

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

America's Two Revolutions

"A Tale of Two Reactions" by Mark Lilla, in *The New York Review of Books* (May 14, 1998), 1755 Broadway, 5th floor, New York, N.Y. 10019-3780; "The Southern Captivity of the GOP" by Christopher Caldwell, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 1998), 77 N. Washington St., Boston, Mass. 02114.

Two cultural revolutions have occurred in recent decades, and together they are redefining American politics—but neither Right nor Left has been able to bring itself to accept the fact. So argues Lilla, who teaches politics at New York University.

The first revolution—call it “the ’60s”—delegitimized public authority, weakened the family, and undermined standards of private morality. Conservatives continually deplore this decline but fail to explain its causes, pointing instead to such culprits as moral weakness, self-indulgence, and nihilism. “What they refuse to consider,” says Lilla, “is the darker side of our own American creed” of individualism and egalitarianism.

The second cultural revolution, he contends, is “the shift in political and economic attitudes” in the 1980s. Thanks to the Reagan revolution, “most Americans now believe (rightly or wrongly) that economic growth will do more for them than economic redistribution, and that to grow rich is good. It is taken as axiomatic that the experiments of

the Great Society failed and that new experiments directed by Washington would be foolhardy. Regulation is considered *dépassé*, and unions are seen as self-serving, corrupt organizations that only retard economic growth.” Liberals of the *Nation* school deplore this seismic shift in attitudes, Lilla observes, and usually blame it on a corrupt campaign finance system that favors the wealthy. Nearly everyone is worse off because of the Reagan revolution, according to the Left, but they somehow have been fooled into thinking they’re better off.

In reality, Lilla writes, both cultural revolutions have been successful, are over—and are basically *one* revolution. The result is “a morally lax yet economically successful capitalist society.” President Bill Clinton’s “’60s morals and ’80s politics do not seem particularly contradictory to the majority of the American public that supports him,” Lilla points out. Indeed, any political agenda that rejects one—but not the other—of the two revolutions is

Washington's Gift

Writing in the *Hudson Review* (Spring 1998), essayist Joseph Epstein ponders the life of one political leader who did not end his career, as so many do today, “happily peddl[ing] their influence in large law firms.”

Although he understood power and knew how to use it, unlike the case with almost every other political leader of his importance, there is no strong evidence that George Washington loved power, either for its own sake or for the perquisites that it brought him. He was a thoughtful but not a speculative man, and neither is there any serious evidence that he had a strong vision for America, a vision of stately grandeur or of human happiness. Why, then, did he accept the most arduous service his nation offered, not once but over and over again?

Because, the only answer is, of a profound sense of duty that derived from his, Washington's, moral character. [It] is the only way to account for the continual tests to which Washington put himself, throughout his life, depriving himself of the leisure and contentment of the private life for which he always longed. His retirement was short-lived, for he died in 1799, three years after he left office. He died, it is reported, stoically, in pain and with no last words of wisdom on his lips. If his life seems sacred, it is because it seems in the final analysis sacrificial, a donation to the state.

“doomed to failure.”

Republicans seem determined to prove that point, according to Caldwell, a senior writer for the conservative *Weekly Standard*. He argues that the GOP is increasingly in thrall to the South, and that its “tradition of putting values—particularly Christian values—at the center of politics” is alienating even conservative voters in other regions. “The Republicans would like to think that Americans are the dupes of a lecherous Arkansas sleazeball, just as the Democrats in the 1980s saw voters as gulled by a senile B-movie warmonger. But Clinton’s success, like Reagan’s, has to do with American

beliefs and the extent to which he embodies them and his opponents do not.” On issues such as gay rights, the environment, and women in the workplace, Caldwell says, “the country has moved leftward.” The GOP may cling to power, but it will not “rule from a place in Americans’ hearts” until it changes.

Clinton-style blending may be a good short-term solution, but in Lilla’s view, “healthy democratic politics” requires a “perceptible distinction between right and left.” This vital divide “will naturally reappear,” he believes, once the political system fully assimilates the two revolutions.

The Proud History of Voter Apathy

“Limits of Political Engagement in Antebellum America: A New Look at the Golden Age of Participatory Democracy” by Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, in *The Journal of American History* (Dec. 1997), 1125 E. Atwater Ave., Bloomington, Ind. 47401-3701.

As clucks of disapproval about Americans’ political apathy and low voter turnout have grown louder in recent years, many historians have looked back to the decades before the Civil War as a time when Americans (at least the white males eligible to vote) were enthusiastically engaged in politics. In that golden age, citizens immersed themselves in politics, understood “the issues,” flocked to meetings and rallies, and faithfully voted on election days as if taking part in a solemn religious rite. “More than in any subsequent era,” one such historian has written, “political life formed the very essence of the pre-Civil War generation’s experience.”

Not quite, say Altschuler and Blumin, professors of American studies and American history, respectively, at Cornell University. Closely examining political life during the 1840s and ’50s in 16 county seats and small cities, they found that political apathy is hardly a strictly modern phenomenon. In a complaint characteristic of the period, the *Dubuque Daily Times* editorialized in 1859 that the “better portion” of the electorate “retire in disgust from the heat and tur-

moil of political strife. They leave primary meetings, and County, District and State Conventions to political gamblers and party hacks.”

Altschuler and Blumin found that antebellum politics was much like our own: that lawyers and businessmen predominated among the politically active; that local party caucuses and conventions were often thinly attended, even when there were close contests; that interest in campaigns slackened in off-year elections; that “spontaneous” outpourings of support for candidates at major campaign rallies were nearly always



GOP “Wide-Awake” clubs march in Hartford for Lincoln in July 1860. Popular enthusiasm displaced political apathy that year.