



# Epistulae

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# Conservatism Can Be Revived: Unmasking Neocons Just a Beginning

By Joseph Baldacchino

Despite the apparent momentum of the Republican Party in the presidential race, it is clear that the party is tottering on the edge of intellectual and moral bankruptcy. Americans by overwhelming margins have had their fill of the George W. Bush Administration, and they have little faith in the GOP's nominee to succeed Bush. It is only because the Democrats have put forth a candidate who raises even more serious doubts that the Republicans may be able to avert electoral disaster.

Americans are tired of the Administration's policy failures—the costly and unnecessary war in Iraq, with its attendant torture and abuse of prisoners; the assault on Americans' constitutional liberties, including protections against warrantless searches and spying; the concentration of power in the executive branch at the expense of Congress, the courts, and the states; and its commitment to economic practices that have damaged the nation's manufacturing base, brought its financial system to the brink of insolvency, and made America dependent on foreign debt to finance its wars and government and to keep afloat its increasingly fragile standard of living.

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Yet even more than the almost perfect storm of policy disasters, what has undermined the Republicans' credibility is their blatant refusal to recognize the complexities of historical reality and to adjust their responses accordingly. Having made a fetish of abstract, a priori principles like the "free market," "democracy," and "national security," the GOP and its intellectual allies have perpetrated and excused irresponsible behavior by individuals and government.

For example, under one part of the "Bush Doctrine" that still has not been revoked, at least not explicitly, the United States has asserted a prerogative unilaterally to invade sovereign nations for the purpose of installing a better regime, ostensibly to promote democracy. Yet it condemns military interventionism by other nations as grounds for expulsion from the community of nations.

Thus President Bush, complaining that the Russian incursion into Georgia might have been designed to unseat the pro-U.S. government there, solemnly proclaimed that invading other countries "is unacceptable in the 21st century." This, as if the invasion of Iraq had never occurred or had taken place in some dimly remembered epoch, perhaps the Middle Ages.

The Administration's aggressive foreign policies and cavalier disregard of its legal and consti-

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tutional responsibilities have stirred alarm even within the Administration itself, including senior officials in the Departments of Justice, Defense, and Treasury. Many registered Republicans, among them admirers of Texas Rep. Ron Paul, are vowing to sit out this election or to vote for the Constitution or Libertarian Party candidates.

The National Republican Congressional Committee openly advised GOP candidates not to run this year as “traditional Republicans,” even in normally hospitable parts of the South and Midwest. Most tellingly, John McCain and Sarah Palin are going out of their way to distance themselves from the party’s record of the past eight years, though they have given little indication of moving in a well-considered alternative direction.

Failure of this magnitude might have suggested to some the need for systematic rethinking of the party’s approach to politics and governance. But not so for the Rush Limbaughs and Sean Hannitys, the Ann Coulters, William Kristols and other loud media voices who represent what passes for Republican wisdom today. Nor have second thoughts been expressed by President Bush, who calls himself the “decider,” or by Vice President Cheney, who has sometimes been the real “decider.”

By the lights of such as these, to question acts of aggression against other nations or worry about the erosion of civil liberties or criticize the economic and regulatory malfeasance that now threatens the nation with financial ruin is to be “anti-American” or “soft on terror” or a “socialist.” They know what’s best not only for Americans but for everyone else in the world, and they have only contempt for opinion to the contrary. This was starkly illustrated earlier this year by Cheney, who, when told by a television interviewer that “two-thirds of Americans say [the Iraq war] is not worth fighting,” sneeringly responded with a single word: “So?”<sup>1</sup>

These policies and this arrogance were bound to elicit growing criticism. Since the Cheneys, Limbaughs, et al., are popularly identified as conservatives, it is not surprising that their opponents in the media and academia have been pouring out books and articles gleefully chronicling what they call the “end of conservatism.”

But the ideology that is losing its credibility after coming most fully to fruition in the current

Bush Administration is not the intellectual conservatism that arose in the 1950s and that took its name and outlook in part from Russell Kirk’s 1953 book *The Conservative Mind*. On the contrary, the political ideas and attitudes that have held sway under the second Bush were brought into the GOP beginning in the late 1970s by former Democrats, many of them also former Marxists, who became known as and often called themselves “neoconservatives.”

Those ideas are in many ways antithetical to the traditional conservatism exemplified by Kirk. Neoconservative thinking greatly resembles the ideas of the French revolutionaries, the Jacobins, who turned against the long-held views of human nature and society that are associated with the classical and Christian Western heritage. Ironically, it was opposition to Jacobin ideology that brought modern conservatism into existence more than two centuries ago.

Modern conservatism originated with Edmund Burke (1729-1797) as a reaction against the ahistorical and reckless attacks by the French Jacobins on the classical and Christian tradition of the West. Burke contrasted the purportedly universal but flimsy and abstract principles of the Jacobins with the more profound and well-supported insights of what he called the “general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.”<sup>2</sup>

Burke’s notion of universality, shared by Irving Babbitt, Russell Kirk, and others in the twentieth century, was indistinguishable from a sense of man’s flawed nature and the insight that what is good in particular situations is seldom easily discerned or achieved. Wisdom and prudent action require the self-discipline, balance, and maturity of civilized judgment and character.

Burke flatly rejected Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s conceit that man is naturally good and that morality consists of giving free rein to one’s impulses. For Rousseau (1712-1778)—who provided the spark for the Jacobins’ inflammatory vision of “liberty, equality, and fraternity”—the source of evil in the world was the restraints imposed on man by ideas and institutions external to self. Hence the most effective way to improve the world was to replace old institutions and customs with revolutionary measures inspired by the strongest desire of the moment. For Burke, the result of thus removing historically evolved restraints on personal

behavior would be, not liberty but anarchy and, finally, tyranny.

In his *Letter to a Member of the French Assembly*, published in 1791, Burke famously wrote, "Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity . . . . Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without."<sup>3</sup>

In America the framers of the Constitution held a view of human nature and society very similar to Burke's. James Madison, in *Federalist 51*, wrote, [W]hat is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

To help force the government to control itself, the framers established a variety of institutional checks and balances, including the division of powers among the three branches at the national level and the division of authority between the general and state governments. But, like their contemporary Burke, they knew that the tendency of the natural man toward selfish power seeking would overwhelm external constitutional checks unless the latter were bolstered by inner personal restraint on the part both of leaders and the citizenry.

As George Washington wrote in his Farewell Address, it "is important . . . that the habits of thinking in a free country should inspire caution [on the part of public officials] to confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres."

Fortunately for the framers, the moral, religious, and social habits and beliefs that were then prevalent in America were grounded in the Christian tradition of "love of neighbor." As such, the public ethos was conducive to humility, compromise, and the questioning of one's own motives—traits that must be present in high degree if a Constitution prescribing political checks and balances is to be paid more than lip service.

Describing the necessary prerequisites for a free society, the constitutional framer John Dickinson noted in *Fabius Letter 3*: "Humility and benevolence must take place of pride and overweening selfishness. Reason . . . will then discover to us, that we cannot be true to ourselves, without being true to others—that to love our neighbors as ourselves, is to love ourselves in the best manner . . . ."<sup>4</sup> Imbued with this ethic, Americans strove to control evil within themselves, to strengthen their own character in order to be able to build more loving relationships within their own families and local communities.

Yet, as mentioned above, at the very time that the old religious, moral, and other traditions brought by their ancestors from Europe were helping Americans to launch a successful constitutional republic, those same traditions were encountering wholesale rejection on the European continent. Influenced by Rousseau, the French Jacobins violently overturned or badly damaged not only the French monarchy but virtually all of that country's political, religious, and social institutions. They then launched wars of aggression meant to spread their utopian vision across much of Europe. The Jacobins' excesses brought their political downfall, but traditional beliefs continued to lose ground to other modern doctrines that looked to science, economics, and other rationalist techniques to bring moral progress.

Instead of moral progress, the new doctrines brought, besides better health, hygiene and material wealth, increasing levels of personal and social disorder not only in Europe but also in America. As the old ethos gave way to various forms of progressivism, Americans came to rely less on personal acts of character in relation to those near at hand as the way to promote a better society. Rather than the difficult effort of ordering one's own soul toward the transcendent good, morality became associated in the public mind with abstract principles such as "freedom" and "democracy" and with "idealistic" caring for amorphous distant groups or for mankind-at-large.

Criticizing these trends as unrealistic and deleterious, the Harvard professor Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) wrote early in the twentieth century that man is intuitively aware of an ever-present conflict at the center of his experience between two competing qualities of will, and this inner

conflict constitutes man's fundamental moral predicament. The lower will, described by Babbitt as man's "impulsive," "natural," or "ordinary" self, is toward self-indulgence or arbitrariness for oneself or one's group. The "higher" or "ethical" will, which is a constant will to do what is right, is experienced in particular situations as an "inner check" on merely selfish impulse.

Babbitt noted that man's higher and lower qualities of will are accompanied by corresponding qualities of imagination. Only men and women of character allow themselves to view the world without pleasing illusions, and thus to recognize the need for difficult self-improvement by all persons, beginning with self. Knowing from personal experience the sense of meaning and happiness that accompanies acts of personal responsibility, such individuals are able imaginatively to apprehend life's transcendent purpose through noble examples from both history and the arts and humanities.

In each particular situation, the individual's imagination presents images of possible ends or desires that might be satisfied with the unique set of means at hand. Among this panoply of potential ends, the higher imagination is looking for the one that is most likely to further life's highest potential in those given circumstances. In the moment of incipient action, the higher will, experienced as conscience, favors one end while discouraging the others, thereby ordering desires and changing situations to its eternal purpose.

By way of contrast, some persons habitually indulge their changing impulses without regard to a universal moral imperative. They favor visions of life that accentuate the pleasures that flow from morally unchecked activity. Such visions tend to ignore the unpleasant consequences of a morally uncentered existence. Any pangs of conscience are easily dismissed as mere residue of superstitious dogmas. If uncentered imagination becomes culturally predominant, whole nations and civilizations can be captivated by worldviews based on self-serving illusion.

The chief crisis of the modern world is a crisis of moral character in which perverse imagination provides seemingly plausible excuses for almost everyone to evade responsibilities to self and others. Babbitt noted that, by painting the indulgence of our dominant desires as acceptable and even

noble, the lower imagination, collaborating with a self-indulgent will, distorts our perception of reality. It also gives rise to an "imperialistic" personality standing at opposite poles from the traditional personality of restraint and humility that had made the American Constitution possible.

In his books Babbitt described the harmful effects of the "imperialistic" personality across a broad range of American life, including education, religion, business, politics, and foreign policy. Regarding the latter, Babbitt wrote in 1924:

We are willing to admit that all other nations are self-seeking, but as for ourselves, we hold that we act only on the most disinterested motives. We have not as yet set up, like revolutionary France, as the Christ of Nations, but during the late war we liked to look on ourselves as at least the Sir Galahad of Nations. If the American thus regards himself as an idealist at the same time that the foreigner looks on him as a dollar-chaser, the explanation may be due partly to the fact that the American judges himself by the way he feels, whereas the foreigner judges him by what he does.<sup>5</sup>

Babbitt's insights along with Burke's would exert a profound influence on Russell Kirk and such other founders of the conservative intellectual movement that emerged in the 1950s as Milton Hindus, Robert Nisbet, Peter Stanlis, Peter Viereck, and Richard Weaver. Babbitt, Kirk would record, "has influenced me more strongly than has any other writer of the twentieth century. It was through Babbitt that I came to know Edmund Burke, and Babbitt, as much as Burke, animates my book *The Conservative Mind*."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, a strong case can be made that the conservative intellectual movement that coalesced in the 1950s and later would come to be associated with the politics of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan was, at its philosophical core, a revival of interest in ideas previously explored by Edmund Burke and Irving Babbitt. Kirk, elucidating Babbitt, summed up such conservatism as

the belief that man is a distinct being, governed by laws peculiar to his nature; there is law for man and law for thing. Man stands higher than the beasts that perish because he recognizes and obeys this law of his nature. The disciplinary arts of *humanitas* teach man to put checks upon his will and his appetite. Those checks are provided by ethical will and reason—not by the private rationality of the Enlightenment, but by the higher reason that grows out of a respect

for the wisdom of our ancestors and out of the endeavor to apprehend that transcendent order which gives us our nature.<sup>7</sup>

Boiled down to its essence, conservatism is first and foremost an ethic of personal responsibility. It consists of inner and outer restraint of self in furtherance of an order that transcends individual, group, or nation. Whether particular actions or policies are good or bad depends not on how we justify them to ourselves but on the actual historical effect on real people in particular instances. Abstract principles and a priori slogans, however loudly proclaimed, count for naught. We know on good authority that the true test of character, the true test of right and wrong willing, is, "By their fruits ye shall know them."

By this test, neoconservatism in its main thrust is anything but conservative. It espouses not a personal ethic that enriches or enhances the community from within but an ideology that announces through a megaphone principles for the remaking of the world, such as "democracy," "freedom," and "capitalism." It espouses not an ethic of personal responsibility and communal effort but proclaims, again through a megaphone, the need for big, muscular government to act in our name. It espouses not a virtue of individual character and love of neighbor but declares, again through a megaphone, that America should rule the world. This imperialistic mindset could not be more alien to the traditions that made the American Constitution possible. Yet it is this mindset that, more than any other, has given shape to the Bush II policies and worldview.

For tactical reasons neocons frequently downplay for public consumption the chasm that separates their position from that of conservatism proper. Yet, often enough, when they have felt sufficiently secure in their power, they have acknowledged that the differences between the two worldviews are fundamental. In his new book *Fighting Words: A Tale of How Liberals Created Neo-Conservatism*, veteran neocon activist Ben Wattenberg praises such past Democratic politicians as Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, and Henry "Scoop" Jackson as having helped in various ways to launch neoconservatism. Wattenberg complains that neoconservatism may forever "be confused with conservatism, with the key differences never quite understood."<sup>8</sup>

Even more candid is an article by Irving Kristol in the August 25, 2003, edition of *The Weekly Standard*, the magazine edited and published by his son William with massive infusions of financial support from billionaire publisher Rupert Murdoch. The elder Kristol, who is widely known as the "godfather" of neoconservatism, reports that, "ever since its origin among disillusioned liberal intellectuals in the 1970s," the "purpose of neoconservatism" has been "to convert the Republican party, and American conservatism in general, against their respective wills, into a new kind of conservative politics."

This "new kind" of conservatism, Kristol explains, is "far less risk averse" concerning budget deficits "than is the case among the more traditional conservatives." Moreover, in contrast to those who have long resisted big government, "[n]eocons do not feel that kind of alarm or anxiety about the growth of the state." Apparently not, since Kristol goes on to lump "the United States of today" with "the Soviet Union of yesteryear" as "ideological nations"—a comparison that he remarkably does not find disturbing. Such nations, he insists, should be willing to use robust military force to spread their ideologies globally.

With such notions widely regarded as representing the mainstream of conservative thought, is there any hope for a revival of the morally and culturally grounded conservatism that guided the framers of the Constitution and inspired the conservative intellectual movement of the 1950s? Some who have belonged to that movement from its early days might think that returning to the ideas and concerns that preoccupied them circa 1970, before the neocon influx into the GOP, would provide a sufficient solution. If so, they'd be wrong. For many members of the conservative movement had only very selectively and imperfectly absorbed the central moral and philosophical insights of the thinkers mentioned above, and they had manifested dubious inclinations well before the advent of the neocons.

As explained above, the main concern of traditional conservatism was not systems of politics or economics but the maintenance of an ethical realism of inner restraint "that grows out of a respect for the wisdom of our ancestors," and it was from the latter circumstance that conservatism drew its name. What separated conservatism from all the

other isms—and why it was not an “ideology,” according to Russell Kirk—was its agreement with Irving Babbitt that what is important to the man of character “is not his power to act on the world, but his power to act on himself.” Conservatism valued philosophy, theology, history, literature, and the arts—the best that has been thought and done—as supports for man’s disposition to put restraints on his lower inclinations.

But, beginning early in the 1960s, partly as an outgrowth of the Goldwater presidential candidacy, conservatives became increasingly infatuated with practical politics. More and more the “power to act on the world” displaced the power to act on self as the conservative touchstone, and the philosophical discernment that previously had distinguished conservatives from their intellectual adversaries went into prolonged eclipse.

Traditionally, conservatives had understood that terms like “freedom” or “free market” were abstractions that could have different—even opposite—meanings in different contexts. As Burke had aptly noted, “Is it because *liberty in the abstract* may be classed among the blessings of mankind, that I am seriously to facilitate a madman, who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell, on his restoration to the enjoyment of light and liberty?”<sup>9</sup> Previously, therefore, conservatives had recognized that, as Wilhelm Röpke pointed out, for an economy to be civilized it must draw upon moral, imaginative, and intellectual habits and preferences that do not arise spontaneously from the economy as such.<sup>10</sup>

With Burke and the American constitutional framers, conservatives knew that the less control that men have within, the more they must have from without, so that, if men and women desire freedom, including a free market and constitutionalism, the prerequisite is to put chains upon their own will and appetite and to avail themselves of the historically evolved norms and prejudices that will assist them in that effort. If traditional conservatism were to be reduced to a single maxim, this last might suffice as well as any other.

But with the turn toward a crude pragmatism that accompanied their new preoccupation with winning elections and controlling public policy, conservatives and the Republican party came for the most part to identify the free market not as a means to a higher end but as an end in itself,

leaving businessmen and women without any restraints or responsibilities other than those imposed by the free market alone. Conservatives forgot the extent to which, as my NHI colleague Claes Ryn noted recently in *Modern Age*, “purely economic considerations need to be subordinated to other motives and . . . habits, institutions, and gatekeepers must help foster moral restraints, good taste and respect for truth.”<sup>11</sup>

The costs of letting purely economic motives run amok are now starkly evident in the financial meltdown on Wall Street. Concerning the latter, columnist Robert J. Samuelson writes: “It wasn’t that Wall Street’s leaders deceived customers or lenders into taking risks that were known to be hazardous. Instead, they concluded that risks were low or nonexistent. They fooled themselves, because the short-term rewards blinded them to the long-term dangers.”<sup>12</sup>

In fact, this is a prime example of self-serving imagination distorting historical perception, as described by Babbitt. What Samuelson could have said is that Wall Street’s leaders—along with their enablers in the think tanks, news media, and both political parties—deceived themselves about the risks, so that they could deceive others in exchange for millions of dollars in fees and bonuses without having to face the truth of their actions. They did not *want* to see the truth.

In an earlier America infused with Christian culture, indulging the desire for material things beyond a certain degree was considered unacceptable, and all the more so if borrowing were required. Only shysters or flimflam artists—certainly not upstanding merchants or bankers—would encourage fellow citizens to buy what they plainly could not afford. Respectable businesses would not think of facilitating such purchases with loans. Yet now the “business model” for virtually the entire economy has become dependent on immoderate practices previously frowned upon. “Just do it.” Hardly a peep of protest has been uttered by persons who are today known as conservatives. Indeed, many seem to equate commercialism with conservatism.

Conservatives forgot the central truths which they had proclaimed and upheld since Burke’s time a century and a half earlier. The consequences of this “derailment” could not have been more tragic. First of all, the neocons never could have

succeeded in changing conservatives and the GOP “against their respective wills,” as Irving Kristol has boasted, if their will and imagination had not already been moving in the direction of what Babbitt termed the “imperialistic” personality.

Equally important, had it not been for this derailment conservatives would have been among the most incisive critics of—rather than the loudest cheerleaders for—the shoddy political and economic policies and practices that have plunged this country into a trough of enormous indebtedness and unfunded liabilities, massive trade imbalances, and staggering budget deficits from which it may not recover for many decades, if ever. It is becoming increasingly difficult to conceal from Americans that they and their nation are getting poorer and that the middle class is endangered.

If there is good news, it is that a recovery of genuine conservatism may come sooner than an economic recovery. For nearly a quarter of a century now, the National Humanities Institute has emphasized the moral and cultural foundations of a good society. NHI has shown the central role of the imagination and the arts in shaping the individual and society. During most of those years that message seemed to fall largely on deaf ears. Recently, a growing number in America and abroad—especially the more reflective young writers and thinkers—have taken up our theme, perhaps partly in reaction to the calamitous results of not heeding NHI’s message.

The intellectual and literary sources needed for a conservative philosophical revival are available, however neglected they have been by self-described conservatives. To get it right this time, conservatives will have to give much closer, more serious attention to sometimes quite demanding works of thought and imagination. Mind-numbing a prioristic ideology must be abandoned. Those who pay only lip service to the higher

values that Burke called “the permanent part of their nature” will pay only lip service to personal and constitutional restraint. That way lies desolation and tyranny.

#### Notes

1. Mike Nizza, “Cheney Unconcerned by Iraq War’s Unpopularity,” *The Lede: Notes on the News – Blog on the Internet*, New York Times, March 19, 2008. Available from: <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/19/cheney-unconcerned-by-iraq-wars-unpopularity/>.

2. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968 [1790]), 183.

3. Edmund Burke, *A Letter from Mr. Burke to a Member of the French Assembly* (Paris and London, 1791), 68-69.

4. John Dickinson, *The Letters of Fabius* (No. 3), in Paul L. Ford, ed., *Pamphlets on the Constitution of the United States* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1968), 163-216.

5. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979), 295.

6. Russell Kirk, “The Enduring Influence of Irving Babbitt,” in George A. Panichas and Claes G. Ryn, eds., *Irving Babbitt in Our Time* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 20.

7. *Ibid.*, 21.

8. Ben J. Wattenberg, *Fighting Words: A Tale of How Liberals Created Neo-Conservatism* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008), 12.

9. Burke, *Reflections*, 90 (emphasis added).

10. Wilhelm Röpke, *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1971).

11. Claes G. Ryn, “The Decline of American Intellectual Conservatism,” *Modern Age* 49:4 (Fall 2007), 540.

12. Robert J. Samuelson, “Wall Street’s Unraveling,” *The Washington Post*, September 17, 2008, A19.