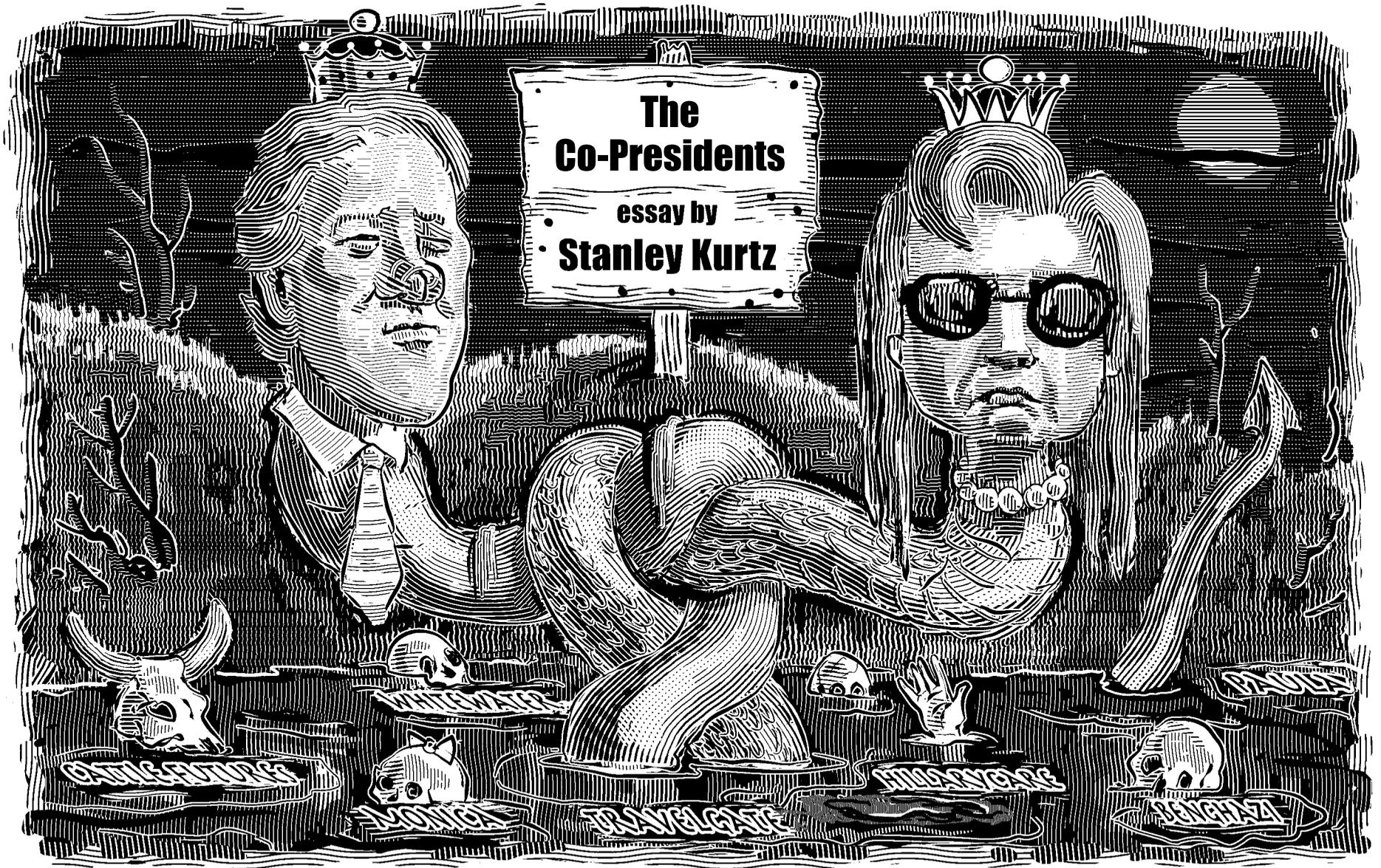


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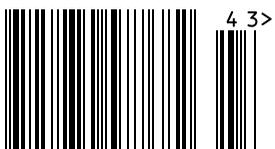
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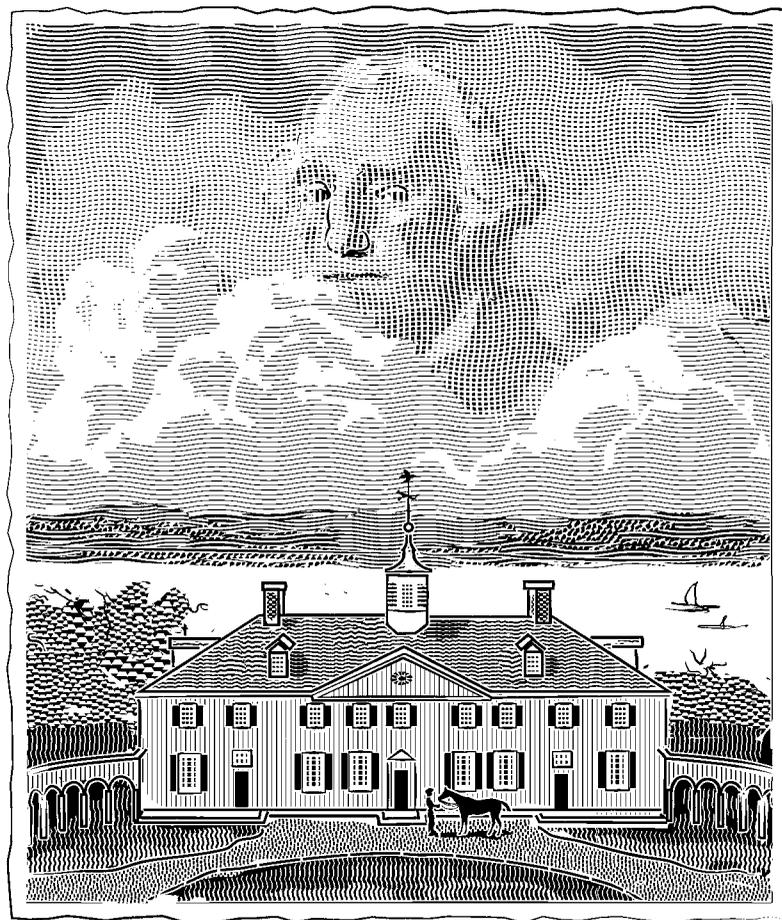
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Book Review by Michael Knox Beran

THE PRIVATE FACES OF PUBLIC VIRTUE

The Founders at Home: The Building of America, 1735–1817, by Myron Magnet.
W.W. Norton & Company, 480 pages, \$35



AS MUCH AS MACHIAVELLI, WHO IN the *Discourses on Livy* observed that a “corrupt people,” if it should obtain freedom, “can hardly preserve it,” Myron Magnet believes that private virtue is essential to the flourishing of a free society. In his 1993 book, *The Dream and the Nightmare: The Sixties’ Legacy to the Underclass*, he argued that the abandonment of old-fashioned virtues such as hard work and self-restraint has led to the stunted lives, broken families, and urban blight that disfigure much of contemporary America. Two decades later he has come out with another book, *The Founders at Home*, in which he turns his attention to the early Republic, where he finds the same intimate relation between private virtue and public felicity, only here the outcome is positive: the founders’ standards of private conduct and personal morality were, he argues, essential to their success in establishing a free and stable constitutional order.

That success has seemed to many little short of miraculous. England’s 17th-century experiment in republicanism, after all, culminated in the military despotism of Thomas Cromwell. France’s 18th-century revolutionary experiment issued in the military tyranny of Napoleon Bonaparte. Yet America’s republican experiment succeeded. To Lord Byron, it was obvious that the happiness of the result was due to the personal character of its leader. Humanity, he said in his poem on “the Cincinnatus of the West,” ought to blush that “there was but one” man who refused supremacy when he might have had it—George Washington.

Magnet, who retired in 2007 after a dozen fruitful years as editor of the Manhattan Institute’s *City Journal*, contends that you will never understand how Washington came to resist what poet William Blake called the “strongest poison ever known”—that of Caesar’s laurel crown—unless you look at the way his statesmanship evolved from codes of con-

duct and self-scrutiny he began developing as a young man. Washington is central to *The Founders at Home* not only because, Magnet writes, he is “unquestionably the Founding’s key figure,” but also because his life so clearly demonstrates the consonance between private morality and virtuous statesmanship Magnet seeks to bring to light.

“FOR WE WHO BELIEVE THAT GREAT men, not impersonal forces, make history,” Magnet says, “George Washington is Exhibit A.” Washington’s public greatness is for Magnet a by-product of the integrity he demonstrated in life’s humbler walks. Nothing is more familiar, in the literature of ambition, than the aspiring hero who rejects pedestrian morality as incompatible with his world-historical designs. In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, for example, Raskolnikov argues that the truly extraordinary man has “an inner right to decide in his



own conscience to overstep...certain [moral] obstacles" in his quest for greatness. You can't, in other words, make an omelette without breaking eggs. Washington, to the contrary, insisted in carrying into public life his own uncompromising standards of private rectitude; and it was precisely this scrupulousness, Magnet believes, that made his decision to relinquish power the *only* one he could have made. George III said that if the American commander-in-chief really did retire to his farm as he had pledged, he would be "the greatest man in the world." Washington did, and was.

Magnet shows that Washington's life from boyhood through the period of the Revolution was in many ways but a preparation for the astonishing act of magnanimity at Annapolis in which he laid down his commission. As a younger son with scant prospects, he had been much neglected. He was 11 when

his father died; his mother was cold and remote. But he refused to yield to self-pity, and devising a regimen of self-improvement that was at once moral and practical, he mastered the maxims of "genteel" etiquette even as he taught himself the practical art of land surveying. He acquired, through study of Joseph Addison's prose, a serviceable writing style, and developed (in his words) "a Constitution hardy enough to encounter and undergo the most severe trials."

WE ARE APT TODAY TO DESPISE AS small-minded the emphasis Washington placed on mere etiquette, on good manners and the qualities that make them possible: self-restraint, habitual courtesy, a certain dignity and decorum in dress and deportment. Washington was wiser: he knew that human nature is too frail to do without

such props. The man who is accustomed to examining his conduct in small matters will very often (if he is not petty or cynical) come to scrutinize it in more momentous ones; Washington's fastidiousness in little things, Magnet shows, bred habits of introspection that influenced his conduct in great ones.

For great things, of course, came. A "run of unlikely strokes of fortune befell him," Magnet writes, "smacking more of the picaresque world of *Tom Jones* or *Candide* than of real life." The overlooked cadet became a gentleman of the first consequence in Virginia after he emerged unscathed from a hail of bullets during British General Edward Braddock's doomed march on Fort Duquesne in the French and Indian War. On returning home, he married a widow whose fortune enlarged his own and set up as a gentleman farmer on the Potomac. Yet when revolution came, and he was elected commander-in-chief of the American forces, the old habits of self-examination persisted. "To his familiar love of fame," Magnet writes, "he now adds a new concern":

Will people recognize that his inner motives are pure, that he values the public good more than his own repute—and certainly more than his own fortune, for he had refused a salary for his service? There are times when you see a culture's moral life revising itself, Lionel Trilling once said: here the arbiter of honor is migrating from the outer world to the inner conscience.

At the same time, Magnet shows, Washington worked towards a more republican and egalitarian understanding of honor. Good breeding was traditionally a set of behaviors the well-to-do cultivated to distinguish themselves from the hoi polloi. But in the course of the Revolution Washington grew dissatisfied with the orthodox conception of honor. Rather as the 5th-century Athenians transformed the old chivalric ideal of *kalokagathia*—beauty and virtue—into a watchword of the democratic *polis*, Washington made the aristocratic ideal of honor into a democratic one. "In his new ethic," Magnet writes, "a man with the merit of a gentleman *was* a gentleman," whatever his social status.

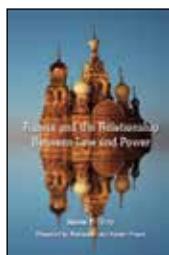
IN HIS CHAPTERS ON JOHN JAY, ALEXANDER Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, as well as on the Virginia Lees and William Livingston, the New Jersey patriot, Magnet finds the same correspondence between private decency and public honor, and suggests that it did much to restrain the revolutionary Americans from settling their

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Russia and the Relationship Between Law and Power

James P. Terry, Center for National Security Law

2014, 188 pp, ISBN 978-1-61163-595-9, paper, \$27.00



This book addresses the development of a self-serving international regime by Moscow to serve its interests and subjugate client regimes in Eastern Europe and Southwest Asia. The events leading to the Hungarian crisis in 1956, the Czech crisis in 1968, the Afghan invasion in 1979, the Polish crisis in 1981–82, the Baltic crisis in 1990, the Chechen invasions in both 1996 and 1999, and the crisis in Georgia in 2008 (including South Ossetia and Abkhazia) are carefully explored and dissected. Each of these interventions (except Afghanistan) was executed under claim of right under Rule IV of the Warsaw Pact, or a claim, in Chechnya and in Georgia in 2008, that Moscow was defending its inherent national interests as the result of the presence of its citizens in that territory.

Because of Our Success The Changing Racial and Ethnic Ancestry of Blacks on Affirmative Action

Kevin Brown, Indiana University Maurer School of Law

Forthcoming October 2014, ISBN 978-1-61163-444-0

When selective colleges and universities first employed affirmative action policies, the predominant ancestries of the beneficiaries were the children of two American-born black parents ("Ascendant Blacks"). However, foreign-born blacks, their children, and mixed race blacks now constitute a growing majority of the black students at many selective higher education programs and their percentages are increasing. Thus, America is ethnically cleansing from the campuses of these institutions Ascendant Blacks, the primary group that affirmative action policies were intended to benefit. This book discusses the ethnic cleansing of Ascendant Blacks and its implications for American society, and suggests possible ways to address the problem.

Federal Justice in the Mid-Atlantic South

United States Courts from Maryland to the Carolinas 1836–1861

Peter Graham Fish, Emeritus, Duke University

Forthcoming October 2014, ISBN 978-1-61163-601-7

This richly illustrated book traces the antebellum development and performance of the federal judiciary across five judicial districts and until 1842 three separate circuits within the bounds of the modern but historic U.S. Fourth Circuit (Maryland, Virginia-West Virginia, and the Carolinas). A variety of sources, data, and approaches are used to explain the politics of circuit and court organization as well as of the selection and disparate compensation of the district judges, court workloads, and administration.

Emphasis is placed on the roles played by the judges including the circuit-riding Supreme Court justices, primarily James M. Wayne and Roger B. Taney, as well as advocates at the bar and grand juries in construing the constitutional powers and limits on the judiciary (i.e., "brown water" admiralty jurisdiction), Congress (i.e., international slave trade), and the executive branch (i.e., executive officers).

Deciphering the History of Japanese War Atrocities

The Story of Doctor and General Shiro Ishii

Kenneth L. Port, William Mitchell College of Law

2014, 288 pp, ISBN 978-1-61163-558-4, paper, \$42.00



Most people know of the atrocities committed by the Japanese in World War II. From Harbin, China, Shiro Ishii unleashed unspeakable horror on the Chinese people while planning biological weapon attacks should the U.S. land on the mainland of Japan. This book is a thorough explication of the life, death and aftermath of Shiro Ishii in historical context. This book includes many heretofore unknown facts and original photos. As a biography of Ishii, the book describes a narrative of World War II and the Occupation that is shocking and original.

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scores in blood, as they have been settled in so many of the great modern revolutions.

At the same time, Magnet candidly acknowledges his subjects' fallings-off from virtue—the wenching and gambling, backbiting and slavekeeping. But he is convincing when he argues that the more you study these 18th-century men, the more you come to see that they talked up manners, propriety, and the secularized Protestant virtues not from hypocrisy, but precisely because they knew their own unvarnished natures to be deeply flawed. It is true that they failed to live up to their highest ideals, as all men do. But there is a great difference between honoring an ideal you know you will fall short of and dismissing it altogether. Unlike the French and Russian revolutionaries, the founders were always conscious of man's innate capacity for evil, and knew that they themselves were by no means exempt from the general taint. Nor did they suppose, as so many modern revolutionists have done, that at the coming of the revolution all men (in Dostoevsky's words) "will become righteous in one instant." They were as a rule skeptical of theories that held men to be naturally good, and corrupt only from the defects of the laws under which they presently lived.

NOWHERE IS THE INFLUENCE OF THE founders' domestic virtues on their conduct more evident than in their wariness of politics and political power. Benjamin Disraeli said that there are those who experience such power as the most exalted of sacraments, "an inward and spiritual grace." The historian Hugh Trevor-Roper once asked the architect Albert Speer why he had lent his talents to Hitler's cause. "You have to understand," Speer replied, "the irresistible fascination of power." The fascination is that of a narcotic, the pleasure of which derives in part from the perfection it promises to disclose; thus Thomas De Quincey speaks of the power of opium (in the first, benign stages of addiction) to produce the "most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony" in the mind. The desire for power is closely connected with this dream of perfection: that is why so many potentates have fancied themselves god-like. Alexander the Great said it was only in the need for sex and sleep that he recognized himself as mortal. Such men dream of transcending the imperfections of their mortal condition—and not infrequently conclude they have.

Of all Washington's virtues, his greatest may have been his acceptance of imperfection as the natural condition of human life. He knew instinctively the line that divides the sensible, attainable forms of self-improvement from the delusions of megalomaniac grandeur.

Mount Vernon, Magnet shows, was the creation of a man who refused to be seduced by the perfectionist demon. The house was the "self-created embodiment" of his "own ideal life," yet it at the same time bore witness to how much the idealist was willing to concede to a less than ideal reality. The façade in which he took so much pride, Magnet observes, fails to achieve a "dignified classical symmetry," and "for all its efforts at balance," the house "is lopsided." But so far from being blemishes, these defects, Magnet argues,

lie at the heart of Mount Vernon's meaning. The house embodies the temperament of a conservative revolutionary. Just as Edmund Burke described how improvement in government ought to proceed—gradually, organically, and with deep respect for time-tested institutions—so Mount Vernon evolved in stages over decades, as Washington embellished, modernized, and extended its asymmetrical core, rather than razing it in order to rebuild from scratch, according to some abstract, rational blueprint, as the French revolutionaries did.

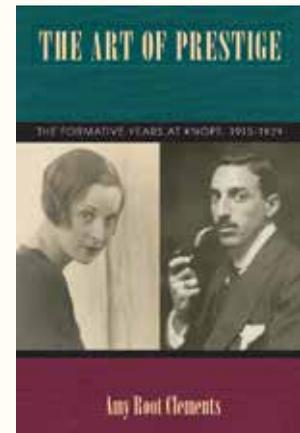
Magnet's founders built their houses the same way they framed their political institutions; they made the most of the imperfect materials that lay to hand.

THE "MORE A MAN DRINKETH OF THE world," Francis Bacon wrote, "the more it intoxicateth." Of all the worldly pleasures, power may be the most intoxicating, not least because it can command so many other felicities. Yet Magnet's founders, deep as they drank of power, stayed sober. It helped, certainly, that, so far from looking on politics as a road to perfection, the founders regarded it as a necessary evil. Magnet illuminates the predicament of John Jay, who found the moral compromises of politics peculiarly painful, with an apposite quotation from Max Weber's essay "Politics as a Vocation": "he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and force as means, contracts with diabolical powers."

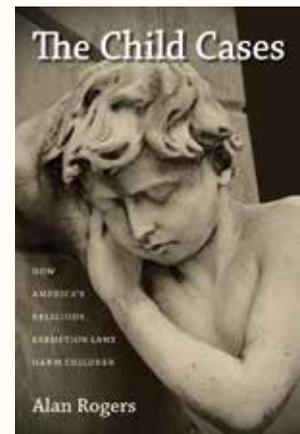
Magnet's book is full of such aperçus; it is the work of a scholar who, trained in the old Western tradition of humane letters, has brought not only a lifetime of learning but also a rich fund of general experience to bear on the meaning and significance of the founding of the American Republic.

Michael Knox Beran, a lawyer and writer, is author of Forge of Empires: Three Revolutionary Statesmen and the World They Made, 1861–1871 (Free Press).

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