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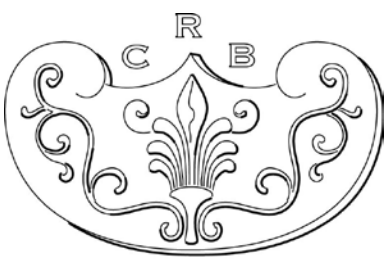

Essay by William Voegeli

Left, Right, and Human

Left, Right, and Center: Essays on Liberalism and Conservatism in the United States, was published in 1965. Its editor, Robert A. Goldwin, director of the Public Affairs Conference Center at the University of Chicago at the time, was later a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. The book has long been out of print, but all seven essays, based on papers given at a conference, remain worth reading. (Contributors include Frank S. Meyer, Martin Diamond, Stephen C. Shadegg, and Samuel H. Beer.) "Conservatism and Liberalism" by Joseph Cropsey, a University of Chicago political scientist who died in 2012, is especially valuable. Its insights, made at the height of liberals' confidence about the Great Society and conservatives' doubts following Barry Goldwater's defeat in 1964, are so applicable to the political situation of 2014 as to argue that Cropsey saw through the flux of transitory events to discern essences.

Consider, for starters, Cropsey's observation that "liberalism envisions the natural fraternity of mankind and conservatism concedes no more than the 'asocial sociality' of man." This single, deft brushstroke leads us directly to understand that the two political worldviews oppose one another, ultimately, because of a disagreement about human nature. James Madison, for example, observed in *The Federalist* that "government itself" is "the greatest of all reflections on human nature." Madison's argument provided, in the sense of Cropsey's characterization, a fundamentally conservative explication and defense of the proposed Constitution's principles. "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition," Madison wrote. "The interest of the man, must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place." Or, in Cropsey's words, conservatism's premise leads to the conclusion that men should make the best of a bad situation by devising ways to deploy human asociality against itself rather than "aspiring to transcend" it.

"This policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives," Madison continued, "might be traced through the whole system of human affairs, private as well as public." In private affairs, the nascent discipline of political economy was contending in the late 18th century that reliance on market competition, subsequently known as capitalism, offered a singular capacity to "transform selfish acts into socially beneficial ones," as Cropsey describes it. And in public affairs, the Constitution's architecture—combining elements of federalism, the separation of powers, checks and balances, all in an "extended republic"—would serve as "devices… to control the abuses of government," in Madison's phrase.

Understanding Human Nature

The defining characteristic of the modern American liberalism that developed in both theory and practice over the past century is its aversion to this understanding of human nature. What we need, in the liberal view, is not a policy that supplies the *defect* of better motives. What we really need are…better motives. Cropsey argues that in the distinctively liberal understanding, human nature prepares us "to live uncoerced in society." Liberalism envisions the simultaneous "cultivation of men's idiosyncratic freedom and their coalescence into social community united by the intimate bonds of their natural brotherhood under the skin…. In that state men's perfect integration into community would be indistinguishable from their perfect freedom to do as they please."

We'll never get those better motives by counteracting ambition with ambition, however, but only by curtailing, renouncing, and transcending ambition. Madison's premise, in the liberal view, is self-validating: by relying on opposite and rival interests it legitimates and perpetuates the pursuit of such interests, impeding the emergence of laudable, selfless motives. As President Franklin Roosevelt said in 1935, "People have learned that they can carry their burdens effectively only by co-

operation." He called for "the collaboration of all of us to provide, at the least, security for all of us." That collaboration, FDR continued, rested on the understanding that freedom and opportunity "do not mean a license to climb upwards by pushing other people down."

Twenty-seven years later, the Port Huron Statement, the founding document of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), took a similar stance. "We regard men as infinitely precious and possessed of unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom, and love," it said. Though SDS descended into violence and lunacy a few years later, it understood itself initially, during John Kennedy's New Frontier, to be the expression of young idealists calling liberalism to recover its best self and highest aspirations. "Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity. It is this potential that we regard as crucial and to which we appeal, not to the human potentiality for violence, unreason, and submission to authority." Accordingly, the Statement declared, "The goal of man and society should be human independence," which is very different from "egoistic individualism—the object is not to have one's way so much as it is to have a way that is one's own."

Because men are not angels, Madison wrote, and angels who could be trusted to wield power wisely and selflessly over men are nowhere to be found, *the* "great difficulty" is that "you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself." If, however, liberals are right about natural fraternity, making conservatives wrong about humans' asociality, Madison's difficulty turns out to be not so great after all. If we commit ourselves to cultivating better motives, rather than elaborating substitutes for them on the assumption they're inherently and permanently unattainable, our progress in that quest will reduce the need to control the governed, since it will make more and more sense to trust that they will control themselves. And this progress, in turn, will make it increasingly possible for government to encourage, guide, and nurture—but not coerce—the governed, whose intentions will prove steadily less competitive and more cooperative.

At the same time, a government pursuing such benign intentions will be steadily less obliged to control itself. Madison's checks and balances can be discarded as the talent, professionalism, and sense of mission that pervade, direct, and restrain modern government become a more reliable, more admirable check on the abuses of government than do counteracting ambitions. "Government now demands the best trained brains of every business and profession," Roosevelt said. Thus, "We must be loyal not merely to persons or parties"—that is, to the sort of opposite and rival interests that defined politics during the receding era of competition—"but we must be loyal also to the higher conceptions of ability and devotion that modern government requires." In the better world liberals are building, Madison's devices to control the abuses of government are no longer protections against tyranny, but impediments that must be removed so that government may act on its higher conceptions of ability and devotion.

The faith liberals invest in the cultivation of better motives is, to conservatives, wishful or even utopian thinking. Liberals, however, believe their optimism about human nature is *more* realistic than conservatives' skepticism. Instead of the dangerous selfishness Madison ascribes to humans, liberals, following Jean-Jacques Rousseau, see our moral shortcomings as the result of the damage inflicted *on* our natures, which are harmless and guileless, by the traumatic, bungled transition from the state of nature to civil society. The goal, in liberals' view, is *not* to make the best of the resulting deformations of humans' innate goodness, in the mistaken belief that those deformations are truly natural and unalterable. It is, instead, to orient political and social life toward allowing our natural goodness, latent but not irretrievably lost, to flourish. Our unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity is authentic, in other words, while our amply demonstrated potential for violence, unreason, and having everything our own way is spurious, something that has been acquired and can, with determination, be un-acquired. The great danger in the struggle to regain our lost innocence and decency is—in terminology religious fundamentalists use for other purposes—backsliding. FDR said in 1937, "Selfishness is without doubt the greatest danger that confronts our beloved country today."

Dependent Individualism

Liberalism's deep, though seldom articulated or examined, commitment to understanding every political question in terms of humans' posited decency explains several of its characteristic dispositions. Consider, for example, the apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, liberals' moral relativism, manifested in demands to be tolerant rather than judgmental about all lifestyle choices; and, on the other, their censoriousness, manifested in political correctness that anathematizes an ever-expanding list of expressions deemed harmful or hateful. Liberalism, Cropsey wrote, demands the "free expression of all powers, unbound by conventions and unjudged by the confining criteria of truth or accomplishment." Liberals are willfully oblivious to the evidence that "self-expression brings forth inanity or worse in the overwhelming majority of cases" because they are convinced that "it is healthier to be oneself than to be right, perhaps because being right has no meaning beyond being oneself."

The philosophy professor John Rawls codified this impulse in his famous treatise, *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls argued that a just, fair society was obligated to do everything in its power to help every member pursue his own "life plan," even if, in an extreme case, that plan involved devoting the bulk of one's time and energies to counting blades of grass in park squares or "well-trimmed lawns." Guaranteeing the sort of material goods enumerated in FDR's Second Bill of Rights, such as an adequate diet, decent housing, and good medical care, was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for Rawls. Justice also requires actively bolstering self-esteem: the grass-counter cannot pursue his life plan while doubting its worth or his own. Rawls takes for granted that humans are too psychologically fragile to maintain their self-esteem if rebuked by harsh criticism. Fairness, then, mandates protection against not only sticks and stones, but against names, dirty looks, inappropriate laughter, or "mansplaining." (According to diverse political viewpoints represented in the Urban Dictionary, mansplaining consists of either condescending explanations delivered by men who are sure they're right because they're men, or the transgression of "stating verifiable facts that are inconvenient to the feminist worldview.") As Allan Bloom wrote in a scathing review of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls demands societies to be *laissez faire* with respect to the ends people pursue, but *beaucoup faire* when it comes to guaranteeing them the means to those ends. Historian Fred Siegel's term for the resulting ideology, which animated the War on Poverty, is "dependent individualism"—guaranteeing simultaneously an absolute right "to the lifestyle of one's choice (regardless of the social cost) with an equally fundamental right to be supported at state expense."

Hierarchy of Victimhood

The liberal belief in humans' innate decency and docility, which treats harmony within and peace between nations as the natural condition of mankind, interprets each of the many instances of invidious competition or open conflict as an anomaly. Given this liberal premise, earnest appeals to all those engaged in contentious relationships with one

another to "do the right thing" should suffice to restore the natural concord. When sincere entreaties do not resolve conflicts, however, liberals must choose sides. The rule for choosing is, in the abstract, simple: the weaker party in any conflict is presumptively aggrieved and more deserving, while the stronger party is presumptively culpable and deserves to be condemned and, if necessary, forcibly opposed. The strong, by definition, are in a better position to make concessions than the weak. And to make sense of conflict—an aberrancy that according to liberalism's optimistic view of human nature should never have existed in the first place—one must assume that the conflict could have been avoided if the strong had made concessions or renounced their unfair advantages at the outset. By the same logic, the persistence of any conflict not initially resolved is mostly the fault of the strong, who would always suffer less than the weak by splitting the difference.

The moral imperative to side with the underdog, the "little guy," and view the antagonist of the weak as an exploiter or oppressor, can be difficult to apply to concrete situations, however. Liberal coherence requires a clear hierarchy of victimhood, which is not always easily constructed. Liberals' instincts were affirmed by the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders—the "Kerner Commission" (named for its chairman, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, Jr.)—which blamed the "destructive environment" of urban ghettos for the riots many cities endured in the 1960s. "What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget," the report declared, "is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."

1968 also saw the publication of a more furious indictment of white racism, *Soul on Ice* by the Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver; as well as the increasing political and social power of second-wave feminism. (It was the year the words "sexism" and "sexist" appeared in print for the first time.) Problematically, the most notorious passage of *Soul on Ice* recounted Cleaver's criminal history of raping white women: "Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women." A logical hierarchy of victimhood would seem to have required either: a) denouncing Cleaver, a position that would affirm feminist principles but have the unfortunate effect of lining up with whites and against aggrieved blacks; or b) overlooking, for the sake of racial justice, Cleaver's violent acts against women, which had the unfortunate consequence of holding women and the most basic feminist principles in contempt.

A 1969 *New York Times* review of a subsequent collection of Cleaver's writings took the latter approach. Never alluding to the passages about rape, it praised *Soul on Ice* as "brilliant and revealing" and Cleaver himself as "remarkable," "valuable," and "responsible." "Few men can equal the intellectual and moral growth" he has achieved. A less audacious though more intellectually dishonest attempt to reconcile black nationalism and feminism was "Rape: The All-American Crime," written by feminist Susan Griffin for *Ramparts* in 1971, and subsequently reprinted in several anthologies. It is not necessary to rank victims, Griffin argued, if instead we confine our focus to their common victimizers. The key point is that "whenever a rape of a white woman by a black man does take place, it is again the white man who benefits." (Whatever else "again" conveys in that sentence, it signals relief that a painful discussion has been safely relocated to a morally comfortable context.)

First, the act itself terrorizes the white woman and makes her more dependent on the white male for protection. Then, if the woman prosecutes her attacker, the white man is afforded legal opportunity to exercise overt racism.

War Is Over

Cropsey's essay is particularly clarifying in its discussion of how liberal premises about fraternity, conflict, and victimization shape liberal thinking about international affairs. Given liberals' belief in humanity's underlying, retrievable fraternity, "the dividedness of men grouped according to their nations," Cropsey wrote, "seems to be an arbitrary division very much to the detriment of peace."

Liberalism certainly looks beyond the love of country to the love of mankind. Patriotism is unavoidably discriminatory, becoming akin to preferring one's own as such and, in the vulgar extreme, degenerating into the simple dislike or hatred of foreigners. Repelled as much by the selfish and unreasoning love of self as by the ignorant and truculent hatred of the alien, liberalism aspires to the transcending of the nation, if only through the union of the nations.

It follows from this premise that conflict between peoples—indeed, between people—is abnormal and unnecessary. Progress and enlightenment entail coming to understand that the reasonable, respectful, patient resolution of differences is the only decent, sane way to preserve or restore peace, which is mankind's default setting—abundant historical and anthropological evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. Accordingly, Cropsey wrote, liberalism holds that "among nations, there are no genuine issues but only attitudes or states of mind which, if they are inconducive to peace, can be removed by the methods of conflict resolution, or exorcism of mass delusion and neurosis." He argued that faith in the power of appeals to better motives, and the aversion to conceding that such motives have had very little purchase on the world, is the thread connecting every liberal policy position. "The liberal view is consistent with itself in applying to domestic as well as to foreign affairs the dictum that trust edifies and absolute trust edifies absolutely."

This proclivity renders liberals—in the newer and narrower sense of the term exemplified by John Rawls—unreliable defenders of liberalism in the older, broader sense we associate with John Locke. Liberals, including Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, are fond of quoting a 1944 speech by Judge Learned Hand, who declared "my own faith" that the "spirit of liberty" is "not too sure that it is right" and "seeks to understand the minds of other men and women." This diffidence, however, culminates in admitting or even insisting that good liberals cannot be too sure that liberal principles are right. Inalienable rights, the separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, respect for the dignity of the individual—we may be fond of these "values" but must eschew the arrogant assumption that everyone else is or should be. Our duty to understand the minds of others will lead us to comprehend the merit of alternatives to liberalism and, in that light, the ways liberal principles are contingent on historical circumstances rather than transculturally valid. And the more exotic those others we seek to understand, the more challenging but also the more rewarding will be the achievement of understanding.

The Proto-Liberal Presumption

Even as liberal diffidence undermines liberal principles, however, liberal understanding culminates in liberal misunderstanding. On the basis of their belief in the fundamental decency of all people, and the natural consanguinity of all peoples, liberals who seek to understand the minds of others who are non- or anti-liberal gravitate to the reassuring conclusion that these others are, deep down, in ways they may not admit or even realize, good liberals, too. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that historians who live in democratic societies are prone to explain every event in undemocratic societies as if it had

in fact taken place according to the logic and correlation of social forces that characterize a democracy. Democratic life is beguiling: so decent, reasonable, and agreeable as to make it hard to believe anyone could possibly reject its advantages. This temptation is applicable more broadly, and especially to modern liberalism.

Since 9/11, Paul Berman has devoted several books and essays to reminding his fellow liberals of their complicity in sophistries that jeopardize liberalism, and America. In *Terror and Liberalism* (2003), he argued that nice, generous, accommodating liberals take pride in being sophisticated cosmopolitans who have worked free of the narrow prejudices that distort others' thinking. Believing they comprehend the world around them, or are striving earnestly to comprehend it rather than settle for lazy, disrespectful stereotypes, liberals treat the incomprehensible as a challenge. The most direct way to render the incomprehensible comprehensible is to assume that people committed to even the most barbaric, nihilistic ideas and practices are, deep down, also just nice, generous, accommodating liberals, or at worst proto-liberals. Considering not only the practice of suicide bombings by Palestinians against Israelis, but the glorification in several Arab nations of such acts of "random mass murder," Berman wrote that "people around the world rushed to suggest ways in which the apparent mass pathologies were anything but pathologies, and terror was reasonable and explicable and perhaps even admirable. Some people convinced themselves that Islamist ideology was not Islamist ideology." He compares the sophisticated comprehenders of suicide bombings to the French socialists of the 1930s who were "eager," even "desperate," to find a way to account for Nazism "that did not point to a new war in the future." "In their eyes, there was always a why," and so the socialists who began "as defenders of liberal values and human rights…evolved into defenders of bigotry, tyranny, superstition, and mass murder."

More recently, Berman has written in the *Tablet* that while "the ancient poets…operated on the assumption that unbridled urges for slaughter and destruction are a human impulse," the modern instinct is to "look upon evil as a problem in social science." Of this year's ISIS beheading videos, for example, Berman writes, "The spectacle of black-uniformed holy warriors conducting human sacrifices gives us the chills, but it also makes us sigh. We tell ourselves: Here is what comes of failing to provide adequate social services to young men in blighted neighborhoods."

The liberal impulse to keep examining the unthinkable until it reveals itself to be thinkable, justifiable, and even noble never runs out of threats to explain away. In 1979 Princeton political scientist Richard Falk took to the pages of the *New York Times* to assure its readers that America had nothing to fear from the Iranian revolutionaries who had overthrown the shah in favor of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Before returning to Tehran from France, Khomeini gave "numerous assurances to non-Moslem communities in Iran," Falk wrote, and to suppose that he would be "dissembling seems almost beyond belief." The

> depiction of him as fanatical, reactionary and the bearer of crude prejudices seems certainly and happily false. What is also encouraging is that his entourage of close advisors is uniformly composed of moderate, progressive individuals.

Noting the Shiite tradition's "distinctive" emphasis on "resisting oppression and promoting social justice," Falk anticipated that other nations would benefit from Iran's example. "Having created a new model of popular revolution based, for the most part, on nonviolent tactics, Iran may yet provide us with a desperately needed model of humane governance for a third-world country."

The "highest good known to liberalism is not truth or even liberty itself," wrote Cropsey, but "peace, or self-preservation." As a result, the task of constructing a hierarchy of victimhood always yields to, or is absorbed by, imperatives derived from threat assessment. The highest good of peace impels liberals to understand the victimization of those who pose the greatest threat to peace, and to be especially concerned about rectifying their grievances. The French socialists of the 1930s "grew thoughtful" about Nazism, Berman writes. The Treaty of Versailles *was* harsh on Germany. Germans beyond Germany's borders *were* suffering, as were those inside the country. "Why not recognize that some of Hitler's points were well taken?" Berman has the socialists asking. "Why not look for ways to conciliate the outraged German people and, in that way, to conciliate the Nazis? Why not make every effort, strain every muscle, to avoid a new Verdun?" In the interests of avoiding bloodshed, liberals always stand ready to propitiate aggressors with the words, "Well, if it's really *that* important to you…." Thus is liberalism constantly available to rationalize moral and physical cowardice.

Not Any People

Cropsey's thoughts about liberalism's aspiration for all people, everywhere, to "dwell in the house of concord forever, in the brotherhood of man with-

out the fatherhood of God," also illuminates the question of immigration, more controversial in 2014 than it was in 1965. Cropsey contrasts conservatives' belief that "if it is narrower, it is also more human, surely more civil, to love what is near and similar, as such, than what is remote and strange, as such," with the liberal conviction that patriotism is conducive to and ultimately indistinguishable from ethnocentrism and bigotry. The desire to prove oneself free of such base sentiments is incompatible with restrictions that impede the free movement of people across borders, but consonant with a welcoming immigration policy.

The justification of such a policy is neither easy nor simple, however. The first contention put forward in the Declaration of Independence is that it had become "necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another." In a recent *CRB* "Upon Further Review" debate on our website, political scientist Diana Schaub rebutted the claim that "government of, by, and for the people cannot turn on invidious distinctions *among* the people." To the contrary, she wrote, "One must first determine who gets to count as part of *the* people."

> Like it or not, those who already belong do get to decide—to say otherwise would be to make a mockery of the notions of liberty and consent. The definite article really matters. "The people" is not the same as people or persons generally; "the people" is not even the same as all who reside in a given area. All human beings are persons, but not all human beings are part of a particular people, a national entity, who join together in a body politic to better secure their own individual rights.

By the same token, the plural really matters. All men are endowed with certain inalienable rights, but to secure these rights *governments* are instituted among men. Not government. Rights are natural and universal, but are enjoyed and secured in nations that are distinct and specific. Schaub argues that coming to terms with national sovereignty means every nation is ultimately a kind of "gated community." It is "only through particular, and exclusionary, acts of political choice—separating one people from other people and peoples—that any rights of any kind are secured for anyone."

The national motto, *E pluribus unum*, referred initially to the creation of one federal republic from several states. But over time it also came to be understood as a celebration of the assimilation of people from many countries into one new country. The motto's *"E"*—"from"—recognized that Americanization was a process, whose end result was valuable in large part as a result of being achieved only with difficulty and commitment. From the liberal premise that differences between people are merely superficial, however, it follows that there are no compelling moral reasons to exclude people from around the world who would prefer to live here, not elsewhere. And the relativism that argues against keeping people out also argues against pressuring them to change once they're here. Who's to say, after all, that their ways are worse than our ways? By what right must *they* change just so *we* feel more comfortable? An immigration policy compliant with liberal sensibilities does as little as possible to exclude people who want to come here, and then asks as little as possible of people who want to stay. In lieu of *E pluribus unum*, the national motto becomes the one made famous by the Olive Garden restaurant chain: *When you're here, you're family.*

Universal rights are embedded in, and secured by, particular political orders. These, in turn, comprise not just random individuals who happen to agree to a social contract, and could just as easily have joined with other individuals in a different social contract. Political singularity rests on the socially and culturally unique. Nations are expressions of the solidarity shared by one people who believe themselves distinct from all others. It is natural that conservatives, who unabashedly love what is near and familiar as such, should regard themselves as defenders of the socially and culturally distinctive, and be acutely aware of the ways in which it is vulnerable. Indeed, that awareness has led many conservatives throughout history to be highly skeptical of, or even explicitly opposed to, the whole concept of universal natural rights, on the grounds that taking our bearings from such principles poses a mortal danger to the perpetuation of particular political orders, the only ones we ever, and ever can, inhabit.

> Liberal coherence requires a clear hierarchy of victimhood, which is not always easily constructed.

In 1939 the English novelist Evelyn Waugh wrote a "Conservative Manifesto," which argued that "mankind inevitably organizes itself into communities according to its geographical distribution; these communities by sharing a common history develop common characteristics and inspire a local loyalty; the individual family develops most happily and fully when it accepts these natural limits." He was, as a consequence, candidly and unapologetically chauvinistic, in a way no liberal in good conscience could be. "I do not think that British prosperity must necessarily be inimical to anyone else, but if, on occasions, it is, I want Britain to prosper and not her rivals." Defending one's own particular nation, not just from military threats but from those who denigrate its common characteristics, is the only way to defend the civilization that has known no other vessel than particular political orders. And the conservative is constantly, acutely aware of civilization's precariousness. "Civilization has no force of its own beyond what is given it from within," Waugh wrote. "It is under constant assault and it takes most of the energies of civilized man to keep going at all."

Up to a Point

Cropsey's essay was, on balance, more critical of liberalism than conservatism. He took particular exception to liberals' denigration of property and patriotism. He did not, however, write as a conservative criticizing liberalism, but as one who aspires to political wisdom evaluating two dispositions that are each partially right but believe they are completely right and have no further political wisdom to pursue. His final, pox-on-both-your-houses judgment is that "Political opinion in our time is related to political wisdom as dreaming is related to thinking."

According to Cropsey, the internal tension besetting American conservatism concerns how, and how heavily, to rely on opposite and rival interests to supply the defect of better motives. While one branch of conservatism "is dominated by an inclination toward free enterprise," the other is "dominated by a reminiscence of traditional morality as conducted into the modern time either by religion or by a recollection of classical antiquity." This leaves conservatism, like liberalism, desiring the "best of several worlds." That is, whenever the results of what Friedrich Hayek praised as "spontaneous order" prove unsatisfactory, "conservatism adds a discordant recollection of moral virtue rooted in the teleological understanding of nature that has been rejected by modern conservatism almost as widely as by modernity in general."

As George F. Will sometimes points out, the most important words in the English language are "up to a point." In *The Federalist* James Madison argued that his "policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives" could be relied on to

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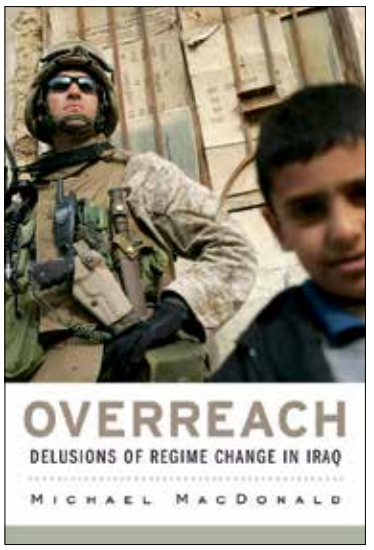

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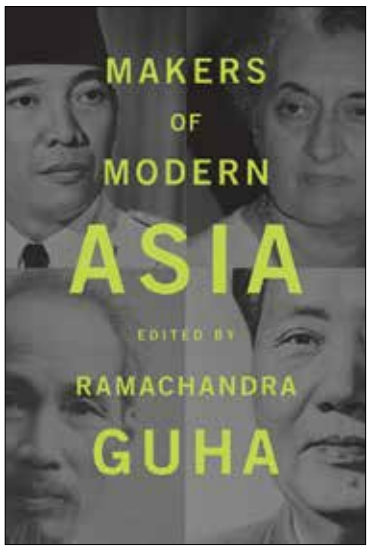

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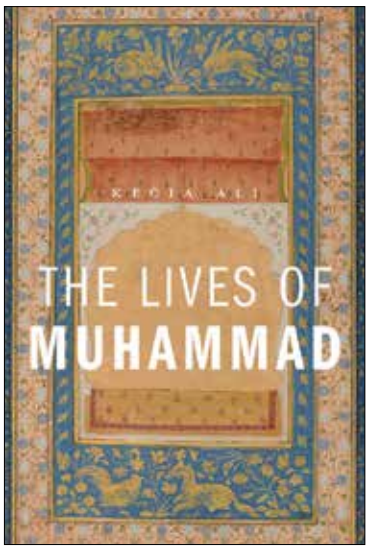

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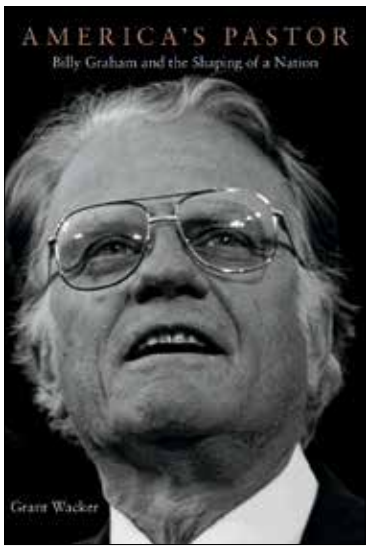

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enable government to control the governed and oblige it to control itself…but only up to a point. To critics who charged that some ambitions might prove to be too strong or sinister to be successfully counteracted by other ambitions, Madison replied that political life is impossible unless people trust one another to some extent, rather than practice and expect "an indiscriminate and unbounded jealousy."

> As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.

This qualification of Madison's position moves us away from supposing that depravity need not doom, and might well invigorate, self-government if a constitutional structure arranges for competing ambitions to check one another. The need for virtue has not been obviated or diminished, it turns out. Indeed, a republic requires a higher degree of humans' estimable and reassuring qualities than any other regime. The ambitions that will counteract one another benignly and beneficially are refined ones that direct people to color inside the lines, rather than rapacious ones that impel us to do anything and everything we can get away with.

The Main Thing

Given this acute need, however, it seems highly unlikely that republics can rely on human nature, full stop, for supplying those virtues. We are led back to the tension Cropsey identified, and the argument Waugh made: virtues are cultivated by specific, quite demanding, religious and moral traditions. These, however, can be sustained only by people who believe their core tenets are true, as opposed to people who find them doubtful but highly useful for *other* people to adhere to.

The main thing, it is said, is to make sure the main thing is always the main thing. As the word implies, conservatism is a worldview embraced by those who believe that the main thing is to conserve that which deserves perpetuation, but which is less than fully capable of fending for itself. American republicanism needs to be conserved against its enemies and self-destructive tendencies. The conserving conservatives undertake, however, must also continuously reconcile the claims of universal truths, such as the self-evident ones in the Declaration of Independence, with the well-being of the particular regime that is the vehicle by which a particular people seeks to adhere to those truths. "Is there, in all republics, this inherent and fatal weakness?" Abraham Lincoln asked in 1861. "Must a government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?" To prevent government from becoming either dangerously weak *or* strong, to ascertain and implement the least bad accommodation of universal principles with the security and happiness of a particular citizenry, is never easy and rarely gratifying work, a duty no one would assume without being convinced of its absolute necessity.

The same cannot be said of liberalism. Its main thing is to make the world a better place, which it pursues in the optimistic belief that progress accords with human nature and historical destiny, meaning that all progress up to this point is irreversible, rather than something tenuous we need to worry about conserving. In its hopefulness, liberalism is highly appealing. In its apprehensions, conservatism is far more plausible.

Edward Kennedy spoke at the memorial for his brother Robert by quoting him: "Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not." It's bad form, even 46 years after the fact, to heckle a eulogy. But seeing things as they are, and trying to make sense of why they are that way and not some other, really is very important. It's a disposition that ought not to be denigrated, especially by those who dream things that never were. If the dreamers would spend more time sitting at the conservatives' table they might comprehend, if they cared to, *why* things that never were, never were. And if it turns out that certain things never were for good reasons, trying to turn those dreams into realities might end up being, not noble and idealistic, but mad and ruinous.

The Kennedy speechwriters (JFK had used the line, too) may not have informed their employers that they were paraphrasing George Bernard Shaw: "You see things; and you say 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say 'Why not?'" The line appears in Shaw's play *Back to Methuselah*. The speaker, addressing Eve in the Garden of Eden, is the serpent. "Everything is possible," he goes on to assure her. "Everything."

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