



U Turn

I walked up to U Street from Howard, trading the college-student detritus of broken ballpoints and shattered brown bottles of domestic beer for the hipster

scurf of cigarette butts. I wove through a neighborhood of narrow streets and row houses, red brick alternating with sherbet colors, passing through a low-rent patch of flea markets and island-themed takeouts. And then, without warning or boundary, I was in a hot little clutch of boutiques and restaurants. The “New U” is at least a decade old now, but it still startles me.

I always remember U Street the way it was in the '90s: a narrow spine of punk clubs and fast-food joints, dive bars and speakeasies, surrounded by abandoned hulks and haunted by men who slept on other people's steps. Some of the buildings burnt out in the King riots had never been fixed. Plants poked their flat, fringed leaves through the windows, with a tropical air of casual disregard for human projects. U Street was like a tiny outpost on a strange planet, where travelers huddled together against the hostile expanse of the past.

But I—so protected, so desperately pursuing unsafety—was happy there. I was in high school; I was still on the Left; all my friends were still friends with one another. When I think about 11th grade, it seems always sunny—a whole year made of ice cream and glitter. The next year there would be cheap teenage tragedies like breakups and two real disasters that won't be made right in this life. But for that year, I was happy.

U Street was changing. There were already a couple of shops that were like thrift stores, only too expensive for us;

we learned to call these “vintage.” There were already ritual complaints about gentrification. There were already a few storefronts with sleek aerodynamic space-age fonts.

But inside the clubs, everything was still dark, cheap, and sincere. Politics was our sex and vice versa; in an intimate corner two husky-voiced teens with dyed hair would blush at each other and fumble for words as they tried to explain their beliefs about corporations. Onstage even the most crass displays seemed to glow with the romance of political dissent: “In her kiss, I taste the revolution!” We went to shows at the Beehive Collective—yes, they called it that on purpose—where the communards silkscreened their logo onto men's dress shirts for the citoyennes to wear.

The Beehive is long gone. Was it replaced by the gay sports bar or the upscale bakery? It's impossible to navigate by the buildings, since the Beehive's building was Old U to the core, all white peeling paint and pipes exposed at random and castoff furniture in the yard.

There's no dead air around U Street now. There's a vibrant, cheapjack neighborhood snuggled cheek-to-cheek with the hipsters. Then there's this huge spray of money, like an explosion in a honeycomb, coating everything with golden ease. Every storefront is bright. The line for Ben's Chili Bowl stretches deep into the adjoining alley. (I love Ben's—it's unpatriotic not to—but I

would not wait in line in an alley for a chili dog no matter how many presidents endorsed it.) I was surprised and pleased to see that the AIDS-relief thrift shop is still standing, although it's overshadowed now. Its shuttered windows are louche and dulled amid the champagne chatter of the street. The iconic business of U Street is no longer an illicit after-hours bar; it's a pricey furniture place called Home Rule.

The last time I went to U Street for a show, it was raining, white sluicing blankets foaming out from the gutters. A girl I'd been friends with in high school is a jazz singer now, and she'd been booked at a local club. I still remembered her voice, by turns knotty and caressing, smoky and coppery. I invited some new friends, people who had never known me when I was a leftist, to come hear her sing. I walked down 16th Street under an unreliable umbrella and found that the club had been shut down for some kind of code violation. I waited in the rain. My new friends showed up, and we got beers at a cute, glossy new place. My old friend never showed; she knew the score.

Yesterday, walking home from U Street, at the outskirts of the neighborhood I passed a bookstore called Pulp. (Of course it is.) In the window a sign showed a quotation attributed to Martin Luther King: “The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.”

It's impossible for me to miss my old extremism. It's impossible for me to feel settled in my new. ■

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Arts & Letters

BOOKS

[*The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft, Russell Kirk and James McClellan, Transaction, 243 pages*]

Mr. Antiwar Republican

By Justin Raimondo

THE READER of a conservative disposition who chances upon Russell Kirk's 1967 *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft*, now reissued by Transaction Publishers and in paperback for the first time, is bound to experience that odd tingling sensation we call *déjà vu*. Arguing that the New Deal had pretty much expired—having been proved a failure—before Taft had entered the national political scene and taken his place in the U.S. Senate, Kirk and his co-author James McClellan write, "And yet for the following thirteen years, Taft found it necessary to argue incessantly with leading members of his own party as to whether the Republicans should come to terms with the allegedly triumphant New Deal. Many Republicans continued in a political trauma, shocked by their defeats of 1932 and 1936, and could think only of making concessions to the new order."

A giant leap into government control of the economy, a nation on the brink of the economic abyss, and a popular liberal Democratic president whose programs have a revolutionary air—we have been here before. Then, too, there were those on the Right who counseled retreat, accommodation, and defeatism—the David Frums of their time, who

argued that labeling FDR's panoply of government programs "socialism" was too extreme and who only served to marginalize the Republican opposition.

Taft, though not temperamentally a radical, made no bones about his opinion of the New Dealers. Many of them, he declared in a radio debate, "have no concern whatever for individual freedom. They are collectivists, like Marx and Lenin and Mussolini. They believe in planned economy; that the government should regulate every detail of industrial and commercial and agricultural life." The New Deal represented a "policy which inevitably leads to bankruptcy and inflation of the currency" and "will not only make the poor people poorer, but it is likely to force a socialism which will utterly deprive them of individual freedom."

Those were fighting words that very few in the cowed Republican opposition were willing to speak, although they may have believed them—or feared them—in their hearts. Taft rallied the GOP remnants and the beleaguered American Right under the banner of liberty and responsibility at a time when the headwinds of collectivism were blowing mightily from every direction. Around him he gathered a movement, which today is known as the Old Right—as distinguished from the "New" Right of William F. Buckley Jr. and *National Review*, which inherited from Taft and his confrères the mantle of opposition but did little to honor it. That movement is now virtually unknown or chiefly remembered by its enemies, who continue to smear it with the ignorant epithets coined by the New Dealers and their propaganda machine.

Conservatives without historical memory would seem to be a contradiction in terms, yet that is the situation in which we find ourselves some 70 years

after Taft's heyday. Conservatives seem to have forgotten their past, which is a pity because the history of their movement is rich with lessons for today, as illustrated by this modest little book.

As Kirk shows in detailing Taft's career as leader of the party's conservative wing, RINO's have always been with us: "The 'liberal,' or anti-Taft, element of the Republican party ... acted upon the assumption that the New Deal was irrevocable." While the party rank-and-file might find That Man in the White House detestable and his policies execrable, they insisted that a more accommodating public face was the key to victory at the polls. They lost consistently and miserably. Landon, Willkie, and Dewey—they were all defeated betting that principled opposition to Roosevelt's revolution was incompatible with electoral success. Three times the party's Eastern Establishment blocked Taft from getting the GOP's presidential nomination. It wasn't until Eisenhower that the moderates scored a victory, but it was the triumph of a popular military commander rather than the party. As Kirk points out, the GOP "steadily declined while Eisenhower held office—declined in Congress, and in state and local elections" and was reduced to a minority in the 1954 congressional contest. The decline continued into the 1958 elections, when the party's congressional caucus shrank to what it had been during the Roosevelt years.

When Taft died in 1953, one newspaper obituary gave voice to the despair that gripped the Old Right as it faced the smug complacency of the Eisenhower years: "Yes, Bob is gone, and there is no one to take his place," wrote the publisher of the New Bedford *Standard-Times*. "This alone is a tragedy comparable to the passing of Lincoln. But with