

Conservatism and Racism, and Why They are the Same in America:  
A Study in Ideas and Movements, 1950s – 1980s

By

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I decided to write this book shortly after Ronald Reagan's funeral. In the long lines of mourners that gathered to pay their respects to the President at the Capitol in Washington and the presidential library in Simi Valley, California there were very few African Americans. In the course of the nearly week long commemoration of Reagan's life and legacy – where he was lauded as one of the nation's greatest presidents – I did a number of interviews where I was asked to explain the absence of black mourners in Washington and Simi Valley. My explanations dealt less with Reagan as an individual or as president than with conservatism as a philosophy and ideology. Ronald Reagan was not mourned by many African Americans because he was a conservative; the most successful conservative president of the post civil rights era and one of the most successful conservative presidents in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Conservatism as a philosophy and ideology, I explained, is and always have been hostile to the aspirations of Africans in America; incompatible with their struggle for freedom and equality. Thus, very few blacks could mourn the passing of a man who was an icon in the cause of 20<sup>th</sup> century American conservatism.

In the nature of modern media it was difficult to convey this rather complex idea in a brief interview. However, I found that even in extended hour long interviews it was difficult to fully explore this complex relationship between conservatism and black aspirations. Repeatedly, I was asked, Are you saying that conservatism is racism? That all conservatives are racist? Aren't there black conservatives? Are they racist? Are the millions of Americans who supported President Reagan racist? Are President George W. Bush and the conservatives who control the Congress and the courts hostile to African American interests?

My answer to most of these questions was a qualified yes. But the many qualifications and caveats left me, the interviewers and the audience without the kind of clarity one would hope for when professors are called upon to explain complex issues to the public. In going through the literature on the subject of conservatism and race in the United States, I was not surprised to find that there was no systematic treatment of the relationship between the two phenomena. Since the 1980s in the wake of the election of Reagan to the presidency, there have been a few books on blacks and conservatism and a couple of dozen articles. These works, however, are largely descriptive and deal mainly with the rise of black conservatives during the Reagan presidency. Thus, this book.

In my interviews I contended that conservatism as a set of philosophical principles and as a governing ideology was hostile to black Americans. I also contended that as a separate matter the conservative movement that came to power with Reagan did so partly on the basis of racism. That is, I contended that a major part of the support of the conservative movement that elected Reagan was based on appeals to white supremacists and racists. In this regard, I noted that Reagan's first campaign appearance after he received the Republican nomination was in Philadelphia, Mississippi. As other commentators noted during Reagan's funeral, Philadelphia was the site of the murder of three civil rights workers by the Ku Klux Klan. In his Philadelphia speech Reagan invoked states rights, code words in the south for the right of whites to oppress blacks. In his first campaign for governor Reagan made similar subtle appeals to racist whites in California. Thus, conservatism as a set of ideas is hostile to African Americans; Reagan as a candidate and as president expressed this hostility; and the means by which he

ascended to national power was rooted in a movement that was hostile to African Americans.

Unlike the relationship between conservative ideas and race where there are hardly any studies, there is an extensive literature on the relationship between race, racism and the ascendancy of the conservative movement in American politics beginning in the 1960s. Kevin Phillips, who in his 1968 book *The Emerging Republican Majority* did as much as any single individual to lay out the “southern strategy” that facilitated the conservative ascendancy estimates that 35% of the Republican ascendancy can be attributed to racism.<sup>1</sup> In this book I will need only to present a synthesis of this extensive historical and social science literature. This literature has never been brought together in a single volume. But, when this is done in conjunction with analysis of the contextually racist nature of conservative ideas then one can more readily see the racism inherent in conservatism in America.

But, the book begins with conservative ideas. This is a tricky problem as scholars of both liberalism and conservatism have long acknowledged. This is because in the United States, as Louis Hartz demonstrated in his classic work *The Liberal Tradition in America*; classical liberalism has dominated the country since its founding leaving little room for classical, Burkean conservatism. As Gunnar Myrdal put it “America is conservative.... But the principles conserved are liberal”.<sup>2</sup> Or, to relate this problem to the purposes of this book, in the 1930s Kelly Miller, the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Howard University, visited the Soviet Union. In the course of discussions with Soviet intellectuals he remarked that there were black conservatives in America. Shocked, his Russian interlocutors responded “why, what do they have to conserve?” A

similar remark might be made historically about conservatives in America, what do they have to conserve? What they have to conserve is liberalism, the philosophical foundations of the nation's culture, economy and government derived principally from the ideas of John Locke.

Thus, we will have to distinguish between the classical liberal ideas of Locke, and the ideas of classical conservatism derived from Edmund Burke. Locke's classical liberalism is American conservatism, a conservatism whose core ideas went virtually unchallenged until the New Deal. Burke's ideas – universally regarded as the major intellectual source of western conservatism – had relatively few adherents in the American political tradition. That is, what we call conservatism and liberalism in the United States are generally variations on or different emphases on the broad liberal tradition bequeathed by Locke. “We are Lockeans, and Locke was both a liberal and a conservative” writes Jay Sigler in *The Conservative Tradition in America*.<sup>3</sup>

However, when examined up close we will see that the ideas in both the dominant Lockean liberal tradition in the United States and the remnants of the Burkean tradition have been almost equally hostile to the African American quest for freedom and equality. Indeed, I will argue that it is only when the nation has been forced – and it has always been forced – to break with these traditions have blacks received a taste of the honey of freedom and equality.

Another problem that makes conservatism as a set of ideas problematic for the question of race in the United States is that the Burkean remnant in particular but conservatism generally has found its most hospitable place in the southern part of the country. The South – the site of the most systematic and brutal oppression of blacks – has

always been the most conservative region of the country. John Calhoun of South Carolina is widely regarded as one of the leading conservative statesmen in early American history. His ideas expose in quite intellectually interesting ways the relationship between conservatism and racism. In *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* George Nash writes that the South was the “least American”, the “least liberal” section of the Nation.<sup>4</sup> In *The Southern Tradition: The Achievements and Limitations of American Conservatism* Eugene Genovese writes “The principal tradition of the South – the mainstream of its cultural development – has been quintessentially conservative”. And “from its origins [the South] constituted America’s most impressive native – born critique of our national development, of liberalism, of the modern world”.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, a part – perhaps the major part of the South’s quintessential conservatism derives from slavery and its legacies. But, southern conservative ideas are more than a mere defense of racism. There are principled conservative ideas in the tradition. And these principled ideas, I will show are also hostile to African American interests.

One of the more frequent refrains one encounters in studying the conservative movement in America, from the ultra conservatism of William F. Buckley, Jr. and *National Review* to the neo-conservatism of Irving Kristol and *The Public Interest* is that “Ideas Have Consequences”. This quote is borrowed from a book of that title by Richard Weaver, who in one of his other books offered a forthright defense of slavery and the overthrow of Reconstruction.<sup>6</sup> Ideas do have consequences, and I will show how the marshalling and marketing of ideas were consequential in the ascendancy of the conservative movement and the election of President Reagan.

The first two chapters of the book are devoted to ideas. Chapter one deals with conservative ideas, from the classical liberalism of Locke and the classical conservatism of Burke to the ultra conservatism of Buckley and the neo-conservatism of Kristol. My examination of these ideas will focus on their consequences for the African American struggle for freedom and equality.

The second chapter deals with the ideas of African Americans. Classical African American thought from its earliest expressions in pamphlets and manifestos to the speeches and writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. embraced classical liberalism. However, the liberal Lockean contract – the Constitution – that created the United States was, as Charles Mills has ably shown, also a racial contract that excluded Africans.<sup>7</sup> The long exclusion of Africans in the United States from the American social contract eventually lead African Americans to fully embrace liberal ideas, but also to develop the most coherent and persistent set of challenges to both liberalism and its Burkean remnant. This chapter analyzes black thinkers beginning with Martin Delaney and Frederick Douglass, paying special attention to W.E.B. DuBois and Ralph Bunche, and the evolving ideas of Martin Luther King, Jr. The evolution of King's ideas is especially useful in this study because the evolution takes place in the midst of the civil rights movement. And his evolving ideas had consequences for that movement as it begin to see that even an inclusive liberalism might be incompatible with the African American freedom struggle.

Chapter two concludes with a comparison of the core ideas in conservative thought – both its Lockean and Burkean variant – with the core ideas in African American thought, showing their fundamental incompatibility.

Ideas have consequences but to have consequences they must be taken up by movements and political leaders. In Chapters three and four I examine the civil rights and conservative movements, from the 1950s to the 1980s. Both of these movements sought to put ideas into practice; to transform American society. Throughout this period the civil rights and conservative movements were in a conflicting, symbiotic relationship. Both movements were to a considerable extent successful. However, at the height of their successes both movements in their ascendancy also experienced setbacks and disappointments. Setbacks and disappointments that were to some extent symbiotic.

The successes and setbacks of the civil rights movement – more broadly the African American freedom movement – are well known to students of American history. What I wish to do in these chapters is to retell this familiar story in relationship to the ascendancy of the conservative movement; keeping in mind Kevin Phillips' guesstimate that 35% of the conservative movement's success can be attributed to the black freedom movement.

Chapters one and two deal with ideas in conflict. Chapters three and four deal with movements in conflict.

Since the decline of the 1960s black freedom movement, the conservative movement has been ascendant. In 1980 with Reagan's election the movement captured the presidency. In the early 1950s, however, the conservative movement was perceived to be at a nadir. One scholar described conservatism as the "thankless persuasion".<sup>8</sup> Another wrote that the ideology was a "despised and unfashionable set of ideas";<sup>9</sup> while another wrote that conservatism was an "illusion" that had "no way of making the crucial transition from values to reality, from theory to practice; and in the limited periods of



history when it seemed to make this transition, it was able to do so only for reasons which contradicted its principles”.<sup>10</sup> Alfred Jay Nock, a widely read and admired writer in the conservative tradition, described conservatives as the “remnant... obscure, unorganized and inarticulate”.<sup>11</sup> And William F. Buckley, Jr in the inaugural issue of *National Review* wrote that the purpose of the magazine was to “stand athwart history, yelling stop”.<sup>12</sup>

By the 1980s this remnant, these despised and disgusted ideas, this thankless persuasion, was widely viewed as the dominant ideology in the United States. Liberalism as an ideology was now viewed as the remnant, standing athwart history, yelling stop. In Chapters three and four I show how the ascendancy of the conservative remnant was related to racism and the African American freedom struggle.

The presidency of Ronald Reagan was a triumph of the conservative movement, and to some extent of conservative ideas. However, on a broad range of issues the Reagan presidency was a disappointment to conservatives because of its failure to translate conservative ideas into practice. One area of disappointment to conservatives was how the administration dealt with race related issues. Chapter 5, based on extensive research in the archives of the Reagan library, is a detailed analysis of how the administration dealt with five critical race issues: affirmative action, renewal of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Welfare reform, the Civil Rights Restoration Act, and sanctions against the apartheid South African regime. On each of these issues conservative ideas and principles were abandoned or to the extent they were pursued were defeated in Congress. In other words, on each of the major race related issues of the Reagan presidency the civil rights movement and its ideas prevailed over conservatism. How and why this came about is explored in this chapter. I also examine the implications of these

outcomes for the idea that conservatism is an illusion that can only move from ideas to practice by contradicting its principles.

Part of this inquiry necessarily deals with the character of Reagan's leadership or lack thereof in the policy making process of his administration. The available studies of the Reagan presidency leaves the reader confused as to whether he was a leader or an amiable actor who was lead by his staff.<sup>13</sup> I am afraid that my work on Reagan leaves the same confusion. In a larger sense, however, this does not matter because in the final analysis the conservative movement and the "Reagan revolution" had to adjust to the realities brought about by the civil rights revolution.

The last chapter is largely speculative. It deals with the implications of the incompatibility of conservatism and the continuing black struggle for equality and social justice. The conservative movement could not stand athwart history and stop the civil rights revolution. Nor after ascending to power partly on the basis of opposition to that movement could it rollback its significant achievements. Its ascendancy, however, is largely responsible for stalling any further liberal initiatives that would bring about the promise of a more racially just society. What might have been is the subject of this chapter. What might have been the status of blacks and American politics in the decades following the civil rights revolution if the conservative movement had not ascended to national power? And, given the incompatibility between conservatism and the black struggle for freedom and equality, what are the prospects for the revival of a robust liberalism? If these prospects are dim – as they appear to be – what is the range of maneuverability for a liberal people when liberalism is the remnant.

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**NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Interview with Kevin Phillips, “Forum”, KQED Radio, San Francisco, April 4, 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944, 1962): 12-13.
- <sup>3</sup> Jay Sigler, *The Conservative Tradition in American Thought* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1969): 4.
- <sup>4</sup> George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1976): 199.
- <sup>5</sup> Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievements and Limitations of American Conservatism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994): 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and his *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought*, (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1968).
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- <sup>8</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).
- <sup>9</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of Conservative Ascendancy in America*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996): xv.
- <sup>10</sup> M. Morton Auerbach, *The Conservative Illusion*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).
- <sup>11</sup> Alfred Jay Nock, “Isaiah’s Job” in William F. Buckley (ed.) *American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970): 509-22.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in John Judis, *William F. Buckley Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservative Movement*, (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1988): 135.
- <sup>13</sup> Michael Kakulani, “Trying to Tell if Reagan was a Leader or Led”, *New York Times*, December 20, 2005.

“America doesn’t have racism anymore. It was a problem before when black people weren’t allowed into the same places as white people, but not anymore.” This was news to me. In Russia, there is that tendency to look at America and assume racism is the same as in Russia, how people are disrespectful toward people from places like Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, etc. I think one third of Russians think America has some common features with this, another third thinks it’s the same, and the last third doesn’t give a sh\*t about racism. With the BLM movement in America, everyone feels like they need to form an opinion fast and nothing is faster than a quick Reddit thread or YouTube videos of conservative talking heads to make you feel certain. The Conservative Mind was an impressive feat of scholarship a synthesis of the ideas of the leading Conservative AngloAmerican thinkers and political leaders of the late 18th century through the early 20th century. The work established convincingly that there was a tradition of American conservatism that had existed since the Founding of the Republic. With one book, Russell Kirk made conservatism intellectually acceptable in America. Indeed, he gave the Conservative movement its name. In the mid1950s, Conservative ideas did not seem to be taking hold in many Americans' minds. Similarly, Conservative politicians found themselves far from the center of the public square. Conservatism and Racism, has been added to your Cart. Add a gift receipt for easy returns. Share. Robert C. Smith is Professor of Political Science at San Francisco State University. He is the author of several books, including African American Leadership; We Have No Leaders: African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era; and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Now You See It, Now You Don’t, all published by SUNY Press. Product details. Publisher : State University of New York Press (September 9, 2010).