

New Thoughts About the Old Order

J. M. Bordelon

Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution, by Forrest McDonald, *Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985. xiii + 359 pp. \$25.00.*

"IT IS NOW POSSIBLE, as it was not a mere twenty-seven years ago, to make a reasonably comprehensive survey of the complex body of political thought (including history and law and political economy) that went into the framing of the Constitution, and I here venture to undertake it." This assertion, found in the preface to *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, is no idle boast: this third volume of Professor Forrest McDonald's trilogy is marvelous in its scope, much broader in fact than his earlier *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (1958) and *E Pluribus Unum* (1965). McDonald admits that the two preceding volumes were too narrowly economic in character, and he has accordingly made an effort to provide a fuller account of the Founding. It is not too much to say that his latest effort has succeeded in accomplishing his ambitious object.

Novus Ordo Seclorum is a scholar's dream. Subtitled *The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution*, the book examines in astonishing depth an array of forces which influenced the thinking of the Founders,

particularly their knowledge of "history and law and political economy." Serious students will be pleased to note that the various chapters are abundantly documented, with the footnotes conveniently placed at the bottom of the page for easy reference. The inquisitive reader is thus at liberty to determine without too much effort the sources which have led an eminent scholar to his conclusions. It is a genuine pleasure to see the results of a lifetime of labor by a writer of ability and integrity, one who is clearly devoted to learning the truth about his subject.

As the subtitle suggests, McDonald's investigations are by no means limited to matters pertaining to historical background. He devotes considerable attention to analyzing important works by the influential political economists of the day, e.g., Locke, Adam Smith, the physiocrats, and Mandeville ("Fable of the Bees"). Present for duty also, of course, are familiar contemporary historians and political writers like Hume and Montesquieu. In fact, since McDonald is writing intellectual history (i.e., about the forces which influenced the thinking of the Founding Fathers), in one form or another virtually everyone from the period seems to show up on the author's panoramic stage—making appearances through the *Federalist Papers*, newspapers, private correspondence, state legislatures, acts of Con-

gress, and most importantly, through the debates on the Constitution, both during and after that famous Convention in the summer of 1787.

By now even members of the relatively uninformed general public have become vaguely aware that 1987 marked another important bicentennial celebration. *Novus Ordo Seclorum* is well-suited in one respect, and ill-suited in another, for preparing us to understand the character of that profoundly important event. McDonald's effort must be labeled as "must reading" for every serious student of the Constitution, and we can hope that it will help us to avoid some of the foolish pronouncements of that other Bicentennial back in 1976. On the other hand, alas, the very fact that *Novus* demands so much of its readers places it beyond the interest and the reach of merely casual observers. It is not a book for beginners.

No single work can be expected to answer definitively the many important questions which we as a nation face over the next several years, but McDonald's latest offering should nonetheless help us come to grips with many of them. Who were the Founding Fathers? Were they monolithic in political philosophy? Were they conservative or liberal in terms of today's politics? What were their attitudes towards "free enterprise" and property rights? Or towards religion, morality, and virtue? Or towards states' rights and decentralized power? To what extent may the Founders properly be called "democrats"? These are old questions for American political theorists, questions still hotly disputed (and sure to be further disputed in the future), but McDonald's findings should help us find our way. He has skillfully shown us how complicated these questions truly are, indeed more complicated than most of us realize. Those who hold simplistic views of our nation's origins may find their cherished theories much shaken by McDonald's meticulously researched conclusions.

In truth ideologues will not like this book, nor will the hard-line libertarians, nor the simple-minded religious zealots,

nor the bigots of the "local prejudices" variety. Nor will doctrinaire liberals. Regardless of ideological persuasion, however, virtually anyone willing to listen with an attentive ear can profit from *Novus Ordo Seclorum*.

Economic libertarians in particular should carefully note McDonald's skillful analysis of the political economy of the Founders. It is evident that he has not lost his interest or his expertise on matters concerning the theory and practice of economics in the post-revolutionary era. As always, he moves easily into discussions about complicated financial matters (about securities, personality, realty, taxes, etc.) and in general he makes those thorny and rather unexciting topics as palatable as possible. Suffice it to say here that, yes, most of the Founders had considerable respect for private property, and no, they were not simplistic exponents of laissez-faire. Thus, for example, McDonald notes that in some respects actions by various state governments during and after the Revolution rendered property less secure than under pre-revolutionary British authorities!

Secular humanists and religious enthusiasts similarly looking for mere confirmation of a simplistic account of the views of the Framers on religion and morality are sure to be disappointed. Those genuinely seeking knowledge, however, will be more pleased: McDonald canvasses a broad range of materials to show a wide variation of views concerning religion, morality, and virtue. It should not be surprising to learn that most of the Founding generation comprehended the importance of having a virtuous citizenry in a democratic republic, but it is a vast oversimplification to imagine that the men who shaped our Constitution (including the Antifederalists) were uniform in their religious and moral sentiments.

Those who imagine that McDonald's background as a conservative historian at a major university (Alabama) in the Deep South would lead him to write a shallow apologia for states' rights will be much surprised. While he is obviously too fine a his-

torian not to be aware that the states' rights/Antifederalist element was an important force at the time, he has certainly not overstated his case: he has curiously chosen not to emphasize Antifederalism as a coherent body of thought. In fact, in my view he has downplayed the theme too much and thus has given insufficient credit to the extent and depth of Antifederalist objections to the "New Order" then in the making. His depictions of Patrick Henry and George Clinton, in particular, seem to me to be unduly harsh.

Petty considerations aside, it is safe to say that conservatives of every persuasion (free market, traditionalist, and states' rightists) who are sincerely interested in the truth are in McDonald's debt, as are

the liberals if they are willing to make the effort. It is difficult to set aside opinions and comfortable convictions slowly formed and long held. The temptation to choose our documentation selectively to reinforce our own private predispositions and preferences is strong in most of us. McDonald has in large measure resisted that temptation. It is an important precedent. If we are to understand the Founders as our Fathers, and ourselves as their descendants, we should strive to study our heritage as dispassionately and as reflectively as possible. Insofar as we are able, we should put private preferences and interpretations aside and attempt to renew ourselves as a people by coming to understand the intentions of the Founders.