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Book Review by Larry P. Arnn

HOUSE DIVIDED

Crisis of the Two Constitutions: The Rise, Decline, and Recovery of American Greatness, by Charles R. Kesler.
Encounter Books, 488 pages, \$34.99



SOMETIMES THINGS GET SO BAD ONE must go back to the beginning and start over. This is not easy to do, because bad things present emergencies, and emergencies distract and consume. When may one ever find a moment to step back and think?

Now is a bad time. Danger is everywhere. We have just been through “the most important election of our lifetime,” according to both the Left and the Right. It has been fiercely fought, and weeks after polling day it was still not over. The electoral process, which is the key to any representative form of government, is doubted and challenged on both sides. People rightly wonder if the constitutional system is breaking down.

We have need of wisdom right now, which brings me to Charles Kesler’s *Crisis of the Two Constitutions*. It is a sweeping book divided into three sections: the first is on the founders’ Constitution, its first chapter “The Founders and the Classics”; the second is on the Pro-

gressives, those ideological revolutionaries who set out to bring a whole new meaning to American government; and the third is on conservatives, its first chapter about Ronald Reagan, the last about Donald Trump. The book travels from Aristotle to Trump and manages to connect them into a continuous story. Kesler does this by finding the questions that are the same through time, at the heart of all times because they are at the heart of the human experience.

KESLER, A PROFESSOR OF GOVERNMENT at Claremont McKenna College and the *CRB*’s longtime editor, wrote his doctoral thesis on Cicero, the first philosopher to develop the idea of the natural law. In 1979, when he was still a graduate student at Harvard, Kesler published a cover article in *National Review* about the Declaration of Independence and its centrality to American politics, and about the chief interpreter of the

Declaration of his time, Harry Jaffa. We in Claremont, students of Jaffa, resolved that we must meet this man. So was born a friendship of many decades.

Charles demonstrates his fidelity to that friendship and its purposes by dedicating his book to three of our departed comrades: Professor Jaffa and two of the founders of the Claremont Institute, Peter Schramm and Tom Silver. In the book itself Charles demonstrates his fidelity through service, the high kind possible through understanding. The most valuable friends are teachers, and Charles is a teacher of many of us, but also of thousands and millions.

These points are personal in a way, but what is plain to all is that Charles has been working out the themes of that dissertation on Cicero and that article in *National Review* to great advantage for decades. Only someone who has spent decades could bring together the classical beginnings of the study



of politics with the story of our nation in thought and deed. In achieving this, Charles better prepares us to understand “where we are, and whither we are tending,” as Abraham Lincoln put it in his “House Divided” speech. This is Charles’s chief service to the world of statesmanship and of political philosophy.

KESLER WELL UNDERSTANDS AMERICANS’ current misunderstanding of the Declaration of Independence, which helps him in turn to make its meaning plain. Today we are relativists first and historicists second. We think the truth is subjective, and from that we conclude that the only way to get at truth is to adopt our own. But relativism fails because it is illogical to adopt a truth only for ourselves. If you think the truth merely personal, you become an opponent of everyone who thinks other than you.

Americans still have political instincts and we still see the friction between contending views of the good. We see that these contending views lay claims beyond persons to communities. Unfortunately, too often we solve this problem with reference to two propositions: that the claims of *our* community are authoritative because they are our own, and that the claims of *our* time are authoritative because time and circumstance have produced us, our situation, and even how we think.

Until one looks clearly at these presuppositions, he cannot see that the Declaration of Independence is both breathtakingly radical and also breathtakingly simple. It is radical because it assaults directly any counterproposition that dominates our time or any time. In the Declaration’s own day, it confronted the claim that people are born to their positions: kings appointed by the divine, nobles inheriting the superior excellence of their fathers and forefathers, commoners fated to be common. Risking hanging, the signers of the Declaration swept that away.

With the same clarity, the Declaration confronts the pieties—which is what they have become—of our day. It does this by inviting us to see things for what they are. We can tell a dog from a horse and both from a man. There must be something in the man, the dog, and the horse that tells us what they are, despite superficial or even dramatic differences. Whatever that something is, it makes us as human beings (and not dogs or horses) equal in that respect. As Thomas Jefferson wrote later in life, you would not rule a man as you would rule a horse because you would not mistake a man for a horse.

When students are invited to regard things in these ways, they have taken a long step toward understanding not only America’s founding, but also the nature of things in and of themselves. This is the heart of Kesler’s argument about the Declaration of Independence.

ON THIS FOUNDATION, KESLER PROCEEDS to interpret the U.S. Constitution, which he shows to be a document aiming to sustain, preserve, and elevate the operation of self-government. The U.S. Constitution implies an entire system of manners and behaviors, an entire outlook upon the world. In this way the Constitution of the United States becomes more than the 4,500-word document written in 1787; it is for Kesler a *constitution* in the old sense, organizing us in such a way as to turn our natural right to secure our safety and happiness into a way of life.

He next takes up the Progressives who have insinuated a new understanding and

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a new way of life into our politics. There is the incompatible second constitution that has caused the crisis of the book’s title. And yet, Kesler’s account of the Progressives is devastating because it is sympathetic. From the classics one learns to think that people do things for something they regard as good. Even the rantings of Hitler in his bunker demonstrate this. So does the conversation that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn contrives in the mind of Stalin in the early part of *The First Circle*. What tyrants think may be puerile and horrific at the same time, but to them it sounds good.

This is valuable to remember when reading political statements of all kinds. It means that amidst their particular claims for this policy or that, their particular explanations of this situation or that, there is also a key to unlock their general understanding of things. This is what Kesler explains in regard to the Progressives. He is able to explain the internal logic of progressivism as it morphs from its idealistic

and confident beginnings to its angry nihilism today.

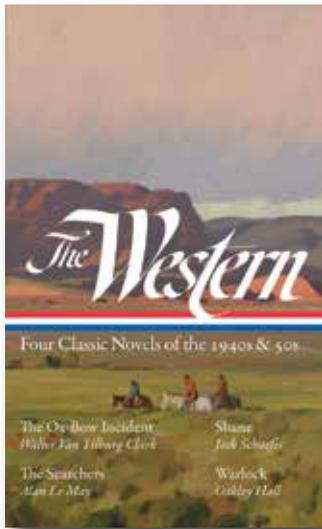
For Kesler, understanding American politics requires going back to the beginning every bit as much as it requires studying the situation today. If our current crisis is a dispute about the meaning of the founding, the founding itself is a development of classic thoughts that were the currency of education, as Charles points out, in the founding era.

Kesler’s background in the classics serves to clarify the relationship between the founders and the great thinkers who are said to be their sources. He is able to discard a great heap of argument that has stood between the founders and us. The meaning of the founding, he argues, does not spring from the work of any particular philosopher, ancient, medieval, or modern. The classics insist on defining each thing as what it *is*, and philosophy and statesmanship are not the same thing, even if they are related, and every human pursuit is not reducible to philosophy, even if it can be best understood in light of it. The founders were statesmen, practical people of a high type. Practical people make judgments. Those judgments are justified ultimately by the things that are right by nature. But nature includes necessity. Statesmen must dwell upon the circumstances—which move in ways big and small all the time—that make up the necessities and opportunities they face. Seeing and adapting to them in light of a general theme is the substance of statesmanship. The differences between John Locke and the Baron de Montesquieu, if the statesman even knows them, are not dispositive.

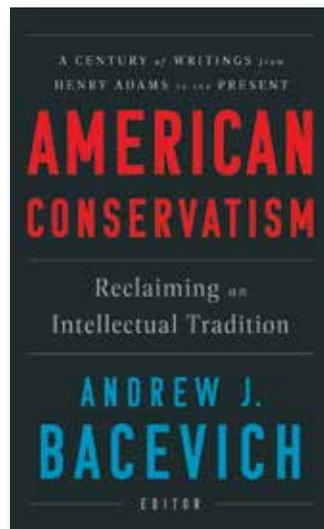
THIS UNDERSTANDING PERMITS KESLER to regard the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution both as statements of principle and as prudential documents. As a statement of principle, the Declaration is universal. As a prudential judgment, one of the most consequential in history, it is the action of us Americans. As a statement and example of the best “structure” (to use James Madison’s word) of republican government, the Constitution is universal. Its particular provisions are made by, and for, us. Especially in his reading of *The Federalist*, Kesler shows us this element of the founders’ mind, and lets us see it as what it is.

The effects of Progressivism have settled deeply into the political system. They have gone far to replace the operation of the Constitution with something contrary to it. This new thing proceeds from top to bottom through a million regulations made in hundreds of places. It replaces citizenship with membership in a multicultural world. It re-

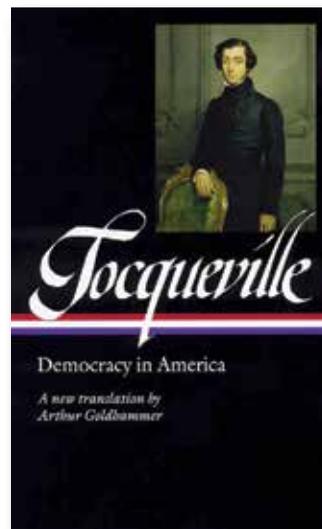
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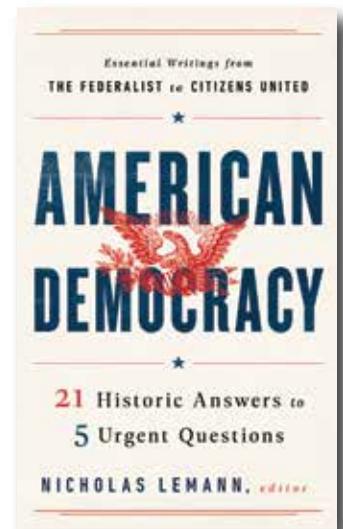
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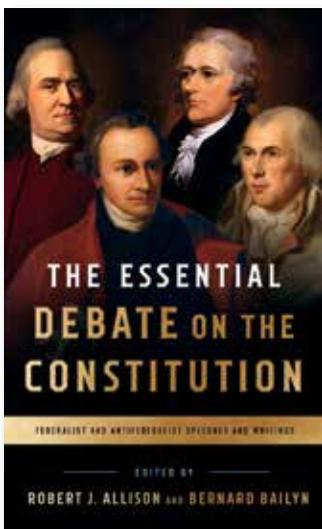
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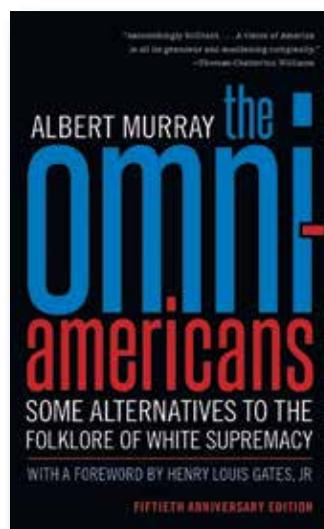
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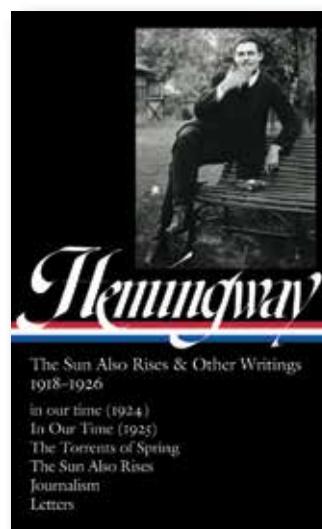
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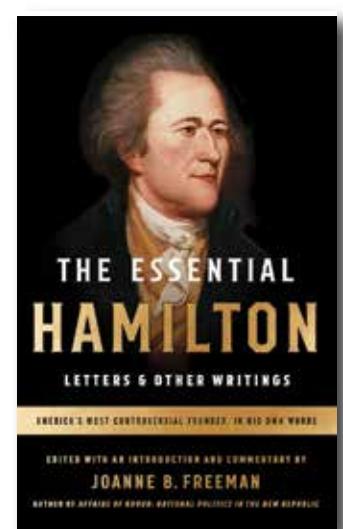
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places independence of thought and action with a compliant outlook, a tendency to wait to see what the ever-changing rules will be today. Partly because this doesn't work very well, dissatisfaction grows everywhere and with it cynicism, especially among the leaders.

Still, the leaders are driven by conviction, ambition, and interest to preserve and extend the bureaucratic form. They are trying to square the circle, and this compels them to present themselves as something not wholly what they are. They cultivate the appearance of common sense and harmony with America's past. Bill Clinton is a country boy. Joe Biden is a regular fella from Scranton. Barack Obama, telling a different kind of story about himself, conflates the old and the new into a single story of progress. (On that last point, see Charles's previous book, *I Am the Change: Barack Obama and the Future of Liberalism* [2012].)

WHAT IS TO BE DONE IN THIS DANGEROUS and confused situation? *Crisis of the Two Constitutions* provides the answer. We require an act, or rather a movement, of recovery. This act must begin at the beginning, when political thought first reached for nature and the universals. It must proceed from there through the great thoughts of political philosophy until the founding of America, itself one of the most significant events in history. From that study one may discover again the beauty of America, now set against the ugly alternatives. This is a recovery of a sense of the good, the first question in Socratic philosophy and the explicit object of the Declaration of Independence.

To recover that story of America is to learn to live it again. This is a deeply conservative undertaking, but it points toward an *American* kind of conservatism. The effort is conservative in seeking to recover old and splendid things. It is liberal in seeking to lay the ground again for the freedom of the mind and the freedom of the citizen, which are inseparable.

Kesler closes the book with a measured and insightful discussion of Donald Trump. He takes up the argument from many that Trump, being a bad man, must perforce be a bad president and politician. In response Charles reminds us of the old argument, especially from *The Federalist*, that all are in some sense bad or fallen. The Constitution exists specifically to account for this and to turn it into good, or at least tolerable, politics. It is written to favor the best and disfavor

the worst in all of us; it did not give absolute power to Trump or anyone else. Through the Constitution the people gave him a certain job, and his mixture of qualities and defects might suit him for that job in this time.

Kesler points out some of Trump's excellences and sees that they are beneficial in the present situation. For one thing, Trump likes the working man. (Lincoln was reported to say, "God must have liked the common people, he did make so many of them.") Trump is unashamed, even in this multicultural and global age, to love his own things, to do it without irony, and to do it in the name of all Americans. He is emphatically an *American* statesman, and he seeks to serve America.

This is not to say that Trump is a genius of the highest order. Winston Churchill teaches us that true genius is extremely rare, and that although genius "may be armed, [it] cannot be acquired." It "flashes upon the scene" as Churchill himself, Lincoln, or George Washington flashed.

Like Churchill, Kesler does not summon us to manufacture genius, or to place it where it does not exist, but rather to recognize what it is. He calls for a revival of conservatism of the American kind. He says that one should be hopeful, because the principles of America are written in the "laws of Nature and of Nature's God." They can be suppressed for a time, but never repealed.

READING CHARLES'S BOOK HAS PUT ME in mind of two stories about Lincoln, who was somehow prepared for the unprecedented trial he faced.

The first story takes place on a train. In 1860 Lincoln made a tour of the east that helped to spread his fame and gather support for his presidential bid. He gave a wonderful speech in Hartford, Connecticut, less famous than the Cooper Union speech on this tour. On the day after the speech, he was recognized on a train platform by a preacher who had attended the speech. The preacher asked to sit with Lincoln, they talked, and the preacher wrote a newspaper article about the conversation. The big question on his mind was one asked by most who marvel at Lincoln's eloquence: how did you write that speech? Lincoln replied that reading to be a lawyer, he came across the word "demonstrate." He thought it was some extraordinary kind of proof. He consulted many sources to figure out what it was, and in vain. "You might as well have defined *blue* to a blind man." So he said to himself:

"Lincoln, you can never make a lawyer if you do not understand what demonstrate means"; and I left my situation in Springfield, went home to my father's house, and staid there till I could give any proposition in the six books of Euclid at sight.

Lincoln returned to the classics to understand the basis of reason and persuasion.

The second story concerns a historical narrative. In his 1854 speech at Peoria Lincoln clarified the tangled history of slavery in America. Like all history, it was full of starts and stops, contradictions and disputes, and therefore rich with material to be mined by both sides to justify their positions. His speech followed the trail of slavery right through its decisive landmarks. Lincoln proved that slavery had never been accommodated as anything but a necessary evil until the notion that it was a positive good arose, two generations after the Declaration of Independence.

In the most moving passage in the Peoria speech, Lincoln says:

Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of "moral right," back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of "necessity." Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it.

We are in the situation of Lincoln. Again, the fundamentals of the nation are disputed absolutely. Again, the forms of the Constitution shake and strain and seem likely to break. To save our Union, we must follow Lincoln back, back to the history of our country, back to its principles, back to the great sources of learning that explicate them.

Charles Kesler is not a statesman. He is in a different line of work than Abraham Lincoln. But reading his book, one sees that political thought and statesmanship together show the way.

Larry P. Arnn is the president of Hillsdale College, a former Claremont Institute president, and the vice chairman of the Claremont Institute's Board of Directors.

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