

The Drift to Starboard

The Conservative Mainstream, by Frank S. Meyer. *New Rochelle, N. Y.:* *Arlington House, 1969.* 488 pp. \$8.00.

CONSERVATISM has become of age and Liberalism has hanged itself with the lariat rope of the cowboy from the Pedernales. But even before the final chaotic year of the Johnson administration it had become apparent that there was, throughout America, a massive slippage to the Right. The Republican party turned Right in 1964 and stayed Right in 1968. Moreover, the public has moved more rapidly than the present administration, an administration which will find itself in the months ahead moving to the Right. The charges against Right wing radicalism have died away, drowned

out by the assassinations, the violence, the rioting, and the expressions of license on the Left. The confidence in omniscient government has dwindled and those who still employ the rhetoric of statist utopianism sound strangely like those men who saved their Confederate money in the belief that the South would rise again. The meaning of the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the frontier clashes of the Red Chinese and the Soviet Union have disabused all those capable of learning of the idea that Soviet or Maoist communism is capable of peaceful evolution and liberalization. And so it is that Liberalism has become another great lost cause. In the thirties and forties the great lost cause was Communism; in the fifties and sixties the lost cause is Communism's kissing cousin, statist Liberalism.

The triumph of Conservatism, however, was not one of those historical accidents which interrupt with cataclysmic power the ordinary historical processes. It was the work of one of the most intelligent, determined and skillful minorities in the history of the modern era. Out of power, rejected even by the party to which every natural and unreflecting conservative belonged, without major financial support and denied access to the public by the monopoly the establishment maintained in the academy, the churches and the news media, Conservatism made itself heard because it has the arguments and it has the men.

For many years Americans have not debated issues or made choices. They have engaged in sand-box politics; a situation where political congruence with the real world was irrelevant. Unfortunately, that real world will break in on even the best run Liberal nursery school. Since the foundation of *National Review* in 1955 there has been steady movement away from a politics of palliatives to a politics of principle. The fact that there is once more choice in American politics, that there are alternatives, is the result in no small degree of the efforts of the editors and the regular contributors of *National Review*.

One of the most important men on the editorial staff of *National Review* is Frank S. Meyer and when the history of the conservative movement is written he will have a most important place in it. Frank Meyer is a great debater because he has first debated with himself every idea which he publicly defends or opposes. He is such a worthy combatant because every issue which he confronts publicly has first been fought out as a civil war with himself. This fact gives his conversation, his oratory, and his prose a passion, a clarity, and a ruthlessness which make tradition seem like innovation and reasoned change appear as revolutionary demolition. A cool mind and an impassioned heart are the stuff of which great politics are made.

And so it is that reading Frank Meyer is in the first place a pleasure. But it is a pleasure that leaves one feeling vaguely ill at ease; a haunting fear of what one might find on the next page or the page after that. Consequently, it is well to have the *National Review* career of Frank Meyer spread out here. It can be examined and picked to pieces and when it is, the examination reveals a man who is surprisingly consistent and integral. There are few Conservative theorists or controversialists who have been less self-contradicting.

Moreover, Frank Meyer has made a special contribution to Conservative theorization and to practical Conservative politics by insisting that freedom and order, innovation and tradition are not irreconcilable antitheses. All political and religious movements manifest their vitality by producing an elaborate sectarianism. That the implicit sectarianism of Conservatism has been contained and restrained is due in no small part to Frank Meyer's catholic leadership. He has managed, and it is a neat trick, to both stand on principle and at the same time swim with the tide. The arguments against the maximalists and the purists are all here in this book. Most of the best pieces dealing with the reconciliation of freedom and order date back some years. The more recent pieces in the book deal with the

practical implications of Conservative politics. In these Frank Meyer discerns earlier and more clearly than others the moment when the Liberal orthodoxy came unstuck and Conservatism began to play a determinative role in American political life. For those who wish to know what Conservatism has been and what it will be, no better statement can be found than Frank Meyer's reflections.

Reviewed by STEPHEN J. TONSOR