



## The Failure of American Conservatism & the Road Not Taken

Claes G. Ryn

March 9, 2023

*Editor's Note: A new book by Claes Ryn assesses the state of American society and politics and explains why conservatism has been unable to head off America's decline. Called The Failure of American Conservatism and the Road Not Taken, the book criticizes "movement" conservatism for having adopted the wrong priorities. Neglecting the best insights of leading thinkers, the movement did not understand that in the long run the future is shaped not by politics but by culture and imagination. Having misdiagnosed the historical situation, it adopted misguided priorities. The movement did not grasp the deeper preconditions for a revitalization of American and Western civilization. The following is an excerpt from the book's introduction.*

Something was wrong with post–World-War II American conservatism. That it did not achieve its stated goals is by itself not proof of this point. Conservatism was up against high odds in a deteriorating civilization. What revealed its shortcomings was the way in which it perceived and handled those odds. Even in more favorable historical circumstances, those weaknesses would have become apparent, if perhaps less conspicuous. The weaknesses in question help explain why putative conservatives have not learned much from their mistakes and why they have been unable to see that their accustomed approaches to problems were deficient or misguided.

Despite ambitious, extremely well-financed, and systematic conservative efforts over many years, America has suffered a broad range of disturbing developments. A brief review of how conservatives have related to those developments will indicate that a reexamination of basic attitudes and assumptions has long been needed. "Fiscal conservatism" or "fiscal discipline" has been close to the heart of American conservatism. Millions and millions of dollars have been spent for decades by the Heritage Foundation, the CATO Institute, and other organizations to advance this cause. Yet, even under supposedly conservative or at least Republican administrations, the United States' national debt has grown by leaps and bounds. It has become so enormous as to far exceed the gross national product. Fiscal discipline is about the last term that might be used to describe governmental spending habits. *New* deficit spending is routinely being contemplated. Sharply raising the debt ceiling has become routine. The staggering cost of wars has been put on the nation's credit card. President Dwight Eisenhower warned of the military-industrial complex, but it is today more bloated and influential than it ever was. Questioning defense spending is seen by many supposed conservatives as "unpatriotic." Vast sums of money have gone into advocacy groups that claim to want to "keep America safe." In practice, that has typically meant support for

hawkish, even belligerent action in support of “American values” abroad and failed wars in which hundreds of thousands died or were maimed.

A staple of American conservatism has been advocacy of limited government. Most conservative organizations, including those mentioned, in theory stressed the importance of faithfulness to the US Constitution. But the federal government is today larger and more intrusive than ever, due in no small part to the willingness of conservatives to go along. American constitutionalism is crumbling. The states are forever yielding more authority to the central government. The old checks and balances are barely working. The executive branch has acquired powers and a reach that would have horrified the . Supposedly conservative defenses of the “unitary executive” have assisted some of these development. Contrary to the explicit requirement of the Constitution, Congress has yielded its war powers to the president. A surveillance state has been created, and citizens are increasingly at the mercy of a politicized judicial system. Traditional liberties and free speech are under broad assault. The criminalization of political opponents is ubiquitous. Congress has yielded legislative authority to an enormous and expanding administrative state.

Outside of government, the mainstream electronic and print media are not vigilantly looking for power abuse on the part of the established order but are more disposed to help protect it against more than marginal challenges.

An important branch of an older American conservatism was concerned that the humanities and other high culture, including advanced scholarship, needed to be redirected and promoted, but organizations like the Philadelphia Society and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute have made almost no progress. Colleges and universities have become hotbeds for intellectually flimsy theorizing idiosyncratic but tyrannical left-wing thought-control. Few if any of America’s national institutions—political, military, educational, journalistic, or religious—can today be said reliably to represent traditional American civilization. Deepening division between what remains of the older America and the forces sympathetic to wokery and cancel culture is tearing at the social fabric.

These developments do by themselves raise questions about the ability of the American constitutional republic to survive, but to them must be added other equally alarming factors, notably America’s deepening problem with ordinary criminality. That problem ranges from the staggering amount of drug abuse and deaths from overdoses in the general population, obvious signs of social decay, to life-threatening violence. It is a disturbing commentary on the state of the country that each year about twenty thousand Americans are murdered, hundreds of thousands more are the victims of other violent crime, and millions live in fear because of lawlessness. Serious crime has also blended increasingly with general civic disorder, including violent protests, looting, arson, organized attacks on police, and destruction of property and monuments. Maintaining peace and security has always been regarded as government’s most basic duty. The inability, in some cases the reluctance, of American civil authorities to contain even acute disorder shows that law and order and the very stability of society can no longer be taken for granted. Together with the previously mentioned departure from constitutionalism, fiscal discipline, and high standards, the spread of street-level lawlessness raises the subject of so-called failed states. Another sign of such dysfunctionality and disintegration is an inability or unwillingness to enforce national borders.

A further very telling illustration of America's fraught condition is the wishful thinking of its dominant, trend-setting elites inside and outside of government: their inability or refusal to *recognize* and *act on* reality. Perhaps the best example are the trend-setters in America's foreign policy establishment, including many putative conservatives. Deeply ingrained in them is a certain strain of thought that has long dominated American foreign policy: that the United States should be sufficiently powerful to act as global umpire and guarantor of world order and to contain or overcome any competitor. There are many reasons to question this view, but one does not have to be dismissive of it to think that, given the historical circumstances, dreams of American global hegemony are, especially in some versions, not merely unrealistic but dangerously fanciful. One might think that American foreign policy experts, especially ones calling themselves "realists," would be acutely aware that the country's pressing political, economic, intellectual, social, and cultural problems are sharply limiting its freedom of action. Do these problems not even mandate modesty and great restraint in strategic and tactical thinking. For the sake of American foreign policy alone, should these experts not be advocating emergency measures to stave off further domestic decline? Should they not recognize that their ambitious plans for American leadership might in the concrete historical circumstances at hand lead to disaster? But no, with few exceptions, members of the foreign policy establishment continue to place all emphasis on America as the world's "indispensable nation." The cynical habit of leaders to deflect attention from domestic failures by stressing foreign threats is well-known to history, but when the American foreign-policy intellectuals assign a hegemonic role to the United States a seemingly deliberate avoidance of reality is at work—a form of escapism that in the nuclear age is terrifying.

How could all this have happened in the United States? This short list of truly ominous developments, including conservative complicity in them, indicates that, by any number of measures that should seem appropriate even to conservatives themselves, American conservatism has failed. It may try to defend itself by pointing to unfortunate historical circumstances and overwhelming opposition, but perhaps its most prominent and debilitating flaw is that it never quite understood those circumstances and the nature of the opposition. For that reason, it could not effectively handle them. American conservatism has to a considerable extent *contributed* to the developments mentioned above, not just because of intellectual confusion but by advocating or accepting ideas and policies that a more mature intellectual conservative culture would have rejected.

Again, how could all this have happened? Might these developments have been averted? This book addresses those questions. The writings collected here all bear more or less directly on the subject of American intellectual conservatism from World War II to the present and on the question of why, despite its many strengths, American conservatism failed. This book will take its readers into territory that will probably strike many as unfamiliar. It will introduce perspectives, including criteria of failure or success, that may initially confound some readers. The book will, among other things, show that the word "conservatism," which has been used rather loosely above, has acquired many different meanings, some of which are incompatible and some of which would appear to have little claim to the term. The failure that this book examines and tries to remedy clearly does not pertain equally to all varieties of American conservatism. The failure has its main source in certain intellectual inclinations and currents. One of the reasons why sadness has to color the description of the failure is that the dubious influences undermined or drew attention away from major, very promising achievements.

What happened was in a way unexpected. The burst of intellectual energy and creativity in the early 1950s, which foreshadowed what would become a broad and many-faceted conservative movement, was truly impressive. The leading thinkers were deeply rooted in earlier American and European thought, and their work revived, extended, and creatively rearticulated old traditions. In decades to come intellectual currents of a generally conservative cast produced an extraordinary number of books and other publications as well as organizations devoted to spreading such ideas. In anticipation of a subject that will be central to this book, it should be mentioned that in its early stages the movement was not merely or even primarily political in the narrower sense of that word. This would change. The movement's interest in politics would become more and more pronounced.

It is today widely acknowledged that conservatism is in disarray or crisis. There is an obvious need for major rethinking of the meaning of conservatism and of what it means to be an American. This book suggests that the current disorientation springs in large measure from certain long-standing, seemingly chronic weaknesses. I have had much to say about them over the years. It can be argued that American intellectual conservatism is not well equipped to cope with the massive long-term challenges that it faces. A prerequisite for dealing with its problems, as with any serious problem, is adequate diagnosis. What went wrong and why? Those wishing to rethink conservatism and the meaning of America in the historical circumstances of today must try to understand the shortcomings that damaged and disoriented conservatism. While devoting much space to analyzing deficiencies, this book points to more promising varieties and potentialities of American conservatism, ones that might have yielded very different results in the past and that might help remedy pressing problems today.

It is common in America to think of "conservatism" as a term relating to politics and economics. It stands for limited government, a strong defense, and a free market. It is less common to include in the definition preferences that are not obviously connected to issues of government. In this book, whether the emphasis is on current practical politics or matters of political principle, it is assumed that issues of politics cannot be adequately understood without relating them to basic questions of human existence, some of which may appear "nonpolitical" or "noneconomic." All notions of government and politics imply assumptions about human nature and society, just as all notions of human nature and society have political implications. A thesis of this book is that politics is indistinguishable from and deeply influenced by society's general culture as expressed in churches, the arts, literature, music, movies, entertainment, education, and childrearing. Although readers of this volume will come across familiar names, ideas, and controversies, those unacquainted with my thinking may find the general perspective surprising, perhaps even far-fetched. Politics is here placed within a moral-cultural context, including its origins in history. There are frequent references to the history of Western thought.

If asked to discuss the meaning of American conservatism and the direction in which it ought to move today, the typical conservative commentator will want to get as quickly as possible to questions of public policy. Should America advance the cause of freedom and democracy in the world, or should it limit its international commitments and pursue the national interest? Should America treat Russia and China as enemies or as competitors with which to seek peaceful, respectful relations? Should tariffs protect domestic businesses and workers, or should international competition be spurring Americans to greater productivity? Should markets be

tempered with reference to a common good or be unfettered except for some ground rules enforced by a minimal state? Should immigration into the United States be easy or permitted only under selective and strictly enforced laws? When one seeks to define conservatism, a broad range of public policy issues are relevant, some of which will come up in this book, but nothing is more important than the frame of mind in which public policy questions are approached. Not even the most detailed and extensive familiarity with the pros and cons of policy choices will ensure that a wise course is adopted. The wisdom of policies selected will depend, in the end, on the quality of the view of life that guides judgment. To what extent does the decision maker have a realistic view of the world? To what extent do policy choices reflect a sound sense of priorities and proportion? What will stop a warped notion of how the world works from influencing decisions? This is to say that the frame of mind within which policy questions are addressed matters greatly. Anything more than a superficial definition or assessment of conservatism must place the basic view of reality at the center. When public policy preferences come up in this book, it is in relation to the general perspective on life that produced them or is implied in them. Much attention will be devoted to basic presuppositions regarding human nature and society in this introduction and elsewhere. It will be argued that certain influential assumptions undermined and diverted an otherwise impressive post-World-War II American conservatism.

A recurring concern of this book is to broaden and deepen the meaning of the term “political.” Only when set within the larger whole of life can political thought or practice be properly understood and assessed. What political or intellectual activists or thinkers with narrow conceptions of power may think of as dwelling on “irrelevancies,” “philosophical subtleties,” or “fine points” is in actuality the only way fully to comprehend the meaning and entailments of policy preferences and to distinguish between tenable and untenable ideas.

Conservatism and politics are addressed here in a manner that ranges far beyond what most people think of as politics. Subjects like ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology may look distant from the world of political practice, but just the opposite is the case. Without exploring them in some depth, it is not possible to have a properly conceived, these subjects do not take students of politics into a sphere of esoteric abstractions but make possible a more firmly grounded understanding of life in general and of politics in particular. Good philosophy weeds out distorting illusions, reveals important connections, and fosters an uncompromising realism. What is often *called* “realism” is prone to rather crude assumptions about politics. Many conservatives think themselves more realistic than others because they conceive of political power as being, at bottom, “coercion,” a view held by so-called libertarians and by admirers of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), the latter famous for his view that the natural condition of human beings is a war of all against all. The key characteristic of government is thought to be that it has “a monopoly on violence.” This reputed “realism” does in fact betray a cramped, even superficial understanding of power. Some sources of power have little to do with physical violence and coercion but nevertheless strongly influence political and other conduct. Any truly realistic definition of “power” must take these sources into account. That even highly intelligent American conservatives should find this view counterintuitive helps explain the disorientation of American conservatism today.

I have tried in my philosophical work to integrate the study of seemingly different but closely related aspects of life and to ascertain their roles and importance within the whole of human existence. The resulting philosophy has been called “value-centered historicism.” It encompasses

ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology and shows the intimate connections between goodness, beauty, and truth and their opposites. According to this philosophy, the higher values of human existence are apprehended and attained through a special interaction of will, imagination, and reason in which moral character is primary and indispensable. While defending universal values, value-centered historicism disputes the common view that these values are disembodied intellectual abstractions or vague emotive states. These values actually become known to human beings in experiential particulars—a notion that seems paradoxical to thinkers who are used to placing what is ultimately normative beyond what is near and concrete and used to regarding the universal as empty of concrete particulars. Value-centered historicism challenges moral rationalism—the belief that only abstract rationality can be morally normative—and challenges an equally ahistorical, merely dreamy notion of transcendence. The higher values of life become known to the well-integrated, morally grounded person in experiential particulars.

Contrary to an ancient tendency, which has been reinforced by some theorists associated with American conservatism, history need not be the enemy of higher values or philosophy. On the contrary, these values enter human experience and become available for philosophical scrutiny to the extent that human beings embody them in their lives. Historical-experiential patterns thus created guide new generations to the ultimate source of these values. Sound philosophy, I argue, incorporates the kind of historical consciousness that entered Western thought in earnest in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. That consciousness sharpened the awareness of what a good current state of affairs owes to the past, and it helped foster a generally conservative view of life, as exemplified by the British statesman-thinker Edmund Burke. The analyses of conservatism in this book flow from these larger philosophical interests. The particular writings are, in effect, case studies in the light of value-centered historicism and typically emphasize the moral-spiritual and cultural aspects of problems.

A topic that is central to my philosophical outlook and that receives much attention in this volume is the important role of the imagination in shaping human thought and conduct. How we behave and see the world is affected less by strictly rational considerations than by deep-seated *intuitions*—by a basic nonconceptual sense of the nature of existence, of what can be expected in life, and of what is desirable. Intuitions already formed direct the attention of the mind and are the material for its theoretical elaborations. Human beings are guided most fundamentally by an overarching sense of the nature of reality and by ingrained hopes and fears. These are derived from a broad range of cultural influences and personal experiences. This sense of what the world is like is intuitive-imaginative rather than rational-conceptual. Because of the influence of the prevalent surrounding culture, some of these intuitive suppositions are widely shared, but the sensibilities and outlooks of individuals are at the same time always unique to them by virtue of their special experiences and circumstances. Creative people—for example, novelists, filmmakers, composers, poets, and artists—who are able to capture the imaginations of others can enter the innermost selves of those others and affect their notion of what is desirable and undesirable, thereby influencing their conduct. Over the years, all the people who are able to color the inner life of others have a cumulative influence that ordinarily far exceeds that of particular political leaders. This is not to deny that political leaders can stir the imagination. They can derive power from an ability to enlist existing popular dreams and hopes in their support. A central theme in this book is the power of “the culture” to shape the predispositions of individuals and hence the evolution of society.

The term “movement” was used loosely above to refer to the expanding conservative intellectual current in America after World War II. This current reaffirmed and creatively applied and extended older traditions. But the term “the conservative movement” would in time acquire a more specific meaning among people interested in the subject. It became the label for particular patterns of thought, for a movement that had its own distinctive emphases and goals. The origins of what became known as “movement conservatism” can be traced back to William F. Buckley Jr. and his *National Review*, which was founded in 1955. A gifted writer and polemicist in his own right, Buckley connected to his magazine a number of prominent authors, notably James Burnham, Whittaker Chambers, Willmoore Kendall, and Russell Kirk. The magazine exhibited great intellectual vitality. Animated by Buckley’s tastes and intuitions, the magazine became in effect the architect and umpire of “movement” conservatism. It could make reputations but also steer attention away from thinkers of whom it did not approve. It is important to understand that the inclinations of this conservatism were more political than they were cultural or philosophical. For Buckley, most of the *National Review* circle of writers, and most of the magazine’s expanding number of readers, the chief and ultimate goal was to promote a certain political objective, specifically, that of capturing the presidency for conservatism—as Buckley and his followers defined it.

The intellectual conservatism that surged in the decade just after the war had great strengths and considerable variety. It seemed poised to challenge “progressive” intellectual trends in America for dominance, but it had to develop in unfavorable intellectual circumstances, which will be discussed in more depth later. One impediment was that it had to evolve without the support of an accompanying mature philosophical culture. It was not assisted and boosted by high-level efforts to explicate, refine, and extend its contributions and to weed out weak ideas. The new conservatism also did not generate any deep desire to remedy that deficiency. One of the consequences was that the strains of early American conservatism that showed the most promise as the foundation for a broad intellectual and cultural renaissance were never fully digested, appreciated, and absorbed. They were not the dominant influence in what became known as “the conservative movement.” One can study this weakness in the otherwise highly successful intellectual enterprise that was *National Review*.

Buckley’s chiefly political purposes made him prone to a rather dubious type of intellectual ecumenism. Ideas advanced in the magazine were sometimes philosophically incompatible—as when Catholic traditionalism was paired with socially atomistic libertarianism—but they appeared to Buckley sufficiently coherent in *political* terms to become parts of the political coalition that he envisioned. *National Review* senior editor Frank S. Meyer tried to make this alliance intellectually consistent in his theory of “fusionism,” which was an attempt to blend classical individualistic liberalism and moral traditionalism. Only a lack of philosophical depth and discipline made it possible for this earnest but ultimately unstable amalgamation to become virtually synonymous with “movement conservatism.”

The problem with Buckley’s magazine and with the ferment that it triggered was not intellectual variety. Even in the most stringently philosophical and discriminating movement, diversity and tension are inevitable. They can be signs of intellectual vitality. The problem was variety stemming from a lack of philosophical discernment and depth.

In their basic interests and tastes, the typical movement conservatives gravitated toward politics and economics, which were perceived as having the most impact on the evolution of society. As directed especially by Buckley, Meyer, and *National Review* publisher William Rusher, the conservative movement formed the intellectual backbone of the effort to get Barry Goldwater elected president of the United States. Movement conservatives did not abjure advanced ideas and works of art—many of them cited the need for a revival of “Western civilization”—but most of them seem to have thought of the churches as supplying what was needed by way of higher values. But what about “the culture”? How important were literature, symphonies, paintings, movies, and advanced education? Few movement conservatives stressed them as collectively indispensable to social well-being or evinced a deep personal desire for them. Were they not primarily a kind of adornment to real life? The idea that high culture might be the very lifeblood of civilization was far from their minds. Although tradition had long looked to works of high culture for profundity of vision and a deepening and softening of the spirit—needed not least to elevate politics—the typical movement conservative regarded books, for example, as worthwhile to the extent that they were directly related to politics: political biographies, exposés, documentaries, or policy tracts. Fiction was not positively disdained, but did it not have something insubstantial, vaguely unserious about it that suited it for rest and relaxation? Was a novel not something to bring to the beach for vacation and that should deliver thrilling “action,” preferably having a political aspect? Only a minority in movement conservatism thought of drama, movies, music, and the best of literary fiction as essential to understanding and elevating human existence. Even fewer recognized that, at its worst, culture has the power to degrade society.

The way in which movement conservatives deployed their energy and financial and other resources showed that, for them, changing society for the better depended more on supposedly robust political efforts and intellectual activism directed to general audiences than on addressing seemingly intangible “subtle” issues of culture or “fine points” of philosophy. In the wake of the 1964 presidential election, which saw Barry Goldwater lose by a landslide to Lyndon Johnson, key supporters of Goldwater, including William Buckley, started the American Conservative Union. The ACU was to coordinate the work of existing organizations and provide intellectual leadership for continued political action. It attracted growing support and became the host of an annual Conservative Political Action Conference, which is attended by thousands. One might say that in its way of combining political ideas and political activism the ACU comes close to embodying the temperament and sense of priorities of the conservative movement. The point here is not that there is something wrong with wishing to organize politically and letting ideas guide politics. Any attempt to improve society will have to have a political dimension. What is at issue is what kind of change is most needed and what kind of political action can best assist that change. The problem has been that the conservative movement had a limited understanding of what forces ultimately move human beings and shape the future. It seemed to many conservatives far-fetched that there might be sources of influence more significant for the longer run than controlling government. The movement’s activist political temperament betrayed a pseudo-pragmatism that will be discussed later. Another factor shaping the evolution of conservatism was that the currents within it that attracted the most public attention were those that most directly related to the issues of the day, as defined by the media and existing political and economic interests. Spokesmen of movement conservatism attracted media attention and gained a career advantage from adjusting to the concerns of the intellectual-journalistic establishment.

Despite the admirable efforts of a few leading thinkers, American conservatism never developed a sure and sophisticated sense of what was at the bottom of the problems of America and the Western world. Movement conservatives placed the blame loosely on the growth of “the Leviathan state” and the retreat of religion, as if the expansion and centralization of government and falling church attendance were independent variables and not consequences of deep moral and cultural developments. Lacking a proper diagnosis of what was wrong, conservatives had difficulty identifying and applying remedies.

Philosophy proper and culture of the most elevated kind will, of course, always be the province of relatively few, but at high points of civilization major figures at that level are respected and heeded by many others. Intellectuals or artists of lesser caliber are inspired by them and transmit their perspectives to the more discerning members of the general public. Sensibilities and insights that elites have in the most refined form spread to different parts and levels of society in simplified, diluted versions. The sense of reality and values that emanates from the most profound works of mind and imagination thus exert a magnetic pull. This pull moderates the tendency for popular tastes to be dragged down by indolence or polluted by intellectuals and artists pandering to humanity’s lower desires.

In the postwar era, there was in American intellectual conservatism broadly understood no strong dynamic of the kind mentioned above that unified and elevated intellectual and cultural efforts. Many American scholars drawn to a conservative outlook made important contributions to particular fields such as political theory, sociology, American constitutionalism, literature, history, and economics, but few attempted the kind of overarching philosophical exploration of basic issues of human existence that might have anchored, informed, and connected particular fields of study. Original and important thinkers did not receive nearly the attention that they deserved. Perhaps the most significant example of this weakness was the failure to recognize the groundbreaking contribution that was made in the immediately preceding generation by Harvard professor Irving Babbitt (1865–1933). That Babbitt had been formally a professor of literature and a cultural critic was probably one reason why he did not attract broad interest among postwar conservatives, focused as they tended to be on politics and economics. Yet Babbitt’s thought was interdisciplinary in the best sense and showed the intimate and crucial connection between culture and politics. Had it not been for Babbitt’s strong influence on a few leading postwar American conservative thinkers, Russell Kirk and Peter Viereck prominent among them, American conservatism would have been without what was perhaps its most original and important ingredient. The case of Babbitt illustrates how major insights available to American conservatism were neglected or only partially appropriated. Important ideas were not philosophically digested and supplemented, were not widely applied to a range of subjects, and did not give rise to the kind of broad, penetrating intellectual and cultural renaissance that might have transformed the American mind and imagination.

The disinterest in more exacting philosophical explorations also made movement conservatism less than discriminating in its likes and dislikes. This book has much to say about movement conservatism’s accommodation of ideas that are fundamentally inimical to conservatism in a traditional sense. Two prominent examples discussed at particular length in this book are its uncritical acceptance of key ideas associated with Leo Strauss and his numerous followers and of the ideology of so-called neoconservatism. This is not to assert that Straussianism and

neoconservatism have been without merit, only that major ideas from those sources entered the mainstream of the conservative movement and undermined its ability to address the deeper problems of American and Western society. This was true of their prejudice against relying on history for guidance and their preference for purely abstract theorizing.

The conservative movement's failure to produce the kind of deep and enduring revitalization that could have transformed American society cannot be blamed solely on its own weaknesses. It should be stated without delay that when it made its first valiant efforts in the postwar period, general historical circumstances were not propitious for the emergence of an advanced conservative philosophical culture. Powerful moral, intellectual, and cultural trends had badly eroded core elements of Western civilization since the eighteenth century. In the universities, the arts, and the general culture, what Walter Lippmann called "the acids of modernity" had produced widespread indifference or hostility to the kind of older Western ideas and tastes that conservatives were trying to revive and develop. Progressive and radical sentiment in ever-new iterations were setting the tone, making conservative impulses a virtually alien influence. In the trendsetting reaches of academic and cultural institutions conservatives were like guerrillas living off the land trying to establish a foothold. That the political dimension of their ideas was often in the foreground intensified resistance.

There is another important reason why American intellectual conservatism did not develop a mature philosophical foundation. A significant feature of the American temperament is pragmatism. In its most admirable form that pragmatism is a salutary check on overly abstract or dreamy speculation. But there is a strong tendency for this pragmatism to become a general impatience with ideas or cultural-artistic phenomena that are not obviously and directly related to practical matters. This pseudo-pragmatism does not recognize that clear, penetrating thinking and a refined sensibility are indispensable to really understanding practical situations. It also overlooks that the culture of a society predisposes its members to practical conduct of a certain kind. In the minds of too many movement conservatives, pseudo-pragmatism combined with dislike of the dominant intellectual and cultural elites to produce a deep ambivalence regarding intellectual and cultural efforts of a more demanding kind. This unease helped keep attention on more obviously "practical" questions of politics and economics, and it served to conceal what is most needed for a society to change its direction—a subtle transformation of character, mind, and imagination.

Russell Kirk and Peter Viereck understood better than any of the other leading thinkers in the postwar period that the imagination and culture play a central role, for good or ill, in shaping the future. They had here been deeply influenced by Irving Babbitt. It was Babbitt who had explained the power and conflicting potentialities of imagination and who, using a phrase from Edmund Burke, had given substance to the term "moral imagination." But the writing of Kirk and Viereck was, though scholarly and often profoundly insightful, predominantly essayistic. They did not feel called to elaborate systematically and with conceptual precision just how the imagination shapes our picture of the world and governs human conduct. As this book discusses, Kirk would become much more influential than Viereck. The latter called himself a conservative but had, by the standards of the 1950s, "liberal" leanings in politics. These leanings seemed to *National Review* conservatives like Frank S. Meyer disqualifying. Some movement conservatives picked up on Kirk's stress on the imagination and often talked of the need for "the moral imagination," but rather than carefully examining the meaning and implications of that term and the deepest

sources of human conduct, which would have helped the larger conservative movement to rearrange and focus its priorities, they remained at the level of essayistic expression or near-philosophy. With regard to the most important philosophical questions, members of the conservative intellectual movement as a whole were only loosely connected and headed in disparate directions.