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In Red State Blues, Matt Grossmann, one of the nation’s most astute political scientists, challenges fundamental orthodoxy in much of academia and the media. He argues that the Republican revolution that swept took over state after state at the behest of the Koch Brothers, ALEC and other architects of the insurgency was in practice of relatively minor consequence. The conservative movement ran into a brick wall – the electorate’s demand for public services. Grossmann goes against the grain in this wise and illuminating book.

Thomas B. Edsall, New York Times Columnist, Columbia Graduate School of Journalism

October 2019 | $24.99
FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK

TRUMP AND OUR POLITICAL STALEMATE

by Charles R. Kesler

D ESpite his reputation as a disrupter, Donald Trump has not been able to break the political stalemate afflicting America for half a century.

Since 1968, neither major political party has been able to command an enduring electoral majority. Such stasis is unusual in American politics, if one can call unusual something that has been happening for 50 years. Still, the older pattern, now almost forgotten though still longed for by strategists of each party, was quite different. To draw the most striking contrast, in the 72 years between Abraham Lincoln’s election in 1860 and Herbert Hoover’s crushing defeat in 1932, the Republican Party controlled the presidency for all but 16 years. Only Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson interrupted the GOP’s electoral serenity.

In turn, the Democrats began their own reign, holding the presidency from 1932 to 1968, with the exception of Dwight Eisenhower’s two terms in the 1950s. That’s eight years of a Republican chief executive to 28 for the Democrats. But Ike had been courted by the Democrats before he agreed to run on the GOP ticket, and his agenda of “Modern Republicanism” stressed its continuity with New Deal foreign and domestic policy. So the era seemed even more unreliably Democratic than the presidential numbers would suggest.

Add to that the Democratic Party’s lopsided control of Congress in those years—and beyond—and the full picture emerges. In the 36 years between Franklin Roosevelt’s roaring entrance to, and Lyndon Johnson’s meek exit from, the White House, Republicans enjoyed control of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate together for (ta-da) four years (1946-48, 1952-54). The Democratic sway over the House that commenced in 1954, by contrast, would last until 1994, an unprecedented 40 years’ control by the same party. It was a similar story in the Senate, held by Democrats from 1954 to 1980, when Ronald Reagan helped to pry it from their grasp.

For most of the century between 1860 and 1968 (the big exception is a 20-year period at the end of the 19th century), the dominant party enjoyed control simultaneously of the presidency, the Senate, and the House—“undivided government,” as the political scientists call it. That pattern, a corollary of the stable dominance of a national majority party, has gone the way of the dodo since 1968.

In our era, voters are fickle, never trusting either party with undivided control for very long, and more or less alternating the parties’ hold on the presidency. Here is the list: eight years of Republican Presidents Nixon and Ford, four years of Democrat Jimmy Carter, 12 years of Reagan and Bush the Elder (R), eight years of Bill Clinton (D), eight of Bush the Younger (R), eight of Barack Obama (D), and three, so far, of Trump. That’s 31 years of GOP presidents, and 20 of Democratic ones—a Republican edge, to be sure; but the more impressive fact is the sustained alternation between the parties. In the past half century, the voters have experimented with undivided government for only 14 years, eight under the Democrats and six under the GOP, and never for longer than four years in a row. (I don’t count the confusing year after the close 2000 election, when George W. Bush had, and then lost within months, a one-vote Republican margin in the Senate.)

Mr. Trump succeeded a president of the other party, came into office with his fellow Republicans in control of both the House and Senate, promptly lost that shot at undivided government in his first midterm election (in 2018, even as Obama did in his first midterm in 2010), has faced a torrent of criticism and Resistance doubting his legitimacy and fitness for the office, and now faces a difficult reelection race. In all of these particulars he fits squarely into the larger patterns of post-1968 American politics.

His nationalism, “populism,” brusque way with subordinates and allies, addiction to Twitter, love of tariffs, criticism of illegal immigrants, disdain for political correctness—these and the several other features that might be said to be distinctive of it have not, so far, boosted his presidency out of the usual political orbits or changed the overall trajectory of American politics, at least in its electoral dimension.

Even in facing impeachment, he confirms another disturbing trend of modern politics. In the first 185 or so years of the republic (until 1974), Americans impeached one president. In the past 45 years (since 1974), we have impeached or come close to impeaching three (Nixon, Clinton, Trump).

Despite what his detractors and even some of his admirers say, Donald Trump is a normal president for our times. And so far, at least, the times are not a-changin’.
Brexit’s Stakes

Christopher Caldwell’s “Why Hasn’t Brexit Happened?” (Summer 2019) is one of the best accounts of the shameful blocking of Brexit that I have read. He might have made more of the clear and present danger to democracy in the U.K. as the result of this spoiling action. Caldwell rightly notes: “The 17.4 million people who voted to leave the E.U. were the largest number of Britons who had ever voted for anything.” But this is only one part of the democratic process that has been thwarted.

When Parliament passed the referendum bill in 2015 by a majority ratio of 10 to 1, David Cameron, prime minister at the time, promised that the government would carry out the wishes of the electorate. What’s more, on three occasions they have voted to overturn three supposedly legally binding exit deadlines for which they had previously voted. In this way, they can simply circumvent elections and previous legislation by repeatedly passing new ones as, and when, they please in a continuous loop. That is not democracy: it reeks of legislative dictatorship.

Sean McGlynn
Monkton Farleigh
United Kingdom

Christopher Caldwell’s assessment of Brexit is easily the most thoughtful and accurate review of the issue I have read to date. Simply excellent. Let me add that, as a continental European living in an E.U. member state, I envy Britain for having had the fortitude to cast off the Brussels yoke. At the same time, I fear that with the United Kingdom leaving there is no longer a strong voice speaking up in support of individual liberty and free-market capitalism in Brussels. This cannot be good for the citizens of the rest of the European Union. Then again, I fervently hope that Ms. Merkel’s greatest fear will become reality: namely, that the U.K. will become a fierce regulator and tax competitor at the E.U.'s doorstep, “à la Singapore,” as she herself said. That may hold in check to some extent the over-ambitious tax-and-regulate-everything-to-death politician-bureaucrats running the continent.

Pater Eusebius Tenebrarum
Perchtoldsdorf
Austria

Conservatism, Young and Old

What editorial genius to place Steven Hayward’s review of George Will’s The Conservative Sensibility (“Sensibility as Soulcraft,” Summer 2019) right next to Michael Anton’s review of Bronze Age Mindset (“Are the Kids Al(t)right?”). Reading the two reviews consecutively created a more refreshing cognitive dissonance than any I can recall since reading an article about Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

George Will in his bow tie at 80 telling conservatives one last time who they are and how to think, sidling up to Bronze Age Pervert (BAP), the eternally pompous and impotent “kid,” telling conservatives, like their liberal counterparts, to do to themselves the anatomically impossible. But it was the similarities between the young Will and BAP that were most interesting. The young Will, like BAP, thought America “ill-founded.” Not enough virtue! Not enough hierarchy! Like BAP, he turned to Europe for something more stimulating and hierarchical.

In the course of a lifetime, and apparently with the help of the Claremont Institute (Hayward says Will quotes Ronald J. Pestritto more than any other scholar in his new book), Will learned better. He now sees that American conservatism—and the right and necessary way to understand politics in our time generally—arises from the principles of the American Founding, specifically the principles most famously articulated in the Declaration of Independence. BAP, and the other “talented kids” Anton is worried about, think those principles are the source of the greatest degradation of our time. Well, BAP, forgive the yawning with luck, and maybe a little help from sympathetic old fogies like Anton, you too may grow up and become the patriot you want to be. But it would be amusing to attend the conversation between you and Will on atheism and Donald Trump!

Maureen Berenthal
Austin, TX

Sticking by Darwin

David Gelernter’s essay “Giving up Darwin” (Spring 2019) contains numerous misunderstandings of 21st-century evolutionary biology.

For one thing, there is no single definition of species that applies to all organisms; nature is too diverse. What exists in nature are populations of individuals with genes (DNA, or RNA sequences) that influence each individual’s characteristics. Typically, individuals exchange genes to reproduce new organisms. For our purposes, a species is a reproductively isolated population of organisms—i.e., one whose individuals exchange genes to produce fertile offspring, but which cannot reproduce with other populations. Evolution within populations, often called “microevolution,” is a matter of changing frequencies of genes (more properly, gene variants called “alleles”). The intelligent design (I.D.) tracts from which Gelernter draws overlook
the fact that natural selection isn’t the only evolutionary force. Biologists have since found microevolutionary mechanisms in addition to natural selection. These include non-random mating, mutation, genetic drift (statistical fluctuations in allele frequencies) and gene flow (migration between populations). Natural selection combined with genetic shuffling explains Gelernter’s “fine-tuning of existing species.” Speciation, then, is the origin of reproductive isolation between populations. Since Darwin we have observed the origin of new species many times in both the lab and the field. We have identified many ways it can happen, some of which don’t involve natural selection per se. Such speciation mechanisms include processes that may be genetic, geographic, ecological, and behavioral. Non-biologists like Gelernter (and some biologists) often caugh in a false dichotomy of microevolution versus “macroevolution,” the evolution of higher taxonomic groups above the species level. Once two populations no longer interbreed, they take separate evolutionary paths. As differences between populations accumulate, we classify them into different genera (e.g., Homo, humans; Pan, chimpanzees), which are grouped into families (e.g., Hominidae includes both Homo and Pan) and on up the taxonomic levels. There is no real dichotomy between micro- and macroevolution. What is perceived as macroevolution is human imposition of categories on what was a spectrum of population-level changes over long time periods. Gaps in the fossil record mean we don’t see the full microevolutionary spectrum and make it seem as if some groups suddenly appear.

Gelernter relies on several false I.D. claims about the fossil record, including the “problem” of the Cambrian “explosion.” This is an argument from incredulity that fails to appreciate the geological perspectives of time and fossilization, as well as rates of evolution. The “explosion” took around 70 million years. It’s hard for humans to grasp such time spans. Seventy million years is 35 times longer than anatomically modern humans have existed and 115 times longer than behaviorally modern humans. Given that plate tectonics constantly recycles rock formations, fossils of that age and older are rare. Fossils of soft-bodied forms are rarer still and fail to preserve many characteristics needed to classify organisms. Although I.D. proponents are right that Darwin thought evolution was gradual, we now know Darwin was wrong. Speciation can occur in a few years—even one reproductive event in the case of polyploidy (duplication of entire chromosome sets in an egg or sperm). Major change can be very rapid in geological time. In recent decades, study of mutation rates of biomolecules has allowed us to estimate how long-ago evolutionary lineages diverged. Nowhere do we see discontinuities that might mark intervention by an intelligent designer—including around the time of the Cambrian “explosion.”

Contrary to the authors Gelernter cites, molecular biology is not “Darwin’s main problem.” In reality, molecular biology has confirmed evolution and allowed us to elaborate on its history and mechanisms. I.D. proponents mischaracterize the nature and frequency of mutations that produce major evolutionary changes. For example, Gelernter accepts Douglas Axe’s flawed model of randomly picking nucleotides to make up a gene from scratch that produces a 150-amino acid protein. Axe did no experiments, just back-of-the-envelope probabilistic calculations. On the genetics of body plans (basic body architecture like segmentation), Gelernter likewise uncritically accepts Stephen Meyer’s out-of-date information on Eric Wieschaus and Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard’s “Heidelberg screen” of body plan mutations in Drosophila melanogaster. He then repeats Meyer’s quote of Wieschaus saying none of the mutations they studied is “promising as raw materials for macroevolution” because all the mutations killed the flies before they could reproduce. But—as with many I.D. claims—that hasn’t been true for decades. “Homeobox” genes, discovered in 1983, are examples of such genes and regulate development in most organisms with nuclei. One well-studied example, bithorax, produces flies with two thorax segments and four wings when normally flies have one thorax and two wings.

David Gelernter is a well-respected computer scientist and something of a polymath. Unfortunately, he evidently lacks sufficient understanding of biology to see most of the flaws in his unreliable I.D. sources, which misunderstand basic population processes, biological classification, the fossil record, the nature of mutations, and the nature of science.

Frank Price
Clinton, NY
People capable of feeling shame would not have immediately followed up the Russiagate hoax fiasco with another transparently phony—and in “substance” nearly identical—attempt to remove President Trump from office, overturn the 2016 election, and shower deplorable-Americans with contempt and hatred. But our ruling elites have no shame.

That is not to say, however, that they are entirely cynical. The means by which they’ve so far tried to crush the Trump presidency may be nasty and illegitimate, but our overlords are 100% convinced of the righteousness of their cause, and of themselves. Hence they do not even need recourse to the cliché that the ends justify the means. The means are good because the end is sacred; they cannot countenance even the thought that the means might be suspect or (ahem) trumped up.

Near the beginning of his epic history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides distinguishes the “publicly voiced” causes of that conflict from the war’s “truest cause, though least in speech.” We may—indeed, must—subject the “impeachment” coup to the same bifurcated analysis.

Collusion?

The Democrats, the corporate-left media (CLM), the permanent bureaucracy or “administrative state,” and the “deep state” (which is not precisely the same thing), along with a few Republicans, have “publicly voiced” many causes for removing the president—a few specific but most maddeningly, yet safely, vague.

From the beginning—that is to say, from November 9, 2016—impeachment has been a cause in search of a trigger, an occasion. The president’s enemies hoped they’d finally hit pay dirt when an anonymous “whistle blower” alleged that the president made, or attempted to make, foreign aid to Ukraine contingent on that country’s government investigating his likely 2020 challenger. Or, in other words, that Trump attempted to “collude” with a foreign power to influence an American election.

Where have we heard that before? It only took two years, $32 million, 19 lawyers, 40 FBI agents and other staff, 2,800 subpoenas, and 500 witnesses for a special counsel to “not establish that members of the Trump Campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities,” according to the Mueller Report.

Yet here we go again?

But let’s drill down a bit. If we are to take the current “publicly voiced” cause at face value, then we may say that the entire Washington establishment, plus most of the country’s elites, are trying to remove the president from office on the basis of an anonymous individual’s private opinion of the content of one phone call he heard about second- or possibly even thirdhand. A phone call, let’s remember, of which we have extensive notes that almost, but not quite, constitute a transcript—in other words, whose content everyone in the country can examine for himself.

That the “telcon” (national security geek-speak for what people are calling the “transcript”) does not support the “publicly voiced” cause is made plain by two facts. First, you can read it yourself and see that it doesn’t say what it is alleged to say. Second, if it did say what the president’s enemies want it to say, they could just quote it verbatim, which they never do, instead of deliberately mischaracterizing it, which they always do.

Only two substantive points make the phone call at all interesting. First, President Trump very plainly wants to get to the bottom of the entire, still-obscure “election-meddling” story of 2016. That includes not just “deep state” attempts to prevent his election and to set him up for removal should the first effort fail, but also allegations of Russian hacking against American targets, including the Democratic National Committee. It appears—and the Justice Department apparently agrees—that some actors within Ukraine may have had something to do with some of this, possibly colluding (there’s that word again!) with a shady, Democrat-linked tech firm called CrowdStrike, though we as yet know nothing like the full story. Trump wants to know and asked the Ukrainian president for his help in
finding out. To some, Trump’s curiosity about this wild “conspiracy theory” is alone proof of his unfitness. Because, as we all know, the complete lack of evidence that anyone in the Obama White House, Justice Department, FBI, CIA, or Office of the Director of National Intelligence colluded with each other, with the Democratic Party, with the Clinton campaign, or with a foreign spy to tar Trump with the false charge of colluding with Russia definitely proves that all “conspiracy theories” are manufactured fever dreams.

Still, you might think that those railing loudest about “foreign interference” over the last three years would also want to know, but of course we all know what a howler that is. The loudest railers are precisely those most responsible for, and most involved in, the illicit effort to spy on and sabotage candidate Trump, set him up for a non-crime he didn’t commit, abuse their power to destroy lives, and much else. So, no, they don’t want to know—or, more precisely, they don’t want you to know. The more that becomes known, the more legal—and possibly criminal—jeopardy they may face.

Though I admit to being somewhat puzzled by their evident alarm. Many others have called Russiagate the “biggest political scandal in American history” and, Lord knows, I agree. The amazing thing about it, then, is how little accountability there has been. From what I can tell, two individuals—Peter Strzok and Andrew McCabe, the latter on the cusp of retirement—were removed from their jobs. That’s it. No criminal charges or anything else. What are these “deep-staters” so worried about? They run everything and take care of their own. Even with a president in office who, they allege, hates them and routinely abuses his power, they’re—as yet—faced no consequences at all.

Just to (re-)ask one question: who leaked the highly classified details of General Michael Flynn’s December 2016 phone call with the Russian ambassador? That’s a felony. The universe of people with access to such sensitive information is very small, and the timing ensures that the crime was committed by a very senior member of the Obama Administration and/or very senior operative of the national security state. Yet I see no sign official Washington is the least bit interested in this question. Nor, despite the Trump Administration’s nominally running the federal government for almost three years (more below on who really runs it), have I seen indications of any action being taken to find answers. I hope that Attorney General William Barr, Special Counsel John Durham, and Inspector General Michael Horowitz will reassure me that American law has not become a tool for elites to enforce, or not, at their discretion and in their interests.

Back to the Ukraine call. The second question President Trump asked the Ukrainian president is another “publicly voiced” cause to seek his removal. That question regarded a specific instance of a well-known Washington-insider phenomenon. It is a measure of how insouciantly our elites accept and even welcome the immense corruption of our government that they raise not a single eyebrow at the phenomenon that underlay the president’s question: exactly how is it that well-connected Americans with no particular or relevant skill sets can earn enormous sums of money for doing, essentially, nothing?

We all know how, of course. They’re not, exactly, doing “nothing.” They’re providing access—in some instances directly, in others prospectively. When a company or bank or hedge fund or real estate developer or foreign government slides big payments over to someone close to someone who might soon be president, they know what they’re doing, and they know—from experience—that the investment is sound. Tom Wolfe coined the term “favor bank” to explain how “the law” really works in the Bronx County criminal justice system. You do favors expecting to have favors done in return. There are no written contracts or enforcement mechanisms, but the system “works” because people know it’s in their interest to honor it. In modern international politics, to pay someone a few million to do “nothing” is to expect to be paid back somehow. The payees have this, and endeavor to make good, lest they risk future payments.

Understand this plainly: Trump may well be impeached, ostensibly, for asking about this corrupt arrangement. But no one is ever impeached for engaging in it. Nor can our elites, who almost all benefit from this system one way or another, muster the integrity to do, or even say, anything against it.

**Cover-Up?**

Though currently central to the “publicly voiced” case, this charge is not the only one levelled. It is also insinuated that the administration somehow acted improperly by not making the telecon available within the government to a wide enough range of bureaucrats. But that’s preposterous.

Such documents are inherently products of the executive branch. They may be shown to, or withheld from, absolutely anyone the president and his senior staff want. To argue anything else is to presuppose that bureaucrats whom the president doesn’t know and likely will never see somehow are entitled—have a “right”—to review anything and everything they wish. Does this sound reasonable to anyone out to get Trump? Would you run your business this way? Or would you try to limit information—especially sensitive information—on a ‘need-to-know’ basis? Formally, the U.S. government insists that it operates according to the latter principle, but in reality, everyone in Washington believes himself so important that he becomes indignant when not allowed to see what he believes by right he ought to see.

Then ask yourself: assuming the president and his team did try to limit access to this or other documents, why would they do that? Perhaps to prevent illegal and damaging leaks? What could possibly give rise to that concern? I dunno—maybe because this has been, and continues to be, the most leaked-against White House and administration in the history of the United States government?

When one thinks for a second about the impact this particular document has already had—the president may well be impeached over it, on the say-so of precisely such a bureaucrat from whom his team allegedly tried, but evidently failed, to withhold it—can one blame Trump or his team for trying to limit the dissemination of internal documents? A saner response is to wish they had restricted the circle even more. The detail, alleged in the press, that the “whistleblower” (more on him below) heard it from a friend who heard it from a friend, etc., does not, to say the least, suggest any kind of cover-up. Apparently, the Trump Administration’s practice of information dissemination is far closer to the Washington ideal than to the hyper-secrecy alleged by the president’s enemies.

“Cover-up” is the latest “publicly voiced” charge. A member of the National Security Council staff alleges that he attempted to include language in the telecon that others insisted on excluding. This is held to be a very serious charge.

Here’s what they’re not telling you. The document, as noted, is not a transcript; there’s no stenographer on the line and such calls are not recorded. Several people, however, will be listening and taking notes for the express purpose of creating the telcon. These will include duty officers in the White House Situation Room, who are not necessarily—and are not expected to be—experts on the country being called; rather, they are covering the call simply because it takes place during their shifts. These duty officers, with the aid of impressive but not infallible voice recognition software, prepare a first draft of the telcon. Since neither the voice recognition software nor human notetakers can catch every word perfect-
ly, sometimes "Inaudible" appears in brackets. But ellipses—about which much is currently being made—represent not omissions but natural pauses in the conversation. This is before we even get into the thorny issues raised by sequential translation, which is necessary for most foreign leader calls.

After the first draft of the telcon is prepared, the duty officer hands it over to the National Security Council’s (NSC’s) executive secretary (ExecSec), the office responsible for all NSC paper flow and records management (among other things). ExecSec then routes the telcon to specific individuals, whom the national security advisor has personally authorized to review it, for their "chop" or edits. The person responsible for shepherding the document through this phase of the process is the "country director," the NSC staffer who coordinates policy and handles documents with respect to a given country or countries. The country director will, in almost all cases, have been listening to the call. He will check the draft telcon against his notes and make corrections, even as others cross-check against their own notes. These will include the relevant senior director (the country director’s boss) and others, up to and including the national security advisor.

The key takeaway here is that the country director is the not highest or final authority on the content of the call. He’s one person who heard it; others may have heard it or parts of it differently. And the country director does not have the final say over what the telcon says. He works in a chain of command and has superiors. His senior director—who presumably was also on the call—can overrule him. If other "equities" such as classification or legal issues are affected, the senior director for intelligence programs and the legal advisor can as well. Ultimately the final say falls to the national security advisor—who, in almost all cases, would also have been listening to the call.

The person alleging a cover-up, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, was, at the time, the country director for Ukraine. But the way he’s being presented—and has presented himself—is meant to convey a much grander impression. No less than the "whistleblower," he is being sold as a patriotic, dedicated, impertial, non-partisan, career officer simply standing up for what’s right. And he may well be all or most of those things; I have no doubt that he sees himself this way.

But he is also, unquestionably, a mid-level officer in the U.S. Army working a mid-level staff job at the National Security Council, i.e., someone who as such has no standing even to serve as the final arbiter of a telcon, much less make policy or remove a president.

We actually don’t know what language the country director was prevented from including in the telcon, but we do know—from those who leaked an anti-Trump account of his testimony to the New York Times—that “[t]he phrases do not fundamentally change lawmakers’ understanding of the call.”

What a marvelous sentence! And how obviously, tautologically, base-coveringly true! Those who want to use the call as a basis for impeaching Trump are not deterred from doing so based on this testimony, and those who never thought the call amounts to what the Democrats say it does are not now persuaded otherwise. The only way, of course, to judge whose interpretation is right would be to make public the allegedly excised phrases. But if they were actually helpful for impeachment, they already would have been leaked. So don’t expect to read them any time soon.

But at least the country director was actually in the NSC chain of command and so had some standing to weigh in on the issue. This cannot be said of the so-called "whistleblower," who of course is nothing of the sort—not as defined by law nor in any commonsense understanding. As to the former, the statute must define what language must fall to the national security advisor. Who, in almost all cases, would also have been listening to the call.

The "whistleblower" was just a tool to get something new going after the ignominious collapse of Russiagate.

As to the latter, ask yourself the following question. As noted, the "whistleblower" reportedly wasn’t on the call and never saw the telcon. Given that several—probably at least a dozen—others were and did, why didn’t one of them lodge a complaint? One—our country director—did complain to the NSC’s top lawyer, who could find no wrongdoing. The others? Nothing. Is it possible most of them also saw no wrongdoing? Or were too cowed to complain?

But then the question arises: complain to whom? Neither the NSC nor its parent organization, the Executive Office of the President (EOP), have a formal whistleblower process. If one wishes to make a complaint, one has five options: complain within your chain of command, complain to the lawyers, complain to the White House chief of staff, complain to Congress, or complain to the press. Even our country director declined four of these five avenues, and all the others apparently declined them all. Why? Perhaps someone calculated that the optics would be better—more “disinterested,” less nakedly political—if the complaint came from somewhere else, a “patriotic career civil servant just doing his job.” This would also explain the Democrats’ head-spinning bait-and-switch about the “whistleblower,” from “This brave soul is the federal Frank Serpico of our time” to “Who? Oh, no, we don’t need to hear from him, move along” in a matter of nanoseconds. The “whistleblower” was just a tool, writting or not (I’m betting on the former) to get something new going after the ignominious collapse of Russiagate. His usefulness over—indeed, his presence in the drama now counterproductive—we are instructed to forget he ever existed.

Changing Policy?

Another deeper cause for the current show trial is less “publicly voiced” than beclouded with pretentious misdirection, because the president’s enemies know that, were they to state it clearly, the American people would scoff in their faces. Our foreign policy priesthood is 100% certain that the United States must take the side of Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. President Trump has expressed skepticism about the wisdom of such a commitment. He wonders why the conflict is our problem, when a not-inconsiderable number of European countries closer to the issue demand action from us but do very little themselves. He worries about the possibility of the United States getting drawn into war with Russia. And he’s concerned that, given historic corruption in Ukraine, American aid there may not be well spent.

Yet despite these eminently reasonable misgivings, the president has, for the most part, gone along with elite opinion in supporting Ukraine. It’s worth pausing to note the brazen hypocrisy of Democrats on this point, given that the Obama Administration
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a process that accelerates the larger it becomes? Finally, try listening to that sentence through Russian ears. You don’t have to be a Putin sycophant to grasp its alarming character. “Integration into the Euro-Atlantic community” sounds to Moscow like “extend anti-Russian Western alliance to 2,300 kilometers of my southwestern border.” Would a neoliberal NatSec geek tolerate similar language from Russia about Canada or Mexico? Russia may be a bad actor in many ways, but to take up a cause that’s not really important to us but that Moscow considers a threat to a vital organ is pointless folly.

Yet this is the “U.S. government policy community consensus” that we’re supposed to follow uncritically and impeach a president for questioning. Do the American people feel any such urgency to arm, finance, and otherwise yoke themselves to Ukraine? Not that they necessarily feel any ill will toward Kiev. But with a broken immigration system, porous southern border, wage stagnation, rising health care costs, declining living standards and lifespans, and nearly two decades of war from which they have, to say the least, not much benefited, is aid to Ukraine on anyone’s top ten list? Top 100? As blogger Steve Sailer put it:

[Just wait until the public realizes that this brouhaha is about the president delaying foreign aid payments to Ukraine. There’s nothing more sacred in the eyes of American voters than our national duty to pay foreign aid promptly.

If this isn’t proof positive that the “deep state” is real, then what would be? Here we have an unelected cabal trying to take down the elected president, ostensibly over an issue that the American people have never voted on and don’t care about but which the “U.S. government policy community” insists is so important that a democratic election must be overturned for its sake. Actually, to the extent that the American people have voted on this issue, in electing a man who very clearly promised to reduce American commitments abroad, they voted against the “U.S. government policy community consensus.”

Yet the “interagency” somehow believes that its decrees are democracy and that it’s somehow “undemocratic” to question them. This is how it’s possible for so many of Trump’s enemies to impugn him as an enemy of “democracy,” sanctify their patently undemocratic attempts to unseat him, and portray themselves as democracy’s saviors. As Christopher Caldwell put it recently in these pages, according to this understanding democracy is a set of progressive outcomes that democracies tend to choose, and may even have chosen at some time in the past. If a progressive law or judicial ruling or executive order coincides with the “values” of experts, a kind of mystical ratification results, and the outcome is what the builders of the European Union call an acquis—something permanent, unassailable, and constitutional-seeming. [“What Is Populism?” Fall 2018]

Aid to Ukraine has been decided! Debate over! No more votes and no changes! That would be “undemocratic”!

**Challenging the Consensus**

The man who best sees right through this thinking is, of course, Professor John Marini. Because I have spoken at length of his thought in the CRB (“Draining the Swamp,” Winter 2018/19), I here offer the barest summary of the most relevant points. Beginning in the late 19th century and intensifying in the mid-1960s, elites inside and outside our government have centralized authority in a “fourth branch,” the executive branch’s agencies and bureaucracies. Marini refers to those institutions, the people in them, and their governing philosophy and methods as “the administrative state.” Administrative state rule is fundamentally anti-democratic and anti-constitutional, intended to be rule by “expert consensus.”

The experts don’t like to be challenged—especially by non-expert voters or the politicians they elect to limit administrative state power. Here, finally, we come to the “trues” cause, though least in speech” of the impeachment: the administrative state is striking back at a mortal threat. As Marini explained in a recent speech,

Many great scandals arise not as a means of exposing corruption, but as a means of attacking political foes while obscuring the political differences that are at issue. This is especially likely to occur in the aftermath of elections that threaten the authority of an established order. In such circumstances, scandal provides a way for defenders of the status quo to undermine the legitimacy of those who have been elected on a platform of challenging the status quo—diluting, as a consequence, the authority of the electorate.

And the chaser:

The key to understanding how this works is to see that most political scandals, sooner or later, are transformed into legal dramas. As legal dramas, scandals become understood in non-partisan terms. The way in which they are resolved can have decisive political impacts, but those in charge of resolving them are the “neutral” prosecutors, judges, and bureaucrats who make up the permanent (and unelected) government, not the people’s elected representatives. To resort to scandal in this way is thus a tacit admission that the scandal mongers no longer believe they are able to win politically. To paraphrase Clausewitz, scandal provides the occasion for politics by other means.

It is no accident or coincidence that the only three presidents who have fundamentally challenged the administrative state—and questioned its song sheet, the “U.S. government policy community consensus”—have been dogged by “scandal” and threatened with impeachment: Richard Nixon by Watergate, Ronald Reagan by Iran Contra, and now Trump. (Whatever you think of Bill Clinton’s impeachment, it was emphatically not driven or supported by the administrative state, which protected him at every turn.) Trump would likely take this as small consolation, but it’s a measure of how much he’s feared that his enemies are running this play against him now, rather than simply trying to defeat him next year. Which more than suggests they doubt they can.

Simply based on what we know so far, the whole thing looks engineered, like those “lawfare” cases in which clever lawyers and activists find sympathetic plaintiffs, carefully choose friendly venues, and file lawsuits not to redress specific, genuine injustices but to force changes in policy—anti-democratically, it goes without saying. That’s the real reason nobody with firsthand knowledge came forward but left it to a distant “whistleblower” to get this train started: because those driving it understand that, by pitching the matter out to an agency covered by a whistleblower statute, with a formal whistleblower process, they could begin the transformation of this inherently political process into a technical, legal matter. This supposition only gains support from reports of “collusion” (what else can one call it?) between the “whistleblower” and Democratic congressional staff. The parade of witnesses in secret testimony also looks carefully orchestrated.

The secrecy has partly ended—but only after the Democrats gathered its fruits and

(page 13)
shaped them into a “narrative” to spoon-feed to the public. The playbook is the same one that failed with the Russia hoax: selectively leak to create a fog, a mirage of vaguely negative-sounding “facts” or allegations that seem ominous but also too complex and in-the-weeds for ordinary folk to follow. Then publicly “confirm” those leaks as the authoritative account of the “scandal.” None of the actual facts adds up to any actual wrongdoing, but the hope is that regular people won’t notice and won’t listen to those who do. Leave it to us experts: we know wrongdoing when we see it! If the actual specifics of what we’re alleging don’t actually appear to you to amount to “treason, bribery, [or] other high crimes and misdemeanors,” as the Constitution’s Article II, section 4 requires, that’s only because you’re not an expert.

Three Possible Outcomes

The worst charge thus far alleged against President Trump is that he attempted to make $400 million in aid to Ukraine contingent on that country’s government investigating possible corruption by the Bidens. This is the much hoped for “smoking gun,” the ‘quid pro quo”—as if the foreign policy of any country in history has ever been borne aloft on the gentle vapors of pure altruism.

The central question would appear to be this: suppose that charge were abundantly substantiated by witnesses and documents—as it is not by the telcon—would that be sufficient to convince a majority of Americans, and a supermajority of senators, that Trump should be removed from office? In the latter case, possibly—Republican senators tend to be wobbly, and many want Trump gone for reasons that have nothing to do with this particular allegation, which merely offers a convenient excuse.

But in the former case, I don’t see it. Especially since a) no aid was actually withheld; b) no investigation was actually launched; c) the American people don’t care about Ukraine and would probably prefer to get their $400 million back; and d) they would inevitably ask: so were, in fact, Joe Biden and his son on the take from a foreign government? And if it looks like they might have been, why, exactly, was it improper for the president to ask about it?

Trump’s enemies’ answer to the last question is: because the president was asking a foreign government to investigate a political opponent for purely personal gain. Really? Is potential corruption by a former vice president—and potential future president—and his family a purely private matter, of no conceivable import or interest to the public affairs of the United States? That’s what you have to insist on to maintain that the request was improper. That’s the line we can expect the Democrat-CLM axis to flog, shamelessly and aggressively. But will a majority of Americans buy it? Especially since career officials at the Department of Justice already determined, and anti-Trump witnesses appearing before Representative Adam Schiff’s secret star chamber reluctantly conceded, that nothing Trump did or is alleged to have done was technically, you know, illegal.

It’s both infuriating and amusing to read the intellectual Left, led by the New York Times, pivot from Project 1619—that racist, white-supremacist founding!—to founders-as-paragons-of-democratic-integrity, whose wise Constitution reserved impeachment just for such dire but foreseeable emergencies. Impeachment, we are often reminded, is a political, not a legal, measure. That’s true to the letter of the Constitution of course, but not to the way “impeachment” is being used now. If Trump’s enemies had sufficient political strength—which means the support of the people—they would have already impeached him. As it is, they’ve held but one narrowly procedural vote and are hinting that another may not happen until next year.

They need—and they know they need—the intervening time to further the transformation of this fundamentally political assault into a legal matter, and to find, assert, or manufacture some technical violation of the law. At the end of the day, “high crimes and misdemeanors” means whatever you can get 218 representatives and 67 senators to vote for. So long as the phrase is understood politically, the latter threshold—at least—is out of reach. The hope is that forcing the public to accept a legal understanding will bring both within reach.

And it might. It worked against Nixon. It almost worked against Reagan. But let’s be clear: if it works this time, there are only three possible outcomes:

* First, deplorable-Americans will meekly accept President Trump’s removal, in which case the country as a self-governing republic will be finished; the elite coup will have succeeded, their grip on power cemented. With all due respect to the vice president, this is not the way—these are not the people on the backs of whom—he should wish to enter the Oval Office. And I am confident he will not.
* Second, deplorable-Americans will revolt at the ballot box and punish the elites in a series of elections that put in power serious statesmen intent on rooting out corruption and reestablishing democratic accountability.
* Or, third, deplorable-Americans’ attempt to set their government airtight via ballots will not avail, as it has not so often in the past; they will realize that it has not, conclude that it never will, and resolve by any means necessary to get out from under the thumbs of people so obviously hate them and wish to rule them without their consent.

Only one of these possibilities is healthy for the continued survival of republican government as currently constituted.

Oh, and let’s also be clear about something else: if the Republicans “collude” with this sham and force the removal of a president whose approval rating within his party hovers north of 90%, and whose voters scarcely understand—much less agree with—the “case” against him, they will destroy the party forever. I don’t often make predictions, because I’m not good at it, but this one is easy. They will have removed all doubt that they are anything but ruling class apparatchiks, adjuncts, and flunkies of the administrative state from which they take orders.

And yet none of them dare gaslight us with the trite dismissal that Trump’s removal would not overturn the 2016 election results because the president’s replacement was also elected. Trump’s intraparty enemies hate him, and wish to be rid of him, precisely because he is not one of them, because he stands for, and represents, something fundamentally different. Getting rid of him is, for them, a way to get back to business as usual. But there is no going back. A few of them in safely anti-Trump states or districts may survive the president’s removal but the vast majority will not. A new party—a Trumpian populist-nationalist party—will arise from the Republican Party’s ashes. More blue collar in economic orientation and less in hock to coastal and financial elites, it will do a better job of attracting Democrats and independents—perhaps pointing the way to the first real national majority coalition since the Reagan era. And that new party will not welcome the traitors, who will have to make do with contributorships on CNN and MSNBC. Assuming any slots are available.

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Kenyan
appear to be very, very good at running long distances. In 1988, Kenya's Ibrahim Hussein won the Boston Marathon, making him that competition’s first men’s champion from Africa. Kenyans have gone on to win 21 of the 31 races since Hussein’s breakthrough while also dominating the women’s competition, winning 12 of this century’s 20 races.

And it’s not just Boston. Kenyan men have finished first in 15 of the past 21 Berlin Marathons. Kenyans have also won seven of the 24 Olympic medals awarded in the men’s marathon since 1988, and five of those for the women’s marathon.

In other words, a country comprising two-thirds of 1% of the world’s population has come to dominate marathon racing in the 30 years since getting serious about international competition. Nor is this talent confined to a handful of exceptional athletes. Ambrose “Amby” Burfoot, an American who won the 1968 Boston Marathon, wrote in Runner’s World in 1992 about Bengt Saltin, a Swedish physiologist who traveled to Kenya with “a half-dozen national-class Swedish runners.” Saltin held competitions in the Rift Valley, home of the Kalenjin tribe that produces most of Kenya’s best runners despite accounting for less than one eighth of its population. The results saw “the Swedish 800-meter to 10,000-meter specialists...soundly beaten by hundreds of 15- to 17-year-old Kenyan boys.”

For Burfoot and Saltin, Kenyan supremacy in long-distance running represents the “perfect combination of genetic endowment with environmental and cultural influences.” Kalenjin culture emphasizes stoicism and aggression, Burfoot writes, qualities that help runners train and compete. The Kalenjin inhabit a part of Kenya more than a mile above sea level. This thin atmosphere develops the body’s ability to use oxygen efficiently, an enormous advantage when running distances.

But, Burfoot points out, the Himalayas and Andes are also elevated, yet Tibetans and Peruvians don’t dominate marathon races. Part of the Kalenjin advantage appears to be innate. In The Sports Gene (2013), David Epstein accounts for this advantage in terms of body structure. Scientists’ examinations have shown that, as a group, the Kalenjin have unusually long, slender legs. The pendulum effect of running with thick calves and ankles is particularly disadvantageous over long distances. By contrast, the “running economy” enjoyed by those with slim lower legs is optimal for taking faster, longer strides than other runners do when using the same amount of oxygen.

Saltin’s research, as summarized by Burfoot, showed these same forces operating at the cellular level as well. Compared to Swedish runners, for example, Kenyans’ quadriceps had “more blood-carrying capillaries surrounding the muscle fibers and more mitochondria within the fibers (the mitochondria are the energy-producing ‘engine’ of the muscle).” These attributes gave the Kenyan runners Saltin tested the ability to burn oxygen with “incredible efficiency,” along with “high fatigue resistance.”

Knowing all this, we can only be puzzled by one reviewer’s judgment that Skin Deep: Journeys in the Divisive Science of Race “demol-
ishes the idea of genetic explanations for any region's sporting achievements. The review scoffs: "Some have speculated that Kenyans might have, on average, longer, thinner legs than other people, or differences in heart and muscle function." To the contrary, Skin Deep's author Gavin Evans shows that "Such claims for athletic prowess are lazy biological essentialism, deeply doped with racism.

The review, which appeared in the July 2019 issue of Nature magazine, was written by Angela Saini, author of another recent book on the same subject: Superior: The Return of Race Science. Both writers are journalists based in England. Saini's enthusiastic review reflects the belief that Skin Deep buttresses her book's thesis, which is that there are no important biological differences among sub-groups of the human race, however defined, and that those who think such differences do or might exist are either saps or bigots.

Strangely, Saini's brief book review makes her purposes clearer than they become at any point in the pages of Superior. "Racist 'science' [is just] a way of rationalizing long-standing prejudices, to prop up a particular vision of society as racists would like it to be," she writes in Nature. "Racists don't care if their data are weak and theories shoddy. They need only the thinnest veneer of scientific respectability to convince the unwitting." A world "in thrall to far-right politics and ethnic nationalism demands vigilance," the sort of vigilance animated by books like Skin Deep (and, implicitly, Superior), which can help the public "become less susceptible to manipulation by hardened racists with political agendas." Therefore, "We must guard science against abuse and reinforce the essential unity of the human species."

Unfortunately, the "essential unity of the human species," noble concept though it may be, is a cosmic or moral axiom rather than a scientific principle. Guarding science against abuse begins with making empirical observations accurately and reporting them scrupulously, even when the data cast doubt on our most cherished beliefs and aspirations. No intellectually honest writer would say, "Some have speculated that Kenyans might have, on average, longer, thinner legs than other people," any more than she would say, "Some have speculated that Pygmies might be, on average, shorter than other people." These are verifiable facts, not tendentious conjecture.

Inconvenient Truths

It's a fair indication of Saini's reliability that she cannot even be trusted to summarize an ally accurately. Evans's "demolition" of the proposition that innate differences play a role in Kenyans' running success is, in fact, a grudging acknowledgment that the idea is almost certainly true, so that the only remaining question concerns the importance of inherited biological factors relative to other causes. For example, Skin Deep offers one scientist's opinion that we can "say with reasonable confidence that social and economic factors are the primary factors driving the success of Kenyan distance running" (emphasis added). Evans subsequently stipulates that his argument "doesn't imply that genetics plays no role at the population level."

Slow-twitch muscle fibres, longer legs and lighter bones provide a significant advantage, and these are in higher supply in Kenya, Ethiopia and Morocco than in, say, Samoa, Nigeria and Jamaica. And when these long legs and light bones combine with high altitude and a running-to-school lifestyle, potential kicks in.

For most of the millennia during which Homo sapiens have existed as a distinct species, inheritable capacities related to physical strength and endurance were crucial to whether individuals survived and social groups flourished. But over recent centuries, humans' cognitive abilities have grown more important, relative to physical ones, for individual and group success. Accordingly, Skin Deep and Superior are concerned with thinking, not running. Both books' overriding purpose is to discredit and denounce all suggestions that heritable cognitive abilities and psychological dispositions are distributed across the human race in any way other than evenly or randomly.

In Skin Deep, Evans pivots from one chapter on athletic ability, which judges it to be somewhat heritable, to nine chapters on intellectual ability. In them, he argues that intelligence is much harder to define and measure than physical ability, and that no evidence has yet emerged proving the existence of significant innate cognitive differences among racial or ethnic groups. Ultimately, while conceding that such evidence may yet be discovered, Evans aligns himself with what he considers the "clear majority of geneticists and other scientists" who believe "that the evolutionary factors acting against population differences in cognition are far stronger than those favouring them."

As shown by her review's misrepresentation of Skin Deep's argument, Saini is more reluctant than Evans to acknowledge any inherited differences among population groups. If there really are some genetically transmitted differences among ethnic or regional subsets of the human race, there might be others. Her response is to deny everything rather than concede anything. But when this strategy culminates in ascribing awareness of Kenyans' running prowess to "lazy biological essentialism," Saini inadvertently affirms one of Superior's targets, blogger Steve Sailer, who says that the definition of racism has expanded to include the "high crime of Noticing Things."

Like all books with a clear agenda, Superior works to convince readers that the author's point of view is correct. The book's most interesting, awkward, and melodramatic passages, however, find Saini struggling to convince herself. In the book, unlike in her review of Skin Deep, she yields some ground, acknowledging that there are "superficial" biological differences among population groups. Superior offers examples—skin color, and susceptibility or imperviousness to certain diseases—but never defines what makes a trait superficial, or what differentiates traits in that category from significant ones.

Yet even this modest, vague concession ends up distressing Saini. She notes that the Bajau people of Southeast Asia have "evolved an extraordinary ability to hold their breath underwater for long periods of time" after centuries of diving to hunt fish. The Bajaus' unusually large spleens, which help sustain the blood's oxygen levels, appear to be "a measurable genetic difference between them and others, sharpened over many generations by living in an unusual environment."
That thought occasions an interior monologue, raising “a question we don’t like to ask out loud.” Is it possible, she wonders, “for a group of people, isolated enough by time, space, or culture, to adapt to their particular environment or circumstances in different ways? That they could evolve certain characteristics or abilities, that they might differ in their innate capacities?” Seeking reassurance, Saini interviews India’s leading population geneticist, Kumarsamy Thangaraj. “Could there be psychological differences between population groups?” She asks, tentatively. “I go further. ‘Differences in cognitive abilities?’ The scientist does not allay her fears. “‘That kind of thing is not known yet,’” he replied. “But I’m sure that everything has [a genetic basis].”

She is even more distressed by her interview with another prominent geneticist, Harvard Medical School’s David Reich. “I know that Reich is not a racist,” she writes, which only makes it harder for her to believe what he tells her: after 70,000 years apart from one another, adapting to very different environments, Europeans and Africans may turn out to have “more than superficial average differences... possibly even cognitive and psychological ones.” Such thoughts, she writes, are ones “I never expected to hear from a respected mainstream geneticist.”

Saini, like Evans, has to account for Reich due to his widely discussed book, written for laymen, Who We Are and How We Got Here (2018). What she lauds as the essential unity of the human species, Reich describes as “an orthodoxy that the biological differences among human populations are so modest that they should in practice be ignored.” This consensus, forged by 20th-century anthropologists and geneticists, came to regard race as a pernicious concept, integral to eugenics and Nazism, but also a meaningless one. No one, that is, could identify the boundaries between racial groups, and scientists asserted with increasing confidence that the genetic variation within any given group was much greater than the variation between groups. It is common in these circles to eschew the term “race” altogether in favor of the more clinical “population group.”

Saini follows this convention, but worries that it won’t suffice. Even scientists who used the right language about population groups, and were clearly anti-racist, continued to pursue research that was “all about finding out how people differed.” Better that they should have treated the question as settled and closed: “the genetic variation between us was already known to be trivial.” Better still that they should have realized it was essential to “reinforce that we were all the same underneath.” Responsible scientists, aware of the history of racist thought and the existence of racist publicists who will seize any scrap of evidence to validate their malign project, will and must “resist the urge to group people at all.”

Sacrilege and Censorship

Gavin Evans trusts, basically, that honest, competent scientific investigation will vindicate the unity of the human species. Saini, less sanguine, can’t decide whether race science is intellectually bad or morally bad. If the former, its weak evidence and arguments will discredit its conclusions, which means race science is deplorable but ultimately too absurd to be a problem. But at some points in Superior, she’s less convinced that wisdom and decency are destined to triumph, and leans toward the position that scientists must simply stop asking questions whose answers might give comfort to racists opposing an ever more equal, inclusive world.

For Reich, the fact that such anti-intellectualism is well-intentioned—he, too, opposes what he calls “hateful ideas and old racist canards”—makes it more dangerous, not less. As an intellectual matter, Who We Are declares that the “indefensibility” of the orthodoxy about a genetically undifferentiated human race is becoming “obvious at almost every turn.” As scientists use the latest tools of genetic analysis more extensively, it becomes harder to “deny the existence of substantial average genetic differences across populations” or to assume that these differences cannot extend to “cognitive and behavioral traits.”

As a political matter, the “well-meaning people who deny the possibility of substantial biological differences among human populations are digging themselves into an indefensible position.” Scientists somewhere in the world will use the latest tools to pursue...
questions about group differences, however strongly defenders of the crumbling orthodoxy may object. When the answers further undermine that orthodoxy, supporters of racist canards will claim vindication—both as having been right, and as having been the only participants in the debate who honored the scientific imperative to follow the evidence where it leads.

Some who oppose scientific investigation of differences among population groups are not content to denounce; they want to suppress. *Who We Are* cites Northwestern University political scientist Jacqueline Stevens, who has called on the federal government’s National Institutes of Health to, in her words:

> issue a regulation prohibiting its staff or grantees...from publishing in any form—including internal documents or citations to other studies—claims about genetics associated with variables of race, ethnicity, nationality, or any other category of population that is observed or imagined as heritable unless statistically significant disparities between groups exist and description of these will yield clear benefits for public health, as deemed by a standing committee to which these claims must be submitted and authorized.

If translated from bureaucratese into Latin, Stevens’s proposal would pair nicely with the Inquisition’s condemnation of Galileo for heresy.

Nor is she alone in opposing open inquiry. Linguist Noam Chomsky (of course) argued in *Language and Problems of Knowledge* (1987) that while “people differ in their biologically determined qualities...discovery of a correlation between some of these qualities is of no scientific interest and of no social significance, except to racists, sexists and the like.” Thus, investigating group differences is pointless and harmful, since it assumes that “the answer to the question makes a difference,” which it does not—except, again, “to racists, sexists and the like.”

Journalist John Horgan wrote in a 2013 article for *Scientific American* that research universities’ institutional review boards, which must approve projects involving human subjects, “should reject proposed research that will promote racial theories of intelligence, because the harm of such research—which fosters racism even if not motivated by racism—far outweighs any alleged benefits.”

Horgan is enthused about research that discredits such theories, however. The only way to satisfy both imperatives would be for review boards to approve only those research projects that support the anti-racist cause, as he understands it, or for them to retroactively disapprove projects, and prevent the publication of their findings, if the results end up being inimical to that cause.

Saini herself favors impeding the spread of harmful rhetoric and research through pressure on big internet firms. In 2019 she wrote, also in *Scientific American*, that because “racists exist at all levels of society, including in academia, science, media and politics,” the public must “recognize hatred dressed up as scholarship and learn how to marginalize it, and be assiduous in squeezing out pseudoscience from public debate.” She hastens to reassure that this obvious free speech issue “is not a free speech issue; it’s about improving the quality and accuracy of information that people see online, and thereby creating a fairer, kinder society.”

## Keeping Our Heads

The anti-racist project’s epistemological rules are impossible to formulate in a way that renders them either coherent or benign. That the truth will set
you free is a precept shared by the Gospel and the Enlightenment. But it’s a perverse distortion to conclude that any finding about how the world works that doesn’t set you free, that complicates or fails to advance your preferred political cause, is not and cannot be true.

By the same token, the standard that Proposition X must be false if Bad People endorse it is no way to run a laboratory. James Watson, a founder of modern genetics as co-discoverer of DNA’s role in transmitting biological information, has become a pariah in his old age (he’s 91) by blurring out views on group differences in abrasive ways. His greatest-hits album, compiled on the blog of computational biologist Lior Pachter, is distressingly robust. Watson accommodates modern sensibilities solely by virtue of being an equal-opportunity offender: “Whenever you interview fat people, you feel bad, because you know you’re not going to hire them.” “[The] historic curse of the Irish...is not alcohol, it’s not stupidity...it’s ignorance.” “Anyone who would hire an ecologist is out of his mind.”

Insult-comic persona aside, when edited by himself or others, Watson poses questions that should provoke thought, not anger. “There is no firm reason to think genetically isolated population groups have evolved identically,” Watson wrote in his memoir, Avoid Boring People (2007). “Our wanting to reserve equal powers of reason as some universal heritage of humanity will not be enough to make it so.”

Though in a 2019 article for Stat, science journalist Sharon Begley lists this contention as just another of Watson’s “odious” views, a strident adjective is not a refutation. Nor does it dispatch Watson’s null hypothesis. “Writing now,” Reich says in Who We Are, “I shudder to think of Watson...behind my shoulder,” a prudent concern in light of how the older man’s career and reputation have crashed. Yet if there is a firm reason to think geographically isolated population groups have evolved identically, either by chance or necessity, Who We Are supplies nothing that reveals it and good reasons to doubt it.

In light of these considerations, we can make two observations about the “indeﬁnable position,” as Reich calls it, being taken by those who deny the possibility of substantial biological differences among human populations. First, people who think they’re winning a debate rarely try to shut it down or keep it secret. Reich opposes the anti-racists’ anti-science defeatism, in part, on the grounds that it’s too early to assume that most, or any, of geneticists’ discoveries will prove inimical to the political hopes he shares with Saini and Evans.

In any case, it is clear that the question of whether population groups have inherited differences in cognitive ability would be hard to answer even if it were not politically incendiary. For one thing, to isolate inter-group differences based in biology from those caused by culture and circumstance is a formidable challenge. Furthermore, intelligence is harder to deﬁne, measure, and compare than, say, the ability to run 26.2 miles. Evans goes so far as to suggest that we stop using the word “intelligence” altogether, an innovative but not totally surprising way to criminalize noticing.

Second, even if anti-racists’ fears about future biological ﬁndings are realized, it’s an unforced error to catastrophize this prospect. “The logical consequence of insisting that IQ gaps between races are biologically determined is that nothing in human society can really be changed,” Saini writes, absurdly. An egalitarianism so frail that it can be shat-

The mistake is to think the discovery of significant dissimilarities would justify a caste system.

Egalitarianism Without Absurdism

W

e should make our theories—political and moral, as well as scientiﬁc—ﬁt the facts, not demand that the facts ﬁt our theories. People are equal in some ways and unequal in others, which means that any egalitarianism that we can both admire and implement will give same-
ness and difference the respect each deserves. Suppose that between two individuals, X is more intelligent (or musical, athletic, physically attractive, etc.) than Y. Suppose, further, that this inequality cannot be wholly explained by environmental differences such as upbringing or education, and might be reduced but cannot be eliminated by equalizing such factors.

Nothing in this scenario supports the conclusion that X and Y should be other than civic and moral equals. In a well-governed republic they will obey the same laws, enjoy the same rights, and shoulder the same obligations. As Thomas Jefferson wrote near the conclusion of his presidency, “Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others.” In a successful society animated by the republican spirit, X and Y will join fellow citizens who honor and encourage one another, each concerned that all others fulfill their potential. In his 1992 speech to the Republican National Convention, Ronald Reagan said, “[W]e are all equal in the eyes of God. But as Americans that is not enough; we must be equal in the eyes of each other.” Egalitarianism rightly understood does not object, however, if X but not Y becomes a geneticist (or a pianist, shortstop, or fashion model), provided that Y’s lesser talents were still given a fair opportunity to manifest themselves.

Suppose, similarly, that members of Group A turn out to be more likely than those in Group B to possess some socially consequential aptitude. Inquiries into the cause of the disparity make it increasingly clear that the origins are, to some significant extent, innate rather than environmental. Civic and social egalitarianism still demands that all members of A and B enjoy equal rights and respect, but also accepts that different proportions of A and B will end up as geneticists, shortstops, etc. “The right way to deal with the inevitable discovery of substantial differences across populations,” Reich counsels, is to accord “everyone equal rights despite differences that exist among individuals.” The important thing is to “celebrate every person and every population as an extraordinary realization of our human genius and to give each person every chance to succeed, regardless of the particular average combination of genetic propensities he or she happens to display.”

I once wrote a book that asked what it would mean for a nation’s welfare state to be a completed endeavor, to acquire all the resources and authority it could possibly use to achieve its objectives. The answer turned out to be that there is no answer, that the welfare state’s ultimate purpose is to facilitate (and necessitate) the welfare state’s perpetual expansion.

Now that identity politics has come to be the salient feature of modern American liberalism, it’s time to update my older question. What, exactly, are 21st-century identitarians trying to accomplish? What would it mean to achieve the equality they are demanding, and how will we know they’ve succeeded?

As with the welfare state, the goal’s only definable feature is that it recedes constantly. Ending racism requires “more equitable education and healthcare,” Saini writes, and a commitment “to end discrimination in work and institutions, to be a little more open with our hearts and maybe also with our borders.” But how much more would be enough more? Everything about the theory, practice, and spirit of modern egalitarianism tells us that Saini’s “little more” is going to end up being a great deal more, and for a very long time.

Along the same lines, what does ending discrimination consist of? Not the elimination of all disparities, we’ll be told, just the bad ones, the unfair ones. In practice, this means that any particular disparity is presumed guilty until proven innocent of resulting from discrimination, defined expansively to encompass such unspecifiable concepts as unconscious, implicit, and structural bias. Since, for example, racism informs the lazy biological essentialism that ascribes innate running ability to Kenyans, we cannot declare victory against discrimination until that golden day when Kenyans and Samoans are proportionally represented among marathon winners.

To spell out the implications of Saini’s anti-racism is to demonstrate that it’s as ominous as it is ludicrous—an egalitarianism that strangles liberty, fraternity, and fairness. The saner, safer path is the one laid out by David Reich: “If we aspire to treat all individuals with respect regardless of the extraordinary differences that exist among individuals within a population, it should not be so much more of an effort to accommodate the smaller but still significant average differences across populations.”

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Book Review by Peter Skerry

BECOMING WHITE

Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration, and the Future of White Majorities,
by Eric Kaufmann. Harry N. Abrams Press, 624 pages, $35

Readers of CRB will find much to like in Whiteshift, a refreshingly original, even bold, analysis of the impact of immigration and demographic change on the United States as well as the United Kingdom, Canada, and other Western democracies. Its author, Eric Kaufmann, comes to this subject from a genuinely—dare I say it?—diverse, even cosmopolitan, personal history. As the book jacket explains, he was born in Hong Kong but raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, and spent eight years in Tokyo. In recent years he has been teaching politics at Birkbeck College at the University of London. And as he mentions while developing his argument, in addition to his eastern European Jewish roots, he has both Asian and Hispanic blood relations living in the United States. So, it seems fair to say that Kaufmann has some skin in this game.

But this is no self-indulgent excavation of one individual’s identity under the guise of scholarship. Quite the contrary. Kaufmann displays an uncommon openness to the many non-cosmopolitans on both sides of the Atlantic. As he puts it: “Because cosmopolitanism is de rigueur in the mobile, elite circles where power often resides, its values can crystallize into coercive norms.” He is especially attentive to those in the United States whose anxieties and anger over immigration and multiculturalism have finally found political voice in the person of their president, Donald Trump. Readers will find here an insightful and genuinely fair-minded effort to understand and explain the anxieties over immigration that have been driving Brexit and propelled Trump to the White House. And though Kaufmann is prepared to call out racism when he sees it, unlike most academics he is sparing in his judgments and refuses simply to dismiss explicitly negative characterizations of immigrants as “racist.”

Instead, he painstakingly argues that the causes of the current populist resurgence are primarily cultural, not economic. As he asserts: “Cultural grievances are the main engine behind the right-wing populism we see today and will continue to be important during the coming century of white decline. This in-group attachment is not racist unless it leads to antipathy towards outgroups or racial puritanism.” Kaufmann grounds this perspective in historical sources as well as analysis of demographic and survey data and even findings from his own focus groups. And as he further argues: “If politics in the West is ever to return to normal rather than becoming even more polarized, white interests will need to be discussed…. Not only is white group self-interest legitimate, but I maintain that in an era of unprecedented white demographic decline it is absolutely vital for it to have a democratic outlet.”

Lest there be any confusion, Kaufmann is no white nationalist; he’s not even a guilty white conservative! And his argument is utterly prudential, not principled. He concludes that “[p]ermitting freer expression of the majority group’s sense of cultural loss…is, in the long run, probably less dangerous than repressing [it].”

Kaufmann places the blame for our predicament squarely at the feet of those whom he refers to as “left-modernists,” whose history he traces back not to the Progressives, nor to labor activists and working-class socialists, but to artists and intellectuals such as Mabel Dodge Luhans and Randolph Bourne. First dissected by historian Christopher Lasch, these “new radicals” launched a cultural revolution from the salons of Greenwich Village back at the beginning of the 20th century. And as Kaufmann rightly notes, the pluralism espoused by these progenitors of today’s multiculturalists led to their embracing selected, exotic aspects of immigrant subcultures while disparaging and rejecting “a desiccated puritanical Americanism.” As he puts it, “Sixties multiculturalism was a more strident, ambitious and large-scale application of Bourne’s double-standard of applauding the Jew who...
sticks to his faith’ while urging the WASP to leave his culture behind and become a cosmopolitan.” And so today, we must endure “asymmetrical multiculturalism,” whereby minority identities are lauded while white majority ones are denigrated.”

From Kaufmann’s perspective, it should be no surprise that large numbers of Americans who identify as white—repeatedly reminded that they are part of an ever-shrinking segment soon to be a minority in a ‘majority-minority society’—have long felt demeaned and threatened. Eventually they began to react and push back. But he goes further, and points out that many of these minorities, especially Hispanics and Asians, either identify racially as white or embrace mainstream American values. Then, too, they are intermarrying with whites in ever increasing numbers. The outcome of these combined demographic and cultural trends will be that “today’s white majorities evolve seamlessly and gradually into mixed-race majorities that take on white myths and symbols.” This is what Kaufmann means by ‘whiteshift.” And while there will continue to be plenty of “unmixed whites,” he also makes clear that this process “will involve a change in the physical appearance of the median Westerner…though linguistic and religious markers are less likely to be affected.” It will also involve a broadening of what constitutes white culture.

He goes on to make explicit what is implicit in this scenario: that the much-maligned notion of assimilation—to the new “white majority” culture—will be the order of the day. Similarly embedded in his perspective is a critique of civic nationalism. Echoing Samuel Huntington, Kaufmann argues that in an era of ideological struggle such as the Cold War, civic nationalism may have been adequate. But in today’s environment, especially with the rise of the populist right, it is “insufficient.”

Civic nationalism, it was hoped, would provide the ethnic majority with the reassurance it needed to stop fretting about immigration. But this logic only works if the majority’s concern is of a piece with that of the state: namely political order, shared values and the smooth running of the economy. What happens if the conservative section of the majority is in fact exercised by the loss of its ethnic identity or of challenges to ethno-traditions of nationhood? Civic nationalism provides no answer to this deeper existential anxiety beyond its reflex to block such questions with charges of racism, xenophobia and pandering to the far right.

Readers looking for the political ideas and principles undergirding Kaufmann’s new “cultural contract” might be disappointed. Although he makes it clear that he subscribes to classical liberal values, his preoccupation with group identities and subcultures means that he is at ease with the formation and articulation of group interests in social and political life. Indeed, it is safe to assume that Kaufmann would be perfectly comfortable with, and indeed supportive of, the ethnically inflected, patronage-based machine politics that characterized state and local affairs in much of America up until the mid-20th century.

In the same vein, he acknowledges his acquiescence to contemporary identity politics—at least when defined narrowly as the pursuit of group interests. He disapproves when “immigrants’ normal desires to defend their interests are decried as ‘identity politics.” Indeed, he parts “company with those on the right who believe group sentiments are a problem and we should simply identify as individuals.” After all, he regards those mobilizing today around their white identity as acting out of “collective memory” and responding to “cultural markers like appearance, religion...
and cultural traditions” that bind them to the group. Such whites are, he insists, “[l]ike African Americans...[and] are not primarily attached to their group as a tool to get more stuff.”

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Kaufmann’s perspective, it is strikingly honest, original, and insightful. Yet its single-minded preoccupation with demographic, cultural, and ideological forces is limiting. For example, when discussing the causes of immigration restriction in the U.S. in the years after World War I, he argues that “cultural loss” was a critical factor, and then points out that restrictionists nevertheless “felt obliged to fabricate economic and security rationales” for their efforts. Yet given the wave of bombings and general strikes across the nation involving immigrant anarchists and socialists in the years immediately following the First World War, it is difficult to understand what kind of “fabrication” Kaufmann has in mind here. Indeed, 1919 was one of the most tumultuous and violent years in U.S. peacetime history.

Moreover, there is considerable evidence, overlooked in Whittiershift, that immigration restriction in that era was fueled in no small degree by the increasing competition experienced by workers, many of them earlier immigrants, with more recent arrivals. As economist historians Timothy Hatton and Jeffrey Williamson have demonstrated, in that era expanded immigrant networks and the increased speed of steamship travel made it easier, quicker, and cheaper to cross the Atlantic. And as the number of immigrants increased, their education and literacy levels declined. The result was increased labor market competition between the latest arrivals from southern and eastern Europe and those who had preceded them, as well as with native workers. This was hardly a “fabricated rationale” for restriction.

Turning to the contemporary period, Kaufmann’s single-minded focus on the role of “left-modernist” intellectuals in shaping how we think about immigrants and immigration neglects the role of other actors and forces. Here again, the role of economic interests in today’s debates gets ignored. To be sure, the implications of this particular oversight are minimal since there is not much evidence of economic competition between immigrants and American workers today, though there is some. But there certainly are powerful business interests pushing for high levels of immigration—whether legal or, if need be, illegal—to which Kaufmann pays no attention whatsoever. Similarly neglected are the economic interests of intellectuals, academics, and other such knowledge workers whose incomes and lifestyles render them particularly reliant on plentiful unskilled workers. Certainly their unacknowledged dependence on such manpower must contribute to the intensity with which such privileged members of our society heap abuse on their fellow citizens not in a position to view immigrants as retainers.

Nor does Kaufmann pay any attention to the fiscal strains—above and beyond the taxes they pay—that immigrants place on services, especially at the local and state levels. Yet each of these factors has helped to fuel the now-inescapable disaffection with immigrants. Finally, he neglects the important role that immigrants and their offspring play in lobbying Congress to keep the gates open for their relatives. And this speaks more generally to the scant attention he pays to the politics of immigration policymaking.

Nevertheless, Kaufmann is hardly oblivious of the need to rethink how we make immigration policy. He begins with a call for “an accommodation between the freely expressed preferences of cultural conservatives and liberals in which each tries to understand the other.” Not surprisingly, the arbiter of such accommodation would necessarily be the government. Yet curiously, he has in mind a rather technocratic process relying on “an evidence-based approach which takes all dimensions of inequality into account and favours ‘nudge’-style remedies.” “It would then fall to the government,” he elaborates, “to reach an open, transparent accommodation between competing forces.... The discussion over immigration rates should be no more controversial than the debate over tax rates”.

It boggles the mind to contemplate what Kaufmann means when he makes such a claim about an obviously and inherently contentious issue. He does, however, highlight that he is assuming that the adulation of minority identities and the denigration of white majority identity characteristic of “asymmetrical multiculturalism” would be eliminated in favor of more even-handed treatment. And the result would be open bargaining among minorities and the denigration of white majorities, something equal to their claims on the political community. Not without justification would African Americans feel threatened and indeed left behind by having their “cultural interests”—not to mention their economic and political interests—placed on a par with newcomers who never experienced the depredations of slavery, Jim Crow, and the unresolved legacy of that history.

I can only surmise that the wide scope of Kaufmann’s analysis, which includes not only the U.S. but Canada, the U.K., and western Europe, contributed to his neglect of the unique and enduring implications of “the first new nation” having accommodated slavery, however ambiguously. Another problem is the sheer scope and ambitiousness of this 600-page volume, overflowing with survey data, statistics, and charts that, the reader is reminded, are further elaborated on at the author’s website. Even the attentive reader can get lost in the details. Then, too, tighter editing might have saved the author from frequent bloopers—including his assertions that John Dewey was “[o]riginally a Congregationalist minister,” that Nathan Glazer rejected multiculturalism in We Are All Multiculturalists Now (1997), that the writer Michael Lind was an editor at the Public Interest, and that “the last [American] troops didn’t leave Afghanistan until 2014.”

But these must be considered relatively minor flaws in an ambitious, admirable, and largely successful effort to reorient a debate that has roiled politics not only in America but in other Western democracies. And that, as Eric Kaufmann rightly insists, will continue to do so in the coming decades.

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Amercia’s surging politics of victimhood and identitarian division did not emerge organically or inevitably, as many believe. Nor are these practices the result of irrepressible demands by minorities for recognition, or for redress of past wrongs, as we are constantly told. Those explanations are myths, spread by the activists, intellectuals, and philanthropists who set out deliberately, beginning at mid-century, to redefine our country. Their goal was mass mobilization for political ends, and one of their earliest targets was the Mexican-American community. These activists strived purposefully to turn Americans of this community (who mostly resided in the Southwestern states) against their countrymen, teaching them first to see themselves as a racial minority and then to think of themselves as the core of a pan-ethnic victim group of “Hispanics”—a fabricated term with no basis in ethnicity, culture, or race.

This transformation took effort—because many Mexican Americans had traditionally seen themselves as white. When the 1930 Census classified “Mexican American” as a race, leaders of the community protested vehemently and had the classification changed back to white in the very next census. The most prominent Mexican-American organization at the time—the patriotic, pro-assimilationist League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)—complained that declassifying Mexicans as white had been an attempt to “discriminate between the Mexicans themselves and other members of the white race, when in truth and fact we are not only a part and parcel but as well the sum and substance of the white race.” Tracing their ancestry in part to the Spanish who conquered South and Central America, they regarded themselves as offshoots of white Europeans.

Such views may surprise readers today, but this was the way many Mexican Americans saw their race until mid-century. They had the law on their side: a federal district court ruled in In Re Ricardo Rodríguez (1896) that Mexican Americans were to be considered white for the purposes of citizenship concerns. And so as late as 1947, the judge in another federal case (Mendez v. Westminster) ruled that segregating Mexican-American students in remedial schools in Orange County was unconstitutional because it represented social disadvantage, not racial discrimination. At that time Mexican Americans were as white before the law as they were in their own estimation.

Half a century later, many Mexican Americans had been persuaded of a very different origin story. Among the persuaders-in-chief was Paul Ylvisaker, head of the Public Affairs Program at New York’s wealthy Ford Foundation during the 1950s and 60s. Though little-known today, he wielded great power and influence to advance a particular vision of social justice inspired partly by socialism and its politics of resentment. Ylvisaker hoped, as he later put it in a 1991 essay, “The Future of Hispanic Nonprofits,” that Mexican Americans could be organized into a “united front.” That concept, formulated in 1922 by the Comintern, implied a union of disparate groups on the Left into what the Comintern’s 4th World Congress called “a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie.”

Ylvisaker, who saw philanthropy as “the passing gear” of social change, set off to find out if something similar was possible with Mexican Americans. In 1968, he poured $2.2 million in seed funding into the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), a national advocacy conglomerate whose headquarters still buzz with activity in Los Angeles today.

He built on foundations laid by the organizing guru Saul Alinsky, who had begun the effort to consolidate the Mexican-American
Assimilation has been a goal of Mexican Americans for most of their history. One hundred fifteen thousand or so former citizens of Mexico chose to stay north of the Rio Grande after the 1846–48 Mexican-American War. They occupied a territory much like many others that America obtained either through purchase or at the point of a sword. Like the Dutch of New York, or the Cajuns and Spanish of the Louisiana Purchase, Mexican Americans freely intermarried with the Scottish, Irish, Scots-Irish, and German Americans who populated the Southwest.

Well into the 1960s, a desire to be absorbed into the great American melting pot made many Mexican Americans suspicious of continued immigration, which was high from the 1890s on. Mexican Americans concluded that "the needs and interests of American citizens simply had to take precedence over the problems faced by the growing Mexican immigrant population," according to the U.C. San Diego social scientist David G. Gutiérrez in his book Walls and Mirrors (1995). For most community leaders, "Mexican Americans were in fact Americans and therefore should make every effort to assimilate into the American social and cultural mainstream."

Two organizations stood out for their support of assimilation. One was LULAC, created in 1929 to help Latinos improve their lot through education and employment; by the early 1940s, LULAC had 80 chapters in several states. The other was the Mexican American Movement (MAM) and its monthly newspaper, La Voz Mexicana (the Mexican Voice), which ran between 1938 and 1944. A MAM editorial in the Voice declared: "If you desire to remain here, if your future is here, you must become a citizen, an American."

Continued immigration made this process harder. Eminent social scientist George I. Sánchez of the University of Texas told the New York Times in 1951 that illegal immigration in large numbers could transform "the Spanish-speaking people of the Southwest from an ethnic group which might be assimilated with reasonable facility into what I call a culturally indigestible peninsula of Mexico."

After World War II, however, activists started to become very critical of such assimilationist tendencies. Roybal’s election campaign drew attention to the criticisms, as did the 1948 presidential run of Henry Wallace, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s former vice president. Wallace often spoke to crowds in Spanish while on government business. Scholar Kenneth C. Burt does not exaggerate when he writes in U.C. Berkeley’s Public Affairs Report of 2002 that these races were “a turning point in American politics.” They opened a new era of identitarianism for those who wished to win the Mexican-American vote. At the same time, sympathetic groups emerged like the Community Service Organization (CSO), financed by Alinsky and supervised by one of his top lieutenants, Fred Ross, from 1947 onward. What the CSO wanted was votes, and thus the politicization of a Mexican-American bloc.

Ross, dubbed “Red Ross” by his critics, feared Mexican Americans lacked “civic organization that could provide a base for people to work on their own problems and to cooperate with other groups that shared similar goals.” Other activist organizations agreed with him. Ross’s initiative soon began to pay dividends, however. The CSO registered 15,000 new voters for the Wallace campaign.

Books discussed in this essay:

**Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority**, by Peter Skerry.
Free Press, 463 pages, $29.95

The University of Chicago Press, 256 pages, $30 (paper)

**Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity**, by David G. Gutiérrez.
University of California Press, 321 pages, $31.95

Russell Sage Foundation, 416 pages, $34.95 (paper)

Oxford University Press, 400 pages, $35 (cloth), $19.95 (paper)

Free Press, 950 pages, out-of-print

Palgrave Macmillan, 308 pages, $34.99 (paper)

**Assimilation and Its Discontents**

Assimilation has been a goal of Mexican Americans for most of their history. One hundred fifteen thousand or so former citizens of Mexico chose to vote during Ed Roybal’s 1949 L.A. City Council election. Roybal, an army veteran and distant descendant of New Mexico’s Spanish settlers, was one of many Democrats at the time whose success in local politics owed much to Alinsky’s organizing tactics. Alinsky’s groups comprised a racial minority group. Americans “accepted a disadvantaged minority at all. As Skerry noted, “[the] race idea is somewhat at odds with the experience of black Americans to that of Latinos. The term La Raza, literally “the race,” by itself epitomized this process of racialization. Ylvisaker was direct on this point. In 1964 he handed UCLA researchers the then-goodly sum of $647,999 for a deep survey of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. One of the things he wanted this survey to find out was in what respect the Mexican-American experience was comparable to that of “Negroes today.”

Peter Skerry, a political scientist at Boston College, discussed this movement in his 1993 book, Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority. The idea, Skerry wrote, was to convince people that “like blacks, Mexican Americans comprise a racial minority group. This abstraction poses no problems for the ideologically oriented Chicano activists who see the world in such terms.”

The process would only work if Mexican Americans “accepted a disadvantaged minority status,” as sociologist G. Cristina Mora of U.C. Berkeley put it in her study, Making Hispanics (2014). But Mexican Americans themselves left no doubt that they did not feel like members of a collectively oppressed minority at all. As Skerry noted, “[the] race idea is somewhat at odds with the experience of Mexican Americans, over half of whom designate themselves racially as white.” Even in the early 1970s, according to Mora, many Mexican-American leaders retained the view that “persons of Latin American descent were quite diverse and would eventually assimilate and identify as white.” And yet “Spanish/Latino” is now a well-established ethnic category in the U.S. Census, and many who select it have been taught to see themselves as a victimized underclass. How did this happen?
especially in places like L.A.'s Boyle Heights. In that same article from the Public Affairs Report, Burt calls Boyle Heights "a cauldron of leftist political activity" where residents were "radicalized by events in their home countries (including the Russian Revolution and the Mexican Revolution)."

Within a decade, there had emerged what sociologists Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz described in their book Generations of Exclusion (2008) as "an explicitly nonwhite racial identity...which provided fertile ground for progressive political activism, including the Chicano movement." Carmen Samora, daughter of La Raza's Julian Samora, argued in her 2011 doctoral thesis for the University of New Mexico that "The CSO effectively politicized the community of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles after WWII.

To the CSO and its new wave of activists, assimilation as embraced by older groups such as LULAC implied a degrading concession that Mexican culture was inferior. "Americanization came to embody the Anglo majority's attitudes," wrote George J. Sánchez, a professor of American studies at the University of Southern California, in Becoming Mexican American (1993). For the new generation of activists, identifying with America felt uncomfortably like disowning Mexico.

Indeed, one of the sustaining creeds of U.S. politics since the founding has been that America's republican form of government and the culture that support it are superior to others. Why else would millions of settlers and immigrants over hundreds of years be drawn so steadily to America? Seeking to explain America's distinctive attraction, the social scientist Louis Hartz in his classic Liberal Tradition in America (1955) noted (not without some consternation) that America lacked a feudal tradition, and that this made the U.S. uniquely impervious to both socialism and reactionary conservatism. Both those movements thrived in Continental Europe and its colonial offshoot, Latin America, where they had experienced feudalism. American liberalism, by contrast, bred an individualistic ethos and an attachment to natural rights and private property.

In other words, a distinctive set of beliefs, customs, and habits supported the American political system. If the Cajun, the Dutch, the Spanish—and the Mexicans—were to be allowed into the councils of government, they would have to adopt these mores and abandon some of their own. It is hard to argue that this formula has failed. Writing in 2004, political scientist Samuel Huntington reminded us that "Millions of immigrants and their children achieved wealth, power, and status in American society precisely because they assimilated themselves into the prevailing culture."

Mexico has a history of feudalism and a tradition that de-emphasizes private property. Its ejido system consisted of communally owned lands that were tilled by individuals, but to which those individuals had no title. Americans desiring the assimilation of Mexican Americans into the national polity might encourage the retention of, say, strong family units that transmit a robust work ethic to new generations. At the same time, they would be loath to see them import other mores that would weaken America's attachment to private property and civic spirit.

So when the activist-scholar Ernesto Galarza complained in his 1973 essay "Alviso" that assimilation made Mexicans in America lose their collectivist traditions, so that "[b]y the beginning of the 20th century these traditions had been replaced by a characteristic version of [W]estern, individualistic society," he was definitely on to something. That was the idea.

Galarza cut his political teeth during the Wallace and Roybal campaigns. Both
candidates attracted support from radical elements, including Communists and community organizers who increasingly saw Mexican Americans as a potential source of political power—if only they would consent to being organized around feelings of racial grievance.

Playing the Race Card

The activists who fomented such grievances had two weapons at their disposal: ideology, and the economic incentives that government and private actors soon began offering to members of groups who claimed to be as oppressed as blacks had been.

On the ideological front, the activists had realized that the vehicle for radical change would not be the workingman, but the identity group. They were influenced by European Communist thinker Antonio Gramsci, who in the 1930s had a transformative epiphany: Marx had promised that the working class would overthrow the bourgeoisie, but the working class had been astonishingly bad at achieving revolution. He and others later, particularly the German-American Columbia University Professor Herbert Marcuse, agreed that it was nearly impossible to instill into the proletariat the feelings of resentment that would conduce to mass organization. Man can aspire to improve his economic condition, after all. What he cannot change is his race or sex.

These weren’t just theories: Marcuse took a personal hand. He directly shaped the worldview of the future Black Panther Angela Davis, to whom he taught philosophy at Brandeis. His exhortations to destroy the patriarchal family were repeated nearly verbatim by the feminist theorist Kate Millet, with whom Marcuse held a famous “Dialogue on Feminism and Socialism” at U.C. San Diego in 1975. “All liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude,” wrote Marcuse in his 1964 book, One-Dimensional Man. The working class, however, had no interest in such self-realization. “[T]hey find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment,” Marcuse despaired. The vanguard of the revolution therefore had to come from “the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors.”

Thus, whatever their individual aspirations, Mexican Americans (and later Hispanics) had to begin accepting their new status as substratum outcasts. The critical theorists saw the division of the country as a propitious opportunity to create a “counter-hegemony” and up-end America’s value system. President Lyndon B. Johnson’s press secretary, Bill Moyers, recounted years later (1978) in the New Perspectives Quarterly that he would send LBJ essays by Marcuse on how the Great Society “requires the transformation of power structures standing in the way of its fulfillment.” It is hard to believe that Johnson read Marcuse’s abstruse writing, but obviously those around him did.

Which brings us to the economic incentives. Activists saw a pot of gold when Johnson decided in the mid-1960s that the government was going to spend lots of money on the Great Society. Benefits such as quotas in government contracts, electoral redistricting, and affirmative action would eventually be dangled as the wages of minoritization. To be able to tell a tale of oppression and discrimination would help get intended beneficiaries anything from a Small Business Administration loan to a spot in the incoming class at Princeton.

The husband and wife duo of Frances Fox Piven (a prominent socialist) and Richard Cloward (then a professor at Columbia University) sounded almost giddy when they wrote in the Nation in 1966, “Whereas America’s poor have not been moved in any number by radical political ideologies, they have sometimes been moved by their economic interests.” Cloward was no mere bystander. His research in 1960 with his fellow professor Lloyd Ohlin had led to the idea of creating local neighborhood organizations to organize and radicalize minorities. That study was then used by the Ford Foundation to justify its “Gray Areas” project, an initiative that got the ball rolling with grants to community organizing groups in Boston, Philadelphia, Oakland, New Haven, and Washington, D.C. When Johnson launched his Great Society, a major source of inspiration was Gray Areas. It was founded and funded by Paul Ylvisaker.

Broadening the Horizons

It remained a problem, however, that most Mexican Americans simply did not think they had suffered oppression akin to that of blacks. This actually became clear in Ylvisaker’s 1966 Ford Foundation-funded
The Unsung heroines of the 1920s
WHO SAVED THE REDWOODS?
Laura and James Wasserman
234 pages $21.95
Powerful lumber interests stood in the way of the first campaigns to save the redwood trees of California, but they were boldly opposed and pushed back. This history of the early 1900s recalls the Progressive Era crusades of women and men who prevailed against great odds, protecting the best of California’s northern redwood forests.

THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM NOBODY ASKED FOR
Robert Lockwood Mills
240 pages $21.95
We accept our two-party system as vital to the functioning of a democratic republic, when in fact the Founding Fathers feared that such a structure would lead to the preeminence of the parties themselves over the commonweal. Obviously, this has occurred. Our media, especially television, thrive on controversy, often for controversy’s sake. They happily highlight spitting contests between political rivals, while pretending to act as a balancing scale. It doesn’t work, because the scale itself is broken.

ALGORA PUBLISHING
Nonplussed by World Events?
THE US SUPREME COURT AND RELIGIOUS OVERREACH
Scott Rutledge
156 pages $19.95
The Supreme Court is no longer a strictly legal institution, if it ever was one; thus the impassioned political struggles when a new justice is appointed. Moreover, the Court now claims a role as an originator of new laws and policies. Lawyer Scott Rutledge explores the troubling situation through a careful selection and assessment of a dozen highly controversial cases.

THE NEW COMMONWEALTH
FROM BUREAUCRATIC CORPORatism TO SOCIALIST CAPITALISM
Claudia A. Secara
296 pages $24.95
As the US piles on layers of bureaucracy, and antagonizes allies in Europe and Asia, Russia has shed its empire and shifted some power to its regions while courting neighbors with mutually profitable partnerships. How far-reaching might the changes be? The author “analyzes worldwide political and economic developments of the past decades, particularly in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and the potential for a reinvented Russia.” Secara suggests that, by compromising the old communist orthodoxy as well as the new casino capitalism, Russia will find its way back to “socialist capitalism”—through which the country can become the dominant power in a Eurasian commonwealth within a new world order.” — Booklist review

THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM NOBODY ASKED FOR
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MEGA-STUDY WHICH REVEALED DEEP AMBIVALENCE ON THE TOPIC. BASED ON INTERVIEWS WITH 1,550 RESIDENTS OF LOS ANGELES AND SAN ANTONIO, THE FINDINGS WERE PUBLISHED BY UCLA RESEARCHERS LEO GREBLER, JOAN MOORE, ANDRALPH GUZMAN UNDER THE TITLE THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN PEOPLE: THE NATION'S SECOND LARGEST MINORITY.

As the title suggests, the study was designed to prove that Mexican Americans constituted a racial minority whose grievances raised (or lowered) it to victimhood and therefore entitled it to benefits. The new leaders that had emerged from the L.A. cauldron “were beginning to recognize that the national minority definition would ease rather than aggravate the group’s problems,” wrote the researchers. “The concrete gains that would result from a joint classification with other disadvantaged national minorities were increasingly seen as more than offsetting a possible loss.”

But even the study’s authors admitted that the narrative was flawed. “Prejudice has been a loaded topic of conversation in any Mexican-American community,” they wrote. “Indeed, merely calling Mexican-Americans a ‘minority’ and implying that the population is the victim of prejudice and discrimination has caused irritation among many who prefer to believe themselves indistinguishable [from] white Americans.... [T]here are light-skinned Mexican-Americans who have never experienced the faintest...discrimination in public facilities, and many with ambiguous surnames have also escaped the experiences of the more conspicuous members of the group.”

Even worse, there was also “the inescapable fact that...even comparatively dark-skinned Mexicans...could get service even in the most discriminatory parts of Texas,” according to the report. These experiences, so different from those of blacks in the South or even parts of the North, had produced a long and bitter controversy among middle-class Mexican Americans about defining the ethnic group as disadvantaged by any other criterion than individual failures. The recurring evidence that well-groomed and well-spoken Mexican Americans can receive normal treatment has continuously undermined either group or individual definition of the situation as one entailing discrimination.

It is incumbent on us to pause and note exactly what these UCLA researchers were boasting. Their own survey was revealing that Mexican-Americans’ lived experiences did not square with their being passive victims of invidious, structural discrimination, much less racial animus. They owned their own failures, which—their experience told them—were remediable through individual conduct, not mass mobilization. Their touchstones were individualism, personal responsibility, family, solidarity, and independence—all cherished by most Americans at the time, but anathema to the activists.

The study openly admitted that reclassification as a collective entity serves the purposes of enabling one to see the group’s problems in the perspective of the problems of other groups. The aim was to show “that Mexican Americans share with Negroes the disadvantages of poverty, economic insecurity and discrimination.” The same thing, however, could have been said in the late 1960s of the Scots-Irish in Appalachia or Italian Americans in the Bronx. But these experiences were not on the same level as the crushing and legal discrimination that African Americans had faced on a daily basis. That is why the survey respondents emphasized “the distinctiveness of Mexican Americans” from blacks and “the difference in the problems faced by the two groups.” The UCLA researchers came out pessimistic: Mexican Americans were “not yet easy to merge with the other large minorities in political coalition.”

With the help of the Ford Foundation, however, that would soon change. The crucial breakthrough came in the 1970s, when it dawned on the leaders of radical groups that “Mexican American” was too limited as a racial category. That community’s concentration in the Southwest meant that its issues would not get the national attention activists wanted. Thereafter, militants from La Raza, MALDEF, and other organizations put pressure on the Census Bureau to create a Hispanic identity for the 1980 Census—in order, as Mora puts it, “to persuade them to classify ‘Hispanics’ as distinct from whites.”

The Hispanic category was a Frankenstein’s monster, an amalgam of disparate ethnic groups with precious little in common. The 1970 Census had included an option to indicate that the respondent was “Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, [or] Other Spanish.” But re-categorizing Mexican Americans and lumping them in with other residents of Latin American descent under a “Hispanic American” umbrella was a necessary move, Mora writes, because “this would best convey their national minority group status.”

La Raza executive director Raul Yzaguirre made it clear why the Census should reject the questions it had used for decades, which gathered objective information about respondents’
national origin. “There is a difference,” Yzaguirre wrote in the 1974 records of La Raza’s National Council, “between a minority group and a national origin group—a difference recognized in terms of national economic and social policies as well as a lengthy, broad ranging legal history relative to civil and minority rights.

On the legislative side, Alinsky’s launch of Ed Roybal ended up paying huge dividends. In 1975, by then a leading member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Roybal authored Public Law 94-311, which mandated special what the law regards as essential to this su-

national Council, “between a minority group

Cuba, Central and South America, and other

Spanish-speaking countries.” This remark-

Spanish-origin or descent,” making PL 94-311 the only

origin or descent from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish-speaking countries.” This remark-

Congress in 1975 that English-only ballots

Mexican Americans could not have been ab-

Filipinos appear to be culturally homogenous.”

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Had these groupthink tactics not been so ef-

Mexican Americans seemed eager to follow it.

As Mora stresses: “It did not have to happen.”

Those of us who believe that individual re-

of victimhood.

Changing the Narrative

But why have so many people been

co-opted into believing in the validity of

of this invented racial category? Mora

explains: ‘A sort of collective amnesia sets

in as organizations begin to refer to the new
category’s long history and develop narratives

about the rich cultural basis of the classifica-
tionalized, and the new classification is, like

other classifications, assumed to have existed

since time immemorial.

That this amnesia has prevailed is still

surprising. In the 1950s, when a young Ju-
lian Samora was at university, he experienced

pushback on the idea of a pan-ethnic identi-

His academic mentor, George I. Sánchez,

then at the University of Texas at Austin, told

Samora, “For gosh sakes, don’t characterize

the Spanish-American with what is obviously

ture of the human race.” According to the his-
torian Benjamin Francis-Fallon in his 2012

Georgetown dissertation, Minority Reports,

Sánchez wrote to Samora in the early ’50s

that it takes “a veritable shotgun wedding to

make Puerto Ricans, Spanish-Mexicans, and

Filipinos appear to be culturally homogenous.”

Sánchez was preaching the individual aspira-
tion that the activists loathed: as Francis-Fal-

fon puts it, “Material improvements in jobs,
housing, and schools would not only allow

[Mexican Americans] to live better but would

reveal their fundamental similarity with other

Americans.”

Sánchez lost the argument. Samora and

radical groups like La Raza made sure that

victimhood became the rationale for group

formation. Along with fabricating the His-

panic identity, equating the unparalleled suf-

fering of blacks to the condition of Latinos has

been one of the activists’ greatest triumphs.

We have Spanish-language ballots today, for

example, because the Ford Foundation’s grant

recipients at MALDEF were able to convince

Congress in 1975 that English-only ballots

were the equivalent of Jim Crow poll taxes.

Absent these converging phenomena—

the ideology, the funding, the advantages of

compensatory justice,” the emergence of de-
termined individuals in powerful positions—

Mexican Americans could not have been ab-
stracted into a racial minority, let alone formed

into the nucleus of a larger pan-ethnic group.
The success of that project inspired other dis-
parate groups—foremost among them the in-
numerable distinct ethnicities and nationali-
ties which are now classed as “Asian”—to rally
behind massive super-ethnicities in the name
of victimhood.

Grievance-mongering created for a vast ar-
ray of American institutions what sociologists
Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning call
Victimhood Culture”—the title of their 2018
book on America’s current oppression fetish.
Victimization, they write, becomes “a way of
attracting sympathy, so rather than empha-
size either their strength or inner worth, the
aggrieved emphasize their oppression and
social marginalization.... People increasingly
demand help from others, and advertise their
oppression as evidence that they deserve re-
spect and assistance.”

This paradigm is predicated on a collectivist
understanding of society, rather than the in-
dividualist striving that Alexis de Tocqueville
identified as the hallmark of early America.
Had these groupthink tactics not been so ef-
fective, we might not have identity politics to-
day. There was a different path available, and
Mexican Americans seemed eager to follow it.

As Mora stresses: “It did not have to happen.”

Those of us who believe that individual re-
ponsibility is a far better route to success than
racialization can still reverse what Ylvisaker,
Samora, Alinsky, and the rest have wrought.
Our first enemy is ignorance. The radicals
who victimized America have done their best
to cover their tracks: general unawareness of
how, and why, the U.S. today is mired in iden-
tity politics makes the victimhood narrative
harder to defeat. That is the reason the myths
still exist, and why we must dismantle them.

Mike Gonzalez is the Angeles T. Arredondo E
Pluribus Unum Senior Fellow at The Heritage
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The Plot to Change America: How Identity
Politics is Dividing the Land of the Free (En-
counter Books).
Book Review by Nicholas Eberstadt

The Future of the Work Ethic

*The Forgotten Americans: An Economic Agenda for a Divided Nation*, by Isabel Sawhill. Yale University Press, 272 pages, $28


In the decades since the Soviet Union collapsed, America’s wealth machine has been the wonder of the world, our political and military dominance of the globe unprecedented. But the social foundation for this prosperity and power has been beset by a growing crisis. Something has gone badly wrong in our domestic project. Yet our explainers and deciders, for the most part, are still at a loss to see just what this might be.

The dysfunction is vividly illustrated by overall trends for a particularly awful recent patch: the years 2000-12, a time that spans the Clinton, Dubya, and Obama presidencies.

Over that 12-year period, the country’s population rose by roughly 30 million and private net worth soared by $28 trillion (trillion with a “t”; on average, this meant over $300,000 in new wealth for every notional American family of four). Yet the number of people on means-tested benefits jumped by 33 million during those same years, and the increase in private sector jobs was just barely positive; the net addition of less than one million such paid positions works out to fewer than 80,000 a year. Our new American economic reality—the one currently impressed in the living memory of any man or woman under age 40 today—is a system generating more wealth for the wealth-holders, but less work (and more dependence) for workers. Thus was the stage set for a populist storm.

The only wonder, in retrospect, was that it took until 2016 to break.

Since 2016, dazed policy analysts from the better zip codes have been struggling to understand what has happened in the country they thought they knew—and why. The learning curve has been arduous and problematic, not least because most of today’s think-tankers and academics are almost completely out of sympathy with the populist wave that upended their preferred Blue and Red presidential candidates in that electoral cycle. To make matters even more confusing, thanks to the famous “bubble” Charles Murray details in...
his book Coming Apart (2012), these same analysts tend to be separated from direct contact with the mysterious creatures (also known as voters) who brought politics as usual to an end in 2016.

The best of this cadre, however, recognize that the grievances which brought a sort of populism to power in America were not imaginary, and have been asking the right questions: How (and why) has the U.S. socio-economic system failed so many of its citizens? What might be done to repair it?

Two noteworthy books have advanced this effort: Isabel Sawhill’s The Forgotten Americans and Oren Cass’s The Once and Future Worker. Sawhill, onetime Clinton Administration official and current Brookings Institution scholar, is a center-left economist, highly regarded in Washington circles for almost half a century. Cass, a rising “reform conservative” star at the Manhattan Institute, served as domestic policy guru in Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential campaign.

Both Sawhill and Cass identify the collapse of work in modern America—especially for men, and, in particular, for men of prime working age without college degrees—as the epicenter of the present American socioeconomic crisis. Both offer detailed, carefully argued approaches for getting America back to work, and more broadly for revitalizing our society and economy.

Although the Sawhill and Cass assessments and prescriptions differ appreciably, what may surprise is the number of points upon which the authors agree, among them: 1) the current over-emphasis on GDP growth as an end in itself; 2) the failure of postwar trickle-down economics to lift all boats; 3) the need to subsidize wages for low-paying jobs; and 4) the importance of immigration control, including limits on the number of less skilled foreign workers entering the country.

At the same time, Sawhill and Cass overlook some of the central problems inextricably linked to the collapse of work in modern America. Both their strengths and their weaknesses clarify the question of how, and whether, we can meet this challenge.

It is about improving the lives of those who are neither rich nor poor but somewhere in the middle. And it is about policies linked to mainstream values such as family, education and work.

For Sawhill, however, this appears to be a second-best agenda, reflecting her judgment that it is the most the political market will currently bear. Drawing on public opinion and survey data, she links the relative decline in U.S. working-class fortunes to an array of sociopolitical attitudes and economic views she regards as benighted or worse—most crucially, in her view, distrust of government and government programs. “As long as a majority of the population remains hostile to government,” she theorizes, “it will be difficult to move forward with a more enlightened set of policies”—by which she means more redistribution by a bigger government. Instead, she has organized an agenda “around three values [that] might command broad support... family, education, and work.”

Sawhill counts 63 million Americans in the white working class, which she defines as non-Hispanic white men and women aged 25-64, whose educations stopped short of a four-year college degree. Nowadays, fewer than three fifths of these working class whites are married, nearly ten percentage points fewer than for elite whites, as she calls those who have at least a bachelor’s degree. Counterintuitively, “working-class whites’ labor force participation levels are 11 points below those of elite whites. And when working class whites are actually working, elite whites earn 77% more than they do because of what Sawhill calls “a precipitous decline in the relative wages of the less educated.” Pointing to the work of Harvard University economist Raj Chetty, she warns that fewer and fewer young Americans are earning more than their parents did. Chetty’s studies suggest 30-year-olds are now as likely to make less than their parents did at the same age (adjusted for inflation) as to make more, partly due to slower overall economic growth, but mainly to growing differences in earnings and incomes. But Sawhill emphasizes that she has tailored an economic agenda for all “forgotten Americans,” not just disgruntled Anglos. By her broader definition, which includes non-college men and women of all ethnicities in families earning less than $70,000 a year, forgotten Americans comprise 38% of the working age population.

To her credit, and unlike her Team Left colleagues who favor an unconditionally guaranteed Universal Basic Income, Sawhill squarely frames the road to recovery for today’s forgotten Americans in terms of “moral agency” and “personal responsibility,” a phrase she uses far fewer than nine times in this short volume. She extols what she calls “the success sequence”:

If an individual does just three things—graduates from high school (at least), works full time, and marries before having children—that person’s chance of being poor plummets from about 14% to about 2%, and the chance of being middle class [which she defines as a family income at least three times as high as the official U.S. poverty line] rises to 70%.... What the country needs are policies that give people a fair chance to succeed in their roles as students, as workers, and as parents in the twenty-first century economy.

Consequently, most of the book is devoted to outlining Sawhill’s schema for supporting family, education, and employment for the forgotten Americans.

So far, so good: but the devil is always in the details, and as non-partisan readers examine the fine print in Sawhill’s proposals they may find it more difficult than expected to make common cause with this self-professed “radical centrist.”

Sawhill is at her most persuasive on education and training. She insists “we need to...
prepare people better for the jobs that exist” and rightly faults America’s elementary and secondary schools for failing to impart more knowledge and skills to more students. She advocates a big new government initiative she calls “a New G.I. Bill for America’s Workers” for upgrading educational opportunities, not only for college aspirants but also for what used to be called “vocational” trainees. The returns from such an effort, she indicates, could be high: one particularly attention-grabbing study suggests that simply matching Canadian levels of student test scores would hike U.S. paychecks by as much as 20%. The price tag for her plan is about 1% of GDP (meaning for now roughly $200 billion a year), though much of this outlay would cover the Europe-style “active labor market policies” she admires—apprenticeship systems, job placement programs, etc.—rather than education and training per se.

Sawhill has other big-government ideas for boosting the availability of better paying jobs as well. One is “an independent investment bank...for funding investments in infrastructure and basic research.” Given the ways of Washington, however, such an organization is more likely to end up looking like Amtrak than RAND. She also wants to raise the minimum wage to $12 an hour, expand tax credits for child care, and develop a new work credit to raise the take-home pay for men and women earning less than $40,000 a year. She proposes funding some of the new spending envisioned here from an aggressive new round of estate taxes on the “One Percent.” Untaxed intergenerational wealth transfer is anathema to Sawhill, who decries America’s lax death tax policies in four of her book’s ten chapters.

As conservatives rethink their approach to labor policies, Sawhill may find allies across the aisle who will concur with her concept of subsidizing low-wage work (including Oren Cass, though he disdains the existing Earned Income Tax Credit—the main tax credit for poorer workers—as byzantine and unfriendly for its supposed beneficiaries).

Sawhill’s approach to family policy, by contrast, is a consensus-killer. While eschewing the woke identity politics that has poisoned the progressive wing of her party, she seems unaware that her own position on the family is itself rigid, ideological, and polarizing.

The reveal comes early on, with her explication of why strong stable families are desirable: “having two earners is one way to boost family income.” The possibility that such families might be better off for other reasons as well—or better off even if one spouse decided to stay home with the kids instead of dropping them at government-sponsored daycare on the commute to work each day—does not merit mention. The author is equally tone-deaf in extolling “responsible parenting and family formation,” which to her apparently involves large supplies of “long-acting forms of contraception.” She warns that without government cost coverage for “the most effective forms of contraception...we will have not just more poverty and less opportunity but also higher costs for Medicaid.” Population controllers wary of heedless breeders abroad sometimes used those same arguments for mobilizing foreign aid, although they have learned to be circumspect about this. It is even more disconcerting to hear the same dog-whistle trained domestically, on our own citizens. So much for a “less-divided nation.”

The dirigiste utilitarianism in Sawhill’s approach to poor families, however, applies equally to families of the well-to-do. She wants American families to be strong—just not too strong. Otherwise, they might transmit unwarranted opportunities and benefits to their kin. Thus she gives a shout-out to her Brookings colleague Richard Reeves’s case for eliminating tax benefits for college savings plans, child care, etc., for upper-middle-class parents (who are denounced as “dream hoarders”). The author also inveighs repeatedly against intergenerational inheritance, a practice “inconsistent with basic American values.” To Sawhill’s bafflement and exasperation, voters from all income groups still want parents to be able to bequeath a fortune to their kids if they somehow manage to accumulate one.

In effect, her family policy seems to count on embedding in each American household an overbearing and somewhat out-of-touch relative, by the name of Uncle Sam. Uncle insists on the final say over many questions bearing directly on family wellbeing—but he is arbitrary and inconsistent, and he plays favorites. Is it really any wonder that many families, and a great many hard-pressed families, do not trust Uncle’s judgment?

Yes—we are back to that lack of trust thing again. Try as she will to comprehend their point of view, Sawhill concludes that America’s disaffected white working class is just plain illogical in its aversion to more government. “There is little question in my mind the white working class is voting against their own self-interest,” she writes. She has learned from Berkeley’s Professor Arlie Hochschild, who studied Cajuns closely, that
How could it be that, poorly educated as they admittedly are, these forgotten Americans cannot see that the value-added taxes, and carbon taxes, and all the rest of the redistributionist apparatus that Sawhill and her allies would like to impose on them today are actually in their best interest?

Cass considers himself a conservative, but the vision he lays out would have been regarded as heretical by many American conservatives in the not-too-distant past. His is a conservatism with much less confidence in the market's spontaneous order, and much more reliant on government-abetted social solidarity and “social capital” augmentation. The resulting rethink is a decidedly post-“leave us alone” agenda, resembling instead the outlook of Christian Democratic parties in Europe after World War II.

Cass posits what he terms “the Working Hypothesis: that a labor market in which workers can support strong families and commun

To be sure, the failure to create more work is part of the problem, but neither the entirety nor the crux of it.

The Once and Future Worker outlines the path to that vision, policy by policy. Cass wants much more education and training targeted at the non-collegiate population; the reintroduction of tracking in high school; a clampdown on low-skill migration to America; a complete overhaul of social welfare policies to reaffirm the importance of working for all who can; and a managed trade policy to help revive the manufacturing sector, which he considers the wellspring of better-paying jobs for less-educated Americans.

Most significantly, he calls for subsidizing work—big time. Cass talks of a $3-an-hour hike in wages for American workers, a bonus directly added to each weekly paycheck through a sort of negative payroll tax. Although he does not specify all its details, what he has in mind is clearly a pricey program. He puts the cost of this initiative at $200 billion, but my back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest it could easily come in between two and four times that amount. In his vision, the new U.S. welfare state would be kinder and gentler, with more subsidiarity and less centrally administered dependence. But the government that Cass envisions would almost certainly be even bigger than the one we support today—and the unintended consequences of subsidizing cheap labor on a mass scale are worthy of a consideration which he does not provide.

Unlike many policy tomes, The Once and Future Worker is a pleasure to read. An extraordinary chapter castigates environmental policy that “justifies itself by assigning enormous economic value to clear air and water, while refusing to consider the effects of regulation on the level, quality, or trajectory of employment.” Cass argues compellingly that the prospect of massive labor displacement due to artificial intelligence and machine learning is seriously overblown, since “an abstract description rarely captures the full complexity of any job.” It is probably still too soon to know whether this time really
will be different, but if the next round of technologically induced disruptions in the labor market proves to be of historically familiar magnitudes, Oren Cass will have explained why in advance.

Not all of his book, however, meets the exceptionally high standards of those two chapters. His discussion of labor unions and the future of work, for example, gets oddly dreamy. Cass is under no communicant illusions about modern America’s unions, which he considers “woefully incompatible with the demands and opportunities of the modern economy and actively harmful to both workers and firms.” But then he imagines a post-Wagner Act (the New Deal legislation that authorizes our present system of collective bargaining with organized labor). In this business-labor Ellysium, management and workers will cooperate together creatively in co-ops. Kind of like German Mitbestimmung, only better! Please. In our real existing America, the most likely place and time for such a high-minded workplace revolution are: nowhere, and never.

In fairness, Cass’s enterprise co-op fantasy is essentially harmless, since it is so utterly unlikely ever to take root in the U.S. Not so his misguided notions about managing trade to revitalize employment, and, in particular, to stimulate a new wave of manufacturing jobs. These proposals could find political resonance in an increasingly populist America, and some day might even be embraced as policy. But the all-too-predictable impact of such protectionist ambitions would be a poorer America— and one with less demand for work thrown into the bargain too.

The populist fixation with manufacturing jobs isn’t hard to understand. Typically, these have provided good pay and steady employment for Americans with less formal education. But manufacturing is a diminishing sector in the economy, and manufacturing jobs are a diminishing share of the labor market. Beginning with the work of 1971 Nobel laureate Simon Kuznets, three generations of economic historians have traced the “structural transformation” that accompanies modern economic development. As societies the world over grow more prosperous, their shares of output and employment in agriculture dwindle to negligible proportions. Sooner or later, the same thing happens in the industrial sector. This is supply and demand: manufacturing productivity frees up labor for other pursuits, while consumer choices limit the market for machinery. All affluent societies are service economies—there are no exceptions.

Consequently, the share of industry and industrial jobs continues to decline more or less everywhere. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), just under 10% of U.S. employment in 2017 was in manufacturing. The corresponding figure in Canada that year was 9%, and 8% in the Netherlands, Norway, and Australia. None of those societies suffers from obvious under-industrialization.

Rich countries with abnormally large manufacturing sectors have distorted economies—and pay for these distortions either by soaking their neighbors (as Germany does through the European Union) or by soaking their own population (as Japan has done with its generation of lost growth). Sawhill—unlike Cass, a skeptic of industrial policy and managed trade—insists “the idea that we can bring back manufacturing jobs in large numbers is misguided”—and that looks like the right call.

Cass plays the China card to justify a more interventionist trade policy—probably the strongest card in his hand. He bemoans the “China shock,” the surge of cheap manufactures that shuttered U.S. plants after Beijing’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). MIT’s David Autor and others have estimated that the China shock resulted in the loss of two million or more blue-collar jobs in the early 2000s. Cass also points to China’s theft of international intellectual property, an ongoing crime spree costing the world hundreds of billions of dollars a year.

But China’s industrial espionage is illegal right now—we don’t need a whole new managed trade policy to address it, just an elected government with the courage to confront Beijing about its criminal behavior. There may even be a case for systematically excluding China from our international supply chains, but this would be a one-off, special-case national security argument, not a precedent for Washington’s global micromanagement of trade and finance. As for the “China shock”: subsequent research by economists Robert Feenstra and Akira Sasa- hara suggests that the U.S. lost little if any net employment from the expansion of international trade between 1995 and 2011, including China’s accession to the WTO. Rather, the disruption to manufacturing employment was more than offset by a surge in service, the sector now accounting for a third of all U.S. exports.

Why the fetish about manufacturing jobs? On a mean hourly basis, U.S. service sector jobs actually pay slightly better than manufacturing work. Some of Cass’s trade policy
proposals—such as increased scientific research—win on their own merits, and are only indirectly connected to trade. But other impulses sound confused: do we really want to restrict foreign investment in America, especially when companies like Nissan and Volkswagen create the manufacturing jobs of which Cass approves? It may help sell other components of Cass’s overall vision if proponents can tell voters they are “tough on trade.” More generally, however, the very best state-directed trade policy for the U.S. economy and the American worker would be one that never gets off the drawing board.

The mystifying difficulty of drawing millions of lost men back into the workforce is also partially explained by another huge social problem hiding in plain sight: America’s ex-con explosion. This is a second blind spot for Sawhill and Cass, and for that matter for almost all those who write about getting America back to work. Since the U.S. government inexplicably neglects to estimate the size of our sentenced population, even well-informed Americans are commonly unaware that the jailed and imprisoned population in our era of “mass incarceration” comprises a tiny fraction of all Americans with a felony conviction in their backgrounds—maybe only a tenth, or less.

The rest—by now likely well over 20 million adults, to build on the path-breaking demographic reconstructions of Sarah Shannon of the University of Georgia and her colleagues—are in society at large, i.e., back in the “civilian non-institutional population” that the Bureau of Labor Statistics references for all its job market statistics. These former convicts are overwhelmingly male: currently something like one in eight adult men in the general U.S. population is an ex-con.
The proportion is very likely higher for those of prime working age—and on current trajectories, the share of male ex-cons of prime working age is set only to increase. While we, inexorably, lack any official employment data on this large and growing contingent of Americans, we can be sure that the ex-cons are over-represented in the pool of labor force dropout, their employment prospects clouded by what economists call “institutional barriers.” Until our government inquires about their plight, they will remain statistically invisible in a way that precludes evidence-based policy.

Finally, there is America’s strange and ominous long-term stagnation in educational attainment. Although Cass does flag this problem in passing, neither he, Sawhill, nor most others concerned with the employment crisis seem to appreciate just how dire it is, and how troublesome are its implications. Research on international educational attainment by Robert Barro of Harvard and Jong-Wha Lee of Korea University shows that Americans were the world’s most highly educated population (in terms of years of schooling) from the 1870s until more or less yesterday. By their reckoning, however, America has achieved only marginal gains in educational attainment for its working age population since the 1970s. Indeed: according to U.S. Census Bureau data, mean years of schooling for Americans in their late twenties was barely three months higher in 2006 than for their parents 30 years earlier.

This is not because the United States reached some insurmountable asymptotic threshold in the 1960s. By Barro’s and Lee’s estimates, educational attainment for U.S. youth 15-24 years of age had dropped to seventh place by 2010—falling behind Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Iceland. Furthermore, by 2010 such countries as Canada, Ireland, Japan, and Singapore likewise had overtake America in the percentage of persons in their late twenties with college degrees. Particularly shocking is America’s “male fail” in higher educational attainment. Census Bureau figures document an eerie stall and slump in matriculation levels for American men in their late twenties, whose college graduation rates in 1977 were higher than ten, 20, or even 30 years later. This dramatic, prolonged, and highly unnatural setback has occasioned remarkably little alarm, or even comment—and so far as I can tell, no one as yet has seriously tried to explain its causes.

Of course, better elementary and secondary teaching is a pressing national need—as is ramping up vocational training. But there should be no doubt that America needs more—and better-trained—college graduates. America today is under-colleged: with more and better college and post-collegiate training our nation would be richer, our growth rates would be stronger, more people would be at work, and median worker incomes would be higher. It is quite possible that income inequality in our society would be less pronounced as well. Most of the measured income gains since the 1970s have accrued to those with college degrees or better. A substantially greater supply of highly trained workers might have moderated those striking returns to higher education. Until, and unless, we understand the reasons for America’s stagnation, and relative international decline, in educational attainment, and redress this abnormality, progress against our ongoing employment crisis and its allied afflictions will be correspondingly limited.

The men disconnected from the workforce; the vast and yet somehow invisible army of former convicts; the new normal of unfathomably slow advances in educational attainment—these are just some of the major problems hiding in plain sight. Though American power and plenty are at their zenith, we are a deeply wounded land. Material poverty has been more or less banished, but our country is awash with misery.

Our policy analysts and public servants have been slow to comprehend this paradox, even though it is fundamental. And though the misery in our wounded nation is by no means entirely economic in nature, there is a glaring financial component to it. America is mightier and richer than ever before, even as economic self-reliance is on the wane and dependence is on the upswing. The United States may be practically sloshing with money overall, but fewer and fewer Americans are managing to find their own personal path to prosperity.

Figures from the Federal Reserve indicate that the real net worth of the least prosperous half of America is no higher today than it was 30 years ago—at the fall of the Berlin Wall. On a per household basis, this Fed reckoning suggests that the real net worth of America’s poorer half is actually substantially lower today—perhaps as much as a third lower than it was in late 1989. America may have won the Cold War, yet that great victory has not been accompanied by anything like a social triumph for our people.

A workable formula for prosperity for all is sorely needed in America. Coming up with such a formula, one could argue, is the urgent and overarching task facing our country today. Getting America back to work would surely be an important step on a road to prosperity for all. But that is only the beginning of the journey.

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It was a rainy Wednesday evening on the Ohio River, November 15, 1843. John Quincy Adams was aboard the steamboat *Benjamin Franklin*, making his way up the river from Marietta, Ohio, to Pittsburgh. A few prominent citizens from the Marietta area accompanied him, among them Ephraim Cutler. Adams was a famous American, son of a president, a former diplomat and president himself, still an active member of Congress, known as “Old Man Eloquent” for the felicity of style with which he championed his staunch anti-slavery politics—which went hand in hand with his pro-American, pro-science, pro-humanity politics. He was returning from a trip to Cincinnati, whither he had gone, at some risk to his health, to lay the cornerstone for what David McCullough in *The Pioneers* notes “may have been the first public observatory in the western hemisphere.” As usual, Adams was thinking big. He wrote of this occasion as an opportunity to build congressional support for the new Smithsonian Institution and generally to advance the cause of learning:

> to turn this transit gust of enthusiasm for the science of astronomy at Cincinnati into a permanent and persevering national pursuit, which may extend the bounds of human knowledge and make my country instrumental in elevating the character and improving the condition of man on earth.

Ephraim Cutler was one of a handful of the obscure “pioneers”—including his father Manasseh Cutler, Rufus Putnam, Joseph Barker, and Samuel Hildreth—who brought higher learning and much else to the wilds of Ohio and who are McCullough’s heroes in this book. For half a century, McCullough has won Pulitzer Prizes and National Book Awards by turning out bestsellers about famous Americans like John Adams, Teddy Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and the Wright Brothers. So much is he identified with America’s story that he was the natural pick to narrate Ken Burns’s acclaimed documentary, *The Civil War* (1990). Now he has written a book “about a cast of real-life characters of historic accomplishment who were entirely unknown to most Americans,” as he puts it. He had wanted to write such a book since he first saw Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*, as a young man. “I always thought it would be wonderful to write a book like *Our Town,*” he says, “but I would write about real people instead.”}

Cutler and Adams were the same age, 76, and their fathers, both New Englanders, had known one another back in the heady days of the 1770s and ’80s. They talked long into the night as the *Benjamin Franklin* carried them up the river. Among their topics was John Adams’s role...
in “securing the Northwest Territory for the United States” in the 1783 Treaty of Paris. This is the historical beginning of the story of The Pioneers: the acquisition by America, as a result of victory in the war for independence, of “all the lands controlled by the British west of the Allegheny Mountains and northwest of the Ohio River east of the Mississippi.” This was the first land owned by the government of the newly sovereign United States of America, “265,878 square miles of unbroken wilderness.” It was an area larger than France, and half as large as the entire territory of the 13 states that had fought for and won independence. It had over 3,000 miles of shoreline on four of the five Great Lakes. Eventually the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin would be carved from this vastness. But in 1783, it was a “howling wilderness,” with no road, bridge, town, church, school, store, or tavern.

When Cutler expressed the gratitude of Ohioans for the statesmanship of Adam’s father a lifetime ago, he “saw the tears gather in Adams’s eyes. Another witness to the conversation recalled that “Adams’s voice faltered in saying that ‘he rejoiced to find that there were some who still remembered the services of his beloved father.’” But immeasurably more important than the acquisition of this immense domain were the distinctly American moral and political purposes that would govern it. These purposes came to be memorably expressed in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. “One of the most far-reaching acts of Congress in the history of the country,” as McCullough calls it, the Northwest Ordinance ranks with Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence as a great milestone in the history of human freedom. In it is found the moral core of McCullough’s story.

As he writes, “the Northwest Ordinance was designed to guarantee what would one day be known as the American way of life.” He emphasizes especially articles 1, 3, and 6 of the Ordinance, respectively securing freedom of religion, providing for education, and prohibiting slavery:

Art. 1. No person, demeaning himself in a peaceable and orderly manner, shall ever be molested on account of his mode of worship or religious sentiments, in the said territory....

Art. 3. Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged....
convention and the exclusion of slavery from Ohio, Adams said, “with emphasis”: “slavery must and will soon have an end.” But that end would not come soon enough or easily. Both men would die before the great crisis over slavery nearly destroyed the country.

The fact that the two old men were traveling on a steamboat was itself remarkable. When the American settlers came to the territory back in the 1780s and ’90s, they had to make their own canoes and flatboats, which were powered by water currents and human muscle. Steam power did not arrive in the western territories until 1811, and by revolutionizing travel and commerce it brought down the nearly 1,000-mile Ohio River, it came to define an era. By 1820 there were 63 steamboats operating on the river, some of them as large as 200 tons, double-deckers, with 12-foot-wide paddlewheels—the kind of thing that entranced Mark Twain in his boyhood.

Following the steamboats were the railroads, but when the first pioneers arrived in the territory in 1788, there were no roads at all, much less rail roads. To travel or transport goods on land, the pioneers had to cut their own roads through virgin forests. Forests, rivers, mountains, seasons, and weather play significant roles in McCullough’s story. The pace of the story is the pace of the first pioneers: 48 men, carefully selected by the Ohio Company of Associates, starting out in December 1787 from Ipswich Hamlet in Massachusetts and Hartford, Connecticut, to walk 700 miles—by many, and it required a sawmill. Sawmills operated on water power; but when the pioneers arrived at Sumerill’s Ferry on the Youghiogheny River, the water was frozen. Once they got working, it took nearly two months to build the necessary boats and canoes and a galley, named the Mayflower, that could carry 50 tons. They arrived at Marietta on April 7, 1788. Once arrived, they needed to clear land and build shelters. It could take one man three to four weeks to “chop down a single acre of hard-wooded forest, leaving the stumps in the ground.... Many of the giants surviving stumps were to last for decades.” Then because of the wet weather, the huge piles of logs had to be constantly rolled and re-piled to keep them from rotting. A great part of McCullough’s charm is his nearly inexhaustible interest in the world around him, especially the American part of it. He is interested in what it takes to walk several hundred miles in winter over mountains and through wilderness with no roads; to know where you’re going; to repair wagons, build boats, and make your way down (and up!) rivers in different seasons; to make and acquire provisions, stay healthy, bear illness, design and construct shelters; to clear forests, plant and harvest crops; and to establish towns, start libraries, and found universities in the middle of nowhere. McCullough’s book delights in this drama of human purpose, endurance, and skill.

It may be sound tradition not to judge a book by its cover, but this book deserves to be judged in the first instance by its title and subtitle. They fully express the unashamed admiration the author has for his subject. McCullough’s pioneers were heroes, because of what they did and how and why they did it. A pioneer, according to the standard dictionaries, is a person who goes before others to prepare or open up the way; one who begins, or takes part in beginning, some enterprise or course of action; an innovator, a forerunner. To this day, local sports teams in the Marietta area proudly call themselves “pioneers.” No one has passed a law against it yet. Christopher Columbus, the Puritans, Lewis and Clark, unnamed thousands in covered wagons on the Oregon Trail, generations of astronauts—all were pioneers. Venturing forth into unknown worlds is something that is essential to the West broadly speaking and to America and the American West. It is heroic partly because stepping into the unknown is intrinsically heroic. It takes courage—maybe even daring or recklessness—and a kind of intrepidity to walk, or sail, or fly away from all that is familiar into regions where everything that happens will depend on you and the elements, unknown forces, and luck. Even the “brought” of the title is powerful.

McCullough is a man of this West. He is a native of Pittsburgh, where a bridge is named after him. He is grateful that the pioneers brought the American way of life, defined by the American Ideal, to this wild country in place of whatever the uncertain alternatives might have been. This meant above all that slavery would be forever prohibited in this territory. It would be the home of the free. Bringing this American freedom to a large expanse that might otherwise have remained or become subjected to one form or other of despotism is what crowns the heroic accomplishments of the pioneers.

The story of America is precisely the heroic story of pioneers who bring the American ideal again and again to the West. In 1788, the West was the largely unknown country northwest of the Ohio River. The West would keep moving west, as the frontier receded. But West is not just an earth-bound geographical direction; it is an idea. As we have been reminded this year, with pictures of Buzz Aldrin placing an American flag on the moon 50 years ago, the cosmos itself is the West. As long as Americans are Americans, as John Quincy Adams might say, they will extend the bounds of human knowledge and make their country instrumental in elevating the character and improving the condition of man on earth and even in the heavens. Or as Abraham Lincoln put it, the American principle of liberty for all gives hope and industry to all and is constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.

America today is deeply divided into two parties: those who celebrate this American spirit and those who condemn it. The former would embrace McCullough’s title and everything it implies; the latter would make it impossible to grant a Pulitzer Prize or a National Book Award to anyone using it. It is a fair barometer of our current politics that this book would simultaneously leap to the best-seller lists and be morally condemned by Harvard and Columbia University professors on social media and in the New York Times and Washington Post. Too much white perspective, old stereotypes, an outdated narrative of American progress and exceptionalism; it should have focused on “indigenous” peoples and been told from their perspective, and so on and tediously and insidiously on.

“What then is the American, this new man?” asked J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in his Letters from an American Farmer, 60 years before John Quincy Adams and Ephraim Cutler made their way up the Ohio River. As long as the American story continues to unfold and is not replaced by someone else’s story, this answer will suffice: he is a pioneer.

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The year 1989 brought not only the end of the Cold War but also The End of Nature, one of the first books to address global warming, by the New Yorker journalist and climate activist Bill McKibben. Its title quickly crept into the folklore of environmentalism, overturning much inherited common sense about man’s relationship to nature. The legal philosopher Jedediah Purdy, for example, while not denying that there was such a thing as a “natural world,” nonetheless told an interviewer in 2015 that “nature’ no longer exists independent of human activity. From now on, the world we inhabit will be one that we have helped to make, and in ever-intensifying ways.”

Intellectuals have grown ever more confident that man is calling the shots. Some have taken to calling our epoch “the Anthropocene,” on the model of a geological epoch, like the Pleistocene or the Holocene. One is reminded of the wiseacre high-school-yearbook quotation that was popular in the middle of the last century:

God is dead.
—Nietzsche

Nietzsche is dead.
—God

For surely the relevant problem is not that man has done away with nature but that nature might do away with him. We have courted danger in so many ways, with pesticides and disease research, with genetic manipulation, cloning, and nuclear fission. It was quite natural that, once the Cold War’s distractions had passed, our relationship with nature would move to the center of our political life. Less expected was that the specific obsession that would seize the imagination of political activists was the weather.

A New Ideology

Worrisome rudiments had long been known. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) absorbs heat. Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius warned at the turn of the 20th century that, as coal and oil burned and CO₂ accumulated, the atmosphere would warm. In 1958 the oceanographer Charles Keeling set up a U.S. Weather Bureau observatory in Mauna Loa to measure atmospheric CO₂ concentrations, which have shown a steep and almost perfectly linear rise ever since. Measurements taken of the Arctic ice cap in the 1960s showed alarming melting. But it was only at the end of the 1980s that scientists’ data came to preoccupy politicians, bringing hearings by Democratic senators Tim Wirth of Colorado (who sought a “New Deal for global warming”) and Al Gore of Tennessee. In 1988 an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was founded at the United Nations. Ever since, the IPCC, backed by a hard core of professors and political agitators worldwide, has been locked in battles with the American, Chinese, Indian, Russian, Brazilian, and other national governments over how serious a problem global warming is, what measures must be taken to correct it, and who must pay for them. A “Green New Deal,” going far beyond Wirth’s early proposals, may soon be part of the Democratic Party platform.

The novelist Nathaniel Rich, in a new history, Losing Earth, has focused on the late Cold War origins of climate consciousness. His claim is that we might have stopped global warming in its tracks back then, had we been bold enough to act. “[I]n the decade that ran between 1979 and 1989, we had an excellent chance,” he writes. “The world’s major powers came within several signatures
of endorsing a binding framework to reduce carbon emissions.... [W]e came so close, as a civilization, to breaking our suicide pact with fossil fuels."

No, we didn't. We didn't even come into the general neighborhood of doing that. A faithful reporter and a stylish writer, one with a gift for seeing complexity, Rich nonetheless has trouble thinking his way into the very different kind of environmentalism that existed before global warming became a global cause. But what did happen in those years is just as interesting, and visible at the margins of his book: a new internationalist ideology was born out of the ashes of the one that had just been vanquished.

The hero of Rich’s tale is Rafe Pomerance, grandson of the financier, philanthropist, and New Deal architect Maurice Wertheim, son of an important nuclear disarmament activist, and himself a welfare agitator until his awakening to environmentalism. That is fitting. Just as the “Christian Right” at the end of the 20th century was invigorated by imports from other, not conspicuously religious branches of the Republican Party, the climate movement is full of people from various non-meteorological walks of progressive life. To take just intellectuals, the anti-capitalist activist Naomi Klein writes increasingly about global warming. So do the prison reformer Michelle Alexander and the Indian novelist and literary radical Arundhati Roy. The novelists Jonathan Safran Foer, Amitav Ghosh, and (in France) Fred Vargas have all put their fiction careers on hold to write short, urgent non-fiction books about global warming—Ghosh, strangely, wondering why more people aren’t devoting their lives to writing about global warming. Rich’s own “climate fiction” (or cli-fi, as it is called) includes a love story set in a submerged Manhattan of the future.

It is fitting, too, that Pomerance should be not a scientist but a lobbyist. It is an article of faith today among those who deplore the prison reformer’s own scientific rightness has made them science’s enemies as often as its friends. Many in the anti-global-warming movement are so confident about their science that they do not think they need scientists. They need uncomplicated activists, such as the Swedish high-schooler Greta Thunberg. “The climate crisis already has been solved,” the 16-year-old Thunberg said at a TED Talk in Stockholm this year. “We already have all the facts and solutions. All we have to do is wake up and change.”

Politics and Pollution

So it has been from the beginning. If there is a low point for environmentalists’ hopes in Rich’s book, it comes with the 500-page National Academy of Sciences report Changing Climate, commissioned by Jimmy Carter in 1979 but not published until 1983, well into the Reagan Administration. Rich describes the moment as “lethal” to the climate activists’ cause. The report gathered dozens of the nation’s most distinguished oceanographers (including Roger Revelle of U.C. San Diego), economists (including William Nordhaus of Yale), climatologists and mathematicians—and lined them up behind hole,” as Rich puts it, “and there was no layer.” But it resulted in a such a broad nationwide uncase (albeit more over skin cancer than global warming) that Ronald Reagan, theretofore a skeptic, called for a 95% reduction in CFCs and signed the 1987 Montreal Protocol to limit greenhouse gases. The Antarctic ozone “hole” is now shrinking rapidly. If climate change (the science) is an “inconvenient truth,” climate change (the cause) frequently advances through convenient half-truths and even falsehoods.

Much of Pomerance’s work was in goading the climatologists he worked with (for example, the NASA computer modeler Jim Hansen) to be more attentive to P.R., and to recognize that “[pol]itics offered freedoms that the rigors of the scientific ethic denied.” These freedoms have always lain temptingly within the grasp of scientists, but Rich misses the Faustian aspect to them. The authority of science wanes in equal measure as the political engagement of the individual scientist deepens. In recent years the same rules have applied, mutatis mutandis, to political journalism and journalists.

One of the reasons Rich believes the 1980s could have been a watershed moment for climate activists is that many industry-affiliated bodies had shown themselves ready to investigate and solve ecological problems. In 1968, the American Petroleum Institute (API) commissioned a study from the Stanford Research Institute—“Sources, Abundance and Fate of Gaseous Atmospheric Pollutants”—in which the authors alluded to the possibility of “significant temperature changes” before 2000. Temperatures did indeed rise by just under 1°F over that period, according to NASA. Rich is not alone among climate-change activists in treating this API report as a “smoking gun”—evidence of oil-industry foreknowledge, and thus culpability. But to examine the original document, which is available online, is to see that it is no such thing. The report is tentative and deferential, citing Revelle’s warming theories, yes, but also research that warned of cooling.

The API did call it “ironic” that so much attention was then being paid to incidents of pollution here and there, so little to the overarching climate. They were right about this: in the early 1980s only seven of the 13,000 employees at the Environmental Protection Agency worked on climate. Yet you can see why an “abatement” approach, a mix of public-sector regulation and private-sector offshoring of dirty industries, was attractive in the 1980s. It was producing extraordinary results: the Charles River in Boston, so dirty at the start of the Reagan Administration that university rowing crews were required to get tetanus shots if they capsized, is swimmable a

Books mentioned in this essay:

*The End of Nature*, by Bill McKibben. Random House, 224 pages, $17 (paper)

*Losing Earth: A Recent History*, by Nathaniel Rich. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 224 pages, $25 (cloth), $16 (paper)


generation later. Today, wolves have returned to the woods around Washington, D.C., and bald eagles to the coast of Maine. That is one reason why the country was not clamoring for a climate-change program at the end of the 1980s. If the problem was a form of “pollution,” then why risk upsetting the economy to fix a situation that was visibly improving?

There is no inherent reason why a scientific question such as climate should divide one political party from another. There is no Democratic and no Republican position on the temperature at which water boils. If today Republicans welcome climate skeptics more than Democrats do, their differences are probably over policy, not science. Just under half of Republicans agree that there is a scientific consensus that global warming is happening.

This statistic infuriates Rich. It ought to be unanimous, as he sees it, and the 1980s mark the moment when Republicans descended from the reasonableness of those API studies to Reagan’s “thuggish” deregulation, on their way to the “mustache-twirling depravity” of today’s party. George H.W. Bush’s chief of staff, John Sununu, whom Rich accuses of politicizing science, argues that no climate-change agreement was ever a possibility back then: “It couldn’t have happened,” he tells Rich in an interview, “because the leaders in the world at that time were all looking to seem like they were supporting the policy without having to make hard commitments that would cost their nations serious resources.”

Rich does not believe him, but Sununu is correct. When Bill Clinton signed the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, the Senate, by a vote of 95-0, refused even to consider ratifying it. Barack Obama chose a different route after the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. He ignored the constitutional requirement for Senate ratification altogether. Instead, Obama “ratified” the agreements reached in Paris by signing a personal “deal” with Chinese Premier Xi Jinping on a visit to Hangzhou in September 2016, promising (promising whom?) to “accept the said agreement and every article and clause thereof on behalf of the United States of America.” That bit of legerdemain did not make the Paris accords the law of the land. It did make them government policy—albeit for a much shorter while than had been anticipated in the autumn of 2016.

Rich ends his book on a “woke” note, if we can use that word to mean orotund, incendiary, and blind to any possibility of good faith in those who disagree with him. He accuses any politician who so much as claims to be unsure about climate change of “crimes against humanity,” the offense that was established as a grounds for hanging Nazis at the Nuremberg trials. “There will eventually emerge a vigorous, populist campaign to hold to account those who did the most to block climate policy over the last forty years,” he writes, and today’s lawsuits “may seem tentative compared with the vengeance to come.” At this point, the reader who has been nodding off will snap alert and ask: am I reading too much into this, or is he proposing to string a few of these people up?

From Ecology to Environmentalism

Rich, perhaps without intending to, charts a shift of paradigms—from the “ecological” perspective common to hippies and other nature-lovers at the start of the 1980s to today’s hard, “environmentalist” perspective, which is in some ways diametrically opposed to it. In the 1960s and ’70s, almost everyone had thought as an ecologist. It was understood that problems were accumulating in the “outdoors”: smog, junk floating down rivers, broken glass. A frequently aired public-service ad showed an Indian in tribal dress paddling his canoe out of a primeval forest, beaching it on a pile of garbage, then having a paper bag full of fast food heaved onto
his moccasins from the window of a speeding car. The old ‘ecological’ paradigm conformed to a long Western ethical and intellectual tradition. Its manifesto, to the extent it had one, was Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered (1973), a collection of essays by E.F. “Fritz” Schumacher, refugee from Hitler, head of planning at the British National Coal Board, and brother-in-law of the theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg. Schumacher’s message was simple: The earth’s resources are limited and, in many cases, unrenewable. We are wasting them.

The countercultural theorist Theodore Roszak placed Schumacher alongside Tolstoy, Gandhi, William Morris, and Lewis Mumford in the tradition of “anarchism, if we mean by that much-abused word a libertarian political economy that distinguishes itself from orthodox socialism and capitalism by insisting that the scale of organization must be treated as an independent and primary problem.” So while Schumacher was a kindred spirit to this hero of the hippie movement, he was also someone whose vision could inspire anyone who thought about life in a traditional or religious way. It might be necessary, Schumacher argued, to take a step back and reconsider whether our position is sufficiently respectful of nature, or sufficiently respectful of God. Our problem was that we were “inclined to treat as valueless everything that we have not made ourselves.”

This was particularly the case with fossil fuels. As people in the 21st century would, Schumacher worried that we were using them too much—although part of his worry was that we were using them up. Modern man, like a dissolve heir, was burning through his inheritance, treating his capital as if it were income. Schumacher noted especially that we were burning through “a certain kind of irreplacable capital asset, the tolerance margins which benign nature always provides.” While this perspective vindicates the global-warming concerns of our time, it also repudiates our time’s simple solutions. Because if Schumacher is right that fossil fuels are capital, then once we have run through them, we will have run through them. Abandoning fossil fuels will not necessarily mean carrying on modern life in a wiser, saner way. It might mean giving up modern life altogether. We will either find another source of stored energy, such as nuclear power, or we will revert more or less to the way we got energy before: water, and the labor of animals, including ourselves.

Schumacher’s “ecology” was a system that ordinary citizens could understand by looking at it. Ecological damage consisted of things that citizens could pick up and filter out. People could thus judge the severity of the problem of pollution and instruct their elected representatives on how much they wanted done to fix it. The evidence from history is that they wanted quite a lot. That is why you can swim in the Charles today. The “ecological” understanding of nature and what it requires from us is compatible with democracy.

Modern “environmental” climate activism is less obviously so. Its science is mysterious to people, and science sometimes seems far from its main focus. To read almost any of the contemporary books that try to give an overview of climate change is to be struck by their non-scientific obsession with “capitalism.” Princeton English professor Roy Scranton, in Learning to Die in the Anthropocene (2015), describes the environmental crisis as “the collapse of carbon-fueled capitalism” and warns that “global decarbonization is effectively irreconcilable with global capitalism.” Similarly, the Harvard historian of science, Naomi Oreskes, co-authored a science-fiction dystopia about climate change, The Collapse of Western Civilization (2014). She and Erik M. Conway of the California Institute of Technology cast the enemy as the “carbon-combustion complex,” backed not just by energy companies but also by those who profit from them (advertisers, public relations, marketing firms).

First World Problems

If all our cars were solar, then advertisers would shill for sunshine just as ardently as they now do for oil.

Today,” writes Scranton, “global power is in the hands of a tiny minority, and the system they preside over threatens to destroy us all.” However true that might be as a description of economic privilege, it is diametrically wrong as a description of the politics of global warming. The problem is rather that access to (carbon) power has been democratized and decentralized, and that coal mining, traffic jams, and air-conditioned malls are now widespread in the most teeming parts of what used to be struck by their non-scientific obsession to quantify) calls for a new economic order (which it will require esoteric expertise to design). The case does not lack for supporting evidence. With a world population headed towards 10 billion, many of them in places with a precarious food supply, we might not have the luxury of a global economy subject to great fluctuation. But Oreskes and Conway have an additional gripe. Like Rich, they are frustrated that so many scientists resist being politicized. The scientists have been “hamstrung by their own cultural practices,” they write, “unable...to act upon what they knew. Knowledge did not translate into power.” More power to experts: perhaps this has been the real climate agenda all along, whether the world is ending or not.
If the United States still dominated the consumption of fossil fuels, we could make a dent in the world’s carbon footprint by setting off on a jag of self-abnegation, however out of the national character such an impulse might be. But as Americans were aspiring to clean energy, the rest of the world began to aspire to the lifestyle that we had acquired (and maintain) through carbon energy. Our old profligacy had passed almost unnoticed as long as there were only a few tens of millions of us living this way; but as Asia and Africa caught up, the whole carbon game threatened to become unsustainable.

We have little to do for poor countries except lecture them. Oreskes’s novel records that we had acquired (and maintain) through carbon energy. Our old profligacy had passed almost unnoticed as long as there were only a few tens of millions of us living this way; but as Asia and Africa caught up, the whole carbon game threatened to become unsustainable.

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The Canadian energy scientist Vaclav Smil said, in a recent New York magazine interview with the climate author David Wallace-Wells, that the depopulation of advanced countries might be a plus for the earth’s future. "Partially there is a ‘hope,’ I would say, in the sense that we are dying out,” Smil said. “As we have seen over the past three decades, once you get to 1.3 or 1.4 [children per woman per lifetime, the rate in many countries of Europe], there’s no... chance in hell that it could ever recover. Japan is losing now half a million people every year.” But this is a “hope” only so long as the green space freed up by depopulation does not get filled with migrants. If it does, then the level of economic sophistication will likely fall, and energy efficiency will fall along with it. "Mere, not less, energy use will be the result. Most solutions to climate change are of this nature—miscalculation or poor execution can exacerbate the problem."

"As our technology grew more sophisticated," Nathaniel Rich writes, "our behavior grew more childish." It is a true and profound insight. Climate change is one of a family of crises of modernity involving Prometheus hubris and unfunded externalities. It connects to all kinds of conflicts between nature and culture, or between barbarism and civilization, or between (to use Bertrand Russell’s dialectic) freedom and organization. Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway speak for many climate-change activists when they imagine that future generations will marvel at "how we—the children of the Enlightenment—failed to act on robust information about climate change.” They probably won’t marvel at it so much if they recall that the Enlightenment has many aspects. It is the source of certain values, the source of a new type of domination by experts, and the source of energy-extracting technologies that have brought wealth beyond man’s wildest dreams. Like many problems the Enlightenment gets called in to solve, this is one of its own making.

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Book Review by Daniel Johnson

ERIC THE RED


Bad ideas are rarely tainted by the evils perpetrated in their name. An ideologist can safely ignore evidence, however devastating, that his ideology brought untold suffering to countless people. If he brazes it out, a generation will eventually emerge with no memory of such horrors, whereupon he can impress new cadres of intellectuals all over again. Genius is not required—only longevity.

Historian Richard J. Evans's Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History perfectly captures this pathology. Marxism was already a zombie ideology by the time of Hobsbawm's birth in 1917. Economists already regarded the Marxist labor theory of value as a museum piece; social scientists noted that the working class had not been "immiserated," but had in fact prospered under capitalism. The German Social Democratic Party—by which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had set such store—had abandoned revolution in favor of reform and, like other Socialists in the Second International, had failed to prevent or even oppose the First World War.

Then came Russia's Bolshevik Revolution. It changed everything. Lenin and Stalin improvised their own version of Marxism—a shock therapy imposed on a peasant society at the cost of starving millions to death. The dictatorship of the proletariat, originally envisaged as a transitional phase, morphed into the one-party police state—a collectivist, totalitarian tyranny unprecedented in the scale of its savagery. The fact that Communism actually existed in the Soviet Union gave new life to the ideas that inspired it—ideas that could in turn be ruthlessly deployed to justify this new despotism.

In Hobsbawm's hands, an ideology that had once longed for government of the intellectuals, by the intellectuals, for the intellectuals, became instead a cynical calculus of power politics, in which the end of a Communist utopia justified any means, from Gulag to genocide. This is nowhere more obvious than in his attitude to an important aspect of his own identity: the fact that he was a Jew.

A couple of illustrations suffice. At a dinner party in the 1980s given by fellow historian Hugh Thomas, Hobsbawm held forth about the threat that the Middle East conflict might precipitate a superpower clash. David Pryce-Jones was present and, writing in the New Criterion, recalled that Hobsbawm said "it would be better to kill a few million Israelis by dropping a nuclear bomb on their country than to suffer the deaths of two hundred million Europeans and Americans in the Cold War nuclear exchange that he forecast would very soon happen. When I said that Goebbels was the last person I could recall who had spoken of mass murder in terms of arithmetic, an enraged Hobsbawm left the room and did not return."

This was no isolated outburst: Hobsbawm blamed the Jews for their own misfortunes. In 2009, he wrote, apropos of Gaza: "Let
Hobsbawm was born in Alexandria, Egypt, the son of Percy, an English postal official, and Nelly, a Viennese jeweler’s daughter. Their family name was Hobsbawm, but Eric’s name was misspelled by the clerk who registered his birth. The only other member of the clan to distinguish himself was Philip Hobsbawm, a poet and critic, impressive not least for having held out against the academic Marxism of which his cousin became high priest.

At age two, Eric Hobsbawm was transplanted from an outpost of the British Empire to post-imperial Vienna. His mother knew how to deal with the anti-Semitism that suffused the Austrian capital, warning him: “You must never do anything, or seem to do anything, which might suggest that you are ashamed of being a Jew.” Her son, however, thought he knew better. After his parents died, he moved to Berlin to be with an uncle working in the film industry. There, parachuted into the last years of the Weimar Republic as an orphaned and impressionable teenager, Hobsbawm became a Communist. For the next 80 years, until his death at 95, he saw no reason to modify his credo.

Although he remembered being terrified in Berlin—alone in a streetcar with Nazi stormtroopers, or stuffing Communist Party leaflets into postboxes—he was spirited out of the German capital in March 1933 by his uncle Sidney, before the real terror began. He entered London, “not as a refugee or emigrant, but as someone who belonged here,” he recalled. This is important: his decision to remain a party member in England was not a matter of existential survival, but cool calculation. “Drown yourself in Leninism,” he wrote in his diary. He admired Soviet leaders for combining principle and opportunism: “Lenin and Stalin were [great statesmen], Trotsky was not.” Already as a schoolboy, the iron had entered Hobsbawm’s soul. The ideas had taken root that would enable him to justify Gulag, famine, and terror.

At the buzz of Berlin, the longeurs of London made Hobsbawm eager to escape to Cambridge, where he studied history at King’s College (1936–39). The only academic there who impressed him was M.M. Postan, who knew his Marx—he had been a Communist at 17, he told undergraduates, “but I grew out of it.” Postan had experienced Bolsheviks firsthand in his native Bessarabia and knew how brutally they treated the peasantry and the bourgeois, but Hobsbawm only heard what he wanted to hear. He left university knowing far more about history, seen through a Marxist prism, yet none the wiser about its distortions. This was evident in his reaction to the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact of August 1939. Hobsbawm judged that Stalin had struck a blow for peace by isolating Hitler; in fact, Stalin had thrown the rest of Europe, including his comrades, to the wolves. “I don’t think there’ll be a war,” Hobsbawm wrote. Four days later, Hitler invaded Poland.

Hobsbawm was too busy writing pro-Soviet propaganda to question the party line (that this was an “imperialist” war), let alone the fact that his hero Stalin was on the war’s wrong side for two years. Drafted into the British army, Hobsbawm narrowly avoided being sent to Singapore just before it fell to the Japanese. Instead, he had a “good” war in the Army Educational Corps, where his intellectual prowess served him—if not always his country—well.

Hobsbawm did not have to choose between party loyalty and patriotism during World War II. That changed in the Cold War. When his first wife, Muriel, wished to signal that their marriage had broken down, she sent him a copy of Orwell’s anti-Communist novel Nineteen Eighty-Four. Such was his contempt for the British ruling class that he might have been surprised to learn how efficiently MI5 kept him and his party colleagues under constant surveillance. These detailed (and inadvertently hilarious) intelligence reports enrich Evans’s biography. The security services had themselves been penetrated, of course. After the spy Guy Burgess fled to Moscow, he called his friend to apologize for missing the annual dinner of the Apostles, the secretive Cambridge society, thereby “making absolutely certain that my phone would thenceforth be bugged.”

Hobsbawm, though, would rather be bugged than unbugged. He was indeed one of the Apostles, whose members permeated
what was just coming to be known as the establishment. Yet Hobsbawm’s tastes were demotic (jazz and cinema); he did not share their homoeroticism (he had many affairs, but only with women); and, above all, he was no fellow-traveler, but an unwavering Communist, dedicated to the long march through the institutions.

Finding the atmosphere more congenial at the workers’ evening schools offered by Birkbeck College, London, than among the jeunesse dorée at Cambridge, Hobsbawm moved to the capital. There he could play a significant part in Communist politics, not least as chairman of the party’s Historians’ Group, which included E.P. Thompson and Christopher Hill. The way that history is taught today in British schools and universities owes much to their ideological zeal.

The majority of evans’s huge biography covers the latter half of Hobsbawm’s career. Yet as his fame grew, the narrative lapses into a chronicle of visiting chairs (notably at the New School in New York), ever longer books (including his trilogy on the 19th century, The Age of Revolution, The Age of Capital, and The Age of Empire, and culminating in 1994 with his bestselling history of the 20th century, The Age of Extremes) and accolades, academic or political (Queen Elizabeth, on Tony Blair’s advice, made him a Companion of Honour). The man who considered himself an ‘outsider,’ even in the Communist Party, had become the ultimate insider of the establishment he despised.

The scale of Evans’s biography is disproportionate to Hobsbawm’s “life in history,” but it may yet justify itself by his daunting legacy. If you would see his monument, look around: the Leftist politicians of our day—not only fossils of the Cold War, such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, but also the new wave of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her ilk—echo Hobsbawm’s critique of the West and justification of its enemies. From neoliberalism to neo-imperialism, from capitalism to climate change, the free world’s supposed defects have been the relentless focus of that critique. The indifference of the “progressives” to, for example, famine-stricken Venezuela is striking: the cruelties of Chavez and Maduro are blamed on the U.S. The evils of empires that once worshipped at the shrine of Marx are still relativized.

And the relativist-in-chief has long been Eric Hobsbawm.

Even a sympathetic biographer like Evans cannot disguise his subject’s readiness to toe the party line. Other Communists could not stomach the invasions of Hungary or Czechoslovakia; Hobsbawm could. Others might have doubts about, say, the 45 million Chinese peasants who died in Mao’s Great Leap Forward; Hobsbawm showed none. Asked by Michael Ignatieff in 1994 whether it would have made a difference to his decision to become a Communist in 1934 if he had known about Stalin’s crimes, Hobsbawm replied: “Probably not...the chance of a new world being born in great suffering would still have been worth backing.” Ignatieff pressed him, asking whether “the loss of fifteen, twenty million people might have been justified?” Hobsbawm: “Yes.”

To write history as cold-blooded as Hobsbawm did is to consign humanity to perdition. But the historian who does so belongs, for his part, in a place too cold for Hell.

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Book Review by David P. Goldman

**TIME OUT OF JOINT**

*Time and Power: Visions of History in German Politics, from the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich*, by Christopher Clark.
Princeton University Press, 312 pages, $29.95

Christopher Clark is our outstanding historian of the Great War. His 2012 account of its beginnings, *The Sleepwalkers*, stunned the world and set a new standard in a field that most thought exhausted. Clark was the first Western historian to enter the Russian diplomatic archives. With them he showed that Russia mobilized first and made war inevitable at a moment when Berlin still expected a localized rather than a European war. He proved that Barbara Tuchman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the war’s beginning in *The Guns of August* (1962) transposed the date of Russian mobilization, delaying it by a decisive two days. Thus Clark discredited the black legend of unilateral German aggression, and with it the popular thesis that democracies don’t start wars; democratic France, eager to regain the territory lost in its 1870 war with Prussia, encouraged Russia to mobilize. The somnambulant autocracies in Berlin and Vienna stumbled into the war.

*The Sleepwalkers* addressed the “how” of World War I’s beginning. In the diffuse, fascinating, and frustrating *Time and Power*, Clark addresses the “why” by way of a meditation on the shifting self-image of the German nation from the Thirty Years’ War to the Hitler period (i.e., 1618–1945). Having established that the statesmen of Europe walked in their sleep, Clark now wants to know what they were dreaming—the better to understand the great changes in politics currently underway.

Brilliant as an investigator, Clark is out of his depth as a philosopher of history. He worries that the liberal vision of history as progress will give way now to an atavistic na-
tionalism that fabricates its past in order to repudiate history altogether. It may be too much to ask a historian of the Great War to take a benign view of nationalism. Clark certainly is justified in pointing to the risks attendant upon our present populist revival. As Angelo Codevilla observed recently in the Claremont Review of Books, “The Great War’s combatants...had become what one might call ‘idol states,’ objects of cult, ritual, and human sacrifice” (“Defending the Nation,” Winter 2018/19). I argued in my 2011 book How Civilizations Die that each of the European powers dreamed of its own national election as a new Chosen People. Nonetheless, Clark’s attempt to draw a parallel between the breakdown of the German state after World War I and the crackup of the 21st-century liberal order fails in both concept and narrative.

Clark has read his way into the theories of time which gained traction on the European continent during the 19th century. He cites Henri Bergson, Émile Durkheim, and Martin Heidegger, who “proposed that the ‘existential and ontological constitution of the totality of human consciousness [Dasein]’ was grounded in temporality.” Here we have an unintended irony: Clark draws on Heidegger to explain why a rupture in temporal sensibility risks encouraging a new kind of Nazism. But, he neglects to add, Heidegger’s own views on temporality led him to conclude that the concrete circumstances of his own time required support for Adolf Hitler. In 1933, during a conference at the University of Tübingen, the Marburg philosopher declared that

We have witnessed a revolution. The state has transformed itself. This revolution was not the advent of a power pre-existing in the bosom of the state or of a political party. The national-socialist revolution means rather the radical transformation of German existence.

That conference was organized by Tübingen’s local branch of the Nazi party. It is odd to warn that we risk a Nazi revival if we depart from a conceptual framework whose first conclusion was support for Nazism.

Clark reduces the issue of temporality to only two possible views: the linear notion of historical progress (à la liberalism) versus the perpetual present fed by obsession with an imagined past (à la premodern societies and Nazism). This juxtaposition leads Clark to the trivial (and wrong) conclusion that the populist rebellion against liberal progressivism represents a devolution to primitive, destructive expressions of nationalism.

Not only has the postwar liberal order failed, Clark avers; its intellectual foundation, namely the belief in progress over time, has fractured:

Liberal democracy is founded, no less than communism, on a linear understanding of history.... Both systems are founded on the intention to change reality for the better; at the heart of both is an idea of modernization that requires “breaking from the old and initiating the new”.... Hence the strong attachment of recent Democratic presidents in the United States to the notion that there is a “right” and a “wrong” side of history. But...[t]he abysmal failure of liberal democratic “nation-building” projects in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars discredited the pretensions both of “democratic peace theory” and of the political culture that gave rise to it.

The horrible alternative to the fractured liberal order, Clark tells us in the book’s introduction, is Donald Trump, who “mounted a challenge...to conventional American historicity by becoming the first president of modern times overtly to reject the notion that America occupies an exceptional and paradigmatic place at the vanguard of his-
tory’s forwards movement.” As Clark sees it, “In the United States, Poland, Hungary, and other countries experiencing a populist revival, new pasts are being fabricated to displace old futures.”

In my view, the linear notion of historical progress which Clark takes for “conventional American historicity” is neither conventional nor American. It is not conventional, because the Progressive movement advanced it at the turn of the 20th century in radical opposition to American convention. And it is not American, but rather a Hegelian cuckoo’s egg deposited in America’s nest by the Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch and others in the Social Gospel movement. Later I will discuss the American notion of temporality. Let us first examine Clark’s narrative.

After claiming that Trump and other populists resemble Nazis, Clark spends most of the book reviewing German history in order to arrive at a characterization of the Nazis that corresponds to his reading of Trump. He writes,

[German Chancellor Otto von] Bismarck’s historicity was riven by a tension between his commitment to the timeless permanence of the state and the churn and change of politics and public life. The collapse in 1918 of the system Bismarck created brought in its wake a crisis in historical awareness, since it destroyed a form of state power that had become the focal point and guarantor of historical thinking and awareness.

Among the inheritors of this crisis... were the National Socialists, who initiated a radical break with the very idea of history as a ceaseless “iteration of the new.”

Totalitarian regimes, Clark asserts, undertook “ambitious modern interventions in the temporal order.” They eschewed notions of progress in favor of a sentimental longing for their respective peoples’ mythic bygone days, so as to foster a sense of “deep identity between the present, a remote past, and a remote future.” The book devotes some attention to the Soviet Union’s official calendar, which in 1930 under Stalin was altered to replace the traditional seven-day week with a new one of five days, identified simply by colors and numbers. Clark calls this “a revolutionary experiment in reordering the human relationship with time.” But, oddly, he does not mention the great precedent for Stalin’s abortive experiment—namely the Jacobins’ ten-day week and renamed months. Perhaps this is because Clark likes the French Revolution, and blames the Nazis for having “neutralized” it.

Clark’s book compares the historical self-understanding of the Hohenzollern nobleman and Great Elector of Brandenburg Friedrich Wilhelm (ruled 1640-88), who built the state that would become modern Prussia and later modern Germany, to that of Bismarck in the 19th century and then that of the Nazi regime in the 20th. But this comparison is insufficient as an account of Germany’s national development. What was it that united the 36 major political subdivisions of Germany, guaranteed sovereignty in 1648 by the Peace of Westphalia, into one nation? It surely was not the Prussian monarchy. The Hohenzollerns, as Clark notes, had no historical connection to Brandenburg, the core of the future Prussian state, “purchased...in 1417 for four hundred thousand Hungarian gold guilders. Through strategic marital alliances, successive generations of Hohenzollern Electors had acquired territorial claims to a number of noncontiguous territories to the east and west.”

Under Friedrich Wilhelm’s grandson, Friedrich Wilhelm I, and great-grandson, Friedrich II (“the Great”), Prussia had neither the characteristics nor the self-under-
Discrimination and Disparities is a radical book, in the fundamental sense of going to the root of an issue. It challenges the very foundation of assumptions on which the prevailing “social justice” vision of our time is based. The first two chapters of Discrimination and Disparities present a new framework of analysis, and back it up with empirical evidence from around the world, before proceeding to demonstrate why and how so much of the “social justice” vision is a house of cards.

Some readers may find it surprising to discover what elementary fallacies provide the basis for many often-repeated assertions about the “top 10 percent,” “top one percent” or the “top 400” highest income recipients. The numbers behind such assertions may be valid as of a given moment, but most people’s lives last longer than a moment.

At some time during their lives, just over half of all Americans are in the “top 10 percent” in income. Internal Revenue Service data show that, over a 23-year period, there were 4,584 people in the “top 400”— and most of them were in that bracket just one year out of more than two decades. In many contexts, turnover is the ignored elephant in the room. Discrimination and Disparities points out many other elephants that have been ignored for far too long.

The fact that life has never been even approximately “fair,” in the sense of presenting equal chances for achievement to all individuals, groups or nations is undeniable. But that tells us nothing about the causes of particular skewed outcomes. Nor does it mean that we can reduce the causes to whatever fits a particular social vision, without putting that vision to the test of empirical evidence.

The alternative analysis and evidence offered in Discrimination and Disparities suggest that skewed distributions of outcomes are by no means improbable or unusual, whether among human beings or in natural phenomena beyond human control, such as tornadoes or earthquakes. This does not mean fatalistic acceptance of economic and social disparities. But it does suggest that much of what is said and done in the name of “social justice” is an impediment to creating greater opportunities for all.

Teachers who want their students to see more than one side of an issue may find Discrimination and Disparities especially appropriate for that role.
standing of a nation. Prussians constituted a minority of its soldiers during wartime, and German was a minority language in Berlin during most of the 18th century. Huguenots, Poles, Jews, and other immigrants replaced the majority of the population of Brandenburg and Pomerania that had been depleted during the Thirty Years’ War. Clark does not mention the man who compelled Prussia to transform itself from a territory, defined by the personal sovereignty of the monarch, into the core of the German nation. That man was Napoleon I. Napoleon’s levée en masse placed the whole of French manhood at his disposal and put a field marshal’s baton in the rucksack of every foot soldier, cutting through Prussia’s best armies and claiming swathes of its territory at the 1806 Battle of Jena. It was in the wake of this trauma that the atomized German princedoms began to develop a sense of national solidarity. The Hohenzollerns, then, were not the unifiers of the German nation.

Friedrich Wilhelm held power by right of personal sovereignty, rather than national sovereignty. In 1701 his son, Friedrich III, was crowned and anointed as Friedrich I, King of Prussia. Clark notes that the coronation ceremony was strangely lacking any sense of continuity with the past: “Publicists and councilors alike were quick to point out that the function of the anointment (Salbung) was purely symbolic. This was not a traditional sacrament, but merely an edifying spectacle designed to elevate the spirits of those present.” Clark thinks that Friedrich III’s vision of the state as “a historically nonspecific fact and a logical necessity” represents a break from the Great Elector’s view of history as an ongoing stream of change and forward movement.

He then attempts to show that Friedrich III’s vision of the timeless state began to clash with a more progressive model of history under Bismarck. But though he sketches Bismarck’s notion of historical time in a neatly drawn miniature, Clark misses the Teutonic forest for the trees. The Iron Chancellor wrote early in his career, “The stream of time runs its course as it should, and if I stick my hand into it, I do so because I believe it to be my duty, not because I hope thereby to change its direction.” And he added late in life, “Man can neither create nor direct the stream of time. He can only travel upon it and steer with more or less skill and experience.” From this we learn only that Bismarck was a pragmatist who sought to adapt the Prussian monarchy to changing circumstances and preserve the balance of power in Europe. Clark wants to get at the developing time-consciousness of German leaders before Hitler. But he has summoned a witness with nothing but banalities to offer.

It would have been instructive to compare the empty rigamarole of Friedrich I’s corona-
tion with its British equivalent. The British monarchy, which claimed its thousandth anniversary in 1973, appropriates the Biblical ritual of anointment to emphasize the sacred character of the institution and its derivation from the Davidic monarchy. (This is portrayed touchingly in Episode 5 of the popular series The Crown, when George VI explains to his child Elizabeth that anointment is what makes one a monarch.) Britain appropriated elements of the biblical past into its own memory, with enormous success. The sense of sanctity attached to the sovereign has helped Britain muddle through for centuries with an unwritten constitution.

All the European nation-states but Germany arose out of such an act of cultural appropriation. Starting in the 6th and 7th centuries, when Saint Isidore of Seville and Saint Gregory of Tours urged the Visigoth and Merovingian kings to assume the mantle of the Davidic monarchy, the nations of Europe understood themselves as emulators of ancient Israel under the tutelage of the Church. Tribes and clans did not naturally agglomerate into nations; by itself, tribal society fractures into something like the 832 distinct languages (not dialects) presently spoken in New Guinea. Christianity transformed the tribes of Europe into nations by forming monarchies on the Biblical model and inculcating Biblical memory into its peoples.

No Western nation undertook this project more consciously and with greater deliberation than the present-day exemplar of a nation-state, the United States of America—the “almost chosen people,” to use a phrase from Abraham Lincoln’s 1861 address to the New Jersey State Senate. America’s national epic is the King James Bible. Its most characteristic work of literature, Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, is derivative of John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, as Harry V. Jaffe noted in a private conversation. Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address is our national sermon, and the Battle Hymn of the Republic with its paraphrase of Isaiah 63:1-4 is our national song.

The cultivation of German nationalism in response to the collapse of the 18th-century Prussian army at Jena took a different path. Clark’s failure to mention it is perplexing.
He sticks to his contrast between liberal progressivism and Hitlerian nostalgia with academic stubbornness. This is unfortunate, because the understanding of time in Continental philosophy actually begins with the response of post-Kantian German philosophers to Napoleon's triumph over the German monarchies. Immanuel Kant's 1795 essay on "Perpetual Peace," with its vision of an eternal and unchanging status among all nations, was both the epitome and swan-song of the Enlightenment. The revolt against the Enlightenment began with an attack on Kant's theory of synthetic a priori reason, the faculty of a rational being that precedes and makes possible our comprehension of space, time, and morality. J.G. Fichte (1762–1814), later the philosopher of German nationalism, argued in his 1793 lectures at the University of Jena that Kant's a priori synthetic reason had to be situated in human consciousness. His young student Novalis, perhaps the most influential of the German Romantics, insisted that all consciousness was temporally bound, anticipating Heidegger by more than a century, as Peter Charles Hanly of Boston College has shown in his 2014 essay, "Figuring the Between."

But this American forward motion is not the utopian progressivism that Clark wants to identify with liberalism. Clark's simple juxtaposition of progressive linear time and the changeless present of traditional society utterly fails to understand American temporality. America does not march toward the end of history, because its founders felt keenly Saint Augustine's distinction between the heavenly city and the earthly city. The American journey does not proceed toward the earthly paradise of the progressives, but to a vanishing-point on the horizon. That is why the most impassioned

It is nonsensical to identify “Make America Great Again” with the Nazi revival of the pagan past. America has no pagan past to revive. Religion can cohabit here with the rule of reason. The American eschaton is not imminent, but beyond the horizon. The American avatar of John Bunyan's Pilgrim is Huckleberry Finn, who, in true American fashion, concludes his journey by starting a new one, lightening out to the new territory ahead of the others.

Sadly, Clark's application of the Continental philosophy of time is reductionist and impoverished. That is his fault rather than that of the philosophers. Heidegger's older contemporary, the great Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig, asserted in 1921 that the Biblical concept of time was the normative case. "Revelation is the first thing to set its mark firmly into the middle of time; only after Revelation do we have an immovable Before and Afterward," he wrote in The Star of Redemption (1921). "Then there is a reckoning of time independent of the reckoner and the place of reckoning, valid for all the places of the world." Rosenzweig never visited the United States or commented on its national character, but his intuition that the Biblical
reckoning of time is “valid for all the places of the world” rings true by reference to America in one way and the United Kingdom in another. Biblical time is metaphysically different from the eternal present of primitive society: it begins with the irruption of the one Creator God into history, which sets a marker for past and future, as Rosenzweig observed.

In Heidegger’s construct, we absorb by mere repetition the heritage that fate has apportioned us. To be entschlossen, or decisive, means to Heidegger submitting ourselves to this fate. America by contrast adopted the heritage of Israel in an act of religious imagination. The Puritan “errand in the wilderness” with its vision of a new “city upon a hill” adopts the history of Israel as America’s spiritual history, the foundation for a new covenant. That is why America’s remembrance transcends the mere repetition of accumulated habits and experience and becomes instead what Lincoln called “[t]he mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone.” America looks back, not to a distant past of pagan legends, but to a Biblical history which it has chosen for the backdrop of its journey into a bright and glorious future.

In Germany, by contrast, the reconstruction of the past took a tragic direction that Novalis and the Christian Romantics failed to anticipate. Neo-pagans like Richard Wagner succeeded in mining the legendary past for a German identity founded upon race. This became the “national nervous fever” that Friedrich Nietzsche denounced in 1886 in Beyond Good and Evil: “the anti-French folly, the anti-Semitic folly, the anti-Polish folly, the Christian-romantic folly, the Wagnerian folly, the Teutonic folly, the Prussian folly... and whatever else these little obscurations of the German spirit and conscience may be called.”

The crux of Clark’s argument appears in his chapter on Hitler, which “builds a case for the distinctiveness of National Socialist temporality.” Hitler sought “to establish an ever more perfect identity with the remote past, out of whose still uncontaminated timbers the house of the future would have to be built. In the ‘longing for a common [German] fatherland,’ Hitler wrote, there lies ‘a well that never dries.’” Clark indulges in a lengthy peroration on the Nazis’ fascination with what he calls “the remote past,” including archeological investigation of Teutonic prehistory, cataloguing of folk customs, and other efforts to promote a culture of German racial identity. The reader well may ask whether the Nazis’ amateurish evocation of the mythic German past had anything like the impact of Wagner’s operas, especially the “Ring” tetralogy derived from 13th-century epic sagas in the Nibelungenlied and the Scandinavian Eddas. Not only did Wagner turn the remote German past into a dramatic parable for the present. He did so in a musical framework that subverted the forward-looking structure of musical time, which had prevailed from the composers of Renaissance counterpoint to the classical composers a generation before him. In 1852 Wagner wrote to the violinist Theodor Uhlig: “Time is absolute Nothing. Only that which makes time forgotten, that destroys it, is Something.”

In Clark’s carnival-mirror comparison, Trump’s campaign rhetoric about restoring American greatness and reclaiming American manufacturing jobs evokes the same regression to a mythical past that beguiled the Nazis—as if the American steel industry, which in 1948 employed ten times more workers than it does today, were the equivalent of Nibelheim or Valhalla. That is a feverish instance of what Leo Strauss mocked as “reductio ad Hitlerum.”

To say that Trump has rough edges is an understatement, but it is nonsensical to identify “Make America Great Again” with the Nazi revival of the pagan past. America has no pagan past to revive. It was founded as a Christian nation with a Biblical culture, albeit low-church Protestant and antinomian. Trump was the overwhelming choice of evangelical Protestants in the primaries and won the highest proportion of the evangelical vote on record. Evangelicals supported Trump rather than one of their own, Texas Senator Ted Cruz, because they sought not a national pastor but the sort of rough man who would lead them in battle against the Philistines—a Jephthah or Saul rather than an Elijah. In a country whose founders held to the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, rallying behind a sinner is not the least bit incongruous or un-Christian, much less Hitlerian.

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I was born in 1947, and for me the effect of the Second World War was not merely a haunting eddy but more like the aftermath of a bombing in which one exists for a time in a netherworld of deafness, confusion, and shock. I grew up surrounded by, and at times living with, Holocaust survivors, former soldiers, French resistance fighters, and families who mourned their dead among the more than 50 million who perished. My surroundings couldn’t have made me anything but serious at heart, and this in turn was deepened by many serious childhood illnesses—quite a few of which nearly carried me away. In many respects, I was an old man before I was five—something often noted by those unfortunate enough to have known me.

Having little use for conventional ambition, I had come to believe that the keys to heaven and earth were truth and beauty, and I went to Harvard truly believing in its vaunted motto: *Veritas*, which was at the head of the admissions diploma that it, perhaps uniquely of all institutions, granted merely for its genius in choosing you. I had no thoughts of prestige, career, making a living, attaining power or position, or whatever the repulsive and dishonorable thing was then that now is called “networking.” Of course, I was a naïf, perhaps a bumpkin, but even as my naïveté vanished I tried to stick with the original idea. Given what I had come to understand about history from the very existence of the people around me, there was no other option.

The first hint of disillusion came in the late spring of 1965, when an itinerant dean descended upon Manhattan to welcome local members of the forthcoming class of 1969 at a Harvard Club lunch, or, as they said in Cambridge, luncheon. The majesty of the Harvard Club complemented his pronouncement that we were “the finest young men of your generation.” Really? How did he know? I was 17. Some of us still had acne and wore white socks. In stating what he did, was he not administering a perhaps daily or hourly dose of self-adoration, as in methadone maintenance? So that was why they gave me the diploma. It was a certification of what they fancied their own good judgment.

**Fair Harvard**

Just as there was Vichy France and *France Libre*, the France of the *collabos* and the France of the *Résistance*, the France of Céline and the France of Zola, so with Har-
were by and large open, accessible, and amaz-

ing. It was either so rich or so odd that it ap-
pear to have the luxury of name collecting: F. Skiddy von Stade, who brought his polo

ponies; Outerbridge Horsey, of the many
generations of Outerbridge Horseys; and
of course Stanislaus von Moos. Taken for
granted were the continual visits of what Bill
Murray might have called, with a long flat a
fter the l, “dudes like the lâma,” as in Dalai.

You were not assigned places in Widener's
main reading room, but claimed them by ad-
verse possession. Mine was next to that of
Lee Kuan Yew, the sitting prime minister of
Singapore, who had granted himself a leave
of research and reflection. He made clear to
me then that the anarchy and dissolution that
by the time he visited had taken over Harvard
Square horrified and disgusted him, and I
was not surprised by his subsequent broken-
windows approach in Singapore, down to
banning chewing gum.

When in my sophomore year Secretary of
Defense and architect of the Vietnam War
Robert McNamara (rule of thumb: whatever
he might recommend, do the opposite) was
trapped by a demonstration outside Win-
throp House, he escaped into Harvard's im-
mense network of tunnels, where I, my room-
ate, and Tony Hiss (son of Alger) intercept-
ed him and an aide. While a DOD car drove
around attempting to find him at the loading
dock of the central kitchen, we were able to
spend half an hour sophomorically debating
him. I will always treasure his unexelled, in-
credulous annoyance.

I have so many similar stories that, as many
have about their years at Harvard, I could
write a book about them that no one would
read. It was a giant, magic barrel, rich in ma-
terial things, experiences, and, best of all, the
acquisition of floods of knowledge within a
still-intact culture and belief system. For a

New and Noteworthy Books from AEI Scholars

**How America’s Political Parties Change (and How They Don’t)**

Michael Barone

October 15, 2019

Publisher: Encounter Books

ISBN: 9781641770781

Whenever one of our two major political par-
ties has a setback, we hear that it is doomed
to permanent minority status or to disappear
altogether. In *How America’s Political Parties
Change (and How They Don’t)*, Michael
Barone argues that’s not likely to happen.
Drawing on more than 50 years of observ-
ing and writing about American politics,
Barone notes that America’s political parties
are old—the oldest and third oldest in the
world—and astutely explains why these two
scorned institutions have been so resilient.

**Seven Pillars: What Really Causes Instability in the Middle East?**

Edited by Michael Rubin and Brian Katulis

December 2019

Publisher: AEI Press

ISBN: 9780844750248

In *Seven Pillars: What Really Causes Instabil-
ity in the Middle East?*, a bipartisan group of
leading experts unravel the core causes of
instability in the Middle East and North Africa.
Understanding the pillars of instability in
the region can allow the United States and
its allies to rethink their own priorities, adjust
policy, recalibrate their programs, and fin-
nally begin to chip away at core challenges fac-
ing the Middle East.

**A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream**

Yuval Levin

January 21, 2020

Publisher: Basic Books

ISBN: 9781541699274

In *A Time to Build*, Yuval Levin explores
the frustration, division, populist anger, and alienation that have overwhelmed
our public life. By understanding what our institutions do for us, how they are now failing us, and how we
might be failing them too, we can chart a
path toward an American renewal and can
see what we each might do to bring it about.
short period, like a break in the clouds, Harvard was deliberately blind to race, class, and the many particulars that now figure so heavily in selection, hiring, and the disposition of controversies. The 1964 application for admission was designed with that in mind. Of course, if you were a donor, a legatee, a Rockfeller, a Mellon—or a squash—or if you had gone to Groton or Andover, it couldn’t be hidden: they didn’t go so far as to ignore such details. From several universes away, I marveled at the precocious alcoholics who drifted in on the afternoon tides from Exeter and St. Paul’s, so well schooled that they were able to coast through their undergraduate years drowning in cocktails and ennui.

But the impulse was toward merit above all, without either the ideological discipline or compulsive categorizations absent which the modern university would be unrecognizable and the hearts of its busbody enforcement would stop. It was generally assumed that after exposure to a wide range of views, facts, and ideas, you would continue your education forever, and freely choose your own course, opinions, and convictions. That confidence and equanimity was possible only with faith in the power of truth and belief that there was such a thing. As the recent kerfuffle between Sohrab Ahmari and David French illustrated and could not settle, such liberalism may lead to its own demise. At Harvard, it did.

Soft, Privileged Center

My first brush with the deluge was anecdotal but potently symbolic. In 1965, I witnessed what I think of as the Ur-protest at Harvard, in the form of a single demonstrator carrying a sign in front of Lowell House. He was against parietals, the rules that not only dictated the limited hours in which girls could visit your room, but assigned proctors to inspect periodically for sexual activity. I didn’t like parietals, but in that era when we dressed in jacket and tie all day, as I had since 4th grade, I appreciated their value in elevating desire by means of the heavy cultivation of forbidden fruit, and in steadying, so to speak, the morals of state. Even if the heart of the game was to circumvent them, that they were there was civilizing. So, undecided, I heard him out.

He was not, however, merely protesting parietals, he was protesting America—past, present, and, were it not to transform according to his lights, future. I loved America and was profoundly grateful for its principles and its reality, so I asked him why he was so angry. His father, he said, one of the Hollywood Ten, was unjustly accused of being a Communist, and had had to move to France. I replied that being a Communist in America was not illegal, and it was a pity that he had had to move to France—though I myself would have loved to have moved to France if only for the food—but that his father was indeed a Communist, and either his father had lied to him or he was lying to me. He reacted in amazed disbelief. I couldn’t possibly back up what I said. But, no, I told him, his father had been in the same Hollywood Communist cell as my mother, who had known him quite well. Ahem.

It is remarkable how such true believers can leverage a community that lacks awareness, conviction, and fighting courage. A well-known Communist tactic is to place a small group of agents both at the four corners and scattered near the center of a large meeting. Reacting simultaneously either to propose or oppose, they can carry the more passive participants with them by creating the illusion of consensus. As the Vietnam War and urban unrest destabilized the ’60s, posing urgent questions one after another and, like the sea beyond a dyke, exerting constant pressure against the figurative walls of the university, leftist true believers took control of Harvard’s soft, privileged center. Pacific by nature, academics are ill-suited to Leninist political combat, and though they cannot be blamed for shying from it, they should be held to account for becoming its agents and converts.

Where were those in authority with the spine to stand up to the fascistic tactics now the everyday province of so many academic institutions? Many on the faculty were veterans of the Second World War. Others were refugees from totalitarianism. They were as brave and eloquent as necessary, but vastly outnumbered by the generation they had sired. William Alfred, my tutor in junior year, said to me, sadly, “It’s different now: they run in packs.” They did, and the elders had begun to fade away.

In the mid-60s, going to see Casablanca at the Brattle Theatre was a ritual. When Victor Laszlo defies the Germans and orders the orchestra to “Play the Marseillaise!” the audience would often stand and sing. Professors (some in tears), tutors, and even undergraduates like me, deeply moved, would rise in respect. Six years later, the same scene, perceived as camp, elicited the conformist, gutless, Harvard hiss, a group exercise in disapproval of expressions of emotion, patriotism, Christianity, and anything unfashionable. In those years, a lot had happened and a lot of pressure had been brought to bear.

Guerrilla Warfare

Harvard was always taken up masses of real estate in Cambridge, Boston, and elsewhere, from forests, agricultural land in California, astronomical observatories around the world, to Bernard Berenson’s former villa in Florence, hospitals, clinics, a cyclotron, giant swimming pools, and secret gardens. But mainly it straddles Cambridge like (if I can be permitted an insane simile) a fat, happy, beautiful, snobbish octopus. You can do a lot with $40 billion, no taxes since 1633, and a river of government and private grants, tuition, and giant bequests. Harvard is as big and varied as Xanadu. For example, only after almost a decade of living in the middle of it did I discover what appeared to be the terrace, of the faculty dining room, of the cafeteria, of the school of forestry. Harvard contains Whimansesque multitudes, and one can describe it only as accurately as the blind men describing an elephant. Though within its vastness I could be in only one place at a time—and spent most of that time with my head down, reading and writing—by chance alone I was present at so many disruptions in the late ’60s and early ’70s that by reasonable extrapolation their real number and frequency were a steady guerrilla warfare: the staple student protests about regulations and living conditions, which by then had been beautifully feathered into broader political themes; jackbooted, leather-clad Panthers marching in cadence through the Yard to the old Gund Hall, where they invaded a lecture on medieval city planning they claimed was in furtherance of black genocide, and forced the professor to abandon it; the attack by helmeted, chain-and-pipe-wielding leftist fascisti on what they thought was the Center for International Affairs but was really the Semitic Museum and its aging female
April 16 of that year 300 were injured; try -
American Academy in Rome I watched a
I could not help but notice. As a freshman
International (which later prefixed
Strategic Survey, 1970
Eastern Studies, where he was the director;
Della Terza, who had opposed it. So I knew
for the injuries and destruction); Cambridge
force and fashion was eerily confirmed yet
inter alia
Neville Chamberlain, John Kerry, and Caspar
Milquetoast (a famous cartoon shows him,
trashed the place. Rather than immediately
dispatch the university police to evict these
vandals, the ever-so-understanding authori-
ties attempted to reason with them. An in-
explicable frame of mind—exemplified by
Neville Chamberlain, John Kerry, and Caspar
Milquetoast (a famous cartoon shows him,
soaked to the bone, standing in a cold rain,
saying, "He’s five hours late. Well, I’ll wait
one more hour for him and if he doesn’t come
then he can go and borrow that $100 from
someone else.")—is doing your damnested to
please whoever it is who is beating the hell out
of you. Rather than strike the precariously
held beachhead, the administration allowed
it to consolidate. So the occupiers chained
the doors, brought in supplies and reinforce-
ments, and engaged in public relations. By the
time action seemed likely, they had assembled
hundreds of Radcliffe girls and others to serve
as a barrier between them and the inevitable
police assault.

Passing by the Cambridge firehouse em-
bedded in the campus (most Harvard build-
ings lay within two seconds to a minute of a
speeding fire truck), I saw masses of govern-
ment police in riot gear and preparing to move
out. After scaling the locked gates of the Yard,
I went to University Hall, where, after plac-
ing newspaper on a beautifully finished table
so as not to damage it, I climbed up and an-
nounced that the battalions were on their way
with their battering rams. My object being to
spare the students outside who would bear
the brunt of the attack, I urged the occupiers
to disperse like the guerrillas they so admired.
But they shouted me down, explaining that
they wanted to “radicalize the bouzhies.” That
is, the bourgeoisie. You didn’t know that Rad-
cliffe girls were the bourgeoisie.
The pumped-up-adrenalin charge that fol-
lowed was extraordinarily violent and bloody,
as the police used their nightsticks like gladi-
ators against the unprotected “bouzhies.” At
the top of the steps, before they broke-in the
doors, they threw students over the rails so vi-
olently that the momentarily splaying bodies
looked like chaff in the wind. I saw an officer
continue to hit a boy on the head as he lay on
the ground, until the nightstick broke either
on the boy’s skull or the pavement. He then
chased me, although I was just a bystander.
I escaped by climbing onto one of the giant
window ledges of Widener. He ordered me to
come down, but I would not. I have a picture
of him. Unfortunately for all serving police
officers (including, subsequently, me), he was
really fat and he looked very much like a pig.
As Lady Macbeth would have put it, Har-
vard’s “most admir’d disorder” came in April
1969, when the Students for a Democratic
Society seized University Hall (Harvard’s
administrative HQ), beat up the deans, rifled
the files, and, in their idiom, occupied and
shoved the place. Rather than immediately
dispatch the university police to evict these
vandals, the ever-so-understanding authori-
ties attempted to reason with them. An in-
explicable frame of mind—exemplified by
Neville Chamberlain, John Kerry, and Caspar
Milquetoast (a famous cartoon shows him,
soaked to the bone, standing in a cold rain,
Insanity as Orthodoxy

Even in the dinosaur time when I was graduated, Harvard conferred so many degrees that, after the general commencement, diplomas were handed out in ceremonies divided by undergraduate house and the various graduate schools. Now, however, perhaps smitten with Ben & Jerry’s many flavors, it countenances black, “latinx,” and “lavender” graduations. But what if you are a womyn, half-Irish, half-black, lavender, latinx, disabled, socialist, atheist, Basque, nudist, survivor of Chinese aggression in Tibet? Where the hell is your inclusion? You have been marginalized by the patriarchy, and just about everything else.

At my first Harvard commencement (I skipped the second), there were no such divisions, just as in the years leading up to it there had been no segregated dorms or race-restricted dining tables such as to my astonishment I would encounter at Princeton in 1973. Each of us was a unique individual, and, in a vast, egalitarian unity, freer than we were carrying the brands of identity. Now your betters will tell you that you simply do not have the latitude of mind to understand why racially separated quarters and ceremonies are proof of the defeat of segregation.

In the jackbooted invasion of the old Gund Hall briefly mentioned above, the students were stunned, fearful, and silent. The photograph accompanying this article is of their successors in the new Gund Hall, at the 2017 “Designing Resistance, Building Coalitions” conference. Except that they are smiling, they seem hardly distinguishable from the Red Guard or the various fascist youth groups of yore. Their department, like most at Harvard, is subject to diversity bureaucrats who are really nothing more than political officers. Certain departments or divisions—Women, Gender, and Sexuality; African and African American Studies; Immigration and Latino Studies; et al.—function as organelles within the university as a whole, making sure that it doesn’t stray from its orthodoxies, and that, if it does, it will hear about it.

Ronald Sullivan, a Harvard Law School professor, was relieved recently of his position as the “residential dean” (more about this later) of Winthrop House because he had the temerity to represent an unpopular client, that fetching sylph, Harvey Weinstein. Had he represented Khalid Sheikh Mohammed he would have been a hero. As in a lobster trap or the Roach Motel, Harvard has a ratchet mechanism: principle flows in one direction only. Professor Sullivan, who is black, then tried the race card. But the militant young piggs of Winthrop House, in a ferocious display of their timidity, insisted that, like their counterparts of the same age at forward bases in Syria or Afghanistan, they had reason to feel “unsafe,” and he had to go. So he did. Such are the workings of a semi-insane asylum as, at a steady though not glacial pace, it sheds its ancient and inherited prestige.

CRB readers will be aware of these and other depravations continually upwelling in the universities. Even half a century ago, though mere seedlings, they were apparent. Visiting the New Republic in Washington, I was speaking to Roger Rosenblatt, who had been on the short list for Harvard’s presidency, when in walked Marty Peretz, who had been a tutor in Kirkland House when I lived there. Roger said, “You remember Helprin, don’t you? From the asylum?” And that was then.

There is no question that a place of free inquiry and free thought must, as much for its own sake as for the public good, tolerate to some extent the unorthodox, the weird, the disruptive, the revolutionary, and even the insane. Although to avoid its own demise it must know and uphold its own principles, it should not be mainly in the business of imposing its own orthodoxy. Tolerance and commitment must be fluid rather than fixed, and balanced as a matter of art, or they easily and disastrously get out of whack. The worst possible getting out of whack is when the insane becomes the strictly imposed orthodoxy, which is what we see now. How did this happen? No one can know exactly, but even though it isn’t in California, Harvard has often been in the lead among American universities, and I have an idea or two about why it has become what it has become.

A persistent mistake of human nature is to attribute power, wealth, and fame to the workings of high intellect, when as often as not in an aristocracy they are merely inherited, and in a democracy they accrue to those who can please the lowest common denominator. Especially in a conformist environment, the appearance of intelligence can be simulated by adherence to orthodoxies in political belief and how one lives, and the adoption of mandated styles of speaking and argumentation. Thanks to the approximately 4 zillion public-radio call signs, it is almost impossible to escape the astoundingly mannered and self-conscious way of speaking that I call NPR- or Ivy-speak, which, like a self-basting chicken, continuously bathes itself in its wonderful reasonableness. A good example of this is Barack Obama, who, even if he doesn’t know the difference between a subjective and objective pronoun and thinks it is possible to lead
from behind, walks the walk and talks the talk in a spectacular victory (for some) of style over substance. Intellectuals would rather be caught dead than failing to pirouette their intelligence or admitting that they don’t know or haven’t read something. At a cocktail party, refer to Durkstein’s Adductive Paradox and see how no one will ask what it is, even though it isn’t. The greatest proof of this lies in the vast tundras of modern academic prose, in which with unintentional hilarity, if one may borrow sentence structure from Winston Churchill, never have so many over-credentialed idiots attempted to conceal such utter nonsense behind so much anaesthetizing jargon.

Unquestionably, Harvard is a nexus of wealth, power, fame, and prestige. Although none of these is necessarily correlated with intelligence, certainly among its many thousands of students and faculty it possesses brilliance, some might say, and they might be right, unrivaled anywhere on the planet. This is not about them. It is about those who hold the power, make the policy, enforce the rules, and set the tone, although it is also about the compliant sheep—designing resistance, building coalitions—who fiercely lap it up. What is one to conclude about the breathtakingly stupid administration of a place renowned for its intelligence?

Take for example the aforementioned Sullivan affair. Unremarked in the press is the significance of the title he had to relinquish: residential dean, which used to be house master, or, after Harvard became co-ed, it was, I believe, sometimes house mistress—until someone complained that this was redolent of slavery. Many words are redolent of slavery, such as “slavery.” Or “chains,” “subjugation,” ownership, “manumission,” “auction,” “block,” “middle,” and “passage.” “Master” pre-dates slavery in America and has many other meanings and connotations. The failure of Harvard’s governors lies not only in analysis and etymology but in taking a word that has numerous applications and rejecting its employment in one because it is objectionable in another. Shall we now have the tortured equivalents of a residential-dean key, a residential-dean switch, a residential-dean piece, a residential dean of arts degree? Should Patricia O’Brien have titled her book Residential Dean and Commander, or Casals have taught a residential-dean class, or Julia Child have written Residential-Deaning the Art of French Cooking?

Is it not astounding that in the universities, where one would expect historians, linguists, philologists, lawyers, and philosophers, among others, to define terms closely, the words “hate,” “diversity,” “equity,” “inclusion,” “aggression,” “rape,” “survivor,” “racist,” “privilege,” etc., are bandied about like badminton shuttlecocks and pushed into Orwellian servitude? The trick in using language as a political weapon is to make it as flexible as Kirsten Gillibrand, vaguer than Beto O’Rourke, and more emotional than Cory Booker. One need only consult Humpty Dumpy, for apparently when Harvard encounters a word, it means just what Harvard chooses it to mean. And Harvard’s answer as to how it can do this is that the real question is who is to be master—that’s all.

If Harvard makes a practice of approaching the English language with no more precision than that of a habitual drunkard; if via its Hiphop Archive & Research Institute it thinks it is “Facilitating and encouraging the pursuit of knowledge, art, culture and responsible leadership through Hiphop” (I did not make this up); if it—fervently—believes that it is possible for a man to become a woman and a woman to become a man, to what extent does this suggest intelligence? And if it does not, is it perhaps an indication of the thing that is the opposite of intelligence, a thing that begins with “s”? Could it be? Is it possible? At Harvard? Really?

**As in a lobster trap or the Roach Motel, Harvard has a ratchet mechanism: principle flows in one direction only.**

**W**ith relatively brief periods of exception, Harvard has always been a racially and otherwise prejudicial institution, as it is now. The only variance in this seemingly unbreakable pattern is which groups are targets and which beneficiaries. In almost 400 years, it has had the opportunity for much revision: Christians good, heathens bad; heathens good, Christians bad; homosexuals good, homosexuals bad; homosexuals good, heterosexuals tolerant (because there are so many) but guilty; men good, women tolerant (because they are so pretty); women good, men actually not: Protestants good, Catholics bad; Catholics and Catholics bad; atheists good; Jews bad, Christians good; Christians bad, Jews okay, maybe, assuming they’re neither religious nor Zionists; blacks bad, whites good; blacks good, whites bad; Americans good, the rest of the world deplorable; the rest of the world good, Americans deplorable, and so on, forever producing new blooms.

Now it is Asians who are bad and against whom Harvard must defend itself lest it be overrun “disproportionately.” Just like the Jews in the 1920s and ’30s, because they’re so wily, Asians would be “over-represented.” It was okay for white Anglo-Saxon Protestants to be “over-represented,” but, in Harvard’s view, not Jews, because, strangely enough, as in Harvard’s view of Asians today, they worked too hard, were one-dimensional, alien, kept to themselves, and lacked desirable personal characteristics such as summering in Southampton.

Caught red-handed in anti-Asian racism, Harvard is now wiggling and obfuscating in a contemptible effort to establish that its racism is not racism. It will certainly succeed in proving this, if only to itself; but a federal district court has recently gone along, too. As it has through the centuries, Harvard fails to perceive, understand, or accept that each of us is unique, and that generalized categories of exceedingly low information content and specificity—such as skin color, eyelid structure, or whatever, even if closely correlated with certain cultures or subcultures—do not and cannot serve as accurate tools of assessment given the high complexity and staggering variation of any individual, his experience, and his soul. The deans of Harvard understand this perfectly well in regard to the police and racial profiling, but not so much as it is applied to admissions and hiring. In this, as much as they might try to tut-tut it away, they are the bosom buddies of those white guys of my generation—Brylcreemed hair, black pants, and white tee-shirts with a pack of Camels rolled up in one sleeve—who hurled insults and more at tiny little black girls trying to go to school.

The only difference is in which groups they favor, which they disfavor, and the savoir faire they employ in doing so. Their American and German predecessors in the academy advanced racism and eugenics with plenty of savoir-faire. Is Margaret Sanger not to this day one of the heroines of the smart set? If people who believe that they cannot be anything but good employ rancid principles in furtherance of what they assume will be just outcomes, the destructive power of the former will almost always make impossible the latter.

Although it would generate mutinies and riots, the faults in Harvard’s governance could be corrected were it genuinely and without evasion to uphold beleaguered principles such as freedom of speech, association, and religion; presumption of innocence; due process; right to counsel; catholicity of viewpoints; and the rights and equality of individuals as expressed in the common law, the Declaration of
of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution. It is most unlikely that they would do so, and the question is why?

The snobbery, elitism, and self-deception of a culture in which people believe they are entitled to manipulate the classes and races “below” them as if these were Mahjong tiles cannot be addressed other than by a heavily documented, multivariate analysis rather than an informal essay, and in either case neither precisely nor conclusively. But I suspect that a large part of the explanation lies in Harvard’s particular situation and may have spread elsewhere due to its outsized influence. As far as one can ascribe an ongoing culture to an institution, Harvard never fully bought in to the principles of the American Founding (or their refinement and realization in the Civil War), the last great and just political passions, after which all others have proved retrograde.

In its atavistic Toryism it remains demonstrably hostile to the essence of the Declaration of Independence. Natural rights? No. Consent of the governed rather than the action of experts? No. Self-evident truths? No. A Creator? Not these days. And it mainly follows Woodrow Wilson—of Princeton, no less—in regard to that exasperating and pointlessly obstructive doctrine, the Constitution. Though Harvard’s sons fought bravely and no doubt disproportionately to preserve the Union and free the slaves, it may have been less in affirmation of the principles of the founding than (as is the wont of their descendants) to engage in the joy of righteousness.

Harvard does not look back to these principles as its own foundation. Why should it? Its culture began 139 years prior to the American Revolution. It regards itself as senior to that disturbance, and above it. As American history has unfurled beneath it, it has watched with the imper turbable superiority of a sow nursing her piglets. Being senior, it need not subscribe to the declarations of relative newcomers long after it had come through almost a century and a half of New England’s punishing winters and beautiful fresh summers. Still remnant as its foundation are attitudes traceable to belief in the divine right of kings, or at least, by extension, the aristocracy of which Harvard and the nobles it imagines it creates are the inheritors and beneficiaries. Dreadful enough, this gets worse when conjoined with the other half of Harvard’s double helix—a fervent, intolerant Puritanism that feasts on the kind of self-righteousness based these days, more often than not, on truly delusionary ravings such as the need to accommodate pregnant men.

When I arrived 54 years ago, the outward signs of aristocracy were unconcealable—in speech, dress, lineage, demeanor, and, most of all, presumption. Some characteristics were laudable and worthy of adoption, others hardly so. Now that undergraduates—who, granted, as a pathology of adolescence, have always garishly en costumed themselves—dress like anarchists, villagers straight out of Bruegel, or 19th-century lumberjacks, the superficialities have changed radically, but not the presumptions. Harvard has always believed itself superior to, and separate from, the rest of America. Over almost four centuries, Puritan self-righteousness and aristocracy’s self-justifications have managed in one form or another to carry on within it.

Years after I had left, I found myself in conversation with an undergraduate. The subject was zoning and how to accommodate the rights of both the owners of property and the community as a whole. I said to this young person, “The difficulty of the question is determining who will decide.” The response—immediate, impassioned, and emphatic—was, “We will decide!” What could better show Harvard’s pride and its prejudices?

Mark Helprin is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute and the author, most recently, of Paris in the Present Tense (Harry N. Abrams).
Richard Vedder keeps a post-it Note in his office: “Never have so many spent so much for so long learning so little.” When Winston Churchill spoke the words on which Vedder’s witicism is based, only 5% of Americans had a college degree, and colleges inculcated a spirit of civic pride and noblesse oblige. Today, more than 50% of Americans have attended some college, and these institutions have become a breeding ground of entitlement and resentment.

In Restoring the Promise: Higher Education in America, Vedder, a distinguished emeritus professor of economics at Ohio University, does not provide a roadmap to restoration so much as a catalogue of the ways in which higher education has become a bad bargain. He describes a “triple threat”: 1) college costs have risen dramatically; 2) students don’t seem to be learning much of anything; and 3) only half of the small majority who graduate find jobs that require their credential.

Why have college costs risen? To hear professors and their progressive allies tell it, because the value of college professors has risen, even as the subsidy state universities receive from taxpayers has fallen from about 50% to under 30% of total revenues in the past four decades. Nonsense, says Vedder. Colleges have bloated up on bureaucrats and spend an ever-decreasing share—now about one third—of their expenditures on instruction. And the taxpayers’ subsidy for universities has actually risen substantially, just not as fast as the explosion in college expenditures.

The best explanation is that colleges have increased their expenditures in order to capture ever more generous federal financial student aid. Professors reflexively deny this theory, because it reveals that they—not disadvantaged students—are the true beneficiaries of federal largesse. Progressives may decry for-profit colleges as having every incentive to collect as much federal money as possible with no direct incentive to educate their students effectively, but that is no less true for non-profit and state universities. The only difference is who profits—shareholders or rent-seekers. The data cited by Vedder leaves little doubt: if the ratio of campus bureaucrats to faculty had held steady since 1976, there would be 537,317 fewer administrators, saving universities $30.5 billion per year and allowing student tuition to decrease by 20%.

Meanwhile, an astonishing 40% of students fail to graduate within six years. And there’s little evidence that those who do receive a degree have learned much at all. Although advocates of higher education insist that college is more important than ever—so much so that we must have “free college for all”—the fact is that nearly half of college graduates end up in jobs that don’t require a diploma, and there’s little reason to expect that to change.

Universities are shockingly inefficient. College presidents engage in a construction arms race, even as they inadequately maintain their existing buildings, which lie vacant for a third of the year. Professors must “publish or perish” rather than focus on teaching, even though a third of journal articles remain uncited years after publication. Colleges are accredited by a cartel of their peers, a process that provides little accountability to students and their families even as it stifles innovation.

Time and again, Vedder declares that his preferred solution would be to eliminate federal financial aid and dramatically curtail state government involvement, only to acknowledge that it’s politically unfeasible and to suggest more modest reforms. He notes, however, that “political and social milieus of nations can change over time, often abruptly,” and expresses the hope that the political environment in America “can and will change as public uncharacteristic acceptance of the ways of the academy change.”

Higher education is perhaps the most regressive government redistribution, providing a benefit primarily to those with the strongest economic prospects. Ever-expanding federal tuition assistance has not increased the share of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds and, by driving up the sticker price, has almost certainly dissuaded many from even applying. For every $100 in their endowments, colleges dedicate less than $0.67 to lowering tuition for disadvantaged students. Room and board costs have nearly doubled after inflation, undoubtedly in part because students are captive consumers.

Our current system exacerbates the cultural divide: not only do the highly educated increasingly mix only with themselves, but all the while they insist that a bachelor’s degree is a prerequisite for first-class citizenship, reinforcing their privilege even as they bemoan all forms of oppression.

But what can be done once public sentiment shifts? Vedder suggests three “Ts” information, incentives, and innovation. Government could require universities to publish information about students’ later earnings, which would show colleges to be a bad investment in many cases. Schools could be put on the hook for students who can’t pay back their loans, prompting them to take better care of those they admit and encouraging them to provide a useful education. Accreditation could be overhauled to allow new institutions into the market, ones that could provide a more useful education for a lower cost.

Vedder also recommends that instituting a National Collegiate Exit Exam could provide a better signal to employers about what a student actually knows, and could also serve as a college analogue to a GED, allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge and skill without necessarily having to spend four years accumulating credit hours. No doubt the Left would object that such a test would have a disparate racial impact. But so does the current system—and at far greater cost: barely more than one in five African-American students graduate in four years. As the American Enterprise Institute’s Frederick M. Hess and Grant Addison have suggested in their essay “Busting the College-Industrial Complex,” published earlier this year in National Affairs, employers should be sued under Griggs v. Duke Power Co. (1971) for the racially disparate impact of requiring a college degree where none is truly needed.

For decades, Republicans no less than Democrats have been profligate and sloppy with their higher education policy and spending. But in a time of increasing public dissatisfaction with America’s colleges and universities, Richard Vedder’s Restoring the Promise may yet show future statesmen how best to restore these institutions to their proper place.
American political science has seen its share of fads. Scientific naturalism—particularly Darwinian evolution—and complementary concepts such as pragmatism and relativism dominated the discipline in the late 19th century. Sympathetic academics paired these with German idealism's celebration of the centralized state's alleged progress toward rationality. Such philosophical constructs gave a new class of "political scientists," as they were proud to call themselves, the overweening confidence to flee from old institutions and ideas as fast as their theories could take them. First abandoned was the founders' Constitution and the understanding of human nature on which it was premised.

The American Political Science Association—dedicated to refining and transmitting this progressive ideology—was established in 1903. Like-minded political and social scientists and historians claimed to deconstruct the founders' self-evident truths and institutional safeguards, revealing them as masks for aristocratic self-interest. Armed with this knowledge, political science could finally address the American public's practical concerns and material interests. Enlightened experts could craft public policy unchecked by the Madisonian system's limited and dispersed powers. Because progressive elites would have the people's best interests in mind, their rule would be "democratic."

In its quest for ever greater scientific rigor political science had, by mid-century, largely reduced itself to empirical—statistical—methodologies. Overreliance on stats produced research that could generously be described as careerist and trivial. It also muddied the waters of the discipline, which could no longer decide whether to be value-neutral—clarifying where history was going—or normative, using apparatuses borrowed from the natural sciences in service of a progressive social agenda. Much of mainstream political science still suffers from this confusion.

This new dispensation was not without its critics. Influenced by the thought of German émigré Leo Strauss, a small group of scholars in the subfield of political philosophy insisted that political science had lost its way. It was nihilistic—denying that we could know anything about the political good simply, or even that there is such a thing. It was therefore either irrelevant—burying the great questions of right and wrong, good and evil, justice and injustice, under a mountain of stupefying and often contradictory data—or dedicated to the pursuit of transient "values," grounded simply in...
what progressives perceived to be required at any particular moment. Political science was also largely unconcerned with the historical events and institutional forms that were once understood to define America.

By the 1980s, scholars who wanted to say substantive things about politics beyond statistics or models, but were unwilling to eschew empirical “science,” began to identify with an approach known as “American political development” (APD). Much of this subfield dedicated itself to tracing in detail—in a value-neutral manner—historical changes in American politics and institutions. APD replaced numerical data with narratives of change. It was the switch in time that created tenure lines (not to mention academic journals). Unlike progressive political science, it was not necessarily hostile to the Constitution, but neither could it fully embrace America or defend it against leftist caricatures. It studiously identified political constructs and compared “stories” about how American politics moved from there to here. It tried to avoid both dry-as-dust empiricism and heart-on-sleeve progressivism—but ended up incorporating a fair amount of each.

Boston College political scientist Ken 1. Kersch is a master of APD-speak. His latest copiously researched book, Conservatives and the Constitution, corrects some of the defects of American political science even as it exemplifies others.

Kersch offers a detailed account of the individuals, ideas, and institutions that collectively argued for taking the Constitution seriously again. He makes clear that constitutional conservatism cannot be reduced to law-school-centered theories of originalism—largely because conservatives were excluded from the mid-20th-century legal academy. Conservative constitutionalism was forged elsewhere, making it much broader, and riven by more serious and substantive theoretical disagreements. Journalists, economists, political theorists, and theologians spoke freely on constitutional questions outside the conventional constraints of the liberal legal academy. “[P]ostwar conservative constitutional argument,” Kersch writes, “was diverse, multivocal, contested, mutable, and developmental.”

Disentangling conservative constitutional thought from contemporary originalism, and showing the latter to be but one thread in a complex tapestry, is fine as far as it goes. But how far does it go? Kersch claims there was little in the “later, narrowed originalism that was necessarily conservative in any theoretical or ideological sense.” It was instead crassly utilitarian, aimed at “kneecapping” liberal precedent, and being “serviceable” to an “activist conservative judiciary.” But this assumes the founders’ Constitution is just a tool to get the results conservatives (or liberals) want, rather than—on proper interpretation—an embodiment of eternal verities. Kersch implicitly denies the possibility of proper interpretation.

He cuts the reader no slack, stylistically or substantively. Almost everything appears as a function of the “construction,” “narration,” “story-telling,” and “agenda-setting” that define “identities” and lend meaning to lives, helping political actors discover “a unified self.” “This process is inherently relational: the construction of a political self typically involves a positioning of that self vis-à-vis the political other, constructing identity through the cultivation of a sense of membership (belonging) and opposition.” The process is not a means of getting things right, but for “political oppositions [to] wrest control and win power.” Kersch’s thesis almost disappears under the weight of developmental verbiage, but he seems to adopt, sub silentio, a classic mid-20th-century definition of political science: the study of power, including its acquisition and uses. The definition is as reductionistic as it is tendentious.

Conservatives and the Constitution provides rich detail about the personalities, organizations, and political alliances that made modern American conservatism. But it emphasizes that they were oriented to crafting stories to suit their interests. Chapters bear titles such as “Stories About Markets,” “Stories About Communism,” “Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christian Stories,” and “Right-Wing Roman Catholic Stories.” The various stories conservatives told about markets tended to insist that the Constitution favors them, thus forging a conservative identity larger than any single policy position. Conservatives also told stories about Communism that “could not help but shape the emotional tenor of all sorts of constitutional stances,” including the conflict of “the faithful v. the Godless.” Fundamentalist Christians told stories about Darwinism’s and progressive modernity’s incompatibility with America’s Christian moral and constitutional order. The arguments of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians “echoed and harmonized with the themes of civilizational and existential struggle emphasized elsewhere on the Right by conservative Catholics, (key) Straussians (the decline of the West), anticommunists, and Austrian economists (the road to serfdom).” Right-wing Catholics told stories about natural law, which helped them “make meaning and meanings.” They chose to “re-narrate the nation’s history—including the history of its Founding, its Constitution” as compatible with Catholicism. By the 1980s, Christians had the audacity to engage in “elevating a new set of ‘culture war’ issues—abortion, most importantly, but subsequently bioethics and gay rights—to the front lines.” This happened, allegedly, in support of “new constitutional positioning.” Readers might be forgiven for wondering if Kersch understands exactly who elevated these things, and what counts as a new constitutional position.

He credits Straussians with being the conservative movement’s chief constitutional theorists and “ersatz” historians. But he thinks much of their work “hagiographic,” particularly that of “moralists” like Harry V. Jaffa, the main theorist of the Claremont school in its insistence that the Constitution is designed to preserve the equal natural rights of all human beings. Kersch avers that subsequent moralists on the Right condemn chattel slavery—but show a “palpable indifference to the concerns of contemporary African Americans,” seeing them as “largely irrelevant” except as a “philosophical first premise” for the fantastic stories conservatives want to tell about the Constitution.

Ken Kersch never sees fit to remind us that the Constitution isn’t just a story. It is, rather, a founding document that sets well-defined metes and bounds to our common life. It rests on a particular, cognizable account of human nature that sees men as politically equal beings, entitled to consent to their government and to exercise the freedoms proper to them, as of natural right, unfettered by arbitrary or unaccountable rulers. This truth never surfaces in his book; it is swallowed by wave after wave of contextualization.

Here’s a story: once upon a time, in a land far, far away from contemporary political science, a group of patriotic men pledged—not just rhetorically but actually—their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to the cause of republic. They bequeathed us a written Constitution carefully designed to preserve it, by putting some things—in the realms of politics, economics, and culture—beyond the constitutional pale. Nowadays, the fake “living constitution” of progressivism—which can be anything its interpreters want it to be, and so amounts to no constitution at all—vies for supremacy with our actual Constitution. As for political science, it remains a discipline in search of something higher than empiricism and process. It won’t find it in American political development.

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Practical Wisdom

Encounter Books, 224 pages, $23.99

If someone had to come up with a bumper sticker encapsulating Edmund Burke’s political philosophy, it would probably read: “Against metaphysical abstractions!” If Burke had lived to the 1850s, he might well have expressed private reservations about Abraham Lincoln’s use of the Declaration of Independence. Burke might especially have disputed an 1859 letter to the Boston politician Henry L. Pierce, in which Lincoln characterized the Declaration as “an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.” Burke embraced prudence as the highest object of political thought and the most important quality—probably the sole qualifying trait—of the statesman. But even had he accepted Lincoln as a model of prudence and high statesmanship (as is likely), it is not easy to square Burke’s understanding of “abstract truths” and their place in political practice with Lincoln’s. Fortunately we have associate professor Greg Weiner of Assumption College on the job with his compact but rich new book, Old Whigs: Burke, Lincoln, and the Politics of Prudence.

On the surface, it is not easy to nail down either man’s account of how abstractions such as natural rights play out in reality. The paradox of Burke is that he supported natural rights in the abstract but (mostly) opposed appealing to natural rights in practical deliberations. This has been a puzzle to readers of Burke ever since his Reflections on the Revolution in France first appeared in 1790. For example, take this declaratory judgment from the Reflections: “Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it.” Yet in a 1783 debate over the governance of India, Burke argued, “The rights of men, that is to say, the natural rights of mankind, are, indeed, sacred things; and if any public measure is proved mischiefvously to affect them, the objection ought to be fatal to that measure, even if no charter at all could be set up against it.”

But trying to reconcile Burke’s apparent inconsistencies, let alone trying to harmonize him with Lincoln on a theoretical level, is a mistaken enterprise for two reasons. First, the prudence of the statesman cannot be understood purely theoretically, much less scientifically—which means modern political science cannot understand it at all. In fact, Weiner points out early on that “scientific politics” is inherently imprudent. Second, Burke explicitly argued that the ability to understand the circumstances of the moment is at the heart of prudence. As he put it in a debate in the House of Commons in 1792, “A statesman, never losing sight of principles, is to be guided by circumstances; and judging contrary to the exigencies of the moment, he may ruin his country forever.” Weiner thus concludes that understanding true statecraft requires “genuine instruction in the unapologetic histories of great and prudent statesmanship.”

As Weiner reminds us at the outset of Old Whigs, even those who understand that the statesman’s prudence is an art acknowledge it to be an art that is poorly understood. This is why there are so few public figures today deserving to be regarded as true statesmen. “No lines can be laid down for civil or political wisdom,” Burke wrote in a 1770 pamphlet on abuses of royal power; “They are a matter incapable of exact definition.” In one of his more enigmatic pronouncements, from his 1777 “Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol,” Burke wrote that prudence is “the god of this lower world.” Weiner connects this with Burke’s well-known critique of ideological and utopian politics, but the analogy to godhead is equally apt because the divine is ultimately impossible to comprehend. It may be going too far to ascribe godlike attributes to the supremely prudent statesman, though perhaps Lincoln came close when he observed in his 1838 Lyceum Address that “men of ambition and talents” with a “ruling passion” for glory belong to “the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle.” Burke would likely have approved of Lincoln’s careful efforts to modulate such passion through dedication to the rule of law, which binds both citizens and statesmen alike. “The Lyceum Address was a model of Lincolnian prudence,” Weiner writes. “He sought to calibrate actions to circumstances, such that calm times, like those he wrongly foresaw continuing, elicited calm leadership.”

Aristotelian moderation is the heart of prudence and enables the prudent statesman to avoid or fend off extremes. But the paradox is that the potential or actual arrival of extreme circumstances warrants a kind of intransigence which, in the abstract, seems highly immoderate. So it was with Lincoln as the 1850s wore on, but Weiner also reminds us of the more felicitous comparison to Winston Churchill, whose central perception in the late 1930s was that compromise with evil was not only wrong but also imprudent.... Churchill did not make an idol of daring for daring’s sake. The moment—which is to say the circumstances—demanded it.”

Weiner notes that “One suspects Burke would see some of Lincoln’s early rhetoric about the power of reason as intemperate,” most especially the climax of his Lyceum Address: “Reason, cold, calculating, unimpasioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense.” But if Lincoln was more Platonic while Burke was more Aristotelian, still a Burkean defense of Lincoln is possible: Lincoln was, after all, drawing on the “tried and true” tradition of the American Founding to ground his statecraft. Burke was sympathetic to American independence. But his assertion in a 1775 speech about the colonies that “[a]bstract liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found” presaged the problem America would pose for him. Still, it is easy to imagine Burke discerning that Lincoln’s attachment to “an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times” did not constitute a utopian vision or threaten a new American Jacobinism. Prudence, after all, counsels all things in their time —and even idealism has its place.

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IN MEMORIAM

MICHAEL MARTIN UHLMANN, 1939–2019

Michael Uhlmann died on October 8, 2019, aged 79. In addition to a distinguished career in government, private legal practice, and philanthropy, he taught at Claremont Graduate University since 2002, and was a senior fellow and faculty member of the Claremont Institute and a frequent contributor to the Claremont Review of Books. He made his debut in our second issue, Winter 2001, with two articles, one on constitutional theory and one defending the electoral college—under attack again by liberals in the wake of an election that didn’t go their way. He wrote his last article for our Summer 2019 issue just a few months ago, on the extent to which the federal courts can be counted on to re-constitutionalize our government. In all, his essays and reviews appeared 28 times in our pages.

CRB readers delighted in Mike’s ruminative mind, graceful pen, and unfailing sense of humor, which he brought to bear on almost any subject—presidential war powers, natural law, the administrative state, Brown v. Board of Education, eugenics, Catholic social teaching, his heroes (particularly John Marshall and William F. Buckley, Jr.), and teaching as a vocation. Readers who crave some examples of his writing are invited to visit our website.

We include here reflections from some friends and colleagues—Michael Anton, Hadley Arkes, James L. Buckley, D. Alan Heslop, Wilfred M. McClay, and Jean M. Yarbrough.
Michael Anton

The first time I saw Mike was in graduate school. Charles Kesler, my principal teacher and then head of the Salvatori Center, told me “We’re having Mike Uhlmann come speak at the Athenaeum, and there’ll be a lunch; you’re invited.” The Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum on the campus of Claremont McKenna College is the premier speaking venue at the Claremont Colleges. Intended for high-minded intellectual discourse, it has more recently become better known—as Heather Mac Donald learned to her dismay—as a place to riot against unpopular speakers. But back in those innocent days of the mid-1990s, the “Ath” was more civilized and lived up to its name.

Impetuous graduate students are always up for a free lunch, so I readily agreed, but also asked: “Who’s Mike Uhlmann?”

Who’s Mike Uhlmann?

I eventually came to understand Mike as five things: a devoted father and grandfather, a serious Catholic, a kindly and knowledgeable teacher, a formidable corporate lawyer, and a political mover and shaker. It was the formidable corporate lawyer, with a little bit of the macher mixed in, who showed up at the Athenaeum. I was neither an affectation nor central to the event. Charles, as ever, had arranged to have his grad students sit with Mike at the lunch. Mike was next to me. As we spoke about politics, philosophy, and other things, the glint in his half-shut right eye said, “I’m not yet impressed, but I want to be, so keep trying.”

Then the subject changed to suits. I complimented him. He examined mine—a glen plaid with a red overcheck—and then said the following, as best as I can remember:

When I was a junior associate at—[he named a bigtime firm so famous even I had heard of it]—I had a suit very much like that. Very tasteful, so I thought. One day I was in the elevator and a senior partner got on; it was just the two of us. He looked me up and down and said, “Nice suit.” Relieved—this was an intimidating guy—I said, “Thanks!” To which he replied, “Off to the track after you get your hours billed?”

I never wore it again.

Not to suggest that he was unhappy in 1996, but he was not kindly or gentle. At least that wasn’t the impression he gave.

I learned from Charles and from Harry Jaffa the basic story of how Mike, already a budding lawyer, got to know Jaffa on the Goldwater campaign, and how Jaffa persuaded him to drop everything and come to Claremont to study political philosophy and the American Founding. Which, a few years later, Mike did. And then took that knowledge back to Washington to save the electoral college, help establish the Federalist Society, transform the federal judiciary—among other things—and practice law while out of power.

We had one major disagreement. As the Trump phenomenon gained steam in 2015, I asked Charles—by then and since, editor of the CRB—if I could make the case for Trump in its pages. He gave me a tentative yes, but then rejected the piece. I later learned that I had divided the house: many were passionately for publishing it, others passionately against. Nothing personal against me, I understand, but passions were running high then, especially about Trump. Mike was against.

About eight months later, Charles asked me to write something fresh on the same topic. I initially said no, but then wrote it anyway and sent it in. Once again, I divided the house. Labor Day weekend, 2016, I arrived in Philadelphia for the American Political Science Association. At the time a non-formidable corporate flak, I was in town to give a paper on Machiavelli, a scholarly interest I maintained more or less as a hobby (or obsession). The fate of my CRB article had been decided—it would be published, under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus—but I didn’t know that as I entered the hotel. Way down a very long hallway, I saw a familiar figure walking toward me. It was Mike. Now, I knew he had opposed the first piece and so assumed he opposed the second. I wondered to myself, “How’s this going to go?”

Mike had a small entourage following him; he was holding court. But it didn’t take him long to spot me. Here goes nothing! He broke out into a wide grin as our paths converged. He extended his arms, walked right up to me, took my face in his palms, kissed me on each cheek like a mafia don, and drawled out one word: “Deciuuuuuuussss.” And then he walked on down the hall.

I spoke to Mike frankly and freely before the conference was over. I made my pro-Trump arguments; he stated his objections and reservations. It would be inaccurate to characterize Mike as “Never Trump”; he had certainly been anti-Trump in the primaries and remained, at best, Trump-skeptical—though certainly not pro-Hillary! I think that, like many (or even most), he expected Trump to lose and worried what his candi-
Michael Anton is a lecturer in politics and to conservatism. And Mike was well as circumstance and events wore down Mike's skepticism, at least partially. So much of his public life was devoted to setting aright the federal judiciary that he could not help noticing that Trump had done and was doing more for this cause than anyone in a generation, and perhaps in Mike's lifetime. Encouraged by this—especially by the selection and swift confirmation of Neil Gorsuch—Mike began to say that, should Trump confirm a second Supreme Court Justice meeting his approval, he would “personally lead the Second Inaugural parade.”

At my daughter’s confirmation, I noticed a tall, white-haired gentleman escorting a young lady toward the altar. It was Mike, who was there as sponsor for one of his granddaughters. We chatted afterward; this was just before the Christine Blasey Ford hit job, when it looked like Brett Kavanaugh was cruising toward easy confirmation. “If this goes through, Mike, you know what that means,” I said. He didn’t hesitate: “I will lead the parade!” Nor did he backtrack when the hit job failed.

I join many others in feeling the same way about Michael Uhlmann: whenever and wherever deserved tribute is paid to this noble and good man, I will lead the parade.

Michael Anton is a lecturer in politics and research fellow of Hillsdale College, and a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute.

Hadley Arkes

From the “Acknowledgments and Dedication” of Natural Rights and the Right to Choose (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

The final word is for Michael Uhlmann. Man of letters, counsel without peer, raconteur with limitless range, sustainer of families, runner to the rescue, devoted son of the Church, maddeningly self-effacing. For matters of moral consequence, enduring alertness; for pretension, unremitting jest. And in friendship, untried, with the touch of grace that lifts everything.

I write here with a free hand, not holding back, because I fill in a story that the principal himself will ever be too modest to set down. He immersed himself in Elizabethan literature at Yale, then went back for a while to teach at his beloved Hill School. But then to the law, at the University of Virginia, with the same depth of engagement, this time in jurisprudence and philosophy. Following philosophy out of the clouds, he moved thence to political philosophy, to earn his doctorate, studying with Leo Strauss and Harry Jaffa in Claremont. His natural—or supernatural—gifts of teaching kept him for a while in the academy, until the academy turned upside down in the turmoil of the late 1960s. He had done a master work on the electoral college, and he was drawn away to Washington, to Senator Hruska, to save the electoral college, when it was subject again, in the 1970s, to another bootless campaign to end it. The recurring melodrama would play out once again: the affectation of shock that we should be governed in modern times by such an anachronistic device, followed by an awareness, slowly setting in, that every practical alternative was notably worse or unworkable. The passion for reform would usually exhaust itself before Michael could go on to show that this arrangement, devised by the likes of Gouverneur Morris, might actually have something to do with preserving constitutional government in a continental republic. Staying in Washington, Michael would join the staff of Senator James Buckley, where he wrote the first Human Life Amendment. He would be recruited to the Department of Justice under President Ford, where he would shepherd John Paul Stevens to confirmation at the Supreme Court, and eventually persuade a young Clarence Thomas that he could find his vocation in judging. With the advent of the Reagan Administration, Michael became counselor to the president, where he argued compellingly, and dealt deftly, on matters freighted with a moral significance. He took an active lead in propelling the administration into action, in dealing with the Baby Doe cases that arose in the 1980s. In those cases, parents sought to withdraw medical care from newborn infants afflicted with Down’s syndrome and spina bifida. If there was a federal presence, casting up alarms, standing against the trends, it was there mainly as a function of his own art.

At one moment, he was persuaded by his friends to let himself be appointed to the federal court of appeals in the District of Columbia. But that was also the moment when the rigors of teenage years began to be felt keenly in a family of five children, and he came to the judgment that his energies and wit had to be absorbed more fully in the family at that moment than in the courthouse. For his friends it has been a lasting source of disappointment that he did not take that appointment—as it has been a source of pride among the same friends that he made the decision he did. But in public office, or in private practice, returning to teaching, or to the life of a private foundation, his counsel has been sought by people at every level in the country, from Attorneys General and presidents to kids in the shipping room. He continues to be, at every turn, the sustainer of everyone else. I have pleaded with him never more to write an essay or speech with the willingness to put, in place of his own name, the name of a figure in public office. In the judgment of his friends, he has been too inclined to efface himself, with rationales too public-spirited: namely, that the byline of a public figure will draw more attention to the argument, and the argument may be far more important that the name attached to it. With the same temper, he is apt to spend Thanksgiving Day working at a kitchen in the parish or painting walls for nuns. And on Christmas morning, his friends are likely to find gifts laid at the doorstep, from a messenger evidently sweeping past in a Mercury station wagon rather than a sleigh. When he returned to teaching, with a stint back in Claremont, one of his students wrote in a review that “Professor Uhlmann could read the telephone book and make it compelling.” He could also, no doubt, lead the students into its deeper implications and find, somewhere in that prosaic thing, the lurking premises of modernity.

In the course of this book I describe the proposal I had shaped as the most modest first step of all on abortion: to preserve the life of the child who survived the abortion. When it appeared to be the moment to revive that proposal in 1998, Michael made the rounds with me on Capitol Hill, meeting with senators, congressmen, and their staffs. He would take himself out of any of his projects to join me, with a keen sense of what staffers on the Hill would find helpful. With the right blend of respect and familiarity, and with the authority of one who had been there before, he would make the case, and no one made it better. Along with Robert George, of Princeton, he knew the logic of that bill as well as the one who devised it. The sparsest account of Michael, and the one most readily recognized, might well be that account, in All’s Well That Ends Well, of Bertram’s late father, a man
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Nipissing University

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Laura Dawson
Director, Canada Institute at the Wilson Center, Washington, DC

“Law’s Indigenous Ethics is extremely novel, important, and has the potential for great influence.”

Bethany Berger
University of Connecticut
legendary for his wisdom in council. Of him the poet writes that

...his honour
Clock to itself, knew the true minute when
Exception bade him speak, and at this time
His tongue obeyed his hand.

Governed by that hand, this account would have ended far earlier. But I plead again for a certain license when the principal figure in the story will never broadcast it himself. Lincoln, as a young politician, in his taut style, defended his course and said, "If I falsely in this you can convict me. The witnesses live, and can tell." In this account, I would make the same claim, and the venture is even more warranted here because the chief witness would never tell, or speak of what he has done. His friends know, and so they must tell. Judy Arkes and Susannah Patton would no doubt skip the embellishment, but they would confirm the judgment, and they would join me, with deep affection, in dedicating this book to Michael Martin Uhlmann.

Hadley Arkes is the Edward N. Ney Professor of Jurisprudence Emeritus at Amherst College, and the founder and director of the James Wilson Institute on Natural Rights and the American Founding. This excerpt is reprinted with permission of the licensor through PLSclear.

James L. Buckley

Mike Uhlmann came into my life at the beginning of 1971, a most critical time for me. The prior fall, I had managed to win election to the United States Senate as a third-party candidate who had little political experience and had never engaged in the in-depth analyses of public issues that my new job would require. And that is why having Mike as a key member of my Senate staff proved such a special blessing.

Mike was a soft-spoken man of deep intelligence, one who combined a lovely sense of humor with an iron adherence to thought-through principle. Although he was only 32 when he came to me, he had already acquired an understanding of the Constitution’s political and philosophical roots that was of a depth and breadth that would prove of the greatest importance to me. What’s more, his analytical skills and ability to formulate effective arguments were of the highest order, and hence of the greatest utility to a newly hatched legislator.

Mike was with me just three years before he was recruited for a more important position in the Nixon Administration. But the lessons he had taught me and his approach to his work served me well during the balance of my Senate term, as they would in later years in my role as a federal appellate judge.

James L. Buckley served as a U.S. senator (New York), undersecretary of state for international security affairs, and judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit.

D. Alan Heslop

Grown men cried when they heard the news of Mike’s death, and on the internet many grieving friends shared wonderful stories of knowing him. Some friends recalled the help he gave to their careers, finding them jobs, opening doors, writing recommendations, and giving life counsel. They were the lucky members of the Uhlmann Network. Mike had made friends everywhere: at the Hill School, Yale, Virginia, the Goldwater campaign, National Review, the Senate Judiciary Committee, the Reagan campaigns and White House, New York and Jim Buckley’s office, the Department of Justice, a dozen Republican national conventions, presidential transitions, Claremont McKenna College and the Rose Institute, the Pepper Hamilton law firm, the Bradley Foundation, Claremont Graduate University, the Federalist Society, the Claremont Institute, the James Wilson Institute, Catholic congregations in several churches, and innumerable academic conferences. He gave enormous energy and great organizational skill to dozens of worthy conservative causes: their leaders owed him favors and he called them in—for others, often his students.

Many of Mike’s friends recounted the pleasures of his company. They and his students remembered the mischievous wit, the deft interruption, the telling anecdote, and the robust laughter of a man at ease with his world. His conversation, with or without whiskey or wine, always sparkled. He could tell of times spent with long-dead political and legal figures, some great, others very far from it; of struggles over the electoral college; and of countless political campaigns. He often spoke of his heroes in the law—John Marshall above all—and of his friends Bork, Scalia, and Thomas. He talked knowledgeably of music, especially Bach and Beethoven, and he delighted in evenings at the opera. But it was English literature, his first love, that lit up many conversations. Mike could quote from Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Metaphysical poets, T.S. Eliot, and Auden. In old age, he could still faultlessly recite lines from the Canterbury Tales (said in careful Middle English), Shakespeare (particularly Macbeth), and Wordsworth (the only Romantic he cared for).

There was a kind of sad pleasure, too, for friends who followed Mike’s mind as he surveyed the broken world of American government. He spoke brilliantly, persuasively, about threats to the Constitution: the fast-growing despotism of the administrative state, the decline of congressional oversight, and the underlying tendencies toward plebiscitary democracy. He would wax gloomily on threats to freedom of speech, the decline of the press, the hypocrisy of both parties, the mounting deficit, the evils of the primary system, the rise of lobbyists, the baneful influence of finance, and the base character of those in power. He saw patriotism as undermined by a kind of hysterical mass sentimentalism that faulted America for some of humanity’s oldest ills. Sometimes he would say bleakly, in his deepest voice, “We’re doomed!” But he didn’t really believe it for, at heart and in belief, he was an optimist.

Mike’s closest friends believe in God. Sure and certain in his faith, he had no time for materialism or determinism or the schemes of “sophists, economists, and calculators.” He disdained Puritanism and all its companion depressants. For him, the Christian life meant battling “our ancient foe,” as the hymn has it, through the daily practice of loving kindness. He made friends, one by one, with a word of thoughtful praise or a small gift (carefully chosen, neatly wrapped), or a book inscribed in his beautiful penmanship with a perfectly apposite message—little tokens of caring and kind comfort. People grieved so deeply at his death because they had seen and felt the goodness in him.

Mike gave help quietly, almost secretly. Few knew the work he did for poor nuns at Thanksgiving, when he painted, cooked, and cleaned for them. Long ago at the Hill School, Mike sang George Herbert’s great hymn-poem and it stayed in his mind:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for Thee....

A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heav’n espy.
All may of Thee partake: Nothing can be so mean, Which with his tincture—"for Thy sake"—
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

God bless you, Mike, our dear friend, great teacher, and true Christian gentleman.

D. Alan Haslcy is professor of government emeritus at Claremont McKenna College, former executive director of the California Republican Party, and founding director of CMC’s Rose Institute of State and Local Government.

Wilfred M. McClay

I first got to know Mike Uhlmann back in the mid-'90s, when he was a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. He occupied the office next to that of great friend the late Michael Cromartie, and I would sometimes pop in during my visits to the office to see how the other Mike—I would eventually call him “The Other,” which he liked very much—was doing.

He was always happy to be interrupted. He was then working on a compendious book about assisted suicide, which would eventually be published by Eerdmans as Last Rights?: Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia Debated (1998). It always seemed a marvel to me that a man who was spending all his working hours contemplating such a dismal subject could be so unfailingly cheerful and witty. But that was Mike.

As I gradually got to know him, I found our (mostly through his other, closer friends) that life had dealt him a very tough hand, with far more than the usual share of personal woes and disappointments. But you would never have guessed it from his radiant countenance, and he never, ever talked about such things, at least not to me. He carried the burdens of his life with an air of quiet but immense dignity, lightened by humor and undergirded by immense and visceral gratitude to God for the sheer privilege of existing—in this time, this place, this country.

He was consistently elegant in his dress and manner, and I imagine that he looked his dapper best for his recent appointment with Saint Peter, no doubt wearing one of his characteristic charcoal pinstripe suits with impeccable white button-down and beloved Hill School tie. He was always better dressed than the academics around him, and his courtly manners were always charming to women and ingratiating to men. But a big part of his charm came from a certain animal magnetism that they don’t teach at the Hill School. Underneath all the outward polish, Mike had the earthy directness and whole-souled humanity of an Irish pol (which he was, despite the Teutonic surname), always ready with a quip or a funny story about Pat Moyrini or some other character he knew from his years on that other (and lesser) Hill. He was a little like Reagan in that way.

I cannot say that I was a close friend in the usual sense. But Mike had an unmatched talent for a certain kind of intimacy. We did not keep up on the details of one another’s lives, but whenever we had lunch or drinks, after some pleasantries, he took things straight to the depths. “How goes it with your soul?” he once asked me, with astonishing and utterly sincere directness, those enormous eyes bearing down on me, as if to say, “you will answer with the truth.” Many of our conversations were like that. He was, of course, always trying to convert me to Roman Catholicism, and I loved him for that, even as I resisted his advances. But that wasn’t really what he was asking me.

His love and concern came from an even deeper place. I’m sure others had this experience of him, and indeed several of us called him Father Mikey, which seemed to please him, and certainly captures some part of his demeanor. He was, as they say in the church business, a very pastoral priest. Which is why, when he gave up the law and the Hill and all that to become a teacher, he really found his proper ministry.

In this respect, I have something important to thank Fr. Mikey for. About ten years ago, I had an opportunity to change the trajectory of my career dramatically—the details of it don’t matter, except that it would have involved leaving academia—and I sought Mike out for advice. We had a long, long conversation over many drinks at the Nassau Inn in Princeton, and at the culmination of it, after clearing away all the brush and all the preliminaries, Mike looked at me with one of those deep, penetrating, uncanny, summing-up gazes of his that came from somewhere not quite earthly, and declared, “You could do this. You’d be great. But you shouldn’t do this.” He then went on to say why I shouldn’t, entirely in terms of what I would be leaving behind, and I have never heard a more passionate encomium to the work of

New from Carolina Academic Press

Complicated Lives
Free Blacks in Virginia, 1619–1865
Sherri L. Burr, University of New Mexico School of Law, Emerita

Complicated Lives upends the pervasive belief that all Africans landing on the shores of Virginia, beginning in late August 1619, became slaves. In reality, many of these kidnapped victims received the status of indentured servants. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of free African Americans in the South and North owned property, created businesses, and engaged in public service. Complicated Lives further explains the lives of Free Blacks through the lens of the author’s ancestors and other Free Blacks who lived this history, including those who served in the integrated troops commanded by George Washington during the Revolutionary War.

Slavery in the Southwest
Genizaro Identity, Dignity and the Law
Robert William Pratt, Jr., St. Mary’s University Law School
Moises Gonzales, University of New Mexico

A brutal reality in the American Southwest is that Indians were captured by the Spanish or by other Indians and were kept or sold as slaves. Descendants of these captives, known as “Genizarios,” still struggle against their loss of tribal identity, while attempting to maintain their culture and dignity. For the first time, this book frames legal approaches, based upon domestic and international law, to alleviate the badges of servitude which still exist for these Indigenous people. The book includes important historical and cultural contexts as the framework for the legal analyses it presents.

Gambling Under the Swastika
Casinos, Horse Racing, Lotteries, and Other Forms of Betting in Nazi Germany
Robert M. Jarvis, Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law
2019, 208 pp, ISBN 978-1-5310-1252-6, $49.00

Although much has been written about the Nazis, one aspect of their rule has been all but overlooked: gambling. While philosophically opposed to gambling, in practice the Nazis relied on gambling to prop up Germany’s economy, earn hard currency, and wage war. In this engaging new work, Professor Robert M. Jarvis (Nova Southeastern University) presents the first comprehensive look at gambling in the Third Reich. After summarizing Germany’s pre-Nazi gambling laws, Jarvis describes how, within months of coming to power, the Nazis reopened Baden-Baden’s famed casino (shuttered since 1872), took control of the country’s horse tracks, and encouraged citizens to play the lottery (to fund social welfare programs). With the advent of war, the Nazis’ use of gambling increased. While in some countries (such as the Netherlands) the Nazis used gambling to curry favor with the local citizenry, in others (such as Poland) gambling became another means of waging war.”

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Wilfred McClay holds the G.T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty at the University of Oklahoma.

Jean M. Yarbrough

I first met Mike Uhlmann in 1997 at a Liberty Fund event run by Jim Stoner and my late husband, Dick Morgan. Dick had wanted me to meet Mike, then at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. Somehow, he got me invited to dinner on the last night—where we spent several hilarious hours, made all the merrier by the adult beverages freely flowing. By the end of that evening, I knew we would be friends for life.

To a few of us, he quickly became known by the slightly, but only slightly, irreverent sobriquet, Father Mikey. Yet that playful address, which he happily accepted and frequently used to sign off his emails, went to the heart of who he was: a light-hearted man of faith who brought uncommon joy and grace into our lives.

Whatever else his achievements, and they were many and impressive, Mike’s true vocation was teaching. For Mike, this was no ordinary 9 to 5 job. For several summers, I taught alongside him in the Claremont Institute Publius Fellowship Program, where he not only presided over masterly discussions, but also got to know his students personally, dispensing ‘fatherly’ advice on the things that mattered. After his presentation, I would often find him in animated conversation with some student who had sought him out.

He lavished even greater attention and affection on his own students at the Claremont Graduate University—charming them with poetry, regaling them with stories, wowing them with his intellect, and showing them by his example the power of faith. He inspired in his students a rare devotion because he helped to shape not only their minds but their souls. An advocate of large families, Mike increased his own by folding his students into it. He celebrated their professional achievements, blessed their marriages, and rejoiced in their children. He understood what made for a good life and pointed the way, even or perhaps especially because he had known both happiness and heartache.

Mostly I knew him as a friend. It goes without saying—though I am not only saying it, but insisting upon it—that being with Mike was always great fun. Whether in La Jolla, Tucson, D.C., Pasadena, Maine, or some other fashionable watering hole where these conferences and lectures took place, he packed a bundle of amusing stories into his suitcase, perfect for each occasion. But these were merely accessories, the finishing touches on a perfectly outfitted mind.

To put it in Aristotelian terms (I hear him now protesting against such hilifalutin’ ideas), he was not only a pleasant friend, but also a useful friend. He championed my scholarly work, praising it extravagantly and recommending it to his students and friends. To make sure that success did not go to my head, this master stylist would dash off emails reminding me, inter alia (as he would say) that I should be thankful for his ongoing criticisms of my writing. ’Consider this, never again in your life, at least before you start drooling, will you write ‘circle around.’ So, let’s show a little gratitude. (s. Henry W. Fowler).’

Above all, Mike was the very best kind of friend, one who freely shared his wisdom and his worldly goods. His generosity of soul sprang from his old-school Catholic faith. Christmas figured prominently in Mike’s calendar as it gave him the excuse to practice generosity on a wide scale. Every year “Santa” showered his friends with gifts meant to mark the true meaning of that holy day. To us, he often sent books on foods of special interest (oysters, trout, game birds) or wines and spirits. Other years his selections included books on gardening and architecture. This is how we first discovered his favorite architect, Allan Greenberg, whose defense of “canonical clas-sicism” appealed to Mike’s love of the beautiful and the good.

Christmas was not the only occasion for Mike’s goodness of soul. When my husband was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Mike sent us a copy of Richard John Neuhaus’s As I Lay Dying to prepare us spiritually for the road ahead. In those last final days, he sent the following email, informing me that coming our way were several CDs of Gregorian chants. I shall let Mike’s own words speak to us now in our sorrow at his death: “It is the true music of the spheres, and I cannot think of anything more comforting as the bell tolls. Put on one of those CDs, pour yourself a drink, and let the prospect of eternity warm you. Be not afraid.”

Requiesce in pace, Fr. Mikey.

Jean M. Yarbrough is professor of government and the Gary M. Pendy, Sr., Professor of Social Sciences at Bowdoin College.
China’s Democratic Future

China is a country where commemorations matter, not only sentimentally but also politically. Two important anniversaries in 2019 have given Beijing’s Communist leadership reason to worry. First and foremost was the centennial of the May Fourth Movement. Thousands of Chinese students assembled on May 4, 1919, in Beijing’s renowned Tiananmen Square to demonstrate against the Versailles Treaty that had ended World War I that same year. Though the Republic of China had been one of the victorious allies, it did not gain the full restoration of sovereignty which had been its main war aim. The Chinese were especially affronted that Germany’s holdings in China were transferred to Japan, not returned to China itself. The resultant protests inaugurated a period of intellectual and political ferment that came to encompass more than foreign relations.

The dominant vocabulary of the movement was Anglo-American. Many of the leaders were American-educated, and many others had been influenced by lectures at Peking University by the philosophers John Dewey and Bertrand Russell. In less than a generation, by the mid-1940s, Anglo-American influence would become conspicuous in the councils of the Republic of China. The upper reaches of President Chiang Kai-shek’s ministries were dominated by Ivy League graduates. The dissidents in 1919 personified their political demands as “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science.” To this day, Mr. Democracy has remained a powerful presence in Chinese political life in the face of extraordinary violence.

May 4, 1919, fell in the midst of the “warlord” era (1916-28), when rival strongmen fought for territorial dominance over a divided China. The warlords were racketeers, typically more interested in local infighting than world affairs. But they did sometimes engage in full-scale wars when prompted, and in July 1937 Japan initiated one. The Sino-Japanese engagement was among the most ferocious conflicts of World War II. When it ended, the Chinese Civil War which had been raging between the Republic of China and the Communist Party of China resumed, killing millions more. In 1950, the newly victorious Communist government, the People’s Republic of China, sent its forces into Tibet and bloodily suppressed an armed resistance. Turkic peoples in the far northwest met the same fate. The new regime then turned against the Chinese people themselves in a violent top-down effort to hasten industrialization. This “Great Leap Forward” claimed tens of millions of lives throughout the late 1950s. In the 1960s the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” a merciless push to suppress anti-Maoist dissent, spread still more death and destruction.

Despite all those years of bloodshed, new protests in 1989 showed that the democratic spirit in China remained truly deathless. In the “June Fourth Incident,” demonstrations erupted again in Tiananmen Square. As New York Times correspondent Nicholas Kristof put it at the time,

More than 150,000 demonstrators openly defied official warnings and a concentration of troops today to march for 14 hours through the capital, repeat-
The desire for democracy in China is not some delicate or fragile flower but a hardy and persistent perennial.

Trouble in Beijing

The survival of the communist dictatorship in 1989 was a near-run thing, and the party knew it. To begin with, the economic reforms that Deng had already instituted in 1979—though they would enable China to rise to worldwide prominence—were beset with contradictions. The administration’s reforms thereafter, which Deng himself called “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” created a state-directed market economy subservient to objectives established by the political leadership. This bargain looked stable for a time—until the Soviet Union unexpectedly collapsed in 1991. After that, the Communists began to fear that their rule could not survive deeper market reforms and more intimate international involvements.

After Deng transformed the People’s Republic into a quasi-capitalist setup, many of the party’s elite members became multi-millionaires or even billionaires. But the same political system that made them powerful and rich was also a perpetual threat: there was always the possibility that a loyal party man could find himself on the wrong side of party infighting and lose his fortune. This is precisely what happened to many thousands of loyal party men when Xi Jinping, the new general secretary, took power in 2013 and launched a so-called “anti-corruption” campaign. With due allowance for exaggeration, the accusations involved staggering amounts of money—$6 billion here, $14 billion there. But this was not a good-government initiative. Xi was going after those who, in his mind, had even the most remote connection to the rivals he had defeated in his rise to power.

Xi was not warring against corruption as such. Mind-boggling corruption was and is the inevitable, because necessary, product of a system in which the Chinese Communist Party reserves to itself the most privileged and influential position in the marketplace. Since 1979, this has been the party’s standard operating procedure. Under Xi, corruption remains instrumental—not only in steering the economy in the direction the party wants it to go, but also in ensuring that high-level civilian and military officials have a stake in preserving the system. It is not a matter of one audacious embezzler here or there. Rather, it is the entire Mafia-like system itself, wherein each of the lower-downs kicks up to his boss until the money finally reaches the most powerful body in the system—the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China. Its seven members sit atop a network of huge state-owned enterprises, especially banks, which generate and disperse enormous amounts of cash. They also sit atop a massive internal security apparatus, thus bringing together in one place tools for coercion and slush funds for cooptation. For the party’s leaders, the daily dialectic is a tension between fear and greed: though they trust their ability to survive intra-party conflict, they also hedge their bets—not least by smuggling billions abroad for safekeeping.

By 2011, Sina Weibo—a microblogging website—was used by people born after 1980 was hitting its stride, with Internet vigilantes felling a succession of corrupt officials and exposing government misdeeds and cover-ups.... In early 2013, protestors both on and offline gave what was perhaps the most significant challenge to authorities since 1989 when they decreed press censorship en masse after the staff of a liberal newspaper...
went on strike over particularly egregious government censorship.

It was at about this time that Xi Jinping became head of the Communist Party and the Central Committee circulated what became known as Document No. 9. This has turned out to be the roadmap for the brutal repression that is the hallmark of Xi’s tenure. Document No. 9 was circulated secretly in April 2013, but a copy was leaked about six months later. The directive identified the most ominous “political perils” created by anti-Communist “reactionaries.” Among these were:

1. Promoting Western Constitutional Democracy.
2. Promoting “universal values.”
3. Promoting civil society.
4. Promoting Neoliberalism.
5. Promoting the West’s idea of journalism, challenging China’s principle that the media and publishing system should be subject to party discipline.
6. Promoting historical nihilism, trying to undermine the history of the CCP and of New China.

The authors of Document No. 9 were well aware that the fight against these perils would take place largely in the realm of ideas. The writers exhorted good Communists to “pay close attention to work in the ideological sphere” and to “conscientiously strengthen management of the ideological battlefield.” “Party members and governments of all levels must become fully aware that struggles in the ideological sphere are perpetual, complex, and excruciating.” As Xi Jinping came to power, the party was growing ever more afraid that the digital era would be one of permeable borders, or none at all, between China and the West.

The World Is Too Much with Us

The party knew whereof it spoke in Document No. 9, for the outside world has always exerted formidable influence on China’s affairs. The Communist Party itself is the product of un-Chinese ideas that originated far away. When the People’s Republic took power in 1949, the accompanying parade featured gigantic portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin—four un-Chinese-looking men to say the least. To look at photographs of that event is to grasp the full subversive potential of “Westernization.” A hundred years before that, millions of Chinese fough and died for the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, a revolutionary movement inspired by Christianity. Also in the 19th century, millions of others staged major rebellions inspired by Islam. In 1912, the millennia-old imperial system finally succumbed to republicanism. Today, foreign-bred ideas both secular and religious continue to roil the Chinese polity as it clamors for democracy and flirts with Christianity. Substantial contact with the world is necessary if China’s ascent is to continue, of course. But such contact is always dangerous.

Warfare is Communism’s preferred political metaphor, and the concept of the “ideological battlefield” has been central to Leninist theory and practice for more than a century. For Lenin himself, “reformism,” “liberalism,” and similar notions were the mortal enemies of real and total revolution. His 1911 essay, “Reformism in the Russian Social-Democratic Movement,” was once required reading for all true Communists.

To this day, there is still an argument over whether Stalin actually said something widely attributed to him: “Ideas are far more powerful than guns. We don’t allow our enemies to have guns, why should we allow them to have ideas?” But Mao Zedong is unambiguously on the record:

We stand for active ideological struggle.... Every Communist and revolutionary should take up this weapon. But liberalism rejects ideological struggle and stands for unprincipled peace, thus giving rise to a decadent, philistine attitude and bringing about political degeneration.

But perhaps the most subversive of the West’s ideological exports is “self-determination,” because the People’s Republic of China is the last of the world’s great multi-national, multi-ethnic empires. Briefly told: in February 1912, the guardians of the five-year-old boy, Pu Yi, who was formally the emperor, arranged for his abdication in a way that brought the Qing dynasty to an end by formally ceding power to a new “Republic of China.” That dynasty had been the creation, not of the Chinese, but of the inner-Asian Manchus. Through alliances, warfare, and guile, the Manchus had overridden a venal Buddhists who live there do not think of themselves as Chinese. Nor do the Turkic Muslims of East Turkistan; and therefore the Communist regime now holds at least a million of them in concentration camps. Like today’s Beijing regime, the Manchu Qing dynasty was brutal and violent in crushing opposition. But in other important ways, it was the polar opposite of today’s Communist dictatorship. The dynasty did not enforce cultural conformity. It was cosmopolitan and ecumenical, because that is what it decided it needed to be. In the event, a tiny Manchu elite held on to power for 270 years. The comparably tiny Communist elite is unlikely to equal that record.

Making China Chinese Again

Until the late 1990s or so, the party relied exclusively on its Orwellian inversion of language—“New China Newspeak,” as the Australian Sinologist Geremie Barmé has aptly tagged it. Barmé wrote in Shades of Mao (1995) that this oppressive jargon was “used by the Party, its propaganda organs, the media and educators to shape (and circumscribe) the way people express[ed] themselves in the public (and eventually private) sphere.” The Chinese argument about world politics therefore turned on a definition of terms. The dispute was not about whether “democracy” and human rights were good things. Rather, in keeping with the dicta of Lenin and Mao, it was the liberals’ implementation of these concepts that needed to be exposed as fundamentally fraudulent. Thus, it fell to Communist authorities to distinguish between bogus democracy—that is, the bourgeois democracy practiced in non-Communist states—and real democracy—that is, the “people’s democracies” in power in Communist states. Similar distinctions were drawn between a bogus “rule of law” and genuine socialist legality.

The critical modifier, as in Stalin’s Russia, was the word “socialist”—socialist democracy,
socialist legality, and all the rest. Sometimes, however, the modifier was “Chinese” or “Chinese characteristics,” which, when applied to words like socialism and democracy, really meant no socialism or democracy at all. Confucius himself in the Analects advocated “the rectification of names,” that is, the effort to ensure that the meanings of words corresponded to the realities they described. To do otherwise was to invite disorder and, ultimately, chaos. But disorder and chaos of a certain sort have proven useful for the Chinese Communist Party, which has always taken a protean approach to language. It used to be happy with words like “imperialism” and “anti-colonialism.” After all, China itself was once somebody else’s colony: the struggle against the Manchu Empire was, in modern parlance, a war of national liberation. But that trope does not well serve today’s Communist empire, for it almost perfectly describes the relationship between the colonized peoples of Tibet and East Turkistan and the colonialist Han Chinese regime in Beijing—a relationship that the historian Bruce Jacobs has described as “classic colonialism.”

So how could the party justify its rule? Proletarian internationalism was no longer a potent intellectual force either at home or abroad. The party had flirted with concepts like “the Pacific Century” or “the Pacific Rim,” but these were too embracing of an oceans-focused maritime commercial order and its cosmopolitan political ideas. Indeed, these ideas were outright dangerous and were already too well-established in what Beijing regarded as its own bailiwick—the “Sinosphere.” There democracy was thriving in Taiwan and, even in next-door Hong Kong, Beijing’s subversive incursions were being resisted at every turn. Beyond that, democracy prospered, too, in the traditional Confucian strongholds of Japan and South Korea.

All this persuaded leaders that New China Newspeak was in need of refurbishment. In its customarily turgid way, the party signaled its conclusion that Western-derived Marxism was no longer up to the task. A high-ranking minister, Luo Shugang, said in 2014, “It is necessary to learn from the essence of traditional Chinese culture, as it embodies the cultural roots of the Chinese people and is an inexhaustible resource for meeting the demands of ideological and cultural competition in global discourse.” Party propagandists in China were put to work crafting and promoting an alternative vision of the world order which “learns from the essence of traditional Chinese culture, embodies the cultural roots of the Chinese people and is representative of the Chinese people’s unique spiritual identity.”

And so China embraced a new and defiant provincialism. The political scientist William Callahan, our foremost student of this language, calls it “Sino-speak,” in contrast to the “Rimspeak” it is designed to supersede. In a 2012 essay for the Journal of Asian Studies, he wrote: “In the 1980s and 1990s, the discourse of the ‘Pacific century’ and then the ‘Asian century’ talked of the trans-boundary and trans-oceanic economic and social networks that knit together the Pacific rim.” Consequently, “[i]n the 2000s the trend among scholars was to see China’s values converging with Western ones as its society became more and more integrated into the international system.” The trend toward internationalization peaked with the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, and the world financial crisis that occurred shortly thereafter. The new party lingo reverses that movement: “[I]nstead of celebrating cross-border flows, Sino-speak looks to China’s eternal civilization to determine social, cultural and territorial borders.” “This is not simply a scholarly debate because Sino-speak is heavily promoted by government officials, state media, and official intellectuals in China.”

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from FRANCIS J. BECKWITH

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Because the party has decided to move beyond modernity by looking to “China’s eternal civilization,” it has become necessary—to use some party jargon—to reverse verdicts. Back in Mao’s day, the worst thing that one could say about a political enemy was that he was a “Confucian.” The official verdict, put forward succinctly in a collection of propaganda articles called *Workers, Peasants and Soldiers Criticize Lin Piao and Confucius* (1976), was that Confucius was a reactionary who doggedly defended slavery and whose doctrines have been used by all reactionaries, whether ancient or contemporary, Chinese or foreign, throughout the more than 2,000 years since his time.

Confucius was a reactionary who doggedly defended slavery and whose doctrines have been used by all reactionaries, whether ancient or contemporary, Chinese or foreign, throughout the more than 2,000 years since his time. The bourgeois careerist, renegade and traitor Lin Piao [once Mao’s Minister of Defense] was a thorough devotee of Confucius.... He used the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius as a reactionary ideological weapon in his plot to usurp Party leadership, seize state power and restore capitalism in China.

But that was then. Shortly after taking power in early 2013, Xi Jinping visited Confucius’ birthplace. As *New York Times* correspondent Chris Buckley noted, Xi gave a speech on that occasion in which he described the Communist Party “as a defender of ancient virtues, epitomized by Confucius and his collected teachings.” He praised Confucius and encouraged study of the *Analects* alongside subsequent commentaries on the classic. A year later, Xi gave the keynote address at an international symposium in Beijing marking the 2,565th anniversary of Confucius’ birth. It was the first time a Communist Party head had attended such an event. “Confucianism, along with other philosophies and cultures taking shape and growing within China, are records of spiritual experiences, rational thinking, and cultural achievements of the nation while it strived to build its identity,” Xi proclaimed. The next step was to link Mao and Confucius, the world’s two best-known Chinese people. Xinhua, China’s official state-run news agency, reported that on the 120th anniversary of Mao Zedong’s birth, “Chinese top leaders including President Xi Jinping visited Mao’s mausoleum, making three bows toward Mao’s seated statue and paying their respects to the remains of Mao.” Xi said Mao was “a great patriot and national hero.”

These two highly scripted party displays were meant to help institutionalize an ongoing conflation of Maoism with Confucianism. Many decades ago, Mao’s *Little Red Book* was Beijing’s favorite literary artifact. Today it prefers the seemingly less threatening *Analects* of Confucius. Since 2006, the Beijing regime has spent about $160 million supporting so-called Confucius Institutes on dozens of American college campuses. It would not have been in the regime’s interests to give these establishments the more accurate name of Mao Zedong Institutes. Yet it is Mao’s purposes, not Confucius’, which such places actually serve. The Confucius Institutes are ostensibly about education, but they are really about keeping tabs on Chinese students in America, spreading propaganda, meddling in American politics generally, and performing espionage. As Barmé has written in *China Heritage*, “the Confucius Institute network...treats Sinologists or students of things Chinese [as] akin to useful idiots of the party-state, mimicking thereby a utilitarian approach to exploiting naïveté and craven ambition that had been devised by V.I. Lenin.”

A Window of Opportunity

Lining confucius and mao zedong is an impressive feat of dialectical leg-erdenemain. The term “Confucianism” is
a way of describing two millennia of thinking about politics and society—not only in China, but in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam also. In years past, Confucianism was blamed for China’s inability to cope with the modern world. Then it was used to explain Chinese successes in that same modern world, and not only in China itself but in the Chinese diaspora as well. The prosperity of ‘Confucian’ societies in Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore also prompted discussions about “Asian Values” as a form of pushback against the West’s repeated calls for multi-party democracy and human rights. This gave Westerners the impression that Confucianism is an opponent of our deepest beliefs about political and social life.

But the Confucian tradition, properly understood, is not a manual for tyrants. Rather, it is a natural ally of anyone interested in political liberalization. Chinese reformers who seek to argue against the excesses of their government do not have to rely exclusively on Western liberal thought or Western religious-based political ideas like natural law: they have centuries of home-grown political theory to draw on. Confucius himself (551-479 B.C.) left only the sketchiest outlines of his own thought in the form of pronouncements written down by his disciples. Like other great teachers, he passed on a many-faceted legacy. But it is clear that he was not a political authoritarian. He thought that the presence of harsh laws and severe punishments was the mark of a state in bad shape. High taxes, large armies, conscripted labor, and vainglorious aggrandizement were not good signs, either. Indeed, the men in charge were supposed to edify and not intimidate. If they had a claim to rule, it was only because they were better, not more ruthless, than their subjects.

Over the centuries, these ideas influenced both personal and institutional codes of conduct. The proper mandarin was obliged to tell truth to power, often paying with his head. And it was Confucian-minded scholars who composed the long, detailed, multi-volume histories that each new dynasty was obliged to write about its predecessor. Twenty-Four such accounts survive, each one a cautionary tale about the need for rectitude and restraint, the threat of profligacy and decadence, and the fate of a state that overreaches itself. These themes reverberated in both high and popular Chinese culture and helped create the beau ideal of the official as scholar, moralist, poet, and artist.

Confucians also argued among themselves about issues which have engaged Western political philosophers—the dividing line between public and private, state and civil society; the relation between virtue in individuals and good order in the nation, between private economic activity and governmental regulation; and especially the limits on the arbitrary power of the state. Historically, scholar-officials trained in the Chinese classics debated these questions. On one side stood advocates of enlarging the government’s role in the economy, setting up the government in competition with private merchants and traders, and, in general, refilling the emperor’s coffers by more astute fiscal and administrative interventions. On the other side stood scholars who argued that bureaucracies were prone to bloat, that government interventions sopped up wealth and did not create it, and that, in any event, reliance on government rather than on the cultivation of individuals would prove destructive.

America’s greatest Sinologist, William Theodore de Bary (1919–2017), spent decades studying centuries of Confucian doctrine, and he found enough in it to speak of a “liberal tradition in China.” Among many other things, this tradition rejected authoritarian pretensions, supported cultural diversity, and favored something akin to Western-style liberal education. Columbia University Law School professor Louis Henkin (1917–2010), who was, during his lifetime, the most highly regarded scholar of international law in the world, argued for the commensurability of Confucianism and universally recognized human rights in his 1998 essay, “Confucianism, Human Rights, and ‘Cultural Relativism.’” “There is no inherent tension between Confucianism and human rights,” concluded Henkin. “The Asian values of Confucianism need not reject... equality in rights, not equal protection of the laws, not individual autonomy and liberty, not economic and social rights, not the acceptance of the individual and his/her rights as fundamental values.... Asian values—Confucian values—are universal values too.”

None of this is in keeping with the image of “oriental despotism” developed for us by 17th- and 18th-century European philosophers. But then they knew next to nothing about actual Chinese political thought. Nor does the Confucian tradition track very well with our experience of Chinese totalitarianism post-1949. But for exactly that reason, these ancient Chinese practices and ideas—these “Confucian values”—may end up loosening the party’s iron grip from the inside out. Xi’s administration turned to ancient Chinese teachings in the hope they could help keep China safe from corruption by “reactionary” liberalism. But there is evidence to suggest that they are doing exactly the opposite. Whatever aspects of Chinese civilization may be in tension with the free world, Confucianism is decidedly not one of them.

In April 2019, less than a month before the centennial of the May Fourth demonstration, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ian Johnson wrote from Beijing that something strange is happening in Xi Jinping’s China. This is supposed to be the perfect dictatorship, the most sustained period of authoritarianism since the Cultural Revolution ended more than forty years ago.... And yet the past few months have also seen...the most serious critique of the system in more than a decade, led by people inside China who are choosing to speak out now, during the most sensitive season of the most sensitive year in decades.

We in the West can be proud that our ideals of democracy and human rights have inspired the brave souls who are standing up for a civilized and humane polity in their country. But the West does not deserve all of the credit. ‘Over the past century,’ Johnson reminds us, ‘even during the darkest times, the underlying humanism of Chinese culture has never been extinguished and has even, at critical moments, reasserted itself.’

The Communist regime in China is betting that the legitimacy of its dictatorship, which it once tried to derive from Western Marxism, can instead be derived from traditional Chinese political thought. Leadership, in other words, has decided that it is time for Confucian Oldspeak to come to the rescue of Communist Newspeak. In so doing, Beijing has wagered that our ignorance of what Confucianism really is will make useful idiots of us all. But there are many Chinese, in China and elsewhere, who object to the Chinese Communist Party’s hijacking of China’s political tradition. We should help them make those objections. Western leaders and scholars can encourage democratic sentiment in China not only by promoting Western principles, but also by educating themselves and others about the true meaning of Confucian mores. Those values—real Chinese values—do not justify high-handed authoritarianism nor mass imprisonment, let alone genocide. Just the opposite: if treated properly, Confucianism could form the basis for a new flourishing of political and civil rights in the East. We should do everything we can to encourage that development.

Charles Horner is a senior fellow of the Hudson Institute and the author of Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate, volumes 1 (University of Georgia Press) and 2 (E.J. Brill).
Open
The Progressive Case for Free Trade, Immigration, and Global Capital
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REGARDING MARIJUANA’S LEGAL STATUS, AMERICA IS NOW A HOUSE DIVIDED. ON ONE SIDE STANDS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT’S 1970 CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES ACT (CSA), WHICH CLASSIFIES MARIJUANA AS A PROHIBITED SCHEDULE I DRUG WITH A HIGH ABUSE POTENTIAL AND NO APPROVED THERAPEUTIC USES. ADDITIONALLY, 17 STATES HAVE NEITHER BROADLY DECRIMINALIZED MARIJUANA NOR LEGALIZED IT FOR EITHER RECREATIONAL OR MEDICAL USES. ON THE OTHER SIDE ARE THE 11 STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA THAT HAVE LEGALIZED MARIJUANA FOR RECREATIONAL PURPOSES. ANOTHER 22 STATES HAVE EITHER DECRIMINALIZED MARIJUANA OR LEGALIZED IT FOR MEDICAL USES OR BOTH.

CAN THIS HOUSE DIVIDED STAND MUCH LONGER? THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE CSA AND 33 STATES (AT LAST COUNT) IS A FEDERALISM PANDORA’S BOX. FOR INSTANCE, FEDERAL “KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER” LAWS REQUIRE BANKS TO RED-FLAG DEPOSITS DERIVED FROM ILLEGAL TRADE. THE CSA OUTLAW MARIJUANA SALES. SO, WHEN BANK OFFICIALS ACCEPT MONIES THEY KNOW COME FROM SELLING OR TAXING CANNABIS, ARE THEY MONEY LAUNDERING?

WHAT ABOUT THE LOCALLY LICENSED MARIJUANA MERCHANTS AND STATE GOVERNMENT TAXMEN THEMSELVES? IN 1996 CALIFORNIA BECAME THE FIRST STATE TO LEGALIZE MARIJUANA FOR MEDICAL USE. SIXTEEN YEARS LATER, COLORADO AND WASHINGTON STATE BECAME THE FIRST TO LEGALIZE IT FOR RECREATIONAL USE. BEHIND THE WAR FOR MARIJUANA WERE BILLIONAIRE GEORGE SOROS AND SEVERAL OTHER RICH BUSINESSMEN, WHO FINANCED THE POLITICKING, MEDIA-MESSAGING, AND COALITION-BUILDING THAT UNITED ANTI-DRUG WAR ACTIVISTS, LEFT-WING RADICALS, AND FREE-MARKET CONSERVATIVES. THEIR SAVVY, NONSTOP, HEARTS-AND-MINDS CAMPAIGN NOW FINDS TWO-THIRDS OF AMERICANS SUPPORTING LEGALIZATION. ADDITIONALLY, A 2017 YAHOO NEWS/MARIST POLL SHOWED THAT 52% OF AMERICANS HAVE TRIED POT, 22% USE IT CURRENTLY BUT RARELY, AND 14% USE IT AT LEAST ONCE OR TWICE A MONTH.

ALEX BERENSON WOULD URGE US ALL TO LOOK HARD BEFORE WE LEAP ANY FARTHER TOWARD LEGALIZING MARIJUANA. IN TELL YOUR CHILDREN: THE TRUTH ABOUT MARIJUANA, MENTAL ILLNESS, AND VIOLENCE, HE PLEADS: “THE UNITED STATES SHOULD NOT LEGALIZE CANNABIS NATIONALLY; IT SHOULD MOVE TO DISCOURAGE MORE STATES FROM LEGALIZING, AND IT SHOULD CONSIDER PRESSURING THOSE THAT HAVE ALREADY DONE SO TO REVERSE COURSE.”

A FORMER INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES, BERENSON IS AN AWARD-WINNING SPY NOVELIST WHOSE WIFE, A PSYCHIATRIST, SPECIALIZES IN EVALUATING MENTALLY ILL CRIMINALS. HE WASTES NO TIME DRAMATIZING HIS CORE REASON FOR INSISTING THAT LEGALIZATION IS NOT WORTH THE RISK: PSYCHOSIS TRIGGERED OR WORSENED BY POT USE AND RESULTING IN MURDER AND MAYHEM. TELL YOUR CHILDREN OPENS WITH A TERRIFYING TALE ABOUT A LOW-INCOME, 37-YEAR-OLD PARANOID SCHIZOPHRENIC AUSTRALIAN WHO STABBED HER OWN SEVEN CHILDREN AND A NIECE TO DEATH AFTER BECOMING A HEAVY MARIJUANA USER. HE CLOSES WITH A HORROR STORY ABOUT A 26-YEAR-OLD MAN WHO STABBED 19 PEOPLE TO DEATH AT A JAPANESE NURSING HOME AFTER BEING “HOSPITALIZED LESS THAN FIVE MONTHS EARLIER FOR CANNABIS PSYCHOSIS.”
Wisely, Berenson assembles his anti-legalization brief not only by multiplying anecdotes and excerpting interviews he conducted, but also by summarizing numerous scientific studies. Unfortunately, his book has no footnotes, endnotes, bibliography, or subject index. Too often, the mystery writer leaves his reader pining for clues about exactly where he got certain facts, figures, or findings. Still, his in-text references to studies usually allow the diligent reader to find them.

For example, Berenson writes, “Cannabis use is likely to increase the risk of developing schizophrenia and other psychoses; the higher the use, the greater the risk.” That’s a direct quote from The Health Effects of Cannabis and Cannabinoids, published by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) in 2017. But Berenson, who seems like a sincere soul, ignores the NAS report’s caveats and qualifications regarding the cannabis-psychosis connection. The conclusion he quotes rests on just five studies, published between 2007 and 2016, whose limitations include “self-report for cannabis use,” “research design issues,” a “lack of information on the frequency of use,” and others. And there are “ecologic data” indicating that, “in certain societies, the incidence of schizophrenia has remained stable over the past 50 years despite the introduction of cannabis into those settings.”

Which way do the causal arrows fly among and between substance use (marijuana and other), mental illness (psychosis and other), and other risk factors (genetic and other) that might predispose one to be a substance-using psychotic? On this “comorbidity” question, the NAS report is expressly agnostic, as is the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) online statement, which advises that marijuana is correlated with “anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia, but scientists don’t yet know whether it directly causes these diseases.” And, in its June 2018 “Drug Facts” research bulletin, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, an agency not known for hiding bad news about narcotics, states that while “[l]ong-term marijuana use has been linked” to “worsening symptoms in patients” with schizophrenia and “other mental health” diseases, “study findings have been mixed.”

In other words, neither Berenson’s claims about cannabis and psychosis, nor those about cannabis-induced violence, are well supported. For instance, he asserts that the link between marijuana and violence is “[i]n many cases stronger than the link between alcohol and violence. In fact, pot is a distant second to booze when it comes to violence. Drunkenness figures in about half of all violent crimes (homicide, aggravated assault, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and child abuse). As discussed in “The Neural Correlates of Alcohol-Related Aggression,” a 2018 study published in Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience, the jury is starting to come in regarding how boozing buzzes the prefrontal cortex and contributes to aggression.

Crime and public policy is a series featuring the latest and best policy-relevant research by leading crime analysts, edited by the late, great conservative intellectual, anti-legalization hard-liner, and my own mentor and friend, James Q. Wilson. The 2011 edition’s chapter on drugs and crime concluded that “the cannabis market causes little violence,” adding that, “since cannabis intoxication does not lead to aggression, legalizing cannabis would not be likely to cause much additional pharmacologic crime.” The 2016 edition of Marijuana Legalization: What Everyone Needs to Know concluded the same. Berenson praises Marijuana Legalization as a “balanced look” at legalization, but asserts that “it understates the violence risk.” I can’t see how.

Likewise, he cites as “definitive” a 2009 article on schizophrenia and violence in PLOS Medicine by Seena Fazel, an Oxford University forensic psychiatry professor. But in that article Fazel and his co-authors stress that their overall estimates are based on dispa-

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rate findings from diversely designed studies. They note that when siblings are used as control groups, “the risk increase” for violence is “significantly less pronounced.” They conclude, far from definitively, that “how substance abuse mediates violent offending needs further study.”

I could find nothing in Fazel’s fascinating work or related studies to undergird Berenson’s claim that marijuana is “a supercharger for sudden, extreme violence.” To conclude otherwise, I’d have to believe that the maximum-security prison officials by the hundreds whom I studied for more than a decade were misreading their own experience managing violent criminals when they worried much more about contraband booze than smuggled-in weed.

Still, Berenson deserves decent marks on several counts. With the help of Sanford Gordon, my own former Princeton graduate student and now a top social science scholar, he deflates the claim that medical cannabis is a solution to the opioid overdose epidemic. [Earlier this year, Gordon co-authored a Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences study reinforcing the tentative findings that are previewed in Tell Your Children.]

In addition, Berenson is right “that occasional use of marijuana by people over 25 is generally safe” and that levels of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) in marijuana have increased over the past few decades. He wisely warns about higher-potency pot and a coming cannabis industry that can maximize profits by turning customers into addicts.

To his great credit, Berenson reached out to pro-legalization leaders. The one he deems “more responsible for the legalization of cannabis in the United States than anyone else” is Ethan Nadelmann, the former Princeton professor who founded the Soros-seeded Drug Policy Alliance (DPA) and whom Rolling Stone magazine touted in 2013 as America’s “real drug czar.” “I like Ethan Nadelmann,” he confesses, noting that Nadelmann “didn’t join the legalization movement to get rich—or high.”

Well, I don’t like Nadelmann...I love him. For nearly 40 years he has been among my closest friends. He remained so even during the two decades that I strongly opposed de-criminalization as a threat to public health and safety, and despite my never trying pot (unless you count not holding my breath through rock concerts). In a 1999 Reason magazine article, “Prison Conversion,” Jacob Sullum summarized how my own research on the alcohol-crime nexus and “drug-only offenders,” mixed with religious stirrings and Nadelmann’s influence, had changed my views. But I still also count among my friends several largely unreconstructed drug warriors, including John Walters, the wonderful public servant who served as federal drug czar when I was on George W. Bush’s White House staff, and with whom I had worked earlier on many projects.

In an extensive sit-down interview with Walters, Berenson waxed eloquent regarding his conviction that children and “vulnerable adults” are victimized when marijuana is ubiquitous. “That risk,” he concludes in his final pages, “is the reason” most nations remain “wary of marijuana.” He asks: “Why on earth would we want to encourage people to use this drug?”

We don’t—not him, not Walters, and not Nadelmann. The real question is: What marijuana public law regime is most likely to achieve the greatest good and minimize the most harm for the greatest number? The best (or least bad) policy must accommodate a national population that includes: security-first folks like me who tell their children to eschew all illicit drugs; freedom-loving folks like Nadelmann who are more open to achieving altered states; and those who tell their own children and others that if they use marijuana at all they must strive to use it responsibly.

Berenson opposes repealing the CSA and extending state-level legalizing, but he also opposes rolling back decriminalization laws, calling them a “reasonable compromise.” Nor does he want to put anybody in jail for using pot, adding that if people “want to use in the privacy of their own homes, so be it.” But that “so be it” seems devilishly hard to reconcile with the 220-plus pages that precede it. Can the supposed epidemic of cannabis-psychosis-induced murder and mayhem be somehow mitigated if people use pot only in the privacy of their own homes—homes that, presumably, they will exit at some point?

But first, let’s stop debating mari-juana legalization as if any one side possesses the empirical and moral truth, wholly and unequivocally. Sir Isaiah Berlin had a term for people who insist that “the truth” is a knowable, single, harmonious whole, such that to possess it is to be spared the need to weigh competing facts, choose between competing values, cope with uncertainties, or tolerate people who think and live otherwise. Berlin baptized them “monists,” as opposed to “pluralists.”

Going forward, we need fewer marijuana monists and more pot pluralists. For all its problems, Tell Your Children is a well-motivated effort to rebut “dangerous myths about cannabis” and be a “bullhorn” for those who “have so much trouble being heard.” I suspect, however, that Berenson knows “the truth” about marijuana to be less certain, singular, and settled than he has rendered it. Indeed, I spy here a pluralist in monist’s clothing. It will be no mystery to me if his position on mari-jana evolves more than a little in the coming years.

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Essay by Joseph Epstein

A PHILOSOPHE IN FULL

Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu are the names most readily associated with the 18th-century French Enlightenment. But Denis Diderot, though less well known, ultimately may have had a greater effect on the formation of the Enlightenment than any of them. Diderot’s name generally falls under the rubric of “philosophe,” never to be confused with the title “philosopher.” “In the eighteenth century,” writes James Fowler, editor of New Essays on Diderot, “the word ‘philosophe’ connoted a man of ideas but also a man of action, a would-be agent of social and political change, a champion of progress.”

This is how Denis Diderot saw himself. The author of novels, plays, philosophical dialogues, art and theatre criticism, and more, he was a literary man of all work, the intellectual par excellence. His most substantial work was that which has come to be known as the great French Encyclopédie. As its chief editor over the course of a quarter of a century, Diderot saw its 17 volumes containing 71,818 articles and 11 further volumes containing 2,885 plates through to publication against the always looming threat of censorship and continuous financial struggle. Among the Encyclopédie’s more than 150 contributors were D’Alembert, Helvétius, d’Holbach, Turgot, Quesnay, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Buffon, Condorcet, and Voltaire, an 18th-century all-star literary and philosophical vaudeville. Diderot himself wrote, among others, the articles “Nature,” “The Will,” “The Soul,” “Political Authority,” “Eclecticism,” “Dictionary,” and “Encyclopedia.”

The Encyclopédie was read and discussed both abroad and in Paris, where, in the words of Harold Nicolson, “in the drawing rooms of Madame de Lambert, Madame de Tencin, Madame du Deffand, Madame Geoffrin, and Mademoiselle de l’Epinasse the intellectuals discussed little else.” More than a source of information, the work was a sub rosa political document, and as such a significant agent of change. The purpose behind it, Diderot wrote, was “changer la façan commune de penser,” or to change the manner in which people thought. In his article “Encyclopedia,” Diderot wrote that “this is a work that cannot be completed except by a society of men of letters and skilled workmen, each working separately on his own part, but all bound together solely by their zeal for the best interests of the human race and a feeling of mutual good will.”

The Encyclopédie’s true intention was to secularize thought during a time when the Church and monarchy were supreme in France and in much of Europe. What Diderot and his confrères thought “the best interests of the human race” were not shared by the Church, monarchy, and much of the aristocracy. To make their views prevail the establishment had the weapon of censorship on its side. Censorship in that day had real muscle behind it; prison, even execution, could accompany it. Before he took up editorship of the Encyclopédie, Diderot served three months in prison for an early essay called “Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See,” and never afterward wrote without looking over his shoulder.

The Ultimate Freelance

Born in 1713 in the town of Langres, Champagne, Denis Diderot was the son of a cutler who specialized in knives and surgical instruments. His father was set on Denis one day joining the priest-
hood, and at ten years old he was sent off to a Jesuit college. At 12 he went through the ceremony of tonsuring (the practice of shaving part of one's head, popularly associated with medieval monks). But the anti-authority impulse in the youthful Diderot was too strong for him ever to become a priest, and, though he completed the education required for the priesthood, he dropped away before taking final vows. He next took up the study of law, but with similarly incomplete results. When asked what he wanted to do with his life, Diderot is supposed to have replied, "Nothing, nothing at all. I like to study; I am very happy, very content. I don't ask for anything else." He was, as the future would bear out, the ultimate freelance.

As a freelance, the young Diderot scrabbled out a living. He did translations from Greek and English (among them Lord Shaftesbury's *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit*), a bit of writing of his own (his essay on blindness; his book, *contra* Pascal, *Philosophical Thoughts*), tutored the children of the rich, and read widely in literature, philosophy, and science. Isaac Newton, with whom it is sometimes said the European Enlightenment began, was, with his emphasis on experimentation, a potent influence on him.

Diderot claimed that the two great mistakes of his life were his marriage and the 25 years he gave to steering the *Encyclopédie* to completion. His marriage at the age of 30 to Anne-Antoinette Champion was opposed by both their parents, and eventually, alas too late, came to be opposed by each of them. A haridan, relentless in her complaints, jealous, with a violent temper, she was, to put it gently, no comfort at all. They had four children, three of whom died; the one surviving child, their daughter Angélique, Diderot loved dearly.

Mistresses in 18th-century France were nearly as common as cellphones today. Everybody seemed to have one, and Diderot had several. Some of his love affairs lasted longer than others. One of his mistresses, a 38-year-old spinster named Sophie Volland, is said to have been the love of his life. Not notably attractive physically, she had a lively and penetrating mind. In his recent biography, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*, Andrew S. Curran writes that Diderot "cherished the fact that he could treat her as he might another (male) philosopher: she was honest and brainy, and blessed with, as one of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* colleagues put it, the 'quick wit of a demon.'" So much did Sophie Volland meet the desideratum of a male mind in a woman's body that she was known, as Curran reports, as the "hermaphrodite." The relationship, he adds, was stronger on the spiritual than on the physical side. Diderot was haunted by the possibility that the woman he loved more than any other might have been in a lesbian relationship with her younger sister. He would go on to other love affairs, his relationship with Sophie Volland cooling and settling into the platonic. But their love for each other never died out. In her will she left him her eight-volume set of the *Essays* of Montaigne and a ring she loved.

In the early pages of his *Catherine & Diderot*, Robert Zaretsky calls Diderot a "mensch," a Yiddish word with richly complex meanings. A cognate with the German word for "human being" (*Mensch*), the Yiddish *mensch* is a clear approbative, describing a person of honor and integrity whose character has been developed through hardship. And so it seems with Denis Diderot, who most of his days feared censorship, underwent financial struggle until Catherine the Great bailed him out by buying his library and appointing him its salaried librarian, and returned at night to a complaining wife. Diderot was indeed a *mensch*, something one would never think to call Voltaire or Rousseau.

Diderot had his enemies—personal, institutional, ideological. He loathed superstition, a category under which he placed much of the religion of his time. "Religion," he declared, "is a buttress which always ends up bringing the house down." He went from seminarist, to deist, to atheist, though he was never a proselytizing atheist. (The word "agnostic," it turns out, did not enter the language until 1869, when it was coined by T.H. Huxley.) Diderot was an early opponent of colonialism and of slavery in all its forms, from Russian to American. He thought liberty a gift bestowed upon all; unlike Voltaire who didn't mind a benign monarch, Diderot was opposed to monarchy *tout court*, certainly all monarchy justified by the divine right to kingship. "No man has received from nature the right to command other men," he wrote, "Freedom is a gift from the heavens, and each individual of the same species has the right to enjoy it as soon as he is able to reason."

**Uneven Fame**

In his even-handed and well-written biography, Curran portrays a tireless Diderot, a battler under the flag of reason, carrying lifelong a torch for freedom. He accounts for Diderot's uneven fame, even in our time, through his strangely erratic publishing history. Diderot wrote no one great book—no *Social Contract*, no *Spirit of the Laws*, no *Candide*—that might ensure his popular or permanent reputation. Much of what he did write, out of worry about the persecution that might come his way through censorship, was published posthumously. "Diderot's unedited books, essays, and criticism," Curran writes, "far surpassed what he had published during his lifetime." Many of these, Curran adds, only "trickled out over the course of decades."

Many of these writings were censored in Diderot's day, and a few would get an R-rating in ours. All three of his novels are of interest, yet none is quite a success. The first, *The Indiscreet Jewels*, is a fantasy about a Congolese sultan who is given a magic ring that, when aimed at a woman, grants her vagina (her jewel) uninhibited speech. An amusing idea, but the problem is that it turns out the jewels haven't all that much interesting to say. Some jewels depry being overused, some underused. Muzzles for jewels are soon invented to prevent their indiscretions. Diderot later inserted a few further chapters to give the novel philosophical weight: one in which the sultan's consort dwells on the question of the residence of the soul in the body; another in which the ring is turned on the sultan's favorite mare, which presents a problem in translation from animal to human language. Loftier critics than I see in *Indiscreet Jewels* a fable about hermeneutics, or interpretation, but as fiction the book doesn't quite really come off.

Diderot's next two novels, *Jacques the Fatalist* and *The Nun* could scarcely be more different from each other. The latter was written under the influence of Samuel...
Richardson’s Clarissa, the former under that of Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy. Diderot’s fiction was more strongly influenced by English than French literature; and Goethe thought his true affinity was with German literature.

The Nun, written in the mode of naturalism, is about a young woman forced to live her life in a convent, presumably to expiate her mother’s sin of having had her out of wedlock, and is grimly anti-theological in its message. Jacques the Fatalist is, like Tristram Shandy, a satire on the very notion of storytelling. In both novels, characters’ stories are always being interrupted, and most never get finished, to remind the reader how arbitrary the telling of any tale is. Diderot pops in from time to time to remind his reader that he neglected to inform him of important details, or one character will ask another why he loathes character studies. At one point the reader (addressed as “You”) is told that he is “the one with the dirty mind”; at another the Master tells Jacques that “I doubt if there’s another head beneath the vast canopy of heaven that’s stuffed as full of paradoxical notions as yours.”

If Diderot’s fiction has a central flaw, it is that it is too obviously driven by ideas. In the best fiction, ideas arise naturally out of the moral conflict, out of the development of fictional characters and their tribulations and victories and defeats and what they learn from them. With Diderot’s fiction one has the sense that ideas, not story, are driving the bus.

Which is perhaps why those of Diderot’s compositions known as dialogues often show him at his best. In these dialogues—among them Rameau’s Nephew, Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage, D’Alembert’s Dream, A Conversation between a Father and His Children—Diderot often plays the mischievous intellectual, questioning such fundamental beliefs as the necessary outlawing of incest, the importance of living up to the law, the superiority of the virtuous life. Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage, Diderot’s addition to Bougainville’s Voyage, was hemorrhoidal colic. We learn from Zаратеsky in Catherine & Diderot—is another record of the failure of philosophy to alter the path of power.

Catherine assumed the throne of Russia in 1762 after the suspicious death of her husband, Peter III. The initial reason given for the altogether inadequate Peter’s death was hemorrhoidal colic. We learn from Zaratęsky, though, that Peter was in fact assassinated by Alexei Orlov (the brother of one of Catherine’s lovers) and his fellow castle guards. Catherine was 33 at the time, well-read, thoughtful, and not in the least shy of power—ready to rule.

Francophile in her intellectual interests, German by birth, Catherine had earlier established connections with Voltaire and the sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet (who did the grand equestrian sculpture of Peter the Great that stands in Saint Petersburg); she was an admirer of the writing of Montesquieu. She knew Diderot through his art criticism and commissioned him to buy many of those paintings that would later become some of the central works of the Hermitage.

Diderot recommended Falconet to Catherine, and so when in 1776 she called on him to visit her in Saint Petersburg it was not altogether a surprise invitation. She had earlier bought his personal library, which she allowed to inform him of important details, or one character will ask another why he loathes character studies. At one point the reader (addressed as “You”) is told that he is “the one with the dirty mind”; at another the Master tells Jacques that “I doubt if there’s another head beneath the vast canopy of heaven that’s stuffed as full of paradoxical notions as yours.”

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Diderot recommended Falconet to Catherine, and so when in 1776 she called on him to visit her in Saint Petersburg it was not altogether a surprise invitation. She had earlier bought his personal library, which she allowed
him to keep in Paris until his death. Diderot viewed the invitation as an opportunity to put his own ideas into action through an already half-enslaved monarch. In his relation with Catherine, Zaretzsky writes, Diderot "sought the role not of Solon, but of Socrates." He also assumed powers of persuasion and charm and he ultimately did not possess.

The reviews on Diderot’s charm are mixed. The salonnière Madame Geoffrin, who eventually outlawed Diderot from her salon, reported to a friend that “[h]e is always like a man in a dream, and who believes everything he has dreamed.” The playwright and literary critic Jean-Francoise de La Harpe found Diderot altogether too delighted with his own conversation and, in Zaretzsky’s paraphrase, “his own most ardent and attentive listener.” This view seems to have been partially seconded by Diderot, who of himself said, “I’m high-minded and, on occasion, come across great and powerful ideas that I convey in a striking fashion.” Note the “on occasion.”

Once arrived in Saint Petersburg, Diderot met each afternoon from 3:00 to 5:00 with Catherine. She was initially much taken with him. “Diderot’s imagination, I find,” she told Voltaire, “is inexhaustible. I place him among the most ardent and attentive listeners.” This view seems to have been partially seconded by Diderot, who of himself said, “I’m high-minded and, on occasion, come across great and powerful ideas that I convey in a striking fashion.” Note the “on occasion.”

Would Diderot have recognized that his beloved reason alone, as far as it goes, never goes far enough?

Diderot seems to have spent his final decade under the shadow of failing health. This, though, did not greatly reduce his high literary productivity. He wrote a 500-odd page study of Seneca; he is said to have contributed substantially to Guillaume Thomas Raynal’s History of the Two Indies. He held out hope that his ideas would find seed in America. He connected with Benjamin Franklin, though it is less than clear that the two men ever met. He allowed that he had failed to produce a single masterwork, yet, according to Curran, held out the hope that his ideas “would change society for the better.” Toward the end he summed up his final views: “There is only one virtue, justice; only one duty, to make oneself happy; only one corollary, not to exaggerate the importance of one’s life and not to fear death.” Earlier he had written: “I will be able to tell myself that I contributed as much as possible to the happiness of my fellow men, and prepared, perhaps from afar, the improvement of their lot. This sweet thought will for me take the place of glory. It will be the charm of my old age and the consolation of my final moment.”

Toward the very close of Catherine & Diderot Zaretzsky notes that Montesquieu portrayed society as it was, Diderot as it ought to be. Diderot, his mind always on the future, may be said to have lived in the ought.

He died five years before the French Revolution, which subscribed to many of his central ideas, yet he could hardly have approved of the Terror. What would he have made of the fate of these same ideas in the centuries since his death, centuries that featured the demise of monarchy, the lessening of the power of religion, the rise of democracy, but also the eruption of world wars, the emergence of murderous totalitarianism, the invention of weapons of mass destruction? Would he have recognized that his beloved reason alone, as far as it goes, never goes far enough?

Diderot’s daughter remembers the last words she heard from her father: “The first step towards philosophy is incredulity.” Were Denis Diderot alive today to consider the world of our day, he might wish to add that the final step toward philosophy also happens to be incredulity.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and the author, most recently, of Charm: The Elusive Enchantment (Lyons Press).
Book Review by J. Eric Wise

**Christian Science?**


The word “revenge” comes from the old French *revencher*, which in turn comes from the Latin *revidicare*, meaning to assert or demonstrate (*dicare*) power or supremacy (*vis*) in return (*re*) for some perceived injustice. In both origin and present usage, then, “revenge” is a political word. Edward Feser’s *Aristotle’s Revenge: The Metaphysical Foundations of Physical and Biological Science* is a dense work of scholarship about physical and biological science. But it is also, albeit inadvertently, a political book.

Feser is not by any stretch the first for whom politics and science have proven interrelated. In his *Discourses on Livy*, Niccolò Machiavelli drew a connection between physical and social science when he lamented that readers of history seemed uninterested in applying lessons from the past to the problems of the present day. Such readers, Machiavelli wrote, behave “as though heaven, the sun, the elements, and men had changed the order of their motions and power, and were different from what they were in ancient times.” Machiavelli sought to reclaim for the politics of his time an ancient way of thinking in which there were no wholly impermissible political actions any more than there were impossible observable phenomena in physical science.

Four and a half centuries later, Leo Strauss also wished to reclaim for his own time an ancient political rationalism. Strauss wrote in *Natural Right and History* (1953) of the tensions among revelation, natural right, and modern science:

Looking around us, we see two hostile camps, heavily fortified and strictly guarded. One is occupied by the liberals of various description, the other by the Catholic and non-Catholic disciples of Thomas Aquinas. But...[t]hey all are modern men. We all are in the grip of the same difficulty. Natural right in its classic form is connected with a teleological view of the universe.... The teleological view of the universe, of which the teleological view of man forms a part, would seem to have been destroyed by modern natural science.

Strauss intimated that the problem of natural right could not be resolved without adequate reconciliation between two seemingly incompatible cosmological visions: that of modern science and that of classical antiquity, particularly Aristotle’s. Man could not have objective ends or purposes, knowable by human inquiry, in a universe purely mechanical and arbitrary in origin.

Although Strauss’s teaching appears differently (often radically so) to different students, a rudimentary assessment of Strauss’s work may categorize his “reconciliation” between these two visions as Platonic. Averting direct confrontation with the cosmological perspective of modern science, Strauss, like Plato, did not himself assert a definitive cos-
I presume Feser will say the differences are with Christianity. Where Aquinas and the fictions and corrections of Aristotle's errors, fairly say that Strauss claimed to know only freely admit this. But Feser, in my view, is coexisting with an uncertain or indefinite cosmology and metaphysics, however, one can fairly say that Strauss claimed to know only that he knew nothing.

A Straussian reading of Aristotle thus emphasizes the divide between practical and theoretical wisdom described in Book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics. This divide makes possible the evaluation of Aristotle's political teaching, without a definitive view of Aristotle's physics or metaphysics. Noetic heterogeneity—the accessibility of different phenomena to different capacities of reason—suggests the possibility of an adequate understanding of politics, or social science, coexisting with an uncertain or indefinite understanding of physical and metaphysical science. In this sense Strauss sought to restore, not classical rationalism tout court, but only classical political rationalism. To paraphrase Martin Heidegger, Strauss sanctioned the continued neglect of the study of Being.

A renowned contemporary writer on philosophy and Christianity, Feser is no Straussian—I believe he will freely admit this. But Feser, in my view, is not a consistent Aristotelian, either—and this I believe he will vigorously contest.

I suspect that Feser will take umbrage at my assertion that he is not a consistent Aristotelian because he will maintain that Aristotle's thought is enlarged by its integration with Christianity. Where Aquinas and the later schoolmen apprehend Aristotle differently from the way the ancient Lyceum did, I presume Feser will say the differences are not fundamental, but mostly represent clarifications and corrections of Aristotle's errors, omissions, and ambiguities. The essential core of Aristotelian doctrine is unchanged, Feser will say, by the advances of Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics.

This explains several features of Aristotle's Revenge. For one, Feser tends to use the terms "Aristotelian," "Aristotelian tradition," and "Aristotelian-Thomistic" somewhat interchangeably, suggesting that any differences among them are minimal. His impressive bibliography—a resource in itself for the curious—includes only one book of Aristotle, the R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye translation of Physics. Yet it includes five books of Aquinas, including the massive Summa Theologica and Summa Contra Gentiles. It is not merely the bibliographic paucity of Aristotle compared to Aquinas; it is the scope of the cited works. The two Summae set out a comprehensive account of the whole of creation and being. Aristotle's Physics is only a part of Aristotle's larger thought.

In citing physics alone of Aristotle's work, Feser has chosen the text of Aristotle that has suffered the greatest derogation by modern critics of classical thought. Aristotle's physics contains a number of conclusions about physics that have been widely mocked. Bodies fall to the earth through the air because of gravity, not because they have a "natural place" towards which they are impelled to return. The material universe is made up of many, many more than four elemental kinds of particle. The fact that Aristotle, using the rudimentary instruments of his age, could not experience these things has so affected thought about him that even devotees of his teaching have dismissed his physics. Indeed, one of the foremost interpreters of Aristotle of the last century wrote:

One can hardly imagine an enterprising astronomer investing serious effort on Aristotle's treatise On the Heavens, when he knew that a glance through the telescope would disprove the major conclusions of that work.

It would, of course, be absurd for someone to study those parts of Aristotle's physical theories that have been disproven by the empirical data of modern physical science because he was dissatisfied by the empirical data of modern physical science.

Harry V. Jaffa wrote these words in Thomism and Aristotelianism (1952) with the rehabilitative intention of distancing Aristotle the political scientist from Aristotle the physical scientist. Feser too renounces certain of Aristotle's conclusions in physical science, such as the doctrine of natural place, with a similar intention. So as not to destroy Aristotle the "philosopher of nature," Feser distances himself from Aristotle the physicist.

It is, however, not necessary to treat Aristotle the physicist so roughly. Carlo Rovelli, in an ingenious essay from 2013 entitled "Aristotle's Physics: A Physicist's Look," makes the astounding case that "Aristotelian physics is a correct and non-intuitive approximation of Newtonian physics in the suitable domain (motion in fluids), in the same technical sense in which Newton's theory is an approximation of Einstein's theory." Given that Aristotle's observations were limited to solid objects moving through air or liquids exhibiting the effects of drag, lift, and buoyancy, Rovelli shows that many of Aristotle's conclusions were provisionally correct. To do this, Rovelli reduces Aristotle's account of motion to mathematical expressions, illustrating the proximity of Aristotle's physics to Isaac Newton's. Indulge, for a moment, an argument from authority: Rovelli is no hobbyist in the field of science. He is a senior statesman of theoretical physics and a savant of loop quantum gravity theory, which aims to harmonize Albert Einstein's equations of special and general relativity with quantum physics.

In attempting to reconcile Aristotle and Newton, Rovelli explicitly rejects as a "vulgata" the American philosopher Thomas Kuhn's thesis of scientific structural revolution. Kuhn argued that major intellectual developments—such as the Copernican change from geocentric to heliocentric astronomy—fundamentally overturn rather than amend the ground rules of scientific thought. By calling this view a vulgata, I understand Rovelli to mean that it has become a widely (and unthinkingly) accepted doctrine which is nevertheless at odds with experience. "Science," Rovelli writes, "generates discontinuities and constantly critically re-evaluates received ideas, but it builds on past knowledge and its cumulative aspects by very far outnumber its discontinuities." Aristotle, Newton, and Einstein can each be correct in a certain way. This idea of continuity and cumulative science is similar to a concept in Book IV of Aristotle's Metaphysics:

[W]e should not say that two and three alike are both even, nor that both he who regards four to be five and he who regards one thousand to be five are alike mistaken. And if they are not alike mistaken, it is clear that the first man is less mistaken and so thinks more truly. Aristotle deploys this argument in rebuttal of ancient doctrines that denied the possibility of a thing being made objectively definite by thinking.

Aristotle's account of truth allowed, against these doctrines, for each of two or more accounts of experience to be partly true and for one to be nearer to the truth. The truth about a thing may be understood adequately without being understood exactly.
Einstein popularized his new and truer physics in 1916 with *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory*. This highly readable book questioned whether space has a real existence, or whether all space consists simply of relationships between different material bodies. This is a very important question for Aristotle. In *Metaphysics*, especially Books III and VII, the concept of location requires space to have a real existence or substance: there must be an actual thing called “space,” consisting of points within an absolute frame of reference. Aristotle is explicit that if space has no real existence or substance, then no thing has being. The issue is also important for Aquinas and for Feser. Feser devotes considerable ink to discussing and criticizing “relationalist” interpretations of space.

In *Aristotle’s Revenge*, however, Feser does not discuss an important development pertaining to this problem. In 1952, less than three years before his death, Einstein changed his mind about space. To the 15th edition of *Relativity* Einstein added an Appendix V. There he conceded, in the course of an examination of pre-scientific experience as it relates to time and space, that the field-equations of relativity are consistent with the notion of space having a real existence.

Appendix V subsequently became the ground of loop quantum gravity, which maintains that space has a real existence. In fact, it is “quantal”: the theory posits that there is a smallest quantity of space, from which there is no linear decrease to zero. Space in loop quantum gravity can overlap, like loops of chainmail, with each loop overlaying another to a greater or lesser degree. One implication of the theory is that there exists a limit to the expansion, compression, and distortion of space. A second implication is that singularities—the compression of space and matter to a single point having a spatial value of zero—do not occur in the way the generally accepted model of a black hole would predict. A third implication, which follows from the first and second, is that the cosmos may be undergoing a cyclical motion, so that it will eventually reverse its current expansion and return to its pre-big-bang state of compression in what is termed the “big crunch.” This would be followed by another expansion (a “big bounce”), followed by another big crunch, and so on for eternity. Such a series of circular motions might remind one of the recursive, circular motion that Aristotle identifies in *Metaphysics* as the prime motion.

Here is where all this butts up against Aristotle’s *Revenge*: the scholastic view of prime motion is different from Aristotle’s. The Christian revelation holds that the cosmos has a beginning and an end. The Genesis of the whole is a creative act of God; the terminus of the whole is described in a revealed eschatology. Aristotle’s eternally cyclical prime motion and the prime mover (pure actuality or thought thinking about thinking) are incompatible with this description, and in scholastic treatment the prime mover becomes a “first” mover. The divine is defined not by the most simple continuous motion, but (and only partly) by the initial motion which imparts motion to all the rest.

There are many other features of scholastic Aristotle that are different from unalloyed Aristotle. For example, a doctrine of angels must be accommodated, elevating Aristotle’s notions of the incorporeal to a plane that simply cannot be found in Aristotle’s system of thought. Indeed, Feser, in a sidebar, briefly discusses the knowledge of angels as the instantaneous and incorruptible knowledge of incorporeal beings. He doesn’t digress into these more theistic concepts, but the serious secular reader is bound to react allergically to supernatural data in the science of Aristotle’s *Revenge*. As another example, the scholastics added the notion of prime matter, which they thought Aristotle’s hylemorphism implied (i.e., his theory that every being is a
Aristotle has no such concept of prime matter.

Aristotelianism is changed from a flexible Aristotle's psyche, the compound consisting of some form and the matter out of which that form is made). Feser deploys prime matter throughout Aristotle's Revenge as a plank against reductionism. Prime matter is the universal stuff of things, or matter with no substantial form of its own out of which all other matter is composed. Aristotle has no such concept of prime matter. A concept of prime matter would confine the examination of things to an ultimate, single, speculative, and unobservable category of matter, and Aristotle's science is rooted in observable experience, which lends it great flexibility to examine new experiences.

There are, in addition, scholastic modifications to Aristotle's psyche, the form of a living thing which gives it life—imperfectly translated as "soul." Unalloyed Aristotle's psyche is eternal for human beings only in the very limited respect of the isomorphism—the structural or formal similarity—of humanity's active intellect and the eternal prime motion: all humans participate in a kind of motion called contemplation, which is the same as the prime motion. But though this motion goes on eternally, our personal participation in it does not: each particular intellect, the individual form of a human being, ceases to exist upon that human being's death. Scholastic Aristotle's human soul (rendered in Latin and freighted with new meaning as anima) is immortal and retains its particular knowledge for eternity—an essential feature of eternal punishments and rewards for bad and good particulars. Scholastic Aristotle sees all human purpose—indeed all creation—as organized toward this end of immortality and happiness in the next life.

The coming into being of man thus requires a doctrine of providence, because a specific intervention—a miracle—is needed to create a human being with a particularized immortal soul. Feser expressly discusses this concept of Aristotelian theistic evolutionism, writing: "special divine action would be required to introduce a distinctively human substantial form." But there is no basis for this in Aristotle's system of thought, nor in any system of thought parallel to Aristotle's absent revelation. In the final analysis, the schoolmen's Aristotelianism is changed from a flexible account of the whole consistent with common sense and empirical fact ("with a true view the data harmonize"—Nicomachean Ethics, Book I) to a highly doctrinal system that derives its truth from divine authority.

Feser opens his book by setting out what he calls the "philosophy of nature." Although Aristotle does not write of a philosophy of nature, Feser finds this category useful because it isolates discrete concepts of metaphysics, and to a lesser extent physics, into a single category. Feser's philosophy of nature advises as to "what any possible empirical and material world must be like. What must be true of any possible material and empirical world in order for us to be able to acquire scientific knowledge of it?" This branch of metaphysics (as Feser identifies it) thus forecloses thought of some phenomena (some undiscovered and some observed) as impossible. Such a foreclosure is, however, not Aristotelian. Aristotle is open to reflection on new observations in a way that Feser's account, which invites the development of doctrine, is not. How else could the truth and data harmonize in a world aflood with new data? This foreclosure thus makes the Aristotle of Aristotle's Revenge a weak competitor with modern science, which has no such limitations. A less rigid approach would, in fact, be more Aristotelian, more consistent with the notion of cumulative scientific knowledge, and make a superior challenge to the reigning scientific vulgata.

In book I of the metaphysics, Aristotle describes metaphysics as a distillation of the desire to know—a science that examines the first principles of things, their being, in a way that is "not instrumental to something else" but rather an object of pure study as an end in itself. Aristotle accordingly saw physics as a science which could competently assume the correctness of commonsense experience in the study of nature, without investigation of first principles. Such investigation was simply not necessary to physics. If it had been, Aristotle's metaphysics would have been instrumental to something else, advising on what could and could not be considered in physics.

Feser frequently asserts that proponents of various modern scientific theories "owe" a response to his arguments about the philosophy of nature. But this is not a business they consider themselves to be in: natural scientists are not concerned with what should or may not be. They are concerned with what is, according to their best efforts at observation. Aristotle's metaphysics establishes no debtor and creditor relationship in thought. Metaphysics, for Aristotle, has the fewest dependencies, because it is undertaken for its own sake. This brings us full circle to Machiavelli and his critique of the thought of his time. The social science of the early 16th century grounded itself on interwoven doctrines of Aristotle and Christianity which deemed certain political actions to be impermissible. The natural science of the era similarly grounded itself on blended doctrines which deemed certain phenomena—even those actually observed, like the earth's revolutions around the sun—to be impossible. In the eruption of Enlightenment thought that began with Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, and Francis Bacon, Aristotle was attacked, often viciously.

Feser sees Enlightenment hostility toward Aristotle as motivated by the desire to undermine the Church. But he might consider whether such attacks were less against the Church and Christianity per se and more against falsely pious doctrines that inhibited both political prudence and the desire to know, frustrating the actualization of human potential in both reflection and choice.

One may admire Aquinas's philosophical thought and yet ask these questions without impiety. Perhaps what began with Aquinas as disputed questions intended partly to moderate Church doctrine had become a drumbeat of "I answer that," lending a patina of rationality to what was no longer reasoned. The value of Aristotle's thought, as well as of Christian piety, might have been observed by their transubstantiation through three centuries of schoolmen's alchemy.

Insofar as Aristotle's Revenge is an attempt to cause modern science to acknowledge or embrace Aristotelian thinking, I do not judge the book to exact much in the way of vengeance. Modern science is—and modern scientists are—mostly materialist. Modern science does informally employ, and indeed, as Feser observes, depends upon, many concepts borrowed from the four causes which Aristotle examined. Indeed, one will find that small pockets of modern science are deep into some variations on incorporeal substances. String theory, for example, has a notion of branes (short for membranes), conjured from the mathematical demands of the theory but never observed, which are imagined to propagate through space-time. Branes would be in good company with the angels of the 13th century. But most of today's physicists and biologists will not examine or acknowledge their debt to the philosopher if they are scolded with medieval arguments about the impossibility of phenomena. Only a few of Feser's arguments, Aristotelian or otherwise, are likely to be compelling for anyone not already committed to an orthodox appreciation of Christian revelation. If Aristotle is to have 'revenge' in metaphysics—if that is even desirable—I suspect it will come not from reiterations of the positions of the schoolmen, but from the re-characterization of Aristotle in ways that illustrate, in terms modern science understands (e.g., in math and symbolic logic and the like), the relevance of his thought to modern humanity.

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Saving Persuasion

Aristotle’s Art of Rhetoric, translated by Robert C. Bartlett.
The University of Chicago Press, 288 pages, $40

A merica has a rhetoric problem. Our political rhetoric has never been particularly decorous, but in recent years, fueled by the internet and social media—and especially by the accelerating decline of American education—public discourse has collapsed into a slough of name-calling, pervasive obscenity, hysterical claims, and unashamed irrationalism.

Oddly enough, rhetoric’s prestige in the academy is at its highest in centuries. This reflects postmodernism’s dominance of contemporary intellectual discourse. In a world lacking objective truths there can only be a variety of “narratives,” deployed as instruments of personal or political power—and the master science of the narrative is rhetoric.

This situation bears more than a passing resemblance to that of classical Greece before the Socratic revolution of the late 5th and 4th centuries B.C. The sophists and rhetoricians pilloried by Plato in dialogues such as the Protagoras and the Gorgias prided themselves on their ability to make persuasive speeches in defense of any cause, and sold their skills to prospective litigants and politicians. It was rhetoric’s claim to “make the weaker argument the stronger”—to make the weaker case prevail, whether in courts or public assembly. Such rhetoric employed deliberately fallacious arguments (“sophistry”) as well as ad hominem attacks and emotional manipulation.

Because of this, Plato’s Socrates concluded, rhetoric was no art but merely a “knack.” What aspiring young politicians really needed wasn’t (simply) skill at speaking, but a substantive knowledge of human affairs, available only through the disciplined study of philosophy. But this apparent dismissal of rhetoric could not be Plato’s last word—after all, Plato’s Socrates was himself a master of rhetoric, even as he spoke contemptuously of it.

Aristotle’s Art of Rhetoric (circa 356 B.C.) is the earliest surviving Western treatise on the subject and continues to be studied as a living work today. Aristotle makes clear at the outset that he shares Plato’s dissatisfaction with the state of the discipline, and offers a corrective to it. As Robert C. Bartlett, Behrakis Professor of Hellenic Political Studies at Boston College, makes clear in an interpretive essay appended to his splendid new translation, Aristotle’s Rhetoric is itself a rhetorical tour de force. The novelty of Aristotle’s approach lies in his emphasis on the centrality in rhetoric of “argument” or “reasoning” (logos), as opposed to extraneous appeals to a listener’s sentiments. As his own argument develops, however, Aristotle quietly rehabilitates much of rhetoric’s dark side that he initially seemed to dismiss. The dangers coexistent with rhetorical ability can be kept in bounds—but only if rhetoric is properly understood not as an autonomous art or science, but as subordinated to the study of human or political affairs, particularly “ethics” or the study of character.

Tellingly, when Aristotle addresses the “modes of persuasion,” he makes clear that argument or reasoning by itself is insufficient. An orator must also present himself—his “character”—in a certain way, so as to gain the audience’s sympathy and establish his own credibility (hence his recommendation to begin a speech with a formulaic opening known as the captatio benevolentiae). Most importantly, he must go to school on the human passions. Anger, envy, hatred, pity, indignation, and other emotions need to be understood so as to enhance the persuasiveness of one’s arguments, whether in response to the manipulations of others or even in an offensive mode.

Thomas Hobbes, who regarded Aristotle’s ethics and metaphysics as dangerous drivel, nonetheless held, as biographer John Aubrey writes, that Aristotle’s “rhetorique and discourse of animals was rare.” But Hobbes’s admiration was directed primarily to Aristotle’s analysis of the passions, rather than to his larger defense of rhetoric. Hobbes viewed the rhetorical disputes of classical Greece and Rome as a prime source of political instability—an attitude that became characteristic of the modern Enlightenment, with its revisioning of the relationship between politics and science or philosophy. The new public authority enjoyed by science necessarily devalued the role of rhetoric in political life. This remains very much the story in contemporary America—despite the fact that in the early days of the republic, political rhetoric enjoyed a golden age.

Contemporary political speech’s most characteristic failure is its inability to construct coherent arguments. This is not just a failing of our political class, but reflects a wider cultural malaise. Schools no longer teach English grammar or composition in any formal way. Logical fallacies can properly be employed as part of a larger rhetorical strategy—but only if such fallacies are perceived as such by their authors. (Colleges could do worse than require a course in logic.) The social justice warriors’ weaponization of words to destroy adversaries personally and advance political causes in non-democratic ways is deplorable. From this perspective, Hobbes was not wrong to see rhetoric as a potentially destabilizing force in republican polities. To recover a fresh and salutary perspective on these issues, there is no better place to start than Bartlett’s translation of Aristotle’s Rhetoric.

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Two summers ago, New York City’s Public Theater staged the assassination of Donald Trump. Their production of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar styled the title character as a Twitter-happy blonde bloviator whose gory deposition looked to many like a savage display of hostility toward the commander-in-chief.

Well-spoken cultural authorities emerged from the heavens to assure us that, of course, the play in no way endorses political violence. Harvard University’s Stephen Greenblatt, known for his popular scholarship on Shakespeare, called it “kind of amusing, in a slightly grim way,” that silly conservatives would get up in arms about a harmless instance of free artistic expression.

True, Julius Caesar leaves us suspecting that the conspirators’ ends may not have justified their means. But America’s artistic landscape has been relentlessly dominated by political revenge porn. Comedienne Kathy Griffin appeared in a 2017 photo op with a Trump mask made to look like the president’s severed head, and every awards show features a stirring call to resistance. Right-wingers may be forgiven for wondering whether the overwhelmingly liberal New York theatre community didn’t relish slaughtering the president in effigy.

More than anything, though, Caesar-as-Trump was a desperate grasp at relevance—a forced attempt to shoehorn a great playwright into a modern staging. Shakespeare’s play is concerned with the terrible dilemma that faces patriots when a real constitutional crisis necessitates drastic measures—not just when the guy in office happens to be unpalatable. Trump is no Caesar. Kathy Griffin is no Shakespeare.

What if, instead of making Shakespeare’s historical dramas into tortured analogues for our present moment, we considered them as earnest attempts to penetrate the issues of the past? That is the premise behind Jan H. Blits’s new annotated editions of the Roman plays:

Julius Caesar, out last year; Antony and Cleopatra, which appeared this September; and a forthcoming Coriolanus. Blits treats the trilogy not as a parable for 16th- or 21st-century politics, but as a searching philosophical depiction of the pagan world’s anguished transformation into Christendom.

Blits, a professor emeritus at the University of Delaware School of Education, is clearly indebted to Shakespeare’s Politics (1964) by Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa, as well as Shakespeare’s Rome (1976) and Shakespeare’s Roman Trilogy (2017) by Paul Cantor. These books gain said a trendy strain of historicist thought which held that Shakespeare could have no real insight into any time other than his own Elizabethan England.

By contrast, Cantor and Blits see in the Bard a serious scholar of antiquity grappling with the same question that haunted Edward Gibbon and Friedrich Nietzsche: how did the noble champions of Roman liberty succumb to the universalizing quietism which made both Augustus and Christ into plausible rulers of the world?

Blits therefore juxtaposes each play with primary texts from the Roman imperial period in notes at the bottom of each page. He frequently cites the 1st-century-A.D. essayist Plutarch, whom Shakespeare read carefully in Sir Thomas North’s translation. Blits points out that even small details (e.g., the “distinctive mincing diction” of the minor lackey Garius Maecenas) are faithfully drawn from ancient accounts. Because these parallels between history and drama are so closely observed, the editions also reveal meaning and significance in moments when Shakespeare does depart from his source material.

For example: Shakespeare has Octavian hid his tears but, Blits argues, there is a reason why Shakespeare makes his budding monarch flaunt his magnanimity in victory. The trilogy as a whole contrasts such ostentatious demonstrations of egotistical benevolence with the old-fashioned Roman brand of Stoic fortitude and self-sacrifice. That venerable code of honor is passing from the world because Rome, in Blits’s words, “has ceased to be a city or a community.” Shakespeare saw in Rome’s massive territorial expansion the death of its old civic values: if Rome is everywhere then it is nowhere, too abstract to love or to die for.

And so, as Act V of Antony and Cleopatra opens with Octavian’s victory, Blits shifts to a new frame of reference: he believes that Shakespeare is now concerned less with Plutarch than with the Book of Revelation. Empire calls forth “a new heaven and a new earth” wherein all the universe must bow to one authority. Either men will worship Caesar, or they will submit their hearts to the gentle yoke of a strange new peasant king who comes barefoot from the East. Either Rome or Christ must now be all in all.

Ironically, Blits’s excellent reading of the play—so ostensibly distant from our modern Trumpian anxieties—turns out to be deeply “relevant” after all. What happens when a ragtag rebel nation sprawls outward into a globalist superpower whose newfound dominance dilutes the fellow feeling of its citizens? What force is strong enough to unite the hearts of countrymen separated by geographical and ideological chasms? These are Shakespeare’s real questions. They are also our own. If we avoid mining his plays for punditry and sloganeering, the Bard may help us find some answers.

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Claremont Fellows: Keepers of the Founders’ Truths

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Yale University Press has published a nearly thousand-page book on classical orchestral music by Robert Philip, a British scholar, broadcaster, and musician. This is good news for a number of reasons. I had thought books like this had gone the way of the dinosaur. That was the hard lesson I took away when my own 500-page book on 20th- and 21st-century music, Surprised by Beauty, went nearly extinct the same year it was published in 2016. Before that, one has to reach back to Ted Libbey’s NPR Listener’s Encyclopedia of Classical Music from 2006, or to his NPR Guide to Building a Classical CD Collection from 1994, to find works similar to Philip’s. The behemoth, biannual Penguin Guide to Recorded Classical Music ceased publication in 2010. The rest is silence—so I thought. No one, it seemed, was very much interested in classical music anymore. Or if they were, they simply read online and didn’t bother with books.

Hope Philip’s Classical Music Lover’s Companion to Orchestral Music proves me wrong, because it deserves to succeed as a guide to the basic orchestral repertory. I was, however, prepared to dislike this book because of what I call the “basic repertory-itis” from which the classical music world suffers today. For example, WETA, the local Washington, D.C.-area classical music station, leans so heavily on the repetition of the basic repertory that I suspect its mind-numbing, soul-killing programming is done by a bot, behind which lurks an evil genius intent on destroying everyone’s love of Beethoven, Brahms, etc., by replaying their compositions ad nauseam. Now that the National Symphony Orchestra has fallen victim to the same plague, I seldom attend its concerts. Therefore, I was not disposed to welcome a book about the basic orchestral repertory.
Yet even with my jaded tastes, I could not resist something as well done as this. And as I happily discovered, this is not a book for beginners only. Despite my familiarity with this music and these composers, I found much to learn and enjoy. Philip covers 400 works by 68 composers way through it, hear the most important features of each piece of music, and vividness, and these are valuable qualities to carry over into the writing of books. Philip’s broadcast experience shows. He seems to be talking to us, rather than at us. He states that he tried “to describe each piece of music so that listeners can find their way through it, hear the most important features and events, and gather a sense of what the whole piece consists of. I have aimed to include enough background and biographical information to illuminate what makes the composer tick.” At this, Philip admirably succeeds.

I was particularly delighted by a number of quotations he has unearthed which I’d not encountered elsewhere. Here are a few delectable examples. I did not know that Claude Debussy had called my favorite English painter, J.M.W. Turner, “the finest creator of mystery there could be in art.” Danish composer Carl Nielsen, remarking upon the technical skills of the German and Austrian composers of his day (e.g., Arnold Schoenberg), accurately predicted, “I cannot help thinking that all this delight in complication must exhaust itself. I foresee a completely new art of pure archaia virtu.” In the brief but excellent introduction to Schoenberg’s controversial works, Philip quotes British conductor Adrian Boult, who premiered Schoenberg’s Variations for Orchestra in London and remarked on his experience revisiting the work three years later in Vienna: “when I opened the score I found nothing in it to remind me of the previous performance, and actually said to myself that if someone had told me it was an entirely new set of variations on a different theme, I could’ve believed him.” This confirms what American composer Stephen Albert told me about 12-tone music: “the past has no meaning. What was going on was the massive denial of memory. No one can remember a 12-tone row. The very method obliterates memory’s function in art.” Then there is this wonderful quote from Igor Stravinsky:

My appreciation is tempered by a few minor reservations. The attention given to various composers no doubt reflects the author’s or his employer’s (BBC’s) interests. Some of it seems lopsided. For example, 20th-century Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů gets little more than three pages with nary a mention of his violin, viola, and cello concertos, five piano concertos, and six symphonies. Meanwhile Anton Webern gets eight pages for his few works. Philip gets off the hook by saying, “I would not like readers to think that there is a direct relationship between the length of the entry and the importance of the music.” Even better, he explains, “some of the greatest works are so transparently self-explanatory that they need little from me.... On the other hand, there are works that tie themselves in knots and need some unpicking.” The latter sentence certainly applies to Webern.

One more irritant. As usual, the obligatory British nod to American music is confined to Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, and the perennially overrated Charles Ives, who is inexplicably called “one of the great figures of American music” and whose work receives eight pages of explication. This is a prime example of repertory-itis that leaves unsaid anything about David Diamond’s 11 symphonies, William Schuman’s 10, or Roy Harris’s 12. But then, British 20th-century symphonic composers don’t do so well either. There’s not a word about Edmund Rubbra, Robert Simpson, Malcolm Arnold, or Ireland’s John Kinsella. The answer to this complaint might be that these composers’ works are not in the basic repertory, to which my reply would be: that’s the problem with the basic repertory—you can’t get in it unless you’re already part of it.

But it is not fair to criticize this book for being something that it doesn’t pretend to be. It excels at the author’s aim of introducing and explicating in a comprehensible and insightful way many of the major orchestral works with which one ought to be acquainted in order to be culturally literate. Philip will help you enjoy and understand Bach, Beethoven, Haydn, Mahler, Mozart, and the other greats of the basic repertory. I wish that space had allowed him to give his recommended recordings of the music he knows so well but, after 1,000 pages, that would be asking too much of any publisher today. I will not look this gift horse in the mouth.

Book Review by Kyle Smith

Breaking Bad

Pop Culture and the Dark Side of the American Dream: Con Men, Gangsters, Drug Lords, and Zombies, by Paul A. Cantor.

University Press of Kentucky, 224 pages, $40

If I told you belief in the American Dream stands today at 70%, would you believe me? It’s true. You might raise an eyebrow because you’re aware the American Dream is made possible by our glorious institutions, none of which is looking so spiffy, except maybe the military and small business. As for the others, according to Gallup only 25% of Americans express “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in big business, 30% in banks, 36% in the medical system, and 11% in Congress. Having faith in the American Dream while scoffing at its constituent parts seems like being blithe about putting an astronaut on Mars while scoffing at physics, engineering, and courage.

Historian James Truslow Adams coined the phrase “the American Dream” in his 1931 book The Epic of America. His framing remains serviceable: “a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” The American Dream assumes freedom, fairness, meritocracy. A “European Dream” would be a vastly different thing, in the past involving feudalism and serfdom and today a lot of bowing to the wishes of Angela Merkel. Europe is about knowing your place. America, gloriously, is about creating any damn place you like—if you can get away with it.

As Paul Cantor observes in Pop Culture and the Dark Side of the American Dream: Con Men, Gangsters, Drug Lords, and Zombies, that “if” has fascinated our writers going back at least to Mark Twain. Cantor’s latest is a lively, astute, and infectiously enthusiastic consideration of works ranging from Huckleberry Finn to today’s television zombie sensation The Walking Dead. The connective tissue linking these works, via the intervening subjects of W.C. Fields’s comedies, the Godfather films, and AMC’s Shakespearean drug tragedy Breaking Bad, may not immediately be obvious, but Cantor proves it’s there. He does a brilliant job sussing out how his artists raise important and unsettling questions about the credibility, durability, and internal tensions of the American Dream.

I’d say Cantor’s subjects “interrogate” or even “subvert” the American Dream—but that would make the book sound more academic (and boring) than it is. Cantor holds a chair in the English department of the University of Virginia, but you’d never know it. This is a compliment.

Consider Huckleberry Finn, a novel about liars, mountebanks, and flim-flammers written under a phony name by a judge’s son who dressed like a Southern plantation owner. The Duke and the King, lowlifes with fancy, made-up European titles of nobility, capitalize upon the American Dream’s wide-open possibilities. Freed from Europe’s rigid social hierarchies and even from any particular chunk of land, Americans can create new selves. But the flip side is that almost nobody, in Twain’s eyes, can be trusted. European living is anchored to a village in which every-
one knows everyone; American living glides along the rollicking, fertile, ever-changing Mississippi— a dynamic, vigorous, competitive environment of ever-shifting status. Fortunes are won or lost, sometimes in accordance with merit, sometimes not. In the words of V.S. Pritchett, “scroungers, rogues, murderers, the lonely women, the frothing revivalists, the maudering boatmen and fantastic drunks of the river towns” are “the human wastage that is left in the wake of a great effort of the human will…. These people are the price paid for building a new country.” Twain wouldn’t have it any other way—he thinks European aristocracy at worst than one. Grifters assume European Old World.

Cantor points out, Coppola seems to believe it too: perhaps the most rebarbative character in American thinking has trapped us on a hedonic treadmill and distracted us from an earlier conception of the ideal American existence—rugged self-sufficiency in small communities of like-minded folk. Perhaps we just need a hearty zombie plague to remind us.

Small, tightly-knit, heavily-armed bands of survivors roam a desolate zombie-ravaged landscape in The Walking Dead, AMC’s sci-fi neo-Western. "A disaster in material terms," Cantor argues, "turns out to have some good results in emotional terms…. [F]amily bonds grow tighter and people learn who their real friends are." Maybe the zombies are a warning about a brainless, soulless existence—the latest incarnation of T.S. Eliot’s hollow men. They also serve as an amusing allegory of the red-state/blue-state cultural rift. A destabilizing satiric series interlude takes place in a cosseted Beltway burb in Alexandria, Virginia, where the roaming band of coarse gunslingers takes shelter in a gated community among a coterie of clueless gentry liberals who demand that all guns be locked away “for safety.” As in other "Redneck Renaissance" TV shows—Duck Dynasty, Mountain Men, Ice Road Truckers—the Walking Dead glories in practical solutions over vacuous progressive shibboleths. “[T]he spirit of the Wild West triumphs over the spirit of Beltway liberalism,” Cantor writes.

The series plays on our fears about the failure, if not outright malice, of the federal government: the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta cooks up a zombie plague then protects only itself against the consequences. Cantor may be right to detect a submerged libertarian hope in the carnage: Hey, the country may have been overrun by zombies, but at least we got the federal government off our backs. If a little bit of apocalypse is the price we need to pay for restoring family and federalism, I’m all ears.

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Primeval forces of the human psyche, mysteriously inflected by sexual differentiation and far too deep to be tamed by any projects of social constructivism, have once more erupted from their underground vaults and are struggling for domination of our public spaces and institutions. Many women are gleeful at the prospect that men, now widely understood to be agents of sexual violence and cultural patriarchy, may soon be subjected to an ultimate “reckoning.”

For one who knows the Greeks, this language is as revealing as it is ominous. Homer’s epic poems explore fundamental tensions inherent in civilization: the conflicting claims of family and polity, individual freedom and social necessity; the tragically tangled struggle of love and aggression. The Iliad explores these contradictions in the context of war. Few passages in literature are as moving as Andromache’s desperate plea, child in arms, for her doomed husband, Hector, to remain within the safety of Troy’s walls; or Achilles’ pitiable lament—having learned too late that his friendship with Patroclus was infinitely more precious than King Agamemnon’s respect—that he is but “a useless burden on the earth.”

The Odyssey unfolds in the chaotic aftermath of the Trojan War, a long and bloody conflict that traumatized and destabilized the whole Mycenaean world. The situation in Ithaca is typical: the prolonged absence of the king and his followers has produced a crisis of moral and political authority. Inevitably, women have stepped (or been pulled) into the power vacuums left by their men. It is not for nothing that Agamemnon’s murder by his wife Clytemnestra and cousin Aegisthus haunts the epic from start to finish. The Odyssey is another kind of war story, one in which a collapsing civilization’s internal contradictions take the form of a pitched battle of the sexes.

The Odyssey focuses on a solitary man who must find his way in the new post-war reality. The verb ὄδυσσαίθαι, George Dimock argues in his essay “The Name of Odysseus,” means “to cause pain [to oneself and others]…and to be willing to do so.” Odysseus earned his name—“Trouble,” Dimock suggests—when gored while hunting a wild boar. The charging boar is a Homeric image of reality. It is a hard and wounding reality that Odysseus rushes to confront in the Odyssey, taking its measure through suffering, and deepening and expanding internally in the accumulated memory of suffering. He himself inflicts pain or death on virtually everyone he associates with, friend and foe alike. He fails to bring one generation back from war, personally dispatches the next (Penelope’s 108 suitors are all young noblemen from Ithaca and the surrounding islands), and would gladly have killed their aggrieved fathers, too, had the gods not stopped the slaughter. But he also must fight for his psyche—his soul, and sometimes his very life—against smothering, bewitching, and homicidal females. The funeral shroud Penelope weaves for Odysseus’s father Laertes signifies the burial of an entire epoch, a past and future slain by violent passions no longer constrained by ancestral ways. The Odyssey is a drama of cultural and political suicide that plays out between vicious extremes of masculinity and femininity—jagged shards of a broken human wholeness.

Femmes Fatales

Early in the poem, the goddess Athena claims she saw the eponymous hero hunting “a man-slaying poison” to smear on his arrowheads. (All translations...
from the Greek in this essay are my own.) Such craftiness is barely a match for feminine charms and potions as lethal to the soul as any poison is to the body. On his homeward voyage Odysseus encounters the Sirens, vaguely female creatures—a red-figure vase in the British Museum depicts them as birds with women's heads—surrounded by the roting cadavers of men unable to resist their “hon-eyed voices.” This is a fair image of Odysseus himself, notorious both for his deceptive sweet-talk (he is punished in Dante’s *Inferno* for his guileful abuse of trust) and for the multitudes he directly or indirectly sends to Hades. Nor is this the only way in which the Sirens—who sense rather than see approach—endeavour to ensnare mortal men. "We know all that the Argives and Trojans suffered in broad Troy by the will of the gods,” they sing, “and we know all that comes to pass on the much-nourishing earth." (H.J. Draper’s 1909 painting *Ulysses and the Sirens* got it just right: naked maidens besiege his ship from the sea as Odysseus, transfixed by some inner vision, rolls his eyes wildly toward the heavens.) Douglas Frame observes that *nostos*—homecoming—is philologically related to *nous*, mind; both words derive from the Indo-European root *nes*, meaning something like “return to light and life.” Little wonder that Odysseus narrates his encounter with the Sirens at the center of the *Odyssey*, for here everything he hazards to become who he is—memory and identity, homecoming and intellect, life and light—hangs in the balance.

Odysseus survives the Sirens because he is counseled by the divine Circe, who marvels at his “unenchantable” *nous*. She should know. Attracted by her song, his men had found her working a great loom (females weave many a web in the *Odyssey*). She’d served them drug-laden wine that washed away all memory of their fatherland, and then she’d turned them into swine. Odysseus drains the same cup, yet Circe’s “baneful drugs”—reminiscent of the phramakon ingested by the Lotus-eaters Odysseus encounters elsewhere—have no effect on him. For Hermes had previously equipped him with a mysterious prophylactic: moly, a plant the god had pulled from the ground—something “hard for mortal men” to do—so as to show him its nature. Jenny Strauss Clay points out that this is the only occurrence of the word “nature” (*physis*) in Homer. Odysseus’s mind is unenchantable because he knows the roots of things, the hidden nature from which they grow. But coming to know nature, including one’s own, involves a certain Socratic hardiness, a willingness to tear things (even if only in speech) from the soil that nourishes them. As Plato makes clear through his famous image of the cave, the return to light and life from confusion and darkness is painful for all involved. This necessary suffering is a major source of hostility to the full development of the individual self in the *Odyssey*.

Nostalgia

Females in the *Odyssey* are an overdetermined group, sexually alluring as well as maternally controlling. Circe is not the only one who resists the suffering associated with spiritual and intellectual rebirth. The nymph Calypso, loathe to give up Odysseus, the mortal plaything she has subjected to seven years of sexual servitude on Ogygia—an island surrounded by vast stretches of ocean—is another such. *Kaluptein* means “to eclipse”; Calypso’s love cave is a kind of black hole, one of several into which Odysseus vanishes only to emerge again after difficult labor. The hero arrives on Ogygia having already visited the dank pit of Hades, in which wretched shades swarm and gibber like bats. Yet when Calypso offers him the seemingly safe harbor of ageless immortality and unstinting comfort and pleasure, he chooses to return to his wife, Penelope. Unlike his unfocused and irresolute crew, Odysseus never loses sight of his goal—even if, as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, suggests in his poem “Ulysses,” it is only because he always wants to be somewhere else. His mindfulness protects him in another way. Binding himself to a goddess is a bad bargain: what if the nymph should tire of his company? Helen, a daughter of Zeus and mortal Leda, is a particularly significant contrast to Odysseus. Her story in the *Odyssey* shows that she who controls memory controls men. When Odysseus’s son, Telemachus, visits the Spartan King Menelaus seeking news of his father, the old warrior’s recollections of Odysseus bring everyone to tears. But his wife, Helen, has a remedy for this sadness: she secretly slips into the wine a drug that “banishes pain and sorrow and allays anger, causing forgetfulness of all ills.” Here is history’s first deliberately constructed safe space, an analgesic realm where words lose their sting and suffering is wiped from memory. In blocking access to the deep feeling of the past, Helen’s ploy is self-serving as well as emotionally manipulative. For the story Menelaus goes on to...
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tell about how Helen (then “of Troy”) tried to sound out the Greek warriors hidden inside the Trojan Horse by ventriloquiizing the individual voices of their long-lost wives contradicts her claim to have been longing for home by this point in the war. On that occasion, she attempts to produce rather than to allay nostalgia, the pain associated with the recollection of home. When a soldier tries to cry out in response, Odysseus brutally silences him; had he not done so, the Greeks would have been burned alive, aborted before they could issue from the great wooden womb. Helen’s witchy pharmacoepia kills more than pain.

Leaving the Cave

The temporary realm of oblivion Helen fashions in her home at Sparta is a prelude and microcosm of the great island safe space of the Phaeacians, who of all of Homer’s peoples most resemble us late moderns. (Names incorporating the Greek aeí, “forever,” abound in the fantastic middle books of the Odyssey; Circe’s island is Aeaea, Ever-Even Land, and Odysseus visits the Aeolian island of Aeolus.) The Phaeacians, ‘close kin of the gods,’ once lived in the vicinity of the Cyclopes but fled from their brutal neighbors. They found refuge on a blessed isle, where fruits are all the more delectable in the names of the Phaeacian rulers, King Alcinous (“Mighty-Mind”) and Queen Arêtē (“Prayed-For”): the mind seeks out reality, while prayers—like those the Phaeacians desperately raise to Poseidon, just before he rings their island in mountains as retribution for their kindness to the man who put out his Cyclops son Polyphemus’s single eye—aim at salvation from its depredations. Alcinous probes Odysseus, attempting to learn his true identity; in the end, however, the Phaeacians don’t need to go looking for trouble. Trouble comes directly to them, a salt-streaked stranger rising naked from the turbulent waters. That’s the way of reality: you can run from it, but you can’t hide.

Cut off from the outside world by a vengeful god, it’s as if the Phaeacians have been swallowed up by the sea. Joseph Conrad’s Stein echoes a piece of ancient wisdom in Lord Jim: “The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.” Those who will not risk destruction are doomed to drown. Born into trouble, we purchase a false security in refusing to see that the warm anonymity of the womb is just another deadly seduction. The hero engenders himself in an act of virility, we purchase a false security in refusing to see that the warm anonymity of the womb is just another deadly seduction.

The matriarchal social reckoning now afoot in the United States aims to produce a society composed essentially of domesticated children.

The Levelling Calculus

The metopes of the Parthenon memorialized legendary scenes of violence: Greeks battling barbarians, Athenians clashing with Amazons, Lapiths (Greeks from Thessaly) assaulted by drunken centaurs they’d invited to a wedding feast. The common theme of these sculptures—the struggle of civilization against chaos—reflects a deep understanding of the moral and political order’s fragility. One of the Elgin Marbles depicts a muscular centaur rearing triumphantly over a supine man. A velvety lion skin is draped over the centaur’s arm, its suppleness perfectly captured in folds of smooth marble. The lion’s extended claws and the gaping jaws of its spatchcocked head loom over the felled Lapith, whose garments have fallen open to reveal his naked body. The sculpture is a peculiarly refined and moving expression of the sudden collapse of civility and culture when
law, custom, and conscience—weakened, in this instance, by an excess of wine—cease to constrain the wild impulses of the human soul.

The prospect of a revenge of the primitive was never far from the minds of the ancient worshippers of Athena, who is said to have tamed the Furies that hounded the matricide Orestes. That prospect still ought to weigh heavily on our minds. Sexual violence, which is mostly (but not exclusively) perpetrated by males, and which is found in every social institution and across the political spectrum, is politically destructive as well as morally deplorable. In Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right (2017), Angela Nagle notes that internet chat rooms of the so-called “mansphere” have spawned a vicious “anti-feminist masculinist politics.” Carried to its logical conclusion, this radical misogyny would terminate in a sterile, doomed death of Euripides’ Hippolytus and Jason, who longed for a world without women. But Nagle also observes that this online hatefulness “developed in the context of evermore radical liberal gender politics and increasingly common anti-male rhetoric that went from obscure feminist online spaces to the mainstream.” Extremism breeds extremism, and it becomes increasingly difficult to hew to the middle line.

With respect to today’s surging “gender politics,” it is insufficient to observe that the equation of speech with violence and the insistence on safe spaces and trigger warnings is particularly infantilizing extensions of the overprotective impulses of what for at least 50 years has been called the “nanny state.” Mature adults with even a trace of spirited individuality must find that relatively benign location laughably inadequate to the scolding, smothering matriarchy our present-day Furies seem hell-bent on establishing. The chthonic forces harnessed by #MeToo, and electronically volatilized into outraged mobs, fly the banners of social justice and progressivism. But so, too, did the Bolsheviks, from whom today’s feminist militants, schooled in “intersectionality,” have borrowed the nihilistic habit of thinking in crude and divisive categories forged in the smithy of cultural and historical forgetting. They are in fact more oblivious than their ideological forebears, whose catastrophic record in the 20th century lies in the plain view of anyone not blinded by extreme indignation.

Today’s fiery ideologists, male and female alike, have forgotten that human life is a whole greater than the sum of its parts—one that is rounded, sustained, and protected by the natural union of these parts. Lear’s clown compares the two crowns of his divided kingdom to the halves of an eggshell that once encased a golden yolk. That is a good image of the thin calcification of humanity, devoid of life and growth, that is all that remains when the vital, complementary strengths of males and females are sundered from one another.

Plato was fond of comparing individual human souls to irrational numbers, whose expression in the modern notation of a decimal series is unrepeatable and interminable. Yevgeny Zamiatyn borrows this image in his great dystopian anti-Soviet novel We (1924), set in a dystopian future after a world war has killed 80% of all human beings. The ideological calculus of the One State aims forcefully to rationalize all individual spiritual infinities and integrate them into a closed and finite social totality, one in which violence and suffering have been eliminated along with individual freedom. Like the One State, the matriarchal social reckoning now afoot in the United States springs from a sense of historical trauma. It also employs a similar leveling calculus for a similar purpose. It aims to produce a society composed essentially of domesticated children: mild and unthreatening men and women whose cautious sensitivity to the feelings of others will in fact be rooted in fear and psychological dependency. To this end, it considers human beings strictly in aggregate, as interchangeable members of a certain group (like the indistinguishable mathematical units that make up any given number when summed), singling out particular individuals when it is thought that targeting them—which it does by a variety of malicious methods, including public shaming, “doxing,” slander, libel, and physical confrontation—will help suppress nonconforming speech and action. And it seeks to rationalize collective memory by anathematizing past words and deeds (and sometimes relocating or destroying monuments thereof) that are judged to be incommensurable with the desired social totality.

All of this evokes revulsion in my male friends—those who retain a vital connection with the past, and a sense that thinking and speaking for oneself and standing surety for one’s own judgments and deeds are non-negotiable elements of a dignified human existence. Of course, this revulsion is almost never voiced in public. The age of Homeric heroes—of men in full, so much better than us and so much worse—is dead and gone. But we know that a society that punishes those who attempt to articulate reality as they see it will eventually go insane. We know that human life will never again be whole and healthy if men and women are unable to recognize and respect their natural differences. Burdened with this knowledge we make shift as we can, like people condemned to witness a riotous crowd slaughtering their livestock and pillaging their homes.

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WHAT ON EARTH HAS HAPPENED TO THE MOVIES? WHY IS IT SO HARD TO FIND A COMPELLING HUMAN DRAMA, A GENUINELY AMUSING COMEDY, OR EVEN A CLEVER AND VISUALLY PLEASING ANIMATED FEATURE IN A THEATER NOWADAYS? WHEN DID THE BIG SCREEN GET TAKEN OVER BY COMIC BOOKS AND VIDEO GAMES? WHO BRAINWASHED HOLLYWOOD INTO CHURNING OUT ENDLESS WANNABE BLOCKBUSTERS ABOUT SUPERHEROES BLASTING AWAY AT SUPERVILLAINS? WHY ARE THE MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR SPECIAL EFFECTS IN THESE MOVIES SO CHEESY THAT EVEN THIS NON-GAMER WISHES SHE HAD A JOYSTICK, GAMEPAD, OR LIGHT GUN JUST TO KEEP FROM NODDING OFF?

ONE OBVIOUS CULPRIT IS CHINA, THE FIRST OVERSEAS MARKET IN HISTORY TO SHAPE DECISIVELY THE PRIORITIES OF THE AMERICAN FILM INDUSTRY. FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, HOLLYWOOD HAS SEEN CHINA AS A GLITTERING SHANGRILA WHERE CINEMATHEMATIC MUSHLABS SPROUT LIKE MUSHROOMS AND 1.4 BILLION CONSUMERS ARE INSATIABLY EAGER TO SPEND HEAPS OF MONEY ON MINDLESS BLOCKBUSTERS. YET GAINING ACCESS TO THAT POT OF GOLD HAS BEEN TRICKY, BECAUSE MOVIES ARE NOT LIKE OTHER PRODUCTS.


NEITHER ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD NOR THE JOKER HAS BEEN ALLOWED INTO CHINA, ALTHOUGH IF THE PARTY WERE A LITTLE SAWVIER IT WOULD SCREEN MOVIES LIKE THESE IN EVERY THEATER, ON THE GROUND THAT THEIR UGLY, AMORAL VISION MAKES EXCELLENT PROPAGANDA SUPPORTING THE OFFICIAL CHINESE VIEW OF AMERICA AS A CIVILIZATION IN DECLINE.

IT’S NOT JUST TELEVISION. IT IS TOO LATE TO ASK WHAT HAPPENED TO THE NETWORKS. THEY SOLD THEIR BIRTHRIGHT 30 YEARS AGO, WHEN COMPETITION FROM CABLE AND THE VCR LED THEM TO REPLACE THEIR COSTLY “SCRIPTED” PROGRAMS WITH CHEAP “UNSCRIPTED” TALK AND REALITY SHOWS. UNFORTUNATELY, THESE UNSCRIPTED SHOWS PROVED EASIER TO CLONE THAN THE SCRIPTED ONES, AND SOON THERE WERE HUNDREDS OF THEM COMPETING FOR EYE BALLS, NOT ONLY ON THE NETWORKS BUT ALSO ON CABLE AND IN SYNDICATION. SOME REALITY SHOWS—AMERICAN IDOL, FOR EXAMPLE—SPOKE TO THE ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES AND AROUND THE WORLD. BUT OWING TO THE CUTTHROAT NATURE OF THE COMPETITION, THE OVERALL TRAJECTORY OF THESE SHOWS HAS BEEN DOWNWARD, TOWARD CRUDE VOYEURISM. THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT “TRASH TV” LIKE THE JERRY SPRINGER SHOW (1991–2005) AND KEEPING UP WITH THE KARDASHIANS (2007–PRESENT) HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE COARSENING AND INCIVILITY, NOT JUST OF AMERICAN TELEVISION BUT ALSO OF WHAT USED TO BE CALLED AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE.

BACK IN THE 1980S, WHEN CHINA WAS EXTENDING ITS STATE TV SYSTEM TO EVERY CORNER OF ITS VAST TERRITORY, IT IMPORTED AMERICAN SHOWS TO ATTRACT VIEWERS. (WHEN VISITING BEIJING IN THE LATE 2000S, I MET SEVERAL PEOPLE WHO FONDLY RECALLED THE BRADY BUNCH AS THEIR FIRST INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN CULTURE.) BUT AFTER CRUSHING THE PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN 1989, THE REGIME BEGAN ENCOURAGING CHINESE COMPANIES TO PRODUCE WHAT MIGHT BE CALLED “U.S. ENTERTAINMENT WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS.” THIS INCLUDED TALK AND REALITY SHOWS AND, IN 2006, THE FINALE OF AN AMERICAN IDOL-STYLE SINGING CONTEST CALLED SUPER GIRL THAT AT-
watched in any order, aired as reruns, and when McGrath suggested that “TV is actually en-
viewers had been encouraged to take the po-
vision history. But instead of being pleased,

ed goal, to provide programming “appropriate

for the whole environment during this period,”

contained a distinct—and, for many Chinese,
an alarming—echo of Maoist totalitarianism.

Getting from Point A to Point Z

Based on what I’ve said so far, this tale of two markets looks bleak. On the one hand, the Chinese market is a place where the cost of doing business includes total submission to the party line. On the other, the American market is in thrall to a pseudo-sophisticated ‘dark’ sensibility that insists on portraying America as a sick society suffering death throes, and dismisses as feel-good pabulum any effort to depict the country in a more positive, or even a balanced, light.

Fortunately, there is more to tell. In 1995, when New York Times literary editor Charles McGrath suggested that “TV is actually enjoying a sort of golden age,” he was not referring to talk and reality shows. Instead, he had in mind a new TV genre then gaining cultural influence and market share. That genre, best described by the British term “limited series,” departed from the traditional practice of having each episode of a TV series tell a stand-alone story. The purpose of that practice was to produce self-contained units that could be watched in any order, aired as re-runs, and sold to other broadcasters. The limited series does the opposite: it weaves several stories together over two or more episodes, and expects viewers to keep track by watching all the episodes in sequence.

A somewhat similar expectation has long existed for viewers of the humble soap opera, but in that case keeping track is made easier by airing a new half-hour episode each day. The soap, which began in the early years of radio then moved to television, is known for its ability to keep viewers hooked with a steady supply of bizarre plot twists that continue as long as advertisers stay interested. The first such program was created in 1930 by Irna Phillips, a second-generation immigrant who worked at radio station WGN in Chicago—and yes, one of the sponsors was a soap company. In 1937 Phillips went to NBC radio and created the longest-running soap in history, Guiding Light, which ran on television until 2009.

That’s 40 years longer than CBS’s The Bold and the Beautiful, which premiered in 1987 and aired its 8,000th episode this past January. But after the first 30 years, who’s counting? Osten-
sibly about the world of high fashion and the class divide between wealthy and middle-class Americans, this convoluted saga’s real subject is the sex life of a woman called Brooke Logan, who keeps marrying and divorcing various men, especially members of a family named Forrester who own a successful fashion house in Los Angeles. Last I checked, Brooke had been married three times to the family patri-
arch, five times to the eldest son, and once to the younger son. As in any long-lived soap, the various stories are not woven together so much as bent, crumpled, and pretzeled to the point of resembling the old novelty song in which a man’s family relations get so tangled that he ends up being his own grandfather.

In the 1980s, “prime-time soaps” such as Dallas, Knots Landing, and Dynasty attracted huge and diverse audiences in the networks’ lucrative evening time slots. But these shows, too, were engineered for longevity. Taking their cues from the daytime soaps, they resort-
ed to all sorts of contrivances and cliffhangers (“Who shot J.R.?”) to keep people tuning in. By the time these began to wear thin, viewers were already discovering the more satisfying alternative of the limited series, which had been around since the 1970s, when PBS began airing popular British series such as such as Upstairs, Downstairs, and later The Duchess of Duke Street and the original House of Cards (much superior to the later Netflix version).

The chief virtue of the limited series is that it does not contort itself to stay on the air for-
ever. Instead, it stays no longer than necessary to tell a particular story. In the words of Vince Gilligan, creator of the acclaimed limited se-
ries Breaking Bad (2008-13), the secret is not to keep the “characters in a self-imposed stasis” but to move them “from point A…to point Z.” This may not be a sufficient condition for great television, but it is a necessary one. This format is roomy enough, but also shapely enough, for a rich development of character and plot while also adhering to the classic structure of beginning, middle, and end. No wonder many of the most esteemed network shows,
from *Roots* in 1977 to *Lonesome Dove* in 1989, were limited series. In the early 2000s the format was taken up by the cable channel HBO, which gained prestige (and subscribers) with such outstanding productions as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Band of Brothers* (2001), and *John Adams* (2008).

**How Will the Streaming Wars End?**

Today, the limited series is the most prominent feature in an entertainment landscape transformed by drastic changes in technology and viewing habits, most notably among digital natives (i.e., people who text with their thumbs). Most digital natives do not own TV sets, because they watch everything via streaming video on their laptops, tablets, smartphones, and other mobile devices. Whether or not this change constitutes cultural as well as technological progress depends on what is being watched. Streaming video seems the natural home of the limited series, and on a good day I would argue that, because this genre has come to occupy the vital space between popular and elite taste once occupied by the novel, it makes perfect sense that we are accessing it on devices roughly the size of books.

But that is on a good day. On a bad day—for example, a day spent pondering what the trade papers, pundits, and mainstream media are calling “the streaming wars”—I worry about the competition now heating up between the best-known streaming platform, Netflix, and a slew of potential rivals: Amazon’s Prime Video, Apple TV+, Disney+, HBO Max, Peacock, YouTube TV, and Facebook’s Portal TV.

The effects of that competition can already be felt. For example, Netflix made its name as an “aggregator” of streaming content produced by others. But in the last year or so, would-be rivals such as NBC, Warner Bros., and Disney have been pulling their films and TV shows from Netflix in order to stream them on their own newly created platforms. Netflix is trying to make up for this loss by becoming a producer in its own right. Fortified by the success of the first “Netflix Original Series,” a remake of the British show *House of Cards,* the company pumped $12 billion into new content last year and has budgeted $15 billion for 2019. But to judge by the noisy and aggressive promotion of this new content on the Netflix home page, a lot of it is going unwatched.

This is pure speculation, I admit. But Netflix is notorious for not publishing viewer data, except to throw the occasional fat figure to the media, where it gets recycled so often, people begin to believe it. My speculation is somewhat supported by the fact that in July Netflix reported a major decline in the number of subscribers, and one of the main explanations offered was that a fair number of people had been logging on to Netflix not to watch its original content but to access their favorite movies and TV shows from (you guessed it) NBC, Warner Bros., and Disney.

It is worrisome and annoying that the majority of reporters who cover the streaming wars focus narrowly on the question of which U.S. company is going to make the most money in the U.S. market. Amid the welter of dark comedy about women in prison (*Orange Is the New Black* on Netflix), and a raunchy dark comedy about women not in prison (*Fleabag* on Prime Video).

The rest of the shows are pretty formulaic. There are the “historical” dramas whose plots consist largely of setting the stage for the moment when hunky heroes rip the bodices off wity, empowered heroines. There are the “noir” detective sagas that follow the descent into madness of chronically depressed sleuths tormented by the hideous crimes they are investigating. There are the small-town mysteries that start with nice, blond, smiling families then plunge them into swirling maelstroms of occult evil. And so forth.

With regard to liberty—specifically America’s vexed tradition of free speech and expression—it is necessary to consider that, although none of these American streaming services will ever be allowed to operate in China, as producers of content they are all desperately eager to sell their wares to their Chinese counterparts. And because of the restraints under which they must operate, the Chinese streaming services are just as desperately eager to buy American content, provided it can be brought into alignment with Xi Jinping Thought. With this oxymoron in mind, I will now end my tale with a brief glance at how the Chinese streaming wars are playing out.

At first glance, the competition for streaming dominance in China looks similar to the one occurring in America. The Chinese equivalent of Netflix, a streaming service called iQiyi, is facing stiff challenges from an existing rival, Tencent Video, and a newly established one, Youku Tudou. Like their U.S. counterparts, these streaming warriors are owned by large corporations—iQiyi by Baidu (the Chinese equivalent of Google); Tencent Video by Tencent (the Chinese equivalent of Google, Facebook, and Apple combined); and Youku Tudou by Alibaba (the Chinese equivalent of Amazon). But appearances can be deceiving, because none of these companies is in fact the equivalent of Netflix, Google, Facebook, Apple, or Amazon. On the contrary, they are all fully vetted subsidiaries of the Communist Party’s Central Propaganda Department. And while their competition is real, the outcome will be very different from the outcome in America. The winner will take all, and that winner will not be one of these companies. It will be the regime.

**American producers of content are all desperately eager to sell their wares to their Chinese counterparts.**
What Iran Sees

In a not exactly churchillian 2012 Foreign Affairs cover story, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb,” distinguished professor Kenneth Waltz argued that “a nuclear armed Iran would be...the best possible result,” as Iran is rational, and a balance to Israel’s nuclear weapons would stabilize the Middle East.

Iran is indeed rational—according to its aims. Reason ascends from postulates. Accepting the postulate that the Jews must be exterminated, the Final Solution was rational. And as for stabilizing the Middle East, we see every day, even absent a nuclear backstop, Iran’s depredations.

Those who posit that Israel’s certain nuclear retaliation would keep a nuclear Iran in check ignore, variously, the Shiite theology of martyrdom; a gamble that Israel’s retaliatory capacity would be eliminated in a first strike; and, more pertinent, in a conventional battle that Israel was losing, the neutralization of its nuclear deterrent. Only Israel’s regional nuclear monopoly saved it in 1973, when little stood between the Egyptian army and Tel Aviv.

A nuclear armed Iran would dominate the Middle East even more than it now does. The threat to Europe would further cleave European and U.S. interests in the area, America would be further expelled, and the Sunni states subordinated or conquered. Not surprisingly, conventional wisdom fails to foresee this outcome just as it failed to foresee today’s Iranian domination from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean, a trick the United States at the height of its postwar hegemony could not accomplish via the failed Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) Treaty. Among other things, the conventional wisdom takes no account of the broader context, which in this case is what Iran sees when it looks at the world, and therefore what it wants, expects, and will try to accomplish.

A cowardly Gallic insight—valuable in that it dovetails with Iranian conceptions—was recently expressed in the Le Figaro headline, “Une leçon à méditer pour Trump: même Rome n’a pas réussi à conquérir la Perse!” (A lesson for Trump to meditate upon: even Rome did not succeed in conquering Persia!)

Unlike most Americans, who—though it is they who will ultimately decide American policy toward Iran—cannot find it on the map, Iran looks upon the world and sees a demographically hot Muslim population heading toward 2 billion, Islamic countries stretching from Indonesia through Morocco, 141E to 17W—almost half the globe—and from Kazakhstan through sub-Saharan Africa. Large Islamic populations elsewhere include 44 million in Europe. Though they are often savagely divided and, on the whole, predominantly peaceful, in Iran’s eyes Muslims share the common goal of a unified ummah and the Islamization of the world. We may perceive permanent schism, but, like either the Allies or the Axis in World War II, Islamists see unity after future victory.

The tide of Islam once surged to the gates of Paris and Vienna; Spain and Sicily were Arab, the Mediterranean a pirate lake. Now, in a declining Europe emasculated by the world wars and wolfing down the suicidal poisons of modernity, Muslims have a fair bid at becoming the majority, and Islam the dominant, unforgiving belief system. Active with extraordinary chutzpah in the politics of Western nations (perhaps “chutzpah” is the wrong word, but how else to describe the work of Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib?), adherents of aggressive Islam appear to Tehran the way American pioneers appeared to Bostonians, as advance agents of manifest destiny.

The Islamic doctrine of taqiya, fundamental to Shia theology, allows lying to unbelievers. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif: “When did we say we want to annihilate Israel?” The answer is: all the time, such as when Ahmad Alamolhoda, a deputy of the supreme leader, said in September, “Israel will be totally demolished within half a day,” or when the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Hossein Salami, claimed “the capability to annihilate” Israel, which “must be wiped off the world geographic [map].”

Monsieur Salami tellingly followed this with: “In the second step we will be thinking of the global mobilization of Islam.” Apparently, Mr. Alamolhoda concurs: “Iraqi Hashd al Sha’bi, Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Ansarallah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas in Palestine, and the Syrian Homeland Front are all part of Iran,” because “Iran is no longer limited to its borders.”

The Islamic, Mongol, Spanish, Napoleonic, and Hitlerian conquests may seem remote to that subset of Americans aware of them. Even the most knowledgeable among us cannot entirely escape the traditional fallacy that we are perfectly shielded by the oceans. And a quick glance at relative strengths renders any idea of an Iranian threat to the U.S. seemingly ridiculous.

But couple a medieval sensibility, thirst for payback, the tradition of martyrdom, and absolute belief in religious destiny, with nuclear weapons, ICBMs, and even lesser-range missiles sea-launched from freighter decks or over the side, and you have the kind of imaginative, asymmetric scenarios that have changed history from the beginning of time. Only one or two relatively low-yield nuclear detonations over the United States could produce an electromagnetic pulse that would in a relatively short time destroy the nation. Unless Iran is stripped of its nuclear potential—a gift of multiple American administrations, some far more than others—in the near future we will be facing a new and perilous front.

Throughout history, great convulsions have required inspiration, will, mobilization, and resources approximately balanced with those of the order to be overturned. The advent of nuclear weapons, other means of mass destruction, and the technological fragility of advanced states means that resources need no longer approximate those of the intended target. Therefore, it is essential to know the mind and intent of enemies that not so long ago could be justifiably dismissed.

Persia was once master of most of the classical world, and Islam had in its sights dominion over the known world. Iran sees this not as something forever remote, but as the inevitable and beckoning light ahead.
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