[Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism, George H. Nash, ISI Books, 450 pages]

Consensus Historian

By Paul Gottfried

GEORGE H. NASH'S *Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, in either its original (1976) or later expanded edition (1996), would have assured him an honored place as a scholar, even if he had never embarked on his exhaustive three-volume biography of Herbert Hoover. His new anthology treats in further detail a movement that Nash has been analyzing since his graduate school days at Harvard in the early 1970s. Even for those who are familiar with his subject, there is much in these essays that is new and insightful.

The section "Jews and the Conservative Community" would make the book worth buying even if there were nothing else to recommend it. Nash presents a spirited group of Jewish financiers and publicists who became known to their friends and enemies alike as "Jews for Joe McCarthy." Spearheaded by Benjamin Schultz, a Reform rabbi from Yonkers, this controversial group got its start as the American Jewish League Against Communism in February 1948. Over the next several years, it came to boast among its writers and sponsors George Sokolsky, Roy Cohn, Bernard Baruch, Lawrence Fertig, Alfred Kohlberg, Frank Chodorov, Maj. Gen. Julius Klein, Eugene Lyons, Morrie Ryskind, Marvin Liebman, and Ralph de Toledano.

In its early days, the League received financial backing from the social-democratic United Garment Workers union as well as from Jewish conservatives. Until the early 1950s, moreover, it could have fit snugly into the Cold War liberal camp as well as the postwar Old Right. It emerged after Schultz attacked his own teacher, the renowned Reform rabbi Stephen S. Wise, for his far-left politics, including his harangues at postwar Communist-front rallies. To Schultz's consternation, Wise had gone after Winston Churchill's 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech, which warned against the aggressive designs of the Soviet empire. Wise railed against Churchill's unfavorable view of Stalin's ambitions as "one of the most mischievous and hurtful utterances ever made by a person of authority and responsibility." Given Wise's reputation as a towering figure in interfaith cooperation and Zionist politics, his former student was about to encounter a tornado.

Schultz scolded Wise in, among many other places, the *World Telegram* newspaper, and in the subsequent heat of battle, he predictably lost his pulpit in a predominantly leftist congregation. It was obvious that a career change was in order. Schultz devoted himself thereafter to anti-Communist activism, including the chairmanship of an interfaith anti-Communist league. His overly close identification with Sen. Joe McCarthy, even after McCarthy had assailed the U.S. military for its alleged openness to Communist infiltration, caused Schultz to fall into widespread disfavor. He ended his bumpy life as the head of a small congregation in a tiny town in Mississippi. Schultz's conservative views, one might imagine, impressed his Christian neighbors far more than they did his puzzled, left-of-center congregants.

By the mid-'50s, Schultz's League had worn itself out in contention with liberal Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Committee, but in its heyday, it was a striking anomaly. While most American Jews, then and now, stood politically left of center, particularly after the Right had been repeatedly identified with Nazis and Nazi sympathizers, the League, by contrast, moved generally in the direction of Schultz's close friend Senator McCarthy. And the group that went after it most doggedly, the American Jewish Committee, was clearly the precursor and early sponsor of today's neoconservatives. Indeed, the Committee financed and oversaw *Commentary* magazine, and its members advocated the same patchwork of positions represented by the magazine and later neoconservatives: fervent Zionist sympathy, pro-welfare-state but non-socialist policies, and an emphatically anti-Soviet approach to international relations.

The League did not really exhibit the features of later paleoconservatives, but the group did remain on the Right. Its most famous authors went to work for *National Review*; there they were joined by other Jewish "forgotten godfathers," whom Nash discusses in a separate chapter. The focus of their activism was the crusade against Communism, not any domestic social agenda. The Jewish anti-Communists whom Nash analyzes were living before the radical social change that big government and the media advanced in succeeding decades. Separating Truman Democrats and Taft Republicans in the early 1950s was not a war over gay marriage and abortion on demand but disagreement about federal redistributionist programs and resistance to the Communist challenge at home and abroad.

Nash's discussion of Jewish anti-Communists reveals an interesting fact: for Jews, as well as Catholics, who embraced postwar conservatism, anti-Communism became a transformative cause. Its participants went from being hyphenated Americans to patriotic heroes. For the first time, they stood above and often against Anglo-Saxon bluebloods as the vindicators of the American cause. This generalization applies to Nash's (mostly Eastern European) Jewish McCarthyites as well as the Irish-German Catholic from Appleton, Wisconsin whom they vigorously defended.

Although no other part of the anthology is quite as engrossing as the one on the League and Jewish McCarthyites, most of *Reappraising the Right* includes valuable insights. Whether talking about conservative think tanks, the

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influence of the Southern Agrarian Richard Weaver, the ambivalences of Whittaker Chambers, William F. Buckley Jr.'s writing habits, or the career of Herbert Hoover, Nash is usually enlightening, even for those of us who have written books on the same general theme. He remains informative even while offering obligatory, formal tributes to onetime conservative personages such as E. Victor Milione and Ernst van den Haag.

It is therefore a pity that he provides so little of substance when it comes to rifts in the present conservative movement. His chapter on the "uneasy future of conservatism" does not indicate any reason for concern about a movement that Nash intermittently suggests is visibly divided. His advice here and in the succeeding chapter is that we should go back to "Ronald Reagan's legacy," although it is not clear that this legacy coincides with what conservatives historically believed. Reagan's presidency might even have marked the beginnings of "conservative wars," which significantly broke out in the 1980s. But then, it does not seem that Nash sees real infighting on the Right, save that not all self-described conservatives like the Religious Right. He may also attach too much world-historical importance to the fact that John Derbyshire (in *The American Conservative*) ridiculed the speaking style of Rush Limbaugh. That is hardly the main line of division on the Right.

Moreover, there seems to be a noticeable disconnect between the second edition of Nash's magnum opus on the conservative movement, which came out 14 years ago, and the relatively harmless fissures he locates in the present house of conservatism. In 1996, Nash referred to the "serious source of discontent" aroused by neoconservatives and the battles this produced. Today, there is supposedly a productive dialogue among conservative factions, the neoconservatives being only one among many. This, of course, is not how the real world works. Since the mid-1990s, thanks to their superior media resources and connections, the neocons have clobbered the Old Right; Nash as a scholar should at least report on this fateful defeat. Alas, he does not. The losing side is pushed down a memory hole. Perhaps this is because these wars never get mentioned on Fox News or at meetings of the neoconservative-controlled Philadelphia Society, a group of which Nash was recently president.

In his introduction, Nash tells us that given the superabundance of self-identified conservatives in the media and think tanks, our world is "a much less lonely place for conservatives than it had been in 1953, when a young don from Michigan, Russell Kirk, brought forth a book he originally intended to call *The Conservative Rout*." Such a judgment is comparable to stating that Elizabeth I would have gladly changed places with Elizabeth II, seeing that today's figurehead monarchy is less endangered than the Tudor monarchy had been in the 1560s. It may be worth repeating the obvious here: America in the 1950s was infinitely more conservative on social matters. A social conservative now is someone who affirms positions that just about everyone, including members of the Communist Party, held in the 1950s. Why would Kirk, who celebrated Edmund Burke's antirevolutionary England of the 1790s, feel more at home in today's America?

Nash makes these errors as someone who has only limited, highly partisan contact with the current conservative movement. His published comments on the contemporary scene are often celebrations and tributes. This may be the kind of writing that comes from someone who is no longer a close, critical observer, but rather a trustworthy ecomiast unlikely to cause embarrassment to those in power. Nash the man might live in the present, but Nash the scholar of conservative history would be well advised to keep away from it. ■

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Conservatism

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nomic arena the need for constant forms of "creative destruction," wealth-generation, and innovation. Several centuries ago, thinkers like Montesquieu and Tocqueville observed that modern politics was an effort to orient people's vision away from the worship of the divine—and away from the attendant theological disputes that resulted—toward the pursuit of material prosperity. They also noted that the pursuit for temporal bounty could know no limits and that as an end, materialism would induce constant dissatisfaction with our current circumstance, whatever that may be. Today's conservatives are prone to embrace this particularly modern political agenda of promoting "restlessness," a condition that rejects the "given" in favor of the prospect of "transformation." Historically, conservatives have instead counseled moderation, frugality, and limits.

There is exceedingly little that conservatism now seeks to conserve. If it would recover, it must begin by acknowledging its own heresies and drift. Such a reconsideration must be based upon a probing examination of what conservatism stands for, not as it is defined against an opposition that succeeds whenever it can set the terms of the debate. Conservatism can be conservative again, but that will require a different turn to radicalism—a return to roots—in order to overcome the ideology the non-ideological temperament has itself become. ■

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Home Plate

Bill Kauffman

Visit to a Small Planet

FOUR SCORE AND ZERO years ago in Flagstaff, Arizona, Clyde Tombaugh, a bespectacled 24-year-old just off the farm from Burdett, Kansas, joined an exclusive fraternity of merit from which he has been posthumously booted. Clyde found a planet—which those costive bastards of the International Astronomical Union now say isn't a planet!

Our family rambled into Flagstaff a few years back, bunking in the downtown Hotel Monte Vista, a splendidly faded and haunted monument. We slept in the Clark Gable room, though Clark seems among the least likely Hollywood haints. (I wouldn't stay in a Sal Mineo room for nothin'!)

Flagstaff is also home to the Lowell Observatory, founded in 1894 by the Boston Brahmin Percival Lowell, who was convinced that he had seen with his own eyes Martian-made canals on the Red Planet.

Lowell was a rich man with a magnificent obsession and the integrity to pay for it himself rather than milk the taxpayers. If his astronomers never did find life on Mars, one found something even less expected—Pluto.

In contrast to the computerized robotism of astronomy today, everything about Pluto's discovery was fallible, painstaking, whimsical—human.

Discoverer Tombaugh was a classic American boy who spent his Kansas days in the wheatfields and his nights at the eyepiece of his homemade telescope. On cloudy evenings, he taught himself Greek and Latin; on Sunday afternoons, his pasture hosted the neighborhood touch-football game.

College was out of the question. So was a "career," until in one of those message-in-a-bottle tosses characteristic of bright and naïve provincial lads, Clyde sent his freehand drawings of Mars and Jupiter to the Lowell Observatory.

His timing was perfect. Observatory director Vesto Slipher was looking for a talented amateur to work long hours at low pay searching for the "Planet X" hypothesized by Percival Lowell. Vesto decided to give the kid a shot. So in January 1929, Muron Tombaugh drove his son Clyde to the train station at Larned, Kansas, whence the youth departed for Flagstaff with Dad's parting words ringing in his ears: "Clyde, make yourself useful, and beware of easy women."

In his history of Great-Uncle Percy's colony of the starstruck, *The Explorers of Mars Hill* (1994), William Lowell Putnam writes that Slipher desired not a theoretician but a plodder for the "boring and tedious" planet search. Using a "blink comparator" microscope, Tombaugh spent up to nine hours a day comparing photographic plates of identical patches of sky taken at intervals of several days.

At about 4 p.m. on Feb. 18, 1930, "I saw a little image popping in and out," Clyde told his biographer David Levy, himself a romantic comet-chasing poet of the Arizona sky. Clyde walked down the hall and into the director's office. "Dr. Slipher," he said, "I have found your Planet X."

The obscure Kansan, his era's version of an industrious office intern, had become the third person in recorded history to find a planet.

He became famous, in a "yes, but" way. In William Lowell Putnam's phrase, Clyde was Pluto's "fortuitous discoverer, the photographic technician Tombaugh."

Ouch! Bring me my tea, boy, and step lively!

Pluto—it's a good name, isn't it? Sure, it's no Uranus, that gift to generations of snickering schoolboys, but it evokes the underworld and honors with its first two letters Percival Lowell, whose batty and litigious widow asked Clyde, "Are you willing to have the planet named Constance?" (He was not, though Mrs. Lowell shared Pluto's iciness and highly irregular orbit.)

You might regard Tombaugh's story as a parable of the diligent clerk, the persevering drone, but there was an ardor in his arduousness. Bearing only a diploma from good old Burdett High—"Let each sheep wear his own skin," said Thoreau of such honors—Clyde seized the chance he was given by the outliers at Lowell, which was "virtually an outcast in professional astronomical circles," as Tombaugh later wrote. (Soon thereafter, the principal of Burdett High convinced the University of Kansas to award the planet discoverer a scholarship. Talk about a distinguished freshman! Clyde eventually taught astronomy at New Mexico State in Las Cruces, becoming that city's most famous resident since Billy the Kid-killer Pat Garrett.)

Eighty years after Clyde broke the news to Vesto, Pluto is in a categorical netherworld—more out than in, alas. Those who expelled Pluto from the planet club are, in the main, credentialed astronomers employed by government-subsidized facilities in which a 21st-century Clyde Tombaugh would be wearing a hairnet and ladling mac and cheese in the cafeteria.

David Levy told me that Tombaugh, who died in 1997, was saddened in his final years by the suspicion that he and Pluto were in for a demotion. "Dwarf planet" they call it now. But maybe that's okay. Pluto, Flagstaff, Clyde Tombaugh —small really is beautiful. ■

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