

The legacy of Murray Rothbard

"I grew up in a communist culture," wrote Murray Rothbard in a personal memoir published in the Rockford Institute's magazine *Chronicles* last August. "The middle-class Jews in New York whom I lived among, whether family, friends, or neighbors, were either communists or



Samuel Francis

fellow-travelers in the communist orbit. I had two sets of Communist Party uncles and aunts, on both sides of my family."

It tells you a good deal about Murray that from the time of his childhood in the pit of the major superstition of this century until his death — last

week, at 68, in the city where he was born and raised — he showed not the slightest sympathy for socialist mythology or the smallest inclination to mask his own affirmation of freedom. "I was a right-winger and bitterly anti-socialist from the very beginning."

By the time of his death, Rothbard was the foremost libertarian thinker and activist of his age, leaving behind some 25 volumes in economics, history and political and social philosophy and probably thousands of articles, essays, editorials and speeches. But it is not mainly that legacy for which his friends and comrades will remember him. What carried Murray through his childhood immersion in a communist culture and bore him through the hundred political and ideological battles of his life was his own character. It was impossible to know him for long without recognizing the moral iron beneath his flesh.

"In one family gathering featuring endless pledges of devotion to 'Loyalist' Spain during the Civil War," he wrote, "I piped up, at the age of 11 or 12, 'What's wrong with

Franco, anyway?' It didn't seem to me that Franco's sins, however statist, were any worse, to put it mildly, than those of the [Spanish] Republicans. My query was a conversation-stopper, all right, but I never received an answer."

It was Murray's destiny to stop conversations, not because he sought to put himself on stage but simply because he wanted, above all else, a straight answer, and the cant of neither the left nor the establishment right could give him that. Hence, he enlisted in what he and others have come to call the "Old Right" gathered around the original opponents of the New Deal and the foes of foreign intervention in the 1930s.

It was these, led by Charles Lindbergh, Col. Robert McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune* and Sen. Robert Taft, to whom he was an adviser, who best represented what Rothbard believed was the real American tradition of small and limited government at home and an America First foreign policy abroad. As a graduate student at Columbia in the late 1940s, Murray signed up with Students for Thurmond, a group that included "one New York Jew, myself."

"I have been asked many times," Murray wrote in *Chronicles*, "whether the Old Right was rife with anti-Semitism. . . . The answer to this question . . . is a resounding No. In my decade on the Old Right, I never once encountered any anti-Semitic hostility." The smear haunts Old Rightists to this day and continues to be trotted out whenever their enemies — on the left or the right — lose another argument.

For Murray and his comrades, then and now, the great enemy was always what he called the "welfare-warfare state," the leviathan constructed by the Progressives, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and inherited and conserved by whatever Republican happened to capture it. Murray had no use for what he liked to call the "official conservative movement" centered around *National Review*, which he

described as setting out "to transform the American right from an isolationist defender of the Old Republic to a global crusader against the Soviet Union and international communism."

I have to say that I never agreed with Murray's view of the Cold War — he never believed the Soviets were a threat to the United States — but in the aftermath of the collapse of communism, the crusade for global management continues. We both opposed the Gulf War and subsequent sallies into Somalia and Haiti as efforts to keep the warfare side of the welfare state in business.

Nor did Murray entertain many illusions about the "Republican Revolution" that is now upon us. The last article he published in his lifetime was a piece in *The Washington Post* last month titled "Newt Gingrich is no libertarian." Even before Mr. Gingrich began saluting the New Deal last week, Murray was not disposed to optimism.

And yet his optimism — and his instinct for combat — was irrepressible. Exactly three years ago, in an address to the John Randolph Club, of which he was co-founder and co-president, he prophesied the end of the welfare-warfare state. It is a lie, he proclaimed, that the clock cannot be turned back.

"We shall break the clock of social democracy," he thundered. "We shall break the clock of the Great Society. We shall break the clock of the welfare state. We shall break the clock of the New Deal. We shall break the clock of Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom and perpetual war. We shall repeal the 20th century."

That stopped a conversation or two, you can bet, and it's as straight an answer as you could want. We haven't done it yet, but Murray was right that we can and we will. And when we do, this brave and brilliant man of iron will be with us.

Samuel Francis, a columnist for The Washington Times, is nationally syndicated. His column appears here Tuesday and Friday.