

UNLEARNING THE LIBERAL HISTORY LESSON: SOME THOUGHTS CONCERNING CONSERVATISM AND FREEDOM

By M. Stanton Evans

M. Stanton Evans is a syndicated columnist for the Los Angeles Times syndicate and a commentator for the CBS radio network. A former editor of the Indianapolis News, he has served as assistant editor of The Freeman and managing editor of Human Events, and is currently a contributing editor and regular columnist for that publication. He also writes regularly on legislative matters and on current books for National Review.

Mr. Evans graduated from Yale University in 1955 as an English major. He then attended New York University where he did graduate work in economics. He is a Phi Beta Kappa and holds an honorary doctor of laws degree from Syracuse University.

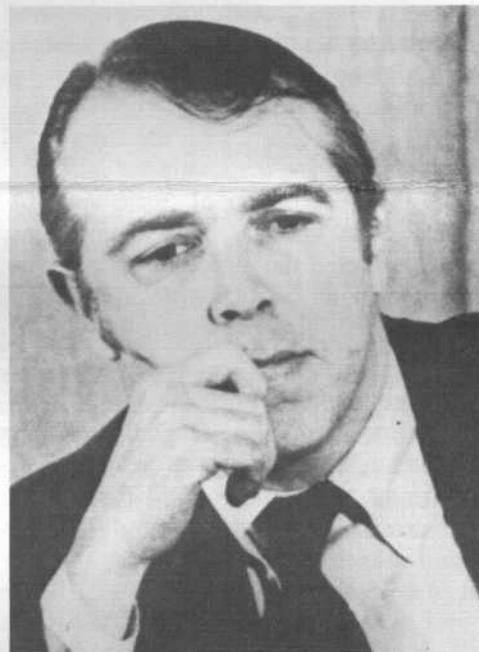
His books include The Liberal Establishment, Revolt on the Campus, The Politics of Surrender, The Lawbreakers, The Future of Conservatism, and Clear and Present Dangers. He is the winner of four Freedoms Foundation George Washington medals. While at the Indianapolis News, he was cited by the National Headliners Club for "consistently outstanding editorial pages."

From 1971-77, Evans served as Chairman of the American Conservative Union and is now chairman of the ACU Education and Research Institute and director of the National Journalism Center.

Mr. Evans delivered this presentation at Hillsdale for the Ludwig von Mises Lecture Series.

Let me begin by saying that, as a former student of Ludwig von Mises, I feel greatly honored by the invitation to give this lecture. This is the second time I have been asked to give a talk in this particular series, and I am sensible of the fact that both the man for whom these lectures are named, and the other speakers who have graced this platform, have set impressive standards of intellectual rigor.

The point is apposite, since the first thing Prof. Mises tried to teach us in his seminar was the science of epistemology: the science, that is, of how we know



things. It is not an easy topic, for the most difficult concept for the human mind to grasp is the extent of its own ignorance. Quite often we think we know things we do not, or imagine we know much when we know little.

An aspect of this problem was expressed colloquially during the 1960's. The trouble with many protesters of that era, it was said, was that they hadn't read the minutes of the previous meeting. By which it was meant they were traversing ground that had been traversed before, unaware that they were doing so.

That observation is applicable to a fair amount of discourse at the present hour. An astonishing number of political spokesmen are involved in repeating solecisms of the past, debating issues that have been exhaustively discussed in years gone by, and expressing themselves in terms which suggest a blissful unawareness that the whole affair has occurred repeatedly before.

im•pri•mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things).

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Many possible instances might be cited—the energy crisis, unemployment, disarmament, and other such prosaic, but in practical terms, important topics. My chosen example for this evening's seance is from the more esoteric realm of political theory—in particular, the political theory of American conservatism. Not long ago, this would have been viewed as a rarefied subject of little general interest, and my treatment of it will perhaps be seen as helping it retain that character. On its merits, however, the continued growth of conservative sentiment in the nation has made the question of conservative theory of much greater general interest than formerly.

Unfortunately, the growth of popular and media interest in conservatism has not been matched by a growth in philosophical understanding. If anything, there seems to be an inverse ratio between the volume of talk about conservatism and the degree of clarity with which conservatism is expounded and perceived. I tend to think this is a matter of cause and effect: The rapid rise of conservatism in academic and media discourse has attracted the notice of people who are not well acquainted with conservative literature, and are thus inclined to refurbish old confusions.

To make my terms of reference clear, I define conservatism pretty much in the way that most Americans would define it—as the practical political position identified with such spokesmen as Senator Barry Goldwater and former Governor Ronald Reagan. This is a view which stresses the primacy of individual freedom, the economic merits of free enterprise, the importance of limited government, the need for a strong national defense, and so on. In philosophical terms, this conservatism is thought to rest on a respect for tradition and custom, affirmation of religious principle, the rule of law, and a belief in constitutional processes.

It is a comparatively easy matter to list such points of doctrine; but it is thought to be more difficult to reconcile them within a single framework. At this level, indeed, there is a great deal of confusion. Within conservative ranks there are, and for many years have been, two over-arching philosophical tendencies. For want of better terms, these have been loosely defined as "libertarian" and "traditionalist." The first stresses the primacy of individual freedom and limitations on the power of the state. The second stresses shared community values in general, religious principle and reliance on tradition.

While these two emphases coexist in practical terms within the American right, so-called, and elements drawn from both categories are affirmed by individual political spokesmen, the mixture is said to be a gross anomaly. In fact, we are told, the libertarian and traditionalist emphases are incompatible. They proceed from different philosophical assumptions, and lead to sharply differing conclusions. It is thought to follow that conservatism of the Goldwater-Reagan stripe is

philosophically incoherent—at best, an absurd conglomeration of things that don't match up, at worst a yoking together of philosophical opposites.

A version of this critique was offered a generation ago by academic spokesmen such as Clinton Rossiter and Peter Viereck, who argued that true conservatism would have no truck with *laissez-faire*. What passed for political conservatism in America, they argued, was in fact warmed-over classical liberalism. True conservatism would be paternalist, hospitable to state intervention, interested in "conserving" the accomplishments of the New Deal.

An updated and somewhat more plausible version of this thesis has been offered in recent months by a group of scholars and publicists generally known as neo-conservatives—people formerly associated with the political left, who are disenchanted with the breakdown of order and other social malfunctions under liberal auspices. These neo-conservatives tend to stress the importance of tradition, institutional stability, the rule of law, and (somewhat obliquely) religious principle; but their view of free enterprise, the activities of corporations, and the allegedly acquisitive metaphysics of capitalism ranges from coolly skeptical to overtly hostile.

This external criticism draws support from within the conservative community. While many people who call themselves conservatives or would be thus defined by political taxonomists do not concern themselves with such distinctions, there are clearly articulated groups within the confines of the American right who divide up rather neatly along the suggested fault lines. Such people adopt one or the other of the emphases described by the external critics, and view conservative spokesmen who do not do likewise as interlopers to be opposed.

These differing attitudes have been apparent in many ways in recent years: utterances of so-called "populist" conservatives who attack, *e.g.*, the free market views of Milton Friedman; a belletristic volley from the generally traditionalist *National Review* against the more extreme variants of libertarian social theory, and a return volley from the libertarians; the rise of a traditionalist school of thought, sometimes of an explicitly religious character, which looks askance at the American political experiment because of its allegedly secularist origins.

To observe such intramural squabbling, and to read the things the more explicit libertarians and traditionalists say about each other, one can only conclude that American conservatism is, indeed, a horrid mish-mosh, a yoking together of factions which have nothing in common except a momentary agreement that the liberal rulers of our politics should be dislodged. Which only goes to show that we have plenty of people around who haven't read the minutes of the previous meeting.

In point of fact, I think it can be demonstrated that there is no inherent conflict between the libertarian and traditionalist emphases within the conservative community. These two emphases, I would contend, are aspects of a coherent world-view—hemispheres which make a whole. I would, indeed, go further: to suggest that these emphases are “compatible,” or that they can somehow be made to fit together, is to understate the degree of reciprocity between them. The more accurate statement is that they *must* go together, and that only as we see them as aspects of a logical, metaphysical and historical unity, can we begin to understand the single reality of which they are components. The error in the case is not to attempt to meld them together, but to imagine that they should be wedged apart.

This is not to say, of course, that they *cannot* be wedged apart; of course they can, just as the hemispheres that make up a library globe can be pulled apart, if one has a mind to do it. Nor is this to say that “traditionalist” and “libertarian” factions, each having chosen its half of the globe, cannot go to war over which half is the proper one. It is merely to say that, if we want to understand the map of the world, or the intellectual history of the Western freedom, such behavior is mistaken. The oppositions thus created are the result of human error, and not inherent in the subject.

In this respect, the rank and file of American conservatives are wiser than their critics. The rank and file conservative, in most cases, is both a traditionalist and a libertarian. He will favor, *e.g.*, religious values and customs, *and* free enterprise capitalism; preserving the historic institutions of the American political tradition, *and* a maximum of individual freedom; a strong national defense *and* a reduction in Federal taxes. In doing so, I would contend this rank and file conservative is correct, and his would-be mentors quite obviously wrong.

The errors of the intellectual spokesmen are many, but I shall focus on one which seems to be central to the problem: the fact that nearly all such spokesmen accept, in one fashion or another, “the liberal history lesson”—the history of Western political thought and institutions as seen by the reigning liberal orthodoxy in our colleges, political literature, and communications media. Its most arresting feature is that, with few exceptions, it has the salient facts about the development of Western political ideas and institutions backward.

In the liberal history lesson, the experience of Western man goes something like this: first, there was an era of human liberty, philosophical achievement, artistic endeavor, and sophisticated political theory in the world of classical antiquity. The most frequently cited examples are the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, the artistic and literary achievements of Periclean Athens, and the political supremacy of Rome. From the standpoint of the liberal history lesson, this pagan era represented a high-water mark of human aspiration.

Then, unhappily, came the disintegration of the classical world, the internal battlings of Greece, the slippage of the Roman Republic into Empire, and at last the fall of the Empire itself, followed by the dreary Middle Ages—the triumph of barbarism and Christianity. This was, we are informed, an era of darkness, a long slumber of the human spirit. Much of the learning of antiquity was lost. Artistic endeavor ceased almost entirely. Explicit political theory was no more, as people lived only in the hope of an after-life. Human freedom, knowledge, and commerce were crushed beneath the weight of religious superstition and general ignorance for upwards of 1,000 years.

Not to worry, however, because there is a happy ending: at length, the 1,000 years of nothing came to a close. In the fifteenth century Western man began to awaken from his slumber. The grip of religious superstition weakened. People started to think for themselves once more, examine forbidden questions, venture forth in exploration of the intellectual and physical world. Pagan literature, philosophy and political theory were rediscovered. Renaissance “humanism” focused man’s thoughts, not on a dreamy after-life, but on this life, this world, and the potentialities of human genius.

As the liberal history lesson tells it, the libertarian tendencies manifest in the Renaissance were continued and enlarged by the Reformation (though this presents some problems, and is accordingly treated with a certain ambiguity) and the Enlightenment (no difficulties here). With the arrival of the intensely secular philosophies of the 18th and 19th centuries, the scenario is complete. The shackles of superstition having been struck off, modern man advances to an era of freedom, democracy, learning, scientific and industrial progress.

It is from the final stage of this development, of course, that the liberal history lesson itself derives. This way of looking at the growth of human liberty and free institutions is a product of Renaissance and Enlightenment complacency, and is unsurprisingly quite flattering to its authors. It is also flattering to human self-esteem in general, since it teaches that the key to freedom, progress, and other presumably good things is the “humanist” unfettering of the self from religious and traditionalist restraints.

This treatment of our intellectual/political history has special relevance to American institutions, since it was at the floodtide of the Enlightenment that the American revolution and constitutional settlement occurred. In the now conventional treatment, it seems to follow that the United States was a product of Enlightenment attitudes—a free nation born by throwing off tradition, and rejecting the strictures of religion. The men who made the revolution, allegedly, were engaged in a radical rejection of the past, while the Constitution and Bill of Rights were explicitly secular in character. And since the United States has been the world’s foremost exemplar of political freedom, its experience is taken as

obvious proof that liberty and Western religious tradition are polar opposites.

To set straight all the errors of fact in this scenario would require more time and expertise than I possess. Let me simply offer a brief historical sketch that will illustrate the nature of the problem.

First, whatever the achievements of pagan antiquity, the concept of human freedom as we understand it was not among them. The idea that every person is important as an individual, entitled to respect and to protection of personal rights, and that the scope of government power should be limited in the interest of defending individual liberty—or any other such notion that is presently described as “libertarian”—would never have crossed the mind of any ancient philosopher or politician.

Such ideas *could* not in fact occur, because of the distinctive pagan vision of the state. In that view, the political state was the agency by which society was integrated into the natural order—by which the gods in nature were propitiated, good harvests sought for, success in warfare entreated, and so forth. Because of this, the pagan state, from ancient Sumer to Augustan Rome, was both a political and religious institution, and as such enjoyed a total lien on the affections and energies of its citizens. Limitations on such a state, or systematic protection for individual freedoms against it, was not a subject that tended to come up.

Conversely, the ideas of political freedom and limited government were distinctive products of Western religious teaching. In the Biblical view, the claims of the secular state were sharply reduced; that state was not the integrating principle that melded society to the intentions of the gods in nature—for the very good reason that there *were* no gods in nature. There was one God, who created both man and nature, but was not in nature, and was not to be propitiated by the rites of nature-magic.

Rather, in the Biblical view, the secular state had an essentially peace-keeping role to play, while divine intention was imparted to society through a separate source of spiritual awareness—*e.g.*, the prophets, the medieval church. Kings were no longer treated as little gods; while they ruled within the providential order, and were themselves subjected to God’s law, they were neither divine, nor unchallengeable conduits of divine intention. They were subject to rebuke and correction by the religious authorities, set apart from the political establishment.

It is this view which is, quite obviously, the source of our modern preoccupation with the “separation of church and state” (though this, too, has been subjected to numerous confusions). It is, more generally, the source of our Western notions of limited government. Compared to its pagan predecessors, the Biblical notion of the secular state—constrained by a vast reduction in its mission, checked by a higher law above it, and

countered by an alternative source of loyalty alongside it—is very limited indeed.

By the same token, the specifically Western focus on the individual is quite clearly a product of the Biblical way of looking at man and his relationship to his Creator. In the Christian view, every person is precious, a child of God, created in His image, possessed of an immortal but individuated soul, and embarked on a drama of earthly existence which has as its central issue the question of individual salvation. In psychological terms, and derivatively in political ones, Christianity is an intensely individualistic, introspective religion.

The medieval era, far from being a thousand years of nothing, was in fact the period in which these implicitly “libertarian” ideas of the Western religious affirmation worked themselves into political institutions. The characteristic medieval political ideas were *constitutionalism*, based on the religious notion of a higher law; the *contractual basis* of political authority, based on the Biblical idea of covenant, the mutual individual worth of human beings entitled to reciprocal rather than unilateral treatment, and the contractual nature of the feudal tie; *diffusion of power* through the feudal equipoise; the horizontal *limitation* of the secular powers by the authority of the church; and *representative assemblies* for the granting of money to the crown, a practice made necessary by the diffusion of power, armed strength, and wealth that existed under feudal conditions. In these ideas and practices we find, not only a working embodiment of Western religious ideas, but a pre-figuring of the modern ideas that we are pleased to think of as libertarian.

Far from inventing such ideas, or recovering them from the ancients, the political tendency of the Renaissance was to deny them utterly. The “reception” of the Roman law at the Renaissance re-established the notion that the king was the law speaking, rather than under God and under the law, as the Middle Ages put it. The Renaissance ushered in the “divine right of kings” and the era of absolute rulers, devoid of restraint except their own interpretation of God’s will or (which often worked out to the same thing) whatever was convenient. The characteristic spokesmen for the medieval view were Bracton and Sir John Fortescue: the characteristic spokesman for the Renaissance was Machiavelli.

As the names of Bracton and Fortescue suggest, the Renaissance transition in political thought and practice encountered its most serious resistance in England. The tendency of the Renaissance was to replace feudal privilege with royal prerogative, to substitute highly centralized political arrangements for the widespread distribution of power; to replace grants of money with unilateral levies by the king; and so on. This process of course occurred in England, as it did, with variations of detail, all over Europe. But in England it was fiercely resisted. And it was precisely on issues of this sort that

the English battle for freedom—from Magna Carta to the Petition of Right—was conducted.

To the extent that libertarian ideas survived the denial of higher law, the glorification of absolute rulers, and the destruction of the feudal equipoise, they obviously did so despite the influence of the Renaissance, not because of it. In one sense they did so as secular survivals of the Christian outlook—by-products of medieval society which struck the modern theorists as useful in their own right, and therefore worth retaining in secular garb. Most of the ideas we have received from the 18th and 19th century as alleged inventions of liberal theory are of this nature: egalitarianism, the idea of linear progress over time, the notion of social contract, the idea of a volitional order, etc. All of these are de-composition products of the Western religious ethic and the political practice of the medieval era, which modern theorists have attempted to set up on their own feet and make self-validating. As the political experience of the modern world has demonstrated, it has not been a successful experiment.

Where “libertarian” notions have survived the longest—most notably, in the United States—they have done so precisely to the extent that they were grounded in religious tradition, not severed from it. It is noteworthy that the spokesmen in the Renaissance/Reformation era who made the most effective defense of liberty against royal absolutism were those who went to the medieval and Christian experience for their arguments. Fortescue, the author of the *Vindicia Contra Tyrannos*, Cardinal Bellarmine, Lord Coke, all reached back to the medieval, feudal, and specifically Christian precedents in behalf of constitutionalism, the contractual/reciprocal nature of political authority, and the necessary limitations on royal power.

The people who settled our country were inheritors—and students—of this intensely libertarian development. They were, of course, Englishmen, and brought with them the traditionalist common law concern for protection of private rights, limitations on royal power, the contractual character of political obligation, taxation through representative assemblies, and so on—a legacy that combined the libertarian and traditionalist emphases, and was repeatedly drawn on in the controversies that led to the American Revolution.

Equally important, the people who founded this country were Christians—and in the case of the New England colonies in particular, aggressively such. They had left Great Britain for political-religious reasons, because they objected to royal dogmatizing in church affairs, and wanted to set up a society according to their own understanding of religious principle. They were the religious political-kinsmen of the Puritan-Whig alliance in the Parliament of 1628, which fought against the extension of divine right kingship, and in particular resisted the notion of royal prerogatives of unilateral taxation. That issue, of course, would have a

prominent role to play in the American Revolution.

No one would claim, of course, that the Puritan fathers were “libertarians” in the sense of favoring unfettered self-expression; they were famously opposed to any such notion. But in their view of political institutions, they were very libertarian indeed. From their English common law and Puritan background, they favored constitutionalism, a covenantal view of political authority, localism and representative assemblies—all the medieval English ideas, dramatically sharpened by their covenantal theology. They thus transported to these shores the ideas and institutions articulated by Bracton, Fortescue, Coke (a member of the Parliament of 1628), the *Vindiciae*, and—though they would hardly have acknowledged the connection—various of the Jesuit opponents of divine right kingship.

Against that backdrop, it should hardly surprise us to discover that the American Revolution, far from being a radical break with tradition, was in fact an effort to vindicate English concepts of limited government, constitutionalism, localism, and taxation through representation against what were seen as dangerous British novelties. Or that the rationale for resistance against such innovation was framed in the feudal language of covenant and contract, in phraseology (e.g., the writings of William Henry Drayton, the Declaration of Independence) that is feudal in character, and virtually identical to the language of the *Vindiciae*. And, of course, the object consistently aimed for was that of limited, constitutional government.

Moreover, contrary to the current wisdom, the specifically religious underpinning of this limited government view persisted in America through the era of the revolution and the constitutional settlement. The American colonies at the time of the revolution were Christian societies that made a point of religious affirmation, and the states continued in this mode at the time of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Far from establishing a purely secular notion of civil life, the point of these arrangements was to insure that the newly created central government would not interfere with the religious affirmations of the states, which, in keeping with the doctrines of localism (federalism), were considered sovereign entities in such matters. And the preference of the vast majority of the states (10 out of 13) was to insist on the explicitly religious basis of the political order.

In almost every other respect as well, of course, the Constitution was a “traditionalist” document. It was based on a profound regard for the lessons of history, an attachment to grown institutions, and a deep mistrust of human nature in possession of unchecked power. These are typically “traditionalist” concerns, made the more so by their specific origins in British medieval-feudal precedent and the considerable experience of the colonies themselves. So on all counts the Constitution and Bill of Rights were “traditionalist” exercises; but,

in their effort to impose strict limitations on the reach of political power, they were "libertarian" as well.

From that brief conspectus, it will be seen that human freedom and Western religious affirmation, considered historically, have not been in opposition, but have gone consistently together. The point, indeed, is virtually a tautology: personal freedom and limited government, as we understand such matters, are products of the Western religious vision and its characteristic view of man, society, and state. Where the influence of this vision has spread, and institutions have been created in keeping with its doctrines, liberty under constitutional government has appeared. Where this influence does not exist, the idea—much less the practice of it—can scarcely be said to exist.

This is not to suggest that there is a direct one-to-one relationship between the incidence of Western faith and the practices of personal freedom and limited government. Sometimes the ideas of Christian statecraft have been melded with pagan revivals—the most obvious instance being divine right monarchy—to produce a non-libertarian result. Sometimes the schisms and religious battlings within the Christian community have led to denials of the freedom that Biblical religion has created. Sometimes religious zeal has generated efforts to impose religious truth by force. So it cannot be said that everywhere Christianity has existed in some form, liberty and limited government have also existed.

Nor can it be argued, from a Christian perspective, that the point of human existence is simply to "be free." From a Biblical standpoint, the object of personal decision should be right choice, virtuous conduct, conformity to the will of God. Biblical faith created the institutional and psychological conditions precedent to a free society, but it is not indifferent to the manner in which the resulting freedom is employed. (Nor were the founders of the United States indifferent to such matters; they were, however, powerfully concerned to prevent the evils that occur when freedom is over-ridden, and to insure that the secular state did not draw to itself the god-like powers it enjoyed in the pagan

world.)

The point of the tautology is otherwise: That whenever personal freedom and limited government have existed, they have done so within the writ of Western religious tradition. It is precisely those societies that have been most clearly formed by Christian religious affirmation—Western Europe, England, the United States—that have experienced limited government and personal freedom in some substantial measure. Societies where this influence has not been felt, or has only lately been exported, have a totally different view of human beings, personal freedom, political power, and the legitimate scope of state authority.

In like fashion, societies that were formerly Christian but have lost their moorings in Biblical faith have experienced a loss of freedom. This is most obvious in Central and Eastern Europe, where totalitarian governments of one type or another have risen to power as the strength of Western faith subsides. But it is also true in England and the United States, which have lately seen the growth of immensely powerful secular governments, intruding into almost every possible zone of life, in tempo with the rise of secular philosophies.

I realize that this discussion does not answer many questions concerning, *e.g.*, the metaphysical relation of freedom and virtue, the specific attitudes of Christian traditionalists toward the market, the alleged conflict between the "acquisitive" impulse of capitalist society and the Christian ethic, and so on. Yet I think enough has been said in this discussion to suggest the central errors of the liberal history lesson and, conversely, the natural unity of "traditional" and "libertarian" emphases in the Western political experience. Our tradition is a tradition of liberty, and our freedoms have been nourished and exercised in keeping with traditional conceptions of religious order.

Conservatives who would affirm both traditional values and libertarian institutions are therefore clearly right on historical grounds, as well as on grounds of natural intuition; it is the sectarians who would sever freedom from its traditional roots who are in error.

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