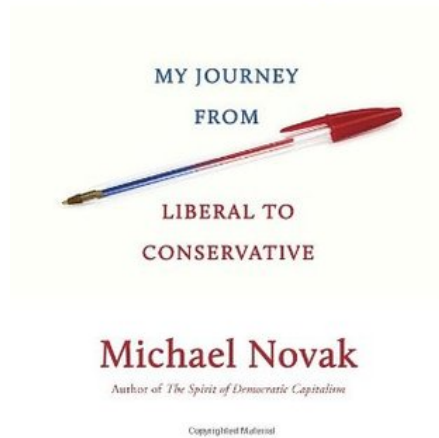


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Writing from Left to Right



Writing from Left to Right: My Journey from Liberal to Conservative

Michael Novak

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Writing from Left to Right: My Journey from Liberal to Conservative Michael Novak

“In heavy seas, to stay on course it is indispensable to lean hard left at times, then hard right. The important thing is to have the courage to follow your intellect. Wherever the evidence leads. To the left or to the right.”

–Michael Novak

Engagingly, writing as if to old friends and foes, Michael Novak shows how Providence (not deliberate choice) placed him in the middle of many crucial events of his time: a month in wartime Vietnam, the student riots of the 1960s, the Reagan revolution, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Bill Clinton's welfare reform, and the struggles for human rights in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also spent fascinating days, sometimes longer, with inspiring leaders like Sargent Shriver, Bobby Kennedy, George McGovern, Jack Kemp, Václav Havel, President Reagan, Lady Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II, who helped shape—and reshape—his political views.

Yet through it all, as Novak's sharply etched memoir shows, his focus on helping the poor and defending universal human rights remained constant; he gradually came to see building small businesses and envy-free democracies as the only realistic way to build free societies. Without economic growth from the bottom up, democracies are not stable. Without protections for liberties of conscience and economic creativity, democracies will fail. Free societies need three liberties in one: economic liberty, political liberty, and liberty of spirit.

Novak's writing throughout is warm, fast paced, and often very beautiful. His narrative power is memorable.

Writing from Left to Right: My Journey from Liberal to Conservative Details

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Phillip W. says

A tremendous witness to uplift provided by the twin wings of faith and reason in a magnanimous soul. Novak, trained as a philosophical realist, never failed to go where the evidence of experience and intellect took him. His penetrating insights into a wide swath of the West's cultural, economic, intellectual, moral, and political life is the gold standard of what it means to be an authentically Catholic intellectual.

Reading his journey was like having an extended friendly and fruitful conversations with one of the most fecund minds on the things that truly matter. His book reminds one of the joyous labors or laborious joys of the intellectual life as an expression of the life of the Spirit. Novak's volume has been an informative, provocative, and inspiring uplift, as well as serving as a hopeful reminder and a prudent caution, that ideas have consequences.

Michael Sherwood says

Students of American politics will enjoy this memoir. Novak knew and/or worked for many of the most influential political figures of the past 50 years- Robert Kennedy, Sargent Shriver, George McGovern, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, both George Bushes and more. He also describes his close relationship with Pope John Paul II. Whether or not you agree with his current neoconservatism, you'll find this book interesting.

Susan Bazzett-Griffith says

I won this book in a Goodreads Giveaway.

3 stars. I appreciated Mr. Novak's thought-provoking prose and descriptions of his unique experiences in the world of American politics. That said, I wanted to like this book more than I actually did. I found Novak's writing very dense at times, and I had to put this book down a few times in lieu of some lighter reading in order to get all the way through it-- you can tell that Novak is a trained journalist, as his writing lacks much figurative language, and he tends to summarize conversations rather than use dialogue often. I also had a difficult time reading parts of the book because I disagreed with some of his viewpoints; however, his views have clearly been ruminated on thoroughly, and I respect the thoughtfulness behind how he came to his conclusions. I think overall, this is an interesting book-- could be a great read for a politically-inclined book club, but chances are only diehard political junkies, and likely Republican ones at that, will wholeheartedly embrace this particular book.

Eric says

I received this book as a part of the FirstReads program from GoodReads

And I am finding it a fascinating journey.

Katie Krombein says

This book is a journey of a man who began his career as a democrat, writing for presidential political campaigns, teaching religion and philosophy and politics at Harvard, and Stanford and SUNY, etc, starting in the late 50s. He then gradually, through working in politics, shifted as he watched policies unfold and thought through underlying assumptions and sought logical dialogues among politicians. As early as 1971 he stated that there didn't seem to be effective logical conversation in the political arena...he also observed that while the left seemed to be getting more and more extreme, they assumed conservative just meant "coming along more slowly" as opposed to "going in the completely opposite direction".... while it is not my typical genre, it is really fascinating as I reflect on current political trends.

p. 125+: Not only did that review not help my reputation; but the reviewer accused me of spreading hate (the insult our elites hurl when they are being unmasked). Really tough to take. I did not then know the fury of the Left when it marks someone as beyond the pale of acceptability. I had never before understood how secular excommunication works--how effectively one can be banished from the innocent banter of old circles of trust, how even old friends change the flow and tone of a conversation when one approaches, signaling with a certain chill that one's presence is no longer desired. All this is a good thing to go through when one is young. One needs the toughness later.

p. 133: In 1971-1972, my mind was in a fruitful turmoil regarding my left-wing tendencies. I had begun to notice the appearance of two lefts--one that included my whole family and what it represented, and the other a "new" left, based on a suddenly emerging "constituency of conscience," no longer rooted among people who worked with their hands and backs. Instead, secure in its own affluence (and in its own suburbs), this new left was now expressing a more refined "morality." It was a rather more utopian morality: More interested in "peace." More interested in "sensitivity." More interested in its own "moral purity," which marked it as superior to past political classes. The New Left was no longer of the old left--which was patently more vulgar, unsophisticated, and unrefined. "Left" now meant morally superior.

p. 133+: Curiously, even in the 1970s (and maybe even the 1960s), writers with Democratic sympathies thought Republican "moderates" were Republicans who voted with Democrats. They were blind to how far out on the extremes of the cultural and moral fronts their own positions now extended. They thought "conservatives" were those who were moving left, but more slowly. They had full confidence that history was inexorably leading everyone leftward. It never occurred to them that, in the eyes of a growing majority of the public, those on the left were now extremists.

p. 149+: In short, my first thought was: Socialism is a pretty good idea; it's just that we haven't found a way to make it work yet. Then I couldn't help thinking: But after scores of attempts around the world to make it work, all of which failed, maybe there's something wrong with the basic idea. Margaret Thatcher would later famously put it: "The problem with socialism is that eventually you run out of other people's money." Socialism, I was beginning to infer, is not creative, not wealth producing. It is wealth consuming (it consumes the wealth of others); it is parasitical. These insights nudge me toward another nest of puzzles. Isn't capitalism based on self-interest? That sounds like selfishness and greed, and it seems verified when economists concentrate all their attention on the "bottom line."

p. 152: There is more practical brainpower in the thousands of families whose livelihood depends on good

decisions than in the smartest hundred government planners.

p. 155: You can see here the beginnings of my full-blown theory that a good society is composed of three interrelated systems: Cultural, political, and economic, each depending on the others; each checked and balanced by the others. But so imperfect is this world that even virtuous, idealistic, humanitarian attempts by government "often gang awry." There is a right way and a wrong way for government to get involved in humanitarian attempts to better the human condition. One wrong way is for government--especially a distant, impersonal, federal government--too easily to become a tyrant, too easily to become inefficient, meddling, bureaucratizing, corrupting, enervating. Even Franklin Delano Roosevelt recognized this truth. Though usually thought of as the founder of the welfare state in America, FDR very early recognized a grave danger our nation had better avoid. Roosevelt warned Congress in 1935, as no Democrat after Lyndon Johnson could have written: "The lessons of history, confirmed by the evidence immediately before me, show conclusively that continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration to the national fiber. To dole out relieve...is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit."

p. 159+: "I first realized I was a capitalist when all my friends began publicly declaring that they were socialists. How I wished I could be as left as they. Night after night I tried to persuade myself of the coherence of their logic; I did my best to go straight. I held up in the privacy of my room pictures of every socialist land known to me: North Korea, Albania, Czechoslovakia (land of my grandparents), and even Sweden. Nothing worked. When I quizzed my socialist intellectual friends, I found they didn't like socialist countries, either. They all said to me: "We want socialism, but not like eastern Europe." I said: "Cuba?" No suggestions won their assent. They didn't want to be identified with China (except that the streets seemed clean). Nor with Tanzania. They loved the idea of socialism. "But what is it about this particular idea you like?" I asked. "Government control? Will we have a Pentagon of heavy industry?" Not exactly. Nor did they think my other suggestion witty, that under socialism everything would function like the Post Office. When they began to speak of "planning," I asked, who would police the planners?" Practical discussions seemed beside the point. Finally I realized that socialism is not a political proposal, not an economic plan. Socialism is the residue of Judeo-Christian faith, without religion. It is a belief in the goodness of the human race and paradise on earth. That's when I discovered I believe in sin. I'm for capitalism, modified and made intelligent and public-spirited, because it makes the world free for sinners. It allows human beings to do pretty much what they will. Socialism is a system built on a belief in human goodness, so it never works. Capitalism is a system built on belief in human selfishness; given checks and balances, it is nearly always a smashing, scandalous success. It's presumptuous to believe that God is on any human's side. But God did make human beings free. Free to sin. There is an innate tendency in socialism toward authoritarianism. Left to themselves all human beings won't be good; most must be converted. Capitalism accepting human sinfulness, rubs sinner against sinner, making even dry wood yield a spark of grace."

p. 178: Jack Kemp: "I want a government that trusts you--and your kids--to spend your money better than the government can. If your kids can keep more money in their own pockets, they will start businesses, and that means they won't have to do the sweaty work that you did all your life. And they will send their kids to college without skimping on nice things for the Mrs. as much as you did. I'm for tax cuts, not for higher rates. I'm for letting you keep your own money, to spend better than government can."

p. 199+: To sum up what I learned just before and during the Reagan administration: First economics is often counterintuitive. It would seem that the common good would be improved by a government supervising the economy from the top down, just as common ownership of property would produce a higher common good than private property. But real experience since the time of Aristotle, Cicero, and Thomas Aquinas has shown that social ownership in practice reduces personal incentives and personal responsibility and induces a common lassitude. A professor I had met in Russia in 1991, who had known only socialism, voiced sharp,

sarcastic thrusts about the Soviet system: 'The trouble with socialism is, who will stay up all night to take care of the sick cow?' and 'Without incentives, you pretend to work and they pretend to pay you.' The irony is that one best raises the level of the common good of all, not through common ownership and top-down control, but by building in the system many incentives for personal industry, invention, and extra hard work. Punishments depress activity. Praise and incentives excite it.

p. 255: The main point is that for welfare programs to do their proper job, they need an ethical component, a signaling function, a call for a bond of mutual obligations between helpers and helped. The community must reach out to suffering individuals; the recipients must do what they can to contribute to the community.

p. 266-267: For an entire century the world had been testing two propositions, one political, the other economic: Dictatorship is better for the people than democracy; and socialism is better for the people than capitalism. The bloodiest century had shown that the answer to both propositions was no: democracy is better, and capitalism is better. The Nazis exterminated some 16 million people, the Soviets upward of 53 million (for further readings, consult *The Black Book of Communism*). What had been neglected for a century was the third component of the free society: the moral and cultural system. That is the deepest system, and the inner dynamic within the two others. A good economy is indispensable for human flourishing; a sound, limited, law-abiding government is necessary for such an economy; and a truly humanistic cultural system is the indispensable life support for the other two systems. Economics begins in the mysticism of creativity. Politics begins in the mysticism of common action. Culture supplies the mysticism for both. At one time in human history the highest value was the silent contemplation of the inner light of creative truth at the center of everything that is. No human could know all that truth. But in the search for each fragment of it, evidence beyond the power of human altering became the judge of who was closer to, or farther from, the truth. In short, there is truth to be uncovered--intersubjective, durable truth. Humans are not masters of that truth; they are only able to glimpse it, expand their comprehension of it, hold to it in tough times, and reverence it. As Jefferson wrote, the mind may rightly bend the knee only to evidence, and be bound only by evidence. Only down that way of seeing reality is the advance of science possible. Only down that way is the inner realm of individual conscience seen to be inalienable. Evidence can animate action only when it is grasped and pursued by individual conscience--each conscience at its own pace and in its own way. How else can evidence shape the soul of individuals? Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, it seemed that hardly anyone in the world knew how to talk about such things...

p. 283+: Sometimes, Manhattan's wise old Jesuit John Courtney Murray once said, two people cannot come to real disagreement without sticking to the argument for a very long time--maybe long enough to work through a case of brandy together as they ruminate. Patience and time. Careful dissection of differences, endless goodwill. And, if possible, infinite good humor. ...There are a few things that, after some back-and-forth reflection, we can all agree on; other things we recognize that, in the limited time we have, we just cannot agree on; and for still others we can over time narrow some of our differences. We do this by finding the point where we began missing each other. I like the lesson of my teacher Reinhold Niebuhr: In my own views, there is always some error; and in the views of those I disagree with, there is always some truth. Still, I am more discouraged in 2013 than I have ever been over the determination of so many to refuse to talk with those with whom they disagree. I seldom hear pro-life people, for example, make an effort to understand what those who are pro-choice are actually thinking, or try to probe their reasons for that position. The reverse is also true. And I believe I have never watched a television news program in which the time is taken to hear out both sides calmly. On such matters the temptation is to be absolutist: yes or no. It is the same with other issues. Conservatives do not try often enough to grasp the motives of those who disagree with them, and liberals very seldom see the good and responsible reasons why conservatives think as they do. Worse, each side too easily tends to stereotype, even demonize, those on the other side. Neither you nor I would consider any of this honest argument. At its best, it is simply mudslinging. At its worst, it is outright

disrespect. The defining characteristic of civilization is the willingness of its members to engage in conversation, that is, in the effort to persuade each other through speech. It bears repeating over and over: Civilized people converse with one another, offering counterargument for argument, and try to follow the evidence where it leads. Barbarians club one another. The contemporary form of using clubs is ridicule. Mutual ridicule has by now been developed into a high art form. And, yet, we must do better.

p. 289+: Republics usually fail, our founders discovered, because of envy and covetousness. Sometimes one powerful family envies another; one section of a city resents the behavior of another; the poor covet a larger portion of what the rich have, the middle class resent the poor, and the rich are indifferent to all below themselves. Sometimes two powerful personalities despise each other, and each will be satisfied with nothing but bringing down the other. In the Ten Commandments, the Lord forbade covetousness seven times. It is the most pervasive sin--far more dangerous than, say, anger. Anger openly displays its destructiveness, while covetousness presents itself not as a capital sin but as the pursuit of "justice." Its battle cry is "Equality!"

p. 297: Compassion may be the most beautiful of all virtues. It is the new possibility that Christianity added on to Greek and Roman virtues. It has captivated the imagination of the modern, pagan West: "Liberty, Fraternity, Equality." These are not directives of Greek or Roman philosophy, but the teachings of the carpenter Jesus Christ. They have captivated the Left. Without "compassion," what would be left for the Left? Yet like every other good ideal, compassion is often used in a fraudulent way. Instead of being blinded just by the name, take a look at the actual, real-world effects of any given policy. The Left leads off with the correct word, but it is not watchful enough over the unintended consequences its policies (said to be in the name of compassion) often dump onto history.

Joseph Novak says

Novak's path from authoritarian liberalism (!) to conservative ideology, his experiences with notable exponents of these worldviews, the lucid accounts of ideas and personalities, is a great reading about the recent past.

R. says

Novak gives an insider's account of the intellectual and political forces that shaped the latter half of the 20th century. Although he tends to gloss over the internal conflicts that seem to have pushed him from the left towards the right, Novak captures the broad outlines of the theories and the issues that have polarized United States politics, indeed US culture, in the adolescence of the 21st century. Of greatest interest is Novak's chapter on economy, politics and culture, especially for anyone who has read Thomas Frank and his more virulent take on modern conservatives.

Novak's latest work misses the mark in a few areas though. In the latter half of the book, it reads more like a diary/travel guide. While Novak provides some interesting insider views and tales of Reagan, Thatcher and the like, he really fails to connect the dots between 1989 and 2013 which he acknowledges. At times the story is one of a wide-eyed star struck politico fan, almost too giddy to be believable. Therein lies the true beauty of *Writing from Left to Right* though. In an era when so many of us have become "political agnostics" it is refreshing to read someone who, in the golden years of a notable career, still has respect for

the process and genuine hope for both the politicians and the people. A little bit of Novak's outlook would go a long way these days.

Christopher Blosser says

Insofar as Novak was part of the "Catholic neoconservative" triumvirate (the other two being George Weigel and the late Richard J. Neuhaus), I was expecting something along the lines of David Horowitz's *Radical Son: A Generational Odyssey* and Noam Podhoretz's *Ex-Friends: Falling Out With Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hannah Arendt, and Norman Mailer*, chronicling his falling out of favor with his former ideological and literary comrades during his neoconservative turn.

Novak's biographical recollections in *Writing from Left to Right: My Journey from Liberal to Conservative* are less memorable or "colorful" than his neoconservative colleagues -- one has the impression that he deliberately glosses over what he alludes to as similar periods of ostracism. We do get a bit of a taste of the 60's with a month in Vietnam (leading to the writing *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience* with Robert McAfee Brown) and his experiences as dean of SUNY Old Westbury, an "experimental" college wherein students were on authoritative par with the faculty in planning the curriculum, grades be damned. (Novak's pseudo-fictional recollection of what he remembers as the inaugural faculty meeting is laugh-out-loud hilarious).

That said, the bulk of the book chronicles his dedicated service in political and public life -- as a speechwriter and consultant for a number of Democratic presidential campaigns (including the Kennedys); as a resident scholar for the American Enterprise Institute, and later some cold-war blow-by-blow reminiscing of diplomatic negotiations with the Soviets as ambassador to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 1981-82). Within these pages, Novak regals us with stories of his personal encounters with such notable figures of the 20th century as Robert Kennedy, Sarge Shriver, George McGovern, President Reagan, Prime Minister Thatcher, Pope John Paul II.

All of these personal experiences are interesting in itself, and I understand in writing a memoir spanning one's life, one must be selective. For my part, I would have preferred less *personal* history and more *intellectual* in covering the transition "from liberal to conservative." Likewise, we only get a glimpse, for example, of the distinctly *Catholic* side of his turning, the founding of *Crisis Magazine* with Ralph McInerny and his involvement with *First Things*. But those are simply personal preferences, and as having written some 27 books on economics, theology and culture, there's certainly no shortage of ideas to digest.

Geoffrey Kabaservice says

Novak is an interesting character who made a significant intellectual impact on both the New Left in the 1960s (when he was a grad student and junior professor at Harvard, Stanford, and SUNY Old Westbury) and the New Right in the '70s and '80s (when he was a neocon in revolt against what he saw as the anti-capitalist, cheese-and-chablis New Class that had taken the Democratic Party away from its white ethnic working class roots). Even so, as I wrote in my forthcoming *First Things* review, he has told this left-to-right story better in the past and never did manage to reconcile *Rerum Novarum* with Gordon Gekko.

Anne says

This is a great title. Novak shares some of his experiences with many memorable political and cultural figures, reflecting on their impact on American life and on his own personal moral and philosophical journey. More importantly, he shows what it looks like to live in constant engagement with the ideas that shape the culture-- and what happens for a person and a culture when you/we engage those ideas courageously and honestly.
