

Att: Greg Pavlik

Farewell, Murray

January 10, 1995

It wasn't like Murray Rothbard to die. Nothing he ever did was more out of character, more difficult to reconcile with everything we knew of him, more downright inconceivable. Murray dead is a contradiction in terms.

He was 68, an age at which most men are retired or coasting or at least levelling off somewhat. He had done none of the above. He wrote, thought, argued, and laughed with undiminished energy, continually surprising and outrunning even his devoted disciples. He was still the main event at any libertarian gathering he attended.

Murray's mind was as open as the sky but decisive as a beartrap, willing to question anything and ready to accept any answer warranted by reason. It didn't matter if nobody else had ever taken a given position: if Murray thought it was right, he would take it up and defend it with everything he had. He reduced sacred cows to hamburger. I've heard him attack Lincoln and defend the Mafia (up to a point) on libertarian principles.

He was born in New York in 1926 and showed his true colors early: as a boy he shocked a family gathering, at which the adult loyalties were mostly divided between Stalin and Trotsky, by asking, "What's so bad about Franco?" Dinnerware clattered to the floor. Murray's intellectual career had begun.

Among New York intellectuals of his era, being an anti-Communist was like being a monk in the Playboy Mansion. The few who opposed Communism were usually liberal or democratic socialist. Murray also opposed liberalism and socialism, democratic or otherwise. What's more, he opposed Cold War conservatism and during the Fifties he broke with Ayn Rand's Objectivist circle, whose doctrinaire atheism could not brook the Christian faith of Murray's young wife Joey.

Murray took his doctorate in economics at Columbia in 1956 and by 1962 had published a classic treatise, *Man, Economy, and the State*. He quickly became a leader of the libertarian movement, and remained its presiding thinker until last week, when a heart attack felled him. He and Joey, still inseparable, were at their optometrist's office at the time.

E.J. Dionne Jr. of the *Washington Post* recently noted the influence of libertarians among Republicans in the new Congress. He quoted with alarm Murray's dictum: "If you wish to know how libertarians regard the State and any of its acts, simply think of the State as a criminal band and all of the libertarian attitudes will logically fall into place." Actually, Murray was only echoing St. Augustine: "What is the state without justice but a band of robbers?"

Murray eventually decided that there could be no such thing as a truly just state removed from limited-government absolutism to philosophical anarchism. He was convinced that *all* the functions of government could be performed by private action and private agencies. It's a challenging idea, and I'm not sure I can quite agree; and yet it doesn't seem as wild as it once did. After all, by a very conservative estimate, a hundred million people have died at the hands of their own governments in this century. Given that record, how bad could anarchy be?

No short account can convey how much fun Murray had, and how much fun he had around. You got the impression that he would have a good laugh than a Nobel Prize. Though he was a powerful and seminal thinker, it never even occurred to him to try to impress anyone. He was as earthy as a cab driver, and he listened with courtesy and unfeigned interest to everyone.

For such a radical thinker, Murray was surprisingly conservative in moral and cultural matters. He disliked the moral relativism of many libertarians. Though he was Jewish, his sympathies were Catholic, and he retained an early respect and affection for the Old Testament. He was a fan of H.L. Mencken, John Flynn, and Robert Taft - who favored limited government at home and abroad.

His life ended too soon, still going full tilt: four new Rothbard books are due this year. We who mourn him have the consolation that his work will outlive us.

Joe Sobran