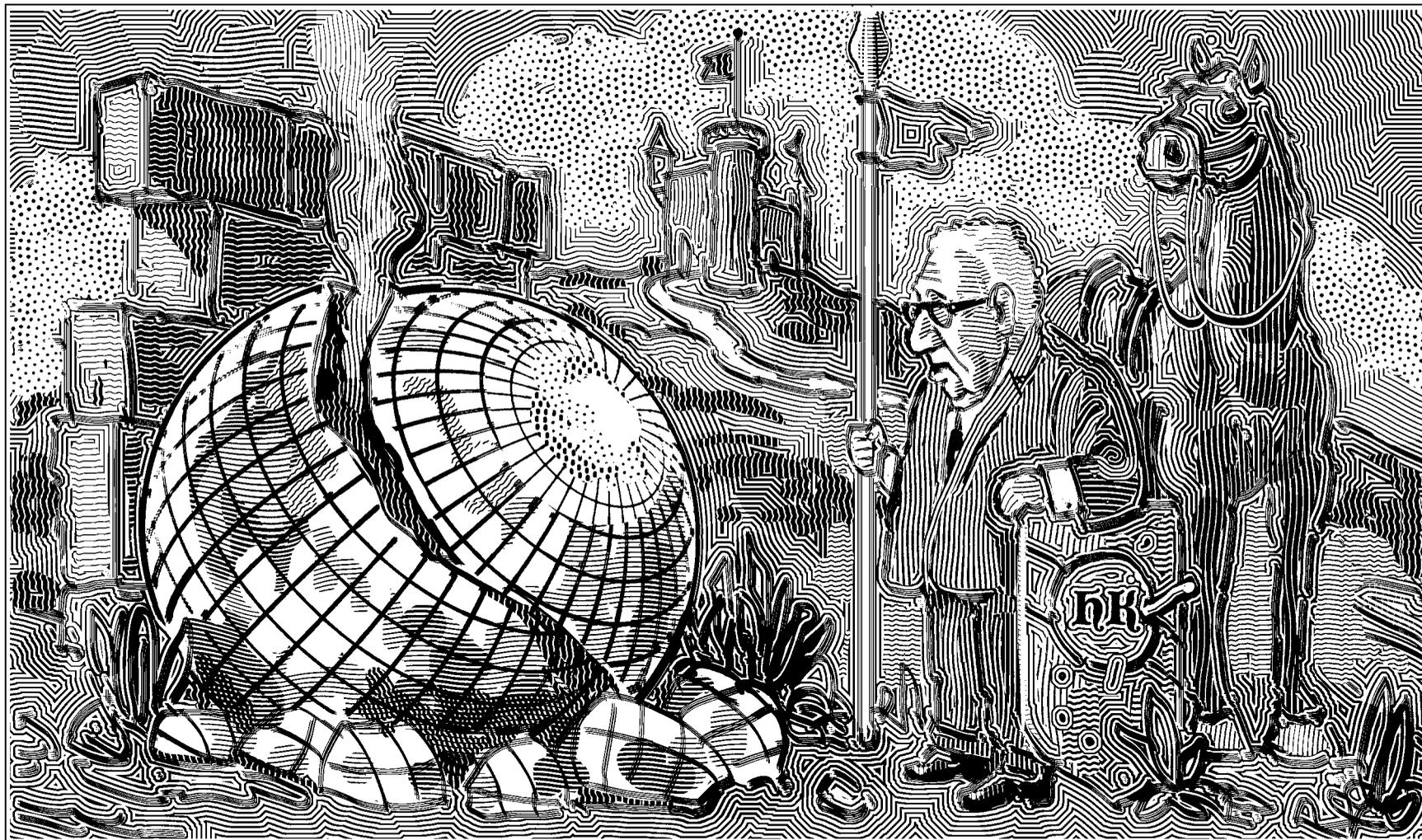


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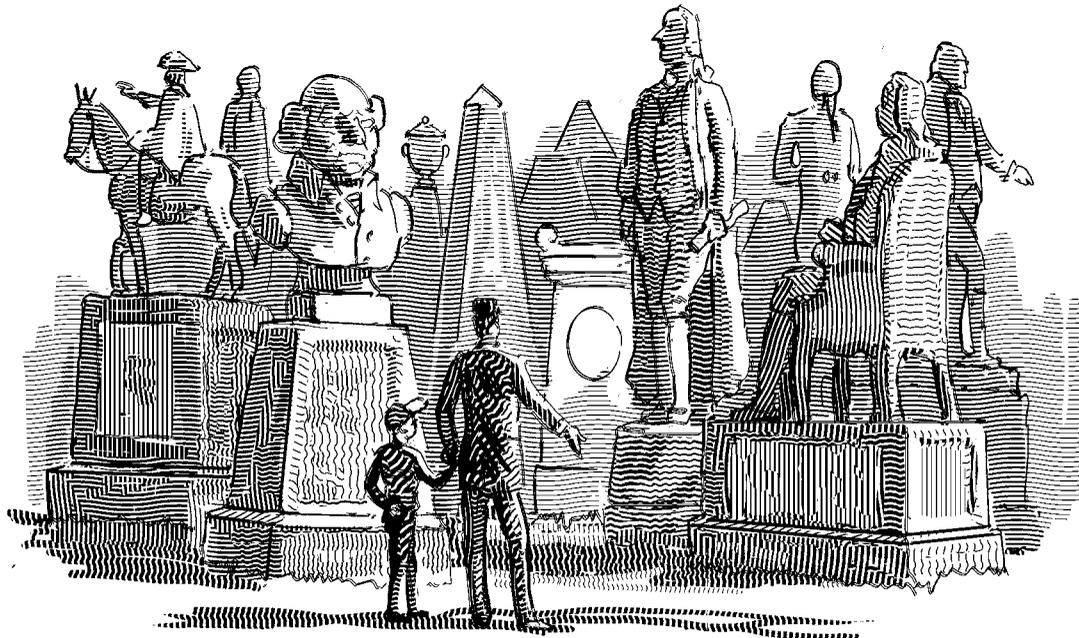
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Book Review by Alan Gibson

WHO OWNS THE FOUNDING?

Fighting over the Founders: How We Remember the American Revolution, by Andrew M. Schocket.
NYU Press, 256 pages, \$30



IN AMERICAN POLITICS, THE AMERICAN Revolution is still being waged.” So argues Bowling Green State University cultural historian Andrew Schocket. By the American Revolution, Schocket means “the American Revolutionary Era,” stretching from the crisis of imperial authority in the mid-1760s to the ratification of the Constitution in 1788. *Fighting over the Founders: How We Remember the American Revolution* studies the competing ways the founding is depicted and strategically evoked, most often for political purposes. “The ability to claim an authoritative version of crucial national memories,” he reminds us, “makes for powerful ammunition in fundamental debates.” Since no period of American history has more moral currency than the founding, we strenuously contest how to remember and depict it.

Few sources that depict the founding lie outside Schocket’s purview. His book analyzes speeches by presidents and presidential candidates, museums, historical sites and reenactments, films and television programs made over the past 20 years, and popular biographies of the founders. Schocket’s central thesis is that the battle over what the founding means today pits “essentialists” against “organicists.” Essentialists believe the American Revolution was “led by demigods, result-

ing in an inspired governmental structure and leaving a legacy from which straying would be treason and result in the nation’s ruin.” Essentialists propose that there’s a single, objective truth about the founding that acts as a reservoir from which we can draw lessons about modern politics. The lessons essentialists draw include the importance of private property and capitalism, traditional gender roles, and Protestantism. He stops short—but only just short—of calling essentialists racists and sexists. Essentialist appeals to the founders, he contends, carry “particularly heavy racial and gendered freight,” reflecting and reinforcing the belief that the U.S. is a “tidy, white, conservative, patriarchal nation.”

Organicists, by contrast, reject the idea that there is a single true account of the American Revolution in favor of a multiplicity of “equally compelling conceptions.” Rather than unequivocally celebrating the founding, they view it as an incomplete project in the quest for political equality. Essentialists venerate a pantheon of heroes; organicists emphasize “forced” and “forgotten” founders, telling their stories, resurrecting their perspectives, and lauding their contributions. For essentialists, the past stands in judgment of the present; for organicists, the present sits in judgment of the past.

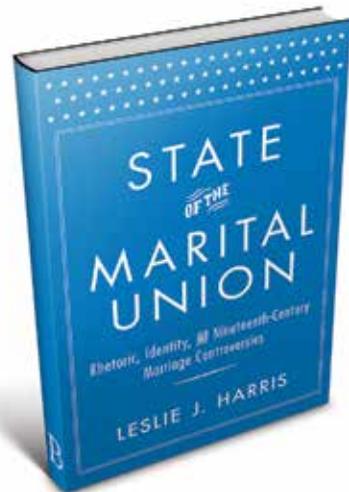
SO, ESSENTIALISM IS HOW THE RIGHT interprets the founding, and organicism is the Left’s approach. Right? Not so fast, because not so clear. Conservatives, Schocket maintains, “hold no monopoly on essentialism.” There are, it turns out, left-leaning essentialists and conservative “organicists.” Apparently, in these cases, essentialists differ from organicists because of epistemology, not politics. Liberals become essentialists, in Schocket’s mind, when they give up their kaleidoscopic view of the past, propose that it can be objectively interpreted, and rummage through it for truth and applicable lessons.

The problem Schocket creates by calling some liberals essentialists, however, is that he contradicts his central contention that “battles over the contemporary memory of the American Revolution serve as proxies for America’s contemporary ideological divide.” If battles over the contemporary memory of the American Revolution are being fought between “essentialists” and “organicists,” but liberals and conservatives can be either, then these labels do *not* serve as proxies for today’s political divisions.

Essentialism and organicism also serve as clumsy categories for classifying contemporary scholars. Schocket labels Gordon Wood, one of the most famous historians of the founding,



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an essentialist because he fights against the politicization of history and rejects the contention that there are as many valid histories as there are historical perspectives. Nevertheless, if essentialists believe the founders were demigods who acted for the benefit of others, then Wood does not qualify. No scholar has more firmly insisted that we bring the founders down from the clouds and treat them as men with concrete interests and anxieties.

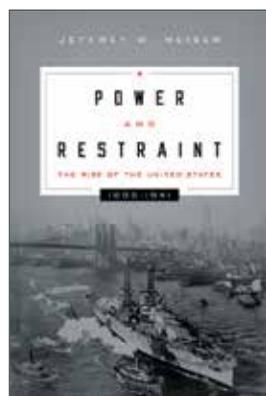
SCHOCKET’S DIAGNOSIS IS, NONETHELESS, stronger than his remedy, which is that scholars should portray essentialist and organicist themes “in tandem.” This involves depicting “persevering generals and heroic slaves, lone tribunes of liberty and boisterous tavern politicians, cruel patriots and suffering loyalists, wise framers and blundering bureaucrats, strident partisans and fearful disaffected, a glorious cause and bone-breaking devastation” together. This approach would indeed yield a “more complicated, more multivocal, more messy Revolution,” one in which everyone in the past has a story worth telling, and everyone in the present accepts that different ways of seeing the past are unavoidable. And it is hard to argue against a more complex narrative that captures a greater variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, it’s clear this third way is just a soft-pedaled version of “organicism,” with occasional references to elites sprinkled in.

More generally, contra Schocket, it is unfair to treat all founding scholarship as inherently political. The best historical scholarship, Bernard Bailyn argued in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), is pursued through “an immersion in the detailed circumstances of a distant era and an effort to understand that world not as it anticipated the future but as it was experienced by those who lived in it.” The past, for historians so dedicated, is sacrosanct. Scholars who ransack it selectively for its present value forfeit credibility. The search for the historic Thomas Jefferson or John Adams, serious historians believe, is complex and elusive, requiring a deep attachment to the subject.

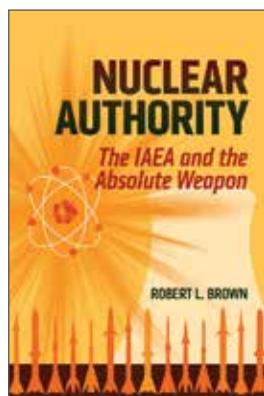
It is true that there are some Americans, including scholars, who want to cling to comforting narratives, either of national self-celebration or of identity politics. But the bridge across this ideological schism is not to integrate selective and partisan accounts, but rather continually to refine our ability to treat the past on its own terms.

Alan Gibson is a professor of political science at California State University, Chico, and the author of Understanding the Founding: The Crucial Questions (University Press of Kansas).

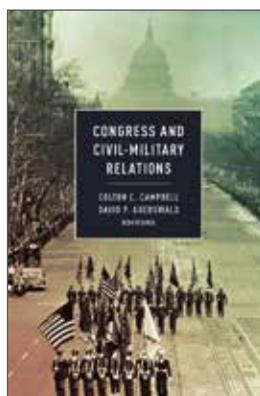
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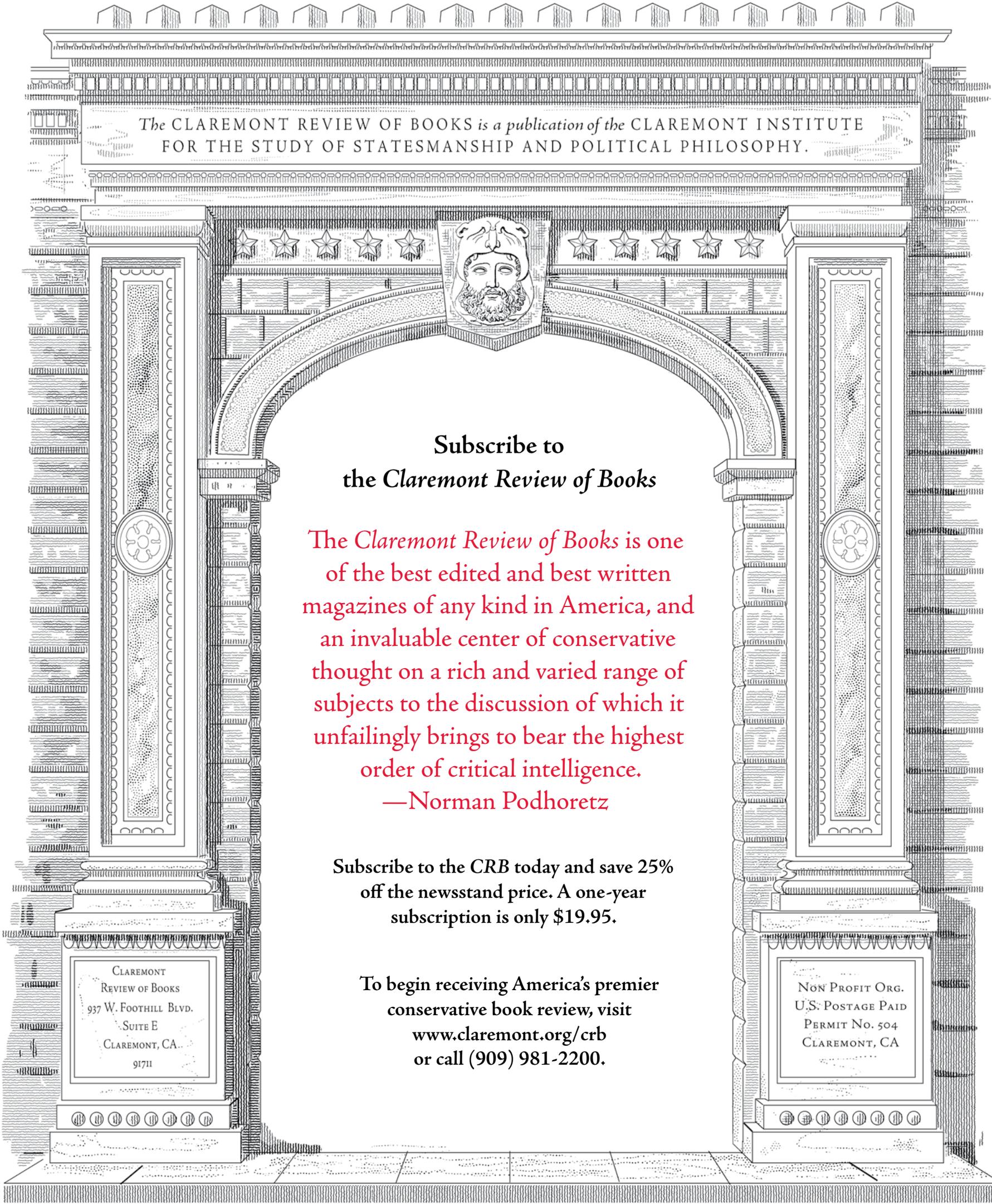
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