

VOLUME XXII, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2022

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

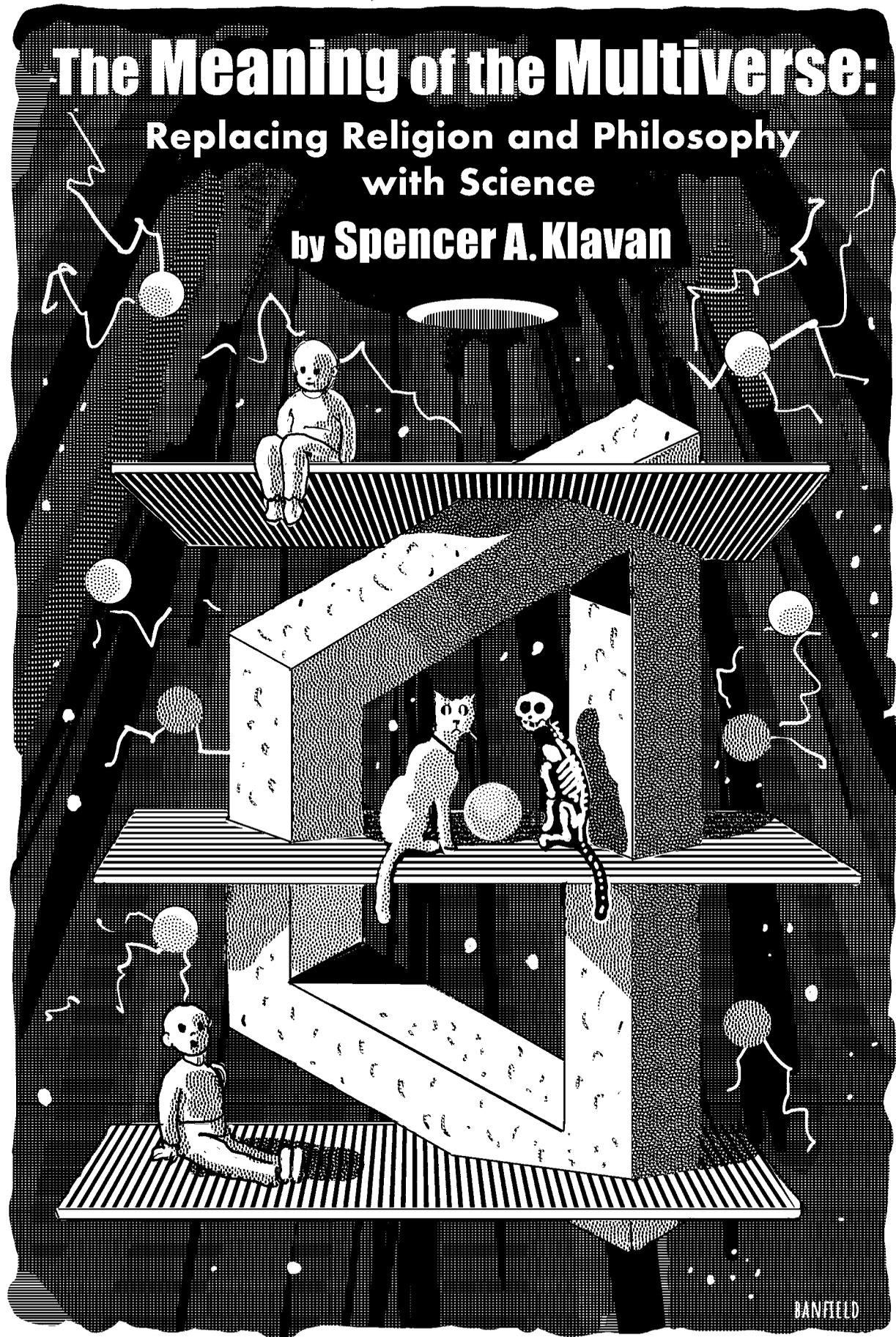
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PRICE: \$6.95

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Book Review by Carnes Lord

## AMERICA FIRST

*America's Rise and Fall among Nations: Lessons in Statecraft from John Quincy Adams*, by Angelo M. Codevilla.  
Encounter Books, 288 pages, \$30



**A**MERICA'S RISE AND FALL AMONG NATIONS: *Lessons in Statecraft from John Quincy Adams* is an extraordinary book by an extraordinary man. Angelo Codevilla, a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute, died in an automobile accident last year near his northern California vineyard. He was a first-generation immigrant, born in Italy, who shared with so many from a similar background a fierce love for his adopted homeland. A political scientist with far-ranging interests in comparative politics, international relations and strategic studies, and political philosophy, Codevilla also served in the United States government as a diplomat, naval officer, and congressional staffer.

An iconoclastic spirit runs through all his books—whether on arms control, war, nuclear strategy, or the intellectual history of American foreign policy. In the late 1970s and early '80s, as a senior staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, he became a formidable critic of the American intelligence establishment. The book that resulted from that experience, *Inform-*

*ing Statecraft: Intelligence for a New Century* (1992), remains the most trenchant study of the complex, poorly understood world of U.S. intelligence. His *The Ruling Class: How They Corrupted America and What We Can Do About It* (2010) was the most important book by an American conservative to foreshadow Donald Trump's emergence on the political scene and the larger moment in which we now live.

**C**ODEVILLA'S POSTHUMOUS BOOK REPRISES many of the themes of his earlier works. Readers unfamiliar with his distinctive rhetorical style might be put off by his self-assured assertiveness, reinforced in the present volume by the almost complete absence of footnotes. This man of wide and deep learning—he taught at Georgetown University, was a senior research fellow for the Hoover Institution, and was professor emeritus of International Relations at Boston University—neither advertises that learning nor boasts of the academic credentials meted out by America's intellectual elite. But *America's*

*Rise and Fall Among Nations* is not an academic work; rather, it's a thundering jeremiad reminiscent of the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel.

Codevilla approaches the history of the United States from some unusual angles. America's "rise" coincides with its first century; its "fall" with the Progressive movement's emergence at the end of the 19th century and its triumph in our own day. It might seem odd that the nation's "fall" includes its imperial excursion after the Spanish-American War, its contribution to the Allied victory in two world wars (and the great power status that flowed from it), its unparalleled economic prosperity in the postwar era, and, not least, its successful orchestration of the peaceful end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet the logic of Codevilla's argument is simple: In its first century, the guiding star of our statecraft was "America First." In its second, under the impact of Progressivism and the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, America's ruling class sought to lead the world and spread the benefits of



democracy to all nations through the creation of diplomatic mechanisms (the League of Nations, the United Nations) that would achieve “perpetual peace” on earth. Thus has America fundamentally lost its way. Instead of a hard-headed concern with the nation’s interests, including a non-interventionist posture toward the world, America’s elites were captured by woolly-headed idealism in various forms and an arrogant conviction of their own inherent virtue and right to lay down the law to others. The result: since the end of World War II, though the United States has fought numerous wars, its stake in these conflicts has rarely been clear, the meaning of victory has been left uncertain, and the outcomes almost uniformly unfavorable to Americans.

**C**ODEVILLA RESURRECTS THE VIRTUALLY forgotten John Quincy Adams as a model of democratic statesmanship. Adams was the son of our second president, president himself from 1825 to 1829, and a practicing diplomat—serving as ambassador in important European capitals and as secretary of state (1817-25). The choice of Adams is a shrewd one: it allows Codevilla to highlight the contrast between the founding generation’s foreign policy and the imperialist thread of American history, first seen in the Mexican War of the 1840s and reemerging in the 1890s with the acquisition of Hawaii and of Spain’s empire in the Caribbean and Far East. Many academic historians will object to Codevilla’s downplaying of American expansion in the early years of the republic, notably with the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and the settling of the West. He concedes that Adams welcomed President Thomas Jefferson’s diplomatic coup, though Adams was appalled at its constitutional irregularity. But Codevilla believes that the pursuit of “manifest destiny” in the West was not something the federal government could have halted even had it wanted to, given the nation’s commitment to individual liberty.

American foreign policy in this period, Codevilla shows, was conducted in a cautious manner that sought to avoid entanglement in foreign quarrels and that respected the sovereignty of nations as formalized in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. As secretary of state, for example, Adams stood firmly

against intervention in the struggle for Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire, despite many influential Americans’ support for such intervention. He also skillfully navigated the global instability caused by the revolt of Spain’s American colonies. The Monroe Doctrine (1823), of which he was the principal author, is frequently misunderstood as the initial step in a long tradition of America’s meddling in its neighbors’ affairs. Its actual purpose was to discourage meddling by European powers in newly independent South America.

**O**VER THE PAST SIX DECADES THE United States has effectively abandoned that doctrine. With its toleration of a Soviet military presence in Cuba after the (less than satisfactory) resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, followed by the transfer of the Panama Canal Zone to Panamanian sovereignty in 1979, the United States signaled that its strategic interest in Latin America was theoretical at best. Politicians of both parties seem to view with equanimity China’s acquisition of port facilities at either end of the Panama Canal as well as growing Russian and Chinese political and military support for Venezuela and other left-wing regimes on the continent. At the same time, the U.S. countenances an ongoing crisis on its southern border which poses a clear and present danger to its security, if not to its very identity. What are we thinking?

Codevilla criticizes and mocks the pratfalls of our diplomatic and military establishments, including their inability to win wars and establish lasting peace. But there is one aspect of his exposure of our ruling class’s sins that should give us pause. Codevilla accuses the American elite of being not only intellectually bankrupt but also morally corrupt. He suggests that senior diplomats and military officers care more for the corporate rewards awaiting them in retirement than for conscientious, selfless service to their country. No evidence is offered for these assertions, and though there is some truth to them, his blanket condemnation is too harsh. This is an aspect of his prophetic performance but it undermines the book’s effectiveness. In particular, Codevilla allows for no distinctions between the elites of today and those of 40, 50, or 60 years ago.

**T**HOUGH IT IS EASY TO ACCEPT MUCH OF his indictment of our present leadership, it’s true, too, that standards have slipped a long way since the 1980s, let alone the 1950s. In the ’50s, for example, federal bureaucrats almost never leaked to the press, and the press itself was much more respectful of government’s need to protect vital secrets. As late as the 1980s, senior politicians and bureaucrats did not publicly criticize sitting administrations, and military or intelligence officials didn’t publicly endorse presidential candidates. Money is a component of current misbehavior, especially from the pockets of America’s globalizing business elites, but more fundamental is the disturbing erosion of high standards of honorable professional and personal conduct among our leaders.

A further and related weakness in Codevilla’s argument is his relatively undifferentiated indictment of progressivism across its history. Early 20th-century Progressives, particularly Woodrow Wilson, did indeed permanently damage the nation. The enormously influential John Dewey brought a wrecking ball to American education. Historians like Richard Hofstadter and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., rewrote the American story to suit their politics. In the 1930s and into the war years, progressives compromised the nation’s will to resist Soviet Communism. At the same time, however, a more traditional liberalism was alive, if not altogether well, which modulated and suppressed progressivism’s hard edges. What happened in the intervening years, alas, was the evisceration of that centrist liberalism, enabling progressives to reveal themselves as Bernie Sanders socialists (or worse) while bringing along with them much of the younger generation. The result—a cultural catastrophe whose end is nowhere in sight.

These quibbles aside, *America’s Rise and Fall Among Nations* is a powerful indictment of our self-serving elites. In his uncompromising but often entertaining style, Angelo Codevilla has left us one final critique of our ruling class’s corruption.

*Carnes Lord is Professor of Strategic Leadership at the United States Naval War College, and is the author, most recently, of The Modern Prince: What Machiavelli Can Teach Us in the Age of Trump (Encounter Books).*

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