

# In Retrospect: George Nash's The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945.

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Jennifer Burns

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**In Retrospect:**

# George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*

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George H. Nash. *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. Wilmington, Del.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996; reprint of Basic Books' 1976 publication. 467 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliographical essay, bibliographical postscript, and index. \$24.95.

It is a rare work of history that remains the authoritative treatment of its subject nearly thirty years after publication, cited by numerous contemporary historians for its content and scholarship rather than as an historiographical curio. Rarer still is the work of history that appears pre-publication as a forty-seven-page insert in *National Review*, the centerfold of the magazine's twentieth anniversary issue.<sup>1</sup> But then, George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, first published in 1976, is an unusual book in many ways, not least because it gives serious consideration to American history's so-called orphan, conservatism. If conservatism is the orphan, as Alan Brinkley famously declared in 1994, then conservative intellectual history is a veritable foundling.<sup>2</sup> Although studies of the American right have become almost fashionable as of late, most of these remain explicitly political or social examinations, with little concern paid to the intellectuals who articulated the formal strategy and concerns of the movement and laid the groundwork for electoral success. In the face of this lacuna, Nash's book, based on his Harvard dissertation, has become literally the first and last word on the topic.<sup>3</sup> Nearly three decades later, a look back at the text reveals that Nash's work achieved this dominance because he was the first historian to cast aside the stale interpretive legacies of the 1950s. By overcoming the inheritance of one generation, he established a powerful legacy for scholars who would follow. Today, his work exerts a deep influence on our common understanding of conservatism in America, an influence that is deserved but nonetheless in need of critical appraisal.

Nash's primary argument is embedded in his general definition of American conservative thought, which he presents as a unique blend of three main impulses, labeled libertarianism, anti-communism, and traditionalist conservatism. According to Nash, while elements of each strand existed throughout **[End Page 447]** the century, it was not until after 1945 that they gathered enough form and strength to be considered a viable movement. His elegant topical and chronological structure further supports and reinforces this trinitarian, postwar image of conservatism. The book begins thematically, with one chapter each on libertarians and anti-communists, and two on the traditionalists (subdivided between "Revolt Against the Masses" and "Recovery of Tradition and Values"). Nash identifies the major thinkers, publications, and themes that make up each part of his triad. He provides useful glosses of the main texts and deftly describes pivotal events such as the founding of the Mt. Pelerin Society and the Hiss trial. Here his book serves as a valuable index to the myriad small magazines and organizations that proliferated unorthodox political ideas in the wake of World War II. As he describes the contours of each nascent impulse, Nash emphasizes their fragility and the pervasive sense of isolation conservatives felt at this time.

Although the libertarians sounded familiar themes of states rights, limited government, and individual freedom, Nash finds that "however old and indigenous this stream of thought may have been, much of the initial impetus for its renaissance came not from America but from Europe" (p. 2). According to Nash, in the 1940s, economists of the Austrian school, primarily Ludwig Von Mises and F.A. Hayek, were the most influential on this strain of conservatism. He also gives significant credit to Albert J. Nock, the American author of *Our Enemy the State* (1935) and *The Superfluous Man* (1943). While libertarians focused on natural rights and political freedom, conservatives of the traditionalist stripe, after the fashion of Leo Strauss, tended to focus on duties and the cultivation of virtue. Again, Nash depicts traditionalism as deeply influenced...

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