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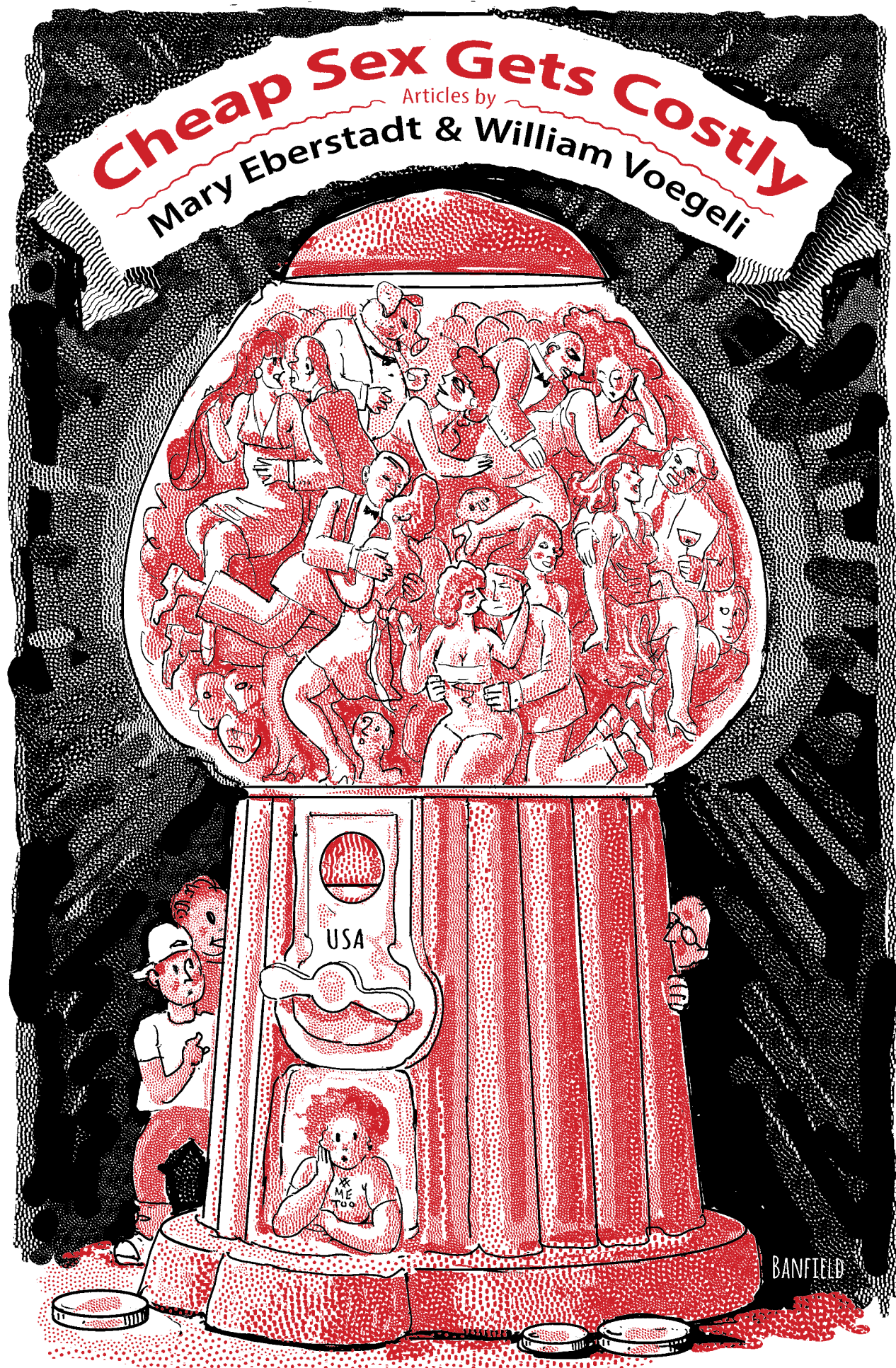
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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

AMONG THE NEVER TRUMPERS

by Charles R. Kesler

AS A TEENAGER IN 1941, WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR., HEARD HIS father and Albert Jay Nock, the eloquent libertarian essayist who was a family friend, discuss politicians' endemic failings. William Sr., his son later recalled, expressed regret for suspending his boycott of the voting booth to cast a ballot for the 1940 Republican presidential nominee. Wendell Willkie, the father asserted, had turned out to be a "mountebank."

"They are all mountebanks," Nock replied, which made an impression on his young listener. "It was about that time that I began reading Albert Jay Nock."

It was also about that time that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. One can carry disdain for politicians too far, as Bill admitted during the Cold War when he found reasons to admire Ronald Reagan. But suspicion, usually good-humored, of politicians as a guild of snake-oil salesmen used to be part of conservative—indeed American—anti-statism. It still is among many voters, but not so much among the Never Trumpers.

From the moment Donald Trump declared his presidential candidacy in June 2015, American progressives and conservative Never Trumpers have poured vituperation on him. The effect is less muck-racking than muck curating, however, as growing invective has yielded diminishing insight.

Trump's vices, real and alleged, have been chronicled more assiduously than Nero's or Caligula's. In the *Weekly Standard* Matt Labash called Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, "the book that ate Washington." If so, it was an act of cannibalism. The same journal's editors, reviewing Trump's first year in office (in the Jan. 29, 2018 issue), concluded that he was "a serial liar," "a singularly dishonest figure," an egomaniac who can't help boasting that his nuclear button is "bigger" than Kim Jong-un's (or do his small hands just make it look bigger?), a policy ignoramus, an ingrate, an adulterer, a president distinguished by the "sheer volume" of his "crazy statements and actions." Their list is not so different from Wolff's.

Still, we can observe changes in the corpus of Trump criticism, one on the Left and another on the Right.

Updating *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), by Sinclair Lewis, Andrew Sullivan pioneered the Left's interpretation of Trump as a proto-tyrant. In a long, interesting *New York* magazine piece in May 2016, Sullivan dusted off his graduate school notes on Plato's description (in the *Repub-*

lic, Book VIII) of the best regime's degeneration into extreme democracy and, finally, tyranny. Sullivan saw America, a country that "has never been so ripe for tyranny," following the same path, with Trump as the upper-class traitor rallying the envious, frustrated masses against the political establishment in order to make himself ruler.

SULLIVAN IS SOUNDING A DIFFERENT ALARM THESE DAYS. THE danger Trump presents is not fascism—he is too scatter-brained for that—but incompetence and buffoonery. By January 2018, in the same magazine, he was seconding Wolff's warning of the White House's "chaos and dysfunction" and comparing the President to a drunk driver lucky enough not to have crashed...yet. From Mussolini to Teddy Kennedy in 18 months—I suppose that's progress.

As for the Right's reassessments, every conservative publication has been forced to admit, however grudgingly, that President Trump had significant accomplishments in his first year. The *Weekly Standard* called his record "reasonably impressive." But this bombshell appears alongside their default position: "Trump's character and temperament made him unfit for office." How to reconcile these?

Partly through wishful counterfactuals. "[S]imilar ends," the editors assure us, "would have come from almost any Republican president given a Republican Congress." Really? That seems far from inevitable. More importantly, one must first become president to be a good or bad one. We know that Trump won the presidency by carrying states that had eluded Republican presidential nominees since the 1980s. It is not only uncertain but unlikely that a more conventional politician would have duplicated this success against Hillary Clinton.

The other part of the *Standard's* answer is better by virtue of being empirical and comparative: Trump's administration will be a mix of good and bad, and citizens should keep an accounting. The editors seem to reckon that the harm President Trump has done in his first year outweighs the benefit, but do not positively assert it. I think they are very wrong, but at least they are now using double-entry bookkeeping, which makes meaningful disagreements possible.

There is always enough mountebankery to go around. The Never Trumpers' violent aversion to the 45th president has been the flip side of a somewhat credulous adherence to the Bush dynasty and its McCain and Romney branches. Perhaps the search for mountebanks should, like charity, begin at home.

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