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# CLAREMONT

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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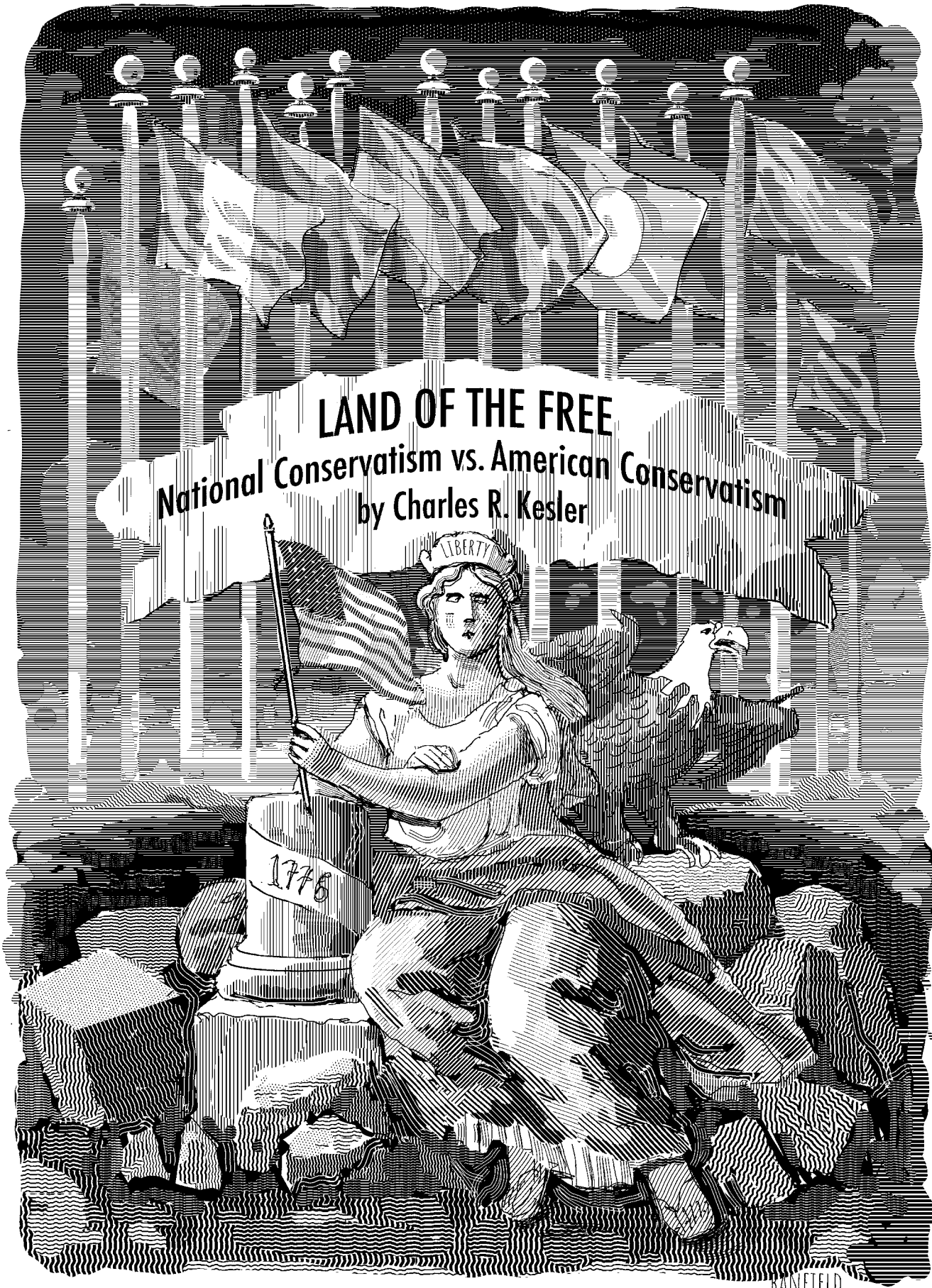
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Book Review by Helen Andrews

## MR. X

*Elon Musk*, by Walter Isaacson.  
Simon & Schuster, 688 pages, \$35



**H**E WAS ALMOST NAMED “NICE MUSK.” The richest man in the world was born, in 1971, exactly nine months after his parents’ honeymoon in France, and their initial thought was to name him after the city in which he had been conceived. In the end, they decided to name him after the bride’s grandfather, J. Elon Haldeman, which was for the best. Judging from Walter Isaacson’s new biography, Elon Musk’s success is largely due to the fact that he is smart, energetic, and virtuous, but not nice.

In April 2022, a little over a year after taking the richest-man title from Jeff Bezos, Musk was running four different companies, either as CEO or an active co-founder: Tesla (then valued at \$1 trillion), SpaceX (\$100 billion), the Boring Company (\$5.6 billion), and Neuralink (\$1 billion). Two of these compa-

nies had already revolutionized their industries. The Big Three car companies’ ventures in electric vehicles had flopped. In the last quarter of 2021, General Motors sold only 26 electric cars. In the same quarter, Tesla sold over 300,000. The aerospace industry had been a sleepy world of cozy contracts until SpaceX disrupted it. If the Boring Company succeeds in building hyperloop tunnels under cities, or Neuralink succeeds in building brain implants that can make the lame walk and the blind see, they too will take their place among Musk’s world-changers.

Then he added a fifth. Compared to building rockets or self-driving cars, running a social media company sounds easy, yet nothing in Musk’s career has done as much to bring him into conflict with the American powers-that-be than his purchase of Twitter in Oc-

tober 2022 (rebranding it as X almost a year later). He promptly fired its CEO and 75% of its workforce, and released internal documents that exposed the extent of Twitter’s collaboration with the federal government in censoring material. This brought Musk into direct collision with the establishment, which clearly values its ability to manipulate public opinion through social media. Which side prevails will do much to determine the future of the republic. For perhaps the first time in his career, Musk faces an enemy even less nice than he is.

**E**LON MUSK WAS BORN IN PRETORIA, South Africa, to an unstable megalomaniac and a former beauty queen. His enemies have pointed to his country of birth as evidence of some hereditary racist taint. Isaacson,

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who received the National Humanities Medal from President Biden last year and whose previous biographies include *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (2003), *Steve Jobs* (2011), and *Leonardo da Vinci* (2017), is not perfectly at home in South African history. For example, he says that in 1950, when Musk's grandfather immigrated, South Africa "was still ruled by a white apartheid regime." In fact, the National Party had only just taken power in 1948 and its main apartheid legislation had not yet been passed. But Isaacson still capably refutes the racism smear. Musk's father was a member of the anti-apartheid Progressive Party. School friends remember Elon confronting classmates who used racial slurs and once venturing into a rural village to attend a black friend's funeral, both remarkably liberal acts for the time.

Another meme has developed about Elon inheriting a vast fortune from an apartheid emerald mine. As Isaacson shows, almost no element of this story is true. Elon's father made only about \$210,000 in profits from three mines located in Zambia and from importing raw emeralds and having them cut—which he did because he did not have a controlling stake in the mines—until his business in selling cut emeralds collapsed in the 1980s, before Elon left for North America. His father's only parting gift to him was \$2,000 in traveler's checks. When Elon first moved to Toronto he shared a one-bedroom apartment with his mother and sister and slept on the couch. Later, when his brother Kimbal and their cousin Peter joined them in a three-bedroom apartment, Kimbal and Peter slept on the floor.

**A**FTER AN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION at Queen's University in Ontario and the University of Pennsylvania, Musk was accepted into a graduate program in material science at Stanford. The more he thought about it, the more he realized his ambition would be stifled in academia. "Most PhDs are irrelevant. The number that actually move the needle is almost none," he tells Isaacson. Besides, the year was 1995. The first internet gold rush was on. Musk deferred enrollment—indeinitely, as it proved—and made his first millions with a city directory website called Zip2 that he sold to AltaVista in 1999. He spent the next three years helping to build PayPal and walked away with \$250 million when it was acquired by eBay in 2002.

Up to this point, Musk's story is unexceptional. Many fortunes were made in Silicon Valley in that era. His greatness lies in what he chose to do next. When he was in college, young Elon came up with three fields most likely to "move the needle" in determining

humanity's future: the internet, sustainable energy, and space travel. He chose to tackle space travel first. SpaceX was incorporated in 2002 and launched its first rocket from the Kwajalein Atoll in 2006. That rocket crashed before reaching space, as did the second and third. The fourth, in September 2008, succeeded. Falcon 1 became the first privately built rocket to launch from earth into orbit.

Building rockets brought Musk into contact with the shadowy entity known as the deep state. The space industry, unsurprisingly, is full of spooks and intelligence assets. Isaacson describes how one of Musk's first hires at SpaceX, Jim Cantrell, "had been leading a cloak-and-dagger life" due to his work on decommissioning missiles in the former Soviet Union and so insisted on having their first meeting "in a safe place without guns," in this case an airport lounge in Salt Lake City. Another engineer left Musk's project to work for In-Q-Tel, the CIA's venture capital firm. This background came in handy when Musk took over Twitter and learned of its connections with various three-letter agencies. More than most other CEOs would have, he understood what he was dealing with.

**T**HE YEAR FALCON 1 REACHED ORBIT was the same year Tesla shipped its first Roadster. As CEO of Tesla since 2008, Musk navigated the company through the twin pitfalls that had befallen other electric car makers. The cars had to be affordable, which required breakthroughs in engineering and mass production. The previous CEO had allowed production costs of the Roadster to balloon to over \$140,000. Under Musk, its successor, the Model S, went on sale in 2012 for about \$60,000. On the other hand, costs couldn't be cut to an absolute minimum because the cars also had to be beautiful. Musk's design mantra was "I want the future to look like the future." One California liberal quoted in the book became a Tesla early adopter because he cared about climate change but hated the dorky look of his Prius.

A pillar of Musk's business philosophy is to keep his engineers and his factories in physical proximity—something he has in common with Isaacson's earlier subject, Steve Jobs. At a time when other companies were scrambling to outsource production to Asia, SpaceX and Tesla built their factories in California and Nevada. There were several reasons for this. Building things in-house was often cheaper, especially for SpaceX, which otherwise would have been stuck paying inflated aerospace industry prices: \$1,500 for a latch that cost \$30, \$3 million for an air conditioning system that they replicated

by modifying one they bought for \$6,000 at a hardware store. It also allowed Musk and his engineers to do factory walk-throughs, which led to far more breakthroughs than would ever have occurred sitting at their desks.

**W**HY DID ELON MUSK BUY TWITTER? That single act turned him from a hero to a villain almost overnight in the eyes of elite opinion. Suddenly, the man who had been saving the planet by mass-producing electric cars became a transphobic, science-denying threat to democracy. The answer, happily, is that his motives were genuinely idealistic.

Musk had long been a dissenter from conventional opinion. One of his sons from his first marriage announced his gender transition at the age of 16 and now goes by "Jenna," which exposed Musk to the darker side of the movement to make transsexualism mainstream. When COVID hit, he turned against lockdowns almost immediately. Tesla's Fremont factory soon fell under a county lockdown mandate, so Musk filed a lawsuit and defiantly kept his plant open. The dispute was resolved with a compromise that let the factory stay open with mask and safety protocols, which, according to Isaacson, "were honored mainly in the breach."

The proximate cause for Musk buying Twitter was the company's decision to ban the Christian satire website *The Babylon Bee*. The *Bee*'s account was locked over a tweet mocking Richard "Rachel" Levine, the U.S. assistant secretary for health who identifies as a woman, as its "Man of the Year." Musk thought the joke was funny. Twitter said it violated company policy against hate speech. Initially Musk planned merely to take a seat on Twitter's board, but he concluded that the only way to achieve his desired changes was to buy the company. After all, the problem was not CEO Parag Agrawal or his top deputies. "Parag is a technologist and has a medium idea of what's going on," he told Isaacson, "but it's very clear that the inmates are running the asylum."

Is Musk a conservative? No, or at least not yet. So far, he could be classed among the anti-woke liberals, those who remain loyal to the Left while deploring its excesses. His alliance with them, however, may be fraying. One of the journalists he selected to comb through the so-called "Twitter Files"—records of internal communications including incriminating contact with the FBI on censoring content—was Bari Weiss. Her fierce independence had caused her to leave *The New York Times* over its stifling political correctness and start her own publication, *The*



*Free Press*. While she was investigating the Twitter Files, she came into conflict with Musk. He suspended a Twitter account that tracked his movements, as well as those of several journalists who reported the fact, when a stalker used the information to attack a limo containing his two-year-old son. Weiss publicly criticized this as a violation of free speech. “You can’t be a journalist and watch journalists get kicked off Twitter and say nothing,” she told Isaacson. “Principles still matter to me.”

Musk was not amused. “They doxxed my plane. They attacked my son,” he told her. It is possible that Musk’s ongoing political evolution, which has already brought him from vaguely libertarian Obama fan to self-declared “super moderate,” will send him hurtling past the milquetoast liberals who dislike wokeness but have no problem with the liberalism of five minutes ago. He may decide that conservatism is the only side in this fight that actually has the backbone and the principles to fight back against the enemy he rightly perceives.

**I**F HE DOES EVOLVE IN THAT DIRECTION, conservatives should meet him there. It is true there are aspects of his persona that are untraditional. He has 11 children (that

we know of) with three different women, including three born in 2021 just months apart with different mothers. But this was not from sleeping around. His colleague Shivon Zilis, nearing 40 with no husband, wanted to become a mother through in vitro fertilization, so Musk volunteered. Behind the jokes about his philoprogenitiveness—when a rival company reported low sales, he joked, “I had more kids in Q2 than they made cars!”—he is sincerely pro-natalist. He is also fiercely pro-capitalist and sensible on foreign policy. His Starlink satellites have provided internet access to Ukraine since the start of the war, but when Ukraine asked him to extend its range to allow an attack on Crimea, Musk prudently said no, thinking it might start a nuclear war and prolong a conflict with no endgame.

Conservatives ought to support Musk because he will need all the help he can get. The deep state has him in its crosshairs and will not stop until he is neutralized, using all the tools at its disposal. Musk is already being targeted with investigations and lawsuits, including a truly bizarre suit against SpaceX for discriminating against non-citizens in hiring. (Like all aerospace companies, SpaceX tries not to let its sensitive technologies fall into the hands of foreign governments.) Left-wing nonprofits have deliberately fomented, and in some cas-

es fabricated, racist content on X in order to make Musk’s version of the app seem like a haven for hate speech. Preserving free speech in the run-up to the next election should be every conservative’s priority. In this fight, Elon Musk is an unexpected but entirely worthy champion.

Isaacson has been denigrated as a courtier rather than a biographer. Perhaps he does flatter his subjects a little, but this book reveals the value of the kind of biography he writes. To most ordinary people, all great CEOs look alike. Isaacson is attuned to the fine differences between them. Steve Jobs and Elon Musk are superficially similar, equally ambitious and equally volatile. But where Jobs was calculating, Musk is exuberant. Jobs was meticulous in pursuit of perfection. Musk appreciates failure as a necessary way station on the road to success. He is open with Isaacson about his mistakes and flaws, knowing that these admissions will be put down in the historical record. Other men might have seen being selected for the Walter Isaacson treatment as a chance to ratify their status as great men. Musk sees it as a chance to present himself honestly. Isaacson does an excellent job of assisting him.

*Helen Andrews is a senior editor at The American Conservative.*

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