

# Requiem for the Old Right

by Murray N. Rothbard

By now it is no news to anyone that public opinion in America has shifted sharply to the right and that an authentic leader of American conservatism may well assume the presidency in 1981. And yet, despite this surge, there is still no adequate treatment of the American Right or of the permutations and transformations it has undergone in the past half-century or so. George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (1976) was a careful and encyclopedic compendium of the various ideological tributaries and branches of conservatism, but no book has yet come along to describe and analyze the right-wing movement as such and to place it in its historical context.



Michael Miles's uninspired account [*The Odyssey of the American Right*] tries to fill the gap, but unfortunately, it is a notable failure. For one thing, Miles suffers from a basic absence of insight; he simply doesn't understand the conservatives, their various "wings" and incarnations, or what they were and are trying to do. His failure in the foreign policy area is egregious; whenever he gets himself into a hole, he just makes new categories – "isolationist," "internationalist," "old nationalist," and "new nationalist," none of them carefully defined or distinguished from one another. What are we to make of Miles's assertion, for example, early in the book, that Senator Joseph McCarthy "denounced the New Deal and internationalist foreign policy as equivalents of treason," which is followed approximately a hundred pages later by the author's admission that McCarthy was an "internationalist" or (whatever this may mean) a "new nationalist"?

Miles's conceptual confusion – fatal in this kind of enterprise – is just as painfully evident in his discussion of classical or "true" liberalism. In the United States, he asserts, "true liberalism meant true Republicanism," from which it follows that although in England classical liberalism called for free trade, in the United States "true liberalism was compatible with protective tariffs... [and] countenanced not only the tariff but huge land grants, tax benefits, and

other subsidies to business, which ate its fill at what Vernon Louis Parrington called the 'Great Barbecue.'" Elsewhere, Miles talks senselessly of the "old *laissez-faire* capitalist order and its foreign policies of protectionism and Pacific First."

In tying classical liberalism to the Republican party, Miles could scarcely be more ignorant of nineteenth-century American history. The classical liberal party throughout the nineteenth century was not the Republican, but the Democratic party, which fought for minimal government, free trade, and no special privileges for business. Moreover, *laissez faire* is nothing if not determined opposition to protectionism in any of its guises. As for Pacific First, it was the last of the New England *laissez-faire* individualists who formed the Anti-Imperialist League at the turn of the twentieth century and battled hard against America's imperial conquest of the Philippines and the brutal suppression of the Philippine national independence movement.

Miles also tries to link classical liberalism in America with xenophobia, ultranationalism, "Americanism," and the Know-Nothing party of the 1850s, and he sees modern classical liberalism as a blend of libertarian economics and repression of immigrants. Since this bizarre conjunction depends entirely on Miles's positing of the Republicans as the avatars of classical liberalism, the less said about it the better.

Generally, Miles tries to offer documentation, however feeble, for his rather wild generalizations. But when he refers to the libertarian strand in pre- and post-World War II conservatism he enters a world totally of his own creation. Libertarians, he believes, were opposed to civil liberties; in America, he writes, "the 'libertarians' had a consistent record since the 1930s of defending the free market while attacking the Bill of Rights." Miles also opines that the "'libertarians' derived from the old Protestant right."

Well, who exactly were these libertarians? Miles doesn't bother to say. There were only a handful. The outstanding libertarian, H. L. Mencken, mentioned only in passing by Miles – and as a "conservative" – is justly famous for having fought hard for the Bill of Rights all of his life. So, too did the essayist Albert Jay Nock, who doesn't even rate a mention in Miles; and then there was Nock's leading disciple Frank Chodorov, who gets passing notice (with only marginal distortion) as a "right-wing anarchist." So did all the libertarians. The only person named as a libertarian by Miles is *National Review* editor Frank Meyer. Although Meyer was significantly more libertarian than the other NR editors (not a difficult feat), he did go along with Buckley's expulsion of the libertarians from the conservative movement in the late 1950s, part of the purge of embarrassing "extremists" of all sorts that was to clear the movement's path to future power. And while it is true that Meyer, at least, attacked the Bill of Rights during the 1930s, he could hardly have been termed a libertarian at the time, since he happened to be one of the leading members of the U.S. Communist Party.

Neither were many of these libertarians "Protestants." Meyer and Chodorov were Jewish, Mencken was an atheist, and Nock, although a lapsed Anglican minister, could hardly have belonged to any of the sects that Miles, in his obsolescent way, identifies with the Calvinist Protestants who were supposed to have ushered in the spirit and institutions of Western capitalism.

Miles is correct that the modern conservative movement was born as a reaction against Roosevelt's New Deal. Yet although he notes that the Liberty League, the major organization opposing the New Deal in its first term, was formed by conservative Democrats, he soon falls into his usual cadence and portrays the league as a Republican institution. In fact, given the origins of modern conservatism, its nucleus was a necessarily disparate coalition of anti-New Deal forces. The philosophical thrust was provided by libertarians like Mencken and Nock, and the political base was formed by the waning group of classical liberal Democrats like the Liberty Leaguers Albert Ritchie of Maryland and Senator James A. Reed of Missouri.

Most of the opponents, of course, were Republicans, who had never been classical liberals or libertarians. They were led by Herbert Hoover, whose whole political career had been dedicated to foisting the "government-business alliance" on America. In opposing the New Deal's leap into a more advanced form of statism, these Republican politicians were forced to use the unfamiliar rhetoric of classical liberalism, in which they had little genuine belief. After all, what other rhetoric was there? So began that grievous disjunction between high-sounding free market and libertarian discourses and actual statist practice that has marked conservatism ever since.

World War II confused matters further. Many conservative internationalists – like Dean Acheson and Lewis W. Douglas, who had left the early New Deal in disgust with its heterodox economic creeds – were happy to rejoin the Roosevelt team as part of the World War II crusade, and many Progressive isolationists joined the anti-New Deal coalition. In the turbulence of the great leap further to statism during the war, the latter found themselves becoming sympathetic to free-market economics as well. Senators Borah, Nye, and Wheeler are examples in politics; Harry Elmer Barnes, Frank Hanighen, and John T. Flynn among intellectuals.

The right-wing movement thus emerged after World War II very different from what it had been before. Once opposed to domestic statism, in the name of the free market and personal liberty, it came to encompass not only hostility to war and foreign intervention but also to American statism in the international arena. When he introduces such labels as "new nationalist" and "Pacific First," Miles gets the whole exceedingly important story muddled.

In all of Miles's book, there is no hint that the hard core of the political Right was solidly anti-interventionist throughout the postwar years. Senator Wherry of Nebraska, and in the House such ultras as the libertarian Howard Buffett of Nebraska (Robert Taft's Midwest

campaign manager in 1952), and George Bender of Ohio were opposed to all intervention.

Bender was Taft's right-hand man in the House, and for those who totally identify the American Right with advocacy of militarism, hysterical anti-Sovietism, and global adventuring, this characteristic statement of his from a speech of March 28, 1947, might prove illuminating:

I believe that the White House program [for aid to Greece and Turkey – the "Truman Doctrine"] is a reaffirmation of the nineteenth century belief in power politics. It is a refinement of the policy first adopted after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 designed to encircle Russia and establish a "Cordon Sanitaire" around the Soviet Union. It is a program which points to a new policy of interventionism as a corollary to our Monroe Doctrine in South America.

Bender, who collaborated with pacifist scholars and intellectuals, was also fond of referring to Chiang Kai-shek's regime as "fascist," and he considered the Voice of America to be nothing more than "a vast foreign propaganda machine."

Indeed, the opposition to Truman's entry into the Korean War consisted almost solely of the Communist party on the left and the ultraconservative Republicans in the House on the right, which led some liberal publications at the time to refer to the Kremlin-*Chicago Tribune* isolationist axis. It is easy to forget that the right-wingers, in those years, were not the only red-baiters.

One obstacle to analyzing the conservative movement of the early postwar years is exclusive concentration on its undoubted political leader, Robert A. Taft. Although both a free-market man and a noninterventionist, Taft, partly due to his addiction to compromise as a way of life, faltered on both counts throughout his career. Second-echelon militants like Wherry and Buffett are far more revealing of the right-wing ideology of the period than is Taft himself.

But why the ferocious red-baiting? If the conservative movement of the 1930s and 1940s was basically classical liberal and libertarian, as I would contend, how come the witch-hunts against Communists and fellow travelers? How come McCarthyism?

In the first place, we must realize, as even Miles does fleetingly, that Joe McCarthy was not himself a right-winger, but came in fact from the moderate, internationalist wing of the Republican party. Even in his book seeking to indict General George Marshall for continuing "treason," the charges begin no earlier than the middle of World War II. The senator did not use the familiar indictment of Marshall by the right: that he had collaborated in Roosevelt's alleged plot to provoke the Japanese into attacking Pearl Harbor. McCarthy did not use this charge against Marshall because he had no quarrel with our entry into

that war – only with the alleged "appeasement" of Russia toward the end.

But McCarthy himself is not the major problem. Why did the right wing, even if isolationist on the Cold War, countenance or even cheer McCarthy on? The answer is rooted in what had happened to the conservative movement during the war. Even though it had shut up shop as an organized movement after Pearl Harbor, it had been antiwar, and as such was subjected to repression once the war had started. Antiwar writers like Flynn, Barnes, Mencken, Nock, and Oswald Garrison Villard were driven from their customary outlets by the interventionists. Flynn and Barnes were forced to publish their pioneering Pearl Harbor revisionist pamphlets privately, since no firm would publish them. Various isolationists were jailed as alleged agents for the Germans or Japanese, and, in the most disgraceful act of repression – an attempt to prove seditious conspiracy via content analysis of numerous tracts opposing the war – the U.S. government put dozens of isolationists and others through a lengthy mass sedition trial.

The conservatives were understandably embittered at such treatment, and in assessing blame they pardonably hit upon the Communists as at least partly responsible for their plight. Again, it is all too easy to forget that from the onset of the Popular Front, and especially after the German attack on Russia made them ardent prowar converts, the Communists were in many ways the left wing and the point men of the Roosevelt New Deal. They applauded and led the way in repressing isolationists and hailed the Smith Act when it was originally used to arrest Trotskyist opponents of the war effort. When we add the observations that Communism is, to say the least, an aggravated form of statism, and that World War II as the right wing had predicted, produced a far more powerful Soviet Union, the red-baiting of the right falls into perspective.

The right wing at first did not apply this fierce anti-Communism to foreign policy. But in a sense, McCarthy was a transitional figure in the radical and fateful shift from Old Right to New Right in the mid-1950s. The last gasp of the old, classical liberal Right was its militant opposition to the Korean War – as well as the Andrews-Werdel third party presidential ticket in 1956 (scarcely noted by Miles), which had as its foreign policy plank strict nonintervention in the affairs of other nations. In focusing on such marginalia as the infusion of Catholics into the Right – unbeknownst to Miles, they had been leaders of the isolationist movement in World War II – and in manipulating his old-nationalism/new-nationalism categories, Miles misses the whole point of the shift from Old to New Right. In fact, in all but the most trivial sense, he seems barely aware that such a shift took place at all.

What happened was this. The political leaders of the Old Right began to die or retire. Taft's death in 1953 was an irreparable blow, and one by one the other Taft Republicans disappeared from the scene. In fact, Taft's defeat in the bitterly fought 1952 convention was to signal the end of the Old Right as a political force. It is typical of Michael

Miles's myopia that the only difference he sees between Barry Goldwater, the star of the New Right, and the Taftites is that Goldwater was more "optimistic" than they. In fact, Goldwater was – and is – an all-out interventionist in foreign affairs; it is both symbolic and significant that Goldwater was an Eisenhower, not a Taft delegate to the 1952 Republican convention.

Meanwhile, the intellectual leaders of the Old Right too were fast disappearing. Nock and Mencken were dead or inactive, and Colonel Robert McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, died in 1955. *The Freeman*, although the leading right-wing journal in the late forties and early fifties, had never been a powerful force; by the mid-fifties it was weaker than ever. Since the thirties, the Right had suffered from a dearth of intellectuals; it had seemed that all intellectuals were on the left. A disjunction therefore existed between a tiny cadre of intellectuals and writers, and a large, relatively unenlightened mass base. In the mid-1950s, with a power vacuum in both the political and the intellectual areas, the Right had become ripe for a swift takeover. A well-edited, well-financed magazine could hope to capture the dazed right wing and totally transform its character. This is exactly what happened with the formation of *National Review* in 1955.

In a sense, Joe McCarthy heralded the shift when, after his censure by the Senate, he feebly changed his focus in early 1955 from domestic Communism to the championing of Chiang Kai-shek. For *National Review*, led by Bill Buckley and William Rusher, was a coalition of young Catholics – McCarthyite and eager to lead an anti-Communist crusade in foreign affairs – and ex-Communists like Frank Meyer and William S. Schlammer dedicating their energies to extirpating the god that had failed them. *NR* filled the power vacuum, and with Rusher as point man in the political arena, it managed, in a scant few years, to transform the American right wing beyond recognition. By the early 1960s, the Rusher forces had captured the Young Republicans and College Young Republicans, established Young Americans for Freedom as their campus arm, and had taken over the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists as a more theoretical organ.

By the 1960 GOP convention, Barry Goldwater had become the political leader of the transformed New Right. By 1960, too, the embarrassing extremists like the John Birch Society had been purged from the ranks, and the modern conservative movement was in place. It combined a traditionalist and theocratic approach to "moral values," occasional lip service to free-market economics, and an imperialist and global interventionist foreign policy dedicated to the glorification of the American state and the extirpation of world Communism. Classical liberalism remained only as rhetoric, useful in attracting business support, and most of all as a fig leaf for the grotesque realities of the New Right. (This entity is not to be confused with the fundamentalist factions now on the warpath

against abortion and ERA.)

In a few brief years the character of the right wing had been totally transformed: Once basically classical liberal, it had become a global theocratic crusade. Such is the lack of acumen and memory among the right-wing masses that few even noted that any shift had occurred – but why does Michael Miles fall into the same trap?