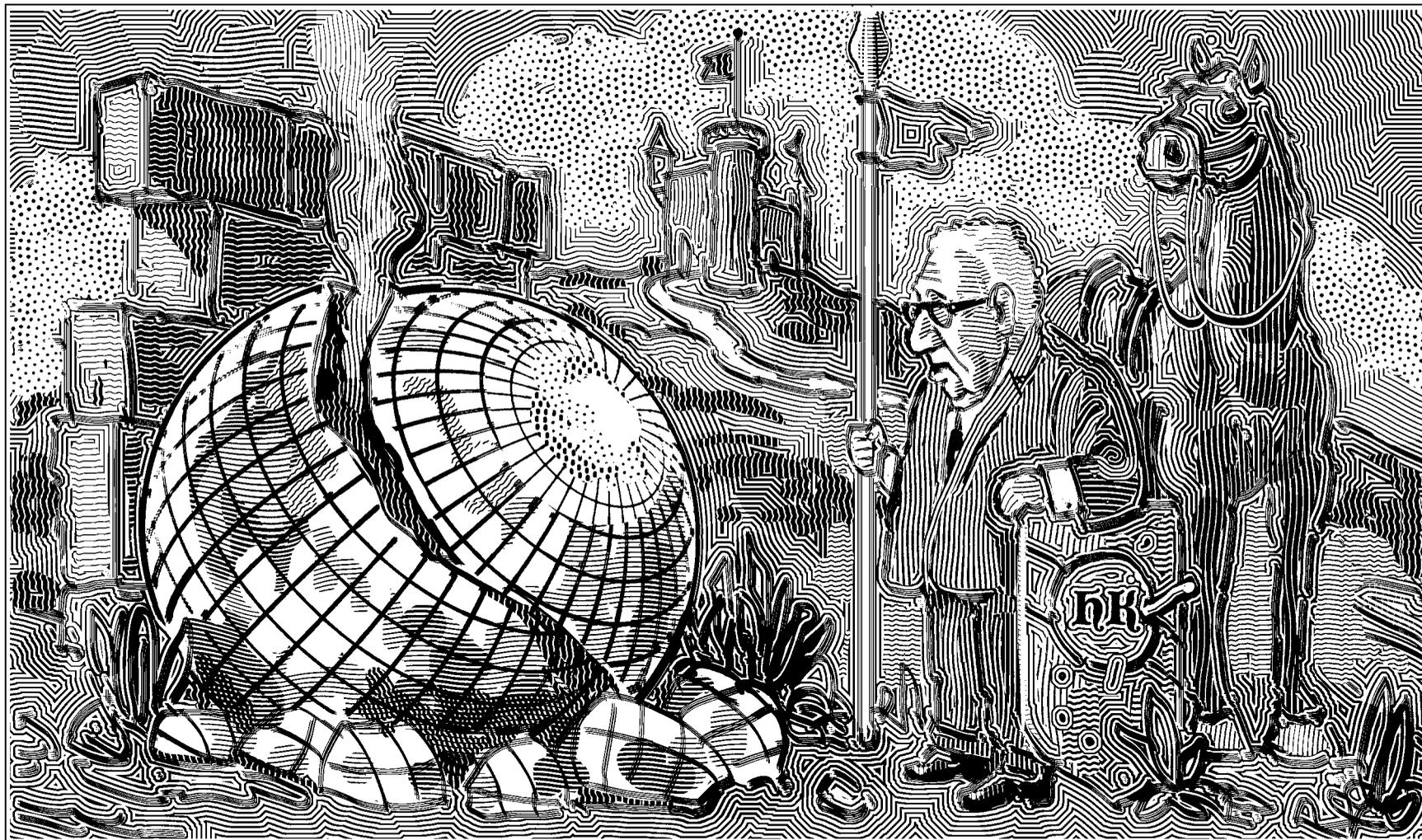


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2015

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THE WORLD ACCORDING TO KISSINGER

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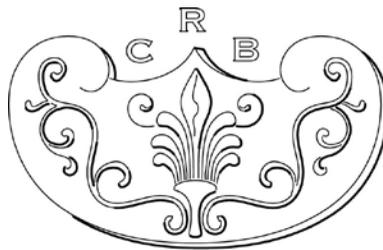
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Essay by William Voegeli

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

PEOPLE ARE SHOUTING ABOUT POLITICAL correctness again, thanks to Jonathan Chait of *New York* magazine. His January cover story, “Not a Very P.C. Thing to Say: How the Language Police Are Perverting Liberalism,” set off a debate among dozens of columnists and bloggers. The fiercest denunciations came from writers to the left of Chait, a senior editor of the *New Republic* before he joined *New York* in 2011. His detractors’ not entirely consistent position was that political correctness is a figment of reactionaries’ imagination...and, besides, nearly every instance of it is fully justified. One journalist, for example, derided Chait as a “sad white man” who reacts to criticism with “operatic self-pity.” Another accused him of lamenting the “inability to write offensive tripe without consequence,” adding sympathetically, “Boo-f--ing-hoo. Get a real problem.”

Chait claims that political correctness, which he says “burst onto the academic scene in the late ’80s and early ’90s,” has once again become a problem after a “long remission.” Yet the vitriol his article elicited makes it highly doubtful that a cancer now capable of attacking so aggressively was ever cured or contained in the first place. Chait suggests the “most probable cause” of P.C.’s long dormancy was the 1992 presidential campaign, which “mobilized left-of-center politics...away from the introspective suppression of dissent within the academy”—an assessment that ascribes Periclean eloquence and force to Bill Clinton’s Sister Souljah speech.

Chait’s argument about what political correctness means is, by contrast, interesting and important, especially for figuring out how to distinguish America’s Left from its Right. He starts from an incontestable premise: American conservatism is “unusually strong” compared to the political Right in any other modern democracy. It is so powerful that its “long propaganda campaign” to equate liberalism with ludicrous, dangerous radicalism has succeeded. Indeed, not just a large portion of the public but “even many liberals” are now persuaded that “liberals and ‘the left’ stand for the same things.”

But they don’t:

It is true that liberals and leftists both want to make society more economically and socially egalitarian. But liberals still hold to the classic Enlightenment political tradition that cherishes individuals rights [sic], freedom of expression, and the protection of a kind of free political marketplace. (So, for that matter, do most conservatives.)

Accordingly, liberals need to defeat political correctness in order to sustain the synthesis, which defines and vindicates modern liberalism, of egalitarian reform and Enlightenment principles.

Liberals believe (or ought to believe) that social progress can continue while we maintain our traditional ideal of

a free political marketplace where we can reason together as individuals. Political correctness challenges that bedrock liberal ideal. While politically less threatening than conservatism (the far right still commands far more power in American life), the p.c. left is actually more philosophically threatening. It is an undemocratic creed.

The Party Line

TO ASSESS THIS CHARACTERIZATION of what’s Left, Right, and liberal, we need to clarify what political correctness means. Chait’s definition accords with how most people now use and understand the term: “a style of politics in which the more radical members of the left attempt to regulate political discourse by defining opposing views as bigoted and illegitimate.” Political correctness’s first manifestation—call it, in keeping with Chait’s chronology, P.C. 1.0—came in 1990, when the *New York Times* and several other mainstream publications devoted articles to the subject. In *Debating P.C.* (1992), Paul Berman records that within months political correctness became the subject of academic conferences and a commencement address by President George H.W. Bush.

“Political correctness” was in use before 1990, however. Berman says it was “originally an approving phrase on the Leninist left,” for those showing absolute fealty to the Commu-

nist party line. It subsequently evolved into “an ironic phrase among wised-up leftists”—that is, an intra-left way of mocking someone as a Goody Two-Shoes. Only in the past quarter-century has “political correctness” been employed “by people who had no fidelity to radicalism at all, but who relished the nasty syllables for their twist of irony.”

Berman recounts not only the history of the term but also of the ideas that animate it. Most of the theorizing came from what he calls the “’68 Philosophy” developed by intellectuals in France. In keeping with Chait’s description, these thinkers really did reject the Enlightenment. Their “great god,” according to Berman, was Martin Heidegger, “who was second to none in holding Western rationalism and humanism responsible for all the unhappiness of modern life.”

Most of the *politics* came from America, however, where the 1960s was less ambitiously intellectualized. The New Left blamed liberalism for Vietnam, and for accepting incremental reforms at home rather than demanding sweeping changes. That attitude became an ideology, “identity politics,” whose creed and method, in Berman’s phrase, was “race/class/gender-ism.” Key tenets include:

1. “Groups, not individuals, produce culture. Every group has its own culture, or would, if oppressors didn’t get in the way. Thus we have the cultures of white men, of black men, of women, of black women, of homosexuals, of Hispanic women, and so forth.”

2. “The different cultures are engaged in a struggle for power. The culture of white males...has pretty much won this struggle, and thus has achieved domination over the rest of the world.”

3. “Race/class/gender analysis will show the culture of white males to be a culture of domination and destruction.... By teaching everyone to appreciate the culture of all groups in equal measure and by discouraging the use of certain common phrases that convey racial and gender hierarchies...we will bring to an end the domination of this one small group.”

True Wisdom

IT’S NOT SURPRISING THAT THE POLITICAL correctness embodying and enforcing these beliefs set up shop in the universities first. In the U.S., those undergraduate and graduate students who had been swept up in the turmoil of the 1960s before go-

ing on to academic careers were becoming established scholars and administrators in the 1980s. (Roger Kimball’s book about academia’s political extremism, *Tenured Radicals*, was published in 1990.) Furthermore, by this time the works of leading ’68 philosophers—especially Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan—had been translated into English, then absorbed and championed by American scholars. As a result of these influences, deconstructionism became an important force in several scholarly fields, literature and cultural studies in particular. Its counterpart, critical legal theory, found a home in many prominent law schools.

In *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (2011), historian James T. Kloppenberg delineates the core tenets of these systems of thought. (Barack Obama would have been exposed to them as an undergraduate from 1979 to 1983, and as a law school student from 1988 to 1991.) The key idea, laid out in a chapter titled, “From Universalism to Particularism,” is that true wisdom culminates in rejecting the whole notion of true wisdom. The “denial of universal principles” he writes, rests on “the belief that everything we see is conditioned by where we stand.” Since “all human values and practices are products of historical processes and must be interpreted within historical frameworks,” it follows that there “is no privileged, objective vantage point free from the perspective of particular cultural values.”

This argument appears vulnerable to a damaging objection: if there are no universal principles, doesn’t it follow that the denial of universal truths and corresponding insistence on the impossibility of escaping the influence of particular values is, itself, nothing more than the expression of the denier’s particular values? If so, then there’s no reason to take this argument seriously, which reopens the possibility of transculturally valid universal principles. But if, on the other hand, the denial of universal principles is a true account of objective reality, period, then the truth of *this* assertion raises the possibility that other truths might exist, ones ascertainable from a variety of cultural perspectives.

This objection isn’t right, contend those who deny universal principles. It’s not even wrong. According to Richard Rorty, the influential philosopher and leftist theoretician, to ask whether the rejection of universal principles is “true” is to judge particularism—or, to use Rorty’s preferred term, non-foundationalism—by the very set of standards it rejects as pointless and fraudulent. The whole purpose of non-foundationalism, he wrote in *Philoso-*

phy and Social Hope (1999), is to discard the “picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside itself,” in favor of the understanding that humans’ only real concern is “the distinction between the more useful and the less useful.” Ideas, and the words in which they are expressed, are among the tools humans employ to “cope with the environment,” and the sole test of this coping is whether the tools “enable [humans] to enjoy more pleasure and less pain.”

The non-foundationalist denial of universal principles, then, means rejecting altogether the metaphysical distinction between true and false. It also entails, Rorty makes clear, rejecting the ethical distinction between right and wrong. The “moral struggle is continuous with the struggle for existence,” he maintains, “and no sharp break divides the unjust from the imprudent, the evil from the inexpedient.” To this assertion Rorty appends the thought that what matters in this moral struggle “is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness.”

Our Turn

SUCH GENEROUS AND INCLUSIVE SENTIMENTS must be regarded as expressions of social hope rather than of philosophy, however, if the harshest condemnation non-foundationalists can lodge against Auschwitz is that it was imprudent. I don’t offer the example as an extreme case of a merely hypothetical difficulty. Both Heidegger, the great god of the ’68 philosophers, and Paul de Man, one of their leading figures, were involved with the Nazi party in ways that remain murky and controversial, but which clearly favored rather than opposed Hitler’s politics. That which lies beyond good and evil may turn out to be the horrifically inexpedient.

The vast moral latitude created by the rejection of universal principles might also appear ill suited to the work of political correctness. The point of correctness, after all, is to denounce *incorrect* transgressors and their transgressions, which would seem hard to do while simultaneously maintaining that, morally and politically, all bets are off. Part of the explanation is that one attribute of political correctness is the working precept that consistency is overrated, which empowers moral relativists to castigate their targets for violating moral absolutes.

Insofar as we can fashion a coherent theory of political correctness, however, it would be that universal principles are most notable for



having been flagrantly violated by the people who proclaimed them—slave owners who signed a declaration holding that all men are created equal being Exhibit A. This indictment of people who fail to adhere to the truths they invoke lends itself to two interpretations. For those non-foundationalists who are less forthright or rigorous than Rorty about discarding the distinction between what's evil and what's inexpedient, criticizing the failure to live up to declared principles can be read as a demand to, at long last, take them seriously enough to obey.

According to a more theoretically consistent political correctness, however, the hypocritical failure to act on universal truths really demonstrates the hollowness and absurdity of those or any such truths. Increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness doesn't require, and won't be advanced by, redoubling our commitment to Enlightenment principles, like those in the Declaration of Independence. Instead, race/class/gender-ism teaches that the most fundamental historical truth is that white heterosexual males have, again and again, gotten what they wanted at the expense of everyone else. They have often done so—and thought themselves noble for it—by invoking universal principles, which is only one more reason

to scorn straight white males *and* their damn principles.

The only moral "principle" race/class/gender-ism provides or believes it needs to provide is that, for everyone other than straight white males, it's now Our Turn. It's not Our Turn due to any Enlightenment blather about extending "inalienable rights" to categories of people from whom they have been withheld. It's Our Turn because over long centuries straight white males have had Their Turn. But now, we're tired of waiting. There are more of us than of them, and there'll be even more of us in the future than there are now. And those of us who are not straight white males refuse to be any more diffident about fashioning ways to experience more pleasure and less pain than those who *are* straight white males have been, over those same long centuries, about finding ways to enhance the quality of *their* lives.

Thought Police

THE ASPECT OF P.C. I.O THAT BECAME most politically controversial was college policies curtailing free speech. In 1989, education scholar Chester E. Finn, Jr., called the modern campus "An Island of Re-

pression in a Sea of Freedom." A 1990 *Newsweek* story on political correctness was titled, "Thought Police." Even Todd Gitlin, president of Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s and later a professor at Berkeley and Columbia, lamented, "A bitter intolerance emanates from much of the academic left." Colleges competed aggressively to devise the most exacting speech codes, most of which were withdrawn after court challenges or public ridicule. The University of Connecticut, for example, tried to ban "inappropriately directed laughter" and "conspicuous exclusion of students from conversations."

The tenured radicals, unsurprisingly, did not react placidly to the feeling they had suddenly become a national piñata. In *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy* (1995), Jeffrey Williams, now a professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University, decried the whole "PC thing" as a "debacle," a "scare," and a "slur." Inadvertently demonstrating Kloppenberg's point about "perspectivism"—how we see things depends entirely on the standpoint from which we see them—Williams gazed upon American higher education at the end of the 20th century and saw a debate over basic precepts as extensive, vigorous, and fair as anyone could desire. "I would argue that the university



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is currently one of the few open public spaces available to Americans, offering a plethora of public voices and conversations, of positions and arguments, of theories and debates.”

This satisfied assessment differs from the one offered three years later by Thomas Sowell: “The next time some academics tell you how important ‘diversity’ is, ask how many Republicans there are in their sociology department.” Zero, it turns out, would be a safe guess. In 2005 two economists studied the party registration of faculty members at 11 California institutions: large and small, public and private, famous and obscure. They found that at 44 to 1, the ratio of Democrats to Republicans among sociologists was more lopsided than in any other academic field. By contrast, among professors of languages and literature, Williams’s discipline, Democrats were merely 11.9 times as numerous as Republicans.

Trial by Media

ACCORDING TO CHAIT, P.C. 2.0 IS DIFFERENT from, and worse than, P.C. 1.0 because the new version has escaped the quadrangle. “Two decades ago, the only communities where the left could exert...hegemonic control lay within academia, which gave it an influence on intellectual life far out of proportion to its numeric size.” Now, however, “political correctness flourishes most consequentially on social media,” such as Facebook and, above all, Twitter. This is an important change. Because “social media is also now the milieu that hosts most political debate, the new p.c. has attained an influence over mainstream journalism and commentary beyond that of the old.” The upshot is that “the p.c. movement has assumed a towering presence in the psychic space of politically active people in general and the left in particular.” He quotes Rebecca Traister of the *New Republic*: “All over social media, there dwell armies of unpaid but widely read commentators, ready to launch hashtag campaigns and circulate Change.org petitions in response to the slightest of identity-politics missteps.”

One problem with Chait’s account is that political correctness was deforming discourse outside the academy *before* social media existed. In March 2006, for example, a stripper claimed she had been raped by members of the Duke University lacrosse team. The story immediately became a national sensation—long before Facebook and Twitter had begun to influence political debates.

In the early days of the controversy one Duke professor, Houston A. Baker, wrote that the lacrosse players, “under the cover of

silent whiteness” had been given “license to rape, maraud, deploy hate speech and feel proud of themselves in the bargain.” (A former president of the Modern Language Association, Baker is now Distinguished University Professor in Vanderbilt’s English department.) By the end of the year, as the stripper’s story and prosecutor’s case fell apart, all criminal charges were dropped. The mother of one of the accused players emailed Baker to ask if he cared to qualify his initial assessment. “LIES!” he replied, calling her a “provocateur” seeking “to get credit for a scummy bunch of white males” who were living like “farm animals.”

But the political correctness wasn’t just coming from Grievance Studies professors and campus activists. Journalists covering the Duke story demonstrated that political correctness did not need hashtag campaigns to assume a towering presence in their psychic spaces. Ruth Sheehan, for example, a columnist for the Raleigh, North Carolina, *News & Observer*, titled her first column after the story

The only moral “principle” race/class/gender-ism believes it needs to provide is that now it’s Our Turn.

broke, “Team’s Silence Is Sickening.” Addressed to the lacrosse players, it began, “We know you know,” and concluded,

Every member of the men’s lacrosse team knows who was involved, whether it was gang rape or not. Until the team members come forward with that information, forfeiting games isn’t enough. Shut down the team.

The politically correct journalistic malfeasance was national, not just local. Kurt Andersen, a journalist and novelist, wrote in October 2006, when the case was still going forward, that the Duke story—“successful white men at the Harvard of the South versus a poor single mother enrolled at a local black college”—brought out the worst in the *New York Times*, which covered it aggressively and tendentiously. One *Times* alumnus told him, “You couldn’t *invent* a story so precisely tuned to the outrage frequency of the modern, metropolitan, *bien pensant* journal-

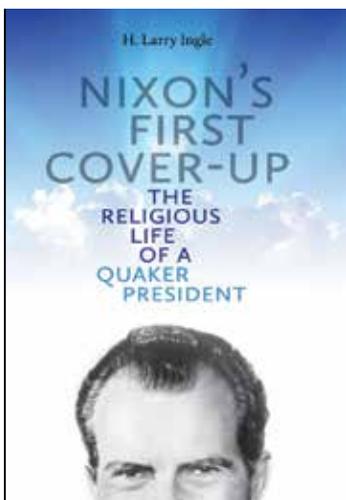
ist.” Two months earlier, when skepticism about the prosecution’s case was growing, the *Times* had published a front-page, 5,600-word story doubling down on the contention that there was a real crime, a real victim, and real culprits. The story’s gist, the paper’s “standards editor” told Andersen, was that “there’s more to the prosecution case than the defense would have you believe.” But, Andersen pointed out, “there’s *always* more to *every* prosecution case than *any* defense would have you believe—and in this instance there’s shockingly less than the *Times* and the rest of the media led us to believe at first.” Andersen’s takeaway was that, though he had for years “tended to roll my eyes when people default to rants about the blindered oafishness or various biases of ‘the mainstream media’ in general and the *Times* in particular,” after its handling of the Duke case, “I’m becoming a believer.”

Not Up for Debate

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ACADEMIC and extra-academic political correctness is, then, highly suspect. One prominent leftist blogger, Fredrik deBoer, a doctoral student at Purdue University, took the complicated position in response to Chait’s *New York* article that Chait was “a jerk who somehow manages to be both condescending and wounded”—but also that his thesis was essentially correct. Although deBoer’s biggest complaint about political correctness was that it generates “vicious left-wing infighting,” he joined Chait in worrying that “ideas and mores from the academy have a way of spreading into the world of media.”

Indeed, if the champions of campus speech codes have their way, comparable regulations are certain to be applied more broadly. Today’s students definitely will grow up, but won’t necessarily grow out of the attitudes they’ve acquired. A Harvard undergraduate who wrote in the student paper that “academic justice” should trump academic freedom conceded only that those who publish what she considered sexist commentary *probably* have a legal right to do so, which suggests maybe they don’t, or won’t always. A Stony Brook senior voiced what might be termed non-foundationalist triumphalism in taking umbrage at a *New York Times* op-ed by Judith Shulevitz about “trigger warnings” and other excessive protections for students who might be upset by words and ideas:

The current generation of college students has denied validity to the failed ideas of the past. We have embraced



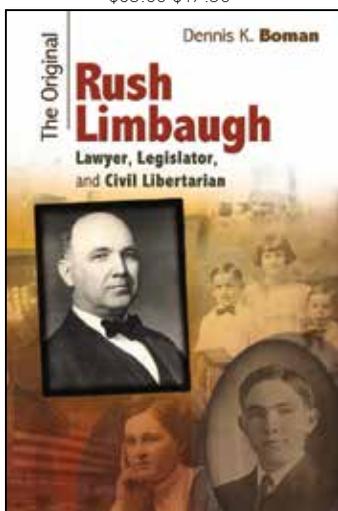
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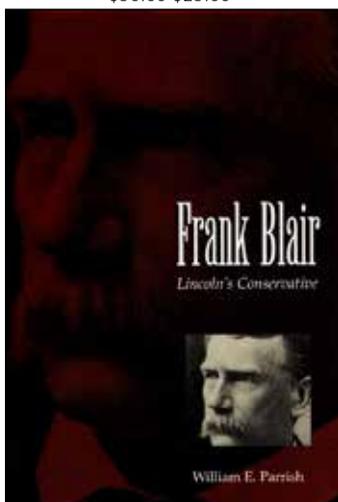
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the knowledge and empathy of the present. We are shaping the wisdom of the future.

It's a letter to the editor that can be sung to the tune of "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" from *Cabaret*.

And it's not as though these empathetic, wise scholars will, when they're old enough to run the country, need to devise from scratch the regulations that will bring the entire nation up to the standards presently refining academic life. As the parody-defying Australian "human rights activist" Tanya Cohen insists, America is scandalously out of step with every other civilized society, wherein national human rights commissions patrol the boundary between free speech and hate speech. The Oklahoma University fraternity members filmed making a racist chant, for example, would not just have been expelled from school in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, or any of the other countries with such commissions. They would have received "a hefty prison sentence for willfully inciting racist hatred and violence against vulnerable minorities." "Obviously," Cohen writes before making a far-from-obvious declaration, "I believe in freedom of speech, and I believe that freedom of speech must always be upheld to the maximum extent possible." It's just that this maximum extent sounds neither maximal nor extensive after she goes on to clarify that "it's just common sense that freedom of speech doesn't give anyone the right to offend, insult, humiliate, intimidate, vilify, incite hatred or violence, be impolite or uncivil, disrespect, oppose human rights, spread lies or misinformation, argue against the common good, or promote ideas which have no place in society." The basis of this common sense—"We all learned this in school"—is doubtless true, and confirms what results when campus politics becomes politics politics. It's "not something that's even up for debate," Cohen explains, although when folks like her are running things, *nothing* will be up for debate, except for propositions considered in low voices by prisoners serving hefty sentences.

Shut Up, He Explained

SUPPOSE, FOR THE SAKE OF THE ARGUMENT, that the U.S. never builds Tanya Cohen's reeducation camps, and that political correctness never really thrives outside an academic environment. Could we, on that basis, be sanguine about the future of reasoning together by exercising our rights of free expression?

That depends on whether one understands the stifling of free expression in narrow, institutional terms, or treats it as a consequence of a broader social ethos. In 2014, 58 scholars and activists took the latter position in a public statement, "Freedom to Marry, Freedom to Dissent: Why We Must Have Both." Issued after technology executive Brendan Eich was forced to resign from Mozilla because he had made a \$1,000 donation to support a California ballot proposition prohibiting same-sex marriage, the statement insisted, "Sustaining a liberal society demands a culture that welcomes robust debate, vigorous political advocacy, and a decent respect for differing opinions." In the belief that "disagreement is not, itself, harm or hate," it urged, "We should criticize opposing views, not punish or suppress them."

By contrast, those who believe political correctness is non-existent and/or benign hold that any consequence less severe than a long prison sentence handed down by Judge Tanya against those who express politically incorrect views aren't censorship and aren't, therefore, a problem. "The congealing conventional wisdom among progressives," deBoer complained, "is that the right to free expression has only been abridged if government literally physically prevents you from speaking." On the *New York Times* website, for example, one of Shulevitz's detractors argued, "The government isn't imprisoning anyone with ugly speech, or preventing them from getting employment, or shutting down their newspapers or articles." Ergo, campus speech codes and "microaggression" rules are no problem. On the asset side of the ledger, "Certain ideas are wrong, and it's up to us as a society to say 'these ideas are unacceptable and we will not pretend this is up for debate.'" Or, as Ring Lardner put it, "'Shut up,' he explained."

Similarly, Angus Johnston, with whom deBoer exchanged heated blog posts after Chait's article appeared, maintains that "being called a racist is not the worst thing in the world." It is indeed far less ghastly than being slowly tortured to death...but the same can be said about being called many other things—"girl," for example, rather than "woman" if you're a female college student—or being exposed to controversial, discomforting ideas. Johnston's no-harm, no-foul observation about accusations of racism (or sexism, homophobia, etc.) is, then, a counterintuitive point to adduce in defense of a campus and national environment where the exchange of ideas is governed by the axiom that there is no such thing as a slight offense.

But, of course, moral and political asymmetry is not a bug but the central feature

in the Our Turn logic of political correctness. Johnston recalls feeling, when he was an undergraduate, afraid to “talk about certain issues” for fear of getting “yelled at.” But those fears sometimes made him “keep my mouth shut—which, as a 19-, 20-, 21-year-old white guy was maybe not the worst thing that could happen.” To ask the question whether it would also be no big deal for a student from any other demographic category to self-censor for fear of being yelled at is to answer it.

The *Guardian*'s Jessica Valenti denounced Chait in similar terms. “We are finally approaching a critical mass of interest in ending racism, misogyny and transphobia and the ways they are ingrained into our institutions.” That being the case, “If the price we all pay for progress for the less privileged is that someone who is more privileged gets their feelings hurt sometimes—or that they might have to think twice before opening their mouths or putting their fingers to keyboards—that’s a small damn price to pay.”

Once more, perspectivism: prices that other people pay usually seem damn small. And these disparate standards don’t just result in the more privileged getting their feelings hurt and being forced to think twice in ways the less privileged don’t. The Department of Education’s zealous, heedless protocols for reducing sexual assault on campuses are a vehicle to bring the Duke lacrosse team’s experience to every college in America. A public letter signed last year by 28 members of the Harvard Law School faculty contended that the Harvard University procedures devised to comply with the Department’s edicts lack “the most basic elements of fairness and due process” and “are overwhelmingly stacked against the accused.” Students charged with sexual assault have inadequate opportunities to secure counsel, discover facts, cross-examine witnesses, and present a defense before the adjudicating campus body, which simultaneously functions as investigator, prosecutor, and jury.

The Department also requires colleges to use a “preponderance of evidence” standard—if 51% of the evidence argues the guy’s guilty, he’s guilty—within procedures that are already biased against defendants in other important ways. The 51% standard is widely used in civil cases, though never in criminal ones, but only in courts of law with exacting procedural standards, neutral judges, and assistance of counsel. The entire project, brought to us by the Obama presidency, embodies the attitude expressed in 1991 by Catherine Comins, who was assistant dean of student life at Vassar: men falsely accused of

rape need to accentuate the positive, edifying aspect of the experience.

They have a lot of pain, but it is not a pain that I would necessarily have spared them. I think it ideally initiates a process of self-exploration. “How do I see women?” “If I didn’t violate her, could I have?” “Do I have the potential to do to her what they say I did?” Those are good questions.

Double Game

IT APPEARS THAT INSTEAD OF P.C. 1.0 AND 2.0, there is just P.C., which never went away. It appears, as well, that eschewing dissuasion in favor of denouncing, deriding, harassing, intimidating, and silencing those who harbor politically incorrect viewpoints is *primarily* an on-campus phenomenon, but has had a robust off-campus life for the past quarter-century.

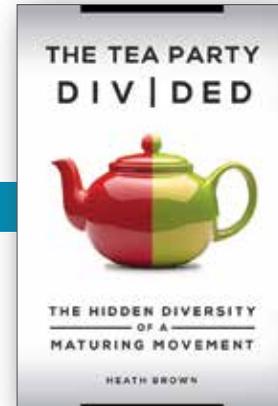
What, then, of Chait’s final and most important distinction: between the liberalism that opposes political correctness, and the Left that favors and employs it? Is this a sound assessment of the disagreements that define the left side of our political spectrum? And to the extent that reasoning together really is, as Chait says, a bedrock liberal principle, how avidly will liberals defend it? Or, to put the same question another way, how vigorously will liberals repudiate politically correct leftism, given that liberals and leftists are both economic and social egalitarians?

Chait describes liberalism’s stalwart moderation in a way liberals have long employed, finding it both persuasive and congenial. Liberalism understands itself to be an Aristotelian mean between conservatism, complacently or viciously opposed to reforms needed to rectify social wrongs, and leftist radicalism, which aspires to good ends, but too often resorts to bad, undemocratic means. Liberalism’s excellence consists in pursuing the right goals in the right way; it’s the quality that made the center vital, both indispensable and animated.

Liberalism’s betweenness can be viewed less flatteringly, however, as a double game. Liberals tell radicals that they agree with their goals, but working within the system—letting liberals negotiate the deal—is the only way to get even a portion of what liberals and leftists seek together. At the same time, liberals tell people afraid of the radicals—an audience including conservatives, but also people with limited interest in politics but a clear aversion to aggressive fanatics—that dealing with liberals is the only way to ward off the crazies.

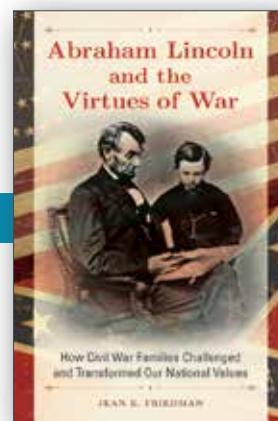


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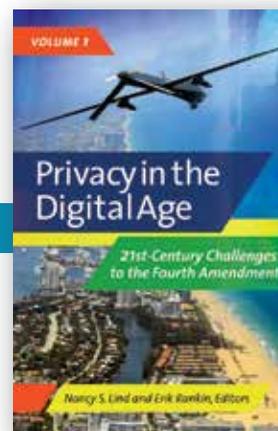
The Tea Party Divided

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August 2015



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This is a kind of triangulation, but not one where liberalism is equidistant from conservatism and radicalism. Liberals have made clear for a century that they regard conservatives as their enemy and radicals as their coalition partners—though often embarrassing, unreliable, counterproductive ones. However uneasily and fractiously, liberals and radicals share a basic understanding about what they loathe and about what the world will look like when they succeed in removing its injustices. The result is a division of labor and mutual dependence. “Without pragmatic liberals,” historian Michael Kazin writes, “radicals spin into fantasies or eat one another alive from inside their desiccated ideological cocoons. But without radical dreamers, liberals absorb themselves with strategies that lead mostly to defeat.”

No comparable shared purpose or understanding binds liberals to conservatives as a political force. As Chait describes it, liberals and radicals are brought together by a fundamental substantive agreement about the need for greater social and economic equality. What liberals and conservatives share is a procedural commitment to conduct politics according to Enlightenment principles of free expression and individual rights. In this account, liberals are playing on the same team

as radicals, but agree with conservatives about which rulebook to use.

Understanding this fact solely in abstract terms would lead us to expect that liberals will be far more likely to side with leftists against conservatives, for the sake of achieving shared objectives, than with conservatives against leftists for the sake of upholding shared norms. The historical record bears out this prediction. The *Atlantic’s* David Frum argued that the point of Chait’s essay was that political correctness makes liberals look “hesitant and weak.” If liberals can’t stand up to “transgender activists at a graduate school,” they can’t stand up to anyone, for anything.

But the idea that liberals suffer from a reputation for being spineless, soft, and irresponsible—hand-wringing wimps who won’t take their own side in an argument—is not categorically true. Liberals have never been bashful about taking their own side when arguing *against conservatives*. Chait’s most famous *New Republic* article, for example, began, “I hate President George W. Bush,” a hatred that went beyond policy differences to encompass the way the 43rd president walked and talked. Liberals demonized Robert Bork, when he was nominated to the Supreme Court in 1987, with equal stridency. “Robert Bork’s America,” Senator Edward Kennedy said at the time, “is

a land in which women would be forced into back-alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens’ doors in midnight raids, schoolchildren could not be taught about evolution, writers and artists could be censored at the whim of the Government, and the doors of the Federal courts would be shut on the fingers of millions of citizens.”

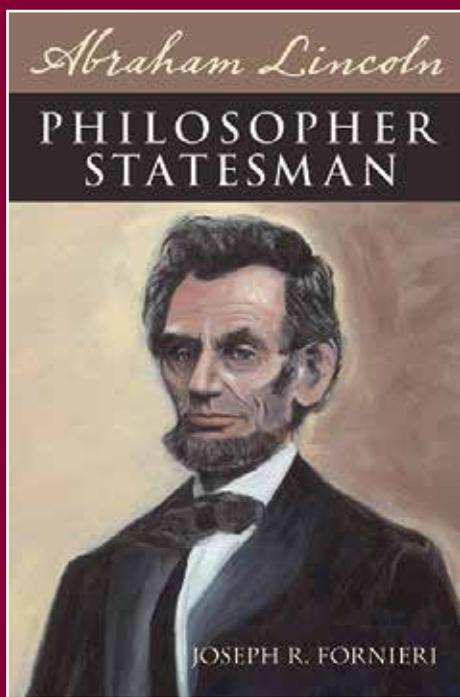
Their determination to fight the real enemy regularly allows liberals to overcome their misgivings, if any, about making common cause with leftists. Democratic senators Tom Harkin, Barbara Boxer, and Tom Daschle attended the Washington premiere of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 911* in 2004, along with Terry McAuliffe, then chairman of the Democratic National Committee and now governor of Virginia. Harkin and McAuliffe, speaking to reporters, praised the strident anti-Bush film. Similarly, Al Sharpton has his own show on MSNBC and walk-in privileges at the Obama White House.

Liberalism’s Logic

THIS PARTIALITY IS NOT JUST OPERATIONAL, but theoretical. Chait portrays liberalism as the quest for egalitarian policies while upholding Enlightenment tra-

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, PHILOSOPHER STATESMAN

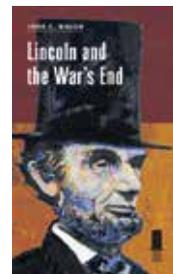
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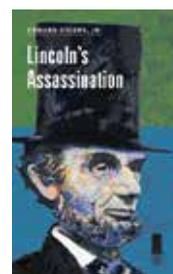
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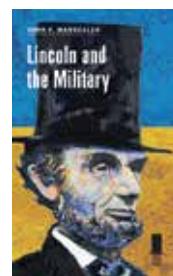
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ditions, but a dominant motif in liberalism's history is the dilution or abandonment of Enlightenment norms for the sake of effecting reform. In one of liberalism's founding texts, *The Promise of American Life* (1909), Herbert Croly complained that "the traditional American confidence in individual freedom has resulted in a morally and socially undesirable distribution of wealth." The solution? "In becoming responsible for the subordination of the individual to the demand of a dominant and constructive national purpose, the American state will in effect be making itself responsible for a morally and socially desirable distribution of wealth."

By the same token, to believe that men are endowed by nature with certain inalienable rights is to believe that rights are what they are. The New Deal, by contrast, insisted that rights are what we say they are. Franklin Roosevelt's 1944 State of the Union address proclaimed a second Bill of Rights—to receive a long list of social welfare guarantees—because the rights the founders held to be self-evident had, by the 20th century, "proved inadequate to assure us equality in the pursuit of happiness." And as America moves forward in the "pursuit of happiness and well-being," FDR said, it can look forward to the elaboration of "similar rights" as circumstances dictate.

This was non-foundationalism *avant la lettre*. "We have to give up on the idea that there are unconditional, transcultural moral obligations, obligations rooted in an unchanging, ahistorical human nature," Rorty contended half a century after FDR's Second Bill of Rights speech. We "so-called 'relativists' claim that many of the things which common sense thinks are found or discovered are really made or invented." Since *all* rights are made or invented, there's no reason for New Deal liberals not to avail themselves of the right to make and invent a new right whenever it might be useful. By the same token, we have every reason to discard or curtail rights that have become inconvenient, which is Tanya Cohen's position on the right to free speech, or the Department of Education's on the right to a fair trial.

Having anticipated Rorty, FDR closed his speech to Congress by offering a sneak preview of Michael Moore. If "rightist reaction" thwarts the Second Bill of Rights, he said, then "even though we shall have conquered our enemies on the battlefields abroad, we shall have yielded to the spirit of Fascism here at home." If, as Chait contends, political correctness consists of radical leftists attempting to regulate political discourse by defining opposing views as illegitimate, then your typical

hashtag campaign fanatic is a bashful centrist compared to Dr. New Deal.

Jonathan Chait castigates political correctness as "a system of left-wing ideological repression" that is "antithetical to liberalism." This very welcome rebuke, however, rests on a very shaky premise. The problem—for Chait, and liberalism, and America—is that political correctness is better understood as a continuation of the liberal tradition than as a betrayal of it.

One must applaud and encourage those liberals, like Chait, Shulevitz, and the Harvard law professors, who criticize political correctness. But it's difficult to be optimistic about whether they'll ultimately succeed, or even fight all that hard. A liberalism divided against itself, half politically correct and half politically incorrect, cannot stand. When it ceases to be divided and becomes all one thing or all the other, that one thing is going to be P.C. unless liberals repudiate, not just radical leftists, but fundamental elements of their own logic and legacy.

William Voegeli is a senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books and the author, most recently, of The Pity Party: A Mean-Spirited Diatribe Against Liberal Compassion (Broadside Books).

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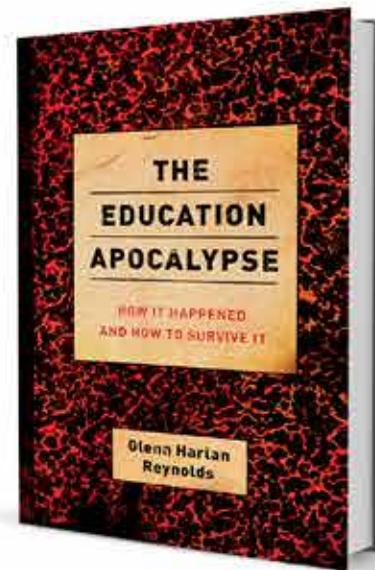
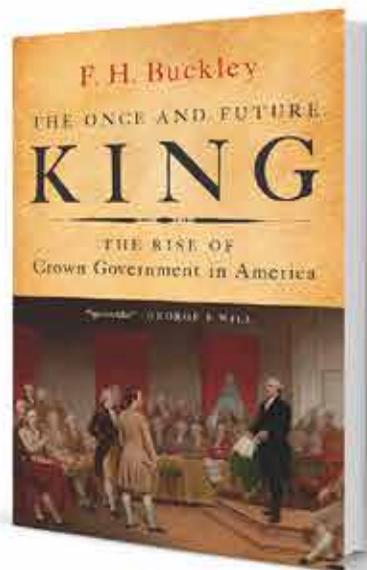
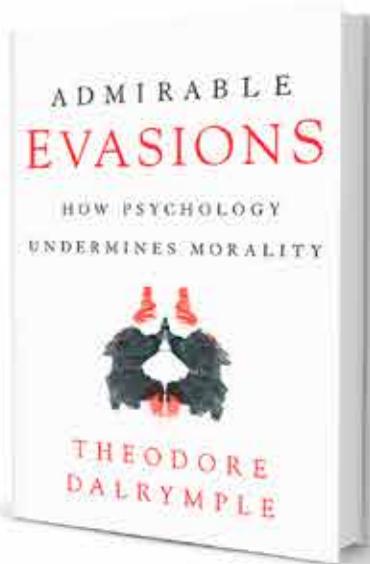
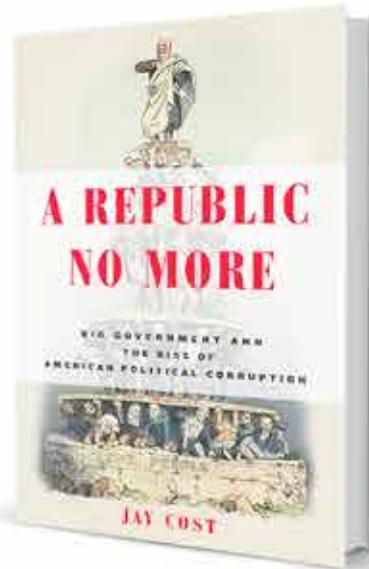
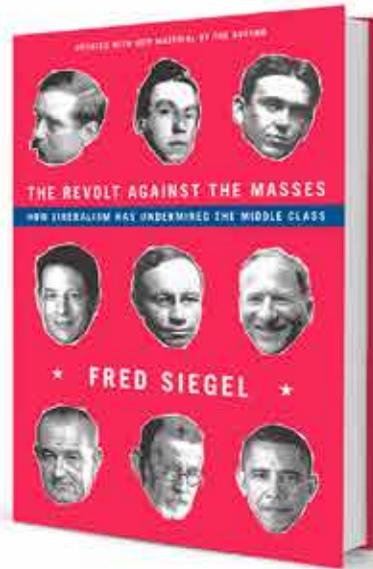
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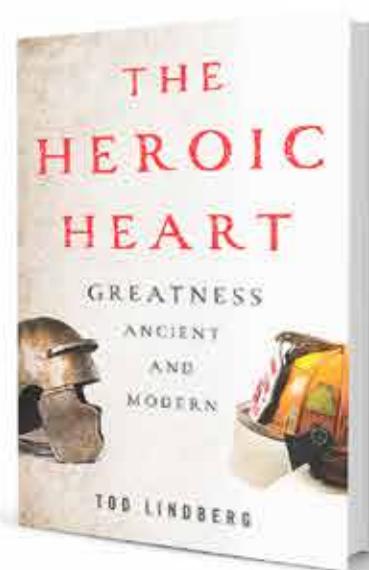
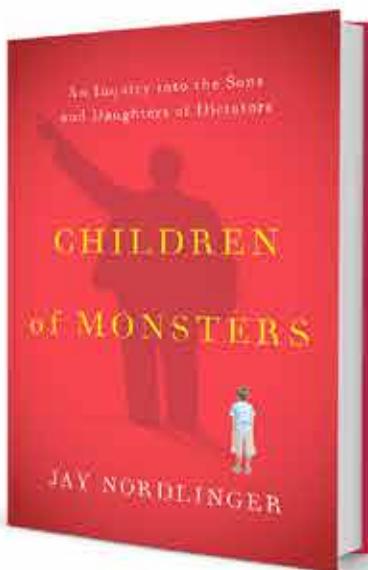
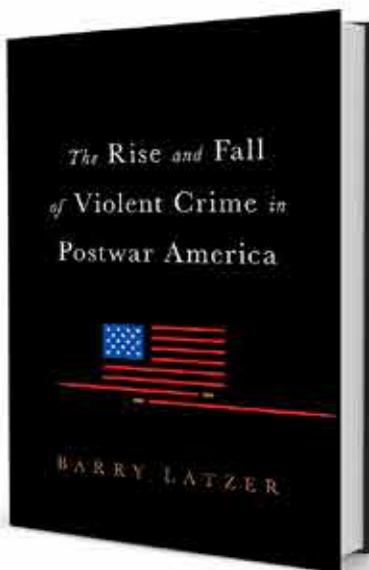
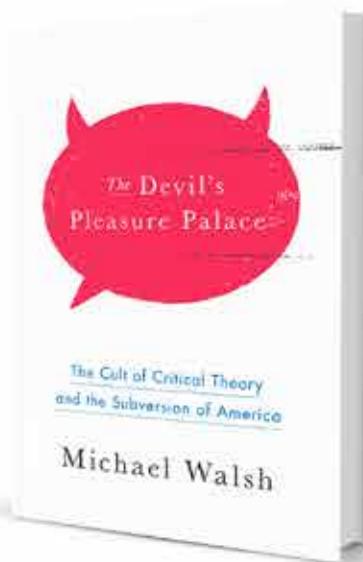
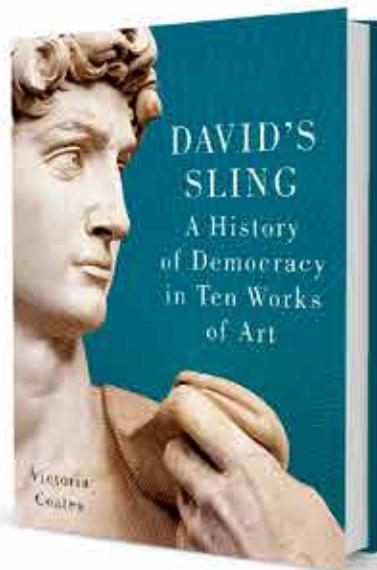


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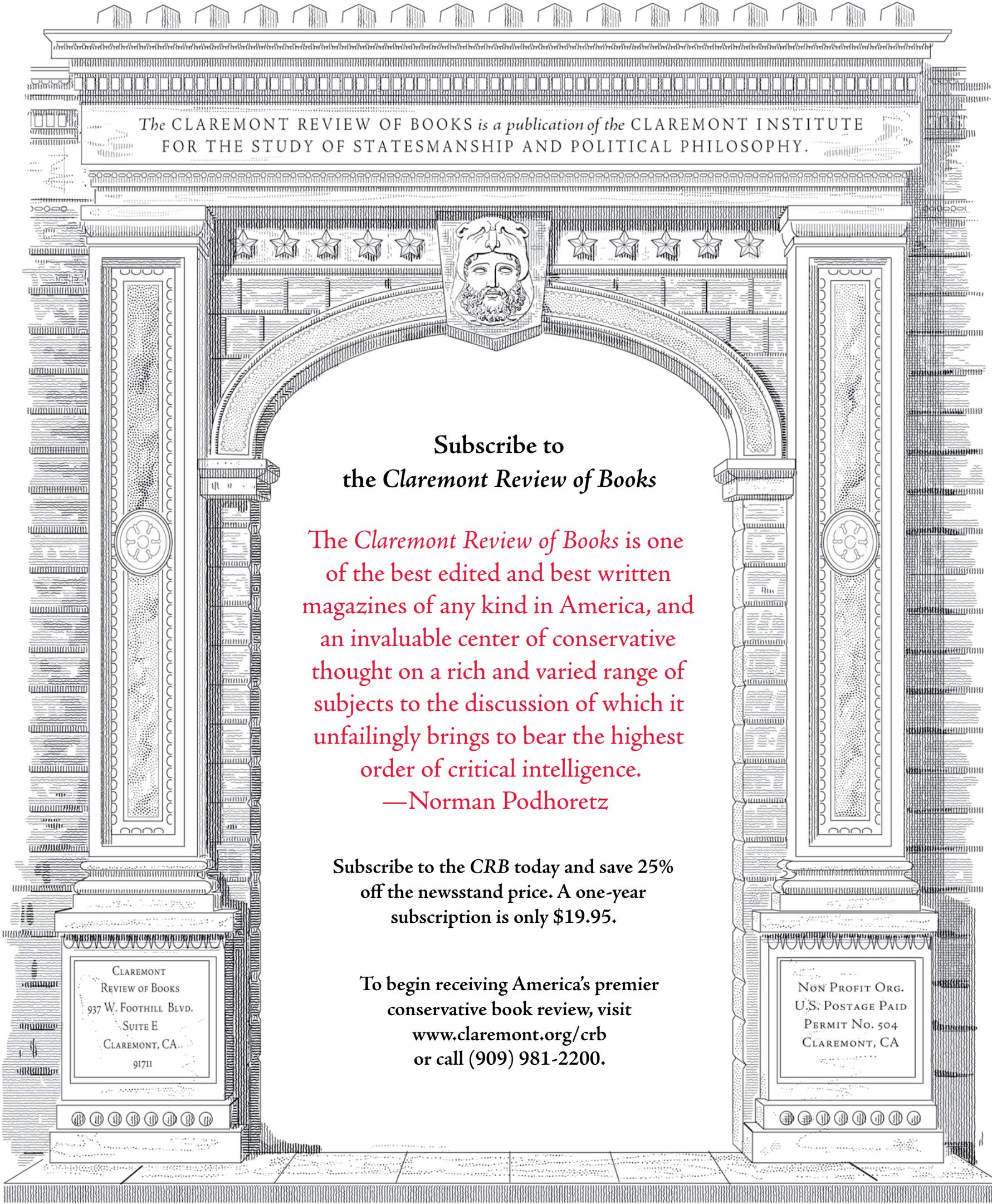
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