

Conservatism Against Itself

BOOK REVIEW BY CARL F. HOROWITZ

If surfaces were all that mattered, Paul Gottfried and David Gelernter might be best friends. Each is a contentious and prolific conservative scholar possessed of the conviction that America's survival depends on a return to long-dormant moral principles. Yet their strains of thought are so utterly at odds that even a civil conversation between the two seems almost unthinkable. The Christian-authoritarian influences upon these Jews—Catholic for Gottfried, Puritan for Gelernter—speaks volumes about why conservatism in our nation remains at once a minority viewpoint and a house divided. And their latest books underscore why brilliant doesn't necessarily mean sound.

Paul Gottfried, now well into his sixties, is the reigning dean of American Old Right social philosophy. Fluent in several languages, he projects, in person and in print, a glib, edgy irony suggestive of a younger William F. Buckley. He's also a rather angry fellow. About 20 years ago, Catholic University named him to an endowed faculty position, only to rescind the offer. Justifiably or not, Gottfried became convinced that certain neoconservatives working behind the scenes had talked his would-be employer into pulling the plug. The experience permanently hardened an already well-formed loathing. He since

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has served, to no great shame, as the Horace Raffensperger Professor of Humanities at Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania.

Conservatism in America, like the author's previous works, is immersed in the spirit of pessimism and payback. Yet Gottfried, despite his unremitting crabbiness, fascinates. He has an insider's knowledge of the ideas and personalities that have shaped a political culture. Equally important, he implies, refreshingly, that conservatism has gotten too big for its own good. Acclimated to political and mass-media success, conservatives have gained a kingdom and lost their soul, leaving intact the very liberal shibboleths they were supposed to challenge.

Unfortunately, Gottfried doesn't understand,

or at any rate doesn't *want* to understand, that reaching for the brass ring necessarily has required conservatism to become less conservative. It's not simply that power by its nature compromises. Equally to the point, America, excepting the antebellum lowland South, never has produced anything close to an aristocratic culture,

under which hierarchy, order, and ritual are cardinal virtues. Thus, to stay politically viable, conservatives have had to absorb large doses of classical liberalism, a point made over the decades by Louis Hartz, John Patrick Diggins, Alan Wolfe, Seymour Martin Lipset, and others. The fight against communism provided conservatives with a cover of popularity, but with the Cold War won, the ruse was over. We're still a country where equality of opportunity rules the day—and where conservatism doesn't.

Paul Gottfried doesn't like this. He'll fight for individualism when it is threatened by legions of

Conservatism in America **Making Sense of the American Right**

by Paul Edward Gottfried
New York: Palgrave Macmillan
189 pages, \$39.95



Americanism **The Fourth Great Western Religion**

by David Gelernter
New York: Doubleday
229 pages, \$24.95

diversity trainers and other therapeutic egalitarians. But he won't defend it on principle. In fact, he sees individualism and its close cousin, social mobility, as gateways to moral laxity. Convinced America is slowly committing suicide, he obsesses over identifying villains, writing in a tone of "Who Lost China?" On virtually every page, the author sounds a certain trumpet for recriminations against intellectual despoilers who poured liberal wine into a bottle marked "conservative."

Gottfried is particularly remorseless toward William F. Buckley, whom he accuses of purging the faithful from *National Review*. The calculated image of Buckley as a sensible ambassador for conservatism who removed Birchers, anarchists, anti-Semites, and other kooks from his magazine, he argues, and not without cause, is a product of willful amnesia. *National Review* for its first couple of decades published any number of these kooks. That changed for good once Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency, as traditional conservatives suddenly became a potential hindrance in the war against the Soviet empire. On the other hand, what would Gottfried have had Buckley do? Stand on the sidelines and blow an opportunity to alter the course of history? Stay "pure" and tiny like the Rockford Institute's *Chronicles*?

Inasmuch as Gottfried is a principled opponent of the New Despotism (check out his earlier *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*), he also pines for the return of the Old Despotism. And that doesn't mean granola-crunch, front-porch anarchism à la

Bill Kauffman, Rod Dreher, or Wendell Berry. Gottfried doesn't just want to decentralize authority; he wants to escalate it. For him, rights at best are distantly subordinate to family, church, and community obligations. He views the modern Right's accent on liberty, which has mirrored the American experience, as enabling classical liberalism to evolve into modern liberalism. Gottfried is right to

excoriate those conservatives who place Martin Luther King on par with Thomas Jefferson. But he's wrong to believe that the Old Despotism is the vehicle by which to combat such self-delusion.

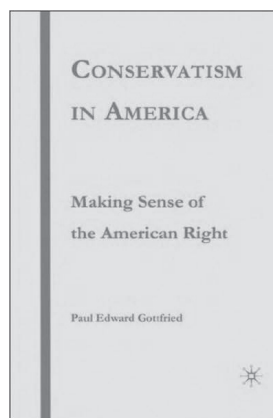
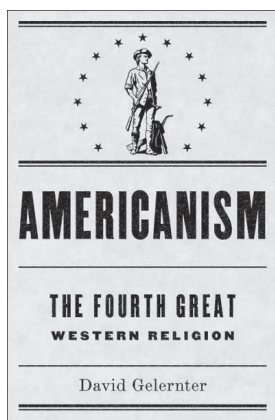
Blame the British for this state of affairs, the author declares. America's Founders,

drawing from Englishmen Locke, Trenchard, and Gordon and Scotsmen Smith, Hume, and Wither-

spoon (among others), naively believed that by emphasizing natural rights and political moderation, we could be inoculated against decadence and the therapeutic state. Their ideas unwittingly laid the foundation for modern conservatism, even the "traditionalist" variety. Gottfried takes to task Russell Kirk, whom he sees as too *much* of an Anglo-Scottish liberal, despite his aristocratic leanings. Kirk was a "movement player," ever adjusting to the nation's leftward drift. His conversion to Catholicism could not prevent him from watering down subsequent editions of

his 1953 *Ur-text*, *The Conservative Mind*, nor from blinding himself to the growth of government.

If Gottfried sees Kirk as a learned, well-meaning, but ultimately failed figure, he fairly seethes over another influential conservative, the Claremont



National Review founder William F. Buckley, Jr., and Freda Utey share a laugh at her book party.

Institute's Harry Jaffa. A master of disguise, Jaffa has managed to pass himself off as the real thing, largely on the strength of his stint as an adviser to Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign. "Equality is a conservative principle," Jaffa wrote in his 1978 book, *How to Think About the American Revolution*, much to Gottfried's disgust. Gottfried believes Bill Buckley seriously erred in inviting Jaffa and Claremont protégés Charles Kesler and Larry Arnn into the conservative inner circle.

The author would inspire us with reactionary Catholic philosophy and jurisprudence from the European mainland. Gottfried admires Frenchman Louis de Bonald (1754–1840), who, among other things, justified a father's absolute authority over his family as analogous to God's absolute authority over man. He favorably views the still-alive German Ernst Nolte, who long has exhibited pro-fascist tendencies, though opposing Nazism. Most of all, Gottfried venerates another German, Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). Schmitt believed that modern bourgeois politics by necessity seeks compromise, in effect sweeping necessary conflict under the rug. His "friend-enemy" principle led him to join the Nazis in 1933. To his credit, he was kicked out a few years later, but his authoritarianism, anything but benign, remained intact. Bitterly anti-Semitic (though not racially), Schmitt never firmly disavowed his support for a state of continuous political emergency to destroy national enemies. This is someone who actually defended Hitler's Night of the Long Knives as "the highest form of administrative justice."

I will grant that Gottfried's authoritarianism doesn't definitively rise to the level of fascism. But, here as in his previous work, it is suffused with a disturbing need to punish behavior occurring outside traditional strictures of religious and filial piety. Moreover, his sympathy for Nolte's "generic" fascism is at least as much in evidence as his opposi-

tion to the Nazi variant. Gottfried isn't just the sort of person who refrains from dining at Hooters; he's the sort of person who wants to close them all down. No deal, mister.

Gottfried rues that most American conservatives don't seem to be with him. Those dastardly impostors in the temple, the neoconservatives, always seem to be beating him to the punch. Their

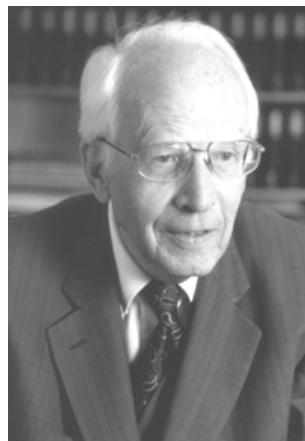
hostile takeover of mainstream conservatism accelerated its journey toward "human rights," "national greatness," and other (liberal) universal abstractions. The recent ascent of Rich Lowry, Ramesh Ponnuru, Jonah Goldberg, and other Right-Stuff whiz kids, for whom the author has only contempt, all but completed the evolution.

Professor Gottfried recognizes that retrofitting our country into an authoritarian federation would be highly unpopular. "Our historical situation differs so fundamentally from that of classical conservatives," he writes, "that neither public support for religious institutions nor the promotion of educational diversity seems likely to bring about the desired moral change." So what would? The author plays his cards close to the vest, though he does endorse (as I do not) the *Kinder-Kuche-Kirche* extreme anti-feminism of Allan Carlson and F. Carolyn Graglia. Given his tone throughout the book, maybe the lack of specifics is a good thing.

Gottfried might have enhanced his Big Idea by paying more attention to small details. At various points, he misspells the first or last names of Elliott Abrams, John Patrick Diggins, Friedrich Engels, Martin Heidegger, Richard Herrnstein, Alan Kors, Seymour Martin Lipset, Frank Meyer, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, John Rawls, and Lynne Cheney. Among factual errors are references to cultural anthropologist Jane Goodall as "Grace Goodall," Reagan-era Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts as an Undersecretary, Washington, D.C.'s



German Conservative Theorist Carl Schmitt



Fascism Scholar Ernst Nolte

Dupont Circle as “Dupont Square,” and Philanthropy Roundtable as “Philanthropic Roundtable.” He also misidentifies Venezuelan-born conservative philosopher Eliseo Vivas as “Columbian-American,” fittingly misspelling “Colombian.” In a brief dissection of Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, Gottfried makes reference to “Edmund Randolph of Roanoke” instead of whom he actually meant, John Randolph of Roanoke. (Edmund Randolph, part of the same Virginia landholding clan and our nation’s first Attorney General, nowhere was mentioned in Kirk’s book.).

All these errors pale before a gnawing suspicion that Paul Gottfried is living in the wrong country. And it’s hard to figure out what the “right” one would be. He sees corrupt America as redeemable only by reviving value systems long ago discarded by Europe, and, for that matter, small-town America. And that’s simply not going to happen. The man is possessed by brilliance, but it’s a severe, brittle brilliance, all dressed up and nowhere to go. *Conservatism in America* fitfully enlightens, but in the end it’s too insular and vindictive to serve as a guide for institution-building or governance.

Gottfried can take comfort that his antipode, David Gelernter, won’t—and shouldn’t—be popular either. Gelernter’s new book, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion*, is an unabashed celebration of our national civic identity as Hebraicized Puritanism eternally reborn, with Abraham Lincoln as our godfather. It’s an emotionally charged mix of genealogy and sermon, a call to arms—at times literally—to replicate the Puritans’ metaphorical shining city on a hill. Like ex-Bush White House speechwriter Michael Gerson’s new

book, *Heroic Conservatism*, Gelernter’s latest effort underscores why neoconservatives are feeling kind of lonely these days.

To understand how Gelernter arrived at his currently exalted position among neoconservatives (in a back-cover blurb, Bill Bennett calls him a “national treasure, a patriot-scholar”), it is necessary to digress a bit and debunk a familiar Old Right trope. As the narrative goes, we Real Conservatives in-

vited neoconservatives, those brainy ex-Trotskyist Social Democrats, into our house to advance the Reagan Revolution. And what did these ingrates do? They purged us from plum jobs and pub-

lications, limited the boundaries of acceptable discourse, grabbed foundation money, and passed off their counterfeit beliefs as the real thing, all the while sucking up to mainstream media.

In reality, this “takeover” was a two-way street. Indeed, the dominant direction was one of neoconservatism *itself* being absorbed into an enlarged, publicity-hungry and increasingly theocratic mainstream Right. It wasn’t always like this. Neoconservatives produced much groundbreaking work well before the Reagan White House years. Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Nathan Glazer’s *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), Edward Banfield’s *The Unheavenly City* (1970), and Nathan Glazer’s *Affirmative Discrimination* (1975) were masterpieces of public policy revisionism. The movement’s leading periodicals, *Commentary* and *The Public Interest*, seemed to crank out one myth-debunking piece after another even well through the Eighties.

But the Reagan Revolution proved less than fully revolutionary, and George H.W. Bush rolled back his predecessor’s gains—or so most New



Edward Banfield



David Gelernter



Harry Jaffa

Right activists believed. Then with Bill Clinton in the White House, they were itching to escalate the Culture War, the Cold War now history. Trolling for lowbrow voters and donors, these activists discovered talk radio, celebrity book publishing, and a new invention called the Internet. Emotions were soaring and coffers were filling.

Leading neoconservatives didn't want to be left out of the action, what with mainstream conservatives adopting most of their views anyway. They would not be content to play the role of ex-liberals trotting out tired tales of being "mugged by reality." If the price of admission to this emerging victory coalition was endorsement of Team Jesus, well, let it be paid. "We worship the same God," *Commentary*'s Norman Podhoretz often retorted to fellow Jewish critics. A smashing religious Right-led Republican victory in the 1994 Congressional elections seemed to portend a glorious future. In an article in the March 1996 issue of *Commentary*, "Neoconservatism: A Eulogy," Podhoretz argued that neoconservatism had done its job so well that it no longer was needed. "(T)he conservative work which remains to be done in every realm will be marked and guided and shaped by the legacy neoconservatism has left behind," he wrote. The neocon "takeover" seemed more like a merger. It was time to cultivate an explicitly religious stable of writers. Enter David Gelernter.

David Gelernter, if nothing else, is an easy man to admire. A professor of computer science at Yale and a contributing editor at *The Weekly Standard*, he'd established himself as something of a cult software polymath during the Eighties and early Nineties. But on June 24, 1993, Gelernter's career path changed, suddenly and irrevocably, when an innocuous-looking package arrived at his office. Thinking it to be a dissertation, he opened it. It was instead a bomb sent by another, less successful polymath, Theodore Kaczynski—yes, him. The explosion nearly cost Gelernter his life. As he

healed (and even then, with the loss of sight in one eye and hearing in one ear), he developed a parallel career as a social critic, penning a full-length rumination, *Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber*, excoriating not simply his would-be killer, but also the counterculture from which the Unabomber supposedly had sprung.

America is a Puritan nation, Gelernter, an observant Jew, repeatedly tells us in *Americanism*. Our heritage, steeped in the idea of a Covenant and a Promised Land, rests on two foundations: American Zionism (religious) and the Creed (civil). Gelernter's almost uncritical admiration for the Puritan settlers, however, leads him to some dishonest semantics and history. At one point he states: "Puritans did not build 'theocracies'—most of their communities were run by laymen, not preachers. Yet American Puritans took for granted that civil authority should operate in accordance with God's law as set forth in the Bible." The distinction is cosmetic. Unity of civil and Scriptural authority, whether or not clergy hold formal power, is the very essence of theocracy. Gelernter also asserts that Roger Williams was expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for preaching a Puritan

doctrine "too pure for the authorities to stomach," undergoing a "change of heart" after founding the Rhode Island Colony. A more grotesque distortion would be hard to imagine. Williams, a true friend of religious freedom, was banished for calling upon Puritanism, born of dissent, to be more tolerant of it. His concept of "soul-liberty" presaged church-state separation.

Now Puritans were not quite as "Puritanical" as caricature would have it. And they did contribute substantially to the development of sovereignty, democracy, and civic virtue. But Gelernter aims to whitewash, not just celebrate. He downplays the core principles of Puritan doctrine, Predestination and Election, not to mention certain inconve-

nient historical facts such as the Salem witch trials. He also gives short shrift to non-Puritan forms of Christianity. Catholicism, as one might expect, is nearly invisible. But major Protestant movements fare little better. Unitarianism was “cool and rationalist,” whose “pale flicker” superseded Puritanism’s “bright blaze” during the early 19th century. Gelernter, without explaining why, doesn’t approve. But he also omits mention of the fact that Unitarianism itself was superseded by the leading Christian success story of the first half of the 19th century: Methodism. From its mid-18th-century English origins, this expression of Protestantism claimed the loyalty of about a third of all Americans by 1850.



Yet Gelernter entertains only the briefest discussion of Methodism, and then only to praise George W. Bush for converting to it.

In rooting for Puritanism, Gelernter exaggerates its popularity. At the time of our founding, he claims, “roughly three-quarters of American citizens and 85 percent of American churches were Puritan.” This unsupported statement does not square with more credible sources. Sociologist Roger Finke in his book, *The Churching of America: 1776–1990*, estimates that only roughly 17 percent of all Americans formally adhered to a religion at the time of Independence, a figure rising to 35 percent by 1850 and 45 percent by 1890. These increases, moreover, were largely products of stage-managed excitement between competing revivalists (sound familiar?),

whether the style of preaching veered toward the emotional or the contemplative. A prime casualty of those pre-Civil War decades was Puritanism. Where Puritan (Congregational) churches comprised about 15 to 20 percent of all Christians at the time of our Revolution, they accounted for only 3 to 4 percent by 1850. Gelernter acknowledges the decline, but cannot accept that it might have had good reasons.

The author also exaggerates the Christian orthodoxy of our Founders, whose general predisposition more accurately could be called Christian-flavored Deism and whose intent was *not* for religion to serve as the basis for governance. “The idea that the Constitution expressed a moral view seems absurd,” observed historian Robert Middlekauff in his now-classic book, *The Glorious Cause*. “There were no genuine evangelicals in the Convention, and there were no heated declarations of Christian piety.”

Gelernter refuses such evidence entry into his universe. No matter anyway—the early decades of our Republic were but a dress rehearsal for the main event, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln, argues Gelernter, not only transformed Old Puritanism into Americanism, he was touched by the hand of God:

At war’s end, on the night of Lincoln’s last public address—April 11, 1865—there was a remarkable scene in Washington: all government buildings were lit up, including the brand-new dome atop Capitol Hill...For a few brief moments the city’s residents saw a powerful prophecy literally fulfilled. *Wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us.*

Our 16th President thus fulfilled John Winthrop’s vision: the Union victory over the Confederacy sealed a New Covenant. Henceforth, we would proselytize our three Creedal faiths of liberty, democracy, and equality with an even more powerful faith, Americanism. Its arsenal would reside with presidential power, especially in time of war. And war is something with which the author is quite comfortable. Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush, by his lights, rank as great Presidents because they under-

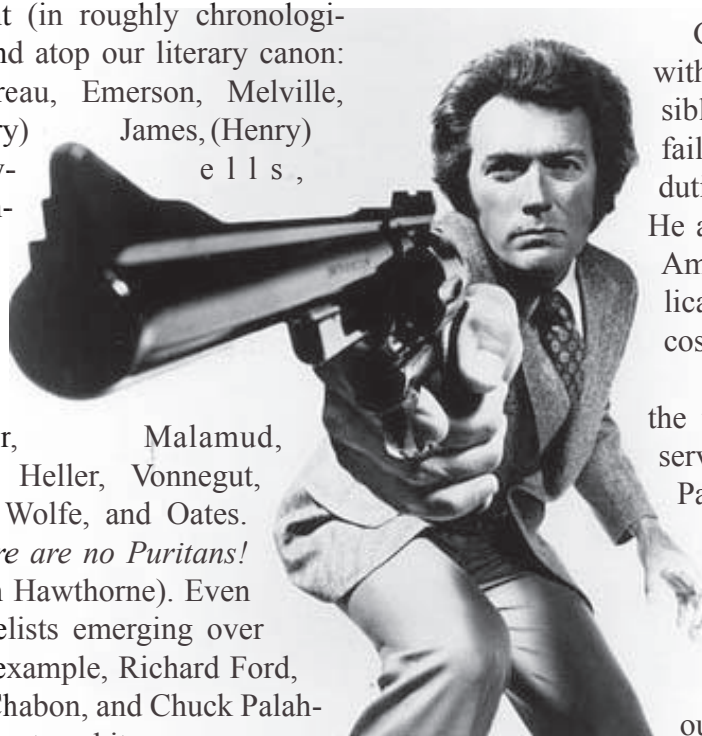
stood the necessity of waging war without delay and invoked religious imagery to justify such action. Franklin Roosevelt would have made the cut, but he delayed our entry into World War II.

Even shorn of militaristic trappings, Gelernter's case for Puritanism as the soul of America is unconvincing. One can't help be struck, for example, by the aridity of Puritan cultural achievement. Consider the following list of writers, who, without much argument (in roughly chronological order), ought to stand atop our literary canon: Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Whitman, Twain, (Henry) Adams, Dreiser, Howells, Wharton, Lewis, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, (Edmund) Wilson, Sandburg, Steinbeck, McCarthy, Singer, Mailer, Hardwick, Vidal, O'Connor, Malamud, Auchincloss, Buckley, Heller, Vonnegut, Bellow, Roth, Updike, Wolfe, and Oates. Notice something? *There are no Puritans!* (don't get me started on Hawthorne). Even throwing in major novelists emerging over the past 30 years – for example, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, Michael Chabon, and Chuck Palahniuk—alters this reality not a whit.

The book's final chapter, "The New Covenant," contains some predictably desultory remarks about America's current secularized condition. Gelernter's displeasure would appear out of place, given all those packed megachurches and 24/7 evangelical radio stations. Unmoved by such a possibility, he would force upon us a new Great Awakening:

The next great American religious revival will start, my guess is, on college campuses—and it will start fairly soon. The need is great. In a spiritually dried-out land where "careers" alone are holy, the thirst is acute. Someone will start preaching. Audiences will be small at first, but young people want to hear this message: 'Forget your career and think about your family. Forget your rights and think about

your duties. Forget your bank account and think about your country. Forget yourself and think about your God.'...(S)omeday soon some sympathetic disciple of the founding fathers will compose the indispensable companion to our Bill of Rights...a Bill of Duties that conveys the exact same truths in terms of responsibility instead of entitlement.



Gelernter, ever thinking with his emotions (and possibly about his fame as well), fails to note that rights and duties inevitably collide. He appears interested only in America's fulfillment of biblical destiny at whatever the cost in blood and treasure.

That brings us back to the theme of American conservatism at war with itself.

Paul Gottfried and David Gelernter must be understood as representing extreme versions of opposite worldviews.

Gottfried would turn our country inward, restoring us to a supposedly better time when local and domestic conformity was highly prized and stringently enforced. Gelernter would transform America into a full-time Globocop, sermonizing with a Bible and a machine gun. Yet at the same time they share a haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy—and not in need of their counsel.

Conservatives as a whole are preferable to liberals, whose advocacy of mass immigration, racial favoritism, and welfarism is a lethal brew for any nation. But many on the Right operate on the assumption that our country's fate hinges on the health of the conservative movement. They are wrong. Conservatism is a means, not an end. Those craving an authentic Americanism would do well to read Samuel P. Huntington's book, *Who Are We?*, and then rent some Clint Eastwood movies. ■