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# CLAREMONT

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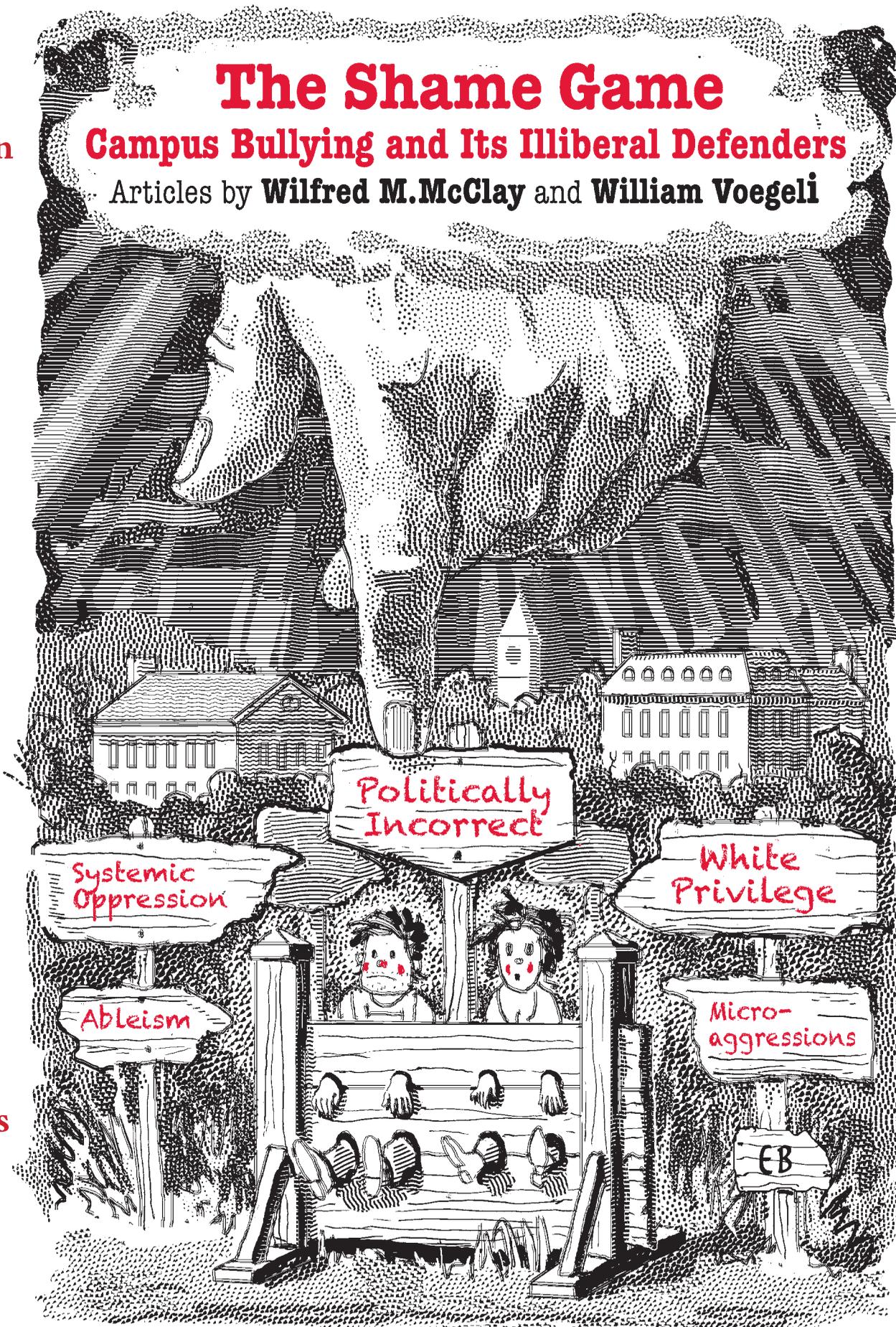
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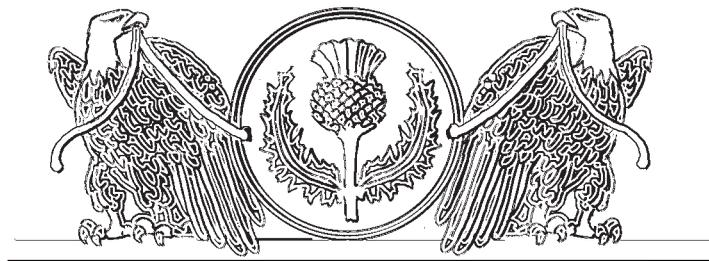


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# SCOTTISH PHILOSOPHY, AMERICAN MORALITY

*Common Sense Nation: Unlocking the Forgotten Power of the American Idea*, by Robert Curry.  
Encounter Books, 152 pages, \$23.99



FOR A CENTURY PROGRESSIVES HAVE argued that History and a more scientific understanding of human behavior have required a new, “living” Constitution interpreted “according to the Darwinian principle,” as Woodrow Wilson put it. The technocrats, whom Wilson called “the hundreds who are wise,” were gradually empowered by an expanded federal government to guide the millions he dubbed “selfish, ignorant, timid, stubborn, or foolish.” This concentration of power in the federal Leviathan has subjected both individuals and the states to its ever-expanding, intrusive reach.

In other words, we now have a kind of government that the Constitution was designed to prevent. To quote George Orwell, “We have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.” Robert Curry’s *Common Sense Nation*, however, is much more than an intelligent restatement of the Constitution’s protections. A member of the board of directors of the Claremont Institute, and a contributor to the *American Thinker* and the *Federalist* websites, Curry corrects various misconceptions and recovers influences on the founders that are too often forgotten.

He pays special attention to the influence of the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment on men like John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Curry clearly and briskly sets out the key insights of philosophers Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Thomas Reid, as well as of Protestant clergyman John Witherspoon, who immigrated to America, signed the Declaration of Independence, and served as president of what would become Princeton University, where his students included three future Supreme Court Justices and 28 senators.

The distinctively Scottish belief in innate human faculties of “moral sense” and “common sense,” Curry argues, left their mark on the American Enlightenment that produced the

Declaration and the Constitution. The moral sense, as Hutcheson explained, is the instinctive faculty for recognizing right and wrong. It is as much a part of human nature as is hearing or seeing, providing access to elementary morals through feelings of pleasure and pain innate to a social animal; and a political community is impossible without it. Reid expanded this notion to include common sense, which Curry defines as “an endowment of human nature that makes possible both moral knowledge and human knowledge in general.” Common sense unifies the reports of the other senses, both physical and moral, into a full picture of the real world. With it we are able to make rational judgments on everything from technical knowledge to moral questions, in order to determine what is both useful and morally right. Rather than being John Locke’s *tabula rasa*, a “blank slate” upon which experience writes ideas and concepts, people are born with both common sense and the moral sense upon which popular sovereignty must be founded.

CURRY TRACKS THE INFLUENCE OF these first principles on the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The Federalist*. However much the language of the Declaration owes to John Locke, for example, to understand as *self-evident* the proposition that “all men are created equal” requires the common sense that tells us that no man is distinguished by nature in such a way that his right to rule another human being is akin to his right to rule, say, his horse. This reliance on common sense contrasts with Locke, who like Voltaire, according to Curry, “drew the conclusion that unassisted human reason [alone] could provide humanity with the answers to every question.” On the contrary, the Declaration’s equality is one of the “self-evident truths common sense grasps...that are implicit in our conduct,” Curry observes. Such truths are the basis of

the republican government created by the Constitution. “[B]ecause a person who is capable of acting with common prudence in the conduct of life is capable of discovering what is true and what is false in matters that are self-evident, self-government is possible.”

THE VALUE OF CURRY’S BOOK LIES NOT just in recovering the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on the American Founders; it points out, too, how the American principle of common sense repudiates the progressive scheme for a technocratic administrative state. As Jefferson wrote, “generalizing and concentrating all cares and powers into one body” is the greatest enemy of “liberty and the rights of man.”

Yet, for the past century, we have been concentrating power in the federal government on the assumption that the new political elite has access to a new kind of knowledge superior to, and different from, that conveyed via the common sense and the moral sense, which has rendered this elite immune to the temptations of power. What’s more, the demonization of free-market capitalism further erodes our political liberty. As Adam Smith saw, in a free market the self-interested desire to please customers creates mutual benefits, as long as both the market and the political order are free from what Smith called “a hundred impertinent obstructions with which the folly of human laws too often incumbers [their] operations.”

Robert Curry’s *Common Sense Nation* is an urgent warning against the threat of progressivism, and an able guide for returning to the genius of our constitutional order and the timeless ideas that created it. Written in an easy and graceful style, it is a handbook for citizens, by a citizen who loves his country dearly.

Bruce S. Thornton is a research fellow of the Hoover Institution.

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