



The Free Congress Commentary

The Next Conservatism #39: The Next Conservatism and “Crunchy Cons”

By Paul M. Weyrich

April 24, 2006

What may be the most important message of this series is that the conservative movement needs a different agenda for the future than that developed during the Cold War. From that standpoint I am encouraged by a book that offers a new agenda, *CRUNCHY CONS*, by Rod Dreher, who formerly wrote for *NATIONAL REVIEW*.

Let me say up front that I cannot imagine a worse name for traditionalist or cultural conservatives than “Crunchy Cons.” I hope that title was inflicted upon Mr. Dreher by some publicist.

What his book describes is not something new but something old and to some extent forgotten: the traditionalist conservatism of Russell Kirk. I agree with Rob Dreher that Kirk’s understanding of conservatism is highly important to the renewal of the American conservative movement.

The book jacket lists a “Crunchy Con Manifesto” that is similar to some of what I and others have said in these columns. Its points include:

- Modern conservatism has become too focused on money, power, and the accumulation of stuff.

- Big business deserves as much skepticism as big government.
- Culture is more important than politics and economics.
- Small, Local, Old and Particular are almost always better than Big, Global, New and Abstract.
- Beauty is more important than efficiency.
- The relentlessness of media-driven pop culture deadens our senses to authentic truth, beauty and wisdom.
- We share Russell Kirk's conviction that "the institution most essential to conserve is the family."

The last point is especially important to me. Free Congress Foundation was the first conservative think tank to make government policy toward families its focus, in the 1970s.

One of the important questions *CRUNCHY CONS* raises is just how important efficiency and even economics should be to conservatism. I agree with Dreher when he writes, "we can't build anything good unless we live by the belief that man does not exist to serve the economy, but the economy exists to serve man." The conservative life is not just about getting more stuff cheaper. Yes, we want a decent standard of living, but Dreher is correct in saying

A society built on consumerism must break down eventually for the same reason socialism did: because even though it is infinitely better than socialism at meeting our physical needs and gratifying our physical desires, consumerism also treats human beings as merely materialists, as ciphers on a spreadsheet. It cannot, over time, serve the deepest needs of the human person for stability, spirituality, and authentic community. We should not be surprised that it has led to social disintegration.

I can imagine Russell Kirk's saying "Hear! Hear!" to this. Kirk also would agree with Dreher's rejection of relativism, not only in morals but also in aesthetics. Dreher writes,

In his 1994 book *THE OLD WAY OF SEEING . . .* architect (Jonathan) Hale argued that the rampant charmlessness of our built environment is a function of America's loss of historical memory: "Everywhere in the buildings of the past is relationship among parts: contrast, tension, balance. Compare the buildings of today and we see no such patterns. We see fragmentation, mismatched systems, uncertainty. This disintegration tends to produce not ugliness so much as dullness . . .

In other words, there is a canon based on tradition, and it should be respected. The next conservatism too, I think, should talk about resurrecting old canons.

One emphasis in *CRUNCHY CONS* likely to be controversial among other conservatives is Dreher's emphasis upon environmentalism. I reject environmentalism as an ideology, which it largely has become. But Dreher is correct in saying that traditionalist conservatives also have been conservationists. He quotes powerfully from Pope John Paul II's Encyclical Centesimus Annus:

In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way. At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day. Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did

not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him.

Dreher is himself a Roman Catholic, but regardless of religious affiliation, I think most conservatives should agree that this is an area we need to think more about.

That may be the greatest service *CRUNCHY CONS* can perform for the next conservatism: getting us all to think anew about some of the challenges ahead, from the conservative principles Russell Kirk laid out better than anyone else. In his book's conclusion, Rod Dreher repeats its most important point:

We believe that culture is more important than politics, and that neither America's wealth nor our liberties will long survive a culture that no longer lives by what Russell Kirk identified as "the Permanent Things" – those eternal moral norms necessary to civilized life, and which are taught by all the world's great wisdom traditions.

Paul M. Weyrich is Chairman and CEO of the Free Congress Foundation.