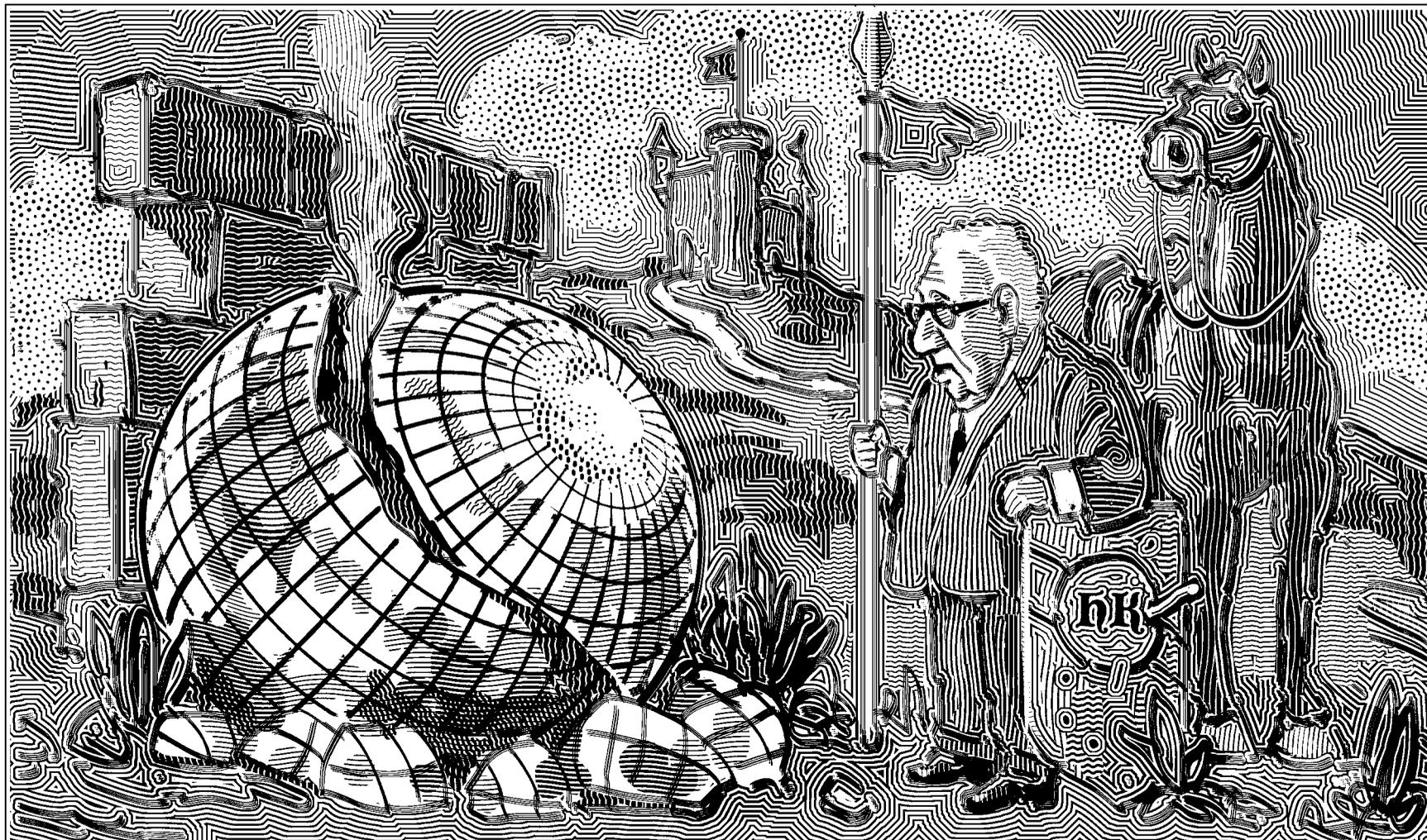


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2015

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



## THE WORLD ACCORDING TO KISSINGER

by Angelo M. Codevilla

*Plus:*

Michael Anton:  
**Tom Wolfe's  
Women**

Mackubin T. Owens:  
**Robert E. Lee**

Lee Edwards:  
**LBJ vs. Reagan**

William Voegeli:  
**Political Correctness**

Lucas E. Morel:  
**Brookhiser's Lincoln**

Edward Feser:  
**Science & the Soul**

Christopher Caldwell:  
**Getting Over Vietnam**

Allen C. Guelzo:  
**Is Capitalism  
Slavery?**

Larry P. Arnn:  
**Martin Gilbert**



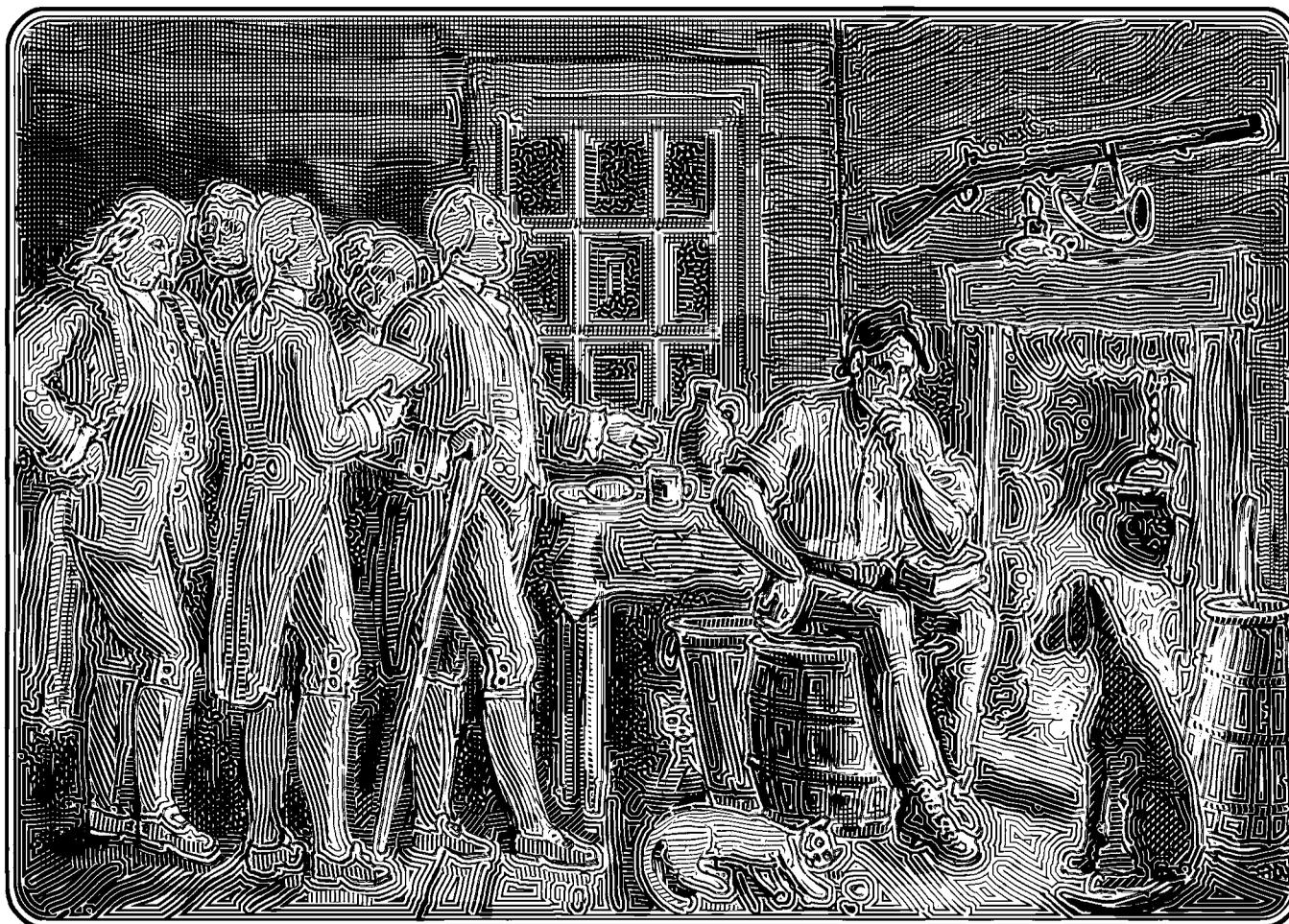
A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95  
IN CANADA: \$7.95

Book Review by Lucas E. Morel

## OUR FATHERS

*Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln*, by Richard Brookhiser.  
Basic Books, 347 pages, \$27.99



**I**N *FOUNDERS' SON*, RICHARD BROOKHISER accomplishes what one might have thought to be impossible: seeing the most written-about life in American history through a lens that is both new and important. Viewing Abraham Lincoln as a “son” of the American Founders, Brookhiser brings Lincoln’s career and especially his mind to thrilling life. Everyone knows Lincoln’s reputation as the preserver of the Union and emancipator of slaves, but Brookhiser explains how central the founders and the founding were to Lincoln’s conception of America and to his own statesmanship.

As the author of biographies of George Washington, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris, and the Adamses (John, John Quincy, Charles Francis, and Henry), Brookhiser—a senior editor of *National Review* magazine—comes

well prepared to make the case for Lincoln as the founders’ son. Relations between fathers and sons can be complicated, all the more so when there are several fathers, and he traces these complications insightfully. It is natural, too, that as sons mature, they grow in understanding of their fathers, as Brookhiser’s Lincoln does in his understanding of the founders. Ultimately, the son acquires his own independent judgment and, if he reveres his father(s), as Lincoln does, he reveres them not merely because they are his but because he has learned to see something in them that is worthy of reverence.

A distinctive virtue of this biography is that it thinks Lincoln’s thoughts along with him, and invites the reader to do the same. *Founders’ Son* illuminates Lincoln’s uncanny sense of political strategy, but attends most carefully to his words. It has something incisive to say

about almost all of Lincoln’s great speeches and writings. Much like Brookhiser’s fine biography of George Washington, *Founding Father* (1996), written “to explain its subject, and to shape the minds and hearts of those who read it,” *Founders’ Son* is biography as civics lesson: Lincoln’s political education of the nation becomes ours.

**T**HE AMERICAN FOUNDER, GEORGE Washington, stands as an important motivator in Lincoln’s life—especially the Washington of Parson Weems’s famous biography. This popular work of fact and fiction conveyed a key lesson about “rising in the world” that Lincoln took to heart: Washington won ascendancy as a public figure chiefly “by his own merit.” Weems’s Washington was a model of personal virtue—cherry tree and all—but he was also a “champion of liberty,”



whose crossing of the Delaware River and battle at Trenton, New Jersey, assumed world-historic significance for Lincoln.

In what, as far as I know, is a first for Lincoln biographies, Brookhiser identifies Thomas Paine as a key influence on Lincoln, not simply as one of several strident critics of Christianity that he read and absorbed—he read Voltaire and Constantin de Volney, too—but as “an eccentric founding father who gave him provisional answers to some big questions, and who encouraged him in certain styles of thinking and writing.” For example, Brookhiser maintains that Lincoln’s signature use of *reductio ad absurdum*, the combination of logic and humor, came from Paine. Most biographies mention Lincoln’s early religious skepticism, which was used against him when he ran for Congress in 1846, but say little else about Lincoln’s attraction to “infidel” views. Brookhiser argues that Paine’s ridicule of religion and his devotion to reason were irresistible to Lincoln, who went so far as to write his own tract critical of orthodox Christianity, which friends managed to dispose of before its publication could ruin a political career just under way. In sum, Brookhiser interprets the early Lincoln of the Lyceum Address (1838) and the Temperance Address (1842) as too enamored of Paine’s reason to do justice to the memory of the other founding fathers, who were “venerable but vanished”—including Washington.

**I**N HIS LYCEUM ADDRESS, LINCOLN PRAISED the founders for establishing “a political edifice of liberty and equal rights,” but concluded that with that “generation just gone to rest,” a living memory of the founding heroes would need to be replaced by pillars

hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence.

Brookhiser thinks reason needs more help from memory than young Lincoln recognized, and that his discovery of this was key to his soaring rhetorical invocations of the founders in the 1850s and beyond. In the meantime, the Temperance Address wasted Washington’s legacy and was “the most fustian performance he would ever give.” More generally, Lincoln’s rhetorical use of Washington in the 1840s was “opportunistic or empty.”

Signal events of the 1850s, including the passing of Henry Clay, whom Lincoln saluted as his “beau ideal of a statesman,” elicited a defter political and rhetorical employment of the fathers and their principles. Clay, the Great Compromiser, was central for Lincoln, but the compromising that appealed to him was not a mere splitting of differences or “going along to get along.” Reflecting a “deep devotion to the cause of human liberty,” his compromises steered between abolitionists who rejected an allegedly pro-slavery Constitution and slavery apologists who rejected the Declaration of Independence if it applied to black people. Clay helped Lincoln see how to apply the founders’ thinking to the increasingly divisive slavery controversy. Instead of appealing emptily to old icons, Lincoln learned to apply the founders’ principles—especially the equality and consent principles enshrined by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence—to the pressing constitutional issues of his day. In doing so, Lincoln answered Clay’s call for “a new race of heroes.”

### A distinctive virtue of this biography is that it thinks Lincoln’s thoughts along with him.

**T**HE FOUNDERS BECAME ALL THE MORE important when Lincoln’s rivalry with Stephen Douglas came to a head in the mid- to late 1850s, for Douglas also claimed the founders’ mantle when he proposed popular sovereignty as the best way to settle the agitation over slavery. Brookhiser wisely identifies the years 1854-60 as “one long Lincoln-Douglas debate,” with Lincoln’s greatest speeches devoted to refuting Douglas’s account of the founding fathers. In the Peoria Address (1854), the dead fathers of the Lyceum Address 16 years before were suddenly brought to life via the Declaration of Independence, the Northwest Ordinance, and the Constitution to clarify the options the country faced in the growing crisis. His Cooper Institute address (1860) delivered blow after devastating blow to Douglas’s claim that “popular sovereignty” represented the principles of the founding fathers; not incidentally, the speech positioned Lincoln as a credible long shot for the presidency.

Brookhiser devotes a whole chapter to the Cooper Institute speech, particularly to how Lincoln came to terms with the Declaration

of Independence and its principal author, Thomas Jefferson, “the most problematic of the founders” and one who “so often seemed to disagree with himself,” as Brookhiser describes him. Lincoln “the reasoner” as well as Lincoln “the artist” found a worthy aegis in Jefferson, whom Lincoln did not mind using “to wrong-foot the Democrats, Jefferson’s political heirs.” To his credit, he “also clung to Jefferson to save him.” Brookhiser observes, “Sons need their fathers to be at their best; sometimes they need them to be better than they actually were.”

Douglas and Lincoln both claimed to be acting consistently with the founding fathers, and both were stalwart defenders of the Union. Former Whig Alexander Stephens, on the other hand, the vice president of the Confederacy, rejected the founders’ ideas as “fundamentally wrong.” For him, Thomas Jefferson “and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution” erred in believing that “the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature.” If Lincoln saw himself as “the loyal son of founders,” writes Brookhiser, Stephens “portrayed himself as the wiser son—wiser than Lincoln, wiser than the founders themselves.”

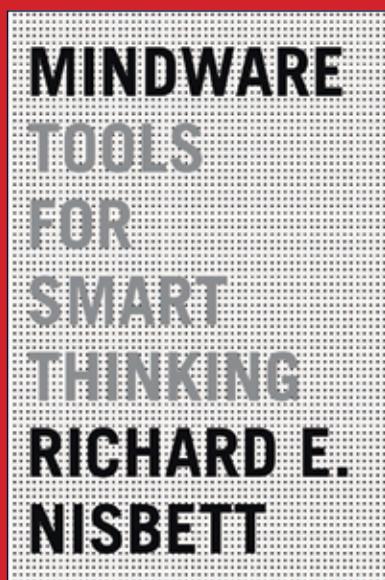
With the deepening of the slavery crisis and the coming of the war, Lincoln’s writings and speeches reveal a growing religious sensibility, which Brookhiser notes but does not give the serious consideration it deserves. To his credit, Brookhiser marks Lincoln’s turn to poetry in his overtures to founders he once claimed were dead but now brings to life by recalling their words and deeds. But he underestimates the seriousness with which Lincoln read poetry, as certain poets helped him wrestle with the quandaries of religious faith and practice.

**B**ROOKHISER CALLS POETRY, ESPECIALLY that of Robert Burns and William Shakespeare, “a mirror for [Lincoln’s] moods.” This is true as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go nearly far enough. Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies were for Lincoln a great teacher, a mirror not only for his moods but for his deepest thoughts. In the middle of the Civil War, he wrote a letter to Shakespearean actor James Hackett, expressing his preference for the abortive prayer of King Claudius over Hamlet’s more famous soliloquy: “Unlike you gentlemen of the profession, I think the soliloquy in *Hamlet* commencing ‘O, my offence is rank’ surpasses that commencing ‘To be, or not to be.’ But pardon this small attempt at criticism.”

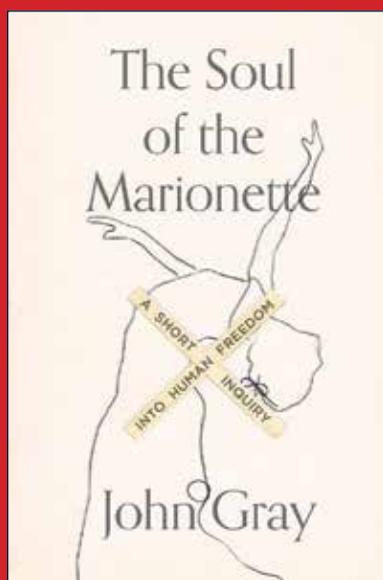
In contrast to Paine’s forthright ridicule of Christianity, Shakespeare gives Christian-

# AN INVALUABLE EDUCATION

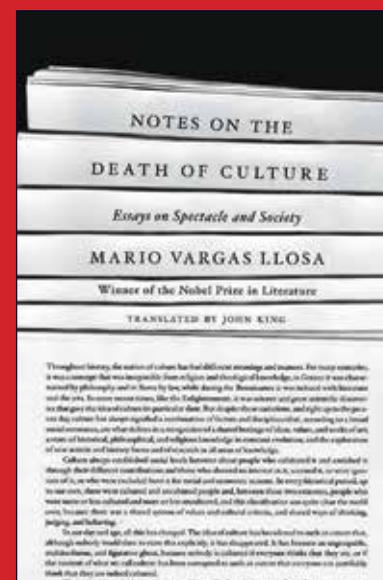
NEW BOOKS FROM FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX



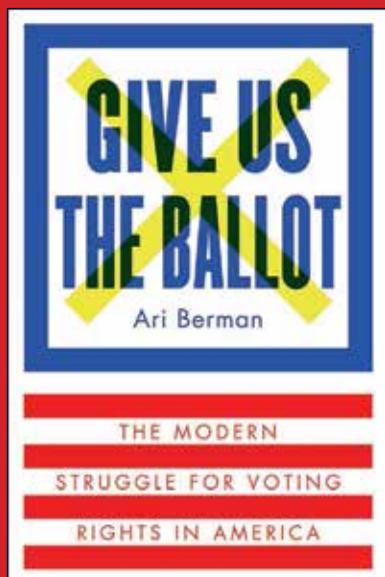
"The most influential thinker, in my life, has been the psychologist Richard Nisbett." —Malcolm Gladwell, *The New York Times Book Review*



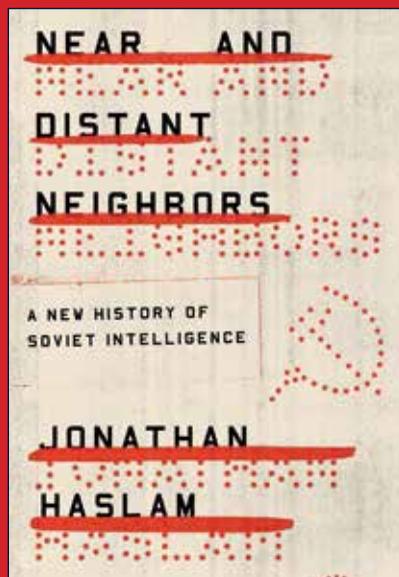
John Gray draws together the religious, philosophic, and fantastical traditions that question the very idea of human freedom.



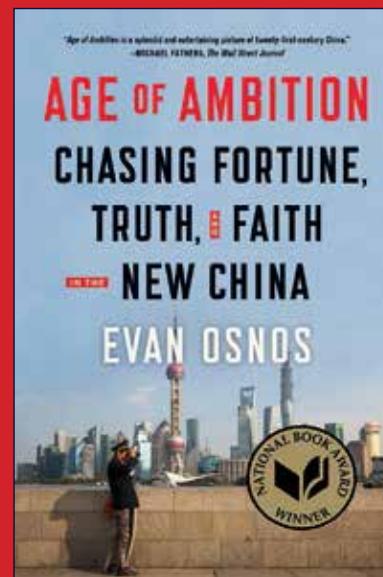
Mario Vargas Llosa's provocative essay collection finds the Nobel laureate taking on the decline of intellectual life.



On the fiftieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, Ari Berman gives us a riveting and alarming account of the continuing battle over the right to vote.



A revelatory and pathbreaking account of the highly secretive world of the Soviet intelligence services and Vladimir Putin's rise to power.



Now in paperback  
Winner of the 2014 National Book Award in nonfiction



[www.fsgbooks.com](http://www.fsgbooks.com)



ity its due while illustrating the difficulties it poses for political life. In the aforementioned prayer, Claudius attempts to ask God to forgive him for murdering his brother (for the crown) and bedding his brother's wife. But as forgiveness only follows repentance, which would require forfeiting his title, wife, and ambition, the new king rejects the mercy of God to enjoy the illicit pleasures of earth. Lincoln marveled at Shakespeare's depiction of a soul caught between the tug of heaven and the pull of earth, which made Hamlet's more famous soliloquy on suicide seem ironically self-indulgent. Where Brookhiser highlights only the rhetorical draw of the Bible for Lincoln, his increasing references to God and the Bible reflect a more serious consideration of its revealed truths, which Lincoln also found in the Bard. And so, despite his youthful reservations about the Bible, Lincoln thought deeply about Christianity. He avoided the religious orthodoxies shared by most Americans, but was never an avowed atheist. In the end, Lincoln was remarkably Shakespearean about religion.

Because Brookhiser underestimates Lincoln's religiosity, he misses an opportunity to reflect upon a profound connection between Lincoln and Washington at a crucial time in

Lincoln's life and the life of the nation. In his biography of Washington, Brookhiser argued that "Washington's God was no watchmaker...but an active agent and force." The first president "had a warm and lively belief, repeatedly expressed in private and in public, in Providence." Consider, then, Lincoln's Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois, in 1861:

I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me, and remain with you and be every where for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

Or Lincoln's 1861 speech to the New Jersey Senate en route to the White House:

I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liber-

ties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

The providential self-understanding that Brookhiser rightly observed in Washington is certainly present in that founder's son as he approaches his presidential inauguration. Though Brookhiser cites both of these speeches, and notices that the task that awaits Lincoln is "serious enough to invoke God," he fails to highlight Lincoln's consistent references to God as he travels to the nation's capital to assume the presidency. Neglecting to mention that Washington also made a habit of appealing to the Almighty is passing strange for a biography that argues that the ravages of the Civil War will compel Lincoln to replace his earthly fathers with "God the Father."

**H**AD HE EXPLORED THIS SIMILARITY between Lincoln and Washington, Brookhiser would not have struggled, as he does, to understand Lincoln's most sublime speech, the Second Inaugural. As the war appeared to draw to a close with a body count exceeding any sane American's expectation, Lincoln turned from the founding fathers to "God the Father." He made the justice of God—and by implication, His mercy—the centerpiece of the address, for without it, he could not fathom the meaning of the war. Brookhiser considers this Lincoln's greatest speech, but thinks it is as "wrongheaded" as it is great.

Despite this blind spot, *Founders' Son* shows how we can, like Lincoln, look to the founders to regain our bearings. Lincoln "made his mark as a politician mostly by communication," notes the author. "He would never have been able to do anything memorable and right if he had not said so many memorable, true words." Thanks to Richard Brookhiser's own memorable, true words, his readers have fresh reasons to be grateful for their patrimony.

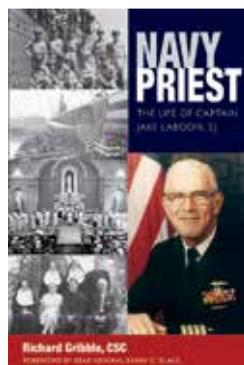
*Lucas E. Morel is Class of 1960 Professor of Ethics and Politics at Washington and Lee University, and editor of Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages (University Press of Kentucky). He is currently writing a book entitled Lincoln and the American Founding (forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press).*

## The Catholic University of America Press

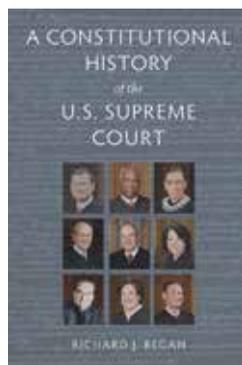
### NEW for SPRING & SUMMER 2015



**A Partisan Church**  
*American Catholicism & the Rise of Neoconservative Catholics*  
by Todd Scribner  
Paper or eBook \$34.95



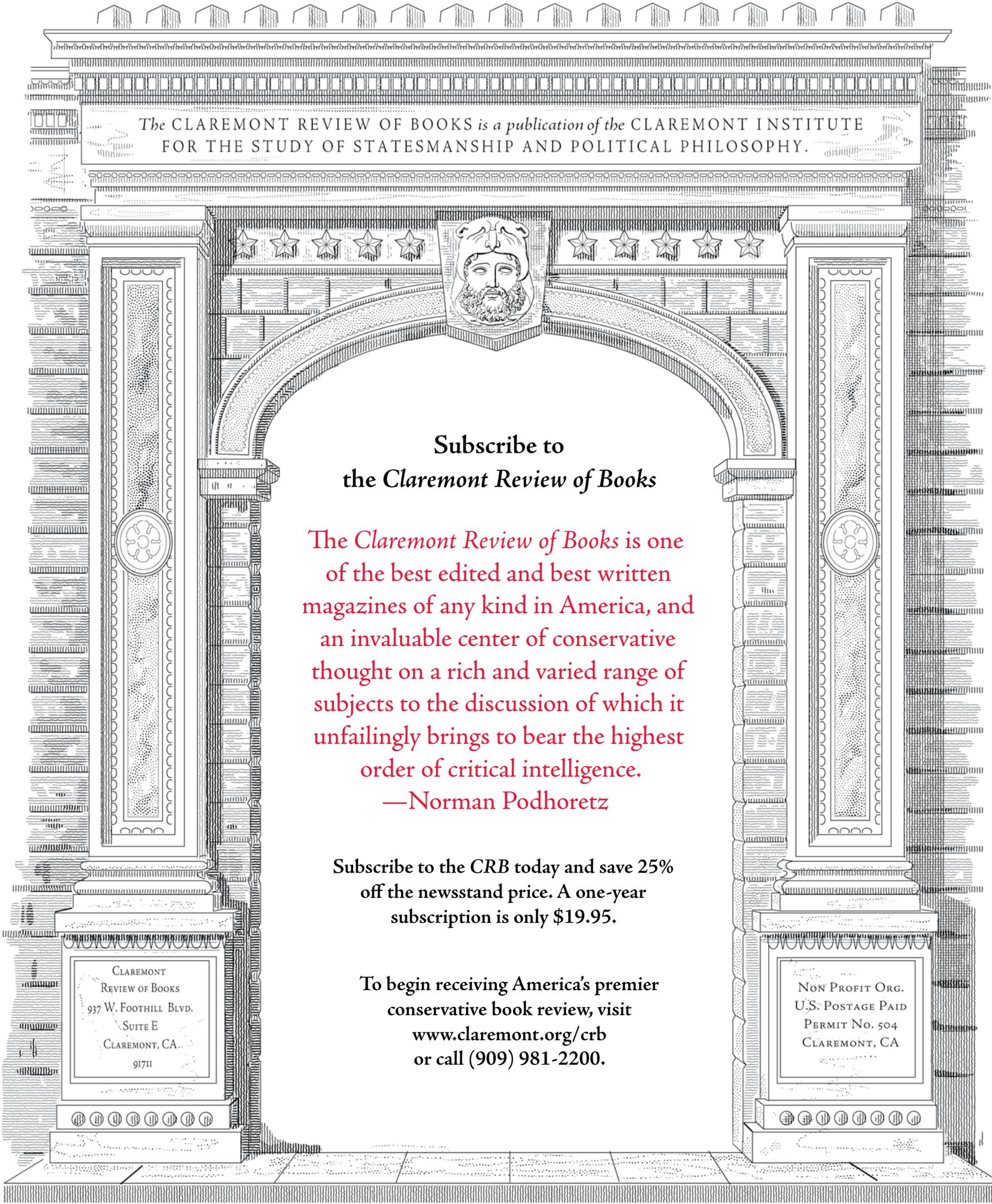
**Navy Priest**  
*The Life of Captain Jake Laboon, SJ*  
by Richard Gribble, CSC  
Paper or eBook \$29.95



**A Constitutional History of the U.S. Supreme Court**  
by Richard Regan  
Paper or eBook \$24.95

[cuapress.cua.edu](http://cuapress.cua.edu)





The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE  
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to  
*the Claremont Review of Books*

*The Claremont Review of Books is one of the best edited and best written magazines of any kind in America, and an invaluable center of conservative thought on a rich and varied range of subjects to the discussion of which it unfailingly brings to bear the highest order of critical intelligence.*

*—Norman Podhoretz*

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25% off the newsstand price. A one-year subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America's premier conservative book review, visit [www.claremont.org/crb](http://www.claremont.org/crb) or call (909) 981-2200.

CLAREMONT  
REVIEW OF BOOKS  
937 W. FOOTHILL BLVD.  
SUITE E  
CLAREMONT, CA  
91711

NON PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
PERMIT No. 504  
CLAREMONT, CA