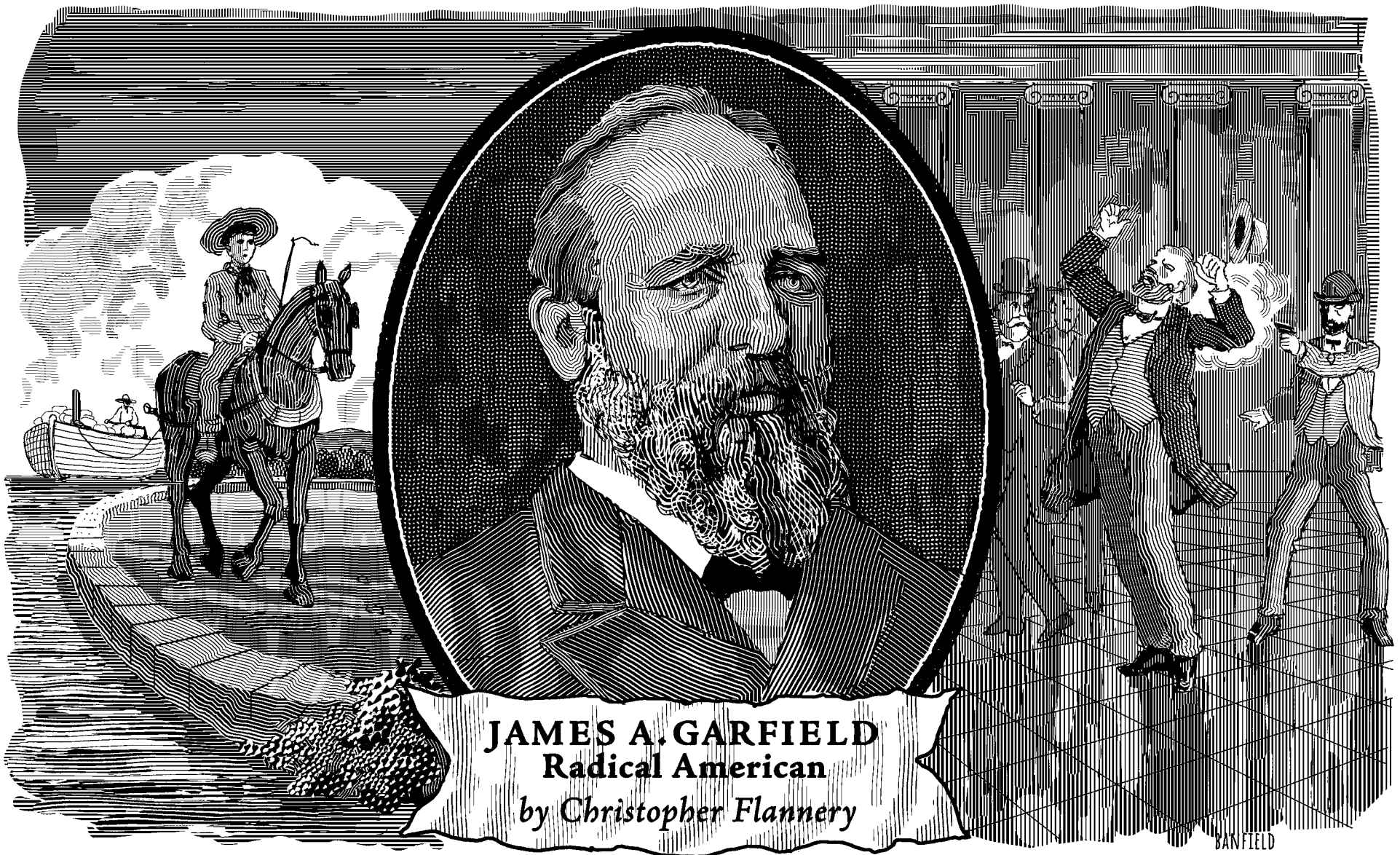


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CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship



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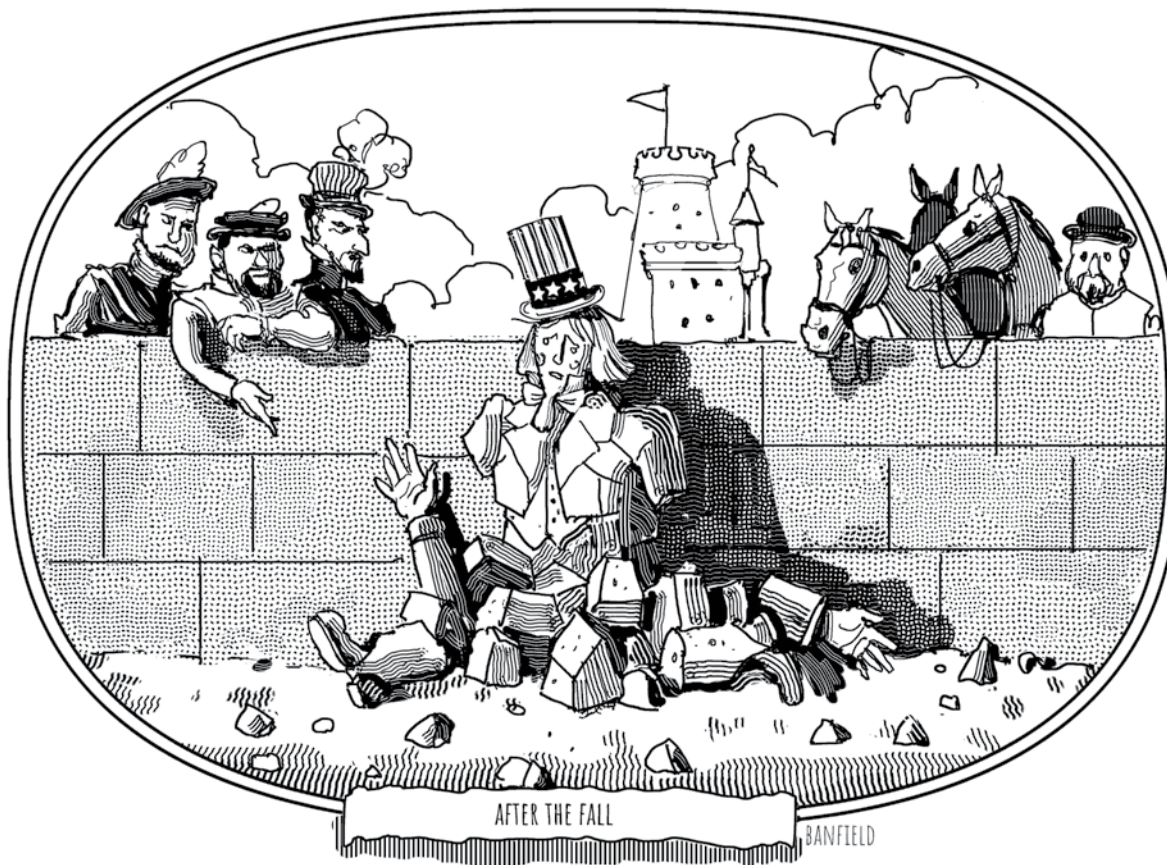
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MODERNITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future, by Patrick J. Deneen.
Sentinel, 288 pages, \$30



PATRICK DENEEN FINDS HIMSELF BETWEEN a rock and a hard place. His new book, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, is too scandalously right-wing for the typical “normiecon,” but not nearly reactionary enough for the contemporary Right’s edgier voices. It is customary, most of the time, for intellectuals or political figures who find themselves attacked simultaneously from left and right to declare that this is proof they’re on to something. Deneen to his credit avoids this lazy trope, preferring instead simply to make his case. Which is, in sum, that liberalism has failed (the subject, and almost the title, of his prior volume), hence “regime change” is necessary.

Readers may recall the last (and perhaps first?) time that phrase was in vogue: the early days of the 9/11 wars, when the Bush (43) Administration argued that the security of America and of the entire world depended not merely on defeating hostile countries militarily but on changing their governments into ones more inherently peaceable and favorable to our interests. In those days, “regime change”

meant the external, forcible transformation from “authoritarianism” or “dictatorship” (sophisticated people stopped saying “tyranny” a long time ago, although the word popped up in Bush’s Second Inaugural) into democracy.

We know how that worked out. Regimes were changed all right, but not into democracies. And some of them—e.g., the one in Afghanistan—20 years later changed back to the same regime American firepower had overthrown in 2001.

DENEEN, A PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL science at the University of Notre Dame, is happy to borrow the phrase, perhaps hoping or expecting to jar readers’ memories and provoke curiosity, but he takes the idea in two entirely different directions: he wants to change *our* regime, not some foreigners’, and he wants to change it *away* from, not into, democracy—at least as currently defined. One may reasonably ask just how democratic our present regime actually is and whether, therefore, restoration of genuine democracy would not require as much, if not

more, change than what Deneen recommends. But he has something else in mind.

In his book’s introduction and first part, Deneen does a fine job of diagnosing the pathologies rampant in contemporary America, and thus why change is necessary. We’re saddled with a predatory, hectoring elite that becomes more self-righteous in direct proportion as it becomes more selfish. Machiavelli attributes the disastrous effects of partisanship in Florence, in contrast to its salutary outcomes in Rome, to the Florentine people’s insistence that they “be alone in the government without the participation of the nobles.” Reverse the parties and you have something like our present situation: our elites wish to have the final say about everything, without input from their supposed inferiors. To add insult to injury, they have the audacity to call this expert rule by fiat “democracy.”

Deneen has our elites’ number, yet even in *Regime Change’s* early pages I found myself disagreeing a bit. He maps the ancient conflict between the few and the many onto our present predicament in a way I find a little too



one-to-one. What we face today is less the age-old struggle between rich and poor than a coalition (conspiracy?) of high and low against the middle. It resembles in a way the medieval dynamic of kings allying with peoples to defend against, or stick it to, the nobility—with kings in this analogy corresponding to the ruling class and “nobility” (bear with me) to non-coastal, non-elite whites. The American Founders, who come in for much direct and implied criticism in *Regime Change*, were well aware of the potential for a high-low coalition, though their remedy—property requirements to exclude the very poor from voting—is not something anyone at any point on today’s political spectrum is willing to contemplate.

PERHAPS IT’S MORE PRECISE TO SAY that in contemporary America there is not one “popular” or downscale class but two: one that benefits from, and hence is aligned with, the present ruling class and one that is hurt by it and thus opposed. These two humors of *populares* cannot unite because their interests are diametrically opposed: the former are not only direct clients of the ruling class but often direct beneficiaries of elite depredations against what the late Angelo Codevilla called the “country class.”

Would that we had reverted, or could revert, to the old-fashioned rich-poor struggle that Deneen says has lately reemerged after being long suppressed by liberalism; our politics might be healthier. We might even be able to practice politics in the first place. Instead, what we have is a regime that rules a disaffected plurality (if not a majority) without consent and gets virtually all of what it wants regardless of election outcomes. The disaffected, meanwhile, long for a tribune and think they’ve found him in Donald Trump, but his effectiveness is hampered by his complete lockout from power and difficulty in using power even when in office (to say nothing of other reasons).

Our predatory elite would be bad enough. But it’s made exponentially worse in being the cause of so many other evils: crumbling infrastructure, dirty and dangerous cities (that’s to leave aside the ones that are all but abandoned), falling life expectancies, sky-high “deaths of despair” from substance abuse and suicide, crashing birth rates, soaring crime, two-track “justice,” the *de facto* criminalization of self-defense, and so much else that even the attempt to list it all would exhaust every page in this issue. “No sensible reader of the news,” Deneen begins his book, “could look at America and think it is flourishing.” I suppose one can always find someone to say anything, but the qualifier is decisive here and Deneen is exactly right. If you think America

2023 is in good shape, that is *ipso facto* proof that you lack sense.

It’s easier to see the symptoms than to know their cause. Harder still is to know how to treat them. I have my disagreements with Deneen on both scores, but I admire the fact that, unlike so many others who venture into this space, he has tried to provide answers.

To the question, “how did it come to this?” Deneen provided his answer in 2018’s *Why Liberalism Failed*, one of the rare recent “public affairs” books (arguably the first since Charles Murray’s *Coming Apart* in 2012) to break through the tidal wave of anodyne over-publication and find a mainstream audience—replete, no less, with a blurb from Barack Obama.

BUT BEFORE GOING ANY FURTHER, WE should clarify what Deneen means by “liberalism.” In this respect, as in many others, *Why Liberalism Failed* and *Regime Change* must be considered a pair, volumes one and two of the same book, for they each advance the same argument in different stages.

Rightists of various stripes—intellectual, philosophic, religious, traditional, libertarian—offer many answers to the question, “what went wrong, and when?” Working backward, some say wokism, others the welfare state, many “the ‘60s,” others the Progressive era, a committed few blame Abraham Lincoln, others “second wave” modernity, still others the Enlightenment, and others still modernity itself. Conservative Catholics and the Orthodox cite the Reformation; the more reactionary among them point to a crisis that emerged from or ended the High Middle Ages, while a certain type of classicist fingers Socrates’ “second sailing,” and another the pre-Socratics’ discovery and demystification of nature. Meanwhile, the most pious of all identify the Fall of Man (an explanation with which, it must be said, the others have something in common).

Deneen seems at various points to embrace all of these explanations, at least in part, but at his most explicit he fingers modernity, the true subject of both books (with John Locke as their true villain)—partly one suspects so as to deflect blame from the American Founders onto a more convenient scapegoat. But the two prove impossible to disaggregate and so America must be condemned, if only by implication, along with the man many assume to be America’s philosopher.

In all this, Deneen may be said to be a quasi-Straussian. In fact, I called him exactly that at a debate we did together at Harvard in April 2022. I was being deliberately cheeky—Deneen does not, to say the least, self-identify as a Straussian—yet his analysis of “liberal-

ism” can easily be made to fit within a certain understanding of Straussianism.

ANYONE THE LEAST FAMILIAR WITH Leo Strauss knows that the surface (at least) of his work holds that ancient philosophy is fundamentally sound while its modern successor, for all its success in addressing some specific if time-bound problems, is fundamentally flawed. Therefore, if America is modern—that is, wholly or mostly derivative of what Strauss called modern political philosophy and Deneen calls “liberalism”—then America too must reflect modern philosophy’s deficiencies.

Deneen definitely takes the latter view. This is not to disparage him as some kind of anti-patriot. Both of these books are suffused with a tone more in sorrow than anger. But Deneen inescapably argues that not only has the American Founding not worked out, it never could have because from the beginning it was based on inherently faulty premises. (Allan Bloom first popularized this argument in 1987’s landmark *The Closing of the American Mind*, but it had been prominent among Straussians and their fellow travelers—e.g., Irving Kristol—for some three decades prior.)

But there is a third possibility, one Strauss hinted at and that his student Harry V. Jaffa developed fully. Perhaps modernity was both necessary *and* tragic—necessary politically but tragic philosophically and spiritually. This is too long and exalted a matter to discuss adequately in a single book, much less a review, but a summary must be attempted, as it gets to the core of Deneen’s argument.

Because Strauss writes so elusively (in part to force readers to work through layers of argument to find conclusions on their own), it is easy to miss what is beneath the surface. On the surface, it is true, Strauss emphasizes the discontinuity between ancient and modern thought. Beneath the surface, he elaborates the discontinuity between ancient and medieval *practice* that made modern thought, or something like it, if not necessary, then at least an understandable or excusable attempt to bridge the divide.

This is clearest (to the extent that the word “clear” may justly be applied to Strauss’s writing) in Strauss’s interpretation of Machiavelli, where he shows that the Florentine justified (at the very least to himself and his successors) his “new modes and orders” on the ground that the Roman conquest of the ancient world, the incorporation of formerly free and independent cities into one empire, the consequent weakening of allegiance to the pagan gods, the emergence of Christianity, and above all, the sundering of the connection between civil and



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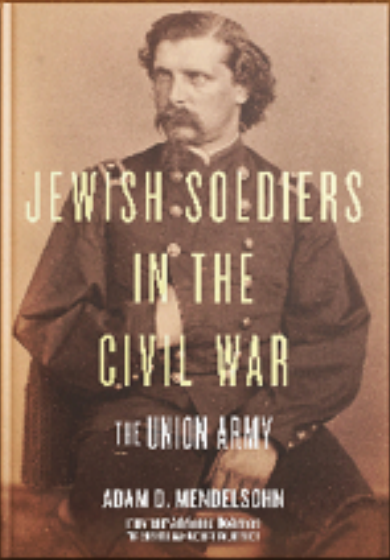
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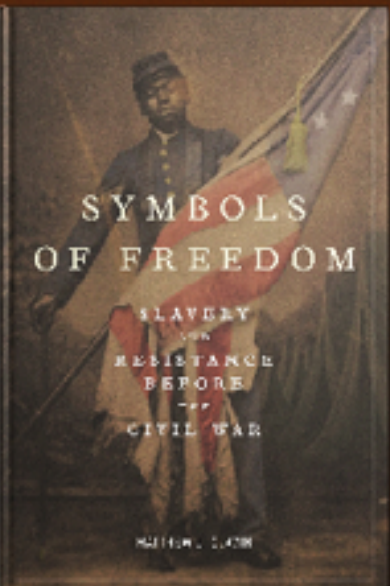


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religious law changed the world in fundamental ways. To these we may add the eclipse of republicanism, the transformation of politics into an almost entirely hereditary and monarchical endeavor, subsequent—and, more importantly, consequent—dynastic wars, and the division of Christianity into sects, which gave rise to religious wars. That’s before we even get to the “divided loyalties”—pope or emperor? *patria* or God? this world or the next?—that Christianity creates. All of this and more made ancient political practice and (for Machiavelli, if not for Strauss) the ancient philosophy that either led to or failed to prevent the transformation no longer tenable.

IN BASIC STRAUSSIAN LANGUAGE (WHICH I do not reject but which Strauss himself would be the first to warn is far from the whole story), the Machiavellian project is to “lower the goal” of human life (political as well as intellectual or philosophic) in order to make that goal more attainable: essentially, prosperity and security for the many; and for the few, immortal glory which can be earned only by providing prosperity and security to the many. In Machiavelli’s telling, the classical solution he replaced aimed too high and delivered its greatest good—a life of blissful contemplation—to too few, fewer even than the glory-hunters who benefit the many, and far fewer than the many themselves, whom the classics all but ignored. Even at its best, the classical scheme benefitted hardly anyone apart from the philosophers and a few acolytes.

In this view, shared by Machiavelli’s early modern followers—all of whom are, directly or indirectly, Deneen’s targets—classical philosophy had by the late Middle Ages stopped making good on even its austere promises to the alleged philosophic elect. Philosophy had retreated to the monasteries, where, on a tight theological leash, it was no longer free to inquire into all things *sanza alcuna rispetto*; that is to say, in no longer being able to philosophize, it was no longer philosophic. The many, neglected by philosophy for 2,000 years, abandoned by (or having chosen to abandon) their ancestral gods, now worshiped a God who explicitly promised them nothing in this world but demanded they take their beatings and accept whatever fate their new rulers accorded them—to which the many mostly acquiesced. Their lot never or rarely improved, and politics bumped along a path that alternated between dismal (dynastic wars and religious persecution) and farcical (mercenary “battles” before and after which more money was exchanged than ammunition during).

Strauss saw as clearly as Machiavelli the stagnation of late medieval philosophy and politics. Yet it’s impossible to say what he would have done—what he would have written and taught—had he been faced with Machiavelli’s circumstance. Perhaps only in hindsight was he able to see the dead end into which Machiavelli’s “new modes and orders” led, whereas had he lived in the early 16th century, he would have charged ahead no less boldly than Machiavelli. Or maybe he would have found a way out of decrepit medievalism without discarding the core tenets of ancient philosophy. Or perhaps he wouldn’t have, yet would have nonetheless judged it unwise to abandon, or even jeopardize, ancient metaphysics, and so written yet another esoteric treatise that looked a lot like its medieval forebears.

ALL WE CAN KNOW IS WHAT STRAUSS did with the time that was given to him. And that was to attempt to overturn what he saw as Machiavelli’s mistakes while preserving and refining what is best about modernity, and infusing it with as much support from ancient philosophy as possible. This may seem to place Strauss with Deneen as an anti-liberal—and that’s partly accurate, if the claim is limited to Strauss’s preference for ancient over modern philosophy. But Strauss also explicitly stated his support for a liberal political order given the available alternatives within modernity. He reserved his explicit criticisms for the worst or most radical turns of modern philosophy; he rarely had an unkind thing to say about America. Granted, Strauss’s character was too elevated to engage in rank ingratitude toward the country that gave him refuge, or to weaken the civic attachments of his army of young American students. Granted also that much of Strauss’s praise for America can be interpreted as guarded, qualified, faint, even “exoteric.” But the mere fact that it’s there is at the very least pedagogically meaningful. Strauss saw something in the United States and in the “first-wave” modernity from which it grew that was worth defending, at least publicly, and thus worth preserving.

Deneen is aware of this argument. But in a 2015 essay for *The American Conservative*, “Natural Rights Conservatism—The Case of Leo Strauss,” he attributes it not to Strauss but to students whom he asserts misunderstood their teacher’s teaching. This assertion ironically only establishes Deneen as all the more “Straussian,” as this is exactly what some of Strauss’s most devoted (if sectarian) followers have been saying for decades about those of us who argue that the “ancients good, moderns bad, USA low-but-solid” formula-



tion is not as clear-cut in Strauss as it is sometimes made out to be.

Though Strauss was undoubtedly an opponent of the philosophical and spiritual consequences of modernity, he did not see any easy or obvious way out of *political* modernity. Strauss understood clearly what overcoming modernity required. It's not clear that he thought it wise for man willingly to pay that price or believed that we have the power to accomplish the task even if so willing.

THIS POINTS TO THE OTHER MAIN DIFFERENCE between Strauss and Deneen. The latter rejects modernity primarily, not to say solely, from a religious point of view. Strauss's concerns are at least as much philosophic as religious. The two may agree that modern philosophy has subsumed religion, and agree that this is bad, but Deneen's solution or wish is for religion to reclaim its preeminence, whereas Strauss seeks to maintain philosophy's independence while imposing a cease-fire in modern philosophy's war on religion.

Which points to yet another, subsidiary but not therefore unimportant, difference. For Deneen, reason is indivisible. He never quite says, but throughout both books more than implies—and, more to the point, his argument demands—that reason inevitably acts as a solvent on religion. In this, Deneen is more Nietzschean than Straussian. Not that Deneen is any kind of nihilist. He begins from precisely the opposite premise—that religion, in particular Catholicism, is both true and good. But just as Nietzsche traces the decline of the West in a more or less straight line from Socrates, Deneen does not acknowledge any change in reason's orientation from the ancient-medieval to the modern world. Strauss, by contrast, elucidates a deliberate transformation of reason's purpose: from primarily theoretical to primarily practical, from understanding to helping or doing. This is Strauss's answer to Nietzsche, who argues that Socrates began the demystification of the world and therefore, eventually, the reduction of everything human to the subhuman, culminating in late modern consumerism and atomism. Deneen is (much) less bombastic than Nietzsche and never explicitly fingers Socrates, but the analysis of cause and effect is at root the same.

In other words, the ancient-modern distinction that Deneen rightly finds in Strauss, and partly rightly invokes to establish Strauss's (qualified) anti-liberalism, Strauss himself uses to counter the late modern charge that reason ruined everything and to rescue reason from its narrow modern manifestation. If Deneen is not dismissive of, or hostile to, reason, he definitely wants to place it back un-

der theological supervision. I expect he would correct that to "partnership" or "synthesis," but Strauss showed that any alleged "philosophy" that is not autonomous within its proper sphere, that is not free to question anything and everything (even if it is obligated to proceed carefully in communicating the results of that inquiry), is not philosophy.

THE READER MAY BY NOW BE ASKING what an extended disquisition on Leo Strauss has to do with a book that doesn't once mention him (neither does *Why Liberalism Failed*). The answer is that Strauss's thought looms like a colossus behind both volumes, neither of which, it's reasonable to say, are conceivable absent the foundation Strauss laid. Even if Deneen doesn't have Strauss in mind, Strauss would remain conspicuous by his absence, as no other thinker since Nietzsche has thought as deeply, and differently, about the spiritual and political consequences of modernity, i.e., of Deneen's "liberalism."

Thus, if *Regime Change* were an academic book, which demands proper acknowledgment of relevant precursors, Strauss's omission here would be inexcusable. It might, however, be justified on precisely the Straussian ground that the silence of a wise man often speaks more loudly than his explicit utterances: if Deneen is familiar with Strauss's critique and disagrees, one way to express his disapproval would be to pass over the whole edifice in silence.

This interpretation would raise the question, which *Regime Change* does not explicitly answer, of how and where, exactly, Deneen disagrees. If I had to offer my own interpretation, I would say that Deneen advocates or longs for some kind of return, a return not merely to premodern philosophy but to faith itself, to a philosophy informed by, or in league with, faith—i.e., Thomism—and to a politics compatible with all of the above.

But Strauss also showed, to my satisfaction at least, that the only way back to "strong gods"—that is, to genuine belief in the divine, not merely as a matter of inner faith but as a basis for public authority—is via some calamity or prophet, or more likely, a prophet who profits from a calamity. We're not going to talk ourselves backward into pre- or forward into post-modernity just because some intellectuals, or even philosophers, however wise, insist doing so is beneficial or necessary—not even if they're right. We're stuck with modernity for the foreseeable future. And, as noted, whatever problems modernity gave rise to, it also solved certain others that bedeviled man for centuries and that still have no other obvious solutions.

The core presuppositions beneath both *Why Liberalism Failed* and *Regime Change* are

that something went wrong, that this something was avoidable, or that once not avoided, is fixable. But what if *nothing* went wrong? That is, what if human effort could not have prevented (although perhaps it might have delayed) the present mess? What if what afflicts us today was, if not exactly fated, at least inevitable given human nature? Do not, after all, the presuppositions that our predicament was either avoidable and/or is fixable by human ingenuity rest on the modern assertion that nature or chance can be conquered? Are we not, in making that assumption, bewitched by the sentiment Strauss ominously called "the charm of competence"?

Let's ask another big question, or a series of them: what is it reasonable to hope for from politics? How much virtue is it reasonable to expect from a society, and for how long? What is a reasonable prospect for even a great civilization's longevity?

It's reasonable to look into the past for correctible errors—prudential or philosophic—that, if addressed in the future, might help virtue soldier on a little, even a great while, longer. But is it reasonable to strive for, to paraphrase Immanuel Kant, perpetual virtue? One might say that the latter is the implied thesis or presupposition not just of Deneen's books but of all such rightist backward-looking laments. If only we get first principles right, then...what? Surely not broad, sunlit uplands...forever?

All that said, let me let me go on record that I personally find such backward-looking explorations not just useful but necessary. The truth as such is always worth knowing, but more practically, as we work to shape a future that is better than the wretched present, we will need a realistic assessment of what is possible. And that assessment must be both positive and negative: it must not only exclude what is impossible, or so difficult as to be not worth the opportunity cost; it must also be careful not to so overestimate difficulties that, unwarrantedly daunted, we leave achievable goals unattempted.

DESCENDING FROM THESE HEIGHTS, we find much common sense in *Regime Change's* second part, which argues for a politics reoriented toward the common good, popular rather than expert rule, and the establishment or revival of a mixed regime. Two of these are uncontroversial on the contemporary Right, but only because they've been stripped of any content threatening to the present order. Conservatism, Inc. has learned how to sing from the anti-administrative state hymnal while blocking any actual challenges to entrenched bureaucratic power. Whether this is out of deference to donors who favor the sta-



tus quo or because D.C. hacks have simply lost the plot is no longer an interesting question.

Professional conservatives similarly profess to love the “mixed regime,” mostly to show off what they suppose or hope others will take to be their classical erudition—the “mixed regime” was invented by Aristotle, you know! We may note, however, that here Deneen appears to stumble. He cites Polybius’ famous praise of the Roman constitution as the exemplar of the mixed regime; so far, so good. But he places that Greek philosopher-historian, who eye-witnessed Scipio Aemilianus’ destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C., in the time of the emperors well over a century later. This is the kind of error that, if Machiavelli made it (which he frequently does), I would say the purpose was to make us wonder whether our purported constitutional republic is in fact disguised imperial rule. Is that Deneen’s hidden intent here?

Most conventional conservatives allege that Deneen’s (and his allies’) invocations of the common good are anti-conservative and un-American, a direct attack on the sacred individual, a threat to civil liberties, the first step toward socialism, a prelude to expropriation. (Funny how, as the Left increasingly speaks openly of this last, the conservative establishment not only refuses to see the threat but attacks anyone to its right who does.) Deneen easily gets the better of the argument, for how can there be politics if there is no common good? This, again, is only common sense but also gains profound support from those premodern thinkers who are the “good guys” in Deneen’s narrative. The American Founders understood this; whole journal articles, and even a few books, have been written to show what the founders learned from the ancients. But leaving aside the question of “sources,” politics without a common good would have been just as incomprehensible to George Washington and all his compatriots as to Patrick Deneen.

INDEED, VERY LITTLE, IF ANYTHING, Deneen proposes would have been alien or anathema to the American Founders or their philosophic forebears. Deneen is well known for being one of a small (though perhaps growing) group of “integralists,” thinkers who wish to reintegrate not just religious faith but religious observance with political practice. To contemporary ears, that sounds profoundly illiberal. And perhaps it is—depending on one’s definition of “liberal.” But the same John Locke who is Deneen’s Bad Liberal #1 held that there is no conflict between religious liberty and government’s right to teach its own preferred religion. He even advocated government prohibition of open atheism. That position is not

“liberal” by contemporary standards nor even in Deneen’s understanding.

My teacher and now colleague Thomas G. West, the most careful and knowledgeable living scholar of the American Founding, once said in my hearing that “the founders were integralists.” That was intended to provoke (West, like Deneen, enjoys a good provocation), but also to make a serious point. However liberal the founders were, they (like Locke) had no problem with public-school instruction in the basic tenets of Christianity, laws that supported or enforced Biblical norms, government-approved or even -sponsored public prayer, and a whole host of other measures that over the past half-century have been excoriated as “theocratic.” To oversimplify, the contemporary insistence that the founders intended to extirpate religion from public life rests almost entirely on the elevation, out of all proportion to its significance—and in contradiction to the actual practice of the founding era and early republic—of one phrase (“wall of separation”) from one founder (Thomas Jefferson, one of the two

Implied in the slippery-slope argument is that anti- or pre-liberalism is somehow exempt from this dynamic. But why should that be?

most religiously heterodox of the bunch) that appears in a letter, not in any lawfully binding document. In a clever bit of sleight-of-hand, modern leftists and their allies in the courts have elevated the most theologically radical of the founders into *the* spokesman for the founding’s teaching on religion. But in truth, in this respect (as in others), on the terms of Deneen’s own argument, the founders were anti-liberal.

CENTRAL NOT ONLY TO DENEEN’S ARGUMENT but to most anti-liberal claims is that liberalism is the ultimate slippery slope: once set in motion, its logic must be carried through to the end—which, as noted, is radical hedonism, individualism, atomism, globalism, and amoralism. There are at least two problems with this argument.

The first finds perhaps its fullest expression in Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind*, in which he correctly identified “relativism”—or, to be more precise, the destruction of reason-based moral judgment—as a cause of contemporary American ills, but erred in describing

only relativism’s anti-social effects. Although Bloom saw clearly modern rationalism’s descent into mindless left-wing dogmatism, lived through (and was disgusted by) radical students’ armed takeover of Cornell, and later saw up close from his perch at an elite university the metastization of “political correctness” in the late 1980s and early ’90s, he had little to say about the rising generation of zealots bent on overturning millennia of settled wisdom and revolutionizing every institution, public or private. Would that the wokerati were hedonistic, individualistic, atomized, and amoral instead of disciplined, political, organized, and self-righteous! Are blasé relativists really our greatest or most urgent threat? Today’s neoliberal Red Guard would seem far more destructive of tradition and faith than even a hundred million dope-smoking, screen-addled couch potatoes, but Deneen pays no more attention to them than Bloom did.

Second, implied in the slippery-slope argument is that anti- or pre-liberalism is somehow exempt from this dynamic. But why should that be? As Lenin asserted, “He who says A, must say B.” If regimes must inevitably travel the full length of their logic, then mustn’t integralism culminate in a second Inquisition? On the other hand, if contradictions, compromises, and stopping short are possible, then why can’t something like the American Founders’ regime—a mixture of antiquity and modernity, faith and reason, tradition and innovation—be sustainable, at least for as long as any human institution can be sustained? On that note, most conspicuous by his absence in Deneen’s narrative is Montesquieu, the most ancient of the moderns, and the founders’ favorite (or at least most-cited) philosopher, above even Locke. Montesquieu came the closest, probably the closest anyone could, to reconciling the necessities of modernity with the peaks of antiquity—a reconciliation Deneen presumably thinks is impossible, even as he argues for a synthesis between reason and revelation.

REGIME CHANGE WOBBLES MOST WHEN it turns to “what is to be done.” To point this out is not necessarily to criticize. “It’s not always easy to know what to do,” Sam Spade says to “Ruth Wonderly” (a.k.a. “Miss Leblanc,” a.k.a. Brigid O’Shaughnessy). Knowing what to do is especially difficult when facing momentous challenges the likes of which haven’t been seen in centuries, and some of which are simply unprecedented. In addition, I can say as a fellow analyst of our present woes that the pressure even—especially—from friendly readers to go beyond mere analysis and get prescriptive is immense. Besides this, no man of goodwill wants sim-



ply to be a downer—Demosthenes without a plan. He wants to be constructive.

Deneen's constructive ideas are fine, even bold in places. They amount to replacing the present rotten elite with a new, more public-spirited one; giving the common people a stronger say, and stake, in their government; and channeling elite-popular competition toward the common good.

Four points occur. First, as with the religious and other issues mentioned above, everything Deneen wants here is fully compatible with the American Founding and within the broader modern horizon. Indeed, I would go further and say that they are attainable *only* within that horizon. Sometimes I think not just Deneen, and not just his fellow integralists, but nearly all contemporary anti-liberal voices underestimate just how profoundly different premodernity was from the world in which we live and are used to—how much conformity the old ways demanded, how much hierarchy, submission to authority, and clanishness were required to survive in a fundamentally low-trust environment. Some of them do see all this but think it desirable for its own sake. That's debatable, I suppose, but this sort of backward-looking austerity doesn't have many takers. More important, placing the emphasis on desirability obscures the question of

feasibility, on which everything hinges. At any rate, many or even most of the political solutions proposed by contemporary anti-liberals require a liberal foundation—political equality, secure natural rights, the consent of the governed, &c.—that was not merely unknown in the premodern world but incompatible with it.

Second, Deneen's proposal for elite-popular competition is exactly the core of the Machiavellian regime at the foundation of political modernity. Deneen's discussion of Machiavelli in chapter 6 shows that he understands this—though he tries, as have many before, to discard the unsavory foundation while retaining the salutary effects. We may leave aside whether it is possible to use "Machiavellian means to achieve Aristotelian ends" and merely note that, precisely if it is, that would place Deneen a lot closer to liberalism than he would have his readers believe. Add these two points together and one cannot help wonder why, given Deneen's vast area of agreement not just with the Founding Fathers but also with their "liberal" philosophical forebears, he persists in throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

THIRD, FOR ALL DENEEN'S EXPLICIT REJECTION of liberalism, he not only refuses to take on core liberal pieties but treats them as no less sacred, if not more so, than does

the contemporary Left. In one respect, this is understandable: unlike leftists, an avowed anti-liberal cannot be presumed to genuflect before leftist gods—indeed he might be presumed to reject them—and so will benefit from a display of fealty. As a result, Deneen sometimes seems to want to keep and discard liberalism simultaneously, most obviously on the topics of race and immigration. He repeatedly, in this reviewer's opinion, protests too much, in the process ostentatiously endorsing present orthodoxy. Either Deneen believes all this or he doesn't. If he does, it's hard to see how he's not contradicting his avowed anti-liberalism. If he doesn't, he should have recalled Strauss's observation about the silence of a wise man. Not wishing explicitly to challenge the strongest pieties of our time is understandable. Endorsing them, even implicitly, is another matter. Better simply to have passed over them in silence.

Perhaps related, Deneen doesn't mention freedom of association. To raise this might seem unfair, in the vein of the smug reviewer commenting not on the book before him but on the one he wishes the author had written instead. But freedom of association is integral to liberalism as originally proposed and understood—and, as Christopher Caldwell has shown, its removal by civil rights law, or at least jurisprudence, was integral to the transi-

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tion from the founders' regime to the leftism that rules us today. Since the difference between these two forms of "liberalism"—which Deneen, if he does not necessarily elide, also does not elucidate—is core to the question of liberalism's reasonableness and worth, its omission seems, at least to this smug reviewer, a limitation.

But an omission that is even harder to understand is *Regime Change's* lack of any thematic assessment of equality, which the book hardly mentions (its index entry reads "see inequalities," plural). Most—I would say, pretty much all—of Deneen's fellow anti-liberals recognize the centrality of equality to liberalism and so attack it as a dangerous illusion. Does Deneen agree? He clearly dislikes (as do I) the glaring (and growing) social and wealth inequality endemic to our present oligarchy. But so do the Bernie Bros, who see "equality" as an excuse to use state power to force equal group outcomes. I'm pretty sure Deneen isn't for that. As a faithful Christian, he must at a minimum believe that all men are equal before God. Does he believe any political imperatives flow from that understanding? The American Founders had an answer for all this: equal natural rights, legal protections for unequal natural faculties that lead to unequal worldly outcomes, and policies that promote the largest possible middle class while preventing concentrations of mass wealth at the top and impoverished mobs at the bottom. That answer is of course "liberal" in the original understanding of the term, and so presumably unacceptable to Deneen, even though entirely compatible with what he explicitly says he wants. But all this goes unexplored in *Regime Change*.

FOURTH, DENEEN OFFERS NO ROADMAP for getting from where we are to where he wants to go. There's no doubt that all of what he wants would be a lot better than what we have now. But how to achieve any of it? There are a lot of "shoulds" and "musts" in this book but almost no "hows." As any reader of the classics knows, it's easier to outline the best regime than to actualize it. This is why, I venture to say, so many critics of the present decline to make any but the most banal recommendations, often to the frustration of their biggest fans.

The core problem with discussing solutions to truly momentous problems, at least from the right, is that anything that might work is too fundamental and astounding to gain a

fair hearing. What's more, even stating such possibilities is more likely than not to get the speaker canceled. Whereas anything that can be discussed openly is all but certain not to work.

The Left does not face this problem. Ivy League professors with endowed chairs can call for violent revolution and be lauded, or at worst ignored. They can praise Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Fidel, and Che—no problem! If someone on the Right cautiously observes that, say, Pinochet improved the Chilean economy? Instant cancellation. Observations of this sort are usually dismissed, by both Left and Right, as whining about double standards. But this double standard is a core source of the Left's power, and a core reason why today's leftism is no longer really liberal at all. *Regime Change* doesn't make this distinction but treats illiberal leftism as if it is liberalism. This observation may strike some as cringingly close to what the kids call "DR3" ("Democrats Are the Real Racists") but the differences between regnant leftism and original liberalism are real and significant, with the latter very much superior to the former. We could solve a lot of our problems simply by reverting back to it—if anyone knew how.

NOT JUST COMING UP WITH SOLUTIONS, but communicating them in a way your audience understands, without getting yourself killed, calls for the most delicate judgment, a fine literary hand, and prudence that would impress Aristotle himself. If Deneen has not definitively pulled off this supremely difficult task, he at least deserves praise for trying—and for taking the risk. He deserves more for forcing a conversation that needs to take place and which hitherto has been trivial, fanciful, circular, stagnant, and/or nonexistent. We need more books like this, not fewer, and more discussion about the issues this book raises, not less—and without any delusional or bad-faith pearl-clutching about "democracy" and "norms" and "muh Constitution."

We also need a certain amount of charity toward those who venture into the arena. I recall reading long ago (on Steve Sailer's blog, if you must know), that one question on a Korean War-era officer candidate school test was "You are in charge of a detail of 11 men and a sergeant. There is a 25-foot flagpole lying on the sandy, brush-covered ground. You are to erect the pole. What is your first order?" Answer: "Sergeant, erect that flagpole." Sailer supplies the lesson:

In other words, if the sergeant knows how to do it, then there's no need for you to risk, as an officer, making a fool of yourself in front of the enlisted men by issuing some cockamamie order about how to erect the flagpole. If the sergeant doesn't know, well, he'll probably order the corporal to do it, and so forth down the chain of command to Pvt. Beetle Bailey, but by the time the problem comes back up to you, it will be well-established that everyone is as clueless as you are.

None of us knows the way out of the present morass. Finding our way will require a lot of trial and error, which will inevitably lead to a lot of dead ends. The sooner we realize that no one has all the answers—that few of us have any answers—and stop sniping at one another but begin to work constructively toward a shared, positive future, the better.

REGIMES DO, IN FACT, CHANGE. INDEED, the Left has been continually changing ours since the beginning of the Progressive era. It's a bit rich for Left and conventional Right alike to insist that the original American regime is still in place *in toto* and then shriek "anti-democratic insurrectionist!" at those of us who know that's not so. Deneen is not proposing to change the founders' regime but to change its replacement. The main divide in conservative ranks today is between those who see clearly what the Left has done and those who deny it—and attack anyone to their right who notices. Say what you will about Patrick Deneen, he's on the right—in both senses of that term—side of this divide.

Denial didn't prevent the American regime from morphing into the present monstrosity, nor will it transform the beast back into the constitutional order conservatives insist they cherish. Still less will inconsistently exempting one regime out of the thousands that have existed—and fallen—throughout history preserve 1787 (or 1865) in perpetuity. America may have been and even still be exceptional in many ways, but to expect her to be exceptional in that way is to expect more than nature will or can ever deliver.

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