POLITICAL CONVERSION

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AS STRATEGIC PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

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Political Conversion

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Introduction

Political Transformation as a Pervasive Strategy

"I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." This famous verse from John Newton's eighteenth-century hymn "Amazing Grace" shares an experience echoed across the ages—the religious conversion story. Conversion is one of the oldest persuasive practices in Western history. For the last 2,500 years, people have used tales of their fundamental change from one orientation to another to convince themselves and others that their new beliefs, values, and attitudes are superior to their former approaches. Given their history and influence, some even describe conversion stories as "nearly perfect rhetorical devices."²

People have publicized their conversion experiences to audiences through autobiographies, such as Augustine's Confessions, George Fox's The Journal of George Fox, and Thomas Merton's The Seven Storey Mountain.³ Yet many have adapted conversion narratives in contexts outside religion. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his tell-all The Confessions to reveal his turn to a deeply individualist, secular lifestyle and philosophy.⁴ Thomas De Quincy's Confessions of an English Opium Eater documented a struggle with drug addiction.⁵ Scientists like René Descartes and Nicolas Copernicus used secular conversion narratives to convey their scientific journeys and findings to the general public.⁶ Even Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis promoted a type of nonreligious change in worldview and identity.⁷

Following these trends, an intriguing phenomenon has developed in the United States, as prominent figures have not only imported the conversion narrative into public affairs but conceived of it as a political, rather than a religious, experience. While religious conversion narratives have a long history, the political version is a more recent development as a strategy aimed at
winning the hearts and minds of the public. Walking through any local book-
store, one is struck by the volume of political conversion autobiographies in
the marketplace. A broad range of political converts and party switchers
exist, both producing and being influenced by networks of rhetoric about
personal transformation. Such figures as Ronald Reagan, Hillary Clinton,
Arthur Koestler, Irving Kristol, Richard Weaver, and Malcolm X—and,
more recently, David Horowitz, Arianna Huffington, James Jeffords, David
Brock, Christopher Hitchens, Linda Chavez, Dennis Miller, Thomas Sowell,
Rick Perry, Michelle Bachmann, Bruce Bartlett, and Charlie Crist—all have
used political conversion stories to gain support for their lives and causes.

These stories act as strategic messages in public affairs. In 2004, for
instance, the Republican Party asked former Democratic governor Zell Mill-
er to deliver its keynote address at the Republican National Convention, in
order to support President George W. Bush’s campaign and policies. Jane
Roe, of the landmark Supreme Court abortion case Roe v. Wade, denounced
her pro-choice views and was embraced by conservative organizations as a
model for antiabortion advocacy. Roe even wrote an autobiography docu-
menting her journey as a religious and political convert. From the other side
of the political spectrum, former Republican governor of Florida Charlie
Crist used the tactic in his book The Party’s Over: How the Extreme Right
Hijacked the GOP and I Became a Democrat. Amid the tumult of Donald
Trump’s presidency, former National Public Radio CEO Ken Stern even
penned Republican Like Me: How I Left the Liberal Bubble and Learned to
Love the Right, documenting his transformation from a Democrat to an inde-
pendent. These leaders stand before the public as convincing examples,
testifying to a personal change with political relevance.

Political conversion narratives have circulated in other ways. Many vol-
unteers for Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign were specially
trained not to share their policy views with potential supporters but, instead,
tell “potential voters personal stories of political conversion” to Obama-
ism. From a different viewpoint, one need only look at former Marxist-
turned-conservative David Horowitz’s relationship to the Republican Party.
Horowitz was among “the refugees from the New Left who . . . turned up on
George W. Bush’s doorstep,” as one of many ex-radicals responsible for
Bush administration policies. Converted elites such as Horowitz drew from
their former experiences to invent terms such as “compassionate conserva-
tive,” a symbol intended to appeal to voters on the left and on the right in
Bush’s presidential campaign. David Brock provides another example. In a
past life as a conservative writer, Brock was infamous for his coverage of
Anita Hill during the Supreme Court hearings over the nomination of Clarence
Thomas and another series of writings that fostered conservative cam-
paigns to impeach President Clinton in the 1990s. Yet years later, President
Clinton praised Brock for converting from conservatism.

Overall, in whichever medium they might be presented, conversion narra-
tives are messages with public significance. These “stories of transforma-
tion” aim to sway or further reinforce readers’ very views of the world. They
have influenced leaders at the highest levels of power and have been
foundational in the creation of movements such as neoconservatism and
ideas like the Cold War domino theory. As this book will detail at greater
length, many audiences have also seen these stories as model examples of
communication and contributions to public discourse. Readers have de-
scribed political conversion narratives as produced by some of the “most
sophisticated thinkers in the postwar era,” who have possessed “a fearless
capacity for self-examination” and exhibited intellectual virtues across
their writings. They have been perceived as positively influencing public
defbate in the United States, promoting an “open, honest contest of ideas in
the public square,” and, in a comment that I hope to rebut convincingly, as
“surprisingly free from rhetoric.”

This project thus explores and evaluates political conversion as strategic
public discourse in the last half century of U.S. politics. As they circulate,
political conversion stories raise questions about how and why this rhetorical
strategy has evolved to meet the needs of contemporary authors and audi-
ences. They straddle the spheres of religion and politics in unexpected ways,
acting as atypical public “information and influence campaigns.” They
show us what kinds of stories are acceptable to tell in public and how such
stories draw and redraw the lines of public communication.

This book details the features and functions of these discourses as rhetoric
al tools and persuasive tactics in postwar politics. The principal focus of
this volume is on the communicative qualities and contributions that these
modes of storytelling make in public affairs. In contrast to many leaders and
other readers who have praised such stories, I conclude—through in-depth, close
textual and contextual analyses of four interrelated, touchstone case stud-
ies—that political conversion narratives tend to have propagandistic, anti-
deliberative qualities in public communication. What I find most remarkable
is that the authors of these stories fashion such problematic messages by
fusing the conversion narrative with other rhetorical devices and resources.
For example, in Witness, author Whittaker Chambers does more than simply
tell the tale of his political conversion; he puts “conversion” and “conspiracy”
rhetorics in the service of each other, bringing the realism and linear
structure of the convert’s story (i.e., from an old to a new life) to bear on
abstract and random conspiracy claims in a way that creates authority for
unsupported assertions. As a rhetorical weapon, the conversion form hence
brings certain emphases and pressures to public discourse worth challenging
upon close examination.

As a secondary consideration, this book argues that political conversion
narratives are civil-religious strategies that negotiate the uneasy lines be-
between church and state in U.S. politics. That is, political conversions benefit from projecting a traditionally resonant religious form in politics without seeming too religious. As Brian Kaylor has observed, “sometimes the political conversion experience on the way to Washington seems even more dramatic than the spiritual conversion of the biblical Paul on the way to Damascus.” Kaylor’s statement is illustrative of both the religious and political power with which these stories tend to be leveraged. Moreover, these narratives work with expectations for not bringing church and state too closely together by, to varying degrees, using the conversion form and general religious beliefs while downplaying explicit religious content. Many figures have ultimately enlisted the conversion narrative’s religious undertones in this way to absolve their public sins, justify a grand change in public affairs, and make their political work more effective.

In support of these arguments, this book covers three types of political conversion narratives that correspond to the book’s first three case studies, each of which presents a conversion story in a different guise. Departing from these types, a fourth case study is offered as evidence of how at least one author bypassed the allures of the other political conversion narratives in his work, escaping the rhetorical trajectory established by the first case study.

Before delving into this book’s framework, some sense of the environment in which political conversion narratives have developed, and several concepts, key terms, and definitions related to personal and public transformation, are first necessary to understand the strategy. This introductory chapter will then chart the journey that conversion narratives have taken from religious spheres to U.S. politics, spotlighting how and why these kinds of stories are largely unique to the modern era. The chapter then provides examples of religious and secular conversion strategies as a bridge to four intertextual works propagating—and, in one case, bypassing—political conversion, which will be examined in subsequent chapters.

Political conversion stories raise issues related to persuasive political practices, deliberation, and modes of reasoning in public culture. Beyond their history and influence, they speak to projects to understand and develop more “cosmopolitan” forms of communication across societies. In this regard, in surveying both religious and secular tales of transformation, Golden, Berquist, and Coleman summarize a need to analyze this strategy across various times and places: “[C]onversion discourse is with us—‘tracking’ us. . . . The professional evangelists are here to stay. We need to know about these people—their strategies and habits. We need to consider ethics and the effect these wizards have on our daily existence.”

MEDIA, POLITICS, AND RELIGION: REASONING IN CONTEXT

Since 1945, the decline of political parties has fostered an environment where celebrities and personal experience have become increasingly revered in public affairs. The rise of mass media changed how citizens and leaders communicate about public issues, focusing on the individual lives of politicians to an unprecedented extent. Some researchers have argued that U.S. political participation focuses more on entertainment than substance and that the media environment has been too directed toward “the present, the unusual, the dramatic, simplicity, action, personalization, and results.”

Renowned scholar Jürgen Habermas also believes that the following media forces work against political engagement in contemporary societies:

[Reporting facts as human-interest stories, mixing information with entertainment, arranging material episodically, and breaking down complex relationships into smaller fragments—all of this comes together to form a syndrome that works to depoliticize public communication.]

These media values undermine the complexity of political situations and promote individual over collective action.

For the past century, the world has further undergone a revolution in communication technologies. Citizens live in such a dense information environment that they have to use shortcuts to make political decisions, relying on simplified narrative structures and cultural symbols as guides to thought and action. Samuel Popkin describes the process as similar to a “drunkard’s search.” Religious appeals, in particular, provide “cues that Americans use to truncate their information exposure and consideration.” Under these conditions, pseudo-political, anti-intellectual norms often trump thoughtful public participation. Overall, modern media bear upon the types of reasoning and expectations for reasonability that have emerged in political life, providing a context well suited to appeals like political conversion.

Over the last sixty years, other trends include a general decline in voting and involvement in elections (with some exceptions, such as the 2008 presidential election) and a number of policies that turned many political behaviors from public to private acts. Some believe that an increasingly irrational climate and declining spaces for civic education have only compounded these problems. At the same time, Americans came out of World War II with a consensus fractured by Communist scares and the unrest of ensuing decades, exemplified by events such as Vietnam and new demands for civil rights. Given the ferment and fragmentation in the postwar climate, the conversion narrative provided a sense of order for various figures, with new commitments creating a linear path for individuals and groups to follow.
Relative to U.S. politics, the extent to which such performances and rituals of citizenship promote or hinder public values has become an important issue. Conversion narratives are a dramatic means of self-disclosure, leveraging one’s private encounters toward political purposes. They promote certain visions of public engagement, fitting within the developing political and media ecologies of postwar culture and prompting questions about how they work and what they contribute to democracy.

Political conversion narratives additionally respond to a series of church and state developments creating unique demands for public communicators. The United States is a nation with a distinctive history of church-state relations. In antiquity, and for much of Western history, there simply was no difference between church and state.40 The United States’s founders made a break from their past experiences of religion and politics by calling the connection between these two realms into question, as reflected in a number of the nation’s founding documents, such as the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Yet from the nation’s inception, many religionists have sought to influence the public square with their faiths. These tensions between church and state have made it both easy and difficult to argue a religious perspective in U.S. politics. Many leaders have had few qualms about asserting their religious beliefs in politics as a way to gain support from various publics, but there are also clear pressures not to have religion in the political arena. When religion intrudes too far into the political realm, it can have a “Pharisee effect”—where audiences react negatively to religious appeals.41 Some postwar factors accentuated this tension between church and state. Surprisingly, it was not until 1947 that the Supreme Court decided that the government must be neutral toward religion.42 But in both official and unofficial ways, individuals and groups have stretched—and, in many cases, broken—this neutral stance. During the 1940s and 1950s, “civil-religious” discourses combining religious and secular appeals increased,43 highlighting the evolving ways in which church and state have come to coexist.

It should therefore come as little surprise that traditionally religious forms such as conversion have found their way into politics. One can negotiate the demands of church-state tensions by subtly drawing upon the power of a religious structure, without explicitly stating religious doctrine. In fact, one need not have any religious beliefs at all to pursue this strategy. Although the content of political conversion narratives may be explicitly nonreligious, advocates can still use the historically resonant religious conversion form—of fundamental change from an old to a new life—to try to influence select audiences. While conversion continues to be an enduring historical pattern, its use in politics is largely uncharted. Many works on rhetoric have alluded to, but left undeveloped, the role that converts play in public campaigns and movements.44

Positioned with developments in U.S. media, politics, and church-state relations, conversion narratives complicate traditional notions of public reasoning. They make use of a narrative form in politics that has mostly emerged from past religious contexts, to argue in a way that is intensely personal and public, and propositional yet story-driven. These narratives document and intertwine a mass of empirical experience and abstract philosophical advocacy, often within the bounds of a chronological, autobiographical medium that is appropriated by individuals as well as larger movements in public affairs. To narrow these issues and provide a foundation for understanding the functions of political conversion rhetoric, some consideration must be given to storytelling as a means of public reasoning.

THE PROMISES AND PERILS OF PUBLIC STORYTELLING

Interdisciplinary scholarship raises the issue of what norms, standards, or conceptions of reason are critical for a functioning democracy. Traditionally, public deliberation has been defined as “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants.”45 It is “an unconstrained exchange of arguments that involves practical reasoning and always potentially leads to a transformation of preferences.”46 Robert A. Ennis argues that “deliberation entails a meta-level of critical reflection that promotes perspective-taking, which is a form of recognizing difference. . . . [D]eliberation unsettles and makes available for examination individual desires and suggests their possible transformation through discourse. It asks participants to judge critically their own claims and the claims of others.”47 Yet not all deliberation is of the same kind; the different communication styles, choice of topics, or values that citizens bring to public discourse can affect a discussion’s quality.48 Researchers differ about whether civility or rowdier forms of deliberation are best for democracy,49 but questions about deliberation generally examine how “an advocate’s discourse implicitly or explicitly widens or narrows discursive space for others.”50 For example, Cass Sunstein worries that many modern forms of communication foster “deliberative enclaves,” where citizens interact with like-minded others without coming into contact with or engaging wider publics.51

Interactive processes of communication are not the only way of looking at deliberation—actual media content can also affect democratic participation by modeling particular norms or behaviors for audiences.52 For instance, media content exhibiting “complexity” and the “co-presence of other claims” invites audiences to adopt similar practices, indicating how much authors care about evidence and how open their discourse is to alternative posi-
Opposingly, some find that cumulatively formulaic and obscure language, evocative words and twisted syntax, and other criteria can also constrain political ideas and informed decision making. By surveying media messages, critics can closely track, as Daniel Brouwer suggests, how the "qualities and quantities of various [rhetorical] resources delimit the available means of persuasion."

Deliberation scholars have underscored a need to describe why different public discourses should be considered democratic or not in a political environment where citizens can easily miss how such texts operate. Habermas and others pose a more specific question relative to these issues: Which religious forms of communication support or detract from just and useful models of deliberative democracy? Since religious and political conversion experiences are cast in story form, it is critical to examine the content and structure of these tales.

The impact of narrative modes of reasoning upon public affairs has also been widely debated. Some find that narratives are a democratic form of communication. Stories, such as those that groups tell about injustice, can lead citizens to greater participation in public life. On the other hand, narratives can focus too much on "emotional identification and familiar plots rather than on [the] testing or adjudication of truth claims, [and] they are better able than other discursive forms to rule out challenge." As public arguments, the very pattern of stories can have an impact on public decision making by squeezing complex issues into the borders of their constricted, ordered molds.

Stories can also exclude and delegitimize alternative voices in political deliberations, privilege elite interpretations of events, and discourage critical reasoning.

As a subset of these narrative issues, the roles that testimonies and personal experience play as evidence for citizens' claims have been of special concern. As argumentation scholar Charles Willard outlines, "the disciplined study of public deliberation may include such questions as: How is technical knowledge translated into testimony or public prose?" and "how do the narrative structures of entertainment media interfere with the rational evaluation of policy consequences?"

Feminist scholars have further led the way in discussions about whether experience undercuts or advances good reasoning, with Catherine Palczewski concluding that "we cannot discount the argumentative power of testimony and its ability not only to garner assent, but also to reconfigure [political] history and authority."

During the Reagan presidency, for example, a government commission struggled with the place of citizens' seemingly subjective interpretations of events in public discussions. Reagan's use of a personal "conversation metaphor, which privileged motives of sincerity, consensus, and civility, ultimately framed a limited participation for others hoping to gain a voice in public policy formation. In the 1990s, too, testimonies of "former welfare recipients" were used strategically in congressional debates to make it appear that low-income populations had a voice in the deliberations, while in effect, only elite interpretations toward the policy were advanced. Similarly, some research contrasts highly individualistic forms of talk in policy discussions, where "the self monopolizes; the individual is central subject, provider of evidence, and solution," with more reasoned forms of public discussion that use an "analysis of data beyond subjective personal narratives and performances of self-identity."

That said, many women activists have successfully used autobiography and personal experience to combat oppressive conditions, "enlarging the rhetorical spaces suitable for a discussion of women's roles and rights by offering their lives as evidence for their claims." Studies of abortion advocacy have shown how personal testimony can transport evidence from the private to the public sphere, bringing relational morals into a realm dominated by strict, rule-based standards, and offering one liberating way of asserting how people know what they know. As such, testimony is not necessarily a singular concept, with various deliberative functions worth teasing out in different contexts. The presence of conversion narratives in politics focuses the same tensions apparent in work on stories, testimonies, and experience as forms of evidence.

In sum, looking at stories in terms of deliberative democracy raises questions about the workings and functions of political conversion narratives. Gerald Peters suggests that, historically, conversion narratives have been all-encompassing forms of communication. Primarily, it is a communicator's claim of fundamental change that is of most concern for public discourse, since "the application of any 'fundamental'—that is, revealed—truth to the political scene, being unanswerable, makes impossible the open market place of ideas and powers." Civic engagement relies on an ability to learn, to be corrected, and to work collaboratively with others, but such forms of communication challenge the very basis of this premise.

To understand this communication practice, it is worth examining how conversion arose in particular social and historical contexts—especially in Christianity and Judaism. The background of this traditionally totalizing strategy remains relevant to its current uses in politics.

CONVERSION AS A PERSUASIVE APPEAL

Given the long history of the term "conversion," it is critical to justify my use of it and to construct a definition for "political conversion." Some may question whether stories of political transformation can be called "conversions," since the transcendent elements typically involved in religious conversions are often missing in political accounts. While studied with the histo-
ry of religion, conversion also had some secular foundations in the pre-Christian era of Greek philosophy. There is a basis for studying secular conversion in both the classical and contemporary periods, although ancient philosophical conversion still retained many of the otherworldly elements characteristic of its religious counterparts. Most important, conversion was virtually unknown to most people in antiquity. Judaism, Christianity, and early Greek philosophy were mostly exclusive in their use of this practice.

As a development emerging from this premodern history, conversion discourse is now prevalent in Western societies. Most scholarship has focused on religious conversion accounts. Yet there are also clear examples of conversion rhetoric operating in less religious settings. In this wider sense, "conversion experiences have been described by feminists, Communists, television-evangelists, alcoholics, psychoanalysts, and scientists, by men, women, atheists, believers, whites, and peoples of color." Wayne Booth called "secular conversion" discourse a "vast neglected area of rhetoric." Kenneth Burke further admonished scholars to track the secular equivalents to religious change, using the term "secular conversion" to describe how the vocabulary of psychoanalysis constitutes conversion rhetoric. Others have even described how the classical meanings of conversion are evident in concepts such as Maslow's self-actualized, healthy-minded individuals.

Conversion has been construed in a variety of ways. There is broad scholarly agreement that A. D. Nock and William James set forth the original definitions of conversion in twentieth-century scholarship. Nock describes conversion as: "The reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right. It is seen at its fullest in the positive response of a man to the choice set before him by the prophetic religions." James defines conversion similarly as "gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided or consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, by consequence of its firmer hold on religious realities." Religious conversions have been described as "a radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life," the process of changing a sense of root reality, and "a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding." More than a simple modification, each of these definitions involves a deep and total change in one's life.

Drawing closer to the rhetorical dimensions of conversion, and reviewing literatures on the concept from Nock and James to the present, Thomas Finn finds that "conversion in Greco-Roman religion, whether Pagan, Jewish, or Christian, was an extended ritual process that combined teaching and symbolic enactment—the cognitive and performative—and yielded commitment and transformation." Whether religious or secular, conversion is connected to communication processes, involving a radical change in one's language community and available ways of talking about experience. Although conversion typically documents one's fundamental crossing from an old to a new life, many researchers have developed more advanced typologies for the stages described in these journeys. But more intriguing is "not how the [conversion] formula is strictly adhered to and repeated but, rather, how it is renovated, adapted, and deployed."

Most definitions of conversion involve a transformative change in an individual's identity and social network. It is change that is fundamental and deep, and less short-term and more constant than other adjustments. Conversion is typically connected to the development of one's life. It can be a complete change of one's most cherished beliefs, values, and attitudes, or a return to one's past that provides a newfound sense of reality. It almost always involves groups, as one joins a group in converting from one paradigm to another (and in-group and out-group boundaries are often reconfigured through the switch), bringing legitimacy and emotional bonding through its ritualistic, communal emphases.

Many terms relate to conversion—for example, confession, mortification, and apologia. But conversion still most captures the sense of transformation constituted by those asserting a public, deep, fundamental change from one state of being, knowing, and acting to another. What, then, is the threshold of political conversion? For this book's purposes, it is enough to define political conversion as one's public assertion of or justification for changing from one political ideology to another. Confessional rhetorics in politics, for instance, may or may not evidence conversion. Individuals might assert that they are sorry for past mistakes, without necessarily turning away from former allegiances and converting into or out of a new political party or worldview. I believe that major policy changes, say, from pro-life to pro-choice on abortion policy, constitute a type of political conversion to particular causes that can occur without party changes. For the moment, these types of political conversions are left outside the scope of this book, in order to focus on accounts where a major shift in party or political paradigm coincides with one's fundamental public reorientation and repositioning.

A Historical Emergence of Political Conversion

As authors such as Craig Martin, Russell McCutcheon, and Mark Noll have written about extensively, many people of faith in the United States efface the historical and social trends in which their faith practices are situated to make individual religious claims appear free from the influence of language communities and particular interpretive choices. So it is critical to position seemingly "personal" narratives of political conversion in certain sociohistorical settings. The conversion pattern grew out of Greek philosophy, Old Testament, Pauline, and Augustinian accounts of public transformation.
Many believe that Augustine’s autobiography *Confessions* was the grandest articulation of conversion in the classical period. Indeed, Augustine’s touchstone work “devised three autobiographical forms—historical self-recollection, philosophical self-exploration, and poetic self-expression,” which most lengthy conversion accounts have followed and adapted. But the genre’s popularity took some time to develop; Augustine’s work was not copied extensively until the medieval and late classical periods, mainly because of Catholic rituals supplanting a need for these kinds of performances. Later in Western history, public communicators revived the connection between conversion and autobiography. In particular, conversion narratives burgeoned during the Reformation. In this period, autobiography arose and coincided with the increasing value of individual experience and change in Western societies. The medium corresponded with the development of modern conversion forms, providing a means of propagating both the content and form of these transformations.

For this book’s purposes, a starting point for conversion narratives in contemporary U.S. politics is with the Puritans in the 1600s. The Puritans are emblematic of church–state tensions that have been present in American society from its beginnings. The conversion narrative became a social requirement for acceptance into the Protestant Puritan faith, and a large number of religious conversion autobiographies appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These conversion testimonies became common during and after the Reformation, providing recognized structures for new religious sects that lacked the formal sacraments of Catholicism, such as the confessional. Autobiographical writing became a means of displaying one’s guilt and grace, promoting a conventionalized mode of practice used to rein in spiritual disorder within communities—in effect, becoming “an ideal method of regulating spiritualization.”

Puritan conversion narratives differed from their Pauline and Augustinian predecessors, which both focused on one’s instantaneous, assured convictions of religious transformation. Since the Puritans’ Calvinist doctrine stressed that no person was guaranteed heavenly salvation, conversion became a highly public demonstration. Puritan figures emphasized how they were continually fighting for salvation throughout their lives. Notably, the Puritan conversion narrative was a “literary morphology, a total way of perceiving and talking about experiences rather than a particular, predetermined mold.” That is, while conversion narratives and autobiographical writing and speaking were used to regulate religious and political beliefs, these experiences also became highly flexible in the American context.

Over time, people reconfigured the conversion narrative beyond its early Puritan form. Explicit connections between conversion narratives and scientific thinking developed. “Logics of discovery” by scientific rationalists like Descartes corresponded with the patterns of religious conversion narratives, functioning as persuasive acts. Political theorists John Locke and John Rawls used conversion narratives to structure their theoretical writings—so much that Matthew Scherer proposes that “figures traditionally identified with religion, such as ‘conversion,’ can and should be reactivated in the imagination of contemporary politics”—highlighting how “religious modes of thought persist within secular rationality.”

Epistemic shifts between the religious and secular deepened during the Romantic and Victorian periods. Rousseau’s *Confessions* marked a turning point in Western autobiographies. Rousseau argued that an individual self can be found only in nature, rather than in a community of others. He created a sense of individuality that “underlies virtually all modern autobiographies,” shifting from the transcendent in Christian autobiography to “personal identity” and the “interaction between men and their secular fictions.” Autobiographical discourse during the Victorian period made a parallel swing from religion to politics, as writers began to focus on social responsibility, using conversion rhetoric grounded in scientific rationalism to straddle “the paradox between uniqueness and universality that so troubled Rousseau.” As one example, John Stuart Mill simultaneously attacked transcendence while employing conversion narratives to structure his advocacy toward concepts such as “progress.”

For writers such as women’s movement activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, conversion to the “scientific enlightenment” replaced religious faith—while she simultaneously used the conversion form (a fundamental change from an old to a new life) to describe this very journey. Overall, “she appropriated ‘conversion’ for a feminist cause.” In a similar fashion, feminist Emma Goldman wrote an autobiography about her conversion to “anarchism.” More secular conversion narratives hence retained their individual foci while replacing transcendent elements with a new faith in an external realm of objective, scientific truth.

This trend continued and evolved in the twentieth century. Underscoring the connections between conversion, identity, and women’s political movements, the Women’s Social and Political Union appropriated and modified traditional conversion narratives to create new modes of self-representation about this-worldly change and converts for the suffragist cause. These political conversions differed from religious stories: “Rather than being blinded by the light of truth,” suffragist converts testified to the role of “gradual and reasoned” agency, or “reading, thinking, and debating” in their conversions to the political movement. As such, suffragist conversions focused less on personal sin than the social structures impeding feminist progress. Activists reworked formal, religious conversion stories to target political goals, as strategic rhetoric for social campaigns.

African American slave narratives mark an additional, critical point in the development of political conversion autobiographies. Slave narratives often
used the conversion form to persuade white audiences to join abolitionist efforts. Authors of these narratives structured their conversions as about a religious “reception of grace” as well as a political goal of “achieving liberation from legal bondage”—effectively targeting public institutions and shifting redemption from individuals to larger social contexts.

As mentioned, when conversion arose, it did so with Greek philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity. It is likely that it could not go into the political realm until modernity because there was less of a sense of politics as demanding choice during these times. In feudalism, politics was still courtly, lacking a civil society. In this respect, there needs to be a modern sense of politics even for talking about overtly political conversions. When human beings moved from the premodern into the modern world, it was a monumental movement “from fate to choice.” As Edwin Black notes, Christianity made an individual’s “beliefs” primary, and “these changes in Western consciousness crystallized in religious form, but they became archetypal patterns of perception and cognition” and “extended into nonreligious areas, most notably into politics.”

Conversion was not as widely available to the ancients in the same way it is to moderns. In fact, the notion of conversion is uniquely tied to what anthropologists have described as the boundary-setting nature of literate religions in the West. The choice to convert also became more of a possibility with the printing press and the broad dissemination of written texts in modernity, which expanded people’s options to join different movements or causes. The development of mass communications in the last century likely influenced these events, making the role of transformation and repositioning in both religion and politics more visible and thus more possible, ultimately opening up vistas to alternative thoughts and actions that would have been harder to come by in previous historical periods.

**Conversion in Contemporary Politics**

In the mid- to late-twentieth century, some key figures used the conversion strategy in politics. Religious conversion narratives have often been placed in the service of election goals. President George W. Bush used his campaign biography, which mirrored a Pauline conversion narrative, to identify with his Christian audience, frame his past transgressions (e.g., alcohol abuse) as beyond public inquiry, and gain the support of religious figures. Related to this book’s primary focus on deliberative rhetoric, David Bailey finds that Bush’s conversion appeals evidenced a certainty about religion and politics that left little space for argument; hence, “there is much to be learned about how religious elements like the Pauline conversion form inspire public policy initiatives and the rhetoric offered in support of them.”

Bush’s narrative had precedent. In the 1970s, public conversions became rituals for revitalizing individuals’ images in the aftermath of Watergate and the Vietnam War, with politicians from Jimmy Carter to Jerry Brown propa gating tales of spiritual change. Combining religious and political appeals in his conversion narrative, former Nixon administration lawyer Charles Colson even downplayed the transgression phase in his religious conversion to Christianity to minimize his culpability in Nixon administration crimes. The very form of conversion as a linear journey from one life stage to another plays a large role in making such accounts seem truthful. The historical conversion pattern has been resonant with many U.S. audiences, and similar religious forms continue to function within a wide range of secular discourses.

Beyond its individual claims to truth, conversion has been a staple form of evidence for modern movements. Conservative abortion documentaries have used converts’ stories to provide model paths for multiple audiences, using “secular language for the unconverted” but “spiritual narrative conventions and resonances for intra-movement appeals.” Pointing toward the potentially anti-deliberative dimensions of these narratives, these convert tales often describe facts as moving in one direction, and leave little room for allowing or legitimating alternative viewpoints. At an intersection between political identity appeals and movement claims, President Jimmy Carter underwent a type of political transformation from a “dove to a hawk” over the course of his administration. Since conversion accounts often activate confessional rhetorics, confessional language in contemporary presidential and other forms of speech raise parallel concerns. Dave Tell argues that confessional discourses can “naturalize historical events and thereby constitute a master narrative of inevitability in which further rhetorical intervention seems unnecessary.” Like conversion, confessional rhetoric may prevent alternative interpretations of events because of its cultural ties to notions of absolute truth and authenticity.

Outside the United States, the conversion form has appeared in other public contexts. Valeria Fabj explored how secular conversion tales have functioned as constructive resources for anti-Mafia advocates in Italian politics. Former Italian Mafia women used collective appeals to describe their secular conversions to a new life outside of the mafia. Ultimately, these conversions legitimized the Italian government’s fight against a criminal culture and created invitations for transformation in civil society. These examples spotlight how conversion strategies have moved into a broad base of public settings, often toggling between religious or secular variations.
Political Conversion as a Civil-Religious Strategy

Beyond these stories’ emergence and the issues they raise for public discourse, political conversion should be understood as a civil-religious strategy. Since the United States’s founding, the relationship between church and state has created many challenges for public communicators. Political conversion narratives should partly be read as attempts to negotiate this territory.

The concept of “civil religion” originated with Rousseau, but Robert Bellah’s work initiated inquiry into the ambiguities between political and religious symbolism. Civil religion combines secular politics with religious symbols, rites, and rituals. It attempts to resolve double binds between an individual’s or a group’s competing allegiances to religious values and political authority. For example, Protestant nationalism has a civil-religious dimension, where political values are made religious and religious values are secularized. Civil religion has been used to support politicians and policies and has been a major factor in deciding some U.S. elections. Relevant to political conversion, as institutionalized religion has diminished in power in industrial societies, “new frameworks have emerged to take over some of the social functions once performed by it.” In this regard, state symbols such as memorials, flags, or anthems have received the awe and respect once reserved for religious artifacts, or are blended with religious texts to provide political institutions with a holy halo.

Stark divides between the religious and secular are no longer adequate to describe the evolving, elastic range of faith-based practices in the modern world. Sociologists since Émile Durkheim “have argued that the social is essentially religious, and what counts as ‘religion’ does not decline, it just keeps transforming.” Conceptions of church-state separation have been critical to these developments. Some scholars find that “because of disestablishment, U.S. religious forms have historically been malleable”—especially since the United States is a place where market models of church membership and ecumenical pluralism, adaptation, and switching beliefs have been the norm compared with, for example, European churches. Communication regulates the church-state contract in U.S. society, and the religious content in this rhetoric tends to be global and morphous so that, “at best, the American civil religion is a political version of Unitarianism.”

Against generalized appeals to civil religion in contemporary U.S. politics are, of course, vigorous forms of religious activism against the political, or what Jason Bivins identifies as “Christian antiliberalism,” where religious advocates attempt to counter the state at every turn, typically with specific faith claims. Most of this activism involves dissent against elites and centralized power, with a high regard for local community identity and morality. Antiliberalism has been prominent since the 1960s in the United States, frequently collapsing the boundaries between religion and politics complete-

by. In characterizing political conversion narratives as civil-religious, I make a distinction between more explicit ways of using religion in the public square (e.g., antiliberalism) and the implicit, subtle ways of crossing religion and politics found in political conversion stories. This understanding of religion fits with Craig Martin’s admission that the dominant rhetoric of capitalism in the United States has propelled the development of minimalist forms of religion that expect few obligations of their followers, making maximalist expressions of religion a rarity in the overall political landscape. That the political conversions in my project were all created by elites using layered messages to garner assent from both religious and political, elite and non-elite audiences, works with these current theories about religion.

Moreover, varying uses of faith still remain important to both civil and specific forms of religion. After all, contemporary Christian antiliberalism “exemplifies the polyvocality and the protean nature of political religion in America,” as an evolving mode of engagement modified for new contexts—like conversion narratives themselves. And, as Susan Harding amply documents, despite disavowing secularism and postmodernism, Christian leaders such as Jerry Falwell and their followers aggressively merged religious and nonreligious cultural traditions in their practices.

As expressions of civil religion, political conversion narratives give public figures an opportunity to communicate in a resonant evangelical fashion without bearing the costs that explicit religious faith claims can carry in public. This claim is not intended to invoke a framework of legal determinism, where such accounts might be seen as following strictly from founding documents or legal doctrines such as the disestablishment clause. Rather, these narratives are the outgrowth of a whole host of cultural performances in U.S. history (of which founding texts and legal doctrines are certainly a part), where communicators have attempted to meet paradoxical, official and unofficial expectations over religion’s role in politics.

LOOKING BACK, STRATEGIZING FORWARD

Looking back, conversion narratives’ social and historical influence has been well documented, with individuals and groups adapting the pattern across time and contexts. Although political conversion narratives generally do not use transcendent truth as their revealed fundamentals, they often use “experience” in an evangelical way. As such, this book will draw out and evaluate the standards by which these stories can be assessed as arguments that invite audiences to view public affairs in certain ways.

The selection of this book’s four case studies stems from my finding that conversion narratives are nexus points between identities and movements. Conversion narratives exemplify liminal moments in the formation of selves...
and groups, influencing political parties and coalitions. Yet it’s critical to note that, at least in the U.S. context, the playing field has not been level. Many American political conversion narratives describe their authors’ turns from the political left to the right. Fewer tell the story of turning from the political right to the left, at least in terms of writings or speeches circulated in public discourse.

Political scientists confirm that the conversion of former Democrats to the Republican Party has been widespread in postwar America; but there appear to be far fewer documented cases of Republican to Democrat converts. Similarly, studies of abortion advocates relate that many pro-lifers are “converts to Catholicism, people who have actively chosen to follow a religious faith, in striking contrast to the pro-choice people, who have actively chosen not to follow any.” This project explores why so many conversion narratives in U.S. politics are from the left to the right, following some of the most prominent texts that happen to be mostly conservative, while concluding that the strategy cannot necessarily be reduced to any one ideology. In previous exploratory work examining David Brock’s political conversion from the right to the left, I found a mostly propagandistic form of rhetoric, similar to the first three case studies in this larger project. While political conversion strategies have tilted to one side of the political spectrum, this book emphasizes that it is the type of discourse itself rather than any inherent ideological designation that presents problems for deliberative democracy.

Another reason so many conversion narratives have been told among conservatives relates to a historical, performative “print culture” among those on the right. Michael Lee finds that a secular “canon” of works—of which Whittaker Chambers’s Witness was a part—helped bring together (and into contention) various sects like traditionalists, neconservatives, and others, establishing certain argumentative commonplaces, patterns, and models of social capital. Emphasizing how amenable the conversion form was to the subculture, this conservative canon “was a sacred force encountered during a sinner’s journey,” with movement advocates continually highlighting the inspirational force of conservative books and testimonies in their own journeys.

Looking forward, four case studies provide an intertextual, connected body of work for studying political conversion. This book invites a larger confrontation with conversion stories by charting an evolving history, focusing on a group of texts that encapsulate this social trend.

Four Intertextual Political Conversion Autobiographies

Autobiographies tend to emerge during periods of intense political change. As one scholar wrote: “Augustine’s Confessions coincided with the breakthrough of Christianity in the Roman world; Montaigue studied himself in the midst of civil war; and Jean-Jacques Rousseau was not merely one of the inventors of modern autobiography but a major figure in the buildup to the French Revolution.”

Autobiographies and social movements often correlate, with abolitionist literatures about the humanity of slaves preceding historical events such as the Emancipation Proclamation—and feminist and black power autobiographies accompanying major movements during the sixties.

More than merely interesting or entertaining invitations to consider a person’s life, then, many writings can be described as “social movement autobiographies.” In essence, autobiographical writing structures enable the rhetorical functions of self-definition and social advocacy to become mutually reinforcing. Activists have used autobiographies to create new audiences for their beliefs, with the medium containing an array of unexplored rhetorical devices employed in public campaigns.

Prior to World War II, several non-American writers and intellectuals began to propagate their “ex-Communist” experiences to the public in exactly this fashion. In the 1940s, figures such as Arthur Koestler compiled ex-Communist stories in The God That Failed, which described several authors’ conversions from Soviet-style totalitarianism to Western democracy. Following these initial essays, in 1952, Whittaker Chambers published the touchstone political conversion autobiography Witness. In the 1960s and 1970s, as self-disclosure and transformation became thematic in American politics, many “ideologically motivated autobiographies” flooded the public square. During this period, ex-liberal intellectuals like Noman Podhoretz used the conversion narrative in works such as Breaking Ranks (1979). In the following decades, the trend continued, with conservatives mobilizing political conversion autobiographies, including David Horowitz’s Radical Son (1997).

The autobiographies of Chambers, Podhoretz, and Horowitz evidence intriguing similarities and differences that merit consideration as a class of left-to-right political conversion accounts. All these autobiographers are journalists or pundits. They all use conversion rhetoric to reflect upon and structure their political transformations. They have all been influential figures in U.S. postwar politics and, in some cases, beyond. These autobiographies also draw upon and cite one another: an intertextual thread and unity to these texts justifies their selection as circulating sites of political persuasion. I trace conversion discourses that influence one another, covering a strategic trail established by these tales across time and in their unique historical moments. Since these texts reference and build on one another, they create a body of work whose sum is greater than its individual parts.

Although these works possess common themes, each author had unique situational demands. Chambers addressed an uncertain postwar environment and the pressing Communist scare enveloping the nation in the 1950s. Pod-
horetz’s political conversion autobiography lamented the 1960s counterculture and the Vietnam War. For Horowitz, political events from the 1960s through the 1990s provided an impetus for his book. While there are clear links between these conversion narratives, contextual changes in each of these authors’ lives affected how and why they used these types of stories.

Generally, a decrease in sacred spaces within modern societies has left experience-making in the hands of individuals; as John Lofland and Norman Skonovd suspect, “conversion motifs differ significantly from one historical epoch to another, across societal boundaries, and even across subcultures within a single society.” Heilbrunn writes that the difference between the old intellectual rank-breakers (such as Chambers) and their newer counterparts (such as Horowitz) is that there was more at stake in the former cases, both personally and contextually. In the 1990s and 2000s “rank-breaking has become an industry, and a rewarding one at that . . . [T]he dark night of the soul that Chambers dramatizes in Witness is now more akin to an audition for American Idol.” Because the first three texts in this study stretch over nearly fifty years of public discourse, they similarly provide a way of exploring shifts in the rhetorical styles and resources available to those crafting conversion messages.

There are also religious and political differences between these autobiographies. Chambers offers the most explicitly religious account, simultaneously offering the reader proof of his political and faith-based conversion. From the opposite side, Podhoretz occasionally discusses religion, mostly to argue that it should be kept out of politics, while asserting that his political journey was grounded in rationality and reason. I find that these autobiographies are political analogues to what Peter Berger has described as three contemporary modes of religious thought (or ideal types) that each respond to the relativity, choice, and pluralistic demands inherent to modern societies.

The first mode of religious thought, deduction, affirms traditional religious authorities and otherworldly realities in the face of contemporary, pluralistic challenges. Here the strategy is to administer one’s faith in a top-down fashion to almost all of life’s events, in a way that typically ignores, minimizes, or deflects tensions or contradictions in the tradition or with others. Religious communicators frame knowledge claims in terms of orthodox, fundamentalist certainties. The second, reduction, works with such tensions to intellectualize and secularize religious traditions. In this turn, modern historical scholarship and critical methods substitute for religious authority to foster highly rational forms of religion. The third, induction, focuses on one’s own experience or the experiences of human beings within religious traditions as grounds for affirming faith. This last, introspective mode reflects an “empirical attitude” and emotional “experience of inner liberation,” emanating from a “nonauthoritarian approach to questions of truth.” Although not without overlaps, the respective narratives of Chambers, Podhoretz, and Horowitz generally correspond to these three ways of approaching the world. Loosely speaking, some similarities also exist between these types and what Lofland and Skonovd call mystical, intellectual, and experimental types of conversion, and what Max Weber described as three bases for political authority—traditional, rational, and charismatic.

Following this framework, my first case study begins with Chambers’s Witness, a foundational text in contemporary conservative politics. By many accounts, “Chambers’ odyssey would become the gold standard against which the experience of future generations of rank-breakers would be measured.” President Reagan said that reading Chambers’s Witness was instrumental in his own political conversion from Democrat to Republican, frequently referring to the book as “represent[ing] a generation’s disenchantment with statism and its return to eternal truths and fundamental values”—themes exercised in U.S. politics to this day.

In this lengthy autobiography, Chambers tells the story of his former life as a spy for the international Communist Party. He became an employee of the U.S. government, spending years working with other Communist spies to gather and send classified documents to Soviet leaders. Through many twists and turns, Chambers left Communism and testified at the famous Hiss trials (1949–1950) that Alger Hiss, an assistant to the assistant secretary of state, was a Communist. In Chambers’s later years, he began writing for conservative publications and became friends with figures such as William F. Buckley. Chambers’s political transformation worked hand in hand with becoming a Quaker.

The second case study explores Podhoretz’s Breaking Ranks, which covers the author’s turn from liberalism and radicalism to become one of the founders of the neoconservative movement. Podhoretz’s autobiography acknowledges the influence of former ex-leftists like Chambers in his own political conversion. Yet it is a puzzling account. Breaking Ranks is highly intellectual, written less with the agonizing personal revelations that many political conversion autobiographies use and instead centering almost exclusively on political ideas. Podhoretz describes his struggles with liberal policies during the Vietnam War and the movements of the 1960s, which, he argues, had little to do with the liberalism that he had always known. When Podhoretz came out as a conservative, he responded to these pressures with his 1979 book and propelled a new conservative movement.

The third case focuses on Horowitz’s Radical Son, which responds to political events from the 1960s through the 1990s. Horowitz describes his gradual conversion from a former life as a Marxist to a very public, staunch conservative in later decades. He provides extensive details about his family history and the political events that shattered his previous worldview, while providing readers with prescriptions for his country’s civic future. Horowitz
often cites both Chambers and Podhoretz as his models, illustrating the influence that political converts can wield with prospective movement members.

There is another work with insight into the functions of political conversion strategies, although not so much for what it does as what it doesn’t do. Like Podhoretz’s and Horowitz’s tales, this story follows the same intertextual thread in its reference to Chambers’s *Witness*. But unlike the three other case studies, Garry Wills’s *Confessions of a Conservative* avoids the types of problems manifest in the other political conversion narratives. As a prominent public figure, Wills could be described as tuning from the right to the left in his politics. Yet the book is more remarkable for deferring and deflecting many of the rhetorical practices described in the other cases. Most important, Wills’s work provides an understanding of what more deliberative forms of transformation rhetoric could look like.

Examining the strategic resources across the four autobiographies, I analyze the particular vision of deliberation that each author constructs, comparing and contrasting the cases toward a theory and evaluation of these stories in public culture. Each case works toward a cumulative conclusion about the communicative possibilities and limitations of political conversion narratives. With the exception of Wills’s case, each chapter builds on the last, both in terms of chronological order and the intertextual connections that each autobiography provides to the previous work(s).

One way I track how each author constructs his political outlook is by looking to what Edwin Black calls the “second persona,” or implied audience in each narrative. My goal is not to make hard experimental claims about the effect of these discourses on people’s ability to deliberate. Rather, my conclusions will center on the kind of audiences that these messages create in their features and functions. In each chapter, I thread the emergent rhetorical norms from each political conversion narrative together with various interpretations, responses, and controversies that each autobiography has evoked in public affairs. In addition to other scholarly and journalistic coverage of these works, many responses to the autobiographies were collected in the form of major and minor book reviews. The contextual analyses were not limited to book reviews, but they provided one means for exploring some responses to the primary sources. The book reviews build support for my claims about each autobiography’s strategic norms as well as provide evidence of how some audiences either affirmed or invalidated the second persona in each. In using these supplementary sources, I am, again, less interested in making any representative claims about audience effects than in simply deepening our understandings of the social and historical milieu of these works and the vision, or what sociologist Charles Taylor has termed the “imaginary,” that each constructs.

**Judging Political Conversion**

It is the argument of this book that, collectively, the first three case studies illustrate how political conversion narratives tend to be propagandistic, anti-deliberative communication strategies. They combine the conversion form (a public proclamation of fundamental, bifurcated identity change from an old to a new life) with various rhetorical devices and themes to produce a seemingly reflective yet totalizing type of public argument. That is, the deep, underlying structure of the conversion form functions to control several resources in each story, creating an anti-deliberative text whose sum is greater than its parts.

This thesis distinguishes the anti-deliberative dimensions of the conversion narrative from other, less all-encompassing, communication practices. At least in these cases, the conversion narrative tends not to portray a simple experience or change of mind but, instead, a heavily bifurcated, unidirectional experience or change of mind from a fundamental wrong to a right. Burke discusses the dangers of temporality and essentializing rhetoric in narratives, which tend to fix points of origin beyond language, foreclosing the possibility of starting from other places and working in different directions from those implied by a story’s structure. In other words, these types of stories fail to recognize that the inevitability implied by their narrative structures is not unavoidable.

Yet public figures have performed this strategy in different, complex ways toward such ends. The first three case studies in this book each present a political conversion narrative in a different anti-deliberative guise—deductive, reductive, and inductive, respectively—in ways that are equally troubling as public communication practices. Collectively, the case studies employ civil-religious rhetoric as a response to their overall postwar context. Individually, however, each autobiography also incarnates its era’s ethos by emphasizing religion and secularity in different ways. Chambers’s narrative is quasi-religious, while Podhoretz and Horowitz create secular conversion stories with reductive and inductive approaches that are at odds with each other. These religious and secular differences show how contextual shifts within the postwar period called for conversion texts under varying guises.

A key component of this historical argument is that authors of political conversion narratives can submerge religious content in their stories while still drawing from the resonant form of conversion for their lives and causes. They are, in Thomas Luckmann’s terms, forms of “invisible religion,” downplaying or even completely discarding religious content while using an enduring historical-religious form to convince audiences that their lives and causes are worth supporting. Much research establishes that U.S. audiences generally favor civil-religious sentiments but not the specific articulation of religious beliefs in politics. Conversion narratives are situated on this
religious-political axis, paradoxically supporting and negating religion in
good/evil and Communism/anti-Communism. The anti-deliberative vision
ultimately is cast as a fundamentalist, deductive Manichaean odyssey.

Chapter 2 explores Podhoretz’s political conversion autobiography,
Brothers in Crime. I find three major rhetorical resources with bearing on
public communication: intellectualism, expression, and accuracy. Each resource
corresponds to concerns for reason, restraint, and rightness in public life. At
first glance, Podhoretz uses a language of reason and reasonability that may
appear to be deliberative. The deep structure of the conversion form works
with these resources to create a totalizing public argument, however. Given
Podhoretz’s criteria for public discourse, several contradictions surface in his
performance of the political conversion narrative. As a whole, the strategic
political vision is cast in terms of an intellectual, reductive journey responding
to the rowdy nature of Podhoretz’s political circumstances.

Chapter 3 explores Horowitz’s autobiography, Radical Son. I find three
major resources in Radical Son: reflectivity, maturity, and psychological experience.
These resources relate to a language of reason, progress, and caring
participation that have been part of the political Left’s vocabulary. Horowitz
draws on these leftist experiences to appeal to assumed virtues such as open-
minedness, creating a generational journey from a socialized, childish
naïveté to an individual, adult capacity for reflection on the world’s truths.
Horowitz’s autobiography ultimately puts the conversion form in the service
of an experiential, inductive vision that sums to an inherently anti-deliberative
discourse.

Departing from these stories, in chapter 4 I turn to Garry Wills’s Confessions
of a Conservative. Wills had been part of many of the same conservative
social circles as the other authors in this project and, given his turn from
his former alliances, had every reason to fashion a political conversion narrative
like the others. Instead, I find that by prioritizing rhetorical processes
over products, conceptualizing a politics of human convention over redemption,
creating grounds for endless argumentation, and constructing conditions
for expansive identity rhetorics, Wills’s text bypasses the types of totalizing
features exemplified in the other political conversion narratives. Wills’s work
provides an entry point for discussing how messages of political change can be created in a more deliberative way, providing one path

through the thicket of concerns raised by the preceding conversion narra-
tives. In so doing, Wills offers a view of what such rhetorical understandings
have to offer our public discourse more generally.

Last, in chapter 5, I summarize the deliberative standards constructed
across the conversion narratives, presenting some final implications about
the cumulative workings of these case studies (including Wills’s divergent
case) and what they portend for public discourse. This book concludes with a
message to be vigilant about the rhetorical operations of the historical, evolving
conversion narrative, whose enduring structure continues to emerge and be
applied in as many contexts as citizens can imagine.

NOTES
George Fox, The Journal of George Fox (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2006); Thomas
Books, 1953).
5. Thomas De Quincy, Confessions of an English Opium Eater (New York: Penguin
6. René Descartes, Discourse on Method and Meditations, trans. Lawrence Lafluer (Indi-
apolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960); Nicolas Copernicus, On the Revolutions [De Revolutioni-
7. See Siegfried Freyd, The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, ed. and trans. A. A. Brill
8. For examples of political conversion autobiographies and related texts, see Herman
Badillo, One Nation, One Standard: An Ex-Ex-Conservative on How Hispanics Can Succeed Just
Like Other Immigrant Groups (New York: Sentinel, 2006); David Brock, Blinded by the Right: The
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The Transformation of an Ex-Ex-Conservative (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Patrick Cormack,
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HarperCollins, 2007); David Horowitz, Radical Son: A Generational Odyssey (New York:
Touchstone, 1997); Joshua Key, The Deserter’s Tale: The Story of an Ordinary Soldier Who
Walked Away from the War in Iraq (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007); Irving Kristol,
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14. Brock, Blinded by the Right, 340. Some of this section’s examples (e.g., Zell Miller) are used in an in-depth study of David Brock by Don Waisanen. “Political Conversion as Intrapersonal Argument: Self-Dissociation in David Brock’s Blinded by the Right,” Argumentation and Advocacy 47 (2011): 230.


17. For instance, the political conversion narrative Witness has been described as setting the “intellectual moorings for American conservatives that would last into the twenty-first century,” Alfred S. Regney, Upstream: The Ascendance of American Conservatism (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 39.


23. This comment is Hugh Kenner’s, in William F. Buckley, Jr., foreword to Witness, by Whittaker Chambers (Washington, DC: Regency, 1980), v.
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44. Jasinski writes that “participants in a movement are, in effect, converts to a cause; they undergo a process of secular conversion that often involves the adoption of a new identity or a new sense of self.” But this “new sense of self is always threatened by the old self.” In both secular and religious conversion narratives, a temptation to return to the old self is always a problem (e.g., in the sixties, many new feminists were surrounded by messages that they should return to their old ways of life). Much rhetorical work goes into conversion narratives since, “if a movement fails to satisfy this need, then it runs the risk of having its members backslide and return to their pro-movement identities.” James Jasinski, Sourcebook on Rhetoric (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 375–76. Leland Griffin describes movements as moving through stages of inception, negotiation, and then a turn to the “rhetoric of conversion and catharsis.” Leland Griffin, “A Dramatic Theory of the Rhetoric of Movements,” in Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke 1924–1962, ed. William M. Rueckert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 464. In an earlier article, Griffin also describes how the “New Left” needed rituals of rebirth to respond to crises that it faced in 1962. The movement’s developments were intimately connected to these patterns of identity change. Leland Griffin, “The Rhetorical Structure of the ‘New Left Movement’: Part I,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 50 (1964): 113–35. King explores how power was maintained by government elites through strategies such “co-optation” (e.g., the use of seemingly assimilated black people to thwart the goals of the black power movement). He also describes the “official betrayal alibi” strategy, where rank-breaking white disidents were blamed for helping black organizations in the 1960s. The use of converts in the public square was further underlined by elite strategies of “rebirth and revenge.” Andrew King, “The Rhetoric of Power Maintenance: Elites at the Precipice,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 62 (1976): 127–34. Conversion analyses overlap with what Simons has described as a leader-centered theory of social movements. Herbert Simons, “Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 56 (1970): 1–11. In explaining the “ego-function” of black power and women’s liberation consciousness-raising rhetoric, Gregg writes that all had to “struggle for a resurrected self.” Richard G. Gregg, ed., The Rhetoric of Protest (Philadelphia: Sigma Rho Pi, 1971): 8. Bormann, Crigan, and Shields describe a stage of U.S. Cold War rhetoric as involving the testimonies of new political converts to the anti-Communist cause. Public figures used these converts to buttress their Cold War rhetoric. Ernest G. Bormann, John Crigan, and Donald Shields, “An Expansion of the Rhetorical Vision Component of the Symbolic Convergence Theory: The Cold War Paradigm Case,” Communication Monographs 63 (1996): 1–28. Maurice Charland argues that constitutive rhetoric in movements is similar to conversion; “the process by which an audience member enters into a new subject position is therefore not one of persuasion. It is akin more to one of conversion that ultimately results in an act of recognition of the ‘rightness’ of a discourse and of one’s identity with its reconfigured subject position.” Deepening a question about how such rhetoric might advance or hinder public engagement, he further believes that “narratives are but texts that offer the illusion of agency,” demanding totalizing responses and restricting the possibilities for audience action(s). Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Quebecois,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 73 (1987): 142.


67. Gring-Pemble, " "Are We Now," “ 360.


72. Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason*: *Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 12. Lipset and Raab explain that the Right invests in preservationism, while the Left pursues innovation. They note that conservatives can develop a "guadnam complex," where one has a greater investment in the past than in the present. The pitfalls of monism, however, be greater on the political left as on the right—particularly in how the Left tends to focus on economic problems, rather than the past. Ibid., 507.

73. Nock finds that "the only context in which we find [conversion] in ancient paganism is of that of philosophy, which held a clear concept of two types of life, a higher and a lower, and which.exhorted men to turn from the one to the other." A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933/1998), 14. Reviewing earlier studies, Finn finds:

[T]o enter a philosophical school required conversion. The language of conversion studded the language of philosophy. For Plato, its purpose was to turn the soul around (epistrophe); for Cicero, to turn people from carelessness to piety (conversion); for Seneca, to discover the truth about things divine and human (verum invenire); for the author of Polmadres, to summon to repentance those who follow the path of error and ignorance (meianota). . . . As a result, philosophers wrote missionary propaganda, which acquired a technical name, protreptic, a tradition that started with Aristotle, whose early work, *Protreptikos*, exults the supreme value of contemplation as a way of life. Protreptics were exhortations that appealed to people to cast off their old ways and adopt philosophy as the true way of life.

While "radical change" is a common quality in all definitions of conversion, Finn also finds that ancient Greco-Roman communicators shaped one definition of conversion as "a change in a way a person understood, valued, and lived in her or his world. The emphasis was on the cognitive—a change of mind, a new way of seeing—and led to a religious world of contemplation and mysticism." On the other hand, "the biblical world of ancient Israel and Judaism shaped the other. Conversion meant a person’s change from a life of infidelity to one of fidelity to God which involved repentance, return, and reconciliation." Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 85, 239–40.


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89. This definition was constructed in Waisanen, “Political Conversion as Intrapersonal Argument,” 230.


91. Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 15.


93. Dorsey, Sacred Estrangement, 23.

94. Ibid., 24.

95. Ibid.


100. P. Caldwell, The Puritan Conversion Narrative, 178.

101. Richard Harvey Brown, Toward a Democratic Science: Scientific Narration and Civic Communication (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). Brown finds that discourses about key scientific discoveries and classical ethnographies were based upon “logics of discovery [or invention] as narratives of conversion.” He finds that classical ethnographies “are narratives that convert the reader and the topic from strangeness to familiarity.” He deployed to induce readers into new ways of thinking and experiencing in a variety of fields. “Narratives of conversion are ways of moving from outside to inside, from the Other to the self—ways of transforming the unknown into the familiar.” Similarly, in science, far from following the logico-deductive method proposed in his Discourse, Descartes presents readers with “a travel story, an autobiographical journey of discovery of this method.” Descartes overcomes the problem of describing his method to unfamiliar readers by “a narrative of his own conversion to the new worldview.” Copernicus used his own conversion narrative, the Narratio Prima, to incline the public toward his radical heliocentric theories. Most important, Brown finds that historically, “the narrative justified the theory.” Richard Harvey Brown, “Logics of Discovery as Narratives of Conversion: Rhetorics of Invention in Ethnography, Philosophy, and Astromony,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 27 (1994): 3–4, 11–12, 19.

102. See Matthew Scherer, “The Politics of Persuasion: Habit, Creativity, Conversion” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2006), iv. Scherer finds that Locke and Rawls denounced religion and conversion tropes to some distant past, while extending their own liberal conversion, legitimizes their powers to establish their authority as political theorists. He demonstrates how the public ironically came to care about Rawls as a “saintly person,” who evaded demonstrations of his principles in favor of convincing character displays (e.g., by arguing how much he rejected moral perfectionism), deferrals of reason, and conversational gestures. In the end, “everything for Rawls depends upon one’s willingness to be reasonable,” and “the rhetorical genius of Rawls’s conversational prose [is] to incline our discussion” by “mobilizing disavowed and largely unrecognized rhetorical modes.” As globalization shrinks social space, Scherer thinks that “the pressures of conversion are likely to intensify,” raising the need to track conversion discourses. Ibid., 52, 76, 207; emphasis in original. Other examples of this religious mode of thought in secular rationality include Walsh, who studies the conversion rhetoric of radical, emergent social movements, finding that converts garner new plausibility structures through arguments of hate, guilt, fear, affective identification with others, and self-criticism sessions to erase ideological impurities. Critical, “the moment of conversion occurs when candidates use a special language to describe their breakdowns.” James F. Walsh, Jr., “Rhetoric in the Conversion of Marxist Insurgency Cadres and the Emotional Component of Conversion in Radical Social Movements: III,” World Communication 19 (1990): 12. Combining the religious and the political, Jensen and Hammerback argue that Elderidge Cleaver had “dizzying shifts in associations, actions, and words,” between his membership in the Black Panther movement and eventual conversion to Mormonism over the course of his public career. They find, however, “a strand of consistency tied together Cleaver’s shifts,” as “he found new organizations and ideologies to reach his goals” of liberating blacks from oppressive social structures. Richard Jensen and John C. Hammerback, “From Muslim to Mormon: Elderidge Cleaver’s Rhetorical Crusade,” Communication Quarterly 34 (1986): 24, 38–39. Kellett invites communication researchers to look at conversion accounts from an interpretive, phenomenological perspective. Peter M. Kellett, “Communication in Accounts of Religious Conversion: An Interpretive Phenomenological Account,” Journal of Communication and Religion 16 (1993): 71–81. Studying religious and secular conversion, communication scholars Golden, Berquist, and Coleman discover a blend of religious and secular arguments in Jim Jones’s rhetoric of “exigency marking.” See Golden, Berquist, and Coleman, “Secular and Religious Conversion,” 581. Bond examines the transformation of Friedrich von Gentz, finding that “his reading contributed towards his political conversion.” M. A. Bond, “The Political Conversion of Friedrich von Gentz,” European History Quarterly 3 (1973): 11.


105. Huntington Williams, Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3. The development of modern autobiographical in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries secularized the religious conversion form, and continued to act as a means of socialization—but with some authors, also “estrangement” and “antisocialization.” Dorsey, Sacred Estrangement, 9–10. Loschning clarifies that autobiography became a literary genre only in the late eighteenth century, despite its public presence since Augustine’s Confessions. There is wide scholarly agreement that during the eighteenth century, confessional religious discourses gave way to new emphases on individual development and (secular and worldly) collectivity in autobiography, since “individuals felt the need to ascertain their identities in the face of a rapidly changing environment” (as evident in works that Rousseau’s Confessions and Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography). In the 1970s, deconstructionists eliminated notions of a “self” and “subject” in autobiography. Since the late 1980s, however, “the concept of autobiographical reference has reappeared. But now the referent is no longer a pre-existing self, but rather a time-bound human experience corresponding with the temporality of narrative.” In this “narrativist turn . . . the self is the product of his or her stories, and is therefore a psychological process of creating an identity rather than a literary form per se.” Loschning, “Autobiography,” 35–36. I would add that, rather than reducing identity to psychological processes, we should view the self as constituted by rhetorical/communicative strategies. In such writing, Bruner finds that “there is something curious about autobiography . . . [T]he larger story reveals a strong rhetorical strand. . . . The Self as narrator not only recounts but justifies. And the Self as protagonist is always, as it were, pointing toward the future. When somebody says, as if summing up a childhood, ‘I was a pretty rebellious kid,’ it can usually be taken as a prophecy as much as a summary.” Jerome Bruner, Acts of Meaning (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 121.

106. Dorsey, Sacred Estrangement, 59.

107. Ibid., 35.

108. Ibid., 69, 71.

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112. Dorsey, *Sacred Estrangement*, 81. In sum, Dorsey says that “the intellectual and political life of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was permeated by the ideas of revolution, freedom, and reform; and these concepts, when applied to the self, presuppose the necessity of personal change, which, when universalized, becomes the basis for social transformation.” Ibid., 84.


115. In Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, the character Teufelsdrockh comments on the possibility that choice has been a progressive achievement in human history: “Blame not the word; . . . rejoice rather that such a word signifying such a thing, has come to light in our modern Era, though hidden from the wisest Ancients. The old World knew nothing of Conversion: instead of an *Ecce Homo*, they had only a choice of Hercules.” Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus and Selected Prose* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 189.

116. Goody describes how, in an oral society, religion is much different now than in previous eras because of the impermanence of the spoken word. On the other hand, literate religions “are generally religiously convergent, with written documents of extreme importance, defining categories of human beings and making concepts like apostasy more tenable. Literate churches practice a dogmatism and rigidity unknown to their oral counterparts, as people herald ideals that correspond to a ‘text, not a context.’” Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986; emphasis added), 5, 21. Peters similarly finds: “[T]he fact that the concept of conversion may have come to fruition first in the philosophical schools may seem somewhat surprising to many who have claimed the term for religion alone. But if we consider that conversion presupposes a unity of consciousness only possible with the advent of an integrated and systematic form of expression . . . the hierarchical form of writing makes ideology possible insofar as it produces a structured system of belief which ‘compels assent’ and polarizes human behavior.” Peters, *The Mutating God*, 31. Graham further probes the question of how orality and literacy affect conversion: “[W]e can also ask if there may not be a correlation between highly oral use of scripture and religious reform movements. . . . We need to know more about the ways in which memorization and recitation of scriptural texts are related to movements of revival and reform. . . . For example, the ‘internalizing’ of important texts through memorization and recitation can serve as an effective educational or instructional discipline.” Shared texts are influential devices for group cohesion, “and especially with a minority group at odds with and bent on reforming or converting the larger society around it. Such issues . . . all deserve attention.” William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 161.

117. Bailey, “Enacting Transformation,” 215. At the same time, Bush recast the Pauline form to suit his own political needs, omitting important details about having had two religious conversions, and softening his past transgressions, effectively bypassing confession while he “plunged headlong into the rhetoric of transformation.” Ibid., 226.

118. Ibid., 232.


120. Ibid., 8. Similar to Colson, former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke’s viability as a mainstream political candidate in Louisiana was accomplished by his witnessing to (and having others witness to) a Christian religious conversion narrative. Duke overcame his Klan association problem by persuasively coupling religious and political themes, so that his motives and sincerity were hard to question. McGee, “Witnessing and Ethos.”
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143. Jacob Heilbrunn, “Rank-Breakers: The Anatomy of an Industry,” *World Affairs* (Spring 2008) www.worldaffairsjournal.org/2008%20%-20Spring/full-breaking-ranks.html, par. 9. Heilbrunn does, however, find that there were a number of other prominent conservatives-turned-liberals such as Garry Wills (covered in this book), John Leonard, Arlene Croce, Joan Didion, Damon Linker, Kevin Phillips, Lawrence J. Korb, Andrew Sullivan (to a certain extent), and Jim Sleeper. Heilbrunn thinks that Wills set the path that others, such as Michael Lind, would later follow in their right-to-left conversions. Ibid., par. 20, 24, 29. Cashill also writes that “indeed, there is a whole literature of conversion from the left, even the very hard left, to the principled right. For inspiration, I would recommend Chambers’s ‘Witness” or Horowitz’s ‘Radical Son.’ There is no comparable literature on the left.” Jack Cashill, “Conversion for Dummies,” *WorldNetDaily*, July 21, 2009, www.wnd.com/index.php?n=PAGE .printable&pageId=102080, par. 6. These observations comport with my own research on the topic, which finds that the majority of these narratives are conservative texts. See n. 8 above for a list of autobiographical- and conversion-related texts.


146. Waisenman, “Political Conversion as Intrapersonal Argument,” 228–45.


148. Ibid., 16.

149. Calls for this type of work in rhetorical studies can be found in Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2005), 23–28.


152. Ibid.


155. Watson, *Lives of Their Own*, 5. Although it’s beyond the scope of this project, it’s worth mentioning the potential connections between other media and conversion stories. Film is now a defining medium for our time, and the narrative structure of many commercial films can be seen as also following a conversion logic of changes from old to new ways of being, thinking, and acting. Part of a film’s very appeal may have to do with this resonant structuring. My thanks go to one of this book’s anonymous reviewers for providing these additional insights.