



One of the Century's Major Books: Kirk's *The Roots of American Order*

by Burton Folsom, Ph.D.

Summary

Michiganian Russell Kirk's quarter-century-old book, *The Roots of American Order*, has become one of the most important explanations of America's unique rise to greatness and warnings of the erosion of her freedom and prosperity.

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What makes the United States a unique country? The late Russell Kirk of Mecosta, Michigan, one of America's foremost historians, answered that question in *The Roots of American Order*, a book published 25 years ago this year. As America faces its challenges in 1999, Kirk's insights are worth reviewing and discussing again.

In Michigan, Kirk's influence was and remains strong. Governor John Engler insists that *The Roots of American Order* is one of the key books of all time. "My own commitment," Engler wrote, "to the permanent things—ordered liberty, free markets, and limited government—owes much to Russell Kirk and his classic book *The Roots of American Order*."

"The history of most societies," Kirk noted, "is a record on painful striving, brief success (if success at all), and then decay and ruin." But not so with America. It is unique. Kirk describes over 30 centuries of the origins of American liberty and freedom. In doing so, he describes the four major cities that have influenced American life.

First is Jerusalem, where the Hebrews established an enduring moral order. Second is Athens, where reason and knowledge helped sustain the freedom that reigned there in the fifth century B. C. Third is Rome, where law and limited government went hand in hand. Fourth is London, where the tradition of common law helped establish justice and secure property rights. In these four cities are found the roots of American order. These roots "go deep," Kirk argued, "but they require watering from time to time."

Kirk's discussion is relevant to understanding how America developed a free-market economy and what America must do to keep it. A free economy and society, Kirk argued, must be guided by and rooted in reason and morality and have a commitment to limited government and the rule of law. With property rights protected and secure, freedom can grow and trade can prosper. The United States, with its history, its Constitution, and its persistent commitment to liberty, allowed a remarkably prosperous economy to form.

“American personal liberty,” Kirk argued, “perhaps owes more to the common law than to any other single source.” Why? Because common law, with its stress on custom and precedent, forced judges and rulers to be bound by previous decisions. That way, “evenhanded justice will be administered from one year to another, one decade to another, one century to another; that judges will not be permitted to create laws . . . or to favor particular persons in particular circumstances.” Investments and business relationships, in other words, can be made in a predictable, safe environment free from arbitrary regulations and seizure of property.

What are the dangers for a free-market economy? Kirk looks to his four cities and their history for his answer. In Rome, the slow but steady growth of government gradually eroded individual liberty. Frequent, unnecessary wars and the rise of special interests produced a crushing tax burden. “Taxation, and the growing bureaucracy, devoured prosperity,” Kirk argued. “Attempts to replace private undertakings with state industries did not prosper.”

The American Founders, Kirk pointed out, were eager to learn from history. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed a commitment to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The Constitution that followed made sure that power was fragmented and that government was limited. The Tenth Amendment to the Constitution, for example, expresses sentiments common in the best days of Rome, Athens, and London: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

Kirk lamented when he wrote *The Roots of American Order* in 1974 that twentieth century America was straying from its roots. The concentration of power in Washington, the growth of subsidies and welfare, the erosion of personal responsibility and accountability, and a decline in confidence in the free economy are all indicators contrary to early American experience and contrary to what we learned from Athens, Rome, Jerusalem, and London.

With its panoramic sweep of America’s origins, *The Roots of American Order* is clearly one of the major books written this century. Michiganians can be proud that it came from the pen of one of their own.

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