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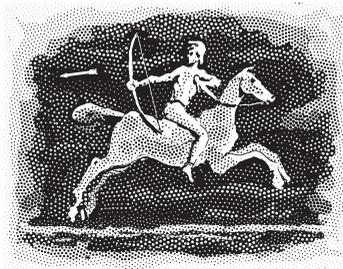
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## PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



## In Praise of Thomas Sowell

**T**HOMAS SOWELL, WHO AT AGE 86 RETIRED HIS SYNDICATED column last December, cannot be justly described without the use of so many superlatives as to debase the currency of description. As there is no obvious place to begin in praise of his virtues, a gentle start might be to state that both his character and his work elicit the kind of admiration that cannot but lead to affection, if only for the marvelous way in which he describes his boyhood and youth in the South and in New York in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, and the progress of coming alive to a world that few have observed and understood as well as he has, and will, one hopes, for years to come.

As you follow him in his thought, you see at every turn that he displays such honesty, independence, and objectivity as to discipline his own inclinations as readily as he might anyone else's, something which, thankfully, he does in spades. He himself perfectly identifies the means he employs when, perhaps with a wink in the mirror, he prescribes the use of "logic and the analytical dissection of many-sided empirical evidence." This he does, combining a passion to illuminate questions great and small, with an unshakable, dispassionate ability to judge. The alternation of these qualities is breathtaking not only because in others they seldom work in tandem but because from year to year and book to book the pacing of his argument is perfectly steady and it never flags.

When he is partisan, as sometimes he must be, there is no hint of prejudice, appetite, or emotion. Rather, logic and analysis have pointed him in a particular direction and his subsequent tests and proofs—which pour forth like an armored division—carry the conclusion. This is all the more wonderful because such method and process no longer comport with their former natural surroundings in the university. And neither does he, having found his home in 1980 at Stanford's Hoover Institution, which, like its tower, is a kind of lighthouse in the dusk of virtue-signaling superstition.

Although the academy is now psychotic, it was once merely schizophrenic, confused by the Tiresias-like back-and-forth between its English and Germanic origins that mirror the supposed dichotomy of richness and rigor. Unlike in their recent martial ventures, the Germans won, resulting in veneration of the narrow, to the point of people believing they can actually argue themselves into becoming hippos, masterworks such as the not inconceivable *Roumanian Fly Paper as a Transmogrifying Metaphor of Imaginary Vaginal Metachronological Stasis During Intermittent Turkish Penetrations*, and essential fields such as feminist glaciology.

But like the patch of blue sky through a prisoner's barred window, there has always been the attraction of the non-neurotic, English approach, the *sine qua non* of which is the graceful deployment of wide and deep learning so as not to become the victim of itself. Of this, Sowell is a master.

**N**O ONE CAN READ HIM WITHOUT SUSPECTING THAT HE HAS A thousand talented research assistants. In his ability to synthesize astonishing volumes of information into an accurate, flowing narrative, he is much like the late Martin Gilbert. But whereas, as a historian, Sir Martin addressed primarily questions of fact, Dr. Sowell addresses primarily questions of interpretation. That he does so with such authority is due not only to his temperament but, like Gilbert, to his almost preternatural learning across broad horizons.

What results is the very thing that so many academics envy and disdain because they cannot achieve it themselves—the synthesis of richness and rigor in the elegance and fluidity of the English academic essay defensively supplemented brick by brick with a Germanic fortress of documentation and detail. The bridging of multiple qualities used to be, anyway, what distinguished Harvard's few University Professors, among whom Sowell would have been *facile princeps*.

But there has always been peril in ranging across history and disciplines and thus trespassing upon the turf of various tenured dunces entrapped in the many tiny thickets of their own making. Sowell is one of the great trespassers, as a great man must be, unafraid to go wherever his talent for elucidation takes him. And this clarity of vision, a strong light that effortlessly shatters the darkness of cant and purposeful misconstrual, repeatedly brightens his chosen fields of battle to the point of stunning his opponents and delighting all others.

Witnessing him wield economics (he earned his Ph.D. under Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago), logic, rhetoric, history, geography, demography, anthropology, political philosophy, and even geophysics as his instruments of analysis gives one the same kind of primal satisfaction that comes from stories of justice restored by mythical powers. That is perhaps the essence of what he does, the melding in one revelation after another of his exceptional talents in a way that surpasses their sum. The controlling objectivity with which he approaches and unravels conventional wisdom simply cannot be exceeded. In striking immediately and with extraordinary economy at the heart of any matter, he casts a clear and calming light on anything he examines, and can dispatch with a dram what might take someone else a gallon.

And, lest we forget, the ability to see things as they really are engenders hostility from countless factions in thrall to countless illusions. To persevere throughout a lifetime of opposition seemingly without the slightest perturbation or instability of judgment requires the rarest of temperaments and an extraordinary measure of courage. In endowing Thomas Sowell with those attributes to protect an unexcelled brilliance, God has blessed us all with a man in full, whose many and varied works will be read so as to understand our times long after they have passed and universal truths as long as they endure.

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