

American Conservatism Revisited

American Conservatism from Burke to Bush: An Introduction,

by Charles W. Dunn and J. David Woodard.

Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1991.

The flurry of recent books on conservatism in the United States could suggest a sustained academic interest in the subject and an increased effort to refine the current understanding of one of the late twentieth century's most important social and political movements; however, most of these works have only obscured the contributions of several generations of scholars who attempted to exegete this fertile field of inquiry. Professors Dunn and Woodard offer at least a partial remedy to this desperate situation with the publication of their *American Conservatism from Burke to Bush: An Introduction*.

The authors suggest that this collaborative effort is a "survey," and not an encyclopedic remembrance of American conservatism. Their presentation exudes a simplicity and calmness of approach unique to most recent books in the genre; this tone is augmented by an inclusive approach to the subject in general, and its relative accuracy regarding historical detail in particular. In the initial chapters (one through three), Dunn and Woodard introduce American conservatism while avoiding any discussion of the disruptions within the contemporary movement, preferring to describe the situation as merely a "division" between neo-conservatives and "agrarian conservatives."

Unfortunately, this approach relegates a substantial and multifaceted exchange on a broad spectrum of concerns to little more than a disagreement on ephemeral issues. As recent studies have indicated, conservative intellectuals have been more reluctant to address philosophical issues, and the recent imbroglio among conservatives regarding America's "new" role in world affairs, especially as it relates to the regimes in Eastern Europe, demonstrates the confusion. Old Right theorists suggest that the neoconservative effort to promote a new "wave" of democracy throughout the world has dangerous consequences for American foreign policy, and instead urge that the most propitious response is to pursue an appreciation of the classical criticisms of democracy.

Neoconservatives, who are generally defenders of this effort to promote democratic institutions, neglect to define terms, and usually confer on "democracy" a status properly reserved for religious symbols. Conservatives are potentially the most able archi-

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pects of a new international order; although, if they are to participate in these important debates, an attempt to elucidate an understanding of democratic government that overcomes the limits of the current theoretical confusion surrounding the concept must be undertaken.¹ The most prudent approach should include the extrication of a definition and the elucidation of democracy from within the confines of an older tradition that stresses the combination of popular political participation with the pursuit of the moral life. The authors fail to develop this problem adequately as a major concern within modern conservatism, and the text imparts a false understanding of unanimity among conservatives on related issues.

A conservative demonology emerges at an early juncture in the book (chapter two), centered around Machiavelli and Rousseau as the chief culprits of the modern predicament. In the case of Machiavelli, the authors' depiction is not without merit, but it relies too heavily on a single, severe assessment of the Florentine as a political philosopher who completely disregards the contributions of classical and Christian thought, and ultimately cannot be reconciled with the conservative mission in politics. Indeed, within the conservative movement one can find critics of Machiavelli who loathe his iniquitous approach to the older understanding of the ethical life, namely, his disdain for certain theoretical rules of conduct, while accepting uncritically the destructive abstractions—the “new invented virtue”—of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

To understand the essential conservative critique of politics and society, the authors compare Rousseau with Burke, the father of modern conservatism. Unlike most of Rousseau's contemporaries, Burke took Rousseau's *Social Contract* seriously. Burke realized Rousseau had presented the most thoroughgoing attack on prescription and

precedent that he had ever witnessed. Burke took umbrage at the presentation of nature as unrefined, and attacked Rousseau's notion of a primeval condition that existed before conventions were made and where all man were completely free. For Burke, the “ancient imperfections” of man could not be dismissed, and it would be impossible to return to such an idyllic existence. The primal life of the savage envisioned by Rousseau, “living in liberty,” was the most unnatural of states. At this point, the work under consideration transcends its self-imposed shackles and proceeds to present a genuine rearticulation of the conservative tradition.

Chapters four, five, and six address the rudimentary elements, historical developments, and the role assumed by tradition in the American conservative experience. Taken as a group, these chapters present a lucid and unpretentious defense of orthodox conservatism as it has been correctly understood and articulated by the majority of conservatives in the postwar era. One of the contributions of this volume can be found in its stress on the importance of the conservative intellectual patrimony—the “wisdom of the ages”—as compared to the varied modes of contingency associated with modern liberalism. The recrudescence of conservative political theory demands an acknowledgment and a reaffirmation of the sources of its tradition.

The authors divide American conservatism into three historical periods; the colonial period to the Civil War; the Civil War to the New Deal; and the New Deal to the present. Dunn and Woodard employ little innovation in their presentation of the major figures and doctrines, but they provide a sufficient overview. The authors also successfully maneuver a potentially troublesome historical and philosophical tightrope in their treatment of historical conservatism. Both Lincoln and Calhoun are praised

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as genuine conservative thinkers. The need for a re-examination of Calhoun the theorist, a legacy largely unappreciated today due to the vituperation of his conservative critics, demonstrates the critical acumen associated with this scholarly enterprise.

The concluding chapter (six) attempts to appraise the future prospects of the conservative movement for the rising generation. Regrettably, some of the most serious problems and opportunities on the conservative horizon that should have been addressed in an introductory text are neglected. The possibility of a new fusionism, for example, as distinguished from the Meyerian amal-

gam, is promising, but receives no mention in this account. A useful bibliography of works by conservative writers from diverse disciplines of study is included, and the listing will be of much assistance to anyone interested in recent scholarship related to American conservatism. The contemporary student of conservatism can find much solace in this tempered and readable tome.

¹ For a recent assessment that incorporates a more thorough understanding of the potentialities of democracy see Claes Ryn's *Democracy and the Ethical Life, Second Edition, Expanded* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990).

