The Heritage Lectures 1

The Conservative Movement: Then & Now

Russell Kirk

The Heritage Foundation

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ISSN 0272-1155

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THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT: THEN AND NOW

RUSSELL KIRK

In the United States, as in Britain, the passage of some three decades is required for a body of convictions to be expressed, discussed, and at last incorporated into public policy. Ordinarily this slowness in the movement of public opinion is to the nation’s advantage—by contrast with the mercurial politics of France, say. It is the devil who always hurries. However that may be, in America nowadays, it appears, such a fruition of ideas is about to take form.

I mean that we are entering upon a period of conservative policies in this American Republic. In both the great political parties, I suggest, conservative views will tend to dominate. Men and women who profess conservative convictions will be elected to office. And what matters more, the conservative political imagination will set to work to allay our present discontents and to renew our order.

For a thoughtful, renewed conservatism began to appear in print at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, with the publishing of books and periodical writings by men of a conservative bent. Ideas do have consequences, as Richard Weaver wrote about that time; and now, a generation later, those conservative concepts, popularized, are about to enter into practical politics.

It does not signify that most “activist” conservatives may have read only scantily, if at all, in the serious conservative books of thirty years ago; that is to be expected; serious thought always is vulgarized and filtered and transmuted, through newspaper editorials and Sunday sermons and college lectures and paperback books and even television programs, until a crowd of people perhaps wholly unaware of the sources of their convictions come to embrace a particular view of religion or of morals or of politics. As Henry Adams remarks in his Education, during his editorship The North American Review had only a few hundred subscribers; but he found his journal’s views plagiarized, happily, in hundreds of newspapers. Thus the average American citizen will have no notion that his vote, in 1980, has been moved in part by certain books three decades old which he has never opened; nevertheless it will be so.

Similarly, it does not signify that some of the writers who
have moved minds in conservative direction do not call themselves “conservatives.” (This is particularly true of Europeans residing in the United States—the historians Eric Voegelin and John Lukacs, or the economist F.A. Hayek.) We are concerned not with ideological tags, but with practical influence upon informed opinion.

I am suggesting that the present conservative movement in America commenced as an intellectual development—in this like the Fabian movement in Britain, which also required some thirty years for its fruition in public policy. But quite unlike the tightly concerted Fabian Society, the American intellectual renewal of conservative ideas about 1950 was perfectly unorganized and undirected, the work of isolated individual scholars and men of letters only slightly acquainted with one another’s work, let alone enjoying personal acquaintance. Take the names of men whose books obtained some attention, perhaps as novelties, shortly before or after 1950: Richard Weaver, Daniel Boorstin, Peter Viereck, Francis Wilson, William Buckley. When I published my book *The Conservative Mind* in 1953, I never had met any of these gentlemen except Weaver; nor had they met one another, with but few exceptions, I believe; besides, no two of them agreed perfectly about everything—not even about the word “conservative.” Nevertheless, the gentry whom Sidney Hook calls “ritualistic liberals” took this recrudescence of conservative opinions for a wicked conspiracy. A rumor went round among professors of history, for instance, about 1954, that Daniel Boorstin, Peter Viereck, and Russell Kirk were plotting industriously to dominate the teaching of history in this land. Actually, no one of us three ever had set eyes upon the other and, hence, could have planned no conspiracy.

Until this renewal of conservative thought at the end of the 1940s, liberal dogmas in morals and politics had been everywhere triumphant in the United States since the 1920s—as Lionel Trilling still declared, with some misgiving, at the end of 1949. Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More had been dead for years; Donald Davidson and Allen Tate were read as poets and literary critics only. In practical politics, the leading men of both parties then employed merely the vocabulary of latter-day liberalism. Yet as if Trilling’s remark had conjured spirits from the vasty deep, no sooner was his *Liberal Imagination* published than the literary adversaries of Liberal dogmata rose up in numbers.
The New Conservatives

In the book-review media and weeklies of opinion, at the beginning of the Fifties, it was the fad to refer to these writers as “New Conservatives” or “Neo-Conservatives”—the prefix “neo” usually implying the contempt of the commentator. Recently, at the end of the Seventies, the epithet “Neo-Conservative” has been clapped to yet another set of writers and scholars. Or are these new neo-conservatives really another set? Some of them, certainly, are recruits or converts to a conservative view of American society. But a chief among them, Irving Kristol, in London as editor of Encounter at the beginning of the Fifties, actually has not changed his views in any very important respect during the intervening three decades: he was quite as prudentially conservative then as he is now, and wrote as candidly and convincingly. Or Robert Nisbet, often mentioned in conjunction with these latter-day New Conservatives, was one of the more conspicuous of us original New Conservatives, with the publication of his principal book, The Quest for Community, in 1953.

But I digress. This fell recrudescence of conservative thought at the end of the Forties and the beginning of the Fifties was paralleled chronologically by the decline and fall of the New Deal Democrats, and the abrupt ascent of Dwight Eisenhower to the grandest seat among the seats of the mighty. But there was next to no connection between these two political phenomena, except that they both may have been provoked in part by a general American boredom with the cliches of the New Deal and by the obvious feebleness of what remained of New Deal measures during the Truman administration.

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. endeavored to taunt the “New Conservatives” for their failure to be appointed to office by President Eisenhower; for Mr. Schlesinger himself yearns always after “place,” as eighteenth-century politicians called it. But the writing conservatives of the Fifties were not disconcerted by not having been appointed Eisenhower placemen. Some of the “New Conservatives” were Democrats; and of the Republicans among them, most had preferred Robert Taft to Dwight Eisenhower. So far as we conservative writers had anything in common, it was this: we were social critics, innocent of any design for
assuming personal power. For one thing, we set our faces against political centralization, so that a cushy appointment in Washington would have been a repudiating of our own convictions.

We were sufficiently ignored by both Republican and Democratic presidents, except that Richard Nixon did occasionally invite one or another of us to the White House for general conversation. Now and again a United States senator or a member of the House—rare birds—might send one of us a note of appreciation. We fared no better among state politicians. We had no central apparatus; few publishers approved our books; the great foundations rarely assisted us; in the Academy we were a forlorn remnant.

Still, we were not ignored by the movers and shakers of public opinion. I owe my job to the New York Times: that is, to Gordon Chalmers’ cordial review of The Conservative Mind in the pages of the New York Times Book Review (a publication then less doctrinaire and more interesting than it is today). Time followed by devoting its entire book-review section, on July 4, to The Conservative Mind; and the other influential journals of large circulation fell into line. Once my book had made a breach in the ramparts that liberals watched, other authors fought their way in: Robert Nisbet, Thomas Molnar, James Kilpatrick, Frederick Wilhelmsen, Robert Fitch; somewhat later, Ernest van den Haag and Jeffrey Hart; a score of others. We were allied, too, with older men, some of whom had been very different in their politics at an earlier time—writers like James Burnham, William Henry Chamberlin, John Davenport, and John Chamberlain; professors like Leo Strauss, Will Herberg, Ross Hoffman, and Eliseo Vivas. Milton Friedman and a few other American economists of a cast more or less conservative had weight early in the Fifties. We made ourselves heard. The breach in the liberals’ literary ramparts has been closed since then, but the liberal reviewers have not yet succeeded altogether in stamping out the forlorn hope of conservative writers who penetrated within the citadel.

There sprang up conservative weekly and quarterly magazines, among them Modern Age, National Review, and Orbis; presently others. Some few book publishers, besides the courageous Henry Regnery, began to indulge us occasionally, among them Louisiana State University Press and a few other scholarly publishers. More wondrous still, now and again people of con-
servative bent actually were permitted to speak upon campuses, M. Stanton Evans among them. There was organized a national campus discussion society, distinctly conservative, now called the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, with its widely-circulated Intercollegiate Review and other journals, and its intellectually vigorous summer schools; there appeared also national and local “activist” conservative student groups. ISI and some others have outlasted the belligerent radical student clubs of the Sixties and Seventies. These were large gains—if one had an eye to the future.

The Conservative Renewal

Of course this haphazard intellectual revival of conservative thought affected American elections only a little. In this land, I repeat, it takes a long while for new or revived political concepts to supplant in citizens’ conscious and subconscious minds accustomed political loyalties and prejudices. Still, the immediate influence of the conservative renewal would have been larger, had not certain political accidents occurred. I refer to the extravagances of Joseph McCarthy, the absurdities of the John Birch Society, the murder of President Kennedy, the fiasco of Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign, Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam War. Despite our protestations, the liberal and radical publicists tarred us conservatives with these alien brushes. Even so, the public-opinion polls showed a steady increase in the number of Americans who set themselves down as “conservatives”—indeed, from the first poll onward conservatives formed the largest single segment of political preference. Combining circumstances and an altered climate of opinion were pushing public opinion toward conservative measures.

The circumstances which worked upon the American public were obvious enough during the past thirty years, and are still more obvious just now. Inflation of the currency, burdensome taxation, oppressive political centralization, sorry confusion in the public schools, disintegration of great cities by social change, violent crime, feebleness and failure in foreign affairs—these are only some of the afflictions concerning which American citizens became uncomfortably aware from the end of the Second World War onward (though particularly during the Johnson administration). I have listed foreign affairs last among these concerns,
incidentally, because the American democracy interests itself in foreign affairs only when disaster is at hand.

Because political administrations professedly liberal were in power while these grim troubles came to pass, and because liberal dogmas dominated the serious press and the universities, quite justly the American public tended to look for some alternative to liberal slogans and policies. Never has any very large proportion of the American electorate embraced a thoroughlygoing radicalism; therefore conservative measures slowly were recognized by the public as the alternative to liberal measures. This realization, it seems to me, is about to produce conservative men and measures this autumn—always barring political accidents.

Adverse circumstances alone do not bring on a reformation or a renewal: for a people to take arms against a sea of troubles, there must be provided the catalyst of ideas, for good or ill. About 1950, the emerging conservative thinkers had perceived the character of national adversity long before the general public became aware of the difficulties into which the United States was sliding. Thus a measure of conservative imagination and right reason already existed as the public rather slowly and confusedly began to turn its back upon the politically dominant liberalism. The handful of conservative writers and scholars, and those public men capable of serious reflection, offered an alternative to the exploded dogmas and measures of liberalism. Those fresh or renewed conservative ideas, which can have consequences, worked upon the public's discontent with the circumstances into which liberalism had brought the country: this union of thought and circumstance brought about the present conservative movement.

At this point we require some definition. Any intellectual and political movement, if it is to achieve more than ephemeral popularity and influence, must possess a body of common belief. I do not mean that it must, or should, possess an ideology. As H. Stuart Hughes wrote once, "conservatism is the negation of ideology." Ideology is political fanaticism and illusion; as John Adams defined it, ideology is the art of diving and sinking in politics. Instead, I mean by "a body of common belief" those general convictions and healthy prejudices derived from long consensus and social experience.

Such a body of common belief still exists in the United
States—perhaps more than in any other land. Here are some of its elements: persuasion that there exists a moral order, of more than human contrivance, to which we ought to conform human laws and customs as best we can; confidence in the American constitution, both the written constitution and the underlying unwritten constitution of tested usage and custom; attachment to representative government; suspicion of central direction in most matters; preference for an economy in which work and thrift obtain their just rewards; love of country—a love which extends beyond the present moment to the past and the future of the country. And there are other elements which have not lost their vitality.

These are conservative beliefs and impulses. Their roots are not altogether withered. I have sketched the origins of this body of common beliefs in my book *The Roots of American Order*. This being still the common American patrimony (even though, of course, the average citizen could not express these beliefs very coherently), it is not surprising that in a time of tribulation and discontent, the American public begins to listen to conservative voices.

In short, this present hour is an hour of conservative opportunity. The conservatives of the United States have made large gains already; indeed, it is possible now to speak of a “movement”—even if of a movement still confused and disunited. Thirty years ago, there existed no organizations like The Heritage Foundation and its influential journal, *Policy Review*, or other present organizations and serious journals of a conservative cast. Thirty years ago, it did not seem conceivable that two economists believing in a free economy would be awarded Nobel Prizes. Thirty years ago, nothing was more improbable in politics than that both great national parties would be inclined toward nominating for the presidency those aspirants who seemed the more conservative of the lot.

Order, Justice, and Freedom

Yet the fact remains that this conservative movement does not march in lockstep. In one respect, this lack of unanimity is a virtue: it means that conservatives are no ideologues; they believe in diversity and individuality. Utopianism, oddity, and
extreme positions, nevertheless, are not conservative virtues. Those failings are easily discerned in various aspects and factions of the growing drift rather clumsily labelled "conservative." Permit me to touch briefly upon some of these excesses.

One of them is the continuing obsession, particularly among some people well endowed with the goods of fortune, with economics. I do not mean to denigrate the Dismal Science. A good economic system has produced America's prosperity; and, still more important, it is closely connected with America's private liberty. Those "civil libertarians" who somehow fancy that we can reconcile an extreme of personal freedom with a servile and directed economy simply do not understand the great mysterious incorporation of the human race. And, as Samuel Johnson put it, a man is seldom more innocently occupied than when he is engaged in making money.

But economic activity is no more the whole of the civil social order than wealth is the sole source of happiness. Economic success is a byproduct, not the source, of America's success as a society. The sort of ignorant understanding to which I refer may be illustrated by one of the inimitable anecdotes of Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. On one occasion, that compulsive traveler was addressing a gathering of Catholic businessmen in Detroit. At the conclusion of his remarks, a gentleman in the audience inquired, "Doc, do you know what history is?"

"Why, no," Kuehnelt-Leddihn replied. "Can you instruct me?"

"Sure. History is just economics, that's all—just economics." In the mind's eye, one may see the ironic Kuehnelt-Leddihn replying: "Indeed? Tell me, sir, are you a Catholic?"

"Sure. I just made a novena."

"What a pity, sir, what a pity."

"Why is it a pity I'm a Catholic?"—this belligerently.

"Because, sir, if you were not a Catholic, you might be made a professor at the Marx-Lenin Institute."

To embrace Marxist materialism and determinism in the name of another abstraction called "capitalism" is to deliver up one's self bound to the foe. Conservatives do defend a free economy; they defend it, however, as bound up with a complex social structure of order and justice and freedom, founded upon an understanding of man as a moral being. To reduce ourselves to economic determinists offering sacrifices to the great god
Mammon is to ruin the prospects of all of us.

Sometimes allied with this economic obsession is the mode of belief which calls itself “libertarian.” I willingly concede that there exist some very sensible and honorable men and women who allow themselves to be tagged with that label. Both F.A. Hayek and your servant reject the term; and we have our reasons, as men who have learnt considerable from Burke and Tocqueville. Those reasons, as applied to current controversies, have been sufficiently detailed recently in National Review by Ernest van den Haag.

Let me say here only a few words by way of general principle. Any good society is endowed with order and justice and freedom. Of these, as Sir Richard Livingstone wrote, order has primacy: for without tolerable order existing, neither justice nor freedom can exist. To try to exalt an abstract “liberty” to a single solitary absolute, as John Stuart Mill attempted, is to undermine order and justice—and, in a short space, to undo freedom itself, the real prescriptive freedom of our civil social order. “License they mean, when they cry liberty,” in Milton’s phrase.

John Adams and John Taylor of Caroline carried on a correspondence about the nature of liberty. Liberty as an abstraction, Adams said in substance, is either meaningless or baneful: there is the liberty of the wolf, and there is the very different liberty of the civilized human being. We owe our American freedoms to a well-functioning civil social order that requires duties as well as liberties for its survival.

I find it grimly amusing to behold extreme “libertarians,” who proclaim that they would abolish taxes, military defense, and all constraints upon impulse, obtaining massive subsidies from people whose own great affluence has been made possible only by the good laws and superior constitutions of these United States—and by our armies and navies that keep in check the enemies of our order and justice and freedom. There is no freedom in anarchy, even if we call anarchism “libertarianism.” If one demands unlimited liberty, as in the French Revolution, one ends with unlimited despotism. “Men of intemperate mind never can be free,” Burke tells us. “Their passions forge their fetters.”

Some momentary encounters become images that fix our future thought. When a college freshman, debating in Indianap-
olis, I happened to stroll into the great railroad station in that city, with my freshman colleagues; and we watched from high above the intricate shuttling of long trains in and out of the station. Because my father was a railroad engineman, I understood what care, precision, and complex scheduling necessarily were involved below. The functioning of a railway station, like the functioning of the American economic apparatus generally, like the functioning of the whole American society, was dependent upon a wondrously high degree of duty, discipline, and complex cooperation. I pointed out to my companions that ineluctable truth. The libertarians still have not grasped that point. It was well for the safety enjoyed by railway passengers that my father and other railwaymen were not libertarians: they did not permit their private interests, such as a glass of beer, to conflict with their duties. Yet those railwaymen were freemen, not ashamed of the American constitution.

Some of the people who style themselves libertarians, I repeat, in fact do subscribe to the body of common beliefs I mentioned earlier. What's in a name? Actually, they remain conservative enough. But as for those doctrinaire libertarians who stand ready to sweep away government and the very moral order—why, that way lies madness. If the American public is given the impression that these fantastic dogmas represent American conservatism, then everything we have gained over the past three decades may be lost. The American people are not about to submit themselves to the utopianism of a tiny band of chirping sectaries, whose prophet (even though they may not have much direct acquaintance with his works) was Jean Jacques Rousseau.

If they are to lead this country, conservatives must appear to be, and in fact must be, imaginative but reasonable people who do not claim that they will turn the world upside down. Genuine conservatives know that man and society are not perfectible; they are realistically aware that Utopia—including the dream-paradise of absolute, unfettered liberty to act just as the individual pleases—means literally Nowhere. It is one of the conservative's principal functions to remind mankind that politics is the art of the possible.

The United States is entering upon an epoch, necessarily, of sweeping but prudent reform: a conservative task. Diplomatic and military policies of the liberal era have brought us into
imminent peril; the economy is virtually static, while inflation and taxation consume the seed-corn of capital; the educational structure is decayed and ineffectual; our great cities have become dangerous and dismal; political centralization reduces local and private responsibility and opportunity; the American people generally are disheartened. What the public hopes for, however dimly, is restoration: a renewal of American intelligence, vigor, confidence; a regaining of order, freedom, and justice. If conservatives can deal with these great problems ably and honestly, posterity will bless them.

The Hope for Restoration

It has happened from time to time in the history of civilizations that a period of decadence and discouragement has been followed by a period of renewal and hope. It can be so with our American civilization. Such a restoration requires the joining of right reason with imagination. Do the people in the present conservative movement possess such reason and imagination?

Or are the conservatives generally what John Stuart Mill called them, “the stupid party”? Certainly a good many folk who are “conservative” are dull or apathetic merely. Admittedly a good many folk who call themselves “conservative” seem interested chiefly in conserving their own advantages. “With conservative populations,” Brooks Adams wrote, “slaughter is nature’s remedy.” He meant that mere plodding adherence to old ways will not suffice for survival in an age of fierce and rapid change.

But it is not the conservatism of dullness and short-sighted self-interest merely which has been stirring in this country. Paul Elmer More remarked that in a time of crisis, often the conservative displays powers of imagination which save the day. We need to rouse imagination of that sort—even the poetic imagination. President Nixon once asked me what one book he should read. “T.S. Eliot’s Notes toward the Definition of Culture,” I told him, and later sent him a copy. With Eliot and other great poets, the imaginative conservative takes long views; and he knows, among a good many other things, that “culture” is more than a matter of subsidized art-festivals. It is our culture itself which totters in these concluding twenty
years of the twentieth century. The word “conservative” originally signified “guardian.” Today thinking conservatives have to be concerned with more than winning elections, important though that task is; we have to think seriously about our civilization’s preservation. Thinking always being painful, liberals and radicals have not troubled themselves much about the shape of things to come.

During those thirty years of growth of the conservative movement, immense mischief has been done to the politics and the economics and the culture of this country. Soon it may be up to the conservatives to repair the damage, if they know how. What commenced as a rearguard action by some of the older generation of men of politics and business, and as a troubled protest against the mindless drift of affairs by a handful of scholars and writers, may find itself invested with national authority. Are conservatives well prepared for this responsibility? No, not altogether; but then, time moves on, and nobody ever is well prepared for great duties, and the longer we delay, the more formidable become the nation’s difficulties.

Those of us who began a conservative intellectual renewal about 1950 have grown gray in opposition to liberal dominations and powers. We do not expect ever to be able to doze secure in Lotus-land. We are not yet the passing generation: another twenty years must elapse before my eldest child is as old as I was when I published my first book—and I was then a young writer. So it is not a case of “to you, from failing hands, we throw the torch.” The Heritage Foundation, I trust, will be here, or at least somewhere in the District of Columbia, by the first year of the twenty-first century—supposing that conservative men and measures have renewed this Republic. And quite conceivably I may be with you on June 4, Anno Domini 2000, reporting on the progress of the conservative movement.

Prudent change is the means of our preservation, and the great statesman is one who combines with a disposition to preserve an ability to improve. That awareness, and that sort of person, the conservative movement has been endeavoring to develop. Our efficacy may be put to the test very soon. If we fail, where else in the modern world will powers of resistance and recuperation be discovered? As Walter Bagehot says, “Conservatism is enjoyment.” Life is worth living, the conservative declares. We are not going to march to Zion; yet we may succeed in planting some trees in the Waste Land. With Burke, I attest the rising generation.
Dr. Russell Kirk is a Distinguished Scholar of The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. He is the author of twenty-three books and of several hundred essays. His books include *The Conservative Mind*, *The Roots of American Order*, and, recently, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning*.

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*The Conservative Movement: Then and Now* is the text of a lecture which Dr. Kirk presented in June 1980 as part of The Heritage Foundation Summer Lecture Series entitled “Varieties of Conservatism.” Other participants in this lecture series included Carl Gershman on “Why I Am Not A Conservative,” George Gilder on “Why I Am Not A Neo-Conservative,” and Shirley Robin Letwin on “Why I Am Not A Libertarian.”