

The Essential Norman Podhoretz

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December 17, 2025

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Norman Podhoretz at his home. James Keyser/Getty Images

The great conservative journalist Norman Podhoretz often quoted a line by George Orwell. “The fact to which we have got to cling, as to a lifebelt,” Orwell wrote, “is that it is possible to be a normal decent person and yet to be fully alive.” The line (from a 1936 book review) touched Podhoretz, I think, because he saw the contempt for ordinary Americans felt by the leftist intellectuals and literary sophisticates of his younger years—and he was repulsed by it.

Podhoretz died Tuesday, a month before he would have turned 96. His life was an expression of that line by Orwell.

“One of the longest journeys in the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan,” Podhoretz wrote in his 1967 memoir, “Making It.” The book—a masterpiece of the genre—chronicles the circuitous path he took from Brownsville, then a scrappy Jewish neighborhood, to the tony milieu

of New York's literati. Podhoretz studied English literature at Columbia; then, on a Fulbright scholarship, he earned a master's degree in English from Cambridge.

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Back in America, the budding liberal intellectual's name was showing up atop impressive essays and reviews in the *New Yorker* and *Partisan Review*. In 1953, the U.S. military required his services, and the experience altered his worldview. In the Army he served with ordinary American boys from all over the country, many from the rural South, with whom, as a Brooklyn Jew with literary pretensions, he was surprised to find he got along extremely well. They were, he recalled in "Making It," "brave, proud, and unstintingly loyal once they had decided to befriend you."

After the Army Podhoretz took a job at *Commentary* magazine, then a liberal outfit, and in 1960 became its editor. The publication of "Making It" signaled Podhoretz's new sensibility and made his friends wonder what was happening to him. The appearance in *Commentary* of heterodox essays, including his own "My Negro Problem—and Ours" in 1963, which the black radical writer James Baldwin encouraged him to write, estranged Podhoretz from "The Family," his term for the circle of left-wing New York intellectuals who had considered Podhoretz so promising a few years before. His clear-eyed advocacy of an aggressive posture toward the Soviet Union—many of his liberal friends were anticommunist, or anyway anti-Stalin, but held out hope for Russia's experiment in socialism—ratified his excommunication.

Podhoretz, who would cheerfully deny any claim to the virtue of humility, wrote three more autobiographical accounts of his rift with the left over what he perceived as its disdain for America: "Breaking Ranks" (1979), "Ex-Friends" (1999) and "My Love Affair With America" (2000). Each is an original essay on politics, friendship and the strengths of American bourgeois capitalism. In a 2002 speech at the American Enterprise Institute, he summed up his outlook by recalling a line uttered by an aunt of Saul Bellow. "After overhearing a passionate ideological dispute around her own kitchen table between the future Nobel laureate for literature and his radical friends from the University of Chicago, she muttered: 'Smart, smart, smart. . . . Stupid.'"

Podhoretz and his friend Irving Kristol—also a Brooklyn Jew and a former leftist—were the two foremost exponents of neoconservatism. Never was a term more glibly used and misdefined as that one has been lately. Several high-profile personalities of the rowdy right, chief among them Donald Trump Jr. and Tucker Carlson, fell for the idiotic lie, popularized on the left a generation ago, that "neocons" like to start wars for no good reason. For Mr. Carlson, and in certain precincts of the international left, the word also signals "Jew."

These professional fulminators, if they bothered to read Podhoretz and Kristol, would doubtless be surprised to find that the neocons articulated the attitudes and principles MAGA's bumbling crusaders have spent the last decade groping to find. In foreign policy, Podhoretz counseled that

an unapologetic defense of American interests abroad is likeliest to frustrate the aggressions of bad actors. He thought liberal internationalism hopelessly naïve, and he rejected Henry Kissinger’s balance-of-power thinking as too clever for its own good (though he was friends with Kissinger to the end).

I [interviewed](#) Podhoretz at his Manhattan apartment in 2021. Slow of speech, his mind was as sharp as ever. “It’s been the same fight going on in my lifetime since, I would say, 1965,” he said. “I still think there’s only one question: Is America good or bad? A force for good in the world—or not?”

In our conversation he quoted that Orwell line. He apologized if he got the wording wrong. Of course he got it precisely right. Norman Podhoretz was the author of a dozen or so books and innumerable reviews and essays, all written in clear, unpretentious prose. He was also a normal decent person, and fully alive.

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Appeared in the December 18, 2025, print edition as 'The Essential Norman Podhoretz'.