VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2021

CLAREMONT
REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

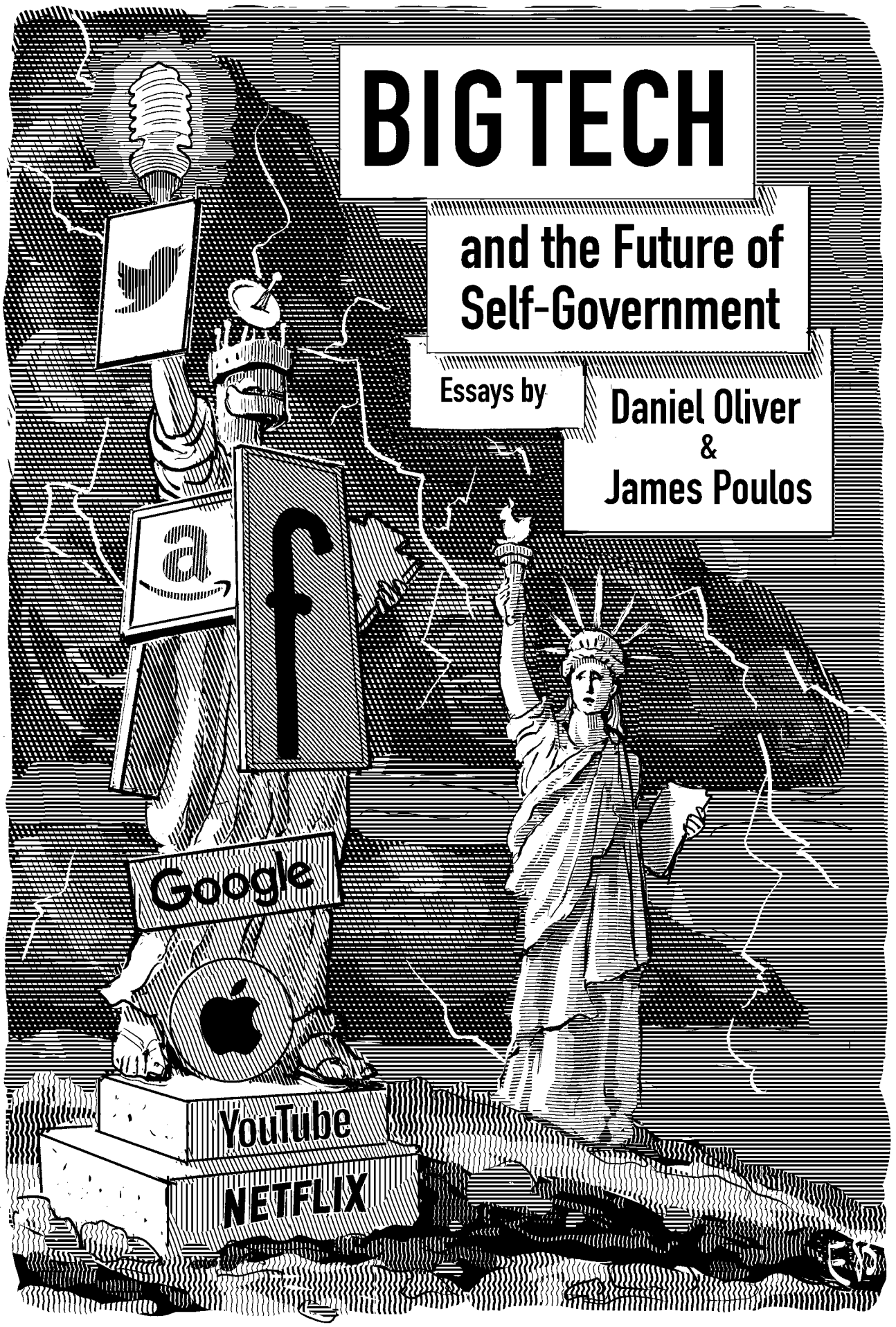
Joseph M. Bessette: Obama's Promised Land

William Voegeli: Californicating America

James Bowman: Eminent Boomers

Christopher Caldwell: Robert E. Lee

Robert Royal: Rod Dreher's Survival Guide



James Hankins: Our Age of Conformity

Harvey C. Mansfield: Feminism vs. Womanism

Mary Eberstadt: Trans Kid Craze

Daniel J. Mahoney ✦ Andrew Roberts: Winston Churchill

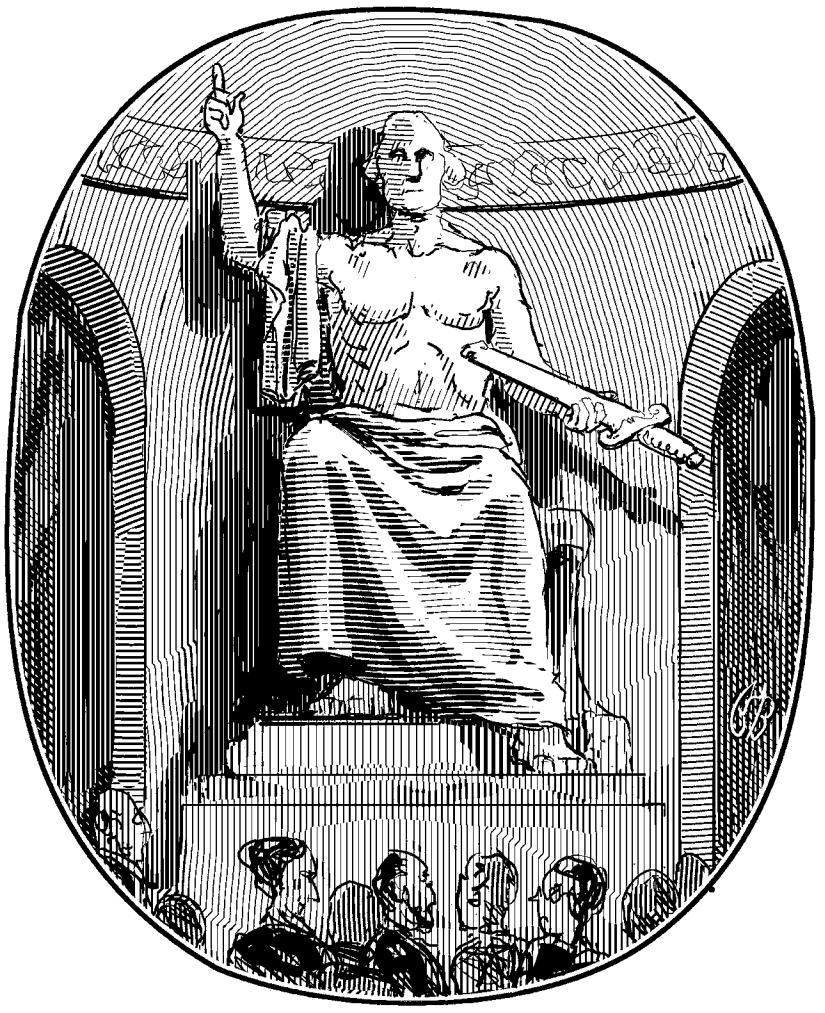
Christopher Flannery: American Westerns

A Publication of the Claremont Institute
PRICE: $6.95
IN CANADA: $9.50

Book Review by Spencer A. Klavan

Classical Education

First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country, by Thomas E. Ricks. HarperCollins, 416 pages, $29.99



Statue of George Washington by Horatio Greenough (1805–1852); Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Thomas Ricks, a military history columnist for the *New York Times*, was shocked and appalled by the election of Donald Trump in 2016. "Before that Tuesday night," he writes, "I had thought I understood my country. Clearly, many of my fellow citizens had an understanding of our nation profoundly different from mine." After collecting himself, he tried to grasp how such a disaster could have occurred. "I embarked on an intellectual quest to try to find my way toward answering a question: *What is America supposed to be, anyway?*" The result of that quest is *First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How that Shaped Our Country*. In it Ricks attempts, by studying the education and personal formation of America's founders, to understand more deeply the principles on which they built the country.

Ricks hints early on that Trump and his supporters represent an aberrant perversion of all our founders cherished and held dear. As he writes in the prologue, "one of the two major parties always seems to have offered a home to white supremacists, up to the present day." Repeated asides about the founders' moral inadequacy regarding slavery, and disclamations about the politically correct way to refer to Native Americans ("First Peoples," apparently) make clear that Ricks is a man of the Left. But the expected screed never materializes; the book mostly leaves modern-day politics behind in the prologue. The main chapters are actually quite edifying—they offer a study of great men reminiscent of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*.

In Part I ("Acquisition"), Ricks furnishes character sketches of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, focusing on the ancient Greek and Roman texts which they studied "not just [as] records of events, but also [as] instruction manuals about how to live, and especially how to acquire virtue." Part II ("Application") is a discussion of how those four founders applied, modified, and sometimes rejected classical principles during and after the revolution. In Part III ("Americanization"), Ricks argues that America's unique character made itself known in contradistinction to the classi-

cal model during the 19th century. The book is full of insight into the founders' personal characters and respect for their wisdom. But the partisan appeals in the prologue, as well as a few misapprehensions in the main argument itself, leave one wondering whether Ricks is really prepared to stomach the whole of what America is—and whether he is ready to share a country with Trumpists.

Part I is the strongest. Ricks nicely conveys, without a hint of condescension, the earnest zeal and high-flown rhetoric with which the revolutionaries idealized the valorous men of late republican Rome. Cato the Younger, a defiant Stoic whose opposition to Julius Caesar was dramatized in a popular tragedy by English essayist Joseph Addison, inspired especially passionate emulation: Ricks notes that Patrick Henry's famous rallying cry, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" was probably adapted from a line in Addison's *Cato*.

John Adams took the upwardly mobile statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero as his own model of courageous resistance against illegitimate rule. "Like the great Roman," writes Ricks, "Adams was largely a self-made man who through his own efforts and eloquence would rise to the pinnacle of power." But "Cicero's faults and failings were also those of Adams, to a surprising and even alarming degree." This is entirely true—although Ricks is generally too hard on Adams, whom he doesn't like very much. Like Cicero, Adams could be irascible, stubborn, and obsessed with his own prestige. But sometimes the vices of one moment are the virtues of another: the dogged contrarianism of both Cicero and Adams, so irritating to their friends and distasteful to their less charitable descendants, helped them hold firm in defense of liberty at times of terrible uncertainty. In 1776, when defying the crown amounted to signing one's own death warrant, Adams spoke in favor of the Declaration of Independence with what Jefferson called "a power both of thought and of expression, which moved us from our seats." That eloquence, too, he learned from studying Cicero.

Ricks's work reveals not just the intellectual proclivities but the character and idiosyncrasies of his subjects. The chapter on Washington ("Washington Studies How to Rise in Colonial Society") is especially successful in this regard. Ricks admires Washington immensely—it's almost impossible not to after any serious study of the man. He notes how many of Washington's biographers have sought to "humanize" him by prying open the cracks in his solemn persona. This approach actually threatens "to undo Washington's work of a lifetime, which was to discipline his turbulent emotions, build an image of lofty distance, and most of all, establish a reputation for valiant leadership, unselfish virtue, and unyielding honor." Our modern obsession with "authenticity"—meaning, in essence, never filtering one's spontaneous thoughts and impulses—obscures the fact that discipline does not amount to disingenuousness. Washington's aspirations to greatness, his devotion to lofty principles, his studied composure in all but the most stressful of moments—if these things were cultivated through years of daily effort, they were nevertheless an essential part of who he was. In that regard, Ricks notes, though he was far from the most educated of his contemporaries, "Washington came closer to the Roman example than his peers precisely because he was a man of deeds, not words."

Things go awry, though, in the book's discussion of Jefferson. Ricks sees Jefferson as largely the product of three intellectual movements: the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the ethical philosophy of Epicureanism. This seems broadly correct, and Jefferson did write with glowing praise of Epicurus to his onetime secretary William Short: "I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing every thing rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us." Then, picking out what he believed to be Epicurus' "genuine" teachings, Jefferson wrote:

> Happiness the aim of life. Virtue the foundation of happiness. Utility the test of virtue…. Virtue consists in
>
> 1. Prudence
> 2. Temperance
> 3. Fortitude
> 4. Justice

Ricks takes this as an accurate summary of Epicurean ethics. But in fact Jefferson was playing a bit fast and loose, simplifying a huge mass of fragmentary and often conflicting testimony by and about Epicurus. The passage Ricks has selected from Jefferson's letter also shows the influence of both Plato's *Republic* Book IV and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which Jefferson is blending (not to say conflating) with Epicurean doctrines. The four attributes listed are what would become known as the cardinal virtues—the central kinds of moral excellence—which Plato and Aristotle considered integral to human flourishing or "happiness" (*eudaimōnia*). This is the mode of thought that was later baptized by Christianity. Epicurus, by contrast, eschewed lists of the cardinal virtues and certainly did not consider them "the foundation of happiness," as Jefferson writes. Rather, Epicurus identified virtue only as a *means* to the separate end of happiness. This is not a trivial difference. Epicurean happiness is, as Jefferson recalled in his letter, attained by aiming "to be not pained in body, nor troubled in mind." But happiness of the kind Aristotle counseled entails all the virtues as intrinsic components of itself and not as mere instruments to its achievement. Thus, though it does eventually bring a pleasure all its own, Aristotelian happiness can be quite painful to acquire—involving various forms of self-denial, sacrifice, and discipline.

The reason this matters is because in Part II, Ricks argues that Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence as "A Declaration of Epicureanism"—in other words, that our rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" constitute "the essence of Epicureanism." This is going much too far, and not just because Jefferson's personal brand of "Epicureanism" was blended with a heavy dose of Aristotle. When Jefferson gave his own account of the Declaration in an 1825 letter to Henry Lee, he named not Epicurus but Aristotle as one of the authors whose basic principles he had enshrined. Americans then and now have understood the Declaration's "Happiness" to mean more than just nights of good discussion and conviviality in the beautiful garden of Epicurus. At her best, America has always invited her people to seek not just pleasure but a more holistic kind of fulfilment that includes courage, prudence, temperance, and justice in service of one's countrymen.

The fact that our public life looks more hedonistic and less Aristotelian by the day is evidence that we are failing in our civic duties—not that everything is going according to plan. Trump's 2016 campaign appealed to popular unease about just this kind of moral decline. Trump voters hoped they could break the grip of a ruling class which looks rather like the less flattering depictions of Epicurus that come down to us from antiquity: dissipated, supercilious, and content to enjoy insular pleasures while laughing off extravagant shows of decadence. If Ricks cannot fathom the behavior of Trump voters who despise such urbane self-indulgence and who fear the erosion of their own traditional social mores, maybe it is because he has misunderstood the strong devotion to Aristotelian virtue upon which American social cohesion has long depended.

Ricks does point out that our founding documents mitigate the need for public virtue because our nation is built on what Leo

Strauss famously called the "low but solid ground" of 18th-century realism. He sees the younger founders Alexander Hamilton and James Madison as having come to grips in a new way with the tragic brokenness of human nature, arguing that government should be built to work with the facts of human vice and imperfection. He describes both Madison's rigorous study of the ancients, and his gradual realization that an extended republic must utilize its people's own self-interest to function. "Hamilton and Madison...differed from their elders in their relationship to classicism. They knew the ancient texts, but had less faith in the classical values propounded there."

Still, there's simply no doing away with the need for virtue. No founder would have wanted that—and neither does Ricks. His motivation for writing this book, after all, was to rehabilitate our national character. But he leaves it an open question whether doing so will have to mean "deprogramming" all those unsavory Trump supporters, to use the language of the *Washington Post*'s Brian Klass. Not everyone is as forthright as Klass, and conciliatory rhetoric from Democrats often masks hostility toward all but the most anodyne forms of conservatism. The Biden Administration, for example, issues calls for "unity" and "national healing," in tandem with Department of Homeland Security advisories which insinuate that right-wingers in general are "ideologically motivated violent extremists" by association with the rioters who stormed the Capitol on January 6. Meanwhile, more radical Democrats such as Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez openly fantasize about drawing up lists of Trump supporters for ostracism.

Ricks's own description of where he hopes we'll go from here is sufficiently vague to admit multiple interpretations: most everyone could agree with him that we need to "re-focus on the public good." But in practice that could either look like bipartisan dialogue or one-party rule. The conclusion of *First Principles* advises that we "promote, cultivate, and reward virtue in public life—but don't count on it." Fair enough, so far as it goes. But one of our major issues is precisely that we no longer agree on what virtue *is*, and how the perceived lack of it should be dealt with. Ricks wants us to "protect repugnant speech, no matter how ugly." How about repugnant voting? He notes that our "system" is "durable," citing as evidence the fact that it "often in recent years has stymied Trump." What if it hadn't? It's one thing to tolerate Trumpism the way the Supreme Court tolerated the Nazis in Skokie, Illinois: as a fringe view that may be expressed but not acted upon. It's another to engage with Trumpism as a legitimate political force whose adherents may one day hold power once again. Ricks does not say whether a national return to the "common good" will entail input from conservatives, or merely their marginalization in the public square.

Most Trump voters would wholeheartedly agree with Ricks about the need for a return to America's founding principles. But if Ricks truly wants to reach that half of the country, he should refrain from pinning the blame entirely on them for our sorry state of affairs. Trump revealed, but did not cause, fissures in the American electorate which have only deepened since his election. The ugly spectacle of racialist arson in the streets, the public monuments defaced by Marxian revolutionaries, and yes, the appalling assault on the Capitol building: all are symptoms of an ailing republic. But none of them can be understood without holding to account our supposed elites, who have haughtily ignored the painful consequences of their own abject failures. The effrontery of our despotic leadership class is a major reason why so many people resorted to Trump in the first place. Now, from their wantonly destructive COVID lockdowns to their grinning support for BLM riots, our oligarchy has made clear that it intends to double down on its antagonism toward those who dared vote Trump.

In some ways, this crisis can be understood as the extreme of a tension which Ricks himself explores in Part III. There, he describes how a rift emerged in America between the gentlemanly sort of erudition that holds classical antiquity in high esteem, and the pugnacious democratic sentiment which inspired the 19th-century congressman Michael Walsh to say, "I had rather speak sense in one plain and expressive language, than speak nonsense in fifty." As both Aristotle and Machiavelli knew, republics are bound to face a certain amount of competition between the people and the aristocracy. But our class conflict has become so extreme as to threaten a breaking point. Our monied and educated classes have become arrogant and self-satisfied, seeking ever-more solipsistic plaudits from one another, speaking nonsense in a language of woke pieties all their own. And so regular folks, resentful of their leaders' failures and feeling abandoned by their government representatives, are turning to desperate and sometimes violent pleas for redress.

Ricks has written an instructive and compelling account of classical influence upon America's founding, and he obviously wants to bring the principles of that founding to bear on the present day. But I cannot tell whether he thinks there is room in our more principled future for the 74 million Trump voters whose attitudes he abhors, or whether he considers unrepentant Trumpism itself a disqualification for polite society. Describing the aims of the Democratic-Republican Party in 1792, James Madison spoke of "banishing every other distinction than that between enemies and friends to republican government." But as Madison also famously argued in *The Federalist*, republican government means compromising with your neighbor—often despite disagreements, mutual distaste, and socioeconomic differences. If Ricks wants to restore our civic health, he and others on the Left must be willing to cultivate civic friendship—even with the people whose horrifying Trumpism prompted him to write this book in the first place. I wonder whether he can bear to do so.

Spencer A. Klavan is associate editor of the Claremont Review of Books *and of the* American Mind*, and host of the* Young Heretics *podcast.*