

**PAUL T. MERO**

# UNDERSTANDING THE CONSERVATIVE MIND

Conservatism is not an ideologically-based political philosophy such as liberalism, or Marxism, or libertarianism. It's not a political system. It's not a "thing"; it's more of a view.

Thank you for having me here tonight. I don't know many people in Logan, nor do I know Logan that well, but what I know I love. I also feel fortunate to be able to talk about conservatism. I wish we had hours at our disposal. But in the short time we have together, my hope is that you'll be able to walk away with a better understanding of who you are and what you believe in relationship to the meaning of conservatism.

A VERY GOOD WAY  
TO UNDERSTAND THE  
CONSERVATIVE MIND IS  
TO FIRST UNDERSTAND  
THE MEANING OF  
ORDERED LIBERTY.

It might surprise you to hear me say that conservatism isn't easy to pin down. And it's not easy to pin down because conservatism is not an ideologically-based political philosophy such as liberalism, or Marxism, or libertarianism. In fact, one scholar describes conservatism as the "negation of ideology."<sup>1</sup> It's not a political system. There is no such thing, really, as a "Conservative Government." It's not a "thing"; it's more of a view.

Abraham Lincoln described it as the "adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried."<sup>2</sup> Ambrose Bierce defined it in his *Devil's Dictionary* as "a statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others."<sup>3</sup> John Stuart Mill called conservatives "the stupid party." And Edmund Burke referred to conservatism as "the wisdom of our ancestors." He said, "The individual is foolish, but the species is wise."<sup>4</sup>

And the godfather of American conservative intellectuals, Russell Kirk, wrote that conservatism "is a state of mind, a type of character, a way of looking at the order of the commonwealth." He went on to write that "the conservative movement or body of opinion can accommodate a considerable diversity of views on a good

many subjects, there existing no [acid test] or Thirty-Nine Articles of the conservative creed. In essence," he concludes, "the conservative person is simply one who finds the permanent things more pleasing than Chaos and old Night."

I'll refer back to Russell Kirk several times tonight. In 1953, Kirk wrote a significant book, titled *The Conservative Mind*, that spawned a school of thought that, ultimately, changed America's fortunes and, for good or ill, depending on your viewpoint, put Ronald Wilson Reagan in the White House and dismantled the Soviet Union. The Heritage Foundation's President, Ed Feulner, wrote of Kirk's *Conservative Mind*,

[He] showed conclusively that conservatism had an illustrious lineage; proved that many of the finest British and American thinkers – including Burke, Coleridge, John Adams and John Calhoun, to say nothing of such luminaries as de Tocqueville, Newman, Disraeli, Santayana, and Irving Babbitt – espoused this philosophy; and demonstrated that much of America's success derived from conservative principles. Attacking popular slurs against traditionalists head-on, Kirk asserted that conservatism is "something more than mere defense of shares and dividends and something nobler than mere dread of what is new."<sup>5</sup>

A very good way to understand the conservative mind is to first understand the meaning of ordered liberty. "Order and liberty" sounds oxymoronic, or mutually exclusive, but the two are an essential team in not only understanding conservatism, but also the meaning of America. So let's begin this search by addressing first liberty, and then order.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, two political revolutions captured the spirit and imagination of the world. The one, taking place in the newly-formed United States of America, sought a liberty that has lasted 232 years; the other, taking place in France of old, sought a liberty that lasted only 10 years. The one, ultimately redeemed 88 years later through the blood of its own sons; the other, quickly forsaken after a mere 18 months, in a Reign of Terror, in the blood of its own delusions.

The American Revolution and the French Revolution: why such dramatically different outcomes? The answer is that each revolution had its own ideas about liberty. While both revolutions invoked the title of liberty, only one – the one remaining still today – understood its true nature.

The French Revolution was built upon a liberty foreign to the nature of man. It was an abstract notion of liberty – not real, not human – which held that every person was born with organic, civil and political rights *independent of inheritance* – not of God, not of family, not of country. In fact, God, family, and country were its enemies. It spilled their blood.

On the other hand, America's founders spilled the blood of military enemies, and no others, in behalf of a liberty inherited. They knew that these inherited rights came from "Nature and Nature's God" – like Michelangelo's fresco depiction of the *Creation of Adam*, they reach down from heaven to touch all men and women with purpose and identity, individually but equally.

In other words, whereas false liberty is the product of selfish individualism, untethered from truth, American liberty is ordered. Because we human beings are the inheritors, *not* the inventors, of our freedom, the context

of our liberty is intertwined in the lives of others. Ordered liberty versus selfish individualism – one used to build the greatest and most lasting nation on Earth, and the other, with blood and horror, to form the most savage experiments of utopian ideals ever known to man.

From the Reign of Terror – what Englishman Thomas Paine ironically praised as “the rights of man” – to the brutalities of every “ism” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mankind has witnessed the unfortunate fruits of false liberty.

Representing this false liberty, another Englishman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, John Stuart Mill, wrote that “liberty consists in doing what one desires.”<sup>6</sup>

Now, contrast those words with these from Mill’s contemporary, Lord John Acton: “Liberty is not the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought.”<sup>7</sup>

*Inherited* rights invoke a spirit and reality of what we *ought* to do. Our founding fathers were educated men – serious students of philosophy, history, and religion – who read scriptures and human nature as “Nature’s God” intended. In their willingness to sacrifice their lives for this nation, they did what they *ought* to have done based upon their inherited identity. Because of their examples, conservatives know that our political freedom comes from what we *ought* to do, based on who we really are, and not from what we *want* to do, based on who we *think* we are.

Of course, ordered liberty requires us to determine just *what it is* that we ought to do and, in America, at least according to the Declaration of Independence, what we ought to do are those things that are consistent with “Nature and Nature’s God.” In other words, what

we ought to do are those things that are consistent with what it means to be a human being – in familiar religious language it means we are to fulfill the measure of our creation.

Liberty, in the conservative mind, presupposes and is wholly dependent upon our understanding of what it means to be a human being – the essence of being human. Conservatism is a correct understanding of human nature and human experience. Ultimately, that’s where our liberty rests.

And *order* is what allows liberty to rest at all. People of faith, especially Latter-day Saints, get this notion as well as anyone. We mostly express it this way – you’re only truly free to the degree that you’re not a slave to appetite or passion. Edmund Burke wrote that, “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. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”

Another way of saying this is that God has a plan for man and that plan is the context of our liberty. And that plan, by definition, is ordered.

Of course, a person doesn’t have to be religious to understand this concept. In his book, *The Roots of American Order*, Kirk shares a conversation he once had with a Russian friend. The Russian testified to him how order necessarily precedes justice and freedom. Kirk writes that his friend “had been a Menshevik, or moderate socialist, at the time of the Russian Revolution. When the Bolsheviks seized power in St. Petersburg, he fled to Odessa, on the Black Sea, where he found a great city

in anarchy. His friend described bands of young men who commandeered street-cars and [roamed] wildly through the heart of Odessa, firing with rifles at any pedestrian, as though they were hunting pigeons. At any moment, one's apartment might be invaded by a casual criminal or fanatic, murdering for the sake of a loaf of bread. In this anarchy, justice and freedom were only words."

Kirk then related that his friend concluded that, "Much as I hated the Communists, I saw then that even the grim order of Communism is better than no order at all. Many might survive under Communism; no one could survive in general disorder."<sup>8</sup>

Human beings require two sorts of order. We need an inner order, or order of the soul, and an outer order, or order of society. Both are essential to liberty. Kirk puts it this way,

**Order is the first need of the soul. [It's] not possible to love what one ought to love, unless we recognize some principles of order by which to govern ourselves. Order is the first need of the commonwealth. [It's not possible for us to live in peace with one another, unless we recognize some principle of order by which to do justice.** <sup>9</sup>

Every society is ordered in some way. The good ones have what we might call a "moral ecology." But the fact that some people object to the idea of order doesn't negate that one always exists. It might be the order of Communists, or it might be the order of Americans. It might be order by force of law or it might be order by rule of law.

Human beings are social creatures and, because our lives are always intertwined with one another, order is necessary for progress and freedom.

Conservatives know that there are roots to our American order. These roots reach back in time to ancient Greece and the Roman Republic. They build from Mt. Sinai and Jerusalem. They survived Europe and our English progenitors. Ultimately, the roots of American order were baptized in the blood of the American Revolution and sanctified in the blood of the Civil War.

Liberals care nothing about this history. For them, the world is all about inevitable change, as if change is a virtue in and of itself. Conservatives think otherwise. Conservatism is the patient study of human nature and human experience – and human history is how we begin to reasonably unfold our future – past is prologue.

We could arguably summarize conservatism in a few general ways, as does Kirk. He tells us that conservatism has, at least, the following characteristics:

- the existence of an enduring moral order
- an adherence to custom, convention, and continuity
- a reliance on prescriptions issued from our wise forefathers
- a belief that prudence is a chief virtue
- a firm conviction that governments cannot perfect human beings
- the idea that freedom and private property are closely linked
- that voluntary community is preferable to involuntary collectivism
- the need for prudent restraints upon political power and personal passions, and

- that permanence and change must be recognized and constantly reconciled <sup>10</sup>

There's one other characteristic that Kirk mentions and that is the conservative virtue in *variety*. Liberals use the word "diversity" to describe a world where everyone is unique and where everyone is forced to be the same. Kirk said it this way,

**For the preservation of a healthy diversity in any civilization, there must survive order and classes, differences in material condition, and many sorts of inequality. The only true forms of equality are equality at the Last Judgment and equality before a court of law; all other attempts at leveling must lead, at best, to social stagnation.** <sup>11</sup>

Former Utah Supreme Court Justice Dallin H. Oaks explained the same thinking in a 1982 court decision:

**Much of the rich variety in American culture has been transmitted from generation to generation by determined parents who were acting against the best interest of their children, as defined by official dogma. Conversely, there is no surer way to threaten pluralism than to terminate the rights of parents who contradict officially approved values imposed by reformers empowered to determine what is in the "best interest" of someone else's child.** <sup>12</sup>

To better understand what I've been talking about, let's take two contemporary and hotly debated issues – two issues that seemingly express differing viewpoints – and compare them as conservative positions. One is "gay rights," the other is illegal immigration.

I don't have to get too deep into explaining why homosexuality is disorderly, either in the human soul or in society – or why rights based on homosexual behavior do not rise to the level of a civil right. In fact, there is only one sexual behavior that rises to that level and then, and only then, in the context of what truly benefits society – sexual behavior bounded by legal marriage, child-bearing and effective child-rearing. Only then does sexual behavior have anything to do with civil rights. Otherwise, human nature and human experience both tell conservatives that "gay" anything or personal sexual behavior of any reasonable sort are private matters best left to individuals to work out for themselves, and are not matters for the public square.

Remember, conservatives look at what we *ought* to do based on what it means to be a human being and, at least in this case, the essence of being human must fall on our innate maleness and femaleness, our natural requirement to procreate and to nurture rising generations to maturity and productivity. All we know – indeed, all we have to know – about human sexuality is that we are born male and female with moral agency. Every other question or concern is a private matter. In other words, "gay rights" isn't a conservative position.

Interestingly, we can use the same logic to address illegal immigration and, perhaps, surprise people with our conclusions.

On this, I can speak with some authority. Sutherland has worked through this issue and concluded that the genuinely conservative thing to do about our neighbors, already here illegally, is to see them as we see ourselves. Because they're human like we are – and not "criminals" or "cheap labor" – we can use our conservative reliance

on human nature and human experience to help us do the right thing.

Because we've written extensively on this subject at the Institute, and because I'm almost out of time, I'll summarize the conservative position on illegal immigration. First, we look to the past – we first have to examine what we're conserving. Consistent with the historic purpose or intent of naturalization, authentic conservatives are clearly pointed in the direction of conserving the principle of open immigration. This policy is inarguably the spirit and letter of our nation's founding.

Second, we look to law, custom, and convention. Conservatives not only respect the rule of law, we understand that any effective rule of law must insinuate the human experience. It must be humane – that is, it must be reflective of human nature. And, in fact, to a large degree our federal laws on illegal immigration are reasonable in this respect. Did you know that violating immigration policy is only a misdemeanor? It's little more than getting a traffic ticket. And rightly so. Our immigration laws recognize what our grandparents and great-grandparents and their parents recognized – everyone wants to come to America because we want to live free and prosperous. Reasonable people don't slam the door on human nature – and that nature leads people to our border. Furthermore, when they're already at our border, no reasonable person should be surprised that the temptation is too great to not want to improve their lives and the lives of their families.

In this spirit, while conservatives cherish an accurate understanding of the rule of law, we also look to avoid a police state. We punish when we *must*, not because we like to or because we can or because it's easier than being charitable.

And, so, in dealing with illegal immigrants already here – living side-by-side with us – conservatives, ever prudent, reject irrationality such as nativism or racism and we look to the institutions of civil society, not government, to solve community problems and reclaim crumbling lives.

As for us, so with them, we invoke free markets within a social framework to help our struggling neighbors and we accept a realistic perspective of human nature, its universal value, and its ultimate redemption. More so, conservatives should celebrate a person's humanity and anything good they bring to our community – and we are no less committed to do our best to mitigate anything bad that people bring to our community.

In comparing and contrasting these two conservative positions, some people (liberals) often confuse compassion with justice. On the one hand, some people would say that this argument offers compassion to illegal immigrants and not homosexuals; on the other hand, some people could say that extending compassion to one group but not to the other is inconsistent, maybe even hypocritical. But the mistake here is in thinking that compassion is a matter of public policy. It's not. Compassion is a personal virtue. Justice is a public virtue.

Conservatives know that justice is based on what we *ought* to do as human beings living together in community. It's reasonable for a society to be humane to illegal immigrants who seek freedom and prosperity as we do. It's unreasonable for a society to be humane toward sexual behavior that is, in itself, innately inhumane. The former is about the universal aspirations of all human beings; the latter is about the selfish desires of a few human beings.

What informs this conclusion is not the force of law, majority rule, or even forcing one's religious beliefs arbitrarily upon our neighbors. What informs this conclusion is human nature, human experience, wisdom, prudence, and reason.

Russell Kirk once wrote that,

**Any public measure ought to be judged by its probable long-run consequences, not merely by temporary advantage or popularity. Liberals and radicals, the conservative holds, are imprudent: for they dash at their objectives without giving much heed to the risk of new abuses worse than the evils they hope to sweep away.**

He continued,

**Human society being complex, remedies cannot be simple if they are to be effective. The conservative, being mindful of this, declares that he will act only after sufficient reflection, having weighed the consequences. Sudden and slashing reforms are as perilous as sudden and slashing surgery. The march of [God's] Providence is slow; [it's] the devil who always hurries.<sup>13</sup>**

We are conservatives because we understand the true meaning of liberty and that liberty requires order. Edmund Burke wrote that, "The only liberty I mean is a liberty connected with order, that not only exists along with order and virtue, but which cannot exist at all without them."<sup>14</sup>

We understand that there are roots of the American order that require persistent protection; they require a vigilant and diligent effort to educate rising generations

about human nature and human experience. They require the best in all of us, constantly.

Thank you for inviting me tonight and I hope I haven't said anything too objectionable that you might not have me back. Thank you.

Paul T. Mero is president of the Sutherland Institute. Prior to his service at Sutherland, Mr. Mero was the executive vice-president of The Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society, where he administered the Second World Congress of Families held in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1999. A prolific writer and noted speaker, he recently co-authored *The Natural Family: A Manifesto* with Allan C. Carlson.

"Understanding the Conservative Mind" was presented as the keynote address at the Cache County Republican Party Lincoln Day Dinner, conducted on February 27, 2009, in Logan, Utah.

## ENDNOTES

1. Russell Kirk, "Conservatism: A Succinct Description," *National Review*, September 3, 1982; 1081.
2. *Ibid.*, 1080.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 1081.
5. Russell Kirk, "Enlivening the Conservative Mind," *President's Essay*, Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 1992.
6. Samuel Gregg, *On Ordered Liberty: A Treatise on the Free Society*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003; 5.
7. *Ibid.*, 4.
8. Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Inc., 2003; 6-7.

9. *Ibid.*, 6.
10. Russell Kirk, "Ten Conservative Principles," *The Heritage Lectures*, Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 1987.
11. Kirk, "Conservatism: A Succinct Description," 1082.
12. *In re J. P.*, 648 P.2d 1364 (Utah 1982).
13. Kirk, "Conservatism: A Succinct Description," 1081.
14. Gregg, *On Ordered Liberty: A Treatise on the Free Society*, xi.



Crane Building  
307 West 200 South, Suite 5005  
Salt Lake City, UT 84101  
[www.sutherlandinstitute.org](http://www.sutherlandinstitute.org)  
office: 801.355.1272  
fax: 801.355.1705