

Right from the Start

Two books by TAC's founders are a roadmap to a better conservatism.

by MICAH MEADOWCROFT

To read Pat Buchanan's 2002 *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization in Anno Domini 2022* is to wonder whether conservatism is a practice of preservation or an art of forgetting.

"America and the West face four clear and present dangers," Buchanan wrote in 2002. "The first is a dying population. Second is the mass immigration of different colors, creeds, and cultures, changing the character of the West forever. The third is the rise to dominance of an anti-Western culture in the West, deeply hostile to its religions, traditions, and morality, which has already sundered the West. The fourth is the breakup of nations and the defection of ruling elites to a world government whose rise entails the end of nations."

Here we have the animating concerns of the 2016 election. Where did they go for the preceding fifteen years? Buchanan perceived that the specific political distinction to which American political actions and motives can be reduced is that between the West—which he concludes was born of Christianity—and those who hate it. He wrote, "This struggle to preserve the old creeds, cultures, and countries of the West is the new divide between Left and Right; this struggle will define what it means to be a conservative. This is the cause of the twenty-first century and the agenda of conservatism for the remainder of our lives." Except, for two decades, it wasn't.

Someone, or someones, helped Americans and American conservatives do so much forgetting. And it wasn't very difficult. It only took the replacement of culture—a growing organic thing, the shared story of a people, the cult that forms them—with ideology. Against Nazism and Soviet Communism the West became an idea, synonymous with democracy and then liberalism. Then America became an idea, too. Borders were opened. Money made a flushing sound. The old WASP establishment had, in winning the Ameri-

can century, reduced politics to tinkering on the margins of the world. They were preoccupied with foreign affairs, and their consciences were too guilty to fight the war at home. Progress advanced largely unopposed.

The Atlanticists were joined by the neoconservatives in the halls of influence, if not always power. Scott McConnell's 2016 essay collection *Ex-Neon: Dispatches from the Post-9/11 Ideological Wars* gives us a glimpse of where fifteen of our missing twenty years went. In *Ex-Neon*, McConnell, who as readers doubtless already know founded *The American Conservative* with Buchanan and edited the magazine for six years, gathered pieces that either reflected on explicitly or pointed to his departure from identifying as a liberal mugged by reality. A former editorial page editor at the *New York Post*, he got his start in journalism as a Columbia history PhD writing for *Commentary*. McConnell experienced neoconservatism in the early '90s as being part of an urbane, sophisticated social set, preoccupied with the smart application of the social sciences to the problems of New York City and maybe the rest of the country, too.

But of course that sort of tinkering on the domestic margins isn't the neocons' only preoccupation, and McConnell broke with his friends and colleagues over America's role in the wider world, especially in the Middle East. From Desert Storm in 1991 to Benjamin Netanyahu's Iran speech to Congress in 2015, with decades of carnage in Iraq and Afghanistan in between and ongoing, the neoconservatives got cocky about what the American military was capable of in the name of democracy, and complacent then dismissive about the consequences of globalism for the American middle class. As one would expect, *Ex-Neon* includes careful analysis of the origins and pathologies of the Global War on Terror and sensitive reporting

Micah Meadowcroft is online editor of *The American Conservative*.



The founders of TAC (left to right: Scott McConnell, Pat Buchanan, Taki Theodoracopulos) in 2002.

from Israel and the Palestinian Territories. But perhaps most striking from the vantage of 2022 are essays on Ukraine and Russia, Vladimir Putin and George Kennan, which remind the reader that none of this had to go the way it did: ideological myopia is a choice.

Taken as a whole, in *Ex-Neocoon* McConnell reveals himself to be, if we can flip the phrase, a realist held up by liberalism. A member of TAC's board and regular contributor, he would nevertheless be unlikely to identify as a species of culture warrior. He voted for Obama, after all, and not only voted for him, but campaigned for him, too, which if not quite *sui generis* certainly makes McConnell part of a small club among Buchanan supporters. Although he has done far more than most to counter the neocons' influence on the Republican party, in his particular focus on foreign affairs and occasional diffidence about domestic issues, McConnell exhibits some of the same genteel intellectualism that made the conservative movement so vulnerable to hijacking by a second generation of neoconservatives.

In a TAC tenth anniversary piece in 2012, "Ten Years in the Right," McConnell offered an explanation as to why the magazine had not made more headway with the conservative establishment. The timeline shifted on 9/11:

I think the answer is that the aging conservative movement needed, and acquired, a glue to substitute for the anti-communism that held its disparate factions together from the 1950s to the 1980s. Fear and hatred of Islam now serves that function. Many grassroots conservatives justifiably perceive an America besieged by demographic changes, globalization, and the collapse of job security, while Republicans have few answers to offer. As a substitute, talk radio and the activist right—the organs that link the GOP to the grassroots base—supply a belligerent attitude toward the Islamic world.

An ideological exploiting of the clash of civilizations replaced the tilling and care of culture, the loam in which that civilization grew.

The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
 Are of equal duration. A people without history
 Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
 Of timeless moments.

— Little Gidding, *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot

Perhaps for older conservatives the last two decades have not been so discontinuous: a detour on the way to the funeral of Western civilization, a mockery of its defense. But for one of the last of the millennials, the shock of missing time is real, like a tiny reversal of Anatoly Fomenko's "new chronology" (which suggested the ancient world was made up in medieval scriptoria). In *The Death of the West* Buchanan details every dynamic of current discourse with all the same vinegar and vigor supposedly so new and threatening today. The terms have changed slightly; we speak of "woke" now instead of "politically correct," and the "Big Lie" was then not establishment talk for concern about election integrity but rather "a central tenet of the cultural revolution: the malicious slander that America is a nation where black folks are constantly at risk from the majority."

But let no automaton at the *Atlantic* tell you critical theory and cultural Marxism were invented by Chris Rufo. Here's Buchanan:

Edmund Burke once wrote, "I would not know how to draw up an indictment against a whole people." Adorno and the Frankfurt School, however, had just done exactly that. They flatly asserted that individuals raised in families dominated by the father, who are flag-waving patriots and follow the old-time religion, are incipient fascists and potential Nazis.

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Later, again: "In the 1950s, Krushchev threatened, 'We will bury you.' But we buried him. Yet, if Western Man does not find a way to halt his collapsing birthrate, cultural Marxism will succeed where Soviet Marxism failed." Buchanan, let me remind you, was a senior advisor to three U.S. presidents, and ran for the office as many times. These are not the mutterings of a retired systems engineer in rural Oregon.

How to explain the contraction of time? The last two decades have been defined, technologically, by the transition from televisual media to digital media. The culture war of Buchanan's '90s was an obvious David and Goliath, for there was still the architecture in place for something like a monoculture: culture in the popular rather than civilizational sense, though of course one is part of the other. Liberalism, of the hard leftist, progressive, and neoconservative varieties, united in contempt for an *essentially* Christian West, had been

on the ascent in every important sphere, and non-coordinated coordination was easy, for there were gatekeepers at every institution and the institutions were the only soapboxes worth a damn. The second half of the twentieth century was *TeeVee v. The Tradition*, and the Supreme Court came down on the side of television every time.

Then, the rise of personal email, which let suburban housewives subscribe to the sort of newsletters that could get someone kicked off the *National Review* editorial board. It let homeschooling become almost normal, and helped Bible studies start private schools. YouTube came online in 2005, as did Reddit, just in time to host the New Atheists and make fedoras permanently uncool. Facebook launched to the wider public in 2006, Twitter the same year. Tumblr came along in 2007, forever dooming us to a world where transhumanist will to power would be expressed in the language of teenage angst. In all that time there were message boards and personal blogs and a weird internet aristocracy of early adopters fracturing public discourse in every direction and changing the English language and with it global communications. Can you remember the Arab Spring?

Now, with capital's tendency to monopoly, came the reemergence of the centralized/decentralized command and control capabilities DARPA and the Pentagon always hoped the internet would bring. The many subcultures made actualized by digital communication have been brought into direct daily contact with every other one. The stranger, the enemy, is right outside your screen, looking back at you. Do you see what they're up to? Someone should do something about it. Dissidents become self-conscious, some subcultures are more countercultural than others. Polarization, the headlines sigh, is on the rise, along with misinformation, disinformation, and how to "become" a Ms. information. Meanwhile, Five Eyes and Prism and all the rest of the terror watch system has grown with our sometimes eager cooperation, and since we're still working on defining woman let's revisit terrorist, too. Words are violence, and riots speech. Orange man? Very, very bad.

One is forced to conclude there never was a culture war. Or rather, the left has waged a war on Western culture and the right has yet to put up a proper fight. There was a moment, six years ago, and it was squished at every turn. I, whose whole professional life has been shaped by the 2016 election—too young to remember a Pat Buchanan who

was not something of a sacred recluse—am, in reading *The Death of the West*, forced to ask professional conservatism once again: what have you been doing all these years? All the pieces are here, all the knowledge needed. This is a guidebook and a war plan and a blueprint. But conservatism, and America, and the West, and Christianity, is also a thing of gratitude, and so I also thank those who have labored well the last two decades, for the overturn of Roe, the end of the wars. I only wish they'd seen all the enemies in their midst.

“In the 2000 election, the Republican ticket ran away from the issues of race, culture, and life, assuming, correctly, that the hostility to and even detestation of Clinton and Gore would bring social conservatives home,” Buchanan wrote. “They were right. But the Gore-plus-Nader three-million-vote margin over Bush-Cheney may be the last wake-up call the Republican party will receive. If Mr. Bush and his White House do not champion the cause of life, of a color-blind society, and of traditional values, those causes will be lost.” The cause of life limps on, thanks to President Donald Trump, but it is hard to be hopeful for the fight against race communism and polymorphous perversity. “No matter what ‘compassionate conservatives’ may wish, the culture war and racial conflict are not going away. Too many have a vested interest,” Buchanan wrote. He was right, but too many still have no stomach for it—or perhaps better yet, no chests.

“Uncontrolled immigration threatens to deconstruct the nation we grew up in and convert America into a conglomeration of peoples with almost nothing in common—not history, heroes, language, culture, faith, or ancestors.” Buchanan is not a prophet, really; he writes what he sees. Like nearly all observations of this sort, it is undeniable, unless you object to it, in which case you will be made to pretend it isn't happening. Mike Anton talks about this “celebration parallax,”—that it's not happening, and it's good that it is, depending on your viewpoint—though Buchanan probably wrote about the phenomenon somewhere first. Black Americans, one suspects, have noticed the consequences of immigration, too, though black public figures know better than not to praise it. One wonders how much energy Black Lives Matters received from a vague general knowledge that while in 2000 the Hispanic population was par with black Americans, almost 13 percent, by 2020 Hispanics made up nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population. One share is growing; the other is not. And the pie is looking liable to shrink.

“We solve nothing by self-deception,” Buchanan wrote at some point in *The Death of the West*. Yes, if we consider conversation about his four clear and present dangers, in the twenty years since publication we've solved nothing. But TAC has been right from the start, and in these books we have all the program we need. ■



Three men climb over a border wall separating the United States from Mexico.

Allison Dinner / Contributor (Getty Images)