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The future of conservatism in a nation of mutts

by Joe Feuerherd

Conservatism RIP?

This reality is not attributable solely to Obamaism, though that is part of it. Rather, it is about the past, namely the contradictory impulses of American conservatism, and the future, specifically a demographic tidal wave that threatens to bury a once powerful political tradition.

The history is effectively explained in *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (Atlantic Monthly Press). American University history professor Allan Lichtman refutes the idea that modern American conservatism dates back to the 1955 founding of *National Review*, the erudite and pugnacious product of William F. Buckley's vivid imagination and abundant energy.

The Catholic Buckley, according to one version of history, purged the conservative movement of its anti-Semitic and isolationist roots (think Charles Lindbergh and the 1930s America First movement), placed militant but not kooky anti-communism at the center of its concerns, advocated smaller government, and defended capitalism against the welfare state.

The reality that Lichtman recounts, however, is far different. Modern American conservatism's roots are more aptly traced back to the 1920s, an era of business-friendly, nativist, pro-traditional-family government he describes as "anti-pluralist."

"The right has held together as a political movement since World War I through its core commitment to conserving white Protestant values and private enterprise, not free enterprise," writes Lichtman.

"Ultimately conservatives have engaged in a struggle for control over American public life against a liberal tradition they have seen as not just wrong on issues but sinful, un-American, and corrosive of the institutions and traditions that made the nation great."

Fast-forward to today. President-elect Obama's "rhetoric is postmodernist, and marks an agenda and vision that are aggressive, disruptive and apocalyptic," Cardinal Francis Stafford told a Washington audience last month. "Gethsemane will not be marginal" during the Obama years, he added.

Writes syndicated conservative Catholic columnist George Weigel: "This year's election cycle clarified decisively that the great public fissure in these United States is between the culture of life and the culture of death."

Stafford and Weigel's words recall another American conservative, the morose but brilliant Whittaker Chambers, invoker of a secular end times in which he feared, having left the Communist Party, that he had "joined the losing side." Whatever its merits as theology or philosophy, such rhetoric -- and the ideas behind the words -- are unlikely to capture the American electorate's imagination.

Twenty-first century America is simply less white, less Protestant and less male, in terms of the electorate, than it used to be. Two-thirds of Hispanic voters embraced Obama, as did 95 percent of African Americans, 77 percent of Jewish voters, a majority of women, and 70 percent of young voters.

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But what of those "culture of life Catholics," those "Reagan Democrats," said to be key to the election? Obama won not only a majority of the Catholic vote, but -- in a blow to the conservative dream of equating religious fervor with Republicanism -- split evenly with Sen. John McCain among weekly Mass attendees.

Political scientist Norman Ornstein writes: "For Republicans, the danger is that their only reliable voting bloc may remain older white guys. Make that older Protestant white guys. Ouch."

President-elect Obama, in response to a question on the First Family's quest for a pet, said his preference was for "a mutt, like me." The United States is increasingly and irrevocably a nation of mutts.

Can a political movement founded on preserving what it sees best about white Protestant America thrive in such an environment? It is hard to see how.

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