

## Steve Klingaman: Hated Roosevelt, Hate Obama: Paleoconservative Persuasions

Source: [Open Salon](#) (11-5-09)

[Steve Klingaman is a nonprofit development consultant and nonfiction writer living in Minneapolis. His music reviews can be found at [minor7th.com](#)]

In the crusade against Obama administration efforts on behalf of economic recovery and health care reform, we encounter lies, damn lies, and Republican talking points. Touchstones like: “government takeover,” “government-run,” “profligate spending,” “usurpation of power”—where did they all come from? Well, in a word, they all came from this guy named Albert Jay Nock.

Albert Jay Nock was one of the most virulent critics of President Roosevelt and his administration’s efforts to extract the nation from the Great Depression. Nock’s opus, *Our Enemy, the State*, published in 1935, attacked the New Deal in terms that, well, you’d have to listen to Glen Beck to replicate. Or Michele Bachmann. Or Rush. It is the source code for anti-Obama talking points.

Born in Pennsylvania and based for much of his life in New York and Brussels, Nock was a visiting professor at Bard College and a lecturer at University of Virginia. He was a failed Episcopalian cleric who wrote proto-libertarian works rooted in a philosophical tradition that would never fly today. Yet many of his sound bites endure.

Nock saw the state as “them,” not “us,” and “them” really came to mean Roosevelt. You must know that Roosevelt was hated by many during the Great Depression. Not disliked, hated. The laissez faire crowd saw every move toward government relief of intolerable conditions as government self-aggrandizement—Nock’s term, not mine. Despite the fact that people were desperate in the streets, extreme-sport capitalists saw only usurpation of the powers of the church (as the precursor to the modern social relief agency) and the individual—that old fall-back, the rugged individual—Nock’s term, not mine.

Nock preferred alms-to-beggars to a hand-up from the government, and said so, as he does here in lamenting government involvement in social relief programs as somehow causing individuals to fall away from the ethos of mutual assistance:

*We can get some kind of rough measure of this general atrophy by our own disposition when approached by a beggar. Two years ago we might have been moved to give him something; today we are moved to refer him to the State's relief-agency.*

Initiatives like the legendary Civilian Conservation Corps, the CCC, were presented as Mr. Roosevelt “announcing the doctrine, brand-new in our history, that the State owes its citizens a living.” And such a measure, he felt, was simply a pretext for increasing government control. “Thus the State,” he wrote, “turns

every contingency into a resource' for accumulating power in itself..."

## Hated Roosevelt, Hate Obama

The issue was with Roosevelt himself:

*State power has not only been thus concentrated at Washington, but it has been so far concentrated into the hands of the Executive that the existing régime is a régime of personal government.*

Professor Nock pulls no punches. With a Beckian flourish he proclaims, "This regime was established by a coup d'État of a new and unusual kind, practicable only in a rich country." Yup. A coup d'état. You almost want to ask for Mr. Roosevelt's birth certificate.

Nock's antipathy to Roosevelt knew few boundaries. Perversely, Nock saw in the New Deal, "the erection of poverty and mendicancy into a permanent political asset." As if, rather than responding to a national emergency, Roosevelt was amassing poverty as political capital, as an opportunistic end in itself even during the depths of the Great Depression. To a Republican of a certain brand, this was gospel.

## Socialists by Any Other Name

Here is Nock's take on the form of relief that would become known as Social Security:

*The method of direct subsidy, or sheer cash-purchase, [as if Roosevelt was literally buying the poor] will therefore in all probability soon give way to the indirect method of what is called "social legislation"; that is, a multiplex system of State-managed pensions, insurances and indemnities of various kinds.*

Instead of socialists, Nock railed against "collectivists." Nock remarked, "One of my friends said to me lately that if the public-utility corporations did not mend their ways, the State would take over their business and operate it." Of course, Nock felt this was repugnant. But what he doesn't say is the utilities weren't bothering to electrify vast expanses of rural America because there was no money in it.

Nock was an adherent of mid-19th century English proto-libertarian Herbert Spencer. Spencer was to contemporary social thought what the reptilian brain is to Einstein. Spencer characterized any government-run effort as "slow, stupid, extravagant, unadaptive, corrupt and obstructive." Interestingly, Nock professed this belief as his own just ten years before the "greatest generation" went to war under Roosevelt and saved the world, for a while anyway, from fascism.

## Birthing Cato

"Every intervention by the State enables another, and this in turn another, and so on indefinitely" wrote Nock. And every intervention life-saving or not was

so on machinery... While Nock and every intervention, the saying of not, was seen as usurpation of individual power. In that jealousy he established that elected government was a thing to be hated, and ultimately, abolished. In this respect, his thought was a precursor to the anarcho-capitalists, or as I call them, anarcho-libertarians. Little known but influential libertarians such as Frank Chodorov and Murray Rothbard were his intellectual progeny, as was William F. Buckley, Jr., who got to know Nock, a supplicant of Buckley senior, while still a child. Ayn Rand fits in here, too. So we see these two strands emanating from the visiting professor's thought, tangling and untangling over time, but always united in opposition to the State, enemy of freedom.

In Nock's construct, individual perogatives were manifest as social power, as opposed to State power. Corporate power, too, was social power:

*Does social power mismanage banking-practice in this-or-that special instance - then let the State, which never has shown itself able to keep its own finances from sinking promptly into the slough of misfeasance, wastefulness and corruption, intervene to "supervise" or "regulate" the whole body of banking-practice, or even take it over entire.*

In a rare moment of informality, Nock bends to facetiousness. Having the State take over failed financial institutions is represented pretty much as a crime against nature. And somehow, Nock manages to see the Crash of '29 as a mere "special instance," an "Oh, that" moment. Furthermore, he has the temerity to go on the offensive against any and all regulation after the nation's life savings have been wiped out. And what were they wiped out by? The market abuses of a decade of laissez faire government. One can only think, "Cato Institute, here we come!"

To Nock, as to libertarians today, social power is locked in a zero sum gain struggle with state power. If state power can in any way said to be increasing, then social power must be decreasing. Sarah Palin rushes to these ramparts with her codified rhetoric under the banner of freedom. Michele Bachman is her lesser echo. Freedom from government. Freedom from them—us.

There is a technical political term, called paleoconservatism—you can't make this stuff up—that describes Nock-inspired thought. Paleoconservatism espouses anti-communism, isolationism, "family values," Americanism, rugged individualism, anti-Statism, and religion (Christians only, thank you). The term is used in opposition to neocon. The paleoconservative motto might be, "Praise God, but get even."<sup>1</sup> Visiting professor Nock may have been the original paleoconservative, the Lucy of his ilk.

Nock's thought arises a multi-layered 19th century tradition of philosophy. He was well-read in the Federalist papers. He is about Hegel. And early 20th century anti-statist Franz Oppenheimer. He even critiques Plato. Serious scholarship could be performed on this guy. But why bother? In his heart of hearts, he was like Beck, a mouthy polemicist.

**"History? We don't need no stinkin' history!"**

## HISTORY: WE DON'T NEED TO STUDY HISTORY.

It is an overworn truism that those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it. But who would have guessed that any party could break its back to repeat it so thoroughly, in the carbon copy reaction we see in the Republicans at this moment?

The Obama administration will never be able to prove that financial catastrophe was avoided by its interventions (and by the impossibly ironic Paulson-led interventions of the dying Bush regime). You can't prove a negative like that. And, in that respect at least, the present moment is far different than the Great Depression, when they went over the falls. History, I predict, will attest to the very great likelihood that the Obama administration did stem the tide of disaster. And it will show that for the most part the administration held its nose as it did so. Despite this, Obama will forever wear the mantle of usurper, government overstepper, just like Roosevelt, in the rhetoric of that obscure, somewhat creepy (he wrote an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* titled "The Jewish Problem in America") ex-cleric from Scranton.

Let them—the Republicans—say what they will, history proclaims Roosevelt was right, and that only a cohesive federal government can marshal the forces necessary to counter a national economic collapse.

But we have an entire party, a party bereft of a moderate wing, standing in the town square, fingers in ears, screaming "Redo, redo!" And while the Republicans still envy the spoils that control of the State entails, in their mushy heart of hearts that tiny anarcho-libertarian muscle is beating away, a little Energizer Bunny from a paleolithic era of political thought.

Note to Scholars: I readily acknowledge that Nock was in no way the only Depression-era antecedent for current conservative talking points. He was merely one of the most visible and audacious. We would not want to forget Mr. Hoover, who railed against Roosevelt for the better part of a decade after losing office.