

# The Strength of Weekly Ties: Relations of Material and Symbolic Exchange in the Conservative Movement

THOMAS MEDVETZ

*The current Republican ascendancy in American government has generated considerable scholarly interest in the conservative movement. Through an ethnographic study of the widely publicized but seldom-observed “Wednesday meeting” of conservative activists, this article inquires into the bases of the conservative movement’s internal cohesion and successful management of alliances with state officials. I argue that the meeting functions as both an instrument of material power and a ritual of symbolic maintenance by establishing relations of reciprocal exchange and sustaining a moral community of conservative activists and their allies. More broadly, the article examines the mutual conditioning and genetic linkage of two dimensions of social reality: relations of force and relations of meaning.*

**Keywords:** conservative movement; right-wing activism; social movements; Grover Norquist; Pierre Bourdieu

## INTRODUCTION

In February 2005, the Republican strategist Karl Rove declared conservatism to be “the dominant political creed in America.”<sup>1</sup> If the recent electoral successes of Rove’s party are any indication, he was not indulging in mere hyperbole.<sup>2</sup> Even

---

This research was supported by awards from the Social Science Research Council’s Fellowship Program on Philanthropy and the Nonprofit Sector; the Phi Beta Kappa Society, Alpha Chapter; and the University of California, Berkeley Graduate Division. The author is grateful to Jerome Karabel, Fred Block, Gil Eyal, Loïc Wacquant, Stephanie Mudge, John Noakes, Sandra Levitsky, Malcolm Fairbrother, Benjamin Moodie, Jeff Sallaz, and the Editorial Board of *Politics & Society* for their helpful comments.

POLITICS & SOCIETY, Vol. 34 No. 3, September 2006 343-368

DOI: 10.1177/0032329206290424

© 2006 Sage Publications

so, the causes of the conservative ascendancy remain open to investigation. An object of increasing scholarly and popular attention, the “rise of the right” is sometimes understood in terms of mainstream sponsorship through successful mass mobilization.<sup>3</sup> However, recent scholarship has more often emphasized the importance of skilled organizational entrepreneurship on the part of movement elites.<sup>4</sup>

Two related puzzles motivate this article. The first is the peculiar combination of internal *heterogeneity* and *cohesion* that marks the conservative movement, both in its current guise and over its recent history. The movement consists of a highly diverse coalition of interest and identity groups, including evangelical Christians, business elites, and neoconservative intellectuals, whose mutual affinity cannot be taken for granted. Yet, despite this structural heterogeneity, conservatives maintain a considerable level of institutional association and ideological affinity, particularly when compared with the political left in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the left is divided into various, often mutually indifferent, issue-oriented fractions, conservatives, while not without their internal divisions, have developed both a centralized movement infrastructure and a set of core principles. To put the question plainly, what are the institutional and symbolic bases of the right’s relatively high level of internal cohesion?

The second puzzle is the conservative movement’s heretofore-successful avoidance of both *absorption* and *maximalism*. Absorption is the situation where a social movement loses both its identity and its ability to mobilize people at the grassroots level because it is incorporated by the government in power.<sup>6</sup> Maximalism is the tendency for movement activists to pursue an uncompromising ideological agenda, making it difficult for their allies in the state to govern.<sup>7</sup> American conservatives have managed to steer a middle course between these two opposing dangers, successfully pursuing alliances with state officials, yet maintaining the active participation of their base. Understanding how the right has managed this tension up to now is a major unresolved task. To summarize the two questions: (1) what are the bases of the conservative movement’s internal cohesion; and (2) how do movement activists maintain congruous relations with state officials without suffering a loss of their conservative identity?

This article provides a partial answer to these questions by focusing on a single, albeit important, empirical object: the widely publicized but seldom-observed “Wednesday meeting” of conservative activists, a weekly closed-door gathering held at the nonprofit organization Americans for Tax Reform and often cited as the movement’s major strategy session. Convened since 1993, the meeting has attained a prominent place among conservatives as a central forum for reaching decisions, resolving disagreements, and coordinating joint efforts. Regular attendees of the meeting include representatives from advocacy groups, think tanks, lobbying firms, and news media organizations; campaign strategists, political pollsters, elected officials, and candidates for political office; as well as informal delegates from the White House, Congress, and various federal agencies.<sup>8</sup>

Though hardly synonymous with the conservative movement, the Wednesday meeting provides a particularly efficient empirical object. While all political movements incorporate observable processes of material and symbolic coordination, these processes usually occur in a diffuse and unpredictable manner, making them difficult to observe. What is therefore most compelling about the Wednesday gathering from an analytical standpoint is its centralization and routinization of such maintenance procedures. Whether taken as pivotal to the conservative movement's success or as merely emblematic of its activists' broader strategic propensities, the gathering provides an instructive forum. Since few political movements have a weekly meeting, the conservative strategy session offers a rare, if somewhat atypical, research opportunity.

This article is based on two kinds of empirical evidence:

1. Ethnographic observation conducted at the Wednesday meeting. I attended fourteen sessions of the meeting during the period from October 2003 to November 2004, an interval that included the twelve months prior to the 2004 presidential election and the two weeks of their immediate aftermath.<sup>9</sup>
2. In-depth interviews conducted with several leading figures in the conservative movement, including Grover Norquist, president of the Americans for Tax Reform and facilitator of the Wednesday meeting; Paul Weyrich, chairman of the Free Congress Foundation and leading figure in the New Right; David Keene, chairman of the American Conservative Union and a weekly attendee of the meeting; Charles Murray, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a leading conservative intellectual; Lee Edwards, senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation; and Adam Meyerson, president of the conservative Philanthropy Roundtable.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from the questions posed above, I take the conservative movement as an object of study because it offers a case of successful political mobilization. Since the 1970s, social movement theory has become increasingly concerned with identifying the factors that contribute to a movement's success or failure.<sup>11</sup> The "rise of the right" in the contemporary United States provides a worthy case with which to verify, critique, and extend theories of how political movements succeed.

My central argument is that the Wednesday meeting functions as both an *instrument of material power* and a *ritual of symbolic maintenance* in sustaining a moral community of conservative activists. The meeting can be studied in two ways:

1. First, as a set of *material practices* to maintain the institutional structures of American conservatism. In this capacity, the gathering provides a setting in which activists strategically pool, exchange, and deploy the resources needed for collective action, such as money, facilities, labor, and information.

2. Second, as a set of *symbolic practices* to establish and maintain the system of meanings that constitute American conservatism. In this capacity, the meeting provides a setting for participants to specify, debate, and reaffirm the core principles that animate their movement and construct the symbolic vehicles through which they mobilize resources. The gathering also serves a boundary-making purpose, helping its members to determine, in an ongoing fashion, who is in and out of the group.

Through these twin forms of exchange, which I refer to as *relations of force* and *relations of meaning*,<sup>12</sup> meeting participants simultaneously channel and direct the flow of resources, bolster the internal cohesion of their group, and uphold their identity as conservatives. The meeting thereby functions both in the manner of a strategy session and a religious ritual,<sup>13</sup> with Grover Norquist as its charismatic leader.<sup>14</sup>

This article's core theoretical argument is that relations of force (broadly construed, resource mobilization) and relations of meaning (framing and identity-construction) constitute two levels of analysis in the study of social movements, not competing explanatory phenomena. While the two levels are analytically separable and structurally autonomous, meaning that neither can be reduced to the other, I argue that inquiring into their linkage facilitates a greater understanding of the Wednesday meeting and its importance vis-à-vis the conservative movement.<sup>15</sup> By *linkage* I mean two things. The first is the *genetic linkage* of resources and symbols. Here my analysis builds on the classic Durkheim-Mauss hypothesis about the social genesis of categories—itsself a re-visitation of the Kantian problem of the origin of categories—and Pierre Bourdieu's extension of this theory.<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* provides a conceptual anchor for the argument. The claim is that, by inquiring into the process by which social movement actors are *fabricated*—that is, how they acquire their dispositional tendencies of perception, appreciation, and action—we gain additional purchase on how they in turn *fabricate* the movement of which they are a part. Thus, rather than analyze a particular dimension of the mobilization process (e.g., framing), this study attempts to capture the mutual constitution of actor and political movement through a close-up, on-the-ground examination of a single empirical object.

The second point of connection between social and mental structures is their *mutual conditioning*: just as a group's objective structural position—its command of resources—shapes its self-definition and capacity to impose meaning, so its choice of symbols influences the manner in which the group mobilizes resources. The Wednesday meeting provides an object lesson in this two-way relationship, showing the conservative movement's rising political fortunes to have seriously challenged its members' favored self-identification as “underdogs,” which has in turn predisposed them to a more incrementalist strategy characteristic of a movement-in-power.

The remainder of the article is organized in the following manner. First, I draw on secondary research and journalistic accounts to situate the Wednesday meeting historically in the recent tradition of the conservative movement, showing it to be the organizational successor to a series of efforts to ensure internal cohesion on the right. The next section offers an ethnographic description of the meeting. This is followed by an analytical discussion of how the meeting simultaneously facilitates the mobilization of material resources and symbolic meanings. I conclude the article with a discussion of the relationship between systems of material and symbolic exchange within the conservative movement.

#### AMERICAN CONSERVATISM AND THE "WEDNESDAY MEETING"

The Wednesday meeting must be situated historically with respect to other efforts by conservatives to ensure the internal cohesion of their group. In this respect, the period from the 1950s to the mid-1970s was especially critical, since it was during this time that American conservatives subjected themselves to a tremendous degree of collective self-scrutiny. The goal of this effort was nothing short of the stable unification of the conservative political program through a reconciliation of the gaps and tensions between its various intellectual strands.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the activity surrounding this unification effort occurred on the pages of conservative magazines and journals like *Commentary*, *The Public Interest*, *Human Affairs*, and the *National Review*. The publishers and editors of these journals included prominent conservatives like Frank Meyer, M. Stanton Evans, and William F. Buckley Jr., who became the primary architects of a project known as fusionism. These thinkers actively sought to reconstruct conservative philosophy by synthesizing its various strands based on the assumption that their differences were matters of emphasis and not fundamental incongruity. The primary ideological fault line faced by these mediating figures was between libertarian and traditionalist varieties of conservatism. Whereas the former strand identified economic individualism as the central value, the latter emphasized traditionalism on social issues. The eventual synthesis worked out and promoted by the fusionist thinkers retained the libertarian notion of individual economic freedom, but rooted this belief in the traditionalist conception of an objective moral order. Substantively, this meant a shift of priority among conservatives toward a moral, as opposed to a purely technical, defense of capitalism, and toward a more aggressive, interventionist foreign policy, with a heavy emphasis on defeating communism.<sup>18</sup>

Just as important as the formulation of a set of core principles around which conservatives could rally was their identification of a common philosophical opposition to the New Deal and to collectivist impulses in general. These ideological foils were conveniently embodied in the person of the secular humanist,

and in the real or perceived “new class” of professionals, technocrats, “pointy-headed intellectuals,” and bureaucrats who had acted as architects of liberal reform during the mid-twentieth century. For all their differences, the various kinds of conservatives could agree on a common distaste for those who had granted the federal government an unprecedented role in the management of economic and social life. The conservative movement thus retained both positive and negative bases of self-identification.<sup>19</sup>

The major result of the fusionist project was an ideological rejuvenation of conservatism in the 1960s. Although there remained rifts and internal contradictions on the right, including with respect to major issues such as the proper size and role of the state and the compatibility of capitalism with biblical faith, American conservatives were able to put aside many of their differences and direct their gaze toward the task of political mobilization. Their primary mission during this period became exerting influence within the Republican Party.<sup>20</sup>

Even though the fusionist project had largely succeeded and a conservative mobilization was underway, the need for symbolic and material coordination on the right persisted. But changing times called for changing political instruments. If the primary institutional medium through which conservatives strengthened their internal cohesion in the 1950s and 1960s was the political magazine or journal, then in the 1970s and 1980s it was the think tank. By now convinced that their movement was principally an intellectual struggle or “war of ideas,” conservative philanthropists poured money into right-wing policy research organizations to provide conservative thinkers an alternative to the perceived “liberal bastion” of academe. Older think tanks such as the Hoover Institution (established in 1919) and the American Enterprise Institute (1943), and newer ones like the Heritage Foundation (1973), the Cato Institute (1977), and the Manhattan Institute (1978), were the major beneficiaries of this philanthropic largesse.<sup>21</sup>

Conservative think tanks were well suited to the pressing task of crafting intellectual tools for use in political debates. However, beyond just promoting ideas and advancing policy prescriptions, these organizations gave conservative intellectuals a forum in which to develop, clarify, and debate the very premises and principles underpinning their movement. It is in this second, often overlooked, capacity that political think tanks extended the tradition of symbolic and material coordination that began a few decades earlier with the magazines and journals. Concretely, think tanks ran seminars and conferences, sponsored television and radio shows, published books and newsletters (not to mention additional magazines and journals), and invented new political terminology. The targets of their effort were not only policy makers, but also other conservative activists. In short, think tanks provided a sophisticated mobilizing instrument, accommodating a greater number of intellectual producers than the conservative magazines and generating a wider variety of intellectual products and practices.

This brief sketch of efforts to promote organizational and strategic unity on the right helps put the Wednesday meeting of conservative activists into historical perspective. In particular, it suggests that the weekly gathering, held since 1993, is heir to the fusionist tradition that began in the 1950s with the conservative magazines and continues to the present day with the think tanks. The continuity is apparent not only in the functions performed by the meeting, but also in its incorporation of political actors from both kinds of organizations.

The general proposition implied by this account is that as a social movement's political situation changes, new organizational forms and strategies are needed to address the emergent problems it faces. In the case of the conservative movement, a major theme has been increasing responsiveness to the exigencies of electoral politics following from the movement's growing success. Accordingly, the Wednesday meeting performs an added function for the right. In addition to promoting group unity, the meeting helps conservatives steer their movement between the opposing perils of *absorption* and *maximalism*. Like all activists, conservatives face the twin dangers of being absorbed by the government in power or becoming too extremist and therefore a liability to politicians. As the following section demonstrates, the weekly gathering provides an organizational setting for conservative activists to confront their allies in the state in order to establish a system of mutually beneficial exchange. In this context, activists maintain their distinctive conservative identities while nonetheless learning the necessities and constraints of electoral politics, including its unique rules of order, norms of reciprocity and compromise, procedural details, and temporal rhythms. Much like the effort to maintain internal cohesion, this process has both material and symbolic components.

#### GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEDNESDAY MEETING

The Wednesday meeting began in 1993 as a small-scale affair. First convened by the anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist for the specific purpose of mobilizing opposition to President Bill Clinton's health care plan, its original participants were the members of an ad hoc coalition composed of taxpayer and property rights organizations, the Christian Coalition, the National Rifle Association, and representatives from conservative media outlets such as the *American Spectator*. The group's major tactic during this initial period was to mount a pressure campaign against the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which had supported the president's plan. Norquist and his allies also coordinated a news media effort to erode Clinton's public popularity, the major vehicles of which were the *American Spectator*, the *Washington Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page.<sup>22</sup> Buoyed by the apparent efficacy of their operation, the meeting participants continued to hold weekly strategy sessions even after the defeat of the Clinton health care plan. Norquist saw his own political stock rise during this period as

well, as he helped draft the 1994 Contract With America with then-Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich.<sup>23</sup> Having developed a reputation as a top coalition builder and a clear communicator, Norquist found his services as a political strategist increasingly in demand.

Its focus no longer bounded by a single issue, and its status now attached to the rising prominence of its facilitator, the Wednesday meeting grew in size, scope, and importance throughout the 1990s. Soon the gathering was being attended by lobbyists, advocates, and operatives of various conservative stripes, as well as politicians and their staff who wanted to monitor and win the support of the conservative movement. As the prominence of the Wednesday meeting increased, so did its notoriety. Following First Lady Hillary Clinton's now-infamous January 1998 remark on NBC's *Today* show about a "vast right-wing conspiracy," it became commonplace for political observers to refer to the Wednesday meeting, with varying degrees of irony, as the headquarters of a conservative conspiracy and to Norquist himself as its leader.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the Clinton administration, the meeting was widely recognized in Washington as one of the central mechanisms of ideological and strategic coordination on the right.

The next watershed moment for the Wednesday meeting was the Republican Party's nomination of George W. Bush for president in 2000 and his subsequent victory in the national election. Bush and his principal advisor, Karl Rove, were determined to avoid the political mistakes of his father, President George H. W. Bush, who had lost the confidence of many conservatives by breaking his anti-tax pledge in 1990. As a result, they cultivated close ties with the conservative movement from the outset of their campaign. Rove, who had known Norquist since their days together in the College Republicans nearly twenty years earlier, invited him to Texas in November 1998 for a face-to-face meeting with the nascent presidential candidate. Norquist came away from the encounter convinced of Bush's conservative credentials and promptly threw his support behind the Texas governor.<sup>25</sup> For his part, Bush began sending a delegate to the Wednesday meeting in 1999 to monitor the pulse of the conservative movement. When George W. Bush was elected president in 2000, Norquist served on his transition team and became the principal architect of Bush's policy plan to cut taxes during each year of his administration.<sup>26</sup>

Its reputation now sealed, the Wednesday meeting became the topic of considerable news media focus. After Bush took office, reporters noted both the direct "pipeline" between conservatives and the White House, and the meeting's status as the major vehicle of the connection.<sup>27</sup> The *New York Times* quoted Norquist as saying, "There isn't an us and them with this administration. They is us. We is them," while *The Nation* called the meeting the "Grand Central Station" of the conservative movement.<sup>28</sup> In 2004, the *Washington Post* declared the Wednesday meeting "a Washington institution" and Norquist the "gardener of the conservative grass roots."<sup>29</sup>



While numerous newspaper and magazine articles have indeed been written about the Wednesday meeting, such pieces are characteristically based on a reporter's observation of a single session, if any at all. In addition to their empirical limitations, popular articles about the meeting often suffer from the mythologizing tendencies of commercial journalism.<sup>30</sup> To my knowledge, no account of the meeting apart from the present study has been based on recurring attendance. In the section that follows, I offer an ethnographic description of the Wednesday meeting that weaves together observations from fourteen sessions held in 2003 and 2004. The purpose of the section is to give a general flavor of the typical form and content of the gathering—its focus, choreography, and organization. The article's final section examines the relations of material and symbolic exchange that structure the meeting.

#### THE WEDNESDAY MEETING: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION

As ten o'clock approaches each Wednesday morning, a few dozen activists, lobbyists, and other assorted politicians mill about a medium-sized second-story conference room on L Street in downtown Washington, D.C.<sup>31</sup> Some members of the diverse crowd help themselves to coffee and bagels, while others rifle through briefcases or talk on cell phones. A more purposeful segment of the group distributes announcements, newspaper articles, campaign leaflets, policy briefs, and "talking points" memoranda. The regulars greet each other warmly and trade political gossip. During 2003 and 2004, much of this casual talk concerned the upcoming presidential election, including the Democratic Party's process of selecting its nominee. Those in attendance comprise a broad mix of conservative advocates, think tank scholars, journalists, campaign strategists, elected officials and candidates for office, as well as informal delegates from the White House, Congress, and various federal agencies.

People hastily fill the room as Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, takes his seat at the conference table in the center of the room. Wearing a clip-on microphone, Norquist initiates the fast-paced discussion with a pronouncement that is only partly ironic: "Alright, we've a got a star-studded, action-packed affair today." The roster of contributors assembled during the previous week includes about twenty-five speakers ranging in status from the humblest of grassroots organizers to the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich. With the exception of special guests, each of the contributors is allotted about three minutes to speak to the group, which typically numbers seventy to 100 people.

There is a built-in stratification to the room's physical arrangement. Most attendees sit in chairs arranged around its perimeter, while Norquist, his special guests, and an inner group of regulars—many of whom are employees of the Americans for Tax Reform—sit at the conference table. During the period of my

fieldwork, high-profile guests included several U.S. congressmen and senators, among them Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN); Karl Rove, President Bush's senior advisor and deputy chief of staff; the political pollster John Zogby; and two visiting members of the National Diet of Japan, the Japanese legislature. Focused and never rambling, the discussion shifts quickly from topic to topic, with occasional moments of levity. Speakers often refer to handouts that they have distributed before the session.

A typical exchange occurred on the morning of October 22, 2003, when Norquist introduced Michael Greve, a scholar from the American Enterprise Institute who had come to the meeting to discuss his idea for an "origin-based sales tax." An assistant from ATR handed the think tank scholar a microphone, and Greve offered a brief summary of a policy proposal he had recently written called "Sell Globally, Tax Locally," about a plan to encourage free market competition by restructuring the taxation of Internet sales. A brief round of questions followed, but the discussion ended almost as quickly as it began. Norquist then introduced a college-aged representative from an organization called Students for Academic Freedom, here to announce the formation of new campus chapters. The group, she explained, is a coalition of university-based centers dedicated to documenting and publicizing instances of political bias in academe. One of the group's major tactics is to promote an "academic bill of rights" defending the embattled ethos of free inquiry in the classroom. His tone polite and helpful, Norquist suggested that the organization conduct research on the political orientations of commencement speakers and other invited lecturers at major universities as a means of demonstrating a left-wing bias on campus.

Next on the agenda was Tamara Parks, the executive director of Fur Commission USA, a trade association representing over 400 mink farmers. Parks had come to speak about "eco-terrorism," the term she used for acts of violence committed by animal rights and environmental activists. The fur commission was lobbying for stronger legislation on the issue, she said, but the bill currently under consideration in Congress stood little chance of going through. What is needed, she said, is a high-profile eco-terrorism case to raise awareness on the issue, after which "the bill will fly." A discussion ensued about whether conservative allies within the FBI could pursue such a prosecution. One of the meeting participants suggested that until the proper legislation could be passed, a stand-alone clearinghouse should be formed to gather information on behalf of eco-terrorism victims and pressure the news media to publicize the issue: "The other team is much better coordinated on this. Every time a chicken sneezes, I get a press release from PETA. We need something equivalent."<sup>32</sup> Parks's impromptu consultant offered some further ideas about where the funding for such an organization might come from, and the two agreed to discuss it after the meeting.

Politicians and candidates for office are frequent guests at the Wednesday meeting. One such visitor this week was Tim Michels, a Senate candidate from

the state of Wisconsin. Michels, a Republican, stood and launched into a well-rehearsed political spiel, complete with invectives against his opponent, Democratic Senator Russ Feingold. After a minute, Norquist cut him off: "Alright, we don't need a stump speech. We're gonna stipulate that Feingold's bad and big government sucks. Now tell us where you stand on babies, guns and taxes." This query, about the candidate's stance on abortion, gun control, and tax policy, is Norquist's favorite way to interrogate the many politicians who come to the meeting seeking the conservative movement's support. Taking the cue that this is not a setting for boilerplate remarks, Michels shifted to a more conversational tone and indicated that he is "pro-baby, pro-gun, and anti-tax." Norquist soon came around to his second favorite question: "Have you signed the Pledge?" "No, but I'd be honored to," Michels said, referring to the Americans for Tax Reform's anti-tax pledge, the signers of which numbered more than 1,200 as of January 2006, including 222 current members of the House of Representative, forty-six U.S. senators, and President George W. Bush. Created at the organization's inception in 1986, the pledge has become the Americans for Tax Reform's most celebrated instrument of political persuasion.<sup>33</sup>

A few of the meeting's most regular speakers attend the session in an effort to manage relations between the conservative movement and the Republicans in power. The first of these is Bill Wichterman, a policy adviser to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, who offers the assembled group a weekly preview of upcoming Senate battles in the distinctive vernacular of Capitol Hill. "We're heading towards some fireworks on judges next week, and the Dems get one bump," he said during the meeting of October 29, 2003, in reference to an upcoming hearing on one of the president's judicial nominees. In the upcoming week, Wichterman said, there would be votes on class action lawsuit reform, anti-spam legislation, fair credit reporting, and an energy and water appropriations bill. While there was good reason to anticipate Republican victories on these measures, Wichterman conceded that a recently passed compromise package, or "legislative leadership agreement," included a bill honoring a "lefty labor activist." But it is better to pass symbolic measures like these to fulfill the terms of a compromise agreement, Wichterman argued, than to allow liberals to promote the "massive expansion of government." "We can do that well enough on our own," he joked, indicating a point of sensitivity among the group's fiscal conservatives, who feel that federal spending has gotten out of control on the current president's watch.

A second regular guest is Timothy Goeglein, White House special assistant to President George W. Bush and deputy director of the Office of Public Liaison. As unofficial link between the White House and the conservative movement, Goeglein attends the meeting nearly every Wednesday, and, in a manner similar to Wichterman, delivers a preview of the upcoming week at the White House.<sup>34</sup> During the session of November 5, 2003, he opened by noting that the president

was in good spirits, not only because today was his wedding anniversary and the first lady's birthday, but also because of yesterday's Republican gubernatorial victories in Tennessee and Kentucky. Goeglein lamented the *Washington Post's* scant coverage of the elections and said that if the Republicans had lost those states, the *Post* would undoubtedly have interpreted the losses as a general indictment of the president.<sup>35</sup>

Goeglein then shifted his remarks to the war in Iraq, particularly to the success stories coming out of it, many of which have gone unreported, he said. These include the new and renovated schools that are up and running throughout the country, the recent introduction of a new currency, and the creation of a police force composed of Iraqis. Goeglein was happy to report some positive domestic economic news as well. Recent data showed a seventeen-year high on housing starts, indicating "a red hot housing market." There were also promising developments in the manufacturing sector and falling gas prices, and consumer confidence was "trending in the right direction." Goeglein noted that the president would be doing a series of events in the upcoming week to "tout the new economy," including a key speech tomorrow at the Heritage Foundation. "I can get an advance copy of that to you if you need it," he offered, asking those in attendance to publicize the contents freely.

While the election returns from Kentucky and Tennessee were cause for celebration, the news from Louisiana was not so positive. Next on the agenda that week was a strategist from the losing gubernatorial campaign, who came to analyze the previous day's defeat. The loss could be attributed, he said, to two factors: first, the victor Kathleen Blanco's strongly negative television, radio, and mail campaign; and, second, the state party's lack of direction and leadership. Despite some modest signs of progress, Louisiana Republicans remain in the midst of an organizational crisis. A fine-grained discussion of the campaign followed, during which a strategist from another state charged the Louisiana team with having misplayed its hand: "You can't play a New Orleans strategy upstate or vice versa," he said, referring to the need to differentiate between rural and urban campaign tactics. Another attendee asked why the president didn't pay a visit to Louisiana to bolster support for the Republican candidate, and the answer was that the idea was considered but there was fear that President Bush's presence "might galvanize black voter turnout." The discussion proceeded to touch on several more of the myriad strategic concerns of electoral politics involving dilemmas of principle versus pragmatism, long-term versus short-term goals, and collective versus personal objectives.<sup>36</sup>

On rare occasions, when there is a highly pressing political development, a single issue will take up much of the discussion. Such was the case on November 19, 2003, when most of the speakers addressed the major piece of Medicare reform legislation that was currently before Congress. If passed, the legislation would constitute the largest expansion of the program in its forty-year

history. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate had already passed versions of the bill, yet there were substantial differences between the two and a bipartisan compromise agreement was being worked on. The legislation included a number of revisions to the existing Medicare program, such as making senior citizens eligible for a drug discount card and establishing prescription drug coverage at a low monthly premium. The bill was also designed to institute a new investment option known as the Health Savings Account (HSA), a tax-free, interest-accruing personal account to which individuals could contribute from their salaries to cover future medical expenses.

By this time, the Republicans had fought long and hard to pass the legislation, which they saw as the first step toward privatizing the American health care system. But it was precisely this determination that left them vulnerable to the Democrats' demands for further entitlement provisions. In fact, many conservatives in the room felt that the efforts at compromise had already gone too far, and that the agreement included excessive "giveaways." This was a critical juncture for the legislation because if Congress did not pass it before the year-end recess later in the month, it was unlikely to be resurrected. Failure to pass the bill would have left all the legislators, particularly those in the Republican majority, open to the charge of producing "gridlock" in Congress.

The first speaker to address the topic was Dan Mitchell, a senior fellow and tax policy expert at the Heritage Foundation. Emphasizing that his concerns were specifically with its long-term tax and fiscal implications, Mitchell spoke out against the Medicare legislation. His thesis was that the measure was undesirable because it "would make America more like France" by expanding the size of the federal government. Mitchell was highly skeptical of the \$400 billion price tag placed on the plan by Congress and estimated that the real cost will be more than twice that much. "You can bet it will be closer to \$1 trillion," he said, since Congress had not factored into its cost estimate the inevitable change in demand for health care that would result from the bill's passage. "People change their behavior when the government is going to give them something for free," he explained. Mitchell's central point was that the Medicare plan would stand in the way of the conservatives' goal of extending and making permanent the Bush tax cuts. When spending gets out of control, he argued, it creates an environment in which tax increases are more likely to occur. Whatever benefits the bill might have are offset by its considerable cost, which could mean an additional \$700 billion in taxes.

Anticipating such an attack, the White House had sent a special representative to the meeting, Special Assistant to the President for Economic Policy Doug Badger. Badger urged the conservatives to support the bill, first, because it contained a measure to encourage private competition with the Medicare program by 2006, and, second, because the bill would reduce overall Medicare subsidies by shifting certain costs to the states and giving smaller subsidies to seniors with

household incomes over \$80,000. The plan would also put a cap on the amount of general revenue that can go into the program, a limit that was previously absent.

Badger faced a tough audience. Following his remarks, representatives from the National Taxpayers Union, the American Conservative Union, and the Institute for Health Freedom all spoke out against the plan, citing the weakness of the revenue cap, which could easily be raised in the future. The plan, they argued, mortgages trillions of dollars on the deficit for future generations. Furthermore, the wealth provision mentioned as one of the bill's drawing points was just a tax increase on the wealthy in disguise, since now the rich would be paying a higher proportion of Medicare costs. Finally, although there was general acknowledgement that the Health Savings Accounts would build the groundwork for privatization, the consensus on the legislation was that "nothing in there can truly be referred to as privatization." Badger responded to the skeptical audience by granting that the proposed cap on spending was not a real cap, but only a "step in the right direction." However, he disagreed that the wealth provision amounted to a tax on the wealthy, since reducing a federal subsidy is not the same as increasing taxes. Badger closed his remarks by acknowledging that the Republicans "lost the battle for privatization" in this round, but suggested that its foundations had been laid for the future.

The debate up to this point functioned largely as a prologue for the day's special guest, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. Here to mediate between the fiscal conservatives who disliked the bill and the free-market conservatives who saw in it the seeds of health care privatization, Gingrich spoke out in favor of the Medicare reform act. His primary message to the group was that they must start "thinking like a majority" by accepting the logic of incremental progress. That's how the welfare state was built, he said, and that is how it must be dismantled. Citing his own efforts to "stop Hillary-care" and promote the Contract With America as examples of incremental progress, Gingrich said Medicare reform is a step toward a more conservative country because it "moves you toward choice."<sup>37</sup> Gingrich saw other benefits in the legislation as well. He cited in particular a major "shift in plate tectonics" now that the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the largest voluntary organization in America, was on the Republican side of an issue and against the Democrats. And there was yet another hidden advantage: Gingrich predicted that the bill's passage would "break up the collectivist language" of union members because when employers adopt the strategy of giving Health Savings Accounts to their non-union employees, the unions would start fighting for them.

In general, Gingrich said, we can "migrate Medicare" rather than destroy it by creating choices that baby boomers will take advantage of. Not only would the bill dramatically modernize Medicare, but the discount cards would be a political "winner" for the president. Ever the astute strategist, Norquist asked, "Who will send them the discount cards, President Bush?" The answer, unfortunately, was

that the discount cards would have to come from the private insurance companies, but Gingrich assured Norquist that the Republicans would be able to capitalize on this measure politically. To the “balanced budget conservatives,” Gingrich said pointedly, “if you don’t reform the health care system, you will never have a balanced budget. Never.” “Having written the only two balanced budgets since the ’20s,” Gingrich said he knows what he’s talking about. He concluded, to considerable applause, “This is a huge victory and I urge you to back it.”

The Wednesday meeting almost always concludes with an informal sequence called “the good of the order,” during which anyone can take the microphone and make a brief announcement or request. Participants offer a number of secondary observations: for example, a compilation of President Ronald Reagan’s most important speeches is now available at the Conservative Political Action Committee’s website; a staff member at the American Conservative Union will be performing at a jazz club next week; there is an interesting op-ed piece in yesterday’s *Wall Street Journal* about global warming. Then, with lunchtime approaching and the week’s agenda now established, the meeting adjourns.

#### RELATIONS OF MATERIAL AND SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE

Two important questions motivate this ethnographic study of the Wednesday meeting: what are the bases of the conservative movement’s internal cohesion? And how do movement activists maintain congruous relations with state officials without suffering a loss of their conservative identity? The weekly meeting of conservative activists offers a partial but efficient empirical object for addressing these questions. I argue that the gathering is a double-sided realm of exchange, functioning simultaneously as an instrument of material power and a ritual of symbolic maintenance among conservative activists and their political allies. On the one hand, the gathering provides a setting in which activists pool, exchange, and deploy the resources needed for collective action, such as money, facilities, labor, and information. At the same time, the meeting offers a venue for participants to specify, debate, and reaffirm the core principles that animate their movement and construct the symbolic vehicles through which they mobilize resources. The following paragraphs separate these levels of exchange analytically and consider them in turn, prior to a discussion of their linkage.

#### *Relations of Force*

First, the Wednesday meeting enables conservatives to accumulate, manage, and decide how to channel the various forms of power at their disposal. Most strikingly, attendees use the gathering to cultivate social networks, often for the sake of collaborative projects and to avoid replicating each other’s efforts. A norm of reciprocity prevails according to which activists, many of whom have

ties to news media organizations, are expected to promote each other's causes. The presence of delegates from the White House and Congress is especially important in this respect because it allows activists to coordinate their efforts with conservative allies in the state through a discussion of "what's on the agenda" in the coming week. In addition to building social capital, the meeting enables participants to marshal cultural authority by providing each other with intellectual ammunition for use in public debates, such as empirical data and rhetorical "talking points." Budget numbers, revenue numbers, and polling numbers, in particular, play into nearly every exchange. Meeting participants also use the discussion to exchange knowledge related to fundraising, protesting, campaigning, and other facets of political mobilization.

In a personal interview, Norquist describes the Wednesday meeting in analogous terms:

If you want to have lower taxes, there are twenty different ways you can cut them. So what you talk about at a Wednesday meeting . . . is what is the best tax cut to do next? What's the most popular? What's the most likely to succeed? What's the one that, if we pass it, allows us to pass another tax cut rather than, "Oh, we passed one tax cut so we don't get to do anymore for awhile." You're now talking tactics and strategy. . . . What do we have votes on? Do you take an idea and pass it at the state level, and then try to introduce it at the federal level? Or do we have more support in the House and the Senate at the national level and we pass it at the national level and then the states will follow? Do you do it through the initiative process or through the legislative process? All of these are interesting and important issues.<sup>38</sup>

In this view, the Wednesday gathering facilitates a tactical exchange between like-minded political allies. While such resources as money, facilities, and labor do not typically change hands within the confines of the meeting itself, it is nevertheless apparent that decisions reached and personal contacts made therein channel and direct the flow of these resources. Participants discuss the most efficient ways to raise and spend money, for example, sometimes directing each other to specific funding sources. A hefty job listings bulletin is circulated to meeting participants on a weekly basis, facilitating the movement of personnel between organizations. Finally, it is not uncommon for participants to discuss the use and exchange of facilities and equipment. In one session, for example, a representative from a think tank specializing in national security issues came to the meeting simply to advertise the availability of office space in the organization's downtown building. The Wednesday gathering thus provides an institutional nexus for coordinating resource transfers of various kinds.

### *Relations of Meaning*

On a more symbolic level, the Wednesday meeting enables conservatives to construct the political world as a set of meaningful objects. Far from ready-made,



a social movement collectivity, like any group, is the product of symbolic work that includes processes of self-identification, aggregation, and demarcation. A group's self-fabrication analytically precedes its capacity to act politically. Even after the group can be said to exist, symbolic forms provide a major source of both its internal cohesion and its external expression. Groups are organized according to principles of classification that their members not only share, but find meaningful and salient. These mental categories give rise to boundary-making practices that determine who is in and out of the group, and they provide the symbolic vehicles of the group's strategic action. Thus, more than mere "casing," principles of classification become the principles of the formation, organization, and mobilization of social movement collectivities.

In this manner, the Wednesday gathering functions as a ritual of group maintenance, helping conservatives to establish and uphold the system of meanings that constitute conservatism itself. There are two aspects to this process. The first, more internally oriented side is a set of boundary-making practices that sustain group cohesion. A great deal of attention is paid, for example, to assessing the character of new and rising figures in the movement and the Republican Party, often to figure out whether or not they are "genuinely conservative." Similarly, Norquist's ritualistic refrain of "babies, guns, and taxes" recognizes and validates the movement's various branches: religious and social conservatives, as symbolized by the issue of abortion ("babies"); libertarians and privacy-rights conservatives, as symbolized by the issue of Second Amendment rights ("guns"); and anti-tax and free market conservatives, as symbolized by the issue of tax policy ("taxes"). Significantly, not once during the fourteen sessions I attended did any politician answer Norquist's question in a way that engendered debate, suspicion, or disagreement: everyone purported to be "pro-baby, pro-gun, and anti-tax," which is to say, "conservative." Rather than a topic of substantive discussion, the "babies, guns, and taxes" slogan served to identify the core issues that were not open to fundamental debate—the symbolic *sine qua non* of group membership, so to speak. The phrase implied that to be "pro-baby, pro-gun, and anti-tax" was to be conservative, and vice versa. In the face of possible disagreements over other issues—the most salient being foreign policy, trade, and immigration—the phrase underscored the need for harmony among divergent fractions of the right, whose members might not otherwise get along with one another.

Once again, Norquist describes the Wednesday meeting in terms consistent with this analytical view:

TM: What is the content of the [conservative] "consensus position"? How do you know it when you see it? How do you know it when it's violated?

GN: Well, something like the Wednesday meeting. You find out when people go, "Gee, I have a problem with this. . . ." If you have all the different interests in the room . . . [you] get everybody in the room focused on talking about what you're doing, and

then you say, “What about this idea?” And if everyone says I am either for it or I’m indifferent, it’s an okay position. The pro-lifers may not care about some gun issue. But if somebody [says], “No, that’s a problem”—where there are disagreements, [you] try to minimize them. And so the whole point of the meetings is to figure out how we translate the general ideas into what we do today, tomorrow, over the next five years, and how we work together without tripping.<sup>39</sup>

The Wednesday meeting thereby reinforces both the sense and the substance of collective identity among conservative activists.

The second, more externally oriented aspect of relations of meaning in the Wednesday meeting is the construction of symbolic vehicles of political mobilization, especially through framing efforts. Participants collectively decide how to think and talk about their movement, often by attaching their particular ideals and priorities to the larger backdrop of American values such as freedom, liberty, individual choice, and equal opportunity. Such efforts involve crafting a persuasive language of political debate. Attendees are reminded, for example, to say “*embryonic* stem cell research” rather than just “stem cell research” when speaking on television, because the former phrase underscores the central issue from the conservative point of view. Through countless such admonitions, conservatives formulate a coherent worldview and the means to communicate it to political elites and the mass public. The Wednesday meeting thus provides a setting in which symbolic meanings are transmitted, learned, and battled over, for the sake of both internal cohesion and public outreach.

### *Managing Alliances with the Government in Power*

The meeting is more than simply a movement organizing session, however. It also allows conservatives to manage their relationships with politicians and state officials in order to avoid the twin dangers of *absorption* and *maximalism*. Activists use the gathering to reaffirm their conservative identity by symbolically distinguishing themselves from non-conservatives. Importantly, the primary foil for this distinction is not the political left, but the Republican Party. Meeting participants routinely express their disapproval of Republicans who are perceived as centrist or inclined to abandon conservative principles in order to mollify their constituents. The Wednesday meeting thereby functions as a weekly declaration of autonomy in which activists proclaim that what defines a conservative is a set of ideas and values, not a party affiliation.

The presence of politicians and other state officials at the gathering gives such declarations a certain immediacy they might not otherwise have. While treated as potential allies, politicians are regarded with a degree of suspicion and expected to affirm their conservatism publicly and unequivocally. Public commitments such as the Americans for Tax Reform’s anti-tax pledge and the “babies, guns, and taxes” query are only the most obvious mechanisms of

accountability, which usually take on a more informal character. Though typically casual in their demeanor, the politicians who speak at the Wednesday gathering tend to do so as if they are addressing the conservative movement itself. They come, in other words, to win approval, to ask permissions, to clarify misconceptions, to rally support, to publicize some important state of affairs, or simply to introduce themselves. By demanding such courtesies of Republican allies and actively critiquing their less responsive colleagues, conservative activists avoid being absorbed by the party with which they seek an alliance.

This strategy of identity maintenance is effective only within the context of efforts to avoid the opposite peril of ideological extremism. The latter project is carried out mostly through pragmatic rather than ideological means: right-wing extremism is pre-empted not by philosophical debate, but by default, since *political feasibility* is the implied precondition for any proposal, suggestion, or plan of action discussed in the meeting. Politicians and state officials play a critical role in the process of defining political feasibility by instructing activists about the necessities and constraints of electoral politics, including its specific rules of order, norms of reciprocity, temporal rhythms, and procedural details. Newt Gingrich's recommendation that the conservative activists accept the logic of incremental change, for example, suggests a didactic function to the Wednesday meeting. Extremists are thus marginalized at the gathering based on the sheer impracticality of their positions.

In summary, conservative activists affirm through the Wednesday meeting that they are neither Republican Party functionaries nor extremists whose values and commitments divorce them from viable participation in electoral politics. More than just an organizing session, the meeting is a confrontation between the conservative movement and state officials who share the goal of establishing a system of reciprocal exchange. Each party gains from the interaction. Activists get a regular audience with powerful political actors and a weekly lesson on the exigencies of electoral politics. Politicians get, first, an efficient means of monitoring the movement that largely fuels their party's success, and, second, the attention of highly mobilized activists, many of whom are ready to assist in the promotion of the Republican policy agenda. The coordination achieved between these two groups is never final, but must be continually negotiated and maintained.

### *Resources and Meanings: Toward a Genetic Linkage*

While it is possible to separate analytically the *relations of force* and *relations of meaning* that constitute a political movement, a fuller understanding requires looking at them simultaneously and inquiring into their linkage. In its current state, social movement theory incorporates both analytical levels. Relations of force are best captured in the notion of *resources*, understood as

media of power,<sup>40</sup> while relations of meaning are captured in the notion of *symbolic forms*, including frames and collective identities. A theory of their linkage is needed not only because the two modes of exchange unfold concurrently in time and space, but also because they extensively condition one another. To take the present case, the Wednesday meeting is a setting in which conservative activists deploy material resources in order to construct and promote symbolic meanings; yet it is also a forum in which they manage symbolic meanings as a means of integrating their various resources.

First, far from a purely mental act, the capacity to impose meaning in public debates is strongly conditioned by the Wednesday group's command of material resources, particularly its access to media institutions. Attendees of the meeting promote symbolic frames as part of the everyday practice of writing newspaper and magazine columns, appearing on news radio and television programs, writing policy reports for think tanks, and organizing grassroots activism. Their success or failure in this endeavor cannot be understood apart from their material resource capacities, especially the strength of their institutions. On the other hand, symbolic cohesion among structurally disparate elements of the Wednesday group facilitates the complementary fusion of resources. Each fraction of the diverse group contributes a distinctive political asset to it: economic capital in the case of business elites, technical authority from policy experts, access to political elites from lobbyists and other political specialists, moral authority from religious leaders, and mass organizing capacity from grassroots activists. An advantageous combination of resources thus springs from symbolic processes of group maintenance.

This argument about the linkage of social and mental structures builds on the classic Durkheim-Mauss hypothesis about the social genesis of categories—itsself a re-visitation of the Kantian problem of the origin of categories—and Bourdieu's extension of this theory.<sup>41</sup> In their essay "Primitive Classification," Durkheim and Mauss "sociologized" what was until then a strictly philosophical problem by proposing a basic correspondence between the social organization of a group (i.e., social structures) and the systems of meaning or classification (i.e., symbolic structures) shared by its members. Their argument was that, rather than being invariant, trans-historical, or God-given, mental categories have a social genesis. Because they are acquired in social life, the systems of classification that actors carry with them mirror the organization of the groups from which they originate.

An important contemporary extension of this theory lies in the work of Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>42</sup> One of Bourdieu's basic propositions is that there is a "genetic linkage" between social and mental structures, meaning a relationship of mutual constitution and two-way causal influence. The crucial conceptual mechanism Bourdieu offers for characterizing this linkage is the notion of *habitus*, which refers to a "socialized subjectivity" constituted by a set of layered, embodied

dispositions acquired through formal and informal education. A habitus is a mental structure that both emerges from and mirrors a social structure, thereby linking the worlds of objective force and symbolic representation.<sup>43</sup> Simply put, Bourdieu's proposition is that relations of force and relations of meaning are linked in the body of the social actor. An actor learns the objective necessities and constraints of his or her setting and incorporates them, in a bodily sense, as dispositional tendencies of classification, evaluation, and action. At the same time, the objective forces structuring the setting exist only because properly socialized agents activate these principles in their everyday practice. Habitus is therefore both the *internalization of external structures*, because agents learn to relate to the world using categories that mirror the objective structure of their setting, and the *externalization of internal structures*, because agents collectively produce the relations of force that constitute a given social structure by activating their dispositional tendencies.<sup>44</sup>

In the case of the Wednesday meeting, this linkage between social and mental structures is evident in the distinctive set of ideological and practical dispositions that the gathering helps to engender and reinforce, which thereby animate the conservative movement. The meeting helps to inculcate the systems of thought and action needed for right-wing mobilization, even as it provides an organizational setting for conservative elites to activate these principles. Importantly, conservative activists make tactical choices concerning the mobilization of resources that are *expressive* of their identities, rather than strictly rational. Just as framing is not a purely symbolic act, so strategizing is not a purely rational or calculative one. For example, Newt Gingrich's admonition to "think like a majority" illustrates a shifting self-imagination within the conservative movement, and, correspondingly, a shifting strategic orientation. The supposed challenger or "outsider" status of the movement, a notion that played strongly into conservatives' self-understanding for many years,<sup>45</sup> is less viable now that the movement occupies a position of power. It is likely that there is a growing willingness among conservative elites to accept the logic of incremental progress to advance their goals. In general, then, the symbolic self-conception of conservative activists coincides with, and contributes to, their strategic decision-making calculus, including their acquisition and deployment of resources.

The central analytical point is that by inquiring into the process by which social movement actors are fabricated—that is, how they acquire their dispositional tendencies of perception, appreciation, and action—we gain additional purchase on how they in turn fabricate the movement of which they are a part. In particular, movement strategy, as mediated by the socialized dispositions of conservative activists, is heavily bound up with group processes of identity formation and maintenance. The simultaneity and co-presence of these functions render the Wednesday meeting an especially salient and meaningful nexus of exchange for conservative activists.

## NOTES

1. Karl Rove, from a speech given at the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) conference, February 17, 2005.

2. At the start of the 2005 governing sessions, Republicans held fifty-five out of 100 seats in the U.S. Senate, 232 out of 435 seats in the House of Representatives, twenty-eight out of fifty state governorships, and majorities in fifty-four out of 100 state legislative chambers. By 2008, Republicans will have controlled the White House for twenty-eight of the previous forty years.

3. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan, 2004).

4. Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006). The study of American conservatism remained underdeveloped until somewhat recently, but there is now a burgeoning literature on the subject. See, for example, Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Times, 1986); Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986); Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming, *The Conservative Movement* (Boston: Twayne, 1988); Jerome L. Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 409-29; Leo P. Ribuffo, "Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything about It?" *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 438-49; Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guilford, 1995); John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1994* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001); Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

5. Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*.

6. Murray J. Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (Chicago: Markham, 1971).

7. William Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey, 1975).

8. The Wednesday meeting has been discussed prominently in many newspaper and magazine articles and in a few books. See, for example, Robin Toner, "Conservatives Savor Their Role as Insiders at the White House," *New York Times*, March 19, 2001; "The Caveman Cometh," *The Economist*, March 31, 2001; Robert Dreyfuss, "Grover Norquist: 'Field Marshal' of the Bush Plan," *The Nation*, May 14, 2001; Peter Beinart, "Going Stronger; What Conservatives Understand about Taxes," *The New Republic*, May 21, 2001; Mara Liasson, "Political Activist Grover Norquist," *Morning Edition Roll Call*, National Public Radio, May 25, 2001; Susan Page, "Norquist Power High, Profile Low," *USA Today*, June 1, 2001; John Aloysius Farrell, "Right Where He Belongs," *Boston Globe*, April 17, 2002; Jill Zuckman, "Pipeline Leads to White House," *Chicago Tribune*, June 9, 2003;

Michael Scherer, "The Soul of the New Machine," *Mother Jones*, January-February 2004; and Laura Blumenfeld, "Sowing the Seeds of GOP Domination," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2004. See also John B. Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*.

9. I secured permission to attend the Wednesday meeting through personal contacts developed as part of a study of the history of American think tanks. My initial purpose in observing these sessions was to learn more about the role played by the right-wing think tanks in the conservative movement. I spread out my observations over a fourteen-month period, attending sessions in several clusters in order to observe long-term patterns in the meeting's form and content. I took extensive fieldnotes, both during and after the meetings, but was not permitted to record the sessions.

10. A 2001 profile of Norquist in *The Nation* (Dreyfuss, "Grover Norquist") identifies him, Keene, and Weyrich as three of the four major leaders of the conservative movement during the past generation:

[O]ver the past decade Norquist has eclipsed such older stalwarts as Ed Feulner of the Heritage Foundation, David Keene of the American Conservative Union and Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation to emerge as the managing director of the hard-core right in Washington.

Reprinted with permission from the May 14, 2001, issue of *The Nation* magazine. For subscription information, call 1-800-333-8536. Portions of each week's *Nation* magazine can be accessed at <http://www.thenation.com>.

11. J. Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 527-53.

12. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7.

13. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (1912; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1995).

14. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (1915; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1947).

15. Examining the linkage between social and mental structures has recently been an explicit priority for social movement scholars, yet a systematic approach to this project has not been developed. See Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, "Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory," *Sociological Forum* 14, no. 1 (1999): 27-54; David S. Meyer, "Tending the Vineyard: Cultivating Political Process Research," *Sociological Forum* 14, no. 1 (1999): 79-92; Francesca Polletta, "Snarls, Quacks, and Quarrels: Culture and Structure in Political Process Theory," *Sociological Forum*, 14, no. 1 (1999): 63-70; Charles Tilly, "Wise Quacks," *Sociological Forum* 14, no. 1 (1999): 55-61; and Jeffrey P. Broadbent, "Movement in Context: Thick Social Networks and Environmental Mobilization in Japan," in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

16. Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, trans. Rodney Needham (1903; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (1980; reprint, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990).

17. The following four paragraphs draw from Himmelstein, *To the Right*.

18. There is some disagreement as to which side, the libertarian or the traditionalist, was more successful in imposing its definition of conservatism. In her review of Himmelstein, *To the Right*, for example, Klatch (p. 802) argues, "Although he concludes that the fusionist synthesis leans heavily toward libertarianism, the evidence presented indicates that the emphasis

on religion actually accommodates traditionalism more than libertarianism.” Rebecca E. Klatch, “Review of *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism*, by Jerome Himmelstein,” *American Journal of Sociology* 96, no. 3 (1990): 801-3.

19. In addition to bringing together disparate intellectual strands on the right, the effort to reconstruct conservative ideology involved purging certain others, particularly the most racist and nationalist elements, from the conservative ranks. On this point, see Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties*.

20. In this regard, the Republican nomination of Barry Goldwater for president in 1964 has increasingly been identified as the watershed moment of conservative influence within the party. See, for example, Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties*; Robert Alan Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995); and Perlstein, *Before the Storm*.

21. R. Kent Weaver, “The Changing World of Think Tanks,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 22, no. 3 (1989): 563-78; Frank Fischer, “American Think Tanks: Policy Elites and the Politicization of Expertise,” *Governance*, 4, no. 3 (1991): 332-53; James A. Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Jean Stefanic and Richard Delgado, *No Mercy: How Conservative Think Tanks and Foundations Changed America’s Social Agenda* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Thomas Medvetz, “Merchants of Expertise: Think Tanks and Intellectuals in the U.S. Field of Power” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2006).

22. John Judis (p. 212) names Grover Norquist as the “key political operative in engineering Clinton’s [health care] defeat,” and suggests that the “Wednesday group” was the original source of public scrutiny of President Clinton’s Arkansas land deal (“Whitewater”), which eventually led to the special investigation by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr resulting in Clinton’s impeachment. Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy*.

23. Gingrich praises Norquist in a 2001 article in *The Nation*: “He is essentially the most creative and most effective conservative activist in the country. He is both a serious conservative intellectual [and] a remarkable implementer of effective communications and grassroots political strategies”; Dreyfuss, “Grover Norquist.”

24. Hence, in 2001, *The Economist* suggested that the Wednesday meeting was both the key to understanding George Bush’s Washington and proof that Hillary Clinton was correct about the existence of a vast right-wing conspiracy; see “The Caveman Cometh.” Months later, NPR noted on its *Morning Edition* show, “If you believe in a vast, right-wing conspiracy, this is its clubhouse”; Liasson, “Political Activist Grover Norquist.” For other explicit associations between the Norquist meeting and the “vast right-wing conspiracy,” see Farrell, “Right Where He Belongs”; and Zuckman, “Pipeline Leads to White House.”

25. According to *The Nation* in 2001 (Dreyfuss, “Grover Norquist”),

Norquist’s support was decisive in swinging the bulk of the conservative movement into Bush’s camp by early 1999. . . . Then, when Bush ran into trouble battling Senator John McCain of Arizona, Norquist mobilized the right against McCain in the early primaries, especially in South Carolina—and, in the process, cemented his ties to Bush and Rove.

The same article goes on to speculate,

To a significant degree, George W. Bush owes his election to Norquist, whose early support was crucial in lining up the right behind the Texas governor’s campaign. And if Bush . . . has managed to forge a governing coalition that includes both Big Business and the far right, Norquist’s skillful ability to hold that coalition together is a big reason why.



26. While it is difficult to weigh the various lines of influence leading to the passage of the Bush tax cuts, a journalistic consensus has emerged that Norquist was one of the key figures in their implementation. For example, NPR reported in 2001, “No piece of legislation is as important to the president’s agenda as the tax cut, and no one person outside of Congress had more to do with getting it passed than a conservative activist named Grover Norquist”; Liasson, “Political Activist Grover Norquist.”

27. See Zuckman, “Pipeline Leads to White House.” See also Dante Chinni, “Washington’s Tax-Cut True-Believers Are ‘in’ Again,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 20, 2001.

28. Toner, “Conservatives Savor Their Role.” The *Nation* quote is from Dreyfuss, “Grover Norquist.”

29. Blumenfeld, “Sowing the Seeds of GOP Domination.” (c) 2004, *The Washington Post*. Reprinted with permission.

30. For example, in a typical flourish, the *Washington Post* marvels, “The shades are down, the lights are weak, yet an incandescent assuredness infuses the room”; Blumenfeld, “Sowing the Seeds of GOP Domination.” Such invocations of secret, back-room dealings are not uncommon in accounts of the Wednesday meeting. See also Scherer, “The Soul of the New Machine.”

31. I have altered or omitted the names of participants who are not public figures.

32. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is a non-profit animal rights organization.

33. The Federal Pledge, “started in 1986 as the first project of Americans for Tax Reform,” runs as follows:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, pledge to the taxpayers of the \_\_\_\_\_ district of the State of \_\_\_\_\_ and to the American People that I will: ONE, oppose any and all efforts to increase the marginal income tax rates for individuals and/or businesses; and TWO, oppose any net reduction or elimination of deductions and credits, unless matched dollar for dollar by further reducing tax rates.

Tim Michels lost his Senate race to Russ Feingold in the November 2004 elections.

34. In an interview with NPR (Liasson, “Political Activist Grover Norquist”), Goeglein explains,

I attend Grover Norquist’s meeting at least twice and sometimes three times a month, and the reason I go is because I am specifically tasked in the White House with outreach to conservatives. I make it a point to make sure that they, the conservative community, understand exactly what the president’s message is and to make sure that I bring from those meetings thoughts from the groups and individuals back to the White House.

35. In general, attendees of the Wednesday meeting tend to prefer the *Washington Times* to the *Post*, sometimes referring to the latter as an organ of the “liberal establishment.”

36. There is a considerable amount of talk at the Wednesday meeting about local party and campaign structures, much of it rooted in very particular historical and regional circumstances.

37. The term “Hillary-care” is a pejorative reference to President Bill Clinton’s 1993 health care plan. First Lady Hillary Clinton led the administration’s unsuccessful effort to install this plan as federal law. The Contract With America was a 1994 policy plan written by Republicans in anticipation of their new status as the majority party in Congress. Newt Gingrich played a leading role in its design.

38. Author interview with Grover Norquist, Americans for Tax Reform, August 2, 2004.

39. Interview with Grover Norquist, August 2, 2004.

40. One of the most apt characterizations of resources may be found in William H. Sewell Jr.'s theory of structure, which is worth quoting at length:

Resources are of two types, human and nonhuman. Nonhuman resources are objects, animate or inanimate, naturally occurring or manufactured, that can be used to enhance or maintain power; human resources are physical strength, dexterity, knowledge, and emotional commitments that can be used to enhance or maintain power, including knowledge of the means of gaining, retaining, controlling, and propagating either human or nonhuman resources. Both types of resources are media of power and are unevenly distributed.

William H. Sewell Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992): 9-10. Resources, then, are forms of power needed for collective action. They may be incorporated in the person of the social actor, or they may be physical objects like factories, weapons, land, and money.

41. Durkheim and Mauss, *Primitive Classification*; and Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.

42. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Attitude of the Algerian Peasant toward Time," in *Mediterranean Countrymen*, ed. Jesse Pitt-Rivers (Paris: Mouton, 1964), 55-72; Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*; and Pierre Bourdieu, "Bodily Knowledge," in his *Pascalian Meditations* (1997; reprint, Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 128-63.

43. On the concept of habitus, see also Loïc Wacquant, "Habitus," in *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology*, ed. Milan Zafirovski (London: Routledge, 2005).

44. Owing perhaps to the apparent seamlessness of this model, one of the most common errors is to interpret Bourdieu as a theorist of social reproduction. However, the possibility—in fact, the necessity—of structural transformation is built into the model because agents are socialized into multiple settings and *traverse social space*, routinely transposing schemas of classification, evaluation, and action they have acquired from one domain into another. The theory is therefore just as well suited to describing cases of structural change arising out of the tension or incongruity between structure and habitus as it is to describing cases of perfect congruity and reproduction.

45. Himmelstein, *To the Right*.

*Thomas Medvetz (tmm@berkeley.edu) is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. His doctoral dissertation examines the history and present-day effects of American think tanks.*