

Ideas, Actions, and Consequences

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As a conservative activist since 1960, I have read or heard reverently repeated innumerable times a short sentence, "Ideas Have Consequences." Conservative intellectuals and would-be intellectuals are so enamored of the words "Ideas Have Consequences" that by now probably each day someone at the Heritage Foundation receives correspondence in which these words are written.

The theme "Ideas Have Consequences" so often crops up in conservative books, speeches, and scholarly articles that I have for several years catalogued each usage I see or hear under the heading IHC.

No meeting of the Philadelphia Society or of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute is complete unless someone solemnly intones the words, "Ideas Have Consequences." The words appear often in the pages of *National Review* and in virtually every other conservative journal, including many with little pretense of intellectuality.

There are now scores of independent conservative campus publications in the United States. Because I conduct Student Publications Schools, I see many of these campus efforts. Virtually every one explicitly affirms that "Ideas Have Consequences," often stressing the point in the premier issue.

The proposition, "Ideas Have Consequences," has attained talismanic status with young conservatives. I would not be surprised to learn that some budding conservative, having adopted it as his mantra, now sits quietly several minutes each day, contemplating those three words.

From time to time I venture to question young conservatives who have used, in writing or in speech, the refrain "Ideas Have Consequences." Alas, even if they know it is the title of a book by Richard M. Weaver, the great majority of those who use the refrain have never held in their hands any book by Weaver.

What then accounts for the frequency of the references? It is, I believe, a manifestation of hubris. The young person of conservative inclination, possessed of a growing vocabulary and having gained some familiarity with conservative writings, readily concludes he is now capable of elevated thoughts beyond the reach of all but a tiny elite.

Perhaps he finds, as I first did twenty-five years ago, the praise of Richard Weaver in *The Conservative Mind* by Russell Kirk. But more likely he reads the magical title in a conservative journal. If the fascination with those three words merely increased the sense of self-worth

among young conservatives, it would do little harm to the conservative cause. Unfortunately, the temptation is often overpowering to take the words literally.

If ideas, in and of themselves, really do have consequences, then being right, in the sense of being correct, is sufficient. If you know you are right, particularly if you believe you can prove you are right, then your ideas inevitably will prevail.

For a young person with intellectual aspirations, this is heady stuff. He concludes he need no longer work with mere mortals in their ordinary plane of existence. He feels elevated above them; he knows that they will eventually conform to his ideas.

Thousands of young conservatives, caught up in the delight of thinking deep thoughts, fancy themselves young Platos. In a way they are, as shall be explained below. But the world does not treat them as they expect and as they believe they deserve. Public policy battles, for example, do not often turn on the question of who is probably right.

Confronted with the failure of his ideas to have their merited consequences, many a young conservative becomes embittered. Some, in the words of the late Dr. Warren Nutter, "retreat to the citadel to save the books." Others become opportunists and quiet cynics. With great inner agony, some resign themselves to impotence in a world that does not function as it "should." Too few discover how to make their ideas effective.

For a number of reasons, it would not be fair to blame Richard Weaver for the problems associated with his magically titled book. He was a professor of rhetoric, which can be defined as ideas artfully presented. A master rhetorician, Weaver knew full well that ideas do not necessarily have consequences.

Although it is dangerous to suggest how deceased persons would respond to current questions, I am confident Weaver would affirm that "Ideas Have Consequences" is a rhetorically contracted enthymeme, an enthymeme being a syllogism with one of the elements missing but understood.

Expanding Weaver's enthymeme, we can get the following syllogism:

- Ideas can motivate people to act
- Actions have consequences
- Therefore ideas can have consequences

Without understanding Weaver's true meaning, some conservatives often give his three words a dangerously misplaced, almost religious devotion. A noble confidence in the truth of their ideas can lure them into the voluntary paralysis of a life of contemplation.

For anyone who makes the effort to read the difficult but highly rewarding Richard Weaver, his meaning is brilliantly clear. In *Ideas Have Consequences*, he actually wrote: "The youth is an intellectual only, a believer in ideas, who thinks that ideas can overwhelm the world. The mature man passes beyond intellectuality to wisdom..." Does this sound like a man who believes that ideas are efficacious without something more?

Elsewhere in *Ideas Have Consequences*, he wrote: "Organization always makes imperative counterorganization. A force in being is a threat to the unorganized, who must answer by becoming organized themselves."

Weaver warned powerfully against rootless, mechanistic manipulation, against knowledge "of techniques rather than of ends." His deserving target was the destructive tendency of modern man to lose his sense of purpose as he rapidly accumulates knowledge of how to do things. But it is a gross misreading to suggest he argued against action.

It would be fair to say he held that actions based on the right ideas will have desirable consequences. He quite correctly gave absolute priority to principles, but recognized the duty of philosophically sound people to take actions.

In 1958, Weaver wrote an essay entitled "Up from Liberalism," a title he graciously later authorized William F. Buckley, Jr., to use also for his delightful book. Russell Kirk calls that 1958 essay Weaver's intellectual autobiography. In it Weaver wrote:

"Somehow our education will have to recover the lost vision of the person as a creature of both intellect and will. It will have to bring together into one through its training the thinker and the doer, the dialectician and the rhetorician."

This statement should enlighten those who take the words ideas have consequence only at their simplistic, literal value.

The intellectual's dismay at the untidy nature of political life is by no means new. Very late in life, Plato wrote in his Seventh Epistle:

"For both the written laws and the unwritten laws of good conduct were gradually destroyed, and the state of things became worse and worse at an astonishing pace, so that I, who at first had been very eager to go into politics, finally felt dizzy when I looked at it and when I saw things carried in all directions in utter confusion. I did still not give up watching for a possible improvement of these conditions and of the whole government; but, waiting all the time for an opportunity to do something, I finally had to realize that all the states of our time without exception are badly administered."

If Plato was dizzied by politics and withdrew almost entirely from personal participation, we should not be surprised that so many conservative intellectuals and aspiring intellectuals now find comfort in the proposition that Ideas Have Consequences. They can believe themselves thereby absolved of the awkward responsibility for personal actions.

The world of politics is invariably imperfect and replete with compromises. How tempting it is to shield our principles from degenerating contact with such untidiness. Never mind that we simultaneously insulate the real world from the ennobling effect of practical contact with our principles.

Now, however, we should know better. Edmund Burke did not tell us: "All that is necessary to triumph over evil is for men to have enough good ideas." Quite the contrary, the most famous words attributed to Burke are: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Leonardo da Vinci had marvelous ideas, many of which had no consequences. For 130 years after his death his famous notebooks were hidden. Only when made available through wide publication did his speculative drawings of worm gears, lens grinders, submarines, and airplanes cause men to act, to try to build working models based on his ideas. By the 20th century we had actually built successful machines Leonardo only imagined.

For Leonardo, though, the classic case is the bicycle. Late in the 19th century, just after the modern bicycle had been invented, someone in the Spanish National Library in Madrid peeled from its backing paper (to which it had been glued for hundreds of years) one of the pages of Leonardo's original notebook. On the reverse of the sheet was Leonardo's drawing of a pedal-and-chain driven bicycle almost identical to recently "invented" models then in use all over the world.

In one of his too few surviving letters, Whittaker Chambers told how he had just burned several hundred pages of a book manuscript he had been working on. For those of us who consider Chambers one of the great masters of our English language, the loss is tragic and irreparable. Those ideas are lost and will not have consequences.

Intellectual giant Ludwig von Mises, in the chapter on "The Role of Ideas" in *Human Action*, said, "Thinking is to deliberate beforehand over future action and to reflect afterwards upon past action. Thinking and acting are inseparable."

Particularly in our day we cannot afford to concentrate on either ideas or actions to the neglect of the other. The conservative intellectual who avoids association with less elegant men of action may doom his cause. Chambers understood this and wrote:

"I do not ask of the man who lets me slip into his foxhole whether he believes in the ontological proof of God, whether he likes me personally, or even whether, in another part of the forest, at another time, he lobbed a grenade at me. I am interested only that, for the duration of the war, he keep his rifle clean and his trigger finger nerveless against a common enemy. I understand that that is all he wants of me."

The reason for the increasing success of conservative ideas in recent years is not that our ideas are much more correct now than those we held, say, in the Goldwater era. We prosper in many ways because we have begun to study the political process and to work together to implement our new knowledge.

In our day we need still more conservatives who are first philosophically sound and then technologically proficient and movement-oriented.

We must teach young intellectuals that a flattering and seductive talisman which they do not fully understand will not guarantee them success. They must not rely on victory falling into their deserving hands like ripe fruit off a tree. They have to earn it.

Good ideas have desirable consequences only if we act intelligently for them. We owe it to our philosophy to study how to win.