

Mickey Edwards. *Reclaiming Conservatism: How a Great Political Movement Got Lost—and How It Can Find Its Way Back*. (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 240. \$ 21.95. ISBN 978-0-19-533558-3

Former Representative Mickey Edwards (R-OK 5th) is well positioned to comment on the status of contemporary conservatism. Edward's book, *Reclaiming Conservatism*, is a relatively early entrant into a burgeoning field of pundits and once and future politicians offering prescriptions for the rescue of conservatism, which has become increasingly linked to the success or failure of the Republican Party's political fortunes.¹ Edwards' recommendation for rescuing conservatism amounts to an act of recovery; lost in the wilderness, Edwards admonishes conservatives to recall the virtues that led to thirty years of political dominance. What emerges is an honest account of a movement by a movement insider, who was in a position to speak knowledgeably about battles won and lost.

Reclaiming Conservatism is organized into four parts. The first part describes how conservatism became the predominant ideology in American politics. Edwards acknowledges the centrality of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, and his brand of libertarian conservatism, as the centerpiece of modern conservatism. At the same time, Edwards notes a few of the paths not taken in the recrudescence of contemporary conservatism: he describes the John Birch Society as a fringe group similar to the "Know Nothings" of the mid-19th century, and considers the rise of "Chicago School of Economics" libertarian economic theory as congenial to the country club set but largely irrelevant to the rising appeal of conservatism among blue-collar voters. For Edwards, Goldwater must be credited with inspiring young people, and beginning the process of rescuing the Republican Party from nearly thirty years

of irrelevance in the face of the Democratic Party's embrace of welfare liberalism.

The ideological homogenization of the Democratic and Republican Parties had enormous consequences for Post-WWII America, and Edwards does a good job of highlighting the tensions inherent in the modern conservative movement. He notes the uneasy alliance of Goldwater libertarians and New Right conservatives with the rising traditional and religious conservatives that were part of coalition that gave Republicans a durable majority in national elections for over forty years. Edwards is clearly uncomfortable in noting the movement of southern conservatives into the GOP, and to the rising influence of religious conservatives in Republican primary elections. His shocked reaction when three candidates for the 2008 Republican presidential nominations is a palpable response of someone profoundly distressed by the anti-intellectualism that has become *de rigueur* among vote-seeking Republicans (p. 42-43).

Edwards is equally troubled by the movement of neoconservatives – former Democratic hawks attracted to the Republican standard by Reagan's muscular anti-communist appeals – and credibly alleges that southerners, religious conservatives, and neoconservatives formed the faction within conservatism that would lead to the “Big Government Conservatism” that marked the administration of George W. Bush. Edwards's comparison of the GOP platform of 1964 and those of 2000 and 2004 demonstrate the growing hold of these less orthodox conservative factions. “Whether one agrees or disagrees with the substance of the positions taken,” Edwards writes of the contemporary GOP platforms, “two things have become abundantly clear: first, there seemed no limit to those matters upon which the convention delegates would not only pronounce judgment but demand government action; and, second, that religious conviction, more than the Constitution, would serve as the template for policymaking” (p. 58).

The second part of *Reclaiming Conservatism* details the policies that cost the Republican Party control of Congress and its status as majority party. For Edwards, conservatives' principal sin was to allow the erosion of a variety of “walls of separation” erected by the Constitution to secure individual liberties. The increasing reliance upon and deference toward executive power – antithetical to more Constitution-minded conservatives like Edwards – reached its apotheosis in the

administration of George W. Bush. Edwards argues that “No president – in fact, not all of the previous forty-two presidents combined – has so aggressively or repeatedly declared the right to simply ignore laws that would restrict his power” (p. 93). The price of conservatives’ quiescence in the face of Bush’s arrogance of power was the cataclysmic congressional losses in 2006 and 2008, and the Obama presidency, and the promise of years of wandering in the political wilderness that is the lot of the minority political party in American electoral politics.

Parts three and four of Edwards’ detail the values that Edwards believes are central to any interpretation of any brand of conservatism worthy of reclamation. The forty-eight pages of the third section on “conservative values” may strike the reader as somewhat out-of-place in the overall narrative; while authors can rarely suppress the architectonic urge to construct idealized monuments of their ideological preferences, I suspect that Edwards might struggle to find ways of successfully persuading the reader that values such as “freedom,” “peace,” “faith in the community,” and “belief in the rule of law” are uniquely *conservative* values, and not in fact fairly universal values that are congenial to most reasonable ideological perspectives.

Edwards concludes with a series of steps that he believes are necessary for the recovery of the kind of conservatism he values. Some, such as Step #2 – reject the destructive legacy of Newt Gingrich – could by a less generous reader be chalked up to the kind of score-settling that routinely punctuates the writing of political commentaries by former politicians. Others, like Step #4 – support rational federal spending limits – will no doubt resonate with conservatives of all stripes, although the insertion of “rational” opens more room for debate over the reasonable scope of government that seems lacking in contemporary conservative discourse. The final three steps – “rethink the attitude toward government,” “reexamine basic values,” and “reread the Constitution” – demonstrate the seriousness of Edwards as a committed and principled conservative:

As most Americans now realize, the Republican Congress’s greatest failure, and its most radical departure from conservative principles, was in failing to scrutinize President Bush’s determination to go to war in Iraq. It bears repeating: the conservative approach to war is based on caution, prudence, a search for ways to keep the peace. Congress is constitutionally charged with the responsibility – and sole

authority – to decide whether the United States should go to war; and Congress, not the president, has sole authority under the Constitution to decide what to do about captured enemy combatants (p. 185).

Edwards conclusion, that the heart of governing power rests with Congress and not the executive, offers an eloquent and persuasive antidote to the theories of a “unitary executive” so popular in the Bush administration’s Office of the Vice President, and serve as a reminder of the importance of a commitment to play the game of politics within the confines of the rules circumscribed by the Constitution.

Reclaiming Conservatism is not without certain lacunae that may trouble some readers. As Edwards admits early in his book (p. 16), he is not a trained historian, and was uninterested in locating modern conservatism within a historical context. The ahistorical nature of the book tends to further contemporary conservatives’ tendency to portray themselves as underdogs in American politics, thus ignoring the relative predominance of an older conservatism that bears a strong familial resemblance to the conservatism Edwards embraces.

Perhaps more importantly, the success of modern conservatism owes as much to the floundering of liberalism – to student radicalism, to mounting frustration over unsustainably high marginal tax rates, to the rising violent crime rates, to the deep unpopularity of the Vietnam conflict and to the sheer exhaustion of liberal ideas among the body politic – as it does to the attractiveness of the principles that Edwards values. In short, the political climate of 2008 to the present looks quite a bit differently than the environment of the 1970’s and 1980’s. To avoid the kind of flailing that afflicted liberals of the last thirty years, conservatives need to be able to distinguish between fidelity to core principles and nostalgia for an imagined “golden era,” never an easy task for those passionately committed to a movement whose race appears to have been run.

Most “wilderness novels” offer two narrative themes: purification and recovery. Is Edwards the conservatives’ Moses, to lead them out of the Wilderness and to the Promised Land? Regardless of one’s ideological persuasion, *Reclaiming Conservatism* offers a pragmatic and principled prescription for the ills of contemporary conservatism.

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¹ See, for example, Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam (2008), *Grand New Party*, New York, Doubleday; David Frum (2008), *Comback*, New York, Broadway; Michael Gerson (2007), *Heroic Conservatism*, New York, HarperCollins; Newt Gingrich (2008) *Real Change*, Washington, D.C., Regnery; and Joe Scarborough (2009), *The Last Best Hope*, New York, Crown Forum.

