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# CLAREMONT

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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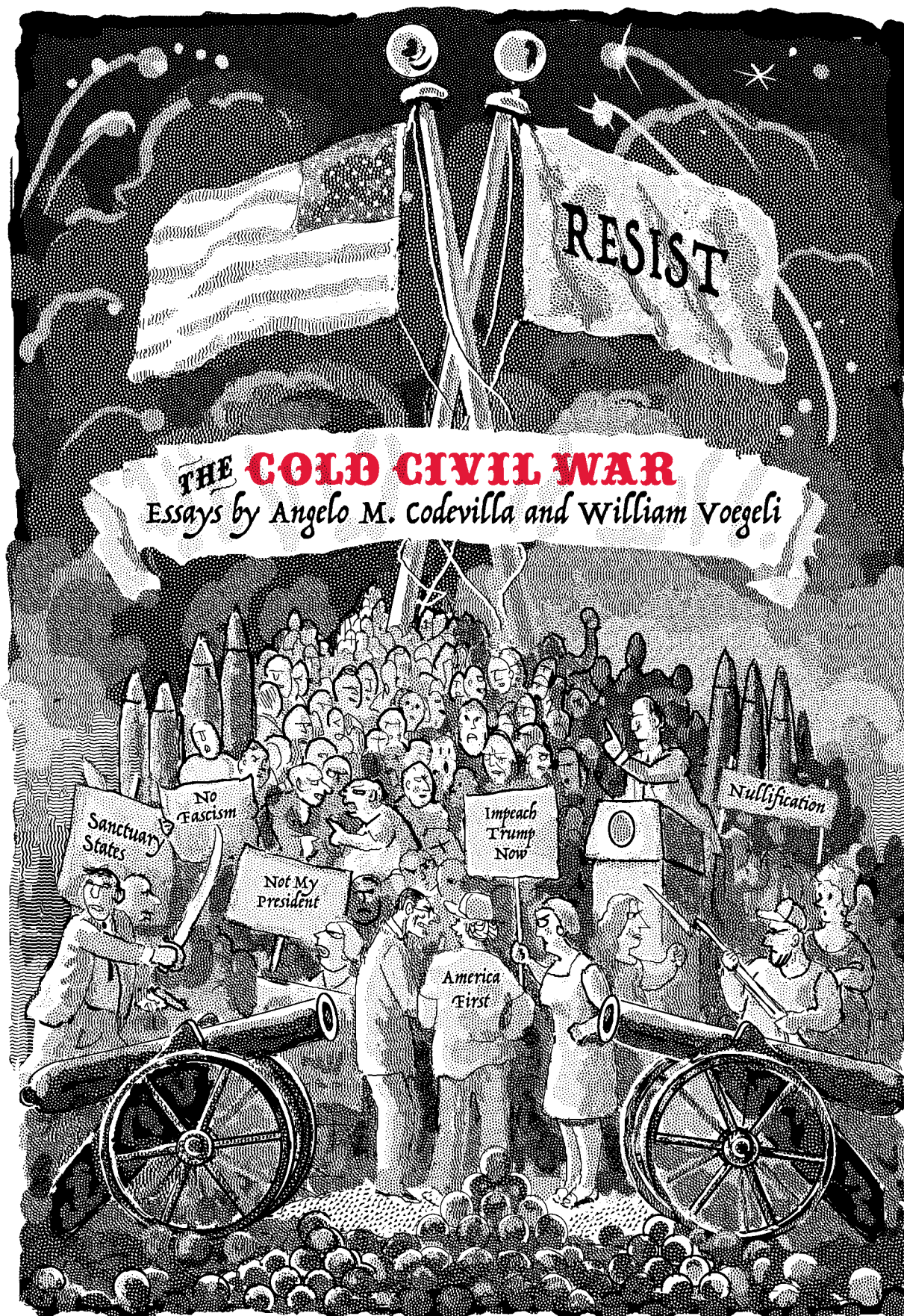
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## PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



## Speaking Freely

THE WARS ABOUT ENGLISH ARE FOUGHT PREDOMINANTLY ON the battlefields of grammar, syntax, and general usage. Unlike French, as puritan in regard to adoption as are the Japanese in regard to immigration, English has always promiscuously embraced anything that washes up on its shores. Partly because of its Norse, Teutonic, and Latinate roots; the world-spanning embrace of the British Empire; and the ease of incorporating borrowings into a declension-free structure, English has by far the richest vocabulary of any language, by some accounts exceeding a million words.

The democratic impulse that distinguishes the English-speaking nations has given English the kind of free-wheeling egalitarianism absent in countries where vestigial aristocracy survives in academies that lock down language. Anglo-American dominance and wealth have drawn into the lexicon the vocabularies of science, business, technology, art, academics, entertainment, the military, popular culture, etc., that many languages lack for want of the opportunity to develop such things so richly. And the dynamism of English allows it to discard the old as readily as it embraces the new. When was the last time you thought about a *liripoop* (the tail of an academic hood)?

Language wars reflect political, philosophical, and cultural divisions: ordered liberty versus careless anarchy, tradition versus progression, inquiry into the etymology of words versus disdain for their original constitution, and, not to be ignored, the freighted division between the idea that the meaning of language is rooted in objective reality and that, in the absence of discoverable truth, language means whatever the most powerful force at the moment decrees. The advance guard of ideological infection is the postmodern theories of MIT linguist Noam Chomsky. A grammar based upon the Latin was good enough for Shakespeare. Compare his style to Chomsky's, and the case is closed.

From such deficiencies arises not constructive evolution but disfigurement, for language must have an intelligible common currency, and like any currency it requires an objective basis, judicious maintenance, shared utility, and constancy. Politicized and process-oriented American education has combined with atrocities like Twitter, texting, and other truncated, thumb-driven means of expression to do astoundingly rapid damage to an otherwise intelligent linguistic progression.

We all make mistakes, and many rules are sometimes beneficially broken, but now even professional writers, especially journalists, are largely semi-literate. Examples could fill an encyclopedia, but here are just a few that point to a lack of knowledge or care.

One reads now of a *France based* such and such, or even, recently, *the Turkey prime minister*. Next will be *the America president*. Too many adjectives may hobble a style, but why exterminate them? *French-based* is an adjectival phrase in which an adjective modifies a participle, much like the wonderful African-American contribution to the language, *crazy-*

*assed*, *assed* being a participle from the newly minted verb *ass*, to endow with an ass. The crazy-assed Chomskyites might call this a *descriptor*.

PURE IGNORANCE HAS SUBSTITUTED *RETICENT*, MEANING RELUCTANT to speak, for *reluctant* itself, just as ideology has substituted *Ms.* for *Miss* and *Mrs.*, all of them abbreviations for *Mistress*, and *Miss* having served quite well to make ambiguous a woman's marital status. *The New York Times* is more responsible than any other actor for the rape of prepositions. It would be one thing if it confined itself to the phrase "standing *on* line," New York usage for sure. But the *Times* will note concern *on* rather than *for*, and a study *on* rather than *of*. Now we have *arriving to*, *advocating for* (and worse, *against*), *surrounded on two sides*, and weather forecasters who think they are *meatorologists*.

We often hear of *survivors* of one thing or another. True, one may live through many a depredation, as opposed to dying. One may live through a Barbra Streisand concert or a Hillary Clinton speech as opposed to dying, but to have *survived* is more appropriate to having withstood a threat to life. One may correctly *survive* an assault which was also attempted murder. One does not *survive* a burglary or a micro-aggression. For years now, the Baltic Republics and their successors have been called *The Baltics*. This is a thoughtless analogy to the Balkans, which are mountains, plural, and are not a group of countries but a region, like the Rockies or the Alps. The Baltic is a sea, singular. One can say *the Pacific nations*, but not *the Pacifics*, although—after *the Baltics*—*the Atlantics*, *the Pacifics*, *the Indians*, and *the Mediterraneans* are probably next.

One could go on and on. Such objections are not, as they could be, pedantry, but rather mourning for the passage of certain habits of thought, care, and education. Attention to language is to civilization what broken windows policing is to public order and domestic tranquility. Unfortunately, those who appreciate it are probably those who already exercise it, and those who need it probably will not appreciate it.

Undoubtedly I have erred even within this column, but if anyone protests that I have he will be making my point. The evolution of language is best sharpened and polished by protest and debate showing a decent respect to the magnificent instrument of which we are the inheritors and custodians. Without such consideration the anarchy that will follow may eventually degenerate into snorts, bellows, hisses, and grunts (who are, coincidentally, my attorneys).

No one should be taken in by reflexive and fulsome professions of allegiance to the idea of unlimited linguistic flexibility, for, just as in politics, the revolutionary mind is libertine until it is accorded control, after which it enforces the eternal stasis of the grave. The first sign of a will to power is the lust for destruction. And the only chance for a language to deepen in expression and widen in application is if it can thrive in a garden of ordered liberty.



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