

David Courtwright. *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics in a Liberal America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 352pp.

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“You have to give the nuts 20 percent of what they want,” Richard Nixon confided to his speechwriter Pat Buchanan. A simple maxim that encapsulates, as David Courtwright argues in his first major political publication, the paradox between the Republican Right’s dominance of national politics from 1968 onwards and the actual reality of an increasingly liberalized American culture.

In eleven loosely interlinked, largely chronological chapters, the author outlines the evolution of the burgeoning “Kulturkampf” of the 1950s and 60s around civil rights, free love, burgeoning feminism and Vietnam war protests to the rage of the rampant Christian Right over abortion, gay rights, the Equal Rights Amendment and the school prayer controversy. In doing so, Courtwright seems to connect Tom Hayden’s “long” – all the way to the election of Barack Obama - to Bruce Bawer’s “other sixties.”

Clearly, the electoral victors of the last forty years have been concentrated within the Republican Party, winning 7 out of 11 presidential elections and successfully shifting the political discourse from a liberal “consensus” to moral and fiscal conservatism. The Goldwater debacle had seemingly paid off. In 1968, Richard Nixon was able to forge an alliance between alienated white southern Democrats, “free market” corporate contributors and a growing segment of Christian conservatives, appalled by a decade of student protesters,

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decaying moral values and increased perceived threats to the traditional family. By 1980, a fully matured coalition of the New and Christian Right propelled conservative champion Ronald Reagan into the oval office.

The capturing of the GOP by right-wing conservatives starting in the 1960s and the growing backlash against the liberal establishment is hardly a novel point to make. In fact, a comprehensive literature on conservative social movements and political mobilization ranging from Sara Diamond's *Roads to Dominion*, Jerome Himmelstein's *To The Right* and Mary Brennan's *Turning Right in the Sixties*, to name only a few, has grown steadily since the Reagan years. Nor does Courtwright's novelty lie in the outlining of a stubbornly liberalized culture, with legalized abortion, persistent yet reduced – or reduced yet persistent - Social Security benefits, affirmative action and increased civil rights, a secular visual culture and a growing, deficit-ridden budget. The originality of the book lies in reconciling both, i.e. the striking duality of American postwar political culture within a fascinating politico-cultural paradox.

Through a series of individual narratives – Clare Booth Luce, Susan Stern, Lee Atwater, Johnny Carson, Jerry Falwell, the Clintons, and so on – Courtwright traces back the insistence of a liberalizing culture *in spite* of growing political clout within the conservative camp. Encumbered by a hostile Congress, a consumer-oriented Boomer generation, a secularized media system and powerful corporate interests, Nixon, Reagan, the Bushes, and to a lesser extent Carter and Clinton, failed to deliver the moral and economic counterrevolution their conservative electoral base so fiercely demanded. Through “bait and switch,” these administrations cunningly threw the conservative watchdogs the odd bone through wars on drugs and crime and an aggressive foreign policy, whilst overseeing a consumer-friendly sexual revolution and a mounting public debt.

Courtwright's shifting focus is at times disorienting as he takes the reader through a myriad of side narratives on both sides of the ideological spectrum, though it is arguably that style of fragmentation and apparent contradiction that best captures the "ragged continuity of left-liberal trends in an age of rising Republican fortunes." Indeed, Courtwright ambitiously sets forth, and delivers, by reconciling two traditionally parallelized narratives that, when properly intertwined, highlight the paradox that is central to the understanding of contemporary American politics, within, between and beyond both major parties. While Hayden heralds the end of the "long sixties" with Obama's election, Courtwright aptly hints at a continuation of the proverbial "Culture War," elements of which have, in recent years, become increasingly visible once again.