What I Saw at the MAGA Revolution

The New Right must choose. Will it be a serious blend of populism and dynamism—or a channel for resentment and appeasement?

"LIKE ALL GOVERNING PHILOSOPHIES, THE NEW RIGHT WILL FACE TURBULENCE AND STRIFE AS THEORY MEETS REALITY," WRITES MATTHEW CONTINETTI. (REBECCA DROKE VIA GETTY IMAGES)

By Matthew Continetti

Matthew Continetti is part of our new roster of Free Press columnists, alongside Tyler Cowen, Jed Rubenfeld, Batya Ungar-Sargon, Niall Ferguson, and others. For more information on the lineup, read Bari's

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I was there at the dawn of the New Right.

In December 2016 I spoke at a conference in Glen Cove, New York, on the Christian-Jewish Alliance: Reclaiming and Rebuilding Conservatism. My topic: Donald Trump's working-class populism.

The weather was dreary. The mood was not. Looking back at the roster of speakers, I see prominent MAGA intellectuals: Israeli political philosopher Yoram Hazony, *First Things* editor R.R. Reno, columnist David P. Goldman, and *American Affairs* editor Julius Krein—leading critics of the conservative establishment.

Their indictment was bracing. Pre-Trump conservatism had abandoned Middle America. It compromised with social liberalism. Its free-trade policies hollowed out the industrial heartland. Its open borders undercut wages. Its endless wars spilled American blood and treasure.

For these writers, Trump heralded a revolution. His presidency was a fresh start. The right would reconnect with its traditional roots in nationalism and religion. This "New Right" wouldn't defer to liberal sensibilities and rules. It would confront and defeat the progressive left. And it would do so without hesitation or apology.

Eight years later, we are living in the age of Trump. What began as a rebellion against mainstream conservatism is now orthodoxy. The pre-Trump GOP is gone. Its standard-bearers are retired or dead. The "Never Trump" faction left the Republican Party.

From their seats on the Trump train, conservative institutions such as Conservative Political Action Conference, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and the Heritage Foundation, promote tariff policies they would have once rejected. The New Right built its own professional ecosystem. Its recruits staff the second Trump administration.

Adherents to free markets, limited government, and interventionist foreign policy still exist. But they've gone from positions of authority to junior partners in the Trump coalition. Not only must they compete for influence with New Right nationalists, they must also contend with Silicon Valley tech bros, Kennedy assassination conspiracists, manosphere influencers, and MAHA moms. The Trump mansion has many rooms—each more crowded than the last.

Indeed, Trump's extraordinary comeback coincides with growing confusion over what the New Right stands for. Even as MAGA thumps its chest, renaming bodies of water and calling for the annexation of Greenland, the intellectual foundation of the new conservatism remains contested.

Yes, Republicans control Washington and have trifectas—governor's mansions and state legislatures—in 23 states. They enjoy an advantage in party identification for the first time in a century. Nevertheless, the stage is set for the same infighting that typifies a president's second term.

In 2016, the battle lines were clear. Michael Anton, now director of policy planning at the State Department, wrote in his pseudonymous "Flight 93 Election" that conservative intellectuals, including me, were too aloof and comfortable to recognize impending national catastrophe. Only Trump had a chance of avoiding disaster.

The division was straightforward. The New Right opposed immigration, free trade, and war, and defended entitlements. The conservative

establishment took the opposite view. Nor was it just a matter of policy. It was also a question of attitude.

The New Right said that the establishment coddled the left, lived inside the liberal bubble, lost touch with the working class, and was imprisoned in a "dead consensus" that prioritized personal autonomy. The New Right ridiculed the establishment for believing the ghost of Ronald Reagan would return to save the country. Reagan wasn't coming back.

The New Right poured a remarkable amount of energy into scrapping the old order. In 2017, when Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway proclaimed that CPAC would become "TPAC," the audience cheered.

In 2018, Hazony published *The Virtue of Nationalism*, an argument for national sovereignty and a critique of the American-led liberal world order. University of Notre Dame philosopher Patrick Deneen published *Why Liberalism Failed*, explaining that the idea of individual freedom propelled Western decadence. Trump identified with this new political language. "I'm a nationalist," he said in October 2018.

Tucker Carlson, long sympathetic to Trump, delivered a seismic monologue in January 2019. Carlson said that Mitt Romney, newly elected to the U.S. Senate, embodied a toxic combination of libertarianism and interventionism that had wrecked the American family and endangered the country. "Market capitalism is a tool, like a staple gun or a toaster," Carlson said. "You'd have to be a fool to worship it."

Reagan wept.

Carlson headlined the first National Conservatism conference that July. The conferences, organized by Hazony and Christopher DeMuth, the former president of my employer, the American Enterprise Institute,

became a sort of traveling road show for the New Right. Among the speakers: best-selling author J.D. Vance.

New institutions joined the National Conservatism shindig. In 2020, former Romney adviser Oren Cass launched a small think tank, American Compass, with the mission of wrenching the GOP away from free-market economics.

When Trump left office in 2021, former officials Brooke Rollins and Larry Kudlow founded the America First Policy Institute. Trump budget chief Russell Vought started the Center for Renewing America. An up-and-coming New Right activist named Saurabh Sharma founded American Moment to recruit young nationalists. He now works in the Presidential Personnel Office.

In October 2021, Kevin Roberts became president of the Heritage Foundation and quickly aligned the storied conservative think tank behind Trump and Carlson. In 2022, Heritage launched Project 2025, a New Right blueprint for governance. “I come not to invite national conservatives to join our conservative movement,” Roberts told the National Conservatism conference in Miami, “but to acknowledge the plain truth: that Heritage is already part of yours.” Vance was elected to the Senate that November.

The 2024 GOP primary confirmed the New Right’s dominance. Trump’s challengers included its tribunes—Florida governor Ron DeSantis and investor Vivek Ramaswamy—alongside old guard stalwarts like former vice president Mike Pence and former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley. “It is not morning in America,” Ramaswamy scolded Pence in the first debate. “We live in a dark moment. And we have to confront the fact that we’re in an internal sort of cold, cultural civil war.” Two months later, Pence suspended his campaign.

Trump rolled over the competition. DeSantis dropped out after Iowa. Haley won only D.C. and Vermont—not exactly bastions of

conservatism. With his base secure, Trump broadened his appeal. Elon Musk came aboard after the first attempt on Trump's life in July. Trump selected Vance as his running mate. The next month, Trump won the support of both Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and former Democrat Tulsi Gabbard. The anti-woke coalition defeated Vice President Kamala Harris.

By Inauguration Day, Trump had transformed American politics. Yet rifts were apparent on the New Right. Beneath a surface of unity and enthusiasm, the tectonic plates of ideology collided into one another. Musk's techno-savants and MAGA populists tussled over legal immigration. Tariffs and talk of upper-income tax hikes divided the party.

Foreign policy debates simmer. Should America abandon Ukraine and Europe altogether, as Carlson advocates, or press Russia for a ceasefire that secures Ukraine's independence? Should we continue strikes against the Houthis or, as Vice President Vance suggested in the Trump national security group chat, is Red Sea shipping Europe's problem?

The most explosive issues involve Jews. Is cracking down on foreign students involved in antisemitic conduct overdue justice or a free speech violation? Would striking Iran's nuclear program be in America's national interest—or a needless sacrifice for the Israel lobby?

More challenges are ahead. MAGA agrees America comes first. But what comes second? RFK Jr.'s management of Health and Human Services will drive wedges between social conservatives and MAHA stans. Howard Lutnick's Commerce Department will help some coalition members while harming others. Musk's plans for Mars may collide with Pete Hegseth's Defense priorities. As 2028 draws near, Trump may test the constitutional limits of pursuing a third term. Vance will take his first steps toward the presidency. His rivals will, too.

It's happened before. Second terms spark rivalry. Reagan's second term witnessed the birth of anti-immigration, anti-globalist, anti-war "paleoconservatism"—the New Right's granddad—warring with the president's "neoconservative" advisers.

Bill Clinton's second term saw Al Gore abandon Third Way moderation for economic populism and a "People versus the Powerful" campaign. George W. Bush's second term featured small-government conservatives, led by congressman Mike Pence, revolt against spending and immigration. Barack Obama's second term coincided with the Great Awokening and Bernie Sanders' socialist revival.

Presidents bind coalitions. And as presidential power wanes, movements fracture. This doesn't mean pre-Trump conservatism is due for a comeback. On the contrary: The New Right is the new establishment, with infrastructure and resources to outlast Trump. But like all governing philosophies, the New Right will face turbulence and strife as theory meets reality.

Reagan's movement conservatism was once in a similar position. It had captured the party from the Eastern Establishment and from the foreign policy of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Henry Kissinger. It dealt with splits and setbacks. Ultimately, though, movement conservatism was partly a victim of its own success—ending stagflation, bringing down the Soviet Union, reducing crime, and imposing work requirements on welfare. By the time Trump arrived on the scene, rehabbing the right was overdue.

The New Right will have to choose between two futures. It can sustain Trump's blend of populism and dynamism and forge a new supply-side consensus with progressives endorsing abundance. Or it can succumb to appeasement and antisemitism and the resentments of social media shitposters. Either way, the New Right will be a different animal a decade from now.

Movements don’t stand still. They are born and grow and evolve. I was there at the New Right’s birth. And one day, like its predecessors, it will meet its end.

In case you missed it, The Free Press and FIRE are heading to San Francisco on May 15 for our next live debate, moderated by Bari Weiss. Tickets are available for purchase here. Our debates sell out fast, so grab your seats today!