

Introduction

Conservatism on Center Stage

Charles W. Dunn

The future, as always, is veiled from our vision. But for the moment the conservative intellectual movement in America, born in the wilderness a generation ago, has undeniably achieved an unprecedented level of influence and importance.

George H. Nash¹

CONSERVATISM, ONCE ON THE wings of the American political stage, now plays a leading role. But despite its emergence as a powerful political force, misunderstandings abound about conservatism's meaning and nature—economically, philosophically, politically, religiously, and socially.²

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln provided a succinct definition of conservatism at New York City's Cooper Union: "Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried?"³ But this simple understanding of conservatism masks important differences among its adherents. Indeed, American conservatism is best characterized by complexity, not simplicity. First, although it is commonly considered an ideology, many of conservatism's foremost intellectuals dispute this notion. Second, although it is often simply presented as a counterbalance to liberalism, conservatism's relationship to liberalism is complicated and contested. Third, although it is thought to embody a common set of principles, its principles frequently conflict. Fourth, although many leading intellectuals, liberal and conservative, believe that conservatism

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lacks a significant tradition in America, it has contributed more to American life than is usually acknowledged. Fifth, although it is usually thought to instill homogeneity among its adherents, in truth conservatism is marked by a great deal of intellectual heterogeneity. And sixth, although the public views it primarily as a political movement, conservatism's strength rests less in the realm of pragmatic politics than it does in the realm of ideas. In other words, conservatism in America is far from monolithic.

Conservatism Defined

Yet despite this complexity and the manifold differences among conservatives, the following definition captures the mainstream of conservative thought. Conservatism is the defense of inherited political, economic, religious, and social traditions from the forces of abrupt change, based upon the belief that to maintain continuity and stability in society, established customs, laws, and mores should guide change.

To amplify this definition by contrasting it with liberalism, conservatives generally (1) place more emphasis on orthodox and traditional religious values, (2) express less faith in the goodness, reason, and perfectibility of mankind, (3) voice greater opposition to the power of centralized government, (4) place a greater emphasis on state and local governments than they do the national government in the federal system, (5) identify with nationalism more than with internationalism, and as such tend to be less supportive of the United Nations and other international organizations, (6) express a more fervent patriotic spirit, (7) put greater emphasis upon the responsibilities and duties of individuals than upon their rights, (8) trust capitalism and free markets more than government regulation in determining economic policy, and (9) believe that gradual changes within existing institutions offer the best way to ensure society's economic, political, religious, and social health.

Ten Canons of Conservatism

This process of comparing conservatism to liberalism helps to give us an idea of its shape. But given the complexity of conservatism, does it offer a generally accepted set of principles? Do certain ideas almost always mark conservatism, regardless of its myriad manifestations? In a nutshell, can conservatism be boiled down to several readily identifiable canons? By synthesizing the conservative tenets articulated by a variety of conservative thinkers, it is possible to answer "yes" to this question. The ten canons presented here represent a sort of conservative intellectual synthesis.

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First, continuity stands out as the most widely accepted canon of conservative thought, which comes as no surprise, because conservatives place a high value on order in society. Preferring organic change to revolution, conservatives oppose large-scale and abrupt alterations that disrupt and unsettle society. Their respect for the past reflects a desire to incorporate change within existing community institutions, standards, and traditions, making continuity from generation to generation the most essential canon of conservative thought.

Second, authority manifests itself as a natural corollary of conservatives' preference for continuity in social order. Conservatives believe that the government must protect society from foreign challenges and domestic disturbances that would disrupt the continuity of community, but critics sometimes attack conservatives for an apparent contradiction between supporting increased government spending for the protection of society and accusing the government of over-taxing and over-spending. But a coherent philosophy rests beneath this seeming contradiction. Because of a passion for order, conservatives believe that the government's primary function is to protect society against foreign threats and to keep order at home. Conservatives see the government as the most effective means of protecting against the selfish appetites of men, such aggression being manifest in both the aggression of foreign nations and domestic disregard for civil authority. On the other hand, because conservatives believe in incremental and organic change, they distrust efforts to alter society through centralized governmental power and planning—which, of course, require high taxes and spending. For conservatives, the primary purpose of government is to protect, not alter, organically developed human society.

Third, community must come near the top of a list of fundamental conservative tenets, for conservatives believe communities provide the structure for organic change and serve as a countervailing force against the power that is concentrated in government. Conservatives also believe that human flourishing is nourished by the individual's inclusion within a dense web of private and voluntary organizations, including professional associations, churches, service groups, universities, trade unions, newspapers, private businesses, and local governmental institutions.

Fourth, deity holds a place on most lists of conservative tenets, if for no other reason than this: conservatives usually believe in traditional moral values, and are distrustful of human nature. Put another way, they believe that natural or divine law transcends human law, which makes man and government ultimately accountable to God.

Fifth, duty or personal responsibility ranks higher in conservative thinking than does the concept of individual rights. When rights come to trump individual responsibilities, conservatives contend, citizens come to think more

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about what government can do for them rather than what they can, and ought to do for themselves. This leads not only to statism, but also to social and moral decay.

Sixth, democracy in the conservative mind exists within the context of a constitutional order carefully designed not only to limit and separate governmental power, but also to refine democratic opinion and encourage deliberation. Because the Constitution circumscribes in precise terms governmental activity, conservatives advocate its “strict interpretation,” contending that the courts should interpret the law rather than make it, thereby observing the “original intentions” of the founders in framing the American constitutional system.

Seventh, property and its ownership enable individuals to have a greater stake in society, according to conservatives, who maintain that when people are tied in this concrete way to their communities, they are more likely to function as responsible citizens who desire to preserve the social order. A sound social order not only creates opportunities for people to own property, thereby strengthening their ties to the community, but it also helps them to rise in economic and social status. The opportunity to own property is therefore basic to a humane and free society.

Eighth, although conservatives value both liberty and equality, they consider liberty significantly more important to the vitality of society. A dynamic and developing society requires liberty to encourage creativity, and equality of opportunity to prevent serious social unrest. Conservatives believe that people have the right to equality of opportunity, but not equality of results. Arbitrary standards of equality, enforced by a burdensome and costly governmental bureaucracy, stultify and numb the desire of the individual to create and excel and, therefore, diminish the dynamic development of society. Totalitarianism, as in the former Soviet Union, emphasizes equality of results rather than equality of opportunity. And in some democracies, such as the Scandinavian countries, cradle-to-grave social welfare policies have driven tax rates to as high as 50 percent, crushing individual initiative and creativity.

Ninth, the principle of meritocracy reflects conservatives’ belief that merit, or talent, ought to be the primary factor in the selection of leaders. Conservatives believe that orders and classes of people naturally exist in society and that the leadership class helps to provide order by guiding and governing society. Because the American founders rejected the idea of an aristocratic leadership class composed of titled nobles, conservatives in America believe in a “natural aristocracy” open to those whose ability qualifies them for membership.

Tenth, antipathy to communism abroad and a more intrusive central government at home, reflected in such legislative initiatives as the New Deal, Fair Deal, and Great Society, historically played a major role in bringing

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together conservatives of different persuasions during its formative years. Nearly all of the foremost conservative works of the 1940s and 1950s attacked the centralized state, a tendency taken to its extreme in communist nations.

The Emergence of Contemporary Conservatism

More than any other public figure in American history, Ronald Reagan manifested all of these tenets in his personal life and philosophy. Decisively influenced by the conservative intellectual movement of the post–World War II decades, he became America’s most effective popularizer of the diverse strands of conservative political philosophy that emerged in the postwar era, which included both American and European thinkers.

In 1950 Lionel Trilling declared in *The Liberal Imagination* that in America “liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative . . . ideas in general circulation.”⁴ But even as Trilling chiseled an epitaph on the conservative tombstone, contemporary conservatism had already risen from the dead as a reaction to communism’s rise internationally and to the emergence of a powerful central government in Washington after the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. These rapid changes, which struck at core conservative beliefs, sparked a remarkably effective intellectual backlash, both in America and abroad, that would culminate in Reagan’s presidency.

In 1944 Friedrich von Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom* challenged the rise of a state-managed economy, whether in the form of communism or New Deal liberalism.⁵ In 1948 Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* argued that the dominant ideas of liberalism would produce disastrous consequences for personal freedom and the social order.⁶ In 1949 Ludwig von Mises’ *Human Action* presented a powerful case for the superiority of free-market economics.⁷ And also in 1949, Peter Viereck’s *Conservatism Revisited* drew praise from *The Times of London* for laying out a set of traditional conservative principles based upon the ideas of British parliamentarian Edmund Burke.⁸ These books represent but a few of the thoughtful presentations of conservatism that boldly attempted to resist liberalism’s ascendancy in America’s universities and public institutions.

Shortly thereafter, in rapid-fire succession between 1950 and 1953, there appeared on the scene many influential conservative books building upon the pioneering work of Hayek and Weaver, including but certainly not limited to William F. Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale* (1951),⁹ Eric Vogelin’s *The New Science of Politics* (1952),¹⁰ Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* (1953),¹¹ Leo Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* (1953),¹² and Robert Nisbet’s *The Quest for Community* (1953).¹³ All of these books, whether written before or after 1950,

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continue to enjoy significant influence more than five decades later among various schools of conservative thought.

Appearing like a double fortissimo on a musical score expressing the crescendo of influential conservative books, Clinton Rossiter's *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion* received the Charles A. Beard Memorial Prize in 1955. Rossiter's book not only won a major literary award, but it sparked a heated debate about the meaning of conservatism. Some viewed Rossiter's book as a defense of the mainstream or moderate center of American politics rather than as an effective counterweight to liberalism's hegemony. Regardless, conservatism had come of age.¹⁴

Not only have these writers had continuing influence for more than fifty years, but others have followed in their footsteps, including Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winners. Among the leading conservative authors and their books since the mid-1950s are Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962),¹⁵ James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent* (1962),¹⁶ Forrest McDonald, *E Pluribus Unum* (1965),¹⁷ Edward Banfield, *The Unheavenly City* (1970),¹⁸ Harvey Mansfield, *The Spirit of Liberalism* (1978),¹⁹ George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (1981),²⁰ Herbert Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were For* (1981),²¹ Richard Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (1984),²² Charles Murray, *Losing Ground* (1984),²³ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987),²⁴ E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (1987),²⁵ and Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character* (1991).²⁶

The titles alone illustrate the breadth and division of conservatism's competing interests, which Ronald Reagan had to balance in his efforts to popularize conservatism and convert it into an effective political message that could successfully do battle with the powerful forces of modern liberalism.

The Wings of Modern Conservatism

In the modern era, five distinct wings of the conservative movement, both intellectually and politically, emerged from this diverse flowering of conservative thought just described: neoconservatives, libertarians, Midwestern conservatives, traditionalists, and religious conservatives. Ronald Reagan blended all of these schools of conservative thought in his successful effort to advance the popular cause of conservatism. Although distinctive, the five wings overlap and influence one another because they possess several common interests.

Neoconservatives—former liberals perhaps best personified by venerable figures such as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz—began to take refuge under the conservative tent during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Disaffected by liberalism's increasing fondness during that era for a weaker military and

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greatly enlarged social programs, neoconservatives found themselves attracted to the conservative ideals of nationalism and a slower rate of social change. But geographically located primarily in the Northeast, particularly New York City, they do not share the same religious and cultural convictions as many of those conservatives who live in the South, Midwest, and Sunbelt states.

Libertarians appear to their critics to be chameleons; they certainly cannot be categorized easily as either conventional liberals or conservatives. On one hand, they ardently advocate autonomy of the individual, a minimal role for government, and a vibrant free-market economy. But on the other, they often oppose governmental action to limit or ban abortion, measures to allow school prayer, and other initiatives supported by traditional conservatives, who argue that libertarians, by placing undue emphasis on liberty, embrace a form of unbridled individualism that fails to respect community customs and traditions.

Midwestern conservatives often differ from other conservatives, particularly those in the South and Sunbelt. Laying claim to the pragmatic mantle of Abraham Lincoln, they are less ideological and more prone to compromise, as illustrated by the legislative leadership provided by many among their ranks over the decades, including Senators Robert A. Taft, Everett McKinley Dirksen and Robert Dole, and President Gerald Ford. Political philosophy guides but does not govern Midwestern conservatism, unlike the emergent conservative leaders from the South and Sunbelt, symbolized best by Newt Gingrich. For pragmatic and humanitarian reasons, Midwestern conservatives may even promote policies that would enlarge the size and scope of the national government. Thus, Senator Taft advocated public housing during the late 1940s, while Senator Dirksen provided the absolutely essential support needed to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Traditionalist conservatives, often called paleoconservatives, look to thinkers like Richard Weaver, Russell Kirk, and the Southern Agrarians for intellectual guidance. Traditionalists once stood in the vanguard of the modern conservative movement, providing substantial intellectual leadership over several decades, beginning especially during the 1940s. On the home front, they reacted to excesses of liberalism in American society, brought about by a greatly enlarged national government through the New Deal, Fair Deal, New Frontier, and Great Society. And on the foreign front, they boldly spoke out against the threat of utopian communism. Their leaders included the aforementioned Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley, Robert Nisbet, and many others.

Religious conservatives are in many ways the first cousins or fraternal twins of traditional conservatives. For example, they share a common concern about the breakdown in America's social order. But religious conservatives,

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who include evangelical Christians, conservative Roman Catholics, most Mormons, and some Jews, express particular disdain for the rise of abortion, homosexuality, and other affronts to their religious heretics. Their intellectual and political leaders include such figures as Stanley Jaki, author of *The Absolute Beneath the Relative* (1988), and Francis Schaeffer, author of *How Should We Then Live?* (1983), James Dobson of Focus on the Family, and William Donohue of the Catholic League.

Conservatism and the Challenge of the Post-Reagan Era

Ronald Reagan rode the power of this diverse intellectual and political coalition to victory in 1980, promising the country an alternative to failures liberalism's at home and its defeatist appeasement of global communism abroad. Reagan was a true master in delivering in concrete and rhetorical ways the political goods that each of the distinct wings of his electoral coalition desired. For neoconservative and other anticommunist nationalists, Reagan provided an unprecedented military build-up to fight and defeat the forces and proxies of Soviet communism. For libertarians and pro-business Republicans, he pushed through a 30 percent across-the-board tax cut, regulatory relief, and reductions in domestic discretionary spending. For Midwestern conservatives, he delivered opposition to affirmative action, anti-crime legislation, and consistent rhetorical flourishes extolling the merits of American exceptionalism and patriotism. And for traditionalist and religious conservatives, Reagan saved up originalist judges, anti-abortion political appointees, and the rhetoric of family values.

Since the passing of Ronald Reagan, no political leader has emerged who could so adroitly balance conservatism's deep philosophical and political divisions while also responding effectively to new realities and challenges.

Of course, one of the new realities conservatives face today is a product of Reagan's success—the passing of Soviet communism into the dustbin of history. Opposition to communism—its atheism, utopianism, statism, and expansionism—was truly the glue that kept all of the wings of the postwar conservative coalition together. Without it, today there is far less to unite, for example, traditionalist conservatives and libertarians, and as the current efforts to combat global terrorism and rogue regimes demonstrate, these contemporary enemies have done more to divide conservatives than to bring them together. Needless to say, these are different times than when Reagan's brand of anticommunist nationalism fused the disparate wings of American conservatism into a united political force.

In addition to new geopolitical realities, there have emerged other distinct challenges to a developed conservative worldview. Among these challenges

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is postmodernism, which through an ironizing of language and meaning especially undermines conservatism's desire for order and stability. In his ten-volume *Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee concluded that civilizations rarely collapse from conquest or invasion, but rather typically fall through a form of cultural suicide, abandoning their inherited beliefs for something—almost anything—new.²⁷ Culturally, nothing is more important than language; words provide coherence and cohesion to society, relating to one another and collectively shaping the significance of reality and defining the meaning of life. When words lose consistent and coherent meaning, they no longer serve as dependable points of reference or anchors of stability.²⁸

But there are other challenges as well, some of them related to our postmodern condition, as the contributors to this volume make clear. In the pages that follow, some of today's most insightful conservative scholars, writers, and pundits examine the major issues that confront twenty-first-century conservatism. They address such matters as:

- Ronald Reagan's conservative character and leadership legacy;
- the economic, philosophical, political, religious, and social impact of conservatism on American society;
- divisions, tensions, and critical problems facing American conservatism; and
- the impact of contemporary American foreign policy on the unity of the conservative coalition.

As these authors demonstrate, conservatism's strength has always rested in the realm of ideas, which fueled the fire of the so-called "Reagan Revolution." So long as conservatism emphasizes philosophy over the realm of pragmatism and politics, it will have a formidable future. Serving as the principal political instrument for the advancement of conservative thought, Ronald Reagan understood the truth alluded to by the title of Richard Weaver's classic book, *Ideas Have Consequences*.²⁹ Ideas endure, politicians change. Contemporary conservatives of all persuasions would be wise to heed that crucial insight.