

The Life and Death of the Old Right

by Murray N. Rothbard

The libertarian movement was once a mighty movement, hardcore but not kooky, part of the mainstream of American ideological and political life. In the 18th and 19th centuries (for example, in the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian movements), libertarians were even the dominant political force in the country. America was, indeed, conceived in liberty. But right now, I'm not going back that far: I'm talking about the origins of the modern 20th century movement. For various reasons, the Progressive movement had wiped out 19th century intellectual and political libertarianism, and, by the 1920s, it was reduced to a few vibrant but lone intellectuals such as H.L. Mencken and his friend, Albert Jay Nock.

But then something happened to shock libertarianism back to life – the cataclysmic Great Leap Forward into collectivism hailed as the New Deal. It's a process of historical reaction: a sudden social change will often give rise to a fierce opposition. Opposition to the New Deal was, necessarily, a coalition politics united on a negative: hatred of the socialism of the New Deal. Increasingly gathering into that coalition were the few libertarian or individualist intellectuals, the heritage and the remnants of the old Jeffersonian Democracy left from the days of Grover Cleveland – men such as Senator James A. Reed of Missouri and Governor Albert Ritchie of Maryland, and Republicans, including formerly stalwart statists and Progressives such as Herbert Hoover, who condemned FDR for going much too far.

As the New Deal intensified and was championed by the Democrats, the opposition inevitably coalesced around the Republican Party. It was a strange transformation, since, from its inception in the 1850s, the Republican Party had always been the party of statism and centralized Big Government. Well, life is strange some times, and this shift was no stranger than what had happened to the Democrats, during the 19th century the party of minimal government and laissez-faire.

When Roosevelt dragged America into World War II, the growing opposition, which I have called the "Old Right," shifted its moorings and changed some of its alliances. Some economic free-marketeers, such as Lewis W. Douglas, became ardent pro-war New Dealers; while former progressives, mainly Republican, who opposed the war, began to see the deep connection between interventionism and Big Government in domestic as well as foreign policy. As a result, by the end of World War II, the Old Right, largely Republican but still including Jeffersonian Democrats (such as Rep. Samuel Pettingill of Indiana), was consistently libertarian, opposing statism at home and war and intervention abroad.

The Old Right was a strong and vibrant movement, dominant in the Republican Party in Congress (especially in the House of Representatives) and constituting roughly the Taft wing of the party. The Old Right was firmly opposed to conscription as well as war or foreign aid, favored free markets and the gold standard, and upheld the rights of private property as opposed to any sort of invasion, including coerced integration. The Old Right was socially conservative, middle class, welcoming people who worked for a living or met a payroll, and was the salt of the earth.

What the Old Right lacked was not a political mass, but rather an intellectual cadre, and the small but increasing number of hard-core libertarians influenced by Mises and Rand and Nock after World War II provided a growing intellectual foundation for that movement. What we have to realize, and we almost have to shake ourselves to believe, is that hard-core libertarians were not considered kooks and crazies; we were treated only as extreme variants of a creed that almost everyone on the Old Right believed: peace, individual liberty, free markets, private property, even the gold standard. And since we were simply consistent upholders of a creed which the entire Old Right believed, we were able, though small in number, to influence and permeate the views of the broad mass of Old Right Americans. It was a happy symbiosis.

That's why, politically, all libertarians, whether minarchists or anarcho-capitalists, were happy to consider ourselves "extreme right-wing Republicans." [The general term for the broader movement was "individualist" or "true liberal" or "rightist" – the word "conservative" was not at all in use before the publication of Russell Kirk's *Conservative Mind* in 1953].

It was a great time for a libertarian to be politically active. Neither did the Old Right collapse with the onset of the Cold War. On the contrary, the Old Right reached a peak in its last days: for it was virtually the only opposition to the Korean War. [Only the Communist Party and I.F. Stone opposed U.S. entry into the Korean War; the entire rest of the Left, including Henry Wallace, supported it in the name of the old interventionist slogan: "collective security against aggression."]

Major opponents of the Korean War were such libertarian and Old

Right publicists as Garet Garrett and John T. Flynn, F.A. Harper and Leonard E. Read; influential newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune*; and major political opponents such as Senators Bridges and Wherry and the libertarian Congressman Howard H. Buffett of Omaha.

It was after the Korean War that the Old Right collapsed. The catalyst was the literal theft of the Republican presidential nomination in 1952 from Senator Taft by the Wall Street elite behind Eisenhower; the deaths of Taft and Colonel McCormick, owner of the *Chicago Tribune*; and the capture of the political reins of the Republican Party by the "conservative" New Dealers constituting the Eisenhower movement. Whereas the right-wing Republicans aimed to repeal and abolish the New Deal, the Eisenhower forces aimed at consolidating the New Deal and fastening it permanently upon American life, and in this they succeeded all too well.

But probably the most important reason for the collapse of the Old Right was not external blows, but the loss of its own soul and principles. As the older intellectual and political leaders died or retired, a powerful new force arose in 1955 to fill that vacuum. This new force – people grouped around *National Review* – set out to transform the nature of the American Right, and they succeeded brilliantly. Headed by a brace of shrewd ex-Communists, steeped in Marxist-Leninist cadre organizing tactics, allied to youthful Eastern seaboard Catholics, the New Right determined to crush isolationism, and to remold the right-wing into a crusade to crush Communism all over the world, and particularly in the Soviet Union.

At first, *NR* had a patina of individualism, in order to capture the considerable amount of Old Right libertarian sentiment and wed it to a policy of global war. The Buckley machine founded Young Americans for Freedom as its youthful political arm. The Intercollegiate Society of Individualists for libertarian-minded student intellectuals, and headed by *NR* publisher Bill Rusher, moved to capture the College Young Republicans, then the YRs nationally, and finally moved to dominate the Republican Party with the Goldwater movement.

Early in this process, moreover, *National Review*, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, moved quickly to read out of the New Right, or "conservative" movement, all "extremists" who would prove an embarrassment in its march to power. And so, in a series of purges, the Birch Society, the Randians, and the libertarians (those who remained isolationists) were ousted from the right wing. *NR* and the New Right were ready to achieve power, which they eventually would attain with the Reagan administration. But the point is that the ideological transformation – into a warmongering and vaguely theocratic movement – was achieved by the early 1960s. The Old Right was dead, and those libertarians who still remembered and cleaved to their principles, were out in the cold.