

THE CONSERVATIVE CAUSE: TEN EVENTS

by Russell Kirk

During the past two centuries, conservatives often have gone forth to battle, like the Celts of the Twilight--but seldom to victory. Forty years ago, when I began to write the book now entitled The Conservative Mind, I intended to call it The Conservatives' Rout--not route, but rout. My publisher, in 1953, dissuaded me from that, however; and indeed I might have contributed to the disaster, turning a rout into a flight, had I persisted in my gloomy title.

For the past two hundred years, nevertheless, conservative men and measures have fought rear-guard actions against the antagonists of order. Edmund Burke, whose imagination and eloquence gave men of conservative impulse some coherent understanding of the contest with the forces of disruption, wrote at the beginning of the dissolution of the old order of things that, if mankind demands what cannot be, "the law is broken; nature is disobeyed; and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow." The contest between conservatives and radicals in the modern world has been a fierce battle between the world of order, on the one hand, and the antagonist world, on the other. Beholding the world today, could anyone maintain that ours is an age of sanity, harmony, virtue, order, and fruitful penitence? No, even if conservatives have held their ground here and there, in general the antagonist world has prevailed.

Divine Guidance. As I wrote in 1950, in Queen's Quarterly, we live in "a world that damns tradition, lauds equality, and welcomes change; a world that has clutched Rousseau, swallowed him down, and demanded prophets yet more radical; a world scarred by industrialism, standardized by the common man, consolidated by government; a world harrowed by war, trembling between the colossi of East and West, and peering over the brink into a gulf of dissolution.... The gloomy vaticinations of Burke, which seemed to liberals of Buckle's generation the follies of a deranged old genius, have come to pass; the gods of the copybook headings with fire and slaughter return. Nations dissolving into mere aggregations of individuals; property reapportioned by the political power; great European states ground into powder; tranquil Britain transformed into a socialist commonwealth; the ancient beauty of the Orient ravaged and the empire of India gnawing at her own vitals; the colonial world vomiting out its Europeans, although already metamorphosed by them; the rising on the eastern confines of Europe of a leveling frenzy fierce enough to make Jacobins pale; the passing of riches and might to the Western republic Burke aided--but prosperity acquired in haste and linked with arrogance. Where is the divine guidance Burke discerned in History? Beheld, perhaps, in the punishment of disobedience: "The

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Lord made all things for himself--yea, even the wicked for the day of evil." This horror may have been inevitable; but the last decade of the eighteenth century resounded to Burke's warning, and we still hear its echo, and perhaps can profit. We can salvage: salvaging is a great part of conservatism.

Holding and Gaining Ground. You will perceive that I was not sanguine in 1950. Am I sanguine today? The most that can be said for the conservative cause, thirty-seven years later, is this: the fabric of civilization still hangs together in some quarters of the world, if precariously. Now and again, over the past two centuries, conservatives have held the line; or even have mounted counterattacks, raids (in Eliot's line) "with shabby equipment always deteriorating." Today I venture to describe for you, very succinctly, ten episodes or actions in which the conservative cause retained or gained some ground.

In three earlier lectures, I endeavored to interest you, ladies and gentlemen, in ten conservative principles, ten conservative books, and ten exemplary conservatives. The magical number of ten is more difficult to attain when we try to bring to mind ten events associated with conservatives' gains. It would be easy enough to mention elections won, in this country or that, by parties of a conservative cast; but elections are ephemeral, and the contest between the conservative impulse and the radical impulse is a struggle that transcends little partisan encounters, often about as significant as baseball or football matches.

The Conservative Impulse. So in selecting ten events, I am not discussing primarily the battles of Tweedledum and Tweedledee--of Franklin Roosevelt versus Wendell Willkie, say, or Harold Wilson versus Edward Heath. Instead I am concerned with the conflict between the forces of integration and those of disintegration. By the conservative impulse, I mean the inclination to support a venerable moral order, an established social order, a society of voluntary community, and such healthful institutions as private property and representative government. By the radical impulse, I mean the desire to emancipate all people (whether they like it or not) from moral obligations, to pull down state and church, to bring about an egalitarian collectivism, to discard all the structures of the past. The radical impulse betrays civilization to what Burke called the antagonist world; and into that anti-world most of the people of the earth have fallen during the past two centuries.

Here and there, nevertheless, and now and again, the forces of order have withstood successfully, for a time, the forces of disorder--or perhaps have restored order after a time of violence and anarchy. Permit me to suggest, quite arbitrarily, ten such episodes or developments; if you think of ten better ones, I may readily defer to your judgment. I confine my choices to the two centuries that have elapsed since the American and the French Revolutions, using the term "conservative" in its modern political sense. It would be possible to range through the centuries, picking out in one era or another men or women who we might label, by analogy, as conservatives; but that exercise might rasp upon liberals' sensibilities. If rarely sanguine, I confess to being sanguinary occasionally. Cicero's order that Catiline's confederates be strangled in the Mamertine prison certainly was a striking event with a conservative purpose, much approved by me; but it was quite unconstitutional; and besides, think of what happened to poor Senator Barry Goldwater when in 1964 he ventured to commend this extremism in the cause of liberty.

Those Remarkable Men. Therefore I confine myself this afternoon to events that occurred within the past six or seven generations of mankind, and chiefly within the pale of

what we call "Western" civilization. The first of these events came to pass not a great many miles from here; and had it not occurred, there would be no District of Columbia in which this gathering of ours might be arranged. I refer to the signing of the Constitution of the United States.

On September 18, 1787, some thirty-nine gentlemen politicians subscribed to the new Constitution, fresh from the pens of Gouverneur Morris and the Committee on Style, there in the Pennsylvania State House, now called Independence Hall. If you contend that the day of the Constitution's ratification, July 2, 1788, is the more significant event, I will not quarrel with you. Yet I prefer the drama of the last day on which the Framers, those remarkable men, put their quill pens to parchment.

Sir Henry Maine, my favorite historian of the day, wrote a century ago that the Constitution of the United States is the most genuinely conservative document in the history of nations. I will not labor the point today, because my remaining three Heritage Lectures this calendar year, commencing with one in June, will have to do with our Constitution as a conservative power and device. What we should be celebrating, this year and next, is the triumph of the conservative mind in America, near the close of the eighteenth century, over the radical impulse in America. After a dozen years of war and tribulation, some fifty-five gentlemen from twelve states succeeded in contriving, in considerable part by compromise (which conservatives ought never to despise), a framework of government that has survived the gigantic technological, demographic, economic, social, and even moral alterations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Conservatives never built more cleverly than that. Today the United States stands, the principal power resisting the triumph of a ghastly collectivism throughout the world. Had there come out of the American Revolution what emerged from the French Revolution, all the world today might be one suffocating despotism. But more of that in my June lecture.

A Struggle for Existence. My second event occurs ten years later, in England. Edmund Burke, dying, told his friends to fight on against "the armed doctrine," which today we call ideology, political fanaticism. "Never succumb to the enemy," Burke exhorted them, "it is a struggle for your existence as a nation; and if you must die, die with the sword in your hand; there is a salient, living principle of energy in the public mind of England which only requires proper direction to enable her to withstand this or any other ferocious foe; persevere until this tyranny be past."

That year of 1797 was black for Britain. Yet Burke already had won, although he did not know it. Paine's popular rhetoric did not persuade Englishmen to pull down their inheritance of ordered freedom; while Burke's late writings captured the more lively minds among the rising generation that he had attested at the end of the trial of Warren Hastings. Burke's thought and power of expression it was that brought about a coalition of Whigs and Tories that became the first Conservative party, now the oldest political party in the world. One man's gifts and one man's passion persuaded Britain to fight on, when all allies were lost; and to fight until the strength of the radicals was exhausted.

Reproaching the Enthusiasts. For a third event with significance for conservatives, I transport you to the House of Representatives, in this city of Washington, in May 1824. John Randolph of Roanoke has the floor, speaking with his accustomed biting wit. He has been fighting internal improvements, intervention in European affairs, and increases in the tariff that spring; and the South, at least, begins to listen to him earnestly. At this moment

Randolph reproaches the enthusiasts for swift progress through public policy. I offer you a brief specimen of his extemporaneous brilliance, unknown in Congress today:

In all beneficial changes in the natural world, and the sentiment is illustrated by one of the most beautiful effusions of imagination and genius that I ever read--in all those changes, which are the work of an all-wise, all-seeing and superintending providence, as in the insensible gradation by which the infant but expands into manhood, and from manhood to senility; or if you will, to cacucity itself, you will find imperceptible changes; you cannot see the object move, but take your eyes from it for a while, and like the index of that clock, you can see that it has moved. The old proverb says, God works good, and always by degrees. The devil, on the other hand, is bent on mischief, and always in a hurry. He cannot stay; his object is mischief, which can best be effected suddenly, and he must be gone elsewhere.

The causes that Randolph defended all were lost, in his lifetime or little more than three decades later. Yet his words have more meaning to us today, perhaps, than they had for Randolph's contemporaries. As T.S. Eliot puts it, "The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living."

Revulsion Against Envy. We turn for our fourth event to New England. Orestes Brownson, an American thinker of most remarkable talents, who still is ignored in American universities but who has fascinated both Mr. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and myself, in 1840 was the original American Marxist. But by 1848, it was otherwise with him; and only a few months after publication of the Communist Manifesto, Brownson refuted Marx in an essay entitled "Socialism and the Church." The understanding of the human condition put forward by Brownson in that essay has confined Marxism in America to dilettantes in universities and a handful of friends of the Soviet Union scattered throughout the land. I give you one passage from "Socialism and the Church":

Veiling itself under Christian forms, attempting to distinguish between Christianity and the Church, claiming for itself the authority and immense popularity of the Gospel, denouncing Christianity in the name of Christianity, discarding the Bible in the name of the Bible, and defying God in the name of God, Socialism conceals from the indiscriminating multitude its true character, and, appealing to our strongest natural inclinations and passions, it asserts itself with terrific power, and rolls on its career of devastation and death with a force that human beings, in themselves, are impotent to resist. Men are assimilated to it by all the power of their own nature, and by all their reverence for religion. Their very faith and charity are perverted, and their noblest sympathies and their sublimest hopes are made subservient to their basest passions and their most grovelling propensities. Here is the secret of the strength of Socialism, and here is the principle source of its danger.

You will recognize in these sentences, written in 1848, the "liberation theology" of our own time. Brownson's writings about the middle of the nineteenth century were events in the sense that they expressed the American revulsion against socialist envy.

The Working Classes Are Conservative. For our fifth event, I point to the victory of Benjamin Disraeli over the Liberals in Victorian Britain. "The old Jew gentlemen sitting on the top of chaos," as Augustus Hare memorably describes that astute champion of tradition and custom and the chartered rights of Englishmen, of course did not succeed in turning back forever the leveling and disintegrating forces at work in the world; but he did resuscitate an enfeebled resistance to those forces--a resistance that still works within the Tory party. I refer not to the Disraeli of the Reform Bill of 1867, but to the young Disraeli of Sybil and the old Disraeli of 1874. Speaking at the Guildhall in that year, he declared that there is more to conservative sentiments than the possession of wealth. "We have been told that a working man cannot be conservative, because he has nothing to conserve--he has neither land nor capital; as if there were not other things in the world as precious as land and capital:" he said then. The working man has liberty, justice, security of person and home, equal administration of laws, unfettered industry, Disraeli went on. "Surely these are privileges worthy of being preserved: . . . And if that be the case, is it wonderful that the working classes are Conservative?" That argument told in 1872, and it needs to be made again today.

As socialism and nationalism begin to pull the world apart in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth, the tide of events runs against the conservative cause. So we must leap down to the struggles of half a century ago, in order to discern conservative resistance to the troops of the antagonist world.

Defeating the Reds in Spain. For our sixth event, or rather group of events, then, I look to the defeat or overthrow of communist parties and forces in eastern and central Europe, in the years immediately following the First World War: the rejection of Marxism by the Finns, Poles, Hungarians, Germans, and other nations. The time would come when most of these peoples would be abandoned to Soviet ambition, after all; but for the time being a kind of frontier was held against Mordor--that is, Moscow. A later signal event of this sort was the defeat of the Reds in Spain, completed in 1939.

Our seventh event is the defeat of a different ideology: the Allies' crushing of the Nazis, in 1945: the Western Allies, I mean. It is pleasant to be able to record one major military victory that helped to sustain order, justice, and freedom. The fortitude of Britain in general, and of Winston Churchill in particular, made possible this successful resistance to the enemies of a tolerable civil social order.

Looking for Spiritual Growth. For the eighth event I choose the change of residence of a man of letters: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, exiled from Russia. Solzhenitsyn's denunciation of the tyranny of ideology did more to dispel illusions--although not from everybody's vision--than did any other writing of our time. In 1974 Solzhenitsyn made his way to the West; in 1983, through his Templeton Address, he expressed with high feeling the essence of the conservative impulse:

Our life consists not in the pursuit of material success but in the quest of worthy spiritual growth. Our entire earthly existence is but a transition stage in the movement toward something higher, and we must not stumble or fall, nor

must we linger fruitlessly on one rung of the ladder.... The laws of physics and physiology will never reveal the indisputable manner in which the Creator constantly, day in and day out, participates in the life of each of us, unfailingly granting us the energy of existence; when this assistance leaves us, we die. In the life of our entire planet, the Divine Spirit moves with no less force: this we must grasp in our dark and terrible hour.

The Pope's Heroic Character. The ninth event of strong significance for the conserving of the world of order is the election of the Polish ecclesiastic now styled John Paul II to the Papacy. A Church swiftly sliding toward a trivial neoterism, or worse, has been arrested in its descent; once more the Church begins to speak against the enemies of order, both order of spirit and social order; and the heroic character of the Pope, who has known the suffering of obscure men under grim dominations and powers, gives his words authority in quarters never Catholic. Rome is the power that withholds, Cardinal Newman wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century; and when Rome falls, the Antichrist will come, in the name of liberation. Fifteen years ago, that hour seemed near at hand; but John Paul II, with few to help him, has faced down the vanguard of the antagonist world.

For our tenth event, I have settled upon the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980. Had a few more Republicans apprehended the drift of public opinion in the United States, and understood how the popular rhetoric of Mr. Reagan spoke to American minds, Mr. Reagan might have been elected years earlier--even so early as 1964, conceivably--and much mischief avoided thereby.

Ronald Reagan will be remembered as the President who restored hope to the American people--even great expectations. Old sureties that the ritualistic liberal had mocked were unshaken in Ronald Reagan's mind; and President Reagan's reaffirmation of those ancient convictions began to arouse the nation from the discouragement of twenty years or more.

Arming Against a Sea of Trouble. We have yet to elect a Congress of which the majority will be intelligently conservative--much though the times cry out for a genuinely conservative renewal, reaffirmation, and restoration of some measure of order and justice and freedom. Indeed, we have yet to obtain some consensus among people conservatively inclined as to what we meant to conserve.

But we have taken arms against a sea of troubles, friends; and by opposing we may end them. The beginning of the twenty-first century--for a time, it seemed as if humanity would not get so far in time--may mark the beginning of a recovery of right reason and moral imagination. Our Time of Troubles, Arnold Toynbee tells us, commenced with the catastrophic events of the year 1914. Some historians now suggest that our civilization has just begun to recover from the errors and appetites that brought society so close to total surrender to the antagonist world--even our society, so smug about its material acquisitions. If indeed some conservative standards are to be erected soon, there will occur large events worth celebrating; and it is conceivable, ladies and gentlemen, that some of you present here this day may look back upon the twentieth century as a Bad Old Time when things were in the saddle and rode mankind; a time when nearly all the big events were disastrous. Let us devoutly hope so. We never will succeed in marching to Zion--that gross delusion, indeed, lies behind many of the ruinous events of the past two centuries--but we may aspire to conserve much that deserves saving. Begin to make events, friends, rather than to be overwhelmed by them.

