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# Rolling Back the 20th Century

by WILLIAM GREIDER

## I. Back to the Future

George W. Bush, properly understood, represents the third and most powerful wave in the right's long-running assault on the governing order created by twentieth-century liberalism. The first wave was Ronald Reagan, whose election in 1980 allowed movement conservatives finally to attain governing power (their flame was first lit by Barry Goldwater back in 1964). Reagan unfurled many bold ideological banners for right-wing reform and established the political viability of enacting regressive tax cuts, but he accomplished very little reordering of government, much less shrinking of it. The second wave was Newt Gingrich, whose capture of the House majority in 1994 gave Republicans control of Congress for the first time in two generations. Despite some landmark victories like welfare reform, Gingrich flamed out quickly, a zealous revolutionary ineffective as legislative leader.

George Bush II may be as shallow as he appears, but his presidency represents a far more formidable challenge than either Reagan or Gingrich. His potential does not emanate from an amiable personality (Al Gore, remember, outpolled him in 2000) or even the sky-high ratings generated by 9/11 and war. Bush's governing strength is anchored in the long, hard-driving movement of the right that now owns all three branches of the federal government. Its unified ranks allow him to govern aggressively, despite slender GOP majorities in the House and Senate and the public's general indifference to the right's domestic program.

The movement's grand ambition--one can no longer say grandiose--is to roll back the twentieth century, quite literally. That is, defenestrate the federal government and reduce its scale and powers to a level well below what it was before the New Deal's centralization. With that accomplished, movement conservatives envision a restored society in which the prevailing values and power relationships resemble the America that existed around 1900, when William McKinley was President. Governing authority and resources are dispersed from Washington, returned to local levels and also to individuals and private institutions, most notably corporations and religious

organizations. The primacy of private property rights is re-established over the shared public priorities expressed in government regulation. Above all, private wealth--both enterprises and individuals with higher incomes--are permanently insulated from the progressive claims of the graduated income tax.

These broad objectives may sound reactionary and destructive (in historical terms they are), but hard-right conservatives see themselves as liberating reformers, not destroyers, who are rescuing old American virtues of self-reliance and individual autonomy from the clutches of collective action and "statist" left-wingers. They do not expect any of these far-reaching goals to be fulfilled during Bush's tenure, but they do assume that history is on their side and that the next wave will come along soon (not an unreasonable expectation, given their great gains during the past thirty years). Right-wingers--who once seemed frothy and fratricidal--now understand that three steps forward, two steps back still adds up to forward progress. It's a long march, they say. Stick together, because we are winning.

Many opponents and critics (myself included) have found the right's historic vision so improbable that we tend to guffaw and misjudge the political potency of what it has put together. We might ask ourselves: If these ideas are so self-evidently cockeyed and reactionary, why do they keep advancing? The right's unifying idea--get the government out of our lives--has broad popular appeal, at least on a sentimental level, because it represents an authentic core value in the American experience ("Don't tread on me" was a slogan in the Revolution). But the true source of its strength is the movement's fluid architecture and durability over time, not the passing personalities of Reagan-Gingrich-Bush or even the big money from business. The movement has a substantial base that believes in its ideological vision--people alarmed by cultural change or injured in some way by government intrusions, coupled with economic interests that have very strong reasons to get government off their backs--and the right has created the political mechanics that allow these disparate elements to pull together. Cosmopolitan corporate executives hold their noses and go along with Christian activists trying to stamp out "decadent" liberal culture. Fed-up working-class conservatives support business's assaults on their common enemy, liberal government, even though they may be personally injured when business objectives triumph.

The right's power also feeds off the general decay in the political system--the widely shared and often justifiable resentments felt toward big government, which no longer seems to address the common concerns of ordinary citizens.

I am not predicting that the right will win the governing majority that could enact the whole program, in a kind of right-wing New Deal--and I will get to some reasons why I expect their cause to fail eventually. The farther they advance, however, the less inevitable is their failure.