

VOLUME XVII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2016/17

# CLAREMONT

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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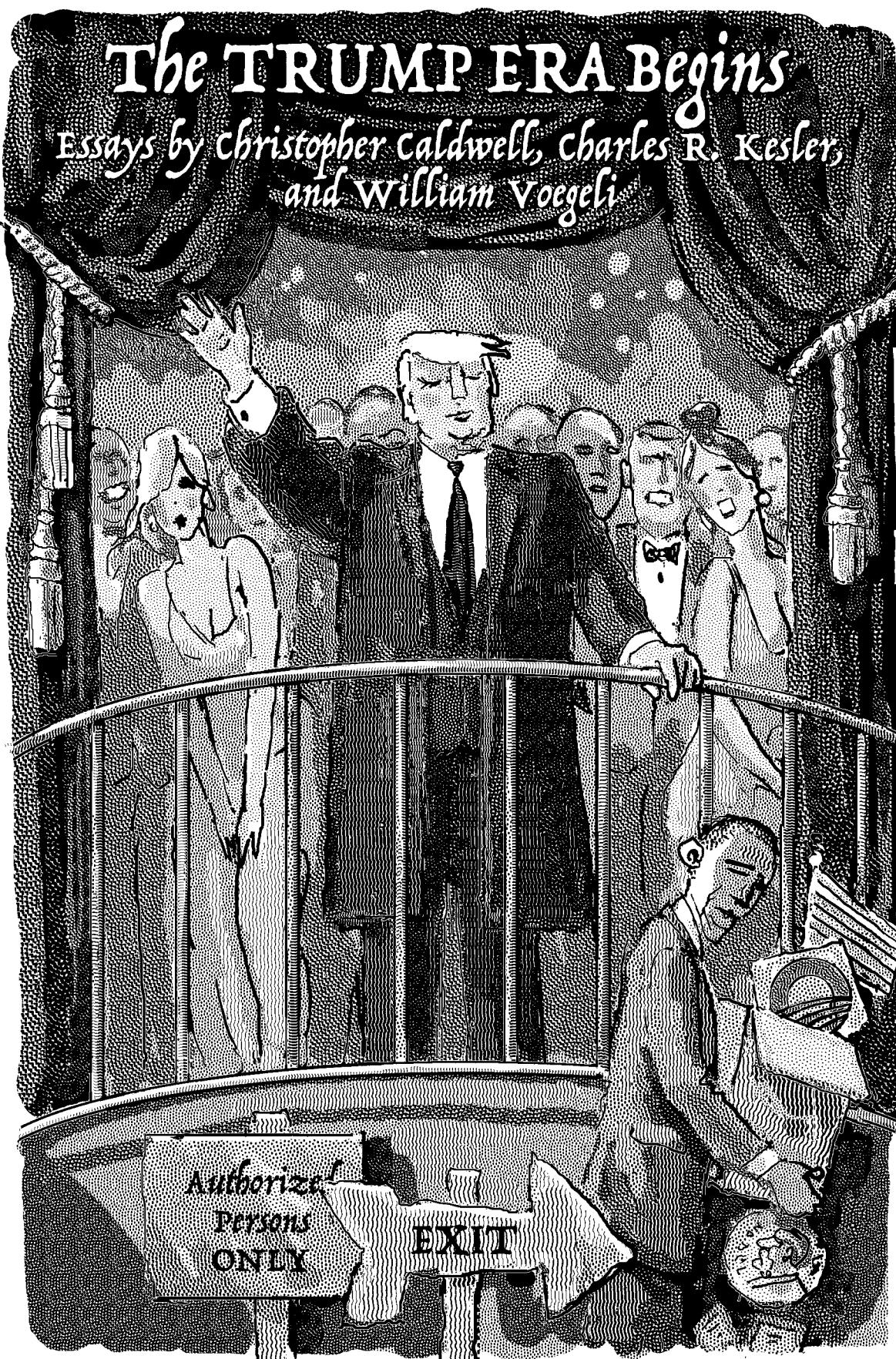
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## LESSONS OF ALGERIA

*The Centurions*, by Jean Lartéguy, translated by Xan Fielding.  
Penguin Classics, 544 pages, \$18

*The Praetorians*, by Jean Lartéguy, translated by Xan Fielding.  
Penguin Classics, 384 pages, \$17



Jean Lartéguy

IS IT POSSIBLE THAT ISLAMIC TERRORISM is France's new normal? In July 2016, after a Tunisian living in France used a truck to kill 86 people in Nice, then-Prime Minister Manuel Valls said, "this hyper-terrorism is here to stay" and "France is going to have to live with terrorism." Last summer it seemed like every week brought news of another attack: a rabbi stabbed in Strasbourg, a policeman and his wife killed in their apartment in the suburbs of Paris, a priest martyred in Normandy. It seems unlikely that the attacks will stop, unless someone comes up with a plan no one has thought of yet, so Valls must be correct. There is no third option. Is there?

They thought terrorism was the new normal in Algiers in 1957, too. The Algerian war is usually lumped in with other first-generation anti-colonial wars like Kenya and Vietnam, but Algeria was an exception to the rule. Those other classic counterinsurgencies were unwinnable because the occupying power always had the option of leaving and the guer-

rillas, whose country it was, were going to stay. For the white "pieds noirs," Algeria was their country. They had been there longer than Americans have lived west of the Rockies, and had no other home. Coincidentally, they were a minority roughly the same size as Muslims in France today—between 5 and 10% of the population—and they said of themselves what we say of the latter: too many to kick out. Yet in the end they were kicked out, all 1.4 million of them.

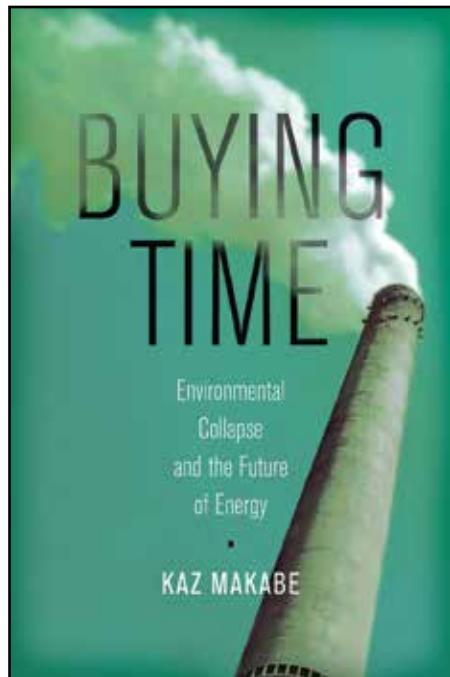
THE LESSON, THEN, OF JEAN LARTÉGUY'S two novels of the Algerian war, *The Centurions* (1960) and *The Praetorians* (1961) is the same as that of a more recent import from the world of French fiction, Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* (2015). Each book describes a clash between France and Islam that looks at first like a problem to be managed indefinitely, but turns out to be a conflict that can be lost conclusively. The drama lies in the protagonists' dawning realization that losing will have worse conse-

quences than they had ever imagined before defeat was imminent.

The point, however, of re-releasing *The Centurions* and *The Praetorians* was not to teach us how to lose in France. They were supposed to teach us how to win in Iraq.

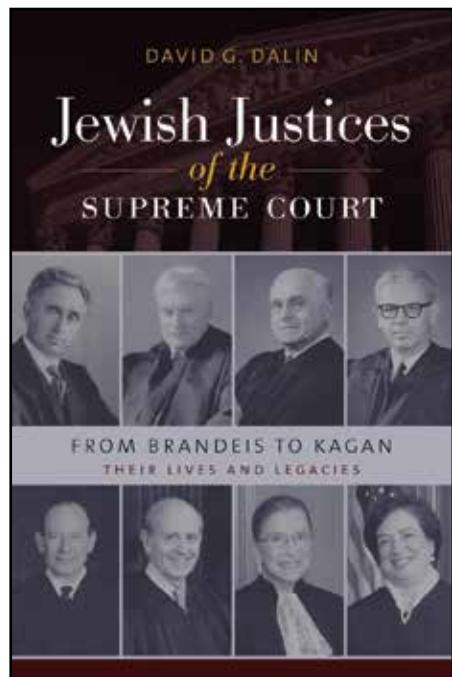
General David Petraeus is almost single-handedly responsible for the deluxe reissue of *The Centurions* by Penguin Classics. In the decades the book languished out of print, he hyped it as a classic of counterinsurgency (COIN) theory, driving up the price of a used copy on Amazon, sometimes into four digits. By his own admission, aspects of his leadership style were taken directly from its pages. Making his men fasten the dorky-looking top "battle button" on their fatigues was an idea inspired by the deliberately hideous double-flapped "lizard caps" Lartéguy's Colonel Raspéguay has specially designed to foster *esprit de corps*. When Penguin needed an introduction for *The Praetorians* they commissioned one from General Stanley McChrystal, another of its admirers in the U.S. military.

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THE BOOKS FOLLOW A GROUP OF FRENCH paratroopers from the battle of Dien Bien Phu to the fall of Algeria. The great historical events of those years flicker at the books' periphery—in *The Centurions*, the 1956 crisis over whether Egypt or the West would control the Suez Canal; in *The Praetorians*, the attempted coup d'état in May 1958 that ended the Fourth Republic and returned Charles de Gaulle to power—but the primary focus is on the soldiers themselves. At the regimental level, the early Cold War produced a dawning realization that the Communist foe demanded an entirely new, more overtly political approach to warfare. The first book describes how this new doctrine—which came to be known by the term *la guerre révolutionnaire*—was developed in Vietnam and then employed in Algeria. It ends on a note of hope, as befits a book written in the wake of the September 1958 referendum that saw more than 75% of registered voters, white and Arab, vote for Algeria to remain French. Not so the sequel. By the time *The Praetorians* was published in English in 1963, the war was over, and the point of writing about it was to try to figure out why the counterinsurgency tactics described in the first book had failed.

Petraeus and his COINdinistas have a great deal in common with the *guerre révolutionnaire* school. Both started out as young upstarts of relatively low rank hashing out their new theories in obscure military journals against a hidebound establishment's resistance. The French older generation was put off for at least two reasons. First, they were burned out on anything that smacked of politics after the trauma of Vichy and Pétain. Second, most of the high-ranking generals used their seniority to steer well clear of the distant, unpromising war in Indochina, so they had no first-hand experience with ideologically driven conflicts where winning civilian loyalty mattered more than winning territory. As the rare forward-looking general Jacques Massu put it, revolutionary war was "*peu connue aux échelons supérieurs*"—little known within the upper ranks.

Lartéguy excels in depicting how the doctrines of *la guerre révolutionnaire* came out of a particular generation of French officers' experiences. It began in the Vietminh prison camps where tens of thousands of detainees were subjected not only to privations but to indoctrination. When these men returned home, it seemed to many of them that their captors had been right about the decadence of France, whose politicians and intellectuals rivaled twilight Rome for corruption, with Communists in the part of the barbarians.

When men like Lartéguy's aristocratic Captain de Glatigny tried to tell their superiors that the Communists' zeal for their ideology would have to be met by equal zeal for Western civilization, they were regarded with suspicion. "The army's one thing, politics are another, and the expression 'revolutionary warfare' is the absolute negation of our traditions," his colonel warns him.

TO THE GUERRE REVOLUTIONNAIRE school, Algeria seemed like a gift from heaven, if only they could be left to put their theories into practice. In Part II of *The Centurions*, the charismatic Colonel Raspéguy gathers a hand-picked regiment from the Vietnam POWs who dispersed to their homes at the end of Part I, telling them, "In Algeria we're going to wage that revolutionary war which you kept dinging into my ears, and put to use what we learnt from the Viets." While the Cold War superpowers played with their nuclear warheads, France would pioneer a new kind of army that might actually get some use in the 20th century outside of war games: an anti-guerrilla force of modern crusaders, half Maoist, half Jesuit. ("Nothing resembles the Vietminh world as closely as the Jesuits," says one of Lartéguy's captains.) There was also an element of redemption to it. In addition to the generalized humiliation the French military felt after years, going on decades, of consecutive defeat after 1940, the veterans of Indochina felt individually dishonored by having betrayed their allies after swearing that France would never abandon them. The vow that they broke in the paddy, they would keep in the casbah.

We know that Lartéguy's picture is accurate, because he lived in Algeria throughout the war and was close friends with many paratroopers. Indeed, he might have been one of them if shrapnel taken at the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge in 1951 had not put an end to his military career. He became a foreign correspondent instead, first in Hanoi and then in Algiers. Many of his characters can be traced back to real people. The enigmatic intelligence officer Boisfeuras is clearly based on Jean Leroy, the half-Vietnamese colonel who attained some fame in the West for having conducted the war's most successful counterinsurgency campaign in his mother's home province of Ben Tre, turning Catholic villagers into a crack militia he called Mobile Units for the Defense of Christian Communities.

The inspiration for Raspéguy was Marcel "Bruno" Bigeard ("Bruno" was his Resistance code name), the officer whose reputation brought *The Centurions* to Petraeus's atten-



tion in the first place. In the mid-1970s during a posting in Europe, Petraeus noticed that every French officers' club featured a portrait of the same eagle-nosed general in a red beret. When he asked his French colleagues for more information about this man, *The Centurions* was the book they gave him.

**T**HE ALGERIA PARALLEL WAS NEVER an easy sell back in Washington. The most that the American brass were willing to do was to use Algeria as a case study in how *not* to fight an insurgency—they once screened the Italian film (and literal Communist propaganda) *The Battle of Algiers* to illustrate that lesson. During editorial revisions of Petraeus's pioneering *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* in 2006, a West Point professor was driven to shout after one Algeria reference too many, "This was a colonial war to impose foreign authority. Do we want to cast our doctrine in that kind of situation?" He added, "We have to get over *The Centurions*."

If Bigeard could have heard that remark, he would probably have resented it. A constant theme of *The Praetorians* is that the paras did not think of themselves as fighting for the wealthy *grands colons*. "We haven't come here to defend colonial privileges, or Blachette's alfa plantations or Bourgeaud's vineyards," one character says, "but to defend one of the last footholds of the West on the soil of Africa." One real-life para interviewed by French journalist Jules Roy said something very similar:

If M. Sartre throws in my face, "You are bastards because you have waged war against a friendly people," I would object.... We have risen instead against that enemy that is ours and yours, the one who, tomorrow, will stop you from being allowed to read and write. You are in peril of death and you don't know it.

He was referring to the Communists, but from the perspective of 2016 his remarks have a different, unintended prescience.

It is a fair criticism to say that Lartéguy does not have much to say about counter-insurgency proper, as opposed to military leadership. His soldiers interact with the native population far less than the real paras did. To his credit, his Algerian characters are three-dimensional and reflect the diversity of motives behind terrorism—the intellectual who craves power in a post-colonial regime, the ambitious young peasant who returns from a Czech training camp full of ideological fervor, the bandit happy to give his crimes a nationalist veneer—but none

of these portraits is very helpful in showing how these motives could have been hacked to win over their allegiance. Not one of his French characters ever builds a hospital or a school.

**B**UT PERHAPS THAT SIDE OF COUNTER-insurgency has been overrated. The French had quite a good record of outreach to Algerians in the postwar years, operating schools for Arab children and giving parcels of land to native farmers. The programs failed not from lack of effort but because the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) killed the civilians who tried to take advantage of them. Back in France, most big cities had entire bureaus devoted to helping North African immigrants claim welfare benefits, renew identity cards, and even make burial and inheritance arrangements for relatives who died back home. These programs, too, were attacked by the FLN and their Communist allies as pretexts for surveillance. Those who claim that today's Muslim immigrants are only vulnerable to radicalization because France has not done enough to integrate them should reflect on this very long record. Indeed, the first outreach programs began in the 1920s, when France had a higher foreign-born population than any Western country, even the United States.

Such conflicts are not determined by welfare budgets. They are not even determined by the insurgents' capacity for ruthlessness, which can be neutralized by effective soldiering, as it was in Algeria—not that anyone remembers. People forget that the military racked up victory after tactical victory, from the Battle of Algiers to the arms blockade to the Morice Line, before politicians imposed defeat.

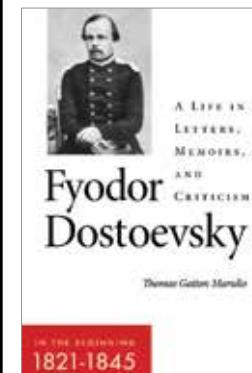
The real determinants of victory are the very factors Jean Lartéguy emphasizes: national morale, the home country's commitment to winning, its conviction that its civilization deserves to prevail. France had lost this self-confidence by 1960, and that more than anything was what brought an end to its empire. Europe would do well to study Lartéguy's lessons in how to conjure these vital sentiments, or else discover the declension proposed by the *pied noir* leader Pierre Lagaillarde:

The Third Republic was born at Sedan and died at Sedan. The Fourth was born in Algiers and died in Algiers. The Fifth is born in Algiers.

Only now there is an Algiers in the *banlieues* of Paris.

Helen Andrews is a writer living in Washington, D.C.

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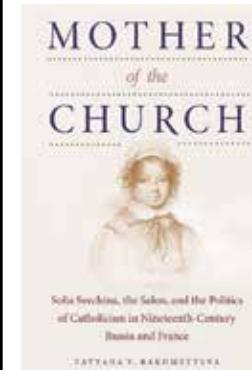
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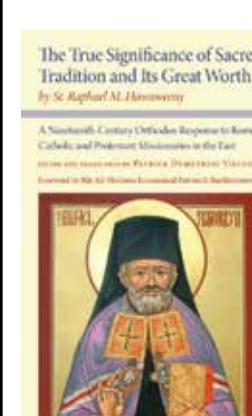
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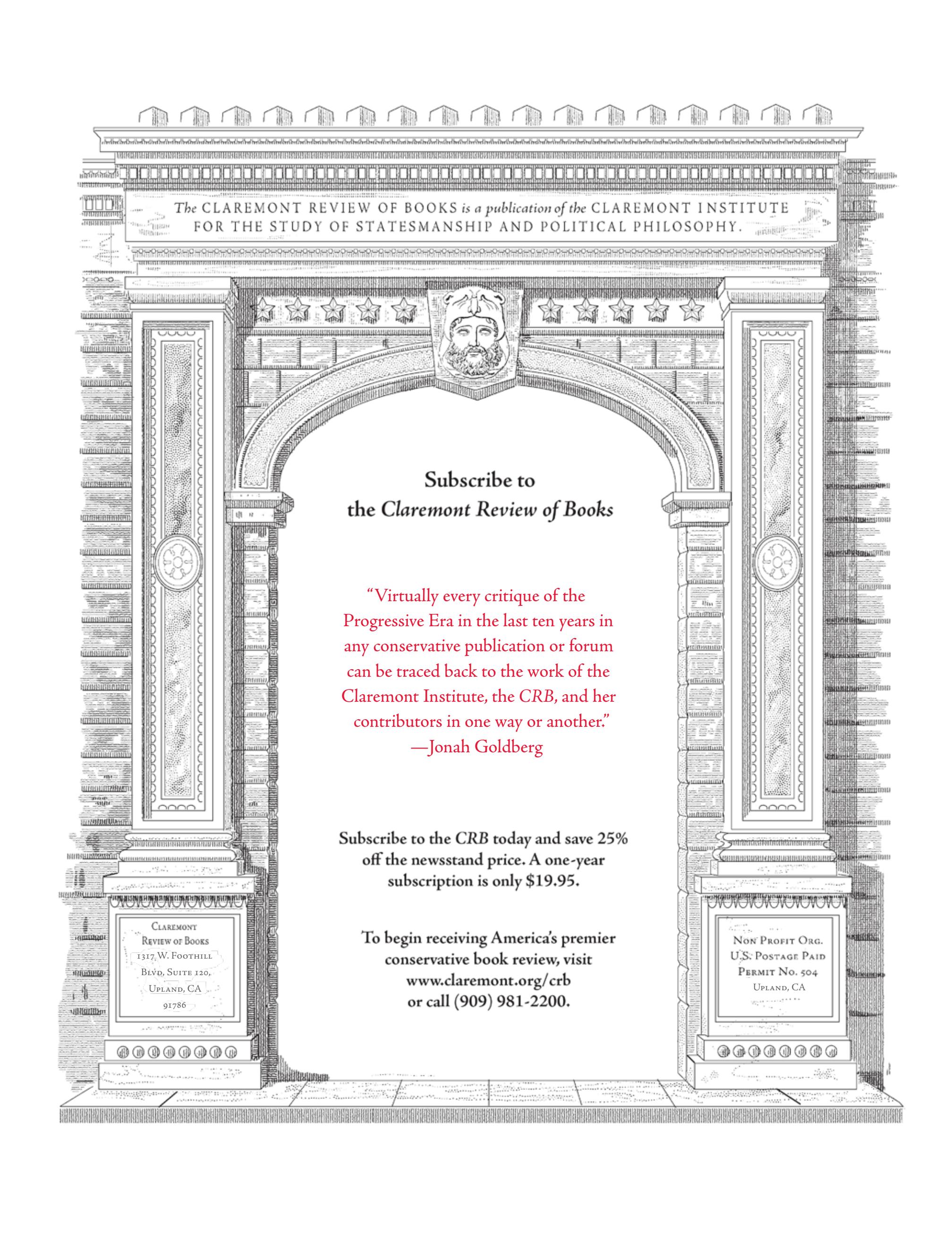
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