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## **Why I Keep Getting Mistaken for a Conservative**

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ONE of my longtime survival strategies as a career freelance writer is a policy of saying yes to everything. This includes paid work, of course, but it also includes lunch invitations, since the only thing I love more than writing is eating. (These are also, incidentally, the only two things in the world that I am any good at.) My policy goes like this: If you invite me to lunch, I will come. Embedded in my policy is a second, equally important policy of asking no further questions about the purpose of the lunch, lest I accidentally trigger a series of events leading to the withdrawal of the invitation, which would be tragic.

This is how I came to be sitting across the table from NATIONAL REVIEW editor Rich Lowry at one of the nicer restaurants on Main Street in a small town in New England on a sunny afternoon in May. In keeping with my policy, I hadn't asked what I was doing there — but he also hadn't told me, and after nearly an hour, it was starting to get weird. The food was eaten, the plates were cleared, and we had covered all the obvious topics: our shared interest in writing fiction, our families, our respective trajectories out of New York City and into the suburbs. And then, finally, the penny dropped.

“I was hoping to talk to you about writing for NATIONAL REVIEW,” Rich said, apologetically. “But apparently you’re . . . a liberal?”

This was not the first time this had happened to me. The first and best (or perhaps worst) time someone mistook me for a conservative, I was interviewing live with a gravelly-voiced drive-time radio host whom I hadn't bothered to google and who had evidently been similarly lax about googling me.

“How about these libs,” he said, conspiratorially. (The noise I made in response was somewhere between “nervous laugh” and “strangled cat.”)

It happened at the Edgar Awards, where I was a Best Novel nominee for my 2021 thriller, *No One Will Miss Her*. A fellow attendee smiled and said, “It’s just so great that a conservative like you was nominated,” prompting my husband to snort so violently that he nearly choked on his beer.

And of course, it happens online — and particularly in the darker corners of what is known as “bluecheck Twitter,” where those who mistake me for a member of the political Right are not conservatives but fellow lefties, writers and lawyers and academics. There, the allegations of conservatism aren’t a fun case of mistaken identity; there, they’re delivered with an accusatory snarl.

**T**O explain why people keep mistaking me for a conservative, I need to first explain what kind of liberal I am and always have been: the free-speech and bleeding-heart variety. As a kid born in the early 1980s — now a Millennial in early middle age — I understood conservatives through the lens of the culture wars long before I knew anything about politics, which is to say (with apologies to my audience) that I saw them as the uptight control freaks trying to ruin everyone’s good time.

Ah, yes, conservatives: the ones who wanted to ban, scold, and censor all the fun out of everything. They were humorless, heartless, joyless, sexless — except for their bizarre obsession with policing what kind of sex everyone else was having in the privacy of his own home. Conservatism was Rudy Giuliani trying to shut down an art exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum on the grounds that it was “sick stuff.” It was Dan Quayle giving a campaign speech that condemned Murphy Brown, a fictional character, for having a fictional baby out of wedlock. It was some lemon-faced chaperone patrolling the dance floor at homecoming to make sure nobody’s hands were migrating buttward. It was my eighth-grade homeroom teacher, Mrs. Teitelbaum, calling my parents at home to report that she’d seen me doodling “satyric symbols” in the margins of my notebook.

“Satyric?” my mother said, her brow furrowed with confusion. “Like, half man, half goat?”

There was a long pause, a series of faint squawks from the other end of the phone. “Oh, you mean satanic,” she said, and put Mrs. Teitelbaum on hold so that she could shriek with laughter.

Here I will acknowledge that it was a different time; the “satanic panic” (a frenzy I now understand to have been as much a product of breathless corporate media coverage and the hubris of certain medical professionals as it was of the religious Right) was only barely behind us. Teen-pregnancy rates were skyrocketing; half of all marriages ended in divorce; violent video games were transforming the entertainment landscape and stoking fears of copycat crimes. If conservatives were anxious about the culture and their place in it, they certainly had their reasons. But to me, a teenager, their anxieties seemed ridiculous, and meddlesome, rooted in a wholly inappropriate yearning to control what was going on in other people’s bodies, bedrooms, and minds.

Of course, ridiculous and meddlesome are not the same as evil — and here, even early on, I diverged from the more strident members of my own political tribe. I had friends who didn’t share my politics, whose existence made it impossible to write off all conservatives as stupid and evil; these people, whom I loved, were clearly neither. I also had friends who did share my politics but whose existence was nevertheless a valuable cautionary tale about what a self-sabotaging trap it was to make “The personal is political” not just a rallying cry in specific moments, for specific movements, but a whole-life philosophy.

So, yes, I was a liberal. I just wasn’t the type of liberal for whom other people’s politics were a deal-breaker or even necessarily all that interesting. When in 2006 I met the man who would become my husband, the fact that he’d voted for George W. Bush was less concerning to me than another affiliation, infinitely more horrifying and far less defensible: He was a Red Sox fan.

**I**N hindsight, the breakdown of the liberal–conservative, Left–Right binary happened like the famous quote from Hemingway about bankruptcy: gradually,

then suddenly. By the time Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, the culture wars that animated my young adulthood had been roundly won by the Left.

Britney Spears, once the poster child for conservative purity politics and virginity pledges, had engaged in a three-way lesbian kiss on stage at the MTV Video Music Awards, gotten married and divorced twice over, and was fading into obscurity on the back side of a highly publicized nervous breakdown. The few conservatives still in the fight — over violent video games, high-school sex education, or the worrisome sexual proclivities of people on TV — seemed ridiculous as well as ancient, on the verge of obsolescence, like animatronic characters at Disney World still mouthing their lines from the 1980s through a decades-old patina of rust and grime. When Rush Limbaugh went on a three-day rant over the Affordable Care Act's birth-control mandate, shouting about the "slut" who "wants to be paid to have sex," it was less outrageous than pathetic, a front-lines dispatch from a battle long since lost.

From my vantage point — I was by now working as an entertainment journalist at MTV News — this massive cultural shift was best observed alongside the rise of a remarkable new age of television. Creators were reimagining storytelling on the small screen, while redefining the limits of what was considered appropriate to beam into the average American living room on a Sunday night. A show such as *Breaking Bad*, which debuted in 2008, not only reflected the evolving culture but also revealed from the first just how much had already changed. Here was a story that, had it been released just ten years before, would have surely raised conservative hackles for its violence, its glorification of drugs and crime, its foul language up to and including one uncensored use of the f-bomb per season. (The f-bomb! On basic cable!)

But when *Breaking Bad* came under fire for being a poor moral influence as it neared the end of its five-year run, it wasn't because of foul language or graphic violence. The outrage was about toxic masculinity, male privilege, and "mediocre white men." It was about the misogyny directed at Walter White's long-suffering wife, Skyler, a topic on which actress Anna Gunn penned a *New York Times* op-ed in which she concluded that the venomous reactions to her character were symptomatic of a culture still permeated by deep-seated sexism: "Because Skyler didn't conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female, she had become a kind of Rorschach test for society, a measure of our

attitudes toward gender.” It was about the show’s being too white, except for its villains. This was also — to use a buzzword — problematic.

The trajectory of cultural juggernauts such as *Breaking Bad* was an illustration of the gradual. The sudden, on the other hand, was a series of jolts. There was one in 2015, when the horrific massacre of *Charlie Hebdo* staffers was met with suggestions from left-wing journalists that perhaps the violence was not undeserved, given the magazine’s penchant for “punching down.” There was another in 2017, when folks swept up by the momentum of the #MeToo movement suddenly began to argue that due process was not just overrated but wholly unnecessary. There was the 2020 Covid-era meltdown over “misinformation,” culminating in the bizarre spectacle of a bunch of free-speech, free-love, Woodstock-era hippies demanding the censorship of podcaster Joe Rogan, one of the country’s most successful self-made content creators.

And the new moral authoritarians, the ones bizarrely preoccupied with the proclivities of fictional characters, the ones clamoring to get their grubby hands on the censor’s pen? They weren’t conservatives — or at least not the kind I’d grown up with. This scolding, shaming, and censoring was coming from inside the house.

THIS is a theory I’ve had for some time, but it crystallized in the writing of this piece: In our current era, politics no longer have anything to do with policy. Nor are they about principles, or values, or a vision for the future of the country. They’re about tribalism, and aesthetics, and vibes. They’re about lockstep solidarity with your chosen team, to which you must demonstrate your loyalty through fierce and unwavering conformity. And most of all, they’re about hating the right people.

Politics in 2022 are defined not by whom you vote for, but by whom you wish to harm.

Consider this representative moment from the Covidian culture wars, the aforementioned weeks-long controversy that began when musician Neil Young

attempted to muscle Joe Rogan off the Spotify streaming service. Rogan, a one-time reality-television personality whose podcast was bought in 2020 by Spotify in a \$200 million deal, had sparked backlash for interviewing guests who made skeptical comments about the Covid vaccine. Young blasted Rogan for “spreading fake information about vaccines” and issued an ultimatum. Spotify, he said, could have “Rogan or Young. Not both.”

Spotify took Young at his word — his music was removed from the service within weeks — but the controversy, fueled by intense politicization of all things Covid-related, had ballooned by then into something bigger. Mainstream-media commentators argued in earnest that Rogan must be censored in the name of public health; Spotify quietly disappeared some episodes of the *Joe Rogan Experience* from its back catalogue while appending warnings to others; even the Biden White House weighed in, with then–press secretary Jen Psaki saying, “This disclaimer, it’s a positive step, but we want every platform to be doing more to be calling out mis- and disinformation, while also uplifting accurate information.”

Amid the kerfuffle over Rogan — which had begun to take the shape of a proxy war over independent media and free speech in times of national emergency — a list began to circulate online of all the guests Rogan had ever hosted, divided by perceived political affiliation. This list, created by journalist Matthew Sheffield of the Young Turks, attempted to undercut notions of Rogan as an equal-opportunity information-seeker by asserting that he “overwhelmingly” favored “right-wingers” as guests. Entries in Sheffield’s “right-wing” column outnumbered those in the left column by nearly four to one. But as multiple commenters (including me) began to note, a plurality of these so-called right-wingers were proponents of drug legalization, same-sex marriage, gun control, and other progressive policies. Many if not most were not just Biden supporters but longtime Democratic voters, dating back 20 years or more. One of them, Tulsi Gabbard, had been a vice chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee and then a Dem presidential hopeful in 2020. (This was before Gabbard’s recent announcement that she was leaving the Democratic Party, calling it an “elitist cabal.”)

In addition to their longtime progressive politics, many of these curiously categorized “right-wingers” had one other thing in common: In recent years, they had been critical of the Left for its censorial, carceral, and otherwise authoritarian tendencies.

As *Reason*'s Elizabeth Nolan Brown noted, "the whole thing makes no sense — except as an exercise in labeling anyone out of step with progressive orthodoxy in any way at all as a right-winger."

But of course this exercise is increasingly the preferred — and perhaps only — means for sorting people into various political boxes. And on that front, the whole thing makes perfect sense: This with-us-or-against-us ethos is how I, a woman who has voted Democrat straight down the ticket in every election for the past 20 years, found myself suddenly accused of apostasy by the Left at the same time that I began receiving invitations from right-wingers to appear on *Gutfeld*!

I said yes to those invitations, too, of course. I even had a good time!

But this is why conservatives so often mistake me for one of their own: not because I argue for right-wing policies or from a right-wing perspective, but because progressives are often extremely, publicly mad at me for refusing to parrot the latest catechism and for criticizing the progressive dogmas that either violate my principles or make no sense. I look like a friend of the Right only because the Left wants to make me their enemy — and because I can't bring myself to do the requisite dance, or make the requisite apologies, that might get me back in the Left's good graces.

On that front, I am not alone. There's a loose but growing coalition of lefties out there, artists and writers and academics and professionals, who've drawn sympathetic attention from conservatives after being publicly shamed out of the progressive clubhouse (that is, by the type of progressive who thinks there *is* a clubhouse, which is of course part of the problem). It's remarkably easy these days to be named an apostate on the left. Maybe you were critical of the looting and rioting that devastated cities in the wake of George Floyd's murder by police in 2020. Maybe you were skeptical of this or that viral outrage: Covington Catholic, or Jussie Smollett, or the alleged racial abuse at a BYU volleyball game that neither eyewitness testimony nor video evidence could corroborate. Maybe you were too loud about the continued need for due process in the middle of #MeToo. Maybe you wouldn't stop asking uncomfortable questions about the proven value of certain divisive brands of diversity training, or transgender surgeries for kids, or — come the pandemic — masking. Maybe you kept defending the right to free speech and creative expression after these things had been deemed "right-wing values" by your fellow liberals.

This is a fraught moment for those of us who aren't reflexive team players, who struggle with reading the room, who remain committed to certain values on principle even when they've become politically inexpedient. The present climate leaves virtually no room for a person to dissent and yet remain in good standing. Attorney Lara Bazon — whose commitment to due-process protections in Title IX cases puts her not just at odds with her left-wing peers but also, in a shocking turn, on the same side as the Trump administration — described the challenges of heterodoxy on an episode of Glenn Loury's podcast in October 2022. "I have a tribe and they have a position, and I don't agree with it," Bazon said, looking bewildered. "Why is it so poisonous and toxic and canceling-inducing to be able to say that basic thing?"

It's also important to note that this isn't happening only on the left. Many conservatives told me as much themselves, with a familiar mix of frustration and incredulity.

But admittedly, as recently as a few weeks ago, I still thought that the left-wing manifestation was something else, something worse. It was in the toxic high school-ness of it all, the way that people gleefully coalesced around a new target each day, as if their confidence in their own righteousness relied on the perpetual presence of a scapegoat to kick. The intolerance seemed particularly intense among the type of highly educated liberals who dominate the media sphere, who police the boundaries of their extremely online in-group with the same terrifying energy as the most Machiavellian high-school mean girl. When various polls were released in the aftermath of the 2016 election as to the willingness of various American voters to date across party lines, it did not surprise me at all to learn that liberals were far more likely to say they wouldn't.

After hearing stories from conservatives who have been shunned, shamed, and estranged from loved ones over their lack of support for Donald Trump, I no longer imagine that this brutal breed of politics is unique to progressives. I think it just seems worse to me because the Left has always been my home — and a home where (as those ubiquitous, insufferable lawn signs say) we believed certain things, and behaved in certain ways. We were not censors. We were not scolds. We were not in the business of trying to shut down artists or meddle in people's sex lives or deny health care to people whose lifestyle choices we disliked. That sort of vicious sanctimony, the boot-stamping-on-a-human-face-forever sense of self-righteousness, was what the Left stood as a bulwark against . . . until it didn't.



On this front, the erosion of free speech in the creative and intellectual spaces that belong to the Left feels like a particular loss. It's devastating to see the worlds of journalism, academia, publishing, and comedy all in such thrall to (or fear of) a culture that sees creative work as activism first and art second, a culture that demands conformity to progressive pieties and is always on the hunt for heretics. It's also alarming to realize that virtually all of America's cultural products are now being made in environments where admitting that you voted for Trump — a democratically elected president who was supported by roughly half the country — would be not just unusual but akin to professional suicide.

This sort of homogeneity is bad for art, and it's also not good for people, for building community, for coexisting peacefully in a society sustained by social trust. And it's not lost on me that expressing these thoughts publicly, especially in the pages of NATIONAL REVIEW, will no doubt prompt a fresh round of allegations that I'm some kind of faker, a double agent, a wolf in sheep's clothing. This, too, is part of the way we do politics now: Even if something is true, we're told, you shouldn't say it lest it provide ammunition to the other side.

Within the past five years, this toxic variation of the no-true-Scotsman fallacy has become pervasive. In the span of just 20 years, we've gone from "The truth has a liberal bias" to "The truth is a right-wing talking point." People who question the orthodoxy are no longer seen as gadflies but as traitors, and they're summarily ejected from the club by some self-appointed arbiter of Who Is And Is Not Liberal. Commentator Bill Maher was the subject of one such defenestration this spring: "He prides himself on just asking questions (a lot of which sound suspiciously like GOP talking points)," wrote Molly Jong-Fast in an *Atlantic* article with the not-so-subtle title "Bill Maher Isn't a Liberal Anymore."

Maher's suspiciously Republican-sounding questions in this case centered on whether the explosion of the number of people under 25 who identify as LGBT+ could be explained in part by social contagion, a psychological phenomenon that has lately been explored by such hateful right-wing outfits as Reuters, the *New York Times*, and (wait for it) the *Atlantic*. But Maher was guilty of broaching an uncomfortable truth too early — which is to say, before the powers that be stepped in to declare that Now It Can Be Said.

**T**HE title of this essay is “Why I Keep Getting Mistaken for a

Conservative,” and it’s not lost on me that it would be an excellent setup for a tidily dramatic ending in which I suddenly realize that wait, no, the mistake was mine, and finally I see that I’ve been a conservative all along. But despite the occasional flirtation (or lunch) with members of the center-Right, and despite the lucrative career potential of a right-wing pivot, I shan’t be coming out of the closet or putting on a “Team GOP” jersey today. I still believe in liberal principles such as free speech, high social trust, and a government that provides a robust safety net for people in need while leaving the rest of us to live and let live. I support same-sex marriage, universal health care, police and prison reform, and an end to the destructive and foolhardy wars on drugs and terror — and while we’re abolishing things, I wouldn’t mind getting rid of the sex-offender registry and capital punishment, too. Like most people, I’ve seen some of my policy preferences evolve over the years (living through Covid has given me some pause about socialized medicine, for instance), but my values remain the same.

On the other hand, those values also still include sitting down for lunch and conversation with anyone who asks — not just because I love eating (although, man, do I love eating), but because I like people and find them interesting, even when we come from different worlds, or perhaps especially then. To be clear, I don’t think this makes me special; if anything, it makes me normal. Those of us who live in political bubbles, who work in political fields, who spend all day online obsessively refreshing Twitter and consuming news straight from the hose — we’re the weird ones, and it behooves us to remember how weird we are, irrespective of which side we’re on. Outside of my professional sphere, I could probably guess with 85 percent accuracy how any one of my friends voted, but I also wouldn’t do this, because it’s not the most important thing. Really, it’s not even in the top ten.

And within that sphere, where political affiliation resembles a team sport, a religious faith, and a recreational witch hunt, I remain more interested in watching the game than playing it. The work I love best is about analysis, not prescription; it’s about trying to understand what is and why, not what ought to be. And yes, granted, when talking about what the progressive Left is up to,

sometimes I feel as if I'm standing inside a crumbling building that used to be my home, narrating the slow collapse of the walls as they rot and buckle around me. There's also a sense that when the house is rebuilt, it might be elsewhere, on different foundations, so that all of us "suspicious" question-asking types are left standing outside.

But the way things are going, the folks who've been pushed out of the club will soon vastly outnumber those still in it. And if words such as "liberal" and "conservative" and "left" and "right" are increasingly meaningless tribal signifiers rather than statements of policy or principle, if all they convey is who you're against rather than what you stand for, then maybe it's in our best interest not to keep clinging to them. What are we without these labels? A tribe of the tribeless, unaffiliated and unfettered, with no choice but to get to know one another as individuals. This doesn't sound so bad. Let's have lunch.