



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: To understand conservatism, read Richard Weaver

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 09.07.26



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A Liberty Fund colloquium is one of the last redoubts (<https://mindingthecampus.org/2026/05/04/the-finest-company/>) of a nearly extinct practice: a room of strangers, difficult texts, and days spent discussing them carefully together.

While preparing for the next one, I have been rereading Richard Weaver and rediscovering why he remains indispensable to anyone who wants to understand American conservatism as something more substantial than a bundle of cultural markers: gun ownership, church attendance, flag-waving.

Weaver, a North Carolinian who spent most of his career teaching English at the University of Chicago, was in his own person an argument about exile and return. He wrote from the North about the South, and about the South as a stand-in for something the modern, technological, rootless order had lost.

That biographical fact – the Southern man of letters making his professional life amid the very “aberration,” as he called the industrial North, that he spent his career diagnosing – gives his writing an edge sharper than mere nostalgia. He was not defending a place he never left but arguing, instead, from within the belly of the thing he distrusted, for what it had displaced.

Weaver was, of course, one voice among many in the postwar conservative revival: Russell Kirk supplied the canon, William F. Buckley Jr. supplied the movement, Whittaker Chambers supplied the martyrdom, Friedrich Hayek supplied the economics.

Weaver’s contribution was quieter and, in some ways, more foundational: the insight that politics rests on culture, and culture on metaphysics, and that a society’s health cannot be measured by its platforms but by whether it still possesses what he called a “transcendent” order beneath its institutions.

That’s the argument he made in a 1957 essay, “Life without Prejudice,” collected in the Liberty Fund volume [“In Defense of Tradition”](https://about.libertyfund.org/books/in-defense-of-tradition/) (<https://about.libertyfund.org/books/in-defense-of-tradition/>).” Weaver was writing about communism, but the essay reads today less like Cold War polemic than like a diagnosis still being confirmed.

Communism, he wrote, “must overcome” the “binding element, or the cohesive force that holds a society together,” which is why its adherents “attack those transcendental unifiers like religion, patriotism, familiar relationship, and the like,” and why they are “so insistent upon their own programs of conformity, leveling, and de-individualization.” One need not squint hard to see the same instinct at work in today’s leftist activism.

Weaver’s account of what such leveling destroys is worth dwelling on. “A society is a structure with many levels, offices, and roles,” he wrote, “and the reason we feel grateful to the idea of society is that one man’s filling his role makes it possible for another to fill his role, and so on.” When a society “breaks down,” he continued, what has actually happened is “a confusing of these roles,

a loss of differentiation, and a consequent waning of the feeling of loyalty,” because “society makes possible the idea of vocation, which is the primary source of distinctions.”

The campaign to erase those distinctions – to make, in his phrase, “every people a mass” – was not incidental to the revolutionary project but its object. The strategy, as he saw it, was to “discredit and do away with the whole” of a society’s institutions, on the theory that if you “weaken one after another of the supporting pillars, the structure must eventually collapse.”

None of this was, for Weaver, an abstraction. Accepting an award from the Young Americans for Freedom, he located the whole enterprise of conservatism in a single conviction: “It is our traditional belief that man was given liberty to ennoble him.” He went further, distinguishing the dignity so often invoked in his day from the thing itself: “Too much is being said today about the dignity of man without realization that the dignity of man means the worth of man. There can be no worth of man unless there is an inviolable area of freedom in which he can assume the stature of a man and exercise choice in regard to his work, his associates, his use of his earnings, his way of life.”

Liberty, in this telling, is not license but the precondition of moral seriousness.

Most Americans, asked to define conservatism, would reach for a senator’s name or a party platform. This is understandable but also mistaken because political reputations decay faster than almost anything else in public life. Ask someone to name the senator who represented his state in 1879, or the leading state legislators of 1916, and you will likely be met with silence: figures who commanded the front pages of their day, reduced now to footnotes even in the jurisdiction they served.

Writers fare better. They tend, oddly, to grow in stature as their contemporaries recede because they weren’t arguing about the issue of the hour but about the permanent things beneath it.

That's Weaver's core legacy, the reason he belongs on any conservative's bookshelf regardless of how the political weather turns. He never mistook parties for principles, or the officeholders for the order they were meant to serve. Read him not to relitigate the 20th century's quarrels but to recover the sense – unfashionable, unglamorous, and for that reason all the more necessary – that ideas outlast the men who hold office in their name, and that a society's worth is measured not chiefly by who wins its elections but by whether it still remembers what it's for.

Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Free Enterprise Initiative and a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com (<http://AllenMendenhall.com>).

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