



Why the Right Went Wrong: Conservatism--From Goldwater to the Tea Party and Beyond

By E.J. Dionne Jr.

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“Dionne's expertise is evident in this finely crafted and convincing work.”
—*The Los Angeles Times*

From one of our most engaging political reporters and the author of *Why Americans Hate Politics*; the story of conservatism from the Goldwater 1960s to the present day Tea Party that has resulted in broken promises and an ideological purity that drives moderate Republicans away.

Why the Right Went Wrong offers a historical view of the right since the 1960s. Its core contention is that American conservatism and the Republican Party took a wrong turn when they adopted Barry Goldwater's worldview during and after the 1964 campaign. The radicalism of today's conservatism is not the product of the Tea Party, *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne writes. The Tea Partiers are the true heirs to Goldwater ideology. The purity movement did more than drive moderates out of the Republican Party—it beat back alternative definitions of conservatism.

Since 1968, no conservative administration—not Nixon not Reagan not two Bushes—could live up to the rhetoric rooted in the Goldwater movement that began to reshape American politics fifty years ago. The collapse of the Nixon presidency led to the rise of Ronald Reagan, the defeat of George H.W. Bush, to Newt Gingrich's revolution. Bush initially undertook a partial modernization, preaching “compassionate conservatism” and a “Fourth Way” to Clinton's “Third Way.” Conservatives quickly defined him as an advocate of “big government” and not conservative enough on spending, immigration, education, and Medicare. A return to the true faith was the only prescription on order. The result was the Tea Party, which Dionne says, was as much a reaction to Bush as to Obama.

The state of the Republican party, controlled by the strictest base, is diminished, Dionne writes. It has become white and older in a country that is no longer that. It needs to come back to life for its own health and that of the country's, and in *Why the Right Went Wrong*, he explains how.

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Why the Right Went Wrong: Conservatism--From Goldwater to the Tea Party and Beyond By E.J. Dionne Jr. **Bibliography**

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Editorial Review

Review

"Dionne's expertise is evident in this finely crafted and convincing work. . . . Lucid, pragmatic and buttressed by a parade of supporting facts." (*The Los Angeles Times*)

"Talk about perfect timing. . . . an account of the GOP's internal tension. . . . *Why the Right Went Wrong* is particularly interesting in its assessment of the past decade. . . . The book is up to the moment." (*The Christian Science Monitor*)

"[Dionne] correctly identifies why we [Republicans] either fail to win power or, when we do, do not use that power to transform America. Conservatives who want to win and effectively use political power, then, must come to grips with the central question Dionne poses: does the intellectual legacy of Barry Goldwater prevent conservatism from being an effective governing movement? . . . Dionne's book for all its faults clarifies the challenge we face and poses the ultimate questions: If not us, who? If not now, when?" (Henry Olsen *National Review*)

"Dependably intelligent . . . Dionne argues, with ample illustration decade by decade, that this right-wing populism would remain a Republican orthodoxy, latent or salient, throughout the time he covers. . . . Dionne comes closer to the facts with his tale of a ground bass of growls against moderation, swelling at times or diminishing, but continuously present." (Garry Wills *The New York Review of Books*)

"Dionne is right that America needs an intelligent conservative party, and the insights of this decent man who, as an award-winning journalist for *The Washington Post*, has unique access to politicians make wonderful reading." (*The Washington Post*)

"Substantial . . . Dionne demonstrates his thesis with a wealth of historical examples. . . . notably fair-minded." (*The New York Times Book Review*)

"So what went wrong? The questions itself might seem provocative. The fact that Dionne is an avowedly liberal columnist for *The Washington Post* would redouble suspicion. Yet it would be hard to find a more sympathetic non-conservative to attempt an answer. He has covered every election since the 1970s and is liked and trusted by Republicans and Democrats....[Dionne's] is a tempered book—suffused with the kind of moderation and balance he believes Republicans desperately need." (*Financial Times*)

"Dionne masterfully traces the influence of movement conservatism and its offshoots on the party of Lincoln, revealing how—despite all assertions of noble principles by conservative thinkers—the party's rightward turn first led to the election of candidates bent on undermining party leaders." (*The American Prospect*)

"*Why the Right Went Wrong* is an essential read for those looking to understand how the conservative movement has become what it is today." (*Huffington Post*)

"In *Why the Right Went Wrong*, one of America's most respected journalists has produced a thoroughly documented, eminently readable account of GOP conservatism up to the party's newest turn." (*National Catholic Reporter*)

"To understand why the current conservative crackup so confounds and confuses the Republican establishment, you have to recognize that the party is facing two separate revolts taking place simultaneously: one led by Ted Cruz, the other by Donald Trump. The first is well described by E.J. Dionne in his important new book, *Why the Right Went Wrong*." (Fareed Zakaria *The Washington Post*)

"Remarkably evenhanded . . . a policy wonk's delight . . . He demonstrates a delightful, low-key wit . . . Dionne's book expertly delineates where we are and how we got there." (*Chicago Tribune*)

"A terrific analysis . . . I recommend it without hesitation . . . very interesting and important." (Tom Hall, WYPR Radio, Baltimore)

"EJ Dionne Jr.'s fine new book . . . Dionne urges Republicans to embrace once more the imported traditions of Burke and the adaptive optimism of Eisenhower. But today, as Donald Trump celebrates victories in Michigan and Mississippi, this doesn't seem immediately probable." (*The Evening Standard (London)*)

"[A] masterly account" (Martin Kettle *The Guardian*)

"Masterful . . . In meticulous and chronological detail, Dionne recounts how since the 1964 landslide defeat of Barry Goldwater, the Republicans' ultra-conservative nominee for president, GOP candidates and even presidents have promised radical conservative action they could never deliver. . . . what makes his 468-page book so compelling and necessary for an understanding of today's GOP goes beyond the overarching analysis to the research, reporting and clarity with which he tracks the party's path. And this Republican presidential cycle, featuring the phenomenal popularity and resiliency of Donald Trump, makes Dionne appear especially prescient." (*Capital Times*)

"His recounting in his new book of the last half-century of conservatism in America demonstrates expertise in public policy and polls, intimate familiarity with campaigns and the media, and an abiding interest in political ideas. He also stands out among his progressive peers for his willingness to at least acknowledge the value of 'conservatism's skepticism about the grand plans we progressives sometimes offer, its respect for traditional institutions, and its skepticism of those who believe that politics can remold human nature.'" (*Real Clear Politics*)

"[Dionne] remains one of the best political writers in America. . . . The book makes the case that contemporary conservatism must reverse course on a calamitous step that conservatism took 50 years ago. There are 16 persuasive chapters, brimming with good analysis in *Why The Right Went Wrong*, that argue to this point. This is a book with great insight, attention to detail and beautifully researched." (*The Buffalo News*)

"An important pundit delivers a thorough exegesis of the stubborn recurrence of the fringe right wing in response to a sense of 'lost social status in a rapidly changing country.'" (*Kirkus Reviews*)

Praise for E.J. Dionne Jr.:

"The best new liberal rethinkers, like Dionne . . . are fair and sophisticated about American conservatism." (David Brooks *the Weekly Standard*)

on WHY AMERICANS HATE POLITICS :

“A book destined to become a classic in American political history.” (*Newsday*)

“Perfectly timed for the 2016 contest . . . an excellent primer. . . a tempered book — suffused with the kind of moderation and balance [Dionne] believes Republicans desperately need.” (*Financial Times*)

“Required reading for political insiders, for academics, for think-tank thinkers, for editorial writers.” (*St. Louis Post Dispatch*)

“An astute, entertaining analysis of the reasons that contemporary political debates and divisions misrepresent American issues.” (*The New Yorker*)

on *THEY ONLY LOOK DEAD*

“A luminously intelligent and quietly passionate polemic that deserves to alter the terms of American political debate.” (*New York Times Book Review*)

“A sweeping, sophisticated and shrewd analysis of the radicalization of the Republican Party from the defeat of Goldwater to the rise of the Tea Party and the bizarre twists and turns of the GOP’s presidential contest in the fall of 2015.” (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*)

on *OUR DIVIDED POLITICAL HEART*

“A richly researched tour of history . . . strong enough, serious enough and grounded enough to challenge those on the other side of the divide.” (*The Washington Post*)

on *SOULED OUT*

“A deeply personal and searchingly intelligent reflection on the noble history, recent travails and likely prospects of American liberalism.” (*The New York Times*)

About the Author

E.J. Dionne, Jr., is a bestselling author, a syndicated columnist who appears twice weekly in *The Washington Post* and nearly a hundred other newspapers, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and a professor at Georgetown University. His *Why Americans Hate Politics* won a Los Angeles Times Book Prize and was a nominee for the National Book Award. He is a regular commentator on National Public Radio and on other radio and television programs. He lives in Washington, DC, with his wife, Mary Boyle, and their three children.

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Why the Right Went Wrong

1

THE AMBIGUOUS HERO

Ronald Reagan as Conservatism's Model and Problem

"You can choose your Reagan."

"I was 13 years old. . . . There was one afternoon my father called me into the room and he said, 'Listen, you've got to watch this. You've got to see what this man is saying.' And there in the TV was this former actor from California. And he looks right at me. He looked right at my father. But he was really speaking to an entire nation. And he said things to us that intuitively made sense. He talked about liberty and freedom. He talked about balanced budgets. He talked about traditional values and personal responsibility. And my father looked at me and said, 'Well, son, we must be Republicans.' And, indeed, we were, and are. That's the party I joined."

On a late June night in Mississippi in 2014, Chris McDaniel offered this warm invocation of the Gipper to open what most thought would be a concession speech. McDaniel had just lost a bitterly contested Republican runoff to incumbent senator Thad Cochran. The result came as a shock to McDaniel and his supporters. Just three weeks earlier, he had run first in the primary, only narrowly missing the majority he needed to avoid a second round. Incumbents forced into runoffs usually lose in Mississippi. Cochran won anyway.

As it happened, it was not a concession speech at all. McDaniel pledged to fight on and contest the outcome—in Reagan's name, of course—though his efforts ultimately failed. The decisive votes against McDaniel in the second round came from African-American Democrats who had crossed into the Republican contest (as they were allowed to under state law) to defend their state's seventy-six-year-old incumbent. "There is something a bit strange, there is something a bit unusual about a Republican primary that's decided by liberal Democrats," McDaniel insisted. "This is not the party of Reagan."

McDaniel had a point. The coalition Cochran put together and the way he did it was anything but orthodox by most conservative standards. McDaniel, a Tea Partier who embodied a kind of libertarian marriage with neo-Confederates, had a fair claim to being the new model of the old Reagan alliance. McDaniel's antigovernment fervor extended to refusing to say whether he would have voted for emergency assistance for his own state after Hurricane Katrina. "That's not an easy vote to cast," he had explained in an interview that came back to haunt him. The summer before, he had delivered the keynote address at an event sponsored by a chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a group that continues to think the wrong side won the Civil War. "The preservation of liberty and freedom was the motivating factor in the South's decision to fight the Second American Revolution," the group declares on its website. "The tenacity with which Confederate soldiers fought underscored their belief in the rights guaranteed by the Constitution." McDaniel added a strong dose of evangelical Christianity to his appeal. "There is nothing strange at all about standing as people of faith for a country that we built, that we believe in," he had declared in his nonconcession.

By virtually all reasonable standards, Cochran was a staunch Mississippi conservative. But he was also a proud appropriator who worked amicably with Democrats to pass budgets that included plenty of money for projects of local interest that knew no party affiliation. This was his sin, not only in McDaniel's eyes but also in the view of Washington-based antispending groups such as the Club for Growth and FreedomWorks. Both backed McDaniel.

Cochran's campaign, of necessity, turned into a textbook lesson in the contradictions of antispending conservatism. If the ideologues and some of the Washington-based groups disliked Cochran for his relaxed attitude toward the flow of Beltway dollars, many Mississippi Republicans, especially business groups and

the politicians who ran local governments, were grateful for his genial approach to federal largesse, particularly in securing the billions that helped rebuild the Gulf Coast communities after Katrina.

“By God’s grace, he was chairman of appropriations for two years during Katrina, and it made all the difference in the world,” former governor Haley Barbour told me a couple of weeks before the primary. With Cochran slated to head up the Senate Appropriations Committee again if the Republicans took back the Senate, the state’s establishment desperately did not want him to retire. “A whole lot of different people said, ‘Thad, don’t put yourself first. Put Mississippi first. You owe it to us to run again,’?” Barbour recounted. When Cochran finally assented, the Barbour organization went to work.

Pause for a moment to consider that a state known for its deep antipathy to Washington—for having, as the Confederate veterans group would insist, a very particular view of “the rights guaranteed by the Constitution” to the states—just happens to get \$3.07 back from the federal government for every dollar it sends in. It ranks number one among the states in federal aid as a percentage of state revenue. Big government in Washington might still have been the enemy in Mississippi, but its dollars were as welcome there as in any of the country’s most liberal precincts.

The 2014 Republican Senate primary in Mississippi provided a particularly pointed lesson in the tensions and contradictions within contemporary conservatism. Federal spending is an evil, except when the money comes into your own state. African-Americans will be left to the other side, except when a conservative politician needs them. Since the GOP primary electorates are often too conservative to nominate a candidate with wide appeal beyond the Republican base, temporarily borrowing the other side’s base is permissible in emergencies. And if you are a Republican, you can declare that whatever you are doing would have been blessed by Ronald Reagan.

Cochran’s victory was an ironic tribute to the fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer and its drive to secure black voting rights. A Republican establishment initially built on white backlash against civil rights won an internal party contest only with the help of voters whose access to the ballot had been secured by the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, a law that so many whites in Mississippi and in other states of the Deep South had so militantly resisted. Between the primary and the runoff, the New York Times concluded, “the increase in turnout was largest in heavily black counties, particularly in the Mississippi Delta.” In Jefferson County, where African-Americans represent 85 percent of the population, turnout jumped by 92 percent—the largest increase in the state.

This is what infuriated McDaniel. “Today the conservative movement took a backseat to liberal Democrats in the state of Mississippi,” he told his supporters. “In the most conservative state in the Republic this happened. If it can happen here, it can happen anywhere. And that’s why we will never stop fighting.”

But in truth, all sides in the Mississippi showdown saw themselves as fighting for Reagan’s legacy. That is how protean it had become. When he had spoken to me before the primary, Barbour had proudly recounted his work as a political aide in Ronald Reagan’s White House and insisted on the great philosophical continuity from Reagan to present-day conservatism. Now, as then, conservatives were still committed to “limited government, lower taxes, less spending, balanced budgets, rational regulation, peace through strength, open markets and free trade, tough on crime, strengthen families, welfare reform—that kind of stuff.”

“That’s the same stuff Reagan was for,” Barbour said.

But McDaniel would have stoutly disagreed with something else Barbour told me that day. “In the two-party

system,” he observed, “purity is the enemy of victory.” And there is the rub. Reagan can be seen as the champion of purity, and also as its enemy.

That both Chris McDaniel and Haley Barbour could reasonably claim to be following in Reagan’s footsteps speaks to the ambiguous character of the Reagan legacy. There is the Reagan who excited the conservative movement before he became president and the chief executive who could govern in a pragmatic way and accept the limits imposed on him throughout his presidency by a House of Representatives led by Democrats. He campaigned thematically and governed realistically. The Reagan who made his name as Barry Goldwater’s most effective advocate in 1964 was different from the Reagan who was governor of California or president of the United States.

When I explored this dilemma one day with Charles Krauthammer, the conservative columnist and Fox News commentator, he cut to the chase. “You can choose your Reagan,” he said. Conservatives do it all the time.



Unraveling the riddles of the American right involves dissecting the twin and overlapping legacies of Reagan and Goldwater. I begin with the Reagan Condundrum because he remains the dominant figure of the conservative imagination and was a touchstone for Republican candidates during the 2016 campaign. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker said he celebrated Reagan’s birthday every year with “patriotic songs” and “his favorite foods—macaroni and cheese casserole and red, white and blue jelly beans.” Senator Ted Cruz commissioned an oil painting of Reagan at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, and it hangs in his Senate office. There was no higher compliment to a candidate than to compare him to Reagan. Thus did conservative writer Paul Kengor offer an extended essay in the *American Spectator* praising a May 2015 foreign policy speech by Senator Marco Rubio by arguing that he was “starting to sound like Reagan’s heir.”

Yet it has also become a habit of liberals, especially since the rise of the Tea Party, to say that the Reagan who served as president of the United States would have no chance of winning a Republican nomination and to cite his many apostasies. Jon Perr, a writer for the left-of-center *Daily Kos* blog, offered an impressive list. Reagan, he pointed out, raised taxes on a number of occasions (after first cutting them). He expanded the size of government. He strongly supported the redistributionist Earned Income Tax Credit. He offered amnesty to undocumented immigrants. He sought to eliminate nuclear weapons. And he approved some protectionist measures on trade.

This line of argument understandably irritates Reagan conservatives. “Those who write that Reagan would not now fit in the party he largely created make the mistake so many do in discussing Reagan,” wrote his biographer and admirer Craig Shirley. “They confuse tactics with principles.” And, yes, Reagan was also responsible for a steep cut in the top income tax rate—from 70 percent when he took office to 28 percent when he left. He broke the air traffic controllers union, helping set off a long decline in the private sector labor movement. He presided over a major military buildup.

Particularly in his first year in office, he aroused rage among liberals for steep cuts in domestic programs. One episode might serve as a reminder of how progressives felt about Reagan when he was in office: a 1981 Department of Agriculture regulation that declared ketchup a vegetable under the school lunch program. Liberals denounced this absurdity as representative of Reagan’s overall approach to programs for the poor. The Gipper, ever the Haley Barbour-style pragmatist, eventually responded to the mockery by withdrawing the rule.

National security conservatives might concede merit to the pragmatic reading of Reagan's domestic record but insist that he was a rock when it came to standing up to the Soviet Union ("Tear down this wall!"). He went to great lengths to restore American military strength. His anticommunist credentials are certainly unassailable and the military spending he supported—totaling \$2.8 trillion—is a simple fact. He did, indeed, initiate the Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as "Star Wars." And his success in persuading Western European nations to accept Pershing missiles in the early 1980s sent an important signal to the Soviet Union that its efforts to divide the Western alliance would fail. It may well have been the key step in the ultimate unraveling of the Soviet Union.

But viewing Reagan as a military interventionist misreads his record. In a deeply misguided decision, he sent American marines to Beirut, but then promptly withdrew them after 241 in their ranks were killed in a terrorist attack. The record suggests that he learned from this tragedy. He may have armed the Contras, who were fighting to undermine the leftist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, but he resisted calls from Norman Podhoretz, William F. Buckley Jr., and other Cold Warriors to send troops to Central America. "Those sons of bitches won't be happy until we have 25,000 troops in Managua," Reagan complained to his chief of staff, Ken Duberstein. His more hawkish supporters were disappointed. Podhoretz, a founding neoconservative, grumbled that "in the use of military power, Mr. Reagan was much more restrained" than his loyalists had hoped. Reagan's intervention in Grenada was, to put it gently, a minor engagement—the American military against an army of six hundred. Still, as the writer Peter Beinart noted, Grenada gave him a military victory to brag about, at a very low cost. "Reagan's political genius," Beinart said, "lay in recognizing that what Americans wanted was a president who exorcised the ghost of Vietnam without fighting another Vietnam."

And when Reagan proved to be eager to achieve arms reduction with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, many conservatives were enraged. George F. Will, the conservative columnist and one of Reagan's most loyal defenders, grumbled that Reagan was "elevating wishful thinking to the status of political philosophy." In the negotiations, Will mourned, the administration had crumpled "like a punctured balloon."

Conservatives will almost always say it was Reagan's arms buildup that effectively bankrupted the Soviet Union and sped its collapse. But a strong case can be made that by dealing so openly and hopefully with Gorbachev, Reagan undercut Kremlin hard-liners and strengthened the forces of glasnost and perestroika. It can be argued, in other words, that the Soviet Union was brought down as much by Reagan the Peacemaker as by Reagan the Warrior.

The ambiguities in Reagan's record are not merely a matter of historical interest. They are vital to today's debates on the right. These "What Would Reagan Do?" moments occur again and again, but they are especially revealing when it comes to foreign policy, where his legacy is most secure. Consider the all-out brawl in the summer of 2014 between Governor Rick Perry and Senator Rand Paul about the Iraq War and the broader issue of when American troops should be deployed. Their whole exchange revolved around the Gipper.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Paul argued that Reagan was widely misunderstood and his legacy had been promiscuously misused. "Though many claim the mantle of Ronald Reagan on foreign policy, too few look at how he really conducted it," Paul wrote. "The Iraq war is one of the best examples of where we went wrong because we ignored that."

In defending his own caution about sending American forces abroad, Paul cited the doctrine offered by Reagan's defense secretary Caspar Weinberger laying down a very stringent set of tests for military intervention: that "vital national interests" of the United States had to be at stake; that the country would go to battle only "with the clear intention of winning"; that our troops would have to have "clearly defined

political and military objectives” and the capacity to accomplish them; and that there must be a “reasonable assurance” of the support of U.S. public opinion and Congress. At the core of the Weinberger Doctrine, Paul said, was the principle that war should be fought only “as a last resort.”

The Iraq War, Paul insisted, flunked the Weinberger test. And then he added what turned out to be fighting words: “Like Reagan,” he wrote, “I thought we should never be eager to go to war.”

Perry, then a contender for the party’s 2016 presidential nomination, hit back the next month, charging that Paul had “conveniently omitted Reagan’s long internationalist record of leading the world with moral and strategic clarity.”

“Unlike the noninterventionists of today,” Perry argued on the Washington Post’s op-ed page, “Reagan believed that our security and economic prosperity require persistent engagement and leadership abroad.” Perry told the more familiar story: “Reagan identified Soviet communism as an existential threat to our national security and Western values, and he confronted this threat in every theater,” he wrote. “Today, we count his many actions as critical to the ultimate defeat of the Soviet Union and the freeing of hundreds of millions from tyranny.” And then came the swipe: Reagan had resisted those who “promoted accommodation and timidity in the face of Soviet advancement,” Perry said, adding, “This, sadly, is the same policy of inaction that Paul advocates today.”

Paul did not turn the other cheek. His lengthy counterattack in Politico carried the rather unambiguous headline: “Rick Perry Is Dead Wrong.” Paul accused Perry (who ended his candidacy in September 2015) of offering “a fictionalized account of my foreign policy so mischaracterizing my views that I wonder if he’s even really read any of my policy papers.” And on the crucial Reagan point, Paul’s Gipper was very different from Perry’s Gipper:

Reagan ended the Cold War without going to war with Russia. He achieved a relative peace with the Soviet Union—the greatest existential threat to the United States in our history—through strong diplomacy and moral leadership.

Reagan had no easy options either. But he did the best he could with the hand he was dealt. Some of Reagan’s Republican champions today praise his rhetoric but forget his actions. Reagan was stern, but he wasn’t stupid. Reagan hated war, particularly the specter of nuclear war. Unlike his more hawkish critics—and there were many—Reagan was always thoughtful and cautious.



The substantive argument behind the name-calling over American intervention will be one of the great divides across the American Right in the coming years. For a while at least, the more libertarian and anti-interventionist conservatives for whom Paul has become the leading spokesman—they included many in the Tea Party—shed the inhibitions many of them felt during Bush’s presidency over fully expressing their unhappiness over wars of choice and nation-building abroad. Indeed, for many conservatives, the Tea Party impulse was itself a reaction against the wars initiated by Bush. “Some of us as conservatives were concerned about the war [and] how long the war had been going on,” Representative Raúl Labrador, elected to the House in the 2010 Tea Party wave, told me. Labrador said he was initially surprised to find himself agreeing with people well to his left who worried during Bush’s second term about the reappearance of an “imperial presidency” rooted in the sense that “Bush had gone too far.” Vin Weber, a former Republican congressman from Minnesota who remains one of his party’s most influential voices, is an interventionist. But he, too, sensed a strengthening of isolationist feelings, on the right and in the country at large. “After the

Iraq War and the problems in Afghanistan, and other things, and terrorism,” Weber said, “there is a real sense that the rest of the world is a place that we don’t want to be.”

Interventionism—reflected in Perry’s orthodox interpretation of Reaganism—remains a powerful impulse in the party. Polls showed that it has never stopped being the majority Republican position, and it experienced a revival in the final years of Obama’s term with the rise of the Islamic State and the controversy over the president’s negotiations with Iran. Most of the party’s presidential aspirants, including Rubio, Chris Christie, Walker, and Jeb Bush, bet on this, for reasons explained by Whit Ayres, a Republican pollster and Rubio booster. “I cannot deny the historical isolationist feeling in America,” he told me. “Nor can I deny that there’s an increase in the Republican Party of that feeling.” But he added: “I still believe that the dominant position in the Republican Party is, as Marco Rubio has said, ‘problems don’t go away just because we ignore them,’ and that we are the only remaining superpower in the world, and that America has a responsibility to lead.” Ayres’s analysis was vindicated as the campaign progressed. Paul himself made tactical moves toward a more publicly hawkish position when he announced his presidential candidacy in April 2015, but his underlying skepticism of interventionism remained. While his view reflected a strong, if temporarily submerged, current on the right, Paul found himself falling behind his more hawkish rivals—though not Perry, whose campaign crumbled for other reasons.

The divide over how Republicans read Reagan’s foreign policy is just one indicator of how unsettled the meaning of Reagan’s legacy is. In one sense, it is a sign of Reagan’s posthumous political success: everyone on the right wants to identify with him, and he thus plays a prophetic and, one might say, even a scriptural role. “All sides take as settled fact the premise that Reagan revealed the truth to the world in its entirety forever and ever,” the liberal writer Jonathan Chait observed archly, “and any revisions to the Party canon must make the case that rival claimants have incorrectly interpreted the Reagan writ.”

The argument over Reagan can run in an endless loop. Only if Reagan is entirely abstracted from the movement that created him can he be viewed as a moderate. Yet there can be no denying his pragmatic side. Both in his 1980 campaign and in the White House, he was careful not to push farther than American public opinion would allow. The movement builder, over time, became a politician. Yes, the true believer was always present. Krauthammer cited what might be seen as Reagan’s Law—“government is the problem”—and insisted, “You can’t get more radically anti-New Deal than that.” But he added that Reagan “didn’t govern that way, because you can’t govern that way in a modern industrial society.” Reagan, he said, understood that while the United States was “a center-right country,” it was “not a right-wing country.”

Is the Reagan who opposed the treaty giving the Panama Canal back to Panama the relevant Reagan? Or was it the Reagan who greeted Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in November 1985 and said, “I bet the hard-liners in both our countries are bleeding when we shake hands”? Who matters most, the Reagan who uncompromisingly cut taxes in 1981, or the Reagan who happily compromised with House Speaker Tip O’Neill and raised social security taxes in 1983 to keep the system solvent? Do we pay attention to the Reagan who made Establishment pragmatist James A. Baker III his chief of staff, or the president who appointed Edwin Meese III, the staunch and long-time conservative, as his attorney general? Are Reagan’s social views best understood by his opposition to abortion as president, by his decision to sign an abortion liberalization law as governor of California, or by his 1978 opposition to a California initiative that would have barred gays from teaching in public schools? (“Whatever else it is, homosexuality is not a contagious disease like the measles,” Reagan wrote.)

When I spoke with William Kristol, the founder of the Weekly Standard magazine that sought to be for neoconservatism what National Review had been to conservatism, he hit on the dilemma in mid-thought. Noting that the pre-presidential Reagan had been out of the mainstream on a range of issues, including the

Panama Canal treaty signed by Jimmy Carter—Reagan’s opposition to it, Kristol said, “was, like, wacky,” even to many conservatives—Reagan had managed to make the transition “from being a leader of protest to a plausible, governing conservative.”

And then, on reflection, Kristol edited himself and suggested that the real contrast was between the Reagan who got elected and governed, and the Barry Goldwater who lost in a landslide. “Until the Tea Party can transition from being Goldwaterite to Reaganite,” he says, “it has a big problem winning.”

Yes, when many harder-line conservatives such as Chris McDaniel invoke Reagan, they really mean Goldwater—or, perhaps, Reagan at the moments when he most sounded like Goldwater. Far more than the Gipper, it was Goldwater who changed the trajectory of American politics. And Goldwater, in turn, was the product of a movement a long time in the making.

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