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Isaiah 61:4

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CONSERVATISM'S SHAKY FOUNDATIONS

by Gary North

Years ago, conservative scholar Richard Weaver was induced to publish a book under the title, *Ideas Have Consequences*. It became his most famous book, and his most oft-quoted phrase. The conservative movement has always been intellectual in its orientation, beginning with the seminal work, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)*. Conservatism's influence has come first and foremost from its commitment to the printed page.

The problem with such a movement is that it finds that its appeal to voters is indirect. Those who promote the principles of conservatism are not generally intellectuals. The basic details of the philosophy are communicated to listeners in a haphazard, emotional way. Politicians, businessmen, and pamphlet writers are seldom noted as intellectuals who are able to discern the fine points of doctrine. So some of the ideas get scrambled in transmission. Ideas can be picked up and filtered, reworked, and distorted by politicians and businessmen. The ability of an ideological movement to defend itself from deviations is limited, unless it is also a rigidly bureaucratic movement that can, in effect, take out and enforce a kind of copyright on its ideas. It has to be able to discipline deviants. Not conservatism!

How broad is the conservative ideology? Far broader than any one group, "school," or organization. They borrow ideas from each other. Each one may think it is the "true conservative" organization, but the public never sees it this way. A group can try to police itself, thereby maintaining its ideological integrity, but ideas cannot be bottled up. Neither can creative people who get "excommunicated." The result is that the ideas get passed around and transformed as they move outward into the community at large.

First Principles

A movement needs a bedrock philosophy. It needs a coherent, integrated set of ideas that enable the followers to apply fixed principles to daily activities. It needs meaning. The problem with conservatism is that its philosophy is straightforwardly anti-rationalistic in nature. The leading conservative intellectuals have always been skeptical about men's ability to draw up platforms, first principles, and even creeds. Social blueprints will not work: here is a first principle of conservatism. The problem is in discovering bedrock first principles that do not resemble social blueprints. Conservatives believe in permanence, but not in rationalism's supposedly fixed standards of logic. The war between the libertarians and the conservatives has always centered on just this issue, going back to the debates between Jeremy Bentham's rationalism and the conservative traditionalists. Which is sovereign: tradition or logic? Whose tradition? Whose logic?

The libertarians have always complained that the conservatives rely on incoherent concepts to defend their position. The conservatives border on mysticism, and there is no way to construct or defend a rational order on the basis of mysticism, the

libertarians argue. When you examine the writings of the leading theoretical defenders of conservatism you have to admit, the libertarians have a point. One of my favorite examples of meaningless verbiage parading as a philosophy is Eric Voegelin's "classic" study, *Order and History*. He begins Volume I with this "illuminating" observation: "The order of history emerges from the history of order" (p. ix). It goes downhill from here. He writes in the opening paragraph of the Introduction:

God and man, world and society form a primordial community of being. The community with its quaternarian structure is, and is not, a datum of human experience. It is a datum of experience in so far as it is known to man by virtue of his participation in the mystery of its being. It is not a datum of experience in so far as it is not given in the manner of an object of the external world but is knowable only from the perspective of participation in it.

I paid 25¢ for a used hardback copy of this book, and I think I was gypped. It is grim to think that some people buy it new, and two more volumes after it.

Voegelin, sad to say, is regarded by some as one of the two or three most eloquent and important political philosophers in the conservative movement, along with Leo Strauss and (some believe) Willmoore Kendall. Kendall was a master of the philosophy of the Founding Fathers of late-eighteenth-century America, and his writings are at least coherent. Strauss adopted an almost arcane approach to the Greeks and Romans, for he was always searching for "secret writings," meaning obscure and even occult phrases hidden in the body of otherwise logical discussions. Strauss was, in the words of Archie Jones, an apologist for classical tyranny. (*Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. V, No. 1, Summer, 1978: Box 158, Vallecito, Calif., 95251; \$4.)

The conservative movement is in deep trouble. It is simply not possible to translate babble like Voegelin's into language that the common man can understand. Common men would recognize a con job like this; only conservative intellectuals can be taken in by such gibberish. This gives us an indication of the crisis of the humanist conservatives. It is impossible to imagine men dying in the trenches to defend Voegelin's ideas regarding an orderly community.

One experience I had in the summer of 1981 is indicative of the underlying irrelevance of conservatism today. I attended a meeting of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, an association of conservatives interested in ideas. This was a sparsely attended free meeting of I.S.I. alumni held in Washington, D.C. Here we were, riding high on Reagan euphoria, in the capitol of the United States. Maybe 250 people showed up. We even got to eat lunch for \$20. The committee in charge of the luncheon meeting had a Ph. D in some humanities department – history, classics, or something – step up to the podium to give an invocation (that

means a blessing before eating, in normal English). He announced to us all that God speaks all languages, so an appropriate one is Attic Greek, whereupon he delivered the blessing in Attic Greek. Not even koine' Greek, the language of the people in Jesus' day, the language of the New Testament. No, sir, this man was no man of the street; he was an aristocrat. This will save America from the judgment of God?

There were some good ideas presented at that day-long meeting, but so what? How could anyone take seriously a group of self-proclaimed intellectuals whose leaders would invite another self-proclaimed intellectual to give thanks to God for an overpriced meal in a language nobody in the room understood? It was like inviting the media in (had they been invited) to prove for all the world to see that this movement is run by the weirdos and for the weirdos, and anyone who takes them seriously as a cultural force belongs on its membership roles. (They aren't all weirdos, but that is the impression the invocation gave.)

If this were some brand-new movement, it would be different. But this was in 1981, in the year of Reagan's triumphant entry into Washington. It was a quarter of a century after the founding of the *National Review* and the I.S. I. It was a meeting held for alumni, not freshman. This was the call to intellectual arms to the tried and true troops stationed in Washington. The rag-tag army of the Old Right straggled in, dressed smartly in three-piece suits, or Harris tweed sports jackets with patches on the sleeves, and Hush Puppy shoes. If this was a conquering Army's high command, try to stay out of any forthcoming draft.

Organizations

If the conservatives' intellectual foundations are shaky, what about its non-profit foundations?

The Old Right was created by men whose vision was the whole world, and whose organizational ability was on the level of the Flower and Garden Society of Sheboygan, Wisconsin. There were some exceptions, but the founders were one-man bands. They created organizations that provided them with permanent employment, permanent control, and permanent stagnation. Many of these men are still alive, which is more than you can say for their organizations. As one cynic who is employed by one of the more famous ones said recently, "This place is a nursing home with 25 staff people and one patient."

Let me describe how they work. I stress the word they. I have several in mind. The Founder had a vision a long time ago. He gained initial financing by appealing to aging men on the Boards of Directors of major corporations, who were veterans of the New Deal wars. These men were about to retire. Their replacements were all graduates of the top business schools, which meant that they were Keynesians and corporate socialists. The old men gave seed money to start the organization. Then they died.

The Founder gathered some men around him: a few scholars, a few younger men, an editor, and perhaps a fund-raiser. Then he started publishing his pamphlets, magazines, newsletters, and an occasional book (usually his own). The mailing list grew, slowly but surely. The list of donors grew even more slowly. Somehow, the outfit survived.

One by one, the scholars left. Then, steadily, the more innovative younger men left. The Founder proved not to be an easy man to work for. His vision more and more became clouded with his ego. He began to equate his organization with himself. Then he equated his organization with the survival of Western Civilization. He became convinced that after his death, only his organization would stand between society and chaos. But the organization was linked to his own person and vision. Would he find a qualified successor to succeed him?

We still do not know the answer, for these same doddering titans still control their stagnant organizations. There may still be

the monthly report. There may still be a bureaucracy intact. But the people with any get up and go long since have got up and gone. Sometimes this was voluntary, and other times The Founder forced out those who deviated from the line of true wisdom—The Founder's latest opinions (subject to constant revision as arteries began to harden and the memory slipped). The Founder's essays have grown general, becoming dim repetitions of earlier brilliance. His books have become shorter—collections of his essays. The organization is winding down.

This does not mean that income is down. The mailing list is solid now. The donors are conditioned. The death legacies mount, as the old-time supporters go to their reward. The wonder of non-profit status takes over: less output and greater income, as time goes by.

The Founder's board keeps him on, especially since many of them are as old as he is, or even older. It was his organization, and he is assumed to have the right to run it into oblivion. The compulsory retirement age of 65 is something profit-seeking shareholders impose on profit-seeking corporations. Such a rule does not exist in these organizations. The shareholders want continuity in their investment, and therefore continuity in senior management. The donors do not monitor their donations with the same sort of skills that they monitor stock prices in the daily newspaper. Stockholders force senior officials to consider the question: "Who will succeed me when I retire?" Donors politely ignore the same question when applied to The Founder. Corporations grow to meet market demand. Non-profit foundations are not nearly so responsive, since there is no comparable market-measuring device available. Without a price system, and a profit-and-loss sheet, it is difficult to manage any organization.

Finally, The Founder dies. At last, the Board has the opportunity to replace him. Guess what? After thirty years of not exercising responsibility, of deferring to The Founder, the Board has no idea of what it wants to accomplish, how to accomplish it, or who should serve as captain of the ship. The Board tears itself apart, finally appointing some committee-chosen bureaucrat to lead the organization. As a compromise candidate, he does not know how to deal with the Board, and the Board is likely to want him to go in several directions at once. The commitment of The Founder to his dream cannot be transferred. Bureaucracy overwhelms the organization. It dies, or atrophies.

These organizations last for a generation, and then drift or sink. Seldom, if ever, does one of them survive the death of The Founder. The Founder wanted it that way. The world will remember him, and only him. His words will not be interpreted by successors, he always wanted to believe. Now, at long last, to the extent that his words survive his death, they are interpreted by successors who were not screened by him, or were fired by him long ago, or who came upon his writings much later. He was unwilling to build up a group of innovative, trained interpreters, so he survives in men's minds only at the whim of those who live on. It is never a question of interpreters or no interpreters; it is a question of which interpreters. If a man's ideas survive, almost always they survive because a group of followers keeps his books in print, allowing the embarrassing ones to go out of print for lack of a market. The Founder, much to his consternation no doubt, cannot continue to determine who will be his official interpreters when he is unwilling to name them, train them, and finance them during his lifetime. When he dies, he loses control. Founders refuse to face this, however. They always have another five good years to go. They think.

Conservatism's intellectual foundations are shaky, and so are its non-profit foundations. It is time for Christians to take advantage of a major opportunity: to replace the Old Right with something more principled, more innovative, and more committed to the source of permanent standards, the Bible.