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H-Diplo Review Essay on **Laura Jane Gifford and Daniel K. Williams, eds., *The Right Side of the Sixties: Reexamining Conservatism's Decade of Transformation***. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-137-01478-8 (hardcover, \$85.00).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **John Ehrman, Independent Historian**

Studying the history of modern American conservatism used to be a simple affair. When I first was introduced to the subject in a seminar in the fall of 1987, when the class was assigned readings from George Nash's now-classic *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* few people studied conservatism seriously.¹ It was easy to master the literature—all one had to do was read Nash, John Judis's biography of William F. Buckley, Jr., and a few foundational works by Richard Weaver, Milton Friedman, John Diggins, and Russell Kirk—and the field was wide open for study by enterprising scholars who wanted to make their marks.² Indeed, they have: in the past twenty-five years, essentially since it became clear toward the end of the Reagan presidency that conservatism was not a passing political moment, scholars and journalists have produced scores of books on the topic.

The benefits of their work have been enormous. The consensus narrative, essentially, is that conservatism was consigned to the margins of U.S. politics until the dominant liberal coalition cracked apart in the 1960s and 1970s, under the pressures of Vietnam, racial tensions, declining economic performance, and cultural tensions. Working in the shadows until the early 1970s, conservatives had organized a strong intellectual and political movement that, to the shock of liberals, emerged in the mid-1970s and took power in a remarkably short time. Since then, conservatives either have dominated American politics or, in periods like the 1990s and since 2010, have blocked liberal attempts to move politics leftward. Working within this framework, researchers have examined closely the ideas, organizations, sociology,

¹ George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic, 1976).

² John Judis, *William F. Buckley Jr.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); John Diggins, *Up From Communism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953).

politics, and people—major and minor figures alike—that constitute American conservatism as we know it. In contrast to thirty years ago, we now know a great deal about American conservatism. It is a considerable intellectual achievement.

An unfortunate side effect of all this work, however, is that new topics for research are becoming more difficult to find. We have filled in so many gaps that now we are working on the tiny cracks. This, at least, is what I concluded from reading *The Right Side of the Sixties*, Laura Jane Gifford's and Daniel Williams's anthology of essays on the development of conservatism at the grassroots level during that decade.

Gifford and Williams argue that the 1960s were when conservatism's ideology transformed itself and became more attractive to large numbers of Americans. (5) Conservatives achieved this, Gifford and Williams note, by banishing extremist organizations, like the John Birch Society, from the movement; recasting arguments on race from support of segregation to a softer defense of free association; and by uniting Protestants, Catholics, and Jews against perceived trends toward secularization. Similarly, on the international front, they point out that conservatives reacted to world events by "generating informed and proactive responses" that laid the foundations for later policies. (13) Overall, Gifford and Williams conclude, conservatives "found their voice" during the 1960s and created the mass movement that "significantly shifted and reshaped the agenda of American life" as ideas once considered out of bounds "occupied an increasingly central role in policy dialogues on Main Street and Capitol Hill alike." (14)

Gifford and Williams include a dozen essays to make their case. Each essay is about fifteen pages long, clearly focused, and tightly written—in this sense, they are models of scholarly writing. Several stand out, if for different reasons. Justin Coffey's essay on Spiro Agnew is the best in the book—how many of us remember that Agnew, before he became a national disgrace, had been an upwardly mobile suburbanite and then a progressive governor whose move to the right mirrored that of millions of other Americans? Almost as good is Robert Daniel Rubin's piece on how Orthodox Jews split from American Judaism's dominant liberalism; it is an excellent reminder that Jews in the United States are not monolithic in their politics. Similarly, Seth Offenbach's paper on conservative views of the developing war in Vietnam will surprise anyone who believes that conservatives always were hawks during the cold war.

That said, the narrow focus of the essays makes *The Right Side of the Sixties* a book for specialists. None of the chapters address topics with as broad appeal as those in, say, Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer's *Rightward Bound* or Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle's *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*.³ Granted, those anthologies did not focus on the 1960s, but their essays addressed issues—such as developments in organized labor or Jimmy Carter's foreign policy woes—that are of interest to large audiences. Nor do the essays, except in their

³ Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

granularity, break much new ground. Jonathan Schoenwald's *A Time for Choosing* (2001) covers, for example, the complex relationship between the mainstream conservative movement and the John Birch Society just as well as Samuel Brenner's essay in this volume does.⁴

H-Diplo readers will be most interested in the four essays dealing with U.S. diplomacy and international policy. Not surprisingly, given their international focus, these papers deal with larger-scale issues and try to draw more important conclusions. As interesting as they are, however, these ambitions sometimes lead the authors to try to take their points just a little too far. Gifford's essay on Dr. Fred Schwarz and the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade suffers from that overreach. Her account of how Schwarz, an Australian physician, and found his calling educating Americans about the Communist threat is informative and nuanced. By taking Schwarz and his efforts seriously, Gifford reminds us that he, and people like him, were not crackpots. At the same time, however, she also notes that his work dovetailed with that of groups like the John Birch Society, thus enhancing their influence on conservatism. At the end of her paper, perhaps seeking to compensate for this, Gifford tries to elevate Schwarz just a little too high—the Crusade, she notes, “provided one signal service to its supporters: it helped to expand the terms of the Communist struggle beyond America's shores.” (175) While it is true that Schwarz focused on the international dimension of Communism, it also is a bit of a stretch to say that he played a large role in alerting Americans to the external threat, something about which they had been well aware of since the late 1940s.

Michael Brenes's chapter on the conservative campaign against nuclear disarmament proposals suffers from a similar flaw. He describes how conservatives, military figures, and defense firms opposed disarmament because of the threat they believed it posed to their various interests. Their strategy, he notes, was to portray disarmament as “liberalism run amok,” (181) that supported an expanded welfare state over the imperatives of national security and fighting communism. Brenes goes on to note that in recruiting defense workers to their cause—which was not too difficult, given the workers' fears for their jobs—the opponents of disarmament subtracted an important pillar of support from the Democratic coalition and moved it to the conservatives' side. Thus, he concludes, “successful conservative activism during the 1960s” helped achieve the “twin goals of eroding the New Deal and increasing defense spending” in the 1970s and 1980s. (195) Brenes has a good point here, but one might also note that some prominent liberals, such as Sen. Henry Jackson (D-WA) were as opposed to defense and nuclear cuts as any conservative. A careful look at the strategies of cold war liberals in these debates might have led Brenes to modify his judgments.

Another problem for the essays dealing with international affairs is that other scholars already have gone over much of this ground. Offenbach provides good details on the evolution of conservative views on Vietnam, but Robert Goldberg's *Barry Goldwater* made essentially the same points; Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors* discusses some of the same

⁴ Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

material on defense contractors and workers that Brenes covers.⁵ Again, one gets the impression that these essays are filling in the fine details of what we already know.

That, in fact, summarizes *The Right Side of the Sixties*. It is a worthwhile collection for researchers and students who want additional information on specialty topics. But anyone seeking context or to understand the larger narrative of the development of conservatism during the 1960s already has plenty of books to consult.

John Ehrman is an independent historian. He earned a BA in history and political science at Tufts University, a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University, and his Ph.D. from the George Washington University. He is the author of *The Rise of Neoconservatism* (Yale, 1995), and *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (Yale, 2005), as well as numerous articles and reviews on modern American conservatism.

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⁵ Robert Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).