The Conservative Canon and its Uses

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In this essay, I aim to locate the scriptural force of American conservatism’s secular canon. My basic claim is that the canon created and managed the potential for symbolic fusion and fracture among conservatives. The canon provided the tools to weather the rocky marriage between various conservative sects: traditionalists, libertarians, neoconservatives, and others; the canon afforded resources for each faction to establish their bona fides and to protect their version of authentic conservatism from impostors and apostates. I conclude by analyzing the link between the principles of classical conservatism and canonical politics.

To Pat Buchanan, his was “the voice in the desert” whose defeat in 1964 was a “baptism of fire.” This politician-prophet left a sacred text, a “sermon of fire and brimstone.” The blessed document, Buchanan said of Barry Goldwater’s The Conscience of a Conservative, was conservatives’ “new testament,” and “we read it, memorized it, quoted it.”1 William F. Buckley, whose writings also enthralled conservatives, agreed with Buchanan; The Conscience of a Conservative, he wrote, held “near scriptural authority” in the community.2 Yet Goldwater’s was not the only book that acquired transfixing power among conservatives. Milton Friedman praised Friedrich Hayek’s The Road to Serfdom as a “revelation.”3 Ronald Reagan could quote lines of Hayek from memory as well as those warning of the “evil” of communism from Whittaker Chambers’s sullen memoir, Witness.4 When George W. Bush alleged evil, he also used Chambers as source material. Michael Gerson and
David Frum, the authors of “axis of evil” in Bush’s 2002 State of the Union speech, knew *Witness* well; they attended a posthumous 100th birthday party for Chambers held at the White House in 2001.5

Contemporary conservative audiences can read conservative columnists in the *Wall Street Journal*, watch a television personality adopt a similar stance on the same day’s story on Fox News, and listen to Rush Limbaugh reinforce an equivalent view during his daily radio program. The conservative media environment is an “echo chamber,” in Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Capella’s terms.6 This insularity is not new, however. Before Fox News and scores of conservative media outlets, I argue, a group of select texts published between World War II and Barry Goldwater’s defeat in 1964 became the de facto canon of conservatism. *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), and *Witness* (1952) joined *National Review* (founded in 1955) and tracts like Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), William F. Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale* (1951) and *Up from Liberalism* (1959), Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* (1953), Robert Nisbet’s *The Quest for Community* (1953), Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), and Frank Meyer’s *In Defense of Freedom* (1962) as conservatism’s most frequently celebrated texts.7 A more generous account of conservatives’ canonization practices beyond these “true classics” would include second-order postwar texts by James Burnham, Willmoore Kendall, Ludwig von Mises, Leo Strauss, and Eric Voegelin.8 Considered as a whole, these canonical texts contain a kaleidoscope of conservative doctrines on individual freedom and social order, capitalism and local traditions, the role of religion in public life, the value of mass democracy, and the legitimate role of government. Meyer and Buckley thought the combination of two principal strains of conservatism, one dedicated to freedom and one whose chief value was tradition, was a natural synthesis that formed a coherent philosophical bulwark against communism.9 Kirk thought such a merger was “ice and fire.”10 Still others, Hayek and Chambers, wanted little to do with the conservative label even as they espoused positions that captivated conservatives.11 The canon’s prismatic doctrinal contents were matched only by the diversity of its rhetorical styles: the guileless moxie of Goldwater, the gladiatorial gallivanting of Buckley, the hoary mysticism of Kirk, and the morose eloquence of Chambers.12 Conservatives canonized the polemic and the phrenic, the dense and the readable.

Although many of these texts forward different, even antithetical, versions of conservatism, since the middle of the twentieth century, each has been touted
over others with remarkable consistency in conservatives’ editorials, speeches, polemics, campaign books, memoirs, testimonials, obituaries, and histories. Conservatives sought to keep the relationship between postwar philosophy and political organization tight, to make sure that, as one conservative writer put it, “political theory becomes real politics.” Nevertheless, the full story of the canon’s symbolic power to shape philosophical conservatism and influence political conservatism remains untold. In this essay, I aim to locate the scriptural force of a secular canon. My basic claim is that the canon created and managed the potential for symbolic fusion and fracture among conservatives. Conservatives turn to canonical works as guidebooks so consistently in periods of triumph, defeat, stability, and division that the canon resembles the protean force of the Bible among Christians, an anchor for communal identity and a wellspring of interpretive disagreement simultaneously.

The canonization of books defending a range of philosophical commitments eased the fusion of dissimilar and contradictory conservatisms both within and beyond the Republican Party: traditionalist and libertarian, populist and elitist, religious and secular, agrarian and corporatist, and principled and adjustable. In addition to furnishing doctrinal and political resources for activists, writers, and politicians, the canon was a resonant symbol of conservative synergy as well as a constituent element of political identity. But in a larger sense, the development of a political identity with a shared history, a trove of insider references, a set of common heroes and enemies, and a repertoire of preferred argumentative forms was aided significantly by an organic canonization process in which conservatism’s ideological and textual traditions coalesced.

Although the canonization of divergent philosophical conservatisms generated versatile symbolic resources useful in fusing a political coalition, persistent differences in philosophical first principles and political priorities contributed to conservative fracture by rendering a precise definition of conservatism difficult. Philosophical diversity in the movement’s mid-century symbolic foundation has legitimized a protean conservatism that shifted between emphases on small government libertarianism, social tradition and the establishment of a Christian moral order, and a forceful nationalism. These oscillations resulted in regular reckonings in which conservative critics lamented conservatism’s leadership and published paeans about canonical wisdom. All told, the canon has become a storehouse of symbolic capital useful in disputes over the meaning of philosophical conservatism and the direction of political conservatism.
This essay is not an analysis of specific books per se but is a demonstration of how conservatives, in Barbie Zelizer's terms, “establish conventions that are largely tacit and negotiable as to how community members can ‘recognize, create, experience, and talk about texts.’” As such, I do not detail the doctrinal content of each canonical text; instead, I elucidate the rhetorical function of a canon within one political community as an illustration of the variety of rhetorical practices that canon enables and constrains. Additionally, I establish the central role of the canon in a decades-long controversy over conservatives’ communal identity. I do not claim that all conservatives have studied the canon; the canon, however, has shaped the rhetoric and tactics of prominent politicians, activists, and scholars as well as ordinary adherents. To demonstrate the sheer variety of conservative commemorative practices, I open this essay by detailing how conservative organizations have constituted canonical texts as a Great Books tradition within the movement. Then, I analyze two common narratives in conservative literature that exemplify the symbolic power of the canon: genesis claims with mythic depictions of founding conservatives and vitriolic jeremiads defending the one true conservatism. I conclude by analyzing the link between the principles of classical conservatism and canonical politics.

**Canons and Political Identity**

As sets of officially sanctioned texts, canons are “complicit with power.” Discriminating between texts enables communities to collate “otherwise unmanageable historical deposits,” but only by proceeding with the controversial claim that “some works are more valuable than others, more worthy of minute attention.” The rhetorical force of canons within political communities has generated curiously scarce interest from scholars who examine the relationship between texts, audiences, and the development of collective mentalities. The form and scope of a print culture can be elucidated by attending to pragmatic questions about what “books do to us and for us” as communities as well as how meanings are made, both orally and in print, through “the signifying practices of media audiences.” Canons are vital resources of meaning in a print culture, which in this sense means a culture about prized print sources, not a culture of print. Canonical force is often exerted in a kind of cultural loop; political communities cultivate and maintain canonical prestige through
rhetorical practices, and canons, in turn, influence the rhetorical practices of political communities.

Canons are more than ecclesiastically approved texts. A canon is a set of texts that a community, implicitly and explicitly, didactically and organically, links to its identity. After all, canonization is a decisive expression of authority, of those texts considered timeless, prophetic, or prescient, but they do not function monolithically. The content of canonical literature may be subject to disputatious interpretations; nonetheless, much like constitutional disputes in the United States, participants widely acknowledge that this document, and no other, must form the basis of proper interpretations. Accordingly, social movement advocates may put “sacred” texts to fusionist or fractious purposes: adjudicating competing claims, resolving crises of legitimacy, charting movement history, forming coalitions, silencing off-key performances, and excommunicating the unrepentant. Canonical discourse is a form of public argument “that builds and creates community for both speaker and audience,” and advocates use canons to highlight the limits of communal identity.24

If communities are bound together by the force of common symbols, then canonicity is a unique binding agent. Canons institute a hierarchy of superior communal touchstones that place rhetorical burdens on those disputing or re-interpreting a community’s identity to recommend courses of action in keeping with canonical wisdom. As a result, canons establish firmer boundaries around what James Boyd White calls “the resources of meaning that a culture makes available to its members.”25 Canonization does not put James Joyce, for instance, beyond criticism, but canonization is a resolute confirmation of Joyce as a communal model.

Determining models in a text-centered tradition does not equate to philosophical consistency, however. In People of the Book, Moshe Halbertal interprets Judaism as a text-centered tradition. “The centrality of the text,” he argues, “takes the place of theological consistency.”26 Common textual practices become cardinal features of a community’s identity: “Text is thus more than a shared matrix for a diverse tradition—it is one of the tradition’s central operative concepts, like ‘God’ or ‘Israel.’”27 As references to source material accumulate over time in print and public address, the community’s text-centered practices become a ritualistic rhetoric. If the variety of Christian doctrine and worship practices can serve as an example of the interpretive range of such a tradition, then canons “can be much more flexible, and less ideologically binding, than prevalent conceptions allow.”28 At its core,
a canon is a “transhistorical textual community” rather than a record of fixed dictates. As one locus in contests between ecumenical and exclusive conceptions of identity, canonical questions are communal questions and, quite often, vice versa.

**Reading like Reagan: Canonical Uplift**

Historians and theorists have accounted for American conservatism in two ways that obscure the importance of galvanizing canonical texts. First, one approach, exemplified by but not exclusive to commentators on the left, has treated conservatism as a disembodied set of political ideas: a defense of tradition, reactionary politics, individualism, capitalism, racism, cultural imperialism, religious fundamentalism, and fascism. Second, historical scholarship on the growth of conservatism in the United States is vulnerable to a related criticism. When explaining the growth of conservatism, scholars have emphasized organizational, cultural, and political trends after World War II ranging from key national elections to racial politics. Historians have noted only in passing that a small set of postwar books were “critical to the success of the GOP Right” without theorizing their individual influence or their rhetorical function as a canon. Since many scholars agree that conservatives of various prefixes—neo-, paleo-, cultural, economic, and compassionate—hold doctrinally disparate beliefs, the most basic question when considering modern conservatism is among the least considered: What holds conservatism together?

The circulation of common texts was, I contend, formative in the creation of conservatism as a political identity that houses differing ideological traditions. Conservatives have not stowed their canon away for safekeeping and special occasions. Common texts afforded a combative and cantankerous community, one conservative testified, “a center of gravity, some focal point, that addressed them as members of a movement and taught them, in Lenin’s words, ‘what is to be done.’” These consecrated texts remain more than resources for pithy proverbs; they are primary teaching tools of conservative organizations, and audiences are encouraged to imitate what they read. Leading conservative organizations invested considerable authority in promoting canonical works both as the origin of the movement and its enchiridion. Conferences at The Heritage Foundation, seminars at the Reagan Ranch, and scores of reading lists and would-be syllabi promoted canonical works by gallant wordsmiths
who forged a political movement, stemmed the leftist tide, and reformed political culture. In the decades since each was published, conservatives have parsed the canon to reprint memorable portions in encomiums with telling titles like *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?* (1970), *Keeping the Tablets* (1988), *The Conservative Bookshelf* (2004), and *The March of Freedom* (2004).35

Like canons in other communities, conservatives have used their canon variously as “a standard, a sublime truth, a rule, a master-work, an artistic model, and . . . a book-list for educational use.”36 The authority of canonical writers has been harnessed and put to use variably by later conservative advocates. Many reserve quotations from canonical texts for the most dramatic spaces in their work: first and last paragraphs, first and last chapters. David Frum, for instance, learned this lesson well. He nodded frequently at Buckley, Weaver, and Chambers in the first chapter of *Dead Right* (1994) and, in *Comeback: Conservatism that Can Win Again* (2008), peppered his lamentations of conservative “tabloid politics” and Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio bombast with comparisons to Goldwater, Kirk, and other conservative founders.37 He concluded broodingly: “Where are the Friedmans now? Where are the Buckleys?”38

Contemporary conservative speakers and writers displayed fealty to postwar sources through noticeable exhibitions of canonical writers’ standout terms and lines. Numerous American writers have energetically updated Hayek’s mid-century argument that England’s planned economy denied political freedom by limiting economic freedom. These American Hayeks alleged that America was “hurting down,” “speeding down,” or merely “traveling down the road to serfdom.”39 The nation’s economic policies risked Keynesian malaise at best or economic despotism at worst, and Hayek’s metaphor was most appropriate to describe excessive government involvement. Similarly, when surveying the state of higher education or religious freedom, Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale* was the rhetorical standard; the title’s basic form and rhythm remained but the nouns did not in articles like “God and Man at Columbia,” or “GOP and Man at Yale,” or “God, Man, and Green at Yale,” or “God and Man in the Conservative Movement.”40 The vocabulary Buckley used in 1951 to call Yale to task for abandoning its Christian roots in favor of secular humanism was a benchmark of cultural criticism especially when impugning religious or educational decline. These were liturgical acts; they mirrored public worship rituals.

By parroting the style, tone, and topic of canonical sources, conservatives sought canonical cachet unsubtly. One writer admitted to forcing awkward
“prose gyrations” in college papers in “shameless” attempts to imitate canonical writers like Buckley. Alfred Regnery, a conservative book publisher, recalled assessing “no fewer than fifty manuscripts and book proposals that began, ‘This book picks up where God and Man at Yale left off.’” Conservative writers dressed their case in a canonical vernacular in more furtive ways as well. Conservative advocates bonded with knowing audiences over pedantic noms de guerre for canonical writers: Russell Kirk as “the Sage of Mecosta,” William F. Buckley as “WFB” or “Chairman Bill.” Playful uses of enigmatic and unwieldy lines from second-tier canonical writers—Eric Voegelin’s “immanentization of the eschaton” from The New Science of Politics (1952) was emblazoned on T-shirts and bumper stickers—indicated that even the most opaque and peripheral canonical works contained symbolic sway. All told, in such a text-savvy movement culture, recitations of Kirk or Buckley demonstrated that the writer or speaker was not only a knowledgeable advocate of core conservative ideas but also a willing conservationist of the movement’s text-centered tradition.

Beyond references, both obvious and otherwise, conservatives have employed various commemorative practices to shepherd readers to the canon. Suggested reading lists, frequently lists that ranked canonical texts, became ubiquitous in conservative literature. Notable conservatives weighed in on the best ways to read the canon. Ann Coulter, for instance, preferred to “snuggle up” with the classics in their entirety. Witness was her favorite. Conservative magazines such as National Review and Human Events published commemorative lists like “The 100 Best Non-Fiction Books of the Century” and “The Fifty Worst (and Best) Books of the Century.” Conservative authors generated even more specific lists featuring canonical texts of the “Top 10 Books Liberals Want to Burn” and the “Top 10 Books Every Republican Congressman Should Read.” In essence, conservatives competed to commemorate canonical texts in new ways; they ranked and re-ranked books in comprehensive lists, subclassified and ranked within genres, and ranked by decade.

These argumentative patterns reveal a connection between, on the one hand, demonstrations of expertise in conservative political thought and, on the other, proclamations of membership within the conservative community. Performing canonical proficiency signified adroit conceptual familiarity and genuine identity. The canon, in short, became a measure of authority and authenticity, and conservatives often displayed their rhetorical plumage. Since these texts were indelibly linked to communal identity, canonical knowledge,
narratives, and rhetorical forms were valuable and fungible cultural capital. In a general sense, allusions to sanctioned sources—whether Shakespeare or *SportsCenter* depending on the community—afford both “linguistic capital,” the ability to speak in the rhetorical forms of authorities, and “symbolic capital, a kind of knowledge-capital whose possession can be displayed upon request and which thereby entitles its possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person.”49 In the conservative context, there was a performative dimension to canonicity. Adept canonical rhetoric signified both education and acculturation. Similarly, conservatives employing canonical allusions wrapped themselves in the authority of an authentic conservative identity; their politics were the natural result of internalizing not just any philosophical individualist or anti-Communist works but treasured books within the community’s public textual tradition.

These frequent expenditures of symbolic capital beg the question of the source of this communal prestige. When conservatives honored books, they did not do so randomly or without consideration of ideological content. When conservatives glorified these texts, they glorified a political idea epitomized. Authors and their books were masters and masterpieces or, put differently, the embodiment of and metonym for conservative concepts of freedom, religion, tradition, markets, and nationalism. In celebratory discourse about the canon, books and authors were corporeal referents and material emblems for ethereal ideas. To share the book was to share the idea; discussing the idea meant citing the text. More importantly, citing, referencing, or republishing a canonical text meant preserving conservative political thought for a future audience. Canonical texts arranged timely cases for timeless ideals so memorably that these books were metonymic of conservative ideas, but not as simple, physical stand-ins. Canonical books were the most eloquent, thorough account of the concept, the idea in its most resplendent rhetorical form. The concept, moreover, before its postwar emblem, was an inert abstraction searching for a moving rhetorical form. Like the holy tomes of religions, the text and the idea become permanently yoked for their communities. In Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences*, a broad political idea like the preservation of tradition found, conservatives argued, its fullest, most forceful expression in Weaver’s ruminations about the decline of musical tastes, language purity, the sanctity of private property, and Western civilization. When Frank Meyer dubbed Weaver’s book the “*fons et origo*” of American conservatism, he intimated that traditionalism was inchoate without *Ideas Have Consequences* as its apotheosis.50

Conservative writers, magazines, publishers, and organizations have
become dedicated to conserving conservative ideas by introducing young conservatives to these textual totems and guiding their reading experiences. Aspiring conservative politicos attended a variety of workshops devoted to the canon and its famous readers. “Everywhere young conservatives turn,” the New York Times reported in 2006, “there are conferences, seminars and reading lists that promote figures from the movement’s formative years.” One young participant excitedly called her month-long experience “conservative boot camp.” The Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) regularly convened national and international conferences, colloquia, half-day seminars, and weekend and weeklong retreats to discuss the enduring relevance of canonical texts. In 2005, for example, ISI invited select undergraduates for a two-week study session on “order and liberty” at Oxford organized around four anchor texts: Witness, The Road to Serfdom, Ideas Have Consequences, and The Conservative Mind.

These promotional efforts were billed as essential both to countering progressive educational trends and, more broadly, to cultivating a new generation of intellectual conservatives capable of leading examined lives. The Young America’s Foundation’s reading list, prominently displayed on their website, aimed to counter liberal pedagogy: “This list of books is only a sampling of the best books available to help you balance your education with conservative ideas.” The conservative historian Lee Edwards made the case for rescuing students from a low, liberal culture while he moderated the instructively titled “Great Books to Read in College” panel at the 2009 National Conservative Student Conference (NCSC). These commemorative practices provided models of text-centered behavior to students to school them in the movement’s learned past, a Great Books tradition specific to American conservatism.

As canonical novels by Dostoevsky or Tolstoy purportedly improved the cultural literacy of the general reader, conservatives claimed that the movement’s canonical texts enhanced the conservative reader’s philosophical literacy. Conservatives have borrowed this cultural “uplift” argument from high-culture defenders such as Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, and Harold Bloom to justify preserving their version of the conservative movement’s Great Books. Contemporaneous with most books of the conservative canon, The Great Books of the Western World, the 32,000-page brainchild of Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins, appeared in 1952. This collection of 443 works by 74 white male writers ostensibly made the best of Western knowledge available for mass consumption. Through the Great Books collection, mid-century
audiences could put their jumping beans aside and get a dose of culture by entering the erudite realm of Goethe, Byron, and Hume. The connection between the mid-century marketing of the Great Books and conservatives’ more recent commemoration of their canon was far from accidental. Great Books devotees and some prominent conservatives, such as Adler and Leo Strauss, shared both personal connections and elitist sensibilities; they cast aspersions on mass culture as a breeding ground for mob rule.  

In their efforts to mold young conservatives into eager, canon-focused readers, several conservative writers have taken cultural cues from notable aesthetes and steered audiences to “classic” conservative books that improved, or “lifted,” the reader and thereby made the model conservative a sophisticated polymath. Some conservatives have essentially rewritten movement-specific versions of Bloom’s *How to Read and Why,* encouraging conservatives to read the right books to attain a more “capacious” sense of conservatism. In so doing, they have cultivated themselves as “arbiters of bibliographic taste” in Ted Strifhas’s terms. Dinesh D’Souza, for example, concluded his *Letters to a Young Conservative* (2002) with an Arnoldian warning: to be an “educated conservative,” he wrote, aspirants must “be familiar with ‘the best that has been thought and said’ of modern conservative thought.” D’Souza, however, went a step further into the high-culture lexicon and, channeling Adler’s *How to Read a Book,* offered a suggested reading list for those hoping to refine their conservatism.

As conservatives imbued their canon with the renown of Great Books, they also framed trailblazing conservatives as canonical disciples with the implication that the latter station caused the former condition. In *Reading the Right Books: A Guide for the Intelligent Conservative* (2007), Edwards injected conservative saints into Adler’s famous compilation of reflective reading strategies from *How to Read a Book.* Edwards recalled visiting Ronald Reagan’s house in 1965 and discovering “works of history, economics, and politics” in his library. Naturally, Reagan read as Adler instructed. He was no passive reader; the shelved books in his home, “conservative classics such as F. A. Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*” among others, “were dog-eared and annotated, obviously read more than once.” Consuming the Great Books of conservatism was, by Edwards’s reasoning, Reaganesque. Reagan’s political legacy was intertwined with reading habits and the philosophical lessons of the canon.

Edwards’s encomium to Reagan-the-reader was not anomalous. Conservative organizations located him within the canonical tradition that students could easily access. At the 2006 Young America’s Foundation convention—“the
conservative movement starts here,” they claimed—noteworthy young activists earned membership in “Club 100.” New “Club 100” members were invited to a retreat at the Reagan Ranch Center “where the foundation conducts summer workshops instructing students in public speaking, media relations, and the fundamentals of conservative philosophy,” including the writings of Goldwater, Kirk, and Buckley. One Reagan Ranch lecturer informed students that Reagan “gained strength from Russell Kirk and Friedrich Hayek.” In case the moral of the story was unclear, he exhorted them to follow in the footsteps of the presidential reader in order to be “as good and decent and helpful as Ronald Reagan.”

Scholastic retreats on liberty and order, Great Books panels at conservative student conferences, and stories about Reagan-the-reader were designed to shape the way conservative readers encountered this group of texts. Whether they read each canonical text or not, conservative audiences came across these books, as Stanley Fish puts it, “in media res”: “they go about their business not in order to discover its point, but already in possession of and possessed by its point.” These authors and organizations preconstituted the canon as well as potential readers; appeals to canonical texts and their model readers established the beau ideal of the conservative sophisticate who located the core of his or her political identity in common texts and who slogged through often baroque prose to find enduring conservative truths.

A Useful Canon

The canon provided the tools to weather the rocky marriage between various conservative sects—traditionalists, libertarians, neo-conservatives, and others; the canon afforded resources for each faction to establish their bona fides and to protect their version of authentic conservatism from impostors and apostates. Two patterns in conservatives’ canonical discourse reveal the varied uses to which the canon has been put. Some conservative stories about the canon were a kind of folklore about the movement’s origins; other stories pursued a divisive revanchism and urged the purging of interlopers. All of these stories, nevertheless, were rooted in the canon, and such shared practices were essential to the creation of conservatism as a variable political experience shared through common texts. The conservative canon provided the resources for constituting the political community as well as the means to contest its boundaries.
The genesis claim

Ranging from recollections of Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign to the unheralded financiers of the early movement, conservative discourse was replete with tales from the postwar period. One tale, however, is noteworthy because its form was replicated by many conservative writers and politicians. What I term the “genesis claim” was a text-centered account of the movement’s post–World War II origins. Part history, part historiography, part hagiography, the genesis claim was conservatism’s origin myth. Conservatism, the genesis claim stipulated, was the product of print, not a march, a protest, or a pivotal moment of persecution. The claim explicitly invoked canonical texts as near holy books penned by ideological warriors. The argumentative structure of the genesis claim was causal, and its form was that of exaltation. Regnery, for example, thought conservative ideas languished during the mid-century before the conservative movement developed in keeping with an “old maxim” in the publishing industry: “everything starts with a hardback book.” “Hayek, Mises, Buckley, Chambers, and Kirk,” he asserted, framing canonical texts as causal agents, “ignited the conservative cause with books, and over the coming decades, books would be at the heart of the growth of the movement.” Regnery’s assessment of the searing power of books was not unique. The conservative movement grew, Richard Viguerie and David Franke contended, because “avid book readers . . . acted out the title” of Weaver’s Ideas Have Consequences. In genesis claim accounts, authoring an influential book amounted to a heroic, even legendary deed.

There were small variations in the form of the genesis claim. Some advocates briefly name-checked mid-century conservatives; others gave book-by-book delineations of the role each played in fusing the conservative ideological coalition. These variations were different takes on the same story, one in which dedicated, mid-century writers connected with mid-century readers, and together they created conservatism as a self-aware political community. This founding story allowed members of the conservative ideological coalition, despite frequent fractious disagreements, to identify a common heritage and bond over shared texts.

The genesis claim exhibited both the content and structure Mircea Eliade attributes to myth. “Myth,” Eliade defines, “narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings.’” Myths enumerate the “deeds” of the “Supernatural Beings” who
brought “reality into existence.”72 Myths are stories that serve a basic existential purpose, providing an account of “creation,” of how a world and a community “began to be.”73 Origin myths fuse potentially fractious communities. The repetition of the origin myth, its public performance, ritualizes those roots and signals that the performer possesses valued knowledge. Eliade explains, “He who recites or performs the origin myth is thereby steeped in the sacred atmosphere in which these miraculous events took place.” Mythic recitations renew the “fabulous time” and permit the performer to summon “the presence of Gods or Heroes.”74 The performer of the origin myth conjures paragons to interpret the community’s past and future.

In several conservatives’ version of the genesis claim, the two decades following World War II were Eliade’s “primordial Time,” a portentous period featuring a disconnected, sporadic, and beaten Right. Free thought was restricted in the mid-century in this account; political ideas that did not emerge from secular, collectivist principles were shunned. Regnery depicted a condition of ideological homogeneity: “The press, the intelligentsia, the publishing companies, the universities, and virtually all parts of the culture that disseminated ideas and beliefs were left of center.”75 Other conservative chroniclers framed this stifled intellectual environment as a form of domestic totalitarianism, “the sort of monopoly enjoyed by Pravda in its Soviet heyday.”76 Conservatism’s exile from political culture was compounded by a liberal, New Deal orthodoxy shared by both political parties. The Republican Party, “shaped in the luminous but nebulous image of Dwight Eisenhower,” offered no recourse.77

With vivid details of fledgling conservatives’ political desperation during the postwar era, conservative canonists enhanced the power of founding texts to the transcendent by intensifying the drama of the genesis claim. Those few daring to call themselves conservative after World War II had “no organizations,” “no networks,” “no voice,” and “no power.”78 Like Eliade’s mythic Gods, conservative founders had few resources with which to bring conservatism into existence; risking much, they composed plangent texts out of sheer will. One writer depicted the publication of these texts in salvific terms; marking the beginning of the end of their mid-century plight, these books were an “escape from bondage.” Laying these intellectual foundations was, he continued, “an astonishing achievement” amid the “long reign of doctrinaire liberalism.”79 The founders composed textual talismans when conservatism’s prospects were darkened by total ideological isolation.

Mirroring Eliade’s notion that myths identify the founding moment of
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communal existence, the genesis claim advanced a causal relationship between conservative books and growing legions of conservatives. Sacred, pioneering tracts enabled the growth of “articulate, self-confident conservatives.” These genesis claims employed the tropes of epic battle sequences to amplify the competition between liberalism and conservatism into a postwar ideological war. At the last possible moment when liberalism looked most dominant, most capable of ending ideological competition in the United States, and most friendly to the nation’s Soviet enemy, a band of elite ideological warriors stepped forward in revolt. A small coterie of heroic conservatives, the movement’s “own greatest generation,” as Edwards named them, emerged to face the “prevailing liberal orthodoxy.” They sought to win the war of ideas, and outnumbered, they stocked up on ideological ammunition in preparation for a protracted siege. Regnery’s rendition of the genesis story portrayed the suddenness of these heroes’ daring intellectual gambit: “But then, out of the blue, during the 1940s and ’50s, a few articulate and outspoken conservatives began to challenge the status quo.” Men like Hayek, Kirk, Chambers, and Buckley, “lonely” and “intrepid” men, throttled the nation’s political culture by introducing conservatism in the 1950s, gained a foothold in the Republican Party by 1964 and, by 1980, saw a president elected because of ideas they developed.

As these books were treated as ideological touchstones, the unprecedented and irreplaceable outcomes of single moments of inspired genius, their authors became legendary founding figures, Eliade’s “Supernatural Beings,” capable of producing masterpieces and much more. Genesis claim accounts reached for metaphoric language appropriate for idols. In Edwards’s version of the genesis claim, postwar conservatives produced a print deluge: “Indeed, books poured forth from right-thinking men and women. . . . like a mighty river.” Where Edwards employed naturalistic imagery, other conservatives magnified the genesis claim with martial metaphors. According to John Engler, former governor of Michigan, Russell Kirk defended the “permanent things” by brandishing the “Sword of Imagination” against an “antagonist world.” Other metaphoric accounts of the founders’ greatness were just as martial if also more visceral. By one account, Buckley was “Braveheart lopping off the heads of one faculty lord and knight after another.” Other writers reached for holy metaphors, figuring founding texts as Bibles and the founders as divinely inspired seeders of the gospel like Paul.

Whereas conservative historiographers asserted these books’ national force, first-person narratives afforded the canon considerable power in the lives of individuals. Several conservatives’ odes to canonical texts exemplified
the anecdotes that animated these personal versions of the genesis claim. In *Right from the Beginning* (1988), Pat Buchanan remembered how he devoted himself to canonical texts, developed an irrepresible conservative zeal, and was made anew. To depict his transformation, Buchanan borrowed the imagistic language Keats employed to describe reading Chapman’s Homer: “Yet did I never breathe its pure serene / Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold: Then I felt like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken.” To one of Buckley’s eulogists, a “chance encounter” with *National Review* “caused the scales to fall” from his eyes. Just as in Paul’s divine roadway encounter in Acts, in these narratives, the canon was a sacred force encountered during a sinner’s journey. These conversions were momentous processes of becoming one’s opposite or changing the essential features of one’s life. Tales like these were enculturation exercises bound within insider anecdotes and personal narratives; these stories showed conservatives the importance of testifying about the transformative power of conservative texts and ideas. Reading the canon was positioned as a religious experience that changed the reader’s political identity.

Many of these sample genesis claims privilege the operatic over the ideological; that is, some conservatives rehearsed their origin myth quickly as an ingratiating prelude to a speech, article, or book; others, however, forwarded claims that valorized the ideological content of canonical texts more specifically. These enhanced versions featured founding deeds no less mythic in nature; conservatives recognized canonical texts as forming conservatism as a multifaceted ideology, a big tent sheltering conservatives of many types including, at least, traditionalists and libertarians.

Reagan, for instance, waxed nostalgic about the books that sparked his conversion so often that he even, in a speech to a *National Review* audience, reflected on the communal value of such rhetorical practices. He gave it a romantic name: “The Portuguese have a word for such recollection—saudade—a poetic term rich with the dreams of yesterday. And surely in our past there was many a dream that went aglimmering and many a field littered with broken lances.” Reagan performed a reflective conservatism, a political identity bent on figuring its future in terms of a storied printed past. Yet canonical texts for Reagan were not all conservative in the same sense. Variations in the ideological content of each signified that canonical conservatism was not monolithic.

For Reagan, the founding conservatives’ efforts deserved continued tribute because they both created and connected potentially separate ideological
threads. Invoking nearly all of the founders by name in an address to the 1981 Conservative Political Action Conference, the recently inaugurated president framed his election as a “victory of ideas” rather than a “victory of politics,” and alluding to the fabulous time of conservatism’s founding, he recognized “a few unselfish Americans” for nourishing these ideas “through many grim and heartbreaking defeats.” Their works of philosophical invention as well as synthesis allowed mid-century conservatism to develop one philosophy with two manifestations in libertarianism and traditionalism, not two philosophies combined awkwardly under one name. He argued that conservatism was an ideology of balance that required a ballast point between individual freedom and objective moral authority. He said, “Just as surely as we seek to put our financial house in order and rebuild our nation’s defenses, so too we seek to protect the unborn, to end the manipulation of schoolchildren by utopian planners, and permit the acknowledgement of a Supreme Being in our classrooms just as we allow such acknowledgements in other public institutions.” For Reagan, a centralcanonical lesson was that the core conservative values of freedom and order complemented and modified one another; put together, these values produced not contradiction but an equilibrium between free choice and self-direction on the one hand and adherence to law, tradition, and heritage on the other. The quest to reduce “government interference in the marketplace” should be achieved with an abiding “respect for law, an appreciation for tradition, and regard for the social consensus.” Virtue was a worthy social goal if it was pursued by free individuals; market innovations were manifestations of individual liberty, but they must be measured against time-honored practices that constitute social order.

In similar fashion, William Rusher’s *The Rise of the Right* (1984) exemplified the historiographic genesis claim as a mythic origin story featuring a coalition of Supernatural Beings rather than a single act of creation. Rusher used his mid-century conversion to conservatism as symbolic of the development of each camp in the “conservative triptych” of libertarians, traditionalists, and anti-Communists. Beginning with libertarianism, Rusher noted that he was “duly impressed” by Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*, the “Bible and battle cry of postwar classical liberals.” In the early 1950s, Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness* taught Rusher the same lesson Reagan learned from canonical texts: in lieu of an unwavering commitment to any first principle, conservatism meant ideological parity between liberty, tradition, and security. *Witness*, Rusher remembered, “drew together, in superb prose, all of my major new preoccupations” about the need to shirk strict libertarianism and empower
the state to confront domestic and international Communists. Although *Witness* proved that “philosophical anti-communism was a full and worthy partner of classical liberalism,” an anti-state, anti-Communist vocabulary could not adequately condemn the speed and sweep of mid-century social change. As Rusher completed his depiction of the conservative coalition, his conversion narrative reached its moment of clarification when the clouds parted or the wool was lifted and political truth was revealed. Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* gave him traditionalist precepts to explain his suspicion of the “scientistic” and his abhorrence of “all forms of Marxist socialism, including communism.” These three conservative traditions yielded Rusher both a complete worldview and, as he harkened to Constantine’s genre-defining conversion tale, “a new sign under which to conquer.” “I was something else,” he wrote with a heightened sense of melodrama, “something with a longer tradition, a richer heritage, a deeper significance. I was a conservative.”

As Reagan and Rusher did, several conservative historians recount the history of postwar conservatism using canonical texts to represent the founding and fusion of conservatism as a philosophical network. Although these texts insisted that conservatism was a coherent philosophy, they also framed differences among conservatives as necessary to produce a larger movement that was not philosophically slavish to any one premise. The canon became the fused doctrinal core that balanced individual freedom, social custom, and a Judeo-Christian heritage. Former Senator John East recalled Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in homage to the diversity of conservative mid-century theorists: “Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?” Conservatives have made sure that mythic textual memory, Reagan’s *saudade*, was an important ritual in the performance of conservatism.

**The Canonical Jeremiad**

When rhapsodized in the genesis claim, the canon fused. The genesis claim rehearsed a common history and set of founding documents for an often argumentative political community. But contemporary conservatives also used a transformed version of the genesis claim as a more divisive tool to highlight breaches separating different types of conservatives; the canon’s sacred message was once written in stone, and conservatives who have departed from those truths have been called false prophets ever since. “The young men and women of the Right,” one writer howled in the pages of *The American Conservative*, “aren’t reading much Richard Weaver these days—nor
much Robert Nisbet or Russell Kirk.” “College Republicans” favored lower formulations like “George W. Bush is My Homeboy” instead. Pedantic conservative authors dismissed the “vast” expanses of conservative literature written by “talk-radio personages” as “rubbish” and found comedic relief in comparisons of cerebral post–World War II books with the “Happy Meal conservatism” of recent vintage. When conservatives failed, it was not a sign that conservatism needed updating or wholesale reinvention; it needed recovery, which only happened when conservatives recommitted to “the writings of the passionate original thinkers and scholars who helped found the modern conservative movement.” The canon had been extolled so frequently in conservative discourse that it has become plain that following its lessons was critical to maintaining one’s conservatism. Accusing other conservatives of discarding canonical texts was a potent argument that simultaneously burnished the conservative credentials of the accuser, placed others’ pedigree in doubt, and resituated the canon as the measurement of true conservatism. The canon, in short, provided the basis of another hallmark performance of postwar American conservatism: the canonical jeremiad.

A product of Puritan New England, the rhetorical form of the jeremiad followed the structure of Jeremiah’s ancient plea for Jews to forsake false idols. Puritans found meaning in Jeremiah’s simultaneous lamentation of communal activities and exaltation of communal traditions. The jeremiad featured a “Biblical precedent” once accepted by the community, detailed the consequences of the community’s failure to stay true to the precedent, and promised a utopia if the community could return to its spiritual roots. In its modern uses, the jeremiadic form allowed dissenters to encapsulate their criticisms of a community’s practices within norms the community itself has sanctioned. The conservative Jeremiah was a reformer, not a revolutionary, and the people needed only to return to their roots to save the community.

Since the conservative canon included roughly ten texts, it was a flexible standard that conservatives adopted to censure a variety of objectionable practices. Conservatives issued canonical jeremiads to critique conservatism’s leadership and media culture, but ultimately, the elasticity of the canon was exhibited by the multitude of political lessons devotees drew: axioms on limited government, justifications for increased government intervention on issues of public morality or military action, tenets on individualism, articles of an interconnected society, and teachings on the combination of social traditions and free markets. Conservatives’ use of the canon to constitute different conservative performances and ideals was, in Janice Radway’s terms, “multiply
determined and internally contradictory.” Although conservative jeremiahs blamed conservatism’s drift on different impostors, the use of the canonical jeremiad by both libertarian conservatives and traditionalist conservatives demonstrates both the frequency and plasticity of the return-to-roots form.

Traditionalists isolated those canonical tracts—God and Man at Yale, The Conservative Mind, and Ideas Have Consequences in particular—that helped sustain the claim that conservatism privileged morality over economics. Denouncing excessive defense spending, expansions of entitlement programs, and attempts to legislate morality, libertarian conservatives chastised conservatives for backsliding from limited government lessons in canonical books such as The Conscience of a Conservative, Capitalism and Freedom, and The Road to Serfdom. Whether these texts were selected individually or spotlighted as a group, or whether original doctrinal tensions among canonical works were obfuscated or highlighted, the function was similar: the political community agreed that present practices should proceed by past principles.

Traditionalist and libertarian conservative infighters in the George W. Bush era had one thing in common as well: conservatism, they agreed, needed to be saved from conservatives. In Modern Age, marketed as “the principal quarterly of the intellectual Right” since Russell Kirk founded the journal in 1957, George Panichas hoped to restore this conservatism to its traditionalist roots. True conservatism, Panichas demanded, began with a reverent posture toward inherited social values; it was suspicious of mass politics, political fads, and contra libertarianism, individual freedom. The lessons of The Conservative Mind and Ideas Have Consequences had been discarded as the formerly fixed term “conservative” experienced “diverse changes in meaning and value.” Panichas amplified his jeremiad by framing the struggle over conservatism in terms of the virgin-whore dichotomy. Traditional conservatism was pure; modern conservatism was perverse. To ignore charlatans who theorized conservatism as the pursuit of private freedom without consideration of public virtue was “to prostitute the ethos of conservatism.” To allow transgressions against conservative ideals yielded to “a cheapness that not only smothers the very soul of the conservative idea but also deconstructs it beyond recognition.” Real conservatives were forced to compete with libertines who did not acknowledge an objective morality for control of conservatism.

Rather than entrust inherited moral standards to markets or governments, conservative politics required, Panichas argued, the active conservation of “time-tested traditions and time-honored customs.” To do less would cede
conservatism to the hubristic apostates.111 As conservators of social conscience, conservatives performed a “critical function,” to recommend “deliberation” and “inner searching” about what was good for society, whereas “opportu


nists and nihilists” engaged an “idolatrous Zeitgeist” and promised to free individuals from any and all social strictures.112 The chief lessons Panichas drew from Weaver and Kirk, the source texts he leaned on most, were of a conservatism deeply suspicious of individual freedom that tolerated political change only glacially.

This term warfare could have been avoided, Panichas explained, if conservatives learned from Richard Weaver, the “rhetorical theorist par excellence,” that “improper changes” in the use of terms, the abandonment of “ontological referents,” preceded the breakdown of civilized communities. Closer attention to Weaver’s warning in Ideas Have Consequences may have protected conservatism from the nihilists who misappropriated conservatism as they pleased.113 Against the “false conservatives in sheep’s clothing” and their relativist morality, Panichas advocated the permanence of moral truth and the conservation of social tradition.114

Contrary to the traditionalist take on the canon, other conservatives mined the canon for lessons on limited government and individual freedom. Bush-era conservative polemics like Reclaiming Conservatism, Invasion of the Party Snatchers, Impostor, Conservatives Betrayed, and Take Back the Right claimed that philosophical conservatism was once a gospel of individual freedom, but conservative politicians grew fat with power and the conservative movement grew lazy with age. A return to the founding ideals was necessary to rescue conservatism from social conservatives, anxious to use government to install a national religion domestically, and neoconservatives, inclined to pursue a wide-eyed quest for global democratic order.115 The biggest factor, Michael Tanner argued in Leviathan on the Right (2007), in the degradation of conservatism from its individualist foundation was the idea that “big government can be used for conservative ends.” Isolating his canonical heroes, Tanner concluded that the oxymoronic big-government conservatism actually “ridicules F. A. Hayek and Barry Goldwater while embracing Teddy and even Franklin Roosevelt.”116 Following his favored guidebooks, Tanner urged sweeping tax cuts, increasing state jurisdiction, and massive entitlement reform as quintessentially conservative remedies.117

Similar to Panichas’s jeremiad, Tanner took aim at conservative factions that deviated from canonical lessons. To recover conservatism’s moorings, Tanner hoped to excommunicate “neoconservatives,” “national-greatness
conservatives,” “the Religious Right,” “supply-siders,” and “technophiles.” Also similar to Panichas’s jeremiad, when Tanner sketched the ideological heritage of these faux conservatives, he did not link them to any hallowed postwar texts.\textsuperscript{118} They were deviationists, pure and simple, with no claim to conservatism’s postwar ideological heritage. As Panichas did not pin pernicious libertarianism on Friedman or Goldwater, texts many of his fellow conservatives idolized, Tanner’s version of conservatism’s postwar origin story was a simple lesson about free markets and individualism with no debate, discord, or extraneous interpretations of conservatism from which later interlopers might have found inspiration. The disparate philosophical factions on the right, traditionalists, libertarians, and others only unified in the postwar period because of a common belief in “small government conservatism,” Tanner summarized.\textsuperscript{119} Panichas and Tanner’s shared reluctance to impugn canonical texts, even those least harmonious with their preferred conservatism, by linking them to misguided conservatives confirmed that although the jeremiad demanded social change, it also set “limits on reform.”\textsuperscript{120} Put another way, even when used in factional conflict, the canonical jeremiad had limited explosive potential because it left a forgiving foundation in the form of diverse texts intact.\textsuperscript{121} Partitioning canonical books or sequestering one founder’s ideas from those of his mid-century colleagues in order to argue for a more streamlined conservatism was beyond the pale. Even while pressing contentious, even sectarian, cases in jeremiadic form, these conservatives countenanced, one tacitly, the other explicitly, a potentially multivocal canon.

The canonical jeremiad was particularly important within the conservative coalition because it allowed for a process of reflection and controlled critique within circumscribed boundaries. Canonical texts became meaningful not only for their individual contents or patterns in readers’ interpretations but also because each has been conserved alongside other select books as the textual heritage of conservatism’s mid-century reinvention as a distinctly American partnership between traditionalists, libertarians, and other types of conservatives. Some traditionalists and libertarians, of course, would have surely dissolved their partnership and gone their separate ways. Yet in a movement culture fond of capacious formulations trumpeting “seminal works like Russell Kirk’s \textit{The Conservative Mind} and Whittaker Chambers’s \textit{Witness} and Richard Weaver’s \textit{Ideas Have Consequences} and F. A. Hayek’s \textit{The Road to Serfdom}” as a seminal group, the conservative canon possessed rhetorical force greater than the sum of its parts.\textsuperscript{122} Doctrinal diversity in the canon may have spurred arguments between conservative ideologues,
but diversity within traditionalist and libertarian canonical doctrine had become so expected, tolerated, and even celebrated as “thought-provoking paradoxes” that the risk of total ideological “crack-up” was palliated.\textsuperscript{123} The canon, in sum, provided a relatively stable framework for conservatives to engage in self-reflexive examination.

**Conclusion: Conserving Conservatism**

In closing, I return to the core issue explored in this essay, the canon’s function within conservatism, to examine the consequences of canonization as a movement practice. The canon was a versatile instrument to build the conservative coalition, close ranks, and cut ties. Internally, canonical rhetorics have highlighted conservatives’ common heritage and kept their rows at a simmer. The diverse canon allowed discordant intellectuals to occupy the masthead of the movement and, in so doing, promoted debates over the foundations of conservatism as a central tradition within conservatism. To debate the definition of conservatism was to engage in a long-standing conservative ritual.\textsuperscript{124} Moreover, the ideological and stylistic variety of the canon mollified competing conservatives. So long as conservative conferences and book clubs featured an ecumenical collection of founding texts, so long as rattling off familiar postwar books by Buckley, Kirk, Chambers, Hayek, Goldwater, and a smattering of other writers—“the basics,” as one writer summarized—was a staple refrain in conservative discourse, then its factions could envision their politics to be the result of the efforts of conservatism’s founders and sense that conservatism could be molded to fit their particular designs.\textsuperscript{125} The canon made stakeholders out of potential separatists. To some extent, the diverse canon haunted those stalwart conservatives who could not cotton to conservatives of different minds. One faction’s concerns about the prominence of odious social conservatives or another’s fears of the base morality of capitalists did not disappear entirely. Nevertheless, since a coalition of conservatives revered founding texts, at least one of which all factions could rally around, calls for secession were muted.\textsuperscript{126} The diversity of the canon reflected a tacit recognition that conservatives profited from internal disagreements.\textsuperscript{127}

Although the canon has inspired and given legitimacy to different schools of conservatives, its constituent books have remained, as I have shown, relatively static in the rhetoric and rituals of many prominent conservatives.
The conservative canon thus contains a paradoxical balancing act between order and flexibility, permanence and versatility. In fact, as an important part of what one historian calls conservatives’ “Sisyphean” quest for philosophical order, the canonization of postwar texts has been an appropriate rhetorical practice for a movement that has attempted to square freedom with tradition.128 Whereas the flexible canon symbolized a revisable conservatism of pragmatic politics, the whole notion of canonized masterworks conveyed ideological authority and order within a resolute conservatism.

As flexible as the canon has been, the creation of a canon of venerated political thought resembled, in both ideological content and rhetorical practice, a classical, British conservatism that predated its American counterpart. Justifications for the conservative re-creation of the Great Books replicated the watchwords of the conservatism of Edmund Burke, a conservatism whose first principle was conservation.129 Although U.S. conservatives disagreed vociferously about whether Burke was an “appropriate patron saint,” the bedrock values motivating Burke’s fears of the destructive force of unguided reason, science, and political equality were safely reaffirmed in many canonical texts.130 Independent of the doctrinal impact Burke had on some American conservatives, his concerns about a modern world that, in Kirk’s gloss, “damns tradition, exalts equality, and welcomes change” mirrored the concerns that conservative canonists cited when recommending canonical texts to young readers.131 On a basic level, canonicity itself proceeded from a respect for the conservative ideological tradition, the need to provide philosophical order to an often pliable movement, and a deferent relationship to the touchstones of prior generations. The canon, preserved in countless citations, references, and larger acts of reverence, was the vehicle by which conservatives conserve their ideological tradition. In articulating a timeless idea in moving terms—the dangerous coupling of absolute power with human frailty in the nation state, for example—a canonical text warranted preservation. As conservative individuals and organizations repeatedly held up timeless exemplars of the wisdom of past generations, they modeled corresponding classical conservative values as well: an understanding of heritage, a social authority, and individual humility. The conservative canon, in short, was the bibliographic form of order and tradition.

As contemporary conservatives treasured postwar texts and encouraged different types of conservatives to do the same, they worked as custodians to cultivate a usable American conservative past centered on ideas and their textual exemplars. These books have been enshrined as intellectual founts
because conservatives saw them as brilliant guides through dark times. As such, many conservatives argued as if their political thought risked impoverishment without rapt devotion to their ideological forbearers. Yet many conservatives did not seek to preserve tradition for tradition’s sake, because of some nostalgic sentimentality, or out of blind fealty to mandarin mid-century conservatives. The diverse conservative ideological tradition was worth preserving for a more pragmatic reason: casting the classics aside meant abandoning useful rhetorical prototypes. The movement’s canonical practices were direct endorsements of Harold Bloom’s more artful aphorism about classical texts as intellectual models. “Without the Canon,” Bloom declared, “we cease to think.”132 Conservatives afforded their own canon a similarly constitutive force: to neglect its insights was to abandon the myriad ways in which political actors could make sense of their world and still call themselves conservatives. These were texts that both formulated a doctrinal inventory for conservatives and, as one conservative concluded, taught them “how to think.”133 One could not engage the legacy of conservative thought, much less be a thoughtful conservative, without a degree of mimicry.

NOTES


13. Purely in terms of method, arguing for the existence of a canon, then tracking the influence of that canon on a specific political community is, on a smaller scale, like assessing the influence of a historic author, say Shakespeare, on modern literary culture. To begin, the critic must amass considerable and wide-ranging instances of the community celebrating specific texts. Generally, the critic must account for various uses of canonical language in the service of numerous goals: direct invocations of tracts in the corpus, appropriations of the Bard’s language without explicit attribution to *King Lear* or *Hamlet*, subtle similarities in sentence-level formulations between...
modern books and *Macbeth*, familiar narrative arcs between recent novels and *Romeo and Juliet*, and simple praise for a literary idol. Then the critic must integrate and explain the testimonials of readers inspired by different plays for different reasons or, even better, the same play for different reasons. Finally, the critic should identify patterns in the relationship between the community and these texts.

To organize a survey of more than four decades of conservative discourse about their founding texts, I systematically collected, indexed, and analyzed three kinds of conservative texts since 1964: books by conservative authors, speeches and lectures by conservatives, and magazine and journal articles written by or for conservative audiences. Where possible, I included other forms of evidence such as newspaper editorials and conservative talk radio and/or television programs. In addition to recording and analyzing how conservatives discuss canonical authors and their benchmark texts, I have followed the term “conservative” in relation to these canonical books because my interest lies in charting how conservatives have created and given meaning to conservatism, not in imposing a particular conception of conservatism on self-identified conservatives. I subdivided most of these categories into multiple sections, and in the following list, I detail those subcategories and give multiple examples of books, speeches, or articles within each. This list is meant to be thorough but not completely exhaustive; it should provide a clear sense of the interpretive scheme I employed and the types of texts I examined.


**CATEGORY:** Speeches and lectures by prominent conservatives. **SUBCATEGORIES:** Speeches at conservative think tanks, conservative youth organizations, and political action committees. **EXAMPLES:** Charles Kesler, “On the Ropes: What William F. Buckley Jr. Can Teach Today’s Conservatives,” speech at the American Enterprise

**CATEGORY:** Magazines and journals. **SUBCATEGORIES:** National magazines, reviews of books, and intellectual journals. **EXAMPLES:** The American Conservative; The American Spectator; The Claremont Review of Books; First Principles, First Things; Human Events; The Intercollegiate Review; Modern Age; National Review; New Criterion; Policy Review; and The Weekly Standard.


15. A broad survey of scholarship on conservatism reveals that only one scholarly study has examined conservative literature in detail, but its approach was debatable: e.g., it included neo-Nazi literature as conservative. See Chip Berlet, “The Write Stuff: U.S. Serial Print Culture from Conservatives out to Neo-Nazis,” *Library Trends* 56 (2008): 570–600.


33. Kevin Mattson, *Rebels All! A Short History of the Conservative Mind in Postwar*


55. Young America’s Foundation, “Recommended Reading,” no date, http://www.yaf.org/InnerPageTemplate.aspx?id=84&terms=reading (accessed October 2011). This YAF should not be confused with the 1960s era Young Americans for Freedom, although both are conservative youth organizations.


91. Reagan, “Our Time is Now.”

92. Reagan, “Our Time is Now.”


105. Canonical sources were, of course, not the only respected voices on conservative philosophy. The difference between Mickey Edwards’s *Reclaiming Conservatism* and Andrew Sullivan’s *The Conservative Soul* is illustrative. Both considered conservatism a lost political movement during the 2000s, yet the former cited nearly every canonical writer, in many cases at length, in defense of an ideal conservatism, whereas the latter cited different source material, mostly European writers like Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott. The operative distinction here is between “movement conservatives” invested in canonical texts, conservative organizations, and, largely, Republican politics and conservatives in the broadest international sense of the term. See Mickey Edwards, *Reclaiming Conservatism: How a Great American Political Movement Got Lost—and How It Can Find Its Way Back* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Andrew Sullivan, *The Conservative Soul: Fundamentalism, Freedom, and the Future of the Right* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).


111. George A. Panichas, “Restoring the Meaning of Conservatism (Part Two),” *Modern Age*
117. Tanner, Leviathan on the Right, 217–33.
118. Tanner, Leviathan on the Right, 8–9.
119. Tanner, Leviathan on the Right, 23.
120. Murphy, “A Time of Shame and Sorrow,” 411.

130. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, 289. Although Goldwater's *The Conscience of a Conservative* acknowledged the importance of historical authorities in places, the vast majority of the text argued on behalf of individual freedom and significant decreases in the size of government. *The Road to Serfdom* was an even more noteworthy exception because Hayek's defense of market solutions was grounded in the rational empiricism of a skeptical social scientist. Richard Weaver's *The Ethics of Rhetoric* was not a canonical conservative text, but Weaver, it bears noting, disapproved of Burke's arguments from expediency as opposed to what Weaver believed to be superior arguments from principle. Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953), 76–77.

131. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind, from Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953), 4. Kirk interpreted Burke as indicting the French revolution based on timeless, trans-historical principles as opposed to pragmatic ones. Hart notes, “Kirk's Burke was not the historian's Burke, or the biographer's, or the Burke of the political theorists . . . Kirk's Burke was a bit of an antiquarian, a lover of ‘old things,’ and more mysterious than he actually was.” Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind*, 355.

