

by Samuel Francis

The Old Right Failure

No sooner had at least a dozen or so counterattacks on David Frum's silly rant against paleoconservatives in the April 7 issue of *National Review* appeared in print or on the internet than the sole defense of the Frum article of which I am aware popped up under the name of William Rusher. Some paleos were willing to bet that the author was not the real William Rusher, onetime publisher of *National Review* and always respected as one of the magazine's stalwarts against the tendencies of some of its other editors to wobble ideologically; alas, those who made such wagers soon parted with their money. In attempting to understand why this elder statesman of the American right, now retired and living in San Francisco, had embraced (so to speak) Mr. Frum, most readers seemed to conclude that his elderliness had gotten the better of his statesmanship. Nowhere in his column did Mr. Rusher bother to notice that not everyone on the right agreed with Mr. Frum, let alone that a small library had already been written rejecting his claims.

The truth is that Mr. Rusher, however flawed his reasoning in his column, shows little sign of senility or decrepitude. The more likely explanation of why this warrior of the Old Right was so quick to clamor into bed with neoconservatives who despise and reject most of what he spent his career defending has to do with the flaws of the Old Right itself. Perhaps that political and intellectual movement was born senile, but, for all the complaints, criticisms, and conspiracy theories from paleoconservatives about how the neocons took over the conservative movement, no small part of the blame for their victory must lie at the feet of the Old Right itself.

Paleoconservatism and the Old Right are not the same thing, a point Mr. Frum in his article somewhat grasped but more than somewhat misunderstood. Paleoconservatism is a movement initiated and led by conservatives who, as individuals, generally were part of and came out of the Old Right but who, as they began to form a new identity under a new label in the late 1980's, eventually came to differ with certain themes and values of the Old Right while, at the same time, ac-

cepting others. By the dawn of the 1990's, paleoconservatism had essentially graduated from what was left of the old conservative movement of the 1950's and 60's, had mounted a powerful critique of neoconservatism, and possessed both a capable phalanx of writers and thinkers centered around this magazine and a highly articulate, nationally known political ally in Pat Buchanan. While it remained on friendly terms and even collaborated with the Old Right, paleoconservatism increasingly distinguished itself from that body of ideas.

If there is one major difference between the Old Right and paleoconservatism, it probably lies in the inherent radicalism of the latter, a trait that causes disquiet among some Old Right adherents, and the . . . well . . . "conservatism" of the former.

Paleoconservatism can be defined as a body of thought that identifies with and defends what paleos call the "Old Republic"—not just the kind of government but the kind of society, economy, and culture that flourished (or is said to have flourished; whether it was an historical reality rather than a convenient myth is not, at the moment, important) before the American Civil War and, in a wounded condition, managed to endure until overthrown in the wake of the two world wars, the Depression, and the emergence of a mammoth federal government fused with equally mammoth corporations, unions, universities, media, and other mass social, political, and cultural organizations—in short, the managerial revolution that Old Right theorist James Burnham analyzed.

The premise of paleoconservatism, in other words, is that the Old Republic no longer exists and that the revolution against it, the traditional identity of the American order, has already occurred—not (as neoconservatives believe) that a gang of New Leftists or communists are planning a revolution some time in the future. In this premise, the paleos are in agreement with the anti-interventionist classical liberal Gareth Garrett, who wrote in his 1938 monograph, *The Revolution Was*,

There are those who still think they



are holding the pass against a revolution that may be coming up the road. But they are gazing in the wrong direction. The revolution is behind them. It went by in the Night of Depression, singing songs to freedom.

That does not seem to have been the premise of the Old Right, which, taking Edmund Burke as one of its principal icons, emulated Burke in formulating what was essentially a defense of an existing order. To the Old Right, post-World War II America was analogous to the old regime that Burke defended against the French Revolution and Enlightenment. It was a prerevolutionary order continuous with the traditional identity of the United States and the West, and, for the most part, the Old Right envisioned itself as "holding the pass against a revolution that may be coming up the road." In theory, of course, many of the Old Right saw that this claim was untrue—Richard Weaver and the Southern Agrarians, in particular, were fairly explicit in their rejection of the modern, secularized, materialistic, and basically repressive regime that had triumphed in the United States—but most Old Rightists (even most "traditionalists," let alone the "fusionists" and libertarians) in practice were perfectly content with the Republican Party, the fake "free enterprise" of a highly regulated managerial capitalism based on mass production and consumption, and the planned and plastic "culture"—ugly, vulgar, and increasingly vicious—that came to prevail in the country by the 1950's.

As long as television served up rigged quiz shows and "family-oriented" sit-coms in which the father was the eternal butt of ridicule and rebellion from his wife, children, and neighbors, most Old Rightists were perfectly happy to claim that mod-

ern America was the same country, with the same government and the same civilization, as the land of Jefferson and Adams, Hawthorne and Melville, Webster and Calhoun. What the real Edmund Burke would have thought of the New America should have been obvious enough, but, whenever the odd Old Rightist tried to explain this to his “movement” colleagues, he was usually muzzled or purged.

National Review, despite its articulation of a body of conservative thought that logically should have been hammering away at the intellectual and institutional foundations of the regime, was in the forefront of the defense of the new order. With the emergence of the anti-Vietnam War movement and the New Left, which mounted an attack on American society from the opposite ideological direction, the Old Right around *National Review* rolled over on its belly and wrapped itself in the defense of Lyndon Johnson’s ill-conceived war and the “system” of the bureaucratized mass culture that the New Left assaulted. In doing so, the Old Right and the mainstream conservatism it led were coopted into supporting the very regime their professed ideology should have resisted, and, from that process of cooptation, alliance with, and eventual deference to, the neoconservatism then emerging was only a short march.

In many respects, the Old Right could have done little else. What was later called “Middle American Radicalism” had not yet emerged in the 1950’s, and, while the McCarthy movement can be seen as its forerunner, the Old Right had little attraction to or understanding of the radical implications of McCarthyite populism and antiestablishment sentiment. Lacking a mass base or following and consisting mainly of a small band of intellectuals, writers, and academics, the Old Right had little choice but to seek converts within the dominant intelligentsia of the system. As George H. Nash notes in his history of the conservative intellectual movement, William F. Buckley, Jr.,

forcefully rejected what he called “the popular and cliché-ridden appeal to the grass-roots” and strove instead to establish a journal which would reach intellectuals. Not all conservatives agreed with this approach, but the young editor-to-be was firm. It was the intellectuals, after all, “who have midwived and implemented the revolution. We have got to have allies among the

intellectuals, and we propose to renovate conservatism and see if we can’t win some of them around.”

James Burnham also seems to have supported this strategy rather than its alternative of mobilizing grassroots resistance to the new regime, and the strategy that Buckley and Burnham adopted is probably what led to the magazine’s constant purges of (mainly grassroots) movements that could have built up an alternative culture able to resist and challenge the dominant one that managerial liberalism imposed. Not until the late 1960’s did Burnham begin to see that no “alliance” with or conversion of the intellectuals was possible and that “the broad middle mass of people who do the work” were the natural alternative to the incumbent ruling class. Mr. Buckley, alas, seems never to have seen this, and his entire career has been one long lurch from one failed alliance with his favorite leftist of the hour to another and a series of ideological purges that would have made Lavrenty Beria envious.

The purge victims were mainly those natural allies on the political right that made *National Review*’s allies on the left nervous—the John Birch Society, the Ayn Rand cult, and (everybody’s perennial favorite) the antisemites (some of whom really were antisemitic). Eventually, Mr. Buckley got around to purging the paleos, actually before the paleos even appeared and while a good many of them were still writing for his magazine, and probably the main reason for their purge was that the paleos really took seriously the ideas and values that *National Review* and most of its founding editors preached, minus the heavy doses of GOP boosterism, business conservatism, and the mythology of Economic Man that was seldom far from the *National Review* mind.

I have never met a paleo who actually believed that real restoration of the Old Republic was possible, but most continue to take it as the ideal against which the existing political and cultural realities in America should be measured and toward which a seriously radical conservatism should aspire. That means that most paleos reject the mass produce-and-consume economy of managerial capitalism that subverts cultural identity and turns what were once the independent businessmen and farmers of the Old Republic into proletarians dependent on mass companies, factories, unions, and markets beyond their control, as well as the

mass immigration beloved of neocons and libertarians and calmly ignored by the dwindling band of the Old Right. As paleoconservative Joseph Scotchie writes in his recent book on the movement, America “was intended by the Founding Fathers to be an Anglo-Saxon Celtic nation also influenced by Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem.” Taking the ideas and values of the classical conservatism of Russell Kirk, James Burnham, M.E. Bradford, Robert Nisbet, and Richard Weaver (to name a few of the best and brightest of the Old Right) more seriously than most on the Old Right ever did, paleoconservatism is, in fact, a far more revolutionary creed than anything the potbellied grad students of the New Left ever concocted. Indeed, the New Left’s much-vaunted “revolution” was as fake as the conservatism of the neocons; both merely offer to perpetuate and enhance the power of the managerial system and its engineered destruction of traditional institutions and identities. A term far more appropriate than the clumsy *paleoconservatism* would be *radical conservatism*—*radical*, because it demands radical changes in social and political arrangements and a revolutionary redistribution of power in favor of self-governing citizens; *conservative*, because it issues these demands from the perspective of traditional Euro-American conservatism.

Given their own fairly conventional conservative assumptions and predilections, the Old Right has generally found paleoconservatism unsettling, but, even when they have sympathized with it, most Old Rightists were still far too frightened to raise their voices against neoconservative infiltration and the looming destruction of the conservative movement. I have known a dozen Old Right conservative leaders of one variety or another who understood clearly what the neocons were up to, but not one had the spine to speak out or publish any criticism of them. It is because of their cowardice that the right in this country is in its present desperate condition. It would be surprising if such elder statesmen of the Old Right as William Rusher did see through characters like David Frum and his cronies today. It was precisely because of their shallowness and their timidity that neoconservatism pulled off its revolution at all. c

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The Rockford Files

by Scott P. Richert

Giving the Devil His Due

Early in the morning factory whistle blows,
Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes,
Man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning light,
It's the working, the working, just the working life . . .

One of the oddest ironies of our postindustrial age is that conservatives—true conservatives, not the various utopian progressivists who call themselves by that name—find themselves defending the remnants of the industrial system, the onset of which their intellectual and spiritual forebears viewed with dread. It is not that the crazy mystic William Blake was wrong when he wrote of the destruction of the English countryside by “these dark satanic mills”; still less Robert Burns, in his “Impromptu on Carron Iron Works”:

We cam na here to view your warks,
In hopes to be mair wise,
But only, lest we gang to hell,
It may be nae surprise . . .

Rather, conservatives, knowing that Jacobin optimism is more dangerous politically (and, possibly, even more destructive spiritually) than despair (you can, after all, repent of despair), see all too clearly that, whatever the damage wrought by industrialism, the emerging postindustrial “service” or “technology” economy bodes far worse for society.

Through the mansions of fear,
through the mansions of pain,
I see my daddy walking through
those factory gates in the rain,
Factory takes his hearing, factory
gives him life,
The working, the working, just the
working life . . .

“Factory gives him life”: Can the same be said of the job at Wal-Mart or McDonald’s or even the relatively high-paying technology positions at WorldCom or Enron? Libertarians and neoconservatives may long for the day when subsistence farming and manual labor disap-

pear completely from the American scene, but what kind of a life can you build for your family if your continued employment—let alone the continued existence of your employer—is always in doubt?

These questions have an added urgency here in Rockford, now that Ingersoll Milling Machine has closed its doors after 112 years and filed for bankruptcy, and one of the largest private employers, Hamilton Sundstrand, is sending signals (perhaps unintentionally) that the days of its factory in southeast Rockford are numbered. (After months of negotiations, Sundstrand’s management gave the union less than a day to examine a six-inch-thick contract proposal; when the union asked for more time to examine the details, Sundstrand locked the employees out.)

Shortly after Ingersoll gave its 300 employees two hours to clear out and locked its doors forever, the local Gannett paper’s token Republican columnist opined that “Some doomsayers will predict that Ingersoll’s failure signals the end of manufacturing in the Rock River Valley.” I’ll take the bait: Yes, manufacturing is leaving Rockford—20 percent of local manufacturing jobs have been lost over the past three years. And, unlike in my hometown in Michigan—which, in the recession of the early 1980’s—successfully exploited its access to Lake Michigan to move to a tourist economy, nothing is replacing it: Unemployment in Rockford is back in double digits—its highest rate since that earlier recession. Rockford is more like Flint, post-GM, struggling to avoid bankruptcy. The major difference is that the political, media, and civic leaders in Flint acknowledge the problem.

When Bruce Springsteen wrote the final verse of “Factory,” he was describing the pain and anger of men who would return to their jobs the next morning, when the factory whistle blew once again:

End of the day, factory whistle cries,
Men walk through these gates with
death in their eyes,
And you just better believe boy,
somebody’s gonna get hurt tonight
It’s the working, the working, just
the working life.



That pain and anger, however, is nothing compared to the social disruption caused by the loss of those jobs. Over the past year, I’ve watched marriages end—good marriages, loving marriages, with young children—as the financial strain of unemployment, compounded by the loss of healthcare just when it is needed most, pulls families apart. Homes are lost, and the financial effects of factory closings cascade through the local economy as small businesses—from sandwich shops to metal-working and packaging plants—find themselves without customers. What does a father do when he can’t find a new job within six months, or nine months, or a year? He can “retrain” in one of the “hot new fields,” the democratic capitalist replies—but that assumes that companies in those fields are opening up in Rockford. (They aren’t.) Then he can uproot his family and move where the action is, the libertarian smugly answers. (The market has spoken.) But at what cost to his family and to Rockford? And where? And when his family arrives in the Promised Land, what guarantee will the father have that his new job won’t head south, or to China, or to India?

Yes, life involves certain risks, and most of us are here in the United States because our ancestors suffered similar economic “dislocations,” but there is a difference in kind, not simply in degree, between the farmer in 1832 who left one subsistence existence in Alsace for another in the fertile fields of Southern Indiana and the engineer in Rockford in 2003 who may eventually—and, in all likelihood, far from his hometown—find work that will pay him wages that the subsistence farmer would never see. After all, that engineer will always know the uncertainty that comes from earning your livelihood at the mercy of another man.

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