

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

The Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures

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First
Principles
In the
Public Arena

By the Honorable John Engler



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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
U.S.A.
202/546-4400

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This weekend, Michigan Republicans held a leadership conference on Mackinac Island. For all practical purposes, we met in honor of Dr. Russell Kirk. After listening to the various presidential candidates and to Speaker Gingrich, it was clear that many of the ideas Russell had written about since the 1950s not only had taken root, but had blossomed. He always said it took about 30 years for a new generation of ideas to enter the public arena—and in this, as in so much else, he proved right.

I am honored to be in this redoubt of conservative thought to inaugurate the Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures. It is a humbling experience for me to stand in this auditorium, knowing that I follow in the footsteps of giants. Russell himself must have given some 60 lectures within these walls. In 1986, at a landmark Heritage event, President Reagan paid a wonderful tribute to the Sage of Mecosta, calling him a pillar of post-war conservative thought.

Who could have foreseen it back in 1952, when Russell submitted a manuscript to Henry Regnery called *The Conservative Rout?* Strange as it may seem to us today, that was the original title Russell proposed for the classic the world would know as *The Conservative Mind*. Back in the early 1950s, Russell was concerned that there was not a more spirited defense of what he and T. S. Eliot called “the permanent things.” But he never put his pen down in despair. Over the course of four decades, he wielded the “Sword of Imagination” against an “antagonist world” and gave new strength to conservative ideas.

How the battle had turned at the close of the day, for Russell could see the makings of a liberal rout. One can only imagine what mordant comment he would have made about last November’s historic elections and the resulting confusion and chagrin in the Liberal Mind, which more than a few are characterizing as brain-dead. Michigan’s own Jack Kevorkian—otherwise known as Dr. Death—could be the poster boy of latter-day liberals.

If you have ever been to St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, you may have seen Sir Christopher Wren’s tomb. Wren designed the cathedral and is buried there. On his tomb is an epitaph, which in translation reads, “If you seek my monument, look around you.” I think that epitaph is apt for our purposes today, because if you seek a monument to Russell Kirk, look around you.

This foundation, this audience, and in significant ways this city, which today is becoming an epicenter of conservative policies and ideas, all bear Russell’s mark. As Ed Feulner eulogized at last year’s Memorial Mass in Russell’s honor, the Sage of Mecosta “made a real impact on Washington. In a city of constant change, Kirk reminded opinion leaders, journalists, legislators, and staffers...of prudence and of taking the long view.”

Not just in Washington, but on both sides of the Atlantic, conservatives looked to Russell for inspiration and guidance. Closer to home, I sought his counsel as well. We both lived in central Michigan’s “stump country,” just two dozen miles from each other, and Russell was a trusted friend. He and Annette, whose hospitality is known around the world, always kept the door at Piety Hill open, not only for the refugee, the hobo, and the scholar, but also for a

The Honorable John Engler is Governor of Michigan.

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young legislator just out of college and eager to learn from Michigan's pre-eminent man of letters.

I don't think Russell ever held public office except for a brief time as Justice of the Peace. He was, above all, a man of ideas. Yet he was wise to the nature of politics. He always used to say—and it's good advice to remember in Washington these days—that “politics is the art of the possible.” The trick is not only to fight for reform, but to live to tell about it.

As an aside, let me say that the Republican Party today has a great advantage over Democrats. It is conservative Republicans and their ideas that are driving the debate. And I think the more Americans get to know Republican ideas, the more they will vote for Republican candidates. But whatever their party affiliation, Russell had much to say to the men and women charged with the responsibility of governing. Nobody was more eloquent than Russell in defending what he called the “first principles” of conservative thought. At the center of these “first principles” is the apprehension that order, justice, and freedom are mutually dependent on one another.

Another way Russell used to put it: For there to be order in society, there must be order in the soul—and vice versa. You cannot have one without the other. So it is not just freedom, but ordered freedom that we must strive to preserve. Otherwise, the barbarians will come crashing through the gates.

There are a number of first principles that Russell wrote about and that have been important to me as governor. What I would like to do today is tell you how I have tried to apply one of them in the public arena. It concerns the importance of community and the need to respect state and local government because they are closest to our communities.

Here, as in so much else, Russell followed the lead of Edmund Burke. The great British statesman wrote that the true wellsprings of community are “the little platoons we belong to in society.” By that quaint term, Burke was referring to the groups that we voluntarily seek to associate with and that give our lives meaning. Our church and alma mater, the professional and civic organizations to which we belong, the volunteer charities and friendships we seek out—these are the little platoons that enrich our lives and humanize our relations with one another.

Russell early perceived that the centrifugal forces of modern times were tearing apart these little platoons, which are the fabric of our communities. He wrote:

We have more voluntary organizations than has any other nation.... But it is tempting and easy to let centralized power assume the burdens which necessarily accompany the privileges of community.... I may add that this disintegration of community, and its supplanting by centralized authority, commonly have been accompanied by a proportionate decay of culture and morality.... A nation is no stronger than the numerous little communities of which it is composed.¹

1 Russell Kirk, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism*, pp. 45, 54, 55.

These words, though written some four decades ago, ring truer than ever today. They certainly resonate with Marvin Olasky's landmark work, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, which I am sure Russell would have applauded. For in the court of public opinion, the verdict is in: We have seen the unintended consequences of a horrendous, \$5 trillion experiment in centralized authority known as the Great Society. After three decades, even liberals are beginning to concede that the Great Society was neither great nor good for society.

In one of his last Heritage lectures, Russell said that the centralizing tendency of the Great Society, combined with the centrifugal forces of modern times, had helped create "a mass of people who have lost...community, hope of betterment, moral convictions, habits of work, sense of personal responsibility, intellectual curiosity, membership in a healthy family, property, active participation in public concerns, religious associations, and awareness of the ends of human existence."² How could this tragedy come about?

At the diseased heart of the Great Society there evolved more than 300 welfare programs, a number of which rewarded ignorance, idleness, and illegitimacy—the absolute antithesis of the qualities you want a free citizenry to possess. These programs have worked untold mischief on the American republic.

As many of you know, the welfare debate is a battleground on which, as governor, I have fought from the beginning. Soon after I took office, back in 1991, I made a priority of getting the Michigan legislature to abolish a state version of the Great Society known as General Assistance. GA provided a monthly check to almost 100,000 able-bodied adults without children. In essence, it paid them not to work.

We put an end to the program with some dispatch and said we wanted these tax-takers to become taxpayers. And you know what? Despite bitter denunciations in the liberal media at the time, not one of the four Democrats who challenged me in my 1994 re-election campaign called for the restoration of GA. That is significant because abolishing GA was, I believe, the first tangible sign in America that the nation was serious about ending welfare as we know it. Nobody else had said, "Get rid of a \$250 million government welfare program; it won't exist next year." But that's what we did—and it signalled the beginning of the paradigm shift that is currently afoot.

As my friends at the Heritage Foundation know, I have some thoughts about Washington's role in welfare. I am not an advocate of pruning federal programs, because those of you who are gardeners know that pruning just makes things grow faster than ever. What I advocate is getting a firm grip on the system as we know it and pulling it up by the roots. That means pulling welfare's roots out of Washington and letting the states decide what to transplant and what to reject. To stick with my gardening metaphor—and to use the words in a recent issue of *National Review*—let 50 flowers bloom instead of the weed patch in Foggy Bottom.

As a result of last November's historic elections, the relationship between Washington and welfare is undergoing radical redefinition. Under Speaker Gingrich and Majority Leader Dole, the 104th Congress is taking an extraordinary step: It is beginning the process of relinquishing power and returning it to the 50 states. Getting Washington out of the way is the crucial first step in the long process of returning authority and responsibility to where

2 Russell Kirk, "Prospects for the Proletariat," *Politics of Prudence*, p. 256.

they ultimately belong—to the “little platoons” of civil society, our families and neighborhoods, churches and charitable organizations.

In the area of welfare, I and other governors are hopeful that this historic opportunity will result in no-strings-attached block grants. I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: There is no devil in devolution. No-strings-attached block grants are the first crucial steps to meaningful reform. But I am not content to stop there. Ultimately, the goal of welfare reform is to cut federal taxes and return all the fiscal and policy initiatives to the states. This is consistent with America’s heritage. There are both constitutional and historical grounds for removing the federal government from such programs as Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

Two weeks ago, the Heritage Foundation teamed up with the Federalist Society to present a working conference on the Tenth Amendment. I do not know whether Russell’s book *The Conservative Constitution* was cited, but it should have been, because in it we are reminded that the Constitution set up a federal government that was to be supreme in its sphere, while the states were to remain supreme in their sphere. Washington and the states were meant to be co-sovereigns, with a host of undelegated powers reserved to the states. Welfare is one of those areas in which the states were meant to be supreme.

This point is buttressed by the fact that our Founders never gave any indication that welfare should be the responsibility of the federal government. America was at its founding, and still is in many ways, a nation of immigrants, and almost 100 percent of the immigrants who have come to our shores have been poor. The men who drafted our Constitution knew the face of poverty. Despite numerous innovations that came out of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, no one called for giving the federal government a role in alleviating poverty. Yet over the last 60 years, as we have moved from the social insurance system proposed by FDR to the massive giveaway programs enacted by LBJ, Uncle Sam has become Big Daddy. And a tragic number of American citizens have been hurt in the process.

I would not be so adamant about getting Washington out of the way if I did not think the states could succeed. If given a chance, the states can and will succeed. Remember the classic by Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*? We in the states are like poor Gulliver on the beach, tied down by small-minded Lilliputians who remind me of the army of federal bureaucrats in Washington. If, like Gulliver, we can extricate ourselves from the entanglement of federal rules and regulations, we will be free to experiment and find better ways of truly helping the needy go to work and become independent.

In Michigan, for example, an array of welfare reform initiatives over the past three years is yielding dramatic results. One goal of reform has been to get people to work and thereby enable welfare recipients to accept more responsibility for their lives. Because Michigan recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children must sign a Social Contract, they are working, training for a job, or volunteering in communities at least 20 hours a week. As a result, the number of Michigan AFDC recipients earning income is up to an all-time high of almost 30 percent, compared to just 8 percent nationally.

A second goal has been to shrink the size of welfare rolls and save taxpayers money. Again, because of our enforced Social Contract, over 67,000 cases have been closed since 1992 because families are earning enough to be independent. Consequently, Michigan’s AFDC caseload has declined to its lowest level in over two decades—and that is saving taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars as a result.

A third aim of reform has been to keep at-risk families intact. In Michigan, our family preservation programs have a proven track record of reducing foster care and helping troubled families work through their problems. Much of our success is due to the fact that we contract out to private agencies, many of them church-run, because they are an important moral element in the battle against poverty.

Finally, the most critical objective has been to lower the illegitimacy rate. Efforts of the public-private Michigan Abstinence Partnership have helped bring about the lowest teen pregnancy rate in the Great Lakes State in a decade. However, our task—and America's task—is far from finished. In Michigan, 70 percent of births to teen mothers are to unwed teen mothers. If you think that is shocking, in Detroit it is 95 percent.

My friends, this is a crisis of unprecedented proportions. As a state we could move even more aggressively to tackle the problem were it not for one thing—and that thing is the federal government. Like Gulliver, the states have been tied down by Lilliputians in Washington who make reform difficult, if not impossible.

I hope the people who complain about the lack of federal control over welfare reform will look at the example of states like Michigan. I also hope they will acknowledge that the 50 governors have at least one credential that nobody in Washington has: We governors must actually administer the welfare system. We are closer to the problem than any federal bureaucrat. We know what works and what doesn't. We know what needs changing and how to change it. And if our reforms are not working, we can tackle the problem quickly rather than wait literally years for the federal government to act. Fifty states experimenting will create what are tantamount to market forces that will encourage governors and state houses to be responsible to both tax-takers and taxpayers.

Whatever the final shape of welfare when the 104th Congress adjourns, more is at stake than whether this group of conservatives or that wins the debate. At bottom, this is a fight for the freedom of the states to exercise their constitutional authority and responsibility. If the states lose and Congress insists it has the right to micromanage welfare programs among the 50 states, then an important principle of freedom will have been compromised.

But I do not think the states will lose. And in this I draw strength from our good friend, Russell Kirk. One of the things I appreciated most about Russell was his ability, no matter what the challenges, "to let a little cheerfulness break in."

I want to close on the last words of one of the last lectures he delivered here at Heritage. This passage summarizes both his belief in the "little platoons" and his indomitable spirit of hope:

Spritually and politically, the twentieth century has been a time of decadence. Yet as this century draws to a close, we may remind ourselves that ages of decadence sometimes have been followed by ages of renewal.

What can you do, young men and women of the rising generation of the 1990s, to raise up the human condition?...Why, begin by brightening the corner where you are, by improving one human...yourself, and by helping your neighbor.

You will not need to be rich or famous to take your part in redeeming the time: what you require for that task is moral imagination joined to right reason

Shrug your shoulders at things indifferent; set your face against things evil; and by doing God's will...find that peace which passeth all understanding.³

Requiescat in pace.

3 Russell Kirk, "May the Rising Generation Redeem the Time?" *Politics of Prudence*, pp. 287-288.