

# BookTalk

## ALL THE PRESIDENTS' VENTRILOQUISTS

By Theodore Pappas

*All the Presidents' Words: The Bully Pulpit and the Creation of the Virtual Presidency*

By Carol Gelderman

Walker & Company, 221 pages, \$23

When Woodrow Wilson delivered a speech before Congress on April 8, 1913, thus breaking the 113-year tradition in which every president since Thomas Jefferson had honored the separation of powers by refusing to appear on Capitol Hill, Senator John Sharp Williams of Mississippi snapped, "A speech from the throne... a cheap and tawdry imitation of the pomposities and cavalcades of monarchical countries." But Wilson—that notorious cold fish of whom William Allen White remarked, "when he tried to be pleasant he creaked"—was unmoved by such criticism. All that mattered to him was that in stealing the limelight in this novel fashion he had one-upped the master of the bully pulpit, Theodore Roosevelt. "I put one over on Teddy," boasted Wilson to his wife.

To Carol Gelderman, a professor of English at the University of New Orleans, Theodore Roosevelt's speechifying and Woodrow Wilson's grandstanding contributed to the shift in federal power from Congress to the president and paved the way for the "virtual presidency"—where molding and tracking public opinion has become the chief business of the executive branch.

Critical to this development has been the presidential speechwriter, whose full-time presence in the White

House began with the election of Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt chose his speechwriters from among his personal aides, and by taking an active role in the speechwriting process he was able to ensure continuity between his policies and his public rhetoric. Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson all followed Roosevelt's example and chose their wordsmiths from among their top advisers.

This tradition ended, writes Gelderman, with Richard Nixon, who took image-making and spin control to new heights, transforming the executive branch into a giant P.R. firm. Nixon created an Office of Communications, an Office of Public Liaison, and a Writing and Research Department composed of 50 writers who "saw themselves as members of a service department rather than a locus for policymaking. This, notes Gelderman, "galled them."

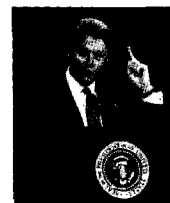
The author's point is that problems can arise from this bifurcated approach to the speechwriting process, which continued under presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, and (during his first term) Clinton. For example, after President Ford announced in a commencement address at Ohio State University a new education program that would provide grants for state and local initiatives, the White House phone began ringing off the hook. But no such program existed. One of the president's anonymous wordsmiths had simply made up the idea.

Some of Gelderman's other examples are far less clearcut. She cites, for instance, Reagan's premature announcement of the SDI missile defense initiative. But Reagan pushed on with SDI over the objections of his foreign-policy team

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quite intentionally, because he saw it as good politics.

Reagan and Roosevelt approached the speech-writing process in diametrically opposed ways, but it did not matter in the end. Reagan may have been the "great communicator," but not for nothing did FDR brag that he and Orson Welles were the best actors in the country.

To Gelderman, Reagan's hands-off style of management is a dangerous sign of the "virtual presidency," whereas Wilson, FDR, and Bill Clinton govern as wise collaborators. This political partisanship taints Gelderman's analysis from beginning to end. From the author's perspective, Roosevelt's rhetorical trick of clothing "the unorthodox in the garb of the familiar" was not done to emasculate congressional powers, establish a welfare state, drag the people into war, or subvert the Constitution in the only way possible at that time. Rather, FDR acted merely and benignly to "banish fear and rally the nation." Regarding Bill Clinton, Gelderman believes that by "remaking his rhetoric" with "a better speech-writing operation" during his reelection campaign he was able to make "the kind of speeches that let him be presidential"—by which Gelderman means acting to shape issues "not in terms of programs or details but in terms of inspiration and moral imperatives."

It is fitting that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has promoted this book, for what Gelderman never questions is the virtue of the imperial presidency. Her chief con-

cern is not to return the executive branch to its limited constitutional moorings but to trim, tuck, streamline, and reform the presidency so that when it squanders our money and starts unjust wars it does so in the most efficient, effective, and rhetorically consistent manner possible. A despot with panache—now that's progress.

Theodore Pappas is the managing editor of *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*.

## FRIEDRICH AND AYN'S KIDS

By Aaron Steelman

*Bringing the Market Back In: The Political Revitalization of Market Liberalism*  
By John L. Kelley  
NYU Press, 270 pages, \$45

Intellectual histories of left-wing movements are commonplace; hundreds of books have been written on the various Marxian sects. Rare, however, is a serious treatment of individualist thought and activism. For more than two decades, George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* was virtually the lone source-book on the ideas and personalities of the modern right. Happily, John L. Kelley's *Bringing the Market Back In: The Political Revitalization of Market Liberalism* now helps fill this gaping void. Not only does Kelley update Nash's work, he also provides a much more focused and detailed portrait of one branch of free-market activism: the libertarian—or, as he puts it, “market-liberal”—movement.

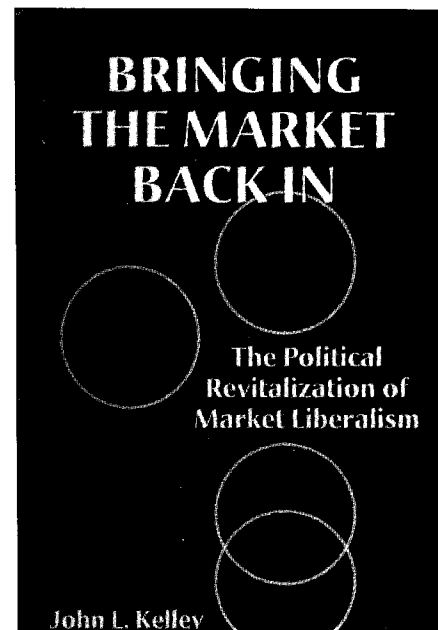
Kelley begins his account in the early postwar years, when only a few free-market thinkers—notably, economists Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, and Henry Hazlitt—were spreading the libertarian gospel. While their ideas had little impact on the government policies of their day, Kelley shows they influenced thousands of acolytes over the decades that followed. By the 1970s, when liberalism's claims of being able to fine-tune the economy through Keynesian fiscal policy and to check communist expansion with a foreign policy of graduated force were

crashing to the ground amid stagflation at home and the slaughter of young Americans in Vietnam, the libertarian movement had grown significantly stronger. Classical liberals had secured academic positions around the country and many had entered the world of political activism.

Indeed, while traditionalist conservatives continued to have only marginal influence in the academy, a number of libertarian economists and political theorists saw their ideas gain prominent respectability. Hayek and Milton Friedman both won the Nobel Prize in economics (as did a half-dozen other classical liberals in the following 20 years), Robert Nozick received the 1975 National Book Award for *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, and James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock changed the way that political scientists look at the democratic process with their work on public-choice theory. For the first time in nearly a century, classical liberals were framing the terms of debate on many university campuses.

At first, it seemed as if libertarian political activists might achieve comparable success. In what is really the meat of his book, Kelley shows how the activist wing of the libertarian movement emerged in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In the process he presents lively portraits of figures like Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard. Rand singlehandedly attracted thousands to the ideas of liberty through her massive novel *Atlas Shrugged*. Although many have been puzzled by her popularity, Kelley finds it quite unsurprising. “For most readers,” he notes, “it was the first time they had read a moral, as opposed to utilitarian, defense of capitalism. Rand's novel could be viewed as a response to Hayek's 1949 plea for a liberal vision to compete with the socialist vision: ‘What we lack is a liberal Utopia, a programme which seems neither a mere defence of things as they are nor a diluted kind of socialism but a truly liberal radicalism.’”

Rand's philosophical radicalism would actually appear tame in comparison to the ideas of Rothbard. While Rothbard essentially lifted Rand's theory of rights, he applied it more rigorously and consistently. He presented the case for the totally free society—that is, for



anarcho-capitalism—and revived the anti-militarist arguments of nineteenth-century liberals like William Graham Sumner and Herbert Spencer. After breaking with the *National Review* Right over foreign policy, Rothbard spearheaded a newly independent libertarian movement—which, in the 1970s, was focused around the Libertarian Party.

Kelley's lengthy chapter on the Libertarian Party is a virtuoso performance. Although his writing is not elegant, his enormous research more than makes up for it. He has pored over official party documents, very unofficial personal memoranda, and conducted a fair number of interviews. He maintains that the fundamental divide among activists was not one of radicalism versus incrementalism, as has been commonly argued, but one of professionalism versus amateurism. In an amusing story indicative of the unprofessionalism of many in the movement, Kelley recounts how in New York a Libertarian candidate for governor sought to get permanent ballot status for the party (requiring 50,000 votes) by running a theatrical campaign in which he “challenged his competitors to a game of Monopoly, acclaimed Chester Arthur as a great President, and sent around Central Park a modern-day Lady Godiva, a blonde in a body-stocking mounted on a horse named ‘Taxpayer.’”

Even if the professionals had been able to fully guide the movement and avoid