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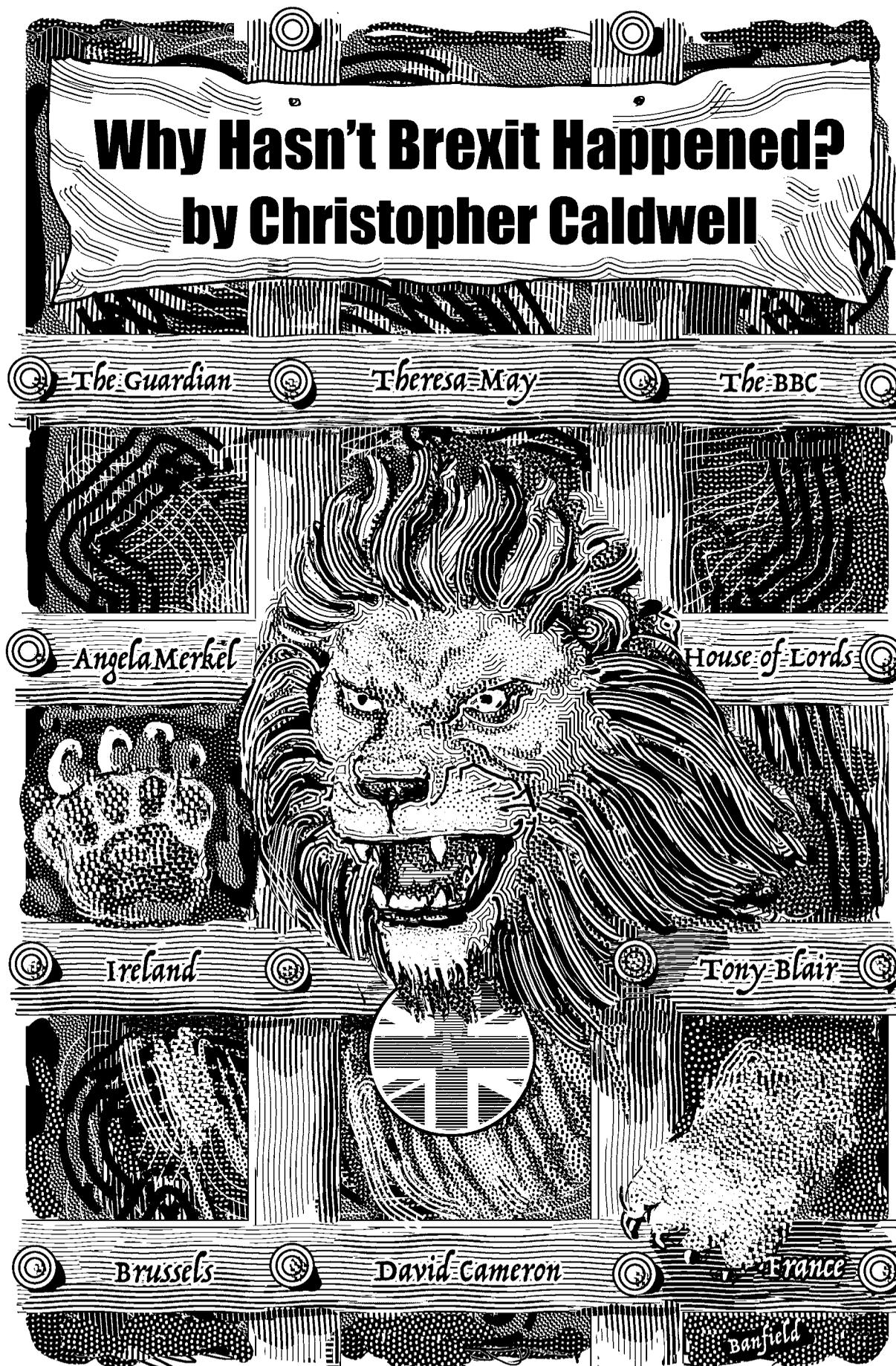
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PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



The Petrified Forest

A PART FROM NOAM CHOMSKY, THE TWO FORCES DEGRADING English today are ignorance and politics. From ignorance we get, among other things, the frequent abandonment of conjunctions (no better way to screw up a sentence); the sudden disappearance of national adjectives, so that we have “the France government,” presumably “France wine,” and the insane construction of the *Wall Street Journal*, July 3, “the Turkey’s decision to take delivery of the Russian S-400.” And do not forget prepositions used as if by men from Mars, as in “arrived to,” “specified of,” or a “study on.”

Though “on” as a universal preposition has for decades been a specialty of the *New York Times*, in most of the supposedly best written public prints one finds more and more the absence of even such basics as subject-verb agreement. After an apparently confusing prepositional phrase—often with the wrong preposition—you see the equivalents of “they is,” or “she are.”

It is unfortunately now acceptable in formal English to use, dredged up from other eras, words that anyone who lived through those eras knows were spoken by idiots—“rip-off,” “turn-on,” “hassle,” “into” (as in, “He’s into her, but she’s into Egyptian hieroglyphics”), to be “hip with”—and kid words and phrases such as “cool stuff” and “awesome” that make even kids sound stupid. Forget syntax. Overnight, the difference between “advocate,” taking a direct object—such as “reform,” and “advocate for” taking an indirect object—such as “my client”—has been forgotten. If “to discriminate” takes the preposition “against,” as it has for so long now, the meaning of the verb is completely changed as it is locked into a room it was never meant to occupy. One could go on, “of book length.” But ignorance is only the lesser evil.

The instant, politically motivated redefinition of words—most often accomplished by advocates of gradual linguistic evolution—takes them so far from meanings earned sometimes over millennia that it effectively removes them from the lines of their natural growth, stopping their evolution as surely as crossing horses with donkeys produces sterile mules.

For example, “survivor” is from the Latin *super* and *vivere*, to live beyond: i.e., someone or something that lasts beyond an event that causes, or would cause, their demise. Once, you could survive your parents, the Holocaust, a plane crash, or even a Barbra Streisand concert. Now, if your professor uses a word that makes you feel “unsafe,” you can be a survivor of sexual harassment or abuse. Miraculously, some people actually live to tell the tale of how someone may have pinched their behind.

“Resistance” is another word that has had the life sucked out of it now that it is commonly taken for its opposite. The proudly aggressive political effort to turn out the current administration calls itself the Resistance. Any aggression can be understood as resistance if one believes that the existence of something is an attack, as Hitler believed of the Jews.

Minted now as fast as donuts, the many words like these are only the saplings of a petrified forest the redwoods and sequoias of which

tend to be misleading phrases that have hardened into seldom challenged totems. The Three-Fifths Compromise, in the main and in effect an anti-slavery effort to diminish the slave-power’s ability to usurp the representation of those in bondage so as to keep them there, has petrified as an emblem of racism when it is the opposite.

TAKEN AT HIS WORD (A MOST DANGEROUS GAMBIT), PRESIDENT Obama apparently believed that history has sides, two of them, one of which is right and the other wrong. If you subscribed to his beliefs you could get over on the right side. If not, you’d remain on the wrong side. This is how he brought people together. The problem with this, of course, is that history doesn’t have sides.

Which brings up the so-called “Reagan Deficits,” supposedly caused by tax cuts and increased military spending. But the actual changes brought about by resulting variations in both caused a sizable surplus. The deficits of Ronald Reagan’s eight years in the Oval Office, produced by increased non-defense spending after his budgets were famously dead on arrival, averaged 4.08% of GDP. Obama’s deficits averaged 5.76% of GDP. Both presidents faced inherited economic crises: Reagan’s was in fact steeper. Despite Obama’s 40% higher deficits his average annual economic growth rate was 1.88%, whereas Reagan’s was 3.59%. And yet, in the petrified forest, one does not encounter “the Obama Deficits.”

Recall the Air Force Bake Sale, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot,” children in cages—lately we’ve witnessed the magical evaporation of Antifa from the now ossified connotations of “Charlottesville,” something much like the hardening of Krazy Glue until not a whiff is left of its volatile reagents. I was taught by my tenth-grade history teacher, a doctoral candidate at Columbia, that “to form a more perfect union” conveniently elided with “to promote the general welfare,” meaning that the founders wanted to perfect America much as, lo and behold, Marxists were engaged in the perfection of man.

During the Civil War and in its aftermath, the “Union” became synonymous with the United States. That is, with the nation itself. But the founders took the “union” they wanted to perfect primarily as the relationship among and the position of the states within a federal schema. This was, as any reader of *The Federalist* would gather, one of the chief questions of the time. “Union” misconstrued suggests that it is the nation that must be perfected, which has led to the misapprehension that the Constitution’s prologue invites a continuing quest for perfection of the nation as a whole—something not unrelated to the perpetual expansion of the administrative state and its limitless messing with everything.

Our fate depends upon our understanding and use of language, for, otherwise, in the petrified forest of words insufficiently considered and ideas poorly conceived, the subtleties and uncertainties of life will be eliminated in striving for an immutable order when all that will remain will be the stillness and silence of perfect control.

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