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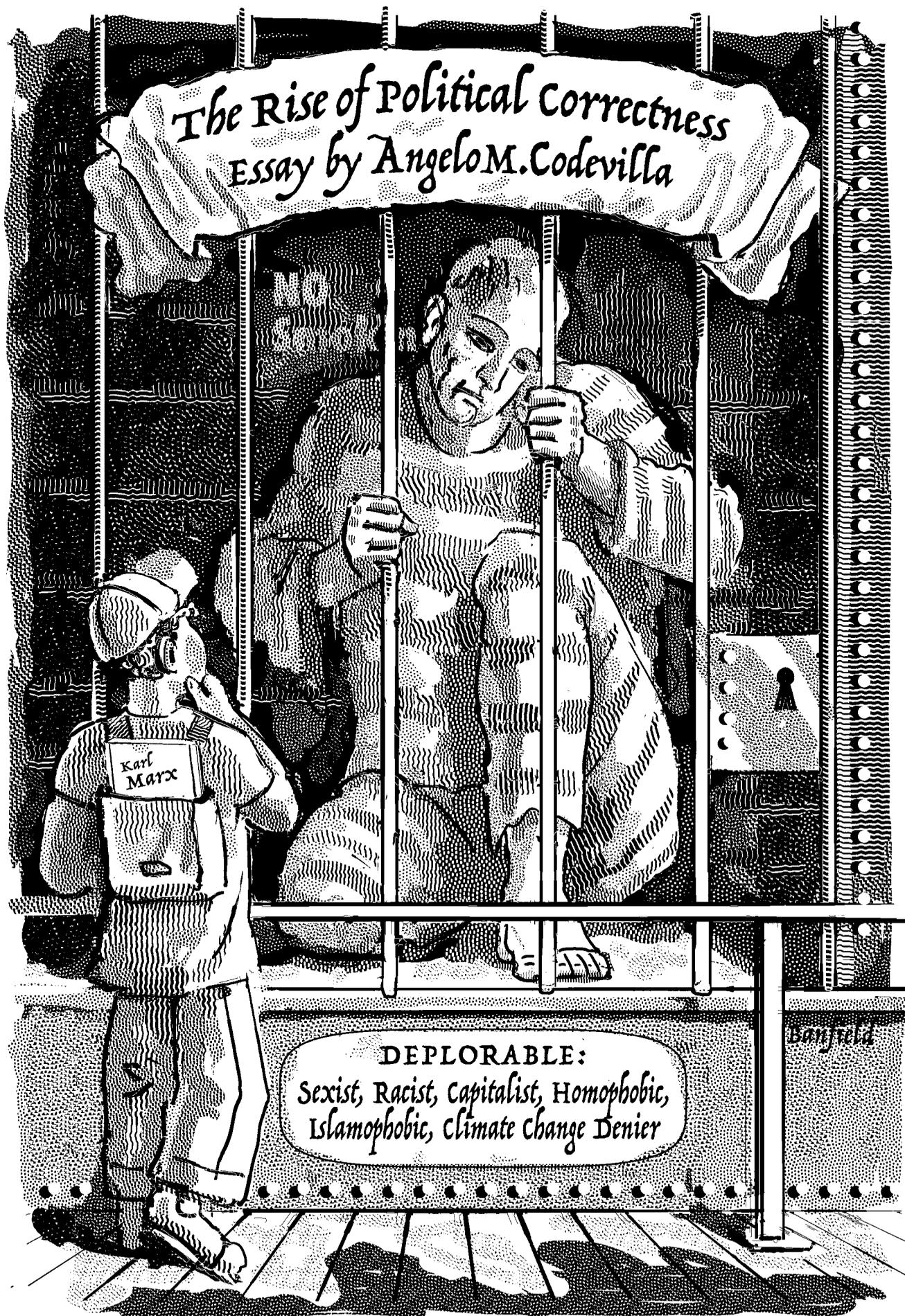
Jeremy  
Rabkin:  
**Randy Barnett's  
Republican  
Constitution**

William  
Voegeli:  
**The Left's  
Dilemma**

Algis  
Valiunas:  
**Edward  
Gibbon**

John M.  
Ellis:  
**The Essential  
Goethe**

Bradley C.S.  
Watson:  
**Conservatives  
on Campus**



David  
Azerrad:  
**Yuval Levin's  
Fractured  
Republic**

Christopher  
Caldwell:  
**Immigration's  
Hidden Costs**

Bruce Cole:  
**Robert  
Hughes**

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Book Review by David Azerrad

## TIES THAT BIND

*The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism*, by Yuval Levin.  
Basic Books, 272 pages, \$27.50



“IF WE COULD FIRST KNOW WHERE WE are, and *whither* we are tending, we could then better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it.” Abraham Lincoln’s pronouncement is not famous by virtue of stating the obvious, but for teaching an important political truth: *only* if we see clearly, can we then act wisely. In any given era, within any given regime, prejudices distort the mind and cloud our judgment.

According to Yuval Levin’s *The Fractured Republic*, our problem in the second decade of the 21st century is that our perceptions are distorted by nostalgia. Left and Right each longs for an idealized mid-20th-century America. Liberals yearn for that era’s economic and political consensus, conservatives for its cultural and moral one. Competing agendas incorporate other, distinctive nostalgias:

Democrats talk about public policy as though it were always 1965 and the model of the Great Society welfare state will answer our every concern.

And Republicans talk as though it were always 1981 and a repetition of the Reagan Revolution is the cure for what ails us.

The intent of this important book is to awaken us from our nostalgic slumber, in order to see our circumstances clearly. On the basis of an incisive diagnosis, Levin, the founding editor of *National Affairs* magazine and the Hertog Fellow with the Ethics and Public Policy Center, offers astute prescriptions, far more thoughtful than the hackneyed recommendations tacked onto most books about America’s ills. Having thought deeply about where we are and what to do, he devotes the entire second half of *The Fractured Republic* to fleshing out an ambitious “reformicon” agenda, anchored in sound policies.

TO DEMONSTRATE THAT NOSTALGIA HAS become pervasive and blinding, Levin cites many instances of politicians and intellectuals invoking a lost Golden Age. Yet

as his argument unfolds, readers may wonder if a problem still more fundamental is an impoverished individualism, which abstracts from the thick, complex, subtle web of relationships that shape and sustain people’s lives.

In spite of their heated disagreements, liberals, conservatives, and libertarians share a “highly individualist, liberationist ideal of liberty,” Levin writes, which leads to an “emaciated understanding of the life of our nation.” Society, in this view, is merely a collection of individuals who would be left alone, if the Right were in charge, or ministered to by the state, if the Left ran things. Drawing from Alexis de Tocqueville and sociologist Robert Nisbet, Levin tries to restore a richer account, emphasizing the mediating structures—families, local communities, religious congregations, small businesses, and the numberless associations forming civil society—that bring life and order to the vast space between the individual and the state. These middle layers are insufficiently appreciated by conservatives and libertarians, who often assume mediating structures create

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and sustain themselves spontaneously, and by liberals, who are prone to disdain these associations for generating nothing besides prejudice and stifling conformity.

Levin replaces the social contract metaphor with an account of concentric rings:

Each ring, starting from the innermost sanctum of the family and the individuals who compose it, anchors and enables the next and is in turn protected by it and given the room to thrive. The outermost ring of society is guarded and sustained by the national government, which is charged with protecting the space in which the entire society can flourish and enabling all Americans to participate in and benefit from what happens there.

Levin's communitarianism, if we can call it that, is at home in the modern world. Unlike many traditionalists, "crunchy cons," and agrarians, he has made his peace with modernity. In the spirit of Tocqueville, he tries to work within it rather than to wish it out of existence.

BY SHOWING HOW THE LIVES WE EXPERIENCE cannot be explained on strictly individualist grounds, Levin makes our situation clear. America has become a "hollow polity," he believes: society's all-important middle layers have grown weaker over recent decades as fewer Americans contribute to or draw from them. A growing number of Americans on the lower end of the income and education scale have become estranged from the mediating institutions of family, work, community and religion. Aggregate national statistics now reveal deep fissures between those at the top and those at the bottom on a host of indicators, ranging from out-of-wedlock birthrates to religious attendance and labor force participation. As a result, Levin says, we have set loose "a scourge of loneliness and isolation that we are still afraid to acknowledge as the distinct social dysfunction of our age."

His diagnosis—a nation that once shared a common way of life is increasingly split in two—closely resembles Charles Murray's in *Coming Apart* (2012). Largely absent from either Levin's or Murray's analysis, though, is a consideration of the largest group and the one with which the overwhelming majority of Americans identify: the middle class. In a democratic regime like ours, its vitality is an indispensable measure of civic health.

Furthermore, the evidence, at least so far, that lower-class alienation from the American

way of life is creating a permanent underclass is under- rather than overwhelming. As best we can tell, the odds of a child born into poverty making it to the middle or upper classes have neither increased nor decreased since we started coming apart in the 1960s. Even Levin admits that upward mobility has remained "remarkably stable."

None of this is to discount the importance of the worrisome trends identified by Levin and Murray, or to rule out the possibility that upward mobility will begin to decline because of them. But the reader is left wondering whether they give us the full picture of where we are as a nation. Are we a hollow polity, or do we have a hollow lower class?

UNLIKE MURRAY, LEVIN TRIES TO identify the subterranean forces pulling us apart. He points to individualism as the Tocquevillian "generative fact" of postwar America. Individualism, as he uses the term, "involves the corrosion of people's sense of themselves as defined by a variety of strong affiliations and unchosen bonds and its replacement by a sense that all connections are matters of individual choice and preference."

Though America emerged unified from World War II with a burgeoning economy, shared national culture, and strong institutions, the subsequent decades have brought "diversity, dynamism, and liberalization" to all realms. These changes have come "at the cost of dwindling solidarity, cohesion, stability, authority, and social order." To borrow from the framework of Levin's previous book, *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left* (2013), we live in the age of Paine, but our Burkean longings remain unfulfilled. The task, then, is to find a way to strengthen the middle layers of society in our individualistic age. "That calling," Levin declares, "rather than a hyper-individualist liberationism, should be the organizing principle of our political life."

Levin treats individualism as a force too powerful to confront directly. While occasionally invoking the importance of "unchosen obligations," he neither elaborates the idea nor considers strengthening our *chosen* obligations by, for example, tightening our no-fault divorce regime.

Instead, Levin concentrates on reining in statism, the other powerful force pulling at our mediating institutions. He applies the logic of decentralization, choice, and diversity to the one realm that has remained immune to it—government—by reviving competitive federalism and reforming the welfare state's clunky machinery. A decentralized, "mod-

ernized politics of subsidiarity" would push decision-making "as close to the level of the interpersonal community as reasonably possible," he explains, thereby empowering civil society's mediating institutions to address local problems.

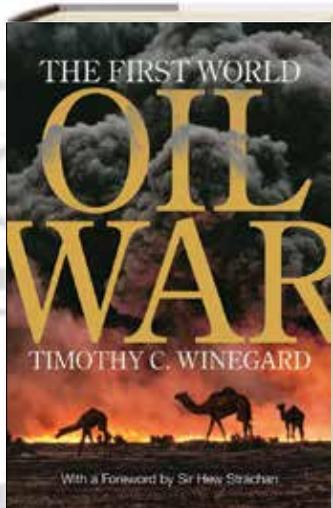
IN LEVIN'S AMERICA, COMMUNITIES would experiment with policies, develop solutions tailored to their specific needs, and have great freedom "to live out their moral ideals, and so to each define freedom a little differently." Although Levin is not advising conservatives simply to abandon the common culture, he thinks their energies would be better spent building thriving subcultures: flourishing communities that would then inspire others to get married, raise children responsibly, and participate in civic and religious organizations.

This decentralizing, live-and-let-live approach is quite appealing. Unlike centrally directed progressivism, it is well suited to the nation we are: vast, diverse, dynamic, and—on a whole range of issues—divided. Following Levin's advice would serve to de-escalate our raging culture wars, but also modernize antiquated governing institutions and begin the hard work of revitalizing civil society. Decentralization must, of course, admit of a limit, lest it dissolve the national ties that bind us together as a nation. Are there not certain issues on which no country can afford to disagree? How divided can a house be and yet still stand? The reader is left wondering.

All in all, America would be a much better place if Levin's vision were implemented. The obstacles to doing so, however, are formidable. As he recognizes, the federal and state Leviathans cling to the faith in central planning, remaining largely impervious to the past six decades' centrifugal forces. The current configuration's beneficiaries—in particular, public sector unions at the state and local level—stand athwart any reforms yelling Stop. Big Business is also often complicit in this state of affairs. Leveraging the power of government to prevent competition or to impose uniform regulations on all 50 states makes for good business.

The Left, meanwhile, for all its paeans to diversity, has become increasingly intolerant and committed to imposing its policies on all Americans. Every last baker, florist, and photographer must affirm the redefinition of marriage. All businesses and charities—including the Little Sisters of the Poor—must cover contraceptives and abortifacients in their health-care plans. Climate change skeptics must be prosecuted. Grown men who believe they are women must be allowed

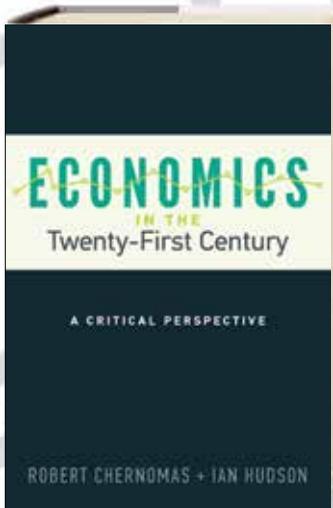
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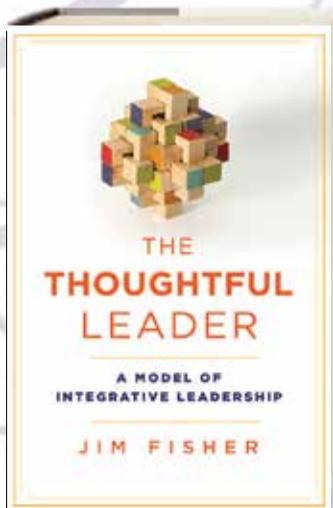


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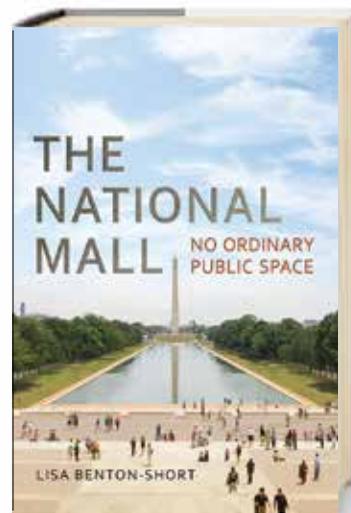


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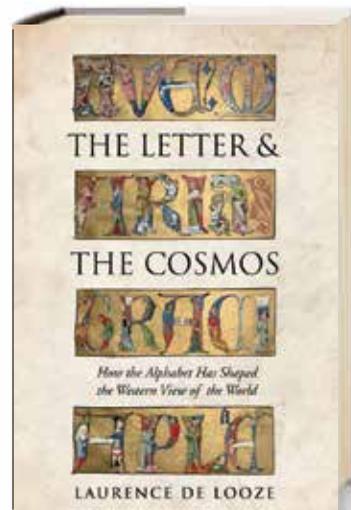


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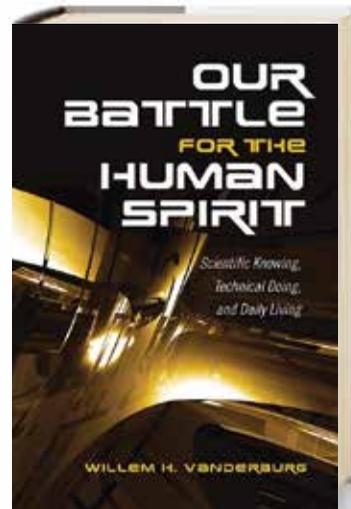


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into all women's locker rooms, showers, and bathrooms. "Progressives have chosen an ideology of total warfare," Ian Tuttle writes in *National Review*. "They aren't satisfied with compromise. They aren't satisfied with surrender. They aren't satisfied until they are roaming the conquered countryside shooting survivors."

**T**HE RECENT HYSTERIA AND BOYCOTT threats in states that passed sensible religious liberty and bathroom legislation reveal how eager Big Business, too, is to side with the Left in its efforts to stamp out dissent. Big Government, Big Business, and militant liberalism are all opposed, in varying degrees, to the politics of subsidiarity.

Though he does not dwell on the challenges facing his agenda, Levin does acknowledge them:

In our time, the greatest threats facing social conservatives come not from the profusion of moral practices and views in American life, but from the efforts of some on the radical Left to use liberal-dominated institutions (from the federal bureaucracy to universities, the mainstream media, and much of the popular

culture) to suppress and exclude traditionalist practices and views.

Yet even this understates the problem by suggesting it is restricted to a minority of radicals, albeit with considerable power. In a footnote with far-reaching implications for his argument, Levin acknowledges that "serious and well-meaning people on the Left"—including "some of the most thoughtful progressives I've encountered"—are absolutely convinced that "most local (public and private) American institutions are thoroughly infested with racism and elite class animosities" and therefore cannot be trusted with power.

Liberals, it turns out, are much less nostalgic than they appear. Whatever economic nostalgia they have is tempered and more often than not overwhelmed by their crusading zeal for social justice, their deep antipathy to civil society, and their obsession with race, class, and gender.

**H**OW THEN DOES LEVIN PROPOSE TO deal with them? His strategy, it seems, is to appeal to the Left's better angels. Although he worries that he may be insufficiently "nuanced, fair, and forgiv-

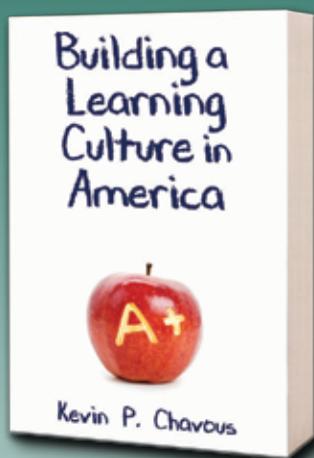
ing" in criticizing liberals, he is on the whole quite generous to them. "Progressives," Levin writes, "can draw upon a deep reserve of experience in populist community and labor activism, a history of intellectual dalliances with a communitarian liberalism, and a lively elite culture of localist consumerism." He tries to nudge them into accepting a modernized "public-option progressivism" in which the government would compete with the private sector to provide services (though he himself opposes it).

Whether such a strategy will work is debatable, especially given the Left's mounting intolerance and position of power in the culture wars. In fact, it's doubtful that much will change unless conservatives adopt a much *more* confrontational approach against progressives and their allies in the public and private sectors.

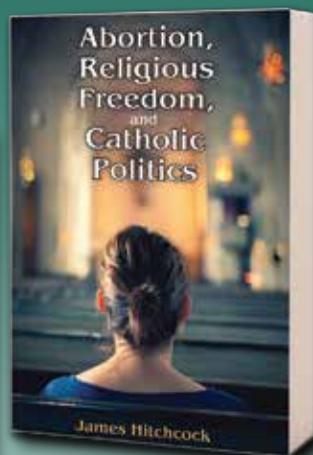
Should we reason with the Left—or defeat it? That is the question. And on it hinges, in no small part, whether we will build the America Yuval Levin envisions.

*David Azerrad is the director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for Principles and Politics and the AWC Family Foundation Fellow at the Heritage Foundation.*

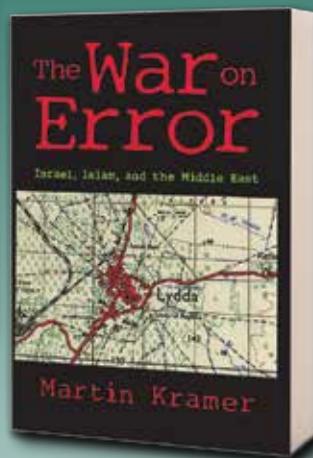
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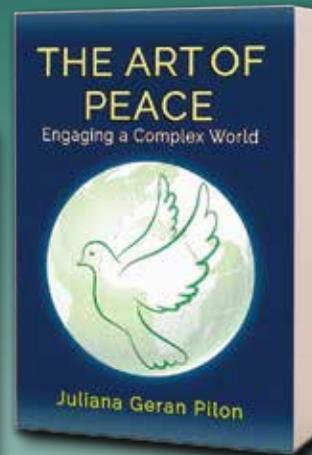
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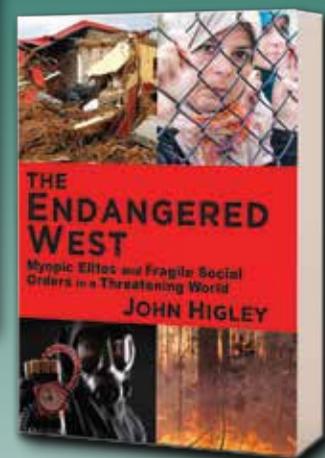
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