



the big idea**What's Next?**

The conservative era is over. What will replace it?

By Jacob Weisberg

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The conservative era in American politics, which has coincided with my entire adult lifetime, came to an end two weeks ago. Though the seeds were sown by Barry Goldwater in 1964, the era truly began in 1980, when Ronald Reagan's election first brought the conservative movement to power. The ascendant right was libertarian in economics, traditional in values, and confrontational in foreign policy. It called for smaller government, lower taxes, a moral dimension to social policy, and a more aggressive stance toward the Soviet Union. Reagan succeeded as president by reversing what had been the country's decades-long liberal drift in all of these areas, much as Margaret Thatcher did in Britain.

The conservative trend continued despite Bill Clinton's election and re-election. Though Clinton was by no means a conservative himself, he too wanted a leaner, more efficient government and a stronger emphasis on personal "responsibility." After Republicans won control of Congress in 1994, Newt Gingrich attacked liberal policy with renewed, some might say [Napoleonic](#), vigor. The debate among the parties became how, not whether, to reduce and restrain government. It was Clinton who proclaimed in his 1996 State of the Union address that "the era of big government is over."

Though George W. Bush is as right-wing as Reagan or Gingrich, he has managed to terminate the conservative era. Bush did this, first of all, by joining with congressional Republicans in treating the federal budget as a Christmas stocking for supporters. Rapidly accumulating deficits and growth in federal spending—from 18.3 percent of GDP in Clinton's final year to 20.3 percent in 2006—undermined the association of conservatism with limited government. On social, moral, and scientific issues, Bush tilted so far to the right that he scared away secular, socially moderate, and libertarian Republicans. Finally, Bush's feckless foreign policy discredited optional military intervention, much as Johnson and Nixon did in Vietnam.

Today, the conservative movement is not just reeling and dejected after a loss at the polls. It has reached a terminal point, much as American liberalism had in 1980. The dream may never die, as Ted Kennedy said at the Democratic convention in 1980, but the patient has. That's not to say that Republican candidates can't win elections, or that some other kind of conservative movement won't emerge as a potent force in the future. But the revolution is over. Its [coalition is fractured](#), its energy is exhausted, and most of its remaining big ideas—school vouchers, the flat tax, and [Social Security privatization](#)—are so unpopular that they're not even part of the conversation anymore.

So, if I'm correct that the conservative era is kaput, what comes next? No one knows! But perhaps we can speculate about some of the candidates for successor. Here are four possibilities, moving from left to right:

1. A New Progressivism

Many liberals interpret the 2006 election to mean that a new age of activism is at hand. By itself, the Democratic victory in the midterms is hardly a mandate for an expanded government role. Even if the new majority could get major legislation through the Senate, Bush still has a veto pen. But if the trend continues—if Democrats recapture the White House and increase their legislative gains in 2008—they will get an opportunity they haven't had since 1993. What would define a major progressive moment more than

anything else would be passing national health-care reform. Beyond that, liberals would have to deal seriously with the negative side effects of globalization and new technology, including wage stagnation, income inequality, and the economic insecurity of the American middle class. The progressive impulse comes in a variety of flavors—populist, [nationalist](#), isolationist, internationalist, even green. In the 2008 campaign, versions of it may be represented by, among others, John Edwards, [Al Gore](#), and [Barack Obama](#).

2. Clintonism Continued

Another possibility is that the conservative era yields not to its liberal antithesis, but to a Third Way synthesis. This would mean picking up where Clinton left off in terms of fiscal responsibility, governmental reform, and global cooperation and engagement. In such an era, the momentum would come not from an energized left but from a vital center. Neo-Clintonism would seek out compromise with moderate Republicans to put the federal fiscal house in order while pursuing health-care and other reforms in an incremental rather than a sweeping way. The natural leader of this movement would be, of course, [Hillary Clinton](#).

3. The Muddled Middle

We could be headed for a period in which no clear political direction emerges—imagine the Gerald Ford/Jimmy Carter period, which connects two eras but doesn't count as one itself. A muddled-middle interregnum would favor social, economic, and security moderates—Rockefeller Republicans, Southern Democrats, and idiosyncratic independents compromising on responsible, consensus policies. It would be a period of single terms, bipartisan commissions, and strange bedfellows. Politicians with this kind of crossover appeal include Colin Powell, Christine Todd Whitman, Rudy Giuliani, Michael Bloomberg, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Joe Lieberman. Schwarzenegger can never be president because he was born in Austria. Lieberman can never be president for [reasons too numerous to mention](#).

4. Bushism Without Bush

If any hope exists for a conservative restoration, the best shot is probably the Bush formula of tax-cutting and security toughness—without Bush's excesses, errors and blatant religiosity. Such an era might be characterized by more-responsible Reaganomics, a refocused war on terror, and the continued march of conservative judicial activism. The person best positioned to lead this kind of movement is John McCain, a zealous political reformer and a secular security hawk. But McCain has [some issues of his own](#).

An unexpected rupture—bird flu, a nuclear attack, an economic crisis—could change all these calculations. Few in 1928 could have predicted the Depression and New Deal that were just ahead. Few in 1962 could have seen the Vietnam War and a conflict of generations coming. A fifth, very likely possibility is that we're headed for something else entirely, and that it's behind a corner no one can see around.

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