

Why U.S. Liberalism Must Change or Die

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out.

—Senior George W. Bush aide to journalist Ron Suskind¹

When journalist Ron Suskind published the infamous Bush aide quotation in an October 2004 *New York Times Magazine* piece, progressives across the United States dismissed the remark as yet another illustration of right-wing banality. The quotation made Dumbest Quotes of 2004 lists, political cartoons mocked Republicans wearing 'freedom earplugs' and 'blindfolds for Bush,' and Air America's commentators joined forces with progressives nationwide in ridiculing the hopelessly delusional Right.

Yet for all the talk of a rupture between Bush's "faith-based community" and the "reality-based community" of the rest of the world, there is much more to the Right's reality-production discourse than the rhetorical follies of an egomaniacal administration. The publication of *The Right Nation* marks the first time in years that a mainstream book has painstakingly elaborated upon a phenomenon that largely-isolated voices on the Left have been identifying, and many more have suspected, for a long time: the extensive right-wing culture-producing infrastructure developed strategically over several decades. Comprised of a web of national and state think tanks, training institutes, lobbying groups, grassroots organizations, and national, local, and campus media venues all supported by a set of powerful, multi-million dollar foundations, this apparatus unites right-

wing factions in what could quite accurately be termed, in the Bush aide's words, production of reality.

The right-wing Heritage Foundation, for example, shapes public policy and political culture by, among numerous other initiatives, releasing hundreds of publications per year and relying on its network of over 2,000 policy experts and scholars.² The information is disseminated into the mainstream, to the media and the public, through an intricate system of culture-production:

Every Congressional staffer is in the Heritage computer. So are about 3,500 journalists, organized by specialty. Every Heritage study goes out with a synopsis to those who might be interested; every study is turned into an op-ed piece, distributed by the Heritage Features Syndicate to newspapers that publish them.³

The Right has also worked hard to recruit and train new leadership through a wealth of right-wing organizations providing prizes and scholarships; flying students to conferences and seminars, and offering trainings in organizing and public speaking. The Collegiate Network, for instance, distributes approximately \$200,000 per year to 58 right-wing student newspapers nationwide and sends aspiring journalists to Washington for professional training.⁴ Such efforts target people of color and women in particular: "Our girls are going to have to fight their girls."⁵

To be sure, scholars have written much on the subject over the years, and mainstream publications have recently been picking up on the phenomenon.⁶ Nevertheless, a notably comprehensive and up to date volume examining this reactionary infrastructure has now been produced by two *Economist* editors, and progressives everywhere ought to make use of their observations (although such use is most decidedly not part of the book's *raison d'être*).

Perhaps equally noteworthy is *The Right Nation's* recognition of the failure of the Left to mobilize anything remotely similar to the right-wing culture-producing behemoth. The entire staff of the Progressive Policy Institute, one of the few self-identified left-

of-center think tanks to arise over the past decade, is smaller than the janitorial staff at the Heritage Foundation.⁷ Today, progressives are slowly beginning to fill this void. John Podesta established the Center for American Progress in 2003 as a counterpart to Heritage. George Lakoff has been making headlines with his work on the need for political framing strategies on the Left, exposing the Right's spinmasters such as the Luntz Research Companies ("Never say 'undocumented workers.' Instead say 'illegal aliens.' Never say 'drilling for oil.' Instead say 'exploring for energy.' Never say 'global economy/globalization/capitalism.' Instead say 'free market economy,'" etc.).⁸ Rumors abound of wealthy Democrats, including financier George Soros, banding together under the name "The Phoenix Group" to funnel money into a new political movement independent of the Democratic Party establishment.⁹ Yet most young progressives are more than likely many years away from the lucrative scholarships and fellowships, all-expense paid training camps, and elaborate mentoring programs readily available to groom right-wing students into hardened intellectual warriors. A broad-based, media-savvy progressive infrastructure to rival the Right still seems in the distant future, with progressives often all too unfamiliar with the tactical obstacles they face when professing to 'fight the Right.'

Micklethwait and Wooldridge describe their book as both a portrait and an argument.¹⁰ The latter asserts that the United States proved such fertile soil for contemporary right-wing movements as a result of an inherent predisposition toward conservatism, at least partially accounting for the warm welcome the book received in right-wing circles. The authors defend their claim in a single, grossly underdeveloped chapter that by and large fails to engage most scholarly contributions to this longstanding debate. Rather, the compelling aspect of the book is the portrait of "the Right Nation," a detailed investigation of U.S. right-wing networks and institutions in historical perspective. For those with a moderate-to-high tolerance for endless claims to objectivity with a neoliberal flair, the book provides a range of

key insights for contemporary progressive politics in the United States. Chapter Six presents an especially useful, succinct introduction to the right-wing infrastructure.¹¹ The key is to watch out for the book's unmasking—albeit indirect—of several detrimental fictions too often internalized by Left circles in the U.S.

Fiction #1: The Right is successful because it is dogmatic and thus unified; the Left's aversion toward fundamentalism dooms it to perpetual infighting and factionalization.

The book reveals the Right as riddled with ideological tensions, engaged in an ongoing struggle to appease a range of disparate interests while presenting itself “as a ‘both . . . and’ party: the party of both social conservatives and libertarians, of both God and Mammon, of both the heartland and Wall Street, of both Arnold Schwarzenegger and Trent Lott.”¹² Right-wing organizers and consultants exert impressive amounts of energy on preventing the movement from tearing apart at the seams, while simultaneously ensuring that disputes are settled behind closed doors rather than in the public eye. Notably, such efforts are anything but easy. Successfully utilizing right-wing strategies for progressive movements undoubtedly calls for significant recalibration rather than mere replication. Yet negotiation of even the grossest ideological and tactical splits, *The Right Nation* tells us, is anything but impossible.

Fiction #2: The contemporary consolidation of the Right in the United States cannot be paralleled by the Left as the aims of political liberals and radicals are diametrically opposed and the rifts between them insurmountable.

The Right is certainly adept at operating within the system, focused on the capture of the state machinery: legislatures, courts, and other traditional decision-making processes. Yet this focus does not prevent the movement from collaborating with,

despite holding at arms' length, factions with fully diverging worldviews, factions committed to radical cultural and/or economic transformation. The relationship between right-wing administrations and extremist evangelicals is one such example. Such relationships are in constant flux and negotiation. Yet for all the frustrations of external right-wing factions with the so-called conservative mainstream, their influence is unmistakable – if only in the grassroots efforts in which they are free to engage by virtue of (at least relative) sympathizers holding down the electoral fort and fighting a number of battles that a less organized mainstream political bloc would leave to its radical counterparts. Further, this dynamic undeniably creates pressure and momentum for the state apparatus to move further to the right, while simultaneously affecting the broader political culture in similar ways.

The material impact of 'within the system' work upon the everyday lives of real individuals must not be ignored in any Left political project. Simultaneously, it must never be enough. *The Right Nation* exemplifies the effectiveness of strategic division of labor between insider and outsider movements. While the prospect of all Left organizations and individuals to reach some broad-based consensus may very well be impossible, collaboration and multi-prong political strategy is not. The reclaiming of the state apparatus and culture-production mechanisms through traditional politics, albeit by the "lesser evils" of a progressive Democratic Party, in the short-term creates windows of opportunity: opportunity to imagine ways of doing "something more than endlessly confronting the system's wars, atrocities and disasters," opportunity to "envision a time when we not only challenge the cruelties of state power, but when we unmake, remake, or reclaim that power."¹³ After all, the weaknesses of contemporary liberalism led more than a handful of solid radicals to put aside their own projects during the last presidential election, instead devoting their energy and resources to electoral battles—moves that a robust liberal presence would render unnecessary.

Right-wing Capitol Hill victories also affect Left organizing initiatives quite directly, another offensive that a well-organized liberal apparatus could thwart. Leading Contract With America strategist Grover Norquist was explicit about the mission to defund the Left: “We will hunt [these progressive groups] down one by one and extinguish their funding sources.”¹⁴ Insidious right-wing projects compromise the bodies and lives of numerous marginalized groups in a very real way; the failures of contemporary liberal politics facilitate this, while simultaneously draining growing grassroots resistance movements of energy and resources.

Fiction #3: The Right is successful because of its wealthy funders, with which progressives cannot compete.

Having effectively described the powerful right-wing apparatus and the influence it exerts in Washington, in state and local politics, and over the political climate more broadly, Micklethwait and Wooldridge offer a provocative analysis of liberal failures. Looking in particular to the country’s universities and liberal foundations such as the Ford, Rockefeller, and MacArthur foundations, they claim that “there is more brainpower on the Left, more money and more resources.”¹⁵ (The authors’ inclusion of the vast liberal media as a significant part of these resources is more questionable.) And, as the authors note, a Republican White House and Congress currently impede the ability of liberals to disseminate their ideas. Nevertheless, right-wing preeminence may indeed have much more to do with focus, commitment, and hardheadedness than with dollars alone. “The conservative foundations know exactly what they want—to change the world in a conservative direction.”¹⁶ Large liberal foundations, on the other hand, have fuzzy goals such as strengthening democratic values and advancing human achievement, aims that could justify a range of programs. They lack focus on specific political battles, often funding a wealth of

disparate local projects all over the world. These types of organizations

give the impression that they have been captured by people who run foundations for a living. The foundations exist to support their staffs—particularly the great and the good who sit on their boards. By contrast, conservative think tanks increasingly run themselves as businesses whose product is furthering the conservative revolution.¹⁷

The progressive People For the American Way has found that the Right has developed a comprehensive funding strategy, providing grants to a broad range of groups, each catering to specific audiences.¹⁸ Funding patterns of right-wing and liberal foundations differ in two striking ways. The first is grant size: while large grants, usually over \$1 million, are commonplace among right-wing foundations, this is not the case among their liberal counterparts. The difference is less financial than strategic. Most right-wing operations are funded by only five large family foundations, in addition to individual contributions: the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Koch Family foundations, the John M. Olin Foundation, the Scaife Family foundations, and the Adolph Coors Foundation. These five foundations give major grants that enable well-organized projects to wield substantial influence over their targeted audiences, whereas their liberal counterparts disperse grant money internationally, across many small projects addressing a wide range of social problems.

In some ways this presents a serious problem for the Left: right-wing initiatives are simply not burdened with addressing the wealth of global social problems that concern progressives, and are thus free to consolidate funding into a lesser number of larger projects. The Left may have to cut some losses with respect to this issue rather than compromise its support of important initiatives. It thus becomes even more imperative for the movement to understand *The Right Nation's* second point on funding: the significance of focus on particular political battles.

As already mentioned, right-wing foundations have explicit ideological agendas and invest comprehensively to promote a given issue on every front. Thus,

they fund national conservative ‘think tanks’ to package and repackage conservative issue positions; state think tanks to lend a local flair to these issues; national political groups to lobby in Washington and shape national media coverage; state-based groups to do the same in the states; grassroots organizations to stir up local activism; national and state media to report, interpret, and amplify these activities; scholars to record the history of such activities and push the intellectual boundaries of the issues; graduate students to form the next wave of scholarship and movement leadership; and college newspapers to shape the milieu in which America’s next generation of political leaders comes to their political awakening.¹⁹

The Left’s political commitments may require it to support a wider and more diffuse spectrum of projects than the Right. It thus becomes all the more imperative for foundations and other funders to act strategically, devoting some set percent of their resources to developing an infrastructure for promoting core progressive issues across numerous fronts. In particular, progressive funders must not shy away from explicit political frameworks and develop long-term, comprehensive, coalitional approaches to integrating progressive issues into public discourse and policy.

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Of course, recognizing and dispelling these myths in no way comprises an all-encompassing solution to the plights of contemporary progressive politics. Doing so does, however, offer some hope for transforming what has been termed the Left’s current crisis of confidence. Specifically, a robust liberal infrastructure strong and effective enough to challenge successfully

even the most insidious right-wing domination of state machinery and public discourse does not, on its own, resolve many progressive dilemmas, but it's not a bad start. Micklethwait and Wooldridge note that it is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which the Right has won the battle of ideas in Washington. Right-wing think tanks are currently a resource for Democrats and Republicans alike, with prominent Democrats attending Heritage orientation sessions for new members of Congress: "Politicians go where the ideas are."²⁰

Meanwhile, liberals are floundering, even during the sometimes-fondly remembered Clinton years. Recall the 1996 dismantling of key welfare initiatives, when "Democrats barely put up a fight for one of the centerpieces of the New Deal: 'The defenders of the old activism toward the poor surrendered willingly, with the shrugs and indifference of those who no longer believed what they stood for.'"²¹

The need for structures dedicated full-time to creating fresh progressive ideas and strategy while simultaneously waging offensive campaigns against right-wing domination is clear. In many ways, *The Right Nation* lays out a plan of attack by highlighting a range of contemporary right-wing weaknesses.

One significant danger for the Right is its increasing extremism. "Papers arguing for bringing free enterprise to outer space, abolishing government departments or toppling Saudi Arabia attract more attention than the nuts-and-bolts questions of fixing American schools, hospitals, and government services."²² Similarly, "The Southern wing's aggressive moralism does not scare off just independents; it also alienates other Republicans."²³

Thus, another weakness is the many rifts within the Right itself. Antigovernment reactionaries, for example, view George W. Bush as an ally, which he has achieved by "sometimes throwing them red meat to gnaw on, but more often by hinting that he is just about to."²⁴ Government spending has skyrocketed under Bush. His administration introduced steel and soft lumber tariffs, created 20,000 federal employees by "federalizing" airport security, signed the biggest farm bill on record ("even adding

price controls on the Soviet-like grounds that they were counter-cyclical”), and, in the right-wing view, infringed upon freedom of speech by signing a campaign finance reform provision into law.²⁵

The Bush deficit could prove detrimental for Republicans. In particular, the favoritism exhibited toward particular businesses, notably the energy industry and big agribusiness, is hardly consistent with the image of the party of free trade. Yet none of this information matters much when confined to academic essays and political journals. A robust progressive infrastructure could channel such information into the cultural mainstream. Exposing the Right as having “squandered their reputation for fiscal prudence”²⁶ would impact public opinion while undoubtedly creating problems in maintaining a unified right-wing front.

The authors note a number of other potentially divisive issues: virtually any advance in reproductive technology, for example, “will divide business conservatives, who see yet another opportunity to make money, from the social ones who worry about mankind perverting God’s will.”²⁷ An internal contradiction of an entirely different sort is the antagonism between neoconservatives and assertive nationalists, which include Bush’s core advisers such as Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, and Donald Rumsfeld, regarding nation-building projects in the Middle East.²⁸ Strategic efforts to exploit and expose these contradictions, and many more that permeate the ostensibly-cohesive Right, could lead to an implosion of its carefully-preserved alliances.

Effective, articulate, and media-savvy progressive organizations are also imperative in shaping public opinion and the broader political culture. The Right has successfully convinced white, working-class “Joe Sixpack” that he has little in common with the “liberal elite,” winning him over with noneconomic issues such as abortion, crime, same-sex marriage, and guns.²⁹ More and more frequently, the Rust Belt working-class allies with the Right, acting directly against its own economic interests.³⁰ “In this, as in most forms of short-term maneuvering, the Democrats are still mostly on the defensive.”³¹

Equally significant are questions of race, gender and sexuality. Republicans have thus far successfully wooed Latino voters. Even in California, where now-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was disinvited from the annual Mexican parade in Los Angeles, his former opponent, lieutenant governor Cruz Bustamante—the highest ranking Latino in California politics—garnered only 51 percent of the Latino vote.³² Similarly, the Right attains credibility by associating with elements of numerous traditionally progressive groups:

America now boasts a thriving black conservative intelligentsia. There are prominent conservative gays, conservative Latinos, conservative environmentalists . . . they are vital to the wider conservative movement—living refutations of the liberal jibe that conservatives are nothing more than a bunch of stupid white men. Who better to explain the way that family breakdown is damaging black Americans than somebody who has a black face?³³

Effective progressive political strategy must actively engage traditionally underrepresented groups while simultaneously highlighting right-wing perpetuation of race, sexuality and gender hierarchies: “Despite all George Bush’s overtures, the Republicans remain a white party.”³⁴ Due in large part to massive appointments of right-wing judges, since 1989 only members of the racial majority have prevailed before the United States Supreme Court under the federal Constitution’s Equal Protection Clause.³⁵ A progressive apparatus could popularize these facts, while broadly exposing the hypocrisy behind attempts to place a multicultural face on right-wing politics. Pushing the Right on race and gender with meaningful progressive initiatives to combat discrimination and other forms of socioeconomic hierarchy would also put pressure on the aforementioned right-wing coalitions.

Ultimately, the challenge for progressives is to not only thwart multifaceted right-wing efforts, but to firmly establish

their own values and commitments vis-à-vis the Right. Through a dynamic infrastructure, long-term strategy combined with short-term offensives, resolute coalition-building, and tactical division of labor across the progressive spectrum, the Left can and will rise above the Right Nation.

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Notes

¹ Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 Oct. 2004.

² Heritage Foundation, *2003 Insiders Guide to Public Policy Experts and Organizations*, available online at <http://www.policyexperts.org> (last accessed, April 2005).

³ Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Times Books, 1986), 49.

⁴ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 281.

⁵ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 283, quoting the *National Review's* Kate O'Beirne.

⁶ See, for example, Ellen Messer-Davidow, "Manufacturing the Attack on Liberalized Higher Education," *Social Text* 36 (1993); John K. Wilson, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). For a recent popular press account, see Matt Bai, "Wiring the Vast Left-Wing Conspiracy," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 July 2004.

⁷ David Dyssegaard Kallick, Open Society Institute, *Progressive Think Tanks: What Exists, What's Missing?*, 10, available online at http://www.soros.org/initiatives/gov/articles_publications/publications/progressive_20020115/ (last accessed April 2005).

⁸ The Luntz Research Companies, *Republican Playbook for 2006*, available online at <http://www.politicalstrategy.org/archives/001118.php> (last accessed April 2005).

⁹ Bai, "Wiring the Vast Left-Wing Conspiracy."

¹⁰ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 11.

¹¹ For an even briefer synopsis in op-ed form, see Bill Bradley, "A Party Inverted," *New York Times*, 30 March 2005.

¹² Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 266.

¹³ Carwil James, *Shattering Consensus and Disrupting Downtown: New Urban Resistance to War and Empire*, 21, available online at <http://www.falseignorance.info> (last accessed April 2005).

¹⁴ People for the American Way, *Buying a Movement*, 5, available online at <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=2052> (last accessed April 2005), citing Jeff Shear, "The Ax Files," *National Journal*,

15 April 1995.

¹⁵ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 166.

¹⁶ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 166.

¹⁷ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 167.

¹⁸ People For the American Way, *Buying a Movement*, 4.

¹⁹ People For the American Way, *Buying a Movement*, 4.

²⁰ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 166.

²¹ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 119.

²² Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 170.

²³ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 264.

²⁴ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 175.

²⁵ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 174, 257-59. For an in-depth analysis of the strategies, approaches, and ideologies of the George W. Bush administration, see Charles Tiefer, *Veering Right: How the Bush Administration Subverts the Law for Conservative Causes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

²⁶ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 256.

²⁷ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 252-53.

²⁸ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 218-19.

²⁹ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 235-37.

³⁰ On this point, see Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

³¹ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 237.

³² Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 241.

³³ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 270-71.

³⁴ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 277.

³⁵ Francisco Valdes, "Culture, 'Kulturkampf,' and Beyond: The Antidiscrimination Principle Under the Jurisprudence of Backlash," in *The Blackwell Companion to Law and Society*, ed. Austin Sarat (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 271-9; quotation from 281. The arguable exception is *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).