

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 4, FALL 2021

CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

Jeffrey H.
Anderson:
**How to Win
in 2024**

Jean M.
Yarbrough:
**Josh Hawley
vs. Big Tech**

Victor Davis
Hanson:
**Allen Guelzo's
Robert E. Lee**

Vincent J.
Cannato
♦
Myron
Magnet:
**Autumn in
New York**

Gary Saul
Morson:
**The
Enlightenment**

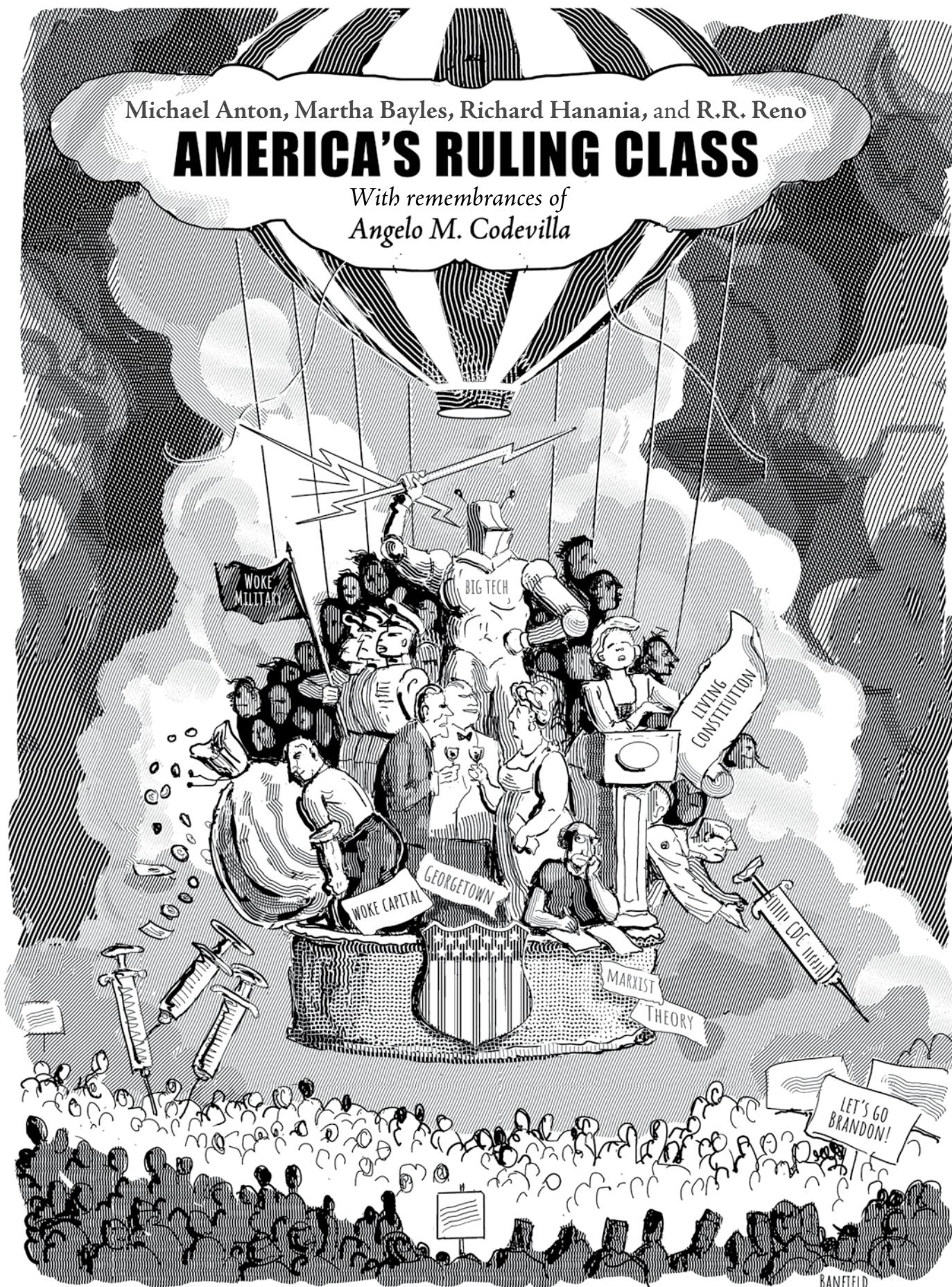
Joseph M.
Bessette
♦
John
Eastman:
**The
Memos**

Christopher
Caldwell:
**Civil War
in France**

David P.
Goldman:
**China's
Art of War**

Spencer A.
Klavan:
**Translating
the Gospels**

William
Voegeli:
**America
Without
Baseball**



A Publication of the Claremont Institute

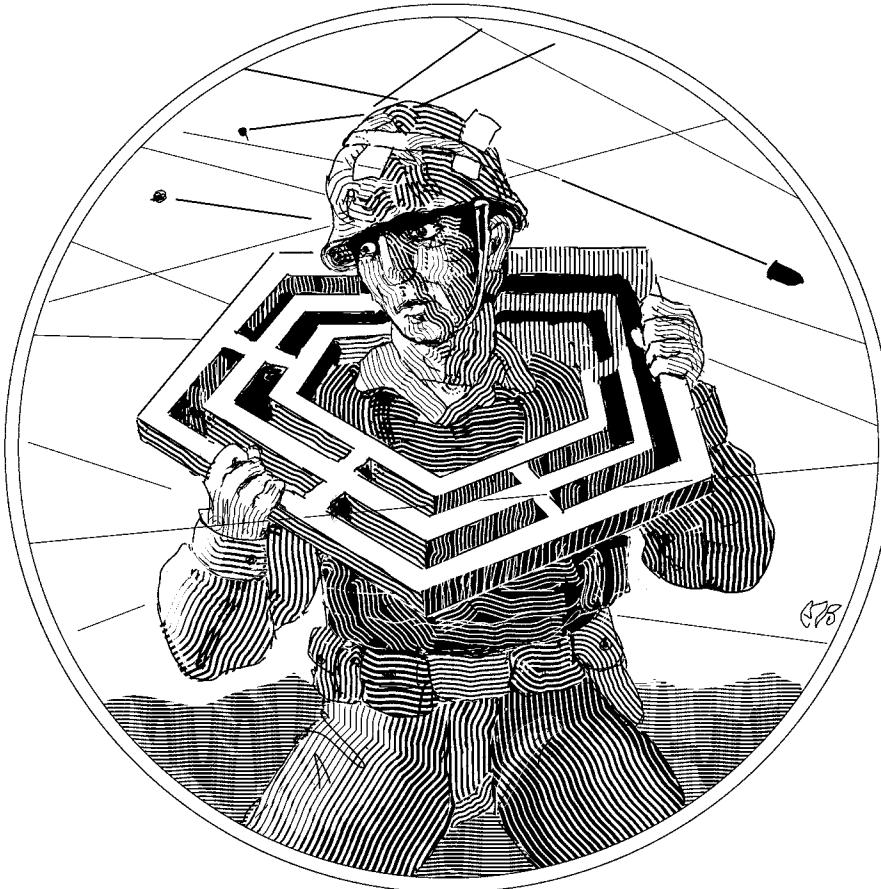
PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$9.50



FUBAR

Breakfast with the Dirt Cult, by Samuel Finlay.
The Red Dirt Syndicate, 318 pages, \$11.99 (paper)



SAMUEL FINLAY'S *BREAKFAST WITH THE Dirt Cult* (the meaning of the title is not obvious and never explained) is a thinly-veiled autobiographical account, dressed up as fiction, of an enlisted soldier's experience in the U.S. Army, specifically, in Afghanistan in the mid-2000s. When the idea to review this now nine-year-old book occurred to me, before the United States's disastrous withdrawal in August, I had thought I would need to make some justifying remarks as to why a book so old—self-published to boot—warranted a review in 2021. It may now seem that, with Afghanistan so spectacularly back in the news, such a justification is no longer needed. But the question of why *this* book still needs to be answered.

It was sent to me, unsolicited, by the author—about whom little is known—around a year ago with a very kind note. I responded with a note of thanks promising to read it, and then didn't. The press of business, you know.

But I was aware that the book is popular with the new or alternative or dissident Right, especially among the young and “very online,” as the kids say—the kinds of people who loved *Bronze Age Mindset* (which I reviewed in these pages in order to shed some light on what the young Right is thinking; “Are the Kids Al(t) right?,” Summer 2019). *Breakfast with the Dirt Cult*'s continued popularity nine years on led me to ask around. It turned out several friends and colleagues had read it and liked it, and urged me to read it as well. So, finally, I did.

THE BOOK HAS THREE CORE THEMES: military life after 9/11, the cynicism and futility of ruling-class democracy wars, and the mess that is contemporary dating and mating. These correspond with its three core settings: Fort Drum in upstate New York, Afghanistan, and Canada (specifically, Montreal and Toronto). The story is told out of chronological order so that the last theme opens and closes the work, as it were

bookending the other two. We may say that the book has five sections arranged like concentric circles, the first corresponding to the fifth, the second to the fourth, and the third—about the main character's deployment and wounding in Afghanistan—standing alone. In between, in a manner reminiscent of a Tolstoy novel, the author-protagonist reflects on the book's themes in passages that sometimes go on for pages.

Specialist, and later corporal and sergeant, Thomas Walton is a prototypical Red American. He's from Oklahoma, loves his family, listens to country music (and much else), and joined the army for patriotic reasons. He's religious but hardly a choirboy; he happily partakes in most of the vices common to life on base.

There's a bit of *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) about this book—except that Finlay beat J.D. Vance to the punch by four years. Although little of *Breakfast with the Dirt Cult* takes place in flyover America (which appears only in remi-



niscences), its spirit pervades the book. The tastes, habits, hopes, and dreams that motivate Walton and most of his comrades are thoroughly middle-American. They are from what photojournalist Chris Arnade has called “back row America,” not merely the interior as opposed to the coasts, but more fundamentally the manual laboring classes as opposed to credentialed “knowledge workers.” Walton actually has a literary bent and is well-read, but his upbringing was anything but sophisticated. His home life was not nearly as dysfunctional as Vance’s, but also not exempt from the characteristic plagues that have pounded Red America in the age of globalization, outsourcing, financialization, wealth concentration, and mass immigration.

WALTON IS A BIT UNUSUAL IN THAT, unlike most of the enlisted men around him, he has a college degree. This allowed him to enter the service as a “Specialist” or E4, skipping the bottom three ranks. Unlike most college graduates in the military, Walton has no desire to be an officer, for reasons that are never explicitly stated but seem to boil down to his holding officers as a class in contempt and not wishing to shoulder the extra responsibility.

The latter may seem like a dodge, but Finlay shows why it’s not. The pressures on Walton as we see him move up the ranks intensify considerably, in at least two senses. First is the gnawing awareness that whatever goes wrong for those under his command will somehow be his fault and he will have to live with decisions, or even mistakes, that get his men maimed or killed. Second is that in the army, accountability is ruthlessly enforced—downward. Walton knows that his superiors will punish him harshly for every little thing his “Joes” (army slang for low-ranking soldiers) do or fail to do, and that his ability to control them is limited while the army’s ability to punish him is not. He also knows that beyond a certain point, which he is unlikely to reach, the higher one ascends, especially in the officer corps, the more this pressure gradually decreases before evaporating altogether. Walton considers this dynamic unfair and has no desire to benefit from it.

Thus did Finlay, in a sense, “scoop” the 2021 Afghanistan debacle by nine years. In one of the aforementioned ruminative passages, Walton wonders why he is so swiftly and harshly disciplined for the most minor (and often inconsequential) transgressions of his men while massive tactical and strategic errors by the brass are not only *not* punished but, likelier than not, rewarded. This is the question that real-life Marine Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller asked, as the recent

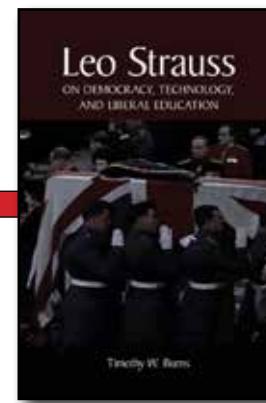
disaster unfolded, in a viral video that got him fired within hours and cost him his career, his pension, and all his benefits—and, for a time, landed him in the brig.

Meanwhile, no one at or near the top has resigned, been fired, disciplined, or even reprimanded for what must count as the greatest American military disaster in the country’s history. Sure, Pearl Harbor and 9/11 cost many more lives. But in those cases, a stealthy enemy managed to find his way around our intelligence networks and other defenses. The Afghanistan debacle by contrast was entirely foreseeable and self-inflicted. Leaving aside the lives lost, the prestige squandered, the allied relationships trashed, and the dire long-term strategic consequences, this was also the single largest surrender of military spoils in the entire history of war. Was this just a giant arms deal disguised as a withdrawal? Another possibility, which cannot be dismissed out of hand, is that the fiasco was the product of deep state spite or interdepartmental pique: “You really ordering us to get out? Fine. We’ll carry out your order *To. The. Letter.* See how that works out for ya.”

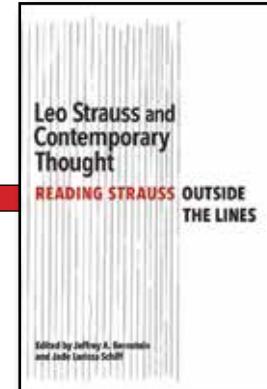
In fact, no senior decision-maker over the course of the entire 20-year catastrophe has ever paid any price. The foundational error of the whole war—letting Osama Bin Laden, Taliban founder Mullah Mohammed Omar, and their top lieutenants escape the mountains of Tora Bora in far eastern Afghanistan—has never even been adequately explained, much less punished. Throughout the war, failure begat failure—at least at the top. “On the ground,” as they say, junior and non-commissioned officers never or rarely lost an engagement. But those battle victories never seemed to support, and in hindsight obviously didn’t serve, a larger strategy for winning the war. Indeed, hardly anyone could define what “victory” looked like. The only coherent answer—a stable, prosperous, democratic Afghanistan aligned with the West and leaving behind its tribal, backward past—was a fantasy from the beginning (and a project the CRB warned against immediately and repeatedly). Yet the more it became evident that this task was impossible, the more the ruling class invested in it.

BUT THE PRESIDENTS, VICE PRESIDENTS, secretaries of State and Defense, national security advisors, directors of National Intelligence, CIA directors, and admirals and generals who compounded one error after another are all today members in good standing of the ruling class, and handsomely rewarded for their failures. Why, for instance, is former top Afghani-

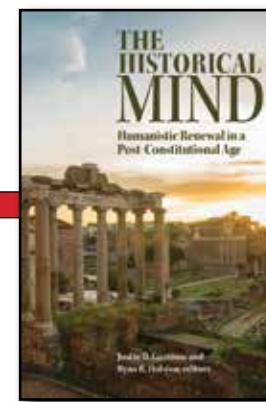
New from SUNY Press



The first book-length study of Leo Strauss’s understanding of the relation between modern democracy, technology, and liberal education.



Broadens the horizons of Strauss’s thought by initiating dialogues between him and figures with whom little or no dialogue has yet occurred.



Timely and provocative assessment of various cultural, moral, and political problems in “post-constitutional” America.

Save 30% on pb and 40% on hc with coupon code CRBF21 through 12/31/21 at www.sunypress.edu.

SUNY
P R E S S



stan commander Stanley McChrystal getting rich off speaking fees and service on corporate boards? He was relieved of his command—not for failing, but for criticizing top Obama Administration officials in a *Rolling Stone* article. Why is another former top Afghanistan commander, David Petraeus, who passed classified information to his mistress, getting even richer at a private equity firm despite no background in finance? Why do these men and others, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, routinely insult Red Americans like Walton and Finlay, accusing them of “white rage,” charging that they and their kind are actual or potential terrorists who pose the greatest danger to America? It is the Finlays and Waltons who overwhelmingly volunteer for the military’s combat units and who’ve suffered 85% of combat deaths in Afghanistan. It’s reasonable for them to ask: why risk your life for a ruling class that hates you, in a cause whose connection to the national interest seems tenuous at best?

FOR TOM WALTON, THE FIRST ANSWER, as noted, was patriotism. But the longer he serves, the more this motive fades. Walton comes to doubt not the value and nobility of genuine patriotism, but whether the country—and, more specifically, the government—is worthy of his loyalty and sacrifice. His answer is yes...and no. He is patriotic for the country he came from, and for the millions in it he will never meet but whom he knows share his conception of what America once was, in part still is, and should be. But he is no longer inspired by a system that manipulates his patriotism so that he and others like him sign up for dangerous missions at cross purposes with the interests of the America he loves. He cannot be patriotic for a ruling class that both hates and cynically uses him.

Walton’s second answer is a war memoir staple: he does it for his buddies. This motive is somewhat paradoxical, in that his buddies can’t, and don’t, become his buddies until after he signs up. But this motive increasingly takes over as he gets to know the men in his unit, and as he questions his conventional patriotism. Even tasked with a stupid mission for stupid reasons, Walton knows that the men around him aren’t the ones who put him there—to the contrary, they were put there by the same stupid people for the same stupid reasons. In such a situation, the only way out and back alive is to rely totally on the men around you, which means they have to be able to rely on you no less fully. To let them down could not merely cause mayhem and death, but shame and a sense of failure as a man.

The book’s second and (to a lesser extent) fourth parts, set mostly at Fort Drum, show how this spirit of camaraderie is built. Finlay never specifies (above the platoon level) what unit Walton is in, but anyone who knows something about the army will surmise it’s the 10th Mountain Division, a light infantry force trained and equipped to fight in tough, uneven terrain at high altitudes in cold weather—just perfect for the Hindu Kush. Which is why, since 9/11, the 10th Mountain has been the most oft-deployed unit in the U.S. military.

The 10th Mountain is semi-elite; that is to say, it is not at the level of a so-called “Tier One” special forces outfit like the Army’s Delta Force or the Navy’s Seal Team Six, but neither is it an ordinary infantry division. The training is tough, which helps bond the soldiers together. Another bond is formed through the Joes’ fear of, and respect for, the sergeants who drive them so mercilessly hard and inflict draconian punishments for minor offenses. The Joes don’t hate the sergeants, exactly, but certainly don’t love them. The sergeants, in addition to being their key authority figures (officers are distant and rarely seen), serve as lightning rods for the joint resentment that fosters unit cohesion.

THE WORK-HARD, PLAY-HARD ATMOSPHERE at the base also builds esprit de corps. Finlay documents a great deal of frat-boy type excesses (the book is extremely vulgar), which some today might find abhorrent. The America of 2021 is, to say the least, much less likely to tolerate this kind of behavior on the grounds that boys-will-be-boys, or that extraordinary stresses are effectively, or at least inevitably, relieved by extraordinary carousing. Part of the problem is that, increasingly, the military is not just boys. As women more and more populate the ranks, the leadership—civilian and military alike—insists that the boys must behave less like boys. I doubt base life today is as raucous as what Finlay depicts and wonder what toll that takes on morale and cohesion.

Which points to a larger question Finlay raises: is the military still this good? In its depiction of bureaucratic idiocy, *Breakfast with the Dirt Cult* is nowhere near as cynical as Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961). But neither does it shy away from frankness about stupidity, inefficiency, and arbitrariness. Shared recognition of, exasperation with, and endurance of the army’s many absurdities further serve to bond the soldiers together. Yet one gets the impression that Walton’s army was much more competent than Mark Milley’s. Reading Finlay’s accounts of training,

deploying, airlifts, base maintenance, perimeter patrols, night watches, and combat missions, it’s hard to believe that his army would have shut down Bagram first, stranded hundreds and possibly thousands of Americans, or abandoned to the Taliban tens of billions of dollars worth of weapons, trucks, helicopters, and other equipment. What a difference 15 years makes.

THE THIRD REASON WALTON GIVES FOR signing up (or staying in) is for himself. As Finlay recently wrote in an article published online after Afghanistan’s fall, “*Requiem for the ‘Stan,*”

Though we owned little on our person and were cogs in a great machine lumbering along for nebulous political ends beyond our ken, there was something liberating about it as well. To be with other men, venturing outside The Wire with weapons in hand, *on the hunt...* it stirred up something. Some primal sense of rightness; that we were close to realizing some fundamental purpose in the quick of our being (emphasis in the original).

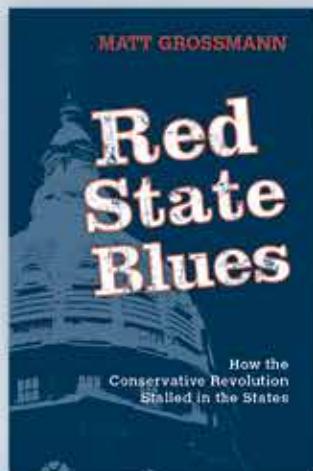
This sense of...let’s call it “vitalism”...permeates *Breakfast with the Dirt Cult* and I suspect explains its appeal to Bronze Age Mindset’s young fans. Although totally different on the surface, the two books share this inner kinship. They frankly acknowledge that something is wrong, something has been lost; suggest where it may be found; and hence speak directly to those young men who are looking. The latter book goes so far as to recommend that young men join the military, precisely to experience the good things that Walton admits, despite it all, he found there. Would Samuel Finlay still agree?

I suspect not. He is too clear-eyed about the ruling class, its contempt for ordinary Americans, and its cynical willingness to use their patriotism to risk their lives for projects it can’t explain even to itself. Toward the end of the book, in one of those long monologues, Walton complains that the ruling class treats ordinary Americans the way the army treated “Haji” (the Joes’ collective name for Afghans): like an occupied people, suspect at best, enemies at worst.

Breakfast with the Dirt Cult is nonetheless not simply an anti-war tract in the tradition of, say, Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). While Finlay, in hindsight, never doubts the futility of nation-building, neither does he conclude, as Remarque seems to, that war itself is simply

Cambridge Is Politics

Titles on conservative politics and the Constitution

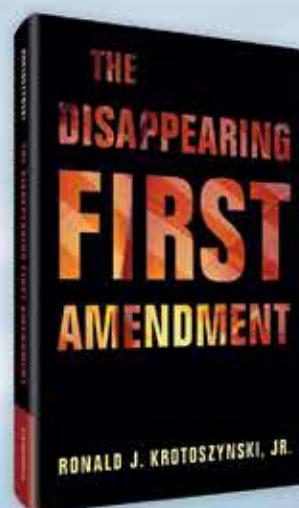


Red State Blues

"In Red State Blues, Matt Grossmann, one of the nation's most astute political scientists, challenges fundamental orthodoxy in much of academia and the media. He argues that the Republican revolution that swept took over state after state at the behest of the Koch Brothers, ALEC and other architects of the insurgency was in practice of relatively minor consequence. The conservative movement ran into a brick wall – the electorate's demand for public services. Grossmann goes against the grain in this wise and illuminating book."

Thomas B. Edsall, New York Times Columnist

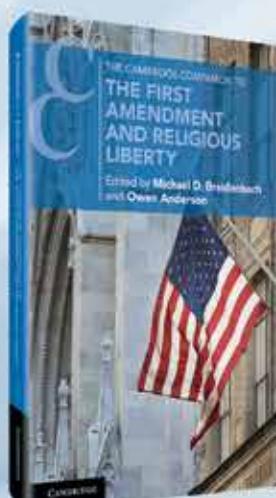
Out Now | \$24.99



"An important corrective to the misleading narrative that Americans' expressive rights have unfailingly expanded."

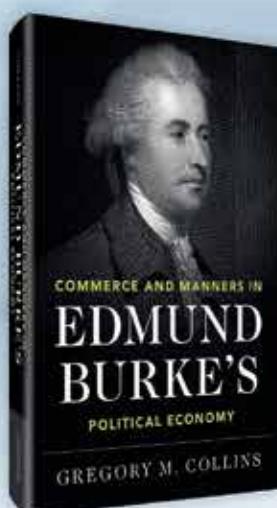
Timothy Zick, College of William and Mary

Out Now | \$34.99



An interdisciplinary guide to the religion clauses of the First Amendment with a focus on its philosophical foundations, historical developments, and legal and political implications.

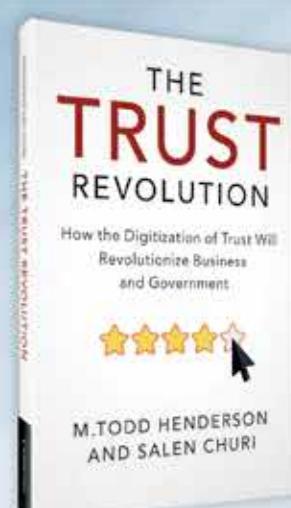
Out Now | \$39.99



"A thorough study of Edmund Burke's thought on economics in which every aspect is well considered, every scholar answered, every point nicely phrased."

Harvey C. Mansfield

Out Now | \$49.99



"A true masterpiece - this book whacks you in the face to show that every transaction you can imagine involves an element of trust. Trust me, you won't put it down."

John List, author of *The Why Axis*

Out Now | \$29.99

Follow us on social media

CUP_PoliSci cupacademic CambridgeUniversityPressPolitics

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



always and everywhere squalid and futile. He recognizes the inherent dignity and necessity of the martial virtues. Just like Walton, he signed up to fight to defend the old America and one surmises would again, if the country were real, the cause just, and the brass not incompetent and mercenary. There is no trace in this book of the sentiments behind the infamous 1933 “Oxford Oath” that “This House will under no circumstances fight for its King and country.”

But Finlay clearly opposes the Afghan war, the 9/11 wars generally, and democracy wars especially. As matters of prudence and hindsight, it’s hard to see where his judgment might be wrong. And if, as I believe, Walton really is Finlay with a name change, then the wounds the book depicts him as having suffered certainly give him special standing to object.

BREAKFAST WITH THE DIRT CULT’S main political lesson, which conservatives and Republicans still don’t understand, is that across-the-board hawkishness is no longer a winning message for the Right. The younger a voter is, but also the more rural and “back row” of any age, the more likely he is not merely to oppose interventionism but to prioritize non-interventionism. Listening to certain senators and former cabinet officers who fancy themselves 2024 presidential contenders, one gets the strong sense that, even five years after Donald Trump campaigned, and won, on opposition to the 9/11 wars, they still haven’t gotten the memo.

Not merely neoconservatism but even Reaganism is well and truly over. “Peace through strength” may still resonate but, increasingly, Republicans are demanding that the first half of that promise be kept. In a way, it’s Taft’s party again—that is, Robert Taft, “Mr. Republican” of the mid-20th century, whose overarching priority in foreign affairs was to carefully husband American power and use it only when absolutely necessary, which he defined very narrowly.

America’s interests as a commercial republic, to say nothing of its commitments to allies, likely preclude any unadulterated return to Taftism. But if the emerging Republican consensus finds its way up from the base to their representatives, the foreign policy it advocates will look a lot more like George Washington’s Farewell Address and John Quincy Adams’s “monsters to destroy” speech than anything recognizably Republican from the past two decades.

THE THIRD THEME OF BREAKFAST WITH *the Dirt Cult*, which I shall touch on briefly since I covered most of this ground in an essay for CRB on Tom Wolfe’s female characters (“A Woman in Full,” Spring 2015), is relations between the sexes. The book begins and ends with Walton’s pursuit, brief winning, and inevitable loss of Amy, a beautiful Canadian stripper.

Amy has a lot going for her beyond her looks. She’s smart, cultured, charming, and a joy to be around. And yet one wants to believe that Walton is too worldly-wise to fall for a stripper—or even to put himself in a position where he might. To her credit, Amy makes clear to him that he can borrow but never have her. To his discredit, Walton charges ahead anyway and ends up heartbroken. What ultimately turns Amy off is not any genuine fault of Walton’s, but simply his love, which she perceives as weakness.

Beyond this failed romance, *Breakfast with the Dirt Cult* abounds with similar examples, mostly via soldiers describing their significant others’ misdeeds, as well as their own. This is not the Lifetime Channel; there is plenty of blame to go around, and as bad as the men can be, the women don’t come off any better. The key difference is that the characteristic vices of only one sex are punished or thwarted; those of the other are denied or encouraged. It’s a recipe for loneliness and unhappiness—which, from what younger people report, makes this theme also true to the realities of our time.

But the heart of the book is its ruminations on service and war. The central question it asks is: was it worth it? If the question applies to the whole endeavor and not merely to the initial response to 9/11, then the answer today is obviously “no,” but Finlay had already reached that conclusion nine years ago. And not from any facile pacifism but from serious thought and hard-won experience. Finlay never uses the term “Jacksonian,” but at root that’s what Walton is: committed to his family, tribe, and nation; fierce when provoked; eager to avenge an insult; but also willing to live and let live—if only others will too. A hard punch in the nose is what the Jacksonians wanted to deliver in Afghanistan after 9/11. They stayed because they believed the punch hadn’t been strong enough, because they believed (for a while) that the only way to avoid having to go back was to change the conditions on the ground, because they didn’t believe or couldn’t conceive that their leaders would let them down so badly, and because they had pledged their word.

The ruling class took advantage of this devotion. Spending down centuries of accumulated goodwill so cynically, so rapidly may have gotten them what they wanted in the short run but is all but certain to inflict disastrous consequences over the long run—especially as America enters its sixth decade with an all-volunteer military. Among other things, Jacksonians don’t like to lose, and they don’t like to be humiliated. The United States just suffered the most humiliating loss in its history—all the worse because so predictable and preventable. The effects will reverberate not merely internationally, but domestically, for decades or even longer.

“What if they gave a war and nobody came?” goes a Carl Sandburg line reworked as a Vietnam-era slogan. The ruling class may soon find out.

Michael Anton is a lecturer and research fellow at Hillsdale College, a former national security official in the Trump Administration, and a senior fellow at the Claremont Institute.



The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to
the *Claremont Review of Books*

"The *Claremont Review of Books*
is full of splendid essays and
reviews—well written, based on
deep scholarly knowledge, raising
issues of lasting importance. I
read it cover to cover, which takes
some time, because there's a lot of
thought-provoking content."

—Michael Barone

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25%
off the newstand price. A one-year
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America's premier
conservative book review, visit
claremontreviewofbooks.com
or call (909) 981 2200.

NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 504
UPLAND, CA