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Restoring the Meaning of Conservatism: Final Reflections

T. H. PICKETT's following essay on "War, Power, and Supremacy" further develops the urgent need stressed in the preceding three issues of *Modern Age*, "Restoring the Meaning of Conservatism." This need becomes even greater as the debate continues between traditional conservatives and ambitious usurpers. Actually this debate would itself be academic if the intrinsic historical and metaphysical bearings of conservatism had secured a foundational authority of definition and acceptance.

That the canons of conservatism must beg to be defended against present-day pretenders who mask their ambitions and antinomies under the rubric of conservatism points to a rampant confusion in the ranks of conservatives. Indeed, some conservatives seem to be searching frantically for another word, another designation, that better defines and authenticates their conservative identity and allegiance. The damage done to the meaning of conservatism in the great tradition from Edmund Burke to T. S. Eliot, from Richard Weaver and Russell Kirk to Claes Ryn and George Carey in more recent times is inestimable.

We live in an age that almost automatically dismisses seminal texts and ideas in

favor of an indiscriminating neoterism. We wantonly abandon standards of authority and tradition in search of new Babylons made to the specifications of ideologues in their campaign to supplant the conservative spirit as we have known the truth of its excellences. Shifting attitudes and opinions proclaimed in elite centers and in mainstream discourse further diminish time-tested conservative values.

Ours is now fast transposing into an age of idolatry that goes beyond the relativistic and nihilistic vices, one in which the conservative idea is ripped from its roots in the Permanent Things and, in effect, alienated from the moral sense and the moral imagination. Deconstruction and anti-historicism are idols that today help dictate a false conception of conservatism. In direct consequence of this phenomenon—it is very much a deformation—conservatism, no less than sacred traditions and affirmations, is increasingly subjected to attacks that often smack of neo-Jacobin sympathies and sentiments.

We are allowing the meaning of conservatism to be annexed by a disordered *Zeitgeist*, which traditional conservatives have been battling steadily since the end

of World War II. In the past the primary traits of this *Zeitgeist* have been Marxist-Leninist in character and interpretation; today it is possessed by idolatrous forms of a continuing debasement that seeks to eradicate the need for roots and the roots of order. It is in this ever-changing, ever-threatening climate, when nothing has a “fixed signification” and everything is tolerated, that committed conservative believers must struggle to hold on to the content of their faith in the face of armed doctrines and violent heresies.

American conservatism is at the crossroads of its destiny as it labors to preserve its vision and soul. The forces pitted against it are in commanding positions of power, resources, and influence; and their control-centers are well-nigh impregnable: in essence, their goal is to strip conservatism of its basic orientation, thus leaving conservatism monistic and superficial, simply another plaything for hucksters and upstarts emptied of organic meaning and historical memory.

A conservatism at the mercy of hollow men is inconceivable, and yet cruelly possible, which ultimately makes it necessary to protect and to conserve the soil of conservative thought and consciousness, to which mendacious conservatives are instinctively opposed. The current warfare between a traditionalist and a spurious conservatism is mighty in meaning and import, the outcome of which will have deep and lasting impact on the present and future state of human thinking and cognition, whether of a transfiguring or disfiguring nature. Above all, as we take part in this warfare we must do so by transcending immediate and transitory aims and schemes as these are propagated for popular consumption—and advantage.

We simply cannot permit the conservative idea to be manipulated for either partisan advantage or materialist interests. But how are we to save conservatism from political adventurers with no loy-

alty to and defiant of what can even be termed an ascetical conservative ontology? How are we to save conservatism from those who see it solely in its evolutionary praxis or shapes and dismiss its metaphysical meaning, its origins and ends? Who are today the true authorities on whom we can rely for disinterested testimony that transcends the publicists and personalities who dominate the electronic media? These are questions that one will not find in the pages and editorial commentaries of newspapers, or on broadcast journalism, or in weekly or monthly tabloids (and headlines) totally subservient to the moment and to the mindlessness that is a national epidemic.

That we cannot rely on academe, which is in total disarray or in ideological captivity, is, inescapably, a worrisome fact that further complicates matters of high importance in the quarrel between a traditional and an evolutionary conservatism—and that makes the writings in this quarterly conservative review so vital, as is attested to in this most recent essay by Professor Pickett, and in earlier essays by Richard J. Bishirjian (“Origins and End of the New World Order”), Jude P. Dougherty (“The Fragility of Democracy”), Bruce P. Frohnen (“The Patriotism of a Conservative”), and Paul Gottfried (“The Conservative Movement in Discontinuity”). Individually and collectively, these essays, it can be said, are authentic texts that are moulded by disinterested diagnostic aims. There is no hidden agenda in them, no self-serving motive, no twisted moral subtlety, no pretense or affectation. In them we see the interplay of critical intelligence, analysis, and judgment surmounting the pernicious nullities that destroy thought and discrimination and mar the pursuit of criticism.

The following words, which are representative of the stimulating thought in George Carey’s hard-hitting essay on “The Future of Conservatism,” should alert one to the problem that faces conservatives

who are concerned with upholding their *raison d'être* and their integrity, as well as defending the validity of conservatism, if it is also to be saved from the misunderstanding and the misrepresentation that have been accruing in more recent years and that threaten its integrity: "Ultimately, one lesson for traditional conservatives, who more than most see the need for a politics guided and restrained by enduring principles, seems clear enough: They should never swear undying allegiance to either political party." Here, in sum, we are faced with the daunting challenge to conservatives who are concerned with their true mission and with what defines their identity and separates and saves it from the confusion, the vagueness, the accretions that threaten the standards of tradition that reside in conservatism. To allow the evanescence of contemporaneity to prostitute the ethos of conservatism is to yield to a cheapness that not only smothers the very soul of the conservative idea but also deconstructs it beyond recognition. A decomposed conservatism is a failed conservatism relegated to a vacuum of disinheritance and to a methodical devaluation regnant in a postmodern society impervious to moral and spiritual foundations.

In essence, the struggle that is now going on among conservatives of various persuasions is a struggle for the destiny of American conservatism; it is, in fact, a struggle to save standards of conservative thought and concept from the clutches of politicization at the cusp of trivialization, an infamously reductive process heightened by the media's endless parade of pundits and experts insensitive to the philosophical dimensions of a reflective conservatism. Clearly, any endeavor to restore the meaning of conservatism has considerable obstacles to overcome when we stop to think of the sharp slide into mediocrity and decadence that determine standards and shape leadership. "To have standards," Babbitt

reminds us, "means practically to select and reject; and this again means that one must discipline one's feelings or affections...to some ethical centre."

The discipline of an ethical centre is inherently opposed to the lexicon of Demos and to politics void of prudence and moral realism, as we continuously discover to our alarm at all levels of our national life. In effect what we find is that any sophistic tampering with general terms impacts on conservatism by blurring its distinctions, which, if anything, need to be renewed. If intellectual and spiritual torpor works against standards and distinctions, arrogance and cynicism further weaken the battle against philodoxers who are enemies of conservatism.

A spirit of imperialism, which sabotages moral paradigms, instances a more extreme stage of the undermining of conservative traditions as essayists in this journal have been emphasizing, especially as it is delineated in the essay on "War, Power, and Supremacy" and as seen in the larger context of the military-industrial complex that Dwight D. Eisenhower warned against at the end of his presidency. Professor Pickett's essay should be studied in conjunction with and as an extension of Professor Carey's critique, which occupies a central place in the debate on the direction of conservatism *vis-à-vis* American domestic and foreign policy.

No two essays better clarify the crisis of American conservatism in which we find ourselves suspended, even as we can observe the spread of new theories of global supremacy anchored in the conceptual structures of modernity and humanitarian idealism that Babbitt warned against in *Democracy and Leadership* (1924) and that Pickett scrutinizes in their meta-modern ethical shifts, complexities, consequences. For traditional conservatives the "American faith in its own power as an indispensable tool in the redemption of

the world through global democratization” now poses a very troubling possibility, which Babbitt detected with a disquietude that does not abate over eighty years since he wrote these prescient words: “A chief danger both for ourselves and others is that we shall continue to have a frontier psychology long after we have ceased to have a frontier. For a frontier psychology is expansive, and expansiveness...is, at least in its political manifestations, always imperialistic.”

Pickett’s view of the political manifestations in a contemporary setting deserves to be pondered, even as their effects become more harmful. What he writes about the grand idea of *Deutsche Kultur* in the years 1871-1945, going back to Otto von Bismarck, underscores points of similarity between Germany and the United States that crystallize in a “new imperial adventurism.” “Both Germany and the United States,” Pickett declares, “have appealed to humanitarianism to justify their actions to themselves and to the world, each with diminishing external credibility.” He goes on to say in words that are more disturbing: “The chilling resemblance lies in the internal dynamics in which phantasms of cultural superiority enhance aspirations of global supremacy.”

Who, even one who is neither necessarily conservative in temper nor actively interested in the Republic, in moderation, in restraint, or in the Christian or ancient virtues, can read the foregoing words without experiencing a tinge of apprehension and responsibility? The swift erosion of tradition and the devolution of conservatism go hand-in-hand, and unless we are willing to measure the results of this confluent crisis, we remain blind to the realities of our dilemma and the symptoms of our disillusion. Whether we admit it or not, we are engaged in moral warfare of momentous fatefulness for our time, for our people, and for our governance.

As long as we choose to worship at the mega-technic shrine of the “terrible simplifiers” in their contemporary variety and stylized idiom, we shall not be able to deliver ourselves from a paralysis of community and soul. The headlong descent into anarchism, which the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev saw as another aspect of the exhaustion and decline of the Renaissance spirit, constitutes the rejection of spiritual history, the triumph of ideology, and the excrescences of the positivist doctrine of Progress, which Father Stanley Parry, in his essay on “The Restoration of Tradition,” published in *Modern Age* nearly fifty years ago, pinpointed as a form of “change from order and truth to disorder and negation.”

The idea of conservatism, as we have hitherto affirmed its first principles and acceptations, is now being subjected to the disruptive forms of transformation which Father Parry feared, and to which commentators in recent issues of *Modern Age* have directed our attention, in the fervent hope of restoring the meaning of conservatism by also removing it from the predatory hands of ideologues. Surely, it would be utter folly to authorize present-day artificers to erect an American conservatism on stilts.

If prudential politics are not to surrender to ideologized politics, to employ here Kirk’s phraseology, and if millenarian stratagems devised for the pre-emptive establishment of a New World Order are to be resisted, traditional conservatives must press on with their labors in defense of principles. In this connection, too, it is worth repeating these words found in the epigraph to the editorial commentary in *Modern Age* (Summer 2005) entitled “Restoring the Meaning of Conservatism”: “If you don’t stand for something, you’ll get knocked down by anything.”

—George A. Panichas