

The Tasks Ahead: The Conservative Mission in the Twenty First Century

Introduction

In recent years there has been some discussion, within conservative circles, of the significance and promise of the "Third Generation" of young conservatives. The term "Third Generation" originated within the community of conservatives in Washington, and has been applied almost exclusively to the new generation of political activists. These young activists have been described in a variety of ways—as being more at ease in the political atmosphere, possessed of fresh ideas in the formulation of policy, and so on.

Until now, however, there has been no concerted effort to take the measure of the third generation of conservative scholars. But if "ideas have consequences," as Richard Weaver said, it is the mission of conservative intellectuals to define and illuminate the *ends* which must ultimately guide the making of policy.

The current symposium is an attempt to look over the shoulders of the rising generation of conservative scholars. Each of the contributors was awarded the Richard M. Weaver Fellowship by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute within the last ten years. The Weaver Fellowship supports graduate studies in the humanities and social sciences for individuals who intend to teach at the college level. An intensely competitive award, the Weaver Fellowship was initiated in 1964; there are now over 300 Weaver Fellows in the academy.

The contributors were asked to outline the

tasks and challenges that they face as they embark on their intellectual missions. They were encouraged to share their own personal stories, including the discoveries which had inspired them and the vocation to which they have been called.

It should be noted that this symposium is not intended as an elaboration of a party line; Weaver Fellows come from a diversity of backgrounds and are placed across the conservative spectrum.

Nevertheless, several themes have emerged from the symposium. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Empire in the East, the contributors are unanimous in their belief that the West itself is in steep decline and may yet fall. Unlike those who herald the "New World Order," or the "End of History," or the "opportunity society," the contributors point out the fragility of order, threatened as it is by moral relativism, an alienated radical intelligentsia, and a pervasive materialism.

Lest one accuse these Weaver Fellows of excessive doom-saying, it should be remembered that Weaver himself, in *Ideas Have Consequences*, sounded an apocalyptic note. Along with Weaver, these young scholars believe that recovery can only begin with an unflinching recognition of the plight of our culture.

Yet each of the contributors possesses the virtue of hope. The road to recovery, they

seem to be saying, is the renewal of what Weaver called the "metaphysical dream"—the fundamental vision of order which we have inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition. That this vision of order is ultimately theological is another common theme among the contributors.

Finally, a few brief words about the method of selection of these essays. Those who were approached to contribute all had a record of publication. In addition to myself, 13 people were contacted and eight agreed to contrib-

ute. The disciplines represented span the humanities and social sciences: English literature, political science, history, economics, and theology. Instead of printing the essays in alphabetical order, I have arranged them from the more general to the more specific.

Here, then, are the ideas and the challenges which constitute the mission of the conservative scholar in the twenty-first century.

—Gregory Wolfe