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George H. Nash

## The Conservative Mind in America

Some years ago a young libertarian published a book entitled *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*. I do not know whether for young conservatives it usually begins with Russell Kirk. But certainly the appearance of *The Conservative Mind* in 1953 was an event of continuing importance in the history of the American Right. It has been said that the best books are those which fuse scholarship and passion. *The Conservative Mind* indubitably fits in that category. Above all, it stimulated the development of a self-conscious conservative intellectual movement in the early years of the Cold War. It is not too much to say that without this book we, the conservative intellectual community, would not exist today.

The topic of this paper is "The Conservative Mind in America" (without italics). The conclusion to which I am driven is this: forty years after the publication of Russell Kirk's monumental volume, the conservative *mind* in America is flourishing, but the conservative *cause* is not.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity"—with these words Charles Dickens opened *A Tale of Two Cities*. I have thought of these lines often in recent days. Obviously in some

respects 1993 is among the best of times for American conservatives, particularly if we consider it from the perspective of forty years ago. The world is a far less lonely place now than it was in 1953 when a young don from Michigan brought forth a book he originally intended to call *The Conservatives' Rout*. If by "the conservative mind" we mean the articulation and dissemination of conservative thought, then one of the most striking features of contemporary conservative intellectual activity is that there is so much of it. Books, journals, newsletters, syndicated columns, and policy analyses pour forth in profusion from an ever-expanding network of conservative media, foundations, and think tanks, virtually none of which existed forty years ago (or even twenty). Between the organized conservative elite and those whom we used to call the "silent majority" there has emerged an array of mediating institutions known as radio and television talk shows, exemplified by Rush Limbaugh. In short, the expression of conservative sentiments in our society has been professionalized. The conserva-

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tive mind has acquired an infrastructure that was nonexistent just a generation ago.

“[I]t was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us”—with these words Dickens continued his introductory paragraph to *A Tale of Two Cities*. If the conservative mind, as I have used the term, shows signs of vitality and endurance, the conservative movement has entered (in a friend’s words) “an awkward time,” which may portend a season of darkness rather than light. As William Kristol reminded us recently in *Commentary*, post-1960s liberalism now “pervades the key institutions of American society.” Meanwhile the perception widens that organized conservatism, for all its intellectual firepower, has become both fractionated and rudderless.

It is not necessary to examine the internal controversies that have afflicted the conservative cause in the past few years: a phase of our history that some might label the “late unpleasantness.” It calls to mind Napoleon’s response when asked against whom he preferred to wage war. He answered: his allies. But we do need to confront this paradox: while the conservative mind in America is more articulate than ever before, conservative influence on our culture is diminishing.

If any of us doubts this point, we need only consult “The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators” that William Bennett prepared. In it he demonstrated empirically what conservatives like Russell Kirk have long observed: in the past three decades the United States has “experienced substantial social regression.” Whatever the causes of

this declension, the conservative critique of it has been unable to reverse the slide.

Why this Dickensian state of affairs? One factor, clearly, is the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Communism. I am not one of those who think that the demise of Communism has somehow rendered the conservative movement obsolete. The end of the Soviet Union and its empire did not invalidate the insights of Hayek, Weaver, or



President Nixon greets Dr. and Mrs. Kirk (1972).

Kirk. But it is undeniably true that anti-Communism was a crucial unifying agent in the post-1945 conservative coalition and that the fall of Communism has contributed to an attenuation of the willingness of conservatives to cooperate with one another. It is also true that the geopolitical upheaval of the last five years has altered the dynamic of our domestic politics in ways that are not palatable to the American Right. Conservatives like to boast that the defeat of Communism proved the superiority of the free market, but today we meet in the New Age of Clinton, under whose direction America is poised to undertake the greatest expansion of statism in our lifetimes. It may be ironic, but historians may yet write that the end of the Cold War liberated the Left and led to the triumph of social democracy

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A related aspect of the current conserva-  
tive malaise, it seems to me, is this. During  
the Cold War, the conservative cause gained  
clarity from a largely external enemy. To be  
sure, the enemy had his allies, dupes, and  
appeasers here at home, but to most conserva-  
tives it was obvious that the prime source  
of danger lay in places like Moscow, Ha-  
vana, and Peking. I suggest to you that when  
the enemy is external, it is easier to mobilize  
against him. But when the enemy is within  
the gates, or even within ourselves, the task  
of cultural restoration is much harder, par-  
ticularly if you are a politician looking for  
votes.

This brings us to one of the most formi-  
dable barriers to the future success of Ameri-  
can conservatism, particularly the variety  
espoused so eloquently by Russell Kirk. I  
refer to what James Q. Wilson has described  
as the growth, especially among baby  
boomers, of "an ethos that values self-ex-  
pression over self-control." But it goes  
deeper than that: I refer to the spread of  
what might be called populist relativism.  
The other day, while sitting in a hospital  
waiting room, I happened to see one of  
those daytime television talk shows that are  
themselves among the prime legitimators  
of social regression. The guest was a mili-  
tant lesbian who wanted to adopt and raise  
children by herself, without a father to  
guide them. When a caller to the studio  
informed her that her position was con-  
trary to the Bible, she merely shrugged and  
said, "You have your Bible; I have my Bible."

Now how does one cope with such invin-  
cible ignorance, fortified as it is by vulgar  
relativism and the powerful societal values  
embraced in the words "freedom of choice"?  
I suggest that this is a very real problem,  
rhetorically and otherwise, for conserva-  
tives. People do not like to be told that their  
behavior is wrong or regressive. And there

are increasing numbers of people in our  
society for whom the doctrine of the "inner  
check" has neither meaning nor attraction.

So here we are: the best of times, the worst  
of times. Conservatives speak bravely of  
"recapturing the culture," yet to most ap-  
pearances our culture is more disoriented  
than ever.

I do not pretend to have a formula for  
reversing the tide. It would be foolish, even



President Reagan awarded Kirk the  
Presidential Citizens Medal (Jan. 1989).

unconservative, to say otherwise. But as we  
assess the present circumstances of the  
American Right in the light of its develop-  
ment since the 1950s, two challenges relent-  
lessly intrude. The first is a consequence of  
success. When I began research on Ameri-  
can conservatism back in the 1970s, my  
principal sources included half a dozen pe-  
riodicals. Since then, as I mentioned earlier,  
the publication of conservative writing has  
attained the proportions of an avalanche.  
As we survey this veritable torrent of print,  
a practical question arises: who can possibly  
read all this material? Who, indeed, reads  
more than a smattering of it? I am not a  
professional marketer of ideas. But I am a  
consumer of ideas, and I have the uncom-

fortable feeling that most conservative literature, alas, is unread—or read only by the already converted. Somehow we must reach beyond ourselves. Otherwise we may discover that we have built a great fortress while the rest of the world slips away.

The second challenge is more profound. During the 1980s the conservative movement achieved some of its greatest impact in the arena of public policy. Now the world of public policy is precisely that: a *public* world revolving around legislation and administration. As our society politicizes, we must of necessity operate on that turf. But as conservatives, especially, should understand, not every issue in life is neatly reducible to a policy issue, to be resolved through expertise and political action. As Russell Kirk has taught us, the proper ordering of the state is ultimately dependent upon the kind of order that prevails in the private sphere.

I wonder whether conservatives, even now, are doing enough. Who among the conservatives is attempting to mold and purify—and not simply criticize—the social mores which ultimately determine the limits of political possibility? Are we conservatives paying enough attention to *value-formation* in our society as opposed to value-application in the legislatures and courts? I wonder.

And here I return to Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* and to a principal reason why it resonates with us still. *The Conservative Mind* recalls us to the truths which, in Robert Frost's words (quoted by Kirk), "we keep coming back and back to." Tirelessly Dr. Kirk has reminded us that social regen-

eration requires remedies at levels deeper than the political and economic. More than most conservatives writing today, he beckons us to ponder questions of ends as well as means.

But here, too, another challenge looms. The conservatism of Russell Kirk has found its principal expression over the years in the printed word. The conservative imagination has to a substantial extent been a literary imagination. Now speaking personally, I find this quite congenial. Nevertheless, another thought cannot be repressed. If conservatives are to reclaim the culture, will literature and the printed word suffice? I live in a Midwestern university town, and although it has two good bookstores, I see few signs of any great demand for the kind of learning and moral imagination most conservatives would applaud. No, the cultural values of the young and even the not-so-young seem increasingly to be shaped by television and motion picture entertainment, fields in which the conservative presence is nearly indiscernible. Conservatives have Michael Medved, but the other side makes most of the films. As long as this imbalance persists, we lose.

But it would be wrong to conclude on a pessimistic note. As Kirk often said, cheerfulness has a way of breaking in. Some years ago I came across an original edition of *The Conservative Mind* in a university library. On one of the final pages someone had scribbled, "Who will read Kirk in 1984?" Well, 1984 has come and gone. *The Conservative Mind* is still in print, and its contents continue to educate those who discover it. Russell Kirk indefatigably taught rising generations; so must we.

