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Up from liberalism

by [James Piereson](#)

On *Upstream: The Ascendance of American Conservatism* by Alfred S. Regnery.

Alfred S. Regnery

Upstream: The Ascendance of
American Conservatism.

Threshold Editions, 464 pages, \$26

The most far-reaching political development in the United States over the past half century has been the rise of conservatism from a minor intellectual movement to its status today as the nation's governing philosophy. The conservative insurgency was all the more impressive because hardly anyone a generation ago thought it was remotely possible. Barry Goldwater's landslide defeat in the 1964 election convinced many experts that conservatism was a lost cause that could never win the support of anyone who was not already a committed believer. "These are the years of the liberal," John Kenneth Galbraith said shortly after that election. "Nearly everyone describes himself so." That verdict was accepted by everyone except for a small band of conservative activists, writers, publishers, and donors who through their combined efforts managed within a few decades to turn the tables on Galbraith and his liberal allies.

Alfred S. Regnery's *Upstream: The Ascendance of American Conservatism* is a finely wrought history of American conservatism from 1945 to the present told from the point of view of one who knew personally its early leaders and whose own coming of age as the son of a prominent conservative publisher mirrored that of the movement itself. Mr. Regnery, formerly president of Regnery Publishing Company and now publisher of *The American Spectator*, adds immeasurably in this volume to previous books on the subject, such as George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* or *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* by John Micklethwaite and Adrian Woolridge. Part memoir and part history, *Upstream* reminds us that the advance of conservatism was a personal achievement of visionary men and women who, swimming against the tide, refused to accept the conventional wisdom that their principles were doomed to extinction.

No one personified this achievement more than Ronald Reagan, whose funeral in 2004 brought forth an outpouring of respect and admiration even from those who a few decades earlier had derided him as an extremist and reactionary, or worse. In his two terms in office, President Reagan had achieved what seemed to be political miracles: discrediting communism and socialism, ending the Cold War, re-energizing the American economy, restoring national pride, and turning the United States into the world's sole superpower. Reagan, as the author reminds us, came to national attention during the 1964 campaign when he delivered an eloquent address before a national television audience on behalf of Senator Goldwater. That speech, which he titled "A Time for Choosing," was vintage

Reagan. “You and I have a rendezvous with destiny,” he said. “We can preserve for our children this, the last best hope for man on earth, or we can sentence them to take the first step into a thousand years of darkness.” Reagan’s speech, though not enough to save Goldwater, galvanized conservatives across the country and gave them hope of future success. Though the 1964 election was a low point for conservatives, it also marked the beginning of their long march to power.

Upstream contains many fascinating and insightful vignettes of personalities and events that marked the birth and early development of post-war conservatism. The first Mont Pelerin Society meeting in 1947 brought together a band of free market thinkers from the United States and Europe to discuss ways of challenging the advocates of socialism and central planning. It proved to be among the most durable and influential of intellectual groups in the entire post-war period. William F. Buckley Jr., ignited a national debate over higher education in 1951 with the publication of *God and Man at Yale*, and then proceeded in 1954 to launch *National Review*, which quickly became the most influential of conservative publications. The Hiss case brought Richard Nixon and Whittaker Chambers to national attention and rallied anti-communists to organize against the Soviet threat at home and abroad. By the end of the 1950s, the conservative movement had taken shape, bringing together under a common umbrella libertarians, anti-communists, free market economists, and traditional conservatives. The Goldwater movement then brought this coalition into the political arena, first with the objective of capturing the Republican Party, but more distantly of bringing their principles into power nationally.

The rise of conservatism was greatly aided in the 1970s by the manifest failure of liberal policies that produced weakness abroad, stagflation in the economy, and crime and disorder in our cities. By the late 1970s, the conservative movement was in a state of ferment due both to the failures of liberalism and to the intellectual momentum that had been gained through nearly thirty years of sustained criticism of liberal policies. New think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the Free Congress Foundation were established to provide an ongoing institutional voice for conservatives in Washington. Following the upheavals of the 1960s, the conservative movement was strengthened intellectually and politically by the assimilation of new elements, especially the neo-conservatives who offered new lines of attack on liberal thought and the religious conservatives who were alarmed at the militantly secular direction taken by the Democratic Party. As the 1980 election came into view, conservatives were prepared to reverse the verdict of 1964.

Yet, as Mr. Regnery emphasizes, conservatives did not rest on their laurels after Reagan’s victory but continued to press forward through the 1980s and 1990s by organizing influential new think tanks, journals, academic associations, and activist groups to build on that breakthrough and to turn conservatism from an opposition movement to a governing coalition. When Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, for example, he could turn for advice and counsel to but a few conservative institutions, such as the Heritage Foundation or the American Enterprise Institute; when George Bush was elected in 2000, however, his administration could look to conservative and free market organizations working in every important area of public policy, including law, economics, urban affairs, and even art and culture.

Mr. Regnery pays particularly close attention to the success of new legal organizations, especially the Federalist Society, in nurturing conservative jurists who could be tapped for positions in the Federal courts and who, once there, could begin to reverse a generation of liberal jurisprudence inaugurated by the Warren Court. President Eisenhower, when leaving office, was asked if he had made any mistakes during his presidency. “Yes,” he replied, “two of them, and they’re both on the Supreme Court”—a reference to liberal justices Earl Warren and William J. Brennan. Richard Nixon was frustrated by his limited success in elevating conservatives to the Supreme Court. Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush elevated five justices between them to the Court, but only two (Scalia and Thomas) turned out to be principled conservatives. Somewhat in contrast to this record,

the author regards the appointment of Justices Roberts and Alito, both firm conservatives and both also alumni of Federalist Society programs, as among the current president's signal accomplishments—but one that would not have been possible without the energy and intelligence that conservatives invested in legal programs during the 1980s and 1990s.

A great strength of this volume is the ecumenical approach taken by the author toward the various strands of thought that today make up the conservative movement. Mr. Regnery understands that a major strength of modern conservatism lies in the sheer variety of its component parts which demonstrates the breadth and suppleness of conservative principles. He has little patience for those who would read this or that group out of the conservative movement because of differences in emphasis or, even, of differences in policy. Debate and disagreement are signs of strength rather than of weakness in a political movement. In taking this view, the author emulates the late William F. Buckley Jr., the founder of modern conservatism, whose generosity of spirit caused him always to welcome new converts to the cause and whose far-sighted leadership was instrumental to its success.

“What will you conserve?” This is the question that Disraeli, the great British statesman, posed to his conservative contemporaries and one that conservatives at all times would do well to keep in mind. For the various conservatives whose achievements are well recounted in this volume, the answer to this question was found in the ideals of individual liberty and limited government that formed the foundation of the American nation but which had been tossed aside by modern reformers as antiquated conceptions. The rise of conservatism in our time, if not quite a revolution, was at least a renewal in that it marked a necessary reassertion of ancient principles that gave birth to the nation and shaped its development. It is a surprising tale, filled with improbable events and eccentric figures, and one faultlessly told in *Upstream*.

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