

## Introduction

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*“Reaction is the most radical of programs; it aims at cutting away the overgrowth and getting back to the roots.”*

—ALLEN TATE



I am an American patriot. A Jeffersonian decentralist. A fanatical localist. And I am an anarchist. Not a sallow garret-rat translating Proudhon by pirated kilowatt, nor a militiaman catechized by the Classic Comics version of *The Turner Diaries*; rather, I am the love child of Henry Thoreau and Dorothy Day, conceived amidst the asters and goldenrod of an Upstate New York autumn.

Like so many of the subjects of this book, I am also a reactionary radical, which is to say I believe in peace and justice but I do not believe in smart bombs, daycare centers, Wal-Mart, television, or Melissa Etheridge’s test-tube baby.

“Reactionary radicals” are those Americans whose political radicalism (often inspired by the principles of 1776 and the culture of the early America) is combined with—in fact, flows from—a deep-set social “conservatism.”

These are not radicals who wish to raze venerable institutions and make them anew: they are, in fact, at antipodes from the warhead-clutching egghead described by (the reactionary radical) Robert Lee Frost:

*With him the love of country means  
Blowing it all to smithereens  
And having it all made over new*





LOOK HOMEWARD, AMERICA



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These reactionary radicals—a capacious category in which I include Dorothy Day, Carolyn Chute, Grant Wood, Eugene McCarthy, Wendell Berry, and a host of other cultural and political figures—have sought to tear down what is artificial, factitious, imposed by remote and often coercive forces and instead cultivate what is local, organic, natural, and family-centered.

In our almost useless political taxonomy, some are labeled “right wing” and others are tucked away on the left, but in fact they are kin: embodiments of an American cultural-political tendency that is wholesome, rooted, and based in love of family, community, local self-rule, and a respect for permanent truths. We find them not at the clichéd “bloody crossroads” but at thrillingly fruitful conjunctions: think Robert Nisbet by way of Christopher Lasch, or Russell Kirk by way of Paul Goodman. Think, always, of things tending homeward.

Not that I have never strayed from home. From Alaska to North Dakota, from visits with pacifist homesteaders to neo-Confederate painters, I have sought what is vital, alive, flavorful, and seditious in American political life. I started in the employ of Pat Moynihan, the most intellectually impressive liberal Democrat of postwar America, and have ended at a homespun anarchism deep-dyed in the native grain, as the sort of typewriter agrarian who, quite unsuspectingly, bakes zucchini bread with cucumbers, somewhat in the manner of blessed old Henry Thoreau taking his wash in from Walden Pond for mom to do on weekends.

My favorite America is the America of holy fools and backyard radicals, the America whose eccentric voice is seldom heard anymore in the land of Clear Channel, Disney, and Gannett. It is the America of third parties, of Greenbackers and Libertarians and village atheists and the “conservative Christian anarchist” party whose founder and only member was Henry Adams. It is the America that is always disappearing but whose rebirth is written in the face of every homeschooled girl, every poet of the wheat fields, every boy who chooses baseball over Microsoft, birdhouse-building over the U.S. Army. It is the America of those who harbor the





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crazy belief that Middle American culture might add up to something more than the oeuvre of Dean Jones.

Yet while I like a tidy Manichean division as much as the next zealot, I readily if glumly concede that as Middle Americans the fault lies in ourselves, as I learned on a sojourn in Columbus, Mississippi, a few years back. We drove into this lovely town of antebellum mansions and magnolia-fragrant avenues, stopping at a local eatery. I am a hopeful romantic and expected to find vatic old black men whittling on benches, laconic loafers drawling wittily on courthouse steps, and tomboyish Nelle Harper Lee hiding in the bushes, taking it all down. Eh, not quite, Bill. The first Columbian we encountered was a sullen youth from Teenage Central Casting, playing the usual corporate schlock on his boombox. We entered the diner and were seated behind four ladies with mellifluous Mississippi accents. They spent the next half-hour recounting the plot of the previous night's episode of *Friends*, that vulgar and witless NBC sitcom by which archeologists will someday condemn our civilization.

I wanted to confront them, plead with them: Look. Here you are, citizens of the economically poorest yet culturally richest state in the union, the state that gave us Eudora Welty, the Delta Blues, William Faulkner, Muddy Waters, Shelby Foote, and yet you not only consume but crave the packaged products of cocaine-addled East/West Coast greedheads who despise you as ignorant rednecks and stupid crackers. Get off your knees, Mississippi!

Well, I didn't say that, checked as I am by that Upstate New York reserve. But I meant every word I didn't say. Until Americans take the Chute route of rejecting the remote and pestilential institutions that mean us harm, and of choosing the free, the local, the life-givingly anarchic, the Columbuses will rot into Columbins.

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I interlard my work with memoir and personal asides the way my wife adds garlic to her cooking: liberally, unabashedly, with the conviction that flavor and spice make savor and nice. But a little extra garlic never hurt anyone. Except the undead.

I begin *Look Homeward, America* with two Catholic Democrats, Senator Eugene McCarthy and my old boss, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. McCarthy, whom I interviewed several times, was a constitutionalist liberal in an age of extraconstitutional liberalism. He was the link between the Old Progressives of the Upper Midwest—boreal Jeffersonians—and the ADA liberals; as time went by and his profile sharpened, McCarthy proved to be much closer to Bob LaFollette than to Adlai Stevenson.

Pat Moynihan's extraordinary career informed—gave shape to—many of the currents that have twisted and twined the Democratic Party and that, withal, drove me away from liberalism. He was both Cassandra and coward, tower and trimmer.

At his best, Moynihan was a blend of radical and reactionary, in the manner of the great postwar literary American patriots: Edmund Wilson, Gore Vidal, Norman Mailer, Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman. Like Eugene McCarthy, he was precocious in his critique of the devastating effect the Interstate Highway System would have on American life. He descried (and decried), with considerable foresight, the virtual expulsion of devout Catholic Democrats from the party, and the ways that this purge would deprive the Democrats of their anchorage in the neighborhood. He was also a late-blooming skeptic of American Empire, as his fulsome eulogists conveniently ignored.

In between . . . well, he sure got good press. But more on that later.

Oh, Pat, I hardly knew ye, yet I sure as hell knew I didn't want to be like ye. Disgusted by the timidity and lack of imagination of liberal Democrats, afire with belief in absolute liberty, I crossed the grand ballroom of American politics. . . . No, that's not right. Better to say that I left the palace and followed the din to the tarpaper shack way down by the laissez river. I jumped into libertarianism as an editor of *Reason*, the oldest and



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largest of libertarian magazines and a harbinger of the market-worship that would overtake—that would briefly invigorate, but then deaden—late-twentieth-century America.

If only the libertarians simply sought maximum personal freedom: legalized dope and criminalized taxation. Neat inversions, those. And clearly part of the zeitgeist, to swipe a favorite term of the movement. Alas, the movement, and *Reason* in particular, had been infected at birth by the misanthropic pulp-novelist Ayn Rand, who hissed at William F. Buckley Jr., “Mr. Buckley, you are too intelligent to be-leef in gott.” The priestess Rand’s only god was selfishness, which she deemed a “virtue” in the title of one of her unreadable nonfiction word-clots.

My casual confession—exaggeration, really—that I was “a good Catholic boy” earned me the enmity of a Randian founder of the magazine, one of those English-as-a-fourth-language Eastern European immigrants who had forsaken his homeland only to seek to bring the spirit of Soviet bloc regimentation to our country, à la Dr. Strangelove, Edward Teller, who was always pestering idiosyncratic Americans to take up the grey, dreary, antihuman metric system. Anyway, our libertarian immigrant asked with (Joe, not Gene) McCarthyite urgency in one confidential missive, “Do you notice whether Kauffman interjects his theistic, altruistic ethical and political views into his editorial decisions and opinions?”

Well, uh, yes, I suppose I did, but I would also, by the grace of that Gott who conjoins congenial subeditors, meet a dazzling array of kooks and patriots, of Mormon polygamists and bellicose economists and would-be Pizarros who plotted to colonize Titan, the largest moon of Saturn, as an outpost of extraterrestrial libertarianism.

I cannot think of the libertarians without laughing, and yet, on the great issue of the day, they were dead right. They diagnosed the twentieth century’s homicidal malady: the all-powerful state, which in the name of the workers of the world, the master race, and even making the world safe for democracy had slaughtered tens, nay hundreds, of millions of human





beings whose misfortune it had been to run afoul of ideologues wielding state power.

I next fell into queer company with the “paleoconservatives,” that intoxicating (and often intoxicated) mishmash of libertarians, traditionalist conservatives, and reactionary hippies whose flagship magazine, *Chronicles*, became, for perhaps a lustrum, the most galvanizing, infuriating, brilliantly written political journal in America. For a moment, the old boundaries seemed to have fallen away; bizarrely apt alliances formed: Jewish Confederates, Latin Mass Catholics, Ed Abbeyesque tree-hugging beer-can throwers, radical businessmen who admired Jerry Brown, and gay Quakers who campaigned for Pat Buchanan. Mix it all together and you get Ross Perot. To whom—despite . . . you know—I will ever tip my cap.

The paleos excited more lurid portraits and sputtering denunciations than any political movement since the New Left. As a sojourner on their left fringe, I agreed with certain of the criticisms while bemoaning the modern practice of demonizing all dissenters as furtively creepy thought criminals. For what a glorious hodgepodge these people were! The guru of the libertarian paleos, the combative economist and joyful iconoclast Murray Rothbard, was a gnomic 5’3” nonbelieving Jew who adored cathedrals; championed the Black Panthers while also boasting that he had been founder, president, and pretty much the only member of Columbia University Students for Strom Thurmond in the 1948 presidential election; and once woke his wife JoAnn out of a sound sleep to declare, in his gleeful squawk, “That bastard Eli Whitney *didn’t* invent the cotton gin!”

The paleos ranged all over the political lot, from Port Huron New Leftists to John Birchers, and American politics staggered from the shock when a former Nixon polemicist and fierce Cold Warrior, Pat Buchanan, adopted isolationist paleo themes in his presidential campaigns and shocked the GOP in that redoubt of flintiness, New Hampshire.

It couldn’t last. The paleos dissolved—or rather, they erupted—in bile and drunken haymakers. Yet the anti-globalist, Little American ten-



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dency to which they gave voice and shape is likely to grow (perhaps even burgeon) as the most intellectually rigorous and sentimentally appealing electoral alternative to our two-for-the-price-of-one parties. At its best, it embraces the gentle, amusedly tolerant and neighborly anarchism that makes small-town America so sweet.

My wanderings had taken me from the populist flank of liberalism to the agrarian wing of Don't Tread on Me libertarianism to the peace-and-love left wing of paleoconservatism, which is to say that I had been always on the outside—an outsider even among outsiders—attracted to the spirit of these movements but never really comfortable within them, never willing even to call myself by their names. When asked, I was simply an Independent. A Jeffersonian. An anarchist. A (cheerful!) enemy of the state, a reactionary Friend of the Library, a peace-loving football fan. And here, as Gerry and the Pacemakers once sang, is where I'll stay.

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*Look Homeward, America*—and yes, the echoes of Thomas Wolfe and George McGovern are intentional—offers an alternative to the American Empire whose subject no true-hearted American would wish to be. Mine is a Middle American, profoundly un-imperial patriotism based in love of American music, poetry, places, quirks and commonalities, historical crotchets, holy fools and eminent Kansans. It is *not* the sham patriotism of the couch-sitter who sings “God Bless America” as the bombs light up his television, or the chickenhawk who loves little of his country beyond its military might.

I celebrate, I affirm old-fashioned refractory Americanism, the home-loving rebel spirit that inspires anarchists and reactionaries to save chestnut trees from the highway-wideners and rural schools from the monstrous maw of the consolidators, and leads along the irenic path of a fresh-air patriotism whose opposition to war and empire is based in simple love of country.





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Yes, I know, “we can’t turn back the clock.” (But did you ever wonder if perhaps your watch tells the wrong time?) This is America, land of progress: we can’t go backward! God how I know it. For I have sat in darkening mizzly forenigh sipping pale ale in Springfield, Illinois’s hipster-Mexican restaurant reading Vachel Lindsay poetize “the City of my Discontent” as the jukebox plays “Don’t You Want Me, Baby?” and gazed out the window at the mottled concrete moonscape of the land where Lincoln walked at midnight.

Springfield was urban-renewed into Gehenna. Sherman’s bummers couldn’t have done it any better. But the faith demonstrated by poor mad Vachel endures. Hell, it animates me.

Now, I do not claim to be the archetypal American. If my ethnic mix is typically mongrel, stretching from Italy to Ireland, so are my politics a blend of Catholic Worker, Old Right libertarian, Yorker transcendentalist, and delirious localist. So my story is singular but also strangely representative. We live in an age in which Americans by the millions have lost faith in a system that seems, at best, alien, and at worst, repressive. I, too, started in the mainstream, but I found it placidly sinister, so I took a trip down the tributaries, left and right and great plunging cataracts, till I found that my faith in the oldest, simplest, most radical America had been renewed.

Robert Frost put his faith in the “insubordinate Americans,” throaty dissenters and ornery traditionalists, and this book is for and about them—those Americans who reject Empire; who cherish the better America, the *real* America; who cannot be broken by the Department of Homeland Security, who will not submit to the PATRIOT Act, and who will make the land acrid and bright with the stench and flame of burnt national ID cards when we—should we—cross that Orwellian pass. This is still our country, you know. Don’t let Big Brother and the imperialists take it from us.

