

HOW ANTICOMMONISM “CEMENTED” THE AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT IN A LIBERAL AGE OF CONFORMITY, 1945–64

LEE HADDIGAN*

WITH THE END OF WWII in 1945 the United States looked forward to a future that promised prosperity and peace for all Americans. Liberals predicted the coming of a new era of freedom in American politics and society based on the principles of New Deal policies. They believed that the lessons of successful government intervention in the economy during the Great Depression, and the bureaucratic controls that had built the industrial war machine that won the ‘Good War,’ could be applied in post-WWII America. Liberals assumed there was a consensus among Americans supporting their view that the State should become more involved in resolving problems in domestic and foreign affairs. Largely unnoticed, however, a growing opposition to this liberal consensus emerged in the early Cold War years; which by the presidential election of 1964, at least in terms of recognition by the American media, had evolved into a coherent adversarial political ideology known as conservatism. But within this American Right no such coherency of vision or principles existed. It consisted of disparate—sometimes contradictory—modes of thought, usually defined as libertarianism and traditionalism. Yet, the fact remains that both groups shared enough common ground to distinguish themselves from liberals, begging the question what values were, and are, intrinsic to being a conservative. Historians of early Cold War conservatism have tended to use anticommunism as *the* ‘cement’ that bonded traditionalists and libertarians into one recognizable intellectual movement. But they have overstated the importance of the transitory phenomenon, and perceived threat, of

*Lee Haddigan (lhaddigan@yahoo.com; ABD, University of Delaware), Worcester, England, thanks Hagley Museum and Library, Delaware (HML), for allowing access to the personal papers of J. Howard Pew, and mises.org and isi.org without whose internet resources this paper could not have been written.

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communism at the expense of other norms of conservatism that united thinkers as different as Richard Weaver and Frank Chodorov.

Instead, three other 'impulses' have a greater claim to be the 'cement' of conservatism in America between 1945 and 1964, when Goldwater's nomination as the Republican presidential candidate marked, in Murray Rothbard's term, a 'transformation of the American Right'; three sentiments that still provide a lodestone for conservative intellectuals. First is the support for an 'original intent' interpretation of the constitution, a position that can be characterized as constitutionalism. The second is an overwhelming scepticism with the aims and purposes of the United Nations. Third is a disdain for the levelling and collectivist policies of liberals or socialists, an instinctual loathing that can be summed up in a somewhat clumsy neologism as 'anticommonism.' The use of 'experts' by liberals to engineer a better society infuriated conservatives because it denied the unique god-given nature of every individual, and sought to impose on Americans, for the good of society, certain common or shared secular values. Liberals attempted to achieve this 'commonization' of American society primarily through federal control of public education. Conservatives looked on aghast as Classical learning in schools and universities was discarded in favour of a curriculum based on the 'pragmatic' program of John Dewey. But they were also stricken by the growth of a mass media and mass entertainment industry that appealed to the common, in the British 'snob' sense of the word, interests of a population interested more in sensationalism and entertainment than humane learning. They viewed with icy hostility the vulgarization of arts and manners, and were appalled at the expansion of the role of government in the economy, with the related use of the federal spending power, to homogenize Americans into one common mass. And conservatives did not just sense this dislocation; a small band of the 'new' social scientists confirmed their fears with studies that illustrated the modern psychology of conformity. Conservatives argued, indeed, that the schools, Hollywood, 'I Love Lucy,' Superman and Batman, the welfare state and Levittowns, had destroyed American individuality and replaced it with a citizenry striving to conform to the prevailing 'common' norms, with a corresponding acceptance of the mediocre and the mundane. Conservative's detestation of the 'common,' their intellectual 'anticommonism,' along with their trenchant constitutionalism and distrust of the UN, 'cemented' the American conservative movement because anticommunism could not.

Read a standard history of conservatism in post-WWII America and you will inevitably encounter some variant of the argument that anticommunism held the movement together after 1945. Somewhere it will argue that; composed of differing ideological strands, conservatism only

existed as a positive philosophy (as against merely the resistance to change by dominant liberal self interests) because all conservatives shared a hatred of the communist or socialist system of government. Conservatives wrote books and articles eulogizing individual freedom and respect for tradition to prevent the spread of the communist doctrines of atheism and materialism in the United States. For example, both George H. Nash and Godfrey Hodgson have portrayed anticommunism as the “cement” that held together the conservative intellectual movement.¹ This is to greatly oversimplify the arguments of these two historians, but it still stands that they looked to anticommunism as the means to tell a narrative story of conservative thinkers in the United States after 1945.

But they have overplayed the importance of anticommunism to the conservative intellectual movement. The result, perhaps, of their unavoidable closeness to the political debates of the Cold War years when their opinions were formed. Conservatives disagreed vehemently on American policy toward the Soviets, with the main split in opinion occurring over the amount of military intervention—and the corresponding growth of the State—that was needed to defeat the Communists. The issue was aired in two infamous public wrangles in the Conservative press. The first in, late 1954, when William Schlamm and Frank Chodorov used the pages of the *Freeman* to consider how much of their temporary freedoms individuals should grant to the government to secure permanent victory over the Soviets. And the second took place in the *New Individualist Review* in November 1961, when Ronald Hamowy and William F. Buckley rehashed very much the same arguments. In fact, it is possible to argue anticommunism divided more than united the conservative movement, especially in the years after 1955 when the foundation of the *National Review* marked the beginning of a New Right committed to massive State expenditure to defeat the Soviet threat.

¹ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 128; “If conservatism was an amalgam in 1955, anti-communism was a vital part of its cement.” And, 179; “fusionism as an attempt at theoretical harmony was immensely assisted by the cement of anti-communism.” Nash has restated his contention in; “How Firm a Foundation? The Prospects for American Conservatism,” *Intercollegiate Review*, Spring 2009; March 6, 2009 (www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=1191): “So long as the Cold War continued, this [conservative] coalition held together reasonably well. Anticommunism—a conviction shared by nearly everyone—supplied much of the essential unifying cement.” Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 309; “the threat of communism, perceived as real, imminent, and potentially catastrophic, was the cement that held conservatism together.”

When you accept the inclusion of the Far Right (The John Birch Society, the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, *et al*) in the ranks of conservatism, as it is correct to do so, then anti-communism definitely split the movement. The Far Right saw the greatest threat from Communism on the domestic front, stressing that liberalism necessarily degraded into socialism over time, and that the main defence against this inevitable decay in the American political system lay in educating citizens in traditional American values. Unfortunately, organizations such as The JBS and CACC were too strident in their identification of some liberals as ‘socialists,’ and Buckley took it upon his shoulders in 1965, after the defeat of Goldwater, to ‘write’ the JBS—to the disgust of many—out of the conservative movement.

Those who still see anticommunism as the subject that cemented the conservative intellectual movement should also ponder the anticommunist stance of many liberals. Truman formulated his Containment Doctrine in 1947 in the face of open opposition from conservatives, and these same conservatives stymied the president’s attempts to introduce conscription, or Universal Military Training, to counter the huge Soviet military machine in the early years of the Cold War. Kennedy and Johnson took the United States into Vietnam, a war opposed not just by the New Left but many on the Right (including the supposedly rabid John Birchers) as well. And the same principles that led many on the Right to oppose the Vietnam War were evident ten years earlier, when a small band of conservative historians questioned the assumptions that dragged the United States into the ‘Good War.’ The ‘revisionist’ interpretation of World War II and the origins of the Cold War did not begin, as liberals assume, with William Appleman Williams and the New Left historians that followed—but with a brave coterie of conservatives, headed by Joseph Barnes, Garet Garrett and Charles Callan Tansill, who battled in vain against the liberal orthodox presentation of a Cold War fought between a ‘good’ America and a ‘bad’ Soviet aggressor. However different the views of the quintessential liberal, John F. Kennedy, and the doyen of the New Right, William F. Buckley, were on domestic matters, they were both Cold Warriors with a shared vision of the means needed to win the Cold War. No such unanimity of aims existed between Buckley, and his followers, and large segments of the conservative movement. Where the New Right, the Old Right, the Far Right, the libertarian and traditionalist, could find agreement was in the lamentable degradation of the ‘nobler’ values in American society: respect for God and family, the intent of the Founding Fathers, and the primacy of individual freedom over the stultifying liberal desire for a harmonious and equal society. A disintegration of superior standards that could be blamed on the ‘progressive’ impulse in American liberalism, exemplified in the figure of Henry A. Wallace

In May 1942, WWII was in an effective stalemate. The Soviet and German armies were struggling to break out of a deadlock at Kharkov, the U.S. Navy had been defeated at the Battle of Coral Sea (a 'victory,' it later turned out), and the Allies were at an impasse with Rommel's forces in the deserts of North Africa. American policy makers knew the means to alter the situation lay in the ability of the nation's factories and farms to outproduce Germany and Japan. But, the United States was beset with industrial discord, hampering the building of the military machine that would bleed the enemy to death. Accordingly, on May 8, 1942, Vice-President Henry A. Wallace addressed the Free World Association in New York City and exhorted American farms and factories to produce more. He argued that after the war had been successfully prosecuted, farmers would be able to buy land at a fair price, and sell their goods through the farmers' own organizations. Labor would be given the chance to build stronger unions and bargain collectively. And, most importantly, every child would be educated to read and write, and to learn the truths, as liberals saw them, of the world around them. He promised his audience that the next century would see freedom from want as the people, of the whole world, acquired the technical knowledge to produce more, and the means to distribute equitably the fruits of their labor. Wallace proclaimed exultantly, the next one hundred years would be 'The Century of the Common Man.'

In 1943, Wallace published a book with that title. The same year also saw the publication of a number of books by an embattled conservative minority that refuted, if not specifically, Wallace's contention about the coming ascendancy of the 'Common Man,' and questioned in general the assumptions of the New Deal. Isabel Paterson's *God of the Machine*, and Rose Wilder Lane's *The Discovery of Freedom*, both argued that the individual 'energy' of men, unhindered by State intervention (i.e., Wallace's collective bargaining and farmer cooperatives), determined their own success or failure. Ayn Rand also expounded, in *The Fountainhead*, that the individual's struggle to achieve their personal desires unfettered by government regulations was the necessary foundation of a vigorous society. These three women would have considered ridiculous the notion society could only 'progress' by everyone following the same goal, even that of the desirable end of the freedom from want for all the people. But the same year, 1943, saw a much more devastating critique of the idea of the primacy of the 'Common Man,' and a stirring defense of hierarchical society led by a 'natural aristocracy,' in Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's *The Menace of The Common Herd*, written under the pseudonym Francis Stuart Campbell.

Kuehnelt-Leddihn's book comprised a presentation of modern European thought on the meaning of democracy—and its Classical

origins—and the fallacious use of that word in contemporary American society. He illustrated with examples that the Founding Fathers had established a representative Republic, but that now the political process in the United States had deteriorated into the democratic rule of the ‘mob.’ As the title of the book implies, Kuehnelt-Leddihn thought the greatest threat to liberty in the United States came from the desire of the masses, the ‘herdists,’ to impose their mediocre uniform views (which resembled those of Mencken’s ‘booboisie’) upon those who disagreed with them. Kuehnelt-Leddihn argued the ‘average man,’ the ‘Mediocre Man,’² eschewed any original thought, “in order not to destroy the uniformity which is so dear to him.”³ Worse, as that uniformity gave him the only identity he possessed in his soulless existence, the ‘herdist’ jealously opposed “anybody who dares to act independently and thus destroy the sacred uniformity of the uniform group to which he belongs.”⁴ Thus, the ‘menace’ of the herd was the tendency to aggressively propagate a faceless, amorphous mass. To counter that dreary future, Kuehnelt-Leddihn proposed the institution of an ordered society, with a ‘new’ aristocracy of naturally gifted individuals running the bureaucracy a modern industrialized country required. As each person’s position was secure in this society (mobility was possible according to the ability of the individual), diversity could flourish. And, he argued, a hierarchic state “can always find some useful job for the outsider (the *uncommon* man) because everybody is *expected* to differ not less from those whom he serves than from those whom he rules.”⁵ (emphasis in text) To emphasize his point he nostalgically compared the riot of colours and dress at a medieval pageant with the drabness and uniformity of modern party clothes, especially the ubiquitous tuxedo.

Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s rigorous proposals for a hierarchical ordered society fell on deaf ears in the United States (as he knew it would), but the problem he identified with the ‘common herd’ was a persistent concern of American conservatives. In quite mindboggling appendices to the main text, he presented the arguments of hundreds of pre-World War II writers who shared his dismay at the uniform nature of American society. And that pessimism continued, and intensified, in the Cold War era. The subtitle of Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s book is *Procrustes at Large*, and conservatives viewed with horror the ‘Common Man’ cutting all values and tastes to the one mediocre size they could understand with no strain on their time or intellect.

² Ernest Hello, *The Mediocre Man*, trans. by David Gordon. *America*, Oct. 17, 1937, in: Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *The Menace of the Herd or Procrustes at Large* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1943), 323.

³ Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *ibid.*, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

Conservative ‘anticommonism’ cannot be merely viewed as anti-liberalism because they were as disdainful of the bulk of what Russell Kirk called the “conservatives of the flesh” and, “of what Bagehot called “the ignorant democratic conservatism of the masses.”⁶ Nor can it be styled anti-collectivism, as intellectual conservatives were as opposed to the cultural leveling of the arts, exemplified by Warhol’s nihilistic ‘commonism’ school of painting, as they were appalled at liberal economic and social policies. And neither can it be regarded merely as anticonformity. In another article for *Modern Age*, defending Southern culture, Kirk argued, “[C]onformity to enduring moral truths is not servile.” Rather, he believed, “conformity and convention of the higher sort deserve the support of every man who values civilization.”⁷

Central to the ‘conventions of the higher sort’ of Western civilization that ‘anticommonists’ strove to defend was the conviction that God had created individuals with the capacity of free will. The reason many conservatives opposed the socialist policies of liberals so vehemently is that they constituted a reversal of God’s design for mankind. Howard E. Kershner, editor of the Christian libertarian journal *Christian Economics*, explained to a college audience in 1957, that socialism “rejects God’s plan for creating unique individuals and starts back down the trail toward obscuring the person in the mass.” He then narrated the cradle to the grave existence of an individual under a socialist government, and asked how “long can individuality persist under such circumstances?” Kershner concluded that it could not, and as a consequence the “crowning injustice, impudence, and sin of socialism,” is that it would begin “the process of reducing individuals to the level of the common denominator.” And once there, it “would force them into a common mold and destroy individuality.”⁸

Kershner’s argument about the ‘common denominator’ process begs the question how are individuals ‘forced’ into a common mold. For nearly all writers on the subject the culprit was America’s educational system, and the main offenders were the proponents of Dewey’s ‘progressive’ education. In essence, the Dewey school denied the study of the Classical humanities had any relevance in a modern and changing world. As a consequence, students should be taught those things which were useful in instilling the life-skills, or well-rounded personality, required to succeed in a mass democracy. Progressive educationalists replaced the discipline and training needed to

⁶ Russell Kirk, “Can Conservatives Be Saved,” *Modern Age*, Spring 1958, 114.

⁷ Russell Kirk, “Norms Conventions, and the South,” *Modern Age*, Fall 1958, 343.

⁸ Commencement Address delivered at Grove City College, June 8, 1957, Kershner, “The Moral Basis of A Free Society,” 5. Pew papers (HML) Accession No. 1634 Box 183.

learn the great truths passed down to us from antiquity, with theories of non-competitive education so that no student would feel discouraged by their lack of academic talent. In a democracy, they believed, everyone has something positive to offer society. Flunking a history class should not determine the future contribution a young person could make to the common good, or stigmatize them as a failure in their own, and their peers, eyes. And to ensure no-one felt inferior, or superior, in the new society of equals teaching was pitched at the level of the common denominator, or the level everyone could understand.

Isabel Paterson's *God and the Machine* included a chapter on 'Our Japanized Educational System.' In it she took to task progressive education in the United States, comparing it to the practice of teaching of Japan, where discipline in the school is enforced by the common judgement of a transgressor's classmates. Resulting in the ideal of a society (that had existed for a thousand years) where "the sole authority is that of the mass, the collective, of the government in the ultimate resort."⁹ Paterson saw the same trend emerging in American schools, with teachers seeking "to make schooling a pleasurable experience," with the aim of encouraging "self expression in the youngest children and social-mindedness in older pupils."¹⁰ As a consequence of this regard for the opinions of others, and the search for a language of expression common to all, when students are "called upon to think, they cannot, because they have been trained to accept the class, the group, or the 'social trend' as the sole authority."¹¹ Paterson especially excoriated the practice of teachers marking papers solely with regard to the natural ability, or lack of it, of the individual child (i.e., they competed only against themselves), and argued that throughout "the whole course of mental and moral training, competition is not only expected but required." The result of competitive education, she contended, is "the cultivation of individual ability and personal character—the creation of an independent and forceful being."¹² Paterson concentrated on the methods used to teach high school students. By contrast, William F. Buckley gained national notoriety in 1951 when he attacked the collectivism taught in economic classes at Yale and other Higher Education establishments. In *God and Man at Yale*, he quoted the textbooks used at his old university to illustrate how liberal materialist economics now dominated, to the detriment of the permanent spiritual and moral values that had served the United States so well in the

⁹ Isabel Paterson, *The God of The Machine* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1943), 253.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹² *ibid.*, 252.

past. And by 1960, concern with the prevalence of ‘Deweyism’ practises in education, and the subject matter taught in the classrooms, was such that Russell Kirk founded the journal, *University Bookman*, dedicated to counteracting the theory and practice of ‘progressive’ education.

Richard Weaver did not look on in horror as Paterson, Buckley, and many other conservatives did at this abandonment of the old-fashioned style of education; that was not the style of one of America’s most learned scholars. In a 1948 essay, “The Humanities in the Century of the Common Man” (not published until 1964), Weaver instead noted sadly that study of the humanities was “not likely to survive another generation.”¹³ Students no longer possessed the necessary discipline to study Greek and Latin, Logic and Rhetoric, because instead of accepting the tragedy of life, “the mass everlastingly insists that the world be represented as *pleasant*.”¹⁴ (emphasis in text) Hollywood films always end happily as, the “modern world is creating an ideology whose hero is the satisfied customer,” and where the “common denominator” is the comic strip, “whose offenses against taste and aesthetic theory it would be impossible to number.”¹⁵ The tragedy for Weaver was not that people were entertained, but that they were living a life devoted to deception, aided by schools ignoring the lessons our ancestors had worked so assiduously to discover. He contended, the “herd man never grows reconciled to the fact that life is a defeat, and that this defeat is its real story,” and instead pursues “a pleasing fiction by which his hopes are ingeniously flattered.”¹⁶ And like Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Weaver saw the ‘menace of the herd’ in the fact that the “mass can never grant that there is something superior to its *habitus*,” and as it is a “jealous sovereign,” it will “seek to destroy with the *ad hominem* attack” those “who challenge it from a superior level.”¹⁷

If Weaver watched regretfully as the Humanities, and the eternal truths they taught, disappeared gradually from the curriculum, E. Merrill Root sounded the battle cry for conservatives; the ‘superior level’ in the colleges who were under attack from the ‘herd.’ In an October 1952, article for the *Freeman*, “Our Left-Handed Colleges,” Root blasted his colleagues on the Right, who “allow themselves to be lulled or cowed into conformity” by a

¹³ Richard Weaver, “The Humanities in a Century of the Common Man,” *New Individualist Review*, Autumn 1964, 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

“militant and ruthless”¹⁸ Left. Root argued parents wanted teachers who taught their children, “values, qualities and meanings”; who gave them a humanistic education. Parents did not want teachers who “reduce the individual to the hideous caricature known as ‘the Common Man,’” and who “slyly or blatantly uphold the encroachments of the total state.” Root recognized professors of a conservative persuasion, “averse to the din of the forum and the blood of the battlefield,” were silenced by the “power wielded by the collectivists.” But, he warned, conservatives must take their stand now and face up to the “smears and lies of a Joliet-Curie or a Red Dean” (who had accused America of germ warfare in Korea), or the academic courts would be ceded to the Left for the foreseeable future.

Root saw the challenge of wresting back control of the curriculum from the Left as an immediate priority for conservatives concerned with the levelling of society through education. Frank Chodorov, in contrast, regarded it, as the title of his 1950 pamphlet declared, “A Fifty-Year Project.” He explained that at the turn of the last century there were virtually no socialists in America, and then narrated his personal account of how over the next fifty years socialist thought slowly replaced individualism as the dominant ideology in America. Chodorov believed the cause lay in the formation of socialist clubs on college campuses after WWI; that “American thought in 1950 is collectivistic because the seed of that kind of thinking was planted in the most receptive minds during the early years of the century.”¹⁹ As the members of those socialist clubs came to positions of influence in the New Deal and WWII years, they used their new authority to promote the adoption of socialist policies by appointing fellow collectivists to similar professions that, especially in the publishing business, moulded public opinion. Now, Chodorov argued, it was time for individualists to try and reverse the prevailing atmosphere at the college level, and begin a rollback of the socialist character of the nation using the methods the socialists had used for the last fifty years. He warned it would not be “an easy or quick job,” and that it would require “the kind of industry, intelligence and patience that comes with devotion to an ideal.”²⁰ But, he challenged, “[W]hat in life is more worth while than the pursuit of an ideal?”²¹ And Chodorov, who once stated ‘it’s fun to fight,’ played his own part in the dispelling over the next fifty years of at least some of the domination of the American character by socialist dogma. He rewrote “A Fifty-Year Project,” as “For Our Children’s

¹⁸ E. Merrill Root, “Our Left-handed Colleges,” *Christian Economics*, Feb. 10, 1953. Abstracted from *Freeman*, Oct. 20, 1952.

¹⁹ Frank Chodorov, *Out of Step* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1962), 246.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 250.

Children,” published in *Human Events* in September 1950. The article received a receptive audience among some conservatives, and with the initial financial backing of J. Howard Pew Chodorov founded, in 1953, the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists. Renamed the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in 1966, Chodorov’s organization continues to distribute literature extolling the individualist philosophy.

In the accepted canon of the historiography of Cold War conservatism, Weaver was a traditionalist, concerned with preserving the best of our ancestors’ civilization, and Chodorov was a libertarian, regarding the right of an individual to determine their own course in life as paramount. Much has been written about the essential differences between the two ideas, particularly their approach to the role of government in establishing the conditions in which one can lead a virtuous life. But conservatism is a tendency, a way of thinking, more than a set body of ideas; there is no manifesto or party platform for conservatives to consult when faced with questions of immediate import. One area all conservatives instinctively agreed upon was the unfortunate growth of the involvement of the State in providing universal education for America’s children. Standardization of the curriculum threatened the development of the diverse character of citizens that Americans so cherish as part of their heritage, and the independence of action that accounts for the remarkable ingenuity and creativity of the nation’s population. Weaver would have found little to disagree with when Chodorov argued that, the “collectivist idealizes group behaviour because he feels an inadequacy in himself,” and shorn of the certitude individual character (as against personality) provides, “he must be part of a mob and therefore he organizes and joins.”²²

Weaver would also have agreed, at least in essence, with the sentiments of the libertarian Leonard E. Read (founder of The Foundation for Economic Education) in the article, ‘Natural Aristocracy,’ published in the June 1964 issue of *Freeman*. Read argued that the evolutionary process of mankind had just begun when viewed against the history of the cosmos, but that we had already produced extraordinary individuals who had enriched the existence of us all. Citing the examples of Jesus, Goethe, Confucius and Lao-tse *et al*, Read was optimistic that the “performances of these uncommon and remarkable persons are but prophecies of what potentially is within the reach of our species”; and that these great figures of the past, “serve as lodestars, as guiding ideals, as models of excellence, as exemplars of the human potential, and thus qualify for what is meant by a natural aristocracy.” Read denigrated the modern tendency for egocentrism, to view existence solely with regard to

²² Frank Chodorov, *One Is A Crowd* (New York: the Devin-Adair Company, 1952), 4.

immediate personal experience and desires. Instead, he praised the rare individuals who possess the “aristocratic spirit,” and who “acts, thinks, and lives in long-range or eternal terms, for he has linked himself with eternity by his love of and devotion to excellence.” And he warned that “I have come to see the need, yes, the necessity, of what Jefferson called ‘a natural aristocracy among men,’” because education in the fundamental principles of liberty was not enough to secure acceptance of those values. Only men with the ‘aristocratic spirit’ could understand, and illustrate for others by their example, that the progress of the human race relied upon an appreciation of the long-term nature of the development of mankind’s ultimate goal, individual liberty.²³

F. A. Harper,²⁴ another libertarian with ties to the *Freeman*, directed his interest in the evolution of mankind to considering the detrimental influence of the Common Man in modern America. In his book, *Liberty: A Path to its Recovery*, published by The Foundation for Economic Education in 1949, he included a chapter on ‘The Uncommon Man.’ Harper argued that progress in society, as in nature, was only possible when variation was allowed to flourish. He reminded readers, that in “this age of political glorification of the common man, of mediocrity, and of the masses and the opinions of masses,” that if common men had been dominant in the history of mankind then, “we would still be living as savages.”²⁵ And Harper extolled the contribution of the natural aristocracy of intellect by contending that, except “for the progress that stems from the uncommon man, ours would still be an existence like that of the lowest animals.”²⁶ He favorably explained Toynbee’s great-man theory of History, and posited that progress “will be slowed to whatever extent the demands of the common man are allowed to rob the uncommon man of the opportunity to generate progress.”²⁷ As he noted, it takes little effort or knowledge to flick a switch and generate light, but it took the rare genius of Franklin and Edison to discover the secrets of science that made the use of electricity possible. The uncommon man must be given the liberty to plough his own furrow, because the “capacity for independent decisions and free choice is the precious attribute of humans that makes

²³ Leonard E. Read, “Natural Aristocracy,” *Freeman*, June 1964; March 6, 2009, www.thefreemanonline.org/featured/natural-aristocracy/.

²⁴ For a memorial on the work of Harper, a sadly marginalized figure in the history of the conservative intellectual movement, see; Murray N. Rothbard, “Floyd Arthur ‘Baldy’ Harper, RIP,” *Libertarian Forum*, May 1973, 3.

²⁵ F. A. Harper, *Liberty: A Path to its Recovery* (New York: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1949; 1993 FEE reprint), 74.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

progress possible.”²⁸ Harper argued that the capacity to make ‘independent decisions’ was now abrogated by State planning, and that if liberty was not recovered then American society would atrophy and eventually decay along the lines of previous dominant civilizations.

It was this loss of the ability to make ‘independent decisions’ that Kershner lamented in his social parable for *Christian Economics*, ‘Pulling Ragweeds—Just One Individual.’ He argued that the individual, not some collective body, is responsible for changing society for the better; where the individual saw disorder it was his duty as part of the wider community to work to alleviate the problem. ‘Common’ problems did not require a ‘common’ solution, organized by politicians or the ‘herd’ instinct of following the directives of a government agency. He distinguished the attitude of the individual and the conformist liberal with the following lesson:

“The liberal approached his neighbour one day and asked;

‘What are you doing here on this vacant lot?’

‘I’m pulling ragweeds’

‘You must have hay fever’

‘No, I never did’

‘Is someone paying you?’

‘No money. Just the personal satisfaction of improving our neighborhood’

‘I have not heard of any local campaign against ragweed. Are they starting one?’

‘No, I am just doing it myself’

‘Then I do not understand why you are working at it?’”²⁹

It was this failure of comprehension of the liberal orthodoxy, conservatives believed, that led them to slavishly follow group opinion and subsume themselves in the mass.

An anonymous author in the *Freeman* of December 1958, was less circumspect than Chodorov or Weaver in his detestation of ‘commonism.’ In a fire and brimstone denunciation, “An American Creed,” the author opened with the declaration: “I do not choose to be a Common Man,” and it “is my

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁹ Howard E. Kershner, “Pulling Ragweeds—Just One Individual,” *Christian Economics*, March 17, 1959.

right to be uncommon if I can.” The rest of the Creed developed this opening statement, and illustrated an implicit assumption of ‘anticommonism’: that the desire to be different was part of the United States ‘exceptional’ character and history. He exclaimed, “I do not wish to be a kept citizen, humbled, dulled, by having the state look after me.” Instead, he declared, “I want to take the calculated risk; to dream and to build; to fail or succeed.” Calling on the pioneer spirit that enabled the United States to grow from a collection of scattered settlements on the eastern seaboard to a democratic nation spanning a continent (a prospect European political theorists like Montesquieu had deemed impossible), the author proudly affirmed, “I prefer the challenges of life to the guaranteed existence, the thrill of fulfilment to the calm state of utopia.” Tapping the history of a nation that had overthrown British despotism at home—at the time, a far from inevitable outcome—defeated fascist tyranny abroad, and now stood as the last bulwark against World Communism, the writer warned, “I will never cower before any master, nor bend to any threat.” And the Creed ended with the triumphant proclamation; “it is my heritage to stand erect, proud, and unafraid; to think and act for myself; enjoy the benefits of creation, and to face the world boldly and say... This I have done.”³⁰

Bombastic as the ‘Creed’ undoubtedly is, it illustrates one of the endearing traits of the Anglo-American conservative tradition: It does not mention political or economic remedies for the perceived ills of society. Sadly forgotten today within much of the conservative movement, certainly since the advent of neoconservatism in the early 1970s, is the inadequacy of politics in the face of spiritual and moral challenges, and in the task of regenerating society. Britain produced few intellectual conservatives of note in the Cold War era, but one modern British conservative that Americans should become acquainted with (along with George Winder and F.A. Voight) is Viscount Hailsham, formerly Quentin Hogg. In *The Case for Conservatism*, of 1947, Hogg ruminated that, some “fatuous ass described this as the century of the common man,” and described the horrendous atrocities that result from replacing the “signs and symbols which have guided the lives of men for centuries,” with political ideologies (especially communism and fascism) in which “every kind of evil is permitted to parade under the name of virtue.”³¹ He argued from what Americans would regard as the traditionalist viewpoint, that the “man who puts politics first is not fit to be called a civilized being,

³⁰ Anon., “An American Creed,” *Christian Economics*, March 17, 1959; *Freeman* reprint, Dec. 1958.

³¹ Viscount Hailsham (Quentin Hogg), *The Conservative Case* (Penguin Books Ltd., Middlesex; revised edition, 1959), 10.

never mind a Christian.”³² Rather, the conservative finds the “joy and riches of existence” rooted in, “religion, art, study, family, country, friends, music, fun, duty.”³³ The conservative is content to develop his individual personality within his own sphere in accord with the word of God, and sees no need (or chance of success) of mass movements, political ideologies, or common causes dedicated to the Utopian reform of society. Politics was the realm of the Common Man; a new religion for the masses afraid to face the tough choices true religion required.

William F. Buckley, Jr. espoused a similar sentiment in 1965, at the tenth-anniversary dinner of *National Review*, where he stated that politics “is the preoccupation of the quarter-educated,” and that the “curse”³⁴ of this century was that conservatives were forced to take part in the political process. The first edition of *National Review* in November 1955, in the new magazine’s founding credenda, warned that “the greatest crisis of the era is the conflict between the social engineers who seek to manipulate people into conformity with scientific utopias,” against the “disciples of truth who defend an ‘organic moral order.’”³⁵ And Buckley’s magazine consistently defended the aesthetic values of an educated elite over the mediocrity of the new democratic culture. Largely through the ‘Books, Arts and Manners’ section of the magazine, *National Review* reminded readers that the love of ‘beauty’ is a natural human desire. *Modern Age* also attempted to revive an interest in the humane arts, and to keep alive the aesthetic traditions of Western civilization. In each issue, alongside articles discussing matters of more mainstream interest to conservatives, Kirk’s journal included short stories and verse from contemporary authors, and reviews of the great thinkers of the past. And even the *Freeman* (before and after the FEE assumed ownership in July, 1954) afforded a considerable amount of space to reviews of literary books and the arts. In the May 3, 1954, issue Max Eastman slated abstract art (using Picasso’s *Girl in a Mirror* as his prime example) as incomprehensible, even to academic experts, and decried the loss of art—printed as well as visual—that ‘communicated’ objectively with the consumer. He advocated that lovers of freedom “should raise an army and go to war for civilized values in art as well as politics and economics.”³⁶ A promotion of civilized values that was needed to counteract, in the words of an E. Merrill Root article for *Christian Economics*, “The Cult of Nihilism.’ Root deplored the effects of modernism on the Western artistic heritage, because with the liberal conviction, “that mass

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ In Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton (editors), *The Conservative Press In Twentieth Century America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 523.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁶ Max Eastman, “Uncommunicative Art,” *Freeman*, May 3, 1954, 573.

should be set above man,” the result was that, “under such a climate, our art, music, literature, become increasingly negative, nihilistic,” and “our lives lose both joy and tragedy, the sanely humorous, the sublime and the heroic.”³⁷

Often obscured in histories of the post WWII conservative intellectual movement is the conservative’s fondness for the ‘sanely humorous.’ The common perception of conservatism in the early Cold War years still today draws on movies such as ‘Dr. Strangelove,’ and ‘Seven Days in May,’ where Goldwateresque characters advocate the complete nuclear annihilation of the Soviets with no regard to the consequences for the United States. Goldwater himself was an amiable personality, who once (allegedly) quipped of Hubert Humphrey; he “talks so fast that trying to follow his speeches is like reading *Playboy* with your wife turning the pages.”³⁸ But liberals reserved their most successful, and unwarranted, hatchet job for Robert Welch, the leader of The John Birch Society. Welch is usually alluded to as some sort of mouth-frothing zealot of anticommunism, a hatemonger intent on dragging the United States into a nuclear confrontation with the Soviets. A presentation that bears little relation to the truth, but that admirably illustrates how successful liberals were in smearing conservatives as warmongers, and which helped result in the perception that conservatism was little more than a front for militant anticommunism Welch, instead, found great delight in the ‘sanely humorous,’ remarking of himself in a JBS pamphlet, that he had, “one wife, two sons, a Golden Retriever dog, and fourteen golf clubs—none of which he understands, but all of which he loves.”³⁹ His journal *American Opinion* (which had no editorial connection with The JBS), included in every issue a page of jokes, quotes and anecdotes under the title ‘Bullets and Confetti.’ One example of a ‘Bullet’ from *One Man’s Opinion* (the immediate precursor to *American Opinion*), by John Cameron Swayze, went; “Russia has abolished God, but so far God has been more tolerant.”⁴⁰ So popular was this feature with conservative readers that *American Opinion* published a book of *Bullets and Confetti*. If nothing else, recognition of conservative humour (even if prone to be of the ‘gallows’ type) helps rescue their reputation from the caricatures of the liberal media.

Studies by some psychologists, sociologists, and commentators on society and culture in the 1950s did little to overcome the pessimism conservatives felt when they viewed modern America. William H. Whyte’s *The Organizational Man* argued that corporations in the United States were run by bureaucrats (educated at colleges in the ‘progressive’ methodology) who

³⁷ E. Merrill Root, “The Cult of Nihilism,” *Christian Economics*, Sept. 22, 1959.

³⁸ Lora and Longton, *op. cit.*, 636.

³⁹ John Birch Society Pamphlet, “From Our Mail,” Jan. 31, 1961, 28.

⁴⁰ John Cameron Swayze, in “Bullets,” *One Man’s Opinion*, Feb. 1956, 21.

sacrificed individual self-expression at the altar of social and organizational harmony. David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* extended the pursuit of conformity from the workplace into suburbia, and other areas of the community where social interrelations took place. The psychologist Erich Fromm, in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, blamed psychoanalysts for the conformist nature of American society by their promotion of the thesis that behaviour is caused by environment, with the attendant premise that the individual should adapt their way of thinking to the norms of the crowd opinion. Anyone who strayed from the accepted bounds of social behaviour was to be considered mentally unhealthy. And conservatives noted, wearily, that the tyranny of the majority in compelling a common culture was nothing new in American society. Some harked back to de Tocqueville's warning in *Democracy in America*, that the Republican form of government in the United States had the potential to be more dictatorial than that of an Absolute monarch. Allen Valentine espoused the same misgivings about the American political system in *The Triumph of the Mollusc—The Age of Conformity*, in 1954, but warned at this juncture in the Eternal struggle for individual freedom the pressures to conform were primarily cultural.

A major protagonist in this slow descent into cultural conformism was the spiralling growth of radio listening between the wars, and in television viewing after World War II. Flora Rheta Schreiber, an associate professor of Speech and Radio at Adelphi College (Long Island), wrote three articles for the *Freeman* in 1953, examining the decline of book reading in the United States (more than any other major democracy of the time) amid the ubiquitous presentation of audio-visual media in American society. She argued that the printed word demanded participation in the experience by the reader, and hence knowledge, understanding, and the questioning of values developed in the cultivated mind. In contrast, radio, television, movies, picture books and comic strips, required only passive and sensual involvement, and as a consequence, the "listener or viewer generally subdues his own personality to the professional personality that exhorts him and so, momentarily at least, becomes a creature of automatism."⁴¹

Schreiber blamed this malaise in the 'democratic' involvement in culture on the education system, which produced citizens who did not possess the mental discipline required to read a book. And the result was a 'mass' that acquired their information from 'outside' of themselves, and replaced the individual's 'inner' authority of knowledge with the platitudinous opinions of an audio-visual media designed to reach the level of the lowest

⁴¹ Flora Rheta Schreiber, "The Audience is Everything," *Freeman*, September 21, 1953, 924.

'common' denominator. A level that Russell Kirk found so disquieting that he buried the family television set in his back garden.

Historians have attempted to provide some semblance of a unifying principle for conservatives by stressing the anticommunist position they all held. But it does not suffice. Conservatism is an impulse, a feeling, more than a political ideology (or opposition to one), and a central component of that tendency is a respect for the differing abilities of mankind, and a distaste for those who attempt to deny such disparities and attempt to force the individual into a 'common mold.' Murray Rothbard, intimately involved with the post-WWII conservative intellectual movement, argued that the "congeries of opponents of the New Deal," and the modern conservatism that arose in the Cold War, had "one theme linking them all: opposition to egalitarianism, to compulsory levelling by use of state power."⁴² A use of state power that encouraged Herbert Hoover, on the occasion of his 80th birthday in 1954, to remind an audience in Iowa that, the "greatest strides in human progress have come from uncommon men and women"⁴³ such as Washington, Lincoln, and Edison. An opposition to the conformity of the age that impelled the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company in 1954 to release an advertisement entitled, 'The Century of the *uncommon* man!', which extolled the contribution of Ford and Edison, Bell and Westinghouse; because these "uncommon men" of "ideas, ability, initiative and courage ... have given us more progress in one century than the world knew in the previous fifty centuries."⁴⁴ Until a better term can be found the clunky expression 'anticommonism' best describes the conservative impulse to oppose 'compulsory levelling by the state' (by a 'commonarchy' of federal politicians and bureaucrats?), and the desire to preserve, and expand, the existence of a 'natural aristocracy' educated in the traditions and values of our Western civilization.

⁴² Murray N. Rothbard, "Frank S. Meyer: The Fusionist as Libertarian Manque," *Modern Age*, Fall 1981, 352.

⁴³ Herbert Hoover, "The Uncommon Man," *FEE Essays on Liberty*, Vol. 3, 1958, 144.

⁴⁴ Pittsburgh Plate Company, full page advert, "The Century of the *uncommon* man!" *Freeman*, November 1954.