

## The Cold War, the “Vital Center”, and the Resurrection of the “Old Right”

Jim Pederson November 15, 2024

FDR had what he thought was a good relationship with Stalin, as did some key figures within his administration. Many Brits including Churchill did not as well as some key people within his own administration including the highly influential “wise men”. Since recognizing the Soviet Union in 1933 FDR envisioned a Russian-American entente that would cure Europe’s “*fratricidal tendencies*” (1 p. 538). How did this go so wrong so fast? To understand the answer to this we must look at divisions within the political left of the 30’s, 40’s, and 50’s; the “Old Left”, and within the Roosevelt and Truman administrations.

The Old Left through the 30’s and 40’s had three components. The first were the communists or “*travelers*” who were especially prominent in academia and whose allegiance was principally to the American Communist Party. Amongst American Marxists there were both Trotskyites and Stalinists but the followers of Trotsky were probably more numerous and certainly had a bigger institutional presence. The Progressives were the second and dominant in the New Deal. They sought radical changes in American society and were willing to work with the communists and communist groups and organizations giving a more appealing appearance to communist thought. The most prominent Progressive publications of the time were the *New Republic* and *the Nation*. The liberals were the third group and were most moderate while still supporting progressive economic and social reform. They held anti-authoritarian positions, generally recognized and respected the basic freedoms defined by the Bill of Rights, and were suspicious of dealing with Communists (2 p. 3). Progressives and liberals had a common belief system that sought to extend New Deal social and economic reforms throughout the world along with democratic self determination and global economic development to alleviate want (2 p. 6). Their faith in democracy as a certain path to end, as envisioned by Dewey, would prove to be misplaced unless the process could be controlled to limit undesirable outcomes.

Liberals weren’t well organized and Communists and Progressives dominated the intellectual left. Communists and, to a somewhat lesser extent, progressives were believers in scientific naturalism and relativism rejecting the concepts of natural law, higher authority, and absolute morality which were central to a constitutional republic. The period of time during the war when the Soviets and Germans had formed a temporary alliance prior to the German invasion while shaking the Communists and Progressives strengthened the Liberals and also created some degree of organization and leadership. One of those early leaders was American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who was a reformed Socialist and had become a critic of Protestant liberalism. He was associated with the Evangelical and Reformed Church which had largely a Luther heritage. He delivered a series of lectures in 1944 that became the basis for *The Children of the Light and the Children of the Darkness* which defined his belief that the western democratic traditions must be defended against totalitarianism. He stated “*Democracy has a more compelling justification and required a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history*” (2 p. 7). Niebuhr still supported the idea of a world community but considered its chances of success slim due to a realistic understanding of human

nature. He specifically saw Russia as an almost insurmountable barrier due largely to his understanding of their underlying culture.

Standing against this vision of a globalist world community stood the “Old Right”, the isolationists who were associated with the Republican Party or at least a portion of it. The conservative Democrats also had isolationist tendencies and there was a vision already formed of removing them from the Democratic Party. Liberals and Progressives saw the need as early as 1942, following the losses they incurred in the US election that year, to form an alliance to wipe away the isolationists. The term “reactionary” was applied to the isolationists and the Old Right and remained commonly in use throughout the Cold War time period.

Niebuhr had a prominent public platform but was still outside of the mainstream of liberal thought and had relatively few adherents as late as 1945. By mid-1946 the progressive journals had become marginalized and had no real effect on American policy (2 p. 9). To control the debate though, liberals had to separate from progressives. Liberals sought to elevate the moral perception of the United States while contrasting America to all types of totalitarian dictatorships not seeing either fascists or communists as being superior to each other but essentially morally equivalent. New York Times publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger wrote, *“I do not believe that free people can afford to trust dictatorships whether they be of the middle, or of the left, or of the right”* (2 p. 10). An article in Life magazine by journalists Joseph and Stewart Alsop reflected the growing belief that communism was the greatest threat to true liberalism. They observed that the *“idealized picture of the Soviet Union”* created during the war by Henry Wallace and many others were *“irresponsible”* and *“delusional”*. They further concluded that communism had to be fought both at home and abroad which effectively initiated a purge of one of the three legs of the old left. Young Harvard historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, who penned the term “Vital Center”, also wrote in Life Magazine that year describing American communists as warped individuals who received from the party, *“the social, intellectual, and even sexual fulfillment they cannot obtain in existing society”*.

The next step in the development of the vital center was Niebuhr’s trip to Europe in the late summer of 1946. Prior to leaving, his views towards the Soviet Union were somewhat moderate. After returning he wrote in Life magazine describing himself as a member of *“Henry Wallace’s school of thought on domestic politics”* (far left) but then cited *“the confusion in American liberalism, of which the Wallace’s speech is a symbol, must be recognized as catastrophic in the light of the European realities”* (2 p. 14). This seemed to have a fairly immediate and broad reaching effect. Wallace’s speech on September 12 of 1946 criticizing the administration policies towards the Soviet Union as being too harsh resulted in his firing by Truman.

George Kennan was another key contributor to establishing consensus around the vital center policies. Kennan was a career diplomat who was also a renowned historian in a long career at Princeton following his government service. He was also more of a pragmatist and less of an ideologue who opposed the creation of NATO as well as US post Cold War, War on Terror policies under the Bush administration (3). Kennan had sent a number of telegrams from the U.S. embassy in Moscow starting in 1944 that give a window into his evolving thoughts on the Soviets, the most notable of which was the *“Long Telegram”*

sent Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup> of 1946. The cable was 8000 words long, which was very unusual, and first used the word or concept of “*containment*” with regard to the Soviet Union. It also made reference to the Soviets refusal to join the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (4). Kennan wrote an article in July of 1947 in *Foreign Affairs* titled “*The Sources of Soviet Conduct*”, which was unsigned (signed “X”) but widely attributed to him, that was reprinted in *Life*, then *Reader’s Digest*, and then the *New York Times Magazine*. Kennan became a household name through all of this.

In September of 1949, Schlesinger synthesized his works with those of Niebuhr, Kennan, and others in the *Vital Center*, which would define U.S. foreign policy (2 p. 18). The Vital Center would hold through the 50’s when the Progressive and Marxist left would again start to reassert themselves but for that period, they were contained within colleges and universities, frequently having to maintain a low profile even there, along with some labor unions. In the years to follow, the coalition formed around the vital center would evolve into the Neoconservatives who came to dominate the Republican Party.

For the Old Left, World War II was a “glorious age” allowing them to rapidly reshape the world. Communists, led by Earl Browder, basked in their new found respectability. For the Old Right, however, the situation couldn’t have seemed much worse. Oswald Villard went so far as to write an epitaph for the Old Right:

*He grew old in an age he condemned, Felt the dissolving throes, Of a Social Order he loved, And like the Theban seer, Died in his enemies days.* (5 p. 271)

When circumstances seemed darkest, however, things started to improve. Several prominent members of the Old Right, like Albert Jay Mock, Erwin Hart, Frank Chodorov, John T. Flynn, and others, who had been de-platformed, removed from academic institutions and publications, and limited to a few “right wing” publications with little circulation, started to attract a following (6 pp. 55-8). At least one successful newspaper was founded, that being the Santa Ana Register in Orange County California. More significantly though, there were several books that gradually built an audience and remain significant today. In 1943 Ann Rand wrote a novel, *The Fountainhead, a paean to individualism* that, after being turned down by a number of publishers, was published by Bobbs-Merrill which became an underground best seller. Rose Wilder Lane, who had been a Communist Party member in the 20’s published the *Discover of Freedom* which was prose-poetry celebrating the history of freedom (6 pp. 55-9). A third important wartime libertarian writing, also by a woman, was the *God of the Machine* by Isabel Patterson. Patterson was a well known writer having written several flapper style novels in the 1920’s and had been a regular columnist for New York Herald Tribune Review of Books. The *God of the Machine* included sections on the state promotion of monopoly after the War Between the States, defense of the gold standard, and critique of the social gospel and the welfare movement (6 p. 59). Albert Nock, then in his 70’s also published his last work, *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* which integrated many of his previous works. Another author who became prominent again in libertarian circles in this period, although from another time period, was 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist and opponent of Lincoln and the vastly expanded government produced by that war.

The area where the libertarians had the greatest immediate impact, however, was economics. Ludwig Von Mises, who had been prominent in Europe through the 1920's but was largely swept aside by the Keynesians and the economic planners in the 30's, published two major works during the war after emigrating to New York in 1940. Mises wrote *Bureaucracy* contrasting the inherent differences between free market and bureaucratic management and *Omnipotent Government* as a repudiation of Marxism. In *Omnipotent Government* he emphasized that Nazi Germany was not a product of big business as the left tried to portray it as being, but was a variant of socialism and collectivism. The wartime work that had by far the greatest impact, however, was Friedrich A Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. Hayek was a follower of Von Mises in the Austrian school of free market economics, had emigrated to England and taught at the London School of Economics where he had an impact on a large number of students and eventually gave him prominence in intellectual circles. *Road to Serfdom*, which was compiled from separate writings and not written in a way that was easy to read, made the clear case that socialism was not compatible with freedom. Hayek stressed that both Communism and Fascism were just different aspects of modern collectivism and had a great many similarities. Hayek's book was a blockbuster and influenced policy after the war but none of this created a strong self sustaining conservative movement (6 pp. 60-3).

After the war the Old Right started to reclaim some academic positions and generally became somewhat successful in reaching a broader audience. George J. Stigler and Milton Friedman became prominent lecturers, professors, and writers and became distinguished members of the "*Chicago school*" of economics. The Volker Company and Volker fund became actively involved in promoting and sponsoring free market economics and specifically funded Von Mises and Hayek (6 pp. 66-67). One specific event that forced mainstream opinion to take notice of the Old Right was a right wing oriented organization in Los Angeles named *Spiritual Mobilization* that published a monthly magazine titled *Faith and Freedom*. Former Naval Officer William Johnson and Chodorov wrote a regular column titled "*Along Pennsylvania Avenue*" (7 pp. 81-2). By 1953 the Vital Center apparently became annoyed with this publication and with the column in particular and responded with a book by young Methodist minister, Ralph Lord Roy, titled *Apostles of Discord: A Study of Organized Bigotry and Disruption on the Fringes of Protestantism*. The book was based on a thesis in Liberal theology written by John C. Bennett at Union Theological Seminary in New York (long progressive tradition). Roy attacked what he referred to as the "*intellectual façade*" of *Faith and Freedom*, *Spiritual Mobilization*, along with a related publication, *Christian Economics* (6 pp. 81-2).

The Old Right became the right wing of the Republican Party in the late 40's and early 50's. It must be stressed to understand what comes next that they were solidly isolationist and opposed to foreign wars along with conscription or the draft and generally supported free market economics and libertarian oriented social policies. Foreign policy is frequently seen as a secondary concern to domestic concerns until circumstances draw it to the front but it must be remembered to the old right, foreign policy was absolutely not negotiable and would not be sacrificed in the name of compromise. In terms of economic impact, especially on a long term basis, a very reasonable case can be made that the constant foreign wars have had more of a fiscal impact than the summation of the social welfare programs and much of the defense spending could even be considered a sort of directed welfare program. The Chicago

Tribune generally reflected the beliefs and positions of the Old Right. The main part of the party, however, was made up of neo-liberal establishment eastern wall-street interests. This balance would more or less hold along with the vital center until the early 60's although the Old Right had a brief shot at taking control in the contested Republican primary of 1952 between Taft and Eisenhower.

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