement an inherent rhetorical advantage by positioning Democrats and liberals as the purveyors of big government while promising a utopia where government no longer interferes in Americans’ lives. This strategy has effectively tapped into citizens’ views on government and the media. According to *Pew Research*, “Public trust in the government remains near historic lows” (“Public Trust in Government,” 2017).

Rather than establishing a counter narrative defending the value of government, Democrats have attacked conservatives and the Republican Party. A poll conducted by the *Washington Post* in 2017 noted, “a majority of registered voters” believe that the Democratic

Party “just stands against Trump” and “has no real message” (Blake, 2017). A counter narrative defending the value of government is needed that supports federal assistance programs, regulation of Wall Street and the environment, and protection of all citizens’ rights.

A more powerful narrative defending government is a necessary ingredient in reinvigorating a public square that works to solve problems. Mann and Ornstein (2016) argued that, “The country no longer has a public square” where most Americans shared “a common set of facts used to debate policy options with vigor, but with a basic acceptance of the legitimacy of others’ views” (p. 181). It is important to find a means of reinvigorating “civil discourse and intelligent, lively debate” (Mann & Ornstein, 2016, p. 181). Government may be imperfect, but a commitment to cutting government without healthy dialogue and deliberation over pressing public issues prevents government from ever coming to the aid of citizens who are truly in need. In fact, “Democracy cannot function without a certain amount of trust among citizens that their government can be relied on to protect the national interest, to act responsibly and to uphold the rule of law” (“Renewing Americans’ Trust,” 2017). Moreover, “A free press has been recognized as a vital element of democracy in America” (“Renewing Americans’ Trust,” 2017).

Second, rhetorical critics and public intellectuals have an obligation to mold a more informed citizenry. This could be achieved in a number of ways, both in and out of the classroom. Critics and public intellectuals should actively support public media that “could attract a robust enough audience to provide a positive role model and a partial counterweight for more-corrosive media figures,” such as Rush Limbaugh or Sean Hannity (Mann & Ornstein, 2016, p. 182). There are previous examples that suggest citizens can be motivated

to act if they perceive public media is threatened. During the 2012 election, Mitt Romney stated in the first presidential debate that, if elected, he would cut funding for PBS. In response, there was unprecedented backlash from the American public on social media (Eisenstadt, 2018).

Inside the classroom setting, critics can teach students the value of rhetorical criticism as it relates to being a more informed citizen. Rather than seeking out information on specific issues that affect them, citizens tend to “broadly condemn Washington or Congress, which is more likely to reinforce the structural dynamics that produce gridlock than to generate a constructive call to action” (Mann & Ornstein, 2016, p. 190). It is therefore a priority for critics of argument and rhetoric as well as public intellectuals to clarify the choices citizens can make and provide them with the necessary tools to make more informed decisions. Doing so is a necessary first step “to help individuals cultivate connections between public crises and their own lives” (Eisenstadt, 2017, p. 212).

Additionally, to inculcate a generation of “successful citizen arguers,” critics must utilize the classroom to “focus on values, temperament, and demeanor” as well as “reasoning, analysis, and refutation” (Hollihan, 2011, p. 18). Therefore, according to Thomas Hollihan (2011), critics of argument and rhetoric share a responsibility to “reaffirm our confidence in human reason, good will, and judgment” (p. 16), and must do so in a way that increases “the impact of our discipline within the academy” (p. 18). He adds, “Nurturing and sustaining a healthy democratic argument culture has historically been understood as a primary, if not THE primary rationale that has sustained our field of study and justified our existence” (Hollihan, 2011, p. 20).

Limitations and future research

The obvious limitation of the preceding case studies is that they conclude at the beginning of the 21st century. Since that time, the symbolic trajectories outlined in the previous chapters have developed. While the preceding chapters mention a number of these developments, such as the rise of the Tea Party and the election of Donald J. Trump, there is a need to continue tracing the development of conservative symbol systems to the present.

Another limitation of this series of case studies is that much more needs to be said regarding the growing presence and tolerance of extremist rhetoric in American politics. For example, there is a need to understand why the birther movement, which accused Obama of not being an American-born citizen, gained so much momentum despite overwhelming evidence that debunked the story. There is also a need to explain why, given the irrefutable evidence of human-induced climate change; the decision to withdraw from the Paris Accord was politically popular among conservatives. Yet another example of extremist rhetoric that deserves additional attention is conservative hostility toward immigration. The political stances of Ronald Reagan and Donald J. Trump on immigration are polar opposites, and yet Trump has galvanized Republican support by campaigning on the message that immigrants are violent gang members or terrorists. Fortunately, the theory that undergirds this study provides at least a foundation for teasing out the answer to these rhetorical problems in order to understand the symbolic trajectories of contemporary conservatism.

A final limitation is that the preceding case studies do not explain why the failures of conservative orthodoxy to produce the promised conservative utopia set the stage for Trump's victory in the 2016 election. This may well be one of the most important and urgent

questions facing rhetorical critics concerned with the status of American democracy.

Fortunately, this dissertation provided the groundwork to understand how the optimistic message of Ronald Reagan evolved into the dystopian worldview of Donald Trump.

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