

On the Public Interest

Irving Kristol and the Public Interest Crowd

Robert Bartley

AS ESTABLISHMENT liberalism blurred into radicalism in the middle and late 1960s, the most telling opposition came not from those we usually call conservatives but from another distinct group of thinkers for which we need a new name, perhaps "neo-conservatives."

To measure what criticism tells, look at the reactions of the criticized. The Nixon adviser most maligned in liberal circles was not a conventional right-winger, but Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In the radical-liberal book reviews, the most hated book of recent times was not anything by a conventional conservative, but Edward C. Banfield's *The Unheavenly City*. Of the same people, the wife of an Ivy League department chairman remarks to a young dinner-guest job applicant, "You don't mention names like that if you want to be hired in this department."

Such is the perverse homage paid to critics who not merely sting but bite, to critics who are a real threat. In fact, "names like that," along with others like Irving Kristol, James Q. Wilson, Robert Nisbet and Nathan Glazer, represent a new intellectual school composed of a somewhat ironical alliance of empirical social scientists and classical philosophers attuned to an almost forgotten conservatism. The best place to follow its development has been in the pages of that incomparable quarterly, *The Public Interest*.

Irving Kristol is a key figure in the group, first of all as a central personality, but also in exemplifying the philosophical side of the alliance. In his new book he says the two contemporary figures who have most influenced him are Lionel Trilling, the famous literary critic who first wrote of "the adversary culture," and Leo Strauss, the great Aristotelian scholar at the University of Chicago. And through the essays run the ancient philosophical themes we so seldom see today: the nature of man and society, the question of virtue and the importance of underlying values.

The basic viewpoint of the group rests on its conception of society. A society, culture or civilization is held together not ultimately by its formal institutions but by informal things — traditions, values, feelings and ex-

pectations shared by its citizens and imposing on them certain disciplines.

Thus the problems of society may stem not from material conditions or its formal institutions but directly from the more important informal variables. In particular, the present distress of the United States and other western democracies arises from the erosion of values and traditions that have held them together. The most obvious manifestation of this erosion is the spread of the adversary culture, the growth of traditional intellectual hostility to capitalist society into a powerful and self-perpetuating force that undermines the authority and legitimacy any society needs to operate.

This view of society also suggests the immense difficulty of reform by rational prescription. Things are always so much more complex than they look. They have evolved that way through cut-and-fit adaptation, and those who follow rational prescriptions do not understand with what they tinker.

Kristol does not carry this as far as other members of the school might, though he says "the unanticipated consequences of social action are always more important, and usually less agreeable, than the intended consequences." He believes reforms are necessary, but not reforms intended to change the material conditions of life as to produce institutions that incorporate, stress and reinforce the values and traditions important to society. He calls for a "combination of the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal."

How to designate this body of thought or thinkers is admittedly a difficulty. "The Public Interest crowd" is serviceable enough for some purposes, but the magazine carries many other writers as well, and others outside its immediate circle are coming to parallel conclusions. For its own purposes, the circle solves the problem well enough; a fellow member is "a sensible person," or more likely "one of the few sensible persons around." You don't describe yourself that way, though, and various individuals are forced to formulations like "radical centrist" or "neo-Whig."

Yet the words — self-discipline, authority, legitimacy, values, virtue — are profoundly conservative ones. And the themes come straight from the pages not only of Aristotle but from Burke. While some of the in-

dividuals involved may still object to the title conservative, this is a heritage that deserves to be emphasized and reclaimed.

Thus Herman Kahn, one of those outside *The Public Interest* crowd who sounds parallel themes, speaks of the emergence of "conservationists: trying to conserve old values, but not necessarily interested in the economic and political emphasis of 'Landon' or 'Goldwater.'" His term is overly contrived and a bit awkward. I do not know who first used "neo-conservative" in this context, but it seems the one that best fits.

The term neo-conservative is also useful in making another contrast. Despite the heritage of pertinent themes, they are not the ones we normally associate with contemporary American conservatism. They are occasionally found in the pages of *The National Review*, to be sure, but other and perhaps contradictory themes leave them muted and confused. The neo-conservative themes speak so plainly to our day, indeed, that it is something of a mark against American conservatism that sounding them is left to a group laced with apostate liberals and radicals.

One must give credit where it is due, of course, and anyone who values conservative ideas of any sort owes a deep debt to Mr. Buckley. His talent and enterprise have succeeded in making clear that another tradition does exist as an alternative to the dominant liberalism. Without his skill and verve even that much probably would not be clear outside of a few cloisters here and there. Writing in this journal, Henry Regnery tells how Russell Kirk won his battle to impose the word "conservative" during the founding of *The National Review*. One wonders, though, if Mr. Kirk lost the war.

So often those who claim the word conservative are not followers of Burke but of Adam Smith. So often you find not skepticism about rationalist reformers, but the prescription of *Laissez faire* not merely as a marvelously efficient economic device but as a cure for the ills of society. So often you find not the thought that other nations must work out their own systems even if we know ours are better, but an apocalyptic anticommunism. So often we find conservatives stressing not the protection and preservation of

the American mainstream, but opposition to it.

There is, of course, much truth in each of these conservative positions. Government regulation has an automatic tendency toward overextension. Even while dealing with Communist China, we should remember that its totalitarianism denies the values Western civilization holds dear. Many recent American trends wholly deserve opposition.

These are truths we should not forget, but they do not really seem the truths central to our day. That is why conventional conservatives so often march off into what strikes even many would-be friends as political irrelevancy, with the Goldwater campaign, strident opposition to the China initiatives, the Ashbrook candidacy. Now we even find that the New York Conservative Party has decided to oppose state senator John Marchi, its impeccably civilized standard-bearer against John Lindsay. Somehow there is the doctrinal rigidity one would expect of radicals, not the moderation one would expect of conservatives.

It is the strength of the neo-conservatives, by contrast, that despite their small numbers they have occupied a number of strategic intersections in American life. Politically, for example, they are something of a swing group between the two major parties. Their political outlook is that of establishmentarians looking for an establishment worthy of the name, and without taking any polls, one can guess that among them the most common Presidential preference would be, 1. Henry Jackson, 2. Richard Nixon. They represent an opportunity for the Republicans to break the Democratic strangle-hold on intellectual talent, and if the Republican Party ever figures out how to make use of any such thing it may, in fact, make itself into the sought-after establishment.

Intellectually, the neo-conservative themes are the central issues of our time. The collapse of values. The place of tradition in a time of change. The need not only for outward material progress but for the inner satisfaction of living in what seems to be a proper society. The place of an intellectual elite in a nation where, *The Public Interest* reminds us, only eleven percent of adults have completed four years of college. These are contemporary issues; they are in fact what underlies "the social issue" of political note; and they may very well be the pressing issues of the vaunted post-industrial society.

Finally, in terms of policy as opposed to politics, the neo-conservatives have been able to deal with the realities that confront a relatively disinterested-policy-maker. *The Public Interest* has a circulation of only 10,000, but is perhaps the chief medium of common knowledge within the incredibly small circle where the public interest is weighed in a rigorous way. One finds it the most cited single source when talk-

ing seriously about social policy with policy-oriented White House aides, or assistant secretaries of cabinet departments or assistant directors of the office of management and budget.

The policy relevance is not due to the philosophers of the movement as much as to its social scientists, those initially attuned not to values but to the data that moves policy-makers. There is something of an irony here, since the Straussians have been among the strongest critics of the recent empirical turn in the social sciences. They felt this turn led away from the key question of values. It never occurred to them, it seems, that a truly hard-headed look at reality would lead back to the same questions, that a rigorous empiricism would prove that Aristotle was right.

Yet something like that seems to have happened to produce the melding

of values and data that is represented by Kristol and his friends. The melding has produced an exceptionally strong and valuable outlook, one sensitive to both detail and the broad sweep, one relevant both to important political battlegrounds and to the diffuse hunger of our times, and above all one that resonates to reality.

That is why, when the intellectual history of the 1960s is ultimately written, we may find that the event of most lasting significance was not the advent of a new radicalism but the evolution of a new and newly relevant conservatism. □

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A Memoir of the 1940s

Kristol and the New York Intellectual Establishment

Nathan Glazer

IN 1945, I was an assistant editor at *Commentary*, which had started at the beginning of that year, a successor to the *Contemporary Jewish Record*. The intellectual ambience of the *Contemporary Jewish Record* and *Commentary* are not easy to communicate now. They were supported by the American Jewish Committee, the most conservative of the American Jewish defense organizations — and staffed by editors who thought of themselves as radical.

Admittedly, to be radical and anti-Stalinist in 1945 was a rather mild sort of thing. Nevertheless, it was an odd concatenation, and I do not know all the reasons for it. It appears that Louis Oko, the editor of the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, who it appears did represent the American Jewish Committee and its outlook, had hired Isaac Rosenfeld, the young Jewish novelist from Chicago, as his editor. Rosenfeld knew Yiddish, and this seemed some basis for hiring him. This developed a link between the *Contemporary Jewish Record* and the world of Greenwich Village, that is, of the readers of *Partisan Review*, and those who aspired to write for it. Indeed, the first successor to Rosenfeld, who left the job to write, was no less a figure than Clement Greenberg, one of the editors of *Partisan Review*, who included such awesome figures as Philip Rahv, William Phillips, Lionel Trilling and Dwight Mac Donald.

Clement Greenberg was left as acting editor of the magazine when Oko died suddenly. He hired me — at least I

had been in student Zionist politics and knew something, if not enough, about that side of things. When Elliot E. Cohen became editor of the newly enlarged magazine, *Commentary* (Cohen too was a friend of the *Partisan Review* circle, but he differed from it in a number of important ways), he inherited Greenberg and me. He appointed Robert Warshaw, the young aspiring film critic, to the magazine. And in 1945 Irving Kristol began to write for it, and shortly thereafter joined it as an editor.

It must have appeared to all concerned that the old succession of those who edited, wrote for, could have written for or hoped to write for *Partisan Review* was being maintained at the editorial offices of *Commentary*. Kristol after all came out of a similar background — a Jewish neighborhood of New York, City College, the Trotskyist youth, then he affiliated with the moderate Schachtamanite minority in the split of 1939, then he affiliated with the small group that split away again from the Schachtamanites, finding even its Marxism rather too much. And so, why not *Commentary*, home of radicals with such or similar careers?

But the fact is, Kristol was very different from the rest of us, and I recall my perpetual surprise at how different he was.

First, Kristol was interested in religion, and even, surprisingly enough, Judaism. He began to study Hebrew — from a grammar published by Oxford University Press, and of a level