

INTRODUCTION

“When I say the conservative movement is spreading, I don't mean to imply that the majority of students are conservative. They are not. Most students, I think, are still indifferent to political matters. But the conservative element on the campus is now on the offensive; it is articulate, resourceful, aggressive. It represents the group which, in 15 or 20 years, will be assuming the seats of power in the United States. That is why, in my estimation, it authentically represents the future of the country.”¹

– Stanton Evans, April 1961.

By the end of the 1960s, the United States had been going through radical social changes that would impact society for many years. Before the election of Richard Nixon in 1968, the country had mainly been under the control of the Democratic Party and American political life was dominated by liberalism. The period between 1932 and 1980 was the longest period of political dominance for the American Left – or at least the Democratic Party—in the history of the country. While the sixties were characterized by the student protests for civil rights, equality, and against the war in Vietnam, the election of Richard Nixon as the 37th President of the United States, made possible by the “silent majority”, marked a turning point in American political and social life. It was during this period of social unrest and turmoil that characterized the sixties that the student Right, and more particularly conservative students, started organizing themselves in reaction to the New Left. Even though student organizations like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) represented the majority of campus

¹ Evans Stanton. *New Guard* 1.1 (1961) : 8.

organization life, groups like Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) or the Young Republicans (YR) were still striving to make their voice heard and oppose the New Left. In a society that was considerably more on the Left, Young Americans for Freedom was founded to promote conservatism on campuses and oppose the New Left that had become stronger than ever during the 1960s. Even though it can be argued that their influence on campus politics was small and only concerned a small number of people, YAF was still able to mobilize students not only on campus life but also on general political issues. One of the best examples of the sixties was the campaign to get Senator Barry Goldwater to run for presidency and to get him elected as the presidential candidate for the Republican Party. YAF's ability to mobilize students on campuses and throughout the nation during a period that most people tend to see as being dominated by the New Left is only one of the many examples that will be dealt with in this paper.

Most people, when dealing with conservatism or even with the Right in general, mainly think about the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s with the election of a conservative Republican candidate as president. The student movement of the sixties and the seventies was also part of a broader grassroots movement to bring back conservatism on the political scene and played a role in the rise of conservative politics. It is thus important to look at the movement before it became mainstream and well known to the population to understand its larger impact. This statement from Lee Edwards, one of the founding father of YAF, illustrated this idea. It was true of the sixties but could be applied to the seventies as well – replaced in its context.

For me, as for most young conservatives, the '60s were the decade not of John F. Kennedy but Barry Goldwater, not Students for a Democratic Society but Young Americans for Freedom, not The New Republic but National Review, not Herbert Marcuse but Russell Kirk, not Norman Mailer but Any Rand, not Lyndon Johnson's

Great Society but Ronald Reagan's Creative Society, not a “meaningless” civil war in Vietnam but an important protracted conflict against Communism.²

Indeed, youth mobilization and student protest has been associated with the Left for a very long time, whether one is talking about the Anarchist movement of the 1920s or the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. However marginal the Right was politically until 1980, it was still an important counter-force to Left activities throughout the sixties and remained one during the seventies. However, because of the popular idea that students and the intellectual world in general are often seen as more liberal than conservative, the use of the term “student conservative movement” appears paradoxical to a number of people. Yet, it is important to understand that groups like YAF, but also the Young Republicans or the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists (ISI) which was the pioneer of the Right movement on campuses, had a significant influence in mobilizing young conservative activists and were still able to play a role on campuses. YAF in particular was an organization present on many campuses throughout the nation that also played a role in the broader political life. As James C. Robert argued in his book, *The Conservative Decade*, the founding of YAF was, “in retrospect, probably the most important organizational initiative undertaken by conservatives in the last thirty years”³. After the decade of student protest that characterized the sixties, the early 1970s saw the collapse of the Left with some major student organizations like SDS being dismantled. YAF was thus entering the seventies with new challenges while having to prove that they could still matter nationally.

In his study, “Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything about It?”, Leo P. Ribuffo argued that the historiography

² John Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 5.

³ James C. Roberts, *The Conservative Decade: Emerging Leaders of the 1980s* (Westport, Conn.: Arlington House, 1980) 25.

of conservatism is complex but that it has also been ignored for a very long time by historians who would rather focus on the New Left. He also recognized that scholarship on the subject is more extensive than it has previously been argued, in a response to Alan Brinkley's article in the *American Historical Review*, "The Problem With Conservatism." In this article, Brinkley developed the idea that there is a "problem of American historical scholarship, the problem of finding a suitable place for the Right—for its intellectual traditions and its social and political movements—within our historiographical concerns."⁴ According to his study, the lack of attention to conservatism from American scholars would be due mainly to the fact that American conservatism was late in developing an intellectual or political force. As will be dealt with later on in this paper, another problem mentioned by Brinkley is the difficulty to characterize and define conservatism and the role that the opposition between libertarians and "normative" conservatives—as he called them—played in post-war America. Indeed, he argued that before World War II, conservatism in the United States was mainly concerned with the libertarian ideal of the "cult of liberty."⁵ The issue of conservatism in the scholarly world has thus always been a debated subject that brought journals such as the *American Historical Review* to dedicate an entire forum to it. Indeed, in the second number of the 99th volume of the journal, three different historians discussed the problems linked to American conservatism and more specifically the problem of scholarly work. While it is true that scholarship on American conservatism is complex, it is still important to mention some of the leading work on the subject.

Most of the influential work on the American Right has been done in the last decades after World War II. The notion of conservatism as it is understood today by historians did not

⁴ Alan Brinkley, "The Problem With Conservatism," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 410

⁵ *Ibid.*, 419.

really exist until the 1950s, and while a few books deal with the Right before World War II, It has been argued by historian Richard Hofstadter, in his work about Barry Goldwater and in his book *The Paranoid Style*, that conservatism in the United States was a product of “status anxiety” and that it was characterized by a “paranoid style” that would explain the rise of grass-roots conservatism. However, while Brinkley criticized consensus historians like Hofstadter for not taking conservatism seriously, he also argued that the conservative movement was “not easy to characterize”⁶ because it covers a wide numbers of ideas and ideologies that often enters in conflict with each other. As far as conservative ideology is concerned, one author has been particularly influential in defining the idea of conservatism and its different branches. The work of Russell Kirk, although he did not enjoy a wide recognition when he published his now influential book, *The Conservative Mind*, in 1953 played an important role in the development of conservative thought in the United States. Kirk explained that there are “six canons of conservative thoughts”, among them are the belief in a “transcendent order [...] which rules society as well as conscience” and that “political problems [...] are religious and moral”; the “affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence”; the “conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes”; and the “persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked”. Kirk had more of a normative vision of conservatism and was among the first historians to really fight the largely libertarian vision of the American society.

While Kirk worked on articulating a conservative tradition in American intellectual and political life, it was purely academic; conservatives still needed a contemporary voice to promote their ideas. Early in the 1950s, William F. Buckley became an influential figure. With the publishing of his book, *Of God and Man at Yale*, in 1951 and the founding of

⁶ Brinkley. “The Problem With Conservatism”. 414.

National Review in 1955, which would become a nationally recognized conservative journal, Buckley was able to appeal to a new generation of young conservatives. *National Review* became a platform for conservatives to promote their ideas and Buckley began to work on building the architecture of a New Right. He urged students to mobilize and would often criticize their lack of interest in politics; he, however, played an important role in the founding of Young American for Freedom. John A. Andrew explained in his study of YAF that Buckley was a “hero to many delegates”⁷ and spoke at the Sharon conference while also hosting it. Andrew's book, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, is one of the few studies that exist of YAF today; he makes an account of another overlooked aspect of the sixties: the activities of conservative youth and more specifically the activities of YAF. Along with John Andrew, another historian published a study of YAF throughout the mid-eighties. Gregory L. Schneider argued that his book *Cadres for Conservatism* “shines light on YAF's whole history, a story of an independent grassroots organization that helped young people mobilize for political action and provided the conservative movement with activists cadres for their causes.”⁸ While Andrew's study ended with the campaign for Goldwater in 1964, Schneider argued that the organization played a role in conservative politics well into the 1980s and was able to mobilize young conservative activists during those years. Indeed, by the early seventies and throughout the decade, YAF would start to emerge as a major conservative organization that played a role not just campus wide, but nationwide. It was also influential in the broader conservative movement in bringing about the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s. Student activism is a component of American politics that is often overlooked at, especially

⁷ Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 56

⁸ Gregory L. Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Contemporary Right*, (New York University Press, 1999) 2.

on the Right, and it is important to remember that the students of today are the leaders of tomorrow.

As YAF was being founded in 1960 during the Sharon Conference, with the purpose to fight for the interests of conservative students on campuses and also in the political sphere in general, the question of whether to use the word conservative in the new organization's name or the word freedom was being discussed. It was only by a margin of 44 to 40⁹ that “freedom” made it into the name, thus clearly showing that “conservative” was a controversial term at the time. The use of the term conservative has indeed always been somewhat problematic. Conservatism can refer to different ideas and positions and thus, needs to be defined. George Nash in his book, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, argued that conservatism can be divided into three different intellectual movements. The first one was the “classical liberals” or “libertarians” who mainly fought against the expanding influence that the government had on liberty, private enterprise and individualism. The second school of thought that was emerging in post world-war two America was the “new conservatism” or “traditionalist” of men like Russell Kirk who wanted to return to more traditional values with a rejection of the mass society and relativism that developed after the war. Thirdly, an anti-Communism conservative movement appeared with former men from the Left bringing the idea that America was engaged in a battle against Communism.¹⁰ While it is clear that these three different schools of thought were all linked to each other in the broader conservative world, it is important to notice that YAF was more concerned with the

⁹ Lee Edwards, *Rebels With a Cause: The Dynamic Story of Young Americans for Freedom: Rebels Helping to Bring About a Better Understanding of the American Way of Life* (Washington: Young Americans for Freedom, 1969) 1.

¹⁰ George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Basic Book, Inc., Publishers New York, 1976) xiii.

traditional branch of conservatism, even though it also included element of anti-Communism and libertarian influence. One must realize though that the ideology struggle would become a problem inside the organization that would lead to a purge of libertarian influence by the end of the 1960s. The organization inner dealings with power and corruption were indeed directly linked to the battle between traditionalists and libertarians, as it will be discussed late on in the paper. It is thus important to understand and define what kind of conservatism is implied when talking about YAF since it played a role within the organization. While this paper mainly focuses on the seventies, it is still important, in order to have a better understanding of the organization, to place it in its context and give the background of an organization that had only existed for a decade at the start of the seventies. The rest of the paper will be dedicated to the youth conservative movement and the role it played on the broader conservative scene, with a focus on Young Americans for Freedom as an organization that was successful in grassroots activism.



FIRST PART

“GREAT EXPECTATIONS”

**YAF’S FIRST DECADE AND THE BUILDING OF YOUTH
CONSERVATISM.**

1

“GREAT EXPECTATIONS”: YAF’S FIRST DECADE AND THE BUILDING OF YOUTH CONSERVATISM.

“[The Sharon Statement] wasn’t the Declaration of Independence, it wasn’t the Gettysburg Address – it was a very common sense statement, I think, of what American conservatives believed then and believe now.”

– M. Stanton Evans.

I THE SEARCH FOR YOUTH CONSERVATISM.

1. The Sharon Statement.

With the adoption of the Sharon Statement on September 11, 1960 at William F. Buckley Jr.'s estate, Young Americans for Freedom was founded as an independent and non-partisan organization that would fight for the interests of conservative students on campuses but also in the political sphere. YAF's first years were mainly dedicated to establishing chapters in every state in order to become a national organization that could be influential. Although YAF started with a national board and a general board of directors in New York, it was stated quite soon that the organization needed to start chapters on campuses as soon as possible. Another challenge as YAF was entering its first year was to transform the ideological principles of the Sharon Statement into an activist program. In October YAF's board of directors organized the program of the *National Review* Forum that focused on the conservative student movement and presented its history, principles and future, as well as a debate between Lee Edwards and Richard Cowan about the issue of the non-endorsement of the Nixon-Lodge candidacy for the 1960 presidential election. This decision reflected the

effort made by YAFers to establish their own conservative principles and to break away from the Republican Party. About the issue of the Republican Party that has always been a debate within YAF, William Rusher publisher of the *National Review* argued that conservatives should oppose Nixon “not simply as a means of recapturing the Republican Party, but as a first step in breaking away from the Republican Party altogether.”¹¹

As YAF had to struggle to find the right balance between principles and activism, they were faced with the difficult issue of organizing themselves and creating new chapters to attract students and get national recognition. Although YAF was only a small corps of activists by early 1961, their progress was still apparent and could be measured through different events that were related in different magazine and journals. *Time* acknowledged the rise of conservatism, quoting Robert Schuchman, the chairman of YAF, who argued that “[his] parents thought Franklin D. Roosevelt was one of the greatest heroes who ever lived. [He's] rebelling from that concept.”¹² while a political action conference sponsored by Human Events attracted more than 700 participants instead of the 500 expected.¹³ However the most successful of YAF's events was certainly the “Freedom Rally” held in March 1961 at the Manhattan Center in New York. As it would become a familiar characteristic of YAF rallies, awards were given to affluent conservatives such as William F. Buckley, Russell Kirk, Lewis L. Strauss or Francis E. Walter, chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee. This rally featured Senator Barry Goldwater as its main speaker and drew 3,200 people while another 6,000 had to be turned away. An article in the *New York Times* published the next day gave an account of the rally and quoted the words of Senator Barry Goldwater who argued that “something is afoot which would drastically alter our course as a

¹¹ Andrew, *Other Side of the Sixties*, 77.

¹² “Campus Conservatives”, *Time* 10 Feb. 1961: 34.

¹³ *National Review* 10.21 (1961): 2.

nation.”¹⁴ YAF was clearly starting to draw more attention as it became energized by the rally, the organization was the embodiment of a new spirit of activism among young conservative.

2. *The New Guard* and campus politics.

The month of March 1961 was also marked by the launching of YAF's first monthly publication, *The New Guard* that quickly became the organization's platform and embodied its policies. It was designed as a way to publicize YAF's activities but also to promote the opposition of young conservatives to the liberal ideals. Another goal of the new publication was also to loosen the affiliation that YAF had with *National Review* by publishing their own voice, even though that connection remained strong as the organization still needed the support of other affluent conservative groups. Edited by Lee Edwards, who was also a member of the board of directors, *The New Guard* quickly stated the politics of YAF: “We are sick unto death of collectivism, socialism, statism and the other utopian isms which have poisoned the minds, weakened the wills, and smothered the spirits of Americans for three decades and more.”¹⁵ The editorial of the first issue of the new publication embodied what the conservative movement had been through in the past thirty five years. Indeed, it explained how thirty five years ago such a magazine would not have been needed, while twenty years ago it would not have been possible. One cannot help but apply this to the conservative movement in general, a movement that was made possible by grassroots activism that would eventually to the rise of conservatism and the creation of journal like *The New Guard* and organization like YAF. The journal was however a rather daunting task since in 1961

¹⁴ Richard Conley, “3,200 at Rally Here Acclaim Goldwater,” *New York Times* 4 Mar. 1961: 1.

¹⁵ *The New Guard*, 1.1 (1961): 3.

conservatives were still a minority in both the American political and cultural life, and few conservatives that could have been defended by YAF were holding office. It was still a platform that YAF could use to express their philosophy by advancing its conservative positions on leading issues and finding their own voice.

As YAF was starting to articulate their position on different issues through *The New Guard*, the organization became particularly involved in the fight against communism at a time where the Cold War was a national matter. In the spring of 1961 YAF leaders participated in a Washington conference on the Peace Corps to demand for more security clearance and proper training to make sure that Peace Corps volunteer were trained in Communist propaganda and the methods to combat it so that they can be prepared and know how to react when challenged by Communists and socialists in more radical countries. For this matter, YAF created a Committee for an Effective Peace Corps and its chairman, Robert Schuchman issued a press released criticizing the training and planning of the Peace Corps. YAF was also being particularly focused on criticizing Kennedy's foreign policy, especially with his handling of Cuba. Indeed, YAF voted for a resolution on Cuba during its first national convention, calling for an immediate armed blockade of the Cuban coast” because of “Communist subversion in the Western hemisphere” in violation of the Monroe Doctrine.¹⁶ With their issues more focused on anticommunism, YAF started creating front group that would promote their views, with the creation for examples of a committee that tried to appeal to student against the admission of Red China to the United Nations. At the same time, on January 3, 1961, 400 conservative students were demonstrating to both show their support for HUAC and to oppose the 200 demonstrators protesting against it. Campus conservatism

¹⁶ “Resolution on Cuba”, *The New Guard*, November 1962, 9.

however still remained a small movement, as it was justly argued by Alan Elms, a graduate student at Yale, the “new conservatism had successfully created the illusion of a wave” with actions limited to a few issues with the conclusion that there had been “no mass conversion to conservatism on the campus”¹⁷

3. YAF and NSA.

The issue of the lack of “conversion” to conservatism on campus was crucial to YAF as it relied on membership and mobilization to remain successful. The organization decided to deal with both campus unrest and anticommunism when it challenged the National Student Association (NSA) during the summer of 1961. The NSA was an organization founded in Chicago in 1947 to promote the interests of college students, it was more liberal oriented and its main focus in the 1950s and 1960s was to oppose anticommunism. For example, NSA supported academic freedom during the McCarthy period, was in favor of the Cuban revolution or supported the sit-in movement in the South during the Civil Rights movement. Another critic that YAFers were making about NSA was its elitist organization that was isolated from mainstream student political opinion. Conservative organizations like YAF but also the Young Republicans, were trying to gain more control of NSA and to have more influence in the decision making process. An interesting fact that should be noted about this struggle is that liberal organizations of the New Left were moving on similar tracks with both sides trying to get more influence and to impose their ideology. To young conservative the position of NSA was simply not acceptable and the opposition to the organization became a part of YAF’s program with the creation of the Committee for an Effective National Student Organization (CENSO), chaired by Howard Phillips. YAFers demanded that NSA confine

¹⁷ Alan Elms, “The Conservative Ripple”, *The Nation* 192, 27 May 1961, 458-460, 468.

itself to “matters of generic concern to the college campus”, and question “whether it in fact speaks for anyone at all beyond a coterie of liberal NSA officers.”¹⁸

YAF decided to take action against NSA and, backed by the Young Republicans, CENSO sent two hundreds delegates to the August convention in Madison, Wisconsin to try and reform its structure. However conservatives formed a minority inside NSA and did not have enough votes to change the organization as it remained dominated by liberals. YAF’s proposal for reform was still able to appeal to both conservative and moderates and leftist organizations like Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) were constantly opposing YAF by fear of having conservative students holding national positions. Despite the organization lack of success in making any change inside NSA, YAF was able to prove that they could effectively mobilize people to a cause. However the organization still needed to prove that they were not just a group that was following old conservative principles and to become a broader political and activist action organization that could lead student movements. The demise of NSA later in the 1960s, after the scandal of the revelation that it had been funded by the CIA since the mid-1950s, proved that YAF, as well as other Left and Right organizations, were right in opposing NSA. The NSA struggle of the early sixties thus showed the growing politicization of campus life and the start of a conflict between liberal and conservative students.

¹⁸ Evans, Stanton. “Trends”, *National Review Bulletin* 10, 24 June 1961, p. 6.

II “REVOLT ON THE CAMPUS.”

1. The Goldwater Campaign.

Although campus politics was a major component of YAF, the organization was also very involved in the 1964 presidential primaries by supporting the candidacy of Senator Barry Goldwater. The 1964 presidential campaign was a big issue for YAF and, as one YAFer argued, it was the “catalytic moment for the conservative movement.”¹⁹ Indeed, after four years of engaging in political action the organization was looking forward to 1964 as they were engaging in what John Andrew has dubbed in *The Other Side of the Sixties* a “crusade for conservatism”. This time a conservative candidate was likely to be elected as the Republican candidate and this prospect was exciting to YAF as they saw this as the culmination of their efforts. They participated in the formation of Young Americans for Goldwater-Miller: YAF member James Harff was appointed director while Carol Bauman, who was editor of *The New Guard* at the time, was named executive secretary. The conservative youth was appealed by Goldwater who was the perfect candidate for conservatives and he became a recurrent subject of *The New Guard* who called Goldwater-Miller a “dream ticket”. To the editors of the magazine, there was a need for “the youth of America, which was becoming increasingly conservative, to express their enthusiastic support in concrete terms.”²⁰ and the presidential campaign provided the elements to do so.

Goldwater's nomination was also the first glimpse of conservatism in mainstream Republican politics in the 1960s and even though Goldwater did not really stand a chance against Kennedy, he still remained an important figure of American conservatism who helped

¹⁹ Emmett, Tyrrell R. *The Conservative Crack-Up*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992, p. 145.

²⁰ Gollan, Antoni. “At the CORE of Racial Tension”, *The New Guard*, August 1961, 17

shape the movement in its infancy. However, during a speech at YAF's annual convention, Buckley argued that

The nomination of Barry Goldwater, when we permit ourselves to peek up over the euphoria, reminds us chillingly of the great work that has remained undone; a great rainfall has deluged a thirsty earth, but before we had time properly to prepare it. *I speak of course about the impending defeat of Barry Goldwater.*²¹

While Buckley's implications shocked a lot of conservatives, his statement was a realistic one who was not entirely pessimistic. According to him the 1964 campaign was just the first step in a longer battle to impose conservative principles in American politics. This candidacy brought hope to the conservative movement and was yet another way to recruit more people. Indeed, according to Lee Edwards, although Goldwater suffered a severe loss and the election results were disappointing, “the campaign produced the largest spurt in the organization's history – almost 2,500 young Americans joined in the month of October alone.”²² This campaign was the proof that YAF was able to mobilize students at a national level on a major issue and brought the organization at a turning point in its history. YAF had contributed greatly to the spread of conservatism on campus, and however little this spread was it is still important enough to be noted.

2. YAF and the War in Vietnam.

After being an active voice of conservatism on campus in the early 1960s, YAF still had to prove that they could survive the defeat of Goldwater. Before Goldwater, the conservative movement had been a minority on the political scene. After 1964, it would start taking more importance as YAF was left with more members than before. The movement was still affected by Goldwater's defeat and as a result was becoming more pragmatic. As

²¹ Andrew, *Other Side of the Sixties*, 203.

²² Edwards, *Rebels With a Cause*, 13

YAF alumni Patrick Buchanan argued in January 1966, “young conservatives, chastened by defeat, came out of that November [1964] more mature, more practical, less over-confident than they were four years ago.”²³ For YAF’s 1965 annual convention a record of more than 900 delegates went to Washington, D.C to participate in the event, more than twice the number of people that ever showed up at any YAF’s convention in the previous years. The different resolutions taken during that convention were mostly concerned with political issues like the support of the war in Vietnam or the opposition to the Johnson’s administration. The war in Vietnam became a major issue for YAF as it represented the high point of YAF’s activity on behalf of anticommunist causes. In opposition to all the anti-war protests made by the New Left, the organization was striving to make its voice heard at a time when all that was apparent was the protest against the war in Vietnam. As Tom Charles Hutson argued, “the gauntlet was down and our job was to support our country and its effort ... and to show that the protestors weren’t the only people that had an opinion.”²⁴

YAF was involved in supporting the war on different level: they were involved in defending American policies in Vietnam with YAF members organizing rallies in favor of the war and protesting against anti-war pickets. While the organization did not always agree with Lyndon Johnson, they supported American involvement and wanted more actions to be taken in Vietnam. In 1965 several chapters throughout the country organized counter protest against anti-war demonstrations organized by Student Peace Union and Students for a Democratic Society. It was common to see YAFers showing up at pickets organized by leftist students to show their opposition to the movement. At one picket in New York, a group of hunger strikers demonstrators against U.S. Policy were even greeted by YAF members

²³ Buchanan, Patrick. “What Happened to the Student Right?”, *Washington World* 4 (Jan 1966), p. 24.

²⁴ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 93

carrying banners saying “better fed than red” while they were forcing them to eat by putting food in their mouths.²⁵ Another type of involvement resided in “stopping American corporations from trading with Communists nations”²⁶ because for YAF the war in Vietnam was first of all a battle against the spread of Communism to other countries in an effort to prevent the infamous Domino theory that South East Asia would become Communist if Vietnam was to fall. Rallies nationwide dedicated to supporting America’s effort in the war were being sponsored by YAF like in Saint Louis where fifty-five hundred people attended a rally held in favor of the war. Although these rallies did not gather as many people as their antiwar counterpart, they were still successful in showing that not all Americans, especially not all young people who were very often thought to be more liberal than their elders, were against the war.

3. The Reagan campaign and the Left scene.

Around the same time, YAF found itself involved in politics again, when former movie star and Citizens for Goldwater state co-chair Ronald Reagan won the California governor’s race. This victory created an enthusiastic reaction from conservatives who were already seeing in him a potential presidential candidate. By the fall of 1967 YAF had already established a Youth for Reagan organization in anticipation of the governor’s entry into the presidential primaries race. Even though the Right was being more careful with conservative candidates after the Goldwater experience, most YAFers as well as a significant minority of conservative activists preferred Reagan to Nixon who was also running in the primaries. Indeed, in Gallup polls from 1967 and 1968 constantly showed Reagan running third in

²⁵ “Feast Versus Fast”, *New Guard*, September 1965, p. 25.

²⁶ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 94

presidential preference polls of Republican voters. Younger conservatives like YAF members were more likely to embrace the Reagan candidacy than their elders. As Steven Richard Koerner argued in his dissertation, *The Conservative Youth Movement*, “YAFers, by virtue of age and position, were naturally more inclined than seasoned politicians to put ideology before practicality.”²⁷ However Reagan was in a difficult position, still facing the aftermath of the Goldwater fiasco a number of Republicans who would have voted for Reagan decided to play it safe and to choose Nixon as their candidate. Besides, Reagan was slow to declare his candidacy and started securing delegates too late in the race. Even though YAF played an important role in creating visibility for Reagan’s last minute candidacy, Nixon was able to secure the vote of enough delegates to assure him the candidacy. Even though the conservative press celebrated Nixon’s election as a victory for the Right, it was important to note that *The New Guard* argued that, “President Nixon is hardly a YAF-type conservative.”²⁸

The situation became more intense with the growing radicalism of 1968 and the issue of violence that was striking large student groups like SDS as other groups like the Black Panther Party or the Weathermen were starting to disturb campuses. YAF could no longer focus only on anticommunist activities because they were having little impact and thus moved away from it in order to dedicate more time to combat the Left. As Schneider argued, “YAF would find its greatest impact as an organization not so much directly supporting a provisory strategy for Vietnam but indirectly in its battles with the antiwar forces of the Left.”²⁹ On the local chapters, coalitions with other anti-radical students were created to have

²⁷ Steven Richard Koerner, *The Conservative Youth Movement: A Study in Right-Wing Political Culture and Activism, 1950-1980*, University of Virginia, 2001, p. 404.

²⁸ “Political Action”, *The New Guard* 9, (Mar 1969), p. 17

²⁹ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 110

a larger impact in the fight against the Left. A coalition of anti-SDS and Students for a Free Campus (SFC) was created at Columbia University, with YAF members adhering to it, to oppose SDS. The New Left organization was indeed involved in the siege of the university in the spring of 1968 and in a campaign to oppose open recruitment on campus. At Indiana University, a conservative political party was created to take back the student senate from radical students: they succeeded in winning all but one of the university seats and were able to regain the office of student body president. Still at Indiana University, a certain number of YAF members, including Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., a graduate student who played an important role in creating the conservative political party, founded *The Alternative: An American Spectator*, a conservative student publication that mainly condemned New Left activities. The publication was endorsed by prominent conservative such as Buckley and liberals such as Sydney Hook and Irving Kristol. It was particularly interesting at the time because it was able to appeal to a large group of people, not only conservatives but also moderates, the same ones who made the victory at the senate possible. *The Alternative* is thus yet another example of how YAF members were able to mobilize locally and to include students from moderate background in their fight.

III THE POST-SIXTIES TRANSFORMATION.

1. Trads and Libs: Schism on the Right.

At the dawn of another decade, YAF found itself in the middle of a factional crisis between traditionalist conservatives and radical libertarians that threatened to endanger the organization greatly. Indeed, libertarian influence was growing within YAF, especially with the issue of the war in Vietnam as it was becoming a more and more “slippery” issue

throughout the nation. The radical libertarians also attacked the systematic return to conservative anticommunism that they judged was becoming old-fashioned in the context of the détente. At the 1969 annual convention, a group of radical libertarians, the Radical Libertarian Alliance (RLA), called for a revision of the organization in a manifesto called the Tranquil Statement. They argued that YAF should “take the initiative in the fight against American imperialism” and reaffirm the principle of universal freedom; according to them, YAF should “reemphasize its commitment to liberty” by restructuring the organization and junking the Sharon Statement.³⁰ While the gap between the two factions widened, it became necessary for YAF to find a solution before the organization would split once and for all. The internal struggle shifted the focus from campus issues and some of its leaders were worried that opportunities to oppose antiwar marches would be missed. However, libertarians were a minority in YAF and traditionalists were able to maintain control of the national board during the national convention. It was more on the local level that the split became more problematic: in California especially the situation was becoming more and more tensed. Radicals claimed that the new national office was “authoritarian” and criticized the purge of libertarian influence from the board. In the few months that followed the convention, the new board dealt with the schism issue by removing libertarian influence from YAF, which, even though the new board denied it, was indeed authoritarian. The split had a somewhat negative impact on YAF with internal battles that made the board turned its attention to other matters. The board would often fulfill the libertarian’s prophecy that “[it] was authoritarian by engaging in personal squabbles among themselves. Power was the new *raison d’être* in YAF, and power increasingly flowed from the national office after the 1969 convention.”³¹

³⁰ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 134

³¹ *Ibid*, 140

However the situation was not as bad as it looked and at the dawn of the 1970s, the organization was able to focus on other issues as libertarian influence had been attenuated. YAF was still involved in the war in Vietnam with the support of American policy, and membership was at an all time high. There were some dangers though: the Left had collapsed and the new foreign policy of détente made anticommunism an obsolete matter. YAF was facing new challenges as the conservative movement was growing throughout the nation and needed to find its own voice within the movement. The election of Nixon in 1968 and the collapse of the New Left would bring new issues and a new horizon to the organization. As Ron Robinson argued, “the excesses of the radical left made YAF members long for the day when striking would be replaced by streaking.”³² Contrary to what one would think, the election of Richard Nixon was not considered as a moment of victory for YAF. Indeed, they did not see Nixon as a true conservative and the organization did not want to be labeled as the youth vanguard of the Republican president. As YAF had been involved in the Reagan campaign of 1967 to get him elected as the Republican candidate for the presidential election, it became important for the organization to distinguish itself from Nixon. Even though the president had been dubbed “conservative enough” by the Right press, he was not conservative enough from YAF’s point of view. While people were starting to argue that the organization would collapse YAF found itself at a turning point in its history.

2. “The only thing YAF has to fear is fear itself.”

In *Rebels With a Cause*, a pamphlet that narrated the story of YAF, Lee and Anne Edwards depicted YAF as a success story that was made possible by a motivated and audacious group of young conservative. It could be considered as a manifesto for YAF as it

³² Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 145

gave the narration of its early years while including the Sharon Statement. Written in 1969, at a time when YAF was trying to redefine itself, it depicted the organization as “one of the most spectacular successes of the conservative movement in America.”³³ The title itself is a reference to famous 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause*, starring James Dean as a rebellious teenager who was defying the morals of the time. The film clearly portrayed and criticized the conformity of the fifties and the decay of American youth as it was portrayed as rebellious. The title of the pamphlet, as opposed to the film, implied that YAF was an organization that had definite goals and was ready to rebel for the right reasons. As Alan MacKay, who had been National Chairman of YAF since 1967 at the time of publication, explained in the foreword he wrote at the beginning of the pamphlet about the use of the word “rebel”,

We are rebelling against the wrong ideas, the wrong theories, the wrong institutions that abound on all sides. But unlike our opponents on the Left, we have something to replace that which we aim to reform and even remove: A sound philosophy based on maximum freedom and minimum control by government.

With an appealing title and prestigious authors, Lee Edwards had been a member of the first board of directors and the first editor of *The New Guard* while Anne Edwards was president of the New York Women’s Young Republican Club, this pamphlet was a clear statement of what YAF had embodied for a whole generation.

The vocabulary used throughout the pamphlet was clearly one of accomplishment and success as it depicted YAF as being the “pre-eminent conservative youth group in America.”³⁴ The authors came back on the founding of the organization and the major events that according to them made the YAF experience a success. *Rebels With a Cause* dealt with

³³ Edwards, *Rebels With a Cause*, 1

³⁴ *Ibid*, 4

the first decade of the organization with an insight in the numerous projects undertaken by YAF. From page 7 to 14, Lee Edwards gave a few examples of projects that the organization lead between 1961 and 1966 to show how it was able to become a national institution with more and more members. He also mentioned the struggles that YAF went through, arguing that they had been either overcome, like the struggle between “those who placed conservatism first and those who placed the Republican Party first”, or that they had strengthened it, like the struggle between conservatives and libertarians that has been dealt with earlier. This apparent humility on behalf of the author, with the recognition of YAF’s weaknesses, was also another way to praise the organization by arguing that it had come out stronger from its challenges. By arguing that “the only thing YAF as to fear is success” in 1969, Lee Edwards clearly wanted to state that the organization was not ready to collapse and intended to make its way into the seventies with success.

3. Into the seventies.

Philip G. Altbach and Robert Cohen’s studies, “American Student Activism: The Post Sixties Transformation”, showed how the decade that followed the sixties and its boom in student activism was marked by a decline of student movement and involvement in political activism. They argued that “for a short period in the late 1960s public opinion polls indicated that the most important concern of the American population was campus unrest. What has come afterwards has been an anticlimax.”³⁵ Although political activism after the sixties was not dead, it was certainly diminished and less known than the social unrest that characterized the decade of the Civil Rights movement and antiwar protests. The authors argued in this study that different reasons could explain this decline: the gradual ending of Vietnam war that

³⁵ Altbach, Philip G. & Cohen, Robert, “American Student Activism: The Post-Sixties Transformation”, *The Journal of Higher Education* 61, No. 1, (Jan-Feb 1990), p. 32

was a major factor in mobilizing students, the economic situation of the 1970s that lead students to chose a safer behavior as they worried more about their future prospects or the violence exerted by some radical groups that made a lot of people turn away from student organizations. The change in the American political climate with the election of Richard Nixon as president in 1968, and later the “Reagan Revolution” of the 1980s, also showed a move to the Right. One should notice that the study barely mentioned the right-wing student activism implying that while the decline of activism was real for the Left, the conservative student movement might have survived the end of the sixties in a better shape than its Left counterpart. Indeed, conservative students had not fallen into the same kind of radicalism as their opponents on the Left – although it would not be fair to argue that they did not exert violence too sometimes. YAF was getting ready to enter the 1970s with a new agenda as conservatism was surely but growing with a change that had already started with the election of Nixon.

With the collapse of SDS in 1970, YAF had started to distance itself from taking action against the New Left. At the start of the seventies, the organization was still an influential conservative student organization, had an all-time high membership and the demise of the Left put YAF in a position of power. After celebrating a decade of existence by returning in September 1970 to Sharon, Connecticut, it’s “place of birth”, YAF seemed to have all it needed to become an even more influential student organization. Its first ten years had been marked by different struggles on several levels with anticommunism, the opposition to the New Left and the antiwar movement had shaped the organization into what it was at the beginning of the seventies. The decline of the Left and the election of Nixon with the victory of what has been dubbed the “Silent Majority” brought about new changes to the organization. After having gone through some internal struggles that god rid of the libertarian

influence and allowed YAF to focus on new issues, the 1970s looked promising but also challenging as the organization was facing a president that they did not really recognize as their true representative. Borrowing the slogan from the successful Conservative campaign lead by James Buckley for the U.S. Senate “We are the new politics”, YAF was emerging as the political youth vanguard for conservatism at the dawn of the 1970s. The new challenges that the seventies would bring to the organization would redefine a new YAF with different goals as they would play an important role during a decade that would prove different from the previous one. As argued by James Patterson in his narrative about post-war America³⁶, the seventies were the end of “great expectations” that Americans had for the future and would bring new perspectives. It was in this context that YAF was starting a new chapter in its history that would hold great importance in the rise of conservatism in America.

³⁶ Patterson, James T. *Grand Expectations: The United States 1945-1974*, Oxford University Press, 1996



SECOND PART

“WE ARE THE NEW POLITICS”

YAF IN THE NIXON ERA.

2

“WE ARE THE NEW POLITICS”: YAF IN THE NIXON ERA.

“I have always believed that the sixties ended on May 4, 1970, at Kent State University with the fatal shooting of four students by Ohio National Guardsmen”³⁷

– James C. Roberts.

I THE POST-SIXTIES CHALLENGE.

1. The Kent State shooting.

The sixties had been a decade of turmoil, protests and experimentation for a lot of people, especially students. As James Roberts argued in his book *The Conservative Decade*, they did not end at the stroke of midnight on January 1, 1970 and there has been a considerable debate over when this decade truly ended. Historians, journalists, novelists and others have written about the sixties and its impact on American society. While some like Charles Reich, a professor at Yale University and author of the book *The Greening of America*, praised the sixties and its youth culture, others like novelist Joan Didion declared in an interview with the *Washington Post*, “I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968”.³⁸ These ambivalent views of the sixties and the interest that has seemed to be revolving around its legacy ever since made people see the seventies as a forgotten decade that did not have a lot of

³⁷ Roberts, *The Conservative Decade*, 11.

³⁸ Anne Tyler, “California Nightmares”, *Washington Post* 17 June 1979: C1.

importance. It has however been argued by historians like Bruce Schulman that it was one of the most important of the post-war decades, a time when the tides of American life turned and that witnessed the southernization of American politics. In the wake of the sixties, the seventies were thus a challenge for the nation and, just like any other student organizations, YAF was not to be spared from its dangers. The organization was struggling to find a balance between continuing its anti-Left activities and finding new objectives in regards to the apparent decline of student protests on campus. By 1970 YAF had committed a lot of its activities to anticommunism and the Vietnam War. Committees like “Student Committee for Victory in Vietnam” or the “Tell It to Hanoi” campaign were the flagships of the organizations.

Another important issue, that dominated the spring and summer of 1970, was the Kent State shooting of May 4, 1970 that James Roberts argued marked the end of the sixties. Students had been holding demonstrations at the university against the recent invasion of Cambodia for a few days before the shooting happened. While officials argued that “guardsmen had been forced to shoot after a sniper opened fire against the troops,” students, “conceding that rocks had been thrown, heatedly denied that there was any sniper.”³⁹ The debate over what really happened at Kent State troubled the nation and added to the already heated issue of student dissent and violence. President Nixon declared, in a statement deploring the tragic events, “This should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy. It is my hope that this tragic and unfortunate incident will strengthen the determination of all the nation’s campuses, administrators, faculty and students alike to stand firmly for the right which exists in this country of peaceful dissent.”⁴⁰ YAF was

³⁹ John Kifner, “4 Kent State Students Killed by Troops,” *New York Times* 5 May 1970: 1

⁴⁰ Kifner, “4 Kent State Students Killed by Troops,” 1.

also part of the debate and took actions after the shootings, especially on the legal scene. The organization was particularly concerned with the closing of universities where violent student dissent was forcing administrations to close down. Court injunctions were filed at Adelphi University and Nassau Community College in New York to re-open the universities that had been closed because of student protest while at Wayne State University students charged Wayne State President Keast with “attempting to use the official machinery of the University to exert political pressure on the Nixon administration to end the Vietnam War.”⁴¹ Most of the lawsuits were successful in pressuring administrations to keep universities open and were a good illustration of YAF’s position.

2. YAF and the Scranton Commission.

While YAF’s position on campus dissent was becoming more and more clear and visible, Nixon decided to react to the Kent State shooting and charged Pennsylvania governor William Scranton to head a commission on student protest and unrest to “study dissent, disorder, and violence on the campuses.”⁴² The report was based on three months of work by the commission which explored the causes of campus unrest and gave recommendations on how to deal with it. David Keene, YAF’s national chairman at the time, testified in front of the commission about his experience at the University of Wisconsin in Madison where New Left radicalism had made students blow up the Army Math Research Center in August 1970, an act that resulted in the death of Henry Fasnacht, a postdoctoral researcher who was doing research in the building that night.⁴³ Despite the implication of the organization in the report,

⁴¹ “YAF’s Legal Attack,” *New Guard* 10.6 (1970): 30.

⁴² President’s Commission on Campus Unrest, *Report of the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest* (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1970.): 1.

⁴³ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 125.

YAF and conservatives in general, were not satisfied by the report and highly criticized it. In fact, even the Nixon administration was not happy with the report's conclusion that excluded some of the radicalism on campus and in a speech at Kansas State University on September 16, 1970 Nixon declared, "the time has come for us to recognize that violence and terror have no place in the free society, whoever the perpetrators are and whatever their purpose cause."⁴⁴ In an effort to counter the commission's report, YAF sponsored its own research committee to point out what the commission failed to do. The directors of the project included Daniel Joy, a former *New Guard* editor, Jay Parker, a former YAF board member and Randall Teague who worked in collaboration with William Roberts, professor at the Catholic University.

The result of that collaboration gave birth to the *Faculty-Student Inquiry into the Causes of Campus Disorders* that was highly critical of the way the commission handled the causes and solutions for campus unrest. The participation of eminent conservatives, like Russell Kirk or Thomas Molnar, and the testimony of influential YAFers, like John Meyer who gave an account of the events at Columbia University, gave credit to this counter-report. The committee was particularly critical of the terminology used in the report and how the commission chose to deal with words like "dissent" and "unrest." Accordingly, it was important in the eye of the committee to distinguish between peaceful dissent—"the hallmark of a free society"—and disorder and violence. They argued that the commission "used not only confusing terminology but failed to distinguish between violence and force."⁴⁵ The inquiry focused specifically on SDS as a leftist group trying to indoctrinate the mass of students that

⁴⁴ Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1994): 448.

⁴⁵ University Research Committee, *A Faculty-Student Inquiry Into the Causes of Campus Disorders and a Rebuttal of the Scranton Commission Report* (Washington D.C.: Young Americans for Freedom, 1970): I-10.

come to college unprepared and immature to get them to protest in violent ways. The YAF sponsored study of campus disorders thus concluded that New Left fanaticism and the reaction of most administrations to close down universities was the result of the violent dissent on campuses. YAF's position was clear: "We urge campus administrators to take disciplinary action against students who violate the rights of others"⁴⁶ In the wake of recent protests and disruptions on campus, the organization was offering a different perspective on academic life by arguing that universities were not social laboratories but rather places to learn, or as YAF advisor Russell Kirk put it, "a place for academic leisure and reflection, not for action."⁴⁷ The organization was thus greatly involved into legal action to counter the activities of the Left, a strategy that proved to be effective in, if not stopping radicals, at least getting campus administrations to exert their authority.

3. A financial crisis.

At the turn of the centuries, YAF was still mainly concerned with anti-Left activities, as proved by the massive effort made by the organization to fight against campus disorders. However, during the 1970-1971 school year, YAF was faced with a substantial decline in New Left activity that meant the organization was losing a consequent number of members. Indeed, the first generation of YAFers characterized by the Goldwater years had graduated from the organization's rank—"110 of 141 YAFers who returned questionnaires distributed at YAF's 1971 national convention, for instance, were twenty-two or younger."⁴⁸ With the Republican Party turning more conservative, YAF did not have anything much more different

⁴⁶ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 124.

⁴⁷ Russell Kirk, *The Swords of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, 1995): 414.

⁴⁸ Koerner, *The Conservative Youth Movement*, 440.

to offer than other Right-wing organizations like the Young Republicans. The organization depended a lot on direct mail revenue and the fall in membership resulted in an important deficit for YAF. While during the 1970-1971 school year the organization had benefits running over \$1.4 million, from May to November 1971 YAF ended up with a deficit of \$230,000.⁴⁹ This dramatic fall forced YAF to reduce its expenses: chapters were cut back, employees were laid off and the budget was almost non-existent. National board member James Minarik realized this as he wrote to YAF's national chairman in the summer of 1972:

I am, to come right to the point, afraid that YAF is about to die. I mean that. It won't be a crashing thud and it may not be noticed for some time as the corpse still twitches in Washington. But an operation that has a mailing list, a board of directors and a national office is not necessarily alive... and if that's all it has then it is definitely not the Young Americans for Freedom I know.⁵⁰

In order to avoid any scandals and to protect its reputation, YAF kept this information secret but the crisis was considerable and the organization could not ignore it.

There was a generation gap in YAF that proved to be problematic in the financial crisis that the organization was going through. Indeed, YAF relied a lot on fund-raising and the average donor was over fifty years of age which resulted in a conflict between fifty-year-olds who were more concerned about social issues and the younger generation who was more libertarian-minded. It threatened the organization funding at a time when YAF was struggling with money issues. The organization was already paying high rent for its offices in Washington but by the end of 1973 the board had finalized the purchase of a house in Virginia in order to alleviate rental costs and to have a place to hold meetings and conferences. However justified the purchase was, in those time of financial trouble it made YAF's finances even tighter than they already were. The low membership was a constant

⁴⁹ Ibid., 441.

⁵⁰ James Minarik to Ronald F. Docksai, June 2, 1972, YAF Archives in Schneider, *Cadre for Conservatism*, 125.

problem in the first part of the seventies. In September 1973 YAF had a membership level of 11,526 but by February 1974 that number had shrunk to 8,812 while some states had no members at all.⁵¹ Although financial problems, coupled with a low membership crisis, were threatening the organization to die out like most of its Left counterpart, YAF was able to maintain a small core of activists. What really became a problem for the organization was the decreasing number of New Left activities that marked the end of what has been called the “campus wars”. Indeed, after 1972, YAF would never again be able to reach the 12,000-member mark even though *New Guard* and the organization would still pretend the contrary to maintain its credibility. YAF was thus faced with new challenges as they were trying to prove that, as Koerner argued in his study, they were more than just a “paper tiger”⁵².

II THE END OF THE CAMPUS WARS.

1. “YAF is not the youth vanguard of President Nixon.”

Although Nixon was running for the Republican nomination in 1968 as a conservative candidate, it soon became clear for YAF that he did not intend to govern as one. As early as April 1969, *New Guard*'s editors were already questioning the Nixon administration when openly asking “Is there still hope for Nixon?” in an article dealing with the early presidency.⁵³ While conservatives were still trying to retain hope towards the Nixon administration, his agenda was more liberal than the one produced during the Eisenhower years as little was made to cut back Johnson's Great Society policies. The Nixon years were paradoxical for YAF as one would have expected the organization to profit from the election

⁵¹ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 157.

⁵² Koerner, *The Conservative Youth Movement*, 442.

⁵³ “Is there still hope for Nixon?” *New Guard* 9.4 (1969): 3.

of a president that was friendly to conservatism and associated with it by most people, especially the Left. It is important to remember that YAF had supported Ronald Reagan in the race for the Republican candidacy in 1968. Nixon had run on a conservative ticket and attempted to work with conservatives by calling on affluent people for advice like Buckley or meeting with Russell Kirk on cultural matter. He even employed young conservatives like Patrick Buchanan and Tom Charles Huston, both members of YAF. However, conservatives were still a minority in the government and the organization was particularly concerned with *unidentifying* itself with the President: in early 1971 Ron Docksai, national chairman at the time, raised this issue when he argued, “YAF is not the youth vanguard of President Nixon.”⁵⁴ The organization would indeed attempt to move the president in a more conservative direction as they were becoming more and more disenchanted with his policies.

YAF had many reasons to be disappointed with president Nixon, as Nicol Rae argued in his book *The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans*, “in the areas of welfare policy, economic policy, and foreign and defense policy, it is difficult to conceive of [Nelson] Rockefeller’s pursuing a course dramatically different from Nixon, were he president.”⁵⁵ Indeed, Nixon’s economic approach was more liberal than conservative with an expansion of the welfare state and the creation of new government programs that were increasing the power and size of that state. The *New Guard* was being particularly critical of the way the Nixon administration was embracing government regulatory power in an article about the 90-day freeze arguing that Nixon had “plunged the economy into government intervention and

⁵⁴ Ron Docksai to National Board, Jan 29, 1971. Further discussed in Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 145-147.

⁵⁵ Nicol Rae, *The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1989) : 109.

control unprecedented in peacetime.”⁵⁶ Another major issue that was very dear to conservatives was the removal of the U.S. currency from the international gold standard in 1971. YAF, especially the national board, was thus dealing with political issues and was more and more concerned with the national political sphere. Issues like campus protest, that had been decreasing since the end of the sixties anyway, disappeared from the organization’s agenda and YAF focused on national politics and on how young conservatives could change that scene. As Schneider argued, these issues “served to “professionalize” the organization, moving it away from youth politics and concerns and turning it into a Young Republican-like youth wing of the conservative movement.”⁵⁷

2. YAF and the return of the Vietnam War.

While at the end of the sixties YAF had chosen to concentrate its activities on campus unrests over the Vietnam issue, the increase of antiwar protests in 1971 made the organization renew its efforts regarding the war. The Vietnam issue had become a complex one as the nation was becoming more and more against it. Debates within the national board were dividing the organization as to whether YAF should support the war or not. Jerry Norton, a member of the national board who was also a Vietnam war veteran, attacked the victory strategy by pointing out the paradox of supporting the war when “so many YAF leaders... judiciously do everything they can to avoid serving there themselves.” He also argued that no politician would ever defend this strategy and that therefore the organization should withdraw quietly from the Vietnam issue.⁵⁸ Although YAF was not supporting the draft anymore, most of the national board members disagreed with Norton’s conclusion by

⁵⁶ L. A. Smith, “Nixonomics,” *New Guard* 11.8 (1971): 12.

⁵⁷ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 148.

⁵⁸ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 148-149.

arguing that the Left's antiwar positions were the ones threatening America's war effort. With the presence of former national chairman David Keene and Tom Huston in the Nixon administration,⁵⁹ the national board was starting to support the President's program of Vietnamization, as long as a withdrawal did not mean the end of American aid to Vietnam. Nixon was indeed increasing military pressure with the invasion of Cambodia and the mining of Haiphong Harbor to get Hanoi to the bargaining table. Besides, members within the organization's administration were pressuring for support towards Nixon's Vietnam policies. Keene was convinced that Vietnamization was the best way to preserve victory while disengaging American troops from Vietnam. Indeed, the Vietnam War also brought back another issue that had always been important for YAF: anticommunism.

The Vietnam War was the symbol of the war against communism that had always been dear to conservatives and while the time of McCarthyism was gone, the Cold War was still a prominent issue for organizations like YAF. Foreign policy was indeed Nixon's primary interest and here he disappointed conservatives the most. Although YAF was being somewhat supportive of the president's strategy in Vietnam, other Nixon foreign policy initiatives were causing concerns. The pursuit of an American-Soviet strategic arms limitations treaty that placed limits and restraints on armaments in order to stop the arm race begun on November 1969 and resulted in 1972 in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I). This, coupled with the pursuit of a policy of détente with the Soviet Union, proved to be another troubling issue for YAF. At the same time Henry Kissinger, former Rockefeller protégé and Nixon's National Security Advisor, pioneered the formalization of relations with Red China. He made a trip to the People's Republic of China in October 1971 and paved the way to the 1972 summit between Nixon and Mao Zedong. To conservatives this attempt to

⁵⁹ They were both holding important positions as political aides to Agnew and Nixon, respectively.

improve relations with the Soviet Union and China was seen as treason. They could see the logic of withdrawing from Vietnam with a war that was getting difficult to win, but they were furious when Nixon attempted to improve relations with communist countries. However, according to Koerner, even though YAF's disregard for the president had deep roots in the political culture, Nixon "nevertheless retained his image as a conservative during these years, largely because of his concerted effort to do so."⁶⁰ This image would prove to be crucial in the coming presidential elections.

3. Nixon's Southern strategy.

In anticipation of the 1972 election, the administration was starting to implement a "Southern Strategy" that would capture the white southern vote. The Southern Strategy mainly rested on the idea that the South was heavily conservative and was only tied to the Democratic Party by tradition rather than by ideology. To secure his southern flank, Nixon made numerous gestures to attract the conservative vote: in June 1971 he privately praised southern contributions to American life and directed aides to have his remarks reprinted across the region."⁶¹ However, Nixon's advisors, instead of going for a *National Review*-style conservative like Barry Goldwater, were targeting George Wallace's constituency. His gestures and declarations still rarely made it to the policy arena and were mostly directed to upcoming election to insure conservative vote. His Southern Strategy did not fool YAF and the *New Guard* was being highly critical of Nixon's assumption that "conservative strategy and a Southern strategy are identical. The idea that the South is "conservative" and the North and West are "liberal" is a negation not only of the observable facts, but of the electoral

⁶⁰ Koerner, *The Conservative Youth Movement*, 444.

⁶¹ Dean J. Kotlowski, "Nixon Southern Strategy Revisited" *Journal of Policy History* 10 (1998): 222.

arithmetic of Nixon's two national campaigns." They argued that Nixon's victory had been made possible by non-Southern conservative, in areas like the Farm Belt, the Mountain States or Southern California.⁶² YAF's critique of Nixon's Southern Strategy was a direct result of the animosity that the organization had always had towards the president and YAF was ready to attempt to defeat Nixon in the upcoming election. They argued that "rhetoric will not be enough to win back Nixon's 1968 right-of-center base in the North and West."⁶³

At the same time, as part of his Southern Strategy, Nixon was starting to overlook liberal positions as he was trying to get more votes. He made his opposition to busing very clear as he asked Congress for a moratorium banning it and even though the moratorium did not pass he had still been able to identify himself with antibusing sentiment. He even argued to Commerce Secretary Maurice H Stans about the creation of the Office of Minority Business Enterprise (OMBE): "I don't think this is a good political move; it won't get us any votes. But we'll do it because it's the right thing to do."⁶⁴ However, in his pursuit of a conservative vote, Nixon was keeping many liberals, who might have otherwise voted for him, away. In order to ensure a "cosmopolitan" image and to keep the Liberal Republicans vote, Nixon used Vice President Spiro Agnew to appeal to the mainstream press. Combining conservative gesture with moderate policies, Nixon was forging a right-center electoral coalition. This double position, with actions different from words, was confusing and dangerous as Elliot Richardson argued in 1971, "in my view, Nixon's political course is subject to too much of this zigzag, and it has hurt him more than helped him."⁶⁵ Indeed, while liberals accused the administration of timidity towards the enforcement of civil rights laws,

⁶² Jeffrey Bell, "The Ordeal of the President: Will Nixon Find True Happiness in 1972," *New Guard* 11.4 (1971): 7.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁴ Dean J. Kotlowski, "Nixon Southern Strategy Revisited" *Journal of Policy History* 10 (1998): 222.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

conservatives charged it had been too vigorous. Nixon's image however remained that of a man of the Right as 52% of Americans considered him to be conservative and only 11% thought him to be a liberal.⁶⁶ As the election was approaching, Nixon was implementing strategies to win the presidential election for the second time, and the long lasting opposition between YAF and Nixon was going to produce a challenging election year for the organization.

III ELECTION YEAR

1. The "Manhattan Twelve" and the mock election.

YAF's long battle against Richard Nixon had shaped the organization into what it had become in the seventies. Less concerned with campus politics and more with national issues, the organization was an important part of the anti-Nixon Right even though some of its old members were now holding important position in the Nixon administration. The debate over Teague's removal from his office as executive director was at the heart of the election year. Teague argued that the influence of David Keene—Agnew's assistant—over the national board was strong enough to dictate its policies and that he was removed because of his hostility towards Nixon. With the organization still in financial difficulties, the removal of Teague appeared to be of both political and personal reasons. His expulsion had indeed little effect on policy and the board decided to keep its liaison with the anti-Nixon conservatives. YAF had announced its intention to back-up Ronald Reagan for the Republican candidacy but the governor refused the nomination and publicly announced his support for Nixon's re-

⁶⁶ 25% considered Nixon to be middle-of-the road, and 10% had no opinion. See *The Gallup Poll, 1972-1977*.

nomination.⁶⁷ While the organization had always backed up Reagan in his political race, he privately asked YAF to stop from further activity on his behalf. The Right's growing antipathy towards Nixon thus led to a series of meeting in New York attended by a dozen prominent conservatives like Buckley, Rusher and Teague. This group that came to be known as the Manhattan Twelve was responsible for the declaration of nonsupport published in *National Review*. In the light of this declaration, YAF passed a resolution to display the Right's discontent with Nixon and to encourage opposition to the president in the 1972 primaries.

Opposing Nixon in the 1972 primaries was a crucial issue for YAF as Teague argued during the 1971 convention, "YAF membership today is so strongly in opposition to the President [...] that a major address before the convention urging them to support the President for re-election would result in the speaker being booed and hooted at."⁶⁸ The national board decided to stage its own mock presidential nominating convention, and Nixon finished thirteen out the twenty nominees on the first ballot, receiving only 26 of the convention's 1498 votes. Vice-President Agnew ended up winning the mock election, followed by Reagan. Schneider explained in *Cadres for Conservatism* how Docksai and the national board decided that "Reagan could not possibly be the candidate selected if he was to have any chance to lead the Republican Party in the future." They thus conspired together to prevent Reagan from being the final nominee at the mock convention.⁶⁹ Young conservatives were disappointed with Nixon, especially since they helped him get elected in 1968. Docksai stated that YAF was not a tool to any political party and explained that "young conservatives

⁶⁷ "For the Record," *National Review* 23 (1971): 622.

⁶⁸ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 150.

⁶⁹ Confidential Memorandum to National Board from Docksai, August 17, 1971 in Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 150.

are not kids who can be satisfied with an occasional lollipop from the administration.”⁷⁰ The organization’s new main theme in the early seventies, that YAF represented the “new politics” of conservative principles was illustrated during this election period. YAF had to prove that it could have a voice on the broader political sphere and that it was an independent organization capable of mobilizing its members to matter on the national scene.

2. Ashbrook and Youth Against McGovern.

When the Nixon administration did not do much to answer to the organization obvious lack of support and responded by offering only a few token gestures to get the conservative Right votes, the Manhattan Twelve decided to challenge Nixon’s almost certain renomination. While only Ronald Reagan had a chance to win against Nixon, he had made it clear that he would not oppose the President. The Right had realistically few chances to get a candidate to win against Nixon and the Manhattan Twelve resigned themselves to finding a protest candidate in an effort to allow conservatives to express their dissatisfaction and discontent toward the president. They consequently approach William Buckley who was a prominent conservative figure but he declined the offer and the task of opposing Nixon came to an Ohio congressman, John Ashbrook who had been frustrated with the president after having first endorsed him in 1968. Just like YAF had backed the Goldwater campaign in 1964, the organization made the Ashbrook campaign its own by providing much of its grassroots manpower. YAF volunteers provided the backbone of the Ashbrook campaign and showed up by the hundreds in the different states where Ashbrook was campaigning. Out of YAF’s twenty-four national board member, only two did not endorse his candidacy. But however little the Manhattan Twelve and the Right’s expectation were concerning Ashbrook,

⁷⁰ “Houston: Making it Perfectly Clear,” *New Guard* 11.8 (1971): 3.

he did not live up to them as he was running only third in New Hampshire, with only 9.6% of the votes. Even the *New Guard* was being realistic when Jerry Norton argued that “despite the rhetoric, he was not Barry Goldwater.”⁷¹ To some extent, Ashbrook’s failure reflected the President’s conservative image and the way the conservative Right had been absorbed by the Republican Party.

Unwilling to support Nixon after Ashbrook faded, YAF decided to encourage members to participate in its state and local election programs. Aware that there was little hope of young conservatives volunteering in the Nixon campaign, the national board also recommended that members should focus their energy in a campaign against the Democrats. This strategy would ensure a victory of the Right without openly supporting Nixon. That idea would lead to the formation of the Youth Against McGovern (YAM), a coalition that allowed young conservatives to still play a role in the presidential campaign. Although it was not a YAF organization and was controlled by YR activists who were using the coalition to build support indirectly for Nixon, YAF members were still active in YAM. Its executive director, Ken Tobin, was the former chairman of American University YAF, while several YAF members served as national directors for YAM. YAF chapters all around the country were involved in the effort: “Massapequa Hi-YAF (N.Y.) members, instrumental at setting up YAM at their school, were so successful a McGovern spokesman found a most hostile crowd in an appearance” and “Orange County (California) YAF joined with Youth Against McGovern to hold a social event called “A Frightening Halloween Night with George McGovern”.”⁷² In the end, Nixon won the election in a landslide and young conservatives

⁷¹ Jerry Norton, “The Ashbrook Campaign: the Making of a Conservative Candidate,” *New Guard* 12.2 (1972): 4.

⁷² For a more detailed summary of YAF’s involvement in YAM in 1973, see “YAF and the Right Scene,” *New Guard* 13.1 (1973): 31.

took little comfort in the prospect of having a Republican President. Internal problems were adding to YAF's malaise after the election as Jim Minarik, a board member from Ohio, wrote to Docksai: "an operation that has a mailing list, a board of directors, and a national office is not necessarily alive."⁷³

3. YAF in the wake of Watergate.

The election year had been very challenging for YAF as the organization had to face the victory of a President they had distrusted for four years already. There were several reasons that could explain YAF's failure during this election year. Conservatives were divided over the Nixon presidency and even YAF had a significant number of Nixon partisan within its rank. Furthermore, four years in the White House had allowed Nixon to develop a power base, embodied by the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP). Even though Nixon's record was more liberal than conservative, he still acted and was still seen as a man of the Right. And as YAF's history indicates, image can play a more important role than actual actions in American politics. YAF was thus left in a difficult position and the organization was still in financial trouble by the end of 1973. The membership crisis had not been resolved and John Meyer pointed out the serious lack of leadership in state YAF throughout the country as he argued that "it is not necessary to have a real state organization, but it may well be necessary to have a state chairman in order to have a real state organization... As long as we are claiming 50,000 members, we had better have those state chairmen."⁷⁴ As Schneider argued, "the implications of declining membership were obvious. Without some major issue that could galvanize young people around conservative issues,

⁷³ This issue is further discussed in Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 154, as Minarik contributed to the factionalism in YAF.

⁷⁴ John Meyer to National Board and Staff, February 1974, in Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 157.

YAF was potentially finished as a membership organization.”⁷⁵ In the wake of the Watergate scandal the organization found itself in a difficult position and was threatened of being dismantled in the broader Republican scene as conservatism was being more and more associated with Nixon and the Republican Party.

The election had shown how the political influence of nonpartisan institutions like YAF or *National Review* was limited and had little impact on American politics. While organizations of the Radical Right such as YAF had played an essential role in campaigns like Goldwater, by securing his nomination as the Republican candidate, they were only a small part of a bigger entity. According to Gallup Polls, by 1972 almost a third of Americans considered themselves to be conservatives, a segment over which these nonpartisan organizations exerted little influence as only a fraction of conservatives participated in them. There was a potential for political action but organizations like YAF had not yet found an effective way to use it. It seemed that nothing remained of the Goldwater movement and YAF was one of the few identifiably conservative organizations that still had a prominent role in political networks. As Koerner argued in his dissertation, “the conservative movement early institutions were disappearing, but the Goldwater movement was alive and well within the Republican Party, especially below the presidential level.”⁷⁶ It was thus becoming crucial for YAF to ensure a strong core and a significant membership for the organization. Thus the Watergate crisis, far from favoring the anti-Nixon organization proved to be a difficult one for YAF as the national board was divided on how to deal with the issue. It was only six months after the hearings had started that the organization took a stand by criticizing Nixon. The national board however never publicly asked for Nixon’s resignation by fear of

⁷⁵ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 158.

⁷⁶ Koerner, *The Conservative Youth Movement*, 451.

damaging the organization image since the average conservative-Republican did not want Nixon to resign. YAF was stuck in a bureaucratic crisis and was losing grassroots support as the organization was more and more resembling the Young Republicans and their highly politicized agenda.



THIRD PART

“CADRES FOR CONSERVATISM”

YAF AND THE RISE OF CONSERVATISM.

3

“CADRES FOR CONSERVATISM”: YAF AND THE RISE OF CONSERVATISM.

“Like those Americans who built our frontier communities through barn raising and spelling bees, YAF members are pitching in whenever less fortunate citizens need help. They are the hope of America, the leaders of tomorrow.”⁷⁷

– John Wayne

I A POST-WATERGATE MALAISE.

1. Watergate and the Neo-Conservatives.

The post-Watergate Right was completely different from the pre-Watergate one as America was increasingly moving towards conservatism. Even though one would think that the conservative image of Nixon would have greatly damaged the right-wing organization like YAF, it appeared that larger political organization like the College Republicans suffered much more. They were decimated by Watergate, recovering only at the decade’s end. YAF was still fading away however, and it became crucial for the organization to focus its attention on staying afloat. Watergate had divided Republicans and the Right. YAF never really had a clear stand on the scandal and while Docksai had publicly called for Nixon’s resignation at an early stage, the national office had been careful not to alienate its Republican base. Closely linked to the GOP, YAF was constantly trying to align its policy to be able to keep a chance to influence its decisions. Thus to join what was viewed by

⁷⁷ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 160.

Republicans as the “get Nixon” clique seemed to be a bad move to the national board if YAF ever wanted to cooperate with GOP-oriented conservatives on any project or election. Docksai’s argument was that by calling for Nixon’s resignation, YAF had a shot at taking over as a leading force in the conservative movement. He argued that “Watergate and Nixon are not everlasting. Young conservatives need the support of our elder supporters and advisors. Otherwise, where else would we be?”⁷⁸ The scandal had become a national obsession and triggered a change in the way Americans saw national politics. Conservatives were still closely associated with Nixon even though they had always been harsh critic of the President.

The situation was however far worse for the Republican Party than it was for its right-wing part and the reality seemed more promising for conservatives. Watergate did remove one of the Right’s biggest obstacles to power. Before Watergate Nixon had been a popular President that had become an unrivaled power within the Republican Party exercising incredible control over it. Indeed, the Nixon presidency represented a hindrance rather than an episode in the Right’s political rise and Watergate thus proved to be a blessing for the Right as it broke Nixon’s hold over the GOP. Furthermore conservatives were gaining a certain respectability within mainstream intellectual circles as it was no longer associated with extremism. Politicians like Barry Goldwater or Ronald Reagan were becoming respectable public figures and prominent conservative scholars like Milton Friedman and Leo Strauss were recognized as leading figures in their fields. This process was influenced by the neoconservative movement. Neoconservatism did not have the same cultural roots as *National Review*-type conservatism. It consisted of a critique of liberalism’s failure spurred by the civil unrest of the late 1960s. Previously liberal scholars were reevaluating liberalism

⁷⁸ Docksai to Jim Norton, March 1974, in Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 159.

and adopting characteristically conservative attitudes towards government and social problems. Prominent neoconservatives like William Kristol or Daniel Bell enjoyed a degree of credibility that a William F. Buckley never could attain. Although neoconservatism did not convince liberals to embrace conservative policies, it nevertheless lessened the stigma attached to many of them and helped pave the way for Reagan's 1980 presidential victory by unintentionally insuring that conservatives would not be subject to the same debacle that Goldwater was.

2. Regional tensions.

Although conservatives were no hit as hardly as Republicans by the Watergate crisis, YAF had suffered like the rest of the nation from a post-Watergate malaise. The nation was experimenting a general cynicism towards politicians and political activity and apathy on campus proved to be problematic as YAF membership was declining. Guilt from the Cold War excesses made anticommunist politics obsolete on the political scene, depriving the organization of one of its core principle. YAF did its best to withstand the defeatist tide by engaging in more direct political activity. To make the matter worse, newly appointed President Ford did not show any sign of sympathy towards conservatives. He appointed Nelson Rockefeller as his Vice President and William Scranton as his transition advisor. Within a year Ford had come out in favor of the Equal Rights Amendments and had fired Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger for his critic of détente. By 1975 conservatives felt disappointed again by the new Republican President and by Republicanism in general and felt that it was time to organize outside the GOP. YAF was contemplating another Goldwater-like campaign but this time however, "the Right would not be starting from

scratch.”⁷⁹ As the 1976 election was getting closer, executive director Frank Donatelli and national chairman James Lacy decided to fully adopt the Reagan campaign as the organization’s own. Building up for Reagan’s candidacy took most of YAF’s effort and attention. Frank Donatelli was crucial in the push for Reagan in 1976, as Thorburn’s replacement for executive director since 1973, he was part of the Middle Atlantic faction that included Docksai and Robinson. The powerful force in national YAF of the eastern chapters proved to be another challenge for the organization as regional tensions were rising to counter-balance eastern-dominated leadership.

Regional tensions were particularly noticeable at YAF’s 1975 convention held in Chicago as Ron Docksai, who had been national chairman the longest in the organization’s history, was relinquishing his position. One of the more promising candidates was Fran Griffin, a member of the national board of Illinois and a long time YAF activist in Chicago, she had even run for a state Senate seat from the south-side Chicago district in 1974. However, the national board selected its own candidate for the election, Jeffrey Kane, who had been chosen to represent the interest of the Middle Atlantic faction and he won in landslide election (376-12).⁸⁰ The small number of delegates present at the convention was an illustration of the regional disputes as fewer than four hundred people attended the Chicago convention whereas more than one thousand YAF activists had come to the 1971 Houston convention. It did not even get any coverage in the *Chicago Tribune*. Part of the problem lay in the fact that Midwestern and Southern chapters felt excluded from important decisions taken by YAF’s national office. Jameson Campaigne, who had left YAF’s national board in 1974, wrote Ron Docksai about the problems that the organization had been facing and

⁷⁹ Koerner, *The Conservative Youth Movement*, 468.

⁸⁰ “Convention Raises Kane,” *New Guard* 15.8 (1975): 30-31.

argued that in the mid-1970s “YAF suffered from weak leadership based on factions and personalities rather than ability.”⁸¹ The election of Kane only confirmed these fears as a small group of people was controlling the organization. Though the tensions were becoming less important as the convention was over, YAF was becoming a bureaucratic organization with diminishing chapters and membership with little ability to build conservative cadres on campus.

3. A Third-Party candidacy?

Throughout the remainder of 1975 and into 1976 YAF was trying to forget its factional problems as the organization was preparing for the upcoming political campaigns. Ronald Reagan was the national board’s almost unanimous choice since the organization had backed away from supporting Gerald Ford who never made any effort to try and cultivate right-wing support anyway as he even took a series of steps seemingly to alienate conservatives. At the February 1975 meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC)—an event YAF cosponsored with ACU—conservatives the creation of a third party was a major topic of discussion. Conservatives thought it was time to think about a third party because they had been disappointed with the Republican Party and believed enough Americans identified themselves as being conservatives. While there was a necessity of restoring conservative principles within the GOP, even Reagan suggested that “if there are those who cannot subscribe to those principles, let us go forward without them.”⁸² The idea of a third conservative party was very appealing to the organization who was trying to profit from the backlash towards liberal Republicans. As Lee Edwards argued, “a recent Gallup Poll

⁸¹ Jameson Campaign to Ron Docksai, July 1974, in Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 162.

⁸² Ronald Reagan, “... Let Us Go Forward Without Them,” *New Guard* 15.3 (1975) 30-31.

showed that 36% of the people would choose a Conservative label while only 26% would select a liberal label.” He believed that, even though a third-party would be a hard thing to do, it would not be impossible and “is an obtainable goal in 1976.”⁸³ An actual third-party vehicle was even created, the Committee on Conservative Alternatives, including among its members Congressmen John Ashbrook (R-Ohio) and Robert Bauman (R-Md.), William Rusher and Ron Docksai. Its purpose was “to provide a formal mechanism to review and assess the current political situation and to develop future opportunities.”⁸⁴

Following the CPAC, this idea of a conservative challenge to both parties resulted in an optimistic mood and people were hoping to see a conservative candidate running to challenge both parties. William Rusher was one of the leading activists behind the third-party idea. He believed that the development of a strong conservative base outside the Republican Party as well as Rockefeller’s domination of the GOP had made it possible for a new majority to emerge. YAF also chose to embrace the third-party idea as the *New Guard* was devoting several articles and headlines to the project. They discussed the issue at the Chicago convention, but John Sears, executive directors of Citizens for Reagan, pointed out that although Reagan had not yet made up his mind about the 1976 election, “[he] had all but ruled out a third party candidacy.”⁸⁵ This declaration was made only a month after Reagan’s CPAC address. While the post-Watergate malaise benefited conservative in the creation of a third-party that would appeal to a number of Americans who were disenchanted with politics, there was some missing factors in order for it to succeed. The main problem was leadership since Reagan had made it clear he would not be running under a third party and was leaning towards challenging Ford in the Republican primaries. YAF and the third-party advocates

⁸³ Lee Edwards, “A Conservative Party: Has its Time Come?” *New Guard* 14.10 (1974): 9.

⁸⁴ “CPAC Resolutions,” *New Guard* 15.3 (1975): 18-19.

⁸⁵ William Rusher, *The Rise of the Right* (William Morrow & Company, New York, 1984): 273.

were thus left with little prospects as they did not have the expected leadership to lead a successful alternative campaign. With the post-Watergate campaign reforms prohibiting independent groups like YAF to set up tables at campaign stops, the organization's activities during the primaries was reduced to volunteer work. Donatelli however still argued that the 1976 campaign resulted in a 25% increase in national membership.

II THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE.

1. Carter Watch and “Old Right” issues.

One significant change in the 1976 election year from 1964 was the number of YAF members holding delegates position in the national convention and playing a role in the Reagan campaign. Sixty-one YAF members pledged to Reagan at the Kansas City convention and David Keene was Reagan's southern coordinator. YAF was also very involved in the campaign to reelect James Buckley, even though he did not win, and was successful in reelecting Robert Dornan in California and Malcolm Wallop in Wyoming. YAF was getting involved into political candidate's campaigns as it became a significant feature of activities within the organization. Bolstered by these campaigns, YAF emerged at the end of 1976 with 3,400 members but the organization's membership was still at a low point with only 8,753 members – less than half of what it had been six years earlier. YAF was entering a difficult period in its history: still haunted politically by Nixon and dealing with the Reagan defeat of 1976, the organization was struggling to find support. Other issues were important enough to mobilize activists, like the détente issue that was attacked by YAF members who believed the new foreign policy contributed to the weakening of America's relations with the

Soviet Union. The organization was also particularly engaged in an effort to stop the SALT II treaty, just like it had been for SALT I. Finally, YAF initiated Carter Watch, a program that begun in December 1976 to monitor President Carter's policies and that would become "an accurate barometer of the organization's dismay at the state of the America's economy and defense by the end of the 1970s."⁸⁶

YAF was getting more involved in what Koerner has described in his dissertation as the "New Right", in opposition to the "Old Right" that he described as being *National Review* type conservatives with deep roots in right-wing principles. The New Right, he argued, "represented responses to the new "social issues" of the 1970s" and was "another variation on provincial Americanism's themes."⁸⁷ While mainstream have described the Radical Right as a "discrete reactionary" episode, they framed the New Right as an angry backlash against recent changes in America. Just like the neoconservatives, the New Right was another example of the rightward bound that America was taking by the end of the seventies. The New Right thus appeared to be more like another stage in the movement than a completely new political impulse. As YAF alumni James Roberts explained,

The point to be made is that on matters of principles and policy there is no *major* differences between these groups and individuals. [...] I know of no conservative leader who does not champion limited government and individual liberties. Similarly, both Old Rightists and New Rightists favor a reliance on the market economy and both subscribe to traditional morality.⁸⁸

The New Right was thus neither a backlash nor a new movement but instead the latest phase of a persisting one that was using an already existing network of activists to express new complaints about a government that was still dealing with the aftermath of the Watergate

⁸⁶ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 166.

⁸⁷ Koerner, *The Conservative Youth Movement*, 470.

⁸⁸ Roberts, *The Conservative Decade*, 7.

crisis. As inflation was becoming one of the nation's main problems, more and more people started to rebel against taxation and government in general.

2. YAF and cultural issues.

At the 1977 national convention John Buckley was elected national chairman as he was running unopposed after Kane had vacated his seat to retire for private business in Maine.⁸⁹ Being a libertarian on social issue and calling for an end to YAF's opposition to legalized marijuana, Buckley created a controversy within the national board. Indeed, the organization had always been running a platform against the legalization of drugs and Buckley's position caused a tumult within the national board. This move towards a more libertarian view put Buckley in a very dangerous position and he was left in the minority with only eleven supporters out of the twenty five national board members. While YAF had always been more on the political side of American life, the Buckley issue brought a more cultural impact to the organization. The national board was still focusing on "Old Right" issues like the Cold War or government involvement rather than on the social issues that were associated with the New Right. According to a survey orchestrated by the *New Guard* during the summer of 1976, for instance, more than a quarter of respondents could be classified as pro-choice on abortion, and nearly half opposed a constitutional amendment banning abortion. Only 62% of respondent supported a constitutional amendment allowing prayer in school and a "razor-thin majority", 51.5%, opposed the legalization of marijuana use.⁹⁰ A significant minority of YAFers were libertarians with views on cultural matters such as abortion, school prayer or drug use were considered left-wing by most conservatives. But the

⁸⁹ Interestingly enough Kane now heads one of the largest Budweiser beer distributorship on the East Coast.

⁹⁰ Ron Robinson, "New Guard Readers Sounds Off," *New Guard* 17.1 (1977): 6-7.

New Right, just like the Old Right, “was not a monolith” and, much like YAF, it comprised a wide range of activists that still identified themselves with conservatism.

YAF tried to fight for other issues that would help reshape the conservative movement during the 1970s and would bring more members to the organization. Although there was a libertarian minority within the organization, most of YAF members still had “traditional” conservative views on cultural issues and the national board decided to get involved in issues such as abortion, the Equal Right Amendment or busing. YAF did not usually get involved in social issues like these, but with an increasingly active Supreme Court that was deciding in favor of abortion, busing and affirmative action, the organization could no longer ignore them. It was also an opportunity for YAF to try and move away from the bureaucratic organization it had become by getting involved in issues that would create new dynamics on the agenda. However, as Schneider argued, “they opposed them out of their continued resistance to an active judiciary, not so much because they were influenced by the morality of such positions or, in the case of abortion, a woman’s “choice” to decide.”⁹¹ Unfortunately, libertarian influence among many YAFers never really allowed for the organization to have a united front on many of the social issues. David Brudnoy, a *New Guard* contributor, was thus hiding a homosexual and drug-using lifestyle that was never really compatible with YAF. Although he still identified as a conservative, he is the perfect example of the difficulties an organization like YAF had to face when trying to deal with social issues. Politics were a field that YAF knew better and where it could get the best result at the grassroots level.

⁹¹ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 155.

3. “We should not be fooled by our own rhetoric and PR.”

During these years of debacle on the Right, YAF was surprisingly able to maintain a certain influence in the political sphere. Indeed, its officers were still respected conservative leaders and enjoyed good connections with the Washington-based community of conservatives. YAF never changed its rhetoric, even as it was getting more and more involved with the New Right and the organization kept one of its practical foundations to maintain its influence. YAF’s well crafted image and fundraising prowess were yet another reason for the organization’s apparent influence on the conservative scene. Only a handful number of YAF members knew the true state of the organization and they knew how crucial it was for this information to remain secret. As the New Guard was still praising YAF’s accomplishment, its remaining core of activists made the glowing reports sound plausible. Even the mainstream press was still treating YAF as a politically significant organization, reporting most of YAF’s claim, like its publicly stated membership of 50,000. Thus, on December 1978 at a national board meeting, Buckley warned the members that “we should not be fooled by our own rhetoric and PR.” The organization was indeed boasting a healthy membership and a growing influence on campus when in reality “YAF doesn’t have 50 state organizers and probably doesn’t have 50 active college chapters. We haven’t got but 5,000 real members.”⁹² While the mainstream press was viewing YAF as “the major organization of conservative students” whose growing influence on campus was the work of the “healthy 55,000” members of the right-wing organization, YAF had to be careful not to be fooled by its own rhetoric of success and to remember that it was on the verge of a crisis.

⁹² Koerner, *The Conservative Youth Movement*, 486.

From the outside YAF was still the same organization that it had always been, a strongly built membership of activists that were able to mobilize on political campaigns. As long as this image would remain, YAF would retain its status within conservative circles as an organization capable to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. Money was indeed a major issue for YAF as the organization had faced several financial crisis since its creation and was still struggling to find financing. Part of the problem was that YAF was not a tax-exempt organization and depended on donations to keep it solvent. During the 1970s large donors were making donations to tax-exempt organizations like Young America's Foundation, a YAF's offshoot started at Vanderbilt University in 1971. "YAF's tax status began to signify its doom to some extent," Ron Robinson argued.⁹³ By the mid-1970s however, the organization was still able to raise enough money to fund its activities and give accomplishments to put in the New Guard and on future fundraising letters. YAF's grassroots raised \$610,000 in 1976, \$677,000 in 1977 and \$590,000 in 1978 while the 1980 election saw an impressive \$1,280,000 of revenue. It was a triumph of image over action, but, as Docksai had previously noticed, "an operation that has a mailing list, a board of directors, and a national office is not necessarily alive." And this conclusion was the same in 1978 as it was in 1972. Like other seemingly impressive mass membership organization like the Conservative Caucus, YAF was raising money on reputations that far exceeded their impact.

⁹³ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 166.

III YAF AND RONALD REAGAN.

1. Facing the economic crisis and the American Right.

In two years, between 1977 and 1978 YAF had gone through three different national chairmen with all three elections being linked to a difficult time of the organization. Kane had been elected thanks to regional faction that made him the candidate of the national board, Buckley had always been a controversial candidate with his support of drug legalization. Buckley's resignation on November 1978, a first in the history of the organization, surprised the board even though he never hid his frustration towards the inability of the board to appreciate his libertarian philosophy. James Lacy, a University of Southern California YAF chapter member who had been a conservative activist in California since Reagan's gubernatorial victory in 1966, was elected to replace Buckley. Lacy had inherited an organization that was having a hard time expanding its membership or finding a common purpose on campus, but that was finally pulling out of its post-Watergate malaise. This renewal was in part due to the revival of conservatism in the late 1970s. The economic crisis that had worsened with growing tax rates, unemployment, and high inflation gave YAF and conservatives occasions to challenge Keynesian economic thinking that had plunged the nation into an economic disaster. Furthermore, problems in American foreign policy provided YAF with yet another purpose as the organization played a big role in criticizing the Carter administration in its dealing with the crisis as well as with foreign issues. YAF opposed the signing away of the Panama canal, the normalization of relations with China or the maintain of the détente policy with the Soviet. These issues were familiar ones to the organization who had always based most of its campaign on anticommunism.

The American Right exploded with activity after Nixon's resignation, although it took a period of adjustment conservatives were "building an extensive network of new political action committees, think tanks, fundraising firms, and single issue lobbies. Conservatives now had two main assets that would assure them a boom in right-wing institutions building. While YAF had been building a mailing list since its creation in 1960, it was now capable to raise an impressive amount of money. But money would not be enough if right-wing organizations like YAF had not been recruiting and molding young conservatives to bring them into the movement and provide them with skills and contacts. While it would be an over-statement to say that the New Right was an outgrowth of youth organization like YAF, there is definitely a link between the two. For example, three prominent New Right organizations – the Fund for a Conservative Majority, the Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, and Young America's Foundation – were actually YAF's spinoffs. Other right-wing groups were also starting to gain importance as the New Right was becoming more and more influential. Such was the case of the religious Right that emerged following the failure of Jimmy Carter, a born-again Christian, to keep the pro-family and traditionalist values of the evangelical community. Along with the neoconservatives, the religious Rights were taking a part in the shift towards the Right in American politics. The failures of Nixon and Carter and the economic crisis made Americans careful about politics and all these different groups helped push longtime conservatives in organizations like YAF out more as they had to strive to keep their influence in the conservative movement.

2. YAF and the roots of the Reagan Revolution.

As the election year was approaching, YAF was finally able to look forward to the nomination of a conservative as the Republican candidate for the 1980 election. Although

Reagan took his time to announce his candidacy, the California governor had been preparing the 1980 election since his narrow defeat to Ford in the Republican primaries in 1976. His political action committee, Citizens For The Republic (CFTR) had been campaigning for four years as well as YAF members who were fully committed to the Reagan campaign. YAF was heavily involved in the campaign and worked hard to get Reagan elected. As part of the effort, the organization organized the Detroit '80 Youth Operation, a national project that sent more than four hundred members to the GOP convention to work for Reagan. It was a relief when the longtime YAF supporter was finally elected presidential candidate for the Republican Party after so many years of effort. Conservatives activists had finally captured the GOP. In the autumn, YAF was also celebrated its twentieth anniversary. More than seven hundred conservative activists came to the dinner at Washington's Mayflower Hotel to hear William F. Buckley and Congressman Robert Bauman speak about YAF's importance in the conservative movement. The dinner seemed to be pointing at a brighter future for the organization after a challenging decade. But as a *New Guard* contributors noted, "though the tide has begun to turn – due in small part to YAF's efforts – much work remains to put our country firmly in conservative hands."⁹⁴ It was indeed important to keep in mind that even though Reagan had won the Republican primaries, he still had to win the presidential election before YAF could think about victory.

Throughout the campaign,, YAG continued its involvement with Reagan as thousands of activists mobilized through Students for Reagan, a program headed by the Fund for a Conservative Majority. YAF was particularly involved in the program with former Dartmouth activist, Frank Cannon, serving as national coordinator and other YAFers holding important positions, like Georgia chairman Phil Linderman or Pennsylvania executive

⁹⁴ "YAF and the Future," *New Guard* (Fall 1980): 40.

directors Brian Tocco. Young conservatives organized operations to bring more campuses in the campaign and mobilize more students, and Students for Reagan was “instrumental in showing substantial support for Governor Reagan among young voters.” A noteworthy project that Student for Reagan organized during the campaign was a mock election that took place on campuses all around the country. Every student was eligible to vote in this “straw poll” designed to give an idea of which candidates students were supporting. Reagan won in the vast majority of campuses such as University of Richmond (VA), Virginia Tech, Louisiana State University or Stephen F. Austin (TX) while President Jimmy Carter only won two universities, losing even his home university, Emory. Students for Reagan also sponsored other project like “Operation Clear Sight” carried by many local organizations where windshields were washed on cars with a flyer left on it that was saying “Now that you can see more clearly, we hope that you’ll vote for Ronald Reagan.”⁹⁵ Student for Reagan was a massive effort carried out by more than 8,000 students to help elect Reagan. As national coordinator Frank Cannon explained: “the level of commitment inspired by Governor Reagan all over the country was much higher than in any other campaign I’ve been a part of.”⁹⁶ With Reagan’s victory, YAF could start looking at the future more brightly than ever as the election of a conservative candidate had put the organization within the majority.

3. Into the Eighties.

The election of Ronald Reagan had some immediate effect on YAF. Members and alumni played significant roles in the Reagan administration and the transition effort, including Frank Donatelli, Carol Bauman or Jay Parker. Former YAF member Don Devine

⁹⁵ “‘Student For Reagan’ Mobilize American Youth,” *Dialogue On Liberty* 6.3 (1980): 2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 2.

was appointed head of the Office of Personnel Management while Richard Allen as National Security Advisor. The organization finally found itself supporting the party of the majority and was still highly involved in promoting the new administration's programs. YAF organized the Youth for the Reagan Agenda dedicated to fighting for Reagan's economic program. As James Lacy argued, "the project is focused on generating youth support for the President's economic program... The only way to stop inflation and restore economic productivity is to scale back the size and scope of government."⁹⁷ YAF members were also successful in lobbying for Reagan: they sent letters to congressional delegations and personally lobbied congressmen to pass Reagan's economic agenda. As his economic program passed Reagan gave YAF credit for helping push the program: "Cutting government spending and reducing taxation have always been YAF goals. Today, they're government policy. YAF's efforts to put these concepts into practice are most appreciated."⁹⁸ The myriad of YAF members that were able to find jobs in the Washington bureaucracy in the early years of Reagan's presidency as well as the important role the organization played during the presidential campaign and after are thus a perfect illustration of YAF's significance during its twentieth year. During 1981 YAF kept its profile public and still influenced the conservative movement. They sponsored the 1981 CPAC meeting and introduced influential conservatives as Reagan was one of the main speakers with Vice President George Bush and Budget Director David Stockman.

The seventies were thus a challenging decade that resulted in the election of a conservative candidate that YAF had supported for years. Although this decade had not been an easy one for YAF the organization was still able to survive it and remained an active and

⁹⁷ Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism*, 170.

⁹⁸ "Youth for Reagan Agenda Celebrates Passage of Economic Recovery Program," *New Guard* 21.4 (1981): 7.

influential institution, at least in the conservative movement. YAF had overcome financial and regional difficulties that, even though they had made the organization lose most its campus programs, had made it ready for the Reagan election. The organization created cadres for conservatism that allowed for Reagan's victory to happen through the building of a network of conservatives that set up the conditions for a right-wing candidate to win. YAF became a tributary to the Right's growing reservoir of politicians. Indeed, throughout the 1970s, thousands of young people became involved in organizations like YAF, building powerful networks. YAF served as an important educational institution, teaching young people about politics and giving them a window into the conservative movement's professional world. As Koerner argued, organizations like YAF or ISI "had provided a welcome political outlet and element of community"⁹⁹ The eighties could not look brighter for the organization. With a powerful network of alumni, as a significant number of them were holding positions in Washington and in the Reagan administration, the organization could boast an appealing program of conservative ideals. However, YAF had to remain careful as, with a conservative President now in power, the organization was in danger of becoming obsolete. Even though YAF had achieved its main goal, political power for the conservative movement, the growth of conservatism throughout the seventies resulted in the conservative capture of the Republican Party and the need for an organization like YAF outside the GOP was thus evaporating. In the wake of the eighties, YAF was thus faced with another challenge: to remain influential and keep its importance within the conservative movement.

⁹⁹ Koerner, *The Conservative Youth Movement*, 491.

CONCLUSION

“We fight for lost causes because we know that our defeat and dismay may be the preface to our successors’ victory, though that victory itself will be temporary; we fight rather to keep something alive than in the expectation it will triumph.”

- T.S. Eliot.

Young Americans for Freedom had gone a long way since the founding of the organization in the small town of Sharon, Connecticut and the drafting of the Sharon Statement on September 11, 1960. While the organization was born in the period of tumult and social unrest that was the sixties, it was able to make its voice heard, however little it was, and to get a significant influence on campuses that were mainly dominated by the New Left. The opposition to this New Left however gave YAF one of its main combat on campus as the organization made the fight against leftist organization one of its main goals. With programs dedicated to fight campus unrest YAF had found a way to mobilize students to join the organization in the sixties. But fighting campus unrest was just one goal on the agenda. Anticommunism and political activism were also closely linked together as the Cold War was still an important issue that created many debates throughout the nation. The Goldwater campaign in 1964 brought YAF to a larger public as students all over the country started mobilizing for the conservative candidate. The election of a conservative as the Republican candidate was an important turn for YAF since the election brought thousands of new members and further developed the organization. Even though Goldwater did not win against Johnson, it showed that there was grassroots mobilization on the Right and a potential for the building of youth conservatism. In its early years YAF was particularly involved in

anticommunism with the beginning of the Vietnam War and the organization dedicated many programs to fight against communism whether it was abroad or in the U.S.

YAF's influence on campus, even though the organization was leading several programs to mobilize students, was still very limited compared to the influence of the Left at the same period. There were a significant number of members that were active but, just like its main leftist counterpart SDS, YAF was functioning with a small core of activists. Most of its programs in the sixties barely achieved their goals as the administration never really paid attention to its protests. The organization was influential in the conservative movement but its impact on American political life in the sixties was small. With the decline of student activism in the wake of the seventies YAF found itself in a difficult position as the organization had to struggle to remain active on campuses. It is important to realize that a good number of New Left organizations collapsed in the seventies when YAF was able to maintain a degree of activity. The collapse of organizations like SDS and the decline of New Left activity on campus brought new challenges for YAF as the organization lost one of its main opponents. This resulted in a more politically active organization with the increase in political activity and a greater involvement in politics. Indeed, during the seventies YAF was particularly critical of the Nixon administration and worked greatly towards the rightward move of America. With their involvement in the different presidential and their constant support of Reagan throughout the seventies, YAF played a crucial role in the building of conservatism in the seventies.

YAF made Reagan's victory possible because of all the grassroots activism the organization organized during twenty years, first with Goldwater and then throughout the seventies. As Koerner argued, "Ronald Reagan won the 1980 presidential election because the American Right had embraced him as its champion more than a decade earlier, allowing

him to develop the stature and fundraising capacity necessary to win the Republican nomination under a primary-dominated format.”¹⁰⁰ As America was shifting rightward in the seventies, with the economic crisis and the Watergate scandal that made Americans more careful about politics, YAF was able to use its core of activists to mobilize conservative students and lead a campaign that would bring out a conservative candidate like Reagan to the presidency. While people were not ready for Goldwater in 1964, almost two decades later the activity of organization like YAF, combined with a cultural shift and a change in political life, made the election of Reagan possible. This resulted in the culmination of grassroots activism, or as Koerner argued “Reagan’s victory was not the triumph of a new majority, but instead the long delayed revival of provincial Americanism as an electoral force on par with liberalism.”¹⁰¹ Forgotten by the mainstream press Right America slowly made its voice heard throughout the seventies. As Lee Edwards was explaining when talking about his own view of the sixties, the conservative youth movement was often overlooked by the press who would assume the left had more importance on campuses. In its 1972 annual report Wayne Thorburn made an assessment of YAF that could have well applied to any other years:

The real import of Young Americans for Freedom in 1972 lies with the local New Left leaders turned away from his nihilistic beliefs and to conservatism after hours of debate and discussion with the YAF chapter chairman at his college. It lies with the young high school student who developed into an effective leader of conservatism as a freshman on his college campus. It lies with the young writer who found an opportunity to develop his talents on a YAF independent newspaper, the young political aspirant who gained knowledge through YAF activities, the young student who learned more about conservative philosophy from reading and discussions generated at a YAF conference, the business major who discovered there is more than making millions and that each of us must do all we can to preserve and extend freedom in America.¹⁰²

In the process of building cadres for conservatism YAF had produced a significant number of assets. The organization was always able to provide volunteers,

¹⁰⁰ Koerner, *The Conservative Student Movement*, 517.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 518.

¹⁰² *Ibid*,

money and publicity to the conservative cause and three prominent New Right organizations—The Fund for a Conservative Majority, the Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, and the Young America’s Foundation—were YAF’s spin offs. Furthermore, almost every conservative operation was employing YAF’s alumni. The organization produced an important number of political directors, field men or policy analysts for New Right institutions. James Robert even dedicated a whole chapter of his book, *The Conservative Decade*, to the conservative youth movement, dressing a list of all the prominent YAF alumni. In his list are included, Robert Bauman who became a Republican congressman and chairman of the American Conservative Union, Howards Phillips, elected head of the Conservative Caucus, Patrick Buchanan who became Reagan’s directors of communications in 1986 or Alan Gottlieb, chairman of the Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms.¹⁰³ The list only scratches the surfaces as hundreds of YAF alumni could have been mentioned on that list. YAF was thus able to provide a network for conservative organizations and was successful in creating cadres for conservatism. The organization would however struggle to survive to its 1980 peak and was more and more challenged by other organizations, like the YR or CR, as conservative was becoming mainstream. With internal struggles in the early eighties YAF’s new challenge was to remain relevant in an America that had considerably shifted on the Right.

¹⁰³ Roberts, *The Conservative Decade*, 32-34.