

Life at the Intellectual Barricades

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At a certain fundamental level, politics is instinct. That which makes us say of a piece of political analysis, "Yes, that is the way things are" or "This is pernicious nonsense," is anterior to and beyond particular evidence or logic: It is, rather, a complex but reflexive product of all we have known and felt and done. We might, on reflection, moderate or even reverse our instinctive reactions, but those initial, immediate impulses tell us and others more of the truth of our political selves than do our possible later revisions.

Breaking Ranks is precisely the kind of book most likely to engage us at the level of instinct. It deals with first principles and does so in an unambiguous manner. The book's line of argument is not without subtlety, but it remains at heart so forceful, even insistent, that it requires of us a straightforward response.

Readers of *Commentary*, which Norman Podhoretz has been editing since 1960, will find nothing to surprise them here. Since the late Sixties, and particularly since 1970, *Commentary* has established itself as the nation's most influential and unflagging enemy of that congeries of impulses known, in various forms and manifestations, as the Movement, the Counterculture, and New Left or the New Politics. Those sympathetic to Sixties radicalism will likely read this book in a continuing blind rage, while those who, like me, found that radicalism at once absurd and frightening, will welcome its appearance and admire its achievement.

The division over *Breaking Ranks* will, in a general sense at least, duplicate the existing division between those who find their political/cultural wisdom in, alternatively, *Commentary* or the *New York Review of Books*. (Things actually aren't quite that simple anymore. The *New York Review* has in recent years undergone its own process of deradicalization and so no longer forms the perfect mirror image of *Commentary* it once did. It has lost its certainty and singleness of purpose; Podhoretz and the *Commentary* crowd have not, however, lost theirs.)

Political reactions aside, this book deserves serious attention. Podhoretz is one of the few intellectuals whose ideas, and whose changes of mind, have made a perceptible difference in the political consciousness of their times. In moving over the past twenty years from

liberalism to radicalism to neoconservatism (or, as he prefers, centrist liberalism), he has attracted continuing attention and controversy, and he has provoked significant intellectual discussion. Whatever one thinks of neoconservatism, and whatever degree of influence it finally exercises on American politics, it has prompted reconsideration of some of the most cherished and venerable assumptions of the left-liberalism that has for so long dominated the political thinking of American intellectuals. *Breaking Ranks* needs to be read, then, if for no other reason than that its author has an important story to tell.

It is fashionable to pretend that the disputes among New York's political intellectuals with which this book is largely (though not exclusively) preoccupied make little difference out in the real America that lies west of the Hudson. But only philistines can suppose that ideas have no impact on politics, and the major role of Manhattan's intellectuals in fashioning America's ideas cannot reasonably be denied. It's true that New York is not America and that it occasionally suffers from a woeful parochialism, but no other place (with the possible exception of Washington) exercises so much influence over what happens across the nation.

Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir, by Norman Podhoretz. (Harper & Row; 375 pp.; \$15.00)

Beyond its importance as political statement, this is simply a very good book. It is not without its flaws—about which more later—but even those who abominate its politics ought to be able to recognize its unsentimental intelligence, its often remarkable insights, and its respect for the seriousness of ideas. Podhoretz has long been an embattled man, and he occasionally succumbs to excessive personalization of conflicts (New York intellectuals *do* seem to have a natural inclination to reduce intellectual dispute to private or political motive), but for the most part his personal references remain fair even where pointed, and his treatment of ideas recognizes nuance and complexity. This is a personal memoir and not a work of disinterested scholarship, but its polemical moments—and Podhoretz has a wonderful instinct for the intellectual jugular—never entirely submerge its analytical sophistication.

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The most remarkable aspect of *Breaking Ranks* is the manner in which it has been put together. Podhoretz wants both to tell his own story and to analyze the development of political thought in the recent American past. He interweaves his two themes in a way that appears artless, almost rambling, and yet what seems at first glance to be merely a random accumulation of anecdotes and observations works to form an intricate and quite brilliant pattern. The final mosaic of people, events, and ideas looks entirely natural but has instead been most carefully structured. The book can be read simply as high gossip—Podhoretz seems at times to have known and dealt with every political and intellectual celebrity of the era—but it remains fundamentally serious in intent and substance. The argument, moreover, is sustained at a very high level throughout.

The significant element of Podhoretz's personal story is how he came twice to change his mind about the condition of American politics. The first change came in the late Fifties when, sensing that the animating ideas of the postwar liberal consensus had played themselves out, he urged a new non-Marxist radicalism in domestic affairs and a relaxation of the hard anticommunism of the cold war era. Paul Goodman and Norman O. Brown wrote for *Commentary* on themes of public purpose and private liberation, while revisionist historians like Staughton Lynd and H. Stuart Hughes challenged the reigning assumptions concerning Soviet-American relations and nuclear strategy. Long before it became fashionable, Podhoretz opposed American intervention in Vietnam. Under his editorship the new *Commentary* revived the tradition of radical intellectual criticism that, it seemed, had fallen victim to the complacencies of a pervasive "American celebration."

Before long, however, doubts began to arise. Already, in 1962, Podhoretz turned down the opportunity to publish the Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society on the basis of its "low intellectual quality." Two years later, during the student strike at Berkeley, he similarly recoiled at the "violence to language and to ideas" involved in the young radicals' reductionism and moral crudity. Much of the intellectual and moral failure of the Movement—which, by the mid-late Sixties, was in full flower—is caught in Podhoretz's observation that "everything was simplified into slogans, fit for shouting and chanting." He is appropriately scathing toward all those middle-class intellectuals who overlooked, when they did not glorify, the students' simplicities.

Only a small percentage of liberal intellectuals went all the way with the New Left—most could not quite swallow its vulgar Marxism—but neither could they bring themselves to reject it cleanly. In a failure both of nerve and of standards, the intellectual fellow-travelers allowed themselves to be stampeded by their dismay over Vietnam and racial conflict into an emotional and guilt-ridden condemnation of their own society and class. Imagining themselves as brave dissenters (conveniently forgetting that dissent is the intellectual's conformity), they joined or at least acquiesced in all the

mindless, vicious talk of "Amerika" and of the evil at the core of its being.

Here, Podhoretz understood, was the heart of the matter—the question of "the nature and character of American society." It was one thing to condemn, as he himself did, military intervention in Vietnam; quite another to invent evil motives for that intervention, to romanticize the Viet Cong and all other revolutionaries, and to portray America as everywhere a malign influence in world affairs. Similarly, it was necessary for decent people to struggle for racial justice, but something else to decide that America's failures on race could be comprehended entirely within the categories of a morality tale or to conclude that those failures told everything that needed to be said concerning the moral standing of the society. In the end, Podhoretz could not accept the notion, axiomatic with the New Left and widespread in the New Politics, that America was a corrupt society whose redemption could only be achieved through massive transformation—revolution for the New Left, "fundamental change" for the New Politics.

In deciding that America was—in the phrase his friend Daniel Patrick Moynihan later used for his New York senatorial campaign—"a society worth defending," Podhoretz made himself, as he wryly puts it, "a traitor to my class." The culture of alienation, he saw, was rooted at once in self-hatred and moral arrogance, with the bourgeois critics of bourgeois society aligning themselves, in their own incredibly self-righteous minds, with the forces of peace, abundance, and brotherhood against, presumably, the dominant American ideologies of war, poverty, and racism. When radicalized liberals carried on about how "we" in America had failed, Podhoretz understood that they almost always meant "they."

Podhoretz launched unrelenting war against the Movement and all its doctrines. He fought intensely against the neutralization of American power abroad and the transformation at home of the traditional ideology of equal opportunity into the radically different concept of guaranteed equal outcomes, whether in the form of racial or sexual quotas or of mandatory equalization of income. It was, by 1970, very stale beer to hold with anticommunism, traditional middle-class values, and a political economy of democratic capitalism (as modified by the welfare state), but that is where Podhoretz established his ground. For that he paid the price of denigration and even ostracism. *Commentary* was no longer fashionable among Left intellectuals, and Podhoretz found himself "avoiding and being avoided" in the social circles he had earlier traveled.

In deciding to stand where he did, when he did, Podhoretz made, in my view, a courageous and necessary choice, and for that many of us will be forever in his debt. He was right, I am convinced, in what he affirmed and what he rejected in the early Seventies, and in the process he and those who stood with him managed to establish, for the first time in modern American history, a resilient and sophisticated body of conservative thought. (In defending traditional liberal-

ism against the radical utopians, Podhoretz had to make use of a number of conservative assumptions concerning man and the social order. Reinhold Niebuhr had tried to do the same a quarter-century earlier, but it never quite took.) Podhoretz and a relatively small number of like-minded thinkers kept political sanity alive when it seemed at times about to disappear. But everything has costs. Podhoretz has, of necessity, been at the barricades for a long while now, and that is a dangerous place for an intellectual to spend too much time.

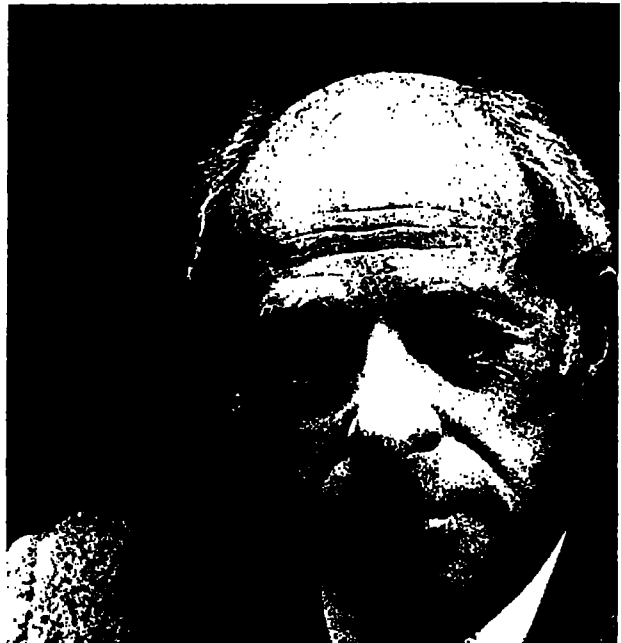
One danger, already noted, is the tendency to personalize and politicize intellectual issues. It shows up here in Podhoretz's slightly off-center discussion of the reception of his earlier book, *Making It* (1967). *Making It*, the story of Podhoretz's early life and career, was savaged by many reviewers, and he remains convinced that most of the criticism was at heart political. He's wrong, I think, though I also think that much of the criticism was wrongheaded and unfair.

In *Making It* Podhoretz argued, on the basis of his own experience, that American attitudes toward success are twisted and hypocritical. Society urges us on to success, but warns us at the same time that the pursuit, even more the attainment, of the bitch-goddess can only end in moral corruption. This, Podhoretz decided, is largely cant and foolishness. His own career had taught him the wonderfully simple and noncorrupting truth that Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* has also learned—that “nice things are better than not nice things.” (It was Lucky Jim, not Podhoretz, who put it that way.) In his own terms, Podhoretz argued that it is better to have money than to be without it, better to be famous than obscure, and better to be able to give orders than to have to take them. Obvious enough truths, one would think, and almost universally accepted in practice, but also almost universally obscured in moral rhetoric. Podhoretz paid for exposing the “dirty little secret.”

But he paid, it still seems clear, not because his ideas violated political taboos—as he thinks—but because they transgressed cultural norms. Intellectuals jumped all over *Making It*, not so much because it contradicted both the liberal-radical view of America's spiritual sickness and the intellectuals' own claim to moral superiority—though there was some of that—but because it challenged certain deeply held cultural (and transpolitical) assumptions concerning the moral nature of public life. There were also, it must be said, occasional gaucheries of tone in *Making It* that left it vulnerable to the critics' assaults and allowed hostile reviewers to evade its central points.

None of this vitiates Podhoretz's arguments in *Breaking Ranks*, but it does to some extent muddy the waters. It will also provide the opportunity for unsympathetic observers to claim, as they have in the past, that Podhoretz's current political views are simply a product of certain frustrations and resentments in his own career. That's a silly and irrelevant argument, and it's unfortunate that anything should be done to allow it to flourish.

Life at the intellectual barricades also contains the potential for excessive rigidity. In my own view, Podhor-



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etz's perspectives on foreign policy now run that risk. He is, I think, right to insist on philosophical and strategic anticommunism (and too much of the Left refuses to face that necessity), but he seems to underestimate the willingness of Americans to defend the national interest and is too quick to label as “appeasement” the views of those more sympathetic to détente than he. (This attitude, it should be noted, shows up more clearly in *Commentary* than it does in *Breaking Ranks*.) When a foreign policy realist as traditional as Henry Kissinger is viewed as excessively soft—as he regularly is in *Commentary*'s pages—one begins to wonder about the angle of perception.

More generally, there is the question of where Podhoretz and neoconservatism go from here. Thanks in no small part to him, the Movement and its friends have lost the political initiative and retired from the field. They lie wounded, but not slain. In the meantime, we are a blessedly less politicized nation than we were several years ago. In such murky and uncertain conditions it will be difficult for neoconservatives, so much of whose definition came from what they opposed, to maintain a clear sense of themselves and what they stand for. If *Commentary* and Podhoretz are to avoid refighting battles they have already won, they will have to augment their eternal vigilance with some creative vision. Podhoretz himself understands this; he has written more than once on the tendency of any body of ideas, however vital or fecund, to run down to banality in time. Everything becomes cliché in the end.

But such concerns are for the future, and they extend in any case beyond consideration of *Breaking Ranks*. Whatever he achieves in the years to come, Norman Podhoretz has already left his mark on his times, and he has recorded his efforts in a book so good that it will itself become a necessary part of posterity's remembrance of how things were then. That, surely, is making it with a vengeance. [WV]