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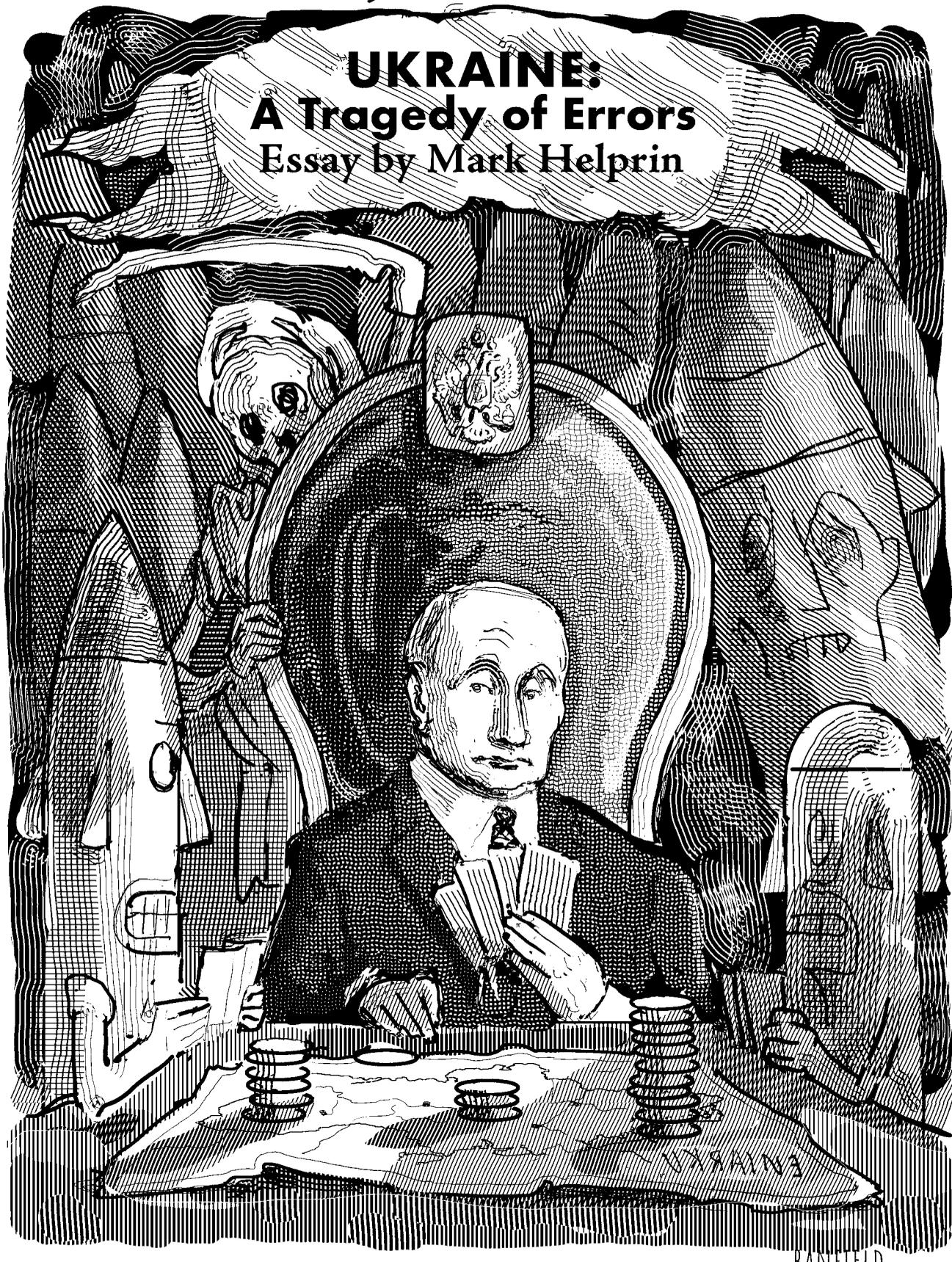
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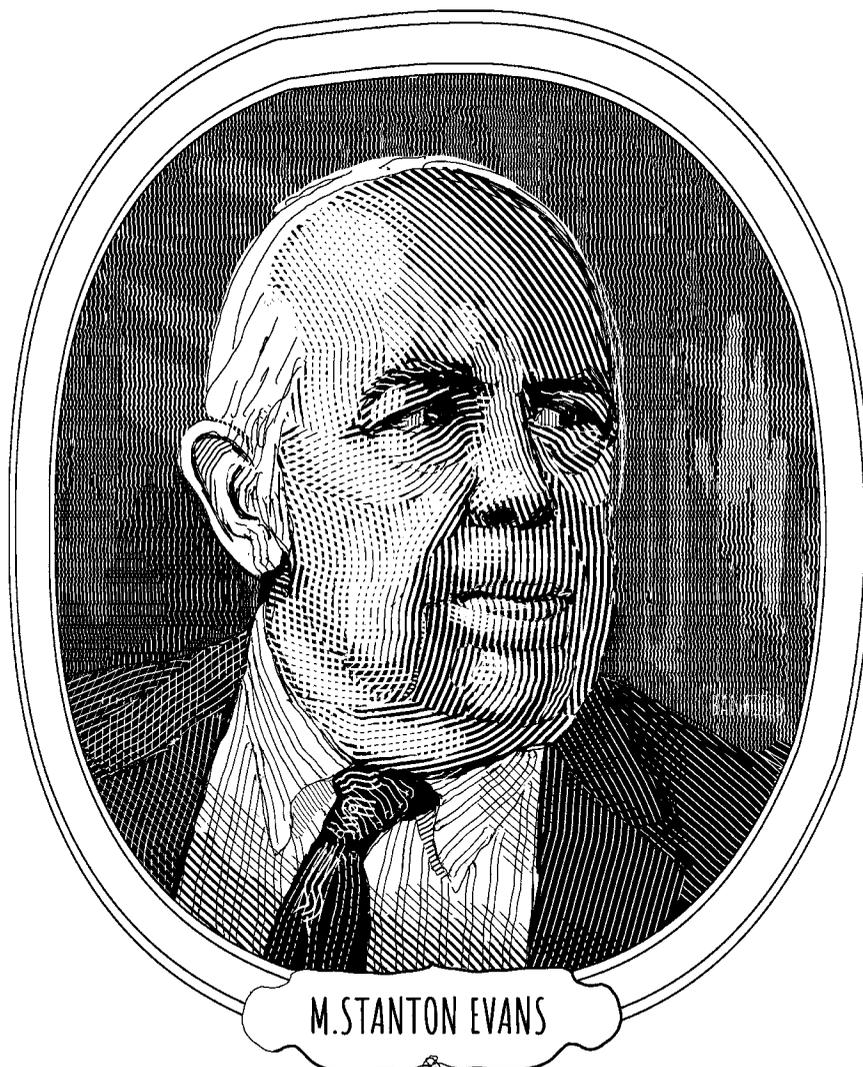


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Book Review by Daniel Oliver

EVERYMAN'S BILL BUCKLEY

M. Stanton Evans: Conservative Wit, Apostle of Freedom, by Steven F. Hayward.
Encounter Books, 400 pages, \$33.99



ACCORDING TO STEVEN HAYWARD, M. Stanton Evans was the perfect conservative. He was a journalist of the first rank; a political activist; a thinker and theorist (one of the rare writers who is “both literate and numerate, conversant with physics as well as with metaphysics”); and ahead of his time in perceiving the issues we’re struggling with today. He foresaw the extra-constitutional nature of the administrative state, the class interests of the elites and their hostility to traditional culture, and the oppressive conformity of university campuses. His first book, *Revolt on the Campus* (1961), for example, describes two phenomena that we today call “political correctness” and “cancel culture.” It’s easy now to say “of course.” But Evans was onto these issues decades ago.

A Claremont Institute senior fellow and U.C. Berkeley senior resident scholar, Hay-

ward has produced a splendid biography of Evans that doubles as a history of the conservative movement from its earliest days. It’s probably unsettled whether the movement’s Big Bang occurred in 1955 when William F. Buckley, Jr., founded *National Review* magazine, or in 1951 when he published *God and Man at Yale*. Regardless, the Left had fair warning. And Evans was there almost from the beginning, graduating from Yale in 1955.

LIKE BUCKLEY, EVANS HAD A FATHER TO help form his early opinions. Medford Evans wrote an article in 1957 explaining “Why I Am an Anti-Intellectual,” in which he called modern intellectuals “treacherous and stupid.” *Plus ça change!* Evans almost certainly heard that from his father for years. And when he got to Yale, Evans concluded as Buckley had that the people in Yale’s religion department

didn’t appear to believe in God. Today, Harvard University’s chaplain is an atheist. Neither Evans nor Buckley would have been surprised.

Buckley was, if not suave, at least polished and proper; Evans was much simpler, much more like America, and much more like most conservatives than the posh members of Republican country clubs. As one friend described it, Evans would sit in his apartment “in a pair of old khakis and an undershirt, chomping on a loaf of Wonder Bread, washed down by a bottle of Big Grape while watching Roller Derby on TV.” In my obituary of Evans, which Hayward quotes, I called him “everyman’s Bill Buckley.” Just so.

In 1960, the polished and proper Bill Buckley and the everyman’s Bill Buckley gathered at the Buckley family estate in Sharon, Connecticut, with about 90 other young conservatives to form Young Americans for Freedom

(YAF). One of the most important pieces Evans ever wrote was the now-legendary Sharon Statement, the founding principles of YAF. It could have been written last week. It begins, “In this time of moral and political crisis....”

EVANS WAS RIGHT ON TOO MANY ISSUES to be mentioned in a review, and some took place long ago. One example: John F. Kennedy’s “missile gap.” Running against Dwight Eisenhower’s successor-not-to-be Vice President Richard Nixon, Kennedy accused Eisenhower of having allowed a “missile gap” to develop between the U.S. and the USSR. It was all fiction, typical of the Kennedys. But Evans was skeptical of the Kennedy claim—and of Kennedy—right from the beginning. In a review of Victor Lasky’s book, *JFK: The Man and the Myth* (1963), Evans wrote,

When we peel away the surface trapping of family glamor and exalted utterance to discover what core of philosophy lies beneath, we find only a great emptiness. The tinsel wrapping is pure Madison Avenue, but what it conceals is just as implausible—a yawning void of ambition, unadorned by visible convictions on any major political issue.

Evans knew Camelot was a fantasy.

President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs were another target of Evans, noting early on that they were turning into a sinecure for “caring” professionals of the welfare state. JFK’s brother-in-law Sargent Shriver, head of Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity, complained about an Evans column but proved his point: “I am confident that the new importance the War on Poverty is giving to the helping professions will have a beneficial effect both locally and nationally on the often inadequate salaries in those fields.” Evans understood the war between the Right and Left is really “a war between the permanent government and the elected government.”

Then came Ronald Reagan. It’s a long story of course, beginning many years before Reagan was first elected governor of California in 1966 and before the 1976 Republican National Convention that nominated Gerald Ford. But Evans was clear-eyed on the limits of personality. He wrote in *The Future of Conservatism* (1968), “It is tempting to suggest that, if Ronald Reagan did not exist, conservative Republicans would have to invent him. Tempting, but mistaken.” The point: ideas were more important than personalities.

Watergate was a disaster. Evans famously said he was for Nixon *after* Watergate. But he also wrote about the media’s double standard: how the Kennedy and Johnson administra-

tions had bugged Republican campaigns using government agencies. “It is noteworthy,” he added, “that the people who most loudly condemn this clandestine effort to gather data on the Democrats are the self-same people who think it was fine for Daniel Ellsberg to abscond with data from the Pentagon and for the *New York Times* to publish it.”

BY 1974 REAGAN WAS AN EVER-GROWING presence in the Republican Party and the conservative movement. His speech at the 1974 Conservative Political Action Conference was well received, but was written up in *National Review* by a reporter who described the speech as “a rousing, lively speech, but not deep.... The crowd loved it. But there were skeptics, especially by the next morning, perhaps when they tried to remember what it was he had really said.” Evans wrote to Reagan telling him to ignore the criticism. That apparently made Reagan happy, but not his wife. Nancy Reagan called Bill Rusher, the publisher of *National Review*, to complain. But the reporter was not criticized by anyone at *National Review*, and in the following years Reagan gave more ideological and specific speeches.

But the 1974 speech didn’t really matter. Reagan was on the move. It would be inaccurate to say nothing could have stopped him, because in fact something almost did in 1976. Chasing the Republican nomination for president, he proposed a cut in the budget of about 25% and a cut in taxes of about the same amount. Collective Washington almost had a heart attack. Then, despite early polls showing Reagan surging ahead of President Ford, he lost the New Hampshire primary and the next five primaries as well. It looked like the end of the road.

But Evans didn’t give up. He flew to North Carolina to inject some badly needed enthusiasm—and cash (from the American Conservative Union)—into the campaign. Reagan won an upset victory. Veteran journalist Lou Cannon wrote that North Carolina was the turning point in Reagan’s political career. Jameson Campaigne, Jr., gave Evans the credit: “Without Stan Evans, it is quite likely there would have been no Reagan in 1980.”

The Reagan Administration was not without problems and disappointments for conservatives, and Evans was perfectly willing to criticize. He supposed, correctly, that there were hostile (i.e., non-conservative) forces afoot in the White House. Hayward tells the stories.

Hayward also writes about Evans’s journalism and his founding of the National Journalism Center (NJC), a school for young, aspiring conservative journalists. Evans was a brilliant journalist and he encouraged students to avoid “horse race journalism,” the kind that focuses on whether a bill will get enacted or

a candidate will win rather than on what the bill or the candidate would do. And he would tell his students, “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.” The NJC was a terrific success. Many well-known journalists, such as John Fund, Ann Coulter, Mark Tapscott, Bill McGurn, and Malcolm Gladwell, are graduates. But money was always tight. A friend suggested to Evans that he ask each graduate to contribute \$100 to the school each year—where the instruction had been free—after he had secured a paying job. Evans never did. By 2002 more than 1,600 students had been lucky enough to attend the NJC. The school could have been self-supporting.

EVANS WROTE TEN BOOKS, BUT HIS most serious and philosophical was *The Theme is Freedom* (1994) which, as Evans says in the acknowledgments, “was a long time coming.” That kind of writing is...hard. Hayward says, “William F. Buckley Jr. gave up on writing a large synoptic statement of conservative political philosophy, finding the effort so discouraging that he took up writing novels instead.” You can see why.

As a final treat for readers, Hayward compiles Evans’s greatest quips, which include “Gridlock is the next best thing to having a constitution” and “The problem with pragmatism is that it doesn’t work.” That alone is worth the price of admission. But there’s one more Stan Evans witticism that is not on Hayward’s list.

Shortly before he died, Evans called me and asked if I would take over as chairman of the Education and Research Institute, which he had started decades earlier. You do not say no to an old friend near death from pancreatic cancer. So I said yes. He thanked me and then deadpanned, conspiratorially: “Dan, I’m not dying, but I don’t want anyone to know it.” A month or so later, he was dead. Perhaps he wanted it to be his last public witticism. Now it is.

You can read biographies of any number of prominent people who couldn’t hold a candle to the effect Stan Evans had on the politics of this country and, therefore, on the world. He was a remarkable man, as those of us who knew him for decades realized and as Steven Hayward has shown conclusively in this biography. The book is terrific—partly, of course, because Stan Evans is a terrific subject; but also because Hayward has done a magnificent job organizing the material and telling the story. Will some of the people mentioned, and their relatives and survivors, be unhappy with the result? I certainly hope so.

Daniel Oliver is chairman of the Board of the Education and Research Institute and a director of the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy in San Francisco.

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