

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2021

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

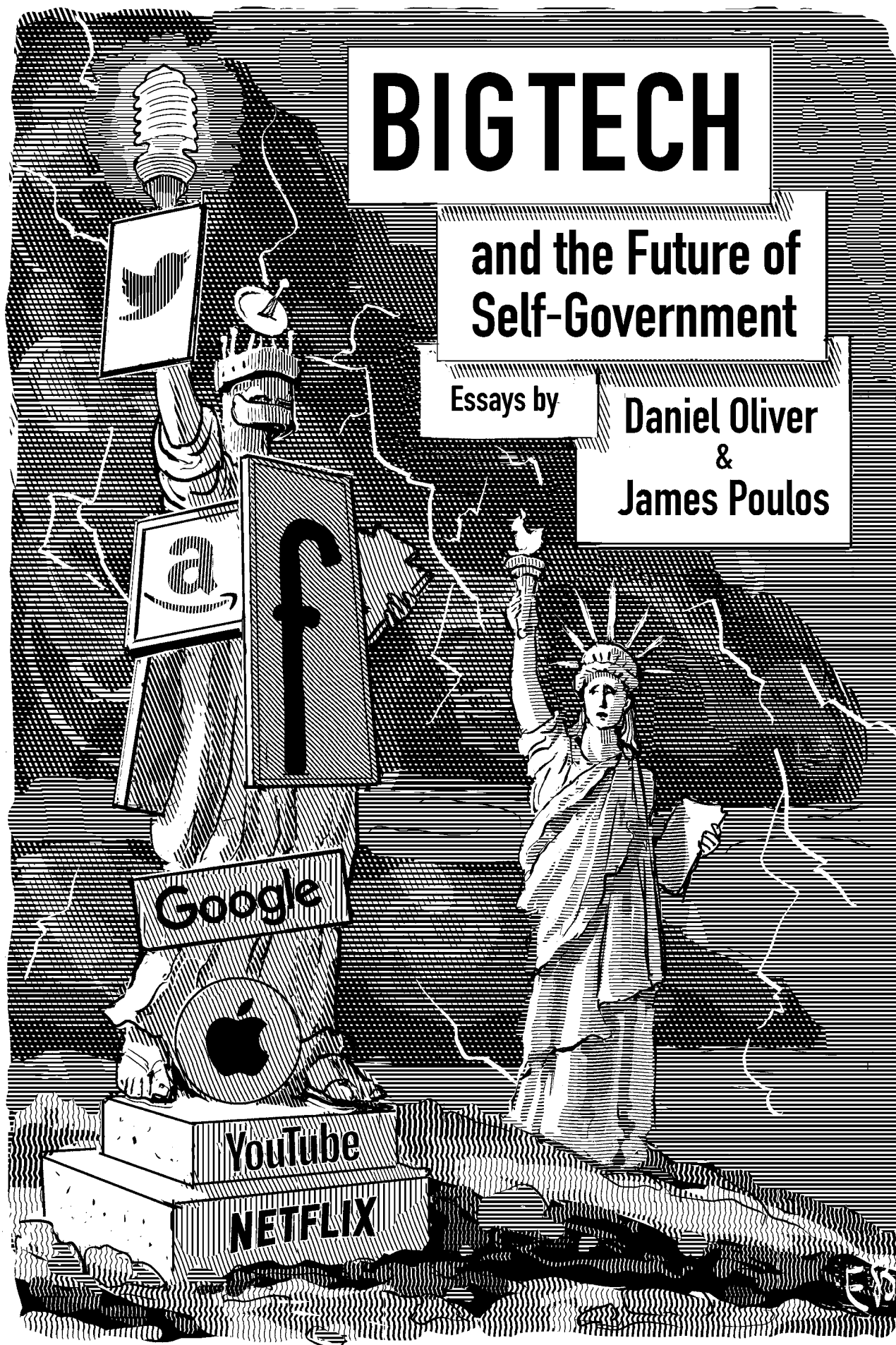
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Book Review by Daniel J. Mahoney

## TO CONQUER WITH CHIVALRY AND MERCY

*The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan* (2 vols.), by Winston Spencer Churchill, edited by James W. Muller. St. Augustine's Press, 1,560 pages, \$150



WINSTON SPENCER CHURCHILL WAS one of the greatest men of the past century and of modern times more broadly. A world-class statesman, he embodied the cardinal virtues of courage and prudence. This was once the nearly universal consensus of free and informed opinion, often accompanied by genuine admiration and gratitude. To be sure, there have always been outliers: inveterate British socialists, eccentric Tory historians who still defend the wisdom of appeasement, isolationists and pacifists of various stripes, and anti-anti-Communists who cannot forgive Churchill for his lucidity about totalitarianism in all its forms. Today, however, Churchill's cultured despisers have become mainstream. They take aim at Churchill's alleged racism, his support for the irredeemably evil West, and his defense of what the political scientist Kirk Emmert called "civilizing empire."

For example, presenters at a recent conference at Churchill College, Cambridge competed with each other to suggest that

Churchill was as bad as, if not worse than, Adolf Hitler himself. His grandson Nicholas Soames has asked for Churchill College to be renamed, since this egregious assault on its namesake belies the considerable benefits it accrues from bearing the name.

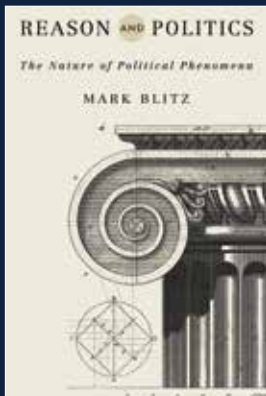
JAMES W. MULLER'S SPLENDID NEW TWO-volume edition of Churchill's *The River War*—the first unabridged print edition since 1899—reveals that there is little or nothing to support such standard-issue charges of racism and hate. Years in the making, delayed innumerable times, this publication of the unabridged *River War* is an event of real significance. The edition's remarkably comprehensive annotations, its helpful maps and beautiful artwork, and above all Muller's lucid and authoritative "Editor's Introduction" (the size of a modest book but without a wasted word) allow us to understand Churchill as he understood himself.

After participating as a soldier-journalist in the Anglo-Egyptian expedition to the Su-

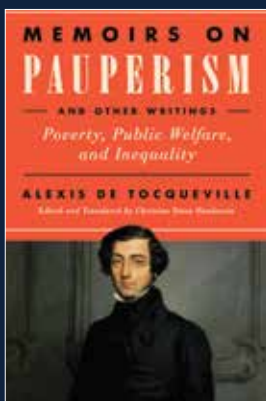
dan—including joining in the British Army's last full cavalry charge—Churchill spent a year researching and writing his weighty masterpiece. Subtitled *An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan*, it was a labor of love on the part of a brilliant and ambitious young man. Read with a modicum of care (or read at all), *The River War* displays Churchill's remarkable capacity to judge Britain's imperial adventures from the heights with neither uncritical praise nor facile condemnation. Early on in volume 1, Churchill endorses "the reclamation from barbarism of fertile regions and large populations." But this "wonderful cloudland of aspiration," as he calls it, cannot escape "the ugly scaffolding of attempt and achievement" marked by "the greedy trader, the ambitious soldier, and the lying speculator." This British patriot never obscured the moral complexity of human affairs. There was something of Xenophon about Churchill: a soldier, writer, and thinker who combined the spirit of adventure with impressive philosophical equanimity.



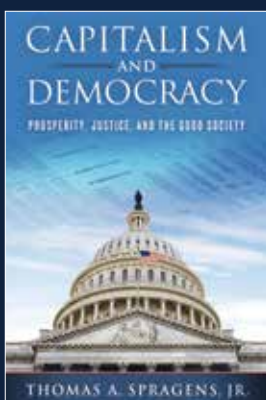
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MULLER, A PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL science at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, presents the full text of the first edition, published when Churchill was only 25 and largely forgotten until Muller stumbled across it in 1989. Churchill's powers of thought and composition are on full display in this version. The prose is, in Muller's words, somewhat "breathless and wordy," though less rollicking and grandiloquent than some of Churchill's later writing. None of this is a criticism: *The River War* is recognizably Churchillian and a joy to read. Muller uses red font to indicate what was omitted in the second, much more concise edition. Muller points out that this later version is more "stately and reserved." But it eliminates some observations of great interest and many of Churchill's sharper criticisms of leading figures on the British side—including Lord Herbert Kitchener, the "Sirdar" or commander-in-chief of the Anglo-Egyptian Army, who led the reconquest of the Sudan between 1896 and 1899. Churchill thought Kitchener "a great and splendid figure," but one who "cared little for others" and "treated all men like machines." He was "stern and un pitying," expressing little interest in wounded Egyptian or British servicemen. Churchill's judgment of Kitchener is far from flattering, but eminently fair—if rather bold for a young soldier.

The Sudanese Dervishes, as the British called them (they called themselves the *Ansar*, "helpers" or "companions" of the prophet Muhammad), rebelled against Egyptian and British rule starting in 1881. Muller notes that this "was an early instance of political Islam, a sort of Muslim revivalism, in collision with Western modernity." This gives Churchill's account a remarkable pertinence to the present day. Churchill admits the Egyptians treated the Sudanese very poorly, even as the Sudanese Arabs enslaved and oppressed the blacks among them. Leading the rebellion against Egyptian rule was Mohammed Ahmed. Ahmed declared himself the "Mahdi," the promised redeemer of the Islamic world—his messianic Islam was often cruel and tyrannical. He died shortly after the triumph of his cause in 1885; the Dervish empire that succeeded him was, in Churchill's estimation, the "worst" that "history records." Its only virtue was courage, real and palpable but severed from both liberty and other "compensating virtues." Still, Churchill gives the Mahdi credit for "rous[ing] patriotism and religion" in the souls of the tribesmen he commanded. Perhaps he was "a commonplace religious impostor." But perhaps in the long run his vision would have given rise to a more tolerable

political order. Despite everything, Churchill does not hesitate to call Ahmed "the foremost among the heroes of the race."

CHURCHILL ALSO RECOGNIZES THE considerable merits of General Charles George Gordon (also known as Gordon Pasha) whom the British sent to oversee Egypt's withdrawal from the Sudan. In 1885, Gordon lost his life in the city of Khartoum: Mahdist forces overwhelmed his palace as Prime Minister William Gladstone's government dithered about coming to his rescue. Gordon was an accomplished general, as well as a man of deep principle and Christian faith. He had warred on slavery in the Sudanese territories out of a deep respect for the dignity of all persons. But his moral rectitude and prideful self-assurance led to imprudence and an excessive confidence in his own judgment. Churchill's final assessment of Gordon is respectful with an undercurrent of doubt and criticism. He was, in Churchill's estimation, "a man of stainless honour and enduring courage" and "the severity of his religion did not impair the amiability of his character." His opinions were not always sound but "the justice of his actions" was generally beyond dispute.

In 1895, a new Conservative and Unionist government under Lord Salisbury officially "adopt[ed] the reconquest of the Sudan as a goal." Churchill did not question that goal, but he interrogated some of the motives that inspired it. Certain men of influence and capacity at home and throughout the empire were dominated by a "military spirit," committed to restoring the honor of an empire sullied by the events of 1885. Others, Christians who saw General Gordon as a religious martyr, "sought to avenge his death": they were given to fanaticism and itched for a "holy war." Still others hoped to bring civilization and sound administration to the suffering people of the Sudan. All these impulses coalesced in what Muller calls a "carefully planned, methodically lengthy, and often tedious operation, well-suited to the temper and talents of the Sirdar who commanded it." Churchill supported this effort, but he warned against hubris and also against the potentially cruel and fanatical urge to avenge Gordon's death.

Churchill artfully renders every step of the Sudan's reconquest. As his late daughter Lady Soames points out in her charming foreword, *The River War* beautifully illustrates his "life-long admiration for courage in friend and foe" as well as the "ordeals and perils on the battlefield." These included what Churchill calls "some of the most peculiar and disgusting maladies known to science," such as the

unspeakably painful “ferntit” or guinea-worm that afflicted many troops on both sides. But Churchill also describes the *bonhomie* among the troops, telling stories or sharing a bottle of champagne. British soldiers during the River War experienced nothing like the inhumanity of the trenches during the interminable years of the Great War.

SOAMES AND MULLER BOTH POINT out Churchill’s delight in describing the “Desert Railway” that Kitchener built which, despite a setback or two, kept the Anglo-Egyptian armies well supplied as they moved through fierce and forbidding desert. Some thought the effort to build such a railway in the desert was sheer lunacy. But Churchill appreciated the ambition, and the overwhelming eventual success, of Kitchener’s initiative. Churchill saw romance in the works of modern technology, even if he never identified them simplistically with moral progress. He counterbalances his scientific enthusiasm with wonder at the natural world: the Nile River plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of the drama. As Churchill eloquently writes near the beginning of volume 1, “It is the life of the lands through which it flows. It is the cause of the war. It is the means by which we fight; the end at which we aim.” Empires and regimes come and go, but the “great river,” which “has befriended all races and every age,” endures and reminds us of the limits of our plans and adventures. Churchill displays piety before nature and a regard for eternity, not just the here and now.

There is a long passage in volume 2 (excised from the second edition) that comments forcefully and frankly on the “fanatical frenzy” and “fearful fatalistic apathy” inherent in political Islam. Churchill speaks of a “degraded sensualism” that has affected almost every Islamic land. He laments that women are regarded as “absolute property” of men under Muslim law, even as he acknowledges that “individual Moslems may show splendid qualities” and have served the queen as “brave and loyal soldiers.” This is the sort of passage that has earned Churchill condemnation in our censorious age. Of course, no small number of Enlightenment thinkers said harsher things about Christianity (e.g., Voltaire: “crush the infamous thing”). But the real issue is whether Churchill was right, not whether he offended Muslim sensibilities.

Cancel culture’s tyrants go searching for provocative passages as an excuse for unpersoning great thinkers and leaders: this has been Churchill’s fate. But there is no justification for such obscene displays of ingratitude and efforts at cultural suicide. They are unjust,

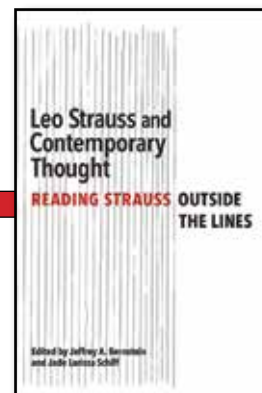
and rest on a terrible simplification. Woke critics fail to read Churchill’s thought as a whole and to consider the more provocative passages with the seriousness they deserve. As Muller points out, Churchill defends the rights of women and also makes “a bold and unequivocal criticism of his commander-in-chief for the way the Sirdar treated the tomb and the remains of the Mahdi,” as well as for allowing Dervishes to be killed by his victorious troops. Kitchener did not order this, of course, but he didn’t do nearly enough to prevent it. In chapter 21 of volume 2 (“After the Victory”), Churchill expresses horror that Kitchener allowed the Mahdi’s tomb to be shelled and despoiled. The Mahdi’s head was separated from his body and tossed around like an “interesting trophy” until Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer, ordered its return to Khartoum. “Such was the chivalry of the conquerors!” proclaims an exasperated Churchill.

AS MULLER JUSTLY REMARKS, “THESE are not the views and actions of a man who has casual contempt for other races.” Churchill always regarded the enemy as human beings capable of displaying courage and heroism. A “racist” or unthinking imperialist he surely was not. Like Edmund Burke before him, who deplored Warren Hastings’s crimes and excesses as governor of India, Churchill always called for restraint and respect in governing the peoples of the empire. Muller thoughtfully notes that Churchill’s attitude reminds one of “Macaulay’s warning in his 1841 essay on Warren Hastings, which Churchill had read in India, about ‘the strength of civilization without its mercy.’” Here one breathes the humanizing spirit of Cicero, Burke, Macaulay, and Churchill himself: the spirit of magnanimity tied to moderation, restraint, and mercy.

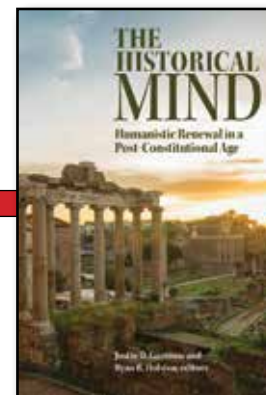
*The River War* is the work of a great statesman and thinker, a writer of consequence about issues (empire, Islam, and the clash of civilizations) that remain very much our own. Already in the first edition, Churchill demonstrated the greatness that lay before him. James Muller and St. Augustine’s Press should be applauded for carrying through the immense labor of producing this magnificent new edition.

Daniel J. Mahoney holds the Augustine Chair in Distinguished Scholarship at Assumption University. He is presently completing two books, *The Statesman as Thinker: Ten Portraits of Greatness, Courage, and Moderation* (Encounter Books), and *Recovering Politics, Civilization, and the Soul: Essays on Pierre Manent and Roger Scruton* (St. Augustine’s Press).

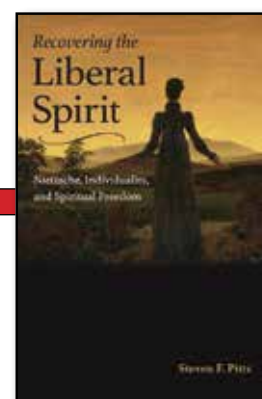
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