

Still Athwart History

David B. Frisk

Just Right: A Life in Pursuit of Liberty

By Lee Edwards

(ISI Books, 2017)

Skirmishes

By Neal B. Freeman

(National Review Books, 2017)

A year into his presidency, the question of American conservatism's proper stance toward Donald Trump remains unresolved. Some right-of-center intellectuals continue to voice uncompromising hostility toward him, as if conservatives, contrary to the most basic common sense, have no stake in his success as president. Yet fear for the right's future, which partly underlies anti-Trumpers' anger, cannot be cured by Trump enthusiasts' grandiose talk of a populist revolution for which there is little evidence. The undeniably negative perceptions of the right among our nation's elites, obviously exacerbated by Trump's rise, are too important to be dismissed by claiming that only "the people" really count in a democracy. For one thing, this claim is simply false. For another, the people elected Barack Obama twice, and more of them voted for Hillary Clinton than for Trump. Such facts don't prove the existence of a liberal majority. But they're enough to disprove a conservative or coherently populist one. And Trump's persistently

low poll numbers are another massive inconvenience for those who think he's the answer to the right's accumulated weaknesses.

All of these questions call for thought, not tribal zealotry. Abraham Lincoln once remarked that the challenges he faced as president were "too vast for malicious dealing." Without in any way comparing those troubles to ours, the same is true today. It is among the responsibilities of a political movement's elder statesmen to promote intelligent discourse on crucial but easily cheapened questions. After the deaths of founders William F. Buckley Jr., William Rusher, M. Stanton Evans, and Phyllis Schlafly, the entire right should heed, although not necessarily agree with, the senior figures who remain. Two such presumptively wise veterans are Lee Edwards and Neal Freeman, authors of the new books *Just Right* and *Skirmishes*.

After heavy involvement in Young Americans for Freedom and the Goldwater campaign in the early 1960s, Edwards spent two decades helping to launch and publicize

a multitude of conservative projects and organizations, and also played a significant role in the first years of the populist New Right of the 1970s and '80s. After he earned a PhD at the Catholic University of America came what Edwards calls his second act, as a “writer, teacher, and lecturer on modern American conservatism.” Among his more than twenty books are a history of the conservative movement, a major biography of Barry Goldwater, and *Missionary for Freedom*, a detailed biography of an extraordinary leader in the anti-Communist cause, longtime Minnesota congressman Walter Judd. Now the Distinguished Fellow in Conservative Thought at the Heritage Foundation, Edwards can be said, with little exaggeration, to have interviewed every “important” living conservative for one or another of his books.

Freeman, who provided financial support for my book on *National Review* publisher Bill Rusher, is probably less widely known. As a young Yale graduate with a promising career in publishing, he impressed Buckley and was hired away to *NR* for a time, although he later returned to mainstream journalism. He was WFB's aide in his famous 1965 race for mayor of New York and, the following year, more or less launched Buckley's talk show *Firing Line*. A good friend of Buckley and Rusher, Freeman was a member of the *NR* board for thirty-eight years. He also became both a powerhouse in documentary television production and a player in the communications technology revolution of the 1980s. More recently, he has served as chairman of the Blackwell Corporation, an advisory firm with clients in the communications, defense, and wealth-management fields. With his combination of entrepreneurial, corporate, and movement political backgrounds, Freeman has long been centrally involved in the cause of “donor intent”—that is, educating wealthy right-of-center people about how easily the foundations they set up as phil-

anthropic legacies can be diverted to liberal agendas and how to prevent this outcome.

Anyone wishing to evaluate carefully the conservative movement after 2016 can be grateful that Edwards and Freeman are neither Never Trumpers nor definite admirers of the new president, and that their lifetimes of activism are palatable to nearly all conservative readers. While there's no difference in their credibility as political counselors, there is a clear difference in their discussions of the Trump issue. Freeman ultimately sides with Trump, while Edwards sides only with the conservative movement, passing up opportunities to criticize it that the past decade's developments have so clearly provided. Most readers, I assume, will naturally incline toward one approach or the other. They should give due consideration to both.

The beginning of wisdom on the Trump question is perhaps to admit its difficulty, even if such acknowledgement risks offending other conservatives who hold adamant views to the contrary. It's hard to disagree with Edwards's simple point that the implications of Trump's nomination and election for conservatism's future “remain difficult to discern.” He adds, also reasonably, that Trump represents “an opportunity for conservatism.” But Edwards doesn't elaborate except to reiterate the old article of faith that “the conservative agenda has the best solutions to the problems that led so many Americans to vote for the radical change that Trump promised.” It's unclear whether Edwards would like conservatives to stand mostly against Trump as a political leader or is counseling them to stand mostly with him—or believes no such choice is necessary.

Freeman, a Tea Party sympathizer, strong dissenter from *NR*'s support for the Iraq War in 2003, and staunch fusionist conservative who opposed Trump's nomination by the Republican Party on a variety of grounds, does not reprint any anti-Trump pieces in *Skirmishes*. Although the only substantial

comments on him in the book date from just after the election, they are noteworthy. Trump, Freeman allows, “has a puncher’s chance to break the grip of the iron triangle that controls our political culture: the one-party government bureaucracy; the pay-to-play rent seekers; the tax-exempt Left; and the symbiotic media class.” He cites two reasons for optimism: Trump is both “instinctively anti-bureaucratic” and “highly skilled in the recriminative arts.”

In addition to his appreciation of the new president as an antagonist to the Deep State, Freeman endorses another essentially pro-Trump argument—that a narrow perspective has blinded the conservative establishment to many of the voters who nominated and elected him. Freeman argues that “conservative intellectuals have failed them, redundantly, on the issue of immigration. The first-level effects of [pre-Trump immigration] policy, both cultural and economic, fall on rural America, border America, and deindustrializing America. . . . My view has long been that the core mission of the conservative movement is to protect the inherited culture and bolster the opportunity economy. We blew it.”

Freeman says leaders and institutions on the right have two options in responding to Trump’s rise. “The first is to withdraw to the castle, pull up the drawbridge, and labor to defend market share in what has become a tax-privileged and well-upholstered Conservatism, Inc.” Alternatively, they can “recognize that the game has changed, thanks in part to the inadvertent contribution of Donald J. Trump.” Freeman urges his fellow conservatives to focus on Trump’s voters rather than on Trump himself. In his view, Trump “has identified and at least semi-organized a large constituency previously unreachable by Conservatism, Inc. . . . pro-family, pro-enterprise, and pro-America—pretty much the kinds of people our movement has claimed to represent these many years. . . . It’s

the kind of coalition-building opportunity that comes around once in a generation.”

The cautious, scrupulously evenhanded Edwards has less to say about the Trump moment. But the lifetime of service to organized conservatism that he recounts in *Just Right* is both an inspirational yet somewhat unsettling reminder that anti-establishmentarian work—as distinct from posturing—is slow, incremental, and demanding. Coalition-building requires far more commitment than our new age of instant political gratification seems to encourage. As Edwards’s memoir demonstrates, the story of conservatism from the 1950s through the 1990s is almost the precise opposite of today’s smash-mouth punditry, reflexive accusations of “fake news,” and quick hits on social media. As Freeman, with a touch of his trademark irony, reflects in the introduction to *Skirmishes*: “Alongside my cherished allies in the conservative movement . . . I have been part of what amounts to a permanent insurgency. There is no rest, it seems, for the ideologically tendentious.”

One example: Edwards has been the moving force in the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation and its statue honoring those hundreds of millions of victims, which was unveiled in downtown Washington, D.C., in 2007. Such step-by-step projects cannot be tweeted and require hard, disciplined sloggng. This is even more the case, one imagines, with the VOC Foundation’s envisioned museum of communism, to be placed “as close to the Mall as the National Park Service and Congress will allow.” Conservative stalwarts in Edwards’s and Freeman’s generations, like their heroes Buckley and Ronald Reagan, have untiringly played the long game.

It’s this passion for the long game that now seems most lacking on the right. What better explanation is there for its high-profile participants’ frequent unwillingness to engage in conversation of any depth with non-conservatives? *Skirmishes* includes an especially

thought-provoking 2014 speech to the Philadelphia Society. Before an intellectual forum founded more than half a century ago, Freeman lamented that “amid the several blessings of talk radio and internet bloggery, we have created for ourselves one very large rhetorical problem. We have learned to savor the many satisfactions of talking to ourselves, while forgetting how to talk to people who do not yet agree with us. That is a luxury that Bill Buckley and the founding brethren never enjoyed.... We must acknowledge that ‘condemn and assert’ won’t cut it. We will have to learn once again how to ‘beguile and persuade.’”

It might occur to the reader that such remarks, delivered a year before Trump announced for president, point both away from this strange man and toward him. In one sense, Trump does seem to talk only to himself and his fans, as Freeman has accused conservative activists of too often doing. In another sense, however, we know that isn’t quite true. Many Trump skeptics listened to him favorably in 2016 and went on to support him. Similarly, it’s entirely fair for Trump’s opponents, on the right and elsewhere, to accuse him of indulging in the “mindless repetition” that Freeman warned against. Yet one cannot deny Trump’s knack for “the plain and powerful speech of Main

Street,” with the stress on “the concrete over the abstract,” that Freeman recommended.

The Edwards and Freeman books should be read together. Richly representing two compelling careers and two valid sensibilities on the right as well, they are excellent reminders of conservative leaders’ obligation “to think, and to write; and occasionally to mediate.” The words are Buckley’s in *National Review*, from his nonendorsement editorial on the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy race. Nixon wasn’t good enough for that endorsement, as Rusher seems to have argued successfully against one of Buckley’s intellectual mentors, the more pragmatic senior editor James Burnham. Buckley, however, didn’t leave it at that. “Our job today,” he told readers, “is surely to remind ardent members of the conservative community that equally well instructed persons can differ on matters of political tactic, and that it is profoundly wrong for one faction to anathematize the other over such differences.” Buckley’s advice remains essential.

David B. Frisk, a resident fellow at the Alexander Hamilton Institute for the Study of Western Civilization, is the author of If Not Us, Who? William Rusher, “National Review,” and the Conservative Movement (ISI Books).