
The Freeman Through the Years

BY JUDE BLANCHETTE

In an age when lots of think-tanks, foundations, organizations, and institutes publish magazines extolling the benefits of free markets, it is hard to imagine the early 1950s, when only a handful of pro-free-market publications existed, most notably *The Freeman*. Published as a fortnightly from its inception on October 2, 1950, until it was purchased by Leonard E. Read in 1954 (and from then on published monthly), *The Freeman* was the nation's leading publication in the classical-liberal tradition.

Conservatives are brought up believing that *National Review* was the magazine that resurrected the cause of limited government from the political malaise of the postwar era. In many ways this is correct, for had it not been for the vision of William F. Buckley Jr. and his associates, the damage wrought on the United States by Keynesian economics and the creep of socialism might have been far worse. Yet in many respects it was *The Freeman* that cleared the way. Even before becoming a publication of the Foundation for Economic Education in 1956, it gave oxygen to a nascent movement of intellectuals, journalists, businessmen, and politicians who believed in free markets and limited government.

“For at least two decades there has been an urgent need in America for a journal of opinion devoted to the case of traditional liberalism and individual freedom. *The Freeman* is designed to fill that need.” So wrote co-editors Henry Hazlitt, John Chamberlain, and Suzanne La Follette in the fortnightly's opening editorial, “The

Faith of the Freeman.” While there were publications that spoke to conservatives and libertarians, *Plain Talk* and *Faith and Freedom* being examples, only *The Freeman* presented a unified philosophy of libertarianism to a mass audience.

Chamberlain, La Follette, and Hazlitt, all well-respected journalists at the time, were thought to be the perfect mix of old and (relatively) new. La Follette was brought into the fold as one of the three principal editors of *The Freeman* after *Plain Talk*'s editor, Isaac Don Levine, bowed out of the fledgling publication. (*Plain Talk* was to be merged with *The Freeman*, giving the new magazine a solid base of advertisers and subscribers from the start.) La Follette was a natural choice for she had been an editor of the original *Freeman*, published by the Albert Jay Nock in the 1920s.



Albert Jay Nock

The Freeman was not an original title with Nock. As John Chamberlain wrote in a 1952 *Freeman* article, “[T]he *Freeman* is a magazine that is always coming up out of its ashes, like a phoenix.” Its roots stretch back to Scotland in the mid-nineteenth century, where a magazine by that name was published in Glasgow from January through December of 1851. *The Freeman* made its next appearance in Indianapolis in 1885 and again in New York in 1908. It was with Nock, however, that *The Freeman* had its longest run to that point. From the first issue on March 17, 1920, until its premature end just four years later, *The Freeman* was intended

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as an answer to the latent statism of the “liberal” *Nation*. Nock, in fact, left his position at *The Nation* to help found *The Freeman* along with Francis Neilson. The staff included Van Wyck Brooks as literary editor, Walter Fuller for rewrites, with Geroid Tanquary Robinson and Harold Kellock joining the magazine in its ensuing years.

Nock thought his qualifications as magazine editor were two: he knew talent when he saw it and he knew enough to do nothing. “I am probably the poorest judge of character now living; none could be worse. A person might be a survivor of the saints or he might be the devil’s rag-baby, for all I should know. But I never yet made the mistake of a hair’s breadth on a person’s ability, one might almost say sight-unseen,” wrote Nock in his 1945 autobiography, *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*. “I can smell out ability as quickly and unerringly as a high-bred pointer can smell out a partridge.”

His editorial style was not unlike his political philosophy—laissez faire. He had a “belief that a good executive’s job is to do nothing, and that he can’t set about it too soon or stick to it too faithfully.”

The end of *The Freeman* in 1924 resulted from two factors that plagued the magazine’s next incarnation some 30 years later—financial distress and personal conflict. Like its predecessor, the 1950 *Freeman* was staffed with great talent. One of its editors, John Chamberlain, had gained stature as a book reviewer for the *New York Times*, for his articles on business in *Fortune*, and for his editorials for *Life*. At *The Freeman* Chamberlain found a home for his brand of libertarianism. He fundamentally believed in the importance of the fortnightly, and knew that it was the power of ideas that ultimately swayed men’s minds. He later wrote, “If the *Nation* and the *New Republic* had not sold the intellectuals on the virtues of the planned economy in the ’20’s and early ’30’s, there would have been no Roosevelt Revolution.”

Of the three editors, Henry Hazlitt was perhaps the most formidable. A powerful opponent of the planned society and an advocate for liberty, Hazlitt was the defi-

nition of an autodidact. His first job at the *Wall Street Journal* in 1916, in his early twenties, introduced him to the importance of economics. At 21 he wrote his first book, *Thinking as a Science*, which met with surprising success. After a stint in the Air Guard during World War I, Hazlitt returned to journalism and during the 1920s he honed his economic analysis. Dubbed by many in the press as “the literary economist,” Hazlitt was as comfortable analyzing labor statistics as he was dissecting Conrad or E.M. Forster. As literary editor of *The Nation* Hazlitt slowly began to insert his incipient libertarianism into his book reviews and feature articles. In 1933 he



Henry Hazlitt

was asked to succeed H.L. Mencken as editor-in-chief of *The American Mercury*, a job he quickly accepted and quickly left after only four months. From there, and perhaps most remarkably, Hazlitt joined the editorial staff of the *New York Times*, writing virtually every economic editorial for over 20 years. From this perch Hazlitt fought nearly a one-man battle against the economic planners in government and the socialists in the intelligentsia. He eventually left the *Times*, refusing to support the Bretton Woods agreement in 1944, and went to work for *Newsweek*. By the time he joined the staff

of *The Freeman*, Hazlitt was one of America’s most widely read libertarians, primarily through his *Newsweek* column, “Business Tides.”

The Only Outlet

From the start *The Freeman* was a magnet for conservatives and libertarians whose pleas for economic and political sanity had been muffled since the beginning of the Great Depression. F. A. Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Wilhelm Röpke, Frank Meyer, John T. Flynn, Raymond Moley, Frank Chodorov, Buckley, and William Henry Chamberlin are a smattering of the names that found their way into the early issues of *The Freeman*. For many it was the only respectable publication that would publish their work.

The importance of *The Freeman* can be understood only in the context of the postwar epoch. The bloodshed of Europe had scarcely been stanchd when Amer-

ica was confronted with the threat of communist aggression. The left, infatuated with the Soviet utopia from its birth, not only agitated for communism's spread across the globe, but courted it here at home. What's more, home-grown statisticians argued that if a government could plan during war, it most certainly could plan during the peace. Doctrines of easy money, hard regulations, and progressive taxation prospered.

It was during this dark period, however, that the liberal ideas of the pre-World War I era made a dramatic comeback, powered initially by three women in 1943, while the war was still raging: Rose Wilder Lane, Ayn Rand, and Isabel Paterson. F.A. Hayek followed in 1944 with his monumentally important *The Road to Serfdom*. Next came the creation of FEE in 1946 by Read. In 1947 F. A. Hayek and the remnant of classical liberals huddled at Mont Pelerin, Switzerland, to assess the damage wrought by the rise of collectivism and to restart the freedom movement.

Still, a journal or publication that would reach a mass audience was needed. Wrote John Chamberlain, "We needed the Read Foundation, yes, and we also needed the Mont Pelerin Society which Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and other free-enterprise economists and publicists (including Leonard Read) had started on a Swiss mountain to build up a backfire to the collectivism that was ravaging Western Europe and threatening the United States. But to give the gathering conservative and libertarian causes a forward thrust, a fortnightly journal of opinion was a *sine qua non* necessity."

The new *Freeman* had two areas of primary focus: economic and foreign policy, and while it was libertarian in the former, it had a conservative bent in the latter. Unlike some limited-government noninterventionists of the time (most notably Garet Garrett, John T. Flynn, and Frank Chodorov), *The Freeman's* editorial position favored direct confrontation with communism. It rejected containment and held that participation in world diplomatic bodies was as dangerous as it was naïve. "Any world organization that includes communist or other totalitarian governments is obviously worse than useless,

for such governments must inevitably prevent the organization from taking any genuine steps towards peace and friendship," stated the opening editorial.

As set out in that defining editorial, "The true tradition has always placed great emphasis on economic liberty. It is particularly of economic liberty that communists, socialists, government planners and other collectivists have been most openly contemptuous. Yet it is not too much to say that economic freedom, as embodied in the free market, is the basic institution of a liberal society." Thus the magazine strongly opposed all economic cure-alls, regulations, and plans.

The magazine's board comprised big names among classical liberals, including Lawrence Fertig, Leo Wolman, Leonard Read, Ludwig von Mises, and Roscoe Pound. La Follette presciently noted, "Such a board might give the magazine a certain prestige before it gets under way. After it gets under way, it will be judged by what it is, not the big names connected with it."



John Chamberlain

Hazlitt's Changing Role

Problems erupted in 1952 when Hazlitt asked to bring in a fourth editor to lighten his editorial load. Because of his work at *Newsweek*, Hazlitt wanted to resign or simply become a nominal contributing editor, but he offered to stay on until a replacement could be found.

While Forrest Davis eventually became an editor, Hazlitt's first choice was Buckley. Among others interviewed were Frank Chodorov, Frank Hanighen, Eugene Lyons, and John Davenport. Davis had earlier contributed articles to the magazine, and he was assumed to share the same political philosophy with Hazlitt and his co-editors.

There was immediate tension between Davis and Hazlitt, who took offense at Davis's attempt to inject the magazine into partisan political struggles. Two issues in particular—the controversy over Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the battle between the Taft and Eisenhower Republicans—proved especially contentious for the staff.

Several of the magazine's donors were rumored to have been rankled when the perception arose that editors favored Robert Taft. This brought to the surface


Hazlitt's belief that *The Freeman* should argue classical liberalism from a distant, nonpartisan perspective. As Hazlitt would later recall, "[I]t quickly turned out that both Suzanne [La Follette] and Forrest [Davis] were bent on making *The Freeman* a McCarthy and primarily an anti-communist organ rather than an exponent of a positive libertarian philosophy. I regarded McCarthy as a sort of bar room fighter, often reckless and sweeping in his accusations."

The feud soon expanded beyond the walls of *The Freeman's* Madison Avenue office. *Time* magazine summed up the whole mess in early 1953: "Instead of being Hazlitt's man, Davis had ideas of his own on how to run the magazine, and Chamberlain and Managing Editor Suzanne La Follette generally agreed. In short order Hazlitt had a falling-out with them."

Chamberlain called for an October 31 meeting of the board of directors to determine who would finally win the power struggle, or in his words, "to determine whether the Board shall give vote of confidence to present editorial management of magazine or dismiss present editorial board—John Chamberlain, Forrest Davis and Suzanne La Follette—replacing it with Henry Hazlitt and staff of his choosing. . . ."

The board ultimately sided with Hazlitt, and Chamberlain, Davis, and La Follette soon resigned. Hazlitt became the editor-in-chief and went on to run *The Freeman* along with Florence Norton (formally managing editor of *The American Mercury*) from late 1952 until January 11, 1954. Norton succeeded Hazlitt when he departed.

Later in 1954 Leonard Read purchased *The Freeman*, publishing it initially under his Irvington Press imprint. With 68-year-old Frank Chodorov, formerly editor of his own broadsheet, *analysis*, as editor, *The Freeman* continued in its political-journalistic mode with emphasis on foreign policy. It was not yet FEE's flagship publication.

In January 1956, 50 years ago this month, *The Freeman* merged with FEE's periodical *Ideas on Liberty* and became the foundation's highly influential publication, the premier advocate of free markets and voluntarism, concentrating on theory and its application rather than current political controversies. Its managing editor was a former business economist, Paul Poirot, who directed the magazine until he retired in 1987. In this, its latest incarnation, *The Freeman* has remained a consistent voice for a free society. 

THE 50th FREEMAN

"We have quite a few more journals where liberty can be discussed, but *The Freeman* remains the place where the most eclectic collection of very readable essays appears. The minor transformations over the decades have made it even better, but its main virtue is still that of being open to good writers of short but astute essays from so many different disciplines. Thanks to those responsible for keeping this wonderful forum thriving."

—**Tibor R. Machan**

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