

Elites, Community, and the Truth: A Little Story

Stephen J. Tonsor

HISTORY IS A SERIES of little stories, or so at least Herodotus, the "Father of History," thought. His stories were so fascinating that my mentor entertained his children with bedtime stories drawn from Herodotus. And so, dear friends, here are some little stories, entertaining or otherwise.

Lissy Voegelin once said that she could not hire someone to help her with the cleaning, for when the *Putzfrau* switched on the vacuum Eric Voegelin would emerge from his study in his bathrobe and in a tone of wounded and confused majesty inquire, "What! Today?" Ah! The power of that Anglo-Saxon four letter word, "What!" "What! Today?" Yes, friends, Today!

I grew up in an Illinois town which was traditionally served by priests from Germany, or by priests who had been educated in Germany. When I was in grade school the pastor was a man ill-suited to his task. In those Depression years he permitted the parish to sink into chaos and ruin; and he was said to have loved men and boys too much. At last a committee from the parish went to the bishop and asked that he be removed. The bishop, like the trustees of Hillsdale Col-

lege, refused, saying that the committee had only hearsay evidence and that he could not take action. However, after a few years, that great Christian worker, Death, did what the bishop refused to do, and the long-suffering parish got a new priest.

He, too, was a German, a refugee from National Socialism, and a man who devoted the whole of his life—he died at age 93—to the people of his parish. A descendant of a prominent family, he had been instrumental in the founding of the Catholic Center party, and was an intellectual who wore his learning with grace and ease. The farmers and small-town people hardly knew what to make of him. For a while his sermons were intellectual and theological exercises that stunned his parishioners into amused silence. Finally, one of his parishioners went to him and said, as Germans are apt to do, "Father, your sermons are too high for us. Just tell us a little story."

"A little story. What! Today?"

In 1954 the "Conservative Movement" was hardly more than a handful of people, a self-selected elite who knew something was terribly wrong with the politics, the economics, and the community life of the American Republic. Though they were not political physicians, they could hear the death rattle of the left-liberal old order. They set about to educate them-

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selves, to argue, to discuss, to organize, and especially to recruit. The elder statesmen, none of them very old, were uniformly concerned with the recruitment of the next generation into the movement.

This elite, many of whom were disillusioned communists or fellow travelers, knew from first-hand experience the power both of ideas and of organization. It was this consciousness of standing on the forefront of history, of battling at Marathon and Thermopylae, which gave this elite its special quality and its dynamic force. Many, like Whittaker Chambers, felt that the battle had already been lost. It was reported to me by someone who ought to have known that Henry Kissinger believed that the tides of history would carry Soviet power to the fore and that his role was simply to buy time. Not everyone was so gloomy, to be sure.

Aside from the Soviet threat and the fact of internal subversion the conservative elite spent its time battling the growth and centralization of state power and restoring order and meaning to everyday life. In this respect the first generation of the conservative elite distinguished themselves from those who came to call themselves "neo-conservatives" and who were anti-communist statist.

Moreover, that first generation of conservative elite participated in the religious revival of the 1950s and 1960s. Those who discovered the "Religious Right" in the second half of the decade of the 1990s are just about half a century too late. The essential character of that primal conservative elite was religious and value-oriented, and if conservatism has anything to say at the beginning of the new millennium it will embody the beliefs and values of that earlier elite. We are now more aware than ever that man does not live by bread alone.

Many in those early days of the movement liked to think of themselves as "individualists" and indeed there once was

a society which called itself the "Intercollegiate Society of Individualists, Inc." I always took that to mean that its members distinguished themselves from the schools of bottom-feeding liberals who dominated every campus, and every faculty, and who automatically assumed that unless one took one's politics from *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, one's aesthetics from *Partisan Review*, and one's entertainment from *The New Yorker*, one was intellectually unqualified to serve on a college or university faculty. Indeed these "individualists" paid dearly for the views they held and the ideas they defended.

The danger to the conservative elite, however, was not the stranglehold the left-liberal elite held and still holds on the academy. The great danger to the conservative elite was, rather, the success which that elite generated in the social, political, and economic world. Once the conservative intellectual entered the realm of power he surrendered himself and his motives to that power and its amassment through politics and bureaucracy. At that point he traded his tweed coat for a pinstriped suit, caught Potomac fever, and went off to Washington to become a denizen of a think-tank. The moral of this little story is that if the conservative movement is to be successful in the years ahead it must cease to be dominated by policy wonks and must find a form of creativity other than writing position papers. The Weberian transition from the realm of ideas to the realm of power has very important consequences for the conservative movement and these must be recognized and confronted.

The conservative elite of forty years ago was not a happy band which suddenly found itself to be thinking "forbidden" thoughts and debating "undiscussable" propositions. The existence of this happy band was the consequence of deliberate recruitment. There was a hand-

ful of creative leaders who said, in effect, "Come, follow me." Men such as Frank Meyer, Richard Weaver, Ludwig von Mises, Kenneth Templeton, Russell Kirk, M. Stanton Evans, Henry Regnery, and Don Lipsett, to name only a few, made it their business to identify talent, to recruit graduate students, to organize meetings, and to see that there was a next generation. They were intellectually diverse and with personalities as large and as contradictory as the issues with which they engaged. It has struck me increasingly that their like has disappeared from the conservative movement and that converts are made, if at all, from the printed page. This does not bode well for the future of conservatism.

Every great transforming movement in world history is essentially a movement of the spoken word. Jesus and Socrates did not write books. Books, indeed, are important but they are afterthoughts. There must always be an original *kerygma* or proclamation. It may be Frank Meyer calling at 2:00 AM in the morning from Woodstock, or Kenneth Templeton sitting in the living room when the morning stars sang together and the fireplace fire had gone out, or students gathered at an ISI summer school, talking, no, not talking but arguing far into the night. When the *kerygma* ceases and the movement bureaucrats take over, the vitality of the movement is threatened.

Moreover, the early conservative movement was a community. Frank Meyer, who had been a communist organizer in the Mid-West, once remarked to me that the communist movement, like the early Christian, was a movement in which no one was a stranger. One could come into a strange town and find immediate hospitality and companionship. And so it was with the early conservative movement. There was a bond of hospitality and friendship. I find this intense spirit of community lacking in today's

conservative movement and I wonder whether it is not another sign that we have grown sclerotic. A room full of 500 people eating rubber chicken is no substitute for a night at Mecosta, Woodstock, or Three Oaks.

Finally, I wish to say a few words about the importance of the TRUTH to the conservative movement. Conservatism developed essentially as a response to persistent and massive left-liberal untruth. The problem was not simply Lillian Hellman, who, as it was observed, never wrote a truthful word in her life: "even the thes and the ands were a lie." Franklin D. Roosevelt was nearly equally in capable of the truth. He was the leader of the pack and many in it were more mendacious and artful than he was. Conservatism sought to banish the right to life in the name of *reason of state*, *Staatsraison*, *raison d'Etat*. There is no greater enemy of community than the lie. It dissolves common purpose and mutual confidence. How terrible, then, that conservatives in power succumbed to lying.

I do not mean the sluggards among conservative writers who resorted, in a pinch, to plagiarism. I have known a number of them but it is not profitable to give the infamous fame by naming them.

In 1974 I attended a meeting in West Branch, Iowa, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of President Herbert Hoover. The conferees divided their time between the celebration of a noble and tragic figure in American history and the slow-motion televised abdication of a pseudo-conservative liar, President Richard M. Nixon. In the person of William Jefferson Clinton we have seen how low the Presidency can sink. Not only has the President behaved in a loathsome fashion but also he has lied more persistently than any other figure in American history—including Mike Fink.

Here I shall not speak of those supposed conservatives, the "Ravelsteins," who have practiced an intellectual dis-

simulation which permitted them to say, in the secret writing in which they indulged; one thing while intending another. No Athenian sophist was more adroit. Nor shall I dwell at length on the subject of a college president who did enormous harm both to the institution he guided and to the conservative causes he supposedly espoused.

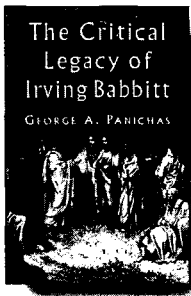
There have also been those men who saw conservatism as a way to personal status and power, men devoid of any purpose other than, as one of my students observed, "an ego-splat." I knew well one of these dark men from the gutter. He lied to himself. He lied to his friends. He created a fictitious past for himself. He even lied in creating objects for his inordinate hatreds. He lied as to his purpose and beliefs and he harmed the movement and those in any way connected with him.

William Buckley, with charity not un-

like that of my wife who believes that serial murderers are victims of a bad breakfast, observes that as Christians we must all recognize our fallen state and draw a veil of forgiveness over dark and unseemly deeds. This is nonsense, and Mr. Buckley knows it. Yes, we forgive the sinner, but it is equally important that we recognize that sinner and sinned against must live out the temporal consequences due to sin, the disruption of the social and the natural order that sin produces. The road to recovery is an acknowledgement and a quest for remedies for those actions which are matters to be dealt with in the exterior forum.

And now, having told all these little stories, like the wise king advising his minions as he sends them off to heroic deeds, let me say, "Be good! Be smart! Be brave! And be gone!"

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