

A WEEKLY HISTORY OF AMERICAN CONSERVATISM

First Principles

The story of American conservatism, and the people who kept faith with what was worth keeping. One story a week.

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Edmund Burke, studio of Sir Joshua Reynolds, after an original of c. 1767 to 1769. National Portrait Gallery, London.

The Irishman Who Understood America

Before there was an American conservative movement, there was Edmund Burke: a member of Parliament who defended the colonists, and whose ideas still shape how we think about faith, family, and freedom.



A Toast in Philadelphia

On May 15, 1775, less than a month after the shots at Lexington and Concord, Benjamin Franklin sat down in Philadelphia to write a letter to a friend in London. The war had started. The Second Continental Congress was gathering. And yet Franklin took time to tell this Englishman, or more precisely this Irishman, that the delegates had been thinking about him.

"We din'd together on Saturday," Franklin wrote, "when your Health was among the foremost."



Benjamin Franklin, by Joseph-Siffred Duplessis, c. 1785.

The man being toasted by America's revolutionaries was [Edmund Burke](#), a member of the British House of Commons. Two centuries later, he would be called the father of modern conservatism.

That is where our story begins.

A Newcomer in London

Burke was born in Dublin in January 1729. His father was a Protestant attorney. His mother, Mary Nagle, was a Catholic from County Cork, and young Edmund spent part of his boyhood among her Catholic relatives in the countryside. He studied at a Quaker school, then at Trinity College Dublin, and in 1750 he left for London to study law. He soon dropped the law for writing.

In 1765 he became private secretary to the Marquess of Rockingham, the new prime minister, and won a seat in Parliament. He was an outsider in every way that mattered. He was Irish, he had no great fortune, and his family ties to Catholicism made him suspect to some. What he had was a remarkable mind and a voice that could hold the House of Commons for hours.



The House of Commons, 1793 to 1794, by Karl Anton Hickel. Burke sat in this chamber for nearly three decades.



The Friend of the Colonies

Burke arrived just as the trouble with America was heating up. The Stamp Act of 1765 had enraged the colonists, and Rockingham's government repealed it in 1766. In 1771 Burke became the colony of New York's agent in London, a kind of official advocate. In 1774 and 1775 he gave two of the great speeches in parliamentary history, *On American Taxation* and *On Conciliation with the Colonies*.

His argument was not that the Americans had discovered some new theory of human rights. It was nearly the opposite. The colonists, he said, were Englishmen. They had carried English habits of self-government across the ocean, and they were resisting London precisely because London was breaking with that inheritance. Burke urged Parliament to stop pushing abstract claims of power and to deal with the Americans as they actually were.

Parliament voted him down. Franklin's letter, still grateful, notes that his resolutions "were negativ'd by a great Majority."



The Battle of Lexington, April 19, 1775. Engraving by Amos Doolittle after Ralph Earl, 1775.

The Revolution He Opposed

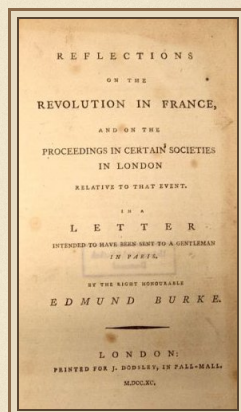
Here is the twist that puzzled people in Burke's own day. When revolution broke out in France in 1789, many expected the friend of the American cause to cheer. Instead he became its fiercest critic.



The Storming of the Bastille, July 14, 1789. Watercolor by Jean-Pierre Houël.

In November 1790 he published *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The French revolutionaries, he warned, were tearing down church, custom, and every inherited institution in the name of pure reason. He predicted the bloodshed and tyranny that would soon follow.

For Burke, there was no contradiction. The Americans were defending a living tradition. The French radicals were trying to erase one.



Title page of the Reflections, 1790.

In the *Reflections* he described society as a partnership "not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."

That single sentence may be the best summary of conservatism ever written. We are not the first generation, and we will not be the last. We hold what we have in trust.

Burke also gave us the image of "the little platoon we belong to in society," the family, parish, and neighborhood where love of country first takes root. Anyone who has organized a church fundraiser or a school board fight knows exactly what he meant.

♥ KEY FIGURE ♥

Edmund Burke (1729 to 1797)

- ♥ **BORN:** Dublin, Ireland, January 1729, to a Protestant father and a Catholic mother
- ♥ **CAREER:** Member of Parliament from 1765 to 1794; agent for the colony of New York from 1771
- ♥ **MAJOR WORKS:** *Speech on American Taxation* (1774), *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies* (1775), *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)
- ♥ **LESSER-KNOWN FACT:** He spent years pushing for relief of the harsh penal laws against Catholics in Ireland.
- ♥ **DIED:** July 9, 1797, at his home near Beaconsfield, England
- ♥ **LEARN MORE:** [Britannica's biography](#)

How Burke Crossed the Atlantic

Burke was never an American and never a Founder, and Americans of his own time argued about him. Thomas Paine answered the *Reflections* with *Rights of Man* in 1791. For a long time Burke was respected more as an orator than claimed as a guide.

That changed in 1953, when a young Michigan scholar named Russell Kirk published *The Conservative Mind*, tracing a line of thought from Burke onward. Kirk's book gave postwar conservatives a family tree, and it put Burke at the root. (We will meet Kirk properly in Issue #7.) As the historian Forrest McDonald later argued in [Hillsdale's Imprimis](#), the American Revolution itself was in many ways a conservative defense of an inherited liberty.

♥ PRIMARY SOURCE OF THE WEEK ♥

“They are therefore not only devoted to liberty, but to liberty according to English ideas, and on English principles. Abstract liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found.”

Edmund Burke, *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies*, House of Commons, March 22, 1775. Read the excerpt in [*The Founders' Constitution*](#) (University of Chicago Press).

WHY THIS LINE MATTERS: Burke is saying freedom is not a slogan. It lives in real laws, customs, courts, and communities, built up over time. Take those away and “liberty” becomes an empty word that anyone can fill.

Why It Matters Today

We live in an age of grand abstractions. Every few years someone promises to remake the family, the economy, or human nature itself according to a new theory. Burke’s answer still holds up: be humble about what one generation can know, and be grateful for what earlier ones learned the hard way.

That is not a call to stand still. Burke wrote that “a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.” Conservatives reform. But we reform the way a good steward repairs an old house: carefully, with respect for the people who built it, and with the next family in mind.

For people of faith, this should feel familiar. The Church has always understood itself as a communion of the living and the dead, passing down what it received. Burke brought that same instinct into politics. It is the thread we will follow for the next eleven weeks.

If you want a short modern summary of this way of thinking, Russell Kirk’s [*“Ten Conservative Principles”*](#) is a fine place to start.



NEXT WEEK

A Republic Built to Last

In the summer of 1787, fifty-five delegates met behind closed doors in Philadelphia and built a government designed for human beings as they really are. James Madison put it plainly in *Federalist* No. 51: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." We will look at how the Constitution turned Burke's kind of realism into an American framework, and why the Federalists believed limits on power were the surest guard of liberty.

If this issue was worth your time, forward it to a friend who loves history, and subscribe so you do not miss next Monday's story.

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