

**THE ESSENTIAL PAUL GOTTFRIED:  
ESSAYS FROM 1984–2024**  
(PAUL GOTTFRIED)

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Paul Gottfried is a great man, and you should read this book. He has spent decades offering a consistent political message, paleoconservatism, a name he coined. Of itself, his philosophy would certainly be of interest, an important thread in decades of ferment on the Right. What makes Gottfried and his thought unique, however, is that he has been proven correct in nearly all, or maybe all, that he has ever said. It is no surprise, therefore, that his ideas, attacked for decades by the self-appointed gatekeepers of the so-called conservative movement, have finally rapidly gained traction. And the illustrious Passage Publishing has done us all a favor by collecting, grouped by theme, some of his many crucial writings over the past forty years.

In his Preface, Gottfried is explicit that he is aiming this collection at younger readers, whom he sees as the renewed hope of America, after decades of the catamite Right acting as a degenerate arm of the Left. Presumably by this he means Millennials, Zoomers, and Generation Alpha. Sadly, Generation X, my generation, had its potential crushed by the vampiric Boomers, the worst generation in human history, who to this very day interminably hang on to power, and more importantly, continuously rob the young to gorge themselves on endless unearned benefits. (Gottfried is not a Boomer; he was born in 1941.) Moreover, Boomers have compounded their sins by increasingly voting Left, as the younger generations, at least among men, are rapidly moving Right. Fortunately, this Boomer drag on America is slowly going away, one pine box at a time, and it seems likely that Gottfried's ideas, by contrast, will have a significant positive impact on how America develops, and hopefully recovers and flourishes, over the next several years.

What characterizes Gottfried most of all, in his many books and in his shorter writings, is unfettered intellectual exploration. It is thus ironic, and he knows it very well, that his entire career he has been subject to suppression and marginalization by those self-claimed defenders of free speech, Conservative, Inc., whom Gottfried correctly analogizes to “kept opposition that developed in former Eastern European communist

countries.” Any person working to defeat the Left who actually shows any chance of being effective has always been quickly labeled “extremist” by the well-funded fake Right of *National Review* and its ilk. Gottfried was not destroyed, because he was smart enough to not be employed by his enemies, but no doubt his academic career suffered because of his principles.

Gottfried’s writing tends to revolve around meticulous definitions, and he particularly loathes the obscurantist use of archaic labels for present-day political movements. Most such labels are objectively “time-bound,” yet are used to confuse and frustrate real political action. “Fascism” is the best example, but it is also true for “conservatism” and “liberalism.” These labels hide “how radically different our present culture and politics have become from those of the past, with which they show less and less continuity.” For example, “Traditional liberalism was the worldview of the nineteenth-century Western bourgeoisie. It is a thing of the past, which is no longer ‘our tradition,’ as opposed to managerial rule, global capitalism, and government enforced wokeness.” Traditional “classical” liberalism today is merely “archaic conservatism,” and has no foothold anywhere. Therefore, those today who frantically advocate “liberalism” as the cure for our present ills are historically illiterate and, in practice and often in intent, merely advance the goals of the Left, a point to which we will return.

An exception, however, is that “Right” and “Left” are real things, possible to define with useful particularity, signifying timeless “opposed worldviews and political positions.” The former “accentuates particularity and the legitimacy of inherited hierarchy”; the latter “prioritizes universality and the equalization or homogenization of humanity.” The former is reactive; “the Right organizes itself after having been challenged by its antagonist, and it becomes increasingly aware of its beliefs while reacting. Unlike the Left, which begins with a project, the Right is pushed into taking up one defensively.”

This Left-Right dichotomy, and what flows from it, is perhaps the overriding theme of Gottfried’s writings here. As he points out, the modern Left has achieved success that earlier incarnations never did, something for which he finds no final explanation, in part because he tends to reject simplistic accounts beloved in the internet era (such as that the Reformation led inevitably to the modern Left, a common

trope). At the same time, Gottfried is at pains to, more than once, quote Carl Schmitt (on whom Gottfried is an expert, and has written a book on his political thought): “An historical truth is true only once.” Thus, Gottfried advises, “We cannot reproduce the political or cultural past,” and it is an error to try. “But we can absorb the wisdom of thinkers from the past while trying to relate what they said and wrote to the present crisis.”

Gottfried divides this book into eleven chapters, each with a different focus, each containing five to ten writings, widely spaced in time, mostly originally appearing in a variety of periodicals. It is impossible to do justice to all the insights the author offers. My usual method when reading a book is to put a check mark in the margin where I see a point worth returning to, and then to write reviews by focusing on those check marks. I nearly wore out a pencil here, however, and cannot possibly cover everything worth discussing. Each chapter combines a deep knowledge of relevant history with incisive analysis; the forty-year span covered allows the reader both to see how matters developed and how Gottfried applies the same principles to changed historical circumstances. Even more interestingly and helpfully, to me at least, Gottfried often refers to, and weaves into his analysis, works by others, many now obscure yet highly relevant (as well as to works in languages other than English—he was born in Hungary, and is fluent in multiple languages).

We begin with a frequent focus of the author, fascism and its evil false twin, anti-fascism, books on each of which he has written. (I reviewed *Fascism: The Career of a Concept*, last year.) Fascism has no modern relevance, for good or ill, although anti-fascism, the umbrella term for anti-Right coordinated violence, is very much alive. The concept of fascism is merely used today “as an extension of Hitlerism into the present,” in order to attack ideas that have nothing whatsoever to do with Hitler or National Socialism, or with fascism, for that matter. This chapter flows, logically enough, into one on the post-Marxist Left, where among other amusements, Gottfried excoriates Mark Bray’s *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook* (which I have also reviewed). The modern Left, he says, has a very different focus than did the Marxist Left, which, for example, had nothing but contempt for homosexuals and no interest in erasing differences between the sexes. He sees, writing in 2020, that “the old communist Left has about as much in common with today’s

Left as the American conservative movement of the 1960s does with its present, would-be incarnation.”

I actually disagree to some extent with Gottfried here. Unlimited emancipation and forced egalitarianism in the service of creating heaven on earth have always characterized the Left, ever since the Enlightenment and 1789, and special rights for homosexuals and the destruction of both sex differences and the family are logical steps in executing those principles. I think today’s Left is the direct and unsurprising successor of the Marxist Left, though different in its prime, economic focus, having abandoned both discredited Marxist theory and any attempt to benefit actual workers. To be fair, maybe there is no real disagreement here. Gottfried does note that “a certain pattern can be discerned in adherents of an older Left moving on to champion a later one,” and he is clear that to the Left, “the most important concept is equality, “ which “is to be brought about through a universal state.” The Left is not, contrary to myth, interested in open debate (as was nineteenth-century liberalism), or even in relativism, but only in the moral and political domination of the Left. Those who call for liberalism today are only calling for “the creation of a libertarian movement stressing individual autonomy.”

After all, what is “classical liberalism”? Is there any possible way it is not simply leftism in sheep’s clothing? Let’s look at Wikipedia (which, to be sure, is terrible, but will do for these purposes): “A political tradition and a branch of liberalism that advocates free market and laissez-faire economics and civil liberties under the rule of law, with special emphasis on individual autonomy, limited government, economic freedom, political freedom and freedom of speech.” Every part of that definition is either not an actual element of classical liberalism or merely a restatement of the Left principles of unlimited emancipation and forced egalitarianism.

Certainly, other than being circular, “liberalism” can only mean “Enlightenment liberalism,” which is the very definition of the Left. Throwing in the “rule of law” is just distraction added to make classical liberalism sound good; the rule of law existed long before liberalism, and is necessarily antithetical to Left achievement of their goals. In practice, it is always ignored once the Left gets enough power to ignore it, including by classical liberals. Similarly, “economic freedom” means only to the extent not in conflict with Left goals—you have no right to

freedom of association, for example, in your economic dealings, under classical liberalism as its modern adherents practice it. In theory, true, one could craft an abstract classical liberalism that is only eighty percent or so Left. In reality, it's always, or always ends up, one hundred percent Left, because classical liberals share all the essential premises of the Left, as one can see today in the actual actions of all those who call themselves classical liberals, such as the odious midwit Bari Weiss. Thus, for example, freedom of speech is always strictly policed by actual self-labeled classical liberals, to limit it to what advances their goals (as Gottfried has experienced many times in his career).

Back to this book, though. The longest chapter, "Dead Right," profiles in what is essentially obituary form ten deceased conservative thinkers. (No doubt Gottfried sympathizes with what Ernst Jünger said toward the end of his very long life—"I live in a graveyard of my friends.") We review the lives of James Burnham, Robert Nisbet, Russell Kirk, Christopher Lasch, William Buckley, and more. As to Buckley, whom I met as a young man foolishly under his spell (I also met Kirk, whom Gottfried sees as more of a literary than political figure) he sees virtues in him, despite his disservice to the Right. "One does not have to overlook his flagrantly opportunistic career, especially his passion for neoconservative dinner companions and for taking instruction from those grotesques, to appreciate Buckley's magnificence as a polemicist and wit." He is worth remembering, as is each of the others profiled.

We next turn to two chapters that form a type of dichotomy—"The Liberal Tradition" and "The Concept of Carl Schmitt." Gottfried, again, despite his distinction between the Left and liberalism, is not a fan of the liberal tradition, at least as it has morphed from what it was two hundred years ago into supposed democracy. "Democracy as indoctrination rather than as self-government has won the day throughout the West." Sovereignty of nations has eroded; the nation-state is itself obsolete, also a now-archaic nineteenth-century conception. He also spends quite a bit of time reaching for a coherent definition of conservatism. "The struggle on behalf of long-hallowed institutions, ideally led by traditional social elites, represents for me the conservative political tradition in its most complete form." This is not possible today; what we will likely get instead is "a political right-wing that develops in place of a truer conservatism," which "grasps the existential threat that has

called forth serious opposition.” We now live in a postliberal age, not of the Right, but of the Left, but this does not mean we cannot also live in one of the Right. We will, however, never live in a liberal age; that day is done.

As to Schmitt, about whom Gottfried could no doubt write multiple volumes, he discusses *The Nomos of the Earth* (which I am currently reading), as well as various critics of Schmitt, along with Schmitt’s own notable failures of prediction, such as that egalitarianism would expand in the postwar world along with nationalism. More importantly, though, Schmitt has been proven entirely correct in his views on what he called political theology—how modernity has made political religions ubiquitous, including the political religion of the Left which, for now, holds sway over the West. And he notes the crucial importance of Schmitt (as I have also in my own thoughts on *The Concept of the Political* and *Legality and Legitimacy*) for understanding the tendency of ideology to lead to total war and the temptation for any parliamentary democracy to decay by denying political opponents the “equal chance” for power, using the excuse of “emergency.”

Next is another diptych of chapters, on “The World Wars” and “Germany, Harbinger of the Abyss.” Gottfried focuses on the American Empire and how it has developed, by analogy to, among other historical examples, the Habsburg Empire. Despite being Jewish himself, Gottfried is measured and historically even-handed about the Germans. He criticizes Leo Strauss, or at least his disciples, for “denying Western Christian nations the ethnic solidarity they have claimed for Jews.” He takes a middle position on Patrick Buchanan’s (and Darryl Cooper’s, more recently) argument that the British were primarily responsible for World War II (while he largely blames the British, and America, for World War I), and strongly endorses Sean McMeekin’s excellent *Stalin’s War*. This section contains many of the slashing characterizations of which Gottfried is fond—for example, discussing one Claus Leggewie, “a widely respected German professor,” who sees Nazis under every twenty-first century bed. “No one can obtain or hold a position at a major German university these days, and particularly in political science or history, who does not sound as outrageously stupid as he does.”

Two final sets of chapters round out the book—one on WASPs paired with one on Jews, and another on neoconservatives paired with the

“alternative right.” WASPs died because they were foolishly guilt-ridden and self-hating, as Gottfried demonstrates at length. “As the great Italian thinker Vilfredo Pareto pointed out about a hundred years ago, ruling classes fall not so much because of opposition from below as they do from disintegration from above.” Worst of all was their exalting of disastrous neoconservatism (which, among other things, he notes prizes equality above all, and is not conservative in any way, shape, or form). He does not spare Jews from blame for contributing to Western decay as well, seeing value (though with some criticisms) in Kevin McDonald’s three volumes constituting “a study of the Jewish people in sociobiological perspective” (none of which I have read, but which is often smeared as mere anti-Semitic propaganda). Gottfried is not a fan of the very powerful Jewish lobby in America, notably AIPAC, which he correctly accuses of “arrogance and sheer viciousness,” and “close ties to such shrieking gentile-haters as Abe Foxman and Alan Dershowitz.” He despises that “Zionists have been eager to highlight the [supposed] collective guilt of Christians for the killing of European Jewry because the resulting guilt feelings are thought to help the Israeli cause.” But he does not fall into the opposite error, unfortunately and counterproductively prominent on today’s Right, of ascribing all our problems to Jews, as if Jewish collective interests formed a type of spectral demiurge wholly opposed to and destructive of the West. And we even get a fascinating exegesis of Josephus’s *Against Apion*, a defense of Jews in response to Apion, an Egyptian Greek who attacked first-century Jews as a malign influence on the Greeks.

And, finally, we return to the future of the Right. Twenty years ago, Gottfried correctly predicted that “it does not seem likely that neoconservatives and their enablers will control ‘the American Right’ forever.” The rise of neoconservatism, like so much else, was time-bound. He foresaw “the post-paleo Right,” contemptuous of managerialism, the therapeutic state, and false equality, and which sees a “need for aggressive action.” Paleoconservatives of his own generation wasted their energies in internecine battles; the post-paleo Right will not make this mistake, or the mistake of being “less well organized, less able to network, and less capable of burying internal grievances” than are our enemies. And while he sees those fixations of some on the Right, race and IQ, as not unimportant, they are not full explanations or the basis for a stable

society, and the most destructive of our enemies are all smart white people, a fact which should not be forgotten.

I am not as old as Gottfried, but I am not as young as I once was. Thus, I have paid close attention to the Right for thirty years, yet I was substantially enriched by reading this book. You will be too. Get a copy now!