

The Roots of Modern Conservative Thought from Burke to Kirk

Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D.

America is the most successful and enduring experiment in democracy in human history. It has survived foreign invasion and terrorist attacks, world wars and a civil war, a great depression and not so small recessions, presidential assassinations and scandals, an adversary culture and even the mass media. It is the most powerful, prosperous, and envied nation in the world.

What is the source of America's remarkable success? Its abundant natural resources? Its hardworking, entrepreneurial, can-do people? Its fortuitous location midway between Europe and Asia? Its resilient national will?

Why do we Americans enjoy freedom, opportunity, and prosperity as no other people in history have?

In *The Roots of American Order*, the historian Russell Kirk provides a persuasive answer: America is not only the land of the free and the home of the brave, but a place of ordered liberty.

The roots of our liberty run deep. They were planted, Kirk says, nearly three thousand years ago by the Hebrews, who perceived "a purposeful moral existence under God."¹ The Greeks strengthened the roots with their philosophical and political self-awareness, and were followed by the Romans,

who nurtured the roots with their law and social awareness.

The roots intertwined with "the Christian understanding of human duties and human hopes, of man redeemed," and were then joined by medieval custom, learning, and valor.²

The roots were enriched, finally, by two great experiments in law and liberty that occurred in London, home of the British Parliament, and in Philadelphia, birthplace of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Kirk's analysis thus might be called a tale of five cities—Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, London, and Philadelphia.

Much more could be said about the philosophical contributions of the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans to the American experience, but I will limit myself to discuss the roots of modern conservative thought that undergird our nation and which for more than 50 years have explicitly reinforced the idea of ordered liberty.

I will focus on two great champions of liberty and order: Edmund Burke, the eloquent British parliamentarian of the late 18th century who was a supporter of American rights even as he was an implacable opponent of the French Revolution, and Russell Kirk, the Ameri-

¹ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1974), p. 672.

² *Ibid.*

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can master of letters whose seminal work *The Conservative Mind*, published in 1953, “catalyzed a self-conscious, unabashedly conservative movement” in America.³

Two significant political thinkers who provided an intellectual bridge in the 19th century: Alexis de Tocqueville, the French historian and author of the classic work *Democracy in America*, and Lord Acton, the British historian and eminent apostle of liberty also merit consideration.

EDMUND BURKE

Although separated by almost 200 years, Burke and Kirk shared much, including a deep respect for custom and tradition, an abhorrence of ideology and radicalism, and a belief in the politics and policies of prudence. Kirk’s biography of Edmund Burke is superb, and I have used it freely in this essay.

Born in Dublin in 1729, Edmund Burke was the son of a successful but not wealthy lawyer. Reared as an Anglican, he was enrolled at the age of fifteen at Trinity College. His was the usual education of the time. His favorite English authors were Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. Among the ancients he favored Virgil, Cicero, Homer, and Juvenal.

In the spring of 1750, young Burke moved to London to study law but eventually entered the profession of letters, publishing several books over the next decade, including *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful*—an indication of his far-ranging mind. In the *Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke challenged the strict rationalism of the Enlightenment. He knew that we cannot neglect the passions in the arts or in politics. He aligned himself with the French philosopher Pascal that “the Heart has reasons that the Reason cannot know.”⁴

Not yet 30, Burke found himself a literary celebrity. Sir James Mackintosh compared Burke with Shake-

spere, declaring, “His words contain an ampler store of political and moral wisdom than can be found in any other writing whatever.”⁵

Married in 1757 to Jane Mary Nugent, the daughter of a Catholic physician, Burke now called London his home.

Burke took on the editorship of a new publication—which continues to this day—*The Annual Register*, covering the major political events and papers and unusual events of the year. It was excellent training for Burke’s political career, for he had to “analyze the whole commercial, financial, constitutional, and foreign interests of Great Britain and its empire.”⁶

While editing the annual volume brought Burke prestige, it could not pay his way. And so, with a wife and children and household expenses, he was drawn into politics and the Rockingham faction of the Whig party. It was a natural alliance, as the Whigs were lovers of freedom and private property.

In July 1765, the Marquis of Rockingham became prime minister and almost immediately appointed Burke as his private secretary. In December of the same year Burke was elected to the House of Commons and began a career in Parliament that lasted 29 years. He became a national and international figure by his opposition to King George III’s colonial policies in America and India and his passionate condemnation of the French Revolution. Wherever it occurred, “the denial of justice roused Burke to greatness.”⁷

Burke’s *Speech on American Taxation*, his *Speech on Conciliation*, and *A Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* were eloquent but unsuccessful attempts to persuade George III, the Parliament, and the public of the folly of England’s policy toward the colonies and the danger of forcing Americans into accepting that policy. Burke became convinced that the colonies were lost to Britain, and he was among the first to endorse our independence. At the same time, he remained a firm believer in and

³ George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 1996), p. 67.

⁴ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke, A Genius Reconsidered* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1967), p. 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

supporter of the institution of the British monarchy, although not of each individual monarch.⁸

In the Bristol Sheriffs letter, Burke set forth his philosophy regarding the obligations of a representative to his constituents—a philosophy, lamentably, that is little practiced in the modern U.S. Congress. Burke said that the wishes of constituents should certainly carry weight with their Member of Parliament, but:

His own unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, or any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure—no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.⁹

Burke's reference to Providence provides another clue to Burkean conservatism. "The principles of true politics," Burke said, "are those of morality enlarged." Burke's politics are a branch of ethics which separates him sharply from Machiavelli and the modern idea that power is supreme in politics. Burke's basic political principles are based on the classical and Christian natural law, derived from God and perceived by good men through "right reason."¹⁰

One is tempted to say that for Edmund Burke religion is the only thing. Throughout his most famous work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke argues that religion lies at the center of civilized society, that without religion, there can be no order or even comfort in society, only chaos. "Religion is the basis

of civil society," Burke writes in *Reflections*, "and the source of all good and all comfort."¹¹

History too is central to Burke's thinking because history reveals the divine purposes for man in the temporal order. Burke believed that history taught those in public office the cardinal virtue of temperance and encouraged them to be restrained in their use of power. History provided explicit warnings from the days of ancient Rome to the present against those seeking radical change through revolution—a theme that Acton would immortalize almost a century later.

Burke concurred with other political thinkers that "society is indeed a contract," but unlike Hobbes and Rousseau, he believed it was a contract between God and man and between all the generations of history—the past, present, and unborn generations.¹²

Burke's life was one long attempt to forestall revolution. He foresaw the American Revolution but was unable to prevent its coming. He predicted that Ireland would go the way of America if reforms were not promptly made, and so it happened. He prophesied that the French Revolution "would rend Europe limb from limb until subdued by force and a master," and that too came to pass. He did not share the smug optimism of the Enlightenment that all change was good and tradition was a thing lightly cast aside.¹³ He was for gradual change rooted in the institutions of society.

Appalled by the blood that flowed from the guillotine and through the streets of Paris, Burke resolved that Britain would "not share in France's folly and that the whole of the civilized world must be awakened" to the menace of Jacobinism.¹⁴ He attacked, in particular, the fallacy of the "Rights of Man" proposed by the French revolutionaries because he saw in this abstract notion a desire to be freed of all duties. But as Nobel

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁰ Peter J. Stanlis, "Burkian Conservatism," in *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Bruce Frohnen, Jeremy Beer and Jeffrey O. Nelson (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2006), p. 107.

¹¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by Thomas H. D. Mahoney (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1952), p. 102.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Kirk, *Edmund Burke*, p. 131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

Laureate F. A. Hayek put it nearly two centuries later, “Liberty and responsibility are inseparable.”¹⁵

Unlike England’s “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, which was more reform than revolution, Burke insisted that the French Revolution of 1789 would uproot human society and lead first to anarchy and then to dictatorship. The French Revolution, he said, was “metaphysical madness” based upon a terrible misunderstanding of human nature.¹⁶

At first, his warnings had little impact on Parliament—Charles James Fox, a fellow leader of the Whigs, considered the French deposing of Louis XVI and the resulting “people’s democracy” a “triumph of progress and liberty.” Burke decided to go directly to the people with his concerns and wrote one of the most brilliant works of English political philosophy, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.¹⁷

While the French revolutionaries talked incessantly of abstract rights, Burke described what he called “the real rights of man” beginning with the right of men to live in a civil society based on the rule law.

“Whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others,” he wrote, “he has a right to do for himself, and he has right to a fair portion of all which society, with all its combinations of skill and force, can do in his favour.” In this partnership, Burke said, “all men have equal rights but not to equal things....”

He insisted that liberty must be prudently measured. “The restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights.”¹⁸

Nowhere is the yawning chasm between the modern conservative and the modern liberal more apparent than in a discussion of “rights.” The modern liberal is the proud successor to the Jacobins’ notion of abstract rights, finding new ones every day in their vain pursuit of perfectibility and Utopia. The modern conser-

vative stands with Burke, holding that the real rights of man are rooted in custom, tradition, and faith—that reform is essential, but that wholesale change is catastrophic.¹⁹

The essential difference between Burke and the French revolutionaries was theological. Burke possessed a Christian understanding of human nature which Danton, Robespierre, and the other Jacobins rejected. To the revolutionaries, Christianity was superstition and an enemy. To Burke, it was “man’s greatest good and established order to be the fundamental of civilization.”²⁰ It provided the civilizing underpinning of society, regardless of the individual’s particular denomination.

In contrast, the French revolutionary leader Danton sought constant ferment and spoke of a “cauldron” in which every impurity of society would be “burnt out.” But Burke declared that the just society was not a bubbling cauldron but a spiritual corporation, formed by a covenant between man and his God.²¹

A frequent charge against Burke was that after decades of defending the oppressed—in America, Ireland, India, and England—he “betrayed his love of liberty and justice” by defending the old regime in France (even Tocqueville taxes Burke for being too sympathetic to the French monarchy). But there was no difference in principle between Burke’s defense of the American colonies and his attacks on the French revolutionaries. In each instance, he adhered to moral natural law and prudence as the best strategy to resist political tyranny (the rule of man vs. the rule of law) and injustice—and this was true whether speaking of kings or democrats.²²

Whatever the differences between Burke and Tocqueville about the vices and virtues of the French mon-

¹⁵ Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 71.

¹⁶ Kirk, *Edmund Burke*, p. 153.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 160–161.

¹⁹ Edmund Burke, *On Taste, On the Sublime and Beautiful, Reflections on the French Revolution, and A Letter to a Noble Lord*, edited by Charles W. Elliot, LL.D. (New York: P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1968), p. 390.

²⁰ Kirk, *Edmund Burke*, p. 152.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

²² *Ibid.*

archy, they were agreed on the importance of religion, custom, and law to the maintenance of an orderly and civil society.²³

How then to summarize the conservatism of Edmund Burke and his influence on American conservative thought? Burke stood for preservation of the British constitution, with its traditional division of powers, as “the system most friendly to liberty and order” in all Europe. And in Russell Kirk’s words, Burke stood for the preservation of the “larger constitution of civilization.”²⁴

In Burke’s writings and speeches can be found reliance upon tradition and custom for public and private guidance; conviction that men are equal in the sight of God but nowhere else; devotion to personal freedom and private property; and opposition to doctrinaire change.

As Burke wrote: “By the unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways, as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No one generation could link with another. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer.”²⁵

The above beliefs articulated by Burke form a significant part of the intellectual foundation of modern American conservatism. Equally applicable in this century, recently released from the threat of Communism, are Burke’s stern warnings against a fanatical elite that demands conformity to its ideology. “To them [the French revolutionaries],” he wrote, “the will, the wish, the want, the liberty, the toil, the blood of individuals is nothing. Individuality is left out of their scheme of government. The state is all in all.”²⁶

Burke’s ideas, Kirk writes, “did more than estab-

lish islands in the sea of radical thought; they provided the defenses [the definition] of conservatism, on a great scale, that still stand and are not liable to fall in our time.”²⁷

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

In the early 1830s, some four decades after Edmund Burke’s death, a young French lawyer and aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, visited America. From his one-year visit there issued a remarkable book, *Democracy in America*, which Harvard Professor Harvey Mansfield describes as “at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America.”²⁸

It is an extended essay on the natural rise of democracy in America and those things that threaten it, including a tyranny of the majority, excessive materialism, and an “insatiable” desire for equality.

The same equality that permits each citizen to conceive vast hopes, Tocqueville writes, “renders all citizens individually weak.” At each step up the ladder they find “immense obstacles that they had not at first perceived.” While it is possible to conceive of a degree of freedom that might satisfy people entirely, he says, “men will never found an equality that is enough for them.”²⁹

For Tocqueville, there are three reasons for a nation’s success: its material circumstances, its laws, and its “mores,” that is, its moral habits and customs. The young Frenchman found that America had no special advantages as regards its circumstances.

As to its laws, he notes that the federal form of government gives America “the power of a great republic and the security of a small one.” Local institutions operate to moderate the potential despotism of democracy and give people “both a taste for freedom and the

²³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, translated by John Bonner (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), pp. 16, 248.

²⁴ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated, edited, and annotated with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. xvii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 513.

skill to be free." Among such institutions are local government, a free press, an independent judiciary, and respect for individual rights. Judicial power in particular checks and directs the movements of the majority, helping to correct "the aberrations of democracy."³⁰

Echoing Burke's belief in the civilizing role of religion, Tocqueville says that the central reason for the success of American democracy, as compared with the failure of other democracies, is America's moral habits.

"For the Americans," Tocqueville writes, "the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of one without the other." For them, Christianity is not a set of "sterile beliefs bequeathed by the past" but beliefs "living in the depths of the soul."³¹

American society might have sunk into an "irresponsible individualism," Russell Kirk argues, had it not been held together by the "cement of Christian teaching." Tocqueville understood that without virtuous customs and prudential laws, the people become Alexander Hamilton's "great beast."³²

Tocqueville is often cited for another antidote to radical individualism—the capability of Americans to associate with one another voluntarily (akin to Burke's "little platoons" of society) in accordance with their own will and reason, instead of relying on what Mansfield calls "a centralized, 'schoolmaster' government to take care of them,"³³ or what Margaret Thatcher has called "the nanny state."

By his investigations into American life, his acquaintance with England and the writings of Burke and others, his political career (he served in the Chamber of Deputies), and his unassuming erudition, Tocqueville was certainly qualified to comment on society and government. That he was eminently qualified to do so is borne out by comments such as that of Lord Acton,

who said: "Of all writers, [Tocqueville] is the most widely acceptable, and the hardest to find fault with. He is always wise, always right and as just as Aristides."³⁴

LORD ACTON

The same might be said of the 19th century English historian John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, the first Baron, famous for the maxim, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." With these somber words, the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb says, Acton places himself in the tradition of political and philosophical pessimism, even as Tocqueville marveled at the optimistic future for America.³⁵

But what saved Acton from unrelieved pessimism was his refusal to succumb to philosophical or historical determinism. He believed, with Edmund Burke, that man was a free agent capable of choosing the good. The forces of evil were "constant and variable," Acton wrote, but so were "the truth and the Higher Purpose."³⁶

Lord Acton was a man of the 19th century, who was born three years before Queen Victoria ascended to the throne and died the year after her death in 1902. He was a devout Roman Catholic (although an opponent of the doctrine of papal infallibility), a pessimist, and a moralist—a combination with little appeal in the early decades of the 20th century, when optimism and materialism were riding high.

However, with the coming of Nazism and Communism, writes Himmelfarb, hard truths about politics and power received new attention. Acton's epigrams denouncing racism and statism appeared increasingly in editorials, dissertations, and speeches. Thus, those who had become skeptical of a liberalism, secular and optimistic, discovered in Acton a philosophy "religious in temper, able to cope with the facts of human sin and corruption."³⁷

³⁰ Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, p. 447.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

³² Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 195.

³³ Mansfield and Winthrop in their introduction to Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. xviii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1993), p. 239.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

For all his erudition—he was said to have more than 20,000 books in his private library—Acton never produced a single volume for publication. His life-long intellectual task—the *History of Liberty*—was “the greatest book that never was written.” But long before nationalism and “democratic despotism”—to use Tocqueville’s phrase—had begun to haunt the world, Acton predicted they would some day “threaten our civilization.”³⁸

RUSSELL KIRK

Which brings us to the last of this quartet of conservative thinkers, the redoubtable Russell Kirk.

In his introduction to *The Liberal Imagination*, published in 1950, the liberal critic Lionel Trilling wrote that “liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition” in America. The conservative impulse, he said, was not thoughtful at all, but made up of at best “irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas.”³⁹

Trilling was not alone in his dismissal of conservatism. In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz explained that by conservatism what was really meant was European feudalism, something altogether foreign to the American experience.

In *Conservatism in America*, Clinton Rossiter concluded that because America was “a progressive country with a liberal tradition,” conservatism was simply “irrelevant.”⁴⁰

We cannot blame Trilling, Hartz, and Rossiter for their profound misunderstanding of conservatism. At the time of their writing—the early 1950s—there was only a small band of disparate conservative writers and thinkers whose philosophical differences seemed to outweigh their similarities.

The writers included Friedrich A. Hayek, a classical liberal economist born in Austria; Richard Weaver, a

Southern agrarian who taught English at the University of Chicago; and Whittaker Chambers, an ex-Soviet spy turned fervent anticommunist.

Traditional conservatives, classical liberals, and anticommunists all agreed that the central values of civilization were in danger. The place of the individual and the voluntary group had been seriously undermined by the growing power of governments. Freedom of thought and expression were threatened by power-seeking minorities. All these developments had been fostered by a philosophical view that denied all absolute moral standards, questioned the rule of law, and contributed to a disbelief in private property and the competitive market.

What intellectual theme could unite the different strains of conservatism? Hayek provided part of the answer in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) with his stern admonitions about economic planning leading to dictatorship. His knowledge of the totalitarian nature of socialism led him to conclude that man does not and cannot know everything, and when he acts as if he does, disaster follows. In April 1945, hundreds of thousands of Americans were introduced to Hayek when a slightly abridged version was published in *Reader’s Digest*. The book went on to sell more than one million copies worldwide.

In *Ideas Have Consequences*, Professor Richard Weaver traced the moral dissolution of the West to the rise of nominalism, rationalism, and materialism under the Enlightenment. Weaver was a man of contradictions. On the one hand, he believed that mankind had begun the “slide down the slippery slope” away from the transcendental in the 14th century. He also believed that man “will prevail over the dark forces of time” by “persuasive speech in the service of truth.”⁴¹

In *Witness*, Whittaker Chambers declared that the nation and the world faced a transcendent crisis not of politics or power but of faith. Ever the pessimist,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁹ Matthew Spalding, “Preface,” in Lee Edwards, *A Brief History of the Modern American Conservative Movement* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2004), p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., *The March of Freedom: Modern Classics in Conservative Thought* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation: 2003), p. 398.

Chambers believed that he was leaving the winning side (Communism) for the losing side, but that “it is better to die on the losing side than to live under Communism.”⁴²

It was at this critical moment that a young, unknown scholar published an intellectual history of Anglo-American conservative thought since the late 1700s that permanently changed the public perception of conservatism and laid the groundwork that would transform the American political debate.

Russell Kirk was only 34 and a lowly instructor of history at Michigan State College in the spring of 1953 when his seminal work, *The Conservative Mind*, was published. Many liberals joked that the title was an oxymoron, but they stopped smiling when they read Kirk’s “eloquent, defiant, impassioned *cri de coeur* for conservatism.”⁴³

His book was a 450-page overview of the most important Anglo-American conservative writers and political leaders since the American Revolution. It was also a scathing indictment of every liberal nostrum from human perfectibility to economic egalitarianism.

The Conservative Mind begins not with a whimper but with a bang:

“The stupid party”: this is John Stuart Mill’s description of conservatives. Like certain other summary dicta which nineteenth-century liberals thought to be forever triumphant, his judgment needs review in our age of disintegrating liberal and radical philosophies.

The passage stunned complacent liberals who had concluded that conservatism could express itself only in “irritable mental gestures,” and it brought up short gloomy conservatives like Whittaker Chambers, who declared that in becoming a man of the Right he had joined the losing side. Not so Russell Kirk, a passion-

ate young American scholar, who had discovered a great truth and wished to communicate his discovery to the world.

What had Kirk discovered?

Modern American conservatism rests securely on the words and deeds of a gallery of conservative giants beginning with the founder of the “true school of conservative principle”—Edmund Burke. Burke was not a lonely voice in the wilderness but only the first of a remarkable group of writers and political leaders, including John Cardinal Newman, Sir Walter Scott, and Benjamin Disraeli in Great Britain; Alexis de Tocqueville in France; the remarkable Adams family—John, John Quincy, and Henry—Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Orestes Brownson in America.

These were not second-rate scribblers and political hacks but men of distinction and purpose who made a profound difference in the thinking of their countries by their exposition of and commitment to first principles. Kirk says that the essence of conservatism lies in six canons:

1. A divine intent rules society as well as conscience—“political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems.”
2. Traditional life is filled with variety and mystery, while most radical systems are characterized by a narrowing uniformity.
3. Civilized society requires orders and classes—“the only true equality is moral equality.”
4. Property and freedom are inseparably connected.
5. Man must control his will and his appetite, knowing that he is governed more by emotion than reason.
6. “Change and reform are not identical”—society must alter slowly.

Before the liberals had caught their breath, the *New York Times* favorably reviewed *The Conservative Mind*, as did *Time*, which devoted its entire book section to it. For weeks, the *New York Times* listed the work in its column of recommendations. Forty-seven of the first

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁴³ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, p. 65.

50 major reviews in publications ranging from the *Saturday Review* to the *Yale Review* were laudatory.

No American conservative had ever before received such glowing notices from the intellectual mainstream. The political philosopher Robert Nisbet wrote Kirk that with one book, he had done the impossible: he had broken “the cake of intellectual opposition to the conservative tradition in the United States.” In so doing, he had made American conservatism intellectually respectable, and even appealing.

As the conservative historian George Nash has said, other conservatives like Richard Weaver and Whitaker Chambers had constructed “genealogies of evil men and pernicious thoughts; here, at long last, was a genealogy of good men and valuable thoughts.”⁴⁴

In the last chapter of *The Conservative Mind*, Russell Kirk separates himself from the doomsayers by arguing that the principal interests of true conservatism and old-style libertarian democracy were coinciding. Confronted by arrogant collectivists and the eager architects of the New Deal and its successors, Kirk writes, American conservatives will “defend constitutional democracy as a repository of tradition and order,” while intelligent democrats will “espouse conservative philosophy as the only secure system of ideas with which to confront the planners of the new order.”⁴⁵

Kirk points out that even Harvard Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a Jackson-FDR Democrat, admitted the pressing need for an intelligent American conservatism. Which is what Russell Kirk provides in *The Conservative Mind*.

There was another critical contribution of the author: Kirk was proud to be a conservative. The true conservative, he insists, is not the cruel caricature of a “dull, boorish, bigoted and avaricious being” presented by most liberal and radical journalists and politicians.

The true conservative, Kirk says, could be many different people: a “resolute and strong-minded” cler-

gyman; a farmer who “holds fast” to the wisdom of his ancestors; a truck driver in the very heart of the metropolis; a proprietor with an ancient name endeavoring to moderate inevitable change by “prudence and good nature”; an old-fashioned manufacturer, diligent, shrewd, and just; a physician who knows human nature too well to talk of social perfectibility; a lawyer who understands we cannot divorce ourselves from history; a schoolmaster who knows there is no reward without labor. The true conservative is a man of the future rooted in the past.

All of these true conservatives, Kirk says, prefer the old and the tried to the novel and the dubious, and in whatever they do, endeavor to safeguard the institutions and the wisdom of the past, not slavishly but prudently.⁴⁶

If we had to pick the thinkers more responsible than any other for planting the intellectual roots of modern conservative thought, I believe we would select Edmund Burke and Russell Kirk, each of whom presented “a profound critique” of their contemporary society and “a vivid image” of how that society might better itself.⁴⁷ They were separated by almost two hundred years but united in their adherence to the priceless principle of ordered liberty. This unites them, and this provides the basis for the conservative tradition.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In conclusion, the gulf between winning the battle of ideas—which I believe conservatives have won with the help of Burke, Tocqueville, Acton, Kirk, and others—and translating those ideas into laws that genuinely diminish government’s power and influence while expanding the choices available to the individual is a very wide one—much wider than we conservatives initially realized.

In his splendid history of the Mont Pelerin Society, Oxford Professor Max Hartwell points out:

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 440–442.

⁴⁷ David Frum, “The Legacy of Russell Kirk,” *The New Criterion*, December 1994, p. 16.

In the history of ideas there are identifiable periods in which an idea about how society should be organized is clearly articulated and circulated and acquires legitimacy and acceptance. The idea is then embodied in laws that control and condition the actions of populations....

“Rhetoric is not enough,” Hartwell emphasizes. “Only when ideas are accepted and also become laws does the world change.”⁴⁸

Thus it is possible to win the war of ideas but fail to change the way the world works. Let me be clear: I believe absolutely in the power of ideas, in their

potential hegemony. To quote Richard Weaver, “Ideas have consequences.”

But ideas are not self-implementing or self-sustaining: they must be linked to action. Translating even the best of ideas into policies and laws that reverse the statist domination we have had in America for the last 70 years is certainly a daunting but not an impossible task.

Viewing our challenges from the shoulders of these giant thinkers, I believe with all my heart and mind and soul that it can be done and that it is being done across this great land of ours.

—Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D., is President of The Heritage Foundation.

This essay was published July 9, 2008.

⁴⁸ R. M. Hartwell, *A History of the Mont Pelerin Society* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1995), p. 216.

The Conservative Mind by Russell Kirk is arguably one of the greatest contributions to twentieth-century American Conservatism. Brilliant in every respect, from its conception to its choice of significant figures representing the history of intellectual conservatism, The Conservative Mind by Russell Kirk launched the modern American Conservative Movement. A must-read.Â Among them are The Roots of American Order, America's British Culture, The Politic of Prudence, Eliot and His Age, Enemies of the Permanent Things, Edmund Burke, Redeeming the Time, John Randolph of Roanoke, and six works of fiction.Â The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, founded in 1995 and based in Mecosta, Michigan, continues his work to defend "the permanent things" today.