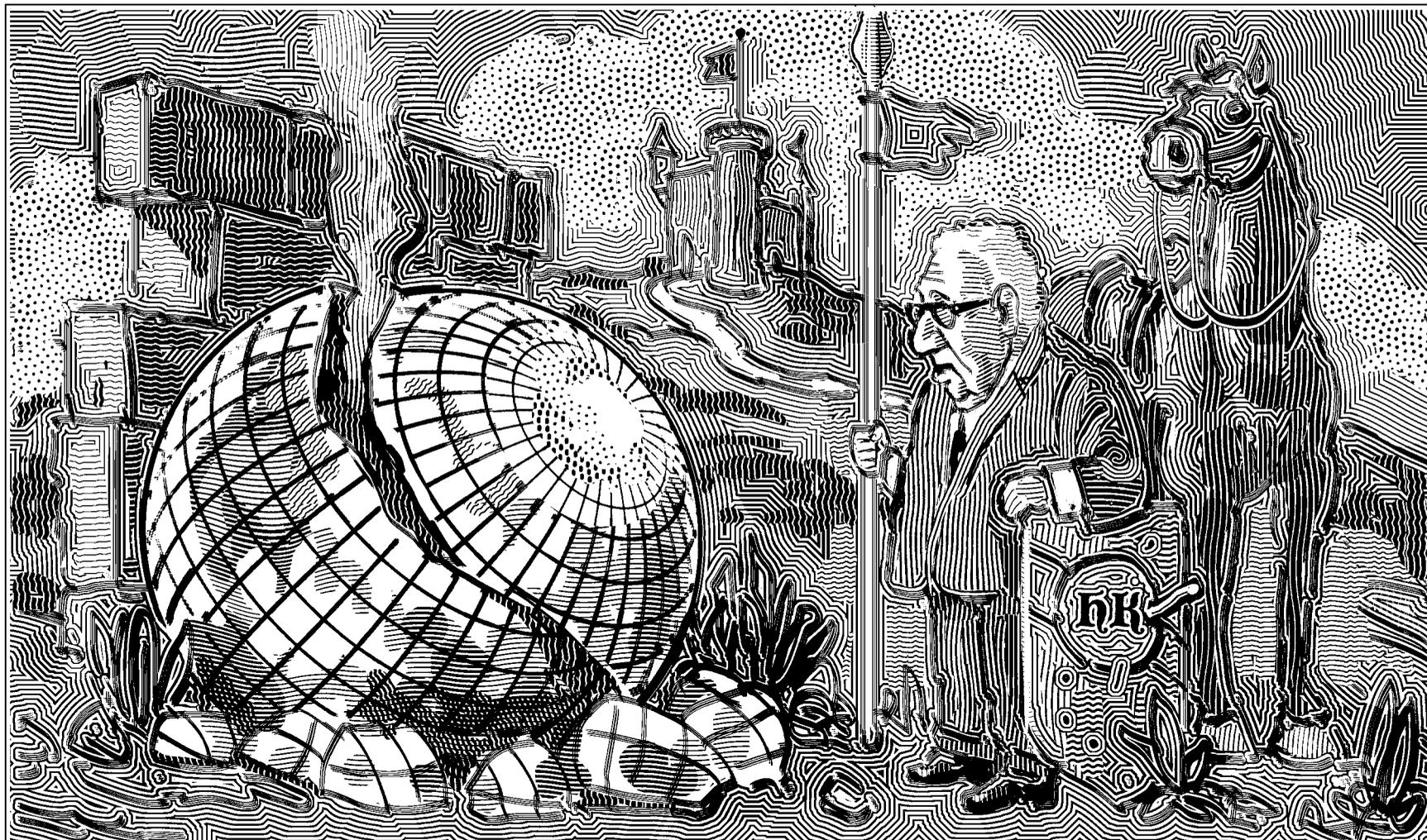


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Book Review by Lee Edwards

FATAL SYMMETRY

Landslide: LBJ and Ronald Reagan at the Dawn of a New America, by Jonathan Darman.
Random House, 480 pages, \$30



LYNDON JOHNSON'S 1964 LANDSLIDE victory was widely understood to mark a political transformation: an irreversible defeat of conservatism and a sweeping affirmation of liberalism. Ronald Reagan's 1984 landslide victory showed that the election 20 years earlier had indeed been transformative—but the reverse of what liberals had so confidently assumed.

Landslide: LBJ and Ronald Reagan at the Dawn of a New America offers a parallel examination of the two presidents by former *Newsweek* correspondent Jonathan Darman. His analysis, more ingenious than persuasive, presents a fatal symmetry between the liberal Democrat and the conservative Republican. Each treated electoral victory as a mandate to offer a “fantasy” of the American future, in which “the federal government could only be America’s salvation or America’s ruin.” While both visions would inspire millions of Americans, Darman concedes, they would also “divide and coarsen the country.” As a result of the two men’s mystical rhetoric, government has been left “in a state of dysfunction and paralysis.” The lingering myths of a government

that can do either nothing wrong or nothing right, he says, make the country hard if not impossible to govern.

BY THE END OF *LANDSLIDE*, YOU ARE indeed persuaded that Johnson’s Great Society was unachievable. In the last week of the 1964 election campaign, President Johnson offered spellbound audiences a vision of the future, which echoed the Book of Revelation:

[H]ere is the Great Society. It’s the time—and it’s going to be soon—when nobody in this country is poor.... It’s the time—and there’s no point in waiting—when every boy and girl in this country...has the right to all the education that he can absorb.... It’s the time when every slum is gone from every city in America, and America is beautiful.... It’s the time when man gains full dominion under God over his own destiny. It’s the time of peace on Earth and good will among men. The place is here and the time is now.

One month after defeating Barry Goldwater, Johnson declared at the White House Christmas tree-lighting ceremony, “These are the most hopeful times...since Christ was born in Bethlehem.” Progressives almost swooned. Observers compared the torrent of initiatives at the beginning of Johnson’s new term—including bills promising health insurance for seniors, billions for education and the poor, and voting rights for minorities—to Franklin Roosevelt’s famous One Hundred Days. Speaker of the House John McCormack intoned, “It is the Congress of accomplished hopes. It is the Congress of realized dreams.”

But North Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh also had a dream: to unite his divided country under Communism. LBJ regarded Ho, an intractable revolutionary, as another politician, like a committee chairman on Capitol Hill, with whom he could cut a deal. Accordingly, writes Darman, he expected that upon witnessing America’s power the Vietcong would suspend their guerrilla efforts in the south and sue for peace. A confident Johnson initiated a period of U.S. bombing in 1965, named “Rolling

Thunder,” scheduled to last eight weeks. In fact, the bombs continued to fall until November 1968, eight months after a weary Johnson announced his intention not to run for reelection.

DARMAN REJECTS THE CONVENTIONAL liberal view that there were two Johnsons—the “good” one who conceived the Great Society and pushed through the historic Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, and the “bad” LBJ who escalated the Vietnam War, which resulted in 58,000 American deaths. There was only one Johnson. Like John F. Kennedy, he was convinced that “a progressive domestic program could only be passed if it was matched with a muscular anticommunism.” The president’s determination to surpass the domestic policy achievements of his idol, FDR, “propelled him toward escalation, not away from it.” There was also his determination not to be the first president to lose a war. (According to Darman, however, Johnson was skeptical almost from the beginning about the prospects for victory in Vietnam.)

By the middle of 1965, says Darman, a decisive split emerged. Outwardly, Johnson proclaimed future greatness at home, but privately he despaired about a war that could not be won. The president, he says, was “divided between two fantasies—one of utopia, the other of ruin.” Fantasy became nightmare for Johnson when fiery riots erupted in the Watts section of Los Angeles and a hundred other cities. College students, unwilling to be conscripted into a distant conflict marked by ever-rising casualties, demonstrated against the war with growing numbers and violence.

The president who had promised utopia now presided over “disunity, frustration, suspicion and fear,” in the words of one magazine. In 1964, says Darman, Johnson “had looked like a man who couldn’t lose.” By the fall of 1966 he looked like a man who could not win. The GOP, thought two years earlier to be on the verge of joining the Whig Party on history’s ash heap, gained at every level: 700 additional state legislators, 8 new governors, 3

more U.S. senators, and a remarkable 47 seats in the House—more than the Democrats had added in 1964.

THE BRIGHTEST NEW POLITICAL STAR was Ronald Reagan, elected governor of California, the most populous state in the union, with 57.7% of the vote. Reagan won because Edmund G. “Pat” Brown, the two-term incumbent Democratic governor, badly underestimated the challenger’s political skills and because Californians welcomed Reagan’s vision of a “creative society” in which the people tell government what to do, not the other way around. Contrary to Darman, Reagan was not an ideologue but a traditional conservative. He was in fact a modern federalist, echoing James Madison’s call for a prudential balance between the national and state governments.

Darman is obliged to acknowledge that Governor Reagan practiced pragmatism when he raised taxes to balance the budget. President Reagan did so again when he accepted a 25% cut in personal income tax rates rather than the 30% he had originally proposed. Darman does not cite, however, Reagan’s dictum that he would accept 70% of what he wanted if he could get the other 30% later.

In an epilogue and afterword, Darman tries, and fails, to sum up Reagan’s presidency. He faults Reagan for making “a mythic promise” to keep America an “island of freedom” and “a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely.” If that is mythical, then every president since Abraham Lincoln—who called America “the last, best hope of earth”—has been a myth-maker, describing America as a land of freedom and opportunity for all. Darman searches high and low for myths. Reagan’s full recovery from the attempted assassination was “a mystical endorsement” of his vision. To substantiate his claim that supply-side economics was a myth, he quotes George H.W. Bush’s dubbing it “voodoo economics,” but does not add that Bush subsequently adopted the concept as president.

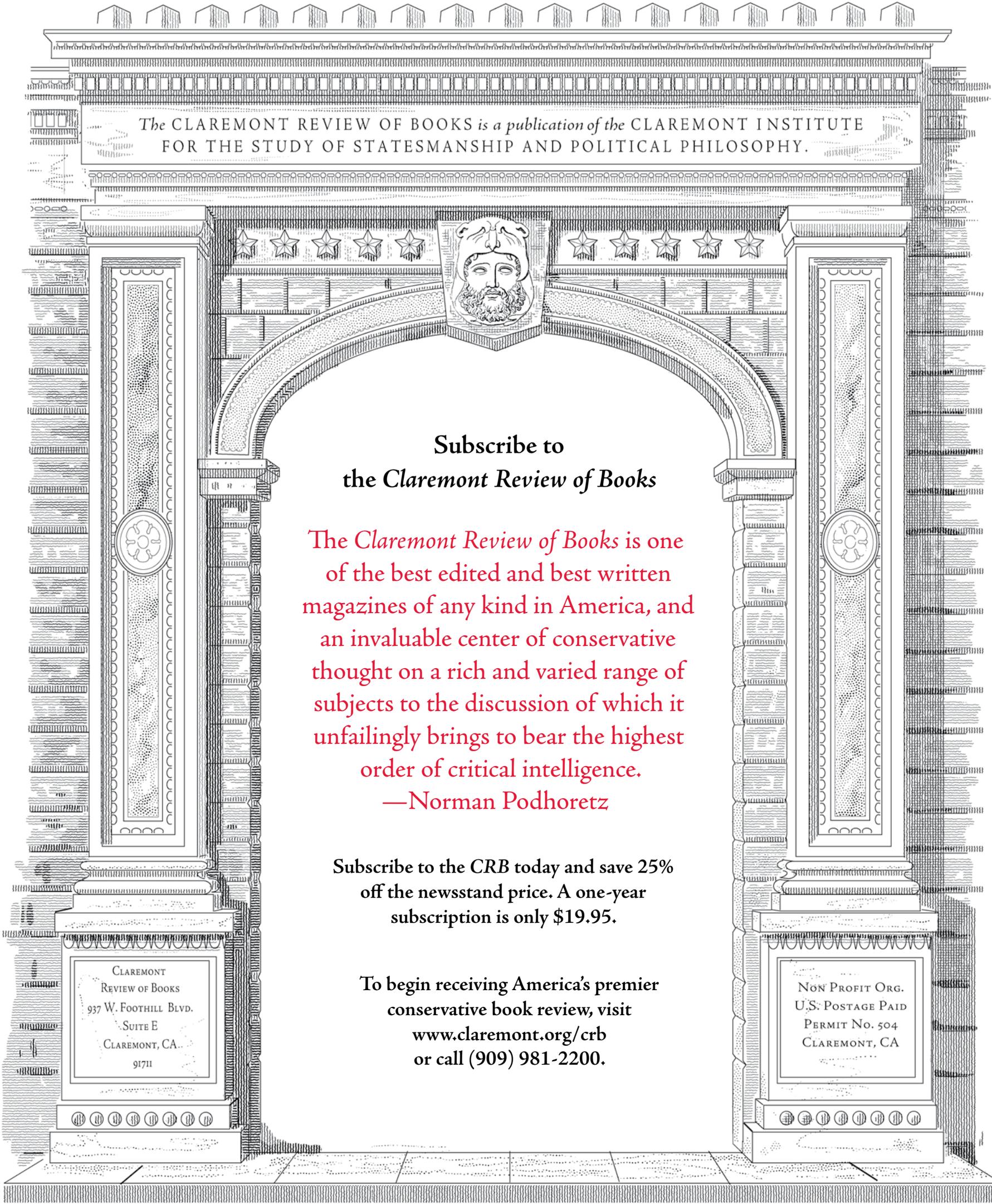
Certainly, supply-side was no myth to the 17 million Americans who found jobs dur-

ing the Reagan years, or to black households, whose income went up 84%. From 1983 to 1988, following the recession, economic growth averaged 4.6% annually, among the highest rates in the postwar period, while the real income of every stratum of Americans increased. As predicted by supply-siders, annual federal revenues increased some 50%, from \$618 billion to \$903 billion. Still, Darman writes that Reagan won reelection in 1984 in another landslide because Americans had gotten used to “fantastic stories of great days to come.” In reality, a better day *had* arrived for most Americans.

LANDSLIDE CONCLUDES THAT MUCH of Johnson’s and Reagan’s grand visions for the country “ring false” when today’s leaders call on them. Neither man’s myth, he says, “has served its respective party, or the country, well.” It is true that you cannot find today a Democrat who presents himself as another LBJ. Johnson’s rhetoric about “Marshall Plans” to solve this or that domestic problem has no 21st-century counterpart. Republican candidates, however, regularly claim to be the most Reaganesque alternative in a primary election. *Landslide* was published shortly before the 2014 midterms, where historic GOP gains were built on tax cuts, smaller government, and strong defense—core Reagan principles.

The reality of Johnson versus Reagan was not symmetrical. LBJ’s Great Society was an impossible dream, while Reagan’s free society triggered unprecedented prosperity and restored Americans’ confidence in themselves and the future. As Darman correctly shows, Johnson was neither humble nor realistic, dooming himself to defeat at home and abroad. But the author cannot bring himself to write that Reagan’s idealistic but prudent statesmanship evoked the best of America.

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