

The Equilibrist

Irving Kristol and the politics of ma non troppo

BY WILFRED M. McCLAY

LUNCH with Irving Kristol was an experience to remember. I had the pleasure only three times, always in the excellent dining room atop the American Enterprise Institute, but I recall each occasion distinctly and fondly. Our conversations ranged widely, and were always interrupted by friends dropping by the table, wanting Irving's take on burning issues of the day, whatever they might have been. Yet he seemed to have the ability, common to skillful editors, of taking all such interruptions in stride, almost as if they were written into the script, directing and redirecting his attention at will without loss of focus. What we now call "multitasking" seemed to come naturally to him. He always had a lot of irons in the fire.

And yet every time I saw him in action, he seemed to me the most relaxed and composed guy in the room, with his broad, radiant smile reminding one of a cross between a Cheshire cat and a contented Buddha. Certainly that was true in our conversations, no matter how gloomy the topic. He had an imperturbable confidence that, like the peace that passeth understanding, was a mystery intrinsic to his being, in no way dependent upon the outcome of external events, about which he was likely to be only guardedly optimistic at best. Such confidence was, I believe, the basis of all his other virtues, the ballast that kept his outlook so unflinchingly sane.

Perhaps that confidence was one reason he had absolutely no interest, at least none that I could detect, in talking about himself. Almost any other subject was more appealing. This was not out of shyness or modesty, but simple boredom, as if one were to propose a long discussion about the commutative principle of multiplication. What was there to discuss? In that sense, Irving was different from most people in our era, and particularly from most Washington people and most academics. Of course, that was partly because he fit neither of the latter categories, even though he lived happily and productively in Washington for many years and taught at New York University for nearly two decades before that. He managed to navigate those settings without ever taking on their vices, because he knew who he was.

He did not, for example, suffer from the academic's addiction to parading ever-greater levels of complexity, making arguments from authority, and using jargon and willfully opaque verbiage to do so. That was not Irving. He weighed the issues with great care, and had a phenomenal ability to read and

absorb and distill a wide range of often highly technical writing. But in the end, what came out of his mouth was often disarmingly simple and direct, presented without qualifications or escape clauses, so much so that he often fooled people. Where they expected mere erudition they got wisdom, and they were not prepared for that.

His willingness to operate in that way reflected the range of his virtues. He had an uncanny ability to cut through the incidentals and accidentals of a matter, go right to its center of gravity, and grasp hold of it in clean, epigrammatic phrases. This intellectual virtue was also a moral virtue, since it demonstrated his willingness to forgo all the protective trappings of erudition and name-dropping, and instead present himself and his ideas simply as what they were. Irving was rightly suspicious of academic intellectuals, and it did him good to keep his distance from them. But no man ever walked the earth who believed more deeply in the power of ideas to make sense of human affairs, and did more to advance the ideas he cared about.

He understood from the start that any sustained success for the right ideas would require something more than the work of a single brilliant pen. So he also became a builder of institutions. As he once put it to me, he had discovered early in his life that all the most important innovations in intellectual history had come out of small, intense groups—circles, schools, salons, sects, metaphysical clubs, and the like. He realized that the task before him, the defense of liberal society against its own excesses, would require the creation of something similar, an incubator and testing ground for the ideas that would become neoconservatism. "I decided that I wanted to create a salon," he said, and in a way that is precisely what he did. In a sense, all the magazines he edited, notably *The Public Interest*, and all the institutions he helped sustain, notably the American Enterprise Institute, were his salon, an archipelago of gathering places where those who were like-minded, but not too like-minded, could have fruitful conversations and exchanges leading to enlivened inquiry and intellectual breakthroughs.

A GREAT deal has already been written about Irving Kristol on the occasion of his death, and there is perhaps no reason to rehearse here his brilliant intellectual career, beginning in those famous alcoves at City College of New York, and culminating in his role as author, *Wall Street Journal* columnist, editor, adviser to presidents, and salonmeister extraordinary. I do think, however, that some aspects of his intellectual contribution have not yet been fully appreciated, and these will become clearer as more time passes.

It is possible to make too much out of his youthful flirtation with Trotskyism, the main result of which was his lifelong non-flirtation with a young lady named Gertrude Himmelfarb, the sole point of interest at otherwise dreary chapter meetings. But there is no doubt that a signal event in his intellectual development was his rejection of modern liberalism's fatal attraction to the furthest excesses of the French Enlightenment, which sought to overturn all traditional forms and usages, and entirely reengineer man and society in the image of rational ideals. This aversion was surely behind his attraction to the work of Leo Strauss, with its critique of modernity. But it also—and I think more importantly—was behind his growing appreciation

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of the alternative treasures of the Anglo-American intellectual tradition: the richness of English conservatism, the prudence and anti-utopianism of the British Enlightenment, the moral balance of Adam Smith, the inherent conservatism of the American Revolution, the skepticism of the American Founders. Indeed, it is no coincidence that his wife, Himmelfarb, one of our most eminent historians, made British intellectual history her grand subject.

His years in England, particularly the five years in the early 1950s spent as coeditor of *Encounter* magazine, were crucial to this shift, and left a permanent mark on him. As John Podhoretz has shrewdly observed, one could even detect the enduring mark of those years in Irving's unusual accent, which occasionally smuggled a British "ah" into a world like "half." It was during those years that he met not only figures such as Isaiah Berlin and W. H. Auden, but also British conservatives such as Michael Oakeshott, Malcolm Muggeridge, Peregrine Worsthorne, and Henry Fairlie, who were, in addition to being far and away the most interesting people he and his wife encountered, entirely comfortable and unapologetic about their conservatism, in a way that was not thinkable in the United States. Just as important, he had the chance to observe at close quarters the beginnings of the descent of post-war Britain from its Churchillian heights to social-democratic depths under the influence of blindly egalitarian ideas, and he did not like what he saw, or want it for his own country.

Imbibing the work of such mentors, and reflecting on the meaning of such experiences, Irving Kristol became a quintessential equilibrist. He did not abandon everything about liberalism, but he came to see that the good life was a balancing act. Virtue was nearly always to be found as a mean between contending excesses, and human nature was so untrustworthy that it always needed to be checked by countervailing forces.

A dynamic and competitive capitalism was optimal for sustained economic growth, but only when it was accompanied by traditions and moral constraints that served to inform and direct economic forces and keep them within bounds. Democracy and a high degree of individual liberty were desirable, but only when they were countervailed by constitutional restraints and a high respect for the rule of law and an orderly society. Lines had to be drawn, and settled precedents were to be respected. Patchwork reforms, undertaken with gradual Burkean patience, were always better and more enduring than comprehensive ones.

There is some fairness in the claim that neoconservatism was, despite its favorable view of Burke, at least at first a form of liberalism. Kristol did not seek the repeal of the New Deal or the banishment of social science, two of the culprits most likely to be fingered by traditional conservatives. But he was keenly alert, thanks in part to his British experiences, to the ways in which overly ambitious welfare states could demoralize otherwise healthy and capable populations and create

dysfunctional and corrosive behaviors that lead to social breakdown and the permanent immiseration of entire classes of people. And in the pages of *The Public Interest* he published the work of a band of brave and innovative social scientists who used the techniques of their disciplines to demonstrate the negative consequences of many of the most "progressive" reforms. To that point, conservatives had generally done little more than inveigh against these reforms in broadly moral or philosophical terms. *The Public Interest* and a handful of other venues provided empirical evidence that the reforms were misguided and damaging. The end result, by the middle of the 1990s, was a reform of the American welfare system that has been one of the few unalloyed successes of American social policy.

He was all too aware of the flaws of the existing system, and never glossed them over. His "two cheers" for capitalism never turned into three, and indeed, he never had three for much of anything. Capitalism, liberalism, and democracy established themselves in America, he wrote (borrowing from Strauss), upon the "low but solid" foundation of self-interest, and accepted a "weak consensus" that extends not to the definition of happiness but only to the procedural means by which governments allow individuals' varied pursuits of happiness to go forward. Such a "weak consensus" proved vastly liberating to individual creativity and aspiration, but it has been pointedly unable to offer a principle of moral cohesion upon which society can be ordered. Hence, for Kristol, the central importance of religion, and hence, too, his alarm at the prospect of our having nearly exhausted the inherited capital of our religious traditions.

Of course, religion too can become a hazard when not counter-vailed by a vigorous regime of individual rights and secular institutions, with protections for minorities; and if that were the problem facing our time, we can be sure that

Irving Kristol would have written about it at length. Indeed, if Kristol had been a composer (and the analogy can be extended, since he was just as much a conductor, and impresario, as a composer), he would surely have marked the tempi on all his pieces with the trailing qualifier *ma non troppo*—meaning "but not too much." *Allegro* . . . but not too much. Capitalism, yes . . . but not without moral and spiritual counterweights. Democracy? Yes, but with a full recognition of its limitations and pathologies. Liberalism? Yes to constitutionalism and free economies, but no to the monstrous and all-devouring thing that statist liberalism has become.

In a sense, the human need for limits, and the problem of identifying limits in an age that refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of them, or for that matter of any authority, was the fundamental insight and animating core of Irving Kristol's intellectual life. We don't have the means anymore to say what is *troppo*. But Irving did, and did so with a confidence that was as rare as it was inspiring. Let's hope that we are wise enough to draw on his work and example in the years ahead. NR



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