

# THE HERITAGE LECTURES

377

**May the Rising  
Generation  
Redeem the Time?**

*By Russell Kirk*



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# May the Rising Generation Redeem the Time?

By Russell Kirk

This year my Heritage lectures have been concerned with American political errors during the closing decade of the twentieth century—errors of the Republican party, of the Democratic party, and general blunders in foreign relations. This evening, ladies and gentlemen, I conclude my lecture series for Anno Domini 1991 with some desultory remarks on the possibility of redemption from error—and, in particular, whether our rising generation in these United States may find it possible to “redeem the time, redeem the dream”—to borrow T.S. Eliot’s line.

First, a few words about this concept “generation.” To generate is to beget; to bring into existence. In popular usage we mean by a *generation* a large number of persons brought into existence about the same time; in the same year, perhaps, or possibly in the same decade. Thomas Jefferson promulgated the somewhat vague concept of every “generation” of people making its own choices; of the generation of the living not binding the generation which soon would come into existence.

Yet, this notion cannot be sustained logically or pragmatically. For really there exists no line of demarcation parting alleged generations of men and women. Every minute, as I address you, babies are being born somewhere; and during the same minutes, old people are dying in every land.

Actually, society is an intricate continuity of lives, not a mere succession of human beings resembling the flies of a summer, generation unable to link with generation. It is possible for me to say truthfully that six generations of my family have lived in our house at the village of Mecosta, in Michigan; but those alleged “generations” have much overlapped; at no time over the past twelve decades has only a single generation lived in our family home. The notion of distinct generations, then, each generation monopolizing the earth during its brief span of existence, is merely a convenient fiction.

Nevertheless, we employ that useful fiction frequently, particularly with reference to literary and political movements. Thus Spaniards refer to the “Generation of ’98,” made up of literary movers and shakers whose convictions were formed at the time of Spain’s naval and military defeats that caused the loss of the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Thus, in Britain, Wyndham Lewis referred to the “men of 1914”—certain innovating writers who began to appear in print about the beginning of the First World War: Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T.E. Hulme, and Lewis himself. And thus, a very few years ago, here at The Heritage Foundation, Mr. Ben Hart introduced the concept of three generations of American conservatives that have exercised influence since the late 1940s, say. Tonight, I address especially the third of those hypothetical generations.

By the **First Generation**, I take it, Mr. Hart means men and women of politics and letters who began to come to public attention about the end of the ’Forties and the beginning of the ’Fifties; who, most of them, had grown aware of the sunken state of the world about them, some time between, or during, the First World War and the Great Depression. Among such persons who grew

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up with a conservative inclination were Richard Weaver, Francis Wilson, Robert Nisbet, Daniel Boorstin, William Buckley, and your servant; one might add William Yandell Elliott (a little older) and William McGovern, and others who were active so early as 1933, say. There would be regarded as belonging to an earlier “generation,” both in point of years and of thought, such persons as T.S. Eliot, Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and George Santayana. Among public men, Senators Robert A. Taft and Carl Curtis, say, would be classified as members of the pre-conservative generation, I suppose, their activity having occurred mostly during the presidencies of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman; while Senator Barry Goldwater, a relatively late conservative champion in arms, would be classed with the First Generation conservatives, I suppose, in Mr. Hart’s scheme. You will perceive, ladies and gentlemen, that membership in a hypothetical generation does not necessarily coincide with the date of one’s nativity.

The **Second Generation** of conservatives, in Mr. Hart’s categories, consists of persons of varying ages who were attracted to conservative causes, or began to style themselves conservatives, sometime after 1953, in which year *The Conservative Mind* was published. Thus Mr. Irving Kristol, almost so old as is your servant, is classified as Second Generation; so is my wife Annette Yvonne Cecilie Courtmanche Kirk, the first secretary at the organizational meeting of Young Americans for Freedom, twenty-one years younger than myself. I take it that Dr. Jeffrey Hart, Mr. Ben Hart’s father, is Second Generation—although very nearly meeting the requirements for Generation I; that Mr. M. Stanton Evans, despite his many years of active duty in the conservative array, is a Second Generation legionnaire; while Mr. Ben Hart himself, and his spouse are field marshals of the Third Generation.

But, more subtle distinctions and classifications I leave to Mr. Gregory Wolfe, now engaged in preparing an *Encyclopedia of the Right*. So far as public men go, permit me to suggest merely that such conservatively-inclined gentlemen as Senator Richard Lugar, Governor John Engler, and Mr. Patrick Buchanan seem to fall within the Second Generation fold. In brief, nowadays First Generation conservatives—such of them as have not passed unto a less troubled realm of being—usually are people in their seventies or their sixties; Second Generation conservatives, most of them, in their fifties or forties; Third Generation conservatives, in their thirties or their twenties—or even in their teens. Pass we then to these ladies and gentlemen of the Third Generations.



Few of the Third Generation folk retain personal memories of the Disaster of 1964—that is, the defeat of Barry Goldwater’s presidential candidacy, the centralizing follies of President Johnson’s “Great Society,” the foretaste of ruin in Vietnam, the loathsome and destructive antics of the crazy black militants and the crazier young white radicals. The present members of the Third Generation were reared when the hearts of our great American cities already were dismal and rotten; when addiction to narcotics plagued every social class; when public schools, with few honorable exceptions, offered next to nothing for mind and conscience; when Demon TV offered something for every taste but good taste; when promiscuity and sexual perversity demanded recognition as normality; when it was unwise to walk the streets o’ nights; when shrieking mobs dominated what had been the grove and halls of Academe; when altercations in Washington made it almost impossible to conduct the regular business of government; when American life seemed confusion worse confounded; when one came to appreciate the mordant aphorism of Albert Jay Nock: “American society is like German beer; dregs at the bottom, scum at the top.”

In short, the conservative Third Generation have not known a tranquil and pleasant and confident America. They scarcely can imagine a time, not many decades past, when it was the happy evening diversion of families or couples to stroll in New York’s Central Park or Detroit’s Belle

Isle Park. They have little knowledge even of the neighborhood grocery or butcher-shop, the corner drug-store with its soda-fountain; for them is the leviathan shopping-mall, commercial collectivism. They have experienced little of continuity; the expectation of change has been greater far. Yet, they know that much remains to conserve, and that much ought to be restored.

In one respect, but in that respect only, the task of the conservative of 1991 looms less oppressive than was the task of the conservative of 1951, when my first book was published. I mean that the grim menace of the Soviet Union no longer hangs over us. Seventy years were required for the Communist ideology to work its own ruin, so that it fell to pieces at a good-natured push, quite bloodless, from Mr. Ronald Reagan. Always will there be wars and rumors of war; yet from the Soviet terror we have been saved, so that the Third Generation conservatives may address their energies to something more fundamental than resisting the armed doctrine called Marxism.

What, then, is the mission of Third Generation conservatives, young men and women who seek to preserve the Permanent Things, those elements in human existence that were not born yesterday? It is *not* to promulgate a “conservative ideology”: for conservatism is the negation of ideology. Ideology is an attempt to govern all life by political slogans; while American conservatives believe that no mere political formulas can make a people content. Conservatives take for their guide in politics what Edmund Burke called “the wisdom of the species”: that is, the experience of human beings in community, extending over many centuries. Thus, American conservatism is a cast of mind and character, not a neat body of political abstractions. Ideology is political fanaticism, an endeavor to rule the world by rigorous abstract dogmata. The dogmata of an abstract “democratic capitalism” may be mischievous as the dogmata of Marx.

It is possible to describe certain attitudes that make up America’s conservative mentality, even though not all Americans could express coherently their belief in such general principles, and although some conservatives would dissent from one or more of the general assumptions or principles I now mention.

**First**, belief in some transcendent order in the universe, some law that is more than human: a religious understanding of the human condition, if you will; a belief in enduring moral norms. As the national pledge of allegiance puts it, “One nation under God....”

**Second**, opposition to totalist ideology and the totalist political order. The American conservative rejects the notion of a future earthly paradise—which the ideologue promises to attain.

**Third**, confidence in the American Constitution—both the written national Constitution and the intricate fabric of custom, belief, and habit that makes up the underlying “unwritten” constitution of a nation-state. Many decisions of the Supreme Court in recent decades are bitterly resented; nevertheless, attachment to the Constitution itself remains strong.

**Fourth**, maintenance of the rights of private property and of a free or competitive economy, as contrasted with a directed or socialist economy. This healthy prejudice persists despite the increasing consolidation of business and industry into large conglomerations or oligopolies.

**Fifth**, suspicion of central political direction, and preference for state and local powers: insistence upon private rights.

**Sixth**, a deep-rooted patriotism, joined to uneasiness at “entangling alliances”; this latter attitude, nevertheless, modified by determination to resist totalist powers that menace the American national interest.

**Seventh**, an awareness that change is not identical with healthy improvement; a relish for the American past; a genuine preference for the old and tried.

Such is the consensus of that very large body of Americans who choose to call themselves conservative in their politics. Within this crowd of conservative citizens exist various factions, each emphasizing some aspect or another of the general conservative attitude. There exists no “party line” to which conservatives of one persuasion or another are compelled to conform.

**Retrenchment and Reform.** With such assumptions as those I outlined just now, America enters upon an age of retrenchment and reform in economic concerns. If American prosperity is to endure, public expenditure and taxation must be kept in check. Conservative economic measures must be employed to prevent inflation of the currency and to reduce the national deficit—a hard necessity of which the general public is becoming aware.

In this present era when the Soviet power fades away, the majority of the American public seem disillusioned with social experiments and with the rapid pace of change; with excessive governmental regulation; with cities fallen to ruin and tormented by crime; with subsidized abortion, with judicial usurping of power, with a permissive indulgence of license and criminality, with the blight of pornography, with the whole liberal climate of opinion. For the next half-century at least, I suggest, the American democracy will tend to reject those politicians who still indulge dreams of Lotos-land. Liberalism has undone itself.

There have been ages when custom and inertia have lain insufferably upon humankind; and such an age may come to pass again; but such is not our age. Ours is an era when the moral and social heritage of many centuries of civilization stands in imminent peril from the forces of vertiginous indiscriminate change. Resistance to the folly of such change is the primary duty of the Third Generation conservative.

The continuing American conservative movement, if it is to be carried on tolerably well, must work within the minds and the consciences of a good many young men and women. I do not think that this work of conservation can be accomplished by any particular group; certainly not by any idealizing of “business rule.” I trust that Americans will conserve a market economy and all the better features of an economy marked by volition. But Americans will conserve such advantages only if they conserve something higher and older: that is, a society of tradition, diversity, and the life of spirit.



The critic Eliseo Vivas wrote once that “It is one of the marks of human decency to be ashamed of having been born into the twentieth century.” Spiritually and politically, the twentieth century has been a time of decadence. Yet, as that century draws near to its close, we may remind ourselves that ages of decadence often have been followed by ages of renewal.

What can you do to commence redeeming the time, to conserve the Permanent Things, to raise up the human condition to a level less unworthy of what Pico della Mirandola called “the dignity of man”? Why, begin by brightening the corner where you are; by improving one human unit, yourself, and helping your neighbor.

You will not need to be rich or famous to take your part in redeeming the time: what you need for that task is moral imagination joined to right reason. It is not by wealth or fame that you will be rewarded, probably, but by eternal moments: those moments of one’s existence in which, as T.S. Eliot put it, time and the timeless intersect. In such moments, you may discover the answer to that immemorial question which now and again enters the head of any reflective man or woman, “What *is* all this? What is this world that surrounds us, and why are we here?”



Yes, what is all this? Why, this present realm of being, in which your consciousness and my consciousness are aware of reality, is a divine creation; and you and I are put into it as into a testing-ground—into an arena, if you will. As the German writer Stefan Andres put it, “We are God’s Utopia.” You and I are moral beings meant to accomplish something good, in a small way or a big, in this temporal world.

The Roman Stoics taught that some things in life are good, and some are evil; but that the great majority of life’s happenings are neither good nor evil, but indifferent merely. Wealth is a thing indifferent, and so is poverty; fame is a thing indifferent, and so is obscurity. Shrug your shoulders at things indifferent; set your face against the things evil; and by doing God’s will, said the Stoics, find that peace which passes all understanding.

**True Authority.** How do we know such postulates, religious and philosophical, to be true? Why, by the common sense and ancient assent of mankind—that is, by hearkening to the voice of true authority, the voice of what G.K. Chesterton called “the democracy of the dead.” I think of what John Henry Newman wrote about Authority in 1846: “Conscience is an authority; the Bible is an authority; such is the Church; such is antiquity; such are the words of the wise; such are hereditary lessons; such are ethical truths; such are historical memories; such are legal saws and state maxims; such are proverbs; such are sentiments, presages, and prepossessions.” Believe what wise men and women, over the centuries, have believed in matters of faith and morals, and you will have a firm footing on which to stand while the winds of doctrine howl about you.

This counsel that I offer you, conservatives of the Third Generation, will not guarantee your winning any of the glittering prizes of modern society; for those too are among the things indifferent, and some of them are among the things evil. Yet, this advice from a conservative of the First Generation who has seen a good deal of the world conceivably may help you on the track toward certain eternal moments, when time and the timeless intersect. What happens at such timeless moments, such occurrences in eternity? Why, quiet perfect events, usually; among them the act of telling stories to one’s children, or of reading aloud to them.

What *is* all this—this confused American world of glittering material things and of appalling personal and social decay? I have found it to be a real world, sun-lit despite its vices; a real world in which one may develop and exercise one’s potential virtues of courage, prudence, temperance, and justice; one’s faith, hope, and charity. You will take your tumbles in this world, which can be rough enough in our age, Lord knows; but also you may enjoy your triumphs. It is a world in which there is so much needing to be done that nobody ought to be bored. For young Americans especially, this is still a world of high opportunity.

All this creation about us is the garden that we erring humans were appointed to tend. Plant some flowers in it, if you can, and pull some weeds. If need be, draw your sword to defend it. Do not fancy that a sorry policy of Looking Out for Number One will lead you to Heaven’s gate. Do not fail to remind yourselves that consciousness is a perpetual adventure. Do not ignore the wisdom of the ages, the democracy of the dead. Such, ladies and gentlemen, is the counsel of this survivor from the First Generation.

Those of us who aspire to conserve our inherited order and justice and freedom, our patrimony of wisdom and beauty and loving-kindness, have a hard row to hoe nowadays—that I confess. But, I am heartened from time to time by a stanza from Chesterton’s long poem, *The Ballad of the White Horse*. Chesterton is describing the prophets of doom, who tell us that nothing in life is permanent; that all is lost, or is being lost, in our culture; that we totter on the brink of an abyss. Such prophets of doom think themselves wise. Chesterton has in mind the typical intellectuals of

the twentieth century, but he calls them the wise men of the East. Here I give you Chesterton's lines:

The wise men know what wicked things  
Are written on the sky,  
They trim sad lamps, they touch sad strings  
Hearing the heavy purple wings,  
Where the forgotten seraph kings  
Still plot how God shall die.

Such despairing souls, though possessed perhaps of much intelligence, in truth are not wise. In our time, ladies and gentlemen, many voices have been declaring that life is not worth living. A multitude of writers and professors and publicists and members of the class of persons commonly styled "intellectuals" gloomily instruct us that we human beings are no better than naked apes, and that consciousness is an illusion. Such persons insist that life has no purpose but sensual gratification; that the brief span of one's physical existence is the be-all and end-all. Such twentieth-century sophists have created in the murky caves of the intellect an Underworld; and they endeavor to convince us all that there exists no sun—that the world of wonder and of hope exists nowhere, and never did exist. Plato knew just such sophists in his age. Those doctrines of despair, the rising generation of conservatives must confront and refute.



My counsels so far may have seemed somewhat ghostly, no doubt. But, I have learned from life in various regions of the world, and under differing circumstances, that it is the life of spirit which truly matters; and that the Permanent Thing most worthy of preservation is an understanding of the human soul. The conscious conservative defends the soul of humankind against the corrosive materialism and sensuality of twentieth-century will and appetite.

Let me turn, however, to the art of worldly wisdom. I can offer, too, some practical advice. How, for instance, you may ask me, does one contrive to forge ahead in practical political life in this sprawling American democracy, with the intention of conducting a conservative defense of the Permanent Things?

Why, ordinarily it is fairly simple to make one's way in the American political structure. American political parties could not function without volunteers. Volunteer, and you will be gladly accepted, such as you being urgently needed; you will find, indeed, that a number of your fellow-volunteers are rather peculiar people, almost Outcasts of Poker Flat, but welcome in a local political organization (if not welcome in many other circles) because, whatever their peculiarities, they are willing to work for the common cause.

If you are an intelligent and adept volunteer, you will be made much of by the party leaders and faithful, and will be advanced in your responsibilities. You may be asked to be a delegate, whether elected or appointed. If chosen delegate, arrive early at caucus or convention. When the meeting proper commences, endeavor to sit at the chairman's right hand; then others may take you for his right-hand man. There are many little arts by which one may gain ascendancy over the minds of one's political colleagues. But, the great necessity is to have acquired previously a fund of knowledge and some mastery of rhetoric—and honest principles. That is why I sometimes advise undergraduates not to expend their time in street demonstrations, but instead to *study*. If Karl Marx, instead of reading books within, had spent his days parading round and round the outside of the British museum, a placard "Down with the bourgeois!" tacked to a sandwich-board over his shoulders—why, had he been so foolish, the world would be so much better off today.



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