

What Became of Conservatives?

by Paul Craig Roberts

I remember when friends would excitedly telephone to report that Rush Limbaugh or G. Gordon Liddy had just read one of my syndicated columns over the air. That was before I became a critic of the US invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration, and the neoconservative ideologues who have seized control of the US government.

America has blundered into a needless and dangerous war, and fully half of the country's population is enthusiastic. Many Christians think that war in the Middle East signals "end times" and that they are about to be wafted up to heaven. Many patriots think that, finally, America is standing up for itself and demonstrating its righteous might. Conservatives are taking out their Vietnam frustrations on Iraqis. Karl Rove is wrapping Bush in the protective cloak of war leader. The military-industrial complex is drooling over the profits of war. And neoconservatives are laying the groundwork for Israeli territorial expansion.

The evening before Thanksgiving Rush Limbaugh was on C-Span TV explaining that these glorious developments would have been impossible if talk radio and the conservative movement had not combined to break the power of the liberal media.

In the Thanksgiving issue of National Review, editor Richard Lowry and former editor John O'Sullivan celebrate Bush's reelection triumph over "a hostile press corps." "Try as they might," crowed O'Sullivan, "they couldn't put Kerry over the top."

There was a time when I could rant about the "liberal media" with the best of them. But in recent years I have puzzled over the precise location of the "liberal media."

Not so long ago I would have identified the liberal media as the New York Times and Washington Post, CNN and the three TV networks, and National Public Radio. But both the Times and the Post fell for the Bush administration's lies about WMD and supported the US invasion of Iraq. On balance CNN, the networks, and NPR have not made an issue of the Bush administration's changing explanations for the invasion.

Apparently, Rush Limbaugh and National Review think there is a liberal media because the prison torture scandal could not be suppressed and a cameraman filmed the execution of a wounded Iraqi prisoner by a US Marine.

Do the Village Voice and The Nation comprise the "liberal media"? The Village Voice is known for Nat Hentof and his columns on civil liberties. Every good conservative believes that civil liberties are liberal because they interfere with the police and let criminals go free. The Nation favors spending on the poor and disfavors gun rights, but I don't see the "liberal hate" in The Nation's feeble pages that Rush Limbaugh was denouncing on C-Span.

In the ranks of the new conservatives, however, I see and experience much hate. It comes to me in violently worded, ignorant and irrational emails from self-professed conservatives who literally worship George Bush. Even Christians have fallen into idolatry. There appears to be a large number of Americans who are prepared to kill anyone for George Bush.

The Iraqi War is serving as a great catharsis for multiple conservative frustrations: job loss, drugs, crime, homosexuals, pornography, female promiscuity, abortion, restrictions on prayer in public places, Darwinism and attacks on religion. Liberals are the cause. Liberals are against America. Anyone against the war is against America and is a liberal. "You are with us or against us."

This is the mindset of delusion, and delusion permits of no facts or analysis. Blind emotion rules. Americans are right and everyone else is wrong. End of the debate.

That, gentle reader, is the full extent of talk radio, Fox News, the Wall Street Journal Editorial page, National Review, the Weekly Standard, and, indeed, of the entire concentrated corporate media where noncontroversy in the interest of advertising revenue rules.

Once upon a time there was a liberal media. It developed out of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Liberals believed that the private sector is the source of greed that must be restrained by government acting in the public interest. The liberals' mistake was to identify morality with government. Liberals had great suspicion of private power and insufficient suspicion of the power and inclination of government to do good.

Liberals became Benthamites (after Jeremy Bentham). They believed that as the people controlled government through democracy, there was no reason to fear government power, which should be increased in order to accomplish more good.

The conservative movement that I grew up in did not share the liberals' abiding faith in government. "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Today it is liberals, not conservatives, who endeavor to defend civil liberties from the state. Conservatives have been won around to the old liberal view that as long as government power is in their hands, there is no reason to fear it or to limit it. Thus, the Patriot Act, which permits government to suspend a person's civil liberty by calling him a terrorist with or without proof.

Thus, preemptive war, which permits the President to invade other countries based on unverified assertions.

There is nothing conservative about these positions. To label them conservative is to make the same error as labeling the 1930s German Brownshirts conservative.

American liberals called the Brownshirts "conservative," because the Brownshirts were obviously not liberal. They were ignorant, violent, delusional, and they worshipped a man of no known distinction. Brownshirts' delusions were protected by an emotional force field. Adulation of power and force prevented Brownshirts from recognizing implications for their country of their reckless doctrines.

Like Brownshirts, the new conservatives take personally any criticism of their leader and his policies. To be a critic is to be an enemy. I went overnight from being an object of conservative adulation to one of derision when I wrote that the US invasion of Iraq was a "strategic blunder."

It is amazing that only a short time ago the Bush administration and its supporters believed that all the US had to do was to appear in Iraq and we would be greeted with flowers. Has there ever been a greater example of delusion? Isn't this on a par with the Children's Crusade against the Saracens in the Middle Ages?

Delusion is still the defining characteristic of the Bush administration. We have smashed Fallujah, a city of 300,000, only to discover that the 10,000 US Marines are bogged down in the ruins of the city. If the Marines leave, the "defeated" insurgents will return. Meanwhile the insurgents have moved on to destabilize Mosul, a city five times as large. Thus, the call for more US troops.

There are no more troops. Our former allies are not going to send troops. The only way the Bush administration can continue with its Iraq policy is to reinstate the draft.

When the draft is reinstated, conservatives will loudly proclaim their pride that their sons, fathers, husbands and brothers are going to die for "our freedom." Not a single one of them will be able to explain why destroying Iraqi cities and occupying the ruins are necessary for "our freedom." But this inability will not lessen the enthusiasm for the project. To protect their delusions from "reality-based" critics, they will demand that the critics be arrested for treason and silenced. Many encouraged by talk radio already speak this way.

Because of the triumph of delusional "new conservatives" and the demise of the liberal media, this war is different from the Vietnam war. As more Americans are killed and maimed in the pointless carnage, more Americans have a powerful emotional stake that the war not be lost and not be in vain. Trapped in violence and unable to admit mistake, a reckless administration will escalate.

The rapidly collapsing US dollar is hard evidence that the world sees the US as bankrupt. Flight from the dollar as the reserve currency will adversely impact American living standards, which are already falling as a result of job outsourcing and offshore production. The US cannot afford a costly and interminable war.

Falling living standards and inability to impose our will on the Middle East will result in great frustrations that will diminish our country.

<http://www.lewrockwell.com/roberts/roberts81.html>