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CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

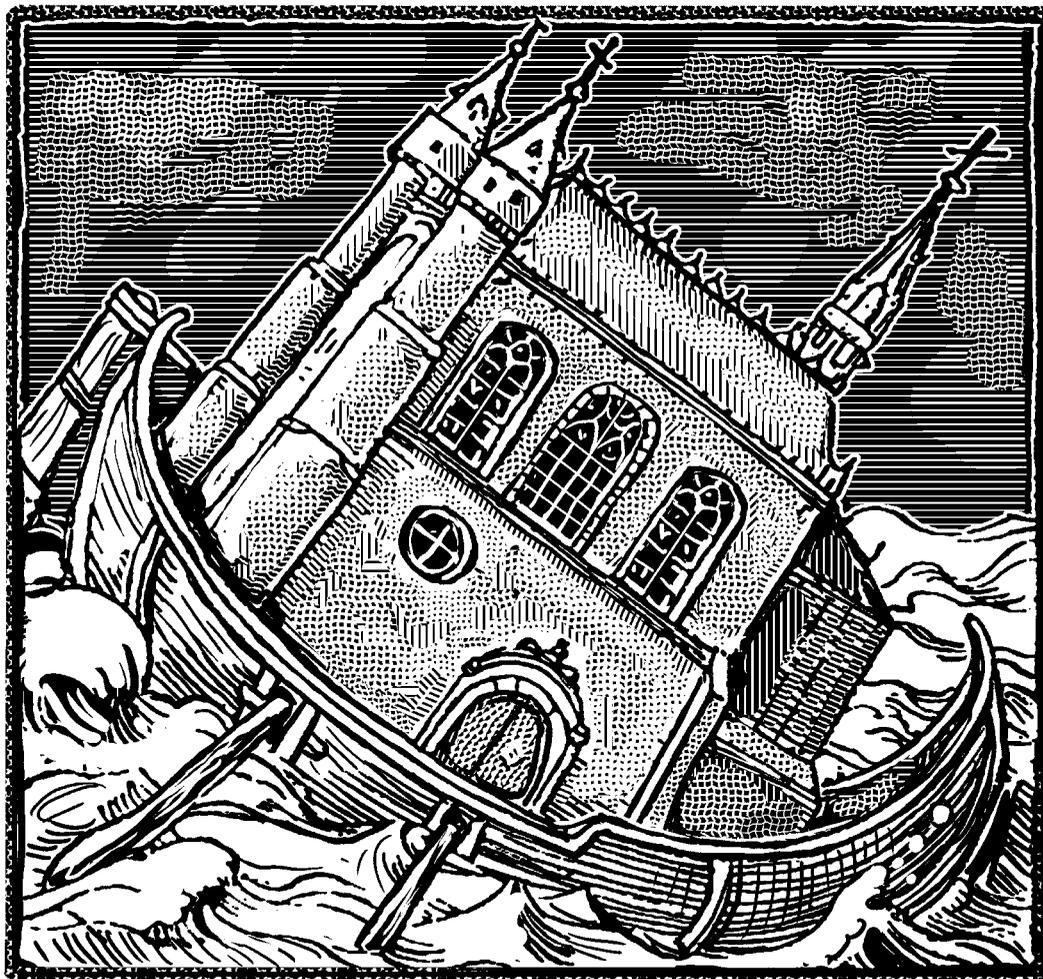
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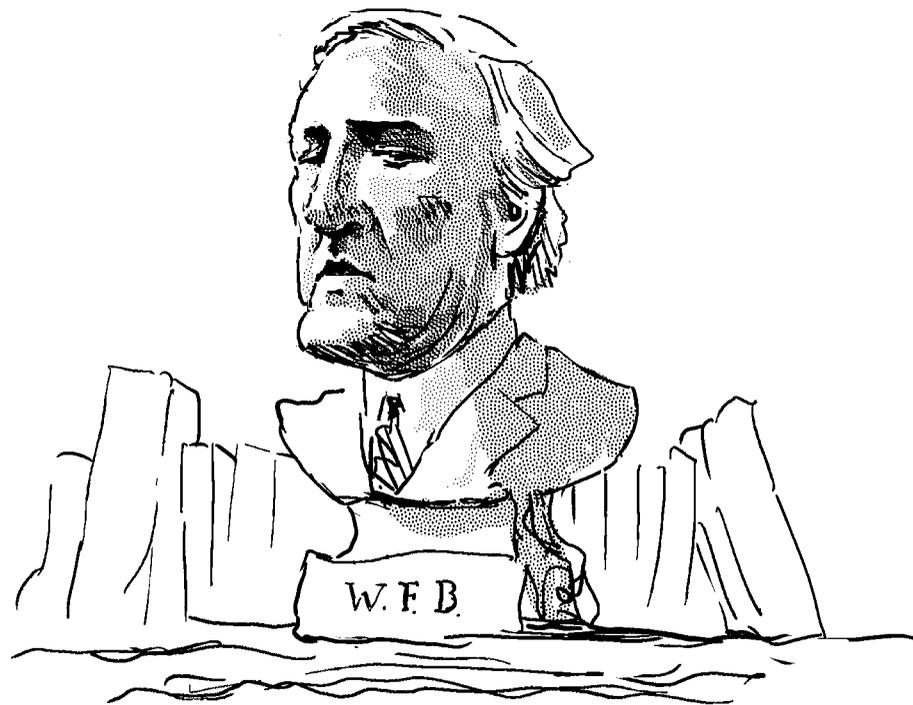
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Book Review by Neal B. Freeman

HE DIDN'T LIKE IKE

A Man and His Presidents: The Political Odyssey of William F. Buckley Jr., by Alvin S. Felzenberg.
Yale University Press, 488 pages, \$35



DEPENDING ON HOW YOU COUNT, ALVIN Felzenberg has just published the 10th, 11th, or 12th book about William F. Buckley, Jr., which makes Felzenberg the Larry Fortensky of biography. For those who have given short shrift to the tabloid press over the years, Mr. Fortensky was, depending on how you count, the seventh or eighth husband of Elizabeth Taylor. As the happy couple departed for their honeymoon, Fortensky, a game and ruggedly-built construction worker, reportedly said, “Well, I know what to do, but I’m not sure that I can make it interesting.”

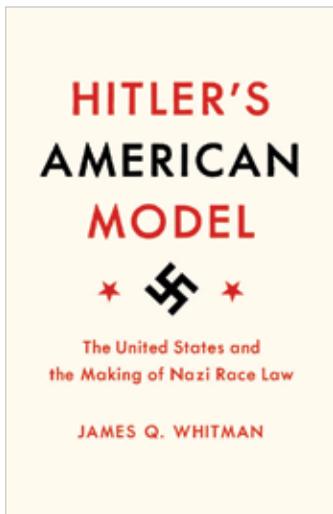
Not to worry: Felzenberg knows what to do and how to make it interesting. *A Man and His Presidents: The Political Odyssey of William F. Buckley Jr.* is a deeply researched and crisply written story of the man who more than any other synthesized and popularized modern political conservatism. In my estimate—informed by ten or eleven other Buckley books, not to mention a 45-year friendship with Buckley—Felzenberg’s is the most useful and heuristic volume since Buckley associates Linda Bridges and John R. Coyne, Jr.’s *Strictly Right: William F. Buckley Jr. and the American Conservative Movement* (2007).

The “odyssey” (which often seems more of a straight-line projection of young Buckley’s iron purpose than a storm-tossed and unpredictable voyage) begins with Dwight D. Eisenhower, whom *National Review*’s early readers will remember as the implausible villain of Buckley’s mid-1950s worldview. Felzenberg, a professor of government and communications at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School who has served in two presidential administrations, attributes this animus to the fact that Ike, for all his well-earned fame and easy charm, was not Robert A. Taft, a “true conservative” in the view not only of young Buckley but of William F. Buckley, Sr.—an important influence on his son’s politics. Both Buckylys, like Taft, had warmed to the America First cause in the late ’30s; both Buckylys, like Taft, had refused to accept New Deal aggrandizement as a permanent feature of American life. And then there was this: young Buckley wanted to start a magazine, and Ike was in the way. Which, I believe, was in part how Eisenhower, the most conservative president of the 20th century save only for Calvin Coolidge and Ronald Reagan, became the *bête noire* of America’s most influential conservative magazine.

IN FELZENBERG’S TELLING, MOST OF BUCKLEY’S relationships with “his” presidents were less consequential than perfunctory. John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush make appearances in these pages, do a brief turn upon the political stage, and then are dismissed in a chapter or less. (Buckley died in 2008, just before Obama ascended the throne.) The exception is a nicely nuanced account of Buckley’s long if low-wattage friendship with George H.W. Bush. The two met at Yale, where as veterans of the wartime military they stood out as being older and more proximately ambitious than many of their classmates. They quickly became big men on campus: Bush as captain of the baseball team, Buckley as chairman of the *Yale Daily News*. And both were good students—though Bush was the stellar academic performer, finishing near the top of his class. Buckley and Bush became warm friends at Yale and would remain so for the rest of their lives, but they never became brothers in political faith.

Buckley’s relationship with Richard Nixon was much more complicated, but then everybody’s relationship with Nixon was much more complicated. Felzenberg does an admirable job of tracking them as they move through

Changing the Conversations that Change the World



Hitler's American Model

The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law

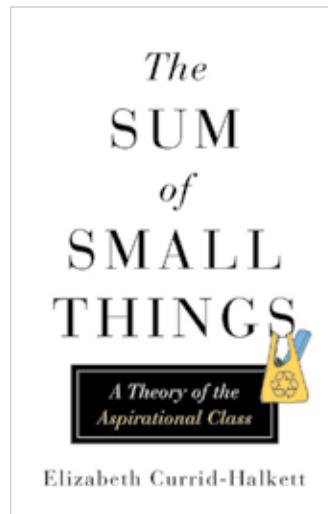
James Q. Whitman

"A brilliant page-turner."
—Laurence H. Tribe, Harvard Law School

"Stunningly well-timed."
—Tim Stanley, *Daily Telegraph*

"Eerie. . . [Whitman] illustrates how German propagandists sought to normalize the Nazi agenda domestically by putting forth the United States as a model."
—Brent Staples, *New York Times*

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The Sum of Small Things

A Theory of the Aspirational Class

Elizabeth Currid-Halkett

"Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, author of *The Sum of Small Things*, says a new cultural elite is on the rise: the aspirational class. These are people who aren't necessarily rich but who share a set of views on the most socially conscious ways to spend money. . . . Currid-Halkett argues that they are driven primarily by an aspiration to be—or at least appear to be—their version of better humans.' That's why, for this milieu, a \$2 heirloom tomato purchased from a farmers' market is so symbolically weighty . . . and a white Range Rover is not."
—Sarah Begley, *Time*

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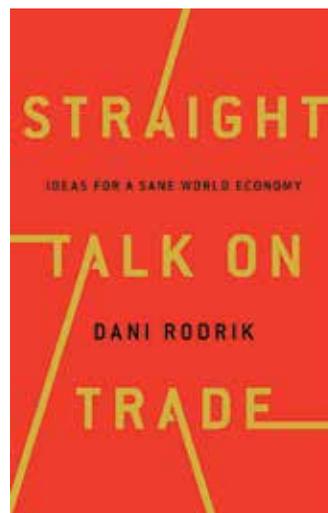
Economics for the Common Good

Jean Tirole

Translated by Steven Rendall

"Jean Tirole is that rare exception, a Nobel laureate who believes he has a social responsibility to talk clearly and responsibly about the topics on the minds of noneconomists. This is an exceptional book. It shows the value of careful economic thinking on topics from unemployment to global warming. Required reading for policymakers, but also for anybody else who wants to understand today's economy."
—Olivier Blanchard, former Chief Economist of the International Monetary Fund

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Straight Talk on Trade

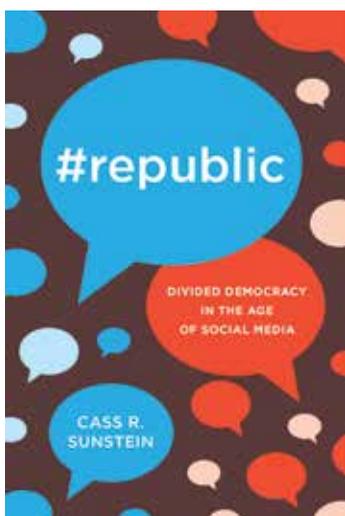
Ideas for a Sane World Economy

Dani Rodrik

"*Straight Talk on Trade* looks at the possibility that the world has proceeded too hastily with globalization and emphasized globalization of the wrong kind. Dani Rodrik contends that we have neglected notions of national sovereignty at our peril, and his knowledge, sources, methods, and arguments are all first-rate and battle-tested."

—Tyler Cowen, author of *The Complacent Class*

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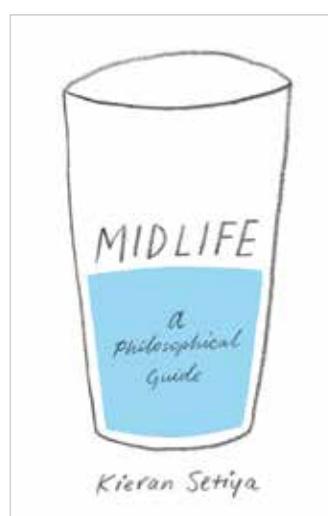
#Republic

Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media

Cass R. Sunstein

"America's leading legal academic gives us a way to address democracy's leading challenge—preserving a public informed enough to govern itself. Drawing on an incredible range of scholarship and experience, this book could not be more timely. Or urgently needed."
—Lawrence Lessig, Harvard Law School

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Midlife

A Philosophical Guide

Kieran Setiya

"Written with charming simplicity and wry humor, *Midlife* is a philosophically rich source of what might be called 'the higher life hacks'—reflective ways of dissolving the sense of emptiness and regret that tends to hit each of us with the onset of middle age. A work of disarming wisdom."

—Jim Holt, author of *Why Does the World Exist?*

Cloth \$22.95



the kaleidoscopic phases of their evolving careers, the one trying to use the other for tactical gain here, the other joining, or shucking, a convenient alliance there. (Following Nixon's zig-zags through his own poorly-lit, psychological obstacle course, reminds more than occasionally of Whittaker Chambers's lambent dictum, "to live is to maneuver.") What was it that kept Buckley and Nixon at the bench all those years, trying to fashion a durable relationship? My guess is that each recognized in the other one of the most remarkable political minds of the age. (Some of the most stimulating evenings of my life were spent at Buckley's table. Willmoore Kendall's evaluation of his former student was on the mark: "Buckley is the world's finest conversationalist." But even those magical Buckley evenings faded by comparison with Nixon dinners in the Octobers of even-numbered years. Nixon had been a part of five—five—national tickets and was the world's finest analyst of American politics.)

THE CENTERPIECE OF THIS BOOK, NOT surprisingly, is the story of Buckley's relationship with Ronald Reagan. In the early going, despite Buckley being 14 years younger, Reagan was the student hungry for knowledge and direction and Buckley the instructor, more and more diligent in his duties as he came to appreciate the special qualities of his charge. My sense of the relationship is that Reagan stopped thinking of himself as the student sometime before Buckley did—Reagan had the politician's genius for making others feel more important to him than they were—but there is no question that Reagan benefited enormously from the private tutorial. It didn't hurt the relationship, either, that of Buckley's many friends, only "Ron" had a spouse with as much style and moxie as Patricia Taylor Buckley. The two couples became a fast, four-way friendship.

I congratulate Felzenberg for seeing the Buckley archive at Yale for what it is—a rich and invaluable resource—and not what several earlier biographers have mistaken it for—a repository of revealed truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The young Buckley, unlike you and me, and unlike even Nixon and Reagan, knew in his twenties that a) he would be famous, and that b) he would care what people wrote about him. He thus tended the central file fastidiously. I don't mean to suggest that there is any falsification in those voluminous folders. There wasn't even any systematic cosmeticization. But of the several thousand surviving Buckley letters, more than a few were intended as much for the file as for the recipient.

A couple of years ago, for example, I read with mounting incredulity Kevin Schultz's

book-length treatment of the relationship between Buckley and the novelist Norman Mailer, titled, astonishingly, *Buckley and Mailer: The Difficult Friendship that Shaped the Sixties* (2015). Schultz, who had apparently spent months spelunking in the New Haven stacks, may have been a victim of the Buckley archive. All you had to do was spend five minutes in the same room with Buckley and Mailer to know that they could never be friends. They never embraced but circled each other, neither eager but both prepared to duke it out with the other side's most formidable controversialist. Regrettably for fans of literary blood-feuds, push never came to shove. In the interim, they exchanged warm and witty letters, copied to file.

ISHOULD ALSO CITE FELZENBERG'S MEASURED treatment of James Burnham, Buckley's longtime colleague as a senior editor at *National Review*. A little revisionism on Burnham's place in the conservative movement is overdue. Buckley said more than once that Burnham was the most important intellectual force at the magazine. True enough. But Buckley's audience was not listening as carefully as Buckley was speaking. Buckley had three primary ambitions for *National Review*. He wanted it to be a platform-writing, candidate-promoting political magazine; an agenda-shaping, coalition-building ideological force (despite urgent appeals from Ludwig von Mises to abjure "ideology" in all its forms); and a transmitter and protector of the inherited culture. Buckley wanted no part of an academic journal.

When it came to political decisions, Jim Burnham's was an articulate voice, sometimes mesmerizingly so, but it did not always carry the meeting. During the time I was participating in endorsement decisions, for instance, there were three sharply contested GOP nominations—in 1964, 1968, and 1976. Burnham pressed the case, respectively, for Rockefeller, Rockefeller, and Ford. The magazine supported Goldwater, Nixon, and Reagan. And as the philosophical debate raged—the compass-setting process, in effect, for the embryonic political movement—Burnham was more bemused observer than active participant. The principal debaters were the "freedom" faction's Frank Meyer and the "virtue" faction's Brent Bozell. What emerged from that robust, protracted, and occasionally exasperating colloquy was the now-familiar "Buckley-style" fusionist conservatism. Burnham seemed more bemused than ever. When the culture war flared, as it did intermittently, Burnham frequently saw the episode as back-of-the-book material.

Burnham was an impeccable editor, an acute analyst, a fine deadline writer, and a consummate bureaucrat. (So consummate, in fact, that his intramural rival, Meyer, soon

found himself rendered extramural, sent into internal exile in upstate New York.) I admired him greatly and give him principal credit for professionalizing the magazine—for making it if not more acceptable to intellectual elites, then at least less easily dismissed. I found him a deft and dedicated anti-Leftist more than he was a conservative, hyphenated or otherwise.

IHAVE BUT THREE NITS TO PICK WITH FELZENBERG'S account. First, there are scores of blind quotations in this book, many of them spicy, a few of them blood-drawing. As a reader who likes to know who is zinging whom, I flipped to the footnotes and found, frequently, only page references to other books by other authors, the quotations having been sourced to interviewers rather than interviewees. Disappointing.

Second, Felzenberg at least twice describes Buckley as "athletic." As one who shared brief excursions with him into soccer, lacrosse, fencing, softball, bowling, darts, golf, and volleyball—detecting no trace of athletic ability in him in the process—I was jarred slightly by the adjective. Perhaps the reference was to sailing. Or skiing. Or the trebuchet.

Third, where is Bill Rusher? *National Review* publisher William A. Rusher was for many years the director of political operations not only for the magazine itself but for its fissiparous offshoots that provided both structure and filigree to the conservative movement. Rusher was Buckley's bridge to both Goldwater and Reagan, and Rusher's extremely complicated relationship with Nixon always colored Buckley's only slightly less complicated relationship with Nixon. In these pages, Rusher appears as a marginal figure in Buckley's political life. He wasn't.

My theory of the author's misdemeanor is this: Buckley and Rusher communicated constantly, sometimes hourly, striding between offices separated only by a short hallway. They communicated in writing only when there was a simmering problem to be resolved or a strategic question to be argued. The daily harmony of close and productive collaboration may thus have gone largely unrecorded. Perhaps we should blame the Yale archive here, too.

Let not the central point be clouded. Al Felzenberg has written a fine book, a valuable contribution to our understanding of the man who, after declaring as a college student that he intended to change the world, proceeded as an author, editor, and political activist to do just that.

Neal B. Freeman, a former editor and columnist for National Review and the founding producer of Firing Line, is the author of Skirmishes (National Review Books).

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