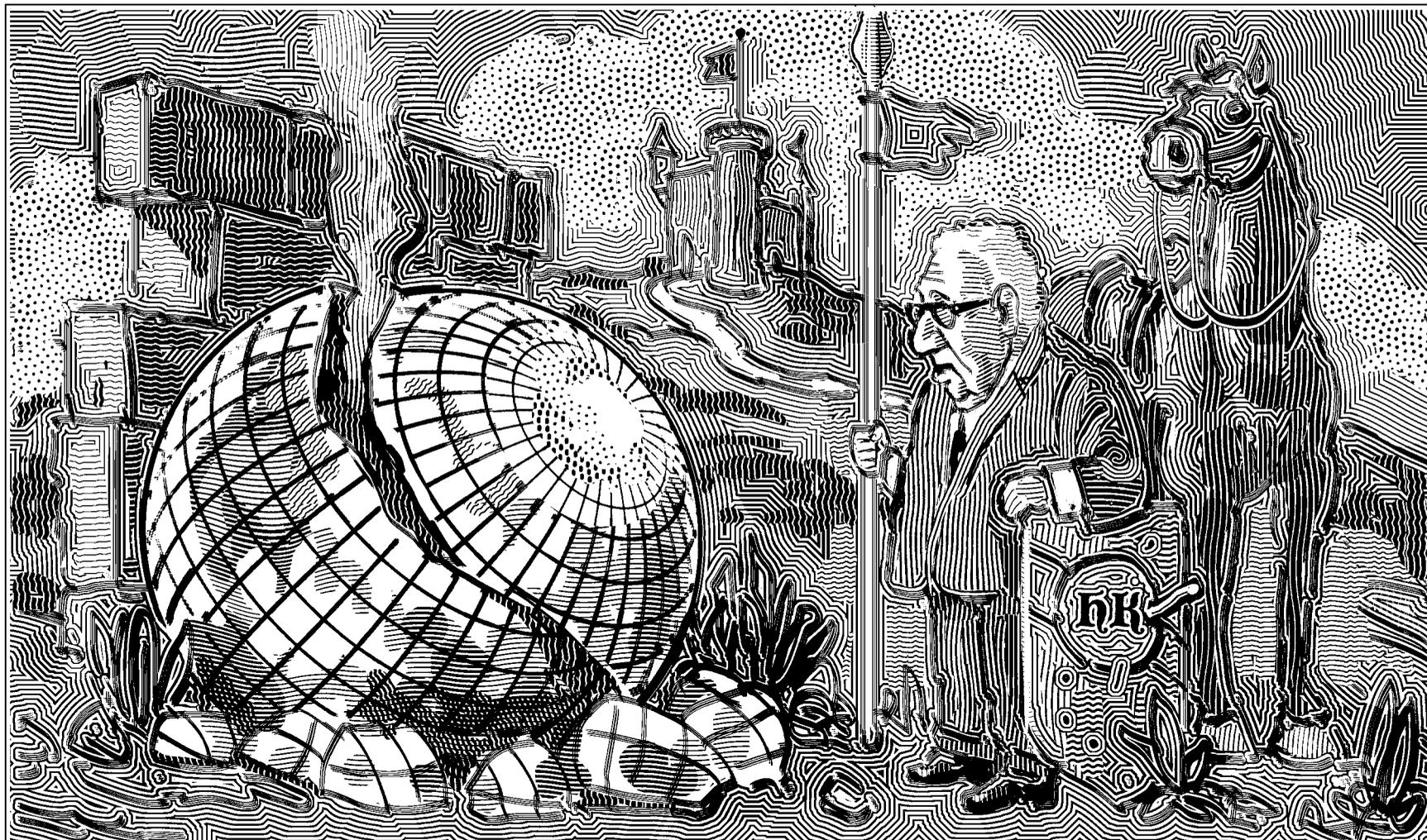


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2015

# CLAREMONT

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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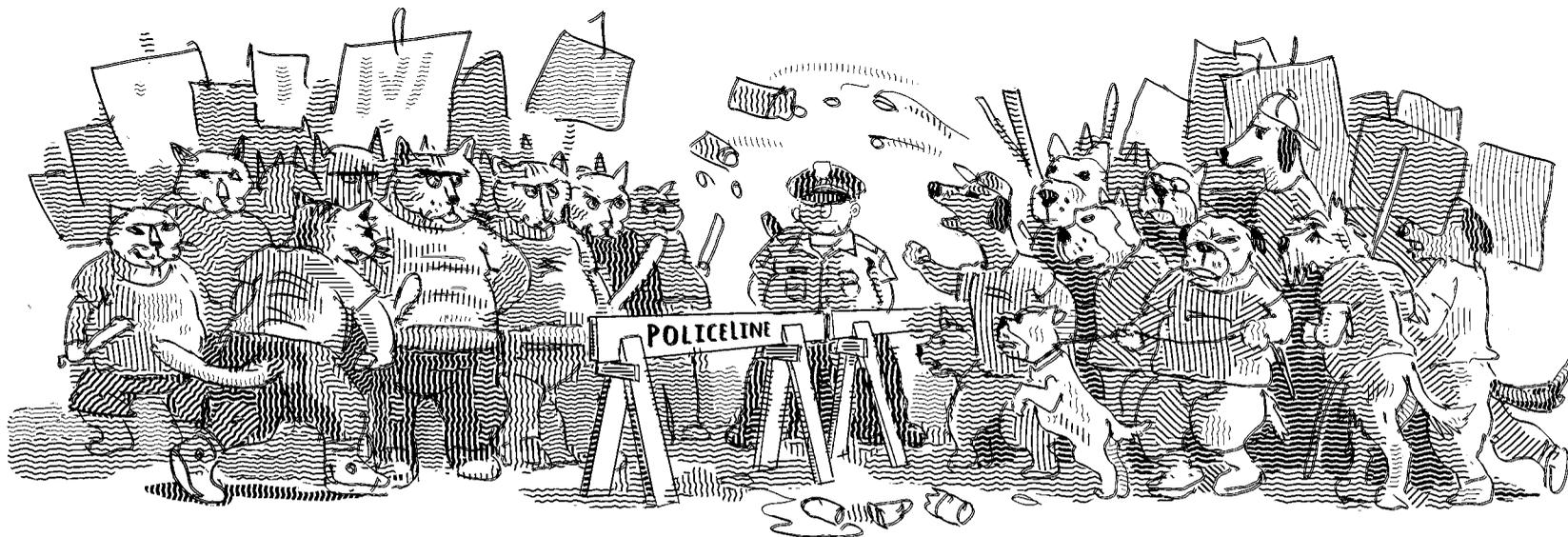
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PRICE: \$6.95  
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Book Review by Jay Cost

## PARTY ANIMALS

*The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, by Russell Muirhead.  
Harvard University Press, 336 pages, \$35



“THE POLITICAL PARTIES CREATED democracy,” political scientist E.E. Schattschneider contended in 1942, “and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.” Yet few analysts today dwell on the Republican and Democratic parties’ role in sustaining America’s republic, and few citizens regard parties as admirable enough to strengthen or important enough to reform. Barack Obama’s startling four-year ascent from the Illinois state senate to the White House was propelled in large measure by his skill in discerning and addressing this widespread aversion to partisanship, most famously in a 2004 Democratic convention keynote address about transcending the divisions between “red” and “blue” America.

Enter Dartmouth College political scientist Russell Muirhead. His brief, readable book, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, attempts to vindicate “the spirit of party”—“the habit, affection, and conviction” of people who, through a party, “stand with others and for something”—by rejecting the idea that partisan attachments are politically trivial and morally shabby. The book is a clear success in this regard. What’s more, Muirhead suggests how the party spirit can more constructively advance the work of governance. Here, despite offering some provocative insights, the book is more problem-

atic, with conclusions too ephemeral to offer much guidance.

On balance, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* is valuable, in significant measure because it is surprisingly enjoyable. Muirhead, by his own reckoning a partisan, accepts rather than deplores certain basic realities: our partisan divide springs from deep disagreements; neither side will ever achieve a “final victory”; and conflict is often good for society. Involved in partisanship yet respecting his adversaries, Muirhead stands in welcome contrast to the more common disdain for parties, expressed either in calls for a plague on both their houses, or in the shrill certitude that everything politically virtuous and wise can be found in one party, and all that is wicked and stupid in the other.

MUIRHEAD’S FIRST TASK, AT WHICH he seems most at ease, is primarily philosophical. Moving deftly from Aristotle, James Madison, and John Stuart Mill to such 20th-century thinkers as Louis Hartz and John Rawls, he makes the case that, far from corrupting republican government or liberal idealism, the parties are essential to each. “Liberal politics,” in his definition, is not just “an agreement only to disagree within certain bounds (never touching foundational ideas), but to disagree in a certain way: according to constitutional procedures, in a

certain manner.” Thus understood, liberal politics and civic unity not only permit party spirit but require it.

Muirhead welcomes rather than regrets that parties fight so much over big things. Because reason will never reign supreme, technocratic expertise will never obviate political conflict, and citizens will never agree to disagree about fundamental questions; conflicts over divergent values and perspectives are inevitable. Parties organize and channel those conflicts. Since we can never “take the politics out of politics,” as Muirhead nicely phrases it, we’ll always need parties.

HAVING ARGUED THAT PARTIES ARE inevitable and necessary, Muirhead wants to make them better. “Partisanship is appropriate for citizens and legislators, for instance—but is a far more potent threat in other institutions that house the executive or judicial functions of the government.” He distinguishes “low” partisanship, which focuses on “strategy, power, and ultimately, victory,” from the “high” form, “oriented to convictions, principles, and conceptions of the common interest.”

The book’s prescriptions concern four main subjects: the electorate, party primaries, party spirit in the Congress, and party spirit in the courts and White House. Muirhead ad-

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vocates what might be called the Goldilocks view of partisanship. For instance, partisans in the electorate should be loyal and patient, but also open to considering facts contrary to their worldviews and agendas. The legislature may of course be partisan, but rigid adherence to partisanship is counterproductive. On this score, Muirhead disapproves of the informal “Hastert Rule,” named for former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert. It allows votes on only those bills that have won the support of a majority within the House’s majority party, precluding passage of a bill supported by a minority of that party voting together with a majority of the other party. The president and the courts must recognize that they are inherently partisan, but must be high partisans who emphasize a particular vision of the good society while eschewing narrow, fractious games of low partisanship.

These arguments are not so much prescriptive as hortatory, however. Partisanship should, per Muirhead, be improved, strengthened, and reformed—but he offers little guidance on how to effect such goals. Often, his suggestion boils down to: do a better job. That is not terribly helpful.

Academic specialization may account for this problem. Muirhead seems more conversant and comfortable with political philosophy than with empirical political science. He overlooks key scholarly texts on parties, and his understanding of public opinion seems to be mostly confined to *The American Voter*, a social science classic published in 1960.

**N**OBODY CAN READ EVERYTHING, OF course, but his book’s weak empirical foundation leads him to slight a crucial fact: parties are constructs of elites attempting to solve pressing political problems. As tools for the pursuit of political victory, the rules and norms governing that pursuit, in turn, condition how the parties function in society at large.

It’s no coincidence that America acquired national political parties only when, during the Jacksonian Era of the 1820s and ’30s, the presidency became an office attainable through popular elections. Similarly, legislative coalitions that we might call partisan did not exist until there were issues upon which legislators disagreed, and had to organize their disagreements.

Moreover, the nature of the party organization itself has evolved with the technology

that shapes the modern political campaign, the role of the state in the provision of social welfare, and the education of the broader electorate. New York’s Tammany Hall operated as it did because that was how ambitious politicians acquired and maintained political office, given the opportunity structures of the day. As those structures evolved, so did parties, which are, above all, tools that ambitious politicians use to acquire office.

Even the issues the parties choose to emphasize result from their desire for victory. Parties “mobilize bias,” promoting certain issues (e.g., the never-ending fight over the top marginal tax rate) while demoting others (e.g., tax-code cronyism) in systematic ways. To a large extent, of course, voters’ needs and concerns are integral to determining which political divisions are active and which are latent. But voter preferences are sufficiently inchoate—more government versus less government, for example, with little specificity on the crucial details—that party leaders can and do fashion policies within capacious boundaries.

This makes parties all the more fascinating. If we take seriously, as we should, Muirhead’s first claim, that party spirit is socially and politically useful, we arrive at a surprising conclusion: the value of party is mostly an artifact of politicians’ strategies to channel ambition.

Thus, to pursue Muirhead’s second goal—improving the value of party spirit—we have to think more carefully about the rules of the game, especially how they interact with elected officials’ endless quest for electoral victory. It is not enough to complain about the Hastert rule, or the presidential tendency to engage in “low” partisanship. We must, rather, acknowledge that this is a consequence of goal-oriented behavior among political elites, who are responding rationally to the electoral game’s rules as they exist. How, then, do we alter these rules so politicians behave more to our liking?

History could help Muirhead more than he lets it. He claims, for instance, that the mid-20th century was not a very hot time for partisan conflict—more or less following conventional wisdom and, for that matter, *The American Voter*. But the battle between Franklin Roosevelt and the GOP was full of rough elbows, and the years of the Truman Administration were quite vitriolic. The 33rd president, after all, right before the 1948 election, compared his opponent, Thomas

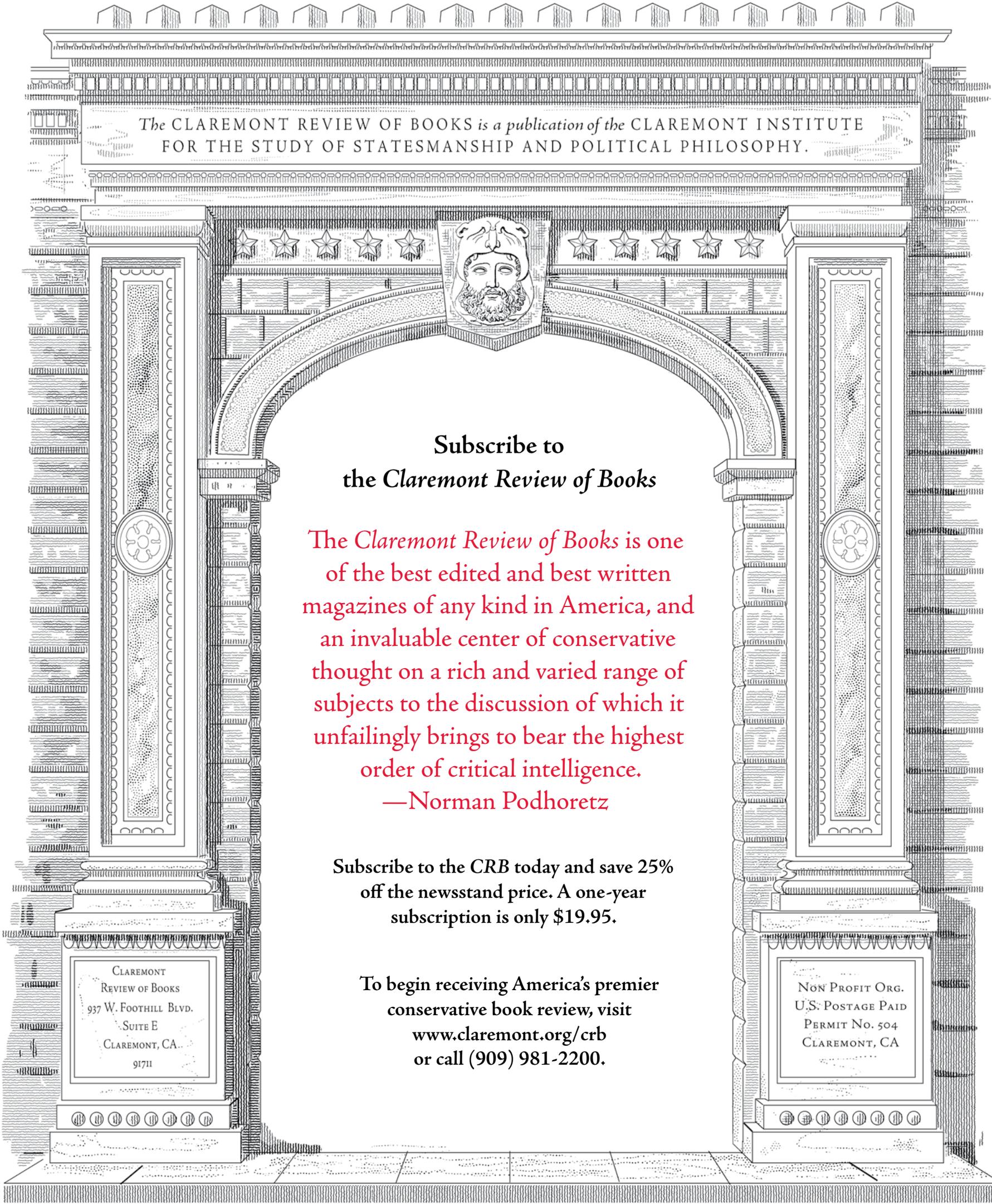
Dewey—a decent, honorable politician—to Adolf Hitler!

**T**HIS IS A MINOR POINT, BUT IT ILLUSTRATES an oversight of the book. By leaving out so much history, Muirhead misses an opportunity to examine instances when partisanship functioned similarly to his abstract ideal. For instance, Martin Van Buren’s Bucktail faction in New York in the 1820s was a partisan effort that enlivened electoral battles, gave meaning and order to the political process, and ultimately pointed public policy in a certain direction. On the other hand, the Gilded Age machines—in states like New York and Pennsylvania—seemed to work in the opposite way; party spoils were not a means to an end, but an end in themselves. Similarly, most of the South was trapped in a one-party oligarchy from the end of Reconstruction until the Voting Rights Act. If we want to be prescriptive—not merely hortatory—history clarifies how parties functioned well or poorly, and what accounts for the difference.

Of course, prescribing to parties is not easy. There is not a single aspect of American political life the parties don’t touch, in some way or another. As a result, a comprehensive understanding of their functions lies beyond any one person’s grasp. Moreover, Muirhead is to be commended for his efforts to merge normative political philosophy with empirical analysis. This is a project that only a handful of others have tried—Schattschneider and V.O. Key come to mind—and little else of substance has been done recently on this front.

And it’s a valuable project. *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* offers a sound theory about the political parties: they are inevitable, they can be helpful, and we would do well to make them function better. His suggestions on the last front are a little lacking, but this book, like all important works of scholarship, points the way toward future inquiries. We may hope and expect that other writers will bring the empirical literature more fully to bear on Russell Muirhead’s rule of thumb, and offer some beneficial, politically feasible solutions for improving the party system.

Jay Cost is a staff writer for the *Weekly Standard*, and the author of *A Republic No More: Big Government and the Rise of American Political Corruption* (Encounter Books).



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