

# Russell Kirk and the Negation of Ideology

by Scott P. Richert

*"The magnificent cause of being, / The imagination, the one reality /  
In this imagined world . . ."*

—Wallace Stevens

**Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology**  
by W. Wesley McDonald  
Columbia, MO: University of Missouri  
Press; 243 pp., \$44.95



Though ten years have passed since his death on April 29, 1994, Russell Kirk has yet to be the subject of a definitive intellectual biography. In his own posthumously published autobiography, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (1995), Kirk did not pretend to present a comprehensive summary of his thought, striving instead to render imaginatively the most important scenes of his life. The result is a book that many of us who knew Kirk find ourselves returning to more and more as time goes by, not to remind ourselves where he stood on thus-and-such, but to conjure his shade when our memories, sadly, grow dim. The third-person narrative, about which I had my doubts when I reviewed the memoirs for *Chronicles*, now seems a comfort, because Kirk's voice comes through perhaps more strongly than it would have if he had written in the first person. Despite its great charms, however, *The Sword of Imagination* is not the place for the student of Kirk to discover the fullness of the content of Kirk's thought.

Nor, for that matter, is James E. Person, Jr.'s admirable *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (1999). Person does yeoman's work in summarizing Kirk's major writings, especially his fiction, which has too often been neglected by scholars of Kirk, and he provides a selected bibliography that fills in many of the gaps since the publication of Charles Brown's comprehensive *Russell Kirk: A Bibliography* in 1982. For

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*Russell Kirk (far right, front) at a Chronicles editorial meeting*

the Kirk scholar, Person's book is indispensable; it is not, however, definitive.

And thus the field was clear for W. Wesley McDonald, who, along with Person and Charles Brown, probably had the greatest access to Kirk and his massive collection of correspondence and manuscripts over the years. McDonald first took up residence at Piety Hill, Kirk's home in Mecosta, Michigan, in the summer of 1969, acting as Kirk's assistant. In his Preface, he describes his earliest experiences with Kirk, experiences that will seem familiar to anyone who had the privilege of visiting Kirk at his home:

At dinner I struggled to make intelligent conversation. My efforts elicited only an occasional "uh-huh." . . . I interpreted his taciturn responses as a form of rejection. He must think I'm an idiot, I began to fear. Annette, though, sensing my anguish, barked, "Russell, speak to the boy!" Only after this admonition did he answer my question about Cardinal Newman's *Illative Sense*.

McDonald's personal reminiscences are touching, but, sadly, his purpose in this book does not allow him to include many. Instead, after a brief biographical

sketch drawn largely from Kirk's *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory*, McDonald spends the rest of Chapter 1 outlining the role that Kirk played in returning conservatism to respectability in the intellectual environment of the 1950's, in which liberalism had, until the publication of Kirk's doctoral dissertation, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana*, enjoyed hegemony. He deftly describes the tensions between Kirk's brand of conservatism and the emerging libertarian strains represented by Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises before transitioning, appropriately, into the main focus of the book: Kirk's rejection of ideology in all its forms and his conviction that conservatism, properly understood, is "the negation of ideology." Instead, Kirk believed, conservatism is "the defense of [an objective universal] moral order against its ideological adversaries of both the Left and the Right."

This distinction between conservatism and ideology is fundamental to a proper understanding of Kirk's thought. It is, at once, both the greatest strength of Kirk's intellectual vision and, as Thomas Fleming and Claes Ryn have each pointed out, potentially its greatest weakness, because it leads Kirk to a distrust of reason that, in the end, may have prevented him from approaching conservative thought in a

properly philosophical cast of mind.

McDonald tries to smooth over this tension by making it appear to be largely a semantic problem: Kirk used the term *ideology* in a more limited way; his critics (even those who are also his admirers) use it to mean “any set of beliefs.” Here, McDonald misses the point, and the misunderstanding leads to a greater problem in his second chapter, on “The Moral Basis of Conservatism,” where he writes:

A certain degree of philosophical imprecision exists in Kirk’s thought that complicates the explication of his ideas. Kirk was not a philosopher in the technical sense of that word (as he readily admitted), and therefore was not concerned in his work with the formal analysis of basic philosophical concepts.

McDonald tries to correct this gap in Kirk’s thought by imposing a philosophical structure on it. He justifies this in his Introduction by pointing to Kirk’s own admission that Irving Babbitt

has influenced me more strongly than has any other writer of the twentieth century. It was through Babbitt that I came to know Edmund Burke, and Babbitt, as much as Burke, animates my book, *The Conservative Mind*.

The problem is that the philosophical framework into which he attempts to fit Kirk’s thought is not truly Babbitt’s (which, on the basis of Kirk’s remark, might be justifiable) but that of “contemporary disciples” of Babbitt “whose work has done much to make their thought relevant to later generations,” particularly McDonald’s teacher (and mine) at The Catholic University of America, Claes Ryn.

Ryn and his mentor, Folke Leander, have done important work in systematizing and extending Babbitt’s thought, especially in *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality* (1986). As a supplement and an extension to Kirk’s thought, these reflections might someday bear useful fruit, but in the context of McDonald’s book, they ultimately distract from the more important question: Why did Kirk choose not to write philosophical works?

As McDonald indicates, Kirk certainly understood that he was not writing systematic philosophy; at the same time, it

would be unjust to imply that Kirk, had he set his mind to it, would have been incapable of philosophical reflection. Instead, his decision not to write such works, I would argue, was a deliberate one: They were not what “the rising generation” needed most.

Kirk took from both Babbitt and Burke an emphasis on the moral imagination; almost always, he speaks of “imagination and right reason,” in that order, because he understood that reason can only work upon the material that imagination provides. When men’s imagination is depraved or—perhaps worse—deprived, their reason cannot be expected to create anything other than the distorting and destructive ideologies that Kirk despised. Thus Kirk, in *The Sword of Imagination*:

Mr. Reagan was endowed with a certain power of imagination; successful actors almost necessarily have a talent for image-making. His successor, President Bush, expressed his distaste for the “vision thing.” At that time, Kirk hoped that Mr. Bush was disavowing political utopianism; but no, it turned out that Bush really repudiated political imagination, so that he was unable to foresee probable consequences of his own policies and utterances.

In a similar vein, Kirk, after commenting on two sentences of Burke that contain no fewer than seven historical allusions, wrote in the Introduction to the Seventh Revised Edition of *The Conservative Mind* that “To remind [men and women with a disposition to preserve and an ability to reform] of their inheritance of thought and feeling, *The Conservative Mind* was written.”

To remind, to bring to mind, to cause to remember—and memory is just the extension of imagination through time. The house, if it is to stand, must be built upon a firm foundation, and Kirk set about laying the stones.

In his discussion of “The Moral Imagination, Reason, and Natural Law” in Chapter 3, McDonald succinctly expresses the heart of Kirk’s thought (and the reason why conservatives are foolish to dismiss Kirk’s fiction as somehow less important than his other works) when he writes:

Myth, fable, allegory, parable, and

fantasy are poetic instruments to arouse our imagination by bringing us back to the central concerns of life. They “are not falsehoods,” Kirk assured us; “on the contrary, they are means for penetrating to the truth by appealing to the moral imagination.”

The strongest part of the book, this chapter nevertheless will not be without its critics, because of McDonald’s insistence that “a close examination of [Kirk’s] work reveals aspects of his thought inconsistent with the consensual Christian natural law position typically attributed to him.” While Kirk’s moral principles were not contrary to natural law, “his moral epistemology significantly differed from that employed by natural law theorists.”

This is a minefield, and likely one of the things McDonald had in mind when he wrote in his Preface:

One of my goals in writing this book is to rescue Russell Kirk from his hagiographers, who, since his death, sometimes venerate him at the expense of understanding the substance of his thought or quote him selectively to promote agendas that would have been foreign to his thinking and nature.

Conservative Catholic admirers of Kirk will undoubtedly object, but McDonald is close to the truth. In his final years, Kirk embarked on an extensive study of natural law, which resulted in a 1993 Heritage Foundation speech (a version of which he also delivered at The Catholic University of America) entitled “The Case For and Against Natural Law.” Two things are obvious from the speech: To the extent that Kirk is a natural-law thinker, his understanding of natural law is, like Burke’s, closer to the Ciceronian natural-law tradition than to the medieval scholastic one; and, for Kirk, the imagination, not reason, is the primary faculty through which we comprehend the truths of natural law. That is not to say that Kirk’s understanding is incompatible with Christian natural-law theory, though it certainly diverges from today’s neo-Thomism, whose exponents suffer from a peculiarly modern conception of reason. Indeed, an enterprising student of Kirk and natural law might profitably examine the extent to which Kirk ascribes to the imagination functions that the scholastics attributed to reason. McDonald makes some efforts

in this direction, but there is still much more work to do.

A delicate matter needs to be mentioned. McDonald does not address Kirk's relationship with *Chronicles*, and, indeed, there is no particular reason why he would, since *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* does not pretend to be an exhaustive biography. However, in an online colloquy on his book sponsored by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in May (the text is available at [chronicle.com/colloquylive/2004/05/kirk/](http://chronicle.com/colloquylive/2004/05/kirk/)), McDonald, responding to a question about Kirk's relationship with *Chronicles* and Pat Buchanan, wrote:

I am a little puzzled by Mr. Kenner's assertion that Kirk is frequently associated with *Chronicles* magazine. *Chronicles* is edited by Thomas Fleming and publishes articles by noted paleoconservatives such as Paul Gottfried, Sam Francis, Justin Raimondo and Peter Brimelow. However, I can't recall Kirk ever contributing anything to its pages. In any case, he was not particularly close to either its editors or most of its contributors. During the 1980s, when the *Chronicles* was a tiny fledgling publication, I remember Kirk and I having a brief conversation about it, and he didn't seem then to be very enthusiastic about the magazine.

McDonald must certainly know that, "In an unwonted outburst of kindness" (as Kirk put it), Kirk broke his long-standing rule against appearing on the masthead of publications and agreed to become a contributing editor to *Chronicles*. A cursory glance through back issues reveals that Kirk wrote at least a dozen articles and reviews for *Chronicles* after The Ingersoll Foundation bestowed on him the Richard M. Weaver Award for Scholarly Letters in 1984. A quick examination of Kirk's correspondence with Thomas Fleming and other editors of *Chronicles* (available in the Kirk papers as well as in our files) indicates that about half of those articles were written at the request of the editors and the other half at Kirk's suggestion. While Kirk could be merely cordial in his correspondence or (as McDonald well knows) could delegate the duty of a reply to one of his assistants, almost all of his correspondence with *Chronicles* came

from his own typewriter, and the tone is always very warm. Kirk intervened with foundations to raise money for the magazine and took an active role in the Ingersoll Prizes. Tom Fleming, who began corresponding with Kirk in the late 70's and published him in the first issue of the *Southern Partisan* before coming to *Chronicles*, was a guest at Piety Hill, and Kirk recommended more than one of his assistants for a position at *Chronicles*.

Even when, in June 1992, Kirk asked to be removed from the masthead, he did so for reasons of friendship and loyalty and not because of a divergence of principles. *Chronicles* had published a *Cultural Revolutions* piece by Greg Kaza (then a member of the Michigan House of Representatives) questioning the politics of first-term Michigan governor John Engler, and Kirk felt compelled to resign in solidarity with his "close ally and disciple" (Kirk's words).

Despite this institutional parting of ways, Kirk continued his correspondence with Tom Fleming, and the two collaborated on the English translation and publication of Eugenio Corti's *The Red Horse*. Moreover, Kirk's decision to abandon sitting president George H.W. Bush (whom he had supported in 1988) and to act as general chairman of Pat Buchanan's presidential campaign in the Michigan primary in 1992 (a fact curiously omitted from McDonald's book) left little doubt about where his political allegiances lay.

In his comments on *Chronicles*, McDonald would seem to have fallen into the same error that he wrote his book to combat, ascribing his own feelings about the magazine to Kirk. His Kirk, unlike the historical one, seems placed, as McDonald's colleague Paul Gottfried has remarked, equidistant between the neoconservatives and the paleoconservatives. This may account for another curious omission: When McDonald discusses Kirk's infamous 1988 Heritage Foundation speech on "The Neoconservatives" (and criticizes Kirk for believing that neoconservatism "would not long remain a powerful force"), he does not quote the one line from that speech that helped define the emerging struggle between neoconservatives and paleoconservatives. "Not seldom has it seemed," Kirk declared, "as if some eminent Neoconservatives mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States." A few years later, in another Heritage Foundation speech, Kirk repeated that line verbatim. In the wake of the Gulf War, which he had op-

posed, he clearly understood that those words carried even greater meaning.

Kirk had agreed to join the editorial board of *Chronicles* in August 1988; he delivered "The Neoconservatives" at the Heritage Foundation in October of that year; but he did not actually appear on the masthead of *Chronicles* until May 1989. Surprisingly, the symbolism of Kirk's appearance on the masthead in that particular issue—the neoconservative reaction to which accelerated the events that led to the decision by The Rockford Institute's board of directors to sever relations with Richard John Neuhaus, the director of the Institute's New York-based Center on Religion & Society—has been missed by most paleoconservatives. To the neoconservatives, however, it must have seemed that the opposition was convening at Gondor for the final battle.

These are not inconsequential problems for a book that bills itself a discussion of Russell Kirk and the age of ideology. Today, in both politics and culture, neoconservatism is the reigning ideology. Busy charting a safe path down the middle of the battlefield, McDonald misses an opportunity to apply Kirk's insights to the raging war.

There is, of course, no way to say with certainty how Kirk would have reacted to the acceleration of the political and cultural decline of the United States since his death in 1994, but few who knew him can doubt that the man who wrote in his memoirs that "during 1991 Kirk would come to detest Bush for his carpet-bombing of the Cradle of Civilization with its taking of a quarter of a million lives in Iraq" would have been even more horrified by the current war, fought at the behest of those very neoconservatives who mistake Tel Aviv for Washington, D.C. (or is it, today, the other way around?). And of the recent election of neoconservative godmother Midge Decter as president of the venerable conservative discussion group The Philadelphia Society—well, some things are best left unsaid.

McDonald's book deserves a place alongside Person's biography in the canon of Kirk scholarship, but, falling prey to its own form of hagiography in glossing over Kirk's role in the most important political and intellectual struggles of his final years, it falls short of being the definitive intellectual biography of this giant of conservative thought. For that book, Russell Kirk still waits.

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# The Dialectic of Suicide

by Samuel Francis

*"A nation never falls but by suicide."*

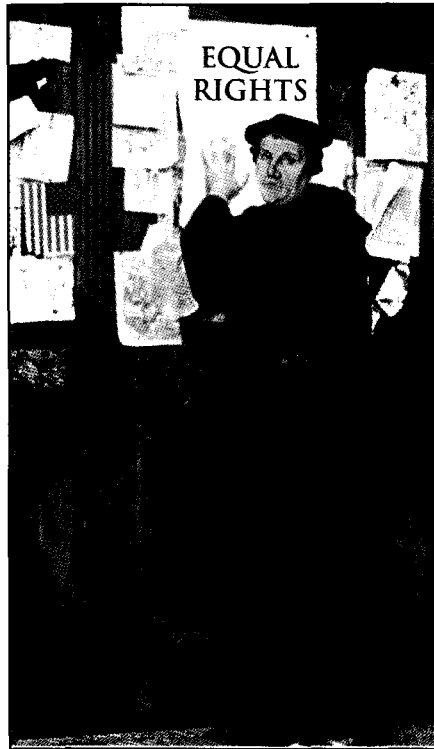
—R.W. Emerson

**Who Are We? The Cultural Core of American National Identity**  
by Samuel P. Huntington  
New York: Simon and Schuster;  
408 pp., \$27.00

The ambush was prepared and actually triggered several months before Samuel Huntington's *Who Are We?* appeared in print. When Mr. Huntington, the author of *The Clash of Civilizations* and a leading political scientist at Harvard, published last winter an excerpt from his new book dealing with the threat posed to American national cultural identity by mass immigration from Latin America, he was lambasted almost at once in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, while the *Washington Post* ran a tinny *Style* section satire ridiculing his thesis and the idea that immigration could ever possibly be a "threat" to anyone. Probably not since the publication of *The Bell Curve* in 1994 have the serried ranks of the establishment media and the ruling class they serve closed so quickly on a book offering ideas they find inconvenient to their myths and interests.

The threat they perceived had nothing to do with mass immigration or the loss of a cultural core identity that Huntington laments but, rather, with the prospect that anyone, especially a major Harvard academic of Huntington's stature, might think immigration could threaten the American nation's "cultural identity," let alone that such an "identity"

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exists. Just as the hereditarian and anti-egalitarian implications of *The Bell Curve* had to be concealed as quickly as possible, so Huntington's ideas had to be strangled in their cradle. What the Harvard professor is saying in *Who Are We?* is—in many but not all respects—very much the same as what Pat Buchanan, Peter Brimelow, *Chronicles*, Chilton Williamson, Jr., and I, among several others, have been saying about mass immigration for years or decades. And when these ideas seep down to places like Harvard, the ruling class sniffs trouble.

Huntington argues that America indeed has a "cultural core identity," that it is not just a "creedal nation" as liberals and most neoconservatives and libertarians like to assert, and that this identity is the "Anglo-Protestant core" created by British settlers of the 17th and 18th centuries—an identity that produced

American political institutions and values, national economic and intellectual achievements, and national coherence as a unified society. He argues further that, today, this identity is under threat from two major forces: mass immigration, mainly Mexican but also Hispanic generally, by peoples who, owing to their numbers and their own cultural attachments, do not and cannot assimilate to the Anglo-Protestant core; and "America's business, professional, intellectual, and academic elites" who have rejected national identity of any kind and (in the case of intellectual elites at least) have abandoned "commitment to their nation and their fellow citizens and argue the moral superiority of identifying with humanity at large." On the latter point, Huntington joins the late Christopher Lasch, James Burnham, and other analysts of the American ruling class.

So far, the argument will be thoroughly familiar to *Chronicles* readers, since various writers have pushed virtually the same ideas here; there are, however, differences between their ideas and Huntington's. In the first place, while paleoconservatives have, for the most part, rejected the very concept of an "American Creed" as the defining element of the national identity, Huntington, for all his qualifications of the idea, insists on retaining it. Against the creedal nationalists (who mainly tell us that the equality language of the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address constitute the abstractions to which American society must be made to conform by the federal government, and to which the rest of the planet must be made to conform by America), Huntington insists that the United States is defined by more than that. Nevertheless, he argues that the na-