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Introducing the MAGA New Right

BETWEEN 2016 AND 2024, over the course of less than a decade, American conservatism capitulated to—and took a part in fomenting—a far-right populist movement that led to the nomination of Donald J. Trump as the Republican Party’s candidate for the US presidency, and then catapulted him into power, twice. This new movement was inspired by Trump, but the seeds were there long before him, and the movement reached well beyond. It transformed US conservatism, including its dominant intellectual wing. Over the course of the first Trump administration, various groups of conservative thinkers coalesced, at different times and for different reasons, and more or less enthusiastically, behind Trumpism.

In short order, the conservative intellectualism I thought I knew had all but vanished from the discourse that dominated the Republican Party. Champions of the US Constitution, and of originalism, were now sympathetic to a man who obviously cared very little for constitutional niceties and was eventually willing to throw the entire electoral system—the foundation of American government—into chaos for his own power. People who excelled at the identification of demagogues and would-be tyrants—who had railed against Barack Obama for his rhetorical excesses and overweening message of “hope and change”—were denying that Trump’s enthusiastic deployment of hate, resentment, and fear was a matter of concern. Former defenders of “family values,” high culture, and Christianity were suddenly lining up behind an adulterer, purported rapist, and obvious misogynist who was also an

anti-intellectual and failed capitalist with a record of six bankrupted businesses. In a separate twist, Trump and the GOP now supposedly stood for a protectionist style of economics—the opposite of the laissez-faire approach that had long been the mainstay of the American right.

By 2024, matters had become much worse. In addition to ongoing right-wing indulgence of President Trump’s “Big Lie” about the 2020 election, and their refusal to contend honestly with the implications of January 6, 2021, right-wing thought leaders were talking about ending liberal democracy and installing a “Red Caesar.”¹ They were calling themselves Postliberals and publishing books with titles like *Regime Change*.² Establishment groups like the Heritage Foundation and Intercollegiate Studies Institute joined arms with Trump-supporting groups like National Conservatism and the Claremont Institute. Together they began to work on “Project 2025”—a plan for action should Trump retake the White House, which involved firing thousands of public servants and replacing them with far-right stalwarts. A doctrine of “No Enemies to the Right,” or NETTR, started to take hold in some of these right-wing circles. Trump, for his part, shamelessly praised foreign dictators, admitting at one point that he *would* like to be a dictator if reelected, but only for one day.³ He then chose Senator JD Vance—a true darling of the new movement—as his running mate.

By then, “New Right” had become the catch-all term for the energetic group of intellectuals and political activists who together formed the brain trust and influencer arm of the new populist Republican politics. This book documents the emergence and coalescence of this movement between 2016 and 2024. It is a book about PhDs and intellectuals who, almost by definition, exist outside of the political mainstream. They are up in the ivory tower, writing articles and books, perhaps an occasional op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times*. These are men (yes, they are almost all men) who most people, including many conservatives, have never heard of, but who matter greatly because they articulated the ideas that have shaped a movement.

I had heard of them and had met a few. And I watched closely—and with genuine surprise—as their authority within the Trumpist GOP grew. This book chronicles how it happened—the writings, conferences, groupings, and schisms. The intellectuals of the New Right did us the favor of articulating their visions for the future, leaving behind a lengthy public record of their project. Over the course of this book, you will meet the men who first endorsed Trump, see their talks, learn about the books they wrote, and read the tweets they tweeted.

The story is one of ideological radicalization—the mutually reinforcing radicalization of intellectuals, politicians, and the movement they led. The men of the New Right saw Trump as a major opportunity; they egged him and his supporters on, and they brought others into the fold. They saw that he shared some of their extremist, old-school conservative views, and they appreciated that he would use whatever means necessary—including unconstitutional means—to gain and exert power. They are people who sought to leverage real problems, as well as known vulnerabilities of liberalism, to impose their own homogenizing moral and political vision on the rest of the country. They wanted to turn back the clock on pluralistic liberal democracy, and even on modernity itself. Many were also articulating new visions for the future: new laws, schemas for education, modes of constitutionalism, traditionalist communities, and technological utopias.

The New Right as a whole consists of many extremely smart people who occupy positions of power and prestige in American institutions. They are professors at Harvard and Notre Dame and have graduate degrees from Duke and Yale; they are concentrated in places like the Claremont Institute in Southern California and Hillsdale College in Michigan, but also have a footing in Silicon Valley, Viktor Orbán's Hungary, edgy New York neighborhoods, and the think tanks of Washington, DC. The Republican staffers on Capitol Hill know all about the New Right. And more than a couple prominent American politicians—like Senators Josh Hawley, Tom Cotton, and Marco Rubio, as well as Vice President JD Vance—have embraced the movement. Ron DeSantis, Florida's governor and one-time presidential hopeful, was first to enact a full-fledged New Right policy suite at the state level.

Michael Anton, who was one of the first to defend Trumpism in intellectual terms, defined it in September 2016 as “secure borders, economic nationalism, and America-first foreign policy.”⁴ This is a useful shorthand that captures some of the fundamentals. The New Right is indeed, with very few exceptions, anti-immigration. It stands against free trade and globalism. And it represents a turn against the neoconservative interventionism in foreign affairs that characterized the first part of the twenty-first century. But if those are the ribs of the New Right’s politics, Anton’s formulation hides the spine, which is a staunch social traditionalism and rejection of liberal pluralism and egalitarianism; in other words, the various New Right policy prongs are organized around a traditionalist (usually white, Christian, and patriarchal) social vision and homogenizing nationalism meant to counter and replace pluralistic liberalism. The New Right views mainstream liberal America—the “woke” America that embraces plurality and equality, including across various formerly marginalized identities—as an all-encompassing, monolithic “regime” of elite oppression (which they often also refer to as the “enemy”). Culture warriorism—which we might define as an excessive emphasis on rhetoric and media performance over policy formulation and real-world political negotiation—plays a major role on the New Right because at bottom this is a movement driven by reactionary social values and principles, not specific policy concerns.

R. R. Reno, the editor of an important conservative Christian journal *First Things*, has framed the right’s turn toward nationalism and populism in terms of a “return of the strong gods.” In a book by that title published in 2019, he celebrated this return, which he identified with strong, solidaristic forms of love and juxtaposed with liberalism. “Liberalism,” wrote Reno, “hearkens to the gods of weakening . . . when liberalism becomes dominant, as it has done in the postwar consensus, civil life withers, for liberalism offers no vigorous language of love.” He claimed that the liberalism of the last half-decade or so “trains us to be loveless and therefore to be something less than human.” It is a refrain that you will hear across the New Right. It is based on misunderstandings both of human nature and of liberalism, but Reno is confident: Whatever comes next, he says, “will require a restoration of love.

And love is roused by the strong gods, which is why they are returning.”⁵ However much it rejects liberalism, the New Right does not understand itself in strictly negative terms. It thinks it has a monopoly on things like “the good, the true, and the beautiful.” In other words, it does not really care about (or for) Donald Trump. The New Right has bigger plans—cultural, political, economic, local, and international visions for a new old-fashioned world.

Who’s Who

The New Right does have a defining core—Reno’s reactionary “strong god” spine, supported by Anton’s ribs of “secure borders, economic nationalism, and America-first foreign policy.” But it is not a monolith. I divide the New Right into three groups: the Claremonters, the Postliberals, and the National Conservatives. In brief, the Claremonters idolize the American founding, the Postliberals a particular (religiously inspired) conception of the “Common Good,” and the National Conservatives the myth of a traditional American nation. These camps are not mutually exclusive; it is best to think of the New Right as a highly networked movement with distinct clusters and modes of thinking, that is home not only to intellectuals, but also to activists, influencers, staffers, and politicians.

The Claremonters are closely networked with the Claremont Institute, a think tank in California, and the political science faculty and administrators at Hillsdale College in Michigan. Many of the scholars in this cluster identify as West Coast Straussians—a school of thought inspired by the twentieth-century political philosopher Leo Strauss and his student Harry V. Jaffa. They rally around a particular vision of the American founders—a vision that they are desperate to recover but that they believe can only happen through radical change. Its ideology is in some respects spiritually adjacent to originalism, except that rather than appeal to the text of the Constitution, the Claremonters appeal to the first principles of the founding (an approach that some scholars have called “Declarationism”).⁶ Between 2016 and 2024 it became attached to a radical form of counterrevolutionary activism, inspired by Anton’s

famous essay “The Flight 93 Election,” from September 2016, in which he had defined Trumpism. This younger generation of Claremonters even took inspiration from an older group of conservatives called the Paleoconservatives or Paleos, opponents of Jaffa’s who disliked his emphasis on equality (and whom one historian described as “the embittered heirs of failed traditionalism, many with longings for the antebellum South.”)⁷ Some Claremonters have also embraced an emergent Christian nationalism.

JD Vance has spoken at Claremonter events, and the Claremonters were jubilant when he was chosen as Trump’s running mate. The aesthetic here is youthful, bitter, masculinist, and counterrevolutionary. The Claremonter crowd signals their toughness with the phrase “knowing what time it is.” If you know what time it is, you know that the hour is late, and it is time for radical action in America.

Compared to the Claremonters, the Postliberal camp is less enamored of the American founders and instead embraces many elements of communitarianism and traditional Catholic social teaching, including a greater role for the state in shaping public life and morality. Some American Postliberals are also part of the Catholic integralist movement, which promotes a radical effort to end the separation of church and state, thus making political life subordinate to spiritual aims. It includes thinkers like Patrick Deneen, a professor at the University of Notre Dame whose book *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018) helped to launch the New Right, and Adrian Vermeule, a legal scholar at Harvard University and Catholic integralist who has gifted the New Right a constitutional defense of far-right conservative authoritarianism. These are the most sophisticated thinkers of the New Right, and the ones who appear the sincerest in their critique of capitalism and commitment to the populist economic reforms that Trump and the New Right have sometimes promised. The Postliberals sometimes lean on mainstream Catholic thought to sustain their views; at other times they deploy ideas from much more controversial figures, like the German jurist (and Nazi) Carl Schmitt. The Postliberal aesthetic is sober, traditionalist, and highbrow. Vance has identified closely with the “postliberal right” and is an admirer of Patrick Deneen.⁸

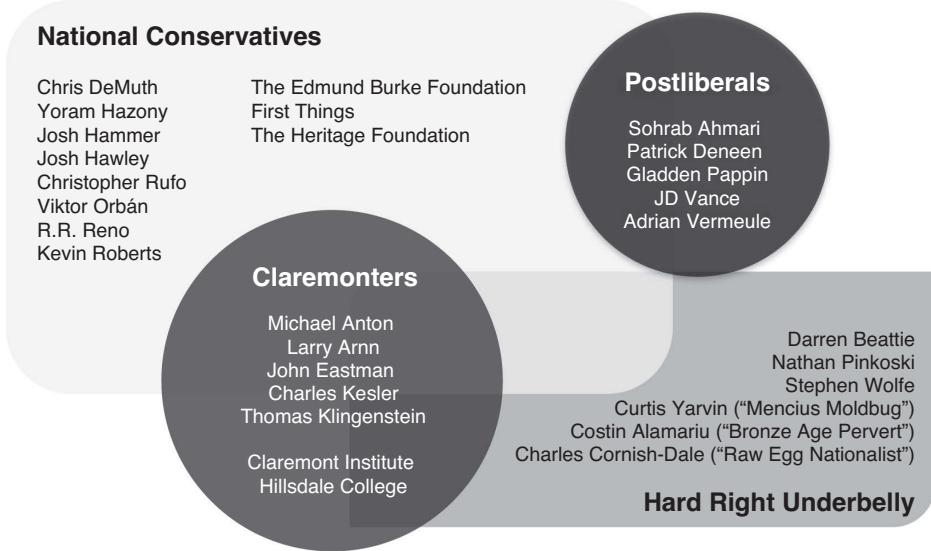


FIGURE 1: Key people and institutions of the MAGA New Right

"National Conservatism" serves as a big tent and umbrella for the movement. It is organized and formal in a way that the rest of the New Right is not, with regular conferences in the United States and abroad. Ideologically, National Conservatism promotes the notion of a single, relatively homogenous nation-state that is under threat from within and without and needs to be protected. This embrace of nationalism—at times the open endorsement of Christian nationalism—is highly exclusive. It cuts against America's tradition of religious pluralism, as well as against the Declarationist creedal elements of America's traditional self-understanding and civil religion.⁹ Vance was a speaker at three of the four NatCon conferences that took place in the United States between 2019 and 2024. The mood of National Conservatism is fervent and unyielding.

Finally, there is a rather capacious underbelly to the New Right movement, which I generally call the Hard Right. I do not consider them their own camp because ideologically they span the other three. They are distinct insofar as they are more hard-line, racist, misogynistic, and violent in their rhetoric. The aesthetic here is hypermasculinist,

desperate, and ruthless; several figures from the Hard Right are open racists and fascists.¹⁰ They push the movement ever further to the extremes.

Furious Minds tells the story of ideals and grievances, aspirations and self-delusions. It is about what the New Right was trying to achieve, how it succeeded, and how it has at times flailed. The New Right gained outsized influence within a Trump-led Republican Party and succeeded in transforming the party. In other respects, it faltered. But the New Right is dynamic and sees itself as youthful, fresh, and hardcore. Carl Schmitt has more purchase in some quarters of the New Right than Abraham Lincoln, and a writer named Bronze Age Pervert is a favorite for GOP staffers on Capitol Hill.¹¹ In many instances, these conservatives have more in common with European defenders of monarchy and reactionary antimodernists than with anything that has been mainstream in the United States for the past hundred or more years. The movement is, in many respects, untethered from the ordinary decency and common sense that characterize America at its idealistic best—and from the pluralistic reality of the country as it exists today.

The New Right is also bigger than it seems. It extends beyond Washington, DC, into movement conservatism—the still broader webs of pundits, funding organizations, media operators, and churches that also give shape to American conservatism. When I look back at the people from that summer program in Charlottesville, I was meeting a cut of professors from the conservative mainstream, and I never would have expected them to turn toward Trump. But some became Trump's defenders or collaborators, and very few repudiated him in public, even after January 6. Most have gritted their teeth and watched the show unfold. They are patient enough—and, justifiably or not, trusting enough in America's capacity to resist Trumpism's excesses—to wait it out and see what comes next. This book is about them, too: about all the people on the elite right whose silence, acquiescence, and bad

judgment allowed Trumpism to grow, who could have spoken up and helped things go a different way but didn't.

That said, the contours of contemporary American conservatism—and the American right—are broader than the currents I investigate here. There are still many conservative intellectuals who oppose Trump and Trumpism; they just have less power than they did before. And this book does not fully address Trumpism as a popular phenomenon. While the New Right has reshaped the Republican Party, the extent to which men like Steve Bannon, Elon Musk, and other New Right figures represent or influence the views of ordinary voters remains unclear.¹² Furthermore, I do not investigate the rise of the QAnon conspiracy, or the ongoing impact of the Prosperity Gospel, or the many ways in which Trump has become a cultlike strongman figure on the American right. The rise of Trump has meant—or coincided with—the rise and spread of apocalyptic, Manichean, and conspiratorial thinking across the country reminiscent of earlier phenomena like the Birchers and the Birthers. Some of the thinkers I discuss in this book suffer from versions of these same pathologies, at times acutely. But I leave the connections for others to untangle.

Historical and Global Context

The New Right movement of the early twenty-first century represents the most radical and successful iteration of a pattern on the American right that goes back at least to the start of the twentieth century. And while this is not a book about the history of American conservatism, it is worth saying more about this dynamic to clarify what is and isn't "new" about the MAGA New Right. It is also useful to put the American case in global perspective. So reader be warned: For a few pages now I will take a more historical and academic turn, to set the stage for everything to come.

As a descriptor, "New Right" is somewhat confounding since it has been used many times by many groups to describe other waves of incipient change spanning the 1950s through the 1990s. Overall, such terms—and others, like "paleoconservatism" and "neoconservatism"—reflect

the push and pull of ideological influence, which tends to oscillate between an isolationist, socially conservative style and one that is more internationally minded (or interventionist/imperialist) and socially moderate. As these waves come, the moniker “New Right” has been used repeatedly, the result being that it can refer to various strands of conservatism, including ones that are in some mutual tension. The matter is complicated still more by the fact of partisan realignment. For much of the twentieth century, the Republican and Democratic Parties did not represent the conservative and liberal sides of the political spectrum. The second half of the century saw progressives, moderates, and Black voters leave the GOP in waves and white Southerners migrate into it, as the GOP pursued its infamous “Southern Strategy.”¹³ The overall story of the twentieth century is one of a gradual, conservative, populist takeover and consolidation of the GOP—away from the progressivism championed by President Theodore Roosevelt or the progressive moderation of President Eisenhower and toward something more ideologically homogenous.

The MAGA New Right is the most successful and forward-looking expression of far-right politics in recent memory, but there have been several cycles or turnings of the push-pull within American conservatism—each with their own permutations and particularities. On an abstract level the dynamic goes something like this: American conservatism, at its ideological core, tends to be isolationist, socially traditionalist, and devoted to small government. This was the basic character of what was called the “Old Right”—which describes the conservatism of the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁴ (The libertarian thinker Murray Rothbard called the Old Right “a coalition of fury and despair against the enormous acceleration of Big Government brought about by the New Deal.”)¹⁵ When conservatives win elections and have to govern, however, this ideological core has to soften: They make compromises and tend to moderate, gradually calcifying into a more centrist, power-wielding “establishment.” We might here think of Eisenhower, who was elected as a conservative but did not turn against the New Deal, or of Reagan’s eventual acceptance of the Civil Rights Act, or of George H. W. Bush’s tax increase. Such compromises are part of holding

power in a large democracy, where realities are complicated, and constituencies diverse.

But it also means that governing coalitions are vulnerable to challenges from the extremes—and especially to the charge of having sold out on conservative principles. This too is part of the cycle and has happened repeatedly over the past century. Barry Goldwater’s movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s took this shape—i.e., of an extremist flank accusing older conservatism of weakness and betrayal, and claiming that they, the true believers, could do a better job. Something similar happened with Pat Buchanan and the Paleoconservatives in the 1990s, and then with Newt Gingrich and with the Tea Party, too. To the extent that such efforts succeed, the party shifts rightward. And often the rhetoric ratchets up: To maintain the affections of the movement, the true believers become more hardened and uncompromising, their rhetoric more militant and violent.

Such a dynamic has played a major part in the story of Donald Trump and the New Right intellectuals, who have been involved in a mutually reinforcing radicalization process that operated mainly against the former GOP establishment (though they were certainly egged on at times by the left and understood themselves to be reacting to a left-wing, “woke Marxist” takeover of the country). Over the course of eight years, they cycled further into extremism of various types—from Red Caesarism and “regime change” to Catholic integralism and Christian nationalism. And as went the New Right intellectuals, so too did many prominent public figures and politicians. JD Vance’s political rise was in nearly perfect—and radicalizing—lockstep with the growth of the New Right movement. So was Elon Musk’s.

So what exactly did the New Right oppose? In brief, they turned against the Reagan/Buckley establishment that had dominated the Republican Party since the 1980s, moving farther right on social issues and foreign policy and left on economics (in the sense of questioning the tenets of neoliberalism and being open to greater state involvement in the economy). William F. Buckley (1925–2008) was one of the most important conservative voices of the twentieth century. In 1955 he founded *National Review*, which served as the intellectual anchor of the American

right for many decades. Buckley and the people he gathered near the magazine sought to raise the tenor of conservatism in America—or, as he put it, to “articulate a position on world affairs which a conservative candidate can adhere to without fear of intellectual embarrassment or political surrealism.”¹⁶ This endeavor was, for a time, successful.

President Reagan famously and succinctly defined his conservative movement as a three-legged stool (“the Gipper’s Stool”), and very much along the ideological lines forged by *National Review*. The three legs that sustained his movement were (1) social conservatism; (2) free-market economics (i.e., fiscal conservatism); and (3) anticommunism (along with foreign interventionism). The first two legs had been part of the Old Right, but the third was distinctive and new. The Soviet Union was now the sole other great power, and it needed countering, even if that meant compromising, for a time, with big government on the domestic front.¹⁷

The Reagan/Buckley movement of the 1970s was sometimes labeled the “New Right”; for the sake of clarity, in this book I use Reagan/Buckley conservatism, “fusionism,” and “establishment conservatism” synonymously to describe the dominant ideological umbrella of the conservatism of the last half-century. (“Movement conservatism” is another relevant term, and encompasses the broader coalition of activists and organizers who worked to shape the GOP in the same period.)¹⁸ Reaganism began as a reprise of Goldwaterism and, as with Goldwaterism, was championed by the minds at *National Review*—intellectuals like Frank Meyer, James Burnham, Paul Weyrich, and Buckley—as well as by institutions like the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation.¹⁹

As the theorist of so-called fusionism, Frank Meyer argued that traditional conservative values, liberal economics, and opposition to communism were all essential to freedom (and that interference by the state meant interference with freedom).²⁰ James Burnham was an editor at *National Review*, where he wrote a regular column in which, according to one scholar, he “excoriated every president from Truman to Carter for appeasing the Soviets.”²¹ The social conservative leg of the Gipper’s Stool was galvanized by the growing Christian Right movement, and by populist figures like Buchanan, Rush Limbaugh, Jerry Falwell, Phyllis Schlafly, and Richard Viguerie (Falwell founded Moral Majority in 1979).²²

The Reagan/Buckley style of conservatism won elections and dominated the Republican Party for many years. Trumpism demonstrates the extent to which Reagan/Buckley fusionist conservatism was a temporary and fragile settlement that masked the enduring id of old-fashioned American conservatism, including the Hard Right fringe, and today's New Right ascension represents the latest push-pull in America's cycle of conservative extremism.

The flipside of right flank attacks on conservative "sell-outs" is gate-keeping from the center, and among America's conservative elites, concerns about the extremist fringe have waxed and waned. As early as 1960, Republican leaders and intellectuals like Russell Kirk and Buckley worried about the extent to which the GOP tolerated (or encouraged) extremists like the John Birchers in their midst. (The Birchers were anticommunist activists distinguished for their paranoia, conspiracism, and antisemitism.)²³ In 1964 the Goldwater Republicans refused to admonish extremists like the Birchers and the Ku Klux Klan in the party, and Goldwater won the primary—an obvious victory for the Birchers and Klansmen. But he lost the election, badly. And when Reagan ran for governor of California in 1965, he began openly denouncing the Birchers. Buckley did too, issuing a special report in the October 1965 issue of the *National Review* that was critical of them. Over the course of the coming decades, Buckley would keep Birchers from having bylines at the *National Review*.²⁴

Conservatives will sometimes speak as though these actions succeeded in establishing a cordon sanitaire around the conservative establishment. As today's New Right plainly demonstrates, that was always something of a myth.²⁵ Behind the burnished images of the establishment players, the rest of the party was not so punctilious, and boundaries proved porous. The forces that sustained the Birchers never went away; they went underground and festered. "Paleoconservatism"—an intellectual counter to neoconservatism rooted in the Old Right—was a persistent thorn in the side of the fusionist establishment through the 1990s and early 2000s. As the establishment faltered at the end of the last century and liberal social victories continued to accrue at the beginning of this one, these older forces raged forth like the chthonic Furies of the ancient world.

The nomination of Donald Trump as the GOP candidate for president in 2016 was a reactionary eruption of buried conservative ideas and sentiment against a compromised and stagnating conservative mainstream and their liberal friends. If the old establishment stood on the three pillars of social conservatism, fiscal conservatism, and foreign interventionism, the New Right stands on four: social conservatism (Reno's strong gods), economic nationalism, isolationist foreign policy, and anti-immigration (Anton's trifecta). Between 2016 and 2024, the New Right was most consistent in its commitment to old-fashioned traditionalist values and opposition to immigration; the legs of economic nationalism and isolationism were wobblier. In these years, the MAGA New Right excelled at culture warriorism but was less effective at escaping the Republican Party's prior commitments to big tax breaks and the American establishment's interventionism in foreign affairs. The early days of 2025 revealed a second administration much less cowed and confused than the first.

The reconfiguration we have seen within the conservative intellectual universe has been dramatic. At the end of the Cold War, the fusionist coalition faltered, and then there were new crises, like 9/11, the (second) Iraq War, and the economic crisis of 2008. The American right also saw both the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the 2015 Supreme Court decision in defense of marriage equality as major national crises. With Trump, a new opportunity emerged, and the New Right seized the day, breaking hard with the recent past. Whereas conservative intellectuals, with some important caveats, have often served as a brake and restraint on the right's worst impulses, the MAGA New Right fast became an engine and accelerant for extremism. The old cordons were soon *épuisés*; the guardrails all but vanished. And though the various New Right camps may disagree about what an ideal future looks like, in each instance they are backward-looking socially and antiliberal politically. They want, in the words of the libertarian thinker Murray Rothbard (as newly recollected by John Ganz), to "break the clock" and "repeal the twentieth century," or perhaps to take

us back to before the Civil Rights Act, or to the founding era, or even the Middle Ages.²⁶ And unlike Rothbard and his friends in the 1990s, or Goldwater in the 1960s, the New Right, thanks to Trump, has had extraordinary success in gaining proximity to power and fueling change. They are finding enormous audiences and achieving an illiberal renaissance.

As these conservatives broke with the fusionist establishment, they also came into their own. I count three main differences between today's New Right and its precursors like the Goldwater movement, paleoconservatism, and the Tea Party.

First, it is populated by savvy and sophisticated young people who understand populism as well as the transformed landscape of modern media.

Second, it is misogynist and obsessed with masculinity in a way that the older iterations were not (they were often antifeminist and masculinist, but not so openly misogynist as the New Right is today). Kristin Kobes Du Mez, in her book *Jesus and John Wayne* (2020), describes how evangelical support for Trump was not an aberration or a merely pragmatic compromise but rather “the culmination of evangelicals’ embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad.” The MAGA New Right is playing catch-up with the world that Du Mez describes.²⁷

The final and most obvious difference between the far-right conservatism of the past and today's movement is that, under Trump, the far right ascended unambiguously to the center of power in the Republican Party. For some on the far right—as we will see in this book—even Reagan seemed like a great capitulator: someone who had betrayed their cause by ceding ground to the center and the left. That is not how they talk about Trump.

The New Right also qualifies straightforwardly as a right-wing populist movement. The Dutch political theorist Cas Mudde defines populism as an ideology “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the

corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”²⁸ For Mudde and others, the twin pillars of populism are anti-elitism and antipluralism, and populists will claim an exclusive right to govern on behalf of “the real people” and in opposition to elites.²⁹ (In the American context, there are stark differences between right-wing populism and left-wing populism, in that, for example, Bernie Sanders and his supporters tend to reject nativism.)³⁰ The New Right takes aim against elites of all stripes, despite being powerful elites themselves, and against pluralism, despite the disagreements within their movement. They argue that the system is failing because elites have not protected the true (and always singular) American way of life. These discussions often echo older forms of racism and antisemitism. The New Right doesn’t care. Its adherents are opposed to pluralism in principle and do not believe in the egalitarian, multiracial, pluralistic democracy that has gained real traction in the United States in recent decades—what Frederick Douglass called “the composite nation.”³¹ Increasingly, and as part of its radicalization, the New Right is openly minoritarian and antidemocratic in its theoretical principles.³²

If some of what I have described of the New Right vision sounds contradictory, that is largely because it is. It is not clear, however, how much the incoherence of the New Right movement matters in the rough and tumble of real politics. As the political theorist Matthew McManus—who has also written extensively about the New Right—explains, “Being unable to live with ideological contradictions has never been a major weakness of the hard right.” He continues: “Indeed a willingness to sublimate and affirm contradiction as expressing some allegedly deep truth, such that subordination to a revanchist aristocracy is really a populist rejection of liberal elitism, is almost a requirement to play the part.”³³ Most camps of the New Right are not bothered by the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of their movement. But there have been some schisms in the movement since it started to take shape in 2016, which I address in this book.

The New Right movement in the United States is also part of a trend toward right-wing extremism and populism in democracies around the world. The shift began with the newly unsettled Great Power landscape

that came with the end of the Cold War, the austere economic programs of the late twentieth century, the failures of American foreign policy in the Middle East after 9/11, the decline of American manufacturing, and rolling economic, refugee, and emigration crises of the twenty-first century. By the time Brexit happened and Donald Trump was elected in 2016, right-wing populist movements opposing free trade and foreign interventionism were gaining ground all over. Many of these movements were also nationalist and xenophobic, favoring one national cultural identity over all others, and usually lining up behind a strongman—or strongwoman—who promised to restore the dominance of that supposedly more authentic group. The list of such figures is long: Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India, Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, and, of course, Vladimir Putin in Russia have all fueled the international turn to chauvinistic nationalism. It is a response to a sense of growing international instability and insecurity that is not unique to any one place, and, increasingly, these groups learn from one another and collaborate. The MAGA New Right often imitates Orbán, who has called his approach “illiberal democracy” or “Christian liberty,” and which involves using majority democratic support to install an authoritarian regime.³⁴

Paradoxically, the New Right fully cohered only after January 6, 2021. The attack on the US Capitol was a major point of consolidation and loyalty testing—the moment Republican leaders briefly questioned the New Right dispensation, only to see it more and more openly affirmed. Eventually, Trump and the New Right’s lie about a stolen election became orthodoxy on the right and, as David A. Graham observed, took the shape of a “New Lost Cause” myth, the recitation of which became a (bizarre) symbol of patriotism.³⁵ This subversion was a clear sign of the power of the New Right, and of its autocratic nature. The writer and Russian expatriate Masha Gessen has written that, “unmoored from lived reality, the autocrat has no need to be consistent. In fact, the ability to change his story at will is a demonstration of power.”³⁶ Gessen named this phenomenon “The Power Lie.” The phrase nicely describes how Trump and the New Right have approached January 6, 2021. This is a

destabilizing approach to truth and reality that puts them firmly in the authoritarian camp.

My Background and Approach

My perspective on American politics is shaped, for better and worse, by my education in political philosophy. I was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, to bourgeois, hippie parents and had ambitious plans to be a doctor in the developing world until a required university course in political theory with a conservative professor—Leon Craig—changed the course of my life.

A former US marine, Craig had a knack for drawing out the seriousness of old books, and the one he taught best was Plato's *Republic*. I happened into a small Plato study group while I took Craig's course; we met every week—often gathering at a restaurant called Plato's Pizza (really)—and went through the Allan Bloom translation of Plato's great dialogue on justice line by line.³⁷

Reading through the *Republic* slowly like that was exhilarating; it allowed us to experience the subtlety of the dialogue, to puzzle at the details together, and to wonder at how much of it resonated in our lives. Plato came to feel like my own personal soul whisperer and diviner. I remember reading Emerson's rapturous essay "Plato, or The Philosopher" at around that time. Emerson declares that "Plato is philosophy and philosophy, Plato" and concludes with the beautiful line, "The great-eyed Plato proportioned the lights and shades after the genius of our life."³⁸ At the time, I read that and thought: "Yes, that's exactly right." I was totally hooked—and so were my friends. Many of us stayed on and did MA degrees with Dr. Craig and Dr. Heidi Studer, who was also a wonderful teacher. Many went on to do PhDs in Straussian political philosophy. Jump ahead some twenty years, to January 2025, and one of us, Jonathan Pidluzny, was appointed deputy chief of staff for policy and programs in the US Department of Education under Trump and Vance. Another, Murray Bessette, was hired as a senior advisor in the Office of Postsecondary Education the following month.

The sort of encounter I had with Plato at the University of Alberta is hardly reserved for Straussians, but that was my entry point to the world of political philosophy.³⁹ The “Straussian” moniker describes a dispersed group of intellectuals and academics (many of whom we will meet in the pages to come), typically conservative in their politics, who work in the style of the political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973). Strauss was an émigré who left fascist Germany in the early 1930s and eventually came to the United States, where he devoted himself to the careful reading and exegesis of diverse works of political philosophy, mainly from what we call the Western canon—Plato, Aristotle, al-Farabi, Maimonides, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, and so on through the messy centuries.

When I say “careful” I mean more than just attentive: Strauss believed (and made a good case) that many of the most significant texts in the history of political thought were multilayered and highly stylized works of tremendous literary and political sophistication. He held that such masterpieces were intentionally crafted to speak to different readers in different ways, and even, in some instances, secretly to shape or influence historical events. He called this the tradition of “esotericism.”⁴⁰ A big part of my education involved reading and decoding political texts in accordance with this Straussian approach—an approach that many on the New Right share. Indeed, many of my teachers’ teachers were also their teachers’ teachers.

Strauss’s legacy as a scholar and teacher is mixed and highly controversial. This reflects the complexity and pluralism of the vast tradition he inhabited, as well as his distinctive approach to that tradition (esotericism—like many other modes of thought—bears some similarities to conspiracy thinking; it’s also just a very standard artistic device—think of fans decoding secret messages in Taylor Swift’s lyrics). Another factor in this legacy is the number of Strauss’s students, or students of students, who have been engaged in American politics and culture at the highest levels for decades—to the extent that there was speculation in the early 2000s about a Straussian neoconservative cabal controlling Washington. At times the speculation was fanciful and overheated, but the influence of Strauss on a certain strata of Washington insiders was

undeniable, and West Coast Straussians certainly figure prominently in the growth of the New Right (they form, as we will see, the core of the Claremonter camp).

This book bears the marks of my Straussian education. Not only do several chapters—especially the early ones—concentrate on the influence that Straussian thought has had on the conservative movement, but in some ways my approach itself is Straussian. I focus squarely on the intellectuals and ideas behind right-wing populism, so I pay less attention than others, for example, to contemporary media dynamics, QAnon, “following the money,” technology, race, gender, and economics. This is not to say these other factors matter less. Rather, I focus on what I know. My hope is to shine light on the political scene in the United States as it unfolded between 2016 and 2024, in order to contribute to a better and truer collective sense of the whole.

In practice, I have concentrated on each actor’s speeches and writings and arguments, trying my best to give their ideas a fair shake, and assuming a degree of good faith. I take for granted the notion that ideas—and not just or even primarily material conditions—have power in shaping our world. Words and ideas obviously do not fully constitute human life, but they play an important role. The ideas of the New Right have been powerful, despite being in many ways untethered from empirical reality. The New Right thinkers are immensely successful propagandists and culture warriors who can show us the power of cultural politics.

They can also reveal the hard limits of such an approach, and indeed the limits of what I, throughout this book, call “Ideas First” political philosophy. The Ideas First approach is typical of the conservative intellectual world and is captured by popular right-wing catchphrases like “politics is downstream from culture” and “ideas have consequences,” as well as by the proliferation of ideological institutions (like the one I attended in Charlottesville) that educate young conservatives and initiate them into right-wing discourses and traditions.

Ideas Have Consequences was the title of a book by Richard Weaver in 1948 that could be considered the urtext of Ideas First thinking. Weaver traced modernity’s ills to the abandonment of transcendentals (or to

“nominalism”—the belief that universals exist only as categories of the human mind, and not “out there” as permanent things). “Like Macbeth,” he wrote, “Western man made an evil decision, which has become the efficient and final cause of other evil decisions.” Weaver’s Western man had fallen for the seductions of “the witches on the heath” and “the powers of darkness,” of all those who denied objective moral truth and embraced “man is the measure” relativism. This was an intellectual move that invited a bundle of problems that have since become trigger words for conservatives: not only relativism, but also materialism, historicism, and politics as will to power. Without a transcendental metaphysics, in their view, there is nothing to limit political turpitude, and no reason for people to be good and true. Only philosophical traditionalism can ground and limit politics.⁴¹

The New Right generally agrees with Weaver (whereas I want to hear out those witches), but they also show why the Ideas First approach is confused. Too often, New Right thinkers find themselves in the awkward position of using intellectual abstractions to defend nativism, rootedness, and love of one’s own. Too often, the recitation of moral ideology is privileged over the practice of good and virtuous deeds. And too often, highbrow abstractions smother straightforward real-world truths—about, say, who won which election, who invaded which country and when, or which demographic is being abused and oppressed. And in many instances, “intellectual abstractions” and Ideas First are too generous as phrases, for we are in fact talking about myths, ideology, and lies. As someone who tends to gravitate toward an Ideas First approach myself, I hope to be your guide to this particular New Right pathology—and a few others besides, like monomania (the idea that there is only one legitimate perspective on anything) and catastrophism.

If my focus on ideas is typical of Straussians, in other ways the book is very un-Straussian. For one thing, I am focused on very recent history, whereas most academic Straussians home in on figures from the canonical past. I also take it for granted that historical context matters a great deal, both for interpreting texts and ideas and for understanding—and evaluating—the relationship between theory and action. Many Straussians show a limited interest in the empirical details of history (I would not say quite the same thing of Strauss, who emphasized the importance of context

for rhetoric—something that distinguishes the Straussian tradition from analytic philosophy). I also care what others, including non-Straussian conservatives, have to say about politics, and big parts of this book are about them. The intellectual movement in support of Trumpism began with a group of Straussians, and Straussians constitute important parts of the movement but the New Right is something quite distinct, and certainly not all Straussians are part of it. Many prominent “Never Trump” conservatives and anti-Trump liberals have Straussian backgrounds.⁴²

Perhaps the most important difference between me and the Straussian world in general is that I am not a conservative and never have been, while many Straussians are and always were. Strauss himself declined to identify as a conservative, as did Allan Bloom (who was perhaps his most influential student). But Strauss’s legacy in the academy and beyond is conservative. And I am more liberal in my politics than either of them.

I came to my belief in multiracial, pluralistic, liberal democracy slowly, and partly through a decades-long intellectual sojourn through the history of political thought. That academic work informs this book in obvious ways. But I also want to be clear that my own belief in liberal democracy does not come primarily from my study of political philosophy (especially in the Straussian context, which tends to be oblivious both to public policy and to post-Rawlsian liberal thought). It comes from my study of constitutional law and of history (especially the atrocities of the twentieth century and the wave of liberal constitutionalism that emerged in the aftermath), and from my own experiences in the world—including the experience of becoming a parent.

I want to be direct about this because it bears on material in the book, especially when it comes to the Hard Right’s contempt for women and nontraditional families (and, indirectly, their contempt for children, too). Becoming a mother has made me ferociously attached to liberalism—to its hospitals, doulas, and midwives; to its everyday domestic comforts; to the time it affords me (because I’m lucky) with my children, husband, friends, and family; to the hope that I can live a long and rich life in community with them while also freely pursuing some of my own interests and loves; and to the hope that my

kids will grow up and live good, free lives, too. A person would have to be an ingrate and a fool not to feel immense gratitude for a life like mine—full of what the Russian Jewish writer Nadezhda Mandelstam called the “privilege of ordinary heartbreaks”—and for the political system that makes it possible.⁴³

Having my own kids has also made me see the glaring injustices and stupidities of contemporary American life more clearly. You know the list. It includes grotesque and rising economic inequality and the absurd consolidation of economic and political power in the hands of the few (and ever fewer!), manic careerism, persistent and degrading racial inequities, dystopian gun violence, drugs and deaths of despair, the brutalities and accountability failures of American policing, cruel attacks on LGBTQ communities, consumption and materialism, relentless environmental destruction, and the new barrage of AI. To this long list I’d add the contemporary degradation of public common goods and public education (in the trades as well as the liberal arts and humanities), and the evergreen democratic dangers of groupthink and intellectual monomania that make honest discussion of these matters so hard.

I want these things to change. One of the most frustrating things about politics today—and here I am thinking about the New Right mainly, but certainly not exclusively—is the amount of money, energy, and talent that it churns through, wasted, when there is always so much to be done.

Many others have done excellent work on the past and present of American conservatism, in articles, Substacks, podcasts, and books. I am constantly learning from others’ insights and excavations and have tried my best to give credit where it is due. My core purpose is not to examine historical precursors to the New Right; I focus on the intellectual world that has grown up under the cover of Trumpism more than on the intellectual roots of these changes. This approach shines a light on an area of critical discontinuity with what came before. Understanding the deep continuities between today’s political realities and those of the past can

help us all to grasp the depth and scope of today's political problems; understanding the shift among conservative intellectuals can enable us to see the acuity of the challenges that the liberal world faces today. Ultimately, it's best to have a clear sense of both.

I have been writing about New Right intellectuals since 2019. The most common response I get when I mention this to liberals is something along the lines of "Trumpy intellectuals? Now that's an oxymoron!" or "Hahaha, I think you mean dumb fascists!" While the impulse is understandable, it's also mistaken and counterproductive.

Many on the left assume that the only serious reason to support the GOP has to do with finance and tax returns, and that right-wing voters are racists. But people's motives are mixed, and America's reactionary intellectuals are armed with more than greed and prejudice. They also have reasons and arguments that they appear to care about, whole epochs and libraries full, ready-to-hand. What the writer Matthew Rose says about the radical right is true of the New Right, too:

Almost everything written about the "alternative right" has been wrong in one respect. The alt-right is not stupid; it is deep. Its ideas are not ridiculous; they are serious. To appreciate this fact, one needs to inquire beyond its presence on social media, where its obnoxious use of insult, obscenity, and racism has earned it a reputation for moral idiocy. The reputation is deserved, but do not be deceived. Behind its online tantrums and personal attacks are arguments of seductive power.⁴⁴

The New Right's questions, ideas, and arguments may not be of the sort to convince the average *New York Times* subscriber, but they are effective in their contexts, and it's not like they are easy to refute. Education and specialization being what they are today, the people I focus on in this book know more than your average JD or political science PhD about early American political history and about the history of the so-called West, and of course many of them have other specialties and areas of expertise besides. I am generally not an admirer of the people I write about here, but it would be foolish to deny that they are smart and

well-informed in their own way. It's obviously possible to be highly knowledgeable and to have terrible judgment or dangerous politics.

To presume otherwise—to believe that there is nothing to learn from these thinkers and no compelling noneconomic reasons to support something like Trumpism—is naive and dangerous. It misunderstands and fetishizes intelligence, by presuming that real brains never chase after raw power. It fails to see the possibility and power of genuine intellectual fanaticism—and the allure of people who have strong convictions backed by strong arguments. And it assumes a deep sameness about one's fellow citizens and so refuses to contend with real, protracted ideological disagreement and conflict. In other words, it refuses to reckon with what might be the greatest challenge posed by political life: the fact that people really do think differently and disagree, about just about everything, and especially about the most important things, like the meaning of life, God, and the soul, and what is good.

Above all else, the naive view overestimates liberalism's immediate appeal and underestimates liberalism's fragility. Growing right-wing extremism has not emerged in a vacuum but in many instances is a response, however misguided, to real problems, and to the real vulnerabilities of liberal democracy. It reflects some of the actual failures of modern liberal politics and economics, of modern liberal culture, and of the corporate neoliberal academy. One of the major advantages of spending time with the New Right is that it allows us to see these challenges more clearly, and to think through future possibilities for a pluralistic liberal order more deeply. And with some urgency.