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The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft, Russell Kirk and James McClellan, Transaction, 243 pages

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The reader of a conservative disposition who chances upon Russell Kirk's 1967 *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft*, now reissued by Transaction Publishers and in paperback for the first time, is bound to experience that odd tingling sensation we call *déjà vu*. Arguing that the New Deal had pretty much expired—having been proved a failure—before Taft had entered the national political scene and taken his place in the U.S. Senate, Kirk and his co-author James McClellan write, “And yet for the following thirteen years, Taft found it necessary to argue incessantly with leading members of his own party as to whether the Republicans should come to terms with the allegedly triumphant New Deal. Many Republicans continued in a political trauma, shocked by their defeats of 1932 and 1936, and could think only of making concessions to the new order.”

A giant leap into government control of the economy, a nation on the brink of the economic abyss, and a popular liberal Democratic president whose programs have a revolutionary air—we have been here before. Then, too, there were those on the Right who counseled retreat, accommodation, and defeatism—the David Frums of their time, who argued that labeling FDR's panoply of government programs “socialism” was too extreme and who only served to marginalize the Republican opposition.



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Taft, though not temperamentally a radical, made no bones about his opinion of the New Dealers. Many of them, he declared in a radio debate, “have no concern whatever for individual freedom. They are collectivists, like Marx and Lenin and Mussolini. They believe in planned economy; that the government should regulate every detail of industrial and commercial and agricultural life.” The New Deal represented a “policy which inevitably leads to bankruptcy and inflation of the currency” and “will not only make the poor people poorer, but it is likely to force a socialism which will utterly deprive them of individual freedom.”

Those were fighting words that very few in the cowed Republican opposition were willing to speak, although they may have believed them—or feared them—in their hearts. Taft rallied the GOP remnants and the beleaguered American Right under the banner of liberty and responsibility at a time when the headwinds of collectivism were blowing mightily from every direction. Around him he gathered a movement, which today is known as the Old Right—as distinguished from the “New” Right of William F. Buckley Jr. and *National Review*, which inherited from Taft and his confrères the mantle of opposition but did little to honor it. That movement is now virtually unknown or chiefly remembered by its enemies, who continue to smear it with the ignorant epithets coined by the New Dealers and their propaganda machine.

Conservatives without historical memory would seem to be a contradiction in terms, yet that is the situation in which we find ourselves some 70 years after Taft’s heyday. Conservatives seem to have forgotten their past, which is a pity because the history of their movement is rich with lessons for today, as illustrated by this modest little book.

As Kirk shows in detailing Taft’s career as leader of the party’s conservative wing, RINO’s have always been with us: “The ‘liberal,’ or anti-Taft, element of the Republican party ... acted upon the assumption that the New Deal was irrevocable.” While the party rank-and-file might find That Man in the White House detestable and his policies execrable, they insisted that a more accommodating public face was the key to victory at the polls. They lost consistently and miserably. Landon, Willkie, and Dewey—they were all defeated betting that principled opposition to Roosevelt’s revolution was incompatible with electoral success. Three times the party’s Eastern Establishment blocked Taft from getting the GOP’s presidential nomination. It wasn’t until Eisenhower that the moderates scored a victory, but it was the triumph of a popular military commander rather than the party. As Kirk points out, the GOP “steadily declined while Eisenhower held office—declined in Congress, and in state and local elections” and was reduced to a minority in the 1954 congressional contest. The decline continued into the 1958 elections, when the party’s congressional caucus shrank to what it had been during the Roosevelt years.

When Taft died in 1953, one newspaper obituary gave voice to the despair that gripped the Old Right as it faced the smug complacency of the Eisenhower years: “Yes, Bob is gone, and there is no one to take his place,” wrote the publisher of the *New Bedford Standard-Times*. “This alone is a tragedy comparable to the passing of Lincoln. But with Bob Taft goes the Republican Party. In its place is a faceless, slinking thing,

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bearing only the name Republican, a name indeed which President Eisenhower hardly has mentioned since he was elected under its label.”

Certainly it was “a faceless, slinking thing” that in 2009 nominated Dede Scozzafava in New York’s 23rd congressional district—a candidate who positioned herself to the left of the Democrat and earned a well-deserved defeat after a third-party conservative entered the race.

Taft’s entry onto the national scene came too late to stop the collectivist tide on the home front but just in time to oppose FDR’s rush to war. Here is where the contemporary “conservative” reader will be shocked to discover that his intellectual and political ancestors held foreign-policy views so far removed from the Bismarckian nationalism of Fox News and the *Weekly Standard* crowd that the distance can only be measured in light years. These views are routinely derided as isolationist, but Taft’s position, as Kirk shows, could today be fairly described as realist: “In international affairs, Taft declared, the New Dealers forever tilted, like so many Quixotes, against windmills. Their objects never well defined even in their own minds, they talked of perpetual peace and the ‘Four Freedoms’; they dreamed of a universal democratic order on the American model; they conjured up stereotypes of nations, and sought to make alliances with—or wars upon—those deceptive simulacra.”

In describing the past, Kirk seems to have predicted our dreary future. Only this time, it is Republicans who are carrying the banner of a “universal democratic order on the American model.” And as for conjuring up stereotypes, what else helped motivate the neoconservative crusade to “transform” the Middle East?

Kirk continues, “Meanwhile, the principle of America’s national interest went glimmering. And while utopian fantasies occupied the imagination of the men responsible for American foreign policy, the other powers of the world ... continued to act, to their advantage and to America’s loss, upon the ineluctable principle of *their* national interests. ... [O]nly American political leaders sincerely entertained the fallacy that foreign policy is a facile instrument of ‘moral righteousness,’ or that it somehow may open the doors to the Terrestrial Paradise.”

For Taft—and Kirk, who waxes particularly eloquent when describing Taft’s disdain for crusading “democratism”—the foundational principle of a truly conservative foreign policy is a respect for the natural limits not only of American power but of human capabilities. If, as Taft averred, “socialism will not work” because “there is no man and no group of men intelligent enough to coordinate and control the infinitely numerous and complex problems involved in the production, consumption, and daily lives of one hundred and twenty million individualistic and educated people,” then the task of coordinating and controlling a global empire would be a fool’s errand. Yet it is precisely that errand on which the fools who now call themselves conservatives—or, more precisely, neoconservatives—would have us embark.

Kirk, in his later years, had a memorable run-in with that movement in a famous lecture delivered at the Heritage Foundation. As prominent neocons sat horrified in the audience, Kirk described the members of this “political sect” as “often clever, but seldom wise.” He went on in this vein, citing a letter from a prominent Pennsylvania historian of conservative sentiments who described the then newcomers from Manhattan’s Upper West Side as “selfish and uninstructed radicals and progressives, wishing to pour cement all over the country and make the world safe for democracy, well beyond the dreams of Wilson. ... A feeling for the land, for its conservation, and for the strong modesty of a traditional patriotism (as distinct from nationalism) none of them has.”

Certainly the author of *The Conservative Mind* would have been aghast at the sight of the neoconservatives at the helm of the United States, rampaging through the Middle East. He rightly avowed, again in that famous Heritage lecture, that while the neocons had been alert to the dangers posed by international communism, “they have been rash in their schemes of action, pursuing a fanciful democratic globalism rather than the national interest of the United States; on such occasions I have tended to side with those moderate Libertarians who set their faces against foreign entanglements. And not seldom it has seemed as if some eminent Neoconservatives mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States.”

That crack earned him unremitting enmity in certain quarters: the truth hurts. Kirk had the neocons’ number, back when they were just a minor carbuncle on the general body of the conservative movement. Of them, he predicted “within a very few years we will hear no more.” If only that had come to pass—we would have been spared two ruinous wars and a third on the way. Instead of becoming “merged with the main current of America’s conservative movement,” the neocons have become the main current. One can imagine the mischievous glimmer in his eyes as the Sage of Mecosta mocked the neocons’ vainglorious pretensions: “There was published in a recent number of *Commentary* a charmingly naïve essay in which it was argued that the children and grandchildren of extant Neoconservatives would come to form a Sacred Band, calling themselves Neoconservatives life long, and ruling the American roost. This dream ignores the fact that things initially new do not long remain new: everything ages; yesteryear’s novelty ceases to charm.”

They don’t quite rule the American roost, yet that Sacred Band has indeed founded an ideological dynasty, one that, having driven the conservative movement and, with it, the Republican Party into the ground, now presides over the mutant remnants of what had once been the party of Taft. Kirk would have been horrified, to say nothing of Taft—and the feeling of antipathy would no doubt be mutual. What appalls the neocons about Taft and his friends is that the Old Right steadfastly opposed U.S. entry into World War II. To the neocons, for whom it is always 1939, this is an impermissible heresy. Yet in the conservative movement of the 1960s, when Kirk’s study of Taft first came out, it was uncontroversial that a leading conservative scholar would casually and approvingly describe Taft’s opposition to the war as being rooted in “two prejudices (using that word in its neutral sense): his prejudice in favor of peace, and his prejudice against empire—that is, against American aspirations of hegemony over much of the world.”

Modern “conservatives” who come upon this quotation sans attribution would doubtless hear some “America-hating” leftist talking. Learning that these are the words of a founding father of their movement should cause a few heads to explode.

These views were unremarkable to the conservatives of not so long ago for the simple reason that they followed logically from the worldview of those who wanted to limit the power and size of government and preserve the centrality of what Kirk called “the permanent things.” For Kirk and for Taft, war “was the enemy of constitution, liberty, economic security, and the cake of custom.” It had to be the very last resort, not only because it “would make the American President a virtual dictator, diminish the constitutional powers of Congress, contract civil liberties, injure the habitual self-reliance and self-government of the American people, distort the economy,” and “sink the federal government in debt” but also because it would “break in upon private and public morality,” destroying the very basis of our Christian civilization. The damage it would inflict “might require generations for the nation to recover”—like a brief but near-lethal encounter with pneumonia or cancer marks one for years—even if it was “a war of a few years’ duration.”

After eight years of constant warfare—occasioned by deception, a regime of torture, and a wholesale assault on the Constitution and what remains of our civil liberties—it is difficult to see how we can hope to come out of it (if we ever come out of it) with our sense of humanity intact, let alone our old Republic. The damage could well be permanent, and, in any case, it may be a horse race between the healing process and the time we have left before we’re driven into bankruptcy.

Taft opposed U.S. entry into World War II for all of the reasons given above and for his belief that the Soviet Union posed a far greater threat—an internal one, as well as an external military one—than Nazi Germany. In spite of the Roosevelt administration’s smear campaign against war opponents, which tied them to a pro-Nazi “fifth column,” the reality was that the German ideology had little or no appeal inside the United States. That, as the Red Decade of the 1930s showed, did not apply to the Soviets, who had plenty of friends here, including some in high places. Taft believed we had to deal first and foremost with the Soviets.

After the war, however, he did not, like many conservatives, jump on the Cold War bandwagon. He retained his principled anti-interventionist stance, albeit not always consistently, opposing the formation of NATO, questioning the concept of collective security, opposing the “victor’s justice” of the Nuremberg trials, and criticizing Truman’s decision to send troops to Korea without congressional approval—although he supported the effort once the troops were in the field. He attacked the growing power of the president to send troops anywhere, at any time, without consulting Congress—a precedent Truman set, which has had unfortunate consequences visited upon us to this day. It didn’t matter that Truman had the sanction of the United Nations Security Council; what he really needed was the consent of Congress, which he never sought until the troops had already arrived. If this were allowed, Taft maintained, then “on the same theory

he could send troops to Tibet to resist Communist aggression or to Indo-China or to anywhere else in the world.” A few years later, the first American “advisers” would be sent to Indo-China to help the French secure their colonies—naturally without Congress’s consent—and a disastrous chapter in the history of U.S. interventionism started.

In an era when radio-shouters, vulgar hucksters, and out-and-out charlatans have taken the spotlight on the American Right, conservatives need to remember their past—to get back in touch with their roots. While the conservative movement is cut adrift, looking for an anchor, what could be better than the principled prudence of these two nearly forgotten giants, Kirk and Taft? □

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