

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



The Conservative Mission

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THE INTEREST IN conservative ideas and action has been growing in America since the close of World War II. The elections of 1980 produced an impressive array of conservative political victories. To many it appeared that conservative ideas were now in a commanding position to be implemented; it seems timely to assess the goals and ends of the conservative commitment.

The purpose of the conservative mission I see is two-fold: first, to define and articulate the enduring principles of Western thought; secondly, to apply these principles in the practical world of politics. The exponents of conservatism come from a variety of philosophical directions. Those of more libertarian bent place their emphasis on individualism and freedom, while those of traditional inclination are preoccupied with such matters as virtue, authority, and order. Probably the writings of the late Frank S. Meyer best represent the position of those who consciously think of themselves as contemporary American conservatives. Meyer saw keenly the relationship between the libertarian and traditionalist approaches. Libertarianism was essential in offering the framework of freedom, while traditionalism was indispensable to remind us that within the free society we must strive

towards the achievement of moral and ethical ends. Thus, it was the free man in pursuit of virtue that was the founding premise of Meyer's thinking. To many conservatives this synthesis made eminently good sense.

Meyer, the theorist, symbolized the conservative mission, for he labored extensively, along with legions of others, to define the enduring principles and to assist in their application. With American conservatives today, the principal preoccupations are with recovering an understanding of the underlying moral and ethical problems, restoring an appreciation for economic basics, and reclaiming a realistic view of contemporary international affairs.

II

WHEN RICHARD WEAVER wrote that modern thought reflected a "sickly metaphysical dream," he struck a responsive chord among those thinking of themselves as conservative, as did Leo Strauss when he wrote of the need to reclaim "the great tradition" of Western thought. Weaver and Strauss were suggesting the need to recover the great moral and ethical foundations of the West. The essence of the argument is that without a

moral and ethical base, little else can be accomplished. What is achieved if we have a strong economy and a powerful national defense, yet have not the moral and ethical base in place? Indeed, the latter is a precondition to all enduring achievement. Perhaps we are back to the old Platonic argument that society is simply the individual writ large. If the individual is corrupt, degenerate, and indifferent to the moral and ethical problems, then society itself will be fatally deficient. On the other hand, if the individuals in a society (or certainly a goodly portion of them—the *leaven*) are properly attuned to the moral and ethical demands, that society will be a sound and enduring one. The error of the modern mind is the belief that merely through restructuring institutions one can produce the good society. From the conservative viewpoint, institutions are secondary; the moral quality of the individuals in society is the primal fact.

In its quest for the moral and ethical imperatives, American conservatism is decidedly theistic. Man is not self-produced or self-defining; man is creature, not Creator. Furthermore, there is a higher law to which man must look. He is part of a hierarchy of being. The moral mandate is to discern the nature of man and to determine his duties and obligations. Thus, man is here to serve, not to be served. Moreover, there is a profound sense of reverence and awe for the majesty of being and a keen awareness of the imperfectibility of the human condition. Concomitantly, there is acknowledgment that tragedy and evil *inhere in the nature of things*. In brief, there is a spiritual dimension to man which must be properly ordered. If properly ordered, the tissue of society is healthy; if improperly ordered, the result is decay and degeneracy within society. The best in the classical and religious traditions of Western thought understood that the spiritual concern was the foundation of sound political theory. As American conservatives view it, this fact has been sadly neglected in our time and to the great peril of the West in general and to America in particular.

There ensues no mania to impose a moral and ethical posture upon all Americans in the practical world of politics. There is, however, a keen desire to enter into a public dialogue on the matter of moral and ethical deficiency in contemporary society. Certainly, a society need not be defenseless against clearly perceived degeneracy. There is a requirement for those in public service to at least make known their concern about the moral malaise of our time. For example, certainly society is not helpless against unchecked violence, pornography, and the growing drug culture that increasingly debases and immobilizes the youth of the country. If such developments continue unchecked, then Weaver is correct—we live bounded by a “sickly, metaphysical dream.”

Conservatism contends that if we are to reclaim the health of the body politic we must break with the thin and shallow premises of modernism that do deny the spiritual dimension of man and do attempt to build earthly utopias through “proper” education, restructured institutions, and the general quest for material ends. This modernist quest is an anguished one destined to fail. The task of conservatives is to break the mold and to begin the restoration of the humane society by acknowledging the nature of man, his finiteness, his limitations, his imperfectibility, and his need to determine the moral parameters and obligations. The task of spiritual reconstruction is essential to the survival of the West.

III

BEYOND REJUVENATING the moral and ethical sense, the path to political health requires a renewed understanding of economic basics. Wilhelm Röpke spoke of the “humane economy.” This goal, this perception, lies at the center of contemporary American conservative economic thought. Government policies of recent decades have produced an inflation rate fluctuating between 10 and 20 percent. No economist of substance is contending such a rate can be allowed to continue in-

definitely. In a state of near panic to control its inflation, the government produces interest rates in the same range and the result is recession and unemployment. These consequences—inflation, high interest rates, recession, and unemployment—are all government induced! There is a growing public feeling that we need to return to economic basics.

Inflation is the point of departure in analyzing modern economic mismanagement. Presumably, if inflation could be brought under control, interest rates would drop and recession and unemployment would ebb; and we would have begun restoring the foundations of a productive, creative, and expanding economy. How to control inflation? The experts offer a number of steps. First, we have an over-regulated economy. Regulation has become an end in and of itself. It inheres as a way of life in the modern administrative state. The historical antecedents of the administrative state are traceable back through the New Deal to the Fabians and the Benthamites, and its major premise is that self-appointed elites at the center can successfully plan and direct a modern industrial economy. It is not possible for businesses to recoup the extensive cost of regulation through increased productivity; hence, the expense is passed on to the consumer, and the result is increased inflation. Similarly, government spending, which allows a national debt of nearly a trillion dollars to evolve, is a major source of inflation. Clearly, deficit spending of the Keynesian heritage has brought us to a perilous point in the spiral of rising prices.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a cause of inflation is the government's own attitude towards productivity. The conservative starts with the assumption that governments do not produce, people do. Governments can set the stage for production of wealth by maintaining a sound currency and by protecting the person and property from internal and external threat, but they do not themselves produce. People as individuals, corporations, or partnerships are the producers. In recent years, the government has discour-

aged productivity by subtly undermining the work ethic. Too frequently, it pays not to work: for example, tax laws approach confiscatory levels, and welfare and unemployment compensation laws are carelessly structured to discourage work. In general, the government's tax laws and regulations discourage productivity. The accumulation of capital for plant modernization, expansion, and growth is increasingly difficult. Productivity is the basis of *all* economic theory, and it is the increasingly lowered level of productivity in the United States that has propelled us into an alarming rate of inflation, for through government deficit spending an ever increasing supply of money is poured into circulation, yet there is no corresponding increase in the production of goods and services.

Today, as the political pressure mounts for economic reform to reduce regulation, to cut spending, and to increase productivity, the charge is heard: What will happen to the "social programs"? The answer, as the conservative sees it, is that the best social program, and the key to all others, is a sound, productive, and expanding economy. Frequently, we are told that conservative economic theories are "negative," that modern liberalism is "positive" in its approach to economic matters. However, one can inquire, what is so positive about inflation rates that hover between 10 and 20 percent, interest rates that fluctuate in the same range, and government induced recession and unemployment? Those results, to the conservative at least, sound quite negative. Language has been corrupted in our time. Conservatives contend that what they are proposing is quite positive: namely, discerning the essential principles of a humane economy—an economy that produces real goods and services.

Conservatism has an unparalleled opportunity to take its economic case to the populace, which seems more willing now to listen to the case for a revitalized private sector. The argument is that if those funds misused through public spending had been kept in the private sector and invested in

real jobs for real people in real communities, how beneficial that would have been for the working men and women of America. Or if funds are to be spent in the public sector (there are legitimate government expenditures; conservatives are not anarchists), how more justifiable if public spending had concentrated upon the fundamentals: at the national level, national defense; at the state and local level, such legitimate programs as law enforcement, education, highways, hospitals, and other programs that contribute at the state and local levels to a healthy and viable economy. The challenge is considerable and the opportunities enormous in the area of delineating the first principles of economics and applying them in the practical world of American politics. This challenge—indeed goal—is a part of the conservative mission.

IV

THE OPPORTUNITIES in the field of foreign policy are exceptionally compelling for conservative theory and practice. In returning to basics in this area, the idea of power is the critical concept. Machiavelli artfully expounded on the importance of power. The cardinal weakness in the Florentine's analysis, as Leo Strauss properly pointed out, was his failure to relate power to mortality, or more particularly his divorcing of power from the moral and ethical considerations and looking upon power as an end *per se*.

Although this was the fatal flaw in Machiavelli's thinking, the author of *The Prince* does remind us that power is a reality in all of politics, and in foreign affairs there is no escaping it. Power can be exercised for good or evil, but power is the critical datum in the conduct of foreign policy. The Soviet Union, as wrong as it is on every other fundamental point of political theory, is theoretically sound in its understanding of the importance of power. The theoretical error of the Soviet system is that it has harnessed power perversely and brutally to the wrong set of philosophical principles; however, it understands power

and has utilized that understanding extensively in advancing its aims in the modern world. Today, many observers of international affairs acknowledge that the balance of power is tipping against the United States and her allies. In sum, the West is strategically endangered.

Although President Carter was not alone to blame, during his administration the understanding of power in American foreign policy was reduced to its lowest level. For example, during his presidential campaign, Mr. Carter contended he would reduce the defense budget between five and seven billion dollars, and he called for the withdrawal of American forces from Korea. After his election, he pardoned draft evaders and appointed Sam Brown, the leading anti-war activist of the 1960's, to high government office. Subsequently, he scrapped the B-1 Bomber, postponed the production and deployment of the neutron warhead, and vetoed the building of a nuclear aircraft carrier. Finally, he appointed Andrew Young, who later opined that Cuban troops were a source of stability in southern Africa, to represent the United States at the United Nations. This sampling suggests the kind of wrong signals concerning an American President's understanding of power that were sent around the world. In his address at Notre Dame in May 1977, President Carter spoke of avoiding "an inordinate fear of communism." He indicated détente was alive and well, and that we were in a new era of international relations. In brief, the Cold War was behind us.

President Carter tried to develop a foreign policy based on human rights, although what he called human rights often turned out to be no more than his own ideological preconceptions, and he was curiously selective in applying even these. The results of President Carter's ignorance of the concept of power became tragically apparent in the last years of his administration: the fall of the Shah of Iran and of President Somoza in Nicaragua, the eruption of terrorist assassinations and attacks on American diplomats and institutions, the dismay and even the contempt of

some of our oldest and most reliable allies, and the bellicose and unchecked expansionism of the Soviet Union, Cuba, and their surrogates.

Conservatives were deeply concerned with the new President's view of power in the world. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter said that he was "surprised." Conservatives were surprised that he, the President, was surprised, for the Soviet Union comprehends power (indeed, the exercise of power lies at the center of the Marxist-Leninist vision), and at every available opportunity the Soviets have not hesitated to use their power. The leaders in the Kremlin are diligent students of Machiavelli.

Disconcertingly, on nearly every continent in the world today the United States and its allies are on the defensive and the Soviet Union and its surrogates are on the offensive. The fundamental reason for this development is a frequent lack of appreciation of the meaning of power in international relations. In our own hemisphere the unravelling of our position continues. At the time of the relinquishing of the Panama Canal via the new treaty, the treaty supporters contended that if the Canal were not given up, it would be taken by force. Furthermore, they advised such a gesture would earn America respect throughout the world. Both premises were wrong. In giving up territory in our own hemisphere under threat of force, we revealed our naive view of power. A case might have been made for the Panama Canal Treaty if Panama had had a tradition of democratic government, somewhat similar to Mexico or Venezuela; however, such was not the case. Omar Torrijos assumed power through a *coup d'état* in 1968. He was a protégé of Cuba and the Soviet Union; in short, he was a dictator. He did not represent the stability and the continuity of the democratic and constitutional tradition. In addition, a case for this treaty might have been possible if the Soviet Union had not been fishing in the troubled waters of the Caribbean, but this too was not the situation. Undoubtedly, the men in the Kremlin looked upon the

relinquishment of the Canal as a testing of America's will and her understanding of power.

The Kremlin and our enemies probably viewed the testing this way: if the United States lacked the will and the awareness of the need to defend its own territory in its own hemisphere, is there any reason to believe it would respond to adventures in Afghanistan and elsewhere? Nor did this treaty earn us world respect. A cursory look at international developments, and the treatment of America in the world generally since this treaty was signed, will answer that question. Soviet embassies are not attacked and its citizens held hostage. After the treaty signing, we were informed of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba and expanding Soviet military facilities there. These disturbing trends continue. Cuba and the Soviet Union were instrumental in the takeover of Nicaragua and the imposition of the Sandinista regime, which in turn is promoting revolution in El Salvador and putting continued pressure upon other areas in Central America—Guatemala, Honduras, and perhaps ultimately the Mexican oil fields. In the real world of international affairs, Moscow and Havana are inexorably turning the Caribbean into a major Soviet sphere of influence. The Communists comprehend the importance of power, and their understanding is yielding impressive dividends in their quest for world dominance.

Supported by the Soviet Union, Cuban troops roam areas of Africa at will and with impunity. The emergence of Soviet power in Africa continues, be it through Cuban proxies in such countries as Angola and Ethiopia, or through her surrogate Libya, as it moves into Chad. Increasingly, this unfolding pattern places the United States at considerable strategic disadvantage. The sea lanes, through which vital shipping passes, are jeopardized around the Cape and the Horn of Africa. The great natural resources of Africa are imperiled: for example, uranium in South Africa, chromium in Rhodesia, and oil in Nigeria. Africa is a continent of extraordinary geological wealth, and its loss will

represent a critical watershed in the increasing power imbalance between the Soviet Union and the United States. Moreover, on a standard of humaneness, one could argue that the peoples of Africa deserve better than Soviet and Cuban imperialism. Regretfully, the United States, with her clouded vision of power, seemed impotent under the Carter administration to check the deterioration on the black continent.

In the Middle East, Soviet pursuit of power continues to offer rewards even to the point where it is acknowledged that the great oil resources of that area are now threatened. Selecting at random, the pattern is disconcerting: the American Ambassador to Afghanistan is murdered; Soviet and Cuban forces are found in South Yemen and more recently in Afghanistan, following the Russian invasion of that country; Soviet troops are poised on the Iranian border, and the United States is humiliated with her diplomats being held hostage in Tehran for over a year; the Soviet Union is the principal manipulator of the Iran-Iraqi War; the Soviets conclude a treaty of friendship with Syria; and the Soviet Union is the primary backer of PLO terrorism. The trend is clear: Soviet hegemony is as foreboding in the Middle East as it is in Africa and the Western hemisphere.

In Southeast Asia, the Soviet Union, upon the departure of the United States, skillfully utilized her power to move into that area. Vietnamese troops, supported by the Soviets, have taken over Cambodia, and these forces threaten Thailand. Former American naval and military installations in Indochina are now utilized by Soviet forces. Here too, the overall pattern is disturbing. The balance of power shifts continually against the United States and her allies in favor of the Soviet Union and her satellites. Lenin understood power in the geopolitical context, and he decreed the role of the Soviet Union as the catalyst in subverting the underdeveloped continents. As Lenin explained, once the "soft underbelly" has been immobilized, the industrial urban

countries of Europe, North America, and Asia will succumb. Whether that ultimately occurs remains to be seen; however, the pattern is striking and the Leninist-Soviet conception of power is compelling. The misconception of power, so manifest in the Carter years, now presents an enormous challenge to this new conservative administration and its supporters.

Conservatives understand the proper uses and limitations of power. Within a society, the public consensus, traditions, and institutions normally enable its members to cooperate with a minimum of coercion. Among societies, however, in the international sphere, there is, of course, far less consensus, far less community of values and interests, far more inherent conflict, and hence, however regrettable, far more need to utilize power (or to be in a position to utilize it) in the conduct of foreign affairs.

A vital element in restoring the balance of power in international relations is the restoration of America's defense capability. The inter-relatedness of a sound economy, a strong national defense, and an effective foreign policy is obvious. Immediately after World War II the United States enjoyed a position of defense superiority. Then emerged an era in which equality, or so-called "rough equivalency," was considered acceptable. The United States now is quite probably in a position of overall defense inferiority *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union. For example, in its report issued in September 1980, the Institute for Strategic Studies in London concluded the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries have a "commanding lead" in general defense capability over the United States and her NATO allies. This troublesome conclusion underscores again the diminished appreciation of the importance of power (in this case the military component) in contemporary American foreign policy. Power is neutral and can be exercised for differing moral ends, but in either case it is the underpinning of a successful and effective foreign policy. Perhaps *The Prince* will become required reading at the State Department, along with Leo Strauss'

Thoughts on Machiavelli. The restoration of American power would be a positive thing, for it would be the single greatest contributor to peace and stability in the modern world.

V

IN SUMMARY, the task of the conservative mission is to discern and expound the enduring first principles essential to the survival of the good and humane society and to determine their applicability in the arena of public policy. In the modern age, this requires first a reassertion of the spiritual dimension of the human condition, a reaffirmation of the moral and ethical first principles. This necessitates an understanding of the nature of man, of his limitations, of his dependency, and of his need to gain a glimmer of the higher law and its requirements. This is an immediate and compelling task, for without meeting this need it will be impossible to restore the health and vitality so desperately needed in the mundane areas of public affairs.

Secondly, there is a need to return to the economic basics of the creative and productive society. The production of goods and services is the ultimate test in any rational discussion of economic theory and practice. Continuously high levels of productivity, qualitatively and quantitatively, are the result of human endeavor in the private sector and not a matter of government planning and edict. Indeed, the latter approach stifles and restricts. The restoration of sound economic thought is a task of considerable imperative, for without a productive economy it will not be possible to restore the final great need in the area of public policy: namely, the development of an effective American foreign policy made possible by, among other things, a strong economy and a resulting national defense of genuine credibility. Hence, morality, economic productivity, and an appreciation of power in the international arena are the most compelling needs in American public life today, and those who wish to contribute to the well-being of their country, and the

West in general, will direct their talents and resources to a better understanding of those needs and their implementation.

In 1948, Richard Weaver wrote, "Humanity does not wish to hear said, however brilliantly, that life is a tale told by an idiot; it wants an unmistakable, if chastened recommendation of life." Weaver is suggesting that a viable, enduring, and effective conservatism will have to approach its task, whether in elaborating theory or in determining practical methods of implementation, in a mood of hope and affirmation. There is genuine reason in the American experience for realizing this approach. The Judeo-Christian heritage is foremost a philosophy of hope and affirmation. The Pauline trilogy, the culmination of the biblical heritage of the West, speaks of faith, *hope* and love. In addition, there is cause for hope and for affirmation in view of American history. In a period of 200 years the United States has come from thirteen colonies on the margin of the world stage to a nation that is among the most influential in world history. This is a record of considerable achievement, and much of that heritage is still in place and can be built upon. Therein lies cause for hope. Finally, in the world of our time where the dispossessed can vote with their feet they come to America. The Communist world must erect fences to keep people in; America has to consider constructing walls to keep them out. The refugee traffic of the world is all one way—away from the Soviet Union and the Communist satellite nations to America and the West. This offers tremendous cause for hope, and this invaluable symbolism ought not to be ignored in the formulation of American foreign policy. To many, America is the envy of the world in terms of standard of living and the potential for human development and fulfillment. Remember, even Jane Fonda and Ramsey Clark always come home again. There is then genuine reason for optimism in theoretical and practical terms, and this should be the underlying spirit in which the conservative mission is undertaken. This spirit is the key to success.

Libertarians: the Chirping Sectaries

RUSSELL KIRK

1. *The Progeny of J. S. Mill*

ANY DISCUSSION OF the relationships between conservatives (who now, to judge by public-opinion polls, are a majority among American citizens) and libertarians (who, as tested by recent elections, remain a tiny though unproscribed minority) naturally commences with an inquiry into what these disparate groups hold in common. These two bodies of opinion share a detestation of collectivism. They set their faces against the totalist state and the heavy hand of bureaucracy. That much is obvious enough.

What else do conservatives and libertarians profess in common? The answer to that question is simple: nothing. Nor will they ever have. To talk of forming a league or coalition between these two is like advocating a union of ice and fire.

The ruinous failing of the ideologues who call themselves libertarians is their fanatic attachment to a simple solitary principle—that is, to the notion of personal freedom as the whole end of the civil social order, and indeed of human existence. The libertarians are oldfangled folk, in the sense that they live by certain abstractions of the nineteenth century. They carry to absurdity the doctrines of John Stuart Mill (before Mill's wife converted him to socialism, that is). To understand the mentality of the libertarians of 1981, it may be useful to remind ourselves of a little book published more than a hundred and twenty years ago: John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Arguments that were flimsy in 1859 (and were soundly refuted by James Fitzjames Stephen) have become farcical in 1981. So permit me to digress concerning Mill's famous essay. Some books tend to form the character of their age; others to reflect it; and Mill's *Liberty* is of the latter order.

That tract is a product of the peaceful-

ness and optimism of Victorian England; written at the summit of what Bagehot calls the Age of Discussion, it is a voice from out the vanished past of nineteenth-century meliorism. The future, it turned out, was not to the school of Mill. As Mill himself was the last of the line of British empiricists, so his *Liberty*, with its foreboding remarks on the despotism of the masses, was more an epilogue to middle-class liberalism than a rallying-cry.

James Mill, John Stuart Mill's austere doctrinaire father (what sour folk many of these zealots for liberty turn themselves into) subjected his son to a rigorous course of private study. By the time he was eight years old, J. S. Mill knew nearly everything that a doctor of philosophy is supposed to know nowadays; but his intellect was untouched by the higher imagination, and for that Mill groped in vain all his life long. J. S. Mill became all head and no heart, in which character he represents Jeremy Bentham; yet in truth it was Mill himself, rather than Bentham, who turned into defecated intellect.

Mill exhibited but one failing, so far as emotions go, and that not an uncommon one—being too fond of another man's wife. F. A. Hayek has discussed this association and its consequences for Mill and his followers. Mill eventually married this dismaying bluestocking, Harriet Taylor, the forerunner of today's feminist militant. He was devoted to her, and she to humanitarian abstractions. It was under her tutelage that he wrote *On Liberty*. The intellectual ancestors of today's libertarians were no very jolly crew.

"By slaying all his animal spirits," Ruth Borchard writes of Mill, "he was utterly cut off from his instincts—instinct for life, instinctive understanding of nature, of human nature in general and of his own in particular." It might be interesting to ex-