Paul Gottfried, who ranks among the most serious scholars on the Right, has long rejected most of it as politically worthless and intellectually bankrupt. It is no surprise then that *Conservatism in America* often lacks the studious deliberation implied by his subtitle, *Making Sense of the American Right*. On the acknowledgements page, Gottfried writes: “This book was written, among other reasons, to open a dialogue on the ‘conservative movement’ with those who are willing and able to participate.” But he warns: “It is unlikely, as my text makes clear, that those who would join this hypothetical discussion will emanate from either ‘conservative’ organizations in the New York–Washington corridor or the neoconservative media.”¹ In other words: Come, let a few of us morosely reason together.

That’s too bad, because the book is one that conservatives ought to read and think about. While tending to disregard the imperatives of the politically engaged and thus to lose much credibility as a political analysis, *Conservatism in America* is a far more thorough statement than we normally see of a substantial right-wing tendency to quarrel with other conservatives, or as the author and his comrades would have it, false conservatives.

Gottfried argues that the movement was usurped by unworthy masters—the neoconservatives—in the Reagan years and that other conservatives, with a craven stupidity, have harnessed themselves to this non-leadership ever since. In the process, he insists, American society lost the truer alternative to creeping socialism and unchecked multiculturalism, which the pre-neocon Right, in the anti-New Deal and early *National Review* eras, had represented.
At the end of the book Gottfried quotes a remark by historian John Lukacs that in today's advanced nations “we're all social democrats!” Movement conservatives, Gottfried adds, would most honestly respond by saying: “Yes, but some of us still vote Republican and talk about values.”

That sounds like Rush Limbaugh on a bad day, but it isn't meant to. It is more in the nature of a slur. Gottfried holds the Republican Party in contempt. He similarly dismisses conservatives’ wide-ranging “values” talk, the attempted debunking of which takes up much space in this book. The movement we have seen for the past quarter century, Gottfried argues, has been in voluntary thrall to big-government cosmopolitans who: 1) care more about a progressive future for the world, and about Israel, than the survival of their own country as a meaningful society; 2) are laughably weak in their supposed anti-statism; and 3) blather about “values,” a dime-store substitute for the hard-line social conservatism they won’t really advocate, doing this in order to lend their careerist network a semblance of unity and also to distinguish themselves from the more powerful Left in a safe manner that preserves social and media respectability.

Such anti-conservatism from the Right, as most readers of this essay know, is hardly peculiar to Gottfried. It has been a common theme among *Chronicles* and *The American Conservative* magazines, the John Randolph Club and Ludwig von Mises Institute, and the late columnist-essayists Joe Sobran and Sam Francis (who were fired many years ago, some say unjustly, by *National Review* and the *Washington Times*). Another intense critic in this camp was the radically libertarian, culturally traditionalist, right-wing anti-militarist Murray Rothbard.

Dating back to hostilities that flared in the 1980s between neoconservatives allied with movement-oriented Reaganites and, on the other side, disgruntled traditionalists and libertarians, paleoconservatism (as it is called by friends and foes alike) is close to the position of the better-known and more politically attuned Pat Buchanan. When the elder President Bush was challenged for renomination in 1992, economist Rothbard claimed with
irrational exuberance that with Buchanan “as our leader, we shall break the clock of social democracy. … We shall repeal the twentieth century.”

A bit less ambitiously, Buchanan has written books on the danger of uncontrolled mass immigration and our nation’s tendencies toward what he views as imperialism, also remaining something of a spokesman for protectionism. More recently, he founded *The American Conservative* in frustrated opposition to dominant tendencies on the organized Right. Meanwhile, paleocons have not said much about taking back America—not due to any reconciliation with the times, but because they have mostly given up on political leaders, or as Sam Francis once wrote, the useless “Diogenes’ search for an honest presidential candidate.” They don’t consider Buchanan dishonest, but that is how they see almost everyone else in major-league politics. Congressman Ron Paul was something of a hit with the paleocons when he ran in 2008, but only as a protester, not a likely clock-breaker.

This school of thought can easily—although not inevitably—shade off into racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Israelism, Paul-like levels of isolationism and opposition to the war on terror, and quasi-anarchism. At its best, it is an insightful and courageous critique of our society, a thought-provoking diagnosis of how bad things have really gotten from even a moderately conservative standpoint in post-1960s America. At its worst, full of the aforementioned ingredients, paleoconservatism is a witches’ brew. In neither mode, to vary the metaphor, is it anything with which to build. Apparently it is not even meant to be.

*Conservatism in America* reminds us of the latter point, for its intermittent but instructive scholarly passages are, as a whole, overshadowed by polemics that smack of score-settling. Even the most open-minded reader will find it hard to set aside a suspicion that Gottfried and most people for whom he is writing are basically obsessive naysayers when it comes to actual conservative political work, or even to communicating with the citizenry as a whole. Those who give either activity much of a try become
objects of contempt to people who think this way. In his introduction, Gottfried claims: “Nothing could be further from my intention than to denigrate the movement I discuss. I am simply trying to get to the bottom of a subject that has preoccupied me for decades.” But there is little follow-through on that respectful denial, and its absence is loud. There is no reluctance to denigrate here.

Gottfried focuses on two essential characteristics, as he sees them, of the pseudo-conservative Right: its “lack of connection to an older and more genuine conservatism” and its “general tendency to move leftward to accommodate those with whom it shares the public spotlight.” In saying “older and more genuine conservatism,” he means both an attitude and a political force, overlapping but far from identical. Gottfried distinguishes between conservatism and the “Right,” with conservatism as a cultural rather than political entity and the Right as “a predominantly bourgeois reaction, explicitly against social and political radicalization, that has taken many forms.” For Gottfried, one example of a genuine Right is unreconstructed opposition to the New Deal: a category known to admirers like himself and others, usually in combination with pre-World War II anti-interventionism or isolationism, as the Old Right. Another genuine Right, Gottfried concludes in a detailed digression that risks unsettling many readers, was European fascism (not Nazism) in Italy and elsewhere.

In contrast to all this, American conservatism today is neither conservative nor, like a true Right, an “authentic historical movement.” It doesn’t, Gottfried alleges, “speak for anyone or anything beyond itself” but rather is “contrived … a media phenomenon.” It can be described as “a collection of Republican Party partisans, think tank employees, and journalists who belong to one side of a changing political spectrum and political dialogue. Lacking either a stable social base or any tie to classical conservatism, self-styled conservatives champion ‘values’ as a kind of moral glue for their network of associations.” Establishment conservatives have had to trim their supposedly permanent values “to make them fit an
increasingly less traditional and at least theoretically more egalitarian society.”8 By way of elaboration, Gottfried explains:

To the extent that we in the West are moving into a post-Christian and multicultural society and polity, political labeling will certainly reflect this process of change. Persons on the Right who wish to be elected to national office must be extremely careful not to offend gays, feminists, the civil rights lobby, and other highly visible pressure groups who enjoy favor with the media and among entertainers and educators. Accordingly, celebrities who take ‘conservative’ labels must signal their ‘values’ discreetly or else learn to make noise without bringing down the full wrath of the liberal establishment.9

Gottfried’s theme will be familiar to those who have read his The Conservative Movement (either the first edition co-authored with Chronicles editor Thomas Fleming, or the second by Gottfried alone). He tells us that the origins of the pathetic situation he perceives lie in a little-resisted seizure of resources and power, reinforced by the basic human selfishness of many conservatives whose guilt has been passive rather than active:

By the mid-eighties, the neoconservatives had been able to achieve a near stranglehold on funds targeted for conservative activism; and unlike other groups on the Right, they did not have to worry about direct mailings for money. Already in control of old conservative philanthropies like the Smith Richardson Foundation, once identified with anti-New Deal isolationism, neoconservative operatives moved into commanding positions at AEI and Heritage, which had started off in association with the older postwar Right. Those who rushed to do their bidding in Washington were often government employees, some of whom came with the ‘Reagan Revolution’ and who decided that they liked the oxymoron soon to be called ‘big-government
conservatism.’ Why push for limitations on the central government when the result might cost them their jobs? Far better to collect a salary while working, or claiming to work, to make the federal administration receptive to ‘conservative values.’

Gottfried makes much of the fact that younger as distinct from the first-generation neocons (or their earlier writings) have shown tendencies to accommodate liberal priorities while differing on detail and execution. “Neoconservatism’s shifting attitudes and positions,” according to Gottfried, “reveal the problem of attaching to it an immutable content or even a coherent ideology. It has become philosophically minimal in proportion to its increased political clout, its enhanced philanthropic resources, and its tendency to celebrate ever more lavishly ‘the neoconservative persuasion,’ ‘the neoconservative imagination,’ and neoconservative readings in ostentatious volumes distributed among its dependents.”

To illustrate the accommodationism, he cites a “values” book by Rick Santorum, *It Takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Ground*, which the then-senator “supposedly had some role in writing.” In television interviews, Santorum “greatly toned down views taken or implied in that work.” Furthermore, its cover featured “an apparently multiracial family, lest anyone believe that the Senator advocated any specifically white or Euro-American values.” Gottfried also points to David Brooks of the *New York Times*, who has “defended gay marriage as a conservative concerned about ‘family values,’” and also, like fellow neoconservative columnists John Podhoretz and Jonah Goldberg, criticized Santorum for his opposition to gay marriage. He concludes:

The values of Santorum and Brooks have little to do with bourgeois liberalism as it prevailed with the professional and commercial classes that survived into the twentieth century. Nation-states controlling immigration, well-defined
gender roles, Victorian morality, and the separation of civil society from public administration were the constituent elements of the bourgeois civic idea that both value conservatives and their talking partners on the Left have excluded from their political conversations.12

The underlying truth for Gottfried is this: “Neoconservatives have merely competed with the Left-Center as interpreters of values widely avowed by the Left.”13 Later on, he adds: “Their value language and shrill war against relativism have been attempts to invest the movement with a deep intellectuality and moral purpose that it lacks. Its shallowness remains obvious despite its journalistic success and its occasional borrowings from Catholic ethics.”14

In challenging Gottfried’s portrayal of the state of affairs on the Right, I proceed on the premise that politics—whether in its lower or higher form—is about live issues and that conservatism’s purpose, therefore, is to oppose the Left’s current agenda as effectively, not as rigorously, as possible. I further presume that the cultural Left of the 1960s and its present-day epigones have been, and are, our main opponents. In contrast, while the economic liberalism of the old Democratic party to which some first-generation neocons continued to feel an attachment may (or, on balance, may not) have weakened civil society, it did not do this in the obvious ways associated with the cultural Left and its prime agent in politics, the post-1972 Democratic party. However much conservatives may disagree with it, the merely economic liberalism rooted in the New Deal is not the true adversary when there is another more absolutist and destructive liberalism we must deal with. As Irving Kristol explained in 1995, neoconservatism “differed in one crucial respect from its conservative predecessors: Its chosen enemy was contemporary liberalism, not socialism or statism in the abstract.”15

On such reasoning, neocon sympathy for the old Democratic party and its works is not, Gottfried to the contrary, a serious problem. The question is not whether most prominent conservatives now accept a more intrusive state than existed prior to the Civil
Rights Act of 1964, the centralizing judicial activism of the Warren Court, and the contemporaneous Great Society programs. Of course they do, and one can reasonably dispute all these constitutive aspects of today’s society on philosophical or practical grounds. All three have a problematic legacy, one that is little discussed in connection with the early civil rights laws, of which an expansive system of reverse discrimination and color-coding are partially though perhaps unintentionally a result. Certainly it can be argued that self-understood conservatives who endorse these and other changes (elements of the sexual and feminist “revolutions,” for example, another recurring topic in the book) that were wrought in the 1960s are not ideologically faithful heirs of the vintage Barry Goldwater and his followers, or of the old National Review. And if they are intolerant of people to the right of themselves on racial or gender or sexual issues, or federalism, or the enhanced welfare state, that is an ideological and maybe a character weakness. But none of this refutes their identity or usefulness as conservatives.

What really matters, in judging Gottfried’s argument, is whether the neocons are in serious opposition to the Left or liberalism, and whether they merit respect from other conservatives. Gottfried answers these questions resoundingly in the negative yet is either neglectful, reticent, or eccentric when it comes to offering examples of conservatives clearly superior to neocons. There is almost nothing about political figures he finds praiseworthy in this sense, among whom he skimpily mentions Goldwater and Robert Taft. As examples of serious cultural conservatives, Gottfried cites the literary scholars Cleanth Brooks and George Panichas, pointing out how little they cared for politics. Brooks, Gottfried notes in a personal recollection from Yale, “had no political inclinations known to his students beyond occasionally casting a vote for the Democratic Party. His strongest commitments were neither to an ideology nor to a party but to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, whose original wording he worked for decades to keep in use at Episcopal services.” Panichas, the longtime editor of Modern Age, “has remained blissfully ignorant of both academic infighting and the presumed differences between our two national parties.
He has justified his deliberate neglect of such matters by dismissing them as ‘passing doxai,’ in contrast to the deeper truths that he finds in mystics and in such religious authors as Dostoyevski, Simon [sic] Weil, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.”

Gottfried is suspicious of people who understand themselves to be cultural conservatives or traditionalists and also have an engagement in party politics. Another eminent paleocon and anti-neocon, the Swedish-born political philosopher Claes Ryn, is quoted in order to amplify this suspicion: “Ryn once observed with puzzled amusement the behavior of his graduate students at Catholic University of America who identify themselves as Kirkian conservatives. Such students typically ‘make a fuss over the GOP’ while ‘also preparing to be received into the Catholic Church.’” If Gottfried interprets this remark correctly, Ryn might also be puzzled by the fact that all four conservatives on the Supreme Court, chosen by Republican presidents while members in good standing of at least the unofficial Republican Party, are genuine Catholics. So was traditionalist godfather Russell Kirk, who remained involved with the party in Michigan for many years.

Gottfried’s denunciation of value-oriented conservative rhetoric and political stances rings hollow when we consider actual politics, not mere ideology. For example, if one accepts that the anti-abortion position is integral to orthodox Catholicism, an issue with special status in its hierarchy of ideological goods, and also chooses at least to vote, there seems little alternative to support for the Republican Party, regardless of one’s subjective attitude toward it. The same can be said of gay marriage, an issue that Gottfried uses more heavily than abortion to illustrate the ideological mushiness of mainstream conservatism. Certainly some neocons have either endorsed or refused to oppose it. George W. Bush made a weak show of opposing it, as is likely true of many Republican officeholders. That does not alter the fact that GOP elected officials are a greater obstacle to the enactment of gay marriage, and Republican judges are less likely to impose it than Democratic ones. Barack Obama said he was against it in 2008, but no politically sophisticated person was
fooled. Neocon writers do not reliably oppose it, but where is the evidence that they lack respect for conservative arguments against it? Criticisms of the magnitude leveled by Gottfried would seem to call for some.

The point holds elsewhere too. The Republican Party has not been an effective or even in most cases serious champion of immigration restriction, which Gottfried accurately identifies as a core issue for any genuine conservatism or right. It is also true that neocon writers have too often sentimentalized immigrants as a whole. But a sincere restrictionist has an excellent chance to win a Republican primary if he has other things going for him. The response to him would be enthusiastic at most Republican conventions, and respectful, if he spoke with normal prudence, at a neoconservative symposium. If he tried to deliver his message to a Democratic convention or the *Daily Kos* or *New Republic* crowd, it would be another story.

Like other paleocons, Gottfried presents the memorable M. E. Bradford-versus-William Bennett struggle of 1981 as a classic case of bigfooting and censorship by neocons. Bradford was to be named as director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, but President Reagan was persuaded to choose Bennett, a friend of Irving Kristol and his wife, Gertrude Himmelfarb, instead. Bradford, a University of Dallas English professor, a latter-day Southern Agrarian and an opponent of Lincoln, “was far better qualified as a published scholar,” Gottfried notes. “Unlike Bennett, he had not been a liberal Democrat before switching over to the Republican side.” Although recollections of this lamentable conflict understandably rankle to this day, its partisans should not overlook the fact that both were logical prospects as Reagan appointees and neither would have been appointed by Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, or Obama.

In two subsequent cabinet-level positions and later as a quite popular author and radio host, Bennett has represented the conservative base well as a champion of higher educational standards, old-fashioned virtues, and simple patriotism. Likewise, neoconservatives and people deferential to them would find little
or nothing to disagree with in “Against the Barbarians,” a Bradford essay (also the title piece in a Bradford collection) defending the traditional conception of the humanities.\textsuperscript{20}

Such points may be of limited significance to Gottfried, but it is also important to recognize the large traditionalist elements at the core of neoconservatism, which emerged more as a cultural (“mugged by reality”) response to out-of-control social liberalism coupled with runaway statism than to foreign-policy crises. As Peter Steinfels noted in 1979, the neocons had stressed the existence of a massive crisis of authority over the past decade and a half; they were thus “preoccupied with the question of stability.”\textsuperscript{21} In their preoccupation with defending authority and hierarchy, discipline and self-restraint, and objective moral standards they were akin to Kirk and traditionalist philosopher Richard Weaver (best known as the author, several years before \textit{National Review} was launched, of \textit{Ideas Have Consequences}).

Much of the neocons’ alleged liberalism was really unwillingness to go along with capitalism wholeheartedly on conservative grounds such as those expressed in sociologist Robert Nisbet’s influential \textit{The Quest for Community}, published in 1953. Nisbet, a conservative whom Gottfried appreciatively, though not wholly accurately, identifies with the Old Right, associated conservatism with the defense of civil society. “[I]n practical politics over the last two centuries,” he wrote in 1986, “in America as in European countries, the hallmark of conservative politics has been its greater affection for the private sector, for family and local community, for economy and private property, and for a substantial measure of decentralization in government, one that would respect the corporate rights of the smaller unities of state and society.”\textsuperscript{22} Compare this with the more neoconservative-identified George Will in his manifesto \textit{Statecraft as Soulcraft}, written in the early Reagan era:

Having hollowed out their political philosophy to make room for an economic doctrine—a doctrine that recommends capitalism for its unsleeping dynamism—contemporary American conservatives are in a singularly
weak position to perform the traditional conservative function of judging and editing the social transformation that comes with the dissolution of old forms and modes of action. Traditional conservatism has not been, and proper conservatism cannot be, merely a defense of industrialism and individualist ‘free-market’ economics. Conservatism is about the cultivation and conservation of certain values, or it is nothing. But industrialism has been a thorough solvent of traditional values, a revolutionary force for change. It is unreasonably a priori to assume that the unregulated consequences of unfettered industrialism—whatever they may be—are compatible with, let alone identifiable with, conservative aspirations.23

Will’s distance from both doctrinaire libertarianism and the economic-growth orientation that had begun to dominate conservative domestic policy was clear. “Conservatives,” he wrote in the same book, “should feel a special responsibility and urgency about providing and conserving a common [societal] character.” They should use government to “discriminatingly but energetically” strengthen “family, church, voluntary associations, town governments,” those institutions “that once were most directly responsible for tempering individualism.” Will denied this was statism. On the contrary, it strengthened civil society, the barrier against statism. It was about “the use of government to prevent statism by enhancing the social competence of citizens.”24 Similarly, Adam Meyerson recommended in Policy Review in 1996 that conservatives work toward a “restoration of civil society”: an establishment and rebuilding of institutions to deal with the failures of public education, the collapse of the family, and rampant crime.25

The fact that pro-New Deal sentiments and general acceptance of the welfare state—or any other concessions to liberalism of which Gottfried convicts the neocons—are common among them does not mean they are truly essential in neoconservative ideology. They are less so, at least, than neoconservatism’s defensive social agenda as described previously. And more important than their
specific positions on welfare-state policies is whether the neocons, by their fundamental skepticism of social engineering and their insistence on other concerns (in a nutshell: order as provided by civil society and culture rather than government), present a strong ideological challenge to the welfare-state philosophy, which they do. Also, there is a difference between an ideological challenge that is isolated from politics and one that aims to move policy. “A conservative doctrine of the welfare state,” Will suggested in 1983, “is required if conservatives are even to be included in the contemporary political conversation. Conservatives need ways to make the welfare state more compatible with conservative governmental values, and to make it more affirmative of conservative social values.”

The virtual disappearance of mainstream conservatives’ once strongly critical attitude toward the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. along with its notable replacement by a nearly opposite attitude among many is provided by Gottfried as another example backing his argument about the condition of conservatism. He is correct in saying there has come to be widespread “adulation” of King on the Right. But it does not qualify as central to neoconservatism or to the political identity of its younger generation and those who follow their lead. Overemphasizing King’s references to natural law, Christian duty, and the rightful supremacy of “character” over color may amount to cherry-picking by culturally beleaguered conservatives hoping to win more acceptance from liberals by endorsing a symbolic pillar of what Gottfried considers the liberal-multiculturalist regime. The “Martin Luther King was a Republican” billboards seen during the 2008 campaign, and applauded by conservatives, were indeed a partial, if probably unwitting, rewriting of history. But celebration of the civil rights leader is, in itself, far from a betrayal of conservatism. Fairer descriptions would be 1) recognizing King’s legitimacy as a national hero despite, among other failings, his sharp movement toward radicalism in his last years; 2) using this liberal’s great reputation to remind liberals (and young conservatives, most of them taught by liberals) of the sounder principles that he preached with salutary effect on our society; and 3)
using King’s successful quest as a demonstration that America could and did reform itself as extensively as it did in the case of segregation and old-fashioned racism.

Gottfried can also be criticized as unjustly neglecting the depth of neoconservative anxiety about cultural decline and disintegration, which argues against his picture of a movement not serious about these themes. For such senior luminaries as Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Michael Novak, liberal scholar Gary Dorrien notes in his excellent *The Neoconservative Mind*, “American mass culture was nothing to celebrate or export, but a sewer that degraded America’s social achievements.” One example: “I do not think that the United States today is an altogether admirable place,” Kristol said in a 1974 interview. “I am not particularly happy with it. I think this society is vulgar, debased, and crassly materialistic. I think the United States has lost its sense of moral purpose and is fast losing its authentic religious values.”27 Ten years later such perceptions were widely ignored by many now-complacent conservatives, as in the “Morning in America” campaign Reagan allowed to be run for his re-election. It was not the vigilant *Commentary* that had shelved the Right’s cultural critique in the intervening years but GOP politicians and operatives, influenced or echoed by economics-minded conservatives elsewhere. Both of the latter are forces Gottfried might have given more attention to in his book.

Professed solicitude for the poor is indeed more characteristic of today’s mainstream conservatives than of the pre-neocon right, and it may inhibit the frank championship of the middle class which Gottfried associates with politically serious conservatism. But solicitude for the poor is not particular to neocons and those strongly influenced by them. It is integral to Christianity, whether the Catholicism that is a major presence at all socioeconomic levels of the conservative population or the evangelical Protestantism that has become nearly ubiquitous in conservative politics. It was the traditionalist Kirk who wrote in *Prospects for Conservatives*: “The proletarian is rootless; well, then, he must be enabled to send down roots. . . . The passion of Marx was to assimilate all of humanity to
the proletarian condition; the object of the conservative is to lift all men up from proletarian degradation.” 28 Kirk meant both the mass-man’s spiritual and cultural health and (citing a human need for property) his material prosperity. Similarly, neocons—as, too, George W. Bush and other advocates of religious social programs—characteristically link the two conditions far more than do liberals.

Finally, it is not neoconservatism that indulges heavily in such sentimentalities, from Gottfried’s standpoint, as belief in the indiscriminate desirability of legal mass immigration, or the educability of every child, or the likelihood that pro-entrepreneurial economic policy, home ownership, and faith-based social services can transform rather than just improve the inner city. The seminal neoconservatives actually specialized in hard-headed critiques of social sentimentalities. Although more common on the right than it was decades ago, this kind of wishful thinking is probably less the result of a softer new generation of neocons and more the intellectual errors of ordinary conservatives—doubtless stemming in part from a wish to feel good about themselves, but also from the deeply American (however unfounded) belief that all problems can be solved.

David B. Frisk

Notes
2. Gottfried, Conservatism in America, 149.
3. Gottfried, Conservatism in America, 129.
5. Gottfried, Conservatism in America, xi.
6. Gottfried, Conservatism in America, x.
10. Gottfried, Conservatism in America, 63.
11. Gottfried, Conservatism in America, 73.
19. Disclosure: Bennett is the Washington Fellow for the Claremont Institute, of which I am an employee.