

A Journey to Mean-spiritedness

March 26, 2012

THIS BIOGRAPHY SUFFERS from extreme hagiography and fanatical sycophantry. Norman Podhoretz is a notoriously opinionated ideologue (always denied) who expressed the most provocative statements on a world of ideas and issues. For more than fifty years there was a steady stream of books, three memoirs or autobiographies, and an endless list of articles from the early 1950s through the first decade of the 21st century.

Not once, to my knowledge, in this entire volume is there a single word of questioning, skepticism, criticism, or disagreement although in the introduction he declares that he "wasn't always" prepared to embrace Podhoretz' conclusions. If so it is not made clear anywhere here. There is a detailed record of his editing, writing, and speaking. Even the personality of the subject, notorious for his aggressive response to opponents, often abusive language and deliberate ridicule, is invariably praised and admired as honest, candid, and straightforward. His biographer offers ONLY applause for a lifetime of fine achievements.

Norman Podhoretz was born in a "slum" and rough neighborhood in Brooklyn and became, at an early age a distinguished social and cultural critic during the post World War II years. In the words of a fervent admirer, the conservative, Paul Johnson he was

"a thinker and writer and polemicist, geopolitician, and student of religious ideas, an autobiographer of genius, a man who reacts sharply to the news as it pours from the press and airwaves, who thinks deeply, angrily, and sincerely about it, and commits his thoughts into vivid and penetrative argument." [1]

An exceptional student of Lionel Trilling at Columbia University, he won a Fulbright to study at Cambridge under F.R. Leavis. He soon decided the academic life was not for him after Leavis rejected one of his essays. He returned to New York to pursue a journalistic career. He quickly became a well-received freelance literary and cultural critic writing for such established literary journals as *The Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, and *The New Yorker*, among others. What launched his reputation was a devastating critique of Saul Bellow's widely acclaimed *The Adventures of Augie March* published by *Commentary* in 1953. He later wrote that he was well aware of how such a negative review would attract attention. As a young man with inordinate ambition he was obsessed with attracting attention. He traced his astonishing rise in the autobiographical *Making It*. In 1960, at the age of 30 he was offered the editorship of *Commentary* magazine, and he transformed it from a Jewish-focused journal into one of the mostly lively and respected intellectual publications competing with the *Partisan Review*, *Nation*, and *New Republic*.

Podhoretz saw himself and was seen by many as a young radical who quickly moved the journal editorially to the dissenting left by publishing such provocative figures as Paul Goodman, Norman O. Brown, Bertram Wolf, and Dwight Macdonald, among other well known intellectuals. It was a star-studded intellectual cast that put the magazine in the forefront of New York intellectual life, certainly no mean achievement.

Jeffers has an inclination, I think correctly, to see beneath the surface — a conservative mind despite his innovative and seemingly initial radical editorial decisions. In the 50s Podhoretz downplayed the danger of McCarthyism. He frequently threw around the charge of homosexuality, a

pejorative offering little in the way of evidence. He was taken with Whitaker Chambers *Witness* especially for its prophetic treatment of Communism and its indictment of Alger Hiss. He was critical of Irving Howe's "This Age of Conformity" published in *The Partisan Review* (1954), which criticized the growing cozy relationship between intellectuals and the government. Always on the search for power and influence, it is not surprising that Podhoretz' alliance with the left was short lived. The sixties completely turned him off and he previewed his growing contempt by writing in *The Partisan Review* in 1958 a devastatingly effective assault on the Bohemians of the 50s, focusing on Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. He saw them as ignorant and anti-intellectual. They were energized by "emotion rather than cerebration." It was the forerunner of his life-long attack on the New Left.

He was initially troubled by the New Left's support of Castro. The young were being corrupted by third world Communists, just as the old leftists of the 30s were corrupted by Moscow-dominated Communists. But it wasn't only that. There was the liberal's naive adoration of African-Americans.

In 1963 he published "My Negro Problem" in which he argued that, contrary to liberal sentimentality, in his experience Negroes bullied and beat up whites, not the reverse. It was seen by many as an attack on the Civil Rights movement and particularly on affirmative action, which he charged was a reactionary and condescending idea. Before the decade was over he claimed that Black Nationalism was a major threat to the country. Podhoretz had broken completely with his brief radical past.

Like Don Quixote he is both thoughtful and well meaning and at the same time given to violent eruptions. When he writes of the tawdry cheap vulgarity, he is astute and clearly defined. However, when he assumes the role of super-patriot his writing turns into an endless rant, often approaching hysteria and incoherence. It is hard to take seriously his fears of such horrendous demons as multiculturalism, homosexuality, rampant egalitarianism, feminism, Black Nationalism, secular liberalism, or any liberalism that differs from his own 19th Century anti-statism.

When it came to foreign policy, waging war was his driving enthusiasm. He spoke in favor of every war of his lifetime, with a full-throated defense of the Vietnam intervention after an early ambivalence and confusion. He favored the invasion of Iraq and called for the bombing of Iran. The recent Gulf war and the Balkan war were enthusiastically supported, and opponents are liberally smeared as pro-Nazi, Islamist fascists, anti-Semites. This is all a part of his extreme anti-Communism accompanied by his total support of all things Jewish and of Israel as a nation state.

In February of 1970 Podhoretz, now in his 40th year, had a visionary experience, an epiphany, in which he saw the true Jewish law. A law of duty and responsibility against rights and entitlements. This vision was carried to the pages of *Commentary* where Podhoretz, according to a conservative admirer, attacks "our enemies, blow by blow — the New Left, the radicalized professor, the generation gap, the Black Panthers, the clerics, the WASP 'patriciate,' the [worst] of them all the *New York Review* — that pernicious journal." Podhoretz believed that he had a sacred mission to protect the country from the inroads of liberal sentimentality. His biographer writes at one point that Podhoretz and his friend Patrick Moynihan believed that

In the United States for more than two centuries American law, and the culture that stood behind it, had progressively treated the individual as an individual, not as a member of a category based on sex, race, or class. The idea of social justice was that rewards should be distributed according to personal merit. What the law guaranteed was equal opportunity. Some with a combination of innate talent and energy, acquired knowledge and skills, and some lucky breaks would cull more prizes. (p.137)

They believed in a safety net, but not in a system that sought equal outcomes. Jeffers makes no comment about this sanguine view of American history, which ignores the existence of poverty, racism, and sexism as playing a crucial role in living an American life.

By now Podhoretz has become a champion of the white working class, which sees liberal programs as serving blacks at the expense of whites. The blacks, in addition to their violence, are anti-Semitic and pro-Arab. In his *Breaking Ranks*, (1979) he went so far as to deny that African-Americans were segregated in the North. Southerners erroneously argued that blacks "were penned up in ghettos and kept out of the neighborhoods and schools of the whites." Podhoretz stated flatly that this was a distorted view not based on reality: "Negroes were not segregated in the North. They lived together in certain neighborhoods, as did Jews and Slavs and other ethnic groups. They were clustered together for a variety of reasons. Discrimination is not an important one." They might, he suggests, "feel more comfortable living among 'their own kind,' surrounded by stores catering to their tastes and with churches and synagogues conveniently at hand."

As for the Soviet Union, it was always a major menace. For years Podhoretz insisted that it outdistanced the United States in armaments. Those who disagreed were appeasers. He felt that his role and duty was to make the present danger, the title of his polemic, so clear that even deniers would be ready for action. He attacked the "Culture of Appeasement" that was "Making the World Safe for Communism." When liberals recognized international law he wrote "Appealing to international law is a form of unilateral disarmament." Any criticism of these positions is seen as "snide" "misconstrued," "deliberately distorted." Ronald Steele told Podhoretz to relax. "Just because the United States had not invaded any country this week did not mean Western civilization was tottering on the brink of ruin."

In the mid 80s he found George Kennan, McGeorge Bundy, Gerard Smith, and Flora Lewis appeasers for their support of a detente with the Soviet Union. This appeasement would lead to "a Soviet-dominated world or a nuclear war or both." He now writes that he would rather be ruled by the Tea Party than by the Democratic Party, and would rather have Sarah Palin sitting in the Oval Office than Barack Obama. (*Wall Street Journal*, March 30, 2010).

Why have I bothered to review Mr. Podhoretz' work and waded through much of his writing? Because he writes very clearly and his works offer genuine insights into the rise of the right wing in America over the last two decades. His writings are historical documents shedding light on the contemporary culture. They also pose the difficult question, how does an intelligent mind become so narrow and limited? In my copy of his *Breaking Ranks* I have written a subtitle: "The Journey to Mean-spiritedness." Alfred Kazin was provoked to wonder how a man like Podhoretz could have developed so much heartlessness in a world where the evidence of wretchedness on the streets of much of the city would have been enough to jar someone who had grown up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. The failure of this volume is the biographer's refusal to entertain such a question, dismissing it as simply snide.