

HEADLINE: The Road to Rightville**BYLINE:** By Stephen Metcalf.

Stephen Metcalf writes the Dilettante column for Slate and is a frequent contributor to the Book Review.

BODY:

As I grow older, I avail myself more and more of the ancient prerogatives of old men. I hitch my pants high, shake my head at the barbarous young and drive a stone-cold 55 on the highway. I'm risk-averse and dress as I please. (In my beginning is my end: I've evolved from slob to hipster slob to ironic slob back, finally, to slob.) I distrust change, labor unions and Al Sharpton and believe that at high enough rates income taxes become confiscatory. In short, I am white, privileged, middle-aged and boring. But one thing I am not, and never will be, is a conservative. The recent essay anthology "Why I Turned Right: Leading Baby Boom Conservatives Chronicle Their Political Journeys" (Threshold Editions, \$23) has given us liberals a chance to think about why, even in our calcifying stodginess, American conservatism remains a nonstarter for us, a stack of loyalty oaths we'd never be tempted to sign.

There is, to begin with, the careful misnomer of the book's subtitle. These aren't in any recognizable sense "journeys." They're conversion narratives. Setting aside two predictably thoughtful essays, one by David Brooks and the other by Peter Berkowitz, a more accurate wording might have been "Why I Turned Right: Or, The Experience That Closed My Mind Forever." Richard Starr, writing about the revulsion he felt for the 1970s, begins his essay by concluding, "Jimmy Carter made me the conservative I am today, as I suspect he did many members of my generation." P. J. O'Rourke, in his engaging but maddeningly evasive entry, tells us he became a conservative "at 11:59 p.m. on Dec. 4, 1997," when his wife gave birth to their first child: "Suddenly all the ideal went out of any idealism for change." When he was 15, Stanley Kurtz attended an antiwar rally, only to be shocked at the sight of severed pig heads mounted on sticks, a crass taunt aimed at the police. For Joseph Bottum, the **road**-to-Damascus moment came when, as an undergraduate at Georgetown, he looked down from a library window and was struck dumb by the sight of a woman out strolling with her toddler. "And it all started with the sudden, absolute conviction that babies are good."

Pig popsicle, bad; babies, good. Got that? As reasons for choosing one political affiliation over another, this is up there with "I am as God made me." As if to drive home the point, Starr, the deputy editor of The Weekly Standard, quotes the British poet Philip Larkin. Larkin the poet was an artist of the first rank, but Larkin the man was an infamously small-minded reactionary. He once told an interviewer, "I suppose I identify the right with certain virtues and the left with certain vices. All very unfair, no doubt." These essays are Larkinesque, but with all the heavily qualifying sardonicism stricken out. The left is knee-jerk and borderline depraved; the right is freethinking and decent. All very fair, no doubt. Lay this down as your given and the comforting solecisms flow forth unregulated. When the left is being idealistic, it is naive, utopian, technocratic and meddling. When the right is being idealistic, it is idealistic. Thus Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty reveals the left to be hopelessly overreaching, as David Brooks assures us, while George W. Bush's war in Iraq "is one of the noblest endeavors the United States, or any great power, has ever undertaken."

Democrats fail essentially; Republicans fail incidentally. Conservatives have been playing this game of "heads I win, tails you lose" for roughly a generation. Ever since Ronald Reagan twitted Jimmy Carter with "there you go again," the American right has carried itself with a swagger, confident the crowd will have its back. As a sales pitch, the essays in "Why I Turned Right" are mostly a dud. But they offer a tantalizing clue as to how handsomely financed "fellows" at corporate-backed think tanks (a description that fits eight of the 13 contributors) manage to connect so unflinchingly with a mass audience. From the evidence of this volume, their righteous anger at liberalism is not cynical. Not at all. Conservative pundit-intellectuals have locked into a magical frequency, one that remains occult to the left, connects with a large segment of the viewing and reading public, and comes from someplace very sincere. The point of origin is announced in the introduction. One "underacknowledged answer to 'Why conservatism?'" writes Mary Eberstadt, the volume's editor, "suggests itself repeatedly in the

essays of 'Why I Turned Right': academia, or more properly the staggeringly uniform and unforgiving creed of ideological correctness against which almost every one of these writers sooner or later set his face."

Young people tend to be politically unthinking, and liberal arts professors tend to be arrested young people. But many undergraduates, encountering the towering stupidity of college radicalism, tenured and otherwise, chose to be conservative, where conservative meant deferential to the past, appropriately awed by greatness, calm, courteous, skeptical and cautious. As Talleyrand immortally put it, "Above all, no zeal." By definition, "no zeal" doesn't lurch you anywhere, especially not with the heaving self-certainty that lurched these writers to the right. For them the primal scene of revulsion at the liberal mind-set stays forever fresh. "By virtue of its one-sidedness and extremism," Stanley Kurtz writes, "the academy serves as a key generator of our polarized political and cultural battles." At Yale, Heather Mac Donald discovered the sorcery known as deconstruction, then "watched with horror as the multicultural yahoos took over the humanities." Dinesh D'Souza arrived at Dartmouth a moderate-to-liberal kid from Mumbai, only to discover a faculty infiltrated by radical feminists, women who "made statements to the effect that all males were potential rapists." Fighting fire with fire, D'Souza recalls with relish the tasteless gay jokes he published while at The Dartmouth Review and how one of his heroes, an English professor named Jeffrey Hart, once wrote an article arguing that the school's apartheid protestors were really "protesting their own ugliness."

Here we near the answer to our riddle: how privileged college graduates, while fronting for the interests of corporations and the rich, speak the language of angry populism, and with such depth of conviction. "I remember," D'Souza writes, misting up at his college days, "some of those early dinners at the Hart farmhouse, where we drank South American wine and listened to recordings of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Robert Frost reading his poems, Nixon speeches, comedian Rich Little doing his Nixon imitation, George C. Scott delivering the opening speech in 'Patton,' some of Churchill's orations, and the music from the BBC version of Evelyn Waugh's 'Brideshead Revisited.'" In a similar vein, David Brooks writes of his early days as a right-winger: "I remember a series of parties with libertarians, pro-lifers, Scoop Jackson hawks, movement activists and movement dissenters all dancing together to the Talking Heads."

In Rich Lowry's essay, the point is finally driven home. "To this day," he writes, "I read between sets on the weight machines at the gym, and while brushing my teeth." At least Lowry has the courage to announce it outright. "If high school had been an ape colony, we would have been those antisocial unattached males lingering on the fringes, envying the dominant males with their mates."

To be genuinely humiliated is to know how to tap into the humiliations of others. Rejecting tout court a culture of cool that prevails against him, a certain sort of person turns to campus politics. Because these conservatives were, by and large, low-status males (or the feminism-disdaining women who loved them) in high school and college, they know instinctively how to connect with the culturally dispossessed.

And so it was that the workers of the world did unite, but with the bow-tie-wearing nerds at the Cato Institute. Ad hominem? Juvenile? Needlessly provocative? Maybe I could turn right after all.