

## **Matthew Continetti**

What Happens Next – 05.01.2022

Matthew Continetti:

Most histories of the American Right begin shortly after the Second World War and culminate in Ronald Reagan's presidency. In my book, *The Right*, I begin the story much earlier and end it after Barack Obama. Reagan is not the central character but one character among many whose rise was not inevitable.

The Republican party of Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis has a lot in common with the Republican Party of the 1920s: Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge. The American Right prior to the Second World War stood for non-intervention in foreign policy, restriction of immigration, and a protectionist trade policy.

The Republican party under Donald Trump is against deploying troops overseas and illegal immigration. Trump called himself, "tariff man."

A theme of my book, *The Right*, is the ongoing dynamic between conservative elites and the broader grassroots populist revolting against expert wisdom, top-down governments, bureaucracy and the elite guardianship of institutions.

Elites and the populists often find a common antagonism toward liberalism in American government, American culture, universities, the entertainment industry and the media.

Beginning in the mid-20th century, conservatives found that the way to power was the populist grassroots. But that didn't necessarily mean that the conservatives and the populists always saw eye-to-eye.

During the Cold War, anti-Communism provided a foundation for an alliance between the conservatives and the populists.

After the Cold War, many of the fissures between conservatives and the populist grassroots came to the fore. The issue of immigration, the simmering discontent with George W. Bush's policy of regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan and the integration of China into the global economy.

This tension between conservative elites and the Republican populist grassroots grew with time. And culminated in the rise of Donald Trump who was the agent of populist revolt, not only against liberal elites but also against conservative ones and that's where we find ourselves today.

Larry Bernstein:

Conservatives do not all agree on the major political issues of the day. Views evolve as constituencies change and social norms evolve. Each party is desperate to get to 51%. The

Democratic party changed its political positions over time as well. Take immigration. Cesar Chavez opposed immigration because Mexican laborers would undercut wages of his union workers.

Matthew Continetti:

There's more coherence on the Democratic side on immigration. There was a change in the attitude of unions toward immigration in the last 20 years when unions saw immigration as a threat to wages of their members to a possible pool of recruits.

In the Republican party, there is still a debate between the business community which does favor relaxed immigration policy and the populist Republicans who are against immigration.

Larry Bernstein:

The Republicans are sore that the compromise from Reagan's immigration legislation that traded border enforcement for expanded citizenship wasn't enforced by Democratic presidents, so I suspect that the Republicans would prefer to do nothing.

Matthew Continetti:

I think that's an accurate statement of the Republican position. The last time there was an amnesty authorized by Congress for illegal immigrants was under Ronald Reagan. Reagan said that the border enforcement and employer enforcement ought to be followed, and they were not as you mention. And that has made many Republicans and opponents of immigration very leery of the deal that would regularize the status of illegal immigrants.

I just don't see the possibility of any compromise.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is foreign policy. The Republicans included both isolationists and internationalists in the party leadership over the past 100 years. Senator Lodge opposed the League of Nations and Trump wanted to bring the troops home and reduce our obligations under the alliances. In contrast, Eisenhower and Bush were true believers in the role of NATO and multilateral institutions to keep the peace. In the 1960s LBJ started the Vietnam war while McGovern protested foreign wars. Both political parties' positions are inconsistent.

Matthew Continetti:

Foreign policy is where you find the greatest diversity of opinion within both parties, and I think that's been true throughout the history.

The Cold War established within the Republican party what one scholar calls, "Engaged nationalism." A foreign policy that's nationalistic, believes in American hard power, and that America shouldn't be tied down by multilateral organizations like the United Nations. America should have troops stationed overseas to meet threats in Europe and East Asia.

The engaged nationalists believed in alliances like NATO, in free trade to empower our allies through economic growth and to hold up America as a model of democracy.

These were all policies generally agreed upon within the conservative movement during the Cold War period. It's before the Cold War, when you didn't have the threat of the Soviet Union, and after the Cold War, when the Soviet Union is removed that figures like Buchanan revert to a disengaged nationalist foreign policy. Still nationalistic, still believing in American power, in American freedom of action but disengaged from the world. No forward defense. No alliances. Protectionist economics. Closed immigration.

The George W. Bush foreign policy of preemptive war and regime change intensified those differences, made this discussion more vitriolic within the party.

On the Democratic side, Bill Clinton seized on that unipolar moment when America was the sole superpower to engage in a variety of humanitarian interventions believing in multilateralism, international organizations and alliances. There's been a retreat from that position on the Democratic side that is more like the McGovern position you mentioned earlier.

One of the reasons I wrote my book *The Right* is to push back against the idea that *The Right* is just one thing.

People take the figure of Reagan. They think he's the standard of the American right that he's the model everyone should follow. My point is he's one model. There are many different schools of conservatism, and they have often competed for dominance within the right. And we've seen a transition in recent years between engaged nationalists and Trump.

Larry Bernstein:

The voter composition of the Republican Party changes over time. Vermont used to be very Republican and now New England is solidly Democratic. College educated elites used to be at the center of the Republicans. Today, non-college educated whites vote 2:1 Republican and are core to the party. We should expect Republican policies to follow the interests of its primary constituents.

Matthew Continetti:

Yes, I think that's right. There's no doubt that the growth of the non-college educated vote within the Republican party has been incredibly consequential for American politics. The migration of non-college educated voters from Democrats to Republicans is what has fueled populism on the right.

My American Enterprise Institute colleague, Michael Barone published a book before the pandemic on the two parties. And he said, the groups of people who composed the two parties have changed over time. But fundamentally, the two parties have always stood for a certain type of American, with the Republican party representing the people who feel they are the true American community and the Democratic party composed of out groups.

Larry Bernstein:

Michael Barone spoke at one of my book clubs a couple of years ago about his book you reference *How America's Political Parties Change and How They Don't*. And my takeaway from Barone is that immigrants' national origin and religion matter for current voting patterns. The fact that Wisconsin and Minnesota were settled by Norwegians and Swedes affects their voting behavior and differs from the German Catholics who settled near Milwaukee.

Matthew Continetti:

The real value in what Barone does is look at ethnicity and religiosity. Rather than looking at the White vote, we could disaggregate it, as you said, the descendants of German Americans or Swedes, and then trace their voting patterns over time. Ethnicity is a much more interesting lens to look at American politics than the reductive frame of race.

The other thing he does is look at religiosity. The real change came beginning in the 1970s, when it was less what religion you were than how often did you practice it.

This idea that church, temple, or mosque attendance is the real metric where you fall politically is an important transformation in American politics.

Larry Bernstein:

Your book *The Right* explores the evolving intellectual policy debates in the context of the political environment.

Matthew Continetti:

My book is unique because it tries to synthesize the ideas with the politics. I try to weave what the intellectuals were doing with the major developments in American politics during this 100-year period. The decomposition of the New Deal Coalition over Vietnam and the civil rights movement after the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. This is the major story of the 20th century politics.

Were they reacting to ideas? Well, it's not as though they were picking up Ludwig Von Mises. What they were reacting to was the rise of the anti-war movement over Vietnam, the student revolt on campuses, rising crime in the cities, and the squeeze on wages because of inflation.

The most receptive audience was the hard hats that's where you see this dynamic between the conservative intellectuals and populist voters. Those construction workers at the World Trade Center who fought the anti-war protestors in the so-called hard hat riot. Nixon loved the hard hats.

Whether you call them middle American radicals, the silent majority, or Reagan Democrats, they have provided the votes for Republican majorities over the last 50 years.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you make of Tom Frank's argument made in his book *What is Wrong with Kansas* that suggests that the Kansas voter makes a mistake by voting against his personal interests?

Matthew Continetti:

The thesis is that social conservative voters don't know what's in their economic interests. And, voters find value issues more important than economic ones, the political takes preference over the economic.

If the voters in Kansas want to vote Republican because they think that the Republican party is on their side on the right to life or the second amendment rights that makes as much sense to me as it does suburbanites in Northern Virginia voting for the Democratic party that is a supporter of rights for LGBTQ Americans.

Values matters. They matter to both sides and usually take priority over economics.

Larry Bernstein:

You make the argument in your book that intellectual but not scholarly magazines like *Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The National Review* and *American Affairs* are critical to the conservative movement. I have subscribed to *Commentary* magazine since high school, but very few people read it. Why do you think that these intellectual magazines have such outsized influence if politically interested people and politicians do not read them?

Matthew Continetti:

People don't read the little magazines. They're also not reading the great works that those magazines popularize. They may not have heard of Milton Friedman, Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, or Leo Strauss. But the magazines filter these ideas that make them accessible to people who are involved in politics.

You're right, most people in politics don't read these little magazines. Some people do. I mean, you read it, Larry. Enough politicians read them to draw ideas, and they get a policy proposal out of them. And it's important that way.

The little magazines are directionally a barometer of what the climate of opinion, as Milton Friedman used to call it, at a given moment.

During Trump's presidency other magazines came into existence to explain and influence the Trump Administration, journals such as *American Affairs*. *The Claremont Review of Books* is now central to the Trump world and continues to rise in popularity.

Larry Bernstein:

Readers of *Commentary* and *The Weekly Standard* would have been shocked by Trump's rise to power and the political issues that pushed him forward in his presidential campaign. Many of

Trump's ideas on foreign policy, trade, and immigration were vehemently opposed by the conservative intellectual writers at these magazines.

Matthew Continetti:

I agree. For someone who had just been reading Commentary, The Weekly Standard, or National Review in its Against Trump issue in 2016, the Trump victory would be a surprise.

Trump was a master at social media and leveraging the social media power to advance his political prospects.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic. Conservative talk radio led by Rush Limbaugh has more listeners and influence than political magazines.

Matthew Continetti:

Yeah that's right. Limbaugh, his audience might not have read those publications, but he did. Rush was very aware of the intellectual scene.

Rush Limbaugh is an incredibly important figure in my story. Many people master an industry, very few people create the industry that they master, and that's what Rush did. Rush Limbaugh created nationally syndicated talk radio and found a huge audience, tens of millions of people, were receptive to it. And he also had unique talents as an entertainer who was very conversant with ideas.

Rush was taking the articles published in these journals and popularizing them to an even larger audience.

Larry Bernstein:

One of the great conservative intellectuals of the period is Milton Friedman. He had many policy recommendations. Some got implemented like eliminating the draft in favor of a volunteer military. Friedman also recommended a negative income tax to reduce the disincentives for work, but it had no support among Democrats at the time. Recently, Andrew Yang is using a similar concept with a universal basic income, but it is now unanimously opposed by the Republicans.

Matthew Continetti:

I would say that the negative income tax example was influential in the development of the earned income tax credit.

Friedman proposed this as a substitute for the welfare state rather than a supplement. And I think Andrew Yang has been perhaps strategically ambiguous in answering the question of whether his proposed UBI would replace the welfare state in its entirety or simply be another add-on. And you're right to say there is no way Republicans would support another welfare

entitlement. However, if one could replace our welfare state with a cash grant that would cover all expenses, there are members of the right who would be receptive to that.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you discuss the influence of the conservative academic Harry Jaffa. Why is he an important conservative intellectual?

Matthew Continetti:

Harry Jaffa wrote one of the most important books in American political thought. It's called *Crisis of the House Divided*, and it's a study of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. I recommend it to everyone. It is an amazing work.

It establishes Lincoln as a political philosopher. After that book, he became interested in politics. Harry Jaffa penned Barry Goldwater's famous line, "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice" from the 1964 Republican Convention. A line that was among the many reasons that Barry lost that election.

Harry Jaffa settled on the idea that America was the greatest. That America is the synthesis of classical and modern philosophy and anything that goes against Lincoln and the founders will lead us down the path to totalitarianism.

Larry Bernstein:

American exceptionalism is a fundamental idea for conservatives which is in sharp contrast to Barak Obama who said that American exceptionalism is as true as Greek exceptionalism.

Matthew Continetti:

The right has long believed in American exceptionalism and what made the American unique was a founding. We didn't emerge from tribal warfare and ancestral kings.

It was the first time it had been done on this scale in human history, and especially these principles proclaimed in the Declaration. The idea that all men are created equal. That the king has no right was a revolutionary concept that Americans introduced to the world.

The American conservative movement said that's something to be defended. The American founding and a constitutional order which protects individual liberty.

Obama went against the tradition of rah, rah, rah, America. We're exceptional." Obama was the first to say, "I believe it in the same way that the Greeks think they're exceptional."

It provided a clue of to where American politics was headed. Because when you look at American politics today, we're not really arguing over the size and scope of the state.

Instead, what we're arguing over is what it means to be an American. Who counts as an American? What is American history? What are the lessons to draw from it? Does American exceptionalism exist?

Whose values ought to rule?

Larry Bernstein:

Conservatives focus on the role of institutions instead of group identity. The importance of the church, business, the military, and thousands of smaller but important institutions like the United Way or the League of Women Voters. Society is centered around the family and not the state. Conservatives fight for these institutions. Changes to them should be incremental because of respect for the way that institutions are managed. There must be a reason that institutions work the way they do because of life complicated and not obvious. In contrast, the liberal view has attributes from the French Revolution that radical change can solve intractable problems, damn the institutions.

Matthew Continetti:

Right. Conservatism is associated with defense of inherited institutions. In American context, what institutions are those? We don't have a king, an established church, or an aristocracy. We do have the American founding, the family, civil society, and the market.

There's always been a tension between conservatism and populism that is often anti-institutional that wants its will imposed immediately.

Larry Bernstein:

In the Fall 2021 Virginia Governor election, public schools and education was an important political issue. The Republican Youngkin argued that content and the curriculum should be determined by parents, while the Democratic candidate said that this decision making should belong with the teacher and education experts. And this debate highlights the differences between the role of parents versus bureaucratic experts.

Matthew Continetti:

Youngkin is on the side of parents who are disgusted at the way schools handled the pandemic and things taught in schools.

Youngkin doesn't have Trump's personality. He's not as combative as DeSantis. He is a potential model for Republican leaders. We can do it with a smile and a fleece vest." And that can go a long way.

Larry Bernstein:

The biggest surprise in the political world is the changing voting patterns of Hispanics as they join the Republican party.



Matthew Continetti:

Hispanic voters care about the same thing as voters everywhere. They want a growing economy, safe streets, good schools, and affordable healthcare and childcare.

And what they saw under Trump was rising paychecks, jobs, and an economy that was recovering quickly after the pandemic shock. There are plenty of people who showed up here legally 30 years ago, who claim Hispanic ancestry, who are infuriated that people are just walking over the border, and they want to deal with illegal immigration.

I think the Hispanic voter is in the same position as the hard hats in the late 60s and early 1970s. With assimilation into America, they are now more aligned with the Republican party.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism, Matt what are you optimistic about?

Matthew Continetti:

I'm optimistic about our Constitution and the political institutions it created. They've been through a profound stress in the past couple years and have survived. It's the role of American conservatives to defend them. Not to look to a single person, a specific figure or a personality. But to preserve it against its challengers, which can come from both the left and the right.