

The American Conservative

Thinking About Dead Libertarians

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I have been thinking about dead libertarians.

The proximate cause is the recent death of historian Ralph Raico. He was a mordant wit and a fiery orator—his talk at the Cato Institute on the 70th anniversary of the Russian Revolution remains the most searing indictment of Soviet tyranny I have ever heard. But he remains a mystery to me.

Our friendship was epistolary. Though Ralph taught and lived in Buffalo, 40 miles to our west, I saw him but once in the last quarter century. Ralph was company-averse. Now, it could be that I am a peculiarly unpleasant lunch companion, but others who knew him better had the same experience. I once spoke at an awards ceremony for the Buffalo State history department—held in a hail-fellow downtown bar—and yet his colleagues could not persuade Ralph to venture the five blocks for a beer and a hello.

I figured Ralph must have been ill when last year he dropped me a note saying that he was disposing of his library and asking if I'd like to come by and select some books. Would I ever! I can only imagine the anarcho-esoterica lodged on those shelves. "How about next week?" I replied—and of course I never heard from him again.

I wish I'd known what made him tick. But had I ever asked Ralph such a trite question, he'd have parried it with a devastating witticism.

Ralph was one of a coterie of older libertarians who sailed letters my way when I joined the staff of *Reason* magazine in 1985. Though my background was populist liberal, they quickly kenneled that I was unapologetically antiwar in the isolationist, quasi-pacifist tradition of the Lost America.

Besides Ralph, my welcome wagon consisted of the ebullient Murray Rothbard, the gentlemen Leonard Liggio and Joseph Peden, and the massive and complicated Roy Childs.

Like the early neoconservatives, the libertarian graybeards were mostly Catholics and Jews and largely New York City-bred or based. Some had met during the Robert Taft presidential

campaign. Who'd have guessed that Youth for Taft ins '52 was hipper than a John Clellon Holmes-Allen Ginsberg-Jack Kerouac rent party? (Kerouac, a good Catholic Taft supporter, would have understood.)

I liked their incongruities. The mild-mannered Liggio, long-time president of the Institute for Humane Studies, had been a prominent member of the Vietnam-era Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal. Ralph, who authored the fledgling Libertarian Party's rousing defense of gay rights, mailed lovely Madonna and Child Christmas cards.

Then there was Murray Rothbard. The chairman and sole member of Columbia Students for Strom Thurmond in 1948 (he supported the Palmetto State horndog-segregationist on states' rights grounds), Rothbard joined the New Left Peace and Freedom Party in 1968, confident in his perfect consistency.

Ayn Rand had expelled Rothbard from her circle when he refused to divorce his wife, JoAnn, a Christian. It seems that JoAnn had not apostatized despite reading atheist tracts recommended by Rand. Theism was thought-crime!

Roy Childs was of the next generation. A skilled polemicist who edited the late 1970s journal *Libertarian Review*, Childs also whipped up seductive ad copy for Howie and Andrea Rich at Laissez Faire Books. The guy could make the phone book (ask your parents what that was) sound like a Tolstoyan epic. ("Crammed with fascinating people!")

He must have weighed at least 400 pounds. At the Cato Institute's 10th anniversary soirée in Washington, D.C., my soon-to-be-wife swiped a dessert from Roy: an act of derring-do that puts the phony exploits of cinematic ass-kicking babes to shame.

Rothbard is remembered, but those unborn will never know why the others cast such long shadows. Joe Peden wrote little; prose was not Leonard's métier; Ralph's published work is mostly about German classical liberalism; and though Roy's best columns were put between covers by his friend Joan Kennedy Taylor, I doubt he is read much anymore.

Yet these men were sublimely sagacious on the critical political issues of the age—peace, antimilitarism, and resistance to the regimenting state. These were not desiccated souls, archetypes of *homo economicus*, fitters of the shopworn caricature of libertarians as profit-maximizing, selfishness-extolling asocial creeps, which describes approximately zero of the libertarians I have known. Okay, I've encountered one or two on the Internet, but I disbelieve their existence, just as I doubt the corporeality of Kendall Jenner or Anderson Cooper.

Ralph and Leonard and Murray and Joe and Roy had the rebel spirit. They were as deep-dyed in the American grain as Anti-Federalists, runaway slaves, baseball hippies, and draft-resister farmers. They didn't beg crumbs from Master's table. They were not afraid to be radical or reactionary; they had no desire for entombment in the mausoleum of political respectability.

They stood in front of tanks and flashed peace signs. As Wendell Berry counsels, they were joyful—even though they had considered all the facts.