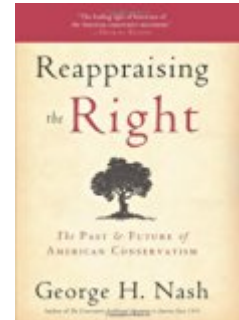


**George H. Nash.** *Reappraising the Right: The Past & Future of American Conservatism.* Wilmington: ISI Books, 2009. xix + 446 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-935191-65-0.



**Reviewed by** Jason Stahl

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We are now past the time when it could be suggested that academic historians have failed to take seriously the American political Right as a movement of historical import as the last twenty years have seen a proliferation of books and articles on the subject. Most interestingly, many of these academic studies have been written by political historians who would identify personally with the liberal/Left but who nevertheless take their conservative subjects of inquiry seriously as a political force in American life. However, such serious scholarly inquiry was not always the norm. When George H. Nash first published his book *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* in 1976, he was something of a lone practitioner in the “field” of American conservative history. This academic seclusion was undoubtedly exacerbated by Nash’s own personal conservatism, a political identity that placed him outside the dominant liberal/Left currents in the academy of the mid-seventies. Such a position led him immediately out of academia after graduate school in 1975 and he has never looked back. For

the past thirty-five years, he has operated as an “academic without portfolio”—an independent scholar who has written prolifically on the subject of the history of American conservatism.

His new book, *Reappraising the Right*, represents a seemingly exhaustive collection of his scholarly and non-scholarly output over this thirty-five-year career. Through five parts and thirty-two chapters consisting of every type of writing from articles and book chapters to op-eds, lectures, book introductions, and even book reviews, the editors at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) have not held back, even when they should have, in presenting the totality of Nash’s career.[1]

How does one best characterize this sprawling totality? For the purposes of this review, it is best to think of Nash’s career in two ways which stem directly from the title of this book. First, we have Nash the scholar of American conservatism—concerned primarily with *The Past of American Conservatism*. This is the Nash who wrote *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*

since 1945 and many of the essays in this book. This Nash is insightful, nuanced, and steeped in the historiography of American conservatism. He is a superb storyteller and someone who can make you truly understand individuals, their motivations, and their philosophies even if you do not agree with them politically.

Second, we have Nash the conservative political activist--concerned with *The Future of American Conservatism*. In his career as an independent scholar Nash has been supported by a now firmly entrenched conservative institutional network--what Nash himself calls in many essays in this book an institutional "conservative counterculture." This book itself is published by ISI, a longstanding conservative institution and publisher. Many of the essays contained in the book were originally published by conservative think tanks, magazines, journals, and publishing houses. In a strange way, Nash's career has nearly paralleled the rise of this institutional counterculture and it has provided him the resources to sustain a career as an intellectual outside of academia. Thus, in such a position, Nash has functioned as the preeminent conservative historian of conservatism--one who helps conservatives in the present form their identities for the future by presenting them with an accessible past. This Nash, the conservative political activist, is equally on display in this volume in shorter essays almost solely directed at other conservative activists.

Even though, for the purposes of this review, I am separating these "two Nashes," it is important to qualify my separation. My division is in some ways false given that all of Nash's writing, and the writing of any historian, can be seen as both a scholarly project and a political project--a fact that we should accept rather than pretend otherwise. Additionally, I do not mean to situate the second category of conservative political activist as a disparaging one. Every movement needs a movement historian and Nash performs this role dutifully. He is clearly a proud conservative who

wants to create a present and future conservative movement and no one should begrudge him this fact. However, the essays in this volume that serve this purpose are flatter possibly because they are by their very nature designed to flatter. They only sometimes challenge conservative perceptions of themselves and thus are much less nuanced, and much more interested in creating conservative "heroes," than the essays in the volume produced by the more "scholarly Nash."

It is with this "first Nash" that I will begin. If there is a unifying thesis to Nash's historical scholarship it is that postwar American conservatism is best seen as a coalition of five distinct impulses. From the mid-1940s to the 1960s, libertarians, traditionalists, and anticommunists made up this coalition. In the 1970s, two more impulses were added with the addition of neoconservatives and the interfaith Religious Right. Thus, Nash's historical scholarship often returns to the development of these varying strands; their arguments with one another; and finally, how they were able to overcome divisions and create a cohesive conservative movement.

Of the five parts of this book, part 3 is the clear stand out as an effort of historical scholarship. Entitled "Conservatism and the American Jewish Community," part 3 contains three essays that shine light on less well-known aspects of the conservative coalition while at the same time providing new interpretations on more familiar ones. As to the former, the essay "Jews for Joe McCarthy: The Rise and Fall of the American Jewish League Against Communism," one of the few previously unpublished works in the volume, shows the ideological power of militant anticommunism for conservatives in the late 1940s and the 1950s. This was so much the case that it even attracted adherents from one of the most reliably liberal constituencies in the United States--American Jews. Through his examination of the American Jewish League Against Communism, Nash shows how and why influential Jews came to be enlisted

in the fight against communism at home and abroad. Although Nash is careful not to overstate the group's power and influence, he nevertheless shows it as a small yet vibrant anticommunist thread of the conservative coalition—one that was a thorn in the side of liberal American Jewish groups and one that helped expose Soviet persecution of Jews. Most interestingly, the essay argues that the group engendered an extensive debate over anti-Semitism in the postwar American Right and in broader American culture with Nash persuasively concluding that the group helped to alleviate such sentiments in both areas.

The next essay in part 3, “Forgotten Godfathers: Premature Jewish Conservatives and the Rise of *National Review*,” continues these same unique argumentative threads as Nash details seven American Jews who were instrumental in the development of the central conservative institution of the 1950s, *The National Review*, and in helping that journal's founder, William F. Buckley, purge organized anti-Semitism from the conservative movement. In the 1940s and 1950s, all seven moved from various positions of left-wing radicalism to right-wing radicalism as they became disenchanted with both communism and liberalism. As they began their journey rightward, all seven were secular and downplayed their Jewish identity. Most interestingly, as they made their journey from left to right, four of the seven became affiliated with the Catholic Church. Nash argues persuasively that this had to do with the continuity and anticommunism of the Catholic Church as well as the “distinctive cultural environment” of *The National Review* (p. 222). However, none made the journey toward rediscovery of their Judaism—Orthodox or otherwise.

Such was obviously not the case for neoconservatives in the 1970s for whom their personal Judaism, or rediscovery of it, was much more important. Jewish neoconservatives were ardent Zionists who began a break with the liberal/Left in the late sixties as it radicalized and as some of

its more vocal components were perceived to be less supportive of Israel. This familiar story is ably told by Nash in his final essay of part 3, “Joining the Ranks: *Commentary* and American Conservatism.” However, in many ways, the story Nash tells in this section is much more nuanced as he details how and why neoconservatives moved from critiquing the Left from *outside* movement conservatism (in the 1970s) to *within* movement conservatism in the 1980s. Nash perceptively argues that there were several barriers neoconservatives had to cross in the seventies before they “crossed the Rubicon” into the Right (p. 232). Most important among these were the neoconservatives' cultural sensibility that the Right was without intellectual heft, their enduring liberal policy attachment to the welfare state, and their hope that the Democratic Party could be remolded in their image through such figures as Daniel Patrick Moynihan or Henry Jackson. It was only after all three were crossed or dismissed that neoconservatives became the fifth strand of the conservative coalition.

Other standout essays in this volume illuminate other known and less well-known aspects of Nash's conservative coalition. In part 1 of the book, “Conservatism Reappraised: Traditions, Institutions, Books, People,” two stand out in this regard. First, “The Place of Willmore Kendall in American Conservatism” interprets the influence of a less well-known conservative intellectual of the fifties and sixties—Willmore Kendall. Kendall, who was senior editor at *National Review* for eight years, was somewhat ignored in his own time and in the present because of his early death (in 1967) and because he was a scholar who produced essays and reviews as opposed to books. However, Nash convincingly argues that his iconoclastic conservatism, his role as the “Great Dissenter,” is ultimately what inhibited his significance in the overall movement (p. 64). Here was a man who did not fit neatly in any of Nash's coalition strands. As a devotee of John Maynard Keynes, he rejected libertarianism outright and he

disliked the dourness and Eurocentric nature of conservative traditionalists. He fit most comfortably in the anticommunist wing of the coalition, but even there his advocacy of “preventive war” against communist countries put him well outside the mainstream, even in the anticommunist wing of the movement. In the end, Nash convincingly argues that his greatest legacies to the movement, those still most evident today, were his distinctly American conservative populism and his idea of the conservative movement as engaged in a political and policy battle against liberalism.

If Kendall was an early developer of conservative populism, Richard Weaver was its elitist. Weaver is the subject of the other standout essay in part 1, “The Influence of Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* on American Conservatism.” Nash persuasively shows that Weaver was instrumental in the development of the intellectual foundations of conservative traditionalism, particularly its Southern Agrarian variety, through the publication of influential books, especially his *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948). In his almost wholesale personal and philosophical rejection of modernity, Weaver comfortably called for a civilized aristocracy and a healthy distrust of the middle class. In this way, he was often at intellectual war with the libertarian wing of the conservative coalition until his death in 1963.

In these more thought-provoking scholarly essays of the volume, Nash is only occasionally overcome by his sympathy for his subjects of inquiry. Nash’s own personal conservatism seems to have been most affected by Weaver, so it is not surprising that his affinity for his subject comes through in this essay (for Nash’s personal feelings on Weaver, see chapter 32, “How Firm a Foundation? The Prospects for American Conservatism” [pp. 355-356]). This affinity twice overwhelms Nash’s analysis, first when he notes that one of the three reasons Weaver was significant in the formation of postwar American conservatism was simply that he “was a ‘remarkable’ man” (p. 98).

Although the quotation is attributed to someone else, one cannot escape the fact that Nash is in agreement.

This is a small quibble, but the second concern is larger as Nash is somewhat incapable of forthrightly discussing the racial implications of Weaver’s ideas--and the racial component of the conservative coalition more generally. Posthumously, several of Weaver’s writings were used to support southern segregation. While this is acknowledged, Nash will only go so far as to say that such a development was a precursor of the so-called paleoconservative movement of the 1980s. However, why not, as other scholars have shown, place anti-civil rights and anti-integration organizing as another part of the conservative coalition in the forties, fifties, sixties, and even seventies (for more on the relationship between postwar conservatism, race, and anti-civil rights activism, see Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* [2000]; Joseph Crespi, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* [2009]; Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* [2007]; and Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* [2006])? Nash’s coalition quite conspicuously does not do this and his essays rarely discuss the issue of race in conservative postwar political organizing. A complete rendering of the conservative movement in the postwar period would have to contain a more forthright discussion of the role of race in conservative coalition building.

Beyond this major omission, however, Nash’s articulation of the five impulses of the conservative movement rings true. He ably describes their points of disagreement, but, more important, he also is able to delineate how and why the coalition was able to coalesce at different points in the postwar period. In many of the essays he agrees with the historiographic consensus that a shared

anticommunism and antiliberalism provided the necessary “coalition glue” in the forties and fifties. In other essays, he relates the well-known development of conservative “fusionism” around Buckley and *The National Review*. Finally, he returns to Ronald Reagan’s presidency in multiple essays in order to forward the argument that Reagan, as a movement conservative himself, was able to “embody all [five conservative] impulses simultaneously” (p. 345). The most interesting of these essays occurs in part 5 of the book, “Wither Conservatism?” In the essay “Ronald Reagan’s Legacy and American Conservatism,” Nash shows not only how Reagan was able to perform this “emblematic and ecumenical function,” but also how conservatives have worked to keep that connective function in place after Reagan left office (p. 345).

In showing the importance of a deceased president in the formation of modern conservative identities, Nash attempts to argue that this “is little more than a right wing equivalent of the liberal cult of John F. Kennedy’s Camelot” (p. 341). However, I know of no present-day liberal who engages in constant “Kennedy nostalgia” in the same way Reagan is regularly invoked by conservative activists and politicians. No, there is something deeper going on here and it is directly related to the “second Nash”—the conservative political activist—that we see in this collection of essays. As I said at the beginning of this review, it is this Nash who helps conservatives in the present form their identities for the future by presenting them with an accessible past.

The main way Nash creates this accessible past is through flat “hero narratives” for conservatives to emulate in the present and future. Reagan is *the* essential hero in this regard as he forged the five-part conservative coalition into a genuine political juggernaut. However, the chapters on John Chamberlain, Whittaker Chambers, John East, Friedrich Hayek, Russell Kirk, Forrest McDonald, E. Victor Milone, Ernest van den Haag,

and Francis Graham Wilson—as well as the entire second part on Buckley and the *National Review*—serve much the same “hero production” function. All, in their own way, were rebels against liberalism/socialism/communism and you (“you” the present-day conservative) need to be a rebel as well! There is a whole vibrant conservative counterculture for you to participate in (see the chapters on think tanks and Hillsdale College)! Again, it is not a problem that Nash has ably served this role in the conservative movement. Movements need their heroes and their historians of these heroes. However, historians of the Right will find little new historical ground broken in the essays that are written in this vein.

Nevertheless, Nash the conservative political activist clearly has worries about the current state and future of the conservative movement and it is in the essays where he lets these worries surface that this “second Nash” can be quite interesting and perceptive. It is clear that Nash’s biggest fears revolve around the five-part conservative coalition he has charted through his work. These fears take on two main manifestations: “crack-up” and “cocooning.”

These fears are best expressed in two chapters in part 5 of the book, “Whither Conservatism.” In chapter 30, “The Uneasy Future of American Conservatism,” presented at a conference at a conservative university in February 2006, Nash delineates his worries of a possible conservative “crack-up” of the five-part coalition. Here he argues perceptively that past “fusers” of the coalition—Buckley’s *National Review*, Reagan, and the Cold War—were either no longer available for fusion or were not as authoritatively situated as they once were. Additionally, but less persuasively, Nash argues that the presidency of George W. Bush presented an “*internal* challenge” to the cohesiveness of the conservative coalition (p. 332). Nash argues that this occurred because some of Bush’s policies angered certain elements of the coalition—particularly libertarians. However,

even Nash seems to eventually concede that this internal challenge was basically small and not influential as “the seriousness of the terrorist threat, and the stridency and near hysteria of the anti-war Left, have done much to suppress any inclination on the right to defect from the man in the White House” (p. 334). In other words, terrorism had replaced communism as a new “movement fuser” while antiliberalism/anti-leftism could still, as it always had, function as another form of fusion. Nash seems on firmer ground in this interpretation. Additionally, and perceptively, Nash notes that by 2006 the movement had become “thoroughly institutionalized” and thus would not be going anywhere anytime soon (p. 335).

However, by the final essay in the book, “How Firm a Foundation? The Prospects for American Conservatism,” Nash seems slightly less sure of the movement’s future. Written in October 2008 on the eve of Barack Obama’s election, he reiterates his fears of a conservative “crack-up.” Once again, he argues that the movement has strong enough roots and a powerful enough “enemy on the Left” to hold it together (p. 362). Additionally, the movement can now put President Bush behind it—who, incidentally, Nash absurdly helps to characterize as a “liberal Republican administration” (p. 358). In this way, liberalism and Republicanism are at fault but conservatism as a philosophy is left unharmed. Additionally, a new Reaganite “fuser” of the movement had emerged in the person of Sarah Palin, who Nash argues aroused “an intensity not felt on the American Right since the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater” (pp. 362-363).

But this same essay also adds a new fear for conservatives beyond the possibility of a “crack-up.” This fear is that conservatives, through their media and institutions, will “cocoon” themselves off from wider American culture and society (p. 365). In other words, the development of a conservative counterculture—in think tanks, talk radio, Fox News, and right-wing blogs—has been turned

into a possible negative as conservatives can sustain a movement but not build a wider one. As an intellectual, this seems to trouble Nash the most. As a historian, one would guess, he also notices the distinct similarity of this occurrence to the sectarian Left of the seventies. His final admonition, that to achieve conservative goals “we must communicate in language that connects not only with our own coterie but with the great majority of the American people” as well could have just as easily been spoken by a liberal Democrat to the Left in 1972 (p. 365).

In short, then, the two sides of Nash have much to teach us about the past and future of American conservatism. Nash the scholar, even in his older work, continues to illuminate darkened corners of the postwar conservative coalition while Nash the conservative political activist can sometimes offer trenchant critiques of conservatism from within the movement. Both have their place and this volume showcases the best of each.

#### Note

[1]. The most conspicuous area where this is the case is in part 4 of the book, “Herbert Hoover: A Neglected Conservative Sage?” While Nash has written extensively on Hoover in the past, including his three-volume biography and his 1987 book *Herbert Hoover and Stanford University*, the bulk of this section is an essay regarding the political relationship between Calvin Coolidge and Hoover—an essay that has very little, if anything, to do with the past or future of American conservatism. The other three essays in this section are interesting and attempt to discuss Hoover’s conservatism, but ultimately they are too short to carry the intellectual weight of the entire part of the book. This reviewer would have liked to see this part, along with some of the book’s extremely short pieces—book reviews, book introductions, etc.—cut for brevity and cohesiveness. George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, vols. 1-3 (New York: Norton, 1983, 1988, 1996); and George H.

Nash, *Herbert Hoover and Stanford University*  
(Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987).

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