

FOREWORD TO

Russell Kirk wrote often and eloquently about what he referred to as “the permanent things”—perduring conditions and needs that must be met if human society is to function well. Among these are a transcendent moral order based necessarily on religious faith, social continuity, the principle of prescription or things established by immemorial usage, prudential and natural change as opposed to change based on abstract theories, variety and therefore inequality except in the Last Judgment and before a court of law, and the acceptance of the imperfectability of man. He was, for all his intellectual self-confidence, too modest a gentleman to claim that his own work was a permanent thing, though one suspects that in his heart of hearts he must have cherished the hope. Nevertheless, I make the claim on his behalf. Moreover, his work has a peculiar quality of being simultaneously timeless and ever timely, at once transcendent and relevant.

I make these observations apropos of a brief review of the publishing history of *The Roots of American Order*. The book first appeared in 1974, a year of national crisis in which Richard Nixon resigned as president in disgrace, the war in Vietnam was coming toward a disastrous end, and colleges and universities were degenerating from seats of learning into madhouses. Kirk’s work was obviously the result of long and deep study, but it was also written as an effort, in his words, “to assist in renewing an appreciation of America’s moral and social order among the general public

and among university and college students.”

The first paperback edition came out in 1978, in the midst of Jimmy Carter’s often directionless presidency and on the eve of the calamity that was the Iranian hostage crisis. Carter himself, in a much-publicized speech at the University of Notre Dame, scolded Americans for having lost their sense of values and appreciation of the American order. I doubt whether Carter had read this book; if he had, instead of just scolding he might have urged every citizen to read the book as well.

Yet another printing came in the early 1980s, before it had become evident what kind of president Ronald Reagan would turn out to be. Those in the know were aware that Reagan had carefully read this and much of Kirk’s other work, and that it would affect his conduct during his years in the White House.

Now, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—I am writing this on September 11, 2002—ISI Books has brought out this current edition, which is perhaps more relevant than ever. The response of most Americans to the attacks was a wave of patriotism that had long since seemed out of fashion, accompanied by a devout appreciation of and determination to defend the social and political order with which we have been blessed. Yet some aspects of the response are troublesome. Predictably, cynicism marked the reaction of the extreme Left, and was especially prevalent among academicians who had long espoused “multiculturalism”—the notion that no culture has a fair claim to being superior to any other. These academics insisted that the United States itself has a history of being a terrorist country, citing slavery, relations with Indians, and the oppression of other minorities. The vast majority of students unmercifully denounced these professors who, though they had years before imposed a code of political correctness upon their students, sought refuge under a plea of freedom of speech.

Certain aspects of the reaction of those defending

America were also disturbing. President George W. Bush displayed admirable leadership in declaring a worldwide war on terrorism, on terrorists and the regimes that shelter them. Moreover, in the face of the likelihood that renegade nations possess or are on the verge of possessing weapons of mass murder and are perfectly willing to use them, the president would seem to have no option but to destroy those regimes. But it is one thing to depose a tyrant, and quite another to establish a peaceable order among peoples who do not have the cultural accoutrements necessary to create or live under such an order. After all, as *The Roots of American Order* makes abundantly clear, the American order, and the order of the entire Western world, was the product of twenty-five hundred years of evolution. That very thesis places this work outside the mainstream of American historical writing, which has tended to view the constitutional regime as something that sprang up, sui generis, from the minds of eighteenth-century Americans.

The rapid westernization of Japan after World War II indicates that the task, though daunting, is not an impossible one. But the implementation of new regimes, as Kirk warns us, cannot be accomplished on the basis of ideology, democratic or otherwise, but only incrementally.

Having reached that cautionary point—and *The Roots of American Order* is a cautionary as well as an educational work—I should like to close on a different and more upbeat note. As you read this book you will, even if you have read others of Kirk’s writings, be awestruck by the depth and breadth of the author’s erudition, as well as his wisdom, which is something considerably more than mere learning. In addition, you will be struck, I think, by the ease with which you follow the discourse. Kirk had a great gift, which he never stopped working on, for expressing complex ideas in the most pellucid fashion. Reasonably literate high school students can comprehend his message, and it will stick with them.

If, however, you know Russell Kirk only from his serious

writings (his ghost stories excepted) and were not privileged to know him in person, you probably will not suspect that he had a sense of humor. It was subtle and sly, I concede, but it was decidedly there. Let me illustrate with an example that I rediscovered when organizing my thoughts for this foreword. Some years ago I wrote an article about Kirk for a special edition of *National Review* commemorating the early superstars of the conservative movement. The article was titled “Russell Kirk: The American Cicero.” Kirk never said anything to me about it, but I knew he was pleased because of his boundless admiration for the ancient Roman Cicero. Not long afterward I reviewed a paperback edition of the present volume for the *Detroit News*. I praised the book appropriately, but said in passing that I had a few quibbles. When time came for yet another paperback edition, Kirk wrote me, thanking me for the review and asking whether I could send him any suggestions. That was not unusual for him, always seeking to improve his work. The tone of his letter was characteristically modest, but he signed it, “Cordially, Marcus Tullius Kirk.” In case you did not know, Marcus Tullius was Cicero’s name.

So pay close attention to the subtleties as you read on. If you do, you will be entertained as well as enlightened.

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Acknowledgement to the First Edition

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