Episode 534: Would Conservatism's Founder Recognize Conservatism Today?

Guest: Brad Birzer

WOODS: I just told everybody about your new book, and it's thrilling, because this really is such a contribution. I was looking at the footnotes, and it's just obvious how much you spent in the Kirk papers. The footnotes are, there are just so many of them that are primary sources, which of course is what a biography should be. But there's nobody who's done this to the extent you have in terms of a study of Kirk; it's really amazing.

And as I was reading through the book, I was struck at how lazy a person I am by comparison to Kirk, because he rebukes himself for being lazy at one point, and then he talks about how he's got to catch up on his correspondence, and this is long before the age of email — this is like the mid '70s — and you note that in August he took three solid days and caught up on 180 letters that he had to mail by hand and everything else, and then he could get back to his work. And I thought, here I've got email; I'm one click away from answering people, and I still can't do it. So you must have had to go through a mountain of correspondence.

BIRZER: You know, Tom — and thanks to Annette Kirk for giving me the trust and allowing me to do that. It's amazing how much there is. That correspondence — which, I couldn't calculate. If you asked me to give you a rough estimate of how many letters are archived up at Mecosta, I'm not even sure I could get that close. I assume there are tens of thousands of papers and letters, and I do think about, my gosh, can you imagine what the expense is, having to pay stamps and envelopes and paper for 180 letters just in three days? Back then, that was a huge expense.

But yeah, those letters are brilliant. Everybody from Flannery O'Connor to T.S. Eliot to Barry Goldwater to Ronald Reagan. Just anyone you can imagine who really mattered at the time for roughly a 50-year period, their letters are all right there, and Kirk kept them in pristine shape. So that archive is a real treasure trove for anyone who would want to study libertarianism, conservatism, anything dealing with politics during any of those decades. It really is a stunning thing.

WOODS: I wonder if public intellectuals like Kirk felt it to be kind of an obligation that came with what he did for a living to keep up with his correspondence, because when I wrote to Murray Rothbard back in the early 1990s, just on a lark I wrote to him, he wrote back to me. He wrote me a letter back. Whereas today, I mean, I do try to

answer email, but I have so many family obligations and so much going on in my life, sometimes I have to make unfortunate — you know, I have to make choices, and sometimes the email suffers. And yet, Rothbard answers a nobody like me.

BIRZER: (laughing) Maybe he knew that you would not be a nobody.

WOODS: (laughing) Maybe so. Who knows?

BIRZER: He had his finger on the pulse of the future.

WOODS: Well, I was really, really star struck to get that in the mail. I mention him not coincidentally here, because he and Kirk had a bit of a relationship, perhaps a rocky one, so we'll talk about libertarianism a little bit later. If you want to know about basically 20th century thought in America and you're interested in libertarianism and/or conservatism, it's impossible not to study Kirk and not to know a bit about Kirk, so you give us a little bit of the background of his life in terms of what he did. We know he wrote *The Conservative Mind*, but he did a lot more than that. And then I want to get into what his contributions were.

BIRZER: Oh, that's great, Tom. Yeah, so Kirk was born in 1918, born in absolute poverty. His father, no matter how hard of a worker he was, just never could make ends meet. So he comes from a long line on his mother's side of kind of skilled, blue-collar intellectuals, very impressive men. And one of the things I argue in his book that I found very interesting was that when Kirk talks about love of father and piety, he really is talking about his mother and his mother's father. He is definitely not talking about his own dad, for whom he had love but not much respect.

But Kirk, coming out of that very poor environment, I think was always determined to make something of his life, but not in the sense that he wanted to get rich. He wanted to do good, but he never was that concerned with money. In fact, he's one of the most terrible managers of money I've ever encountered in my life. He made so much eventually and basically had nothing when he died.

But what he did after he went to college and he went to graduate school at Duke and got his M.A. in history there, he was then drafted into the military, spent 1942 to 1946 in Utah at the chemical weapons facility. Once he left there, he went on to graduate school starting in 1948 at University of St. Andrews, earned his D.Litt. — which is a little bit higher than a PhD — earned his D.Litt. in 1952 and then amazingly published his dissertation to huge acclaim. His dissertation, what would be called *The Conservative Mind*, really did give voice to almost every non-leftist person in America and actually in the English-speaking world in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

So for kind of brief moment in the summer of 1953, Kirk was the voice of all conservatism and libertarianism, really kind of channeling Albert Jay Nock and Isabel Paterson, a couple of other conservatives who've been forgotten. But he was able to bring all of those people together and give them voice in that book, which ultimately

over its seven editions sold well over a million copies. So between roughly 1953 and 1986, sold about a million copies.

After that, and maybe we could get into some of the details of this, Tom, but after that he tried his hand at fiction. He did extremely well; in fact, his first novel, *Old House of Fear*, sold more than all of his other books combined. That book sold for about 17 years and is really credited with reimagining horror in the 20th century as a genre, and there really would be no Steven King without Russell Kirk.

WOODS: No, hold on a minute. Are you really saying that?

BIRZER: I'm really saying that. Kirk's book *Old House of Fear* in 1960 really did open up horror as a genre. Prior to that, it had been — there had been some literary attempts like the whole story of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, but for it to become a mass movement beyond just pulp fiction, it took Kirk's book. And it does open it up, not just to Steven King, but to Clive Barker, to really anyone who wrote horror in the 1970s. They owe a lot to Kirk for that. So yes, that book was a major book — and how strange. I mean, Tom, when I usually talk to people in conservatism and the libertarian movements, they don't have a clue Kirk wrote this stuff. And most people in the horror world who know Kirk had no idea he was the guy who wrote *The Conservative Mind*. So yeah, he made most of his money off of his fiction.

WOODS: Okay, you see, I have a collection of his ghost stories, but I don't think I ever read them.

BIRZER: They're worth reading. They are challenging. I would put him — you know, if I were to rate him, and I'm not literary scholar, but I love literature — I would put him at about — his writing style's at about the level of Ray Bradbury at his B+ writing. He's not at the level of Ray Bradbury at his best, but I do think he's as good as Steven King. But I don't think he's as good as, say, Flannery O'Connor. So his short stories are very good. They're not brilliant, but they have great moral lessons. And they're pretty dark. As dark — and I read a lot of Steven King — they're as dark as anything King wrote.

WOODS: Early on in the book you say that a lot of time libertarianism gets — we talk a lot about — actually, no, not libertarianism; let me correct myself here. You're saying that when we think about conservatives, a lot of times these days we think in terms of what their views in politics and economics are. And you note that for Kirk, although he obviously did write on those topics, he wrote on them without much energy or enthusiasm or originality. He didn't have a whole lot that was original to contribute to these things. And that if you're going to look through the prism of politics and economics, you're not really going to get who Kirk was.

Now, that's an interesting thing, and I'd like to hear then what it is that Kirk did think was important that conservatives should be talking about and should be conserving. But as I just think through the titles of Kirk that just come to mind, he writes *Program for Conservatives*; that's political. He has a book on free market economics. He wrote

a bio of John Randolph of Roanoke, who was a political figure. So how can you make that stick? I'd like to be persuaded in this, because it sounds right to me.

BIRZER: Maybe I can put it this way, Tom: you're absolutely right, and the intent of your question is absolutely right. He really saw politics as important, but he saw other things as more important or equally important. So he would never — and we have to put ourselves in the time. Imagine, for example, his great hero, Albert Jay Nock. Albert Jay Nock is remembered for many things, but we rarely read him for his politics. We may read him, for example, in *Our Enemy The State* as having this absolute — he just despised the New Deal. But in large part, he despised the New Deal because of its political character, and much of what someone like Albert Jay Nock wrote about was education or he wrote about the classics or even weird things, for us at least today, about how to dress or how to speak.

And that's the kind of tradition Kirk was coming out of. He would not have thought of politics as the end-all be-all. Now, he does in many ways betray his own views on this, because in the late 1950s he becomes so enamored with Barry Goldwater — and the feeling is mutual — that he becomes very involved in actual practical politics from about 1957 up until 1964, and then again briefly during the Reagan administration. But that is really an aberration. It's an extremely important one, but it is an aberration for Kirk's life.

He had argued as early as 1953 with *The Conservative Mind* that the true conservative would dedicate his life to scholarship or poetry or art and really only, as he put it — and he's so nasty about this — that really only the quarter-educated would devote their time to politics. But he did find in Goldwater an exemplar and someone that he really thought had the charisma, the intellect, and the ability to present a message that was necessary to bring down politics within the political sphere rather than actually advocate it.

I don't know how much of this I want to stress, because as a biographer I tried to balance this out, but there is no doubt that as a very young man, a man in his 20s, Kirk would have been very comfortable calling himself an anarchist. He would not have felt that way by the late 1950s. But certainly as a young man, his views on the draft, on World War II, on the New Deal, these were things to be despised and despised for very, very moral and ethical reasons, not just political reasons.

WOODS: Let's talk about *The Conservative Mind* for a bit. We talked about the last time we talked about Kirk on this show, but that was so many episodes ago, I don't even remember what number it was.

BIRZER: (laughing)

WOODS: What was the point — let me just ask you this basic question.

BIRZER: Sure.

WOODS: What was the point of *The Conservative Mind*? And I don't just mean what is its thesis, although we should talk about that. But what does he want to accomplish with it. My sense is he must realize that he may in fact be writing a book for the ages in writing that. Why then? What's necessary for him to accomplish in this book?

BIRZER: Yeah, you know, Tom, I would say that there's really very few things in Kirk's life that he didn't do with at least keeping in mind writing for the ages or thinking for the ages. In a lot of ways, you just grabbed Kirk in a nutshell, because that's what he always wanted. He believed life, being very short, was this thing that we had to do excellent at; that is, everything we do, we must pursue excellence in everything, whether it's in friendship or in cooking or writing a book. In that sense, he is a very, very stoic character, and he did believe in that in a lot of ways, just like his great friend Ed Opitz, in ways like Henry Hazlitt did, in ways like Albert Jay Nock.

I mean, this old school of libertarian conservative of course believed that you don't do anything without committing yourself fully. And that's something I find very attractive. You know, we find that I think in people like Steve Jobs, but of course Steve Jobs went off in a radically different direction and certainly wouldn't have held the same kind of views of life that these guys did. But *The Conservative Mind* as his dissertation that he wrote for J.W. Williams at the University of St. Andrews, I'm not sure that he actually thought it would be the seller it was. He certainly hoped that he would make —

WOODS: No, there's no way you could have predicted that a book like this would sell that way. Impossible.

BIRZER: That's right. And it's funny, I don't know if you knew this, Tom. You can actually go back now, the University of St. Andrews has made his entire dissertation available online as a PDF, so you can go back, and he has very funny things in it. I mean, one thing people don't realize about Kirk because he could be so quiet and soft-spoken is he was absolutely hilarious, and he throws a lot jokes into his books. There really is a kind of just mischievous humor in a lot of what he writes. But *The Conservative Mind* was meant to give voice to everybody who was not an ideological leftist at the end of World War II. It's caught up in the questions of America at the beginning of the Cold War. Who are we? What are we fighting for? What do we believe in?

So he was trying to give voice, and he did believe — and I think we could argue with him on this — but he firmly believed that there was a coherent, anti-ideological voice — whatever we want to call it, kind of classical liberalism or conservatism — he believed that there was a coherent voice that could be found from Edmund Burke all the way up to T.S. Eliot. And that was what he was trying to do. He was trying to create in many ways a very post-modern thing. He was trying to create a narrative that established a number of different characters. In fact, in *The Conservative Mind* there are three major characters — Edmund Burke, John Adams, and T.S. Eliot — and then there are 26 supporting characters, ones that we wouldn't necessarily put together. People like Nathaniel Hawthorne and then Irving Babbitt, we wouldn't necessarily say, oh, of course we would jump from one to another. But that's what Kirk

saw, and that's what he was trying to do to give that voice to everybody who was not a leftist.

WOODS: I guess we need at some point to talk about what he views a conservative as, because certainly it is different from a libertarian and he sees it as being different, and there are commitments that a conservative has that a libertarian might not. Now, I know he's got something like nine things that go into this, so maybe you can encapsulate these somehow.

BIRZER: Sure. It's hard to say in the beginning. There are seen editions of *The Conservative Mind*, and there's no doubt that they go from edition one, which is very, very sympathetic to anarchism and libertarianism, especially as understood by Albert Jay Nock and Isabel Paterson, to the final version, which reads much more — and that's 1986 — it reads much more like a traditionalist kind of creed. And so Kirk, who's very big tent in the beginning, I think becomes much less so. My own view on this is that Kirk does so for personal reasons. He gets into fights with Frank Chodorov. He gets into arguments with Frank Meyer. He and Hayek always maintain a decent relationship with one another, and you actually find more praise of Hayek in version seven than you do in number one.

But I think it's easier to look at this way, Tom: rather than thinking of it as libertarian or conservative or some mixing of both, I think Kirk very strongly believed that, as he puts it in *The Conservative Mind*, that there are six ways of thinking about conservatism. And he puts these in a way that we can interpret them in a variety of different fashions. And this is where I think for a lot of people like Hayek and Hazlitt, they get frustrated understandably with Kirk. Kirk intentionally uses the language that these are canons, and he's taking that — even though he's at best a kind of lukewarm theist at that point but really still an agnostic; he won't become a Roman Catholic and a Christian until 1964, so when he's writing in 1953, he's still 11 years away from that — but he takes the language of the Catholic Church. And as you and I as Catholics, Tom, both know, but Kirk was not as converse in it.

A canon is an argument; it's not a decree. It's not an absolute. A canon is an argument, and so if we had a Dominican, a Jesuit, and a Franciscan arguing, they could each be arguing from canons. That is, they each make a statement. The Franciscan might think about free will; the Dominican might think about free will; the Jesuit might think about free will, but they wouldn't be saying it in the same way. And so Kirk uses the language of canon rather than decree, because in his mind the creation of conservative thought must be based on principle that is universal, but it must also be particular in its understanding. So the Irish may have one way of thinking about it, northern Germans another, people in Botswana another. And Kirk is totally fine with that.

So there are certain things. Murder is wrong everywhere in every culture in every time in every place. It doesn't matter if we're in Athens or Rome or Washington D.C., murder is just wrong. But the shaking of someone's hand is culture, and so in some places we might bow; in others we might do some other kind of culture; in America as

small "r" republicans, we shake hands. And so Kirk was actually that adamant that there are certain things we know for certain, there are other things that are culturally specific, and I think he's frustrating for a lot of people, because he's not willing to challenge a lot of those culturally specific things.

He will go to his death defending murder being wrong, but when it comes to attire or how we present ourselves, those are things that he's not willing to state. And that's why he never, even in *Program for Conservatives*, he never gets into what our tax frankly he's just too much of a humanist there, and it drives the economists and the social scientists just crazy — and understandably. But he looks at things much more poetically and never mathematically.

Even, as you know, Tom, even in his book on free market economics, it's really all about virtue. Of course law of supply and demand matters, but what matters more is that you do things excellently. Does that mean you're going to make more profit? Probably. But that's not what Kirk's concerned about. He's concerned that if you build this thing, you do it with every ounce of excellence; everything that you have you pour into it.

WOODS: Well, that makes me want to ask, he is opposed to — I hate the expression "big government." It just is so third grade to me.

BIRZER: That's okay; he says leviathan.

WOODS: Okay, leviathan. Okay, yeah, that's much better. So he's opposed to leviathan obviously, but for different reasons, so I want to get into why a real conservative — not somebody who writes for *National Review* today necessarily, although I don't want to put down *National Review*, because they darn well better review your book on Kirk, or the conservative movement is just doomed completely if they won't even review a biography of Kirk.

BIRZER: *National Review* has been very good to me and was very good to Kirk, so — (laughing)

WOODS: Okay, so we're not going to — but I think you know what I mean. There's been a kind of juvenile evolution of the conservative movement. But I mean a real conservative in the Kirk mold. What are the dangers that he sees in leviathan, and how are they unique as compared to what we might hear in a Republican presidential debate or a libertarian magazine.

BIRZER: This is where, Tom, I think we do — and I don't want to contextualize or historicize him, but this where he is very clearly a man of the '40s and '50s. This is where he loves the individual and he hates individualism. He believes very strongly that — and this is one of his, I think it's principle number two or canon number two, but I don't have my copy of *The Conservative Mind* in front of me, Tom. Stupid, I should have done that for this interview. But he says — and these are his words, though he's playing on John Randolph of Roanoke — he argues that every single person

is a principle of proliferating variety. This is the way Kirk likes to put it, and of course he loves arcane language.

But what he means by this is that — and of course at this point, when he's writing in 1953, he basically means nature; later he'll mean God — but this is where everybody — you, Tom, your wife, me, my wife, all of my kids, all of your kids, every single person listening to this podcast, every single person who ever has existed or ever will exist — is made in a certain time in a certain place endowed with very specific gifts, excellences. And of course they're excellent because no one ever will be able to do exactly what that person does. So the greatest violinist in the world, we love that violinist because of the excellence they bring to that instrument. We love the great woodworker because of the excellence of the piece of furniture or whatever it may be.

But we also carry with us, for Kirk, and whether we're thinking in old classical terms or modern Judeo-Christian terms, we also carry with us sins and flaws. Those sins and flaws are the lowest common denominator, because, Tom, no matter how great you are at certain things — and you are obviously very great at certain things — you and I both share in the same nastiness. We both at whatever level, at some level have jealousy; we have avarice; we have lust, and those are the kinds of things we have in common. So what we have in common are our worst qualities.

What we don't have in common are our excellences. You will be able to do things I will never be able to do, and that means for Kirk real individuals, real belief in individual. And individual excellence must mean inequality. It must mean that we promote the brilliance of a person as opposed to the nastiness of a person.

And so for him — and he sounds no different than Albert Jay Nock — for him, what is life about? Life is about the individual living to the fullest of her or his potential using the gifts that nature or God gave that person. And nobody, no government, no god has the right to interfere with that. In that sense, Kirk is a hard-core, small "r" republican. I mean, he truly believes that life is living out those excellences. So imagine Kirk, who is one of the weirdest people who has ever lived in this world, Kirk who never went anywhere without a three-piece suit, even when he hiked in the summer of 1963 with Thomas Molnar across North Africa, Kirk wore his three-piece suit, because that's he did and that's what men do. And he carried with him a swordstick, this huge staff where you could pull a sword out. He was a bizarre person in almost every way.

WOODS: (laughing)

BIRZER: But for him, he was doing what he wanted to do, and to say, my gosh, he's an anti-individualist, well, he didn't like individualism because he thought individualism as understood in the '50s and the '60s was really just conformity to some goal, like the hippies. Yeah, they're all individualists, and yet they all look alike; they all smell alike; they all live alike. He truly believed in real individualism as opposed to that kind of ideological individualism.

So what was leviathan? Well for him, leviathan was that thing which always tried to crush us; it always tried to make us less than what nature or God meant us to be. It did so through regulations, through taxes, through public schools, through bureaucracies. Government existed — if it existed beyond creating order — or he would not say "create order" — maintaining order in the old Augustinian sense, well, what was it? It only existed to crush our individuality. So that's why he hated leviathan so much. It can't create, and it really does nothing more than protect against those who would try and smash us.

And yet, as we know, Tom, and as you and Lew Rockwell have talked about, Kirk saw at the end of his life that not only was our government becoming leviathan at home, but it would very soon spread leviathan abroad, and this would just further the collapse, not only of world order, but of order at home as well. Sorry, that's a lot longer than you wanted, Tom; I'm sorry about that.

WOODS: No, that's okay. The thing is I have several other things I definitely want to make sure I ask you, and of course —

BIRZER: (laughing) That one I'm really passionate about.

WOODS: No, that's fine. That's fine. We talked about libertarianism quite a bit last time, so I don't want to repeat too much of that. It's unavoidable, though, given that this is a libertarian show; I do want to get to it.

BIRZER: Sure.

WOODS: I want to say one quick thing about, I think I read at least a portion of, I think it was called *The Sword of Imagination*, which was his own memoir.

BIRZER: Yes, his autobiography.

WOODS: Autobiography, yeah. And as I recall, he referred to himself in the third person throughout. He referred to — I guess his home had burned down, and that was referred to as the Great Fire, capital "g," capital "f." There was — I mean, I don't think I can avoid the word pomposity there. Do you want to say anything about that?

BIRZER: He's quirky. There's no doubt about that. He was actually a very humble person, and it's unfortunate that the writing style he employed in that book makes him look just the opposite. He was trying to be objective, but I agree, Tom. It's not — it didn't come out as well as I think he wanted to.

WOODS: All right.

BIRZER: I will throw this in, and a lot of people talk about his archaic writing style. There are two people who are living in Mecosta right now that you probably know, Marcia and Alex, who are Portuguese, and they are very high up in the Mises Institute, not only here but in Brazil as well. One of the things they've had to do — and I found

this fascinating, because obviously you and I are native English speakers; I don't think about this — but as they've translated Kirk into Portuguese, they have found that they have to go back to 18th century dictionaries to understand what he's doing, and I found that fascinating and very revealing about Kirk.

WOODS: That is indeed, and I find that sometimes there are just ways of — sometimes he writes in a way that would be elegant for the present day, but other times, even if it's just the word order is —

BIRZER: Oh, it's so archaic.

WOODS: Yeah. And to me it just rubbed me the wrong way, because it seemed like he's trying too hard.

BIRZER: Yeah.

WOODS: And he doesn't have to, because he's very smart, and he has a lot of interesting things to say, so it comes off as an affectation, whether he means it or not.

BIRZER: Yeah, he definitely doesn't mean it, but I agree; it does come across that way, and it does turn a lot of people off.

WOODS: All right, here are the things I want to get to: the last thing I want to get to would be libertarianism. I found it fascinating that when Hayek gave that speech about why I'm not a libertarian, I did not realize until I had you on that Kirk was in the audience for that, that it was almost certainly meant as a reply to Kirk, and that Kirk delivered an extemporaneous reply, of which we have no record. I mean, what the heck? That is a case where, I don't care what Kirk's views of technology might have been, YouTube would have made our lives a lot happier, because I want to know what he had to say to Hayek.

But let's start here: when you say that Kirk writes in the tradition of Christian humanism, what does that mean? Without any jargon, what is Christian humanism? I found it interesting, by the way, that Kirk was such a partisan of Pico della Mirandola, which kind of surprised me.

BIRZER: Yeah, I think that surprises a lot of people. It does me as well. It doesn't make a lot of sense, in the same way that he absolutely loved Marcus Aurelius. And when he was pushed and people would say, well, you realize Aurelius just persecuted Christians to no end, Kirk's response was, eh, okay. So there are definitely some weird aspects there.

Christian humanism is really the tradition of Thomas More and Erasmus, and it was simply — it's not as convoluted as it sounds. It's basically the argument that because Christians as they went into the world had to, as a religion with a great commission to go out and by two by two convert all peoples or at least potentially, that as they went into the world, they would always be encountering people who were not themselves,

whether it was the Druids or the Norse or Asian Indians. And therefore they actually had a duty as humanists to actually learn about those cultures. So you find it in the 20th century; it was a major movement, and it's people like Jacque Maritain, Etienne Gilson, Romano Guardini, John Paul II talked in terms all the time of Christian humanism.

So there were a lot of people who were involved in this, and it was their way — Kirk as well — of basically saying conservatism is not right-wing; it's also not left-wing. It transcends both, because it's not political. It really is man versus anti-man or God versus anti-God, and so they would think of it as a cross. You have the left-right spectrum, but you also have up-down. So that's — when Kirk wrote about Christian humanism — and he really is the kind of great American Christian humanist — he was basically saying we shouldn't see a conflict between the pagan world and the Christian world or between the liberal arts and scripture, that they in fact coalesce very nicely one with another.

So I hope that answers you, Tom, without using jargon at all, but it's really more of a movement of people — Thomas Merton, Flannery O'Connor, Willa Cather — than it is an ideology. In fact, it's very definitely not an ideology, and you can see that by looking at the kinds of writings that you find.

WOODS: All right, there is one other thing that I want to get to before we get to the libertarian stuff. I want to know the sense in which the word "boredom" is used. When you say that Kirk wrote about boredom, we're not talking about, well, my video game machine doesn't work, so I'm sitting around all day kind of bored. When he's talking about boredom in the modern world, what does he mean? What's the cause of it, and what can be done about it?

BIRZER: Well, there are a couple of things. What Kirk really means by that is de Tocqueville's idea of associations; that is, that we really should be involved in community, whether that community is little league baseball or whether that community is writing a book and addressing a certain audience or a certain topic. He is using this in the very old sense that leisure properly understood is not going to the beach and relaxing or going to Six Flags or Coney Island. Leisure is using your time to read and to contemplate and to think.

So he was very worried that in the 20th century — and this is a very common Christian humanist fear — he was very worried that people had stopped thinking in terms of what do I do with my neighbors; how do I help my neighbors; what do I do in community; what's an association, but instead, became really isolated one from another and spent their time doing things such as merely watching TV. So it fits a lot, and this is one reason a lot of modern communitarians think so highly of Kirk, though I'm not sure he would think that highly of them, mostly because he would have believed that they kind of made an ideology of this. But he does think that in a voluntary kind of way, we should be living out the life that de Tocqueville saw we were best at: doing good, working in neighborhoods, helping people.

And Kirk was — however quirky he was, and he was — Kirk spent his vast fortune — he made millions of dollars from his books. This was not someone who was not living on a lie. He was grown up in poverty, but he made so much money on his writings, especially his fiction, and on his speeches. But he also believed that he had to give that all away, and so his letters, you go back to his letters in the 1950s, people like John Lukacs, the very famous historian, Kirk if they need money, Kirk just sticks bills, lots of bills into an envelope and sends them off.

He and his wife, Annette, once he marries in 1964, they would drive around Grand Rapids, and they would pick up homeless people, or they would find women who had been battered or who were pregnant and were unwedded, and they would take them back to the house. They brought over people like Ivan Pongracic, who I know you know because he's a great Austrian economist. Ivan Pongracic was brought out of Yugoslavia with Kirk's help and then raised in Mecosta under Kirk's, not only money, but also sponsorship. There were times when there would be tens, maybe upwards of 30 Ethiopians or Cambodians living at the Kirk house, because they opened up their house to anybody who needed help.

And so when Kirk died in 1994 — and we may say he wasn't financially responsible, and I think we could say that, but he was also so charitable that they were broke, because he had spent all his money helping people. And that's the kind of thing, when he talks about boredom, he means that we should spend our lives aiding one another and not watching TV, not just being so absorbed in our own lives that we ignore others. So that's where — he's obviously not an extreme individualist, but he's clearly an extreme individual.

And for him, boredom meant that we had turned away from the needs of our neighbors and our communities and had become isolated to self. And one of his great arguments — and I think we could go back and forth on this, because it's too simple, and I will freely admit it's too simple — but he firmly believed that one of the major reasons so many people fell victim to fascism, Nazism, and communism is simply because they had become bored with their lives, and Hitler and Mussolini and Lenin and Stalin had offered concrete truths. They may be truths that are absolute lies, but they were presented as something good, and people gravitated towards those. So Kirk believed very strongly that if we don't love neighbor and we don't love self, we will turn to these abstractions and fall victim over time to evils that are presented as truths.

WOODS: Let's talk now about libertarianism. You note in here that he had friends who thought of themselves as being either libertarians or sympathetic to the libertarian message, people who were more or less libertarians, but there were people he thought were just too darn extreme, and that was compounded by the fact that he had personal difficulties with some of them. Rothbard may be chief among them. So what can we say about Kirk and libertarianism, given the impression one is left with by his writings — which he doesn't have much on libertarianism, but what he does have has been talked about over and other, is that these people are just absolutely opposed to

conservatism, that they are ideological fanatics and therefore, you know, maybe they're right about some things, but it's totally overshadowed by their errors.

BIRZER: Yeah, Tom, that's a hard one, because — you're right; the two writings he has published on libertarianism are so brutal towards libertarianism and really such a caricature of a certain type of libertarian that I don't think they really apply, but it's what most people, especially if I go to IHS or to other groups and I mention Kirk, the automatic reaction is, oh, this is the guy who hated libertarians.

Larry Reed of FEE I think has done a really good job, and he helped me a lot with this, and I quoted him extensively in the chapter on politics in the book, because he recognizes and I think Larry understood where Kirk was coming from about this, even though Larry himself is I think no one would question — his libertarian street cred is quite strong. And certainly Kirk loved Larry, thought very highly of him. He loved Peter Stanlis, who regarded himself as a libertarian. He didn't have problems at all with people who thought of themselves as libertarians, but he did have problems with people who used that libertarianism as a way to exclude others. And there's no question; Kirk wrote those two very nasty articles on libertarians.

What I think is often ignored, though, is Kirk actually wrote — and this doesn't necessarily excuse it, but for every article he wrote on libertarianism, he wrote five articles against the neoconservatives, and that's often ignored I think by libertarians. Part of what Kirk really worried about — and he may be as guilty as anyone of this, though he didn't see it in himself — he really did believe that the movement to succeed — that is, the movement to fight the leftist ideologues — must be unified. It must be brought together.

And that sounds strange, because in his writings on neocons and libertarians, he's basically kicking them out of the movement. But the reason he was doing that is because he believed they had already isolated themselves from the movement. And of course, imagine: Kirk's closest ally in the political world was Barry Goldwater, and I don't think any national prominent figure in the 20th century came closer to almost a pure libertarianism than Goldwater did. And so it's hard to say Kirk hated libertarians, that he hated libertarianism. I think there were certain libertarians, like Frank Meyer — at least, Meyer saw himself as one for a while — and Frank Chodorov, that he couldn't stand.

But another thing to keep in mind, Tom — and I feel like I'm just being an apologist for Kirk, and I don't mean to do that, because there are flaws there, and I think Kirk went overboard on a lot of this — but we have to remember that in the 1950s, Buckley, Chodorov, and Kirk all saw themselves as absolutely, without question the legitimate heirs of Albert Jay Nock. And so there was something deeply personal there about who gets to claim the mantle of Nock. And all three of them thought that they were the legitimate inheritors of that mantle.

We don't remember Nock that well anymore. Even libertarians have kind of forgotten him. But there was no greater figure in the anti-Left movement of the 1940s than Nock

was. Nock was everything. And when he passed away in 1945, that left a huge vacuum in the movement, and I don't think we would exaggerate to say that so much of the rise of modern libertarianism and conservatism comes out of the attempt to fill that vacuum in the '40s and '50s of Nock's voice that was now missing.

WOODS: I hadn't realized until you said it just now the proportion of — let's say, just how much of his attention he devoted to the neoconservatives as opposed to libertarians. That of course gives me an idea. I'm always — I've become an idea man, Brad.

BIRZER: You are an entrepreneurial intellectual, Tom.

WOODS: That's what I'm trying to be, and I just got a good idea. I don't know how many writings he has on the neocons, but if they're substantial, that should be a book.

BIRZER: They are very substantial.

WOODS: Put together *Kirk Against the Neocons*.

BIRZER: You could easily put together a nice book on that. Absolutely.

WOODS: And just have it be him talking about them, so that when somebody like me goes out there and says look, you people are phony baloney conservatives, I'll be able to hold this book up and say, look, Kirk has greater authority to say this than anybody in this room, so be quiet and listen. What were his complaints?

BIRZER: Well, you know, the amazing thing, Tom, is most of what he said against the neocons was said in his lectures at the Heritage Foundation (laughing).

WOODS: Really? Okay, so is there anything else other than those?

BIRZER: Well, yes. Partly what happened — and again, you and Rockwell talked about this in your conversation about Kirk — but Kirk had been a pretty hardcore Reaganite, and he believed Reagan had his problems, but he also thought that Reagan was really capable of bringing together the various schools of conservatism and that he did it extremely well. And he also believed that Reagan's foreign policy overall was quite measured.

What he despised was Bush. And Kirk really — when he kind of recognized — there's a moment in 19 — I know I'm being recorded here, Tom, but I may be wrong about this; I think it's '87, that Kirk for the first time becomes quite worried about neoconservatism and especially domestically about people like Michael Novak, whom he does not respect at all. And he's worried about what these guys are doing, *Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, he thinks no, no, no. There's just — the free market is good because it's good. We don't need to make an ideology around it. He was worried about that; especially mixing it with theology he found quite dangerous. But what worried him even more was the first Gulf War. And of course Kirk is near death at this point. 1991,

he's only three years away from dying. He doesn't know, of course, he's going to die, but his health declines dramatically in the '90s.

And I think had he lived beyond '94, I think he would have produced a lot about neoconservatism, but he really did dedicate his last three years in life writing as much as he could against the neoconservatives. He had been blind to how powerful they were until the invasion of Iraq, and at that point, he was really kind of panicking. So yes, there's really good stuff. He said it at Heritage; he wrote about it; he did a series of pamphlets for a place in Houston that as far as I know doesn't exist anymore. It was a little group called Conservatives Do Care. And he was writing at that point everything he could against neoconservatism abroad.

And that's when — you may this history far better than I do, Tom — that's when in '92 he and Murray Rothbard put all their differences aside and met in a number of different hotels and places where they tried to create a new organization that would influence the Republican Party against imperialism. And we don't have a lot of records for those, but he definitely buried the hatchet with Rothbard, and they became quite close in those meetings, trying to undermine it. And of course it never got off the ground, but they were trying to create some kind of subgroup within the Republican Party basically to revive a republican way of thinking about foreign policy rather than a neocon vision.

WOODS: I remember that. I was a college student at that time, and what I do remember specifically is the creation of what was known as the John Randolph Club, and —

BIRZER: That was a part of it. I don't think that was the full thing, but I could be —

WOODS: No, it wasn't, because I don't remember Kirk being there. But they started it in the early '90s, maybe '92, something like that, and I went to one of the first meetings in late '93 as a college kid, just because I thought it would be interesting. It was libertarians like Lew Rockwell and Murray Rothbard and the so-called paleocons, so Tom Fleming, the *Chronicles* magazine crowd —

BIRZER: Right.

WOODS: And I liked all those people, and they were all really smart, and I thought they could run rings around their neoconservative opponents, so it seemed like an exciting thing to do. So I went and that turned out to be a really important event for me, because I met a whole lot of people there. But it was thrilling and exciting. We sang songs around a piano, where they had taken traditional songs but then written them with sort of paleo lyrics, like instead of "the Green Berets," it was "the Blue Berets," because you'd have the UN beret.

BIRZER: (laughing)

WOODS: Anyway, it was tremendous. Or — was it? Yeah, we had a song called "Won't You Come Home, Bill Buckley?" So it's, "Won't you come home, Bill Buckley? Won't you come home from the establishment?" (laughing) It was great. Everybody was singing, having a blast. So those were the days, because the two sides realized we do have differences, but what an opportunity with the Cold War being over to try to revisit this closed question of foreign policy.

BIRZER: Yes, and I think Kirk's fears have been proven right. We — well, that's another topic, but —

WOODS: Yeah.

BIRZER: The empire's out of control.

WOODS: What I love about this book is that it reminds me of Guido Hulsmann's biography of Mises, in that it's not just a bunch of details of "then he did this, and then his wife did that." You do get biographical information, but it really is an intellectual exploration of this man and of the times he lived in. So you're going to learn an enormous amount of 20th century intellectual history and the history of ideas that we believe in very much. Even though a lot of my listeners wouldn't call themselves conservatives, Kirk is interacting with libertarians and he's wrestling with ideas that are important to us, so you're going to learn an awful lot by reading this book. It's not a dry biography; it's very much alive, I find.

BIRZER: Well, Kirk of course was just so quirky that — (laughing) yeah, if anybody wrote a biography about him and it wasn't entertaining, they messed up.

WOODS: Yeah, exactly. You already gave us a hint of that, and then I remember reading that he had not — now, you tell me what the actual details of this are, because I think I remembered it wrong. What was the deal with Kirk and driving a car?

BIRZER: Yeah, well really quickly, let me say thank you too, Tom, because I love Hulsmann's biography of Mises, and I don't know if you saw, but I cited it and I used it, relied upon it. I only met Hulsmann once, but I was very impressed with him, so thank you for that; that's a high compliment.

WOODS: Sure.

BIRZER: Kirk used to call — he is a weird — when it comes to technology he is really strange. He hated the telephone. Hated it. Despised it. Used to just curse it. He hated automobiles, and he cursed them as well. He did have to drive a Jeep when he was in the military during World War II —

WOODS: So that was the difference. He did learn to try; he just chose not to.

BIRZER: He had to, but the moment he left the military, he never drove again. And he hated interstates. He believed the interstates were fascist. He thought that this was

nothing — not only were they patterned after Hitler's Autobahn, but he also believed they were meant politically to destroy ethnic neighborhoods and cities. He hated them. So he would never allow anyone to drive on an interstate that he knew. If he was driving with someone, he would make them take back roads, because he just refused to go on the interstate. And he called cars mechanical Jacobins. And he just thought they were meant to destroy America and break up communities.

And growing up in Kansas, Tom, I don't get this, because I started driving when I was a farm kid, and I got my driver's license — I don't know if this is still the case in Kansas — I got it at 14. I love driving fast. I love driving — not as much anymore — I love driving recklessly on country roads. I love driving, and I love cars. So I don't get this, but he really despised them and would only use them in absolute necessities.

But the same was true of TV. He would not allow a TV in their home, yet he had no problem at all with typewriters. He had no problem with word processors, though he was never very good with them. If the technology, as he saw it, allowed for humanity, he was totally fine with that, so his Ludditeism was very, very specific and not always consistent.

WOODS: Well, you know, Brad, on a completely unrelated not just before we went on, I told you what happened a week ago today when I was recording an episode on a Monday at noon —

BIRZER: The tornado sirens.

WOODS: And they're going now. I don't know if you can hear them, but the tornado sirens in Topeka are going now.

BIRZER: Noon. Yeah.

WOODS: Don't anybody panic; there is no tornado. This is only a drill.

BIRZER: Oh, I miss Kansas.

WOODS: Oh no, get me out, get me out

BIRZER: Tom, can we also say, and I know you probably also mentioned this, but — and I know you're not airing this today — but we are recording this on the 26th anniversary of the coming down of the Berlin Wall, and that means a lot.

WOODS: I didn't even know — I've been — you're the third person I've interviewed today, so I've been completely lost in interviews. I didn't even know that until you said that just now.

BIRZER: Yeah. Well, it's November 9th. There's no reason unless you knew it was November 9th to remember that.

WOODS: I've shown videos of that to my kids numerous times. I want them to — I want that seared in their consciousness.

BIRZER: I can't even mention it, Tom, and I'm just sitting here at my computer; I can't mention it without getting — I mean, I just felt my heart stop for a second, so —

WOODS: Yeah, what an astonishing thing.

BIRZER: What a blessing that we were alive —

WOODS: To see that. Yeah. And the thing is a lot of my listeners, Brad, were too young. They were not actually alive to see that.

BIRZER: That of course is not their fault, but it is their fault if they don't remember it.

WOODS: Yeah, that's right. That's right. We're going to be generous; we won't blame you for not having been born sooner, but —

BIRZER: (laughing)

WOODS: All right, listen, Brad; I'm going to of course link to *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* at TomWoods.com/534, the show notes page for today, and urge people to check it out. And no doubt it was a labor of love, but it's also hard work to do what you did, and I hope it will be amply rewarded. Thanks so much.

BIRZER: Thank you, Tom. Great talking, as always.