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All That

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Kissinger

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Bridges:
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Queen

Cheryl
Miller:
Jonathan
Franzen

Joseph
Epstein:
Isaiah
Berlin

Richard
Samuelson:
Hamilton
on
Broadway

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Abroad

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PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



Taking Terrorism Seriously

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE INSURGENCY IN IRAQ, I WAS IN MY local old-guy barbershop when someone said, gravely, “We lost another boy in Iraq.” But it didn’t take long for the climbing fatality counts to go unremarked, as in all wars when death becomes familiar and people are inured to casualties, no matter how high.

Though statesmen may suffer for their decisions, *they* are inured to calculation. Surveying populations of tens or hundreds of millions, they are obliged to put things in ruthless perspective, which is why in the morning they can send soldiers to cemeteries and sailors to graves in the sea, and then play golf in the afternoon. They cannot but view planeloads of flag-draped caskets from abroad in the context of, for example, the roughly 2.5 million Americans who die every year (some 43,000 by suicide), or the 14,000 or so murders per annum. Forced to “think big,” they often reach counter-intuitive conclusions, and they know the public’s attention span to be measured in microns—which is why for decades most Western governments have tolerated a *modus vivendi* with terrorism.

A hundred here, a hundred there, every six months or so, among 67 million Frenchmen? In America, among hundreds of millions, a dozen here, fifty there, even 3,000—an almost *de minimis* fraction of the death toll. Using this logic, the Left believes in its heart of hearts that the reaction (war, expenditure, airport lines, surveillance) to an imagined threat is the real problem. What they see instead are tens of millions of Americans starved to death by millionaires and billionaires, armies of racist police combing the streets for innocent young black men to slaughter, and, of course, the cause of the over-hyped terrorism itself, global warming.

George W. Bush deserves credit, if not for the conduct of the Second Gulf War at least for his intuitive understanding that, just as with a family, an attack on a nation from without (not to mention terrorist access to weapons of mass destruction) is of far greater moment than dissension within. For world-citizen Obama, there is no without or within, other than that the object is “to fundamentally transform” the deplorable within to the virtuous without.

One would hope that most Americans would eventually realize that a nation which refuses effective defense and just retaliation will sooner or later cease to exist, that we will no longer grow accustomed to atrocities perpetrated against our country and the West,

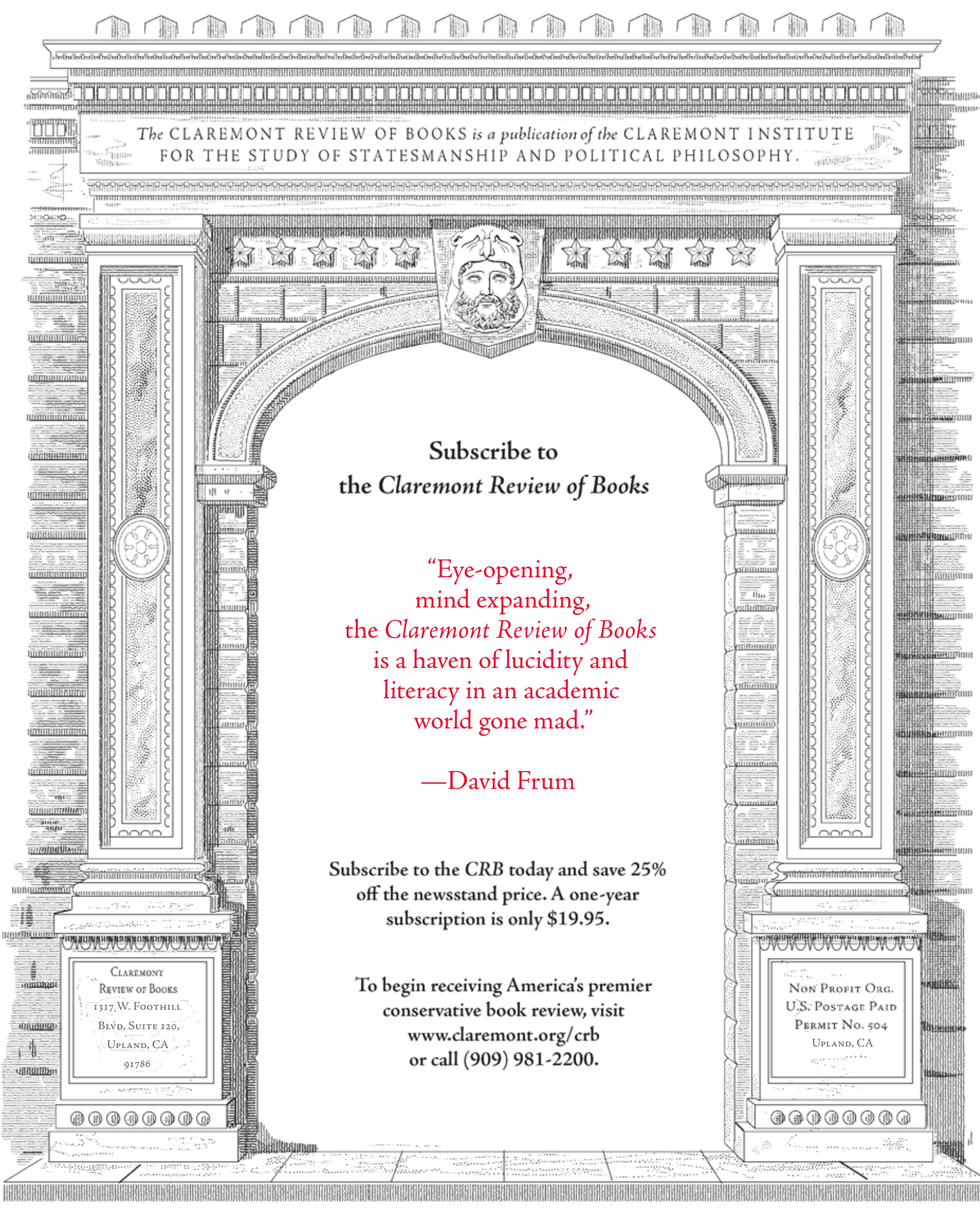
and that finally we will assert our rights as a nation and accept the blood, toil, tears, and sweat necessary to fight with adequate force and resolution.

CONSIDER THE ISRAELI APPROACH TO TERRORISM. WITH 170 miles of open coastline and 632 miles of land borders on the immediate other side of which are Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS, and, at further remove, the militaries of traditional enemies, and 1.2 billion “unsympathetic” Muslims—Israel has managed since its founding to survive and diminish wave after wave of terrorism, despite a population of 6.4 million Jews, 1.8 million potentially hostile Arabs, and a GDP of only \$305 billion. With great oceans east and west, and a southern border that could and should be made impervious, we, a nation of 330 million with a GDP of \$18.2 trillion, can certainly do as well or better.

Israel controls immigration, and would not admit tens of thousands of often angry, traumatized young men from Syria. Nor should we. Our borders and coasts should be meticulously controlled. Every piece of cargo and every airline passenger in the U.S. or headed for it should be thoroughly inspected—including physically—and every shipping container effectively scanned for nukes at sea or in foreign ports. All this would be very expensive, and worth it.

A large proportion of our citizens, like those of Israel and Switzerland, should be armed and trained. Mass attacks in Israel tend to fizzle when the crowd shoots back. You would hardly believe it, but such a provision is actually in the U.S. Constitution. Speaking of which, constitutional rights should not be afforded to those who take up arms against the United States. And Americans—who broadcast nude pictures of themselves and entrust their records and intimacies to Google and Facebook—should not recoil at things like government collection of telephonic metadata, which the telephone companies collect anyway.

Finally, and paramountly, the military must be rescued from its long decline, so that it can sufficiently deter Russia and China (a capacity diminished every day) and so that it can punish terrorists and the regimes that shelter them: at long range, at close range, decisively, without nation-building, if necessary again and again—and with the ferocity and resolve of old. In terms of capacity, our cup runneth over. As with many things, it is just a matter of will.



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