

What the Crackup of the Heritage Foundation Says About the Post-Trump Right

The bastion of American conservatism best known for Project 2025 has been consumed by an ideological — and generational — civil war.

By Elisabeth Zerofsky

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Elisabeth Zerofsky writes frequently about right-wing politics in the United States and Europe. For this article, she spoke with more than a dozen current and former employees at the Heritage Foundation and key figures of the conservative movement.

You can never institutionalize the gut instincts of a great, heroic populist like Donald Trump, or Teddy Roosevelt, or Andrew Jackson,” Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, told me this spring. “But the point is that, moving forward, on the evening of Jan. 20, 2029, President Trump will have left the stage. We as conservatives have to answer the question, Where is this movement going? And what it can’t do — what it must not do — is go back to 20 years ago.

The Heritage Foundation currently finds itself engulfed in an internal struggle that mirrors the one roiling the Republican Party: how to harness the energy unleashed by Trumpism without being completely overrun by its conspiracy- and nativist-minded elements, particularly among the rising generation that has known little else. Long accustomed to placing its experts in key positions in Republican administrations, as it did in Trump’s first term, Heritage presented its Project 2025 as just the kind of master plan an uncompromising second Trump administration would need to implement its agenda.

But once Trump took office, Heritage was instead pushed to the side. As it tried to work its way back into the center of power, the foundation was consumed by a vicious in-house conflict. An old guard of establishment experts saw themselves swamped by an influx of more radical, often younger conservatives eager to remake the institution for the post-Trump right in their image: terminally online, ruthless in fighting the culture wars and vehement in rejecting the dogmas of postwar conservatism.

Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, is remaking the storied conservative institution for the Republican Party after Trump. Credit...Ross D. Franklin/Associated Press A watershed moment came last October, when Roberts posted a video to X in support of Tucker Carlson, who had been widely criticized for inviting the 27-year-old white nationalist and antisemitic influencer Nick Fuentes onto his show. Condemnations flooded in from across

the right, with several of Carlson's closest allies breaking with him over his decision to turn his show into what one of them, the Israeli American philosopher Yoram Hazony, recently called "the leading clearinghouse for virulent antisemitism on the political right." Roberts leapt to Carlson's defense, denouncing the "venomous coalition attacking" Carlson and arguing that conservatives should "feel no obligation to reflexively support any foreign government no matter how loud the pressure becomes from the globalist class" and the "bad actors who serve someone else's agenda."

Roberts later apologized to Heritage staff for his choice of words, which some had criticized as playing into antisemitic tropes, and for having "let down this institution." But when I asked him about the video, he insisted that it was Heritage's job to figure out how to bring together a coalition that can win elections and exercise power effectively. Roberts, who is 52, projects a friendly, confident energy. He was wearing a fitted blue suit along with alligator-style cowboy boots, in keeping with his years as president of Wyoming Catholic College. Before taking over at Heritage in 2021, his pitch to the board of trustees, according to *The Dispatch*, was that he could marry the conservative movement's new populist ethos with a traditional institution like Heritage. "You can't have a governing coalition if you're saying, I'm not even going to talk to people who occasionally listen to a podcast by someone who's a total goofball," he went on, referring to Fuentes. "That doesn't mean that we endorse what that person says. We endorse trying to convince these people of what's right, and what isn't right."

After Tucker Carlson had the white nationalist and antisemitic influencer Nick Fuentes on his show, Roberts's defense of Carlson caused a furor at Heritage. Credit...The Tucker Carlson Show Many employees and experts at Heritage appeared to disagree with the premise that such people belonged in their coalition, and especially that anyone was trying to set them right. Long-time Heritage employees told me that the people they usually collaborated with in congressional offices, circuit courts, foreign embassies and other institutions no longer wanted to be publicly associated with Heritage and what they perceived as its fidelity to Carlson. In a resignation letter later made public, Josh Blackman, a legal scholar who had for years been working on a new edition of "The Heritage Guide to the Constitution," said the volume's contributors pulled out of an event promoting the book and refused to sign copies. Judges who had spoken at the foundation, Blackman wrote, said "they would no longer affiliate with Heritage."

In the wake of Roberts's video, dozens of staff members departed. Eigh-

teen of them ended up at former Vice President Mike Pence's new think tank, Advancing American Freedom, which Pence founded shortly after leaving office in 2021, as a home for more traditional conservatives. (It has attracted money and experts, if perhaps not yet a proportionate boost in cachet.)

Roberts seemed unfazed by the departures. "There are a handful, not many remaining, now former colleagues who wanted to direct Heritage's mission, its implementation of that mission, in sort of a 1980s-style way," he told me. "So, I guess it's appropriate they went to Pence's think tank." Certain scholars, particularly in the legal and economics departments, had been "used to getting their own way," he went on. "And it's good that they're gone."

What looked from the outside like an exodus of Heritage staff in response to the Carlson controversy is, in fact, only a small portion of the 293 people who have left Heritage since 2021. By the time of the video incident, multiple former staff members told me, there was a pervasive atmosphere of insecurity and disillusionment. Employees were being fired or resigning without any announcement or explanation. "People would just get disappeared," one former Heritage policy staff member, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of professional repercussions, told me. "There would be a weekend where you'd come in and be like, Wait, I'm sorry, how many people are no longer here?" Staff members called it the "Heritage Hunger Games." As leaks to the media intensified, and as more people sought positions elsewhere, a paranoia settled in. Some employees, believing that their work computers were being monitored, took to communicating with each other over Signal and on burner phones. (Asked about this and other specific allegations by former employees, Andy Olivastro, the chief advancement officer at Heritage, wrote in an email, "Their self-serving, bitter and vindictive attempt to disparage Heritage from the outside demonstrates perfectly why they are no longer on the inside.")

This mass turnover, multiple former staff members told me, was intentional. "There's this movement that's been brewing on the right, and they have crept into a variety of mainstream conservative institutions and taken over," one former senior Heritage analyst, who insisted on anonymity for fear of professional reprisal, told me. That's what had happened at Heritage. "It was planned," the analyst said. "And it was a coup."

The troubles at Heritage could be said to have started with Project 2025. Since 1980, Heritage has put out a policy manual, the "Mandate for Leadership," roughly every four years for any potential incoming Republican ad-

ministration. Its inaugural 1,000-page booklet went to the cabinet of Ronald Reagan, who used it as a script for the Reagan era. Project 2025 was not a wholesale reinvention but a rebrand.

It was also a return to the original conception of the “Mandate” as collaborative. Project 2025 brought in a plethora of voices on the so-called New Right — more than 50 of them — including such groups as American Compass, a socially conservative organization that advocates economic policies to support the working class; the American Conservative, a magazine co-founded by Patrick J. Buchanan, an early America Firster and nativist who ran three times for the presidency; the Claremont Institute, a right-wing think tank that wants to restore America’s founding principles; and the Center for Renewing America, which was founded by Russell Vought, a proponent of the maximalist view of executive power and the current director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Trump administration.

Roberts, who had been serving as chief executive of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative research institute in Austin, arrived in Washington between the first and second Trump administrations. Many among the New Right’s intelligentsia saw this interim period as an opportunity to elevate a Trump 2.0, someone with the populist spirit and policies of Trump without Trump’s baggage.

Roberts was well positioned to court, and be courted by, the new intellectual factions vying to shape the movement: the National Conservatives, or Nat Cons, headed by Yoram Hazony, who believed that decades of globalism had destroyed the identity of the nation; the post-liberal Catholics, a growing force among conservative elites, who believed that free-market economics and social liberalism had undone the fabric of the nation; and the tech oligarchs, who believed in the capacity of Silicon Valley to restore the dominance of the American nation. One of the figures who spoke fluidly in the language of all three was JD Vance.

Another was Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida. According to Reuters, there were near-daily phone calls between Heritage staff and the DeSantis presidential campaign, as well as monthly visits to Tallahassee, often by Roberts himself. In April 2023, DeSantis headlined Heritage’s 50th-anniversary conference, where Heritage presented Project 2025.

Roberts with Ron DeSantis, for whom Heritage is said to have compiled Project 2025, expecting that he would be the 2024 Republican presidential nominee. Credit...Sarah Silbiger/Reuters Advertisement

Many Heritage staff members told me that Project 2025 was compiled

with DeSantis, a strategic policy thinker, in mind. But DeSantis dropped out of the race in January 2024, and Heritage was forced to pivot. After Trump sealed the nomination, a deluge of critical press coverage homed in on Project 2025 and its aims: to radically “deconstruct the administrative state”; strip the government and civil society of “woke” D.E.I. initiatives; close the borders; and consolidate power in the executive branch.

Trump vehemently denied any knowledge of Project 2025, which many in the media interpreted as gaslighting. But multiple former Heritage staff members told me that Project 2025’s showy publicity infuriated Trump. According to them, Susie Wiles and Chris LaCivita, Trump’s campaign managers, were incensed that they hadn’t been consulted and called Heritage to demand that they stop associating Project 2025 with the next Republican administration. (The White House did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

After Trump won, Roberts and other Heritage leaders found themselves scrambling to place their people in the new administration. Roberts acknowledged to *The Times* in late 2024 that Project 2025’s brand “had become a political liability.” A crop of new organizations were challenging Heritage’s previous dominance, including the America First Policy Institute, founded by officials from the first Trump administration. Linda McMahon, the future secretary of education; Brooke Rollins, the future secretary of agriculture; and Pam Bondi, who would become attorney general — all were A.F.P.I. leaders.

A.F.P.I. also had its own policy manual, “The America First Agenda,” which was less flashy than Project 2025, with which it overlapped substantially, but just as potent. In their book “Regime Change,” the *Times* reporters Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan write that Russell Vought was initially not in the running to head the Office of Management and Budget because of his association with Project 2025. It was only thanks to Vance and the Trump adviser Stephen Miller that Vought became central to Trump’s radical restructuring of government in his second term. (Heritage says that there are 290 alumni in the new administration.)

Roberts didn’t exactly contradict this account, even as he took credit for the administration’s accomplishments. When I asked him what he was happy with one year into Trump’s second term, he was effusive. “I personally, and all of us at Heritage, have been happy with almost everything,” Roberts said. “As you know, we spent a lot of time thinking about what the next administration should do.” He gestured to a copy of Project 2025 in his

office. “Came up with 1,900-some recommendations in this great book. The administration to its credit, starting with President Trump, has implemented 750 or so.” When I questioned this claim, he clarified: “They may be ideas that others had as well; they may be ideas that originated with us. But the point is, using that as a report card, it’s pretty good one year in.”

After the blowback over Project 2025, Heritage leadership seemed fixated on getting back into Trump’s good graces. Just before the inauguration, they hung a banner several stories tall on the Heritage building, which occupies the better part of a block at the edge of Capitol Hill, that read “Congratulations, President Trump!” It showed Trump, fist raised, face bloodied, right after the assassination attempt in Pennsylvania.

Seeking to repair its relationship with Trump, Heritage hung a banner showing his defiant stance after the assassination attempt in Pennsylvania. Credit...Kayla Bartkowski/Getty Images According to multiple former staff members, Heritage leadership had, for some time, been less and less interested in the opinions of experts. Those with extensive experience in law, economics, trade, foreign policy — the so-called establishment — were increasingly sidelined. But in the early weeks of the new administration, as Heritage tried to ingratiate itself with Trump, an intensely pressurized climate took hold. Any longtime employee who wasn’t thoroughly on board with the new mission became persona non grata. “They were so concerned with getting the clout back with the administration,” the former policy staff member said. “It just exacerbated the tension between the policy people, who were like, Look, I know Trump wants to do this, but we’ve always believed, like, tariffs are bad.”

‘Free markets, free trade? They don’t do that anymore. I was the last person there promoting that.’ In September 2025, after the assassination of Charlie Kirk, who was killed at a campus event while answering a question about transgender mass shooters, Trump directed the F.B.I. to investigate “all participants” in domestic “criminal and terroristic conspiracies.” Mike Howell, a visiting fellow and lawyer in his 30s who was directing Heritage’s Oversight Project — created in 2022 to expose supposed fraud and other misconduct in the Biden administration and among the “enablers of the leftist regime” — petitioned the government to include “Transgender Ideology-Inspired Violent Extremism” in its domestic terrorism category. “Experts estimate that 50 percent of all major (non-gang-related) school shootings since 2015 have involved or likely involved transgender ideology,” the brief stated, offering no data to back up the figure. (Howell did not respond to

requests for comment.)

By late 2025, enough of the old guard had been replaced that Roberts liked to say in staff meetings that he had hired 60 percent of the building. Mario Enzler, who served in the Vatican's Swiss Guard, joined Heritage as a senior adviser. According to The Houston Chronicle, Enzler resigned from his previous position at the University of St. Thomas, a private Catholic school in Houston, amid allegations that the Italian university where Enzler claimed to have earned his Ph.D. did not offer Ph.D.s, and that the institution where he supposedly earned his bachelor's degree was actually a high school. This year, Howell's Oversight Project recruited Jeffrey B. Clark, a former Department of Justice official who was indicted on charges related to his role in trying to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

The former senior Heritage analyst told me that the senior leader who conducted his exit interview commended his "decision to recognize that you're no longer aligned with the organization and to leave voluntarily." Then, the analyst went on, the leader said that he was "concerned that all these other people were not aligned, but not leaving. And that the organization would be 'deep-stated,' that there were people subverting them from within. And then he began floating ideas about how to get rid of them to me, to see what I thought of them."

Some of the people Roberts hired in the wake of resignations by more traditional conservatives seemed less interested in the intricacies of policy than in the exigencies of the culture wars. Among them were converts to Catholicism or Eastern Orthodox Christianity, a recent trend among Gen Z. There was also a new class dynamic at play in Heritage's orbit. One former staff member, who insisted on anonymity out of fear of professional reprisal, described a marked difference between the guests at the foundation's inauguration party in January 2025 and those in previous years. "It looked like central Pennsylvtucky had invaded a country club," the person said. "There was more ink on these people than the U.S. Constitution."

Roger Severino, the 51-year-old vice president of economic and domestic policy at Heritage, who has been with the organization for a total of nine years, told me that there is a clear "populist strain that gained tremendous currency under President Trump, because it speaks to a neglected portion of the American electorate" who felt that "only elites, mostly on the coasts, were benefiting from all the free trade and growth." Heritage, Severino says, wants to make sure that such traditional conservative economic pursuits don't mean the sacrifice of "higher goods like family, faith and national security"

— the priorities of what he says the foundation is calling Heritage 2.0.

In this new climate, older analysts who championed free trade say they increasingly found themselves pitted against a younger cohort that embraced Trump’s tariffs. “Free markets, free trade? They don’t do that anymore,” Andrew Hale, a trade policy analyst who left Heritage in January and is now a fellow at Pence’s organization, told me. “I was the last person there promoting that.”

Hale told me that he was willing to debate policy; what he wasn’t willing to do was “sit here and discuss whether the Holocaust happened or not.” Discussions among new hires frequently echoed arguments promoted by Fuentes, Carlson and the podcaster Candace Owens that shed doubt on the historical consensus around the Holocaust or the origin of the state of Israel. Hale described a conversation with one new hire who claimed that the publishing tycoon Robert Maxwell — the father of Ghislaine Maxwell, Jeffrey Epstein’s longtime partner and enabler, and a Czechoslovakian Jew by birth — had paid for the rights to all the history textbooks used in public schools in the United States, and that everything in them about the Holocaust was a lie.

These groups had ‘always existed out there, but they never seized main institutions before. That’s what’s new.’ Debates over World War II became popular at Heritage, with a lot of “rehashing and going through who was the bad guy and who were the good guys,” Richard Stern, who was then director of Heritage’s budget center and is now at Pence’s organization, told me. A sizable number of newer staff members were fans of Pat Buchanan, who wrote a book about how Churchill, not Hitler, was the instigator of World War II. A number of them, several former staff members told me, seemed to share this view. Among them was Heritage’s chief economist, E.J. Antoni, a 38-year-old whom Trump nominated in 2025 to lead the Bureau of Labor Statistics (the nomination was ultimately withdrawn amid skepticism about Antoni’s qualifications), who praised Buchanan’s book on X.

Buchanan has recently been resurrected by some on the right as a forefather to Trumpism, even though he was sidelined by the Republican Party in the 1990s for his claims about Jewish control over Washington’s foreign policy in the Middle East. Just a month before the Carlson-Fuentes incident, Heritage posted a short tribute to Buchanan on its YouTube channel called “Pat Buchanan Was Right About Everything,” part of its push to see Buchanan awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The boundary between building a coalition and gatekeeping has always been fuzzy on the American right. William F. Buckley, the paterfamilias of

postwar conservative intellectuals, is credited with keeping antisemites and other extremists at bay, even if those red lines were sometimes breached. But that boundary has been particularly fuzzy in the Trump era. Shortly after the all-staff meeting that Roberts convened to limit the fallout from his video defense of Carlson, Ryan Neuhaus, Roberts's 31-year-old chief of staff, who wrote the script for the video, posted on X: "Masks are coming off every day now and the gatekeeping strategy of Buckley is dying fast. This is not only a clarifying exercise for those paying close attention, but enables a legitimate and unified future within the MAGA coalition." (Neuhaus, who stepped down after the fracas over the video, resigned from Heritage not long after. He declined requests for comment.)

Many of the staff members who left Heritage quit because they were exasperated by what they saw as the institution's failure to firmly distance itself from extremists and trolls. As the former senior analyst put it to me, these groups "always existed out there, but they never seized main institutions before. That's what's new."

'Any intellectually honest conservative or libertarian, we want him or her in our movement.' This shift is perhaps best summed up in the figure of Scott Yenor, who joined Heritage in 2025. Yenor, a professor of political science at Boise State University, has long focused on family policy. His views on women are virtually indistinguishable from the discourse of increasingly influential "masculinist" pastors like Joel Webbon and Douglas Wilson, who advocate a return to traditional gender roles. While there had long been informal discussions at Heritage about whether feminism had gone too far, Yenor took the debate to another level.

Yenor believes that first-wave feminism — women's suffrage — was a mistake; that women shouldn't enjoy legal protection from discrimination at work; that professional women are "medicated, meddlesome and quarrelsome"; and that a healthy society requires patriarchy. These views were not confined to Yenor at Heritage. Conversations were held openly about whether only male heads of household should be able to vote; also discussed was whether Heritage, in its special report on family policy, should support an annual multitrillion-dollar direct wealth transfer from single people to married couples with children via changes in the tax code. The idea of a wealth transfer was ultimately rejected. Even so, by the time the report was released, earlier this year, nearly the entire economics team at Heritage had pulled their names from it.

Attitudes in the office around gender changed palpably. Every former

employee I spoke with recounted an incident involving a promising intern in the legal department who sought Severino’s advice and was told that she should consider skipping law school, getting married quickly and having children. (Severino’s wife, Carrie Campbell Severino, a prominent attorney, author and commentator, is a graduate of Harvard Law, which is where they met.) Severino says that he suggests to anyone seeking his counsel that “choosing to start a family first is a beautiful option worthy of consideration, especially for talented people who have many seasons of life ahead of them.”

Liana Graham, a 22-year-old research assistant in domestic policy at Heritage, who worked on the family policy report, insisted that Heritage does not condone any form of discrimination. But, she said, the purpose of life “is not confined to career achievements,” as she said that “one-size-fits-all feminism” has taught. She went on, “I’m not saying that you can’t pursue these things, but realistically, if this” — marriage, family — “is something you say that you desire, how do you order your life such that you can actually achieve that?” The Heritage approach is to “recognize that the role of government is limited, and there’s a lot to be said on the cultural side.”

For some staff members, the cultural side — both outside and inside the institution — was precisely the issue. In early 2025, an employee sent a letter to the Heritage board of trustees, a copy of which I obtained, laying out what the writer described as a toxic environment. Roberts, the author wrote, had admitted to staff that he had “anger management control and rage issues” and that his “insecurities” led him to dismiss “all longstanding HF employees with more experience than him as ‘establishment Republicans’ or ‘people who attend Washington cocktail parties.’” Those who disagreed with him had been “bullied out of their jobs.”

Catholic beliefs now reigned, the letter writer continued, and everyone at Heritage was required to be against I.V.F. as well as birth control, including for married couples. Single women without children were deemed failures with “no skin in the game,” which the author noted was “actionable in law.” The letter continued: “Competitive selections for positions have ceased to exist. We are now required to hire primarily RCs” — Roman Catholics — “who agree with every policy that KR dictates.”

Roberts described himself to me as a “dyed in the wool” conservative, though he isn’t offended when people suggest otherwise. Some of his closest colleagues, he says, are leading figures of the New Right, including Hazony, the Nat Con founder, and Patrick J. Deneen, a Catholic political philosopher who teaches at Notre Dame. “The point is, these are the great intellectual

leaders, among others, in the conservative movement now,” he told me. “Any intellectually honest conservative or libertarian, we want him or her in our movement.”

ut to observers, Roberts seems to have undergone a kind of political conversion — one that has informed his radical reshaping of Heritage. Richard Reinsch, a founder of the online magazine *Law & Liberty*, and himself a Catholic and free-market conservative, was one of Roberts’s first hires. During his interview, Reinsch told me, he and Roberts had a “meeting of the minds.” Reinsch had drafted a memo stressing “a lot of things that an old-school Heritage conservative would like,” on economics, he said, “but with a much more moralistic, natural law background.” Roberts appeared pleased, Reinsch said, but the proposal turned out to be “the exact opposite of the course he pursued.”

‘If the circumstances change, and you don’t change your tactics, that’s the game plan of fools.’ Not long after Reinsch was hired, Roberts spoke at the 2022 National Conservatism conference — which brought together the various New Right factions that support Trump — where he made a point of telling the crowd, “I came not to invite National Conservatives to join our conservative movement, but to acknowledge the plain truth: that Heritage is already part of yours.” This came as a shock to many Heritage employees, including Reinsch and Stern.

In 2023, shortly after Vance arrived in Washington as junior senator from Ohio, Reinsch was made by Heritage management to remove a post on X criticizing a bill introduced by Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio, of which Vance was a co-sponsor and which Reinsch regarded as a handout to unions. Reinsch told me that he later found out that Heritage had taken an ambivalent stance on the bill, despite what he saw as its clear conflict with Heritage positions, in order to back Vance. Reinsch was also made to remove his affiliation from an open letter he signed affirming individual liberty in the face of both left- and right-wing authoritarianism.

According to Stern, Roberts began to talk, around the office, not about individual liberty but about the “common good” — not about freedom as the right to do as you want but as you “ought.” Roberts adopted what Stern described as a “policy sweep,” a push not for smaller but for larger government, with more regulatory powers. One of his former chiefs of staff, Stern recalled, liked to say that the most appropriate limit on the government was no limit.

In his 2024 book, *“Dawn’s Early Light: Taking Back Washington to*

Save America,” Roberts writes about the productive powers of destruction. Credit...Amir Hamja for The New York Times Advertisement

In the interest of exerting maximum influence, Heritage had always had a “one-voice policy”: All differences were to be resolved internally and opinions presented as unanimous. Yet according to former staff members, Roberts and his team would let select employees ride roughshod over it. “They would publish something and not go through the proper channels,” Stern said, and they would “do things that were somewhere between rude and inappropriate, to process-inappropriate.”

One incident that stood out occurred after a “hactivist” collective, SiegedSec, which called its members “gay furry hackers,” targeted Heritage in the summer of 2024, leaking usernames, passwords and emails from an affiliated media site, to protest Project 2025. Howell, the head of Heritage’s Oversight Project, engaged one of the hackers in a chat. “Are you aware that you won’t be able to wear a furry tiger costume when you’re getting pounded in the [expletive] in the federal prison I put you in next year?” Howell texted him. When the hacker threatened to leak the chat, which he promptly did, Howell replied: “Please share widely. I hope the word spreads as fast as the STDs do in your degenerate furry community.” (SiegedSec disbanded shortly after this exchange, citing safety concerns.)

Earlier this year, on X, Howell told a Jewish analyst at Heritage, who expressed First Amendment-related concerns about Howell’s suggestion to ban Muslim head scarves in Congress, to “go dry clean Ilhan’s hijab.” (He was referring to Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota.)

When people complained about incidents like these, which were becoming increasingly frequent, Stern said, Roberts’s response would be, “What a shame, oh, my God, I’m so sorry, will never happen again.” But there was “no discipline, no nothing,” Stern said.

Roberts seemed keen, himself, to join in the rhetorical bluster so beloved by the New Right. He referred to the “administrative state,” whose “governmental power” he wanted to see destroyed, as the “secret Communist movement inside America.” When asked in 2024 by The Times whether he believed that Joe Biden won the 2020 election, he said “no” because there were “unknowns.”

The emergence of this public persona surprised many of those who knew him earlier in his career. Like Vance, Roberts grew up in an impoverished and troubled home (in Roberts’s case, in rural Louisiana’s Cajun country), which he has written about extensively, before rising through the ranks of

America's elite institutions. Roberts eventually attained master's and doctoral degrees in American history, and one of his professors at the University of Texas, Austin, recounted that even though Roberts was clear about his conservatism, he had a feel for liberal areas of study "around marginal identities." His doctoral dissertation explored expressions of Black agency under slavery, with what the historian David J. Garrow, known for his biography of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., called a "deeply empathetic view of his subjects."

But like Vance, somewhere along the way Roberts embraced a new combativeness. By 2024, he was arguing on Steve Bannon's podcast that the country was in the midst of "a second American Revolution," which would be bloodless "if the left allows it to be."

Heritage has bet on JD Vance as the Republican Party's likely candidate for president in 2028. Credit...Erin Granzow/The Heritage Foundation Tucker Carlson's first job out of college was at the Heritage Foundation. He was a staunch supporter of Roberts, whom he described in 2023 at the Heritage 50th-anniversary gala as "a real leader at the helm of an institution that matters." But his loyalties appear to have changed along with his sense of where the zeitgeist is headed. When I spoke to him in June, he dismissed Heritage as irrelevant. "They can't even defend free speech," he said, referring to the apology that Roberts made after the outcry provoked by his video. "They can't even do what a think tank is supposed to do, which is think," Carlson said. "They do what their donors want, and what their donors want is support for Israel and tax breaks. So, I don't see why anyone cares what Heritage is doing, and I feel sorry for Kevin Roberts." (Roberts did not respond to a request for comment about Carlson's characterization.)

Sarah Longwell, the publisher of the "Never Trump" publication *The Bulwark*, and Carlson's antithesis in most respects, more or less agrees with this assessment. "The reason that the whole Tucker thing happened to Heritage is because Tucker is more powerful than Heritage," she said. "These think tanks don't matter that much anymore." Longwell worked in the conservative think-tank world beginning in the early 2000s. She told me that when she left, after the 2016 election, she realized "how much spending time in those spaces really obscured to me the actual feelings of Republican voters." She now hosts the podcast "The Focus Group," which features frequent conversations with Trump supporters. She says she has found that free markets and American leadership abroad — the crucial "first principles" of the conservative movement forged during the Cold War — no longer have wide

purchase.

This is precisely why, for Hazony, who joined the Heritage board of trustees in May, Heritage's shift is both a political and a practical necessity. Postwar American conservatism was "very attractive to people for two generations," he said, but it had "gone wobbly in terms of its ability to analyze and explain important political phenomena." It is a poor tool, he said, for coming up with solutions to open immigration, unrestricted trade and forever wars — the three issues Trump rode to victory. Once people see this, Hazony added, "They wake up, and the feeling is, I was blind until now, how could I have possibly missed it?"

Heritage was "built to be in the arena," says Severino, the Heritage vice president, and "if the circumstances change, and you don't change your tactics, that's the game plan of fools." He emphasized, though, that Heritage is "not just about shaping the terms of the debate, which is generally what the online voices do. We're not just asking questions — we provide the answers as well," through concrete policy proposals.

Everyone on the right, says Ryan Williams, president of the Claremont Institute, is wrestling with how to bring together those who have worked in the movement since the '90s and those under 30 whose "main political awakening on the right has been Trump's two terms." Heritage, he says, has done "a fairly decent job in adjusting to the circumstances on the ground." One of these circumstances is the changing communications ecosystem, particularly around podcasters and influencers, for whom one incentive is "shaping the policy debate and engaging in intellectual arguments," Williams said. But "another big competing one is driving engagement, clicks and making money. Which often has a tenuous connection to a scrupulous attention to truth and accuracy."

Heritage, which has shaped successive Republican administrations since Reagan, was "built to be in the arena," says Roger Severino, a Heritage vice president. "We're not just asking questions — we provide the answers." Credit...Jared Soares for The New York Times The prominent conservative writer Rod Dreher, who has orbited around the Nat Cons and the post-liberal Catholics for the last five years, sees some real hazards for the American right, particularly when it comes to the young men, often referred to as groypers, who follow Fuentes. Dreher, who, like Hazony, broke with Carlson over what they regarded as his antisemitism, says that "it would be foolish and even cruel for these institutional leaders on the right to just ignore all these people." But he is at a loss for an "example of conservative institutional leaders

or politicians acknowledging the pain and anxiety these young men feel, and then saying, But there is a better way.”

Just how far Heritage might need to go to accommodate this cohort was encapsulated by a remarkable moment during the all-staff meeting that followed Roberts’s video defense of Carlson. In leaked footage, one young staff member says she and her colleagues have no problem with the video he released, but they fear it’s the wrong moment to have the conversation about American support for Israel, because their real concerns will remain unaddressed. “Gen Z has an increased unfavorable view of Israel,” she says, “and it’s not because millions of Americans are antisemitic. It’s because we are Catholic and Orthodox and believe that Christian Zionism is a modern heresy.”

Roberts’s response seems addressed as much to himself as to her. “That’s the difficulty in the conservative movement right now — is trying to figure out how we can all respect each other’s differences of opinions.”

Yet the choices he has made suggest that Heritage has already bet on a side. Former staff members told me that, although Heritage does not back individual candidates officially, it is investing heavily in its relationship with Vance, who caters to this sector of the right. On a recent podcast, Hazony stated outright that Vance was the presumed candidate for 2028.

Many former Heritage employees predict that aligning with online activists and Gen Z-ers is a doomed strategy. “They don’t reflect Republican politicians nationwide,” says the former senior Heritage analyst, “and they’re a tiny, tiny part of the Republican Party even in D.C.” Dreher went further. To be a conservative, he says, seems “dispositionally to be against radical change. But these guys, if they want to tear it all down, OK, what are you going to replace it with?”

In the opening chapters of his 2024 book, “Dawn’s Early Light: Taking Back Washington to Save America,” Roberts unspools a long metaphor about the productive properties of destruction. “Fire transforms rot and deadwood into new soil, clears the ground for new life to take root,” Roberts writes, and conservatives must “plant new trees — that is, found new institutions.” He continues, “None of this will matter, however, if conservatives remain unwilling to take the crucial third step: to destroy the institutions that can’t be saved.”