

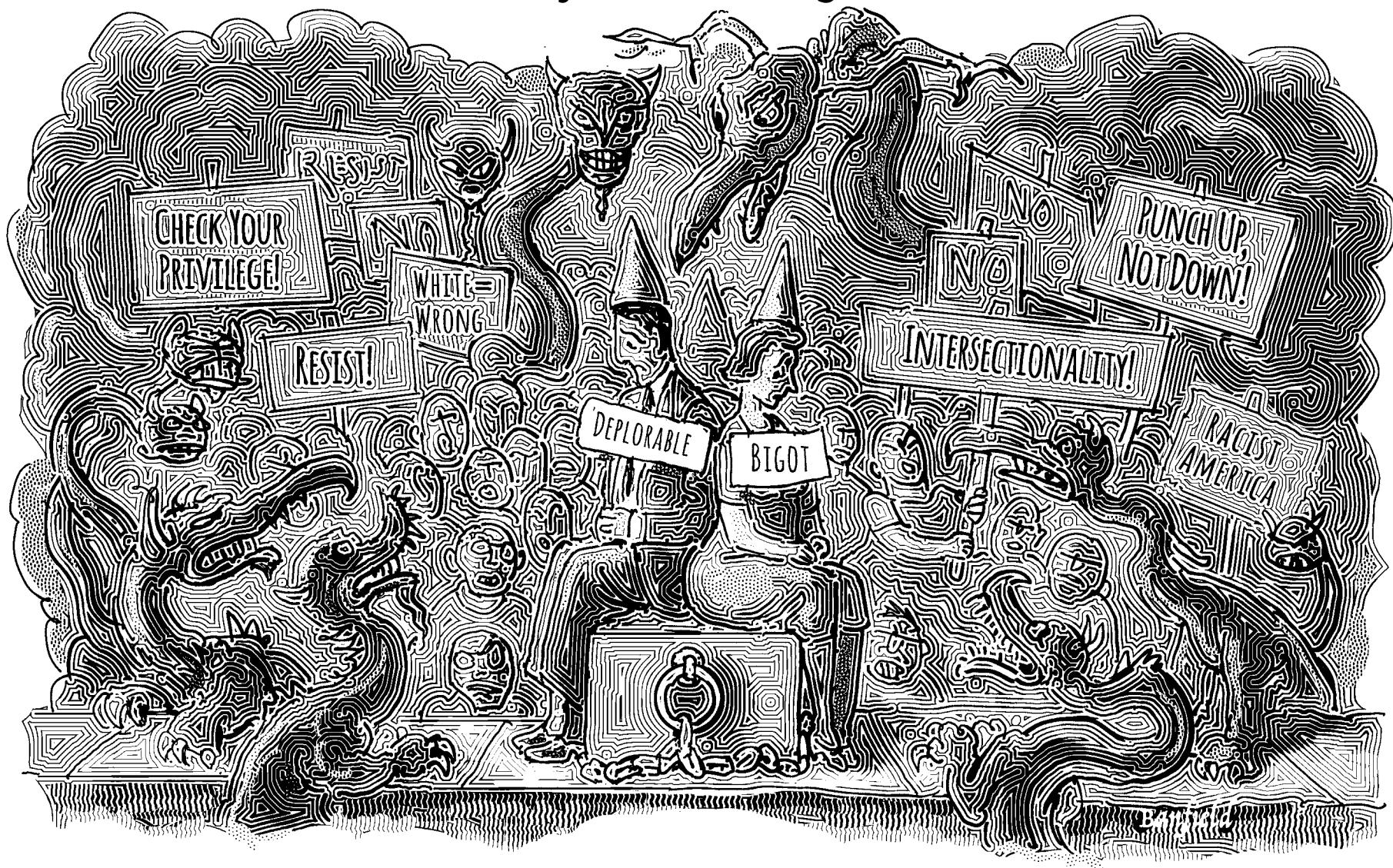
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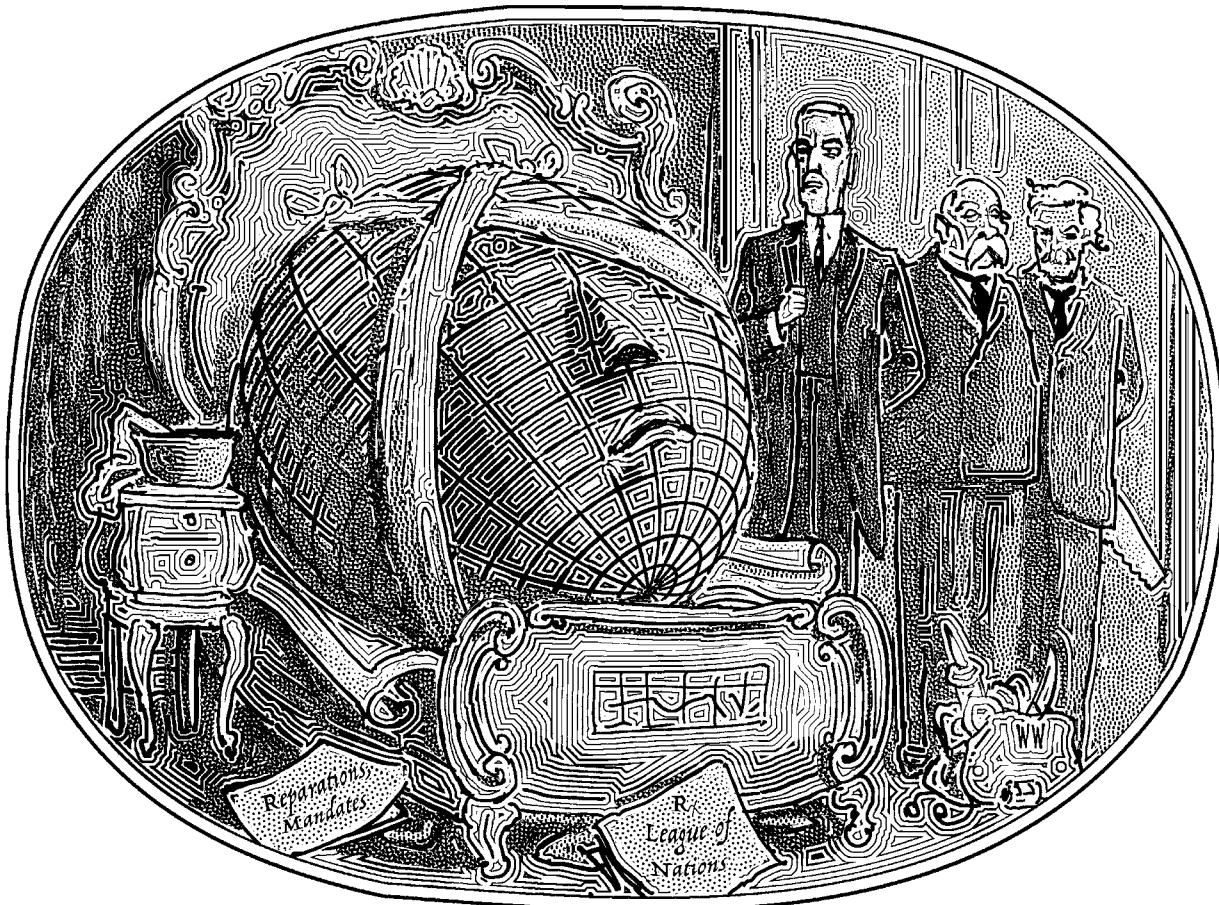
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THE GREAT RESENTER

The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made, by Patricia O'Toole.
Simon and Schuster, 636 pages, \$35



PATRICIA O'TOOLE'S *THE MORALIST* IS yet another hagiographic account of the mission and martyrdom of Woodrow Wilson, the patron saint of American internationalists. With minor variations, O'Toole sticks to the Received Account as told by John Milton Cooper in *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (2009) and by A. Scott Berg in *Wilson* (2013). In this view, the 28th president came close to ushering in the millennium after World War I, but his prickly self-righteousness lost the great moment. Under the diabolic influence of Republican Henry Cabot Lodge, the story goes, the Senate refused to ratify the League of Nations treaty that Wilson had brought back from the Versailles Peace Conference. Wilson then destroyed his health in a desperate effort to persuade the American public about the League, and the world plunged back into a dark age of atavistic nationalism. O'Toole, whose previous books include biographies of

Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Adams, thinks of Wilson as a *moralist* rather than a politician, and attributes his failure to a combination of excessive high-mindedness and an inadequate blood flow to the brain that ultimately led to his incapacitating stroke in October 1919. She deduces the latter from the translucence of the president's ears upon his return from Versailles.

It is quite wrong to speak, as this book's subtitle does, of the world that Woodrow Wilson made, for he made no world at all; he merely signed the Versailles Treaty by which Britain's David Lloyd George and France's Georges Clemenceau turned the Great War into the opening salvo of a new Thirty Years' War. So utterly utopian was Wilson's vision that it is unfair to characterize the internationalism of Bill Clinton or George W. Bush as "Wilsonian." Clinton and Bush threw America's weight around after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but they did not propose—as Wilson did—to

replace America's sovereign decision-making with a global council. Wilson's League of Nations was closer to the conspiracy theorists' notion of the United Nations. The commonplace belief that minor concessions on his part would have won ratification of the League of Nations treaty is untenable.

WILSON WAS A LATECOMER TO THE matter of collective security. William Howard Taft, whom he defeated in the 1912 presidential election, formed the League to Enforce Peace in 1915, which proposed a collective security agreement that pledged members to arbitration and to wield economic and military force against aggressors. Wilson's nemesis of 1919, Henry Cabot Lodge, endorsed Taft's League the following year, remarking that "[p]robably it will be impossible to stop all wars, but it certainly will be possible to stop some wars and thus diminish their



number." Wilson at that time still was reluctant to enter World War I, to the frustration of hawks like Theodore Roosevelt.

After unrestricted German submarine warfare paralyzed America's Atlantic trade in early 1917, Wilson proposed to help arm American civilian ships, an impractical measure that gave the appearance of action without committing America to war. Not until the British leaked the Zimmermann Telegram in February, which revealed German plotting against the U.S., was Wilson ready to go to war in earnest. Even so, as O'Toole observes, Lodge did not quite trust Wilson to take the plunge into hostilities. He introduced a Senate resolution asking the president to attest to the authenticity of the diplomatic memo. "In truth, Lodge had no doubts about it, but he realized that if he could wring a verification from Wilson, Wilson would find it difficult to go on defending U.S. neutrality."

WILOSON HAD PLEDGED TO KEEP America out of the war and surrounded himself with pacifists like his first secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan. His last newspaper advertisement before the 1916 presidential election proclaimed, "You are Working—Not Fighting! Alive and Happy;—Not Cannon Fodder!" He famously called for "peace without victory" in January 1917, weeks before his declaration of war. Two years later Wilson backed the Carthaginian peace that Lloyd George and Clemenceau imposed upon Germany in return for British and French backing for the League of Nations. John Maynard Keynes, a famous critic of the Versailles Peace, ridiculed Wilson as "a blind and deaf Don Quixote," a dupe of the Anglo-French cabal. Britain and France got something concrete—namely, the humiliation of Germany—and gave Wilson in return a castle in the clouds. As O'Toole puts it,

The president of the United States had insisted to the prime minister of Great Britain and the premier of France that they could not have their peace treaty unless he got his League. But after they paid his price, he was obliged to pay theirs.... Solely to spare Lloyd George and Clemenceau the wrath of their electorates, Wilson agreed to demand the kaiser's trial and force Germany to sign a blank check for reparations.

If only Wilson's health hadn't failed, and if only he had accepted Lodge's half-loaf, O'Toole contends, America would have

joined the League of Nations in 1919. That conclusion is not supported by the historical record, not even by the snippets O'Toole presents. Wilson may have suffered from diminished blood flow to the brain, as O'Toole contends, but that is not why the League failed. He wanted to compromise American sovereignty and most of the Senate did not. Wilson weaseled and wiggled around the issue: did the League treaty (and a second mutual defense treaty with France and Britain) obligate the United States "legally" or only "morally" to intervene in foreign wars? And if so, who would decide when such an obligation went into effect, and on what terms the United States might withdraw from the treaty? Even Wilson's allies balked; Senator Henry Fountain Ashurst, a Democrat, wrote that the president's lack of detail left him "petrified with surprise."

LODGE'S RESERVATIONS TO THE TREATY centered on sovereignty: "He wanted to clarify the terms of withdrawal from the League (Article I); spell out that Congress, not the League, would decide when to use force abroad (Articles X and XI); state explicitly that only the US government would set policy on its domestic issues (Article XV); and exempt the Monroe Doctrine from interpretation by the League (Article XXI)," reports O'Toole. In short, Lodge wanted a clear statement that the United States was under no obligation to go to war at the insistence of the League of Nations. Wilson refused to give one. His exchanges with Republican senators were maddeningly evasive.

For three and a half hours (on August 19, 1919), the president and the [members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee] went round and round, devoting more time to the military obligations that might arise from Article X than to any other subject. Wilson had already described the obligations as moral rather than legal, and Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio raised a basic question: if League members had only a moral obligation to commit troops, what good was Article X? Wilson was taken aback. Harding persisted. Suppose a League member was under attack and every other member said, Well, this is only a moral obligation, and we don't think this situation merits our participation. What then? Harding asked.

It was a matter of "national good conscience," Wilson said. "Now a moral obligation is of course superior to a legal obligation and, if I may say so, has a

greater binding force; only there always remains in the moral obligation the right to exercise one's judgment."

It seems clear from this exchange that Wilson would have liked to impose a legal obligation from a foreign body upon the United States, but could not say so openly. Instead, he hoped that once in the League, the U.S. would be more disposed towards globalism, and the League would bolster the position of interventionists at home. O'Toole concedes that Wilson was "mistaken" in at least one critical instance about moral vs. legal obligations:

Senator William E. Borah of Idaho inquired whether the second treaty that Wilson had submitted, the one promising that the United States and Britain would rush to the defense of France in the event of another German invasion, imposed a moral obligation or a legal obligation. Moral, Wilson replied. He was mistaken, but no one bothered to correct him.

Wilson was unwilling to admit before the Senate that he had brought home a treaty that entailed a legal commitment for American military intervention on behalf of France or Britain, and it is not surprising that the Senate declined to trust his account of Article X of the League Covenant. O'Toole allows that "Wilson's critics wondered why he imagined that the Senate would consent to an alliance binding the United States to take part in a European war. Wilson did not explain himself."

THE MORALIST RELATES A GREAT DEAL about its subject's subsequent physical decline, but little else. It may be helpful, then, to take a step back and enquire as to how and why this man became president of the United States to begin with. O'Toole claims that his predecessors' tariffs had caused economic hardship:

For more than a decade, senators and congressmen beholden to big business had done their shameless best to obscure the connections between the tariff, the trusts, and the banks. The tariff had been sold as the protector of American jobs...and the bankers who lent only to the privileged few presented themselves as bulwarks against folly and catastrophe. Wilson blew away the smoke. Tariff, trusts, banks—he treated them all as causes of the hardship felt by everyone but the rich.



In fact, Gross Domestic Product grew from \$18.06 billion to \$26.6 billion between 1904 and 1912, a gain of about 47%, the fastest period of economic expansion in U.S. history. According to Census Bureau estimates, labor compensation held steady during this period at around 61% of national income. Wages, that is, had risen by nearly half during the previous two Republican administrations. The available data—which O'Toole never cites—describe a boom that rewarded both labor and capital.

The vast concentration of economic power that took place during the McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft presidencies does not seem to have impeded economic growth. Whether T.R. was right to inveigh against the trusts, and whether Taft was right to tolerate them, are difficult questions and beyond the scope of this review. But economic hardship had nothing to do with Wilson's election, contrary to O'Toole's tendentious account. Rather, the split in the Republican Party during the 1912 election (with Roosevelt as a third-party spoiler) allowed Wilson to win the presidency with less than 42% of the popular vote. Only John Quincy Adams in 1824 and Abraham Lincoln in 1860 had a lower plurality. O'Toole doesn't like the idea that Wilson's election was an anomaly made possible by internecine

Republican warfare, but that's where the facts lead.

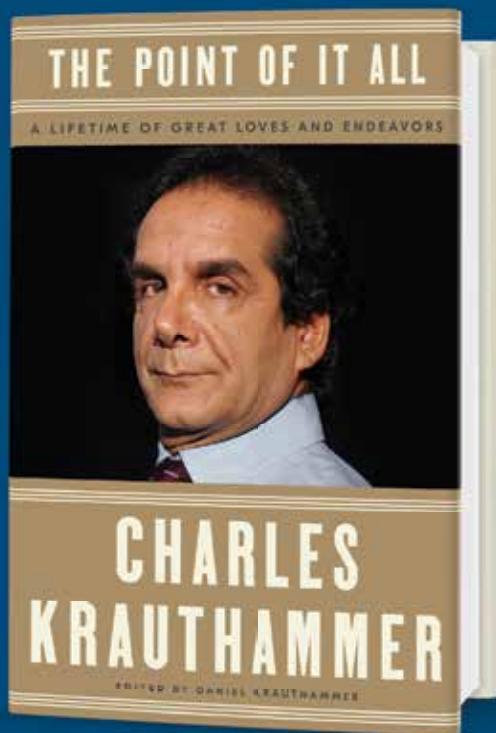
Wilson had shown no interest in foreign policy during his long career as a historian and constitutional scholar. His obsession was the creation of a supranational agency able to dictate policy to national governments, an obsession that grew out of his lifelong hostility to the American political system, and his profound belief that the Civil War had destroyed the Constitution. He was the first Southerner to win the presidency since Zachary Taylor in 1848.

A DEFINITIVE WILSON BIOGRAPHY REMAINS to be written. To make sense of his grand overreach in 1919, historians will need to give more attention to his rancor at the U.S. Constitution and his Southerner's sense of aggrievement over the Civil War. His was a deep, abiding passion for the Lost Cause and a smoldering hatred for those who crushed it. Of the Confederacy, Wilson rhapsodized in his history of the United States:

[The North] awoke into consciousness, shook its locks, and established its power. But its material resources for the stupendous task never lacked or were

doubted; they even increased while it spent them. On the part of the South, on the other hand, the great struggle was maintained by sheer spirit and devotion, in spite of constantly diminishing resources and constantly waning hope. Her whole strength was put forth, her resources spent, exhausted, annihilated; and yet with such concentration of energy that for more than three years she seemed as fully equal to the contest as did the North itself. And all for a belated principle of government, an outgrown economy, an impossible purpose. There is, in history, no devotion not religious, no constancy not meant for success, that can furnish a parallel to the devotion and constancy of the South in this extraordinary war.

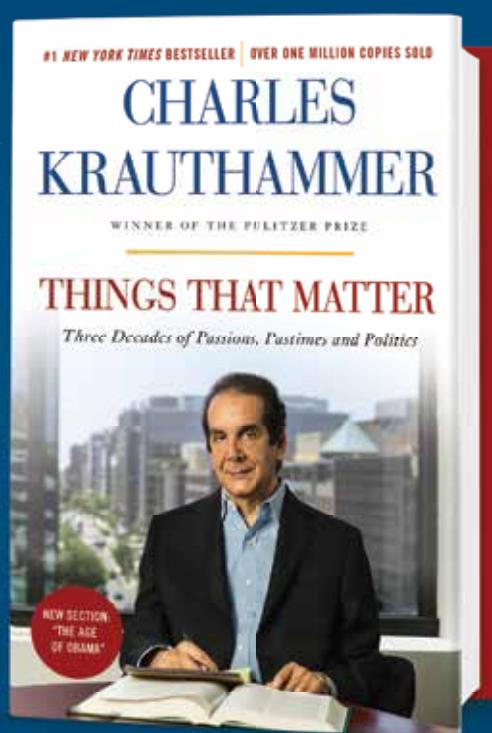
That there was no "parallel to the devotion and constancy of the South" during the Civil War is quite wrong. The South lost nearly 30% of its military-age men in the war, a horrendous sacrifice that yielded a century of relative poverty, a predilection for Gothic literature, and a culture of enduring resentment. Napoleon killed as large a proportion of Frenchmen during his wars, by my calculation; so did France and Spain during the



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Thirty Years War. Wilson was born into the heart of the Confederacy; his father, the Reverend Joseph Wilson, hosted the breakaway convention of the Presbyterian Church of the Confederacy after the national Presbyterian body condemned slavery. The family moved to Columbia, South Carolina, "still a blackened wreck," in O'Toole's words, when Woodrow was 13.

THE ELDER WILSON WAS NOT MERELY an apologist for slavery, but an impassioned defender of the institution as an instrument for the salvation of Africans. He preached in an 1861 sermon that one "ought to look forward to the time when they [African slaves] will all be what the bible would make them; a race whose love for the Master above will spread through their rejoicing millions a measure of sanctification which will convert their services into the very first of home-blessings, and their piety into a missionary influence for saving the black man everywhere from the ruin of perdition." O'Toole does not quote Joseph Wilson's lurid encomia to slavery, but she does note that "[i]f Woodrow Wilson ever wrote an unkind word about his father, it did not survive. The son voiced his admiration often and at length, and always referred to Joseph as the finest of all of his teachers." Like his father, Woodrow Wilson defended slavery, although a bit more cautiously:

Books like Mrs. Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which stirred the pity and deep indignation of northern readers, certainly depicted possible cases of inhuman conduct towards slaves. Such cases there may have been; they may even have been frequent; but they were in every sense exceptional, showing what the system could produce, rather than what it did produce as its characteristic spirit and method. For public opinion in the South, while it recognized the necessity for maintaining the discipline of subordination among the hosts of slaves, was as intolerant of the graver forms of cruelty as was the opinion of the best people in the North. The punishment of the negroes, when severe, was in most cases for offences which were in effect petty crimes, like the smaller sorts of theft. Each master was in practice really a magistrate, possessing a sort of domestic jurisdiction upon his plantation.

Wilson scholars have long observed that the future president shared John C. Calhoun's view of the Constitution as a failing experiment, unable to prevent factious government. Calhoun

believed, in the late Harry V. Jaffa's summary, that good "[c]onstitutions are the result of mindless struggles in which chance adaptation to the constitutional forms results in the benefits which causes the form to be perpetuated." Jaffa argued in *A New Birth of Freedom* (2000) that Calhoun was the original American Progressive. Wilson is evidence for that thesis.

THE CONSTITUTION IN WILSON'S READING had become a relic of a bygone era. He proposed to jettison this putatively archaic document in favor of a government less burdened by checks and balances. His first major publication in political theory, an 1879 essay titled "Cabinet Government in the United States," preferred what he called the British Cabinet system to America's separation of powers. What he advocated, of course, had nothing to do with the actual British Constitution, in which the monarchy restricts the capacity of a passing parliamentary majority to undertake drastic and permanent change. Wilson had proposed a sort of quasi-parliamentary dictatorship, with no appeal to natural or unchanging rights. Later he revised his views, resting his hopes on a strong executive Leader to direct the government and people into the future. Unfortunately, O'Toole barely mentions Wilson's copious writing about political theory. Instead she writes that cabinet government appealed to him because he loved debating and oratory. In place of substance, the reader has a surfeit of personal detail about a rather vain, priggish, self-absorbed man whose favorite diversion was playing solitaire.

The same utilitarian criteria that Wilson applied to the Constitution guided his judgment about capitalism and socialism. He abandoned the personal God of his clerical antecedents in favor of the Social Gospel, to which he was introduced at Princeton by Richard T. Ely, a close friend and ally of movement founder Walter Rauschenbusch. As economists Clifford Thies and Gary Pecquet have observed, "Wilson believed that the difference between socialism and democracy was a matter of means rather than ends." In an unpublished 1887 essay Wilson averred that socialism

proposes that all idea of limitation of public authority by individual rights be put out of view, and that the state consider itself as bound to stop only at what is unwise or futile in its universal superintendence alike of individual and public interests.... Applied in a democratic state, such doctrine sounds radical, but not revolutionary. It is only a [sic] ac-

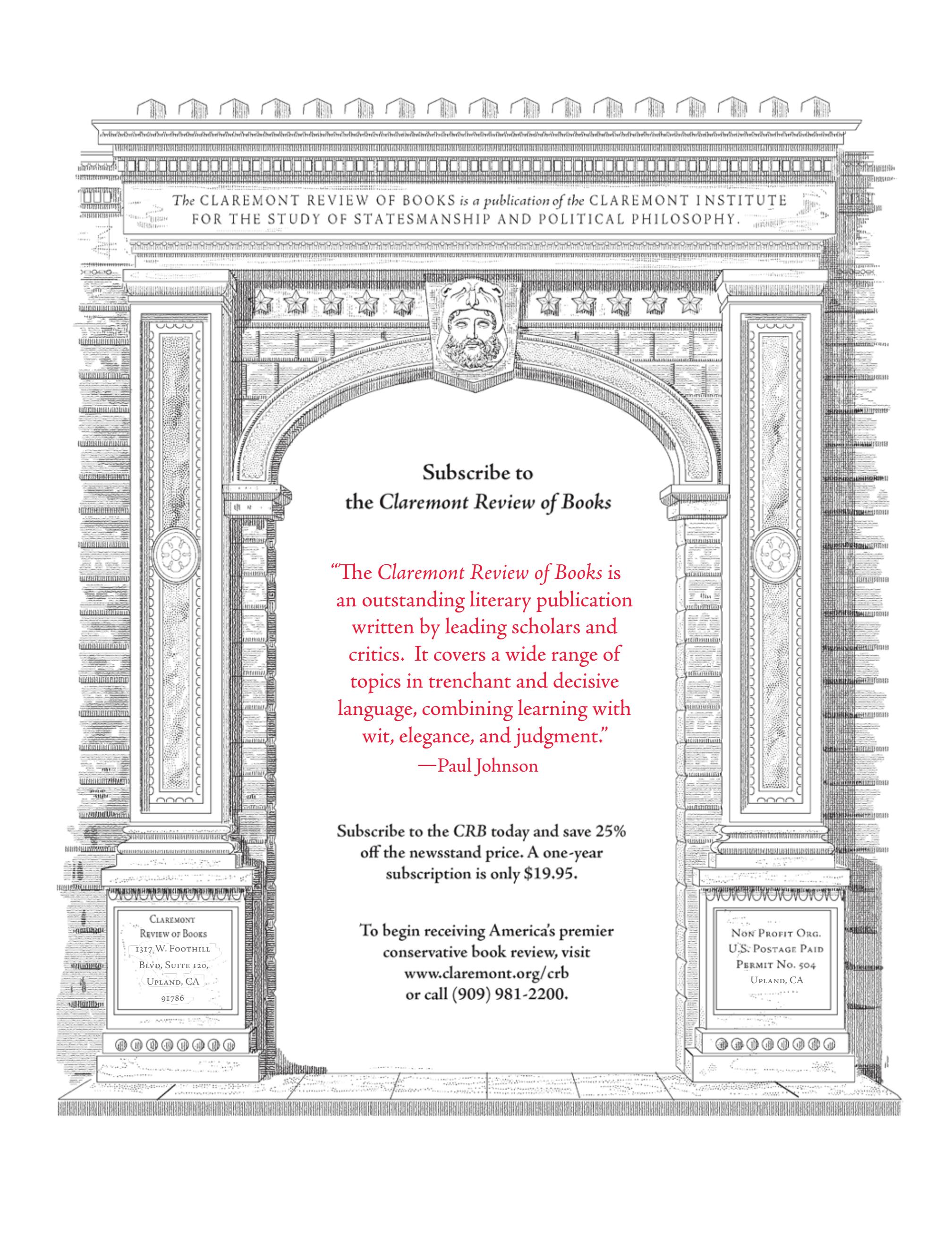
ceptance of the extremest [sic] logical conclusions deducable from democratic principles long ago received as respectable. For it is very clear that in fundamental theory socialism and democracy are almost if not quite one and the same.

He eschewed mass expropriation of industry only because he thought it inefficient.

IT IS NO SURPRISE THAT O'TOOLE FINDS Wilson distant and enigmatic; he had to spend a large part of his waking hours obscuring his opinions. Only in a few asides to his five-volume *A History of the American People* (1902) does his passion pour out onto the page, denouncing the Civil War as a monstrous injustice against a Confederacy that did no more than defend itself and its decent and humane system of slavery. He spent his life in search of a mechanism to subvert the Constitution that had ushered in Northern dominance and Southern humiliation. That was the source of his obsession with a supranational entity capable of overriding what he saw as a catastrophically flawed American system of political deliberation. What Patricia O'Toole and others miss is that the lost battle for ratification of the League of Nations treaty was the last of the guerilla actions that elements of the Confederacy undertook against the victorious Union.

Although Wilson's dudgeon came from the Deep South, his Progressivism came from Princeton and the Social Gospel. His views were quite similar to Theodore Roosevelt's. According to Walter Rauschenbusch biographer D.R. Sharpe, the founder of the Social Gospel movement told Roosevelt that socialism was the wave of the future. Roosevelt replied that no such thing would happen while he was president, but that he would adopt socialist ideas "so far as those theories are wise and practicable." The North was as disillusioned after the Civil War as the South was resentful. Louis Menand describes in *The Metaphysical Club* (2002) a generation of Boston Brahmins who marched to war as evangelical Abolitionists and returned as bloodied pragmatists, convinced that no idea was worth the awful sacrifice they had witnessed. America was ripe for Woodrow Wilson at the turn of the 20th century. It was our luck that this bearer of the Progressive standard was obsessive in his convictions to the point of political ineffectiveness.

David P. Goldman is a columnist for Asia Times and PJ Media, a senior fellow at the London Center for Policy Research, and the author of *How Civilizations Die (And Why Islam Is Dying Too)* (Regnery Publishing).



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