
American Modernities: The Competition for the Future, 1972-1985

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The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency of the United States on November 4, 1980, marked the formal ascendance of conservatism in American national politics. During the late twentieth century, a more politicized evangelical Christian movement and a re-emergence of free market capitalism converged within the Republican Party, producing a political transformation that fundamentally rejected the liberal consensus that characterized the American political landscape since the triumph of the New Deal. The political success of a more explicitly religious movement in the United States appeared to contemporary observers to be an anti-modern aberration in American life.¹ If Western conceptions of modernity championed egalitarianism and secularism in the public sphere, then the success of a religious conservative movement was incompatible with the values of the country. The soul of the nation appeared to be at stake.

This article re-examines the American discourse on modernity as it pertains to the American conservative movement. Rather than dismissing the movement as anti-modern, this study examines how American conservatives imagined the future and their destiny within that vision. The American conservative movement was not anti-modern relative to the Western tradition of modernity. Rather, the conservative movement engaged in the discourse of Western modernity and placed itself within this trajectory. The adherents of the movement maintained faith in the forward march of history shared by American liberals and believed that they were continuing an American tradition inherited since the founding of the country. By analyzing two features often associated with modernity—gender and technology—it is apparent that the American conservative movement fits within a longer tradition of Western conceptions of modernity and values similar developments as the political mainstream, though with certain reservations. The American Right conceived a modernity that existed outside of the liberal consensus but was no less forward-looking in its vision.

¹ Daniel Bell, "The Revolt Against Modernity," *The Public Interest* 81, no. 81 (1985): 42-63.

What it bore was a different vision of the future based on a heterosexual suburban landscape and the military-industrial economy that spawned such changes.

Analytical Framework

The term modernity maintains several assumptions about the trajectory of history. Historically, a belief in a *universal modernity* has dominated both academia and public policy. This approach to the concept of modernity has maintained that a single, teleological view of history exists, following the liberal model of Western Europe. A second interpretation of modernity, having come to dominate the academic sphere in more recent years, is the category of *multiple modernities*. This approach has mistakenly essentialized societies by arguing that different sociopolitical contexts will present their own vision of modernity and ignored the internal debates that happen within each society. What is lost are the alternative visions of the future that have been articulated within national boundaries by diverse voices.

The academic is then faced with a frustrating quandary when attempting to study the modern. This article is guided by two ideas. First: modernity does not objectively exist. The term is merely a historical product that relies on contemporary debate and how people view themselves vis-à-vis the Other. Modernity means different things at different times to different people. Second: this paper will adopt historian Frederick Cooper's approach to modernity. Attempting to find a more objective definition of modernity is ultimately useless. Rather:

[Scholars] should instead listen to what is being said in the world. If modernity is what they hear, they should ask how it is being used and why; otherwise, shoehorning a political discourse into modern, antimodern, or postmodern discourses, or into "their" modernity or "ours," is more distorting than revealing.²

² Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 115.

For the following discussion of American modernity, this article considers what adherents of the conservative movement thought of themselves relative to American society and how they engaged the concept of modernity. Modernity has not meant the same thing for all Americans. If we ignore the rise of the American Right and dismiss it as an anti-modern movement, we ignore the internal debates that occurred within American society over modernity and the alternative visions of the future that were put forth.³ Western (European) modernity and its meanings were historically fraught with debate; so, too, was modernity debated in the United States.

Historical Context

Following the end of the Second World War, the United States experienced significant changes that fundamentally altered its domestic context and place in the world. The postwar economy, coupled with New Deal-era labor protections, bequeathed to the United States unprecedented wealth that was more equitably distributed amongst the working and middle classes. As the protectors of the Free World, postwar America was responsible for opposing communism globally. The country's domestic politics necessarily changed. It was in this context that the modern conservative movement came of age.

The economic growth of postwar America introduced social forces that would inevitably lead to cultural and political changes. The federally funded defense industry in the American Sunbelt and the suburbanization of postwar America created a class of mostly white middle-class Americans who no longer relied on the New Deal state.⁴ Suburbanization and new wealth encouraged certain groups of postwar Americans to favor a reconfiguration of local and national politics: middle-class Americans, insulated from urban America, fostered new identities that rejected federal oversight and favored localism.⁵ The new class concerns of those who benefitted from the postwar economy created a

³ Seymour Martin Lipset, "Failures of Extremism," *Society* 20, no. 1 (1982): 48–58.

⁴ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵ Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

divergent path that could articulate a political vision outside of the liberal consensus.

The Civil Rights Movement and its growing acceptance within the political mainstream led to a racial and political backlash that benefitted the nascent conservative movement. As national politics and the politics of the Deep South began to converge, political figures such as George Wallace and Richard Nixon were able to benefit from white discontent, overseeing a political realignment that handed the Southern states over to Republicans reluctant to use the federal government to expand civil rights.⁶ Simultaneously, American suburbs and cities began articulating a new conservatism predicated on a language of rights, freedom, and individualism in response to desegregation.⁷ White voters were attracted to a Republican Party beginning to adopt these views.

A cultural shift that encompassed religion and gender also helped precipitate a political realignment in American politics. The rise of an evangelical Christian movement that attached itself exclusively to the Republican Party in 1980 emerged nationally during the culture wars of the 1970s. In response to the liberationist environment of the decade, evangelical Christians successfully mobilized Americans in their opposition to abortion and feminism.⁸ As they articulated an identity outside of the Democratic Party and moderate wing of the Republican Party, evangelical Christians formed a movement committed to free market capitalism and militaristic anti-communism.⁹ This new force successfully dislodged the moderate Republicans and captured the Republican Party for the ascendant conservative movement.

⁶ Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁷ Kevin Michael Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁸ Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁹ Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

The American Right coalesced around the issues of race, economic class, and religion. No longer dependent on the state that brought them their unprecedented wealth, the adherents of the conservative movement sought a world outside of New Deal liberalism. The emerging worldview would imagine a return to “tradition,” privilege Christianity in public life, and encourage the economic and military growth of the United States to fight communism.

Gender and Modernity

The question of gender and the role of the citizen in the nation-state has long been a concern of political modernity. Western political modernity imagines the incorporation of equal citizens into the body politic without social hierarchies that would impede democratic expression. Theoretically, the liberal modernity associated with the United States has been told as a story of expanding rights: suffrage was first expanded to include all white men regardless of property qualifications, followed by emancipation and the granting of political rights to freed slaves and their descendants, and finally the extension of political rights to women in the twentieth century. Over a longer period stretching back to include Enlightenment Europe, political modernity has also witnessed the disintegration of the family unit as a meaningful institution, with citizenship marked by an unobstructed relationship with the state. Any reversal of this development could be seen by liberal modernists as a step backward on the spectrum of modernization.

In the context of American politics, gender and women’s rights became explosive issues by the 1970s. At the foundation of issues such as abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment were concerns regarding the role of women in American society. For the conservatives reacting against the perceived dismantling of the family, the question of gender became fundamental in their construction of a conservative modernity. To the liberal observer, the emphasis on traditional values and a gendered division of responsibility appeared to be a rejection of the forward march of political modernity. However, the conservative was instead attempting to articulate a vision of America based on the ideas of “republican motherhood” formulated in the early years of the American re-

public that continued through the twentieth century.¹⁰ As a consequence of the suburbanization of the American landscape and the reintegration of American soldiers into the postwar workforce, conservatives endorsed a heteronormative nuclear family identity for the nation. The result was a vision of the future that privileged the role of the family vis-a-vis the state while celebrating a political yet curtailed role for women in public life.

The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 introduced a new environment in which women could engage in electoral politics. As the century progressed and women exercised their newfound voting rights, traditional gender expectations were simultaneously threatened and reconstructed. In the twentieth century, women involved in the Republican Party developed two strategies of female political participation that “nurtured conflicting ideas about gender, power and politics.”¹¹ This would result in opposing views concerning the appropriate political activity of women. These two groups could be divided between the women who attempted to work through the party structure to secure office and those who viewed politics as a feminine civic duty that should be pursued outside of the party structure. For the latter group of women, their disregard for both party loyalty and compromise nurtured an ideologically purist environment that would eventually lead to reactionary politics in the postwar era.

Later in the twentieth century, the two groups of Republican women—represented by the professional female party staffers and the volunteer National Federation of Women’s Republican Clubs (NFWR)—competed for influence over the Republican Party. Although the grassroots activists of the NFWR did exert some influence over the Republican National Convention, particularly with the nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964, by the early 1970s the Republican feminists and professional party women were successful in securing an albeit tenuous hold over the party.¹²

¹⁰ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 283;

Jacqueline Beatty, *In Dependence: Women and the Patriarchal State in Revolutionary America* (New York University Press, 2023).

¹¹ Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 3.

¹² Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women*, 211.

Despite the initial success of moderate Republicans in the 1970s, the Equal Rights Amendment campaign, second-wave feminism, and abortion rights invigorated the New Right and resulted in the restructuring of the Republican Party.¹³ In this new conservative environment, the grassroots conservative women and their allies were successful in dislodging the moderate wing of the Republican Party, securing an anti-ERA and anti-feminist RNC platform, and nominating Ronald Reagan for the presidency in 1980. After decades of political activity, the conservative faction was for the first time in control of the party's direction.

The conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly famously became associated with the anti-ERA movement and the triumph of conservatism in the Republican Party. In many ways, Schlafly was a beneficiary of the feminist movement she so vehemently rejected. Following graduate school and wartime employment at an ammunition plant, Schlafly ran for Congress in 1952. Although she lost to an incumbent Democrat, she continued her political activity as a Republican club woman, eventually securing the vice president position of the national wing of the National Federation of Women's Republican Clubs. Schlafly first rose to national attention with her 1964 book *A Choice Not an Echo* in support of Republican candidate Barry Goldwater, which gained her the admiration of alienated grassroots conservative activists.¹⁴ As a representative of the conservative ideal of the Republican woman, Schlafly challenged the moderate wing of the Republican Party when she ran for the presidency of the Federation in 1967. Following her loss to a moderate candidate and subsequent alienation from the Republican Party, Schlafly exploited her grassroots connections from her years as a clubwoman to create new women's organizations and campaign for conservative issues, particularly against the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Her reactionary conservative gender politics would gain her national attention and the hostility of anyone outside of the conservative movement.

¹³ Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values that Polarized American Politics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

¹⁴ Phyllis Schlafly, *A Choice Not an Echo* (Alton, Illinois: Pere Marquette Press, 1964).

In response to the political resurrection of the Equal Rights Amendment and its passing in the United States Congress, Phyllis Schlafly published a monthly newsletter that provided arguments against the ratification of the ERA and, later, arguments in favor of conservative causes. In her analysis of the ERA, Schlafly argued that its commitment to the equality of the sexes would fundamentally alter the social position of women in the United States. The ratification would deny women the “right to be a woman”: “The proposed Equal Rights Amendment will wipe out all our laws which . . . guarantee this right to be a woman. ERA will replace these present laws with a doctrinaire equality under which women must be treated exactly the same as men.” At the time of her November 1972 newsletter, all fifty states had laws requiring men to support their wives and children. Adopting the language of rights familiar to the liberal tradition, Schlafly engaged with a Western modernity associated with the legal protection of the citizen. As a social obligation within the institution of marriage, the ideal husband was expected to provide financial security for both his children and wife, which would allow her to maintain the home and fulfill her obligations as a wife and mother. If the ERA were to pass, the amendment would “remove this sole obligation from the husband, and make the wife *equally* responsible to provide a home for her family, and to provide 50 percent of the financial support of her family.”¹⁵ This fear demonstrates Schlafly’s, and the wider conservative movement’s, commitment to historical conceptions of republican motherhood. The protective legislation that makes a distinction between men and women and provides institutional protections for mothers illustrates the centrality of the family as a fundamental social unit within society as well as the conservative movement’s adoption of the language of rights. In the eyes of Schlafly, the ERA would rearrange this social unit and alter the individual’s relationship to the state. Rather than being oriented toward her family and fulfilling traditional obligations of motherhood, the ERA would implicitly reorient the woman toward the state and theoretically change the significance of the family unit. This threatened the historical social and political obligations of republican motherhood.

¹⁵ Newsletter article “The Right to be a Woman” by Phyllis Schlafly, November 1972, SPC. 2018.022, box 6, folder 6, Right-Wing and Conservative Publications Collection, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA.

Though celebrating the evolution of women's place in American society over time, President Reagan largely paralleled Schlafly's articulation of complementary gender roles in the body politic. Writing in a 1984 edition of the magazine *Ladies' Home Journal*, President Reagan idealizes the role of women and their gender-specific civilizing capabilities. In his discussion of his mother, Reagan celebrates features of republican motherhood by commenting on her ability to carry "the pains of the family" and her role as a moralizing force for his father. The mother is presented as a selfless caretaker, an almost otherworldly being of God whose moral strength ensures the survival of the family unit. These women have Reagan's "deepest respect and affection for what they are accomplishing," and the nation is responsible for recognizing the gift of the republican mother. Reagan continues to celebrate the role of his wife in his public and private life while celebrating the "assertiveness" and individuality of his daughters. Whether Reagan's concluding remarks about the freedom of women to choose "the one role she wishes or to perhaps fill them all" are genuine or not, he argues that the American future is bright because of the innate qualities of the American woman.¹⁶ This gendered responsibility of both the mother and the American woman reflected the ideals of republican motherhood and the characteristics of American womanhood that Schlafly maintained in the years of her newsletter publication.

The ERA's threat to Schlafly's conception of republican motherhood becomes more obvious when we consider the republican mother's responsibility for the political socialization of her children. In the eyes of Schlafly, the ERA would deprive mothers of this right to political socialization. In the October 1975 edition of *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, Schlafly opposes the Child and Family Services Bill of 1975 for its alleged government intervention in the family. Under this bill, a new federal office of Child and Family Services within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare would be created to supervise a network of federal daycare centers for children. This expansion of the federal government and its perceived intervention into the home would, according to Schlafly, lead to the "engineer[ing] [of] the educational,

¹⁶ Ronald Reagan, "In Praise of American Women," in *Reagan as President: Contemporary Views of the Man, His Politics, and His Policies*, ed. Paul Boyer (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 163-164.

mental, emotional, physical and behavioral needs of children. . .” For the conservative supporters of the ideal of republican motherhood, the intervention of the state would threaten the traditional role of mothers in the education of their children. Naturally, Schlafly asked, “Who is a ‘parent’?” Under this child services bill, Schlafly writes, the bill “would transfer your rights as parents of your own children into the hands of HEW bureaucrats, social workers, or teachers. . .”¹⁷ The alleged erosion of parents’ rights in the education of their children would, according to conservatives, replace the social and political role of mothers in inculcating their children with values compatible with the state. As a result of earlier introduction into the public school system, it was feared that children would learn values antithetical to the family unit.

This emphasis on the role of the family and mothers’ responsibility for the moral education of their children could also be found in other conservative outlets. In a 1985 edition of *Moral Majority*, a newspaper associated with the Christian Right and the Republican Party, conservative contributors attacked “progressive education” and the infiltration of the education system with “humanist” philosophy. In their view, the federal government had removed parents from the moral education of their children by circumventing parental rights and teaching a curriculum that was incompatible with America’s Christian heritage. *Moral Majority* contributor Carl Sommer plainly stated the conservative position when he declared, “[educators] did not have the authority to violate parental rights by undermining the values children were being taught at home.” Public education served a purpose in the conservative worldview. However, education was meant to remain neutral, teaching only reading, writing, history, mathematics, and “non-ideological” science, while parents were responsible for teaching values that were consistent with American identity.¹⁸ The denial of this balance would theoretically alter the political significance of the family.

The imagined role of the mother and the family unit was a contentious topic in the battles between conservatives and their

¹⁷ Newsletter Article “Child-Care Responsibility -- Family or State?” by Phyllis Schlafly, October 1975, SPC.2018.022, box 6, folder 8, Right-Wing and Conservative Publications Collection, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, Ca.

¹⁸ Carl Sommer, “EDUCATION: Schools in Crisis,” *Moral Majority*, September 1985, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32207796>.

detractors. From the liberal modernist point of view, the mother would be liberated from the unpaid demands of motherhood and the oppressive structure of marriage, while the education system would create citizens for the nation. The demands of modernity would require a direct relationship between the individual and the state, effectively removing the family unit as an intermediary. The conservative view of modernity, however, still imagined a legitimate place for this intermediary. Rather than seeing themselves as an aberration within American history, conservatives believed that they were instead inheriting and continuing an unbroken thread of American identity. If anything, conservatives saw the progressives as the aberrations within American history, akin to internal enemies attempting to destroy the values of the republic. By maintaining the rights of the family and raising patriotic children, the family unit retained a formal social and political role in this conservative modernity. The future would have a familiar American face as conservatives protected what they believed to be historical continuity.

Technology and Modernity

The increasing role of science and technology in society is a defining feature of modernity. As the West applied science to economic production and created an industrial system that could function on inanimate energy, modernists placed their confidence in continued advancement and its role in meeting human needs and desires. This faith in the industrial system and its possibilities encouraged its beneficiaries to look toward the future. Very few people sought to turn back the clock; industrial capitalism and its concurrent societal changes were accepted by Western observers as inevitable consequences in the march of history. Following the decline of traditional Western powers, the United States inherited a new position on the world stage as the country emerged from the Second World War and resumed its production of consumer goods. The American industrial system and global leadership in both science and technology excited both the liberal and the emerging conservative movements.

Conservatives in the twentieth century were no less forward-looking in their view of science and technological ad-

vancement. The conservative celebrated the feats of industrial capitalism and the postwar economic boom that revolutionized American life. In the context of the Cold War, technological innovation reflected America's greatness as well as a key component in defeating the Soviet Union. As a result of this view, conservatives celebrated technology and, at times, pushed for continued development in different fields of science, particularly military weaponry. The imagined conservative future would be marked by continued development and the defense of the American way of life.

The conservative worldview came of age at a time of global competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Following the first successful test of a nuclear weapon by the Soviet Union in 1949, the arms race between the two superpowers began in earnest. The United States and the Soviet Union both continued to advance their nuclear capabilities, shortly leading to more advanced weapons and a significant increase in the number of nuclear bombs in their respective arsenals. Until 1963, there existed no concerted effort between the two superpowers to control the proliferation of weapons, nor were there formal mechanisms to address a potential nuclear clash. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis witnessed a stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union following the Soviet deployment of nuclear weapons to Cuba—a move that was in response to the deployment of American nuclear missiles to Italy and Turkey. Following this confrontation between the superpowers—widely seen as the closest the world has ever come to nuclear war—the United States and the Soviet Union sought to improve relations. What followed was a series of nuclear talks and treaties, spanning several American presidents, designed to control unchecked nuclear proliferation.

The post-1962 international environment saw an increase in diplomacy and political agreements to slow the arms race. In a series of multilateral treaties, the United States and the Soviet Union, including smaller nuclear states, participated in talks to control the rules of nuclear proliferation and limit the number of countries in the pursuit of such weapons. Despite the efforts of the United Nations to limit the nuclear threat, the United States and the Soviet Union both continued to increase their number of

intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and invested in the early development of anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense systems. The two superpowers turned to bilateral talks to implement a more meaningful policy of de-escalation.

The two Strategic Arms Limitations Talks, SALT I, and SALT II, were bilateral conferences and treaties that were designed to introduce substantive arms control policies. Under the provisions of the SALT I treaty, President Richard Nixon and General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev established a quantitative limit on the number of intercontinental ballistic missiles. The Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 was negotiated concurrently with SALT I. Targeting defense capabilities rather than offensive weapons, this treaty limited the number of ABM interceptors each superpower could deploy. In the second round of talks, SALT II, under President Jimmy Carter and General Secretary Brezhnev, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to further limit the number of nuclear weapons and established procedures for the gradual disposal of excess weapons.¹⁹ Due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979, President Carter withdrew the United States from consideration of the treaty in 1980, though both countries honored the terms until 1986. Domestic politics in the United States responded to this international context of nuclear de-escalation.

The conservative wing of the Republican Party was critical of the diplomatic approach that was adopted by the political mainstream. The ratification of arms-limiting treaties, conservatives argued, prevented the United States from defeating the communist threat and compromised the sovereignty of the nation. Such an arrangement only benefitted the Soviet Union as they could “emerge with a strategic force superior to that of the U.S.” and limit the long-term potential of the American military.²⁰ The goal of American conservatives was the fall of the Soviet Union; the Democratic Party and the moderate wing of the Republican

¹⁹ Richard Dean Burns, Joseph M. Siracusa, and Jason C. Flanagan, *American Relations Since Independence* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2013), 261-262.

²⁰ Jerry Falwell, “SALT II — Experience Should Be the Best Teacher Moral Majority,” *Hotline Report*, July 1979. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32207680>.

Party appeared to accept co-existence. Leading up to the 1980 presidential election, conservative observers were critical of both the SALT treaties and President Carter's alleged weakness in international affairs. Ronald Reagan made a point to openly oppose arms-limiting treaties and distanced himself from previous presidents' attempts at diplomacy.²¹ At a time of perceived American weakness on the international stage, conservatives were vocal in their support of military buildup and continued advancement in military technology. In their worldview, the United States was the defender of Christianity and freedom in the world. The protection of this promised land required American ingenuity and the freedom to pursue its unrealized strength.

Several conservative commentators in the late-1970s expressed their disdain for the SALT treaties and their alleged weakening of American power. If the long-term goal of the conservative movement was the eradication of the Soviet threat, then any attempt at compromise was antithetical to the core of the movement. In a 1979 *New York Times* article by Norman Podhoretz, the conservative commentator saw the SALT treaties and the refusal to pursue alternative energy sources during the OPEC oil price increase as a "self-imposed contraction of [the United States'] own power." The United States historically enjoyed "greater wealth and technological sophistication" over the Soviet Union, he argued, but now Americans seem to wince at their strength. To maintain this superiority and to protect its political freedom, Podhoretz insisted that the United States overcome its "anti-growth" policies and rediscover its drive for advancement and ingenuity, whether it be in military capabilities or the creation of "synthetic fuels."²² Perpetual growth seemed to be the only way to ensure the continued existence of the country.

These sentiments are echoed by conservative magazine publisher Richard A. Viguerie in his 1980 book *The New Right: We're Ready to Lead*. In a chapter titled "Our Primary Goal: Military Superiority," he attacks President Jimmy Carter and the perceived growth of Soviet military power under the SALT treaties. Viewing the global battle between capitalism and communism as

²¹ Burns, Siracusa, and Flanagan, *American Relations Since Independence*, 296.

²² Norman Podhoretz, "Waking Up the Giant," *Conservative Digest*, October 1979, 8.

an existential threat, Viguerie articulated the conservative movement's goal when he called for the total defeat of the Soviet Union. To achieve this goal, he argues, the United States must abandon its policy of détente and "regain strategic military superiority without delay."²³ This would include increasing the nuclear capabilities of the country and controlling technology diffusion from the West to the Soviet Union which would give the communists a strategic edge over the United States. In the conservative worldview, adherents believed that the Soviet Union sought the end of the Free World. The appropriate response to such deception was incomparable military strength and economic growth.

The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 inaugurated what many historians now call the Second Cold War. Following President Carter's departure from office, Reagan continued the confrontational rhetoric that gained him popularity amongst American conservatives during his presidential campaign. The administration feared the growth of Soviet power and the extension of their influence into Africa, Asia, and the Western Hemisphere. For these reasons, Reagan opposed the SALT and ABM treaties negotiated by his predecessors. During his presidency, the United States witnessed significant increases in military spending and an emphasis on nuclear strength as the means to dominate the international stage. When the world became increasingly anxious about President Reagan's goal of nuclear proliferation, the president gave a speech that proposed the development of an anti-missile defense program that would destroy incoming missiles in flight.²⁴ This Strategic Defense Initiative, known as "Star Wars" by President Reagan's critics, sought the militarization of space and weapons such as, but not limited to, lasers and particle beams. Reagan was quickly criticized by his detractors due to the current unavailability of such technology, but conservatives picked up his tone of technological optimism and encouraged the pursuit of such technology. By considering

²³ Richard A. Viguerie, *The New Right: We're Ready to Lead* (Falls Church, VA: Viguerie Co., 1981), 119.

²⁴ Paul S. Boyer, "Selling Star Wars: Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative," in *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century*, ed. Kenneth Osgood and Andrew K. Frank (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 196. This speech was given on March 23, 1983.

the conservative voices who supported this program, a vision of modernity and an embracing of science becomes apparent in the conservative worldview.

Reagan was not the first to suggest the construction of missile defense systems. In the years leading up to his speech, advocates in the scientific community discussed the possibility of weaponized lasers in space to intercept ICBMs.²⁵ What was new was an ideological split between conservatives and the political mainstream over the feasibility and merit of such a system. Reagan was optimistic about American scientific ingenuity: "Let us turn to the very strengths in technology that spawned our great industrial base and that have given us the quality of life we enjoy today."²⁶ The development of such unprecedented technology fit within the longer history of American scientific leadership and technological growth: it was a part of the American tradition to pursue the impossible and come out on top. The *National Review* echoed the optimism and acceptance of technological challenges expressed by Reagan. The conservative magazine cautioned the liberal critic, stating that "[r]esearch into exotic weapons is much further advanced than is generally realized by non-specialists." It would be foolish to "imagine that technology can somehow be made to stand still," the magazine argued, as it would "[go] against all historical experience."²⁷ Instead of adopting an anti-science or –technology position, conservatives imagined a militarization of space and continued pursuit of this new frontier. Conservatives saw themselves as forward-looking and daring to take up this challenge, introducing a world where the most technologically advanced weapons—nuclear missiles—were rendered obsolete by even more advanced technology.

Reagan and other members of the conservative movement fit within a longer tradition in American thought that linked tech-

²⁵ Paul S. Boyer, "Selling Star Wars: Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative," in *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century*, 202.

²⁶ Ronald Reagan, "'Peace and National Security' Address," in *Reagan as President: Contemporary Views of the Man, His Politics, and His Policies*, ed. Paul S. Boyer (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 208.

²⁷ National Review, "Star Wars," in *Reagan as President: Contemporary Views of the Man, His Politics, and His Policies*, ed. Paul S. Boyer (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 212.

nological development to the creation of a godly civilization. Historians have identified the marriage of technology and Christian theology in American thought.²⁸ Providential American ideology has maintained that the United States has a theological imperative to be the world's beacon of progress. The Strategic Defense Initiative could be placed within the language of a Christian civilization and the American moral responsibility for leading the world in technology. In a 1985 radio address to the nation, President Reagan argued that the United States should recover its sense of invulnerability, citing Luke 11:21—“If a strong man shall keep his court well-guarded, he shall live in peace”—as justification for the pursuit of the Strategic Defense Initiative.²⁹ Reagan presented the United States as innocent and righteous: as the leading world power, the great moral position of the country required the development and command of such technology. In the conservative worldview, it was important for the United States to wield this capability over the “evil empire,” as this international struggle was reduced to a dichotomy between Good and Evil.³⁰

In a 1984 letter to the *Moral Majority*, an American reader, June M. Collier, from Montgomery, Alabama, shared similar sentiments concerning the American role in world history. In discussing the American industrial base and advocating for more protectionist trade policies, Collier argued that “God, Country and Family” were the country's three priorities. It was important for the United States to protect its industrial base from foreign competition and remain “on the cutting edge of technology” to survive in the late twentieth century. The preservation of the American model, she argued, was not only necessary for the interests of American citizens but also served a larger moral purpose

²⁸ Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019); Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Strategic Defense Initiative,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, Published July 13, 1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/radio-address-nation-strategic-defense-initiative>.

³⁰ Ronald Reagan, “Address to National Association of Evangelicals,” in *Reagan as President: Contemporary Views of the Man, His Politics, and His Policies*, ed. Paul S. Boyer (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 169.

in world history: "If we owe the world anything, it's to be the shining example of strength that we once were, a beacon of hope and a model to which others may aspire."³¹ The continued American conservative fixation on serving as a model of civilization fits within a longer trajectory of Western modernity and the American fantasy of a Christian commonwealth. Not unlike the rhetoric of American imperialists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the conservative celebration of the United States as a model for the entire world implied that the American project represented the pinnacle of human achievement and progress. The maintenance of this strength through industrialism and technological advancement thus occupied the conservative worldview and vision for the unfolding of world history.

The American conservative movement was not inherently anti-science or –technology in their worldview.³² Rather, conservatives were critical of positions that challenged their epistemological foundation—Christianity. They approached topics such as evolutionary biology by attempting to adopt methodological features of the natural sciences and adapting them to Christianity (i.e., the development of "Christian science") rather than rejecting science entirely. The Christian conservative could celebrate something like the scientific feats of genetic engineering while "develop[ing] guidelines for interpreting the meaning of the wonders of the genetic revolution for themselves and their families."³³ American conservatives celebrated advancements in science and technology when they did not intrude upon the prerogatives of God. They could compartmentalize science and their religious beliefs without rejecting either subject entirely. To protect the world's "beacon of hope," science and technology had a legitimate place in the world, particularly when it concerned military superiority and economic development. As it pertains to a conservative modernity, the American Right's enthusiasm for American ingenuity fits within a longer thread of Western modernity and

³¹ June M. Collier, "Opinions from America: Free Trade is Not Free Enterprise," *Moral Majority*, March 1984, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.32207762>.

³² Norman D. Newell, "Creationism and Science Education," *Journal of Geological Education* 31, no. 2 (1983): 74-78; Jack Grove, "Anti-Science," in *In Defence of Science* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

³³ Woodrow Michael Kroll, "Supreme Court Rules on Genetic Engineering," *Moral Majority*, October 15, 1980, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.32207739>.

its celebration of Man's command over the sciences and the environment. Conservatives maintained a vision of the future that anticipated continued development and the harnessing of science for the country's benefit.

Conclusion

An examination of the American conservative's relationship to Western modernity reveals the modern aspects of the movement. In this article's consideration of postwar discourse concerning gender and technology, it is clear that the American Right fits within the universalist language that is associated with liberal modernity. The conservative articulation of gendered rights and responsibilities must be seen as a consequence of liberalism's language of rights as well as a continuation of inherited American gender roles. In their view of the United States' position in the world, the conservative observer remained committed to continued technological development and the fulfillment of the American destiny—though the conservative and liberal may have disagreed on History's endpoint.³⁴ The conservative view of gender and the proper role of science and technology may have differed from the American liberal's view of the world, but postwar conservatism was still a consequence of twentieth-century developments. The American conservative movement could not have unfolded the way it did in any other historical period.

The search for the national mind of a society often leaves many diverse voices unheard. No society is monolithic: groups rise and fall, and in the process offer alternative views of the world. The nation, then, can be seen as a set of competing narratives. Some voices periodically dislodge others, marginalizing unpopular views for the moment before they return to the surface. In the case of the American conservative movement, its members entertained visions of the future that were often obscured by contemporary charges of anti-modernity. An interrogation of the conservative vision and their engagement with concepts of modernity reveals a heteronormative and technologically advanced vision that rivaled the future envisioned by American liberals. Though the Republican Party and the conservative movement have changed since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, a faction that

³⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

identifies with the conservative legacy continues to influence the party into the twenty-first century. The conservative movement will continue to represent an alternative future that a sizable minority of Americans hope to see realized. Once analyzed, the language and beliefs of the American conservative movement reveal a common intellectual tradition familiar to American history. This is but one national story told by Americans.