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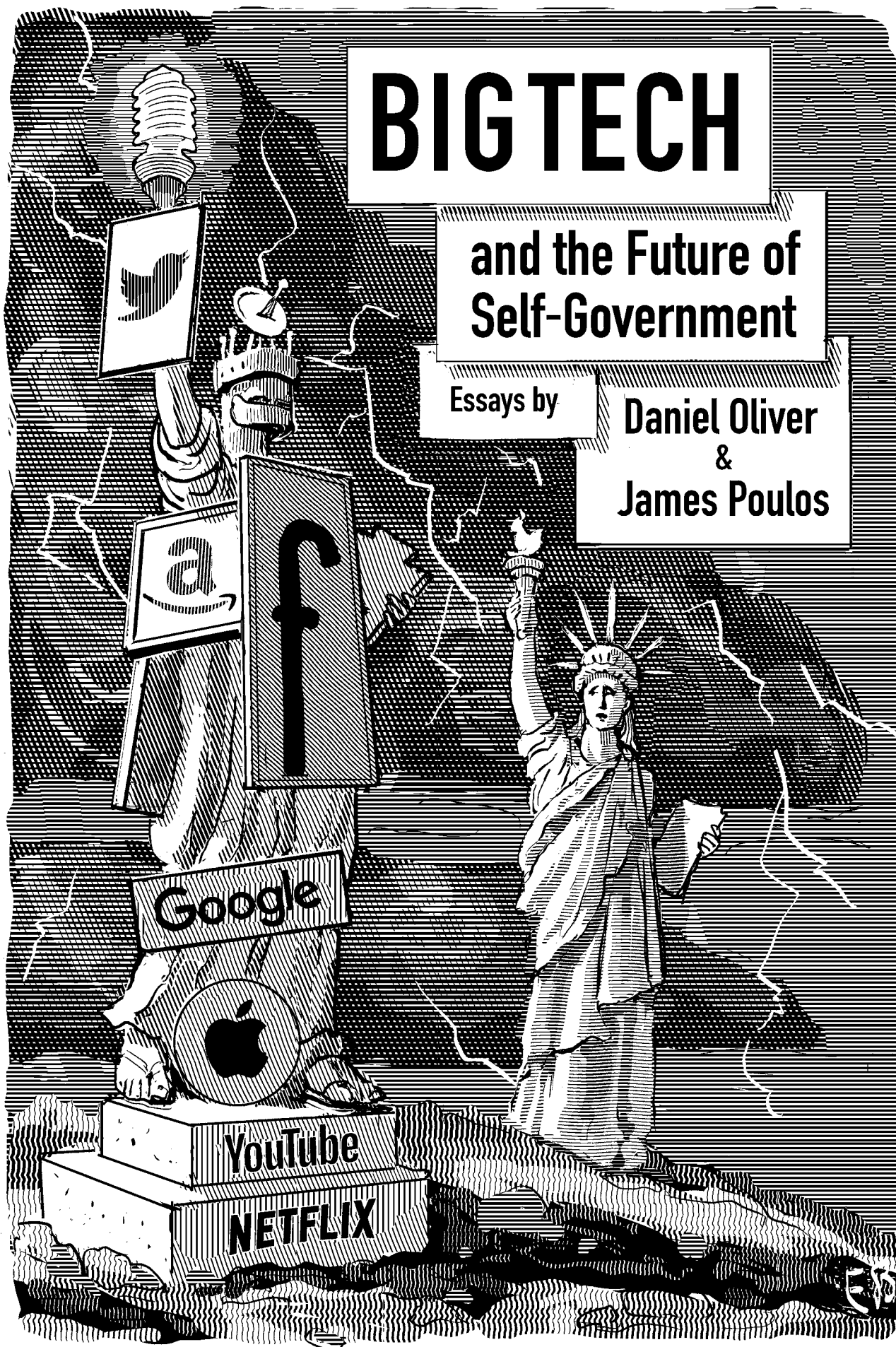
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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

BETTING AGAINST AMERICA

by Charles R. Kesler

AMERICA HAS ADVERSARIES, "THE AUTOCRATS OF THE world," who are watching us carefully and betting against us, President Biden announced in his first speech to a joint session of Congress. Echoing the Gettysburg Address, he warned, "The question of whether our democracy will long endure is both ancient and urgent."

He pointed to the January 6 "insurrection" on Capitol Hill as the latest "test of whether our democracy could survive"—an "existential crisis" (do speechwriters know any other kind?) revealing to Biden the danger of homegrown autocracy, too. To China and Russia, the autocrats abroad, the images of a violent mob ransacking the Capitol suggested "that the sun is setting on American democracy."

"[W]e have to prove them wrong," Biden enjoined his sparse, masked audience. "We have to prove democracy still works," which he immediately translated into "government still works—and can deliver for the people," deliver to the tune of an additional \$4 trillion in federal programs on top of the recent \$2 trillion already approved by Congress for fighting the coronavirus.

Do Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping care about American infrastructure or preschools? Hard to believe, unless they cheer on American domestic priorities because every dollar spent on these is one dollar less for national defense. The president announced no new trillions (nor even millions) for defense, by the way, though he took credit for "ending the forever war in Afghanistan." What he meant to say, more exactly, was ending *U.S. participation* in that conflict; the forever war will go on for Afghans, not forever but until the Taliban and al-Qaeda win. Call it Vietnamization, the Sequel. This outcome, however protracted, will not escape our foreign adversaries' attention.

Neither will Biden's inability to learn anything from the last 40 years of American foreign policy. The old hubris is still there. His former boss, Barack Obama, used to borrow Martin Luther King, Jr.'s line about the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice. The implication was it took its own good time getting there. In his speech Biden promised that his policies will "bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice." Notice the breathtaking switch from intransitive to transitive verb—from the universe *bends* toward justice, to Biden will *bend* the universe toward justice.

He isn't kidding. For instance, Biden promised we will "get at the root of the problem of why people are fleeing to our southern

border from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador. The violence. The corruption. The gangs. The political instability. Hunger. Hurricanes. Earthquakes." He has "absolute confidence" that Vice President Kamala Harris, whom he deputed to handle this problem, "will get the job done." A thorough moral and political reconstruction of three foreign countries should be a good start. Solving for hurricanes and earthquakes might take a little longer. But if we can bend the moral universe to our will, why not the physical one?

MOSTLY, THOUGH, BIDEN TALKED OF THE EXISTENTIAL CRISIS at home, and how we had to save American democracy by allowing the federal government to spend a lot more of the people's money on the needs of the people. "We the People are the government," as he expressed it. The Constitution makes rather the opposite point, that "We the People" set up a Constitution, which then controls the government, so that the government remains subordinate to the people's will not only through elections but through fundamental *law*.

But if we the people *are* the government, then any failures of government are failures of democracy itself. Police brutality is thus not a matter ultimately of bad policemen or bad policing but of a bad people, a sick society. George Floyd's murder, said Biden, exposes the (white) "knee of injustice on the neck of Black America." Systemic racism, a term he indulged twice in the speech, plagues not only the criminal justice system but "American life in many other ways."

Yet Biden assured his audience that America stands also for "basic human rights." So, are we the children of darkness or the children of light? It doesn't matter, presuming we can bend our darkness (Trump) into light (Biden). If we just "root out" our systemic racism and spend that \$4 trillion, we can prove, once again, "that democracy is durable and strong." If we do so, "[t]he autocrats will not win the future. America will."

Biden was right to assure us "it's never been a good bet to bet against America." In the War of 1812 the British burned the Capitol building to the ground, and the U.S. bounced right back. Abraham Lincoln transmuted the Civil War's great suffering into a new birth of freedom. But we believed in ourselves then. This time may be different. It's hard to win the future if you've already lost the past.

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