

Forgotten Conservatives
in **American History**

Forgotten Conservatives *in* American History

Brion McClanahan and Clyde N. Wilson



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To those who fight for the Principles of '76 and '98, present and future:

*In the words of the immortal Stonewall,
"Forward, gentlemen, and show them the bayonet."*

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Acknowledgments

In 1997, I traveled to the University of South Carolina to tour the campus and meet Dr. Clyde Wilson. I was soon to graduate with a BA in History from Salisbury University, and I had great professors and mentors there, most importantly Dr. Bart Talbert, but I did not yet realize that I knew very little history. It was not their fault. I was twenty-one and naïve. After meeting Dr. Wilson for a few minutes, two of his students, Carey Roberts and John Devanny, took me to a room and interrogated me, asking questions ranging from why I wanted to go to graduate school, to why I wanted to work with Dr. Wilson, to what I thought of various people in American history. I guess I passed, because the next fall, Dr. Wilson took me on as one of his students, and ultimately his last doctoral student.

I finally learned a little history and in the process made a good friend. I would not be where I am today without Dr. Wilson's tutelage. The same can be said for almost two dozen other fine historians, and by default anyone who has read his works or those that have been produced by his students, the present volume included. I say this for all of his students and those who have been influenced or mentored by his thoughtful guidance, thank you. I am honored to be the first, and hopefully not the last, of his students to write a work of history with him.

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Brion McClanahan
24 January 2012, Phenix City, Alabama

Introduction

Several times in his dense treatises, John Taylor of Caroline, the systematic philosopher of Jeffersonian democracy, warned that political terms are treacherous and their exact meaning must be examined with care. Because, words are themselves weapons in the eternal campaign of designing men to achieve power and exploit their fellows. Let them control the terms of the debate and you have already conceded the battle.

Not only are political terms subject to deceptive use, but their connotations are inevitably relative and change with time and circumstances. So it is with “liberal” and “conservative.” During the second half of the twentieth century those terms fairly clearly described a division in the American polity. One had a pretty good idea of the difference between a “liberal” and a “conservative” and could predict which way either might jump. That is no longer the case.

Beginning with the upheavals of the Sixties, for obvious reasons the number of people who called themselves “liberals” began to decline and “conservative” self-identification began to rise from a long spell in the doldrums. There was a great deal of discussion of exactly what “conservatism” is. There were traditionalists, libertarians, anti-communists, and others who agreed on a need to challenge the dominant liberal regime. The argument over what constituted an American conservative was never concluded. It was pre-empted by the rise to power of “neo-conservatives” under the wings of Ronald Reagan.

Soon the “neoconservatives” became the accepted, respectable Right in American discourse and the erstwhile conservatives became an irrelevant and possibly dangerous fringe, disdained equally by all decent people, whether “liberal” or “conservative.” The new conservatives, however, were a rather peculiar band to carry that name. They were Trotskyites who had replaced their hereditary agenda of global socialist revolution with one of a global

revolution of “democratic capitalism.” Unashamedly embracing Machiavellian tactics against opponents and against the American people, they gloried in “big government” and fervently planned to project American armed force around the world, the national debt be damned. None of this could be considered a “conservative” agenda or way of proceeding.

This was hardly what the millions of “conservatives” who voted for Reagan, the self-declared enemy of big government, had bargained for. However, it was probably inevitable given the political ineptitude and naïve decency of conservative leadership; given that Republicans had always had a weakness for moralistic crusading; and given that “neo-conservatism” did not much bother the state capitalist elite, who really control the Republican party. It could even be boasted that now the Republicans had the guidance of bona fide “intellectuals” whom they had so long lacked (though the claim of William Bennett and other neo-conservative luminaries to the status of “intellectual” might be questioned).

We have chosen to be guided by Russell Kirk’s classic *The Conservative Mind* in identifying who is a conservative. According to Kirk’s once-honored teaching, a conservative is one who values “prescription,” that is, who defers more to established custom and wisdom than to rational speculation, who insists that inevitable change should be cautious and reconcilable with the wisdom of the ages. A conservative avoids being a “provincial in time,” recognizing a responsibility to the past and the future; he would not willingly burden future generations with debt by spending up everything for present notions and pleasures. An American conservative will certainly honor the true “Constitution for the United States” as it was before greed, ambition, ignorance, and deceit distorted it beyond all recognition. An American conservative naturally remembers the warnings of the most revered forefathers about “entangling alliances” with foreigners.

A conservative tends to value voluntary community, a larger sphere for private society, and a smaller sphere for government, especially the federal government. Fundamentally, a conservative is one who accepts that the world was endowed by its Creator with an enduring moral order (as described by C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*). In his love of Creation a conservative delights in the proliferating variety of life among free people, the direct opposite of “multiculturalism,” which is an enforced monolithic non-culture. A conservative knows

as well that man is forever imperfect, that evil comes in many comely guises, and that not all “progress” is progress.

Thus the duty of a conservative in politics, society, and culture is to exercise what Kirk called “the moral imagination,” to keep in touch and in tune with the moral order to which all questions must ultimately be referred and to which the giants of the past, upon whose shoulders we stand, have pointed the way.

In understanding conservatism in American history one must avoid a common confusion. In America, Kirk pointed out, an acquisitive impulse has often been mistaken for a conservative disposition. Thus there is a frequent erroneous identification of conservatism with capitalist interests. Conservatives generally believe in the necessity of private property for civilization and accept the utility of free markets for general prosperity. That does not necessarily make them support corporate welfare or international conglomerates, which can be as destructive of social order as socialism and have a dubious relation to true private property and free enterprise.

By this measure, the American regime today cannot be considered to be to any significant degree “conservative.” The United States in the early twenty-first century, in fact, has no politics at all in the strict sense. Presidential elections do not address real issues but revolve around personalities. Congressmen are elected according to their adroitness in delivering the pork and are careful to leave all important and potentially divisive decisions to the president and the U.S. Supreme Court.

Both parties are in essential agreement on a settled, semi-imperial order and they can hardly be told apart. Both are eager to please Wall Street and happy to let the masters of media set the terms of national discourse. Both are content with a government that brings more and more of our life under federal control. Neither seems to think that a military presence in more than one hundred countries or a catastrophic national debt are anything to worry about. Both are committed to the ongoing demographic and cultural transformation of the American population by mass immigration. Both are in the process of legitimizing changes in age-old morality of sexual roles and practices, although at a different pace.

It might be timely then to pay some attention to some of the numerous admirable people who have exemplified and preached forgotten conservative ideas. The men we have chosen do not

agree completely among themselves. That is no problem, because conservatism as defined by Russell Kirk is not an ideology or a fixed program but a “disposition.” All of our subjects exemplify some lost aspect of American thought. Often they will be seen to be prophets as well as sages.