

Author Profiles 2012: GEOFFREY KABASERVICE (Alexandria, VA)

As institutions, America's two major political parties are used and abused, traduced and reduced. Ideologues slice and dice them. A hundred different "best-sellers" (and who certified that status, by the way?) say one party should be ABC, or the other party do XYZ -- and yet most such recommendations seem like selfish agenda-pushing.

Enter [Geoffrey Kabaservice](#). He likes what the GOP was in the late 1960s, and offers us a detailed account of how the conservatives edged out the moderates from the early '70s on. As a historian, Kabaservice takes pains to insert events and stories that do not square with his own thesis. He also admires individuals -- Bill Buckley, Ronald Reagan -- who were not moderates. Factor in a prodigious amount of original research, and Geoff's [Rule and Ruin](#) emerges as deep, rich, and often rollicking.

Yale graduate Kabaservice also gave us [The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment](#). He has studied at Cambridge and taught at Yale. He's a visiting research fellow at the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College and a part-time pundit for *The New Republic*.

And, as for you -- well, what brings you here? Do you "respect" what a major U.S. political party is, and can be, as an institution? Author Kabaservice and interviewer Gregorsky presume that a receptive audience is out there; and they believe GOP "activists" really need to know more about this institution they aspire to represent. The resulting Q&A should appeal to any non-ideologue who has ever thought about what makes a Republican, and how we can appeal to what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature" in a sustained way that benefits all Americans...

(1) Not a Moderate. Not a Conservative. And -- Not a Soul?

FRANK GREGORSKY: On page 246, which has taken the reader up to the year 1968, you say that Richard Nixon "had always acted as the bubble in the plumber's level, seeking the dead center of the GOP." Did somebody tell you that or is that your own analogy?

GEOFF KABASERVICE: That was my own analogy [smiling].

FG: I really, really like it. And now, elaborate a little bit on this related statement in *Rule and Ruin* -- "Nixon was a centrist, but he was not a moderate."

KABASERVICE: He was a centrist in that what he thought was best for the country was neither

wild experimentation nor resistance to change. He was looking for the center of gravity in the Republican Party. Better than anyone, he knew that the Party needed all of its factions to cooperate, or at least to coexist, for it to get anywhere nationally.

FG: That's where you say he was by 1967-68.

KABASERVICE: I think that's where he was throughout his whole career. Yes, he started [in 1946] as a firm anti-Communist, but that didn't make him intensely hostile to social progress of any form. And people forget that he was [in those early days] popular enough on the other side of the aisle --

FG: That he got the Democratic nomination [as well as the Republican] during his second House race.

KABASERVICE: Which doesn't happen much anymore. That's quite an achievement.

Especially after 1964, Nixon no more wanted the conservatives to triumph within the GOP than he wanted the progressives to triumph. His idea was that the Republican Party had to get stronger, which meant in some ways turning toward a populist conservative direction, but also leaving room for other factions of the Party -- because one does not win elections through subtraction. So Nixon was really much more about party balance than he was about espousing any particular ideology for the Republican Party.

FG: Beyond "netting out" in the center as a result of all sorts of discordant things being averaged over time -- do you also think he thought as a centrist?

KABASERVICE: I think he thought [pause] more in foreign-policy terms than about domestic policy, first of all. But he believed that the strongest institutions in both the foreign and domestic spheres had to be strengthened, not undermined, as he saw happening in the 1960s. Disorder is bad, in Nixon's view; yet you can't repress all change, either internationally or domestically.

Nixon had been a loyal moderate player [as Vice-President] in the Eisenhower Administration, although he chafed under Eisenhower. But he saw that Eisenhower was a successful President, and I think he wanted to do what Ike had -- both domestically and internationally. To some extent, that meant spending on government. Eisenhower greatly disappointed conservatives because he didn't turn against the New Deal and uproot all of its institutions. To uproot Social Security [in the middle 1950s] would have been radical, not conservative.

FG: But, other than the Interstate Highway system, no big expansion of government can be traced back to Ike. By contrast, conservatives can lay four or five of those [expansions] on Nixon's time as President.

KABASERVICE: Which is true -- yep. So Nixon was also departing from the Eisenhower model.

FG: Then why doesn't that make him, even if only a mushy way, a "moderate"? Why do you withhold that term from Richard Nixon as President?

KABASERVICE: Well, because “moderate” to me is not about expanding government wherever possible. That’s kind of what liberals are about. The moderate movement was very much associated with civil rights, civil liberties, meritocracy, good government -- perhaps the way to think about it is “active but limited and modest government.”

FG: So then Nixon, once in the White House, overshot with domestic entitlements even while threatening civil liberties with “no-knock” raids and all that political spying. He displayed a penchant for recklessness.

KABASERVICE: All of which was anathema to moderates. Take wage and price controls. I can’t think of anyone on the Republican side who was really enthusiastic [when Nixon imposed them in August of 1971]. [John Connally](#) [then Treasury Secretary] was the biggest cheerleader for that decision -- and he came from a very different perspective than the moderates.

FG: Closer to Corporate Capitalism. [The evocative sketch in *Rule and Ruin* reads: “As a nationalist and mercantilist, Connally opposed international free trade where his region’s favored industries were concerned... He was the political product of the South’s postwar industries -- such as aerospace, defense, agribusiness, mining, and oil and natural-gas extraction -- that depended on government protection and subsidy...”]

KABASERVICE: Yeah. But Nixon was the President and, to a certain extent, all the factions were prepared to go along with him.

FG: I recall [New York Senators] Jacob Javits and Jim Buckley, both speaking for Nixon at the ‘72 Convention. It’s striking how he held the Party together.

KABASERVICE: Right, right. And I think he saw that as one of his main accomplishments.

But these policies were not something that I think either moderates or conservatives approved of -- Nixon was doing them just for reasons of pure political calculation, which again is I think is what makes him a centrist rather than a moderate. I mean, a moderate has a soul -- and I’m not sure Nixon had a soul. [Pause] Politically speaking, at any rate.

(2) Someone Who “Could’ve Told Us Who Nixon Was”

FG: After all this research, archival study and talking with people, can you now say “what manner of man”? Do you feel you know what made him tick?

KABASERVICE: Nope [laughter]. I do think he was one of our most intelligent Presidents. Having read a lot of Nixon biographies, I’m sure he was a person of great resentments as well as inspirations. He commanded the loyalty of a lot of the moderates. Someone I actually spent more time trying to figure out was [Robert Finch](#).

FG: Yes! Glad you mentioned him -- one of the great “ghosts” of GOP history.

KABASERVICE: Elected [as Lieutenant Governor of California] with Reagan in 1966, he outpolled Reagan.

FG: And your book says flatly that Nixon wanted to make Finch Vice-President two years later!?!

KABASERVICE: Yeah! But [in addition to being an effective politician] he was one of Nixon's closest friends. Nixon had very few friends, and Finch was one of them. So I wish we had Finch here to "inquisit" about these sorts of things -- he could've told us who Nixon was. A lot of people liked Robert Finch, too.

FG: And you report his stance as "I'll serve in your Cabinet, but I won't go through an election campaign to become Vice-President."

KABASERVICE: And it turned out he didn't do a very good job in the HEW post.

FG: Do we know why that was? Does it come out in your digging?

KABASERVICE: [Pause] Well, Finch wasn't a good manager. I could go off on a riff about why HEW was successfully managed by [Elliott Richardson](#), which would illuminate why it was unsuccessfully managed by Finch. I don't think he was prepared for the kind of protest he got [from forces such as] the National Welfare Rights Organization.

FG: Even coming out of the rough and tumble of California politics?

KABASERVICE: Or even coming out of the Marines! I just don't think he quite knew how to deal with it -- that's all. He knew that he couldn't simply repress the demonstrations. That was one of the lessons of my [first book](#) -- you have to negotiate with the protesters if you don't want to make [their actions] worse. Yet there are ways to negotiate without giving away the store.

FG: Other than this kind of "competitive alliance" the U.S. still has with Mainland China -- today our banker in ways that would have startled even Dick Nixon -- what do you see as his active legacy in policy terms? It doesn't have to be positive, but I'm really asking what you most "credit" him for, or with, 40 years later.

KABASERVICE: [Pause] The global economy in which China plays such a large role is clearly one of Nixon's principal accomplishments. Others are better appreciated by historians than by the general public: The arms-reduction deals with the Soviet Union, the improvement in relations with European governments after the Johnson Presidency, the peaceful desegregation of Southern schools, support for medical research and environmental reforms, the creation of the EPA and OSHA -- it's a long list.

(3) Moderately Bold, and the First Such Book in 22 Years

FG: Not now, but four, six or eight years ago, what was your personal investment in the Republican Party and/or "Republicanism"?

KABASERVICE: [Pause] Well, I suppose I am myself a moderate -- depending on the issue, moderate to conservative. When I was an undergraduate at Yale, I was part of the Political Union and a member of the Tory Party, which at least styled itself as the moderate conservative party. It wasn't completely in the middle of the Political Union, like the Independent party, but it was not over as far to the right as the Party of the Right.

FG: "Change is okay, but it's gotta be organic"?

KABASERVICE: Yeah! You know, at Yale there was a lot of invocation of [Edmund] Burke, as you would expect, in the Tory Party. And I liked that -- I was also an Anglophile. But generally speaking, you know, I thought that enlightened moderation was the best position. As a voter, I favored both Republicans and Democrats -- usually the person who struck me as the most intelligent.

FG: Did you want John McCain to get the GOP nomination in 2000?

KABASERVICE: Yes, and I wanted to see him run against Bill Bradley. That would have been my ideal election.

FG: Everybody forgets that Bradley came within four points of beating Gore in New Hampshire. Gore came that close to deflating.

KABASERVICE: He did. It would have been a different world.

The idea for this book about the moderate Republicans actually came from my previous book -- because [Kingman Brewster](#), and most of his peers, had been moderate Republicans. Some, like Cyrus Vance, had been moderate Democrats, but most of them came out of the Republicanism that was dominant in the New England society of which they were part, in their era.

In ***The Guardians***, an ambitious biography of Brewster as well as a collective biography of five of his close friends, Geoffrey Kabaservice demonstrates why the "President King" of the comic strip "Doonesbury" ought to be better known as the most visionary and successful university president of his generation. But Kabaservice is after bigger intellectual game, making larger, more-provocative claims about the Northeastern liberal Establishment and its contribution to American politics, society and foreign policy in the 1960s and 1970s... Kabaservice's truly prodigious research -- on his principal subjects, on Yale, on the culture of the Northeastern elite, on New York City and the Ford Foundation -- and fluent narrative style serve him well, as he captures the feel and the facts of the period and people he describes.

FULL REVIEW (from July 2004) -- http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2004-07-04/entertainment/0407030063_1_kingman-brewster-liberal-establishment-tutors

FG: The second footnote in ***Rule and Ruin***, out of a commendably vast horde, says: "Political scientists have paid more attention to the role of moderate Republicans than have historians.

The best analysis of this kind is Nicol C. Rae, *The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans from 1952 to the Present...*" -- the present in that case being the late 1980s. First, how good of a book was that?

KABASERVICE: It's a good book. I had come across it when I was in graduate school and started to think about these issues. Rae's book is a political scientist's view of what happened to the liberal faction of the Republican Party. He didn't differentiate, as I do, between a progressive faction and a moderate faction; his book put them all on the "liberal" side.

FG: And, being a political scientist, did he overdo things and try to subordinate the personalities to the legislation and election data?

KABASERVICE: You know, there isn't really a lot of "color" and biographical-driven narrative in his book, because I don't think he saw that as his project. But what Rae did contribute is a lot of interviews with people who had been in the Congress at that time, or who had been (or still were) involved in some way with moderate Republicans. And I used some of those quotes.

FG: To what extent did it presage the story *Rule and Ruin* is telling, but -- I assume -- with little of the private documentation?

KABSERVICE: I don't think Rae did much in the way of archival research, because that's not how political scientists really operate. He essentially did these interviews with people in Washington who had a relevant perspective, and he read the secondary works about the Republican Party. His book is mostly taxonomic, looking at Republican moderates in the House, the Senate, and the different regions of the country across the historical eras.

[Gregorsky's Note: I never heard the word "taxonomic" until Geoff uttered it. It still sounds like a shorthand account of liberal Democratic fiscal policy. But the 2004 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* says the root word "taxonomy" means "classification esp. of animals and plants according to natural relationships."]

The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans from 1952 to the Present provided me with a good overview of some of these questions that I wanted to flesh out.

I also knew that there wasn't anything else about the moderate Republicans that had come after Rae's book. This was a completely wide-open topic. For a historian, that's appealing.

(4) Back When Moderation Could Function as a Movement

KABASERVICE: In 2006, I realized that a very good source -- which no one else had used for anything at that point -- would be the *New York Herald Tribune*. In a way, it offered me an alternative primary source for American history, a completely different take from most people who just go to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as their fallbacks.

I spent a year living on Capitol Hill during 2007-08. I needed to be there because there were an awful lot of collections in the Library of Congress that I had to go through. I also spent a lot of

time going up to Cornell to look at the Ripon Society papers, and then talking to people from the Ripon Society.

It became clear that the subject of my book was not just the moderate Republican politicians. I was also writing about a moderate Republican movement -- at a time when there was such a thing. That time was the early 1960s through 1970. That's why the bulk of my book is about those years.

And of course you want to go to the activists, because that's where you get the juicy details about politics. I had learned that from years of research in the William F. Buckley Jr. papers.

FG: You partly explained it before we started the taping, but -- explain how you got that access.

KABASERVICE: I knew Sam Tanenhaus [[see box, page 9](#)] because I was his research assistant for three years, when I was studying for my Ph.D. in history at Yale. Sam was then, and still is, writing the authoritative biography of Buckley, and he needed somebody at the university to go through Buckley's papers at Yale.

So I've probably spent more time in the Buckley Archives than anyone else has. Buckley's papers, particularly his correspondence from the early '60s, contain much more of interest than any politician's archive would -- even Barry Goldwater's archives during that time.

And nobody in academia, at the time I started doing work on Buckley, was writing about conservatives. For the older generation, it was a topic beneath contempt. One of my advisors was [John Morton Blum](#), and as far as John Blum was concerned, Republicans had not done anything interesting since Theodore Roosevelt, so there was simply no point in studying them.

FG: Right, right, right.

KABASERVICE: Blum did not understand my interest in them at all. For the succeeding generations, particularly Generation X and the Millennials, it gradually became "okay" to write about conservatives. [Lisa McGirr's](#) 2001 book *Suburban Warriors* was the first in what then became kind of a wave of scholarship on conservatism.

Within the mainstream of academic scholarship, most of the kinds of scholarship that I was interested in had been marginalized -- political history, intellectual history, business history, military history, diplomatic history, you name it -- because essentially the '60s Generation just didn't consider those subjects to be worthwhile. And [those subjects] were things that they thought they had to overthrow. That was a big part of the reason why I never got a job [in academia].

But my problem with the new wave of scholarship on conservatism is that most of those historians write about conservatism from what seems to be an anthropological rather than an informed political position.

FG: You'll need to clarify that distinction.

KABASERVICE: McGirr was writing about the John Birch Society as if that were the mainstream of Republicanism. She was oblivious to the fact that, #1, it wasn't, and #2, there were all these battles going on within the conservative movement against the John Birch Society. Someone like Bill Buckley was trying to get the John Birch Society out of the conservative movement. There's simply no recognition of that in her book, or in most of the books that followed.

FG: Would you agree that no one writes about the Republican Party -- in or out of academia -- unless they are trying to fasten an agenda on it? They don't write about the Party on its own terms as an evolving institution.

KABASERVICE: Yeah -- exactly. And that's why this looked like a wide-open field. And I really wanted most of my story to come from the archival material that I would find -- material that would be new to everybody -- rather than relying on the secondary sources that most academics name-check.

(5) “Weigh the Evidence, Not the Mail” -- a Lost Ethos

FG: Another big contribution of *Rule and Ruin* is [your coverage of] particularly Tom Curtis and William McCulloch -- two Midwestern GOP Congressmen who blended fiscal conservatism and civil-rights progress. These guys are given no credit -- not even from today's Republican moderates.

KABASERVICE: That's true. First of all, they were Republicans, so the media didn't care. Secondly, they were not flashy or “mediagenic” in any sense. But they were extremely consequential in the development of civil-rights legislation and getting Republican assent to it.

FG: Whereas [Senator] Everett Dirksen is the only one given credit [in some history books], as opposed to these guys on the House side.

KABASERVICE: They were actually involved with it long before Dirksen had any idea that this was something Republicans were doing or ought to be doing. And, in both cases, their advocacy of civil rights sprang from their genuine convictions. It was not because they represented a lot of minorities in their districts -- they didn't. And it was not because they had a lot of “allies” in the Republican Party. It was simply because they thought it was the right thing to do. And that's why [McCulloch and Curtis] become heroes to these moderate Republican activists who came along in the early 1960s.

FG: In the 1958 congressional races, blacks gave 31% of their vote -- that's out of a total vote still being suppressed in the South -- to Republicans. Nixon got 32% in 1960 against Kennedy -- which doesn't sound great, except that no GOP presidential candidate has come anywhere near that level since then.

Conversely, when LBJ signed the '64 legislation, he reportedly feared that he was guaranteeing that the South would never again be an electoral-vote resource for his own party. The push-and-pull on civil rights, going on in each major party during the time your book covers, echoes resoundingly a half-century later.

INTERMISSION (so you won't need to open up Wikipedia for every name...)

"Sam Tanenhaus (born October 31, 1955) is an American historian, biographer, and journalist... He is currently the editor of *The New York Times Book Review* and *Week in Review*. His siblings include psycholinguist Michael Tanenhaus, filmmaker Beth Tanenhaus Winsten, and legal historian David S. Tanenhaus. Tanenhaus was an assistant editor at *The New York Times* from 1997 to 1999, and a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* from 1999 until 2004. Since 2004, he has been the senior editor of *The New York Times Book Review*. His 1997 biography of Whittaker Chambers won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and was a finalist for both the National Book Award for Nonfiction and the Pulitzer Prize for Biography." (Source: Wikipedia, November 2012.)

Thomas Bradford Curtis (1911-93) was a U.S. Representative from Missouri, elected in November 1950 and serving through 1968, when he lost a Senate race to Thomas Eagleton by just 2%. Curtis "was admitted to the bar in 1934 and commenced the practice of law in St. Louis.... He served in the United States Navy from April 8, 1942, until discharged as a lieutenant commander December 21, 1945... Mr. Curtis was...considered by most Republicans and some Democrats to be the most knowledgeable and insightful economist in Washington during his tenure as a Member of Congress. He predicted the massive inflation that would become reality during the presidency of Jimmy Carter... He served as chairman of the Federal Election Commission from April 1975 to May 1976." (Source: Wikipedia, November 2012.)

William Moore McCulloch (1901-80) entered Congress via special election in November 1947 and became part of the huge 1946 freshman Republican class led by Speaker [Joseph Martin](#). "As the ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee [he] introduced civil-rights legislation months before Kennedy presented his own bill to Congress... Representative McCulloch had a small number of African-American constituents, and thus few votes to gain from introducing or supporting civil-rights legislation. Regardless of the possible political ramifications, Representative McCulloch fought to repair an unjust system [and was] recognized by President Johnson as 'the most important and powerful political force' in passing the 1964 Civil Rights Act... During the Great Society Congress, although he supported Johnson's civil-rights programs, he opposed most Great Society legislation. He was not a candidate for reelection in the 1972 election." (Source: Wikipedia, November 2012.)

KABASERVICE: And someone like Curtis was really effective as an advocate of civil rights, even though he was a Representative from Missouri, which was a Jim Crow state. Generally he tried to represent his constituency, but his willingness to consider each issue on its merits meant that he upheld some positions (like civil rights) despite popular opposition. In many ways that was representative of the Robert Taft tradition of non-ideological conservatism.

FG: Which was exemplified in that marvelous [Hugh Scott](#) maxim: "Weigh the evidence, not the mail."

KABASERVICE: Yeah.

FG: Beyond giving Dirksen acknowledgment for going with LBJ [on the 1964 and '65 bills], what does political science say about the GOP on civil rights?

KABASERVICE: This is the subject of a paper I gave in Richmond. The political scientists who are writing about these things are all liberals, and they discount any kind of Republican role in

civil-rights legislation. They do so because they think that "civil rights" is about political, social and material equality -- and you can't support one element without supporting all the others.

FG: Right.

KABSERVICE: So, if you don't support what essentially are redistributive economic policies to give material equality to black people, then you can't support voting rights, or any other kind of civil right. Therefore, Republicans by definition can't support civil rights.

Well, that's silly. McCulloch [as the ranking Republican member of the House Judiciary Committee] kept out of the '64 Civil Rights Act provisions against [what came to be known as] red-lining. He thought federal controls on banks were an excessive overreach. He kept out school busing [as a way to reduce racial disparities in the school system]. He kept out affirmative-action policies. He refused to authorize a federal Fair Employment Practices Commission that would have had statutory authority to compel businesses to hire minorities.

But the civil-rights activists didn't hate McCulloch for removing these maximal provisions. Instead, they saw him as essential to getting the sort of bill that would be broadly acceptable to a majority of Republicans, as well as to the nation as a whole. Civil rights had to be a bipartisan cause rooted in American principles. That's what they saw McCulloch working for, and that's why they honored him. That's why they honored Curtis as well.

FG: And we're talking about the relatively gentle part of 1960s history before Vietnam, urban riots and college chaos polarized the electorate.

KBASERVICE: The early '60s is when young moderate activists were following these people -- McCulloch, Curtis and some others. They gave them glowing coverage in *Advance* and the *Ripon Forum*, because they understood that these were people who were actually making civil rights happen.

(6) Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1908-79

FG: I grew up in western New York State. My father hated this big-spending Governor known as "Rocky," and despite being a Goldwater guy two years earlier voted for Rockefeller's Democratic opponent [Frank O'Connor] in 1966. By the time I started paying attention to politics five years later, Rockefeller's agenda was an incoherent mix of prison raids, abortion-on-demand, and cracking down on drugs. It's still unbelievable to me that Rocky had all this influence on young Republicans a decade earlier.

KBASERVICE: [Sympathetic laughter]

FG: For somebody who was so decisive and built these grand projects, why did he get in and out [of the 1968 GOP primary campaign] and send so many mixed signals? He infuriated people who wanted to be his allies. Strikes me -- in national political terms -- as something of a flake.

KBASERVICE: Yeah -- it's strange.

FG: Did he really think national politics worked that way? Growing up rich, it meant that, whenever you change your mind, everyone else just kinda changes around you?

KABASERVICE: I think that politics was really not the world he understood best. And --

FG: What was the world [he excelled in]?

KABASERVICE: Well, I think he understood power. And I think he understood how to get his way in business -- and maybe in government to some extent too. One thing I didn't give him enough credit for is that he actually steamrolled the New York legislators -- I mean, they were really under his control during that time, in a way that later New York Governors have not managed to accomplish.

But go back to the late 1950s. There were a lot of appealing aspects about Nelson Rockefeller. Here was this handsome, charismatic, extremely rich guy who seemed ready to sweep the world before him. He also had these vulnerabilities that were harder to see. One of them was the indecisiveness. Another was the fact that he didn't really have ideas.

He was good on civil rights -- he knew that civil rights were important, and should be supported. But, unlike many moderate Republicans, he believed that big government was actually not a problem, as long as it was delivering the services in a clean, efficient, honest way. He was an institution-builder. He was actually someone who I think would've liked to have more Republican "machines" around.

FG: Like [the one run by] David Lawrence in Philadelphia.

KABASERVICE: Yeah, exactly. So part of the tension in his relationship with the Progressives came from the fact that he didn't share their antipathy to political machines like Tammany Hall. Rockefeller didn't mind bossism as long as he got to be the boss.

FG: But your book shows how much disdain Rocky and his chief operative George Hinman had for those young reform-minded GOP thinkers during the JFK years.

KABASERVICE: Well, I mean -- Rockefeller, with a snap of his fingers, could have supported *Advance* magazine, helped build it into a big institution, and made a real impact for his causes and principles.

FG: So he didn't have a place for ideas? It was all action without theory or philosophy behind it?

KABASERVICE: He thought he was interested in ideas. He did have this enormous research apparatus.

FG: "So let's hire some intellectuals" -- but that doesn't mean his mind worked that way.

KABASERVICE: He was not an "idea man," let's put it that way -- but he wanted to be associated with ideas. The problem was that he wasn't able to tell good ideas from bad ones.

FG: The more expensive the idea was, the better.

KABASERVICE: Exactly. "And the bigger the Establishment name, the more I trust it."

And so his reaction to *Advance* was: "Who are these kids, doing their little magazine? If anything, they're just stirring up trouble." He believed that, to the extent anyone thought of [*Advance*] as a Rockefeller operation -- which it was not -- his reputation was likely to be damaged. That's how he and George Hinman saw it.

FG: Your book also has Hinman telling the Governor that he can neutralize or cozy up to some of the conservatives who at that point were supportive of [Barry Goldwater](#).

KABASERVICE: Rockefeller thought of himself as someone who could bridge differences in the Party; he didn't really understand the extent to which he was actually a devil figure to many on the Right.

(7) George W. Romney, 1907-95

FG: Particularly since his son Mitt lost the 2012 election, an even more ghostly figure in modern Republican history is George Romney. Everyone agrees, and your book confirms, that, along with Rocky, he was the great presidential hope for moderate Republicans prior to 1968. I never even saw George Romney on *Meet the Press* during high school, so I have no feel for him.

But your book is marvelous at bringing back those magic pro-Romney moments of 1966-67.

KABASERVICE: And we could name all of the ways in which George Romney and Nelson Rockefeller differed.

FG: Did Americans like the self-made aspect of Romney?

KABASERVICE: They liked it more than they could like somebody who inherited all his money, more than somebody who wanted to become President because -- as Rockefeller put it -- "what else was there to aspire to?"

I think Romney was appealing because he was not a predictable northeastern liberal Republican, whereas Rockefeller was taking most of his "pointers" from that world, which wasn't really representative of the Republican Party or the country. There was something a little "soulless" about those moderate technocratic types -- but that's not Romney, you know? Romney had very strong beliefs. He was actually wrestling with his Church over the issue of civil rights, which the Mormon hierarchy opposed.

And that's the kind of religious person I admire: Someone who does wrestle with their faith, and still comes out a Believer, but dissents in certain ways.

And, though George Romney came from the business world, he was not a predictable "business hoo-ray" person. He got into politics through the consumer movement and the "citizens"

movement. His view was that the citizen-individual was menaced by Big Labor and Big Government (which you might expect from an auto executive), but also by Big Business.

Romney's perspective came from the fact that his auto company [the [American Motors Corporation](#)] was not one of the giants. Running AMC in the '50s, George Romney saw himself as oppressed by those giants. That gave him more of an affinity with the "little guy" than was true of most business Republicans.

FG: More than any other account of the "brainwashing" episode [that, in November 1967, hastened the collapse of his candidacy], you seem to say it really was a bum rap.

KABASERVICE: Yeah, I thought it was! I mean, it's an infamous example of how one word can ruin your career. I think mine is one of the first accounts that shows how Romney probably took the word "brainwashed" from a *Detroit News* editorial of just a few days earlier.

www.minnpost.com/eric-black-ink/2011/12/politics-gaffe-recalling-brainwashing-george-romney -- **INCLUDES the VIDEO**

But Romney was somebody who was honestly searching for solutions to the U.S. dilemma in Vietnam. And, as [his foreign-policy advisor] Jonathan Moore pointed out, he encountered great difficulty in the abstract terrain of foreign policy. He was much more at home when it came to concrete, graspable problems.

FG: Where he could get everybody [who matters] around a table.

KABASERVICE: Precisely. Romney was actually very good at meeting individual foreign leaders -- he could charm them, he could win them over, he could understand them. After meeting the foreign leaders, he understood the foreign policy issues better. But, if he were just sitting down to talk about the options facing the U.S. in Vietnam, he would need a lot of preparation.

But he was prepared to change his mind on issues. He was an independent-minded person. And he had a lot of personal appeal, particularly in the Midwest, which was the historic stronghold of traditional Republicanism. And so, if he had become President, he might have had more ability to shape the Party than Rockefeller did.

I actually had prepared a longer riff on Romney's [post-Governor] "afterlife" at HUD and his conflicts with Nixon and so forth. I ended up not using it [in the book] -- for reasons of space, more than anything else. But Romney and Nixon did not get along, because Romney was a moderate and Nixon was a centrist.

FG: Maybe the bigger problem -- I recently reread *Nixon in the White House*, a 1971 book by Evans and Novak -- was that Romney was a booming extrovert, and Nixon the lone wolf despised that kind of personality. Glad-hander versus Cold Fish -- yet George Romney walked away from the Governorship of Michigan for a Cabinet job?

KABASERVICE: I think he made that transition because he cared a lot about urban issues. He wasn't posturing. I mean, there was a real reason why he started out his [presidential]

campaign by going around the country to see urban poverty centers. He really thought Republicans had something to offer those areas and those people, something that would be different from what the Democrats were offering.

(8) Before Armed Camps Sapped the Fluidity

FG: Your book tries to cover 1980 to 2011 in just 60 days, and I'd like to hand you this hard-copy memo with several gripes and dissents about those characterizations and conclusions. [It's a document you can receive electronically by e-mailing FrankGregorsky@aol.com... Note that Kabaservice, far from feeling ambushed by the memo, absorbed it during our lunch and was appreciative of its fine-grained look at the GOP from Reagan's first term to current times.]

And, as for Republicanism pre-1980, *Rule and Ruin* has a lot more about the '60s than it does the '70s.

KABASERVICE: I came at the 1960s because, first of all, it was an extremely consequential decade -- much more so than the '50s or the '70s and '80s.

FG: Okay.

KABASERVICE: Second of all, it was a period that I personally can't remember, but many of the people who were important in it are still alive, and I could talk to them as well as get at the documents.

FG: Good.

KABASERVICE: So the problem with extending this story into the '80s and beyond is, first of all, as a movement, moderate Republicanism comes to an end in 1970. Some organizations carry on, but really the bloom is off the rose after 1970.

There's also the practical problem that, to some extent for the '70s, but especially the 1980s and '90s, the papers just aren't open yet. To the extent that those collections exist, they're closed, or they haven't been processed -- or, if they have been processed, too many restrictions have been placed upon their use.

I need primary archival materials for my histories -- because I don't want to be forced to rely wholly on other people's secondary sources or the participants' unreliable memories.

Writing, as you know, is an unpleasant business. It requires you to cloister yourself away. That's particularly true if you're an independent scholar. And since I'm not presently affiliated with any institution that can validate my book with other historians, this book is going to have to force its way into the academic mentality from the outside. The whole subject of ideological diversity in the Republican Party is not a subject that academic historians are interested in right now.

FG: Why do you assume that academics are the audience?

KABASERVICE: Well, I don't necessarily. And I didn't write it for a specifically academic audience; I wrote it for a general audience. But I wanted it to have academic credibility. Because it seems to me that most histories that come out nowadays are either these inward-looking academic books written in scholarly "thieves' cant" -- utterly impenetrable and, frankly, useless and ill-informed.

FG: Right.

KABASERVICE: Or the kind of history books that are written by celebrities, or quasi-celebrity talking heads.

FG: Or ideologues who are basically giving you a diary entry plus cleaned-up transcriptions of their talk show.

KABASERVICE: Yeah, but often those ideologues are also celebrities. In the future, will histories of the Civil War be written by Snookie? A professional writer will assemble the book behind the scenes, but the text will still come out: *Omigawwwddd, then there was Antietam, and it was soooo bloody...*

FG: [Holding back a guffaw in this low-key eatery...]

KABASERVICE: I mean, that's just the way things are going. The book-buying market --

FG: The pendulum is starting to swing back a little.

KABASERVICE: Well, we'll see. Anyway, I wanted my books to have the comprehensiveness and authority of the best academic histories. And it's important to me personally to feel that -- with two serious books now -- I have achieved what most of the professors I respected achieved. Theoretically, you're tenured for two books. People who write two books run the academic profession. Even if I never get a job as a professor, I will feel that I have met that mark.

FG: Yes, and that's good. I respect your achievement a lot. And since your mode of historical research is so much more fundamental than mine -- I'm not going to sit in libraries for dozens of hours -- whose "papers" are of value in your writing lately?

KABASERVICE: The William Rusher papers. Now, I never met William Rusher. And I'm sorry I didn't. He was inaccessible, and I think rather ill, out in San Francisco for his final several years. But he did grant me access to his papers, for which I am grateful.

FG: Wow.

KABASERVICE: His papers are in the Library of Congress. And they're a real treasure trove. They differ from the Buckley papers. Buckley was a "social being" who was talking about philosophical issues relating to conservatism and so forth. Rusher was much more of a political operative. I mean, he apparently had only one Democratic friend [chuckle] -- somebody he knew from his boyhood, who I guess he decided not to "divorce" for his political opinions.

FG: "Political operative" meaning -- a schemer and a plotter?

KABASERVICE: A schemer and a plotter, and one of the members of the Syndicate [described in *Rule and Ruin* as "Cliff White's conservative machine that had controlled the Young Republicans since the early 1950s"] -- which very little has been written about. But it was important. They got the job done. And Rusher was an important figure -- someone who was very good to a lot of people. He kept in touch with them and supported their careers.

[Gregorsky's final insert: One of many revelations that compelled an exclamation mark in my copy of Geoff's book is on page 48: "Rusher left the Republican Party in 1956 and began to describe himself as a 'revolutionary' seeking to build a conservative third Party." For more, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Rusher]

(9) Last Call for Golden Eras

KABASERVICE: In looking back [at American politics] in the 1960s, I feel in some ways like someone looking back to the golden days of the Ottoman Empire.

FG: [Appreciative laughter]

KABASERVICE: There was a lot more ethnic and sectarian diversity -- peoples comfortably coexisting -- in cities like Istanbul and in the Ottoman Empire generally. And then during the 20th century you see this process of homogenization, you know? I have the same "soft spot" for the moderate Republicans as I do for the Copts in Egypt -- Christians in what used to be the Ottoman Empire.

FG: Sure.

KABASERVICE: I don't like the fact that we've moved into such a homogenous, rigid, ideologically uniform era. Maybe this is the way these things go, but [pause] -- when you get right down to it, I'm not fond of ideological uniformity, for some of the same reasons that I'm not that big a fan of nationalism or globalization.

Looking at the Republican Party [in 1970 and earlier], it was incredibly diverse, and it's hard to categorize people who were Republicans then in the same ways that we categorize them now. What I like about those bygone Republicans is they were very eclectic. They had influences and beliefs and political positions that don't seem to logically go together, from our standpoint nowadays -- but they made perfect sense at the time.

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FOR ADDITIONAL ENLIGHTENMENT

[Kabaservice's review](#) of *If Not Us, Who? William Rusher, National Review, and the Conservative Movement* -- a book by David B. Frisk (ISI Books, 517 pages, \$34.95)

[Seven House Judiciary Committee GOPers](#) (including freshmen Bill Cohen, Harold Froehlich and Trent Lott) confront the impeachment of President Richard M. Nixon.