

‘Puritans’ and ‘Revolutionaries’ Are Battling for the Heart of the GOP

The post-Convention Republican presidential campaign has exposed a stark rift in the conservative movement that threatens to undermine the hard-fought gains conservatives of the Buckley and Reagan eras made over the past 50 years.

On one side are those conservatives who take their inspiration from the politics of Ronald Reagan but the spirit of their movement from Phyllis Schlafly’s 1964 classic *A Choice Not an Echo*.

Mrs. Schlafly, long-considered to be “the First Lady of the Conservative Movement” wrote her initially self-published attack on “the kingmakers” in Washington, D.C., and the state capitals in support of Barry Goldwater’s bid for president.

The premise of the book was that the “kingmakers” using every trick of politics “dictated the choice of the Republican presidential nominee just as completely as the Paris dressmakers control the length of women’s skirts.”

In that incisive observation, Schlafly, who just turned 92 years old, may have been the first conservative to articulate that the first impediment to governing America according to conservative principles is not the Democratic Party and liberals, but the entrenched special interests running the establishment Republican Party.

The original version of Schlafly’s 1964 indictment of the power of the kingmakers and the need for a grass-roots conservative revolution was updated in a 50th anniversary

edition of *A Choice Not an Echo* that brought the critique of the destructive D.C. power structure and the call for revolutionary change into the 21st century, but one key premise remained the same—anyone running for president who threatened the power of the kingmakers would be destroyed.

So it came as no surprise to those who knew Schlafly's work that the charges the kingmakers leveled against Barry Goldwater in 1964 would be eerily repeated against Donald Trump in 2016:

Scranton camp followers spread shocking tales suggesting that Goldwater was perhaps in league with neo-Nazis in Germany—and this about a man whose own father was Jewish. Scranton himself attacked Goldwater; in his challenge to a “debate” in tones plainly implying that Goldwater was not only wrong but actually evil.

And it likewise came as no surprise that Mrs. Schlafly was an early and enthusiastic endorser of Donald Trump, saying, “Trump is the only hope to defeat the kingmakers ... because everybody else will fall in line. The kingmakers have so much money behind them.”

“The kingmakers,” Schlafly told Breitbart, “have picked our last bunch of losers. And there's one loser after another because they were more interested in maintaining their flow of money from the big donors and their cooperation with the Democrats—their bipartisanship—and that's not my goal. I'm for America [Schlafly slams hand on table] and America first [slams hand on table again].”

However, Schlafly's analysis and calls for a grass-roots revolution against “the kingmakers” is loudly rejected by a newly surfaced stream of conservative thought that rejects the practical politics of Schlafly, William F. Buckley and Ronald Reagan for one that sees voting as a personal and profoundly moral act that should reject any candidate who does not meet

an as yet unarticulated test of moral rectitude.

These individuals reach back to such 19th-century public intellectuals and preachers as Charles Haddon Spurgeon for their inspiration.

Spurgeon, whose aphorism “Of two evils, choose neither” is posted widely on social media by Christians and others who find themselves in a moral conundrum at the very thought of voting for either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump.

Thus *National Review* writer and erstwhile presidential candidate David A. French can tweet, “Trump is more than just a ‘bad candidate.’ He’s a moral and political disgrace.”

Strangely enough, this suddenly prominent New Puritanism also found its first articulation in 1964 in the rejection of twice-married New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller by none other than Sen. Prescott Bush, father and grandfather of the presidents Bush:

Have we come to the point in our life as a nation where the governor of a great state—one who perhaps aspires to the nomination for president of the United States—can desert a good wife, mother of his grown children, divorce her, then persuade a young mother of four youngsters to abandon her husband and their four children and marry the governor?

The problem with the exacting standards of this New Puritanism is that in a country where the divorce rate now approaches 50 percent, it would disqualify nearly half the population, including conservative President Ronald Reagan, from public service.

What’s more, as Pastor John Barber of Jacksonville, Florida, observed, it has no biblical basis.

Many Christians, said Rev. Barber, wish to avoid choosing between the lesser of two evils is because they confuse an

evil with a wrong. An “evil” is something that brings suffering. Evil is therefore broader than a wrong.

For example, my back pain is an evil. To alleviate it, I may choose back surgery, an even greater evil. But my hope is that, although super painful in the short-term, surgery will facilitate complete relief long-term. Starvation, poverty and disease, are also forms of evil. James says that “God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (1:13). He means we shouldn’t use evil as an excuse to sin. Also, the devil is called “the evil one” (1 John 5:19). So we see the breadth of evil.

A “wrong,” explains Pastor Barber, is a sin against God. Steal a candy bar from the 7-Eleven, and you’ve committed a wrong.

I am rather confident, said Barber, that “No Trump” evangelicals incorrectly assume that a vote for Trump is a wrong—a sin against God.

Rev. Barber makes sense of the conundrum this way: Imagine our two families are miles from land in a sinking boat. Suddenly, out of the mist, come two boats to save us. One is captained by an adulterer; the other is captained by a thief. Which boat will you get into?

You say, “Neither one. I’m waiting for the evangelical boat which is captained by a devout Christian who will end abortion.” I say, “You’re kidding, right?” You reply, “Both these guys are reprobates and I’m not going to choose between two evils.”

You see what you’ve done? For one, you failed to prioritize scripturally. *The immediate priority is to save our families so we can fight another day. Scripture passages against thievery and adultery simply don’t apply here.*

Second, you confused an evil with a wrong. As painful as it is for you to sit in the adulterer’s boat on the way to dry

ground, God doesn't view you as an adulterer. Neither does He view your choice to get your family into the boat as a "wrong."

Pastor Barber then offers this insightful observation: *Is it possible that God, in His infinite wisdom, has brought Trump along, if for no other reason than to prevent this nation from sinking permanently into the abyss of PC progressivism?* And that He has done this so that when this nation is back on the ground we can then plan for the kind of constitutional conservative we need for the future?

Right now our nation is sinking says Pastor Barber. And two boats are on the way. God is not asking you to pick between "the lesser of two evils." He asking you to: (1) Prioritize what Scripture prioritizes. (2) Distinguish an evil from a wrong.

Finding sin and moral purity tests where the Bible imposes none and calling one's opponents a "moral and political disgrace" are strangely reminiscent of the kingmaker-created anti-Goldwater hysteria Phyllis Schlafly inveighed against in 1964.

Conservatives won in 1980, and in 1994 and in 2010 and 2014 because the wise leaders of the Reagan and Tea Party movements mastered coalition politics and brought together economic conservatives, national security conservatives, cultural conservatives and eventually limited-government constitutional conservatives and small L libertarians to create a winning coalition.

How can this new and dangerous division in the conservative movement be healed?

It won't be easy because of the personal invective coming from both sides, particularly through social media. One place to start might be to agree, as Rev. John Barber suggests, that the priority in this election is defeating Hillary Clinton to

preserve the future opportunity to choose a godly candidate, a goal upon which the broader conservative movement should certainly all agree. {eo}

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