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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# Building the International Right: The American Conservative Union and CPAC



Grant Silverman

*IERES Occasional Papers, no. 29, February 2025*  
*"Transnational History of the Far Right" Series*

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*Photo: "CPAC 2022 con Hermann Tertsch y Victor Gonzalez. (51915634644)" by Vox España, public domain.*

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# TransHistFarRight

TRANS HIST FAR RIGHT

Transnational History of the Far Right  
*A Collective Research Project led by Marlene Laruelle*

At a time when global political dynamics seem to be moving in favor of illiberal regimes around the world, this research project seeks to fill in some of the blank pages in the contemporary history of the far right, with a particular focus on the transnational dimensions of far-right movements in the broader Europe/Eurasia region.

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The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) will hold its 2025 Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., from February 19 to 22, where a victorious Donald Trump will be the central figure. From its first public conference in 1974, CPAC has grown from a US-based annual event to a proliferating number of international conferences, which are a driving force in consolidating an increasingly tightly woven network of reactionary movements, political parties, think tanks, and publications allied with the American Right-wing. Recent featured right-wing leaders have included Italy's Georgia Meloni, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and Argentina's Javier Milei, as well as France's Marion Maréchal-Le Pen. In 2024, CPAC conferences were held in Hungary, Argentina, Japan, and Israel.

These conferences represent a public outreach, recruitment and mobilization project of the American Conservative Union (ACU).<sup>1</sup> The ACU was formed in December 1964, immediately after Barry Goldwater had been defeated in the presidential election, to serve as a coordinating "union" for American ultraconservative structures that had sprung up before and after WWII, many of which had connections to the international Right.<sup>2</sup> The key role in the organization was played by William "Bill" Buckley, Jr. (1925–2008). Heir to an oil fortune and a committed right-wing Catholic, Buckley provided initial ideological guidance and funding for the ACU. Already by the time of his graduation from Yale in 1950, he had published *God and Man at Yale* with an introduction by John Chamberlain (1903–1955), a propagandist for the America First Committee, a fascist group that lobbied against US entry into WWII against the Axis Powers.

The book was published by Regnery Publishing, founded in 1947 by Henry Regnery, whose father, William, had also been a member of the America First Committee.<sup>3</sup> Buckley had been recruited to the CIA at Yale in the late 1940s and served briefly under senior CIA agent Howard Hunt (later of Watergate fame) in Mexico, where Buckley's father had oil interests. Returning to the US, in 1954 Buckley published a book defending Senator Joseph McCarthy, coauthored by Leo Brent Bozell, Jr., who had converted to Catholicism in 1947, been president of the Yale Political Union, and married Buckley's sister, Patricia, in 1949.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Currently there are several organizations associated with the ACU: the American Conservative Union, Inc. is a 501 (c) (4) organization with annual revenues and expenditures of about \$10 million dollars; the American Conservative Union Foundation, aka CPAC Foundation, which is a 501 (c)(3) and a "PAC" and a "Super PAC". The (c)(3) and (c)(4) share Matt Schlapp as Chairman, and otherwise have separate Board members as of their 2022 990s. The ACU/CPAC Foundation runs several centers: (1) Center For Combatting Human Trafficking, (2) Center for Regulatory Freedom, (3) Center for Legislative Accountability, (4) Nolan Center for Justice, and (5) Nolan Center for Justice.

<sup>2</sup> "Top Conservatives Form a New Group," New York Times, December 20, 1964,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/12/20/archives/top-conservatives-form-a-new-group.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Special To The New York Times, "AMERICA FIRST GROUP FORMS LOCAL UNITS," *The New York Times*, November 13, 1940.

<sup>4</sup> The son of L. Brent Bozell, Jr. and Patricia Buckley, L. Brent Bozell III, founded the Media Research Center in 1987 which since last year is run by the former Executive Director of CPAC, Daniel Schneider. According to the latest FY 2022 990 (filed February 16, 2024) Schneider has remained on the Board of the ACU Foundation.

In 1955, Buckley and Bozell founded the *National Review* to serve as a think tank of the Buckley crusade, propagate its political theology, and nurture its recruits. So many in the leadership of the journal were close to the proto-neofascist John Birch Society that Buckley felt the need to take steps to distinguish the two organizations and insist on a membership divide. The early senior cadres of the journal included Yale professor Willmoore Kendall, who, as chief CIA recruiter at Yale, was responsible for Buckley's early recruitment and who "went over the manuscript of *God and Man at Yale*";<sup>5</sup> James Burnham, formerly of the OSS (a predecessor of the CIA), active in the CIA's post-WWII front organization the Congress for Cultural Freedom and "reputed to have had a hand in the successful [CIA] plan to overthrow Iran's Mossadegh and install the Shah in 1953"<sup>6</sup>; and William Rusher, formerly a hard-right captain in Army military intelligence.

Another key figure at the ACU has been Matt Schlapp, a right-wing Catholic militant who participated in the notorious "Brooks Brothers riot" of November 2000, which was organized by right-wing manipulator Roger Stone during the recount of presidential election votes in Florida (recall the Supreme Court eventually decided the election in favor of George W. Bush). Schlapp was rewarded by the Republican Party leadership in 2001 with a post as deputy assistant to the president and ultimately, from May 2003 to February 2005, as White House director of political affairs. He then joined Koch Industries as vice president of federal affairs. He had become a board member of the ACU by 2008, rising to be named chairman on June 19, 2014. He has led the ACU since. Matt met his wife, Mercedes, daughter of a Cuban émigré, when she was a White House media staffer, and she went on to become Trump's White House director of strategic communications from September 2017 to July 2019, leaving to work on his 2020 campaign as senior advisor for strategic communications.

Against this backdrop, in the past decade CPAC has branched out across the globe, with CPAC Hungary taking place annually in Budapest since 2022 and receiving major support from the right-wing Fidesz government. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose political career was notably kickstarted with American aid, appears to be the patron of the event.<sup>7</sup> CPAC's expansion to Europe has significantly contributed to Budapest becoming a hot spot for arch-Catholic American reactionaries, who subscribe to Orbán's right-wing strongman politics and culture wars.<sup>8</sup>

CPAC Hungary is funded indirectly by the government through the Batthyány Lajos Foundation (BLF), which bankrolls the Center for Fundamental Rights (CFR), the official organizer of CPAC in Budapest.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, the CFR has secured millions of dollars in government funding via the BLF, with \$5.5 million allocated in 2022 alone.<sup>10</sup> The BLF also doles out large grants to other organizations that promote collaboration between the American and the European Right, including

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<sup>5</sup> Preliminary comments of William Buckley to 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition of "God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of 'Academic Freedom'" (p. XXIII). Skyhorse Publishing. Kindle Edition

<sup>6</sup> Francis P. Sempa, "The First Cold Warrior: James Burnham." "In 1983, Ronald Reagan, who presided over the West's victory in the Cold War, presented the United States's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, to James Burnham, who had envisioned a strategy for that victory nearly forty years before. . . ." [http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/AD\\_Issues/amdipl\\_17/articles/sempa\\_burnham3.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/AD_Issues/amdipl_17/articles/sempa_burnham3.html)

<sup>7</sup> Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 23; Ellen Rivera, "Orbán's Hungary: A Launching Pad for the 21st-Century Reconquista," *IERES Occasional Papers, no. 25, July 2024* "Transnational History of the Far Right" Series, <https://www.historyofthefarright.org/orbans-hungary-a-launching-pad-for-the-21st-century-reconquista/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of the CPAC Hungary Conference," Viktor Orbán, May 5, 2023, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-opening-of-the-cpac-hungary-conference/>.

<sup>9</sup> Center for Fundamental Rights, <https://alapjogokert.hu/en/>

<sup>10</sup> Marianna Tóth-Biró, "Újabb kétmilliárd forint közpénzből működhet idén az Alapjogokért Központ," telex, May 19, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/05/19/ujabb-ketmilliard-forint-kozpenzbol-mukodhet-iden-az-alapjogokert-kozpont>.

the Danube Institute, *The European Conservative* (TEC), and several other right-wing journals.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that the previous publisher of TEC was the Center for European Renewal, which was fashioned after the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, an organization that Buckley helped establish in 1953 and led as founding president.<sup>12</sup>

A key figure in this European rightwing network is the CPAC regular John O'Sullivan, a former adviser to Margaret Thatcher who crossed the Atlantic and became editor of the *National Review* from 1988 to 1997. He remains an editor-at-large for the journal. Later, O'Sullivan became vice president and executive editor, in 2008–2012, of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, originally set up as a CIA propaganda front. Since 2013, he has been running the BLF-funded Danube Institute in Budapest and has served in editorial and advisory roles in at least three BLF-funded right-wing journals, including TEC. The US reactionary movement has therefore succeeded in exporting its brand to Central Europe and beyond. But to understand the present American brand of reaction-for-export, we now turn to an earlier era in which the American Right's movement politics were ensconced in the internationalism of the Cold War.

## History: From the America First Committee to Reactionary Cold Warriors

In the 1940s, conservative figures like the aviator Charles Lindbergh and automaker Henry Ford were involved in the America First Committee. The Committee, opposed to the US intervening in World War II against the Nazi Axis, often leaned heavily on antisemitism and isolationism to capture the popular imagination of a nation that wanted to avoid American involvement in a second world war. To affect this, the pro-interventionist camp was painted as being overly concerned with Jewish issues. Lindbergh was particularly vociferous in his criticisms that the media and voices professing support for intervention were Jewish.<sup>13</sup> The political orientation of the America First Committee was not only centered around the notion of isolationism, but in many cases was sympathetic to the fascist movements and leaders of the day.<sup>14</sup>

John Chamberlain came from exactly this milieu. Chamberlain is a key figure within the story of the American right precisely because he is one of the intellectual figures who helped bridge the old right that existed before World War II and the modern right that was created by William F. Buckley Jr. and company after the defeat of the Republican nominee, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, in the 1964 presidential contest. Writing in the *National Review* on July 9, 2024, Neal B. Freeman, another Yale graduate and Washington editor of the journal from 1978 to 1981, said:

The 1964 presidential nomination of Barry Goldwater was, from front to back, a production of *National Review*. Goldwater was an attractive, ruggedly Western, occasionally irascible, widely unknown senator from Arizona. He first came to national attention with the publication of his political manifesto, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, which became the best-selling campaign book of all time. The book was,

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<sup>11</sup> Lapkiadás," Batthyány Lajos Foundation, <https://bla.hu/lapkiadas/>.

<sup>12</sup> "1st 'Vanenburg' Meeting," Center for European Renewal, archived copy from May 17, 2008, [https://web.archive.org/web/20080517190145/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page\\_id=19](https://web.archive.org/web/20080517190145/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page_id=19).

<sup>13</sup> Charles Scaliger, "America First: Decades before Trump's 'America First' Rallying Cry, There Was the America First Committee, Which Enjoyed Strong Popular Support Prior to Pearl Harbor," *New American* 38, no. 6 (March 2022), p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Rauchway, "President Trump's 'America First' Slogan Was Popularized by Nazi Sympathizers," *Washington Post*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/20/president-trumps-america-first-slogan-was-popularized-by-nazi-sympathizers/>.

ideologically speaking, white-hot, and it was written with a throbbing narrative drive. It conferred upon Barry Goldwater a sharply etched national persona. (Many intellectually pretentious young conservatives, myself included, would prefer to have said that we had been drawn to the cause after reading Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, but the galvanizing force for many of us was in fact *Conscience*). The author of that timely and powerful book was not Barry Goldwater but Brent Bozell, *National Review's* Washington bureau chief. And as time would in later years reveal, the politics of the book were more Brent's than Barry's.<sup>15</sup>

Chamberlain was an American conservative journalist, historian, and critic who was a leading figure in the construction of the modern conservative movement. After attending Yale University, Chamberlain gained his first professional experience working for the *New York Times* and later joined the journalistic branch of the America First Committee, the Writers Anti-War Bureau.<sup>16</sup> Known as "one of America's most trusted book reviewers," Chamberlain was a leading voice in America on the right in the years before World War II.<sup>17</sup> During that period, he was part of a committee that translated the first American edition of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.<sup>18</sup> A fusionist and staunch anti-Communist, Chamberlain was one of the most influential transitional figures who helped guide American reactionaries from the first half to the second of the 20th Century.<sup>19</sup>

A similarly key figure who bridged the old and modern right-wing of the 20th Century was Willmoore Kendall (1909–1967). An early anti-Soviet follower of Trotsky who had been thrown out of the USSR in 1929, shortly after Trotsky established his International Left Opposition in April 1930, Kendall was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship in December 1931.<sup>20</sup> The opportunity to study at Oxford would broaden the young Kendall's world and open professional and intellectual doors for him. Christopher Owen, in his biography of Kendall, *Heaven Can Indeed Fall*, notes that as a student at Oxford, despite being superficially attracted towards leftist social-democratic rhetoric, Kendall had an aversion to Marxism even during his student days<sup>21</sup> and Kendall would transform from an idealistic student into an agent of empire himself.

Kendall traveled to Spain and found work as a correspondent based in Madrid for the United Press news agency during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939).<sup>22</sup> George Nash, in *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, writes: "Exposure to the Spanish Republic 'really shook Willmoore up, 'one friend recalled, and within a few months, 'his thought crystalized into fervent anti-communism. 'This theme—militant, uncompromising hostility to Communism—became one of the dominant features of his thought."<sup>23</sup>

Kendall's rightward shift was completed during World War II. During the Second World War, Kendall served in an intelligence analyst role with the State Department, first in in Washington, DC, and later

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<sup>15</sup> Freeman, Neal. "That Week in San Francisco." *National Review* (blog), July 9, 2024.

<https://www.nationalreview.com/2024/07/that-week-in-san-francisco/>.

<sup>16</sup> John D. Stinson, "Uncensored, Records 1939–1941," New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, p. 3, <https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/uncensored.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Mises Institute, "John Chamberlain," Mises.org, <https://mises.org/profile/john-chamberlain>.

<sup>18</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf: Complete and Unabridged, Fully Annotated*, eds. John Chamberlain, Sidney B. Fay, John Gunther, Carlton Hayes, Graham Hutton, Alvin Johnson, W. L. Langer, Walter Mills, R. de Roussy de Sales, George N. Schuster, trans. Alvin Johnson (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, [1925–1926] 1939), <https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=16391&recCount=25&recPointer=0&bibId=14124916>

<sup>19</sup> George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (Wilmington, Del.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute Books), p. 475.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Owen, *Heaven Can Indeed Fall* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021) p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Owen, *Heaven Can Indeed Fall*, p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, p. 315.

<sup>23</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, p. 315.



in Bogotá, Colombia.<sup>24</sup> Upon the creation of the Central Intelligence Group on January 22, 1946 (later formed into the CIA under the National Security Act of July 26, 1947), Kendall headed up the Latin America branch of the organization.<sup>25</sup> He joined the Yale faculty in 1947 while continuing his intelligence work part-time.<sup>26</sup> It was during this period that Kendall met college sophomore William F. Buckley Jr.<sup>27</sup> It was Kendall who recruited Buckley into the CIA, where the latter would serve two years as an intelligence officer stationed in Mexico.<sup>28</sup>

## The Construction of the post-WWII American Right

The origins of the reactionary architecture of the ACU must be understood through the time in which they originated (that is, during the Cold War), but the ACU has continued to push for right-wing hegemony through its long-established, fear-based politics. Before the ACU, however, there were two preceding structures: the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) and the magazine *National Review*.

Owing to the sensation caused by Buckley's book *God and Man at Yale* the ISI intellectual landscape was ripe for the ascendancy of libertarianism. Chodorov and Buckley provided exactly the organization that found fertile ground in such an environment. Buckley complained in his book that left-wing thinkers could, in theory, be taught in the classroom but that conservative thinkers, especially those who inspired reactionary economic policies, were left out.<sup>29</sup>

The appealingly named Libertarian movement developed support under the influence of two right-wing Austrian economists Ludwig von Mises, and Friedrich August von Hayek, the latter of whom a month after the Battle of Stalingrad and before D-Day - while the UK and US were still formal wartime allies of the Soviet Union - published a dramatic denunciation of the USSR with his famous 'Road to Serfdom' in March 1944. Libertarianism was both a reactionary feudalist denunciation of the state as a product of the Treaty of Westphalia, and an extremist endorsement of free-wheeling capitalism as a denunciation of state efforts to mitigate the social brutalities of capitalism with state laws against child labor, regulating legal working hours, union rights, worker safety and health laws, and graduated income taxes to fund social programs, etc.

The Intercollegiate Studies Institute was set up as an anarchic, freewheeling home for the intellectual—and especially libertarian—right during the middle of the 20th Century. Nash notes that, "there was virtually no organization, no salesmanship, no fanfare. All materials were free on request; all members were self-elected."<sup>30</sup> It is likely from this open structure that ISI was able to position itself as what Nash calls a "clearinghouse of conservative publications and coordinator of the conservative intellectual movement."<sup>31</sup>

The influence Chodorov he maintained through the ISI likely ingratiated him to other leading figures of the Right. Understanding this influence is important in painting a larger picture of how he and his cadre of reactionary intellectuals developed the conservative establishment in the middle of the 20th

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<sup>24</sup> Davis, "The Kent-Kendall Debate of 1949," p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> Davis, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Continetti, "Willmoore Kendall and the Intellectual Roots of the Populist Right," *National Review*, October 28, 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2021/11/15/willmoore-kendall-and-the-intellectual-roots-of-the-populist-right/>.

<sup>28</sup> Chris Weinkopf, "William F. Buckley Jr." Salon.com, September 3, 1999, <https://www.salon.com/1999/09/03/wfb/>.

<sup>29</sup> Nash cites in his discussion of this dynamic: Wilhelm Röpke, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich von Hayek, Frank Knight, and Walter Lippmann.

<sup>30</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Nash, p. 41.

Century. ISI had the role of developing conservative intellectual thought among a group of right-wing student subscribers who would then channel their organizing efforts through the fellow Buckley creation, Young Americans for Freedom (YAF).<sup>32</sup> It was the ISI that would essentially radicalize students and then with the presence of YAF on campus students could then put their knowledge and activism to the test. This pipeline formed a critical proving ground for many political and intellectual leaders of the recent past.

This radicalization to action pathway was not an entirely new phenomenon, however, because it was the same one that William F. Buckley Jr. had been through himself. During his time as a Yale undergrad, Chodorov's broadsheet newsletter *analysis*<sup>33</sup> influenced the impressionable Buckley.<sup>34</sup> Though *analysis* had only limited success, Chodorov considered it among his greatest achievements.<sup>35</sup> Eventually, though, the publication of *analysis* would become too difficult to maintain, especially with Chodorov's ascent to the editorship of the right-wing magazine *Human Events* (founded in 1944), and the two publications were folded into one in 1951.<sup>36</sup>

Starting in the 1960s, ISI published a journal called the *Intercollegiate Review*. Individual members included such luminaries as Ernest van den Haag (Professor of Jurisprudence and Public Policy, Fordham University), Thomas Molnar (University of Budapest), Philp M. Crane (Member of Congress, Ill. 12-R), and others.<sup>37</sup>

After setting up ISI in 1953, William Buckley and his brother-in-law Bozell wrote a book defending Senator Joe McCarthy, and the next year they founded their propaganda journal *National Review*. The longtime publisher of *National Review* was William Rusher (1923–2001), who was brought on board in 1957.<sup>38</sup> According to David Frisk in *If Not Us, Who?*, Rusher had been made aware of the magazine shortly after its founding in 1955 by former CIA agent Lyle Munson.<sup>39</sup>

Central to the internal political landscape of the conservative movement of the mid-20th Century was the development of fusionism. Fusionism was the attempt to bind the libertarian economics of

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<sup>32</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, pp. 456–457.

<sup>33</sup> The publication was stylized in all lowercase.

<sup>34</sup> Ronald Hamowy, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008), ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> Hamowy, *Encyclopedia of Libertarianism*, p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> Hamowy, p. 62. Since mid-2021 the Senior Editor of *Human Events* has been Jack Posobiec, author of the pro-Franco and pro-Pinochet book "Unhuman." The "Senior Content Contributor" is Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point USA.

For Chodorov, leadership of *Human Events* was an ideal fit. He had been a strong proponent of anti-interventionism during the early stages of the Second World War. After the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Chodorov was dismissed from his position as director at the Henry George School of Social Science in New York City for his anti-interventionist stance. Before his dismissal, he had worked on a self-published magazine called *The Freeman* (not to be confused with a magazine of the same name published by John Chamberlain, Henry Hazlitt, and Suzanne La Follette), which was a proponent of the teachings of political economist Henry George.

<sup>37</sup> Credits, *Intercollegiate Review* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 1, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/credits/docview/210675589/se-2>. Philip Crane also served as the chairman of the ACU during the 1970s. It was under his tenure that the ACU fought tooth and nail to convince the American public that the Panama Canal ought not to be ceded to the Republic of Panama. It was also during Crane's tenure that future US Ambassador to the UN and National Security Advisor John Bolton was brought in to offer legal consulting services to the ACU. Based on the cursory research done to compile this memo, it is unclear at what point Crane joined the board of the *Intercollegiate Review* or indeed the ISI itself, but the connection between Crane and the ACU and ISI is an interesting link to consider when thinking about how pervasive the ACU is, both historically and presently, within the different projects of the American right.

<sup>38</sup> David B. Frisk, *If Not Us, Who?* (Wilmington, Del.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2011), p. 69–73.

<sup>39</sup> Frisk, *If Not Us, Who?* p. 69–73.

thinkers like Murray Rothbard (1926–1995) with the aristocratic (often Catholic) traditions of the older right-wing establishment in the United States. As historian and journalist William Henry Chamberlain (1897–1969, no relation to John Chamberlain) put it in 1963, “Conservatism at all times and in all countries has stood for religion, patriotism, the integrity of the family and respect for private property as the four pillars of a sound and healthy society.”<sup>40</sup> For many Americans, and especially William Henry Chamberlain, conservatism was thus a “shield of liberty” against “the revolt of the masses.”<sup>41</sup>

At the center of this controversy was Ayn Rand’s 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged*. The book’s release revealed the enormous divisions between those who were inspired by the rejection of the welfare state, collectivism, and government intervention; and the more traditional views of commentators like Garry Wills (b. 1934), who asserted that John Galt (among others in the novel), who serves as Rand’s protagonist, is representative of the “Malthusian heroes ... [who] are all expressions of Liberalism—the attempt to attain beatitude with a politico-economic program.”<sup>42</sup> By binding the two strains of conservative political ethos together, thinkers, writers, and politicians set the stage for ideological cohesion, which though often contested, formed the basis of the political program of the American Conservative Union.

## The Birth of the American Conservative Union

The ACU had its first board meeting on December 18 and 19, 1964.<sup>43</sup> The ACU’s organizational history can be viewed as a direct consequence of the changes that were happening in American political culture and history at that the time, and how conservative and far-right actors reacted to those changes. The first element of this trajectory occurred in November 1964, when the incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson defeated Barry Goldwater in a landslide for the presidency. In *National Review* editor and ACU founder William F. Buckley Jr.’s, words, “it was embarrassing that the only political organization in town that dared suggest this radical proposal—the GOP’s nominating Goldwater for President—was the John Birch Society.”<sup>44</sup>

From the very beginning of its existence, the ACU sought to distance itself from the John Birch Society, a militantly anti-Communist organization founded by Robert Welch Jr. in 1958, who had accused President Eisenhower of being a “dedicated, conscious agent of the communist conspiracy.”<sup>45</sup> Needless-to-say, for the faction of the American Right which chose to work with government structures as part of the Cold War anti-communist efforts, such a public position was not particularly useful. The ACU addressed the issue in its first meeting. The initial group of board members, themselves ultraconservatives, passed a motion to bar members of the John Birch Society from membership on the ACU’s board of directors and advisory board.<sup>46</sup> This distance was only done

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<sup>40</sup> George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, p. 277; William H. Chamberlain, “Conservatism in Evolution,” *Modern Age* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1963): 254.

<sup>41</sup> Nash, p. 281

<sup>42</sup> Nash, p. 239–241.

<sup>43</sup> Rusher Papers, “ACU Minutes 1964-12-18 and 19.”

<sup>44</sup> William F. Buckley, “Goldwater, the John Birch Society, and Me,” *Commentary* 125, no. 3 (March 2008): <https://www.commentary.org/articles/william-buckley-jr/goldwater-the-john-birch-society-and-me/>. Buckley is an important figure within the creation of the modern American right. He was lifted from obscurity by the publication of his memoir *God and Man at Yale* (1951). The introduction of his memoir was written by John Chamberlain, who had formerly been a member of the Writers Anti-War Bureau, the publishing wing of the America First Committee. It was also at Yale that Buckley met Willmoore Kendall, a longtime CIA recruiter at that university, and it was through these connections that Buckley became an agent himself.

<sup>45</sup> Trickey, Erick. “Long before QAnon, Ronald Reagan and the GOP Purged John Birch Extremists from the Party.” *Washington Post*, January 15, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Rusher Papers, “ACU Minutes 1964-12-18 and 19.”

in the public sphere. Privately, the American Conservative Union maintained a relationship with the John Birch Society.<sup>47</sup>

There are three central historical considerations to take into account when explaining why the conservative intellectual establishment—in many ways led by Buckley—established the ACU. While there is no singular moment that caused or could have prevented the ACU from taking shape, the historical forces at play gave the movement conservatives the impetus they needed to form the group. As previously mentioned, the crushing defeat of Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election was a major impetus for forming the ACU, but additionally, the Hungarian Uprising in 1956 was another motivating factor. Specifically, former President Eisenhower’s decision not to intervene by providing tangible assistance to the anti-Communist forces left many conservative thinkers and leaders feeling adrift in their contemporary Republican Party.<sup>48</sup>

Thirdly, while the meeting minutes do not list everyone present at the first meeting of the board, the *New York Times*, following the initial reporting by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, stated that among the attendees were Robert Bauman (b. 1937), director of Young Americans for Freedom; Representative Donald Bruce of Indiana (1921–1969), who was additionally a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC); Representative John Ashbrook of Ohio (1928–1982), also a member of HUAC;<sup>49</sup> and Marvin Liebman (1923–1997), the notable conservative activist who would be a founder and fundraiser for the ACU.<sup>50</sup> Liebman in particular should be understood as a key player in the synthesization of an internationalized American Right. He met Buckley in the early 1950s and helped found the *National Review* before his role with the ACU. Liebman was active in CIA projects internationally, including the Committee for a Free Asia, the World Anti-Communist League (WACL), and the American-Chilean Council (a pro-Pinochet front). There, he worked with various members of the *National Review*-ACU network, particularly the publisher of the *National Review*, William Rusher.

These members taken together indicate the domestic preferences of the early ACU as being staunchly anti-Communist.

With the Republicans faced with electoral defeat, the ACU was founded to act as an iron fist ensconced in a velvet glove. The John Birch Society was publicly shunned, but the developments that would follow proved that reactionary power could effectuate its desires through long-term organizing and planning. The memberships of the attendees of the December founding meeting signify that leaders and members of prominent right-wing organizations saw the defeat of Goldwater as a bellwether for American Politics. They accordingly changed tacks to remain effective for the remainder of the 20th Century. A tradition of organizing was thus established that continues to the present day.

In the years after its founding, the ACU’s domestic agenda was driven by a desire to maintain the status quo regarding race relations. According to the organization’s minutes dated October 21–22, 1965, a film covering “riots and civil disobedience” was to be produced by Fulton Lewis III.<sup>51</sup> It is unclear whether the documentary was produced because of the initial objections noted in the same minutes by Frank S. Meyer.<sup>52</sup> Lewis, for his part, was a journalist who worked with HUAC and

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew Dallek, “Debunking a Longstanding Myth about William F. Buckley,” *Politico*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/03/31/buckley-john-birch-society-00087893>.

<sup>48</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, p. 365.

<sup>49</sup> Albert Eugene, *Treason in Congress: The Record of the House Un-American Activities Committee* (New York: Progressive Citizens of America, 1948), p. 957.

<sup>50</sup> “Top Conservatives Form a New Group,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1964, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/12/20/archives/top-conservatives-form-a-new-group.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

<sup>51</sup> Rusher Papers, “ACU Minutes 1965-10-21 and 22 v. 2.”

<sup>52</sup> Rusher Papers, “ACU Minutes 1965-10-21 and 22 v. 2.”

provided the voiceover for a HUAC-produced documentary about the protests in San Francisco against the existence of that committee in 1960.<sup>53</sup>

The HUAC connection is crucial given the board membership of Donald Bruce, who was, as stated previously, a member of the committee. The use of anti-Communism as a political tool was a cornerstone of the dynamic that the ACU used in its early days to enforce a reactionary worldview and given the floundering of HUAC during the middle and late 1960s, it is no surprise that a member of the committee would be tapped to be a board member of the ACU as American conservatives attempted to stay politically viable.

Evidence of the radical nature of the ACU's early composition is further found in the pages of the *National Review*. In 1957, William F. Buckley Jr. wrote a full-throated defense of the Jim Crow South stating, "The central question ... is whether the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas in which it does not predominate numerically? The sobering answer is *Yes*—the White community is so entitled because for the time being it is the advanced race."<sup>54</sup> With the hard-won victories of the Civil Rights Movement and the party realignment that occurred following the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, the right wing of the American political establishment needed a new organizational strategy to effect its policy ambitions. The ACU was established in the wake and directly because of these changes within American society.

Buckley's influence in the resurgence of right-wing intellectualism in the United States cannot be ignored, and it was likely also the vast Buckley fortune that financed the projects of the early ACU. Interestingly, the CIA figures prominently in the early history of the American Conservative Union. The cachet of the Buckley family combined with William F. Buckley Jr's CIA network meant that he could draw like-minded agents and sympathizers he knew through his friend and handler E. Howard Hunt into the project.<sup>55</sup>

## The Early ACU in the International Arena

On March 3, 1966, US Representative and ACU board member John Ashbrook gave a speech to the House of Representatives entitled "Give Rhodesia a Fair Break."<sup>56</sup> It is possible that this piece of apologia for the regime led by Ian Smith served as the inspiration for a so-called fact-finding mission launched by the American African Affairs Association (AAAA). In February 1967, the AAAA sent a delegation to Rhodesia to report on the situation there.<sup>57</sup>

The write-up that resulted from the mission took the form of a *National Review* special edition. Illustrating the commitment to imperialism, the members of the team that traveled to Rhodesia included Dr. Walter Darnell Jacobs (1922–2010), James Jackson Kilpatrick (1920–2010), and Rene Albert Wormser (1896–1981).<sup>58</sup> Of these three, Jacobs and Kilpatrick were both members of the ACU

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<sup>53</sup> John De Looper, "Operation Abolition and Operation Correction," October 19, 2010, <https://blogs.princeton.edu/reelmudd/2010/10/operation-abolition-and-operation-correction/>.

<sup>54</sup> Ryan Grim, "National Review Is Trying to Rewrite Its Racist History," *The Intercept* (news site), July 5, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/07/05/national-review-william-buckley-racism/>, emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> William F. Buckley, "My Friend, E. Howard Hunt," *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 2007, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-mar-04-op-buckley4-story.html>.

<sup>56</sup> US Congress, *Congressional Record*, 89th Congress, 2nd session, 1966 vol. 112, pt. 4, "Give Rhodesia a Fair Break," pp. 5338–5348.

<sup>57</sup> Walter Darnell Jacobs, James J. Kilpatrick, and René Wormser, "Report on Rhodesia: April 1967," AAAA Report, found in Rusher papers.

<sup>58</sup> Jacobs, Kilpatrick, and Wormser, "Report on Rhodesia: April 1967."

board of directors.<sup>59</sup> While the ACU may not have officially backed the fact-finding mission, the fact that two of the three members on the mission were board members at or around the same time and that it was published in the *National Review*, a project of William F. Buckley and publisher William Rusher speaks for itself. This indicates that at the very least some key members of the organization were in support of the Rhodesian system of apartheid. Indeed, the article stated in defense of Rhodesia and against the international sanctions against the regime, “By what rights of divine ordination is it supposed that Western Nations have a duty to impose their own political and social institutions by fiat upon a people still blinking from the darkness of the cave?”<sup>60</sup>

The case of the Rhodesia report is instructive because it shows the links between members of Congress, the ACU, and other organizations operating in narrowly-defined policy or interest spaces. It is unclear exactly what impact this report had on either lawmakers or American public opinion of Rhodesia or Smith. *National Review* and the ACU’s network of activists and writers were able to launder the blatantly racist reporting promoted by the AAAA. This indicates the network’s existence and its ability to conduct intricate acts of propagandistic research on behalf of political interests originating in the US Congress.

In the sphere of Latin American politics, the ACU was particularly active. The first case of the ACU’s activism is evident vis-à-vis the American Chilean Council (ACC) and its sister organization, the Consejo Chileno Norteamericano (CCN). In a letter dated March 28, 1975, Liebman wrote to Rusher describing the committee’s purpose as “counteract[ing] the Communist-inspired, anti-Chilean propaganda campaign.”<sup>61</sup> In the letter, Liebman assures Rusher that there is no direct link between the CCN and the Pinochet government;<sup>62</sup> however, this is a tenuous claim at best because one member of the CCN, Carlos Francisco Cáceres Contreras (listed as Carlos F. Caceres in later documentation produced by the ACC),<sup>63</sup> served as the president of the Chilean Central Bank from September 1982 to February 1983, at which time he became minister of finance until 1984.<sup>64</sup> His last position with the Pinochet government was as minister of the interior, from 1988 to 1990.<sup>65</sup>

The preceding example shows the closeness that existed between business and cultural elites for a member of the CCN to be close enough to Pinochet’s regime to be appointed as president of the Central Bank of Chile within seven years of the initial letter. But what is more damning is the membership of Pedro Ibáñez Ojeda (listed as Pedro Ibañez) in the same ACC letter dated September 29, 1977 that listed Cáceres.<sup>66</sup> Ibáñez was a senator who helped found the National Party (Partido Nacional),<sup>67</sup> an aggressively reactionary party that was formed to oppose the government of the People’s Unity (Unidad Popular) under Salvador Allende.<sup>68</sup> After the 1973 military coup, the National

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<sup>59</sup> Rusher Papers, “Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting 1965-1-28”; Rusher Papers, “ACU Letter to Board RE Meeting 1968-7-1.”

<sup>60</sup> Jacobs, Kilpatrick, and Wormser, “Report on Rhodesia: April 1967.”

<sup>61</sup> Rusher Papers, “Ltr. from Liebman RE AMERICAN-CHILEAN COUNCIL.”

<sup>62</sup> Rusher Papers, “Ltr. from Liebman RE AMERICAN-CHILEAN COUNCIL.”

<sup>63</sup> Rusher Papers, “American-Chilean Council Letter from S. Braden 1977-11-29.”

<sup>64</sup> Carlos Cáceres, “Es una utopía ir a sociedades más reguladas pensando que la autoridad goza de una inteligencia mayor,” interview by Lina Castañeda, *El Mercurio* (Chile), WaybackMachine, October 5, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160304195641/http://diario.elmercurio.cl/detalle/index.asp?id=%7Bad49d81c-633c-40de-9662-38b306bb05c1%7D>.

<sup>65</sup> Cáceres, “Es una utopía ir a sociedades más reguladas pensando que la autoridad goza de una inteligencia mayor.”

<sup>66</sup> Rusher Papers, “American-Chilean Council Letter from S. Braden 1977-11-29.”

<sup>67</sup> “Fondo Pedro Ibáñez Ojeda - Bibliotecas UAI,” Bibliotecas UAI, December 13, 2021, <https://bibliotecas.uai.cl/recursos-de-la-biblioteca/fondo-pedro-ibanez-ojeda/>.

<sup>68</sup> Sofía Correa, “The Chilean Right after Pinochet,” in *The Legacy of Dictatorship: Political, Economic and Social Change in Pinochet’s Chile*, eds. Alan Angell and Benny Pollack (Liverpool, UK: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Liverpool, 1993), p. 164.

Party dissolved itself.<sup>69</sup> These two examples provide robust evidence that the ACC and therefore its membership, closely mirroring the ACU, was well aware of the nature of the Pinochet government. And its attempts to paper over the horrors of that regime were done in service of advancing a right-wing agenda on the international stage.

As the ACU was sending its representatives abroad to conduct propagandized reports on the nature of the apartheid regime under Ian Smith in Rhodesia and whitewashing the crimes of the Pinochet regime in Chile, it was also involved in lobbying for reactionary political outcomes that had international consequences in the United States. The issue of ownership of the Panama Canal was an important one in the late 1970s. President Jimmy Carter's plan to hand the waterway over to the Panamanians caused much consternation on the American right. The ACU was accordingly engaged in a fight to convince the American public that the best course of action was for the United States to retain control over the canal. According to a lobbying report dated from the third quarter of 1976, the issue of the Panama Canal was critical in the eyes of the ACU and one that was brought before Congress.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, meeting minutes of the ACU dated December 5, 1977, reveal that the ACU commissioned a film to make its position known to the American public regarding the handover.<sup>71</sup> According to follow-up discussions of the film, it was cumulatively aired 209 times to a television audience that ultimately numbered up to 9 million.<sup>72</sup> Even though the ACU was unsuccessful in preventing the handover of the territory to the Republic of Panama, the minutes from December 5, 1977, indicate an interest in producing more televised content for distribution to the public.<sup>73</sup> This was to be supplemented with radio and television advertising. While the latter strategies did not provide an income, the minutes reported that the ACU experienced an uptick in interest in the organization with nearly 58,000 new names being collected as a result of the documentary being aired.<sup>74</sup> Total income derived from the film was more than \$245,000 (or \$1.27 million in 2024 terms).<sup>75</sup>

Around the same time, the ACU was deeply involved in a campaign to not just launder the reputation of the Nicaraguan Contras before the American public, but also persuade lawmakers on Capitol Hill to offer material support to the Contras.<sup>76</sup> Specifically, the minutes detail efforts on the American influence side to brand the Contras as "freedom fighters."<sup>77</sup> This support for the Contras appears to have been quite long-lasting, because in another report from the executive director dated September 16, 1985, "aid to the Contras" was a key part of that meeting's discussion. The ACU's activities with regard to the Contras fell under a portfolio referred to as the "Central America Project," headed by Maria R. Gonzalez.<sup>78</sup> In a letter created by the Central America Project, and likely sent to members of Congress, Gonzalez invites recipients to a working breakfast that promises the opportunity to "meet

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<sup>69</sup> Angell and Pollack, "The Legacy of Dictatorship."

<sup>70</sup> Conservative Victory Fund, Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act report, 1976, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University Archives.

<sup>71</sup> ACU Board Meeting Minutes 1977. 12.05, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University Archives.

<sup>72</sup> ACU Board Meeting Minutes 1977. 12.05, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University Archives.

<sup>73</sup> ACU Board Meeting Minutes 1977.12.05, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University Archives.

<sup>74</sup> ACU Board Meeting Minutes 1978.03.19, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University Archives.

<sup>75</sup> ACU Board Meeting Minutes 1978.03.19; US Inflation Calculator, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com>.

<sup>76</sup> Undated Report from the Executive Director to the Board members of the ACU.

<sup>77</sup> Undated Report from the Executive Director to the Board members of the ACU.

<sup>78</sup> February 6, 1985, form letter created for the Central America Projects.

with prominent democratic leaders from Central America.”<sup>79</sup> The keynote speaker for that event was Contra Leader Arturo Cruz.<sup>80</sup> We can thus conclude that the ACU served as an influential political force not only for the manufacture of right-wing opinion (both for the public and lawmakers), but also by serving as a conduit for reactionary and anti-Communist forces abroad. They did this by creating environments for leaders of those movements to appeal directly to policymakers who offered material support for their causes.

## Conclusion

There is a marked difference between the historical American conservative ethos before the Second World War and after it. With the isolationist, and often pro-Nazi image of the America First Committee discredited, the American right embarked on a mission of self-reinvention. The shape it ultimately took was a product of its international political context as well as the influential members responsible for the reinvention. In this way, Catholic intellectuals and writers such as William Buckley and Willmoore Kendall served as key architects of this new movement.

At the heart of this new identity for the American right was an indelible spirit of anti-Communism, which, given the international political context of the time, explains why there was also a significant interface of the intelligence community within the conservative movement. It is no surprise that staunch anti-Communists such as Willmoore Kendall who developed their anti-Communist commitments during the Spanish Civil War would have careers in organizations like the CIA. These connections allowed for an ease of access to and an interest in both the international arena as well as a strong opposition to Communism in line with the prevailing domino theory of international relations.

The involvement of the organization in projects aimed at both influencing the way the American public viewed the international arena, and its participation in that arena on its own accord. It is exemplified by the examples discussed in this article: projects such as the so-called Rhodesia fact-finding mission, the overlapping membership with the American-Chilean Council, and advocating aid to the Contras before Congress.

The ACU has been involved in the wider world of reactionary politics from its inception in the 1960s. Students of history and politics must understand these in their international context if they are to have a complete picture of why and how the American Conservative Union, and other related actors, have come to occupy both domestic and international roles. The ACU was able to engage in an anti-Communist effort that was just as profound for it as the one it engaged in at home.

Today the ACU’s CPAC continues its impact in the international arena. This is exemplified by the electoral victory of Javier Milei, formerly a right-wing congressman representing Buenos Aires, to the presidency of Argentina in 2023. Relatively unknown in the US and Europe, Milei’s speech and the enthusiastic standing ovation which it received was the most prominent event of the ACU’s first CPAC held in a Spanish-speaking country (in Mexico). This is not to say that somehow the ACU or its allies awarded Milei the Casa Rosada, but it does serve as a reminder that the American right is always looking abroad with an appetite to influence politics the world over.

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<sup>79</sup> February 6, 1985, form letter created for the Central America Projects.

<sup>80</sup> February 6, 1985, form letter created for the Central America Projects.