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# Newsroom: A Liberal Reads the Conservative Canon

Roger Williams University School of Law

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# Newsroom

## A Liberal Reads the Conservative Canon

The National Review featured this "self-interview" by Professor Carl Bogus, in which the conservative classics are discussed from a liberal viewpoint.

From the NATIONAL REVIEW: "[A Liberal Reads the Great Conservative Works](#)" by **Carl T. Bogus**,  
Professor of Law



**July 18, 2011:** Do you have a liberal friend who is reasonably intelligent and open-minded? Have you ever fantasized about giving your friend a reading list full of the iconic conservative works? Would he enjoy reading them, learn anything from them, be affected by them? Consider me a surrogate for your friend. I'm a dyed-in-the-wool liberal, and, in the course of researching [a biography about William F. Buckley Jr.](#) and the rise of the conservative movement, I've spent much of the past four years reading many of the great conservative books. Let me conduct something of an interview with myself, attempting to ask the questions you might ask your friend, and giving my answers.

*Q. What did you read?*

A. I read a lot of William F. Buckley Jr., of course — books, columns, speeches, and magazine articles — but not everything he wrote. Buckley wrote 56 books, and, if his syndicated columns were published in book form, they would fill another 28 volumes. I also read many other conservative writers from the seminal period of modern American conservatism — roughly from 1951, when *God and Man at Yale* was published, to 1968, by which time Buckley and *National Review* had redefined conservatism. I read authors within the *National Review* family — James Burnham, Russell Kirk, and Frank Meyer, among

others — as well as conservative writers outside of *National Review*. I made a special point of reading (or in some cases rereading) the canon of American conservatism.

*Q. What was your favorite Buckley book, and why?*

A. I liked best *The Unmaking of a Mayor*, Buckley's memoir of his 1965 New York mayoral campaign. The book bursts with scintillating wit, but it's Buckley's position papers — set forth in full — that make the book truly special. They may be the most unusual position papers ever issued by a political candidate. Buckley had no chance of winning. He wasn't running to win; he was running to promote conservatism, and to explore conservative approaches for urban problems. This left him free — truly free — to tell the truth as he saw it, regardless of how voters would react. While most position papers are written by campaign staffs or consultants, Buckley wrote his own. They are cast in his inimitable style (James Buckley, who was his brother's campaign manager, confirmed for me that Bill penned them himself). Most of his proposals exhibit sophisticated research and analysis, yet are presented with elegant simplicity. Some of Buckley's proposals might be characterized as liberal, such as constructing an elevated bikeway from 1st Street to 125th Street in Manhattan; some are outrageous: quarantining welfare recipients and drug addicts in what Buckley described as "great and humane rehabilitation centers" and his opponents called "concentration camps"; but most deal with mundane yet critically important urban problems, such as traffic congestion, public transit, water, and the like. Buckley had the rare gift of making even such prosaic topics interesting.

*Q. In your opinion, what constitutes the canon of modern American conservatism?*

A. There is, of course, no official list. But I think there is a consensus that at least half a dozen books deserve such a designation. In chronological order, they are: F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), William F. Buckley Jr., *God and Man at Yale* (1951), Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (1952), Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (1953), Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), and Milton Friedman, *Freedom and Capitalism* (1962).

*Q. Which of these did you respect?*

A. I respected something in each of them. *Witness* is marvelous in terms of literary merit — unrivaled in this respect among the conservative books with which I am familiar, except perhaps *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* by Albert Jay Nock, a work that made an impact on the young William F. Buckley. Today, *Witness* serves as a reminder to us all that conservative worries about liberals with compromised loyalties have a historical basis (although it should also remind conservatives about the origins — and sensible limits — of such worries). Goldwater's *Conscience of a Conservative*, which was ghostwritten by

Buckley's friend and brother-in-law Brent Bozell, is a model polemic, perhaps the modern conservative movement's equivalent to Paine's *Common Sense*. It is reductionist, but this may be the strength as well as the weakness of the genre. By contrast, Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* is nuanced. But I suppose a liberal's saying this is merely fuel for the fire of hard-line libertarians who denounce Hayek as a "squish."

*Q. Which of the canonical works had the greatest impact on you?*

A. Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*. That was inevitable. Kirk argued that Burkeanism "is the true school of conservative principle," and I happen to be an admirer of Edmund Burke. Indeed, I consider myself a liberal Burkean. If you think "liberal Burkean" is an oxymoron, you have never read Kirk, who repeatedly — convincingly — contends, in both *The Conservative Mind* and his biography of Edmund Burke, that Burke was both a conservative and a liberal. Anyone who appreciates the complexity of the world realizes that, to be truly wise, a philosophy must somehow embrace the best sentiments of both conservatism and liberalism.

*Q. What is different between conservative and liberal literature?*

A. One striking difference is that the iconic conservative works are about ideology. By contrast, the most influential liberal books of the era are about policy issues. Those works are *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962), *The Other America* by Michael Harrington (1962), *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1963), and *Unsafe at Any Speed* by Ralph Nader (1965), which helped launch the environmental, anti-poverty, feminist, and consumer movements, respectively. Some prominent liberal books of the time were about ideology — such as *The Vital Center* by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (1949) and *The Affluent Society* by John Kenneth Galbraith (1958) — but these are exceptions to the rule.

*Q. Why the lack of symmetry?*

A. Conservatives have big appetites for ideology; liberals don't. There are, of course, taxonomies of conservative schools of thought. People on the right classify themselves as libertarians, neoconservatives, social conservatives, traditional conservatives, and the like, and spill oceans of ink defining, debating, and further subdividing these schools of thought. There is no parallel taxonomy on the left. Maybe, in part, it is because a central tenet of liberalism is that ideology should be eschewed in favor of the supposedly enlightened, pragmatic approach of making ad hoc judgments about issues. But on this conservatives are more realistic. Ideology is inevitable; we all have an ideology, whether we are aware of it or not. First of all, ideology is about values, and we can't decide how we wish to solve policy issues without having a firm grasp on the values we are seeking to advance. Second, the world is too complex for us to make informed judgments about all of the issues that confront us. We need a philosophy to serve as a north star. One

way I've been enriched by reading the great works of conservatism is that I've come better to appreciate how central ideology is to thinking about matters of governance and public policy.

*Q. After having completed an extensive program of reading great conservative works, how can you still be a liberal?*

A. As Isaiah Berlin pointed out, what separates us at the most fundamental level may be our different conceptions of liberty. Conservatives value above all else what Berlin called the negative vision of liberty, namely, freedom from coercion. Liberals are more willing to balance that against the positive vision of liberty — that is, having a reasonable opportunity to realize one's potential. The negative vision focuses conservatives on restricting the government's ability to interfere in people's lives. The positive vision leads liberals to believe that government has a role in guaranteeing baseline minimums in education, medical care, and healthy communities. Most of us probably accept both visions to some extent, but how we balance the two may be built into our DNA. It is not to be expected, therefore, that a liberal will be converted by reading the great works of conservatism, or vice versa. But there are rewards to be gained from doing so nonetheless. Often, we get a better understanding of what we believe by reading about a philosophy with which we have disagreements than by reading congenial literature. More important, reading its great works helps us better understand — and respect — the other side. That, at least, has been my experience.

— **Carl T. Bogus is a professor of law at Roger Williams University in Bristol, R.I.** His latest book is [Buckley: William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism](#), forthcoming in November from Bloomsbury Press.

To read the full article, click [here](http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/271937/liberal-reads-great-conservative-works-carl-t-bogus#). [<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/271937/liberal-reads-great-conservative-works-carl-t-bogus#>]