

## FOREWORD

### *The Philosopher of Right-Wing Populism*

**W**illmoore Kendall is the most important conservative philosopher of the twenty-first century, even though he died in 1967. His genius was recognized in his lifetime, but it was often overshadowed by his tempestuous personal life. In the decades since his death, however, the significance of his achievement has become undeniable. Willmoore Kendall is the philosopher of right-wing populism—and the populist right has proved to be the keystone of American conservatism.

Populism is a dirty word to many Americans, and not just on the political left. Kendall himself preferred to present his work in terms of democracy, a word that for many conservatives is almost as alarming as populism. But whatever the language one chooses, the substance of Kendall's thought is clear. He trusts the American people over the educated elites, and he finds the liberal ideology of the educated classes to be both false and harmful to our country. He speaks for the populist position.

Bookish conservatives who blanch at that should stop to consider that every nasty stereotype of populism is also a stereotype that liberals have applied to conservatives.

For as long as conservatism has been an organized political force, its opponents have accused it of being “anti-intellectual,” vulgar, and demagogic. In the nineteenth century John Stuart Mill famously called conservatives “the stupid party”—or rather the stupidest party. By the middle of the twentieth century American liberals had also begun to brand conservatives as unpatriotic. Conservatism, they argued, was a European ideology identical with absolutism, theocracy, and serfdom, and its modern heirs were racism and fascism.

If there was such a thing as “American conservatism” at all, it could only mean conserving an older form of liberalism. There was nothing else to conserve. The American tradition was exclusively liberal. When conservatives failed to accept this, they only demonstrated their ignorance and un-American character. If they turned toward populism, they would soon become fascists.

Conservatives are not stupid, of course, and populism is not fascism. But because populism is anti-elitist, it does not always have articulate theorists on its side. Conservatism, meanwhile, counts many policy thinkers, historians, journalists, legal minds, and literary men among its adherents, but only a few political philosophers. George Santayana was a philosopher who can justly be called a conservative, but he was not overtly a philosopher of conservatism. Michael Oakeshott and Roger Scruton did make conservatism a subject of their

philosophical investigations, and their ideas do apply in the American context. But they require a certain amount of translation, and neither of those great British conservative thinkers of the twentieth century wrote extensively about the political order on this side of the Atlantic.

Without a clear philosophical guide, conservatives are easily misled about their own tradition, and liberals are ready to take advantage of conservative confusion to disarm and discredit the right. When conservatives are unable to defend their place in the American tradition, liberals easily make them look like fools, hypocrites, oddballs, or traitors. To avoid this, American conservatives need a better, more philosophically grounded understanding of themselves as both Americans and conservatives. They need *The Conservative Affirmation*.

In this book, first published in 1963, Willmoore Kendall provides what remains the best conservative interpretation of American democracy and the best philosophical account of right-wing populism. In the six decades since *The Conservative Affirmation* first appeared, the struggle between left and right in American politics has proceeded along the battle lines Kendall identified in these pages. Indeed, the battle has intensified along the very points Kendall recognized as most decisive. Already in the 1960s, Willmoore Kendall gave conservatives the theoretical support for populism that they need today.

The ideas in this book are timeless. Readers are forewarned, however, that Kendall's occasions for expressing those ideas are often topical to the time when he wrote. Kendall is a brilliant writer but an idiosyncratic one. He combines philosophical

acuity with a seemingly casual and at times colloquial prose style. Both make demands of the reader. Add the historical references that may seem obscure today, and the riches of *The Conservative Affirmation* can appear rather inaccessible. There is a mountain to be climbed, at the top of which is an incomparable vista. But where does one start? Kendall's life provides one doorway to his thought. The context of the postwar conservative movement that he helped to launch provides another.

Willmoore Kendall's early life was extraordinary. His father, Willmoore Kendall Sr., was a blind Methodist minister whose sermons against the Ku Klux Klan and U.S. intervention in World War I would make him a figure of controversy in the Oklahoma towns where he served. Between the battles he fought (and usually lost), his disability, and financial stress, Willmoore Sr. never rose as high in the world as he might have hoped, so he transferred his ambitions onto his son. Young Willmoore, born in 1909, was a child prodigy whose talents were honed by reading to his sightless father. He graduated from high school at thirteen and enrolled at Northwestern University.

That proved to be a disaster. He was academically unprepared: in fact, as related in Christopher Owen's biography of Kendall, *Heaven Can Indeed Fall*, Willmoore Sr. "had written all his [son's] high school papers." The boy was as socially isolated as one would expect a thirteen-year-old freshman far from home to be. He soon withdrew from Northwestern and enrolled at the University of Tulsa. By the time he was fifteen, he had transferred to the University of Oklahoma. He returned

to Northwestern in 1926, earning his B.A. the following year and an M.A. the year after that, both in Romance languages, with a particular expertise in Spanish.

Oklahoma had been a rough and uninhibited place to grow up, and Willmoore Sr. was a theological modernist to the extent he retained his faith at all. Young Willmoore had a worldly upbringing, including a brush or two with the law. The Kendall family had political ties to the Democratic Party, and the ingenious boy saw for himself, as well as through his father's experiences, the complexities of racial politics and domestic attitudes towards America's burgeoning power beyond its border. Kendall worked as a cub journalist and wrote his first small book, *Baseball: How to Play It and How to Watch It*, in 1927.

While pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Illinois, Kendall applied for a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University. His time there, where he studied with R. G. Collingwood, would be intellectually transformative. From Collingwood he acquired the habit of reading a text by asking what question the author was trying to answer. In his time away from the United States Kendall also lived in Spain, where he worked for United Press International (UPI) on the eve of the Spanish Civil War. Kendall considered himself a socialist in those days, and although he was not in Spain during the Civil War, it would have an effect on him not unlike the one it had on George Orwell, who was there to report on it in person. Back in America, Kendall would learn that old friends from the Spanish non-Communist left faced as much danger from their Stalinist allies as they did from their Nationalist enemies.

During World War II Kendall worked for the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), which was responsible for pro-American propaganda in Latin America. His familiarity with the left led him to recognize Communist infiltration in the agency, and after the war Kendall became an advisor to the gestating Central Intelligence Agency. Yet his style of anti-Communism was a poor fit for the agency's emerging direction. Kendall believed the United States should emphasize public diplomacy over covert action. Years later, when he saw a television report on a botched assassination attempt against the Indonesian dictator Sukarno, Kendall darkly joked to his friend Jeffrey Hart, "This has all the earmarks of a CIA operation. Everyone died except Sukarno."

Kendall took up an appointment at Yale University as an associate professor of political science in 1947. His dissertation, published in 1941 as *John Locke and the Doctrine of Majority Rule*, had demonstrated his abilities as a political theorist. The canonization of Locke as the philosophical fountainhead of liberalism—and hence, according to scholars like Louis Hartz, of America too—had not yet been completed by then, and Kendall dissented from the developing consensus. Liberal scholars wanted Locke to be liberalism what Karl Marx was to Communism. But as Kendall interpreted Locke's *Second Treatise*, the seventeenth-century English philosopher was not so much a liberal devoted to natural rights as he was a majoritarian committed to the constitutional supremacy of representative legislatures.

Kendall would later revise his view both of Locke and of simple majoritarianism. But two features of *John Locke and the*

*Doctrine of Majority Rule* would persist and evolve in Kendall's later thinking. One was a recognition that in any constitution, no matter how "mixed" it might be, someone ultimately had to have the final say. If the people, through their representatives, did not have the final say, then democracy was a sham. No minority could overrule the majority by invoking "rights" while still calling the regime a democracy. The objection that in a democracy the people might choose to act unjustly had to be weighed against the likelihood that in any other kind of regime the minority might choose to act unjustly. As the question might be framed today, should the Supreme Court be trusted more than the American people and their representatives? And if it should, then do we not have to admit that "self-government" is a bad thing, which we ought to be glad not to have?

Rights are moral claims that require enforcement. Regimes, including democracy, are means of enforcement. There are both theoretical and empirical questions to be asked about what kind of regime is best suited to enforcing rights correctly—starting with the question of which rights are themselves correct and morally binding. It is a mistake to assume that democracy, or popular government by any name, is uniquely threatening to rights. Yet, as Kendall would increasingly come to emphasize, rights-talk is cunningly used by liberals to circumvent democracy, even as those same liberals profess themselves to be democracy's true champions. In fact, they are champions of themselves: liberals believe that their superior knowledge entitles them to define the terms (rights) that overrule popular self-government. In effect, liberal democracy means democracy

in which the most important decisions are taken out of the hands of the people, who are then expected to ratify what liberals have already decided for them.

In 1941, Kendall believed that Locke assumed the people were the best judge of their rights, thus Locke was a majoritarian democrat, not a liberal. The apparent tension between Locke's majoritarianism and his idea of inviolable rights could be resolved, Kendall thought, by a "latent premise" present in Locke's philosophy but nowhere stated explicitly. The latent premise was that the people were virtuous: they were inclined to think correctly and act justly. Later in his career, Kendall came to think that Locke really was an anti-democratic liberal. But what Kendall had originally imputed to Locke as a "latent premise" then became an explicit premise of Kendall's own work. In his 1964 Vanderbilt lectures, which later became the basis for *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*, Kendall argued that from colonial times onward the American people had always understood themselves as a virtuous people deliberating under God. They might still make mistakes, but as long as they strove to live up to such a description, there was something to anchor (if not guarantee) the people's goodness and justice.

By the time he arrived at Yale, the outlines of Kendall's populist conservative philosophy were in place. He was anti-Communist, anti-liberal, and strongly in favor of popular self-government. The fact that so many liberals of his acquaintance in the government and the academy were "anti-anti-Communist" or oblivious to the dangers of Communism deepened his opposition to liberalism. Even

before the Cold War, he believed that the people had the authority to judge for themselves what rights meant and what their limits were. Now he saw liberals insisting that the rights of Communists be protected against popularly elected anti-Communist leaders such as Senator Joseph McCarthy, who wanted Communists to be investigated, exposed, and fired from government jobs. Kendall knew from personal experience that there were indeed Communists in the government. But he viewed the direct threat from them as secondary to a more fundamental philosophical problem. That problem came down to the question of "public orthodoxy."

In any society there are certain beliefs that have to have compulsory force if the society is going to survive. A society that does not have an orthodoxy about justice, for example, will collapse amid competing, incommensurable claims. Courts ultimately have to try to enforce one view of justice, but in fact all of society has to have a level of agreement about such fundamental questions in order to maintain its health and survive in the long run. Communist subversives might steal nuclear secrets, but anyone who could destroy the moral cohesion of a nation would not need atom bombs to reduce it to ruins. America's liberals were even more openly destructive of that moral cohesion, the nation's public orthodoxy, than Communists were. For Kendall, the principle of the question at stake with "McCarthyism" was far more important than the answer to the question of how Communists were to be treated.

Thus this "wild Yale don," as Dwight Macdonald called him in *The Nation*, became the most philosophically cogent defender

of "McCarthyism." That won him no friends among the faculty in New Haven. But it did win him the friendship of a few remarkable students, including one who would go on to become the most prominent conservative public intellectual of the late twentieth century: William F. Buckley Jr.

Buckley was already a conservative when he began taking classes with Kendall. He was himself a World War II veteran, and he had inherited much of his politics from his father, an enterprising oilman known as Will Buckley. Like his father, the young W.F.B. was staunchly Catholic and unabashedly anti-socialist and pro-capitalist. He thought of himself as an "individualist" and was also something of an elitist, one who later contemplated writing a book called *The Revolt Against the Masses*. Outside of his family and the Church, the greatest intellectual influence on W.F.B. Jr. was perhaps his father's friend Albert Jay Nock, the philosophical elitist and anarchist who had written such books as *Our Enemy, the State* and *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, the latter taking its title from the thought that a man of high philosophical sensibilities was superfluous in an age of mass politics.

Kendall taught Buckley in the classroom, but he also taught him as a friend and mentor, one whose outlook was more democratic than that of Nock or the senior Buckley. When W.F.B. Jr. told *Esquire* in 1961—a little over a decade after his graduation from Yale—"I would rather be governed by the first 2,000 names in the telephone directory than by the Harvard University faculty," he sounded exactly like the student of Willmoore Kendall that he was.

The collaboration between the two men was close. Kendall helped to edit Buckley's first book, *God and Man at Yale*, whose core argument about the university's duty to uphold traditional orthodoxy is very much a Kendall theme, though the free-market orthodoxy that Buckley favored in economics was never to Kendall's own taste. Buckley's subsequent book, *McCarthy and His Enemies*, co-written with his Yale classmate and later brother-in-law Brent Bozell Jr.—another Kendall protégé—also benefited from Kendall's green editorial pen and the tutelage in "McCarthyism" that Kendall provided.

McCarthy's anti-Communism had distinctly populist overtones, on account of which his supporters were accused of "anti-intellectualism" and labeled as the "radical right" by such liberal and left-leaning political scientists as Richard Hofstadter and Daniel Bell. As tendentious as those terms were, they traced real social divisions. Already liberals had claimed the nation's most prestigious institutions, prompting grassroots conservatives to adopt an anti-establishment, outsider, and populist character. McCarthy spoke their language when he denounced a figure like Secretary of State Dean Acheson as "this pompous diplomat in striped pants, with a phony British accent."

But McCarthy imploded. His accusations were often wide of the mark, and after he took on the U.S. Army for its promotion of Communists within its ranks, a critical mass of his Senate colleagues turned against him. He was censured by the Senate in 1954 and died three years later. The movement he had awakened did not die with him, however. In 1955 Buckley

started a new magazine to give it a voice. And right from the beginning, Willmoore Kendall was one of *National Review's* senior editors and columnists.

McCarthy had been an energetic, reckless politician, and what he was against was more clearly defined than what he was for. American conservatism in the decade after World War II struggled to define itself. Democrats had held the White House for five consecutive presidential terms, and when a Republican finally won in 1952, it was Dwight Eisenhower, a moderate who seemed to promise little change.

A return to the days of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover was unimaginable: the New Deal was entrenched, and America had become a global power. Nazi Germany had been defeated, but the Soviet Union was more powerful than ever, and Communism was spreading across East Asia. At home, liberalism meant ever-growing executive bureaucracies; abroad, it meant yielding ground to totalitarianism. Behind both of these developments lay a moral crisis: the erosion of American virtues and habits of self-government.

Several books that appeared in the late 1940s and early 1950s attempted to recover a lost tradition of conservatism as an alternative (or, more modestly, a supplement) to the regnant liberalism of the time. The most important of these was by a young historian named Russell Kirk, who in 1953 published *The Conservative Mind*. Kirk argued that Americans shared with British conservatives a patrimony of thought derived from the great Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke. But *The Conservative Mind* had begun as a doctoral dissertation titled

*The Conservative Rout*, and while Kirk could show that the intellectual lineage of conservatism continued into the twentieth century with such philosophers and poets as George Santayana and T. S. Eliot, the political line seemed to have died out in the nineteenth century.

Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* argued that liberalism was America's only political tradition. For liberals like him, the idea of an American conservatism was a non sequitur. The feudal institutions that conservatives defended in Europe—throne and altar and landed aristocracy—did not exist in republican America. So the only thing American conservatives could possibly conserve was liberalism.

Willmoore Kendall found neither Kirk's nor Hartz's accounts satisfactory. He was not any more pleased with the definition of conservatism advanced by his *National Review* colleague Frank Meyer. For Meyer, conservatism meant a tension between traditionalist and libertarian tendencies. His version of conservatism, soon dubbed "fusionism," recognized virtue as the supreme goal of human life but designated freedom as the highest aim of politics. In short, Meyer was a proponent of liberal means to conservative ends. His liberalism was of the "classical" or libertarian variety, and Meyer was a firm anti-Communist. (Indeed, he was an ex-Communist who feared assassination by the KGB.) But as far as Kendall was concerned, Meyer's philosophy, which he eventually laid out in a book titled *In Defense of Freedom*, was hopelessly misconceived.

Kirk was a literary man, Meyer was a dogmatist, and they were both averse to anything resembling populism (Meyer even

went so far as to say "populism is the radical opposite of conservatism"). In Kendall's view neither of them provided a definition of American conservatism capable of countering liberal claims. Already in the 1950s and 1960s conservatives were susceptible to the mythology supplied by liberals like Hartz. Kirk presented an Anglo-American conservative genealogy, but his admirers and detractors alike tended to emphasize what was least American about Kirk's conservatism. Young men who thought of themselves as traditionalists believed that tradition was a European thing that required them to reject America as too liberal from the start, just as Hartz had described it. Other young conservatives, then as now, impaled themselves on the other horn of the dilemma. They chose to remain proud Americans, but in doing so they thought they must accept some form of foundational liberalism. This left them powerless to defeat modern liberalism; at best they could only slow it down, at worst they could do no more than chide liberals for failing to live up to their own supposed original principles.

Willmoore Kendall wrote *The Conservative Affirmation* to clear up the meaning of American conservatism once and for all. This book is his response to *The Conservative Mind* and *In Defense of Freedom*, as well as a battery of other works that tried to define the American right. As Kendall explains in these pages, American conservatism is not liberalism, and conservatism is not exclusively European. Conservatism is anti-modern in some respects, but what conservatism opposes in modernity is not, according to Kendall, anything essential to the American founding. On the contrary, the Constitution as interpreted

through the philosophy of *The Federalist* is profoundly conservative. It is a continuation of a tradition that extends back to the Mayflower Compact, as Kendall argues in his subsequent book, *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*.

Progressives have argued for more than a century that the Constitution is not democratic, or not sufficiently democratic: from the publication of Charles Austin Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* in 1913 to today, the prevailing view among progressives has been that the Constitution was an elitist document designed for the benefit of the wealthy. Some conservatives take the same view but see that as a good thing.

Not Kendall. For him the Constitution was a thoroughly democratic charter, in the sense of all power originally and continually emanating from the people, who have the final say when the mechanisms of the Constitution are followed. *The Conservative Affirmation* affirms the understanding of legislative supremacy that Kendall worked out in *John Locke and the Doctrine of Majority Rule* more than two decades earlier. But in the earlier work, Kendall treated majoritarianism as a simple concept. In *The Conservative Affirmation*, he takes care to note the ways in which the U.S. Constitution and the teachings of *The Federalist* preserve democracy while bringing out the best (and suppressing the worst) within the people.

They do this not simply by pitting one power against another through checks and balances among the branches of government and the use of faction to counter faction within the legislature of a large republic. One of Kendall's most original



insights is his recognition of the flip side to the checks upon power: in order to use power well and effectively amid all these restraints, voters and their representatives must embrace a "constitutional morality" that encourages deliberation and wide satisfaction, even among legislative minorities. The majority principle is still in effect in Congress and in individual states and districts, but it is a refined majoritarianism, and at times it even leads to a voluntary form of super-majoritarianism. This is exactly what the Senate filibuster is, for example.

Far from any of this being "undemocratic," it is fully consistent with the principles of democracy for majorities to limit their immediate authority in order to improve democracy's overall well-being. As Kendall writes within these pages, in his review of *Democracy and the Challenge to Power* (borrowing a thought from Bertrand de Jouvenel), "the 'sovereign' can set up procedures for the exercise of his sovereignty which from one point of view seem to limit his authority but from another are seen to increase it." This was how Kendall thought of "the barriers to popular rule in our constitutional system."

A word about the organization of *The Conservative Affirmation* is in order. Why are there thirty book reviews at the end of this work? Kendall had at first set out to write his guide to understanding conservatism as a series of commentaries on other conservative thinkers, each designated a "sage," such as the "Sage of Mecosta" (Russell Kirk, resident of Mecosta, Michigan). Kendall changed tack, however, and instead adopted as his model Leo Strauss's book *What Is Political Philosophy?*, which combined ten chapters of original and

previously published material with sixteen book reviews at the end. Kendall at one point intended to imitate Strauss's title, too, by calling this book *What Is Conservatism?* That remains the title of the first chapter. But the book's original publisher, Henry Regnery, convinced Kendall to accept a different title for the work as a whole, which is how it became *The Conservative Affirmation*.

Kendall was a philosopher in action, constantly adapting and refining his core ideas in response to new stimuli. He published relatively little during his lifetime, and he never wrote a comprehensive account of his philosophy. *The Conservative Affirmation* is the closest he came. Like Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is not a comprehensive philosophical treatise, Kendall conveyed his philosophy powerfully yet unsystematically. This book, like *Reflections*, repays close attention and repeated reading.

As a writer Kendall was brilliant yet idiosyncratic. His sentences are long and his wording precise, but he has no aversion to colloquial language and idiom: here too he is both philosopher and populist. Because Kendall was often most inspired when he was responding to other thinkers or to contemporary events, this book is also marked by many references to people and occurrences with which twenty-first-century readers will be unfamiliar. But filling in the gaps with a little internet research, when necessary, is not difficult. Most of the time the reader need not know anything about the authors of the books that Kendall reviews at the end of this volume beyond what Kendall himself tells us about them.

Kendall twice refers in these pages to Leo Strauss by saluting him as a great teacher rather than naming him explicitly. In the acknowledgments, Kendall calls Strauss “the greatest living teacher of politics, whom I have ventured to imitate in the very structure of the book.” It was Strauss whose interpretations of John Locke caused Kendall to revise his own evaluation of the philosopher from 1941. Kendall was also deeply impressed by Strauss’s *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, and Kendall’s presentation of the Florentine thinker in these pages, almost always as an adversary of everything traditional or good, owes a debt to Strauss.

Leo Strauss was an émigré Jewish intellectual who came to the United States (by way of Britain) from Nazi Germany, where he had studied with Martin Heidegger. He was a brilliant interpreter of the classic texts of political philosophy, which Strauss read in ways that uncovered layers of meaning not obvious to readers who simply treated these books as artifacts of the time in which they were written. Strauss argued, in his 1953 book *Natural Right and History* and elsewhere, that the Western mind had become corrupted by historicism, which led ultimately to nihilism. Not only books but ideas themselves came to be seen as entirely historically contingent, so that even right and wrong became mere terms for certain historical attitudes rather than words denoting enduring moral truths. As a remedy for the amoral drift of modern thought, Strauss called for a return to careful study of the Greek and Roman classics.

Strauss was also deeply interested in the relationship between reason and revelation, which he characterized as being

mutually unfalsifiable. Kendall’s treatment of religion in *The Conservative Affirmation* reflects something of Strauss’s approach to the “theologico-political problem.” In places, Kendall presents the anti-traditional, secularizing tendencies of modern thought as being characteristic of what conservatives are pledged to oppose. Yet Kendall also argues that the connection between religion and conservatism is neither simple nor altogether defining of the right.

Despite his reverence for Strauss, Kendall strongly disagreed with one of Strauss’s most prominent students, Harry Jaffa. Kendall’s review in these pages of Jaffa’s 1959 book *Crisis of the House Divided* launched a debate in conservative intellectual circles that extends to this very day. As a student of Strauss, Jaffa read the collected Lincoln-Douglas debates and was struck by their resemblance to a Platonic philosophical dialogue. Lincoln seemed to speak for philosophy, for a view of right and wrong as real things in themselves and not simply expressions of power. Douglas on the other hand seemed like a sophist, and his position on “popular sovereignty” amounted, in Jaffa’s estimation, to saying that might makes right. If the people of a territory wanted slavery, then they were entitled to have it—as if a majority’s decision about a matter of right and wrong was the end of the question.

Kendall, Southerner though he was, was not looking to vindicate the South in his review of Jaffa’s book. Nor was he, as Jaffa later argued, in any way an adherent to the political philosophy of John C. Calhoun. What Kendall found objectionable about Jaffa’s view of Lincoln was the implication that

a philosopher-president could improve upon the Constitution itself if he had an allegedly better understanding than the founders did of the real meaning of the principle that "all men are created equal." To uphold Lincoln's view was one thing, but what about the next president to come along with a claim to speak for philosophical truth rather than the role delegated to him by the people and their Constitution? There was no end to how abstract notions of equality could be used to overrule representative government, creating tyranny in the place of popular self-rule.

Kendall was a strong critic of the civil rights movement during his lifetime. Yet he also thought passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was a victory for conservatism. The law was a product of exactly the kind of deliberation that Kendall prized, and he saw it as a measure that would avert a radical turn by the civil rights movement. Kendall was not a "states' rights" advocate, though he was a defender of the states as components of the federal republic. Congress was supreme, both within the federal government and over the states. (Kendall notes, for example, that Congress has the power to impeach the president and circumscribe the power and resources of the federal courts, if it chooses to use the tools that the Constitution provides. The Courts and the president have no similar powers to coerce Congress, unless one imagines the U.S. Army carrying out a coup on the president's behalf.)

Jaffa responded to Kendall's criticisms more than once, even after Kendall's death. With Kendall unavailable to defend his own position, his cause was taken up by others, notably the

University of Dallas professor of English M. E. Bradford. When Bradford was denied an appointment to head the National Endowment for the Humanities in the Reagan administration, partly on account of things he had written in response to Jaffa, he became a symbol of the dispute between older traditionalist conservatives (some of whom adopted the label "paleoconservatives") on one side and neoconservatives, some of whom had "Straussian" allies, on the other. Jaffa himself had been supportive of Bradford's appointment. But the long battle between paleoconservatives and neoconservatives, touched off in part by the dispute over Bradford, continues to define some of the divisions on the intellectual right, although today the lines have shifted again. Among Straussians themselves there are now sharp differences between groups more sympathetic to the neoconservatives and others warmer to the paleoconservatives. Kendall, as a figure much beloved by paleoconservatives but himself a keen student of Strauss, may in the end provide a bridge to conciliation between right-wing populists of different camps.

If *The Conservative Affirmation* is Kendall's most "Straussian" book, the volume that his friend and collaborator George W. Carey completed after Kendall's death, *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*, is his "Voegelinian" book. Kendall found in the philosophy of Eric Voegelin a way to frame his own understanding of the American people's commitment to virtue. Jaffa's criticism of Douglas and the widespread belief that democracy easily degenerates into mob rule were a lingering difficulty for Kendall's populist conservatism. Democracy seemed

to many people to imply relativism. How could Kendall refute that impression?

The outlines of his argument can be found in *The Conservative Affirmation*. But in *Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*, first published in 1970, Kendall and Carey offer an elaboration. From the Mayflower Compact onward, through the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut to the U.S. Constitution itself, Americans have seen themselves as a virtuous people deliberating under God. That is the basic symbol of the American order, a symbol that undergoes articulation and development over the course of U.S. history; and while Americans may still reach false conclusions, and their ideas of God might be vague, they will nevertheless direct their deliberative efforts toward justice and transcendent truth.

This understanding is, however, at risk of what Kendall and Carey call a “derailment” by a competing idea of individual rights. These rights leave no place for deliberation by a lawmaking body of citizens. They are instead revealed by philosophers or prophets—or presidents—who derive a right to rule from their special knowledge of abstract rights.

*Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* is a stunning synthesis of history and philosophy. The two views of the American tradition that are contrasted there are already present, however, in *The Conservative Affirmation*, where political and philosophical analysis combine in Kendall’s second chapter, “The Two Majorities in American Politics.” The pattern Kendall describes there still holds true today. Indeed, it has become even more pronounced. Liberals do indeed demand that elections

become national plebiscites, without the modulations required by the Constitution. Given the chance, they would bring about the direct popular election of the president and the abolition of non-proportional representation in the Senate. The logic of their position, if they dared to follow it, would extend all the way to abolishing representation by state in any form, even in the House of Representatives. According to the left-liberal interpretation of democracy, legislative seats ought to be filled according to the proportion of the national vote that each party gets. And in fact, one often sees progressive liberals in the twenty-first century complain that Republicans have too many seats relative to the “national vote” in House elections.

As Kendall shows, while this project sells itself as the fulfillment of democracy, it would in truth destroy the representative character upon which democracy depends in such a large nation as ours. Presidential elections already show the defects of a national plebiscitary conception of democracy. Presidential candidates make very broad, ill-defined, and simply unfeasible promises that are able to find wide support only because they are so utopian. Having won over voters with pleasing fantasies on the campaign trail, once in power presidents are free to pursue a different agenda of their own choosing. What is worse, the executive branch, full of unelected permanent bureaucrats, can set its own course, with the president as little more than a figurehead. Democratic accountability is short-circuited, the local nexus of politics is superseded, and self-government begins to collapse. We have only traveled further down this path since *The Conservative Affirmation* first appeared.

Kendall's thought has become more important than ever to the right, not because conservatives have read him and are acting in light of his theories but because his theories provide the means for conservatives to understand their actions and the battlefield on which they fight today. Kendall did not believe that Americans had to read books, including his own, to find their conservative convictions. They carried those convictions "in their hips," not their heads, as he liked to say: in the very way they walked. And the way they have walked in the more than half-century since Kendall's death was described by him in these pages four years before he died. What they need from Kendall is what everyone needs from a good philosopher: a clarification of questions and concepts and a reminder of the truths they already know. That may sound modest, but in fact the effects of Kendall's clearing away of false conceptions of conservatism, America, and democracy can be personally and politically transformative. Kendall makes better thinkers and better citizens of his attentive readers.

Yet his name has languished in obscurity, and his ideas have reached too few of the souls that need them. This is in part because he published so little. In part it is because he did not cultivate disciples for a school of thought. He was a lifelong inspiration to many who studied with him. But he did not try to stamp others in his own mold; instead, he provided his students, as he provides his readers, with the tools and training to build their own philosophical homesteads.

He could be personally difficult. He married three times, with numerous affairs on the side. In the early days of *National*

*Review* he was caught *in flagrante delicto* with a copy girl in the office of his colleague Suzanne La Follette, who was not amused by his indiscretion. (Legend has it that the couch on which the tryst took place was thereafter known as the Willmoore Kendall Memorial Couch.) Kendall was an alcoholic who in the darkest days of his career appeared in class inebriated. He quarreled with his colleagues in the academy and the conservative world. Reid Buckley, the younger brother of Bill and also a student of Kendall's, remembered his teacher as a man who "never lost a polemic but could not keep a friend."

Willmoore Kendall's lost friends included William F. Buckley Jr. himself, who grew tired of Kendall's high-handedness in responding to editorial supervision at *National Review*, when Kendall deigned to submit anything for publication at all. And if Kendall was too much for his conservative friends, he was entirely too much for his liberal colleagues in the academy. He was a pariah in the Yale politics department for his McCarthyite views. So unwelcome was he at the institution where he held tenure that Yale eventually reached an agreement to pay Kendall to resign. For a time thereafter he was a scholarly vagabond, with short stints teaching at Stanford, Georgetown, and elsewhere.

Before his death in June 1967 Kendall finally found a place in the academy where he belonged, at the small, recently founded University of Dallas. Kendall, a Catholic convert, was invigorated by the faithfulness and conservatism of his new academic home; students found him a mesmerizing teacher; and he had at last found personal happiness with his third wife, Nellie. He was only fifty-eight when a heart attack took his life.

His friend George W. Carey at Georgetown University carried on his work. At Nellie's request he wrote the latter half of the book that became *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*, drawing upon his conversations with Kendall and familiarity with his work. Indeed, a generation of Carey's doctoral students have an affinity for Kendall thanks to the faithfulness of his friend and collaborator and perpetuator of the idea of "constitutional morality." Carey's books *The Federalist: Design for a Constitutional Republic* and *In Defense of the Constitution* have something of Kendall's spirit, though the arguments are naturally Carey's own.

Another friend who carried Kendall's ideas forward was Jeffrey Hart, a later senior editor at *National Review* and professor of English at Dartmouth College. Hart wrote the introduction to an important posthumous collection of Kendall's essays, *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, in which Hart calls Kendall "beyond any possibility of challenge the most important political theorist to have emerged in the twenty-odd years since the end of World War II." Hart also paid Kendall the compliment of constructively disagreeing with him. Hart argued in 1974 that conservatives should place their hopes in the White House, not Congress as Kendall and James Burnham had advised, because only an energetic president could tame the otherwise invincible federal bureaucracy.

Hart illustrates the way conservatives today should approach *The Conservative Affirmation*: not necessarily to arrive at Kendall's conclusions—though Kendall's conclusions are often correct—but to apply his techniques and analysis to the

battles today. Kendall reminds us that local political attachments are indispensable to constitutional morality and to the Constitution itself. While Kendall is not here to help us confront the challenges that self-government now faces from the globalization of the American economy and the success of liberals in proclaiming rights-based ideology over local interests, this indispensable book, *The Conservative Affirmation*, is here to teach us how to help ourselves.

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