

Research Outline:

Working title:

American Conservatism and the Struggle against Federal Authority. Grassroots Organizing, Activism, Discourse.

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Deutsche Version untenstehend.

In the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s, the Conservative movement in the United States underwent a period of decisive transformation. The concept of “Fusionism,” coined by *National Review* editor Frank S. MEYER, aimed to unite the prevalent ideologies of Traditionalism and Libertarianism. On their own, each would lead into societal collapse, MEYER argued, with extreme Traditionalism resulting in authoritarianism and extreme Libertarianism in anarchism.¹ Taken together, one would restrain the other, establishing a kind of ideological checks-and-balances system. The means of fusing the two belief systems together was anti-communism. Libertarians opposed communism as collectivist, while traditionalists despised among others the atheistic, morally nihilistic, and radically secular elements of communism.

Despite the success this approach showed temporarily in uniting the two strands, the most significant expression being the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater in '64, the contradictions between the differing ideologies were only sublated in fusionism. Many of the clashes between libertarians and traditionalists concerned the role of the state and of federal authority. The aim of my research is to carve out the ideological fault lines and to show how they helped shape an inherently contradictory conservatism, parts of which are still present in today's politics. Specifically, the dissertation is concerning the role grassroots groups played in this process by mobilizing a large conservative constituency, which expressed its views via political activism and later established some of their members in the central institutions of the American polity.²

The main focus of my study is the conservative youth organization “Young Americans for Freedom (YAF).” The group was founded in September 11, 1960 in Sharon, Connecticut.

¹ Cf. MEYER, Frank: Libertarianism or Libertinism? In: *National Review*, September 9, 1969, p.910.

² For example, Ronald Reagan served as YAF's honorary chairman since the early sixties, while subsequent vice-president Dan Quayle was a member of YAF as a student.

Ideologically, they drew heavily upon the fusionist credo espoused by William F. Buckley's *National Review*.³ The roughly 100 participants of the founding conference adopted a manifesto called the "Sharon Statement,"⁴ in which they outlined their core beliefs. YAF expressed a strong plea for weak governmental authority, which's sole purposes should be "the preservation of internal order, the provision of national defense, and the administration of justice." Any further concentration of power in government would "diminish order and liberty." Clearly, the *federal* government presented the greatest threat, as they hailed "the clause which reserves primacy to the several states, or to the people, in those spheres not specifically delegated to the Federal Government" as the "genius of the Constitution."

This distrust of governmental power was not attached to a distrust in the political system or in political establishment(s) in general as can be observed today. Indeed, founding member Lee EDWARDS, editor of YAF publication *The New Guard*, actively called for the formation of a conservative establishment. "Conservatives must begin to place themselves not only in the US House of Representatives, but in the television networks, in the universities, in corporations and companies and, perhaps most important of all, in the Federal government. [...] [There is] one certain vehicle for a firm foreign policy and a competitive enterprise economy – a Conservative Establishment."⁵

This wish for a "firm foreign policy" led to an unexpected endorsement of federal power. Since the Cold War was viewed as a zero-sum game, every defeat of the United States would simultaneously be a victory for the Soviet Union. Therefore, everyone that was against U.S. anti-communist policies necessarily was pro-communist and anti-American.

Because, according to YAF, communism was the greatest threat to freedom at this moment,⁶ even greater than the federal government, YAF was willing to accredit broad power to the federal government to combat such opposition. For example, when 59 students visited the Castro regime in Cuba in 1963, Robert Bauman, then YAF national chairman, urged Attorney General Robert Kennedy to prosecute them "to the fullest extent of the law. [...] Only by making an example of these students, who violate American law and damage United States foreign policy, can the American people have respect for their government."⁷ The apparent contradiction between demanding containment of government and distrust of it on the one hand,

³ It is no coincidence that the conference to found the organization was held at Great Elm in Sharon, which is the Buckley family's estate.

⁴ The Sharon Statement is reprinted in SCHNEIDER, Gregory (Ed.): *Conservatism in America since 1930*, New York 2003, pp. 229–230. It is also found in most monographs concerning Young Americans for Freedom.

⁵ EDWARDS, Lee: Needed: A Conservative Establishment, in: *The New Guard*, June 1962, pp.2/7.

⁶ Cf. The Sharon Statement, p.230.

⁷ "Bauman raps Cuban trip" (YAF Roundup), in: *The New Guard*, August 1963, p.13.

and presupposing respect for government on authoritarian measures to be undertaken on the other hand, seems to have gone unnoticed by YAF's members.

Still, this endorsement of a weak state on the internal policy side and a strong one on the foreign policy side with the latter winning out when the two spheres overlapped is not necessarily inherently contradictory.

Yet, YAF's position isn't consistent here either. In the May 1967 issue of *The New Guard*, YAF took a stand against the military draft, and featured articles by prominent conservatives Barry Goldwater, Russel Kirk, and Milton Friedman. The abolition of the draft possibly could have weakened American military strength. Here, the weak internal state took precedence over the strong external one.⁸ Regarding the Vietnam War in its totality, however, the outlook of YAF remained unchanged. YAF was the foremost organization to oppose the opposition to the Vietnam War on campus, using tactics they learned from their enemies. They maintained a firm stance against draft evasion, even when they were against the draft itself. They formed uneasy alliances with Johnson, whom they detested for his expansion of the welfare state in his Great Society program, and Nixon, and supported the measures both took against the college "peacemongers."⁹

Issues such as these led to rising tensions between libertarian and traditionalist conservatives within YAF. Libertarians attacked traditionalists for their inconsequential stance on governmental power and authority and tried to convert the organization's unofficial motto 'Sock it to the left!' into 'Sock it to the state!' These tensions escalated, when one radical libertarian delegate at the 1969 national convention burned his draft card and a brawl broke out. Since the more traditionalist-oriented conservatives were in the majority, subsequently the more radical libertarians left YAF. The organization itself survived, however, and carried the fusionist approach well into the seventies and eighties even after libertarians had established their own platforms. Many of YAF's former activists and leaders later found their way into mainstream politics and left their marks in the Reagan administrations and beyond.

Examining how the described differences and contradictions in the perception of federal/governmental authority in the 1960s shaped a conservative movement that would be triumphant with the election of Ronald Reagan would provide a deeper understanding of the history of American conservatism.

⁸ There have been allegations that this was a simple promotion of self-interest, as most of YAF's members would have been eligible for the draft (e.g. in SCANLON, Sandra: *The Pro-war movement. Domestic support for the Vietnam War and the making of modern American Conservatism*, Amherst 2013, p.264). Until there is concrete evidence to support this position, it seems better to assume they actually meant what they said.

⁹ A term YAF had already used previously to the Vietnam War, for the first time in (Schulz, William: *They spur college 'peace' move*, in: *The New Guard*, September 1963, pp.10/15)

I am primarily drawing on archival material linked to the conservative movement. This approach will be supplemented by interviews with key figures of the historical conservative movement.

Dissertationsskizze

Das Dissertationsprojekt soll zeigen, wie konservative Graswurzelgruppierungen an einem Kreuzzug gegen die als überbordend verstandene Bundesregierung und -administration partizipierten und diesen nach eigenen Vorstellungen beeinflussten. Dabei waren die intellektuellen Hintergründe der einzelnen Gruppen durchaus unterschiedlich. Gemeinsam war ihnen die konservative Identität, die sich hauptsächlich auf ein Traditionalisten- und ein Libertärenlager verteilte.

Auf Basis von Archivmaterial und Zeitzeugengesprächen soll ein ausgeglicheneres Bild dieser Schnittstelle der amerikanischen Geschichte gezeichnet werden, die auf gängige, polemische Meistererzählungen wie den ‚konservativen Rattenfänger‘ verzichten soll.

Hauptuntersuchungsgegenstand ist die Jugendorganisation „Young Americans for Freedom“ (YAF). Sie wurde am 11. September 1960 in Sharon, Connecticut, gegründet. Ihre intellektuellen Wurzeln lagen im Fusionismus, der insbesondere vom konservativen Magazin *National Review* und seinen Redakteuren William F. Buckley Jr. und Frank Meyer vertreten wurde. Letzterer versuchte als Architekt dieser Denkrichtung, normativen Konservatismus mit libertärem Marktwirtschaftsdenken unter dem Banner des Antikommunismus zu vereinen. Insbesondere der libertäre Teil vertrat einen starken Anti-Etatismus. Dabei darf diese Position nicht mit einem generellen Misstrauen in das Funktionieren des politischen Systems und seiner Prozesse verwechselt werden. Tatsächlich schrieb Lee Edwards, Chefredakteur von YAFs Magazin *The New Guard* 1962: „Konservative müssen sich nicht nur in [...] TV-Netzwerken, Universitäten, Firmen und Konzernen etablieren, sondern, und das ist vermutlich das Wichtigste, in der Bundesregierung. [...]“¹⁰

Die Frage der staatlichen Autorität war es auch, an der der Fusionismus mit Ende der 60er-Jahre zunehmend erodierte. Libertäre waren nicht bereit, im Zuge des Vietnamkriegs repressive Staatsmaßnahmen wie die Wehrpflicht hinzunehmen. Durch ihren Protest gerieten sie in die Nähe der linken Antikriegsbewegung und ihrer Gegenkultur. Diese war den traditionalistischen Konservativen schon länger ein Dorn im Auge. Auf der YAF-Bundesversammlung 1969 kam es zum Eklat, als libertäre und traditionalistische Gruppen erbitterte Grabenkämpfe

¹⁰ EDWARDS, Lee: Needed: A Conservative Establishment, in: *The New Guard*, June 1962, pp.2/7.

gegeneinander führten. Die siegreiche traditionalistische Fraktion verzichtete in der Konsequenz jedoch nicht auf die Beibehaltung libertärer Elemente in ihrer Politik.

Mit dem Wahlsieg Ronald Reagans hielten viele ehemalige YAFer Einzug in die höchsten Ebenen der amerikanischen Politik. Eine Untersuchung ihrer Hintergründe ist zentral für ein vollständiges Verständnis dieser bedeutenden Ära der US-amerikanischen Geschichte.