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# CLAREMONT

## REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

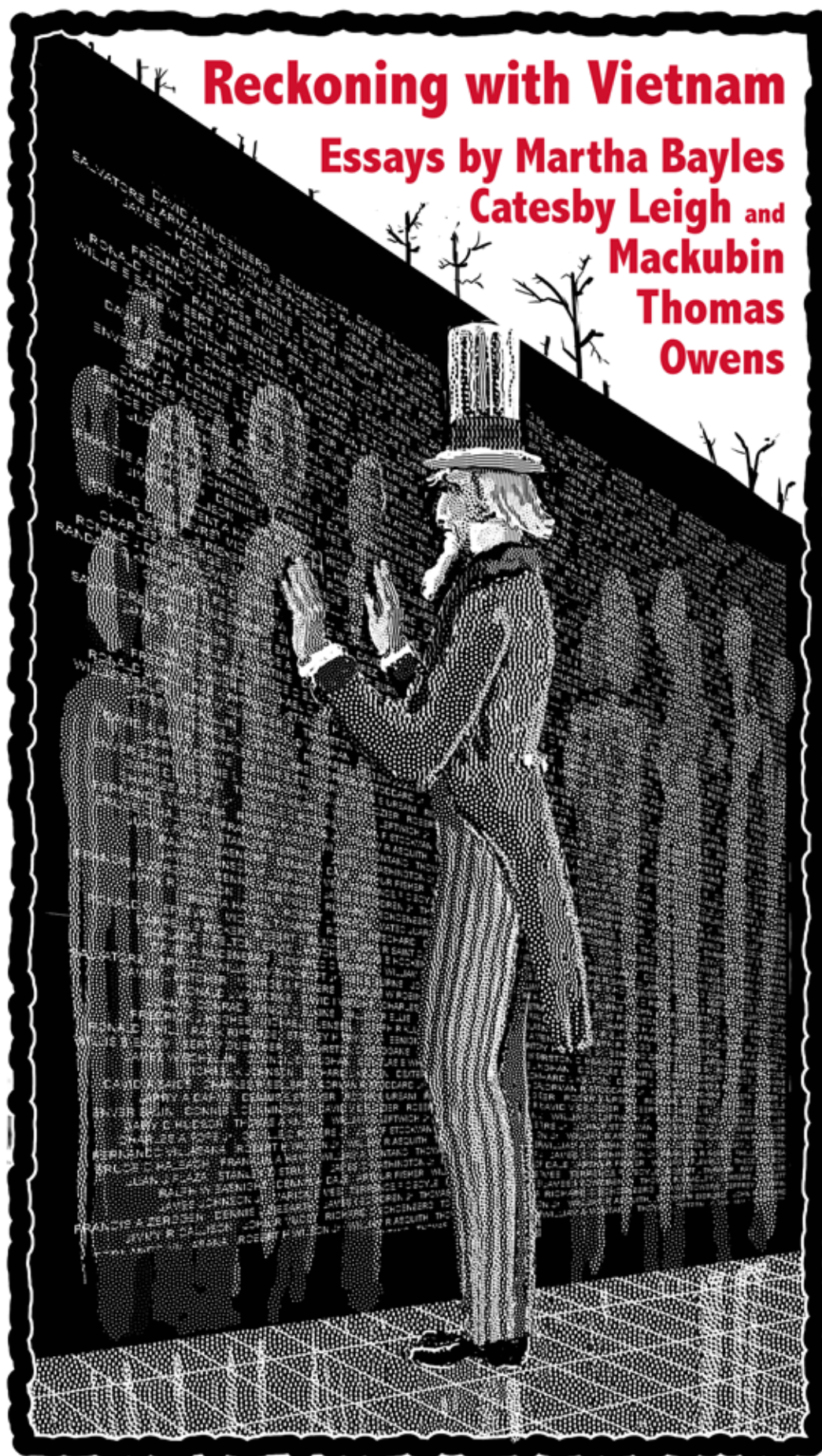
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# ON THE NATURAL LAW OF WAR AND PEACE



Second Infantry Division World War I Memorial, Washington, D.C. (before alteration)

*The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid.*  
—Proverbs 30:19

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND WHAT GUIDANCE natural law gives us about war and peace in our time, it is first necessary to have some understanding of what “natural law” is. Far from being a hazy concept peculiar to some philosophers, natural law is quite simply how the world works. It is reality. Our very civilization is based on understanding that nature and man exist and behave according to laws that our minds can grasp by observation and study. Only recently has it become customary to distinguish between facts and values—that is, between what is and what we want. Formerly, the fundamental distinction was between truth (reality) and opinions (the thoughts we winnow to understand reality). The people who built the United States believed that attention to the laws of nature and of nature’s God was the key to thriving because they knew that ignoring or flouting reality does not turn out well.

Physics and chemistry remind us that natural law is inflexible and self-enforcing. You may “identify” as a bird, eat bird food, and wear feathers. But if you jump off a cliff chirping and flopping those feathers, Mother Nature’s laws regarding mass and motion will punish you. Nor will she let you make salt out of two sodium atoms, regardless of your commitment.

Plants are just as subject to laws. Regardless of anybody’s opinion, apples, oranges, and avocados require different conditions to thrive. That is why judgments about farming have to be right by nature, or else. Not so long ago, the Soviet government, following a scientific consensus that acquired characteristics are inherited, wasted millions of tons of seeds trying to modify wheat to grow in Siberia. In America today, scientific consensus has it that the globe is warming, and yet citrus growers are moving their operations southward because the trees don’t share that consensus. Mother Nature does not care what anybody thinks.

Wild animals are, as the saying goes, “hardwired” to survive and thrive, moving

and reproducing to take optimal advantage of weather and food sources. They can’t help doing the right things for themselves. So far as we know, human beings are the only part of creation capable of doing the *wrong* things for themselves. But that freedom doesn’t affect nature’s peculiar requirements for human beings to survive and thrive. Human survival, like that of other mammals, starts with food and community. But the happiness of these creatures, who are more than animals but less than gods, requires more.

## User’s Manual

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS ARE THE most common and concise compendium of natural law regarding man. But aren’t they, one might object, a set of peculiarly Jewish ideas that draw their authority from the claim that Moses received them from God? Think again. Try reversing each of the Commandments, and ask how humans would fare living by the reversed list: *have* many gods and disrespect them all; *never* stop to rest or

to consider whence you came or whither you go; *dishonor* your father and your mother; *kill* as you please; *take what you can* from whom ever you can; *fornicate* with whomever you can; *lie* and betray; *envy and scheme* against those around you. Not even criminal gangs could survive on that basis. Nor could any individual be happy who lived by such counsels. At best, he might become a tyrant. His choice would be whether to die like Stalin or like Ceaușescu. We are forced to conclude that, whatever their provenance, the Ten Commandments just happen to be a pretty good summation of what nature requires for human beings to live human lives.

Moses' precepts concerning magic, sodomy, and much else, also invite us to consider the consequences of violating them. But the point here is not that the Torah is the apex of natural law about man. Aristotle, Cicero, and many others have delved into the subject systematically and more deeply. Rather, the point is that our civilization is full of pretty accurate descriptions of what happens when humans disregard Mother Nature.

In fact, all actions can only be understood in light of their natural consequences. Naturally, all voluntary movement aims at some state of rest. We move, walk, speak or shut up, for certain purposes. When an action aims at a purpose other than, or even opposite to, what may reasonably be expected from it, the effort is wasted at best, or counterproductive. All actions make sense insofar as they serve their proper ends. As the saying goes, "not even a dog wags his tail for nothing." Human action follows the same logic. The farmer fixes the tractor to till the ground, to grow the crops, to help maintain family and country. This is what philosophers mean by "teleology."

What is the natural law concerning trades or professions? They are naturally about producing certain things. Yes, all of them bring advantages to the tradesman. Yet, by nature, each is about producing a good peculiar to itself: buildings that stand, ships that float, plumbing that doesn't leak, shoes that fit and last, medicine that heals, banks that serve lenders and borrowers. When human activities aim at results other than the ones proper to them, nature makes humans suffer the consequences. Trades exercised primarily for the tradesman's profit tend to produce buildings that fall down, ships that leak or capsize, shoes that chafe and fall apart, financial systems that defraud.

That is why human activity cannot be understood in terms of power-seeking or pleasure-seeking as ends in themselves. Consider the successful tyrant. He can have anything he wants—including all sorts of things that

are bad for him. The same goes for very rich people. Dictators and rock stars routinely make themselves powerfully miserable. Powerful men differ from powerless ones in the number of people they make miserable. If they do well, it is not because they have the power to please themselves but because they learn what really is good.

What, then, should we expect from statesmen and warriors?

### Why Peace?

OVER THE PAST CENTURY, AS AMERICAN power has grown, the American people's peace and security have diminished. Even though America's armed forces have won essentially all their battles, Americans have enjoyed peace for only about 30 of the past hundred years. Common sense tells us that winning battles naturally leads to winning wars, and hence to earning peace and security. Results so contrary to common sense and intentions do not happen because

Progressive politicians  
of both parties have  
pursued concepts of  
peace that are literally  
outside the realm  
of possibility.

of errors in policy. They happen only from mistakes regarding first principles, regarding the natural laws of war and peace.

Just as nature obliges shoemakers and shipwrights to produce certain goods, so it obliges statesmen to produce certain results. What are the goods or natural ends of statesmanship? The Chinese empire's millennial claim to rule has been to provide *tien an men*, heavenly peace. Caesar Augustus' claim to the power that replaced Rome's raucous republic was that he was the *princeps pacis*, the prince of peace. As the Roman Empire was falling, Saint Augustine defined statesmanship for the next thousand years in terms of *tranquillitas ordinis*, "the tranquility of order." The temporal ruler was to be the *defensor pacis*, "the defender of the peace." Fourteen hundred years later, Abraham Lincoln summarized his objective as "peace among ourselves and with all nations." Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes were, if anything, more insistent on judging any exercise of statesmanship by the degree of peace that it produces—especially

internal peace. Indeed, just as peace seems to be the natural end of statesmanship, the incapacity to rest from war really does seem to be the punishment Mother Nature imposes for incompetent statesmanship.

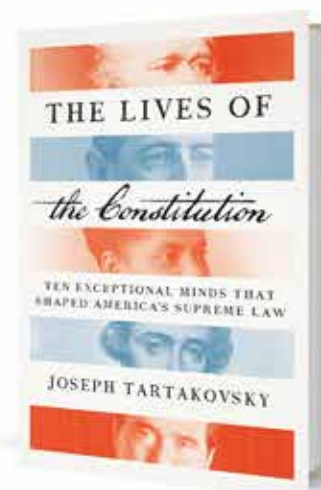
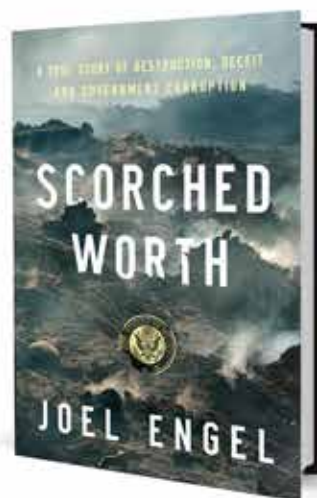
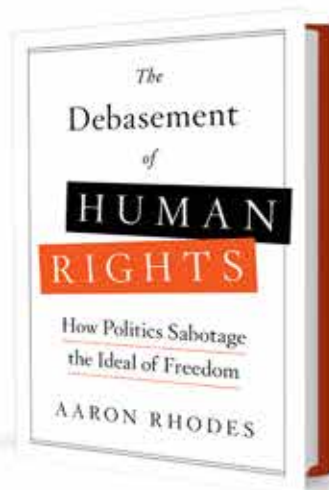
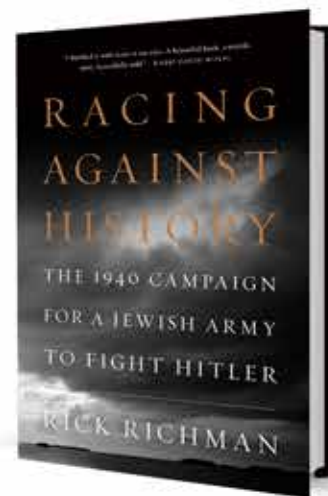
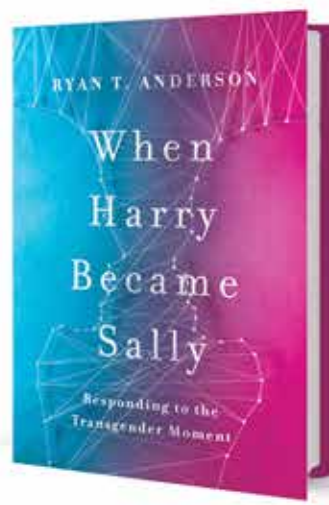
If peace is so essential to well-being, why then is mankind so often at war? Simply because, by nature, each of us wants his or her way. We human beings share in Eve's appetites and in Adam's irresponsibility. Individually and collectively, we want to be a law unto ourselves. Statecraft is the art of reconciling all sides' claims to their own desires, and perhaps to their own peace. We fight wars so that we may have *our* version of peace. That is why *any* peace is what one side earns for itself by defeating the other side's attempt to get the peace *it* wants. Still, although war is the most intense of activities, it aims naturally at a state of rest neither more nor less than any other activity.

### Law of War

THIS IS WHY APPROACHING WAR AS ANYTHING other than the pursuit of peace is naturally self-defeating. Consider how two of history's greatest warriors failed. During the Second Punic War, Hannibal subordinated strategic logic to operational logic by staying on the offensive even after having failed to break Rome or force it to negotiate. Napoleon never thought of an end to his string of battlefield victories. His failure to aim at peace nullified his valor as a warrior. As Charles de Gaulle wrote, Napoleon "broke France's sword by striking it unceasingly." Hannibal's and Napoleon's victories in battle contributed to defeat in war because the victories were not aimed intelligently at war's natural objective: an end to the fighting. Victory in war means forcing the enemy to acquiesce to one's enjoyment of one's own peace.

Aristotle noted that such peace is the natural end of the statesman's art and victory the natural objective of the warrior. Fact is, your victory is what makes possible your peace. Victory, of course, comes in different forms—everything from the enemy's annihilation or enslavement, as was the rule in ancient warfare, to sovereignty over border provinces, as was common in 18th-century European warfare. But victory in all its forms means the vanquished no longer disturbs the winner's enjoyment of his peace. But to establish and maintain one's own peace naturally presupposes a coherent understanding of that peace. If you have made war—killed and destroyed—and yet you cannot enjoy peace, it means that you have been fighting the wrong battles, killing the wrong people.

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During the past hundred years, American statecraft has not produced peace because Progressive politicians of both parties, beginning with Woodrow Wilson, Charles Evans Hughes, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin Roosevelt, have pursued concepts of peace that are literally outside the realm of possibility. Indeed, the enemies these statesmen designated were purely creatures of their own minds, whether “autocracy,” “war itself,” “world disorder,” or “ancient evils, ancient ills.” Who would we have had to kill in order to defeat those enemies?

Hence, for a century American blood and treasure has been committed to kill and destroy certain people as if they embodied the abstractions in our leaders’ own minds. But who are the people whose death would end war itself, bring about world order, establish liberal democracy, end ancient evils, reconcile historic enemies? The conjuring of unreal enemies makes it impossible to ask who might be the real persons who actually trouble our peace, whose killing or constraint would restore it? This unnatural understanding of what troubles our peace is the reason why America’s military campaigns have been waged without reasonable plans for achieving peace. Unnatural objectives lead to unnatural operations. Since Korea in 1950, the U.S. government has explicitly disavowed seeking military victories.

### The Old Way vs. the New Way

UNDERSTANDING THIS HUNDRED-year divorce of force from purpose requires looking again at the argument between Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

T.R., who advocated “the big stick,” rejoiced in America’s emergence as a great power because he believed that the U.S. could and should use this power to secure Americans’ enjoyment of domestic peace and tranquility. Like George Washington, who he called “the best of great men and the greatest of good men,” T.R. wanted to mind America’s business, as (in Washington’s words) “our interest guided by justice shall counsel.” He regarded power as a means of keeping trouble away from America. The enemy was whoever troubled America’s peace. War was a temporary measure to secure that peace.

By contrast, Wilson had started his career denouncing the hurdles that America’s founders had placed in the way of forceful human improvement. He believed the enemy at home and abroad was anything and everything that stood in the way of his vision

of progress. For him, America itself existed to defeat such enemies. To improve America, he pushed Prohibition, which started a war at home. To improve the world, he invented the League of Nations. For him, Washington’s (and the Gospel’s) admonition to mind one’s own imperfections, looking not for specks in others’ eyes, was priggishness. When senators asked him how his commitment to everlasting peace differed from a commitment to perpetual war, he was unable to answer. Wilson erased the distinction between war and peace. American statesmen have yet to redraw it.

In short, the peace at which Teddy Roosevelt aimed was America’s peace, to be secured by minding America’s business, that is, by speaking softly to foreigners and carrying a stick big enough to bash whoever would interfere with us. George Washington, John Quincy Adams, and T.R. had taken for granted that America’s business came first—always—and that this business requires jealous attention to squaring ends with means. Words had to be smaller than the stick. Wilson, however, collapsed the distinction between America’s business and everybody else’s business. Voicing limitless objectives, he gave little if any thought to how America’s armed forces could actually achieve them.

The American people rejected Wilson. Yet he won the hearts and minds of the subsequent century’s statesmen. Reading Charles Evans Hughes, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, Dean Acheson, John F. Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, we might imagine that the world had united in disarming, in outlawing war, or in eliminating ancient evils, ancient ills; that it was policing the world through the U.N.; that nothing could stand in the way of freedom; that satisfying the Soviet Union had tamed it; that a New World Order was aborning; that democracy was conquering the Middle East; or that Islam was terrorism’s solution. None of this was true. Although most of these men were not shy about sending Americans to fight abroad, none explained how doing so could realize the marvelous vistas they sketched.

From Washington to T.R., American statesmen had known that the world is made up of different folks who want incompatible things. That is why the essence of statecraft is jealous attention to what our own power can do to secure our own interests. But because men from Wilson’s time to our own have been certain that all civilized peoples share the same objectives of peace and progress, they have felt justified in dispensing with the es-

sence of statecraft. That is why, far from producing peace, the past hundred years’ efforts have got us less peace, and more war.

### Nature’s Penalties

EACH DEPARTURE FROM THE ESSENCE of statesmanship has earned the penalties imposed on unnatural behavior. Let us see what truths nature has been trying to teach us.

In 1921, Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes brokered three major treaties that scrapped more naval tonnage than all of history’s wars had ever sunk, and fixed the major powers’ ratios of naval power. Japan also agreed to respect China’s integrity and sovereignty in exchange for America’s promise not to fortify our Pacific bases. America disempowered itself from securing that objective. Our best and brightest believed that the treaties secured peace because they were sure that all peoples shared their consensus that armaments caused war. Hence, their logic said, limit the means of war and you will limit the will to war. That was not true. In fact, *the natural chain of logic leads in the opposite direction: from ends to means*. That is why these treaties secured not peace but Japan’s supremacy in the western Pacific, China’s dismemberment, Pearl Harbor, Corregidor, and so on.

Herbert Hoover believed that the world had outlawed war by the 1929 Kellogg-Briand Pact. That was not true. Franklin Roosevelt spent the first seven years of his presidency lecturing America and the world about the need to act as if it were. His lasting legacy was to fight World War II while trying to persuade the American people that Stalin understood good and evil in the same way Americans do. That was not true either. Naturally, because untruths necessarily cause confusion, they produced divisions among Americans. These divisions plague us to this day.

FDR, and especially Dean Acheson and Harry Truman, fostered a consensus that, finally, the United Nations had brought law and order to international affairs. So precious was that consensus-in-illusion that in order to preserve it they sent some 50,000 Americans to die in Korea in what they called a “police action.” Naturally, that sacrifice resulted in preserving an enemy that today targets nuclear weapons on America. Douglas MacArthur had protested, “in war, there is no substitute for victory.” The ruling consensus, denying nature, deemed McArthur a dinosaur.

Under presidents John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon the practice of defeating global evils by committing U.S.

military forces without intending to defeat the enemy became explicit. JFK redeemed his promise to “bear any burden” in freedom’s defense—presumably against the Soviet Union—by sending Americans to fight in Vietnam. Johnson identified the enemy as “poverty, ignorance, and disease.” He, Kennedy, and Nixon were unanimous that military victory in Vietnam was impossible—perhaps because they stipulated that U.S. efforts there must not unduly upset the Soviet Union. In the service of such illusions, they rotated some 12 million Americans in and out of Southeast Asia. Some 58,000 never came home. Ho Chi Minh and the Soviets had other ideas more in tune with nature. So did the North Vietnamese soldier who drove his tank through the U.S. embassy gate in Saigon in 1975 as U.S. Marines were beating doomed allies off the last helicopter escaping from the roof.

### Unnatural Consensus

**T**HE SAME UNNATURAL CONSENSUS spoke through Kissinger and Nixon to the effect that nuclear weapons had sobered the Soviet politburo. All America had to do for the Soviets to join in Wilson’s dream of world order was to make U.S. nuclear forces incapable of targeting the Soviet military or of interfering with Soviet mis-

siles targeted on America. Accordingly, the U.S. government built strategic forces fit for killing Soviet civilians rather than for protecting Americans in case of war. The Soviets would follow suit. In 1972 Kissinger, presenting to the Senate the treaties that embodied this vision, spoke of having banished nuclear war. Eight years later Harold Brown, Jimmy Carter’s secretary of defense, had to tell America that the Soviets’ preparations to fight, survive, and win a nuclear war were well advanced. Those who pay attention to natural law, you see, build things to do themselves some good. Dogs do not wag tails for nothing. American politicians do.

As the Soviet monster was dying of disaffection, the first President Bush tried to save it by massive transfusions of U.S. cash in untied loans (never repaid). He also told a crowd in Ukraine’s capital that they should be good Soviet citizens. Drafted by Condoleezza Rice, this speech was the voice of the U.S. establishment, which valued the dream of U.S.-Soviet cooperation over the real prospect of undoing a real enemy. Ukrainians shook their heads in disbelief.

The same president and consensus decided that since Saddam Hussein’s Iraq had violated world order by absorbing Kuwait, the U.S. would conduct a police action to reestablish the borders. At the time, Saddam was no

enemy of America. Five hundred years earlier, Machiavelli had cautioned that “[p]eople ought to be caressed or extinguished.” President Bush just assumed that “a new world order” would follow his unfinished war. Instead, by harming Saddam without eliminating him, he helped make him the Middle East’s paladin of anti-Americanism. The troops Bush then stationed on Saudi soil to deal with this newly menacing Middle East ended up energizing Muslim jihad against America.

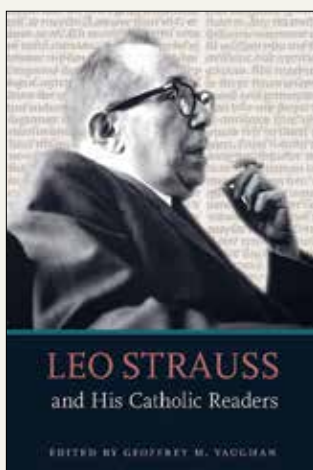
George W. Bush and Barack Obama differed only verbally and quantitatively in their approach to this jihad. Essentially, each ordered the U.S. armed forces to do the same things they had done in Vietnam: hunt down groups and individuals while the rest of the government infuses these societies with economic aid and social reform. They did so while explicitly eschewing any plans for ending the conflict, never mind winning it. With various degrees of emphasis, each bent ever backwards to counter suggestions that the Muslims who attack America do so for reasons related to Islam. In fact, neither would identify *any* causes of anti-American terrorism. Bush’s proposal for the Department of Homeland Security stated that terrorism will be with us indefinitely because of “modernity itself.” Obama’s use of the term “violent extremism” moved further into abstraction. But



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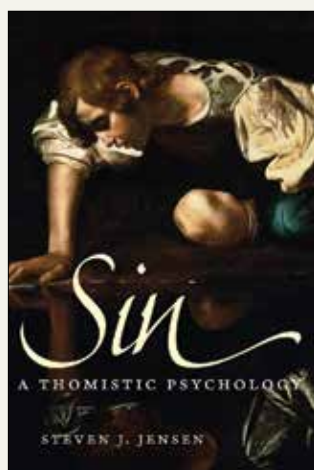
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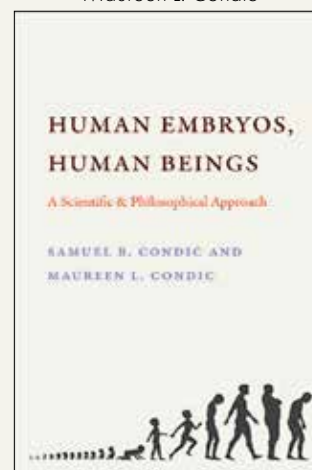
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the blood of hundreds of innocents and the fears of millions are not abstract.

### Natural Resentment

ORDINARY AMERICANS' DESIRE TO live peacefully is natural. So is resentment of a consensus that has no plan for delivering peace. Though the establishment has become shy of voicing support for more "nation-building" or "engagement with moderate local allies," it cannot imagine anything other than what it has been doing. Thus the question must be asked: what has it been missing? What has Mother Nature been trying to teach us about how to deal with war so as to obtain peace? The lessons are neither new nor complex. They will startle only those whose intellectual horizon is the same old consensus.

First, foreign relations involve dealing with foreigners, that is, people whose cultures, priorities, and interests are their own, not ours—above all, whose business is their own. The *sine qua non* of peace is to recognize different peoples' natural, ineluctable focus on themselves, and then distinguish what is our business from what is their business. Others may not like what we do in pursuit of our own business. They are less likely to forgive intrusions into theirs.

By nature as well, statesmen are their people's fiduciaries. Minding the business of one's own nation is a task that stretches the capacity of the very finest statesmen. Just as it is impossible to serve two masters, it is impossible to serve more than one nation at a time. Nor is the attempt to do so legitimate. John Quincy Adams rightly reproved suggestions that the U.S. help one side or another in conflicts within or among foreign peoples by asking "who appointed us judges in their causes?" By nature, *they* alone get to decide what they want for themselves.

Second, by that very nature, *we* alone get to decide how important anything is to us and what to do about it. Because we alone are re-

sponsible for ourselves, decisions about how to mind such business as we decide is our own come first, while foreigners' needs, desires, and views are naturally incidental. Like everybody else, we are the only ones on whom we can count to defend our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor. Hence, alliances are subject to the same rule of nature as bank loans: the more you need them, the less they avail you. In short, nature seems to dictate that we must make only such commitments as we can and intend to keep with our own resources no matter what. Even questioning whether our own interests should come first is unnatural.

Third, earning the respect necessary for living peacefully as we please requires fulfilling commitments, and especially dealing harshly with whoever disrespects us. Respect is the practical meaning of "honor" in international affairs; it is hard-earned and easily lost. Words bigger than actions, dropping allies in their hour of need, responding to injuries with complaints rather than with disproportionate recompense, are the most common ways in which modern America's leaders have dishonored their country. How precious honor is may be seen in a 1791 memo from Alexander Hamilton to President George Washington on how to respond to Britain's possible movement of troops across U.S. territory to attack (former U.S. ally) Spain in New Orleans. The disasters of war with Britain at stake, Hamilton outlined the ways in which Washington could ignore or color Britain's affront. But he ended by counseling that, were Britain's transit to have violated America's honor, disasters would have to be suffered for the sake of that honor. In fact, nations exist only insofar as they are honored—especially by their own people.

Fourth, while America's armed forces have earned more honor perhaps than any in history, our leaders' failure to draw peace from their victories has drawn down the reservoir of respect for America among foreigners and, most importantly, among Americans as well. The consensus—from Henry Kissinger on down—blames the American people for

insufficient support of the elite's long-range policies and for "isolationism." But the discrepancy between the declared objectives, the sacrifices, and the results has been impossible to hide. Actions in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East make sense only to those few thoroughly trained to suppress ordinary human beings' natural revulsion. Ordinary Americans' revulsion at their own government is no small tragedy.

Fifth, and finally, our experiences with nature tell us that those old simpletons George Washington, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt were right: don't go looking for trouble and make nice with everybody. As Jeanne Kirkpatrick reminded her fellow neoconservatives: "There is no inherent or historical 'imperative' for the U.S. government to seek or achieve any other goal—however great—except as it is mandated by the Constitution or adopted by the people through elected officials." By nature, no society exists to conduct foreign policy. Rather, foreign policy naturally exists to allow the society to live in peace. But if you have to fight to preserve or reestablish your peace, then fight with all you've got to accomplish that as quickly as possible. Partial commitments, "sending signals," or "shows of force" convey stupidity and invite contempt.

Yes, all wars are foggy and require adjustments. But nature supplies a compass by which to navigate the fog. Its needle keeps pointing straight to the reason you fought in the first place: your understanding of the peace you are seeking. The path to that peace is victory.

*Angelo M. Codevilla is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute and professor emeritus of International Relations at Boston University. This article originated as a lecture, sponsored by St. John's College and the U.S. Naval Academy, in memory of Lieutenant Commander Erik S. Kristensen, a graduate of both institutions, whose life and death testified to the interdependence of war, peace, and philosophy.*



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