Is there such a thing as a “neo” gene? I ask that question because, looking back over a lifetime of my opinions, I am struck by the fact that they all qualify as “neo.” I have been a neo-Marxist, a neo-Trotskyist, a neo-socialist, a neoliberal, and finally a neoconservative. It seems that no ideology or philosophy has ever been able to encompass all of reality to my satisfaction. There was always a degree of detachment qualifying my commitment.

One “neo,” however, has been permanent throughout my life, and it is probably at the root of all the others. I have been “neo-orthodox” in my religious views (though not in my religious observance). This is something of a puzzle to me, for my own religious background was not at all conducive to such a perspective. It is true that my parents’ household in Brooklyn was Orthodox Jewish, but only in observance; belief seemed to have nothing to do with it. My father would go to synagogue only once a year, on the High Holidays; my mother never went, though she kept a strictly kosher household. We took notice of the other main Jewish holidays too, but we never “celebrated” them. I received absolutely no Jewish instruction at home, nor did my parents seem to care very much about my own observance. It is true that they dutifully sent me to an old-fashioned yeshiva—two afternoons a week and Sunday mornings—so that I could learn to read the prayer book and qualify for my bar mitzvah. There we also read the first five books of the Bible, translating from Hebrew into Yiddish, two languages I didn’t know. (My parents spoke Yiddish to each other, but only English to the children.) I dutifully participated, learning to read the Hebrew and memorizing the Yiddish translations. Discipline was strict; if we misbehaved in any way, the rabbi would order us to stand up and then give us a stinging slap in the face. He also taught us to hate the goyim and to spit whenever we passed a church.

If ever there was a regimen that might have provoked rebelliousness, this was it. But though I obviously had not the faintest interest in my Jewish studies, I felt no impulse to rebel. I was duly bar-mitzvahed, making the conventional speech (in a memorized Yiddish) in which I thanked the rabbi and my parents for bringing me to this glorious day. I even continued to attend the yeshiva for at least six months afterwards, though I was not required to and my parents never encouraged me to. Then when I was sixteen my mother died of stomach cancer, and for the next six months I would get up at dawn, just when my father was setting off to work, and go to the synagogue to say the morning prayers, which included a prayer for one’s recently deceased loved one. Again, my father never urged me to do this, and he himself seems never to have considered doing it. So why did I do it?

I don’t know the answer to that. Though I took some adolescent pride in being a member of the “chosen people,” I felt no passionate attachment to Judaism, or to Zionism, or even to the Jewish people. I had read nothing on any of these matters, and the only magazine that entered our house was The New Masses, to which my older sister, Lillian, subscribed as a consequence of attending City College at night. (She was an office worker during the day.) I did not think of myself as religious. On the other hand, one thing becomes clear in retrospect. There was something in me that made it impossible to become antireligious, or even nonreligious, though my subsequent intellectual commitments kept trying to steer me in that direction. I was born “theotropic,” and not even my dismal experience of a decadent Orthodoxy could affect this basic predisposition.

Even while I was a young Trotskyist at City College, I was a dissident in this respect. I read Plato and was immediately persuaded that it made sense for a supra-sensible universe of ideas to exist. I read the King James Bible, and was immediately persuaded that the Book of Genesis was, in some nonliteral sense, true. Later in my college days I read Niebuhr, Tillich, and Maritain, along with Trotsky, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, et al., and found myself sympathetic to all of them. There were then no serious Jewish theologians available in English; it was not until after World War II that Buber, Rosenzweig, and Scholem began to be translated from the German. By that time, the Holocaust had touched my Jewish nerve and I was delighted to discover that there really could be an intellectual dimension to Judaism.

What impressed me most about the Christian theologians was their certainty, derived from the Bible, that the human condition placed inherent limitations on human possibility. Original sin was one way of saying this, and I
had no problem with that doctrine, though how to reconcile it with my youthful utopian socialist hopes and beliefs was beyond me. In fact no reconciliation was possible, and the “neo” worm was already eating away at my socialist certitudes. It is interesting that the Jewish Prophets have never much interested me—who their religious utopianism was too close to the political utopianism I was already becoming disenchanted with. I was more affected by the law-giving books of the Bible, and to this day I believe that this difference in emphasis will determine one’s attitude toward traditional Orthodox Judaism as against modern reformed versions, which usually means “liberal” versions. Even as a socialist I had more respect for “tradition-bound” religion than for a modernized and liberalized one. This respect, however, did not necessarily extend to all traditional rituals and ways of behavior. I was a non-observant Jew, but not a nonreligious one. Hence the “neo” in my religious orientation.

For decades, and even now, some of my closest friends will occasionally wonder aloud whether I really believe in God’s existence. My wife tells me that back in the 1950s, my revered teacher, Sidney Hook, took her aside on several occasions and asked her precisely that question. He, as a pragmatist and a rationalist, just didn’t see how it was possible. The problem with that question, of course, is that “existence,” in the normal usage of the term, is not a divine attribute. The mysterious term “being” is more appropriate. And a religious person doesn’t “believe” in God, he has faith in God. One’s relation to God is existential, not rationalist. As I learned later from a reading of Kant, pure reason will never get you beyond—pure reason. But the more you pray, the more likely you are to have faith. That is why children are taught to pray, rather than being instructed in “proofs” of God’s “existence.”

I have emphasized the importance of religion in my personal and intellectual development because, in my own writings, it is only on rare occasions evident. I am not a theologian, after all, though reading theology is one of my favorite relaxations. Other nonreligious thinkers, however, have had a more direct influence in shaping my mind. I have already mentioned Sidney Hook, whose writings revealed to me the power of logical, coherent analysis, something my formal education had neglected. He certainly helped me perceive the fallacies of Marxism, though, ironically, Hook always remained far more respectful of Marx, and of the socialist ideal, than I was. I sometimes think he taught me more than he intended. But that is the sign of a truly great teacher, which he was.

The two thinkers who had the greatest subsequent impact on my thinking were Lionel Trilling in the 1940s and Leo Strauss in the 1950s. Trilling was, in contemporary terms, a skeptical liberal, Strauss a skeptical conservative. Trilling was an elegant and subtle literary critic, Strauss a powerful Germanic, super-subtle political philosopher. In both cases, their skepticism went to the very roots of modern liberalism and modern conservatism, respectively.

I still remember vividly first reading Trilling’s essays in _Partisan Review_, later collected and published under the title _The Liberal Imagination_. They hit me with the force of a revelation. Though I had by then read widely in the modernist writers—D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Franz Kafka, Faulkner—it had simply never occurred to me that their vision was incompatible with the dominant socialist and liberal worldviews shared by all New York intellectuals, a group whom I regarded as a Sanhedrin of wisdom and sensibility. The “modern,” it turned out, was not all of a piece; artistic sensibility and political reason were in conflict. To put it another way: the metaphysics of modern “avant-garde” art and the metaphysics of modern “progressive” politics were at odds with one another. Given my metaphysical bent, I took this very seriously indeed. No politics, I sensed, was viable if its own culture was radically subversive of it. The “neo” part of me was quickened and invigorated.

Trilling himself spent the rest of his life trying to reconcile “reactionary” modernism in literature with a secular liberalism. He was not a religious man, but, like Matthew Arnold whom he so much admired, his commitment to great literature was a kind of religious commitment. His “great books” had a biblical authority for him—the Bible, after all, was one of those great books. His Arnoldian liberalism kept him out of step with the “progressive” liberal community. After an early flirtation with the Left, the one certain thing about Lionel Trilling was that he was not a politically correct “progressive”—not in politics, not in education, not in cultural matters, not in manners and morals. At the same time, there existed no conservative intellectual body of thought worth noting, so that to the end Trilling remained a skeptical, out-of-step liberal, whom his students in later years would simply describe as “conservative.” This lent a certain pathos to his life and thought, but it was a pathos that never came close to the pathetic. His luminous intelligence was as striking as ever as the years passed, and he coped with the disharmony of his condition by writing admiringly about Jane Austen and even Kipling instead of D. H. Lawrence or Kafka.

Leo Strauss—“Mr. Strauss,” as his students called him, and still call him, posthumously—was from a different planet. A German-Jewish émigré who had been a student of medieval Jewish and Arabic philosophy, he was the quintessential philosopher, of a kind satirized in popular literature. Helpless in all practical matters, the author of very difficult and complex texts, studious and
meditative, a rationalist who pressed reason to its ultimate limits, he was no kind of “intellectual,” a class he held in, at best, tolerant contempt. (I would not be surprised if he had never read a line of Trilling’s.) After several years at the New School in New York, he moved to the University of Chicago in 1949, where he became a most influential teacher. His students—those happy few who sat at his feet—became “Straussians,” though they preferred to be known as “political theorists.” (One such student was my dear friend, the late Martin Diamond, who helped me understand what Strauss was up to.) These students of Leo Strauss, in turn, have produced another generation of political theorists, many of whom have relocated to Washington, D.C., since the academic world of positivist “political science” has become ever more hostile to Strauss and “Straussians,” even while his mode of thought has filtered down to an ever more numerous “happy few.” This was understandable, since Strauss did not disguise his disgust for what his contemporaries called “political science.”

Encountering Strauss’s work produced the kind of intellectual shock that is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. He turned one’s intellectual universe upside down. Suddenly, one realized that one had been looking at the history of Western political thought through the wrong end of the telescope. Instead of our looking down at them from the high vantage point of our more “advanced” era, he trained his students to look at modernity through the eyes of the “ancients” and the premoderns, accepting the premise that they were wiser and more insightful than we are. One read the premoderns, therefore, in order to understand them as they understood themselves, not to understand them better than they understood themselves. In addition, one read them in order to understand ourselves, products of the modern age, better than we are able to do on our own. In the battle between the “ancients” and the “moderns,” he was on the side of the “ancients.”

What made him so controversial within the academic community was his disbelief in the Enlightenment dogma that “the truth will make men free.” He was an intellectual aristocrat who thought that the truth could make some minds free, but he was convinced that there was an inherent conflict between philosophic truth and the political order, and that the popularization and vulgarization of these truths might import unease, turmoil, and the release of popular passions hitherto held in check by tradition and religion, with utterly unpredictable, but mostly negative, consequences. Strauss was respectful of the common sense of the common man when this was guided by tradition, itself the heir to generations of practical wisdom when it came to the art of living a humane life. He was contemptuous of the modern demagogic idolatry of the common man.

Moreover, he was persuaded that the great philosophers prior to the Age of Reason, and many of the greatest poets, shared this point of view. As a result, they took the greatest care in their writing so as not, as the British would say, to “frighten the horses.” To a greater or lesser degree, they had a prudential concern for the effects of their opinions, as well as for their own safety, this in an era when the secular and temporal authorities felt an obligation to suppress heterodoxy. And in most cases, especially where religion and political philosophy were concerned, they did subscribe to some heterodox views, simply by virtue of being rigorously thoughtful men. One therefore had to study, not read, their texts with a quasi-“alumnic” intensity and care, in order to distinguish between their “esoteric” and “exoteric” views. Nothing has engaged contemporary “enlightened” academic political scientists and political philosophers more than this approach to the “great books” of the premodern era. Our contemporaries do not study to learn so much as to read and express opinion.

Because Strauss believed, along with the “greats” he revered, that prudence was the greatest of practical virtues, he never allowed his aristocratic mode of thinking to determine, in any simple and linear way, his political opinions. Himself a victim of Nazism, he defended liberal democracy as the best alternative among modern political regimes, even while keeping it intellectually at a distance. He was no right-wing ideologue, as some of his critics have claimed, nor did he fit easily into contemporary conservative discourse. He did not, for instance, much admire Edmund Burke, a modern conservative icon, because he felt that Burke’s emphasis on “prescription” as the basis of a social order was too parochially British, and too vulnerable to the modern insistence that we should, in the words of Tom Paine (echoed by Jefferson), “let the dead bury the dead.” Modern populist conservatism, it goes without saying, was alien to him.

But one didn’t study Strauss to discover ready-made political opinions. He opened modernity to serious, critical thought, of a kind that reveals Marxist and postmodern critiques to be, as they are, the paltry offshoots of modernism itself. In a sense, the premodern political philosophers served Strauss as the modern (or modernist) novelists and poets served Trilling, as a force for liberation from the contemporary progressive, liberal, or conventionally conservative outlook that prevails among our intellectual classes. Strauss, in conversation, once remarked that it was entirely proper for a young man to think Dostoyevsky was the greatest novelist, but it would be a sign of maturity when he later concluded it was Jane Austen who had the most legitimate claim to that place. Lionel Trilling, I think, would have agreed.
By the time I was twenty-two, my “intellectual formation” (as the French would say) was already beginning to take shape. The seeds of my future neoliberalism and neoconservatism had been sown, but any flowering had to come with writing, not merely reading and thinking. I wanted very much to be not only an “intellectual” but a “writer,” and, with the arrogance of youth, I was convinced I could be one. An intellectual who didn’t write struck me as only half an intellectual. But what kind of writer? Of that I had no idea. In college, I had written only term papers, which got me good grades but which, I knew, revealed little by way of literary talent. There were, of course, the writers for Partisan Review—wonderful stylists like Dwight Macdonald and Mary McCarthy—but I sensed that they were not suitable models for me. They were out of my class, as it were. I recall a conversation I had with Saul Bellow, about a year later. I had then joined my wife in Chicago, where she was doing graduate work at the University of Chicago and where I was waiting to go into the army. Saul and I were friends and neighbors. He was just publishing his first novel, and I was writing occasional book reviews for The New Leader, at which my college friend Daniel Bell was an indulgent editor. I confided to Saul that I thought I had the potential to be a writer. He looked at me suspiciously and asked: “What kind of writer?” (Saul has always been convinced, as most novelists are, that the world does not need more than one novelist.) I thought for a moment and then said briskly, “Well, good enough to write for The New Yorker.” He roared. At that time, we intellectuals did not think too much of that slick magazine.

What had given me even this degree of confidence was one of those strokes of luck that shape careers. In a bookshop that sold “remainders”—I think it was the Marboro Bookshop in Times Square—I picked up, for twenty-nine cents, a copy of John Crowe Ransom’s God Without Thunder. I had never heard of Ransom but loved the title, since I, too, had little use for such a god. The book enchanted me, not so much for its theme, already familiar as well as congenial from my religious readings—by then I was into Charles Péguy and Léon Bloy—as for its style. That style was lucid, straightforward, unpretentious, but brightened with flashes of irony and wit. “That’s the style for me,” I thought, “I can do it!” Some months later, I submitted an unsolicited book review to Kenyon Review, which Ransom was then editing. I received a pleasant, handwritten rejection note, which strengthened my high opinion of him.

Another stroke of luck. At about the same time that I discovered John Crowe Ransom, I rediscovered W. H. Auden. To be sure, I had read his poems when they appeared in Partisan Review, had “appreciated” them, but I read them as a casual consumer of poetry, not as a writer reads, with an active intellect. Learning to read in that new way I owed to Ransom, whose other writing I hastily searched out. There, he introduced me to the New Criticism. Applying myself to Cleanth Brooks, I. A. Richards, and others, I learned to read poetry, really to read, as had never been possible for me before, simply because no one had ever told me how to do it. And then I came across an older issue of Partisan Review, where I found Auden’s “September, 1939,” whose opening lines have echoed in my mind forever after:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low, dishonest decade . . .

I was certainly vulnerable to the sentiments and mood of this poem, but what struck me forcefully was that phrase, “low, dishonest decade.” What a powerful use of ordinary words! “Clever hopes” is good too. Then I read through all of Auden’s longer poems, most of them in this edgy, conversational style, savoring the language. They are uneven, of course, but a few wonderful phrases can, for me, redeem an entire poem. In later years, I have had a similar experience with a few other poets (Eliot, Yeats, Larkin), but much of modern poetry, I confess, evokes no response within me. This is poetry written for other poets, or for those engaged in the academic exegetical analysis of poems. I take it on faith that Wallace Stevens is a major poet, but I cannot read him. I once had the idea of compiling a brief anthology of poems for ambitious young journalists who wished to write better, but nothing came of it. Instead, I tell them to read Shakespeare’s sonnets in their spare time—wasted advice, in most cases.

I have mentioned the role of luck in the shaping of the mind, but it is clear to me that my entire life has been one instance of good luck after another. My relatively brief sojourn among the Trotskyists, for instance—I left before I was twenty-two—was immensely fruitful, and not only because I witnessed, close up, very sharp wits in ideological conflict. My becoming a Trotskyist, rather than something else, was itself an accident. I knew nothing of radical politics when I entered City College, but I did have two friends from Boys’ High who had accompanied me to college. We constituted a troika for the rest of our lives—the late Harold Lubin, Earl Raab, and myself. Earl was an aesthete; he had, in high school, introduced me to the short stories of James Joyce and Thomas Mann. I was confused about my politics, so it devolved upon Hal...
Lubin to explore the ideological terrain and report back to us what kind of radicals we should be. In later life, as it happens, both Earl and I remained politically involved, while Hal opted out and became a professor of literature. But at the time, he was more serious, more passionate, and more optimistic about “creating a better world” than we were. When he explained to us that the Trotskyist student group was the most interesting and least tarred with the sins of Stalinism—it was the first I had heard of such sins—we promptly followed him into the Trotskyist “movement,” as we then called the dozen or so young men who sat around, reading and arguing about radical politics. Young men, because City College in those days was an all-male institution [only the night school was co-ed], with our sexual energies finding an outlet in either study or politics.

But the larger Trotskyist organization was, thank goodness, coed. Shortly after I was graduated from City College, I was assigned to attend meetings of a “branch” of young Trotskyists in Bensonhurst, in Brooklyn, at the opposite end of the borough where I lived. I dutifully attended the meetings, which were quite farcical since we were trying to recruit young blacks in the neighborhood, who were sensible enough not to take us seriously. But at these meetings I noticed a girl—she was eighteen, it turned out—who sat quietly at the other end of the small room. Her name was Gertrude Himmelfarb, but she was called “Bea.” She had a trim figure and a strong, handsome face that radiated intelligence and sensibility. I noticed her for some weeks before approaching her and asking her out. In truth, I was already in love with her without even knowing her. She said “yes” quietly. And so we “went out,” which is to say we went to the Saturday night movies—in cosmopolitan Manhattan rather than provincial Brooklyn—and saw only foreign movies since we were cultural snobs. After our first excursion, I already knew that this was the girl I wanted to marry. After the third or fourth movie, I finally asked her to marry me; perhaps because she was weary of subtitles, she said yes. Thus began what my friend Daniel Bell later described as “the best marriage of our generation,” a judgment I have no quarrel with. We are about to celebrate our fifty-third wedding anniversary.

In retrospect, it is interesting that it never even crossed my mind to suggest a “love affair,” or a “relationship,” or whatever other connection young people experiment with these days. Many of the young Trotskyists were bohemian in their “lifestyles,” but that was not for me. Trotskyist or no, radical socialist or no, I was bourgeois to the core. I sought no sexual adventures or experiments, but wanted a girl to love and marry. Bea was of a like mind. We even waited a year to get her parents’ consent, a consent withheld on the grounds that they were not about to permit their lovely and brilliant daughter to marry a young man who was earning $13.89 a week as an apprentice machinist. But when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and my salary had reached $22 a week, they relented. We were married on January 18, 1942, when she was nineteen and I was just short of my twenty-second birthday.

With such a bourgeois character, one which I seem to have been born with, it is not surprising that, shortly before this twenty-second birthday, I (and Bea) had left the Trotskyists—in a state of pleasant and intellectually productive disaffection, but with no regrets. I had received an excellent political education of a special kind. I made several lifelong friends. And I had gained a lifelong wife. That is why I don’t really mind when some journalist, even today, a half-century later, casually refers to me as an “ex-Trotskyist.” I regard myself as lucky to have been a young Trotskyist, and I have not a single bitter memory. Even when Irving Howe “expelled” us for having had the ideological impudence to resign, I regarded it, and still do, as comic relief. Oddly enough, he never quite forgave me for leaving so many years before he did.

My subsequent army experience, as an infantryman in Western Europe, also had some significant, and on the whole benign, influences on me. I was shot at but not hit, and, in what military historians call “battles,” did my share of shooting, though in the confusion I doubt that I ever hit anyone or anything. When V-E Day came and I was transported to Marseilles for shipment to the Far East, so as to help conquer Japan, the atom bomb was dropped and such shipments ceased. My wartime experience in Germany, however, did have the effect of dispelling any remnants of anti-authority sentiments (always weak, I now think) that were cluttering up my mind. My fellow soldiers were too easily inclined to loot, to rape, and to shoot prisoners of war. Only army vigilance kept them in check. At the same time, observing German women and young girls, living among the rubble and selling their bodies for a few packs of cigarettes, the currency of the day, rid me of any anti-German feelings which, as a Jew, might otherwise have been present in me. Even the subsequent revelation of the Holocaust could not make me feel differently about ordinary Germans. They, too, had suffered, more than most Americans realize. And I was not so convinced that the American soldiers I knew were a different breed of humanity from their German counterparts.

I spent about a year in Marseilles, and it was a kind of postgraduate sabbatical. Because I was a college graduate, I was assigned to headquarters, first in the library, where I pretended to understand the Dewey Decimal System, and then as chief company clerk. It was a small headquarters, a point of transshipment of American GIs going home, and I was assigned two young, intelligent prisoners of war who had been clerks in the German army. They were so
much better than I in clerking that they were soon doing all the paperwork, leaving me to pursue my studies. My high school and college French stood me in good stead, needing only some refreshing to become usable. I spent my days reading French journals—*Les Temps Modernes*, *Critique*, *L’Esprit*, *Les Cahiers du Sud*, and others. I was especially fond of *Critique*, which gave excellent critical accounts of authors who were worth reading about but not worth reading. This went along with various philosophical-theological books by the likes of Jean Wahl, Rachel Bespaloﬀ, and Lev Shestov, who made Kierkegaard’s leap of faith seem like a modest hop. French intellectual life was then boiling over with a passionate interest in ideas. Existentialism was the rage, and I became quite knowledgeable about that depressing philosophy, without however being depressed by it since it was intellectually so exciting. I even read a novel by Simone de Beauvoir that set my teeth on edge, which may have been her existentialist intention. Enjoying anything, including existentialism itself, seemed to represent for existentialists some kind of spiritual transgression.

When I returned, once again a civilian, to the States, where Bea was finishing her graduate studies at the University of Chicago, I was immediately informed that another sabbatical was in prospect. Bea had received a fellowship to go to the University of Cambridge to work on the papers of Lord Acton, the subject of her thesis. But before we left, one small thing happened that was to be of considerable importance to me. Bea told me of this new magazine that had been born in my absence, a “serious” (i.e., quite highbrow) Jewish magazine called *Commentary*, which actually paid as much as $100 for a contribution. I read what issues were available and decided that there was no reason I should not be a contributor. So I sat down and quickly wrote a very short story about my encounter with a young Jewish survivor in a displaced persons camp outside Marseilles. To my delight and astonishment, they immediately accepted it and promptly paid as well. This last was not unimportant, because we had calculated that Bea’s fellowship money and what she had saved from my army allotment would give us a budget of $12 a week in Cambridge. *Commentary’s* fee added another $1.50 a week. What I could not foresee at the time was that the *Commentary* connection was to play such a crucial part in my life.

We really need not have worried about our English budget, since there was nothing to buy in Cambridge. Food was still stringently rationed, and we mostly lived on fish and chips or cheese sandwiches. Rent was cheap too, for our furnished room with toilet upstairs and a sink in the backyard. But this was the year of the coal shortage and the Great Freeze, so we slept in our overcoats and poor Bea, who had developed chilblains, had to wear gloves when she worked on the Acton papers lest her bloody ﬁngers stain them. Being young, we shrugged all this off. Cambridge was lovely, positively exotic to our eyes, and we were leading the kind of bookish life that suited us. I started writing again, pieces on English affairs for *The New Leader* and a couple of book reviews for *Commentary*. I also wrote a novel, in a style that was a bastard mixture of Saul Bellow and Jean Giraudoux, whose novels I was then enchanted by. Fortunately, I never tried to get it published and eventually incinerated it. I knew in my bones that I was not born to be a novelist. Indeed, had it been published it would have been a major disaster for me, since I then almost surely would have wasted some years (perhaps even a lifetime) doing something I was not really suited for.

We returned to New York in 1947 with a couple of hundred dollars in the bank and no visible prospects. Bea wanted to write her thesis, and I wanted a job that enabled me, in my spare time if necessary, to keep on writing. Once again, my luck held out. My brother-in-law, Milton Himmelfarb, then a researcher at the American Jewish Committee (which published *Commentary*), told me that he had heard that *Commentary* was looking for a couple of junior editors. I promptly applied and was thrilled to learn that I had been accepted. My salary was $3,600 a year, more than enough to allow us to rent a dark two-room apartment on Broadway and Ninety-sixth Street, immediately above a Bickford’s cafeteria (now long since gone). The smells were awful, but the neighborhood was ﬁne—at last we had our own apartment, and in the heart of Manhattan, no less! Interestingly, it never occurred to us to look for an apartment in Greenwich Village. Bohemia held no attractions for us, though we were then childless.

My colleagues at *Commentary* were an extraordinary group: Elliot Cohen, the editor and founder, had edited *The Menorah Journal* at Columbia, to which his classmate Lionel Trilling contributed, and he then spent two decades in the bureaucratic wilderness of Jewish philanthropy. He was a thoroughly assimilated southern Jew whose interest was in Jews, not Judaism. He was very intelligent and wrote well, in a somewhat ﬂorid style. I liked and respected him, while he had a kind of fatherly affection for me. Clement Greenberg, ten years older than I, was even then a prominent art critic. Clem, like Elliot, was interested in Jews (though not very interested) as distinct from Judaism. He wrote for *Partisan Review*, not for *Commentary*, and was our main link with the intellectual community around PR. Because he could read German, he became the editor for a brilliant group of German-Jewish émigré writers (most notably Hannah Arendt). Though he had a reputation as having a terrible temper, leading even to an occasional brawl, we
saw none of that. Toward his younger colleagues he was always genial, if distant. I recall vividly, for obvious reasons, his once offering to acquire for me a large Jackson Pollock painting for $10,000. It was a friendly gesture, but I declined. I didn’t have $10,000, we didn’t have space in our apartment for so large a painting, and I didn’t like (still don’t like) “abstract expressionist” art. That painting would today be worth millions. But, since I still don’t like abstract expressionist art, I have never felt particularly regretful.

Robert Warshow was, for me, the most troubling of my colleagues. We got along well enough—played poker together, that sort of thing—but he always made me feel uncomfortable. There was a hard, cold, almost affectless streak in him, clothed in the purest rationalism. Like Elliot and Clem, his interest in Jews was “ethnic,” though, I always felt, as minimal as such an interest could be for an editor on a Jewish magazine. But he was a truly brilliant writer, with a cool, chiseled, powerful style that suited his talent and personality perfectly. He would write in longhand, in pencil, on a yellow pad, in a very large handwriting that permitted only six or seven lines a page, and when he brought in his essays to be typed they were letter-perfect—no deletions, no additions, not even a correction in punctuation. I have never seen anything like it. It’s as if every single word in the essay was preformed in his mind before he sat down to write. Several of those essays, mainly on popular culture—and there was very little serious writing about popular culture then—are deservedly famous today.

Nathan Glazer, whom I had known at City College—he was a couple of years behind me—became one of my closest friends and remains so to this day. (He was later to succeed Daniel Bell as my co-editor of The Public Interest.) Intelligent, amiable, intellectually curious, he was a sociologist who was skeptical of most of what then passed for sociology, and established a valuable department, “The Study of Man,” which summarized and criticized new trends in the social sciences. He also had a more intense Jewish background than Clem or Bob, and together we constituted the “Jewish” editors; I specialized in Jewish religious writing and he in the secular life of the Jewish community. We were also both more “political” than the others, having emerged from the ideological hothouse of City College.

Richard Clurman, fresh from the University of Chicago, joined Commentary the same day I did. Bright and articulate, he was more interested in journalism than Judaism. We were not surprised when he left to work for Time magazine, where he had a distinguished career.

My position at Commentary brought me to the margin of the world of Partisan Review, since the two magazines overlapped one another on the political spectrum. Only on the margin, because the PR crowd was older than we were and far less bourgeois in what we now call their “lifestyle.” Still, it was exciting to meet and get to know all these famous people I had been reading for the past ten years. My most vivid memory of our excursion into the world of PR occurred at a cocktails-and-buffet party at the apartment of William Phillips, the co-editor of the magazine. I had piled my plate with food and sat down in the middle of a couch, assuming Bea would join me there. Instead, what happened was this: Mary McCarthy sat down on my right, Hannah Arendt on my left, and then Diana Trilling pulled up a chair and sat directly opposite me. I was trapped, and I remember thinking, as I sank into a terrified paralysis of body and mind, that this was an event to remember. For the next hour, they argued about Freud and psychoanalysis while I sat there mute, not even touching my food lest eating seem like a rude intrusion into their high conversation. I kept wondering why my wife wasn’t rescuing me, but she sat across the room eating and giggling. When the conversation finally broke up, I had not the faintest recollection of anything that had been said.

During my first years at Commentary, I wrote only on philosophy, religion, and occasionally on literature. My political views were what we would now call neoliberal, but I had no interest in expressing them. What brought me back into the world of political controversy was the extraordinary profusion of opinions sympathetic to, even apologetic for, the Stalinist regime in Russia among so many leading liberals. These opinions were dominant in The Nation, The New Republic, the New York Times, and Hollywood, so that anti-Stalinist liberals came to feel, as indeed they were, an isolated group within the larger intellectual community. Eventually, I was sufficiently irritated to write a short political piece.

The occasion was a book by Carey McWilliams, a leading “progressive” and a very stylish writer. We had actually published an article by him in Commentary, on how “social discrimination”—e.g., barring Jews from membership in country clubs—was part of a larger pattern of discrimination that sustained the hegemony of a ruling class. I did not like the piece because I did not see why any Jew should want to join a country club where Jews were not welcome. (In truth, at that time I didn’t see the point of anyone belonging to a country club.) But Elliot, the editor, understood that this was an issue that did matter to those wealthy Jews who, as leaders of the American Jewish Committee, financed Commentary. He was quite right; the article evoked a chorus of appreciative approval from the AJC. Since relations between the AJC and Commentary were always under strain, our political posture being too anti-Communist for the more “mainline” liberal AJC members, this was no small matter.
McWilliams’s book was a slick, prototypical exposition of this “mainline” liberalism, studded with a disingenuous rhetoric that cleverly wedded this liberalism, in the most natural way, with a discreet apology for Stalinist fellow-traveling. My Trotskyist background, as well as my reading in literary criticism, made it easy for me to dissect his rhetoric and reveal its underlying purpose. To my astonishment, the review was enthusiastically received by people whose opinions I respected. I was astonished because political writing was so easy that I had no idea it was, as seemed to be the case, in scarce supply—at least so far as “our side” was concerned.

Well, one thing leads to another. Encouraged by the reception of that book review, I wrote what was to be the most controversial essay of my career. It was 1952, and McCarthyism was the issue of the day. The problem for liberal intellectuals was to define an attitude toward the civil liberties of Communists. (There was, so far as I was concerned, no problem in defining one’s opposition to Senator McCarthy.) Most “mainline” liberals, many of them “fellow-travelers” in varying degrees, did not argue in favor of toleration of Communists as Communists, a perfectly acceptable opinion which I respected even if I didn’t fully agree with it. They preferred to regard the question of whether anyone was or was not a Communist as an irrelevancy, since for them Communists were simply “progressives” who were more outspoken and militant than the rest of the breed. It was the disingenuousness, the hypocrisy, even the intellectual cowardice of such people that moved me to write my article in *Commentary*. In that article, I had a passing reference to Senator McCarthy as a “vulgar demagogue” who was making an impression on the American people because they knew him to be anti-Communist (as they were), whereas they knew no such thing about most of the leading spokesmen of the American liberal community. This was during the Korean War, a war in which as many American soldiers died as were later to die in Vietnam, and popular passions were high. And here were our leading liberals, many of whom were publicly suspicious of American motives in this war (though not of Communist motives), becoming passionate only in the defense of the civil liberties of American Communists, who openly supported the North Korean regime. My article dissected some of these leading liberal spokesmen, demonstrating that their ostensible concern for the civil liberties of Communists arose, more often than not, out of an ideological sympathy for Communists as “fellow progressives.”

What a storm my article created! In truth, American liberals were so hysterical about McCarthy that they simply could not think straight about the issue I was addressing. My unforgivable sin, I subsequently realized, was in not being hysterical about McCarthy, whom I assumed to be a transient, ugly phenomenon with no political future. That I had no use for “witch-hunting” I assumed the readers of *Commentary* would take for granted. On the other hand, I did have the temerity to suggest that, while the American Communists had their civil rights under the Constitution, no American had a “right” to government employment, and the idea of “civil liberties” could not be stretched to give Communists, or even their loyal fellow-travelers, such a right. Nor did anyone’s civil liberties make him immune to public opprobrium. The Communists, after all, were a totalitarian group hostile to our constitutional democracy. How we defined their civil liberties was a matter of prudence, not principle. After the experience of the Weimar Republic, this seemed to me a reasonable approach. Perhaps I didn’t express these thoughts with the clarity they needed. But it would not have mattered, since most of my infuriated critics had an agenda of their own.

I survived the tumult and the shouting that article provoked because many prominent liberals thought that I had made a point worth making, one not at all offensive to an authentic liberalism which understood that there were indeed enemies on the left. The main effect was to define me publicly, for the first time, as a political writer with a voice of my own. The timing, as it happened, was not of the best. My situation at *Commentary*, after five wonderful years, had become intolerable. Elliot Cohen was in the process of having a nervous breakdown that would later cost him his life. I didn’t understand the tragedy that was happening; all I knew was that his editorial interventions had become ever more capricious and arbitrary. As the managing editor, I found myself pitted between authors and editor, trying to negotiate acceptable solutions to the problems he was causing. Finally I felt so miserable that I had to resign. I came home and broke the news to Bea. She had news of her own.

Job hunting was a new experience for me, and fortunately it did not last long. I applied for a position on *Fortune*, where a senior editor was an old friend of Elliot’s who had become an acquaintance of mine. (He, too, had once been a Trotskyist!) He gently turned me down, essentially on the grounds that my kind of writing was too “highbrow” for them. Occasionally I wonder, with a shudder, what my life would have been like had they hired me.

It was Sidney Hook who came to my rescue, a practice he made a habit of doing for the rest of my life. Something called the American Committee for Cultural Freedom had recently been formed, associated with the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris. It was an organization of anti-Communist liberals with the mission of counterbalancing the pro-Communist liberals and
gauchistes who were then so active in the intellectual worlds of the Western democracies, including our own. The position of executive director of the ACCF was then vacant, and Hook, who liked my political writing, campaigned successfully to get the job for me. Apparently I was acceptable even to those liberals on the Committee who thought my *Commentary* article had gone somewhat overboard.

The next ten months or so were tedium interspersed with crises. The tedium was the administrative chores, which I coped with easily enough. (I have always found administration a much-overrated skill.) The crises were internally generated by a heterogeneous group of intellectuals whose common cause turned out to be not quite common enough. There was a small group on the right, led by James Burnham, who if not pro-McCarthy was certainly anti-anti-McCarthy. There was a much larger group on the center-left, led by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Richard Rovere, who believed the Committee should be, above all, actively anti-McCarthy. Somewhere in the middle were a handful of very articulate people, led by Diana Trilling, who were unhappy with the ideological posture of the Congress in Paris, which was anti-Communist but which, in an effort to appeal to the anti-Communist Left, was not simply or belligerently pro-American. I mediated between these groups, not fully sharing the views of any in this respect—my guide was Sidney Hook, who was the Committee’s moving spirit—but all such mediation could do was to put out one firestorm of controversy and prepare for the next. My only satisfaction was the organization of two public debates, the first (naturally) on the relation of religion to democracy (Paul Tillich versus Sidney Hook), the second on “containment” versus “liberation” in American foreign policy (Arthur Schlesinger versus James Burnham). They were very good debates, attended by some five hundred people, and the Committee actually made some money on them. In the end, however, the spirit of factionalism was bound to prevail, as it always does among intellectuals with ideological passions and little political common sense.

I was about at the end of my tether and tenure when Sidney, once again, came to the rescue. The Congress, he informed me, was interested in starting an English-language cultural-intellectual-political magazine in Paris to counteract the predominant influence of anti-American and often Communist fellow-traveling magazines in all the democracies, not only of Western Europe but in Asia as well. Would I like to be considered for the position of editor? That question answered itself. The prospect of editing such a magazine, in Paris no less, made my head spin with anticipation.

I had not, at that time, met anyone from the Congress, so some interviewing was in order. I flew to Paris—well, from there on it’s something of a blur.

On either the first or second night Michael Josselson, the Congress’s executive director, took me to dinner at the home of the ex-Communist novelist and critic Manès Sperber. I no longer recall who was there because after the appetizer of garlic-packed snails I passed out. (It turned out that I am allergic to garlic in large doses.) They laid me out on a dining room couch, Sperber fed me some pills, and they proceeded to an evening of fine food and animated conversation while I lay on that couch, regaining consciousness intermittently in order to throw up. For the rest of my trip I was violently sick. I do recall going to London with Mike to have lunch at the Savoy with the leaders of the British Committee for Cultural Freedom, among them Malcolm Muggeridge, T. R. Fyvel, George Lichtheim, and Fred Warburg, the publisher (Secker & Warburg, as it then was). I recall, while at the table rather than the “loo,” their making a very strong pitch for locating the magazine in London—bereft of a good literary magazine since the death of Cyril Connolly’s *Horizon*—and for making Stephen Spender (a member of the British Committee but then away teaching in Cincinnati) my co-editor. Mike found their case very persuasive, especially after Muggeridge offered to raise the money for Spender’s salary. So did I, though I really would have preferred Paris. Anyway, I staggered home to inform my wife that we would be living in London after all. She, being as much an Anglophile as I was a Francophile, was happy to hear the news. A month or so later, I flew to London to find a place for us to live, to rent a temporary office, and to hire someone to help put out the magazine.

That was early in 1953, shortly before the Coronation. I had committed myself to a first issue in October—for an untitled magazine that wasn’t even on a drawing board. I recall T. S. Matthews of *Time*, then in London ostensibly to fund some kind of highbrow British magazine, telling me that I was being wildly unrealistic. In the event, my magazine came out on schedule; his never did.

I rented a shabby two-room office and hired a secretary-assistant in the person of Margot Walmsley—a splendid woman, prematurely widowed, who stayed with the magazine until the bitter end, by which time she had become managing editor. (It also turned out that, on practically no money at all, she gave the liveliest cocktail parties at which all sorts of people showed up, some very interesting, some merely important.) The two of us put out our first issue. I solicited articles from my friends in the United States, Stephen, still in Cincinnati, wrote to his friends in London, we agreed on a title after much bickering, I found a printer and distributor, I designed a magazine modeled (with variations) on *Commentary*, and in the fall of 1953 the first issue did come out, as promised.
The history of *Encounter*, including the CIA connection, has by now been well told by Peter Coleman in *The Liberal Conspiracy*, and told less well by others, so I shall say little about it. I do feel compelled to say, however, that my relations with Stephen Spender were, against the odds, quite good, all things considered. After all, he was ten years older than I, infinitely more distinguished, and was far more sensitive to the opinions of British literary circles than I was. So there was always the possibility of friction, a possibility that was realized less often than I had feared. A poet, a man of letters, and a gentleman, Stephen was absolutely no kind of editor. I ran the magazine, he made major contributions to it. He brought W. H. Auden and Isaiah Berlin to *Encounter*, and the imprint that resulted was significant. He also solicited the most famous article ever printed in *Encounter*, Nancy Mitford’s “U and Non-U,” which provoked the popular press to a frenzy of “research” into the class-specific usages of the British vocabulary. This was not exactly the kind of article that our publishers in Paris had in mind for the magazine, and they, like all non-Brits, were mystified by the commotion it caused.

The 1950s were, despite Suez, the golden decade of England’s postwar history, and we were lucky to be there then. The dollar was strong, and my modest salary, less so by British standards, went a long way. We lived in a succession of furnished houses and could even afford an *au pair* girl, which permitted Bea to continue her research and writing. Her biography of Lord Acton had already been published, to a laudatory review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, so she was of interest to the British in her own right. We made many friends, amid a host of acquaintances.

Very few of our friends and acquaintances came from Stephen’s circle, the literary establishment. They were simply not my kind of people. There was never any serious intellectual or political talk at their parties, just malicious, witty, often brilliantly witty, gossip. I never felt more solemnly New York–Jewish than at one of these occasions, and never more bourgeois. They all seemed to have more money than we had, or at least lived more extravagantly and adventurously than we did. Many of them could fairly be called upper-class, but those who weren’t affected upper-class mannerisms and modes of speech. As an American, I was to some degree outside the British class system, but only to a degree. The thought of attempting an entry never crossed my mind.

Our closest friends, almost inevitably, were older Jewish ex-radicals who were now on *Encounter*’s ideological wavelength and among whom we felt at home. These included Jane Degras, historian of the Comintern at the Royal Institute of International Affairs; T. R. Fyvel, who had been a close friend of George Orwell and who was now at the BBC; George Lichtheim, the fiercely independent neo-Marxist and anti-Communist; and Mark Abrams, who introduced opinion polling and market research to Britain. In addition, among the Labour MPs—the very first politicians I had ever met in the flesh—there was Woodrow Wyatt, now a prominent conservative journalist who sits in the House of Lords; Anthony Crosland, who was trying to redefine socialism in terms of simple social and economic equality, and who was fascinated by the “City College sociologists,” especially my friends Daniel Bell and Seymour Martin Lipset; and Denis Healey, who transfixed the visiting Lionel Trilling at dinner one night with his knowledge of contemporary literature, leaving me to disabuse Trilling of the notion that all Members of Parliament were like Healey. The only conservative MP we were friendly with was Angus Maude, who should have been Prime Minister, but his fellow Tories thought him to be far too intelligent for that responsible position.

There were, however, conservatives not in Parliament with whom we established ties of friendship. They included Malcolm Muggeridge, then editor of *Punch* and the *enfant terrible* of British journalism, and Michael Oakeshott, who succeeded Harold Laski in his chair at the London School of Economics and who was already on his way to becoming one of the most distinguished conservative thinkers of this century. By marrying, as it were, Oakeshott to Muggeridge, three gifted young conservative journalists were born. They were Peregrine Worsthorne, Colin Welch, and Henry Fairlie, with all of whom we became fast friends. They had no counterparts in America at the time. And, of course, there was the steady stream of American visitors to enliven our days: Dan Bell, the Glazers, the Sidney Hooks, the Trillings, the Jason Epsteins, and numerous others.

In London, though our social life was politically ecumenical, my (and Bea’s) evolving discontent with social democracy and liberalism continued. As an American and a co-editor of *Encounter*, I kept aloof from British politics—my writing for *Encounter* consisted of essays on Machiavelli, Tacitus, and the Marquis de Sade—but I found my conservative friends far more interesting than the others. I hadn’t known any conservatives—as distinct from ex-radicals with budding right-wing opinions—in New York, and I was fascinated by the fact that they felt perfectly at ease with themselves as conservatives, neither apologetic nor unduly contentious. They were, after all, heirs to a long tradition of conservative politics and conservative thought in Britain, whereas there was no such tradition in the United States. Though in a distinct minority, they were accepted by society at large as having a legitimate place on the political spectrum. More than that, their claim to government could hardly be dismissed, with Winston Churchill still the overpowering figure that he was.
My discontent with social democracy cum liberalism had absolutely nothing to do with economics, of which I was perfectly ignorant. It did have to do with foreign policy, where I was, on general principles, a “realist” to the core, contemptuous of the Left’s blind assumption that the class struggle was natural but that national or purely ideological conflicts were not. I was equally contemptuous of the Left’s predisposition to see Communists as, in some sense, a wayward extremity of the Left, ultimately redeemable by therapeutic strategies. (My Trotskyist background stood me in good stead here.) The Cold War seemed to me not deplorable but inevitable. In contrast, the kind of liberal sentiments and thinking that went into the formation of the United Nations struck me as not at all inevitable and certainly deplorable. Even the so-called right-wing Labourites, who were friendly to *Encounter*, felt they had to be cautious in their anti-Communism, lest they appeared to be impugning their own socialist beliefs. For my own part, I found their socialist beliefs, especially the blind commitment to egalitarian politics across the board, ever more questionable. The prospect of the entire world evolving into a cheerless global Sweden, smug and unhappy, had no attraction for me.

Though we felt truly privileged passing these years in London, we had every intention of returning to America when the first opportunity presented itself. The longer we lived in Britain, the more American we felt. When our son, William, reached school age, we sent him to the French Lycée; we did not want him to return an imitation Brit. And when our daughter, Elizabeth, was born, we promptly registered her at the American embassy. I sensed that, though life in England could then be more pleasant, in so many ways, than coping with the tensions of American life, I also sensed that British politics and British culture were becoming ever more provincial. The United States, it was easy to foresee, was going to be the place where the action was, and, somewhat to my own surprise, I felt keenly that I wanted somehow to participate in that action. We had good friends in London who, as American expatriates, made very decent lives for themselves. But not for a moment did we have even the most fleeting idea of emulating them. Oddly enough, the sphere of action I had in mind for myself was domestic politics rather than foreign affairs. I intuited, rather than knew, that after the Eisenhower interregnum we were living through, American politics was going to become a lot more interesting.

The opportunity to return came as the result of an intervention in our lives of an old friend, Paul Jacobs, then a staff writer for *The Reporter*. The editor of that magazine—I think it was Theodore Draper—had just left, and the publisher and editor-in-chief, Max Ascoli, was seeking a replacement. Paul, then more sympathetic to *Encounter* than he was later to be, recommended me to Max, who was intrigued enough to bring me to New York for an interview. I went with trepidation because editors of *The Reporter* seemed to come and go, and Max was reputed to be a difficult man to work with. The meeting went well. I liked him. He was an Italian antifascist émigré who had taught at the New School for Social Research in New York before marrying Marian Rosenwald, a very wealthy woman whose family had founded Sears, Roebuck. I was actually familiar with some academic articles he had written, which pleased him. He was also pleased by my European experience and my personal acquaintance with Raymond Aron, Ignazio Silone (who co-edited the Italian counterpart to *Encounter*), and Isaiah Berlin. He made me a generous offer and, eager to return home, I accepted. However things worked out, I reckoned, at least I would have some kind of head start in a career in the States.

We arrived in New York at the very end of 1958, rented a large, old apartment on Riverside Drive for $270 a month—Marian was shocked to learn that rents were so high—and quickly settled in. It did not take me long to learn that working with, in truth, under, Max Ascoli was as difficult as the reports would have it. He was kind, generous, and intelligent, but he was also egomaniacal, and sometimes tyrannical in behavior. He was also extremely snobbish. When I solicited and received a book review by George Steiner, then a young writer on the London *Economist*, Max was reluctant to publish it. But when he discovered that Steiner was the son of a well-known international banker, his attitude changed radically. We agreed that I was to be “reintroduced to America” by focusing at first on “the back of the book”—book reviews, the arts, cultural reportage—which seemed sensible enough. The trouble was that he wanted to keep me there. The political articles were his domain, over which he exercised a lordly sovereignty. Unfortunately, he was not really a good editor—his command of the English language left much to be desired—and in general he preferred second-rate contributors whose copy he could regard as raw material. Even more unfortunately, he regarded his long editorials, usually on the importance of NATO, as the magazine’s centerpiece and very reason for being. Indeed, he bitterly resented any article that caused too much comment because it distracted attention from his editorials. He was always competing with his writers, and the only way he could win was to prefer the second-rate to anything better.

I first understood this clearly in the case of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. I was introduced to Pat, who was then teaching at Syracuse, by Bob Bingham, our managing editor, who had worked with Pat in the Democratic reform movement in New York City. He thought Pat might be a possible contributor, and so we had lunch. I was overwhelmed. Pat had enough wonderful ideas for
articles to fill up his own magazine. We finally agreed that he would write a four-thousand-word piece on automobile safety, an issue he had worked on when he was an assistant to Governor Averell Harriman. I had high hopes, but they fell far short of the reality when, a little more than a week later, I received a ten-thousand-word article on automobile safety that was an editor’s dream. I wanted to publish it in toto and feature it, but Max wouldn’t have it. The article was cut to perhaps six thousand words, and when it attracted a lot of attention and won all sorts of prizes, Max was not at all happy. He soon made it clear that while he was willing to publish more Moynihan, it should not be too often and not at too great length.

I don’t want to paint too bleak a picture. The Reporter was a better magazine than my own frustrating experience would suggest. It just wasn’t a magazine where I could play a significant editorial role. The staff was friendly, and I liked them. My friendship with Pat Moynihan flourished, and there was also this young researcher, Meg Greenfield, in whom I had an ally in trying to enliven the magazine. But after one year, I felt trapped and decided to leave. Max was understanding and gracious, gave me a generous severance payment, and once again I was without employment.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do next—to write a book that would be a critical examination of the evolution of the American democracy, a kind of sequel to Tocqueville and Henry Adams. For three months I read furiously, took a large bundle of notes, and then realized it was all an exercise in futility. I was not a book writer. I did not have the patience and I lacked the necessary intellectual rigor to bring my ideas into some kind of consistent thesis. I learned a lot in those three months, and it stood me in good stead in the years to follow. But I needed a job, and, fortunately, soon found a congenial one. Through a mutual friend, I was introduced to Arthur Rosenthal, publisher and editor in chief at Basic Books, a small publishing house specializing in psychoanalytical works. Arthur wanted to expand the list to include the social sciences, and that was my mission, first on a part-time basis but in the course of the next ten years as executive vice president of the firm.

Arthur was a wonderful man to work for, and never in those ten years did we have a serious argument. I did what I was supposed to do, and I think I did it well. But it did not take me long to realize that though publishing was a business I could be passably good at, I lacked the kind of patience, passion, and commitment that is the mark of an authentic editor-publisher. Arthur had it; I didn’t. I was exasperated by the fact that once you had wed a good idea to its potential author, it took two years at least for him to deliver a manuscript (often not the book you had had in mind in the first place), another year to get it edited and published, and then it might or might not sell for reasons which, so far as I could see, had little to do with its intrinsic merit or lack thereof. The cure for such exasperation was for me to do some writing on the side.

At that time, the Great Society was getting into full swing, and I found myself increasingly skeptical of the liberal ideas behind it and of the programs they spawned. I started to write occasional op-ed pieces for The New Leader, making the arguments in support of my skepticism; but, increasingly, I felt that something more was needed. Not surprisingly, that “something more” took shape in my mind as another magazine. The only existing conservative journal, the National Review, was not to our tastes—at that time insufficiently analytical and “intellectual,” too stridently hostile to the course of American politics ever since 1932. I discussed these thoughts with my friend Dan Bell, then at Columbia, who shared my skepticism, though less from an ideological point of view than from that of a scrupulous social scientist. We even went around to a few wealthy individuals someone or other had put us in touch with, but they were immune to our enthusiasm.

It was not until the beginning of 1965 that a potential publisher appeared on the scene. At a dinner at Sidney Hook’s, we found ourselves in the company of Warren and Anita Manshel. We had known Warren when, as a newly minted PhD from Harvard, he had come to work in Paris for the Congress for Cultural Freedom. There he had met and married Anita, the daughter of a very successful Wall Street investor. He was now himself on Wall Street, struggling with boredom because his heart belonged to politics. I mentioned the magazine idea, and he was interested. How much would it cost, he asked? I explained that, by my calculations, $10,000 could see us through the first year (i.e., four issues). The editors, Dan Bell and myself, would work pro bono (as they have ever since). He agreed to put up the money and became our publisher. Over time, in the following years, he invested much larger sums in what became The Public Interest, until such times as some foundations became interested in us.

I edited the magazine, the first issue of which came out in the fall of 1965, out of my office at Basic Books, with my secretary constituting the rest of the staff. For the first issues, I asked friends to contribute—Daniel Bell (my co-editor), Pat Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, James Q. Wilson, and others who I had reason to think were upset by the frothy ideological climate of the mid-1960s. One forgets just how frothy this climate was. The centerpiece of the War on Poverty was the sociological fantasy that if one gave political power to the poor, by sponsoring “community action,” they would then lift themselves out of poverty at the expense of the rich and powerful. All of us at the core of
The Public Interest had grown up in lower-middle-class or working-class households, unlike the academics who had authored the War on Poverty, and we knew that becoming politically militant was no way for poor people to lift themselves out of poverty. This, it seemed to us, was just a sociological echo of an older socialist idea that a “Great Society” could only come about as a consequence of class struggle.

There were many other such fantasies floating about at that time. One involved the threat and promise of “automation.” We were, it seems, entering a “push-button” phase of human history, in which the economy would mechanically (or electronically) produce abundance, but in which no one would have steady work. What would all these people do? Thus arose the problem of “leisure” and how tens of millions of people, with time on their hands, could spend that time fruitfully. The Ford Foundation ran many conferences on this problem, and some very big books on “leisure” duly appeared. Lyndon Johnson even appointed a Commission on Automation. Fortunately, Dan Bell and the MIT economist Robert Solow became members, and they shaped the final report to suggest that things would never be as good or as bad as imagined. It was his experience on this Commission that persuaded Dan there was urgent need for a journal like The Public Interest, and Bob Solow contributed a piece on “automation” to our first issue.

I designed the magazine the way I had designed Encounter: by borrowing from the format of existing or previous magazines and changing things around a little. What was important was that, given our lack of staff, it should be as “idiot-proof” as possible. So the articles for the first issue came in, the printer delivered as promised, and there we were, with two thousand copies ready to be mailed to subscribers who had answered our ads as well as to a list of people who ought to have been interested. My secretary, Vivian Gornick, was an intelligent, pleasant young woman who had done graduate work in English literature. She had done the proofreading, dealt with the printer, and now she went down to the post office with a small truckload of copies to be mailed. But the post office refused to mail them; it turned out we had failed to get some necessary permits. Vivian came back in despair, and I was stumped. Then Vivian said that we should try again. It worked this time. Vivian simply sat on the loading dock, burst into tears, and the kindly older supervisor was so touched that he waived his objections. Shortly thereafter, Vivian wrote her first article for The Village Voice, which launched her career as a feminist—an increasingly radical feminist writer.

Though the founding of The Public Interest is generally seen in retrospect as the origin of “neoconservatism” (a term that had not yet been invented), the core group around the magazine still regarded themselves as liberal, if of a dissenting and revisionist bent. I was the most conservative of the lot, my British experience having exposed me to intelligent, thoughtful, and lively conservatives. But conservatism in the States at that moment was represented by the Goldwater campaign against the New Deal, with which none of us had any sympathy, and by National Review, which we regarded as too right-wing. The spectrum of opinion within our group was very narrow, with me slightly on the right, Dan Bell (ever loyal to his right-wing social-democratic background) on the left, and the rest somewhere in the middle. We considered ourselves to be realistic meliorists, skeptical of government programs that ignored history and experience in favor of then-fashinable left-wing ideas spawned by the academy. This was the original idea of the magazine, but events soon overtook us.

The major event of that period was the student rebellion and the rise of the counterculture, with its messianic expectations and its apocalyptic fears. It certainly took us by surprise, as it did just about everyone else. Suddenly we discovered that we had been cultural conservatives all along. This shock of recognition was to have profound consequences. We were bourgeois types, all of us, but by habit and instinct rather than reflection. Now we had to decide what we were for, and why. Cool criticism of the prevailing liberal-left orthodoxy was not enough at a time when liberalism itself was crumbling before the resurgent Left. Nor were we the only ones to experience this sea-change. The editor of Commentary, Norman Podhoretz, and most of the contributors to it, who had been moving left until 1965, now became our allies. As the New Left and the counterculture began to reshape liberalism, as can be seen by a perusal of the New York Review of Books and even The New Yorker, and, eventually, to reshape the Democratic Party, disenchanted liberals began to find themselves harboring all kinds of conservative instincts and ideas. Something like a “movement” took shape, with The Public Interest at (or near) the center. It never really was a movement, however, since no organizational efforts were made or even thought of. It would more fairly be described as a current of thought, represented by not more than a few dozen people who were rather more articulate and familiar with ideological controversy than most conservatives at the time. The political implications of this current of thought were gradually to reveal themselves under the pressure of events. One such key event was the nomination of Senator George McGovern as the Democratic candidate in 1972, which in effect sent us, most of us anyhow, a message that we were now off the liberal spectrum and that the Democratic Party no longer had room for the likes of us. Though none of us was a Republican, and few of
us even knew any Republicans, our political landscape was in the process of being transformed.

One important agent in this transformation was the Wall Street Journal, a newspaper that, at the time, few American intellectuals had ever seen, much less read. But it turned out that a young conservative journalist in their Washington bureau, Robert Bartley, had been reading The Public Interest and sensed that something of interest to conservatives, a fresh wind, as it were, was happening. He rang me up for an interview and in May of 1972 his article about The Public Interest, “Irving Kristol and Friends,” appeared. It was favorable almost (but not quite) to the point of embarrassment, and suddenly we had national exposure. A few years later, Bob was appointed editor of the editorial and op-ed pages, and I became a frequent contributor to those pages. More important, the editorials themselves began to reflect, in some degree, the mode of thinking to be found in The Public Interest—analytical, skeptical, and implicitly ideological in a way we did not ourselves at the time appreciate.

At that time, I had already left Basic Books to become a Luce Professor at New York University. (The appointment was largely due to vigorous lobbying by Sidney Hook.) I spent eighteen years as a professor there, as Luce Professor and then John M. Olin Professor, and enjoyed it immensely—lots of free time, long vacations, and if one can avoid entanglement with departmental or faculty politics (as I was able to do), a generally easy life. I also found teaching to be a useful exercise, because it forced me to seek more coherence in my thinking than I was accustomed to. The title of “professor” was desirable too, because otherwise I ran the danger of being labeled a “journalist.” But it will not come as a surprise to NYU to learn that most of my energy and attention were focused on the “real world,” of which academia these days is a creaking and reluctant part.

Washington, D.C., on the other hand, is very much in the real world, in the sense that what it does matters a lot even though what it thinks can often be extraterrestrial. At that time, when I had already marked my fiftieth birthday, I had been to Washington only once in my life, and that was a one-day visit while I was on home leave from Encounter. (The goal was to persuade Walter Lippmann to contribute an article to the magazine; he was friendly but unobliging.) I was still very much a New Yorker, still as much a free-floating intellectual as a serious “policy wonk” in my thinking. But Bill Baroody Sr., head of the American Enterprise Institute, a small conservative think tank in Washington, had been reading The Public Interest and the Wall Street Journal and sensed that something new and enlivening was occurring. He got in touch with me, offered me an honorary title of “associate fellow” (or some such thing), and a connection was established.

At that time, AEI was concerned solely with economics and a defense of the “free enterprise system.” But Bill himself had a much broader range of interests, which included religion, political philosophy, and the social sciences generally. The emergence of a new group of “neoconservative” intellectuals—the term was invented, in a spirit of contempt for “renegades,” by the socialist Michael Harrington—intrigued and excited him. He calmly ignored the fact that not a single one of us was at that time a Republican, a fact that caused much outrage among Goldwater conservatives who were the main financial support for AEI. In the course of the 1970s and ’80s, Bill made a determined effort to recruit “neoconservatives” to AEI, and did in fact recruit, early on, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Michael Novak, Ben Wattenberg, as well as many others as the years proceeded. His task was facilitated by the appearance on the scene of a rejuvenated Bradley Foundation and John M. Olin Foundation, now staffed by younger men and women who had been exposed to, and influenced by, “neoconservative” thinking. Among them special note has to be made of Michael Joyce of Bradley, who turned out to be an accomplished neoconservative thinker in his own right.

This was all taking place during the Cold War—a war, it is often forgotten, that was not so cold for the United States, which lost over 100,000 soldiers killed in Korea and Vietnam. On the whole, though I wrote critically of the liberal illusions embedded in the thinking of our State Department and the foreign policy establishment—illusions about the nature of foreign affairs generally and of Communist intentions in particular—it was writing done with my left hand, as it were. The illusions were so simple-minded, and the whole controversy over foreign policy so intellectually unchallenging. (The Public Interest dealt only with domestic policy, as a consequence.) I had had an excellent education in communism at City College and in my Trotskyist youth group, and I knew that if you took Marxist-Leninist doctrine as seriously as the Soviet leadership did, the broad outline of an appropriate American foreign policy almost designed itself. To be a “hard-liner” vis-à-vis the Soviet Union or another Communist regime meant that you were likely to be right far more often than wrong. Only people who believed themselves so clever as to be able to outwit those odds could come up with original views on the Cold War. Unfortunately, our universities are well populated by such types. More unfortunately, some of them ended up micromanaging American policy in Vietnam, with disastrous results.

My intellectual perplexities in the 1970s began to focus rather on economics. Until that time I took it for granted that John Maynard Keynes had discovered the secret of the “boom-and-bust” cycle that seemed to characterize
a market economy, and I assumed that astute fiscal management by the government could reconcile economic growth and economic equilibrium. This assumption certainly seemed validated by the postwar experience—until the 1970s, that is. Then we found ourselves confronting simultaneous inflation and depression, and no one seemed to be able to explain it, much less know what to do about it. I decided with the greatest reluctance that “neoconservatism” could not blandly leave the economy to the economists, and that I personally had to become economically literate. So I took a sabbatical leave from NYU in the academic year 1976–1977, and we moved to Washington, where I became a visiting fellow at AEI while Bea formed a similar relationship with the Woodrow Wilson Center.

The timing was most fortuitous. The Ford administration was winding down and, for the first time, I was able to see close up the basic political impotence of traditional conservatism, which lived off Democratic errors but had no governing philosophy of its own—at least none that could strike a popular nerve among the electorate. There were many fine people in the Ford administration, and by election time they were all defeatist, in the sense that they thought the Republican Party would be better off out of office than in it. Their party had reached the end of the road, the post–New Deal road, and was floundering in a blind alley.

A fair number of these people came to AEI, as a kind of temporary haven. The economists among them were useful for my purposes, since they could help me understand the economic literature, old and new, that I was assiduously studying. But the men I formed the closest ties with were three newly unemployed lawyers—Robert Bork, Antonin Scalia, and Laurence Silberman—who have remained close friends to this day. AEI had no lunchroom at that time, and so we “brown-bagged it” every day, munching on our hamburgers or sandwiches while talking about everything but law, for this would have excluded me from the conversation. Our main topics for discussion were religion (my permanent favorite) and economics, about which none of us knew as much as we would have liked. But it was clear to all of us that the Republican Party would have to become more than the party of a balanced budget if it was to be invigorated. As it happens, there was an apostle of a new conservative economics right at hand, also spending a year at AEI. He was Jude Wanniski, and something called “supply-side” economics was his theme. He became a frequent member of our little luncheon group.

I had known Jude, then an editorial writer for the Wall Street Journal, for a couple of years previously, and had been largely responsible for his getting the foundation grant that brought him to AEI to write his book on supply-side economics. Jude had tried very hard to indoctrinate me in the virtues of this new economics, with partial success. I was not certain of its economic merits but quickly saw its political possibilities. To refocus Republican conservative thought on the economics of growth rather than simply on the economics of stability seemed to me very promising. Republican economics was then in truth a dismal science, explaining to the populace, parent-like, why the good things in life that they wanted were all too expensive. In the course of my new studies in economics, I had become aware that this nay-saying economics originated with Ricardo and represented nothing less than a perversion of the optimistic economics of Adam Smith, an economic idea of capitalism I found far more congenial. It was Jude who introduced me to Jack Kemp, a young Congressman and a recent convert. It was Jack Kemp who, almost single-handed, converted Ronald Reagan to supply-side economics. Ideas do have consequences, but in mysterious ways.

Economists, most of them Keynesian or neo-Keynesian, have given supply-side economics a bad name. That is because, with its emphasis on microeconomic incentives and disincentives, supply-side economics calls into question the entire structure of macroeconomic analysis and forecasting developed since World War II. Since something like half the economists in the United States today are macroeconomists, in academia, industry, and government, they are understandably irked when someone comes along to suggest that their intellectual efforts, some of them technically brilliant, are largely in vain when it comes to “guiding” the economy or making short-term forecasts. Such forecasts are right only by accident; if it were otherwise, Wall Street would be an infallible mechanism for making all investors rich. The essential goal of supply-side economics is to keep increases in government spending below the historical rate of growth of the economy, avoid needless government regulations, and keep tax rates low so as to encourage investment and sustain growth. After that is done, particular circumstances will intervene in unpredictable ways, but the preconditions for enduring, long-term growth will exist.

Neo-Keynesian orthodoxy has persisted in claiming that supply-side economics was tried and failed during the Reagan years, during which the budget deficit ballooned alarmingly. This is a false accusation. To begin with, the Democratic Congress, in a political frenzy, enacted much larger tax cuts than President Reagan originally requested. Then, for the rest of the decade, the same Congress proceeded to make expenditures at a rate far above the rate of growth of the economy, so that even as government’s revenues increased, as they did, despite the tax cuts, the deficit increased more rapidly. The reason these facts are either ignored or distorted is that liberal politicians, the liberal
media, and a substantial segment of professional economists do not want to encourage people to think that the activities of government ought to be considerably more limited than they now are.

There is nothing wrong with supply-side economics, but there is often something wrong with people attracted to it. These people are all too likely to think that if you follow the correct economic prescriptions, the polity will bloom with social and political health as well as greater economic well-being. But there is a lot more necessary for a healthy society and a healthy polity than solid economic growth, as we have discovered in the post–World War II decades. Just as erroneous economic actions by government can wreck a society and a polity, so erroneous moral and political beliefs can accomplish the same end, more indirectly but just as effectively.

And here, I think, is where what we call “neoconservatism” has made its major contribution in these past two decades. By enlarging the conservative vision to include moral philosophy, political philosophy, and even religious thought, it helped make it more politically sensible as well as politically appealing. Supply-side economics, in one version or another, offered neoconservatism an economic approach that promised steady economic growth, a *sine qua non* for the survival of a modern democracy. Neoconservatism, for its part, has provided traditional conservatism with an intellectual dimension that goes beyond economics to reflections on the roots of social and cultural stability. If the Republican Party today is less interested in the business community than in the pursuit of the happiness of ordinary folk, and if, as I think is the case, this has made the party more acceptable and appealing to the average American, then I believe the work of neoconservative intellectuals has contributed much to this change.

In 1987, Bea and I made another major decision: to retire from our professorships, at the City University of New York and New York University, respectively, and move, along with *The Public Interest*, to Washington, D.C., where I would become a senior fellow at AEI. We were, and to a large extent remain, New Yorkers, but we found life in New York not only disagreeable in the details of daily living but boring as well. That our children and grandchildren were in D.C. was surely a large consideration, but I do believe we would have made the move anyhow. New York is the national center of the arts, the communications media, and finance, but if you are keenly interested in public policy, as we had gradually become, D.C. is the place to be, especially since public policy these days has its own cultural and intellectual aspects.

There were two other reasons behind the move. First, most of our New York friends in the academic and journalistic worlds had exited our lives, through either retirement or death, and we had little contact with the generation that replaced them. Second, we found ourselves more and more isolated politically, as a result of our shift toward conservatism. New York is a one-party town, where liberalism and the Democratic Party unite to establish a regnant orthodoxy. Conservatives are mainly found in the financial community, and their outlook tends to be narrow. We found ourselves more and more uncomfortable at dinner parties, where we were regarded as exotic curiosities. In Washington, there is no shortage of conservatives and Republicans, and of necessity there is a degree of comity between liberals and conservatives that is unknown to New York. Perhaps this situation will change, but it is my perception that while Washington is a pleasant place in which to live, New York has become ever more unpleasant. And while New York intellectual and cultural life becomes ever more parochial and sterile—witness what is happening to the *New York Times*, which used to be a national newspaper—Washington inches along toward greater hospitality toward the life of the mind. Or so it seems to me. So today we are “Washingtonians,” joining a growing population of New York transplants.

Even before moving to Washington, however, I did have one final idea for a new magazine I would like to be involved in, one that was to be located in Washington. As I have noted, *The Public Interest* dealt only with domestic affairs. But as the Soviet regime showed signs of unraveling, it became clear to me that some kind of post–Cold War foreign policy would be needed. Such a policy would have to steer its own course between Wilsonian internationalist utopianism and a “pragmatism” that was little more than opportunism. In short, I foresaw a “neorealistic” foreign policy journal that would complement the “neoconservatism” of *The Public Interest*. The idea for such a magazine took shape in the course of discussions with Owen Harries, an Australian political scientist, former Australian ambassador to UNESCO, now an American resident, and one of the wisest analysts of foreign policy. He was willing to be the editor of *The National Interest* (as it was to be called), while I would be merely the publisher, watching over the budget. The first issue appeared in the fall of 1985, and it is now, together with the long-established *Foreign Affairs*, the leading journal in its field.

Washington is not only the political center of the nation, but the government center as well. This is both good and bad. To see close up how government operates in both domestic and foreign affairs—how it must operate under the rule of law—is to appreciate how complex modern government is and how difficult it is to bring about political change. That’s good, since to listen to the TV news or read the newspapers is to experience a radical simplification. What
is bad is the natural tendency to get too closely involved in the problems of
government and lose sight of the larger issues of politics, issues concerning what
type of country we want to be and what kind of lives we want to live in it.

In the past three decades, Washington has witnessed a surge of intellectual
vitality. This is largely the result of the formation and growth of think tanks—
conservative, liberal, and left-of-center. Washington’s universities play only
an ancillary role in this, since they are more teaching universities than re-
search centers. And, it has to be said, the tendency among the think tanks is
to focus on governmental activities, especially those affecting the economy.
Still, with every passing year this focus is of necessity broadened to include
such social issues as crime, illegitimacy, family problems, education, and other
such matters that neoconservative social scientists have been especially promi-
nent in highlighting. There is even a growing attention to cultural issues (e.g.,
the condition of the humanities and the arts). AEI, under Christopher De-
Muth, exemplifies this wider focus. So it is far more possible than it used to
be to lead a perfectly civilized life as well as an active life in Washington. And,
of course, it is still the most gracious and beautiful city in the nation, which
is why people hate to leave it. The recent modest decline in Washington’s
population is exclusively the result of middle-class black people moving to
the suburbs.

So here I am and here we are. I conclude this memoir on my seventy-fifth
birthday and a few days after our fifty-third wedding anniversary. Looking
back, I am astonished how intellectually twinned Bea and I have been over
the years, pursuing different subjects while thinking the same thoughts and
reaching the same conclusions. And not only Bea and I but our children. An
intellectual memoir like this necessarily shortchanges some of the most im-
portant and engrossing facts of life, such as children. I have been fortunate to
have children, Bill and Liz, who are not only dear to me because they are my
children, but who also happen to be gifted, interesting, and, even more re-
markable, intellectually and politically congenial. And they, in turn, have man-
gaged to marry spouses who are equally gifted, interesting, and congenial. Susan
Scheinberg Kristol is a classicist by training and a magnificent mother to her
three children. And Liz, who still manages an occasional piece of sparkling
criticism while caring for her two very young children, is married to Caleb
Nelson, currently a law clerk for Clarence Thomas.

If I am, as is sometimes said of me, a cheerful conservative, it is because I
have much to be cheerful about. So far at least, all of our family is right here
with us in Washington. Bea has just published her tenth book, and only a cata-
ysm of some kind will slow her down. I, on the other hand, have definitely
slowed down, simply because writing commentaries about current affairs in-
terests me less. I am happy to leave such work to my son Bill, who is in any
case the better political scientist. I find myself far more interested in the prob-
lems of American civilization, or even Western civilization, than in American
politics as conventionally defined, and I am more intrigued by the problem-
atical aspects of modernity itself than in our current social issues. One of these
problematical aspects is the relation of our religious-moral traditions to the
secular-rationalist culture that has been imposed upon them.

And where stands neoconservatism today? It is clear that what can fairly
be described as the neoconservative impulse (or, at most, the neoconservative
persuasion) was a generational phenomenon, and has now been pretty much
absorbed into a larger, more comprehensive conservatism. My son and daugh-
ter and son-in-law and daughter-in-law, along with dozens of young “interns”
who have worked at The Public Interest over the past thirty years, are now all
conservatives without adjectival modification. They have, I should like to
think, keener intellectual and cultural interests than was once common among
conservatives. There are even “conservative intellectuals” today to whom the
media pay attention, something that didn’t exist fifty years ago.

So I deem the neoconservative enterprise to have been a success, to have
brought elements that were needed to enliven American conservatism and help
reshape American politics. But my personal opinion is hardly authoritative,
and I am well aware that the unanticipated consequences of ideas and acts are
often very different from what was originally intended. That, I would say, is
the basic conservative axiom, and it applies to conservatives as well as liberals
and radicals.

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