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Reagan Was Wrong

To conservative Cassandra Henry Fairlie, Republicans sowed their present-day destruction from the start.

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When Henry Fairlie came to America, the editors of this magazine deemed his arrival sufficiently momentous to run a page-long story about him. The 42-year-old writer had been called "the most controversial political journalist in England" and "the first of the Angry Young Men" for his piercing and heterodox columns in the British press—including his most celebrated one, in which he coined the term "the establishment." After his 1966 move to the United States, he would write some of the liveliest and most provocative essays of his time about what NEWSWEEK called "the American scene."

Fairlie's sharp eye, stylish pen and outsider's perspective let him capture why he loved this country (our freedom, our gadgets, the endless space) and attack us natives for how we sell it short (our wavering belief in America's greatness, our uptight yuppie ways). Even now, decades later, these pieces hold up beautifully: while editing a new anthology of his work, *Bite the Hand That Feeds You:Essays and Provocations*, I found funny, timeless examples of his writing in *The New Republic, The Washington Post, The New Yorker* and other papers and magazines that published him.

Read today, when America's political ideologies are in flux, some of these arguments turn out to be surprisingly, urgently timely. Fairlie arrived when the Republican Party was regrouping in the wake of Barry Goldwater's loss, and he lived long enough (until 1990) to see it assume power under Ronald Reagan. The trajectory horrified him. For Fairlie—a lifelong, if idiosyncratic, Tory—the ideology that came to dominate American conservatism after World War II didn't live up to America's best traditions. It was, in fact, no conservatism at all. He didn't explicitly predict that in 2009 we'd watch this ideology fall rather spectacularly to pieces, but he knew it couldn't last long. When a rudderless Republican Party seems in danger of humiliating itself to death, Fairlie—a conservative who saw from the era's beginning how badly it was going to end—deserves a fresh hearing.

Fairlie was no theorist. And while he wrote five books—including *The Kennedy Promise*, an early, critical account of the Camelot years—he wasn't a pamphleteer. He was a freelancer, a position he held for nearly 40 years. This choice was rooted in principle, because he demanded the independence to write what he wanted when he wanted. It was also a function of his genius for burning bridges. (He drank, had endless affairs and distilled his relationships with editors and proprietors to the title of his unfinished memoir, *Bite the Hand That Feeds You*.) So Fairlie's critique of American conservatism needs to be assembled from pieces scattered over several decades and many publications. He stated its theme most clearly in an essay for *Harper's* in 1984: "The fundamental and persistent weakness of American conservatism is that it is not nourished by any distinct tory spirit."

Fairlie's views of toryism, like his views of most things (America, women, Parliament, Scotch), were deeply

romantic. He described his kind of conservative as one who stands alongside "the King and the People, against the barons and the capitalists." In other words, government's role was to preserve tradition and social order, not to speed the accumulation of great power and wealth among the elites or to enact sudden or overreaching reforms. He warmed to this view as a boy, when summers on a family farm in Scotland taught him that "nothing very much changes, and then changes only slowly." He refined it as an adult, coming to revere the leadership of Winston Churchill, whom he called "the greatest tory of them all," and absorb the writings of Michael Oakeshott, "the most formative conservative political thinker of his generation." When he arrived in America, he expected to find conservatives with similar beliefs. Instead he found the Republicans.

Fairlie's critique of American conservatism began with a GOP heresy: that by embracing the free market so completely, the party had gone calamitously awry. "The conservative can all too easily drift into a morally bankrupt and intellectually shallow defense of those who have it made and those who are on the make," he wrote. Without a humanizing tory influence, conservatives were apt to forget "the ugly face of capitalism"—the way that the market tends to coarsen and destabilize society, making the gross national product fodder for our "gross national appetite." Republicans, he argued, could never succeed in uniting the country as long as they supported business interests so completely with both their policy choices and their rhetoric: "The nation cannot be brought to you, as if it were *Masterpiece Theatre*, by a grant from Mobil Oil," he wrote.

Though Fairlie distrusted John F. Kennedy—making a good tory's case that his charisma and outsize promises gave the country false expectations for change—the market worship and hyperindividualism of Reaganism led him to think more warmly of JFK's inaugural. Whatever the excesses of the speech, he wrote in 1986, it had at least treated the American people as citizens, as men and women with a shared stake in the national destiny. A comparable call in the 1980s, Fairlie wrote, would have been: "And so, you fellow Americans, buy your condominium and your Volvo—that's your war effort." In this, he turned out to be more right than he knew. Fifteen years after that essay ran, George W. Bush tried to rally the nation in the wake of the September 11 attacks by telling everybody to go shopping. His failure would have disappointed Fairlie, but it wouldn't have surprised him.

Tax-cutting regulation-haters weren't the only false conservatives in the Reagan coalition, Fairlie argued: the bedroom-snooping, morality--legislating social conservatives were just as misguided. He was no libertarian, but he thought that much of the social agenda of the American political right (then and now) consisted of things that were nobody's business: "Let one homosexual, coke-snorting student bum get hold of two food stamps, and the whole apparatus of government is brought into play," he wrote.

While Fairlie wanted government to be big enough and strong enough to unify society, relieve material want and maintain global order (his defenses of American empire were so forceful and frequent that Sen. J. William Fulbright derided him as "a British Gunga Din"), he had little use for leadership that agitated people needlessly. The history of his homeland gave him a reason to think that government shouldn't meddle in personal affairs: "One may say that the English aristocrat has always been the truest tory because he knows that his own family has survived the most eccentric and often reprobate conduct of its members for centuries."

This question of class plays a crucial part in Fairlie's contempt for American conservatism. Though he

wasn't an aristocrat (his father had been a hard-drinking Fleet Street prodigy before him) and genuinely relished spending time with people far removed from the Washington media overclass, he was repelled by the GOP's pandering to the common man. It struck him as vulgar. And it led to his most notorious feud.

During the 1980 Republican convention, he wrote a column for *The Washington Post* describing the delegates as members of the "booboisie" once mocked by H. L. Mencken, by which Fairlie meant they were: "Narrow minded, book banning, truth censoring, mean spirited; ungenerous, envious, intolerant, afraid; chicken, bullying; trivially moral, falsely patriotic; family cheapening, flag cheapening, God cheapening; the common man, shallow, small, sanctimonious." William F. Buckley replied with a column attacking Fairlie for being an English interloper, a bad grammarian and a snob. When Buckley included the column in an essay collection five years later, Fairlie panned the book in *The New Republic*, dissing Buckley as unconservative, overexposed and "the quintessential Common Man of our time." This so incensed Buckley that he bought a full-page ad in a subsequent issue of the magazine to reprint his original attack on Fairlie.

When I first read Fairlie's column about the convention, it seemed overheated. Then I watched Sarah Palin speak. Fairlie's disgust at the GOP's impulse toward small-minded demagoguery anticipated the day when it would reach its fullest expression—when the movement would have no farther to fall.

Fairlie didn't assail American conservatives because he was a liberal in Burke's clothing: he was just as quick to castigate the Democrats when they screwed up, and with just as much spiky humor. But however much they erred, he argued, the Democrats remained "the normal governing party of the most powerful and most restless free nation in the world." The vital difference between the parties lay in their views of government itself. Like many Democrats, he believed that the political realm was the only place where a free people could contend with the tyrannies of all the other realms—especially the economic one. Even after reporting on political malfeasance in more than a dozen countries on three continents, Fairlie insisted that politics was "essentially good" and politicians "the most hopeful messengers of a society's will to improve."

Conservatives, by contrast, showed an infuriating hostility for Washington, nothing like the "gusto" brought to politics by Fairlie's beloved FDR. "The Reaganite conservative does not trust the political system, and so is always trying to circumvent it; he does not trust the instincts of Congress, but places profound faith in the wisdom of the executive if he is in charge; he does not trust the deep religious instinct of a people, unless it is decked out in the tawdry costume of a minute of silent prayer in school. The only loyalty that eight years of Reaganite conservatism has inspired is of each to the country of his self." Extend Fairlie's argument to the present, and Dick Cheney, with his consistent and inventive transgressions, begins to look like one of the least conservative leaders we've ever had.

Fairlie didn't offer any bullet-pointed plan for how American conservatives could reclaim the soul he believed they'd lost (and needed to reclaim, since "conservatism more than liberalism needs a soul"). But if he were writing now, he would find any attempt to rebuild the Reagan coalition, or to reassert the principles that elected him, foolish and unconservative. He would argue instead that Republicans need to try once again to "civilize and broaden" conservatism, even though they've failed so many times before.

This doesn't mean making marginal improvements to the racial mix at the voting booth. It means finding

a way to uphold our best traditions while ceasing to profess "a conservatism that is just one long grouch at the twentieth century." It means bringing a genuine compassion to government, as opposed to the sloganeering kind. And it means learning to love America in all its messy kaleidoscopic glory, as Fairlie did. During last year's campaign, he would have been thrilled by Barack Obama's story and what it demonstrates about the possibilities of American life (though quick to chasten his Kennedy-esque ambitions), and he would have eviscerated Palin's notion that there's such a thing as "real America." For someone who never learned to drive, Fairlie contrived to spend much of his time away from the Eastern Seaboard, falling more and more in love with this immigrant nation. "Ameri-ca must be kept open," he insisted in 1983—"no technique, no system, no ideology, must be allowed to close it down."

That, too, is a romantic view, but one that Fairlie never abandoned, not even when he had good reasons. During the 1980s, his fecklessness with money and increased drinking led him to lose his apartment in Washington. The years that other writers of his caliber might have spent in suburban comfort, putting together the anthologies that would outlive them, Fairlie spent living in his office at *The New Republic*, since he had nowhere else to go. Even as he went on skewering the Republicans and immoderately praising the country he understood so much better than they did, he didn't grow bitter. Far from it. The most direct counsel he offered to American conservatives was the advice that the great journalist Walter Bagehot had offered to their British counterparts a century earlier. It's even more worth heeding today, when their spirits are so low: "Try a little enjoyment."