

The American Cause

INTRODUCTION By Gleaves Whitney

America is a great nation. But is it an exceptional nation? Does it have a unique mission in human history? Russell Kirk believed so, and nowhere in his early career did he make the case better than in *The American Cause*.¹

How this enduring primer on American civilization came about is a story in its own right. The book was not originally Kirk's idea. In 1956, he was approached by his friend and publisher Henry Regnery, who urged him to write an elementary statement of the moral, political, social, and economic principles upon which the United States was founded. The Cold War was heating up, and militant Communism was America's mortal enemy. It was crucial that Americans understand what their country stood for, how it differed from the enemy, and why it was worth defending.

Kirk, 37 years old at the time, was at first reluctant to write the primer. He was working on larger projects that had grown out of his magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind*.² Regnery's publication of that book just three years earlier had opened up the "intellectual commons" to Kirk. He believed his energies could be better channeled into other book projects. He changed his mind, however, once certain disturbing facts came to light.

What Kirk learned was that many American troops who had been taken prisoner during the Korean War (1950-53) had been easy targets of Communist indoctrination. In fact, the chief of intelligence of the "Chinese People's Volunteer Army" in North Korea had written a memorandum to his superiors in Beijing in which he fairly gloated. "Based upon our observations of American soldiers and their officers captured in this war," this intelligence officer wrote, "the following facts are evidenced." Among other things, "There is little knowledge or understanding, even among United States university graduates, of American political history and philosophy; of federal, state, and community organizations; of states rights and civil rights; of safeguards to freedom; and of how these things supposedly operate within [their] own system."³

Americans were justifiably skeptical of an enemy's report—but were later disturbed to learn that it contained more than a grain of truth. Investigation of our troops' conduct and morale in prisoner-of-war camps yielded disturbing insights.⁴ A number of our soldiers were indeed ignorant of their own cause. Some had "weak loyalties" to their faith and to their nation. Some had succumbed to Communist propaganda in the absence of torture and without serious resistance. How could this have happened? A Senate subcommittee ventured that American institutions as a whole—not just the public schools—had failed to inculcate the knowledge and values needed for U.S. citizens to defend their nation adequately. One American officer put the matter bluntly: "This is a commentary on manners and morals; on character and lack of it; on a disease that might well be considered the Number One Social Disease of America. Its prevention and its treatment are essential to the continuing survival of our system."⁵

Kirk, himself a soldier during the Second World War, was also disturbed by these findings. He accepted Regnery's commission and in short order produced a 39,000-word manuscript in ten chapters. In 1957 Regnery printed 5,000 copies of

the book. It sold for \$3.50, and a number of copies were purchased by the U.S. government to distribute to the armed forces.⁶ One reviewer wrote that the book would appeal not just to military men but to a broad spectrum of Americans—if they were not ideologues. If you are not an ideologue, Paul Kiniery ventured, "you will like this book which puts into hard-hitting words many of your thoughts and convictions about the gift that is represented by life in the United States."⁷

Regnery went through the initial print run. Within a decade, however, the United States found itself entangled in a new war in Asia. Communism still posed a significant threat to the United States, to be sure. But more serious challenges were arising within the nation. It was the tumultuous Sixties, and the stakes seemed higher. Among college students especially, the essential goodness of the American cause came under serious attack. At the same time, there was little evidence that American institutions had become any more successful at instilling the knowledge and values needed for the nation to fight for its principles and promise. Regnery decided to reprint *The American Cause* in 1966, this time with a foreword by John Dos Passos. Mincing no words, Dos Passos wrote, "It is an appalling thought that *The American Cause* should be more needed today than it was needed on the day it was published nearly ten years ago." But the nation was confronted by a new outbreak of "distemper." Dos Passos hoped that the work would enjoy a wide circulation. He hoped that even student radicals would read *The American Cause* and be inspired by it. "Intelligent radicals," after all, should "find aid and comfort in the principles on which the American republic was founded."⁸

These two early editions of *The American Cause* were met by quite different generations. The book's first readers were members of a generation that in youth had some memory of economic depression, world war, and Cold War. The next wave of readers might as well have been from another planet, so different were the Sixties from the Fifties. They were members of a generation that in youth caused or experienced profound cultural changes, and they were deeply skeptical of American ideas and institutions—indeed, skeptical of America itself.

Since the 1966 edition, new generations of college students have grown up among us. Once again *The American Cause* makes its appearance. And once again, the passage of time reveals the book to be much more than a period piece. It is not just a product of the Fifties, for Kirk focused on the principles underlying American civilization rather than on ephemeral policy debates. It seems especially to speak to Americans in the aftermath of September 11th. Citizens are once again discovering their love of country, and there is a keen desire among Americans to understand our heritage as a self-governing people under the rule of law.

Despite the interest of the Pentagon in *The American Cause*, it is not a government publication. Despite its friendly reception among conservatives, it is not a party manifesto. To approach the book so narrowly is to do Kirk a great injustice. As Dos Passos put it, *The American Cause* is the attempt of one man of letters "to jot down in simple terms a few of the principles upon which American government is based."⁹ It endures because of the clarity with which Kirk saw timeless ideas intersecting American history.

Although Kirk believed that the United States was an exceptional nation, he was no jingoist, nor was his book chauvinistic. Kirk had long acknowledged that the nation had "grave faults."¹⁰ Nevertheless, he believed that America was worth vigorously defending, no less in the arena of debate than on the field of battle.

Thus, his purpose in writing *The American Cause*, he said, was to offer "a statement of the moral and social principles which the American nation upholds in our time of troubles." Faced with the findings of the armed forces and U.S. Senate, Kirk was frustrated by the fact that most Americans were "badly prepared for their task of defending their own convictions and interests and institutions against the grim threat" of our nation's enemies. "And in our age, when all civilization is immediately menaced," he warned, "good-natured ignorance is a luxury none of us can afford."¹¹ Kirk wrote this passage during the Cold War, and he was referring to the armed, militant Communists who threatened the West. But his words are just as apt today, when al-Qaeda and other terrorists menace numerous nations—and the United States above all.

One book that influenced Kirk's thinking about the United States—especially regarding the question of America's national purpose—appeared almost a century before *The American Cause*. It is Orestes Brownson's *American Republic*.¹² Kirk held Brownson in great esteem and called his book "one of the more penetrating treatises on American political theory."¹³ Except for their discussion of constitutional principles, there is not much overlap between these two books. They were, after all, composed in quite different centuries and in considerably differing circumstances.

Despite differences in milieu, scope, and audience, *The American Cause* and *The American Republic* are animated by the same idea. As Brownson expressed it, every great nation has "its special work, mission, or destiny." In fact, every people is, "in some sense, a chosen people." He explained: "The Jews were the chosen people of God, through whom the primitive traditions were to be preserved in their purity and integrity, and the Messiah was to come. The Greeks were the chosen people of God, for the development and realization of the beautiful or the divine splendor in art, and of the true in science and philosophy; and the Romans, for the development of the state, law, and jurisprudence."

The United States was also a great nation with a great mission. Brownson wrote that America "has a mission, and is chosen of God for the realization of a great idea. It has been chosen not only to continue the work assigned to Greece and Rome, but to accomplish a greater work than was assigned to either. In art, it will prove false to its mission if it does not rival Greece; and in science and philosophy, if it does not surpass it. In the state, in law, in jurisprudence, it must continue and surpass Rome. Its idea is liberty, indeed, but liberty with law, and law with liberty . . . which secures at once the authority of the public and the freedom of the individual—the sovereignty of the people without social despotism, and individual freedom without anarchy."¹⁴

What Brownson was saying is that the United States had achieved something unprecedented in human history. Its great contribution was to show the nations how to reconcile justice, order, and liberty. America was the champion, not just of freedom, but of a justly ordered freedom. America's Founders, in other words, had largely got freedom right. They understood that if freedom is not justly ordered, it degenerates either into tyranny or into anarchy. The obligation of succeeding generations of Americans is to continue to get freedom right.

Kirk believed this, too—strongly believed it. In a later essay he wrote, "The American Mission, I maintain with Brownson, is to reconcile the claims of order with the claims of freedom." And—this point is crucial—the American mission is "to maintain in an age of ferocious ideologies and fantastic schemes a model of justice."¹⁵

Kirk was no chauvinist. On the contrary, readers expecting to find in the conservative Kirk a militant assertion of the "American way" abroad will be disappointed. He appreciated the marvelous variety of human cultures. He eschewed demonizing the foreign. He proposed in *The American Cause* "to steer clear of 'devil terms' and 'god terms.' We shall not argue that a thing is good simply because it is American, or bad simply because it is not American; our endeavor will be to describe the essence of American belief and practice, without preaching a crusade for Americanism."

Kirk explained that *The American Cause* "is not written to convert Americans into political fanatics, zealous for a vague 'Americanism' to be extended over the whole world. Nor is this book written as a piece of propaganda to persuade other peoples that everything American is perfect. One of the most important and beneficial aspects of our American tradition, indeed, is toleration: and this toleration extends to a sympathetic approval of variety, national and private rights, and freedom of choice, both at home and throughout the world. The American mission is not to make all the world one America, but rather to maintain America as a fortress of principle and in some respects as an example to other nations. The American cause is not to stamp out of existence all rivals, but simply to keep alive the principles and institutions which have made the American nation great."¹⁶

What threatened the American mission, according to Kirk?

The ideologue. Kirk defined the ideologue as one who "thinks of politics as a revolutionary instrument for transforming society and even transforming human nature." Unleashed during the most radical phase of the French Revolution, the spirit of ideology has metastasized over the past two centuries, wreaking horrors. Jacobinism, Anarchism, Marxism, Leninism, Fascism, Stalinism, Nazism, Maoism—all shared the fatal attraction to "political messianism"; all were "inverted religions." Each of these ideologies preached a dogmatic approach to politics, economics, and culture. Each in its own way endeavored "to substitute secular goals and doctrines for religious goals and doctrines." Thus did the ideologue promise "salvation in this world, hotly declaring that there exists no other realm of being."¹⁷

One of the worst traits of ideology is that its true believers eschew political compromise. They are contemptuous of the politics of prudence. Yet compromise and prudence are two virtues that have been essential to the American achievement from the early days of the Republic. Indeed, compromise and prudence were virtues inherited from the British, who gave shape to colonial Americans' early political experience.

Kirk was not alone in worrying about the threat of ideology to the West. Other twentieth-century thinkers warned of its menace: Raymond Aron, J. L. Talmon, Kenneth Minogue, Eric Voegelin, Gerhart Niemeyer, and Daniel Bell among them. Early in the century, Max Weber, in his famous essay "Politics as a Vocation," observed that two fundamentally different political approaches characterize modernity. One embraces the "ethic of responsibility," the other the "ethic of ultimate ends."

The former understands that politics is the art of the possible, so compromise among competing factions is necessary for the health of the body politic. Those who embrace the ethic of responsibility are respectful of political traditions and inherited customs. They do not think compromise is "dirty." They avoid the hubris

of thinking that they and they alone know how all of life should be ordered. They adapt to a pluralistic array of people, beliefs, and factions, and accept pragmatic compromise as necessary to a tolerable order.

By contrast, those who embrace the ethic of ultimate ends disdain such compromise, believing no price too high to achieve their objectives, even if it means the murder of innocent human beings. After all, in a moral crusade, the end justifies any means. "One's stainless standard must mow the enemy down."¹⁸

The ideologues that have plagued the United States in the past are well known—they are the anarchist who assassinated a president, the Fascists and Nazis who plunged the U.S. into world war, and the Communists who declared, "We will bury you," among many others. However, the United States has, by and large, successfully withstood each successive wave of ideological fanaticism. With the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, it may have seemed for a brief moment in time that the "end of history" had arrived; that the world might now live under a *Pax Americana*.

It was not to be. September 11th abruptly destroyed the illusion that history had ended or that ideology was dead. Al-Qaeda terrorists cut short the nascent *Pax Americana*. Their barbaric acts had all the marks of armed ideology. But instead of marching under the swastika or hammer and sickle, they war under the Crescent, which introduces an interesting twist. For in our day the armed ideologues are not *secular* totalitarians, but *religious* totalitarians—to wit, Islamic extremists.

The vast majority of Americans have traditionally rejected the way of religious totalitarianism. As Kirk persuasively argues in the following pages:

[T]he religious foundation of our nation, accompanied by complete toleration of legitimate worship and private conscience, does not, of course, mean that we endure religious fanaticism in action, or that we refuse to prosecute acts which we consider immoral or harmful to society merely because they are committed under the name of religion. When a religious sect or a private believer actively violates the laws of the land, we do not hesitate to take stern steps to restrain such people. But in America any man can hold such religious views, or irreligious views, as he chooses, so long as he does not attempt to force those views upon others and so long as in his actions he does not violate the law.

This combination of complete toleration of opinion with national attachment to religious principle is very rare in the world. Most nations either recognize—formally or implicitly—a state religion, or else disavow religious truth altogether. Such a harmony between church and state is one of the principal achievements of American society, and no powerful religious body in America desires to alter this situation. Americans, then, may take pride in being the most tolerant of people—tolerant without sacrifice of religious conviction.¹⁹

The foe we must face today is of a different stripe than the one we faced fifty years ago—but not much different. Kirk's words steel us for the battle just as much as if our enemies were the Nazis or Soviets of old.

In editing *The American Cause*, my aim has been to leave Kirk's essay as undisturbed as possible. In a few passages I delete or abbreviate the discussion of Communists as the enemy. But much of Kirk's extensive treatment of the Communist threat in chapters 9 and 10 remains of permanent value when understood in the context of his deeper concern about the destructiveness of nearly every revolutionary movement. In such passages, I change the mention of a specific revolutionary or ideological movement to language reflecting this more universal concern—hence "revolutionary," "revolutionary movement," "ideologue," or "ideological." These modest changes are, I believe, in the spirit of Kirk's original intent.

Reading *The American Cause* anew, I am struck by how Kirk's words retain their grace and conviction, their power and hope. They speak to us in the face of international terror, just as they spoke to our parents in the face of nuclear annihilation. For the bedrock principles upon which America was established live on.

NOTES:

1 The first edition is Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1957). The second edition is Russell Kirk, *The American Cause*, Foreword by John Dos Passos (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1966). Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of *The American Cause* are from the 1966 edition.

2 The first edition is Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953).

3 Memorandum quoted in Kirk, *American Cause*, p. 2.

4 At the time Kirk wrote *The American Cause*, the evidence was collected at Maxwell Field, Alabama, and at Harvard University. Kirk also referenced the Army booklet, "Communist Interrogation, Indoctrination, and Exploitation of Prisoners of War." In addition he cited the published memoirs of several officers and soldiers. See Kirk, *American Cause*, p. 3.

5 Quoted in Kirk, *American Cause*, p. 3.

6 Editor interview with Annette Kirk, February 28, 2002.

7 Paul Kiniery, book review, *Catholic World*, 187 (April 1958): 74.

8 Dos Passos, foreword to *American Cause*, pp. v, xv. Of relevance is that a student competition sponsored by an organization called Constructive Action, Inc., was included in the republication of the book. See Kirk, *American Cause* (1966 ed.), pp. 153-54.

9 Dos Passos, foreword to *American Cause*, p. v.

10 Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7th ed. (Chicago: Regnery Books, 1986), p. 72.

11 Kirk, *American Cause*, this edition, p. 1.

12 Orestes A. Brownson, *The American Republic: Its Constitution, Tendencies, and Destiny* (New York: O'Shea, 1866). A new edition of this work is being published by ISI Books in fall 2002 and contains a substantial introduction by the political philosopher Peter A. Lawler. Much of Brownson's *The American Republic* is a rewriting of Brownson's much earlier essay series on the "Origin and Constitution of Government," published originally in the 1840s in the *Boston Quarterly Review* and *U.S. Democratic Review*.

13 Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, p. 249.

14 Brownson, *American Republic*, Introduction, pp. 2-3.

15 Russell Kirk, "The American Mission," in *Redeeming the Time* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 1996), p. 180.

16 Kirk, *American Cause*, this edition, p. 12.

17 Russell Kirk, "The Errors of Ideology," in *The Politics of Prudence* (Bryn Mawr, Pa.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1993), pp. 1, 5.

18 See Max Weber, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. C. Wright Mills, trans. Hans H. Gerth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 77-128; and Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), ch. 13.

19 Kirk, *American Cause*, this edition, pp. 37-38.