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Understanding the Call for an “Alternative Right” as a Consequence of Neoconservative-Paleoconservative Disputes within the Twentieth Century American Right

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William Conley began his research to fulfill a requirement for a departmental Honors thesis. To flesh out what he described as a “somewhat bookish, thesis,” William also conducted a public opinion survey. Throughout the process, he came to enjoy exploring his topic in detail, discovering something thrilling about discovering trends in history that could potentially explain current events. After graduation, William plans to pursue a graduate degree at UC Irvine and continue working toward developing a career in academia.

Abstract

This paper examines the origins of the “Alternative Right” or “Alt-Right” movement in the United States through an analysis of the American conservative movement and the broader American Right of the twentieth century. I find that the initial call for the creation of an “alternative Right” in 2008 was the result of ongoing conflicts within American conservatism. These conflicts themselves have origins in the postwar “fusionist” transformation of the conservative movement, which injected Cold War interventionism into the previously isolationist American “Old Right.” This allowed the rise of the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party, which implanted stronger internationalist tendencies into a previously more isolationist Right. In response, the so-called “paleoconservative” faction was formed, articulating an ideology more closely resembling the interwar Old Right. Viewed as having peaked with the 1992 presidential campaign of Patrick Buchanan, the paleoconservative philosopher Paul Gottfried would in 2008 call for a “post-paleo movement,” later rebranded as an “alternative Right.” Although the more recent “Alt-Right” term has become associated with more than mere opposition to neoconservatism, this paper hopes to show that the act of its proposal can be seen as an attempt to create a successor movement to paleoconservatism, and by proxy, the American Old Right.

Key Terms

- ♦ Alternative Right/Alt-Right
- ♦ Anticommunism
- ♦ Fusionism
- ♦ Libertarianism
- ♦ Neoconservatism
- ♦ Paleoconservatism
- ♦ Traditionalism

Faculty Mentor



William’s project provides a comprehensive and sobering window into the origins and defining features of the alt right. His analysis of this movement proves quite timely and relevant. He shares insights that advance our understanding of how hostile ideological movements proliferate in the current era. Undergraduate research is invaluable for revealing for students how they can be not simply recipients of knowledge, but creators of knowledge in their own right. That is an empowering process. And, the knowledge that is created by undergraduate researchers very often has clear potential to contribute to the public good. It’s knowledge with real, practical value.

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Introduction

In August, 2016, in a campaign speech in Reno, Nevada, Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton made a widely publicized reference to a movement called the “Alt-Right.”¹ The Alt-Right, short for “Alternative Right,” was as she claimed a racist movement espousing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim views (DeBenedetti, et al.). Existing analyses of the Alt-Right suggest it is a more complicated development than Clinton claimed in her speech. Some have suggested that it is a movement of serious intellectuals who are concerned about the preservation of white identity in an increasingly multicultural society. Others have argued that the Alt-Right is largely made up of young, enthusiastic conservatives who are frustrated with a culture of political correctness and have found catharsis in provocative and offensive behavior on the internet (Bokhari and Yiannopoulos). Among the more persistent interpretations of the movement is the claim that the Alt-Right is a white nationalist movement, opposed to multiculturalism and asserting a need for people of European or “white” heritage to break off from multicultural society to form their own so-called white “ethno-state” (Ingram). While analyses of the Alt-Right continue to emerge, less study has been given to where this movement came from and why the need to create an “alternative” to the existing American Right and conservative movement was felt in the first place. That question is the subject of this paper.

From examining relevant literature and other primary sources, I hope to show that whatever the present-day associations with the term, the initial call for an “alternative Right” was originally a result of a Cold War ideological conflict within the American Right with foundations in the “fusionist” transformation of the American conservative movement. This conflict itself was in part a result of the persistence of the ideas of the American “Old Right,” dating back to before the United States’ involvement in World War II. It was from the perceived defeat of the paleoconservative movement in the face of neoconservative dominance on the Right that intellectuals of the Old Right persuasion would call for the creation of an alternative Right.

Despite the more recent “Alt-Right” term’s connotations, I argue that the desire to create an alternative Right in 2008 stems from long-existing disagreements within the American conservative movement, and particularly the confrontations between the neoconservative and paleoconservative factions of the American Right. To this end, a brief analysis of the history of the conservative movement in the United States deserves review. In this focus, I rely largely on the descriptions and histories provided by Sara Diamond in her 1995 publication *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*.

Diamond’s View of the American Right

A cursory examination of the scholarship analyzing right-wing movements reveals the lack of consensus on how precisely to define and classify them. In some analyses, attempts were made to chart these movements on the traditional left-wing/right-wing continuum, with “conservative” movements being closest to center on the Right, followed by general “right-wing” movements, and followed finally by “far-right” movements. In other analyses, determining whether a movement could be classified as “right-wing” depended upon whether it met particular criteria, such as skepticism of democratic processes, nationalist impulses, and other proposed determinants. Additionally, some scholars have tried to differentiate “extreme right-wing” movements from other more moderate movements such as conservatism on the grounds that the extreme Right tended to express racist, anti-Semitic, or other such race-based attitudes less visible in conservatism (Blee and Creasap 170).

Sara Diamond is critical of an earlier framework proposed by scholars of the American Right, which classifies right-wing movements as either “extremist” or “radical.” The problem with these labels, Diamond suggests, is that they are not only derogatory in nature but also imply that all or most right-wing movements “operate outside normal political processes” (Diamond 5). In fact, the twentieth century contains several examples of activist right-wing movements that effectively mobilized large portions of the American electorate to vote and participate in electoral politics. Prominent examples include the American New Right and Christian Right, both of which are briefly examined below.

Diamond suggests that right-wing movements in the United States have generally shared two common qualities. “To be right-wing means to support the state in its capacity as *enforcer* of order and to oppose the state as *distributor* of wealth and power downward and more equitably in soci-

1. A brief word on my own punctuation methods and relevant terminology. There is some inconsistency in how scholars have punctuated the label “Right” when describing a movement or ideology. Some capitalize it, others not. For this paper, I capitalize the single-word “Right”—and “Left,” where applicable—when referring to the general ideology, but do not capitalize adjectives or hyphenated adjectives such as “right-wing” or “far-right,” as these can refer generally to multiple movements. For specific movements with proper names, however, such as the New Right or Christian Right, I capitalize accordingly. This is also true for the “Alt-Right” label, which I will capitalize in all cases. Not all analyses of the Alt-Right do this, with some leaving that label uncapitalized and even unhyphenated. For consistency in this paper, though, this is the general punctuation method I have adopted.

ety” (Diamond 9). In other words, to be right-wing means to have a particular opinion about the role of government in the operations of society. This remains imperfect, as libertarians for example would likely oppose state involvement as both *enforcer* and *distributor*, while as a movement they have a strong association with the American Right. Still, Diamond’s conception captures broadly much of the essence of the American Right, and therefore I will largely build off of her definition.

The American Right in Diamond’s view exhibits three core traits in varying degrees: *libertarianism*, *anticommunism*, and *traditionalism*. All three of these ideologies have specific concerns about the role of the government or state in society and its level of involvement. These “three pillars” of the American Right are not uniform in their policy prescriptions (7). For instance, a libertarian, as indicated above, might argue that the state should minimize as much as it is able its involvement in both the economic and social spheres of life. In contrast, a traditionalist might prefer the state enforce or encourage social and religious traditions in society, while also refraining from overbearingly regulating the economy. Despite these differences, the coming of “fusionism,” to be detailed later in this section, would unify adherents of these three pillars into an ideologically diverse but relatively cohesive movement.

Accepting Diamond’s three pillars, my own operational definition of right-wing movements is broad. It is able to include moderate movements such as the conservative movement, to be covered below in this section, as well as extremist movements, such as the John Birch Society. In this way, “right-wing” as a label by itself becomes insufficient to accurately describe a movement on the Right, with additional clarifiers being needed.

Libertarianism

One of Diamond’s three pillars of the American Right, libertarianism in twentieth-century America was a largely intellectual movement concerned with maximizing freedom for the individual, limiting government involvement in all spheres of life, especially the economic, and opposing so-called “collectivist” systems, such as the systems the Soviet Union and other communist states were experimenting with throughout the twentieth century. The philosophy of libertarianism in post-war America derived many of its tenets from the writings of Austrian economists such as Friedrich A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises. Hayek’s seminal 1944 publication *The Road to Serfdom* argued that welfare programs, such as the ones implemented by the

New Deal in the United States, would eventually lead to systems resembling German-style National Socialism or Soviet communism. “Hayek took aim at ‘collectivism’ and any sort of economic planning that would usurp ‘competition’” (Diamond 26–27). For Hayek, the mechanisms of the free market and the free market’s separation from government involvement were the best defenses against any form of totalitarianism. This deference towards the free market and *laissez-faire* economics were defining features of the American libertarian movement, and disposed them to uniting with other elements of the American Right against the threat of communism.

Traditionalism

Of Diamond’s three pillars, none exemplify her aforementioned definition of right-wing movements more clearly than traditionalism. There was no specific movement that named itself “traditionalism” in twentieth-century America. Rather, traditionalism describes an ideological tendency of elements of the American Right. Traditionalists were, like the libertarians, generally in favor of the government minimizing its role in the economy, allowing market forces to operate as unconstrained by government regulation as possible. But traditionalists differed from the libertarians in their view that the state should be an encourager and enforcer of social, religious, and moral norms. Still, “[traditionalists] longed for the ‘good old days,’ when the schools taught the virtues of Western civilization, when the government, ostensibly, kept its nose out of family affairs” (Diamond 9).

In the 1970s, the three issues that would animate the American Right’s traditionalist elements were legalized abortion, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution, and gay rights. Each of these raised questions about the structure of the nuclear family and the proper roles of men and women in society. The New Right, which began to form in the 1970s in response to the waves of social changes that followed the 1960s and the Civil Rights movement, mobilized against the perceived threats to traditional social institutions that these three issues presented.

Illustrative of the traditionalist impulse, Phyllis Schlafly, a prominent figure of the New Right, would organize middle class women against the ERA with her “Stop ERA” organization, later to be renamed the “Eagle Forum.” Schlafly argued that the passage of the ERA would deny women the “greatest rights of all: (1) NOT to take a job, (2) to keep her baby, and (3) to be supported by her husband.”

Schlafly's activism helped to eventually defeat the ERA, and her campaign is emblematic of the New Right's wariness to change the traditional roles of men and women in society (166–169). For traditionalists in the New Right, and American Right more broadly, the man was the original breadwinner of the family, and the woman the caretaker of the home and children. These roles, like all traditional institutions of American society for traditionalists, were natural, sacred, and deserved to be protected.

Anticommunism

Anticommunism was the persistent ideology of right-wing movements in the United States throughout the Cold War. I chose to analyze this “pillar” last because of its constancy and unifying power within the American Right. No major right-wing movement of Cold War America was ever in contrast to the view that communism posed an existential threat to the United States and the American way of life. To be right-wing in the United States of the twentieth century meant to oppose communism, if for varying reasons.

Anticommunism therefore had utility in allying the various forms of right-wing ideologies against a common enemy. Libertarians were naturally opposed to communism as an economic system that sought to reduce or eliminate the competitive element of the free market, and they were concerned about communism's attempts to enforce broad economic equality among those living under it. Traditionalists believed communism threatened the institutions on which the United States were founded, and religious traditionalists viewed communism as an atheistic system dangerous to America's religious identity. Whatever the reason, “[a]nticommunism was the tenet everyone on the Right could agree on” (Diamond 37). The resulting alliance of the libertarians and traditionalists around the anticommunist cause would come to be termed “fusionism,” and was a defining feature of the conservative movement from the 1950s onward.

“Fusionism” and Modern American Conservatism

The conclusion of World War II not only brought with it heightened concerns about Soviet expansionism and international communism in the United States, but also the role the United States government was to play in addressing the Soviet Union in its newly acquired superpower status. The isolationist attitudes that had been popular within the “Old Right” prior to American involvement in World War II had fallen out of favor by the conflict's end, as it appeared the

United States was the only nation capable of challenging Soviet expansion (Diamond 23–24). Isolationism for adherents of the American Right, in the face of this threat, was suddenly less defensible, while conservatives, all of whom possessed anticommunist inclinations, were faced with a dilemma. As seen by Diamond, “[Conservatives] were unequivocally opposed to redistributive New Deal economics, but the Cold War would require a strong state to influence foreign affairs” (26). Halting the advance of communism required an aggressive foreign policy that could only be achieved through an expansion of the state, antithetical to the ideas of the American Right before World War II. As discussed above, anticommunism as a doctrine was able to cross ideological lines within the American Right as a common value, and it would serve to temper the disagreements of the libertarians and traditionalists and unite them into a singular movement. This union was labeled “fusionism,” a term coined by the American conservative philosopher Frank S. Meyer, and the result was a new, modern American conservative movement (Delton 49).

Conservatism as a general ideology has been defined at a basic level as preference for tradition over change, a “wish to preserve present or past values rather than to create or adopt new ones” (Shannon 14). Its origins as a term and philosophy have been traced back to the eighteenth century and the writings of British statesman Edmund Burke, whose concerns over the political upheaval of the French Revolution would form the basis of what is today understood broadly as conservatism (Delton 62).

In the early twentieth century, in what is now referred to as the “Old Right,” much of American conservatism was centered around opposition to the Depression-era New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration (Diamond 22–23). Allan Lichtman, a history professor at American University, suggests that the “modern” American conservative movement began even earlier, with opposition to industrialization and immigration in the 1920s. But there is an older consensus that credits William F. Buckley Jr.'s work in the 1950s as the true beginning of modern American conservatism (Delton 51–52). Acknowledging this debate on the beginnings of the movement, I generally accept the abovementioned consensus, and in particular look to the founding of Buckley's magazine *National Review* in 1955 as a defining moment in postwar American conservatism. The conservatism of Buckley and *National Review* was at the time a new conservatism, ideologically distinct from that of the Old Right.

National Review is a crucially important publication for any understanding of the modern American Right. It was in its pages, among other similar outlets, that fusionism was to absorb the disparate elements of the American Right and create from them a tighter and more powerful union. “Fusionism, simply put, was the historical juncture at which right-wing activists and intellectuals focused, diversely, on the libertarian, moral-traditionalist, and emerging anticommunist strains of conservative ideology, recognized their common causes and philosophies, and began to fuse their practical agendas.” (Diamond 29). Pieces from traditionalists, libertarians, and writers who had departed from the American Left were published in *National Review*, and the magazine would come to serve as a platform for debate and discussion in the emerging and increasingly diverse American conservative movement.

National Review saw itself as a “gatekeeper” of the movement it had arguably started (32–33). As stated at the beginning of this section, I consider most versions of conservatism to be movements that can be classified under the “right-wing” umbrella. But *National Review*, as a conservative magazine, was narrower in which right-wing ideologies it entertained. In its perceived “gatekeeper” role, it would seek to identify the boundaries of the conservative movement in the United States. Throughout its lifespan the magazine has repeatedly “purged” itself of writers and ideologies it deemed too extreme or unsavory to associate with. A famous example of one such purge is the magazine’s campaign against the John Birch Society, which Buckley famously denounced as a movement of conspiratorial extremists (Felzenberg). These purges, however, were not limited to extremist elements on the American Right. *National Review* would also oust some of its prominent writers during its early years over milder ideological or policy differences. Pieces by libertarian writers John T. Flynn and Murray Rothbard, who were anti-interventionists in regards to Cold War foreign policy, contrasted with the militaristic anticommunism that *National Review* had developed a reputation for advocating. Both writers would be fired from the magazine in the late 1950s for their nonconformity on that issue (Heer).

The fusionism of Buckley and American conservatism, then, was not always egalitarian in its treatment of its three pillars of libertarianism, traditionalism, and anticommunism. Fusionism might subdue one of these pillars or prioritize one above all others, as appears to have been done with anticommunism over libertarianism in the above case. Diamond writes “[w]hereas the fusionism of the late 1940s and 1950s subordinated moral traditionalism and economic libertarianism to the priority of defeating communism at all

costs, the New Right brand of fusionism gave heightened priority to issues of moral traditionalism, without reducing the focus on anticommunism” (127). Fusionism therefore can be seen as an adaptive, combinative ideology that ran through the modern American conservative and New Right movements that broadly permeated much of the American Right.

The Neoconservative Ascent

The modern conservative movement in the United States would gain a new and unexpected constituency in the form of the neoconservatives. Relatively small in number and diverse in origins, the neoconservatives—often abbreviated as “neocons”—would nevertheless come to wield transformative power within the American Right and the Republican Party.

Neoconservatism was rather famously described as a “persuasion” by its icon Irving Kristol. Kristol, frequently referred to as the “godfather of neoconservatism,” considered neoconservatism more of a “mode of thought” rather than an actual movement. In “The Neoconservative Persuasion,” a 2003 piece for the neoconservative journal *The Weekly Standard*, Kristol reflects on the so-called persuasion’s legacy, and defines the neoconservative project as “convert[ing] the Republican party [sic], and American conservatism in general, against their respective wills, into a new kind of conservative politics suitable to governing a modern democracy.” In some respects, this, despite Kristol’s claim to the contrary, suggests that neoconservatism was indeed a kind of movement, one with ambitions toward changing the qualities and direction of American conservatism.

Sara Diamond devotes Chapter 8 of *Roads to Dominion*—a book importantly published before the abovementioned Kristol piece—to analysis of neoconservatism. She writes “[a]mong all the groups treated in [*Roads*], the neoconservatives fit least comfortably into a ‘right-wing’ category” (179). This may be because what arguably makes the neoconservatives unique among all other right-wing groups of the postwar American Right are their origins. Unlike the traditionalists, libertarians, and other groups examined in this section, the neoconservatives largely emerged from the American Left and “became uneasy allies of the New Right and the Reagan administration” (Diamond 179). These political migrants were diverse in their origins and included anticommunist liberals who felt increasingly alienated from the Democratic Party and “Old Left” intellectuals con-

cerned about the illiberalism of the American New Left in the 1960s.

In fusionist terms, most neoconservatives emphasized the anticommunist pillar of the American Right, despite some even being ex-Marxists themselves (Siegel). As in the case of the alliance between traditionalists and libertarians, anti-communism would similarly grant nascent neoconservatives entrance into the conservative movement. Fusionist conservatives, as discussed above, tended to reluctantly adopt the position that a strong state was necessary in the realm of foreign policy in order to combat the spread of communism around the world. This would have been unacceptable for most adherents of the American Old Right, who generally regarded any expansion of the state as dangerous. Although modern American conservatism made this position more ideologically permissible. Members of the anticommunist Left in the 1950s concurred with the view of state expansion for foreign policy purposes, and “the centrality of anticommunism as the foundation of a post-war political consensus positioned liberals as supporters, too, of the United States as military and diplomatic *enforcer* of the ‘free’ world” (Diamond 182). As liberals, however, the anticommunist Left also advocated for the state acting, in Diamond’s terminology, as *distributor* of wealth and power to more disadvantaged groups in society. On this policy issue, the anticommunist Left and broader American Right may be said to have drawn their dividing lines.

In the 1950s, neoconservatives had not yet fully materialized as a political identity distinct from the anticommunist Left and conservative movement. The question then becomes what issues motivated the small but diverse group of liberal intellectuals who would eventually adopt the neoconservative label to move into the American Right. Part of the answer can be found in reactions to the social policies of the 1960s. Some eventual neoconservatives like Daniel Patrick Moynihan voiced criticism over the “Great Society” anti-poverty campaigns of the Johnson administration, which were also opposed by mainline conservatives. But Moynihan and likeminded figures objected to the Great Society not because they were opposed to aiding the poor of society as a policy in itself—Moynihan in fact supported such measures—but because they objected to, as Moynihan put it, the “proliferation” of the anti-poverty projects (Diamond 187). For Moynihan, it was acceptable for the state to provide some amount of welfare programs to the public, but the amount and scale of these programs had to be carefully monitored. If the state required expansion, such expansion had to be done gradually, not rapidly, as Moynihan might argue had been done with the

Great Society. We can see this stance repeated in Kristol’s “Neoconservative Persuasion,” while also marking a key distinction between neoconservative and traditional conservative thought:

“Neocons do not like the concentration of services in the welfare state and are happy to study alternative ways of delivering these services. But they are impatient with the Hayekian notion that we are on “the road to serfdom.” Neocons do not feel that kind of alarm or anxiety about the growth of the state in the past century, seeing it as natural, indeed inevitable” (Kristol).

Those who would become neoconservatives tended to share with more typical conservatives their concerns about the “concentration” of welfare programs and expansion of the state for the purpose of redistributing wealth throughout society. But they were more resigned than traditional conservatives to the inevitability of an expanding state in general. Still, the fact of any sort of opposition to the Great Society in the 1960s made this group of intellectuals feel gradually less welcome in the American Left and increasingly inclined toward the Right. Nathan Glazer, another upcoming neoconservative of the 1960s, expanded upon Moynihan’s critiques of the Great Society into a more general critique of what he termed “social policy,” by which he meant any public policies intended to improve conditions for the working classes and maintain a modicum of living conditions for individuals and their families. Glazer’s two-pronged critique of social policy was that it created expectations of and demands for economic equality as well as diminished “traditional problem-solving institutions such as the family, the ethnic group, and the church” (Diamond 188).

Many soon-to-be neoconservatives were also born in their reactions to the rising American “New Left” of the 1960s. The New Left in America can be briefly defined as the largely youth and student led movement that was opposed both to Soviet communism and to perceived excesses of capitalism, with “an orientation to decentralized ‘direct action,’ violent or nonviolent” (Lynd 65). The New Left of the Democratic Party exercised much of its ideology through the so-called “New Politics,” an umbrella term for “anti-war activists, women’s liberationists, and other New Leftists not averse to working within the Democratic Party” (Diamond 191). Many emerging neoconservatives during the 1960s were themselves Democrats and became concerned about the influence the New Politics wing was exacting on the Party’s platform. The defeat of Democratic nominee George McGovern by Richard M. Nixon in the

1972 presidential race was viewed by some in the neoconservative camp as the result of the Democratic Party's having surrendered itself to New Politics, which they argued represented untraditional Democratic ideas such as affirmative action, a non-interventionist foreign policy, and a general disdain for American society, believing it to be "sick and guilty" (Diamond 191–192).

These neoconservative critiques of the New Left, Democratic Party, and social policy are insufficient to explain how neoconservatism became the influential "persuasion" Kristol suggests it was for the American Right. Where they truly became ascendant was in their alliance with the New Right and the influence that afforded them in the presidency of Ronald Reagan. As discussed above, while the anticommunist Left and American Right both shared unwavering opposition to communism, their views of the state's role as *distributor* of wealth in society kept them at arm's length. But neoconservatives' growing disillusionment with the New Left, Democratic Party, and liberal social policies gradually reduced the magnitude of this disagreement and increased their ideological similarities with the New Right. As was the case with the conservative fusionism of the 1950s in uniting libertarians and traditionalists, anticommunism served to unify two groups who otherwise differed on their views of the state's role in society, and in this case, create the seemingly unlikely neoconservative-New Right coalition. It would be in Reagan that this coalition would find its patron, and neoconservatism in particular its access to policymaking power.

Briefly, the "New Right" as a label began entering usage in the 1960s, coinciding with and perhaps in response to the defeat of Republican Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election. It was also used to describe a new right-wing movement in America that represented a reaffirmation of moral traditionalism, and a movement that was developing close ties with conservative evangelical Christians. These evangelicals would eventually constitute an allied faction referred to broadly as the "Christian Right" (Diamond 128). Christian Right icon Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority organization in 1979, which mobilized swaths of evangelical conservatives to vote for Reagan in 1980 (231). When Reagan was elected, expectations were created among the groups that rallied behind him that he would use his administration to focus on enforcing moral traditionalism and would adopt a foreign policy that would effectively challenge communism around the world. While the Christian Right's activism focused on issues of traditionalist importance such as opposition to gay rights and abortion,

the New Right and the neoconservatives became focused on fighting communism.

The conflicts in Latin America during the 1980s became a particular focus of the Reagan administration's foreign policy and a crucial entry point for neoconservatives. In 1979, the left-wing Sandinista National Liberation Front took power in Nicaragua, and this would later be equated by the State Department as a fall of that country to left-wing "communist" forces. In December, 1980, four American women, working as missionaries in El Salvador, were assassinated during the country's civil war. With Reagan's stated commitments to religious traditionalism and anticommunism, this event focused the incoming administration's attention on left-wing movements in Latin America. Indeed a "White Paper" produced by the State Department in 1981 claimed that the "communist" Sandinistas in Nicaragua were linked—falsely, it would later be discovered—to arms flows into El Salvador (Diamond 215). Against this backdrop, prominent neoconservatives voiced support for the Reagan administration's policy of sending aid to El Salvador's military dictatorship in its fight against left-wing guerilla movements. Reagan began taking notice of this, and many neoconservatives would win powerful appointments in his administration as a result. Notable examples include neoconservative Elliot Abrams, appointed Assistant Secretary of State, and fellow neoconservative veteran Jeane Kirkpatrick, appointed ambassador to the United Nations.

Kirkpatrick was particularly influential and saw Latin America as a critical theater in the United States' anticommunist efforts around the world (216–217). Writing for the neoconservative journal *Commentary*, Kirkpatrick's 1979 essay "Dictatorships and Double Standards" outlined her view that cooperating with and even supporting right-wing authoritarian regimes, like many in Latin America at the time, was a permissible foreign policy option so long as these governments were themselves opposing communism. At the heart of "Dictatorships and Double Standards" were the ideas that would come to form the so-called "Kirkpatrick Doctrine," which "argue[d] that there is a difference between authoritarian regimes led by anti-communist dictators and totalitarian regimes led by communist dictators" (Lugar 10). Kirkpatrick viewed right-wing autocracies as having a greater capacity to develop over time into democracies than communist dictatorships, and this justified support from the United States, so long as these right-wing dictatorships were challenging the spread of communism within their own spheres of influence.

The Kirkpatrick Doctrine represented a kind of manifestation of earlier neoconservative ideological tendencies. While “the New Right conceived foreign policy questions in *nationalist* terms...[n]eoconservatives were more likely to view the struggle between ‘freedom’ and ‘communism’ as an *internationalist* problem” (Diamond 195). The Kirkpatrick Doctrine was also compatible with the then-developing “Reagan Doctrine,” which advocated aiding and supporting so-called “freedom fighter” resistance movements in communist dictatorships. What the Kirkpatrick and Reagan Doctrines shared was the view that “the United States should be busy promoting democracy in all of the dictatorships” (Lugar 10). The joint implementation of these two doctrines during the conflicts in Latin America and throughout the Reagan administration’s foreign policy are evidence of the power neoconservatism had come to display. Once a small disparate collection of disillusioned liberal intellectuals, the neoconservatives were by the 1980s guiding the Reagan administration’s foreign policy, and through Jeane Kirkpatrick, representing the United States on the international stage. But as will be shown below, not all in the American Right welcomed their ascent.

Paleoconservatism

Despite their closeness to Reagan and the New Right, not all on the Right were content with the neoconservatives’ presence. Nowhere is opposition to their influence more apparent than in the obscurer “paleoconservative” movement that emerged in the late 1980s. Further, no group discussed in this section is more important to understanding the rise of the Alt-Right than the paleoconservatives. It would be from the remains of paleoconservatism that the desire for an “alternative Right” would first emerge.

Sara Diamond describes the paleoconservatives as “a group of staunch traditionalists—explicitly Christian—who advocated a non-interventionist foreign policy and the libertarian economic theories of Ludwig von Mises” (282). Organizationally based out of the Rockford Institute in Illinois, most paleoconservatives were intellectuals, academics, and writers rather than activists like their contemporaries in the popular New Right and Christian Right. The term “paleoconservative” itself was first coined in 1986 by Paul Gottfried, a historian and professor emeritus of Humanities at Elizabethtown College (Siegel). Gottfried and likeminded thinkers had during the Reagan years become wary of the direction that neoconservatives were taking the American Right. The Greek root word “paleo” translates in English as “ancient” or “old,” and *paleoconservatives* similarly were those on the American Right who stressed the values and

concerns of the American “Old Right.” As discussed earlier in this section, the Old Right can be viewed as the prewar or interwar American Right, distinct from later fusionist conservatism, primarily rallying behind adherence to traditionalism and opposition to the “New Deal” policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Old Right was also deeply anti-interventionist with regards to United States involvement in foreign wars and was generally skeptical of any broadening of state power for any purpose.

Like most manifestations of the American Right, the Old Right was almost by definition anticommunist. After World War II, communism in the form of the Soviet Union as a superpower constituted the most significant geopolitical threat for the United States. Fusionist conservatism, with its acceptance of the need to expand the state for the explicit purpose of fighting the Cold War, eventually supplanted much of the libertarian and “anti-statist” views of the Old Right as the dominant ideology of American conservatism (Smant 473). The Old Right did not disappear; rather it became more muted in the need for cooperation among the American Right’s many factions in their common struggle against communism. The unexpected departure of the neoconservatives from the New Left and their consolidation of influence under Reagan further marginalized Old Right views, as policymakers increasingly entertained neoconservative ideas of military intervention in foreign countries as a strategy for fighting communism. Anticommunism during the Reagan years therefore had the effect of making the American Right appear more united than it actually was, and perhaps the starkest internal disagreements were between the neoconservatives and those who embodied the lingering ideology of the Old Right (Diamond 275–276).

Paleoconservatism can thus be seen as a rebranding of the Old Right. It was a reassertion of the continued existence of Old Right ideology in the face of the growing power of neoconservatism, and through its journals like *The Intercollegiate Review*, “the paleoconservatives declared open season on the neoconservative influence and participation within the New Right” (282). In the Spring 1986 issue of *Intercollegiate Review*, a collection of essays titled “The State of Conservatism: A Symposium” was published, in which contributors identified neoconservatives as liberals who had infiltrated the conservative movement and had begun moving its ideology further away from the values of the Old Right. Paul Gottfried himself contributed to the collection the essay “A View of Contemporary Conservatism,” in which he blamed liberal media outlets for confusing Old Right conservatives with neoconservatives and with portraying the latter as though it represented the true

essence of American conservatism. Melvin Bradford's "On Being Conservative in a Post-Liberal Era" described the neoconservatives as "interlopers" who had hijacked the conservative label and transformed it away from its original definition:

"There are, to be sure, certain groups who have recently attached the conservative label to themselves...allow[ing] them to so redefine our position that we can no longer hold it for our own—allow[ing] them to steal our identity and put it to uses at variance with its origins: to invert it into something foreign to itself, leaving those who are still conservatives in the familiar sense of the term with no ground on which to stand" (Bradford 15).

Two political developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s would bring the neo-paleo dispute into greater visibility. The first was the conclusion of the Reagan administration in 1988, which effectively left leaderless the diverse coalition of right-wing factions that had united to support him (Diamond 276). The second was the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, which stripped the American Right's factions of a common enemy. Against this backdrop, George H.W. Bush succeeded Reagan as President. Despite initial support, the Right became increasingly critical of his domestic and foreign policies. The reversal of his famous campaign promise—"read my lips: no new taxes"—with the implementation of a tax increase in 1990 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1991 angered activists on the Right who had initially backed him (278). In 1989, the fall of the Soviet Union appeared imminent, and the paleoconservative Thomas Fleming urged the Right to "deemphasize anti-communism and advocate a non-interventionist U.S. foreign policy," in contrast to the neoconservative interventionist theories that had prevailed under Reagan (285).

The Bush administration's 1991 decision to go to war in the Persian Gulf to combat the Iraqi occupation of neighboring Kuwait served as the first conflict of the post-Cold War world for the United States, and the first case where post-Cold War foreign policy would be tested. Prior to official declaration of war, paleoconservatives supplied some of the most forceful critics of intervention. When in 1990 Bush threatened United States involvement if Saddam Hussein did not pull Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the paleoconservative columnist Patrick Buchanan publicly opposed any military intervention in the Persian Gulf. At the same time, most neoconservatives were broadly supportive of such measures. A public feud between Buchanan and the neoconservative *New York Times* reporter A. M. Rosenthal

ensued over what Rosenthal alleged was anti-Semitism contained in Buchanan's talk show comment that "the Israeli Defense Ministry and its amen corner in the United States" were the only supporters of involvement in the Middle East (286). The neoconservative charge that the paleoconservatives were anti-Semitic was in fact a recurring one. Paleoconservatives were for example critical of what they saw as excessive support for Israel in recent American foreign policy. In response, neoconservatives, largely Jewish and Catholic themselves, "said paleocons were anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, and nativist, that they distrusted 'democracy' and the efforts of the United States to promote 'democracy' around the world" (Rosenthal 284).

When the United States did intervene in the Persian Gulf, Buchanan halted his criticism and instructed his readers to support the war effort and the President, and to resume the debate about interventionism only after victory was achieved (288). But by the time victory came, Bush's term in office was coming to a close. Paul Gottfried suggests that the paleoconservative movement reached its height when Buchanan ran to succeed Bush in the 1992 presidential campaigns. "There was a time," Gottfried writes, "roughly between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, when the paleo[conservative]s looked like an insurgent force. In 1992, they found in Pat Buchanan a powerful presidential contender, and one who listened to their advice. ("A Paleo Epitaph"). Buchanan's 1992 campaign for the Republican Party's nomination was short-lived, but during it he demonstrated many of the sensibilities the paleoconservatives had by then become known for. "In his first speech in New Hampshire, Buchanan...called for tax cuts and a reduction of the welfare state, an America First foreign policy, and a return to 'Judeo-Christian values' as the solution to domestic social problems" (Diamond 293).

Buchanan's 1992 bid proved unsuccessful, but not before he won "between a quarter and a third of Republican primary votes" (294). Much as this momentum of support for Buchanan during the 1992 Republican primaries symbolized paleoconservatives' own forward momentum, so too did Buchanan's defeat symbolize the beginning of paleoconservatism's decline on the Right. Blame was placed on "excruciatingly limited funding, exclusion from the national media, vilification as 'racists' and 'anti-Semites,' and finally, strife within [paleoconservatives'] own ranks" ("A Paleo Epitaph").

The next Republican presidential nominee to win office would not come until 2000, when George W. Bush succeeded Bill Clinton in the White House. Shortly after Bush's

election, the September 11th terror attacks in New York occurred. Much as communism provided an enemy against which neoconservatives could offer their interventionist policy advice to the Reagan administration, September 11th and Islamic terrorism provided an opportunity for Bush's neoconservative advisors to execute a new interventionist agenda in Iraq (Dusanic and Penev, 92). Bush's reelection in 2004 suggested to some paleoconservatives that the neoconservatives had effectively solidified their dominance within the Republican Party. This in turn suggested the ultimate defeat of the paleoconservative movement, and by proxy, the marginalization of the ideas of the Old Right.

In April of 2008, Paul Gottfried wrote “A Paleo Epitaph,” published in the right-wing *Taki's Magazine*. In this, he effectively declared paleoconservatism's defeat, but also spoke of the coming of a successor movement: a “post-paleo Right.” He predicted that the post-paleo movement would be a largely youth-led movement, consisting of young conservative activists who were frustrated with neoconservatism in the Republican Party and hoped to transform it back into something resembling the Old Right. Toward the end of “Epitaph,” Gottfried writes, “Even now an alternative is coming into existence as a counterforce to neoconservative dominance.”

The Call for an “Alternative Right”

In 2008, roughly seven months after the publication of “A Paleo Epitaph” in April of that year, the H.L. Mencken Club gathered for its first annual meeting on the weekend of November 21–23. The Mencken Club—now a yearly gathering of intellectuals on the Right named after the Old Right writer and icon H.L. Mencken—was founded in part by the same Paul Gottfried discussed earlier. He is also at the time of this paper the Club's acting President.

In an address to Mencken Club attendees in November of 2008, Gottfried praised the accomplishments of the paleoconservative movement and lamented its failures. Much attention was given in the speech to what Gottfried viewed as the triumph of the neoconservatives in consolidating their influence and marginalizing the paleoconservatives from the conservative movement. But he also stressed paleoconservatism's increasing irrelevance on the American Right and called for a “post-paleo” movement, suggesting the Mencken Club represented a possible beginning for such a movement.

Gottfried believed the Mencken Club had by then joined “a growing communion” of organizations on the Right

who shared the old paleoconservative revulsion at neoconservative dominance in the Republican Party. The H.L. Mencken Club would be “part of an attempt to put together an independent intellectual Right, one that exists without movement establishment funding and one that our opponents would be delighted not to have to deal with.” The speech was recorded in video form, collectively titled “The Post-Paleo Movement,” and uploaded in two parts onto the YouTube channel “MenckenClub” in 2009.

Gottfried's address was available publicly even earlier. Roughly one week after the 2008 Mencken Club meeting, Gottfried's speech was transcribed and reprinted in *Taki's Magazine*, the same magazine that published “A Paleo Epitaph” earlier that year. The reprinted transcript of Gottfried's speech on *Taki's Magazine*, however, bore a different title than its video counterpart on YouTube. “The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right” was published in *Taki's Magazine* on December 1, 2008. Though a verbatim copy of Gottfried's address, nowhere in the speech did Gottfried use the words “alternative Right.” The title given to the *Taki's Magazine* reprint was assigned by Richard B. Spencer, then managing editor of the magazine. Prior to *Taki's Magazine*, Spencer had written for *The American Conservative*, and before that was on a path toward a career in academia before dropping out of Duke University (Hawley 53–54). Gottfried himself had previously been a mentor to Spencer and wrote that he “once enjoyed a close personal relation with him” (“Some Observations”).

Spencer has claimed that it was he who coined the term “alternative Right,” though Gottfried has maintained that he and Spencer coined the term together (Siegel). During its early usage in *Taki's Magazine*, the “alternative Right” label broadly referred to anyone on the Right opposed to neoconservatism (Hawley 55). As shown above, opposition to neoconservatism was also a driving factor in the creation of the paleoconservative movement roughly thirty years earlier.

Conclusion

We can see from the term's usage in describing Paul Gottfried's call for a “post-paleo” movement that the original desire to create an “alternative Right” was born from an old feud between the neoconservatives and paleoconservatives, the latter being a more recent incarnation of the twentieth-century Old Right. It appears that Gottfried had hoped an alternative Right would develop into a successor movement to paleoconservatism and the Old Right, but there is reason to believe he was relatively unsuccessful in this endeavor. In recent years, the term “alternative

Right” and its more common abbreviation “Alt-Right” have become associated with a movement that appears distinct from the Old Right and paleoconservatism, with Richard Spencer himself being a key figure and leader (Gottfried, “Some Observations”).

In 2009, after having helped coin and begin circulation of the “alternative Right” term, Spencer left his position as managing editor for *Taki’s Magazine*. The following year he created the eponymous *Alternative Right* website, which would become an early intellectual hub for writers interested in contributing to the development of an “alternative Right” movement. After founding *Alternative Right* in 2010, Spencer began fundraising campaigns to develop his new venture. During Spencer’s initial campaigning, *Alternative Right* drew the attention of the right-wing philanthropist William Regnery II, a relative of the twentieth-century conservative book publisher Henry Regnery. William Regnery, having inherited a portion of his family’s wealth, eventually became politically active, and would “[use] his share of the family fortune to fund white-nationalist projects” (Hawley 57–58). One of these projects was the National Policy Institute (NPI), a white nationalist think tank founded in 2005 and headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia.

NPI’s current website, though having changed its organization’s banner name to “Geopolitical Studies Institute,” has an “About” page that describes NPI as “an independent organization dedicated to the heritage, identity, and future of people of European descent in the United States and around the world,” explicitly identifying itself with the Alt-Right further down the page. Spencer in 2011 was made President of NPI, succeeding its chairman, the late Louis R. Andrews. When this occurred, *Alternative Right* became an arm of NPI itself. *Alternative Right* and NPI did not solely confine themselves to discussion of race, with both having published pieces on domestic and foreign policy. This, in addition to the general lack of vulgar language visible on other white nationalist websites, differentiated *Alternative Right* from similar groups on the far-right of its time. The subject of race from the perspective of white identity politics, however, remained the primary focus of both organizations.

It is roughly at this moment that the “alternative Right” label, once synonymous with a so-called “post-paleo movement,” became associated with white nationalism, an ideology Gottfried opposed (Siegel). It may then be said that at this moment the Alt-Right transformed into something Gottfried would not have wanted to succeed paleoconservatism. But paleoconservatism was itself a kind of successor

movement, one meant to succeed the Old Right and declare its continued existence as the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party began to exert influence on conservative orthodoxy. While the Alt-Right may have ultimately deviated too far into white nationalism to become Gottfried’s ideal post-paleo movement, the prospect of its decline may yet leave open a path for such a movement to develop.

George Hawley, author of the book *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* and a scholar of the movement, has argued that the Alt-Right experienced a fatal blow after the events of the “Unite the Right” rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia on the weekend of August 11–12, 2017. Organized in response to the planned removal of a statue of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee from Emancipation Park—formerly named Lee Park—the rally sparked a violent confrontation between a collection of protesters from various far-right groups, another group of counter-protesters that included members of far-left groups, and local authorities. The riots that followed resulted in the injuries of nineteen participants and the death of one counter-protestor, events that brought Unite the Right, white nationalism, and the Alt-Right to national attention. Richard Spencer was a key organizer of Unite the Right and several figures associated with the Alt-Right participated in and gave speeches at the rally (“A Timeline of Events”).

In an interview for National Public Radio in July of this year, Hawley cited Unite the Right as a “major setback for the alt-right [sic],” believing it to have caused in-fighting within the movement and resulting in its marginalization nationally as an extreme and potentially violent fringe group that could no longer present itself as a mainstream movement. At the time of the interview, another rally named “Unite the Right 2” was being planned in Washington D.C. to mark the one-year anniversary of the Charlottesville rally. Hawley predicted in his July interview that due to the fissures in the movement caused by the first Unite the Right rally, turnout for its second incarnation would be low (“The State Of The ‘Alt-Right’”). In fact, only two dozen protestors arrived for the rally, themselves overwhelmed by the volume of counter-protestors that had turned out in response (Carlisle).

It is arguable then that the Alt-Right is on the decline overall, wielding nowhere near the influence it once had in 2017 prior to Charlottesville. If paleoconservatism is as irrelevant a movement as Gottfried asserted in his 2008 address to the Mencken Club, then perhaps the decline of the Alt-Right suggests a vacuum remains in American conservatism in which a true post-paleo movement may yet emerge. Should

it come, however, we might expect that such a movement will not brandish the “alternative Right” label.

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