

# On Resisting Evil

by Murray N. Rothbard

How can anyone, finding himself surrounded by a rising tide of evil, fail to do his utmost to fight against it? In our century, we have been inundated by a flood of evil, in the form of collectivism, socialism, egalitarianism, and nihilism. It has always been crystal clear to me that we have a compelling moral obligation, for the sake of ourselves, our loved ones, our posterity, our friends, our neighbors, and our country, to do battle against that evil.

It has therefore always been a mystery to me how people who have seen and identified this evil and have therefore entered the lists against it, either gradually or suddenly abandon that fight. How can one see the truth, understand one's compelling duty, and then, simply give up and even go on to betray the cause and its comrades? And yet, in the two movements and their variations that I have been associated with, libertarian and conservative, this happens all the time.

Conservatism and libertarianism, after all, are "radical" movements, that is, they are radically and strongly opposed to existing trends of statism and immorality. How, then, can someone who has joined such a movement, as an ideologue or activist or financial supporter, simply give up the fight? Recently, I asked a perceptive friend of mine how so-and-so could abandon the fight? He answered that "he's the sort of person who wants a quiet life, who wants to sit in front of the TV, and who doesn't want to hear about any trouble." But in that case, I said in anguish, "why do these people become 'radicals' in the first place? Why do they proudly call themselves 'conservatives' or 'libertarians'?" Unfortunately, no answer was forthcoming.

Sometimes, people give up the fight because, they say, the cause is hopeless. We've lost, they say. Defeat is inevitable. The great economist Joseph Schumpeter wrote in 1942 that socialism is inevitable, that capitalism is doomed not by its failures but by its very successes, which had given rise to a group of envious and malevolent

intellectuals who would subvert and destroy capitalism from within. His critics charged Schumpeter with counseling defeatism to the defenders of capitalism. Schumpeter replied that if someone points out that a rowboat is inevitably sinking, is that the same thing as saying: don't do the best you can to bail out the boat?

In the same vein, assume for a minute that the fight against the statist evil is a lost cause, why should that imply abandoning the battle? In the first place, as gloomy as things may look, the inevitable may be postponed a bit. Why isn't that worthwhile? Isn't it better to lose in thirty years than to lose now? Second, at the very worst, it's great fun to tweak and annoy and upset the enemy, to get back at the monster. This in itself is worthwhile. One shouldn't think of the process of fighting the enemy as dour gloom and misery. On the contrary, it is highly inspiring and invigorating to take up arms against a sea of troubles instead of meeting them in supine surrender, and by opposing, perhaps to end them, and if not at least to give it a good try, to get in one's licks.

And finally, what the heck, if you fight the enemy, you might win! Think of the brave fighters against Communism in Poland and the Soviet Union who never gave up, who fought on against seemingly impossible odds, and then, bingo, one day Communism collapsed. Certainly the chances of winning are a lot greater if you put up a fight than if you simply give up.

In the conservative and libertarian movements there have been two major forms of surrender, of abandonment of the cause. The most common and most glaringly obvious form is one we are all too familiar with: the sellout. The young libertarian or conservative arrives in Washington, at some think-tank or in Congress or as an administrative aide, ready and eager to do battle, to roll back the State in service to his cherished radical cause. And then something happens: sometimes gradually, sometimes with startling suddenness. You go to some cocktail parties, you find that the Enemy seems very pleasant, you start getting enmeshed in Beltway marginalia, and pretty soon you are placing the highest importance on some trivial committee vote, or on some piddling little tax cut or amendment, and eventually you are willing to abandon the battle altogether for a cushy contract, or a plush government job. And as this sellout process continues, you find that your major source of irritation is not the statist enemy, but the troublemakers out in the field who are always yapping about principle and even attacking *you* for selling out the cause. And pretty soon you and The Enemy have an indistinguishable face.

We are all too familiar with this sellout route and it is easy and proper to become indignant at this moral treason to a cause that is just, to the battle against evil, and to your own once cherished comrades. But there is another form of abandonment that is not as evident and is more insidious – and I don't mean simply loss of energy or interest. In this form, which has been common in the libertarian movement but is also prevalent in sectors of conservatism, the militant decides that the cause is hopeless, and gives up by deciding to abandon the corrupt and

rotten world, and retreat in some way to a pure and noble community of one's own. To Randians, it's "Galt's Gulch," from Rand's novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. Other libertarians keep seeking to form some underground community, to "capture" a small town in the West, to go "underground" in the forest, or even to build a new libertarian country on an island, in the hills, or whatever. Conservatives have their own forms of retreatism. In each case, the call arises to abandon the wicked world, and to form some tiny alternative community in some backwoods retreat. Long ago, I labeled this view, "retreatism." You could call this strategy "neo-Amish," except that the Amish are productive farmers, and these groups, I'm afraid, never make it up to that stage.

The rationale for retreatism always comes couched in High Moral as well as pseudo-psychological terms. These "purists," for example, claim that *they*, in contrast to us benighted fighters, are "living liberty," that they are emphasizing "the positive" instead of focusing on the "negative," that they are "living liberty" and living a "pure libertarian life," whereas we grubby souls are still living in the corrupt and contaminated real world. For years, I have been replying to these sets of retreatists that the real world, after all, is good; that we libertarians may be anti-State, but that we are emphatically *not* anti-society or opposed to the real world, however contaminated it might be. We propose to continue to fight to save the values and the principles and the people we hold dear, even though the battlefield may get muddy. Also, I would cite the great libertarian Randolph Bourne, who proclaimed that we are American patriots, not in the sense of patriotic adherents to the State but to the country, the nation, to our glorious traditions and culture that are under dire attack.

Our stance should be, in the famous words of Dos Passos, even though he said them as a Marxist, "all right, we are two nations." "America" as it exists today is two nations; one is *their* nation, the nation of the corrupt enemy, of their Washington, D.C., their brainwashing public school system, their bureaucracies, their media, and the other is *our*, much larger, nation, the majority, the far nobler nation that represents the older and the truer America. We are the nation that is going to win, that is going to take America back, no matter how long it takes. It is indeed a grave sin to abandon that nation and that America short of victory.

But are we then emphasizing "the negative"? In a sense, yes, but what else are we to stress when our values, our principles, our very being are under attack from a relentless foe? But we have to realize, first, that in the very course of accentuating the negative we are also emphasizing the positive. Why do we fight against, yes even hate, the evil? Only because we love the good, and our stress on the "negative" is only the other side of the coin, the logical consequence, of our devotion to the good, to the positive values and principles that we cherish. There is no reason why we can't

stress and spread our positive values at the same time that we battle against their enemies. The two actually go hand in hand.

Among conservatives and some libertarians, these retreats sometimes took the form of holing up in the woods or in a cave, huddling amidst a year's supply of canned peaches and guns and ammo, waiting resolutely to guard the peaches and the cave from the nuclear explosion or from the Communist army. They never came; and even the cans of peaches must be deteriorating by now. The retreat was futile. But now, in 1993, the opposite danger is looming: namely, retreatist groups face the awful menace of being burned out and massacred by the intrepid forces of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms in their endless quest for shotguns one millimeter shorter than some regulation decrees, or for possible child abuse. Retreatism is beginning to loom as a quick road to disaster.

Of course, in the last analysis, none of these retreats, generally announced with great fanfare as the way to purity if not victory, have amounted to a hill of beans; they are simply a rationale, a half-way house, to total abandonment of the cause, and to disappearance from the stage of history. The fascinating and crucial point to note is that both of these routes – even though seemingly diametrically opposite, end up inexorably at the same place. The sellout abandons the cause and betrays his comrades, for money or status or power; the retreatist, properly loathing the sellouts, concludes that the real world is impure and retreats out of it; in *both cases*, whether in the name of "pragmatism" or in the name of "purity," the cause, the fight against evil in the real world, is abandoned. Clearly, there is a vast moral difference in the two courses of action. The sellouter is morally evil; the retreatist, in contrast, is, to put it kindly, terribly misguided. The sellouts are not worth talking to; the retreatists must realize that it is not betraying the cause, far from it, to fight against evil; and not to abandon the real world.

The retreatist becomes indifferent to power and oppression, likes to relax and say who cares about material oppression when the inner soul is free. Well sure, it's good to have freedom of the inner soul. I know the old bromides about how thought is free and how the prisoner is free in his inner heart. But call me a low-life materialist if you wish, but I believe, and I thought all libertarians and conservatives believed to their core, that man deserves more than that, that we are not content with the inner freedom of the prisoner in his cell, that we raise the good old cry of "Liberty and Property," that we demand liberty in our external, real world of space and dimension. I thought that that's what the fight was all about.

Let's put it this way: we must not abandon our lives, our properties, our America, the real world, to the barbarians. Never. Let us act in the spirit of that magnificent hymn that James Russell Lowell set to a lovely Welsh melody:

*Once to every man and nation  
Comes the moment to decide,*

*In the strife of truth with falsehood,  
For the good or evil side;  
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,  
Offering each the bloom or blight,  
And the choice goes by forever  
Twixt that darkness and that light.  
Though the cause of evil prosper,  
Yet 'tis truth alone is strong;  
Though her portion be the scaffold,  
And upon the throne be wrong,  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
And, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow  
Keeping watch above His own.*