

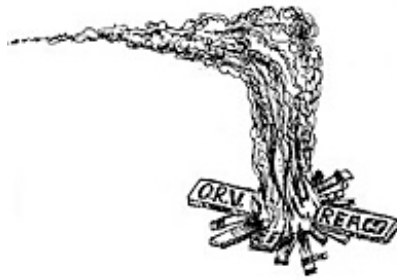


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Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



Piety, Prudence, Posterity

Perhaps the two topmost organizing dares before the wilderness and wildlife network today are to grow our web of friends among those who are politically middle-of-the-road or even slightly to the right, and among those in small towns and the hinterlands. Too often we think the only field where we can gather new backers is the progressive/liberal one, but clubs such as Republicans for Environmental Protection, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, and Trout Unlimited strongly show that there are more than a few folks caring about wild things who are not progressives, who may even be conservatives. Now, when I write *conservative* I do not mean so-called “movement conservatives,” shills for big business, or Tea Baggers, but the many folks who still have the values of “traditional conservatism,” which more or less lost its seat in the Republican Party in the Reagan years. Indeed, some of the bedrock values for traditional conservatives, but not for today’s highly partisan right-wingers, are also bedrock values for wilderness and wildlife conservation—such as piety, prudence, and posterity.

I think that if we wildlovers would talk more about these values, we would find that we could better reach folks we are not reaching now because they think we are all left-wingers.

Dr. John Bliese, formerly Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, has done more than anyone since the 1970s to show not only that conservatism and conservation can be like-minded, but also that the intellectual leaders of conservatism from the end of World War Two to the Reagan Revolution, most of all Russell Kirk, Richard M. Weaver, and Clinton Rossiter, were foes of landscaping.^[1] In 1953, Kirk wrote *The Conservative Mind*, likely the foremost conservative work of the last hundred years.^[2] In a 1996 article for *Modern Age*, Bliese writes, “If we go back to the ‘Founding Fathers’ of American traditionalist conservatism, we will find a solid philosophical basis that would lead conservatives to be environmentalists.”^[3] Conservatives and conservationists alike should read his book, *The Greening Of Conservative America*.^[4] True conservatism has deep ties to conservation through the following thrusts: Antimaterialism, Piety, Prudence, Posterity, Values, and Responsibility.

I go into all these in my forthcoming book, *Take Back Conservation*, from which this "Campfire" is taken, but I'll only write here about piety, prudence, and posterity.

Before we look at these principles, however, let's go to writings by Russell Kirk on conservation and pollution. Most of the work by Kirk (and Weaver) was before widespread heed was given to how we were wounding Earth. Nonetheless, Kirk did not shun the land in his syndicated newspaper column in the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1962, he wrote about pesticides and how they harmed wildlife. He told his readers to read Rachel Carson's newly released *Silent Spring*.^[5] This is a big deal since Carson's book led to a bitter wrangle among the directors of the Sierra Club, with some pooh-poohing any harm from pesticides.^[6] In your wildest dreams, can you see any leading conservative today telling folks to read a book like *Silent Spring*?

Bliese writes:

In 1965, [Kirk] deplored the fact that "rare, strange and beautiful animals are shrinking toward extinction in much of the world." He argued that "preservation of the multitudinous animal species has been enjoined by religion since the dawn of human consciousness," with specific reference to the story of Noah. He wrote this piece in South Africa's Kruger National Park, but added that "we Americans have done our despicable share in decimating the animal kingdom."^[7]

So, even before biologists like Hugh Iltis and Norman Myers were warning about wholesale extinction, the foremost conservative intellectual in America was highlighting the doom of many beings in his newspaper column.

In other columns in 1965, Kirk took on polluting industries, the threat of insecticides, the harm done by overfishing, strip-mining, nuclear waste, and wasting energy. By 1970, he "applauded" student protests against runaway logging and pollution, and wrote, "Nothing is more conservative than conservation." Kirk, unlike politicians and pundits calling themselves conservatives today, did not hold progress up as some sacred cow. He wrote that "pollution, exhaustion of natural resources, the transformation of city and countryside for the worse, and various social afflictions are bound up with our swift technological advance."^[8] He backed those who worried about "obsessive materialism and total infatuation with technology," and warned that "the rising generation has the prospect of bad air to breathe, poisoned rivers and lakes, cities devastated by a 'progress' hastened through technology, and a society that may become little better than a sullen and violent producer-consumer equation."^[9] It sounds to me that Russell Kirk in 1970 pegged the beginning of the twenty-first century pretty well.

Now, let's look at the philosophical grounds of piety, prudence, and posterity for a traditional conservative path to conservation.

Piety

Bliese writes, "Perhaps the most fundamental value or attitude for a conservative is what Weaver called 'piety'....He believed that to bring harmony back into the world, we must regard three things with the spirit of piety: nature, other people, and the past." Weaver believed that "creation or nature is fundamentally good...and that acts of defiance such as are daily celebrated by the newspapers are subversive of cosmos. Obviously a degree of humility is required to accept this view."^[10]

Moreover, Weaver believed that how we hold Nature "is basic to one's outlook or philosophy of life." He wrote toward the end of his life that "man has a duty of veneration toward nature and the natural. Nature is not something to be fought, conquered and changed according to any human whims." Bliese writes that Weaver "condemned modern industrialism which 'is making war upon nature, disfiguring and violating her.'"^[11] Good grief, Weaver was ranting like Ed Abbey before Ed Abbey.

Bliese further writes, "Piety toward nature is, thus, a fundamental attitude of traditionalist conservatism, and this obviously has profound implications when we confront today's environmental disasters."^[12] What should piety toward Nature mean?

Bliese says:

Surely the subsidized, systematic destruction of our public forests can only be seen as the height of impiety, on top of being sheer stupid policy. Likewise, with his respect for

nature, no traditionalist conservative could sympathize with an industry that opposes clean water regulations simply because it is so much cheaper to dump its toxic wastes in the river—and if it destroys the life of the river and pollutes drinking water for those downstream, too bad, but the profits on the bottom line look great.[\[13\]](#)

Piety at its best is respect for land when it is yet self-willed and for deors when they are wildeors. How can one have piety toward one's slave or thane or toward that over which one lords?

I thoroughly lack belief in ghosts of any kind, but I am often overcome with piety as I drink in the big outside as it is. I no longer need thrills and derring-do; watching a prairie dog, plump as an old town burgher, stand outside its burrow and take in the world, or being uplifted by the bluster of a rufous hummingbird on its sky-loping through New Mexico in mid-summer, can near bring me to my knees with blissful piety. Piety before the little ones is a deep piety, maybe the deepest, the truest, and the best for the soul. It's one thing to be awestruck before the workings of the wild or before a wildeor when they threaten to cripple or snuff me, but I also find myself awash with piety when a flock of bushtits or a sea of desert marigolds makes me smile without thinking.



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Prudence

“For traditionalist conservatives the most important virtue in politics is prudence,” writes Bliese and then quotes Edmund Burke, Clinton Rossiter, and Russell Kirk for backing.[\[14\]](#) Bliese also believes that good stewardship of raw goods is prudence; squandering them as we do is imprudence. He says climate change and wildlife extinctions are areas “in which we are performing uncontrolled and irreversible experiments on the entire planet.” Prudence is how we should guide ourselves through these plights.[\[15\]](#) “Traditionalist conservative values would have us make major efforts to preserve all the forms of life on earth, as a matter of prudence and good stewardship.”[\[16\]](#) We can see such beliefs at work in how Republican senators such as James Buckley and Pete Domenici spoke for the 1973 Endangered Species Act. Prudence is at the heart of the precautionary principle, which, retired Grand Canyon National Park river ranger Kim Crumbo (and Navy SEAL in Vietnam) writes, “reverses the burden of proof by requiring proponents of anthropogenic change to prove that the proposed actions will not harm species and habitats, rather than requiring conservationists to prove a high likelihood of ecological damage or species loss before halting an activity.”[\[17\]](#)

Where is prudence, or her sister, humility, among today's “conservative” anticonservationists? Among today's Republican Senators and Representatives? Is pooh-poohing global climate change prudent? Is underwriting rip-and-chop business to cut down the last ancient forests prudent? Is no-holds-barred landscaping for ticky-tacky development spreading out desert cities like Phoenix (eight inches rain a year), Albuquerque (nine inches), and Tucson (twelve inches) prudent? Where, for goodness sake, does prudence dare show herself in the authoritarian right today? If she is there at all, she slips silently about in the shadows in a head-to-toe burkha, I fear. For today's right-wing holy warriors, prudence is blasphemy, it seems.



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Posterity

Two hundred years ago, Edmund Burke saw society as “a partnership not only between those who are now living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”^[18] Put that conservative thought alongside the fast-buck thinking of many American business-lords and Republican politicians today. Rossiter writes, “The spirit of trusteeship—the sense of receiving a precious heritage and handing it on intact and perhaps even slightly strengthened—pervades Conservatism.”^[19] This understanding of posterity is key to the National Wilderness Preservation System. In the 1964 Wilderness Act, Congress stated its policy was “to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an *enduring* resource of wilderness.” Knowing that the Wilderness Act would protect Wilderness into far tomorrows after they were gone greatly heartened those who crafted the Act, as it does we others who have worked to put new lands into the National Wilderness Preservation System. As Howard Zahniser of The Wilderness Society and main wordsmith of the Wilderness Act wrote, “The wilderness that has come to us from the eternity of the past we have the boldness to project into *the eternity of the future*.”^[20] (Emphasis added.) Edmund Burke would have thought well of the Wilderness Act as a farsighted bond with posterity, methinks, as he would have with the Endangered Species Act.

Russell Kirk wrote that “the modern spectacle of vanished forests and eroded lands, wasted petroleum, and ruthless mining...is evidence of what an age without veneration does to itself and its successors.”^[21]

Bliese writes that T. S. Eliot warned “that our disregard for nature ‘is leading both to the deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism, and to the exhaustion of natural resources, and that a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly.”^[22] Asking Republican leaders today what they think about that would fetch up smirks and guffaws. But if we wildlovers talk about piety, prudence, and posterity in the way of Burke, Kirk, and other traditional conservatives as the grounds for keeping wild things, we may show more Main Street Americans that they should back wilderness and wildlife conservation.

Dave Foreman

With *arfæstnes* for the bushtits outside the window^[23]



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- [1] Few today recall Kirk, Weaver, Rossiter, and their fellow workers, but in the 1950s and 1960s at least, they were key intellectuals in the United States.
- [2] By "conservative" I mean what follows, not the authoritarian right or the reality-challenged Tea-Baggers.
- [3] John R. E. Bliese, "Richard M. Weaver, Russell Kirk, and the Environment," *Modern Age* Winter, 1996, 148.
- [4] John R. Bliese, *The Greening Of Conservative America* (Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 2001).
- [5] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 156.
- [6] Michael P Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club* (Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1988), 285-289.
- [7] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 156.
- [8] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 156.
- [9] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 157.
- [10] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 150.
- [11] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 150.
- [12] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 151.
- [13] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 151.
- [14] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 152-153.
- [15] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 153.
- [16] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 154.
- [17] Kim Crumbo, "The Precautionary Approach to Ecosystem Conservation," Nov. 24, 1999, draft in my files. I likely know no one tougher and steadier than my friend Crumbo; through him, I understand that prudence and piety for the wild is a mark of thoroughgoing strength.
- [18] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 151.
- [19] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 151.
- [20] Douglas W. Scott, *A Wilderness-Forever Future: A Short History of the National Wilderness Preservation System* (Pew Wilderness Center, Washington, D.C., 2001).
- [21] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 152.
- [22] Bliese, "Weaver, Kirk, and the Environment," 152.
- [23] *Arfæstnes* meant *piety* in Anglo-Saxon, with a sense of steadfast respect far into many tomorrows



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