History and Turning the Antitrust Page

Present-day advocates of antitrust reform referred to as “New Brandeisians” have invoked history in pressing the case for change. The New Brandeisians bemoan the upending of a mid-twentieth-century “golden age” of antitrust by an intellectual movement known as the Chicago School. In fact, mid-twentieth-century enforcement of antitrust was uneven and large corporations exercised substantial market power. The Chicago School also was not as decisive an agent of change as the New Brandeisians suggest. Doubts about the efficacy of government regulation and concerns about foreign competition did much to foster the late twentieth-century counterrevolution that antitrust experienced.

**Keywords:** antitrust, Chicago School, monopoly, oligopoly, foreign competition, deregulation

Marc Levinson, in his review in this journal of Thomas Philippon’s 2019 book, *The Great Reversal*, suggested engagement with “the very rich historical literature on competition and market power” would have improved an otherwise “fascinating book.”¹ *The Great Reversal* is part of “a torrent of recent studies” documenting a growing concentration of market share in key American industries, buttressed by rising markups and persistently high profits.² Such evidence of the


accumulation and exercise of market power has convinced many that with antitrust, a venerable form of business regulation that targets anti-competitive business practices, "a full turning of the page" is essential.³

While Philippon may not have drawn on history to the extent he could have done in The Great Reversal, current pleas for change on the antitrust front have a strong historical undercurrent. The most enthusiastic advocates of reform are known as "New Brandeisians," harking back to a distinguished jurist, Louis Brandeis, who warned of "the curse of bigness" more than a century ago.⁴ The New Brandeisians, consistent with their backward-looking moniker, have invoked history with some regularity in making their arguments for present-day reform.⁵ For instance, Lina Khan, a leading figure in the New Brandeisian movement, praised mid-twentieth-century American antitrust in a widely cited 2017 Yale Law Journal article on the basis that enforcement was shaped by "recognition that excessive concentrations of private power posed a public threat, empowering the interests of a few to steer collective outcomes."⁶

The occurrence of meaningful antitrust changes cannot be taken for granted, given the possibility of substantial inertia in Congress and the courts.⁷ The New Brandeisians nevertheless have the wind in their sails, and history is helping to set the antitrust reform tone. When Khan was appointed chair of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in 2021, law professor David Singh Grewal said, "What she’s doing is really just returning antitrust and market policy to the status quo ante, of the 20s through the 60s, even the 70s."⁸ Numerous antitrust-related

⁵ Tennant, "Monopolies," 11.
bills have been proposed in Congress recently, and the proponent of one of these, Senator Amy Klobuchar, fortified her case for reform with a 624-page book on antitrust where a majority of the chapters focus on history. President Joe Biden has likewise invoked history to make the case in favor of antitrust changes. When signing a July 2021 executive order encouraging federal agencies to promote competitive markets he said, “Forty years ago, we chose the wrong path, in my view, following the misguided philosophy of people like Robert Bork, and pulled back on enforcing laws to promote competition.”

President Biden, in invoking Bork, referenced what is for the New Brandeisians the key phase of antitrust history. The New Brandeisian narrative revolves around the Chicago School, a market-friendly intellectual movement associated with the University of Chicago, corrupting an American antimonopoly tradition as the twentieth century drew to a close. Bork, a Yale academic, U.S. solicitor general, and federal court of appeals judge, was a University of Chicago law school graduate and the “most combative evangelist” of Chicago-style antitrust thinking.

As this essay shows, the historical analysis on which the New Brandeisians have been relying in their influential push for antitrust reform is problematic. The New Brandeisian version of events presumes that there was a mid-twentieth-century golden age of antitrust that implementation of Chicago School theorizing upended. Such nostalgia is misplaced. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, large corporations were exercising substantial market power amid uneven antitrust enforcement. As for the Chicago School, it clearly was influential. Growing doubts about the efficacy of government regulation and the rise of foreign competition also contributed substantially, however, to the late twentieth-century antitrust counterrevolution with which the Chicago School is associated. Hence, the New Brandeisian invocation of mid- and late twentieth-century history to support the turning of the antitrust page is dubious in key respects.


New Brandeisian Antitrust History

President Biden said when signing the July 2021 executive order relating to the promotion of competition that “what we’ve seen over the past few decades is less competition and more concentration that holds our economy back.” This assessment accords with the New Brandeisians’ pessimistic characterization of current market conditions in the United States. Senator Elizabeth Warren proclaimed in a high-profile 2016 speech that “competition is dying.” Noted economist Joseph Stiglitz subsequently concurred, saying, “We live in an economy where a few firms can get for themselves massive amounts of profits and persist in their dominant position for years and years.” In sum, “monopoly is back.”

Warren, in condemning present-day arrangements, referred nostalgically to an era when “antitrust law was real—and American corporations knew it.” This era began, according to Warren, with a dramatic escalation of antitrust enforcement by the Department of Justice between 1938 and 1943 under the leadership of Thurman Arnold, the Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Department’s Antitrust Division. Matt Stoller concurs in his 2019 book Goliath, saying after describing the entrenchment of Arnold’s antitrust ethos during the 1950s and 1960s: “There was more competition, and increasing competition, in the economy at large.” The mid-twentieth century thus was for New Brandeisians “a golden age of antitrust enforcement in which the U.S. government’s expert regulators had the wisdom” to address “unfair, anticompetitive practices that harmed not just consumers but society as well.” Market power in turn did not have the baleful influence it has currently.

13 White House, “Remarks.”
17 Warren, “Reigniting Competition.”
20 Tennant, “Monopolies,” 11; see also Klobuchar, Antitrust, 239.
According to the New Brandeisians, disaster was just around the corner, with a radical antitrust philosophy with strong roots in the University of Chicago corrupting the mid-twentieth-century version of antitrust.\textsuperscript{21} Led by Bork, the Chicago School declared “their intent to overthrow our antitrust laws,” arguing that antitrust enforcers should forsake trying to protect competitors losing out to dominant rivals and attempting to safeguard democracy from concentrated private power.\textsuperscript{22} The focus should instead be on the closely related goals of enhancing consumer welfare and increasing economic efficiency.\textsuperscript{23}

The New Brandeisians maintain that a Chicago-driven antitrust counterrevolution took place as the twentieth century drew to a close, prompting courts and regulators to default toward non-enforcement.\textsuperscript{24} And the New Brandeisians decry the adverse consequences: “since the implementation of antitrust deregulation, market power has widened.”\textsuperscript{25} Hence, a battle of ideas went badly awry, with the result that “Bork led an intellectual revolution that sacrificed citizens at the altar of efficiency and cheap goods.”\textsuperscript{26}

In terms of chronology, the U.S. Supreme Court explicitly invoked Chicago School commentary in \textit{Continental Television v. GTE Sylvania} in 1977.\textsuperscript{27} Then, in the 1980s, the market-friendly administration of Ronald Reagan drew heavily on Chicago School reasoning while revamping federal antitrust policy.\textsuperscript{28} Monopoly power, according to the New Brandeisians, duly thrived.\textsuperscript{29} As Khan has said, “The result of this counterrevolution in antitrust, originating as an intellectual movement led by the Chicago School, stamped into policy by the Reagan administration, is


\textsuperscript{22} Barry C. Lynn, \textit{Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction} (Hoboken, NJ, 2009), 143.


\textsuperscript{26} Tepper and Hearn, \textit{Myth of Capitalism}, 158.


\textsuperscript{28} Klobuchar, \textit{Antitrust}, 136–37, 144–45, 148; Khan and Vaheesan, “Market Power,” 294.


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that markets across sectors are highly concentrated.”30 Or, as Warren argued in her 2016 speech, “the Bork approach to antitrust law . . . let companies grow larger and larger.”31 Eager to correct antitrust’s ostensibly wayward turn, the New Brandeisians have been “rediscovering our traditions and updating them for the age in which we live today.”32

The New Brandeisians’ invocation of history has gone largely unchallenged. The Chicago School, as they maintain, is widely thought of as providing the catalyst for the Reagan-era antitrust makeover that has been largely sustained through to the present day.33 However, this version of history merits a closer, critical look, particularly given that New Brandeisian thinking is proving to be influential in current debates about antitrust reform. The mid-twentieth century’s supposed golden age of antitrust is a prime candidate for reevaluation with a turning of the antitrust page being in view.

How “Real” Was Antitrust in the Mid-Twentieth Century?

Senator Warren’s suggestion that mid-twentieth-century antitrust was “real” might well be something of a surprise to those familiar with Richard Hofstadter’s well-known 1964 essay “What Happened to the Antitrust Movement?” Hofstadter argued that because of “growing public acceptance of the large corporation,” antitrust was “a faded passion” that had become “specialized, and bureaucratized.”34 How can this verdict be squared with Warren’s? Essentially, there was meaningful mid-twentieth-century antitrust enforcement, but within distinct limits. Large American corporations accordingly could accumulate and exercise considerable market power with substantial impunity.

The mid-twentieth century may well have been “antitrust’s most interventionist period.”35 Even Hofstadter acknowledged that “there is hardly a major industry that has not seen a significant lawsuit or two and in most industries in which intervention might be thought desirable government intervention has had more than negligible effects.”36 Certainly, antitrust “received considerable attention from the business community.”37

31 Warren, “Reigniting Competition.”
32 Stoller, Goliath, 453.
33 Kovacic, “Chicago Obsession.”
35 Sacher and Yun, “Twelve Fallacies,” 1491, 1500.
The *Christian Science Monitor* was telling readers in 1958 that “these are good years for corporation lawyers whose clients are distressed by antitrust jitters.” A decade later law professor Thomas Kauper said, “Businessmen now commonly talk about antitrust; internal compliance programs have been initiated and carried out.”

Mid-twentieth-century antitrust featured for interested parties eye-catching jurisprudence. During this era, in relation to a wide range of conduct, the Supreme Court invoked inflexible antitrust “per se” rules where a court was to presume conclusively a type of conduct was unreasonable and therefore illegal. According to Kauper, “the rulings . . . rested on concerns over the straits of small entrepreneurs” and were “more consistent with civil rights thinking than economic analysis.” Whatever the precise ideological underpinnings, with antitrust appeals to the Supreme Court there was “a common belief . . . the result is preordained. Defense lawyers expect to lose.” With justification; from 1953 to 1969, when Earl Warren was chief justice, government litigators won virtually all of the antitrust cases the court heard. Justice Potter Stewart confirmed this via an “acid comment” in his dissent in a 1966 case, *United States v. Von’s Grocery Co.*, saying that in merger cases coming before the court “the sole consistency” he could find was that “the Government always wins.”

The Warren Court merger jurisprudence seemingly supplied antitrusters with “the leverage to stop any and all horizontal mergers.” As the *New York Times* observed after the Supreme Court handed down its *Von’s Grocery* judgment, “These court opinions, if acted upon fully, would practically eliminate from the American business scene the horizontal merger.” That potential would be at best partially fulfilled. Uneven enforcement of antitrust law meant the mid-twentieth-

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41 Kauper, “Report,” 1873.
century business community was “chafing more at the Supreme Court than at administrative trustbusters.”

Post–World War II antitrust enforcement got off to a slow start, partly owing to the Truman administration slashing appropriations to the Department of Justice’s Antitrust Division as part of an economy drive the Korean War prompted. One by-product was that the 1950 Celler-Kefauver Act, which fortified antimerger provisions in the 1914 Clayton Act, went unused under Truman. Matters changed when Eisenhower became president.

In the twilight of the Eisenhower presidency, the New York Herald Tribune suggested that under his administration “mammoth corporations have taken quite a battering” due to antitrust. How did this happen with a Republican president? The Economist explained why in 1960:

A surprising aspect of the Eisenhower Administration from the very beginning has been its anti-trust policy. As the “party of big business” the Republicans were expected to deal gently with monopoly and anti-competitive practices. The disappointment of businessmen at the way things have turned out has been manifest. The Anti-trust Division of the Justice Department—the agency chiefly responsible for the enforcement of the anti-trust laws—has been tougher and more aggressive than its immediate predecessors under a Democratic Administration. Even the congressional Democrats most concerned with anti-trust matters have found little to criticise.

Under Eisenhower the primary emphasis with antitrust was on mergers, with the greatest contribution being energetic enforcement of the revised Clayton Act. Eisenhower trustbusters brought most of the cases where the Warren Court interpreted the legislation liberally.

It initially appeared the Kennedy administration would sustain the antitrust momentum. The Wall Street Journal stated in 1961 that “surgeons of the Kennedy administration are sharpening their antitrust

53 Kovaleff, Business and Government, 158.
scalpels” and itching “to swing into offensive action to assault more existing corporate structures.” Ultimately, though, the Kennedy Antitrust Division favored pursuing price-fixing cases of doubtful economic significance in lieu of cracking down on large corporations reputedly exercising quasi-monopoly power. Attorney General Robert Kennedy’s close monitoring of the Antitrust Division, motivated by concerns that his brother’s administration was unfairly thought of as “antibusiness,” underpinned the cautious approach.

Little changed when Lyndon Johnson became president. The Wall Street Journal suggested in 1965 that it was impossible Johnson’s “consensus brand of politics would welcome a spirited campaign to break up big business.” This meant that if Donald Turner, the Harvard academic just appointed head of the Antitrust Division, “grows bold and attempts to expand the antitrust range, he can expect a lasso from the White House.” By 1967, “traditional, crusading trustbusters” had concluded that “Turner’s brand of antitrust is namby pamby.” The Wall Street Journal was even referring to “gentle trustbusters,” saying that despite the misgivings of “old-time Washington liberals, gray haired survivors of the New Deal era when trustbusting was in vogue and business bigness was all bad . . . antitrust enforcement is becoming an anachronism in this era of the Great Society.”

Johnson did set up a task force to study antitrust in December 1967. He declined, however, to release the task force’s July 1968 report. The Wall Street Journal explained why in 1969 when the Nixon administration made the report public: “The recommendations apparently weren’t to the liking of Johnson, whose Administration displayed little enthusiasm for vigorous enforcement of antitrust statutes and none for new antitrust laws.”

Arguably, a by-product of the not-so-golden mid-twentieth-century antitrust era was the prevalence of the sort of market power that the New Brandeisians attribute to the late twentieth-century Chicago-influenced corruption of antitrust. As George David Smith and Davis Dyer maintain

in a 1996 essay on the history of the American corporation, “During the 1950s and ’60s, most leading U.S. industrials held their dominant positions in domestic markets without substantial price competition.” Historian Gabriel Winant agrees, saying, “The postwar years of the 1950s and ’60s were the age of ‘monopoly capitalism,’ as the Marxists then called it, or, less polemically, an era of ‘administered prices.’”

Contemporaries tended to be similarly pessimistic about market conditions. In the early 1950s, Harvard economist Sumner Slichter suggested that “the belief that competition is dying is probably accepted by a majority of economists.” Humorist Art Buchwald speculated in a 1966 Washington Post column that by 1978 all corporations west of the Mississippi River would have merged into a single corporation, that the same would have happened east of the Mississippi, and that the two companies would soon be looking to merge so there would be only one corporation in the United States. Those responsible for administering and applying America’s antitrust laws were far from sanguine themselves. Victor Hansen, head of the Antitrust Division from 1956 to 1959, said while in office, “Economic concentration is increasing.” The Wall Street Journal reported in 1961 that “trust-busters are convinced many industries set prices by follow-the-leader techniques.”

Antitrust policy was thought to be at least partly to blame for the truncation of market forces. The antitrust task force Johnson struck and then ignored reported that “highly concentrated industries account for a large share of manufacturing activity in the United States” and, citing “a gap in the law,” recommended legislation to break up “entrenched oligopolies” so as to “reduce concentration in industries where monopoly power is shared by a few very large firms.” Buchwald’s punchline in the 1966 column where he speculated that America’s two remaining corporations might merge by 1978 made the point more whimsically. He suggested that trustbusters would “naturally study this merger to see if it violates our strong anti-trust laws” but would ultimately clear the merger, leaving the United States with just the one corporation.

67 Beecher, “Antimonopoly Attack.”
69 Buchwald, “Capitol Punishment.”
Regulation Misgivings

While antitrust was not the potent check on business activity during the mid-twentieth century that the New Brandeisian version of events implies, antitrust was by no means a spent force when the 1970s rolled around. The decade has been described as “a period of intense antitrust activity” and “the heyday” of antitrust enforcement. For instance, Gerald Ford pledged as president “a return to the vigorous enforcement of antitrust law” and the Antitrust Division’s budget and staff levels increased markedly during his administration.

Unlike with the Eisenhower/Kennedy transition, antitrust momentum was fully sustained when the Democrats took over the White House from the Republicans in the 1970s. Reputedly, “antitrust activity hit its stride during Jimmy Carter’s presidency,” fulfilling a 1977 prediction by Forbes that the business community could “be in for a rough time on the antitrust front from the Carter Administration.” The Antitrust Division’s budget and staff levels indeed continued to increase. And tougher laws seemed to be on the way. Carter declared in 1978 that “there is a great need for reform” of federal antitrust laws as he established a national commission to study possible improvements. When Carter’s national antitrust commission reported in 1979, it recommended amending the first antitrust law, the Sherman Act of 1890, to introduce a “no fault” approach where violations could occur without proof of culpable conduct.

Given the apparent vigor of antitrust law in the 1970s, why did a counterrevolution occur as the twentieth century drew to a close? For New Brandeisians the answer is clear: Reagan’s election as president in 1980 formally ushered in the Chicago School antitrust era. As Khan has argued, “the failure to preserve competitive markets” attributable to “contemporary antitrust enforcement” can be traced back to “the Chicago School intellectual revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, codified into policy by President Reagan.”

73 Wood and Anderson, “Politics,” 18 (Figures 1 and 2), 21.
events is too simplistic. Non-Chicago School variables evident prior to the Reagan presidency also contributed substantially to the reconfiguration of antitrust that would ensue. Diminished faith in government was one of these. Noted economist F. M. Scherer has indeed argued that a belief that “government is the problem” was a more important root cause of late twentieth-century antitrust counterrevolution than Chicago School theorizing.\textsuperscript{77}

The 1970s were a dismal decade for government. America’s troubles in Vietnam, the Watergate political scandal, chronic federal budget deficits, and bungled efforts to control inflation and unemployment all helped to drive anti-government sentiment among the American public from 32 percent in 1964 to 50 percent in 1972 and 67 percent in 1980.\textsuperscript{78} One by-product, as law professor Reuel Schiller highlights in a 2019 article on airline deregulation, was that Democratic politicians who might have been expected to favor increased state involvement in the economy advocated at least a partial retreat.\textsuperscript{79} Carter acknowledged in his 1978 State of the Union speech that “government cannot solve our problems.”\textsuperscript{80} Influential Democratic senator Ted Kennedy said in a 1979 interview that “there is no reason we can’t get the government off the back of American industry in the area of economic regulation.”\textsuperscript{81} Such sentiments yielded a substantial deregulation-oriented reform legacy in the late 1970s, affecting airlines, railways, trucking, and natural gas pricing.\textsuperscript{82}

Various accounts of the late twentieth-century antitrust counterrevolution acknowledge antiregulation sentiment was a contributory factor.\textsuperscript{83} Antitrust, however, initially seemed to be a beneficiary of the deregulatory impulse.\textsuperscript{84} As president, Ford denounced “the dead hand of government” while calling for “an antitrust policy that validates our commitment to competitive markets.”\textsuperscript{85} Ted Kennedy pressed in the late 1970s for stronger antitrust laws in tandem with deregulation,

\textsuperscript{78} Brian R. Cheffins, The Public Company Transformed (New York, 2018), 137.
\textsuperscript{80} Kim Phillips-Fein, Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade against the New Deal (New York, 2009), 198.
\textsuperscript{82} Cheffins, Public Company, 140.
\textsuperscript{84} Eisner, Antitrust, 145.
\textsuperscript{85} Louis M. Kohlmeier, “Ford, the Shy Trustbuster,” Boston Globe, 9 Nov. 1975, D1.
arguing in so doing for the abolition of antitrust immunities permitting anti-competitive activity in heavily regulated industries.\textsuperscript{86} Howard Metzenbaum, a Democratic senator who was a proponent of vigorous antitrust enforcement, suggested in a 1987 speech, “If you are for free enterprise, then you must be for antitrust. You just can’t be for one and against the other.”\textsuperscript{87}

Despite Metzenbaum’s protestations, in the 1980s antipathy toward government regulation was a catalyst for the recasting of antitrust for which the Reagan administration is credited (or blamed). The\textit{ Economist} drew attention to the pivot in a 1981 article entitled “Trustbusters Busted,” saying that U.S. antitrust statutes “supposed to underwrite competition have perversely become confused by conservatives with government regulation.”\textsuperscript{88} The same year the\textit{ Washington Post} indicated that politicians who thought deregulation should be accompanied by a tough antitrust policy were “starting to express their fears” that antitrust was in retreat as compared to “way back in 1979.” The\textit{ Post}’s take was different: “the hullabaloo . . . should come as no surprise since candidate Reagan . . . criticized big antitrust cases and big government in the same breath.”\textsuperscript{89}

The antitrust mentality that prevailed when Reagan was campaigning in 1980 was sustained during his presidency. As a senior FTC official explained in 1999, “A major part of that administration’s economic program was to reduce government regulation. Antitrust enforcement was perceived as being overly intrusive, out of control, and highly regulatory.”\textsuperscript{90} Reagan trustbusters tended to assume that “traditional antitrust law”—that is, antitrust as enforced during the mid-twentieth-century “golden age”—imposed substantial efficiency costs akin to conventional governmental regulation.\textsuperscript{91} Charles Rule, head of the Antitrust Division during the final years of the Reagan administration, referred, for instance, to pre-Reagan antitrust as “know-nothing, attack-everything.”\textsuperscript{92} In contrast, he said, the Reagan Antitrust Division was “exceedingly careful to ensure that we prosecute only conduct that is

\textsuperscript{86} Kramer, “U.S. Regulators.”
unambiguously anticompetitive and clearly illegal,” primarily horizontal practices such as price-fixing, bid-rigging, and market allocation among competitors.93

Foreign Competition

For Reagan trustbusters such as Rule, an “attack-everything” antitrust policy was misguided partly because of the potential chilling of “some legitimate, efficient business practices.”94 When Rule made this point he had in mind a factor that did as much, if not more, to reshape late twentieth-century antitrust policy than misgivings concerning regulation. This was foreign competition, which, according to Rule, had revealed “the price society had to pay for misguided, at times silly, antitrust policy.”95

In 1991, the Economist focused on foreign competition to explain why America’s trustbusters had become “timid”: “America’s economy is more open today, exposing many big firms to foreign competition. This does not make it impossible for a domestic market to be dominated and then abused, but it is far less likely to happen. If General Motors, Ford and Chrysler were foolish enough to conspire to fix prices, they would quickly lose market share to Toyota, Volkswagen and Hyundai, at home as well as abroad.”96 The rise of foreign competition dovetailed with the intellectual trends in operation to reshape thinking about antitrust. As law professor Daniel Crane has said, “The Chicago School arose at a time when foreign competition was flooding the U.S. market as never before. Its generally laissez faire policy recommendations for antitrust resonated with realities that many markets were becoming intensely more competitive as a result of foreign entry.”97

Foreign competition should make an industry more difficult to monopolize.98 As the 1960s got underway, however, approximately 95 percent of steel, automobiles, televisions, radios, and other consumer products Americans bought were domestically sourced.99 Foreign competition thus seemed an unlikely check on the market power of leading

94 “60 Minutes,” 269.
95 Rule, “Setting the Record,” 10–11.
mid-twentieth-century American firms.100 Perceptions would soon change.

The percentage of goods that Americans used that were imported increased from 8 percent in 1969 to 21.2 percent in 1979.101 By the end of the 1970s, over 70 percent of goods produced in the United States were actively competing with foreign-made goods.102 As the 1980s got underway, foreign competition had sideswiped various major industries, including apparel, automobiles, footwear, shipbuilding, steel, and televisions.103 Moreover, concerns were growing that American business was stumbling in response to the challenge foreign firms were posing. As the Washington Post told readers in 1978, “From boardroom to research lab, there is a deepening sense that something has happened to the once unchallengeable Yankee ingenuity.”104 In 1980, NBC broadcast an hour-long documentary, If Japan Can Do It, Why Can’t We?, that, according to Fortune, “brutally demonstrated the poor quality of U.S. products and processes” and “was one of the great managerial fashion statements of all time.”105

Doubts about antitrust grew in tandem with concerns about foreign competition. A Washington Post columnist argued in 1978 that “the American fear of concentrated power” that underpinned antitrust law seemed “outmoded in today’s world” and indicated, “What is called for is a new policy that reflects the reality of a U.S. market open to foreign competition.”106 Time, in a 1979 article discussing a major conference on antitrust the magazine had organized, posed the question “Is the function of antitrust to enhance economic efficiency or to ensure the dispersal of economic power into many hands?” Its answer: “At a time when the U.S. is struggling to curb inflation, create jobs and sharpen its competitiveness in world markets, the purpose of antitrust policy should be to enhance efficiency.”107

Again, despite the foreign dimension, antitrust enforcement in the 1970s was comparatively robust. Time acknowledged the point in its

103 Magaziner and Reich, Minding America’s Business, 203.
1979 article, saying “the American Captain of Industry” was “under fresh attack from trustbusters in the Justice Department, the Federal Trade Commission and the Congress.” In contrast, foreign competition clearly affected the mindset of Reagan trustbusters. When J. Paul McGrath took over as head of the Antitrust Division in 1983 he acknowledged that “there has been a rather broad shift in thinking about antitrust law” resulting largely from “an interest in looking at things in terms of economic reality.” In making this point he emphasized the need for the United States to remain competitive in a fast-changing global marketplace. In 1986, Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige defended a proposal to relax antitrust restrictions on mergers on the basis that “we are living in an era of intense worldwide competition, and we think American companies should merge if it is going to increase their competitiveness.”

As McGrath’s reference to a “broad shift in thinking” implied, foreign-competition-driven antitrust skepticism extended well beyond the Reagan administration in the 1980s. Economists Walter Adams and James Brock wrote in 1986, “American antitrust is under renewed fire. Cast as an economic anachronism in the ‘new’ age of global competition, it is attacked by critics all along the political spectrum—left and right, liberal and conservative, neoliberal and neoconservative.”

Business Week, in making the case that it would make little difference to antitrust policy whether the Democrats or the Republicans won the White House in 1988, struck the same chord, saying, “The Reaganites have won the battle. Even many Democrats, concerned about America’s ability to compete internationally with Japan Inc., are having second thoughts about the restrictive merger policies they espoused in the 1970s.” For instance, Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, Attorney General under Lyndon Johnson in the mid-1960s, said in 1981, “The whole time I was down in Washington, people there wanted me to go after General Motors. Wouldn’t that look ridiculous today?” Hence, the view was widely shared in the 1980s that owing to the potency of foreign competition, antitrust changes made by the Reagan administration were appropriately “geared for the times.”

110 Isikoff and Brown.
Conclusion

The antitrust counterrevolution associated with the Chicago School and the Reagan administration evolved into “the relative stability of [an] antitrust consensus,” a consensus the New Brandeisians are now seeking to disrupt.116 In so doing, the New Brandeisians have invoked history, maintaining that a reversal of the Chicago School’s corruption of a mid-twentieth-century golden age of antitrust is essential. Whatever the merits of the case in favor of antitrust reform, the historical account underpinning calls for change is partial at best and misleading at worst. Mid-twentieth-century antitrust was not as vigorous as the New Brandeisians imply and the Chicago School was hardly working with a blank slate. During the 1970s and 1980s, doubts mounted about the efficacy of regulation—including antitrust—absent Chicago School theorizing. With foreign competitors gaining ground, an interventionist antitrust policy increasingly seemed to be a luxury the United States could no longer afford.117 Perhaps turning the antitrust page would be beneficial now. Regardless, the history that advocates of reform have been putting forward to advance their case should not be accepted at face value.

BRIAN R. CHEFFINS is S. J. Berwin Professor of Corporate Law in the Faculty of Law, University of Cambridge.