

The Gold in the Garbage: What the Left Can Learn From Ayn Rand

by James Fallows

The first time I read *Atlas Shrugged* was in the summer of 1963, a year before the Goldwater campaign. I was in my early teens at the time, about to begin high school, and very much wrapped up in the right-wing political movements which were then so strong in the part of Southern California where I lived. I quickly got my hands on the major scriptures of the Goldwater crusade, which included Goldwater's own *Conscience of a Conservative*, the Birch Society's *Blue Book*, Phyllis Schlafly's *A Choice Not an Echo*, and the works of Ayn Rand.

I was dutiful enough about memorizing Schlafly and the *Blue Book*, but my heart was always with Ayn Rand. The rest of the books might be campaign propaganda, but this, I knew, was philosophy. *The Fountainhead*, *We the Living* and most of all *Atlas Shrugged*—these three novels articulated a view of life, men, and morals which completely captivated my political imagination. As I read them, I felt that Ayn Rand was enabling me to make sense of what I

had observed myself, as well as opening up new dimensions I had not begun to consider.

The unique appeal of *Atlas Shrugged* was that it mirrored the world that I saw; although this is not a comparison I would have made at the time, it provided me with the same shock of recognition the early Bolsheviks must have felt on first reading Marx. The book's most fervent plea was that each man should be permitted to succeed, to rise as high as his abilities would take him, without anyone else getting in the way. Those who failed or were defeated should not be permitted to shift the blame to anyone but themselves. Their frustration or need, by itself, did not constitute a claim for "charity" from their abler brothers.

The important thing about this philosophy, and the small town setting in which I discovered it, was that daily life held few reminders of what I would later consider the heartlessness and arrogance of Ayn Rand. If you were ever to believe that each man started with an equal chance in life, you would believe it in a town like Redlands, California. The encrusta-

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tions of social class, educational background, and family name which weighed so heavily in the East seemed largely to be shed when one moved to California, the land without a past. Everyone had an equal chance at the brass ring. One succeeded or failed according to one's energy and wit—or so it seemed to me. To those raw perceptions Ayn Rand added a sense of galvanizing, fighting urgency. Someone out there was trying to deny me, my parents, my friends the fruits of our efforts; it was our duty to stand up and fight back.

In my own way, I attempted to do so, giving my all for Goldwater, toying with the Birch Society, even taking the podium at a high school debate to defend California's Proposition 14, the one denounced throughout the nation as the anti-fair-housing law. I developed to a fine degree the ability, often mislabeled "right-wing paranoia," to take offense at the most minute incursion on my rights. I recall with special clarity the Saturday morning in the fall of 1965 when my father was driving me to school so I could take a scholarship test. While sitting in the car I went on and on

complaining how unfair it was that this was the only scholarship I could try for. Since most of the other scholarships were awarded not on merit but on need, our family's comfortable income froze us out of the competition. Bitterly, bitterly I denounced the injustice of a world that denied me my fair chance, which would deliberately give scholarships to people *less qualified than me*, simply because my parents had been successful. My father, never given to airy speculation, grunted tolerantly about how he would be happy to pay my way, which seemed to me an infuriating evasion of the issue.

Not long afterward it all changed. The following year I was heading east to college, bearing with me the earnest warning of one of my most respected advisers that I not let myself "go pink." In a manner too cliched and familiar to bear much explanation, I soon did just that. What subsequent experiences hammered home was a little point Ayn Rand seemed to have missed—that not everyone does start with an equal chance, and, given that imperfection, that one could rarely err by being charitable. The few times I

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thought of Ayn Rand or the old Goldwater days, I wrote them off to the excesses of youth.

Recently, however, I took another look at *Atlas Shrugged*, mainly because I remembered what the book was about. The plot concerns a world in which the railroads don't work, the mail isn't delivered, and the economy, as a whole, is going straight to hell. This sounded like Contemporary Relevance to me. Could there be a neglected truth in the old potboiler? A grain of wisdom in those 1200 pages? Even though, for the first time in years, I underwent the indignity of concealing a book's cover while reading it in public, I decided to find out. I found far more value than I ever expected.

First, for the benefit of those whose own childhoods denied them the opportunity for close study of Ayn Rand, some plot summary may be in order. *Atlas Shrugged* is less a novel, in the quality-lit sense of the term, than a parable—specifically, of the struggle between the energetic, economically-productive members of society and a parasitic class known as the "looters." These looters, rough caricatures of the bleeding-heart liberals, have taken control of the society Ayn Rand depicts, and, bit by bit, they are squeezing the life out of it. They are killing their country because, in their humanitarian noble-minded, public-spirited contempt for the businessman, they have forgotten how much they rely on that despised character. With each new restrictive regulation, all designed to enhance equality and "justice," they make it harder for the few remaining entrepreneurs to run the railroads, smelt the steel, and pump the oil the nation demands. For mysterious reasons, many of these same industrialists respond to the harrassment by simply disappearing. Soon only two remain: Dagny Taggart, the she-man, super-woman power behind Taggart Transcontinental Railroads, and Henry Rearden, her lover, owner of Rearden Mills and inventor of the fabulous

Rearden Metal, a lighter, stronger substitute for steel.

As these two struggle under the mounting difficulties imposed by the looters, we learn that they are struggling against other forces as well. The other productive geniuses who have vanished from the earth have done so for a reason surprisingly similar to that of the radicals during the 1960s; they want not reform but revolution. Rather than permitting the looters to continue feeding off the energies of those they denounce as profiteers, they decide to withdraw their talent, and let the looters starve. Under the direction of the greatest genius of them all, the clean-featured, golden-haired, bright-eyed John Galt, they create a utopia of ability out in Colorado, while the rest of the world regresses to the Dark Ages. Most of the book concerns the process by which the two holdouts, Taggart and Rearden, are finally convinced to abandon the looters and adopt the view of themselves as "Prometheus who changed his mind. After centuries of being torn by vultures in payment for having brought to men the fire of the gods, he broke his chains and he withdrew his fire—until the day when men withdraw their vultures."

Whinning Rotters

The appeal of the book is obviously not in its literary quality, which is a heavy-handed, low-grade cross between Bunyan and Nietzsche. Nor is the book's main message especially palatable or persuasive.

That main message, of course, is the case for libertarianism, for the minimal state. The libertarian agrees—in fact, requires—that men should have equality of opportunity, but he reserves his most bitter denunciation for state efforts to ensure equality of result. In all the self-important, epistemological rigamarole Ayn Rand devotes to proving this case, I found no convincing response to the objection which had first made me deviate from her flock. In the world as we

know it, men do not have equal opportunities, nor any plausible chance of being rewarded in proportion to their merit. A deviation of that order, from the world of the logical model to society as it actually is, weakens the theory hopelessly.

I should add at this point that it is not fair to hang the libertarians' whole case on Ayn Rand, for on this issue especially she presents an abnormally weak face. Far from demonstrating sympathy for the inequalities of the real world, she gives herself over to a tone of contemptuous, vindictive hatred of those who have failed. It is hard to select single illustrations of a current that runs through nearly every page of the book, but the following passage should give some small idea. In it, Rearden is being asked about one of his fabulous inventions:

"Did you want to see it used by whining rotters who never rouse themselves to any effort, who do not possess the ability of a filing clerk, but demand the income of a company president, who drift from failure to failure and expect you to pay their bills, who hold their wishing as an equivalent of your work and their need as a higher claim to regard than your effort, who demand that it be the aim of your life to serve them, who demand that your strength be the voiceless, rightless, unpaid, unrewarded slave of their impotence. . . .?"

The libertarian case can be made without these vicious overtones, as Robert Nozick has done in his monumental new book, *Anarchy, State, Utopia*. In a surprisingly lucid style, Nozick argues that any "patterned" distribution of resources—that is, any forced deviation from the distribution that free capitalist exchanges would create—is an indefensible infringement on individual rights. Therefore, he concludes after a case too complex to summarize, the only legitimate functions of the state are to protect its citizens against force, fraud, and the like. While this is the most eloquent defense of the libertarian position to

appear in some time, it, too, fails to meet the basic objection of unequal opportunities. Nozick himself has conceded that, until he can find a way to accommodate historical injustice in his theory, redistributive measures—the very thing the libertarian most fiercely opposes—may be legitimate state functions.

If the pure libertarian credo is finally unpersuasive, what is there provocative in *Atlas Shrugged*? For me, it was an element I had not noticed at all in my earlier incarnation—Ayn Rand’s demonstration of one of the most serious omissions in liberal political philosophy. That is the liberals’ vacuum of ideas about basic economic competence and productivity. Ayn Rand does not make this point directly. Rather, in building both sides of her case, in celebrating her heroes and denouncing the villains, she tends to lump together two non-identical qualities. One is the libertarian political theory; the other, economic performance and skill. In *Atlas Shrugged* the two appear to be virtually inseparable: the libertarian advocates are nearly all inventors and businessmen, while her looters could not run a factory to save themselves. By combining these two elements, she serves one rhetorical end: not only can she argue, as does Nozick, that violating libertarian principles is “unjust,” but she can go on to warn that it will cause an utter economic collapse. But by insisting on this conjunction she tempts readers who are not persuaded by her philosophy and who are repelled by her heartlessness to ignore her valid complaint about the left’s conspicuous failure to deal with the techniques of business and economic production.

I have two examples of what I mean by “conspicuous failure.” For most liberals “economics” has meant, during the last three decades at least, a question of distribution rather than production. To be sure, distribution of the world’s goods, both in this country and abroad, remains a major injustice. But recent signs have indi-

cated that production—simple, unglamorous industrial production—may soon become one of our major priorities. Some industrial economists have predicted that the next shortage this country will confront will be more profound than even the energy shortage—that is a capital shortage, on the order of one trillion dollars over the next ten years. While the term “capital” has come to connote rich, powerful men exploiting the poor and the weak, technically it means nothing more than the resources available for production. A capital shortage, in this sense, does not simply mean lean times for the men on Wall Street, but affects our ability to do everything from supporting museums to providing education to satisfying the simple material desires. Dealing with it will require something more than the traditional liberal attacks on big business and the military. But mention the capital problem in the steel industry or ways of providing long-term finance for our exporters, and you’ve put your liberal friends to sleep.

A second illustration is the disdain, so accurately parodied by Ayn Rand, that the public-service, humanitarian-liberal crowd feels for the good side of the business ethic. Time and again my heart went out to one of Ayn Rand’s titans when, after working an 18-hour day trying to fend off one catastrophe after another, he would run into a smug liberal fresh from reading *Babbitt*. After Henry Rearden has been through one of the more heroic days of his business career, he is greeted by his wife: “‘Why, darling,’ she said in a bright tone of amusement, ‘isn’t it too early to come home? Wasn’t there some slag to sweep...?’” Another time, when attending a party with her bleeding-heart friends, he thinks:

“‘You don’t care for anything but business.’ He had heard it all his life, pronounced as a verdict of damnation. He had always known that business was regarded as some sort of secret, shameful cult, which one did not impose on innocent laymen. . . that to

talk shop was an offense against higher sensibilities, that just as one washed machine grease off one's hands before coming home, so one was supposed to wash the stain of business off one's mind before entering a drawing room."

The Joy of Work

This hits close to home for anyone who has ever instinctively brushed off his clothes and thought, "there but for the grace of God. . ." after encountering a friend in business. Ayn Rand's race of philosopher-kings is an imprecise portrait of the business world, to say the least, but inside all this overblown heroism there is a small reminder of a neglected point. It is that some people are in business for the joy, even the nobility, of bringing men and materials together, taking risks and staving off disasters, and finally producing something good that other people can use or enjoy. As the contemporary versions of the Two Cultures, government and business, gyre farther apart, those of us on the "public service" side of the fence often forget that the man who invented the calculator, or simply found a more efficient way to manufacture it, feels proud and worthy for reasons other than the profit he's made. In the full flush of his contempt for the manipulative Harold-Geneneen face of the business world, the liberal is also tempted to forget the equal contempt which the entrepreneur feels for the sniveling cowards of the "non-competitive," "non-productive" sector. Ayn Rand is absolutely on target in depicting the contrast between those who plunge themselves into the effort to make something *work*, be it a novel or a smelter, and those whose most fervent desire is to cover their tails. In a number of scenes which, though she may not have intended them as such, come off as sublime black comedy, she shows how the two types of people react to catastrophes. When a blast furnace springs a leak, you see all the entrepreneurs stripping off their

jackets and charging into action to plug the hole. Taggart and Rearden work through the night at their desks trying to meet their next deadline. Meanwhile, another catastrophe looms, as a series of foul-ups means that a crammed passenger train will be sent on a course that will certainly kill everyone aboard. Taggart and Rearden are unaware of this impending disaster, and the public service types rise, in true form, to the challenge. They rush around in a desperate race against the clock—not to save the people, but to get the right memos on the record so that, after the catastrophe takes place, the investigating committee will not be able to blame them.

After a few scenes like this, you can begin to understand the businessman, understand why he hates the civil servants in their risk-free world. If the grotesquely archetypical figure of Ayn Rand's world is the industrialist sneering at the inferior, starving masses, his equally grotesque counterpart on the left is the New York City bureaucrat who lives in a rent-controlled apartment, berates the landlord for letting the building fall apart, and, sitting in his vaguely-defined job, imagining that he is still fighting the battles of the '30s, feels vastly superior to the businessmen, because he can conceive of no motive for them other than vulgar acquisitiveness and cannot understand the joy some of them feel in what they have created.

Ayn Rand has no heart for those who stumble, and a good part of the left has no heart for those whose accomplishments happen to earn them a profit, rather than being foundation-supported. The usual conclusion to a case such as this is a plea for mutual understanding, but the brutal reality is something different. For the immediate future, the burden is on the liberals. With our capital shortages and our economic emergencies, the most urgent need is to create a climate that will encourage productive entrepreneurs. This is a major departure for those of us chilled by Ayn Rand, but a necessary one. ■

political book notes

*Public affairs books
to be published in May.*

The Alaska Pipeline: The Politics of Oil and Native Land Claims. Mary Clay Berry. Indiana Univ., \$10.95.

American Public Administration: Past, Present, Future. Frederick C. Mosher, ed. Univ. of Alabama, \$10/3.50.

The Anxious Economy. Ezra Solomon. W.H. Freeman, \$6.95. Originally prepared as part of Stanford University's alumni-education program, this is a clearly written, comprehensive, sensible survey of the economic system and its current disorders.

Bank Management and Portfolio Behavior. Donald D. Hester, James L. Pierce. Yale Univ., \$20.

Bellevue: A Documentary of a Large Metropolitan Hospital. Don Gold. Harper & Row, \$10.

The Big Woods. Ellis Lucia. Doubleday, \$12.95.

Blue-Collar Aristocrats: Life Styles at a Working Class Tavern. E.E. LeMasters. Univ. of Wisconsin, \$8.95.

Breach of Faith: The Fall of President Nixon. Theodore H. White. Atheneum, \$10.95. Teddy White, who was one of the last to awaken to the Watergate scandal—he had a two hour interview with Nixon on March 17, 1973 and did not ask a single question about it—has now produced what is not only his own best book but is also the best book yet written about Watergate. Most of the book is directed to examining why the “fall” occurred. The first chapter is an engrossing account of the last two weeks of the administration.

Here is his account of the role of Nixon's family:

“Buchanan met. . . Saturday, in the solar-

ium of the White House, with the two daughters of the President and Bebe Rebozo. What they were seeking was one staff member, just one, to lead the President's guard to the last battle. Would Buchanan do it? They wanted to carry the fight right down to the Senate floor. Buchanan argued against—they had only one choice: either their father would be the first President of the United States to resign, or he would be the first President to be impeached and convicted. Which did they want? If they fought, Buchanan said, they would drag the whole party down with them; it simply wasn't right to take the country through this debate for another three or four months with no hope for victory. The daughters disagreed. Buchanan countered again: if we had known about this mess fifteen months ago, we could have gone to the nation, made a confession of it like the Bay of Pigs. But there had been a year of “ongoing deception.” They insisted that Buchanan must lead the fight. Pat compromised—let us wait, wait just a few days, wait to see what the nation's reaction would be. . . .

“By Tuesday. . . the President was moving toward the only conclusion possible, held back from it only by the family guard. Julie Nixon Eisenhower was its leader; now she insisted on an appointment with Haig for her husband, David Eisenhower, to press on Haig her father's plea. The President had lied to her, as well as to everyone else, but he was her father; and she could see in him not only his anguish but what she felt was his greatness. Haig listened, not commenting, recognizing that the only resistance left came from the family. . . .

“By Wednesday afternoon. . . the loyalty of his daughters and their husbands was the last genuine base of support he commanded. Deputized to receive them, Buchanan lis-

tened in his EOB office to the last plea of Edward Cox and David Eisenhower, at three o'clock. "They were eloquent," said Buchanan; they were as familiar with every detail of the transcript as Buzhardt himself, and they knew the dangers to both the party and the country. But they were appealing to Buchanan as a man of the conservative cause. For the sake of history, the record ought to show how much good had been done for the country by Richard Nixon; the record should demonstrate by trial in the Senate the precise reason why he had been removed. The two young men made no attempt to justify the "trivial" crime of which Nixon was guilty. But, they argued, the fight must be made all the way to the Senate floor, because Constitutionally it was important that a President not be removed, by a wave of public opinion; he must be removed only by clear Constitutional judgment of his responsibility and its abuse. The offense, the impeachable offense, must be focused sharp.

"To which Buchanan could only reply: the course they sought could not balance the danger to the President himself, vulnerable to every penalty of law if he were found guilty by the Senate. Nor could it balance the danger to the country—months more of controversy in a lost cause until the vote came on the floor of the Senate, with the country unable to strain the clear and narrow perspectives of crime from the turmoil. There was no purpose to such a fight at such a cost. At about four, the two young men left and, said Buchanan, 'I felt no minds had been changed.'

"What message the sons-in-law carried back to the President from Buchanan must have been a melancholy one. But the messages coming in to him from his party via the Haig track were worse.

"The previous day, Senator Stennis of Mississippi had relayed his message that the President must resign. The previous evening George Bush, National Chairman of the Republican Party, a close personal friend, almost a protege of the President's, had pondered his loyalties, personal and partisan, and on Wednesday morning had delivered to the White House his final judgment as party leader. 'Dear Mr. President,' read the Bush letter, 'It is my considered judgment that you should now resign.'

White is still too kind to his sources. Leonard Garment is called "the conscience of the White House" without the slightest hint of what modest praise that is. Other sources like Buzhardt, Burch, Haig, and Timmons are treated with consistent reverence for their part in the administration's final days. The author seems aware of the motivation for their sudden concern for justice in only one sentence: "The matter was intolerable. Unless he, Haig, acted

immediately, then he, St. Clair, Garment, Burch, Timmons and other honorable men who had served the President unflinchingly would themselves become party to crime."

A Child is Being Beaten. Naomi Feigelson Chase. Holt, \$7.95.

Congress. Randall B. Ripley. Norton, \$7.95.

The Conscience of the Courts: Law and Morals in American Life. Graham Hughes. Anchor/Doubleday, \$8.95.

Conversations with Kennedy. Benjamin C. Bradlee. Norton, \$7.95. The author with his subject's permission kept a record of his social life with the Kennedys. The result is a fascinating picture of John Kennedy's informal off-the-record self at small dinner parties and weekends in the country or on the Cape. Bradlee is sufficiently honest to include enough unfavorable material to have already supplied Bill Safire with a whole column of anti-Kennedy anecdotes.

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