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CLAREMONT
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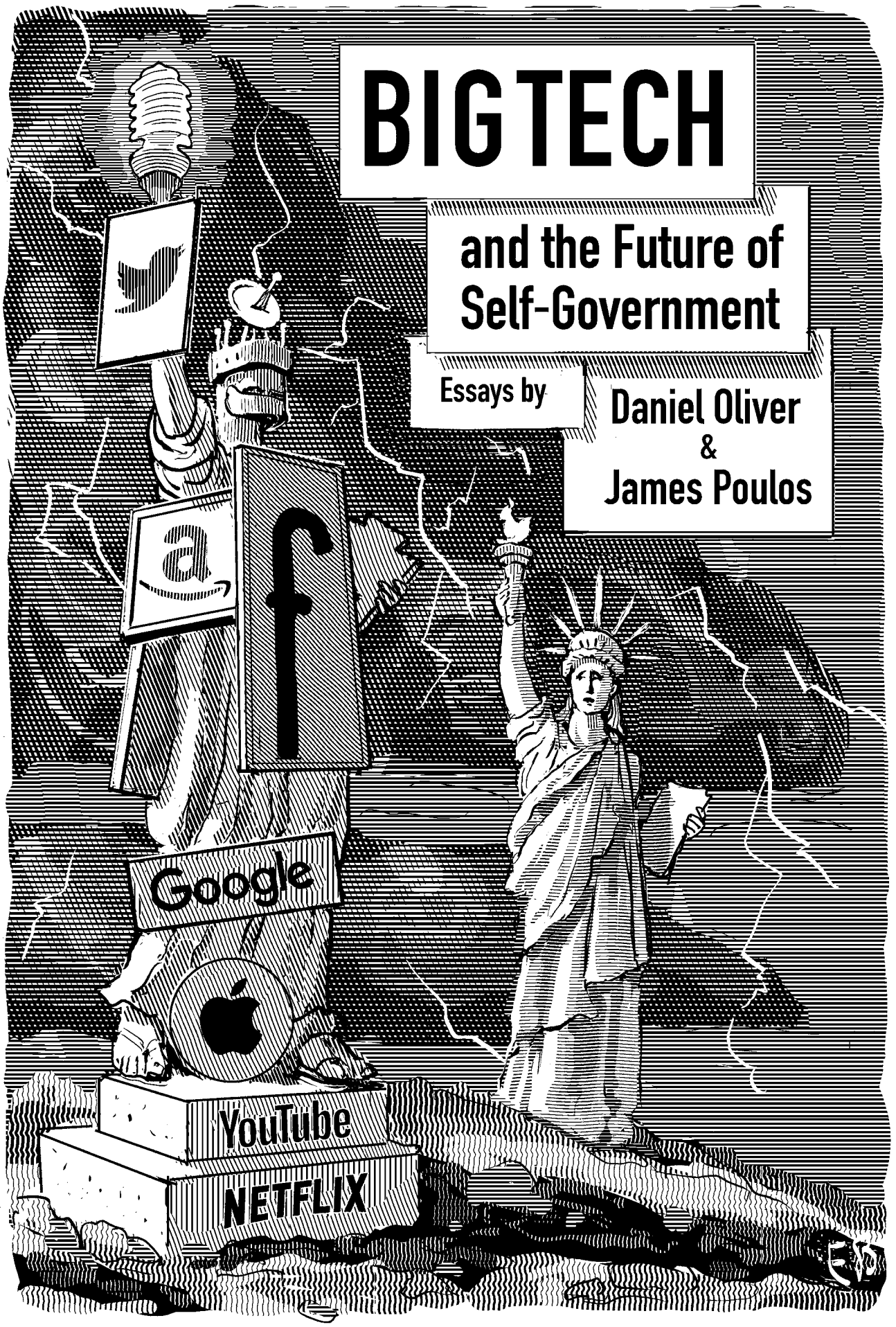

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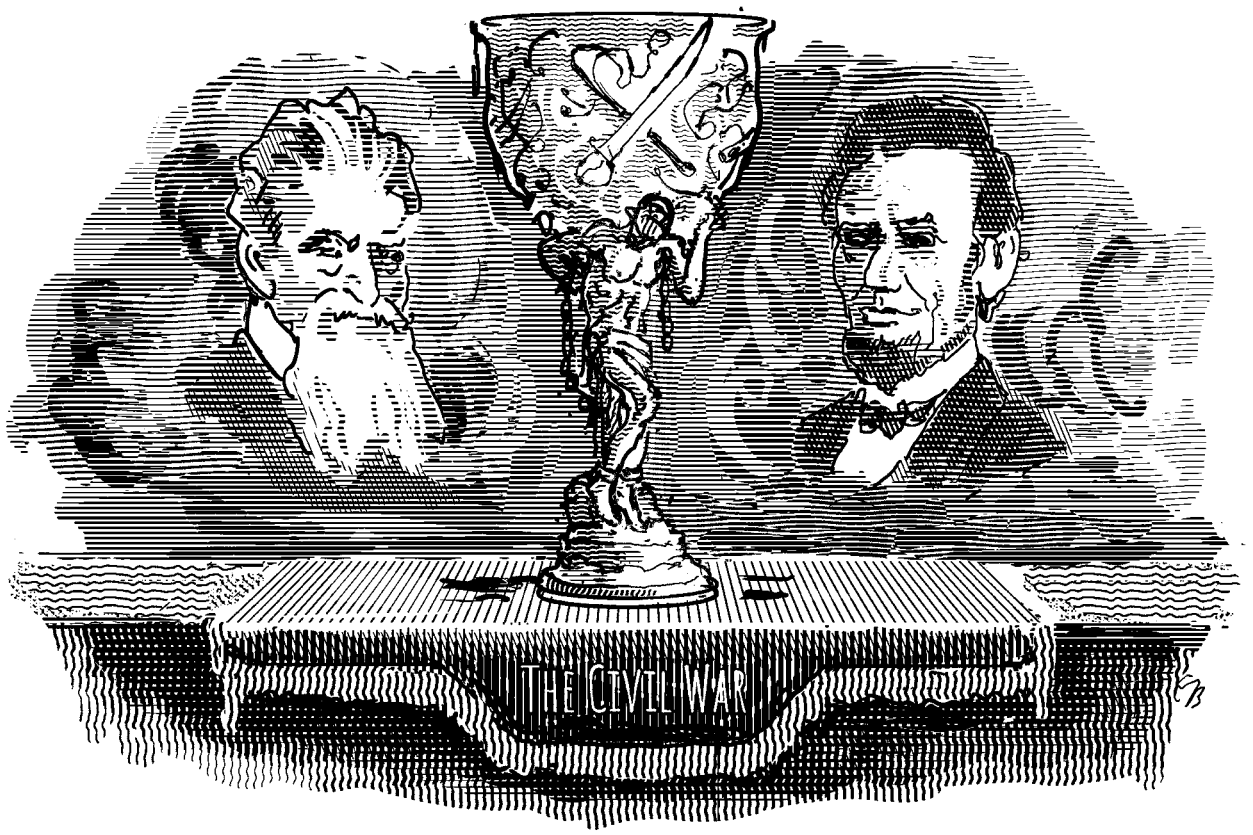
Book Review by Diana Schaub

The Cup of Sacrifice

The Zealot and the Emancipator: John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, and the Struggle for American Freedom, by H.W. Brands. Doubleday, 464 pages, $30



Best-selling historian H.W. Brands offers a dual biography of the Civil War's most famous martyrs to the anti-slavery cause. To present the thoughts and deeds of John Brown, who courted martyrdom, and Abraham Lincoln, who did not, Brands draws mostly from each man's own inimitable words and the insightful reflections of those who knew them. This method makes for engaging reading: a great historian's gift is to transport readers to another place and time, and even into another's mind and heart. Alternating between Brown and Lincoln, Brands pursues his guiding question: "How does a good man challenge a great evil?"

Occasionally, Brands does cross the line between history and historical fiction. His prologue, for instance, ends with this leap into omniscience:

> Lincoln looked at the walls of his office. In the past few years he had been able to see beyond them. He had managed to push back the melancholy as he returned to political life. Now this. The walls closed in. The melancholy settled upon him once more. Lincoln's mother had taught him not to swear, but in his heart he was tempted to curse John Brown.

This is sheer speculation, not history. But such moments of dramatic overreach are rare.

Knowing less about Brown, I found the details of his formation and murderous exploits the best sections of the book. Brown massacred five supporters of slavery in Pottawatomie, Kansas, in 1856; three years later, his raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, got him tried and executed for treason. But the intensity of his commitment to abolition earned him respect as well as condemnation. Frederick Douglass knew Brown well and loved him from the start, describing him as "a grand, brave and good old man." Remarkably, even those who regarded Brown as a dangerous terrorist, like Virginia Governor Henry Wise, were moved to similar admiration by the power of his personal presence. After interrogating the injured prisoner at Harpers Ferry, Wise announced, "He is a bundle of the best nerves I ever saw cut and thrust and bleeding and in bonds. He is a man of clear head, of courage, fortitude and simple ingenuousness."

Lincoln never met Brown. His only public statement about him, in the Cooper Union address a few months after his hanging, was entirely negative: "An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution." Douglass, by contrast, was in awe of Brown's religiously inspired fanaticism—"I could live for the slave, but he could die for him"—and convinced of its political impact. Douglass credited the seizure of the federal arsenal, brief though it was, with beginning "the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic."

Brands avoids drawing conclusions in his own name, but by relying on Douglass's panegyric he seems to endorse this favorable evaluation. Yet Douglass may well have overestimated Brown's importance (perhaps for

rhetorical reasons of his own). One might, with just as much warrant, regard Harpers Ferry as the bloody froth on the surface of huge, unstoppable waves. Already in 1855, Lincoln wrote in a private letter that events since the Missouri Compromise had demonstrated "that there is no peaceful extinction of slavery in prospect for us." Brown, of course, had long agreed with that assessment. To achieve his sole end of freedom for the slaves, he was willing to start the blood-letting—or, as he conceived it, to respond in kind to the inherent violence of slavery. Intellectually, Douglass agreed. However, when Brown tried to enlist him in the Harpers Ferry plot, Douglass declined, regarding it as a suicide mission far inferior, tactically, to Brown's previous plan to stage an extended guerrilla campaign of slave rescue and recruitment. Ironically, Lincoln revisited Brown's original idea late in the Civil War, when he met with Douglass to discuss a military operation to speed the flow of slaves making their way north after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. As the statesman knew, ripeness is all, and part of ripeness is constitutional legitimacy.

Brands's chapters on Lincoln are less satisfactory, however. Brands quotes extensively from Lincoln—one can hardly fault him for that, since Lincoln is always a wonder on the page. Nonetheless, readers might have benefited from more analysis of those nicely assembled and sequenced passages. At times, insufficient examination of the text results in misrepresentations, as well as missed opportunities to explore the complex character of Lincoln's statesmanship. To take an early example: Brands claims that Lincoln's formal protest against the Illinois legislature's anti-abolition resolutions of 1837 represents a "middle-of-the-road stance" that helped him win a Whig seat in Congress almost a decade later. He is right that Lincoln's resistance to the "amoral position on slavery adopted by the assembly" did indicate the "firm but moderate" ground Lincoln would occupy in controversies to come. He goes wrong, however, with his breezy suggestion that Lincoln's protest was a canny career move or that it much "pleased" anyone. Going on the record at all was politically risky, even for a Whig. Anti-abolition furor was sweeping the nation at the time. The "gag rule" against abolitionist petitions to Congress had been imposed in 1836, and state legislatures in the free states were taking further action to censor anti-slavery agitation. Of the 101 legislators in Springfield, Lincoln was one of six to vote against the resolutions. Only he and a lame-duck colleague, Dan Stone, were willing to take the further step of specifying the reasons for their dissent.

The 1837 protest is a remarkable document worthy of careful study, especially since Lincoln included its full text in his 1860 campaign biography. There he asserted that the protest "briefly defined his position on the slavery question; and so far as it goes, it was then the same that it is now." Lincoln re-centered the debate on the wrongfulness of slavery, while admitting that extreme abolitionist rhetoric was divisive. Then, by drawing attention to the differences between the Illinois resolutions and the U.S. Constitution, Lincoln set forth his understanding of both the limits and the available powers of the federal authority with respect to slavery. With terse precision, he corrected misconstructions of the Constitution that were beginning to gain a foothold, such as the notion that there is a "sacred right" to hold slaves "under the Constitution." It was true, he argued, that there was no federal power to interfere with the pre-existing institution within the slave states. This federal incapacity made it necessary to tolerate the evil of slavery. But the Illinois resolution fallaciously embellished that necessary evil into a right, and a "sacred" one at that.

More attention to this early episode could reveal much about Lincoln's moral compass, his constitutional logic, and his political daring. This was not middle-of-the-road, split-the-difference pragmatism. Lincoln already understood what was non-negotiable—the wrongness of slavery and the limits of constitutional government—and, hence, where the room for political maneuver and persuasion lay. The protest sketched the essentials of a comprehensive approach to dealing with slavery—an approach that was moral without being moralistic, and that pointed toward the eventual Republican policy of opposing slavery's territorial spread.

Brands similarly misrepresents Lincoln's reaction to the Lecompton controversy. The proposed Lecompton Constitution would have brought Kansas into the Union as a slaveholding state. The battle over its ratification provoked a split between Democratic President James Buchanan, who favored it, and Democratic Senator Stephen Douglas, who rejected it. Considering the pro-slavery constitution to be unreflective of the will of the people of Kansas because of serious irregularities in the staging of the referendum, Douglas in effect shouted, "Stop the Steal." Impressed by this maverick position, prominent eastern Republicans began to consider Douglas's "popular sovereignty" a workable

anti-slavery stratagem. They went so far as to suggest leaving him unopposed in the upcoming Illinois Senate race. Brands describes those Republicans as "joining Douglas on principle." By contrast, "Lincoln chose party over principle, although he explained it to himself otherwise."

This is seriously off-base in two respects. First, Brands falsely dichotomizes party and principle. Lincoln fully acknowledged the dangers of "mere party wantonness" (a phrase from his 1848 speech against the Mexican-American War), but he also believed in the possibility of principled partisanship and saw it as the proper democratic means of pursuing the common good. Second, Brands fails to register Lincoln's critique of Douglas's "popular sovereignty" as a tyrannical and morally relativistic perversion of self-government. A momentary gain for the anti-slavery cause should not be purchased at the price of granting legitimacy to a policy that disregards the original axiom of human equality. As Lincoln said at Peoria in 1854, because Douglas had "no very vivid impression that the negro is a human," he also had "no idea that there can be any moral question in legislating about him." It was all a matter of perfect indifference to Douglas, so long as the majority got its way. The Illinois Republicans wisely endorsed Lincoln. In his 1858 House Divided speech, Lincoln demonstrated why the Republican Party must remain on the high road rather than tumbling into the muddy mire of "Pop. Sov.," according to which a majority was perfectly free to enslave or not enslave others, as it liked.

I don't want to be unfair to Brands. Taken as a whole, his book is both lively and illuminating. In a certain sense, pairing Brown with Lincoln reveals a disproportion—one visible in the title of the book. Brown is identified by a quality: zealotry. Lincoln is identified by his achievement: emancipation. The framing seems to rank Lincoln above Brown, inasmuch as "zealot" is not usually a term of praise (except among other zealots), while "emancipator" is. Although some today want to strip that honorific from Lincoln, Brands is assuredly not one of them. If we were to add the implied, and fully parallel, terms to the book's title, it would read *The Zealot and The Moderate*, *The Failed Emancipator and the Great Emancipator*, or *The Man Who Aspired to Emancipate and the Man Who Did Emancipate*.

Why did the man whose only object was abolition fall short, while the man whose primary object was union succeed in achieving both abolition and union? Here, Frederick Douglass is a fair guide. Although he registered serious reservations about Lincoln, both during the war and in his retrospective "Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln" (1876), he also acknowledged that Lincoln did "save his country from dismemberment and ruin; and...free his country from the great crime of slavery." Lincoln succeeded, according to Douglass, only *because* he subordinated the cause of abolition to that of union. Douglass, like the holy warrior Brown, had occupied "the genuine abolition ground." This was a vantage point from which Lincoln "seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent." But Douglass, unlike Brown, had a more flexible and capacious mind. The unfolding argument of his "Oration" encourages his audience to adopt the broader perspective of the elected officeholder, who must take account of obligations both more comprehensive and more limiting than the zealot's unadulterated activism. Bound by his oath to the Constitution, Lincoln was further constrained by "the sentiment of his country." Measured by this complex standard of statesmanship, Lincoln was "swift, zealous, radical, and determined." By speech's end, Douglass honors Lincoln as "our friend and liberator," zealous in his own right and in his own fashion.

The subtitle of Brands's book, which features "the Struggle for American Freedom," suggests a final way to get at the difference between these figures. Brands floats a simple dichotomy, declaring Lincoln "a pragmatist" who saw the struggle "as political," whereas both Brown and Douglass were "idealists" who "saw the struggle as essentially moral." But this schematic does not exhaust the complexity of Lincoln, or, for that matter, of Douglass. Though Lincoln was assuredly anti-slavery, slavery for him was just a particular manifestation of a larger moral-political problem concerning the meaning and maintenance of self-government. The requirement to proceed politically—through the consent of the governed, even when the governed are ill-formed and downright malicious—was itself grounded for Lincoln in the moral truth of human equality as instantiated, always inadequately, in a specific political order.

In *Crisis of the House Divided* (1959), Harry V. Jaffa elucidated the dual imperative of equality and consent which the Declaration establishes and which Lincoln was duty-bound to respect. Lincoln was seeking

> that common denominator in existing circumstances which was the highest degree of equality for which general consent could be obtained. To insist upon more equality than men would consent to have would require turning to force or to the arbitrary rule of the few. But to turn to oligarchy, as a means of enforcing equality, would itself involve a repudiation of equality in the sense of the Declaration.

John Brown, however, was too impatient to bother with the democratic requirement of consent. For him, freedom meant freedom for the slaves, to be gained immediately through violence. For Lincoln, freedom was more all-encompassing, involving the fate of the whole nation—slaveholders included. In his 1862 message to Congress, he lodged a final (unsuccessful) plea for the justice of voluntary, gradual, and compensated emancipation: "In *giving* freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free*—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve."

A century before Brands, Lincoln's great biographer Godfrey Benson, Lord Charnwood, included a few pages in his *Abraham Lincoln* (1916) on John Brown. Charnwood noted that "Any one who is interested in Lincoln is almost forced to linger over the contrasting though slighter character who crossed the stage just before he suddenly took the principal part upon it." While more sympathetic toward Brown than Lincoln was, Charnwood left no doubt about his preference for the politician and his "policy of deadly moderation" over the death-dealing Puritan. He concluded by reflecting upon Lincoln's own form of zealotry. Charnwood's words could serve as a fitting epigraph to Brands's work:

> As to [Lincoln], perhaps the sense will grow upon us that this balanced and calculating person, with his finger on the pulse of the electorate while he cracked his uncensored jests with all comers, did of set purpose drink and refill and drink again as full and fiery a cup of sacrifice as ever was pressed to the lips of hero or of saint.

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