Conservative Thinkers: From John Adams to Winston Churchill

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Across America today, conservatism is being hotly debated both across the political spectrum and within the conservative movement itself. Much of the public debate is without definition or historical context. This history of conservatism by renowned historian, social critic, and poet Peter Viereck aims to meet the need for a concise, balanced picture of conservative thought in all its different shadings and cultural contexts.

The analytical portion of the book provides a succinct but thorough critical overview of conservatism's most representative figures. Viereck begins with chapters defining conservatism itself, its special technical terms, and its changing historical circumstances. The rest deals with its actual thinkers and statesmen. After each main conservative thesis, the anti-conservative rebuttal is summarized, and the reader is allowed to reach his own conclusions. Though the first stress is on conservative political philosophy (from John Adams to Churchill), key sections also stress non-political conservatism: in religion (Cardinal Newman) and in the primarily cultural protest against material progress (Coleridge, Dostoyevsky, Melville, Henry Adams).

Every major point is concretely illustrated by an appended cross-reference to a primary source in the second half, a well-chosen anthology of key conservative documents. Criteria for inclusion are three, representativeness, depth of perception, importance of influence. The result is not uniformity but a gamut: from extreme intolerant reaction to an evolutionary moderate spirit. The former passes imperceptibly into authoritarianism; the latter, into liberalism.

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