

Geoffrey Kabaservice. *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 482pp.

Bart Verhoeven

University of Nottingham\*

“No study of our recent politics could possibly be more timely on the eve of the 2012 elections.” So sayeth prominent political historian Sean Wilentz, and only few would contest the claim. Over the turbulent last four years, pundits across the spectrum have fervently pointed at the President’s increasingly greying scalp. Besides the obvious burden of steering the American behemoth through the Scylla and Charybdis of recession and debt crisis – as well as his presumably honoured pledge to quit smoking – the once so young, dynamic and upbeat candidate Obama has – as president – found himself grappling with one of the least popular congresses in U.S. history, and – after the seismic midterm turnaround – a House dominated by unyielding Republican opposition of an unseen ideological extremism.

For a number of eager observers – including Wilentz himself – the Republican Party’s dance of death with what became commonly referred to as the “Tea Party movement” revealed a not too distant ancestry of right-wing extremism and reactionary populism simmering along party lines. In the rhetoric of iconic ringleaders such as Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin, they retraced echoes of wild-eyed McCarthyist/Birchite conspiracy theorists and suburban housewife grassroots activists who pushed back violently against a seemingly

---

\* Bart is currently a PhD student in American Studies at the University of Nottingham. His thesis focuses on the role of the John Birch Society within the greater American conservative movement from 1958 to 1972. He can be reached at [aaxbv@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:aaxbv@nottingham.ac.uk).

triumphant midcentury cold war liberalism. However, as but a handful of commentators at the time initially seemed to remark – journalist Fred J. Cook writing for *The Nation* being one of them – the primary targets of this emerging “Radical Right” were in fact moderates and liberals within the Republican Party itself, embodied by the Eastern Establishment wing that had dominated the GOP for nearly a century.

Kabaservice sets out from exactly this perspective and takes the reader through over fifty years of Republican infighting with frustrated isolationists, libertarians, Christian conservatives and conspiratorial factions forcing their way into the proverbial Big Tent. Quite appropriately, the narrative takes off at the 1960 Republican convention, at the end of Ike’s self-styled “modern” Republican era. Right-wing Republicans, flocked around Senators Taft and McCarthy had been frustrated by Eisenhower’s tepid embrace of the New Deal-era welfare state and its internationalist support for the United Nations and NATO. Also, Eisenhower’s appointment of modern Republican ally Earl Warren further angered conservatives as the new court would go on record expanding civil liberties, criminals’ rights, restricting school prayer and most significantly, forcing racial integration in education upon the segregated South. To make matters worse, Kennedy only narrowly beat Richard Nixon, with whom the hard right had developed a strained and ambiguous relationship, and sent the Republicans back to the drawing board. With Arizona Senator and conservative *chouchou* Barry Goldwater, the Republican Right would find its new champion and a new generation of unyielding, populist ultraconservatives stood ready to infiltrate the party from the grassroots up, with Southern California as the case study *par excellence*.

To seasoned students of the post-war Right much of this is old hat. Indeed, those familiar with the works of Lisa McGirr, Kurt Schuparra, Mary Brennan, Jonathan Schoenwald and David Reinhard – or Michael Rogin and Sheila Koeppen before them – will

recognise the well-established narrative of the conservative ascent from the 1955 formation of Buckley's *National Review* via Young Americans for Freedom into the Cow Palace coronation of Goldwater as nominee over liberal Rockefeller in July 1964. Kabaservice's strength here lies in the long-neglected point-of-view from exactly the same moderate factions targeted by the Right, and firmly standing in the shadows of Rockefeller, Scranton, Kuchel and – *historia se repetit* – George Romney. Through extensive research – and over fifty interviews and oral histories with luminaries as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Bill Scranton, Joe Lieberman and the inevitable Bill Buckley – Kabaservice offers a detailed view on the moderates' resistance against the burgeoning right-wing wave of populist resentment.

Through a re-evaluation of figures like Bruce Chapman, George Gilder and the publication *Advance*, Kabaservice interestingly illustrates how moderates proved – at least initially – much more resilient than recent historiography on the Right has given them credit for. Beneath a gripping, dramatic surface – each chapter title is taken from Yeats's "Second Coming" poem – *Rule and Ruin* complicates the established narrative and leads the moderate Republican contingent from Goldwater's crushing defeat to the restoration of Nixon, whose presidency – as illustrated by David Courtwright's *No Right Turn* (2009) – sought compromise with domestic liberalism and opted for a Realpolitik further angering the unyielding Right into bankrolling right-wing candidates, most notably the "sunny salesman" of Hollywood and General Electric, who would conquer the White House in the Fall of 1980.

The final section of the book reads more like an extended epilogue rather than a chapter fully in sync with the main narrative, and ambitiously spans over thirty years from Reagan's election right down to the Tea Party phenomenon. The analogies between the latter movement and key figures such as Goldwater are relevant but tenuous and at times in need of nuance. Whereas Goldwater was quick to denounce the Birchers, Liberty Lobbyists and racist

rightists, the Tea Party bandwagon seems to have smuggled some of these previously banished factions back into the tent. Naturally, the novelty and relevance of Kabaservice's work rests in part on his continuation onto the present situation, and many valid points are put forward to argue for the eventual decline if not outright destruction of moderate Republicanism. Fair is fair.

*Rule and Ruin* is far from a complete compendium of the gradual right-wing takeover of the Grand Old Party. Nor does his 500-page tome lay claim to the virgin seas and uncharted shores of the conservative advance – the irony – within Republican Party politics. Yet, as a proper and scholarly restoration of the study of moderate politics in crisis, it stands out as a work of magnitude and profundity, and can offer scholars of the post-war American Right a dependable, nearly inexhaustible reference work. Whether America's political Tea Party "hangover" will further complicate Kabaservice's speculations into the future, remain to be seen. No doubt an updated edition will be rolling off the presses after the new – or old – president takes his oath on the icy portico.