Willmoore Kendall’s Battle Line Metaphor

George W. Carey


This work constitutes a reprinting of Willmoore Kendall’s The Conservative Affirmation, first published in 1963. The words “in America” have been appended to the original title (on the cover, though oddly not on the title page) presumably to reflect the fact that the essays which comprise this volume deal primarily with conservatism in the context of American politics. In keeping with Kendall’s thinking, however, a more appropriate title would be An Affirmation of American Conservatism because, as he writes in his preface by way of twitting Clinton Rossiter, “American Conservatism” and “Conservatism in America” are far from being one and the same thing. A lucid and informative introductory essay by Gregory Wolfe which tells us a good deal about Kendall’s background and his place in conservative thought has also been added. But, aside from these two additions, the original version is untouched. It consists of a preface which is important for understanding Kendall’s approach and his “plan” in this book; seven chapters which deal, respectively, with the meaning of conservatism, the inherent tensions between executive and legislative branches of our system, freedom of speech, social contract theories, the “open society,” and Christian pacifism; and, finally (à la Leo Strauss’s What is Political Philosophy?), certain of his book reviews, thirty in all, intended to give the reader a finer appreciation of the conservative affirmation by exposing him to the “give and take of political controversy among egg-heads.”

Although Kendall was one of the original senior editors of National Review and for several years wrote a regular column (“The Liberal Line”) for it, he could never rightly be considered a “professional” conservative; that is, his livelihood was not derived from his efforts in the conservative “movement.” Rather, he was a teacher of political philosophy whose primary commitment was to academic pursuits, not the least of these being a careful reading and analysis of the political classics of the Western tradition, as well as long and deep meditation on the values they embodied. This collection of essays, then, in both quality and character is quite unlike that which the “movement” conservatives are wont to put between covers with pretentious titles. Kendall’s purpose, as he states at the outset, “is . . . to identify the ‘Conservative affirmation’ . . . [and] to situate it on the map of American politics.” To these ends the essays are theoretical and analytical in nature; each in its own
way deals with one or more of the difficulties encountered in situating American conservatism and defining its character.

The primary difficulty confronting Kendall is the one upon which he dwells in his preface and first chapter; namely, how are we to define or conceive of American conservatism? This was a problem that troubled him in the very early sixties, particularly when he was called upon, as he frequently was, to talk about the meaning and status of conservatism. In this respect, he found the formulations of Kirk, Rossiter, and Meyer largely irrelevant to the American political scene or, if not that, couched in terms that were nebulous, vague, or even meaningless. In a course on contemporary conservatism that he taught at Georgetown University in the spring of 1962, he came upon his own formulation which he sets forth in terms of a "battle line" metaphor in chapter one. The key to his answer, i.e., to start by looking about us in order to discover the "line" that divides liberals and conservatives, seems simple enough once it is laid out in the fashion he has. Yet, while there was scarcely any dearth of such "lies" at the time he wrote, none of them, as he correctly notes, could embrace, much less explain, the full dimensions of conservative-liberal confrontation. This shortcoming stemmed from the then fashionable practice of deriving such lines from theory, not from existential reality.

In my judgment, Kendall's battle line metaphor still provides the most heuristic perspective from which to view and appraise what many regard as the essence of American politics, namely, the contest between Left and Right. In Kendall's metaphor there is a line between the two forces; a battle line that "stretches from the bottom of the chart all the way to the top, passing through pretty much every issue that enters into our politics." The conservatives, on the right side of the line, are the resisters. But the typical resister in this metaphor is concerned only with his sector of the front so that resistance is not coordinated. "Only in the loosest sense of the word," writes Kendall, do the conservatives "constitute an army." They are best viewed as relatively isolated bands of resisters, largely impervious to what is going on in other sectors of the front and ignorant of the "revolutionary and integrated character" of the general war of which their local skirmish is only a small part. The liberals, on the other hand, Kendall portrays as a "disciplined and battle-wise enemy, with crystal clear war-aims and a grim determination to win"; "a disciplined army, an army conscious of itself as staging a general advance along an extensive front, with a common service of supply and a common general staff."

One of the merits of picturing the battle in these terms is that we are in a better position to ask and answer critical questions concerning the status of the war; that is, for instance, how it is progressing and what the future holds. In this regard, Kendall—and this is contrary to the judgment of most professional conservatives at the time—felt that the conservative bands were pretty much holding their own; that while the liberals may have won victories here and there, their advance had been effectively halted in most sectors. His estimate, of course, was based on looking at the entire battle line, not simply certain sectors of it, as well as the depth of liberal penetration at any given point. What is more, he could see how it might come to pass that the liberals could be put on the defensive and even forced into a general retreat. This would occur, in his view, "when the pools of Conservative resistance... become fully aware of one another; when they have become ready, instead of going it alone, to make common cause; and when they will have made it their business to establish, back and forth among themselves, the channels of communication without which large-scale warfare is impossible."

All of the essays in one fashion or another answer questions relevant to this conception of conservatism. This is not to say that Kendall covers, so to speak, all the bases; nor does he give us anything resembling a complete picture of the values that form the basis of American con-
servatism. What he does do is to direct the reader to the sources of these values. They are not, he tells us, to be found in the consent theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, whose teachings represent a "break with the idea of a law, whether natural or divine, higher than and prior to any laws originating in agreement and contract." Rather, he stresses, the conservatives will find their roots in the "Great Tradition" which holds that the ends of social and political union, far from simply being "to minister to the self-interest of the members of society," are "the perfection of man's nature or to the attunement of human affairs to the will of God." Thus he sees both reason and/or revelation as the ultimate sources of conservative thought. For this very reason, he is quick to point out that conservatism cannot be defined solely in terms of resistance to change; on the contrary, the conservatism which he affirms "distinguishes between 'change' directed at the development and perfection of our heritage as that which it is, and 'change' calculated to transform that heritage into that which it is not; and far from opposing the former, stands forth as its champion."

It is within this broad context that we can best understand Kendall's understanding of American conservatism, both what it stood for and what it must fight against. For instance, he was critical of other "conservatives"—e.g., Burnham, Kirk, Meyer—for trying to make our heritage into something it is not. His conservatism, which looked to the basic documents of the founding era (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Bill of Rights, and, above all, The Federalist), had no room for a Calhoun, a Babbitt, a More, or the pre-Publius Hamilton, because their teachings were alien to the basic principle organic to our political heritage and its refinement; namely, "the United States, because of the qualities of its people, must and should be governed by the 'deliberative sense of the community.'" But he directs most of his attention to liberals whose egalitarianism compels them to refashion our political system to conform with the principles of plebiscitary democracy complete with ideological and programmatic political parties.

One of his more provocative essays, "The Two Majorities in American Politics," spells out how we have, so to speak, been blinded by the American liberals who have successfully peddled the notion that "the majority rules [or can rule only] through presidential elections"; or that, to put it somewhat differently, the successful presidential candidate possesses a mandate from the majority to carry out those policies, programs, and principles to which he has committed himself during the campaign. But, as Kendall points out, this "presidential majority" has actually been "engrafted" onto the system bequeathed to us by our Founders, who looked to the deliberative processes of Congress to fashion policies consonant with the will of the majority. Now there are, on his showing, inherent differences between this "congressional majority" and the presidential majority that account for the executive-legislative tensions which we have witnessed over the decades.

In one of the finest analyses concerning the character of presidential campaigning we have in our political science literature, he points out that the presidential candidates, obliged to make their appeal to a national "community" of incomprehensible complexity and diversity, must necessarily "avoid talking about something [which] leaves them no alternative but to talk about nothing—that is (for this is always the most convenient way of talking about nothing), to talk about high (or at least high-sounding) principle, without application to any concrete situation or problem." "There are no issues," Kendall continues, "because both candidates for the most part merely repeat, as they swing from whistle-stop to whistle-stop and television studio to television studio, the policy platitudes that constitute the table talk of our faculty clubs." On the other hand, the congressional candidates must conduct their campaigns in communities far more "structured" than the national constituency; communities characterized
by “numberless, highly complex face-to-face hierarchical relations among individuals.” As such congressional candidates are forced to deal with the “realities, problems, the potential benefits and potential costs (and for whom) of doing this rather than that—all in a context where the principles that are applied [are] very different we may be sure from those of the presidential candidates.”

Kendall pictured the resulting tension between these two majorities as reflecting an ongoing battle between American liberalism and conservatism—the goals of liberalism articulated by the President and the bureaucracy with resistance coming from the Congress. Indeed, he even looked upon Congress as an initiator of policy, particularly with regard to matters of national defense because it had been more “hawkish” than the executive branch. He did not, however, concede that the presidency and the bureaucracy have a monopoly on “high principle” or that Congress acted on the basis of “lower” motives or more selfish considerations. Instead, as he puts it, we should come to understand that there is a tension between two “conceptions of high principle” which amounted to “two sharply differing conceptions of the destiny and perfection of America and of mankind.”

Kendall’s specific propositions, it would seem, stand in need of modification in light of the political events of the past twenty-five years. To be sure, the presidential campaigns are still as he pictured them and promise to remain so, but it is now clear that the presidency is not the exclusive bailiwick of liberals because conservatives have devised attractive appeals of their own. By the same token, Congress can be as resistant to change in conservative directions as it has proved in the past to be with regard to liberal proposals. Nevertheless, by extrapolation his analysis does point to one enduring truth: The more “removed” an institution is from a structured community, the more inclined it is to accept and act upon the “high” liberal “principles” without regard to the consequences. For instance, in the twenty-five years since Kendall’s article originally appeared, the judiciary, not the presidency, bears responsibility for most ideological forays of this nature. And the message for conservatives seems clear enough: Whatever their composition or character at any given point in time, the modern courts and presidency bear close watching because they are more likely than Congress to ignore or circumvent those processes essential for discovering the deliberate sense of the community. As such they represent a potential and highly dangerous threat to our republican heritage.

In the last analysis, it may well be that the most enduring contributions of these essays are the lessons they teach us about how to get beneath the surface of controversy to see exactly what is at stake, to separate the images from reality. Kendall’s unparalleled skill in this regard stemmed, I believe, primarily from his ability to comprehend thoroughly the liberal mindset. In any event, the most instructive article in this connection is “McCarthyism: The Pons Asinorum of Contemporary Conservatism.” In my judgment, this piece represents the finest analysis we have of what the McCarthy controversy was all about.

As those who lived through the so-called McCarthy era can testify, the liberals arrayed themselves against McCarthy with a passion seldom seen in American politics. The nucleus of the liberal army was the same as we encounter today—the media types, university professors and presidents, most of Hollywood, the bureaucracy—but in this particular battle its members lost all of their usual aplomb. Kendall’s point of departure, then, is to inquire into why liberals got so fighting mad at McCarthy; a reaction which on the face of it posed a mystery since the liberals completely discarded the tentativeness one associates with the teachings of their mentor, John Stuart Mill. To find an answer Kendall used the occasion of a “stag” dinner party to ask five political scientists, myself included, why McCarthy elicited such a reaction. The answers, which he faithfully recounts, are those that we are
accustomed to hearing; they are what might be called the "stock" answers. But none of them, as he demonstrates, can account for the phenomenon in question because they fail to identify the uniqueness of McCarthy or McCarthyism that could serve to stir the passions so violently. The answer that Kendall comes up with takes him to the issue of "open society." As he puts it, the anti-McCarthyites perceived a threat to the very foundations of liberalism, namely, the doctrine that "all questions are open questions." In their view, our society is "dedicated to the proposition that no truth in particular is true"; it is a society, moreover, "in which no one can speak properly of an orthodoxy—over against which any belief, however immoral, however extravagant, can be declared heretical and thus proscribed."

The McCarthyites subscribed to a different conception of our society and heritage. They held that the first amendment cannot be read to establish an open society; that "America is a society whose essence is still to be found in the phrase 'We hold these truths'"; and that, therefore, "it can...proscribe certain doctrine and beliefs" such as the "doctrine and beliefs of communism" that deny "the consensus that defines the society and sets its tone and character." This basic cleavage, in Kendall's account, was only papered over as both sides tentatively and with reservations came to accept "clear and present danger" as the standard for proscription. But "until," he writes, this "issue is decided we no more understand ourselves as a nation than a schizophrenic understands himself as a person."

As all of these essays in one fashion or another reveal, Kendall was highly critical of the teachings and principles associated with the theory of the "open society"; teachings and principles which liberals would have us understand form the basis of the American society. For this he has been charged by his critics over the years with believing in the virtues of the "closed" society characterized by, among other things, rigid limitations on speech and association. These essays should certainly convince any fair-minded reader that such a representation of his position is a gross distortion. Kendall's animus against the open society stemmed from his perception that its principles, if carried to an extreme, would undermine the orthodoxy necessary for civil society; that once the orthodoxy had been sufficiently eroded, the society would simply cease to be a society.

This, I should emphasize by way of concluding, is a central message of his teachings that liberals have, over the years, simply ignored. But we may indulge the hope that a reprinting of this book, aside from acquainting a new generation of conservatives with Willmoore Kendall's thoughts, might serve to rouse a liberal to face up to the issues he raises relative to the open society.