



Too Dumb to Fail: How the GOP Betrayed the Reagan Revolution to Win Elections (and How It Can Reclaim Its Conservative Roots)

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From a leading voice among young conservatives, an impassioned argument that to stay relevant the Republican Party must look beyond short-term electoral gains and re-commit to historic conservative values.

In 1963 Richard Hofstadter published his landmark book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. Today, Matt Lewis argues, America's inclination toward simplicity and stupidity is stronger than ever, and its greatest victim is the Republican Party. Lewis, a respected conservative columnist and frequent guest on MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, eviscerates the phenomenon of candidates with a "no experience required" mentality and tea party "patriots" who possess bluster but few core beliefs.

Lewis traces the conservative movement's roots, from Edmund Burke to William F. Buckley, and from Goldwater's loss to Reagan's landslide victory. He highlights visionary thinkers who understood nuance and deep ideology and changed the course of the nation. As we approach the 2016 presidential election, Lewis has an urgent message for fellow conservatives: embrace wisdom, humility, qualifications, and inclusion--or face extinction.

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Author : Matt K. Lewis

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From Reader Review Too Dumb to Fail: How the GOP Betrayed the Reagan Revolution to Win Elections (and How It Can Reclaim Its Conservative Roots) for online ebook

Seth Millstein says

The basic purpose of this book is to help save the Republican Party from self-destruction. As a liberal, I'm not terribly invested in this goal, but I read the book anyway, because Matt Lewis is one of my favorite conservative political writers and I was interested in hearing his take on the party's problems.

As far as the diagnoses goes, Lewis is basically on-point. He accurately notes that the Republican Party has given outsized power to some of the most destructive elements within the conservative movement, which I'd broadly describe as Tea Party-type agitators (Sarah Palin, talk radio hosts, etc) anti-intellectuals, and new converts to conservatism who aren't informed about how the movements history or how the political process works. Lewis is also correct that demographic trends are working against the GOP, and that this will be the party's undoing unless it can make itself more appealing to growing demographics (that is, non-rural non-whites).

The most interesting part of the book to me was the section on culture. Lewis's basic premise is that politics (by which he means both laws and political attitudes) follows cultural trends, not the other way around, and that cultural trends, in turn, are influenced by things like entertainment and pop culture. Lewis points out that, while social conservatives have done a good job getting themselves and their allies elected, they've done a terrible job of changing cultural attitudes in their direction (gay marriage being a prime example), and as such, they're not able to effectively enact their ideologies. He suggests that conservatives focus on infiltrating mainstream entertainment and pop culture, and I found this to be a fascinating argument.

Lewis's diagnoses of the problems are spot on, but his prescription is a bit wanting. He says the Republican Party should enact some manner of immigration reform as a way of wooing Hispanic voters. The thing is, "immigration reform" is a vague term that can refer to either very liberal or very conservative policies. Though he doesn't say it, Lewis is clearly referring to liberal reforms (otherwise, they'd hold no appeal to Hispanic voters), yet he knows that the mere suggestion of things like amnesty or a path to citizenship are a non-starter for the vast majority of Republican lawmakers, and so he doesn't specify what type of "immigration reform" the GOP should or could pass.

But this has been the central problem facing the GOP for years: How to pass immigration reform that's both amenable to GOP lawmakers (and by extension, base voters) and also appealing to Hispanics. There is just no evidence that this is possible, as evidenced by the absolute failure of the party's attempts at immigration reform in 2014, and Lewis hasn't proposed a specific solution for fixing this impasse. To be fair to him, I'm not sure there is one.

In one section of the book, he correctly notes that there's a tension between the short-term goals of Republican campaign managers (they want to win individual elections) and the long-term needs of the party (it needs to expand the party's appeal or face destruction). What this basically means is that the GOP is pandering to rural, white voters at the expense of everyone else, because this is a winning formula for many legislative and gubernatorial elections. But it's not a winning strategy for winning the presidency.

Again, this is a good observation, but I'm not sure the problem can be as easily overcome as Lewis suggests.

This conflict of interest within the party has played out over the course of several election cycles, and the fact that the GOP is on the cusp of nominating Donald Trump — who exacerbates this problem more so than any other Republican candidate I can imagine — suggests that the party is not inclined to think long-term, and will instead focus on short-term successes at the expense of the party's general health.

I could be wrong about this, but I'm starting to think the Republican Party might need to sacrifice this presidential election, and perhaps the next one, in order to reform itself. That was my biggest takeaway from this book, because all of the problems Lewis describes have been pretty apparent for quite some time now. His proposals are all good ones, but there's no indication that the powers-that-be in the Republican Party have any inclination to adopt them.

However, Lewis may be on to something by proposing that conservatives focus, for the time being, more on changing cultural attitudes than changing laws, because that's how you actually built long-term ideological support for your policies. The GOP might as well try something new, because what it's been doing for the last several decades clearly isn't working.

Jim Serger says

Well written book, just in time for the general elections running, to commence. Thought provoking.

Kristi Richardson says

“All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent.” Edmund Burke

I firmly believe that you cannot be a political animal and not read what the opposition is writing. I must admit that some pundits I can only read so much and then I have to put it away, because it is not based on facts or ideas but on vitriol and stirring things up by repeating falsehoods. This book by Matt K. Lewis is not like these others. I read it all the way through and enjoyed it for the most part.

Mr. Lewis takes us through the beginning of the Conservative movement and I found his history engrossing. I used to laugh at William F. Buckley's way of speaking but I never doubted his education and spirit. Nowadays the GOP and the Conservatives have dumbed their selves down so much, that if you don't act as if you never read a book or newspaper, you won't be elected. He shows examples of that with Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. If you think about it, how do you go to Yale and not get some knowledge? How do you become a doctor and not have some brains? Yet the people running for office act as if they are just regular folks and don't get any knowledge outside of the Bible. In the end that will hurt their message.

Mr. Lewis points out specific steps that Conservatives need to take to modernize not moderate. I think our nation is stronger when both sides are strong and viable. The way it's going now, the Democratic Party may have lopsided power in the future if the GOP doesn't learn from this book.

I am a lifelong Democrat and while I used to say a “bleeding heart liberal”, as I age I will say I am more moderate and definitely not a democratic socialist. I think Mr. Lewis' book is well written and should be required reading for anyone interested in politics.

David says

I found this book disappointing, as it failed to deliver on its promise to explain how the contemporary conservatives had deviated from orthodoxy. The primary reason for this failing is that the author never attempts to define or explain 'conservative.' Instead, we only get examples of supposedly conservative historical figures. Aristotle, we are told, is a conservative thinker because he considers the polis to be a natural phenomenon rather than artificial. Aquinas is conservative because he was a medieval Catholic. Burke is conservative because he opposed the French Revolution. Goldwater is a conservative because he ran as a Republican. I'm reminded of Socrates' dispute with Euthyphro, where Socrates points out that Euthyphro is giving him examples of piety when he has asked for a definition.

Even when Lewis discusses the ideas of those he deems to be great conservative thinkers, he sees them only through the lens of contemporary political disputes. Calling Aristotle's thought conservative because it aligns with the views of some contemporary conservatives is anachronistic. Aristotle was dealing with a different set of issues than the latter are addressing. For example, Lewis tells us that conservatives are "anti-government," which is hardly something one could say of Aristotle. Conservatives and liberals alike can make use of Aristotle, so it's more reasonable simply to consider whether he's right or wrong on a particular issue than to attempt to pigeonhole him within a contemporary political framework.

Lewis comes across as more competent when discussing recent issues, but undermines his own case either by inconsistency or overreaching. For the latter, he says numerous times throughout the book that Reagan "won" the Cold War. This is simply Reagan hagiography, which makes it difficult to respect Lewis's claims of caring about the facts. To say that Reagan contributed to the downfall of the Soviet Union is disputable, but at least a more reasonable position. To give the main credit to Reagan is to neglect the skill and temperament of Gorbachev, as well as the internal decline of the Soviet state that had been in progress for decades. We can now see that Soviet military spending did not significantly increase during the Reagan years, so what did Reagan contribute to its fall that was exception from his forebears?

As for inconsistency, Lewis has no trouble attacking his opponents on a basis that he recognizes as unfair when used against the people he supports. For example, he complains of a media environment that focuses on soundbites over context. Soon thereafter, he complains of Obama failing to respect small business owners because of his "You didn't build that" statement.

When Lewis is not leading the reader astray with partisan casting of history, he is offering trite and banal observations. His discussion with a businessman who says we need "an Uber for government" is something I expect to see in a Thomas Friedman column. I would expect someone claiming to represent the intellectual strain of conservatism to recognize a difference between an app focused on a particular service against the range of expectations people have for their government.

Two good things about this book are that Lewis has correctly identified a problem: the lack of respect for their intellectual heritage among conservatives. He even goes some way toward addressing this with his reading recommendations of intellectual figures with a conservative bent. What I would have appreciated more however was a bit less cheerleading for intellectualism, and instead some real intellectual engagement. If you are interested in this topic, you can find reading lists such as Lewish provides elsewhere. I would skip this and opt for something more challenging and serious.

Joe James says

It's a very poorly written book. Perhaps I wasn't the targeted audience, but all in all the author participates in a lot of speculation and revisionist history. He seems very critical of hacks in the conservative movement and how they've dumbed down the electorate (or what have you) when he himself can't seem to humanize Democrats or make a caricature of them (for instance whenever he mentions Jimmy Carter he always mentions he's a Peanut farmer, why do this other than to wink wink nod at his conservative readers). His analysis isn't the worst interpretation of political developments but sometimes he's informed so much by partisanship that facts are inconvenient. I didn't even read the last chapter because I got to where he repeated myths about climate change that I had just had enough.

It's true that we are a hyper partisan of a society and that both liberals and conservatives contribute to that, but there was no facts or data to support any of his points (not to say that some of them didn't have merit). It came off as a sort of smug superiority that he tries to begrudge.

In this sense, this criticism of conservatism as it now stands embodies what's wrong with conservatism. It's averse to facts and quantitative, empirical evidence. It sounds great if you're one of the converted. It lionizes token examples of conservative initiatives to be more inclusive (for instance, Nikki Haley is no champion or leader on inclusion, she only cared about removing the confederate when the national spotlight was on her; she didn't have the political will to initiate a culture change until she absolutely had to, so too with conservatives).

The author confuses anecdote for data, over-invests political leader's influence over the sociological development of society and proposes counterfactual narratives to support his interpretation of history (how was the country against intellectuals at some point but for them at others? His only evidence is who was president and who lost elections. Forget the fact that consent to intellectualism is only one factor among many in such outcomes, it's not quantified and therefore spurious

Overall if you're a conservative who doesn't want to face reality and empirical facts beyond superficial engagement, this is the book for you. It's not reality that's the problem. It's the idiots.

Josh Waters says

Well Written; Solid Insights; good game plan for future.

Very easy to read and understand where the conservative movement currently is, how we got here, and how to make sure the movement lasts in the future. A good overview for the political enthusiast. An underlying tension seemed to run throughout of the "modernization not moderation" theory. It seemed that some of the thoughts were more on becoming more moderate in the goal of modernization. Seemed to lack much discussion or reflection on the role of government itself, lacking a foundation on which to launch the future of the conservative movement. Also, I disagree with several sentiments on evangelicals and their negatives towards the conservative movement. Without evangelical and strong intellectual Christians across the country the Republican Party could be completely irrelevant today. Would recommend to anyone interested in politics, but one might look to the recommended reading list at the end of the book for more on policy

reading.

Deirdre says

Despite the aforementioned flaws (most notably on climate change and science) I DO think this is an worthwhile read. Easy to read with some bold and valid points apropos for the current disgraceful election, I found the overall message to "get smart" to be timely and on point. I was between 2-3 stars on this, but found myself giving 3 because I believe books like this are a start. Like many voters, I feel it's important to read an alternative viewpoint which is why I picked up this book. Lewis writes here how important it is to know history. I've been reading a biography on each President of the United States and it's startling to think about how far Republicanism has swung from the ideal of Lincoln and Roosevelt.

Sean Hackbarth says

Matt Lewis offers remedies to an intellectually flabby ideology.

He takes us on an intellectual journey to the beginning of conservatism with Edmund Burke through Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. Then he brings us into the present full of bad comedians, talk radio yappers, and populist candidates possessing thin amounts of political wisdom. Lewis also delves into the Con\$ervative Movement of consultants and professional activists where skimming a percentage off fundraising trumps actually accomplishing political goals.

After describing the problems with the modern conservative movement, Lewis lays out solutions for modernizing but not moderating conservatism. Deep learning, humility, engaging with pop culture, and speaking to those outside our bubbles are some of his answers.

If conservatism is to be more than cartoon characters trying to be reality television stars, Lewis' advice can show us the way forward.

Sean Blevins says

Turns out, conservatives are no longer conservatives.

In Lewis' analysis, the GOP has abandoned wisdom, prudence, and foresight in favor of anger, self-gratification, and short-term thinking. One doesn't need to look beyond the 2016 crop of GOP presidential candidates to see it. This is useful for conservatives, enjoyable by liberals, and valuable for all invested in the political process.

Lewis points specifically to the GOPs embrace of rural, evangelical, populist platform and its abandonment of science, the arts, and popular culture as both causes and effects (!) of the current conservative malaise.

The title comes from the party's valorization of inexperience and ignorance. Populism represents a strain of "know-nothingness," so political outsiders and those who proudly claim, "I'm no scientist!" are considered "too dumb to fail." The problem with this strategy should be obvious.

Lewis does a masterful job of avoiding the "Sure we have a problem...But liberals are so much worse!" sentiment that often creeps into these types of self-assessment. But I believe that his party loyalty prevents him from simply seeing the bottom line: the Republican party is no longer very conservative. The oft-quipped line about Reagan being unelectable is all too true. The current incarnation of the GOP is not interested in happy warriors who are always recruiting; they're in the market for angry demagogues who are always excluding.

He hits on the fundamental question that *should* be confronting every serious conservative thinker by this point: "What happens when appealing your base and growing your coalition become mutually exclusive goals?" (61) But there is no easy answer. While the GOP's core demographic is shrinking, they're pursuing policies and rhetoric of exclusion rather than inclusion. Look at the candidacy of John Kasich; Republicans cite his appeal to liberals as an argument against him. Kasich *IS* a conservative. Don't conservatives want liberals to hop the fence? It's...frustrating.

The solution Lewis offers that resonates most strongly with me is his call for conservatives to not create niche markets for themselves, but to engage the popular culture. "Don't," says Lewis, "try to be a Christian rock band; try to be a really good rock band that *happens* to consist of believers."

With their rural affinities and disdain for cities ("New York values!"), the young, science, popular culture, racial and religious minorities, who among the current crop of Conservative leaders proposes to build that "shining city on the hill"? There's no love for cities; there seems little love for building ("The party of 'No!'"). Heck, there isn't even much love for love. But love may be the thing most worth conserving...

Hannah Walden says

Thoroughly enjoyed this book and the timing could not be better! Lewis perfectly depicts how the Republican Party has strayed away from successful Reagan Era tactics over the past few years. His suggestions for the Republican Party are not only insightful but clearly display Lewis' experience and research. Absolutely worth the read.

Kristjan Wager says

I went into the book, which has gotten rave reviews, wanting to be sympathetic to the message - Lewis is trying to address the dumbing down of the GOP - but I must say that I am disappointed.

The book has several major flaws:

- It never addresses the money men behind the current GOP (the Koch brothers and others)
- It never addresses the underlying fact that when asked about their stance on single issues, the vast majority on US voters are closer to the Democratic Party than the GOP
- Every time he mentions a Democrat, he takes a swipe at them, often misrepresenting their stance
- He misrepresents the GOP's stance on several issues

- He cherry-picks his sources - e.g. he repeats what some blogger at Forbes wrote about Climategate, but doesn't quote any of the many inquiries that cleared the scientists of any wrongdoings
- He misrepresents the science of global warming

One thing I have noticed that Lewis doesn't include in his advice to future GOP politicians, is to be more honest. Given the stuff I mentioned above, that is probably a good idea.

There is definitely room for a principled Republican writing a book taking on the Tea Party segment of the GOP, but this was unfortunately not it.

Drake says

I make it a goal to stay away from books on politics. In fact, the only reason I picked up this one was because it was recommended by Dr. Russell Moore, whom I deeply respect (see my review of his book "Onward"). I'm glad I did, because it has helped explain so much of what I'm seeing in this year's race for the presidency. In his book, Matt Lewis (a conservative journalist) offers a very insightful and helpful critique of the current state of the Republican Party, showing how a conservative movement that was once championed by great intellectuals like William Buckley and Ronald Reagan is now being championed by leaders who go out of their way to pander to their (usually white, rural, and evangelical) party base. The result is that these leaders have encouraged several disturbing trends in the GOP. In particular, they have fed into the kind of angry anti-intellectualism that now fuels the GOP's base, reducing their message to simply shouting the same talking points over and over again and encouraging their supporters to feel like helpless victims oppressed by the liberal elite. Character traits like knowledge, wisdom, and humility are being increasingly downplayed; rather than evaluating each candidate's political philosophy, modern conservatives tend to vote for whoever's the most angry, whoever gets people fired up, and whoever is the political "outsider" (regardless of their competency). In the past, this has helped Republicans win elections; but with the growing changes in the population and the increasing number of people obtaining a college education, conservatism is in danger of losing all credibility in the eyes of 21st century voters. But it doesn't have to be this way. Lewis does an excellent job charting a path forward for the GOP by encouraging the party to go back to its conservative and intellectual roots. Lewis argues that conservatism as a philosophy is far more sound and realistic than modern liberalism, but many Republican leaders are turning people off by their arrogant, bitter, and overly-simplistic (i.e., "dumb") presentations of conservative views. What we need are thoughtful, intelligent, and optimistic conservative leaders who seek to persuade people of the truth of conservatism rather than encouraging division and disdain for "those liberals over there." I'm grateful to Lewis for his honest and thorough critique as well as his helpful insights into how the Republican party can change to meet 21st century needs. As Lewis puts it, conservatives need to "modernize" their approach without "moderating" their own core conservative beliefs. While I don't agree with Lewis on everything he writes (he seems to consistently give the impression that conservative Christians must embrace modern ideas about evolution), I found the bulk of the book both helpful and enjoyable to read.

Joann says

I won this book in a free book giveaway through a Goodreads Giveaway published by Hachette Book Group (IPG) and by Betsy Hulsebosch. Thanks to all for an informative read. It is important for our country to maintain a healthy two-party system of government. Matt Lewis has some

very good ideas for how the Republican Party can overcome some of its weaknesses. I am a moderate who wishes that Republicans and Democrats weren't so polarized. A very interesting and thought provoking read. I would recommend the book not only to those who would seek public office but to voters in general. Put your cell phones down and start reading this book!!
A solid 4.5 from me.

Richard Sansing says

I read this book right after reading E.J. Dionne's *Why the Right went Wrong*. Dionne, a liberal, argues that Republicans should be more moderate. Lewis, a conservative, argues that they should be more modern. I am more sympathetic to Lewis's argument.

Mathew Whitney says

Too Dumb to Fail: How the GOP Betrayed the Reagan Revolution to Win Elections is a book by Matt K. Lewis analyzing how the conservative movement in the United States has come to be in its current state (especially within the Republican Party). I received this book through a giveaway on Goodreads.

As someone who grew up in a conservative home, in a conservative town, which happens to be a suburb of a relatively conservative city, in the not-so-conservative state of California, I had some expectations coming into this book. In some areas the author met or exceeded those expectations, and I would generally say that there is a lot worth reading here for people still holding on to the GOP and conservative beliefs. Overall, I feel like there is a lot of good advice here for conservatives who want to find out how to better represent the conservative cause, to learn more about the movement's roots, and maybe take a more critical look at the candidates the GOP is putting forward, and what their actions are really doing.

I also spent some years in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, where I experienced a closer mix of liberal and conservative views in a generally conservative state (though recently playing the role of a swing state); an experience which drastically changed my views on the GOP specifically, and the conservative movement in general. The same differences that drove a wedge between myself and the GOP (and many conservatives) holds true with the opinions brought forward in this book. There's nothing here that is likely to change my mind any time soon, and little effort is shown here to cast aside many of the limitations of the conservative echo-chamber, despite much of the text being dedicated to telling people that it is something they should avoid. There is what appears to be a good reading list in the back of the book which I will be giving some further examination, though.
