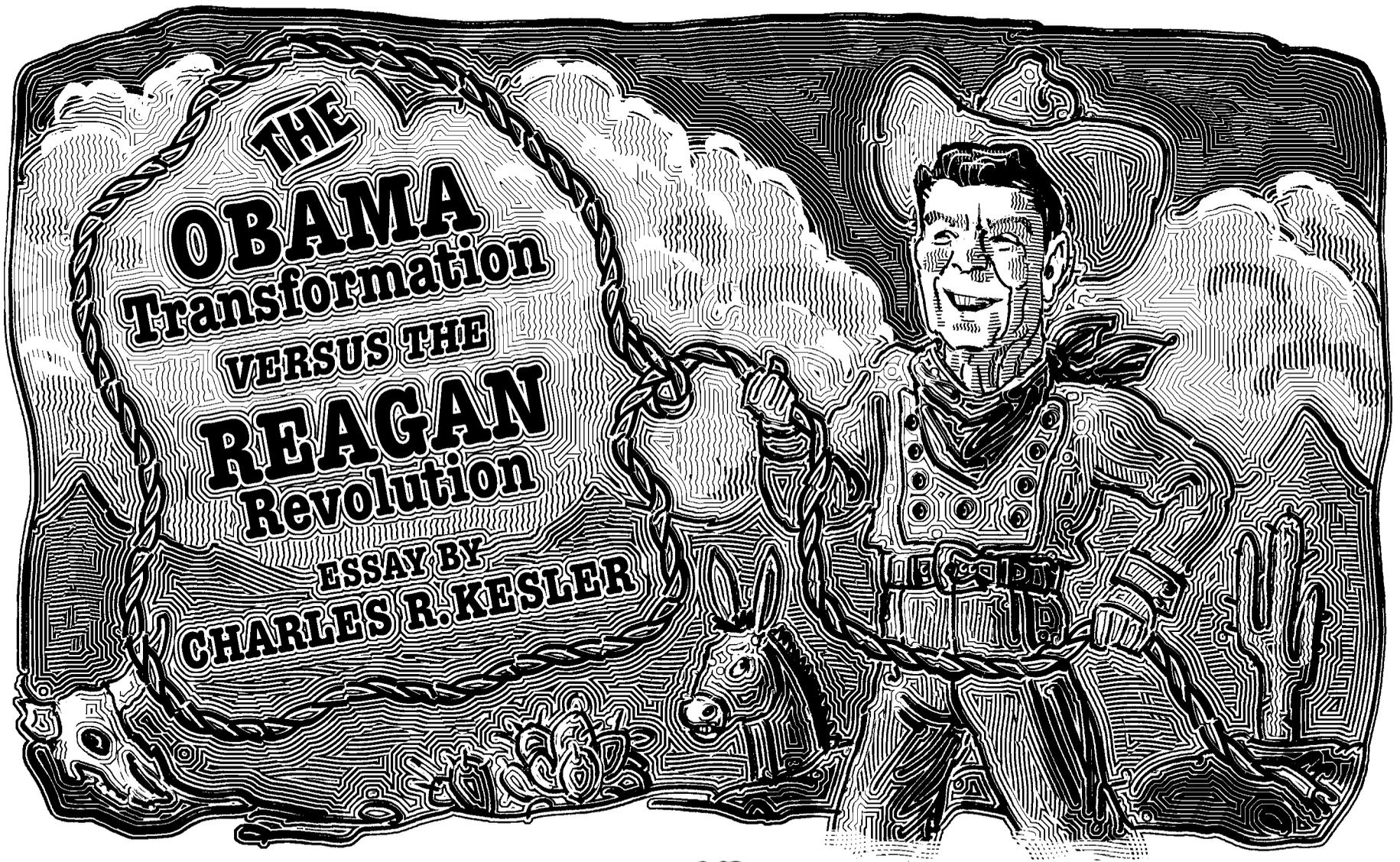


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REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship



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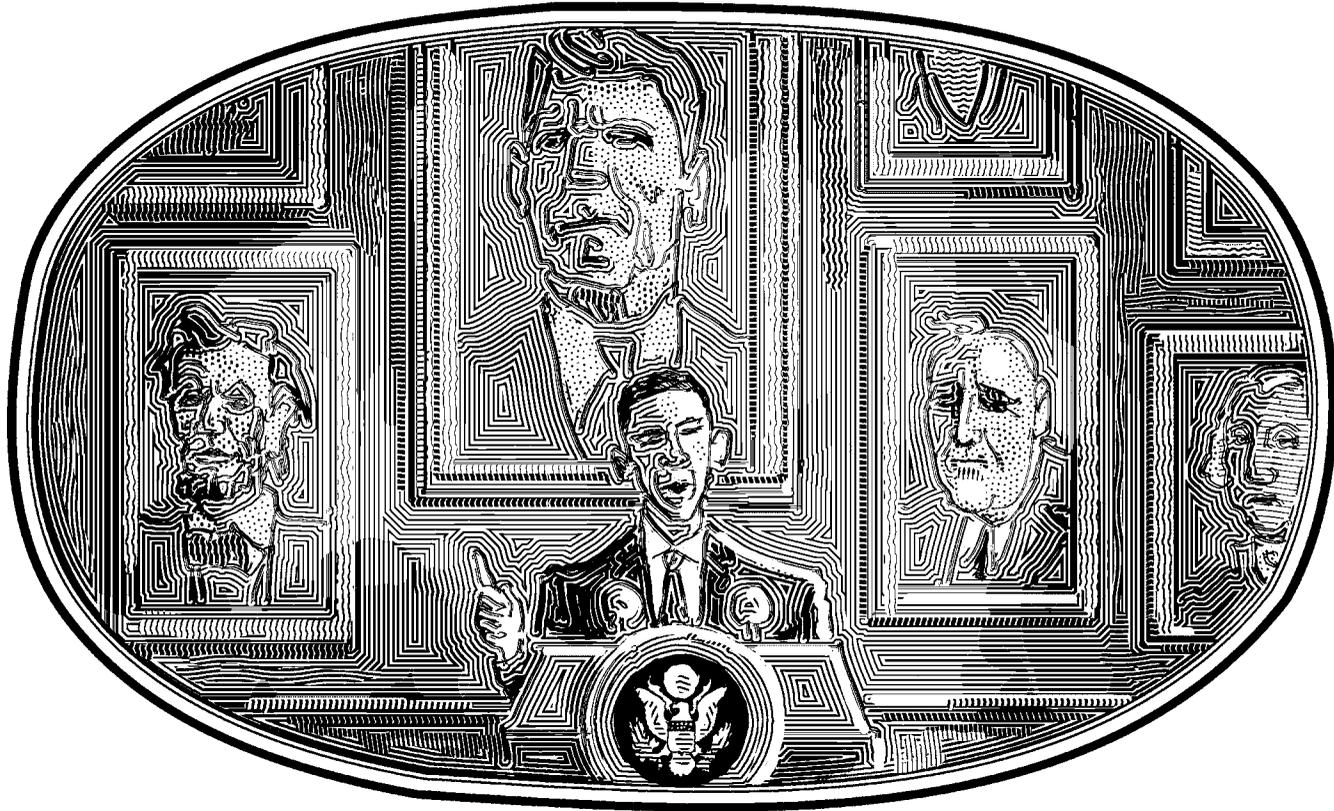


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THE OBAMA TRANSFORMATION VERSUS THE REAGAN REVOLUTION



THE GOOD NEWS IS A WEARY COUNTRY can begin to focus on the president who will succeed Barack Obama. The bad news is President Obama's legacy will not be retired so easily.

He intended to be a president who made a big difference. "Let us transform this nation," he demanded in 2007. "We are five days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America," he proclaimed as Election Day approached in 2008. With a year and a half to go, Obama knows (he admitted as much to the *New Yorker*, his favorite confessional) that a fundamental transformation will not happen on his watch. But he remains hopeful that it is underway and will continue long after his presidency. After all, look at what he has already accomplished. He revived liberalism from its Clintonite doldrums, promoted a generation of ambitious apparatchiks to high judicial and administrative office (we'll be hearing from them again), and spurred the national conversation as far to the left as he could on almost every issue, from income redistribution to gender reassignment, from local policing to global climate change. His legislative breakthroughs came early in his first

term; it's too soon to say they will endure. But if the Affordable Care Act survives—which is better than one can predict for many of its patients—"transformation" may yet be the right word to describe the long-term effects of his presidency.

Granted, it wasn't a rousing electoral success. Though he won a comfortable reelection, his party suffered a shocking collapse. After six years of his leadership, the Democrats have fewer congressmen, U.S. senators, governors, and state legislative chambers than at any time since the 1920s. For someone who doesn't believe in turning back the clock, Obama certainly has done a good job of it. Democratic legislators might be forgiven for thinking they'd suffered a reverse Rip Van Winkle, falling asleep in the Age of Obama and waking up in the Age of Calvin Coolidge.

Yet the full weight of their losses in 2010 and 2014, and the continuing unpopularity of Obama's economic, foreign, and health care policies, have not quite registered on the Democrats. To the administration's rescue rode its allies on the Supreme Court and in the regulatory agencies, handing the president huge victories on housing policy, immigration,

Obamacare, gay marriage, carbon regulation, and other key issues. Who needs the House and Senate if the courts and the bureaucracy can legislate in their place? The extent to which one man in the executive branch, five justices on the Court, and thousands of unelected, unaccountable, uncivil servants can make policy and law in today's Washington—without the active consent of the legislature and sometimes even against its will—ought to fill citizens with dread.

It will be up to the bevy of Republican presidential candidates, and eventually the party's nominee, to make the case against four more years of government à la Obama. They will be helped in this task by the example of the last Republican president who had to confront a disastrous, overextended liberalism, which, as he warned in his First Inaugural, showed "signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed." Ronald Reagan's "Eleventh Commandment"—"Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow Republican"—will assuredly be applied in the upcoming primaries to one Republican only: Ronald Reagan. None of the candidates will speak ill of him, however energetically they inveigh against one an-



other. But the serious among them ought to be thinking about him, studying his speeches and decisions, reflecting on his successes and failures. Today's questions differ from those he confronted in the 1980s, and so it is less his specific policies than the reasons behind them—and his leadership on their behalf—that matter. For on the level of major political movements inspired by political principles, the great contest in 2016 remains what it has been since 2008: the Obama Transformation versus the Reagan Revolution.

Transformers

CANDIDATE OBAMA IMPLIED AS MUCH in his famous comment in 2008: “I think Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not. He put us on a fundamentally different path because the country was ready for it.” His point was that America, blessedly, was now ready to take another path—up from Reagan—with himself as the guide or leader. He would be the Democratic Reagan; perhaps, if he were lucky or audacious enough, as he freely insinuated elsewhere, the Democratic Lincoln. The “fundamentally different path” Obama recommended was not altogether new, but neither was it altogether old. It was the path of “transformation” itself, of constant self-reinvention, endless becoming, unceasing adjustment to new social conditions, challenges, and ideals. This was the road modern American liberalism had been on for a long time. This was the line of march Reagan himself had been on when he was a Democrat—from New Freedom to New Deal to the Great Society, each meant as a transformation of the existing America. Together these promised the *Aufhebung* (the absorption, nullification, and transcendence) of the old freedom of the Declaration of Independence, the agreed deal of the original Constitution, and the not-so-great society (as liberals saw it) of selfish or repressed individualism. Reagan abandoned the path before the Great Society, having realized where it was heading. Obama's threatened transformation, the fourth in a series, would not have surprised him.

Reagan expressed his objections in one of his earliest political addresses, a televised speech in 1962 (the year he became a Republican) on behalf of Richard Nixon's ill-fated campaign for California governor.

Senator Fulbright, speaking at Stanford University, referred to the President as our moral teacher and our leader, and he said “he is hobbled in his task by the

restrictions of power imposed on him by a constitutional system designed for 18th Century agrarian society,” and we've been told that the talk of taking the country back to the Constitution is talk of taking it back to the days of McKinley. Well, I for one, don't think that's a bad idea.

For a president to be hailed as “our moral teacher and our leader” struck Reagan as sycophantic, un-American—and as thoroughly repugnant to the genius of the U.S. Constitution. He took Senator J. William Fulbright, the liberal Democrat from Arkansas, to be implying that an *unhobbled* president, the kind of leader and moral teacher that the times really demanded, would have to escape “the restrictions of power imposed on him” by America's obsolete Constitution.

Once free of those restrictions, the president would be free to be “as big a man as he can,” in an office that could be “anything he has the sagacity and force to make it.” Those rather ominous phrases come not from Reagan or Fulbright but from Woodrow Wilson, who devised our modern and highly favorable view of leadership, and who was elected president the year after Reagan was born. A leader-president untethered from the Constitution might be ambitious or unambitious, progressive or reactionary; Reagan objected that, regardless, such a figure could not be *safe* for a free people. The very idea smacked of “Kaiserism” and “Hitlerism,” he said elsewhere. So, quoting Daniel Webster, he urged his fellow citizens to “hold on” to the “Constitution of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands.”

Wilson's critique of the old Constitution and its principles lay behind Senator Fulbright's criticism of it. In Wilson's striking phrase, the old system amounted to “leaderless government,” which he regarded as a contradiction in terms. The Constitution, with its separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, and tortuous amendment process—the very 18th-century impediments Senator Fulbright regretted—had divided authority and rendered leadership by a Big Man of “sagacity and force” peculiarly difficult. And without such leadership, rational and continual political progress—transformation—was impossible. “Leadership and control must be lodged somewhere,” Wilson insisted. “No living thing can have its organs offset against each other as checks, and live.” The form of government suitable for “leadership and control” was not George Washington's or William McKinley's but a new one, what Obama, following Wilson, calls

the “living constitution.” The term implies, none too subtly, that the old Constitution is dead or on life support, and that the new one, to remain alive and healthy, must be coordinated or overseen by a leader. To sugarcoat this shocking news, the advocates tell a soothing tale to friend and foe alike: that the new constitution is nothing more than an extension, an updating, a gradual, unthreatening, and altogether necessary evolution from the old. “Darwinian,” Wilson liked to call it. He meant that human rights, governments, and constitutions, just like biological species, have their “natural evolution and are one thing in one age, another in another.” Transformation is all.

As a Progressive, Wilson thought the times could be counted on to be gradually but inevitably improving, so much so that mankind in the 20th century could for the first time recognize the difference between, as Obama likes to say, the right side and the wrong side of history. Although “leadership” had a reputation as undemocratic (try saying it in German), so long as leaders follow the permanent path of progress—keep to the right side of history—democrats need not fear it. The danger is further reduced because true leadership, combining Darwinian ethics with Darwinian efficiency, summons people into a better and more or less inevitable future where they would want to go anyway, if only they knew how.

To help the people overcome their blindness—to persuade the people to follow them—leaders like Obama need two novel qualities, now grown familiar: vision and compassion. The leader lends the people *vision* by appealing to them to imagine a much better future that is closer than they think, e.g., a world in which health care is universally available, dirt cheap, and surpassingly excellent. Imagine that! Why would anyone want to deny your right to *that*? Visionary politics relies primarily on imaginative appeals, not syllogisms or enthymemes, as anyone who has listened to recent presidential campaigns will recognize. The leader must feel a lively *compassion* or sympathy for the people in order to keep these dreams of the future tethered to some present-day reality. He must move with the common impulse and interpret the common feeling. Bill Clinton summed up the qualifications in one sentence: “I feel your pain.”

Leadership opened the royal road that modern liberalism took into American politics. Rather than separating and checking governmental powers, liberals sought to combine and concentrate them. Wouldn't such accumulated power be dangerous? Not if it were in the hands of selfless experts devoted to the people's good, i.e., liberals. Rather than



an embarrassing case of self-delusion fanned by self-interest, they called this a great ethical advance. At any rate, these powers were to be spent in the continual emission of a new class of social and economic rights for the people. Each right denied was the kernel of a social problem. Each social problem demanded a social program. Every social program constituted a solemn promise, in conjunction with all the other programs, to bring to the people unprecedented material well-being and unimaginable spiritual fulfillment.

In this way American government, once limited by natural rights and a written Constitution, became perpetually engaged in the reconstruction of human nature itself, of the people themselves. Rather than the government representing *us*, we came to represent *it*. Bertolt Brecht satirized the inversion in his poem "The Solution": "the people had forfeited the confidence of the government and could win it back only by redoubled efforts." Gradually, a people with the capacity to govern themselves became a people addicted to transforming themselves—or rather to *being* transformed—into whatever the times demanded, down whatever path "our moral teacher and our leader" beckoned. Hope and change became the coin of the realm.

The Reagan Revolution

BEGINNING IN THE 1960S, REAGAN tried to save America from this fate. He faced an unusual set of questions. Could a conservative be a leader in the new sense, without succumbing to the concept's implicit progressivism? Could a conservative chief executive lead popular opinion and thus Washington, D.C., into the future, while somehow leading the country back to the Constitution and limited government? As his political career took off, Reagan confronted the Obama Transformation in advance, as it were, and tried to redefine leadership in a populist, conservative, and at least partly constitutionalist direction.

Wilson had distinguished leadership from old-fashioned rulership. *Rulers* thought themselves superior, and used their unequal power to impose their opinions and interests on the ruled; *leaders* were of the people, though slightly in advance of them. Rulership involved looking down; leadership involved looking forward. Ruling implied ordering the souls and bodies of the ruled. Leadership implied opening up individuals to "self-development," which would proceed hand in hand with the performance of their social duties, in constant adjustment to the spirit of the age.

In effect, Reagan tried to turn this distinction against liberalism. It was the living constitution, he argued, the sprawling, evolving Big Government produced by modern progressivism, that desired to *rule* Americans. It did so through a new kind of ruling class, a mixture of leaders and experts, whose rule could hardly be resented because it was justified, in theory at least, by the solution of the people's problems, the alleviation of their needs, and the recognition of their lifestyles. By contrast, Reagan and the conservative movement sought to remind Americans that they were not needy victims whose freedom, dignity, and happiness depended on the State, but citizens capable of ruling themselves, and capable therefore of returning to a smaller, more limited government.

His starting point was invariably American exceptionalism. "This idea," as he put it in 1964, "that government was beholden to the people, that it had no other source of power except the sovereign people, is still the newest, most unique idea in all the long history of man's relation to man." Twenty-five years later, in his Farewell Address, he expanded on the point:

Ours was the first revolution in the history of mankind that truly reversed the course of government, and with three little words: "We the People."... Almost all the world's constitutions are documents in which governments tell the people what their privileges are. Our Constitution is a document in which "We the People" tell the government what it is allowed to do. "We the People" are free.

"This belief," he continued, "has been the underlying basis for everything I've tried to do these past eight years." Reagan spoke of *reversing* the course of government, that is, returning it to first principles. That's what a "revolution" means in one of its basic senses, a complete circular turn, a return to the beginning.

Reagan's three little words are themselves a derived truth. "We the People' are free" because each human being who consents to form this people is himself, or herself, by nature equal and free. That self-evident truth stands opposed to what he once called the latter-day "perversion" which presumes that "our natural unalienable rights are...a dispensation of government, divisible by a vote of the majority." Reagan is clear that "we have certain rights which cannot be infringed upon, even if the individual stands outvoted by all of his fellow citizens. Without this recognition, majority rule is nothing more than mob rule."

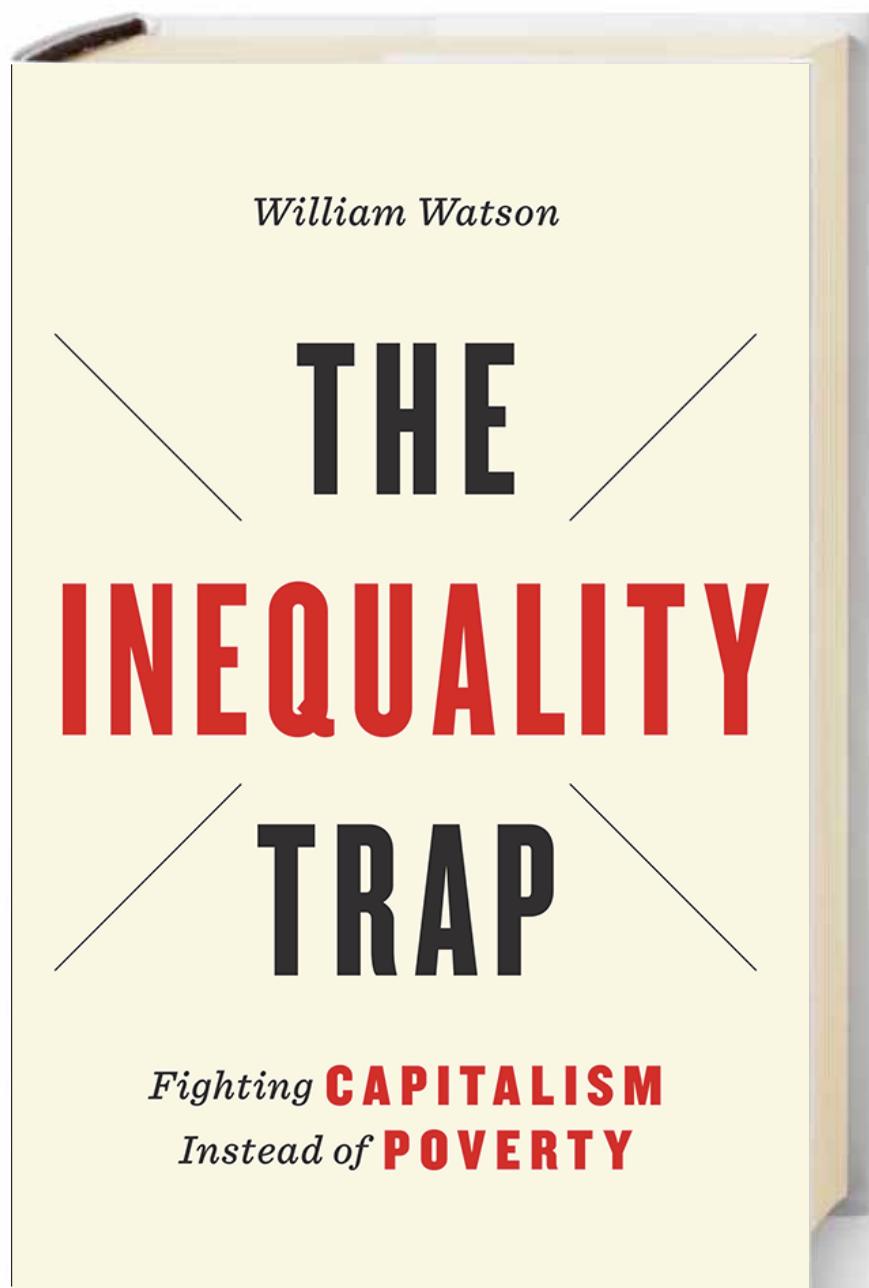
Although the Declaration of Independence supplied the basic principles, Reagan emphasized the Constitution, and especially the Preamble's opening words, which he called "probably the most meaningful words" in the whole document. This focus on "We the People" lent a democratic or populist tone to his interpretation, but like the latter-day Tea Party's, his was a populism dedicated ultimately to restoring, not supplanting, the Constitution. Before the people could take significant steps in that direction, however, they needed first to regain confidence in their own capacity—and right—of self-government. Americans' self-confidence had been shaken by the political and moral beating they had endured in the long decade of the 1960s, when liberalism's vanguard turned for the first time openly anti-American. In 1972 he remarked, "Some of our young people find little to love or defend in this country.... [T]here is an increasing tendency to believe the system has failed." In many of his speeches he emphatically rejected the notion that America was a democracy in name only, or that it was (and some said, always had been) a force for evil in the world.

It is time for us to quit being apologetic, especially to our own children. Even more important, it is time to challenge some of their most cherished notions by presenting facts about their world as it really is—facts that will expose the sorry myth that ours is a sick, racist, materialistic society.

Reagan rejected easy talk of "the masses" and so of the kind of leadership necessary to deal with the masses. Here is a choice passage from "the Speech," Reagan's 1964 address on behalf of Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign:

Another articulate spokesman for the welfare state defends liberalism as "meeting the material needs of the masses through the full power of centralized government." I for one find it disturbing when a representative refers to the free men and women of this country as "the masses," but beyond this "the full power of centralized government" was the very thing the Founding Fathers sought to minimize. They knew you can't control *things*; you can't control the economy without controlling *people*. So we have come to a time for choosing. Either we accept the responsibility for our own destiny, or we abandon the American Revolution and confess that an intellectual elite in a far-distant capitol can plan

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our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves.

As opposed to the would-be ruling class, he championed the “common sense and common decency of ordinary men and women, working out their own lives in their own way.” “In my own mind,” he often said, “I was a citizen representing my fellow citizens against the institution of government.”

When he became governor, he asked citizens to volunteer for a “recruiting committee” to staff his administration with “men and women who did not want government careers and who would be the first to tell me if their government job was unnecessary.” He asked for “expert people” in many fields to volunteer for task forces to audit and apply “modern business practices” to every department and agency of California government. “This was government-by-the-people,” he commented, “proving that it works when the people work at it.” The same approach would work in Washington, D.C., he predicted. He summed up his premise: “I believe in the people.”

That was what President Reagan was getting at in the memorable words of his First Inaugural: “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” He underlined the point by distinguishing, in the same paragraph, between the dueling forms of government in American politics.

From time to time we’ve been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?

In the struggle between the oligarchy of leaders and experts (ruling a nation of victims) and the republican government of old, he was clearly on the side of “government for, by, and of the people,” rearranging Lincoln’s triad at Gettysburg (“of the people, by the people, for the people”) to emphasize the democratic significance of government not merely *for* but also *by* and *of* the people, not by and of an elite.

Nonetheless, Reagan’s emphatic focus on the quarrel between “the people” and “the institution of government” tended to overwhelm the fact that this was also an epic struggle between two very different forms of government: between republicanism and oligarchy, between the Constitution and the living constitution. He didn’t neglect this dimension of the conflict, but he sided more often and more

passionately with “the people” than with their Constitution. Where one would have expected to find a defense of the old Constitution—an interpretation of it and its powers and duties—one found instead, all too often, a sidestep to “We the People.” Where Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Lincoln, and in their own way even Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt argued boldly for their own interpretation of the document, Reagan often deferred to popular “values,” not so much in a majoritarian as in a unitarian, or consensus, sense, claiming these embodied “the collective wisdom and genius of the people.” When he did speak up for a constitutional provision or doctrine, it was usually federalism, in sweeping 10th Amendment (and for that matter, in Barry Goldwater) style, as in his Second Inaugural, where he regretted, “We yielded authority to the national government that properly belonged to states or to local governments or to the people themselves.”

Why didn’t he make a sharper, more sustained constitutionalist case? It is hard to

Was the Constitution still the supreme law of the land—or was it being gradually, almost silently, displaced by a new form of autocracy?

know precisely, but several considerations occur. He was not a lawyer. He had seen Goldwater’s fierce campaign to roll back modern government lose by a landslide. One of the glories of his administration, of course, was Attorney General Edwin Meese’s bold campaign for a return to “original intent” in interpreting the Constitution. Though almost all conservatives supported the idea, what exactly was being returned to and why remained a little unclear. Originalists split over the relative authority of constitutional text, tradition, who counted as ratifiers, legislative intent, and especially over whether the ratification of the Constitution was an act of pure popular will or of will informed by natural reason and law. Politically, originalists disagreed over civil rights (including the legitimacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*) and whether judicial deference to democratic laws and to administrative agencies’ regulations was a virtue. These fault lines, still active today, did not make things easier. And when the Left turned against the

American middle class and its morality, a gifted politician like Reagan could hardly avoid returning the favor on behalf of the American people and their traditional mores.

Still, it wasn’t as though the Constitution was irrelevant to the defense of American morality, or to the defeat of liberalism. In separating the healthy from the diseased parts of modern government, “modern business practices” and “common sense” could only go so far; these needed to be supplemented by a discerning application of the founders’ own political science and art. After all, the point, as Reagan well knew, was not to get the public simply to laugh at or curse the follies of government. The people had to remember why, and how, to govern themselves in a constitutional way. Sensible and decent though they may be, Reagan thought they needed to be led back to self-government, but in a manner that did not vitiate the conditions of self-government. That was the essence of his dilemma.

Here we arrive, perhaps, at the deepest reason for Reagan’s populist sensibility. He believed in the people *not* because he thought a leader could bring vision and order to their disjointed stirrings, but because he trusted their good principles and their good character—their “values,” as he liked to put it. In a strange way, the people were for Reagan the vital, that is, the living link with the cause of the American Founding, and with the heroic pursuit of its principles over the centuries. We the people *embodied* the cause of American constitutionalism, forming both its substratum and its living expression. This was a conservative version of living-constitution theory, dispensing with social science experts and progressive leaders in favor of business experts and commonsensical leaders who appreciated Americans’ genius for freedom. The people and their values formed the kind of living constitution that Reagan could favor and, indeed, follow, a kind of string leading back through the moral-political labyrinth to America before big government and the administrative state.

Accepting the nomination in 1980, he said,

My view of government places trust not in one person or one party, but in those values that transcend persons and parties. The trust is where it belongs—in the people. The responsibility to live up to that trust is where it belongs, in their elected leaders. That kind of relationship, between the people and their elected leaders, is a special kind of compact.

He restated that compact in his Farewell Address. “I wasn’t a great communicator,” he



demurred, “but I communicated great things, and they didn’t spring full blown from my brow, they came from the heart of a great nation—from our experience, our wisdom, and our belief in the principles that have guided us for two centuries.” He called what his administration had accomplished over the past eight years “the great rediscovery, a rediscovery of our values and our common sense.”

Revolution Manqué

IN THE END, HOWEVER, THE POPULIST path did not lead where Reagan really wanted to go, or at least where he thought the country needed to go. And it came with costs and consequences he had not anticipated.

To begin with, at some point the tension between trusting the people’s values and honoring the Constitution’s principles could, and did, become acute. The problem had arisen in the 1960s and earlier, according to Reagan, who in his Second Inaugural admitted that our “system has never failed us, but, for a time, we failed the system. We asked things of government that government was not equipped to give.” What options are left to a leader, then, who says trust the people to trust their values—if the people cease to trust or even

understand, at least as fully as they once did, those values?

The term itself pointed to problems ahead. “Values,” in the sense of the standards or principles of a person or group, is not a word that Washington, Lincoln, or even Wilson used. It is a new meaning for an old word, coming into general use in America around the middle of the 20th century, though introduced as a specialty word decades earlier by philosophers, principally Friedrich Nietzsche, and social scientists, especially Max Weber. Its implications are relativist: “values” are no more and no less than the standards which someone happens to “value.” Valuing things differently, other people will have different values. Strictly speaking, all values are therefore relative, as Nietzsche and Weber emphasized. As the banner for Reagan’s effort to “renew our faith,” it is an odd choice. Earlier generations of Americans, trying to make a point similar to Reagan’s, would have put it differently, as the state of Virginia did in its famous Declaration of Rights (June 12, 1776), drafted by George Mason. Its 15th article reads:

That no free Government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to jus-

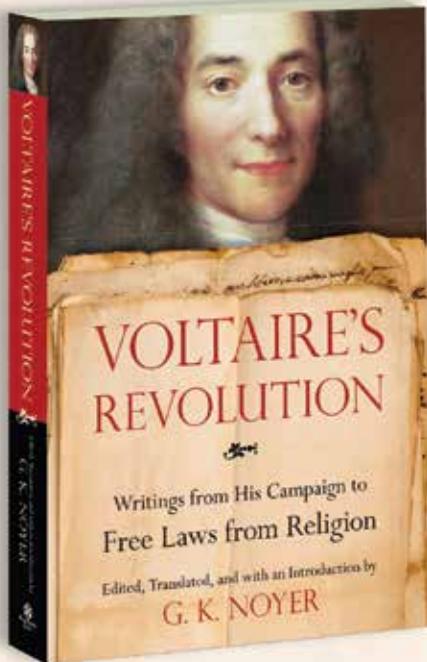
tice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue, and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.

Where Reagan urged a return to the people’s values, Mason called for a recurrence to virtues and fundamental principles. What’s the difference? Values are what the people value; virtues and principles are what they *should* value. And they should value them because the principles are true and the virtues are good, not only for Americans but for human beings as such.

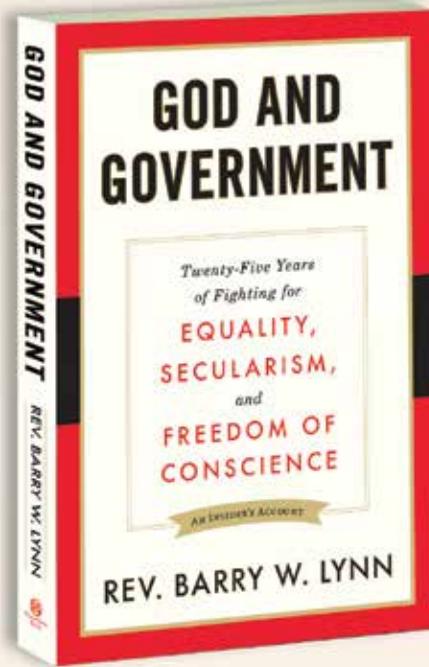
By invoking “values,” Reagan did not mean, of course, to traffic in relativism. He did not for a moment imagine he was seconding the worst tendencies of postmodern liberalism. But the language he used had a logic of its own, and it quietly left the arguments in favor of those traditional American “values” in worse shape than Reagan had found them, and employed them, in some of his better speeches.

In any case, he focused his campaigns in 1980 and 1984 on the American people as they recovered their moral and political health. The immediate enemy was the sense of paralysis and drift that had set in under the Carter Administration. “We must act today

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LEWIS BLACK



in order to preserve tomorrow," he declared in the First Inaugural, and he stressed the people's *capacity* to save themselves. "[W]e as Americans have the capacity now, as we've had in the past, to do whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom." He urged the people "to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds." He invoked "God's help" along with the excellence of American character shown not only by great American presidents, but also by everyday American heroes, whether soldiers, factory workers, farmers, or entrepreneurs. The "citizens of this blessed land" are "heroes," he declared.

Reagan mentioned the Constitution once in his First Inaugural, in a beginning salute to the "orderly transfer of authority" between administrations "as called for in the Constitution." His single reference was to an instance when the Constitution was being obeyed. Though the speech contained many criticisms of the "unnecessary and excessive growth of government," he chalked that problem up to violations of "the consent of the governed" more than to violations of the letter or spirit of the Constitution. Both his diagnosis of the problems afflicting the country and his prescriptions for them remained strikingly populist, albeit with a constitutionalist accent. Everything depended on the people acting "worthy of ourselves." "'We the people,' this breed called Americans," as he hailed them, had to reassert our authority over government, and in so doing rediscover our heroic past and future, our heroic *selves*.

His arguments were less about the form of government and its principles than about the "constitution," in the sense of the health, of their own opinions, habits, and values. Because public opinion was so important, the leadership of public sentiment remained essential to his conservatism. In his 1980 Acceptance Speech, he called for "a new consensus with all those across the land who share a community of values embodied in these words: family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom." Justice, moderation, virtue, and principles like natural rights and checks and balances were not among those words. Reagan thought these and other aspects of our form of government and way of life to be valuable, of course, as many passages in his writings and speeches attest. But he seemed to think them derivative from or entailed in the people's own recovery of self-confidence. Once president he began to feature at the State of the Union address "American heroes," mostly ordinary citizens who had done extraordinary things, later ordinary citizens who had done less extraordinary things—

"heroes for the eighties," i.e., the 1980s, he once called them revealingly. He pointed them out in the gallery, driving home the moral that "the heroes are our people, not government."

What he sought from Americans in 1980 and 1984, accordingly, was more a reaffirmation of values than a political revolution. In American history, the decisive partisan breakthroughs, as in the elections of 1800, 1860, and 1932, involved sharp clashes over the meaning of justice, over who should be free and equal and to what extent, and over the purposes and limits of the Constitution. Reagan never quite asked for that kind of turning point, though he came close in 1980 and won enough of it to change "the trajectory of America," to recall Obama's celebrated pronouncement. In 1985 he noted the incipient signs of American renewal:

Of all the changes that have swept America the past four years, none brings greater promise than our rediscovery of the values of faith, freedom, family, work, and neighborhood. We see signs of renewal in increased attendance in places of worship; renewed optimism and faith in our future; love of country rediscovered by our young, who are leading the way. We've rediscovered that work is good in and of itself, that it ennobles us to create and contribute no matter how seemingly humble our jobs. We've seen a powerful new current from an old and honorable tradition—American generosity.

Reagan got what he did ask for, in many respects, but this realignment of values, without a broader and deeper victory for the Republican Party and for the cause of constitutional governance, proved less enduring than he had hoped.

Reagan entered office calling for a "new beginning" in our politics. Four years later, in his 1985 State of the Union, he raised the goal to a "second American Revolution of hope and opportunity." In his Farewell Address, he rejoiced that the Reagan Revolution (a term he there accepted) had succeeded in creating millions of jobs and reviving the national pride he called "the new patriotism," but regretted, in effect, that these had fallen short of the second American Revolution he still thought necessary to restore the country's health. We need a patriotism "grounded in thoughtfulness and knowledge," he declared. And then this passage, which came as close to a poignant admission of defeat as anything he ever said or wrote:

Those of us who are over 35 or so years of age grew up in a different America. We were taught, very directly, what it means to be an American. And we absorbed, almost in the air, a love of country and an appreciation of its institutions. If you didn't get these things from your family you got them from the neighborhood.... Or you could get a sense of patriotism from school. And if all else failed you could get a sense of patriotism from the popular culture.... But now we're about to enter the nineties, and some things have changed. Younger parents aren't sure that an unambivalent appreciation of America is the right thing to teach modern children. And as for those who create the popular culture, well-grounded patriotism is no longer the style. Our spirit is back, but we haven't reinstitutionalized it.

Four years after he had hailed the recovery of American values, five years after he had run for reelection on the theme "It's morning again in America," he confronted some hard truths. Reagan had grown up "in a different America," he admitted. He meant: America had suffered a change of regime, and was a different country now. Despite its many other proud accomplishments, which in the speech he modestly attributed to the American people, the Reagan Revolution had not succeeded in restoring that earlier America or, more precisely, in sparking the "second American Revolution" that really was needed. In this most comprehensive and important political task, he and his administration had not succeeded, and the disquieting proof was that even in Reagan's America an "unambivalent" patriotism could not prosper, much less dominate.

In his retirement, John Adams used to distinguish between the War for Independence and the American Revolution. The latter came first, he said. The American Revolution was in "the minds and hearts of the people" from 1760 to 1775, as the pamphlets and speeches of the era enlightened them to their rights and to their growing Union of political sentiment. The war, and what is usually called the Revolution, were a consequence of the real revolution that had prepared and forged American patriotism. Reagan's hoped-for political revolution depended on a deeper revolution, which he and the conservatives of his day were unable to inspire.

Being Reagan, he might put the point more optimistically: the great task of re-founding American patriotism remained for his successors, for us, to accomplish. He had, after all, managed to thrust back to the



center of American politics, for the first time since the New Deal, the question of the constitutionality and the justice of the modern state. Was the Constitution still the supreme law of the land—or was it being gradually, almost silently, displaced by a new form of autocracy operating behind the façade of the old Constitution? Had he pursued this question relentlessly—as, say, FDR did on behalf of the *new* constitution and against the Republicans of his day, whom he denounced as Tories, economic royalists, and even fascists—Reagan might have discovered the key to the kind of “new beginning” he thought the country required. But he did not pursue the question. By 1984, he claimed it was “morning again,” as though the new beginning had happened overnight while everyone was asleep. It had not.

A renewal of unambivalent patriotism would require renewed faith in the justice and goodness of America’s principles and institutions. In his Acceptance Speech in 1980, he said that “renewing the American Compact” would require Americans “to trust your values—our values—and to hold me responsible for living up to them.” Yet the prevailing *ambivalent* patriotism, he warned as he left office nine years later, is the sign of a people that

does *not* know or trust its values. Worse, from the point of view of a conservative leader, it is the sign of a people that can’t be trusted to trust its values. What then becomes of the “special kind of compact” between the people and their leaders? By leaving leaders to be guided primarily by the people’s values, Reagan, like Wilson, left statesmen to that extent hostage to the *Zeitgeist*, unable to make a “new beginning,” a revolution, by returning to first things. His ends—“taking the country back to the Constitution,” as he put it in 1962—became increasingly discordant with his means—leading the people by advancing their enduring or strongest values.

Reagan liked to repeat Tom Paine’s spirited boast, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” He drew criticism from some conservatives for indulging Paine’s radicalism. What Reagan was affirming, however, was that the American people had the power or the capacity to begin the world of American politics over again, to return to the spirit of American politics before liberalism. When ambivalent patriotism prevailed, it suggested to Obama and other liberals that they had been right all along, in effect: the American people did not have the capacity to govern themselves, to choose to depart from the lib-

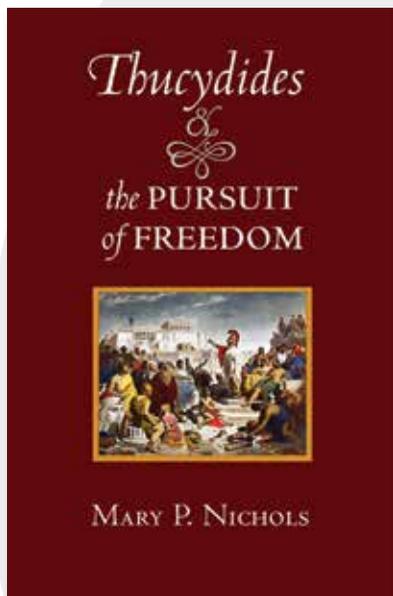
eral path. Revolution was impossible; transformation was inevitable.

It is more likely, of course, that the political moment simply was not ripe; or that the people’s leaders, including Reagan himself, were, so to speak, too progressive because too conservative: they could never make a clean break, even in thought, with the progressive canons of popular leadership, “values” and all, and with the progressive belief in a benevolent future.

Thirty years after Ronald Reagan’s election, the Tea Party movement revived his challenge to the constitutionality of the modern state. Its challenge faded, alas, for many of the reasons his did. But it is at least possible that one or more of the Republican contenders for the presidency in 2016 will take up the challenge, and think anew about the path leading not merely to sounder domestic and foreign policies, essential as those are, but to a recovery of first principles.

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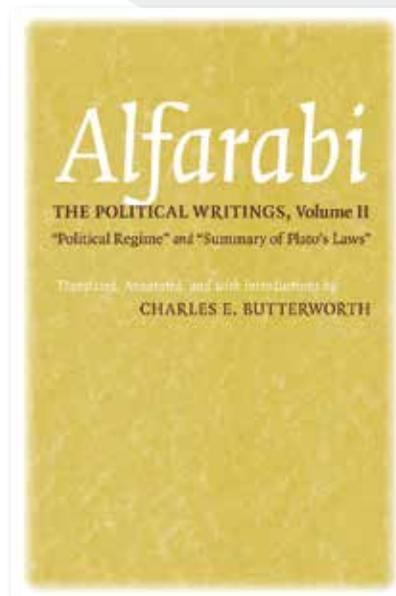
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