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## POST-CONSERVATIVE AMERICA: PEOPLE, POLITICS, AND IDEOLOGY IN A TIME OF CRISIS

by Kevin P. Phillips. New York: Random House, 1982, 261 pages, \$14.50

*Reviewed by Sheldon Pollack*

For more than a decade, Kevin Phillips has occupied an odd position in the literature on recent party politics in the United States. Phillips, you will remember, was the chief political/voting patterns analyst for the Nixon presidential campaign of 1968. (Later Phillips worked as special assistant to Attorney General John Mitchell—a post understandably left unmentioned in his most recent author's profile.) After Nixon's victory, Phillips published *The Emerging Republican Majority*, his analysis of the shifting voting patterns of the U.S. electorate in the 1960s. A comprehensive and capable look at changing voting allegiances, *The Emerging Republican Majority* seemed to point toward a weakening of the Democratic New Deal coalition and the emergence of a viable and dominant Republican party in the West, Southwest, and South. Making only a modest effort to suppress his glee, Phillips predicted the arrival of a majority Republican party capable of shifting American politics away from the northern "liberal establishment." Phillips' analysis was competent, though derivative, and there was a certain originality in his predictions. Then, Watergate and the collapse of the Republican party majority and any future hegemony relegated Phillips to his peculiar position—as prime example of the limits of predicting from past voting behavior.

But Phillips has had the last laugh. The 1980 election suggests that much of the analysis in *The Emerging Republican Majority* was not so farfetched after all. (His editor does tend to exaggerate, though, describing the author as "prophe-

tic" and, indeed, a "brilliant man." With *Post-Conservative America*, Phillips goes beyond voting behavior and broadly considers post-1960s U.S. politics. If his first book was too narrow in its analysis, this one suffers from a lack of discipline and focus. Still, it makes for an interesting discussion, one that is bound to offend his compatriots on the Right and, simultaneously, to fail to satisfy those on the Left. It is full of eclectic analysis, not original in its research, but new in its conclusions. Or perhaps it is only that Phillips represents such an unlikely and titillating source of criticism of Republican politics under the Reagan banner.

Rather than taking the all-too-standard line—Watergate was merely an aberration that temporarily delayed an impending "critical realignment," begun in 1968, of the American party system—Phillips sees the emerging Republican majority as a lost moment. Voters who were already changing allegiances toward the Democratic party were subsequently cut adrift by the Watergate fiasco and Nixon's fall from grace. There was no realignment; Phillips ascribes to Walter Dean Burnham's thesis that party realignment is impossible in an era of declining and disintegrating partisanship. Third-party movements such as those of George Wallace and John Anderson usually point toward voter disillusionment with the two major parties, and it did once look as though disaffected blue-collar workers and southern conservatives (religious as well as fiscal) would desert the New Deal coalition and join Republican ranks after a temporary sojourn in the

Wallace camp. This assessment led to the premature prediction that the 1980 election signaled the critical realignment that Watergate had simply delayed. Phillips is wise enough to see beyond his own 1969 forecast of a new Republican/conservative order. The Democratic coalition has crumbled, but the Reagan coalition is itself tenuous and probably destined to be short-lived. Phillips recognizes that the same conditions which have undone the Democratic coalition will similarly undermine the Republican "majority."

The author's argument is persuasive, if not structurally coherent. *Post-Conservative America* is a collection and revision of essays, some previously published. This results in a certain amount of repetition; indeed, several sentences are repeated almost verbatim in different chapters (along with Phillips' incessant reminder that *he* coined the terms "sunbelt" and "New Right"). The central theme, though, is interesting. Phillips holds that the "conservatism" which swept Ronald Reagan into office is a complex gathering of forces. Fundamental to the movement is a radical and populist element quite at odds with the traditional conservative wing of the Republican party. This "radical conservatism" was the political energy behind both the Reagan victory and the populist politics of Proposition 13 and similar anti-taxation moves. This radicalism of the middle class (of which Nancy Reagan is such a clear symbol) embraces a strong hostility toward both the welfare poor and the old-fashioned rich. Phillips recognizes the difficulty of holding the radical populist element along with the New Right fundamentalists in a Republican party coalition. Reagan's success in 1980 should not lead to any hasty predictions of a new conservative order: the strongest common bond of the Republican coalition may have been a simple dislike of the established "liberal" politics of the Democrats.

According to Phillips and others, the difficulties experienced by the Democrats in holding together their coalition will be repeated by the Republicans. What is the cause of this seemingly inherent inability to put together a lasting political majority, liberal or conservative? Party theorists have long speculated that declining partisanship, declining voter turnout, and the rise of independent voters have all contributed to a dysfunction in the party system. Under such conditions, no critical realignment is possible. This line of analysis—derived from such political scientists as Burnham, James Sundquist, and V.O. Key—is accepted by Phillips. Furthermore, he accepts as a foregone conclusion the irreparable

collapse of the Democratic New Deal coalition. What is unusual is his point that the 1980 election marks the *passing*, not the beginning, of the conservative coalition.

Certainly Phillips is correct in pointing out the irreconcilable contradictions within the conservative coalition of the 1980s. New Right fundamentalists and Old Right business elites, monetarists and supply-siders, radical populists and neoconservative intellectuals—this is at least as impossible a coalition as the Democrats ever tried to put together. Explaining the weaknesses in the American party system, however, Phillips overextends himself. The explanation, says the author, is to be found in a broader decline of America—a “break-down” or “trauma,” as he puts it. This American upheaval is occurring across the board—an economic decline vis-à-vis Western Europe and Japan; a breakdown of social consensus. As so often occurs with prophets of decline, this is the unconvincing side of the argument (although there are many significant insights).

The most persuasive part is the theme of economic “trauma.” The decline of U.S. preeminence in the world economy was inevitable, given America’s own interest in a revitalized Europe and Japan after World War II. Still, it has been a blow to America’s self-image and especially to American politics. If Americans have traditionally been a “people of plenty,” to use David Potter’s phrase, we now face a declining economy and have less wealth to distribute. Phillips correctly foresees difficulties for the political system in the face of falling productivity, declining wages, and increasing energy costs. The “no growth” philosophy offers little to the poor or to workers in nonproductive sectors. A sagging economy may contribute to greater political instability. A Republican failure to “get America moving again” through supply-side and trickle-down economics might well mean troubles for the political system as well as the Reagan coalition. Liberals, too, must recognize that democratic politics depends to some extent upon a healthy economy and overall productivity as well as equitable distribution.

The weakest of Phillips’ speculations concerns the “Balkanization” of America’s social fabric and its contribution to the decline of America. Certainly Phillips means to blame liberals for the unhealthy fragmentation of the social fabric and the pursuit of a politics based upon race, ethnic origin, class, gender, and sexual preference. In retrospect, liberals of the 1960s may very well deserve criticism for stimulating such divisive politics. Whereas the New Deal sought to bring various groups together, liberals

have recently provoked confrontation. This helped to undermine the Democratic party itself.

It is wrong, however, to see this Balkanized America as something new. Ethnic and religious cleavages have long been a part of U.S. party coalitions. Catholic/Protestant splits, as well as divisions between Protestant sects, have stood behind party alignments since early in the nineteenth century (even earlier at the state level). And surely race is not a new cleavage. Possibly there has been a resurgence of ethnicity, comparable to the immediate postwar years, but America never was a melting pot, especially not in the political arena. The author is correct to see the peculiarity and uniqueness of some of the newer cleavages, such as abortion and sexual preference. But there have always been intense single-issue divisions (slavery, temperance, immigration). The problem is not that there are new issues which are breaking down American party politics; rather, it is the very weaknesses of our party system that today make it so difficult to suppress the divisive aspects of these new issues. The parties are incapable of providing a strong, institutionalized coalition useful for anything beyond turning an incumbent out of office. America is no more Balkanized than it ever was; it simply lacks political parties capable of governing. Liberals should find this no more comforting than Kevin Phillips.

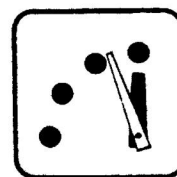
The final explanation offered for the U.S. decline, or trauma, is the decline of the American empire. Here Phillips joins forces with William Appleton Williams, accepting his thesis that America’s behavior must be understood in the context of its decline as a world imperial power. There is something to this. Yet, Williams and Phillips’ alliance is strange. When individuals so radically at odds agree on a point, then one ought to be wary as a matter of principle.

In the end, *Post-Conservative America* makes for an engaging discussion, although it falls short in the area of original scholarship. But, then, Phillips is not a scholar, and he does fill a void in American political analysis—falling somewhere between the academic pedant and the media showman. The former is usually too cautious to engage in predictions and too slow to explain contemporary events; the latter simply does not understand very much of substance about politics or America. Phillips is no “prophet,” but he is perceptive, learned, and willing to go out on a limb. In this case, it is a limb from which his former Republican/conservative allies will undoubtedly wish to see him fall.

*Sheldon D. Pollack teaches in the Department of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, specializing in American politics and political thought. Previously, he lectured at Cornell University.*

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