

Confessions

STATINTL



TWENTY YEARS AGO I was an extreme right-wing Republican, a young and lone "Neanderthal" (as the liberals used to call us) who believed, as one friend pungently put it, that "Senator Taft had sold out to the socialists." Today, I am most likely to be called an extreme leftist, since I favor immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, denounce U.S. imperialism, advocate Black Power and have just joined the new Peace and Freedom Party. And yet my basic political views have not changed by a single iota in these two decades!

It is obvious that something is very wrong with the old labels, with the categories of "left" and "right," and with the ways in which we customarily apply these categories to American political life. My personal odyssey is unimportant; the important point is that if I can move from "extreme right" to "extreme left" merely by standing in one place, drastic though unrecognized changes must have taken place throughout the American political spectrum over the last generation.

I joined the right-wing movement—to give a formal name to a very loose and informal set of associations—as a young graduate student shortly after the end of World War II. There was no question as to where the intellectual right of that day stood on militarism and conscription: it opposed them as instruments of mass slavery and mass murder. Conscription, indeed, was thought far worse than other forms of statist controls and incursions, for while these only appropriated part of the individual's property, the draft, like slavery, took his most precious possession: his own person. Day after day the

veteran publicist John T. Flynn—once praised as a liberal and then condemned as a reactionary, with little or no change in his views— inveighed implacably in print and over the radio against militarism and the draft. Even the *Wall Street* newspaper, the *Commercial and Financial Chronicle*, published a lengthy attack on the idea of conscription.

All of our political positions, from the free market in economics to opposing war and militarism, stemmed from our root belief in individual liberty and our opposition to the state. Simplistically, we adopted the standard view of the political spectrum: "left" meant socialism, or total power of the state; the further "right" one went the less government one favored. Hence, we called ourselves "extreme rightists."

Originally, our historical heroes were such men as Jefferson, Paine, Cobden, Bright and Spencer; but as our views became purer and more consistent, we eagerly embraced such near-anarchists as the voluntarist, Auberon Herbert, and the American individualist-anarchists, Lysander Spooner and Benjamin R. Tucker. One of our great intellectual heroes was Henry David Thoreau, and his essay, "Civil Disobedience," was one of our guiding stars. Right-wing theorist Frank Chodorov devoted an entire issue of his monthly, *Analysis*, to an appreciation of Thoreau.

In our relation to the remainder of the American political scene, we of course recognized that the extreme right of the Republican Party was not made up of individualist anti-statists, but they were close enough to our position to make us feel part of a quasi-libertarian united front. Enough of our views were present among the extreme members of the Taft wing of the Republican Party (much more so than in Taft himself, who was among the most liberal of that wing), and in such organs as the *Chicago Tribune*, to make us feel quite comfortable with this kind of alliance.

WHAT IS MORE, the right-wing Republicans were major opponents of the Cold War. Valiantly, the extreme rightist Republicans, who were particularly strong in the House, battled conscription, NATO and the Truman Doctrine. Consider, for example, Omaha's Representative Howard Buffett, Senator Taft's midwestern campaign manager in 1952. He was one of the most extreme of the extremists, once described by *The Nation* as "an able young man whose ideas have tragically fossilized."

I came to know Buffett as a genuine and thoughtful libertarian. Attacking the Truman Doctrine on the floor of Congress, he declared: "Even if it were desirable, America is not strong enough to police the world by military force. If that attempt is made, the blessings of liberty will be replaced by coercion and tyranny at home. Our Christian ideals cannot be exported to other lands by dollars and guns."