

# *In Memoriam: Frank Meyer*

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THOSE who knew Frank Meyer know instinctively, so to speak, that Frank would not have liked me to read a regular obituary, an account of his claims to distinction, such as you find in *Who's Who*. He would have expected me to go beyond the conventional truth. And the real truth is that Frank Meyer was not a respectable personality, in the accepted sense of this term. Respected he was, by all who knew him, especially by the undergraduates to whom he spoke in conservative clubs throughout the nation. I have talked to a number of them. He was loved by the youngsters and he was profoundly respected by them.

Permit me to dwell on this aspect of Frank's personality with emphasis. One thing I learned from my long teaching experience is that the respect of the best undergraduates is not easily gained. I was told by some students who heard Frank speak, why they respected him. He made them feel responsible, he demanded of them as much as he did of himself, and much more than they had thought possible to demand of themselves before he made the demand. He did not make the demand directly; he made it by taking it for granted that, since they were committed with a full heart to the goals he was committed to, they would of course undertake to reach them.

But Frank was not respectable. For all respectability means is conformism; and no one, neither his former comrades nor his conservative friends could possibly call

Frank Meyer a conformist. He conformed to nothing, not even to the hours by which the rest of us do our work. He worked when the rest of us, except burglars, sleep or try to. Frank was not respectable. He had too much courage for that, he was too much of an activist as we say today of the wreckers of the left, but an activist dedicated to the conservation of our civilization; he was too relentless, too energetic, too fluid yet principled, too unsparing of self, too reckless of danger, to be respectable.

For this reason I have always thought of Frank Meyer as one of the most paradoxical men I have ever encountered. Not at all a conformist but a radical libertarian, a genuine autarch, I have often wondered how such a man could have made a good communist for as long as he did. For you can say all sorts of things about communists, but one thing you have to grant them is that they are thoroughly disciplined soldiers who never need to be told: "Do this. This is an order."

Frank hung on to his communism until he left the army. I had a long conversation with him in Columbus, Ohio, sometime between 1947 and 1950. He had been debating with someone in Cincinnati and came to speak with me, and of course we stayed up all night; you always did, with Frank. He told me his reason for leaving the party. Please notice this, for this is pure Frank Meyer. He did not leave because of

the trials, nor the Russian-German pact, nor any other act of gangsterism perpetrated by Moscow or by his American comrades. He knew his Lenin too well for that. He left because he became convinced that what the communists were going to put in place of our civilization, which they were trying to destroy, was evil.

Kindly see what this means: External pressure and the busy-beaver activity of the party functionary had kept him in line. Once the pressure was removed in the army, the autarch emerged. The quality of civilization had always been close to his heart. It has often been said that communists do not change when they defect. But this is not quite precise about Frank. He never changed when he joined the communists any more than he did when he left them. His head and heart had always been given to the rearing of a good world. When the opportunity arose to read something else than party literature and to do some thinking, Frank realized clearly that what he had been doing was employing the wrong means towards the right end.

From that moment on he bent his energy, his talent, his considerable gifts as writer and speaker, his broad knowledge, all he had, in his usual relentless way, to the conservation of our world.

I am not saying that Frank Meyer was solely a political man. There was much more to him and it was this more that made him good company. He had very broad interests, he was endowed with a philosophical mind—as distinct from the mind of a philosopher—his knowledge was wide-ranging and sound, his social thought was controlled by a pervasive sense of history of which he had a very extensive knowledge. He had a quality in good measure without which a human being is not fully human, a sense of humor and a capacity to laugh at himself. And he bore no grudges. He was large.

He was an intellectual born to the manor. I want to dwell on this because I suspect that the intellectual, often despised, frequently feared, is not well understood. Your true intellectual is a man who sees the world through the prism of theory. Others see it through the prism of feeling, while others through the prism of pure drama, and the majority through a compound lense made up of abstract clichés, vague imagery, feeling and scraps of theory. Frank grasped the world in terms of theory. He was therefore concerned with the quality of theory. But he was also an activist concerned with the feasibility of theoretical schemes. I am convinced that this combination of pure activist and pure theorist is seldom found in the way in which it was exhibited by Frank Meyer.

There was much more to my friend, the man we have lost. There was the man of faith, who needed certainty; with him I, a skeptic about Revelation, although a serious theist, felt no identity but I do feel profound respect. He found peace of mind during the last hours of his life, as his wife Elsie, told me—a woman, by the way, without whose help Frank could not have accomplished as much as he did. There was also the prophetic man, in the special sense in which Henry de Lubac applies it to Dostoevsky. Ahead of us, Frank penetrated into the world in which we are now beginning to discover we have been dwelling for quite some time. He had a prophetic awareness of the crisis in which we are only now beginning to realize we have been living. He lived the crisis, and lived the fears it generates in good men, much earlier than we did.

We have lost Frank Meyer; we have lost one of our gallant fighters, a rare person; we have suffered an irreparable loss.\*

\*Read at The National Meeting of The Philadelphia Society, Chicago, April 15, 1972.