1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Frank Meyer, the unlikely conservative

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The hushed interval between Christmas and New Year's invites a retrospective mood, a glance backward at the year just lived and a tentative peering toward the one waiting in the wings. In this contemplative interlude, I find myself turning over the books I read in 2025. One emerges from the stack with particular distinction, quite possibly the most intriguing of the lot: "The Man Who Invented Conservatism: The Unlikely Life of Frank S. Meyer (https://books.google.com/books?id=cC0mEQAACBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false)," by Daniel Flynn.

Flynn's biography arrives freighted with ambition, and not only because it proposes to recover a man nearly lost to memory. It also marks the return of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute to book publishing, now under the Encounter Books imprint – an institutional resurrection that mirrors, in some ways, the resurrection of its subject.

Meyer has long occupied an odd place in conservative history: cited, nodded to, half-remembered. A name invoked more often than encountered. That he might now be seen whole is due largely to Flynn's improbable archival discovery: 15 boxes of Meyer's correspondence, abandoned in a warehouse, waiting to be read. From these papers emerge not a doctrinaire thinker, but a restless, volatile intelligence, alive with contradiction.

Meyer was born in 1909 into comfort and drifted early toward revolt. As a young man, he despised God, admired Milton's Satan, and cultivated a skepticism that was as emotional as it was intellectual. At Princeton, he encountered anti-Semitism (he was Jewish); at Balliol College, Oxford, he found communism – not merely as an ideology, but as a vocation.

Flynn traces these years with patient care, drawing on transatlantic sources and even MI5 files, showing Meyer as a young man for whom politics was a total experience. What fascinates is that even before he became the conservative father of so-called "fusionism" (the reconciliation of libertarian freedom with traditional moral ends), Meyer was already attempting a synthesis: presenting socialism as an outgrowth of the American past rather than its negation. The break came only when history, stubbornly examined, refused to cooperate.

The life that followed had the intensity of someone who had once believed absolutely and now believed again, but differently. Meyer and his wife, Elsie, lived as nocturnal bohemians in Woodstock, surrounded by books, cigarettes, arguments, and ringing telephones. He slept late, talked endlessly, and spent absurd sums on phone calls placed at impossible hours.

From this unlikely domestic scene, he helped shape postwar conservatism, editing National Review's Books, Arts and Manners section, promoting Barry Goldwater, and founding organizations that would outlast him. It was not a tidy life, or a temperate one. It was a life lived in conversation.

Flynn insists, in his subtitle, that Meyer "invented conservatism," and here one feels the strain of biography reaching for theory. Meyer's fusionism was less a discovery than a formulation, a naming of impulses already at work. His book, "In Defense of Freedom, (https://www.amazon.com/Defense-Freedom-Related-Essays/dp/0865971404)" never became a seminal text; even in its moment, it seemed to follow rather than command. Meyer himself knew this. He worried that conservatism had grown better at denouncing enemies than imagining futures, more skilled at demonology than creation.

And yet influence is not always measured by books. What Flynn understands, and shows persuasively, is that Meyer's importance lay in formation rather than philosophy. As an ex-Communist, he grasped the necessity of institutions, discipline and apprenticeship. He and Elsie molded younger conservatives through conversation, expectation and example – none more consequentially than their son Eugene, later a founder and president of the Federalist Society.

Meyer's quarrels with Russell Kirk, Harry Jaffa, James Burnham, and even William F. Buckley were not petty; they were earnest, intellectual struggles over standards, seriousness, and the place of culture in politics. His insistence on quality – literary, artistic, moral – made his corner of National Review something rare.

What lingers after Flynn's book is not a system, but a temperament. How did a bohemian, chain-smoking intellectual help midwife a movement that would later prize order, discipline and certainty? Flynn does not resolve the paradox so much as inhabit it. Meyer's refusal to retreat after Goldwater's defeat and his belief that ideas required cultivation even in defeat shaped the movement's infrastructure, if not its creed.

Meyer died in 1972, at 62, of lung cancer, worn down by tobacco, long nights, and intensity. What he left behind were institutions that endure and arguments that never quite settled. Flynn may press too hard on the claim of

invention, but he gives us something more human and more lasting: the portrait of a man for whom ideas were lived before they were written, whose influence passed less through doctrine than through presence.

In the end, that may be how intellectual history actually happens – not by invention alone, but by the stubborn, imperfect transmission of seriousness from one restless mind to another.

Allen Mendenhall is a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies and Senior Advisor for the Capital Markets Initiative at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com (http://AllenMendenhall.com).

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