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# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

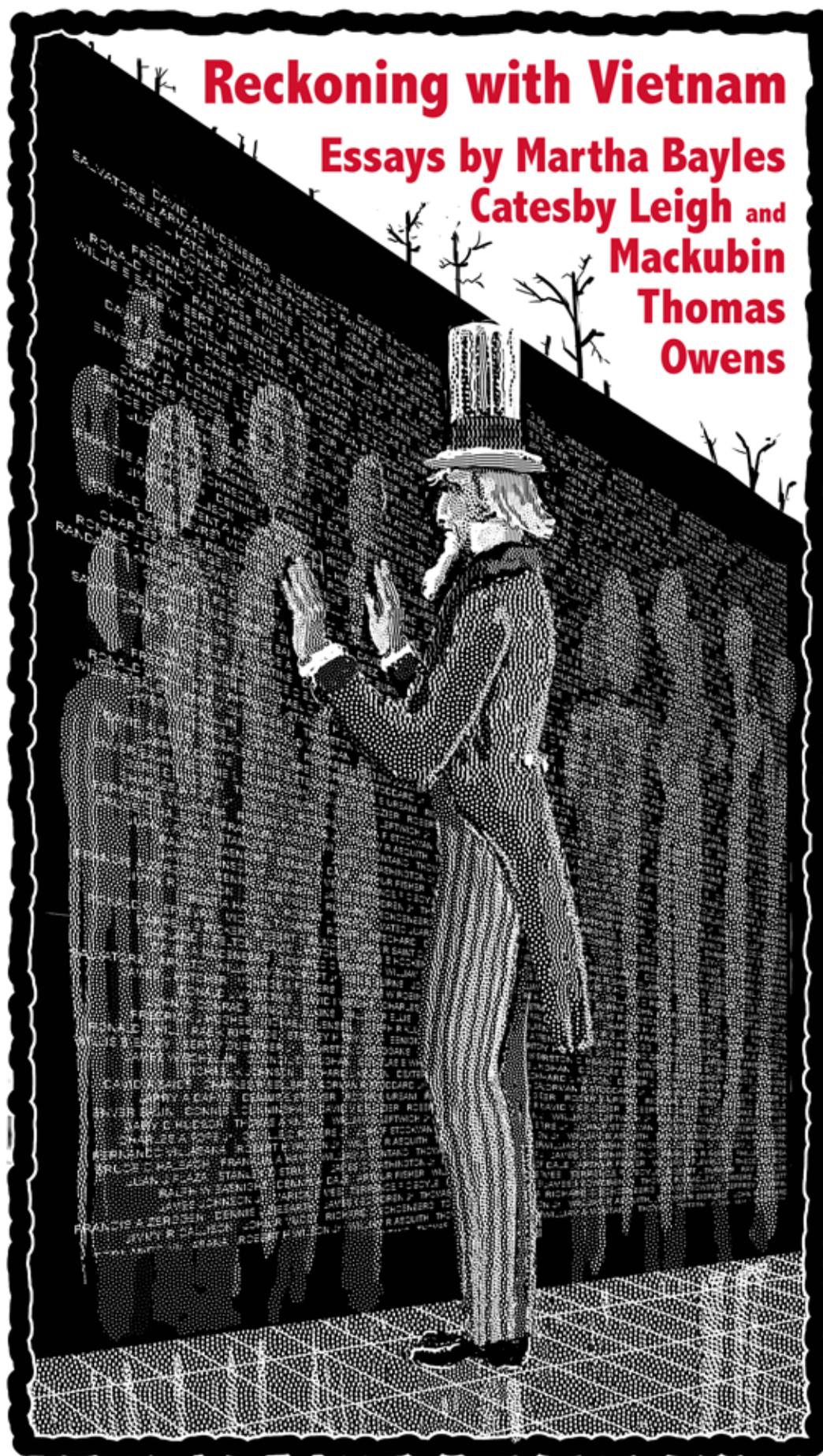
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## A MAN OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

*Entrepreneurial Life: The Path from Startup to Market Leader*, by Robert L. Luddy.  
Lulu, 192 pages, \$27.99

ROBERT LUDDY'S NEW AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *Entrepreneurial Life*, is chock-full of aphorisms that any entrepreneur—or anyone looking to succeed in business—would be wise to post on his office wall. One in particular stood out: “Execution is the most difficult part of management.” It certainly rings true—the world seems to be long on thinkers and talkers, and short on doers. But it’s an odd thing for Luddy to say. All he’s done for decades is execute, and he’s made it look easy.

*Entrepreneurial Life* chronicles, in refreshingly direct prose, Luddy’s journey from his first paid gig, on a bread delivery truck at age 11, to his current job as founder and president of CaptiveAire Systems, Inc., North America’s leading manufacturer of commercial kitchen ventilation systems. But it is also the story of his work as a visionary educational reformer.

Entrepreneurship has been a way of life for Luddy since his youth. He started his first business in college in the 1960s—a fiberglass manufacturing firm. He had to sell it after being drafted into the army in 1967. Upon returning stateside, he worked selling fiberglass components and then fire and safety equipment. In 1976, he struck out on his own, selling and installing his own fire suppression systems in restaurants. He started Atlantic Fire Systems with just \$1,300; that firm eventually became CaptiveAire, which boasts \$450 million in annual sales today.

In the first half of his book, Luddy relates the history of his company. A few themes stand out. First, the successful entrepreneur must maintain a “fanatical focus” on his customers. Luddy points to specific sales and customers that enabled him to make payroll or provide the funding he needed to expand. His gratitude and devotion to his customers leaps off the page. Second, entrepreneurs must be men or women of action. Many business books challenge readers to be bold, to make decisions with daring. And Luddy does, too. But his matter-of-fact instruction to “do it now” breaks down some of the mystique associated with decision-making that can slow us down. He’s not an *Übermensch*; he’s a man committed to reaching his goals quickly, without wasting time. Third, entrepreneurs must relentlessly pursue perfection. The history of CaptiveAire is in many ways a story of incremental improvements in the business’s prod-

ucts, manufacturing processes, sales practices, and internal operations.

Luddy tells of one meeting in 1986 where he and two young engineers revamped the manufacturing process for CaptiveAire’s ventilation hoods in 90 minutes. The following morning, they implemented the new protocol. Within a few months, they’d increased output by 50%.

THE SECOND HALF OF THE BOOK COVERS six disciplines Luddy believes are crucial to successful entrepreneurial management: mentorship, leadership, innovation, finance, sales and marketing, and education. Luddy’s chapter on leadership is the most compelling portion of the book. He names execution—actually accomplishing something, and fast—as “our highest priority.” He favors decentralized management, with decisions “made at the lowest level possible and quickly.” Employees are encouraged to improve the company’s operations on their own—and rewarded when their ideas yield positive change and corporate growth. Empowering employees gives them ownership over their work. That leads to improvements in employee retention, work ethic, and overall productivity. He attributes this decentralized approach to one of his mentors, former Nucor Steel president Ken Iverson. But it has an awful lot in common with the ideas of the Austrian economists Luddy has long championed.

He ends his book with a description of his approach to education. In Luddy’s view, a commitment to lifelong learning is every bit as important to the success of an entrepreneur as a sound sales strategy or continuous improvement of his products. As he puts it, “Simply earning a degree is not sufficient because the world of knowledge is constantly changing... Entrepreneurs must be curious about everything relevant to their business.”

Luddy’s approach to education is one that emphasizes problem-solving and learning how to think and master disciplines, rather than specializing in one area. He’s taken to evangelizing because the educational status quo has not produced enough “candidates with the appropriate sets of skills” to succeed at a company like CaptiveAire.

That approach is on display in his remarkable and multifarious work as an educational founder: at Franklin Academy (named after

Ben Franklin), the public charter school he founded in 1997; St. Thomas More Academy, the independent Catholic school he launched in 2001; and the six campuses of the independent, secular Thales Academy (named after Thales of Miletus, the pre-Socratic philosopher and businessman) that he started in 2007. Five more locations of Thales are currently under development. Luddy’s schools focus on outcomes, he says, just as CaptiveAire does in all its endeavors. Teachers are subject to yearly performance reviews and cannot receive tenure. The curriculum focuses on developing not merely students’ thinking, learning, and communications skills but also their character and work ethic.

AT THE HEART OF THAT CURRICULUM is the “Direct Instruction” method of teaching. For someone as committed to outcomes as Luddy, one would expect, as he writes, that “the effectiveness of this instructional method has been demonstrated in numerous educational studies over the past half century.”

Teachers lead scripted lessons presented in small increments. Research determines which methods, materials, and lessons work. Those are then codified and reproduced, so that other teachers can use them. Students must master skills before they can advance; classrooms are organized according to ability rather than age.

Students at his schools are expected to master Luddy’s “Top 15 Outcomes,” which cover everything from acting with integrity to embracing traditional American mores and entrepreneurship to working toward a healthy mind, body, and spirit.

Robert Luddy’s life truly has been an entrepreneurial one. He’s built multiple institutions that have created thousands of jobs—and prepared people for thousands more. His autobiography is a fitting summation of his remarkable career—and should inspire anyone interested in building an entrepreneurial life for themselves.

*Sally C. Pipes is president, CEO, and Thomas W. Smith Fellow in Health Care Policy at the Pacific Research Institute. In April she received an honorary doctorate in humane letters from Pepperdine University, in recognition of her many years of leadership in the health care policy arena.*

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