

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2021

# CLAREMONT

## REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

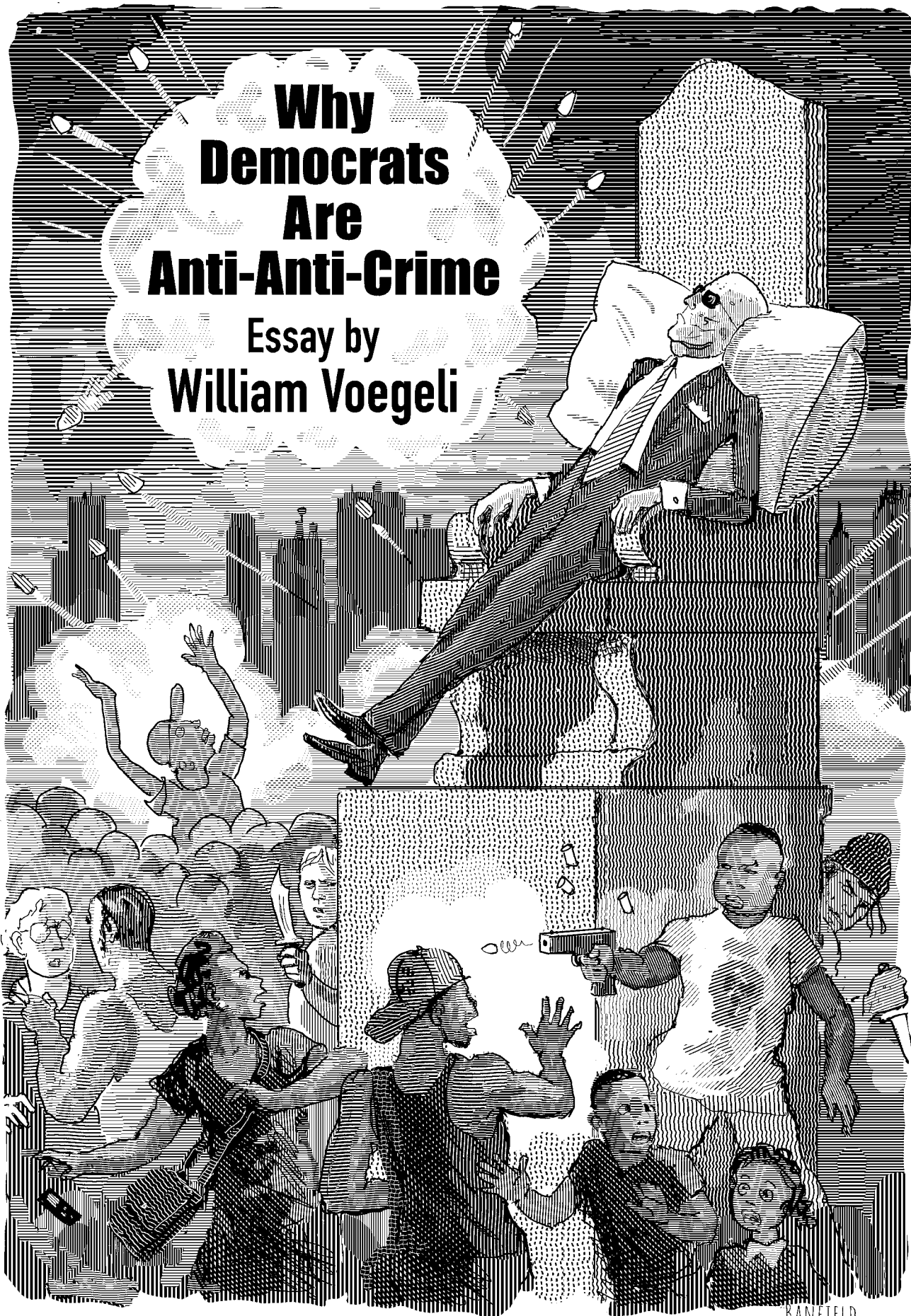
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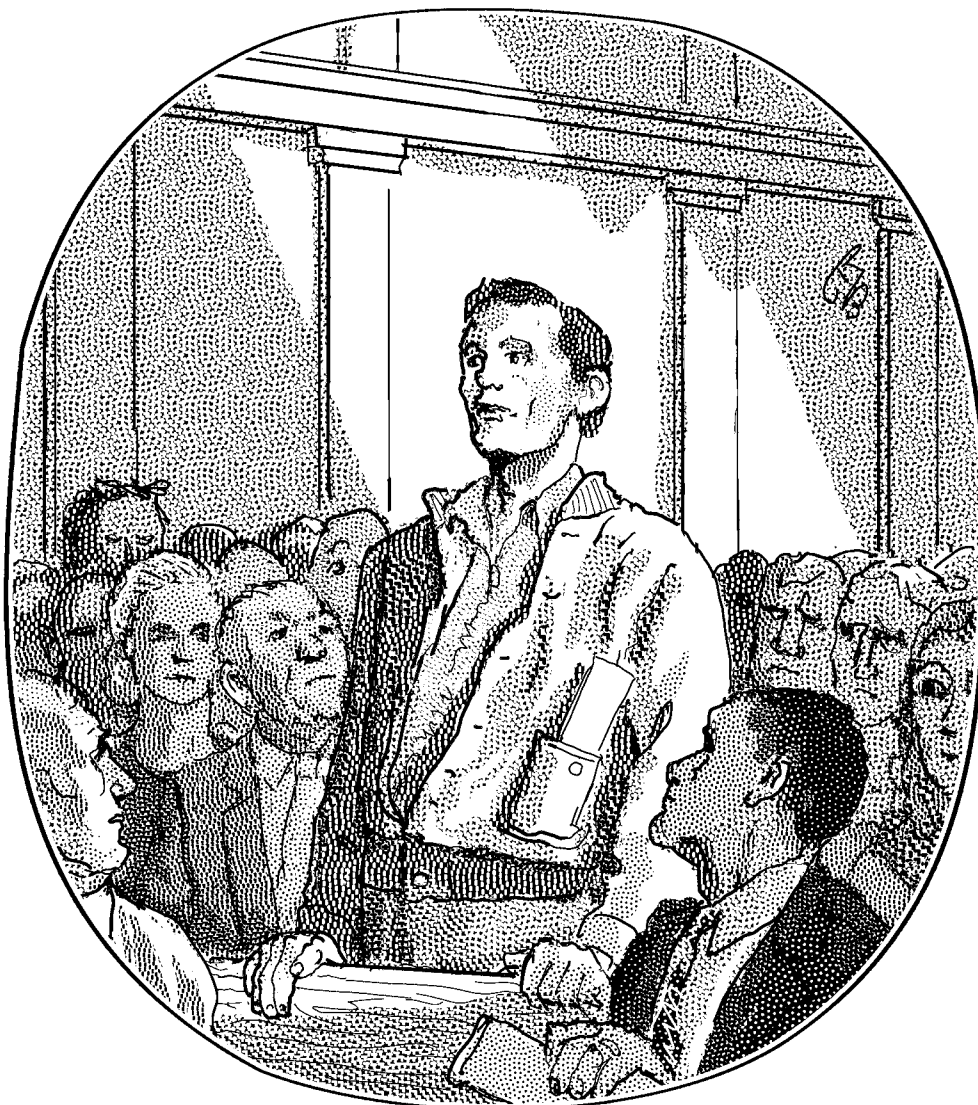
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Book Review by Bradley C.S. Watson

## YESTERDAY ONCE MORE

*The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again,*  
by Robert D. Putnam, with Shaylyn Romney Garrett. Simon & Schuster, 480 pages, \$32.50 (cloth), \$18 (paper)



"Freedom of Speech"

Drawing based on the 1943 Norman Rockwell painting

THERE'S NOT MUCH WRONG WITH America that more progressivism can't fix, according to Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett's *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*. Despite its impressive data sets and clever graphing, *The Upswing* proffers progressivism as the solution to our problems *without examining progressivism's role in creating those problems*, a prescription not for a cure but for frustration and bewilderment.

A professor of public policy at Harvard, Putnam is best known for his 2000 study, *Bowling Alone*. There, he argued that since

the 1970s Americans have become increasingly disconnected from each other and from the thick network of civic associations in which they find shared meaning and community. This diminishment of "social capital" seriously undermines individual well-being and the overall functioning of society, as the sense of trust and solidarity among citizens evaporates. His co-author is a Harvard grad, award-winning social entrepreneur, and "changemaker."

Surveying a wealth of statistical data, *The Upswing* presents a "wide-angle history" of the past 125 years, depicting trend lines of economic equality, comity in politics, cohesion

in social life, and altruism in cultural values. Each reaches its apex at essentially the same moment in the mid-1960s, forming an "inverted U" shape. Putnam and Garrett call the confluence of these four metrics the "I-we-I" curve. "For roughly half a century these separate 'streams of events'...shaped an America that was more equal, less contentious, more connected, and more conscious of shared values.... But then, unexpectedly, though not without forewarning—the diverse streams simultaneously reversed direction."

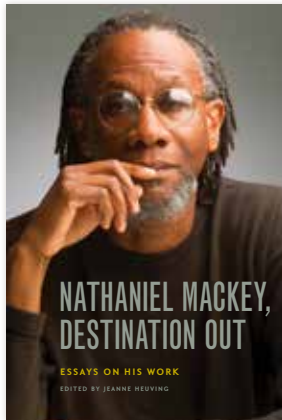
As a result, we live in a new "Gilded Age," claim the authors, closely mirroring the original of the late 19th century. Ours is charac-



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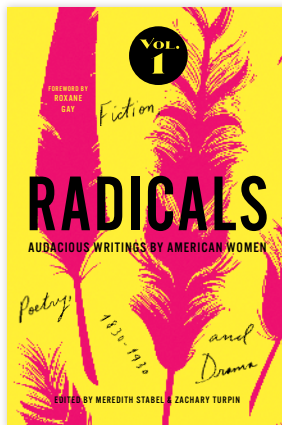
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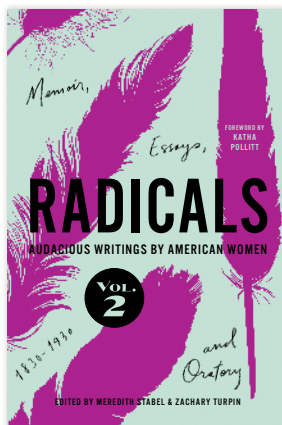
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terized by an entrenched elite, extremes of wealth and poverty, a culture of self-centered individualism, a belief in “the unimpeachable fairness of the market,” and the reality of racism and gender discrimination.

THE FIRST GILDED AGE GAVE WAY TO A more communitarian nation beginning, Putnam and Garrett argue, with the Progressive era. On the economic front, every decade of the 20th century showed improvements in material and physical well-being. But income and wealth *equality* reached their pinnacle (and measures of despair their low point) in the 1960s. Public investments in education, progressive taxation, unionization, and various progressive policy initiatives mostly account for what Putnam and Garrett call the “Great Convergence” of the ’60s, before the subsequent divergence of citizen fortunes.

Cost-benefit analysis is not the authors’ strong suit. They put almost every progressive measure or attitude on the benefit side of the ledger, and anything that smacks of “individualism” on the cost side. They lament, for example, that popular support for “major public investment” in high schools and universities waned after 1970. But this is another way of saying people became more skeptical of massive educational inputs that appear to correlate with marginal outputs, or even net harm. Public education became *controversial*. The authors offer few reasons why, beyond suggesting that Americans just weren’t progressive enough. Those same Americans grew skeptical of promiscuous taxing and spending, as they somehow sensed they weren’t getting bang for their buck.

Putnam and Garrett are chagrined by this development, but don’t seem to have much in common with ordinary folk who for some reason “shifted toward individualism.” The authors are far more “I” than “we” when it comes to the common man. Outside of the Harvard Faculty Club, this might be seen as condescension.

Like the economic curve, measures of political polarization—including cross-party collaboration—start to trend in the “right” direction with the rise of progressivism. “The Progressive movement...brought into politics a new generation of reformers in both parties who would dominate presidential politics for decades to come.” Nearly half of congressional Republicans supported major New Deal reforms. It turns out, to update Thomas Jefferson’s First Inaugural Address, we are all Republicans, we are all Progressives.

Putnam and Garrett insist that the Republican Party’s increasing “conservatism” drove our rising political polarization and “tribal-

ism”—starting with civil rights questions in the ’60s, but eventually encompassing controversies over big government, abortion and religion, the environment, and education. The hard left shift of the Democratic Party and its progressive allies who occupy much of the high ground in media, educational, cultural, and legal circles *surely* had nothing to do with it.

WITHOUT THE BROAD TRUST IN THE federal government that existed when comity peaked in the ’60s, cynicism and alienation arose. Or might cynicism and alienation breed lack of trust? It could seem to a cynic (or an ordinary American) that the federal government since the Great Society—progressivism’s grandchild—has grown into a Leviathan both feckless and frightening, and unworthy of trust. As the authors admit, the data don’t conclusively determine which way causality runs on significant measures of social capital. “The various trends we have identified are braided together by reciprocal causality”; the “very simultaneity of these changes makes it virtually impossible to distinguish what might be causing what.”

Civic associations and family life provide key metrics for gauging society’s health and cohesion. Relatively low levels of civic engagement and family formation can be found in both the original Gilded Age and the present one. These metrics began to rise during the Progressive era and followed the same inverted U curve over the course of the century. From clubs, to churches, to union membership, to family formation and stability, society followed the “I-We-I” paradigm. In the authors’ telling, the Social Gospel and liberal Catholicism did much during the Progressive era to “highlight the importance of social solidarity over individualism.”

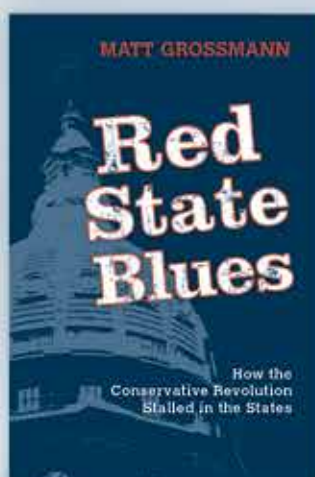
But individualism returned with a vengeance by the 1970s. Our embrace of privacy and self-development effectively bulldozed institutions and families. Putnam and Garrett are at pains to say it’s not their “intent either to condemn or to praise” current trends in family formation, “though some evidence suggests that kids may do better when they are raised in stable families by somewhat older parents.” They merely wish “to point out the remarkable shifts in the choices that Americans have made over the last 125 years”—choices which have negatively affected “social solidarity.”

When it comes to cultural values, the triumph of inegalitarian individualism since the ’60s is evident in the declining cultural salience of such phrases as “the common man” and concepts like “agreement,” “compromise,” “unity,” “conformity,” and “responsibility,” with concomitant rises in the use of concepts such



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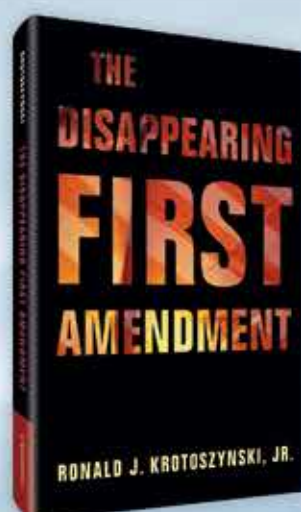


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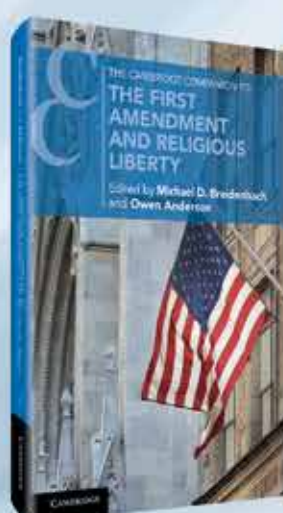
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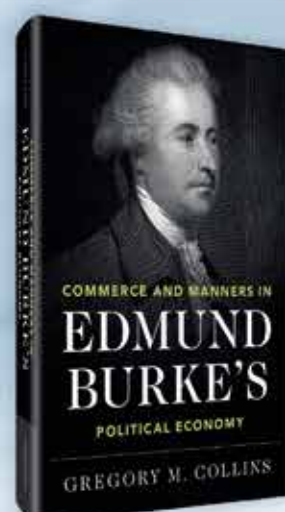
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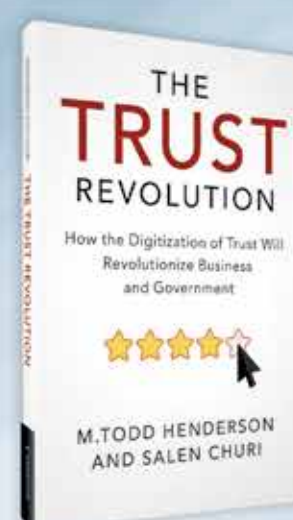
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as “identity.” We know these things thanks to the power of Google, which can display the relative frequency of any word or group of words. We escaped the first Gilded Age thanks to the “reformist and pragmatic, rather than radical” Progressives who “shared a critique of hyper-individualism.” Putnam and Garrett maintain that this “[c]ommunitarian sentiment...was at the heart of the progressive mood”; it carried us through the New Deal and several decades beyond.

THEY IGNORE THE FACT THAT PROGRESSIVISM was inspired by the idea that neither individuals nor societies are rooted in a permanent moral nature, but rather are borne along by the flow of history, the direction of which can be discerned only by enlightened elites. There is little reason to think that cultural cohesion or altruism will result from embracing continuous change—especially when the changes must be interpreted by gnostic insight. Nowadays, for example, our progressive elites’ peculiar fascination with identitarian politics doesn’t leave much cultural space for the ordinary non-birthing person (formerly known as the common man).

No contemporary work of social science would be complete without considering race and gender. The authors insist that “[t]he shift in the Sixties was less from left to right (or the reverse) than from we to I.” But that “we” was largely “a white, affluent, male ‘we.’” They allow that African Americans and women made progress early in the century but, as might be expected, they conclude that “the mid-century ‘we’ was nonetheless highly racialized and gendered.”

Still, by the mid-’60s blacks were advancing toward parity with whites on a variety of economic, educational, political, and health measures. This was followed, Putnam and Garrett argue, by a deceleration of progress in

the face of white backlash, with whites championing individualism as their rationalization for opposing policies that would favor blacks. Might there have been *reasons* for “backlash,” and might arguments for “individualism” have been something more than pretextual? Perhaps, but Putnam and Garrett don’t seem to care. “The broad national shift from ‘we’ to ‘I’ in economics, politics, society and culture...clearly harmed blacks as much as whites, and perhaps more.”

When it comes to gender and the American “we,” the authors claim that “most liberalization in gender attitudes” happened prior to the ’70s, though many instances of inequality and exclusion did not give way until the end of the century—to the point that gender equality does not quite mirror the I-we-I curve. But on the whole women have had more success in establishing themselves as part of the “we” than blacks have.

WHAT WILL REUNITE AMERICANS? Putnam and Garrett suggest we must relearn the lessons of our ancestors—not our founders, mind you, but those Progressives who “set in motion a sea change that helped us reclaim our nation’s promise, and whose effects rippled into almost every corner of American life.” These hardy heroes “refused to let go of the reins of history.” To recapture their legacy we must be serious about our progressive commitments. There’s hope: “We are beginning to see the synthesis of the strategic lessons of the Progressive era, most prominently in activism around climate change—the ultimate ‘we’ issue.” It’s simply unimaginable that anyone might question commitments that resonate so widely across a diverse range of colleges, legacy media outlets, and Democratic Party platforms.

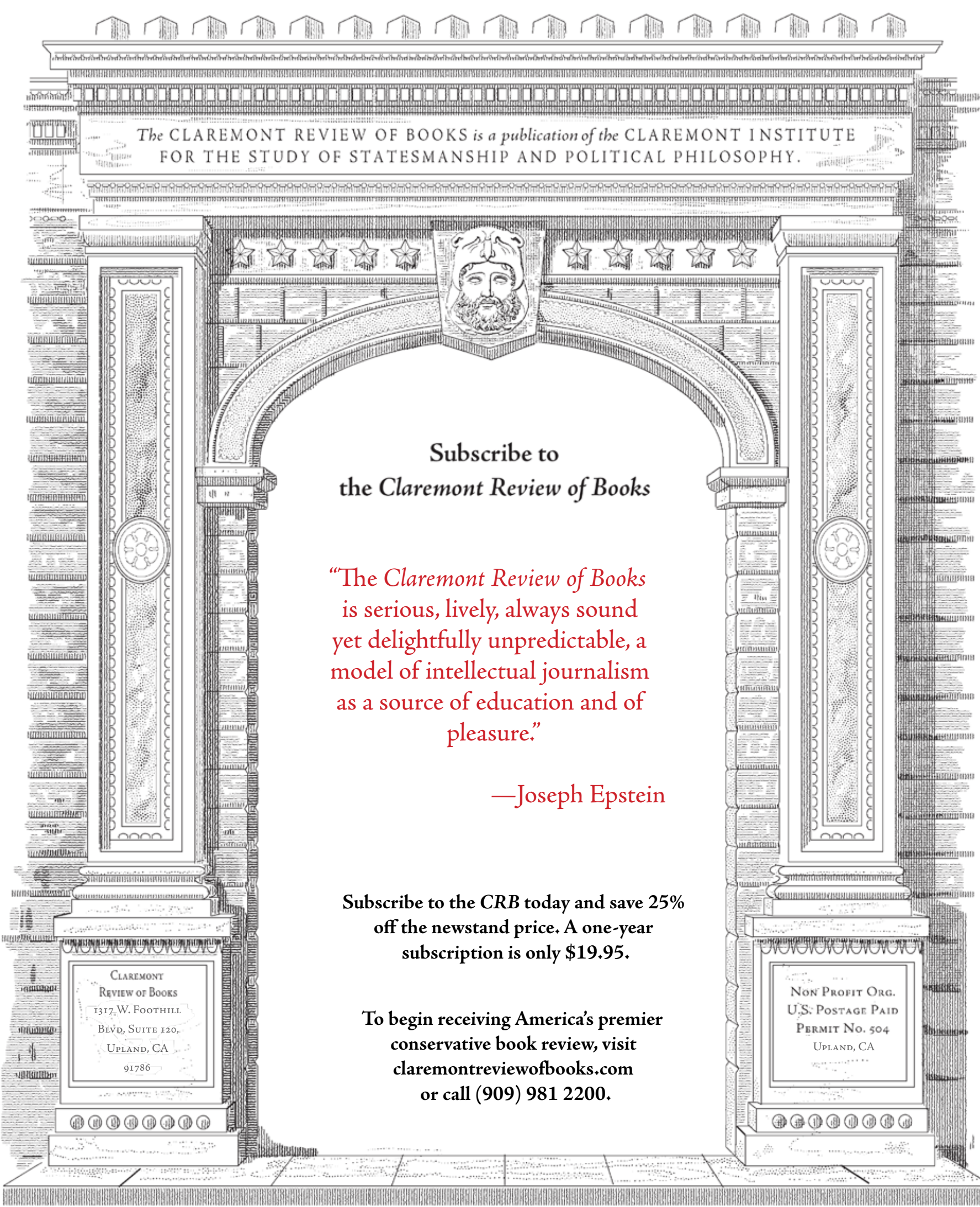
But there is another way to account for “the choices that Americans have made,” which demands we reject Putnam and Garrett’s rec-

ommendations root and branch. Perhaps the recent movement from “we” to “I” has really been a movement toward progressive oligarchy. Certainly, the characteristics of our present Gilded Age, as the authors describe them, are consistent with this view. Progressivism was always much more than a “moral awakening.” It was a comprehensive political and theological movement with enough power to set American society in motion—in the very directions Putnam and Garrett lament.

Despite damning statistical indictments of a nation coming apart, the authors are content to reinforce liberal sensibilities. The rock of our salvation was and forever shall be a progressive one. But that rock quickly turns to sand. Nowhere do the authors mention progressivism’s open hostility to the founders’ Constitution and the political theory of natural rights on which it rested. That hostility was designed to overcome the spirit of local self-government, decentralized administration, and robust social capital that the Constitution had helped to engender—and to replace it with a watery form of national consciousness and unity, more top-down than bottom-up. Such hostility, given time, is just what a progressive doctor would order to destroy any sense of common purpose that a republican people might possess. The doctor’s medicine likely wouldn’t take effect until great economic and international crises had run their course—and common enemies and enterprise had begun to fade from view. Only then would it simultaneously attack the organs of the body politic. It might even set races against each other.

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