

EIR Books

Conservatism revisited: not much to offer today

by William Jones

Right from the Beginning

by Patrick Buchanan

Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1988

392 pages with index, \$18.95 hardbound

Conservative columnist Pat Buchanan has published his autobiography *cum* conservative manifesto, presumably as a bid to line himself up as a future leader of the Conservative Movement. One could undoubtedly discuss the pros and cons concerning Buchanan's qualifications for donning the mantle of conservative guru, although after reading his book with an eye on the results of the much-touted conservative Reagan Revolution, it would appear that a much more fundamental question than that of Buchanan's leadership qualifications would be of interest in such a review. One should rather pose the question as to whether conservatism even serves as a viable political alternative, seeing the disastrous course this country has taken after eight years of leadership by the former flagship of that same movement.

I imagine that it's difficult for anyone who grew up during the the Second World War or the period immediately following, not to feel a tinge of nostalgia reading Pat Buchanan's description of his childhood and upbringing in a moderate-sized Scottish-Irish Catholic family with nine children in the Washington, D.C. area. In this case such nostalgia is probably not merely the psychological phenomenon of reflection on what memory enshrines as "the good old days." For it is a fact that the world generally was in much better physical shape—economically, politically, and socially—during that time, than it is now. A comparison of the relatively tolerable

reality of the 1950s with the incredible ugliness and insanity of contemporary America tends to enhance any sense of longing such a "remembrance of things past" would otherwise entail. But apart from the shades of *Zeitgeist* which provide something of the charm of the book, Buchanan also makes an attempt to give the readers a psychological and philosophical profile of what makes Pat Buchanan tick.

In that, I believe, the book is quite enlightening, not only in indicating serious flaws in Buchanan's own moral and psychological make-up, but also in that of the Conservative Movement itself. "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem," goes an old leftist cliché—and yet one with a grain of truth in it. If, as Pat Buchanan seems to admit, this country has marched down the road to moral and social depravity during roughly the last 30 years, the question must be asked why Buchanan's Conservative Movement did not succeed in "turning the tide" of that process—even though it has wielded considerable power at the very helm of government, most prominently during the Nixon and Reagan administrations.

One of the prime reasons has undoubtedly been the inability of the Conservative Movement to inject into broader sections of the political environment a sense of vision and idealism, namely, that this nation has a purpose, and that that purpose is global in scope, and that that purpose must serve as a focal point for which the citizens of this nation are responsible for realizing with some element of their being. "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," became a rallying cry for the more idealistic elements of the 1960s—and yet it was coined by a speechwriter for the liberal "Kennedy Revolution." Even Buchanan characterizing the civil rights movement as "liberalism's finest hour," woefully admits that during the 1960s,

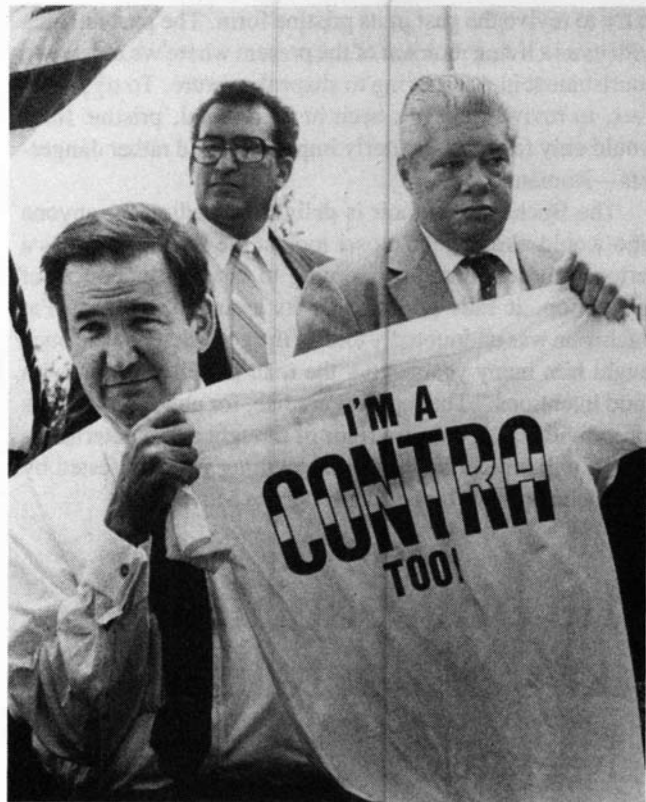
the conservatives took a back seat to the liberals in mobilizing the hearts and minds of the people.

The Conservative Movement showed very few signs of intellectual rigor in trying to work out a strategy for the problems confronting our nation. The growing signs of major dislocations in our economy, especially after the initiation of LBJ's Not-So-Great Society, the gradual undermining of a commitment to a U.S. global military presence (largely through the debilitating, slogging pace of the meat-grinder of a Vietnam War) as well as the steady deterioration of the educational system (and of the cultural environment generally) by the liberal education reforms—all this never quite succeeded in provoking any systematic response from the Conservative Movement.

The 'free market' straitjacket

The ideological straitjacket imposed on the Conservative Movement by the "free market" ideology and the inability to distinguish between friend and foe except on the basis of that schematic ideological formula, condemned conservatism to a state of relative (and absolute) impotence. In a period in which the budding nation-states of Ibero-America, Africa, and Asia were seeking an independent existence in the international community, after having broken the chains of the "free market" of the colonial powers, the Conservative Movement had very little to offer. This was indeed unfortunate since the United States was one of the few countries which had similarly broken out of its own colonial status through a life-and-death struggle with the "free market" ideology of Adam Smith of the British intelligence services. Because of the anti-colonial tradition of the United States, its reputation as a friend of the developing sector countries was at that time quite strong. That reputation has since become considerably tarnished. Had Gen. Douglas MacArthur's policy toward Japan and South Korea become a more general element in the conservative armory, the postwar world would have looked much different.

The ideological sloganeering and sophistry, which today characterizes all too many of our conservative pundits, was not always the fallback option of conservative thinkers in this country. Go back even to the turn of the century, and you will find an intellectual depth and a level of culture in the conservative movement in this country rarely seen these days—within the Catholic Church (where Pat Buchanan's conservatism had its first nourishment) and within society at large. The great Irish-born Archbishop of Philadelphia, Patrick John Ryan, known in the last half of the 1800s as one of the most eminent pulpit orators of his day, a staunch conservative and a strong proponent of the American System, was a student of Plato, and a great admirer of Leibniz, whom he characterized as "one of the greatest men that Protestantism—or any other ism—can boast of." Ryan drew thousands—Catholics as well as non-Catholics—to his sermons and lectures. We have a dim reflection of the remnants of that



Pat Buchanan displays his conservative credentials, at a Washington, D.C. rally in 1986.

tradition in the famous West Point speech by Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur was still old enough to have been imbued with the higher cultural standard of what was at that time the Conservative Movement in this country.

For today's "free market" conservative, however, Plato is a totalitarian and Socrates (at best) a misguided idealist. When the likes of Bill Buckley can be canonized a "saint of conservatives" (as a recent sympathetic biography is entitled), it's obvious that "conservatism" as ideology is becoming rather satanic. Conservatism in this country no longer understands its own roots. The great Whig tradition of the 1800s, which produced an Abraham Lincoln and a Henry Carey may often be cited with approval by our present-day conservative ideologues—but it is little understood. The paeans to their memory may be dutifully recited, and their monuments regularly visited, but their practice of life and their thought has become anathema to today's conservative pundits.

Buchanan's book illuminates the very flaws of the that conservative "ideology." "One must look back," said the great maestro Giuseppe Verdi, "in order to move forward." For it is only in studying the great moments and the great individuals that preceded us, helping to shape the present, that we can elicit the general principles whereby we ourselves may shape the future. It would, however, be a grave mistake

to try to revive the past in its pristine form. The past remains with us as a living moment of the present where we must seek nourishment in our striving to shape the future. To try, however, to revive what has been in its original, pristine form would only result in an utterly impotent—and rather dangerous—Romanticism.

The Buchanan memoir is delightful reading for anyone who would like to get a closer look at the *Zeitgeist*, but as a serious political manifesto aiming to change the course of this nation, it falls far short of its assumed goal. As Pat Buchanan was undoubtedly told by the good Sisters who once taught him many years ago, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” The road to Paradise, for nations as well as for individuals, requires a rigor of thought and a determination of will which far surpasses anything yet manifested by Pat Buchanan—or by his Conservative Movement.

The philosophical roots of liberalism

by Peter M. Schuller

Whose Justice? Which Rationality?

by Alasdair MacIntyre
University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame,
Indiana, 1988
410 pages, \$22.95 hardbound

In our anti-philosophical age, few books in academic philosophy have much impact on the larger world. This one portends, however, to have some degree of real effect.

The overall organization of the book is to contrast what MacIntyre calls the rationality and morality of tradition-informed inquiry with the abstract, formal reason of the Enlightenment and its social embodiment: modernity’s liberalism.

A rational tradition is defined as a historically developed and developing set of social institutions and forms of activity. Rationality so understood postulates that persons are members of a social order (one which itself is embedded in a larger cosmic order). Thus, tradition-informed inquiry acknowledges the socially and historically shaped nature of its theories and practices. It recognizes that how one thinks and acts determines the material for further thinking and acting; it holds that there are no pure “data.”

The Enlightenment proposed to overthrow tradition entirely as part of its scheme of liberation. It postulated the philosophical construct of The Individual, someone essen-

tially self-sufficient in rationality and morality, and whose relations in society are mere adjuncts to his inner self. Such an individual is supposed to be able to rigorously and correctly generate true conclusions by working on “data,” with a mind uninfluenced by his circumstances and no matter how he otherwise lives his life. This view has been embodied in a way of life which MacIntyre identifies as liberalism, which comes in three main varieties: conservative, liberal, and radical liberalism.

It is MacIntyre’s thesis that liberalism has become a kind of tradition, although recognized as such by very few. Thus, its claims that it is the ultimate and purely neutral rationality are false. Further, MacIntyre believes that this ideal of abstract and pure reason is a false ideal. He holds that we must consciously return to a rationality of traditions. But liberalism is not the tradition which MacIntyre thinks suffices. In fact, he is concerned to show the incoherence and irrationality of liberalism.

He organizes the book by first narrating three different traditions of rationality and morality: the Aristotelian, the Thomist, and the 17th-century Scottish. MacIntyre gives a feel of the differences among them and also the sharper differences they collectively have with liberalism.

He then gives an account of the Enlightenment, stressing its concept of the pure individual—what in an earlier work (*After Virtue*, 1981) he called “the empty self.” This concept meshed with free market practices and in that conjunction constituted, contrary to its own self-conception, the tradition of liberalism.

The founding of the liberal social order, he argues, was in part motivated by a desire to enable those who espouse widely different and incompatible conceptions of the good life to live together peaceably and to advocate and live by whatever conception of the good each one pleases, unless that conception involves reshaping the life of the rest of the community in accordance with it. But this means that liberalism has its own broad conception of the good, which it imposes wherever it has the power to do so, and that its toleration of rival conceptions in the public arena is definitely limited. This broad view of the good (usually the satisfaction of the largest number of individual preferences, whatever they are and insofar as liberalism can tolerate them) entails that there is no one overriding good which orders subsidiary goods. Instead, life is compartmentalized, and in each compartment some one type of good is pursued.

Pretense of coherency

From this two things follow. The first is that a single person may not have an overall, coherent ordering of preferences, but, to bargain successfully in the public domain, one must engage in the pretense that one does. This pretense tends to become a pathological self-deception. Second, among individuals there are conflicting preferences, but these cannot be resolved on the basis of one overall conception of the