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The Popular
Conservatives

By Russell Kirk



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THE POPULAR CONSERVATIVES

By Russell Kirk

Will the American coalition of interests and groups called conservative fall apart a few months from now when President Reagan leaves office? Will there succeed to power in Washington a very different coalition, made up of extreme liberals, black radicals, and militant feminists? Is the conservative movement in the United States, which began to take form forty years ago, enervated and disheartened, plodding down the road to Avernus?

Nay, not so. The political and social attitudes that we call conservative are deeply rooted among Americans, and the leaders of both great political parties are thoroughly aware of that popular attitude. The amusing post-convention attempt to represent Governor Dukakis as a prudent conservative, and Senator Bentsen as the Old Gentleman with the Black Stock, is sufficient illustration of the realism that has descended upon the Democratic party; while that party's platform, accepted by delegates best classified as ritualistically liberal, is an endeavor to assure the voting public that Democrats, too, are attached to the Permanent Things. Far from entering upon an era of political innovation, we Americans may look upon the spectacle of two parties professedly conservative. It does not necessarily follow that either party must be intelligently conservative: my present point is merely that our principal public men today have come to recognize the great strength of what I call Popular Conservatism.

When I say "popular conservatism," I do not mean "populist conservatism." A Populist, whose basic conviction is that the cure for democracy is more democracy, conserves nothing — even though he may wish to do so. Populism, in effect, is what Walter Bagehot called the "ignorant democratic conservatism of the masses." It is the tendency later called Populism that Tocqueville dreaded when he wrote that the triumph of democracy might lead to the stagnation of the society of the future, all change being resisted by the conservatism of mediocrity and complacency. Populism declares, in the mordant sentence of Mark Twain, "One man is as good as another, or maybe a little better." In American politics, the populist attitude is typified by the following little true anecdote of the presidential election of 1960.

Right to Vote. To a friend of mine, an employer, came one of his employees at the end of October, to discuss the presidential candidates. He told my friend that he — let us call him Smithson — never had voted before, but had determined to vote on November 7, 1960. For which candidate he should vote, he could not make up his mind. The dialogue went much as follows:

Smithson: "Gee, boss, I don't know nothin' about them two guys Nixon and Kennedy, except what I see on TV. What'll I do?"

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Employer: "Jack Smithson, the thing for you to do is not to vote; stay home."

Smithson: "Oh, I got a right to vote; I'm gonna vote, all right."

Employer: "You lost that right when you stopped paying attention to politics; or maybe you never started paying any attention, Jack."

Smithson: "Don't give me that: I gotta right to vote. Why, if it wasn't for voters like me, them smart guys would be runnin' everything in Washington."

Populism is a revolt against the Smart Guys. I am very ready to confess that the present Smart Guys, as represented by the dominant mentality of the Academy and of what the Bergers call the Knowledge Class today, are insufficiently endowed with right reason and moral imagination. But it would not be an improvement to supplant them by persons of thoroughgoing ignorance and incompetence.

Essence of Conservatism. No, there prevails in America a conservative understanding of a popular character that is not Populism. It runs through both great political parties, though whether it is sufficiently expressed by either party's measures varies with times and circumstances. To put the matter very succinctly, the large majority of Americans prefer the devil they know to the devil they don't know: that is the essence of conservatism. "What is conservatism?" Abraham Lincoln inquired in an election address. "Is it not preference for the old and tried over the new and untried?" He so affirmed, declaring himself conservative. Neoterists, preferring the new and untried to the old and tried, do not make much headway in America's practical politics — not if the general public comes to understand what the neoterists are about.

Over the past several decades, opinion polls have shown that the word "conservative," as a term of politics, is distinctly preferred by the American public over the terms "liberal" and "radical." Most Americans do not think that society is perfectible — so far as they can be said to think at all about such matters — and are not disposed to march to Zion at the heels of some political enthusiast. The ideologue they reject with commendable decisiveness: that is what happened to Jesse Jackson at Atlanta and elsewhere. So far as any political theory influences popular opinion in these United States, it is political empiricism: the test of the nation's political experience. The Constitution of the United States is revered, even if, given a knowledge test about the Constitution, most voters might score poorly.

Acceptance of Institutions. Of course few American citizens think of themselves as empiricists, or subscribe consciously to any other mode of philosophy. They are governed, rather, by their acceptance of institutions and traditions. Once, in my presence, the late Eric Voegelin was asked by a professor, "Dr. Voegelin, don't your students at Louisiana State find your doctrines strange?"

"Not at all," Voegelin replied, urbanely. "They never have heard of any other doctrines."

So it is with the great American public: they never have heard of a doctrinal alternative to the assumptions and institutions upon which the American Republic is founded. They

know the words "Marxism" and "Communism", true — but as devil-terms merely, anathema among labor union members especially. Whatever their discontents of the hour, the large majority of Americans — nay, the overwhelming majority — are basically conservative in that they do not dream of undoing America's social order or America's established political structures.

Conservative/Liberal Paradox. Do not think I am claiming overmuch, ladies and gentlemen. You may be inclined to inquire at this point, "If Americans are so conservative, why is it that the present Congress repeatedly has enacted measures advocated by rather extremely liberal lobbyists and publicists? Why is it, for instance, that the baby-bin proposal — the design for a massive day-care program for children — would have been enacted during the Nixon Administration except for a presidential veto, and rears its fatuous head again nowadays in Congress?"

Well, there are two reasons for this paradox of a conservative electorate and liberal Congress; either of those reasons is worthy of a separate lecture. Here I can suggest them only very briefly.

Tyranny of the Minorities. The first reason is that the United States today does not suffer from what Tocqueville dreaded, "the tyranny of the majority"; rather, it labors under the tyranny of the minorities, but minorities aggressive, intolerant, well financed, and cleverly directed. I mean the feminist minority, the black-militant minority, the welfare-rights minority, the pistol-packing minority, the industrial-merger minority, the blight-South Africa minority. Such groups, coherent and vindictive, claim to have the power to make and unmake members of Congress — who often are timid, if blustering, creatures. Thus the conservative impulses and prejudices of the general American public frequently are ignored by the majority in the Congress and in the state legislatures, not to mention the Executive Force.

The second reason is that most Americans, though conservative enough in their general views, are unable to distinguish between conservative and liberal or radical candidates, very commonly — especially when all candidates claim to be more or less conservative. Nor is this the worst of it: for most American citizens do not perceive the character or probable consequences of new legislation until well after such measures have been enacted and have begun to have unpleasant results. (Repeal, I scarcely need add, is very difficult: the various lobbies that secured enactment in the first place are zealous to impede reaction.) The public is left complaining of some new meddling by the bureaucracy or of some new exaction by the Internal Revenue Service; but what's done is done, and can't be undone, it appears — or can't be undone, short of some immense wave of public protests. Conservatives are not given to intimidation by street demonstration and police bashing.

Six General Conservative Inclinations. So I repeat that the overwhelming majority of Americans are conservative enough in their political inclinations, if often frustrated in the actual policies carried on by public authorities. Can I be more specific about these conservative attitudes or prejudices that are so prevalent in this nation? Yes, I can. I offer you the following several assumptions or inclinations that are general among American conservatives.

First, they take a religious view of the human condition; they believe in a moral order of more than human contrivance; and they grow alarmed at increasing secularization of American society, both through the agency of the state and commercialized sensationalism.

Second, they resent increasing concentration of power in the agencies of government and in the economy.

Third, they retain confidence in the Constitution of the United States and in America's prescriptive political institutions and principles.

Fourth, they set their faces against Communism and all other ideologies.

Fifth, they believe in protection for private property, a competitive economy, and diversity of economic rewards.

Sixth, they emphasize private rights, voluntary community, and personal opportunity.

And one might name other major assumptions of American conservatives; but time runs on, runs on. Let me repeat here that relatively few conservatively-inclined citizens, if required to make a formal statement of their political convictions, could give us such a summary as I have just now presented: Americans are not given to abstract doctrine and theoretic dogma in politics. Nevertheless, one may subscribe implicitly to a sort of creed without being able to repeat it from memory.

Ordinarily conservatives in this country have much to say about felt grievances, but relatively little to say about political first principles. They are dismayed at the decay of our great cities, angered by public policies that have injured public instruction, deeply resentful of inflation of the dollar, uneasy at new taxes, alarmed at the decay of private and public morality, opposed to abortion-on-demand, suspicious of central direction. On specific issues of this sort, they may be roused to political action, or at least to vote; but sustained resistance to the great grim tendencies of our age often is quite another matter. Such is our present popular conservatism — less vociferous just now than it was a decade ago, because a popular conservative public man is lodged in the White House.

Apotheosis of Popular Conservatism. For Ronald Reagan, Mr. President of these United States, has been and is the apotheosis of America's popular conservatism. Had the Republicans nominated him for the presidency in 1968, say, the recent history of this country might have been very different. I am not saying that he has been successful in everything he has undertaken; at present he is baffled in much; but he has been sustained by the conservative understanding that politics is the art of the possible.

I was invited to meet with President Reagan in the Oval Office a day or two after his return from Moscow — which was no retreat. He stood there erect and smiling, ruddy of face, ineffably cheerful, American confidence incarnate, eager to take the campaign trail in advocacy of Mr. George Bush's candidacy. As the photographer clicked pictures of us, Mr. Reagan told me jokes; all of his jests seem original with him; anyway; I never heard them before. I offer you one specimen — a fabrication of his, I hasten to remark.

He and Gorbachev had been riding together in a Soviet limousine, Mr. Reagan told me, through the Russian countryside. Gorbachev had with him in the car a KGB agent, and Reagan a Secret Service man. They were passing a tall cataract; Gorbachev ordered their driver to stop.

"Jump down that waterfall!" Gorbachev commanded the Secret Service man – who declined to do so.

"Why do you disobey my order?" the master of all the Russias demanded.

"Because, sir, I have a wife and three children," the Secret Service man declared.

Gorbachev turned to the KGB agent: "Jump down that waterfall!" The agent obeyed.

Horrified, the Secret Service man scrambled down to the foot of the waterfall, where he found the KGB man, battered and bruised, but wringing out his clothes. "Why did you obey him?" the American gasped.

"Because I have a wife and three children."

Reagan as Statesman. The President, actor that he was and is, was at once entertaining me and assuring me that he was no naive enthusiast for *glasnost*. Later, responding in a holograph note to my letter informing him of the death of our old friend Lawrence Beilenson, he remarked that he had read Colonel Beilenson's wise book *The Treaty Trap*. He ought not to be underestimated as a statesman: he understands the grisly power against which American policy contends.

As everyone here knows, Mr. Reagan was the catalyst that brought together the disparate elements of American conservatism in 1980, giving them control of the Executive Force. We may not look upon his like again. For we may elect presidents with a fuller knowledge of the federal government, or presidents with a better command of foreign affairs, or presidents abler in finance – but we are unlikely to find, ever again, a president who so perfectly represents America's popular conservatism.

Living the Part. Ronald Reagan really is the Western hero of romance, the conservative's exemplar in public life: audacious, dauntless, cheerful, honest – and skilled at shooting from the hip. William Butler Yeats tells us that everyone ought to make a mask for himself, and wear it, and become what the mask represents. Decades ago, in Hollywood, Ronald Reagan put on the mask of the Western hero, and truly lived the part, and became the Western hero. He proved that when, shot and trampled upon outside a Washington hotel, he joked irrepressibly with his wife and the doctors who worked nip and tuck to save his life. So it is that no matter what blunders President Reagan may have made in office, he has become the most popular public man in half a century and more.

And in the eyes of the typical American conservative, Mr. Reagan's occasional failures are eclipsed by his large accomplishments during more than seven years in office. His administration has achieved virtually full employment, greatly reduced inflation of the dollar, lowered interest rates drastically, reduced income taxes for many and virtually

abolished inheritance taxes by the federal government, restrained the bureaucracy somewhat, and opened the way for reforms of public instruction. In foreign policy, Mr. Reagan's Lebanese and Iranian blunders have been counterbalanced by his dramatic successes in Grenada and Libya. If some conservative journalists reproach his administration for not having undone liberalism root and branch — why, the typical American voter sensibly never expected Ronald Reagan to work miracles: politics is the art of the possible, and from the first Reagan did not command a majority in both houses of Congress.

If, then, I am asked to declare what the typical American conservative believes in — why, he believes in Ronald Reagan and Mr. Reagan's general principles and prejudices. Mr. Reagan did not create the American conservative character, of course; but he embodies it.

Reader's Digest Conservatives. Yet, charismatic personalities aside, can I offer an image of the sort of people who subscribe to this popular American conservatism, and did so before Mr. Reagan took to practical politics, and will continue to do so when Mr. Reagan has gone back to his modest ranch-house there in old-fangled California, in the unspoiled country behind Santa Barbara? Why, yes, I can do that.

The person attached to America's popular conservatism is a person who reads *The Reader's Digest*. He is practical, not very imaginative, patriotic, satisfied for the most part with American society, traditional in his morals, defensive of his family and his property, hopeful, ready for technological and material improvements but suspicious of political tinkering. His name is legion, and so is hers. Like conservatives in other lands, he and she are the salt of the earth.

His opinions on current affairs coincide with, and in part are formed by, *The Reader's Digest*, more widely circulated than all the other conservative magazines combined. In the *Digest*, it is not editorializing, but the general content and tone of the many articles, that tend to shape opinion. When I was a boy, before *The Reader's Digest* sprang into existence, a principal conservative influence among periodicals was *The Saturday Evening Post*, with an admirable editorial page; but that influential weekly was broken by Demon TV which took away many former readers and, worse still, the bulk of the popular magazines' advertising revenue. Of the weekly and monthly popular periodicals of the 1930s and 1940s, only the *Digest* still is a power in the land.

Best Editorial Page. Of course I do not mean that the *Digest* alone shapes the mind of the representative American conservative. The most widely circulated newspaper in America (counting its several regional editions) is the *Wall Street Journal*, with the best editorial page in the land, read faithfully by what we may call the upper status of the conservative public. Of serious fortnightlies, monthlies, and quarterlies of a conservative tendency, none has a mass circulation: the biggest is *National Review*, with some 115,000 copies per issue, read by perhaps a quarter of a million people — that is, one tenth of one percent of the American population. (It is considerable consolation that the liberal and radical periodicals of opinion are no more widely circulated than are the conservative ones.) My immediate point is that popular conservatism has a *Reader's Digest* mentality, rather than a *National Review* mentality.

As for television, of course conservatives are influenced by the boob-tube as are Americans of other persuasions. But the conservative tends to be less credulous when he views TV news and the like: he may be fairly well aware of how the war in Indo-China, for instance, was reported. He may even have grasped the hard truth that seeing ought not to lead infallibly to believing — at any rate, not seeing through somebody else's distant TV camera.

"Liberal" a Nasty Label. Our hypothetical representative conservative, popular variety, then, is a person of fairly modest means who reads his monthly *Digest*, probably takes a grain of salt when he reads his local daily paper or watches television, aspires to send his offspring to college, owns a decent house or apartment, works industriously, does some thinking about society's ills and prospects, and perhaps takes arms occasionally against the sea of troubles that begins to flood the corner where he is. He is resolved to resist Soviet designs and Marxist influences, but he has no really passionate interest in foreign affairs. Neither is he a zealot for an abstraction (and a Marxist abstraction, at that) called "democratic capitalism"; he is willing to let the rest of the world mind its own business, if the rest of the world will refrain from troubling him. He distinctly is not a rich man bent upon enlarging corporate mergers; indeed, he tends to resent the consolidation of banks, airlines, and Lord knows what else — having found that he was better served when more competition existed. He abhors the politics of race and of gender; he votes for conservative candidates when he can contrive to identify them, but he cannot be described as a political "activist." He goes to church, or at least encourages his children to attend. He would like to have a short way with drug-pushers and muggers. For him, "liberal" is a nasty label; and the Democratic National Convention took note of that distaste.

Some Democratic candidates for high office seem to think that most Americans reel on the brink of destitution, and calculate their speeches accordingly; they obtain about 5 percent of the votes in primary or election, much to their chagrin. Some Republican candidates for high office apparently take it that most Americans live by large capital gains, and wish public policies shaped accordingly; such Republicans, too, win about 5 percent of the votes. For 90 percent of the American electorate is neither really rich nor really poor, or in any event does not think of itself as rich or poor; and that 90 percent of the population is concerned primarily for order and security, rather than infatuated with the dreams of avarice, or moved by the vice of envy. So conservatives, already a majority in American sentiments, have the prospect of becoming a huge permanent majority.

Rousing the Popular Conservative. In my earlier talks, this year, here at The Heritage Foundation, I have discussed the Cultural Conservatives and the Libertarians; this autumn I will talk about the Neo-Conservatives. Libertarians and Neo-Conservatives enjoy next to no conscious popular following, and their publications reach only a few thousand people. Cultural Conservatives have a somewhat larger popular following, but cannot claim as yet to have exerted much influence upon public policy, at least at the federal level. Were all the various intellectual circles that are called conservative to unite their efforts in the hope of winning some immediate political victory, they would get nowhere at all — unless they should contrive to rouse from his sleepiness that being I have called the Popular Conservative. Mr. Reagan roused him in 1980 and 1984. Has he sunk back into slumber since then?

I think not. The considerable majority of the American public has grown prejudiced against liberal men and measures, and prejudiced in favor of conservative men and measures — a condition quite contrary to the climate of opinion during the ascendancy of Franklin Roosevelt, half a century ago. And neither the hopes nor the fears of American conservatives have diminished since 1984.

Polls Without Significance. President Reagan's chosen successor, Mr. Bush, something of an aristocrat, has not mastered the craft of popular rhetoric; yet he is a public man of vast and successful experience in both the executive and legislative branches of the federal government, and so approved by empirical conservatives. Polls suggesting that Governor Dukakis is more popular just now are without significance; other polls, before the Democratic primaries commenced, showed conclusively that Mr. Gary Hart was much the most popular Democrat presidential aspirant; it was otherwise when the ballots were counted, for the name-recognition of some months past is valueless on election day. Other pollsters, in 1980, at this season of the year, assured us that Mr. Reagan would not be elected president. I venture to predict that Mr. Bush will be chosen by a thumping majority.

Yet if, by some accident, Mr. Dukakis should win in November, the popular conservative movement would not fold its tents like the Arab and as silently steal away. Political parties trim their sails that they may catch the wind of public opinion. Certainly the Democratic candidates would have to seem conservative if they were to carry the Southern states.

More than a Mood. Popular conservatism is not necessarily committed on all occasions to the Republican party, although in recent years it has been expressed through the Republican political framework chiefly. But it seems highly improbable that Governor Dukakis and Senator Bentsen could become sufficiently clever to persuade the people who peruse the *Reader's Digest* that the party of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson suddenly has converted itself into the grand guardian of the Permanent Things. The popular conservatives do not relish the notion of return to the inflation and indecisiveness of the Carter Administration; nor to the violent foreign policies and the extravagant expenditure of the Johnson Administration. Popular conservatism has become something more than the inclination or the mood of eight years' duration.

The moral difficulties and the material interests of the American Republic nowadays require conservative measures. Mr. Arthur M. Schlesinger's cyclical theories notwithstanding, the Age of Roosevelt is not going to come round a second time; as Heraclitus instructs us, we never step in the same river twice. Conservatism is not going to become unpopular in America; so the question before us is not whether it will be supplanted by a new liberalism, but rather if a high degree of intelligence and imagination may be infused, these next few years, into the popular conservative yearning. Some of us have been laboring into that vineyard for the past four decades. We pray that our harvest may be something better than the grapes of wrath.

