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“A Loathsome Plague Called Reaction”: Fear in Prescriptive Conservative Thought

*“The tide of American Conservatism runs in confusing patterns, but few will now deny that it runs deep and strong.” – Clinton Rossiter*

Today, fear and conservatism might be more frequently linked in the minds of political scientists than any time in recent memory. Whether it is stemming from the rhetoric of politicians or talking points on cable news, fear mongering is at an all-time high. The link between fear and conservatism is not an altogether difficult one to make. Central to conservative ideology is a resistance to change- that the alternative may be worse than the situation we find ourselves in now; fear of what may come is easily connectable to that notion. However, the question of how this fear manifests itself arises. As analysts across the country bemoan the increasing radicalism in the Republican Party, many call for a return to a different brand of conservatism, based more in ideology than appeals to emotion. Still, that transition may not be so simple. Conservative thought is not altogether homogenous. Liberalism and traditionalism do not always go hand in hand. Yet as general attitudes of conservative thinkers shift, from early modern thinkers who trust in power to contemporary philosophers who do not trust it at all, fear remains consistent. Some theorists attempt to suppress this fear while others embrace it, but all invoke it in some way or another.

This paper will seek to track rhetoric of fear throughout the history of conservative political thought. Beginning with Edmund Burke’s *Reflections of the Revolution in France,* a text and thinker oft-credited as the foundation of conservatism, and continuing with writings of Russell Kirk, this political theory journey will rely extensively on textual evidence. However, that is not to say that it will cast aside the wealth of scholarship already published on this topic. Burke is one of the most covered scholars in the contemporary theoretical canon, and his emotional language has been addressed in a number of places. Isaac Kramnick’s 1977 book *The Rage of Edmund Burke* puts forth a controversial vision of Burke the man as an angry and fearful leader- this study aims less to conjecture upon his character on Kramnick’s, but certainly builds upon some of his analyses.[[1]](#footnote-1) Additionally, this paper will be seeking to build off the work of Lauren Hall, whose 2011 paper “Rights and the Heart: Emotions and Rights Claims in the Political Theory of Edmund Burke,” spectacularly assessed Burke’s conception of emotions, which in many ways is the bedrock to this thesis. One of the most prolific scholars on Burke is indeed Russell Kirk, and his writings will be examined in on their own merit. With respect to American conservatism as a whole, no book serves as a better background than George H. Nash’s excellent *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945.[[2]](#footnote-2)*  In terms of biographies of various conservatives as well as an understanding of conservatism as a whole, I will relying on Nash extensively. Regarding Kirk’s writing, this paper will draw upon the Gerald J. Russello’s excellent 2007 book *Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*.[[3]](#footnote-3) A benefit of studying a modern scholar is the wealth of book reviews and responses written by contemporaries- this paper will integrate writings from such scholars, including Clinton Rossiter.

In respect to the larger question of how fear and conservatism are inextricably linked, three pieces of scholarship form the basis of this study. Judith N. Shklar’s chapter in *Liberalism and the Moral Life,* entitled “The Liberalism of Fear,” theorizes that liberal ideology derives itself of a fear of what may happen when rights are restricted, rooted in the ideology and rhetoric of thinkers of John Locke and J.S. Mills.[[4]](#footnote-4) Her argument is extremely compelling, and inspires consideration of the emotional aspects of all political rhetoric. While this paper considers conservative thinkers, some of whom may even identify as definitively anti-liberal, Shklar’s work provided guidance and illumination.

Research on fear in the conservative mind has been done in the field of psychology, with the groundbreaking work of Glenn D. Wilson as the preeminent example. While his edited volume *The Psychology of Conservatism* has a number of fascinating studies, perhaps the most revolutionary is his conclusion- that conservatism in humans can be predicted by the presence of a “generalize fear of uncertainty.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This study cannot be taken for fact- central to most conceptions of conservatism is of course a skepticism of “scientific” conclusions- but it does strongly link fear to conservative political ideology. My study begins as an attempt to expand Wilson’s conclusions and apply them to the realm of political theory.

The thought of connecting psychology and conservatism is not unheard of in the realm of political science. George H. Nash briefly addressed the idea of the “irrational roots” of conservative behavior in his “Biographical Essay” at the end of his 1978 book. While acknowledging the novelty of the idea, he mostly comes down against any kind of subconscious explanation of conservatism, saying the work of proponents is marked by “relatively little discussion of conservative thought” and that “the use of social psychological categories like ‘status anxiety’ to explain the activities of highly sophisticated, self-conscious, often idiosyncratic *intellectuals* is a hazardous undertaking at best.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Hazardous indeed, but worthwhile. I will be attempting to address Nash’s main critique by applying Wilson’s “generalized fear of uncertainty” to conservative thought.

# Defining Conservatism

Much ink has been spilled in the pursuit of defining who exactly is a “conservative.” Each thinker has their own slightly different outlook. If we are to take Burke as the foundational thinker in what it means to be conservative, then we are led to believe it is about an adherence to tradition and prudence over new ideas and frequent change. However, this does not encompass many that today may be labelled, either by themselves or others, as such. In the modern political landscape, advocates of devolution, the complete privatization of health care, and deregulation of the economy are the strongest voices of right wing politics, but may be decried as radical by more classical conservatives. Indeed, Russell Kirk, foundational thinker of the New Conservative movement in the 1950’s, argued that anyone who thinks that policy decisions can be made “on a basis of absolute right and absolute wrong” are the type of “political zealots” that out to be avoided.[[7]](#footnote-7) Kirk’s camp is often described as “paleoconservative,” in opposition to the more well-known term “neoconservative.”[[8]](#footnote-8) However, a more accurate term would be “prescriptive conservative,” as their great focus is on trusting the wisdom of the past and relying upon knowledge of what has happened to determine what to do. A term that might suffice to describe the alternative- one that is less context specific than neo-con- is “reactive conservative,” taken to mean those who still look backwards for solutions but are unafraid to alter the status-quo to achieve their goals. These two groups, prescriptive conservatives and reactive conservatives, form the two great camps of conservative tradition.

This simplistic delineation is solely used to say that this paper will fixate on the former camp instead of the latter. While reactive conservatives dominate much of today’s rhetoric, their heritage is far more difficult to understand. Still, both groups have one common ancestor- Edmund Burke. Burke’s own *Reflections on the Revolution in France* can be seen as torn in these two directions, fixated both on tradition and reaction, and varied different interpretations can lead a reader down opposite paths. Still, authors like William Graham Sumner and John Stuart Mill intentionally decry tradition, while prescriptives embrace it. This enthusiasm makes it all the more inviting look at them through the lens of Burke. Specifically, it is the threads of Burke’s great fear of change and its primary manifestations that can be picked up in the words of prescriptive conservative thinkers. By understanding this fear, and thus the roots of prescriptive conservatism, one can begin to gain a fuller comprehension of those voices throughout history that seek to slow the careening train car of “progress.”

# Burke- The Common Denominator

The French Revolution is frequently considered one of the most exciting events in European history. Edmund Burke himself described it as “All circumstances taken together, the French revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world.”[[9]](#footnote-9) A watershed moment when a people decided to overturn a system that had been in place for centuries, the French Revolution is noted for both its commitment to putting Enlightenment principles into action and for its at times excessive violence and radicalism. Naturally, the confluence of these two specific themes was deeply disturbing for many contemporaries, who worried about the ripple effects of these actions.

However, fear was not the first emotion connected with the British reaction to the initial news. “The first English reactions to the French revolution were quite favorable,” explains scholar R.R. Fennessy.[[10]](#footnote-10) Most hoped this would be France’s version of the Glorious Revolution, the 1688 change in power that resulted in a shift to a constitutional monarchy in England. At most, citizens were concerned that this could lead to France becoming a more powerful economic rival.[[11]](#footnote-11) The most outspoken of all these was Dr. Richard Price, who gave a sermon in front of the Revolutionary Society in London that provided emphatic support for the movement. Numerous conservative voices spoke up immediately following the events, with “a mixture of surprise, regret and self-satisfaction.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Responses ranged from reasoned to ridiculous. Moral theorist William Paley opposed the revolution from a utilitarian standpoint, believing the rights of man aspect of Enlightenment thought was overblown.[[13]](#footnote-13) Richard Hey bought into the natural rights idea, but in a way to harkens to a Libertarian non-aggression principle.[[14]](#footnote-14) William Drummond took a stand in favor of rights in a state of nature, but still held that liberty was “uncertain and liable to total destruction.”[[15]](#footnote-15) All of these voices quickly became overshadowed when Edmund Burke weighed in on the topic.

Burke is now remembered as the seminal personality in the British response to the French Revolution. Born January 12th, 1729 in Dublin, Burke’s life leading up to his infamous treatise is critical to understanding his work. He began studying law in London some time before May 2nd, 1750, and started a political apprenticeship in 1759.[[16]](#footnote-16) In the interim period, the young Burke had a crazed youth phase, complete with affairs, mysterious trips to America, and sarcastic poetry.[[17]](#footnote-17) He also ran in similar circles to fellow modern thinkers Adam Smith and David Hume, the latter with whom he may have been entangled in a competition for the former’s university position.[[18]](#footnote-18) However it was during his political career that Burke began to formulate his conservative values. In 1765, he was elected to Parliament, and quickly became renowned for his writings and speeches, often infused with elaborate rhetoric.

Burke became an outspoken advocate for the American Revolution, beginning in 1775 with a speech entitled “On American Taxation”: "Again, and again, revert to your own principles—Seek Peace, and ensue it—leave America, if she has taxable matter in her, to tax herself."[[19]](#footnote-19) This speech struck a more hopeful chord, with Burke still being of the belief that mediation was possible. However, he retained his support for the revolution throughout, even calling out his peers for celebrating British victories. One of the largest questions in his biography is why he chose to definitively oppose the French Revolution when he wrote so fondly of the War for American Independence. One answer calls to the Americans were experiencing true injustice, whereas the French were not. However, the most important point was that there was no monarchical tradition being overturned. Political theorist Jeff Spinner summarized it as such: “With America, Burke contends, honor is not so important.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

*Reflections on the Revolution in France* is a defining piece of conservative thought. The piece is written as a letter, “intended to be written to a gentleman in London”, but at well over 400 pages it is hard to imagine it was ever meant to be sent in that form.[[21]](#footnote-21) This format makes reading *Reflections* in its entirety a challenging proposal from a modern perspective, as there are no chapters or organization of any kind. Nonetheless, Burke’s ornate style brings an intense drama to the topic. The general question the book tries to answer is simple: why is the French Revolution a bad idea? He draws constant comparisons between the 1789 uprising and his country’s very own Glorious Revolution in 1688, saying that the former lacks the legitimacy of the latter for a variety of reasons, including a respect for tradition, working with the ruling family, and general amicability, among others.

However, *Reflections* is not a logical, reasoned response to the French Revolution- it is an emotional one. Burke scholar John Turner noted the elaborate and dramatic style of the work, saying “it is to literature that we must turn… to find a work that can match the *Reflections* in the poetry of its reading of man’s political history.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The importance of emotions in Burke’s political theory is the subject of intense scholarly debate, but none doubt its omnipresence.[[23]](#footnote-23) Interpretations range from examining his erotic feelings towards history,[[24]](#footnote-24) to looking at his work through a lens of anger.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, the most significant emotion in this particular work is fear. Throughout the treatise, Burke clearly betrays an omnipresent anxiety that serves as the underlying motivation for opposing the movement. This fear has three core tenets: intangibility, chaos, and a loss of tradition. While all three are inextricably tied together in his argument, they all use distinctive language and approaches to relay the author’s point. Burke’s conservatism is rooted in a general fear of change as a whole, and he uses impassioned emotional language to strike that same fear into his readers. As the author says himself, “better to be despised for too anxious apprehensions than ruined by too confident a security.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

## Fear of Intangibility

Burke’s most obvious misgiving is with all things he cannot personally interact with or understand. He believes that science and advanced concept are a waste of time, especially when compared to what has worked in the past and what “feels” right.This fear of intangibility and preference for the known as opposed to the unknown is used in his arguments against the rationalism used to justify the revolution, his defense of religion against atheism, and the emphatic antagonism he feels for academia (perhaps a result of his earlier failures). After all, as one scholar said, “Burke is famous for reviling theory.”[[27]](#footnote-27) This rhetoric is used to convince the readers that the more complicated something is, the less it is to be trusted.

One example of this phenomena is his derogatory use of the word “metaphysics”. The actual term relates to a section of philosophy that discusses topics not of the physical world. However, for Burke that intangibility makes the discipline illegitimate and an example of over thought nonsense. In fact, Burke uses the term “metaphysics” in some conjugation 25 times in the text.[[28]](#footnote-28) “Metaphysical abstraction”, “metaphysical sophistry”, “Political metaphysics”, and “metaphysical principles” are all common examples of his use of this term, each time associating the concept with overly complicated thought.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Whole books have been written about Burke’s conception of metaphysics alone.[[30]](#footnote-30) His particular understanding likely comes from early studying of St. Thomas Aquinas, and can best be summarized as the pursuit of the unknowable, or as the aforementioned book on metaphysics describes it, “the science of being as being.”[[31]](#footnote-31) However, one of the most dangerous aspects of this is not the ideology itself, but what people are able to do with it. He seems especially concerned with leaders using complex concepts to convince common folk that their direction is the best one. For example, at the end of an extended metaphor on mixing science and faith, he said that religion “will be perfumed with other incense than the infectious stuff which is imported by the smugglers of adulterated metaphysics.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Another instance saw him referring to the chaos of revolution as “the fruits of metaphysic declarations wantonly made, and shamefully retracted!”[[33]](#footnote-33) Comparing the leaders of the 1688 revolution in England to the French, he exclaimed “As the first sort of legislators attended to the different kinds of citizens and combined them into one commonwealth, the others, the metaphysical and alchemistical legislators, have taken the direct contrary course.”[[34]](#footnote-34) In that example, he conjoins metaphysics with alchemy, the medieval “science” of changing common metals into gold. By associating these two concepts, he is insinuating that the new intelligentsia has no better idea of what is right than those who sought riches through magic centuries before. Why trust those who speaks of greater truths when those who have spoken those truths before have been misguided?

Interestingly, Burke’s fear of the unknown also manifests itself in an economic context. Throughout *Reflections*, he shows a strong dislike for paper currency, believing that its usage in France is irresponsible, because it is not used to supplement real coin, like it is in Britain. In this, Burke agrees with Adam Smith, who viewed paper money as a more exciting and productive currency, but more dangerous.[[35]](#footnote-35) Burke is not opposed to paper currency as a whole, but the way in which it is used in France worries him, as it is not backed by “real” wealth, also known as gold and silver. The National Assembly was using money that was supported instead by reclaimed church property, which had a value estimated in gold- hence the use of the term “alchemist.” Language scholar Tom Furniss summarized it as such in his article on Burke’s word choice in relation to assignats:

Paper money, then, is a ruinous, inflationary, ‘dangerous’ supplement in France, where it is ‘a badge of distress’ indicating a ‘want’ or absence and supplanting ‘real’ wealth. But in England, it is a benevolent ‘symbol of prosperity’, having ‘a tendency to increase’, -or supplement- ‘real coin’.[[36]](#footnote-36)

This is a clear connection to that Burkean fear of intangibility- if money isn’t attached to solid coin then it simply cannot be trusted. There is no evidence that leads the reader to believe that he has any real knowledge about economics, but having money that is not linked to a gold standard *sounds* like a bad idea. Burke’s choice of language is meant to scare the reader into believing that the French economy will fall apart, the inevitable consequence of a misguided revolution.

The writing style in the book also reveals a deep distrust in academic authority. Burke tries to show that newfangled ideas are simply a justification for leaders to take power. “We are generally men of untaught feelings,” and scholars do not know any better than the common man.[[37]](#footnote-37) Describing teachers, he explains “his zeal is of a curious character… It is not for the diffusion of truth, but the spreading of contradiction.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Later, he espouses “let them be their amusement in the schools… but let them not break prison to burst like a levanter, to sweep the earth with their hurricane.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Burke also noted the absence of emotion in education, saying “fashionable teachers have no interest in giving their passions exactly the same direction.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Ultimately, Burke did not think knowledge mattered that much.

We are so made as to be affected at such spectacles with melancholy sentiments upon the unstable condition of mortal prosperity and the tremendous uncertainty of human greatness; because in those natural feelings we learn great lessons; because in events like these our passions instruct our reason.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Without feelings, knowledge does not matter. What we think we know is relative to how we feel, and reason is secondary to passions. If this is taken to be the case, then justifying revolution with logic is deeply problematic. Either the revolutionaries in France are deeply misguided in their faith in reason, or those promulgating Enlightenment thought are intentionally deceiving the public.

Burke does not take a clear stance on which he thinks is the case, but he does not need to here. The greater fear is that this trend toward reason is not only apparent in France. British readers could easily see this in 1789 and think reflexively about their own position. Burke is not only speaking against the French, he is speaking against the entire modern epistemological zeitgeist. It is with that connection that he is truly able to inspire fear in his readers.

## Fear of Losing Tradition

Burke’s hatred of reason is closely related to his concern for the loss of tradition. This is the second great fear in *Reflections*, the fear that these intellectual movements are causing society to drift away from its roots, the things that make it work. “When ancient opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment, we have no compass to govern us.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Losing the history of nationhood is dangerous in this sense, as it sets the world on a new trajectory unattached to everything we know to promote stability and to prevent chaos. “But the age of chivalry is gone,” he bemoans, “That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.”[[43]](#footnote-43) A proponent of a more unchanging model of governance, Burke believes that the French are destroying the good with the vague notion of what may be great.

The classic example of this tenet of the conservative world view is religion, and the author spends a healthy portion of the book belaboring that topic. “We know, and what is better, we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and of all comfort.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Unsurprisingly, he holds the British up as a paragon of piety: “We are Protestants, not from indifference, but from zeal.”[[45]](#footnote-45) “Man is by his constitution a religious animal,” he continues, channeling Aristotle, and thus atheism is unnatural.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The expected progression would entail Burke fearing atheism, the opposite of a strong religious base and thus the dangerous ‘unknown’. However, a careful reading of the text reveals that is not the case. Atheism is only mentioned 11 times, and none of those instances seem particular frightening. “Atheistic libellers” are mentioned, but only as “trumpeters to animate the populace.”[[47]](#footnote-47) “Speculative and inactive atheists” are not to be engaged by clergy, as they are not worth the time.[[48]](#footnote-48) Burke tells a story of a man named Burnet’s visit to France in 1683, where he described a group that overthrew Christianity for atheism, but that “atheism has succeeded in destroying them.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

Therefore, it is not a world without religious tradition that concerns Burke, it is what replaces it in that section of men’s hearts.

But if, in the moment of riot and in a drunken delirium from the hot spirit drawn out of the alembic of hell, which in France is now so furiously boiling, we should uncover our nakedness by throwing off that Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization amongst us and amongst many other nations, we are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure a void) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take place of it.[[50]](#footnote-50)

We have seen this time and again from Burke: his conception of the average citizen is so low that he feels they can be swayed by anything. Once the “good” religion is gone, humans will naturally succumb to whatever comes in next- superstition is, after all, "the religion of feeble minds."[[51]](#footnote-51) The average Frenchman is likely unable to know the difference between the two: “From the general style of your late publications of all sorts one would be led to believe that your clergy in France were a sort of monsters, a horrible composition of superstition, ignorance, sloth, fraud, avarice, and tyranny.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Again, it is unclear whether or not leaders are intentionally manipulating people into believing these fabricated superstitions, or if the leaders are a victim of this as well, but the fear inspired is the same either way. If the French Revolution points to a post religious age, as Burke suggests, society is going to be cast down a dangerous and uncertain road. This goes for both France and England.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The author also maintains a quasi-religious adoration of royalty. In one of the more seemingly counter-intuitive aspects of the letter, Burke seems talk down the more democratically elected parliaments and assemblies, and to glorify both the British and French royal families, despite the fact that he himself was a representative in one of these bodies. William and Mary of the Revolution of 1688 are referred to with their “merciful goodness”, “most happily to reign over” over English people.[[54]](#footnote-54) Even more surprisingly, he describes seeing the now deceased French royal family at Versailles and being astounded by their presence. Marie Antoinette was “glittering like the morning star, full of life, and splendor, and joy.”[[55]](#footnote-55) He notes “the beauty, and the amiable qualities of the descendent of so many kings and emperors,” and finds it a shame that these individuals are disliked “instead of being the subject of exultation.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

Meanwhile, the National Assembly is held in the exact opposite esteem. He thinks “to form a free government… requires much thought, deep reflection, a sagacious, powerful, and combining mind. This I do not find in those who take the lead in the National Assembly.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Not only that, but the body is too strong, saying “the power… of the House of Commons, when least diminished, is but a drop of water in the ocean, compared… to your National Assembly.”[[58]](#footnote-58) In fact, according to Burke, the form of government was a bad idea in the first place: “I believe the present French power is the very first body of citizens who, having obtained full authority to do with their country what they pleased, have chosen to dissever it in this barbarous manner.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

To him, the National Assembly is just a handful of “country clowns” trying to control a nation.[[60]](#footnote-60) The choice of who is better suited to govern is simple: those who have done so successfully for centuries, or those who have not. Burke seems to make no attempt to hide his dislike for republican systems of governance, even when he himself is a part of one. “When the leaders choose to make themselves bidders at an auction of popularity, their talents… will be of no service. They will become flatterers instead of legislators. ”[[61]](#footnote-61) Hereditary systems, where succession is fixed, is preferable for stability’s sake. Any group that disregards a preexisting chain of command is denying what is known to work and hoping that an unproven system will work better. Burke finds that unwise.

*Reflections* also holds a severe reverence for the knowledge of “the ancients.” It seems as though the only ideas Burke has any respect for are the classical world views that shaped contemporary existence. Burke prefers “ancient institutions when set in opposition to a present sense of convenience.”[[62]](#footnote-62) It is important to note, the ancient tradition articulated is not made up of a single set of ideas. Instead, much like the English Constitution he values so much, “ancient” knowledge is made up of several components. One crucial part of that convention is “the ancient charter, the Magna Charta of King John.”[[63]](#footnote-63) The document in question, the first Magna Carta of 1215, is generally considered the beginning of English common law and an early example of a social contract. To him, it implies “the stationary policy of this kingdom in considering their most sacred rights and franchises as an inheritance.”[[64]](#footnote-64) While this is poor history on Burke’s part, it is unsurprising considering his noted positive regard for the British tradition. He also includes the Declaration of Right, a key component of the 1688 Revolution, as a part of the pantheon of traditional documents. In addition to the two British documents, he adds chivalry, Aristotle, and the thinkers of Rome to the conversation at various points in his letter.

None of those things is closely related to France. In fact, the words “ancient” or “antiquity” are only used in reference to France when combined with either the royal family or religion. Burke’s view of tradition is highly Anglocentric. This is understandable, considering his intended audience. However, an understanding of that bias provides an important context for quotes like this:

Do these theorists mean to imitate some of their predecessors who dragged the bodies of our ancient sovereigns out of the quiet of their tombs? Do they mean to attaint and disable backward all the kings that have reigned before the Revolution, and consequently to stain the throne of England with the blot of a continual usurpation?[[65]](#footnote-65)

Yet again, the fear comes not from a concern over the future of France- although he does certainly hold the French royal family in oddly high regard –but from what this means for Britain. If the disease of disregarding history spreads across the channel, then all hope for the home country may be lost.

## Fear of Chaos

Burke’s third and final great fear is that of chaos. In many ways, this is the natural evolution of the previous two: when one moves away from a known, stable tradition to an intangible, dangerous model, chaos inevitably has the opportunity to reign. If a people lose their tradition and venture into the nebulous unknown, Burke thinks “men would become little better than the flies of a summer.”[[66]](#footnote-66) The word “chaos” itself is only mentioned twice explicitly: once within the first few pages as the author sets context, and once later on to describe the unconnectedness of France new political system.[[67]](#footnote-67) However, its presence is one of the overarching themes of the letter, and in some ways it is the sum of all fears written here.

The most direct manifestation of chaos is the actions of an unthinking mob, the characterization that is so often associated with the French Revolution. Consider the following two excerpts:

It is thus with all those who, attending only to the shell and husk of history, think they are waging war with intolerance, pride, and cruelty, whilst, under color of abhorring the ill principles of antiquated parties, they are authorizing and feeding the same odious vices in different factions.[[68]](#footnote-68)

These writings and sermons have filled the populace with a black and savage atrocity of mind, which supersedes in them the common feelings of nature as well as all sentiments of morality and religion, insomuch that these wretches are induced to bear with a sullen patience the intolerable distresses brought upon them by the violent convulsions and permutations that have been made in property. The spirit of proselytism attends this spirit of fanaticism.[[69]](#footnote-69)

Both of these address mobs with the two fears already broached: loss of religion and disdain for academia. Certainly Burke does not approve of unthinking masses, but they aren’t feared as explicitly as in other contemporary texts as one might expect. On the surface, it is a fairly benign disdain that is forced upon the reader in this sense. A joke about how the French currency “cannot raise supplies, but they can raise a mob,” and a snide dig at the National Assembly (“is it in destroying and pulling down that skill is displayed? Your mob can do this as well at least as your assemblies”) is mostly the context in which mobs are mentioned.[[70]](#footnote-70)

The real fear of the masses requires more nuance to access. The worry about mobs is not that they are mobs, but what those mobs do. Burke believes “Justifying perfidy and murder for public benefit” lasts “until rapacity, malice, revenge, and fear more dreadful than revenge could satiate their insatiable appetites.”[[71]](#footnote-71) In short, if violence for the greater good becomes the norm, then the violence only grows worse. In fact, Burke often refers to mobs indirectly, through their actions instead of directly tackling their existence. Referring to propaganda efforts, he believed their purpose “was to stimulate their cannibal appetites (which one would think had been gorged sufficiently) by variety and seasoning; and to quicken them to an alertness in new murders and massacres.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Another rant about Parisian delusions concludes “It has been the effect of their sense of perfect safety, in authorizing treasons, robberies, rapes, assassinations, slaughters, and burnings throughout their harassed land.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

One might notice after that last quote that Burke has a habit of listing off evils. Another example has the author condemn “the frauds, impostures, violences, rapines, burnings, murders, confiscations, compulsory paper currencies” of the movement.[[74]](#footnote-74) The effect of these grammatically questionable rants is to provide gravity for his fear. Instead of simply instructing readers that the chaos of revolution is bad, he associates a wide variety of awful things to its actors: rape, pillage, murder, treason, robbery, and a host of others. The audience is naturally fearful of these things, and by connecting these evils with the French masses Burke is able to turn the Parisian commoners into a straw man of evil, with no regard for human life.

Is this characterization accurate? Perhaps not, but it is understandable why Burke takes such offense to it. Much of the author’s fear of chaos can be construed from the way he talks about structure and stability. Again, he writes about England and revolutionary France in very opposite terms, with the former being lauded for its consistency and reliability. The British “conceive the undisturbed succession of the crown to be a pledge of the stability and perpetuity of all the other members of our constitution.”[[75]](#footnote-75) Another section describes the current British system, where “the institutions of policy, the goods of fortune, the gifts of providence are handed down to us, and from us, in the same course and order.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Perpetuity and continuation are ideas consistently associated with the English crown. Burke reiterates his preference for hereditary monarchies by saying “no experience has taught us that in any other course or method than that of an hereditary crown our liberties can be regularly perpetuated and preserved sacred as our hereditary right.”[[77]](#footnote-77)

None should be surprised that Burke thinks the stability of the British model is good for the happiness of a people. However, what is striking is that he uses similar language to describe the pre-revolutionary monarchical traditions in France. Here, Burke describes the Estates General:

They had been a safe asylum to secure these laws in all the revolutions of humor and opinion… They were the great security to private property which might be said (when personal liberty had no existence) to be, in fact, as well guarded in France as in any other country.[[78]](#footnote-78)

He goes on to say that “if the parliaments had been preserved, instead of being dissolved at so ruinous a charge to the nation, they might have served in this new commonwealth.”[[79]](#footnote-79) In a later section bemoaning the fall of the house of Bourbon, he laments that “in the monastic institutions, in my opinion, was found a great power for the mechanism of politic benevolence.”[[80]](#footnote-80)

The parallels in terms of language between his descriptions of the two houses is striking, and its purpose is evident enough. Burke aims to sees the parallels between the two systems as evidence that revolution can spread across the sea. He sees very little fault with the old French system, instead focusing the blame on the commoners for becoming caught up in new ideas and forgetting old traditions. But by drawing such stark similarities, a contemporary English reader could not help but think that this could happen to them too. Nothing can stop the chaos once it breaks out, and unless we value the traditions we have, we run the risk of falling into the same trap as France.

## The Burkean Standard

Now having identified Burke’s three core tenets of Burke’s fear- intangibility, loss of tradition, and chaos- one can begin to truly understand the root of his conservatism. Burke is concerned not only with what is happening in France, but with society and humanity as a whole. There is great wisdom in tradition, but it is not solely the old that must be preserved. Change is allowed, but must be gradual and considered- institutions should not be rattled by brief gusts of new ideas, but slowly formed by the prevailing winds. Burke’s fear of intangibility derives itself from both a distrust of academia as well as a distrust in general theoretical conceptions. The loss of tradition, meanwhile, comes from something much more tactile- the loss of the structures and beliefs that he maintains holds society together. This leads naturally into his final concern, that which fixates on the effects of these changes- chaos. These three fears taken as components of one great distrust of change, one can begin to evaluate other thinkers in terms of Burkean fear.

# Russell Kirk- The Quintessential Prescriptive Conservative

This discussion of Burke leads naturally to his self-identified successor, Russell Kirk. Kirk, one of the founding members of the American New Conservative movement, is often referred to as a modern Edmund Burke- Clinton Rossiter once described him as “born one hundred fifty years too late and in the wrong country.”[[81]](#footnote-81) His writing reflects that conception- Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind,* the 1953 book that even Rossiter describes as “one of the most valuable contributions to intellectual history,” places Burke as the subject of its first chapter.[[82]](#footnote-82) Kirk’s writing style is also evocative of Burke- both are at times loquacious and never afraid to offer strongly worded advice to their opponents. Still, the importance of *The Conservative Mind* in its own right should not be understated. Historian George H. Nash describes it as “not only a huge, 450-page distillation of the thinking of 150 years of the intellectual right; it was also a relentless assault on every left-wing panacea and error imaginable.”[[83]](#footnote-83) A reviewer for *Time* put it even more bluntly- “*The Conservative Mind* was the most important book of the 20th century.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Kirk was among the trail blazers in sparking a return to intellectualism in American conservatives post war, and his importance in rearticulating conservative opposition to liberalism cannot be understated. This makes Kirk an excellent comparison to Burke, and thus a wonderful place to apply the standard of Burkean fear.

The Michigan native’s biography paints him as typical of his generation- enlisting in World War II and finding himself on the battlefield. Born in Plymouth, Michigan, 25 miles west of Detroit, on October 19th, 1918, Kirk entered the world just as it exited from the First World War. Growing up during the Great Depression, he earned his B.A. from Michigan State and an M.A. from Duke- where he discovered his love for John Randolph of Roanoke-before enlisting in the military during World War II. [[85]](#footnote-85) After the war, he stayed abroad, earning his doctorate at St. Andrews University in Scotland. It is here that he rediscovered many of the British authors here revered so much, Burke chief among them.[[86]](#footnote-86) According to scholar Gerald J. Russello, it is in Scotland that he gained a “fascination with the occult and the gothic,” and the “aristocratic and antique trappings” of Scotland appealed to his old world sensibilities.[[87]](#footnote-87) He returned to Michigan State to teach upon graduation, but found the university system distasteful. After the fame he reached with *The Conservative Mind* he left his post and began focusing solely on writing and lecturing around the country, based out of his home in upstate Michigan. It was here that he wrote much of his more famous scholarship, and developed into one of the foremost personalities in 20th century conservatism. He died as he lived, quietly at home in Mecosta, Michigan, in 1994 at the age of 75. However, knowing Kirk’s penchant for the adoration of those voices who have faded into history, he would probably argue that his writings are even more relevant today than they were while he was still active.

Kirk outlines his definition of conservatism clearly in the beginning of his 1953 treatise with six “canons”: 1) a belief in a transcendent order, 2) an appreciation of the mystery of life, 3) confidence in classes and order, 4) understanding that freedom and property are linked, 5) faith in tradition, 6) skepticism of change.[[88]](#footnote-88) Forty years later, this definition changed only slightly- his final book, 1993’s *The Politics of Prudence,* listed ten principles.[[89]](#footnote-89) Only two principles constitute considerable additions- that “conservatives uphold voluntary community, quite as they oppose involuntary collectivism,” and that they “perceive the need for prudent restraints upon power and upon human passions.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Most central to Kirk’s belief in Conservatism is that it is “neither a religion nor ideology” but instead a state of mind.[[91]](#footnote-91) By the end of his career, Kirk wrote that the phrase “prudent politician” is “synonymous, virtually,” with the word conservative.[[92]](#footnote-92)

Given this explanation, is it possible that The Conservative Mind is riddled with fear? Certainly many of these canons are easily connectable with the fears Edmund Burke felt so deeply. No.’s 1, 3, and 5 all clearly fit themselves into Burke’s fear of losing tradition, and that the structures that have held society together for so long ought to be maintained. However, Burke’s other two fears may seem on the surface less apparent. No. 4- the link between freedom and property- can be viewed just as easily as endorsing an acceptance of abstract concepts instead of rejecting them, and No. 2- appreciating the mystery of life- seems to be embracing chaos, not fearing it. Nevertheless, upon closer examination, Kirk actually fits quite comfortably into the mold left by Burke. This section of the paper will go through each of Burke’s three sub-fears- intangibility, losing tradition, and chaos- and apply them to the political theory (although he may not like that term) of Russell Kirk.

## Fear of Intangibility? Radicalism and Ideology

In keeping with the structure of Burke’s section, our examination will start with Kirk’s fear of intangibility. A key characteristics of Kirk's writing is to define conservatism by what it is not. In *The Conservative Mind*, that opposing force is radicalism. Hedefines radicals as those who attack the principles of conservatism on the basis of one of four principles- “meliorism” or the perfectibility of society, disdain for traditions, the belief in political and economic equality, and a distrust of society as being a connection between “the dead, the living, and those yet to be born.”[[93]](#footnote-93) Five schools of thought throughout history have challenged Conservatism: Rationalism, exemplified by David Hume and *philosophes* like Voltaire, the “romantic emancipation” of Rousseau, utilitarianism, positivism, and Marxism, which he refers to as “collective materialism.”[[94]](#footnote-94) These five all oppose conservatism on the key tenet of embracing change, inspired by abstract ideas, instead of relying and the tried and true system at play. Radicalism here does not just mean any idea- ideas have merit to conservatives- but simply when those concepts are taken to the extreme, and embraced wholeheartedly. While it is likely Kirk thinks all five of these schools of thought are misguided, it is not that they are wrong that is the issue- it is that they took things too far.

In *Politics of Prudence*, Kirk broadens his focus from simply radicalism to ideology as a whole. He opens the book with a simple premise- “a defense of prudential politics, as opposed to ideological politics.”[[95]](#footnote-95) While the younger Kirk may have been more open-minded, the elder attacks the notion of big ideas wholesale. Kirk sums up the problem as such: “Ideology, in short, is a political formula that promises mankind an earthly paradise; but in cruel fact what ideology has created is a series of terrestrial hells.”[[96]](#footnote-96) The specific phrasing of the word *ideology* was “coined during Napoleonic times” by an “abstract intellectual of the sort since grown familiar on the Left Bank of the Seine.”[[97]](#footnote-97) This man, Destutt de Tracy, working in “the alleged science of ideas” was inspired by John Locke, but his ideas have since been connected to “the famous liberator of Democratic Kampuchea, Pol Pot.”[[98]](#footnote-98) The willingness to connect John Locke, the political philosopher whose natural rights theory kick-started the idea of limited government, and Pol Pot, the Cambodian totalitarian dictator whose Khmer Rouge government oversaw one of the bloodiest genocides of the 20th century, demonstrates Kirk’s conviction that ideology is not good for society. In particular, ideology has three specific vices- 1) it is “inverted religion”, rejecting Christianity and instead “substituting collective salvation here on earth through violent revolution," 2) it makes political compromise “impossible,” as no one will deviate from their ideology, and 3) since ideologists believe so strongly in their “Absolute Truth,” any disagreement will result in factions that will inevitably come to war with one another, “as did Trotskyites and Stalinists.”[[99]](#footnote-99) One of ideology’s strengths is that it attracts people from across society- those who feel marginalized certainly, but also young students fresh out of college, and the “Knowledge Class” who might think they know better than the answers offered by tradition. According to Kirk, one needs look no farther than the “early composition of the Nazi party” to illustrate the power of ideology to attract people.[[100]](#footnote-100) While this may seem to be a slippery slope argument, Kirk argues that it is not just the extremes of ideology that should not be tolerated. Responding to a woman who wondered if there was such as a thing as a good idea, he states, “Nay, madam, *all* ideologies work mischief.”[[101]](#footnote-101)

At the root of his despair over ideology is the new wave of self-identified conservatives that have taken over American government. Chapter 10 in *Politics of Prudence* is entitled Popular Conservatism, and its thesis is that Americans on the whole maintain support for the idea of conservatism.[[102]](#footnote-102) This does not equate to populism- Kirk thinks that populism is tantamount to a “revolt against the Smart Guys,” which he agrees should be undertaken but not to supplant them with ignorance.[[103]](#footnote-103) He believes voters love tradition- “The Constitution of the United States is revered, even if, given a knowledge test about the Constitution, voters might score poorly”- and that Americans view the word “conservative” more favorably than the word “radical.”[[104]](#footnote-104) Furthermore, Kirk thinks that both the Democratic and Republican Party are fundamentally conservative organizations, employing rhetoric around preservation and are attached to “the Permanent Things.”[[105]](#footnote-105) However, despite this silent conservative majority, conservatism has not overtaken the country. Kirk cites two reasons for this. The first is that the country is overrun by a tyranny of the minority:

America labors under the tyranny of minorities- but minorities aggressive, intolerant, well financed, and cleverly directed. I mean the feminist minority, the black-militant minority, the welfare-rights minority, the pistol-packing minority, the industrial-merger minority, the blight-South-Africa minority, the Zionist-minority, the homosexual majority, the animal rights minority. Coherent and vindictive, such groups claim to have power to make and unmake members of Congress- who often are timid, if blustering creatures.[[106]](#footnote-106)

Here Kirk builds upon his fear of these intangible ideas by connecting ideology to action. These factions take hold of these ideologies, and motivated by some conception of absolute truth they hold up democratic process in pushing their agenda. This applies to both sides of the political spectrum- with the contemporary right represented by the critique of the “industrial-merger” and “pistol-packing” minorities- although certainly biased more towards leftist radicals. Kirk implies that what is so terrible about these groups is their proclivity to pass legislation that favors them, which could result in more frivolous laws being passed. Although perhaps he overestimates which minorities are truly in power, there is significant support for his argument- political scientists Virginia Gray and David Lowery published a statistical analysis in 1995 that provides a strong correlation between the number of interest groups and the productivity of a legislature.[[107]](#footnote-107) This points to interest groups slowing down the legislative progress for the sake of adding earmarks and the like to bills, and it is doubtful that Kirk thinks more legislation is should be the goal of government, he certainly seems opposed to the excessive presence of interest groups.

Similarly, Kirk displays a distrust of the American party system. He believes “most Americans, although conservative enough in their general views, are unable to distinguish between conservative candidates and liberal or radical candidates.”[[108]](#footnote-108) This applies doubly for new legislation, which he feels “most American citizens do not perceive the character or probable consequences of.”[[109]](#footnote-109) Since repeal is difficult, and “conservatives are not given to intimidation by street demonstration,” the current political system seems to stack the deck to pervert the national conservatism.[[110]](#footnote-110) It seems his disdain for the American people’s ability to participate goes so far as actively discouraging less educated citizens from voting, as he thinks they’re more likely to be swayed by these forces.[[111]](#footnote-111)

However, as Kirk moves from talking about government and “the people” as a whole to just talking about Ronald Reagan, moving from the intangible to the tangible, his remarks become much more glowing.

For Ronald Reagan, Mr. President of these United States, was regarded as the apotheosis of conservatism. Had the Republicans nominated him for the presidency in 1968, say, the recent history of this country might be very different. I am not saying that Reagan was successful in everything he had undertaken; he found himself baffled in much; but in difficulty he was sustained by the conservative understanding that politics is the art of the possible.[[112]](#footnote-112)

Kirk’s glowing review of Reagan continues on for many pages- he describes a meeting with Reagan where the president was “erect and smiling, ineffably charming,” and referred to him as the “Western hero of romance.”[[113]](#footnote-113) Reagan did the most possible with the office, managing to achieve “virtual full employment,” lower tax rates, and restrain the bureaucracy, all while maintaining the love of the public.[[114]](#footnote-114) While Kirk admits Reagan experienced “blunders” in Lebanon and Iran, his “dramatic success” in Libya and Grenada more than made up for it.[[115]](#footnote-115) Ronald Reagan is a complicated figure to invoke when attempting to defend a model of conservatism- as Reagan scholar Hugh Heclo writes, “It is more realistic to speak of the legacies rather than the legacy of Ronald Reagan.”[[116]](#footnote-116) While Kirk appreciated that Reagan lowered taxes, it is hard to imagine him wholeheartedly endorsing the ballooning the federal deficit that occurred during his administration.[[117]](#footnote-117) Additionally, Reagan spoke about the Cold War with a kind of “moral clarity,” with a clear sense of good and evil.[[118]](#footnote-118) As Heclo writes, “Reagan’s vision of a global mission in defeating communism was now transposed onto a new global mission that strained to the breaking point the caution, modesty, and anti-utopianism that Russel Kirk has commended.”[[119]](#footnote-119) Reagan’s foreign policy “blunders” are not so off-handedly dismissed either- the involvement in Libya Kirk admired led to the rise of Muammar Qaddafi, and interventions into South America resulted in significant bloodshed. Furthermore, Heclo also points out “Reagan was largely blind to the threat of militant Islam,” and oversimplified all foreign policy into an anti-communist context.[[120]](#footnote-120) This is all to say that Reagan is complicated, and Kirk is all too eager to accept his leadership. One reason for this could be that Kirk knows Reagan- he’s tangible and human instead of a faceless senator or Congressman. Kirk himself admits the essence of conservatism is preferring “the devil they know to the devil they don’t know,” and in supporting Reagan the same principle applies.[[121]](#footnote-121) He simply feels more affection for the tangible presidency behind him than the potential regimes ahead.

## Fear of Losing Tradition- Kirk’s Conservative Idols

For whatever failings Kirk may have had as a contemporary observer, he more than made up for them with his enthusiasm towards retelling his own history of political thought. From here, one can begin to see where his Burkean admiration of tradition takes hold, and his concerns about what may happen if the lessons of the past are forgetting become apparent. Throughout his writings, Russell Kirk consistently holds up a handful of men to his conservative pantheon, and the way he speaks of his heroes is instructive in his overall philosophy. First and foremost among these historical figures is Edmund Burke, who he believes is the grandfather of all conservatism. However, several other characters begin emerge as well- John Adams, T.S. Elliot, John C. Calhoun, Benjamin Disreali, and Alexis de Tocqueville chief among them, each imparting their own character on Kirk’s story.

Still, Kirk writes more about Edmund Burke than anyone else, intentionally so. The second chapter of *The Conservative Mind,* which seeks to give a comprehensive intellectual history of modern conservatism, is dedicated to Burke, entitled “Burke and the Politics of Prescription.”[[122]](#footnote-122) In the chapter, Kirk’s central thesis is easy to understand: Burke’s willingness to counter the 18th century radicals and articulate a conservative doctrine inspired generations and paved the way for all who came after him. This claim is not particularly novel- perhaps the only person who might argue this would be Burke himself, who would likely defer credit to the ancients he so adored. Nonetheless, Kirk’s argument is Burke’s favor is strong- he holds that Burke was among the first thinkers for whom it was not a contradiction to be both liberal and conservative. Kirk explains it thusly:

All his life, Burke’s chief concern had been for justice and liberty, which must stand or fall together- liberty under law, a definite liberty, the limits of which were determined by prescription. He had defended the liberties of Englishmen against their king, and the liberties of Americans against king and parliament, and the liberties of the Hindus against Europeans. He had defended those liberties not because they were innovations, discovered in the Age of Reason, but because they were ancient prerogatives, guaranteed by immemorial usage. Burke was liberal *because* he was conservative.[[123]](#footnote-123)

This combination of a love of freedom and a love of tradition had existed before, but Kirk holds that it was Burke who built this legacy for many of the conservatives to follow. By wedding freedom to tradition, the beginnings of the uneasy alliance of social conservatives and libertarians is born. This explains a few of contradictions of Burke- supporting revolution across the Atlantic but not across the Channel- and creates a standard of prescriptive conservatism draws its power from both the law and tradition.

However, when weighing law and tradition, it seems Kirk more heavily emphasizing Burke’s love of the latter over the former. The second half of his chapter on Burke focuses on the question of religion, and the reliance of society on a transcendent order. The greatest feat of Burke’s work according to Kirk is his ability to thoroughly refute the dominant ideologies of his time- “utilitarianism, positivism, and pragmatism, as well as an attack on Jacobinsim”- with an endorsement of a transcendent order.[[124]](#footnote-124) Kirk seems to see Burke as the strongest example of his first canon of conservatism, and sees Burke as uniquely potent in his connection of politics and tradition. Kirk writes that Burke thought “This temporal order is only part of a larger, supernatural order; and the foundation is social tranquility is reverence.”[[125]](#footnote-125) He also holds that Burke saw that “the first rule of society is obedience- obedience to God and the dispensations of Providence,” but after that is “an order of spiritual and intellectual values.”[[126]](#footnote-126) Finally, Kirk argues that Burke understood that the only thing preventing complete anarchy is “general acquiescence in social distinctions of duty and privilege.”[[127]](#footnote-127) Understood simply, Kirk thinks Burke builds an order of 1) religion, 2) social values, and 3) nobility and social structures. I differ slightly here in my interpretation of Burke- swapping religion and social structures in order of primacy- but certainly Burke’s love of tradition shines through throughout his work.

Indeed Kirk remembers a Burke far more obsessed with God than the one who appears in *Reflections.* While religion is a key theme in Burke’s book, it comes secondary to class and constitutionalism in terms of focus. As mentioned in the section on Burke’s fear of losing tradition, it is really what comes after religion that scares Burke, yet Kirk is absolutely certain Burke offers a rousing endorsement of Christainity. Kirk published a revised version of his chapter on Burke from *The Conservative Mind* in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, with the key difference being the subtraction of Burke’s biography and a reinvigorated emphasis on Burke’s view of religion.[[128]](#footnote-128) In it, he writes things such as “There is a God; and He is wise; and this world is His design; and man and the state are God’s creations- such is Burke’s philosophical principle.”[[129]](#footnote-129) Additionally, Kirk authored an entire biography of Burke, entitled *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered,* which is centered on enlivening the conversation around his idol.[[130]](#footnote-130) Here he agrees that *Reflections* was written with “written with white heat,” and it “burns with all the wrath and anguish of a prophet who saw the traditions of Christendom and the fabric of society dissolving before his eyes.”[[131]](#footnote-131) Instead of rambling, Kirk sees a Burke that “winds into his subject like a serpent.”[[132]](#footnote-132) More importantly, the book’s opening chapter is titled “How Dead is Burke?” with the obvious insinuation that Burke has faded from the mind of most.[[133]](#footnote-133) He calls for a return to Burke, “not for what he did, but for what he perceived.”[[134]](#footnote-134) In this regard, Kirk is referring to Burke’s concern over radicalism, and warning that if we forget Burke we run the risk of losing his lessons in a time- rife with “communism” and “atomic waste”- when we may need it the most.[[135]](#footnote-135) As he concludes Burke’s chapter in *The Conservative Mind*:

Our age, too, seems to be groping for certain of the ideas which Burke’s inspiration formed into a system of social preservation. Failing these or some other genuine principles, our own epoch of concentration is sure to descend into sardonic apathy and fatigued repression.[[136]](#footnote-136)

It is important not to let Kirk’s love of Burke overshadow the other conservatives he holds up on high. In *The Conservative Mind,* he dedicates his third chapter to John Adams, the early American statesmen who was instrumental in the early days of revolution as well as serving as the country's second president.[[137]](#footnote-137) Having enjoyed a run of popularity recently, most notably with an HBO mini-series, it may be difficult to imagine that he was once an overlooked founder. It may be even more difficult still to picture him as a "conservative," given that among his most well-known traits are a short temper and a bombastic demeanor and a legacy that involves suspending the constitution for the sake of the national interest. Still, in 1953, he was still very much the forgotten founder, and Kirk sought to call attention to Adams as a political thinker. He maintains that Adams’ Federalists were “the first conservative faction in an independent America,” and were combatting their own radicalism- both from the *philosophes* in France and from Jefferson’s “agrarian republicans.”[[138]](#footnote-138) Of all the founders, Kirk holds Adams foremost: “between the centralizing and inquisitive principles of Hamilton and the beetling defiance of Ames stands John Adams, the real conservative.”[[139]](#footnote-139) The most valued principle of Adams, similar to that of Burke, is that legal equality and natural equality are separate. Adams saw that men possess “moral equality” from God and “judicial equality” from the state, but Kirk believes he thought “that they are so many equipollent physical beings, so many atoms, is nonsense.”[[140]](#footnote-140) His embrace of a natural aristocracy supported Kirk’s opposition to any abstract sense of equality.

It also allowed him to seamlessly segue into his next two thinkers, John C. Calhoun and John Randolph. Randolph, “the single greatest man in American history,” was a Congressman from Virginia who, though formerly allied with Thomas Jefferson, led the conservative southern delegation in the early 19th century.[[141]](#footnote-141) Joined by John C. Calhoun, the South Carolina politician famous for his stance on nullification, Randolph is who Kirk argues is chiefly responsible for ensuring the discussion around slavery was entangled with the notion of states-rights.[[142]](#footnote-142) He argues that their choice to attach slavery to less tangible questions of federalism was intentional- it enabled them to build a coalition that otherwise may not have been willing to discuss these fundamental issues of American governance.[[143]](#footnote-143) “Human slavery is bad ground for conservatives to make a stand upon; yet it needs to be remembered that the wild demands and expectations of the abolitionists were quite as slippery a ground for political decency.”[[144]](#footnote-144) This theme of memory continues when he turns his focus across the Atlantic to British conservative Benjamin Disreali, who was “determined to resuscitate the virtues of an older order.”[[145]](#footnote-145) Writers James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and T.S. Eliot are lauded for their ability to capture moments that encapsulate what it means to be an American conservative.[[146]](#footnote-146) All the historical figures he admires so much all build to this sense of collective memory that is critical to retain.

More compelling than the more popular historical figures on the list is Kirk’s penchant for highlighting more obscure characters. Of Adams, he writes: “Nowadays, Adams is not read; I was the first man to cut the pages in the ten big volumes of my set of his works, although they were published a hundred years ago.”[[147]](#footnote-147) It is difficult to ascertain today who was well known while Kirk was writing in 1953, but one could imagine that names like Walter Bagehot, Paul Elmer More, and W.H. Mallock may have received blank stares from much of Kirk’s intended audience. Still, in some ways that appears to be his point- this wondrous conservative tradition exists, and society has pulled away from it. Kirk is hoping to act as a beacon back to this intellectual history, to dust off the decrepit volumes and rediscover what it means to be a conservative. If this tradition is left disregarded, Kirk argues that we stand to lose the great wisdom offered therein.

This fear is not as “fire-and-brimstone” as Burke’s, but still takes the same shape- if society fails to learn from the past, they may be doomed to repeat it. “Conservatives have been routed,” he says, “but not conquered.”[[148]](#footnote-148) Conservatism remains strong to Kirk, with the exception of one domain- the burgeoning prospect of collectivism. As Kirk writes in his sixth edition of *The Conservative Mind,* Communism is a specter abroad moreso than in the United States and Britain. Still, Kirk observes that traces of socialism have begun to undermine liberalism in Britain, and warns that the U.S. is in danger of a similar threat.[[149]](#footnote-149) He does not see Americans slipping into communism as reflect in Russia, but still he envisions a nation that may unknowingly be doing irreparable harm to itself. As Edmund Burke himself said, “Rage and frenzy will take down more in half an hour than prudence, deliberation, and foresight can build up in a hundred years.”[[150]](#footnote-150)

## Fear of Chaos

Kirk’s understanding of Burke’s final fear is a little less apparent in his writings. As a whole, Kirk is less bombastic a writer than his idol and more moderate in persuasion, while still maintaining the integrity of his message. Still, Kirk in *The Conservative Mind* seems to almost accept that a state not adhering to conservative principles will simply be a less ideal form of government than one carefully considering the lessons of the past. The closest thing we can come to a fear of chaos is his concern of man losing sight of their natural “prejudices.”[[151]](#footnote-151) Kirk takes the word prejudice to mean something slightly different than the negative connotation the word holds today. He describes it as “the half-intuitive knowledge that enables men to meet the problems of life without logic chopping.”[[152]](#footnote-152) The notion is paired with his concept of prescription- “the customary right which grows out of conventions and compacts of many successive generations”- and presumption- “inference in accordance with the common experience of mankind.”[[153]](#footnote-153) Without these three guiding principles of humanity, “society can be saved from destruction only by force and a master.”[[154]](#footnote-154) Reason itself is the fourth mode through which Kirk believes Burke thought men think, but holds that “the mass of mankind reason hardly at all.”[[155]](#footnote-155) Kirk acknowledges that these three “p’s”- prejudice, prescripton, and presumption- are not exactly rational, but instead they are suprarational, and the ways in which citizens connect to the great wisdom of humanity. Prescription is central to the ideas of prescriptive conservatism in general- hence the name- and presumption takes much the same meaning as it does today, albeit with a much more positive spin. Prejudice, instead, is the one that piques the most interest. Instead of running from biases, they should be embraced, for they exist in our subconscious for a reason. This prejudice reveals itself in many forms, folk wisdom chief among them.[[156]](#footnote-156) It is important to note that Burke does not hold these principles to mean society should remain static- “change is inevitable; but let it come as the consequence of a need generally felt, not out of fine spun abstraction.”[[157]](#footnote-157) Kirk holds that this notion of prejudice is the most vulnerable, as even when Burke wrote it three hundred years ago he was nearly held in contempt by the literary public.[[158]](#footnote-158) Yet it is the most important of all virtues to hold dear- without it, we risk a return to the Hobbesian life- “nasty, brutish, and short.”[[159]](#footnote-159)

More critically, it appears prejudice is not something that can be reacquired once it is lost.[[160]](#footnote-160) Kirk holds that Burke “has very little to say concerning the greatest social quandary of our time” but thinks it is likely he doesn’t believe a return to providence is possible.[[161]](#footnote-161) Still, we can understand Kirk’s own feelings by looking to his later works, as in *The Politics of Prudence* he speaks with a different manner of clarity and conviction. As if often the case, Kirk’s strongest words are spoken in someone else’s voice, this time T.S. Eliot: “The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.”[[162]](#footnote-162) He laments that we have “yet to elect a Congress of which the majority will be intellectually conservative- much though the times call out for a conservative renewal… of some measure of order and justice and freedom.”[[163]](#footnote-163) In his concluding chapter, entitled “May the Rising Generation Redeem the Time?” he imparts some final advice for those taking care of the world after he is gone.[[164]](#footnote-164) He refers to the 20th century as “a time of decadence,” and calls for a reinvestment in religion and social values.[[165]](#footnote-165) In terms of specific actions, Kirk recommends young people to go into law- “if you can endure the boredom of law school nowadays”- teaching- “if you can surmount the dull obstacles to certification,”- or the clergy.[[166]](#footnote-166) Still, this generation must hurry. “If we aspire to redeem this age of ours, so far gone in decadence,” Kirk concludes, “we have no time to lose.”[[167]](#footnote-167)

# Other 20th Century Prescriptives

Now that we have built the stable structure and classically designed house of Burke and Kirk, it is time to begin to throw stones. In casting a definition of prescriptive conservative down from on high, we must begin to determine who fits into this category. Russell Kirk is, as it seems, the obvious candidate- his fellow New Conservatives Robert Nisbet and Richard Weaver not too far behind. But at seems at this point poignant to question, who else might this Burkean Standard apply to? This section will address three of Kirk’s contemporaries- though Kirk himself may not have identified them as such- who have all impacted prescriptive conservative thought in the 20th century. It is not worthwhile to apply the entire Burkean Standard to each one, but some investigation will be made into the political theory of each in attempts to make an argument for why they should be considered as part of the prescriptive tradition.

## Clinton Rossiter- Justified Fear vs. “Standpattism”

In terms of mid-20th century conservatives, few thinkers rival Clinton Rossiter in terms of relevance. Rossiter, a historian and political scientist active in the immediate post-war period, rose to prominence in the mid-1950’s as a counter to Kirk, agreeing with him in many ways but taking in general a much more moderate approach.[[168]](#footnote-168) His rise to prominence began in when he started teaching at Cornell in 1947. Although his earlier books, *Constitutional Dictatorship* chiefly among them, have found increased acclaim after his death, it was his 1953 text *Conservatism in America* that entrenched his position as a 20th century conservative icon. In this book, Rossiter argued for a four-tiered approach to thinking about conservatism. This mindset in some ways runs counter to that of Russell Kirk, but in other ways finds deep agreement with him. Most importantly, however, is that Rossiter embraces the fear that is the basis of the conservative mindset, bringing the subconscious to the forefront.

*Conservatism in America* embarks with a specific purpose- to explain conservative principles as a whole, and to understand how they apply to the political climate of the contemporary United States. In his introduction, he begins with a quest to examine the word “conservative.” He claims there are “four connotations with which students of American conservatism must be fully conversant.”[[169]](#footnote-169) The first and most common is “*Tempermental Conservatism,”* which he explains as a psychological stance at the basis of all conservatives, the natural hesitance to change. Fundamentally, conservatism takes root in man’s innate inertia, and Rossiter says this is caused by two key factors: fear and emulation.[[170]](#footnote-170) Rossiter’s paragraph on fear is excerpted here, with emphasis added:

Fear is both an instinctive and culturally-determined element in the psychology of conservatism; as such it takes the shape of anxiety, guilt, or shame. **Fear of the unknown and unexpected,** fear of the unconventional and unexpected, fear of the group’s disapproval and one’s own weakness- these and a thousand other fears persuade a man to be conservative. The most important fear of all in shaping the conservative temperament is the **fear of change,** which dislocates, discomforts, and, worst of all, dispossesses.[[171]](#footnote-171)

This explicit endorsement of fear as motivating factor for humans to turn to conservatism is compounded by his next paragraph on “emulation,” which he describes as a “fear of alienation” that pushes when to “abide by the established.”[[172]](#footnote-172) This results in an adherence to tradition and a respect for the status quo.[[173]](#footnote-173) Rossiter’s words on tempermental conservatism might appear critical, but they are not- in fact, he claims that this mindset is “essential”- without it, “men cannot hope to solve such ever-present problems as procurement of food and shelter, division of labor, maintenance of law and order, education and procreation.”[[174]](#footnote-174) He goes on to place tempermental conservatism as the base of other three key connotations. “Conservatism of possession,” the idea that one has something worth protecting, comes from a fear of the alternative of leaving said property unprotected.[[175]](#footnote-175) “Practical conservatism” is, Rossiter claims, “the conservatism of temperament and possession operating in a new dimension, the community,” meaning it is the mindset of someone who has “recognized, however fuzzily, that he is a member of a society worth defending against reform and revolution.”[[176]](#footnote-176) This interpretation seems to tie itself closely to that very Burkean fear of losing tradition. The fourth and “highest” kind of conservatism is his so-called “philosophical conservatism,” which combines the practical conservative with a higher sense of consciousness and theoretical purpose.[[177]](#footnote-177) “Awareness, reflection, traditionalism, and at least some degree of disinterestedness- these are the qualities,” Rossiter claims, “that distinguish the genuine conservative from all other that bear this label.”[[178]](#footnote-178)

Rossiter’s placement of fear at the heart of prescriptive conservatism is prescient and inspired. While Burke and Kirk seem to rationalize their fear, Rossiter embraces it, placing it on high for the world to see. He also makes the choice to draw in opposition to his ideal of conservatism a concept he refers to as “standpattism.”[[179]](#footnote-179) Standpattism, read as “stand-pat-ism,” is painted as the perversion of true conservatism, when careful consideration gives way to obstinacy. Rossiter writes that “the conservative conserves discriminately, the standpatter indiscriminately, for he fears movement in any direction.”[[180]](#footnote-180) This aversion to action is “simply an excess of conservatism, compounded of fear, ignorance, inertia, and selfishness.”[[181]](#footnote-181) Rossiter connects this stubbornness to its backward looking cousin- reaction. “The true reactionary,” he says, “refuses to accept the present.”[[182]](#footnote-182) They harken back to an age at which they believe life was better, and actively seek to return to that point. Rossiter argues for a *kyklos* of political philosophy, where conservatism perverts to standpattism, which perverts to reactionism, which then leads to hermitism, anarchism, and radicalism.[[183]](#footnote-183)

Perhaps most compelling about Rossiter as a conservative was the ways in which his own life reflect the theory he articulated. The greatest example of practicing what he preached was his actions during a period of high racial tension at Cornell in spring of 1969. On April 20th, 1969, over eighty members of Cornell University’s Afro-American Society marched out of the student union in protest of sanctions levied against activists, as well as an administration that had proved inadequate in meeting their needs.[[184]](#footnote-184) What escalated this situation more so than the hundreds of other protests at colleges and universities across the country was that these students- and several fraternities who opposed them- were armed, brandishing rifles and bandoliers at the height of white hysteria over the black power movement.[[185]](#footnote-185) Naturally, this created a crisis and the university was forced to respond. Rossiter, as a professor at the school, was cast into a precarious position. Originally, he held that this radicalism was caused by the deterioration of student government on campus, which created a power vacuum from which chaos arose.[[186]](#footnote-186) As the situation worsened, Rossiter joined a faculty consortium called the “Group of Forty-One,” which lobbied the president to postpone any kind of vote in reaction to the violence.[[187]](#footnote-187) Eventually, it became apparent that the Government Department, where both Rossiter was housed, was positioning itself in opposition to the administration. Chief among the dissenters was Allan Bloom, a Straussian who staunchly opposed any restriction to faculty freedom. According to Don Downs, a historian who wrote the definitive account of these events, Bloom circulated a resolution- also signed by Rossiter- stating the government department would stop teaching classes if the administration caved to student demands.[[188]](#footnote-188) A faculty vote on Monday, April 23rd, three days after the beginning of the occupation, sided with Bloom and opted to chastise student protestors instead of include them in the conversation.[[189]](#footnote-189) Rossiter supported the decision, saying “If the ship goes down, I’ll go down with it- as long as it represents reason and order.”[[190]](#footnote-190)

However, the next day Rossiter began to talk with students, and his mind changed. Administration had asked professors to speak to their students about the situation, and Rossiter found himself more convinced by their arguments than those of his colleagues.[[191]](#footnote-191) The Government professor who earlier had opposed the accepting of student demands now, after engaging in dialogue, felt it was imperative to change. Cornell was no longer being driven by “reason and order,” and action was necessary.[[192]](#footnote-192) Despite the Afro-American Society’s further deluge into radicalism- including threatening the life of Rossiter himself on a college radio station- Rossiter stood in front of the faculty on Wednesday, April 25th, in favor nullifying the sanctions levied against AAS activists and effectively ending the crisis.[[193]](#footnote-193) Rossiter was the key voice in reversing the faculty’s decision- an opposing professors recalled “I knew that when [he] supported reversal of the cause our side was lost.”[[194]](#footnote-194) Rossiter’s proposal passed, and the students and faculty were once again reunited in their efforts to make a better Cornell. Naturally, this was controversial among his fellow professors. In the weeks and months following the events, Rossiter became “persona non grata” at Cornell, and former many friends, Bloom included, refused to speak to him.[[195]](#footnote-195) Bloom went on to write *The Closing of the American Mind,* a treatise in defense of intellectual liberty and perhaps his most famous book, inspired by the events at Cornell.[[196]](#footnote-196) However, Rossiter did not fare as well- his pre-existing alcoholism and depression only worsened, and he committed suicide a little over a year later.[[197]](#footnote-197)

While Rossiter’s suicide is a great tragedy, it certainly can contribute to an understanding of how much he was willing to risk in pursuit for what he deemed was right. In applying these actions to Rossiter’s own political theory, it can be understood that accommodation and cooperation are central to what it means to be a conservative. One might imagine that Rossiter thought of his own actions at Cornell in the context of conservatism: holding a natural disposition to change and a healthy fear of what might ensue, but being willing to accommodate change when it is necessary. Bloom might serve well in this context to play the reactionary- entrenched in his beliefs, refusing to teach unless he gets his way. It is unclear whether Rossiter would hold that Bloom is suffering from standpattism or not, but he certainly appears stubborn when juxtaposed with Rossiter’s own w illingness to listen to students and change his mind upon the appearance of new information. It is impossible to determine which approach may have been more effective in the long run, either in the case of Cornell or American society in general. Still, it seems Rossiter highlighted the great tension of conservatism in the 20th century- between those who chose to act intentionally, with an eye towards preserving tradition and respecting moderation, and those who take an attitude of recalcitrance and openly refuse change for the sake of the refusal and not the change itself.

## William F. Buckley Jr.- Unity Under Fear

With Kirk and Rossiter brought into the fold, the next logical target to wrap into prescriptive conservatism is William F. Buckley Jr. Buckley’s conservative biography is extensive, but his most significant accomplishment was the founding and publication of the *National Review.* The magazine was started in 1955 aiming to “consolidate the right,” which it did by bringing in the three major categories of post-war conservatives: New Conservatives (typified by Kirk, who contributed a weekly column to the magazine), libertarians, and anti-communists.[[198]](#footnote-198) George H. Nash describes Buckley’s magazine as a “coalition government,” bringing traditionalists and early right-wing radicals into the fold with the pro-American nationalists whose support of politicians like Eugene McCarty who many on the right understood as problematic.[[199]](#footnote-199) Buckley’s fear of defeat far outweighed his concern over an absolute right or wrong definition of conservatism.

This pragmatism and accommodationist perspective is evident from the mission statement he wrote for the first issue of *National Review.* He begins the magazine with an argumentation of its uniqueness, and is unafraid to use bold language to do so. Consider the following two quotations:

*National Review* is out of place, in the sense that the United Nations and the League of Women Voters and the *New York Times* and Henry Steele Commager are in place. It is out of place because, in its maturity, literate America rejected conservatism in favor of radical social experimentation.

The inroads relativism has made on the American Soul are not so easily evident. One must recently have lived on or close to a college campus to have a vivid intimation of what has happened. It is there that we see how a number of energetic social innovators, plugging their grand designs, succeeded in capturing the liberal intellectual imagination. And since ideas rule the world, the ideologues, having won over the intellectual class, simply walked in and started to run things.[[200]](#footnote-200)

The fear in Buckley’s voice is readily evident, but so is the willingness to bring varied opinions together. The first quote sees Buckley create a common enemy for his magazine, appealing to isolationists (by including the United Nations), intellectual conservatives (with the mention of Henry Steel Commager, who may be described as the Russell Kirk of the left), and social conservatives (with the League of Women voters). The second quote points to the cards being stacked against those who resist “big ideas,” and that it is liberals who now run things. Later in the article, Buckley outlines the magazine’s seven official positions clearly and concisely: Libertarian on the size of government, against “Social Engineers,” to “oppose any substitute for victory” against communism, in favor of intellectual excellence and debate instead of novelty and conformity, in favor of a strong two party system, in favor of capitalism and against unions, and against world government, saying “it would make greater sense to grant independence to each of our 50 states than to surrender U.S. sovereignty to a world organization.”[[201]](#footnote-201) Even in Buckley’s willingness to accommodate different perspectives, we can see inklings of Burkean fear in his positions, chiefly opposition to abstraction and in favor of long standing traditions in academia and the economy.

The Burkean fear of chaos exists in Buckley, but in a more problematic location- his resistance to racial integration. In 1957, Buckley wrote an editorial in the *National Review* entitled “Why the South Must Prevail,” in which he offered an endorsement of continuing to deprive African-Americans the right to vote. In it, he states “The White Community, is so entitled [to politically dominate blacks in the South] because, for the time being, it is the advanced race.”[[202]](#footnote-202) Certainly Buckley was not the only conservative voice tinged with racial bias, but he was one of the strongest. He draws a parallel between the segregationist south and the British occupation of Kenya, where the choice is between “barbarism and civilization,” and argues that similar rules apply.[[203]](#footnote-203) The section where Buckley’s fear of what may come to pass is most clearly excerpted here:

If the majority wills what is socially ***atavistic,*** then to thwart the majority may be, though undemocratic, enlightened. It is more important for any community to live by civilized standards then to bow to the demands of the numerical majority. Sometimes it will become impossible to assert the will of a minority, in which case it must give way, and the society will regress; sometimes the numerical minority cannot prevail except by violence: then it must determine whether the prevalence of its will is worth the terrible price of violence.[[204]](#footnote-204)

The paragraph is rich with emotionally-laden language, and must be broken down piece by piece. In the first sentence, Buckley uses the word “atavistic” to describe these regressive goals of the majority group. This implies more than just a net negative move in terms of social progress- it points to a return to the primitive roots of humanity, language loaded in terms of both race and emotions. The second sentence point to this reliance on a higher power- “civilization”- as being more important than a more abstract concept- “numerical majority.” The final clause, when applied to the topic at hand, translates frankly to: “If whites cannot oppress blacks at the ballot box, they may have to use force to retain their power.” That statement underscores a deep fear about the potential consequences of racial integration, and the potential primal chaos that may ensue.

Before we move on from Buckley, it is important to point out that he provides an interesting window into how conservatives viewed themselves at this time. Buckley actually responded to the central question of this paper, this link between psychology and conservatism, although to a different question than mine. Engaging with a 1950 sociology book entitled *The Authoritarian Personality* that argued conservatives feel the need to dominant others, Buckley wrote that it was “’frivolous’ and ‘preposterous’.”[[205]](#footnote-205) While this may appear to go against applying a standard to fear to him, in fact it does the opposite- Buckley was constantly acting in defense of conservatism in general. Buckley was keenly aware of the weakness of the conservative position in politics, and actively sought in his career to remedy this deficiency. In 1954 he wrote “the few spasmodic victories conservatives are winnings are aimless, uncoordinated, and inconclusive.”[[206]](#footnote-206) Nash argues that this is the basis of his rationale for writing *God and Man at Yale* in 1951- to attack the imbalance between liberal and conservative at its locus, at the university level.[[207]](#footnote-207) Still, this sense of fear that conservatism was not articulating itself well enough- a fear that inspired the publication of *National Review*- is equally likely to be the same fear that inspired him to defend conservatism against the flimsy attacks of Eisenhower-era social scientists.

## Leo Strauss- A return to the Ancients

For the third 20th century thinker to apply this standard to, a more unconventional name comes to mind. Leo Strauss, the Jewish émigré who began writing and teaching in the U.S. when he moved from London in 1938, is both one of the most influential and one of the most controversial thinkers in the modern conservative canon. Although not considered politically active or relevant while he was writing, his work, and particularly the way in which he inspired others, has often been credited for planting the early seeds of the Neo-Conservative movement in the early 1990’s, led by Irving Kristol.[[208]](#footnote-208) Kristol and other self-proclaimed Straussians like Paul Wolfowitz, Robert Bork, and Carnes Lord became active in politics in the 1980’s and 90’s and held strong influence during the presidency of George W. Bush in the early 2000’s.[[209]](#footnote-209) This created a connection between Strauss and the Iraq War in 2003 that was promulgated by the popular media of the time.[[210]](#footnote-210) Still, there is significant debate about whether he was a conservative at all. Catherine and Michael Zuckert, two of his most ardent critics instead suggest he was not particularly interested on contemporary politics, and that “the Strauss links to Neo-Conservativism has been much overstated.”[[211]](#footnote-211) Strauss scholar Steven B. Smith wrote a chapter in his book dedicated to Strauss entitled “What Would Leo Strauss Do?” in which he wrote “Strauss would be deeply skeptical of President Bush’s remarks about an ‘axis of evil’ in his State of the Union Address after 9/11.”[[212]](#footnote-212) So what is the cause of this inspiration? If Strauss himself had no interest in politics, and was not himself particularly conservative, why did Straussians rally around his ideas?

Strauss scholar Anne Norton addresses one of the reasons behind this in her book *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire.* In her first chapter, she makes a key distinction between Strauss himself, students of Strauss, and so-called “Straussians,” who were disciples of his ideology but not necessary his ideas.[[213]](#footnote-213) The term “Straussian” is problematic to Norton, because “it implicates Strauss in views that are not necessarily his own.”[[214]](#footnote-214) It is these Straussians that have “made a conscious and deliberate effort to shape politics and learning in the United States and abroad.”[[215]](#footnote-215) These Straussians are great in number, and spread across all of academia- Norton notes a difference between “East Coast” Straussians and “West Coast” Straussians- and are considered so prominent and distinctive that they can often become victims of discrimination.[[216]](#footnote-216) Notable Straussian scholars include Thomas G. West, Harvey Mansfield, and, of course Allan Bloom, who was discussed in the section on Clinton Rossiter.[[217]](#footnote-217) Like any group, it is problematic to assume homogeneity- certainly there are Straussians who do not endorse the Neo-Conservative movement, contrary to some of Norton’s ideas. Still, oftentimes the actions of these self-identified disciples is tied to Strauss himself, without direct connection to his own works.

The question now moves to what Strauss’ thought was, and how he inspired such a vociferous following. The answer to the first question is deceptively simple: Strauss preferred Ancient to Modern, and led his students to revive and reinvigorate the thought of classical scholars like Plato and Aristotle instead of fixating on more modern thinkers like Hobbes and Locke.[[218]](#footnote-218) Catherine and Michael Zuckert describe a Strauss that saw “a crisis of Western civilization” growing up, influenced by his experiences as a German Jew during Hitler’s rise to power.[[219]](#footnote-219) This inspired him to dive into the realm of philosophy, and understand the ideas that dominated his time. What he discovered disappointed him- a world built on Hobbes, Locke, and Machiavelli, false idols of abstraction and writers that placed an emphasis on the individual that Strauss was not necessarily convinced of. Strauss’s opinions on the natural rights thinkers that were so fundamental to the formation of the Western canon were controversial for sure, and contrasted with the thoughts of several of the prescriptive conservatives already mentioned. He identified property as central to Locke’s work, writing in his book *Natural Right and History,* and addresses some of his issues with Locke thusly:

Locke’s doctrine of property is directly intelligible today if it is taken as the classic doctrine of “the spirit of capitalism” or as a doctrine regarding the chief objective of public policy…. But to say that public happiness requires the emancipation and the protection of the acquisitive faculties amount to saying that to accumulate as much money and other wealth as one pleases is right or just, i.e. intrinsically just or by nature just.[[220]](#footnote-220)

Strauss is not particularly convinced of this. Still, according to the Zuckerts, he thinks problematic thinkers like Locke have value: “In order to make progress, Strauss explained, it is necessary to begin in a defective condition from which one can move to a better.”[[221]](#footnote-221)

So what did Strauss think was the more ideal way to think about society? It appears as though he thought Burke might have been on the right track. The final chapter of *Natural Right and History,* entitled “The Crisis of Modern Natural Right,” begins by addressing Rousseau, who is likely the most notable modern critique of natural rights theory.[[222]](#footnote-222) Rousseau seems to come closer to Strauss’s ideals of philosophic expression and reinvigoration of civil society.[[223]](#footnote-223) But after Rousseau, he moves on to Burke, whom he says “attempted, at the last minute” a return to a premodern conception of natural right.[[224]](#footnote-224) Strauss argues that Burke’s fascination and love of British constitution is actually better understood by looking back at ancient philosophy, particularly that of Cicero, for answers.[[225]](#footnote-225) To Strauss this comparison is a great compliment:

Among the theoretical writings of the past, none seems to be nearer in spirit to Burke’s statements on the British Constitution than Cicero’s Republic. The similarity is all the more remarkable since Burke cannot have known Cicero’s masterpiece, which was not recovered until 1820. Just as Burke regards the British Constitution as the model, Cicero contends that the best polity is the Roman polity; Cicero chooses to describe the Roman polity rather than to invent a new one, as Socrates had done in Plato’s *Republic*.[[226]](#footnote-226)

Strauss’s parallel between Burke and Cicero goes even longer- he argues they both made an effort to inform readers that their great tradition was “not the work of one man.”[[227]](#footnote-227) Strauss is difficult to understand at times because, much like Kirk, he uses the voices of his subjects to speak his mind for him. Still, there can be no doubt that his love of ancient philosophy rivaled none other. Steven B. Smith wrote “the lesson Strauss leaves us with is: what today can we learn from the ancients?”[[228]](#footnote-228) The Zuckerts put it another way- “The theme of Strauss’s political philosophy is… political philosophy.”[[229]](#footnote-229) Strauss sees this same spirit in Burke- although Burke himself may not admit it- when he concludes his book by saying “Burke himself was too deeply imbued with the spirit of ‘sound antiquity’ to allow the concern with individuality to overpower the concern with virtue.”[[230]](#footnote-230)

If Strauss saw Burke as a kindred spirit in political philosophy, did he share Burke’s fear? He certainly shared the Irishman’s love of tradition, but was his fixation on philosophy for philosophy’s sake contradictory to his inclusion in this Burkean prescriptive camp? It certainly throws a wrench into the categorization, but his fear of the “big ideas” of others outweighs the potential incongruence of his own big ideas. In particular, Strauss viewed two of the great problems of the modern age to be Historicism and Relativism. Historicism, as the Zuckerts define it, meant to Strauss “the replacement of philosophical questions with historical questions,” emphasizing context over ideas.[[231]](#footnote-231) It may sound contradictory- Strauss opposes a big idea that downplays big ideas- but Strauss believe that it downplays the traditions that are still relevant to him today for the sake of context. His critique of historicism can be well understood alongside his thoughts on positivism, which argued in favor of moving past philosophical questioning and into examining the “how?” instead of the “why?”[[232]](#footnote-232) Strauss argued that this notion, believing that society has moved past philosophy in some sense, “vastly overestimated the power of reason.”[[233]](#footnote-233) This kind of “social science” is something Strauss finds himself highly skeptical of, and encouraged his students to critique. From here it becomes clear how students, or disciples, might run with this approach. Challenging new theories and attempts of social engineering is fundamental to prescriptive conservativism. To some Strauss becomes a manifestation of this skepticism, when his message is really much more simple: read political philosophy and develop your own meaning from it.

# Counter Arguments

## Was Edmund Burke a Reactionary?

I raised a point in the “Defining Conservatism” section that I feel I need to return to and readdress: What if Edmund Burke, the grandfather of so-called prescriptive conservatism, was a reactionary? Certainly he was responding to events that transpired, and wrote in an increasingly worried tone about their potential affects. If Burke was a victim of, as Kirk calls it, “the loathsome plague called reaction,” is all prescriptive conservatism built on a lie?[[234]](#footnote-234)

It is certainly possible. Russell Kirk might argue that Burke offers a reasoned reaction to the French Revolution- a reaction certainly but one intended to counter the radicalism brewing across the channel, not add to it. Burke does seem to fit into Rossiter’s mold of reactionary, looking to the past for answers and seeking some manner of a return to it, but that is only a surface level interpretation of Burke. On a deeper level his love for the past lies not in what it offers as a setting but more so how it informs the present. This perspective implies someone who is reactive, if not a true reactionary. Still, the interpretation of Burke as reactionary is strong, supported by a string of scholarship as long as that supporting him as a prescriptive, chief among them Isaac Kramnick’s study *The Rage of Edmund Burke.[[235]](#footnote-235)* A recent study from scholar of conservatism Corey Robin, entitled *The Reactionary Mind,* proposed a counter to Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind-* and by extension this thesis. Robin argued that Burke was indeed the foundational thinker in modern conservation, but that that foundation was one of reaction, not prescription.[[236]](#footnote-236) He draws Burke’s ancestors as Calhoun and Kirk as well, but adds Sarah Palin, Ayn Rand, and George W. Bush to the lineage.[[237]](#footnote-237) Kirk and Robin find themselves fundamentally opposed to one another.

Still, I believe accommodation is possible. In fact, it’s possible that my thesis and Robin’s run parallel to one another. Everything depends on the interpretation of Burke. Indeed my subtitle of section on Burke- “The Common Denominator”- could have two meanings, with both types of conservatives- prescriptive and reactionary- drawing their inspiration from him. These two divergent paths- Robin’s and mine- begin at the same place, but build off different interpretations of their ancestor. This controversy should inspire curious readers to reexamine Burke, as to understand him is to understand conservatism. If nothing else, this dichotomy stresses the importance of creating an original interpretation of the seminal documents in political theory.

## What’s wrong with fear?

One of mistakes in my interpretation likely comes from my potential mistreatment of the idea of “fear.” While central to the ideology of Burke, Kirk, and Rossiter, it is easy to dismiss their fear as the subconscious dominating the conscious. However, this could not be further from the truth. One of Burke’s greatest beliefs, echoed to a lesser extent by Kirk, is that emotions and the “non-rational” are in fact supremely important to how we interact with the world. Fear in this context is thus not only justified but instructive- in the same way that pain is weakness leaving the body, fear is the collective knowledge of the ancients informing your perceptions. Put most simply, prescriptive conservatives would say that fear is a good thing and should be cherished.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that there is a rich tradition of prescriptive conservative political theory. From Edmund Burke, the grandfather of prescription who looked to the structures and wisdom of the past for reassurance in the wake of the French Revolution, to New Conservatives like Russell Kirk and Clinton Rossiter who looked to Burke and other historical figures for guidance in navigating politics in the post-war era, prescription has been a strong influence throughout the history of conservatism. At the core of prescription is an underlying fear- fear of change, understood more specifically as the fear of the unknown, fear of the loss of tradition, and the fear of chaos. This fear is not irrational but instead suprarational, the manifestation of the wisdom of all time. Building from Burke, this fear runs deeply throughout Kirk and bubbles directly to the surface in Rossiter. By understanding this fear, one can understand both the arguments of prescriptive conservatism and its proponents throughout history.

Still, why does prescriptive conservatism matter? When Kirk speaks of his brand of conservatism being "routed, but not conquered," he could just as easily be speaking of prescription today instead of in 1978.[[238]](#footnote-238) In a contemporary political climate dominated by reaction, prescriptive conservatism is almost gone, but should not be forgotten. Conservatives in the United States find their choices in the Presidential primary to be wanting: either the poster child of standpattism Ted Cruz or the ultimate reactionary Donald Trump. Today, more than ever before, the right needs to turn to prescription to find their way again and bring balance to conservatism.

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