

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

The title for this day-long event, in the spring of 1995, was “A Focus on the Future.” What sounds like a press conference for the IPO of Amazon or Yahoo!, was actually an academic symposium held at Hillsdale College, dedicated to the memory of the historian and legendary Luddite, Dr. Russell Amos Kirk (1918-1994).

On display that day was the typewriter on which Russell Kirk wrote his classic work, *The Conservative Mind*,<sup>1</sup> which served as the foundation of the American conservative movement in the post-War era, and has been reprinted in seven editions. Not on display, however, were the remains of a television set Kirk once tossed out of a third story window, in a fit of rage, after he caught his wife and children watching it against his strict orders.

Russell Kirk was one of the last holdouts against the modern era. In his 75 years, he never learned to drive a car. Like many others born in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he had an uneasy relationship with technology. And true to the intellectual *dis*-honesty of all Luddites — what could be called Luddite's Law — he only objected to technologies introduced after he came of age. Kirk never complained about the plow, the rifle, or the printing press.

Kirk's typewriter is a relic, an icon, a tangible link between generations. It was saved and put on display, not for what it is as an object, or for what it can do as a functioning medium; but for what it represents: the life and work of Russell Kirk as a historian and writer. Had he been born fifty years later, he wouldn't have written *The Conservative Mind* on a typewriter, but keyed it into a personal computer. But had Kirk been born fifty years later, would he have needed or bothered to write *The Conservative Mind* at all? That is the question I will address this evening.

## **Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind***

The two concepts that dominated Kirk's life and work come from Edmund Burke and T. S. Eliot. From Burke comes the concept of the intergenerational contract. The idea that society and civilization “becomes a partnership, not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born.”<sup>2</sup> This proposition asserts that the current generation owes a debt to its ancestors, and has an obligation to its offspring.

Debts must be accounted for and paid. Obligations must be acknowledged and fulfilled. With respect to these debts and obligations, the task for the historian such as Kirk was to formulate and answer the questions of “what” and “how.” What does the current generation owe to the generations which preceded it? What are its obligations to future generations? And how can these debts be paid, and obligations fulfilled?

From Eliot comes the challenge for us to seek, not the ephemeral, sensational and trendy illusions of life (such as fame, wealth, and sensual indulgence), but instead, “the permanent things,” which transcend place and time, which are passed down from one generation to the next, and which form the basis for our culture and civilization. Concepts such as virtue, honor and integrity. Faith, hope and charity. Truth, goodness and beauty. These are nurtured in the institutions of the family, the church, and the community. And they are transmitted from generation to generation via myth, tradition and ritual.

# Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

## The Conservative Moment

The terms of Burke's intergenerational contract, along with the philosophical and spiritual ideals of Eliot's permanent things, are alien to today's digital generation. Learned monks of centuries past, overwhelmed by superstition, sat in silent isolation, dedicated to preserving ancient truths, copied sacred texts by hand as a form of worship. Today's programmers, motivated by stock options, lounge in cubicles, overdosing on caffeine, plugged-in to pop-music, are obsessed with creating the software infrastructure of the future.

Books such as *Accidental Empires*,<sup>3</sup> chronicle a new history that is being made, not by old, established and learned patriarchs — with their roots firmly planted in the traditions and institutions of their ancestors — but by a group of pimply faced kids, who never graduated from college, aren't old enough to rent a car, and are obsessed with the challenge of making their parents' professions obsolete before they can retire.

Kirk, who ironically in his youth, worked as a tour guide in the Henry Ford Museum, dedicated his life to battling Ford, who dismissed history as “bunk.” Why care about history when you can become a millionaire before you're thirty? If FORTRAN is already a dead language, why bother to learn Latin? Why worry about the permanent things, when you live in the random access memory of cyberspace that pays your rent and defines your career path?

The typewriter which produced *The Conservative Mind*, was more expensive in relative economic terms in the 1950s, than an Intel microchip is today. Not only was it valuable for what

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

it allowed its author to do, but ten years after it was purchased, there was nothing on the market technologically superior to replace it.

Before the age of the transistor, hardware tools such as Kirk's typewriter were passed down from generation to generation. But today, hardware becomes obsolete soon after it's purchased. The idea of saving the keyboard on which you typed your masterpiece is absurd. People don't form emotional attachments to their old keyboards any more than they develop a nostalgic urge to reinstall version 3.3 of MS-DOS. The accelerating pace of technological change, as famously defined by Gordon Moore's Law<sup>4</sup> of the microchip, quickly reduces the value and significance of all hardware down to zero.

This represents the most challenging paradox of our time: the hardware, that is easy to identify, is no longer worth preserving. While the software, that defines our culture and civilization, is becoming more difficult to identify, nurture and pass on to our children. And most urgent is the fact that the middleware institutions — the family, the church, and the community — that have traditionally facilitated the fragile transfer of the hardware and software between generations, have been laid waste by the passage of time and progression of technology. What amounts to a cultural application of Moore's Law.

In his monumental essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, political dissident Václav Havel identifies the role of the middleware institutions — to nurture and preserve society's intangible software concepts — as the most critical of our era, which he defined as "The Post-Totalitarian Society," and what could be called the identity crisis of Western Civilization:

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

“If an outside observer, who knew nothing about life in Czechoslovakia, were to study only its laws, he would be utterly incapable of understanding what we were complaining about. The hidden political manipulation of the courts and public prosecutors, the limitations placed on lawyers’ ability to defend their clients, the closed *de facto* nature of trials, the arbitrary actions of the security forces, their position of authority over the judiciary, the absurdly broad application of deliberately vague sections of the code, and the state’s utter disregard for the positive sections of the law (the rights of citizens); all of this would remain hidden from our outside observer. The only thing he would take away would be the impression that our legal code is not much different than the legal code of other civilized countries.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the first task for historians of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, is to identify the intangible software concepts which are permanent, and therefore part of the intergenerational contract. The second, is to create a stable structure of middleware institutions to transact the intergenerational contract to pass the vital and precious permanent things onto future generations.

Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this was a simple hardware problem. You could point to a physical object — be it a farm, a house or a simple tool such as Kirk’s typewriter — and say, “This is my life’s work. This is my legacy. This is what I leave to my children.” However, our life’s work will wind up in the recycling bin before we do. The only legacy we can leave to our children is the software in our brains — whatever we deem to be the permanent things. And when the

# Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

middleware institutions that facilitate this software transfer erode, societies fail and civilizations are threatened.

## The Middleware Vacuum

Speaking at the Kirk Memorial Conference, a Roman Catholic priest, Father Richard John Neuhaus, chronicled the accelerating decline of the family from his personal experience. He noted that the illegitimacy rate in the New York City parish he ministered to during the 1960s now stood at 78%. To compound the obvious disadvantages of these children, who must grow up without a father, is the tragedy that most of them will grow up without knowing *anyone* who has a father, or even having any conception of what a father is. They may never meet an adult male who accepts responsibility for his children — or anyone else.

How can a society define the scope and terms of the intergenerational contract, when the male half refuses to take responsibility, fulfill its obligations, or even participate in it? What sort of permanent things can these children come to know, value and aspire to? With hardware rendered worthless in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, how can they comprehend such software ideals as “freedom,” “virtue,” “truth” and “love,” that we take for granted? And can society nurture a culture, and sustain a civilization, without the middleware institutions of the family, the church and community?

No amount of money, resources or technology can alter the circumstances of these children. Nothing in their experience is permanent. There is no one who recognizes an obligation to them

## **Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind***

which must be acknowledged and fulfilled. And consequently, they perceive there is no one to whom they owe a debt, which must be accounted for and paid. They are as alien to the classical liberal ideals of the United States and Western Civilization, as a polar bear in the Sahara desert. Basic survival is all they may ever learn and know.

John Taylor Gatto, who taught for 26 years in the New York City public school system, spent his adult life dealing with the inevitable consequences of these abrogations of Burke's intergenerational contract, and Eliot's notion of the permanent things. He describes how alienation from the basic institution of the family, inexorably leads to alienation from the community, and ultimately, from civilization.

“One thing I do know: most of us who've had a taste of loving families, even a little taste, want our kids to be a part of one. One other thing I know, is that eventually you have to come to be part of a place — part of its hills, streets, waters and people — or you will live a very sorry life in exile forever.”<sup>6</sup>

Following in the footsteps of these ghetto children born out of wedlock, are the children of dual-income suburban households. Their parents are more likely to bear their offspring within the middleware institution of marriage, but less likely to remain so for the duration of their childhood. Their parents have the luxury of the choice of raising their children, or hiring someone else to do it for them. A growing number are deciding that childrearing is not their core competency, and from an economic perspective, they are better off subcontracting that task to someone else.

# **Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind***

For many children of suburbia, their parental relationship is subject to change with the shifting winds of market conditions. The intergenerational contract, that traditionally nurtured them to maturity, like a home mortgage, has been stripped, collateralized, bundled and swapped to rebalance their investment portfolio. Divorce, once a threat to a stable society, is now a luxury good, whose discounted value is routinely written into marriage contracts. Eliot's notion of “the permanent things” has been transformed into suburbia’s version of “the convenient things.”

## **Gresham’s Law of Digital Middleware**

This substitution of “the convenient things” for “the permanent things” is insidiously manifested in today’s most popular middleware institution, the television situation comedy. Reflecting on its unintended social consequences, sitcom writer Susan Borowitz notes:

“The sitcom has taken the place of church, of religious training. Sitcoms work better if they're little sermons or parables. In many families, watching sitcoms together is an almost sacred obligation: when the set goes on, the couch becomes a pew.”<sup>8</sup>

We still recognize the need for the intergenerational contract and the permanent things. But we have changed the format and bastardized the content. Instead of a minister, priest or rabbi instilling the timeless virtues that sustain our society, we teach our children with sitcom reruns. Sitcom creator Gary Goldberg warns, “A lot of latchkey kids are watching alone, and frighteningly, you are many people's closest friend.”<sup>9</sup>



## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

For children today, grasping the milieu of situation comedies develops a sufficient requisite variety for their social interactions. Unfortunately, many will never strive to rise above it. Intimate conversation has been displaced by sitcom banter. From learning to the laugh-track, from wisdom to the wisecrack, from pedagogy to the putdown. The result is a shrinkage of the bandwidth of human emotions and experience. John Gatto's conclusions about its consequences, drawn from his decades of teaching, are frightening:

“The children I teach are uneasy with intimacy or candor. They cannot deal with genuine intimacy because of a lifelong habit of preserving a secret inner self, inside a larger outer personality, made up of artificial bits and pieces borrowed from television. Because they are not who they represent themselves to be, the disguise wears thin in the presence of intimacy; so intimate relationships have to be avoided.”<sup>10</sup>

The entire gamut of emotions, from common courtesy, to filial love, to erotic passion, has been reduced to T. S. Eliot's classic phrase of “shape without form, shade without colour, paralyzed force, gesture without motion.”<sup>11</sup> The “Generation X” label is accurate, in the sense that this generation has no proper name, no link to the generation which preceded it, and will leave no legacy to the generation that follows it. Indeed, they are what Eliot called, “the hollow men, the stuffed men.”<sup>12</sup>

When Dan Quayle casually made reference to the obvious moral and economic consequences of the atrophy of the nuclear family, during the 1992 campaign, he was shouted down in the

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

mainstream press, tortured into submission — reminiscent of the Moscow Show Trials — and relegated to the status of a Bukharin or Trotsky. His name can only be uttered in public, if it is coupled with a slanderous denouncement of him and what he stands for: the intergenerational contract and the permanent things.

In a business school survey of the time, one MBA commented on how she dealt with an on-the-job ethical dilemma by saying, “I think your own family values are most important. I hate to sound like Dan Quayle. But that was the only thing that helped me through this.”<sup>7</sup>

“I hate to sound like Dan Quayle!” Now Quayle is no different from any other politician. There are numerous reasons to vote for or against him. But why is he branded as a leper, and blacklisted, for making a simple statement in defense of the traditional family? What makes his ethics so reprehensible? Why does someone who values her own family, its heritage, and its moral guidance as much as Quayle, shriek in horror at his affirmation of her values?

What those in the anti-Quayle chorus impulsively object to, are not Quayle's statements, or what he represents, but what they have lost and are unable to recover. They are ashamed to admit that the basis for everything from their moral standards, personal goals, and even material success, is not the result of current popular trends, but of the elusive, intangible and sacred permanent things they learned from their parents, and desperately want to pass onto their children.

# Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

## Traditional Conservative Middleware

Before the industrial age, most of society was employed in agricultural pursuits, eking out a modest living, held hostage to the random shocks of nature, such as disease, drought and floods. A typical day consisted of field work to the point of physical exhaustion, ending with the family coming together for the evening meal.

The meal was much more than a recycling of bodily functions. It represented the fruits of the day's labor, an intimate family sacrament, which was commenced with a prayer, to give thanks to God, not for the wild economic abundance we now take for granted, but for a meager subsistence we associate with Third-World nations.

The meaning and significance of this middleware ritual can't be comprehended by 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans. Perhaps the last person to express how people of past centuries lived, what they thought, and how they felt, was Whittaker Chambers, who grew up in poverty, lived in large cities, and only late in life was able to realize his dream of returning to an agrarian lifestyle. In his classic autobiography, *Witness*, he hammered into words, as best he could, the spirit that he was able to recapture, what few of us — and none of our children — will ever know:

“Our farm is our home. It is our alter. To it each day we bring our faith, our love for one another as a family, our working hands, our prayers. In its soil and the care of its creatures, we bury each day a part of our lives, in the form of labor. The yield of our

## **Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind***

daily dying, from which each night, in part restores us, springs around us in the seasons of harvest, in the produce of animals, in incalculable content.”<sup>13</sup>

For Whittaker Chambers, the family that prays together stays together; the family that labors together stays together; and the family that breaks bread together stays together. This is light years removed from the 1980s and 90s, that introduced the terms “power breakfast” and “working lunch,” which signify that dining with business associates takes precedence over dining with one's family. The gathering of the family for the evening meal — once the central link of the intergenerational experience — has been reduced to an unwanted intrusion.

Pausing to say a prayer of thanks for the food on the table, in a country which pays billions to farmers not to grow food, has passed the stage of irony into absurdity. It takes a fictional cartoon character, Bart Simpson, to sum up our third wave approach to this archaic middleware ritual, when he revises the prayer of thanks to say, “Dear God, we paid for all this food ourselves; so thanks for nothing!”

### **Conservatism's Identity Crisis**

But the world that Whittaker Chambers and Russell Kirk were born into no longer exists. In his childhood, wandering around the railroad yards of Plymouth, Michigan, Kirk boastfully recalled that neither he, nor any of his friends, ever had an identity crisis. They all “knew who they were” and no one ever had to “find himself.”<sup>14</sup>

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

For Kirk, and the generations that preceded him, there was no such thing as an identity crisis, because who you were and what you did were almost exclusively determined by (a) the tyranny of the elements, such as famine, disease and natural disasters, (b) man-made catastrophes such as war, and (c) what your parents did. For the most part, your opinion didn't matter.

If a drought ruined your crops, you abandoned your plot of land, packed up your belongings, and headed on the nearest dirt road towards some unknown new destination. If your country went to war, you went to war. If your father was a farmer or a blacksmith, you were a farmer or a blacksmith. The reason phone books are dominated by surnames such as Baker, Miller and Smith, is that people were literally defined and named by their profession.

Not only are there very few farmers and blacksmiths today, the work your father did no longer exists. And before you leave work this Friday, you may find out your job no longer exists also. As Tom Peters proclaims, "If you don't have an identity crisis at least once every six months, then you'd better check your pulse. Because odds are you're already brain-dead."

For Whittaker Chambers, despite his exceptional literary artistry, life was meant to be a hardware problem. That's where he felt most comfortable. That's why he left the city and returned to farming. Chambers' personal identity crisis, which he described so eloquently in his autobiography, was the identity crisis of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western Civilization.

Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, no child was asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Nor was an adult asked, "Are you happy with your job?" Thus, for Kirk to admonish a baby-

## **Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind***

boomer as being psychologically inferior because he suffers from an identity crisis, is like a baby-boomer criticizing Kirk as morally inferior, because he was so vainly materialistic and anal-retentive as to save and value an old typewriter.

Events in the fifty years since the publication of *The Conservative Mind*, have made it painfully obvious that Kirk's conservatism, along with his Luddite indulgences, amount to a self-delusional lie, which relies on a philosophical foundation that is only capable of facing the familiar challenges of the past. His conservatism resembles the Maginot Line, which may have been a great piece of military engineering, but which was designed to fight a war that would never recur, and which depended on its enemy using the same weapons, strategies and tactics.

It failed to evolve and is increasingly irrelevant. Its core principles are still valuable, but they need to be deconstructed and reconstructed into a robust evolutionary philosophical system. Otherwise Conservatism — like the Maginot Line — is destined to be ridiculed as a “monument to the stupidity of man.” This would be especially devastating for Kirk, whose underlying theme of *The Conservative Mind* was to refute John Stuart Mill's assertion that conservatives were “The Stupid Party.”

### **Conservatism's Strategic Inflection Point**

Conservatism's decay is not measured by the volume of bold proclamations of arrogant academics and ignorant politicians. Rather it is quantified by the fact that society has tested and proven new paradigms, and has even advanced to a stage where it now relies on them to survive.

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

Two of these paradigms are labor and education. As manual labor became increasingly mechanized, conservatives condemned the prostitution of the labor of the common man. This thesis held that, in order to make products for the mass market, quality had to be sacrificed for quantity. The task of the craftsman had degraded from heroic efforts to attain perfection, into half-hearted compromises to meet quotas.

In his book, *Ideas Have Consequences* — a warning to the standardized, mechanized and materialistic society — Richard Weaver (in the vein of Whittaker Chambers) bemoaned the demise of the sanctity of one's labor, and personal pride in craftsmanship, when he wrote:

“The laborer toiled, not merely to win sustenance, but to see this ideal embodied in its creation. Pride in craftsmanship is well explained by saying that to labor is to pray, for conscientious effort to realize an ideal is a kind of fidelity. The craftsman of old did not hurry, because the perfect takes no account of time, and shoddy work is a reproach to character. When utilitarianism becomes enthroned, and the worker is taught that work is use and not worship, interest in quality begins to decline.”<sup>15</sup>

Evidence to support this view was abundant until the 1970s. It wasn't until Japanese cars arrived on our shores in large numbers — when the teachings of William Deming and Joseph Juran were finally re-imported back to America — did we learn just how much our poor quality was costing us. The insidious trend of the industrial age to dehumanize and devalue labor was reversed, worker autonomy was restored, and Richard Weaver's fears have evaporated.

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

It's not quality that is rare and expensive today, but the absence of quality. Virtually every product or service on the market is the best of its kind, anywhere at anytime in human history — from an exquisitely engineered Honda Accord to a basic cup of coffee. Employees aren't wallowing in a cesspool of shoddy workmanship, because companies of that mindset are quickly driven out of business. Montgomery Wards and Woolworths no longer exist, not because department stores no longer exist, but because these traditional conservative business and social structures failed to evolve.

The passage of time and progression of technology have also upended the conservative ideal of education. John Henry Newman's book, *The Idea of a University*,<sup>16</sup> was predicated on the precepts that education and knowledge were scarce resources, and that teaching was a highly prized vocation. The paperback book and electronic media have annihilated Newman's thesis.

Knowledge is practically a free good, and teaching is like driving a car or secretarial work. Where individuals once performed these dedicated tasks, we now have all learned to do them for ourselves routinely, without consciously thinking about them. The highly-prized medieval monk, dedicated to copying the Bible, has been replaced by the \$79.00 laser printer. The educated person used to be defined by what he knows. Today he is defined by what he achieves.

The adolescent Silicon Valley millionaires of the 1990s represent the historical realization of two of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's greatest fictional heroes: Ayn Rand's Howard Roarke and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. The story of both characters, is the sudden realization in their youth that — for



## **Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind***

the first time in human history — their future would not be defined and proscribed by the social structure and culture into which they were born, but rather by their individual ideals, talents, integrity, and determination to create what they desire to become.

It's not a coincidence that *The Fountainhead*<sup>17</sup> and *The Invisible Man*<sup>18</sup> were written within a decade of each other. Their fictional prophesy, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, followed by their mass culture realization five decades later, represent the greatest triumph of the human spirit, and the greatest collective achievement of Western Civilization, which has forever changed the structure of philosophical and political thought.

Just as the question of who should govern, was transformed two centuries earlier from lineage to merit, the question of whom one would marry, or what profession one chose, has been transformed from predetermined fate, to market forces and individual preferences. Ever since the industrial age, one's past would become increasingly irrelevant in determining one's future. And thus conservatism's grip on individuals and society would diminish.

### **Only the Paranoid Survive**

The challenge of conservatism is learning. Conservatives preach that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. Conservatism isn't so much a coherent robust philosophical system, as it is a timid nostalgic preference for a simpler more stable time, when outside threats were minimal, and the established order reigned unchallenged. Embedded in conservatism is the lie of the luxury of analyzing and judging a past, which never changes, and entails no risk for the

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

future. If time moved backwards instead of forwards, conservatism would make perfect sense. Thus only conservatives could design and build the Maginot Line.

In contrast, the challenge of classical liberalism is unlearning. Classical liberals fear that those who *remember* the past are condemned to repeat it. Classical liberalism is a blueprint for those who have the courage to face the challenge — and accept the risks and responsibilities — of looking forward into an uncertain future. They incessantly test the crumbling foundation on which they stand, and seek the safest path, to leap across the chasm of fear, uncertainty and doubt, before they sink into the quicksand of the exponential trajectory of history.

The slope of this exponential curve is both mind-boggling and frightening. In less than 20 years, Xerox, which invented the PC, gave way to Apple, because it didn't know how to use it. Before Apple could figure out the market, it yielded to IBM because it wanted to control every aspect of the design. IBM lost out to Microsoft, because it failed to understand that software was more valuable than hardware. The lesson of this history was written by Intel CEO Andrew Grove, who summed it all up in the title of his book, *Only the Paranoid Survive*.<sup>19</sup>

Whether you are an individual, small business, church, city, corporation or nation, you must challenge your principles and assumptions before your competitors do. In the language of the venture capitalists, you must cannibalize your product lines, eat your young, slaughter your sacred cows, and take ever larger calculated risks on experimentation with the future. Because you will eventually be overrun by the law of large numbers, comprised of infinite mutations of

## **Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind***

social genetics, which generate new test versions of spontaneous order faster than anyone can evaluate them.

We are no longer concerned with adapting to change, but the second derivative, the rate of change. Burying one's head in the sand, and boycotting the digital age, is not an option. Luddite complaints about lost innocence, and how technology has upended our society, are about as productive as going on a drinking binge: you may enjoy yourself, nostalgically reminiscing far into the night, but you still have to get up and face reality tomorrow morning.

Conservatism's arrogance in ignoring the disciplines of economics and science has largely been its undoing. Even the most ardent conservative of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Whittaker Chambers, recognized and attempted to correct this fault by enrolling in college courses in economics and the sciences near the end of his life.

### **Within the Depths of The Heart of Darkness**

It's not just conservatives who have to learn to face reality. Regardless of our age, achievements, wealth or status, we all must inevitably come face-to-face with the meaning of our existence — when we are forced to define a coherent moral and philosophical structure for justifying our actions, fighting against the odds, and acknowledging our ultimate mortality.

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

We are all hard-wired to demand that we have value, that others perceive us as honorable, and that the sum total of our lives represents more than just the random interaction of atoms bouncing into each other for no other reason or purpose than gravitational attraction.

Today's pop-culture, with its vacuous middleware infrastructure, only teaches us how to handle these crises when they happen to someone else. When they happen to us, all the self-help platitudinous philosophizing instantaneously evaporates, as we are exposed to the Potemkin village society we tacitly relied on. And we are forced find our own bearings without anyone's assistance or guidance.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century's foremost expert at orienting his philosophical and moral foundation, under the most intense and unbearable circumstances, without the support of a middleware infrastructure, is Admiral James Stockdale, who spent eight years in a Vietnamese POW camp, four of them in solitary confinement. He described how the extremes of starvation, torture and isolation expose the "thin veneer" of our civilization:

"When you're alone and afraid, and feel your culture is slipping away, even though you're hanging on to your memories — memories of language, of poetry, of prayers, of mathematics — hanging on with your fingernails as best you can and yet, despite all your efforts, still seeing the bottom of the barrel coming up to meet you and realizing how thin and fragile our veneer of culture is, when you suddenly realize the truth that we all can become animals when cast adrift and tormented for a mere matter of months. You start

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

having some very warm thoughts about the only life preserver within reach — that human mind, that human heart next door.”<sup>20</sup>

When your very existence is at stake, your survival depends on quickly unloading all of the trash from your mind and cultivating your “memories of language, poetry and prayers” — in other words, the permanent things.

### In the Beginning ...

A generation before Stockdale’s desperate struggle to preserve and cultivate the permanent things, T. S. Eliot prophetically formulated the problem of Gresham's Law of society’s middleware, in his poem *Choruses of the Rock*, when he wrote:

- Where is the Life we have lost in living?
- Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
- Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?<sup>21</sup>

Eliot is posing the questions: What are the building blocks that serve as the foundation of our civilization? And how do we nurture and transmit them across generations? Responding to these challenges, Mark Van Doren of Columbia University contended that before anyone could proclaim himself to be educated, he must be asked, “Can you re-found your civilization?”

The American POWs in Vietnam did precisely this. They mastered digital communication a decade before the invention of the PC, by tapping on the walls of their cells, in a language known

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

as the *Smitty-Harris Tap Code*,<sup>22</sup> which could be transmitted at roughly one bit per second — about 5,000 words per day — with no improvement from Moore's Law.

When your communication channel has no bandwidth to speak of, you are forced to focus — with laser-like precision — on the permanent things. The permanent things that Stockdale and his fellow POWs nurtured, to the surprise of many sophisticated erudite classical liberals, were thousands of years old, and completely unrelated to science, reason and logic. The two most treasured items for Stockdale during his eight-year prison ordeal, were the Book of Job from the *Old Testament* and the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus. Stockdale recalls:

“It’s then that the love of memorization and poetry becomes an almost universal preoccupation. Verses were hoarded and reviewed each day. The person who came into [prison] with reams of previously memorized poetry was the bearer of great gifts. I often chuckled to myself about the professor I had who used to say, ‘Never waste your time memorizing anything you can look up in the library.’ If we had all followed that advice, our [prison] civilization would have been a very barren thing.”<sup>23</sup>

Reflecting on what helped him and his fellow POWs endure and re-found their civilization, the personal traits Stockdale cites are alien to both traditional conservatism and classical liberalism:

“[Our training was] based on two things I have come to respect very, very much. One was the taking of physical abuse. One should include a course of familiarization with pain. I learned the merits of taking physical abuse in body contact sports. It’s a very

## **Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind***

important experience. You have to practice hurting. Second, survival school was based on taking mental harassment. I came out of prison being very happy about the merits of plebe year at the Naval Academy. You have to practice being hazed.”<sup>24</sup>

Stockdale sums-up the fundamentals of re-founding his civilization in one simple sentence: “Self discipline is vital; self indulgence is fatal.”<sup>25</sup> Upon returning to the United States in 1973, to what he and his fellow POWs would come to call “this big-easy world of yackety-yack,” Stockdale passed judgment on the digital age:

“I remember being disappointed a month after I was back, when one of my friends — a prison mate — came running up after a reunion at the Naval Academy. He said with glee, ‘This is really great, you won't believe how this country has advanced. They've practically done away with the plebe year, and they've got computers in Bancroft Hall.’ I thought, ‘My God, if there was anything that helped us get through those eight years in prison, it was the plebe year, and if anything screwed up that war, it was computers!’”<sup>26</sup>

### **Something Wicked This Way Comes**

One undeniable datum of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was the Soviet Union’s utter failure to displace religion as a social middleware institution. Thus, for Kirk, Burke and Eliot, the greatest threats to civilization were radicals like Thomas Paine, who saw the French Revolution as the natural extension of the American Revolution. Paine, who was well armed with the software of ideas

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

and ideals, lacked the middleware infrastructure of the family, church and community to define, transmit and sustain them.

For conservatives, the lesson of the French Revolution is that every generation falls prey to the temptation to substitute of an excess of confidence and power, to compensate for a lack of wisdom and experience. And every generation must be punished in accordance to the severity of its crimes. An anonymous German soldier, awaiting inevitable defeat in the isolated frozen city of Stalingrad, in January 1943, verbalized what countless lost, abandoned and broken generations have tragically experienced, in a final letter to his wife:

“I used to be strong and full of faith; now I am small and without faith. I will never know many of the things that happened here; but the little that I have taken part in is already so much that it chokes me. No one can tell me any longer that the men died with the words ‘Deutschland’ or ‘Heil Hitler’ on their lips. There is plenty of dying, no question of that; but the last word is ‘mother’ or the name of someone dear, or just a cry for help. But all of them called out or shouted a name which could not help them anyway.”<sup>27</sup>

These sentiments are neither random nor an aberration. In his book, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, John Glenn Gray quotes a Vietnam veteran, who recounted why he resolved to report — and bring before a court-martial — the other members of his patrol, who had abducted, raped and murdered a Vietnamese girl. While pondering his motivation for not participating in the crime, and for undertaking the hazardous task of bringing his comrades to justice, this simple soldier spoke the following:



## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

“We all figured we might be dead in the next minute, so what difference did it make what we did? But the longer I was over there, the more I became convinced that it was the other way around that counted — that because we might not be around much longer, we had to take extra care how we behaved. That's what made me believe I was interested in religion. Another man might have called it something else, but the idea was simply that we had to answer for what we did. We had to answer to something, to someone — maybe just to ourselves.”<sup>28</sup>

The fates of the German youth of the 1930s, and the American youth of the 1960s, represent the best example of Karl Marx's dictum that history repeats itself: first as a tragedy, then as a farce. The movie documentaries, *Triumph of the Will* and *Woodstock*, chronicle two mirror-image cohorts of youth, separated by an ocean of distance, and a generation in time. Both, driven by the same inexpressible frustrations, evoking the same immature emotions, propelled by the same vacuous enthusiasm, and shouting the same mindless slogans. What could be billed as a macabre public relations dual between Joseph Goebbels and Country Joe and the Fish in a desperate race to the bottom. The saga of *Triumph of the Will* ended with a bang. The story of *Woodstock* ended with a whimper.

A generation which denies its debts to its ancestors, and ignores its obligations to its offspring, is not freeing itself from the chains of unfunded liabilities, rather it is carelessly throwing away its greatest assets. When a student challenged T. S. Eliot by claiming, “The dead writers are so remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.” Eliot replied, “Precisely, and

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

*they are what we know.*"<sup>29</sup> And where business schools teach that the Intel Pentium chip was developed in 18 months, a historian like Russell Kirk would argue that it took several thousand years — the span of Western Civilization.

While *The Invisible Man* and Howard Roarke could boldly and confidently dismiss their culture, heritage and community, to define their own future, Edmund Burke would conclude that they did not make these choices. Rather these choices were gifts to them from the accumulated efforts and sacrifices of past generations, who traveled blindly through the minefield of history, to create a stable, wealthy, culture and civilization, which allowed them the luxury of choosing their destiny.

Thus, an amateur historian or philosopher, who eagerly and confidently shreds the vast majority of *The Conservative Mind* that has eroded, and been rendered obsolete by the progression of time, is flying blind. Because that part which remains becomes all the more vital and valuable. Like a gambler who is convinced he can beat the casino by repeatedly doubling his bets, he is destined to go broke. Because he is irresponsibly playing a dangerous game, where the odds and the rules are stacked against him.

### **Right Where I Belong; Right Where I Was Meant To Be**

Russell Kirk started his career as a historian, ardently fighting for conservatism on the offensive, but ended it hastily retreating in a losing battle on the defensive. By denying its identity crisis, traditional conservatism conceded defeat. Despite this disheartening progression of events, Kirk

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

will not be remembered as a buffoon like Thomas Malthus, Ralph Nadar or Paul Erlich. Rather, the legacy of Russell Kirk is more like that of Jacques Derrida, Marshall McLuhan or Alvin Toffler. Like Derrida, McLuhan and Toffler, Kirk will not be remembered so much for what he wrote, but for teaching a generation how to think.

One hundred years from now, *The Conservative Mind* will probably still be in print, most likely in an abridged format, perhaps with only a quarter of its original content. Yet the core that remains will continue to appreciate in value, as society struggles to cope with the erosion and decay of the traditional middleware institutions of the family, the church, and the community that have sustained Western Civilization for thousands of years.

Conservative societies that fail to challenge their principles and evolve fast enough, wither and die. Like a deer caught in the headlights, they are mercilessly run-over by unknown forces that ignore their existence. Conversely, arrogant liberal revolutions that attempt to reinvent society by destroying all vestiges of their conservative roots inevitably lose their bearings. Like student pilots and skydivers, they eagerly learn how to take-off, but fail to practice their safety training. And when confronted with a crisis, they panic, spin out-of-control, crash and burn.

The philosophical structure that will emerge is that one that is best able acknowledge and confront its identity crisis (the strength of classical liberalism) and to re-found its civilization (the strength of traditional conservatism).

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

I cast my lot with James Stockdale, who was derided and ridiculed for openly acknowledging his personal identity crisis, when he posed the rhetorical question: “Who am I; and what am I doing here?” in his opening statement of the 1992 vice presidential debate. This wasn’t a clever gimmick dreamed-up by a Madison Avenue ad agency. Rather it was a brutally honest and heartfelt question Stockdale posed to himself each day during his eight-years as a POW in Hanoi. Within the confines of his 6’ x 4’ prison cell, his own internal bold and confident answer to this question, which few voters would understand, has the beauty, brevity and simplicity of a Biblical verse: “I am right where I belong; I am right where I was meant to be.”<sup>30</sup>

Like James Stockdale and Václav Havel, both conservatives and classical liberals desperately need to recognize and cope with their identity crisis, not just once, but continually on a daily basis. Because future generations — ultimately like Stockdale and Havel in the solitary confinement of their tiny prison cells — will be left on their own, to fend for themselves, lost and abandoned, to re-found their civilization.

The building blocks they choose to start with — i.e. their debts to the past — and the ideals they choose to aspire to — i.e. their obligation to their offspring — will determine their ultimate fate. Traditional conservatism is failing. The hardware is worthless. The middleware is gone. Time is running short. Choose wisely. And remember, “Only the Paranoid Survive.”

[1] Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* Regnery Gateway, (1953)

[2] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

[3] Robert X. Cringley (a.k.a. Marc Stevens), *Accidental Empires*, HarperBusiness (1992)

## Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

- [4] Moore's Law holds that microchip processing speed doubles every 18 months, or conversely, the cost of computer processing drops by 50% every 18 months.
- [5] Václav Havel, *Open Letters*, Vintage Books (1992), p. 187
- [6] John Taylor Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down*, New Society Publishers, (1992), p. 68.
- [7] Joseph L. Badaracco and Allen Webb, "Business Ethics: A View from the Trenches" *California Management Review*, Winter 1995, p. 19.
- [8] Tad Friend, "Sitcoms, Seriously" *Esquire*, March 1993, p. 122.
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Gatto, p. 31.
- [11] T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men" *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays*, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich (1971), p. 56.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Whittaker Chambers, *Witness*, Regnery Gateway (1952), p. 517.
- [14] Russell Kirk, "The Meaning of Virtue," *Center For Constructive Alternatives* Lecture, Hillsdale College (1976)
- [15] Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, University of Chicago Press (1948) p. 73.
- [16] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of the University*, University of Notre Dame Press (1852, 1986)
- [17] Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*, New American Library (1943, 1996)
- [18] Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, Random House (1947, 1980)
- [19] Andrew Grove, *Only The Paranoid Survive*, Currency Doubleday (1996)
- [20] James Stockdale, "The Melting Experience: Grow or Die" *National Review* December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1981, p. 1536.

# Deconstructing *The Conservative Mind*

[21] Eliot, "Choruses From 'The Rock'" *Collected Poems*, p. 96.

[22] Smitty-Harris Tap-Code

	1	2	3	4	5
1	A	B	C/K	D	E
2	F	G	H	I	J
3	L	M	N	O	P
4	Q	R	S	T	U
5	V	W	X	Y	Z

[23] James Stockdale, *A Vietnam Experience*, Hoover Press (1984), p. 132.

[24] Stockdale, pp. 7-8.

[25] Ibid. p. 10.

[26] Ibid., p. 37.

[27] Franz Schneider and Charles Gullans (tr.), *Last Letters from Stalingrad*, Greenwood Press (1974), p. 50.

[28] John Glenn Gray, *The Warriors*, page xvii

[29] Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* 3rd Edition, Regnery Gateway (1991), p. 8.

[30] James Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, Hoover Institution Press (1995)  
p. 63