

WINNING AND LOSING: MARCHING ORDERS FROM SAM FRANCIS

Beautiful Losers:

Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism

Samuel Francis

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Reviewed by Peter B. Gemma

Although my colleague Louis Andrews may disagree (see “Thinkers of our Time: James Burnham,” page 93), I believe *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* is the best book Sam Francis wrote. It’s a wonderfully eclectic mix of practical politics, philosophical musings, and authentic analysis of public policy. Best of all, the book remains timely.

Why does *Beautiful Losers*, a dozen years after publication, give purpose – particularly to political action? Consider the author’s succinct observation on tactics and impetus: “I place more emphasis on the concrete forces of elites, organization, and psychic and social forces such as class and regional and ethnic identity than on formal intellectual abstractions and their logical extrapolations as the determining forces of history.”

Another example of why Sam Francis is still a unique and incisive political protagonist can be found in his explanation of the conservative movement’s realignment and reduction:

The quarrel between the Old Right and the neoconservatives arose not so much from intellectual and philosophical conflicts as from social, ethnic, political, and professional differences between them, and the philosophical differences were, in fact, expressions of these social divisions.

Curiously, just a year after *Beautiful Losers* was published, the Republicans were making impressive electoral gains. Nineteen ninety-four ushered in the seemingly historic era of Newt Gingrich and the GOP’s “Contract with America.” Sam had predicted the previous year that “[v]irtually every cause to

which conservatives have attached themselves for the past three generations has been lost, and the tide of political and cultural battle is not likely to turn anytime soon." Since conservatives affixed their political fortunes solely to the Republicans, the casual observer might have considered Sam's thesis flawed — especially on election night, 1994. But a good student of *vrai politique* understood that a Republican majority in Congress was no more a help to traditional conservative issues than was the "moderate" Democrat Bill Clinton, who was reelected in 1996, or, currently, the "compassionate conservative" regime of George Bush. According to *Beautiful Losers*, "the ideology or formula of liberalism grows out of the structural interests of the elite that espouses it."

George Wallace — a Sam Francis favorite — said there "ain't a dime's worth of difference" between the political parties and, from the *Beautiful Losers* political lesson book, that's especially true when it comes to the governing elite's wielding of managerial power. *Beautiful Losers* — essays he wrote during the 80s and early 90s — covers a broad range of people (Joe McCarthy to Martin Luther King) and policies (interventionist foreign stratagems to patronizing domestic programs.) It is a political thriller: a whodunnit...and why they're getting away with it.

A REVIEW OF SAM FRANCIS

The Washington Post noted in its obituary that Sam Francis was "an outspoken voice of American conservatism," and that "he wasn't just conservative, but proudly 'paleoconservative' — certainly not neoconservative."

Sam Francis was not difficult to define politically — he was usually deemed a paleoconservative, a nationalist, and, in the best sense of the word, a reactionary. He was also quite orthodox in his dogma, defending things moral and decent in expedient and exciting style. He advocated "a thunderous defense of moral and social traditionalism...a domestic ethic that centers on the family, the neighborhood and local community, the church and the nation as the basic framework of values." He condemned "immediate gratification, indulgence, and consumption."

The philosophical core of Sam Francis, a political street fighter, is not hard to find in this book. He observes that "Traditionalist and bourgeois ideologies, centering on the individual as moral agent, citizen, and economic actor, could not provide justifications for the managerial economy and the managerial state." Thus, the cultural war we now fight began when

The bourgeois ideal...was replaced by a managerial political ideal that involved a bureaucratic, social engineering state actively intervening in and altering by design the economic, social, and even intellectual and moral relationships of its subjects.... The new ideology of the managerial regime thus involved a cosmopolitan, universalist, and egalitarian myth that challenged the localized and traditionalist loyalties and moral values of bourgeois society.

Beautiful Losers is a diary of Sam's evolutionary journey as a political revolutionary. In the introduction (must reading to properly appreciate the

dynamics of what follows), he details why he put together this collection on policies, people, and politics:

No matter how beautiful [conservatism's] ideas and theories, no matter how compelling a chart of the currents of history's river it drew, American conservatism was not enough to channel those currents into other courses. It is a chronicle and an explanation of these beautiful losers in our history that these essays may serve.

A REVIEW OF REVIEWS

In looking back on the impact of Sam Francis, it is delightful to see how much attention his commentary received. Mainstream media reactions include this from the *Detroit News* (November 17, 1993): "Francis is a skilled prose stylist; his essays are often a pleasure to read for that reason alone," but the paper also noted that "Francis is an expert complainer." No argument there, I suppose. *Publishers Weekly* (September 6, 1993) described *Beautiful Losers* as "provocative." Well, um, obviously.

From the conservative press there were a variety of reactions to the charges and challenges contained in the book. *The New American* (May 2, 1994) observed: "There is a strong tendency among American conservatives to so ideologize their outlook that they often find that they have cut the ground from beneath themselves...Samuel Francis' magnificent book is a powerful signal to conservative Americans that a fundamental change in our strategy and tactics is now a matter of life and death." *Southern Partisan* (3rd quarter, 1995), remarked: "Acting on the iconoclastic aphorism that 'sacred cows make the best hamburger,' Francis feeds starving Old Right multitudes on such trenchant essays as 'The Cult of Dr. King,' 'Message from MARs' [Middle American Radicals], and 'Equality as a Political Weapon.'"

First Things (April 1994), on the other hand, offered its readers a terse notice that Sam's thoughts were in print. It began: "The author has considerable writing talents; more the pity that they are spent in such a dismal cause. The cause is paleoconservatism." Harrumph.

Professor Paul Gottfried, writing in *The Social Contract* (Spring 1994), observed: "[The author's] anthology of essays assails almost every received assumption of respectable N.Y.-D.C. conservatism, especially of its neoconservative kingmakers." He qualifies this statement by noting: "Francis pushes too far a belief, which he shares with his mentor James Burnham as well as with Karl Marx and the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, that the dominant class pursues its material and political interests no matter what kinds of fanciful rationales it uses to mask them."

The Washington Times (October 24, 1993) — where Sam served as a columnist for years — published a review that stated: "When Mr. Francis gets his dander up, he can be both cruel and unusual...*Beautiful Losers* is an angry book." Cranky, but still accurate enough.

A long, thoughtful, but not uncritical interpretation of *Beautiful Losers*, penned by the noted historian Eugene D. Genovese, appeared in *Crisis* magazine (September 1994). "Francis makes fresh contributions to the development of the critique of equality and radical democracy," Genovese wrote. "The burden of *Beautiful Losers* belies the gloom and apparent hopelessness of its title: It calls for a coalition to assert the interests of a healthy Middle America and repeal the welfare state. By no means is Francis ready to throw in the sponge..."

Genovese is critical of Sam Francis's analysis on several key points: "That we need a new coalition to combat the reigning moral degeneracy and irresponsible individualism that are paraded as 'alternate life-styles' is clear enough. That we can get anywhere by projecting imaginary new political classes to undergird such a coalition is doubtful." He freely admits, however, "The Left as well as the Right would profit greatly from a vigorous debate over his principal theses."

Beautiful Losers received some intense interest from libertarians. *Reason* magazine (April 1994) carried a review that opined: "Francis hates the modern state with an inspiring and radical passion. Would that his passions were rooted in a love for liberty instead of a hatred for the values of the people in charge." The author explains and complains:

As an intellectual rather than activist movement, Francis's revanchism is best known as 'paleoconservatism,' a term he thinks clumsy and rejects. Pat Buchanan is its political figurehead and most famous exponent.... Though these days Buchanan's columns and Francis's are almost indistinguishable in stance, Francis's tone tends to be sharper, less jolly, more vicious. In this sense he is truer to his principles than Buchanan. How can one be a cheerful warrior when the cause one must fight to the death for is lost? No wonder a chapter of this book is devoted respectfully to that glum crusader in defense of a decadent and defeated West, Whittaker Chambers.

David Gordon, writing in the Ludwig von Mises Institute's *Mises Review* (Fall 1995), was on target in his summary of *Beautiful Losers*:

Francis adopts [James] Burnham's famous thesis of a 'managerial revolution.' Developments in science and technology, along with the attendant growth of large corporations, have in the twentieth century made old-fashioned capitalism, based on small business, obsolete. Nowadays, managers and a technical-scientific elite control the economy. Liberalism expresses the interests of this managerial elite. Those who wish to counter liberalism, cannot proceed effectively by appealing to the same groups whose interests liberalism serves.

Gordon admits:

I have underestimated Francis's subtlety. Although he writes with apparent sympathy for Burnham's modernism, and seems critical of traditionalists, I cannot find any explicit profession by him of the modernist

creed. It would not be surprising if it turns out that this ironist has baited a trap for prospective critics.

Murray Rothbard, who stretched the libertarian label often, created a thought-provoking fourteen-page review for the *Rothbard-Rockwell Report* (July, 1994.) It was a message to all ideologues:

In the introduction to this brilliant collection of essays, Dr. Samuel Francis crystallizes one of his unique contributions to modern conservative thought. Since World War II, he points out, conservative intellectuals and theorists (and this would be true in spades for libertarians) have concentrated on what ideas *should* be adopted in society. In the famous phrase of Old Rightist Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*. Of course, Sam Francis concedes, but what they have all neglected are the crucial questions *what* and *who* decides *which* ideas get adopted, to generate those consequences? As Francis puts it, with his typical blend of powerful reasoning and mordant wit: "Ideas do have consequences, but some ideas have more consequences than others, and consequences ensue from which ideas is settled simply because the ideas serve human reason through their logical implications but also because some ideas serve human interests and emotions through their attachment to drives for political, economic, and social power, while others do not."

A REVIEW RECAP

The late, great Murray Rothbard wrote this about the late, great author of *Beautiful Losers*:

What does Sam Francis want? Shining through the hard-headed analysis, the answer is clear: he is fervently opposed to the rule of the existing Left Liberal-neoconservative-Official Conservative managerial elite, and aims to replace that elite by a mass movement of working class Americans who would, as far as possible, return to leadership by the bourgeois elite.

The inspiration and expectation that comes from reading and rereading *Beautiful Losers* is best found in Sam Francis' description of "Middle American Radicals" (aka "MARs.") He warns the establishment:

The choice between the present elite and its challengers is not merely between one power and another. It is a choice between degeneration and rebirth, between death and survival, for survival is not a right or a gift freely granted by the powers that be. Survival, in the jungle or in political society, is a hard-won prize that depends ultimately on power itself. In this world, wrote Goethe, one must be the hammer or the anvil. The essence of the message from MARs is that the messengers want to work the forge.

Sam's Middle American Revolutionaries—that's us, no matter how well off your stockbroker promises you are or soon will be—must confront the "hedonistic, pragmatist, relativist and secularized cosmopolitanism" of "managerial globalism" and its "elite."

Our marching orders, left behind by Generalissimo Samuel T. Francis in *Beautiful Losers*, are forthright: "Disperse and dismantle the managerial verbalist class."

You got any questions, soldier?

*Peter B. Gemma has written for such publications as **USA Today** and **Middle American News**. The radical Southern Poverty Law Center asserts that he is a "veteran far-right agitator" who "has championed many conservative causes over the years."*
