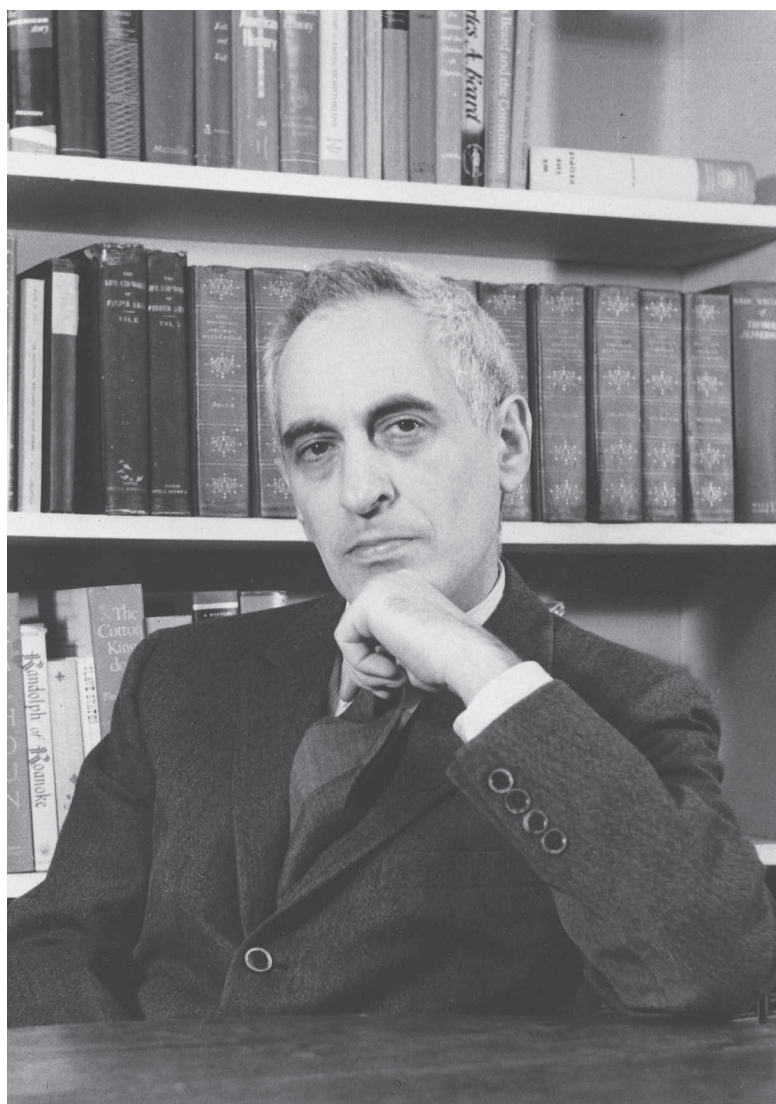


IN DEFENSE OF FREEDOM  
and Related Essays



Frank S. Meyer  
(1909–1972)



Frank S. Meyer

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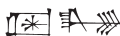
IN DEFENSE  
OF FREEDOM  
and Related  
Essays

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
WILLIAM C. DENNIS



Liberty Fund  
Indianapolis

This book is published by Liberty Fund, Inc., a foundation established to encourage study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals.



The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagī*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Our band is few, but true and tried,  
our leader frank and bold . . .

—William Cullen Bryant,  
“Song of Marion’s Men”

Firm, united, let us be,  
Rallying round our Liberty;  
As a band of brothers joined,  
Peace and safety we shall find.

—Joseph Hopkinson,  
“Hail, Columbia”

These epigraphs are taken from *Breathes There the Man: Heroic Ballads and Poems of the English-Speaking Peoples*, edited by Frank S. Meyer.

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# Foreword

Frank Straus Meyer was a leader in the founding generation of post–World War II American conservatism. Like Whittaker Chambers, Max Eastman, and John Dos Passos, he embraced conservatism after having been a member of the Communist Party, and like them, too, Meyer became a fierce and unrelenting foe of communism and the Soviet Union that sponsored its spread worldwide. In addition, Meyer was the key figure of the 1950s and 1960s who argued that American conservatives should not let factional ideological quarrels distract them from their duty to further their common heritage of liberty and to reduce the power of the Leviathan state. Meyer’s *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo*, the most philosophical and least polemical of his works, is the defining statement of this belief. The work is his enduring intellectual legacy.<sup>1</sup>

Meyer was born on May 9, 1909, in Newark, New Jersey, to Jack F. Meyer, a New York lawyer, and Helene Straus Meyer. He

1. Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962). The dedications in each of Meyer’s books reflect his most important loyalties. *In Defense of Freedom* contains the dedication: “To L. Brent Bozell, William F. Buckley, Jr., Willmoore Kendall. Companions in battle. Whetstones of the mind. None of whom will by any means agree with much of this book; without whom, however, it could not have been written.” All page references to *In Defense of Freedom* and the related essays are to the previously published versions; references to the same works in this Liberty Fund collection follow in parentheses.

attended Princeton and then Balliol College, Oxford, where he received his B.A. in 1932 and his M.A. in 1934. While at Oxford he was a well-known radical student leader and secret member of the Communist Party, taking instruction from his party handlers on his duties as a student activist. This radical phase continued through his studies at the London School of Economics (1932–34) and at the University of Chicago (1934–38).<sup>2</sup> In 1940 Meyer married Elsie Bown, who became his life-long intellectual and political companion. They made their home on Ohayo Mountain Road in Woodstock, New York.<sup>3</sup> Here, over the years, the Meyers welcomed countless visitors for memorable nights of conversation, food and drink, and song. Their two sons are John C. and Eugene B. Meyer.<sup>4</sup>

Always the intellectual, Meyer, who turned to communism through a study of Marxist texts, began an agonizing reappraisal of his beliefs after reading F. A. Hayek's *The Road to Serf-*

2. Many years later, at a meeting of the Philadelphia Society, Meyer recounted tales of some of his party associates who still held various positions of influence.

3. Meyer's *The Moulding of Communists: The Training of the Communist Cadre* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961) contains this dedication: "E. B. M. uxori meae quae mihi et in tenebris erranti et e tenebris exeunti eximia pietate animam confirmavit" (To my wife, who was with me while wandering in the darkness and who strengthened my spirit with her exceptional piety when I left it). Murray Rothbard wrote of the Meyers, "Never have I known two people so close, so intimate on every level; in this age of instability, here was a truly rare marriage, a marriage to cherish even for those of us who experienced it as friends." See Rothbard, "Frank S. Meyer, RIP," *Libertarian Forum*, May 1972, 8. William F. Buckley, Jr., wrote an obituary on Elsie Meyer. See Buckley, "Elsie Meyer, RIP," *National Review*, May 23, 1975, 546–47.

4. For sketches of the Meyers' life in Woodstock, see "Frank S. Meyer, RIP," *National Review*, April 28, 1972, 466–75. Contributors to this reminiscence were William F. Buckley, Jr., Peter P. Witonski, C. H. Simonds, Guy Davenport, James Burnham, M. Stanton Evans, Garry Wills, L. Brent Bozell, Neil McCaffrey, J. Daniel Mahoney, Jared Lobdell, Eliseo Vivas, Priscilla L. Buckley, and Hugh Kenner. Another fine biographical appreciation is Edwin J. Feulner's foreword to the Heritage Foundation's reprint of Meyer's "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," published as the *President's Essay*, 1991.

dom while serving in the U.S. Army during World War II.<sup>5</sup> In 1945, after fourteen years of active service at its direction, Meyer made a complete break with the party. In *The Moulding of Communists: The Training of the Communist Cadre*, a volume in the series *Communism in American Life*, edited by Clinton Rossiter, Meyer drew on his experiences as a party disciple to produce an important and chilling account of the role of the party, the cadre, and the ideology in creating and deploying the Communist revolutionary. This book is not an autobiographical recounting of Meyer's days as a Communist; nor is it a history of the American Communist movement. Instead, the book is a study of how the party in theory and practice went about creating the Communist man. Here Meyer showed how the Communists systematically attempted to transform the whole man—personality, intellect, and will—into a faithful servant of the party. For the fully developed Communist, there was to be no conceivable area of life in which Marxist-Leninist theory could not quickly provide certain and clarifying answers. Meyer's devotion to this systematic way of thought made it difficult for him to break with the party, even after he became convinced that Marxism was an intellectually puerile and hideous dogma.<sup>6</sup>

Meyer's intellectual pilgrimage from Marxism led eventually in 1955 to a position at the newly founded conservative magazine *National Review*, edited by William F. Buckley, Jr. Meyer became a senior editor of the magazine in 1957. "Principles and Heresies," a column Meyer wrote until his death, was one of the magazine's leading features. Meyer collected many of these columns, together with other of his writings, in *The Conservative Mainstream* (1969). In these columns, Meyer's writings ranged

5. "Champion of Freedom," *National Review*, May 7, 1960. This article is a review of F. A. Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

6. Meyer, *The Moulding of Communists*, 47–57, 156–58.



widely, covering contemporary domestic concerns, dangers abroad, moral decline, history, political philosophy, and the American political tradition. Among the topics he covered that remain of perennial interest are Abraham Lincoln; the future of the Republican Party; the sins of contemporary liberalism; foreign affairs and communism; and the nature of true education. This collection remains a revealing compendium of Meyer's views and concerns.<sup>7</sup>

During the last decade of his life, supported by small grants from various foundations, Meyer edited a newsletter entitled the *Exchange*. This periodical was a forum for discussion of academic and teaching issues and was a job-opening bulletin board for scholars on the Right. Circulation eventually grew to nearly one thousand. For several years after Meyer's death the *Exchange* continued under the editorship of Elsie Meyer, and after her death, under the auspices of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

Meyer's description of the Communist cadre was in some respects a self-portrait. He was a man of principle, devoted to sniffing out heresies wherever they might abide.<sup>8</sup> This ideological and partisan aspect of Meyer's life and work was manifested in his efforts on behalf of such conservative organizations as Young Americans for Freedom, the American Conservative Union, the Conservative Party of New York, and the Philadelphia Society. Meyer's character and convictions were further manifested in his support of the 1964 presidential campaign of Senator Barry Goldwater; in his support of Moise Tshombe's Katanga; in his hostility to Castro's Cuba, Khrushchev, nuclear disarmament, and liberal Republicans; and in his opposition to compulsory national service and the growing welfare state. Meyer pursued these principles and objectives with an energy

7. *The Conservative Mainstream* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969). This book contains the dedication "To John and Eugene. In Hope."

8. "A Man of Principle" was Meyer's title for an early column on Barry Goldwater, *National Review*, April 23, 1960, 269–70.

and enthusiasm (laden with more than a touch of stridency) that endeared him to his followers but must have angered and outraged his adversaries. Only those who heard him speak publicly can have had a full appreciation of Meyer's singular embodiment of these principles. Fortunately, he spoke often, on college campuses, at meetings of the Philadelphia Society—where his spontaneous outbursts became legendary—or, for example, at the banquet commemorating the tenth anniversary of *National Review*:

Conservatism is no more, nor less, than devotion to the restoration and renewal of the spirit of Western civilization. . . . The nature of men, firmly rooted in their creation, belies the constructions of the utopians. And when men set foot on the planets of Sirius or Vega they will still be men, not constructs. The natural habitat of man is freedom and piety towards the constitution of being, not subservience to a man-made utopian plan. By that token, however many battles we may lose, in the end the view of man and his relations to the universe for which we stand will triumph. But when, no man can say. We will have reverses and we will have successes. The road is a rough one. Still, I venture to predict, we will be back here ten years from now, ten years stronger, to signalize, fittingly, together the twentieth anniversary of *National Review* and the 200th anniversary of the War of Independence that launched our republic.<sup>9</sup>

Meyer's intellectual road from Marxist collectivism to the defense of individual liberty was paralleled by another, more drawn out, and evidently more wrenching spiritual journey that probably began during his days at Oxford. On the day of his death this proud Jew was baptized into the Catholic Church. As William F. Buckley, Jr., recounted after visiting Meyer on Good Friday, 1972: "The next day he was worse, much worse. That afternoon he saw Father [Eugene V.] Clark,

9. Transcribed by the editor from a recording of portions of the speeches presented at the dinner commemorating the tenth anniversary of *National Review* at the Imperial Ballroom of the Americana Hotel in New York City, November 11, 1965, National Review Recording NR-3, 1966.

and made the great submission, and a few hours later I was called to the telephone. It was his son, Gene. I told him the truth that his father was a great man, and hung up.”<sup>10</sup>

The profound nature of this deathbed conversion renders difficult an assessment of the importance of religion in Meyer’s earlier political thinking and writing. In the best published study of Meyer’s thought, Senator John P. East argued that the key to understanding Frank Meyer “is to appreciate fully that the Christian faith is the *summum bonum* of his thinking, and that all other ideas flow from that fact and are corollaries to it.”<sup>11</sup> However, Meyer’s own testimony suggests that the relationship of his political thought and Christianity was more complicated and indirect than Senator East later suggested. In his *In Defense of Freedom*, published a decade before his death, Meyer wrote about “the constitution of being,” “the eternal order of truth,” and “objective moral order” but not about Christian virtue or God’s grace, as East would have it. In a long footnote, Meyer wrote that “Christianity, which informs Western civilization, is the highest and deepest relationship to the Divine that men can attain, I am also certain; but I am not able to say that any single institutional church is the bearer of God’s spirit. And this makes it impossible for me to discuss the church in the terms of this book.”<sup>12</sup> In answer to a question in a November 1970 interview with John Boland, eventually published in the *New Guard*, the magazine of the Young Americans for Freedom, Meyer described himself as having a “pretty complex theology” and as being a theist; essentially, though formally unattached, he accepted the Christian situation.<sup>13</sup>

10. *National Review*, April 28, 1972, 467.

11. John P. East, *The American Conservative Movement: The Philosophical Foundations* (Chicago: Regnery Books, 1986), 71.

12. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom*, 165 n (147 n).

13. Meyer said even more here: “I do believe in revelation, but I do not believe in it being limited to a single document or a single church or anything of the sort. What I really think, I guess—I’ll try to work this out—is that

Meyer's *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo* was also long in its development. He had published on the themes that would inform this book at least as early as his short 1955 essay "Collectivism Rebaptized."<sup>14</sup> Though *In Defense of Freedom* is not a comprehensive philosophical treatise, it is a good primer for each new generation's rediscovery of the tradition of liberty.<sup>15</sup> In this book Meyer argued that American conservatism is a blend of two strands of thought that for the most part remained in opposition to each other in Europe but in America were historical and natural allies. On the one hand, there were the "traditionalists," with their emphasis on value, virtue, and order; on the other hand, there were the "libertarians," with their stress upon freedom and the innate importance of the individual. While British and Continental conservatism, concerned with religion, tradition, authority, and status, emerged in reaction to the French Revolution, American conservatism was a homegrown development; it combined a devotion to individual freedom with an appreciation for the institutional arrangements of ordered liberty that made the practice of freedom possible. For Meyer the individualism of the libertarians made no philosophical sense without an implicit acceptance of some "absolute ground of value . . . [while] the belief

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through a steady growth of civilization—ups and downs, obviously not steady; I'm a bit Spenglerian and think of civilizations rising and falling—but through civilization and especially through Western civilization in its total works, as it were, a revelation exists." See John Boland, "An Interview with Frank S. Meyer," *New Guard* (July/August 1975): 6–8. See also Meyer's "Western Civilization: The Problem of Political Freedom," *Modern Age* (Spring 1968): 120–28, reprinted herein (209–24).

14. *Freeman* (July 1955): 559–62. Reprinted in this collection (3–13).

15. John P. East's excellent summary may be found in *The American Conservative Movement*, 75–88. Meyer's own best short statement is "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," *Modern Age* (Fall 1960): 355–63. A slightly longer version of this essay may be found in *What Is Conservatism?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 7–20, reprinted herein (14–29). This book contains the dedication: "In memoriam: Richard M. Weaver, pioneer and protagonist of the American conservative consensus."

in virtue as the end of men's being implicitly recognizes the necessity of freedom to choose that end. . . ."<sup>16</sup>

But why freedom? Because, Meyer argued, freedom is the quality that separates men from other orders of the universe. Freedom to make choices is at the center of "the drama of human existence."<sup>17</sup> Society and the state, then, are instrumental; they are not purposeful or moral orders. The value of these institutions depends on the degree to which they facilitate individuals in the pursuit of their own purposes. According to Meyer, the locus of virtue is in the individual, and the individual to be truly human must be free to choose, even if he chooses in error. "Only if there exists a real choice between right and wrong, truth and error, a choice which can be made irrespective of the direction in which history and impersonal Fate move, do men possess true freedom."<sup>18</sup>

From this line of argument, Meyer concluded that the advancement of individual liberty should be the highest duty of the politician. Though the political realm cannot compel virtuous action, it can provide the conditions in which the free man can best pursue virtue on his own. Yet political theorists of collectivist liberalism, the liberalism of the New Deal, and the emerging New Conservatism of the 1950s had abandoned the American political ideal of liberty. Collectivists did so in the name of social science. The New Conservatives—identified by Meyer as those of the 1950s who deemed themselves to be the intellectual heirs of Edmund Burke and several nineteenth-century conservatives<sup>19</sup>—did so in the name of tradition. In Meyer's judgment, each group had subordinated the individual to the collective and had, therefore, reduced men to something less than human. "Neither the welfare statist with his

16. Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," 9 (16).

17. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom*, 22 (47).

18. *Ibid.*, 49 (67).

19. See Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom*, 2–4 (34–35), for a description of his limited meaning for this term.

materialist ends nor the New Conservative with his spiritual ends is willing to accept freedom,” said Meyer.<sup>20</sup>

This strong, explicit attack on the New Conservatism of the 1950s made *In Defense of Freedom* a controversial book. The thrust of the controversy was Meyer’s insistence that the New Conservatives had forgotten the essential nature of the tradition they claimed to be defending. Prudential choice among “immediate practical alternatives” was a proper stance for the enlightened statesman, but, Meyer argued, conservative intellectuals could not depend on “prescription” and “Providential dispensation” to defend the liberties of the West against collectivist doctrines. Reason and judgment needed to be used to preserve and develop the institutions and ideals of freedom once they had emerged in the course of history and had proved themselves to be good for mankind.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to the New Conservatives, therefore, Meyer called for a “conservatism of principle,” or “a conscious conservatism,” and argued that men needed to face up to the shock of freedom. “Freedom brings men rudely and directly face to face with their own personal responsibility for their own free actions.”<sup>22</sup> This confrontation may present a serious challenge to modern men. Collectivism of one sort or another has dominated our political culture for so long that the constituency for liberty appears to be diminished. Even so, Meyer entertained no doubts about his objective or of the possibility of renewed devotion to freedom in America. Sounding a populist note, he maintained until the last that, though the political order had become corrupted, “the old truths, the old understanding still live in the hearts, the basic moral instincts, the fundamental beliefs of ordinary Americans.”<sup>23</sup> He devoted *In Defense of Freedom* to showing how his understanding of rights,

20. Ibid., 60 (74).

21. Ibid., 40–48 (60–66).

22. Ibid., 169 (150).

23. Ibid., 170 (150).

virtue, order, the good society, and the dangers of the modern Leviathan state is connected to his thesis that personal and political freedom stand at the center of the American political tradition.

Meyer's argument that freedom is the basis of virtue, and not the other way around, and his belief that there is an essential harmony between American conservatism and libertarianism, were immediately controversial—and they still are controversial. Other thinkers were immediate and pointed in response, and Meyer was equally pointed in engaging his challengers and critics. Eventually these exchanges would encompass an extensive polemical literature, constituting an ongoing conversation among many of the leading lights of post-World War II conservative or libertarian thought, including Russell Kirk, Father Stanley Parry, John Hallowell, L. Brent Bozell, Willmoore Kendall, Ronald Hamowy, Murray Rothbard, Felix Morley, Richard Weaver, M. Stanton Evans, Donald J. Devine, Stephen Tonsor, and Peter Stanlis.<sup>24</sup> Several of the essays important to this debate were reprinted in *What Is Conservatism?* The effects of this controversy linger today in a cacophony of conservative voices that have succeeded the libertarians and New Conservatives of Meyer's generation.

Today, as before, the issue is, as George H. Nash has written, “nothing less than the intellectual legitimacy of the coalition that had developed in the mid-1950s. . . . Did libertarians and traditionalists really have any business associating with one another?”<sup>25</sup> Meyer convinced few of his adversaries in his own day that they did—that his reconciliation of the best parts of con-

24. For a full description of the controversy engendered by *In Defense of Freedom*, see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), especially chapters 5 and 6, and East, *The American Conservative Movement*, 75–81, 96–101. Nash is especially good in describing the many intellectual streams in the controversy between Meyer and his conservative and libertarian contemporaries and he also provides a fine personal portrait of Meyer.

25. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 172.



servative traditionalism with a libertarianism based in American history could be sustained. He was, however, the first to insist that such a unity was not only possible but also necessary considering the political crisis at home and the dangers of communism abroad. Yet for many readers Meyer's fusionism (as it was called by his friendly adversary L. Brent Bozell) will remain convincing simply because it makes such good sense and because the readers believe Meyer described the true nature of American conservatism as they have come to know it through their own experience and study.<sup>26</sup> For these readers it will not be Meyer's text that seems narrow and doctrinaire, but rather those of his uncompromising libertarian and traditionalist critics—the first group irrational in their arid rationalism, the second unaware of the realities of their own tradition.

What would Meyer make of the world that came into being after the collapse of the Soviet empire? Edwin J. Feulner, president of the Heritage Foundation, speculated that "Frank would have rejoiced not only in the triumph of freedom, but also in the way it has happened—with whole societies—one man, one heart, one spirit at a time refusing to acquiesce in iniquity, refusing to be the commissar's creature. . . ."<sup>27</sup> This much is surely true. In a moving essay, typically full of passion and exuberance, published in *National Review*, January 1961, Meyer wrote of his hope that the world would soon witness a new birth of liberty. He argued that for the first time in modern America an intellectual conservatism was arising and that it was beginning to put collectivist liberalism on the defensive throughout the humane disciplines of American university faculties:

I do not want to exaggerate. I am not maintaining that the strangeness of the arid and nihilistic doctrines which for three genera-

26. Meyer discusses the use of the term "fusionism" in "Why Freedom," *National Review*, September 25, 1962, 223–25, and reprinted herein (155–63).

27. Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., *President's Essay* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1991).



tions have increasingly permeated American thought is broken—or even that it is on the verge of being broken. . . . What I do maintain is that the tide has turned and turned unmistakably. . . . I do not underestimate the hard, steel strength of power. Whether for good or evil, it is power which has the next to the last word in the affairs of men—but not the last word. . . . It is ideas and beliefs that truly reflect the nature of man and his destiny that will in the end decide our future.<sup>28</sup>

Meyer returned to this theme in the closing chapter of *In Defense of Freedom*: “Here lies the challenge to resurgent conservatism in America: simultaneously to create a new intellectual and spiritual leadership, and on the basis of that leadership to move forward to the defeat of collectivist liberalism in the political sphere.”<sup>29</sup>

Despite its partisan conclusion, Meyer did not intend for *In Defense of Freedom* to be read in some narrow, particularistic fashion. He believed his message would appeal to all who gave him a thoughtful ear, because he thought there was a common interest in the maintenance of a free society. For Meyer, a social order was a good order to the degree that it permitted men to live in freedom under conditions in which virtue could be advanced and perpetuated. And he believed that America had been, and should continue to be, such a society. Of course, freedom has its risks because vice, not virtue, might characterize man’s advance. But, then, all existence has its risks. Unless men can choose to be vicious, they cannot act to be virtuous. And, while a community may be able to compel good behavior, compulsion does not produce virtuous men.<sup>30</sup> Armed with this understanding, both the serious student of liberty and the activist in the cause of freedom would be well prepared for further work.

A fair-minded look at the history of the past twenty years would lead to the conclusion that only a part of Meyer’s vision

28. *The Conservative Mainstream*, “Hope for the ’60s,” 87–88.

29. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom*, 170–71 (150–51).

30. *Ibid.*, 166 (147–48).

has been realized. Indeed, defeats in some areas may have balanced gains in others. But one can be sure that Meyer would continue to glory in the intellectual and polemical struggle on behalf of freedom. In an oft-quoted observation on Meyer, Whittaker Chambers wrote to William F. Buckley, Jr.:

If the Rep. Party [and evidently conservatives in general] cannot get some grip of the actual world we live in and from it generalize and actively promote a program that means something to the masses of people—why, somebody else will. There will be nothing to argue. The voters will simply vote Republicans into singularity. The Rep. Party will become like one of those dark shops which apparently never sell anything. If, for any reason, you go in, you find, at the back, an old man, fingering for his own pleasure, some oddments of cloth (weave and design of 1850). Nobody wants to buy them, which is fine because the old man is not really interested in selling. He just likes to hold and to feel. As your eyes become accustomed to the dim kerosene light, you are only slightly surprised to see that the old man is Frank Meyer.<sup>31</sup>

In one sense these lines do describe the Meyer of Woodstock. Yet, as the passage of time has shown, Chambers's characterization of Meyer assuredly is flawed. True, Meyer would not yield to the *Zeitgeist*, but he did not despair that the reforms he advocated were possible politically. He devoted his life to the unending task of changing the nature of the political order so that it would correspond more to the truth of "the great tradition of the West"<sup>32</sup>—or as he liked to put it, to the "constitution of being." In contrast to Chambers's description, then, such a man had a great deal that he was eager to sell. Still today we may find his old cloth to be woven from threads of gold.

William C. Dennis

31. *Odyssey of a Friend: Whittaker Chambers's Letters to William F. Buckley, Jr., 1954–1961*, edited by William F. Buckley, Jr. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 216.

32. Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," 9 (16).