The works of Voegelin and especially Strauss charm many of their readers. As portals into the ghostly netherworld resting beneath contemporary life, their books give access to the unseen machinery of our modern, liberal world. They expose assumptions, motivations, pathologies, and the reader may wander around studying first this fixture—say Machiavelli—and then another—say Hegel. Pretty soon the whole system, so mysterious to those without access to that underworld, becomes a coherent whole. Mystery, or at least one mystery, is no more.

The problems of the contemporary world are bound up in a very elaborate intellectual or even philosophical struggle. A follower of these two philosophers not only can come to understand the nature of the problem but also can trace the often minute (sometimes arcane) philosophical events that led down the slippery slope. Their works lend themselves to this sort of reductionist understanding of the world and its history. The whole modern constellation of conundrums may be understood, for instance, as a gnostic revolt against reality. Although the actual histories provided by both Strauss and Voegelin are not so reductionist, their accounts are genetic in character, for the family of modern ideologies all trace back to the same ancestors.

The chronicling of the genealogy of modernity was a relatively simple task. Strauss’s and Voegelin’s efforts expose a few examples of strained logic and coerced interpretation, but the story was not terribly difficult to write. Yet far more interesting are their struggles to articulate an answer or response to the modern world. They failed insofar as their struggles did not produce easy or fully coherent an-
answers. The dimensions of the problems became clear as they took up the search. If the relatively easy blame they assigned to a few ancestors provide some readers with a surer grasp of the problems, the real appeal of these two men (for people of independent mind) is their struggle to provide meaningful responses to the crisis they encountered.

Voegelin was much more interesting when engaged in a deadly serious investigation of Anselm or Plato than when he was attacking some faceless group of "positivists." Once one gets accustomed to Strauss, his engagement with Plato actually takes one away from the here and now, and his ubiquitous search for answers leads, not to answers, but to more interesting questions. The evasions, or qualifications, or even contradictions of the answers of both men to modern problems result, not from their limitations, but from their abilities. Of course, the answers do not satisfy. Why should one expect that they would? The search goes on, and in no small measure, that was their point. So long as the search continues the goal—even when understood as a heuristic goal—shapes the people who search. The loss of philosophy as the search for a normative order necessarily has, they believed, devastating effects. The thing most needed is the inspiration of the quest. By saving philosophy one saves society.

The struggle to understand two such complex thinkers is complicated by the way different audiences received them, for in the case of both Strauss and Voegelin, the question of intended audience creates numerous problems. Of course, in most of their works they wished to speak to other "specialists," and of all their audiences, other philosophers understood them best. Nonetheless, their works were almost always charged with a sense of significance that transcended the small orbit of philosophers. However odd it appears, these two abstruse writers functioned as public philosophers and communicated a strong sense of purpose. The world was in danger—in a crisis—and they sought to understand the nature of that danger. What could be more important? As a result, other people who had come to believe, for reasons very different, perhaps, from Strauss's and Voegelin's, that American or Western civilization was in peril naturally found reason to be curious about the work of these two philosophers. Consequently, Voegelin and Strauss became [perhaps unwilling] participants in more mundane political matters.

A group of politically oriented conservatives, few if any of whom
had read Voegelin’s work seriously, put the phrase “Don’t Let Them Immanentize the Eschaton” on shirts and buttons. This example and numerous others just like it tell us that Voegelin and Strauss were appropriated, however inaccurately, by conservatives. Nearly every anthology of “conservative” works includes selections from both philosophers. They were adopted. But even as adopted sons they became targets for opponents who sought to discredit “conservatism”—whatever that is. As a result, conservatives and liberals alike have dealt with little more than caricature’s of these philosophers and their works. In part, I have struggled to understand Strauss and Voegelin as reactionaries without forcing them into the conservative mold; I have tried to understand their response to their world almost in isolation from any intended audience. However, because their influence has so profoundly shaped some segments of the American conservative movement, it is worth returning to my earlier analysis of traditionalist conservatives to test the “conservatism” of Strauss and Voegelin. It might be helpful to expand the ideal type of conservative developed in Chapter 1 as the best means of establishing a comparison. Perhaps then we can find some hints of the larger role Voegelin and Strauss played in American life.  

THE CONSERVATIVE IMAGINATION

Conservatives seek to conserve something, real or imagined. To talk about them in the context of dissent to the dominant intellectual, social, and political trends of their day is to encounter a paradox. If one broadens the frame of reference from twentieth-century America to the past several centuries in the West, then the paradoxical quality of the conservative label disappears, at least in terms of self-designation. Conservatives think of themselves as defenders of Western civilization against an assault launched from any number of modern thinkers: liberals, socialists, Marxists, positivists, relativists, nihilists—philistines all.

Conservatives emerged as such in reaction to changes that threatened to undermine the moral, religious, social, political, and intellectual traditions and principles to which they were devoted. The great Whig reformer Edmund Burke did not think of himself as a conservative—the label did not exist then—but sought nonetheless
to conserve the Western tradition against the threats posed by the French Revolution. Burke fought against the ideas or beliefs that gave impetus to the revolution, as it was the ideas, more than the actual revolution, that threatened the fragile fabric of European civilization, an artifice created from thousands of years of human experience guided by right reason and divine providence. The revolutionaries sought to rend this fabric and to construct a social and political order based upon abstract reasoning alone.

The French Revolution did not inaugurate the modern world; indeed, as far as I can tell, the modern world, a most porous conceptual vessel, has no beginning. But at least since Descartes split the subject from the object people here and there have fought a mostly losing battle against the emerging way moderns define knowledge, the political and social order, freedom, the individual, and of course reality. Over the years since Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, persons with a conservative turn of mind have emerged in every generation to defend the principles of Western civilization, as they construed them, against the most recent innovation. The list is long and includes John Adams, Alexis de Tocqueville, Cardinal Newman, Jakob Burckhardt, Henry Adams, the New Humanists, the Southern Agrarians, and the so-called new conservatives. Some affinities link these people and groups together as part of an ongoing tradition.

Conservative principles are bound up with an aesthetic sensibility. The search for a normative social order, for instance, is in part a quest for beauty, so it should come as no surprise that conservatives see a great deal of ugliness in the modern world. All around them they see a homogenization of American culture. Individuals get lost in the bureaucratized society, adrift without moorings or bearings. Rootless people in constant motion seek diversions to replace purpose. Industrialism and capitalism subvert craftsmanship and community while replacing these values with atomized individualism and crass materialism. The conservatives see huge tracts of land transformed into monotonous rows of look-alike houses occupied by think-alike people while grand, distinctive old homes and buildings succumb to the wrecking ball—testimony to the passion for the new and untried and disregard for the old and established. The United States has become, conservatives fear, a society bent on consump-
tion and sensual gratification, a society possessing an utter disregard for ancestors, posterity, and creation.

In 1900, a particularly pessimistic conservative, Henry Adams, visited the Paris Exposition and ruminated about the contrasting symbols of social order that dominated the Middle Ages and modernity: the Virgin and the dynamo. The Virgin, which represented not only the Catholic church but also the compelling, charismatic figure of Mary, helped orient and inspire the people of the fourteenth century. The Virgin functioned as an organizing ideal so compelling that it inspired great cathedrals. The people living within this paradigm knew the comfort of unquestioned verities and established purposes that gave their existence meaning in this life and the life to come. Moderns, by contrast, are dedicated to the human ability to create, to transform nature and to turn it toward human ends. The dynamo, most perfectly represented in 1900 by the steam engine, could occupy the imagination of moderns obsessed with change and power, but, quoting Henry Adams, "All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres." An imagination so yoked to the material world, so stunted as to see only human ingenuity and power, could never see or understand the realm of beauty and order transcending the purely physical world. Conservative hope for restoration rests, therefore, upon the cultivation of a higher imagination. Like Aristophanes, conservatives fear that "Whirl is king, having driven out Zeus."

But what will a properly cultivated higher imagination apprehend? Basic to conservative thought is a belief in a normative structure transcending purely human existence. Conservatives appeal to an authoritative standard not created by humans but to which humans are responsible. The issue takes a variety of forms. From a natural law tradition and with it "right reason," to an appeal to revelation or to more clearly Platonic concepts of essences or forms, all conservatives rely upon a transhuman standard that makes appeals to truth, justice, and beauty, meaningful. Of necessity, conservatives must rest their social beliefs in an idealist philosophy, and perhaps this is where, more than anywhere else, conservative principles sound hollow to modern ears. Embedded in this issue are a number of related questions, the most important being, What constitutes knowledge? If conservatives wish to appeal to some normative struc-
ture, humans must have some knowledge of it, and this knowledge must be intersubjectively communicable.

During most of the nineteenth century, when normative theory appealed to virtually every intellectual, the issue separating conservatives from their rivals involved the substance, not the existence, of a normative order. By the late nineteenth century, conservatives found themselves in an intellectual environment that was hostile toward any constructions of reality that possessed a static nature. Certain historicists and pragmatists, especially, emphasized the ever-shifting character of existence. With the fall from fashion of conceptual ontologies, the emphasis shifted from understanding and articulating a timeless standard by which humans ought to be judged to the experimental methods of science as being the most efficient means of finding ways of living congruent with human desires. Humans, in the modern world, must create their own standards, and by these alone will they be judged.

Conservatives found themselves without a useful vocabulary in the new climate even as they grounded their entire body of beliefs upon a subject about which no claims to knowledge could gain a hearing. The conversation had shifted, and knowledge had been reconfigured to exclude those realms of human experience not amenable to the scientific method. To conservatives, the restriction of knowledge claims to evidence found only in the flux of human affairs was evidence of a nominalistic spirit and an atrophied imagination. Through imagination one might transcend the moment to capture a glimpse of the timeless. Moderns, conservatives suggest, have decided simply to live out their lives in Plato's cave, creating meaning out of those fleeting images on the wall. To people who are skeptical about anything beyond the cave, the claims of those who have made their way out of the cave cannot make sense because those claims rest on experiences that have engendered a vocabulary that is opaque to the cave dwellers.

Shifting from the metaphysical to the more prosaic, conservative commentary on the social and political order is very complicated and nuanced, and this social and political commentary presents important problems to people who wish to engage seriously in a dialogue with conservatives. First, critics very often present deformed caricatures of conservative thought that have more or less dominated popular perception. In other words, conservatives are misun-
derstood, which means that one must chop through the crude stereotypes. Moreover, while conservative critiques of the modern world touch perspicaciously on the numerous problems presented by liberalism and other isms, conservatives cannot present sweeping solutions because sweeping plans to remedy problems are the problem. The matter is complicated, and since neither conservatives nor their critics concern themselves with careful qualifications in these matters, they too often talk past one another. Emphasizing principles rather than an ideal type leaves conservatives without an ideological model simple enough to plaster on the bumper of a car or in some other way reach large numbers of people. Their critique of the modern evolution of state power puts them in an ambiguous position with regard to the significant improvements made possible by that evolution. Conservatives acknowledge that a number of injustices have been partially remedied as a result of this development. On the other hand they find the means for achieving these advances profoundly dangerous, as is the underlying belief in progress toward some equalitarian utopia. All that conservatives have achieved, in this regard, is an articulation of principles, for a clear and precise call to reform would require that they cease being conservatives.

The principles, conservatives argue, upon which a society ought to order its institutions emerge from an understanding of the normative order and of human nature, the two constants of human reality that ground the otherwise ever-changing political and social order. The specific contexts for emulating the principles of the normative order vary greatly, so no paradigmatic human political and social structure exists, only flexible and general principles learned through centuries of human experience, reason, and to a far lesser degree, revelation.

So much of the difference between liberals and conservatives with regard to political and social institutions and goals spring from contrasting anthropologies. Whereas liberals have typically considered humans as autonomous individuals and, consequently, social and political institutions as creations of those individuals, conservatives acknowledge no such thing as an individual outside of the social context. Consequently, they consider it a gross distortion of the nature of things to think of social and political institutions as being created by individuals. Individual humans are participants in several institutions in which they find their place. One is a member of a
family, the local church, a guild or profession as well as a citizen of a city or village and a state. In the interstices of these institutions, along with the traditions and prejudices inherited from one’s ancestors, one understands one’s place in relation to the whole as well as one’s duties and liberties. Both humans and rights are creations of society, and they cannot be understood in an anterior relationship to society.

More than the social nature of humans, conservatives argue that humans have a fundamental need to be a part of a community, including a community of purpose. If the balance of authority dissolves by virtue of the decay of one or more important social institutions, as has been the case with the growth of the modern state at the expense of competing institutions like family, church, voluntary organizations, and local government, humans look to the ascending power to fulfill the various community needs that a network of institutions once satisfied. [If the citizens feel especially rootless and alienated, then the state will provide them with a sense of national purpose in which they play a part and find their meaning.] The state apparatus expands to meet the new social demands, which means the state becomes increasingly centralized, bureaucratic, and popular. Indeed, the most conspicuous danger conservatives identify is, not the failure of centralized power to supply the needs of the citizens, but its relative success. By accumulating more functions, the state necessarily destroys those institutions that once performed those functions. The individuals served by the state then find themselves alienated from local and personal sources of identity and meaning, and the relationships that once constituted local institutions are replaced by a distant and impersonal relationship between equal, atomized, and homogenized individuals and the state.

Two additional problems issue from that state of affairs. Because conditions require a centralized and bureaucratized system that is inflexible with regard to individual cases or even local conditions—or so conservatives assume—the goods or ends of a society become the sole property of the political power. In an almost Rousseauean sense, the will of the majority not only decides that freedom is good but defines freedom. In such a system recalcitrant members—those “individualists”—must be forced to be free—i.e., conform. Under these conditions the individual possesses no defense. In a society with a very healthy church, a vigorous extended family, or similar
institutions, the individual finds protection from arbitrary power because those institutions have authority in a wider field of competing nodes of authority. In their absence, the individual is defenseless against the power of the state.9

A conservative principle related to this affirmation of the social character of the individual is the belief that a proper social and political order requires a hierarchy that is roughly commensurate with abilities and effort. Here conservatives swim upstream against a rather vigorous current of equalitarianism. Conservatives recognize two forms of equality: equality before God and equality before the law. (They do not even embrace equality of opportunity because they cannot separate that formally from equality of condition.) Otherwise, they see an enormous variety of talents that deserve distinct places. Here they stand upon the Platonic definition of justice in which each person receives his or her due.

Hierarchy extends well beyond a simple concern for social justice, and it must do so, I think, because conservatives who are given to a justification of class distinctions based upon natural talent fail to explain how this just distribution of privileges might work, except to say that no human system can achieve justice fully. Perhaps more important to the conservative defense of hierarchy is an abhorrence for its opposite, "mass society." Any society that seeks to achieve equality of condition betrays the diversity that is so dear to the conservative heart. This sort of equality is maintained at enormous cost to the personal development of a society's citizens, even as the society robs itself of a just ordering of talents best suited for the common good. On this point, as in most others, conservative arguments contain an integral aesthetic critique. The argument for justice, though not without its merits, is almost ancillary to the conservative reaction to the blandness, the dullness of mass society. The real moral problem is that people display a boredom with life as evidenced in narcotic use, meaningless violence, and the endless search for new diversions.

Closely connected to the defense of hierarchy is the faith conservatives place in the role of tradition in maintaining order. There is a tension between the conservative emphasis upon tradition and the conservative emphasis upon normative principles. On the one hand, conservatives affirm a timeless standard for justice and truth while, on the other hand, they affirm the authoritative quality of the pre-
vailing human traditions, which are historical and not timeless. Indeed, conservatives often warn against trying to transplant American institutions to nations with very different cultures. Those nations must find their own ways to approximate the normative standards, ways congruent with their cultural inheritance. The timeless principles humans wish to emulate are rather loose, and human understanding of them is weak. Therefore, a great deal of diversity in institutions does not war against an affirmation of the normative order. Moreover, tradition serves humans very well, conservatives insist, in bridging the gap between the conditions of the moment and the more permanent qualities of human social and political life. As Russell Kirk so aptly put it, tradition confers upon change the element of continuity, keeping the alteration of society in a regular train. Everything which the living possess has roots in the spiritual and intellectual achievements of the past. Everything man has—his body, his mind, his social order—is in large part an inheritance from people long dead. The passage of time brings new acquisitions; but unless men know the past, they are unable to understand distinctions between what is permanent and what is transient in their lives. Man always is beset by questions, of which the largest is the question of his own existence. He cannot even begin to think about his existence, and lesser questions, until he has acquired the command of means that come to him from the past, such as the names that people customarily use with reference to modes of being and acting.4

One can make sense of Kirk and other conservatives only if one understands that the fundamental constituents of reality possess a permanent nature, which is true not only of the transcendent normative order but also of humans. A great many things change about humans, and these changes over time constitute history. The task is to distinguish the temporary from the permanent. Conservatives chastise moderns for emphasizing the ever-shifting patterns of human life, for declaring human nature a fiction. Conservatives recognize in the chronicle of human history an intelligible structure that helps expose human nature. Humans are sinful, given congenitally to lusting for things immoral, especially power and control. Also,
humans have a part of them that is unsatisfied with purely material things; they have a spirit or a soul that longs for order and beauty. This part of the human, often atrophied by degradations, requires the artifice of civilization, especially as expressed in the arts, to find fulfillment—or partial fulfillment. These cultural creations hint to the divine that one cannot apprehend directly, or grasp firmly. They require a highly developed imagination to make the symbols of these cultural creations transparent to the deeper truths they represent.

STRAUSS, VOEGELIN, AND THE CONSERVATIVES

In "liberal" America, where most people have possessed a strong belief in "truth"—even in the Christian truth—conservatives nonetheless have felt beleaguered because Americans were slowly accepting a rational or planned society over some supposed "traditional" society. Meanwhile, many intellectuals advocated these organizational trends because they believed that the sciences provided the means to achieve more fulfilling ways of living. Moreover, the "quest for certainty," as John Dewey put it, only hindered the collective human effort to build more satisfying societies. In short, tradition and particularity were under attack from different sides. Although conservatives expressed dismay at the path taken by most citizens, their real foes, they thought, were the godless intellectuals who cut American society from its moorings. Adrift, but in search of a more felicitous future, most Americans would recognize too late that they had not only thrown off tradition but God also.

During the 1950s, as conservatives began finding one another and forming institutions, the books by Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin served as primary philosophical bulwarks against many challenges to the Western philosophical tradition. Although most self-proclaimed conservative intellectuals were not philosophers, nor particularly interested in engaging in debates about technical points, they generally recognized that their religious and philosophical inclinations required some systematic defense. In the authors of The New Science of Politics and Natural Right and History they found, or thought they found, able defenders of the citadel. Voegelin and Strauss exposed the modern philosophical fraud, and moreover, their enterprise—to rea-
waken the philosophical quest (though not the quest for certainty)—was a necessary part of the larger conservative agenda.

Traditionalist conservatives had use for the works of Strauss and Voegelin, but did these two philosophers have any use for conservatives? This difficult question deserves yet another book, but some observations are necessary here. Although traditionalist conservatives clearly favored Voegelin to Strauss, they found *Natural Right and History* very useful for resurrecting the natural rights tradition, and this point was so important they were able to overlook Strauss's "misreading" of Burke. The relationship became more strained, however, when they found in Strauss's other books an emphasis upon a necessary tension or even contradiction between a religious and a philosophical way of life. Nonetheless, Strauss himself sought to reinvigorate religious belief in the United States, and for all his attacks upon "conventions," he fought hard to reawaken allegiance to "traditional" moral codes. Strauss's political legacy has developed through the so-called neoconservatives who seek simultaneously to expand liberty and to create communal codes sturdy enough to check many kinds of social behavior. The neoconservatives can uphold capitalism as an outgrowth of freedom and emphasize the need for a society to cultivate traditional virtues. For Strauss, the justification for these two thrusts rested upon the beliefs that a social order depends upon clearly understood and widespread opinions about right and wrong and that if these restrictive beliefs are absent, the measure of freedom so adored by the philosopher will be more restricted. In brief, Strauss wanted a society that was reasonably bound by conventions so that the philosopher can live free to think and teach, so long as he teaches responsibly.

Voegelin, on the other hand, took seriously and participated in both the philosophical and the theological traditions of the West. That he did so by emphasizing that theology, properly understood, is an adjunct to philosophy, proved a minor annoyance to his admirers. Indeed, when in the 1950s Voegelin emphasized the "equivalence" between the symbols of Moses and Plato—with the Christian symbolism the most articulate expression of the underlying experience—Christians could accept alien traditions while recognizing a single normative order under which all people live. Voegelin provided no real comfort, much less ammunition, for the emerging neoconservatives, but for the traditionalists, his early and middle works seemed the best philosophical response to the liberal society in which they
lived. Although the later Voegelin embarrassed his Catholic followers, his earlier works continue to gird them for battle.

For their parts, Strauss and Voegelin avoided labeling themselves or associating with any overtly political groups. Voegelin wandered in and out of conservative institutional circles, writing for the *Intercollegiate Review* and accepting a position at the Hoover Institution. He appears to have cultivated friendships with a few well-placed conservatives, but he largely remained independent of those circles as well. Strauss was more aloof—but not his students.

Strauss and Voegelin were two European emigrés who never felt entirely at home in the United States. Although their relationships among Americans were numerous, their most important intellectual partners were Europeans or other emigrés. They were more embroiled with debates about Husserl or Heidegger than about James or Dewey. Both men wrote as German thinkers, which means that one should explore their relationships with Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Alfred Schutz, Alexander Kojève, and Hannah Arendt, to name a few. Yet it is their adopted home in which they are destined, I think, to have the greatest impact. They helped bring Continental thought to America—to the American right—and as a consequence, they changed the shape of conservatism in America. Another European emigré, Friedrich von Hayek, helped recast the conservative reaction to "the liberal state" by connecting the New Deal with totalitarianism. Similarly, Strauss and Voegelin provided conservatives with a frightening backdrop against which to view Anglo-American trends. The problems did not concern this or that policy, or even tradition, but emerged from the growing allegiance people were paying to instrumental reason. The belief that humans could control their world and their destiny, Strauss and Voegelin suggested, rested hidden beneath the enormous technical successes of the modern age, and conservatives who believed them could no longer consider technological advances as unqualified improvements. In short, Strauss and Voegelin helped give a historical sweep to the conservative struggle even as they more clearly identified the enemy.

THE CONSERVATIVE PREDICAMENT

If the enemy they identified was the Enlightenment and with it a faith in human-directed progress, there is some question today as to
whether conservatives have abandoned the Enlightenment tradition that Voegelin and Strauss connected with liberalism. As the political fortunes of the right rose, beginning as early as 1968 but especially in the 1980s, the debate within the right escalated. Increasingly it appears that the main fissure (though there are hundreds of others) in the right, at least at the level of ideas or principles, has developed between those who thoroughly reject modern liberalism and those who seek to restrain it by one means or another. The two sides of the growing divide might even be designated conservative (those who seek to conserve the American liberal tradition by saving it from its own excesses) and reactionary (those who reject root and branch liberal ideas as products of modern, Enlightenment principles). My purpose in undermining my own (earlier) definition is twofold. First, to make sense of the ideological and political topography of our times we must be aware of the various meanings attached to everyday words, and we must insist upon asking for definitions of any who use them. Second, I wish to make a point in this concluding section: conservatives whom I have described as possessing a conservative imagination have no choice in the present age but to become thorough reactionaries. Indeed, to maintain the integrity of their principles they may need to seek practical or political alliances with groups on the left. With many members of the left they share a critique of key characteristics of a consumerist society, but their varying prescriptions would prevent conservatives from losing their identity and thereby being enervated by success—as they are today.

A brief and selective look at the recent past may help expose the intellectual and political dynamic of the right generally and of conservatives more specifically. I hope, in the process, to shed some light on the recent rise of the right and what that means for conservatives—especially for the conservative intellectual movement.

The heart of the "respectable right" that emerged in the 1950s was a constellation of thinkers who advocated either traditionalism—usually Catholic devotees of natural law—or a 1950s' version of libertarianism, usually emphasizing the baneful effects of government intervention in economic affairs. For all their differences, these two groups shared a fear of what James Burnham called the managerial revolution, the attempt of certain elites to construct a "new man" and a new age by managing most aspects of human life. Outside of the sweeping historical and philosophical arguments about the na-
ture of the modern age, members of this coalition could point to the European drift toward wholesale restructuring and to the growth of centripetal forces in the United States inaugurated by the New Deal and which accelerated during the war. For these thinkers, recent events (going back to 1933) marked a dramatic shift in the equilibrium of American political, economic, and social life, and it was to these events that they were reacting.

It took William F. Buckley, Jr., to "fuse" these two elements of resistance into a conservative front with the National Review articulating the view of the responsible right. Traditionalist conservatives participated—sometimes reluctantly—in this common front, but they also worked in their own institutions and through their own journals to advance a conservative response to larger and somewhat more esoteric modern trends. They tended to emphasize cultural matters more than governmental issues, and in the context of their own journals said almost nothing about the nostrum of the other half of the movement, "free enterprise." The economic question is the most difficult for the traditionalists to deal with effectively. In the late 1940s Richard Weaver, a southern traditionalist, emphasized that property rights (what he called a metaphysical right) concerned the property of a farmer or small businessman but not the "abstract" property of stock, bonds, and corporations. Traditionalists feared a growing, centralizing, and bureaucratizing federal government, but they never forgot that "capitalism" tends to undermine the traditions, customs, and reverence for the past that they so cherish. On this subject they have remained reticent if not entirely silent.

Nonetheless, the coalition worked temporarily for several reasons, of which two strike me as especially significant. First, its members had a common enemy, however abstract. Insofar as they focused upon the encroachment of centralizing forces their differences could even strengthen their bond. The traditionalist could assent to the most important statements by libertarians (and various other groups like Taft Republicans) who devoted their energy to fighting the enemy while at the same time traditionalists could concentrate in their more academic journals on the cultural questions that did not much concern the libertarians. Second, the conservative movement had to fight against more radical and populist right-wing groups, most famously the John Birch Society. Buckley effectively defined
the "respectable right" during the late 1950s and early 1960s to exclude the most populist movements. This exclusion had the effect of binding together the other elements of the right [in their own minds and in the minds of liberals] into a conservative movement and at the same time created an elitist movement dominated by northeastern, Ivy-league educated, cosmopolitan, and wealthy conservatives.

The raucous years of the late 1960s and early 1970s brought new elements into the conservative movement, giving it more political power at the expense of a clear identity. Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign, aimed at the "silent majority," indicated the growing political importance of frustrated and even alienated Americans. The growth of two groups changed the dynamics of the conservative movement. The first might be called the populist right. These are the people who had long felt that the federal government was working against their interest and that the nation was increasingly controlled by a class of intellectuals who sought to reshape America in their image. These "middle Americans" were upset not only by the antiwar ferment but by the way the federal government [especially the unelected Supreme Court] was forcing changes on them. They resented the elitist intrusion into their local affairs. Many of these people were Christian fundamentalists who had come to feel that the changes in the United States, both in policy matters and in social and cultural matters, reflected an anti-Christian bias. To the chagrin of a great many liberals who had thought that Christian fundamentalism had died in the 1920s, fundamentalists proved to be very numerous indeed, making them the largest untapped source of political power in the 1970s.

The neoconservatives, whose leaders had begun as intellectuals on the left but who had become disillusioned with the radicalism of the 1960s and early 1970s, also joined the conservative movement. They brought a more pragmatic perspective. Although they usually emphasized the great virtues of the Western tradition they were generally less interested in that heritage than in finding practical, political means of curbing liberalism. They sought to roll back many of the government programs of the Great Society on the grounds that they did not work. Indeed, many of the neoconservatives advocated alternative programs [some governmental, others private] that they argued would better deal with the problems. In short, then, they accepted more of the liberal assumptions than did either of the original
groups that composed the conservative movement. Furthermore, the neoconservatives shared with their liberal counterparts a passion for politics and political action. As these intellectuals moved into conservative institutions (which they came to dominate by 1980) they turned them into think tanks designed to provide policy analysis and advice. It is not surprising, then, that when a "conservative" president came to office he drew upon these policy specialists to implement his conservative revolution. As one might expect, the conservative revolution amounted, in part, to an ideological takeover of the instruments of power (bureaucracy) rather than a fundamental change in the nature and extent of government.

The current era of the conservative movement (beginning in 1980) is astonishingly complex, but the major elements were already in place by 1980—traditionalists, free-market advocates, populists, neoconservatives. The introduction of the snake oil of supply-side economics would complicate matters by providing a common political cause that hid but also aggravated internal divisions. The movement stayed together partly because Ronald Reagan was capable of being all things to all people, but in the struggle to get control over the levers of power, the neoconservatives and their free market allies won.

Their victory was indeed meaningful—the center of the political debate had shifted to the right. Democratic candidates avoid the taint of the "liberal" label, and hardly anyone advocates a return to the Great Society, at least directly. But was the victory translated into a revolution? Nothing could be further from the truth. By any indicator one wishes to consult, the fifteen years after the election of Ronald Reagan were characterized more by continuity than by change. Even the rhetoric of the president himself was charged with the electricity of progress, not return. Reagan promised to bring about peace and widespread prosperity by new means. He reminded his listeners time and again of the power of the American people to chart their own course, to create a future of their own making. He would facilitate this great awakening by unleashing the power of the market—which had been transformed by supply-siders into a system of benevolence that could translate individual self-interest into public altruism—to create full employment and rising wages.

The political success of the broader conservative movement meant the defeat of the traditionalist conservatives. The neoconser-
vatives and their allies became the new "respectable" right, but while the political center moved to the right, the right end of the spectrum was truncated. The "Reagan revolution" effectively eliminated socialists and conservatives—all those who challenge the value of large-scale capitalist enterprises and consumerism—from the acceptable political spectrum.

The conservative imagination now seems further removed from American experience—or at least political experience—than ever before. The social order is no longer shaped by a dedication to tradition, governed by a clearly articulated concept of natural law, or organized into variegated and largely local institutions. All forms of localism, it seems to conservatives, are imperiled or dead as a result of the growing integration of the world economy, with increased political and military internationalism, and with judicial nationalism. Hierarchy is more or less tied to wealth, which in turn is connected to the complex and international corporate economy, making old notions of noblesse oblige (which entails obligations to one's own people) archaic. Even traditional virtues—so cherished by conservatives as necessary for a democratic order—are undermined by the institutions they helped create. If capitalism depended, originally, upon the virtues of hard work, extensive savings, and deferred gratification, today the dynamics of the consumer culture encourage consumption over production; immediate gratification; a preference for the new over the old; and, in general, a hostility toward all restrictions (internal or external) on behavior.

The conservative predicament, then, is that the American people are no longer guided by the internal principles of restraint and motivation that once made them conservative just as the social and political order no longer has the essential means of buttressing the virtues necessary for a successful conservative renascence. The realistic options for conservatives are few. Many conservatives (especially neoconservatives) choose to draw upon Strauss's conclusion that the United States represents a salutary balance of modern and premodern beliefs and that the resulting society of freedom and opportunity can be sustained by working to keep premodern beliefs (especially notions of a transcendental moral order) as restraining influences. Yet for them there must be a sense in which the balance is out of kilter, which would send them back to the founding fathers as venerable exemplars for our troubled times. Unfortunately, for many
of this group, their goal will be undermined by the fact that they do not truly believe in what they call others to believe.

Traditionalist conservatives find themselves without much to conserve. Their only real option in these times is to seek recovery rather than conservation. Even though many of them might devote a good deal of energy to the political realm, their own understanding of the world dictates that they must seek social restructuring by calling upon individuals and small groups to resist the charms of the modern world in favor of the truths represented by the Christian natural law tradition. They might call people back to an older notion of responsibility to family and community, they might try to educate people into living lives of virtue, and they might remind people of the larger reality (transcending the physical world) in which they play a part and to which they have a responsibility. They might do all of these things, but as they very well know, a society ordered around these virtues and beliefs requires institutions that shape citizens. They know as well that people must feel an affection or love for their family, community, and other social units for them to participate as virtuous citizens. Finally, these conservatives know that faith of the sort they require is not a matter of simple choice but part of the great patrimony one inherits from a society one cherishes.

A favorite aphorism of traditionalist conservatives comes from Edmund Burke: "To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely." Burke penned these words as part of a lament about the direction of his own time. "All the decent drapery of life," he wrote, "is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion." Perhaps not since Burke wrote those words have conservatives had as much reason to feel so utterly besieged. What is different, however, is that contemporary conservatives are operating in a more thoroughly modern, secularized age. They find themselves, then, like Voegelin, in a disordered age seeking the roots of order. They no longer have the luxury of conservation, but of necessity they must become reactionaries who call for a return to Christian faith and to political philosophy as a normative enterprise.

In some ways, then, Strauss and Voegelin become more important
to conservatives in the 1990s than they were in the 1950s, not because the two philosophers became conservatives but because conservatives must become reactionaries. Now more than ever conservatives require, for their own survival, a clear understanding [in practical terms it does not matter that their understanding be historically accurate] of the origins and nature of their situation as well as some sense of that to which they are calling their nation back. Strauss and Voegelin provide them with versions of the causes of the present problem, but conservatives will have to look elsewhere, I suspect, for a clear articulation of their plea.

I have not attempted in this book to describe the precise influence of these two philosophers on the thinking of specific conservatives. Rather, I found Strauss and Voegelin to be two compelling figures who sought to make sense of their world. They believed that they lived in an age of crisis. As political philosophers, they devoted their lives to understanding the nature of that crisis and to finding answers (or to rearticulating the problems as the only acceptable solutions). This is the story I have tried to tell—two men in reaction to their times. Whether they were correct about the nature of our world or not, their struggles tell us something of the anxiety that accompanies life in a universe adrift.
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