

## The Conservative Mind at Forty

Forty years ago this past July, *Time* magazine, at Whittaker Chambers' suggestion, devoted its entire book review section (July 6, 1953) to a book entitled *The Conservative Mind* by Russell Kirk. To most of the left-leaning intelligentsia, the idea that conservatives *had* minds was itself an arresting thought. That they might use them to good effect or that conservatism might be a respectable intellectual tradition seemed to stretch credulity to the breaking point. That this tradition was actually dominant in the history of the Free World and mainly responsible for the triumph of democracy was, to the denizens of *academe* and the pundits of the day, frankly incredible.

To such people, the very concept of a "conservative mind" seemed oxymoronic. For them, it was the intellectual equivalent of "Flying Pigs Found in Equador!" Ironically, the idea was almost equally disconcerting to conservatives. They, of course, knew they had minds, but most were unaware that their mode of thinking derived from a coherent philosophical tradition. Moreover, in typical individualistic fashion, many conservatives did not *want* to be *organized* into a group or to *belong* to any

movement—no matter how respectable. Victims of frequent sieges, enforced exiles, and many spurnings, conservatives had grown proud not only of their battle scars but also of their isolation. Offered the chance to assume the philosophical mantle of their forbears, some preferred to wrap themselves in the tatterdemalion splendor of eccentric, personalist, regional fancies rather than cast their lot with an old assortment of other like-minded souls. After all, wasn't "organizing" an inherently liberal thing to do?

Belonging to a coherent group of any sort however, was a charge that no one could have made stick against conservatives in 1953. As Richard Brookhiser once quipped in *National Review*, "*The Conservative Mind* appeared at a time when . . . the American right wing was an intellectual rag-tag about as coherent as the Iranian parliament; robber barons and free enterprisers; Communists turned Americans; America Firsters turned McCarthyites; Midwestern Republicans and Confederates; with Peter Viereck on the sidelines whispering all the while that

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the True Prince was Franklin D. Roosevelt.” And this was a friendly assessment of the situation!

As far as liberals were concerned, there was no need to alter John Stuart Mill’s trenchant insight that the conservatives were the “stupid party.” Indeed, in 1950, only three years before the publication of Kirk’s landmark study, no less a critic than Lionel Trilling announced that there was no intellectual tradition of conservative thought in America. Although Kirk had devoted four years of his life to proving that there was such a tradition and that it was intellectually vibrant, even he despaired of a conservative renaissance. In fact, he had originally called his book *The Conservative Rout*, changing its name only when his publisher, Henry Regnery, insisted on a more optimistic title.

As luck would have it, this change was both fortuitous and prophetic. As Regnery records, the publication of *The Conservative Mind* “catapulted the author from the obscurity of East Lansing . . . into national prominence,” and “restored the word ‘conservative’ from an adjective of opprobrium . . . to respectability.” After this book’s appearance, the publisher remembers, “one could call himself a conservative without apology.”

Nor was Regnery alone in considering its publication “a major intellectual event.” Whittaker Chambers labeled *The Conservative Mind* “one of the most important books of the twentieth-century.” John Chamberlain, in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, called the book “brilliant in its conception, brilliant in its avoidance of clichés, brilliant in its ability to relate man to his landscape . . . and brilliant in its choice of significant figures in the history of intellectual conservatism.” Even the *New York Times* conceded that Kirk’s “account . . . merits the . . . attention of all informed persons who are not rattled by unpopular labels.”

It is a measure of Kirk’s achievement that almost singlehandedly he removed the stigma from the label “conservative.” As the reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* put it, “to be a conservative in the United States has for so long been . . . identical with being backward and even faintly alien, that Mr. Kirk’s . . . justification of the term is to be welcomed.” *The Conservative Mind* not only, as Jeffrey Hart observes, “de vulgarized” conservatism, but also elevated it in popular and scholarly discourse. Kirk’s book was, in the words of historian George Nash, “an eloquent, defiant, impassioned *cri de coeur*” that “left no stone unturned” in attacking liberalism and in vindicating conservatism. As Lee Edwards noted, Kirk’s work was a “brilliant distillation of conservative thinking over the past 150 years,” as well as a “scathing indictment of every liberal nostrum, from the perfectibility of man to economic egalitarianism.”

The effects wrought by what Russell Kirk modestly called “my fat book” were far-reaching. It established him as one of the preeminent conservative thinkers and writers of the second half of the twentieth-century. Moreover, as Kirk himself recognized, his work, the first to break “through the barriers erected by America’s liberal dominations and powers, . . . opened the channel for a spate of other books of a conservative thrust.” And, as George Nash remarked, this study “decisively catalyzed a self-conscious, unabashedly conservative movement,” playing “a crucial role in the emergence of the New Right.”

Indeed, in *Grand Rapids Magazine*, Victoria Callas and Richard Harrold go so far as to credit Kirk with “the resurgence of conservatism in America” and with “spark[ing] the political trend” that “culminated in Ronald Reagan’s election.” Perhaps the *Religion and Society Report* (1988) summarizes the situation best when it calls Kirk

“the doyen of a conservative wisdom that twenty-five years ago was dismissed as idiosyncratic but . . . today [is] near the center of public discourse.” That one man could accomplish so much is, as Henry Regnery recognizes, a tribute not only to Russell Kirk and to his book, but also to “the power of ideas” masterfully expressed.

What were the ideas that catapulted their author into such prominence and caused liberals to fall back in astonishment? In *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (changed to “From Burke to Eliot” in later editions), Kirk attacked liberalism root and branch; defined and defended conservatism; identified its leading figures and their contributions to the conservative tradition; and upheld what T. S. Eliot called “the permanent things,” urging the recovery of virtue and wisdom through the use of what Burke dubbed “the moral imagination.”

In his attack on liberalism, Kirk singles out “at least five major schools of radical thought that have competed for public favor since Burke entered politics”: the rationalism of the French *philosophes*; the romantic solipsism of Rousseau and his associates; the utilitarianism of Bentham and his *confrères*; “the positivism of Comte’s school; and the collectivistic materialism of Marx and other socialists.” According to Kirk, the ideologies spawned by these men and schools of thought are based on five unfortunate ideas and impulses which, in turn, derive from a radical misunderstanding of the nature of man, of history, of society, and of reality. These five include belief in “the perfectibility of man”; “contempt for tradition”; a mania for political and economic levelling, coupled with the desire to suppress prescriptive rights in favor of centralization and consolidation; and a benighted statism that denies society’s organic and transcendent nature.

In contrast, as Kirk makes very clear, conservatism “is not a fixed immutable body of dogmata,” but rather a way of thinking based on the idea that “society is a spiritual reality, possessing eternal life but a delicate constitution.” Moreover, for conservatives, it is axiomatic that man is a “moral being.” Thus, it follows that, for Kirk, “Conservatism is something deeper than mere defense of shares and dividends, something nobler than mere dread of what is new.” Indeed, for him, it is an adventure, and the conservative is “a pilgrim in a realm of mystery and wonder, where duty, discipline, and sacrifice are required.”

In this realm, Kirk believes that the conservative is guided by what he calls six “canons”: “belief in a transcendental order”; “affection for the . . . variety and mystery of human existence”; recognition that civilization “requires orders and classes”; belief that “freedom and property are closely linked”; faith in custom, convention, and tradition; awareness that change is not necessarily reform; and the understanding that Providence is the final arbiter of fate. These canons, Kirk shows, have provided the animating principles for the thought, lives, and actions of an array of statesmen, thinkers, writers, poets, politicians, and professors from the eighteenth-century to the present in both Britain and America. Among the European upholders of conservatism, Kirk cites Burke, Macaulay, Walter Scott, Tocqueville, Disraeli, and Newman. Among the Americans he includes John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, John Randolph of Roanoke, John Calhoun, and James Fenimore Cooper—tracing their influence down to such twentieth-century luminaries as Paul Elmer More, Irving Babbitt, George Santayana, and T. S. Eliot.

As conservatives, all of these men, Kirk proudly illustrates, were defenders of “the permanent things”—what the ancients would have called the eternal verities. More-

over, he shows that the chief means they used in defending this patrimony are the quintessentially conservative weapons of the individual's courage, imagination, and love. Citing Burke with approval, Kirk recognizes that courage (whether to reform or to conserve) can change the course of history: "Chance, providence, or mere individual strong wills, Burke declares, abruptly may alter the whole apparent direction of a nation or civilization."

But raw courage, Kirk is quick to acknowledge, does not suffice without imagination; for he insists, "Men of imagination, rather than party leaders, determine the ultimate course of things." The kind of imagination he has in mind, however, is not one haunted by the phantasms that bedevil liberals: The saccharine sentimentality of Rousseau, the mechanistic vagaries of Bentham, and the "metaphysical madness" of libertarians.

No, the creative faculty that Kirk considers crucial is what Burke called "the moral imagination"—a faculty that Kirk defines in *Enemies of the Permanent Things* (1969) as "man's power to perceive ethical truth . . . in the seeming chaos of many events."

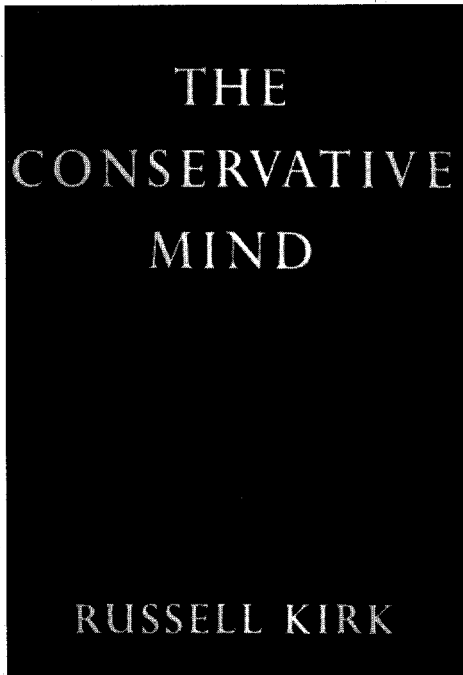
Neither this power, however, nor the courage that Kirk extols is sufficient to win the day without love. It is this emotion, he believes, that provides the motivation, as well as the goal of all conservative wisdom. As Kirk writes movingly in *A Program for Conservatives* (1962), "Men are put into

this world . . . to struggle, to suffer, to contend against the evil that is in their neighbors and in themselves, and to aspire toward the triumph of Love . . . to live like men and die like men." In the same book, he insists that "the enlightened conservative . . . believes . . . that the object of life is Love." Extolling courage, imagination and love as the crucial conservative virtues—with the greatest of these being love—Kirk concludes *The Conservative Mind* with "Cupid's curse":

They that do change  
old love for new,  
Pray gods they change  
for worse.

That Russell Kirk's "fat book" should end with reference to the importance of fidelity to old loves is totally in keeping not only with the kind of man that he is, but also with the contribution he has made over the last forty years to conservatism. From first to last, he has been faithful to his old love

and diligent in her service. Realizing that "the permanent things" are best kept when they are shared with others, he has worked indefatigably to spread the good news of conservatism. As Richard Brookhiser notes, Kirk has "lent himself to just about every conservative intellectual operation going—the Philadelphia Society, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and *National Review*"—to say nothing of launching *Modern Age* and *The University Bookman*—in addition to writing twenty-nine books, penning an education column for a quarter century and writing another syndicated column, "To the



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Point,” for thirteen years. While admirably filling the role of scholar, thinker, author, and journalist, he has not shirked his role as a teacher. Indeed, many know Kirk best for his speeches on hundreds of campuses, lectures at ISI symposia, talks at The Heritage Foundation, or the informal courses he gives at his home, Piety Hill—which some wags have christened “Mecosta U” after the sleepy Michigan town where the Kirks live.

In all these activities, Kirk’s aim has been to clarify and defend the principles of conservatism so as to pass them on to the next generation as their patrimony. For him, this is the ultimate conservative responsibility, for in true Burkean fashion, he is convinced that society is made up of a community of souls linked by social and spiritual bonds in one great communion that includes the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born.

Although such an inclusive vision should appeal to everyone, some conservatives may feel that the theory or history of the movement to which they belong is really not so relevant as practicing it in the halls of power. Others may feel that a book published forty years ago is no longer “on the cutting edge,” or that the battles that it urges them to fight have, in the main, already been won. Still others may be leery of taking instruc-

tion from a man whom Jeffrey Hart calls a “tradition” himself—a man who is a self-confessed cape-wearing, non-driving “Bohemian Tory” with Scottish enthusiasms, who eschews television in favor of “Burmese cheroots” and Gothic tales.

Conservatives who feel that *The Conservative Mind* has little to offer them—for any or all of these reasons—would be seriously deceived. *The Conservative Mind* is as relevant at age forty as when it was first published in 1953 not only because “the permanent things” never go out of style, but also because it is a writ of inheritance—describing in detail the patrimony that we all stand to inherit. The good news is that the legacy is ours. The sobering corollary is that it must be defended. For Kirk, however, this is not bad news but rather a welcome opportunity to fight to defend what he loves. As he observes toward the end of his masterwork, “In every period, some will endeavor to pull down the permanent things, and others will defend them manfully.” Russell Kirk has devoted his life to guarding these things and to driving the attackers from the ramparts—we could scarcely have a more relevant or more admirable example in the task that lies before us.

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