

Twilight in America
The Birth of Ronald Reagan and Contemporary Conservatism

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President Ronald Reagan's re-election campaign famously proclaimed in 1984 that it was "Morning in America." Before the morning, however, there had to be a re-birth of the conservative movement. The conservative movement's ideology evolved during the 1970s into the modern conservatism that dominates the right in contemporary politics and society. By focusing on the evolution of conservatism during the 1970s, historians can better understand Reagan's presidential election in 1980.

The historiography on Ronald Reagan has proliferated over the past five years as historians attempt to place Reagan in his proper historical context. This work adds to the rise of Reagan by analyzing the changing ideological nature of conservatism in the early-1970s. The early-1970s was the period that connects the older conservative movement with Ronald Reagan's newer conservatism – often called the New Right. Much of the current interest in Reagan focuses on the later half of the decade, when the New Right was becoming an entrenched social and political movement.

The changes that took place during the early-1970s were particularly important for the future transformation of the movement's ideology. This presentation will focus on the combination of the upheaval over the Vietnam War and violent disagreements over the policy of *détente*. Combined, those events threw the movement into disarray. The New Right's ideology focused more extensively on the role of religion and morality in politics than previous conservatism had. Additionally, the movement retained its ardent anti-communism, despite a push by some members of the movement who acknowledged that the Vietnam War exposed problems with anti-communism. The internal struggles within the movement during this period are important for scholars of modern conservatism to understand.

This presentation, which is part of my larger dissertation on the conservative movement's response to the Vietnam War, helps historians place the birth of Ronald Reagan and the New Right into greater historical context. Prior to the New Right, libertarianism played a much larger role within the movement, and this paper analyzes the effects of the loss of some libertarians and how that contributed to the rise of the New Right. The loss of libertarians and increase in morality-based politics can be traced directly to this period and the internal upheaval caused by the events of the Vietnam War and *détente*.