



## Conscience of a Conservative, The

peared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Eventually, 3.5 million copies sold, making it one of the most popular political works of the 1960s and prompting comparisons to Paine's *Common Sense*.

Why was this slim 125-page political manifesto so popular? Well-written, crisp, clear, and concise, the book insisted that conservatism was not old-fashioned or out of date any more than “the Golden Rule or the Ten Commandments or Aristotle’s *Politics* are out of date.” The conservative approach, Goldwater (or rather Bozell) wrote, “is nothing more or less than an attempt to apply the wisdom and experience and the revealed truths of the past to the problems of today.” Many have tried and failed to offer a more succinct definition of conservatism’s role in politics.

Second, *The Conscience of a Conservative* addressed the issues of the day in a breathtakingly direct way. Agricultural subsidies? There should be a “prompt and final termination of the farm subsidy program.” Organized labor? Enact state right-to-work laws and limit contributions to political campaigns to individuals, barring both unions and corporations from same. Taxes? The government “has a right to claim an equal percentage of each man’s wealth and no more.” In the area of foreign policy and national security, Goldwater proposed a seven-point program to achieve “victory” over communism, including military superiority, maintenance of defense alliances like NATO, and the cessation of U.S. aid to communist governments that had used the money “to keep their subjects enslaved.” We should, he said, encourage the captive peoples to “overthrow their [communist] captors,” foreshadowing the Reagan Doctrine of the 1980s.

Third, it was an original work of politics and philosophy, a persuasive fusion of the three major strains of conservatism in 1960—traditionalism, classical liberalism or libertarianism, and anticommunism. In the

most quoted passage of *The Conscience of a Conservative*, Goldwater argued that a decisive turn toward freedom and away from government would come when Americans elected to public office those who proclaimed: “My aim is not to pass laws, but to repeal them. . . . If I should later be attacked for neglecting my constituents’ ‘interests,’ I shall reply that I was informed their main interest is liberty and that in that cause I am doing the very best I can.”

This one book introduced conservatism as a major new factor in national politics, helping to lay the foundation for the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s and the Gingrich-led capture of Congress in the 1990s.

—LEE EDWARDS

### Further Reading

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See also: Bozell, L. Brent; Goldwater, Barry M.

## conservatism

Conservatism is a philosophy that seeks to maintain and enrich societies characterized by respect for inherited institutions, beliefs and practices, in which individuals develop good character by cooperating with one another in primary, local associations such as families, churches and social groups aimed at furthering the common good in a manner pleasing to God.

Often defined simply as a predisposition to conserve existing political and economic structures, conservatism generally is seen as having its roots in opposition to the radical innovations of the French Revolution of 1789. In that revolution, established hierarchies in politics, religion (especially the



Catholic Church, in France heavily influenced by an all-powerful monarchy), and society at large were overthrown in favor of an abstract theory of human equality that proclaimed an age of reason yet ushered in years of oppression and mass executions known as the Reign of Terror. The generally acknowledged founder of modern conservatism, the Irish-born British statesman Edmund Burke, wrote his masterpiece, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in opposition to this revolution in its early stages, predicting the terror to come and arguing that the drive to remold society according to any abstract theory, including the revolutionaries' Rights of Man, must lead to tyranny and bloodshed.

Unfortunately, conservatism's modern origin in opposition to revolution has led many to define it in simply negative terms, as a kind of "stand-pattism" or opposition to change. And conservatism is "against" many things to which contemporary liberals in particular are attached. Principally, conservatives reject liberals' faith in the ability of political planners to "perfect" human nature through a combination of economic incentives (subsidies and the like) and, more crucially, the reshaping of character through therapy and progressive education. Fundamentally, the liberal's goal is to liberate individuals from inherited institutions, beliefs, and practices. Policies like no-fault divorce and politically correct speech codes and courses of study put into action the liberal desire to remold people into autonomous individuals "liberated" from prejudice and other historical inheritances so that they may build their lives on the basis of radically free, unencumbered choices constrained only by the certainty that all people, choices, and lifestyles are morally equal.

Conservatism is opposed to this radically individualist view of man's nature and goals. Some who are labeled "conservative" stop here. Skeptics of a conservative predis-

position, whether conscious followers of eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume or modern neoconservatives, accept many institutions put in place by liberals (the centralized administrative and welfare state being the prime example) so long as they do not descend into overtly revolutionary policies and activities. These stand-pat conservatives offer no transcendent set of standards by which to judge political and moral developments, resting on skepticism and faith in the inherent strength and goodness of modern American institutions and ideologies, taken in their patriotic mold.

But as a full-fledged philosophical outlook, conservatism does not stop here. It is not constituted by mere pessimism concerning human nature. Nor, despite some conservatives' romanticization of eras bygone, does it aim simply to restore what once may have been. To the contrary, conservatism defends a positive and fully integrated view of the individual and his role in society. True, conservatives are too skeptical of the power of abstract reason to believe that politicians can improve human nature, though they believe that politicians may corrupt it. True, conservatives believe that the individual, shorn of his inherited social ties, will act less morally because he will lose the bonds of affection that keep pride and selfishness in check. But these are mere defensive responses to the overreaching claims of liberalism and its radical outgrowths. The roots of conservative opposition to liberalism lie in a very positive conception of the human person and the possibilities of social life.

Conservatives are attached, not so much to any particular regime or form of government, as to what they believe are the requirements for a good life for all peoples. In the American context, conservatives defend the ordered liberty established by the Constitution and the traditions and practices on which that constitution was built. In particular, the common law understanding of custom as a



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necessary basis for law and public action and the primary role of local associations in framing the character and lives of the people are central to the conservative vision of America. Because conservatives believe that people live in their families, associations, and communities more than in their government, they seek to maximize the number of important relationships available to individuals as they seek to minimize the role of particular politicians and policies in dominating, destroying, or displacing these associations.

Conservatives' rejection of liberals' claims that they may, if only given the political power, reshape individuals into more caring, healthy members of richer communities rests in part on an appreciation of the importance of private property and free markets. These social institutions serve as important bulwarks of individual and group initiative against state planning. Free markets form an important structural component of a good society, from the conservative perspective, because they allow individuals and the groups to which they belong to work and trade together, free from undue interference from politicians seeking to dictate what people should make or buy, or how they should live. But economic goals are not ends in themselves. In particular, economic efficiency, measured in the short term, may dictate the elimination of jobs or entire sources of production that are of critical importance to a local community and its members. What Joseph Schumpeter called the "creative destruction" of capitalism may often be inimical to a people's existing practices and community. The conservative would choose to conserve that people's way of life rather than the unbridled search for efficiency and profits, even if that search might ultimately issue in more material comforts (at the expense of established traditions).

Ideological defenses of economic freedom are unconservative because they posit one universal spring of human action—the

desire for material gain. Such reductionism denies free will and the need for individuals to join with their fellows in common service to the common good. Thus, those in the political coalition often called the conservative movement, be they libertarian or neo-conservative, who see in capitalism the source of human goodness and progress toward ever-better societies and individuals are not, in the philosophical sense being defended here, conservative. Such individuals may join with conservatives in fighting a common foe (centralized governmental intervention), but in fact they share more with liberals than with conservatives because they seek freedom (defined merely as the absence of restraints, be they wholesome or harmful) or material progress as man's goals, rather than the leading of rich lives in a multitude of diverse local associations.

Like most movements, the conservative political movement has brought together people of differing viewpoints on the basis of certain important shared goals. The conservative movement has undergone changes in recent decades as the threat posed by communism has waned, which has deprived the movement of an issue that in the past provided significant cohesion and motivation for cooperation. As a result, philosophical cleavages in the movement have become more pronounced and cooperation between segments with differing viewpoints more difficult to sustain. Moreover, conservatism as a distinct body of thought is concerned more with preserving and enriching the Western tradition of political, religious, and social thought and institutions than with "progress" for its own sake, even if that progress is brought about through economic prosperity. Conservatives, following their philosophical godfather, Burke, believe that any society that maintains decent rules of public conduct, allowing families to form and maintain their integrity, encouraging individuals to form groups with their fellows



in pursuit of common ends and respecting the central role of religion in the lives of its people, is worthy of deference and loyalty. But it is specifically to the Western tradition—informed and shaped by Judeo-Christian institutions, beliefs, and practices—that they look for the model of a proper society and social order.

Conservatives believe that there is a natural order to the universe, governed by a natural law that gives mankind general rules concerning how to shape their lives in common and as individuals. The natural law is not a detailed code, spelling out how men should act in every possible situation. But it provides general guidelines prohibiting acts such as murder and indicating the central importance of moral decency (best summed up in the Golden Rule) and of institutions, like the family, in which alone decent character can be formed. Traditions flesh out these general principles (for example, some societies rely more on extended families than do others). But should individuals or societies violate natural law principles, such as by devaluing the family and its life- and generations-long ties, they will find themselves suffering (for example, through an increase in juvenile crime and alienation), because natural law tells us what is needed to form decent lives for ourselves and our communities.

Some have argued that this moral vision can be sustained without recourse to religion. But philosophers at least from Cicero onward have acknowledged that natural law is not fully coherent in the absence of a creator and recognition that men are meant not to live as the flies of a summer, but rather for eternity, and that their good must be therefore measured in light of eternity rather than short-term gain or pleasure. Moreover, while some individuals can discover the principles of natural law through reason, to put them into practice in a manner that makes sense for their community requires far more. It requires immersion in a living culture,

habituation to the proper ways of acting, genuine affection for one's fellows that only grows from daily interaction and, perhaps most important, religion. Conservatives are defenders of culture, and culture comes from the cult, or religious practices of a people. A people grows together from its common worship. As individuals develop common liturgical practices, be they a formal liturgy or the simple singing of hymns, they also develop social habits concerning things like cuisine, art, and daily ritual. These common habits bind them together as a people into a common culture. They also tie, forever, the culture of a people with its common religion.

The Judeo-Christian tradition at the root of Western civilization is doubly important because it provides the fullest, most coherent understanding available concerning human nature and the proper goals of man and society. The West inherits from the Israelites, to whom God gave the Ten Commandments through Moses, the understanding that religious norms are superior to those of politics—that we should kneel before God, not Caesar, and that religious, higher law norms must be enunciated and put forward vigorously by religious leaders who are institutionally separated from political leaders. Our civilization owes to Christianity the understanding that the character of each individual is crucial, that each of us is created in the image of God and is capable of salvation as an individual, seeking communion with the creator. Thus conservatives, in keeping with their tradition, value each life as sacred, free, and responsible, with duties, rights, and a central goal of leading a life as much in accordance with the will of God as is humanly possible.

The conservative vision is deeply tied to the tradition of Christian humanism, in which each of us has the right and the duty to serve God in our vocations and daily relations. The institutions, beliefs, and practices to which conservatives are attached are in



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many ways universal: all of us have the potential to lead good lives of piety and service to the families, associations, and societies into which we are born. But the constitutional freedoms and ordered liberty that have grown from the Western tradition, being intimately tied with Western culture and religion, are not easily transferred to other societies. This means that conservatives, unlike their neoconservative allies, are loath to become greatly involved, particularly at the level of state action, with other cultures. While the saving of souls and the undertaking of other charitable acts are worthy endeavors, to attempt to simply transplant Western political and cultural institutions abroad, in the conservative vision, is prideful and wrongheaded. Thus, while defending families, local associations, private property, and free markets may be conservative, attempting to export a particular version or combination of these natural goods may disrupt or even destroy a society and, by disturbing people's time-tested expectations, the exporter does evil where he should do good. It is central to the conservative temperament that, in politics as in medicine, one should first do no harm.

—BRUCE FROHNEN

### Further Reading

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*See also:* authority; Buke, Edmund; Buckley, William F., Jr.; common law; custom; family; ideology; individualism; Kirk, Russell; liberty; mediating structures; moral imagination; natural law; prejudice; prescription; progress; rule of law; science and scientism; technology; tradition; traditionalism

### Conservatism in America

Penned by a distinguished professor of political science at Cornell University, Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (1955), subtitled in its 1962 edition “The Thankless Persuasion,” reflected the attempt by academic elites in the early 1950s to understand the emerging conservative movement in America. Rossiter was sympathetic with some elements of the conservative critique of the period, but maintained that his goal was “to sober and strengthen the American liberal tradition, not to destroy it.”

In *Conservatism in America*, Rossiter argued that, at least in America, conservatism was a matter of subrational “temperament” rather than a set of political principles. In fact, he wrote, “the reasonable man finds conservatism hard to embrace because he is asked to distrust reason.” He saw only a slight difference between a “conservative liberal” and a “liberal conservative,” and argued that liberalism and conservatism were essentially and properly united within a Whig view of history. Quoting Macaulay favorably, he argued that the conservatives’ role was to defend the “progress” made by the previous generation of liberals. In America, liberals would seek to “enlarge” liberties and conservatives to “preserve” them, but the direction of American history toward more liberty—or more liberalism—was clear and inexorable. In Rossiter’s view, the conservatives’ foremost duty was “to bring stability to the national community.”

This role Rossiter was willing to concede to American conservatives; but he would concede little more. Following Louis Hartz, he claimed that “the American tradition” is “liberalism.” To Rossiter this meant that only a temperamental conservatism in substantial agreement with liberal principles could prosper in America. He recognized that in his time there were some Americans committed to drawing links between genuinely non-