

# A RELIABLE GUIDE TO CONSERVATISM

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## American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia

Edited by Bruce Frohnen, Jeremy Beer, and Jeffrey O. Nelson

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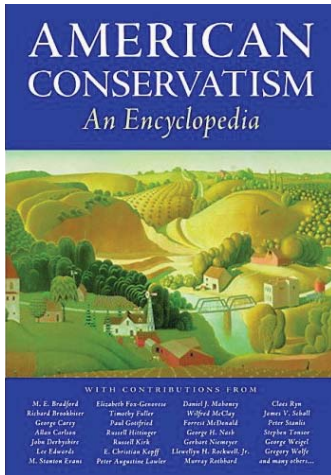
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*Reviewed by Mark Wegierski*

Attempts to chronicle the American conservative intellectual movement, in all its variations, have produced very few noteworthy books. George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* and Gregory Schneider's *Conservatism in America since 1930* are two exceptions. Along with Roger Scruton's philosophical treatise *The Meaning of Conservatism*, a book that examines the ideological pillars of modern conservatism, the works of these authors prove to be of exceptional value. Now comes *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, published by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a leading conservative organization on the cultural frontlines of American society.

The *Encyclopedia*, which is available in both hard and soft cover, is very "user-friendly." It should be noted that on the first inside cover page Mark C. Henrie, Anne E. Krulikowski, Gregory Wolfe, and John Zmirak are identified as contributing editors. There are the interesting Acknowledgments (vii-viii) (the book apparently began as a project by Gregory Wolfe in the early 1990s); the insightful Editors' Introduction (ix-xv) – which already hints that a second volume may be in the works; and the Alphabetical Listing of Entries (xvii-xxv). The Editors' Introduction outlines some of the *Encyclopedia's* selection decisions, that is, to focus on post-1789 America, and, indeed, to emphasize American conservatism after 1945 (listing very few non-American politicians, for example). Nevertheless, the matter of scope has been handled quite well, with the post-1945 figures and tendencies offering considerable opportunity for comment on earlier figures and tendencies, as tradition and the past are especially important for most conservatives. There are 626 entries, from "abortion" to "Zoll, Donald Atwell" – "ranging, in the main, from 250 to 2,500 words in length" (xiii). At the end, "About the Contributors" (939-948) lists every contributor along with a short biographical note. This is followed by a generous index (949-979).

It may be remembered that one of the most prominent intellectual movements in history takes its name from an encyclopedia. The Encyclopedistes of the French Enlightenment, in putting together their massive compendium of what was supposed to be general knowledge, inserted plenty of their own ideas into the mix, fully realizing that to define the wide expanse of current knowledge in their own terms was to change people's minds and begin the transformation of society they were hoping for. In the context of publishing as it existed in the eighteenth century, the French *Encyclopédie* was aimed at



the highest circles of French society, as its high price could be afforded only by the very wealthy. In the English-speaking world, the role of the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as an “authoritative” source of information has also been legendary.

It is clear that, as an encyclopedia of “American conservatism” published by a recognized conservative academic institution, the work will endeavor to present “American conservatism” in a positive light, and to try to be scrupulously fair to all the various strands of what constitutes and has constituted “American conservatism.”

In America today, “conservatism” is indeed a deeply contentious term. It is often considered that America is now going through a deeply “conservative” period, under the “conservative” presidency of George W. Bush. Critics describe this presidency as marked by massive warfare abroad, and the near destruction of civil liberties at home. Thus it is a colossal, and at times fruitless, exercise in American political discourse to try to argue the merits of the term “conservative” and “conservatism.” In the hugely prominent left-liberal discourse in America, conservatism is typically defined as a series of highly negative actions and attitudes—limitless wars abroad, “the desire to forbid,” “the round-up of minorities and dissidents,” or even the urge to impose a “theocracy” on America—and is often mischaracterized as an unsophisticated view, absent of any principled tradition, delineated by “red state” America. Some elements of public opinion claim to see little difference between George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden. It is often the characteristic of left-liberal thinking to deny any positive qualities to conservatism—and especially to militate against any attempts to allow conservatives a self-definition that embraces anything positive and “decent.” Conservatism is typically seen as an ideology of selfishness and warmongering—and sometimes of outright “hate.” Many contemporary politicians considered conservative are extremely defensive about strongly stating and arguing for what they sincerely believe to be in the common good—and are indeed frequently confused as to what is authentically conservative—and how it could even be argued for by a “decent” person.

An important element contributing to the conceptual problem of “conservatism” in America today, it could be argued, is “neoconservatism.” The “neocons” are frequently characterized by left-liberals as gung-ho warmongers pushing America into endless wars. Mostly because of America’s engagement in the “War on Terror” and certain security stringencies that arise from it, the idea that America is in a deeply conservative period of its history is gaining wide currency. Yet this calculus simply ignores the numerous aspects of domestic policy and the current-day social and cultural context that point to the massive policy and conceptual triumphs of left-liberalism since the 1960s. Left-liberal critics of the neoconservatives rarely care to focus on the ideas and policies of most contemporary neoconservatives in most areas of domestic policy, most of which they would probably find relatively congenial. Indeed, some of the “paleoconservative” critics of the neoconservatives have suggested that in many areas of domestic policy, the neoconservative and left-liberal positions are almost identical. Thus, the paleocons might argue, there is a “pseudodialectic of opposition” between left-liberals and neocons.

The Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), which was founded in 1953 by, among others, the then preeminent traditionalist philosopher Russell Kirk, originally identified itself with the “traditionalist” strand of conservatism in American politics. However, it welcomed debate with “libertarians” and eventually came to mostly embrace what it considered a “modus vivendi” position called “fusionism” (as defined in the early 1960s by Frank S. Meyer in the pages of *National Review*). This work, by calling itself an encyclopedia of *conservatism*, is able to avoid the “paleo” and “neo” prefixes, as well skirt conflicts of traditionalism vs. libertarianism – which suggests that it will be a “broad church,” “big tent” kind of work. That is also obviously what an encyclopedia should be, as too narrow or circumscribed a field of inquiry would be unworthy of an encyclopedia.

The Intercollegiate Studies Institute is an institution that holds a unique niche in the broader conservative constellation in the United States. It is very open to various strands of traditionalism, to a serious debate over culture, and, indeed, to a sense of reflective foreboding as to what awaits America in our period of so-called late modernity. The fact that ISI pays such great attention to the “culture war” – to what is “written” by the state, culture, and society “in the hearts of men” – places it far, far above the typical “American conservative” policy think tank. Indeed, the typical “American conservative” think tank is so wrapped up in policy minutiae and defense of “the free market” that it all but ignores social and cultural matters. It should be said that paying attention to the “culture war” – even if done somewhat fragmentarily and haphazardly – is an enormous “force-multiplier” in social, political, and cultural engagements today. Thus, the ISI, as an avowedly intellectual institution, and one very open to an examination of society and politics with serious social and cultural depth and nuance, is especially suited to bring out an encyclopedia like this one.

Although ISI remains to the “right” of other leading conservative groups, and therefore a cut above many of the other leading “conservative” intellectual organizations, it remains captive to contemporary political correctness, particularly when it comes to controversial matters involving race, ethnicity, and culture. The conservative establishment elite in the United States is a slave to political correctness, and conservatives who, for example, delve too far into the area of racial differences in IQ are alienated for straying too far from contemporary norms of political correctness. The *Encyclopedia* tiptoes around the subject of race and IQ (it contains no entries for either subject) in the entry for Charles Murray (595):

*The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, published in 1994 and coauthored with Richard Herrnstein, brought to the American public—in remarkably accurate and accessible form—truths about the social importance of intelligence which, although increasingly undeniable in academic psychology and sociology, remained largely unknown outside these disciplines. For their efforts Murray and Herrnstein suffered an enormous, highly publicized backlash and numerous personal attacks, but the core of the book’s thesis—that intelligence is highly heritable and is generally a more important variable than socioeconomic status in predicting any number of socially important outcomes—remains a faithful portrayal of the academic consensus.

Just as some conservatives have been purged from the ranks of *National Review* and *Human Events*, ISI has followed suit by winnowing from its ranks those who are viewed as being “beyond the pale” politically. (The one silver lining in this otherwise gray cloud is that the editors of this encyclopedia have included John Zmirak’s favorable and balanced biography of Samuel Francis (320), the late associate and book editor of *The Occidental Quarterly*, and have also included Sam’s bio of James Burnham.) Despite the fact that ISI remains slightly to the right of the center of political gravity of today’s conservative movement, it is still to the left of what passed for “conservatism” in the era of John T. Flynn and other patriotic, nationalist-minded, grassroots citizens who supported the isolationist movement prior to World War II.

Reading through the various entries in the *Encyclopedia*, one finds a high degree of subtlety and a high level of intellectual sophistication—for example in the entry on T.S. Eliot—that go far beyond what most self-described “American conservatives” ascribe to themselves today, let alone fit the conventional, mass-media definition of conservatism. There is an entry on Charles E. Coughlin but no entry for Ann Coulter. Nor is there an entry on Martin Luther King, Jr., who has been posthumously adopted as a “role model” by some contemporary “conservatives,” such as former education secretary William Bennett. One guesses that the average Rush Limbaugh or Sean Hannity listener, or for that matter Fox News viewer, would be somewhat befuddled, as would considerable numbers of liberals in the “opinion-forming” elite—including those who style themselves as pundits or “deep thinkers.” The genuinely more

intellectual left-wing university professors would doubtless understand this book, but would probably feel themselves in vehement opposition to it.

As noted above, one of the chief objectives of left-liberal academic, cultural, and social elites has been simply to never permit the effective self-definition of conservative views, nor to ever allow an effective presentation of them to the public.

The *Encyclopedia* approaches its topic with a high degree of reflection and great subtlety. It goes to war against the notion that—as some liberal wags would have it—“intellectual conservatism is an oxymoron.” It has endeavored to present the various figures and tendencies discussed in a fair and reflective light—remaining quite conscious of the “demonization” of various figures that has been carried out in the last few decades of American politics. Indeed, the *Encyclopedia* often points out the various weaknesses and missteps of various conservative figures and the tendencies that made them easy targets for liberal criticism.

The *Encyclopedia's* underlying stance could be characterized as one of moderate traditionalism; at the same time, it takes seriously the notion of engaging in fair, reasoned debate with various outlooks. The fact that it takes reasoned intellectual discourse so seriously marks a real difference from the accusatory imprecations of some neocons and left-liberals.

One of the hallmarks of traditionalism is its desire for custodianship of the polity as well as a desire for constructive engagement in society, politics, and culture—regardless of how inhospitable the social, political, and cultural situation appears. Hence traditionalism tends to be conciliatory and avoids flinging itself into what it considers various radical deviations.

The general philosophy of the *Encyclopedia* could be characterized as the search for the rightwardmost viable conservatism in America. In a certain sense, this reviewer has to say, he dislikes the word “viable” as a political term. It can often serve as merely an excuse for accommodating oneself to the most wretched social, political, and cultural situations, because any alternative to them or criticism of them would not be “viable.” At the same time, there is certainly a role for prudential considerations in social, political, and cultural matters, if one still wants to be connected to “real world” politics.

Today, in America, there are considerable numbers of self-described conservatives, especially within the Republican Party. Presently there is a serious debate among genuine conservatives as to whether the electoral fortunes of the Republican Party are closely linked to the future of all of Western civilization, or whether that party is just another bureaucratic machine mostly beholden to politically correct views. To this reviewer, the general philosophy of the *Encyclopedia* would tend somewhat toward the former view. However, the general philosophy of the *Encyclopedia* welcomes genuine diversity of thought and inquiry, and the party-lining attitude of “movement conservatism” or of shallow Republican operatives is antithetical to it. The *Encyclopedia* is genuinely

fair in that it offers more than lip service to intellectual freedom and diversity of thought. By contrast, one thinks of the political correctness of much of the academy today, which claims to welcome open debate, but then shuts down any genuinely dissenting free speech with imprecatory accusations. One also thinks of the harsh tone and obloquy of some neoconservatives.

While various political partisans might feel that their favorite thinkers and tendencies are underrepresented and sometimes even partially misrepresented in the *Encyclopedia*, this reviewer thinks that the general philosophy of the *Encyclopedia* is about as good as it gets for conservatism today. It staunchly defends what it understands to be a diverse constellation of views that can be seen as constituting the rightwardmost viable conservatism in America.

In tune with the traditionalist predilection for prudence, it is a work of conciliation, not polarization. In “the struggle for civilization” today, only broad-based coalitions can have an impact on real world politics. This reviewer believes that the immigration-reform movement is probably one of the most important elements in determining what kind of future America will have. Nevertheless, there are many other aspects of American society that require real attention. Indeed, America today can be seen as enmeshed in a combination of crises – the crisis of state, the crisis of nation, the crisis of art, the crisis of family, the crisis of religion – and so forth.

The real division in politics today is not necessarily between left and right, but between the general outlook a person has on his own nation, culture, and civilization. Before the 1960s there existed a left that while fighting for social justice for the working majority largely upheld notions of traditional nation, family, and religion, which it considered a part of pre-political existence it had no desire to challenge. In Canada, this tendency was represented by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which became today’s ultra-politically correct New Democratic Party (NDP) only after the 1960s. It could be argued that the greatest problem facing America and other Western countries is the self-hatred of its majority population, and especially that of its elites. All the activism of the various “accredited minorities” is to some extent politically understandable as an exercise of self-interest, but the craven surrender of the majority to those ever more expansive and unjustifiable claims is a sickness of the soul. It could be argued that the political labels which individuals choose for themselves are often far less important than their attitudes toward their nation, culture, and civilization. It is also possible that certain parts of self-described “conservative thought” may be off-putting to “decently inclined” people, such as the apparently excessive zeal for capitalism in some quarters, or the pronounced disdain for ecological and environmental issues seen among many self-described conservatives, or the attempts, sometimes bordering on the bizarre, to uphold such elements of religious dogma as the ban on contraceptives. The fact is that the opponents of conservatism seem to have an uncanny ability to zero in on what are seen as the most ridiculous,

exaggerated aspects of the conservative mind, which they then portray as symptomatic of the whole outlook.

Thus, from the 1950s forward, no matter the actual social, political, and cultural situation, there has been a widespread notion that America is under some kind of harsh, grinding, conservative regime – or about to succumb to it. Even the Joe McCarthy episode was marked more by vociferous condemnation of “McCarthyism” by virtually every significant sector of American society – rather than by the senator’s activities – which then became an extremely pejorative byword for both “paranoid anti-Communism” and “ultra-sleazy politics.” Nixon, Reagan, the elder George Bush, and now George W. Bush are all said to have presided over a harsh, oppressive administration that was taking America in the direction of Nazi Germany. This could be called the myth of “eternal fascism.” It prevents any serious thought and consideration of what our current-day predicament of late modernity might actually consist of. Nazism was unquestionably an evil ideology – but one that was clearly buried in the rubble of Berlin. Nevertheless, it could be argued that, in the West’s reactions to Nazi evil, most Western societies have plunged themselves into new kinds of problems and nightmares. J. R. R. Tolkien astutely noted “...for evil always takes on another shape, and grows again.” Today, when we contemplate the surreal textures of our consumption-driven and administratively manipulated existence, the abject depths of self-hatred to which many Western persons have sunk, the almost unbelievable sexual decay of our era, we have come to know much of this new evil.

It could be said that opposition to these evils of the new type is what should be the central concern of what could be conventionally called “conservatism.”

Whether some kind of tendency toward Western social, political, and cultural restoration and renovation can have any impact on real world politics in America today is an open question. The reviewer should say that, in contrast to the situation for Canadians, Americans seem to have at least a fighting chance. Compared to Canada, conservative infrastructures in the United States are massive and well funded – for which the existence of this very encyclopedia is the best evidence. The ISI also publishes a guide called *All-American Colleges*, which lists colleges that could appeal to “conservatives, old-fashioned liberals, and people of faith.” Such colleges are virtually nonexistent in Canada. There is only one province in Canada, Alberta, that is somewhat similar in its social outlooks to those of the so-called “red states” in America. It could be argued that all that remains of Canadian conservatism outside of Alberta is some pleasant rural landscapes – as well as the decidedly more pleasant life in some parts of Canada’s larger cities, such as Toronto, than is the case of most U.S. big cities. One is reminded again of the centrality of the issue of mass, dissimilar immigration, as far as the possible future of one or another society. The rate of immigration into Canada is more than twice per capita that of the United

States, yet there is no figure comparable to Pat Buchanan on the Canadian horizon. Peter Brimelow, who settled in Canada before coming to the U.S., strove to make an impact on the political situation in Canada, but was virtually pushed out of serious social and political commentary in the Canadian media. (Brimelow and his immigration-reform website Vdare.com are mentioned in the *Encyclopedia's* entry on Sam Francis, 320).

Indeed, it could be argued that Canada since the 1960s has striven to become a society where to be a genuine traditionalist or conservative will be impossible. The United States today, this reviewer believes, is in comparison still far from reaching that situation. ■

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*Mark Wegierski is a Canadian-based freelance writer. His articles have appeared in **American Outlook**, **Culture Wars**, **The World and I**, **Telos**, **The Social Contract**, and **The Review of Metaphysics**.*

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