

been living in the very middle of New York, and, yes, he was ill and morose for some time; but the interest in him—indeed, the respect—had been largely abandoned by the younger set of public writers and other literati, including those whom he had helped years before. Into their intellectual and social categories, he did not fit. But 15 or more years later, his reputation (a word that he would dismiss, or even despise) has—no matter how slightly—risen. Another generation of thoughtful young people and serious readers, scattered across this vast country, includes men and women who respond to Macdonald's prose and respect him for the probity of his thinking. They must somehow sense that the outdated and corroding categories of "conservative" and "liberal" really do not (and did not) apply to him. Dwight Macdonald was a radical and a traditionalist—which, in our technological age, is no contradiction. "Traditionalist," even more than "radical," perhaps describes him best. That, I think, is the source of what I hope is his slowly growing appeal.

For much of this, Michael Wreszin may take credit. His serious biography of Macdonald (*A Rebel in Defense of Tradition*, 1994) did not receive the attention it deserved, in spite of the richness of its contents. (I was Macdonald's friend for 30 years and yet learned much about him from Wreszin's book.) Now we have his edition of a collection of Macdonald's letters (again with a very apposite title), which, I think, will be read by more and more people—assuming, that is, that they are made aware of its existence. Wreszin's selection is very good, and the first paragraph of his Introduction amounts to a masterful summary of what Macdonald was—and means:

Dwight Macdonald's life story as revealed in his vast correspondence is the story of an American awakening. It is an account of an upper-middle-class white male, schooled in the elite institutions of the establishment, who started out with all the prejudices and provincialisms of his class. . . . and through the force of his inquiring mind managed to jettison a footlocker full of dandyish pretensions and become one of the most penetrating critics of politics, society, and culture in twentieth-century America.

His correspondence was vast, and

there his problem resided. (His problem, not that of his biographer—Wreszin had a large job but selected and annotated well). There are great writers and thinkers whose letters are often as valuable as their books. (Tocqueville is one.) But Macdonald never wrote a large book; there are Macdonald books that are collections of essays, extraordinarily consistent and cohesive ones; also small books that are brilliant and profound—one about the Ford Foundation, another about Poe. Macdonald should have—and could have—written a great memoir, since he was in the midst of American intellectual life for nearly a half-century. It would have dwarfed, easily, the (at times unpleasant) memoirs of Alfred Kazin and Edmund Wilson. But he didn't—not because he couldn't, but because he convinced himself that he couldn't. For deep down (or even not so deep down), this strong-voiced, opinionated, and often convinced man suffered from a want of self-confidence. Whether his lack of self-discipline was both cause and effect of this other want, we will never know.

That is why Macdonald wrote those letters—thousands of them. And he (no lack of discipline here?) preserved them all; he made copies of almost every one, including his handwritten notes. (His mental strength, his probity, is somehow present even in his handwriting). A writer for the *New York Times Book Review* (in a poorly written notice prominently placed, appearing beneath a portrait of the author so badly drawn as to make him unrecognizable to those who knew him) suggested that Macdonald wrote these letters with an eye to posterity. Nothing could be further from the truth. He wrote them because (or, rather, when) he felt he could not, or did not want to, do any other writing. Yet, he had to write. That is why the letters are so valuable—and telling.

They show the man at his best. In 1956, he wrote Frank S. Meyer, then an editor at *National Review*:

It's comic when an ultra-nationalist pro-private-enterprise-and-property-rights organ shows the same paranoid defensism as a Marxist splinter group. (NR, of course, is isolated vis-à-vis the intellectuals, whom it is trying to reach, because it's on such a low level, and, also, granted, because the intellectuals are mostly liberal; but I'm not a liberal, in fact I'm getting to be more

and more of a traditionalist, and it is just the crudity, dullness, and vulgarity of NR that makes me abhor it.)

Seventeen years earlier, Macdonald was a regular critic of Trotsky, who was supposed to have written or said that "Every man has a right to be stupid on occasion, but Comrade Macdonald abuses it." Wreszin notes that "Macdonald seemed proud of the attack and quoted it often. I think he made it up." (So do I.)

Macdonald had many faults. His problem with self-discipline was but one of them, though surely the source of not a few others. Though he seems—unlike most intellectuals—to have been seldom untrue to himself, we, of course, cannot tell. What we *can* tell is that Macdonald was a fierce visionary and hunter of untruths, including fashionable ones, that appeared in the speaking and writing of all kinds of people. The path to great truths that passes through a jungle of untruths did not really attract him. As an American, he did not (probably) quite agree that the pursuit of justice is inferior to the pursuit of truth; but he knew a flower from a weed, no matter what the accepted opinion of horticulturalists may have been. His comment on the Revised Standard Version of the Bible ("finding a parking lot where once a great cathedral had stood") is proof of that.

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Bandwidth Blues

by Jeremy Lott

Rebel on the Air: An Alternative History of Radio in America

by Jesse Walker
New York: NYU Press;
326 pp., \$24.95



It is 1923, hot on the heels of the Progressive era and World War I. *Radio Broadcast* magazine confidently opines that the advent of radio as a popular medium "is destined, economically and politically, to bind us together more firmly." It might even produce "to some extent at least, unification of the religious

ideas of the different creeds and cliques.”

Come forward to 2002 and scan the local radio dial—AM and FM. A survey of the average metropolitan area will yield broadcasts in Spanish, Korean, and Russian; gardening shows; sports talk shows; Gregorian chants; country and new country; classical music; National Public Radio; soft rock, hard rock, jazz, blues, oldies, classic rock, and Christian rock; fundamentalist preachers railing against all rock music as a tool of the Devil; evangelical answer men telling listeners that they can’t lose their salvation; Jewish geologists admonishing callers to sober up and take responsibility for their pitiful lives; call-in sex-advice shows; and outraged Republicans and libertarians whipping their listeners into a froth over Democrats, moral outrages, and Big Brother.

Rather than unity, homogeneity, and equality, radio has fostered a different set of impulses: the drives to specialize, separate, and splinter. In times of crisis, radio can disseminate needed information and direct resources, but normally it allows for an increasingly eclectic people to accommodate their varied tastes and beliefs.

Reason magazine editor Jesse Walker (full disclosure: I briefly worked with him when he was editing the *Citings* section) is an idealist, albeit of a left-libertarian bent. Throughout *Rebels on the Air: An Alternative History of Radio in America*, Walker surveys the current state of radio and finds it wanting. For all the variety, he explains, certain policies have “decimated the radio dial”: “Most radio today is boring and homogenous, chains of clones controlled by an ever-dwindling handful of focus-group-driven corporations.”

In the hands of a less competent writer, the anti-corporate streak might begin to grate. Like the poor, corporations we will always have with us. If big business has given us the wide variety of choices described above, then where is the harm? The book veers from descending into a tortured anti-corporate polemic because Walker is not merely an idealist; he is also a good reporter and historian.

The narrative parts of *Rebel on the Air* are not a formal history of the discovery of radio but of what people *did* with that discovery. In the early 20th century, “the amateur operators . . . took the new technology in hand and, armed with cheap crystal detectors, formed a new community in the ether.” These “hams”—predominantly teenage or preteen boys with

a technical itch—set up in barns, homes, and odd locations and used scraps to extend the reach of their signals. Geek contacted geek and, human nature being what it is, began to network. They traded technical tips and gossip news, established rough protocols, and created a new cliché: the virtual community.

It was a cohort with teeth. Though many of the participants did not have their full set of adult molars, Walker credits the lobbying efforts of the hams for the defeat of Sen. Chauncey Depew’s Wireless Bill of 1910, an attempt to seize control of the burgeoning airwaves. In the same year, if commercial operators wanted to use a particular part of the then-limited spectrum, it was necessary to request that the local amateurs refrain for a bit. If the request was not polite, “often the reply would be, ‘Who the hell are you?’ or ‘I’ve as much right to the air as you have.’” The hams’ rivalry with the Navy was legendary, with the two competing to find and relay rescue messages—and the hams often won.

Then came World War I and the total and dictatorial nationalization of the airwaves. However, the Navy quickly learned what commercial operations were beginning to discover as well: The only way it could maintain radio communications was by hiring the previously hated hams *en masse*. This guaranteed the survival of the hams after the war, even in the increasingly regulated radio environment.

During and after World War I, Congress passed restrictions, mostly to find them ignored. Hams were theoretically required to be licensed, but the requirement was often conveniently forgotten, and the Department of Commerce could not afford to enforce it. The military, realizing that it could not have functioned without the goodwill of these amateurs, harrumphed a bit and relaxed its position that every last bit of spectrum should be controlled by the government.

Because of this relaxation, the postwar years saw a boom in radio. Interactive radio was curbed, but the regulations of the 1920’s were light enough that anybody could set up a formal radio station and play (or say) whatever he wanted. Most hams decided that they could make a bigger dent by starting their own radio stations or trading on their technical know-how for others.

The resulting proliferation rubbed some large players, such as RCA, the wrong way, since it undercut their bot-

tom lines; they lobbied the government to curb the number of stations. Enter Herbert Hoover: Rather than let private individuals and the courts decide how to allocate the ether, the future president first created a crisis by abolishing, in effect, any legal claims to broadcast rights. The remedy for this “crisis” was the Federal Radio Commission—forerunner to the FCC—in 1927.

Thus, in Jesse Walker’s anti-corporate parlance, Big Radio jumped into bed with the U.S. government to try to edge out small competitors and reinforce market positions—an arrangement that, as Walker makes amply clear, persists to this day. The FCC, which is nothing more than the lengthened shadow of Herbert Hoover, continues to treat the airwaves like its very own box of toys. As a result, the price of getting into radio has become both prohibitive and stifling: By the 1990’s, a single company was allowed to own most of the stations in a given locality. Many of the unlicensed broadcasters—“pirates” in FCC-speak—are shut down not because they are interfering with other stations’ signals, but because they threaten the bottom lines of Big Radio.

All of this leads Walker to decry the unholy alliance between Big Radio and Big Government, which he claims is ruining radio today, and call for the FCC to be abolished. Only then, he says, will radio realize its potential. He may have a point. Still, is modern radio really all that bad? As my slapdash list above is meant to indicate, radio is packed with such a wide variety of choices that any ham transported from the 1920’s would be struck dumb with amazement. Put another way: How did a group of thoughtless, heartless corporations manage to produce something so diverse?

The answer is concealed in the book’s title. In each generation, rebels find new ways—legal or otherwise—of reinventing the wheel, doing new and interesting things with radio that haven’t been done before. Corporate radio stations, eager to make a buck, steal the idea even as they seek to kill the messenger. That may drive the idealists wild, but it does get the job done.

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by Samuel Francis

The Tyrant's Lobby

As American wars go, President Bush's crusade—excuse me, campaign—against terrorism doesn't really make the big leagues. So far, American military action in Afghanistan is not even comparable to the Gulf War of 1990-91, and put next to the Civil War, World War I, or World War II, the current adventure barely registers. That doesn't mean, however, that the war business is not proving useful to those ever on the alert to stamp out constitutional freedoms and those dissidents who exercise and enjoy them.

Almost from the very moment of last year's terrorist attacks, an endless parade of experts, non-experts, wannabe experts, and used-to-be experts have strutted forth on TV, radio, and in the opinion pages of newspapers to explain to Americans how they are going to have to accustom themselves to less liberty; how they had better not complain about standing in line at airports for two hours or more and having their toenail clippers and bottle openers pocketed by an avaricious, largely untrained, and manifestly incompetent security staff; and how we all have to start pulling together to root out the terrorists amongst us. Of course, as a result of the crackpot immigration policies of the federal government for the last three decades, there are, in fact, terrorists amongst us, and the Justice Department eventually admitted that there are some 250,000 aliens in the United States whom it wishes to question about their possible role in terrorism, but is unable to locate.

Yet, even as various political leaders and public figures told us to shut up, sit down, and prepare for our forthcoming servitude calmly, neither the government nor the experts (for the most part) expressed the least discomfort with official immigration policies or the vast hordes of immigrants, many from Arabic lands, that have flooded the country. As I noted in "Enemies Within and Above" (*Principalities & Powers*, December 2001), as far as the American ruling class is concerned, the Constitution is expendable, but immigration and the multicultural and multiracial checkerboard it creates remain sacrosanct, unquestionable, and untouchable.

Just how expendable constitutional freedoms are soon became clear. Within a month of the terrorist attacks, the Congress passed and the President signed a bill vastly expanding the powers of the federal government to spy, investigate, surveil, and wiretap, to the point that civil libertarian Nat Hentoff wrote that the new law represented "the worst attack on the Bill of Rights since World War II." For a gentleman of Mr. Hentoff's persuasion, that's saying something, since it means the current law is worse than Joe McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and Richard Nixon. Mr. Hentoff is a zealous (and largely consistent) defender of liberty, and perhaps he has overstated the case—but not by much. As Jeffrey Rosen explained in the *New Republic*,

If your colleague [unknown to you] is a target of a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act investigation, the government could tap all your [own] communications on a shared phone, work computer or a public library terminal.

There really are terrorists inside the country and others outside who would like to get inside, and it makes sense to allow federal police and intelligence services a certain amount of elbow room in tracking them down. But there is every indication that the elbow room, like a space warp in a science-fiction story, will quickly balloon into a vast and uncharted universe of its own.

By the time of the anthrax attacks of last October, some in the tyranny lobby were actually banging the drum for what could only be called an undisguised police state. A popular historian named Jay Winik published in the *Wall Street Journal* (October 23) a long piece entitled "Security Comes Before Liberty," in which he expounded the glorious precedents of Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt in suspending civil liberties during the various "national emergencies" that their own policies helped to manufacture. Mr. Winik began his little rationalization of despotism with a glowing account of



the torture of a suspected terrorist by Philippine police for several weeks in 1995. The terrorist eventually belched up information that prevented an attack similar to those later committed on the World Trade Centers, and Mr. Winik made it entirely clear that the procedures employed by American police are woefully and regrettably backward compared to the more sophisticated techniques of their Filipino colleagues.

The piece was mainly a theoretical manifesto to show that police statism is as American as, well, Lincoln, Wilson, and Ole Moosejaw himself. The real case for torture was advanced when the *Washington Post* ran a story about how some federal authorities, dismayed by the refusal of various terrorist suspects to spew their secrets voluntarily, are now pondering "alternative strategies." "Among the alternative strategies under discussion," the *Post* reported without cracking a smirk,

are using drugs or pressure tactics, such as those employed occasionally by Israeli interrogators, to extract information. Another idea is extraditing the suspects to allied countries where security services sometimes employ threats to family members or resort to torture.

The article quoted one unnamed (for obvious reasons) FBI agent as saying, "But it could get to that spot where we could go to pressure . . . where we won't have a choice, and we are probably getting there." I agree; we probably are.

By the week after this report, who should start bolstering the case for the outright legalization of torture but that icon of progress and liberty, Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz. Speaking in St. Louis, the hero of a thousand courtroom crusades—excuse me, campaigns—