

# Conservatism in the U.S.: The Rise of a New Counterculture

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DIPLOMSKI RAD  
CONSERVATISM IN THE U.S.: THE RISE OF A NEW  
COUNTERCULTURE

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## 1. Introduction

*The hippies of yesteryear and today's conservatives and libertarians have more in common than most care to imagine. Distrust of government's motives, a lust for individual freedom, and a foundational belief in freedom of expression all bind the rebellion of the past and the rebellion of the present. – Greg Jones, The Federalist*

The question of counterculture in America is an often-overlooked issue, which at first seems to not have a clear-cut answer. Tracing back to the late 1950s, liberal thought was considered to be the main starting point for what we now know as the liberal counterculture of the 1960s. Defining a culture or movement as a form of counterculture implies an already existing cultural conflict and a division between people. When speaking from a present-day point of view, it is painfully obvious that the American people have been constantly politically divided and subdivided for centuries. Union and Confederate, “blue“ and “red“, hippie and “bootlicker“, conservative and liberal – a perpetual divide between the citizens of arguably the most powerful country in the world that comes in the same form, with a different nomenclature. In the past couple of decades, we have been witnessing an interesting shift in the two sides of that same divide. Looking back at the late 1950s and 1960s, it was taken as an universal truth that the government, mainstream media and public thought in the United States were predominantly traditionalist and conservative, and that being liberal in terms of being pro-LGBT rights, pro-minority rights, pro-women's rights and anti-establishment defined an individual as being part of a countercultural movement, an opinion which seemingly remained unchanged to this very day. Thus, the question of whether the west has become accustomed to equating the notion of counterculture with liberalism, and dismissing any other socio-political and cultural movement as a potential form of counterculture, has to be addressed.

Naturally, the counterculture movement of the 1960s in the United States had a major role in defining the notion of counterculture itself, as well as affecting all future outlooks on cultural relations between the establishment and those who oppose it, i.e. the counterculture. However, in the context of U.S. politics of the past couple of decades, the establishment seems to have shifted towards a more liberal mode of thought and behavior, and with it, so have the mainstream media and public thought. At the doorstep of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a dominant part of the popular culture in the U.S. is based on and promotes a liberal way of thought – being pro-LGBT, pro-minority rights and being feminist seems to be the cultural

norm of the modern American. Current president Joe Biden, as well as the ex-president Barack Obama, have both been strong proponents of the liberal way of thought, working towards creating a liberal atmosphere in the country, with acts such as Joe Biden overturning ex-president Donald Trump's transgender military ban in January of 2021, which is in complete opposition to the way the establishment functioned in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (BBC, 2021) With the establishment obviously shifting towards a liberal way of functioning, and the mainstream media being heavily liberal for decades now, the question of whether liberalism should be seen as a form of counterculture in the U.S. at all is brought forward, and if liberalism is not the current counterculture, then what is the current main counterculture in the U.S., if there is one at all. This question is the main starting point for this thesis, as the shift of liberalism from being the leading form of counterculture during the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S., becoming a part of the popular culture and establishment in the 2010s and 2020s, inadvertently created a social and cultural space for a new form of counterculture to develop. Through the exploration of the formation of the notion of counterculture in the U.S., the pivotal 1960s and 1970s, as well as present-day events and the phenomenon of the presidency of Donald Trump, I will show how conservatism went from being the main socio-political guiding ideology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to being slowly culturally and politically repressed during the past couple of decades, only to become a potential, new form of counterculture in present-day America.

This paper will be divided into several chapters, each covering an important part of the event of this new counterculture in America. The first chapter is going to concern the 1960s, a crucial decade in modern American history, due to the birth of the original countercultural movement that persisted well into the 1970s. Another reason why this period is going to be examined is because it offers a great overview of the relationship between the liberal counterculture and the conservative establishment – a relationship which remains relevant to this very day. The second chapter is going to cover several aspects of the present-day state of liberalism and conservatism in America, focusing on the transformation of conservatism in terms of its public presence, its popularity among the younger generations and the new ways its relationship with liberalism in America can be observed, as well as the notion of political correctness and how it ties in with this relationship. The different manifestations of conservatism as a new possible counterculture are also going to be explored in this chapter, with the main focus being on the censorship of conservative public figures on social media and the public American stage. The third chapter is going to focus on the event of the election and presidency of Donald Trump and the effect it had on conservatism in the country, the divide

between conservatives and liberals, and how it ultimately changed the American socio-political scene, including the development of conservatism as a new counterculture. This chapter is also going to function as a segue to the final part of the thesis, which is going to tie up all the arguments made in the paper into one cohesive conclusion about the existence of conservatism in present-day America and if it has truly become a new counterculture.

## **2. Setting the stage: The pivotal 1960s**

To be able to fully grasp the complex relationship between liberalism and conservatism in present-day America, it is necessary to look back at the time period that fundamentally changed the social and political tendencies present in the U.S., and heavily influenced America's socio-political future. The 1960s in America are often remembered as a revolutionary period, born from the rejection of conventional social norms of the 1950s, when the U.S. Civil Rights Movement helped shape an entire generation, anti-war protests were occurring all over the country and the U.S. was headed towards a more liberal future thanks to president John F. Kennedy. Many movements related to women's rights, human sexuality, LGBT rights and minority rights were born and started developing during this period. The traditional interpretation of the American Dream was starting to fall apart, allowing a social and cultural liberation of the younger generations, but also creating a generational gap. The division between the American people was very clear: for many, this cultural revolution reflected the American ideals of freedom, peace, free speech and the American dream, while on the other side many viewed the revolution as a perverse, unpatriotic rebellion against all traditional American values. However, as it soon turned out, the latter had much less of a public following, especially in the younger generations.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s conservatives were widely dismissed as "kooks" and "crackpots" with no hope of winning political power. In 1950 the literary critic Lionel Trilling spoke for a generation of scholars and journalists when he wrote that "in the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition.... It is the plain fact [that] there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation" but only "irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas." (Dallek, *The Atlantic*, 1995)

The 1960s are often seen as a period of civil struggle, where conflicts and riots were a common occurrence, and America was undergoing a massive shift in public and political consciousness. Considering that one of the most popular American presidents of all time, John F. Kennedy, whose politics were as much as liberal as they were anti-communist, politically defined the entire decade after his inauguration in 1961, it is no surprise that a clash between liberals and conservatives was in store for America. Some authors believe that due to Kennedy's political tendencies and decisions, such as the proposition of far-reaching civil rights legislation in response to the violence in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, he was a sort of spiritual and political successor to president Abraham Lincoln, who was considered extremely progressive

and liberal in his time. (Flamm and Steigerwald, 2008: 79) Kennedy's popular domestic proposals, which he called the "New Frontier" included initiatives such as federal aid to education, creation of a department for urban development and housing, increase of the minimum wage, federal aid to struggling areas, as well as better medical care for the elderly. (Giglio, 2006: 63-65) Another major step forward done by Kennedy was the passage of the Area Redevelopment Act and Housing Act of 1961. The former was supposed to provide federal funding to financially and economically poor regions of the country, while the latter was supposed to provide funding for public housing, urban renewal and federal mortgage loans for people who did not qualify for public housing. (Giglio, 2006: 105-106) These acts and decisions on the part of the young and progressive president made him a popular icon of the American liberal counterculture of the 1960s. However, at the same time, many of his acts were actively blocked by the conservative coalition of southern Democrats and Republicans. (Brinkley, 2012; 63-65) Due to his lack of connections and influence, many of his acts did not pass in the way he wished for them to, or they didn't pass at all. The active blocking of Kennedy's liberal acts was just one of the many instances of a conservative establishment standing in the way of social rights and progress, effectively creating a divide between the American people and the establishment itself. So it comes as no surprise that a liberal counterculture came to be during these crucial times of potential social and political progress. According to David Greenberg, at the time of Kennedy's presidency, the popular support for the government was well over 70%, a number which was never again seen in the U.S., especially after his assassination and controversies surrounding president Nixon. (Greenberg, The New Republic, 2013)

While many of the ideals and practices of the counterculture of the 1960s were already present at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, the countercultural "movement" really started taking up a major part of the public space after John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. The counterculture endured and remained active during the entire decade, as well as during the beginning of the 70s, when it died down after the resignation of president Richard Nixon. The counterculture's ideals, as well as art, music and everyday practices became a part of everyday life of the average American, thus becoming a part of the American culture of the 1970s. However, what remained was the ever-present divide and spite between the establishment and the people. While many of the issues tackled during the 60s were being addressed, a major part of them still remained unresolved. Racial issues, gay rights issues and women's rights issues were still a hot topic in politics and everyday life. What we understand



as the notion of counterculture in the U.S. is the revolutionary movement that happened during the 1960s and the beginning of 1970s as a reaction to the norms of the 1950s and the American establishment's unfair treatment of the American people, resulting in a political and cultural shift in the country, which gave birth to a new relationship between the conservative and the liberal. However, I will argue that while this kind of definition might be historically accurate, in terms of calling that movement “counterculture“, the fight for civil rights, LGBT rights and women's rights, as well as against racial injustice, did not end after Nixon's resignation. Rather, the liberal counterculture had gained more traction and more social backing, keeping these issues relevant up to this very day. Due to the liberal movement's multi-decade fight against racial and anti-LGBT prejudice, which were the main public social issues in recent history, its influence has grown exponentially over the years. In a present-day context, the ideas of what was once seen as a revolutionary movement that defied the establishment, are slowly but surely becoming part of the establishment itself.

Once norms and laws favoring tolerance, personal freedom and a big welfare state get institutionalized and don't have significant adverse side effects, citizens become accustomed to them, making them hard to reverse. Further, getting major policy changes through the U.S. political system is difficult, so once new social programs are enacted, they are hard to dilute or eliminate. (Kenworthy, The Washington Post, 2019)

So, a clear line of development of liberalism and its influence in the U.S. can be drawn from the late 1950s to present-day America. However, the question of what happened to conservative thought still remains unanswered. In the following sections of the thesis, I am going to explore the present-day state and spread of conservatism and liberalism in the U.S., as well as the phenomenon of the shift in the socio-political divide in the country.

### **3. Conservatism and liberalism today**

#### **3.1. Political tendencies and growth**

Following the tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s, the pattern of growth of liberal thought in the last two decades in the U.S. has significantly risen. Surveys conducted by the American analytic and advisory company Gallup in 2018 show a clear narrowing of the gap between the percentages of conservative-oriented and liberal-oriented Americans between the 1990s and the year 2019. Back in 1992, about 17% of Americans identified themselves as liberal, while moderates held the majority with around 45%, and around 38-40% of American identified themselves as conservative. (Saad, Gallup, 2019) Today, we are looking at a very different situation. Lydia Saad from Gallup reports that in 2018, 26% of Americans identified as liberal, while both conservatives and moderates were both hitting around 35% each. So, the positive liberal tendency is alive and well, and is close to reaching a similar number to the percentage of conservative-identifying Americans in the U.S. Another interesting fact that came up in this survey research is the percentage of Democrats and Democrat voters identifying as liberal. The survey showed a steady increase from 1994, when the percentage of liberal-identifying Democrats was around 25% (the same as conservative-identifying Democrats), and the majority of Democrats identified themselves as moderate. In 2018, liberals make up the majority (around 51%), while conservatives fell to less than 13%, and the rest of Democrats identify as moderate. The pattern of growth of liberal Democrats was around 1% per year until George Bush's presidency, when it jumped to more than 2% per year, and it stayed around that growth percentage. (Saad, Gallup, 2019) The linear growth of liberal Democrats is a clear sign of the socio-political atmosphere in America, and a natural continuation of the liberal counterculture of the 1960s. Considering the Democrat victories in the past couple of decades on the American political stage, including the presidential elections, it is safe to look at these victories as liberal victories.

On the other side, Republicans have a relatively homogenous composition, with 73% of Republicans identifying as conservative, and no more that 8% identifying as liberal. This percentage started to solidify itself after the election of president Barack Obama in 2008, when it was close to 70%, and during Donald Trump's presidency, it finally reached its peak in 2018. (Saad, Gallup, 2019) However, a large portion of the American voter base still identifies itself as moderate. The moderate voter base can swing both ways, determining the outcome of political decisions, referendums and elections. What the 2020 elections have showed us is the

power of the independent vote, with the majority of independents voting in favor of the Democrat candidate, Joe Biden. The jump of Democrat-voting independents from the 2016 election to the 2020 election is quite sizeable; in 2016, 42% of independents voted Democrat, while in 2020, that number rose to 54%, showing a drastic Democrat and liberal influence in the independent and moderate voter base. (Alcantra et. al., The Washington Post, 2020) However, the number of moderate voters is also diminishing, as voters flock to either far side of the political spectrum. In the years to come, it is reasonable to assume that the moderate voter-base is going to shrink even further, as more and more Americans are starting to identify themselves as non-moderate (both liberal and conservative).

But the cold, hard truth is that moderates face a difficult, if not intractable, problem that institutional reforms will never be able to fully remedy: Even under optimal institutional rules, political outcomes are not determined by the mystical, disembodied median voter so much as they are by the blood, sweat, and tears of committed partisan actors. In the American political system, there are no shortcuts around the hard work of organization, mobilization, and engagement in the sometimes unseemly business of party politics. To put it more bluntly, moderates lose out to the "wingnuts" because those on the ideological extremes, to their credit, actually do the difficult, long-term labor that democratic politics rewards: showing up, organizing, and devoting themselves to building durable institutions for political and intellectual combat. (Teles; Saldin, National Affairs, 2021)

As previously stated, Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 elections is both a sign of the power of the moderate/independent voter and how the moderate voting base is starting to lean towards a more liberal (in this case, Democrat) political orientation. The country has voted Democrat, and the next four years seem to be colored in liberal paint. However, where does this newfound political atmosphere leave the conservative voter? Rather, is this political atmosphere a new situation or has it been in the works for some time now? As the leading socio-political orientation of the country shifts towards liberalism, and the once moderate conservatism starts being regarded as the "far right", can the average conservative voter now be considered as part of a socio-political minority? In order to properly explore this new possibility, we need to look back a couple of years, before Donald Trump's election, as the event of his presidency is one of the biggest instances of conservative spite in recent American history.

### **3.2. Creation of a counterculture: the internet, social media and politics**

The rise of liberalism in America in the 2010s brought a parallel rise of a culture of political correctness with it. Whether the event of serious political correctness becoming a major part of mainstream American culture is detrimental to free speech is a question which is often debated in politics and media. The answers to this question often range from one extreme to the other, with some claiming that PC culture is the death of free speech and America, and others believing it is the only way to socially progress as a country. This issue is often linked with liberal activism and modern liberal thought, where its paradoxical nature is often problematized and debated. One of the main arguments against this new and aggressive version of political correctness is that the modern liberal machine that keeps political correctness alive and well is the same machine that works against liberal principles from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Cohen, Financial Review, 2015)

Strip away the appearance of a solid ideology, and you see the contradictions. The tendency of the modern liberal-left to excuse radical Islam is supported by the politically correct belief that liberals should support a religion of the disadvantaged. In the name of liberalism, they fail to fight a creed that is sexist, racist, homophobic and, in its extreme forms, genocidal and totalitarian. Their political correctness has turned their principles inside out, and led them to abandon their beliefs in female and homosexual equality. (Cohen, Financial Review, 2015)

Political correctness does not discriminate – anyone engaging in any form of racial, gender or sexual prejudice will feel the full brunt of public outrage, censorship and in some cases, personal attacks and business termination. In its aggressive march towards progress, modern liberalism has alienated many; not distinguishing between moderate and conservative, or in some cases, even moderate liberal, it created an atmosphere of “if you're not with us, you're against us“.

On the face of it, political correctness looks nice; in practice, however, it tends to censor language, especially under the censorious scrutiny of the lords and bishops of public discourse. Anything they dislike, they call ‘hate speech’. (Kapoor, News 18, 2019)

So, it only comes naturally that the “victims“ of this PC machine will rebel in a certain way or form. In this “age of the internet“, it has become very easy for an individual to share his/her own opinion with the world, while keeping a certain dose of anonymity. At the beginning of the 2010s, American disillusioned with this new socio-political atmosphere,

where even politicians were being humbled and held accountable for their discriminatory statements made during their political career, found a safe haven on the internet. The golden age of social media facilitated the intellectual transition to different platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. However, the popularity of social media reached far more than just the disillusioned American trying to escape political correctness. By the year 2011, 50 percent of Americans were actively using social media, and that number began to grow rapidly. In 2021, we are looking at more than 72% of nation-wide active usage of social media. (Pew Research Center, 2021) Both conservatives and liberals saw an alternative in this fresh, new way of promoting one's own opinions.

So, in the age of the social media user, where everyone's personal opinions and political stances are out in the open, available for all to see, how does conservative thought survive in an on-line environment? According to some authors, on-line conservative communities survive and thrive due to their closedness. Creating a social echo chamber, where one's own opinions are not immediately discarded by the opposition and are reinforced and supported by others' opinions is the building block of a closed on-line community, which can be either liberal or conservative. However, there are some differences between the two in terms of creating and managing such communities. Conservatives often consume a limited number of media outlets, and do not let new ones in easily, while liberals consume a wider array of media outlets, allowing for differences and a wider range of opinion. Furthermore, conservatives have been creating on-line communities for longer than liberals have, thus having a head start in creating closed communication circles. (Hmielowski, et al., LSE US)

Our most important finding is whether beliefs and use create what is known as an echo chamber, a space where the reinforcing effect of media and beliefs drive people to wall themselves off from a wider range of media. Our results did not find evidence that liberals live in a media echo chamber. Indeed, there may not be an echo chamber for liberals because they are consuming a wider range of views. Research has shown that liberals tend to report higher levels of trust in media, generally, and higher levels of trust in more outlets compared to conservatives. Therefore, although attention to liberal media sources could lead certain people to hold more extreme attitudes, these attitudes do not seem to increase use of partisan media because they could also consume other outlets that breaks this reinforcing process. (Hmielowski, et al., LSE US, 2020)

There are many instances of closed conservative on-line communities, which began as obscure forum threads and private Facebook groups. The most infamous forum for conservatives was 4chan, which is a specific instance of an on-line community in itself, and will be covered in the following subsection of the paper. These different communities evolved from simply sharing their thoughts and ideas about this quickly-evolving liberal America to publicly starting to make their voice heard, with many conservative public figures making a name for themselves and spreading conservative thought through their YouTube channels, podcasts, on-line shows and social media posts. Some of the most popular ones include figures such as Ben Shapiro, Steven Crowder, Paul Joseph Watson and Lauren Southern - all of which were popularized by their “against the liberal current“ activities, such as debating liberals, commenting on different aspects of the “neo-liberal“ movement, such as BLM and Antifa, and criticizing contemporary political correctness in America and in the western world. The following these conservative figures get on social media is nothing to scoff at either – as one of the most popular conservative figures among the younger generation of Americans and author of several bestsellers, Ben Shapiro, has over 3 million followers on Twitter and YouTube respectively, and is both socially and politically active with his notorious tours of the country where he debates individuals on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Steven Crowder, a conservative activist and the host of the popular on-line show *Louder with Crowder*, has over 5 million subscribers on YouTube, and has had guests such as Senator Ted Cruz on the show, discussing politics and the current socio-political state of the country. (Bergen, Bloomberg, 2020)

These numbers clearly show a large following and interest in the conservative way of thinking, among both the older and younger generations. More often than not, these public figures show a high degree of support of Donald Trump and his politics - a tendency which is highly visible in figures like Steven Crowder and Milo Yiannopoulos, a conservative speaker and staunch supporter of Donald Trump, who is also a member of the LGBT community and is highly critical of modern liberalism and political correctness. Parker, Graf and Igielnik from the Pew Research Center report that in 2018, around 30% of Gen Z voters and 29% of Millennial voters approved of Trump and his politics, showing how a minority part of the younger voter-base is conservative-oriented. However, this fact shows another tendency, which concerns the other side of the political divide, and that is the growing liberal influence among the younger generations, especially Gen Z voters. In recent years, younger voters have held more liberal views than older generations, and along with Millennials, the majority of the “post-

Boomer“ voter base is becoming heavily liberal, resulting in a 30% conservative versus a 70% liberal divide. (Parker, et. al., Pew Research Center, 2019)

The question that pushes itself forward is what are the values these on-line conservative figures propagate to their audiences, and are these values the same conservative values from the 1960s? As the socio-political climate in the U.S. changed from the Kennedy/Nixon era, so have the values and opinions of both sides. While the liberal movement has usually had a tendency of blindly striving towards social progress, the conservative side has undergone some changes and made some compromises in its journey. As stated previously, younger generations tend to have a more liberal worldview than the older generations, which does not only apply to a liberal or Democrat context, but also to a conservative or Republican context. While such issues as racial discrimination, LGBT rights and pollution were relatively disregarded by conservatives in the past, and are still being ignored by older generations of conservatives and Republicans, data shows that this tendency is starting to drastically change in the younger generations. In fact, around 43% of Gen Z Republicans believe that African-Americans are treated less fairly than Caucasians in America, which is a much larger percentage than the 20% of Republicans over the age of 50 that share that same belief. (Parker, et. al., Pew Research Center, 2019) It is clear that being conservative in 2021 does not mean sharing the same values of conservatives from back in the 1960s. Rather, being a contemporary conservative in the U.S. means keeping some basic traditional conservative values while replacing outdated ones with liberal values. This notion is perhaps best seen in Donald Trump's politics during his presidency. As a Republican candidate coming into the White House after a two-term Democrat presidency, he wasn't able to perpetuate the same conservative stances as his Republican predecessors, such as Ford, Reagan and Bush. On multiple occasions, Trump has openly shown support for the LGBT community and has pointed out racial injustice in the country, which are arguably two of the most liberal-focused issues in the country.

In February, Trump promoted Richard Grenell, then the U.S. ambassador to Germany, to acting director of the Office of National Intelligence. It made Grenell the first openly gay person named to a Cabinet-level position. Three months later, Grenell was appointed the Trump campaign's senior adviser on LGBTQ outreach. On social media, he praised his boss as "the most pro-gay president in American history." (Avery, NBC News, 2020)

Liberal-oriented values seem to have become a major part of the contemporary conservative mindset, with supporting LGBT and minority rights being a staple of both liberals and conservatives. So, which values remained unchanged? If conservatives adapted to the socio-political climate in the country by adopting liberal values, what does differentiate them from moderate liberals? According to Patrick J. Deneen, in recent times, the issues American conservatives use as a platform for showcasing their traditional values are gay marriage, abortion, religious liberty and communism. (Deneen, 2016; 149-151) However, in the past couple of years, some of these hot topics lost their edge in a conservative context (mostly gay marriage, as the Republican party and different conservative organizations started openly supporting it), while others reemerged as burning, contemporary issues.

Being anti-abortion and anti-communism still seem to be two of the “traditional“ American values contemporary conservatives hold on to. This includes the previously mentioned on-line communities and the popular social and political figures representing them. Steven Crowder famously toured several college campuses with a sign reading: “I’m Pro Life: Change My Mind!“, inviting passing students to debate him on the topic. (Fregoso, NTD, 2019) It is safe to assume that a large portion of his followers also share his sentiment towards abortion. Crowder being just one of many conservative figures sharing this same ideal, makes being anti-abortion or Pro Life one of the basic ideals of the modern conservative. If we take a look at the data from the Republican party in 2019, 64% of Republican voters are Pro Life, 55% of Republican voters up to the age of 29 , and 57% up to the age of 39 are Pro Life/anti-abortion. (Diamant, Pew Research Center, 2019) This data clearly shows that being anti-abortion is still a major conservative ideal, but it is also showing that young Republicans are less likely to stand behind this stance than the older generations.

The anti-communism sentiment is a remnant of the Cold War, a notion that has changed targets during the past decades, shifting focus from the USSR, to North Korea, Russia and China. However, in these conservative communities, communism is not a socio-political ideology that exists just in another nation, but rather a disease that is starting to spread on U.S. soil. Personal and political freedom, the disillusionment with capitalism and conservative values no longer being as present in the establishment as they used to be caused a surge of popularity of communism in America. In 2019, one out of three Millennials and around 30% of Generation Z viewed communism favorably. (Smith, Miami Herald, 2019) This pro-communism sentiment started being shared on-line as an anti-establishment and anti-capitalism symbol, mostly from liberals and far-left supporters. During the 2016 elections, in an effort to



publicly support their candidate's ideas, Bernie Sanders supporters were fanatically spreading liberal and pro-socialist messages and images on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. While Bernie Sanders is hardly a communist, many on-line conservative communities (especially on 4chan and Facebook) decided that his supporters were spreading communist propaganda, which in their opinion made him a communist as well. In doing so, these communities shared and perpetuated Donald Trump's opinion of Bernie Sanders, which he publicly stated numerous times.

In his Fox News town hall appearance Thursday night, President Trump — apparently now resigned to Joe Biden's primary victory — casually revealed his now-moot plan to run against Bernie Sanders. "So mentally, I'm all set for Bernie. Communist, I had everything down, he's a communist." (Chait, New York Magazine, 2020)

In this part of the thesis, I wanted to show how on-line conservative communities were forming around the notion of rejection of modern political correctness, ending up in the creation of a massive community of like-minded conservatives who shared much more than their disdain for a liberal-oriented America, both on-line and in the physical world. Sharing similar ideas regarding important contemporary issues, supporting an unlikely presidential candidate and adapting their values to a modern American context are all characteristics of this socio-cultural phenomenon, which stands against a liberal tidal wave that has been washing over America for some time now. As the presidency of Joe Biden is already in full swing, and liberal thought is slowly becoming the norm in a large part of America, this phenomenon is starting to resemble a form of counterculture.

### **3.3. The social media battlefield**

In the past decade, it has become obvious that social media became a necessary evil in politics, with political figures tweeting and discussing political arguments on and across different on-line platforms. The first American president to actively use social media as a means of communicating with the nation and with the world was Barack Obama in 2008, which became the precedent for all future political figures in the U.S. American politicians, political parties and groups all gained access to a worldwide audience thanks to a number of social media platforms, allowing for direct two-way communication with the average Joe, which facilitates the spreading of political propaganda, asking for campaign donations or support during election times.

But social media has changed the game, allowing incumbents and newcomers alike to speak directly to constituents on everything from policy to what they had for dinner. Barack Obama was the first presidential candidate to use the medium, which was still nascent during his 2008 bid, and Donald Trump takes to Twitter almost daily to express himself without the filter of traditional media. (Wharton Business Daily, 2020)

While more “traditional“ ways of reaching a wider audience, such as newspapers, television and radio are still being employed, social media has become one of the staple modes of communication between a public figure and their target audience. Its appeal lies in the cheap, no-filter, straight-to-the-point, direct sharing of opinions and ideas. In recent years, Twitter has become the preferred social media platform for politicians, as it creates a practically instantaneous communication channel, where a political figure can share, promote and argue any idea that comes to his/her mind at that moment. Another benefit of social media political communication is the rising costs of political campaigning – as the need for reaching out to a target audience becomes imperative for a candidate or a party to succeed in a certain election, the cost of the campaign itself rises exponentially. Thus, social media offers a valuable alternative, where both the costs of campaigning can be reduced and money can be made from online donations from political supporters and voters. (Wharton Business Daily, 2020) One of the best examples of this new way of supporting one's political campaign is Barack Obama's 2012 campaign, where he raised a record-breaking 1 billion U.S. dollars. Around 65-70% of this money was raised through donations facilitated by social media, e-mails and website donations. (WBD, 2020) At that time, 26% of adult Twitter users were active followers of his profile, and he is currently the most followed user on the platform, with over 130 million

followers. As a Democrat ex-president who made many socially liberal decisions, it is very clear that he used social media as a platform for sharing his political ideals and thoughts, such as openly supporting the legalization of same-sex marriage. (BBC, 2012) Likewise, ex-president Donald Trump had become somewhat of a Twitter phenomenon himself. Currently, around one in five adult Twitter accounts follow Donald Trump's Twitter profile, which is arguably far more active and chaotic than the one of his predecessor.

Donald Trump was actively present on social media long before his election in 2016, and his social media posts were nothing short of entertaining, ranging from accusing China of making up the concept of global warming as a means of sabotaging the U.S. economy, offering relationship advice to actor Robert Pattinson about his ex-girlfriend Kristen Stewart, commenting on the topless photos of the Duchess of Cambridge, and claiming he had never seen a thin person drinking Diet Coke. (Sky News, 2021) While many believed that this kind of person, making these kinds of public posts, could never achieve any serious political greatness and dismissed any argument that he will be a serious contender for the presidency of the U.S., Donald Trump was slowly but surely gaining internet popularity and support from different conservative social groups. One of these on-line communities that had embedded itself deep into internet culture was the alt-right conservative community on the infamous message board 4chan. This alt-right community was infamous for several reasons, many of which had to do with the fact that certain anonymous individuals in this community were skilled hackers and social media manipulators, who were disillusioned with the rising liberal social atmosphere in the country and were actively combatting against modern political correctness, which had already penetrated the American establishment.

Young geeks may be the losers in the cruel and chaotic modern free market of sexual choice, but they are the relative winners in the dominant economic ideology of the day. It is the geeks- those who merged the counterculture with information technology in the 1990s- who have already inherited the earth. (Nagle, 2016; 76-77)

This community's role in the election of Donald Trump as the American president in 2016 can't be ignored either. During Trump's campaigning across the country, the conservative and alt-right communities on 4chan and Reddit were engaged in a massive promotional pro-Trump crusade, denouncing the liberal movement and atmosphere taking over America, and glorifying Trump as a beacon of hope for the oppressed conservative. (Ohlheiser, Chicago Tribune, 2016) After Trump's election, 4chan and other social media sites and forums celebrated his win as a

win for the conservatives and the alt-right, and a crucial strike at the heart of the liberals and Democrats, a sentiment that was also shared by many of the contemporary conservative public figures, such as Steven Crowder and Milo Yiannopoulos. Trump's victory was seen as an equivalent to a victory of anti-liberalism and a collapse of political correctness that had silenced many conservatives. The victory of the silent conservatives over the 'liberal elite' silencing them was one of the largest conservative achievements in America in the past decade.

What seems most unusual about Trump's victory is Trump himself. For the first time in modern American history, we have a president obviously unfit for the office according to previously accepted standards. Trump's political inexperience, authoritarian leanings, and incessant dishonesty would have disqualified him not long ago. If "liberal elites" failed to appreciate Trump's popularity prior to election night, it was not because of disregard for Main Street. It was because they believed America's better instincts, values, and traditions would prevail, as they often had in the past. Liberals were guilty not of elitism but of naiveté. (Michels, 2017; 190)

Many authors, such as Angela Nagle and Aryssa Shultz, have shown through their research that a large part of these communities are young, white men with questionable social skills, who are against the establishment and detest modern feminism and liberalism, often showing signs of support for white supremacy. (Nagle, 2016; 64-76) This community was one of the first conservative on-line ones formed during the late 2000s and early 2010s, and was the first one to act outside the internet bubble. In 2008, a 4chan user hacked into ex-senator Sarah Palin's personal data and leaked her security information. At the same time, another 4chan hacker started spreading the Steve Jobs death hoax, causing Apple stocks to drop by 10% basically overnight. Four years later, 4chan hackers manipulate TIME magazine votes, making Kim Jong Un TIME's person of the year. A couple of years later, around the year 2016, the first instances of the QAnon conspiracy start emerging on 4chan's /pol/ board, claiming the existence of a deep state in America and its intention to plot against Donald Trump and his supporters. At this point, 4chan's support for Donald Trump was at an all-time high, with different boards on 4chan and subreddits on Reddit actively spreading promotional posts and propaganda for Donald Trump, claiming that they are the ones standing against the establishment, with Trump being their leading figure. (Gonimah, Storyful, 2019) 4chan's activities did not stop with Trump's election and the QAnon conspiracy started gaining some serious following on different on-line forums. This conspiracy theory reached its peak in

popularity after Jeffrey Epstein's death in 2019, as BuzzFeed reported that a user on 4chan was the first to announce Epstein's death, around 38 minutes before ABC news first reported it. (Gonimah, Storyful, 2019) By this time, the conspiracy theory was fully fleshed out and had a clear allegation; a cabal of cannibalistic pedophiles, protected by the deep state, are running a global child sex-trafficking ring and were plotting against Donald Trump. The individuals accused of being members of this cabal included many liberal and Democrat politicians, liberal Hollywood actors and high-ranking government officials, with Trump being the main figure fighting against this pedophile ring. (Itkowitz, et. al., The Washington Post, 2020) Epstein's death only added fuel to the already massive fire of the conservative anti-establishment sentiment. After the story of Epstein's child sex-trafficking ring emerged, 4chan users and QAnon supporters finally got some tangible validation for their accusations, which became even more pronounced after his supposed suicide, as they believed it was an obvious cover-up job by the deep state as a means of protecting information about the larger pedophile ring. While these QAnon accusations might seem questionable at best, the following the conspiracy theory garnered through internet and social media spreading cannot be overstated. What once started as a smaller community of conservatives on an obscure internet forum, soon became a large community of active conservative alt-right members who acted outside of their social bubble, and finally gave birth to one of the most popular conspiracy theories of the late 2010s, which has continued being a popular topic to this very day.

The effect the existence of this community has had on the perception of conservatism as a form of counterculture in the U.S. is massive. Starting with the fact the community views itself as a counter-establishment entity, the ideals and opinions its members share are very often against many of the different aspects of social progress, such as political correctness, LGBT and trans rights, and hold counter-mainstream views in terms of important social issues, such as racial discrimination, welfare and abortion. Most of these mainstream ideals are liberal in nature, and social progress in 21<sup>st</sup> century America is usually linked to Democrat policies and acts. Political correctness, LGBT and trans rights, as well as minority discrimination are topics which became a part of the mainstream public discourse thanks to the liberal movement in America – a seed which was planted back in the liberal counterculture of the 1960s. Thanks to social media and Hollywood, the spreading of liberal ideals and values (just as conservative ones) became much easier than back in the 1960s. Hollywood actors, Instagram influencers and Tik-Tok stars alike partake in the spreading of liberal values through their different social media outlets, which heavily influences the younger generation and their political affinities.

From a very young age, the modern American is bombarded with political propaganda, and is urged to choose a side.

According to those we spoke with, a main driving factor for influencers to post this new kind of politically-charged content is a general change in audience demand. Since influencers operate in an engagement-driven system, when their audiences expect them to speak about social issues, the influencers have to respond. In the words of one influencer platform executive: “It’s become a place where influencers are expected to say something, and they are expected to be on the right side of history if they want to continue to operate their businesses.” (Goodwin, et. al., Media Engagement, 2021)

While the younger generations are mostly influenced through newer forms of media consumption and social media, such as YouTube, Instagram and Tik-Tok, older generations tend to look at other forms of media for guidance. Newspapers, TV News, political commentaries on TV, movies and interviews all play a part in affecting the average Joe’s perception of different political entities and situations. In the past decade, a large part of the Hollywood elite has shown that they strictly follow a progressive way of thinking, regularly bringing up issues such as sexual harassment, feminist demands for equality, racial discrimination, global warming and human rights, both on stage speeches during awards or on red carpet interviews. However, Hollywood’s liberal sentiment goes beyond just interviews and emotional speeches; the Center for Responsive Politics reports that individuals, groups and entities present in the television business gave more than 84 million dollars in campaign donations during the 2016 presidential elections, 80% of which went to the Democrats. (Gross, The New York Times, 2018) Some of these celebrities will go even a step further, publicly endorsing a political party or candidate, while at the same time urging their fans to vote, which tends to appear as a subtle persuasion towards supporting a political entity. Lady Gaga was one of the fiercest supporters of the Biden/Harris campaign, often publicly sharing her support for the Democrat candidate and disdain for ex-president Donald Trump and the Republican party, which resulted in her being the main singing act during Biden’s inauguration. Jennifer Lopez, Chris Evans and Selena Gomez are just some of the enormous celebrity names that have publicly supported the Biden/Harris campaign, while simultaneously sharing their vision of a liberal America and their support for BLM and Antifa. When a large majority of the nation’s most famous and beloved celebrities openly endorse a Democrat presidential candidate and

share their support of liberal values and liberal political movements in the country, it is hard not to perceive liberalism as an integral part of the mainstream culture. Interestingly, in a survey conducted in 2019 by Hill-HarrisX, only 11% of respondents said that a celebrity endorsement of a political entity would make them more likely to vote for that party or individual, while 65% of respondents claimed that political endorsements from Hollywood would have no effect on their decision. (Del Vecchio, Forbes, 2020) However, there is no denying that the overarching influence of Hollywood has gone beyond pop-culture and movie conventions, and has become a serious presence in the American political sphere, where it has made an obvious and biased choice. Hollywood's obvious and active involvement in American politics and the support it shows for liberal moments in the country only further strengthens the argument that modern liberalism has become an integral part of the mainstream culture in America and a part of the establishment.

Considering all the aforementioned liberal notions and ideals being present in the mainstream culture of the 2010s and 2020s (and will presumably be present for some time), a large community of conservatives and alt-right members with a track record of actively supporting an anti-political correctness president and who denounce these mainstream liberal values and the current establishment, stand at a very similar point as the liberal counterculture of the 1960s. While their ideals differ massively from the liberal ones, the socio-political and cultural positions of the two are very similar, and the 'against the popular opinion' sentiment is as present as it was back then. This development of the socio-political relationship between conservatives and liberals in America attests to the fact that the internet conservative communities from the start of the 2010s were the first instances of the conservative counterculture movement in present-day America.

## **4. The counterculture effect**

### **4.1. Censorship of conservatives**

Freedom of speech is one of the fundamental rights upon which America was founded, and is a pivotal part of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. However, throughout its history, America has had many instances of infringement on that right, and censorship was an ever-present reality for many Americans. This ugly truth came into spotlight in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, when state censorship over anti-war news publishing, minority rights and gay rights pieces and opinions was at an all-time high. State censorship would go to such lengths that the U.S. Supreme Court would have to get involved, such as the case of The New York Times trying to publish Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War, which the executive branch of the federal government deemed an act of treason. (Corell, Air Force Magazine, 2007) America under the Nixon administration was perhaps one of the most anti-liberal periods of American history in terms of censorship. There is no denying that the conservative establishment was trying to suppress liberal thought and the anti-war sentiment. However, when taking into consideration the fact that in the past couple of year, liberal thought has become prevalent both in what we know as 'the establishment' and in mainstream media, the question whether censorship also goes the other way, trying to suppress conservative thought, must be asked.

What the past decade has shown us is the role and influence of Big Tech companies in the everyday life of an average citizen, and how American economy seems to be resting upon the shoulders of technological giants such as Google, Apple, Amazon and Facebook. Social media, technological gadgets, smartphones, tablets and on-line shopping have become the norm when it comes to being a modern American citizen, and when the standard is provided by said companies, their value and influence tend to reach unimaginable heights. However, when a private company and media giant has a monopoly over sharing thoughts on social media, does it also have the right to exert censorship on its users if the users' opinions don't match the company's political stance? This question has been a burning topic for a couple of years now, and it had its inception during Donald Trump's presidency. Back in 2016, conservatives on Twitter and Facebook started expressing concerns over these social media giants censoring conservative posts and groups and banning conservative users. While both Facebook and Twitter denied any political bias and stated that the removed content and banned users were in violation of the terms of service, many conservative figures, including Donald



Trump, claimed that there were far too many instances of unjustified conservative censorship and fact checking. (Brewster, Forbes, 2020)

In the following years, extensive research and various surveys have been conducted to clarify the situation and to find the truth behind the issue of conservative censorship. New York University researchers found that while most of the Big Tech companies' employees are liberal, the content moderation comes from contractors outside of the U.S., and that the companies' executives' goal is not to censor conservatives, but rather to placate them. (Durkee, Forbes, 2021) This answer, however, does not completely solve the question of conservative censorship and it only shows that there does exist a political preference when it comes to employment in these companies. The Pew Research Center conducted a comprehensive survey in 2020, with the question of social media censorship being the focus of the research. Interestingly, 37% of adults in the U.S. think that it is very likely that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints that they find objectionable, while 36% think it is somewhat likely. In terms of Republicans, around 90% of them believe it is likely that social media sites censor conservative posts and profiles. This amounts to roughly three-quarters of U.S. adults who believe that social media engages in a manner of censorship of targeted political entities. (Vogels et. al., Pew Research Center, 2020) The suspicion of a targeted political censorship by social media giants reached a crescendo in the past year, mostly due to two major events that occurred on the 'Big Tech versus conservatives' battlefield. Following the event of the 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol by conservative and alt-right rioters, Twitter decided to permanently ban Donald Trump's account from the platform, essentially nullifying his on-line reach during the last days of his presidency, as Facebook had also decided to follow Twitter's decision. Twitter's reasoning behind this act was that Donald Trump was inciting violence and was somewhat responsible for the Capitol incident, which is a direct violation of the platform's terms of use. (The Guardian, 2021) The act of silencing a conservative president during his last days in the White House did not sit well with his supporters, or the alt-right community, which once again received confirmation about the Big Tech bias against conservatives. The main figure the alleged American conservative 'counterculture' movement had chosen had been banned for supporting conservative riots, while BLM and Antifa riots were openly supported by the mainstream media. This was a telling sign for conservatives about the current socio-political atmosphere in the country, which solidified their socio-political ideology as a form of counterculture.

The match in the powder barrel for the conservatives happened around the same time as Trump's on-line ban, and it came in the form of the controversy around the Parler ban. Parler

was an alternative social media platform which launched in 2018, and was mostly used by conservatives who believed in the mainstream media and social media censorship of conservatives. It was a successful alternative, with many conservative public figures urging other conservatives to join them on the platform, creating a new conservative community which would not be restrained by the random whims of big social media companies. The platform's rise in popularity was closely linked to conservatives' suspicion over social media bias, and the site surged to become the number one free app in Apple's App Store. (Edelman, Wired, 2021) However, in a similar fashion as the ex-president of the U.S., the platform was in for an unexpected removal from the internet. After the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, both Apple and Google removed Parler from their respective stores, and Amazon Web Services decided not to host the website anymore, essentially completely removing the entire platform from the internet, along with all the profiles of conservative and non-conservative users on it. For American conservatives who were actively following the incident, this was a clear sign of Big Tech censorship of conservative thought, and a clear mainstream media bias. (Edelman, Wired, 2021)

Today, platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter remain banned to people in Iran, mainland China, North Korea and Syria. As we've seen with the removal of Parler from the Amazon cloud, Apple and Google, these tech titans are creating a shockingly parallel line of banning speech in the United States, very much like these oppressive nations. (Makki, Tampa bay Times, 2021)

What started as a movement of political correctness that washed over the country, soon became a manner of controlling and regulating free speech. To conservatives, the Parler ban was a clear infringement of the First Amendment. The fact that this transgression was not punished by any state entity and was even applauded by some mainstream media figures, such as Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey, only confirmed conservative suspicions over conservative thought no longer being welcome in mainstream culture. As a socio-political group which believes it is being censored by the establishment and the big companies which dictate the country's economy, while at the same time standing at odds with the country's mainstream culture, resulting in the policing of conservatives' right of free speech, conservatives in America have every right to consider themselves as being a form of counterculture.

The Parler situation, however, opens a new front in the online speech wars, as the debate over moderation migrates from an oligopoly of social media platforms to the oligopoly of companies that make those platforms available to the public. (In the case of Google, those oligopolies overlap.) Never before have three of the most dominant Silicon Valley corporations—all of them subjects of Congress’s massive antitrust investigation—simultaneously banned a social media platform because they don’t approve of its policies around user speech. They have, in effect, decided that they get to moderate the moderators. (Edelman, Wired, 2021)

Big Tech companies have become a massive factor in defining the contemporary mainstream culture, as names such as Apple, Netflix, Amazon and Google are inescapable for an average American citizen. By taking on such an impactful role, they have become the judge and jury for regulating a large amount of content, profiles and opinions on their respective platforms. In their willing decision to censor and ban conservative thought from a plethora of social media sites and removing the biggest conservative on-line platform, Big Tech companies have shown a clear bias towards liberalism, as well as the fragility of the concept of free speech when faced with an agenda supported by the influential and the powerful. Due to the role these companies have in dictating what is and what isn't part of the contemporary American mainstream culture, combined with their liberal bias and anti-conservative sentiment, it is only logical to conclude that conservatism truly is a form of counterculture in present-day America.

## **4.2. Political extremism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Creating a 'new Trump'**

A large part of this paper was dedicated to showing several aspects of the contemporary relationship between conservatism and liberalism in the U.S., and how the nature of this relationship caused the shift from conservatism being a major part of the country's mainstream culture to it being a suppressed form of counterculture, much like liberalism was back in the 1960s. While this paper focused on the events leading up to the present day and the current state of conservatism (and its possibility of being a form of counterculture), it is also imperative to consider future prospects, and how the current situation might possibly affect both the mainstream culture and the socio-political climate in America in the near future. By discussing and exploring crucial events in the past couple of decades in this paper, a clear tendency of the American socio-political atmosphere was shown – America's left and right are radicalizing each other at a rapid pace. During the past few years, the American left, which includes Democrats, liberals, socialists, etc., has shown a high degree of antagonization of conservatives. (Applebaum, *The Atlantic*, 2020) This antagonization came in many different forms, some of which I have covered in this paper, such as on-line censorship, targeted political correctness silencing and liberal support of BLM riots, while denouncing conservative protests. However, this liberal aggression towards conservatives does not just stop at different instances of censorship, but it goes up to a point of nation-wide political hysteria. Recent removals of statues of various American historical figures (many of them conservative figures), liberals on social media targeting conservative accounts for cyber-attacks and threats and a general attitude of liberal intolerance towards any other form of free thought are all recent acts and decisions that radicalize both sides of the divide. On the one hand, the left becoming a large part of the mainstream culture allows for a larger reach and a certain degree of ideological recruitment, supported by a large number of popular public figures and politicians, while on the other side, the constant cultural and political dragging and censorship radicalizes not just the members of the right, but also moderate, average citizens who are fed up with liberal intolerance, which results in events such as the storming of the U.S. Capitol in January of 2021 and the shootings during the Kenosha Protests.

Far-left groups do knock down statues, not just of Confederate leaders but of Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. Some self-styled “antifa” activists do seem more interested in smashing shop windows than in peaceful protest. Dangerous intellectual fashions are sweeping through some American universities—the humanities departments of the elite ones in particular. Some

radical students and professors do try to restrict what others can teach, think, and say. Left-wing Twitter mobs do attack people who have deviated from their party line, trying not just to silence them but to get them fired. (Applebaum, The Atlantic, 2020)

At which point does the straw break the camel's back? In the 1960s and 1970s, JFK held the status of the main American politically 'liberal' figure and a guiding light for the liberal counterculture. His assassination, the termination of U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia and the controversies surrounding ex-president Nixon and his cabinet were crucial factors in the development and impact of the liberal movement, causing it to emerge into a mainstream spotlight. The present-day situation surrounding the divide between the liberal mainstream culture and conservative counterculture places different figurines on the same positions as the 1960s. However, today's mainstream culture in America is much more complex than the one standing against social progress sixty years ago. Political correctness has allowed the modern liberal left to create a language bubble, where the meaning of words is socially and politically dictated, and any expression going against the liberal worldview is classified as 'hate speech'. This Orwellian manner of creating a hostile environment for anyone engaging in serious dialogue goes further beyond just words and expressions. Lately, the American public witnessed the resurgence of the term 'Nazi' as a denominator used by the liberal left to define anyone who is not pro-LGBT or pro-choice. Due to a large number of conservatives falling under this categorization, the liberal left has started equating the term 'conservative' with the term 'Nazi'. In a country where the socio-political climate and the mainstream culture is very politically polarized, and a socio-political group is being actively targeted and censored, equating them with an openly-fascist and sociopathic regime clearly shows the underlying political liberal agenda present in a large number of political and cultural faucets in America.

In the hands of a self-righteous clique, that the Left-liberal establishment is, these tools have become potent weapons against free speech; and professional revolutionaries employ their weapons with much more efficacy and subtlety than Fascists and Nazis ever did. And yet, Left-liberals have the temerity to call others, especially the Right, Fascist. (Kapoor, News 18, 2019)

As the world becomes more and more internet-dependent, various corporations become the judge and jury in deciding which opinions are 'correct' or 'incorrect' and which side is the right side of history. In the previous section of the paper, I have problematized this notion by

focusing on the role Big Tech companies have in silencing conservative voices and promoting a liberal agenda. The intense and constant bombardment of liberal and 'progressive' ideas, forcing them into mainstream culture and the everyday life of the average citizen, tilts the scales against conservative thought and puts it at a serious disadvantage when compared to the prevalent liberal climate in the country. Due to this reason, the conservative counterculture in America finds itself in a less than ideal position, one that is perhaps even more unfavorable than the one liberals had in the 1960s. The anti-conservative sentiment these large companies and liberal movements have shown in the past couple of years truly reflect the disadvantageous current position of conservatives in the country. A telling sign of this big company anti-conservative sentiment occurred in 2018, when one of America's most beloved ice cream companies, Ben & Jerry's, had been openly leading an Anti-Trump campaign for quite some time, culminating in the company releasing an ice cream flavor called Pecan Resist, as a reference to the liberal Resist! Anti-Trump movement. Moreover, the designer message on the ice cream's print reads in part: "Welcome to the resistance. Together, Pecan Resist! We honor & stand with women, immigrants, people of color, & the millions of activists and allies who are courageously resisting the President's attack on our values, humanity & environment." (Adebowale, Delish, 2018) At the same time, the movie industry is perpetuating a similar censorship-based system, where conservative Hollywood actors are getting sacked due to their political inclinations. Celebrities such as Tim Allen, Julianne Davis and Steve McGrew all testified to an anti-conservative practice in Hollywood, where any conservative-identifying person ends up losing their jobs or are being pressured into quitting. (Toto, The Hill, 2020) The recent social media witch hunts against conservative celebrities such as Gina Carano and Chris Pratt show that Hollywood's anti-conservative tendencies are being consistently put into practice by liberals on social media. The end goal of both Hollywood and liberals on social media trying to censor and ban conservative celebrities seems to be a purge of conservatives from mainstream media.

The point at which popular ice cream companies involve themselves in political movements and initiate political attacks against the president of their country, is a point which attests to the severe degree of political hysteria and polarization in the country. Social media companies and the movie industry are constantly shutting down popular conservative figures and conservative voices, not allowing for a dialogue to develop, which makes the political divide in America seem like less of an equally supported conflict and more of a one-sided beatdown. While liberals are tearing down conservative statues, conducting witch hunts against conservatives and enforcing political correctness at every and any possible instance, they are

also further broadening the gap between themselves and conservatives, pushing both sides to the extreme. Many arguments could be made about Donald Trump's incompetence as president and political figure, but there is no denying that for the time he was president, he was a beacon of hope for the average conservative and a symbol of anti-liberalism. As such, his presidency was a natural reaction to the rising liberal socio-political atmosphere in the country. Now that his presidency came to an end, and the anti-conservative and pro-liberal sentiment is shared by almost every major company and media platform, who does the average conservative turn to for guidance? Many popular conservative figures were trying to establish themselves as vanguards of conservative thought in the past couple of years, organizing public speeches and seminars on various American campuses, only to be met with complete and utter liberal intolerance and protesting, causing the organizers to pull back from these events. Back in February of 2017, conservative commentator Milo Yiannopoulos was supposed to hold a speech at the University of California in Berkley. The University's liberal left students protested his engagement with the University and caused over 100 thousand dollars of damage to the campus, which prompted the event organizers to pull the plug on his speech. In 2018, after Sarah Lawrence College professor Samuel Abrams published an essay in the New York Times about the 12:1 ratio of liberal to conservative staff in the University, his office was vandalized and several harassment campaigns were made against him. More recently, in April of 2019, efforts were made to stop conservative author Matt Walsh from speaking at Baylor University. Due to the on-line harassment from self-proclaimed liberal accounts, he was forced to adapt his speech to an altered and simplified version, which was originally supposed to focus on the American Left's efforts to redefine gender roles and marriage. (Kapoor, News 18, 2019) The silencing of conservative speakers on college campuses is the final nail in the coffin for potential future conservative figures and ambitious conservatives trying to become the new symbol of conservatism and anti-liberalism. As Universities become more and more liberal, young conservative voices tend to be silenced, resulting in a complete lack of conservative thought in American Academia.

But conservative critics continue to fault higher education for making students more liberal. The central argument is that higher education does not value politically conservative perspectives. As a result, conservative critics believe college students are not exposed to conservative scholarship or teaching. Research has shown that conservative students feel silenced for voicing their political opinions in the college classroom. (Meyhew et. al., The Conversation, 2020)

Moreover, this constant aggression towards conservative thought on campuses also creates a sentiment of conservative shame, where many students will hide their conservative opinions from their peers, out of fear of being looked down at by the other (liberal) students and professors. The fear of being isolated and ostracized due to one's own political stances and opinions is a fear often associated with fascist regimes, which is ironically a socio-political system liberals claim to rebel against, but perpetuate when it comes to American conservatives.

After The Beacon requested interviews from multiple students who identify as conservative on campus, there were many students who declined to share their story because of how they thought other students would treat them and how their professors would view them. Some of these students have even gone to such lengths as to lie on assignments to sound “more liberal” due to concern that a professor might grade them differently based on their political views. Some don’t feel like they can share their opinions in class without being judged harshly. (Vetter, The Beacon, 2019)

With the lack of a strong conservative leader in America, the question of survival of conservative thought is brought forward. Trump's presidency was a temporary setback for the liberal wave washing over America, and now that he's out of the White House, there is no single conservative figure taking up the mantle. The lack of such a figure shows the conservative need for a strong, anti-liberal and anti-PC leader, as it is the only way for conservative thought to survive in a harsh, liberal environment. Due to the liberal rejection of conservative thought in any public discourse, it is fair to assume that Donald Trump's presidency will not be the only conservative 'rebellion' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a matter of fact, Donald Trump has hinted at a probable running for president in 2024, and is already gathering a sizeable following, as well as planning rallies in Ohio and Florida in the summer of 2021. (Orr, CNN, 2021) However, the deciding factor of Trump's popularity and the sheer possibility of him becoming president again is not in the hands of conservatives rallying behind him, but it is in the hands of liberals censoring conservatives. Much as liberal intolerance was a major factor in deciding the results of the 2016 elections, it may again prove to be the main tool in the conservative arsenal in future political elections.

Trump’s rise in popularity—and ultimately his election to the presidency—should be seen as a long-building reaction to grass-roots liberal activism that came to dominate the cultural landscape and claim victory after victory in the social arena,



whether the issue was abortion or gay marriage or transgender rights, always accompanied by that same disdain for right-wing views as worthy of the Stone Age.

...

Trump's victory seems to indicate that unmitigated social activism can have unintended consequences. (Hoffman, Politico Magazine, 2016)

The future for conservatives in America is very unsure. In this section of the paper, I have covered several methods liberals use in silencing and deplatforming conservatives, removing them from any public discourse. As conservatism's current status in the American socio-political climate is clearly one of counterculture, it is hard to predict how its relationship with mainstream culture will develop. However, the crux of the current mainstream culture in America is that it presents itself as a tolerant and inclusive culture, but underneath the pleasant exterior, a practice of intolerance, judgement and hatred of anything against the main current is being employed, which can be undeniably seen on liberal college campuses and at student rallies. That same intolerance is one of the main factors pushing moderates and moderate conservatives further on the right, enabling unexpected political happenings, such as the presidency of Donald Trump. It is the relationship between the liberal mainstream culture and the conservative counterculture that will be the deciding factor in the socio-political climate of the coming years in America.

## 5. Conclusion

Conservatism has had a long history of mainstream presence in America, be it the mainstream culture, the leading political establishment or the general atmosphere in the country. For a large part of the nation's history, conservatives were holding their hand on the driving wheel, and social progress was often slow-going. It wasn't until the 1950s when the first traces of what we call modern liberalism started to show on a major scale, and even then, it took almost half a century for liberalism to truly become a part of mainstream culture. These are the main reasons why it is difficult to perceive conservatism as anything other than the oppressive force standing in way of social progress. However, turning a blind eye towards current events only perpetuates the lack of self-awareness in terms of social and political changes in the country. In the past couple of decades, liberalism has been rapidly taking over as the dominant socio-political ideology in America, and conservatism has slowly taken the backseat, both in terms of the mainstream culture and politics.

By losing its position as the dominant ideology in the country, conservatism has started to feel the full brunt of the decades long liberal grudge. Conservative censorship, Big Tech and social media companies showing clear political bias, universities silencing conservative students' voices and liberal Hollywood's intolerance towards conservative actors are all instances of the liberal mainstream culture exerting power over the waning conservative presence in America. This novel socio-political power dynamic in America is the main factor in defining conservatism as a new form of counterculture. Moreover, Donald Trump's presidency, which is by some seen as a testament of conservative domination in America, was actually a manifestation of the counterculture's reaction to the mainstream culture's constant pressure over conservatives. Attesting to this argument is the sheer number of conservative online communities that have formed in the past decade due to liberal intolerance of conservative thought and free speech becoming a loose notion defined by social media companies and liberal interest groups, which is also a clear sign of a power struggle and political polarization in the country. The political hysteria we have been witnessing the last few years resulted in an aggressive relationship between the two ideologies, where patriotism is being equated with fascism, and conservatives are being called Nazis by liberals, while those same liberals are employing censorship of conservatives, political attacks and riots, all as means of purging any instance of conservative thought from public platforms. As the liberal left in America is gaining more and more support due to their mainstream reach, the conservatives and alt-right members are becoming more polarized to the right. The social and political pressure conservatives have

been put under for the last couple of years is clear evidence of the liberal cultural domination in the country, and a final yes to the question of whether conservatism is a new form of counterculture in America.

*In this country it means you can speak your mind without retribution - without being kicked off of social media by a self-righteous censor in Silicon Valley. It means you can freely practice your religion and that church is more essential than a casino. And it means that we judge people on actions not on their immutable characteristics.*  
– Charlie Kirk, *Turning Point USA*

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## 7. Abstract and key words

In the past decade, liberalism has rapidly become the leading socio-political ideology in America, quickly spreading its ideas to different cultural faucets, making it also the leading ideology in terms of the mainstream culture in America. Conservatism, on the other hand, has been experiencing a socio-political dark age, where conservative thought has less presence than ever before, and has become unwelcome in the mainstream culture, making it a potential new form of counterculture in America. By exploring the very inception of the notion of counterculture in America, I discuss the first steps of modern social liberalism and its development from the 1960s to the present day, tracking its development from an underdog position to the leading national political and cultural ideology. Through the examination of the different aspects of the relationship between the new dominant liberalism and the waning conservatism in America, a clear power dynamic is shown, where liberalism is aggressively pushing conservative thought out of any public discourse. Focusing on the creation of conservative on-line communities in the past decade, I show how conservative thought survived the era of political correctness and conservative censorship in mainstream media. Through the engagement and activities of these communities, the presence of a new conservative movement was made present, a movement whose active engagement with politics was a large factor in the election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S. Following his election, Big Tech companies and social media platforms started intensively involving themselves into politics and clearly showing liberal bias, up to the point of publicly endorsing liberal candidates and denouncing conservative political figures. Large companies and social media platforms engaging in the active censorship of conservatives is one of the main arguments for classifying conservatism as a form of counterculture, and I cover it extensively in this paper. Conservatism in its present state might be just a shell of its former self, but it also shows willingness to fight the current liberal wave washing over the country, and as a form of counterculture in America, it retained its pride and ideals.

**Key words:** conservatism, liberalism, America, Donald Trump, counterculture, mainstream