

A Motorcycle Ride Through America's Many-Sided Conservative Movement: From Robert Taft Through Ronald Reagan

L. John Van Til, Ph.D.

OUTLINE

Prologue

Introduction

I. A Useful Way to Distinguish Between American Social/ Political Views

A. Liberal/Progressive Views of the Good Life

-The Difference Between Lyndon Johnson and Barack Obama

B. A Radical View of the Good Life

C. How Conservatives and Reactionaries View the Good Life

1. Reactionaries

2. Conservatives

II. The Origins of Modern Conservatism

A. The Impact of the New Deal

B. The Effect of WWII

C. A Revolution in the Supreme Court's Jurisprudence

D. Growing Opposition to the New Deal's Liberal Philosophy

III. Some Conservative Movement Thinkers

A. The Two Minds of Russell Kirk: Their Source and Significance

B. Thinkers Huntington and Muller on the Question of Conservatism's Roots

IV. Conservatism's Courtship of the Republican Party

A. Conservatism and the Would-be-Presidency of Robert A. Taft

B. Conservatism and the Presidency: From Eisenhower to Reagan

V. Ronald Reagan and the Marriage of Conservatism and the Republican Party

A. Conservative Factions That Emerged by 1980

B. The Reagan Revolution

VI. Some Concluding Thoughts on Conservatism and the Post-Reagan Years

VII. A Summary

A Motorcycle Ride Through America's Many-Sided Conservative* Movement: From Robert Taft Through Ronald Reagan

L. John Van Til, Ph.D.

Prologue

Are you a Conservative? If so, what makes you one? What kind of Conservative are you? Social? Economic? Political? Religious? Traditional? Neo-Conservative? Religious Right? Libertarian? Far Right? Have you ever sat down and put on a sheet of paper the factors that make you a Conservative? Think about these questions as you work your way through this essay.

Introduction

Every American wishes to enjoy the good life—have sufficient food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities. And more. They also wish to enjoy personal freedom—freedom of worship, safety, and security at home and abroad under the rule of law, and the hope of a better life for their children. This is the American Dream. It's not surprising, therefore, that leading political/social parties—liberals, radicals, reactionaries, and yes, conservatives—all claim to know how to achieve this dream. But harmony among them is lacking. Each has a different vision of how to accomplish this.

While our focus here is on a conservative view of society, it will be much better understood if we begin with an account of how all political parties say what can be done to arrive at the good life. Second, the essay moves on to sum up the origins of the modern American

* Use of "conservative" in literature on the subject has no consistency in distinguishing between its use as a common or proper noun, i.e., conservative and Conservative. We attempt to bring some order to this distinction in this paper.

Conservative Movement following WWII. Third, we examine several examples of the Movement's thinkers. Fourth, we look at ways the Movement sought to be active in politics and this meant an alliance with the existing Republican Party. For our purposes Conservative political activism is best measured by attitudes toward Republican presidents and Republican presidential candidates in the decades that followed WWII. We view it here as a sort of courtship of the Movement's followers and the Republican Party—from Eisenhower to Ronald Reagan, under whom the parties actually married. As for Robert Taft, who preceded Eisenhower, his attempts to get his party's nomination should be viewed as hoping for a date since he never became the candidate. He personified this courtship, however, as a fierce conservative and a staunch Republican. Fifth, differing attitudes towards the Republican party and its candidates resulted in a series of conservative sub-cultures—traditionalists, Neo-Conservatives, libertarians, the Religious Right, and recently the Tea Party. Each has their own agenda which results in conflicts among them. These factions will be discussed as a prologue to the wedding, Reagan's presidency. The essay concludes with a brief look past Reagan to the Bush era. We are too close in time to make a good evaluation of this period, though a few clues about Conservatism's future in the Republican Party may be found.

I. A Useful Way to Distinguish Between American Social/Political Views.

As noted in the opening sentence of this essay, most everyone seeks a way to enjoy the good life. In a few words, contentment and an opportunity to improve one's lot in life are the essence of the good life. Even the crusty and venerable conservative thinker, Russell Kirk, writing late in the last century, allowed himself to say that a chief end of life was happiness.

How does one achieve the good life? What do the political parties say?

The names are familiar: 1) Liberal/Progressive; 2) Conservative; 3) Reactionary; and 4) Radical. *Time* is the key element in understanding where and how one finds the good life. We ask, where in time—past, present, future, or utopia [no time no place]—does one find the good life?

The question, then, is where in time do liberal/progressives, conservatives, reactionaries, and radicals find the good life? Contrasting conservatism with these other views of the good life will produce a better understanding of the Conservative Movement.

A. Liberal/Progressive Views of the Good Life: The Difference Between LBJ and Obama.

Listen to liberal/progressive thinkers and politicians, and it will be obvious that they see the good life in the future. Look at LBJ and his Great Society.¹ Where was the good life? In a future “promised land,” said Johnson. He would lead Americans into it, like Joshua in Old Testament times. He would, of course, use the power of the Federal government to achieve this goal. Thus, once elected in his own right in 1964, within a few weeks Johnson ordered the formation of 20 task forces which created over 100 programs that would pave the way to this Promised Land. He thought that the “Federal government could solve all our problems.” Parenthetically, we note that he accelerated the war in Viet Nam at the same time. LBJ personified mid-20th century liberals. One might agree that a few problems in American society were corrected by Johnson’s efforts, but after 40 years and a trillion dollars, the nation still has as many poor as it did when Johnson began his War on Poverty.

¹Vision & Values held a conference in 2005 on The Great Society. The papers presented were published by the Center with the title *The Road from Poverty to Freedom: A Look Backward and Forward at the War on Poverty*. My essay “Lyndon Johnson, Poverty and the Great Society,” in that collection discusses Johnson’s war on poverty in detail.

President Obama represents a new breed of liberal, one that probably ought to be termed “radical/progressive.”² His words and actions show that he envisions a liberal American social-constitutional order that is on a much grander scale than LBJ’s. His dense books³—which some doubt he authored—his endless speeches, mind-numbing in their frequency, and a few public documents—all point to a vision of an America dominated to a much greater degree by Federal programs and policies than anything President Johnson imagined. Social-constitutional orders most similar to what Obama seems to be thinking about can be found in Western Europe. More likely, however, to this observer is the strong probability that Obama earnestly envisions a society that either does not exist or cannot exist, or can exist only in his imagination.⁴ There is no “promised land” for him like there was for Johnson. If that be true, his view is best described as a *utopia* which means no time at “no place”; that is to say, it does not or cannot exist. This makes sense, especially when his policies, programs, and pronouncements are seen as process—movement along a line. If process is the normative factor in one’s view, one never reaches a goal, nor does he even need a goal. For Obama, the process is the never-ending practice of expanding the Federal government into a larger and larger part of the nation’s life. Yet, one must believe that Obama is, indeed, convinced that he is attempting to achieve the good life for Americans.

² Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father* (New York: Crown, 2004).

³ Barack Obama, *Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2006). It’s worth noting that Obama admits to changing names and creating “composite characters” in this book.

⁴ The Center’s 2010 conference was on the new progressivism. My essay, “A Motorcycle Ride Through America’s Reform Tradition: With Special Focus on Obamian Radical “Re-forming,” discussed at length numerous people who supplied Obama with policies, programs, and speech content. The Conference essays were published by the Center under the title, *The Progressive Surge and Conservative Crackup*.

Another factor helps us understand the essence of the good life that liberal/progressives see as their goal. Since no one can deny that there is much evil in the world, the question arises as to its origins. “Reformers,” after all, certainly want to correct evils in society. Liberals and progressive radicals assume that man is essentially good and conclude that such evil as there is comes from bad social structures. This assumption enlivens their belief that the “adjustment” of social and economic structures and institutions by the Federal government will do much to eliminate evil in the world. This attitude accounts for the messianic character of most progressive “reformers.” Like the Great Society’s anti-poverty program, subsequent attempts to dramatically alter social and economic institutions have had poor results. Post-Great-Society programs, too, have cost trillions of dollars as the Obama administration demonstrates. In fact, many are concluding that the radical-progressive programs of Obama are not only expensive but are actually diminishing the chances for Americans to achieve the good life.

B. A Radical View of the Good Life.

Radicals, whether of the Left or Right, have a different view of what the social-constitutional order ought to look like as the basis of the good life. While conservatives, liberals, and reactionaries tend to assume the validity of the standing social-constitutional order, radicals think it ought to be scrapped in favor of a wholly new order. There are versions of this, but they tend to have a utopian cast to them. An old and obvious example of this is the neo-Marxist vision of the Student Left in the 1960s, led for a time by Students for a Democratic Society.⁵ These

⁵ Students for a Democratic Society, formed in 1960 and dissolved in 1969, is but one example of the larger category called the New Left. SDS is famous for the “Port Huron Statement” which set out their radical view of society. The statement was written by the SDS’s most famous member Tom Hayden, who later married Jane Fonda. A good account of the New Left is Van Gosse, *Movements of the New Left* (New York: St Martin’s, 2005).

Neo-Marxists differed from European Marxists in that they hoped to get to the workers' paradise without violence. This has been a practical issue for a generation or more. America's public universities, and many private ones along with numerous colleges, are staffed in the professorial ranks with a second generation of progressive radicals who teach a neo-Marxist vision of America's social-constitutional order to millions of students. Two principal doctrines of this group include the economic leveling of society along with the use of Federal power to achieve it.

C. How Conservatives and Reactionaries View the Good Life.

Classroom discussions of conservatism and reactionaries frequently generate confusion, a point to be kept in mind as we take up the question of where conservatives find the good life. When asked about it, many students immediately say that conservatives find the good life in some past era of the American experience, perhaps in the 1920s during the age of Coolidge. This answer is innocent enough, but it actually describes a reactionary view of where a person finds the enjoyable life.

1. Reactionaries. A reactionary is usually unhappy with much of the existing social-constitutional order. He also sees in the past—at different times and places for different people—a social-constitutional order that embodies elements that to him are ideal. A good example of this today is the Southern Agrarian movement. “Southern Agrarian” is a label that is applied to a small group of writers, poets, novelists, and other folks associated with Vanderbilt University in the 1920s and 1930s. They wrote and published a manifesto in 1930 titled *I'll Take my Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*.⁶ Along with others they contributed to a revival of

⁶ Twelve Southerners (This is the actual designation for authorship of the book), *I'll Take my Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1977). For further study of the Movement, see

Southern literature, sometimes known as the Southern Renaissance. Several themes run through their work. One is the belief that the pre-Civil War South embodied a simplicity and ethical purity that has vanished from Modern America. A second theme is a belief that industrialism has deeply damaged American society, disrupting social structures and the admirable simplicity of agrarian life. A leading contemporary apostle of the movement is Kentucky's Wendell Barry, author of many novels about the virtues of Southern rural life.⁷ For our purposes here, the Agrarian Movement exemplifies the reactionary view of society; that is to say, for them the good life was definitely in the past.

2. Conservatives. Where then does the conservative find the good life if it is not in the past as many of my students always assumed? Conservatives find it in the present.

That is not to say that the conservative is content with all aspects of the present social-constitutional order. On the contrary, there often is much in it that he does not like. There is much in society that is distasteful and immoral in the conservative view of society today, resulting from liberal and radical/progressive actions. The conservative works to change these practices. His proposals may be new, innovative measures or simply ones that aim to repeal what he sees as distasteful, destructive, and unconstitutional practices and policies of the government.

To emphasize, conservatives are not by nature or reflection opposed to all change as some people think. They are opposed, however, to rapid, untested, untried, utopian schemes, especially ones that depend on the government to “solve all of our problems.”

Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

⁷ See, for example, Wendell Barry, *Hannah Coulter* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2004).

As to the question of man's basic nature, unlike liberal/progressives, conservatives view man as not essentially good, that he is flawed, or prone to evil, or as some say, he is a sinner. If this nature is left to its own devices, it will produce poor, even destructive, social practices. Thus, conservatives favor the use of tried and effective traditional laws which insure order in society. They also desire rational free markets. Moreover, a limited government is best for society because it allows people to prosper through personal initiative. In short, most conservatives embrace the United States Constitution with its Bill of Rights as the best way to insure a free and prosperous society. This is their view of the good life. In so far as current political efforts seek to alter the founding documents, or make new laws that are, on their face, contrary to these documents, conservatives will oppose those efforts. Yet, they are open to new applications of the old principles as circumstances may require.

From what has been said in this section of the essay we conclude, and emphasize, that a good understanding of Conservatism and other social-constitutional views is aided by asking where and how one finds the good life. Is the preferred model for this in the past, the present, the future, or merely in an utopia. Intimately tied to this question is the question of evil, the presence of evil being evident to all. There seems to be two main views on the source of evil among political practitioners, either in man's nature or in the structures of society itself. Which of these views one assumes in political theorizing and programmatic proposals goes a long way in determining the kind of society and good life one desires or proposes. Bearing these distinctions in mind will help in understanding how the Conservative Movement emerged in modern America. To this topic we now turn.

II. The Origins of Modern American Conservatism.

It is worth noting that Calvin Coolidge, the most popular politician in the decade of the 1920s, did not think of himself as a conservative. At least, I am not aware of him ever having referred to himself as a conservative, this conclusion being based upon studying and editing his works for many years.⁸ Indeed, Ronald Reagan's famous comment on why he had Coolidge's portrait hung in the Cabinet room may be the first time anyone referred to Coolidge as a conservative. Said Reagan, "He was my kind of conservative." Reagan, of course, intended to convey the proposition that he liked many of Coolidge's ideas about government. As for Coolidge, he thought of himself as a "party man," meaning that he embraced the Republican Party's philosophy—a fairly coherent set of ideas that party leaders had held for a long time, at least as long as Coolidge could remember. Recognizing that wildly popular Coolidge did not think of himself as a conservative lends weight to the notion that the modern American Conservative Movement began in about 1950.

And what gave rise to that development? Three events: New Deal programs; the massive expansion of the Federal government as a result of WWII; and a revolution in the thought and personnel of the Supreme Court of the United States.

A. The Impact of the New Deal.

The nature and effect of the New Deal is well known. Roosevelt, and to some extent Hoover before him, saw the solution to the Great Depression in the use of the Federal government's massive power as a means to jump start the economy. Just as unemployment now

⁸ Several of my Coolidge essays are available on line through The Center for Vision & Values, "Scholars," Van Til, then scroll to items. The Center is also in the process of posting on line several volumes of Coolidge papers that I edited with head notes.

is a great problem, so too in the Great Depression. Thus, myriad programs were born that their creators thought would stimulate employment. Except for an occasional brief spurt in employment in the wake of a WPA, these Federal programs failed to solve the unemployment problem. Significantly, FDR's liberal brain trust took the occasion of the continuing depression to introduce many other government programs. Social Security and the National Labor Relations Act are examples of two of the most comprehensive ones. These acts were truly children of the Progressive mentality the brain trusters brought with them to Washington from their student days during the Wilsonian era. A hundred New Deal programs did not end, or significantly reduce, unemployment over the next decade. It was as high in 1941 as it had been in the early 1930s. The coming of the Second War ended the unemployment problem as some 11 million men were put under arms.

B. The Effects of WWII.

Equally important in the growth of the Federal government during the New Deal era was the growth, even more rapidly, of the Federal government itself during WWII. Massive powers were used to create war materiel, to ration food, and to do a thousand other things. While by late 1942 it became clear that the Allies [basically the United States] would win the war, a murmur began to turn into vocal dissent against the rate of growth and size of the national government among some Americans, including a group of Senators who were known informally after 1937 as the Conservative Coalition. More about them in a moment. Thoughtful people began to ask whether America was turning into a socialist, state-directed society like much of Europe. By 1945, scattered opposition among political leaders stirred the hearts and minds of hundreds, then

thousands, and then millions of Americans to oppose a continuation of the “big government” philosophy that had dominated Washington for a decade and a half.

C. A Revolution in the Court’s Jurisprudence.

A third event was at least as important as the impact of the New Deal and the war-time government in stirring an emerging opposition movement. We call this a “revolution in the personnel and philosophy” of the United States Supreme Court. It was an intellectual revolution in that it institutionalized a “big government” philosophy. For this reason we look at it in some detail. In general, one may posit two sources for the Court’s change in perspective—one intellectual and the other political.

Intellectual changes on the Court involved new attitudes towards the law and its place in society. More than in the past, the 1940s Justices argued about what weight should be given to the words of the Constitution and to the views of the drafters of the document. For much of its history, the Court viewed the Constitution, as written, to be the law of the land, or more accurately, the foundation of the nation’s laws. Moreover, most of FDR’s appointees were open to the adoption of Justice Holmes’ famous dictum, which stated that “the Constitution means what the Supreme Court says it does.” This doctrine allowed the newer Justices of the 1940s to read whatever they wished into the words of the Constitution. And, they did.

Applying a theological term also gives insight into the basis of the Court’s revolutionary thinking. Thus, it might be called “neo-orthodox.” A neo-orthodox person uses old, time-honored words of his profession but fills them with new meaning. The result, of course, is an entirely different concept. An excellent example of this is the word *religion*. To the Founders and generations of Justices after them, it meant what the Virginia Bill of Rights said, that is, religion

is “the duty we owe our Creator.”⁹ The Modern Court has changed that meaning, though still using the word *religion*. Thus, by 1995 it built on the religion clause in opinions of Justices Black, Douglas, and others to craft a new definition of *religion*. *Seeger*¹⁰ still used the word *religion*, but now it meant, the Court said, “the consciousness of some power manifest in nature which helps man in the ordering of his life,” or the “Ultimate Cause for the fact of the being of the Universe,” or “duties superior to those arising from any human relation.” So much for the personal God worshiped by most of the Founders and most Americans for most of the nation’s history. This development was especially distasteful to many conservatives who by then were known as religious conservatives. Religious conservatives embraced the Ten Commandments, encouraged the continuation of traditional morality for the whole society, and more.¹¹ This is an example of ways one conservative faction differs from others. Economic conservatives as a faction, to make a comparison, were usually not much interested in the moral issues Religious Right people raised.

A second reason for the revolution on the Court involved politics. The 1930s Court heard many cases involving New Deal legislation. It found many of them unconstitutional, including the Agricultural Adjustment Act and the National Recovery Act. Roosevelt was angry and decided to retaliate. Following the 1936 elections, he proposed an expansion of the Supreme Court’s size by as many as six additional seats, and he made this proposal without first telling Congressional leaders about his plan; such a move is always a fatal political error. To his

⁹ Library of Congress Web Site, “American Memory Time Capsule,” *Virginia Bill of Rights, June 12, 1770*.

¹⁰ *United States v. Seeger*, 380 U S 163 (March 8, 1965). *Seeger* is one of three cases consolidated for appeal.

¹¹ Charles W. Dunn, ed., *The Future of Conservatism: Conflict and Consensus in the Post-Reagan Era* (Wilmington: ISI, 2007), vii.

surprise, an astonishing outcry against his plan greeted him, including many in Congress. Still Roosevelt thought he could work a compromise and get his way, at least in part.

Following Roosevelt's "court-packing" plan,¹² votes on the Court itself began to change as several Justices changed sides. Soon thereafter, senior Justices began to retire, or die, until by 1941 a half dozen were gone. They were replaced by Justices Black, Douglas, Reed, Frankfurter, Byrnes, Murphy, and Jackson, all who subsequently played crucial roles in developing the New Jurisprudence that would set the direction of the Court for two generations.

The point here is that this rapid and revolutionary change in the Court's philosophy, along with the expansion of Federal power in the New Deal and during WWII, further alarmed Republicans and other traditionalists. It fueled their determination to form an alliance against a "big government" philosophy that had become ascendant by the late 1940s, even capturing the heart of the Supreme Court.

D. Growing Opposition to the New Deal's Liberal Philosophy.

The first expression of this attitude was in the formation of the Conservative Coalition in the United States Senate.¹³ The Coalition was an unofficial group composed of Republicans, who were temperamentally conservative and Southern Democrats, who opposed New Deal programs that departed from Southern traditions and values. The Coalition's immediate cause was the publication of *The Conservative Manifesto* in December, 1937, which was a blueprint for a practical economic recovery in place of vague or ill-defined New Deal programs. Its principal author was North Carolina's Senator Josiah Bailey. Hundreds of thousands of copies were

¹² FDR's plan was officially known as the Judicial Procedures Reform Act of 1937.

¹³ The leader of this coalition was Democrat Senator from North Carolina, Josiah Bailey, one of many conservative Democrats in the South at that time.

distributed or printed in newspapers. Millions of people read it. It marked an end to unchallenged New Deal policies. Robert A. Taft, son of President Taft,¹⁴ became a chief leader in the Conservative Coalition in the 1940s and 1950s, seeking his party's nomination for President three times as a conservative Republican.

Meanwhile, the Conservative Movement itself was born with a two-pronged mission. One part desired a continuation of the principles and practices embraced by Taft's friends in the Conservative Coalition in the Senate. The other part was content to ponder conservative theory and history, personified by conservative thinkers like Russell Kirk. Kirk's 1953 book *The Conservative Mind* became a sort of "bible" for a rapidly growing number of disaffected Americans.¹⁵ The political side of the Movement wanted to return to or revive the *status quo ante*, which embodied long-standing American social, economic, and political practices. It was not reactionary, that is, possessed with a desire to return to an idealized or imaginary American past, as Southern Agrarians wished to do. Kirk's book, on the other hand, argued that Conservatism had roots in 18th- century England, and he developed a considerable following for this view over the next decades.

We turn now to an extended consideration of the conservative-thinker side of the movement, beginning with Russell Kirk, and then examine the thinking of several other lines of conservative thought in the decades after 1950.¹⁶ Following this, we will turn to conservatism's "courtship" of the Republican Party. The term *courtship* is significant because as the evidence

¹⁴ See pages 9-38 on Taft in David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America: Since 1945* (Wilmington: ISI, 2008).

¹⁶ Nash's *Conservative Intellectual Movement* is one of many books that demonstrate this point.

will show a conservative courtship of the party ultimately resulted in a marriage as Ronald Reagan came to power. One might say he was the “Best Man!”

III. Some Conservative Movement Thinkers.

Scores of books and thousands of articles have been written about “conservative thinkers” during the past fifty years, creating a huge corpus of Conservatism. These writings have been by conservatives and non-conservatives—about conservatives, about what they meant, about what they did not mean, **about the differences between them**, and more. Professional conservative thinkers emerged as a definable group at about the same time as the Conservative Movement itself. Indeed, it was part of it.

First in time and in rank in the minds of many conservatives was Russell Kirk (1918-1994), publishing his magnum opus *The Conservative Mind* in 1953. Studying Kirk’s writings for this essay led to some surprising insights.¹⁷ A principal one involved Kirk’s use of the concept *moral imagination*. His use was difficult to understand and only after weeks of thinking and studying did his use and meaning of the term become clear. Given the length of it, we decided to place our findings at the end of this paper as an appendix—which interested readers can examine. Below, then, we give only a brief account of his life and work in general terms, focusing on his “two minds.” Appreciating this characteristic of his thinking certainly is basic to understanding his work also. Following, we examine views of Professors Samuel Huntington and

¹⁷ Russell Kirk spoke three or four times in our week-long summer conference for about ten years in the 70s and 80s at Grove City College. John Sparks managed and I assisted in the operation of this conference. In this way we became well acquainted with Russell. Indeed, my wife Kathryn and I entertained him in our summer home in Northport, Michigan, as well. Clear theological assumptions were not part of his presentations. A highlight of those conferences was the Wednesday night dinners at the Franklin Club at which time Kirk entertained the 80-some guests with ghost stories—all with the lights turned low. It was only in the study of him this year that I realized that ghost tales were such an important part of his life—an exercise of his “moral imagination.”

Jerry Muller as representative of **two streams** of conservative thinking, underscoring the earlier differing facets of the Movement at its birthing. Space does not permit consideration of many other significant thinkers who contributed to the corpus of Conservative thought.¹⁸

A. The Two Minds of Russell Kirk: Their Source and Significance.

During the first decades of the Conservative Movement no one was more influential than Russell Kirk. To many conservatives, especially older ones, Russell Kirk (1918-1994) was a sort of bishop, or even an archbishop of conservatism. That is to say, to his followers Kirk was a fountain from which flowed *ex cathedra* accounts of his view of conservatism's history and ideas.¹⁹ This adulatory view of Kirk is based largely on his book *The Conservative Mind*.

Students of *The Conservative Mind* might be surprised to learn that just one of his works of fiction, his gothic novel *Old House of Fear*,²⁰ sold more copies than all of Kirk's other writings combined, including fiction and non-fiction. Kirk was himself a man of two minds, one equipped with a conservative temperament and the other deeply tinted with a gothic literary disposition. We will explore the source and difference between these aspects of Kirk's intellect, resulting in a better understanding of Kirk's work overall.

Kirk himself was well aware that his work represented two distinct views of life. "Some readers began to fancy that there were two scribbling Russell Kirks," so said Kirk himself in his memoir. Accomplished Kirk scholar Gerald Russello saw the same thing in Kirk's work and

¹⁸ See Farber, *Rise and Fall*, for examples. See also George Nash's essay in the Conference Reader on Bill Buckley and his contributions.

¹⁹ Even Nash's majestic intellectual *tour de force*, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, is largely uncritical of Kirk. See his discussion, page 104, and especially footnote 118.

²⁰ Russell Kirk, *Old House of Fear* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). See also Kirk's *Ancestral Shadows: An Anthology of Ghostly Tales* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

commented on it in his *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*. Russello noted that one mind of Kirk wrote long works of biography and history—*The Conservative Mind*, *Roots of American Order*, and the like. Kirk’s other mind “produced stories of the occult for collections, such as Kirk’s *Love of Horror*,” says Russello. Further, Hungarian-born American historian John Lukacs saw this two-sided mind of Kirk too, observing that Kirk “had propagated the restoration of medieval and bourgeois virtues sometimes within the same book, essay, or article.”²¹ Part of Lukacs’ reference here is to the *gothic* quality in Kirk’s thinking—a quality Kirk himself took pride in.

Kirk’s conservative thought was born of his distaste and rejection of the world in which he grew up. This distaste began early and focused on the impact of the industrial revolution on American society. It was personal, also. His train-engineer father worked out of Plymouth, Michigan, and seemed to only tolerate the demands of his work for this big corporation. Kirk himself, while a student at Michigan State College, worked summers in Ford Motor’s River Rouge plant, which employed over 100,000 people under one roof. The size, the noise, and impersonality of it all re-enforced Kirk’s negative impression of modern industrial America. Moreover, young Kirk was reading Southern Agrarian social critics at the same time and their views furthered his dislike of industrialism. Soon Kirk found himself drafted into the Army as WWII began. He served most of his four years at a desert outpost in Utah. It seems fair to say that if industrialism was the heart of modern society, Kirk was not a modern man. Kirk’s anti-modern stance (Dare we call it reactionary?) colored the rest of his life—in dress, style,

²¹ Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007).

language, and more.²² Kirk's refusal to drive an automobile is but one example of his anti-modern attitude. Later, as we shall see, this anti-modern attitude was supported by Kirk's discovery of Edmund Burke's rejection of the Enlightenment concept of Reason as authority.

Kirk's other mind, an artistic literary one, was a product of his youthful summer experiences among his Mecosta relatives. The extended Kirk family had long been practicing spiritualists, enamored with ghost-hunting, spirit-chasing, and other occult practices. Generations of Kirks had lived this way in Mecosta. Young Russell relished the occult climate of his relatives, especially influenced, he said, by old aunts who inhabited, along with ghosts, the main family dwelling called Piety Hill. This climate, enhanced by a devotion to Swedenborgian spiritualism, was so pervasive that Kirk stated that he knew of no family member or neighbor who had ever been a baptized Christian or at any time went to church.²³ Judging by Kirk's prodigious output of ghost stories later, it may be concluded that this occult climate enlivened Kirk's natural imagination and petulance for matters aesthetic and literary. Indeed, Kirk began writing ghost stories by the time he went off to college.

After the War and several years teaching at Michigan State, Kirk went to St. Andrews in Scotland to study, still armed with his distaste for things modern and a love of the occult-based literary life. At St. Andrews he discovered Edmund Burke and the mind of the 18th century. This discovery supported his anti-modern spirit. Burke's seeming rejection of Enlightenment thought with its cult of Reason was adopted wholesale by Kirk as he began to further develop his own

²² Nash, *Intellectual Movement*, 105-106.

²³ Russello, *Postmodern Imagination*, 35.

social thought. Moreover, Kirk learned that he was at home in, and loved the life of, the 18th century, echoes of which could be found in the towns and hamlets of Scotland in 1948.

The Burkian rejection of the cult of Reason was especially important for Kirk's developing conservative thought. It became an important theme in Kirk's dissertation on Burke, which was eventually published as *The Conservative Mind*. Kirk's purpose in this volume was to argue that Burke founded Conservatism as a basic social/political attitude and that there was a line of thought from him to Kirk's own time. Significantly, as we shall see, Kirk stated that writing *The Conservative Mind* was an exercise in what he termed "moral imagination." Worth noting here, too, is the fact that not everyone is convinced that Kirk succeeded in establishing his claim that there was a lineal development of Conservatism from Burke into America down to Kirk's own time.²⁴

Upon returning to the United States, Kirk sought a publisher for his dissertation. Rejected by a major publisher, the small conservative Regnery Press agreed to publish it under the title *The Conservative Mind*. To Kirk's surprise, the book suddenly became a best seller. Soon he was in demand on the speaking circuit. Likely, this popularity was due, in part, to the fact that his book was the only one that seemed to be a comprehensive guide to conservative thought. In addition, it appeared just as the Conservative Movement was emerging in the decade after the end of WWII. This movement was, of course, much in need of ideas and principles that could claim, explain, and sustain a conservative outlook on life.

Kirk's popularity allowed him to give up his academic career at Michigan State, a post he despised all along, move to Mecosta, and settle down to a life of writing and speaking. Kirk

²⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *American Political Science Review* 51 (1957): 453-73.

wrote more, much more, about Conservatism over the next decade and a half and continued to enjoy wide appeal.²⁵

What Kirk meant by Conservatism has been the subject of considerable discussion for decades. But, what did he mean? He tells us himself. On page 7 of his flagship book *The Conservative Mind*, he wrote, “Any informed conservative is reluctant to condense profound and intricate intellectual systems to a few pretentious phrases. . . . **Conservatism is not a fixed and immutable body of dogma**, and conservatives inherit from Burke a talent **for re-expressing their convictions to fit the times.**” (Could this be a Postmodern stance? Indeed, should he be viewed as a Postmodern reactionary despite the oxymoronic quality of this phrase?) He continued, “As a working premise, nevertheless, one can observe here that the essence of social conservatism is the preservation of the ancient moral tradition of humanity.” Kirk goes on at this early point in the book to list what he calls the “six canons of conservative thought.” Listing them here is not essential to the point we wish to make. We note, however, that the content of the canons changed over time as new editions of *The Conservative Mind* were published, the last edition having ten canons. Fluidity is not surprising since he had just stated that Conservatism is not a “fixed body of dogma.”

One may infer from his remarks that in Kirk’s view Conservatism was more of an attitude or state of mind or thought process. And, it may be argued that there is a whiff of gnosticism in Kirk, a sense that he possesses secret knowledge about the way the world works available only to him—and his fellow men of letters. Numerous students of Conservatism agree

²⁵ A good working bibliography of Kirk’s works may be found in George A. Panechas, ed., *The Essential Russell Kirk* (Wilmington: ISI, 2007), 567 ff.

that Kirk was never able to fully and clearly articulate what he meant by the moral imagination.²⁶ Stated another way, he did describe it though he did not define it. Indeed, much Kirkian writing is descriptive rather than definitional in character, this, no doubt, due to his antipathy to the use of reason or logic.

Kirk said that writing *The Conservative Mind* was an exercise in *moral imagination*. What did he mean by this phrase? It was, as we shall see, his answer to the problem of how one knows. And, as indicated, more discussion of that may be found in Appendix “A.”

B. Thinkers Huntington and Muller on The Question of Conservatism’s Roots.

Most conservative thinkers have an opinion about the origins of conservative thought. Some see its roots in the Old Testament; others among the Greeks or Romans; some in Medieval thought; in 18th-century France; and famously in late 18th-century England. In addition, some writers find the roots of Conservatism in colonial, revolutionary, post-Civil War, or early 20th-century America. Significantly, many of these claims about Conservatism’s roots also assume an unbroken lineal development of the phenomenon from ancient times to the present. Thus, the question of roots has two parts: origins and the way it has developed since. Consider the views of Samuel P. Huntington and Jerry Z. Muller.

Huntington, long-time professor of political science at Harvard University, has a reputation for his provocative views on a great range of topics, touching both foreign and domestic policy.²⁷ Of his more recent books, *Who Are We?* has been by any judgment his most

²⁶ Russello, *Postmodern Imagination*, 38.

²⁷ Jerry Z. Muller, ed., *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 427.

controversial.²⁸ Its main thrust is about changes in immigration and how they are destroying traditional American civilization. Clearly, he prefers retention of the heart of traditional American civilization. The book shocked his fellow Ivy League professors since he was assumed to be a card-carrying liberal. Reviewers note that any fair reading of the book, however, suggests that its tone and flavor is a Conservative defense of American culture. How could this “liberal” do this? many wondered. Clearly Huntington is a true scholar who writes what he sees upon due reflection and deliberation. From this stance, he may seem liberal at one point and conservative at another.

Important as this book is as an expression of Huntington’s view of Conservatism, almost a half-century ago he wrote a seminal piece on Conservatism that is still in print and studied. It appeared in the 1957 *American Political Science Review* under the title, “Conservatism as an Ideology.”²⁹ Here he argued that Conservatism should be understood as what he called *positional ideology*. Said Huntington, “When the foundations of society are threatened, the conservative ideology reminds men of the necessity of some institutions and the desirability of existing ones.”³⁰ Conservative ideology, presumably a formulated and articulated response to a perceived threat to society, emerges from fear and anxiety that the good life is threatened and endangered. The result, according to Huntington, is a flurry of writing and activity in defense of the existing order which should be called Conservative.

Huntington, in this, answered the question about the roots of Conservatism by saying each conservative movement has its own roots in the immediate circumstances that generated it.

²⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

²⁹ Huntington, “Conservatism,” 454.

³⁰ Huntington, “Conservatism,” 455.

In his words, “The articulation of conservatism at any one time and place has little connection with its manifestation at any other time and place,”³¹ echoing Kirk. In this he also answered the question whether conservatism has a lineal line of development from ancient times to the present. It does not, in his view.

Professor Muller of Catholic University takes a different view than Huntington on the question of the roots of Conservatism. In his valuable *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought From David Hume to the Present*, Muller states, “It is the purpose of this book to present and explicate the characteristic features of conservative analysis which were first articulated in the eighteenth century and which have consistently recurred, in a variety of national contexts, until the present day.”³² Muller, not unlike Kirk, recognized that institutions which conservative thinkers sought to conserve would change from time to time, yet he insisted that “a set of conservative assumptions, themes, and images has endured.”³³

As for the roots of Conservatism, Muller’s reference to the eighteenth century tells us that he believed that Conservatism began at that point. Altogether, Muller discusses two dozen thinkers that illustrate the “tradition” he argues for. Here we note two of them. Surprising to some conservatives, no doubt, Muller considers both of them to be children of the Enlightenment.³⁴ Philosopher David Hume is a political conservative in Muller’s view. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Hume did not believe that institutions of the political order had their foundation either in a divine plan or in natural law. They had a sort of natural utility for people,

³¹ Huntington, “Conservatism,” 455 ff.

³² Muller, *Conservatism*, 4.

³³ Muller, *Conservatism*, 4.

³⁴ Muller, *Conservatism*, 24.

Hume thought, and therefore, should be used to preserve order in society. Muller does not argue that Hume was conservative in other respects.

While his view of Hume is interesting, Muller follows many other students of Conservatism and sees its tap root in the works of Edmund Burke. He sums up Burke's role in these words: "Though it would be a mistake to designate Edmund Burke the founder of modern conservative social and political analysis, it would be no exaggeration to characterize his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790 as the single most influential work of Conservative thought published from his day to ours."³⁵ Thus, with a nod to Hume, Muller clearly makes the claim that Edmund Burke was the tap root of modern conservative thought. Further, Muller assumes that there has been a lineal development and continuity in conservative thought from Burke to the present, though a careful reading of his introduction and notes to each selection in the anthology shows that he has great difficulty, if not apprehension, in sustaining this claim of continuity.³⁶ This is a characteristic of other Burkian school advocates of Conservatism as well.

Arguing for an 18th- century origin for conservatism, and for a lineal development from that time to the present places Muller at odds with professor Huntington and others. Such are some of the foundational differences among conservative thinkers, thus demonstrating the "many-sided" quality of the American Conservative Movement.

³⁵ Muller, *Conservatism*, 25.

³⁶ Muller, *Conservatism*, 23.

IV. Conservatism's Courtship of the Republican Party.

As indicated in our discussion of the Conservative Movement's origins, it had two wings—conservative thinkers and conservative political activists. We turn now to a consideration of the politically minded Conservatives from the mid-1940s to the present time. This is a huge task but is manageable when we measure it by looking at Conservatism's relationship to Republican presidential candidates and Republican presidents themselves. In the process, we will examine the development of conservative political factions that emerged from time to time during this same time frame, including Traditionalists, Neo-conservatives, Libertarians, the Religious Right, and more recently the Tea Party.

We use the phrase “conservative courtship of the Republican Party” to describe the relationship between the Conservative Movement and Republicans because it aptly captures the mood and attitude of this relationship. Fickleness, indecision, embraces, rejection for a season, and any other mood that one may find in courtships-to-marriage partners may be found in the Conservative/Republican experience. As indicated, we will look at contenders for the office of president, successful or not. Thus, we consider Conservatism's relationship to Robert Taft, Dwight Eisenhower, Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Jerry Ford, and Ronald Reagan, leaving the Bushs to the essay's concluding remarks.

To continue the courtship figure, Reagan's presidency may be seen as the end of the courtship and the beginning of a marriage. For this reason his presidency will be examined separately and in a bit more detail. As a prelude to that, it will be crucial to sketch out the nature of conservative factions that had emerged by the time Reagan took office. Reagan's genius after all was in his ability to understand and manage these factions, using elements of each to push

forward his programs and policies—ultimately called by many the Reagan Revolution. Indeed, it may be argued that he was the only conservative Republican President so far, though some George W. Bush supporters might argue that point.

A. Conservatism and the Would-be-President Robert A. Taft.

The presidency is, of course, always the big prize in national politics because of the power the office holds. The first conservative who sought the presidency in the era of the Conservative Movement was Robert Taft (1889-1953), a Republican Senator from Ohio. Since his biographical information is readily available on the Net, we note here only a few pertinent facts to form a context for his conservative political efforts.³⁷

Robert Taft came from a prominent Ohio political family centered in Cincinnati. Elected to the Senate in 1938, he served until his death in 1953, with a time out when he ran for president in 1948. He was known in those years as “Mr. Republican,” though he was instinctively and ideologically as conservative as any other Senator—for less government, lower taxes, and the like. As noted earlier, he joined with conservative Southern Senators to form the informal Conservative Coalition in the 1940s. Legislatively, he is known for co-sponsoring the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which began to limit the sweeping power granted to unions by the National Labor Relations Act of 1935.

He failed in three attempts to gain the Republican nomination for President—in 1940, 1948, and 1952. In the 1944 and 1948 primaries he battled Thomas Dewey of New York and the Eastern Republican Establishment for control of the Republican Party. The 1952 run is especially important because his opponent was Dwight Eisenhower. As a conservative before the

³⁷ Farber, *The Rise and Fall*, 9.

Conservative Movement was up to full speed and politically developed, Taft had gained a very substantial following. They together opposed Eisenhower because they saw him as the Eastern Establishment's candidate—too liberal. Likely, however, no one could have defeated war-hero Eisenhower that year.

It's important to note here that the difference between conservative Taft and moderate Eisenhower represents a line of conflict that continued in the Republican Party from that day to the present—also evidence of the courtship figure used in this discussion. Gerald Ford was another moderate Republican who was not trusted or liked by Conservatives. More on that later.

B. Conservatism and the Presidency from Eisenhower to Reagan.

As for Eisenhower's presidency and the Conservative Movement, many in the Movement were not happy with Eisenhower policies, though in foreign policy he was more acceptable to some conservatives. Conservative thinkers, editors of *The National Review* for example, thought that Eisenhower gave lip service to conservative principles while using Federal power to continue national programs. He echoed the New Deal, some thought. In fact, Ike, as he was affectionately known, supported the Federal Highway Program and the St. Lawrence Seaway project. Other conservatives thought he supported the market system too fervently, personally being a close friend of many leading corporate CEOs. Especially difficult for many conservatives was his nomination of Earl Warren as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The Warren Court was highly distasteful to most conservatives. Finally, most states-rights conservatives—mainly from the South—were angry when he sent Federal Troops to little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce a desegregation order by the Supreme Court.

Eisenhower was always more popular with the public at large than he was among conservatives. He won, after all, re-election in 1956 by a landslide.

Conservatives liked Eisenhower's Vice President, Richard Nixon. Friends of Eisenhower urged him to choose Nixon as a running mate because Nixon was liked by conservatives. Nixon outsmarted party regulars in an alleged campaign scandal by going on TV to defend himself in a famous performance. The public rallied, or rather conservatives rallied, to Nixon's side in large numbers. This public display forced Eisenhower to create a TV photo op and declare that "Nixon's my boy!"

Nixon came from conservative Orange County in California and was known as a strong anti-communist even though the public press vilified him. In 1960 Nixon ran for the presidency but was defeated by John Kennedy with a very narrow margin—about 212,000 votes.

Having assumed office on the death of John Kennedy in November, 1963, LBJ ran for the presidency in 1964 against Barry Goldwater and won in a huge landslide. But, on the conservative side, 1964 was Goldwater's time. Successful business man, several terms in the Senate, a general in the Air Force, and in 1963 the author of a best-selling book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*,³⁸ Goldwater was wildly popular with conservatives. He ran as a candidate on the Right, some would say the far Right. His defeat was assured even before the campaign got under way in earnest. Some of the opposition to him was based on the notion that he was not only a conservative with a conscience but that he was, indeed, a reactionary. In his waning years Goldwater moved more and more into the libertarian camp and from there was disdainful of the rising Religious Right. Often his characterization of this wing of Conservatism was shocking to

³⁸ Barry M. Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder, 2009).

the conservative community. Yes, here was another example of Conservatism's many-sided soul!

With Goldwater, conservatives had *their* candidate. In this we see a very important moment in the courtship of Republicans by conservatives. Indeed, it was a sort of conservative marriage proposal. The election outcome showed that the proposal was rejected. The Republican Party was not ready to embrace a candidate from the far Right. The ever-present Nixon was waiting in the wings.

Following a tumultuous four years of LBJ's emerging Great Society and an expanded war in Viet Nam, Johnson decided not to run again. Some thought it was because he could see that he could not win. Nixon, awaiting a nod, ran in 1968 and won the presidency with a campaign that appealed to his natural allies in the South and to the famous, more traditional "silent majority," a group Nixon claimed made up a plurality of the electorate. Apparently he was correct.

Conservatives certainly were crucial to his victory. In office, however, he pursued policies that ran counter to many conservative instincts. The Federal deficit and Federal budget expanded rapidly. His principal political sin in the eyes of conservatives was his imposition of wage and price controls in 1971. His forced resignation in August 1974 was the final blow to his many former Conservative supporters. Moreover, his nomination of Gerald Ford as Vice President upon the resignation of Spiro Agnew did not sit well with Conservatives either. Nixon's writings about foreign policy in his later years brought some redemption among some Conservatives, but in the end he was "not one of theirs."

Gerald Ford of Grand Rapids, Michigan, was sworn in as President upon Nixon's resignation. Ford was what Charles Dunn, a perceptive student of conservative politics, refers to as a "mid-western conservative," grouped with Evert Dirksen of Illinois, Bob Dole of Kansas, and others.³⁹ Yet, the growing Conservative political community was, at best, lukewarm to Ford and his policies. Evidence of Conservative appreciation of Ford may be seen in Conservative publications. *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*⁴⁰ does not even have a brief entry about Ford. Many other books have a one-line entry about him and that is likely to be a mention of him as the President who succeeded Nixon. Other Conservative publications relegate him to a footnote.

As for the Conservative courtship of Gerald Ford, the courtship took a vacation. This sideline performance by conservatives probably allowed Georgia Democrat Jimmy Carter to take the presidential chair from Ford in the 1976 election. The courtship, however, would intensify in four years as it resumed with the arrival of California's Ronald Reagan.

V. Ronald Reagan and the Marriage of Conservatism and the Republican Party.

Without a doubt Reagan shaped the Conservative Movement's ideology and direction more than any other person in the 20th century, affirming and advancing certain of its ideas while rejecting and ignoring others.⁴¹ A clear understanding of his impact on the face of conservatism requires a summing up of the Conservative Movement's sub-sets at the time he came to power. We will characterize these and then move on to note Reagan's tie to these groups.

³⁹ Dunn, *Future of Conservatism*, vii.

⁴⁰ Bruce Frohnen, et al, *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington: ISI, 2006).

⁴¹ Dunn, *Future of Conservatism*, 10.

A. Conservative Factions That Emerged by 1980.

It appears to me that the dozens of varieties of factions can be boiled down to a few, perhaps four. Many practicing Conservatives will, of course, dissent and object vehemently when their particular version is squeezed into one of the divisions proposed here. Even when reduced to a few varieties, however, several themes run through most of them. All, for example, claim to heartily support “freedom” and “liberty,” though some do so with only modest enthusiasm (Old Right), while others push freedom to its furthest extent. (Libertarians). It is more obvious that Conservatives all oppose one thing especially—at least in principle—socialism in all its versions, socialism being the idea that government can and should solve all of the nation’s problems.

As Ronald Reagan made his switch from being a card-carrying liberal to a confirmed conservative in the years just after World War II, one branch of the Conservative Movement was gaining in popularity. Historians refer to this branch as the “Old Right” and agree that its leading spokesman was probably Russell Kirk. Like many Old Right Conservatives, Kirk had a deep affinity for all things old and English, especially for social ideas that flowed from the writings of Edmund Burke, as we recounted at length earlier. Thus, tradition, customs, civility, manners, morals, and above all, social order were prominent elements in his writings, as in his personal life. His anti-modern streak was always evident also. These ideas can be summed up in the proposition that for a Kirkian, the mere long-time existence of an institution created a presumption that it must have great value. Implied, therefore, was the idea that old institutions should not be changed except for great cause. Kirk, thus, personified the Old Right or traditionalism or the “godfather” of early Conservative thinkers.

After 15 to 20 years of growth and support by foundations, from the 1950s to the early 1970s, the Old Right was vigorously challenged by a new breed of Conservative—soon labeled Neo-Conservatives.⁴² Neo-Conservatives were converts to the movement from the liberal left. The occasion of their defection and subsequent conversion was what they called a betrayal of the liberal cause by a youthful core of radicals such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), radicals who attacked academic standards, encouraged the sexual revolution, and embraced Marxist views. Many Neo-Cons were Jewish intellectuals who were at home in the social sciences and its methods—statistics and computers—but also usually embracing traditional Jewish support for high moral standards. Moreover, they were pragmatic and policy-oriented, and this set them apart and in tension with Conservatives of the Old Right, who were humanistic or literary scholars—more at home with the ideas of Aristotle or Burke than with computers and the social sciences.

Both competed for funding from traditionally conservative foundations such as Coors, Scaife, and others, but by the 1980s the Neo-Conservatives were gaining a larger share of foundation funding. Leaders of the Neo-Conservative movement included Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, the extended family of each becoming powerful figures in government, journalism, and foundation work.⁴³ Unlike Old Right Conservatives who wanted to dismantle the welfare state, Neo-Conservatives assumed the necessity of it but wanted to make it efficient and effective. They also vigorously supported a global democratic order, a view not found among leaders of the Old Right since they were inherently suspicious of democracy, a suspicion they

⁴² Dunn, *Future of Conservatism*, vi-vii, 23-24.

⁴³ Frohnen et al, *American Conservatism*, 610.

inherited, they said, from the Founding Fathers. When Ronald Reagan came to power in 1981, most of his staff came from the Neo-Conservative wing of the Movement. Old Right attempts to gain seats of power in the Reagan Administration were largely rebuffed, one here and there being given minor posts such as an Assistant Secretary of Education.

As the Old Right was being marginalized and Neo-Conservatives were rising to positions of influence and power in the 1970s on into the Reagan years, a third conservative faction emerged—the New Right, further fragmenting the Conservative Movement. It is true that it had some ideas in common with the Old Right, such as opposition to communism, support of free markets and limited government, and respect for religion and Judeo-Christian values. Founders of the New Right, including Richard Viguerie, Paul Weyrich, and Phyllis Schlafly, had been active in Republican politics but felt betrayed by its liberal Eastern Establishment leaders. To them, the great majority of Americans endorsed their views, not the views of liberal Republicans. Though, like Old Right leaders in some respects, they came at problems from a business and pragmatic point of view, not from the writings of Aristotle or Edmund Burke. Unhappy with liberal Republicans and the emerging Neo-Conservatives, New Right leaders decided to form a new political caucus designed to take over the Republican Party or perhaps even form a new party, that is to say, the New Right had a courtship of its own with the Republican Party.⁴⁴

The outstanding feature in the rise of the New Right, however, was the sudden appearance of the Christian Right in the movement. Christians on the Right had been involved in politics for a long time, but now new faces and new issues galvanized a large number of

⁴⁴ For general comment on the New Right, see Samuel Francis, “Messages from MARS: The Social Politics of the New Right,” in *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, ed. Gregory L. Schneider, 300-317 (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

Christian organizations, and they joined hands with the more pragmatic New Right leaders.⁴⁵

The Christian Right brought much to the New Right movement—vast television and radio audiences, millions more listening in the pews, a moral fervor, and a deep patriotic appeal. Its leading figures were Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. One issue more than any other brought the Christian Right out of the churches and into the political fray—the Roe abortion decision of 1973. It was not long before other social issues were tied to it, including prayer in public schools, Supreme Court appointments, and the like.

Unfortunately for them, the Christian Right suffered the same destiny as the Old Right at the hands of the Reagan administration. Their ideas were honored with lip service but not with policy initiatives supported vigorously by the President. Typically, Christian Right leaders would be invited to the White House from time to time to discuss issues especially important to them, this experience generating great optimism about their chances for their programs being advanced legislatively. One would be hard pressed, however, to find any Christian issue that was turned into policy and legislation. The Christian Right—conservative by definition—continued, however, to vote Republican by the millions—even voting for the first President Bush.

In addition to the Old Right, Neo-Conservatives, and the New Right, a fourth group claimed citizenship in the kingdom of conservatism in the post-World War II era. They styled themselves “Libertarians.” Libertarians have always argued vigorously about who they are and which of them truly represents the essence of their movement.⁴⁶ They do so because the core idea that drives all Libertarians is the notion that each person is autonomous. This premise is not

⁴⁵ Dunn, *Future of Conservatism*, 8.

⁴⁶ Frohnen, *American Conservatism*, 505.

always stated so starkly, but personal autonomy is nevertheless the central idea for them. From a distance, it is clear that Libertarians have their roots largely in the works of two intellectuals—the Austrian economist Mises (1881-1973) and the anarco-capitalist Murray Rothbard (1926-1995).⁴⁷ Most Libertarians, at least in the early decades, focused on economic issues and the need to be free from all government contact and control. One admiring biographer of Rothbard captured this mood when he titled his book about him *Enemy of the State*.⁴⁸ As for moral principles in typical Libertarian thinking, many would be comfortable with the spirit of a line from the Book of Judges: “Each man did what was right in his own eyes,” and they would probably add “as long as it does not injure anyone else.” Contemporary expressions of a Libertarian outlook may be found in the work of the Reason Foundation and the Cato Institute; a look at their websites will make this clear.

All four of these branches of the Conservative Movement were at work as Ronald Reagan achieved political power. Great reader that he was, Reagan was familiar, doubtlessly, with most ideas emanating from all these groups. The question remains, however, as to how Reagan related to them. In answering that question, we can see how Reagan changed the face of Conservatism. This could be the subject of a whole book, but here it will be briefly sketched. We emphasize here that Reagan was a self-confessed believer in Conservative principles. Crucial, however, to this observation is the fact that Reagan gathered up his conservative principles from his own reading and experience. This is not surprising because Reagan was, indeed, a very gifted student

⁴⁷ Nash, *Intellectual Movement*, 10. See also Jorg Guido Hulsman, *Mises: The Last Knight of Liberalism* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007).

⁴⁸ Justin Raimondo, *Enemy of the State: The Life of Murray N. Rothbard* (New York: Prometheus, 2000).

of people and ideas. In addition, Reagan was a deeply committed Republican. Thus, in Reagan we see the personification of the idea of a *conservative Republican!*

B. The Reagan Revolution.

Reagan was famous for his statement, paraphrased here, “Thou shalt not speak evil of fellow Republicans.” That phrase could be applied to Conservatives as well. In a word, he genuinely appreciated the efforts of all Conservative groups and said so. Significantly, however, he used only those ideas that fit with his own well developed public philosophy and his sense of mission. Rebuilding the American economy was one of two central pillars of his mission as a politician. The other was the defeat—not the containment—of Communism. As it turned out, many ideas of the Neo-Conservative branch of the Movement fit well with many of his goals, more so than ideas from other branches of the Movement.

Being a born-again Christian, especially evident from recent books about his faith,⁴⁹ Reagan was very sensitive to numerous social issues that were near and dear to the hearts of the Christian element of the New Right. He spoke to that constituency often about these ideas, including abortion and pornography. When it came to legislation about these matters, however, he did little, sensing, no doubt, that they were more divisive than constructive in the public square. Stated another way, he was not willing to see these issues undermine the two main goals of his mission.

Reagan’s plan to rebuild American capitalism, a capitalism which had faltered for 20 years under the influence of John Kenneth Galbraith’s doctrine of an “affluent society,”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Regan, 2004).

⁵⁰ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998). This book was immensely

assumed limits for government—something less than the New Deal and Great Society had put in place. This is not what the Old Right, the New Right, and Libertarians heard. They thought he meant to roll back government and radically shrink it to a size they imagined, eliminating huge programs such as Social Security along the way. Reagan did not think in these terms; rather, he thought more in terms of efficiency—“more bang for the taxpayer’s buck,”—that is, Reagan wanted to make government work better, not merely make it smaller. Further, he wanted government to be less intrusive in the daily lives of citizens as they sought to make their way in life. Neo-Conservatives were more attuned to this view and were, thus, the main beneficiaries of Reagan’s economic stance. Their mantra was “democratic capitalism,” not free market economics.⁵¹ In short, Neo-Cons ended up being appointed to many important policy posts of Reagan’s government.

They were also well positioned to advise Reagan on foreign policy. Generally, they favored communism’s extinction rather than its containment. Further, as proponents of “democratic capitalism,” they were for expanding world trade rather than being supporters of a cranky economic isolationism as others of their conservative brethren were.

Ronald Reagan was in the right place at the right time with the right strategy to form a powerful alliance in support of his programs. It was a remarkable coalition of fellow conservatives and Republicans as well as socially and economically conservative Democrats—“Reagan Democrats.” This alliance made the Reagan Revolution possible. This alliance empowered him to achieve great things, including his twin goals: the defeat of communism and

influential in the Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon era.

⁵¹ Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). The phrase “democratic capitalism” refers to a tendency of some to support the export of the American system to other, often emerging nations. “Democratic Promotionalism” is frequently synonymous with it.

the revival of the American economy. It is also clear that social and moral reforms were not programmatically successful, though social and moral issues moved front and center in a growing cultural war between conservatives and liberal elements in American society itself.

As his farewell speech indicated, Reagan left office with a deep sense of achievement and satisfaction, not least of which was being the “best man” at the marriage of Conservatism and the Republican Party. Reagan did change the face of the Conservative Movement through the sheer power of his ideas and personality and through his ability to engineer the political process. His sense of achievement was, indeed, well founded.

Once Reagan was out of office, the question was whether another conservative would marry the Republican Party or whether the Republican Party would marry another conservative. That is a matter we will consider in our concluding observations.

VI. Some Concluding Thoughts on the Post-Reagan Years.

To follow the courtship figure, the Conservative Movement was widowed with the end of the Reagan Administration. The aging Movement immediately faced a would-be suitor in the person of Vice President George H. W. Bush. The courtship began with the fact that Bush was above all an Eastern Establishment Republican. In his campaign for the presidency he courted conservatives but at a distance. On the other hand, many conservatives, from various parts of the Movement, were suspicious of Bush’s credentials as a conservative—suspicion like the parents of a bride wondering about the religion of their perspective son-in-law. He was elected in 1988 but with only modest support from conservatives. When it came time for re-election in 1992, Bush was in trouble with conservatives because he went back on his promise: “Read my lips, no new taxes.” At the same time many conservatives found third party candidate, Ross Perot,

attractive. Moreover, Bush's campaign was lackluster. Bush either thought he was owed a second term or he was not much interested in being re-elected.

Attractive, winsome, and the best natural politician of his generation, Bill Clinton won the 1992 election, holding the presidency for eight years. The Conservative Movement was unraveling during these years, factions tending to war with each other: formal factions including Traditionalists, Neo-Conservatives, Libertarians, and the New Right and the Religious Right within it. Indeed, other informal segments included groups who were economically, politically, socially, or religiously motivated on a personal level. Nevertheless, conservatives on the Right grew in number rapidly. Yet, foundation support grew exponentially, publications proliferated, numerous attractive conservative candidates for state and national office appeared, and many in the next generation signed on as conservative.

When election time came in 2000, the best the Conservative-Republican coalition could do was nominate a winsome, "born again" Christian, and Texas Governor—George W. Bush. As everyone knows, this election was so close that the Supreme Court had to decide the outcome. This event itself helped to polarize the American electorate.

Was George W. Bush's election another Conservative/Republican Party marriage in the making, as in the case of Reagan? It seemed not to be the case. The Religious Right liked Bush because of his religious convictions and his stand on moral issues like abortion. More were pleased with his Court appointments. As his second term came to an end, many conservatives were disaffected because of the Mid-East wars, massive deficits, and national debt. Indeed, as the 2008 election approached, the Conservative/Bush courtship had deteriorated.

With Obama's election, Conservatives wondered what they should do. His programs were so far left that his programs became a rallying point for many Conservatives. Thus, the 2010 election ushered in a new vitality among Conservatives. The election showed several levels of conservative motivation. Massive Federal programs—especially Obama Care—struck fear in the hearts of conservatives. Many wondered whether the American system was being irreversibly changed. Other conservatives were motivated by a new sense of patriotism and decided to fight for a return to a more traditional America.

At this writing, December 2011, candidates for the presidential nomination of the Republican Party are tripping over each other to court the Conservative vote. Moderate Eastern Establishment candidate, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, is the leading contender, though former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich—a more conventional Conservative—leads in some polls. Support for Romney among Conservatives is tepid, Conservatism's various factions each having separate reasons to like or dislike him. The question of the hour is, therefore, whether Conservatives, in the face of very serious national financial problems, will court, and then vote for, a moderate Republican candidate like Romney, or will they turn to a Gingrich?

A more sobering thought for Conservatives, especially those attending this conference, is this: Conservative chances of defeating Obama in 2012 are slim to none. And why? As the title of the April 2012 Conference—"The Challenge 2012: The Divided Conservative Mind" suggests, and as the title of this essay suggests, Conservatism as a Movement is fractured. Moreover, too many Conservatives hang on to their personal, and often narrow, conservative ideas—unwilling to bend even a bit to join other Conservatives in a courtship of the Republican

Party, a move that is essential if they wish to defeat progressive/left Obama. If Conservatives do not court the Republican Party, they can be sure that Independents will not join their effort to defeat Obama either. The door then will be wide open for an Obama re-election next November.

It might be a good time to re-read this paper's "Prologue." In sum, it asks: "What kind of Conservative are you?" Are you willing to join with Conservatives of a different stripe and to unite with the Republican Party? The goal—winning the 2012 presidential election—may ultimately depend on your decision.

VII. A Summary.

Political parties all seek the good life for the nation, but they have different visions of what the good life consists. Conservatives are no different: They have their own ideas about the good life. Rather, each of the segments of the Conservative Movement has their own view of it. The Movement, is above all, many faceted.

As a Movement, Conservatism emerged by the late 1940s, beginning with several early thinkers and a handful of political candidates. A good way to account for Conservatism's development from these early days is to see its relationship with the Republican Party as a courtship, like ones found between people who eventually marry. Here we have traced this process by focusing on Republican presidents or presidential candidates—from Robert Taft through Ronald Reagan, noting the hot and cold phases of the courtship. The signal development in this relationship was a marriage among conservatives and Ronald Reagan in which Reagan picked and chose programmatic offerings from the various wings of Conservatism to suit his vision for America. All factions were admired by Reagan, therein alienating none.

Following his departure from office, a new courtship began. Bush senior had a formal and distant relationship with the courting conservatives, he doing some “dastardly” things, make that unforgivable things, as far as many were concerned. Think: “No new taxes.” Bush was elected in 1988 and defeated in 1992. Conservatives grew in size and power during Clinton’s eight years, but also grew more factious. The Conservative-Republican Party courtship warmed up in 2000. Conservatives had their man, they thought, in the person of Texan “born-again-Christian” George W. Bush. They liked his lower taxes and Supreme Court appointments. By the second term, however, many Conservatives were soured by his big deficits, expanding debt, and expensive wars. With the massive movement towards more Federal control of society under Obama, Conservatives pushed back in the 2010 election. At the moment Conservatives, with all of their factions, are attempting to find a candidate they can support in the 2012 presidential election. Can they continue the traditional courtship? Can they find a suitor most of the factions can support? By the time of the Vision & Values Conference in April, the nature of this search will be more clear. One thing is certain: Without unity among the Movement’s factions, a Republican presidential victory in November 2012 appears doubtful.

Appendix “A”

Notes Towards Understanding Kirk’s *Moral Imagination*

As already indicated, Kirk’s phrase *moral imagination* is central to his writing and thinking, both in his academic and literary work. An inquiry into what he means by the phrase is a difficult exercise for two reasons: 1.) Kirk was defining—and expanding its meaning—as he wrote over the years; 2.) in rejecting reason as a reliable way to know, Kirk was left in waters that apparently were uncharted for him; that is, he was swimming about in the field of epistemology—that branch of philosophy that studies the problem of knowledge. In our college core program we introduced students to this problem by asking two questions: “How do you know what you know?” and “How do you know what you know is, in fact, true?” The latter points to the need to have **certainty** about what we know. To emphasize, Kirk’s development of the concept of *moral imagination* was an attempt to find a way to answer the question about certainty of knowledge, having rejected reason. After much study, it appears that Kirk never expressed himself clearly about the meaning of the concept, that is to say, his best expressions about the meaning of *moral imagination* are elusive, vague, and frequently changing. Could this be evidence of a latent postmodernism in Kirk’s thought? Below we offer a suggestion that will lead, we believe, to a better understanding of Kirk’s core phrase.

As a practical matter, we also need to note here that any reflection on the phrase by ordinary, non-academic readers suggests that Kirk’s phrase is an oxymoron (usually a pair of words contradicting each other, for example, giant shrimp, deafening silence, original copies, larger half). Applied to *moral imagination*, indeed, raises questions. Imaginative morality? Creative ethics? No absolutes? And what about the Scriptural proposition: “The imaginations of man’s heart are only evil continually”?

After several months of studying Kirk’s writings, and endless hours of stimulating discussions with my literary-oriented wife Kathryn (It became an obsession.), we finally reached a working conclusion as to what Kirk intended in using the concept. Its essence may be captured by substituting two other words for the two words in Kirk’s phrase. The words are *conscience* and *intuition*. We need to define them with precision, first, and then we can go on to see how they clarify the phrase.

Conscience, historically understood, refers to a mental faculty or distinct inherent capacity which applies fixed moral principles to particular moral problems. Conscience is, thus, a moral monitor of thought and action. In using “moral” Kirk never tied it firmly to the concept of conscience, though he did use the term a few times. Intuition is the ability to acquire knowledge without the use of inferences or of reason. It produces knowledge that is difficult to justify or “prove” in the logical sense, but has a degree of certainty that usually satisfies the mind at the time. Is the conservative mind, according to Kirk, evolving, always new? This would seem to support the notion that conservatism cannot be pinned down, and has and will have variations depending on time, place, and political conditions. From another angle, intuition is a kind of immediate apprehending of knowledge often based on what we may call “gut feelings.” The product of intuitive insight is often viewed as new, original, innovative, and imaginative.

With these ideas in mind, let’s see what Kirk himself has to say about the meaning of *moral imagination*. We will quote a number of his comments on it, then evaluate what they appear to mean in his thinking. For one thing, he says that *The Conservative Mind* was an exercise in moral imagination.

American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia (2006) has an article entitled “moral imagination” and the author is Russell Kirk himself. Kirk died in 1994 and the editors did not indicate from which Kirk writing they extracted this piece. Kirk began the essay by stating:

The moral imagination is a term of humane letters (emphasis mine, referring to literary creations) and politics implying that men and women are moral beings and that the power of imagination enables them to perceive, beyond mere appearances, a hierarchy of worth and certain truths.

Following, Kirk paraphrased Burke and stated that “the civilized being is distinguished from the savage by his possession of the moral imagination.”

Another extended comment on moral imagination by Kirk appeared in *The Essential Russell Kirk: Selected Essays*, edited by George Panichas in 2007. It’s a re-print from the journal *Literature and Belief*, [volume 1 (1981), pp. 37-49.] Among other things, Kirk observed that “the moral imagination aspires to the **apprehending** [grasping] (emphasis mine) of the right order of the soul and the right order in the commonwealth.” Kirk does not say how the moral imagination knows what “right order” ought to be. Is it through conscience? The grasp and expression of this “right order,” says Kirk, “are expressed afresh from age to age.” Significantly, “moral imagination and its creations . . . are the special care of men of letters,” observes Kirk. “It is the moral imagination which informs us concerning the dignity of human nature, which informs us that we are more than naked apes.” He says this another way too: “The end of great books is ethical [moral]—to teach us what it means to be genuinely human.” Another phrase comments on his view of the moral imagination’s relationship to great literature: “It is to search the human heart to find in it the *laws* (emphasis mine) of moral existence, distinguishing man from beast.” In another place Kirk ties his view of reason to his view of imagination. Said Kirk, “Not pure reason, but imagination . . . is the moving force in private life and in public.” (p. 53) As for intuition, Kirk says that one can have a “direct, imaginative, and experiential intuition” about historical matters. This view seems to preclude any objective historical accounts. That is, indeed, Kirk’s position if by *objective* one means history written by children of the Enlightenment, including most of Kirk’s contemporary historian-colleagues. There are, of course, many other Kirkian comments on moral imagination, but these are sufficient in number for our purposes.

To move towards a better understanding of Kirk’s moral imagination we next paraphrase and summarize his observations.

1. People are moral beings, but are morals fixed as absolutes? Or, relative?
2. People have the power to perceive (imagine) truths that are beyond the visible.
3. These qualities set men apart from beasts (apes).
4. This power seeks to grasp the right order for the self and society.
5. Though ordinary people have these powers, they really are the special province of “men of letters” who have extraordinary moral imaginations and sensitive consciences.

6. These literary artists write books that are great because they have the power to arrive at ethical truths. Again, are these truths transient or permanent? Kirk did like to refer to “permanent things.”
7. Imagination/intuition is their special gift, not powers of reason.
8. History is understood through insights produced intuitively, subjectively.
9. Yet, imagining hearts and minds have an underlying evil condition (sin).
10. Degenerate imaginations, ones unaffected by morals, are diabolical, and therefore, requiring the presence of conscience (Kirk borrows the idea of “diabolical imagination” from Irving Babbitt).

What happens when we re-state these propositions in terms of conscience and intuition? In a few words it is this: Conscience as a set of fixed moral principles monitors what the intuitive imagination creates—whether fiction or non-fiction. While every person has a conscience and intuitive ability, a select few in any given civilization have these powers at a much higher level: Kirk himself? He thinks so. Some possessed with a high level of such powers can know the stuff of history—its meaning. Again, Kirk saw himself as exercising this power. That is what he meant when he said that *The Conservative Mind* was a product of moral imagination. In a concluding section of his ghost story collection *Ancestral Shadows: An Anthology of Ghostly Tales* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), Kirk also tells us that these stories were the product of moral imagination.

This is a very significant statement, for with it we conclude that all of Kirk’s writings—ghostly, historical, and everything else were the product of his moral imagination. That is to say, all of his writings are the product of his artistic, imaginative/intuitive insight.

There are difficulties with Kirk’s expanded use of the concept of moral imagination. As we noted above in defining *intuition*, what the intuitive imagination produces cannot easily be “proved” in the sense of logic. Thus, it appears that one must “feel” what the moral imagination creates rather than know it in an objective sense. Stated another way, what is produced through the moral imagination is largely subjective rather than objective in the sense that someone else can verify independently what a particular moral imagination discovers—about historical events, for example.

Some of Kirk’s critics sensed an inherent subjectivity in much of Kirk’s academic and historical work. From another angle, he could make history to be what he and his intuition wanted it to be, but that was likely alright with him because he had unwavering confidence in his own imagination, that is, his intuitive insights. He was, after all, a man of letter, that select group who can rise above the masses and grasp the inner meaning of experience and history.

One might ask whether Kirk’s claim in his *The Conservative Mind* that conservatism in his era was a lineal descendant of Edmund Burke is sound, defensible, reasonable, or correct. The book is a description, one might say, of what Kirk in his imagination **thought** was a true state of affairs. But, intuitively based claims are not really subject to proof in the ordinary sense. Agreement with the claim of Burkian conservatism being the source of conservatism in the late 20th century, then, becomes a matter of belief.

Before leaving the topic of Kirk’s moral imagination, we call attention to a stimulating study of Kirk’s concept of moral imagination, that is, Gerald J. Russello’s 2007 study entitled *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*. Russello was in a good position to know Kirk’s thought since he had been

Kirk's student at Piety Hill in Mecosta. Russello says that "imagination lay at the heart of Kirk's thinking." He again notes its central place in Kirk's thought: "Not pure reason, but imagination. . . is the moving force in private life and in public." Russello devotes a large portion of his book to an examination of how moral imagination fits into the whole scheme of Kirk's thought. Russello's conclusion? Kirk was actually a postmodern thinker. Some Kirk devotees will be surprised by Russello's argument: Russell Kirk a "postmodern man?" Russello states that "Kirk was one of the first conservative thinkers to see in postmodernism an opportunity for conservatism to reassert itself amidst the collapse of modernity." Modernity, of course, refers to the rational, scientific age that was spawned by the Enlightenment. A central characteristic of postmoderns, presumably including Kirk, is the rejection of absolutes in favor of a relativistic view of culture. In this vein, a postmodern is likely to say, "It all depends."

With these observations in mind, we may ask whether parts of the Conservative Movement have embraced a postmodern attitude under Kirk's influence. Has this been a basis for some of the fragmentation of the Movement? Fragmentation of the Movement is a characteristic of it, as the title of the April 2012 Vision & Values conference suggests. Russello's argument tends to support such a view. From another angle, we note that the Conservative Movement's inability to find any fixed principles that all can agree on may also be the result of Kirkian postmodern influences, especially its relativistic tendencies. Indeed, one might also wonder whether there are other—perhaps stealth—postmoderns in the Conservative Movement.

Undoubtedly, Russello's inspiring study of Kirk's thought, along with the suggestion made here about using conscience and intuition as ways to understand Kirk moral imagination, will stimulate further study of Kirk.

December, 2011

L. John Van Til
Fellow for Law & Society
Center for Vision & Values
Grove City College