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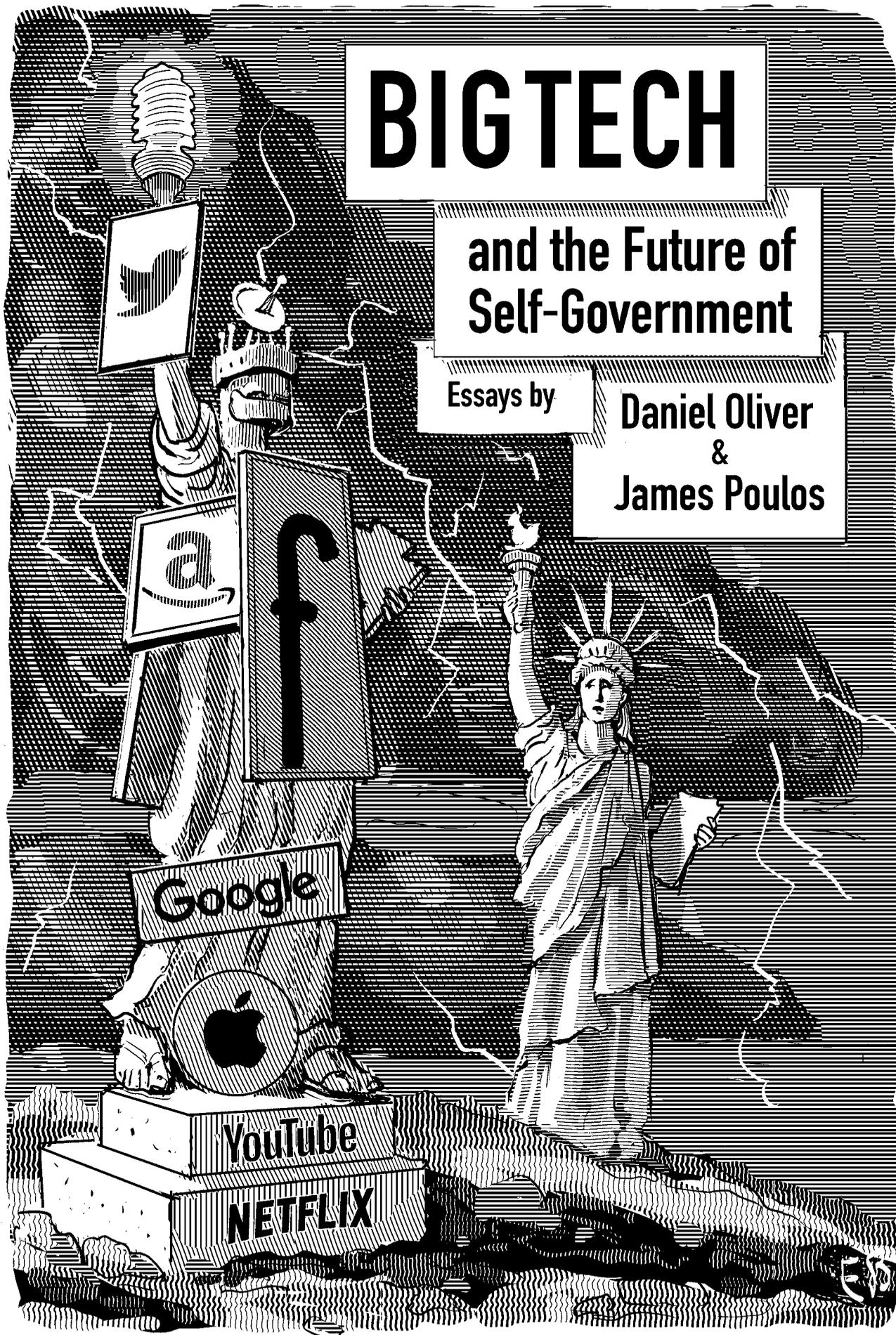
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PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



Defense Rests

THOUGH THE STRENGTH AND PRESERVATION OF THE UNITED States have always depended upon the spirit and guidance of its founding principles, these are now astoundingly subject to widespread and hateful repudiation from Americans themselves. Seldom has so obvious a national suicide advanced with such geometric speed against so little resistance. True to form, the rot comes from within.

Nevertheless, just as a dead tree can stand for decades until toppled by the wind, a *coup de fond* would likely come from without, even if via a quisling or legions of them, as history has shown. America is blind. Protected by oceans, repulsed from the beginning by the Byzantine chess of European diplomacy and war, and shielded by a long period of economic and military pre-eminence, we are uninterested in, and ignorant of, the international system, the consequentiality of military power, and the means by which nations maneuver short of war and by war itself to dominate or destroy rivals and enemies.

Of 56 categories in the last seven Gallup Polls, national security is ranked by less than half a percent of respondents as the most important problem facing the U.S., and yet its effect on whether we stand or fall is equal to that of all other problems combined. Even should we descend into nightmarish shambles as in the Civil War, with the defense of our sovereignty and independence, just as then, we can survive. Without it, we cannot.

Essential to survival is, and always has been, a clear and profound understanding of the correlation of military forces among nations, something rare for politicians, journalists, academics, or the public, encumbered as are most by ideology, ignorance of the facts, and wishful thinking, all of which act synergistically one upon the other. Thus the illusion that now and in the future our position is and will be secure.

As Shakespeare would phrase it, “in the gross and scope” of things, America’s global prospects aren’t encouraging. From the least to the greatest concerns:

In the Middle East, nexus of three continents and holding by far the world’s largest oil reserves, Russia and China now have firm footholds as Iran and Turkey spread forces and influence in an envelopment of the region’s center of gravity, including dominance over its three essential straits (the Bosphorus, Hormuz, and the Bab al-Mandab). In response, the Biden Administration punishes Saudi Arabia, relieves pressure on the Houthis, snubs Israel, ignores the Abraham Accords, and courts Iran, begging for revival of the agreement that would guarantee the near-term birth of Iranian nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them at long range. President Obama began to cede the Middle East to the old empires of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, and Joe Biden, ideologically bound and lacking a scintilla of strategic clarity, hurtles toward completion.

European militaries recently were many times more powerful than now and held together in NATO by gravitating around forward-deployed U.S. forces an order of magnitude stronger than at present. Russia, too, is less powerful, but its unified command, ex-

panding and illicit nuclear arsenal, lax nuclear doctrine, and popular support for defense make it more of a martial threat than in the heyday of the Warsaw Pact. In purely military terms, it can overrun Poland and Germany. In military/political terms, little prevents it from reconquering the Baltic Republics in a day. Russian and Chinese encroachment upon Europe—military, pipelines, ports, economic warfare, and political subversion—subtracts from Europe the residual power it might have contributed in the Indo-Pacific.

There, China’s mass, ingenuity, proximity, and ruthless statecraft hold inimitable sway as America has lost its military edge. Though recent administrations point proudly to the pivot east, in the Western Pacific China’s naval forces outnumber ours ten to one; in aircraft west of the international dateline by 1,440 to 350; in missiles pertinent to theater, 1,000 to nil. In many cases American forces are qualitatively superior, but China’s military trajectory strongly suggests that in five to ten years this will not be so. And when its technologies fully mature, its surge capacity can make it the arsenal of despotism. Consider that the U.S. has six major shipyards, that China has more than 100, and that whoever is master of the Pacific will be master of the world.

We cannot fall back on combining our capabilities with those of our Indo-Pacific allies. Nations at the seam of two blocs will adhere to the most powerful whether by bargain or conquest. If we assess our power by including the powers of those we propose to protect, they will debit theirs from our account and remain open to other alliances. We see this already in southeast Asia and South Korea.

FURTHER, WE HAVE LOST THE WILL TO PRESERVE EVEN OUR shrinking military advantage. One illustrative example was the gratuitous cancellation of the F-22, the world’s most advanced fighter plane. Now, Adam Smith (D., WA), genius chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who compares defense budgeting to “asking the Cookie Monster how many cookies you should have in your cookie store,” is hell-bent upon cancelling the F-35, America’s only 5th-generation aircraft in production, in favor of the 4th-generation F-15EX. Of many mortal differences: the radar cross-section of the F-15EX is 42.8 feet (a yacht, broadside); of the F-35, 3.8mm (a mosquito, head-on). So much for stealth, and survival.

We perilously neglect Chinese, Russian, and even *Iranian* inroads in South America, inasmuch as the Western Hemisphere should be our undisputed and possibly last bastion. Blinded by the fog of inward-looking self-destruction, we have forgotten that military force is the sine qua non in the chess game of the world. Every piece on the board, even the king, can fight and kill. A country that has lost sight of this—and fails to understand the roles of deterrence, forces in being, the threat of force, the use of force, and spatial maneuver across the continents and seas—cannot be destined for anything but servitude.

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