

ROTHBARD'S TIME ON THE LEFT

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MURRAY ROTHBARD DEVOTED HIS life to the struggle for liberty, but, as anyone who has made a similar commitment realizes, it is never exactly clear how that devotion should translate into action. Consequently, Rothbard formed strategic alliances with widely different groups throughout his career. Perhaps the most intriguing of these alliances is the one Rothbard formed with the New Left in the mid-1960s, especially considering their antithetical economic views.

So why would the most free market of free-market economists reach out to a gaggle of assorted socialists? By the early 1960s, Rothbard saw the New Right, exemplified by *National Review*, as perpetually wedded to the Cold War, which would quickly turn exponentially hotter in Vietnam, and the state interventions that accompanied it, so he set out looking for new allies. In the New Left, Rothbard found a group of scholars who opposed the Cold War and political centralization, and possessed a mass following with high growth potential. For this opportunity, Rothbard was willing to set economics somewhat to the side and settle on common ground, and, while his cooperation with the New Left never altered or caused him to hide any of his foundational beliefs, Rothbard's rhetoric shifted distinctly leftward during this period.

It should be noted at the outset that Rothbard's pro-peace stance followed a long tradition of individualist intellectuals. Writing in the early 1970s, Rothbard described the antiwar activities of turn-of-the-century economist William Graham Sumner and merchant Edward Atkinson during the American conquest of the Philippines, and noted:

In taking this stand, Atkinson, Sumner, and their colleagues were not being "sports"; they were following an anti-war, anti-imperialist tradition as old as classical liberalism itself. This was the tradition of Price, Priestley, and the late 18-century British radicals that

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earned them repeated imprisonment by the British war machine; and of Richard Cobden, John Bright, and the *laissez-faire* Manchester School of the mid-19th century. . . . We are now so used to thinking of opposition to imperialism as Marxian that this kind of movement seems almost inconceivable to us today.¹

Chronologically, the nearest link in this lineage to Rothbard was known as the Old Right, populated by journalists H.L. Mencken, John Flynn, and Garet Garrett; U.S. senator and 1952 presidential candidate Robert Taft; and essayist Albert Jay Nock and his primary follower, Frank Chodorov. The coalition of the Old Right began primarily as opposition to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, but as the clouds of war loomed large in the late 1930s, it evolved into an anti-interventionist movement. Shortly before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, most of these men lost their jobs due to their antiwar stances. Mencken and Nock were fired from the *American Mercury* when a new editor arrived; Chodorov was relieved of his duties as president of the Henry George School in New York; and the *New Republic* no longer published Flynn's column "Other People's Money."² By 1956, all these men would be dead except Chodorov. Rothbard and Chodorov met in 1947, and in short order Rothbard became the newest member of the Old Right, a tradition which he quite self-consciously carried on throughout his entire life.

In 1956, believing that his place was on the Right, Rothbard began writing columns on economics and book reviews for *National Review*, but he was constantly troubled by the publication's extreme bellicosity toward the Soviet Union. In an article sent to *National Review* in April 1959, he reluctantly voiced his Cold War concerns:

It is with a heavy heart that I enter the lists against the overwhelming majority of my friends and compatriots on the Right; also with a sense of futility in trying to combat that tough anti-Soviet foreign policy to which the Right is perhaps even more dedicated than it is to anti-Socialism. But I must try, if only for the reason that no one else has done so.³

Rothbard argued for a return to non-interventionism strictly on the grounds of American national interest, meeting the magazine's conservative readers and writers on their own supposed terms.

¹Murray N. Rothbard, "The Betrayal of the American Right" (unpublished; Murray N. Rothbard Papers, Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn, Ala.), p. 6.

²*Ibid.*, p. 23.

³Murray N. Rothbard, "For a New Isolationism," www.LewRockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard41.html.

Specifically, Rothbard proposed mutual nuclear disarmament as a method for America to disengage from the Cold War and bring her troops home. The article was rejected, in a "friendly fashion," by *National Review* editor William F. Buckley. In a letter written to a colleague dealing with this rejection, Rothbard noted:

I can think of no other magazine which might publish this, though I might fix it up a bit and try one of the leftist-pacifist publications. The thing is that I am getting more and more convinced that the war-peace question is *the* key to the whole libertarian business, and that we will never get anywhere in this great intellectual counter-revolution (or revolution) unless we can end this Verdante cold war—a war for which I believe our "tough policy is largely responsible."⁴

Demonstrating how far the contemporary Right has slipped into internationalism since the 1950s, Rothbard simply assumed that practically no right-wingers promoted America as a global policeman:

I take it for granted that there are few, if any, world-savers on the Right of the Wilson-FDR stamp, who believe in the moral obligation of the American government to enforce "collective security" all over the world, and to make sure that global Ruritania has no government which we do not like.⁵

We see here Rothbard's distaste for the establishment Right, and an inchoate willingness to throw his lot with the Left solely on the issue of war. Rothbard's relationship with *National Review* would not survive another two years; he wrote his final book review for the magazine in March 1961.

Nine short months later, *National Review* editor Frank Meyer wrote "The Twisted Tree of Liberty,"⁶ ensuring that Rothbard's self-imposed exile from mainstream conservatism would become permanent. Being the most libertarian of the magazine's editors, only Meyer could place Rothbard outside of the acceptable right-wing dialogue. It was expected that a libertarian like Rothbard would have conflicts with a traditionalist like Russell Kirk or an authoritarian like James Burnham, but if Frank Meyer, with whom Rothbard remained on friendly personal terms until Meyer's death, declared someone too dogmatic in his libertarianism, no one at *National*

⁴Rothbard to Kenneth S. Templeton, May 19, 1959, Rothbard Papers. See also "For a New Isolationism."

⁵Rothbard to Kenneth S. Templeton, May 19, 1959.

⁶Frank Meyer, "The Twisted Tree of Liberty," *National Review* (January 16, 1962).

Review would rise to his defense. Although Meyer never named his targets, the article was a fairly obvious attack upon Rothbard and his coterie of followers⁷ for their refusal to support the Cold War:

It might seem that there is no point to discussing a view of reality so patently distorted that it can consider appeasement of Communism, disarming ourselves before the Communist armed drive, and alliance with those who ease the road to Communist victory, as essential to the defense of the freedom of the individual. But although those who profess these absurd opinions are small in number, they do influence a section of the right wing, particularly in the universities, and they may, if not combated, influence more.⁸

There was now no returning to the Right for Rothbard, at least for the foreseeable future. The United States government had been active in Vietnam since the days when it was still part of French Indochina, but 1964 would see the infamous Gulf of Tonkin Incident used by President Johnson to send combat troops into battle with the Viet Cong. For the next five years, the war in Vietnam would only escalate, along with the National Review Right's bellicosity; the war ended any possibility of reconciliation between Rothbard and the mainstream right. The decision to reach out to a new audience was a clear one, but to whom, exactly, would he reach?

Rothbard found common ground with a small group of New Left historians on the issue of historical revisionism, and he sought to ally himself with them. It was perfectly natural that Rothbard looked to these men as allies, given that he was engaged in revisionism of a similar sort. America's Great Depression, which Rothbard finished in 1963, was a thoroughly revisionist work.⁹ It challenged nearly all extant theories of the Depression,¹⁰ especially the orthodox Keynesian underconsumption theory, and instead championed the Austrian theory of the business cycle as the only possible explanation for the 1929 crash. The most revisionist claim in the book was that Herbert Hoover was no friend of the free market:

⁷E.g., Ralph Raico and Ronald Hamowy, who were then publishers of the recently founded *New Individualist Review* at the University of Chicago.

⁸Meyer, "The Twisted Tree of Liberty," p. 25.

⁹Murray N. Rothbard, *America's Great Depression* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1963).

¹⁰That same year, Friedman and Schwartz published their monetary history, so Rothbard was unable to challenge their work in his own. Their work has since become the new orthodoxy among neoclassical economists. See Milton Friedman and Anna Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963).

Laissez-faire, then, was the policy dictated both by sound theory and by historical precedent. But in 1929 the sound course was rudely brushed aside. Led by President Hoover, the government embarked on what [Benjamin] Anderson has accurately called the "Hoover New Deal." For if we define "New Deal" as an anti-depression program marked by extensive governmental economic planning and intervention—including bolstering of wage rates and prices, expansion of credit, propping up weak firms, and increased government spending (e.g., subsidies to unemployment and public works)—Herbert Clark Hoover must be considered the founder of the New Deal in America. Hoover, from the very start of the depression, set his course unerringly toward the violation of all the *laissez-faire* canons. As a consequence, he left office with the economy at the depths of an unprecedented depression, with no recovery in sight after three and a half years, and with unemployment at the terrible and unprecedented rate of 25 per cent of the labor force.¹¹

Clearly, Rothbard was interested in attacking the old statist shibboleths of the historical profession that treated the doctrine of *laissez faire* as outdated, and government intervention as progressive. He would soon hear a harmonious voice, in this case speaking about the Progressive Era, from across the political spectrum.

The same year *America's Great Depression* was published, a young historian named Gabriel Kolko released his second book, entitled *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916*. Kolko challenged the commonly held view that the federal government's intervention in the economy during the early twentieth century gave the consuming public lower prices through increased competition, or that they were even designed to serve such a purpose. **On** the contrary, he argued that the federal government purposefully facilitated the growth of centralized, big business by constricting a dynamic, competitive marketplace:

Despite the large number of mergers, and the growth in the absolute size of many corporations, the dominant tendency in the American economy at the beginning of this [the twentieth] century was toward growing competition. Competition was unacceptable to many key business and financial interests. . . . As new competitors sprang up, and as economic power was diffused throughout an expanding nation, it became apparent to many important businessmen that only the national government could rationalize the economy. Although specific conditions varied from industry to industry, internal problems that could be solved only by political means were the common denominator in those industries whose leaders advocated greater federal regulation. Ironically,

¹¹Rothbard, *America's Great Depression*, p. 168.

contrary to the consensus of historians, it was not the existence of monopoly that caused the federal government to intervene in the economy, but the lack of it.¹²

Kolko's analysis of the Progressive Era meshed well with Rothbard's assessment of Herbert Hoover: both disputed the accepted line on their subject, and both found the truth to be its precise inverse. Furthermore, Rothbard recognized Kolko's work as the kind of analysis that was needed. Rothbard's historical method followed from that of Albert Jay Nock, who "look[ed] at all State action whatever in terms of 'Who? Whom?' (Who is benefiting at the expense of Whom?)"¹³ This was precisely what Kolko had done: he looked at the federal regulation of business, and asked who benefited at expense to whom. Kolko concluded that Big Business benefited at the consumer's expense. However, it seemed that historical revisionism might be the only thing the two could agree upon: Kolko was a socialist and Rothbard a free-marketeer. Nonetheless, Rothbard remained optimistic.

In the spring of 1965, Rothbard established *Left and Right*, a journal dedicated to the fight for liberty. In "Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty," his first editorial for the publication, Rothbard jabbed at conservatives with one hand and drew the left closer with the other. His attack upon conservatism was tactically couched in terms of which the Left would approve:

Conservatism is a dying remnant of the *ancien régime* of the pre-industrial era, and, as such, it *has* no future. In its contemporary American form, the recent Conservative Revival embodied the death throes of an ineluctably moribund, Fundamentalist, rural, small-town, white Anglo-Saxon America.¹⁴

Aside from not spelling America with a "k," this criticism could just as easily have been written by a devoted New Leftist like Tom Hayden as by a radical libertarian. As the article continued, Rothbard claimed that modern libertarianism was true leftism, while socialism was "a confused, middle-of-the road movement" that aimed "at Liberal *ends* by the use of Conservative *means*."¹⁵ As he continued to reinterpret history so that nearly all progress was

¹²Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916* (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), pp. 4–5.

¹³Rothbard, "Betrayal of the American Right," p. 15.

¹⁴Murray N. Rothbard, "Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty," *Left and Right* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1965): 1.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 4.

leftist and all regress conservative, Rothbard began to praise the work of Gabriel Kolko. For a full four pages, almost a quarter of the whole article, Rothbard summarized and lauded *The Triumph of Conservatism*. With the establishment of *Left and Right*, Rothbard's overtures to the Left became more and more obvious, and his attacks upon conservatism all the harsher; he was finally demonstrating his preference for something new in his political ventures.

The work of another New Left historian soon earned Rothbard's accolades. William Appleman Williams was an influential professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. In his writings, Williams frequently advanced a form of the frontier thesis. Williams's particular variation held that, throughout history, most Americans thought expansion "offer[ed] the best way to resolve problems and to create, or take advantage of, opportunities," and this *Weltanschauung* led to a continental American nation by the late nineteenth century, and a worldwide informal American empire by the end of World War II.¹⁶ Williams himself viewed this expansionism as escapist and increasingly dangerous in a world where "[e]xpansion as escape meant nuclear war."¹⁷ He reserved his praise for leaders, both left (e.g., Eugene Debs) and right (e.g., Herbert Hoover), who opposed expansionism and instead focused on improving the domestic situation.¹⁸

Inspired by Williams's rigorous revisionism, several of his numerous graduate students helped found the influential radical publication *Studies on the Left* in 1959. Two of the journal's editors recalled that it "was both a product of the disenchantment with the old left and a forerunner and participant of the new."¹⁹ Williams was a socialist, but he was also an extreme political decentralist, anti-imperialist, wildly popular with New Left academics, and, unlike Kolko, ecumenical when it came to alliances. In Williams, Rothbard found his greatest New Left ally.²⁰

In the Winter 1966 edition of *Left and Right*, Rothbard wrote "Old Right/New Left," highlighting the similarities between the two seemingly disparate groups. Referring to him as "one of the major theoreticians of the New Left," Rothbard discussed a speech given

¹⁶William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (New York: World Publishing, 1961), p. 480.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 484.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 485–88.

¹⁹Quoted in Henry W. Berger, ed. *A William Appleman Williams Reader* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992), p. 23.

²⁰With the possible exception of Karl Hess, but Hess started on the right and drifted to the radical left at a time when Rothbard began pulling away from it, so it becomes problematic to refer to him as a New Left ally of Rothbard.

by Williams to the anniversary dinner of the National Guardian, an Old Left publication, in which he implored his listeners to aim for political decentralism. Rothbard quoted Williams thus:

The core radical ideals and values of community, equality, democracy, and humaneness simply cannot in the future be realized and sustained—nor should they be sought—through more centralization and consolidation. These radical values can most nearly be realized through decentralization and through the creation of many truly human communities. If one feels the need to go ancestor-diving in the American past and spear a tradition that is relevant to our contemporary predicament, then the prize trophy is the Articles of Confederation²¹

Although Rothbard noted that Williams was "probably over-optimistic" in his analysis, Williams saw this same desire for decentralization in the Goldwater Movement:

Such decentralization also provides American radicalism with the most exciting and creative vista upon a different America and a better America. The validity of this is ironically attested to by the handful of tough and shrewd old 19th century conservatives who [had] already beaten the radicals to this perception.²²

The National Guardian crowd did not care for Williams's tolerance of such heresies, but here Rothbard finally saw the possibility for a popular movement of left and right united against the ruling center. He closed the article by noting:

The ideological walls in America are crumbling fast, and regrouping and reforming almost as rapidly. The keepers of the flame of the Old Left are as much doomed to obsolescence as are the swaggering fire-eaters of the New American Right.²³

Throughout Left and Right's four-year run, Rothbard observed what he believed to be an incorporation of Kolko's and Williams's anti-statist stances into the largest New Left group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In a Spring 1967 editorial, "SDS: The New Turn," Rothbard complained that the original principles of SDS, as set forth in the famous Port Huron statement,

did not fully assimilate the decisive New Left insight of William Appleman Williams and the *Studies on the Left* group that Big Government, as developed down through the New Deal and the New

²¹Murray N. Rothbard, "Old Right/New Left," *Left and Right* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1966):5.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 6.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 7.

Frontier, has not been a "progressive" instrument by which "the people" curbed and regulated Big Business.²⁴

Nonetheless, it seemed that the young members of the group were becoming anarchistic, and were driving the more statist "Old Guardsmen" of the group away.

A hopefully decisive moment for SDS came at its national convention at Clear Lake, Iowa. . . . There, it was expected to elect an Old Guardsman as president. But the grass-roots members of SDS, many of them wearing "I Hate the State" buttons, decisively defeated the Old Guard and elected a slate of national officers sympathetic to their goals. It was the convention of Clear Lake that marked a signal repudiation of the Old Guard by SDS; in effect, it meant the sharp weakening of Social Democrat influence in the organization. The path was cleared for new directions, for new aims, for giving the radicals and libertarians their head.²⁵

This development gave Rothbard good reason to believe that SDS was leaning his way, so he continued to woo the group in *Left and Right*, going so far as to ~~run~~ an editorial, which he most likely wrote himself, called "Ernesto Che Guevara: RIP" in the Spring–Autumn 1967 issue.²⁶ This eulogy for Che was not without criticism for the man. He was chided as "not a distinguished administrator, and an even poorer economist." Specifically, Che's policies that steered Cuba toward autarky were dismissed as "arbitrary and uneconomic."²⁷ Nonetheless, certain aspects of Che's life received high praise:

What made Che such a heroic figure for our time is that he, more than any man of our epoch or even of our century, was the living embodiment of the principle of Revolution. More than any man since the lovable but entirely ineffectual nineteenth-century Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, Che earned the title of "professional revolutionary." And furthermore, . . . we all knew that his

²⁴Murray N. Rothbard, "SDS: The New Turn," *Left and Right* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 13.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁶The article is not bylined, but being the primary editor, Rothbard almost assuredly wrote it. Also, the use of the word "lovable," an expression that Rothbard commonly used, to describe Bakunin gives further credence to the claim that Rothbard was the article's author. Finally, even if he was not the author, it should still be taken to represent his thoughts because non-bylined articles are official stances taken by the publication.

²⁷[Murray N. Rothbard], "Ernesto Che Guevara," *Left and Right* 3, no. 3 (Spring–Autumn 1967): 4.

enemy was our enemy—that great Colossus that oppresses and threatens all the peoples of the world, U.S. imperialism.²⁸

While Rothbard maintained his commitment to *laissez faire* economics here, left-wing rhetoric appears frequently throughout all the issues of Left and Right and, more importantly, in the single article Rothbard wrote for Ramparts, the largest New Left publication in the late 1960s. "Confessions of a Right-Wing Liberal" appeared in the June 15, 1968 edition of Ramparts, and was Rothbard's own retrospective account of how his alliance with the New Left came about. In the opening lines, he emphasized that he had not abandoned the Right, the Right had abandoned him:

Twenty years ago I was an extreme right-wing Republican . . . who believed, as one friend pungently put it, that "Senator Taft had sold out to the socialists." Today, I am most likely to be called an extreme leftist, since I favor immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, denounce U.S. imperialism, advocate Black Power and have just joined the new Peace and Freedom Party. And yet my basic political views have not changed a single iota in these two decades!

It is obvious that something is very wrong with the old labels, with the categories of "left" and "right," and with the ways in which we customarily apply these categories to American political life. My personal odyssey is unimportant; the important point is that if I can move from "extreme right" to "extreme left" merely by standing in one place, drastic though unrecognized changes must have taken place throughout the American political spectrum over the last generation.²⁹

Rothbard argued that most of the original opposition to the Cold War came from right-wing Republicans, but within a few years, the Old Right had been taken over by the National Review crowd that was heavily populated by former Communists like Frank Meyer and James Burnham, now eager to bomb their erstwhile comrades into oblivion. Rothbard recounted how these warmongers led him to conclude that the New Right was not, and could not be, his ally. He claimed:

[T]he right wing has been captured and transformed by elitists and devotees of the European conservative ideals of order and militarism, by witch hunters and global crusaders, by statist who wish to coerce "morality" and suppress "sedition."³⁰

²⁸Ibid., p. 3.

²⁹Murray N. Rothbard, "Confessions of a Right-Wing Liberal," reprinted in *American Radical Thought: The Libertarian Tradition*, ed. Henry J. Silverman (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1970), p. 291.

³⁰Ibid., p. 299.

These condemnations of the contemporary Right were accompanied by kind words to leftist scholars including Kolko, Williams, and D.F. Fleming. In fact, Rothbard wrote that Fleming had convinced him and other libertarians, to their "considerable surprise, that the United States was solely at fault in the Cold War, and that Russia was the aggrieved party."³¹

Rothbard's strategy of appealing to the New Left seemed to him to be working well. He wrote in "Confessions" that Left **and** Right had two primary goals:

to make contact with libertarians already on the new left, and to persuade the bulk of libertarians or quasi-libertarians who remained on the right to follow our example. We have been gratified in both directions: by the remarkable shift toward libertarian and anti-statist positions of the new left, and by the significant number of young people who have left the right-wing movement.³²

But unbeknownst to Rothbard, 1968 would mark the apogee of the New Left as a mass movement, and, hence, the apogee of the New Left-Old Right alliance.

The collapse of SDS in 1969 marked the end of the New Left as any sort of united or effective political entity. At the June 1968 SDS national convention, a Marxist group known as Progressive Labor (PL), which had been run out of the Communist Party for extreme leftism, attempted to seize control of the national organizational apparatus from the anti-statists elected at the Clear Lake convention.³³ PL wanted SDS to direct its efforts toward alliances with the working class, instead of protesting the war and helping the Black Panthers. Progressive Labor narrowly failed in their bid to take over the national SDS office, but the damage to the organization had been done, and the national officers split in three different directions, forming three subgroups within SDS: one backed PL, one created a group called the Revolutionary Youth Movement, and the other was known as the Action Faction, but would later become infamous as the revolutionary terrorist group the Weathermen. At the 1969 convention, SDS formally split into two groups, PL being one, and the other a motley crew consisting of everyone opposed to PL.

Rothbard and his longtime colleague Leonard Liggio commented on these developments in two different columns in their

³¹Ibid., p. 296.

³²Murray N. Rothbard, "Confessions of a Right-Wing Liberal," *Ramparts* 6, no. 11 (June 15, 1968): 52.

³³Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 336.

recently founded publication *The Libertarian Forum*.³⁴ Both Liggio and Rothbard agreed that PL had to be driven from SDS if there was to remain any viable New Left mass movement, but Liggio also seemed to think that PL's absence was sufficient to restore SDS to its former, anarchistic glory:

Having been on the defensive for some time because of PL's dogmatic hegemony, the original movement spirit has re-emerged in SDS. The ultimate result of the 1969 New Left convention was the reaffirmation of native American radicalism as part of the international anti-imperialist revolution.³⁵

Taking a more skeptical view, Rothbard worried that many of the remaining SDSers had adopted PL's doctrinaire Marxism even in combating them. If this was the case, Rothbard saw little to save in the group:

For while the virtue of the old SDS is that it had an open libertarian spirit rather than a dogmatic Marxian ideology, this very absence of positive theory left a vacuum which, inevitably, Marxism came to fill. For in the course of struggling against PL's invasion, too many of the "New Left" opponents of PL began to adopt their enemy ideology, to call themselves "communists" (even if with a "small c"), and to take on more and more of the trappings of Marxism and socialism.³⁶

As the article continued, Rothbard demonstrated his refusal to back away from first principles for the sake of an alliance. In order to keep the organization free from another PL-style infiltration, SDS adopted a set of principles, two of which concerned Rothbard deeply. First, Rothbard voiced his objections to Point Three, which endorsed so-called women's liberation:

Insisting on a total analogy with black liberation, the women's liberationists claim that women, too, are systematically oppressed by men and that therefore a separate women's power struggle is needed against this oppression. This idea seems to me absurd, and probably at least as good a case could be made for the view that *men* are oppressed and exploited by parasitic women (e.g. through divorce and alimony laws)... [T]he insistence on analogy with the black movement is even more absurd, for the logical conclusion of

³⁴*Left and Right* folded in 1968, and was replaced by *The Libertarian Forum*.

³⁵Leonard Liggio, "Liberated Zone," *Libertarian Forum* 1, no. 8 (July 15, 1969): 3.

³⁶Murray N. Rothbard, "Continue the Struggle," *Libertarian Forum* 1, no. 8 (July 15, 1969): 2.

the women's liberation struggle would then be . . . women's nationalism or separatism. Are we supposed to grant women an Amazonian state somewhere? Men-and-women, happily, are inherently "integrationist" and one may hope that they will remain that way.³⁷

However distressing Rothbard found Point Three, it was Point Five that led him to believe that SDS might have become useless to libertarians. Point Five called for the public ownership of the means of production, a principle that was "intolerable for any libertarian." Rothbard concluded that

the crisis in SDS provides striking opportunity for the growing student libertarian movement to organize itself as a radical, militant movement free at last from any possibility of socialist subjugation.³⁸

Rothbard was not ready to completely abandon the New Left as hopeless, but he reasserted his libertarian principles in opposition to rising socialist ones in SDS, and set forth the possibility for a libertarian movement separate from both left and right.

The independent libertarian movement truly came into being after the 1969 Labor Day weekend conference of Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), the right-wing version of SDS, in St. Louis. A full exposition of the convention's events is beyond the scope of this article,³⁹ but the essence of the conference was that most libertarians in YAF split from the group, primarily over the issues of Vietnam and the draft. Rothbard organized the first Radical Libertarian Alliance conference, a little over a month later on Columbus Day weekend, where the libertarians from SDS and YAF were to meet.

To put it bluntly, the convention was a disaster. As Rothbard feared, many of the SDS libertarians were infected with extreme leftism. One of the left-wing libertarians denounced "all academic economists" and the wearing of neckties as great evils which the libertarian movement should focus on destroying. This did not sit well with the more right-wing libertarians, or with Rothbard himself, as he never ceased to be an academic economist, producing an overwhelming amount of scholarly economic work throughout the

³⁷Ibid., pp. 2-3; ellipsis in original.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 34.

³⁹For more on the YAF convention and the libertarian split, see Rebecca E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 211-37. The first part of the chapter also covers the similar split in SDS.

period of the New Left alliance. As a non-bylined editorial, but certainly written by Rothbard, in *The Libertarian Forum* noted:

Each extreme reacted on the other with cutting dialectical force, each pushing the other farther away from its position. Instead of the conference bringing both extremes. . . together, the rap sessions only served to drive them further apart.⁴⁰

Former Barry Goldwater speechwriter Karl Hess, who had been converted to anarcho-capitalism by "Confessions of a Right-Wing Liberal" and conversations with Rothbard, but had drifted toward anarcho-socialism in the interceding year, sealed the conference's fate when he spoke on Saturday night. Wearing Fidel Castro-style battle fatigues and a Wobblie pin adorning his hat, Hess roared out to the audience, "There is no neutral ground in a revolution. . . . You're either on one side of the barricade or the other."⁴¹ He proceeded to implore the crowd to join him in a scheduled anti-war march on Fort Dix the following day.

The conference reopened Sunday morning to about 50 attendees. Most of the leftists and radical libertarians had gone with Hess to Fort Dix, while most of the more conservative libertarians had just gone home. When the Fort Dix marchers returned after having been tear-gassed, there was some concern that the police would raid the building to arrest Hess and anyone else who marched on the fort, so the convention closed prematurely on Sunday night.⁴²

The Libertarian Forum article devoted to the conference blamed most of the trouble at the convention on ultra-leftists who acted (i.e., the march on Fort Dix) without thinking. The article's conclusion includes the following:

[T]his sort of large, totally open convention—gathering all manner of leftists, rightists, and cops—has become counter-productive. The need now is for smaller, far more selective, and more homogeneous meetings, in which there will be far more room for much-needed internal education of cadre, and for genuine discussion and dialogue. Leftists and rightists can only be moved toward the

⁴⁰[Murray N. Rothbard], "The Conference: Two Steps Forward, Two Steps Back," *Libertarian Forum* 1, no. 15 (November 1, 1969): 2. The other two editors of the *Libertarian Forum*, Joe Peden and Karl Hess, would not have written this editorial, Hess because he disagreed entirely with its conclusions, and Peden because he rarely wrote anything, and almost never on current events.

⁴¹Quoted in Jerome Tuccille, *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), p. 121.

⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 122–25.

center separately, where they cannot reinforce each other's errors through mutual denunciation. Only when and if left and right have effectively blended into the center will there be need for a second open convention.⁴³

There never was a second convention; the left and right alliance had failed as a popular movement.

But this collapse was not an isolated incident. The New Left, in all its forms, was collapsing rapidly. The SDS, composed of all those who routed Progressive Labor, mainly the Revolutionary Youth Movement and Weathermen, itself split in late summer 1969, when Weathermen won all three national offices. The Revolutionary Youth Movement died within a few months, and only Weathermen carried on the SDS banner. Unfortunately for whatever good name SDS had left, Weathermen were hell bent on the Red Revolution, and therefore engaged in and celebrated whatever kind of violence they deemed to advance their cause.⁴⁴

Rothbard was well aware of these occurrences, and declared the New Left dead in two editorials in *The Libertarian Forum*. In "The New Left, RIP," Rothbard praised some of the New Left's early accomplishments, mourned their embrace of the counter-culture—"that blight of blatant irrationality that has hit the younger generation and the intellectual world like a veritable plague"—and examined what remained:

Perhaps the patient [the New Left] is not totally dead, but surely it is "medically dead"; the brain is long gone, the heart and spirit are failing fast, and what we are left with are the final reflexive convulsions of the corpse: the mindless and febrile twitchings of such pathetic and decaying groups as the Weathermen and the Patriot Party, the feeble high-camp of Yippie guerrilla theatre, the arrant nonsense of Women's Liberation. The heart and body of the New Left are gone.⁴⁵

Of course, if the New Left, in any meaningful sense of the term, was dead, the idea of an Old Right-New Left alliance was pure gibberish. Realizing this fact, Rothbard excoriated the libertarians who clung to the alliance, and, in doing so, summarized the position he had consistently held concerning the New Left:

One tragedy in this whole affair is that many of the libertarians of New York, New England, and Washington, D.C. have completely

⁴³[Rothbard], "The Conference," p. 3.

⁴⁴Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, pp. 339-42.

⁴⁵Murray N. Rothbard, "The New Left, RIP," *Libertarian Forum* 2, no. 6 (March 15, 1970): 1-2.

forgotten the crucial strategic principle of Lenin: that, in associating with other groups, one must remain firm and steadfast in one's principles, while remaining open and flexible in one's tactics, in response to ever changing institutional conditions. The original idea in allying ourselves with the New Left was to work with a new generation permeated with strong libertarian elements. Now that the New Left has died, and its genuine libertarian elements have disappeared, objective conditions require that we make a tactical shift away from the current Left. Instead, too many of our young East Coast libertarians have done just the opposite of Lenin's strategic advice: they cling as a vital principle to the mere tactic of alliance with the Left; and they abandon their original principles (free-markets, private property rights) that led them to becoming libertarians, and therefore into making tactical alliances in the first place. . . . They have tragically allowed the means to become an end, and the end to become a mere means.⁴⁶

However, despite all of the emerging chaos, the oldest part of the Old Right-New Left alliance held into the 1970s. Rothbard's relationship with William Appleman Williams and several of his students, particularly Ronald Radosh, remained firm, and, in 1972, Rothbard and Radosh edited a collection of anti-statist historical essays entitled *A New History of Leviathan*. In the book's preface, the editors discussed their strange relationship:

How is it that an arch-exponent of laissez-faire capitalism can coedit a collection on the Leviathan Corporate State with a firm believer in the socialist revolution? The answer is that each, because of his critique of liberal ideology and concepts, has been able in his own work to transcend the ideological myths that enable the large corporations to mask their hegemony over American society.⁴⁷

It should be noted that the terms of the alliance had shifted from the headier days of 1966, when Rothbard and Williams both spoke passionately about the need for decentralization. Neither the socialists nor the libertarians had altered their beliefs, but they had realized that a truly positive alliance was impossible; their end goals were simply too different. What remained was an alliance against the status quo, that is, a purely negative one.

Politically, the 1960s were a roller coaster ride for everyone involved, and, everything considered, Rothbard's strategic alliance with the New Left fared relatively well. The alliance ultimately

⁴⁶Murray N. Rothbard, "Farewell to the Left," *The Libertarian Forum* 2, no. 9 (May 1, 1970): 2.

⁴⁷Ronald Radosh and Murray N. Rothbard, eds., *A New History of Leviathan* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972), p. viii.

failed, but strategic alliances are, by definition, temporary. And certainly, the Radical Libertarian Alliance was a terrible flop, but it is equally certain that the libertarian movement as a whole ended the 1960s far larger than it was when the decade began. It is impossible to say exactly how large an impact the alliance had on the libertarian movement, but it certainly seems that a great many libertarians were culled and/or created from the ranks of SDS and unaffiliated Vietnam War protestors.

Whatever else can be said, Rothbard never backed away from the truth as he saw it, even when it meant the destruction of a political bond he had worked so hard to build; the struggle for liberty always remained paramount.

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