

The Benevolent Sage of Mecosta*



Let us listen first to Mr. Russell Kirk, in his now-famous opening pages of *The Conservative Mind*:¹

There is, we learn first-off, a “conservative principle” (it has been defended, during the past 150 years, by “men of genius,” both in Britain and in America [p. 3])—or, what appears to be the same thing, an “essence” of conservatism, a “system of ideas” that has “sustained men of conservative *instincts* in their *resistance against radical* theories and social transformation ever since the beginning of the French Revolution [italics added, *ibid.*]. The resistance has, however, fared poorly: the “radical thinkers” have, by and large, “won the day”; put otherwise, the world has “clutched at Rousseau, swallowed him whole,” as the conservatives have “yielded ground in a manner which . . . must be described as a rout” (p. 4); through the period in question, “things” have been in the saddle (as, apparently, Rousseau had wished them to be!); “unreasoning forces” have prevailed, which is to say: “industrialism, centralization, secularism, and the *levelling impulse*” [italics added] have prevailed, presumably over the important protest of the “conservatives.” (Let us note, in passing, the tacit premise: *had* the conservatives prevailed, industrialism, centralization, secularism, and the levelling impulse, all four on the same footing it would seem, would *not* have triumphed, as triumphed they have.) Nor, in this context, is there any difficulty about placing the American Revolution: it was “substantially” a “conservative reaction, in the English political tradition, against royal innovation (p. 6).

What *is* the conservative principle—or rather the conservative principle? Well, Conservatism is *not*, we must understand, a “fixed and immutable body of ideas”; conservatives “re-express” their “convictions” to “fit” the times; at most we can hazard, on the main point, a “working premise,” which we may state variously as “preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity” (presumably Kirk’s own preferred way of putting it), or, with Lincoln, as “adher-

*Work notes found in Willmoore Kendall’s files indicate that the three chapters in this section were to be re-worked and enlarged. They are not finished material.—Ed.

ence to the old and tried, against the new and untried." Or, if we wish to be more specific, we can identify certain "canons" of "conservative thought," as follows:

The conservative believes (I do not follow Kirk's numbering, and to some extent I paraphrase):

1. Society is ruled by, on the one hand, divine intent, and by, on the other hand, conscience.
2. There is an "eternal chain of right and duty."
3. One of the characteristics of the "eternal chain" is: it "links" the "great and obscure", the "living and dead."
4. Political problems are, "at bottom . . . religious and moral problems."
5. "Narrow rationality" cannot "of itself satisfy human needs."
6. Satisfying human needs is at least one standard by which we should judge principles.
7. There are "great forces in heaven and earth that man's philosophy cannot plumb or fathom."
8. Human reason is not to be trusted.
9. "Traditional life" was characterized by "proliferating variety and mystery," as over against the "narrowing uniformity and equalitarianism and utilitarian aims of most radical systems"; of these it is the former that merits "affection."
10. "Civilized society requires orders and classes."
11. Society longs for leadership.
12. There are natural distinctions among men.
13. Society should respect, not try to set aside, give free rein to, the natural distinctions among men.²
14. The natural distinctions among men are compatible with "equality," if by equality we understand "moral equality"; society should strive to bring about moral equality among its members.
15. Attempts at levelling, if "enforced by positive legislation," lead to despair; society should (for that reason? for, among other reasons, that reason?) not make such attempts.
16. Attempts at levelling which are *not* enforced by positive legislation do not lead to despair, and are not to be quarreled with (because they do not lead to despair).
17. Despair is a bad thing.
18. If society destroys natural distinctions among men, dictatorship will ensue.

19. Freedom is inseparably connected with property; property is inseparable from "private possession"; if property *is* separated from private possession liberty disappears.

20. Economic levelling is not economic progress (and is *therefore* a bad thing, economic progress being a good thing).

21. Prescriptive rights should be respected.

22. Man is governed more by emotion than by reason; he has an "anarchic impulse."

23. Man must put a control upon his will and appetite, *because* he is governed more by emotion than reason.

24. Tradition and sound prejudice are good things, at least insofar as they put checks on man's anarchic impulse.

25. Change and reform are not identical.

26. Innovation is more often a "devouring conflagration" than a "torch of progress."

27. Slow change, however, is the means of society's conservation, wherefore "society must alter."

28. The proper instrument for change in a society is Providence.

29. Real statesmen are statesmen who have cognized the real tendency of Providential social forces.

There the creed is, then. "Deviations," says Kirk, have indeed occurred, but

"in general conservatives have adhered to these articles of belief with a consistency rare in political history."

Their opponents, by contrast, he deems more difficult to pin down (there are five major schools: the rationalism of the *philosopher*; the "romantic emancipation" of Rousseau and his "allies"; the utilitarianism of the Benthamites; the positivism of the Comtists; collective materialism, that is, Marx and other socialists). Nevertheless, Kirk sees a "common denominator," and here again we can discern a creed. The radical believes that:

1. Humanity does *not* have a proclivity toward "violence and sin."

2. Education, positive legislation, alterations in the environment can (variously) produce "men like gods," or (not quite the same thing, surely) improve men.

3. Unlimited social progress is possible.

4. Where social welfare is concerned, the wisdom of "our ances-

tors” is a poorer guide than “reason, impulse, and materialistic determinism.”

5. “Formal religion” should be rejected in favor of “anti-Christian systems.”
6. The ideal form of government is “total democracy, as direct as practicable.”
7. “Old parliamentary arrangements” should go by the board, in favor of centralization and consolidation.
8. “Order and privilege” are bad things.
9. Private property, especially in land, is at best suspect, and short of best ought to be abolished.
10. The state is not a “divinely ordained moral essence, a spiritual union of the dead, the living, and those yet unborn.”

Or, to summarize *both* creeds, the conservative believes “Conserve that which was seen by the eyes of your fathers.” The radical is “in love with change.”

One shudders at this point as one thinks—well, of several people: the student, assigned to write a term-paper on “modern conservatism,” whose instructor has steered him (as there are many good reasons for his instructor’s doing) to Kirk’s *Conservative Mind*; the undergraduate who, in the context of all the current talk about “conservatism” and “liberalism,” would like to know whose “side” he is on; the conscious “young conservative,” who begins to deem himself part of a “conservative movement,” and wishes to clear up for himself the question, What do “we” stand for; the university teacher who wishes to include in his course on contemporary politics a spate of lectures on contemporary American conservatism, and turns (as, given Kirk’s reputation, he *must*) to the Sage of Mecosta for help.

One shudders because it is clear, once you lay Kirk’s analysis out in front of you in black and white, and subject it to even the most casual textual winnowing, that Kirk can only confuse them; and one asks oneself, here at the beginning of a series of lectures on contemporary American conservatism, how many of the difficulties one should pounce upon at once, how many of them postpone, push forward to some later moment. But at least the following cry up at one in such fashion that postponing them seems dishonest:

a) Mr. Kirk, in *this statement*, seems something less than clear on where his conservatives stand with regard to *reason*. They are, we readily see, opposed to letting “narrow rationality” (no. 5) call the

turns in human affairs (partly because it “of itself” cannot “satisfy human needs,” but it would be gratuitous to suppose that that is Mr. Kirk’s only objection to it). If, on the other hand, we pass along to no. 8, attention has shifted from “narrow rationality” to reason itself, and we are being told that conservatives “distrust” it. Yet in no. 23, where we learn of man’s “anarchic impulse,” the latter seems to be a matter of man’s being governed more often by “emotion” than by “reason,” and we get the impression that, the “anarchic impulse” being a bad thing, being governed by “emotion” is also a bad thing—and being governed by reason a *good* thing, presumably because reason *is* to be trusted. (I do not suggest that a satisfactory position on these questions cannot be extracted from Mr. Kirk’s *opera* in general, but I am concerned here only with his widely-quoted statement in *The Conservative Mind*.)

b) Several of the propositions are clearly as can be (I put it that way because some of them, e.g., no. 1, no. 4, appear to be but are not) “empirical” propositions, that is, statements about reality, about how things work. This is certainly true of no. 11, “Society longs for leadership,” possibly of no. 15, *in re* the “despair” to which “attempts at levelling . . . enforced by positive legislation” lead, possibly (assuming we all know what we mean by “natural distinctions”) of no. 18, *in re* levelling and dictatorship, possibly again (assuming we can agree what “liberty” is), of no. 19, in the destruction of private property and liberty. Now: this raises the question, Do such propositions conceivably have any proper place in such a “Creed” as Mr. Kirk is trying to construct?—where the off-hand answer would appear to be, Probably not. What Conservatives and Radicals disagree about are (as they are fashionably called) “values” or ends, or goals, or goods, which cannot be expressed in “empirically” “verifiable” propositions—not, of course, that men do not often differ about empirical propositions, propositions about how things work, what reality is like, and sometimes so deeply that they seem actually to be talking about different worlds. But the matter is not quite so simple as that. There are, in the first place (as the point is anticipated in two parenthetical remarks just above), some propositions that, though ultimately empirical, cannot be stated without employing *words* that involve, or may involve, difference in value. Take, for example, the proposition, “Good men make more money than bad men.” It is, once we have agreed as to which men are good and which bad, empirically verifi-

ble, and once "we" had looked up the relevant income-tax returns "we" should be able, quite without regard to our differing "value judgments," to agree as to whether or not the proposition is valid. Kirk's no. 15, about "levelling" and "despair," his no. 18, about leveling and dictatorship, and his no. 19, about the destruction of private property and dictatorship, are all propositions of this kind, and differences about them might well arise between conservatives and liberals because of differing views as to what despair is, or what liberty is, or what "natural distinctions" are. Insofar as this is true, we should perhaps not, *a priori*, exclude such propositions from such a creed. (Put otherwise, some apparently empirical propositions contain concealed value judgments, and so easily become fighting matters between persons of differing political philosophies.) Secondly, almost but not quite the same point, there are indeed competing "world-views," views of reality, which is half the point, and possessors of differing views often do observe different things when they look out upon the world, which is the other half, and it is conceivable that there is a "conservative" view of reality and a "radical" view of reality, in which case empirical propositions describing the behavior of that reality might very well find a place in our creeds. Third, there are propositions that, even after the component terms are agreed upon, are so difficult of proof, that they easily become matters of dispute even though they are inherently provable or disprovable "empirically." Mr. Kirk's writings are full, for example, of statements about the unavoidable effects, in any society, of the pursuit of "materialistic" ends, and these are good illustrations of the kind of thing I have in mind. Here again, a close student of the clash between conservatives and radicals might possibly conclude that a given proposition of that kind belongs in the creed. Fourth, we may anticipate a little by saying that the strongest claimants in this area, that is the "empirical" propositions about which the strongest claim can be made that they belong in a conservative creed, are propositions about the nature of man, about which, in my view, conservatives do not so much agree among themselves, but are united, or uniteable, against the Liberal view of the nature of man. (But of that more later.) We might conclude, of a much later moment, that one of the weaknesses of Kirk's creed is that it does not focus attention, at least not directly, upon the "nature-of-man" issue. (Due to the asymmetry between his two creeds, the second is the less open to this objection.)

a) The creed does *not* seem to bear out Mr. Kirk's initial reference to "the" conservative principle. Even in the statement *preceding* the creed, Kirk appears to have two candidates: preservation of the ancient moral traditions of mankind *and*, since the two things are, clearly, not one and the same thing, adherence to the old and tried (many things that confront us as very old, very tried, clearly fly in the face of *anybody's* statement of the ancient moral traditions of mankind) or, to put that differently, the first of the two *mots d'ordre* bids us cling to the tried in one "area," that or morals, while the second appears to embody the general animus against "change" that is often attributed to conservatives. In any case, the creed as it stands cannot possibly be regarded as a specification or "reading out" of either of the two; rather it seems to add *further* principles that would appear to be projected *on the same level* with the two, especially those relating to "divine intent" and "Providence." (One of the theses of this book will be that there *is* a conservative principle, that is, a principle that ultimately underlies the positions adopted by contemporary American conservatism, but that it cannot be either of the two Mr. Kirk puts forward.)

In any case, b) and even on the loosest reading of the creed, the latter would seem to make *non-conservatives* out of all *non-theists*. The conservative, we are assured, believes that society is ruled by *divine intent* and that *Providence* is the "proper instrument for change," both of which are propositions of which we can say that they are clearly unacceptable to persons who do not, so to speak, believe in God to begin with, and worse still that they are unacceptable to many theists, including this theist. This—the equating of conservatism with Christian or even "Judaean-Christian" belief, or *quite* with some particular aspect of such belief—poses very great problems, to which we must recur often in these pages. Here we merely note that Mr. Kirk is one of the contemporary analysts of conservatism who poses the problem.

c) The *most* obvious of the difficulties that cry up at you out of the creed we may point up with the question, Where, when Mr. Kirk has done, where do we end up about conservatism and "change"? *If* conservatism is adherence to the old and tried, then presumably it opposes "change," as, again, *if* conservatives believe that "innovation" (= change) is most often a "devouring conflagration," then presumably we would expect conservatives, unless they are arsonists,

to oppose it. But No, *one kind of change*, “slow” change, is the “means of society’s preservation” (= “society must alter”), and conservatives are not only no longer opposed to change, but in *favor* of it, or at least in favor of it provided it proceed *slowly*—which seems an astonishing criterion to try to saddle off on the conservative movement, if only because we have no standards by which, in this connection, to say what change *is* slow. Or, as no. 23 would seem to suggest, conservatives favor “reform” (= slow change) over against change (= rapid change). Evidently Kirk, at least as we see him here, needs to go off in the corner and make up his mind about this: as it stands, the creed here is hopelessly confusing. And, anticipating once again, let me say that, on this point unlike some others, we cannot clarify matters much by fanning out into Kirk’s other writings: he is himself mixed up about conservatism and change, as, *whether in large part thanks to him (and Rossiter) we need not say*, contemporary American conservatives in general are mixed up about it—understandably, perhaps, since on the showing of this book the problem involved is *not* an easy one to square off to, but all mixed up all the same. (I shall “move in” on the matter in the chapter on the Pseudo-Sage of Ithaca.)³ Suffice it to say here that *any* attempt to define conservatism as adherence to the old and tried must trip up over some difficulties that should be obvious to a high school boy.

d) A further difficulty, once we have grasped the foregoing, leaps to the eye, which we may put tentatively as follows (this time in the hope of Yes, getting some mileage): ‘If we were to assume, *arguendo*, that conservatism = adherence to the old and tried = opposition to change, which is indeed always one possibility, then we must look askance at the contention that *both* Burke and the Founders of the American Republic were conservatives. For, even if we grant (as if we are in a mood for the somewhat far-fetched we might conceivably do) that the American Revolution was *on one side* (yes, the qualification *is* necessary) a “conservative reaction” against innovation by that wicked fellow George III, even I say if we grant that, the feat of fitting the Founding Fathers into the category “opponents of change” or “adherents to the old and tried” is one that, quite simply, no one, not even someone with Russell Kirk’s gifted pen, is going to bring off, because it cannot be done. “Change,” and not “slow” change either by a long sight, was the watchword on these shores from the moment of the Mayflower Compact, which in and of itself

was a breathtaking political innovation—as, in due course, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States were also to be innovations. Yes, yes, I know that all that was done in accordance with the traditional rights of Englishmen, and anyway under intolerable pressures that made it impossible to perpetuate the “old and tried” political *status quo* of 1775, but after you have milked all that dry you are still up against the fact that principled, general opposition to change (political, social, economic, what have you) was *not* characteristic of our Founding Fathers, was never in American conditions, and is not today, a possible political posture: save perhaps as we confine our purview to the ancient moral traditions of mankind, and then only if you can work “all men are created equal” into your picture of those ancient moral traditions. Put otherwise; take Burke as your Bible for this purpose, take as your premise that what Burke taught is conservatism, and you will indeed find yourself with passages on your hands that point you to adherence to the old and tried as the essence of conservatism. But take the *Federalist* as your Bible, and you will find few such passages, and very guarded ones when you do find them.

e) Let us note, for what it is worth, that there is nothing in the creed we have before us—nothing unless, just possibly, the reference to “natural distinctions” among men, and the references to “leveling”—that would suggest any connection between conservatism and capitalism, or conservatism and the “defense of the free market.” Some readers, especially those familiar with the what-conservatism-is pronouncements of some of Mr. Kirk’s putative political allies, may well find this a little confusing; as we shall have much to say, in what follows, about the kind of problem this kind of thing poses for the emergent conservative movement.

f) Let us note, again for what it may be worth at a later point, the—well, defeatism of the statement with which Mr. Kirk introduces the creed: he thinks of the conservative force as, quite simply, having been “routed,” and, as many a passage in his subsequent works show even more clearly, of himself and his contemporary allies as fighting a rear-guard or delaying action. Nor, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, is he alone in this—indeed the battle-cry of contemporary American conservatives often seems to be: “We are losing! We are losing! But in how beautiful, how fine, how *noble* a cause!”

g) Some at least of the apparently empirical propositions in the

creed would appear to be open to attack on the grounds not so much that they are empirical and thus seem a little out of place, as that it is difficult to believe, in the absence of convincing proof to the contrary, that they could possibly be “issues” between conservatives and their opponents. Is Russell Kirk, conservative, really more deeply persuaded than John F. Kennedy, radical, that “society longs for leadership”? Can we imagine a falling out between Russell Kirk, conservative, and the editors of *America*, liberals surely, over whether there is “an eternal chain of right and duty”—or over whether political problems are “at bottom . . . religious and moral problems”? Is Russell Kirk, conservative, likely to hold out more stubbornly than, say, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, pacifist, for the truth that there are “great forces in heaven and earth that man’s philosophy cannot plumb or fathom”? Is Russell Kirk, conservative, more persuaded that “despair is a bad thing” in society than, say, the editors of *The New Republic*? So, too, with at least one item that is clearly a “straight” moral precept. Does Russell Kirk, conservative, really think there is something peculiarly conservative about the belief that “man must put a control on his will and appetites”? Obviously not; and this comment, which I believe to be of the first importance for the emergent conservative movement in the United States, seems to me in order. One understands, upon a moment’s reflection, how all these copybook maxims got into Mr. Kirk’s creed, namely as follows: Many “radicals,” that is, liberals, either openly deny the maxims in question, or hold beliefs that can be shown to involve their denial; conservatives regard such denial, whether explicit or implicit, as wrong; pernicious even; and the temptation arises to include the assertion of the maxims in the conservative creed, where what *should* appear in the creed is, at most, repudiation of the denial of the maxims (which if echoed from some liberal quarters merely strengthens the conservatives’ hands). But we must not, on pain of sounding trivial, yield to the temptation. Put otherwise: a conservative creed should include only items demonstrably *central* to the conservatives’ position over against their opponents. Put otherwise again: one clear objection to Mr. Kirk’s creed, distributed as it is on a very high level of generality, is that there is too much of it. Put otherwise again: any item of belief that conservatives share with large numbers of their political opponents is suspect as an item for inclusion in a conservative creed, and should be offered up to Ocean’s razor

however ardently conservatives may believe it.

h) If we assume, as it seems natural to do and as the very remarks with which Kirk introduces the creed would dispose us to do, that the issues that have divided conservatives and radicals over the decades since Burke are the selfsame issues that divide conservatives and liberals in contemporary America, many of us will find the creed hard to square with what we know about the contemporary discussion process. That omnipresent phenomenon of the contemporary American discussion process, the debate between Mr. William F. Buckley, Jr. and whatever unfortunate Liberal the program committee has served up for Mr. Buckley’s kind and capable ministrations, simply is *not* a debate about the kind of thing with which, for the most part, the creed deals—either directly, or, another possibility of course, indirectly (in the sense that Mr. Kirk’s issues are those on which the debaters, had they time and leisure, would ultimately be forced back). That, as I have intimated, is partly a matter of Kirk’s writing and thinking with an eye too much to Burke and not enough to the Framers, so that he addresses himself to, for Americans, the wrong topics in an inappropriate vocabulary. Partly, however, and more importantly on the showing of this book, it is a matter of Mr. Kirk’s actually being, except where education is concerned, too far above the fray, that is, above the kind of thing over which, in for example the Congress of the United States, conservatives and liberals actually divide; he is, therefore, on the showing of this book, an improbable spokesman for the emergent conservative movement, because he simply does not “identify” with those who are fighting the battles on which the outcome of the war must ultimately turn. The free market is, as we shall see, only one of the central issues between conservatives and liberals that the creed not only does not touch upon, but does not, so to speak, even prepare us for. The appropriate creed, if and when we are able to formulate it, is likely to be set down by someone with, if I may put it so, a little more blood showing on his hands and a little more smell of sweat emanating from his armpits. We shall see why, or rather why in greater detail, in what follows.

i) It remains, in all fairness, to indicate those points on which, on the ultimate showing of this book, the Kirk creed is *not* open to the kind of criticism I have been urging—that is, to say what ones, out of all the concepts and ideas we now have before us, I would advise the reader to seize upon and cherish. They are, briefly, these: The

idea that conservatism, as or especially as it presents itself in the arena of political conflict and conflict over social and economic policy, is a *resistance*, and a resistance to proposals put forward by those whom Kirk, for his purposes, calls radicals, and whom in contemporary America, we call liberals. The idea that the clash between conservatives and liberals is somehow reducible, on one side at least, to a disagreement about the rôle of “reason” in human affairs. The idea, in our view quite insufficiently stressed in Kirk’s creed but certainly present, that the conservatives find themselves forever resisting the radicals (*i.e.* liberals) because the liberals are “levellers,” and, finally, the idea that there are, on the one hand, “conservatives by instinct,” and, on the other, conservative intellectuals, whose function it is to *articulate* the principles and premises that demonstrably underlie the political and social action of the “inactives”—or, as I would prefer to add, fail to articulate them. As regards all these points, Mr. Kirk seems to me to be on solid ground.

If Kirk’s creed is open to all that many objections, why have I carried thus long over it? Well, for a number of reasons: First, as I have already intimated, because of the place it occupies in the literature of our topic. It was, in point of time, the first recent attempt, by an American, to offer a succinct answer to the question to which this book is addressed; and, because of the fame and prestige that have been justly accorded to the book in which it appears, *The Conservative Mind*, because, if you like, so many other writers and speakers have used it as a point of departure for a discussion of contemporary American conservatism, so that it has itself entered into and become part of our problem, acquiring something approaching semi-official status and authority. Second, because whatever its shortcomings for the purpose for which it was intended, in part *because* of its shortcomings, it provides, when subjected to the kind of criticism I have just attempted, an excellent means of opening up some of the problems and pitfalls with which our topic abounds, so that, as I hope, we shall the more easily come to grips with the Pseudo-Sage of Ithaca, and the Muscleminded Sage of Kent,⁴ as a result of having dwelt upon it so long.

The temptation to pass along at once to the Pseudo-Sage of Ithaca is, let me confess it, considerable, but I propose, before doing that, to raise and try to answer, and at some little length, two questions about Russell Kirk over and above the question (What, according to

him, *do* conservatives believe?) with which I have just dealt. Mr. Kirk regards himself, and is regarded by others, as a conservative in his own right. Put otherwise, he is not merely a would-be definer and historian of modern British and American conservatism, but also a political thinker, observer, commentator, with ideas of his own that might or might not be subsumable under his own definition of conservatism and, what is more important, might or might not be subsumable under a more accurate and realistic definition of conservatism. Put otherwise: he is himself a conspicuous and honored figure in the emergent conservative movement in America, and in the two-fold capacity of *evangelist*, selflessly devoted to the task of bringing converts into the fold, and *theorist*, with notions of his own as to the *doctrines* the movement should adopt and, that being by no means necessarily the same thing, the *program* it should espouse. Put still otherwise: he has himself entered into and become part of our problem, so that it would be unjust, alike to him and to my readers, not to take cognizance here of his characteristic doctrines and proposals and, however briefly, square off to them from the point of view defended in these pages.

Three remarks, by way of propaedeutic, before entering on this phase of our inquiry:

We now distinguish, I say, between Russell Kirk, the author of a celebrated definition of conservatism, and Russell Kirk, the teacher, especially (as we shall see) the *moral* teacher, of his contemporaries, and propose to fix attention upon his *teachings*. In order to do this, however, we must adopt a rather arbitrary procedure the necessity for which we may put as follows: Kirk’s characteristic manner of putting a teaching forward is not the “verily, verily, I, Russell Kirk, say unto you” of the New Testament, but rather the sentence or paragraph or statement that begins “The intelligent conservative feels” or “The reasoning conservative will support” or “The true conservative believes, etc.,” which is to say that if we read him “literally” we shall find him forever at the stage of defining conservatism. There may (I do not exclude the possibility) be some cases where such sentences or statements are really intended as parts of a “com-pleat” definition of conservatism, that is, where the phrase “the reasoning conservative will, etc.” is intended *sensu stricto*. I give it as my opinion, however, that these cases are rare, and that “the reasoning conservative” is merely Kirkian shorthand for saying what a less

(or is it more?) modest man would express with a simple “I,” and I shall, in what follows, so read it. (Put otherwise: Mr. Kirk does *not* distinguish between the two questions, “What is conservatism?” and “What are my teachings?”) We, if only because we cannot accept the tacit premise involved (the archetype of the reasoning conservative is Russell Kirk), must and will distinguish between the two questions.

Second, I happen, for the most part, to agree with the moral teachings of Russell Kirk, and would like nothing better than to see them taken to heart, and lived by, not only in the emergent conservative movement but in the American Republic as a whole; put otherwise, I wish Russell Kirk the moral teacher well, and in my own part-time activities as a moral teacher propose, in future as in the past, to echo and second and underline the main body of his teachings. But it seems to me, as apparently it does not to Kirk, that it is one thing to say, “I deem this moral teaching sound,” another thing to say, “Because and in virtue of being sound, this moral teaching has a place in the doctrine of the emergent conservative movement,” and still another thing to say, “This moral teaching, because sound, has a place in the doctrine of the emergent conservative movement, and furthermore I think there *is* anyhow a prayer of the movement’s adopting it in the foreseeable future.” Quixotism is always admirable—the place of honor in the living room of the Old Sage of Northford is occupied by two beautiful editions of *Don Quixote*—but somewhere, in the course of building a political movement, we must draw the line between teachings whose reception could come, at the earliest, only at the end of sustained educational effort, by Church and Academy, over many decades or even many generations, and those for which we might, in the foreseeable future, win enough adherents to actually affect the course of events.

Thirdly, no treatment of the doctrines and program of a man who is, on the face of it, one of the contenders for intellectual leadership of the emergent conservative movement, could (what with the movement burgeoning all about us) be complete without a certain amount of attention to what let us call, borrowing the phrase from Leo Strauss, his “silences”—the points he might fairly be expected to make but never gets around to, the further thing that, in this context or that, he might say but doesn’t. In Kirk’s case, on the showing of this book, the silences are perhaps equally important with the characteristic doctrines and the program.

The Characteristic Teachings of Russell Kirk. *The teaching concerning tradition.*

Let us examine the teaching first in its programmatic aspect. Mr. Kirk would, first, like to see the conservative movement adopt as part of its program measures calculated to decentralize industry, decentralize population, and to “prevent further diminution of our rural population”—measures, in a word, calculated to keep as many as possible of our people close to the world of nature and of custom. He would like, second, for the movement to work for the “humanization” of urban life, that is, the revival, in our cities, of the “old ways and old things,” and of concern for the preservation of, for example, “old houses and neighborhoods.” And he would like, third, for the movement to throw the weight of its influence against the claim, on the part of public educators, to a “right” to “train the whole child,” while, at the same time, “encouraging” parents to resume responsibility for instructing the young in morality and in “the ways of the world,” and supporting the churches in their “endeavors to make religious knowledge the most important part” of education. (Mr. Kirk does not go into the question of how a conservative movement might go about achieving these, for me at least, worthy objectives or how the second and the third, as opposed to the first—decentralization and deconcentration could, presumably, be accomplished by legislation, though probably not without granting to “the state” powers that some conservatives would wish to think twice about—could conceivably become the business of a political movement. We have, clearly, come almost at once upon one of those teachings that, however sound their moral basis, must be left to grow by a slow process of persuasion and that, even if finally accepted by, say, a majority of Americans, could for the most part be translated into reality only in the personal lives of the persuaded. There seems nothing to be gained, except confusing matters, by labelling it conservative, though one *might* give a different answer here if the proposals were, so to speak, turned ‘round, and the conservative movement called upon to resist any and all state action calculated to produce further centralization and concentration, further undermining of the rural community, further transfers to public agencies, from the family and the churches, of responsibility for education.)

The doctrinal theme common to the three foregoing proposals is, as my heading indicates, a teaching concerning tradition, which we may summarize briefly but I think not unfairly as follows: We should feel a deep sense of gratitude to the "generations that have preceded us in this life" (and, beyond or above them, to the "eternal order" and, finally, to the source of that order, that is, God). If we are to maintain a just civilization, we must keep ourselves, and others, reminded of the value of *continuity*—continuity in "religious and ethical conviction," in "literature and schooling," in (if I interpret Kirk correctly) our political institutions and economic policy, and, finally, in the "physical fabric of life" (down, one supposes, to the town and city planners). Men who have interrupted such continuity, men that is who break with tradition, in due course lose all sense of community with their fellows, become impatient of any restraints upon appetite, and give themselves up to, on the one hand, a "levelling envy" that undermines the achievements of mind and spirit, and, on the other hand, the "violence" that is congenital in "fallen human nature." Put otherwise: to interrupt the continuity is to break an "eternal contract" that imposes upon the living sacred obligations toward the dead—the forefathers that is, and the unborn—future generations that is. What obligations? An obligation, *inter alia* it seems, to live in accordance with the "wisdom" of the ancestors (p. 298); to keep alive recognition of the "divine element in social institutions" (p. 299), to—well, not so much to keep things as they are, since society must be continuously "renewed" and "change" is the instrument by which its renewal is accomplished (p. 301), but to see to it (Kirk is not easy to follow here) that such changes as are made shall be "beneficent," and in "continuous train" with the past (p. 301); finally, to "look forward with solicitude to the interests of posterity" (p. 298). Why does the obligation obligate, why should the living observe the contract? Not, it appears, because they are bidden to by Reason, which Kirk seems, in this connection, to equate with "abstract rationality," or "simple rationality," which, in turn, he seems to equate with being guided by "self-interest" (p. 298)—as, so far as I can see, he seems to equate the two questions, "Why should the living obey the contract?" and "Why do the living obey the contract?", letting his answer to the second of the two stand as his answer to both: the living obey the contract because of their "beliefs": "The eternal contact . . . has been made known to succeeding generations, from the dawn of civilization, by

. . . tradition. Tradition is the process of handing on beliefs, . . . [especially] through the life of the family and the observance of the church" (pp. 301-302). "Tradition [is] . . . the principal source of our moral beliefs and our worldly wisdom . . . [It is] that body of knowledge that is bound up with prescription and prejudice and authority, the accepted beliefs of a people . . ." Just any old beliefs the people may happen to have "accepted"? Apparently so.

Let us observe at once: if the teaching is sound, the programmatic proposals are unexceptionable. Let us observe, too: the teaching is a teaching about *the* important problems of politics. Let us observe, finally, that no attempt is made to conceal the extent of the author's indebtedness to Burke: it would be easy, as I am sure Mr. Kirk would agree, to send the reader, point by point, to the parallel passages in Burke's writings; much even of the vocabulary is Burke's. The question might well arise, therefore, whether the teaching is a faithful rendition of Burke's teaching, though we must be careful, because it would take us too far afield, *not* to let it arise. Let us ask, rather, *Is the teaching sound*, that is, a teaching that contemporary American conservatism would be well-advised to let the Benevolent Sage of Meocosta talk it into accepting? And let us give at once the only possible answer, which is No, and for, to go no further, the following reasons:

a) Mr. Kirk's teaching on tradition is, on the face of it, an assertion of the very relativism and positivism that, in other contexts, he abhors. For it is, on the face of it, a teaching about the role and binding force of tradition in societies-in-general, and what it says about societies-in-general is that they are all somehow based on an "eternal contract," which enjoins a moral and religious tradition which is and, one gathers, ought to be transmitted from generation to generation by the family and, one gathers again, the local equivalent of "churches" (presumably shrines in Japan, mosques in Turkey, and temples in ancient Greece). Having, as I do, no objection to certain "circular" arguments, I shall not dwell on the patent circularity of the teaching (the contract is the source of the morality, the morality the source of the obligation to obey the contract), that is, the weakness of its weak side, but rather shall insist merely upon the dangerousness of its dangerous side: Because it declares all traditions equal, it reduces the American tradition to the level of, say, the tradition that will obtain in the Soviet Union once the latter has succeeded in

getting the Russian family and the Russian churches into the business of transmitting Communist doctrine. Contemporary American conservatism, one of whose basic quarrels *must* be the quarrel with relativism and positivism *in all their forms*, must give the teaching a wide berth.

b) Even if we shook the teaching loose from its relativist emphases, which we could do by abstracting from societies-in-general and traditions-in-general and restating it as a teaching about *American* society and the *American* tradition, matters would not be greatly improved. For the teaching then becomes: We Americans are parties to an “eternal contract” which imposes upon us certain obligations to our forefathers and to our descendants, and which we ought to obey because we are taught to obey it by our families and by our churches—one, moreover, which we would *not* be led to obey through reliance on Reason, which merely points us in the direction of “self-interest” (and, Mr. Kirk assures us, cannot teach us the “real veneration” we owe to the “wisdom of our ancestors”). Such a teaching—let me lay it on the line—would be an insult to the American tradition that contemporary American conservatism must conserve, and the latter must, in this area anyhow, find itself a teacher who can teach it *why* it is an insult. For one thing, American traditionalists do not have to speak vaguely of an “eternal contract,” like that which Burke pulls out of thin air in his famous metaphor (which he surely never intended as anything *but* a metaphor), which we ought to observe merely or even primarily because our families and churches taught us to; when, in connection with the American tradition, we speak of a contract (which I, for one, have no objection to our doing) we know perfectly well what contract we are referring to, namely that of the Declaration of Independence as renewed and specified in the Constitution of the United States and as explicated in a book entitled *The Federalist*, and have no reason, when we speak of it, not to put a name to it. And we ought to obey that contract not because our families and churches taught us to (which, as we saw Mr. Kirk recognize a moment ago, they may very well not have got around to doing), but for one thing because contracts, which are *promises*, ought to be kept (= we ought to obey the contract, and live up to and perpetuate the morality it enjoins, because to begin with we have *promised* to), and for another because the contract is *reasonable* (= we ought to obey because that which it specifies was worked out by

reasonable men locked in discourse, and the *law of reason* accordingly bids us to obey it). *Our* contract, moreover, is *not* understood by its tradition as possessing a “divine element”—indeed one of the promises it involves is, as we shall be saying in this book again and again, *not* to make any such claim for it, as its Framers were careful not to do. And we will not entertain the suggestion that there is something somehow un- or non-reasonable about it—even if Burke, in some passages, seems inclined to edge us along in that direction.

c) The teaching is, quite simply, unintelligible as regards the relation between tradition and “change,” the latter, as we have had occasion to notice before, being always a stumbling-block for Mr. Kirk. His creed teaches us that change is allowable if “slow”; here slowness disappears as the criterion, and we are taught, variously, that change is allowable if “in continuous train” or allowable, desirable even, if “beneficent,” both criteria which Mr. Kirk would be wise to let disappear also, the first because it is uncongenial to the American tradition, the second because it is demonstrably tautological. Here again contemporary American conservatism needs a better teaching than Mr. Kirk is able to offer it—because, if I may put it so, he is relying on Burke for help with a problem, a very difficult one to be sure, over which Burke stumbled, too, and because, again if I may put it so, he has not got his problem stated in terms of the *American* tradition, or even in an American vocabulary. For the *American* tradition, stemming as it does from the *Federalist*, has a “built-in” solution to the problem, which we may put as follows: We are under contract, alike with our forefathers and our descendants, to perpetuate for the latter the heritage of tradition that we have received from the former. That tradition, however, is a tradition that, so to speak, *wills its own perfection*, unambiguously recognizes and welcomes change as the means by which that perfection is achieved, and includes *within* itself both a) the criteria, those of the Preamble of the Constitution, in the light of which proposals for further perfection are to be weighed, and b) procedures in accordance with which such proposals are accepted or rejected. The problem, *politically speaking*, is not properly a problem, and certainly not properly a stumbling-block, for contemporary American conservatives who look well to the sources of *their* tradition. And no teaching should be acceptable to them that treats it as a problem.

The teaching about the "open society."

Mr. Kirk does not address himself directly to the problem of the open society; he speaks to us, rather, about "loyalty," which he prefers to construe in what we may call its philosophical sense, that in which it is used in, *e.g.*, Royce's celebrated book, and *not* in the sense which, as he condescendingly points out, was likely to be uppermost in the minds of his readers at the time (1954, or perhaps 1953) he was writing; that is, the sense in which it was then being used in the phrase "loyalty [that is, internal security] program"; or perhaps we should say: So Mr. Kirk insists, since I am less certain than Mr. Kirk that those of us who at that time called the internal security program the "loyalty" program were, as he puts it, "degrading" the word loyalty (= leaving out of "loyalty," he says, the dimension, over and above that of "fidelity," of "love"). But a) he does keep coming back, in the course of his discussion, to such things as (p. 272) the "eagerness of legislatures and boards of regents in America to exact pledges of conformity from civil servants and . . . teachers" ("so much lost endeavor" for the most part, Kirk believes), and to (p. 274) "committees of Congress and of the state legislatures . . . busy . . . prying into the opinions and conduct of various minorities," and b) does force himself to square off to them, and, in doing so, does lay down a teaching of sorts on the open society issue—which, on the showing of this book, is one of the deepest issues that divide contemporary American conservatives from their enemies the Liberals. The teaching is this:

An ordered society has a right, transcending the right of individuals to "follow their own humor," to protect its own existence. It therefore has the right to "expect" that its "professors and teachers" shall not "preach subversion" (p. 27 f.), to distinguish between "valuable criticism" and "irresponsible sedition," and to insist, upon pain of inviting anarchy or tyranny, on the "very principle and necessity of loyalty." It is, therefore, "pointless to ask whether legislatures have a right to inquire into the loyalty of public servants and even private persons"—"of course they have such a right" (p. 278-279); and not only the "right," but also the "duty" (p. 280), because the "peril of the present hour, when betrayal of scientific and military secrets may mean national destruction, . . . has brought us face to face with the grim nature of the problem of loyalty" (*ibid.*), and because "there is

something even more precious than absolute liberty, and that is absolute survival" (*ibid.*). In view, indeed, of the "menace of modern warfare," it is a "matter for congratulation that the American people and American legislators have been so moderate as they remain to-day." Indeed again, what "sustains the present demand for loyalty" is in point of fact a "conservative impulse"—an impulse on the part of the American people to "safeguard . . . a complex of rights and laws," and to "exact fidelity to certain prescriptive institutions and habits . . . : private property, liberty under law, a just distribution of political power, and a respect for individual personality" (p. 277). On the other hand, "sometimes the language and conduct of investigators has exceeded the bounds of decorum and even justice," so that this is an area in which we must be "jealous of our liberties" (p. 280). And, in any case, we must think of the "present interlude of loyalty checks . . . as a mere interim, however distasteful, between an era of doubt and an era of renewed faith"—in which, one gathers, the "loyalty checks," and the need for them, will disappear. Why? Because, if I read Mr. Kirk correctly, we shall have restored in our society those "qualities of loveliness, which encourage loyalty to a nation," (p. 290), which qualities—again if I read him correctly—have not of late fared well amongst us (p. 28, *et seq.*). "[We] will do well to suspect that there is something ailing with the heart of a society in which loyalty-investigations are a recurring phenomenon" (p. 292).

Now: let not the contemporary American conservative, especially the young contemporary American conservative who has turned to Mr. Kirk for instruction that will sustain him in his defense of the congressional investigating committees, of, indeed, the whole internal security program, against the never-ending demand of the Liberals that a stop be put to all that sort of thing—let him not, having at first got the impression that Mr. Kirk is himself going to attack the committees, heave a sigh of relief at the foregoing song-and-dance, and embrace *this* teaching of the Benevolent Sage of Meecosta. It is, let me assure him, a *false* teaching, which reflects at every point Mr. Kirk's ambivalence and hesitations on a matter on which there can, for conservatives who mean business about their conservatism, be no compromise, either in practice or in theory, with their opponents. And it is false for the following reasons:

First, the ground Kirk takes up in order to extend his tardy and

reluctant blessing to the internal security program is exactly that to which the Liberals, back during Korean war days, finally *retreated*—in order to call off their direct attack on the program: We are up against a relentless and resourceful enemy, the World Communist movement, which is prepared to use against us, amongst other aggressive weapons, that of internal subversion; apparently that weapon can be turned only with such counter-weapons as the loyalty-program, legislative investigations, etc., which, accordingly, become necessary to our *survival* and, *qua* necessary but of course only insofar as necessary (wherefore henceforth we shall attack the program only indirectly, through the Courts), may go forward with our acquiescence. The tacit premise, shockingly immoral on the face of it, is that we are justified in doing whatever is called for us to survive; and the clear implication, where the argument is used in connection with the internal security program, is that the latter can be justified on no other grounds. Now: the argument from survival is, let us be clear, always and everywhere a *Liberal* argument; the Liberals, having nothing to die for, must survive *côte que côte*; must therefore go along with whatever appears to contribute to survival (including, as we shall see, a foreign policy that subordinates both honor and the national interest to the keeping of a tenuous, but presumably satisfactory from the standpoint of survival, peace). No conservative has any business being caught, dead even, using such an argument; the conservative's clear obligation is, rather, to *repudiate* the argument wherever, and in whatever form, it turns up. He will, by doing so, strengthen the case he can make out for the internal security program, and for the other conservative interests that are threatened by current Liberal interpolations of the First Amendment.

b) There is a second emphasis in the foregoing line of argument (and, on beyond that, still a third), which is difficult to square with his protestation, elsewhere in the book we are considering, that he and the Liberals are, so to speak, as oil and water, namely: the contention, half-explicit half tacit but certainly there, that if there are disloyal Americans we are ourselves, somehow, to blame; had we but made our country lovelier, our disloyal Americans would have loved it more, and would have been loyal Americans; there is, moreover, a happier time coming, off in the future, when having *made* our country lovelier we shall no longer have any loyalty problem, thus no longer have any need for the sort of thing associated with the internal

security program. Have the Liberals been right, all along then, in insisting that society, not the criminal, is responsible for crime, when it occurs, and that, in any case, we can by manipulating the institutions of society so perfect the generality of men that crime will disappear? Or does Mr. Kirk see some significant difference between his line of argument about the crime of disloyalty and the Liberal line of argument about crime in general, between his version of the dogma of human perfectibility through institutions and the Liberal version. Nor is it any good to answer, on Mr. Kirk's behalf, that one can cite a thousand passages from his works that show he knows better. Of course one can, and of course he knows better—except where the issue of the open society comes into view. But with respect to that problem, which on the showing of this book is one of those on which the differences between our conservatives and our liberals are beyond compromise, Kirk has many of the stigmata of the un-reconstructed Liberal, and, far from providing the kind of intellectual leadership the contemporary conservative movement needs, is sure to point young conservatives who turn to him for guidance in *exactly* the wrong direction.

c) So too with the third emphasis in Mr. Kirk's line of argument to which I wish to direct attention.

Conservatives, Mr. Kirk writes, regard "power" as a "dangerous thing"; they have, therefore, always sought to "hedge it about with strong distinctions," to "divide it among many groups and institutions," to see to it that "concentrated power may abide nowhere" (p. 251). Being "severely aware of the frailty of human nature," they have favored the checking and balancing of legislative, executive, and judicial authority, federalism (and presumably other devices) for restraining central authorities in favor of regional and local authorities, and—though one would have expected this to come first—the "prudent confinement of the state's sphere of action to a few well-defined objects" (p. 256); they have spurned the view that the passing over of power from kings and aristocrats to "the People" has changed matters in this regard; it is, indeed, the conservatives' "search after a just balance of authority" that has vouchsafed to us Americans, over the centuries, the "high degree of freedom and right" that we have enjoyed (pp. 256-257). All conservative voices here speak as one: Burke, in his struggle against the "unitary designs of George III" (p. 288); John Adams, in his *Defense of the Constitu-*

tions (p. 251); and the authors of the *Federalist*, “the most influential work of all our political literature,” with their insistence that justice and liberty are safeguarded not so much by “any wisdom innate in ‘the People’” as by “wise constitutions” (*ibid.*). The American conservative needs, therefore, to keep himself reminded that “power is held in check by two influences: moral authority, or the dictates of conscience, and *political authority, or the barrier of good laws*” (p. 259, italics added). And he needs, also, to recognize that processes are afoot amongst us that, “unless conservatives begin to oppose [them] effectively,” are “liable to make an end of American society as we know it” (*ibid.*)—processes that are “undermining every political and economic element of the old order” (p. 262): religious faith, which “through its inculcation of humility and resignation has made men ashamed of their appetite for power”; private property; and our “constitutional provisions for the checking and balancing of political authority” (p. 263), which may be so nullified by “judicial decisions and legislative infringements”—not, mark you, through encroachment by the Executive, but through “judicial decisions and legislative infringements”—as to leave us with a “simple ‘plebiscitary democracy.’” And here, as a matter of program, the conservative must not be afraid of public ridicule, must “be prepared for the role of Don Quixote”: “the further authority is removed from local communities, the less democratic it becomes” (p. 265); conservatives must “stand firm” in favor of “states’ rights,” against centralization, “against the conversion of representative government into plebiscitary absolutism.”

Now: I shall be concerned throughout this book with the topics Mr. Kirk touches upon in the statement just summarized; which is to say: only at a much later point shall we have before us the materials that would enable a full discussion of the statement’s inadequacies from the point of the emergent conservative movement in the United States. Therefore, I shall do no more than place question-marks and certain “silences” about which I would like to keep an open mind, as follows:

1. Against us, says Mr. Kirk, that look to the *old economic element of the old order* (2), that are likely to remove the “moral exercise of power that conservatives so good; there are indeed such “forces”

at work amongst us: that which looks to the inauguration in the United States of a “plebiscitary democracy” is indeed one of those “forces”; those forces are, indeed, only too likely to prevail in the absence of effective conservative efforts to oppose them. But, if that is true, we stand in the presence of a *revolution*, already, on Mr. Kirk’s own showing, far advanced, which it becomes the business of conservatives to oppose at every point with steps not “quixotic” but rather *infinitely and immediately practical*—first of all, that of identifying the *revolutionaries*, which, it will be observed, Mr. Kirk conspicuously fails to do, and secondly, that of bringing the revolutionaries’ *entire program* into focus and exposing it as revolutionary: which Mr. Kirk’s statement is certainly very far from doing. Put otherwise: Mr. Kirk’s statement on power is the closest thing we have in the book before us to recognition on his part of that which, in these pages, we call the *Liberal Revolution*. But the theorist who can go so far without feeling impelled to go further (the chapter in which the statement appears tapers off into a homily on the dangers of concentrated power in international affairs, the effect of which is to link together, as instances of the “ferocious intoxication of power,” the destruction of Hiroshima and the ambitions of World Communism), is *not* the theorist contemporary American conservatism requires in its hour of need.

b) The tendency of Mr. Kirk’s statement would be to commit contemporary American conservatism to a sort of “anti-power” *mystique* which, on the showing of this book, is characteristic of *Liberal thought* (and by no means merely *Liberal thought* about international affairs), and, worse still, to attribute some such *mystique* to the authors of the *Federalist*. It cannot be too often emphasized that the *Federalist*, to which indeed American conservatives cannot be too often referred, was *as understood by its authors*, a plea for, precisely, a *concentration of power* on the Eastern shores of this continent, that is, such concentration of power as they saw to be needed for the prosperity and happiness of the American people; that perhaps the most scathing single line of argument to be found in the *Federalist* is that which it directs against the superstition that the Constitution it defends possesses a built-in animus against the transfer of power from the states to the federal government; that the *Federalist*, perhaps more clearly than any other masterpiece of political philosophy, warns against the heresy, a constant temptation to American conserva-

atives, that the tyrannical exercise of power can be prevented by a “wise constitution”; that, in any case, it was the *tyrannical* exercise of power, not the exercise of power as such, that the authors of the *Federalist* were concerned to prevent; and that their ultimate reliance, for this purpose, was upon the wisdom and virtue of the American people, whose “last say” on all questions concerning the use and extent of power in the American political system is permanently enshrined in Article V of the Constitution. The essence of the American political tradition, as we shall learn from the True Sage of Woodstock,⁵ lies in the exclusion of political power itself from certain *spheres* of human activity, thus *not* in the “separation” or “division” of powers—in *limited government* as one face of the coin of which *freedom* is the other, thus not, I repeat, in any mystique about power in the spheres assigned, rightfully, to government. Yet Mr. Kirk’s statement, by giving equal status to limitation of power, separation of power, and division of power, encourages just that *mystique*, and the dangers here for the contemporary conservative movement, which must learn to regard power as *morally neutral*, cannot be exaggerated. For one thing, as the Liberals are always there to remind us (and as Mr. Kirk seems to recognize *en passant*), power can be concentrated *economically* and *socially* as well as *politically*; and in the context of a mystique against power it is a short step from that discovery to the notion that it is the business of government, acting of course in the name of *equality*, to pulverize concentrations of power wherever and however they may arise, and thus, for conservatives, to an open alliance with the Liberals in Bobby Kennedy-type crusades on behalf of *unlimited* government and, on beyond that, of the Liberal Revolution itself. (Conservatives must learn, about the Liberals, that which they already know about the Communists: that they are an intelligent and resourceful enemy, who can be counted on for correct judgments as to what will forward their Revolution; that, therefore, any enterprise, even “crushing Jimmy Hoffa,” that allies Conservatives with them must have something wrong with it.)

Mr. Kirk is, of course, quite right in stressing the connection between true democracy and the local community, and, by implication, the conservative’s deep concern for the good health and vigor of cities and towns and villages and countryside in which people actually *live*. But that is one of those conservative interests which must be achieved, if ever it is to be achieved, through voluntary action

which conservatives can only encourage through slow processes of education. In the present connection—*because* it is quixotic and not infinitely and immediately practical—it is sheer red herring.

c) Mr. Kirk recognizes only *two* ultimate “checks” on power: the “dictates” of conscience on the one hand, and “the barrier of good laws” (presumably the limitation, separation, and division of power by constitutional enactment) on the other; and, here too one gathers, he supposes himself to be repeating *Federalist* doctrine. But if “dictates of conscience” be intended here in its usual sense, which I believe it to be, then *Federalist* Number Ten, and, for that matter, the book as a whole *passim*, make it clear that the authors’ ultimate reliance for their purpose (which was to check *not* power but *tyrannical* power, that is, the use of power for the invasion of natural rights) was on *neither* of these two things but upon a third, namely, what for lack of a better term we may call a “constitutional morality,” or, in Rousseau’s classic phrase, the laws engraved upon the hearts of the people. These it is that cause the people to maintain, by channeling their major energies into, a certain kind of society that we are now in the habit of calling “pluralist”; these it is that cause the people to *respect*, that is, neither undermine nor set aside, the general plan of government embodied in their Constitution; and it is well to remember, especially for conservatives to remember first, that if the people possess such a morality it is because *someone* has taught it to them, and, second, that the teaching of a constitutional morality is a continuous and never-ending task. There lies the *real* danger in conservative reliance upon the “Constitution,” or even upon the Constitution plus “conscience,” as sufficient safeguards against the tyrannical and unjust use of power; just to the extent that they permit themselves the luxury of such, a reliance they are likely to neglect what must be their central task in this regard, namely, to see to it that the people *are* taught the constitutional morality handed down to them in the *Federalist*—or even, like Kirk, to forget that there is such a thing.

d) Mr. Kirk regards “plebiscitary democracy” as a distinct possibility on the American horizon, and one which conservatives should be concerned to prevent; but we are left wondering *both* what he means, and why he is so reluctant to satisfy our unavoidable curiosity. Is the emphasis on “democracy,” with plebiscitary just thrown in like the first red in “red, red rose,” the point being merely the tired old

Birchite slogan that ours is a “republic” not a “democracy”; or is it on plebiscitary, the point being that ours is a democracy, but a non-plebiscitary democracy, which may be on the point of becoming a plebiscitary one? One suspects, from what follows, that the emphasis is on “plebiscitary”; and we are led to comment: Ah! But there are two kinds of “plebiscitary democracy,” which we may distinguish by calling one of them “French-type plebiscitary democracy” and the other “English-type plebiscitary democracy”; and they are, while perhaps equally objectionable from a traditional American point of view, as different as chalk and cheese. French-type plebiscitary democracy, with its roots in Bonapartism, is a device by which the French strongman, usually a general, assures himself the semblance of popular support by submitting his major policy or policies for ratification (always forthcoming, else the plebiscite is never held) by “the People”; it is, one might say, plebiscitary democracy *sensu stricto*. English-type plebiscitary democracy, by contrast, is a matter of conducting elections that eventuate in a choice by “the People” between the alternative “programs” of two disciplined, putatively “ideological,” political parties, in conditions in which, usually, the results of the consultation cannot be foreseen: “the People” really *does* decide, and gives its “mandate” to one of the political groupings competing for its favor. Now: which of these two kinds of “plebiscitary democracy” is it that Mr. Kirk sees as a danger in the United States? Since, as he goes on to say, it is going to be a matter of an “executive . . . elected nominally *by the masses* but actually brought to office and kept there by the publicist and the manipulator, [and] compelled to make decisions for everyone,” one suspects that it is the French-type he has in mind—which, if so, would represent another of the curious failures on Kirk’s part to understand the Revolution which the Liberals are preparing under his very nose, and square off to it in the manner in which the intellectual leader and spokesman of contemporary American conservatism must square off to it. The Liberals are indeed bent on giving us plebiscitary democracy, English-type; with their usual clear-headedness, they know precisely where they must attack the American political system in order to convert it into a plebiscitary democracy, English-type; that attack must be fought off, year-in year-out, at each of those points, with the normal weapons of American politics; and the *least* the emergent conservative movement can expect of its spokesmen is that they

should show an intelligent understanding of the necessary total conservative strategy required for the purpose. But Mr. Kirk fails conspicuously to pass this test.

e) Mr. Kirk’s silence about the Executive, in the sentence in which he speaks of nullification of our “constitutional provisions for the checking and balancing of political authority,” leaves one aghast. Especially since, as we have just seen, it is the Executive that he envisages as emerging victorious from the process of nullification.

We shall, curiously, find the Part-Time Sage of Ithaca⁶ giving better advice to the conservative movement about the problem of power.

Notes

¹Kirk, Russell. *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1953).

²Kirk is not easy to construe at this point. But I believe this is implicit in his language. [Kendall footnote]

³Clinton Rossiter.

⁴James Burnham.

⁵John Courtney Murray.

⁶Also Clinton Rossiter. See the next chapter (p. 59) for Kendall’s explanation of his use of two titles for Mr. Rossiter.