Twitter Thread by Matthew Sheffield



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Thread: Meaning and loss in American conservatism

I've written a lot about how Christian supremacism (expressed and implicit) is the underlying objective of most Trump supporters but the psychology of American conservatism is very important in its descent into madness.

We're seeing it manifested heavily in the present moment as Trump and his followers are forced to contemplate the loss of the presidency but it's important to realize that losing is the psychic core of the U.S. right.

Trump's repugnant demeanor and prior history of political moderation is what made him so reviled by conservative activists and donors in 2015 but his angry victim complex so deeply resonated with the GOP base that this is why he won the primary.

American conservatism has been obsessed with death and loss since it emerged in the 1940s. The utter humiliation of Herbert Hoover and the rapid growth of federal spending and regulation under FDR was an existential moment for the corporate barons who started the U.S. right.

The rise of explicitly atheist Marxist-Leninism was also immensely triggering of long-time fundamentalist fantasies of persecution and death before the return of Christ. Most Christians don't see John's Apocalypse as a literal text but fundamentalists do.

The ethos of Revelations so utterly permeates modern conservatism even after the collapse of the USSR. The book's tale of two prophets called by God to witness for Christ in Jerusalem is foundational to evangelical support for Israel and for Christian nationalism in the US.

Outside the US, the idea of Christian witness is mostly personal but as successive presidents sought to ramp up public support for the Cold War, the idea that US was some sort of divinely created country became very widespread.

The religious concept of witness was merged into the identity politics of American conservatism from its very beginnings as in Buckley's first book "God and Man at Yale" and Whitaker Chambers's book "Witness."

Critical to both men's views was that they were on the losing side.

The founding slogan of National Review was that it would "stand athwart history, yelling Stop." It has been the mission and identity of conservatism in the country ever since.

Conservatives would witness against the godless wicked and die fighting for the truth.

I sat in many meetings of conservatives about various legislative tactics on budget bills or some regulatory policy and the phrase "well this is the hill that we'll die on" was uttered so often. There is this obsession with dying for Christ, even if only metaphorically.

This attitude is present at the very highest levels of American conservatism. And it keeps re-manifesting itself anew in different ways. This essay about Kayleigh McEnany is a great example of one person's view: https://t.co/pl4zVfJ7fT

Even non-religious conservatives are obsessed w/loss since the idea that "big government" is inevitable is actually true. Basically no one is going to vote to slash Medicare or to privatize Social Security.

Some of them, like billionaire Peter Thiel, blame this on women.

In 2009, he seemed to pin the growth of government on women having the right to vote. He also wrote that "the higher one's IQ, the more pessimistic one became about free-market politics — capitalism simply is not that popular with the crowd" https://t.co/yiqXBEEKwJ

Trump promised an end to the losing. He told fundamentalist Christians that they would be in charge of society under his administration. But this was a lie, not only because he couldn't effect that but because fundamentalist Christianity has never been regnant in the U.S.

Realizing that their views were rejected by most Americans was something that started to happen among fundamentalist Christians after the Scopes trial in the 1920s. But the geopolitical struggle against the USSR resurrected the delusion that cultural victory was possible.

From the beginning, GOP electoral consultants knew that the public didn't support slashing the govt, but they figured out soon that you don't need a majority of the people if you can get a majority of the voters. And with the Electoral College, you don't even need that.

Elites have long known they didn't have majority. This is why McConnell won't kill the filibuster despite its medium-term benefits. It's also why Paul Ryan was obsessed with stopping society's "takers" and favoring its "makers."

The activists, however, really did believe that the struggle was winnable. That the public really did believe in Ronald Reagan in 1984.

The GOP's successive losses of the popular vote began shaking faith in the struggle. Trump's defeat in 2020 was the last straw.