Commentary
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Comrades

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THE FIRST time I contributed to this magazine was as a junior partner to Penn Kemble, a friend and longtime political activist who died last October at the age of sixty-four. In 1972, Penn and I collaborated on an article chronicling Senator George McGovern's role in rewriting the Democratic party's presidential-nominating rules and his subsequent use of those rules to win the nomination for himself.

Penn had found an inside source, someone who had served on the staff of the so-called "McGovern Commission" and was willing to talk about its deliberations and share its files. These were replete with secret memos frankly discussing how the commission could foist racial and sexual quotas on the party without calling them quotas. (They were referred to jocularly as "non-quota quotas.") The whole thing amounted to a breathtaking conflict of interest that only a liberal avatar like McGovern could have gotten away with, which induced Penn to propose that the piece be titled "The Machiavellis of Reform."*

I am still not sure why Penn recruited me to help him. As an undergraduate, he had entertained the ambition of becoming a writer and had accumulated some experience, but I had no idea how to write anything. (Once, after looking at something I put down on paper, he explained to me that a sentence should convey a thought and then end.) For the COMMENTARY article, at any rate, we made an outline and divided the sections between us; he wrote his half, revised the half I had written, and then stitched the parts together.

When the piece was accepted and we received our fee, Penn said apologetically that he would like to keep a share of it for himself in order to cover some expenses. Since he was drawing a salary at the time and I was unemployed, he assumed that I was entitled to the whole check on the basis of the socialist principle—to each according to his need—that we both professed. I don't recall how much he asked to retain, perhaps a third, but even half would have been less than proportional to his contribution.

THAT MY first appearance in COMMENTARY came courtesy of Penn was but one of many ways in which I was his follower. I had first encountered him in 1963 at a meeting of the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL, pronounced "yipsel"), the youth section of the Socialist Party of America that had been founded in the early 20th century by Eugene Debs and was led for many decades by Norman Thomas. As is typical with radical groups of all kinds, this particular meeting was given over to factional rivalry. The antagonists

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* It appeared in the December 1972 COMMENTARY under a more demure title, "The New Politics and the Democrats."

who paraded to the microphone diverged in their views, but they were alike in their scruffy appearance, offering a tableau much like the one immortalized by the late Marion Magid, an editor of COMMENTARY who, attending a radical gathering in the early 1960's with Norman Podhoretz, remarked that every person in the room was clearly a tragedy to some family or other.

But then someone took the floor who did not look as if he was anyone's tragedy, or indeed as if he belonged there at all. That was Penn. He was twenty-two, and he might have stepped out of a respectable college fraternity. Clean-shaven, without an ounce of fat on his short muscular frame or a hair out of place on his head, he appeared, in this room full of Jews and the occasional Irishman, like the stock image of a WASP. Neither his look nor his ethnicity scored him any points with the crowd at hand, as must have been evident to him, too. He began his remarks by saying that he had only recently arrived in New York from Colorado and was having trouble following the esoteric debate, which was richly marbled with Marxist jargon.

That his innocence was a pose became apparent soon enough. The ideological disquisition that followed bore all the earmarks of close training at the knee of Penn's own Marxist mentor, Alex Garber. A professor of sociology at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Garber played guru to a chapter of YPSL's made up mostly of his students. There were perhaps a hundred of them, a staggeringly high number for such a group. Garber himself had grown up as a member of the Olerites, an eponymous Communist splinter group whose ranks at its height may barely have reached double digits.

By the time Penn became one of his prize pupils, Garber had progressed from Communist schismatic to right-wing social democrat. Indeed, he and his acolytes—among them were my future wife Sally and several others who remain friends and allies to this day—took pride in being the most right-wing of socialists, having developed a peculiar combination of standard-issue opposition to the free market with fierce anti-Communism and cold-war hawkishness. Typical of this was their stance on fallout shelters, a hot issue in the late 50's and early 60's. Unlike other leftists, who shuddered that such measures would help make nuclear war thinkable, the Boulder YPSL's argued that they were a perfectly acceptable means of national defense but that their construction should not be allowed to profit any capitalist. Rather, the federal government should build a shelter for every citizen *and* hire the unemployed to do the construction.

SCHOOLED IN such gymnastics, Penn was hardly the hick he made himself out to be in his maiden speech to the New York "comrades," as we invariably referred to ourselves. Despite his out-of-place looks and anomalous genealogy, he was prepared to hold his own in dialectical skirmish, then and later. Nonetheless, in the early 1960's his was the losing side. In what proved a harbinger of the increasing radicalization of student activism throughout the decade, the left wing soon took command of YPSL, and the organization flew apart in an explosion of new factions, each more radical than the last. By 1965, most had found their way to more fertile fields in the emergent New Left. Ironically, they also thereby cleared a path for our rump of right-wingers to re-create the YPSL according to our own lights.

The moving force for this was a triumvirate comprising Paul Feldman, the editor of the Socialist paper *New America*; Tom Kahn, the head of the League for Industrial Democracy, an old socialist academic association; and Penn. Being in their late twenties, Paul and Tom played the role of senior advisers. Penn, then twenty-four, became the YPSL leader. I, at seventeen, was among the more active rank-and-file.

Penn and Paul seemed to be constant companions, although, politics aside, it was hard to see what they had in common. Paul was much the taller, pot-bellied and lacking Penn's musculature. Where Penn was extremely well turned out, Paul was awkward and covered in ash from the unfiltered Pall Malls that hung perpetually from the corner of his bottom lip. He had a stutter, and even after learning to master it he spoke in a self-consciously lowbrow New York diction that he used as a kind of shield, or as a medium for his sardonic humor. Once, during his college years, a Ferris wheel halted with his gondola swaying near the top of its arc. Paul yelled to his date: "Now put out or get out." Years later, visiting him at the beach, I was shown how he surf-cast a shiny lure with his new fishing pole. "Sometimes the fish try to catch it," he said. "But I'm too fast for 'em."

Penn and Paul were the leading white members of the East Harlem branch of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), of which I was a junior member. One rush-hour afternoon in 1964, a phalanx of our forces staged a sit-in on the Triboro Bridge while the rest of us patrolled the bridge's walkway distributing leaflets explaining our purpose. The point was to impede commuters on their way home from Manhattan and make them think about the plight of the poor blacks they were leav-

ing behind in dirty tenements. To make sure they got the picture, we dumped piles of authentic ghetto garbage on the bridge. It took a while for the cops to reach us through the massive traffic jam created by our shenanigans, but luckily they did so before the steaming commuters caused bodily harm to our vanguard. As the law moved in to make arrests, our protesters, instead of going limp as was the norm in such non-violent acts of civil disobedience, linked arms and clung to each other with all their strength, forcing the officers to pry them apart before loading them into the paddy wagons.

Later, Penn told me that the cops had roughed them up on the way to the station house, an instance of police brutality that he considered amply provoked. He was, in any event, fearless at taking a punch. He lived in a slum building on the Lower East Side of Manhattan long before many other whites moved into the area and realtors rechristened it the "East Village." Once, he had intervened forcefully to protect a neighborhood woman from a beating by her boyfriend, and a brawl ensued. Penn got the short end of it when the boyfriend, joined by a buddy, pummeled him two against one.

Paul, too, was physically bold, and tended to become overly aggressive when drunk. On one occasion, after a few rounds in a bar with another comrade, he waxed obstreperous and the police were called. The look of the two of them, and their Jewish-sounding names, must have struck the would-be arresting officer as funny; laughing, he let them go with a warning.

TOM KAHN was rather more remote than Penn or Paul. He had been adopted in infancy by a mismatched couple who did not get along. His father had been a Communist and a minor official of the New York subway workers' union; his mother was a practicing Catholic. Since it was through a Catholic agency that Tom was adopted, his father had nominally converted from Judaism for the purpose. But Communism was his true faith, and his new affiliation meant no more to him than his old.

The reflex of trying to shut out his parents' quarrels must have contributed something to Tom's remoteness. So, too, did his homosexuality. Although everyone active in the movement was aware of it, he was never explicitly out of the closet. He took his sexual orientation as an affliction, a source of pain and embarrassment. In part, perhaps, because he was so unreconciled to his longings, he limited himself for a long time to brief encounters. But then he became involved with one of the YPSL's and was compelled to seek the counsel of a psychiatrist to explain his unfamiliar feelings. The diagnosis, he told me, was "you're in love."

Tom played a part of unsung importance in the civil-rights movement. As one of the few white students at Howard University, he had helped to develop the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, soon to be headed by Stokely Carmichael. He had also formed an early bond with Bayard Rustin, the key disciple of A. Philip Randolph and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr. Together, Rustin, Tom, and Norman Hill, a black fellow socialist who helped lead CORE, had come up with the idea for the 1963 March on Washington, the landmark civil-rights demonstration at which King delivered his now famous "I have a dream" speech.

Before enrolling at Howard, Tom had spent a few years at Brooklyn College, which is where he first met Paul. There, the two of them became devotees of a former Trotskyist named Max Shachtman—a fact that today has taken on a life of its own. Tracing forward in lineage through me and a few other ex-YPSL's turned neoconservatives, this happenstance has fueled the accusation that neoconservatism itself, and through it the foreign policy of the Bush administration, are somehow rooted in "Trotskyism."

I am more inclined to laugh than to cry over this, but since the myth has traveled so far, let me briefly try once more, as I have done at greater length in the past, to set the record straight.* The alleged connective chain is broken at every link. The falsity of its more recent elements is readily ascertainable by anyone who cares for the truth—namely, that George Bush was never a neoconservative and that most neoconservatives were never YPSL's. The earlier connections are more obscure but no less false. Although Shachtman was one of the elder statesmen who occasionally made stirring speeches to us, no YPSL of my generation was a Shachtmanite. What is more, our mentors, Paul and Tom, had come under Shachtman's sway years after he himself had ceased to be a Trotskyite.

PAUL AND TOM provided the strongest ideological guidance, but Penn possessed a unique creative genius. Left to the likes of me, our activity would have consisted of adopting position papers on myriad issues and then casting a net for any of our peers who might agree with them. Penn understood that people are likely to be drawn to po-

* See "The Neoconservative Cabal," COMMENTARY, September 2003.

litical movements more through activities than through abstractions. He was forever dreaming up action projects and creating organizations designed both to give our members something to do and to bring us into touch with other activists who might be recruited to our ranks.

One of his earliest creations, on which Paul collaborated, was Negotiation Now! Launched in 1967, when Penn was all of twenty-six, it had a notable impact on early debates over the Vietnam war. Calling for a cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam and for unconditional talks with the Communists, it distinguished itself from other antiwar voices by explicitly criticizing the idea of an unconditional U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

A second Kemble creation of the late 1960's was Frontlash. The odd name was intended as a riposte to the "backlash" of blue-collar workers, many of them registered Democrats, who had voted for George Wallace in the presidential race of 1968. Bringing college students into cooperation with the labor movement, Frontlash worked in voter-registration drives aimed at boosting the regular Democratic vote. It proved so successful that the AFL-CIO eventually adopted it as its official arm for outreach to young people.

Later there were to be numerous other Kemble creations, many of them influential, leading the political commentator Ben Wattenberg to quip that YPSL's grand strategy was to "take over the world in a blizzard of letterheads." How Penn came up with these ideas I could never figure out. But when he did, he was relentless in making them happen, a bit like an artist who sees things that others do not and then will surmount any obstacle to bring his vision to life. I learned early that it was best to hold on to my hat and jump aboard.

Over the next several years, YPSL grew to perhaps as many as a thousand members. That was not much in a country the size of the U.S., but it was not as insignificant as it may sound. In student politics, the question is not how many members you have on paper but how many of them you can mobilize. This explains why the New Left, which started out on the extreme fringe of the American spectrum and grew ever more outré in its positions and activities, could nevertheless set the tone for a generation.

In the student world of that era, groups reflecting mainstream America held the allegiance of few. As a result, we YPSL's, although earnestly regarding ourselves not only as socialists but even as Marxists of a sort, and thus to the Left of 99 percent of Americans, spent the largest portion of our energies battling student groups even farther to our Left. Sometimes this allowed us to capture the ostensible middle ground.

Thus, we participated in a large umbrella organization, the United States Youth Council, of which first Penn and then I served as vice president. It included the Young Democrats and Young Republicans, the Catholic Youth Organization, the YMCA and YWCA, and dozens of other such venerable organizations whose names are familiar to everyone. But we discovered that YPSL was stronger than any of them: among our 1,000 members, we had more dedicated "cadres" than others could muster out of their tens of thousands.

In addition, we had more confidence in what we stood for. In contrast to us, the representatives of the more prosaic youth organizations, although they did not identify themselves with the New Left, generally lacked the élan to stand up to it or even to articulate ideas that bucked the radical tide. By means of this experience I learned a truth about politics that I have since seen validated in countless different guises. In resisting extremists, the problem with moderates is that they are moderates. This means they are temperamentally averse to matching the extremists blow for blow. Only rarely did we YPSL's encounter other youth groups ready to oppose the New Left, and they were all immoderate themselves: the followers of Sun Myung Moon; the Jewish Defense League; and the cult of Lyndon LaRouche during a brief centrist moment in its peregrination from ultra-Left to ultra-Right.*

SO POWERFUL was the pull of the New Left on our generation that opposition to it caused a schism within the larger socialist movement. Not that, after the battles of the early 1960's, many YPSL's themselves were drawn to the New Left; but the figurehead of the Socialist party, the writer Michael Harrington, found its allure irresistible. To be sure, he was critical of it, but his criticisms were mostly instrumental: he feared that the New Left's "antics" would alienate Americans and push them to the Right, whereas by joining the movement and bidding for leadership within it, he thought he could push it in a more responsible direction. Most of the rest of us, by contrast, were repelled by what the New Left stood for: a "revolution" that would remake America in the image of Mao's China or Castro's Cuba.

* I must record one exception to the general fecklessness of mainstream youth groups in that era. Just as I was moving out of the U.S. Youth Council, ceding my place to younger YPSL's, a group of uncharacteristically nervy Young Republicans became active in it. Although I met them only briefly, they seemed to get their starch from their leader, a wiry kid named Karl Rove.

None of the one or two dozen other most respected leaders of the party shared Harrington's view, but he was the only celebrity in our ranks. This was thanks to his 1962 bestseller, *The Other America*, which was said to have inspired the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty." As a result, Harrington was the polestar for a fair slice of the party membership. But he could never win a majority, and after a few years he decided to break off and form his own organization.

As it happens, the proximate cause of the final split was the Democrats' 1972 nomination of George McGovern, who had vowed to go to Hanoi "on my knees" if that would secure the release of American POW's and thus enable a final and complete withdrawal from the Vietnam war. Harrington applauded McGovern's opposition to the war. He was also delighted that McGovern's candidacy had drawn the antiwar movement away from raucous demonstrations and into electoral politics, where it could be much more effective.

To our side in the party, however, McGovern seemed hopelessly soft on Communism. In addition, the AFL-CIO under George Meany had refused to endorse the Democratic nominee, an unwonted stance for the labor federation that was made all the more egregious by the fact that McGovern's Republican opponent was Richard Nixon. Since sticking close to the AFL-CIO (which we quite reasonably viewed as embodying the proletariat) was a supreme value to us YPSL's, we were happy to go along.

As for Harrington's dream of an increasingly respectable antiwar movement that, constituting a "new class," could come to dominate the Democratic party, to us this seemed nothing less than a nightmare, and we aimed to do what we could to prevent it from happening.

THUS DID the upheaval wrought by McGovernism thrust our little socialist band more squarely into mainstream politics. The 1972 article about McGovern that Penn and I published in COMMENTARY was a small marker of this transformation. Another was the formal split of the socialist movement, and the subsequent decision by our side to change the name from Socialist Party of America to Social Democrats USA. Dropping the two words "socialist" and "party" signified an overdue relinquishment of our self-concept as "radicals" and a dawning recognition that we were now centrists.

Our entry into mainstream politics in the early 1970's entailed a geographic change as well—specifically, a migration from New York to Washington. It had begun a little earlier with Tom, who had been commissioned to write speeches for Lane Kirkland, the second-ranking official (after Meany) of the AFL-CIO. Then Senator "Scoop" Jackson, discovering Tom's talents, recruited him for his own campaign for the 1972 Democratic nomination. When Tom's work for Jackson ended, Kirkland gave him a permanent position at the AFL-CIO as, in effect, the house intellectual.

Penn, too, moved to Washington, becoming the chief executive of another organization largely of his own invention, the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM). With Jackson and Hubert Humphrey as its titular leaders, and with financial backing from organized labor, CDM, founded in the wake of Nixon's landslide reelection, became the factional center for the anti-McGovern Democrats. A year later, Penn hired me to come work for CDM, and once again I followed in his footsteps.

Paul was in some sense left behind. He had been well cut out for New York, where we had formed a kind of Marxist sect, living in a milieu of ideological scholasticism and cultivating offbeat ways of life, or at least their appearance. In Washington, we were merely a network, inhabiting the world of ordinary politics and government and conducting lives whose rhythms did not differ appreciably from those of our bourgeois neighbors.

Moreover, as our energies shifted into the mainstream and with the split of the Socialist party, the paper that Paul had edited, sometimes going unpaid for months, became unsustainable. Someone, probably Tom, helped him find a job with the newspaper of the steelworkers' union. This, however, was in Pittsburgh, away from the center of political action. Paul put his ideological talents to use in fending off an effort by the New Left to capture the union in the late 1970's, but on the whole his position must have seemed a far cry from the leadership role he had played among us just a few years earlier.

BOTH PAUL'S difficulties and our relative success were inadvertently presaged in a comment that his wife, Sandy, had made to me at a party long before. Looking across the room at Penn, she had had an epiphany. "Penn could make it in the real world," she said. And then, after a pause suggesting that one epiphany had led to another, she added: "So could you."

She was right about Penn. In the 30-odd years after migrating to Washington, he carved out a distinct place for himself in American politics, culminating in a stint as deputy director and then as act-

ing director of the U.S. Information Agency under President Clinton. Through it all, he never ceased inventing new organizations, many of them important. Nor did he change his ideology. At the conclusion of the Clinton administration, instead of parlaying his eight years in office into new sources of remuneration, as is customary in Washington, he went back to the task of trying to sustain some kind of social-democratic network.

Others in our old socialist group made meaningful careers as well. Tom Kahn's stature at the AFL-CIO rose as Lane Kirkland succeeded Meany in the presidency of the federation. Tom became the chief of labor's foreign-policy programs, and in that capacity he orchestrated labor's support for Solidarity in Poland. Rachelle Horowitz, a comrade of Paul and Tom at Brooklyn College, became a leader of the Democratic National Committee. I found my niche writing essays and books. Arch Puddington, now at Freedom House, did much the same. Carl Gershman, who succeeded me as YPSL leader as I had succeeded Penn, became president of the National Endowment for Democracy. Linda Chavez became a noted columnist and TV commentator. Her husband, Chris Gersten, served in appointed office under both Presidents Bush. Max Green was President Reagan's liaison to the American Jewish community. John Earl Haynes distinguished himself as a historian of American Communism. David Jessup became the point man for the quite substantial efforts by organized labor under Kirkland to resist Communism in Central America. Marshall Wittmann became the spokesman for the Christian Coalition. Jim Wood, an Okie from the far wrong side of the tracks, became a top labor and political figure in Los Angeles before dying young. And there were many others.

All this would have surprised Sandy Feldman, but no more so than the identity of the one person of all of us who was to enter the "real world" and make it the biggest. In the early 1970's, leaving one of those meetings that were almost a nightly routine with us, I had accompanied Paul to pick up Sandy at Manhattan's Washington Irving High School, where she was representing the teachers' union for which she then worked. The meeting hadn't ended, so we sat in the back and watched as Sandy took the floor several times. "She's good at this," Paul whispered to me in pride.

His pride was tinged with wonder, since Sandy had never distinguished herself in the Marxist theoretics that we all took to be the highest form of political skill. Not one of us, including Sandy herself, could have imagined that in time she would rise to the presidency of the American Federation of Teachers, one of America's largest and mightiest labor unions.

IN RETROSPECT, it seems less surprising that many of us should have achieved a measure of professional success. Despite our sense of ourselves as misfits, we were, after all, a group of middle-class youngsters with plenty of advantages. What is more surprising, and of greater interest, is that our little band should have exercised an impact on the political developments of the past decades.

It was not the impact we thought we would have. Our formative experience in the civil-rights movement and the great confrontation with Jim Crow had predisposed us to assume an axiomatic need for "social change" in the United States. By contrast, many of us came to believe that more than changing America, the truly urgent task was defending it, and what it stood for. In that sense, we would with justice come to be known as neoconservatives.

The impetus of this evolution came from three forces, I believe. The first was the recognition that, however much capitalist America might fall short of our edenic socialist vision, Communism was infinitely farther from the mark and, to boot, posed a lethal threat. The second was the repulsion we experienced in our encounter with the New Left—which, seen up close, struck us youngsters as even more nihilistic, irrational, and narcissistic than it seemed to our elders.

The third followed from the first two. If one were to ask what was the best political system imaginable—Plato's question—then the answer for us (as for Plato) was socialism. But what about Cicero's question, namely, what is the best system *extant*? Measured by the abstract ideals we held—freedom, equality, opportunity—it was hard to deny that America came out on top. And even if you thought some other (usually West European) country surpassed America's achievements in those areas, it was one whose political system resembled America's in important respects and that survived thanks to America's protection.

Thus we came to deploy the political passion that had first brought us to socialism, and the ideological skills we had developed in the hothouse of young socialist activism, not to overhaul our country but to defend it and the principles it embodied.

A FEW years after Paul moved to Pittsburgh, and still in his early forties, he suffered a debilitating stroke that forced him into a nursing home where he lingered for many years before succumb-

ing. Tom, meanwhile, contracted AIDS and died of it in 1992. He was fifty-one. He and I had not been close during his latter years, but I saw him near the end and was pleased to learn that he had a partner with whom he appeared at last to have found contented intimacy.

If Paul and Tom were felled by ailments for which they were at risk, Penn never appeared to be at risk at all. Just like the dapper twenty-two-year-old who seemed so out of place at that YPSL meeting in 1963, he led a life of exemplary self-discipline. I often watched him sip a glass of red wine at a meal as if it were a great indulgence, to be savored slowly. None of his muscle ever went to fat: he played handball at the Y regularly with guys literally half his age. But one day, in the summer of 2004, as he prepared to go out for the evening, he had a seizure, and a tumor was discovered in his brain. It was removed; he resumed working and playing handball. But it returned, and it took him last October.

During the final weeks, as his condition deteriorated, he seemed determined to hold on for a final socialist meeting. It was one that he himself had conceived but no longer had the strength to execute. (Carl Gershman, in a last, fine act of friendship, assumed the burden of organizing it.) The meeting was billed as a tribute to the late philosopher Sidney Hook, but Penn had had an ulterior purpose. He intended it as a device for revivifying the Social Democrats. For most of the rest of us, it had an ulterior purpose as well—paying tribute to Penn.

As we counted off the days, hoping he would live to see it, we were buffeted by another strange twist of fate when Sandy Feldman, who had stepped down from the presidency of the teachers' union for reasons of health, died of cancer. She was sixty-five to Penn's sixty-four.

Penn, Paul, Tom, and Sandy remained socialists, or social democrats, to the end. I and others more exactly my age (Carl, Linda Chavez, Arch Puddington, John Haynes, Max Green) abandoned that faith years ago, without losing our esteem for the older group. Their lives were brief, and they entirely failed at moving America even a little toward socialism. But in the "real world," their works were consequential nevertheless.

For them, the rather nebulous concept of "socialism" functioned in truth as a kind of code word or incantation meant to connote everything that is decent and humane. Today, all such things, as well as America itself, are under fresh attack by the darkest foes. I dearly hope that something of the legacy of my old mentors and comrades will make itself felt once again in the defense.