

# After History's Detour

*In 1914, history took a wrong turn toward totalitarianism, statism, and moral liberalism. Despite the crackup of Communism in 1989-91, we remain saddled with the destructive legacy of three-quarters of a century. How shall we cope?*

## Standing Athwart

WM. F. BUCKLEY JR.

IT has been suggested to me by NATIONAL REVIEW's management that it would be appropriate for the author of the injunction that we stand athwart history, yelling, Stop! to give fresh instructions to history, on the order of: Proceed!

An interesting suggestion. In 1955, history was indeed the ideological prime mover of the Soviet enterprise. The theorists of Communism had vowed that they saw in history ineradicable impulses which after a time would empty the sources of human tension and, in the ensuing social tranquillity, bring on the blissful absence of government.

The death of Stalin three years earlier had not brought the surcease Winston Churchill had openly spoken of in 1949 when, lecturing at MIT, he recalled the death of Genghis Khan, the ensuing demoralization of his invading armies, and the salvation of the West.

There had been factional struggles after the death of Stalin but none in which a contender for power spoke from outside the Marxist orbit. Almost immediately ahead, in the few years after 1955, lay the suppression of the freedom fighters in Hungary, the launch of the first satellite, the angry theatrics of Nikita Khrushchev at the UN and in Paris. Blustery stuff, without so much as a hiccup's interruption from history, save that little, overnight ignition in Budapest, so conclusively crushed. In those days, NATIONAL REVIEW began its struggle, seeking at once to restrain history and to help to sharpen a better view of it, a view of history that harmonized with political, economic, and philosophical impulses largely

*Mr. Buckley is editor-at-large of NR.*

dormant during the struggle for the world, as James Burnham had called it.

At odds, but not at daggers drawn, were two liberal traditions. One of them was anti-statist, pure and simple. This was the patrimony that engrossed senior editor Frank Meyer, sharpened by his own immersion in the Communist movement, within which he had seen the ultimate exercise of state power. He devoted his important lifetime to the libertarian cause.

But there was also the other conservative world, which spoke of traditional values. It called for respect for the adjudications of our forefathers, a qualified reverence for those institutions that mediate between the individual and the state: the family; the church; the courts, little and larger, often organs of compromise and justice. Russell Kirk was this conservatism's primary exegete, and the two schools came together in NATIONAL REVIEW, which gave enthusiastic shelter to advocates of both.

What gradually happened was a felt acknowledgment that the two strains were not mutually exclusive. Frank Meyer was persuaded that tradition was important to the good health of libertarian mores. The prescriptive wisdom celebrated by Dr. Johnson bequeathed, among other things, an instinctive skepticism of state activity. Civil discourse, foreign to the Communist tradition, was essential in democratic circumstances, which meant that Frank Meyer *had* to talk to Russell Kirk (even if they avoided each other's company), just as Edmund Burke and Adam Smith saw no problem in each other's view of things.

And Russell Kirk was persuaded, without observable difficulty, to single out the state as the presumptive enemy of useful social energy, as the predictable obstacle to liberal progress. This meeting of minds grew to be known as Fusionism; and little fusionists were born and baptized from coast to coast.

BUT inevitably the question would arise: The hegemony of Communism having been challenged and defeated, what will history, resuming its normal gait, tell us of special interest to conservatives?

Primarily, in my view, history will advise us whether the great gamble that inaugurated democracy will work, will prove out, in the very long haul. Abraham Lincoln was asked, on his return to the White House, whether, when wondering out loud whether rule by the people, for the people, and of the people could long endure, he was doing anything more than loosing a resonant rhetorical challenge; so to speak, one more fusillade in the cause of Unionism. His reply to that question, put to him by his young secretary, John Hay, was that by no means was Lincoln serene on the question of democratic longevity. *He* knew about the value of self-government, he said, because his parents had taken part in the Revolutionary War. His own generation would know, because they had risked their lives for true self-government among men created equal. But what of his grandchildren? Or *their* grandchildren? Would the experiences of those of their forefathers who had fought in the Revolution and in the Civil War continue to animate their desire for freedom through self-government?

Lincoln made his point. At Gettysburg he was asking a *serious* question. And we are right to ask, to wonder, whether history is on our side in this matter. And if so, whether we should egg history on, and if so, how.

**W**HAT would it take to loose the rein on history? Answer: A very careful opening of books once thought settled. Take Social Security. That institution, in America, is almost universally revered. Irving Kristol has celebrated it as the enduring benefaction of the New Deal. But that much of history that is acquisitive and induces torpidity has seized Social Security and made it more untouchable than Christian dogma. Here and there one feels free to ask for holy orders for women, marriage for homosexuals, the de-divinization of Christ. But there is no corresponding heterodoxy in respect of the Social Security program. President Reagan, freshly in office, proposed a minor amendment and was turned down by the most thunderous senatorial vote since the Gulf of Tonkin. If history were to oblige, a serious examination might be made of social security as promulgated in Chile, which has given us a model that would seem greatly preferable to what we now have, while securing the ends desired by theorists of social security.

Social security is here a synecdoche for major reforms that might be made in other areas of social life, and the question whether history would oblige us in this matter hangs on the fate of freedom under self-government. One end of self-government is satisfaction by those who are governed. If governed by their own laws, the people are generally assumed to be satisfied. But if government, even popular government, endorses forms and practices and conventions that suppress creative impulses in human beings, self-government can induce not so much satisfaction, as a sullen acquiescence. And of course as latent dissatisfaction festers, what is induced is contumacy and, potentially, insurrection. The bill of particulars written by Thomas Jefferson against George III would not require much editing to describe today's excesses by the Federal Government, never mind that it is the creature of the

ruled, by the ruled. Already, self-government, as widely practiced, is an exercise in self-deception. Ask the people (calling Mr. Gallup!), Do you believe in equal treatment under the law? and the overwhelming majority will record their enthusiastic assent. Ask the same people whether they believe in progressive taxation and they are likely to record the same enthusiasm. It is not widely noticed that the two positions are mutually exclusive. The Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing equal treatment, and the Sixteenth, authorizing a progressive income tax, are irreconcilable. Yet a self-governing people is apparently indifferent to the philosophical conflict.

Our self-governing Republic appears to be reconciled to a form of separation of church and state which is a decoction from the First Amendment done by fanatics whose secularist sensibilities have transformed traditional practices. Up until the late 1940s, there was no impediment to a community's prescribing what role should be played in its public schools by religion, and no signs, anywhere, of any movement to unite church and state. The Supreme Court, in this situation as in many others, has asserted its own power and, in doing so, diminished self-government. It is by now a cliché that the enthusiasm for an activist Court shown by liberals in the past generation has to do with their recognition that they cannot activate their agenda by legislation. Accordingly, they rely on the Court to transform their program into law.

History, then, suggests a gradual impoverishment of genuine popular sovereignty. Can history, accelerated, have the effect of doing the opposite? History finally allowed in the Soviet world the crystallization of opposition to the whole structure of Marxism-Leninism. Elsewhere, in Britain and in Sweden and in New Zealand and in France, there is evidence of popular perception of the depredations of statist economics woosily justified by the imperatives of redistribution. What is difficult to know is whether an acceleration of the historical process will take us into a better world, with reduced government, or whether history will take us to a kind of Orwellian transcription of democracy.

From all of which, surely, we learn that history triumphant awaits the crystallization of an informed public intelligence seeking maximum human freedom. The easiest way for history to take its cue is to maintain its subscription to NATIONAL REVIEW. Our job is to keep the fly-wheel in working condition. □

## After Liberalism

DAVID GELERNTER

**L**IBERALISM today is a spent force, morally and intellectually. And so the question before us is "What can the Left do now?" and I really don't know. Perhaps it could open a restaurant. Leftists do have

Copyright of National Review is the property of National Review Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.