



**Robert B. Horwitz, *America's Right: Anti-Establishment Conservatism from Goldwater to the Tea Party*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013; pp. 279; RRP AU\$41.95 paperback**

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States in 2008 seemed to mark the start of a new era. Obama's campaign was built on pledges of hope and change, and led by the man who would become the nation's first African-American president. As the presidential campaign entered its final months, the first stages of the Global Financial Crisis had begun. Campaign promises of hope and change had to give way to the economic realities of dealing with the worst financial catastrophe since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In the final months of his presidency George W. Bush had initiated the Troubled Asset Relief Program, a bailout of major financial institutions, and these policies were continued by the Obama administration through various stimulus programs, most notably the Recovery Act. At the same time, Obama also moved to fulfil a campaign promise to bring real health care reform to the United States.

The process of shoring up and stimulating the economy, and bringing America closer to universal healthcare saw an aggressive resurgence of conservative forces. Dubbed the 'Tea Party', these groups (primarily composed of Republican voters) railed initially against the bailouts, and then against the introduction of the Affordable Care Act, quickly dubbed 'Obamacare'. In the midst of these criticisms of government policy were accusations that Obama was a secret Muslim, a secret communist, had really been born in Kenya and was therefore not entitled to be president. To outsiders, this movement may have seemed aberrant, paranoid or suffering from, in the words of journalist Jonathan Alter, 'Obama Derangement Syndrome'.<sup>1</sup> Robert Horwitz, in *America's Right: Anti-Establishment Conservatism from Goldwater to the Tea Party*, traces the historical trends of this movement, showing its roots in a variety of different strands of conservative thought going back to the 1950s.

Horwitz is in good company. Since the emergence of the Tea Party, numerous journalists and academics have weighed in to discuss the rise of this movement, and its historical origins. Like many, Horwitz is guided by (although disagrees with in some respects) the ground-breaking work of historian Richard Hofstadter, particularly Hofstadter's seminal 1963 essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'. Unlike Hofstadter, who claimed a fringe paranoia dating back to the immediate post-revolutionary period that resurfaced every couple of generations, Horwitz draws, across four main chapters, a more recent, and in some ways more comprehensive approach to the subject. The chapters focus on the rise of what Horwitz refers to as 'anti-state' statism; the intersection of the religious right with American politics; the rise of the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Alter, *The Center Holds: Obama and His Enemies*, Simon Schuster: New York, 2013, esp. pp 30-43.

influence of the neo-conservatives; and finally an analysis of Hofstadter's work in the light of recent developments.

It is an ambitious task, and if this work suffers at all it is from an excess of detail. Otherwise, Horwitz does a commendable job showing how these various strains of conservative thought have contributed to the current debates. The role of both the religious right and the neo-conservatives in shaping this movement are particularly interesting. Both movements were outside the mainstream of American electoral politics for decades. And both movements engaged in cultural wars and foreign policy aims that seemed to be keeping out of step with the 'small-government' ethos that they preached. For the religious right, the growth of 'secularism' has meant the need for government to strongly defend 'values' (family and otherwise) against the creep of 'militant humanism'. The impact on the Republican Party has been such that 'all Republican presidential candidates must essentially make pilgrimage to the fundamentalist bastions of Bob Jones University and...Liberty University' (p. 103). For the neo-conservatives, who also engaged in the culture wars of the 1980s, small government was essential, except when it came to foreign policy, the final outcome of which could be seen in the disastrous second Gulf War. From examining these movements, Horwitz makes a powerful case for the seeming contradictions in the Tea Party, especially how a group supporting limited government in some respects can support almost unlimited government in others.

With this build-up, the section on the Tea Party itself – 'Richard Hofstadter's "Paranoid Style" Revisited: The Tea Party, Past as Prologue' – does seem in some ways to come almost as an afterthought. Horwitz engages with the current trend of using Hofstadter's work (some of it now fifty or sixty years old) to explain the current Tea Party movement. The advantages and disadvantages of Hofstadter's approach are well covered, with Horwitz acknowledging that Hofstadter's approach 'provides a set of tools for help in grasping some of the most baffling features of contemporary American politics'' (p. 167), including, on the part of the Tea Party, 'the bizarre, blind fixation on President Obama's citizenship status and religious affiliation, often accompanied by overly racist rhetoric' (p. 159). This chapter provides a fitting capstone to a work that provides an excellent introduction to the broad sweep of conservative politics and ideology across the last sixty years in the United States.

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