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Book Review by Steven F. Hayward

A TOWERING ACHIEVEMENT

Margaret Thatcher: From Grantham to the Falklands, by Charles Moore.
Vintage, 928 pages, \$20 (paper)

Margaret Thatcher: At Her Zenith: In London, Washington, and Moscow, by Charles Moore.
Vintage, 912 pages, \$24 (paper)

Margaret Thatcher: Herself Alone, by Charles Moore.
Alfred A. Knopf, 1,056 pages, \$40 (cloth)



LEO STRAUSS DESCRIBED WINSTON Churchill's four-volume biography of his great ancestor, the duke of Marlborough, as "an inexhaustible mine of political wisdom and understanding, which should be required reading for every student of political science." With the recent publication of *Herself Alone*, the third, concluding volume of Charles Moore's biography of Margaret Thatcher, it is no exaggeration to place this epic work on the same plane as Martin Gilbert's *Winston S. Churchill*, Robert Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, or indeed *Marlborough* itself.

A former editor of the *Spectator*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, and the *Daily Telegraph*, Moore masters details of the policy controversies that defined Thatcher's long political career while ably depicting the people and events that surrounded her. Some readers will get more information than they would prefer—such as Thatcher's purchases at the duty-free shop after a summit in Bermuda, or her apparel choices at various key moments—but the pace never drags. Moreover, this level of detail permits Moore to sort out discrepancies, mistaken accounts, and erro-

neous recollections to provide an undoubtedly accurate narrative.

DESPITE MOORE'S SYMPATHIES FOR Thatcher's politics and regard for her as a person, he criticizes her mistakes. As in Churchill's narratives, Moore pauses from time to time to observe the wider scene, offering wisdom and insight. Yet he conveys his judgments with a light touch, never lapsing into the mawkish sentimentality that frequently mars Caro's otherwise compelling LBJ biography. Along

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One of the right’s most gifted and astute journalists.

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”

The reforms of the 1960s—
which intended to make the nation
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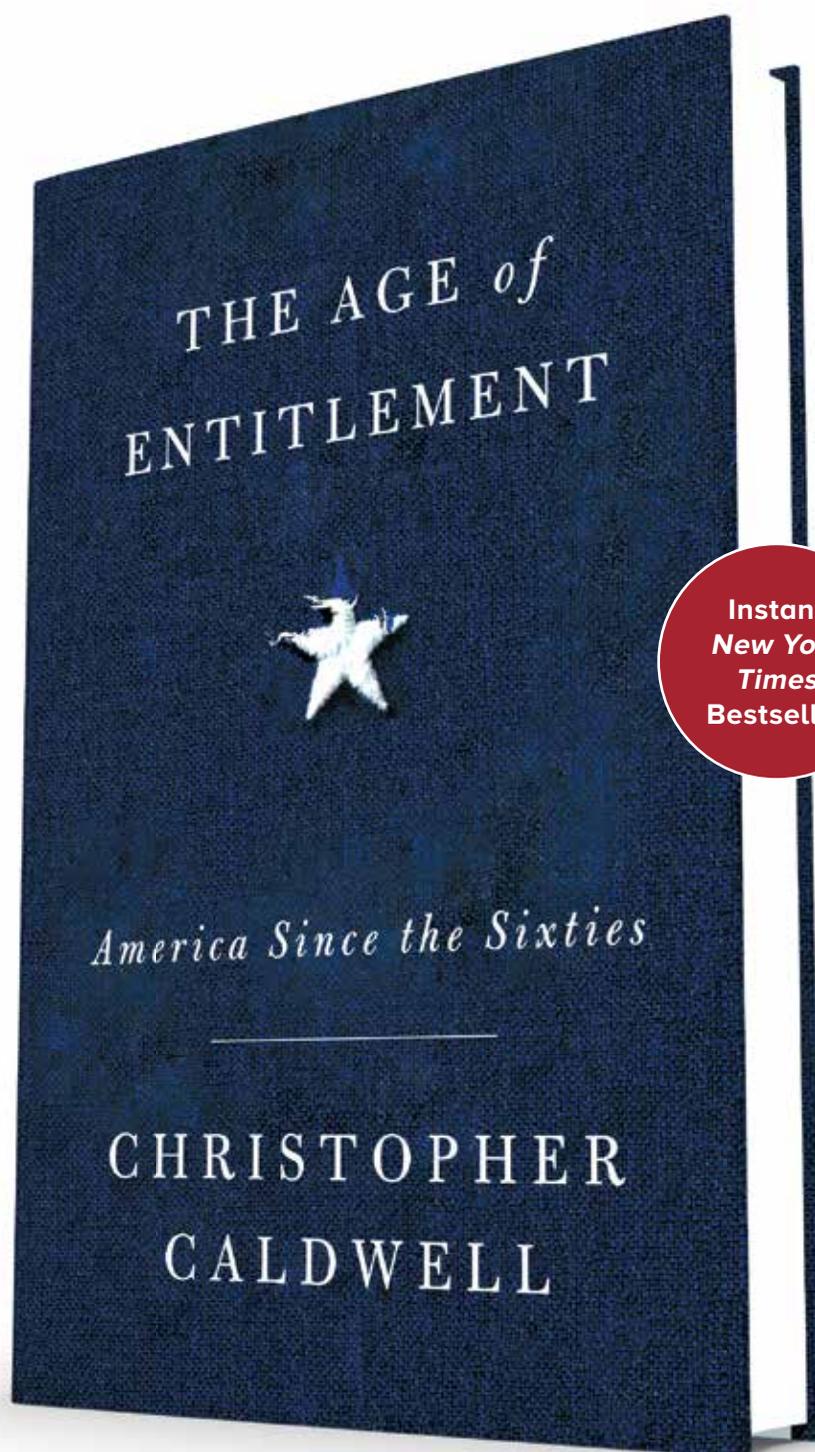
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“A must-read among right-leaning
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the way, Moore debunks many myths and misconceptions. For example, Thatcher did not say, “Don’t go wobbling on us, George,” to President Bush after Saddam Hussein’s Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

Moore presents the necessary analysis of Thatcher’s character, the central factor in her (or any politician’s) greatness, and explains why her political opinions were of secondary importance. From an early age we see Thatcher reaching heterodox views from her own reading and reflection as much as through formal education. Key elements of her outlook, formed at a young age, included: a core attachment to the rule of law; a hatred of totalitarianism and a corresponding opposition to leftist utopianism; an appreciation for a free-market economy (formed at a time when the enthusiasm for collectivism and central planning was running at flood tide); and, surely not coincidentally, a deep admiration for Churchill. Some of this orientation she acquired from her middle-class shopkeeper father, who was also a borough finance official in her hometown of Grantham. But much of her thinking was formed by reading the works of Friedrich Hayek, among others.

THATCHER WAS AN APPRENTICE LAWYER. Her appreciation for the rule of law was deepened though her independent study of Roman law, and she was much taken with A.V. Dicey’s neglected 19th-century classic, *The Law of the Constitution*. Throughout her entire adult life she supplemented her reading by interacting with authors and thinkers. After reading Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), for example, she hosted Bloom for lunch at Chequers. Robert Conquest influenced her latent anti-Communism, but she met, read, and kept in regular contact with Henry Kissinger, which didn’t prevent her from becoming a vocal critic of détente. (In fact it was the Soviets, reacting strongly to an anti-détente speech she delivered in 1975 just after becoming Tory leader, who first called Thatcher the “Iron Lady,” comparing her to Otto von Bismarck, Germany’s “Iron Chancellor.”) A 1975 meeting with Ronald Reagan, at that time a former governor and future presidential candidate, lasted twice the scheduled time and looms large in retrospect.

One of Moore’s many invaluable services is explaining Thatcher’s political philosophy, mischaracterized by her enemies and even many of her sympathizers and supporters. It has been commonly supposed, partly because of her stated affinity for Hayek, that she was purely a libertarian individualist or “economic

conservative. Even Roger Scruton criticized her on this ground in the 1980s, though he later retracted it. A core axiom of the Left’s current obsession with “neoliberalism” is that Thatcher, along with Reagan, “gutted” the welfare state and unleashed the “cowboy capitalism” that led directly to the housing crisis and financial crisis of 2008. It is an exceedingly weak case for many reasons, but as Moore explains, Thatcher made few serious efforts to rein in social spending (“Public spending, as a whole, was never cut”), and “in truth she was more open to the very different charge that she shied away from serious reform” of the welfare system. In fact, Thatcher felt as early as the end of her first term that she should have been bolder in challenging the British welfare state.

THATCHER’S CRITICS TREAT HER COMMENT that “There is no such thing as society” as proof of unfeeling individualism, an unfair distortion that Moore corrects. Contrary to the common perception, he argues that Thatcher “instinctively disliked mere individualism: what she was searching

Thatcher’s raw courage explains virtually all of her actions.

for was liberty in a strong moral and social order.” (He points to her strong opposition to proposals to institute a small charge for library books: “People must always have access to pull themselves up—that is why I will never have charges for libraries.”) Individual persons, she explained in an early lecture, only exist in a rich social context of “family, clan, community and nation, brought up in mutual dependence.... [L]ove thy neighbour as thyself’ express[es] this.”

To Thatcher, the welfare state’s ideological defect was transferring responsibility from the individual and civil society networks to the state, expecting government to solve life’s problems. She understood that “individual” is an adjective rather than a noun: “And you know, there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do things except through people.... It’s our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours.” “Far from advocating selfishness,” Moore concludes, “she was arguing against it, on the grounds of duty to neighbour.” Predatory labor unions stran-

gling the economy and robbing taxpayers were, Thatcher argued, a better example of selfishness.

TODAY WE ASCRIBE HER OUTLOOK TO A rebalancing between state and civil society, but Moore explains that Thatcher’s view arose more from her religious sensibilities, a consideration most accounts overlook. Moore calls Thatcher a Methodist who “was not one of those who thought Christianity should be merely private, with nothing to say about the life of society.” Indeed, one of Thatcher’s pious private secretaries regarded her as “the most religious Prime Minister since Gladstone.”

She took theology—and her interactions with senior Anglican clergy who were mostly critical or opposed to her—seriously. The religious component of her thinking owed much to Edward Norman, the Cambridge theologian who dissented from the prevailing leftward drift of the Anglican Church. Although appointing bishops to the Church of England was a mere formality by her time, she once chided Robert Runcie, the archbishop of Canterbury: “Why can’t we have any Christian bishops?” “She had a preference for theologically orthodox bishops,” Moore says, “whom she considered an endangered species.” When school curriculum reform came up in her second term, she urged her education ministry to include explicit content about the religious (and specifically Christian) heritage of England. Predictably, Church leaders were opposed.

As a young woman Thatcher singled out the Acts of the Apostles as her favorite book in the Bible, which may explain her energetic practice of spreading a message. One surprising fact that emerges from Moore’s account of her many policy battles is how she was much more flexible and compromising than ideologically dogmatic. The Thatcher who emerges is more cautious and deliberate than widely believed. “‘Thatcherism’ was never a philosophy, but a disposition of mind and character embodied in a highly unusual woman.”

Key to that disposition of mind was her understanding that whatever compromises may be necessary as a practical matter, it was essential to keep the central principles and core ideas front and center before the public at all times. Like Reagan, she understood that persistent argument would shape compromises in your direction. Thatcher delighted in drawing the sharpest distinctions between the Conservative and Labour parties, and welcomed conflict and confrontation. She hated appeals to “consensus” and

“national unity,” rightly regarding such watery terms as evasions of clarity and the necessity for decision. “No great party,” Thatcher said early in her political career, “can survive except on the basis of firm beliefs about what it wants to do.”

NIGEL LAWSON, ONE OF HER CHANCELLORS of the exchequer with whom she clashed sharply, said, “A key to understanding Mrs. Thatcher was that she actually said what she believed.” Moore’s own gloss is that “[s]he had the radical’s total lack of embarrassment about arguing from first principles.” In a speech she delivered in Canada in 1975, shortly after becoming Tory leader, Thatcher averred: “It is often said that politics is the art of the possible. The danger of such a phrase is that we may deem impossible things which would be possible, indeed desirable, if only we had more courage, more insight.”

Thus, what emerges in Moore’s treatment is that single most important virtue: courage. Beyond her natural political ability, evident very early when few women were recognized in British politics, Thatcher’s raw courage explains virtually all of her success.

One startling aspect of her career that emerges from Moore’s narrative is precariousness. Despite contrary perceptions, Thatcher’s economic policy over her 11 years in office was often uncertain and halting. More importantly, she was never fully accepted by her own party establishment, and was effectively “on probation” for most of her first term. For long periods in all three of her terms she and her Tory Party were down in the polls and staring at electoral disaster. She turned things around twice to achieve landslide re-elections, even though internal conflict and uncertainty pervaded the Conservatives.

The ineptitude and hard-left lurch of the Labour Party helped, but her own steadfastness was decisive. Her three greatest triumphs—winning the Falkland Islands war, breaking the radical coalminers’ union, and reviving the dynamism of the British economy through denationalization, deregulation, and tax reform—were all close-run affairs. But for her determination, each could have ended disastrously. Other major policy attainments resulted from traditional cabinet government at work. Moore explains that the famous industry privatizations—a term Thatcher disliked as “a dreadful bit of jargon to inflict on the language of Shakespeare”—

were almost entirely the work of her treasury department.

The Falklands War was crucial. Thatcher’s first-hand memory of Britain’s capitulation in the Suez crisis of 1956 left her determined not to repeat that humiliation and retreat, but she had to overcome the deep equivocations of her own foreign office, the U.S. State Department, and her military service chiefs. “It is not mere flattery to say that only she could have done it,” Moore writes. “The Falklands War brought out Mrs. Thatcher’s best qualities—not only the well-known ones of courage, conviction and resolution, but also her less advertised ones of caution and careful study.”

MOOORE’S ACCOUNT MAKES A COMPELLING case that Thatcher deserves more credit than she gets for unwinding the Cold War, ending apartheid in South Africa, making progress on Northern Ireland, and for attempting, with less success, to make serious progress toward a settlement in the Middle East. One other foreign policy controversy remains highly salient—resistance to the metastasizing European Union. Europeans—and much of her cabinet—were horrified by her hostility to the “European project,” most memorably expressed in her statement that “We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level, with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels.” The proximate controversy that caused a serious breach with her foreign minister and chancellor was Britain’s entry into the nascent European exchange rate mechanism, the first step to the single currency that eventually appeared as the Euro. Thatcher was vehemently opposed, while her cabinet was in favor. She lost this battle in the short term, with cabinet resignations damaging her political standing and contributing to her eventual ouster. After 2016, however, it is clear that Thatcher’s resistance to European integration helped make Brexit not only possible but necessary.

By her third term, as Moore’s title *Herself Alone* attests, Thatcher was increasingly isolated from many leading cabinet officials and much of her party. Ultimately, her position as prime minister became untenable due to an attempt to reform local government finance. The so-called “poll tax”—which means a per capita tax in the British context, rather than one on voting as it does in the American—

were hugely unpopular with the public and her own party, setting in motion the long train of party intrigue to oust her in 1990. This “political assassination,” says Moore, amounted to “an unforgettable, tragic spectacle of a woman’s greatness overborne by the littleness of men.” His narrative of her downfall proceeds day-by-day and even hour-by-hour, a feat of forensic journalism producing a drama worthy of Hollywood.

EVEN WITH A RESTIVE PARTY IT WAS only by the narrowest margin that Thatcher was voted out, but she had lived and governed on narrow margins throughout her career. Moore thinks poorly of the cabal that ousted her—“The tribe acted largely by instinct against the leader whom it had never fully accepted”—but also assigns blame to Thatcher. She did not take the leadership challenge seriously and was absent from London while the intrigue gathered speed. Her rough personal relations with her male colleagues caught up with her. “Her victims could not have been expected to put up with it for ever,” in Moore’s judgment. “After more than eleven years, most colleagues were understandably sick to death of her... As is often the case with great leaders—it makes them the subject of tragedy—her vices were inseparable from her virtues.”

Beyond the Brexit legacy, Moore’s three volumes have material relevant to 2020, such as Thatcher’s remark that urban riots are “crime masquerading as social protest” and that most British people “regard the police as friends.” The discussion of a proposed Tory campaign theme for the mid-1970s—“Who governs Britain?”—seems ideal for our present moment in the U.S. (The Tory leadership rejected the theme in favor of a bland campaign, which disgusted Thatcher and prompted her successful challenge to Ted Heath as party leader.) Thatcher’s death certificate, Moore tells us at the end of the third volume, recorded her occupation as “Stateswoman (retired).” One of her favorite aphorisms was, “Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted.” Studying Thatcher through Charles Moore’s eyes provides lessons about statecraft that will never stale.

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