

## The Conservative Capture: From Nixon to Reagan

*This country is going so far to the right you are not even going to recognize it.*

—Attorney General John Mitchell,  
speaking to reporters, 1971

*If there is a role for the Republican Party, it is to be the party of the working class, not the welfare class. It is to champion the cause of producers and taxpayers, of the private sector threatened by the government sector, of the millions who carry most of the cost of government and share least in its beneficence.*

—Patrick Buchanan, 1975

*The problems of the nation—abortion, the schools—can all be traced to humanism. . . . Our basic values, even the Ten Commandments, have been thrown out. The values of the community aren't controlling things anymore; the courts and the government are.*

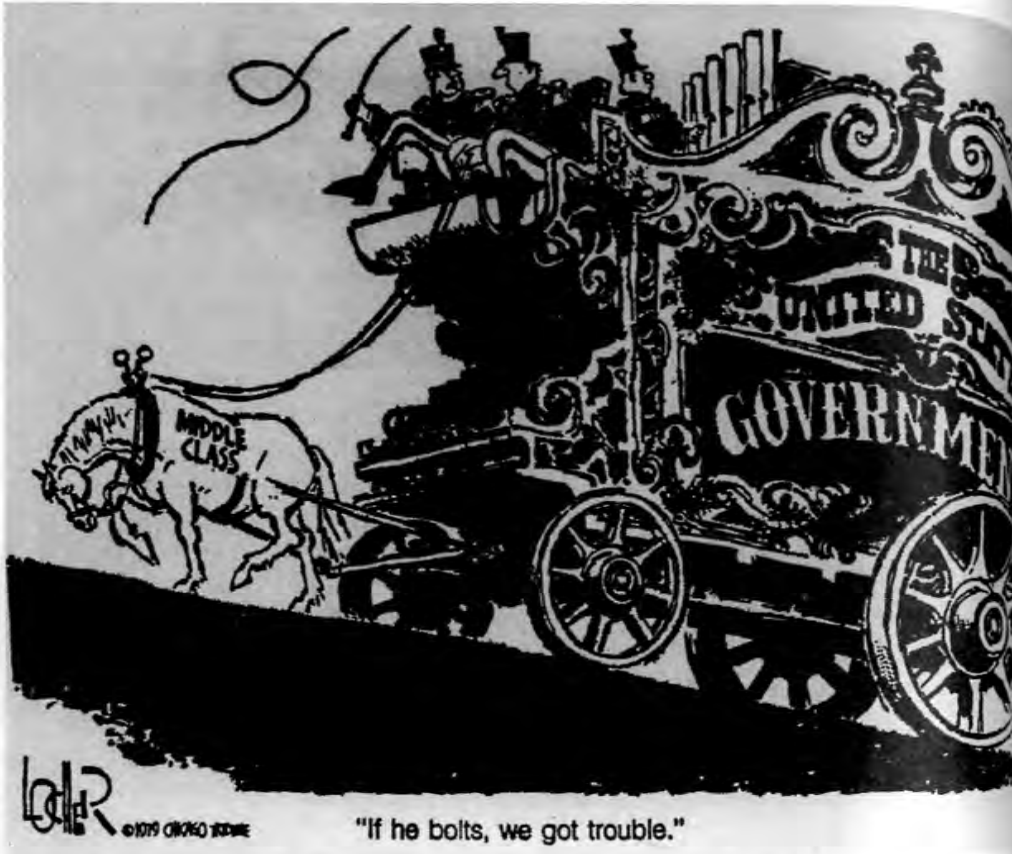
—Bob Whorton, Christian activist, 1987

*They called it the Reagan Revolution. Well, I'll accept that, but for me it always seemed more like the Great Rediscovery—a rediscovery of our values and our common sense.*

—Ronald Reagan, presidential farewell address,  
January 1989

### WHIP THE LIBERALS AND PRAISE THE LORD

**T**HERE is no political boon greater than the ineptitude of one's foes. At the end of the 1980s, the three easy electoral wins of Ronald Reagan and George Bush seemed to represent a wholesale rejection of liberalism—both



The burden of Middle America, 1979. (Courtesy of Tribune Media Services)

as policy and ideology. The New Deal order, intoned commentators across the political spectrum, had expired in a hail of outmoded nostrums, estranged constituencies, and bumbling standard-bearers. Its death appeared as epochal and inevitable as that of the dinosaurs. In white ethnic neighborhoods that, until recently, had been bastions of the Democratic Party, liberalism had become associated, observes the sociologist Jonathan Rieder, with "profligacy, spinelessness, malevolence, masochism, elitism, fantasy, anarchy, idealism, softness, irresponsibility, and sanctimoniousness."<sup>1</sup> In most areas of the country, politicians on the way up mouthed the very term with the utter distaste once reserved for socialism.

But liberalism did not topple simply from the weight of its own failures. Beginning in the late 1960s, conservative activists and politicians—most of whom were Republicans—re-created themselves as the authentic representatives of average white Americans. They learned to harness the same mass resentments (against federal power, left-wing movements, the counterculture, and the black poor) for which George Wallace had spoken but was unable to ride to victory. The Grand Old Party turned itself into a counter-elite and a welcome home for white refugees from the liberal crack up.

This required broadening and softening the Alabamian's contentious definition of "the people." Rather than suggesting a takeover by angry steelworkers and street cops, emblems of the blue-collar backlash, conservatives announced their solidarity with the concerns of an imprecisely defined "silent majority" of producers and consumers—taxpayers, white ethnics, housewives, "Middle Americans" who felt scorned by the New Left and besieged by powerful liberals.

The Republican Party had always been rooted among white middle-class voters. As liberalism crumbled, astute minds in the party recognized that the defense of middle-class values—diligent toil, moral piety, self-governing communities—could now bridge gaps of income and occupation that the GOP had been unable to cross since the Great Depression. This became possible only because, away from the workplace, millions of white wage earners now proudly identified themselves as consumers and home owners.<sup>2</sup>

The labor-liberal alliance forged in the 1930s was the victim of its own success. The social programs and long-term union contracts that, in the context of the post-war boom, had enabled millions of white working people to enjoy a measure of job security and to afford homes of their own also made possible a new coalition that demolished the New Deal order. By the end of the 1960s, whether one earned a wage or owned a small business, carried a union card or chafed at the restrictions imposed by labor was often less important than a shared dislike of a governing and cultural elite and its perceived friends in the ghettos and on campus.

The United States was a very different country than it had been at the end of World War II. The cultural and political fault lines split open in the 1960s had yielded a jagged, racially defined landscape not reducible to haves and have-nots. And organized labor—once a reliable bastion of left-wing populist imagery—was

often unwilling and increasingly unable to challenge the legitimacy of the big corporations that employed thousands of union members.

Unlike Wallace, most conservatives did not have to choose between building their own third party or returning to a political fold controlled by their sworn enemies. Since the Goldwater campaign, they had become the dominant grassroots force inside a major party that was on the rebound. In contrast to Wallace, they enjoyed a legitimate platform from which to speak in grand, optimistic terms appropriate to a force that would govern the nation and not merely trade blows with its despoilers.

And the Republican Right enjoyed another advantage the one-time AIP candidate lacked: a normative vision. From the mid-1970s on, the rhetorical defense of hardworking Americans against the liberal elite was yoked to a discourse of values that were considered "traditional" as well as middle class. Organizers based in fast-growing evangelical Protestant churches led the fight to make both policy and social custom reflect their biblical code of sexual self-discipline, patriarchal families, and a Calvinist type of producer ethic. As one minister explained his opposition to welfare payments: "It's immoral to take money from people who work and give it to those who won't work. . . . This is God's morality, not ours. Our laws were founded on God's word and not on Man's will."<sup>3</sup>

Liberals accused the Christian Right of wanting to coerce citizens into a mythic, small-town regimen of bigoted uniformity. And loose talk that "God Almighty does not hear the prayers of Jews," though untypical, seemed to confirm the charge.<sup>4</sup> But, like prohibitionists early in the century, the evangelical Right wanted to save ordinary people, not repress them. In its view, the liberal elite wasn't merely arrogant, bumbling, and spendthrift; liberals' tolerance of abortion, homosexuality, and atheism demonstrated a higher immorality. Conservative Protestants—in alliance with a large number of sympathetic Catholics and even some orthodox Jews—understood the need to transform collective perceptions of right and wrong if they would change not just the rulers of society but the nature of their rule.

To carry out the desired reformation, the Republican Right could marshal a formidable array of resources and constituencies. Conservatives talked like grassroots activists but were able to behave like a counter-elite. Within their coalition were Sunbelt corporations opposed to federal regulation and high taxes; churches mobilized to reverse the spread of "secular humanism"; local groups that protested school busing, sex education, and other forms of bureaucratic meddling in "family issues," and foundations that endowed a new generation of intellectuals and journalists. All these groups were skilled in the art of impressing politicians with their organizing capacity, if not their convictions. The multi-issue, multiconstituency offensive was more potent and sustainable than the crusade against the domestic red menace had ever been.<sup>5</sup>

From its beginnings, the newest Right bloomed in symbiotic liaison with a fresh crop of standard-bearers. Conservative politicians gave up talk of repealing the

New Deal (or hunting down its Communist foot soldiers) to focus, in populist ways, on cultural ruptures. First came George Wallace, eager to invoke a mass movement of the unpolished and neglected. Then, in 1966, Ronald Reagan won the governorship of California by campaigning as a straight-talking "citizen-politician" who vowed to clamp down on ghetto rioters, welfare cheats, permissive academics, and unpatriotic college students (but not unions or Social Security). He did quite well with white working-class voters.<sup>6</sup> And, at the end of the 1960s, a refashioned Richard Nixon tried his hand at wooing the plain but alienated people.

Left behind in these efforts was the Madisonian rigidity of Barry Goldwater—as well as the antiradical paranoia of Joe McCarthy and Robert Welch. Anticommunism remained basic to the worldview of the Right; it made it possible to draw a line in the sand between "captive" nations and free ones and to attack the peace movement and its liberal allies for being unpatriotic. But, as Nixon's 1972 visit to China demonstrated, the leader of a conservative party could bend the old orthodoxy when it no longer served his purposes.

Without abandoning their core beliefs, activists and politicians on the Right became skilled at courting white Democrats, both North and South, with praise of their labor, their families, their ethnic identities, and their moral beliefs. Such language did not guide the domestic programs of either the Nixon or the Reagan administration—both of which aided the interests of large corporations and did nothing to stem the decline in real wages and good industrial jobs. But it did help frame their policies as correctives to the damage that had supposedly been done by haughty liberals who ignored the desires of the virtuous majority. By capturing the language of populism, conservatives were able, at last, to dominate national politics and to force their long-time adversaries onto the defensive.

## THE NIXON DEPARTURE

Richard Nixon was not the dream candidate of the Republican Right. After becoming vice president in 1953, he had worked hard to transform himself into a statesmanlike moderate in order to dispel memories of the red-hunting zealotry that had first made him a national figure. Those who fondly remembered Nixon calling Adlai Stevenson an "appeaser . . . who got a Ph.D. from Dean Acheson's College of Cowardly Communist Containment" mistrusted his attacks on Joe McCarthy and the compromise he made with the GOP liberal Nelson Rockefeller to secure the 1960 nomination.<sup>7</sup> Nixon had, however, regained the esteem of figures like William F. Buckley, Jr., by campaigning for Goldwater in 1964 and then working, tirelessly, to pick up the pieces after that year's landslide drubbing.

And Nixon's loathing of what conservatives called "the Eastern establishment" was as visceral as theirs. He still resented the attempt by Eisenhower's corporate backers to dump him from the GOP ticket in 1952. And the privileges of sanctimo-

nious liberals chafed against his prepolitical past: a childhood spent on a small, unprofitable orchard in Southern California; his family's subsequent struggle to keep their garage and grocery store afloat; the self-discipline and constant work regimen demanded by his devout, ever-serious Quaker parents; his failure as an entrepreneur of frozen orange juice during the Depression. This was, at heart, the same man who, as a first-term congressman, had labeled Alger Hiss "the darling of the elitists" and helped send him to jail.

Despite the nearly two decades Nixon spent at or near the pinnacle of a rich man's party, his old wounds had not healed. In his White House diary, Nixon spilled out his contempt for members of the "American leader class" who came to "whine and whimper" and his preference for "labor leaders and people from middle America who still have character and guts and a bit of patriotism." Unlike Wallace, Nixon had not sounded anti-establishment themes throughout his career. But he had no trouble deciding what side he was on in the raging cultural conflict.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1968 race for president, however, he played it safe. The Nixon campaign followed the perennial strategy of any challenger running against an unpopular administration—hammer away at the incumbents and say as little as possible about what you might do. In his acceptance speech, the Republican nominee drew a dismaying portrait of "cities enveloped in smoke and flame . . . sirens in the night . . . Americans dying on distant battlefields . . . hating each other; killing each other at home." His television commercials, more ingenious than any previous examples of the genre, employed the unsettling devices of rapid montage and electronic music to remind viewers that "America is in trouble today," trouble that only a shift in leadership could remedy.

Nixon made no serious attempt to articulate a conservative vision to replace the liberal one. His 1968 campaign, orchestrated by advertising executives and television producers, cleverly remade the image of a candidate widely perceived as a vindictive loser. Nixon welded together shiny scraps of rhetoric without acknowledging the sometimes antagonistic political vehicles from which they had fallen. He sought to straddle the racial gulf—sternly promising a crackdown on "criminal forces" and blaming urban violence on "government programs" while vowing to promote "black capitalism." He made a feint toward the idealistic young by endorsing "participatory democracy which puts personal liberty ahead of the dictates of the state." The point was not to win over activist blacks or left liberals. It was, as Garry Wills observed, to "throw up a protective screen around his actions." Nixon spoke as a congenial centrist who needed to transcend the bitter internal struggle that had plagued the Republicans in 1964. This stance befitted the man whom Patrick Buchanan, his admiring aide, called "the least ideological statesman I ever encountered." Nixon's guiding slogan "Bring Us Together"—lifted from a poster carried by a young supporter—could have been directed to his own party as much as to the country at large.<sup>9</sup>

But the victor's campaign was not all bathos and shadows. Working out of their headquarters on Park Avenue, Nixon and his handlers were beginning to develop a populist message that borrowed from Wallace's themes while avoiding their caustic

sting and Southern provenance. We need to listen, advised the Republican nominee, to "the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the nondemonstrators." This spoke to and for people who disliked the New Left and its sympathizers. But it avoided Wallace's suggestion, born of his region's damaged pride, that forgotten whites should smash their way to recognition. And while the AIP threw in its lot with "workingmen and -women," the Nixon campaign defined the majority in more comfortable economic and moral phrases, unmoored to specific ways of earning a living: "They're good people. They're decent people; they work and they save and they pay taxes and they care."<sup>10</sup>

Muting Wallace's thinly veiled attacks on blacks, such verbal markers placed the onus on the self-centered, the lazy, and the disorderly—on people who yelled about change but wouldn't (or couldn't) pay their taxes. The majority of Americans, Nixon implied, were content to obey the law—including civil rights laws—and to go about their business; they didn't want to run over bearded protesters or let the cops take over the cities. In this sanguine vein, the Republican National Committee put out a license plate emblazoned with the popular motto, "I Fight Poverty—I Work."<sup>11</sup>

Nixon carefully distinguished his racial politics from those of the segregationist Right. He endorsed the egalitarian, color-blind principles embodied in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. However, like Wallace, he directed his fire at judges and federal officials who tried to implement such principles through remedies like affirmative action and school busing. In measured phrases, Nixon invoked the primacy of community: "to force a local community to carry out what a federal administrator or bureaucrat may think is best for that local community—I think that is a doctrine that is a very dangerous one." As the sociologist Jonathan Rieder observes, "If Wallace offered rollback, Nixon suggested containment."<sup>12</sup>

Helping to devise Republican strategy in 1968 was Kevin Phillips, an Irish Presbyterian from the Bronx who worked directly under the campaign director John Mitchell. Still in his twenties, Phillips was also engaged in writing an audacious interpretation of American political history that placed populism in the center. With the imaginative use of a voluminous array of statistics, Phillips argued that ethnic, racial, and regional antagonisms had been the keys to party supremacy in every electoral cycle from the era of Jefferson to the 1960s. When a party convincingly placed itself on the side of the hardworking, culturally mainstream masses and against the moneyed, Northeastern establishment, it usually gained national dominance for a generation or more. Phillips traced his own populist awakening to his initial days as a student at Harvard Law School in the early 1960s. The Young Democrats there, he remembered, had gone to prep schools, dressed expensively, and looked down on Young Republicans like him—public school graduates in bargain-store clothes. "Knowing who hates who" and acting accordingly was, he claimed, the key to electoral success.<sup>13</sup>

In the late 1960s, Phillips exulted, the only reliable Democratic voting bloc

were committed liberals and the poor blacks and Latinos the government was attempting to uplift. This was a coalition of minorities, held together by a combination of guilt, rage, and domestic programs the taxes paid by middle-class whites made possible.

Contemporary Democrats, argued Phillips, had made a fatal political error. They foolishly leaped "beyond programs taxing the few for the benefit of the many (the New Deal)" to pass "programs taxing the many on behalf of the few (the Great Society)." In response, whites across the Sunbelt (a term he invented) and Catholics in the North and Midwest were moving toward the GOP. The establishment—which Phillips defined as "Wall Street, the Episcopal Church, the great metropolitan newspapers, the U.S. Supreme Court, and Manhattan's East Side"—had opposed FDR. But now it was composed of genteel liberals who disdained the conservative wave that "has invariably taken hold in the ordinary (now middle-class) hinterlands of the nation." George Wallace was only riding the froth of this breaker; the new breed of upwardly mobile, college-educated Republicans, Phillips predicted, were far better equipped to gain the allegiance of "the productive segment of society" that "resents the exploitation of society's producers."<sup>14</sup>

This was the first time a leading conservative had linked his cause to an explicitly "populist" identity, albeit one with a middle-class rather than blue-collar flavor. Upon taking power, the president and his men built on Phillips's predictions and carried most conservatives (even those who had despised Wallace-style populism) along with them. During Nixon's first term, which climaxed in his landslide reelection, the wooing of the forgotten majority proceeded along two main tracks: a critique of the mass media as a new type of elite and the use of the phrase "Middle America" as a seductive definition of the people. At the time, the advice Phillips gave to Nixon reminded one journalist of Machiavelli's relationship with the Florentine ruler Cesare Borgia, "describing in naked words what his hero had all along been doing by instinct."<sup>15</sup>

The new administration certainly did not abandon the levers of domestic reform. In fact, Nixon officials designed an affirmative-action plan to speed up integration in the construction industry, and they proposed tougher environmental laws and a guaranteed annual income to replace the welfare system. Brilliant opportunist that he was, the president talked like a grassroots conservative while often governing like a liberal.<sup>16</sup>

But he would never allow the barons of the old, declining order to think he had become one of them. To neutralize opposition, the new administration waged a rhetorical offensive against the television networks and erudite liberal dailies, particularly the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. In 1969, Vice President Spiro Agnew gave several speeches in which he indicted the networks in terms once used by leftists to describe corporate power in toto: "a tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, elected by no one, and enjoying a monopoly sanctioned and licensed by government . . . the airwaves do not belong to the networks; they belong to the people." Administration figures began popularizing the term "media"

itself—believing it had a colder, more sinister sound than the traditional “press.”<sup>17</sup>

The alleged sins of the electronic moguls were not economic in nature. Unlike the leftists of old who had lambasted “lords of the press,” the dapper Agnew (who was fond of making impromptu references to his golf game) said nothing about the wealth or labor policies of the men who decided what Americans should know about the world. His aim was patently partisan: to reveal that prominent reporters and anchormen posing as objective in reality had a “radical-liberal” agenda. How could these people portray the antiwar movement and counterculture kindly yet refuse to accord the president and his supporters the benefit of the doubt? Clearly, the media was trying to substitute its views for those of the citizens it was supposed to be serving. “There is no element in American life more out of touch with the concerns and beliefs of the common man than the liberal press,” wrote Patrick Buchanan, then a presidential speechwriter. In late 1969, at a time of huge antiwar demonstrations, the president asked “the great silent majority” to support his Vietnam policy. “It was almost as if the media, not Hanoi, were the enemy,” reflects a biographer.<sup>18</sup>

Targeting the media satisfied some old personal grudges. Since his days as a red-hunting congressman, Richard Nixon had waged frequent skirmishes with the press; it was to a corps of political correspondents that he had spat, erroneously, in 1962, “You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore. Just think how much you’re going to be missing.”<sup>19</sup> Buchanan was the principal writer of both the “silent majority” speech and Agnew’s major critique of the networks. A former Goldwater activist who viewed himself as the conservative conscience of the administration, he still bore a grudge against Edward R. Murrow and his colleagues for helping to bring down Joe McCarthy.<sup>20</sup>

But at the end of the 1960s, with most Americans disgusted with both the war and those protesting it, blaming the biased messenger also seemed like good politics. If the nation was indeed becoming a society whose major commodity was information, then exposing the motives of one’s adversaries who controlled its production and distribution was vital to sapping their power. And television news was controlled by executives and reporters who tended to favor cultured, liberal Democrats like Adlai Stevenson and John Kennedy and to disdain politicians like Richard Nixon who rose from the provincial, lower-middle class and often appeared stiff and defensive on camera. “They own the word factory,” complained Agnew’s press secretary; “they make the words.”<sup>21</sup>

Such arguments, planted in vengeful soil, helped to germinate the conservative critique of a new class, organized in academia as well as the media, that continued to undermine American values and national security—even after the New Left had withered. They also led the Nixon administration to create its own image-making apparatus to counter the hostility of what the then-White House aide David Gergen called “the great outside they.” The perpetual selling of the president had begun.<sup>22</sup>

Its original consumer base was Middle America—the antithesis of slick cosmopolitans who mocked the patriotic, the un-hip, and the blue-collar. The political

idiom was coined in 1967 by Joseph Kraft, a national columnist worried that he and his liberal colleagues “in what is called the communications field are not rooted in the great mass of ordinary Americans—in Middle America.” Under the guidance of Attorney General John Mitchell, it became the GOP’s identity of choice, one that could unite loyal, “Elm Street” Republicans with white working-class Democrats who had soured on their party’s liberal ideas and leadership—an alliance between Rotary Club, American Legion post, and union hall that embodied Mitchell’s talk of a government and economy “close to the people.”<sup>23</sup>

As a metaphor, Middle America evoked, simultaneously, three compelling meanings: the unstylish, traditionalist expanse that lay between the two coasts; an egalitarian social status most citizens either claimed or desired; and a widespread feeling of being squeezed between penthouse and ghetto—between a condescending elite above and scruffy demonstrators and welfare recipients below. The wholesome connotations of Middle America functioned somewhat like a Frank Capra film or a Norman Rockwell painting to repel critics. Other than revolutionaries or cynics, how many people would want to be permanently located on the edges of the body politic? The very ubiquity of Middle America indicated that conservatives had successfully steered populist sentiments in their direction.<sup>24</sup>

At the beginning of 1970, *Time* magazine bestowed its imprimatur on the term by crowning Middle Americans its “Man and Woman of the Year.” The lengthy cover story summarized the attitudes toward race, dissent, Vietnam, and morals of this group estimated, for no apparent reason, to number about half the population; it also listed their presumed tastes in entertainment—baton twirling, the Rockettes, football, and *The Green Berets* (a pro-war movie starring John Wayne). Hedging a bit, the article concluded: “The present shift to the right is in one perspective illusory”: average folks no longer considered adulterous movie stars or moderate black spokesmen outside the pale. But by anointing Nixon “the embodiment of Middle America,” *Time* suggested how difficult it would be for opponents on his Left to apply the designation for their own purposes.<sup>25</sup>

Alongside the optimistic thrust of Middle America, the president and his men expressed a tougher, militant brand of populism that echoed George Wallace’s defense of blue-collar prejudices. In the spring of 1970, groups of construction workers in New York City and St. Louis—union members all—beat up demonstrators (many of whom were college students) protesting Nixon’s decision to send American troops into Cambodia. A few weeks later, the president invited leaders of the New York Building and Construction Trades Council to the White House and donned a hard hat for photographers to dramatize his gratitude that someone had put people he had recently dubbed “these bums . . . blowing up the campuses” in their place. Almost immediately, buttons emblazoned with a hard hat showed up at demonstrations organized to support Nixon’s war policy, and the headgear became synonymous with white backlash politics.<sup>26</sup> In that fall’s midterm elections, the president and his allies focused so tightly on Middle America’s hostility to radicals, rioters, and permissiveness that their stridency

may have cost the Republicans votes from people who preferred "a sense of calm mastery and consensual order" the Nixon of 1968 had projected.<sup>27</sup>

For Wallace, however, this strategy posed a grave problem: an administration of rhetorical conservatives was co-opting his message. Nixon, Agnew, and their subalterns attacked many of the same enemies and courted the same productive middle as he did. And they did not adopt the heated, class-conscious barbs and fondness for country music and stock-car racing that, taken together, seemed to limit Wallace to a Southern, largely blue-collar constituency. The governor complained that the administration was stealing his issues without acknowledgment. But in national polls from 1969 to 1971, he drew no more support than he had won in the last election.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, he had to make some changes.

Thus, as the 1972 campaign began, Wallace turned down the emotional volume and began to sound more like a conventional politician—albeit one who could never escape his contentious image and who probably would have demoralized his loyal followers without it. Hankering for legitimacy, he decided to run in Democratic primaries, consigning the jilted AIP to a marginal existence. An avowed Bircher, former Representative John Schmitz, became its presidential nominee.<sup>29</sup>

Wallace's own literature—slicker and better financed than before—now portrayed the seemingly perpetual candidate as a safer, saner tribune of the (white) common man. With few radical protesters still in evidence, he no longer talked about running over any anarchist who lay down in front of his car. Accepting the enfranchisement of African-Americans, the governor of Alabama had himself photographed with a black homecoming queen and told a conference of black mayors: "We're all God's children. All God's children are equal." Wallace focused on the issues of high, regressive taxes and the "senseless, asinine busing of little children" to make concrete his indictment of a spendthrift government run by incompetents and liars.

Wallace also took tentative aim at a more traditional populist target: concentrated wealth. His glossy campaign organ, *The Wallace Stand*, proclaimed a populist siege on "super-rich, tax-free" foundations. "If the Supreme Court is so interested in busing, why don't they bus some of this money from Wall Street back to the Treasury?" Wallace asked in 1971 at a stop in Toledo. Yet he soon dropped this gambit, which failed to gain the type of response accorded attacks on minions of the state.<sup>30</sup>

These adjustments helped, somewhat, to lift the onus of being the backlash candidate, but they got him no closer to the prize. During the presidential primaries of 1972, the Democrats were split in three irreconcilable directions; the old Capitol hands Hubert Humphrey, Edward Muskie, and Henry Jackson competed for the middle while Wallace and the antiwar liberal George McGovern occupied the wings. Before he was shot and paralyzed on May 15, the Alabama governor's white working-class base had gained him a plurality of delegates in the crowded field. But the Wallace campaign seemed a disgruntled cry of protest rather than a fresh groundswell of formerly silent citizens demanding redress from an unyielding sys-

tem. "Send Them a Message," Wallace's 1972 slogan, unintentionally revealed his finite prospects. The antiwar and feminist activists who were increasingly powerful at the party's grassroots would never have abided as their nominee this former segregationist, who was still the darling of the far Right.

In self-evident frustration, Wallace and his loyalists claimed that an old pattern of domination was simply being repeated. "They"—the elite Eastern media, the Nixon administration (suspected of aiding the assassination attempt), and the whole permanent system undergirded by courts, inherited wealth, and the milieu of top universities—seemed determined that the Alabama governor and his kind of people would never gain national power. It was the same lament the followers of Tom Watson and William Jennings Bryan had made at the end of the previous century. "If they're against it, why don't they change it?" Wallace chided his electoral competitors. "They been in power a hundred years, all together."<sup>31</sup>

In 1972, the Nixon-Agnew re-election campaign demonstrated how a rising political elite could take advantage of an anti-elitist message. The Republicans portrayed George McGovern and his supporters as the embodiment of everything Middle America abhorred: "giveaway" antipoverty programs, the "reverse discrimination" of recent civil rights rulings, the sexual anarchy allegedly promoted by radical feminists and gay liberationists, and a willingness to surrender Vietnam to the enemy. In the words of a secret Nixon campaign memo, McGovern was portrayed "as the Establishment's fair-haired boy and RN postured as the Candidate of the Common Man, the working man." Of course, the Democrats were quite capable of going themselves. They angered the chieftains of the AFL-CIO, denied a delegate seat to Mayor Richard Daley (whom the media had made a symbol of white ethnic power), and botched the selection of a vice-presidential nominee.

Still, Nixon's landslide that fall was the culmination of a project the Right had been developing since the end of World War II. A champion of the hardworking, plain-living majority had finally vanquished the candidate of the cosmopolitan liberal establishment (albeit one who hailed from South Dakota). Despite or because of his opportunistic nature, Richard Nixon had showed conservatives how to profit from the crackup of their adversaries.<sup>32</sup>

## THE NEW PROHIBITIONISTS

But opportunism was not enough. Nixon had never offered more than the gauziest of alternatives to the ideology of the liberals he was deposing; and his domestic agenda, however described, was clearly intended to be a refinement of the welfare state, not an attempt to dismantle it. The Watergate scandal that began to build only months after the 1972 landslide seemed to prove that "Tricky Dick" had never really changed his spots. Other than Pat Buchanan, few conservative activists were willing to mount a campaign to defend a president who spoke profanely, acted devi-

ously, and had done little to weaken the leviathan state. Nixon's accusations of a conspiracy by the Eastern press and assorted other liberal "enemies"—a chord he had strummed since the Hiss case—could not slow the wreck of his presidency.

That debacle opened up space for grassroots activists who knew quite clearly what kind of America they wanted and what stood in the way of realizing it. The religious Right emerged as a national force in the half-decade just after Watergate and a severe jolt of "stagflation" (recession plus high prices, particularly for energy) highlighted the impression that American society was flailing about in a septic tank of corruption, ineptitude, and decline. In 1976, the movie *Network* attracted large audiences who readily grasped why the protagonist, a renegade television anchorman, might achieve nationwide popularity simply by exhorting people to shout in public, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore."<sup>33</sup>

Mainstream politicians—whether they called themselves liberals or conservatives—were seen as either having caused or made a major contribution to the mess. By thinking primarily of personal and partisan advantage, they had forgotten what had made the United States so prosperous, stable, and free in the past. With such arguments, reminiscent of jeremiads hurled by the original Populists, the call for a moral and spiritual revival caught on among many Americans who had never sympathized with the Right before. Perhaps the lack of leaders and of a citizenry imbued with "traditional values" was what ailed the nation.

For the first time since the victory of the prohibition movement a half-century earlier, conservative religion meshed with conservative politics to produce a bumper crop of discontent. Defenders of the old-time religion in the 1970s expressed their grievances and hopes in spiritual terms that had not been prominent in the public realm since the 1920s. A consuming desire to cleanse sinful institutions led them to chastise judges who forbade school prayer but authorized abortions, television executives whose productions smashed sexual taboos, and school authorities who promoted an agnostic stance toward moral questions. Activists on the religious Right were spearheading a traditionalist backlash against cultural changes they identified with the stylish professionals of "the new class" who allegedly controlled the mass media, the educational system, and the federal government. In contrast to Wallace and Nixon, who focused almost exclusively on tearing down the liberal battlements, the Christian Right had a coherent, albeit nostalgic, vision of what needed defending: the family headed by the father, a moral code based on the Bible, and an economic order that favored the self-reliant entrepreneur and worker.

The local terrain was already well seeded. Evangelical Protestant congregations had been growing rapidly since the 1940s, particularly in the booming Sunbelt. And a florescence of new seminaries, radio and cable-television stations, and riveting young preachers supplied a fervor and moral purpose lacking in theologically staid (and politically liberal) denominations. By the late '60s, the Southern Baptist Convention had become the largest denomination in the United States and the source of many votes for George Wallace. But not until the mid-1970s did this missionary

zeal focus on the same liberal establishment that the Right had long been assaulting with secular terms. Billy Graham's well-known friendship with President Nixon had a meager impact compared to the sophisticated national institutions—part business, part movement—run by Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and other paragons of conservative evangelism.<sup>34</sup> Not since the heyday of the Anti-Saloon League had masses of Christian activists had the determination and the resources to place themselves and their grievances in the vanguard of a grassroots campaign to change American culture.

Unlike earlier attempts to bring the political world back to God, this crusade leapt across the divide of the Reformation. Catholics repelled by legal abortion, homosexuality, and the advance of secular mores joined the same organizations—the Moral Majority, the Conservative Caucus, Committee for Survival of a Free Congress, and others—as did conservative Protestants.<sup>35</sup> The public image of the movement reflected its ecumenical nature; leaders from Catholic backgrounds such as Phyllis Schlafly, Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, and Pat Buchanan echoed the same "back-to-basics" message voiced by Protestants like Falwell and Robertson. The first denunciations of "secular humanism," in fact, had come from conservative Catholics in the 1950s.<sup>36</sup> The flame of the old social encyclicals still flickered wanly in phrases about government having a responsibility, as Weyrich put it, "to protect the helpless, be they unborn or senile, against the self-interest of others."<sup>37</sup> But Catholics on the Right no longer advocated a guaranteed annual wage or a corporatist order. The welfare they wanted the state to promote was almost completely spiritual.

To combat the shared danger of liberal secularism, Christian conservatives revived the notion of an aroused "community" of ordinary men and women. Red hunters had employed such rhetoric a quarter-century earlier to justify expelling "subversives" from schools and workplaces. But the 1970s Right applied it more broadly. The communities they spoke for were filled with pious, self-reliant individuals who gathered together to safeguard "traditional values" acquired either through upbringing or conversion. And political activism was mandatory because the state—its courts, its schools, its bureaucrats, and its untrustworthy politicians—was trying to dictate how "the ordinary man" taught his children and conducted his business. Such an appeal echoed that of the original Populists, though the context was vastly changed. "Certainly the rebels from the towns and countryside would have preferred to fight where they felt at home, in the very communities they were striving to protect," writes the historian Robert Wiebe about the movement of the 1890s. "But this much they had already learned: to free the community they would have to free the nation."<sup>38</sup>

For the communitarian Right of the 1970s, no issue was more salient than education. The dawning information society appeared to put liberal academics, and school officials who followed their lead, in a position of unusual influence: by deciding what knowledge students should absorb, they could shape the views of whoever held power. And, over the previous two decades, contention had wracked

the whole arena of education—from the fight over desegregating public schools to the revolt on college campuses. George Wallace, Ronald Reagan (as governor of California), and Richard Nixon had already attracted support from many white Democrats by standing up for “neighborhood schools” and against student “riots.”

What the Christian Right added was the element of spiritual self-defense. The power of this stance could be glimpsed in a variety of local settings filled with white working-class people. In the mountain towns of Kanawha County, West Virginia, the spark was textbooks that allegedly encouraged students to take a relativist attitude toward diverse religions and sexual practices. In 1974, thousands of coal miners and their families—led by fundamentalist ministers and Alice Moore, a member of the local board of education—walked off their jobs and boycotted school. Their statements and songs breathed an outrage that bunched together all elite outsiders—big coal companies, the National Education Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Supreme Court—as irreligious “experts” who wouldn’t listen “to us little old hillbillies.” In the words of “Ballad of Kanawha County” by Mary Rose (an alias):

*Our bridges fell in, the dams gave way, and they strip-mined our beautiful hills.  
We turned our cheek when the bridges blew up, but they even blew up our stills.  
Yes, we turned our cheeks seventy times seven, we did not resist  
Till they came for the souls of our precious ones, and now we're gonna resist.  
Now they come for our kids with their dirty books and their one-world plan,  
But they got a surprise from us mountain folk, because now the Lord  
said stand.<sup>39</sup>*

In Boston, that same year, the issue was a busing plan handed down by Judge W. Arthur Garrity, Jr., a liberal. The angry white protesters, most of whom were devout Catholics, utilized both church rituals and anti-authoritarian symbols and slogans borrowed, unapologetically, from the civil rights movement and the New Left. Affixing handfuls of militant buttons to dresses and windbreakers, they chanted “Hell, no! We won’t go” and sang “We Shall Overcome.” Hundreds of mothers marched through their neighborhoods loudly reciting the rosary. While most journalists depicted the revolt as a racial one, the anti-busing movement took pains to depict its adherence to a Catholic ethic of selfless service to one’s community, family, and faith. The struggle was to “preserve neighborhood schools” against “judicial tyranny,” not to oppose integration per se. George Wallace never said it better.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that women played a central role in such local movements indicated an important shift for the Right. With rare exceptions, the main activists backing Father Coughlin, crusading against domestic communism, and campaigning for George Wallace had been men. And their discourse assumed it was a man’s job to rescue the citizenry being robbed and tyrannized. To turn back the enemy, Americans would have to be as aggressive and resourceful as combat soldiers or policemen under fire.

But women such as Alice Moore, Mary Rose, and the thousands who turned out to oppose busing in Boston articulated a more benevolent rhetoric of resistance. Not since the turn-of-the-century heyday of the WCTU had the urgent tones of collective moralism been so closely associated with the concerns of wives and mothers. Inspired by a love of God, this new conservative sisterhood was acting to protect children—“our precious ones”—and to prevent an amoral state from trespassing on such intimate family matters as sex education and religious training. In the early ’70s, Phyllis Schlafly put aside her speeches against nuclear arms control to lead the campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). “The most tragic effect of ERA,” she warned, “would . . . fall on the woman who has been a good wife and homemaker for decades, and who can now be turned out to pasture with impunity because a new, militant breed of liberationist has come along.” The Middle American woman—like her feminist foe—would be silent no longer.<sup>41</sup>

The same “pro-family” stance motivated the growing right-to-life movement—although favoring a ban on abortion would seem to contradict one’s antipathy to a meddling state. Both Protestant and Catholic women in the religious Right placed the “sacred” lives of “unborn children” in opposition to the “self-centeredness” of career women, who allegedly cared only about their own pleasure and personal freedom. The overwhelming majority of grassroots workers against the ERA and abortion, like those on the opposing side, were women. And, despite their antifeminism, they presumed that a womanly conception of politics was the soul of common sense.<sup>42</sup>

None of this repudiated the conservative animus against big government. Schlafly told her audiences: “If you like ERA, you’d better like congressmen and Washington bureaucrats and federal judges relieving you of what little power you have left over your own life.” Banning abortion posed no contradiction for Schlafly and her antistatist sisters. It was intended to restore an older and superior moral code, not to create a new layer of official guardians and regulators (which had also been the perspective of the Anti-Saloon League—until the prohibition amendment became law).<sup>43</sup>

Like Richard Nixon, the grassroots Right was convinced that the mass media was a hostile force that might be manipulated but could not be persuaded. To get its message out, the new conservative movement turned to other outlets, some of them fresh creations, that “moral Americans” could both own and control: direct mail, radio talk shows, cable television stations, right-wing magazines, and newspapers. Direct mail received the most attention—because of its emotional, polarizing style as much as for the funds it generated. Political copywriters had to alarm readers into reaching for their checkbooks instead of their wastebaskets. A letter from Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, for example, named the television producer and liberal activist Norman Lear “the number one enemy of the American family.” A solicitation for Senator Jesse Helms warned: “Your tax dollars are being used to pay for grade school education that teaches our children [that] CANNABALISM, WIFE-SWAPPING, and the MURDER of infants and the elderly are acceptable behavior.”<sup>44</sup>



Producers of this alternative medium often described their work in populist terms. Richard Viguerie, a pioneer in selling conservative views by mail (who had worked for George Wallace in the 1970s), explained in 1982:

The liberals have had control not only of all three branches of government, but of the major universities, the three major networks, the biggest newspapers, the news weeklies, and Hollywood. . . . So our communication has had to begin at the grassroots level—by reaching individuals outside the channels of organized public opinion. Fortunately, or rather providentially, a whole new technique has become available just in time—direct mail, backed by computer science, has allowed us to bypass all the media controlled by our adversaries.<sup>45</sup>

The newest wrinkle in political advertising—delivered, ironically, by a legion of government employees—thus became the ordinary people's best friend.

The right-wing movement being born struck many journalists as a frightening and quite novel phenomenon. But, as Kevin Phillips (who coined the phrase "new right" in 1975) commented, it actually represented a blend of "three powerful trend patterns that recur in American history and politics": white lower-middle-class resentment of urban elites, a moral crusade akin to prohibition, and a "Great Awakening" of religious zeal.<sup>46</sup> Jimmy Carter, with his background in the rural South and his born-again Baptist convictions, benefited from these impulses in his 1976 presidential campaign when he promised Americans "a government as good as its people." But, once in office, as leader of what was still a liberal party, he ignored or opposed the issues dearest to the Christian Right.<sup>47</sup>

This cleared the way for the Republicans to reclaim the Lord's people. Unlike earlier populist-speaking movements that had denounced the power of governing elites, the traditionalist Right after World War II had never really been politically autonomous. Its roots lay in the revengeful GOP of the 1940s that had mounted the first national charge against a left-wing, modernist capture of the state. Not all leading figures in the Christian Right were lifelong Republicans. Falwell and Robertson had been raised as Southern Democrats; others had flirted with the Wallace campaign or mused about starting a party of their own after Gerald Ford appointed Nelson Rockefeller vice president in 1974.<sup>48</sup> But most conservatives who considered that option—like William Rusher, Pat Buchanan, and Viguerie himself—had begun as GOP stalwarts. The presidential candidacy of a buoyant senior citizen from California brought them back to the fold.

## THE REAGAN RESOLUTION

In rhetorical terms, Ronald Reagan was the most effective chief executive since Franklin Roosevelt. The conservative Republican encouraged the resemblance.

FDR had been his youthful political hero and, through the 1940s, the lodestar of his beliefs. Even after Reagan turned sharply against the legacy of the New Deal, Roosevelt's rhetoric remained his model of how a president should talk: affably, anecdotaly, with concern and confidence for the problems of individual Americans as well as the welfare of the people, writ large.

Reagan was fond of quoting the Democratic icon to signify that he, too, was engaged in transforming a hapless government that no longer served average citizens. In so doing, the GOP leader touched cultural chords in many white Democrats who had soured on their party's liberal standard-bearers but were uncomfortable with the traditional Right. Observes the biographer Lou Cannon: "When Reagan spoke, ordinary Americans did not have to make the mental translation usually required for conservative Republican speakers. He undermined the New Deal in its own vernacular." One could thus become a Reagan Democrat without ceasing to venerate FDR and John F. Kennedy.<sup>49</sup>

During his presidency, most analysts of Reagan's prowess as a communicator focused on matters of style: his sonorous voice, first trained for radio and then mastered during his decade as a spokesman for General Electric, his low-key, conversational tone (whether delivering the State of the Union address or giving a personal interview); and his ability to use body language and wit to persuade television viewers he truly believed whatever he was saying. Reagan turned all the jibes about selecting a second-rate actor for president on their head. In an age saturated with the mannerisms and drama of the visual media—when "TV in a way *was* the presidency," as the White House speechwriter Peggy Noonan put it—an agreeable performer in the role of Everyman could be a devastating presence.<sup>50</sup>

But thespian skills, while essential to building Reagan's popularity, did not by themselves convince millions of Democrats and independents that he was their kind of president. The populist content of his speeches dovetailed smoothly with his direct, relaxed, quip-ready approach. What Reagan said seemed to flow naturally from the way he said it.

The erstwhile New Dealer could switch deftly from a spiritual to a secular mode as he conveyed his mistrust of haughty liberals and his faith in the American people. He charmed the moralistic Right while never separating himself from middle-class citizens whose collective anxieties were more bound up with income lost through taxes and inflation, and homes and families imperiled by crime than with the issues that fired up Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schlafly. With party loyalties crumbling and a clear desire for change in the air, Reagan depicted himself not primarily as a Republican but as an insurgent outsider who fit none of the preconceived categories of American politics. Richard Darman, a close economic adviser, insisted Reagan was more a "populist" than a conservative or Republican. Allies and critics alike compared him to Andrew Jackson. Like Old Hickory, Reagan seemed "the authentic echo of a groundswell voice" of "freedom from government"—one who felt as comfortable in a tuxedo and limousine as clearing brush on his California ranch.<sup>51</sup>

Despite glib allusions to the "revolution" he was making, Reagan was actually reconciling the different strands of conservative populism. He shared evangelical Protestant concerns about school prayer, evolution, and the imminence of Armageddon while also appealing to pious Catholics who worried about abortion and the "evil empire" of communism (and it didn't hurt to call attention to his Irish surname, though he was raised in the fundamentalist Disciples of Christ). He gave Americanism a fresh prominence and optimistic meaning; it was the natural creed of plainspeaking, industrious citizens who were capable of improving their lot without government assistance. And his speeches and television ads, especially during the 1984 campaign, revitalized the myth of the national community as a homogeneous small town, stocked with friendly people of middling incomes who had "a quiet, unselfish devotion to our families, our neighbors, and our nation."<sup>52</sup>

The Anti-Saloon League, the red hunters, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, and the Christian Right had minted their own versions of these durable coins of discourse. But Reagan cleansed them of all but a modicum of resentment and bitterness, making an ideology that had once sounded extreme appear to be the bedrock of common sense and consensual values. As the journalist Sidney Blumenthal wrote, "without Reagan, conservatism would never have become a mass cultural experience; he gave life to abstractions."<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, the Republican president maintained the Right's traditional silences: his frequent references to Jesus Christ made Jews seem a spiritual other, the "federal establishment" he derided never included anyone in a military uniform or the weapons business (who did exceedingly well during his administration), and his vaunting of ordinary people rarely mentioned the existence (much less the merits) of African-Americans or the impoverished newcomers flooding in from Latin America. Yet Reagan's omissions seemed myopic rather than mean-spirited, and the Democrats were unable to exploit them. Except during the severe recession of 1982-83, the president enjoyed solid support from the white majority.<sup>54</sup>

Reagan's most striking rhetorical tactic was his updating of the traditional opposition between "special interests" and "the people." In place of the old pejoratives about trusts and economic royalists, the president and the right-wing activists who followed his example spoke of "the interests" the way neoconservatives did about "the new class"—as a group of liberal insiders who wielded their great power to thwart the public will.

The exact identity of these "interests" remained quite vague. Reagan's 1984 statement that "national Democrats used to fight for the working families of America, and now all they seem to fight for are the special interests" suggested that a bundle of privileged minorities were the problem: organized feminists, homosexuals, advocates of affirmative action, public schools, and government unions—all elements of the Democrats' weakened coalition.<sup>55</sup> But he seldom attacked any of the groups by name. Imprecision was vital to describing this putative elite; many voters, after all, were connected to one or more of its specific parts.

Reagan's reworking of the venerable dichotomy was vital to Republican hopes

of becoming the majority party. It allowed conservatives to blunt attacks on his administration and the GOP as apologists for the corporate rich—the second coming of Coolidge and Hoover. Updating the decade-old focus on "the silent majority" and Middle Americans, Reagan and his handlers (several of whom had also served in the Nixon White House) described a conflict between bureaucrats greedy to enhance their power and a hard-pressed majority tired of paying for welfare programs it neither wanted nor needed. As earlier, this invocation of the moral middle depended on a belief that elite interests and the black poor were colluding in parasitic embrace.

What made this message compelling to independent voters was the issue of taxation. At the end of the 1970s, middle-class home owners in several states—California, most prominently—mounted and won initiative campaigns to sharply cut local property taxes that had risen along with the inflationary surge of the decade. Most of the leaders of this tax revolt were conservative Republicans like Howard Jarvis, a retired businessman from Southern California, who had traveled on Herbert Hoover's campaign train in 1932 and had long insisted that the best way to combat big government was "not to give them the money in the first place." But now this kind of argument drew approval from millions of home owners "mad as hell" (the slogan Jarvis borrowed from *Network*) about bearing the financial burden of liberal programs. The image of their movement as a populist insurgency rapidly passed into conventional wisdom—along with the language its organizers had used to describe themselves. In 1984, a team of reporters for the *Los Angeles Times* described the "tax rebels" as "led by political outsiders . . . from groups on the fringe of the dominant institutions in American society" who "found themselves arrayed against a coalition of establishment forces comprising most elected officials, public employees, the trade unions, and the large corporations."<sup>56</sup>

Ronald Reagan, who aimed to slash all levies, quickly aligned himself with the insurgent spirit blowing from his own state. The rage of small home owners was extended to taxpayers in general, regardless of position or income. Productive Americans, declared the president, should not have to transfer any more of their just rewards to the Goliath state. "The people have made it plain already," asserted Reagan during his commencement address at Notre Dame in May 1981. "They want an end to excessive government intervention in their lives and in the economy, an end to . . . a punitive tax policy that does take 'from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.'"<sup>57</sup>

Like past conservatives who engaged in populist talk, the president never attempted to define "the people" too closely. The rage for tax cuts had given Republicans an advantage they had long desired: an economic issue that placed a majority of voters on their side in apparent conflict with an unresponsive elite. But the GOP was, as much as ever, the party favored by employers and wealthy individuals, and their tax rates generally plummeted under Reagan's policies. It wouldn't do to call attention to class divisions that could upset the new coalition.

So, in his unique fashion, Reagan simply transcended the problem. He offered

glittering tributes to the indispensable masses and stern warnings to their foes and let an improving economy and the disarray of the Democrats do the rest. In his first inaugural address, Reagan called a rhapsodic roster of producers that, with one exception, could easily have appeared in literature the CIO published during FDR's last campaign: "men and women who raise our food, patrol our streets, man our mines and factories, teach our children, keep our homes, and heal us when we're sick—professionals, industrialists, shopkeepers, clerks, cabbies, and truck drivers . . . this breed called Americans." And in his 1985 Labor Day speech (given in Independence, Missouri—the hometown of the now legendary "plainspeaking" Harry Truman), Reagan promoted a new income tax "simplification" plan (originally designed by the Democrats Bill Bradley and Richard Gephardt) as the salvation of the struggling middle class:

I'm here to declare to the special interests something they already know, and something they hope you won't find out: Our fair share tax program is a good deal for the American people and a big step toward economic power for people who've been denied power for generations.<sup>58</sup>

The Republican president had captured the language of the New Deal and of earlier populists on the Left. And the "fair share" proposal he was advocating cut rates dramatically for the wealthiest 5 percent of Americans while raising, slightly, the taxes most families had to pay. It was quite a performance.<sup>59</sup>

In the wake of his sweeping re-election in 1984, Reagan was so well liked that reporters were loath to point out such a clear contradiction between his words and his program. An aura of mysterious strength enveloped him; it was hard to belittle a man in his seventies who kept smiling after being shot by a would-be assassin and who gave uplifting, entertaining speeches on a regular basis. Even jokes about his lack of attention to the details of policy may only have burnished his image as a leader with the common touch who understood as much as the job required. The novelist John Updike remarked, through his fictional alter ego Rabbit Angstrom, "the powerful thing about [Reagan] . . . was that you never knew how much he knew, nothing or everything, he was like God that way, you had to do a lot of it yourself."<sup>60</sup>

For vivid testimony of the spell Reagan cast over the faithful, one can turn to the memoir of Peggy Noonan, who spent 1984 to 1986 as a lyrical and much-appreciated presidential speechwriter. An Irish Catholic from a working-class family who adored the Kennedys, she credits her move rightward to a Wallace-like resentment of rich liberals who made "the nonrich" pay for their expensive, unworkable domestic programs. Her favorite White House official was coreligionist Pat Buchanan, then the communications director, whom she describes as "effortlessly egalitarian," the kind of conservative "happy to sit for an hour with a janitor and talk about life and the world in a way that one suspects [prominent liberals] never could. . . ."<sup>61</sup>

Like most Washington memoirs, Noonan's book is full of witty put-downs of

former associates and hard lessons learned about the exigencies of political power. But when she writes about Ronald Reagan, the sun shines brightly and harps are playing. "He was probably the sweetest, most innocent man ever to serve in the Oval Office," she gushes. "'I'm not odd,' he would say, 'I'm only odd for a president.'"<sup>62</sup> The man at the top was a man of the people.

Down in the ranks, however, rejoicing gradually gave way to carping and competition. While all sections of the Right cheered Reagan's unexpected victory in 1980, many Christian conservatives came to doubt whether his talk of defending traditional values was being matched by action. The administration's energies went into cutting taxes and building up the military; Reagan avoided waging congressional battles on such divisive issues as a Human Life Amendment and public funding for religious schools. Neoconservative intellectuals praised America's new pugnacity abroad, and free-market ideologues cheered measures to curb regulation and unleash entrepreneurs. But the sunny populist in the White House was putting a large section of the conservative movement in the shade.

The reaction was pained, though sporadic. Richard Viguerie charged that Reagan had "turned his back on the populist cause" by dining with the likes of Nelson Rockefeller and Henry Kissinger "to stroke them and assure . . . other members of the establishment that things would not be very different under Reagan, that they had nothing to worry about." Paul Weyrich, an influential proponent of "family issues," made similar, if more muted, complaints.<sup>63</sup> In several states, corporate donors to the GOP tried to drive the Christian Right out of the party. Evangelicals saw it as a matter of class shoving conviction. Claimed one member of Christian Voice in northern Virginia: "The majority of the big money men are three Martini Episcopalians who belong to the Country Club and drive a Rolls or a Jag or something and they despise these unwashed low-income Christians coming in singing their hymns and trying to take the Party away."<sup>64</sup>

But not many Christian activists blamed their president. They understood that Reagan was succeeding by making conservatism sound like common sense, not a spiritual call to arms. Insurgents on the Right were discovering a truth that labor leftists had learned during the height of the New Deal: grassroots criticism loses its sting when the president captures the people.

And success encouraged demobilization. Following the 1984 Reagan landslide (and the beginning of Mikhail Gorbachev's dismantling of the "evil empire" from within), contributions to right-wing organizations dropped precipitously. Only the most paranoid conservatives could still argue that veterans or emulators of the Great Society and New Left were dominating the governing elite. Bathed in the nostalgia of "oldies" music, the conflicts of the 1960s that had given the grassroots Right a new birth now seemed more quaint than persistent.

Populism of the confrontational variety was an icing on the old cake of bitterness that fewer people now needed to consume. In the late '80s, Viguerie's direct-mail firm almost went bankrupt; it survived only by securing contracts from the

fanatical Reverend Sun Myung Moon. The Moral Majority dissolved, and evangelical activists were thrown on the defensive as the mainstream media charged them with censorship and authoritarianism.<sup>65</sup>

For two decades, from the end of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, conservative Republicans had posed authentically in populist dress by keeping cultural resentments uppermost in the public mind. Adhering to a disciplined script, GOP politicians ran against a "liberal establishment" composed of federal bureaucrats, the mass media, arrogant academics, and other amoral "special interests." This nexus of power supplanted big business and its political cronies as *the* main threat to the beliefs (and pocketbooks) of the hardworking white majority. In a 1980 poll, even two-thirds of union members agreed that business was over-regulated.<sup>66</sup> The Right's definition of what was at stake in American politics gained wide acceptance, even though the GOP itself never attained majority status—with the great exception of presidential elections.

But populist policies did not follow from populist rhetoric. At the end of the 1980s, the taxes of middle-class Americans were higher than ever. And, despite the entreaties of the Christian Right, neither the Reagan nor the Bush administration did much to ban abortion, curb homosexuality, or weed "secular humanist" texts and teachers out of America's schools. The GOP was, after all, still the party of business, and the only priority of business in an era distant from the days when John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford denounced the saloon was to sell products, not to worry about the spiritual health of its customers. Praise of workers and taxpayers with "traditional values" was one thing; to take on the institutions—television, malls, advertising—that peddled all kinds of sensual gratification would have been quite another.

The Christian Right might also have learned a hard lesson from its (unacknowledged) forefathers and foremothers in the prohibitionist movement. At the stage of protest, a language of moral revival is enormously useful; it gives voice to people who feel the nation is slipping away from its righteous moorings. But the same language sounds mean and divisive when spoken by people in or close to power. It seems a peril to majority rights instead of a cry of outrage by the unrepresented. When Pat Buchanan bluntly announced at the 1992 Republican National Convention that "there is a religious war going on for the soul of America," he triggered a backlash that helped the Democrats win that fall. Ordinary citizens were no less angry at big government, but the declining value of their jobs and education now seemed to alarm them more than did the values of any secular cabal.

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# The Populist Persuasion

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AN AMERICAN HISTORY

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Michael Kazin



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