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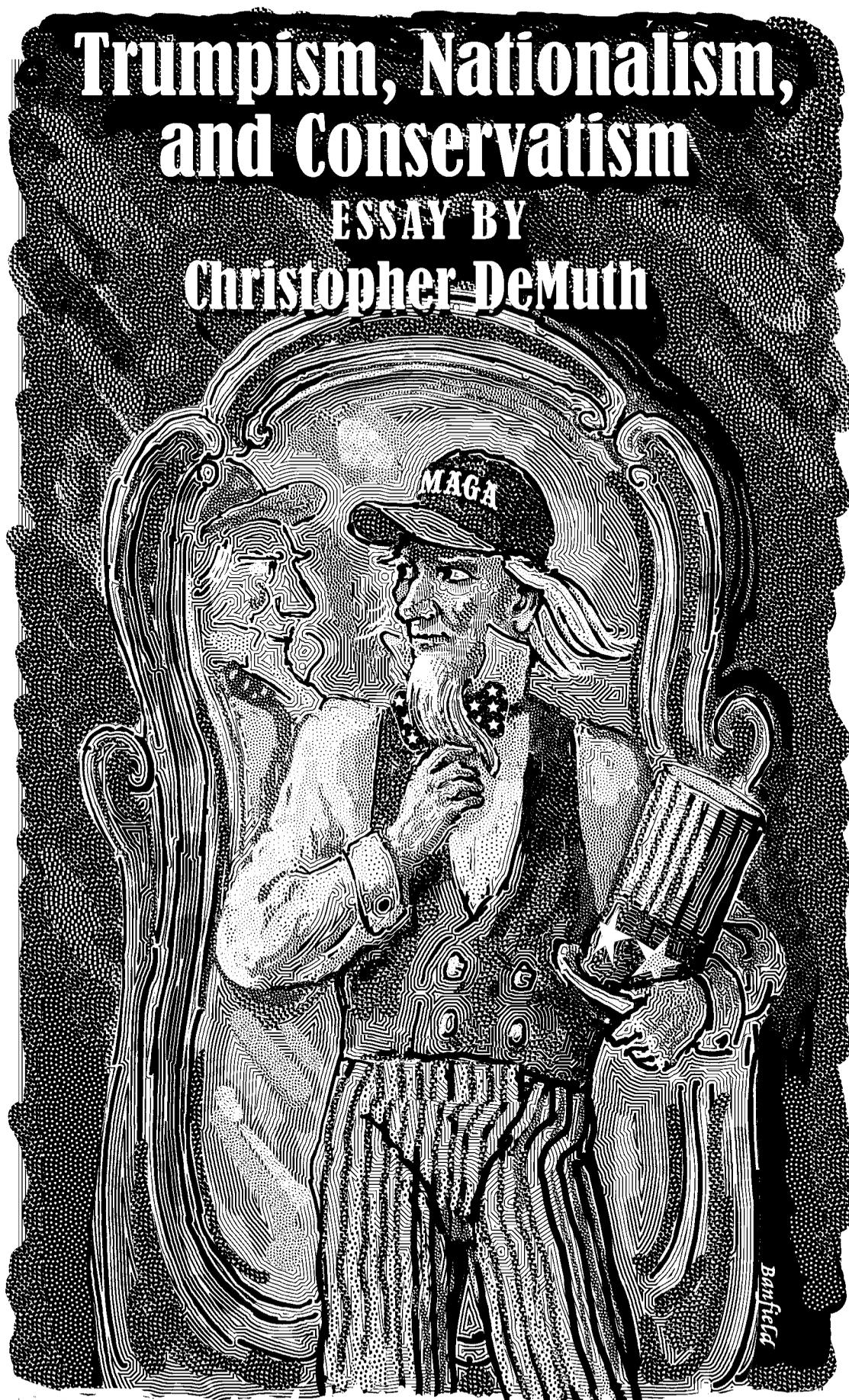
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Book Review by Kevin D. Williamson

AUSTIN CITY LIMITS

God Save Texas: A Journey into the Soul of the Lone Star State, by Lawrence Wright.
Alfred A. Knopf, 368 pages, \$27.95



DAVID REMNICK, EDITOR OF THE *NEW YORKER*, asked staff writer Lawrence Wright to “explain Texas.” Why would Wright choose to live there? “I hope this book,” says Wright, “answers the question.” But the book—*God Save Texas: A Journey into the Soul of the Lone Star State*—does not explain Texas. It does not even explain why Lawrence Wright of the *New Yorker* chooses to live in Texas, a question of limited interest. It is not, as it proposes to be, a meditation on the culture and politics of Texas and their influence on the wider American scene. It is an overflowing slop-bucket of ignorance, laziness, and snobbery in the shape of a book.

The structure of the work will be familiar to those obliged to read books produced by columnists and broadcast-media figures: a series of mostly disconnected essays and vignettes repackaged as a monograph, lightly stitched up with newly written connective material and punctuated every fourth page or so by something the author doesn't realize is hilariously stupid or obviously wrong. As with chainsaw sculpture, the process leaves its mark on the product: columns and essays are arranged in a particular order and then written through (sometimes by the au-

thor, often by a junior editor) two or three times until the recycled material smells fresh enough to put a cover and title on. Wright has spent decades writing about the politics and personalities of Texas, and this book is a kind of greatest-hits album underneath a thin wash of the now-familiar indignant moral hysteria induced in the NPR crowd by the Age of Trump.

THE BOOK BEGINS WITH WRIGHT AND his friend Stephen Harrigan, author of *The Gates of the Alamo* (2000), riding their bicycles through one of the ugly stretches that sprawl between Texas cities, just as they sprawl between most American cities. Wright is disappointed by the scenery. “The actual vista in front of us was an unending strip mall hugging a crowded interstate highway,” he writes—a sentence that could have been written about nearly identical scenes in almost any of these United States. This is somehow the fault of the oil business, which left Texas with “cruddy strip shopping centers, garish beach communities, the ugly sprawl of car lots and franchise chicken joints and prefab warehouses that issued out of the heart of every city and crawled along our highways like poison vines.”

They stop at Buc-ee's, a Texas-based chain convenience store that sells fudge and kolaches and kitsch along with the usual gas-station fare, and which (accurately) advertises the remarkable cleanliness of its bathrooms in humorous billboards along the vast ghastly asphalt lengths of Eisenhower's Folly. Buc-ee's is not Lourdes; it is a place dedicated to urination and defecation and the acquisition of things that later will be urinated and defecated, and to gasoline: go with the flow, and flow with the go. It is bigger and stranger than, say, those excellent Autogrills straddling the Italian Autostrade serving strong espresso and salami sandwiches, and it is over-engineered compared to those stunted and hobbled little gas stations on Manhattan's west side, but it is recognizably an example of the same genre: it's a gas station. Wright concludes from his visit that Texas is “a lowbrow society...that finds its fullest expression in a truck stop on the interstate.” The areas alongside intercity highways tend, for obvious reasons, to be home mostly to the unsentimental, un-quiet, unlovely, high-volume/low-margin businesses that serve people in transit through places that do not have much of a sense of community because



there aren't any communities there. The interstate isn't where you're going, it's how you get where you're going—a means rather than an end. This is true in Texas, as it is true in Southern California, New Jersey, Maine, Ohio, and any other blasted and blighted slice of exurbia where three gas stations rub up against an Applebee's and a Burger King.

EVEN AS WRIGHT SNEERS AT TEXAS FOR the sin of having ugly commercial and transit zones indistinguishable from those in Connecticut or Oregon, he misses the story in front of his face. Convenience-store owner Arch "Beaver" Aplin III ("Beaver" and "the Third" coming together to form one of those wonderfully unlikely American names) built Buc-ee's out of almost nothing in the 1980s, a time when the highways already were well stocked with gas stations selling fuel and fare (in Texas, the gas-station burrito is a food genre all its own, perfected by Allsup's) and the market apparently saturated. How is it that Aplin (who is the opposite of the stereotypical businessman braggart and hardly an emissary from "a lowbrow society") went from owning one convenience store to owning a business with hundreds of millions of dollars in sales in such a mature market, while turning up his nose at a huge share of high-paying customers (Wright calls it a "truck stop," but Buc-ee's in fact excludes commercial trucks from its facilities) and paying remarkably high wages (\$15 an hour) to car-wash attendants and cashiers? How many chain gas stations have admiring articles written about them in *Bon Appétit*? And how does a reporter in possession of a Pulitzer Prize stand there in the middle of that story and never even think to ask a question?

Someone might have saved poor David Remnick some effort and mystification with this simple explanation: Wright doesn't live in Texas—he lives in Austin, the world capital of extended adolescence. Wright's ruminations on Texas are those belonging to a familiar kind of permanent teenage holden-caulfieldism associated with that city. Wright is a son of privilege who attended all-white schools in suburban Dallas—his wealthy father was a socially prominent bank executive who was waiting to lunch with John Kennedy when the president was assassinated by a Marxist in Dallas in 1963. Wright's the worst kind of angry lefty: he cannot forgive American capitalism for giving him a life of opportunity and ease. Hence his sophomoric ranting about "corporate fascism" and his weakness for phony "authenticity." He argues that Dallas's post-assassination humiliation not only was good for the city but

that it in effect saved the city's soul. A similar campaign of humiliation is what he seems to have in mind for Texas.

THERE IS LESS THINKING HERE THAN posturing. Channeling the same aw-shucks cornpone offered up by other rich, liberal Texans such as Molly Ivins (the California-sourced daughter of a River Oaks millionaire who enjoyed taking her private-school pals yachting before she developed that ridiculous put-on accent native to no place in Texas), Wright insists that he does not live in New York City or Washington because he is "too much of a rustic." But he's a funny kind of rustic: a rustic from one of the least-rustic backgrounds imaginable, a rustic who grew up with the founder of Neiman Marcus as a family friend, a rustic who lives in a city with a metropolitan population north of 2 million, a rustic with a sideline business in Hollywood. The quest for authenticity often leaves one vulnerable to fraud, and Wright has fallen for the very ersatz Texanisms that he here intends to expose and flay—the idea that the "real" Texas is to be found at some quaint out-of-the-way steakhouse rather than in a Dell facility or Panhandle hydrocarbon cracker.

God Save Texas is full of sloppy writing of the kind that raises the question of what exactly it is that book editors are for: using *staunch* when Wright means *stanch*, *career* when he means *career*, *jealousy* when he means *envy*, *nonplussed* when he means *uninterested*; deriding "Daddy Warbucks capitalism" as "heartless, rapacious, and predatory"—the opposite of the benevolent ethic of Harold Gray's self-made philanthropist in *Little Orphan Annie*; repeating the myth that Texas enjoys a unique right to subdivide itself into five states (Article IV, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution confers the right of subdivision on all states, assuming legislative cooperation); classifying Louisiana as a Saudi-style petro-state without considering that health care and education employ about ten times as many people in the state as oil or wondering why its economy has sunk while Texas thrives. Those errors come alongside some truly strange assertions. Wright complains that he knew no liberals and hardly any Democrats growing up in a state that was at the time almost uniformly Democratic and whose political foundation was New Deal liberalism. (I myself grew up not far from New Deal, Texas, surrounded by cotton farmers who would barely spit the word "Republican"—but then, I worked at 7-Eleven and think Buc-ee's is pretty interesting, so I suppose I have unfair advantages.) Only four of Dallas's 59 theoretically nonpartisan may-

ors have been Republicans, and none served before the 1980s. Rick Perry first held office as a Democrat (his CV does not emphasize his energetic support for the presidential campaign of Al Gore) and Texas did not go all meshuga Republican until the 1990s. The state didn't have a Republican governor between Reconstruction and the Reagan era. If Wright didn't know any Democrats, he wasn't looking very hard.

THIS BOOK IS FULL OF EVIDENCE OF NOT having looked very hard. Wright goes tottering here and there with potted biographies of Texas political and cultural figures, half-understood anthropologies of Houston and Dallas, reminiscences of a space program about which he evinces almost no knowledge at all (and a strange contempt: he recalls his disappointment at the pitiable sight of a space shuttle being carried by an airplane), and a fair bit of padding that adds nothing to what purports to be the argument. It has the feel of a collection of memoirs that should have been written by someone else. The book's final chapter finds Wright shopping for a cemetery plot, which seems appropriate. Whatever power he may once have enjoyed as a writer has been expended. If this is what Wright can do, it would be better if he did not do anything at all. Let him retire to his fajitas and bicycling, and tell his LBJ anecdotes to whoever will listen.

Or perhaps to a hermitage where he might be more contented, maybe up around Woodstock or Big Sur. Texas, as it is—as it actually exists—does not suit him. And it plainly does not interest him, either, except as a vessel for his contempt and disappointment, neither of which seems to have a great deal to do with Texas per se. Wright repeatedly returns to the physical ugliness of Texas's public spaces, and what he abominates as the low tastes of its cultural powers. He mocks museums and galleries for boasting of the "largest display" of this and the "finest collection" of that, the "largest Robert Rauschenberg painting," the "largest painting by Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo." Oh, here he's got 'em! "Only in Texas is Large Art an aesthetic category."

Because I, too, am a beneficiary of American capitalism, I read those words while sitting on a beautiful terrace in Rome with an arresting view of the Pantheon. Do you know how the Romans describe the Pantheon—what they boast of? That almost two millennia after its construction, it remains the world's largest unreinforced concrete dome. They boast that the Coliseum was the largest amphitheater of its time. Paris boasts



of having the world's largest number of annual visitors...and the largest bicycle-sharing program outside of Asia. The world's great cities compete to have the tallest building and the tallest examples of certain categories of buildings. Wright and his *New Yorker* colleagues surely must recall a certain New York City property developer boasting (inaccurately, as is his habit) that after the 9/11 attacks one of his buildings became the tallest in Manhattan. The Dallas curators' pride in their collection of Chinese porcelain is relatively modest. It is King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, and Aventura, Florida, duking it out for the title of nation's largest shopping mall—Houston's Galleria is way down there in a four-way tie for seventh.

Wright follows his fusillade against *largeness* with a sustained sneer at Wendy Russell Reves, the former model and philanthropist who donated a splendid collection of European art to a fledging Dallas museum but attached an "intransigent demand that her residence be faithfully reproduced in order to showcase the art." If that seems strange to you, consider that Albert Barnes did approximately the same thing with his storied Barnes Foundation, specifying in the insti-

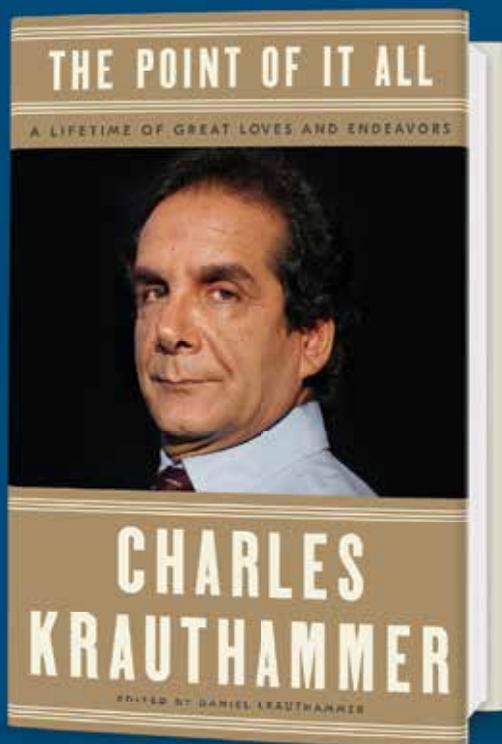
tution's charter that his eccentric arrangement of Matisse's and Cézanne's be displayed just as he left them, a request that was honored until the clowns to whom he entrusted his bequest ruined it. The difference is that Barnes was an East Coast physician with an Ivy League education, and Reves a hick from Texas. When the Barnes Foundation went to court and broke its indenture, overturning Barnes's ban on loaning out his paintings, it took its famous collection on tour. The first stop was Fort Worth, Texas, where they no doubt boasted of just how many Renoirs were in the holdings.

THERE IS AN INTERESTING STORY TO be told about Texas, and, contrary to what many of my conservative friends insist, it is not without exception a success story. Something weird did happen in Texas around the turn of the century, when its partly prideful and partly self-deprecating sense of Texan-ness curdled and mutated into the strange and distasteful thing it is now. Wright almost gropes his way there with his comparison between AM Texas and FM Texas, which is to say, the Texas represented by right-wing talk radio and the Texas of well-heeled NPR-

listening progressives in Austin (or Winnetka Heights or Montrose). But Wright would have to get out of himself a little bit to tell that story, which is, as reality tends to be, more complicated than the just-so stories political partisans like to tell themselves. (Texas's leading talk-radio figure is my friend Michael Berry of tiny Orange, Texas, and the University of...Nottingham, U.T. Austin's sister school. He's a politically moderate lawyer who once served as Houston's youngest city councilman, married to an Indian-American woman who served as Texas's secretary of state. The us-vs.-them, white-hats/black-hats progressive story breaks down when confronted with the realities of Texas political life.) Wright, unfortunately for his readers, is almost entirely self-absorbed. His great takeaway from his account of the flooding following Hurricane Harvey is that it interfered with the premiere of a play he had written. There are remarkable stories related to that episode, and Wright's is not one of them.

What to make of Texas? Don't ask poor Lawrence Wright. He just lives there.

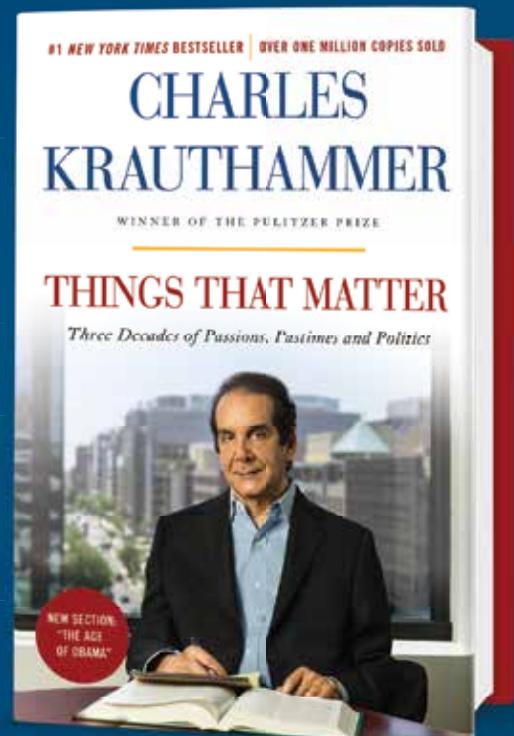
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