

De Mortuis

The current issue of *National Review* has a bitterly belittling obituary of Murray Rothbard by Bill Buckley, who writes of Murray's "defective judgment" and "deranging scrupulosity," among other faults, and ends by comparing him to David Koresh.

Others are asking what on earth got into Bill; I don't have to ask. This is just the latest example of the fury that possesses him when faced with a conservative who has more principle and courage than he has. In such cases he tends to make insinuations against the sanity of his targets, implying his own serene mental balance.

His abusive farewell to Murray abounds in factual errors. But the cattiest touch is this sentence: "In 1957, reviewing in *NR* a book by Murray Rothbard, Henry Hazlitt observed that he suffered from 'extreme apriorism.'" Note the hint in the phrase "suffered from": not a fault, but an affliction. That sentence is as much a disservice to Hazlitt as to Murray. Both are dead, so neither can protest. As it happens, I last saw Murray at a tribute to Hazlitt two months ago. They were two remarkable men who admired each other deeply, and Murray cherished Hazlitt's memory. So let me set the record straight.

The truth is that the review Bill refers to called Murray's book *Man, Economy, and State* (which was published in 1962, not 1957) "the most important general treatise on economic principles since Ludwig von Mises' *Human Action* in 1949." All in all, it was one of the most laudatory book reviews ever to appear in *National Review*, which in fact recently reprinted it. But you'd never know that from this obituary, which plucks out Hazlitt's minor reservation in order to give the impression that Hazlitt thought Murray was crazy.

Such a distortion would be dishonorable in any polemic. In an obituary it is just indecent. When a man dies you give him his due or you keep quiet. You don't try to cheat him out of his reputation.

There is something self-defeating in the whole tone of the piece, as if Bill thinks he's having the last word on Murray. He hails "the end of his influence on the conservative-libertarian movement." Not so fast! Murray's influence is still growing. It is Bill's that has ended. Even in his prime nobody ever wrote of him such words as Hazlitt and others wrote of Murray, and over the past few years his gifts have dwindled sadly; his columns no longer seem dogged attempts to conquer. You know what they're going to say. I wonder how many subordinate clauses will elapse before they say it. What a contrast with Murray's headlong intellectual energy, which never abated and which kept his many admirers curious to the end about what he thought and what he'd say next.

Nor was Murray a man to be pushed around: it is inconceivable that he would let a Norman Podhoretz tell him what to publish in his own magazine, and that Murray didn't know the meaning of sacrifice is a compromise; that's another reason why he was always interesting. Bill is unwise to invite the comparison. I knew both men well, and even before I left *National Review* I was drawn by Murray's cheerful, fearless, lucid mind. The spirit of the whole Rothbard circle was so unlike *NR*'s timid and stagnant conservatism. It had a *philosophy*, not just "positions."

John O'Sullivan, the current editor of *NR*, had the humanity to counter the abusive obit with a kind note about Murray in his own column in the same issue. John's whole instinct is to make friends and keep peace, and it must be a strain having to accommodate Bill's capricious interference in the magazine.

The last word will be Murray's. He left behind the manuscript of a book on the betrayal of the principled conservatism of the Old Right. It is said to have a long section on Bill Buckley.

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