God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy

Mike Huckabee, former Arkansas governor, frequent presidential candidate, and former Fox News host, opens the election year reissue of his 2014 manifesto *God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy* with the arresting anecdote of 2012’s ‘Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day’. The American chicken franchise earned this day of appreciation in the wake of then-COO and now-CEO Dan Cathy’s anti-gay marriage comments, which sparked campaigns against the chain by liberal politicians and gay rights activists. This backlash to Cathy’s comments ‘was the slaughter of the basic American principles of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and free enterprise’ (p. 6) and after hosting the company’s founder Truett Cathy on his Fox News show, the former governor called for a Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day on August 1 of that year. This ‘was not intended as a protest against same-sex marriage but as an affirmation for a chicken sandwich company’s executives to enjoy the same rights of free speech’ (p. 9) as those of other companies. Huckabee’s call went viral on social media and, by all accounts, led to an explosive day of sales at Chick-fil-A locations throughout the United States. This success can be explained because the ‘[f]rustration for many people of the heartland of America had reached a tipping point’ (p. 12).

Those frustrated Americans are, in Huckabee’s view, the New American Outcasts. American society in the Obama years, in this view, has seen the cultural victory of formerly outcast groups – atheists, avant-garde artists, racial and ethnic minorities, and, above all, gays and lesbians – which casts traditionalist Christians as a persecuted minority. Huckabee highlights this transformation by examining the differing reactions to Miley Cyrus’s ‘disgustingly pornographic performance’ (p. 34) at the 2013 MTV Music Video Awards – which led to her single going number one – and Duck Dynasty star Phil Robertson’s defense of ‘traditional
marriage, albeit in graphic terms’ (p. 17) – which led to the cancelation of his family’s hit reality television show. This is a conception of American political culture which views Richard Nixon’s infamous ‘silent majority’ through the lens of 1960s counter culture. The hippie was yesterday’s outcast, the megachurch attendee today’s. This places conservatives as modern day radicals and turns the logic of American political opposites on its head. Advocates of the separation of church and state are no longer the defenders of religious liberty, advocates of religious exemptions are; gay rights advocates are no longer champions of diversity, conservative Christians are; and so on. Witches these days are burning Christians, rather than the other way around.

Huckabee buttresses this claim through the type of boilerplate dichotomies common in this kind of political writing. The former governor divides Americans into people who live in two places: the ‘Bubble-villes’ of the New York, Washington DC, and Los Angeles and the ‘Bubba-ville’ of the ‘flyover country’ of the American interior. There is nothing particularly new about this assessment of American politics. It is simply a conservative tinged recasting of the classic American political divide between coast and interior, between urban and rural. Huckabee contrasts ‘Bubba-ville’ residents as those who in maintaining a commitment to small-government, traditionalist Judeo-Christian morality, and Americana are the outsiders of contemporary political life in the United States. Coastal residents, then, who to Huckabee lack a love of the titular god, guns, grits, and gravy, are cast as out-of-touch insider elites. While this ‘Bubble-ville’ versus ‘Bubba-ville’ dichotomy acts of as a touchstone through the book it lacks any real analytical heft. It is a gloss on the real animating force behind God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy: Huckabee’s conception of politics as culture war.

Like many commentators on state of contemporary American society Huckabee argues that inequality plagues the republic. What sets the former governor apart from others is that he locates this inequality in the cultural rather than economic realm. Class is very much an alive concept to Huckabee, but it is a cultural rather an economic structure. American division is linked cultural decline – as he terms it the rise of ‘the Culture of Crude’ (p. 35). Opposition to this culture unites rich and poor denizens of ‘Bubba-villes’. Huckabee sees American modern conservatism as fundamentally uniting the ‘the people for whom God, guns, grits, and gravy all make perfect sense’ (p. 4). The residents of ‘Bubble-ville’ have denied cultural resources to the residents ‘Bubba-ville’, transforming those who hold to the dominant values of the mid-century United States from cultural insiders to cultural outcasts. Even national security issues are viewed through this cultural lens, for the ‘emotional impact’ of September 11th taught white Americans to ‘bend over and take it like a prisoner’ (p. 117) through increased airport security. The regulations of the Transportation Safety Administration force white American travelers to perform what Huckabee sees an unfit role. Physical submission to the poking and prodding of a TSA employee readies New American Outcasts for submission to the political authority of the Obama administration and the cultural authority of ‘Bubble-ville’. To Huckabee, the political struggles of the second decade of the 21st century unite oil executives living in a posh Dallas, Texas suburb with Walmart employees living in Huntington, West Virginia.

The narrative Huckabee presents is one of historical declension along two axes. The first is between modern American values and those of the American Founders. The former governor sets up contrasts between the politically correct world controlled by residents of ‘Bubble-ville’ with that of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. On virtually every policy issue touched on in God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy – freedom of speech, religious liberty, gun rights, etc – modern America pales in comparison with that of the Founding. The second narrative of declension contrasts the dignified mid-century America of Huckabee’s youth to our present ‘Culture of Crude.’ Huckabee idealizes the ‘old-fashioned traditions of the South’ (p. 7) under which he was raised and argues that something great about America was lost as those values faded and multiculturalism arose in its place. Both of these declension narratives tie deeply into Huckabee’s sense of modern politics as culture war. This decline can only be restored if conservative Americans can wrest back control of ‘our culture and country and restore things to a constitutional republic, instead of a nation of narcissist numskulls from the Northeast creating a plutocracy’ (p. 211).

God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy is organized topically. Bookended by a brief introduction and concluding call to action, the book is divided into chapters which cover a different policy or political concern. Each pithily
titled chapter – such as ‘School’s out: mass exodus from public schools’ and ‘Reality-TV culture’ – offers Huckabee’s dire diagnoses of modern American problems sprinkled with a few policy prescriptions. Most chapters cover cultural concerns, though two – ‘Bailing out the big boys’ and ‘Regulation + taxation + litigation = job migration’ – cover banking and tax policy respectively. Only the final chapter breaks from this pattern and offers a laundry list of relatively boilerplate conservative and small government policy proposals, from term limits for Congress, marriage promotion, the further devolution of authority from the national to state governments, among others.

As is the case with most candidate manifestos, *God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy* is not deeply researched. Most of the evidence for Huckabee’s arguments is anecdotal; the stuff of political speeches and talk-show appearances over that of social criticism or academic debate. Primary and secondary sources, when referenced, are fully cited in text and are internet based. The ideological range of Huckabee’s source material is varied – mainstream outlets like the *New York Times* are cited along with more conservative-minded publications like *Breitbart.com*. There is no bibliography but a useful index is present.

*God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy* is a useful source for observers looking for the ways in which the Republican Party and the conservative movement transformed from the Bush years to the nomination of Donald Trump for President in 2016. On the surface Huckabee’s manifesto is obsessed with the same concerns which powered President George W. Bush’s successful reelection campaign in 2004 – national security, God, guns, and gays. The book’s title seemingly says it all, but national security has lost its central place in Huckabee’s assessment of the present predicaments facing the United States. The politics of white, Christian resentment has displaced the politics of terrorism for conservatives like the former Arkansas governor. The narrative of American declension which animates *God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy* replaces Al Qaeda and ISIS as villains with a scheming panorama of the political correct. The path to Trumpism from there is clear. On the policy level, however, Huckabee remains more a product of the past than the present. There is no call for walls or massive deportation in *God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy*. Huckabee, rather, draws from the policy toolbox of the late-20th-century conservative movement – tax cuts, anti-gun control, and devolution of power to the states. In that way *God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy* serves as a useful bridge in the intellectual trajectory between President Bush’s pleas for a ‘compassionate conservatism’ and candidate Trump’s call to ‘Make America Great Again’.

Observers looking for clues as to how the Republican establishment failed to come to terms with the rise of Trump will also find much of use in *God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy*. Huckabee casts himself as an outsider throughout the book, and the fact that the former governor explicitly *does not live* in the District of Columbia is baked into its very premise. In his new, election year preface Huckabee attempts to position himself as the compromise candidate between ‘Bubble-ville’ Republican establishment candidates of Senators and Presidential siblings and the extreme outsider candidates of neurosurgeons and reality show hosts. On one hand the former governor understands the ‘seething rage’ and the ‘depth of disgust emanating from people whose livelihoods, culture, and very way of life has been upended by the ruling class’ (pp. x–xi). On the other hand Huckabee stresses that ‘hiring someone for a job for which he or she is totally unprepared for is nothing short of irrational’ (p. x, italics in the original). The contrast here is clear. Both Huckabee and Trump are outsiders but only one of them has experience to really break the power of ‘Bubble-ville’ over American life.

The attempt to weather the shoals between the Republican establishment and Donald Trump failed for Huckabee in the winter of 2016. The former multi-term Governor, Lt. Governor, and twice-previous Presidential candidate proved not to be outsider enough for the New American Outcast voters in the Republican primary. Huckabee’s campaign manifesto *God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy* nonetheless serves as a useful source in the intellectual genealogy of Trumpism. With its overheated discussion of the ‘criminalization of Christianity’ (p. xi), argument that ‘diversity is code for uniformity’ (p. 45, italics in the original), suggestion that gun registration helped cause the Holocaust (p. 29–31), and much more, the book prefigures the themes and rhetoric of the Trump campaign. Above all Trump and Huckabee share an iron-clad commitment to stoking the fires of white, Christian resentment. This is something Huckabee has
admitted since losing to Trump in the Iowa primary. As he explained in Politico piece on the eve of the 2016 Republican National Convention, for the former governor it was ‘frustrating to know that the message I championed … was mirrored by Donald Trump’. (2) This frustration must be intensified for the former governor by the fact that it was a real estate mogul turned reality star from ‘Bubble-ville’ who ended up most successfully articulating the anger of the outcast residents of ‘Bubba-ville’. For students of American politics trying to make sense of 2016 complex political terrain a close reading Mike Huckabee’s God, Guns, Grits, and Gravy can, perhaps, transform some of its author’s frustrations into useful insights on the state of American conservatism in the age of Donald Trump.

Notes


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