

VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2019

# CLAREMONT

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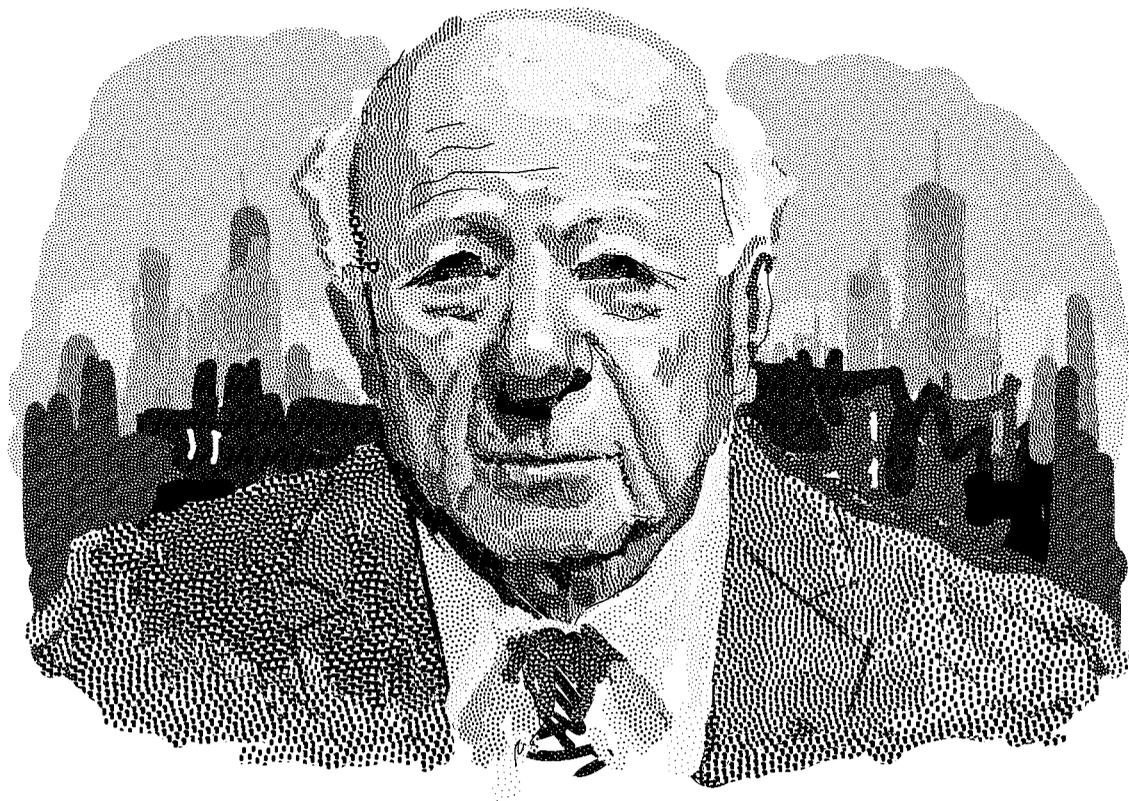
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CRB editor Charles R. Kesler recently sat down with Norman Podhoretz at his home in New York. In a wide-ranging conversation, the longtime editor-in-chief of *Commentary* and one of the founders of neoconservatism, who received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2004, revealed his thoughts on Donald Trump, *Never Trumpers*, Iraq, immigration, 2020 predictions, and more.

CRB: Let's start by talking about Donald Trump and you. In the first sentence of the first chapter of your book *Making It*, recently republished by the New York Review of Books Press, of all people—

NP: Hell froze over!

CRB: —you write famously, “One of the longest journeys in the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan...” How does your journey compare to Trump's journey from Queens to Manhattan?

NP: Well, of course that's very dated now. Nobody can afford to live in Brooklyn anymore. Escaping from Brooklyn was the great thing in my young life, but I have grandchildren who would like nothing better than to have an apartment there.

Trump's move from Queens to Manhattan was, as I understand the real estate business, a quite daring move. Maybe *that* was the longest journey in the world because the Manhattan

real estate world is a world unto its own. The competition is very fierce, you're dealing with many, many clever people. I think it was Tom Klingenstein who said he always thought Trump was Jewish because he fit in so well with the real-estatenicks in Manhattan, most of whom were, and are, Jewish.

CRB: What does that comparison mean?

NP: I take it as an affectionate remark. He had the qualities that all those guys had in common, and you might have thought, other things being equal, that he was one of them. And in a certain sense he was, but not entirely. I know a few of those guys and they're actually very impressive. You have to get permits, and you have to deal with the mob, and you have to know how to handle workers who are very recalcitrant, many of whom are thuggish. You're in a battlefield there, so you have to know how to operate politically as well as in a managerial capacity, and how to sweet talk and also how to curse. It's not an easy field to master.

CRB: Some people say that Trump has a blue collar sensibility. Do you see that?

NP: I do see it and even before Trump—long before Trump—actually going back to when I was in the army in the 1950s, I got to know blue-collar Americans. I'm “blue collar” myself, I suppose. I'm from the working class—my father was a milk man. But in the army I got to know people from all over the country and I fell in love with Americans—they were just great! These guys were unlike anybody I had ever met in New York or in England or France. They were mostly blue-collar kids and I think Trump has, in that sense, the common touch. That's one of the things—it may be the main thing—that explains his political success. It doesn't explain his success in general, but his political success, yes. Also—I often explain this to people—when I was a kid, you would rather be beaten up than back away from a fight. The worst thing in the world you could be called was a sissy. And I was beaten up many times.



Trump fights back. The people who say: “Oh, he shouldn’t lower himself,” “He should ignore this,” and “Why is he demeaning himself by arguing with some dopey reporter?” I think on the contrary—if you hit him, he hits back; and he is an equal opportunity counter puncher. It doesn’t matter who you are. And actually Obama, oddly enough, made the same statement: “He pulls a knife, you pull a gun.”

CRB: “The Chicago way.” Your own attitude towards Trump as a political figure has changed over time. How would you describe that evolution?

NP: Well, when he first appeared on the scene, I disliked him because he resembled one of the figures that I dislike most in American politics and with whom I had tangled, namely Pat Buchanan—I had tangled with him in print and I had accused him of anti-Semitism. And he came back at me, and I came back at him. And it was a real street fight. And I said to my wife: “This guy [Trump] is Buchanan without the anti-Semitism,” because he was a protectionist, a nativist, and an isolationist. And those were the three pillars of Pat Buchanan’s political philosophy. How did I know he wasn’t an anti-Semite? I don’t know—I just knew. And he certainly wasn’t and isn’t, and I don’t think he’s a racist or any of those things.

CRB: But you still think he’s an isolationist and a nativist?

NP: No, that’s what’s so interesting. At first, I disliked him because I thought he was a Buchananite, and then when he said that they *lied* us into Iraq—that put me off, because that is itself one of the big lies of the century, and no matter how often it’s been refuted and refuted decisively, it just stays alive. And when Trump committed himself to that, I thought, “well, to hell with him.”

CRB: You refuted that lie in your book *World War IV*.

NP: Yes, and I’m actually quite proud of that section of the book—it certainly convinced me! So for a while I was supporting Marco Rubio and I was enthusiastic about him. As time went on, and I looked around me, however, I began to be bothered by the hatred that was building up against Trump from my soon to be new set of ex-friends. It really disgusted me. I just thought it had no objective correlative. You could think that he was unfit for office—I could understand that—but my ex-friends’ revulsion was always accompanied

by attacks on the people who supported him. They called them dishonorable, or opportunists, or cowards—and this was done by people like Bret Stephens, Bill Kristol, and various others. And I took offense at that. So that inclined me to what I then became: anti-anti-Trump. By the time he finally won the nomination, I was sliding into a pro-Trump position, which has grown stronger and more passionate as time has gone on.

On the question of his isolationism, he doesn’t seem to give a damn. He hires John Bolton and Mike Pompeo who, from my point of view, as a neoconservative (I call myself a “paleo-neoconservative” because I’ve been one for so long), couldn’t be better. And that’s true of many of his other cabinet appointments. He has a much better cabinet than Ronald Reagan had, and Reagan is the sacred figure in Republican hagiography. Trump is able to do that because, not only is he not dogmatic, he doesn’t operate on the basis of fixed principles. Now some people can think that’s a

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defect—I don’t think it’s a defect in a politician at a high level. I remember thinking to myself once on the issue of his embrace of tariffs, and some of my friends were very angry. I said to myself for the first time, “*Was thou shalt not have tariffs*” inscribed on the tablets that Moses brought down from Sinai? Maybe Trump has something on this issue, in this particular—and then I discovered to my total amazement that there are a hundred tariffs (I think that’s right) against America from all over the world. So the idea that we’re living in a free trade paradise was itself wrong, and in any case, there was no reason to latch onto it as a sacred dogma.

And that was true of immigration. I was always pro-immigration because I’m the child of immigrants. And I thought it was unseemly of me to oppose what not only had saved my life, but had given me the best life I think I could possibly have had. I wrote a book called *My Love Affair with America*, and that states

it accurately. So I was very reluctant to join in Trump’s skepticism about the virtues of immigration.

CRB: And you used to debate immigration with John O’ Sullivan and Peter Brimelow when they were at *National Review* in the 1990s, I guess. They were turning NR’s position on immigration around in a sort of anticipation of Trump.

NP: Yes, though if anyone deserves the epithet “rootless cosmopolitan,” which has been applied to the Jews, it’s John O’Sullivan, whom I’m very fond of.

CRB: Do you find yourself repudiating the arguments you were maintaining then, or do you think the circumstances have changed?

NP: Well, both. I mean it’s hard for me to repudiate those arguments because I think there was a lot of validity in them. We weren’t arguing about illegal immigration. We were arguing about immigration. And one of my favorite stories about immigration had to do with Henry James. Henry James was taken on a tour of the Lower East Side in 1905—I forget the name of the sociologist who took him; it was a WASP of course. The Lower East Side was then a heavily Jewish ghetto, and James visited a café filled with artists who were speaking animatedly in English and in Yiddish. And he said to himself, “Well, if these people stay” (or something like that), “whatever language they speak, we shall not know it for English.” And I would then point out, well, the only people who are reading Henry James and indeed writing doctoral dissertations on him are the grandchildren of those people. So that was something to be borne in mind. But that was on the issue of immigration in general.

In 1924, immigration virtually stopped and the rationale for the new policy was to give newcomers a chance to assimilate—which may or may not have been the main reason—but it probably worked. What has changed my mind about immigration now—even legal immigration—is that our culture has weakened to the point where it’s no longer attractive enough for people to want to assimilate *to*, and we don’t insist that they do assimilate. When I was a kid, I lived in a neighborhood that had immigrant Jews, immigrant Italians (mainly from Sicily), and immigrant blacks—that is, they had come up from the South recently. It was incidentally one of the things that made me a life-long skeptic about integration because far from understanding each other and getting



to know each other, all we did was fight. In any case, the stuff that went on in the public schools! I had an incident when I went to school at the age of five. Although I was born in Brooklyn, I was bilingual and Yiddish was in a sense my first language, so I came to school with a bit of an accent. And the story was: I was wandering around in the hall, and the teacher said: "Where are you going?" And I said: "I'm goink op de stez." And they slapped me into a remedial speech class. Now, if anyone did that now, federal marshals would materialize out of the wall and arrest them for cultural genocide. But, of course, they did me an enormous favor. I imagine my life would have been very different if I had not been subjected to that "speech therapy," as they called it. And parents then did not object—on the contrary, they were very humble. If the teacher thought so, and the school thought so, they must be right. That was the culture of the prewar period. You certainly wanted your children to be Americans—real Americans—even if you wanted them to hold on to their ancestral culture as well. You were free to do that on your own time and your own dime. And it worked. It worked beautifully.

So when I got into the army and I began meeting other kinds of Americans—native

Americans—so to speak, I was floored. I didn't like the army particularly, but I got on very well with the guys I met. Their humor, and their irreverence, and their camaraderie—it was great!

CRB: Well, there you go. So you began by looking at Trump as a kind of warmed over Pat Buchanan—

NP: Yeah, without the anti-Semitism.

CRB: Did he do anything as president or as a candidate that accelerated your reevaluation of him? Did a lightbulb go on at some point?

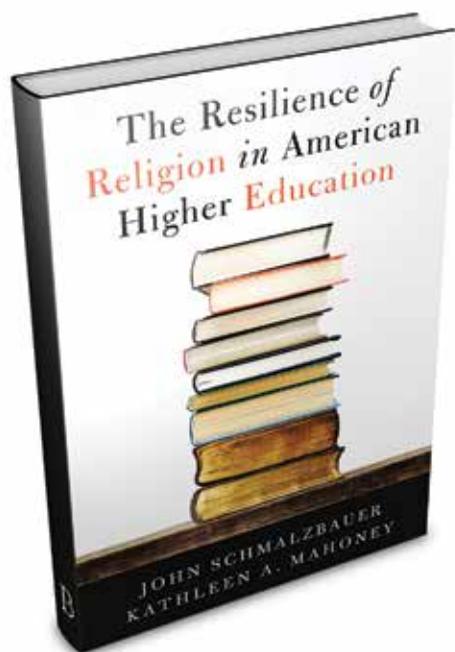
NP: Well it wasn't a lightbulb, and it wasn't the road to Damascus revelation. It was that as I watched the appointments he was making even at the beginning, I was astonished. And he couldn't have been doing this by accident. So that everything he was doing by way of policy as president, belied the impression he had given to me of a Buchananite. He was the opposite of a Buchananite in practice. The fact is he was a new phenomenon. And I still to this day haven't quite figured out how he reconciled all of this in his own head. Maybe because, as I said earlier, he was not dogmatic about things. He did what he had to do to get things done.

CRB: I think you said he didn't have principles.

NP: Well, okay, but he had something—he had instincts. And he knew, from my point of view, who the good guys were. Now, he made some mistakes, for example, with Secretary of State Tillerson, but so did Reagan. I used to point out to people that it took Lincoln three years to find the right generals to fight the civil war, so what did you expect from George W. Bush? In Trump's case, most of his appointments were very good and they've gotten better as time's gone on. And even the thing that I held almost sacred, and still do really, which is the need for American action abroad—interventionism—which he still says he's against. I mean, he wants to pull out all our troops from Syria and I think it was probably Bolton who talked him out of doing it all in one stroke. Even concerning interventionism, I began to rethink. I found my mind opening to possibilities that hadn't been there before. And in this case it was a matter of acknowledging changing circumstances rather than philosophical or theoretical changes.

CRB: You were an avid supporter of the Iraq war. He's a pronounced critic of it. Are you persuaded by his opinion?

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NP: No, I am intransigent on Iraq. I think it was the right thing to do at the time. I've even gone so far as to say Bush would have deserved to be impeached if he had *not* gone in. Every intelligence agency in the world said that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction—nuclear weapons, actually—every one of his own intelligence agencies said so. Saddam himself said so. Especially after 9/11, there was almost no good reason *not* to go in. The administration had gone through all the diplomatic kabuki, which I always knew wouldn't work. It's inconceivable that they could have been lying. Who would be stupid enough to lie when you're going to be exposed in a week? It's ridiculous! Nobody was lying, except Saddam.

I was once on a panel on a *National Review* cruise. Bill Buckley was still alive. They posed the question: "Knowing what you know now, would you have gone into Iraq?" And everybody, including Bill, said no. And I said yes, for the reasons I just gave. And I said, "Anyway, if I knew the outcome of every decision I've ever made, I probably would have made the opposite of each one. You act on the basis of what you know now and what looks probable now—not under circumstances five years later." I thought it was a stupid question, to tell you the truth. I still feel it was the right thing to do and the story's not over yet, by

the way. I mean, it's assumed Iraq is a disaster and Iran is taking over—that's not quite true. Many Iraqis are trying to resist Iran. I'm told that Baghdad has become what Beirut used to be—full of cafés and nightlife and traffic jams and liveliness; and they had a decent election.

CRB: Invading Iraq—toppling Saddam—was one thing. Occupying and trying to democratize the country was another. How do you regard the latter now?

NP: I know, it's as if the effort to democratize was somehow ignoble instead of just misplaced. I mean, let me put it this way, we obviously did a bad job of the occupation and we are not an imperial power despite what the Left says. We're not good at it. Although, in the case of Germany, Japan, and Korea, we've stationed troops there for 50 years. If you're going to do it, you need to be prepared to do what is necessary when it's over—when you've won. And we were not prepared. Many mistakes were made, and the will to see it through to the end was absent. So that I agree to. But my hope was not that we could have an election and overnight everything would be fine, but that we could clear the ground a bit in which seeds of democratization could be planted. That was what I used to call "drain-

ing the swamp." And that swamp, we knew, was the swamp in which terrorism festered. So it seemed to me to make sense as a policy.

CRB: Would you call Trump an isolationist? He didn't use the term.

NP: No, he didn't; he was against what he called stupid wars or unnecessary wars. But I think that, again, he's willing to be flexible under certain circumstances. I think that if we were hit by any of those people, he would respond with a hydrogen bomb.

CRB: And you're not speaking metaphorically.

NP: No, I'm not. But again, I was a passionate interventionist. I was a passionate believer in democratization before I was a paleo-neoconservative—when I was just a plain neoconservative. But it was a totally different world.

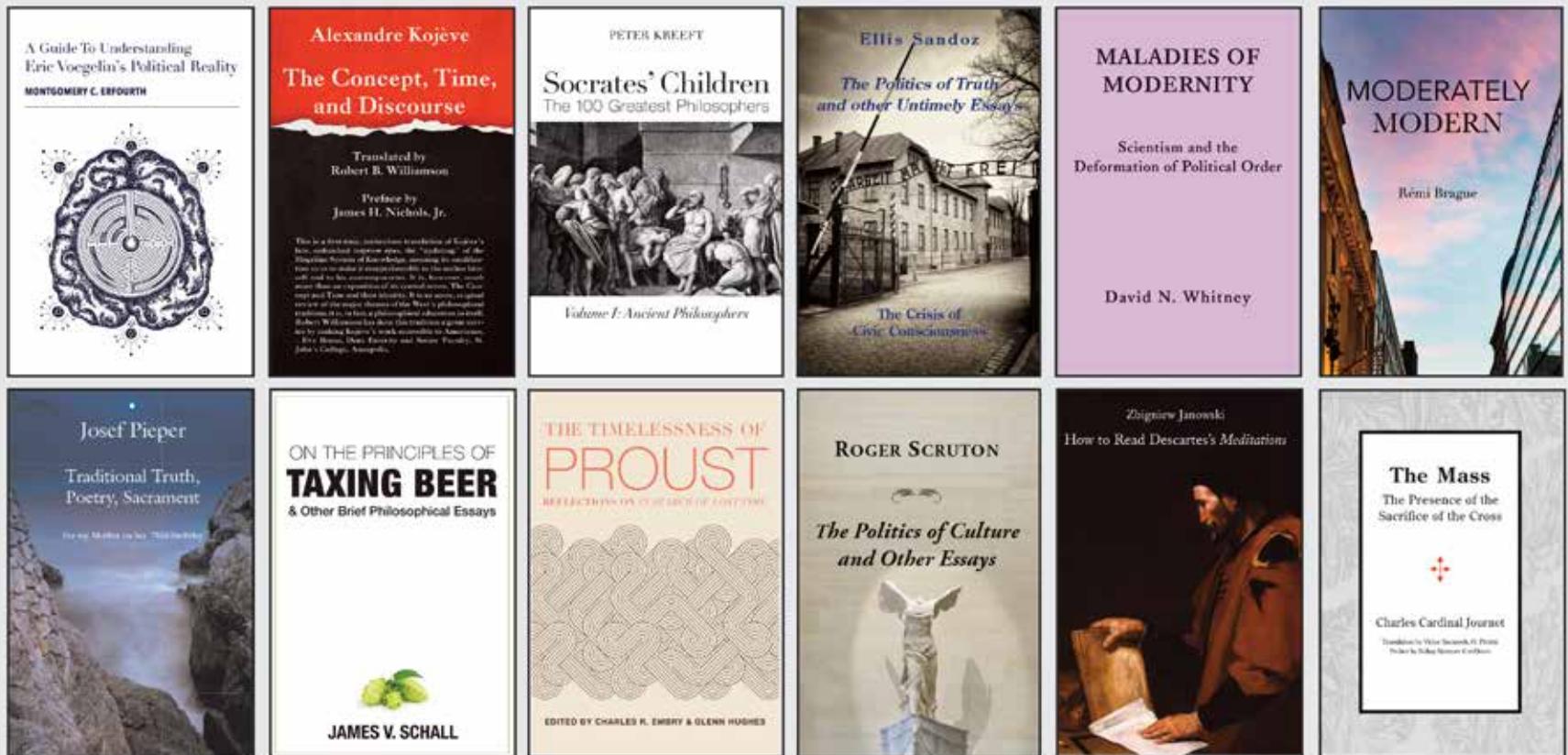
CRB: But many of your new set of ex-friends, as you call them, were with you on Iraq and democratization, which explains partly at least, why they are against Trump. You deviated from them, or they deviated from you.

NP: Well some of them have gone so far as to make me wonder whether they've lost their

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minds altogether. I didn't object to their opposition to Trump. There was a case to be made, and they made it—okay. Of course, they had no reasonable alternative. A couple of them voted for Hillary, which I think would have been far worse for the country than anything Trump could have done.

But, basically, I think we're all in a state of confusion as to what's going on. Tom Klingenstein has made a brilliant effort to explain it, in terms that haven't really been used before. (See "Patriotism vs. Multiculturalism," page 28.) He says that our domestic politics has erupted into a kind of war between patriotism and multiculturalism, and he draws out the implications of that war very well. I might put it in different terms—love of America versus hatred of America. But it's the same idea. We find ourselves in a domestic, or civil, war almost.

In 1969-70, we neocons analyzed the international situation in a similar way, behind a clarifying idea that had a serious impact because it was both simple and sufficiently complex in its implications. I had by then become alienated from my long-term friend Hannah Arendt, whose book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* had had an enormous effect on me. Although she had become an ex-friend, her book's argument still inspired me, and I think a lot of other people, to fight. And that argument was that the Soviet Union was an evil, moral and political, comparable to Nazi Germany. As we had fought to defend the West in World War II from the evil coming from, as it were, the Right, so we had to fight it coming from the Left in the Cold War, which I liked to call World War III. (And I've tried to say since 9/11, we have to fight an evil coming from the 7th century in what amounts to World War IV—but that name hasn't caught on.) But the important point is we offered a wholehearted, full-throated defense of America. Not merely a defense, but a celebration, which is what I thought it deserved, nothing less. It was like rediscovering America—its virtues, its values, and how precious the heritage we had been born to was, and how it was, in effect, worth dying for. And that had a refreshing impact, I think, because that's how most people felt. But all they had heard—though nothing compared to now—was that America was terrible. It was the greatest danger to peace in the world, it was born in racism, and genocide, and committed every conceivable crime. And then when new crimes were invented like sexism and Islamophobia, we were guilty of those, too.

CRB: The fight against Soviet Communism ended in victory for the West, but not, it seems, in the rehabilitation of Americanism.

What happened to "the new American patriotism" as Reagan called it?

NP: Well, one of the Soviet officials, after the fall of the Soviet Union, actually put it correctly when he said: "You've lost your enemy." And that's, I think, the largest cause.

CRB: You mean the only thing that really inspired us was the external threat?

NP: No, the external threat inspired us, but it also gave rise to a new appreciation of what we were fighting for—not just against. I was a Democrat, you know, by heritage, and in 1972 I helped found a movement called, "The Coalition for a Democratic Majority," which was an effort to save the Democratic Party from the McGovernites who had taken it over. We knew exactly what was wrong, but it metastasized. The long march through the institutions, as the Maoists called it, was more successful than I would have anticipated. The

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anti-Americanism became so powerful that there was virtually nothing to stop it. Even back then I once said, and it's truer now: this country is like a warrior tribe which sends all its children to a pacifist monk to be educated. And after a while—it took 20 or 40 years—but little by little it turned out that Antonio Gramsci—the Communist theoretician who said that the culture is where the power is, not the economy—turned out to be right; and little by little the anti-Americanism made its way all the way down to kindergarten, practically. And there was no effective counter-attack. I'm not sure why. I mean, some of us tried, but we didn't get very far.

CRB: How do you assess the American Left today?

NP: The crack I make these days is that the Left thinks that the Constitution is unconstitutional. When Barack Obama said, "We are five days away from fundamentally transforming this country," well it wasn't five days, but he was for once telling the truth. He knew what

he was doing. I've always said that Obama, from his own point of view, was a very successful president. I wrote a piece about that in the *Wall Street Journal* which surprised a lot of people. Far from being a failure, within the constraints of what is still the democratic political system, he had done about as much as you possibly could to transform the country into something like a social democracy. The term "social democrat," however, used to be an honorable one. It designated people on the Left who were anti-Communist, who believed in democracy, but who thought that certain socialist measures could make the world more equitable. Now it's become a euphemism for something that is hard to distinguish from Communism.

And I would say the same thing about anti-Zionism. I gave a talk to a meeting of the American Jewish Committee, which was then the publisher of *Commentary*, two years or so after the Six-Day War. And I said what's happened since that war is that anti-Semitism has migrated from the Right, which was its traditional home, to the Left, where it is getting a more and more hospitable reception. And people walked out on the talk, I mean, literally just got up. These were all Jews, you understand. Today, anti-Semitism, under the cover of anti-Zionism, has established itself much more firmly in the Democratic Party than I could ever have predicted, which is beyond appalling. The Democrats were unable to pass a House resolution condemning anti-Semitism, for example, which is confirmation of the Gramscian victory. I think they are anti-American—that's what I would call them. They've become anti-American.

CRB: What are they pro?

NP: Well, some of them say they're pro-socialism, but most of them don't know what they're talking about. They ought to visit a British hospital or a Canadian hospital once in a while to see what Medicare for All comes down to. They don't know what they're for. I mean, the interesting thing about this whole leftist movement that started in the '60s is how different it is from the Left of the '30s. The Left of the '30s had a positive alternative in mind—what they thought was positive—namely, the Soviet Union. So America was bad; Soviet Union, good. Turn America into the Soviet Union and everything is fine. The Left of the '60s knew that the Soviet Union was flawed because its crimes that had been exposed, so they never had a well-defined alternative. One day it was Castro, the next day Mao, the next day Zimbabwe, I mean, they kept shifting—as long as it wasn't America. Their real passion was to destroy America and



the assumption was that anything that came out of those ruins would be better than the existing evil. That was the mentality—there was never an alternative and there still isn't. So Bernie Sanders, who honeymooned in the Soviet Union—I mean, I don't know him personally, but I have relatives who resemble him; I know him in my bones—and he's an old Stalinist if there ever was one. Things have gone so haywire, he was able to revive the totally discredited idea of socialism, and others were so ignorant that they picked it up.

As for attitudes toward America, I believe that Howard Zinn's relentlessly anti-American *People's History of the United States* sells something like 130,000 copies a year, and it's a main text for the study of American History in the high schools and in grade schools. So, we have miseducated a whole generation, two generations by now, about almost everything.

CRB: And President Trump offers a path up from ignorance and anti-Americanism?

NP: The only way I know out of this is to fight it intellectually, which sounds weak. But the fact that Trump was elected is a kind of miracle. I now believe he's an unworthy vessel chosen by God to save us from the evil on the Left. And he's not the first unworthy vessel chosen by God. There was King David who was very bad—I mean he had a guy murdered so he could sleep with his wife, among other things. And then there was King Solomon who was considered virtuous enough—more than his father—to build the temple, and then desecrated it with pagan altars; but he was nevertheless considered a great ancestor. So there are precedents for these unworthy vessels, and Trump, with all his vices, has the necessary virtues and strength to fight the fight that needs to be fought. And if he doesn't win in 2020, I would despair of the future. I have 13 grandchildren and 12 great grandchildren, and they are hostages to fortune. So I don't

have the luxury of not caring what's going to happen after I'm gone.

CRB: What are his virtues, if you had to enumerate them?

NP: His virtues are the virtues of the street kids of Brooklyn. You don't back away from a fight and you fight to win. That's one of the things that the Americans who love him, love him for—that he's willing to fight, not willing but *eager* to fight. And that's the main virtue and all the rest stem from, as Klingenstein says, his love of America. I mean, Trump loves America. He thinks it's great or could be made great again. Eric Holder, former attorney general, said, "When was it ever great?" And Michelle Obama says that the first time she was ever proud of her country was when Obama won. By the way, I make a prediction to you that the Democratic candidate in 2020 is going to be Michelle Obama, and all these people knocking themselves out are wasting their time and money. The minute she announces that will be it.

CRB: You heard it here first!

NP: I fear she could beat him.

CRB: Well, I've always thought she would go into politics. She's so good at giving a speech.

NP: And she's written the bestselling memoir of all time. I've seen her in the flesh, so to speak. I mean, I've met them and she's much more beautiful than she looks in photographs. She's statuesque and extremely, extremely good looking.

CRB: The Never Trumpers agree with you that Trump is an "unworthy vessel" but see nothing whatsoever to redeem his vices.

NP: Mainly they think he's unfit to be presi-

dent for all the obvious reasons—that he disgraces the office. I mean, I would say Bill Clinton disgraced the office. I was in England at Cambridge University when Harry Truman was president, and there were Americans there who were ashamed of the fact that somebody like Harry Truman was president.

CRB: A haberdasher.

NP: Right, and no college degree. And, of course, Andrew Jackson encountered some of that animosity. There's snobbery in it and there's genuine, you might say, aesthetic revulsion. It's more than disagreements about policy, because the fact of the matter is they have few grounds for disagreement about policy. I mean, I've known Bill Kristol all his life, and I like him. But I must say I'm shocked by his saying that if it comes to the deep state versus Trump, he'll take the deep state. You know, I was raised to believe that the last thing in the world you defend is your own, and I am proud to have overcome that education. I think the *first* thing in the world you defend is your own, especially when it's under siege both from without and within. So the conservative elite has allowed its worst features—its sense of superiority—to overcome its intellectual powers, let's put it that way. I don't know how else to explain this.

CRB: Like Donald Trump, you don't mind being politically incorrect, or what some would call populist.

NP: I often quote and I have always believed in Bill Buckley's notorious declaration that he would rather be governed by the first 2,000 names in the Boston telephone book than by the faculty of Harvard University. That's what I call intelligent populism. And Trump is Exhibit A of the truth of that proposition.

CRB: Thank you very much.

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