Books

Book Review: "Norman Podhoretz: A Biography"

By Thomas L. Jeffers (Cambridge University Press).

By
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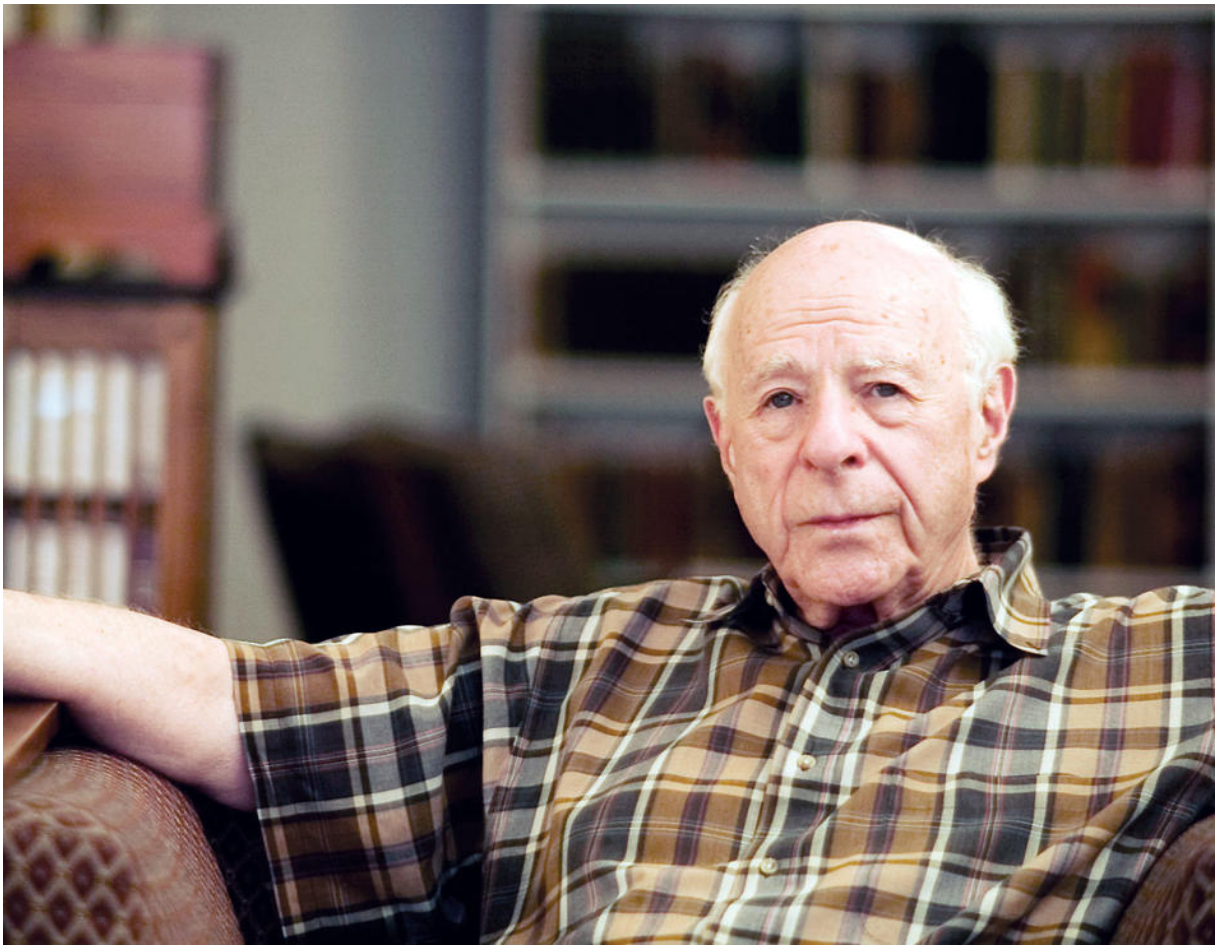

Norman Podhoretz, a maker of friends, ex-friends, and enemies. (David Howells / Corbis)

John Gross, the English literary critic, was once in a magazine office in New York when the secretary called across the room to him: “John, there’s a Mr. Podhoretz on the phone for you.” As Gross recalled, “I felt every pair of eyes drilling into me, as though she’d said, ‘There’s a Mr. Himmler on the phone for you.’”

This anecdote, retold by Thomas Jeffers in his *Norman Podhoretz: A Biography*, nicely sums up what many people feel about “Mr. Podhoretz.” He is hated by liberals for his turn to the right at the end of the sixties, and particularly loathed for his energetic support of Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and the Iraq War. So it is good someone should remind us, as Jeffers admiringly does, that Podhoretz is a first-class intellectual of enormous culture and considerable humanity.

Podhoretz ’50CC was a first-generation American prodigy, an acute reader initially of literature and then politics, whose aggressive intellect took him from beat-up Brownsville through a glittering student career at Columbia College and Cambridge University to the editorship of *Commentary* at age 30. He edited the monthly from 1960 to 1995 into a publication *The Economist* once mused might be “the best magazine in the world.” In the last 25 years of his tenure, Podhoretz helped found and lead the neoconservative revolution that insisted, against some popular and much elite opinion, that America was, for all its faults, a clear force for good in the world. So if Podhoretz’s name still evokes a special kind of horror on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, it is precisely because he saw the counterculture whose more serious causes he supported (the ending of the Vietnam War and an insistence on racial justice at home) mutating into the virulence of identity politics and a generalized anti-Americanism — and set off in the opposite direction.

This intellectual reversal was the result of years of growing disquiet with the Left’s increasing radicalism. That, and an extraordinary metaphysical awakening Podhoretz experienced while walking in the snow outside his small Delaware County farmhouse — something one wishes Jeffers had dissected more thoroughly.

Podhoretz found his vocation in an unflagging espousal of “duty and responsibility against rights and entitlements.” *Commentary*, which Podhoretz had originally moved to the left, now took a frankly conservative stand against the liberal groups and positions of the day. Its editor never looked back, except to wave a final good-bye in 2000 in *Ex-Friends: Falling Out with Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt, and Norman Mailer*.

Podhoretz, born into the Depression in 1930, began making enemies in earnest at the age of 37 with the publication of *Making It*. That 1967 memoir, with its blunt message that intellectuals were as interested in fame and success as any Hollywood starlet, was widely received as both vulgar and overconfident.

As Jeffers demonstrates in a lucid account of Podhoretz's early life and career, if Podhoretz was proud of making it so quickly, he had certainly earned it. He was a prize pupil of Lionel Trilling and a respected one of F. R. Leavis, two almost mythical figures in the pantheon of literary criticism.

Podhoretz's first engagement with the professional world was also as a literary critic. In early demonstrations of the independence, intelligence, literary acuity, and occasional humor that marked his writing, he offered astute accounts of contemporary writers that did not hesitate to differ from the conventional wisdom. (Podhoretz's judgements were sometimes hard. Who today would suggest that Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* was in part "forced" or that *Seize the Day* should have ended in an act of murder rather than mourning — a shiv rather than a *shiva*, as his close ex-friend Norman Mailer might have put it?)

After Podhoretz's 1970 epiphany, *Commentary* became more consciously political, always arguing the essential goodness of America, most consequentially in its conflict against an expansionist Soviet Union. Until the fall of the Soviet empire, Podhoretz set himself squarely against all forms of accommodation with the USSR, from radicalism to détente, and felt himself vindicated when it collapsed.

The world might, by 1990, have been safe for democracy, but it never felt that way for Israel, a country Podhoretz had already been defending energetically for years. He never tired of defusing the charge that American Jews put Israel's interests before America's. Israel's fight was America's fight; the same principles were at stake, so any right-thinking person loyal to America would ipso facto be dedicated to Israel's cause. Those such as Gore Vidal — who insisted in a particularly vicious literary exchange Jeffers retells that "Poddy" went on about the evil Soviet Empire in order "to plump the defense budget, a goodly chunk of which went to 'the support of Israel in its never-ending wars against just about everyone'" — were, by Podhoretz's reckoning, the anti-Americans at the party.

With the attack on the twin towers, however, Podhoretz entered the broader lists once again, calling urgently to his compatriots to recognize the implacability of an

Islamist totalitarianism no more susceptible to negotiation than its Soviet or Nazi predecessors.

If Podhoretz's career lived up to the "high expectation" Trilling foresaw in his inscription to Podhoretz on a copy of *The Liberal Imagination*, it came at a considerable cost. Podhoretz's pugnacity masks a warm heart. His rightward shift had, he acknowledged, "cost me the friendship of most — well, not most, more like all — of those interesting and amusing people." This is distancing language, but it is doubtful that Podhoretz's "new friendships and new associations" ever quite filled the void.

All this and much more is for the most part well told in Jeffers's steady, workmanlike biography. But Jeffers is not without his faults. Toward the end, he bluntly inserts rather than integrates a set of occasional essays. Odder yet, striving perhaps for originality, Jeffers suggests that Podhoretz's political shifts were illusory: Podhoretz stood still while the world moved left. Yet Podhoretz wrote repeatedly of his change of direction, and to suggest that the odyssey never occurred is to undervalue his recognition of the destructive utopianism of his own early commitments, and his courage in coming flatly out against them.

Another problem is that, where Podhoretz's signature polemics always elegantly anatomize his opponents' arguments before demolishing them equally elegantly, Jeffers has so thoroughly identified with Podhoretz's conclusions that he sometimes merely dismisses people and positions Podhoretz argued so trenchantly against. This is presumably also the reason Jeffers's and Podhoretz's voices merge at a number of points in the book, so that it is sometimes frustratingly unclear who is speaking.

As a result, Jeffers, preaching to the choir, will win no new converts, and may even annoy some of the choristers, who may justly feel that the book could more fully have articulated Podhoretz's achievement by taking his interlocutors more seriously. That achievement was to have cured himself of the maladies of the Left, and successfully to have devoted himself since to inoculating the largest possible number of literate Americans against them.

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