

VOLUME XXII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2021/2022

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

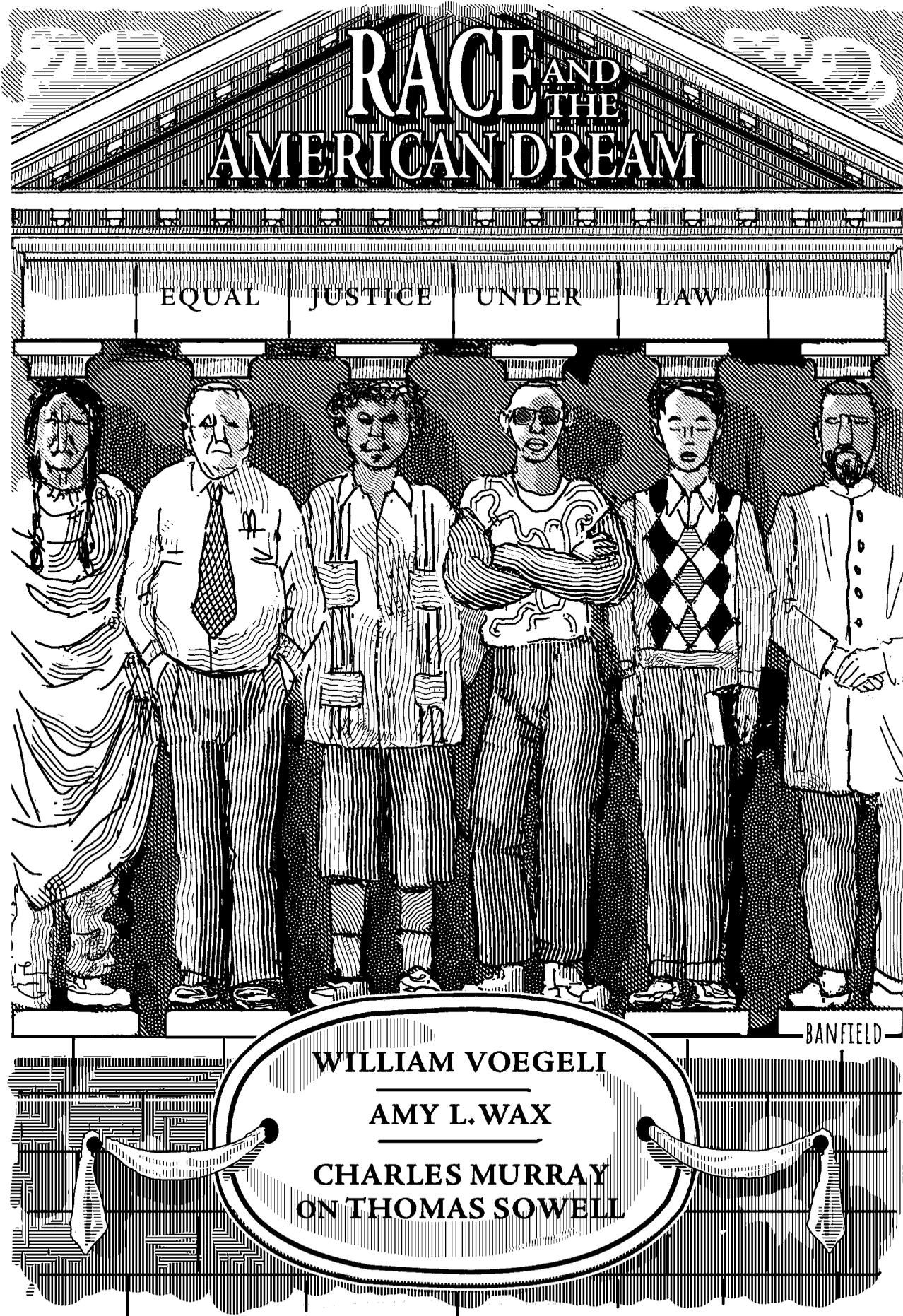
Nate Hochman:  
**What Academic Freedom Is For**

Sohrab Ahmari:  
**Tucker Carlson**

Gordon S. Wood:  
**Andrew Roberts's George III**

Christopher Flannery:  
**Lincoln's 1619 Project**

Helen Andrews:  
**A Good Imperialist**



James Piereson:  
**VDH's Dying Citizen**

Christopher Caldwell:  
**Poland Against Progressivism**

Nathan Pinkoski:  
**Who Started the Spanish Civil War?**

Peter A. Coclanis  
+  
Barnaby Crowcroft:  
**Woke History**

Kyle Smith:  
**The Godfather at 50**

A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$9.50



7 25274 57768 2

Book Review by James R. Stoner, Jr.

## THE WHOLE WAY OF LIFE

*Reason and Politics: The Nature of Political Phenomena*, by Mark Blitz.  
University of Notre Dame Press, 202 pages, \$45



IN A SERIES OF LECTURES AT THE HEBREW University in Jerusalem, Leo Strauss asked the question, “What is political philosophy?” It was the mid-1950s, and the field, said Strauss, was “in a state of decay and perhaps of putrefaction, if it has not vanished altogether.” On the one hand, political science had turned toward positivism, restricting itself to measurement and calculation in imitation of the natural sciences, with little acknowledgement of the difference between human beings and other natural substances. As a result, the once-ancillary disciplines of economics, sociology, and social psychology gained preeminence among social sciences. On the other hand, serious philosophers, including “the four greatest philosophers of the last forty years—Bergson, Whitehead, Husserl, and Heidegger”—ignored politics altogether. They dismissed the age-old philosophical question of the best regime as a pointless dead end. Only the history of political philosophy remained respectable. Through its study,

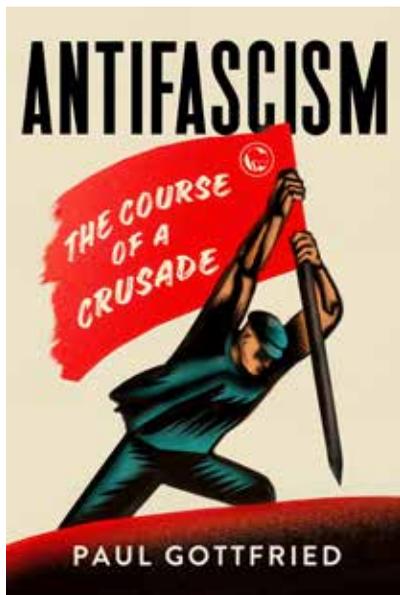
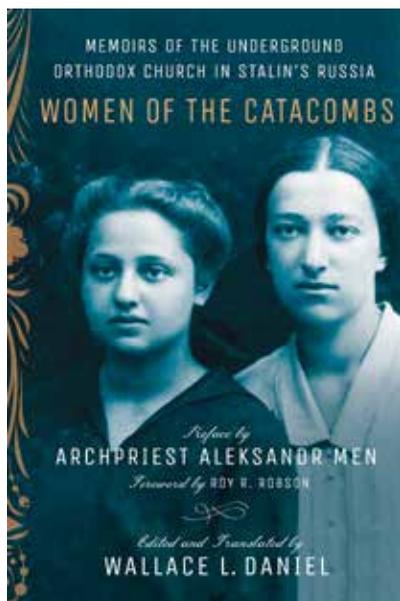
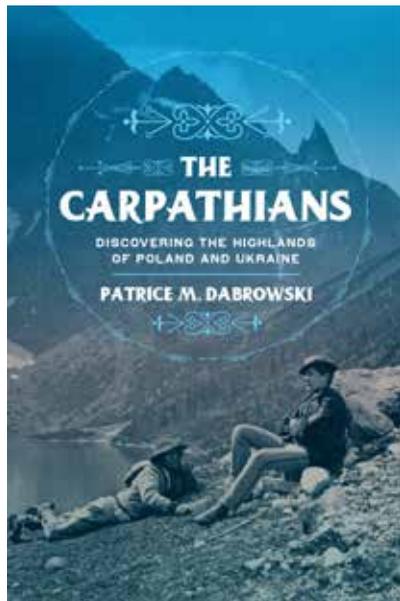
Strauss—alongside such contemporaries as Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott, and Eric Voegelin—brought the great texts and questions of political philosophy back to life.

IN REASON AND POLITICS: THE NATURE of *Political Phenomena*, Mark Blitz undertakes to explain the insights Strauss discovered, without all the trouble of sorting through the history of the discipline. A well-known professor of political philosophy at Claremont McKenna College, Blitz seems to hope that the acid rain of the 20th century has washed away all the dross of scientism and historicism, making possible a fresh approach—even for admirers of Martin Heidegger such as himself. His method is to take the concepts he considers central to our political life and subject them, not exactly to analysis, but to a discussion that can represent their complexity and multiplicity as constitutive of a larger whole. The concepts he gathers are nature, practical action, freedom and rights,

power and property, virtue, the common, and the good. He devotes more or less a chapter to each—and another concept, justice, emerges indirectly through his comparison of possible regimes.

For Blitz, the regime (what classical Greek philosophers would have called the *politeia*) is the whole way of life of a people or culture. As such, regime analysis is not solely concerned with identifying the person or people who rule in the polity (the *politeuma*). This allows Blitz to engage, with many nods toward Plato and Aristotle, in a running debate between his two principal contenders for the best regime: classical aristocracy and liberal democracy. Only the first of these would comfortably identify as a *politeuma* or ruling body. The latter is more generally a system of cultural values and political practices—Blitz describes it, following John Locke rather than Aristotle, as the regime that affords all citizens equal rights and incentivizes them to advance their station by

## CARPATHIANS, CATACOMBS, & ANTIFASCISM



Discover great books at [niupress.niu.edu](http://niupress.niu.edu)

# NIU PRESS

AN IMPRINT OF CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS

acquiring both wealth and knowledge. Other kinds of regime get short shrift: tyranny is mentioned occasionally, socialism and fascism barely at all.

**I**N HIS QUEST TO COMPARE THE TWO REGIMES he considers viable, Blitz embarks on a chapter-by-chapter study of his chosen political concepts. He introduces each one with a paragraph collecting numerous and various uses of the relevant term or terms. For example, in chapter 3, here is how he starts to answer the question, “what is power?”:

We begin with our current uses. He has too much power. He has tyrannical power. He has a powerful hold on her. The country has great military and economic power. He is a powerful pianist. He plays the piano powerfully. He is awfully powerful. He has great intellectual power. His powers are failing. The real power is his wife. He is the power behind the throne. Who has the real power here? I'd like to help, but it's not in my power. Executive, legislative, and judicial power. Air power and sea power. He's lost the power to hear. This will be a powerful storm. He has a powerful right hand, left hook, serve. Human powers...

...and so on for another ten sentences or sentence fragments. As is evident, some of the usages Blitz adduces are clearly related to politics, others much less obviously so. (The Polish pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski was chosen to represent his restored nation in signing the Treaty of Versailles, but that didn't exactly give him or Poland much political power.)

In the discourse that follows each such paragraph, the author develops an argument that untangles the various strands of meaning. Sometimes he uses the apolitical to elucidate the political, and sometimes he sorts out ambiguities that exist both in and outside of politics. For example, with “power,” Blitz distinguishes ability and strength, noting that power can be used “for good or ill,” then concluding, “Proper power is measured concentration on proper tasks or movements that allows one and others to follow their natural inclinations and, consequently, sometimes to improve their immediate inclinations.” This leads Blitz to a defense of education rather than an analysis of destruction and then, after a discussion of Thomas Hobbes, Locke, democracy, and Friedrich Nietzsche, to a discussion of virtue. Next comes property, “a visible place where we humanize ordinary

material,” the “leading meaning” of which is “ownership, what is one's own, what belongs to one, what is mine, what cannot rightfully be separated or detached from me.” Then, after distinguishing Aristotelian use from Lockean accumulation, Blitz ties property to the body, itself entangled with the soul. In conclusion, things are said to have properties as well as powers, tying together the chapter's themes.

**H**OW IS THIS KIND OF WRITING SUPPOSED TO clarify things? Perhaps the accumulation of various abstractions is meant to illuminate core ideas gradually, in the mode of Heideggerian phenomenology? I am not enough of a Heidegger scholar to say, though I note that at the outset of a 1933-34 lecture course, “Nature, History, State,” the philosopher made a distinction between concept and essence that could have helped Blitz's book. Blitz meditates on many concepts which are important for politics. But what makes *these* concepts necessary rather than others, such as partisanship and ambition, or war and law? These harsher realities seem at least as close as the ones Blitz discusses to the essence of political life—not least according to the thought of Heidegger's contemporary Carl Schmitt, who goes unmentioned in Blitz's book. Doesn't Heideggerian musing tend to look away from real-life politics rather than subject it to critical analysis, leaving readers as clueless as the great philosopher himself when facing actual political choice?

Not according to Blitz, who seems prepared to follow Heidegger into idealized theory rather than getting down to brass tacks. Heidegger argued that all individual ideas and events were parts of an organized whole, to be understood in light of that whole. For Blitz, the classical *politeia* becomes the whole according to which all politics is understood. He argues that the classical regime is oriented toward virtue, i.e., toward nobility in action. Courage, magnanimity, moderation, and other ethical virtues are goods that approach us or beckon to us, writes Blitz in Heideggerian cadence, and this is so even in classical democracy, though virtue there is less refined. He acknowledges in passing that the classical city accepted slavery and oppressed women, but he apparently means to assess not its institutional arrangements so much as how it directed and formed the souls of its citizens. At the summit of the classical regime's aspiration is the philosophic life—for all the indeterminacy of the author's conceptual meditations, he is entirely clear on this point. A close second is

the life of the noble statesman, who is able to exercise more virtues but subject to accident and chance. The classics set the mark: "The understanding of goodness, justice, and virtue that forms the best classical lives and regimes is the standard by which the other regimes should be measured."

**T**HE ONLY MODERN REGIME ABLE TO rise to this challenge is liberal democracy. Blitz's account of it begins inauspiciously: Following Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he asserts that pleasure in a liberal democracy is simply defined as the removal of unease. So the regime affords citizens equal rights because it declines to adjudge the nobility or baseness of the various pleasures, or at any rate of those who pursue them. All pleasures are created equal, and citizens are free to barter for whatever kind of satisfaction they desire. Because of this, liberal democracy is open to a new form of science which promotes technology, market society, and material plenty—all in service of an emaciated, autonomous individual who seeks comfort, if not gratification.

But then it becomes clear that liberal society is not devoid of nobility. There are new virtues associated with liberal democracy—responsibility, first and foremost, then industriousness, civility, tolerance, and philanthropy—and these are genuine virtues which measure up pretty well against the classical standard. In political responsibility and entrepreneurial activity, liberal democracy affords an opportunity for genuine excellence despite its tendency to flatten or forget what is outstanding. This the regime accomplishes without the vices of traditional aristocracy, for "communities that are or claim to be aristocratic (or religiously aristocratic) will likely be fraudulent and need not be risked." For good measure, Blitz assures us that a "stable background" for excellence in "family, friendship, everyday trust, the relations between men and women" can persist in democracy, and besides, the classical *polis* and classical philosophy were often enough at odds, as the fate of Socrates makes plain. Liberal democracy appears now to be the thinking man's destiny.

Are there further alternatives or, for that matter, other political possibilities that win the loyalty of the people (if not philosophers)? Blitz sometimes alludes to the religious life, but except for a brief discussion of reverence and holiness in the context of rights—quickly dismissed as "priestly obfuscation"—religion is not allowed to speak for itself in a serious voice such as that of Moses Maimonides or Thomas Aquinas. What of

radical democracy, socialism, Communism, fascism, or any other sort of totalitarianism, none of which can be easily relegated to an unfortunate past? For all Blitz's admiration of Plato, nothing in his book corresponds to Book VIII of the *Republic*, in which Plato's Socrates evaluates each possible regime by analyzing the character of the citizens it produces. Blitz isn't bothered to do the same for modern regimes, unless one counts his summary historical list in the last chapter of alternative models for human excellence besides the philosopher and the statesman: the medieval saint, the Machiavellian prince, the Rousseauian Romantic, the Kantian moralist, the Hegelian bureaucrat, and the Nietzschean superman. Perhaps it does not matter very much what sort of person the majority of citizens in a liberal democracy will become. Perhaps, in the marriage of classical virtue and Heideggerian authenticity, we are supposed to recover a sort of serene indifference to our troubled times.

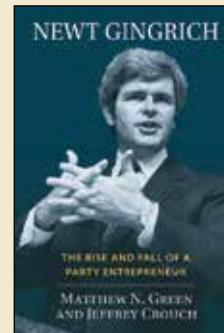
**T**OWARD THE END OF THE BOOK, BLITZ considers whether the whole accounting of what is politically good must alter "as technology lengthens life spans or the character of the family changes," and as even the mind itself might be enhanced. No, he concludes, for "the meaning of truth will not change," nor will the soul's spirited and erotic parts disappear—or at any rate, we cannot imagine what sort of beings we would become should this happen. "We can continue to address and discover what is novel by developing aspects of things that we have left in the shadows. But it is best if this would be done based on permanent standards of excellence." When he published "What Is Political Philosophy?" in book form, Strauss added a third section, "The Modern Solutions," unfolding a history of political thought that proceeded from Machiavelli's ambitious effort to conquer chance to Nietzsche's catastrophic "renunciation of the very notion of eternity." Strauss was suggesting, I think, the need to recover a classical understanding of nature alongside classical philosophy. It seems an open question whether Blitz has advanced that recovery, or, much like Heidegger, simply acquiesced to the current of fate and the political fashion of the day. That fate and fashion in recent decades have been more edifying and humane than in Heidegger's time does not mean we can do without an anchor or a compass in the coming storms.

*James R. Stoner, Jr., is professor of political science at Louisiana State University.*

## Congressional Leaders

A series from the University Press of Kansas

### FORTHCOMING

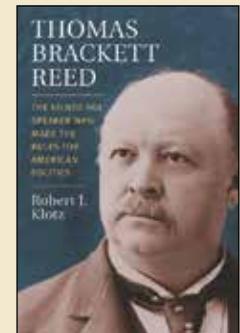


#### Newt Gingrich

##### The Rise and Fall of a Party Entrepreneur

Matthew N. Green and Jeffrey Crouch  
Coming July 2022

296 pages, 12 photos, 4 tables, Cloth \$29.95



#### Thomas Brackett Reed

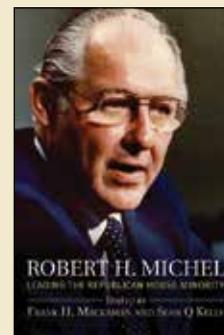
##### The Gilded Age Speaker Who Made the Rules for American Politics

Robert Klotz

Coming July 2022

304 pages, Cloth \$29.95

### NOW AVAILABLE

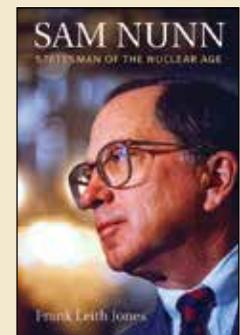


#### Robert H. Michel

##### Leading the Republican House Minority

Edited by Frank H. Mackaman and Sean Q. Kelly

432 pages, 20 photos, 16 illustrations, Cloth \$29.95



#### Sam Nunn

##### Statesman of the Nuclear Age

Frank Leith Jones

448 pages, Cloth \$29.95, Paper \$25.95

Published in association with the Dirksen Congressional Center

## University Press of Kansas

Phone 785-864-4155

[www.kansaspress.ku.edu](http://www.kansaspress.ku.edu)

Ebook editions available from your favorite ebook retailer.

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 the proof that conservatism is a  
living and civilising force in American  
intellectual life, and a powerful  
challenge to the dominance  
of the academic left.”*

—Roger Scruton

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

To begin receiving America's premier  
conservative book review, visit  
[www.claremont.org/crb](http://www.claremont.org/crb)  
or call (909) 981-2200.

CLAREMONT  
REVIEW OF BOOKS

1317 W. FOOTHILL  
BLVD, SUITE 120,  
UPLAND, CA  
91786

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