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CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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How Reagan Saved the Great Society

by Christopher Caldwell



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Essay by William Voegeli

NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING



WILLIAM GOLDMAN, CALLED THE world's greatest screenwriter by critic Joe Queenan, won Academy Awards for writing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *All the President's Men*. Eight films made from Goldman screenplays grossed more than \$100 million in domestic box office sales, and he was also an uncredited but well compensated "script doctor" on numerous distressed properties. For all that, Goldman considered movie writing a sideline. He thought novels and plays his true métier, though the ones he wrote met with modest success.

It's no surprise, then, that Goldman wrote "the best line in the history of Hollywood," as *Variety* said in 2018 after his death at the age of 87. What's great is that the line was about movies rather than in one. It appears in *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (1983), his non-fiction book about how the film industry (barely) works. Goldman asked readers to sympathize with the high-paid but beleaguered executive, whose job is to decide whether his studio will or won't invest the millions needed to turn a particular idea into, as they say, a major motion picture.

And the line was: "Nobody knows anything." That is, "nobody, nobody—not now, not ever—knows the least goddam thing about what is or isn't going to work at the

box office." The point is to make money—as another industry adage insists, "They call it show *business*, not show *art*"—but there appears to be no formula or even guideline for doing so. Goldman points out that every Hollywood studio but one passed on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which became one of the most successful films in history. Around the same time, all the executives involved with *The Island*, a 1980 movie with a Peter Benchley script and starring Michael Caine, thought it was a can't-miss project. Upon release, *The Island* sank without a trace.

Expertise

THE FILM INDUSTRY WAS DIFFERENT in 1983, before the advent of streaming services, Rotten Tomatoes, and DVRs. Whether a particular film soars or crashes, however, remains perversely random. Thus, despite Clint Eastwood's stature as an actor and director, there were modest expectations for his 2014 film, *American Sniper*, mostly because previous films about the war in Iraq had performed poorly at the box office. *Sniper*, however, went on to generate \$547 million in receipts against a \$58 million budget. The movie "has the look of a bona fide cultural phenomenon," CNN reported. "All of which has Hollywood execu-

tives, and a lot of other people, scrambling to understand why." Goldman quotes one executive looking back on his career: "If I had said yes to all the projects I turned down, and no to all the ones I took, it would have worked out about the same."

Although his line became famous, Goldman never really explained, in *Adventures in the Screen Trade* or elsewhere, why nobody knows anything. He says that industry people refer to some unexpected hits as "nonrecurring phenomena," but that's just a clinical term deployed to conceal the fact that nobody knows why a film with doubtful prospects found a sizeable audience. Ultimately, Goldman seems as mystified as the studio executives: nobody knows which films will and won't be popular because there's no way anyone *could* know. The audience is large, fickle, mysterious, its wants and aversions inchoate. Most filmgoers don't know what they want until they see it, and even then could not helpfully explain why they loved this movie but hated that one.

Goldman's sharp analysis of Hollywood does, however, suggest a more substantial theory of the case: perhaps no one knows anything because everybody knows too much. The longer you stay in Hollywood, the more you hone skills—acting, writing, directing, editing, etc.—crucial to the complex, precari-

ous business of turning an idea into a motion picture. But acquiring this expertise, combined with being immersed in a colony/industry that discusses movies constantly, necessarily means that you find it increasingly difficult to *see* a movie the way a layman does. You become estranged from the customers who go to the cineplex every few weeks (or order up a movie for the home flat screen), unable to imagine what they seek in a movie and how they respond to what's in front of them. Unfortunately, these are the people who hold all the power in the movie business: they, in the aggregate, will determine whether a movie succeeds or fails.

Most endeavors require expertise and immersion in a vocational community, while every enterprise must ultimately answer to the consumer. Besides show business, the field with the most acute tension between inside knowledge and outside knowledge—between the craft needed to offer something to the world and the savvy needed to understand the public you're offering it to—is electoral politics. “Nobody knows anything,” would work as a title for any YouTube compilation of journalists, academics, and campaign advisors confidently predicting that Donald Trump would win neither the 2016 Republican presidential nomination nor the general election against Hillary Clinton. The same title could be used for a movie about Brexit. Or about the 2018 primary victory by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a 28-year-old who had never run for any public office, over New York congressman Joe Crowley, a ten-term incumbent who was the fourth-ranking House Democrat. Or the 2019 Australian election, where the Labor Party lost after leading every public opinion poll taken for the previous two years.

These examples aren't like *Collier's* magazine predicting Alf Landon would defeat Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, or the 1948 “Dewey Defeats Truman” headline. Measuring public opinion was crude then but, we've been assured, is sophisticated now. Survey samples are large and designed to be demographic miniatures of the electorate. Polling is done continuously, the results analyzed by savants who tune out the noise to reveal the signal. Campaigns themselves are run by professionals who adapt market-research techniques, such as focus groups, for fine-tuning message and strategy. The whole point of this expertise is to make the electorate's preferences comprehensible, to make election results foregone conclusions.

And yet, the voting booth is as unpredictable as the box office. Politics and show business are frequently compared, of course, most

famously in Paul Begala's remark that Washington is Hollywood for ugly people. They appear to have this other thing in common. Where governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, the citizenry is sovereign. The ultimate point of governance in such a democracy is to give the people what they want—or, at the very least, to refrain from imposing policies or conditions they don't want, creating dissatisfactions that political opponents can exploit. This permanent imperative has given rise to various forms of expertise, such as polling, speechwriting, advertising, and strategy, designed to ascertain and gratify the public's wants. Journalists who cover politics must be conversant with all these practices.

And yet, these experts on the public are, by virtue of their expertise, alienated from the public. People who spend their days reading, writing, thinking, and talking about politics find it increasingly difficult to imagine how political ads, speeches, interviews, podcasts, and news coverage look to people who pay

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very little attention to politics...that is, to most people, most of the time. In this sense at least, political science is a contradiction in terms.

Method without Intelligence

DEMOCRACY USED TO BE MORE DEMOCRATIC. Historian Robert Wiebe's *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (1995) tells how Americans turned democracy into a mass activity in the early 19th century, after the founders had passed from the scene. Deference to demigods gave way to grass-roots engagement as “self-selection powered the entire democratic process.”

No principle lay closer to the core of its operations than the one governing participation: the way to get into American democracy was to get into it. Ask nobody's permission, defer to nobody's prior claim.

In that era, when democracy took the form of torchlight parades and patronage machines, how were political campaigns able to gauge popular sentiment without polls and focus groups? Interestingly, the most plausible explanation comes from the realm of literature, not politics. In an 1884 essay, “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James advised the aspiring novelist: “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!” Similarly, in a 1921 essay on literary criticism, T.S. Eliot praised Aristotle's *Poetics*: by putting forward neither laws nor even a method of criticism, Aristotle showed that “there is no method except to be very intelligent.”

Retail politics was more confident, more adept at ascertaining and satisfying the public's will, when it depended on the ability to read a room rather than to read a poll. The reliance on methods, such as conducting polls or focus groups, has allowed the ascendance of a political clerisy that does not have to be especially intelligent in the sense that James and Eliot described: alert, discerning, and shrewd. As law professor and columnist Glenn Reynolds has written, we find ourselves with a cognitive elite that isn't “especially elite, or for that matter particularly cognitive.”

Method without intelligence leads to interpreting data generated by modern political techniques in ways that are excessively literal but insufficiently thoughtful. Public opinion polls give equal weight to all responses, including those that are lightly held and of little importance to the respondent. Elections, which force voters to choose, cause many to pick an issue or two they consider crucial. Opposition to gun control, for example, is usually the minority position in voter surveys. But that minority contains many who will vote for candidates largely or even solely on the basis of that one question, while the issue does not have comparable salience for the majority that tells pollsters it wants more gun laws.

Similarly, Ross Douthat of the *New York Times* points to opinion studies showing solid majorities in favor of liberal positions on a range of issues, including gun control, abortion, health care, taxes, and the environment. The number of respondents who favor *all* those liberal positions, however, was a mere 18%. Democrats set themselves up for disappointing Election Days, Douthat argues, by failing to understand that the liberal “consensus” is broad but shallow, susceptible to defections as people consider one or another liberal position a deal-breaker.

Technology always has consequences, though the unanticipated changes are usually more important than the intended ones. It turns out that the internet in general, and

social media in particular, does less to democratize expertise than to democratize insularity. One can now become estranged from one's fellow citizens, like film industry and political insiders, without submitting to the rigors of mastering a body of knowledge or climbing the ladder of a competitive field. By custom-tailoring the information and opinions we receive, culling the distressing and retaining the congenial, we can each inhabit a cyber-sphere that affirms our particular sensibilities. Its ideals are ours, our hatreds are its.

Twitter Nation

THE DISCOVERY THAT THIS CONSTRUCTED world is quite different from the real one comes as a brutal surprise. Right up until the December 2019 election, for example, when the Labour Party suffered its worst defeat since 1935, many British leftists were convinced that Jeremy Corbyn had a legitimate shot at becoming prime minister. As the results came in, columnist Nick Cohen found it necessary to admonish them: "Never mistake your Twitter feed for your country." The "Twitter Primary," in the words of the *Atlantic's* Helen Lewis, "drives its members to extremes" because an "excess of certainty leads activists to bad decisions and misappre-

hensions." The "cloistered world of Twitter is creating a false sense of consensus," she says, because those who succumb to its narcotic attractions lose touch with crucial facts. "Using Twitter makes you exceptional. Being highly politically engaged makes you exceptional." The result is to make such people exceptionally convinced that their distorted misinterpretations are, instead, highly incisive.

When William Goldman said that nobody knows anything, he meant that nobody among the handful of moguls able to greenlight a film project knew, or could know, whether it would end up making or losing money. Thirty-seven years later, with more people more committed to viewpoints they've acquired and reinforced by selectively grazing in pastures of fact and opinion, Goldman's rule is becoming categorically true. The web is worldwide, but the constant torrent it has unleashed makes us less rather than more comprehending and connected. The dangers of individualism that Alexis de Tocqueville lamented, where each man is led back toward himself alone and confined wholly in the solitude of his own heart, become more dangerous than ever.

Upon realizing that their Twitter feed is not their country, many solipsists will withdraw, transferring their allegiance from the

real country that has betrayed them to the artificial one that respects and affirms their every idiosyncrasy. Others will react with anger, grimly determined to transform their country into their Twitter feed—and do so by any means necessary. The latter will, at the same time, impose ever more stringent loyalty oaths on their Twitter feed, creating a "turbocharged tribalism," in Ms. Lewis's phrase, where the "stridency of highly polarized voices online...has a chilling effect on less engaged and less confident tweeters."

I can't imagine how this state of affairs can be interpreted as a problem that we might solve. It is, at best, a condition that we must understand and account for. Telling stories and governing ourselves are imperatives as old as the human race. Despite their differences, they address some of the same basic needs: to render life more bearable, meaningful, and noble; to surmount the walls of subjectivity that enclose us. In both endeavors, the imperative to see things as they are and improve them as we can requires us to swim against a strengthening current. To do so demands striving to be people on whom nothing is lost, who employ no method other than to be very intelligent.

William Voegeli is senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

New and Noteworthy Books from AEI Scholars

A Time to Build

From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream

Yuval Levin

January 21, 2020

Publisher: Basic Books

ISBN: 9781541699274

In *A Time to Build*, Yuval Levin explores the frustration, division, populist anger, and alienation that have overwhelmed our public life. Drawing on examples from politics, the professions, the academy, media and social media, civic and religious life, and more, he argues that a transformation of our expectations of institutions has played a key part in powering our age of acrimony and shaking the foundations of our common culture. By understanding what our institutions do for us, how they are now failing us, and how we might be failing them too, we can chart a path toward an American renewal and can see what we each might do to bring it about.



The American Dream Is Not Dead (but Populism Could Kill It)

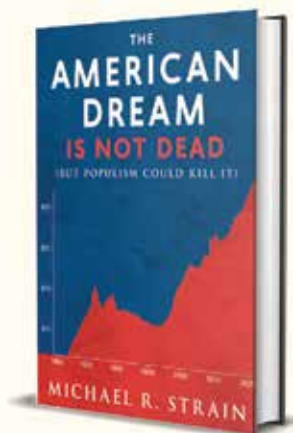
Michael R. Strain

February 25, 2020

Publisher: Templeton Press

ISBN: 9781599475578

Populists on both sides of the political aisle routinely announce that the American dream is dead. According to them, the game has been rigged by elites, workers cannot get ahead, wages have been stagnant for decades, the middle class is dying, and life was generally better in the past. Michael R. Strain disputes this rhetoric as both wrong and dangerous. On measures of economic opportunity and quality of life, there has never been a better time to be alive in America. He warns, however, that if enough people start to believe the American dream is dead, they could, in effect, kill it. To prevent this self-fulfilling prophecy, this book is urgent reading for anyone feeling the pull of the populists.



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