

Reflections from the Old Right

REVIEWED BY CARL F. HOROWITZ

Conservative political philosophy — the real kind — has never been that big on optimism, inasmuch as it views human nature as predisposed toward rapaciousness. People can be real predators, whether for the purpose of territorial acquisition, abstract principle, or revenge. It's the job of civil society, backed by statecraft, to rein in the worst among them. Even successful nations like ours are far more unstable than they look, especially when those who govern lack the requisite wisdom to recognize peril domestically or from abroad.

Paul Gottfried, a professor of humanities at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania, recognizes this, perhaps a bit too much. And as one of our country's leading conservative political philosophers, he's not about to allow some careerist middlebrow like William Bennett or Newt Gingrich claim the high ground for his cause. Even a quarter-century ago, Gottfried was reluctant to sing the "morning in America" tune, necessary as it may have been to securing electoral victory — the Reagan presidency, in his mind, brought no revolution. The man looks out his window and can't help but see dusk. He wryly acknowledges as much in *Encounters*, his remembrance of people, living and deceased, who have shaped his worldview, recalling a question directed at him, "Do you give out suicide razors with your books?"

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With this work, at least, he doesn't have to. Gottfried wanted to write a political memoir, not an end-of-the-world jeremiad. He may or may not qualify as a public figure — his friendship with Richard Nixon would give him some benefit of the doubt — but he is one of the few conservatives still alive willing to take on big ideas in ways that go well beyond standard Red State *Über Alles* culture-war talking points.

Paul Gottfried belongs to the Old Right, a contentious fraternity prone to crossing swords sometimes as much among themselves as with others. But unlike another Old Right paladin, *Chronicles* magazine's Thomas Fleming, a man seemingly terminally incapable of uttering or writing a sentence without inflicting moral punishment, Gottfried comes off as pleasant, more so anyway than much of his recent work would suggest. More than from anyone else, his worldview comes from his late German-

speaking, Hungarian-born Jewish-immigrant father, Andrew Gottfried. A master furrier, the elder Gottfried and family members

on his and his future wife's side emigrated from Nazified Europe during the Thirties, settling in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Young Paul didn't quite take to his father's vindictive streak or his admiration for FDR's New Deal, but he did internalize the father's strong "sense of command." Paul's massive twinges of disdain for the sorts of wimpy, guilt-ridden white men who too often populate today's academic, corporate, philanthropical, and government circles on some level are echoes of his father.

What may arouse the most curiosity is how the author became a confidante to another father figure (of sorts), Richard Nixon. They first met in January 1989 in the former president's Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey office. Nixon had been impressed with

Encounters

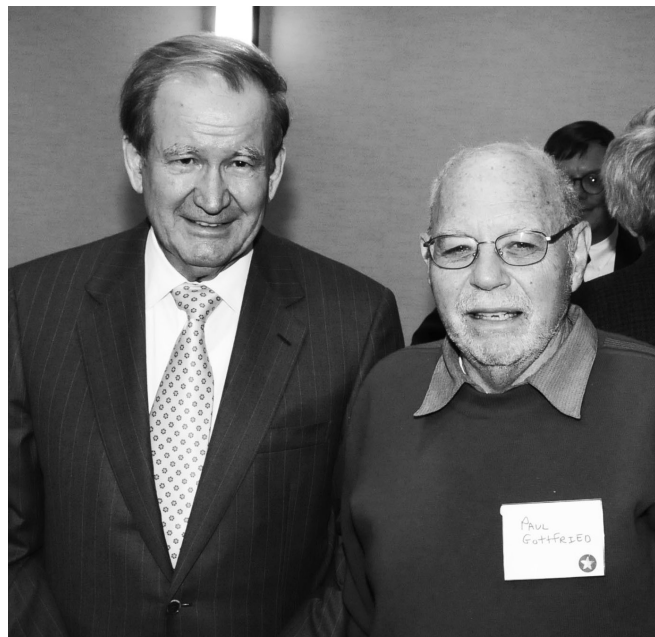
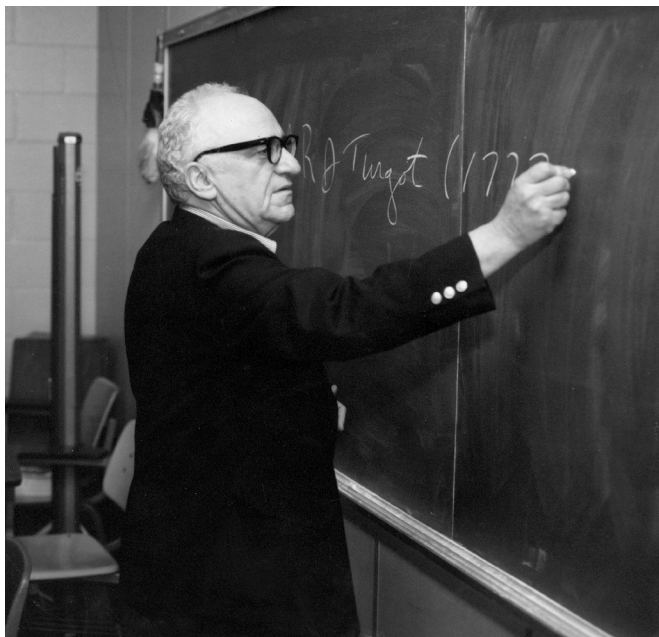
My Life with Nixon, Marcuse, and Other Friends and Teachers
by Paul E. Gottfried

Wilmington, Del.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute
220 pp., \$28.00



Gottfried's book of a few years earlier, *The Search for Historical Meaning*, praising it in *The American Spectator*. Gottfried, taking the initiative, wrote Nixon, partly in hopes of getting him to write for *The World and I*, where he was a senior editor; Gottfried's boss at that magazine, Morton Kaplan, had been an advisor to the Nixon administration's arms limitation talks with the Soviets. The former presi-

Richard Nixon was one of two "pugnacious Republicans" who shaped Gottfried, the other being Nixon's former understudy and syndicated pundit, Patrick Buchanan. Gottfried had formed a friendship with Buchanan following a speech in Philadelphia during the 1992 Republican presidential primary season. Buchanan's beliefs and style posed problems, but the frequent and "indefensi-



Libertarian scholar Murray Rothbard in the classroom (left) and Pat Buchanan (right), with Paul Gottfried at the 2009 H. L. Mencken Club meeting, are some of the intellectual luminaries on the old right that author Gottfried reminisces about in *Encounters*.

dent's response was prompt, and a visit ensued.

Nixon, up close, far from embodying his familiar caricature of awkward, shifty-eyed neurosis, projected relaxed erudition, a presence Frank Langella captured in his Tony-winning and Oscar-nominated depictions in *Frost/Nixon*. But the conversations did something more: They gave Gottfried a first-hand education in realism in the world of nations. Nixon, he writes, "belonged to a tradition that would place him well to the right of his neo-Wilsonian critics." This tradition especially drew from Hobbes, rooted as it was in a resignation to the inevitability of violence and the need for a State to restrain it without inflicting it. Nixon, as a matter of principle, reserved his idealistic rhetoric for mobilizing public support, not for developing a stable political order.

bly extreme" attacks from liberals, denunciations cautiously seconded by William F. Buckley and other marquee conservatives, convinced Gottfried that the Right needed redefinition. He sent his new friend information on sources of neoconservative funding, which Buchanan used for a column.

The primaries produced no victories, not even in the celebrated case of New Hampshire, where Buchanan (contrary to Gottfried's unfortunate assertion) lost to incumbent President George H.W. Bush by 58 percent to 40 percent. But the experience proved a launching pad for a 1996 run. Gottfried had won himself a job as a member of the Buchanan brain trust, which included Russell Kirk, Murray Rothbard, and Samuel T. Francis. He'd known them from before, but the new context was bracing. They were now a band of brothers locked

in mortal combat with the post-American socialism and multiculturalism that had come to set the tenor of debate even among the Republicans.

Francis saw our post-World War II managerial class, bent on centralization and egalitarianism, as supplanting older property-owning classes. As traditional American “conservatism” no longer really existed, its successor would have to court “Middle American Radicals,” who were at once populist, traditionalist, and angry. Murray Rothbard, godfather of anarcho-libertarianism, saw an ally in this revived conservatism, a way station toward abolition of the State. Capitalists are crucial to liberty and prosperity, he argued, but they are as prone as the rest of us to seeking and protecting favors from government (especially during wartime), while giving lip service to “free enterprise.” Secession, or some less extreme form of political devolution, could restrict government’s capacity to bestow benefits upon the relative few at the expense of everyone else. Russell Kirk, a bohemian Tory with a prodigious output, saw conservative victory as impossible without a revival of a nearly defunct moral sensibility. But that sensibility was very much a projection of Kirk’s own crusty, mystic Luddism, and as such, he was an unlikely source of advice for *anyone’s* campaign. Political victory required mastery of television (among other media), and it would have been hard to find a person anywhere more filled with hatred for that device than Kirk — the oft-told story about Kirk tossing a TV set out his Mecosta, Michigan home attic window rather than have his family watch it happens to be true. Gottfried never quite found Kirk’s style or beliefs tenable, but they both agreed that populism and conservatism were a poor fit.

Each of these grand strategists, in differing ways, was possessed of keen observations and, regrettably, misguided assumptions about the modern American character. Sam Francis came

closest among the three to grasping how resentments, properly harnessed, could move voters rightward, but even he could not grasp that “Middle America” was a highly imprecise post-Sixties construct. And for all that Gottfried desired counterrevolution, he sided with Kirk, not Francis, in fearing the fabled “wisdom of crowds,” including those inside voting booths. Given the multitudes’ susceptibility to demagogues, it has been a minor miracle that we have managed to avoid a police state. At one point in *Encounters*, Gottfried recalls being asked at a Cato Institute seminar if the people have the government they deserve. His response: “The government is far better than the one that the masses actually merit.” The masses, needless to say, did not go for Pat Buchanan in 1996. Gottfried ruefully notes the naïveté of today’s conservatives, even Buchanan to some extent, who accept man’s nature as fallen yet believe an electorate can become angelic if roused to action by the right candidate.

A trio of distinguished Central European Catholic émigrés — Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Thomas Molnar, and John Lukacs — could hardly be accused of such an error. Like Gottfried, they had ancestral connections to Budapest. And each offered an attractive critique of mass politics that was at once Rightist and realistic. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, having witnessed democracy degenerate into legitimized mob rule in Europe, came to see it as unworkable here as well, a secularized extension of Protestant sectarian passions. Molnar was a throne-and-altar Catholic, providing a defense of a reactionary tradition, which though moored in theocracy, at least understood the futility of expecting democracy to adjudicate vast, warlike differences within a sovereign entity. Lukacs likewise recognized how a people who lose their memory become fair prey for nationalists and socialists, two common denominators of all totalitarian regimes, though Gottfried, unlike his mentor, saw the latter



as posing the greater long-term threat.

Another refugee from Europe, sociologist Will Herberg, “a religious visionary,” as Gottfried calls him, provided further reinforcement for Rightist realism. An inveterate book collector and author of the heralded book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955), Herberg saw a confluence of religious communities into a conservative American polity. He began as a Communist, but thankfully left at a young age, young enough at any rate to recognize the futility of the impulse to seek perfection in this world.

Gottfried never has been a man of the Left, but he acknowledges his debt to two of its key late figures, Herbert Marcuse and Paul Piccone. It was Marcuse who in 1964 as a visiting professor would leave an early mark on Gottfried during his Yale graduate studies. Yes, I know — *that* Herbert Marcuse, the Frankfurt School Marxist who in 1956 defended the Soviet invasion of Hungary and who in the late Sixties, while at San Diego State University, would unleash Angela Davis upon the nation. Yet young Gottfried sensed he was in the presence of someone with an extraordinary grasp of European intellectual history and German philosophy. Even when Gottfried turned against him, as was inevitable, he recognized the critical skills his mentor had imparted. His challenge henceforth would be “to find other exponents for ideas that I had picked up from him.”

Among the Left, at any rate, he would meet such a person many years later in Paul Piccone, editor of *Telos*, a Marxist anti-Soviet journal launched in the late Sixties where Gottfried served as an editor. The flamboyant Piccone eventually would recast practical Leftism as political decentralism. Communitarian socialism, in his mind — and Gottfried’s — assumes much of the character of an ordered conservatism. “How is it,” asked Gottfried of his friend, “that you and I can agree on so much while claiming to be on opposite sides politically?” Piccone’s response: “Because you’re a Marxist and don’t know it.” Perhaps it was because Piccone was a conservative and didn’t know it. Might Vermont

“Leftists” be more tradition-bound than they care to admit as well?

The final chapter covers “voices against progress,” the term “progress” being a matter of definition. The subjects here — Eugene Genovese, Christopher Lasch, Peter Stanlis, Robert Nisbet, and Mel Bradford — chose to define it in the negative, uprooting more than advancing. To the extent the spirit of utilitarian reformism has captured conservatism, it has counterfeited it. Gottfried saw



Herbert Marcuse

in these five individuals, as he later would as an adviser to Pat Buchanan, allies in a battle against an unrelenting opposition.

Genovese was a historian who began as a self-defined Stalinist and wound up a Southern agrarian, the common denominator being an animus toward bourgeois liberalism. He’d done some brilliant work on antebellum Southern plantation life, but also had the sensibility of a Genovese crime family hit man. During a time in the Eighties when Gottfried was a candidate for the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Genovese, advising him on how to deal with hostile NEH board members, made positive references to the organizational skill of the Mafia, a group, Gottfried noted, that Genovese “held up as a model for the Old Right.” His one-time bitter rival, Christopher Lasch, who achieved sizable fame with his

book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, likewise began, if not as a Communist, then as someone who feared anti-Communism more than what it was fighting. Gottfried had every reason to give Lasch the cold shoulder, for back around 1970 he'd worked behind the scenes to quash Gottfried's appointment at the University of Rochester (to his credit, Lasch much later profusely apologized). His radicalism would morph into a hybrid of Frankfurt School socialism and communitarian conservatism, recasting blue-collar Middle American Radicals as repositories of Christian virtue, a foil against rootless cosmopolitan capitalism. Lasch just wasn't a *Forbes* magazine kind of guy.

The remaining traditionalists, never on the Left to begin with, didn't have to worry about alienating that part of the world. Peter Stanlis, the nation's foremost biographer and interpreter of Edmund Burke, understood why the Old Right had to play defense. "Of all my allies in the struggle against the neoconservative ascendancy," Gottfried writes, "Peter grasped the enormity of the Old Right's problems earliest and best." M.E. "Mel" Bradford, a learned Southern traditionalist, remains best-known as the man who would have won the NEH chairmanship in 1981 were it not for neocon backroom skullduggery, real or imagined, that put Bill Bennett in the driver's seat. Bradford's mortal enemy was universalist "armed doctrines," whether supplied by Rousseau, Kant, or Marx. His open hostility toward Abraham Lincoln was a product of his ancestors' fighting on the losing side in the Civil War, and equally crucially, of the victors' setting in motion a global hegemony shorn of experience and tradition. Robert Nisbet mined this view from a sociological perspective. A merciless critic of social engineering in the service of Pax Americana, Nisbet had a special distaste for our contemporary Religious Right. Few tendencies were more frightening to him than these descendants of Cromwell-era ranters attaching themselves to state power. Nisbet having died in 1996, one can only imagine the scowl forming on his face if he were alive during this decade listening to President Bush extol the necessity of transforming Iraq into a showcase democracy.

Come curtain call, a certain melancholy sets in: Everyone here is either dead or elderly. Underneath it all, the book is an elegy for a nearly lost intellectual culture. Truth to tell, I don't find all of these characters attractive, especially Molnar, Bradford, and Genovese, who are reactionaries rather than conservatives, seeing little in the modern world worth conserving. The larger issue, however, is how each of these persons, in agreement on the most important things, contributes to a full picture of Gottfried. And what is that picture? It is one of a self-admitted elitist who sees the State's proper function as administrative management, not moral correction or social justice, and who though possessed of a soft spot for continental European Catholic tradition, is an Old Protestant small-"r" republican in matters of practical governance. Robert A. Taft, not Joseph de Maistre, provides the template for reversing the march to multicultural hell and its attendant mass immigration, affirmative action, and welfare dependency. The presidency of Barack Obama, for now, is the fullest realization of this historical tendency.

The author's vision isn't really mine, for reasons that space does not permit. But it's not cock-eyed either. Of the post-Americans, Right or Left, who see rule of law, national identity, and sovereignty as dispensable, I cannot say the same.

Gottfried, meanwhile, doesn't live like a pessimist. Now in his late 60s, he's happily married to his second wife (his first, tragically, succumbing to breast cancer some 15 years ago) and the father of five grown children. And he writes like he's got a few more books left in him, not to mention hundreds of articles, blogs, and reviews. Getting people to read them, however, is something else. Even his students at Anabaptist-founded Elizabethtown College have proven all too conventional. He notes: "The students I now encounter in my nonage... represent the 'West' not at all. They are merely consumers who occupy the space of what used to be the Western world, and they fall over themselves trying to repudiate the 'sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic' culture that preceded them." Redirecting them will be an uphill fight. The man could use some reinforcements. ■