

Norman Podhoretz

A Biography

This is the first biography of the Jewish-American intellectual Norman Podhoretz, longtime editor of the influential magazine *Commentary*. As both an editor and a writer, he spearheaded the countercultural revolution of the 1960s and – after he “broke ranks” – the neoconservative response. For years he defined what was at stake in the struggle against communism; recently he has nerved America for a new struggle against jihadist Islam; and always he has given substance to debates over the function of religion, ethics, and the arts in our society.

The turning point of his life occurred at the age of forty, near a farmhouse in upstate New York, in a mystic clarification. It compelled him to “unlearn” much that he had earlier been taught to value, and it also made him enemies.

Revealing the private as well as the public Podhoretz, Thomas L. Jeffers chronicles a heroically coherent life.

Thomas L. Jeffers, a Yale Ph.D. and a professor of literature at Marquette University, earlier taught at Cornell and Harvard, where he was a Mellon Fellow. Author of *Samuel Butler Revalued* (1981) and *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana* (2005), he has also published pieces in numerous journals, including the *Yale Review*, the *Hudson Review*, *Raritan*, and *Commentary*. In 2004 he edited *The Norman Podhoretz Reader*, which provided the inspiration for this book.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19814-1 — Norman Podhoretz
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*This book is dedicated to my mother,
Viberta Lorraine Jeffers,
and to the memory of my father-in-law,
Norman B. Livermore, Jr. (1911–2006)*

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THOMAS L. JEFFERS



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
 32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013-2473, USA

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107617872

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First published 2010
 First paperback edition 2013

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Jeffers, Thomas L., 1946–
 Norman Podhoretz : a biography / Thomas L. Jeffers.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-19814-1 (hbk.)

1. Podhoretz, Norman. 2. Intellectuals – United States – Biography.
 3. Jews – United States – Biography. 4. Editors – United States – Biography.
 5. Authors, American – Biography. 6. Conservatism – United States – History.
 7. Liberalism – United States – History. 8. United States – Intellectual life. 9. United States –
 Politics and government – 1945–1989. 10. United States – Politics and government – 1989–
 I. Title.

CT275.P66824J44 2010

973.931092 – dc22 [B]

2010014791

ISBN 978-0-521-19814-1 Hardback
 ISBN 978-1-107-61787-2 Paperback

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Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19814-1 — Norman Podhoretz
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Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19814-1 — Norman Podhoretz
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Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Norman Podhoretz himself, who granted me permission to quote from his letters and papers, gave me hours of interviews, and, crucially, left me free to make of everything what I would; of his wife, Midge Decter, who not only offered me interviews but read through an early draft of this book; and of Neal Kozodoy, Podhoretz's second-in-command at *Commentary* for nearly thirty years and editor-in-chief for thirteen years thereafter. Having let me loose in the magazine's archive, Kozodoy also read this book in draft, helping me condense and sharpen the narrative. Three foundations – the Bradley, the Achelis & Bodman, and one wishing to remain anonymous – either paid my travel expenses or bought me out of some teaching assignments, which gave me time to read and write. Finally, a pair of Marquette University deans paid my permissions fees. I am deeply grateful to them and, finally, to my wife, Pauli, who, vetting these pages, often put her finger on what an “outsider” would need to know.

Prologue

It has been difficult for many people to get a handle on the Jewish-American intellectual Norman Podhoretz. When he started out as a writer in New York in the fifties, his friend, the novelist Norman Mailer, admiringly called him the “hanging judge” of literary criticism, while others – the novelist Saul Bellow and the poet John Berryman – thought him much too big for his britches. Fifty years on, neoconservatives – intellectuals who began as liberals but then changed their minds – regard him as an icon speaking truth, whether about democracy’s struggle against totalitarians, the promise of America, the condition of Western culture, or the essence of Judaism. Liberal intellectuals, for their part, remain wedded to their idea of him as a warmonger – a “zany” hysteric, as one put it recently, with a “toughness problem.”¹

In most academic neighborhoods, “neoconservative” is a sort of swear word. Intellectuals in general, especially Jewish-American ones, are nearly always liberals, and liberals are supposed to be the children of light – tolerant, fair, charitable people whose bumper stickers declare that “war is not the answer.” How can an enlightened American intellectual, Jewish or otherwise, call himself a conservative, with or without a prefix?

Much of the interest in Podhoretz’s career lies in this apparent incongruity. He started out as a liberal but then “broke ranks.” Why? That is one of the questions this biography seeks to answer. It is the story of how Podhoretz’s experience of life, and the endless thought he has devoted to understanding that experience, led to a great “unlearning.” His relentlessly honest articulation of that process over the decades, while making him the figure liberals love to hate, has more tellingly made him a uniquely valuable witness, surely one of the most important in our cultural history.

Podhoretz is important for four reasons. The first is that from 1960 to 1995 he edited *Commentary*. In the late seventies the *Economist* called it, “with just the prudent hedging of a question mark,” the “world’s best magazine?”² By the early nineties it was, for the *Washington Post*, “America’s most consequential journal of ideas.” Podhoretz had raised it to that eminence initially by getting

out in front of the countercultural and New Left revolutions of the sixties – promoting the social critic Paul Goodman, Mailer, and others – and then in “breaking ranks” by helping to instigate the *counter*-countercultural and anti-leftist revolutions of the seventies and beyond, when contributors like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Milton Himmelfarb, Robert Alter, and others registered their principled, reasoned dissent from what was being touted as politically, aesthetically, or morally correct. Whether the subject was the nature of class in America, the question of America’s role in the world, the job of the intellectual in public life, the struggle between the liberal and conservative visions of the world, the proper ends of education, the stance of the artist versus the interests of society, the war between the sexes or the generations, the interests of the Jews, or the place of Judaism – no particular reason to stop here – month after month, Podhoretz’s *Commentary* had something urgent and original to say that no thinking person could ignore.

That is the second reason Podhoretz is important: what he published in *Commentary* and what he wrote under his own name helped significantly shape the form and often the substance of American public discourse. If this was true when it came to defining, with consummate clarity, what was at stake in the Cold War against Soviet totalitarianism and, more recently, in the hot war against jihadist Islam, it was no less so when it came to the boiling-hot quarrels among intellectuals over the place and function of religion, ethics, culture, and the arts.

The third reason for Podhoretz’s distinction is that he has been so strong a *literary* voice. He came to public notice in the fifties as a book reviewer – Mailer’s “hanging judge” – his acumen raising him to the editorship of *Commentary* at age thirty. At later periods of his career, he has shown an undiminished ability to “crack” a novelist’s, a historian’s, or a fellow critic’s work, revealing not just its qualities but its meaning and its status. But beyond that he has *created* literature, primarily in the mode of autobiography. His reminiscences – *Making It*, *Breaking Ranks*, *Ex-Friends*, and *My Love Affair with America* – stirred controversy in their day, in part because they refought the battles of a fascinating coterie, the New York Intellectuals. Those battles were entertaining, at least in the retelling, for they were waged not just in print but in the apartments and restaurants where, from the fifties through the early seventies, these intellectuals, many if not most of them Jewish, spent so much time talking “about people who weren’t there.” So quipped the sociologist James Q. Wilson, who, living in Southern California, added: “Of course we spend a lot of time doing that out here, but we just call it gossip, not literature. The New York Intellectuals *made* it literature.”³

It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that Podhoretz’s writerly achievement was the mere elevation of gossip into literature. As George Weigel, the Catholic thinker, remarked: “Norman’s importance as an American intellectual and cultural figure far transcends the question of whether people thought *Making It* was pissing in their soup, or what scores were being settled in *Ex-Friends* – the proper subtitle of which, if one wanted to be cruel, might have

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been ‘I spit on your grave!’” What mattered, Weigel believed, was Podhoretz’s work “in a prophetic rather than a political mode.” His “rabbinic determination to be a truth-teller, the most enduring thing about him, accounts for what others take to be his inconsistencies.”⁴

That is the fourth reason for studying Podhoretz’s career. He has been a kind of prophet, putting his finger on the underlying issues that have agitated his times and insisting on locating and arguing for the truth about them as he sees it. As with the truth-telling Hebrew prophets whom he studied in his teens, and about whom he would write a book in his seventies, his mature ideas about politics, society, and culture were wrapped in a larger, overarching vision of the nature and purpose of human existence. In his case, that vision came into full focus, at the age of forty near a farmhouse in upstate New York, in a kind of mystic clarification that proved to be the hinge event of his personal and intellectual life, compelling him to “unlearn” much that he had been taught to value while apprehending afresh, now as an urgent and integrated whole, much that he had turned his back on. From that point forward he would remain faithful to what had been revealed to him, and to its demands.

Is it any wonder that, again like those Hebrew prophets of old, he made enemies? The novelist and critic Cynthia Ozick remembered walking with him down a mall in Copenhagen:

[T]he sun was low in the sky, the glare was so intense as we walked into it. I have no idea what we were talking about, but I remember Norman said – it hit me very hard and stayed with me – “It’s important to have enemies, because everything depends on the *kind* of enemies you have.” It was perhaps late in my life, never to have encountered that idea before, but he said it with such passion and precision, with a kind of prophetic clarity, that I’ve never forgotten.⁵

It needs only to be added that, in emphatic contrast with the biblical prophets, this one never did manage to shed his sense of irony, his sardonic wit, or his quintessentially American boyishness. To the British man of letters John Gross, who recalled meeting him in the fifties, he was like nothing so much as “a character I’d expect to see in the sort of Hollywood movies I really like, the kid from around the block with all that intellectual energy, immensely likable, almost in the Mickey Rooney style, which suited me down to the ground.”⁶ In this sense he never changed at all.

My own acquaintance with Podhoretz began about twenty years ago with a belated reading of *Making It*, the memoir he published in 1968. I thought it not just beautifully written – evocative of episodes and characters typical of my own, and many people’s, growing-up years, and often very funny – but also astute in its judgments about my own specialty, literature. He had begun as a literary critic but, as I soon discovered while following his writings in *Commentary*, he was also a sharp polemicist in debates about our culture and our politics. Again I found him astute, even if I wasn’t always prepared to embrace his conclusions. I kept an open mind, however, for I knew there were subjects,

especially those having to do with American foreign policy and the wars Israel had been constrained to fight in the Middle East, about which I understood only, as they say, what I read in the newspapers. And the newspapers were so absorbed in the sensational – terrorist attacks and police responses, the threat of a great-power shoot-out and the demonstrations against nuclear weapons – that like most citizens I wasn't confident about the underlying principles.

As I went on reading Podhoretz, however – *Breaking Ranks*, *The Present Danger*, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, *The Bloody Crossroads*, *Ex-Friends*, all published between 1979 and 2000 – I felt my comprehension of those principles deepen. Certainly my admiration for his lucidity in exposition, and his fearlessness in argument, continued to grow, and when, using *My Love Affair with America* as a point of departure, I did a long essay on him for the *Hudson Review*,⁷ I felt the satisfaction of having tried to present an embattled writer in terms as critically dispassionate as I could.

But it was a mere outline. I did not know the man, wasn't sure how to pronounce his name, and had never met any of the friends and ex-friends he wrote about. I was beginning to grasp his motives as a writer, however, and often to feel instructed – even convinced. After editing *The Norman Podhoretz Reader* (2004), I thought myself equipped to attempt what you have here – a critical biography. My being neither a Jew nor a political thinker would be an advantage: I could explain to a mixed audience the sometimes arcane material I myself had needed to learn. In any case, I would try to put all of Podhoretz's activities – the many sides of his mental, emotional, and spiritual life – together.

Through interviews, I came to know the man, his family, and many of his enduring friends. His ex-friends had either died or didn't return phone calls, but they had published a great deal about him, and by the time I had gone through the voluminous cache of papers he gave to the Library of Congress and the correspondence in the archives at *Commentary* and elsewhere, I had material for a book many times larger than this. The man at the center of it was neither a monster nor an icon, but a human being engaged with the world. Not an abstract thinker standing above the mire, Podhoretz has been a son, friend, enemy, husband, father, grandfather, doubter, and believer who has known the full range of human emotions – and who, through stresses that would have broken a merely ordinary person, has achieved a heroic integrity.