

# POLITICAL PALEONTOLOGY?

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## **The Conservative Bookshelf:**

### **Essential Works That Impact Today's Conservative Thinkers**

Chilton Williamson, Jr.

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314 pages

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*Reviewed by Robert S. Griffin*

**H**ow many of these conservative classics have you read?  
*Suicide of the West* by James Burnham  
*Treason* by Ann Coulter

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

*Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

*Witness* by Whittaker Chambers

*The Camp of the Saints* by Jean Raspail

*City of God* by St. Augustine

*The Conservative Mind* by Russell Kirk

*The Bear* by William Faulkner

*Ideas Have Consequences* by Richard Weaver

The question — and the list — come from the back cover of Chilton Williamson, Jr.'s book, *The Conservative Bookshelf: Essential Works That Impact Today's Conservative Thinkers*. Williamson's commentaries on these ten books and forty others, prefaced by a brief introduction, comprise the volume. These fifty books are Williamson's fifty, not *the* fifty, essential conservative books; there is no established definition of conservative and no agreed-upon conservative canon, and *The Conservative Bookshelf* is a book of advocacy.

Williamson is the senior editor of *Chronicles* magazine, which reflects a paleoconservative perspective (defined in a bit). He has constructed his list of essential books and written about them from this frame of reference, and he openly argues the merits of paleoconservatism. Also, I received the impression from reading his commentaries and from the authors he chose to include that he is a strong Christian and more particularly a Roman Catholic.

There's a progression to *The Conservative Bookshelf*: It goes somewhere. If you take where it ends up, with a drama of sorts, a conflict, a struggle between protagonists and antagonists, heroes and villains, good guys and bad guys, you can pretty much account for what's in the book and what isn't. The fifty books and Williamson's commentaries justify the protagonists' cause.

Who are the protagonists in this drama, the book's heroes, if you will? We meet three prominent ones on page 304, to be exact: Thomas Fleming, Samuel Francis, and Clyde Wilson. These three leading contemporary paleoconservative intellectuals attended the University of North Carolina together in the 1970s. Williamson quotes the novelist Walker Percy as referring to them as the "Chapel Hill Conspiracy." Fleming is currently the editor of *Chronicles*, the magazine for which Williamson writes. Francis, the late political editor of *Chronicles*, was also a syndicated columnist and the book review editor of *The Occidental Quarterly*. Wilson is a historian and editor of the John C. Calhoun Papers at the University of South Carolina. Williamson includes books by the three men in his essential fifty: Fleming's *The Morality of Everyday Life: A Classical Alternative to the Liberal Tradition*, Francis' *Revolution from the Middle*, and Wilson's *From Union to Empire: Essays in the Jeffersonian Tradition*. While these three men are highly influential thinkers, the best-known paleoconservative is the journalist and former presidential contender, Patrick Buchanan. Buchanan is represented in *The Conservative Bookshelf* by his *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization*.

What do the paleos, as they are called, believe? They emphasize the positive aspects of America's Western heritage and want it to prevail and worry that it is threatened. They point out the negative impact of mass non-European immigration and of an increasingly multiracial and multiethnic population on American culture and society. They are concerned about the harmful effects of free trade and economic globalism on working Americans and their families. They value regionalism, decentralization, and local control. They are opposed to what they see as an intrusive, controlling federal government and an overreaching welfare state apparatus in this country. They view with alarm the current American foreign policy, which appears to them to be bent on imposing our will on other countries on and empire building. In general, they are critical of the secularized, homogenized, de-Europeanized, pacified, deluded, manipulated, lowest-common-denominator-leveled, popular-culture-dopified country they see America becoming.

Another theme among the paleos is concern for the well-being and fate of the white race, although that remains largely tacit. Francis was the only prominent paleo I know of to talk about white people directly. I read his weekly newspaper columns in *Conservative Chronicle*, and he straight out wrote about the interests of white people—no euphemisms, no circumlocutions. Most paleos deal with race indirectly. An example is one of Williamson's

fifty, Peter Brimelow's book, *Alien Nation*. And I remember when reading Buchanan's book, *The Death of the West*, having the distinct feeling that he was talking about the death of the white race as much as he was talking about the death of the Western cultural heritage.

The paleos, then, are the good guys in Williamson's drama, and what this book comes down to is a paleoconservative reading list. And who are the villains? They aren't, as you might expect, the liberals and far left-wingers. The bad guys are those who adhere to another brand of conservatism: neoconservatism. The story in Williamson's book is about who is going to come out on top, the paleoconservatives or the neoconservatives.

What do the neoconservatives, or neocons, believe? What do they want? Basically, it's the opposite of what the paleos believe and want. The neos point out the negative aspects of the Western and American heritage: oppression, exploitation, racism, patriarchy and other authoritarian tendencies, and narrow, ethnocentric conceptions of art and decorum. Rather than viewing America as the product of an Anglo-Christian people and tradition, neocons see this country as the repository of certain laudable ideals: freedom, equality, democracy. Neocons applaud large-scale non-European immigration and a multiracial, multiethnic, egalitarian America. Neocons believe in free trade and economic globalism. They accept strong federal government initiatives directed at ensuring economic and social justice. They see an opportunity and obligation for America to spread democracy and freedom around the globe.

It must be pointed out that Jews are overrepresented among the neoconservatives. Among the prominent Jewish neocons are Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol and his son William, David Frum, David Brooks, Jonah Goldberg, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, and Paul Wolfowitz. (Some prominent gentile neocons: Daniel Patrick Moynihan, William Bennett, James Q. Wilson, and Michael Novak.) While they aren't always up front about it, paleos are concerned about the impact Jewish intellectuals and activists are having on America. For example, paleos believe that Jewish neocons and Jewish organizations such as the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) have been strongly influential in this country's attempt to "democratize" and thus pacify Israel's enemies in the Middle East, beginning with Iraq. One of Williamson's fifty books deals directly with the influence of Jewish intellectuals, John Murray Cuddihy's *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Lévi-Straus, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity*. Three contemporary paleos — Francis, Buchanan, and Joseph Sobran (Sobran is represented in the fifty by his book, *Single Issues: Essays on the Crucial Social Questions*) — have expressed opposition to Jewish activities publicly, and all three have paid a price for doing so: scorn and ridicule, marginalization, and/or losing jobs and opportunities. None of Williamson's fifty essential conservative books is by a Jewish author, nor, since Williamson sees the neocons as the villains in the piece, so to speak, do any of the neocons' writings appear in *The Conservative Bookshelf*. (For readers who want to look

into neoconservatism, Podhoretz's book *Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir*, would be a good place to start.) At the present time, Williamson tells us, the neocons are winning out over the paleos, and he refers to "the triumph (however temporary) of neoconservatism." There is no doubt about how he wants the story to turn out. He wants paleoconservatives to win against "this shallow, arrogant, aggressive, and materialistic thing called neoconservatism."

Williamson orders his fifty books by rank. He starts by placing them in one of six categories and then ranks the categories. Starting at the top rank, the categories are Religion, Politics, Society, Economics, The Prophetic Artist, and The Present Day. He also ranks the books within each category, with the result that, in order, the top category of Religion includes the Bible, *The Abolition of Man* by C. S. Lewis, St. Augustine's *City of God*, and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. In the Politics category, *The Republic* by Cicero; *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by Edmund Burke; *Considerations on France* by Joseph de Maistre; *The Federalist* by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay; *Rationalism in Politics, and Other Essays* by Michael Oakeshott; the Kirk book; *The Liberal Mind* by Kenneth Minogue; *Weaver's Ideas Have Consequences*; the Southern Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*; *Garet Garrett's Burden of Empire: The Legacy of the Roosevelt-Truman Era*; *James Burnham's Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism*; *Whittaker Chambers's Witness*; and *Robert Conquest's Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*.

Books of similar scope and character are included in the Society category—for example, de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*, Ortega y Gasset's *Revolt of the Masses*, etc.—and in the Economics section, not only Frederick Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* but also Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. The Prophetic Artist includes T.S. Eliot and Solzhenitsyn and works by Faulkner, Evelyn Waugh, G.K. Chesterton, and others, including Jean Raspail's *The Camp of the Saints*. The Present Day Section consists of the books by Brimelow, Buchanan, Fleming, Francis, and Wilson (and a book about the paleoconservatives by Joseph Scotchie), and two books by women writers, *The Power of the Positive Woman* by Phyllis Schlafly and *Treason* by Ann Coulter.

*The Conservative Bookshelf* is the survey course on conservatism that you never got in college. And the instructor is superb. Williamson has fine credentials: He is a former literary and senior editor of *National Review* magazine, has written extensively for magazines and newspapers (you can find some of his writings at the VDARE website, [www.vdare.com](http://www.vdare.com)), and is the author of four non-fiction books. He is informed and thoughtful and writes very well. I felt privileged to be in his company, and I couldn't put the book down. I read the fifty commentaries out of order, picking the one that looked most interesting and reading that one and putting a check mark by it in the table of contents, and then going to the next one that seemed most interesting. The

six or seven pages he devotes to each book made for nice “bite-sized morsels.” For me, reading this book was like going through a box of assorted chocolates. Williamson’s discussions invite you to read the books you haven’t read. This week, after reading what Williamson had to say about it, I picked up the Whitaker Chambers book *Witness* at the library, and it was worth my time. I was especially taken by Chambers’s eloquent foreword that he framed as a letter to his children.

A good teacher makes you think. I’ll go into three things Williamson prompted me to think about and one thing he prompted me to fantasize. Reading this book caused me to think more about the place of religion, and more particularly Christianity, in conservatism. Williamson obviously considers religion generally and Christianity in particular to be front and center. He affirms Russell Kirk’s declaration, “All culture arises out of religion.” He holds that the Bible is “the indisputable ground that (with the obvious exception of the classical tradition) all Western thought comes from” and “the bedrock of Western civilization.” The Old and New Testaments, he offers, were “mysteriously anticipated by the greatest minds (Socrates, Plato) of the classical Pagan tradition that preceded it.” Other and similar assertions include the statements that Christianity and the West are “unimaginable apart from one another” and that the Western rationalist tradition is “unshakably Christian.” Conservatism involves man’s willingness to “accept from God an unchangeable plan for man.” Piety and openness to the absolute “remain the dominant, indestructible, inseparable component, and also the animating principle of the generic conservative mind.” Paleoconservatives are “keeping the old conservative flame,” which includes the Christian faith.

I was particularly interested in how Williamson supports those claims because I brought to this reading a different way of looking at culture and religion and at Christianity. Cultures, it has seemed to me, arise out of biologically grounded human needs and wants related to survival and safety, reproduction, order and predictability, connection to others, and personal and collective expression. Religion and spirituality are consequences, manifestations, of those needs and wants, resultant cultural elements rather than primary cultural precipitants. In other words, culture doesn’t arise out of religion but rather the reverse: Religion arises out of culture.

As for Christianity in particular, it has seemed to me that its doctrine and practices run counter to some of the central tenets I ascribe to conservatism. There is its universalist message: that there is really no difference among people, that we are all – black, white, yellow, and brown, European, African, Latin American, and Asian – part of Jesus’ flock. And there is its egalitarianism: The meek shall inherit the earth, the last shall be first, and so on. And it has seemed to me that Christianity has been antagonistic to reason and science, as evidenced by the ordeal of Galileo and the rest. And just the whole idea of deifying and worshiping a martyred Middle Eastern Jew has not seemed to me

to be the truest religious expression of European people, Western people. The pantheistic, nature-centered religions of Northern Europe before the Roman imposition of Christianity have appeared to me to resonate more closely to the issue of who the European people are than Christianity. To me the Poetic Edda has seemed to be more our book than the Bible.

The claims for religion and Christianity came through clearly in Williamson's religion section, but not, at least for me, the support for those claims. I was told, and I wanted to be shown. I found it surprising that his discussion of the Bible—the highest-ranking book among the fifty—was significantly shorter than any of the other forty-nine: one full page and two half pages. I thought he would give the number one book more space than that. For comparison, Faulkner's *The Bear* took up five full pages and two half pages. The second work Williamson discussed in the religion section, C.S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man*, centered on Lewis's treatment of the concept of the Tao. To me, that discussion supported a concern for ultimate reality, for the metaphysical, but I couldn't plug it into a general argument for the transcendent or a particular argument for Christianity. As for the other two sources in the religion section—Augustine's *City of God* and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*—I did my best, reading each twice, but Williamson's discussions stayed airy, words connected to other words. I couldn't ground what he offered in any reality to which I could relate. Maybe I was the problem; a book is only as good as the reader. Whatever the case, the religious outlook I brought to this book wasn't challenged by its contents.

The second issue that *The Conservative Bookshelf* caused me to think more about is where the individual fits into conservatism. Williamson's presentations focused on the collective: religion, culture, ideas, public issues, what it is all about, what "we" are, what "we" do, what "we" should do. Where does that leave me? I ask myself—this mortal, finite, human being sitting here in front of this computer on a Friday afternoon? And where does it leave you, the person reading this right now.

It has been important to me to have encountered the writings of people—Frank Chodorov, Murray Rothbard, and Frank Meyer come to mind—who, at least at one point, in the 1950s and '60s, were associated with conservatism but who focused on the individual rather than the collective. These three weren't writing about abstractions—Western man, conservative ideology, God's rules, whatever. They were writing about me, the one trying to put a good life together here in Burlington, Vermont. They didn't write about my obligation to align with some preordained plan. They wrote about how free I am, and how capable, to manifest the person I really am beneath all the conditioning I've had in my life. I consider it healthy for me to have engaged both the collective-focused visions of writers such as William Buckley and the individual-focused visions of these writers I've just mentioned. Meyer wrote about fusing the collective- and individual-centered visions. I prefer to allow them to remain separate and

to clash and compete and come together and fall apart within my mind as I confront the choices and take the actions that comprise my life.

Williamson includes the economist Friedrich Hayek and his arguments for a free enterprise economy, which does emphasize personal freedom, and the Nock book has a more iconoclastic approach than the others, but Williamson doesn't include books of the Rothbard-Chodorov-Meyer sort. That's his call, and indeed these writers don't fit into the paleoconservative frame of this book. These days they'd be classified as libertarians; "them," not "us," to conservatives of whatever stripe. But if all I take in is about the big picture and my duty to carry on this or that or abide by something or another or defer to something else, I feel hemmed in and get edgy. I admire Russell Kirk immensely and have profited greatly from his writings. But at the same time I picture him as a pudgy guy in a dark suit with a vest sitting at the head of the dinner table, and that's just not me. I care about the destiny of the West, but the truth of it is I spend most of my time thinking about friendship, love, sex, pleasure, honest expression, my mental and physical health, and finding a rewarding way to get through my day-to-day activities. And the truth of it is I'm going to attend to people whose work or life example informs these personal concerns. So tonight I'm not going to read *From Union to Empire*. I'm going to pick up where I left off in a biography of the French film director François Truffaut and watch a video of his film *Jules and Jim*.

That brings up a third thing I'm thinking about: Who are some contemporary conservative artists? Two of the ten writers in Williamson's prophetic artist category, Solzhenitsyn and Raspail, are alive, but they are past their productive years. I am hard pressed to name conservative artists of the first rank now in their prime. The novelist Tom Wolfe (and he is getting up there in years)? Who else? What television shows reflect a conservative perspective? Not *Desperate Housewives*. What films? *The Passion of the Christ*? What else? Name a conservative playwright past or present. Shaw in his early years? Who else? When people think of American playwrights, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and David Mamet come to mind, none of them conservative. I'm not saying there aren't any conservative artists; I'm saying that I don't know of any, and I attend to the arts more than most, I believe. Reading through Williamson's ten books in The Prophetic Artist category, I thought he might have been reaching some to fill out his list. (Edward Abbey? Hemingway? Flannery O'Connor? Really?) These days, I have been reading novels by writers that I see as essentially nihilistic (example: Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*) and I don't want to give that up because, frankly, I don't think that conservatives are the only ones who speak the truth or create good art. But I'm still left with the question: Who are the conservative artists?

As for what I fantasized while I was reading *The Conservative Bookshelf*, I imagined that in 2012 an attractive governor from Williamson's current home state of Wyoming was the Republican candidate for president, and that he ran

on a paleoconservative platform (although he didn't use that label — "paleo" anything doesn't stir the passions): America's European heritage and character; traditional moral values; Christianity as a core aspect of American life; immigration control; non-interventionism in foreign affairs; an American-interests-first trade policy; a check on the growth of the federal government and its incursion into the affairs of states and communities; merit rather than group preference; and academic excellence and local control in education. And he won!

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*Robert S. Griffin's latest book is **One Sheaf, One Vine: Racially Conscious White Americans Talk about Race.***

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