

Life in the Old Right

by Murray N. Rothbard

One problem with labeling ideological movements "old" or "new" is that inevitably, with the passage of time, the "new" becomes an "old" and the markers get confusing. In the modern, post-World War II right wing, there have been a number of "news" and "olds" over the past half-century. But what I call the "Old Right" has an excellent claim to that label; for it was the original, oldest right, and it was in many ways radically different from all the rights that have followed after its demise.

The original right of which I speak, and of which I am one of the few survivors, stretched from 1933 to its approximate death, or fading away, upon the advent of *National Review* in 1955. The Old Right began in 1933 in response to the coming of the New Deal. It was "reactionary" in the best and most generous sense: it was a horrified reaction against the Roosevelt Revolution, against the Great Leap Forward toward collectivism that enraptured socialist intellectuals and enraged those who were devoted to the institutions and the strict limitations on centralized government power that marked the Old Republic.

Last fall, David Lauter, writing a think-piece in the *Los Angeles Times* about the Clinton health plan, wittingly or unwittingly echoed Maoist terminology about this Great Leap Forward, declaring that "every so often... the government collectively braces itself, takes a deep breath, and leaps into a largely unknown future." The Clinton health plan is such a leap, Lauter noted; the previous Great Leap was the civil rights laws of the 1960s; and before that, in perhaps the primordial leap, was the New Deal of the 1930s, when the nation agreed "to give the federal government a whole new set of responsibilities – from providing social security for the elderly to establishing a new system of national regulatory agencies to monitor the economy."

A fairly good summation, except that instead of the "nation" agreeing to give powers to the government the New Deal proceeded in the manner of all nonviolent revolutions: it was the federal government and its new rulers that seized power, drove through a flurry of socialistic measures, and then won "agreement" by using the levers of propaganda and opinion-molding in society, as well as by relying on the sheer force of inertia and habit once the new institutions were in

place.

The Old, original, Right realized the horrors of the New Deal and predicted the collectivist road on which it was setting the nation. The Old Right was a coalition of ideologies and forces that did not have one single, common, positive program, but "negatively" it was solidly united: all opposed the New Deal and were committed to its total repeal and abolition – lock, stock, and barrel. The fact that its unity was "negative" did not make it any less strong or cohesive: for there was total agreement on rolling back this collective excrescence and on restoring the Old Republic, the true America.

The Old Right coalition consisted of the following elements. Most "extreme" were the libertarian and individualist writers and intellectuals: H. L. Mencken, Albert Jay Nock, Rose Wilder Lane, Garet Garrett, all people who had resisted what they believed to be the mounting statism of the Republican regime of the 1920s and who called for an ultraminimal government that would have rolled back the statism of the Progressive period, the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, and perhaps the judicial despotism of Chief Justice John Marshall. Next came now virtually forgotten remnants of the conservative, states' rights Democrats of the nineteenth century, largely from the South, whose views were almost as libertarian as the first group's. These men were led by Governor Albert Ritchie of Maryland, who was a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1932, and Senator James A. Reed from Missouri. The third group consisted of conservative Republicans who were outraged at New Deal democracy and who largely came from the Midwest. Former Progressives and statist, who believed that the New Deal was going much too far, formed the final group; its leader was former President Herbert Hoover, who, though he had launched many New Deal measures in microcosm in his own administration, denounced the New Deal for going too far into "fascism." It was the first group that set the tone, since individualist and libertarian rhetoric provided the only general concepts with which New Deal measures could be opposed. The result, however, was that hack Republican politicians found themselves mouthing libertarian and antistatist slogans that they did not really believe – a condition that set the stage for a later "moderation" and abandonment of their seemingly cherished principles.

Unity in our hostility and hatreds, however, combined with diversity of positive principle, had a healthy effect on the Old Right. It meant that we could unite and act together in denouncing and moving against the New Deal enemy, while disagreeing and arguing in friendly fashion among ourselves about the kind of America we would ultimately like to achieve. How much government did we wish to roll back? Stop at 1932, or press onward to repeal Progressive measures or even the centralization of the nineteenth century? We were all committed to states' rights, but how far did we want to carry this view? A few libertarian extremists wanted to go *all the way* back to the Articles of Confederation, but the great bulk of the right was committed to the United States Constitution – but a Constitution

construed so "strictly" as to outlaw much twentieth-century legislation, certainly on the federal level.

In those days, it was a pleasure to pore over the voting records of right-wing Republicans in Congress, especially in the harder-core House, for the common garden-variety rightists of the pre-1955 era make the most right-wing congressmen today seem impossibly leftist and socialistic. My two favorite congressmen were Howard Buffett of Nebraska and Frederick C. Smith of Ohio, both of whom would invariably draw "zero" ratings from the Americans for Democratic Action and other leftist groups. I remember being disappointed that once in a while they might deviate by favoring a federal anti-lynching bill; did they not know that the federal government is not supposed to have any police powers?

Friendly disagreement on positive principles meant genuine and healthy diversity and freedom of discussion within right-wing circles. As Thomas Fleming noted with astonishment when researching the Old Right, there was no party line, and there was no organ or central GHQ that excommunicated "unrespectable" members. There was a wide spectrum of positive views: ranging from pure libertarian decentralization to Hamiltonian reliance on strong government within rigid limits to various wings of monarchists. And in all this diversity and range of discourse, no one would react in shock and horror to any "extreme" views – so long as the "extremism" did not mean selling out the fight against the New Deal. There was also a great deal of disagreement on specific policies that had been open questions in the Old, pre-New Deal, Republic: tariffs vs. free trade; immigration restrictions vs. open borders; and what constitutes a military or foreign policy truly consistent with American national interests.

The Old Right experienced one big sea change. Originally, its focus was purely domestic, since that was the concentration of the early New Deal. But as the Roosevelt administration moved toward world war in the late 1930s, the Old Right added intense opposition to the New Deal's war policies to its systemic opposition to the domestic New Deal revolution. For they realized that, as the libertarian Randolph Bourne had put it in opposing America's entry into World War I, "War is the health of the State" and that entry into large-scale war, especially for global and not national concerns, would plunge America into a permanent garrison state that would wreck American liberty and constitutional limits at home even as it extended the American imperium abroad. As anti-foreign interventionism was added to the anti-New Deal mix, the Old Right lost some adherents and gained even more. For Eastern Establishment anti-New Dealers, such as Lewis Douglas, William L. Clayton, Dean Acheson, and the Morgan Bank, embraced the entire New Deal package once it came wrapped in the enticing trappings of American Empire. On the other hand, antiwar progressives, originally New Dealers, men such as Senators William Borah and Gerald Nye, intellectuals and writers such as John T. Flynn and Harry Elmer Barnes, began to realize that there was something very wrong with a strong state that could expand into foreign adventures, and so they gradually became anti-New Dealers in

every sense of the word.

World War II added foreign policy to the mix, so that by the end of the war, the Old Right was opposed to big government on every front, foreign and domestic. All parts of the right were opposed to global crusading, to what Clare Booth Luce wittily labeled "globaloney." They were opposed to what the former New Deal historian-turned-noninterventionist Charles A. Beard labeled the foreign policy of "perpetual war for perpetual peace."

There have been many memoirs about being Jewish and growing up in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. Although I am a few years younger than most of the memoirists – Irving Howe, Irving Kristol, Alfred Kazin, etc. – my experience was in many ways the same. It was great being a Walker in the City in that bygone era. New York street life was vital and fun. There was no harassment, no sense of crime lurking around every corner. Whites would go up to the Apollo Theater in Harlem to watch Pearl Bailey and other great entertainers with no sense of fear whatsoever. There were no bums or aggressive beggars on the street; if anyone wanted to see a bum, they could go to a short street downtown called the Bowery, where bums or "winos" hung out. And even they were not strictly "homeless," as they lived in very cheap Bowery hotels. The streets teemed with fascinating characters hawking their nostrums and ideologies. Soapboxes in Union Square or Columbus Circle featured any speaker who wanted to get up and address the crowd. I remember with affection one elderly guy working the streets in the Wall Street area, earnestly hawking the idea that lemonade or lemon juice was the panacea for all bodily ills. And at that time, New York was studded with inexpensive cafeterias, where one could sit nursing a cup of coffee for hours and either read or discuss ideas undisturbed. One guy came to be called "Senator Mendel," from spending most of his hours in the Senator Cafeteria on the Upper West Side. Nowadays, of course, such cafeterias would be filled with aggressive bums and muggers, and quiet or discourse would be impossible.

Looking back on it all, the discussions and arguments I got into, whether in street, neighborhood, family, or school, were marked by an instinctive civility and courtesy. Even though there were lots of communists around, there were no angry squads of enforcers of political correctness or threats to send you to brainwashing or sensitivity training sessions. And even though I was, with the exception of my father, virtually the only rightist I knew personally, I was uniformly treated not with hostility but rather with reactions ranging from astonishment to amused affection.

The one important aspect in which my growing up differed from these other Jewish memoirists, of course, is that they were some species of communist or socialist, whereas I was a right-winger and bitterly antisocialist from the very beginning. I grew up in a communist culture; the middle-class Jews in New York whom I lived among, whether family, friends, or neighbors, were either communists or fellow-travelers in the communist orbit. I had two sets of Communist

Party uncles and aunts, on both sides of the family. But more important, the one great moral question in the lives of all these people was: Should I actually join the Communist Party and devote the whole of my life to the cause, or should I remain a fellow-traveler and "selfishly" devote only a fraction of my energy to communism? That was it; any species of liberalism, let alone conservatism, was nonexistent. And, contrary to the fond memories of Kristol, Howe, Kazin et al., I never heard of a Trotskyist in this period. Trotskyism was confined to a few intellectuals and future academics; for middle-class New York Jewry, the political world revolved around the C.P. (In later years, there was a reality-based joke on the left: "Whatever happened to the Old Left? The Trotskyites went into academia, and the Stalinists went into real estate.")

The one exception to this communist milieu was my father, David. My father emigrated to the United States from a Polish *shetl* in 1910, impoverished and knowing not a word of English. Like most immigrants of that era, he had resolved "to become an American" in every sense. And that meant, for him, not only learning English and making it his language, but also abandoning Yiddish papers and culture and purging himself of any foreign accent. It also meant devotion to the basic American Way: minimal government, belief in and respect for free enterprise and private property, and a determination to rise by one's own merits and not via government privilege or handout. Russian and Polish Jews before World War I were swept with communist, socialist, and Zionist ideologies and movements, or blends of the three. But my father never fell for any of them. An individualist rather than a socialist or tribalist, he believed his loyalty was to America rather than to Zionism or to any Zionist entity in the Middle East.

I grew up in the same spirit. All socialism seemed to me monstrously coercive and abhorrent. In one family gathering featuring endless pledges of devotion to "Loyalist" Spain during the Civil War, I piped up, at the age of eleven or twelve, "What's wrong with Franco, anyway?" It didn't seem to me that Franco's sins, however statist, were any worse, to put it mildly, than those of the Republicans. My query was a conversation-stopper, all right, but I never received an answer.

When I shifted in early grades from the debasing and egalitarian public school system to a private school that I enjoyed a great deal, I found myself in another odd ideological climate. In those days, girls of the wealthier classes were protected, and so they were sent to a day school in New York, whereas upper-class boys were sent out of town to boarding school. The private day school I attended was coed, but it had difficulty attracting boys and was in danger of falling into all-girls status. As a result, they gave scholarships to bright, middle-class boys. The result was socially anomalous: the girls were all wealthy, driven to and from school in chauffeured limousines, whereas at least half the boys were scholarship lads such as myself. Another fascinating note was that the students were mostly, though not solely, Jewish, whereas the staff and instructors were all WASPs. None of the Jewish students felt oppressed by this situation; indeed, none of us felt aggrieved when

every Friday we attended chapel, nondenominational to be sure, but singing glorious Christian hymns. None of the Jewish students felt anything but happily assimilated into what America – which was, after all, a WASP and Christian country – was all about.

But while none of my fellow high school students was a communist, they were all left-liberals, what came to be called in New York "Park Avenue" or "limousine" liberals – all too literally in their case. I soon became established as the school conservative, arguing strongly in the eighth grade against Roosevelt's introduction of the capital-gains tax in 1938 and later against Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia's left-wing policy of coddling criminals.

My reputation as the high school rightist came in handy. In my junior year in high school, I was the supporter, in one of those meaningless school elections, of my friend Lloyd Marcus for school president or speaker or whatever the post was called. We thought we would be up-to-date politicians, so we happily had handbills printed up: "Lloyd Marcus: Charges and Facts." All the "issues" were trivial. There was nothing ideological about them; only personal friendships were at stake. But tough old Miss Birch, the school founder, scented "communism" and "strike" at the very sign of a handbill. (Lloyd Marcus was the son of the fabulously wealthy Bernard K. Marcus, who had gone to jail as part of the Bank of the United States scandal. Lloyd was indeed a "Park Avenue leftist," but the difference between the pro-Marcus and anti-Marcus camp was trivial and irrelevant to the election.) The ringleaders in the Marcus camp were called into Miss Birch's office one by one and quizzed sternly about "communism" and whether we were affiliated with the American Student Union, the communist student front at that time. I assured Miss Birch that no "strike" or Student Union thought was in any of our minds. In the event, all of the Marcus ringleaders (including the now-distinguished concert pianist and music historian Charles Rosen) were expelled, except myself. The idea that the school rightist was a commie was unthinkable.

When I entered Columbia during World War II for college and graduate school, the universe of people I met expanded, but the political ambience remained the same. Everyone was either a communist or a social democrat, or a variety of each. The only other Republican student at Columbia was an English major, and so we had little in common, as I was increasingly steeped in economics, both for its own sake and because it seemed to me that the knottiest political problems and the strongest arguments for socialism and statism were economic, dwelling on the alleged failures of free-market capitalism. The more I engaged in debates and discussion with fellow students and professors, who were all some variety of leftist, the more conservative I became.

I was so far out of it politically on campus that sometimes I served as a kind of father-confessor. One time, someone I knew only slightly came to see me and poured out a tale of woe. (He was later to become a sociologist.) "Murray, you know I have been active in many liberal

causes. Well, today, I was stunned, I don't know what to do. All my friends whom I thought were regular liberals came to me and invited me to join their cell of the Communist Party. I had no idea they were communists! What should I do? Should I join?"

What can you say to a mere acquaintance who spills out this kind of confession? I do not remember how I reacted, probably with some sort of cliché like "to thine own self be true" or "don't let anyone intimidate you." I never knew what he decided, but I am reasonably certain that he decided not to be sucked into the C.P.

During this period, I knew that there was a right-wing movement out there, but my knowledge was confined to such grand newspaper organs as the Hearst press, the marvelous *New York Sun*, and reports about Congress. For a while, after the war, I was perhaps the only New Yorker outside of libraries to subscribe to my favorite newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune*, which, in the grand old Colonel Robert McCormick era, was hard right throughout, not just in its editorial pages but in its reportorial staff as well. I had not yet, however, met any other rightist.

Finally, in 1946, I discovered the Old Right personally by finding the new Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) at Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, where I met the movement intellectuals and activists and was introduced to wonderful Old Right literature I had never heard of – libertarians Albert Jay Nock and H. L. Mencken, Frank Chodorov, John T. Flynn, and Garet Garrett – and all this very rapidly converted me from a free-market economist to a purist libertarian. This literature also converted me to hard-core isolationism in foreign policy. I had never really thought much about foreign policy, being steeped in economics, but now I realized that a non-interventionist foreign policy was part and parcel of a devotion to freedom and resistance to statism.

Libertarians in the post-World War II right naturally thought of themselves as "extreme right-wingers" amid the right-wing spectrum. There was no enmity between us and the less extreme or less pure; we were all happy to work together in the anti-New Deal cause: we were trying to get our less extreme allies to be more consistent; they were trying to get us to be more "pragmatic." Even in party politics, a purist libertarian like Congressman Howard Buffet (R-NE), whom I got to know personally, rose to become Senator Taft's Midwestern campaign manager at the ill-fated 1952 Republican Convention. I became a member of the Young Republican Club of New York in 1946 and wrote its policy paper blasting Harry Truman's price controls on meat, which he was forced to repeal during the 1946 campaign. I was astonished in later years to see "conservatives" hail Harry Truman as a model president: on the contrary, we opposed Truman hip and thigh, for his domestic statism as well as for his interventionist foreign policy. Indeed, one of my happiest political moments came when the Republicans swept both houses of Congress in the November 1946 election on the slogan, "controls, corruption, and communism." My first foray into print was a letter I sent to the Scripps Howard *New*

York World Telegram celebrating the Republican victory, saying "Hallelujah!" and naïvely expecting the Republican Congress to promptly repeal the entire New Deal. Well they *said* they would, didn't they?

The first disillusion of many set in quickly. The National Association of Manufacturers, before that pledged to repeal the entire socialistic and pro-union Wagner Act, caved in, at their winter 1946 meeting, to the "responsible" corporate elements (read the "enlightened" Rockefeller-type forces) and changed their tune to call for what finally did occur: not repealing but *extending* the powers of the federal government to apply criteria of "fairness" to unions as well as employers. In short: to extend government power over labor relations instead of removing it completely. And with the NAM acquiescence, the Republicans, led by Senator Taft (a brilliant man but someone who was, disastrously, *philosophically* – and not just tactically – devoted to compromise), went along with this new sell-out position and passed the amending Taft-Hartley Act instead of abolishing the entire Wagner Act. Politically, repeal might have succeeded, since the public was fed up with unions and strikes in 1946, and they had, after all, elected a rightwing Republican Congress. Also in this 80th Congress, the Republicans largely abandoned their "isolationist," noninterventionist principles, led by their foreign affairs committee head, renegade isolationist Senator Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI), who managed to establish the first, disastrous "bipartisan foreign policy," i.e., global interventionism, in the post-World War II era.

Old Right Republicans, the soul of the party, always managed to lose the presidential nomination, perpetually stolen from them by the Eastern Establishment-Big Banker-Rockefeller wing of the party, who used their media clout, as well as hardball banker threats to call in the delegates' loans, to defeat majority sentiment in the party. In 1940, a Morgan bank blitz managed to steal the presidential nomination for the unknown utility magnate and leftist Republican Wendell Wilkie from Old Right isolationist Senator Taft and Tom Dewey, all his political life a Rockefeller stooge, who in 1940 followed what was then the isolationist Rockefeller line. In 1944, Dewey, now an internationalist following the Rockefellers' shift, won the Republican nomination. He was renominated in 1948, beating out the Old Right isolationist Senator John W. Bricker (R-OH) for the nomination, Bricker getting the consolation post of vice president.

As far as I was concerned, Dewey's nomination completed the congressional sellout, and even though I was unhappy that Truman ran a demagogic leftist campaign against the 80th Congress, I could not bring myself to support Dewey. Hence, once again naïvely, I embraced the new states' rights or "Dixiecrat" ticket of Strom Thurmond for president and Fielding Wright of Mississippi for vice president. I actually believed that the States' Rights Party would continue to become a major party and destroy what was then a one-party Democratic monopoly in the South. In that way, an Old Right, Midwestern Republican coalition with States' Rights Democrats could become the majority party!

At Columbia graduate school, I founded a Students for Thurmond group. I showed up at the first meeting, which consisted of a group of Southern students and one New York Jew, myself. There were a brace of other New York Jews there, but they were all observers from the Henry Wallace Progressive Party, puzzled and anxious to find out to what extent fascism and the Ku Klux Klan had permeated the fair Columbia campus. They were especially bewildered when I got up at the meeting and made a fiery stump speech on behalf of states' rights and against centralized socialism. What was a nice Jewish boy doing in a place like this?

I have been asked many times whether the Old Right was rife with anti-Semitism. Left-wing undercover operators and smear artists such as "John Roy Carlson" had written a best-selling work, *Under Cover*, tarring all anti-New Dealers and America Firsters with the anti-Semitic and "neo-Nazi" brush, and the reputation of the Old Right has grown worse over the years, since, as usual, the interpretation of history has been solely in the hands of the internationalist winners.

The answer to this question, however, is a resounding No. In my decade on the Old Right, I never once encountered any anti-Semitic hostility. It is true there were unfortunately very few Jews on the Old Right, but those that were there – notably the great libertarian Frank Chodorov – were widely admired and encountered no ethnic hostility. It is true that there was a general unhappiness with the fact that most Jews seemed to be leftists, as well as widespread opposition to the Zionist program of driving Palestinian Arabs out of their lands and homes, but these were attitudes that I myself fully shared.

The Old Right finally began to fade away over the issue of the Cold War. All Old Rightists were fervently anticommunist, knowing full well that the communists had played a leading role in the later years of the New Deal and in getting us into World War II. But we believed that the main threat was not the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, but socialism and collectivism here at home, a threat that would escalate if we engaged in still another Wilsonian-Rooseveltian global crusade, this time against the Soviet Union and its client states. Most Old Rightists, therefore, fervently opposed the Cold War, including the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and the quasi-debacle of the Korean War. Indeed, while the entire left, with the exception of the Communist Party, got behind the Korean War as opposition to North Korean "aggression" under the cover of the United Nations, the Old Right, particularly its hard-core members in the House of Representatives, led by the *Chicago Tribune*, opposed all of these policies to the hilt. Howard Buffett, for example, was one of the major voices in Congress opposed to the Korean adventure.

By the mid-1950s, however, the Old Right began to fade away. Senator Taft was robbed of the Republican nomination in 1952 by a Rockefeller-Morgan Eastern banker cabal, using their control of respectable "Republican" media. In the early 1950s, Taft himself and the doughty Colonel McCormick passed away, and the veteran Old Right leaders faded from the scene. The last gasp of the Old Right in

foreign policy was the defeat of the Bricker Amendment to the Constitution in 1954, an amendment that would have prevented international treaties from overriding American rights and powers. The amendment was sabotaged by the Eisenhower administration.

Finally, the Old Right was buried by the advent in late 1955 of the lively weekly *National Review*, a well-edited periodical that filled the ideological vacuum resulting from the deaths of McCormick and Taft and the retirement of other isolationist stalwarts. *National Review* set out successfully to transform the American right from an isolationist defender of the Old Republic to a global crusader against the Soviet Union and international communism. After *National Review* became established as the GHQ of the right, it proceeded to purge all rightwing factions that had previously lived and worked in harmony but now proved too isolationist or too unrespectable for the newly transformed Buckleyite right. These purges paved the way for later changes of line as well as future purges: of those who opposed anti-Stalinist, pro-welfare state liberals called "neoconservatives," as well as of those who persisted in opposing the crippling of property rights in the name of "civil" and other victimological "rights."

As time passed and Old Right heroes passed away and were forgotten, many of the right-wing rank-and-file, never long on historical memory, forgot and adapted their positions to the new dispensation. The last political manifestation of the Old Right was the third-party Andrews-Werdel ticket of 1956, which called for the repeal of the income tax and the rollback of the New Deal. Its foreign policy was the last breath of the pre-Cold War Old Right: advocating no foreign war, the Bricker Amendment, and the abolition of foreign aid. The betrayal of Senator Taft in 1952 had driven me out of the Republican Party, and after supporting the Andrews-Werdel ticket, I spent the following decades in the political wilderness, trying to join abortive third "Constitutional" parties and to separate libertarians out from a right wing that I no longer recognized and that seemed to me far closer to the hated New Deal, domestic and foreign, than to its Old Right enemy, which I had happily discovered and embraced in the years just after World War II.