
Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

Inside History's Dustbin

Ever since I committed the blunder, nearly 30 years ago, of signing up with the “conservative movement” during my first year in graduate school, a certain pattern of behavior has enforced itself on my decreasingly callow mind. The pattern, as a colleague of mine once remarked to me, is that there seems to be no other purpose of any conservative organization than to ignite a faction-fight as soon as possible and thereby destroy the organization. In graduate school the rule proved true. There was no campus chapter of Young Americans for Freedom because the leaders of that group had already fallen upon each other and dispatched the rest of the Yaffies to oblivion. The year I joined the only remaining conservative group on the campus, the Young Republicans, the ex-Yaffies decided to attack it and soon managed to leave it a shattered vessel lurching helplessly through the dark seas of the academic left. The child is father to the man, and what I observed as a mere stripling conservative back then has turned out to be something close to a law of the universe ever since. The “right,” whatever its philosophical content and whatever its political agenda, appears to be inherently flawed by tendencies to schisms and factionalism, and these tendencies go far to explain why it always loses, no matter how compelling its ideas or how repulsive its political and cultural enemies on the left.

The conservative organizations that prevailed in the 1960's and 70's—like YAF itself—are now largely defunct or mere shells of what they used to be, and not a few destroyed themselves by their own internal factionalism. Today, there is virtually no “conservative movement” worthy of the name, apart from the ever-thriving hive of neoconservative Beltway *condottieri* whose simulation of “populism” keeps their kids in private schools and high-priced cars. Even these quarters are not exempt from the law of conservative self-destruction, and most of them periodically titillate the Beltway rumor mill with stories of their own internal purges, bloodlettings, bankruptcies, and the odd embezzlement by one or an-

other of the patriotic Christians who run them.

No one should be surprised that the Beltway right behaves pretty much like most other people in Washington, but the inherent factionalism of the right is not confined to it, nor is it a product of serious philosophical and political antagonisms. On what may be called either the “Hard Right” or the “Old Right,” I can think of perhaps half a dozen organizations that simply cannot work with each other because of the personal loathing, jealousy, and distrust that prevails between their leaders or members. But despite some ideological differences, these groups are all in essential agreement with each other, and all of them have the same enemies. If they could work together, they might actually accomplish something, but they can't, and every effort among them to coordinate and cooperate has flopped. If the truth be told, there is very little practical purpose in anyone joining or aligning with any of them, let alone expecting them ever to accomplish any substantial goal other than remaining in useless existence. Signing up with the American right today resembles nothing so much as picking up a loaded revolver and proceeding to shoot your own toes off one by one.

There are various explanations of the suicidal proclivities of the right, not least the theory that conservatism as it emerged in the 1950's was largely dominated by ex-communists of one stripe or another who insisted on importing into their new-found political allegiances the same demand for conformity and orthodoxy that had prevailed in the Party (whichever “Party,” Stalinist, Trotskyist, or other, they had belonged to). The most notorious of these ex-communist grand inquisitors of the right was perhaps the late Frank S. Meyer, a Communist Party functionary until 1945 who, once he had concluded that path was the wrong road to travel, at once set himself up as the chap who got to decide who was and who was not a “real” conservative. From the foundation of *National Review* in 1956 until his death in 1972, Meyer never failed to denounce, purge, read out, expel, and generally behave

like the Andrei Vishinsky of the American right. He tried to prevent the late Russell Kirk from writing for *National Review*, spread the rumor that his ex-Trotskyist colleague at the magazine, James Burnham, was a CIA plant, and managed, in his major political-philosophical manifesto (*In Defense of Freedom*), to excommunicate just about every promising mind on the American right of his generation. Admittedly, some of these minds never lived up to their promise, and some lived to break their promises as soon as it was profitable to do so, but Meyer's insistence on an “orthodoxy” or a “mainstream” largely invented and formulated by himself helped make the movement he came to shape as uninteresting as it was unimportant and impart his own doctrinaire habits of mind to the generation of younger conservative activists whom he influenced.

But blaming right-wing self-destructiveness merely on one man is a toad that won't hop. The truth is that the tendency arises from the historical situation of the right in almost every historical context in which any movement of the right appears; it emerges from the fact that the right, almost by definition, is a collection of historical losers.

Probably the first historical conflict in which “right” and “left” were the main contenders was the English Civil War of the 1640's, and while the left side of the conflict, represented by the English Parliamentarians and their myriad “Puritan” allies and supporters, was notoriously schismatic, the same was true of the right, represented by King Charles I and his court. Anglicans versus Catholics, civilians versus military, absolutists versus constitutional monarchists, and the usual baggage of nincompoop courtiers and sycophants versus serious advisors who had some glimmer of how to win and what needed to be done all significantly contributed to the loss of the civil war by the “right” of the day, the eventual execution of the king himself, and the triumph for nearly a dozen years of Oliver Cromwell's dictatorship. Unlike Charles I, Cromwell dealt with his own side's tendencies to factionalism simply by kicking out or ruthlessly suppressing

those rivals that bothered him.

The left, whether Puritan, Jacobin, Bolshevik, or other, can do that because it generally represents history's winners, a rising social force that actually has an agenda with concrete interests and ideas, and sooner or later the victorious mainstream simply cuts adrift the nuts, crackpots, and perennial malcontents that deflect it from its main purpose. But the right, whatever the historical context, tends to be composed of history's losers—people whose interests, ideas, and values represent a social and political order that is on the wane. If it were not on the wane, there would be no emergence of “right” and “left” at all and hence no significant conflict between them. But precisely because the interests and ideas of the right are declining, it has immense difficulty in coming up with any practical, concrete program by which its obsolescent wishes can be realized, and because it generally represents the losing side of history, it tends to attract folks who are losers in many different respects—conspiracy nuts who worry about the fringe on the flag while the substance of their national sovereignty and civilization is being destroyed; crackpots who have invented their own secret cures for AIDS and cancer; fanatics who have drafted vast, unreadable manuscripts exposing the bankers, the Jews, the Masons, or the Clinton White House as the real cause of everything that's going wrong; and, inevitably, the sad sacks who have no social life whatsoever other than the potato-chip-and-soda-pop *soirées* in which history's discards get to know one another as human beings.

In the United States before 1930, it was not so. The right back then was the organized political expression of a dominant social and political class, a class that sported at its top such families as the DuPonts and at its bottom such happy warriors as Sinclair Lewis's George Babbitt and his friends. It was a class that dictated the tastes and manners of the day, was determined to keep immigrants out of the country, maintain the Constitution and the free enterprise system, put America First, preserve the white, Christian, Republican character of the nation, and crush the Bolsheviks and labor agitators wherever they could find them. As a ruling class, it was an amalgam of the old stock Protestant establishment and the plutocracy that rose to national power after the Civil War. However poorly de-

finied its ideas and vapidly expressed its ethic, it was nevertheless a real class that had something to conserve, and it generally knew that it could not conserve it unless it also conserved the social and cultural fabric through which it exercised social power.

In the Great Depression and New Deal, this bourgeois ruling class was effectively dislodged from social and political power. Its top ranks, if they survived at all, soon allied with the emerging managerial elites in state and corporation, and its bottom ranks, stripped of any real prospect of preserving or restoring the social order in which they had played a significant part, simply drifted. It was mainly those middle and bottom ranks of the old bourgeois elite that for the next 40 years would effectively define “conservatism” and the right as they were known to the generation between Herbert Hoover and Barry Goldwater. Unable to articulate its own ideas and values very effectively, it welcomed ideological allies in journalism and the academy that could express them, but the journalists and the academics were not for the most part of the same class or culture. Hence, the “conservatism” they defined displayed all the symptoms of rootless intellectualism and attracted all the odd and awkward personality types who could not fit anywhere else and would not get along with each other.

Once “conservatism” is decoupled from the social order and the social class that it naturally represents, it becomes simply one more ideological ghetto, angrily hunting down and kicking out those who deviate from its sectarian commandments and every now and then hurling a few mudballs at whoever passes by, and the kinds of personality it attracts are precisely those that are unable to work together for any serious purpose. It ceases to defend authentic tradition because authentic tradition has ceased to exist in a coherent form, and what it defends is “traditionalism.” It ceases to defend authentic liberty because the rooted liberty that once prevailed in the defunct social order is no longer meaningful, and what it defends is “libertarianism.” It ceases to defend the people, culture, and institutions of the old order because they too have ceased to exist coherently as a fabric or have been conscripted into the new order, and what it defends is simply a pallid ghost of what was once a living civilization. All it can do is worry over who is and who is not a “real conserva-

tive,” which merely means who does and who does not let the self-appointed swamis of the right do his thinking for him. Depending on the personal strength and success of the particular swamis that lead them, the cults of “movement conservatism” may flourish indefinitely, continue to publish their endless series of unreadable tracts and sermons to their own choirs, and actually meet the payrolls of their staffs, but no one—least of all the swamis in charge—ever expects to gain substantial power or take charge of the rudders of history.

Is there anything that can be done to cure the incessant self-destructiveness of the right or remove the causes of its own suicidal tendencies? Probably not, as long as the “right” insists on defining itself in terms of social and historical forces that have already lost. The only thing it can do is try to grasp the truth that those forces have lost and that what they represented cannot be restored and, instead of presenting itself as the champion of lost causes, to align itself with new forces able to challenge the established order and to do so in terms that will neither be co-opted by the new regime nor be deflected by the phantoms of the old. Once in a while such a movement appears, but invariably it only excites the wrath of the “right.” It is too “populist,” it appeals to Mass Man, it is too “statist,” it is too “radical,” or it deviates from the ideological orthodoxy of the right in some other arcane way. Sooner or later, such a movement is either captured by its allies on the right and simply becomes one more phone booth into which all the malcontents and oddwads try to cram themselves, or else it ignores them, wishes them a good day, and proceeds to make a little history all by itself, on its own terms and for its own purposes. But, of course, when the movement does the latter, it ceases to belong to the “right” at all and actually begins to evolve into one of history's winners. ©

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3443 N. Main Street

Letter From England

by Derek Turner

A Valediction for Enoch Powell



Enoch Powell is dead, and it is as if a hill has suddenly vanished from the horizon. British life, conservative life, political philosophy, economic philosophy, classicism, Biblical studies, and learning generally are all the poorer for the death of this English original. Powell was a man of many contradictions—classicist and romantic, patriot and imperialist, politician and moral arbiter, Englishman and Briton, gentleman and populist, soldier and philosopher, public spender and monetarist, man of impulse and man of reflection, introvert and weeper-in-public—who yet represented unchanging truths and steadiness of purpose to his devoted followers. “Enigmatic” was the polite word used by those on the left who hated his views but could not bring themselves to hate the man, but it is a quite useful signification for all that.

J. Enoch Powell was born in Birmingham on June 16, 1912, during a thunderstorm—a suitably Wagnerian beginning to a heroic life. The son of two schoolteachers, he could read by the age of three and was soon nicknamed “the Professor.” As a boy he was always reserved, to the point of seeming distant and withdrawn. He was called “scowly Powlly” by his colleagues, although later in life he insisted that he had been just like a normal boy at least some of the time. “I hesitate to recollect the deprecations committed [by himself, when a schoolboy] against the rolling stock of the West Midlands Railway,” he told a disbelieving television interviewer in 1995.

Showing an early interest in the classics, he won a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was a Fellow between 1934 and 1938. While there he came under the influence of A.F. Housman. Powell always loved Housman’s haunting *A Shropshire Lad*, and his own verse was derivative. During the 1930’s,

he traveled much on the continent, and became increasingly disturbed by the trends in Italy and Germany. His old love of Nietzsche and the militant atheism which it had inspired evaporated, although he retained his love of Wagner. Powell could see that Hitler was bent on war; worse, he thought that the Nazis would win. “I could hear this drumming coming right through the earth,” he later recalled. He was always chagrined by not becoming a professor at the age of 24, as Nietzsche had done, but he only missed the record by one year, becoming a professor of Greek at the University of Sydney in 1938.

As soon as war broke out, Powell enlisted as a private, and spent some of the happiest times of his life in the ranks. But his intelligence and linguistic abilities brought him to the attention of the Intelligence Corps, who speedily snatched him and promoted him. He had a dynamic military career, although he never saw any direct action. He coordinated attacks on Rommel’s supply lines, helping to ensure British victory at El Alamein. He soon rose to be the youngest brigadier in the army (at 31) and the only brigadier who had ever risen from private. Powell would give his comrades impromptu lectures on Greek and Roman history and culture as they drove through the desert, but he was not always good at practical things. A well-known Powell anecdote is about the tin of sausages that he could not open, and which cut his finger: “Oh the malice—the cursed, diabolical malice of inanimate objects! . . . If they want to be bloody-minded, I’ll show them, by God I will,” kicking the tin into a bush. Powell’s driving was also deservedly infamous, although he always retained his *sang froid*. Once, after driving into a ditch by mistake, he broke the silence after the crash by laughing: “Ha, ha, ha! Never been upset in a gig?” (a reference to an incident in a R.S. Surtees story). In 1943, he was awarded the Member of the British Empire and was posted to India, which he was visiting for the first time. He was captivated by India and instantly busied himself learning Hindi and Urdu. (During a street protest after his famed “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968, he addressed some of the multi-racial rent-a-mob in fluent Urdu, which

they found somewhat disconcerting.) He also conceived the idea of being the Viceroy of India, and this ambition was what fired his decision to enter politics.

In 1945, he voted Labour, but he joined the Conservative Research Department in February 1946 after demobilization. He spent several frustrating years being rejected for 19 parliamentary seats before being adopted in the Tory marginal of Wolverhampton South West in 1950, winning by 691 votes. During this time, his views were slowly changing. In 1947, after the announcement of Indian independence, he walked through London all night trying to come to terms with what had occurred, but after arriving in the Commons, he soon began to change his emphasis, from imperialist to patriot. In 1995, he remembered how “I fell head over heels under the spell of the House of Commons. I said this is what I want. The only thing worth having is to be a member of this place and remain a member of this place—it was the incarnation of a nation to me.”

He was to be MP for Wolverhampton South West until 1974. Although tipped for rapid promotion, his political career started slowly. His first post was Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, from 1955-57, during which time he helped remove rent controls. His decent record here led to his promotion to Financial Secretary to the Treasury from 1957-58. He resigned from this position over Macmillan’s refusal to embrace monetarism. Margaret Thatcher later freely admitted her indebtedness to him. From the backbenches, he continued to raise a principled voice which won wide respect across party lines. In 1959, he famously criticized the conditions at a concentration camp in Kenya, where suspected insurgents were being abominably treated. He helped save the Macmillan government during the 1963 Profumo scandal by publicly declaring his confidence in Macmillan, so widely recognized was Powell’s moral probity.

Powell became Minister of Health in 1960, and his three-year reign there was marked by reform and, ironically in the light of his 1958 resignation, plenty of public spending. While Health Minister, he also went along with the existing