

*The Conservative Intellectual
Movement in America
Since 1945*

Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition

George H. Nash

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*To my sister
and
in memory of my parents*



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*Preface to the
Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition*

Three decades have now elapsed since the book before you was published in its original form. In the lives of men and women, as well as the cycles of book publishing, such a period of time can constitute an epoch.

So it has been for the subject of the pages that follow. When *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* was first published, Ronald Reagan was a former governor of California with no apparent political future, and George W. Bush a young oilman in Texas. Journals like *First Things*, the *New Criterion*, and the *Weekly Standard* did not exist. While intelligent conservatism was clearly on the upswing in the 1970s, it was still a minority phenomenon, especially in the academic community. Abroad, Lech Walesa was an unknown Polish electrician, Vaclav Havel a persecuted Czech playwright, and Margaret Thatcher the new leader of a British Conservative Party that was out of power. The pontificate of Pope John Paul II had not yet begun, and the Berlin Wall stood firm. The Cold War was very much a reality.

And yet, as I reread these pages, mostly written in graduate school, I am struck by how contemporary their subject still

seems. Despite the corrosive passage of time and the ephemerality of so much public discourse, the conservative intellectual movement chronicled in this book has not faded into quaint irrelevance. It has not become history. To the contrary, it has *made* history and it is still making history—to the point that, for adherents and detractors alike, it is more relevant to our nation’s life than ever before.

For this reason alone, it seems fitting that my book remain accessible to readers in a new edition, reflecting the developments of recent years. There is another reason as well: since the early 1990s, and especially since 2001, the conservative movement has entered a period of introspection and fractiousness not seen, in such acute form, since the early 1960s. Gladdened by political victories, yet disappointed with their fruits, many on the Right are seeking to reorient and even redefine the conservative mission in a post-Cold War, post-9/11 world. In such confusing circumstances, it is usually helpful to “remember who we are” or have come to be. As thoughtful conservatives feel impelled to reexamine their first principles, perhaps this study of modern American conservatism’s intellectual history will provide some edifying perspective.

“The only thing that’s new in the world is the history you don’t know,” Winston Churchill once remarked. It is my hope that students of all persuasions, especially students who call themselves conservatives, will find in this book some history that they “don’t know” but will want to know, if they would truly understand the national debates raging around them.

For this thirtieth-anniversary edition, I have essentially let stand the portions of the book first published in 1976. What I called the Epilogue in the second edition (published in 1996) has become, with a few modifications, Chapter 12 here. The Bibliographical Postscript of 1996 has been revised and expanded to encompass the surge in scholarship about conservatism in

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the past decade. My Conclusion (“Whither Conservatism?”) is new. It has been drawn, in part, from an essay that will appear in Charles W. Dunn, ed., *The Future of American Conservatism* (ISI Books, 2007).

Many people have influenced and facilitated the preparation of this volume in its successive versions. In my Acknowledgments pages I cite those individuals who contributed to the process of study and reflection that culminated in the first edition. In this Preface it is a pleasure to mention those who made a second—and now third—edition possible. For initiating the reprint project that eventuated in the second edition a decade ago, I am grateful to Jeffrey O. Nelson of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI). To Mr. Nelson and his former assistant Brooke Daley (now Brooke Haas), I repeat my earlier thanks for skillfully shepherding this book to publication. In this task I benefited from the able and conscientious proofreading assistance of Andrea Gralenski, Catherine Lulves Hancock, Michael Hancock, Mary Slayton, Jean Nash, and G. Harlan Nash. I remain grateful to them all.

It was Jeremy Beer, the editor in chief at ISI Books, who gave me the welcome news of ISI’s intention to bring out a thirtieth-anniversary edition. It has been a pleasure to work with him, Jennifer Connolly, and their colleagues on this endeavor. For proofreading and copyediting assistance this time around, I thank Jennifer Connolly, Emma Kuipers, and Nancy Nash. For preparation of the index I thank Megan Muncy. For providing a congenial environment in which I prepared this new edition (and much else in recent years) I am indebted to the dedicated librarians of Mount Holyoke College. For typing assistance and computer support cheerfully rendered on this and many other projects, I especially thank Emma Kuipers, who always came through with flying colors.

Finally, in the world of historical scholarship relatively few

publications attain an active shelf life beyond their publishing season. If the book before you has been an exception, much of the credit must go to the good people at ISI Books. From the outset of our association, they have treated my volume as more than a product to be marketed. They have discerned both a need for the book, and an audience for it, among the rising generation of college and graduate students. No author could hope for a more enthusiastic publisher.

For prolonging the book's shelf life I also happily acknowledge my subject: the conservative intellectuals who, in defiance of criticism and even ostracism, pursued their callings, raised their banners, and refused to vanish into the so-called dustbin of history. No scholar could have a more cooperative group to study: thirty years later, they and their intellectual heirs are still shaping the American conversation. Because they have persevered, so, too, must those who would undertake to explain them. Hence the book which is now in your hands.

South Hadley, Massachusetts

June 29, 2006

Acknowledgments

Probably every historian who engages in scholarly research soon becomes aware of the dual nature of his craft. On the one hand, his work is usually solitary; on the other, it is supported by, and even dependent upon, the contributions of those who make him aware of the larger community to which his work is eventually addressed. As this project now passes from the scholar's study into public view, it is with deep satisfaction that I contemplate the many people who at one stage or another contributed, directly or indirectly, to my undertaking. With particular pleasure I thank Donald Fleming of Harvard University for his unfailing encouragement, scholarly example, and wise counsel. To Frank Freidel of Harvard I express my appreciation for his helpful advice and continuing interest as my work developed. I am pleased to thank Bernard Bailyn, Oscar Handlin, and my other professors at Harvard for their roles in the process of professional training which has culminated in this volume.

I am indebted as well to the many conservative intellectuals and others (listed in the Appendix) whom I corresponded with and, in many cases, interviewed. Their cooperation was invaluable, and their assistance to my research has been one of the most enjoyable aspects of my entire project. Although it would be impossible to cite here every instance of their courtesy and helpfulness, I must record my special thanks to William F. Buckley Jr. for granting me complete and unrestricted access to his collection of papers at Yale University—a generous and thoughtful act for which I am grateful. I am happy to acknowledge the permission of Mrs. T. S. Eliot to quote from three of her husband's unpublished letters to Russell Kirk; the permission of Mrs. Maxwell Anderson and Brandt & Brandt to quote from Maxwell Anderson's poem "Churchill," copyright © 1965 by Gilda Oakleaf Anderson; and the permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston to use a passage from Robert Frost's poem "Reluctance." In addition, I express my thanks and appreciation to the persons and institutions that graciously permitted me to quote from correspondence, interviews, and other sources essential to this study.

An additional list of friends, associates, and acquaintances helped to make my own research experience a fundamentally agreeable one and, in ways great and small, affected the preparation of my book: Paul Neuthaler and Keri Christenfeld at Basic Books, Geoffrey Horn, professors, fellow graduate students, colleagues at the Charles Warren Center and in the Senior Common Room at Lowell House, my students and other inquiring Harvard undergraduates, a bevy of typists, and the archivists of the libraries listed in the Bibliographical Essay. Rather than attempt to compose a long list which would risk omitting some who belong on it, I simply offer here my gratitude—no less sincerely felt, I hope, for being extended to so many. If any of them read this book, I trust they will recognize

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that it is to them that I render my thanks for making this project so rewarding to me and, I hope, worth the effort.

And, of course, my family—indefatigable cheerleaders, ever thoughtful critics, proofreaders extraordinary: qualities that cannot begin to exhaust my reasons for dedicating this book to them.



Introduction

This book is about conservative intellectuals—those engaged in study, reflection, and speculation; purveyors of ideas; scholars and journalists. It is not a chronicle of political campaigns or an examination of the careers of such right-wing politicians of recent times as Robert Taft, Barry Goldwater, or Ronald Reagan, men primarily involved in the hurly-burly of everyday politics. Nor is it concerned with the much-publicized “Radical Right” organizations which received extraordinary attention in the 1960s. While extremists of the Right were often energetic in the period covered by this study, their contribution to conservatism as an intellectual force was negligible.

The focus of this book is on a “movement”—a movement of ideas, but one with visibly nonacademic and political aspirations. Conservatism in America after World War II was no closet philosophy or esoteric sect, at least not for long. It was a decidedly activist force whose thrust was outward toward the often uncongenial America of the mid-twentieth century. An intellectual movement in a narrow sense it certainly was, yet one whose objective was not simply to understand the world but to change it, restore it, preserve it.

Because this is an examination of what I have labeled “conservatism” in the postwar period, readers may perhaps expect a definition: what is conservatism? For those who have examined the subject, this is a perennial question; many are the writers who have searched for the elusive answer. Such an a priori effort, I have concluded, is misdirected. I doubt that there is any single, satisfactory, all-encompassing definition of the complex phenomenon called conservatism, the content of which varies enormously with time and place. It may even be true that conservatism is inherently resistant to precise definition. Many right-wingers, in fact, have argued that conservatism by its very nature is not an elaborate ideology at all.

There are, to be sure, a number of definitions which are inadequate and tendentious. Thus, on occasion conservatism is equated with mindless defense of the status quo, *any* status quo; under such a usage even Stalinist Russia, Maoist China, or any other revolutionary state could be called “conservative” once the revolutionaries had managed to entrench themselves. Sometimes conservatism has been blandly defined as an attitude toward “change”; under such a usage even Fabian Socialists who believed in the “inevitability of gradualness” might be labeled conservatives. Such definitions seem superficial and indiscriminating. On the other hand, some are unduly restrictive. Thus, intellectual conservatism has sometimes been confused with the Radical Right. Frequently, it has been associated with European experiences, such as feudalism, aristocracy, and the Middle Ages—a device often used to explain away conservatism (Mr. X is not conservative, he is “really” something else; America has no conservatives; we are “really” all liberals). Attempts to define conservatism abstractly and universally or in terms of one peculiar set of historical circumstances have led many writers into a terminological thicket.

How shall we extricate ourselves? Great as is the temptation

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to construct a pattern of my own, I have deliberately refrained from what I believe to be a dubious enterprise. The subject of this book is conservatism as an intellectual movement *in America, in a particular period*. Not all conservatism; not conservatism as an illustration of an archetype derived, perhaps, from a study of feudalism or the Middle Ages. Rather, conservatism as it existed, in a certain time and in a certain place. Conservatism identifiable as resistance to certain forces perceived to be leftist, revolutionary, and profoundly subversive of what conservatives at the time deemed worth cherishing, defending, and perhaps dying for.

At some point, however, an insistent reader may still object to my use of the word “conservative.” How, it may be asked, can you label someone a conservative when he was “actually” a nineteenth-century liberal? How can you include an émigré royalist from Europe in a study of the American Right? How can you discuss individuals who deny that they are conservatives or even intellectuals? To these questions one answer, I hope, will suffice: I have designated various people as conservatives either because they called themselves conservatives or because others (who did call themselves conservatives) regarded them as part of their conservative intellectual movement. I have counted diverse people within the conservative fold because study shows that, existentially, they belonged to the American conservative ranks in the postwar period. Whatever our sense (or their sense) of the propriety of these alignments may be, that was the way it was. The reality was that all sorts of people have comprised the conservative intellectual movement in the United States in the years since 1945. This is the reality I have attempted to portray.

So I offer here no compact definition of conservatism. In fact, American conservatives themselves have had no such agreed-upon definition. Instead, the very quest for self-definition has

been one of the most notable motifs of their thought since World War II. All the more reason, then, to examine this movement in its intriguing complexity, on its own terms, and to illuminate the various streams of conservative consciousness. All the more reason to dispense with defining “true” conservatism and to get on with the task of explaining what conscious conservatism in the United States has been since World War II.

In 1945 no articulate, coordinated, self-consciously conservative intellectual force existed in the United States. There were, at most, scattered voices of protest, profoundly pessimistic about the future of their country. Gradually during the first postwar decade these voices multiplied, acquired an audience, and began to generate an intellectual movement. In the beginning one finds not one right-wing renaissance but three, the subjects of the first several chapters of this book. First, there were “classical liberals,” or “libertarians,” resisting the threat of the ever expanding State to liberty, private enterprise, and individualism. Convinced that America was rapidly drifting toward statism (socialism), these intellectuals offered an alternative that achieved some scholarly and popular influence by the mid-1950s. Concurrently and independently, a second school of thought was emerging: the “new conservatism” or “traditionalism” of such men as Richard Weaver, Peter Viereck, Russell Kirk, and Robert Nisbet. Shocked by totalitarianism, total war, and the development of secular, rootless, mass society during the 1930s and 1940s, the “new conservatives” urged a return to traditional religions and ethical absolutes and a rejection of the “relativism” which had allegedly corroded Western values and produced an intolerable vacuum that was filled by demonic ideologies. Third, there appeared a militant, evangelistic anti-Communism, shaped decisively by a number of influential ex-radicals of the 1930s, including Whittaker Chambers, James Burnham, Frank Meyer, and many more. These former men of

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the Left brought to the postwar Right a profound conviction that the West was engaged in a titanic struggle with an implacable adversary—Communism—which sought nothing less than conquest of the world.

While no impassable gulf separated these three components of the intellectual Right, and while each shared a deep antipathy to twentieth-century liberalism, the need for consolidation of the conservative camp was urgent by the mid-1950s. Through the medium of various journals and organizations this task was gradually accomplished. Still, the forging of a movement out of such extremely diverse materials created certain intellectual problems for the Right by the early 1960s. What—besides a common foe—bound them together? Behind what principles and aspirations could they coalesce? What intellectual legitimacy did the conservative movement have? In addition, conservatives confronted a second crucial intellectual challenge: the search for an authentically American conservative heritage. What was conservatism in America? How should the Right refute the recurrent criticism that conservatism was “un-American” because the United States was really a “liberal” country? To these fundamental questions conservatives gave a variety of answers. Their responses—and their continuing efforts to achieve coherence and self-understanding—are the subject of chapters five through eight.

But conservatives were by no means constantly preoccupied with internal, theoretical issues and controversies. For in the 1960s a momentous transformation of the Right began to occur: a transition from minority to potentially majority status in American politics and culture. These were years of preparation for American conservatives. Right-wing critiques of liberal foreign and domestic policies were expounded with increasing sophistication and effectiveness, while conservatives strove to develop intellectually serious and practical alternatives. Al-

though the polarization of the 1960s produced tensions within the conservative community, it also generated new alignments that facilitated the emergence of conservatism as a powerful intellectual and political force. Through a proliferating network of journals, books, organizations, and political alliances, the intellectual Right steadily approached maturity and recognition—until, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it achieved its long-sought breakthrough. Twenty-five years earlier it had been almost an underground phenomenon. By 1972 conservatives had gained a national audience and had won a chance to exercise national leadership.

During the period under review, conservative intellectuals produced a large—and, toward the end, enormous—literature. It has not been possible to analyze here every book and essay written by every conservative intellectual, major and minor, since 1945. Nor has it been possible to examine the thought of every person who might be labeled a “conservative” in every field from politics to literature, and from science to art. It has been necessary to be selective, to concentrate on the writings of those individuals who, in my judgment, contributed most to the postwar conservative resurgence as an organized intellectual (and ultimately political) force. In 1945 “conservatism” was not a popular word in America, and its spokesmen were without much influence in their native land. A generation later these once isolated voices had become a chorus, a significant intellectual and political movement which had an opportunity to shape the nation’s destiny. This transformation and its architects are the subject of the pages that follow.