

BookTalk

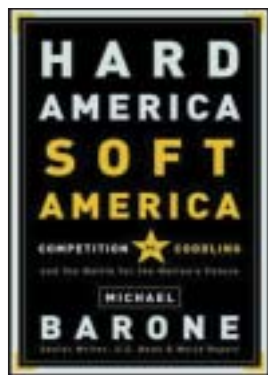
COMPETE OR WITHER

By Scott Walter

Hard America, Soft America: Competition vs. Coddling and the Battle for the Nation's Future

By Michael Barone

Crown Forum, 178 pages, \$22



S omehow, observes Michael Barone, America produces “incompetent 18-year-olds but remarkably competent 30-year-olds.” For

decades our young have performed badly on standardized tests and generally seem “unready for adult endeavor.” But Americans at 30, by contrast, are “the most competent people in the world.” They power the globe’s strongest economy, are unmatched in science and technology, and “man the strongest and most agile military the world has ever seen.”

What explains the paradox? Barone says young Americans live in “Soft America”—where there is little competition and accountability. But from 18 to 30 they live mostly in the nation’s crucibles of competition, high standards, and accountability. “Soft America coddles.” Hard America, in offices and in foxholes, “plays for keeps.”

And so Barone, co-author of the *Almanac of American Politics*, sets out to describe the landscape of Hard and Soft

America, bringing the same keenness of vision for which his “Bible” of politics is famous. Calmly and fairly sketching the country’s last century, he has written a pithy and convincing brief for conservative politics. He begins in 1900 with the hardships faced by the 90 percent of Americans who didn’t even graduate from high school. Those suffering illness, injury, or abandonment could expect no government aid and only spotty private assistance. Life, especially in the cities, was so hard that a quarter of urbanites never married (today the figure is 8 percent).

Still, there was surprisingly little political unrest. Social criticism came mostly from intellectual elites like the so-called Progressives. They achieved some softening of work conditions and relaxed educational standards. The New Deal further softened the economy and, together with World War II, brought about what Barone calls “Big Unit America,” dominated by Big Business, Big Government, and Big Labor. The Big Unit economy produced “rigid, pyramidal organizations” that were “full of Soft niches.”

Mid-century America was ripe for change. A “Hard private-sector economy” slowly began to overtake “the Softer Big Unit economy.” Post-war Los Angeles, for instance, generated one out of every eight new jobs in America, and most of these came thanks to “small operators.”

Another critical mid-century development was the civil rights movement. The lives of blacks in the South were, in Barone’s terms, hard but not Hard. They faced many injustices, not least being barred from “the rigor of Hard

America” and the achievements it inspires. Many whites tried to compensate for this unfairness by softening the criminal justice system, the welfare system, and the schools.

As a result, imprisonment of criminals declined even as crime rates rose. Social workers lavished welfare benefits on the poor, and schools lowered expectations. The nadir of this softening spanned 1965-75, when both welfare dependency and crime rates *tripled* nationwide. Barone chides “the great mass of well-meaning Americans” who intended to remedy injustice but “in fact increased and perpetuated misery.”

The U.S. military likewise reached lows of performance in the ’70s. The economy got Soft, too. Even our money Softened, as inflation skyrocketed under Nixon. In the 1970s growth disappeared, shortages mounted, and elites predicted irreversible social decline.

But during this Softening, Hard countercurrents were building. On the crime front, imprisonment began to rise in the late ’70s, new ideas of policing were put into action in Rudy Giuliani’s New York and elsewhere in the ’90s, and crime rates finally plunged. The military largely reformed itself—with some help from Congress—and began emphasizing high standards, accountability, and “fluid, fast-moving tactics.” By 1991, the first Gulf War showed the superior quality of our Hardened armed forces.

Then there is the Hardening of the economy, a story Barone tells especially well. Big (but Soft) Business declined from the mid 1970s to the late ’90s, its

share of GDP and the workforce halved, even as aggressive small firms built jobs and assets. From the late '60s to the 1980s, deregulation dramatically hardened competition in such industries as trucking, airlines, telecom, and oil.

Meanwhile, entrepreneurs like Microsoft's Bill Gates, Intel's Andy Grove, Wal-Mart's Sam Walton, FedEx's Fred Smith, and GE's Jack Welch were flattening corporate hierarchies, boosting competition, and demanding accountability for results. In the financial world, hard-edged entrepreneurs like Michael Milken and Henry Kravis brought growth-inducing innovations that strengthened the economy's sinews. The rise of 401(k) plans spread this culture of personal responsibility broadly through the middle class.

Our welfare system began to harden in the late '80s, with the breakthrough federal welfare reform of 1996 dramatically reducing dependency and child poverty. Public schools have mostly resisted hardening. They remain our nation's weakest institutions, though Barone does see the beginnings of possible improvement.

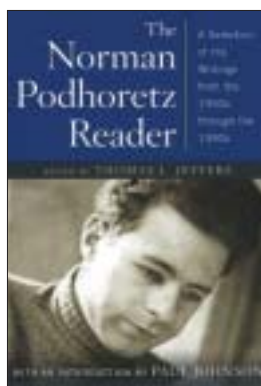
Although he stresses that the proper boundaries of Soft and Hard America are always debatable, Barone has no doubt as to which is primary. "Soft America lives off the productivity, creativity, and competence of Hard America," he writes. "We have the luxury of keeping parts of our society Soft only if we keep enough of it Hard."

TAE contributing editor Scott Walter is vice president of *The Philanthropy Roundtable*.

MAN OF LETTERS

By David Evanier

The Norman Podhoretz Reader: A Selection of His Writings from the 1950s through the 1990s
 Edited by Thomas Jeffers
 Free Press, \$35, 496 pages



New York City writer, polemicist, and man of letters Norman Podhoretz is consistently consigned to pigeonholes and niches by his enemies on the left. Yet he regularly springs out of them by force of intellect and originality. Writers who come to mind when reading Podhoretz include Edmund Wilson and George Orwell. But no one writing today can be so closely compared to him as Paul Johnson, the British editor and historian who provides the penetrating introduction of this volume. Johnson writes that Podhoretz's thoughts are "deep, sinewy, often very direct and even strident, but equally often surprising and unexpected, never predictable."

As Johnson suggests, Podhoretz is at heart a surprier; he never lands quite where you expect. This tendency derives from an open-ended intellect and a capacity for literary criticism and political analysis that strives, as Matthew Arnold wrote, "to see the object as in itself it really is." In his 1963 essay, "My Negro Problem—and Ours," Podhoretz turned from the social-protest writing of the period to reflect, without an ounce of racism and fully supportive of the struggle for integration, on his own experience growing up in the poverty-stricken Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville: "For a long time I was puzzled to think that Jews were supposed to be rich when the only Jews I knew were poor, and that Negroes were supposed to be persecuted when it was the Negroes who were doing the only persecuting I knew about—and doing it, moreover, to me." He writes that "it was the whites, the Italians, and Jews, who feared the Negroes, not the other way around." This is Podhoretz the troublemaker from way back, offending his

brethren on the left with truth-telling that adds nuance and complexity. As politically incorrect as it is, that essay has made its way into many anthologies of black-white dialogue, its brilliance overcoming its detractors.

"Israel—With Grandchildren" is another powerful essay. Its argument against the Israeli Left's undermining of its country's capacity for survival (a clear parallel to the role of the Left in the U.S. in opposing a strong military) is intensified by the naked emotion Podhoretz expresses in his fear for his grandchildren in Israel. Podhoretz's writing is clear and pure.

Whether as memoirist, political thinker, or literary critic, Podhoretz unravels complex issues with iron logic and honest emotion. He is a shrewd—but appreciative—critic of Philip Roth, Mark Twain, Vladimir Nabokov, and Milan Kundera. He is generous and fair, and does not shrink from criticizing friends and praising foes.

He offers, for instance, a devastating appraisal of the limitations of Saul Bellow. Bellow is as close to Podhoretz's ideological camp as any living writer, and one who has attempted "a sense of joyous connection with the common grain of American life." But in Podhoretz's perceptive view, what emerged in *The Adventures of Augie March* was a strained optimism, a "willed buoyancy" expressed by a protagonist "who is curiously untouched by his experience, who never changes or develops, who goes through everything but undergoes nothing." Podhoretz concludes with regret that all of Bellow's voices are the author's own, not autonomous creations, and that Bellow has written a series of essays in the form of novels. Podhoretz had a similar take on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Deeply appreciative of Solzhenitsyn as hero and man and historian in *Gulag Archipelago* and *The Oak and the Calf*, he sadly dismisses Solzhenitsyn's fiction (except *Ivan Denisovich*) as hopelessly wooden.

It is personal experience clearly

observed that has shaped Podhoretz's politics more than anything else. He has approvingly cited Irving Kristol's definition of the neoconservative as "a liberal mugged by reality." Podhoretz was part of the liberal establishment in the 1950s, but when the counterculture brought hatred of America, open-hearted support for the enemies of the United States, and glorification of crime and drug addiction, Podhoretz began to question the perceptiveness of his friends like Norman Mailer, Lillian Hellman, and Allen Ginsberg.

He was particularly sensitive to the New Left's scorn for literature of any kind—except the literature declaring the uselessness of literature itself. Like "Soviet realism," it held that reflection and introspection were enemies of revolutionary change. Literary nuance, complexity, and ambivalence in writing of the human condition were despised. The outcome of these attitudes, in Podhoretz's view, was a diminution in the scope of literature, a loss from which it has yet to recover.

Podhoretz still feels guilt for having been part of a process that caused so much harm to America in the artistic and political realms. It was a short step from that realization to deciding which way of life was worth defending and fighting for. Even while he was a critic of the Vietnam War, Podhoretz could not accept the idea that "the entire policy of trying to check the spread of communism was...morally wrong as well." In *Commentary*, the journal he edited, Podhoretz launched an offensive against the New Left in 1970, with the aim of supporting anti-communism in American foreign policy. It was in large measure an atonement for the part he felt he had played in the destruction of American will. He published two major books in that period, *Why We Were In Vietnam* and *The Present Danger*, and until the fall of communism two decades later virtually abandoned his literary interests to help repair the cultural damage done by

the radical Left in the 1960s.

Having retired in 1995 from 35 years as editor of *Commentary*, Podhoretz went on to write some of the best prose of his life in scores of essays and three recent books, including his small masterpiece *My Love Affair With America*. In this collection, the reader is left with a feast of 50 years of prescient and often luminous writing. Podhoretz's essays from the 1950s and '60s are often devoted to literary and cultural issues. The '70s and '80s works focus mostly on the questions of totalitarianism, the Left, communism, and Vietnam. In the '90s, with the collapse of communism, Podhoretz returns to such cultural matters as censorship, free speech, the autonomy of art, Philip Roth, Ralph Ellison, and even the beauty of Central Park and New York in the spring. Throughout this body of writing, Podhoretz conveys a passionate commitment to literature, culture, and politics that is leavened by indelible logic and reason.

David Evanier is author of The One-Star Jew, Red Love, and Making the Wiseguys Weep.

SOUTHERN MANIFESTO

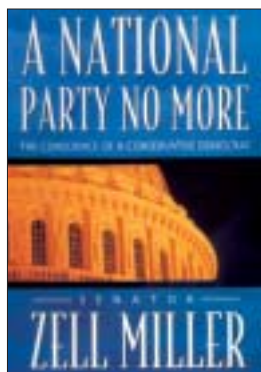
By Susanna Dukupil

A National Party No More: The

Conscience of a Conservative Democrat

By Senator Zell Miller

Stroud & Hall, 256 pages, \$26



opens with stories of his youth that shaped his moral and political values. He

acknowledges his debt to his mother, his wife, and the Democratic Party, to which he remains staunchly loyal. But Senator Miller believes his party has lost its way, beholden to special interest groups and liberal causes that do not represent mainstream America.

Senator Miller is one of a dying breed—the conservative Democrat. As he spells out his political positions in chapters targeting key election issues, he reveals he has much in common with Republicans. He favors cutting taxes (and reducing spending). He hates the obscene exhibits sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. He opposes gun control. And he favors drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. No wonder the Republicans wanted him to switch parties when they lost their majority in the Senate.

Miller reminds Democrats that Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and John Kennedy were all tax cutters. He warns Democratic would-be Presidents against abandoning the Bush tax cuts or announcing new spending programs, because such measures will cost them votes. He believes cutting the capital gains tax would not only help the American middle class invest in the stock market and save for retirement, but also *increase* tax revenues. Most emphatically, Miller would like to replace the income tax with a simpler flat tax or consumption-based tax.

Although he does not use the term, Senator Miller is essentially pro-life. He believes modern ultrasound technology "has proved the unborn baby is human" and that *Roe v. Wade* will be rejected as surely as was *Dred Scott* (a monumental comparison for a Senate Democrat). In both decisions, Miller suggests, the Supreme Court misdefined human life in order to reach a desired political result.

Miller grew up around guns, and though he instituted an instant background check in Georgia that prevented convicted violent felons from purchasing firearms, he views gun ownership as an

important means of protecting freedom. He co-sponsored the anti-terrorism legislation allowing airline pilots to carry firearms in the cockpit.

On other issues, such as campaign finance and affirmative action, Miller is less conservative. He favors campaign finance reform because he abhors the pressure on candidates to call lists of potential donors, an activity which takes time from meeting with voters individually or in groups. Although the senator admits to playing the very game he chastises, he looks back fondly on simpler times when waking up his neighbors at home to ask for their support was more important than raising money for television commercials.

Miller believes that the government has an important role in helping certain minorities achieve equality. But, unlike many of his Senate counterparts, he

wishes to modify the many federal programs aimed at promoting equal racial outcomes: "Income level should now be the criteria for affirmative action, not the color of one's skin." Miller also advocates social programs designed to train welfare recipients for the workforce as a means to close the racial economic equality gap.

The book exhibits Senator Miller's talent at taking complicated issues and explaining them in a way average voters can understand. He skillfully relates national policies to personal stories and individual values. The fact that the senator can make even his flip-flops sound perfectly reasonable marks him as a gifted politician.

Miller suggests that if other Democrats moved closer to the positions in his policy manifesto, their party message would resonate more strongly with middle America. He points out that Bill Clinton's cam-

paign success in 1992 stemmed from his ability to portray himself as a "New Democrat" with economically conservative policies. Instead, to Miller's chagrin, his party has become, in his words, beholden to left-wing special interest groups who, while supporting the party financially, repel the average voter.

In this sense, *A National Party No More* offers prescriptions that Republicans might wish Democrats will ignore. But for the nation's sake, one hopes some of his common sense takes root among his political compatriots. Regardless of political persuasion, the reader will find Senator Miller a principled and thoughtful statesman.

Susanna Dokupil is an attorney and writer in Houston.



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