

TEN BOOKS THAT
SHAPED AMERICA'S
CONSERVATIVE
RENAISSANCE



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INTERCOLLEGIATE STUDIES INSTITUTE

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If a conservative order is indeed to return, we ought to know the tradition which is attached to it, so that we may rebuild society; if it is not to be restored, still we ought to understand conservative ideas so that we may rake from the ashes what scorched fragments of civilization escape the conflagration of unchecked will and appetite.

—Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*

The above words were written, of course, with reference to the great inheritance of conservative thought in the West, the long drama of lived experience as glimpsed by poets and novelists, social philosophers and practical statesmen. But these words could also be applied to a more particular conservative experience, that of post-

World War II America. If we are to know and rebuild a conservative civil social order in this country, then we need to “rake from the ashes” of recent American history the books that influenced a generation of conservative scholars and public figures, books whose message resonated with much of the American populace and resulted in astonishing political triumphs.

At the time these books were published there was no conservative movement, only a belief among a disparate group of thinkers that conservative ideas had something to say to a society sated with liberalism. As Frederick D. Wilhelmsen put it, the only thing conservatives had was their vision. Today, conservatism has become so much a part of American life that it is difficult to comprehend what an astonishing achievement it was to lay the foundations of a movement that was, as the publisher Henry Regnery once remarked, not only an “opposing force to liberalism, but a vital force in its own right.” With all the opportunities and outlets now available to conservatives it is easy for us to

forget that the movement which arose at the century's midpoint came after a long reign of doctrinaire liberalism, and was greeted, according to Regnery, almost as an escape from bondage.

William Bennett observed that one of the primary concerns of conservatives should be to re-articulate a philosophical case for the kind of conservative government and society we advocate and oppose it to the one advanced by activist liberals. The first step in this effort must be to reacquaint ourselves with the tradition—the books, the figures, and the ideas—that enlivened conservatism, that made it “a fact and a force” on the American political and social landscape.

George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* is the authoritative study on conservatism's intellectual renaissance. In it, Nash outlines an American conservative movement that was forged, at times uneasily, from three intellectual groups: libertarians, anti-Communists, and traditionalists. In terms of organization, it seems sensible to consider each group in light of the literature it

produced, for these are the works that gave birth to the political movement with which we are all familiar.

Since the days of Franklin Roosevelt, conservatives of all stripes have denounced the growth of the American welfare state. After World War II in particular, many conservatives were alarmed at the decrease of economic freedom at home and the rise of collectivism overseas. The growth of the omnipotent state was leading to a degree of cultural deterioration that alarmed many thoughtful people.

It was the so-called “libertarians” who responded first to the unwelcome changes that were wrought by this new American “superstate.” The libertarians were attracted to the economic and political teachings of classical, nineteenth-century individualists. The principles libertarians believed should guide government were free markets, private property, individualism, and limited government, in short, *laissez-faire*. The 1930s, the decade of the New Deal, had been

uncongenial years for devotees of economic and personal liberty, and it wasn't until after the war that these libertarian ideas gained a sympathetic hearing.

As has been suggested by a number of scholars, post-war libertarians were buttressed theoretically and philosophically from their association with members of the Austrian School of economics. Since the late-nineteenth century, economists associated with the Austrian School have been forceful critics of all variants of anti-capitalism and collectivism. The most famous of these Austrian economists is

*The Road to
Serfdom*

Friedrich von Hayek, whose 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom* was central to the early definition of the conservative movement. It was Hayek's contention that "[a]lthough we had been warned by some of the greatest political thinkers of the nineteenth century, by Tocqueville and Lord Acton, that socialism means slavery, we have steadily moved in the direction of socialism." The purpose of his book was to explain "why and how

thinking, powerfully challenged socialist economics as being not only inherently flawed because they are unable to allocate scarce resources efficiently, but contrary to the very nature of the individual as well. Collectivist economics does not recognize the central role played by the entrepreneur in ordinary economic and social organization. For Mises, socialism was far from being a humane alternative to the free market. Rather, at bottom, it was contrary to human nature itself. By denying the human aspect—the role each individual plays in communicating vital economic information—socialism, according to Mises, was doomed to fail.

One of the great classical liberal journals was the *Freeman*, founded by Albert Jay Nock. An incisive author who deserves to be studied more often today, Nock was read by many of the key intellectual figures of the burgeoning conservative movement, profoundly influencing the likes of William F. Buckley, Jr., Russell Kirk, and Robert Nisbet. Nock's *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*

of a Superfluous Man, passionately read as it was by most post-war conservatives, left its mark on the shape the movement was to take. *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* is no confessional autobiography, but rather “an autobiography of a mind,” an extended musing on Nock’s life and strongly anti-statist prejudices. According to Nock, the state is “our enemy,” aggressively interfering with the economic and social life of its citizens and arrogantly assuming the right to direct human affairs. He believed that “custom and agreement,” rather than “conquest and confiscation,” were to be the means by which government could be changed. In an influential essay entitled “Isaiah’s Job,” Nock invoked the biblical prophet to suggest that societies dedicated to freedom and individualism must be kept alive by a “remnant,” by those people, as Charles Hamilton put it, “who were capable of transcending mass culture, materialism, and political opportunism in order to seek a more humane life.”

Overall, the anti-statist, individualistic vision promoted by the libertarians was, and

remains today, central to the American conservative movement.

Anti-communism, especially opposition to Soviet imperialism, was another powerful force affecting the development of

American conservatism after 1945.

Witness

A book that unquestionably shaped

resurgent conservatism is Whittaker Chambers' classic *Witness*, perhaps the most influential book produced by the anti-Communist group of conservatives. The gripping account of Chambers' days as a Communist agent, and then later as a conservative or, as he called himself, a "counterrevolutionary," has inspired generations of conservatives. Chambers played the key role in exposing Alger Hiss, a former high-ranking State Department official, as a Soviet spy in 1948.

Chambers' *Witness* is as prescient and moving today as when it was first published in 1952. In a haunting tone, Chambers describes the nature of the crisis which has confronted society in the post-war era. "Few men," he wrote, "are so dull

that they do not know that the crisis exists and that it threatens their lives at every point. It is popular to call it a social crisis. It is in fact a total crisis—religious, moral, intellectual, social, political, economic. It is popular to call it a crisis of the Western World. It is in fact a crisis of the whole world. Communism...is itself a symptom and an irritant of that crisis.” For Chambers, the crisis was embodied in his struggle with Hiss, a struggle that was at bottom a conflict between “the two irreconcilable faiths of our time—Communism and Freedom.” Ultimately, for Chambers, “the crisis of the Western world exists to the degree it is indifferent to God. It exists to the degree in which the Western world actually shares Communism’s materialist vision, is so dazzled by the logic of the materialist interpretation of history, politics, and economics, that it fails to grasp that, for it, the only possible answer to the Communist challenge: Faith in God or Faith in Man? is the challenge: Faith in God.”

Another important anti-Communist figure of the burgeoning conservative movement was

Frank Meyer. For two reasons, Meyer's classic work *In Defense of Freedom* decisively influenced the direction of the post-war conservative movement. First, it represented an ex-Communist's views on the nature of communism; and second, it called for a "fusion" between libertarians, with their emphasis on freedom as the end of society, and traditionalist conservatives, who argued that order and virtue were the ultimate social ends. Indeed, as George H. Nash pointed out, Meyer's fusionist project represented a critical point in the history of the conservative movement, for it tested the "intellectual legitimacy of the coalition that had developed in the mid-1950s." Throughout *In Defense of Freedom*, Meyer posited with great skill and vigor that "the freedom of the person" was "the central and primary end of political society." Furthermore, he argued that there was an "integral relationship between freedom as a political end and the basic beliefs of contemporary conservatism." Significantly, Meyer's "fusionism" became the guiding philoso-

phy of the newly established conservative weekly magazine, *National Review*.

The greatest English conservative theorist of the twentieth-century, Michael Oakeshott,

*The New
Science of
Politics*

once remarked that “[t]he project of finding a short cut to heaven is as old as the human race.” The philosopher of history Eric Voegelin saw

Communism as the most recent of man’s many attempts to forge such a shortcut. In his influential book *The New Science of Politics*, a book that contributed much to a reinvigorated conservatism, Voegelin argued that one of the defining marks of modernity was the increasingly popular view that politics was essentially about the pursuit of secular salvation. Transcendent objectives and standards, he asserted, no longer define and guide political existence. Voegelin traced a connection between an ancient heresy, gnosticism, and modern ideologies that claim to have the key to history’s laws and promise happiness, peace, and fulfillment on this side of eternity.

While the struggle against communism *per se* may be over, both the sense that we are involved in a great civilizational struggle and the “gnostic” impulse that drives men to seek heaven here on earth certainly remains—and continues to be a force against which conservatism is defined.

The search to recover society’s “moral norms” was conducted principally by the “traditionalist” wing of the post-war American conservative movement. Like the libertarians, traditionalists were trying to make sense of the nightmare that was World War II. They believed that conservatives should be custodians of the cultural past. They were critical of mass culture and of moral relativism. But they understood that to maintain a critical stance wasn’t enough. Traditionalists realized that before one can defend or refine a tradition, one must define one. To find and to articulate a genuine conservative tradition was a task that had been unmet in the years immediately following the war. This was the challenge

that prominent traditionalists like Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, and Robert Nisbet accepted.

The most eminent member of this branch of the movement is Russell Kirk. *The Conservative Mind* His book *The Conservative Mind* is perhaps *the* seminal work of the conservative movement. In it, Kirk set out to prove that there is no conservative blueprint or “system”—that is, no conservative ideology. For him, conservatism is a disposition, a way of living and viewing life. He outlined six “canons of conservatism,” however, to suggest a coherent philosophical vision. But in the realm of political governance, Kirk believed that prudence, aided by right reason, is one’s surest guide, and that politics, as Burke had taught, was “the art of the possible.” To support this view, Kirk traced an impressive intellectual genealogy of Americans and Britons that included Edmund Burke, John Adams, John Randolph, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and T. S. Eliot. In contrast to mainstream academic thought, Kirk persuasively demonstrated that

conservatism has in fact been central to the American experience, and in doing so gave American conservatism, according to Henry Regnery, its “needed unifying concept.” “In essence,” Kirk wrote, “the body of belief that we call ‘conservatism’ is an affirmation of normality in the concerns of society. There exist standards to which we may repair; man is not perfectible, but he may achieve a tolerable degree of order, justice, and freedom....” To uphold these norms and standards is a concern of every conservative. Kirk asserted that post-war conservatives were concerned foremost with “the regeneration of spirit and character—with the problem of the inner order of the soul, the restoration of the ethical understanding and the religious sanction upon which any life worth living is founded.” This, for Kirk, is “conservatism at its highest.”

Another prominent and influential traditionalist conservative was Richard Weaver. His book *Ideas Have Consequences*, like Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, contributed significantly to the philosophical coherence of contemporary

conservatism. Frank Meyer went so far as to say that “the publication of *Ideas Have Consequences* can well be considered the *fons et origo* of the contemporary American conservative movement.” For Meyer, what was adumbrated in the pages of

*Ideas Have
Consequences*

Weaver’s book was “the informing principle” of the burgeoning conservative movement: “the unity of tradition and liberty.” Weaver began his book by flatly stating, “This is another book about the dissolution of the West.” He centered his argument around the observation that the best representation of the fundamental change in man’s view of reality was the nominalist controversy of the fourteenth century. The nominalist dispute centered on the denial of the existence of universals, and for Weaver, it led directly to cultural deterioration and to the contemporary West’s primary malady: moral relativism. Weaver insisted that the “[d]enial of everything transcending experience means inevitably...the denial of truth. With the denial of objective truth there is no escape from the relativism of ‘man is the

measure of all things.”

That sentiment especially was shared by the conservative sociologist Robert Nisbet, whose book *The Quest For Community* ranks high among the foundational works of post-war

American conservatism. In it,

Nisbet argued that the emergence of the “centralized territorial State”

*The Quest for
Community*

in the wake of the Middle Ages decisively impacted Western social organization. Nisbet was particularly sensitive to the rise of the “national community,” the total political state, and he posited that the decline of the West was intimately connected to the decline through the centuries of intermediate associations between the individual and the state. George H. Nash has succinctly outlined Nisbet’s thesis: “The weakening or dissolution of such bonds as family, church, guild, and neighborhood had not, as many had hoped, liberated men. Instead, it produced alienation, isolation, spiritual desolation, and the growth of mass man.” With the weakening of alternative authorities, as Mark C.

Henrie has noted, “the individual has nowhere to *stand* to articulate a perspective differing from that of the liberal polity and its culture.” Nisbet alerted post-war conservatives, many of whom were uncompromising individualists, that “[t]he quest for community will not be denied, for it springs from some of the powerful needs of human nature—needs for a clear sense of cultural purpose, membership, status, and continuity.”

The ideas contained in the works penned by traditionalist conservatives, among the many classic works of post-W.W.II conservatives, may be the most relevant to today’s concerns. What with all the talk about and interest in the so-called “culture wars,” family values, drugs, education, welfare, crime, and quotas, it appears that the country is acutely aware that we are culturally adrift and in danger of cutting ourselves off from our shared past—and hence threatening the very existence of our Republic as outlined by our nation’s Founders. There are many indications that the traditionalist social critique and prescription for remedy may now find the nation willing

to listen. In refashioning that message, we can do no better than to re-examine the works of Kirk, Weaver, and Nisbet.

Each of the conservative movement's original components, libertarianism, anti-communism, and traditionalism, held in common a profound antipathy toward twentieth-century liberalism. During the late 50s and 60s these disparate groups began to coalesce and, as George H. Nash has taught us, the difficult task of forging a movement began.

After the 1964 election, and especially after the implementation of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programs, the conservative movement welcomed what was to become the fourth component of its intellectual coalition. Popularly known as "neoconservatives," this group of disillusioned liberals, claiming, as one of them put it, to have been "mugged by reality," migrated to the conservative cause. Reacting in part to the social uprisings of the 60s, in part to the isolationism and perceived "anti-Americanism" of

the New Left, and in part to the consequences of liberal activism in government, these gifted newcomers came to realize that good intentions do not guarantee good or effective government.

Irving Kristol is the principal neoconservative figure, and his book *On the Democratic*

On the Democratic Idea in America

Idea in America helped to direct and shape the conservative movement. The subject of the book, in Kristol's own words, was "the tendency of democratic republics to depart from...their original, animating principles, and as a consequence precipitate grave crises in the moral and political order." Kristol condemned moral relativism as vigorously as did the traditionalists. As against the libertarians, however, he only gave "two cheers" for capitalism. He noted that while he did "think that, within limits, the notion of the 'hidden hand' has its uses in the market place," he also believed that "the results are disastrous when it is extended to the polity as a whole...." For Kristol, "[s]elf-government, the basic principle of the

republic, is inexorably being eroded in favor of self-seeking, self-indulgence, and just plain aggressive selfishness.” (Much of this book has been reprinted in Kristol’s *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. This “memoir” offers an unsurpassed introduction to the development of neoconservative thought in America.)

As one can see from the list of books mentioned, American conservatism has in no way been monolithic. Rather, it is a collection of distinct intellectual groups, with distinct intellectual traditions. In retrospect, as George H. Nash observed, it is remarkable that most conservatives have managed to remain united and cooperative at all. On practical day-to-day issues there has been a surprising amount of convergence on the Right. As the journalist John Chamberlain observed in an interview with Nash, when conservatives moved from “first principles” to “first practices,” many of the internal “fights” disappeared. For most conservatives, political success was based on cooperation.

It is not to be expected that everyone has read or will read all of the books that influenced the course of growth the conservative movement would take in the post-war years. But it is important to recognize that thought is always transmuted through newspaper editorials, college lectures, church sermons, policy and position papers, and radio and television talk shows, until as Russell Kirk observed, “a crowd of people perhaps wholly unaware of the sources of their convictions come to embrace a particular view of religion or of morals or of politics.” It is in such a way that these books have exerted an influence on our culture.

While on their own these works may not guide us to future political successes or, more importantly, to a rebuilt or restored civil social order (we need new books, new writers, new approaches), they nevertheless present to us “conservatism at its highest.” What the authors of these books can do for us today, as Richard Brookhiser noted, “is raise the awkward questions, show us what we missed the first time around.” The rest is left for us to do.

APPENDIX

10 Books of the Conservative Tradition*

<i>The Road to Serfdom</i>	F. A. Hayek
<i>Socialism</i>	Ludwig von Mises
<i>Memoirs of a Superfluous Man</i>	Albert Jay Nock
<i>Witness</i>	Whittaker Chambers
<i>The New Science of Politics</i>	Eric Voegelin
<i>In Defense of Freedom</i>	Frank Meyer
<i>The Conservative Mind</i>	Russell Kirk
<i>Ideas Have Consequences</i>	Richard Weaver
<i>The Quest for Community</i>	Robert Nisbet
<i>On the Democratic Idea in America</i>	Irving Kristol

*Each of the "Ten Best" books can be ordered at discounted prices from ISI by calling 1-800-526-7022. Note: Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea is offered in place of On the Democratic Idea in America.

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**The Conservative Intellectual Movement
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George H. Nash

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to Classical Liberalism**

Liberalism John Gray

**History of
Pre-WWII American Conservatives**

Superfluous Men..... Robert Crunden

Anthology

**Portable Conservative Reader* Russell Kirk

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of Conservative Thought**

Right Minds Gregory Wolfe

Primary Sources

Reflections on the Revolution

- in France* Edmund Burke
Democracy in America Alexis de Tocqueville
The Federalist Papers Hamilton, Madison, Jay

Other Great Books of the Conservative Tradition

- *The Roots of American Order* Russell Kirk
Bureaucracy Ludwig von Mises
The Law Frédéric Bastiat
**The Conservative Affirmation*
in America Willmoore Kendall
**A Humane Economy* Wilhelm Roepke
**The Constitution of Liberty* F. A. Hayek
Natural Right and History Leo Strauss
A Better Guide Than Reason M. E. Bradford
The Crisis of
Western Education Christopher Dawson
The Anti-Capitalist Mentality .. Ludwig von Mises
**Democracy and Leadership* Irving Babbitt
**The Social Crisis of Our Time* Wilhelm Roepke
The Servile State Hilaire Belloc
I'll Take My Stand Twelve Southerners

**Visions of Order* Richard Weaver
Notes Toward the
 Definition of Culture T. S. Eliot
The Managerial Revolution James Burnham
Attack on Leviathan (retitled Regionalism and
 Nationalism in the U.S.) Donald Davidson
Christianity and Political
 Philosophy..... Frederick D. Wilhelmsen
Enemies of the Permanent Things Russell Kirk
Reflections of a Neoconservative..... Irving Kristol
Our Enemy, The State Albert Jay Nock
Crowd Culture Bernard Iddings Bell
**The Politics of Prudence* Russell Kirk
**Literature and the American College* Irving Babbitt
Order and History (5 vols) Eric Voegelin
Up from Liberalism..... William F. Buckley, Jr.
Historical Consciousness..... John Lukacs
Original Intentions M. E. Bradford
The Decline of the Intellectual Thomas Molnar
Human Action Ludwig von Mises
Law, Legislation, & Liberty (3 vols) .. F. A. Hayek
Suicide of the West James Burnham
The Theory of Education in
 the United States Albert Jay Nock

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