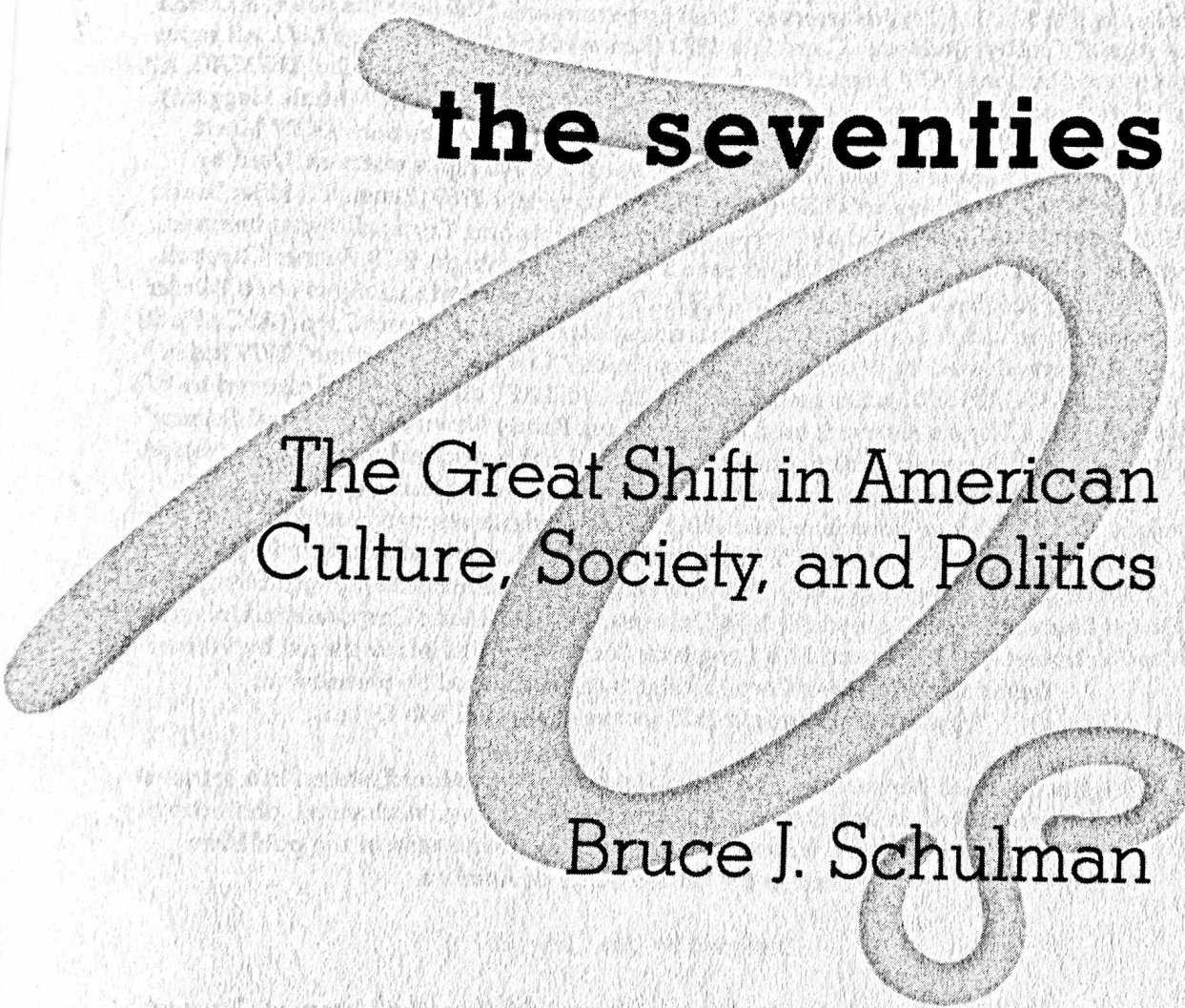




the seventies

The Great Shift in American
Culture, Society, and Politics

Bruce J. Schulman



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"THE MINUTEMEN ARE TURNING IN THEIR GRAVES"

The New Right and the Tax Revolt

SEVENTIES AMERICA REMAINED AMBIVALENT ABOUT conservatism. The American right seemingly belonged on the lunatic fringe.¹ Most establishment experts had simply not heard the thunder on the right—the rise of conservatism in the years before 1980 into a potent ideological and political force in American life. In an unusually astute remark, a New Right financier and organizer, Richard Viguerie, declared that the election of 1980 marked the first modern conservative landslide, but not the first modern antiliberal landslide. That had been 1968, when liberal poster boy Hubert Humphrey pulled a paltry 40 percent share of the vote against Richard Nixon and George C. Wallace.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there had been plenty of discontent with and antagonism toward liberalism: hard hats outraged by hippies and antiwar protesters; parents, mainly northern white ethnics, hostile to forced busing; born-again Christians disturbed about sex on television and sex education in the schools; antifeminists frightened by the ERA; blue-collar workers fed up with seemingly profligate welfare spending; right-to-lifers fighting against legal abortions; business interests resisting excessive regulation. "Things are going mighty wrong when respect for law is gone and it seems that everyone hates the uniform," country singer Ernest Tubb crooned, capturing this revulsion against the left. "It's America: Love It or Leave It."²

As "a member of the silent majority," one North Carolinian had written President Nixon at the beginning of the decade, "I have never asked what anyone in government or this country could do for me; but rather have kept my mouth shut, paid my taxes and basically asked to be left alone." It "is time the law abiding, tax paying white middle class started looking to the federal government for something besides oppression."³

Yet before Ronald Reagan's stunning victory in 1980, this broad antiliberal phalanx had never coalesced into anything like a coherent conservative coalition or movement. Liberals and liberalism had angered many Americans, but most voters had been unwilling to identify themselves with conservatism. As late as the mid-1970s, the Republican right still carried the taint of Goldwaterite extremism. It evoked fears of race baiting, hard-line anticommunism, and the destruction of social security and other beloved government programs. Working Americans associated conservatism with an assault on unions, deregulation of business, and the weakening of environmental protections.

But by 1980, a vague antiliberalism had transformed into avowed conservatism. Americans were voting for Reagan. The metamorphosis, however, did not occur overnight. The first step involved organization: forging conservatism into a powerful movement through the construction of a New Right that could raise money, support candidates, create issues, and mobilize millions of voters, including millions of previously disorganized and largely nonpolitical evangelical Christians.

Second, movement leaders had to tame conservatism, to soften and domesticate it. Conservatives needed to sell their philosophy to Michigan hard hats, South Boston housewives, Florida retirees and California aerospace workers—Americans who found its basic tenets attractive but remained wary of its hard edges.

Finally, the right needed a match—something to ignite a grass-roots chain reaction. Conservatism would find it with the tax revolt of the late 1970s, and the economic turmoil of the era would provide its tinder. Where previously no flame had been able to burn, the disaffection of the Seventies would provide pure oxygen. Out of the fire something entirely new would emerge: a love-it-or-hate-it political force that would indelibly reshape the political landscape and elect as president its once absurdly extremist leader, Ronald Reagan, who would go on to make the once orphaned movement he embodied more popular still.

The New Right Network

The decades before the Seventies had not been kind to American conservatism. From the 1930s through the 1960s, conservatives attracted no mass constituency, as the vast majority of Americans embraced the liberal New Deal coalition. The old right also lacked coherence. Bitterly divided among themselves, conservatives could not agree on a program or unite into powerful organizations.

Nor did conservatives possess a real home. Before the mid-1960s, a moderate eastern establishment dominated the Republican party. It represented what their leader, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, called "Modern Republicanism," a gentle corrective to New Deal liberalism that nonetheless accepted the necessity of the welfare state and the existence of the labor movement. Modern Republicans would not rule out negotiations with the Soviet Union and tacitly accepted the division of the world into rival blocs. At the very least, they would not contemplate a war to roll back communism in Eastern Europe. These eastern Republicans—men like President Eisenhower and New York senator Kenneth Keating in the 1950s and New York governor Nelson Rockefeller and Pennsylvania governor William Scranton in the 1960s—also affected a moderate style and manner. Overt displays of religious piety or patriotic enthusiasm made them uncomfortable.

In those days, committed conservatives toiled in the wilderness—in fringe organizations, second-rate colleges, unread publications. In the 1950s and 1960s, according to Nixon aide Richard Whalen, the conservative movement was long on "egotists, dogmatists, hucksters and eccentrics, all engaged in a childish sandbox politics and being very noisy about it." They formed not so much the radical right that opponents charged, Whalen reflected, but an "irrelevant Right."⁴

Still, the fledgling conservative movement found some important voices in the wilderness, voices that would, in Richard Viguerie's terms, form the foundations of the modern New Right. The first was William F. Buckley, Jr. Buckley managed to unite disparate factions of conservatives—to pull together traditionalist, religious conservatives worried about moral decay, libertarian free-marketeers concerned about government interference with the economy, and hard-line anticommunists primarily interested in the twilight struggle against the Soviets. Buckley created a forum for all conservatives in the pages of his magazine, the *National Review*, and in 1960 helped found the principal conservative youth group, Young Americans for Freedom.⁵

Senator Barry Goldwater became the second pillar of modern conservatism. Unlike earlier Republican leaders, Goldwater was an authentic conservative. Against the prevailing consensus, he promised "a choice not an echo." And indeed, Goldwater advocated positions none of his Republican rivals would even have contemplated: rapid escalation of the war in Vietnam, including possible use of tactical nuclear weapons; elimination of popular government programs; opposition to the Civil Rights Act. "In your heart, you know he's right,"

Goldwater's loyal admirers declared. "Yeah, far right" responded his opponents. Most Americans, the overwhelming majority, rejected Goldwater in 1964, deciding, as the opposing slogan charged, "In your guts, you know he's nuts."

Still, the Goldwater campaign proved crucial to the development of modern conservatism. It energized a generation of conservative activists, veterans of Young Americans for Freedom like Patrick Buchanan, Howard Phillips, Richard Viguerie, Robert Bauman, and Tom Huston. They would serve in the Nixon and Reagan administrations and found New Right organizations. It also marked the emergence of Ronald Reagan, who first entered national politics to campaign on Goldwater's behalf. Most important, the Goldwater campaign culminated a long grass-roots effort by young conservatives to take over the Republican party and transform it into a truly conservative organization. They did not succeed immediately, but they quickly built conservatism into the dominant force within the national Republican party.⁶

Building on the foundations laid by Goldwater, Buckley, and their supporters, a revived conservative movement emerged after 1970. By the middle of the decade, American conservatism had become "an institutionalized, disciplined, well-organized and well-financed movement of loosely knit affiliates."⁷ This New Right, as it was called, included large umbrella groups like the American Conservative Union and the Conservative Caucus, youth organizations like Young Americans for Freedom, think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, publications like *Conservative Digest*, lobbying organizations, and political action committees.

New Right leader Richard Viguerie summarized the various elements of the emerging conservative movement as "the Four Keys to Our Success." First, Viguerie identified single-issue groups. Consciously mirroring liberal activists like NOW, the NAACP, the Sierra Club, and Planned Parenthood, the emerging conservative alliance tapped into a number of existing and newly formed single-issue groups like the National Rifle Association, Stop-ERA, and a number of right-to-life organizations. These groups could mobilize millions of people around hot-button issues like gun control and abortion, people who might not share a broader conservative agenda or agree on other issues.⁸

Multi-issue, broad-spectrum conservative organizations formed the second component of the New Right network—groups like the Conservative Caucus, the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, the Heritage Foundation, and the National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC). Although they lacked the mass support of the NRA or the pro-life movement, these groups could map out a broad-based conservative agenda and organize

the pressure groups into an effective movement, teaching the techniques of lobbying, fund raising, and grass-roots organizing. They schooled local and single-issue constituencies in guerrilla theater and protest tactics, helped them qualify ballot initiatives, and printed their newsletters.

These broad-spectrum organizations also generated a leadership cadre for the movement, nurturing the careers of men like Paul Weyrich, Howard Phillips, and Terry Dolan. Dolan, for example, headed NCPAC and proved instrumental in the unseating of liberal senators in 1980. He identified opposing candidates, coordinated efforts of many local and single-issue groups, and raised the money. In short, he masterminded the operation.

Viguerie termed the third key feature of the New Right coalition politics; others called it the New Right network or the New Right interlocking directorate. Although no "vast right wing conspiracy" ever emerged, the New Right constructed a well-disciplined national network, linking together many local groups that organized from time to time in response to specific concerns. Many movement leaders, including conservative organizers like Dolan and Viguerie, activists like Schlafly, religious figures such as the Reverend Jerry Falwell, and journalists like Pat Buchanan met regularly in Washington with conservative congressmen and senators to plan strategies and establish objectives. During the late 1970s, they helped defeat a common situs picketing law championed by organized labor, the creation of a new consumer protection agency, and federal financing of congressional elections.⁹

This network assembled for the first time in August 1974, when President Gerald Ford announced his selection of Nelson Rockefeller as vice president—the same liberal Republican who had opposed Goldwater for the GOP presidential nomination in 1964. Outraged, a group of fourteen young conservatives met in Richard Viguerie's home. They immediately recognized their impotence in the face of this insult; at that time, conservatives lacked the strength to block Rockefeller's confirmation on Capitol Hill.

Disappointment clarified the need for extensive consultation and more rigorous organization. Larger, more successful conservative planning sessions became routine. Often at these meetings, leaders of local struggles involving school textbooks or gay rights or abortion would participate. So although they never built a single, hierarchical organization, the various New Right groups formed a well-disciplined, interlocking network. "Organization is our bag," Paul Weyrich declared. "We preach and teach nothing but organization."¹⁰

Fourth and finally, the New Right pioneered and perfected a new mode of political communication. "Like all successful political movements," Viguerie

declared, "we must have a method of communicating with each other," and for conservatives in the 1970s, that method was direct mail. "Frankly," the New Right guru admitted in 1981, "the conservative movement is where it is today because of direct mail. Without direct mail, there would be no effective counterforce to liberalism."¹¹

Viguerie and his fellow conservatives believed they had no choice but to operate outside standard channels of communication, to make an end run around the traditional media, which they insisted were controlled by liberals. Ironically, direct mail organization and solicitation owed its success to the post-Watergate reforms in campaign finance laws. The new regulations placed strict curbs on individual donations to political candidates, ending officeholders' reliance on a few rich fat cats. Limiting individual contributions to \$1,000, campaign finance reforms put a premium on being able to reach and bundle together large numbers of small donors.¹²

Direct mail made that possible. From his vast computer facility in Falls Church, Virginia, Richard Viguerie's operation alone collected the names of 15 million conservatives, potential donors to New Right candidates and causes. Opponents so feared the power of Viguerie's IBM mainframes and magnetic tape units that the head of the United Auto Workers Community Action Project believed that Viguerie had the capacity to generate as much money for a campaign as the entire American labor movement.¹³

Direct mail soon became a tool not merely for fund raising but for communication and organization. "The purpose of direct mail," Viguerie explained in 1978, "isn't just to raise funds. We are building a movement. Direct mail is a way to get people involved, to educate them, to turn out the vote. Direct mail is a form of advertising and conservatives have found a way to communicate with people and pay for the communication."¹⁴

A well-placed mailing could generate thousands of letters and telephone calls to congressmen. In one famous "panic letter," a mailing from the Conservative Caucus included two flags—the red, white, and blue of Old Glory and the white flag of surrender. After attacking the proposed Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) with the Soviet Union, the mailing warned, "You and I must choose—and the Senate must decide—whether we will personally accept the White Flag of Surrender as America's banner." Another notoriously effective solicitation from Americans for LIFE asked recipients to "take a second look at the outrageous pro-abortion political propaganda I've enclosed and then help me STOP THE BABY KILLERS by signing and mailing the enclosed

anti-abortion postcards to your U.S. Senators (You'll find a list of all U.S. Senators on the back of that sickening baby killer propaganda)."¹⁵

By the late 1970s, conservatives had organized. Through the New Right network, they had formed a movement. But organization would have meant little without issues around which to organize, and for the first time since the 1930s, conservatives felt they had them. Basically, the New Right agenda revolved around three main areas of concern. The first was national defense. Movement conservatives deeply resented and passionately resisted the nation's seeming loss of international dominance after Vietnam. In particular, they rejected the stabilization and thawing of the cold war that Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger had launched and that Jimmy Carter continued. The New Right distrusted the Chinese and opposed all negotiations with the Soviets. They especially opposed arms control and favored a major buildup of American military might. A country western hit, by a singer calling himself Stonewall Jackson, captured this sentiment in the mid-1970s. "The minutemen are turning in their graves," Jackson warned. "Washington and Jefferson are crying tears of shame. To see these men who'd rather live as slaves, the minutemen are turning in their graves."

Politicians "have lied to the American people about the Soviet threat," one New Right leader told an *Atlantic Monthly* reporter in 1978. "They indicate that we can work things out with the Russians instead of spelling out that this is the enemy, the same as Nazi Germany. When have you heard a leader of the free world say that freedom is the way of the future and someday will prevail over slavery? . . . It's hardly a fair fight if one side believes it is a fight to the death and the other side doesn't think it's a fight at all."¹⁶

Late in 1977, the New Right mobilized a massive campaign against the Panama Canal treaty. Nine million cards and letters flooded the postal system, asking people to express opposition to the canal giveaway. Although almost all establishment voices—in business, academia, and government—supported the treaty, movement conservatives waged a spirited battle. Surprising nearly everyone, they fell just two votes short of defeating the treaty in the Senate.

Defeat on Capitol Hill turned into victory at the polls and turned out new legions of conservative voters. In 1978 and 1980, twenty supporters of the canal treaty lost their seats, while only one opponent met defeat. In the New Hampshire U.S. Senate race, an unknown thirty-seven-year-old former airline pilot named Gordon Humphrey made the election a referendum on the canal and unseated Democratic incumbent Tom McIntyre. The canal fight also built a close relationship between the New Right network and the treaty's most

famous opponent, Ronald Reagan. "The canal is ours," Reagan famously declared. "We built it, we paid for it. And we intend to keep it."¹⁷

The rising tide of nationalist sentiment about the canal, the Soviet Union, and the military budget surprised and pleased conservatives. In 1980, the Charlie Daniels Band acknowledged it appreciatively in their hit song "In America." The band confessed that "a lot of people are saying that America's fixin' to fall." But the decline had been reversed: Lady Liberty had regained her footing and the Russians had sure as hell watch out. Americans, the song concluded, were "walking real proud and talking real loud again."¹⁸

In the skepticism that conservatives showed diplomats and policy experts, the canal fight also pointed up a second crucial aspect of the emerging New Right agenda: antielitism. This passionate class resentment represented a profound shift for American conservatism. In his 1962 book *Conservatism in America*, historian Clinton Rossiter had identified the classic political style of American conservatives. Conservatives, Rossiter explained, were suspicious of grass-roots activism and drew support principally from people "who have a sizable stake in the established order." The left, on the contrary, "is made up of those who demanded wider popular participation in public life and draw particular support from the disinherited and disgruntled."¹⁹

Just ten years later, that traditional distinction no longer applied. New Right strategists like Kevin Phillips and Patrick Buchanan realized that conservatives need not fit the image of country club Republicanism. They could reverse all that, linking liberals with a snooty, snobbish, out-of-town establishment and allying themselves with ordinary folks.²⁰

This antielitism manifested itself in resentment against bureaucrats and "pointy-headed intellectuals," the alleged architects of busing and affirmative action, the haughty elite who sneered at Mom, apple pie, and the flag. This conservative version of class warfare emerged in challenges to schoolteachers and administrators over which textbooks to assign, curricula to follow, and library books to retain. It expressed itself as attacks on universities and their faculty and against the national news media.

Spiro T. Agnew, the attack-dog vice president under Richard Nixon, perfected this political style. With help (and some fancy vocabulary) from speechwriter William Safire, Agnew assailed the liberal bias in the media and lambasted the press as "nattering nabobs of negativism." The vice president repeatedly rallied the "hardhats," "the forgotten Americans," and the "Middle Americans" against an enemy he called elitist, radical chic, limousine liberals.

At a Republican party dinner in Houston, Texas, Agnew attacked college students and their professors. Education, he charged, "is being redefined at the demand of the uneducated to suit the ideas of the uneducated." Students attend college to "proclaim rather than to learn," encouraged by an "effete corps of impudent snobs that characterize themselves as intellectuals."²¹

The New Right also charged the liberal establishment with immorality. Liberal elites in the universities, the press, and the government, conservatives declared, had undercut traditional notions of decency and undermined established sources of authority. In the New Right's terms, the nation's ruling class displayed contempt for "family values." Thus, efforts to protect and restore family values formed the third major component of the emerging New Right agenda.²²

The family values coalition included the antifeminism personified by Phyllis Schlafly; the right-to-life movement, which fought to place new restrictions on abortion after the Supreme Court legalized the procedure in *Roe v. Wade*; and textbook protests, a series of local efforts to remove supposedly immoral textbooks or library books and to purify the curriculum in public schools. The issue first received national attention during the 1974 West Virginia textbook battle. Alice Moore, a young mother of four school-aged children in Charleston, West Virginia, emerged as the leader of protests against what her children were being taught in the schools. She first assailed the school's sex education program and won election to the school board based on her opposition to it. Led by Moore, the new board decided to reform the curriculum, removing such authors as black militant Eldridge Cleaver and Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti from the school's assigned readings.²³

Moore proved so successful and her local struggle gained such national attention because of their connections to the burgeoning conservative network. The Heritage Foundation sent a lawyer to represent Moore and other conservative parents. Texas activists, skilled in battles in the Lone Star State, came to West Virginia to help organize. In the aftermath of the West Virginia fight, the Heritage Foundation founded and bankrolled the National Congress for Educational Excellence, which united some 200 parents' groups seeking curriculum changes around the country.²⁴

Homosexuality, especially civil rights protections for homosexuals in general and gay teachers in particular, constituted another major front in the battle over family values. In 1977, former beauty queen Anita Bryant, best known as the spokesperson for the Florida citrus industry, led a successful ref-

erendum campaign to repeal a Miami gay rights ordinance. The national New Right network heavily financed the Miami campaign and helped build Bryant's organization, Save Our Children. Bryant and her allies mounted similar efforts across the nation, scoring successes in Oregon, Minnesota, and Kansas in the late Seventies.²⁵

Finally, the profamily coalition drew considerable strength from the Christian schools movement and the broader Christian right that developed around it. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Christian schools had burgeoned in response to court-ordered racial integration and the banning of prayer in school. As religious-oriented nonprofits, these fundamentalist academies paid no federal taxes, and a number of civil rights groups, viewing these lily-white academies as nothing but an attempt to resist racial integration, pressed the government to revoke their tax exemptions.²⁶

In 1978, Jimmy Carter's new IRS commissioner, Jerome Kurtz, issued new regulations and moved to withdraw the exemptions. Provoked, conservative Christians launched a battle against the IRS and the federal government. For generations, the fundamentalist right had remained politically quiescent. As a rule, evangelical Christians had avoided partisan politics and even sat out most elections. Focused on matters of individual salvation, they had paid little attention to national politics and had been content to withdraw from the corrupt secular world and build their own shelters from the storm.²⁷

The IRS fight threatened one of these havens and energized the Christian right. "It kicked the sleeping dog," Richard Viguerie remembered. "It galvanized the religious right. It was the spark that ignited the religious right's involvement in real politics."²⁸ The proposed regulations produced more than 125,000 letters of protest. As IRS chief, Kurtz was accustomed to hate mail, but the anonymous threats surrounding the Christian academies proved so alarming that the commissioner requested Secret Service protection for his family.²⁹

The furor over tax exemptions for Christian academies also linked religious conservatives to the broader tax revolt of the 1970s, uniting religious and secular conservatives against a common enemy. In 1979, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, an ambitious minister and shrewd organizer from Lynchburg, Virginia, formed the Moral Majority, drawing much of its staff and resources from the school debate. The organization would play a key role in Ronald Reagan's race for the Republican presidential nomination. A year later, the Republican party

included a plank in its party platform opposing the "regulatory vendetta launched by Mr. Carter's IRS Commissioner against independent schools."³⁰

This potent coalition—and the ambitious agenda around which it was shaped—were formidable achievements. But if conservatives hoped to succeed in American politics, they would have to reach out more broadly. A Jewish teacher in New York, discouraged by black nationalism in the schools and crime in the neighborhood, might be ripe for conservative pickings but would worry about a movement led by evangelical Protestants committed to creating a Christian republic. A Polish Catholic steelworker in Chicago might like to see America stand tall against the commies, but would not want anyone to mess with his union. An Oregon lumberjack might resent tree-hugging environmentalists and their restrictions on logging, but not want to remove sex education from the schools or *Playboy* and *Penthouse* from the local convenience stores. A small businessman in Dubuque wants the IRS off her back but cannot embrace a foreign policy she thinks might start another world war.

So even if the country was moving in the direction the New Right was leading it, there remained a residual scariness about the conservative movement. Conservatives seemed too ready, in pop parodist Randy Newman's words, to "drop the big one and pulverize them." Asia's "crowded and Europe's too old, Africa's far too hot, and Canada's too cold," crooned Newman, satirizing the tone of a New Right patriot. "South America stole our name. Let's drop the big one and there'll be no one left to blame."³¹

But during the early 1970s, as the movement organized, a new strain of conservative thought emerged that would help smooth the edges of conservatism and sell its worldview. Contemporaneous with the rise of the New Right, but mainly outside of it, a more practical and politically palatable conservative philosophy was developing in the work of the so-called neoconservatives.

Refugees from the campus struggles and leftist politics of the 1960s, the neoconservatives had defected from the liberal camp and included even some ex-socialists among their ranks. Highly educated and urban, they were largely Jewish and Roman Catholic—strangers in the suburban Protestant Sunbelt communities that nourished the New Right. They had grown up in the old left (against which the 1960s new left had rebelled) and found themselves sickened by the excesses of radical youth, especially their embrace of Chairman Mao and Ho Chi Minh and their attacks on the university.

The neoconservative high command included influential magazine editors, such as Norman Podhoretz of *Commentary*, Martin Peretz of the *New*

Republic, and Irving Kristol of the *Public Interest*. It drew on the brain power of prominent scholars like Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and James Q. Wilson. And it claimed a number of political figures, most prominently future U.N. ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick and New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Neoconservatives, in Irving Kristol's famous definition, were "liberals who've been mugged by reality." They were former leftists who came to share conclusions with conservatives, but whose rightward tilt seemed more practical, less motivated by crusading principle, closer to the mainstream of American political debate. On foreign policy, for instance, neoconservatives remained rigorously hawkish; they largely supported the war in Vietnam, the overthrow of Chilean leftist Salvador Allende, and the Nicaraguan contras in their guerrilla war against the Marxist Sandinista government. But they lacked the religious zeal that motivated most movement conservatives. Instead they grounded their passionate anticommunism in realpolitik, a cool-headed calculus of national interest.

As a matter of basic philosophy, neoconservatives shied away from the crusading ideologies of other American conservatives. They believed, as did the champions of family values, that the left had forsaken moral values, but they had no desire to establish a Christian republic or a traditional hierarchical society. Like the libertarian, free-market conservatives, neoconservatives asserted that liberal big government interfered too much with the market, but they did not oppose all economic regulation on principle. They opposed inefficient, counterproductive, wrongheaded programs without threatening to eliminate social security or shut off Medicare payments to the elderly.³²

Neoconservatism always remained a primarily intellectual movement. Adherents never developed any neoconservative party or organization. Nevertheless, they exerted influence well beyond their small numbers, reshaping policy debate and political strategy in the late 1970s. Most important, they domesticated American conservatism; they redefined it in terms that made it a responsible alternative to liberalism. They offered Ronald Reagan intellectual and political legitimacy, echoing Reagan's odyssey from New Deal liberal to disaffected scourge of the left.³³

Neoconservatives helped to turn the growing conservative political movement into a powerful mainstream force, but building a winning conservative coalition required more than an appealing ideology and a well-organized, energized cadre of activists. It required popular leadership and effective com-

munication (which Ronald Reagan would provide). And it needed an issue to unite its various factions, cement its disparate, multifaceted agenda, enliven a mass constituency, and empower a movement that had been gestating for a decade. That political birth came in the tax revolt of the late 1970s.

From Tax Shifts to Tax Cuts: Origins of the Tax Revolt

The tax revolt began in California. After the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, tax-cutting and service-slashing popular initiatives swept the nation. More than twenty states, from Maine to Alaska, rapidly followed California's lead. The tax revolt overran high-tax states like Massachusetts, which enacted property tax caps in its Proposition 2 1/2 and even low-tax states like Idaho, which barely had any taxation to rebel against.

In California, protests against property taxation had erupted regularly since World War II. The state's phenomenal growth and soaring property values stung homeowners with huge increases in their tax bills even though prevailing tax rates hardly changed. In 1957, homeowners in the San Gabriel Valley, a mushrooming community on the suburban frontier east of downtown Los Angeles, opened their mailboxes to find 30 to 50 percent jumps in their property tax assessments and a new levy to fund school construction. The steep hikes ignited months of resistance, including a mass meeting at the Los Angeles Coliseum that drew more than 6,000 angry homeowners.³⁴

The San Gabriel flare-up, like most such tax protests, fizzled quickly. The indignation remained local, usually manifesting itself in immediate, unorganized responses to the arrival of tax bills in the mail. Most protesters, even the leaders of the hastily assembled neighborhood groups, possessed little political experience. The very names of these groups advertised their amateur status: cutesy acronyms like OUCH (Organization of United California Homeowners) and TUFF (Taxpayers United For Freedom).³⁵

The property tax only became a major state-wide issue in 1965 when the *San Francisco Chronicle* published a series of exposés on unsavory practices by California tax assessors. California's constitution required that property be assessed at "full cash value" and that all property be taxed at the same rate. In practice, assessments never reached more than a third of actual value, and in some cities, like San Francisco, the assessor valued residential property at less than 10 percent of its market price.

Tax assessors, who were elected officials in California, depended on the votes of the constituents they assessed, and many collected "campaign contri-

butions" or received laundered kickbacks in exchange for making low assessments on business properties. After the story broke, the assessors for San Francisco and Alameda County served jail sentences. San Diego's assessor committed suicide. The Los Angeles assessor, Philip Watson, was indicted but found not guilty.³⁶

The state legislature quickly moved to reform the property tax system. The 1966 Petris-Knox Act required uniform assessment of all property at 25 percent of actual value, mandated systematic reassessment every three years, and sharply limited the discretion of county assessors. The state attorney general estimated that the new law would recover more than \$200 million in taxes from business properties. The League of California Cities expected a windfall of nearly \$500 million.

But the experts had not understood the true nature of old system's depravity. Sure, a few large businesses and political insiders paid bribes in return for favorable valuations, but most business properties faced substantially higher assessments than homeowners did. Corrupt assessors had been overtaking businesses so they could keep homeowners' taxes artificially low and ensure their popularity with the voters on Election Day. Then they lined their pockets by offering a few businesses discounts. When the reforms came into effect, most businesses received steep cuts in their tax bills, but the new law socked homeowners with an entirely unexpected increase. In San Francisco, where assessor Russell Wolden had held residential assessments at an absurdly low 9 percent of market value, angry residents even trotted out a new bumper sticker: "Bring Back the Crooked Assessor."³⁷

The uproar over assessment reform inspired a new, sustained wave of property tax rebellion across California. In 1966, the Los Angeles-based United Organizations of Taxpayers (UOT), a confederation of neighborhood homeowners' groups, called for a county-wide property tax strike. A year later the UOT attempted to abolish property taxes altogether. UOT canvassers tried to qualify a state ballot initiative, but collected only 100,000 signatures, barely a fifth of the total needed to place the measure on the state ballot.³⁸

Protests fell off in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the initial shock of the assessments wore off and the state legislature cushioned the blow with a series of adjustments that eased the bite. But the tax rebels kept at it. Led by Howard Jarvis, a retired businessman and cigar-smoking Mormon from Utah, the UOT repeatedly introduced tax-cutting ballot measures. While Jarvis's radical proposals fell short, establishment figures joined the battle

against the property tax. Hiring paid signature gatherers, Los Angeles County assessor Philip Watson qualified a measure for the 1968 ballot. Proposition 9 would have restricted the use of property tax revenues to "property-oriented services" such as police and fire protection. The measure failed, and Watson tried again in 1972. In both cases, the state legislature defused support for the initiatives by offering a bundle of tax relief measures. By 1972, California devoted 11 percent of the state budget to property tax relief for local government.³⁹

Even Governor Ronald Reagan joined in. Despite his limited-government rhetoric, Governor Reagan had actually raised sales and income taxes by more than 50 percent during his eight years in Sacramento. In 1973, the governor sponsored a referendum to control state spending. Proposition 1 proposed a spending cap that would steadily tighten over a ten-year period. The 5,700-word proposal struck voters as absurdly complicated; Reagan himself confessed to not understanding it. But Proposition 1 fared better than any of Jarvis's or Watson's proposals, losing by 54 to 46 percent.

This embryonic agitation, in California and elsewhere, sent out ambiguous signals. First, these early tax rebellions did not ally closely with conservative politicians or policies. Indeed, they displayed a genuine populist, progressive streak. They aimed not so much against high taxes as at the inequitable distribution of the tax burden. During the 1960s and early 1970s, tax rebels sought to shift the burden to the wealthy and business, not to shrink government and cut taxes altogether. In California, for example, the Statewide Homeowners Association, a Los Angeles-based property tax group, championed homeowners and "working businessmen" against the "non-creators, the non-builders, those who sit back fat and lazy." The Statewide Homeowners did not advocate cuts in government; in fact, a 1964 broadside suggested that the property tax could raise millions more for the public schools if land speculators and "slumlords" were assessed fairly.⁴⁰

In Massachusetts, the tax revolt actually began as a movement of the political left. Led by a former SDS organizer, Massachusetts Fair Share formed in Chelsea, Massachusetts, in 1973. Five years later, the organization claimed more than 12,000 dues-paying members scattered throughout the Bay State. In the mid-1970s, as assessments on modest homes in blue-collar neighborhoods spiraled upward, Fair Share led battles against sweetheart tax deals for downtown developers and to collect back taxes from delinquent big businesses like Eastern Airlines and New England Life Insurance. Fair Share also proposed a progres-

sive "taxbraker" plan, one that would cut property taxes up to 20 percent and replace the lost revenue with new taxes on professional transactions used mainly by the affluent—legal fees, accounting services, stock transfers. Equity, as much as demands for tax cuts, sparked the opening salvoes of the tax revolt.

Even Howard Jarvis's UOT, which contained many conservative, small-government fanatics, felt it had to make concessions to the liberal sentiments of the late 1960s. Jarvis himself claimed that his organization represented the little guy against big business. "We've got teachers who belong to this organization, and labor people," Jarvis told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1970. "We've got a great number of Negroes." We "don't have any oil company money and no title insurance money. No bank money and no land speculators."⁴¹ Although Jarvis despised unions and activist government and had even supported formation of an independent Conservative party, he still needed to clothe the tax revolt in progressive, populist terms.⁴²

The early tax revolt possessed no clear conservative pedigree and few close links to the emerging New Right. It also achieved little success. On four separate occasions, Jarvis and the UOT failed even to qualify tax-cutting initiatives for the ballot. California voters rejected the Watson and Reagan propositions. Across the country, Massachusetts Fair Share made limited headway. In 1976, referenda to limit taxes and government spending appeared on five state ballots. Every single one failed.⁴³

By the late 1970s, runaway inflation had changed the economic landscape, and the political climate had altered. A new generation of tax protesters had emerged, demanding steep tax cuts, not tax equity. They focused their anger on the crushing burdens they faced and the public officials who imposed them—the governing class, not the upper class. Demands to soak the rich or remove special breaks for business disappeared from the debate.

In California's San Fernando Valley, even former radical Howard Farmer allied his United Voters League with antigovernment tax rebels. A one time Communist party member and longtime union activist, Farmer had long championed big government as the people's instrument in the struggle for social and economic justice. But in 1976, as skyrocketing taxes threatened to drive working people from their homes, Farmer denounced public servants as "those leeches who must have more and more taxes." His group spearheaded a campaign to deprive the city council of a pay raise.⁴⁴

In 1977 Howard Jarvis ran for mayor of Los Angeles and, in one historian's words, campaigned as "a different Jarvis—an out of the closet libertarian." He

denounced government as "evil" and questioned such basic public services as garbage collection, parks, and libraries.⁴⁵ In "Tax Relief, Shift, Or Shaft?" the *Taxpayer's Watchdog*, a southern California newsletter, warned that shifting tax burdens onto the privileged would offer only a temporary fix for ordinary citizens. "Without cutting down the size and variety of government," the *Watchdog* asserted, "there is little that can be offered in terms of tax relief since the money has to come from somewhere."⁴⁶

Tax rebels boiled over with rage at public employees, venting discontent at their supposed inefficiency, their corruption, their cruel indifference to human suffering. "Here's why I voted for Proposition 13," one California woman wrote Governor Edmund "Jerry" Brown in 1978. "I'm tired of paying for politicians' dinners and lunches when my family can't afford to go out to dinner even once a month. . . . I'm tired of doing without so that you all can have everything."⁴⁷ Angry voters targeted prevailing wage laws, which guaranteed high union wages to municipal workers. They opposed pay raises for public officials and complained about phony sick leaves and extravagant perquisites.⁴⁸ They called not just for tax relief but for spending limits that would tie the hands of bureaucrats and politicians. Howard Jarvis tirelessly retold the story of a dear friend hounded to death by insensitive tax collectors. She suffered a fatal heart attack in the county offices, "in the very act of pleading about the prohibitive level of property taxes on her home."⁴⁹

The emerging tax revolt thus offered conservatives an opening, the chance for rewriting the rules of American politics that Richard Nixon had first envisioned as he strolled the beach at San Clemente. As Nixon had recognized, Americans hated government in the abstract but supported and appreciated most existing programs. Poll after poll confirmed that Americans rejected steep reductions in public services just as adamantly as they opposed taxes and resented bureaucracy. Attacks on waste and corruption resonated so deeply because they promised something for nothing—a way to cut government without slashing essential services.

Conservatives needed to exploit the visceral feelings about taxes and government without spawning fears of Goldwater-like cuts in cherished programs. Even at the height of the tax revolt, Americans never embraced the views of libertarian extremists. Across the nation, taxpayers selected carefully among spending cap and tax cut proposals, often rejecting measures they found irresponsible or extreme. Voters balanced their demands for tax relief against their desire for good schools, smooth roads, and reliable amenities. But

during the late 1970s, the scales tipped. The era's peculiar economic and political conditions intensified resentments against taxes and government, eroding Americans' resistance to cuts in public services.⁵⁰

Rising prices were the biggest culprit. Runaway inflation meant that property values soared and incomes crept up into higher tax brackets, while people's standard of living hardly changed. Families suddenly had to pay twice or three times the property taxes for the same modest home. As the 1970s proceeded, astronomical increases in assessments led many homeowners to fear the loss of their houses. "There is no way I can come up with the expected taxes," one woman wrote Governor Jerry Brown. "I had hoped that by age 65 the house would be paid for and I would have a place to live. But I now see that all the planning is in vain because our government will not allow this to happen." Adding insult to injury, inflation swelled the coffers of state and local governments even as it squeezed taxpayers. California and many other states ran huge budget surpluses in the late 1970s.⁵¹

The stagflation of the 1970s meant, among other things, that Uncle Sam took ever larger bites out of the average American's wallet. Between 1964 and 1980, the social security payroll tax rose eightfold, lightening workers' pay envelopes.⁵² As inflation mounted, the cost-of-living increases in people's paychecks, the raises that barely kept pace with the latest outrages at the gas pump and the butcher's counter, bumped them into steeper tax brackets. Ordinary people paid more in taxes even though their real incomes had remained level or even declined.⁵³

In 1976–1977, new property assessments sparked intense protests in California. Groups like Taxpayers United for Freedom and the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association mounted massive letter writing campaigns. Burying the governor's office under more than 200,000 letters, angry homeowners petitioned Jerry Brown to convene a special session of the state legislature to offer relief before the new higher tax bills kicked in. When Brown refused and the legislature again failed to compromise on tax relief, a new generation of protesters joined the UOT's fifth petition drive. Aided by northern California activist Paul Gann, a retired Sacramento car dealer, they collected 1.25 million signatures, far more than the required number to place a major cut in property taxes, Proposition 13, on the state ballot in June 1978.⁵⁴

The campaign was heated. Opponents filled the airwaves with tales of doom. Schools would close in midyear, thousands of public employees would lose their jobs, affirmative action would grind to a halt. The measure, some

claimed, threatened losses of local revenue severe enough to force major cutbacks in police and fire protection.⁵⁵

These dark prophecies might have swayed the electorate, except that the massive state budget surplus strained their credibility. As Election Day neared and the estimated surplus swelled to nearly \$6 billion, predictions of fiscal catastrophe seemed laughable. Moreover, early projections had so underestimated the surplus that many Californians believed their politicians had been hiding something. Only Proposition 13, they concluded, could discipline the rogues in Sacramento.

Still, the likely vote remained close until the state's most populous county dropped a bombshell only a few weeks before the election. The Los Angeles County assessor revealed that new property assessments, to take effect shortly after the balloting, would skyrocket by an average of 125 percent. On L.A.'s prosperous West Side, values would double, even triple in many cases. The new assessments provoked such uproar that the county canceled the increases and restored the old valuations. Governor Brown ordered other counties to freeze assessments.

That episode erased any lingering doubts about Proposition 13. Approved on June 6, 1978, by a two-to-one margin, the measure immediately slashed property taxes by 57 percent and rolled back tax rates to 1 percent of market value based on the 1975 assessment. It ensured that values could rise no more than 2 percent a year—unless a property was sold, in which case it was reassessed at market value. The initiative also amended the state constitution, requiring a two-thirds vote of the legislature to increase state taxes and requiring that voters approve any new local levies by a two-thirds vote.⁵⁶

The scope of the victory stunned nearly every observer. Proposition 13 won broad support across the ideological spectrum and among all economic strata.⁵⁷ Only African Americans and public employees outright opposed the measure. The crusade drew most heavily on middle-class homeowners, especially modest householders who could not pay their tax bills. According to historian David Koistinen, three-quarters of the San Fernando Valley protesters he sampled lived in homes smaller than 2,000 square feet. A third owned very small houses, under 1,250 square feet. Elderly people, whose incomes remained fixed while their taxes soared, residents of older subdivisions, and owners of small businesses figured heavily in the campaign for Proposition 13.⁵⁸

The effects were immense. The measure immediately reduced property tax

revenues by more than \$7 billion. When Prop 13 passed, Californians were facing one of the stiffest tax burdens in the United States; the average property tax bill reached 50 percent above the national average. Tax bills plummeted overnight. A year later, Californians paid 35 percent below the nationwide standard. At the same time, the dreaded declines in services did not materialize. The huge state surplus muted the tax cut's initial impact; for the first three years after Prop 13, the state cushioned the blow with massive bailout payments to cities, counties, and towns.⁵⁹ Tax rebels declared Proposition 13 a total victory.

A "Modern Boston Tea Party"

Outside California, pollsters and pundits immediately interpreted Proposition 13 as the opening salvo in a national tax revolt. A Harris Poll, released just after the California vote, reported that Americans favored similar measures for their own communities by more than two to one. The *New York Times* surveyed the nation and discovered a "modern Boston Tea Party." Conservative guru Milton Friedman brimmed with glee. "The sweeping victory of Proposition 13," he predicted, "will be heard throughout the land. The 'brewing' tax revolt is no longer brewing. It is boiling over."⁶⁰

These predictions quickly bore fruit. In Tennessee, three months before Proposition 13, voters had approved the Copeland amendment—revisions in the state constitution that capped the growth of government spending.⁶¹ Over the next four years, from 1978 to 1981, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Washington approved similar spending limits, while Californians continued their revolution. In November 1979, by an overwhelming majority, California voters approved Proposition 4, a state constitutional amendment proposed by Paul Gann. Called the "Spirit of 13" initiative, it capped state and local spending, allowing growth only on par with inflation and population. It also mandated immediate return of budget surpluses to the taxpayers.⁶²

Antitax fever so frightened the governing class that most state legislatures cut taxes voluntarily, hoping to avoid the fiscal straitjacket that California voters had wrapped around their government. In the immediate aftermath of Proposition 13, thirty-seven states reduced property taxes, and twenty-eight cut their state income tax. Early in 1978, according to *Newsweek*, state and local governments enjoyed an aggregate surplus of nearly \$8 billion. By the end of 1979, after two years of aggressive tax cuts, they showed deficits of \$6 billion.⁶³

After Proposition 13, no skirmish in the tax revolt proved more important than the enactment of Proposition 2 1/2 in Massachusetts. Like California, the Bay State imposed high property taxes, and new assessment standards had transferred a heavier burden onto residential property owners.⁶⁴ The Massachusetts state legislature had also failed to take remedial action to cut off tax rebels at the pass. That failure proved particularly decisive because Massachusetts voters never expressed the same antipathy toward government that appeared in Far West. The legislature's inaction seemed to leave desperate Bay State taxpayers with no choice.⁶⁵

Citizens for Limited Taxation (CLT) spearheaded the Massachusetts campaign. The organization had formed in the 1970s, mainly representing small businesses and cranky conservatives. CLT had fought its first battles against the graduated tax, an unsuccessful effort by Massachusetts Fair Share to enact a progressive, graduated income tax.⁶⁶

Prop 13 emboldened conservative tax rebels in Massachusetts. "We couldn't have done it if Proposition 13 hadn't passed in California," CLT director Barbara Anderson reflected. "Certainly, the big argument we used was, 'California did it, and they didn't fall into the ocean.'"⁶⁷ Anderson's predecessor and colleague, Don Feder, agreed: "We were watching proposition 13 very carefully through the Spring of 1978. We were thinking that if this goes over well in California—which is a fairly liberal state—perhaps we should try it in Massachusetts."⁶⁸ After Prop 13, Feder, Anderson, and CLT advanced a much more aggressive antigovernment line. Testifying before the Massachusetts legislature's Joint Committee on Taxation, Feder dismissed most government services as unnecessary. He opposed plans to build swimming pools for high schools, municipal tennis courts, and a new city hall for Boston. He also denounced what he described as lavish pensions for public employees.⁶⁹

CLT carefully cultivated a reputation as the champion of ordinary taxpayers. During the struggle over Proposition 2 1/2, the organization elevated Barbara Anderson to the directorship. The former swimming instructor boasted that the only credentials she brought to the post were "a degree in water safety instructorship from the Red Cross." But the Massachusetts rebellion never was the people's crusade that Anderson made it out to be. The state's growing high-technology industry proved crucial to the success of Proposition 2 1/2. In fact, a consortium of firms, the Massachusetts High Tech Council, underwrote almost the entire cost of the campaign.⁷⁰

In November 1980, Massachusetts approved Proposition 2 1/2, the same

year that notorious bastion of liberalism cast a narrow majority for Ronald Reagan. The measure, as its awkward name suggested, capped local property taxes at 2.5 percent of the full and fair cash value of the local tax base. It also limited future tax hikes to 2 1/2 percent per year, with no exceptions for inflation or population growth.⁷¹

If California ignited the tax revolt, Massachusetts legitimated it. The success of Proposition 2 1/2 indicated that tax cut fever could spread anywhere; no state or region possessed immunity. The tax revolt no longer belonged to Sunbelt extremists—reckless cowboys, single-issue Goldwaterites, and antigovernment crazies. The Sunbelt tax rebels had won the battle; they had even gained the support of established interests. Tax relief had become a national issue.

Washington clearly heard the echoes from the statehouses and ballot boxes. Days after the passage of Prop 13, Kansas senator Bob Dole introduced a series of tax cut measures in the U.S. Senate, including a constitutional amendment requiring a balanced federal budget.⁷² Acting “in the spirit of Proposition 13,” Wisconsin Democrat William Proxmire urged an immediate 5 percent cutback in the appropriations for the Department of Housing and Urban Development.⁷³ Meanwhile, Representative Philip Crane (R, Illinois), a leading New Right politico, proposed a constitutional amendment limiting federal spending.⁷⁴

But beyond the boost it supplied to the burgeoning conservative movement, what were the immediate, practical effects of these cuts? Prophecies of doom—of massive unemployment and crippled public services—did not pan out. In California, the surplus alleviated most of the pain, although the state imposed a salary freeze on state employees and made some difficult cutbacks, especially in the politically unprotected areas of libraries, mental health services, facilities for the disabled, and recreational activities. Many public schools eliminated entire programs—sports, art, extracurricular activities—and dropped support staff like teachers’ aides. Still, in the short run, overall spending on education and public employment remained steady and even grew slowly.⁷⁵

Other places faced greater struggles. Although state aid offset most of the first year’s hardships, Massachusetts cities faced painful economies. Despite a \$40 million injection of new state aid, Boston had to make sharp cuts in police and fire protection. Brookline, a prosperous suburb, imposed charges for trash collection; working-class Somerville closed many of its firehouses. Proposition 2 1/2 especially hammered public schools, which relied heavily on local prop-

erty taxes to finance their programs. Many towns eliminated music, art, intramural sports, and teacher sabbaticals. Cambridge dismissed one in four teachers; Quincy laid off one in three. But the Bay State never looked back. Massachusetts voters continued to appreciate Proposition 2 1/2 and adjusted to its strict limits on public services.⁷⁶

Eventually the tax revolt in the provinces lost momentum. There would be few more renewals of the Boston Tea Party. By 1981, when Ronald Reagan signed national tax cut legislation, new initiatives had failed in Arizona, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, and Utah. Even in California, Proposition 9, a Howard Jarvis-backed measure to halve income taxes, failed to win majority support. But the tax revolt did not so much fizzle as complete its work. Spend-unnecessary and unproductive. Americans applauded smaller government and accepted diminished services. Increasingly over the course of the 1980s, consumers, taxpayers, and their elected representatives would turn to the private sector to provide the amenities, the services, the essentials of community that the public had once provided for itself.

The Triumph of “Reagan Country”

The tax revolt need not have fueled the rise of the right or the triumph of conservative ideology, but it did. Desperate taxpayers readily accepted the New Right critique of big government and the conservative promise of low taxes and broad prosperity. “The property-owning class,” which “by now includes most members of what used to be referred to as the working class,” *Fortune* magazine asserted in the summer of 1978, was “voting for capitalism.” They were reaching the conclusion that if “the load of government could be lightened, if young and old were allowed not only to get capital but to keep it, the private economy could propel the country into a new era of expansion.”⁷⁷

Americans wanted a change, and the New Right offered the only authentic alternative. “The real issue,” Barbara Anderson told a *Washington Post* reporter, “wasn’t money, it was control and attitude. People were fed up with the attitude of government toward them.” Public opinion surveys confirmed that sentiment. The message of Proposition 13, according to *Newsweek* columnist Meg Greenfield, “could most aptly be headlined: CALIFORNIA TO LIBERAL GOVERNMENT: DROP DEAD.”⁷⁸

The rebellion against taxes and the governments that imposed them fused together many different aspects of the conservative message. It highlighted the

use of tax money for supposedly immoral purposes, like sex education, abortion, and permissive curricula in schools. It dramatized an overweening big government, with briefcase-toting bureaucrats imposing crippling regulations on businesses and telling ordinary working Americans how to live. High taxes confirmed the New Right portrait of a government out of touch—one that favored the lazy over the hard working, welfare over national defense, opera and museum exhibitions for the elite over relief for struggling citizens.

The tax revolt also provided a more acceptable outlet for some brands of racial hostility. In the racially polarized United States of the 1970s, it allowed conservatives to tap into the fears and resentments of some white voters. Without even mentioning race, Republican candidates and New Right demagogues could exploit the pervasive feeling that the liberal welfare state unfairly benefited blacks and racial minorities—the sense that OUR tax money was being spent on THEM. Welfare, public housing, and urban services became the most frequently stigmatized examples of waste and the preferred targets for cuts.

Ronald Reagan whipped these ingredients into a winning coalition, into a new force in American public life. After the tax revolt swept his native California, candidate Reagan began stressing tax cuts in his preliminary campaigning and speaking. He even endorsed the Kemp-Roth tax bill, the 30 percent income tax cut proposed by Congressman Jack Kemp (R, New York) and Senator William Roth (R, Delaware). During the 1980 campaign, Reagan embraced supply-side economics. He insisted that steep tax cuts, even without corresponding reductions in spending, would so feverishly stimulate the economy as to balance the budget by his second year in office and produce a large surplus by the end of his first term.⁷⁹

Ronald Reagan simultaneously reached out to conservative evangelical Christians, appealing to their new-awakened antipathy to the IRS and the Department of Education, the ERA and legalized abortion. The Reagan campaign hired Moral Majority executive director Robert Billings as liaison to the Christian right and openly appealed for the votes of evangelicals. Reagan was the only major presidential candidate to appear at the Religious Roundtable's National Affairs Briefing, a two-day "revival meeting cum political rally" that attracted 15,000 activist evangelicals to Dallas. "I know you can't endorse me," Reagan told the pious horde. But "I want you to know that I endorse you."⁸⁰

Reagan also tapped into the New Right network and the neoconservative brain trust. Unlike Richard Nixon or George Bush, Reagan's political organization did not have to rely on Republican party regulars for intellectual fire-

power, organizational talent, and fund-raising ability.⁸¹ It could draw on the brain power of the neoconservatives, the organizational vigor of the New Right, the direct mail and fund-raising skills of Richard Viguerie and his allies.

In a prescient 1967 essay, Harvard professor James Q. Wilson had interpreted the appearance of Ronald Reagan for his colleagues in the eastern establishment. In "A Guide to Reagan Country," Wilson warned the readers of *Commentary* not to underestimate Reagan or to dismiss "Reaganism" as an oddity, a product of southern California's bizarre sun-baked culture. Reaganite conservatism, Wilson predicted, "will be with us for a long time under one guise or another. We will not take it seriously by trying to explain it away as if it were something sold at one of those orange juice stands."⁸²

Anticipating the emerging New Right, Wilson understood that Sunbelt conservatism represented a new and potent force, not some bitter, nostalgic remnant from an outmoded, idealized past. Reagan's followers voiced discontent, but it was "not with their lot that they are discontent, it is with the lot of the nation. *The very virtues they have and practice are, in their eyes, conspicuously absent from society as a whole.*" They were determined to restore them, and they were developing the will and the means to do so.⁸³

Still, Wilson expected Reaganism to remain a minority sentiment. The "political culture of Southern California," he concluded, "will never be the political culture of our society."⁸⁴ Only there did Wilson guess wrong. Reaganism would become America's prevailing political culture. Ronald Reagan, that bone-chilling extremist, would become a venerated national father figure—the grinning, impossible-not-to-love undertaker burying the casket of liberal reform and 1960s public purpose. His ready smile and preternatural optimism would mock the malaise, the irony, and the foreboding that soaked through Seventies America. The times they were a-changin'.