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Some years ago the journal *Science* published a fictitious interview with the director of a mythical think tank known at the Breakthrough Institute. The director, whose name was given as “Dr. Grant Swinger,” was said to be chairman of the board of the Center for the Absorption of Federal Funds. The reporter asked “Dr. Swinger” to give some examples of his institute’s accomplishments. “Well,” he said, his staff had “resolved the conflict between teaching and research.” “How?” the reporter asked. “By doing neither,” the director replied.

Somehow this anecdote reminded me of the Philadelphia Society. Like Dr. Swinger’s fabled institute, the Society does not sponsor teaching or research in conventional ways. We offer no research grants. We publish no peer-reviewed journals. Unlike Dr. Swinger’s Center for the Absorption of Federal Funds, we have never sought a bailout from Uncle Sam, no matter how unusual or exigent the circumstances. And the scholarships that we award to students to attend our meetings most definitely do not come from the United States Treasury.

And yet what transpires at our meetings does matter—and has mattered, for nearly half a century now, for American conservatives. What the Society does is to foster conversation—conversation aimed, in our charter’s words, at “deepening the intellectual foundations of a free and ordered society.” In our own way, we stimulate the exchange of ideas—a process that has proven both rejuvenating and edifying. So, unlike the Breakthrough Institute, which brazenly performed neither teaching nor research, the Philadelphia Society, in its own distinctive manner, promotes both.

This weekend we resume our conversation by reexamining the roots and pondering the future of American conservatism. In some quarters it does not appear to have much of a future at all. Writing last September in *The American Prospect*, the liberal columnist E. J. Dionne declared flatly that “the conservative era” in American politics is “in its final days.” The “conservative project,” he said, is “exhausted.” Writing last month in the *New Republic*, Sam Tanenhaus, the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, published what was called an “intellectual autopsy” of the American Right. His article was headlined “Conservatism Is Dead.”

Such sentiments are by no means confined to the American Left. In the past few years an increasing number of conservative commentators have wondered aloud whether the long foretold “conservative crackup” was finally at hand. Their mood of apprehension deepened with the rise of Barack Obama to the presidency.

Last year the *New York Times*' technology columnist David Pogue listed the five stages of grieving when you lose your computer files: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Moving to Amish Country. It sounds like a fair description of the mood gripping many American conservatives in 2009.

Well. Have conservatives really lost their "computer files"? Certainly evidence abounds of a political and intellectual movement in some disarray. One sign of this is the growing tendency on the Right to classify conservatives into ever smaller groupings: neoconservatives, paleoconservatives, big government conservatives, leave-us-alone conservatives, tea party conservatives, dinner party conservatives, compassionate conservatives, crunchy conservatives – and the list goes on. Another sign is the volume of intramural polemicizing in which some of these elements have engaged in recent years. A once relatively disciplined band of brothers and sisters (or so it used to appear in the Age of Reagan) has seemingly devolved into a rancorous jumble of factions.

Several adventitious factors have strengthened the impression that American conservatism has come to a cul de sac. The deaths of Milton Friedman in 2006, Jerry Falwell in 2007, and William F. Buckley Jr. in 2008 precipitated an outpouring of introspection and an intensified awareness that nearly all of modern conservatism's founding fathers have now gone to the grave. Coupled with this generational changing of the guard has been a phenomenal upsurge of popular interest in the life and achievements of Ronald Reagan. Critics scoff at this as mere nostalgia, the rightwing equivalent of the liberal cult of John F. Kennedy. It is much more than that, of course, but memories of the Gipper do remind conservatives of better days and reflect the feeling of disorientation that many on the Right now feel.

A more subtle ingredient in this mix has been the efflorescence in the past decade of historical scholarship about American conservatism since World War II – much of it written by young liberal historians. This is not necessarily a sign of declension, but it certainly testifies to the growing passage of time: the conservative movement has now been around long enough to be an object of academic inquiry. To put it another way, modern American conservatism – a marginalized orphan in academia when I began research on it a generation ago – has become middle-aged. Which, of course, raises the uncomfortable question: are old age and remarginalization just around the corner?

Clearly many conservative thinkers and activists are determined to avoid any such outcome. One of the notable features of the conservative landscape at present is the quest by the intellectual Right to revitalize its roots and recover its philosophical moorings. Our gathering this weekend is one manifestation of this healthy impulse. In and of themselves, these efforts are a token of vitality. Taken together, however, they convey the impression that the condition of conservatism has become problematic.

Current explanations of the conservative predicament tend to fall into two distinct categories. The first stresses the movement's political failure and frustrations during the presidency of George W. Bush. With the exception of its judicial nominations and tax-cutting policies, Bush's administration now seems to many conservative stalwarts to have

been in large measure a liberal Republican administration – more akin to Rockefeller and Nixon than to Reagan. I need not recite to this audience the multiple sources of disillusionment on the Right with the fruits of its political ascendancy under Bush.

The second cluster of explanations for conservatism's present malaise focuses not so much on external, political circumstances but on internal factors – that is, the structure and dynamics of the conservative movement itself. Perhaps the most important thing to understand about modern American conservatism is that it is not, and has never been, univocal. It is a coalition with many points of origin and diverse tendencies, not always easy to reconcile with one another. Historically, it has been a river of thought and activism fed by many tributaries: a wide and sometimes muddy river, but one with great power, so long as the tributaries flowed into the common stream.

Now so long as the Cold War continued, this coalition held together reasonably well. Anticommunism – a conviction shared by nearly everyone – supplied much of the essential unifying cement. But with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, and the departure from office of the ecumenical Reagan, long suppressed centrifugal tendencies resurfaced on the American Right, as we well know. Without a common foe on whom to concentrate their minds, it became easier for former allies to succumb to the bane of all coalitions: the sectarian temptation, the tendency to go it alone.

Cropping up in both of these sets of explanation, from time to time, has been a kind of historical determinism: the notion that political and intellectual movements, like individuals and nations, have immutable life cycles. Just as it was once believed that civilizations ineluctably pass from barbarism to arcadian bliss to urban prosperity and eventual rot and decline, so, it sometimes seems, must the conservative movement itself pass – in Jacques Barzun's phrase – from dawn to decadence. This half-articulated theory of social entropy underlies much of the current giddiness on the Left about conservatism's prospects – and, perhaps, some of the angst that one finds among some commentators on the Right.

There is one other explanatory framework that has recently arisen to account for conservatism's success and, inferentially, for its supposedly imminent demise. It is the thesis--popular among some left-of-center academics-- that in political terms American conservatism arose in reaction to the racial and cultural tumult of the 1960s and that as the traumatic Sixties recede into the past, so will the voting patterns associated with it. Put more bluntly, it is the thesis – again, popular among some on the Left – that the key to the conservative ascendancy since 1968 has not been conservative ideas or the failures of liberalism but something more ugly: the racial prejudice of white people.

Although most scholars, I believe, would reject this line of historical analysis as crudely simplistic, nevertheless, on both sides of the political divide one detects at times a sense--of hope on the Left and fear on the Right--that conservatism is doomed to political decrepitude as America becomes more multiracial in character. It is one more manifestation of the nervousness with which some conservatives are facing the future.

So, then, is the house of conservatism in shambles and about to collapse? When addressing such questions, historians are expected to be judicious, and accordingly I begin with the judicious words of Mark Twain. When informed in 1897 that a newspaper in New York had reported that he had died, he told a visiting journalist: “Just say the reports of my death have been grossly exaggerated.”

How firm are the foundations of modern America conservatism? Perhaps they are sturdier than many observers now think. There are several reasons for considering this possibility.

First, when examining the epiphenomena of contemporary politics – especially in our era of ever more frenzied and frothy news cycles – it is helpful to remember the adage: “This, too, shall pass away.” The divisive Bush presidency is over, and the Iraq war gives signs of winding down. Slowly some of the “external” political circumstances that so dismayed and divided conservatives in recent years have begun to dissipate.

As George Orwell reminded us years ago, one of the temptations to which intellectuals are susceptible is to assume that whatever is happening right now will continue to happen – that tomorrow will inevitably look just like today. In some ways it will, but in some ways it won't. Certainly the future is preconditioned by the past. But it is not predetermined by the past. We are creatures of our mental constructs and our life experiences, yes, but we are not robots. The longer I study history, the more impressed I am by the importance of contingency – the unforeseen and the unforeseeable – in the shaping of human events. American conservatives, I suspect, instinctively look upon our history in this way: not simply as a burden and constraint but as possibility. They should therefore take heart in 2009 from the knowledge that this moment, too, shall pass away.

Secondly, in their fixation on the sound and fury of the stormy present, it is easy for conservatives to overlook and undervalue one of their most impressive achievements during the past forty years: the creation of a veritable conservative counterculture, a burgeoning infrastructure of alternative media, foundations, research centers, think tanks, publishing houses, law firms, homeschooling networks, and more. From the Beltway to the blogosphere, these clusters of purposeful energy continue to multiply and flourish. From the perspective of a historian, this flowering of applied conservatism is a remarkable intellectual and political development. It augurs well for the continued influence of conservatism on our national conversation.

A third source of durability for conservatives is this: on the home front, the cohesion that was once supplied by Cold War anticommunism has increasingly come from another “war,” one that seems integral to the identity of most Americans on the Right. This is the so-called culture war, pitting an alliance of conservative Roman Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Orthodox Jewish believers against a post-Judeo-Christian, even anti-Christian, secular elite whom they perceive to be aggressively hostile to their deepest convictions. Every day fresh tremors break out along this fault line – over abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, the definition of marriage, and the composition of the federal courts. Last year the clash appeared in political arguments about black liberation

theology and Senator Obama's claim that "bitter" rural Americans "cling" to God and guns. It is a protracted and seemingly irrepressible conflict that gives few signs of ebbing, especially among the media and chattering classes for whom politics seems increasingly to be a form of warfare. Whatever its outcome, for the present, the long-simmering "culture war" continues to give grassroots conservatives a sense of purpose and embattlement.

Fourthly, the conservative coalition seems likely to survive for a while because most of the external stimuli that goaded it into existence have not disappeared. On the contrary, they have recently grown stronger. The Berlin Wall may be gone, but fresh, authoritarian challenges abound on many fronts, from Moscow to Caracas to Teheran. As the global economy flounders and bewildered people struggle to understand why, the urge to tax, control, and even socialize the private sector is gaining force. Large swatches of American life – notably the universities, the major media, and the entertainment industry – continue to move in directions antithetical to conservative beliefs. For defenders of Judeo-Christian ethics – and that means most conservatives – there is still a potent enemy on the Left.

This awareness of a revived, external challenge from the Left is, I believe, integral to the prospects for American conservatism in the years just ahead. If anyone doubts this, the phenomenal events of last autumn should be persuasive. I do not think we will soon forget the emotional intensity surrounding the candidacy of Governor Sarah Palin for Vice President – an intensity not felt on the American Right since the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater. Her selection did more than invigorate an anemic conservative movement. The ferocious assault upon her by her ideological foes reminded indignant conservatives of who they are and, even more, of who their opponents are. At least for a season, it restored an insurgent spirit to the conservative cause. If this spirit persists – and there is every reason to expect that Obama's actions will help it to persist – it will likely buttress the movement's foundations and enhance its vitality.

Nevertheless, spirit alone cannot do it all. Ideas, too, have consequences, as Richard Weaver long ago reminded us, and it is in this realm that conservatives face challenges that should curb any temptation to relax. Consider, for example, the phenomenon known as globalization. When we use this word, we tend to think first of the globalization of markets – of free trade in goods and services across national borders. But far more significant, I think, in the long term is the accelerating globalization of human migration patterns, with cultural and political consequences that we have scarcely begun to fathom. More people are now on the move in the world than at any time in the history of the human race, and more and more of them are making America their destination. The number of international students, for instance, attending American colleges and universities is now approximately 600,000 per year – a figure more than double what it was in 1980.

Meanwhile, increasing numbers of Americans are electing to live outside the United States. At least four to six million Americans, and some say it might be as many as ten million, are now permanent residents abroad. Among American college students,

particularly those matriculating at elite institutions, it is now quite common to spend one's junior year overseas – something very few could afford to do just a generation ago.

This unprecedented intermingling of peoples and cultures – abetted by expanding air travel and the incredible velocity of mass communication – has already begun to have ideological ramifications. In the United States it has been accompanied by the emergence of multiculturalism as the driving philosophy of our educational system. It has been accompanied by the deliberate dilution of traditional civic education and the resultant explosion of cultural illiteracy about America's heritage. It has been accompanied, in the field of historiography, by narratives which accentuate the failures and blemishes of the American experience. It has been accompanied by the rise of a liberal, cosmopolitan elite imbued with a post-national, even at times anti-national sensibility and motivated by what the historian John Fonte calls “transnational progressivism” –an ideology profoundly antithetical to conservative beliefs.

What does all this portend for the party of the Right? For generations American conservatives have been united in their defense of our nation, of our inherited constitutional order, against enemies both foreign and domestic – something relatively easy to do during the Cold War but increasingly difficult today. Traditionally, American conservatives have been Eurocentric in their political and cultural discourse, but how can conservatives convincingly articulate this perspective to non-Europeans immigrants and to millions of superficially educated young Americans, and at a time when Europe itself no longer seems Eurocentric?

These are not idle questions. Recently the political scientist James Ceaser observed that for thirty years the conservative movement in the United States has been defending ideas “that almost all other nations in the West are abandoning”: “the concept of the nation itself,” “the importance of Biblical religion,” and “the truth of natural right” philosophy. Traditionally Americans have adhered to a form of national self-understanding that scholars term American exceptionalism. Ronald Reagan did, and he carried the country with him. Now, increasingly, the Reaganite vision of American goodness and uniqueness that most conservatives embrace seems both more exceptional and more vulnerable than ever.

With what arguments, symbols, rituals, and vocabulary can conservatives make their case for the American way of life that they cherish to those for whom the traditional arguments, symbols, rituals, and vocabulary are either unfamiliar or seem hopelessly passé? Again, this is not a trivial concern. It lay at the heart of our recent election campaign. Behind the disputes over public policy and personal fitness for the presidency, behind the vehemence of the culture war surrounding Governor Palin, lurked the question: What kind of a polity does America desire to become? As the conservative British commentator Gerard Baker has noted, the election of 2008 turned into a “struggle between the followers of American exceptionalism and the supporters of global universalism.” As the outcome last November 4th made plain, American conservatives have not yet adequately articulated their convictions in terms that can appeal to people

outside their own camp and particularly to those whom James Burnham called the “verbalizers” of our society.

On this point, consider a demographic datum from the last election. Make a list, as someone has done, of all the counties in the United States with at least 20,000 people. Then look at the 100 best-educated of these counties: those having the highest percentage of college graduates, defined as people over the age of 25 with a bachelor’s degree or higher. Most of these counties—America’s so-called Diploma Belt—used to be Republican. That is no longer the case. In 1988 the Democratic presidential candidate carried only 36 of these 100 counties. Last year the Democratic candidate won 78 of them.

This leads me to a final observation. I am a historian of American conservatism, and I can happily report that sophisticated discourse is thriving on the American Right. Some of this discourse will take place here this weekend. But it also appears to me that conservatives spend much of their time (in current parlance) “cocooning” with one another and that, in this Age of the Internet, too much conservative advocacy has been reduced to sound byte certitudes and sterile clichés. What do conservatives want? Limited government, they answer; free enterprise; strict construction of the Constitution; fiscal responsibility; traditional values and respect for the sanctity of human life. No doubt, but I wonder: how much are these traditional catchphrases and abstractions persuading people anymore? How much are they inspiring the rising generation (present company excepted)? How much are they resonating with America’s new immigrants and dominant professional classes, particularly those in the more secularized and urbanized regions of this country?

It is not a new problem. In fact, it is a perennial problem, the essence of which Whittaker Chambers captured long ago. “Each age,” he wrote, “finds its own language for an eternal meaning.”

What do conservatives want? To put it in elementary terms, we want to be free, we want to live virtuous and productive lives, and we want to be secure from threats beyond and within our borders. We want to live in a society which sustains and encourages these aspirations. Freedom, virtue, safety: goals reflected in the libertarian, traditionalist, and national security dimensions of the conservative movement and the Philadelphia Society. But to achieve these perennial goals, we must communicate in language that connects not only with our own select coterie but with the great majority of the American people in all stations of life.

Can it be done? I think it can. If there is one thing that virtually all conservatives hold in common, it is the conviction that there is indeed an “eternal meaning,” a fount of wisdom to be drawn upon through thick and thin. And believing this, we can smile and persevere. The immediate future may prove unsettling to American conservatives. But in the words of William F. Buckley Jr. nearly fifty years ago: “the wells of regeneration are infinitely deep.”

NOTE:

Portions of Dr. Nash's speech were drawn from his 2008 Weaver Prize address, which will appear in the Winter 2009 issue of *The Intercollegiate Review* and in Nash's forthcoming volume *Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism* (ISI Books, 2009).