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Review

## REMARKS TO THE NATIONAL REVIEW INSTITUTE CONFERENCE

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I'd like to take up where Brent Bozell left off. He spoke of the continuing culture war, and indeed during the past year, we have heard a great deal about the war that the title of this session suggests: "A Conservative People, A Liberal Culture."

In thinking about the nature of this "culture war," I'm reminded of my friend and teacher Irving Kristol's typically thoughtful—and typically blunt—observation: there is no culture war in America. It's over, and we lost. Indeed, we lost the culture conflict *without* a war, *without* pitched battles, *without* orchestrated campaigns. There was instead what Peter Collier termed a "culture coup."

The major centers of cultural influence in our nation—the major journals and newspapers, television, the universities and intellectual salons, the major foundations—have been quickly, quietly, and all but bloodlessly occupied during the past several decades. Everywhere we look, the cultural street corners are patrolled by the heavily armed forces of anti-Western intellectualism, race/gender/class analysis, and the bureaucratic and intrusive social-service state. The debate over "political correctness" today may in fact be little more than the distant rattle of small-arms fire, announcing that yet another isolated pocket of intellectual resistance has been overrun by the forces of occupation.

How did conservatives—who proudly claim to be above all else conservators of the Western cultural tradition—permit themselves to be so easily overwhelmed by forces hostile to it? I would say it's because conservatism's participation in the cultural sphere has, in fact, been hesitant and incomplete. Consequently, we simply don't possess the weapons or the expertise to wage successful cultural warfare.

To be sure, conservatism is thoroughly grounded in the intellectual, analytical, rational components of culture. We are quite adept at theoretical and philosophical reasoning and argument. We justly pride ourselves on our ability to unmask the intellectual bankruptcy of contemporary ideological fads.

More recently, we have become quite adept at what is called "policy analysis"—the application of rigorous analytical reasoning to public affairs. Again, we justly pride ourselves on our ability to unmask the practical bankruptcy of what John O'Sullivan yesterday called "the resurgent mythology of liberalism."

But we tend to forget that culture is far more than reason, analysis, and philosophy. Culture is also image, story, myth, vision, and picture. It is poetry, as well as prose; fiction, as well as non-fiction; motion picture, as well as journal article. Culture moves the imagination as much as the intellect. It speaks to the spirit and the heart, as much as to the mind.

Now, there *are* certainly those of us who prize and seek to defend the heritage of the West thus understood—to preserve its great literature and art. But we aren't very good at "doing" culture in this broader sense. We aren't very good at creating new cultural artifacts, or attracting to our cause those who are. Conservatives simply do not make very good poets, novelists, artists, or filmmakers.

Now, I hasten to add, Mr. Heston, that conservatism *has* produced some splendid actors. And it is no accident that the conservative actor who appreciated culture in its broadest sense—who knew in his

bones that the story, the anecdote, the movie scene carried as much weight as the 10-point policy proposal—should today be the President with such a special place in the hearts of us all.

Nonetheless, it's undeniable that the Left has been far more successful at recruiting those of artistic and creative temperament. Consequently, it has proven to be far more adept at the full range of cultural activities. And that, I regret to say, has had profound and fateful consequences for the Republic.

Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the course of the 20th century, as Norman Podhoretz has just reminded us. At its outset, the imagination of our nation's leading writers, artists, and photographers was fired by a shocking, new vision of American life. Far from being the province of the average citizen, these so-called muckrakers suggested, American public life was in fact utterly subservient to corrupt, entrenched, self-serving special interests—the big corporations, the railroads, the utilities, the political parties, City Hall, all in cahoots.

In cheap, mass-circulation magazines, in pulp novels, in clever editorial cartoons, in early silent film, the muckrakers embellished and broadcast this lurid vision of American life. Soon, virtually every American citizen had graven in his mind a compelling and vivid image—an octopus, a vulture, a serpent, whatever—that captured in a pictorial flash the political problem of the age.

Then and only then—only after the artists had been recruited to the cause, only after the public imagination had been fired by their cultural vision, only after the human passions had been stirred by its power—could the concrete political program of liberalism make headway, coming ultimately to dominate 20th century America. So powerful is the progressive liberal vision of American public life that even today, it is effortlessly evoked by motion pictures, television programs, talk-show hosts, and presidential candidates, with dramatic effect upon the American audience.

It's important to note, however, that the power of this vision—its appeal to the artistic temperament, as well as to the public imagination—derives not simply, nor even primarily, from the fact that it is skillfully executed propaganda. Its power derives above all from the fact that it bespeaks a powerful human story, one with particular resonance in the American soul: the average citizen, wishing only to run his own affairs according to his own lights, is ignored, manipulated, and disempowered by the entrenched special interests; when at last he's fed up with the abuse, he rises in righteous rebellion and seizes control of his own affairs again, in a grand renewal of the American ideal of citizenship.

Such has been the theme of a thousand familiar novels, movies, and TV specials, because this *is* the great American story. We ignore it—we dismiss it as a mushy left-wing cliché—only at our very great political peril.

What *has* been the conservative response to the great story at the heart of progressive liberalism? We have tried to talk—to reason—Americans out of it. We are convinced that painstaking rational explanation, that statistically impeccable policy analysis—the activities of reason that we are so good at—will somehow awaken Americans from their trance.

*If only* we can explain the workings of the free market to our citizens with sufficient clarity and cleverness—*if only* we can counterbalance the news photo of the ragged, homeless family with the actual statistics on homelessness—*if only* we can get the real facts out about the career of the latest liberal Hollywood icon, whether Gandhi, Malcolm X, or Hoffa—if only Americans would listen to reason, then we would prevail.

Now, these sobering, analytical activities are surely necessary and useful. But to rely exclusively on them means that we remain on the defensive, merely reacting, forever playing catch-up. When this seems to have so little effect, we are finally reduced to muttering sympathetically among ourselves, topping one another's stories about the gross mendacity and unjust exaggeration of the images emanating from the cultural Left. We learn again and again the futility of attempting to dispel compelling pictures with mere facts or words. We discover the profound consequences of being—apparently—on the wrong side of the great American story.

Is this simply a case of being caught up in the “cultural contradictions of capitalism,” as some suggest? Are conservatives forever doomed to wage a futile campaign of prosaic rationality against the dazzling poetry of the adversary culture? I don’t believe so.

I would suggest, rather, that it’s time for conservatism to ponder anew the great American story—for a critical shift is occurring in the American scene today. To put it bluntly, *we are no longer on the wrong side of the American story. Liberalism is.*

How can this be? Reflect for a moment on the signals buried in recent election returns and in opinion surveys: The massive, palpable discontent with all major governing institutions; the success of term limits and tax-and-spending limits in referenda across the nation; above all, the immense popularity of Ross Perot’s radical, populist call to return government directly to the people. The message, I believe, is clear: Americans are *sick and tired* of being treated as if they’re incompetent to run their own affairs.

They’re sick and tired of being treated as helpless, pathetic *victims* of social forces that are seemingly beyond their understanding or control.

They’re sick and tired of being treated as passive *clients* by arrogant, paternalistic social scientists, therapists, professionals, and bureaucrats, who claim exclusive right to minister to the hurts inflicted by hostile social forces.

They’re sick and tired of supporting the *bloated, corrupt, centralized bureaucracies* into which our social therapists are organized to insure that power and accountability flow to them, rather than to the citizens of the United States.

Americans are clearly willing and eager to *seize control of their daily lives again*—to make critical life choices for themselves, based on their own common sense and folk wisdom—to assume once again the status of proud, independent, self-governing *citizens* intended for them by the Founders, and denied them by today’s social-service providers and bureaucracies. In short, Americans are ready for what might be called “*a new citizenship*,” which will *liberate and empower* them.

This should, of course, sound familiar. It’s the great American story being played out once again. But this time, the leading roles are reversed. The entrenched, corrupt special interests are the towering bureaucracies of liberalism, not the corporations. And this time—if only we have the eyes to see and the imagination to seize the opportunity presented us—conservatism can stand *with* the average citizen, *against* the intrusive institutions of liberalism that seek to dominate and manipulate his life.

Once conservatives come to understand this dramatic role reversal in the great American story—once we understand that we are now the natural heirs of one of the great cultural assets of American life—perhaps then we will be inspired to tell stories and to create images, as well to generate arguments and statistics. Perhaps then we will be able to attract to our ranks greater numbers of those possessing creative and artistic talents. For all about us are the dramatic, compelling tales and pictures—begging to be written, filmed, and painted—of courageous individuals struggling to run their own lives according to their own lights, and yet who are ignored or abused by powerful social structures jealous of their own prerogatives.

The impoverished mother who struggles against the public-school bureaucracy to put her child in a private school where discipline and values prevail; the street vendor who battles licensing and zoning boards in order to make an honest living; the middle-class family that braves the ridicule of the social-service professionals in order to challenge the distribution of condoms in school; the public-housing tenant who seeks to govern his own project, in spite of an enervating maze of regulation—let us make *their* stories, *our* stories.

And in the fertile soil of these timeless human dramas—these quintessential American tales of oppression, rebellion, and restored citizenship—let us cultivate a new, conservative generation of Upton

Sinclairs, Ida Tarbells, Jack Londons, Theodore Dreisers, Finley Peter Dunnes, Booth Tarkingtons, and Jacob Riis's.

Now, I am not naive about the immensity of the cultural task before us. Everything about the new citizenship seems to swim against the cultural tide. The new citizenship requires, among other things, that we seek to restore the intellectual and cultural legitimacy of citizenly common sense—to reestablish the dignity of traditional folk wisdom and everyday morality, with a renewed emphasis on personal character—the customary guideposts of everyday life.

That, in turn, requires us to reinvigorate and re-empower the traditional, local institutions—families, churches, schools, neighborhoods—that provide training in and room for the exercise of genuine citizenship, that pass on folk wisdom and everyday morality to the next generation, and that cultivate and reinforce personal character.

Today's culture, of course, evidences nothing but contempt for the standards and structures of ordinary American life. They are regarded as benighted, retrograde, oppressive.

We must demonstrate, by contrast, that the assault on common sense and everyday morality has been perhaps the single most-crippling and disempowering blow against the capacity of the ordinary American citizen. We must demonstrate that the values and commitments of daily life—far from being oppressive—are themselves the true source of revolutionary resistance against the oppressive ministrations of the so-called “helping” professions.

Now, I'm aware that much of what I'm saying must seem “unconservative” to you—perhaps even radical. It may sound as if I'm suggesting that conservatism should now engage in the sort of countercultural activities that previously dismayed us. *I am*. Given the structure of power in America today, it's time we realize that *we are*, indeed, the *counterculture*. *We are the revolutionaries*.

Once we have understood that—once we have realized that the great American story—the great human story—of oppression, rebellion, and reinvigorated citizenship is now *ours* for the telling—then at last we will be sufficiently armed to join the battle that will be required, if we are to roll back the great coup in American cultural life.