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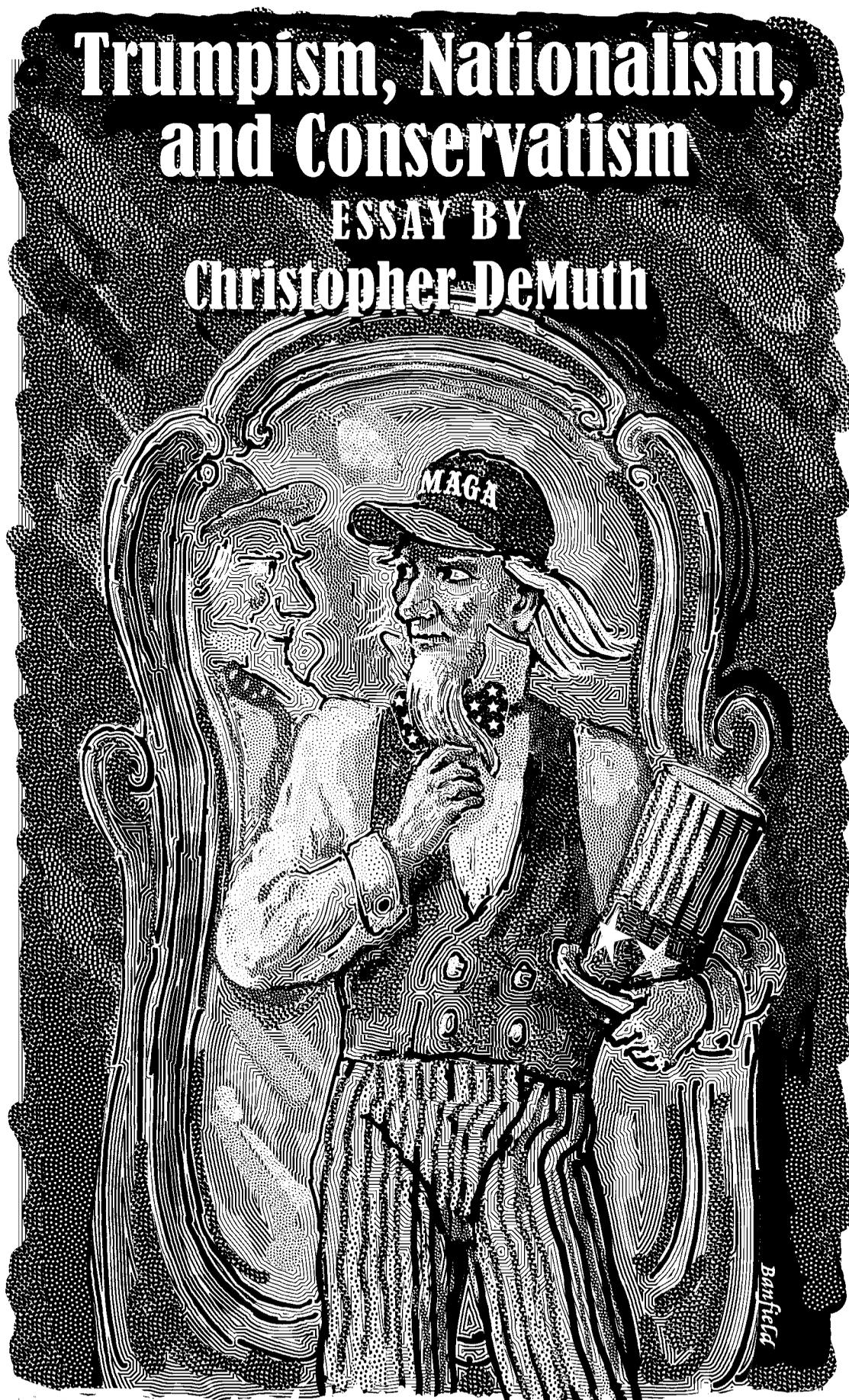
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## Trumpism, Nationalism, and Conservatism

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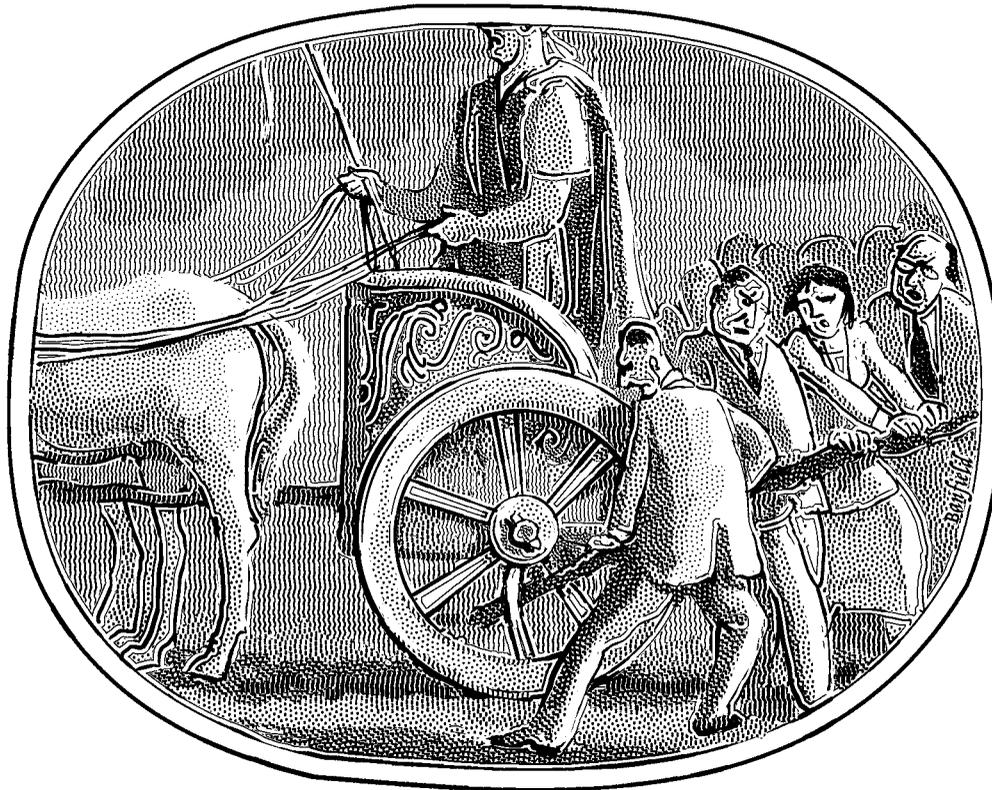


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## 2020 FORESIGHT



**I**T IS LESS THAN TWO YEARS UNTIL THE end of President Donald Trump's first term. Whether or not there will be a second is already a consuming question.

Will he even choose to run? Since he established his re-election committee *last year*, the earliest start of any president, the question may seem moot. But we've never had a billionaire president who would be 74 years old at his second inauguration, and so it's at least conceivable that Trump might announce he has won so much in four years that even *he* has grown tired of winning.

Like the vast majority of presidents faced with the decision, however, the 45th will probably run again. He faces an uphill fight, as he did in 2016, though with the added consideration that he has a record now. The first two years of the Trump presidency are in the books. What light might they shed on the coming contest?

### Before the Nomination

**I**N THE FIRST PLACE, TRUMP FACES AN unusual array of obstacles. Before he can claim his party's nomination, he will have to survive some potentially formidable chal-

lenges, beginning with the multiplying investigations of his 2016 campaign and his presidency. Of these, the one launched by his own Justice Department is central.

Robert Mueller, the special counsel investigating the administration's supposed collusion with Russia, is the most implacable prosecutor since police inspector Javert began pursuing the hapless Jean Valjean. We shall see what Mueller has on Trump, if anything, when he gets around to issuing his report. But the possibility of an anticlimax seems to grow with every indictment of a Trump associate for...something other than collusion with Russia. The very notion of "collusion," implying careful collaboration in a secret, deceptive project, appears foreign to this administration. On any given day, Trump is barely on speaking terms with his own White House advisors. If he can hardly cooperate with his own staff, how could he coordinate a plot with Russian Intelligence?

Nonetheless, Mueller has probed embarrassing aspects of Trump's disorderly business and personal life. It is here that the special counsel could strike paydirt, or at least dirt. This would make Democrats happy, and provide fodder for their pornographic

impeachment fantasies. And they are fantasies: though it's possible a majority of the Democratic-controlled House might indict the president, it's almost unimaginable that two-thirds of the Republican-controlled Senate would vote to convict and remove him from office. Back in 1974 GOP senators told Richard Nixon to resign—or be impeached and convicted. Two decades later Democratic congressmen told Bill Clinton to fight it out, no matter what. Which lesson do you think sticks with today's Senate Republicans?

Besides, Trump, unlike Nixon, would not go quietly. And sober Democrats remember at least this cautionary lesson from *l'affaire Clinton*: the failed attempt to remove him from office made him more popular than ever. They don't want their persecution of Trump to make him, at last, a sympathetic figure.

Which is why, of all the forces gathering to deny Trump a shot at a second term, the most interesting and unexpected is the possibility of an intraparty challenger. No Republican upstart could count on *defeating* Trump in the primaries. The hope would be to *damage* him enough to cost him the gener-



al election. Why would a Republican candidate collaborate in trying to throw the election to a Democrat? Why would a Republican *collude*—where’s a special counsel when you need one!—with the Democratic Party? Why would (to name a few reported to be weighing it) Senator Mitt Romney, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, and Senator Ben Sasse, risk it?

### Interest and Honor

**A**LONG WITH MANY RIGHT-WING, OR formerly right-wing, Never Trumpers, these gentlemen claim that Trump dishonors the party, the presidency, and the country. For them, it is not a question of interest so much—running against him would probably injure their political careers; and some of them, especially Romney, are probably better off because of Trump’s tax cuts. It is a matter of honor. The two are not mutually exclusive, inasmuch as doing the noble thing may sometimes conduce to one’s long-term advantage. But often doing the noble thing (e.g., rushing into a burning building to save someone’s life) means rising above, or harming, one’s own interest.

If there is a persistent theme to the Never Trumpers’ and these potential challengers’

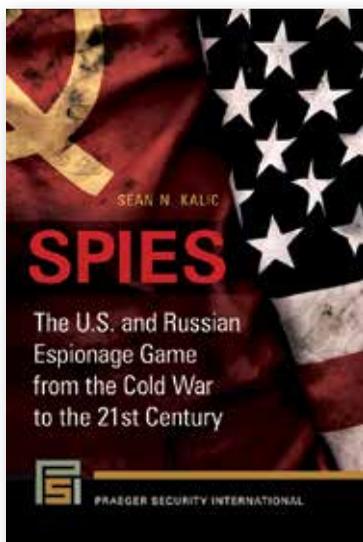
discontent, it is their passionate conviction that Trump exalts the spirit of self-interest and pleasure-seeking above the nobler virtues of public service and love of the public good. They paint him as a corrupt figure, a bad man, even a “racist,” and their opposition to him comes closer to personal disgust or revulsion than to any merely political disagreement over policy, though they do disagree with him over immigration, trade, and other matters.

Hence Hogan, Romney, and others contemplate running against Trump in the GOP presidential primaries in order, they tell one another, to save the country’s honor. Some even claim to be inspired by the late John McCain’s brand of maverick courage. McCain cast the decisive vote against the GOP’s repeal of Obamacare, and conspicuously didn’t invite Trump to his funeral. But when in 2016 he ran for re-election to the Senate, he accepted Trump’s endorsement. Even McCain’s courage had limits. The potential challengers wouldn’t resolve to oppose Trump in 2020 if they thought he could simply ignore the attack or escape unscathed. The decision to enter the race would probably turn, therefore, on signs of his potential weakness—economic recession, foreign policy setbacks, drooping poll numbers.

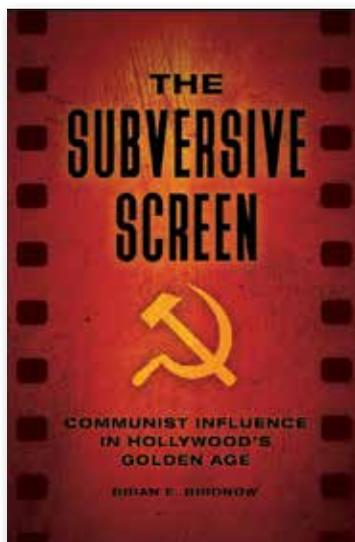
Saving America from Trump would mean, in this case, almost certainly delivering it into the Democrats’ hands, but like Teddy Roosevelt running against incumbent William Howard Taft in 1912, these would-be challengers rate that outcome as the lesser of two evils. (Honor plus interest, you might say.) Even as T.R. thought Taft would spoil the GOP’s reputation for idealistic Progressivism, so they have persuaded themselves, or are trying to persuade themselves, that Trump’s re-election would spoil forever the compassionate conservative movement and this kinder, gentler country.

A similar chain of reasoning led T.R., after his 1912 race for the Republican nomination had been defeated, to run as a third-party candidate against Taft, effectively splitting the Republican vote and throwing the race to Woodrow Wilson, the Democrat. For fear of dividing the anti-Trump vote, none of our potential challengers would likely exercise such a third-party option in 2020. But politics is a strange business, and if the Democratic nominee were so left-wing as to seem unelectable, or if the Democratic vote were about to split between the socialists and the billionaires (Michael Bloomberg or Howard Schultz), or if Trump’s candidacy simply swooned, a three-way race might suddenly seem viable.

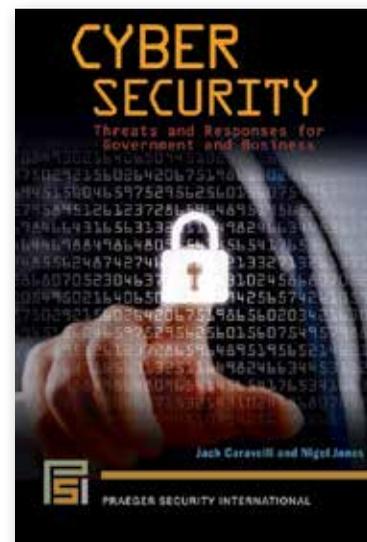
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This disdain for Trump's disdain for moralism would not have taken hold without some help from the man himself. It would be hard to imagine Trump defending his own selflessness because as a brash New Yorker, real estate tycoon, and TV celebrity he has never asserted such a thing. "The Donald" is, by definition, not self-effacing.

For example, he promises to make "great deals" on behalf of the American people. To make a deal it's usually necessary to cut some moral corners: to conceal or to dissemble the ultimate price you are willing to pay or to accept, and to exaggerate costs and benefits in the course of the negotiations. Trump enjoys the process, celebrated it in a book (*The Art of the Deal*), and dislikes politicians who think they're above it, or who can't occasionally drop their high-minded mask.

But there are disadvantages to non-stop egotism and egoism, summed up in the charge that his morality is purely, as they say, "transactional." The art of "the deal" seems to imply that life is nothing more than one deal after another, without any permanent partners or friends, much less sacred ties of family, citizenship, and religion. The very shape of his business career—moving opportunistically from New York real estate to New Jersey casinos to reality TV to branding deals, sometimes leaving unhappy creditors in his wake—lends itself to this interpretation. Though this indictment is terribly one-sided, it is a side of Trump he likes to show in public.

Of all his potential Republican challengers, Romney is best positioned to press this critique of Trump, which is why I regard him as the most dangerous to the president should he enter the race. He is or was a businessman, too, but Romney doesn't boast about cutting corners. He likes to think of himself as a moral capitalist, and as a religious and moral man simply, who stands for honor in both private and public life. During the 2016 Republican primaries, his denunciation of Trump, though it came too late to make a difference, glowed with a fierce indignation that none of Trump's actual rivals for the nomination could muster. (For instance, he said Trump's promises "were as worthless as a degree from Trump University.")

As president, Trump sometimes has treated his political allies with astonishing indifference and even disrespect, dismissing members of his staff and cabinet (e.g., Reince Priebus, Rex Tillerson, Jeff Sessions, Jim Mattis) without even the courtesy of his *Apprentice* trademark, a face-to-face "You're fired." He has been as shifting and elusive in negotiations with his Republican allies on the Hill as he

has been with his Democratic congressional opponents. Such high-handedness will come back to haunt him, and betrays a position not so much above, as outside of, party, including his own GOP.

A president caught between the two parties is a weak president. Transactional loyalty runs both ways. The number of tell-all books is bound to increase, as is the reluctance of congressional Republicans to help clean up his rhetorical and policy messes. Many suburban GOP and independent voters who were with Trump in 2016 stayed home or voted Democratic in 2018. Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, which provided his margin of victory in the electoral college, trended Democratic last November. Ties of mere interest are fickle.

Yet his poll numbers are not in free fall. The Republicans gained seats in the Senate this time. Trump's base remains loyal to him—because many conservatives see him not only as a guardian of their interests but also

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#### Choose Greatness

**T**RUMP'S CAMPAIGN SLOGAN WAS "MAKE America Great Again." The goal of greatness, as Trump invokes it, embraces both interest and honor. It strives to unite might and right in a proud or honorable combination, a distinctively American combination that we have lost, or at least are in danger of losing. To make her great again means America was once great and that it is in our power to make her so once more. It is our choice. Neither greatness nor decline is inevitable.

Trump wove these themes together brilliantly in his second State of the Union Address, the opening salvo of his 2020 campaign against the Democrats. Though not well delivered by normal standards, the speech displayed a deep political cunning and a gratifying statesmanship. More in sadness than anger,

and by quiet contrasts more than emphatic confrontations, Trump seized the common-sense middle ground of our politics and laid the premises for his coming campaign to marginalize the Democrats.

The speech opened by commemorating two anniversaries that showed "the majesty of America's mission and the power of American pride." The first was D-Day (75 years ago this June), the start of what General Eisenhower called "the Great Crusade," when 75,000 "young American men" stormed Europe "to save our civilization from tyranny." He pointed to three of them, now 90-something-year-olds, in the gallery. The second anniversary was Apollo 11's landing on the moon (50 years ago this July); of the "brave young pilots" who made the journey and "planted that flag," the most famous survivor, Buzz Aldrin, rose and saluted from his seat in the gallery.

It was good theater, and even better politics. Ronald Reagan had struck similar chords; Barack Obama, too, though with subtle reservations. But patriotic nationalism is out of fashion, especially among the leftists young and old who are planning to run for president or who are otherwise celebrated these days. Can anyone imagine Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez singing such paeans to American majesty and pride? Why, the very mention of a "great crusade" would have triggered her into a rattling denunciation of Islamophobia. Or Bernie Sanders, who longs to be the first socialist president—who would also be, and not exactly incidentally, our first chief executive to have honeymooned in the Soviet Union.

Trump let the sheer political incorrectness of his remarks remain implicit. Those heroic "young American men" who liberated Europe stood in silent contrast to the Left's contemporary obsession with toxic masculinity; and to the chaste virtue-signaling exhibited by what Lance Morrow called the "white-clad vestal brigade" of new Democratic congresswomen. Those woke priestesses would be puzzled by the notion of saving "our civilization from tyranny," insofar as they've learned at university that our civilization *is* tyranny, from the racism, sexism, and capitalism of which they have been elected to deliver us, in a political invasion far more consequential (in their fevered imaginations) than D-Day.

Trump spoke movingly of his, and America's, horror of late-term abortion, which he put tacitly in the context of the Nazi horrors to which those American boys had put an end. His lengthy discourse on immigration policy, one of the best of his presidency, emphasized its moral dimensions, and the way that "mass illegal migration" unfairly burdened the working class with "reduced jobs, lower wages,...



and a depleted social safety net.” His rediscovery of pre-Cold War Republican policies continued with his defense of tariffs and trade protectionism on grounds of national defense and fairness to American workers.

Perhaps the most striking moment, sending a kind of premonitory shudder through the Democrats and offering a clear preview of the 2020 contest, was Trump’s warning against socialism. “America was founded on liberty and independence, and not government coercion, domination, and control. We are born free and we will stay free. Tonight,” he declared, “we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country.” He had Venezuela at hand as an example of socialist folly and evil. He didn’t have to mention that the Nazis were socialists, too. From their dreams of socialism, a Green New Deal, and Medicare for All, the Democrats in the chamber suddenly seemed...woke. They sat there, stunned, or at least silent, realizing that soon they would have to face this man in the ring. As Mike Tyson said, “Everybody has a plan until they get hit.” And Trump was only sparring.

At the end Trump returned to D-Day, to those “young men of 18 and 19, hurtling on fragile landing craft toward the most momentous battle in the history of war,” and to those whose lives and freedom they saved, including the two Holocaust survivors in the gallery. Why did those young men do it? Trump asked. “Their cause was this nation and gener-

ations yet unborn.... They did it for America. They did it for us.” They chose greatness, and freedom, and life, as we should, too. Let the Democrats run on infanticide, socialism, and porous borders.

### The Persuasion Gap

IT WAS A SMART SPEECH HIGHLIGHTING an attractive form of civic nationalism. At the least, it will make it harder for leftists and Never Trumpers to compare Trump to Hitler—harder, but they will still do it, because they can’t help themselves. At its best, this State of the Union foreshadows the terms on which the president may enlarge his base of support, and perhaps win a majority of the popular vote, in 2020.

Yet his SOTU from 2018 was also a very effective address. Does anyone remember it? This president has given some good set-piece speeches but their influence, not only on public opinion but even within his own administration, seems to have faded rapidly. Reagan’s and Obama’s speeches set the tone for their presidencies. They and their spokesmen and appointees referred back to the speeches in order to explain where the country was and whither it was tending, and in order to justify what the administration was doing.

Trump’s speeches tend to disappear in the next day’s or next week’s Twitter storm. This is unfortunate, because if Americans could focus on his more deliberative statements

they would have a less chaotic, more consistent view of his policies and goals. They could see his administration unfolding in a series of choices, i.e., deliberate decisions connecting means to ends, rather than in a daily hailstorm of congratulation and indignation.

Andrew Roberts, whose *Churchill: Walking With Destiny* is deservedly a bestseller, said the other day that Winston Churchill would have been a master tweeter, a virtuoso of vitriol and wit in 280 characters. But still, those tweets would have been ornaments to his speeches, not a substitute for them. Twitter is anti-deliberative most of the time, and needs to have a dignified connection to something greater than itself. Reagan, and *a fortiori* Churchill, used their speeches to introduce and explain important policies, but Trump has advanced his own policies with little or no rhetorical cover. An egregious example is the decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, announced via Twitter. It isn’t necessary to stop tweeting, but it is urgent to pursue a larger strategy of persuasion.

Mrs. Thatcher’s famous motto was, “First you win the argument, then you win the vote.” The Trump Administration needs to keep its eye on the argument, if it intends to win the vote.

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