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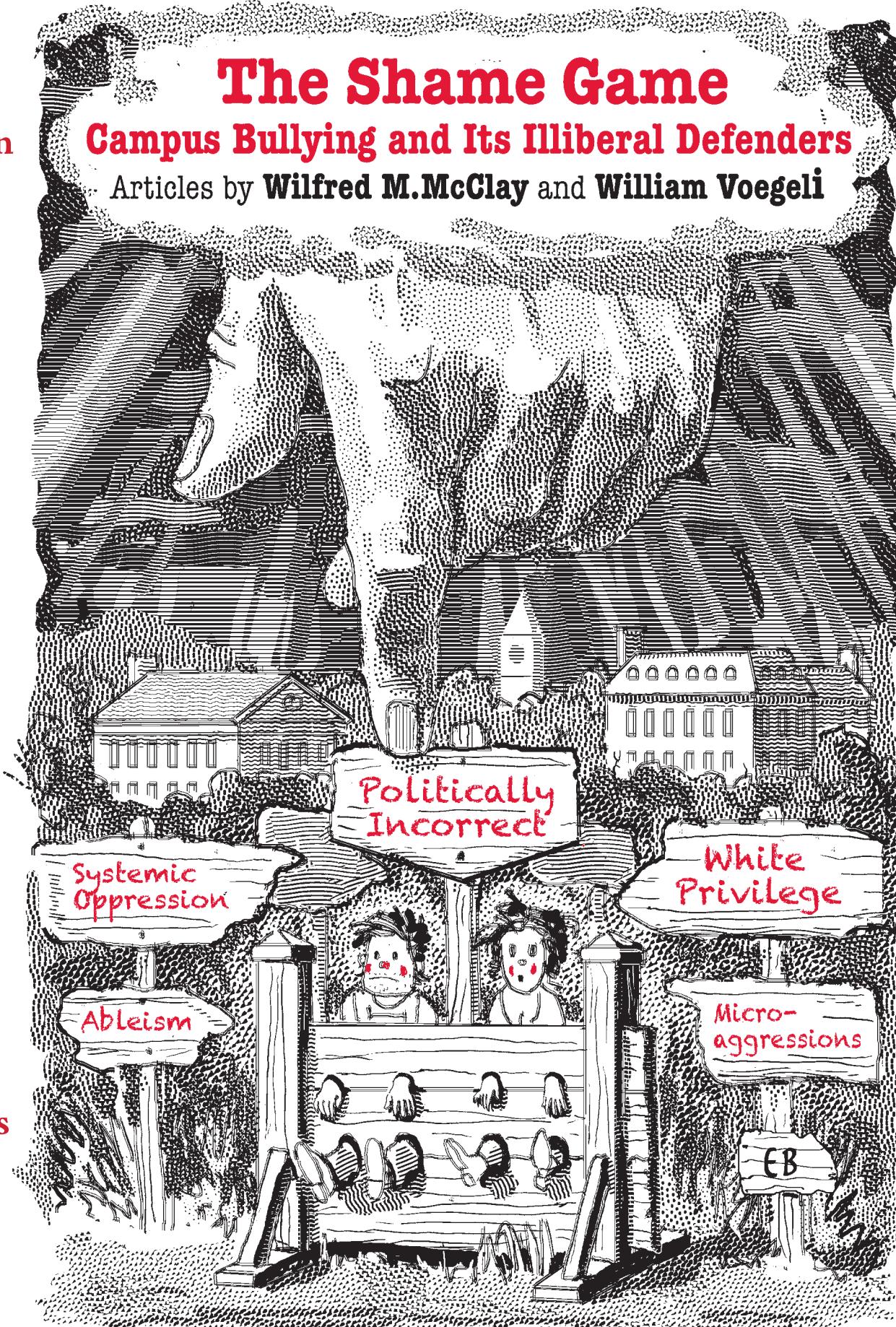
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## THE ROOSEVELT REVOLUTION

*Man of Destiny: FDR and the Making of the American Century*, by Alonzo L. Hamby.  
Basic Books, 512 pages, \$35



*Drawing after cartoon by Coven in the Boston Transcript, c. 1934*

THE 20TH CENTURY IS COMMONLY DESCRIBED AS ONE OF STARK ANTINOMIES: East versus West, Communism versus capitalism, totalitarianism versus freedom. Certainly, this was how Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin viewed the world. Alonzo Hamby writes that Stalin's membership in World War II's Grand Alliance did nothing to displace "[t]he revolutionary Marxist ideology that determined [his] view of the world," according to which "both [Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill] and their liberal nations were inevitable antagonists" of the USSR. But Hamby also points out that this rivalry was asymmetrical:

For many New Dealers...the Soviet Union was, for all its shortcomings, a progressive force with enormous potential. Roosevelt chose his words carefully when...in public, but there is every indication that he shared in the liberal consensus.

Though Stalin regarded him as a future enemy, Roosevelt, like other leading American

progressives—Jane Addams, John Dewey, and Robert M. La Follette, Sr., among them—believed the Soviets were forging reforms substantially similar to those they were trying to effect. Hamby's comprehensive biography of FDR recognizes how central the earlier progressive movement is to explaining Roosevelt's political career. *Man of Destiny* also helps us understand FDR's and many New Dealers' esteem for Soviet Communism.

HAMBY, A DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR of history emeritus at Ohio University and the author of several well-written, deeply researched volumes on 20th-century American politics, disputes the view put forth during and after FDR's lifetime that he was little more than a "facile opportunist." True, he never pursued the intellectual credentials that his illustrious cousin Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson achieved. While an undergraduate at Harvard from 1900 to 1903, FDR was content merely to earn gentlemen's C's. He was unusually ambitious, however, and not merely in a narrow, personal way. Although

Franklin, like his father, was a Democrat, Hamby credits T.R.—the former Republican president who emerged around 1910 as "the leading figure in the multifaceted push for social and political reform that was beginning to be called the progressive movement"—for whetting FDR's appetite not just for power but for sweeping reform.

Hamby argues that from the start of his political career in 1910, when he was elected to the New York State Senate, through service as assistant secretary of the Navy for nearly the entirety of Wilson's presidency, to running for vice president on the Democrats' doomed 1920 ticket, and finally to being governor of New York from 1928 to 1932, FDR's commitment to progressivism strengthened and deepened. Historians frequently distance Roosevelt from Rexford G. Tugwell, the most radical member of the "brains trust" of academic advisors that FDR brought with him to Washington to fashion the New Deal. Tugwell, Hamby writes, was "[a] radical critic of capitalism in his younger days." (Actually, Tugwell remained a radical critic all through his days. A few years be-



fore his death in 1979, he advocated a new constitution to give the central government sweeping powers to regulate and redistribute.) FDR not only immediately “admired [Tugwell’s] unorthodoxy,” Hamby contends, but was also “more than receptive” to the brains trust’s desire to organize the “chaotic” market.

At the same time, however, Roosevelt had a growing appreciation for the constraints that conditioned reformers’ access to power, including the need “to avoid being typed as a flaming radical.” Greater ideological purity might satisfy a La Follette, the 1924 presidential nominee of the quixotic Progressive Party, but FDR wanted to win, not lose virtuously.

Victory also required retaining the party organization’s support. When, beginning in the 1920s, FDR set out to institutionalize the cause of reform to an unprecedented degree, the Democratic Party was an “uneasy alliance of seamy northern urban machines and reactionary southern ruralists,” observes Hamby. Like the Republican Party, it did have a progressive wing, which would become the foundation of Roosevelt’s bold, long-running project to transform the Democrats into “the nation’s progressive party.” Believing that the Depression rendered ethnic rivalries and

cultural issues largely irrelevant, FDR saw an opportunity to remake his party as the vessel of a durable political majority committed to activist government. He wanted independent progressives, most of them nominal Republicans, to support and eventually join the Democratic Party.

PARTS OF THIS QUEST, ESPECIALLY FDR’s high-handed 1938 attempt to “purge” conservative congressional Democrats in favor of primary election challengers who were committed New Dealers, are well known. Other stories, less famous, are equally revealing. Hamby relates how FDR secretly reached out to Wendell Willkie, the Republicans’ 1940 presidential nominee, just after the GOP nominated New York governor Thomas E. Dewey for president in 1944. Roosevelt proposed “a party realignment in which the progressive wing of the Republican Party would join with liberal Democrats.” Willkie, though apparently “enthusiastic” about the proposal, decided not to take any steps before the November election. Willkie’s sudden death at the age of 52, barely four weeks before the November elections, ended an intriguing episode in the long effort, which continues to this day, to make America’s par-

tisan division coincide more closely with its ideological one.

For Hamby, the New Deal was a deliberate innovation. In his last annual message as governor, after laying out an ambitious agenda of social reform, FDR exhorted New Yorkers: “Let us not seek merely to restore. Let us restore and at the same time remodel.” Later that year, following T.R.’s example at the 1912 Progressive Party convention, FDR became the first major party candidate to accept a presidential nomination in person. His acceptance speech declared, “Let it be from now on the task of our party to break foolish traditions.” When he assumed office in March 1933, President Roosevelt immediately began to “remodel” the role of government in American life. Congress enacted a “stunning agenda” of “precedent-breaking legislation.” Both in style—strong, personal presidential leadership—and in substance, Hamby contends, Roosevelt “was leading a political revolution.”

BUT HAMBY VACILLATES ON THIS CRUCIAL point. The “emerging New Deal seemed to be building huge new bureaucracies to run the economy,” especially through the agricultural and industrial

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planning initiatives that formed the “center-pieces” of what historians call the first New Deal. But he also takes seriously the New Dealers’ claim that they were honoring their party’s and country’s “Jeffersonian Democratic roots.” Hamby argues, for example, that the National Recovery Administration, the administrative agency created to implement industrial planning, was as “much an expression of Jeffersonian Democracy as of European fascism,” because it “embraced regionalism and localism as primary virtues and even touted voluntarism.”

For all his sensitivity to FDR’s need to appear centrist, Hamby accepts such claims too credulously. It is difficult to see how Jefferson, eloquent exponent of natural rights, including property rights, inspires national industrial planning. In an article published around the time he joined FDR’s brains trust, Tugwell underscored just how profoundly the embrace of industrial planning would revolutionize American political life. Most of those who support planning, he wrote,

do not...understand that fundamental changes of attitude, new disciplines, revised legal structures, unaccustomed limitations of activity, are all necessary

if we are to plan. This amounts, in fact, to the abandonment, finally, of laissez faire. It amounts, practically, to the abolition of “business.”

“This is not an overstatement for the sake of emphasis,” he stresses; “it is literally meant. The essence of business is its free venture for profits in an unregulated economy.... To take away from business its freedom of venture and of expansion, and to limit the profits it may acquire,” would be necessary for the ultimate goal: to destroy business as business “and to make of it something else.” That something else does not have a name, Tugwell claims, but it was already “becoming visible in Russia.”

**H**AMBY LIKEWISE DENIES THAT industrial planning was a “foreign import.” What he means by this is that the New Deal embrace of planning was not particularly inspired by Italian fascism, but, rather, “had deep roots in early-twentieth century American progressivism.” Yes, New Deal industrial planning did have “deep roots” in the earlier progressive movement, but American progressivism was hardly autochthonous. Many of the first progressive

economists responsible for the development of planning—most prominently Richard T. Ely and Simon N. Patten, Tugwell’s beloved teacher—were products of what historian Daniel Rodgers calls “the German university connection.” Americans by birth, these men pursued graduate education in various German universities where they studied with the professors of the German Historical School of economics, which promoted what some of its members called “state socialism.”

The goal of “state socialism,” Rodgers explains, was to lead the economy “more and more out of private into public organizational forms” but “without the ‘craziness’ and ‘criminality’ of revolutionary socialism.” Conservative compared to the more Marxist social democrats, the Historical School nonetheless had an explicitly “collectivist” vision of the state. Albion Small, one of the German-trained Americans, explained that the German system “is based on the opposite presumption from ours.”

American civilization starts with the presumption that individual liberty is the fundamental and paramount factor in a rational human condition. German civilization starts with the

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presumption that the welfare of the state must always have precedence over the liberty of individuals.

Even if New Deal industrial planning was not particularly inspired by Italian fascism, as Hamby acknowledges, this does not mean they didn't share a common ancestry. As legal and intellectual historian James Q. Whitman has argued, "the German academic socialists of the late nineteenth century" were leading "expositors" of the corporatist theory that subsequently inspired Mussolini's corporatism.

**H**AMBY'S RELUCTANCE TO DISCUSS Soviet influence within FDR's administration shows his ambivalence about the New Deal's "revolutionary" character. He does mention that there were "[a] few... closet members of the Communist Party," but he neglects or otherwise downplays this topic.

Despite this, Roosevelt's progressivism, and its affinity to Communism, plays an increasingly important role in Hamby's assessment of FDR's final years, the ones dominated by World War II. He repeatedly notes that "Roosevelt and many New Dealers shared the liberal fascination with the Soviet experiment." Hamby suggests that FDR's strategy of marginalizing Churchill and cozying up to

Stalin at Teheran and Yalta—where the Big Three met to hash out what the postwar world would look like—reflected not only FDR's overconfidence in his powers of persuasion, but also his "conviction that Soviet communism, despite its totalitarian social engineering...was a progressive force in the world." At the time, FDR was growing "increasingly uncomfortable with the imperialist implications of his alliance with Churchill," but not so with his alliance with the Soviets. The possibility of a "Soviet empire, stretching from the Bering Strait to the Baltic Sea and harboring open designs on eastern Europe, seems never to have come to mind."

In this vein, Hamby reports a particularly disturbing exchange FDR had with Archbishop Francis Spellman of New York in September 1943. According to the prelate, FDR was not only willing to concede Soviet predominance in "Finland, the Baltic states, eastern Poland [the territory acquired through the Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler], and the Romanian province of Bessarabia," but also in "Austria, Hungary, Croatia, and possibly as far as France." Spellman, Hamby notes, "paraphrased [the President] as saying, 'The European people will simply have to endure the Russian domination.'" In his epilogue, Hamby revisits this exchange to

suggest how very different the aftermath of the war might have been had FDR lived:

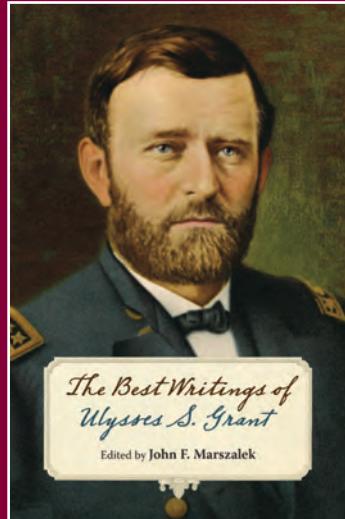
At best, perhaps there was realism in his realization that the United States could not prevent Soviet domination of eastern Europe. It is unclear how he might have reacted to Soviet ambitions for control of the rest of the continent, but he would not likely have responded as quickly and decisively as his successor, Harry Truman. His private conversation with Archbishop Spellman leaves one with the impression that he was willing to accept Soviet hegemony over all of continental Europe.

Ultimately, even though Hamby is unclear whether the Roosevelt "revolution" really revolutionized the American regime, his exploration of the origins, character, and consequence of FDR's precedent-shattering policies makes *Man of Destiny* highly instructive. Anyone seeking to understand how the United States descended into its present over-regulated, debt-burdened, and eminently confused condition should read it.

Tiffany Jones Miller is associate professor of politics at the University of Dallas.

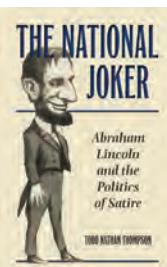
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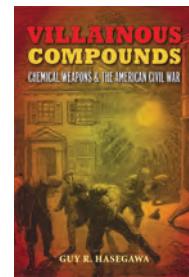


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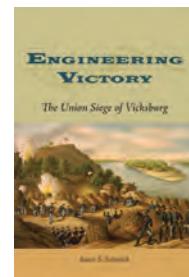


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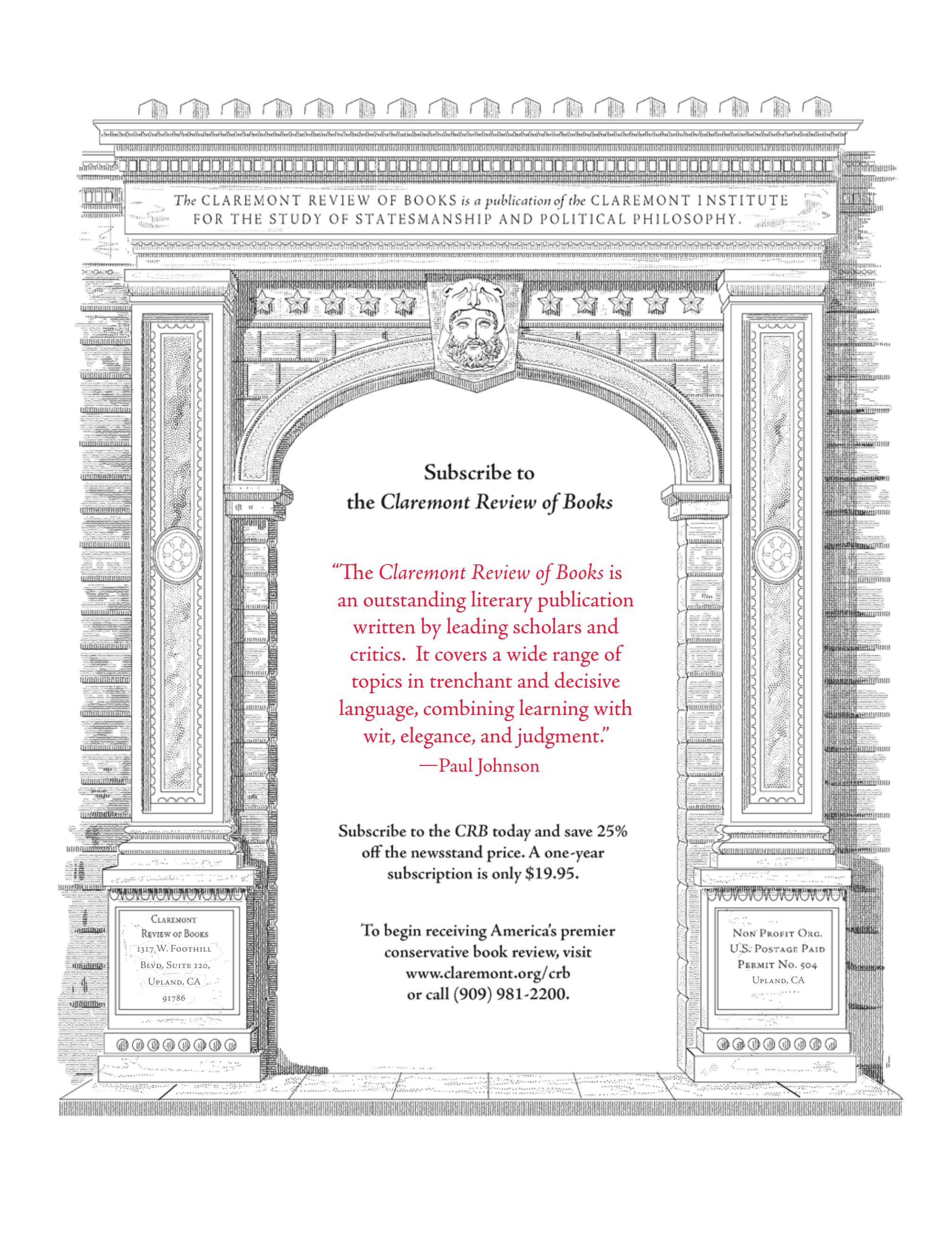
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