

BookTalk

THE RIGHT MAN FOR THE PART

By Paul Kengor

The Right Moment
By Matthew Dallek
Free Press, 320 pages, \$25

The *Right Moment* may be the seminal work on Reagan's first gubernatorial campaign. This much is certain: Matthew Dallek grasps the long-term importance of those early Reagan years and understands that Reagan personally was a vital, irreplaceable force within that period, and thus far beyond as well. This book, which was Dallek's doctoral dissertation at Columbia, will help shape the historical view of Ronald Reagan. It will do so to Reagan's advantage.

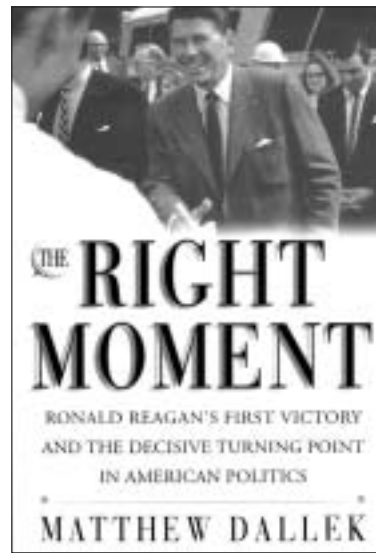
The book has its problems. Dallek is a liberal, and that bias leads him to occasionally misstate things. For example, prior to the gubernatorial run, Dallek says few California politicians were as "shrill and radical in their political beliefs" as Reagan. He follows with a quote from a Reagan speech in January 1962, that isn't especially shrill or radical. Of communism, Reagan asserted: "Whether we admit it or not, we are in a war. This war was declared a half-century ago by Karl Marx and re-affirmed by Lenin when he said that communism and capitalism cannot exist side by side." Reagan would be labeled shrill and radical in the 1980s when he made such statements. In reality, however, his 1962 assessment was correct. Far from radical, Reagan was bold and insightful. In that same vein, Dallek uses phrases like "excoriated," "mocked," and "thundered ominously" to describe when Reagan merely defended himself and conservative ideals against attacks from liberal Rockefeller Republicans. That crowd made

unfair, harsh charges against Reagan, once viciously (without merit) accusing him of racism—an attack so unfair that it sent Reagan charging off the stage cursing.

By and large, Dallek does a good job describing Reagan's beliefs and much of the conservatism of the time. He is quite fair, unusually so for a liberal scholar. Indeed, a big story here is that a major work by a rising liberal academic, one endorsed by top liberal academics like Alan Brinkley and William Leuchtenburg, is so fair and positive. This is the kind of work that will enhance Reagan's reputation among those who rank Presidents and who determine, for better or worse, how "history" remembers them.

The book's contribution is its focus on Reagan's early political career, where it breaks new ground. This period has been neglected. Not until this book did anyone comprehend the gravity of what Reagan did from roughly 1962-67. He was responsible, as much as or more so than anyone else, for the dominant new era in American politics, the conservative ascendancy that captured the last quarter of the twentieth century, and still dominates. This, then, is a book about the importance of Reagan himself, and how he made the difference. It helps slay the myth that Reagan succeeded merely because of the "smart men" around him. As Dallek notes, "To critics of the 1960s, it was not at all clear that without Reagan, there was no Reagan campaign." To the contrary, he writes, "in their rush to debunk Reagan," critics have "overlooked the degree to which the Reagan campaign was a group effort that coalesced around a talented candidate."

He details what Reagan faced and reversed. In 1962, a handful of conservative politicians ran for high office in California,



and to a person they nearly all suffered resounding rebukes at the ballot box. The conservative movement in California and the nation was "an object of derision," particularly among journalists and academics.

Conservatism was on the ropes. With Goldwater's collapse, "most of the country agreed... that as a political force conservatism remained marginal." The defeat was "dispiriting, overwhelming." It was "so thorough, so crushing, that [Goldwater] and the larger ideas for which he stood had virtually no chance of making a comeback."

Dallek skillfully notes how Reagan was able to reverse enough of this view to get himself elected and lead a national movement that would fundamentally shift politics. No small achievement.

How did he pull it off? He had the right issues at "the right moment," peddling them in a palatable, articulate, "reasonable-sounding" manner in a way other conservatives hadn't—or, more importantly, couldn't. He did so with a smiling message of "sunny," soaring optimism and patriotism. He was a quick study, as well as a "crowd pleasing and inspirational orator" of unusual prowess. He could be "eloquent, witty, and self-effacing" and "charismatic, handsome, and cool under fire," as well as "warm and good-natured."

In 1966, Reagan trounced the popular governor Pat Brown by a million votes. He took 55 of the state's 58 counties—a "remarkable reversal" from 1958, when Brown won nearly the same. It would be a sign of the next 20 years to come. "And when Brown went down," concludes

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Dallek in the book's final lines, "so did the [liberal] philosophy he had clung to throughout his adult life. It has never really recovered."

It hasn't. As Dallek shows, that's a credit to Reagan. And so is this book.

Paul Kengor is associate professor of political science at Grove City College. He is writing What Reagan Knew, which focuses on Reagan's personal role in undermining the Soviet empire.

THE TIES THAT BIND

By Allan Carlson

Robert Nisbet: Communitarian Traditionalist

By Brad Lowell Stone
ISI Books, 152 pages, \$19.95

With the rise of "communitarian" thought on the American Left and of "civil society" theory on the Right, Robert Nisbet (1913-1996) only grows in stature as one of the seminal minds of the twentieth century. Nisbet's academic career began at the University of California-Berkeley as a student of Frederick J. Teggart, who emphasized the innate conflict between state and family in human history and encouraged Nisbet toward a 1939 dissertation on "The Reactionary Enlightenment."

Nisbet absorbed here the intoxicating work of the early-nineteenth-century French writers Bonald, de Maistre, Lamennais, and Chateaubriand. Their defense of small, historic, and rooted institutions against the claims of the revolutionary modern state inspired Nisbet's first book, *The Quest for Community*. It was part of that "freshest of books," all appearing in the early '50s, which would spark the conservative intellectual revival in America. The others were Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, Eric Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics*, and William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*. In his book, Nisbet described human society as a partnership of the dead, the living, and the unborn. He highlighted the spontaneous order that grew out of custom and tradition, one compatible with true liberty. He respected "the inherited authority and status of traditional communities"—

families, churches, villages, craft guilds, and so on. Such true communities were functional, embraced some transcending ideal or "dogma," bore an authority resting on consensus and legitimacy, maintained task-centered hierarchies, and rested on senses of honor, solidarity, and group pride. For most of human history, Nisbet argued, such communities—rather than individuals—were the basic units of society.

But the modern state had risen to challenge and dissolve these primordial human collectives. The centralizing state was the foe of kinship. It used war to crush localisms and particularities. The concepts of "democracy" and "equality" also proved effective in disrupting traditional hierarchies and authority. The modern state especially welcomed and contributed to the disintegration of the family, with the welfare state absorbing many of the family's former functions. Nisbet emphasized the growing alliance between the "intellectual" class and centralized government, and the intimate connection between the welfare state and the "warfare state." (My favorite concrete example of Nisbet's observation: In 1966, with the American role in Vietnam growing in parallel with Lyndon Johnson's domestic agenda, one presidential aide described the administration's goal as seeking "great societies at home and grand designs abroad.")

Author Brad Lowell Stone, a sociologist at Oglethorpe University, shows how this "one great" theme of authentic community versus the state percolated through all of Nisbet's subsequent work, including such important volumes as *The Sociological Tradition* (1966), *The Sociology of Emile Durkheim* (1974), *Twilight of Authority* (1975), and *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980). Stone also offers valuable clarifications of Nisbet's basic argument. He notes, for example, that although Nisbet found intellectual heroes in Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville, he did not embrace their grounding of society's "little platoons" in human nature. Eschewing any focus on "natural law," Nisbet talked instead about the functionality of small institutions and their ability to solve social problems.

Regarding capitalism, Nisbet acknowl-

edged that it had disturbed many traditional social units. But the root cause of trouble was again the centralizing political state. As he wrote in *Quest for Community*: "The State's development of a single system of law...; its deliberate cultivation of trade in the hinterlands; its positive subsidies and protections to those new businessmen who were seeking to operate outside the framework of guild and church; its creation of disciplined State workhouses—all provided a powerful *political stimulus* to the rise of capitalism."

On the subject of religion, Stone shows that Nisbet was conflicted. On the one hand, he saw *institutional* religion as a necessary bulwark in a conservative order, where a strong church could serve as a check on state power. And in his *History of The Idea of Progress*, he highlights the "faint" signs of "a religion renewal... in America" as one cause for hope. On the other hand, he distrusted religious enthusiasm and observed that the best conservative thinkers were usually tepid in their own religious beliefs.

Stone concludes his investigation of Nisbet with compelling arguments that "Nisbetism" is in fact highly compatible with "the classical liberalism" of the Scottish Enlightenment (whose leaders included David Hume and Adam Smith) and wholly at odds with the political "monism" of Robert Bellah and other American "new communitarians." He also launches into his own Nisbet-inspired salvos against certain feminist orthodoxies: arguments that this reviewer, at least, found gratifying (for example, "Our culture has replaced the natural purpose of marriage, the rearing of children to maturity, by the emotional and sexual gratification of adults; a gendered division of labor has given way to an androgynous ideal buoyed by avarice").

Robert Nisbet still awaits his complete intellectual biographer. But for now, Stone's volume serves as a concise and admirable review of Nisbet's substantial intellectual legacy.

Allan Carlson is president of the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society in Rockford, Illinois.





A REGULAR REVIEW OF CLASSIC, OVERLOOKED, NEWLY RELEVANT, OR OTHERWISE DESERVING OLDER BOOKS

A Lost Art

By Nicholas Stix

The Art of Teaching (1950)

By Gilbert Highet

Teaching is *not* a science. So underscores Gilbert Highet at the outset of *The Art of Teaching*. Highet (1906-78), a sort of “Yankee don,” was an Oxford-educated Scot who spent a long and illustrious career at Columbia University teaching and writing about the classics.

Highet warns the reader that he will not be offering any curricular proposals, or telling us how to teach particular subjects. His concern is with teaching in the broadest possible sense. Thus, while he discusses with great candor and not a little irony types of pupils, and the respective virtues of the lecture and tutorial systems, he devotes one-third of the book to “great teachers and their pupils,” and to teachers “in everyday life”—none of whom are “educators,” as far as today’s professionals are concerned. Highet points out that we are, all of us, constantly learning from and teaching others, whether or not we are conscious of this, or even wish to do so. Teachers in everyday life include everyone from fathers and mothers and husbands and wives to clergymen and advertisers. (Highet is especially fond of the Jesuits and of nineteenth-century pedagogues.)

In some ways this book is quaint, and in others prophetic, but in every way it is of perennial interest to the intellectually curious and spiritually hungry. Its quaintness is exhibited in Highet’s telling, in shocked tones, of the then-extraordinary case of the school

boy who urinated on a textbook in front of his teacher and class. Today, I can see more than a few New York City assistant principals in the same situation breathing a sigh of relief: “Well—it’s not like he raped somebody!”

The book becomes prophetic when Highet explains why teachers cannot also be social workers charged with improving their students’ extracurricular lives. Teaching, Highet points out, is exhausting work. At the end of the school day, a dedicated teacher has no energy left to solve problems for which he has no expertise. (Were Highet alive today, I think he’d see that social workers also lack such expertise.)

But we live in an age of activist teachers, who claim to be able to fix students’ sex, family, and—though they are often hostile towards religion—spiritual lives. Today’s activist teachers have so much time and energy for ruining students’ extracurricular lives not because they are more dedicated than their predecessors but because their indifference toward trivialities like grammar, math, and history frees up their energy for more urgent pedagogical concerns like sex, death, and race.

A good teacher, says Highet, has three primary characteristics. “First, and most necessary of all... he must know what he teaches. This sounds obvious; yet it is not always practiced.” Second, a teacher must *like* what he teaches. Highet tells of an ignoramus he once encountered who was trusted to teach introductory French, yet who had never read Molière and “never will. I don’t really like French at all. What I like is basketball. We’ve got a great little team at Woodside.” Highet continues, “The third essential of good teaching is to like the pupils.”

Ideas Highet champions that were already unfashionable in 1950 include teachers’ need to have, and to teach, willpower. He similarly praises the central role of a powerful memory in teaching and learning, which today’s progressive pedagogues deride as “mere rote memorization.” And although

writing at a time of relative safety in the schools, Highet addresses the problem of thuggish boys, for which he has a simple, no-nonsense solution: Such boys must be taught by *men* who themselves exude the sort of masculinity and toughness the boys will respect.

While Highet does not polemicize, he is at sword’s point with much of his age’s progressive pedagogy and is anathema to the radical feminists/multiculturalists, who for the past 30 years have eliminated intellectually demanding pre-1970 literature, henpecked the teaching profession and teacher education, and emasculated the boys in our nation’s classrooms, all the while denying responsibility for what they have wrought. (“Education merely reflects society.”)

To gauge how far we have fallen, and thus how much we need to re-learn Highet’s lessons, consider the sneers recently heaped on him by some feminist graduate students of teacher education (and posted on Amazon.com): “A very out-dated book that should not be used in any classroom”; “his exaltation of the Jesuit methods of teaching focusing on memorization and recitation are very out of line with current educational theory” (amen!); and “Highet, the author, does a very good job of ostracizing his readers with his use of elaborate vocabulary and his extreme use of historical figures I have barely heard of.”

You don’t have to be a parent or educator in order to enjoy reading Gilbert Highet. But if you are responsible for a child’s education, you might consider employing the principles he enumerates as part of a home-schooling program, in the selection of a private school, or as a subversive program for when your child is at home from government school.

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New Yorker Nicholas Stix, a veteran college instructor, is presently at work on a book on the destruction of American education.

