

# History 390/Poli Sci 490: American Conservatism

MWF, 12:30-1:20pm

ASB 116

Robert Elder

ASB 356

[robert.elder@valpo.edu](mailto:robert.elder@valpo.edu)

Office Hours: MTWF, 2:30-3:30pm ([reserve a meeting slot](#)), or by appt.

“In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition...This does not mean, of course, that there is no impulse to conservatism or to reaction. Such impulses are certainly very strong, perhaps even stronger than most of us know. But the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas.”

--Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 1950

“...The essence of social conservatism is preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity. Conservatives respect the wisdom of their ancestors...they are dubious of wholesale alteration. They think society is a spiritual reality, possessing an eternal life but a delicate constitution: it cannot be scrapped and recast as if it were a machine.”

--Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 1953

“It stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it.”

-[William F. Buckley, National Review, 1955](#)

## Course Description

Is there such a thing as an American conservative tradition? What are the contours of this tradition in the American past? What does it mean in the context of American history to call someone a conservative? Who are the main figures, movements, and ideas associated with this elusive term? Until very recently American historians spent very little time on such questions, preferring to focus on the more progressive and radical elements of the American past or perhaps agreeing with Lionel Trilling that conservatism amounted to little more than “irritable mental gestures.” This course will explore these questions and other related topics through a

sustained engagement with some of the central texts, ideas, movements, and people associated with conservatism in American history.

## Writing Intensive Course (WIC)

This course fulfills the requirement for a writing intensive course (WIC) in the general education curriculum. This means that the course places special emphasis on the process of both research and writing, including instruction in research methods, individual meetings with me about the main paper, producing drafts before the final version, and peer review of your work.

## Attendance

Attendance at every class meeting is required. I will take attendance at every class meeting with the understanding that sometimes, due to extraordinary circumstances, it may be impossible for you to attend. At the end of the semester your attendance record will directly impact your participation grade, which is 30% of your overall grade. It will be impossible to do well in this course without regular attendance. I make no distinction between excused or unexcused absences (except for sports or other university-related activities. It is your responsibility to notify me of these events).

## Course Policies and Information

- Turn off and put away any unauthorized electronic devices (phones, tablets, laptops). If I observe any unauthorized use you will be counted absent.
- I will strictly enforce Valparaiso University's Honor Code, which reads, "I have neither given or received, nor have I tolerated others' use of unauthorized aid." You can find out more about the [student-run Honor Council here](#).
- Late papers will be penalized a third of a letter grade for every class period they are late.
- Weekly reading responses must be uploaded **by 8:00am Friday** or they will not be counted.
- You are ALWAYS welcome to drop by my office, I will often be there and available to talk. However, I offer appointments to make sure I'm available at specific times and to allow you to plan your schedule. Please use the link at the top of the syllabus to make an appointment. The link can also be found on Blackboard.

## Evaluation

1. Participation, including attendance, informed participation in class discussions, daily reading responses, etc. (30%)

2. Historiographical essay (25%)
3. Book review (15%)
4. In-class book review presentation (10%)
5. Final Exam (20%)

## Reading

The following books are required reading for this course, and are available at the university bookstore. Other readings are available on Blackboard or online (if linked).

Dochuk, Darren. *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.

Kirk, Russell. *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*. Seventh Edition, Seventh Edition edition. Regnery Publishing, 2001.

Nash, George H. *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. 30th anniversary edition. Wilmington, Del: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006.

Wooton, David. *The Essential Federalist and Anti-Federalist Papers*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003.

## Important Supplementary Information

- For help with your writing, make an appointment with a tutor at the [VU Writing Center](#).
- For [Disability Support Services](#), contact Zebadiah Hall, room 100-A in the Christopher Center.

## Course Schedule

**Note:** course schedule is subject to change with notice. The online version (Blackboard/Google Docs) always takes precedence over any paper versions.

### Week 1: Introduction

1/6 Introduction and Syllabus

1/8 No classroom meeting; Roger Scruton, [“Why I became a conservative”](#) (Blackboard); **“How would you define conservatism?” response due**

### Week 2: Definitions and Problems

1/11 Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 3-11; Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, Introduction (Blackboard)

- 1/13 Samuel Huntington, "[Conservatism as an Ideology.](#)" *American Political Science Review* (1957) (Blackboard);  
 1/15 No classroom meeting;

### Week 3: European Origins

- 1/18 MLK Day-NO CLASS  
 1/20 "[Declaration of the Rights of Man](#)" (1789); Kirk, 23-47,  
 1/22 Kirk, 58-70; Marcus Cunliffe, "Tory Champions" (Blackboard);

### Week 4: The Revolution and the Constitution

- 1/25 Kirk, 71-80, 86-113  
 1/27 Gordon Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Introduction, "Equality," (Blackboard)  
 1/29 Wooton, Cato #4 (58-61), Speech of James Wilson (97-110), Federalist #? (pick one), and Constitution and Bill of Rights, 326-338;

### Week 5: Conservatives in a Liberal Society

- 2/1 John C. Calhoun, "[A Disquisition on Government.](#)" ed. Lee Cheek, 1-81  
 2/3 Louis Hartz, "The Reactionary Enlightenment," in *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), 145-177 (Blackboard)  
 2/5 Michael O'Brien, *Intellectual Life and the Old South*, 191-258 (Blackboard);

### Week 6: Conservatives in a Liberal Society, cont.

- 2/8 Kirk, 150-184  
 2/10 Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition*, 1-40 (Blackboard)  
 2/12 Alexis de Tocqueville, [Democracy in America, vol 2, book 4, chptrs 1-4, 6;](#)

### Week 7: The Civil War

- 2/15 Emory Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience*, 1-42 (Blackboard)  
 2/17 James McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, 23-42  
 2/19 James McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, 131-152 (Blackboard);

### Week 8: Against Modernity

- 2/22 Henry Adams, [The Education of Henry Adams](#), ch. 1, 4, 22, 31 (also Blackboard)  
 2/24 Adams, cont., ch. 33-35

2/26 T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, 261-297 (Blackboard);

### Spring Break

2/29 NO CLASS

3/2 NO CLASS

3/4 NO CLASS

3/7 NO CLASS

3/9 NO CLASS

3/11 NO CLASS

### Week 11: The Agrarian Critique

3/14 "Introduction: A Statement of Principles" in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) (Blackboard); Wendell Berry, "[It All Turns on Affection](#)" (2012 Jefferson Lecture, NEH)

3/16 Paul Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (UNC Press, 2001), 1-30 (Blackboard);

3/18 In-class research and library instruction

### Week 12: Anticommunism and the Cold War

3/21 George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, Introduction, chptr. 4

3/23 Joseph McCarthy, Speech at Wheeling, West Virginia," Feb. 9, 1950; Whittaker Chambers, "Foreword in the Form of a Letter to my Children" in *Witness* (1952) (Blackboard)

3/25 Good Friday-NO CLASS

### Week 13: Libertarians and the Market

3/28 Ayn Rand, "Man's Rights" in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964); Milton Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business to Increase its Profits," *New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970, p32-33, 122-126; Albert Jay Nock, *Our Enemy, the State* (1935), part 1 (Blackboard)

3/30 Nash, chptr 1

4/1 Jennifer Burns, "[Godless Capitalism: Ayn Rand and the Conservative Movement.](#)";  
**Bibliography for Historical Essay Due**

### Week 14: Recovering Certainty in a Secular Age

4/4 Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), 1-17, 35-51

- 4/6 Preface to the First Edition, and chapter 3, *The Quest for Community* by Robert Nisbett (Blackboard)
- 4/8 Nash, chapter 3; **Draft of Historiographical Essay Due**

Week 15: Grassroots Conservatism

- 4/11 Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt*, Introduction, Part One
- 4/13 Dochuk, chapters 7, 8, 9
- 4/15 Dochuk, chapters 10, 12, 13; **In Class Peer Review**

Week 16: Neoconservatives

- 4/18 Adam Wolfson, "[Conservatives and Neoconservatives.](#)" in *National Affairs* (2004); Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968), 3-25 (Blackboard)
- 4/20 Justin Vaisee, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of A Movement* (2010), 1-20
- 4/22 No Class; **Historiographical Essay Due**

Week 17: The Culture Wars, etc.

- 4/25 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), 24-46, 62-81
- 4/27 Daniel Rogers, *The Age of Fracture* (2011), chapter 5 (Blackboard)
- 4/29 Matthew Lassiter, "The Suburban Origins of "Color-Blind" Conservatism: Middle-Class Consciousness in the Charlotte Busing Crisis," *Journal of Urban History* vol. 30, no 4 (May 2004), 549-582 (Blackboard)

Week 18: The End of Conservatism?

- 5/2 Sam Tanenhaus, "[Conservatism is Dead.](#)" *The New Republic* (2009)
- 5/5 FINAL EXAM, 1-3pm