What spurs ideological conversions? How do intellectuals who hold strong political views come to change their minds and adopt different – sometimes opposing – ideas? In this seminar, led by AEI fellow Matthew Continetti, students will track the political odysseys of five prominent intellectuals who, for different reasons, broke ranks with their fellow partisans.

Students will survey thinkers who journeyed from Left to Right (Whittaker Chambers and Norman Podhoretz), who broke with the Left (Christopher Hitchens), who broke with neoconservatism (Francis Fukuyama), and who left the Republican Party (George F. Will). In so doing, students will meditate on the nature of political ideology and identity, the conflicting pull of loyalty and dissent, and the larger shifts in American political and intellectual life over several generations.

This seminar will meet online weekly on **Wednesdays** from 6 PM to 8 PM ET on the following dates: June 16, 23, 30, July 7, & 14.

**Course Materials**
- Course Reader

**Discussion Papers:** Each fellow will be responsible for completing a brief discussion paper (1-2 pages, single spaced). See below for your assigned session.

**Papers are due the day before your assigned session by 5 PM ET.** They should be posted on the course Slack channel and will be part of the assigned readings for the session. Paper-writers should be ready to briefly present their ideas during the seminar.

**Resources:**
To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: The Great Thinkers (http://thegreatthinkers.org/) and Contemporary Thinkers (http://contemporarythinkers.org/) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.
Wednesday, June 16, 2021

6 PM – 8 PM ET  Session I: Whittaker Chambers

Readings:

- Daniel Oppenheimer, Ch. 1, *Exit Right: The People Who Left the Left and Reshaped the American Century* (2016)

Suggested Viewing:


Discussion Questions:

1. What drew Chambers to membership in the Communist Party? What pushed him away from the Party and from communism?
2. What does Chambers identify as “the problem of man in this century”? And what is his answer to it?
3. To what degree did Chambers’ personality change along with his politics?

Wednesday, June 23, 2021

6 PM – 8 PM ET  Session II: Norman Podhoretz

Readings:

- Oppenheimer, Ch. 4, *Exit Right*
Suggested Viewing:

- Norman Podhoretz, “Reflections of a Jewish Neoconservative,” Tikvah Fund, July 17, 2017
- Norman Podhoretz, “Intellectuals at War,” Think Tank with Ben Wattenberg, April 19, 1999

Discussion Questions:

1. Why did Norman Podhoretz admire Norman Mailer? How did this admiration relate to Podhoretz’s ambitions and journey?
2. What role did “the politics of interest” play in Podhoretz’s ideological transition?
3. What is the connection Podhoretz draws between the politics of interest and the preservation of political liberty?
4. What is Podhoretz’s explanation for radicalism? Where does he see radicalism in the postscript of Breaking Ranks? Where might he see it today?

Wednesday, June 30, 2021

6 PM – 8 PM ET Session III: Christopher Hitchens

Readings:

- Oppenheimer, Ch. 6, Exit Right
- Andrew Ferguson, “Naughty Boy,” Washingtonian, November 1993

Suggested Viewing:

- Christopher Hitchens, “Conversations with History,” University of California, February 8, 2008
- Christopher Hitchens & George Galloway, “Iraq War Debate,” Baruch College, September 14, 2005
Discussion Questions:

1. Describe the personal and political qualities that made Hitchens unique in 1980s Washington, DC.
2. What role did Hitchens’s personal commitments have in his support for the war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq?
3. Did Christopher Hitchens leave the Left, or did the Left, to paraphrase Ronald Reagan, leave him?
4. What values did Hitchens absorb from the Left – and were these values compatible with those of the Right?

Wednesday, July 7, 2021

6 PM – 8 PM ET  Session IV: Francis Fukuyama

Readings:

- Wesley Yang, “Democracy and Its Discontents,” Esquire, October 17, 2018

Suggested Viewing:

- Francis Fukuyama, “In Depth,” CSPAN BookTV, March 5, 2006

Discussion Questions:

1. What provoked Fukuyama’s break with neoconservatism?
2. What do you make of the Krauthammer/Fukuyama debate? Who scored the most points?
3. What is Fukuyama’s general critique of neoconservatism? How is it different from or similar to other critiques on the Left and Right?
4. Are we still living in the end of History?
Wednesday, July 14, 2021

6 PM – 8 PM ET  Session V: George F. Will

Readings:

- Kristen East, “George Will Leaves the GOP,” *Politico*, June 25, 2016
- George F. Will, “The Tempting of America,” *Newsweek*, December 4, 1989

Suggested Viewing:

- George Will and Robert Doar, “The Conservative Sensibility,” AEI, June 11, 2019

Discussion Questions:

1. Explain why George Will opposes Donald Trump, and how that opposition affected his decision to leave the Republican Party.

2. What is the difference between the jurisprudential views expressed in Will’s review of Robert Bork’s book and those in his own *Conservative Sensibility*? Do you agree with Will’s assertion of a difference between “judicial activism” and “judicial engagement”?

3. Why did George Will change his mind on the virtues promoted in a commercial society? Which George Will presents the best evidence for his compelling case?

4. Reflect on the relationship between personality and ideology expressed in the lives of all of our subjects. Did people change, or did circumstances change?

5. Which of our subjects changed the substance of their views, and which simply found themselves in a new political orientation based on the flow of events?