

VOLUME XI, NOS 1 & 2, WINTER 2010-SPRING 2011

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

## A DECADE OF *CRB*

by Charles R. Kesler



TEN YEARS AGO THE CLAREMONT INSTITUTE DECIDED TO PUBLISH a book review. What could we have been thinking? It isn't unheard of for a think tank to publish a magazine, of course, though it is rare for a think tank to publish a good one. For the *Claremont Review of Books* to prosper it would have to be *very good*, and it would have to meet a need that the conservative intellectual movement, despite its fecundity, had not satisfied.

In the inaugural issue, I posed the threshold question: Why a book review? Because, I wrote,

it is a format that conservatives have not exploited, and we think that conservatives need, persistently and farsightedly, to wage the battle of ideas at the level of ideas rather than at the level of particular policies, important as they are. The galaxy of conservative journals and think tanks will continue to shine brightly...illuminating ideas as well as issues. But every month important conservative books and arguments languish, liberal tomes escape censure, and intelligent works of biography, history, politics, and literature remain unexamined.

The *CRB* set out to change that for the better, and we have succeeded remarkably, despite our remaining a David compared to the Goliaths of the Left. Take our most conspicuous competitor (please!): the *New York Review of Books* has scores of staffers, publishes 20 times a year, and is read by tens of thousands of academics and liberal activists, always assuming one can distinguish between an academic and a liberal activist. The *Claremont Review of Books* operates with a handful of staff (we have never had more than four full-time employees), publishes quarterly, and is read by mere thousands of people—but *what* people. Our readers love their country not despite but *because* of its founding principles. They believe in the liberty of the individual not merely on account of its material benefits, though these are undeniable, but because human liberty reflects the divine image stamped on every human soul. They cherish the civilization of which America is such a distinguished part, the civilization which Americans are once again called upon to defend against new forms of barbarism and tyranny, at home and abroad.

Despite his size and shiny helmet, and his coat of mail and the greaves of brass upon his legs, Goliath had a weakness, which Da-

vid exploited. He smote the Philistine in the forehead. When we at the *CRB* take up our little sling, we too aim our stones at liberalism's head—its most vulnerable point. Two generations ago, men as cultivated as Lionel Trilling and Louis Hartz took it for granted that conservatism in America was either liberalism in disguise or a European affectation, at once aristocratic and ridiculous. Over here, conservatism was supposed to be inarticulate—"bookless," John Kenneth Galbraith once sniffed. With his usual acuity, Galbraith's pronouncement came in the midst of the century's greatest outpouring of conservative books—by such different thinkers and writers as Milton Friedman, Leo Strauss, Whittaker Chambers, and William F. Buckley, Jr. And the flow of important books and essays has continued—as a glance at this issue's table of contents will confirm.

So who's bookless now? Six years ago the publisher of the *New Republic* confessed, "It is liberalism that is now bookless and dying. Who is a truly influential mind in our culture? Whose ideas challenge and whose ideals inspire?... There's no one, really." Perhaps Marty Peretz missed Barack Obama's autobiography, which inspired a lot of readers, or at least a lot of purchasers, once he became a presidential candidate. But in truth, it wasn't the book but Obama in the flesh, more precisely at the podium, that caused such devotees as Chris Matthews to go all tingly. In any event, the underlying problem is worse than Peretz realizes. As an intellectual movement, liberalism peaked a hundred years ago. Backhandedly, liberals have come around to admitting as much. From Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to President Obama, leading liberals now prefer to be called "progressives," hoping that everything old really is new again. This exhaustion of ideas does not imply that the printing presses have been stilled, to be sure, and books by and about liberals continue to pour forth, demanding critical attention.

WE HAD PUBLISHED ONLY FOUR ISSUES WHEN THE AWFUL ATTACKS of 9/11 occurred. In a few months we shall commemorate their tenth anniversary. In the intervening years, the *CRB* published bracing commentaries on the war arguing consistently that America's goal should be the destruction of the regimes that abetted and encouraged the attack, but not the occupation and wholesale democratic reconstruction of the unfortunate countries misruled by these regimes. Although we yield to



no one in our belief in the truth of the majestic propositions of the Declaration of Independence, we cautioned from the start that the right to self-government is one thing, the habits of mind and heart essential to self-government, quite another. In the current “Arab spring,” which is far from the first such season, we recommend a similar prudence.

These honorable disagreements over foreign policy were far different, however, from the reaction to 9/11 among the America-haters here and abroad. You may recall, for example, Ward Churchill, the faux American Indian professor in Colorado who compared the Americans slaughtered on 9/11 to “little Adolf Eichmanns” who got exactly what they deserved. Ward Churchill is now that rarest of rare beings: a tenured professor who has been fired. (Though this being America, he is suing for wrongful dismissal.) In the end, he was fired not for his slanders against those murdered in the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, but because his entire so-called scholarship was a tissue of lies. He made up events, he invented sources, and he spun everything in the most tendentiously anti-American way possible. And his colleagues, including those who had vetted him and recommended him for promotion and tenure at every turn—didn’t notice. Or rather, didn’t care to notice, until, that is, Churchill’s remarks about 9/11 drew public attention, for the first time, to the man and his mendacities.

I mention this sordid episode not because it is typical of the American academy. It is not, though precisely as an extreme case it sheds interesting light on the way his defenders thought to handle the matter. He had many such defenders, the late Howard Zinn among the most prominent, in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* and elsewhere. (To be fair, he had critics in those same pages.) After many obfuscations and evasions, his diehard supporters admitted he made stuff up. Nevertheless, they insisted, the ideological line he followed was the correct one: America was and is an unjust country dedicated to the suppression of blacks, Indians, women, and other minorities, and thus his falsehoods were *truer* than any of the so-called truths of his critics.

It is against perversions of truth such as these, and the cultural and intellectual superiority asserted in their name, that the *Claremont Review of Books* sets its face. Several issues ago, for instance, Steven Hayward replied to two Australian environmentalists whose book he had reviewed, unfavorably, in the previous *CRB*. Long ago Harvey Mansfield quipped that environmentalism is school prayer for liberals. In this case, however, the authors of *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy* seemed eager for downright authoritarian measures to force people to be green.

How did they respond to our reviewer’s skepticism? Well, they did not deny that in their book “we make some favorable comments about China’s authoritarian capacity to deal with environmental problems *potentially* better than liberal democracies can.” Without quite admitting it, they proceeded to suggest why “saving the planet is a value that overrides democracy and freedom.” “Is Hayward really implying,” they asked incredulously, “...that freedom is more important than life itself? Is this a modern day version of ‘better dead than red?’ If so it is absurd. No life, no freedom. Why should freedom be the ultimate value?”

Why indeed? Why should freedom be worth dying for, when it is possible to live comfortably, and with a miniscule carbon foot-

print, as a slave? On the radical Left, and even among mainstream liberals, one senses a growing alienation from the republic’s precepts and precedents that bodes ill not merely for comity between our political parties but also for our whole experiment in self-government.

**Y**ET WE SHOULD NOT DELUDE OURSELVES INTO THINKING THAT conservatism is in robust good health, either. It is surely better off than liberalism, but the Right has its own problems, perhaps best signified by the gap between the political possibilities suddenly raised by the Tea Party’s emergence and the rapid electoral repudiation of President Obama’s statist agenda, on the one hand, and the confusion over what, exactly, a return to constitutional government could possibly mean, on the other.

Which is why the *CRB* seeks to reinvigorate the American mind by returning to its first principles. Here we follow the lead of the Claremont Institute itself, which is pledged to restore the principles of the American Founding to their rightful, preeminent authority in our public life. As Harry V. Jaffa has argued wisely and often, a return to the principles of the Constitution and the Gettysburg Address requires something like a revolution not only against modern liberalism but also within modern conservatism.

Some conservatives start, as it were, from Edmund Burke; others from Friedrich Hayek. While we respect both thinkers and their schools of thought, we begin instead from America, the American political tradition in all its genius and profundity, and the relation of our tradition to revealed wisdom and to what the elderly Jefferson once called, rather insouciantly, “the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.” We think conservatism should take its bearings from the founders’ statesmanship, our citizens’ loyalty to the Declaration and Constitution, and the scenes, both tender and proud, of our national history. This kind of approach clears the air. It concentrates the mind. It engages and informs the ordinary citizen’s patriotism. And it introduces a new, sharper view of liberalism as descended not from the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, nor (God forbid) Abraham Lincoln, but from that movement which, a century ago, criticized George Washington’s and Lincoln’s Constitution as outmoded and, as we’d say today, racist, sexist, and antidemocratic. The Progressives broke with the old Constitution and its postulates, and set out to make a new, living constitution and a new, unlimited state, and the Obama Administration’s programs are merely the latest, and worst, installment of that purported evolution.

Even so, we don’t regard this view of conservatism and liberalism as a dogma to which our writers must subscribe. And besides, man doesn’t live by politics alone. Happily, we devote attention in our pages to Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, Facebook (Whitman would have loved it), and other cultural blooms. Indeed, we aspire to comment on the whole panoply of the arts, sciences, and civilized delights that Cicero celebrates in his marvelous phrase *otium cum dignitate*—leisure with dignity.

Ten years necessarily ring up many debts of gratitude, especially to our devoted staff, our expert contributors, and above all to you, dear reader. With your support, the *Claremont Review of Books* will continue to explore and express the common sense, and uncommon wisdom, of the American mind.