

After Bush: updating conservatism

David Frum. *Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again*. New York and Toronto: Doubleday, 2007

Review by Adam Daifallah

How the mighty have fallen. The triumphalist proclamations of the late 1990s and early 2000s had it that conservatism and the Republican Party were in a “permanent” majority situation, an electoral behemoth out of the reach of the out-of-synch, out-of-date and rudderless Democrats.

Then came the messy war in Iraq, George W. Bush’s unpopular presidency, the bungled handling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster and various scandals involving lobbyists and politicians (think Senator Larry Craig and his “wide stance”).

The Republican Party in 2008 is in dire straits, and the back-patting of recent years now seems unbelievably misguided, if not laughable. What went wrong, and how do they regain their glory?

Very few people are asking the tough questions, and David Frum is one of the few who are. In the short but stinging *Comeback*, Frum, the Canadian expatriate who wrote speeches for President Bush, sets out to define three things: what went wrong, why the ideas of the past no longer work and how to win again.

Few are as good as Frum at highlighting the shortcomings of his own movement. Out of curiosity, after reading *Comeback*, I dusted off my copy of his 1994 breakout book, *Dead Right*. That volume had a similar theme: how to rejuvenate the conservative movement. In *Dead Right*, Frum surveyed the failings of the Reagan years, analyzed the state of the Republican Party, and concluded by challenging conservatives and Republicans to recommit themselves to shrinking the size of government. That goal has eluded every self-proclaimed conservative revolutionary, from Reagan to Thatcher to Mike Harris.

In 2008, Frum takes a different tack. Writing now as much less an observer of politics and more an active partisan (he constantly uses the term “we” to describes Republicans and conservatives throughout), Frum says the solutions of the past can no longer work. The Reagan revolution is over, he says, and conservative ideas have won the day.

Inflation is consistently low. Income taxes have been reduced so much that nearly 30 million income-earning households don’t pay any tax at all. Crime hardly registers as an issue. He trots out a plethora of social science data to demonstrate that the recent demographic, economic and attitudinal shifts in American make it so that the issues of the past no longer have traction.

Therefore, according to Frum, it is time to move on to new ideas and a new conservatism fit for the times. This time Frum is not advocating a libertarian-style revolution. Rather, he is happy to use the levers of the state to move the country in a more conservative direction.

He wants to introduce tuition tax credits for families earning less than \$75,000 a year. He urges the Republicans to come up with better solutions to the health care problem or permanently cede the issue to the Democrats. He wishes America would do more to help India, to try to advantage it over Communist China. There are even suggestions for a conservative campaign to humanize prisons and for a government campaign against the obesity epidemic.

Another surprise is Frum’s enthusiasm for a carbon tax to wean America off its dependence on oil and to force expansion of nuclear energy production. As someone who has advocated a Canadian conservative co-opting of the environ-

mental issue, I find this strategy makes obvious sense. Environmental issues cut across the partisan divide, and much as in health care, the American right is presently offering no innovative policies.

This book will surprise some readers, who (mostly wrongly) associate Frum with the right wing of the Republican Party. This is no libertarian manifesto. But as an adherent myself to the view that conservatism in America and throughout the Anglosphere needs some updating, I think Frum makes some convincing points. Attitudes and priorities have changed, and any political movement wishing to stay relevant must change with them.

Conservatism is in a state of crisis compared to where it was only a few years ago. Before Frum’s prescriptions are contemplated or adopted, a return to first principles — just as he advocated in his 1994 book — would probably be a much better first step. Frum does prescribe this near the end of his book, urging conservatives to stop neglecting the “ideas business.” But I think it would be more useful if they were to do this first before exploring specific policies. The movement is lost. Another problem is that the movement has no clear white knight (or “next Reagan”) at the moment. Without strong leadership at the top acting as a uniting force, there is little hope that the base of the movement and the party could be dragged in a new direction.

If nothing else, this book should cause the American conservative movement to give itself a good look in the mirror. It needs it.

Adam Daifallah is co-author, with Tasha Kheiriddin, of Rescuing Canada’s Right: Blueprint for a Conservative Revolution (2005, John Wiley & Sons).