

Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950)

In 1950, literary critic Lionel Trilling famously declared the dominance of liberalism in America and the virtual extinction of conservative ideas.

In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation. This does not mean, of course, that there is no impulse to conservatism or to reaction. Such impulses are certainly very strong, perhaps even stronger than most of us know. But the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas, but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.

William F. Buckley, *Up From Liberalism* (1959)

As if in answer to Trilling, William F. Buckley gained fame in 1951 when, at the age of 26, he wrote God and Man at Yale, an attack on the liberal intellectual establishment at the university he had attended. In the 1950s and 60s, Buckley was one of very few prominent conservative intellectuals. His 1959 book Up From Liberalism provocatively borrowed its title from Booker T. Washington's 1901 classic Up From Slavery.

What all conservatives in this country fear, and have plenty of reason to fear, is the loss of freedom by attrition. It is therefore for the most realistic reasons, as well as those of principle, that we must resist every single accretion of power by the state, even while guarding our rhetoric against such exaggerations as equating social security with slavery. ... The tendencies of Liberalism are every day more visibly coercive, as the social planners seek more and more brazenly to impose their preferences upon us.

... I will not cede more power to the state. I will not willingly cede more power to anyone, not to the state, not to General Motors, not to the CIO. I will hoard my power like a miser, resisting every effort to drain it away from me. I will then use my power, as I see fit. I mean to live my life an obedient man, but obedient to God, subservient to the wisdom of my ancestors; never to the authority of political truths arrived at yesterday at the voting booth. That is a program of sorts, is it not? It is certainly program enough to keep conservatives busy, and liberals at bay. And the nation free.

Lyndon B. Johnson, “The Great Society” (1964)

Johnson’s landslide electoral victory in 1964 (against conservative Republican Barry Goldwater) and his dreams for the Great Society represent a high-water mark of American liberal ambition.

For a century we labored to settle and to subdue a continent. For half a century we called upon unbounded invention and untiring industry to create an order of plenty for all of our people. The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization. ... For in our time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning. ...

I want to talk to you today about three places where we begin to build the Great Society—in our cities, in our countryside, and in our classrooms. ...

In the next forty years we must rebuild the entire urban United States. The catalog of ills is long: There is the decay of the centers and the despoiling of the suburbs. There is not enough housing for our people or transportation for our traffic. Open land is vanishing and old landmarks are violated. Our society will never be great until our cities are great. Today the frontier of imagination and innovation is inside those cities and not beyond their borders. ...

A second place where we begin to build the Great Society is in our countryside. We have always prided ourselves on being not only America the strong and America the free, but America the beautiful. Today that beauty is in danger. The water we drink, the food we eat, the very air that we breathe, are threatened with pollution. Our parks are overcrowded, our seashores overburdened. Green fields and dense forests are disappearing. A few years ago we were greatly concerned about the “Ugly American.” Today we must act to prevent an ugly America. ...

A third place to build the Great Society is in the classrooms of America. There your children’s lives will be shaped. Our society will not be great until every young mind is set free to scan the farthest reaches of thought and imagination. We are still far from that goal. ... We must give every child a place to sit and a teacher to learn from. Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty.

Phil Ochs, "Love Me, I'm A Liberal" (1966)

Phil Ochs was a folk and protest singer in the 1960s and 70s known for his wit and political activism. Like many of his generation, he identified in his youth with the liberalism of John F. Kennedy, but moved farther to the left during the civil rights and anti-war struggles of the 1960s.

In every political community there are varying shades of political opinion. One of the shadiest of these is the liberals: an outspoken group on many subjects, ten degrees to the left of center in good times, ten degrees to the right of center if it affects them personally. Here, then, is a lesson in safe logic:

I cried when they shot Medgar Evers
Tears ran down my spine
I cried when they shot Mr. Kennedy
As though I'd lost a father of mine
But Malcolm X got what was coming
He got what he asked for this time
So love me, love me, love me
I'm a liberal

I read *New Republic* and *Nation*
I've learned to take every view
I've memorized Lerner and Golden
I feel like I'm almost a Jew
But when it comes to times like Korea
There's no one more red, white and blue
So love me, love me, love me
I'm a liberal

I go to civil rights rallies
And I put down the old D.A.R.
I love Harry and Sidney and Sammy
I hope every colored boy becomes a star
But don't talk about revolution
That's going a little bit too far
So love me, love me, love me
I'm a liberal

I vote for the Democratic party
They want the U.N. to be strong
I go to all the Pete Seeger concerts
He sure gets me singing those songs
I'll send all the money you ask for
But don't ask me to come on along
So love me, love me, love me
I'm a liberal

I cheered when Humphrey was chosen
My faith in the system restored
I'm glad the Commies were thrown out
Of the A.F.L. C.I.O. board
I love Puerto Ricans and Negroes
As long as they don't move next door
So love me, love me, love me
I'm a liberal

Once I was young and impulsive
I wore every conceivable pin
Even went to the socialist meetings
Learned all the old union hymns
But I've grown older and wiser
And that's why I'm turning you in
So love me, love me, love me
I'm a liberal

The people of old Mississippi
Should all hang their heads in shame
I can't understand how their minds
work
What's the matter, don't they watch Les
Crane?
But if you ask me to bus my children
I hope the cops take down your name
So love me, love me, love me
I'm a liberal

An American Melodrama

LEWIS CHESTER, GODFREY HODGSON, AND
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Three British journalists covering the 1968 election capture the feelings of a week that began with Lyndon Johnson's withdrawal from the reelection campaign and ended with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lyndon Johnson stared toward the television camera. He was not looking straight into the lens, but at a teleprompter screen just below it. This useful device, flashing the words of his script to him at a suitable rate for his slow and impressive rate of reading, had enabled him to get through a speech nine thousand words long without once dropping his eyes to the desk in front of him. Eighty-five million of his fellow citizens had thus been able to watch the powerful emotions registered on his familiar face.

It was nine-thirty-five P.M. in Washington, on March 31, 1968. The President had just read, "I would ask all Americans, whatever their personal interest or concern, to guard against divisiveness and all its ugly consequences." He glanced across at his wife, and raised his

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right arm. It was a prearranged signal that he would, after all, read some additional words which had been prepared for the machine later than the rest. Mrs. Johnson, and very few other people, knew what those words would be.

"Fifty-two months and ten days ago," the President read, "in a moment of tragedy and trauma, the duties of this office fell upon me." Many of his watchers divined now that he was off on another tack, away from the discussion of Vietnam which had been the main burden of his speech. Where on earth was he headed now? "I have concluded," Johnson said, "that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year." It was a startling proposition—to take out of politics the most important elective office in the Western world. But it prepared the way for his next statement, which—for theatrical effect if nothing else—must compare with anything that any President has ever said: "Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President."

The President had been tired . . .

The fact of the President's exhaustion was well known in Washington in the spring of 1968. When he made his telecast on March 31, it showed in the movements of his hands. Once or twice, tears stood in his eyes. But until the telecast, there remained an almost superstitious belief in his demonic energy. Surely he would refresh his energy from some inner well and gird himself again to scatter his enemies. And one enemy, of course, in particular.

There were some in Washington who, without actual knowledge, had long suspected that the President would decide not to run again. One of these people, a close personal friend of Johnson's, was asked in late March whether he still thought the President would not run. The friend laughed and said, "With Robert Kennedy in the race, he won't be able to resist running against him!"

It was characteristic of the tempo of American politics that of the four men then openly competing for the Presidency two were in the air when Lyndon Johnson made his move. Richard Nixon was in his own campaign plane, a Boeing 727 jet, about twenty minutes out of New York on a trip from Milwaukee. Robert Kennedy was in an American Airlines Astrojet making its approach to John F. Kennedy Airport, New York, incoming from Phoenix, Arizona.

Eugene McCarthy was finishing a speech in Waukesha, Wisconsin.

And the fourth candidate, George Wallace, was immobilized for the moment. He was in Montgomery, Alabama, with his wife Lurleen, then shortly to undergo her last operation for cancer.

Two days after Johnson announced his decision, on April 2, the primary election in Wisconsin would fall due. When he spoke, Johnson already knew he was going to be badly beaten, and perhaps humiliated, in that election by Eugene McCarthy.

Before the New Hampshire primary on March 12, the President and James H. Rowe, a Washington lawyer whom he had chosen to run his campaign, had expected no trouble in Wisconsin. Ten days before the vote, Rowe began to worry. He sent out half a dozen tried political operators to make the state safe. One of them was Neil Staebler, a veteran politician from Michigan. Every night, they called the White House and told the President's aides what they had found. There was no organization and too little money, and McCarthy was riding on a wave of enthusiasm. In the end, Staebler flew to Washington and gave it to Jim Rowe without varnish. "I told him," he says, "that it was quite evident that the President would be beaten." . . .

These reports came at a moment when the President already knew that the Gallup poll was going to publish, on March 31, figures showing that the percentage of voters who supported his actions as President had dwindled to thirty-five. After New Hampshire and Wisconsin, there were other important primaries to come, in most of which the President—or his representative—would be compelled by law or by practice to compete. There was scarcely one of them in which he could hope to avoid comprehensive and humiliating defeat by Eugene McCarthy or, what was worse, by Robert Kennedy.

Primary elections are not everything, of course. As the leader of his party, the President could still hope to command the allegiance of a majority of the delegates to the convention. But even here, the little-noticed fact that Lyndon Johnson, the great legislator, was a poor party manager, made his grasp uncertain. It was entirely possible by late March that the incumbent President might fail to win the Presidential nomination of his own party.

No doubt for such a proud man the prospect and even the danger of such a humiliation was anguish. But there was an even greater risk. Short of death or impeachment, Johnson still had nine months to serve as President. The shadow of domestic revolt had already compromised his authority. The disastrous turning of an intensely unpopular foreign war now threatened to destroy it completely.

Only a few days before his announcement, he had been debating with his generals such alarming "options" as the invasion of Laos and the invasion of North Vietnam. Confronted by their estimate that such drastic policies to end the war would demand the sending of two hundred thousand more American troops to Vietnam, he had chosen to keep the war "limited." But that meant a daily struggle against the intrinsic momentum of the war. And he had chosen to negotiate. Apart from his strong feeling that it was improper to divert time and energies to campaigning from the supervision of the war and the peace talks, there was the realization that the two roles might well prove irreconcilable. His White House adviser, Walt Rostow, might argue with jesuitical ingenuity that the Tet offensive had been "the greatest blunder of Ho Chi Minh's career." The President might even believe, as he told the Australian Cabinet in December, that after a cold winter the war would be won. But he knew how hard it would be to sell those arguments on the hustings. Least of all could they be sold there by Lyndon Johnson, whose mere appearances seemed only too likely to provoke civil disorder.

If Johnson were to fight and lose in the primaries, he could hope to keep the nomination only by the most ruthless demands on the loyalty of the party machine. And that effort was likely to be self-defeating. It might make him so disastrous an electoral liability that the politicians would turn to Kennedy in sheer self-defense. To put it at its simplest, Johnson was losing control of his party. . . .

At suppertime on Thursday, April 4, Martin Luther King stepped out of his room on the second floor of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. He had spent most of the day in the room with his disciples, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, Ralph Abernathy. They were all young black clergymen whose toughness and militancy had been hardened by years of nonviolent campaigning in the streets, the black churches, and the white jails of the South. They had seen how, in Birmingham in 1963 and in Selma in 1965, King had been able to use the technique of nonviolent confrontation to keep the Negro's demands at the top of the agenda for white America. But now they were wavering about nonviolence. King himself knew as well as any of them how hard it was going to be to restrain the anger of their people and to compete with those who sneered at his creed and wanted to brush it aside. Only the Sunday before, in the National Cathedral in Washington, a few hours before the President's announcement, he had said, "I don't

like to predict violence, but if nothing is done between now and June to raise ghetto hope, I feel that this summer will not only be as bad, but worse than last year."

Now, in the close motel room, he preached his philosophy to his friends as he had done so often before. He spoke of Jesus and of Gandhi, and he told them in his slow, quiet voice, "I have conquered the fear of death." In substance, he repeated to them the sermon he had given the night before in a Memphis church, ending with these words: "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its grace. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land."

He stepped out of room 306 to the balcony. Jesse Jackson pointed out to him the organist who was going to play at the church where he was to speak that night. "Oh, yeah," said King. "He's my man." And he leaned over the railing. "Tell him to play 'Precious Lord,' and play it real pretty!"

Two hundred and five feet away, across the motel courtyard, across the unended back-street roadway and the scrubby, untended gardens of a row of sleazy brick houses, a man was watching. He was white. He had been watching for two hours, his feet in a dingy bathtub, his left hand braced against the window, and his right eye to the telescopic sight of a rifle. It was a .30-'06 pump-action Remington, but at that range, with a scope, there was no question of missing with any weapon. As Dr. King straightened up to go, the man fired. . . .

To be a garbage collector in Memphis is a Negro job. The city of Memphis did not recognize the garbage-collectors' union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. On February 12, more than a thousand garbage men, virtually all Negro, went on strike. They had two main demands: recognition of their union and the city's agreement to deduct union dues from their pay packets. The mayor, a shopkeeper called Henry Loeb, flatly refused both requests and began to hire white strikebreakers. By February 22, the strikers were angry enough to march on the auditorium where the city council was meeting to discuss a compromise. The council turned the plan down, and the police dispersed the demonstrating strikers with truncheons and tear gas. . . .

There were sit-ins, and silent single-file marches down Main Street by black sandwich men whose boards proclaimed simply I AM A MAN.

The Negroes in Memphis had long been leaderless and divided into middle class, working class, and the unemployed at the bottom of the heap. . . .

On March 14, nine thousand Memphis Negroes listened to speeches of encouragement from two of the most powerful—and moderate—of the national Negro leaders: Bayard Rustin, and Roy Wilkins, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. And on March 16, Martin Luther King came to Memphis. . . . He had been in Mississippi recruiting enthusiasm for the Poor People's Crusade he was planning to take to Washington in the summer. He stopped in Memphis, and agreed to come back on March 28.

Technically and politically, as an exercise in nonviolent protest, the March 28 march can only be called a disaster. . . .

The marchers met at Clayborne Temple, a large gray-brick Negro church. They were surrounded from the start by burly, unsympathetic police in full riot kit. King arrived late, and Lawson was never quite able to channel the milling mass into an orderly column. The demonstrators had been given I AM A MAN banners, mounted on stout wooden poles. From the outset, twenty or thirty young militants tore off the banners and used the poles to smash in shop windows.

For a while, the police did nothing. Then, as the head of the column was wheeling out of Beale Street into Main Street and toward the white part of town, some of the young men began to javelin their poles clear over the marchers' heads into the windows on the other side of the street. The police waded into them, and a riot became inevitable.

The black leaders began to be afraid for King's life. They had already had threats, both from white racists and from Black Power militants. Lawson took a bullhorn and turned the column around. When they got back to the church, the older people dispersed as they were asked to do, but the young wouldn't go. They grabbed sticks and bottles and began to throw them at the police. Stupidly, the police used tear gas to herd them into the church, where firebrand Black Power orators were lashing them back into the fight. All hell broke loose. Young Negroes started to throw Molotov cocktails, and the police opened fire.

Before the night was over, King had suffered the worst defeat of his career. He called a press conference and said he would not come back to Memphis. Some newspapers openly reported that he fled. But it was not his courage that had failed. What had happened was

a terrible setback to his faith in that self-discipline under provocation which, he had always argued, could alone give nonviolent protest its power to persuade.

Lawson went on with his daily demonstrations, and King was persuaded to change his mind. His lieutenants began to work with Lawson on careful preparations for a second march. On Wednesday, April 3, King came back to lead it. He had been criticized for living in luxurious white motels, so this time he checked into the Lorraine Motel, room 306. . . .

King was shot a few seconds after six o'clock, Memphis time, which is seven o'clock on the East Coast. Within a quarter of an hour, blacks in Harlem and the south side of Chicago and on upper Fourteenth Street in Washington had heard the news on their transistor radios. The wire-service copy was handed to the President in his oval office as he was talking about the Vietnam peace negotiations with his ambassador to Moscow, Llewellyn Thompson. A few minutes later Johnson's secretary, Juanita Roberts, typed a second message on a slip of paper and handed it to him. "Mr. President," it read, "Martin Luther King is dead."

The President was scheduled to leave that night for Hawaii to talk about the war and his new initiative for peace with his generals. That afternoon, he had held a surprise meeting with U Thant at the United Nations. All that must now be laid aside. He sat down and wrote out a short statement and read it into the television cameras.

"America is shocked and saddened by the brutal slaying tonight of Dr. Martin Luther King," he began, in a voice heavy with sorrow and concern. "I ask every citizen to reject the blind violence that has struck Dr. King. . . . We can achieve nothing by lawlessness and divisiveness among the American people. . . ."

At Fourteenth and U Streets, less than a mile to the north, his voice was coming over the radio in the People's Drugstore. Black staff and customers gathered round to listen to their President. "Honky!" shouted one man. "He's a murderer himself," said another. "This will mean a thousand Detroits," said a third.

Within two hours, the prophecy was well on the way to fulfillment. In Washington, an angry black river poured into the streets. At Fourteenth and U, at the heart of the crowded, dingy black city of slums which mocks the pompous monuments and cool green spaces of the white capital, a middle-aged man began to shout. There were tears

in his eyes. He picked up a trash can and hurled it through a drug-store window.

"This is it, baby," said another man. "The shit is going to hit the fan now. We ought to burn the place down right now." And to the best of their ability, that is just what they did. "Man!" said a militant leader—one who had helped to set the fires with Molotov cocktails and dynamite—"when that window broke, that was like—the shot that was heard round the world when the honkies were fighting their own people!"

In Chicago, with more than eight hundred thousand Negroes, violence was slower to start. But before it was over, twenty blocks of West Madison Street had been burned and Federal troops had been called in. Mayor Daley was so shaken and so angry that he ordered his policemen, if it ever happened again, to "shoot to kill arsonists, and shoot to maim looters."

There were rioting and arson, shooting by snipers and by police—in New York, Detroit, Newark, Cincinnati. In Baltimore, the Republican governor took the outbreak of rioting almost as a personal affront. His name was Spiro T. Agnew.

By the end of the week, thirty-seven people had been killed and there had been riots in more than a hundred cities. For the first time in history, the situation room in the basement of the west wing of the White House was plotting the course of a domestic crisis. Into that nerve center of America as a great power there flowed reports of fighting—not in Khe Sanh or on the Jordan, but on Sixty-third Street in Chicago, One hundred twenty-fifth Street in New York, Fourteenth Street in Washington: the White House is on Sixteenth Street. . . .

And there was Robert Kennedy. When he heard that King was dead, he went out onto a street corner in Indianapolis and told the small crowd of Negroes who gathered what had happened. Standing under a street lamp, he waited until the shouts of the men and the wails of the women had died away. Then he quoted Aeschylus: "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until in our despair, against our own will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."