

the manifestly incompetent and brutal murderers who work for the BATF, the FBI, and other agencies that maintain strict compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

States' rights and federalism, we know, are relics in the museum of dead ideologies; consolidation of power is inevitable and progressive, the wave of the future. But we live in the future, and it does not work. Perhaps it is time to give the sage of Monticello a second chance. He was, after all, no simplistic ideologue on the subject of states' rights. As Dumas Malone points out, Jefferson had acknowledged the need to strengthen the government set up by the Articles; his criticisms of the Constitution "related, not to the reduction in the powers of the states, but to the lack of safeguards for individuals."

In drafting the Kentucky Resolutions, according to Malone, "Jefferson went further in his emphasis on the rights and powers of the states vis-à-vis the general government than he had ever done before or was ever to do again." This is not entirely accurate. The 1798 Resolutions may represent the high-water mark of his defense of states' rights, but that is partly because the nature of the crisis demanded a strong and principled response. In 1800, Jefferson was in office and could hardly regard his own administration as a threat to Virginia, and his Virginia dynasty lasted through three presidencies for 24 years. However, it was only in his later years that Jefferson fully articulated his vision of decentralized political authority, both in his plan for a localized system of state education in Virginia and in his blueprint for a government of wards, outlined in a series of letters written in the last ten years of his life.

In Jefferson's comprehensive vision, each level of government—national, state, local, and neighborhood—would have sufficient autonomy to manage its own affairs. Each ward (corresponding to a township or neighborhood) would be given "those portions of self-government for which they are best qualified, by confiding to them the care of their poor, their roads, police, elections, the nomination of jurors, administration of justice in small cases, elementary exercises of militia." In short, says Jefferson, these wards will become "little republics . . . for all those concerns which, being under their eye, they would better manage than the larger republics of the county or State."

Ultimately, the principle of devolution works its way down even to the household, to "the administration of every man's farm by himself." This principle, if carried out, would serve as a secure foundation of political liberty: "Where every man is a sharer in the direction of his ward-republic . . . and feels that he is a participator in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in the year, but everyday . . . he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte."

It hardly needs to be said that would-be Bonapartes and their lackeys are instinctively revolted by Jefferson's vision. Today, he would be called President Moonbeam, because it is a mark of insanity to believe that a government can be anything but corrupt.

What are the inspirations for Mr. Jefferson's vision? His own experience of managing an estate and working with his neighbors must have been at the back of his mind, but Jefferson also had read enough about the history of ancient Greek and Renaissance Italian city-states to know that political liberty and national creativity are always rooted in local attachments. His radically American dream may have drawn its strength from ancient and medieval sources, but despite the constant opposi-

tion of national and state governments, America remained a predominantly Jeffersonian nation through the 19th century. Most so-called public schools were owned and operated by communities as small as one of his wards, and the volunteerism that he recommends ("Get them to meet and build a log cabin," he urges Joseph Cabell in describing how a local community can take charge of its own affairs) and that is described by Tocqueville was the spirit that animated the towns and villages that sprang up on the prairies without any "by your leave" from any of the Caesars and Walpoles who had taken up permanent residence on the Potomac.

When honest men ponder the future of the United States, they would do well to consider Jefferson's recommendation that the best defense against dictatorship is the independence of neighborhoods, counties, and states. In a famous pamphlet, Ezra Pound floated the idea of Jefferson and/or Mussolini. As usual, Ol Ez was half right, but whatever good points Mussolini had, he was Caesarist. If that is what the nationalists of left and right desire for their country, I wish they would say so. But for my political leader, I shall take Jefferson without any ifs, ands, or buts.

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Superhighway

by Harold McCurdy

There is a road in Congo,
A sandy camel track,
That suffers eighteen-wheelers
To break its asphalt back.

The eighteen-wheelers carrying
Tons of bottled beer
Come up from the port city
Of what was once Zaire.

They cross a roaring river
Past turbines that supply
More electrical power
Than the Congolese can buy.

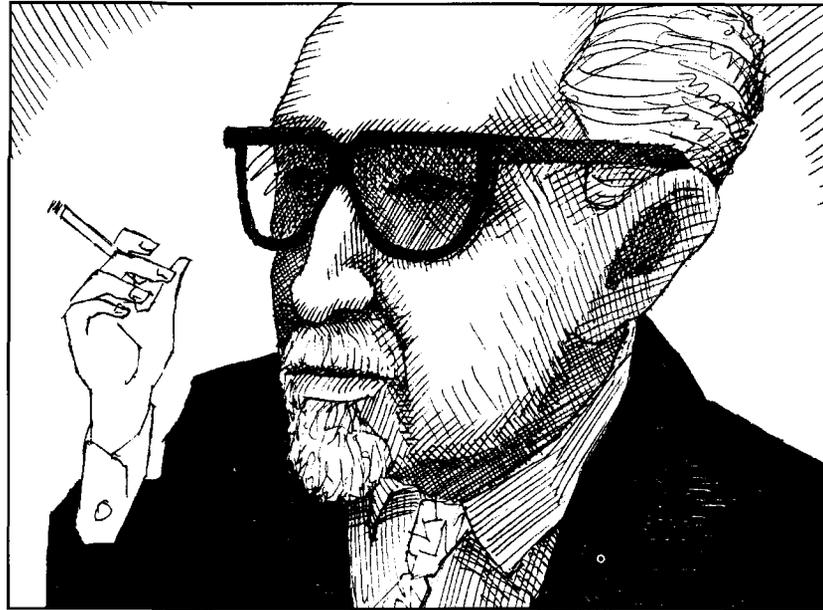
The turbines have gone rickety
From want of use and parts,
The native roadside markets
Lack customers for their arts.

But still the eighteen-wheelers
Grind northward with their loads
Of imported beer in bottles
While the economy implodes.

I listen to this saga
On NPR, and weep
For the unknown people of Congo
And the absurd high tech they keep.

Dwight Macdonald

by John Lukacs



A *Rebel in Defense of Tradition* is the title of Michael Wreszin’s 1994 biography of Dwight Macdonald (1906–1982). It is a very good title, by which I mean something more than a “handle”; it is a precise phrase, a summary properly affixed to the memory of an extraordinary man. The emphasis of Wreszin’s biography is on Macdonald’s politics; but that is not what I wish now to emphasize. My wish is to draw attention to the unjustly forgotten and, yes, often unjustly obscured qualities of this American thinker.

We met in 1953, seven years after I had come to America. *Commonweal* had published a short essay of mine, dealing with literary correspondence. Macdonald wrote a note to the editors of *Commonweal* about something else and went on to say how much he liked my piece “above all.” I was elated, because I had read some of his writings by then and I was impressed with their literary and moral—yes, moral—qualities. I called on him in New York. He was living in Greenwich Village, toward the end of his marriage with his attractive first wife, Nancy. Our meeting was not a success. He sat there nervously, moving his large frame jerkily from one side to another, wagging his head, including that impressive forehead and head of hair and the *Henri-quatre* goatee of his. This combination of the Highlands and Greenwich Village, of a Scottish philosopher and Trotsky

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was there, too, in his diction: his carefully chosen words were pronounced in his high heady voice with occasional queer, lower-New York vowels and consonants. That may have been—I am not sure—an early habit that eventually had become his accustomed self: as in the case of George Orwell (with whom he had many things in common), his clothes, too, were part and parcel of Dwight Macdonald’s wish to identify himself with the people—well, with a certain kind of people. I knew that he called himself—and in many ways he indeed was—a freedom-loving anarchist; I tried to impress him with the argument that a true conservative and a true anarchist have much in common, because of their distrust of state power and their dedication to liberty. He was in one of his dour moods; our conversation did not go very far. Yet thereafter we became friends, close friends for a quarter of a century at least.

He visited us two or three times each year, staying for a week-end or for a few days. He loved and esteemed my first wife Helen and my second wife Stephanie. He came down on a dark winter afternoon, a month after Helen had died. As he walked in the door he stopped in the hall: “This house is empty,” he said. He loved children; he would talk to my children and tease them for hours.

Our relationship had its ups and downs. The downs were grim, but they did not last. Occasionally our relationship suffered because of his extraordinary thin-skinnedness. Once their car broke down somewhere in Pennsylvania; he rang us up in the middle of the night; I said that I would come and get him