

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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Long Live
The Revolution!

By Midge Decter



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DR. EDWIN J. FEULNER

It is my pleasure to introduce Heritage trustee Thomas “Dusty” Rhodes. Dusty has been officially on the Board of Heritage for a year and a half. In his earlier incarnation, he was a partner with the investment banking firm of Goldman Sachs. While Goldman Sachs is known to many in the room, I’m sure, for its considerable achievements in the investment world, it is not particularly known for its hospitality to conservatives. Perhaps on some other occasion we will have the opportunity for Dusty to tell us about Wall Street’s political perspectives. Also in his earlier business incarnation, he was a Chief Financial Officer for commercial insurance in London.

Dusty, in addition to his service on Heritage’s Board, has brought a closer link between Heritage and *National Review*, the premier conservative magazine, of which Dusty is President. He also helps lead the Conservative Movement by his service as co-chairman of Town Hall, the conservative computer network.

He has been active in the Conservative Movement for a number of years. He is one of the founders of the Project for the Republican Future, which has had such a salutary impact in formulating some of the specific debates on major public policy issues since it began about two years ago.

Dusty began a state think tank in New York, the Empire Foundation. He works very closely with another organization called Change New York, which is a grass-roots activist organization in New York. I was reading the *New York Times* not long ago about the new Governor, George Pataki, and alongside the article I saw Dusty’s picture and noted that he serves as one of Pataki’s chief advisors.

Dusty is also a graduate of the Wharton School. In fact, Dusty and I were graduate school classmates.

He has recently been appointed to the Board of the Bradley Foundation. Dusty, please introduce Midge.

DUSTY RHODES

When faced with a list of accomplishments—so long and well-known—one is tempted to say, “Midge Decter needs no introduction.” It’s shorter, it’s sweeter, it’s somehow less boring. This list of accomplishments must be cited, however. It is only then that we see them in the context of Midge Decter’s enormous energy, radiance, heroism, and humor.

Midge Decter is a member of the Board of Trustees of The Heritage Foundation.

She spoke at The Heritage Foundation’s Annual Board Meeting and Public Policy Seminar, San Diego, California, on April 21, 1995.

ISSN 0272-1155 © 1995 by The Heritage Foundation.

She wrote *The Liberated Woman and Other Americans*, *The New Chastity*, and other arguments against women's liberation; *Liberal Parents, Radical Children*; hundreds of pieces for *Commentary*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *The Atlantic*, *National Review* (my favorite magazine).

She was the Executive Director of the Committee for the Free World, Managing Editor of *Commentary*, the Editor of CBS Legacy Books, Editor at the Hudson Institute, the Executive Editor of *Harper's*, Book Review Editor of *Saturday Review World*, and Senior Editor of Basic Books.

She is preparing the Erasmus Lecture to be delivered at the Institute for Religion and Public Life. She is frequently on TV and radio. She is the board chairman of the Clare Booth Luce Fund. She is a board member of the Center for Security Policy. And, most important, she is a board member here at The Heritage Foundation.

When she first joined the Heritage Board she gave a speech saying how delighted she was. She said, "I decided to join the side I was on." She has done all of these things while quietly raising four children; she is the grandmother of 10. She was heroic and prescient to have signaled, when it was dangerous to do so, the negative impact to be expected from the feminist movement as it gathered steam in the late '60s and '70s.

She was heroic to have formed the Committee for the Free World knowing the controversies that would arise by being fervently anti-communist in an era of détente.

She is humorous. How many of us have laughed at her writing and speaking about the foibles of mankind? Humorous and brilliant, she was ahead of her time; her critics were so wrong.

She is humble. She always has time for us. Have you ever noticed that when she talks to you she is really listening? Not like so many of us, looking over your shoulder ready to get to the next conversation.

Father Richard Neuhaus, with whom Midge worked for years, tells of this major figure in the field of public policy disappearing into the mail room to help when there was a crunch.

She has boundless energy and commitment. When she was 8 months pregnant with son John and had a 3 year old, a 9 year old, and a 10 year old, she packed, moved, unpacked, and wrote two articles.

I have known Midge only for a few years, but we have covered a lot: the art and responsibility of raising children, magazine publishing, religion—you name it. Together, we have marveled at the wonders of the Vatican and wondered about the Albanian definition of luxury. For me, it has been a blessing.

I am honored to introduce a truly wonderful woman, Midge Decter.

MIDGE DECTER

We are gathered here primarily, of course, to celebrate a revolution: that glorious revolution whose anthem was set to music in 1964, whose first shot was fired in 1980, and whose armies are now, at last, in full headlong engagement.

Before I begin with my own very particular celebration, however, I want to read you a classified document that was dropped on my desk the other day by a highly confidential source. This document is the transcript of a recent editorial meeting at the *New York Times*, one of the famous five o'clock meetings, usually presided over by the newspaper's executive editor, at which the next day's major stories are discussed. This particular meeting

began with a challenge from the executive editor, who shall hereinafter be designated only as boss editor, to the various department editors. If you would bear with me for a few moments, I should like to read you this transcript verbatim.

Boss editor: “The issue for today, gentlemen—and I have to tell you I am both disappointed and disturbed about this—the issue for today is, why haven’t you people been able to tame Newt Gingrich the way we used to tame all the others?”

The first one to respond is the Arts and Culture editor (who does, from the text here, seem to me to be a touch defensive): “What do you want? We’ve just cost the guy *four million dollars!*”

Boss editor: “Yes? Well, I notice *that* hasn’t stopped him. What about our reporters, for God’s sake? Have you guys so quickly forgotten Woodward and Bernstein and how they once put us to shame?”

National news editor: “Boss, my boys are on the case night and day. Hardly an issue goes out that doesn’t carry some item or other—how he wants to starve poor schoolchildren, for instance—that should be a major embarrassment to him”

Here the editorial page editor interrupts: “And how about us? Admit it, boss, you’ve never *seen* such editorials. Not even Ronald Reagan....”

At this point the transcript indicates there is a sudden silence, broken first by a gasp and then by a moan. “Can it be?”—this is the boss editor again—“Can it be?” everyone present repeats. “Can it *be* that this guy actually doesn’t give a *damn* about what we think of him? So what in Heaven’s name do we do *now*? Has anybody around here got something *else* for tomorrow’s front page? A new angle on the OJ trial? A follow-up on last month’s witchcraft story? How about those UFO sightings....”

Here the transcript is cut off. I have read it in part to help you understand that whatever great things Newt Gingrich and Company may have done for the United States of America in general, they have performed one extra great service for regular readers of the *New York Times*. Truth to tell, they have given us back the pleasure of our morning coffee.

You see, if you do it at all, you have got to read the *Times* first thing in the day; if you let it go till later or, God forbid, until evening, you will simply have no time off at all. And whereas for some years now we have been forced to greet each weekday morning—not even to mention Sunday, oh awful!—whereas we have been forced to greet each morning with the newspaper in one hand and a bottle of Pepto Bismol in the other, now the only thing that might disturb our coffee-sipping is an occasional fit of the giggles.

Just last week, for instance, there was a story about how a newly “resolute” Clinton was at last coming out from under the Republican shadow. He was stepping up his pace, said the *Times*: first there would be a fund-raising event at the home of Steven Spielberg—now there’s a sign of a real effort to be a resolute leader!—and from Steven Spielberg’s house to Warm Springs, Georgia, for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Take that, you conservatives! Indeed, it is hard to know which is more amusing—the *Times*’s bewilderment in the face of a political development that refuses to fit the paper’s long-held cozy assumptions about its importance to the world or the febleness of its efforts to stand four-square behind a President it deeply despises.

In any case, cheerful mornings are a very special gift of the 104th Congress to its *Times*-reading friends, one the Members might be surprised to hear about but which has earned them our deepest thanks all the same.

I fear some of you may find all this rather frivolous, especially in the face of all our grave national problems. But let me assure you that there has for many years now been no graver problem facing this wonderful country than the establishment press and the mischief it has taken it upon itself to make, from Vietnam to the environment to health care and education to the enthronement of AIDS and homelessness. (Look, I know we are in San Diego, and I understand that the San Diegans may simply be too lucky to understand at first hand the kind of problem with the press that I am talking about. But people who get to read the *Union* should nevertheless be encouraged to have some compassion for the predicament of others.)

Now, what has made it possible for the establishment press—the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and add whatever name you wish to this list—to make such mischief is the sensitivity of politicians and government officials to the things that are said about them by their enemies. To the extent that there is a new class of legislators more concerned about what they can accomplish than about how they look to the Washington watchers, the media simply lose their power.

And if for some reason you should happen to think that the newfound light-mindedness of such powers in the political land as the *Times*, the network news divisions—and don't forget that age-old Washington mainstay *The New Republic*—the light-mindedness and irrelevance that are nowadays the very hallmark of these institutions are anything other than a leading symptom of the general encroaching senility of liberalism, think again. Let me give you this month's leading example of what I mean by the senescence of liberalism, this time not a confidential document but a widely published and commented-on story.

It seems that Harvard University recently offered early enrollment to a 19-year-old young lady who turned out on closer inspection to have some five years earlier bludgeoned her mother to death with a crystal candlestick and, when she saw that her mother was dead, stuck a knife into the woman's throat in order, she said, to make it look like a suicide. (A charming story, no? For any of you who might be new to Heritage meetings, it has commonly been my role to entertain our friends with pleasant stories of this kind.) In any case, for this little mishap the girl received six months in what the papers referred to as a "locked facility." Well, as you can imagine, poor old Harvard was in a pickle. Might there not be some problem about admitting into its august community an erstwhile matricide? some officials thought. But on the other hand, said others, might it not be unjust to rescind her acceptance, which, since she was an excellent student, she had after all earned fair and square?

It subsequently turned out that Columbia University had also accepted this young lady and has not yet made up its collective mind about what to do should Harvard in the end reject her after all. What has clearly been something of a puzzlement for the community of liberal educators, however, was no problem at all for the *New York Times* editorialist, who was without a day's hesitation happy to tell the Harvard admissions committee where its duty lay: The only course of justice, said the editorialist, was to accept this girl. She had after all served her six months, and in addition to being an excellent student, she had also helped to tutor poor children.

If you were inclined to ask was there *anyone*, Harvard or no Harvard, from among all the officially designated precincts of liberalism to suggest that perhaps six months in juvenile hall, even *with* the doors locked, might not be an exactly suitable punishment for offing one's mother, the answer is a ringing no. This, my friends, is not mere senility; this is a political-cultural form of what the psychiatrists call senile dementia.

Well, let the pundits and the pollsters say what they will, it is not the voters' pocketbooks but, rather, the way that the liberals have come more and more to respond to the horror of stories like mine as if it were merely caseload material for some skilled guidance counselor that really accounts for what happened on November 8th and what will be happening at the polls with greater and greater frequency in the future. People can live with and humor dementia for only so long before they say, "Stop! This is crazy! I *need* to get off!"

When they tried to tell us this country is evil, we said, "So's your uncle!" and went on about our business. When they tried to tell us there was no difference between men and women, we had more important things on our minds and tried to ignore it. When they tried to tell us that taking money away from working people in order to give it to idle people was only justice, we got angry but said, "Go fight city hall!" When they tried to tell us that people dying of a certain venereal disease called AIDS were entitled on this account to society's special love and most tender consideration and that, besides, we were all potential victims, we were shocked but confused—until, that is, some of us discovered that the liberal authorities wanted to teach six- and seven- and eight-year-olds how more carefully to go about doing the things that got you this disease. Then we weren't confused any more and understood that what was going on was an effort to recruit all the little kids for what most people called perversion but the liberals called "another lifestyle."

For different people among us there were, of course, different straws that did the trick, but whichever it was, for most ordinary, honest people that camel's back has finally and forever been broken.

So why are we at this meeting spending our time in serious discussion? Why aren't we out in the streets dancing around the broken back of liberalism? The answer is, of course, that we are doing both. (And those of you who are afraid that, given the past 40-45 years, your street-dancing might be a bit rusty, I advise that you see our master dancer Peter Pover, who has over the years lightened the load on many a pair of Heritage feet.) What we are discussing is precisely what we are also celebrating: namely, how to restore the most brilliantly invented government in the history of mankind to its rightful and necessary role both in the world and in the lives of its citizens.

And yet. And yet. If there is one thing we ought to have learned by now, especially during the years of the Reagan presidency, it is that no President and no legislature can move very far beyond the limits set by the political culture. Newt Gingrich—I speak of him now as the liberals speak of him: not as that particular man, but as the symbol of the revolution I was talking about—Newt Gingrich the symbol is not some happy accident; he was prepared for, in meetings like these, by people like you and who knows how many tens of thousands of others, by arguments that have for years now been chipping away at the status quo like so many ax-blows at the base of a rotting tree.

That is why, when all the so-called Washington insiders in a tone somewhere between desperation and triumph say things like "See, *x* percent of the American people don't even know what the Contract with America is," or "See, this or that amendment to the Constitution hasn't got the votes," or "This or that piece of legislation won't pass the Senate," or "The President will veto it"—when all the inside dopesters tell you that there really *is* no revolution, they are engaging in that very special form of rationalizing known as whistling past the graveyard. Deep down, they know that what passes or doesn't pass this year in the halls of Congress is only a pale reflection of what is really going on in this country.

Because what is really going on is all of *us*: Newt and company and Heritage, which has of course already gone way beyond him, and you and me and that vast coalition of people who worry about textbooks, who worry about universities, who worry about the corruption of race relations, who worry about the criminal justice system, who worry about manners and morals, who worry that the greatest medical establishment in the world might be destroyed, who worry about the status of the English language, who worry lest the country be left once again without an adequate defense, who worry that the vast, productive machine that is the American economy is being fettered to the point of paralysis. These are in fact not separate worries; combined, they add up to what you might call Ronald Reagan's prayer: "Make us great again."

Now, therefore, is the moment for us to remember that we are not only the *makers* of a revolution, but the *heirs* of a revolution—the greatest and most benign revolution in the history of human affairs—fought a little more than two hundred years ago by a band of settlers on this continent who believed they were struggling to secure for themselves the rights of free Englishmen and who in the process created the one truly revolutionary system: a system based on the proposition that all men are created equal, by which was meant that all men are created *morally* equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. This system was not born full-blown, but drew on centuries of experience and centuries'-worth of ideas developed in a country called England and then embodied in a set of political institutions freed up from the dead weight of the past out of which they had been carved. *Our* revolution, then, is not to make something new, but precisely to return to that system which is our blessed inheritance, to refresh it, and to rescue it from the hands of those who, in arrogance and carelessness and moral greed, have overlaid it with alien structures and ungrateful purposes.

Ours is, in a way, actually a harder job than that undertaken by our American forefathers. For we have no new and virgin territory to repair to, but rather what is by now an old land—the oldest continuing form of government in the world!—to clean up. We will not accomplish our purposes overnight, and we must not grow impatient. Each of those worries must be attended to, and none must be scanted.

We must not, either, depend on others to do the job for us. We must not make the Newt Gingriches our water-carriers and throw up our hands when they fail. And fail they are bound to do sometimes. (While we are remembering that first revolution, let us remind ourselves that it took that revolution eighty years and a bloody fratricidal war to settle its affairs and another ninety to grant the moral equality of all men to black Americans.) The overlay that I spoke of—the overlay of alien structures and ungrateful purposes—has been a long time accumulating; it will not vanish by legislative fiat.

The job is not only the politicians' to do nor even only the Heritage Foundation's, but ours as well, each and every one of us: as members of communities, as businessmen, as educators, as doctors, as soldiers and sailors, as philanthropists and parents—perhaps especially as parents—as churchgoers, as husbands and wives: in general, as citizens on our knees in gratitude for our inheritance from that band of men who once set out to claim the rights of free Englishmen and ended by creating the richest and most powerful of all the nations on Earth.

So let us celebrate indeed. Not only what is at long last being accomplished in Washington and in our state legislatures and even maybe—though I tremble to say it—in our cities. Let us also celebrate our own need to carry on the fight. It will energize us, this need, and replenish us and keep us younger and more fit than ten thousand hours of running down streets or working out in gyms.

One thing more: Many conservatives—I include myself—tend to be suspicious of good news. Perhaps it is in our nature as conservatives. We do not easily take yes for an answer. And we are soon to enter that silly season that leads up to presidential elections, where every day we follow the political stock market and feel rich with every up and poor with every down. I would caution us all, especially in honor of the man who at a critical moment was not afraid or embarrassed to say simply, “Make us great again,” that it was to us and not to his minions in Washington that he was speaking. So let us pay more attention to what is in our own hands and under our own noses than to that political stock market.

In other words, this revolution is not Newt Gingrich, not Phil Gramm, not Bob Dole or Lamar Alexander or...take your pick. It is YOU. What a heavy and happy responsibility! What a grave and golden opportunity!

Long live the revolution!

