

# BOOK REVIEWS

Irving Kristol, the graying guru of neoconservatives, never set foot in Washington until the late 1950s, after he had co-founded *Encounter* magazine with Stephen Spender. Reading his book of essays, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, makes it clear that Mr. Kristol neither missed nor much liked the pre-Reagan carryings on in our nation's capital. He even finds distasteful some of the action under the current Administration.

Nonetheless, by 1981 Mr. Kristol understood, far better than most Democrats and (I like to hope) most Americans, what Ronald Reagan was up to with his massive tax cuts. In Kristol's view, the new President was determined to "put the welfare state in a moderately tight straitjacket for the rest of the decade at least." He applauds the President for "being bold enough to create a conservative deficit (one resulting from tax cuts) as a counterweight to liberal deficits (resulting from increased government expenditures)." To Mr. Kristol, Mr. Reagan is "just about the only conservative in his administration who appreciates the full ideological significance of his economic policy."

Here, I think Kristol has scored a top-of-the-scale 10 in political perspicacity. On the other hand, too many Democrats have scored three or less for their inability to perceive Reagan's true intentions in time to thwart them.

Kristol claps his hands for Reagan's domestic ideological coup in the same essay that condemns the President's foreign policy as soft:

What single bold action has this administration taken in foreign affairs? None. What single bold ideological affirmation has this administration uttered in foreign affairs? President Reagan occasionally says something that approximates such an affirmation, but the State Department quickly blankets it with an obfuscatory "explanation." Diplomacy becomes a substitute for, rather than a tool of, foreign policy.

Therein—as throughout his later essays—Kristol reveals how misleading the title of his book is. For there is nothing "neo" about him. These

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## REFLECTIONS OF A NEOCONSERVATIVE: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

Irving Kristol/Basic Books/\$19.95

Joseph A. Califano, Jr.

essays are the reflections of a full-blooded conservative. Fortunately for Mr. Kristol, the Reagan Administration has so defanged the Federal Trade Commission that there is little, if any, likelihood it will enforce laws against false advertising, much less invoke the Truth-in-Packaging Act of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

Kristol may lack the lifelong card-carrying status of a Richard Viguerie. He is mercifully free of the political buffoonery of Howard Phillips. And he does not subscribe to the ridiculous litmus tests of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. But with this book, Irving Kristol puts forth a thesis that entitles him to a doctorate in conservative letters, no "neo" about it.

Kristol's book is extraordinarily well written—a series of sprightly, provocative essays that also display a remarkable versatility of mind and matter. The Cold War, American

higher education, obscenity, foreign policy, economics, politics, art, Judaism, psychoanalysis, Christianity, NATO, Einstein, and socialism are just some of the topics covered. Most of the essays have such pace that, once begun, it's hard to put them down.

The tone of *Reflections* is relentlessly that of the convert who has become purer than the lifelong ideologue, like the born-again Christian who totally eschews things material, or the newly convinced vegetarian who considers it a moral outrage to kill cattle or chickens. Kristol is purer than Reagan, more economically pristine than Martin Feldstein.

Yet, taken with a few grains of salt, there is much for liberals to learn about their own excesses and hypocrisies from Kristol's thirty-year intellectual tour. One only wishes the author had subjected his new-found conservative faith to the same pragmatic harpoons that he so brilliantly directs at the intellectual and

political foibles of American liberals.

*Item:* In his 1977 essay, "Memoirs of a Trotskyist," Kristol contrasts the radicalism of the thirties, "decidedly an adult movement" in which young people participated, with the radicalism of the sixties, a childish, generational movement. The sixties were "a bewildering and self-destructive tantrum," because we adults failed to transmit adult values to our offspring. Kristol's characterization of this tumultuous period is accurate enough. But he neglects to note that the kids of the sixties got broad-based support that hardcore radicals of the thirties never could muster. Most Americans believed that the draft was forcing millions of young men to risk their lives in a war that had a seemingly insatiable appetite for American blood and gave no adequate return on the investment of our national honor and power.

*Item:* In his essay on "Pornography, Obscenity and the Case for Censorship," Kristol rightly notes that in order to propound seriously that "no one was ever corrupted by a book, you almost have to believe that no one was ever improved by a book (or a play, or a movie)." With characteristic wit, he notes that "no one, not even a university professor, really believes that." Every civilized society has put some limits on public amusements. I find it remarkable that many of the same liberals who so fervently seek to ban boxing as a public sporting event should place no limit on the human degradation to which they would permit men and women to sink in X-rated films and sex-oriented nightclubs.

*Item:* In the essay "Urban Civilization and Its Discontents," Kristol punches down the special problems, concentrated poverty, and physical deterioration of large urban centers. Rather, he almost one-dimensionally attributes the decline of the American city to the establishment in America of a moral code that asks not why, but "why not?" For Kristol, it is a "startling absence of values" that is responsible for the urban crisis of our democratic urban nation.

Again and again, Kristol punches holes in Marxist economic and historical theory. He sharply draws the lines between socialist theory and the reality of what's happening in most socialist countries in the world. In economics, Kristol puts all his faith in the capitalist system. I heartily agree.



# REPRINTS

It would be hard to find three subjects more hotly debated today than education, environmentalism, and the growing nuclear freeze movement. Each of these topics merited in-depth coverage in past issues of *The American Spectator*, and now, due to popular demand, are available in reprint form. Order your copies today to provide material for your own debates, or to distribute to educators, businessmen, and students.



**The Counterfeit Peacemakers: Atomic Freeze** by Rael Jean Isaac and Erich Isaac. This 12-page investigative report appeared in the June 1982 issue and documents Soviet involvement in the nuclear freeze movement. The article was the subject of a White House press conference, as well as numerous national newspaper articles and television shows.



**Marva Collins and American Public Education** by Rita Kramer. Mrs. Kramer reports on how Marva Collins, whose success in teaching ghetto children how to read and write earned her the wrath of the NEA, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the assorted fat cats of our bloated educational bureaucracy. First run in the April 1983 issue, it is must reading for teachers, principals, administrators, or just parents concerned about the education their children are receiving.



**Modern Man and the Obsession** by Robert Nisbet. In this reprint of his May 1983 feature article, Nisbet argues that the environmental movement has lost all perspective and taken on the aura and enthusiasm of a religion. No other work has so cogently documented the anti-capitalist mentality and upper-class fanaticism behind this the Age of Environmentalism.

**Sanctifying Revolution: Protestantism's New Social Gospel** by Rael Jean Isaac and Erich Isaac. Though recently the subject of a "60 Minutes" report, the Isaac's research into the Marxist links behind various church movements first made headlines when it appeared in the May 1981 issue of *The American Spectator*. In the wake of the WCC's recent criticism of Afghan freedom fighters, the Isaacs' documentation of how Church money is being spent in various countries is now more important than ever.



**Sideswipe: Kissinger, Shawcross, and the Responsibility for Cambodia** by Peter Rodman with rebuttal by William Shawcross. This reprint features the complete and lively exchange between Rodman and Shawcross regarding the alleged United States responsibility for the Cambodian holocaust. These articles appeared in the March and July 1981 issues.



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Capitalism is the best economic system the world has ever known. But I deplore Kristol's reluctance (at least in this collection) to accept the need for government to act as a redistributor of wealth to those who are unable, either temporarily or permanently, to fend for themselves.

Contrary to conservative myth, the Great Society was not a set of programs designed to pour money into the hands of the lazy poor so they could atrophy, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, and sending the bill to the American taxpayer.

The Great Society was first and foremost a program of economic policy that gave this country some of the most prosperous times in its two-hundred-year history. The real economic growth of the middle sixties took care of the overwhelming majority of the American people without any government help.

If the majority of Americans are to reap the fruits of a capitalist society with a clear conscience, then they must recognize that even the finest economic policy cannot, without government intervention, deal with two kinds of people: those who are literally unable to care for themselves, and those who need some help, above and beyond what the market place provides, to share in the general economic well-being.

In the first group I would include the aged who need Social Security or other support, the permanently disabled who are so physically or mentally ill that they cannot work, and the millions of little children born into our society of parents who either neglect, abuse, or ignore them, and who certainly do not fulfill their obligation to support them.

In the second group, I would put the temporarily unemployed, the people who need health care to repair their minds or bodies in order to work again but who cannot afford that health care, and those who need an education or training to master technical skills. By and large, these are people who need the kinds of things the fortunate among us receive from our parents or other loving relatives.

Government can and should help these two groups, but one finds precious little support for that humane role in Kristol's neoconservatism.

One of Kristol's devils, clearly, is interventionist government—of Franklin Roosevelt, and particularly of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. This is one devil Kristol will not give his due.

But the currently fashionable world of neoconservatism, even as brilliantly articulated by Mr. Kristol, cannot obscure the reality of what the Great Society achieved. In 1960, 22 percent

of the American people lived below the official poverty level. When Lyndon Johnson left office in 1969, that percentage had dropped to 13 percent. Despite the flat economy of the 1970s, the official poverty level did not rise. Indeed, by 1979 it had gone down to 12 percent. But if we count (as David Stockman does when it supports his budget-cutting points) the income effects of the Great Society service programs, such as those for health care, job training, aid to education, and rehabilitation for the handicapped, by the mid-1970s the poverty rate had been reduced to six percent.

What has Reagan's economic and domestic policy achieved? By 1982, the poverty rate had skyrocketed to 15 percent, the highest in seventeen years with 34 million Americans officially considered poor. These numbers come from the same Administration that pays Ed Meese to make hungry children disappear.

Though Mr. Kristol has high marks for President Reagan's shrewd economic policy and conservative deficits, his inability to see much good in governments past allows him to miss another point I think Reagan understands far better than most Republicans and Democrats. The President's ability to drive down inflation with a sledgehammer was made possible by the cushions Lyndon Johnson's Great Society provided: food stamps, unemployment compensation (which Reagan came to like so much as President that he kept recommending 13-week benefit extensions), Medicaid and Medicare, community health centers, work training, and a host of other programs. Ronald Reagan has taught us that we can rapidly wring inflation out of the economy because the remnants of a compassionate, interventionist government are there not only to keep the mobs off the streets, but to keep most families together and a good many adequately (if not well) fed.

When all is said and done, what do I think of Kristol's book? If you like *The American Spectator*, you'll love Irving Kristol. If you are a committed liberal, you'll get your dander up as you go through its pages. But there's a lot to learn in the way he pointedly—but always good-naturedly—reminds you of your haunting mistakes and lingering hypocrisies. If you appreciate good writing about the serious business of making America work better, reorient its values, and get moving again, read it. You'll enjoy.

And you'll discover that there's nothing neo about Mrs. Kristol's son, Irving. □

THE TROUBLED CRUSADE:  
AMERICAN EDUCATION 1945-1980  
Diane Ravitch/Basic Books/\$19.95

John R. Turner

Dealing with a subject as diverse as American schooling over a 35-year period requires thematic discipline. The strength of Diane Ravitch's new book, *The Troubled Crusade*, is its close adherence to the argument that public demands for equality brought state action to bear on the schools in a way never before experienced in our history. The corresponding weakness is an absence of information about what actually went on in the classroom.

Through eight dense chapters Mrs. Ravitch amply documents the governmental ingestion of the schools. A single fact alone, offered in her final pages, could well serve as a symbol for her entire story: In 1965 there were 92 federal regulations affecting education; by 1977 the number had grown to almost a thousand.

The cost of assuring educational access to everyone—aside from billions of dollars—has been intense confusion about what education is supposed to be. As Mrs. Ravitch concludes: "Lost in the new order of things was any conception of the common interest, the idea that made common schooling possible."

The author's attitude toward these developments is not as decided as the foregoing statement might suggest. Though she clearly regrets the bureaucratic invasion, and the consequent loss of coherence, she is also strongly impressed by the sheer physical growth of education. The number of buildings built, the number of teachers trained, the number of graduates certified, and the number of dollars spent since 1945 are astounding. The number of people graduating from college and going on to advanced education now exceeds the wildest predictions of 35 years ago. If one assumes, with Mrs. Ravitch, that all this represents learning, there can be no question that the schools now are better than they were at the end of the Second World War.

John R. Turner is Director of Continuing Education at St. Mary's College of Maryland and author of the column "An Idea of Freedom."

The problem with any assumption about a subject as vast as the schools of an entire nation is that it is inevitably more a product of political and historiographical stance than it is of evidence. One can find pretty much what he looks for.

Diane Ravitch is what I would call a conservative liberal—as contrasted with the progressive liberal to one side of her and the liberal conservative to the other. Her heart is with government reform, but her head tells her that the government often fouls up what it touches, and that it is particularly inept in dealing with the subtleties of education. She knows also that the government's weakness in the face of pressure groups means that political initiatives can be ruinous to genuine learning.

For these reasons, she is suspicious of sweeping governmental programs, preferring instead processes with limited and specific goals. Nor does she have much patience with those who argue that piecemeal reform is little more than patching holes in a rotten educational fabric.

Her account of the curriculum revision movement, which rose up in the anxiety following Sputnik, provides a clear example of how she thinks educational change occurs. Between 1956 and 1975, the National Science Foundation funded 53 projects designed to spruce up the teaching of mathematics and science by weaning teachers from their dependence on textbooks and memorization exercises. By the mid-seventies these efforts were generally seen as failures by the educational community. A great deal of money had been spent and ambitious claims had been made. Yet, according to the common view, not much had happened. Science and mathematics were taught pretty much as they had been before.

Not so, says Mrs. Ravitch. Though the schools had not been transformed, some changes had occurred. Particularly in the natural sciences, the NSF curricula had found wide acceptance, and were being used in 60 percent of the nation's school districts. Therefore, the author asserts, the NSF "can be judged to have achieved a

significant influence through its relatively small investment."

Well, maybe. It's hard to know what "significant" means in this case. That a school district used one of the curricula doesn't tell us how many students were affected. And certainly, it doesn't tell us what the effect was. The flaw in Mrs. Ravitch's approach to educational history is that it seldom pushes through to results that count. A history of schooling that says virtually nothing about what actually took place in the minds of students

leaves something to be desired.

She might well respond that it's impossible to know what happened in students' minds. And if one adheres to her view of valid evidence, she's right. She is a social scientific historian and places her faith in data, statistics, and "studies" based on them. She exhibits no inclination toward individual perception and so makes scarcely any use of anecdotal evidence. Consequently, not only does her book seldom penetrate to the heart of her subject, it also makes for fairly dry

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