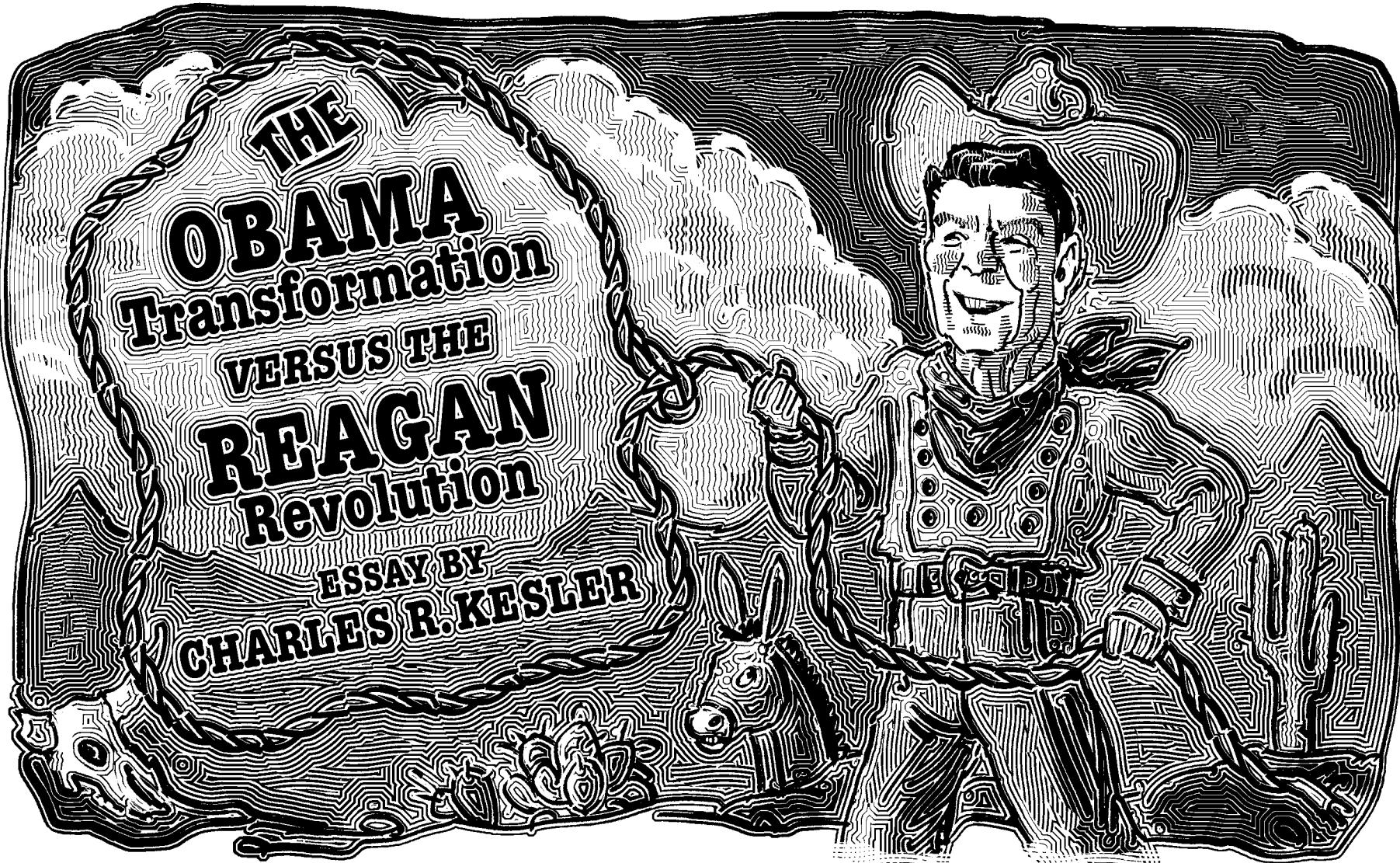


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2015

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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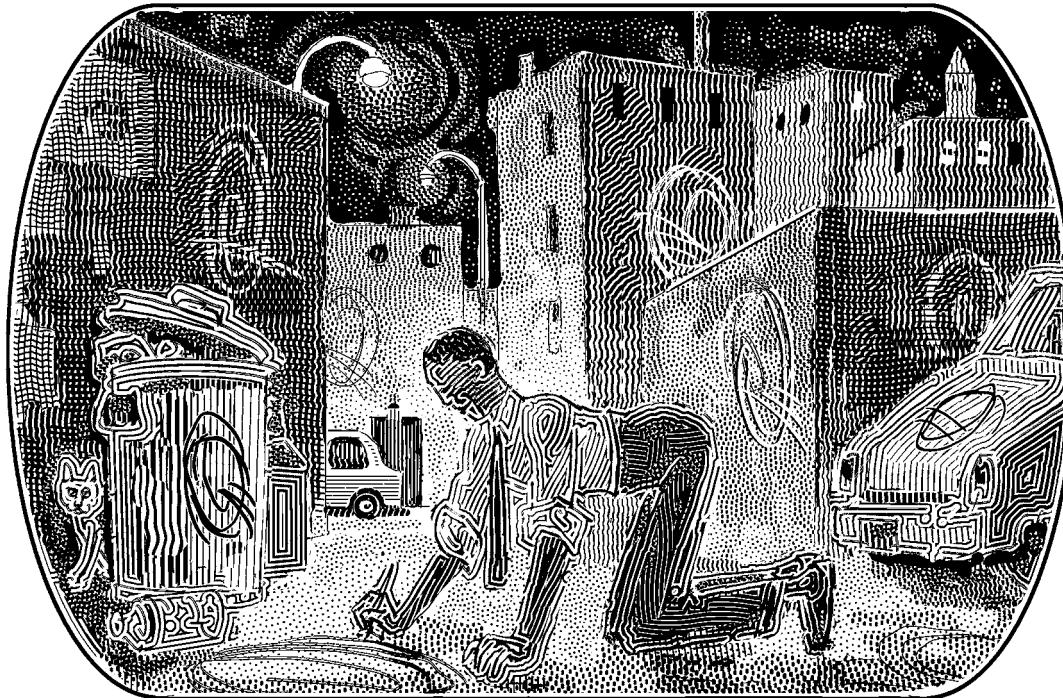
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## THE ONE

*Obama's Time: A History*, by Morton Keller.  
Oxford University Press, 352 pages, \$27.95



MORTON KELLER IS ONE OF THE most accomplished historians of our time. Over the past half century he has developed what is virtually a new field concentrating on the history of American political and institutional structures. In a series of books that span nearly a half century, of which *Affairs of State* (1977) is the best known, he has examined the growth in state power, the development of regulatory and bureaucratic instruments, and the shifts in the sub-constitutional arrangements of modern governance. Reminiscent of Alexis de Tocqueville in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Keller explores the profound effects of changing administrative mechanisms, weaving events and personalities into this unheroic narrative. Given the subjects he studies, it is no surprise that he is the political scientists' favorite historian, differing from them only by doing what they do too rarely (visit a library or an archive) and by avoiding what they do too frequently (invent useless jargon and overblown theories).

In *Obama's Time*, Keller ventures into what he admits is unfamiliar territory by telling the story of a single individual and presidency, and by analyzing a period that is more contempo-

raneous than historical. Though he owes no one a justification for this foray into a new domain, he offers one anyway. Existing writings about Barack Obama are in his view far too much driven by prejudices and predilections, resembling more the spirit of prosecutors and defense attorneys than judges. A historian true to his discipline, he argues, possesses the tools to check partisan impulses and provide a measure of impartiality. The book's subtitle, *A History*, is intended to convey more than one might think.

KELLER BEGINS, NATURALLY, WITH THE president's persona, asking, "[w]hat... makes him tick?" His answer: Obama is a man of "messianic" disposition. This vague and protean term proves immediately suggestive in prompting the reader to think of the character traits it excludes. Obama, unlike George Washington, does not appear to be motivated by a strong sense of duty; nor does he operate under a compulsion to hold and exercise power for its own sake, like Lyndon Johnson or Bill Clinton; nor, finally, does he value limits, whether deriving from law or tradition, as William Howard Taft did. Obama is instead bent on realizing an outsized project,

not under a divine dispensation but according to a secular Vulgate. He has told many an interviewer that he is a president who "wants to make a difference," leaving the impression that his making a difference is as important to him as the difference he makes.

In looking for the sources of this messianic impulse, Keller alights on the observation that Obama is an intellectual. He prides himself on thinking that he thinks beyond the conventional, that he is a man of world historical material. Keller places two other presidents into the intellectuals' category, Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson. Each, like Obama, was elected near the beginning of a century—a fact that might lead some to conclude that one intellectual president in a century is enough. Wilson, Obama's "doppelgänger," also harbored messianic thoughts, though he never realized his dreams. Perhaps he was sent only to prepare the way for the one to come after, who would be greater.

Obama differs substantially from his two analogues in the focus of his intellectualism. Jefferson and Wilson both made their mark in the study of politics: Jefferson as a great theorist who drafted the Declaration of Independence and wrote *Notes on the State of Vir-*



ginia; Wilson as the nation's leading political scientist, who produced notable works on the Congress, the presidency, and public administration. Obama's intellectual credentials derive, by contrast, from a literary work, *Dreams from My Father* (1995), a partly fictionalized autobiography that recounts his intense search for personal identity. Obama nonetheless fit comfortably into the academy, having spent much of his adult life, as Keller notes, "not in politics or business but in higher education, as a student and law school lecturer."

The president's experience in this milieu played a part in incubating his self-image. As Narcissus came to approve of himself by regarding his own reflection in a pool, Obama basked in "a steady stream of recognition from an affirmative action-saturated academy, hungry to bestow its laurels on someone who was a person of talent as well as a person of color." In seeing himself through the eyes of others, he is not so unconventional after all, especially as an intellectual.

IT IS A KNOWN FACT THAT IT TAKES TWO to messiah; if there is to be an object of worship, there must be a ready supply of worshippers. The students and colleagues at the University of Chicago who cast an admiring gaze at him were only the minutest harbinger of what took place during the 2008 presidential campaign. That campaign—one of the most remarkable in American history—had a profound effect on Obama. Displaying until then only symptoms of early onset messiah syndrome, he progressively developed the condition in its purest and most advanced form. Nor is it difficult to understand why. Imagine being lauded daily by the most astute political analysts for your intelligence and insight, being told by celebrities that your every utterance is either a gem of wisdom or a pearl of inspiration, and being feted by adoring crowds, especially of the young, for your coolness. The merging of mass politics and mass culture reached a new stage, as Obama

became a global icon. Never has any candidate—not even John F. Kennedy—endured such a symphony of sycophancy or enjoyed such a festival of flattery.

Subjected to this unrelenting adulation, only a person of profound moderation and self-knowledge could have resisted it. Barack Obama is not that person.

Keller allows the reader to gauge the fullness of Obama's inflated self-image by recalling an instance when he embraced a more sober evaluation of his office. It was this rare concession, however short-lived, that proved newsworthy. At the beginning of 2014, he had one of those serious sit-downs with *New Yorker* editor David Remnick, a person of intellectual parts in his own right as well as a great admirer of the president. In the relaxed atmosphere of this high-level exchange, Obama stepped back to reflect on matters, observing that the presidency is laden with structural institutional realities. He is "essentially a relay swimmer in a river full of rapids, and that river is history." From the messiah commanding the future to a bit player in a sports drama, the plunge seemed almost poignant. As for the actual point—that a president is constrained by structural realities—it is an insight that, one might hope, any occupant of this office—not to mention someone who has taught constitutional law—would have had before assuming the job.

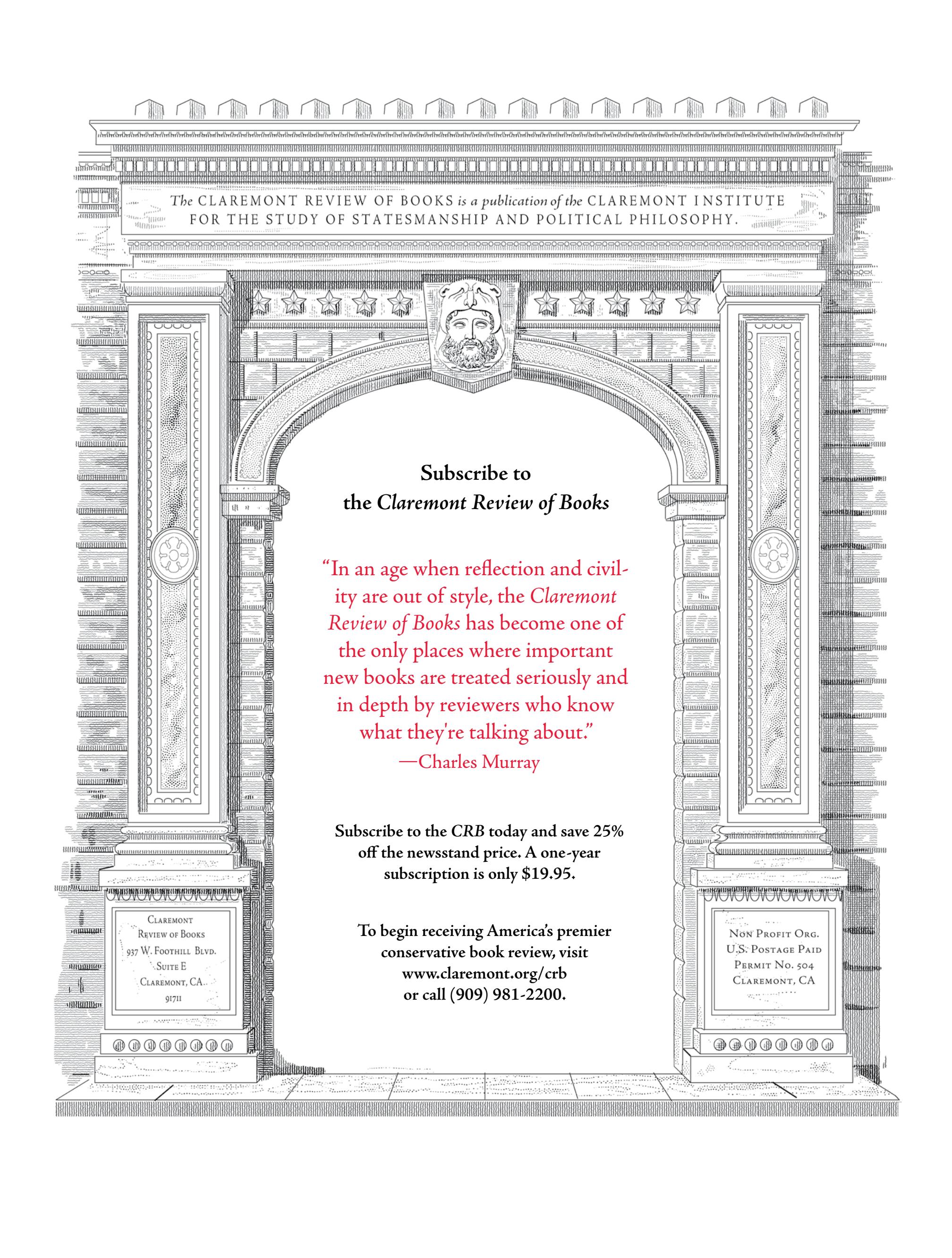
MESSIANIC DISPOSITION DOES NOT BY itself lead one in any particular direction. Modern history shows that there have been charismatic figures from both the Right and the Left. Keller's second overall characterization of Obama must therefore serve to fill in the content of his project. Keller shies away from the use of general labels and discussions of public philosophy, preferring to anchor his observations in particular facts. Yet no one—surely no one who reads the CRB—can mistake Obama's ideological disposition: "The core belief of the Obama administration

is in the power of the national government—of 'machinery'—to do social good...expanding this goal has been Job One of the Obama presidency." Combine a messianic bent with an activist's view of government, and it begins to look pretty much like an aspiration to be "the change"—to put one's face on Mount Rushmore as the transformative leader who brought progressivism to its completion.

Charismatic figures, Max Weber famously observed, will not brook restraints from laws, tradition, or—so they boast—from any recalcitrant realities. Everything will bend before them. The messiah's acolytes follow him in wishing to see all impediments erased and in believing that the leader's magical powers can achieve this goal. Does this strange description not capture the spirit of the Obama phenomenon? Keller, the sober historian, never goes this far. But he doesn't need to. His underlying theme is that political messianism is inconsistent with the basic realities of the modern world. He is impressed with the restraints and limits that he sees all around, which derive not just from intentionally instituted checks and balances, but from custom, events, and from the very limitations of bureaucracy itself, which often proves an ineffective instrument. On this basis Keller concludes that Obama's transformation cannot come near to realizing his overblown hopes. His time will be short, not an era but more like a moment: "Obama's place in history will be defined more by who he was than by what he did."

The conservative who reads this insightful, informative book will find much solace in this epitaph—perhaps a bit too much. It's almost as if Keller believes that forces are at work that will somehow ensure the underlying system's preservation. Perhaps. But it is safer to believe that in the end history helps only those who help themselves.

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