



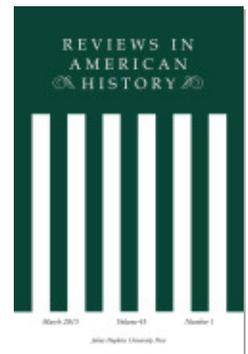
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IN RETROSPECT: GEORGE NASH'S *THE CONSERVATIVE INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENT IN AMERICA SINCE 1945*

Jennifer Burns

George H. Nash. *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. Wilmington, Del.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996; reprint of Basic Books' 1976 publication. 467 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliographical essay, bibliographical postscript, and index. \$24.95.

It is a rare work of history that remains the authoritative treatment of its subject nearly thirty years after publication, cited by numerous contemporary historians for its content and scholarship rather than as an historiographical curio. Rarer still is the work of history that appears pre-publication as a forty-seven-page insert in *National Review*, the centerfold of the magazine's twentieth anniversary issue.¹ But then, George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, first published in 1976, is an unusual book in many ways, not least because it gives serious consideration to American history's so-called orphan, conservatism. If conservatism is the orphan, as Alan Brinkley famously declared in 1994, then conservative intellectual history is a veritable foundling.² Although studies of the American right have become almost fashionable as of late, most of these remain explicitly political or social examinations, with little concern paid to the intellectuals who articulated the formal strategy and concerns of the movement and laid the groundwork for electoral success. In the face of this lacuna, Nash's book, based on his Harvard dissertation, has become literally the first and last word on the topic.³ Nearly three decades later, a look back at the text reveals that Nash's work achieved this dominance because he was the first historian to cast aside the stale interpretive legacies of the 1950s. By overcoming the inheritance of one generation, he established a powerful legacy for scholars who would follow. Today, his work exerts a deep influence on our common understanding of conservatism in America, an influence that is deserved but nonetheless in need of critical appraisal.

Nash's primary argument is embedded in his general definition of American conservative thought, which he presents as a unique blend of three main impulses, labeled libertarianism, anti-communism, and traditionalist conservatism. According to Nash, while elements of each strand existed throughout

the century, it was not until after 1945 that they gathered enough form and strength to be considered a viable movement. His elegant topical and chronological structure further supports and reinforces this trinitarian, post-war image of conservatism. The book begins thematically, with one chapter each on libertarians and anti-communists, and two on the traditionalists (subdivided between "Revolt Against the Masses" and "Recovery of Tradition and Values"). Nash identifies the major thinkers, publications, and themes that make up each part of his triad. He provides useful glosses of the main texts and deftly describes pivotal events such as the founding of the Mt. Pélerin Society and the Hiss trial. Here his book serves as a valuable index to the myriad small magazines and organizations that proliferated unorthodox political ideas in the wake of World War II. As he describes the contours of each nascent impulse, Nash emphasizes their fragility and the pervasive sense of isolation conservatives felt at this time.

Although the libertarians sounded familiar themes of states rights, limited government, and individual freedom, Nash finds that "however old and indigenous this stream of thought may have been, much of the initial impetus for its renaissance came not from America but from Europe" (p. 2). According to Nash, in the 1940s, economists of the Austrian school, primarily Ludwig Von Mises and F.A. Hayek, were the most influential on this strain of conservatism. He also gives significant credit to Albert J. Nock, the American author of *Our Enemy the State* (1935) and *The Superfluous Man* (1943). While libertarians focused on natural rights and political freedom, conservatives of the traditionalist stripe, after the fashion of Leo Strauss, tended to focus on duties and the cultivation of virtue. Again, Nash depicts traditionalism as deeply influenced by European ideas. He focuses considerable attention on Russell Kirk, who idolized Edmund Burke, as an exemplar of this tendency. Following Kirk, Nash defines the traditionalists as those who believe in order, hierarchy, a divinely infused society, and the wisdom of ancestors. Like Nock (and the Nashville Agrarians before him), Kirk felt a deeper spiritual kinship with Europe than with America.⁴ He received a doctorate from the pleasingly gothic St. Andrew's University in Scotland and in his *The Conservative Mind* (1953) divided his time equally between American and British thought. Although Nash identifies anti-communism as the third component of conservatism, in his text it functions more like ideological cement than a distinct political position. An enemy that embodied both secularism and an overweening state equally satisfied libertarians and traditionalists. Joined in battle, they were able to overlook the differences that divided them. Perhaps the most distinctive and important contribution anti-communism made to the conservative mix was a populist emphasis that helped dilute the elitism of the traditionalists and libertarians.

According to Nash, while these three distinct strains were never mutually exclusive, considerable tension did exist between the proponents of each. As the movement slowly coalesced in the 1950s, primarily through the efforts of *National Review* (founded in 1955), partisans of each flank sniped at one another. While all could agree with anti-communism, traditionalists disliked the libertarian emphasis on the free market and individual liberty.⁵ Libertarians fought back fiercely, refusing to cede any ground to traditionalists and their talk of "virtue." Yet, by the mid 1960s, this phase of internal warfare had passed, with both parties agreeing to coexist in a grudging yet stable peace. Here, Nash provides little explanation for what led to this accord, sparsely elaborating on his observation that "the tumult began to subside" (p. 164). He does identify the critical people in this reconciliation, namely William F. Buckley, Jr., and Frank S. Meyer, both of *National Review*. Meyer's 1964 anthology *What is Conservatism?* symbolized the resolution by including libertarians, traditionalists, and anti-communists alike. In an influential conclusion, Meyer articulated his theory of "fusionism." He called for "reason operating within tradition" and listed common standards all conservatives could support: belief in an objective moral order, the value of the human person against the state, suspicion of planning, the Constitution as originally conceived, anti-communism. Nash praises Meyer for his recognition that "conservatism in America in the 1950s and 1960s was not, in its essence, a speculative or theoretical enterprise. It was an intellectual movement with definite political implications." Therefore, if conservatives could agree on "the *intermediate* level of intelligent action," they could call themselves unified and suspend the quarrel (p. 171; italics in original). In the latter chapters of the book, Nash explores the conservative's search for a "viable heritage," the intramural disputes that characterized the period of fusion, and their varied responses to the Cold War. Having traced the development of conservatism from the postwar years through the early 1970s, he concludes on a Whiggish note. Divided and lonely conservatives have learned to work together, ironed out their many differences, and by the end of the text, are duly poised to assume their rightful mantle of national leadership.

On the whole, Nash's discussion is marked by a carefully neutral tone and an extraordinary empiricism. Because he quotes so liberally from his sources, the book provides the reader with a deep exposure to the rhetoric and style of mid-century conservatism. When describing arguments among conservatives or between conservatives and liberals, Nash delineates the boundaries of the dispute and then allows each party to speak for itself. In the notes, he follows up with additional detail, copious citations, and perspectives gleaned from his extensive oral interviews. While this method makes his text a treasure trove for historians following in his footsteps, such high *wissenschaftlich*

practice leads to a rather plodding, pedestrian style. Nonetheless, Nash's extensive contacts with conservatives at an early moment in their history, when events were fresh, documentation plentiful, and oral history easily done, is a clear strength of the volume. Although he received his Ph.D. from Harvard and Basic Books first published *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*, Nash did not pursue a traditional path in academia.⁶ Instead, he went on to become a respected independent scholar and commentator. In 1975 he was commissioned by the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association to write the official scholarly biography of the ex-president. Three volumes of this work were published, to general high acclaim, and today Nash is considered one of the foremost experts on Hoover.⁷ He has also been a regular contributor to *National Review*. Although Nash's book is a scholarly account of conservatism, his political beliefs do shine through the text. Particularly in the concluding sections, when Nash considers just how far conservatives have come over the course of the century, he allows a triumphant note to creep into his discussion and his affinity for conservatism comes clear.

In this veiled admiration for conservatism, Nash's book represented a clear departure from some influential approaches to the American right. One of the earliest attempts at understanding the American right was made by the ill-fated "pluralist historians," best represented in the two volumes *The New American Right* (1955) and *The Radical Right* (1963). While these volumes paid careful attention to the structure and dynamics of conservative thought, they did so in a largely pejorative fashion, imagining adherence to right-wing ideology as symptomatic of deep psychological disarray.⁸ Although the pluralist interpretation is long since discredited, and indeed has become a stale set piece in accounts of conservative historiography, it is important to remember the influence it once exerted. The first full scale attack on the pluralists, Michael Rogin's *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter*, was published in 1968, only a few years before Nash began writing. In this book, Rogin convincingly argued that the pluralists understood McCarthy through the prism of their own post-Holocaust consciousness, and so their understanding of McCarthy and the right was fundamentally distorted. He argued that right-wing movements should be seen as similar to any other political phenomenon, rather than relegated to an outmoded and unhelpful category of "extremism." Nash, who resided on the opposite end of the political spectrum from most contributors to these early volumes, had little trouble avoiding their condescending view of conservatism. And in the wake of Rogin, he need not openly attack their interpretation, choosing instead to simply ignore it. Thus his book was one of the first to discuss conservatism without being tangled in the pluralist legacy.

As noteworthy as this evenhanded treatment may have been, far more significant to the historical profession was the new definition of conservatism

that Nash pioneered. In 1976, Nash's presentation of conservatism as a carefully balanced triad of traditionalists, libertarians, and anti-communists was a profound argument unto itself. The importance of this definition can be seen by a cursory glance at two books published just before Nash's that attempted to cover similar territory. In *The Conservative Tradition in America* (1967)—published as a Civil Rights backlash swept across the country—Allen Guttman argued that “conservatism has persisted in America as an essentially literary phenomenon.”⁹ Hence Guttman focused exclusively on literati such as William Cooper, T.S. Eliot, and James Gould Cozzens. Guttman was able to restrict his discussion in this way because he defined conservatives essentially as followers of Burke. Even so, he struggled mightily to justify this definition and to maintain his analytic divisions. For several convoluted pages in his introduction he labored to explain the differences between the Burkean conservatives and the others who laid claim to the label, eventually dividing his subjects into upper case real “Conservatives” and lower case false “conservatives.” When dealing with the troublesome politically active intellectuals who might be characterized as conservative, his language was straight out of *The Radical Right*. Goldwater's followers, Guttman revealed, “are the men and women whom a combination of psychological and political opinion tests revealed to be suspicious, rigid, compulsive, intolerant, guilty, hostile, defensive, timid, frustrated, and submissive.”¹⁰ Similarly, Ronald Lora, in *Conservative Minds in America* (1971), confined his interest to cultural conservatives, again defined as those of a Burkian bent. He noted that “cultural conservatism as I have defined it was once important even in the political life of the nation. It is no longer found there and is today restricted to a thoughtful minority, mostly in literary and academic circles.”¹¹ Like Guttman, Lora chose to focus on literary types. However, at the end of his book, he began to branch out in a consideration of the so-called “New Conservatives,” namely Kirk, Peter Viereck, and Buckley. But here his discussion was cursory, and he left unexplained the connections between these new developments and the history that was the primary focus of his book. It was left to Nash to do the voluminous archival research and scholarly spadework that would provide a more complete picture of intellectuals on the right.

Although published in 1967 and 1971, the work of Guttman and Lora was profoundly influenced by interpretations of conservatism first advanced in the 1950s. Both historians closely followed the argument of Clinton Rossiter's *Conservatism in America* (1955), thereby unwittingly joining a long-dormant debate about who might legitimately lay claim to the label “conservative.” In that book, Rossiter drew a distinction between a true “Conservatism” that was worthy of carrying Burke's mantle and a derivative, unsatisfactory American “conservatism” that was betraying its profound political and social obligations through its overheated enthusiasm for laissez faire capitalism. (He

paid scant attention to anti-communism.) Rossiter wrote partly as an analyst and partly as an exhorter, urging conservatives to emulate not Andrew Carnegie and Herbert Spencer but rather their true American fathers, the Puritans, the Federalists, and the Adams family. His intended audience rather peevishly rejected this advice. As Nash noted, libertarians and anti-communists were infuriated by the liberal claim that a true conservative would support the New Deal reforms and eschew the doings of Senator McCarthy. Most conservatives considered Rossiter little better than a "Trojan Horse of Liberalism," seeing his criticism as typical liberal bossiness and an unacceptable attempt to co-opt their movement.¹² Rossiter was only one of many liberals who tussled with his political enemies over the word "conservative."¹³ He was joined in this effort by the likes of Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Samuel Huntington, and Peter Viereck, who inaugurated a vogue for "New Conservatism" with his *Conservatism Revisited* (1950), only to see the word successfully claimed by his political opponents. Schlesinger was an active participant in these debates and published several articles on the topic. Huntington argued for conservatism as a "situational" ideology and thus invited liberals into the conservative fold so that they might preserve the gains of liberalism. Richard Hofstadter, too, attempted to protect the label conservative, calling supporters of McCarthy "pseudo-conservatives" in *The New American Right*.¹⁴

Despite these efforts, drawing a bead on conservatism in the 1950s proved a difficult task. In contrast to Nash's thirty-year run, the most prominent interpretations had a shelf life of around seven years. Bell and his collaborators re-issued the *The New American Right* as *The Radical Right* in 1963, admitting they had misconstrued several key features of McCarthyism and the right more generally. While most contributors to the second volume remained loyal to their pioneering model of "status politics," they did admit to numerous faults in their initial analysis. As Hofstadter explained, in his first essay he had relied too heavily on the concept of status politics, been excessively clinical in his interpretation, and underestimated the importance of religious fundamentalism. Rossiter also published a revised edition of *Conservatism in America* seven years later, now with a wry subtitle that reflected the ideological pounding he had taken: *The Thankless Persuasion*. He did this because of his "recognition of the wrong turns and loose ends in the first edition," and so that he could more fully identify his own political stance as one "well to the right of Walter Reuther and well to the left of Senator Goldwater." Despite his stated claim to analyze rather than exhort this time around, the second edition is far more critical of both "conservatism" and "Conservatism" than the first. He called both ideologies mean in spirit, materialistic, selfish, and smug, among other unflattering adjectives.¹⁵ Viereck was even more explicit in his subtitle, republishing his *Conservatism Revisited*

(1949) in 1962 with the addition of *Book II: The New Conservatism—What Went Wrong?* Viereck's first work had promoted Metternich as the conservative ideal and a guide to the postwar world. His second edition noted the failure of this project and the changed meaning of the word conservative. He bemoaned "the appalling extent to which this misuse would triumph" and asked, "What is it, triumph or bankruptcy, when the empty shell of a name gets acclaim while serving as a chrysalis for its opposite?"¹⁶ Despite this flurry of revision, by 1960, the liberals had definitively lost the semantic battle. In that year, Barry Goldwater proudly claimed the label "conservative" for his libertarian, anti-communist beliefs with *The Conscience of a Conservative*.¹⁷ From then on, only within the confines of academic history would the older usage persist.

In 1976, Nash definitively repudiated this 1950s interpretative legacy by recognizing libertarians and anti-communist crusaders as bona fide members of a movement that also included the more familiar traditionalists. Nash followed a big tent definition of conservatism and explained that he would count as conservatives anyone who characterized himself or herself as such. He wrote: "I have designated various people as conservatives either because they called themselves conservatives or because others (who did call themselves conservatives) regarded them as part of their conservative intellectual movement" (p. xiv). Essentially, Nash's definition—and historians' acceptance of it—represented the final victory of conservative efforts at self-definition. Beyond this, there were good reasons to follow such a policy. Conservatism has been a uniquely variegated movement, and Nash's expanded definition enabled historians to accurately see and understand conservatism as the distinctive American blend that it was. In foregoing the invidious distinction between "Conservatives" and "conservatives," Nash presented for the first time a clear and rational argument about conservatism that hewed to reality rather than theory. Whereas the pluralist historians rashly identified conservatives as members of certain highly specific social groupings, and thus opened themselves up to simple empirical refutation, it is not so easy to accuse Nash of misconstruing who conservatives actually were. He restricted his claims only to intellectuals, yet allowed into the text anyone with a passing affiliation for the right. This flexibility meant that Nash's arguments could expand to encompass new manifestations of conservatism and it helped Nash withstand shifts in opinion regarding the American right. While his approach may be dry, in its meticulous detail and scrupulous inclusiveness, it rarely appears dated. No historians have openly challenged Nash's portrait of conservatism, and many have made extensive use of it. Decades later, this broad definition of conservatism is the primary reason why Nash's work lives on while the books by Guttman and Lora have faded into insignificance.

Several contemporary reviewers understood the importance of Nash's expanded sense of conservatism. They also deeply appreciated his fastidious research and encyclopedic scope. In a 1976 *American Quarterly* review essay that considered recent works on conservatism, including Lora's, Nash's, and several anthologies issued by Buckley, Justus Doenecke judged that "Nash's solid grounding in manuscripts, journals, and interviews makes his work the most thorough and responsible account in print." Doenecke also largely accepted Nash's definition, agreeing that "it is best to reserve the conservative label for those who call themselves conservatives and who are considered so by others."¹⁸ In *The Journal of Southern History*, Franklin Mitchell also welcomed this approach, noting that "Nash's comprehensive account demonstrates the great diversity of conservative thought in postwar America and thereby renders an important contribution to recent intellectual history."¹⁹ Doenecke and Mitchell were among the first historians to appreciate Nash's insight that conservatism in America might be best defined as a loose alliance of impulses, rather than an ideologically consistent movement. Unsurprisingly, Lora and Guttman, who reviewed Nash for the *Journal of American History* and *American Historical Review* respectively, were less impressed by the work. Lora criticized Nash's "refusal to define conservatism" and bemoaned his lack of critical verve.²⁰ Guttman felt overwhelmed by Nash's approach; he complained, "Everybody appears onstage; nobody has a starring role," and reported that "the reader sometimes feels rather helpless confronted with this mixed bag."²¹ Both were further bemused by Nash's insistence that conservatism was of a piece, and his acceptance of Meyer's "fusion." How was it possible that all these disparate elements made up one identifiable worldview?

Here, the gap between Nash the conservative and his more liberal reviewers yawned large. Nash's insider position was critical, for he was able to accept at face value conservatism's claim to coherence. To outsiders, such claims appeared muddled at best or preposterous at worst. As Lora carped, "[A]re readers to believe that free enterprise economics and libertarian social theory have been successfully reconciled with traditionalism and its emphasis on community, order, virtue and prescriptive rights?"²² But Nash, as a movement conservative himself, understood that conservatism was essentially a balancing act (or, as the title of his dissertation rather more poetically phrased it, "A Dance Along the Precipice"). While his reviewers might challenge as folly the conservative idea that liberalism was monolithic, Nash knew from experience how effectively this belief helped weld together disparate strands of conservatism. As he wrote, "[Conservatives] deeply believed . . . that the Left was, in basic philosophy, united" (p. 137). Here, then, lay the key to conservative identity: a well-defined enemy. Coming from the right, Nash understood how liberalism and "the Left" stood out in sharp relief to conservatives, whatever the true complexities might be. And on a

larger scale, this idea informed Nash's whole approach. Conservatism was a matter of self identification, self perception. It was not a matter of what historians conversant in the varieties of leftism thought, but rather what conservatives thought. And it took a conservative historian to make this point clear.

The question remains, why were the reviewers so untroubled by Nash's close relationship with the conservative movement? In the first place, Nash did an admirable job of keeping his sympathies and personal perspective under wraps. He was, for the vast majority of the book, a historian first and a conservative second. Perhaps the reviewers were unaware of the book's early appearance in *National Review*, although Lora did make passing mention to its publication there. Or perhaps the reviewers graciously recognized that advocacy in a historian need not be a terrible thing, that historians on the left had often translated their scholarship into politics and vice versa, and granted Nash the right to do the same. Furthermore, it did generally appear that Nash's conservatism had no undue effect on the text. If anything, it appeared to make him painfully chary of controversy. Little that he said was falsifiable, objectionable, or inflammatory. His cast of characters was vast, and Nash treated each with equal respect. As Doenecke put it, "He makes no distinction between profundity and silliness." All reviewers agreed that Nash's research was beyond reproach, but wished for more rigorous treatment of the most critical debates and more straightforward weighing of the factors at stake. Few were able to outright disagree with Nash on anything specific; he could only be accused of being *too* fair. His book was decidedly not one to engender argument.²³

This aspect of Nash can be seen in the reception his book has received in the thirty-odd years since its publication. Nash's approach has proved highly appealing to fellow historians in need of analytic coherence. His definition of conservatism is simultaneously capacious and precise, allowing historians maximum freedom in the redeployment of his thesis while permitting them to feel they have a rigorous definition at hand. By now, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement* has achieved the rare status of a "classic."²⁴ But it is an odd classic, for few scholars engage his argument directly or line up on either side of his interpretation. Rather, historians rely on Nash as an easy citation for the intellectual side of the story as they rush on past toward the political campaigns, secretive societies, and social movements that are their destination. Moreover, while Nash intended his book to be a study of conservative intellectuals, historians have used it as a synecdoche for right-wing phenomenon of all kinds. Tributes and references to Nash are legion among the bumper crop of new work on the right. "Much of the discussion that follows is informed by [Nash's] work," John Andrew avers in *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (1997),

as he discusses the ideological formations of the 1960s.²⁵ In her study of Orange County conservatives, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2001), Lisa McGirr notes while analyzing the thought of her subjects, "Here I draw on Jerome Himmelstein's formulation of the content of conservative ideology." As it turns out, Himmelstein's formulation, found in his widely quoted *To The Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (1990), is simply Nash overlaid with a sociological gloss.²⁶ Likewise, Jonathan Schoenwald in *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (2001) identifies conservatism as a "tripartite ideology" composed of "traditionalism, libertarianism, and anticommunism . . . conceived in the decade after World War II."²⁷ To a surprising extent, Schoenwald's argument revives the pluralist distinction between extremist and mainstream. But if this anachronism sets him apart, his dependence on Nash does not, for virtually every recent book published on the right cites Nash, as a glance at the footnotes can confirm.²⁸

Even if Nash's book did not set forth explicit interpretive canons for other historians to debate, it was certainly not devoid of an argument. Placed in context, it becomes clear that Nash's description of conservatism itself was an implicit, embedded argument. And, thirty some years later, this thesis still moves under the surface of his work, influencing those historians who rely upon him. Even quick nods to Nash can have important consequences. This can be seen clearly with regards to periodization, and in the continuing perception that conservatism germinated around 1945 or so. It may well be that the post-World War II frame is so popular because it does reflect a discipline-wide preference for tidy categories marked off by fail-safe events of historical import. But surely, when it comes to this particular topic, Nash plays a role as well. In a 1991 revision of his and Thomas Fleming's 1988 book, *The Conservative Movement*, Paul Gottfried laments his earlier dependence on Nash, writing that he chose to substantially revise his book partially because of a "subtext in Nash's work that we accepted all too uncritically: that American conservatism only became something deserving of serious national attention in the postwar period."²⁹ In this instance, Nash's periodization of conservatism can be traced directly to his partisanship. Nash is invested in the idea of conservatism as an isolated, ineffectual movement in the early years, because it feeds his romanticism. He writes with evident admiration of the early conservatives, whom he presents as proud and defiant individualists, bucking the tide in fealty to their principles: "the Olympian Nock, Hayek in war-torn London, Chodorov living on a meal a day, Read in a 'monastery' outside New York City, Buckley seemingly alone at Yale—these and the others seemed especially noteworthy for their refusal to abandon what frequently appeared to be a doomed position. In their contempt for the cult of easy security, passive conformity, and acceptance by the 'lonely crowd,' they

exhibited an 'inner directedness' that many of their contemporaries believed was dying" (p. 28). If conservatives were not so exceptional, but rather inherited a series of long-established American beliefs and shared with the broader populace certain fundamental attitudes and opinions about communism, government, religion, and so forth, the embattled remnant Nash valorizes loses much of its luster. Indeed, recent scholarship has begun to argue that conservatism be considered not an aberration but in many respects a norm of American thought.³⁰

Similarly, while Nash escaped many deleterious legacies of the 1950s, he persisted in seeing conservatism as an essentially elitist and European affair. In this, he simply followed a long line of historians and the self-image of many conservatives. Most twentieth-century efforts at understanding the right have been profoundly shaped by the products of the storied consensus school, which exerted (and continues to exert) a far more pervasive influence than the pluralists. As far as modern American conservatism is concerned, the consensus historians could be used in many ways. If one peered beneath the surface of Louis Hartz's "liberalism" one could conceivably find a conservative, or at the very least a libertarian devoted to contract and laissez faire. Similarly, Daniel Boorstin's *Genius of American Politics* might yield a crop of sober-minded, reflective individuals who could nest easily in Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*.³¹ But many historians instead chose to focus on the "consensus" aspects of consensus history, defining America as essentially liberal, and conservatives as, therefore, essentially un-American. Such beliefs pervaded far beyond the confines of academic history, influencing general liberal attitudes towards the right that persisted well into the 1980s. The consensus viewpoint also shaped Nash's description of conservatism, where even states rights libertarians and 100% Americans draw inspiration from Europe. Yet, by broadly drawing the borders of conservatism, Nash has laid the groundwork for a thorough reappraisal of this impression.

From today's vantage point, it is clear that in many areas Nash's rendition of events needs to be revised. This is glaringly obvious in his treatment of race, where Nash elides the most urgent questions. Discussing the civil rights era, Nash insists that "the conservative leadership strenuously abjured any notions of innate black inferiority," while marshaling much evidence to the contrary (p. 260). It is true that the conservatives Nash discusses avoided crude expressions of racism. But it is equally true that many of their arguments against civil rights rested implicitly on an assumption of black inferiority, which might not be "innate" but was still obdurate enough to require a very slow pace of reform, or no reform at all. Nash does not make these connections or explain how these beliefs might be related to different parts of the conservative cosmology. To what extent was this persistent racism linked to conservative distrust of social science (especially regarding *Brown v.*

Board of Education), religious belief, or a general struggle against cultural modernism?³² What did libertarians have to say on the racial issue? Did the pressure of civil rights activism and success produce any shifts in conservative thinking on the topic?³³ In bypassing these issues, Nash particularly cripples his examination of the South. Writing about Richard Weaver, a neo-Agrarian who for a time rivaled Kirk as conservatism's main traditionalist theorist, he notes blandly that Weaver's dissertation on the antebellum South was not simply a historical investigation but also an apology. Yet if Weaver defined the South as having a unique "ethical claim which can be described only in terms of the mandate of civilization," how did this accord with the South's reaction to the ethical claim of desegregation (p. 32)?³⁴ The classic American problem of race was particularly vexing for conservatives, but Nash avoids this territory. And as it is with race, so too with gender, social class, and other categories of analysis that historians have employed so fruitfully in the years since Nash wrote.³⁵

Nash's influence on our understanding of conservatism has been considerable. With his insistence that libertarians and anti-communists be included along with the traditionalists in any movement called "conservatism," Nash has left an indelible mark on the field. His work has undoubtedly helped historians come to a more nuanced and accurate understanding of conservatism, and this is all for the better. Nash sensibly avoids jamming the American experience into any overarching category, pointing out that conservatism in America cannot be reduced to either fascism or Edmund Burke. As he notes, "If America was distinctive, perhaps its conservatism (if any) was also distinctive" (p. 176). But even as he articulates a sense of American exceptionalism, Nash's conservatism remains surprisingly disconnected from the American scene. One wonders how his cast of affected pseudo-Europeans would have made any impact on Americans whatsoever, because they are not linked to any earlier movements or impulses. In his text, there is little sense that there existed a cogent critique of federal government expansion that predated the New Deal, drawing strength from events as diverse as Prohibition, the federal income tax amendment, and the teaching of evolution in schools. Nash also minimizes the deep antipathy the New Deal aroused among his subjects, focusing instead on the European experience. This leaves fundamentally unexplained the central narrative thrust of the book, in which conservatives at long last gain a wider hearing for their ideas. Readers looking for explanations about how the right came so far so fast will get little information on this from Nash. Although technically Nash grants roughly equal importance to the three impulses he discusses, he lavishes the most attention on the traditionalists, with whom his sympathies clearly lie. But the traditionalists are far from the entire story.³⁶

Beyond his personal affinities, it may be that Nash pays more attention to the traditionalists because they are the most willing to engage with a canon of texts and to reshape classic arguments in their own image. Unfortunately, Nash's dusty treatment showcases all the flaws of an old-fashioned approach to intellectual history, while eschewing the deep analysis that makes this mode of analysis so fertile. Nash, like his subjects, believes in the autonomy of ideas (or, as Weaver put it, that "ideas have consequences"). Thus, as a matter of principle, he ignores any materialist explanations, including the basic social embeddedness of the ideas he examines. This approach is particularly deficient, given his subject matter, because American conservatism as an ideology is uniquely suited to a multivalent approach that considers not only its progress in elite cultural forms but also its popular success. After all, it was not the creativity and sophistication of conservative ideas that captured the nation's intellectual life; even today, conservative ideas have made little headway in universities, the traditional bastion of intellectuals.³⁷ Rather, intellectuals (read: historians) began paying attention to conservatism after it captured the electorate writ large. To write conservative intellectual history in the academy is essentially to play catch up, to reconstruct an ideology that was largely hidden from view as it developed. George Nash may have given us the first word on this topic, but his book should by no means be the last.

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1. See *National Review*, "Special Book Supplement: The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945," December 5, 1975, pp. A1–A47.

2. Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *The American Historical Review* 99:2 (1994): 409–29. On the paucity of intellectual history treatments of the right, despite significant new scholarship in recent years, see William B. Hixson, Jr., *Search for the American Right Wing: An Analysis of the Social Science Record, 1955–1987* (1992), xvi.

3. I speak here of overarching interpretations that attempt to consider right-wing or conservative thought as a comprehensive whole or to examine its development across several decades. Valuable studies of right-wing thought besides Nash do exist. Two recent works of note are Shadia Drury's excellent study, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1997); and Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (2001). Patrick Allitt's *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985* (1993) draws crucial connections between Catholicism and conservatism. Ted McAllister's *Revolt Against Modernity* (1996), if somewhat dry, provides insight into the thought of Strauss and Eric Voegelin. Also still important are Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right* (1983); and John P. Diggins, *Up From Communism* (1975). (However, for an important critique of Diggins that points out considerable inaccuracies in his account, see Douglas G. Webb, "From Old Left to New Right," *The Canadian Review of American Studies* 9:2 (1978): 223–40.) Ample material has been published since 1976 that could make a return to Nash's territory fruitful. Two recent narrowly focused biographies indicate that present scholars may be

laying the groundwork for a future synthesis: see Daniel Kelly, *James Burnham and the Struggle for the World* (2002); and Kevin J. Smant, *Principles and Heresies: Frank S. Meyer and the Shaping of the American Conservative Movement* (2002). There is a growing body of literature on Christian fundamentalism that could be mined and a tradition of writing on the Cold War (although most of this literature remains focused on liberal anti-communists). Recently, historians have begun to uncover a significant gendered component to conservative thought, which suggests a number of promising avenues. See Kim E. Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (2001); June Melby Benowitz, *Days of Discontent: American Women and Right-Wing Politics* (2002); and Michelle Nickerson, "'The Power of a Morally Indignant Woman': Republican Women and the Making of California Conservatism," *Journal of the West* 42 (Summer 2003): 35–43. Libertarian thought in general remains a neglected area.

4. In 1930 John Crowe Ransom declared that southerners were essentially European. Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), 3.

5. For more on these debates, see Jennifer Burns, "Godless Capitalism: Ayn Rand and the Conservatives," *Modern Intellectual History* 1:3 (2004).

6. Nash's book was reissued in 1996 by the right-leaning Intercollegiate Studies Institute and is still in print.

7. Three volumes of this study have been published to date: *The Life of Herbert Hoover, Volume One: The Engineer, 1874–1914* (1983); *The Life of Herbert Hoover, Volume Two: The Humanitarian, 1914–1917* (1988); and *The Life of Herbert Hoover Volume Three: Master of Emergencies, 1917–1918* (1996). For positive reviews of these works, see *Journal of American History* [hereafter *JAH*] 71:2 (1984): 404–5; *JAH* 78:3 (1991): 1120; *JAH* 84:3 (1997): 1112.

8. Contributors to these volumes included such luminaries as Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter, Talcott Parsons, and Seymour Martin Lipset. It might be argued that these volumes paid attention to the "radical right," not necessarily conservative intellectuals. Such a distinction falls into the paradigm of extreme/center that has been so soundly criticized as of late. Furthermore, the contributors, notably Richard Hofstadter, paid considerable attention to the Goldwater candidacy, which was avidly supported by nearly every conservative Nash mentions. Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (1955), and *The Radical Right* (1963).

9. Allen Guttman, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (1967), 11. Italics in original.

10. *Ibid.*, 4–13, 162.

11. Ronald Lora, *Conservative Minds in America* (1971), x.

12. The comment is from Willmoore Kendall. See Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, 2nd ed. (1962), vii.

13. A definition of the term "liberal" seems warranted at this point. I use "liberal" in general reference to intellectuals who supported the New Deal reforms, organized labor and the civil rights movement and opposed Senator McCarthy. Hofstadter and Schlesinger may be taken as representative figures.

14. Representative arguments by Schlesinger include "The Need for an Intelligent Opposition," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 2, 1950, pp. 13, 56–8, and "The New Conservatism in America: A Liberal Comment," *Confluence* (Dec. 1953): 61–71. See also Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *The American Political Science Review* 51:2 (1957): 454–73. The above is only a sampling of participants in this debate, which was widespread among intellectuals at mid-century.

15. Rossiter, *Conservatism in America*, 2nd ed., vi, ix, 59–64.

16. Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited*, 2nd ed. (1962), 17, 151. Significant portions of this revised edition were also published in *The Radical Right*.

17. Brent Bozell, a leading *National Review* writer and Buckley's brother-in-law, was Goldwater's ghost writer. *Conscience of a Conservative* was an immediate bestseller and went through over twenty printings in four years.

18. Justus D. Doenecke, "Conservatism: The Impassioned Sentiment," *American Quarterly* 28:5 (1976): 604, 606.

19. Franklin D. Mitchell, "The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945," *Journal of Southern History* 43:1 (1977): 144.

20. Lora, "The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America: Since 1945," *Journal of American History* 63:4 (1977): 1069.

21. Guttman, "The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945," *American Historical Review* 28:1 (1977): 215.

22. Lora, "Conservative Intellectual Movement," 1069.

23. Doenecke, "Conservatism," 604. See also David D. Van Tassel, "The Politics of Righteous Indignation," *Reviews in American History* 5:4 (1977): 572–6.

24. Nash's book has been designated "classic" in innumerable instances, one of the most recent being Leo P. Ribuffo, "The Discovery and Rediscovery of American Conservatism Broadly Conceived," *OAH Magazine of History* 17:2 (2003): 5.

25. John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (1997), 238.

26. It should be noted, however, that McGirr makes selective and judicious use of Nash's thesis. Without directly engaging his argument, she treats conservatism as essentially a dyadic ideology composed of libertarianism and traditionalism, with anti-Communism functioning as a background element that declined during the 1960s. This qualified use of Nash is unusual. Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2001), 279. Jerome Himmelstein, *To The Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (1990), 7, 217n1.

27. Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (2001), 4.

28. Beyond the books discussed above, Nash's book is cited in the following: Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the 60s: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (1995); Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement that Remade America* (1999); Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (1996); John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (1988); Rebecca E. Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (1987), and *A Generation Divided* (1999); Murphy, *Rebuke of History*; Gregory L. Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of the Contemporary Right* (1999); and Kurt Schuparra, *Triumph of the Right: The Rise of the California Conservative Movement* (1998). This is only a partial listing; the careful reader of footnotes will find more.

29. Paul Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, rev. ed. (1993), viii–ix.

30. In his review of Nash, Van Tassel made this very point, criticizing Nash's omission of the prewar years. For a discussion of how right-wing ideas dominated populist political discourse throughout the twentieth century, see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (1995). Jon Butler argues that historians have been slow to "mainstream" religion as a factor in twentieth-century America, and that so doing could reshape our understanding of politics, especially on the right. Butler, "The Religion Problem in Modern American History," *Journal of American History* 90:4 (2004): 1357–78. Some historians writing on political conservatism in the 1950s and 1960s were well aware of conservatism's deep American roots. Robert McCloskey argues that the ideas later known as libertarianism had their origin in the nineteenth century and developed out of the conflicts and struggles of the Gilded Age. See his *American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise: A Study of William Graham Sumner*, Stephen J. Field and Andrew Carnegie (1951). For the Congressional manifestation of these attitudes, see James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933–1939* (1967). Also helpful on this period is George R. Wolfskill, *Revolt of the Conservatives: A History of the Liberty League, 1934–1940* (1962).

31. Two of the most influential interpretations of the consensus school are found in Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (1955); and Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (1953).

32. The literature on modernism in the South is suggestive on this point. Daniel J. Singal argues that in order to forsake their racist beliefs, southerners would have to make the

traumatic transition from Victorianism to modernism. Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* (1982), 10.

33. Garry Wills is an example of one intellectual whose thoughts on civil rights and race changed profoundly over the years, eventually leading to his estrangement from the conservative movement. Nash does not cover this aspect of his career. For a discussion of Wills's thought, see Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, Chap. 7.

34. For a discerning treatment of how race functioned in the thought of several Agrarians, see Murphy, *The Rebuke of History*. Murphy handles this topic with an eye to racism as a constituent element of conservative thought and also a moral failing worthy of explanation.

35. As I indicate in note 3, recent scholarship indicates that gender would also be an important concept to consider here. Historians may also wish to reconsider Nash's use of anti-communism as a plank of equal significance to libertarianism and traditionalism. Anti-communism may be better understood as an episode in conservative development rather than as a core belief and there may be important regional and class variations in the significance of this belief.

36. Recent work has begun to focus on the role of businesspeople and corporations of all sizes in the development of conservative ideas. Rick Perlstein, for example, notes that many small business owners developed strident libertarian beliefs in response to negative regulatory experiences during the New Deal. Later, these people formed the core of the "Draft Goldwater" movement, which took shape in the early 1960s. See *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (2001), 4–6. Also see Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–1960* (1994).

37. To this point, the success of conservative intellectuals, who are mostly based in private institutes and think tanks rather than universities, may mark a fundamental change in the nation's intellectual life and a diminution of the university's traditional role.