

# Defending the “Little Platoons”; Communitarianism in American Conservatism

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Within the conservative intellectual renaissance that took place in the United States following World War II, there emerged several distinct schools of thought. George Nash classifies the three principal groups that ultimately emerged as traditionalists, libertarians, and anti-Communists; and while this tripartite division conceals significant disagreements within each group, and implies a certain rigidity of categorization that did not really exist (to which group would one assign William F. Buckley, Jr., for example?), it is more than adequate for our purposes.<sup>1</sup> Of these groups, it is the traditionalists—so named in order to distinguish them from their (arguably more numerous) libertarian counterparts, as well as to identify them with the modest Burkean revival that took place during the 1950s—to which I turn my attention in this paper. Broadly speaking, traditionalists believed in prescription over rash innovation, emphasized the importance of private property and social distinctions, and denied the perfectibility of man. They viewed man and his condition in the concrete, and not with reference to an imaginary state of nature or under a Rawlsian veil of ignorance.<sup>2</sup> Russell Kirk, while offering six “canons of conservative thought,” insisted that conservatism was less an ideology than a temper of mind.<sup>3</sup>

In their work traditionalists often reflected on the kind of social and political order that would most conduce political freedom and social order. In so doing, they inevitably discussed the importance of protecting the intermediary institutions that stood between the individual and the state. Tocqueville had identified them as a key bulwark of American liberty; and the traditionalists sought to ensure their vitality whether their antagonist be the central state or the modern corpora-

tion. For Americans who reflexively identify the right with market economics and *laissez-faire*, the traditionalist perspective will come as a surprise; but it was advanced by some of the most accomplished conservative intellectuals of the postwar period.

Traditionalist political and social thought focused primarily on preserving what Edmond Burke called the “little platoons” of civilization, all those associations—e.g., family, church, town, civic group—that gave people social identities and prevented them from dissolving into an undifferentiated mass. It is fundamental to conservatism to prefer the local and particular to the abstract and universal,<sup>4</sup> and in advocating the pre-modern idea of a federative polity composed of a variety of little sovereignties, they hoped to substitute for the superficial and abstract sense of identity manufactured by the modern unitary state the true identity and rootedness that comes from belonging to small and well-defined associations. In *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk concluded that without this “spirit of particularism, the idea of local associations and local rights, perhaps no sort of conservatism is practicable.”<sup>5</sup> Dedicated to this principle, these traditionalist conservatives consistently fought the leveling forces, whether federal edicts or business combinations, that threatened to dissolve the organic network of interpersonal relationships that comprised a community.

Three of the most influential and representative of the traditionalists were Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, and Robert Nisbet. Kirk, conservative historian, philosopher, and critic, is frequently called the father of the conservative movement, and certainly of its traditionalist wing. His seminal *Conservative Mind* (1953), along with his founding of *Modern Age*—which became the principal academic journal of the intellectual right—established him as one of America’s top conservative thinkers. Over the next four decades he would write thirty books and hundreds of articles, advancing the conservative intellectual movement he had done so much to construct. Richard Weaver, while not as prolific as Kirk, contributed enduring works on history, rhetoric, and philosophy while a professor of literature at the University of Chicago.<sup>6</sup> Robert Nisbet, a Columbia University sociologist, made important scholarly contributions to his own discipline, but after publishing his book *The Quest for Community* (1953), soon found himself drafted into a traditionalist movement that sensed in his work the mind of a kindred spirit.<sup>7</sup> It is primarily through the work of these men that I shall examine the school of thought that for lack of a better term I have called “conservative communitarianism.”

To resurrect the communitarian work of these men is far from a sterile intellectual exercise. Nothing could be clearer than the continuing relevance of the issues the traditionalists confronted. In recent years it has been primarily left-leaning communitarians who have engaged issues of community, liberty, and individualism most vigorously and thoughtfully; nearly forgotten is that the traditionalists, or conservative communitarians, had distinct insights of their own in these areas. An appreciation of the traditionalist perspective, moreover,



**Figure 1:** Russell Kirk



**Figure 2:** Richard Weaver

provides insight into the internecine conflicts that consume conservatives in our own day.

Traditionalists based their attachment to community life, they insisted, not on mere sentiment or nostalgia, but on serious reflections on history and human nature. Richard Weaver's study of American social thought, for example, uncovered "two types of American individualism": the "social bond individualism" of John Randolph of Roanoke, and the isolationist and atomistic variety practiced by Henry David Thoreau and many of his fellow Transcendentalists.<sup>8</sup> Thoreau's penchant for abstract speculation in political matters was certain to elicit the censure of the traditionalist, but it was his commitment to a theoretically absolute individualism, divorced from the practical necessities of governance and order, that particularly concerned Weaver. When Thoreau refused to pay the church levy, for example, he declared that he did not "wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined." The Concord sage was unclear as to whether his categorical rejection of all such associations included the very government under whose authority he was born, but Weaver was no doubt correct to observe that his argument pointed in this direction. By making all decisions bearing on authority and submission subject to the sovereign will of the individual, whose subjective whim the legislator may never legitimately override, Thoreau had made any stable political order utterly impossible.<sup>9</sup>

The individualism of John Randolph, according to Weaver, recognizes the absurdity of theories which have as their starting point such an abstraction as the sovereign individual, divorced from all social relationships and independent of all other persons and institutions. Randolph acknowledges with Aristotle that man is a political animal, and that it is only through his interaction and relationships with other people and through his membership in society that he becomes truly human. His defense of states' rights, while on the one hand a repudiation of arbitrary central authority, explicitly recognizes the individual's status as a member of a corporate body.<sup>10</sup>

Central to the traditionalist's view of human nature, therefore, was the insistence that the fundamental unit of society was not the individual but the group, that it is only within a social context that the goods of human excellence can be cultivated.<sup>11</sup> To set men free from the various social identities that have defined them, traditionalists insist, is not to liberate them but to reduce them to mere masses.<sup>12</sup> As Robert Nisbet explains, "What is crucial in the formation of the masses, is the atomization of all social and cultural relationships within which human beings gain their normal sense of membership in society. The mass is an aggregate of individuals who are insecure, basically lonely, and ground down, either through decree or historical circumstance, into mere particles of social dust."

The body politic enters the terminal phase when what had once been a people, with all its distinctions, little sovereignties, and individuating characteristics, is reduced to a mere mass. The would-be totalitarian is well aware indeed of the individual's need for social identity; and in place of the sense of community that



**Figure 3:** Robert Nisbet. *Courtesy Columbia University Press Office.*

the masses once found in religion, in the family, in small political communities, and in professional or workingmen's associations, he is prepared to offer them membership in a great national community and a share in great collective enterprises. When masses exist in any substantial number, Nisbet argued,

half the work of the totalitarian leader has been done for him. What remains but to complete, where necessary, the work of history, and to grind down into atomic particles all remaining evidences of association and social authority? What remains, then, but to rescue the masses from their loneliness, their hopelessness and despair, by leading them into the Promised Land of the absolute, redemptive State?<sup>13</sup>

Nisbet appealed to recent findings in a variety of disciplines to support his contentions about human nature. Most obviously, perhaps, was the work of Durkheim, which found that the highest rates of suicide and insanity obtained where individualism, both moral and social, was greatest. In the fields of psychiatry and social psychology, Nisbet pointed to such psychiatrists as Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, and Harry Stack Sullivan. When Sigmund Freud began his groundbreaking work in clinical psychology, the fundamental stability of society was assumed; these scholars, on the other hand, were pointing to the increasingly individualistic and impersonal society in which people lived for the source of their neuroses.<sup>14</sup> The conclusion to be drawn from this *a posteriori* evidence was simple and straightforward: there was something distinctly unnatural about modern political and social arrangements.

Traditionalists therefore insisted that society be viewed not as a mere aggregation of individuals but as a delicate edifice consisting of numerous geographic communities, each with rights and traditions of its own. Often citing Calhoun, they found the roots of tyranny in the exaltation of the central state at the expense of these smaller communities, and in the refusal to recognize competing jurisdictions within the larger national framework. "The totalitarian philosophy," according to Weaver, "assumes that the unit of the whole, or the totality, has all the rights and that the constituent parts either have no rights or have rights of an inferior order."<sup>15</sup>

In their defense of the integrity of these "constituent parts," they made a clear distinction between traditional American democracy, rooted in localism, and the centralized democracy of the French Jacobins, a system of government which elevated "simple majority rule to the status of divine right."<sup>16</sup> Under the French system, Weaver explained, "structure was sacrificed to a political unity of an extremely unrelenting kind"; local prerogatives and loyalties were overridden by a cold "general will."<sup>17</sup>

The problem with "Jacobin democracy," as the traditionalists saw it, was not simply that it hesitated to accept limits on the power and scope of the decisions

reached by a majority, or that it was easily manipulated by the unscrupulous demagogue. More precisely, it blurred the distinction between community and collectivism. These two principles of political organization "are at opposite poles," Kirk explained. "Community is the product of volition; collectivism, of compulsion."<sup>18</sup> The problem with collectivism was not, as the libertarians would have it, that it conceived of man as part of a community; for indeed he was. The problem was that it proposed for his allegiance a large-scale, artificial community instead of the small, tangible ones of which he was more immediately a member.<sup>19</sup> In place of genuine local self-government, Jacobin absolutism substituted the sovereign will of the nation as a whole—that arbitrary despot whom Randolph derided as "King Numbers." By failing to acknowledge the rights and autonomy of the little sovereignties of which the nation is composed, the Jacobin undermined the vitality of community life and transformed historic communities into mere administrative units of the central state.

The decentralized republic of small democratic communities that the traditionalists advocated does more than give meaning to the idea of local self-government; it also contributes to the preservation of the free society. The existence of myriad autonomous political communities, they agreed, serves to frustrate the would-be reformer who seeks to impose a uniform General Will upon the nation as a whole. A unitary state may originate in the name of freedom, Weaver explained, "but once it has been made monopolistic and unassailable, it will, if history teaches anything, be used for other purposes."<sup>20</sup> The discerning student of history and indeed of human nature sees the advantages of a society "which permits and even encourages many different centers of authority, influence, opinion, taste, and accomplishment. These things grow out of associations freely entered into by persons of common necessity, interest, or geographical habitat."<sup>21</sup> Traditionalists thus agreed with Calhoun's classification of simple majoritarian democracy as simply another form of absolutism,<sup>22</sup> and concluded that a state that wishes to remain free will honor local prerogatives and respect the diversity of customs and traditions that exist within its boundaries.

Industrialization, traditionalists charged, had had devastating consequences for the local culture and traditional social relationships that made community life possible. Its effects on the traditional loci of community authority were particularly severe; "[p]ersonal loyalties gave way to financial relationships," Kirk explained.<sup>23</sup> The shop-owner, for example, the man of property who had provided community leadership and sometimes even largesse, was replaced by the branch manager of the chain store. The owner was now "hydra-headed, an impersonal corporation." No doubt some members of the corporation are men of refinement and goodwill, but their job calls for the maximization of profit, not an acute concern over the effects of their policies "upon the stability and beauty of a community."<sup>24</sup>

Traditionalists were concerned that the increasingly large scale on which economic activity was being carried out would not merely disrupt community

relationships, but also would completely eclipse competing power centers and sources of authority. They feared economic concentration for the same reason they opposed the concentration of power in the federal government. "Collectivism is not the less disagreeable because it retains the label 'capitalism,'" Kirk observed.<sup>25</sup> Taking his place alongside many of his predecessors in the Southern conservative tradition, Weaver expressed a similar distrust of *laissez-faire* and the economic concentration to which he thought it led.<sup>26</sup> "[W]hen properties are vast and integrated, on a scale now frequently seen," he maintained, "it requires but a slight step to transfer them to state control."<sup>27</sup>

Both men were unmoved by the libertarian distinction between the coercive authority of the state and the more precarious economic power of the corporation (contingent as it is upon the favorable disposition of consumers toward its product). "As the consolidation of economic power progresses," wrote Kirk, "the realm of personal freedom will diminish, whether the masters of the economy are state servants or the servants of private corporations."<sup>28</sup> Kirk accepted uncritically the predictions of Karl Marx regarding the allegedly inevitable concentration and centralization of industry under capitalism:

Karl Marx prophesied that private enterprise would become increasingly monopolistic, until only a few great "capitalist" corporations would remain; and then the triumph of Communist revolutionaries would be easy; for the men of property who once held stubbornly to their own would have given way to mere managers, without courage or interest to defend "capitalism"; and "capitalistic" managers can be supplanted by commissars overnight.<sup>29</sup>

Kirk and Weaver in particular regretted capitalism's emphasis on physical mobility and its tendency to divorce man from his traditional attachment to his physical surroundings. Critical to capitalism and free enterprise is the unfettered movement of labor and capital across political boundaries, whether town, city, or state, and this economic dynamism can create severe dislocations in the life of a neighborhood. Moreover, the mass-production techniques which capitalism had introduced contributed to this revolution in personal mobility by making available on a large scale the very means of transportation that the *laissez-faire* order demanded. Thanks to the ready availability of the automobile to Americans, the 1920s marked the climactic culmination of a transportation revolution that had proceeded relentlessly onward for a century.

Kirk and Weaver accepted that this enormous increase in reliable and readily available transportation yielded benefits of profound significance. But Weaver feared that his newfound mobility threatened to sever the crucial link between man and his physical location that had served for centuries as a source of identity and stability for individuals and families. In his *Visions of Order*, Weaver observed:

Modern man has acquired an excessive mobility, so that it means nothing, as compared with yesterday, for him to be in one place or to go to another. The automobile and the airplane whirl him about with such velocity that it now has little significance to be in or from a place: one's situation can soon be altered. In the book of modern progress this is, it hardly needs saying, listed as a credit, yet there is much to make us feel that it is a debit when all things are considered. There is something protective about "place"; it means isolation, privacy, and finally identity.<sup>30</sup>

In light of Weaver's quaint but compelling observation, it becomes easier to understand Russell Kirk's frequent characterization of the automobile as a "mechanical Jacobin." Since the first decade of the twentieth century, mass production of automobiles has proceeded to "disintegrate and stamp anew the pattern of communication, manners, and city life" in the United States, Kirk explained. Henry Ford attempted to reconcile the old rural order with urban life, by such means as "the restoration of little water-powered mills in small towns, and the allocation of garden plots to his employees—projects designed to check the proletarianizing of society." Such efforts were abandoned at Ford's death, and the Ford Foundation "has been conducted upon the principles of 'disintegrated liberalism,' with little of the sound, if eccentric, common sense of its founder."<sup>31</sup>

So concerned was Kirk over the disintegrative effects of market pressures that he was even prepared to offer a qualified endorsement of labor unions. He saw in union activity a desperate attempt on the part of workers to recapture the sense of community that he thought the market had taken from them. Kirk was confident that many of the very workers who struck for higher wages "would strike for lower wages just as cheerfully, if the union told them to. For the union has restored to them some semblance of community, which any true human being loves a great deal more than an abstract standard of living."<sup>32</sup> He never counted himself among its supporters, but insofar as the labor union originated in social boredom and the dissolution of community ties he could not bring himself to condemn it, either.<sup>33</sup>

Disturbed by the rootlessness that a variety of economic pressures appeared to be promoting, and seeing in this rootlessness a crucial ingredient in the rise of the mass man that they both deplored, Kirk and Weaver especially sympathized with the sentimental attachment to localism—and, no doubt, to the jeremiads against the "cash nexus"—they found in the antebellum conservative tradition of the American South.<sup>34</sup> The South of John Randolph, Weaver argued, possessed a "rooted culture which viewed with dismay the anonymity and the social indifference of urban man."<sup>35</sup> Weaver described the Old South as "a type of corporative society, held together by sentiments which do not survive a money economy," and went so far as to claim, in contradistinction to the materialistic

capitalism of the American North, that the antebellum South represented “*the last non-materialist civilization in the Western World.*”<sup>36</sup> Although Weaver was sympathetic toward Abraham Lincoln, he sensed that a great deal was lost in the defeat of the South. By the 1860s, everything “betokened the breaking-up of the old synthesis in a general movement toward abstractions in human relationships.” Political, economic, and intellectual trends seemed to point toward a political economy that would place much less emphasis on the various intermediary institutions and dispersed loci of authority which stood between the individual and the state. Weaver did not consider a political economy in which the individual stands naked before the central state, and risks becoming a mere “unit in the formless democratic mass,” to be self-evidently preferable to the hierarchical structure of authority of a society such as that of the Old South.<sup>37</sup>

In his own work on Southern political and intellectual history, Kirk discovered the same stubborn attachment to the locality, a sentiment that protected men from a stultifying social anonymity.<sup>38</sup> In standing against centralization, he wrote, “the South—alone among the civilized communities of the nineteenth century—had hardihood sufficient for an appeal to arms against the iron new order which, a vague instinct whispered to Southerners, was inimical to the sort of humanity they knew.”<sup>39</sup> Both Kirk and Weaver agreed with G.K. Chesterton that the true patriot never boasts of how large his country is, but “always, and of necessity, of how small it is.”

Implicit (and only seldom explicit) in the traditionalist critique was an ideal political economy that would recapture the sense of community that they believed a cold and relentless “modernization” had undermined. For Weaver, the “moral solution” to the specter of the mass man, to economic and political centralization, was “the distributive ownership of small properties.” These properties would “take the form of independent farms, of local businesses, of homes owned by the occupants, where individual responsibility gives significance to prerogative over property.”<sup>40</sup> The connection between Weaver’s vision and that of such distributists as Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton is very clear.

Kirk, while not as explicit a distributist as Weaver, expressed sympathy for distributism in *The Conservative Mind* and indicated elsewhere a willingness to consider its program.<sup>41</sup> His obvious displeasure at the dislocations occasioned by industrialism has been discussed above; on one occasion he revealingly lamented that “once in an industrial society, we cannot get out of it without starving half the world’s population.”<sup>42</sup>

In addition, Kirk deplored the aesthetic effects of the forces of modernization, particularly in Europe. All over the continent can be found examples of civilizational treasures blithely destroyed by what Kirk called “the evangels of Progress.”<sup>43</sup> As for the business class that made this transformation possible, Kirk had only contempt for their pretensions to moral and cultural leadership. Our businessmen “are deficient in the disciplines which nurture sound imagination and strong moral character. They do not know the arts of *humanitas*, which teach

a man his true nature and his duties."<sup>44</sup> Kirk's criticisms of industrialism, combined with his condemnations of the undue cultural and economic influence of a relatively small number of businessmen, suggest a sympathy for the kind of economic decentralization advocated by Weaver.

When we recall that the traditionalists were advancing their arguments during a particularly inauspicious period for regionalism and decentralization, it comes as little surprise that they did not always find a sympathetic ear. The decades-long state of emergency that was the Cold War seemed to demand the very political and economic centralization that they so detested. As early as 1952, in fact, future conservative leader William F. Buckley, Jr., expressly advocated the erection of a "totalitarian bureaucracy" at home in order to fight the Communist menace abroad.<sup>45</sup> Regionalism and particularism of the sort advocated by traditionalists could scarcely be expected to flourish in an ideological environment calling for national uniformity and oneness of purpose. Moreover, with national prestige and even survival thought to be at stake, their sympathy for some kind of economic decentralization would doubtless have been anathema to any American leader.

Ironically, it was on the left that much of what Kirk, Weaver, and Nisbet were saying about the importance of community resonated most—in particular, in the "participatory democracy" of the New Left and its Port Huron Statement, and in the demands of the Black Power movement.<sup>46</sup> Both of these developments, of course, were short lived. With the Cold War over, these issues have come to the fore yet again, both inside and outside the conservative movement.

A growing number of left-leaning intellectuals and politicians, particularly since the early 1980s, have registered what they call a "communitarian" critique of liberalism.<sup>47</sup> Communitarian symposia reveal a wide variety of perspectives; but their broad areas of agreement permit several generalizations. All agree that liberalism, with its emphasis on individual rights, fails adequately to take into account the human need for community, and indeed undermines the existence of those corporate bodies that stand between the individual and the state. They tend to look with favor on the republican ideology, with its concern for the common good and for broad political participation, that seems to have dominated American thought in the eighteenth century.

Indeed, much communitarian rhetoric seems to echo traditionalist concerns. Thus Amitai Etzioni, in a survey of communitarian literature, writes:

Indeed, the greatest danger for rights (and liberty more generally) arises when the social moorings of individuals are severed. The atomization of individuals, the dissolution of communities into mobs, the loss of attachments and social commitments, cause individuals to lose competence, the capacity to reason, and self-identity. This is a societal condition which, it has been widely observed, has preceded the rise of totalitarian

movements and governments, although it is not necessarily the only cause. As Alexis de Tocqueville argued, the best protection against totalitarianism is a pluralistic society laced with communities and voluntary associations, rather than a society of highly individualized rights carriers.<sup>48</sup>

While much of the rhetoric that emerges from the communitarians is relatively innocuous and antiseptic, their specific positions are more controversial. The idea of community that Robert Bellah propounds in *Habits of the Heart*, a landmark communitarian work, calls Americans “to wider and wider circles of loyalty ultimately embracing that universal community of all beings”—something like the opposite of the idea of community that the traditionalists sought to vindicate.<sup>49</sup> He quotes with strong disapproval the sentiments of Ted Oster, a California lawyer, who observes: “I have a big problem with identifying with hundreds of millions of whatever—people, flowers, cars, miles. I can see the community around me.” Bellah has only contempt for what he considers such a stunted view of community. “When thinking of the imperative to ‘love thy neighbor,’” he writes, “many metropolitan Americans like Ted thus consider that responsibility fulfilled when they love those compatible neighbors they have surrounded themselves with, fellow members of their own lifestyle enclave, while letting the rest of the world go its chaotic, mysterious way.”<sup>50</sup>

The traditionalists, as we have seen, would no doubt have joined Bellah and Michael Sandel in deploring the consequences for community life of the introduction of, say, a Wal-Mart (to choose a favorite example of Sandel’s). But when it comes to federalism, a principle they considered fundamental to the rejuvenation of localities, Sandel, like most communitarians, has very little to say—and the remarks he does offer are usually disparaging.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, and on a not unrelated point, many if not most communitarians concern themselves less with protecting the integrity and independence of communities than with ensuring that the communities themselves observe the basic tenets and freedoms of liberalism. Amy Gutmann of Princeton, for example, insists that communities honor the principles of “nonrepression” and “nondiscrimination.” She means by these terms, moreover, to secure not simply “negative liberties,” but also to vindicate positive rights. The most fundamental of these, in her view, is “the entitlement of every child to a nonrepressive education.” The approach of which Gutmann speaks, which traces its pedigree to John Dewey, seeks to educate children in the values of social democracy.<sup>52</sup>

For Gutmann, deliberative democracy is sustainable only if its citizens are educated in the liberal values that a democracy requires. The traditionalists would have had no quarrel with the communitarian call for a diversity of intermediate institutions between the individual and the state.<sup>53</sup> But Gutmann’s claim that authentic community necessarily demands an *internal* pluralism and a diversity of ideas and perspectives *within* these institutions—which, moreover, children must be taught to accept as the sign of a healthy body politic—is much more

problematic. Traditionalists, in fact, would be prepared to argue the very opposite. There can indeed be elements of explicit and implicit coercion in a community, particularly when its members see themselves as collectively defending substantial goods—certain moral norms, say, in a small Catholic town—and not as simply agreeing to neutral procedural rules within which a variety of perspectives may be debated (as in Gutmann’s scenario). In the case of children and parents, to offer a very specific example, should a school engage in pedagogical methods involving deliberation among a variety of political perspectives when parents object on religious grounds to some of those perspectives? Gutmann says yes—the community’s need to educate future citizens in democratic modes of thinking and decision-making trumps parental objections.<sup>54</sup> The traditionalist, with an emphasis on the primacy of the family, must disagree.

Yet in raising the issue of coercion and illiberalism at the local level, communitarians do raise a point that the heirs of Kirk, Weaver, and Nisbet must address if they wish to be taken seriously. Indeed, for all their appreciation of the importance of intermediary institutions and of the sense of identity that can come only from the spontaneous association that occurs in small, organic groups, the traditionalists were seldom frank about what might be considered some of the less agreeable consequences of decentralization. Of the three men under consideration, Nisbet addressed the problem most directly in his discussion of the civil rights movement—which all traditionalists opposed. That there was some justice in the claims of blacks Nisbet did not dispute. He insisted, however, that in the long run it is better for these issues to be resolved at the local level, by the people who live in the communities in question. The central state is all too willing, in the name of humanitarianism, to protect the individual from intermediary institutions—and, in the process, to weaken those institutions. Nisbet warns that such an approach fails to appreciate that to the extent that these institutions are weakened, people are deprived of an important source of protection from abuses of power from the center itself.<sup>55</sup>

It appeared that the traditionalists were at least partially vindicated in the victories of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the Republicans in 1994; but this was true only in a very limited and superficial sense. Reagan’s administration was dominated by neoconservatives, whose views in a whole host of areas were anathema to traditionalists.<sup>56</sup> To suppose, moreover, that Kirk, Weaver, and Nisbet would have been satisfied with block grants to the states is to fail utterly to appreciate the depth and profundity of the traditionalist critique.<sup>57</sup>

While the neoconservative philosophy, to the extent that one can be said to exist, may well pay rhetorical allegiance to the idea of Burke’s “little platoons,” its exaggerated nationalism trumps any such considerations. William Kristol and David Brooks, editors of the neoconservative *Weekly Standard*, articulated this perspective with revealing candor in a recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed. Echoing the left communitarians, they write: “The revitalization of our local civic life depends, ultimately, on our national political health.” Kristol and Brooks go on

to outline what they call a “national-greatness conservatism,” for “America won’t be good locally if it isn’t great nationally.”<sup>58</sup>

“National-greatness conservatism,” they explain, consists of the nationalism of Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay and Teddy Roosevelt—a central part of which is a strong executive. Kristol and Brooks are representative, here as elsewhere, of neoconservatism in general; support for a vigorous and dynamic presidency is a standard neoconservative position.<sup>59</sup> Robert Nisbet’s views on the danger posed by a strong charismatic figure at the head of any modern state, democratic or not, have already been cited. Kirk, for his part, refused to admit Alexander Hamilton into the conservative pantheon precisely because of his centralizing and imperial designs; Hamilton had said, moreover, that he hoped the central government would “triumph altogether over the state governments and reduce them to entire subordination.”<sup>60</sup>

Neoconservatives, indeed, express guarded support for the welfare state,<sup>61</sup> and enthusiastic support for the civil rights movement.<sup>62</sup> Traditionalist misgivings about the latter have been discussed above; as for the welfare state, the likes of Kirk, Weaver, and Nisbet based their opposition on a concern that when the central state takes over a task that had previously fallen within the purview of localities, churches, and civic groups, these institutions, denuded of their traditional functions, will atrophy.

Still more troubling from the traditionalist point of view is the neoconservative emphasis on an aggressive American foreign policy. Neoconservatism “embraces a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of national strength and moral assertiveness abroad,” according to Kristol and Brooks. Indeed, the moral imperative of what for lack of a better term might be called democratic globalism permeates neoconservative foreign-policy commentary. Even before the Cold War had ended, Joshua Muravchik spelled out what America’s future approach to the world should be. “The West knows little about ideological war,” he began. “But the place to start is with the assertion that democracy is our creed; that we believe all human beings are entitled to its blessings; and that we are prepared to do what we can to help others achieve it.”<sup>63</sup>

Robert Nisbet, on the other hand, condemned what he saw as an especially unctuous Wilsonian moralism that had characterized American foreign policy since World War I. “Where we intervene the act is almost compulsively cloaked, even as Wilson’s acts were, in rhetoric of pious universalism.”<sup>64</sup> Coupling moralism and foreign policy, the traditionalists were convinced, virtually guaranteed ongoing American intervention across the globe, the domestic consequences of which could only be disastrous. They saw in war and in ceaseless military intervention not a recipe for national glory but a deadly poison for civil society. War not only leads to still more political and economic centralization, but it also at least implicitly calls on Americans to transfer their primary allegiance from the locality to the central state. As Nisbet put it:

For it is difficult to perform the administrative measures necessary to political and military centralization without drawing in drastic fashion from the functions, the authorities, and the allegiances that normally fall to such institutions as religion, profession, labor union, school, and local community. Quite apart from direct administrative action, the sheer brilliance of the fires of war has the effect of making dim all of the other lights of culture. The normal incentives of family, occupation, education, and recreation—already so weakened as the result of processes embedded in modern history—become singularly unattractive and irrelevant compared with the intoxicating incentives that arise from war and its now unlimited psychological demands. Given the quickening effects of war on social dislocation and cultural sterilization, it is not strange that the State should become, in time of war, the major refuge of men.<sup>65</sup>

According to Nisbet, war serves to revolutionize society, to undermine the very kind of social order that conservatives claimed to support. The traditional, kinship-based order that Nisbet pointed to as a source of social and psychological stability, with its checks against excessive individualism, its intermediation of authority—in household, clan, kindred—and its emphasis on ascribed status over achieved status, gave way under the demands of war and military mobilization to something resembling modern forms of social organization. The principles of military association placed much more emphasis on individualism; honor was given not to the oldest or wisest but according to achievement, to the strongest and the most skillful, and therefore usually to the young. From ancient Athens to China to modern-day Vietnam, Nisbet argued, the pattern was the same. Indeed these consequences of war did not escape the notice of the Jacobins or the Communists, for whom war served, at least in part, to accelerate the destruction of the kind of traditional society that they sought to replace. For these reasons in particular, no foreign policy that smacked in any way of a state of constant military readiness, of universalism or globalism—what revisionist historian Harry Elmer Barnes caustically denounced as “perpetual war for perpetual peace”—could earn the assent of an authentic conservative.<sup>66</sup>

The end of the Cold War has served to separate those conservatives who had supported an anti-Communist foreign policy for reasons of strict security—and who under normal conditions would have been “isolationists”—from those whose aims were more or less explicitly Wilsonian.<sup>67</sup> The Ludwig von Mises Institute, for example, a free-market organization founded during the early Reagan years, published the proceedings of one of their recent conferences as *The Costs of War: America's Pyrrhic Victories*.<sup>68</sup> In attendance at the conference—which consisted of interdisciplinary antiwar papers by isolationist conservative and libertarian scholars—was presidential candidate Patrick J. Buchanan.

Not surprisingly, Buchanan, who has criticized abuses of power by both big government and big business, in the process articulating the conservative communitarianism of the traditionalists, won the support of Kirk and Nisbet. (Richard Weaver died prematurely in 1963.) Also supporting Buchanan were the Rockford Institute and its magazine, *Chronicles*, whose editors and contributors favor, if anything, more decentralization and local control than does the conservative commentator himself. While neoconservatism has come to dominate the right wing at large,<sup>69</sup> its ongoing confrontations with the “paleoconservatism” of the pro-Buchanan camp have contributed to a growth in the visibility and influence of those foundations who support the controversial candidate. The *New Republic* noted in 1992, for example, that “*Chronicles*, which was on the periphery of conservatism under Reagan, has become suddenly engaged at its center as the Bush-Buchanan race looms.”<sup>70</sup>

The conservative communitarianism of Kirk, Weaver, and Nisbet is therefore pregnant with implications for modern America. The spread of taxpayers’ revolts, Tenth Amendment movements, neo-Confederate activism, and even militias and rumblings of secession suggest the continuing urgency of the issues of liberty and community. The traditionalist point of view brings to these questions a surprisingly fresh, if at times problematic, perspective—and one that the communitarian left of Bellah and Sandel or the mainstream right of Kristol and the neoconservatives fail to capture. And as it does so, it also serves to remind us that the important fissures in the conservative movement today revolve not around mere policy disputes or questions of strategy, but around the most fundamental questions of human interaction and social existence.

## Notes

1. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York, 1976).

2. *Ibid.*, 57-83.

3. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Santayana* (Chicago, 1953), 8-9.

4. In describing modern conservatism’s debt to Edmund Burke, Nisbet pointed out, “Groups of individuals—classes, communities, guilds and corporations—seemed to Burke and Tocqueville alike to have been the principal victims of the Revolution in France: these rather than abstract individuals. Burke repeatedly referred to violations of the corporate and communal rights of Frenchmen by the Jacobins: rights in kinship, religious, economic, and other kinds of associations”. The freedom that the Jacobins celebrated, Burke believed, was essentially the freedom of the people as a national community to act against all groups “which sought to limit or qualify in any way this monolithic community.” Robert Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* (Milton Keynes, England, 1986), 48-49.

5. Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 143.

6. Weaver, it should be noted, did not share his fellow traditionalists’ enthusiasm for Edmund Burke, seeing in some of Burke’s appeals to tradition and prescription an invitation to moral relativism. Weaver may have been influenced in his view of Burke by the anti-historicist work of his contemporary, Leo Strauss. See Brenan R. Nierman, “The Rhetoric of History and Tradition: The Political Thought of Richard M. Weaver” (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1993), 346ff.

7. “I had not particularly written it as a conservative book,” Nisbet later recalled, “but when it was so judged, I did not appeal.” Nisbet, *Conservatism*, 97.

8. Kirk pointed to a similar dichotomy, choosing as representative thinkers Orestes Brownson and Ralph Waldo Emerson. See Russell Kirk, “Two Facets of the New England Mind: Emerson and Brownson,” *The Month* 8 (October 1952): 208-17.

9. Richard M. Weaver, "Two Types of American Individualism," in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, eds. George M. Curtis, III and James J. Thompson, Jr. (Indianapolis, 1987), 91-103.

10. *Ibid.*, 77-91, 100-103.

11. Robert Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority* (New York, 1975), 287.

12. Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York, 1953), 198-99.

13. *Ibid.*, 199. Nisbet goes on to add: "The genius of totalitarian leadership lies in its profound awareness that human personality cannot tolerate moral isolation. It lies, further, in its knowledge that absolute and relentless power will be acceptable only when it comes to seem the only available form of community and membership." *Ibid.*, 204.

14. *Ibid.*, 15-19.

15. Richard M. Weaver, "Individuality and Modernity," in *Essays on Individuality*, ed. Felix Morley (Philadelphia, 1958; repr., Indianapolis, 1977), 112; Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 146-57. Weaver found the roots of atomistic political philosophy—and much other evil besides—in the triumph of nominalism in the fourteenth century. For with the existence of universals disparaged, and our classifications of the world of physical nature claimed to be arbitrary fictions that did not reflect an objective order but merely aided apprehension, it was only a matter of time before the acid of nominalist metaphysics would be applied to the social order. Since to the nominalist only the individual substance possesses any ontological reality, the very idea of "human nature" becomes problematic, the structures and social distinctions that were once thought to conform to man's nature thrown into question—and ultimately dismissed as arbitrary and open to change. Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, 1948), 44.

16. Richard M. Weaver, "Lord Acton: The Historian as Thinker," *Modern Age* 4 (Spring 1960): 20; Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 236-40; Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 169.

17. Richard M. Weaver, "Two Orators," in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, eds. Curtis and Thompson, 106.

18. Russell Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 140.

19. See, for example, Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 189ff.

20. Weaver, "The South and the American Union," in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, eds. Curtis and Thompson, 246-47.

21. Weaver, "Individuality and Modernity," 112-13.

22. See, for example, Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics* (Chicago, 1951; repr., Indianapolis, 1978), 71-84; Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 248-79 and *passim*.

23. Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 199.

24. Kirk, "Multiple Shops," in *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory*, 271.

25. *Ibid.*, 273.

26. Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, 1994), 34-35.

27. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 133.

28. Russell Kirk, "Ideology and Political Economy," *America* 96 (January 5, 1957): 388-91.

29. Russell Kirk, "Little Shops and Socialist Capitalism," in *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory*, 268.

30. Richard M. Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (Baton Rouge, 1964), 37.

31. Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 325; idem, "Automobile Tears Old Order Apart," *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (November 28, 1962), 9. Kirk worked briefly at the Ford Motor Company after receiving his master's degree, and the experience "confirmed his distrust of industrialized mass-production and its radical consequences for the traditional life of society." Ridgely Hill Pate, "Russell Kirk, Friedrich Hayek, and Peter Viereck: Three Positions in Contemporary Conservative Thought" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1970), 29. Kirk himself never learned to drive, but allowed family members to drive him around. I owe this point to an anonymous referee.

32. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 148.

33. *Ibid.*, 157-58; Kirk, "The Mood of Conservatism," in *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory*, 294-95.

34. See, for example, Richard M. Weaver, "The Southern Phoenix," 17-18, 22-23; "The Southern Tradition," 224-26; and "The South and the American Union," 239; all in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, eds. Curtis and Thompson. See also idem, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1968; repr., Washington, D.C., 1989), 180-81, 344-45, 360.

35. Weaver, *Southern Tradition at Bay*, 43.
36. Fred Douglas Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind* (Columbia, Mo., 1995), 79; Weaver, *Southern Tradition at Bay*, 375. Emphasis in original.
37. Weaver, *Southern Tradition at Bay*, 207.
38. Russell Kirk, "Norms, Conventions, and the South," *Modern Age* 2 (Fall 1958): 338-45; idem, *Randolph of Roanoke, passim*.
39. Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 184.
40. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 132-33. See also the excellent essay by Ralph T. Ancil, "Richard M. Weaver and the Metaphysics of Property," in *The Vision of Richard Weaver*, ed. Joseph Scotchie (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995), 61-75.
41. Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 359.
42. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 149. Nisbet, for his part, in a preface to the 1970 edition of *The Quest for Community*, admitted that the implication of the first edition that centralization had been "confined to processes of political government" was "inadequate." He added a host of other centralizing forces to his list, including, naturally, private corporations. Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York, 1970), xxvii. Unless otherwise indicated, all other references to *Quest* refer to the 1953 edition.
43. Kirk's *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory*—particularly Part Two, "Trudging the Wintry Roads"—is filled with the author's denunciations of such destruction.
44. Russell Kirk, "The Inhumane Businessman," in *The Intemperate Professor and Other Cultural Splenetics*, rev. ed. (Peru, Ill., 1988), 91.
45. William F. Buckley, Jr., "The Party and the Deep Blue Sea," *Commonweal* 55 (January 24, 1952): 391-93.
46. William A. Schambra, "Foreword," in Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (San Francisco, 1990), xiii-xiv.
47. The communitarian literature is obviously extensive, but representative works include Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1996); Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York, 1985); William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge, 1991). See also Bruce Frohnen, *The New Communitarians and the Crisis of Modern Liberalism* (Lawrence, Kans., 1996).
48. Amitai Etzioni, "Old Chestnuts and New Spurs," in *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Virtues, Institutions, and Communities*, ed. Amitai Etzioni (Charlottesville, Va., 1995), 22.
49. Bellah discusses the need to construct a sense of "national community" in *Habits of the Heart*, 201ff., 250-71. See also Brad Lowell Stone, "Statist Communitarianism," *Intercollegiate Review* 32 (Spring 1997): 9-18.
50. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 178-79.
51. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 334-35. Sandel quotes one activist (on page 335) as saying: "I'd rather have a viable community than a cheap pair of underwear." See also Wilfred M. McClay, "Communitarianism and the Federal Idea," *Intercollegiate Review* 32 (Spring 1997): 34-39.
52. Amy Gutmann, "The Virtues of Democratic Self-Restraint," in *New Communitarian Thinking*, ed. Etzioni, 162.
53. One should be mindful, however, that not all self-described communitarians necessarily hold a benign view of intermediary institutions. Some tend towards the idea of a national community, a political order in which incessant rights claims are sublimated in a general concern for the common good of the country as a whole. See Bellah, *Habits of the Heart, passim*, and Stone, "Statist Communitarianism."
54. Gutmann, "The Virtues of Democratic Self-Restraint," in Etzioni, ed., 163-68.
55. See Robert A. Nisbet, "The Fatal Ambivalence of an Idea: Equal Freemen or Equal Serfs?" *Encounter* 47 (December 1976): 10. Donald Livingston, professor of philosophy at Emory University, recently explained the Nisbet thesis this way: "Most of the totalitarian regimes of the modern period, from the Terror of the French Revolution to the Marxist regimes of the twentieth century, have claimed to support human rights. What made them totalitarian was the destruction of those independent political societies (states, principalities, regional authorities, the Church) that had hitherto been a means of corporate resistance to tyranny from the center. The people were then free of any injustice these intermediate orders might perpetrate, but they were also bereft of their protection." Donald W. Livingston, "One Nation Divisible," *Chronicles*, February 1998, 13-17.
56. "How earnestly they founded magazine upon magazine!" Russell Kirk sneered. "How skillfully they insinuated themselves into the councils of the Nixon and Reagan administrations!" Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia, 1993), 12. On neoconservatism, see also Mark Gerson, *The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold War to the Culture Wars* (New York: 1996); Chris-

topher DeMuth and William Kristol, eds., *The Neoconservative Imagination: Essays in Honor of Irving Kristol* (Washington, DC, 1995); Mark Gerson, ed., *The Essential Neoconservative Reader* (Reading, Mass., 1996).

57. On Reagan's unimpressive record on restoring federalism, see Larry Schwab, *The Illusion of a Conservative Reagan Revolution* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1991), esp. 217-20.

58. William Kristol and David Brooks, "What Ails Conservatism," *Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 1997. Kristol told the *Washington Post's* E.J. Dionne Jr. that "Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy and, for that matter, Lyndon Johnson are big facts in American history. Are we willing to say that the country is worse off because of FDR or JFK or LBJ? I'm not willing to say that."

59. See, for example, Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York, 1995), 355-56. See also Samuel Francis, "Imperial Conservatism?" in *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (Columbia, Mo., 1993), 170-75.

60. Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives* (Chicago, 1954), 258. A more detailed analysis of Hamilton's thought can be found in Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 65-70. See also Clyde N. Wilson, "The Jeffersonian Conservative Tradition," *Modern Age* 14 (Winter 1969-70): 36-47.

61. Irving Kristol argued in favor of what he called a "conservative welfare state." "The idea of a welfare state," he insisted, "is in itself perfectly consistent with a conservative political philosophy." Kristol, *Neoconservatism*, 346-48.

62. Clint Bolick, the neoconservative head of the Washington-based Institute for Justice, argued in an influential work that the real threats to liberty occur on the local level, and that federal intervention in local affairs can be welcome if it brings about libertarian results. Clint Bolick, *Grassroots Tyranny: The Limits of Federalism* (Washington, D.C., 1993). For a traditionalist reply to Bolick, see Jeffrey Tucker, "Uprooting Liberty," *Chronicles*, March 1994, 37-39.

63. Quoted in Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind*, 327.

64. Robert Nisbet, *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America* (New York, 1988), 29-39; quotation on 35. Nisbet also observed wryly that "the American Constitution was designed for a people more interested in governing itself than in helping to govern the rest of the world." *Ibid.*, 1. Samuel Francis remarked acridly that "it was the Right of the 1980s that first seriously proposed official policy projects for exporting democracy and intoned the imperative of spreading the democratic gospel to the heathen, and President Reagan himself constantly made use of the Puritan millenarian 'City on a Hill' image to describe his own vision of what America should be and do." Conservatives in the 1980s thus came to recapitulate the same millenarian premises that historically have been the property of the Left, and their adoption of millenarian metaphors, slogans, and actual policies is one of the major indications of the effective death of a serious conservatism in that period." Francis, *Beautiful Losers*, 6-7.

65. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 260. See also Felix Morley, *Freedom and Federalism* (Chicago, 1959; repr., Indianapolis, 1981), esp. ch. 6, "Nationalization through Foreign Policy"; Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 240. Political scientist Bruce Porter came close in 1994 to suggesting that a war, which would lift Americans out of ethnic and regional parochialisms, might be the only way to prevent social and cultural fragmentation in the post-Cold War era. Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics* (New York, 1994), 295-96.

66. See especially Robert A. Nisbet, "The Military Community," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 49 (Winter 1973): 1-28. On the revolutionary nature of war see, for example, Allan Carlson, "The Military as an Engine of Social Change," in *The Costs of War: America's Pyrrhic Victories*, ed. John V. Denson (New Brunswick, N.J., 1997), 323-331.

67. Llewellyn H. Rockwell, Jr., "Realignment on the Right?" *Conservative Review* 1 (June 1990): 50-68; Paul Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement* (New York, 1993). At the 1986 meeting of the Philadelphia Society, an organization composed of a wide variety of conservative intellectuals, Stephen Tonsor lashed out memorably—and somewhat colorfully—at the upstart neoconservatives. "It is splendid," he said, "when the town whose gets religion and joins the church. Now and then she makes a good choir director, but when she begins to tell the minister what he ought to say in his Sunday sermons, matters have been carried too far." Quoted in Gerson, *The Neoconservative Vision*, 314.

68. *The Costs of War*, ed. Denson.

69. See Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, 118-41.

70. Sidney Blumenthal, "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," *New Republic* 205 (January 6 & 13, 1992): 26. On the conflict between neoconservatives and paleoconservatives, see Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind*, 343-49 and Gottfried, *Conservative Movement*, *passim*.