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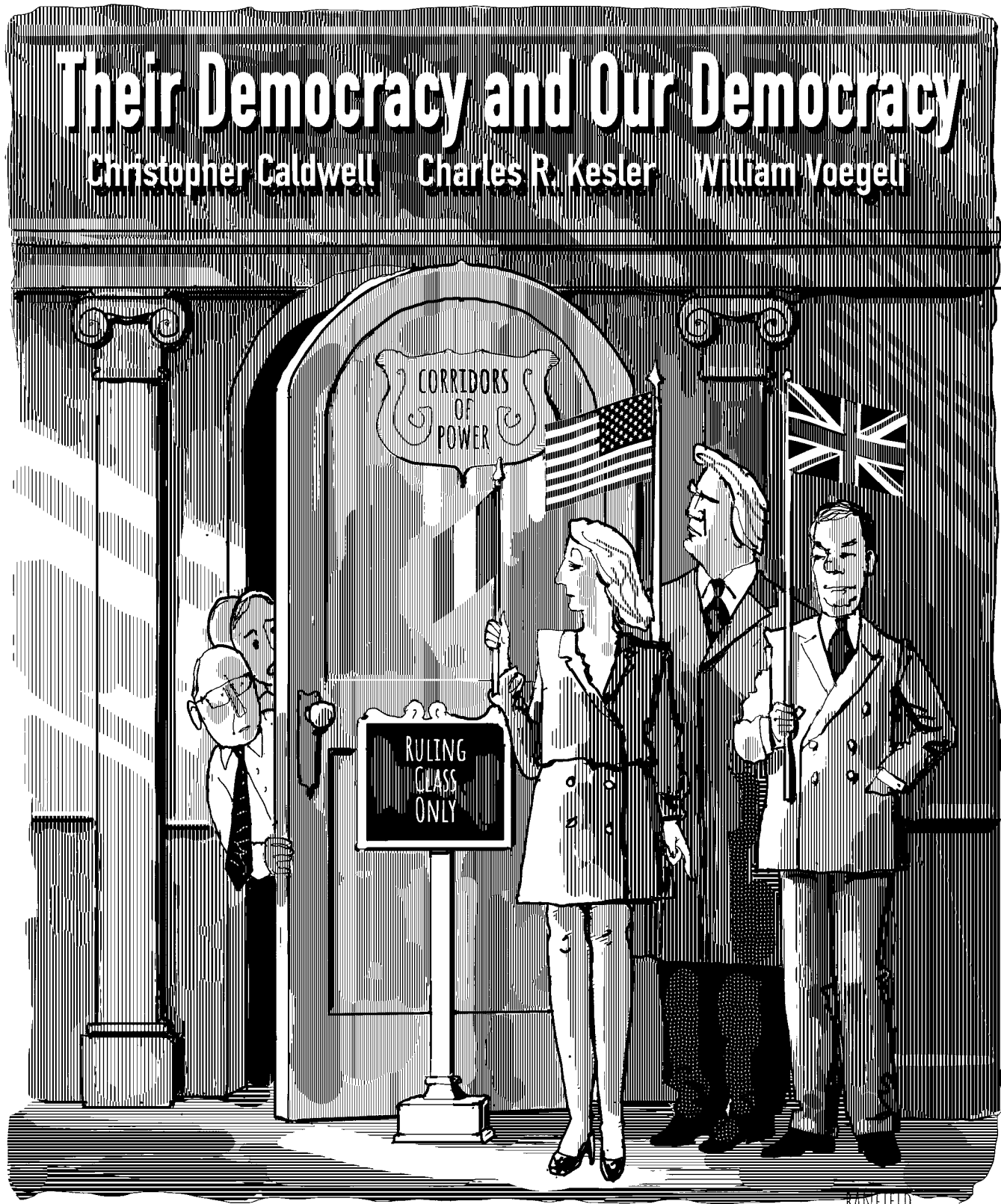
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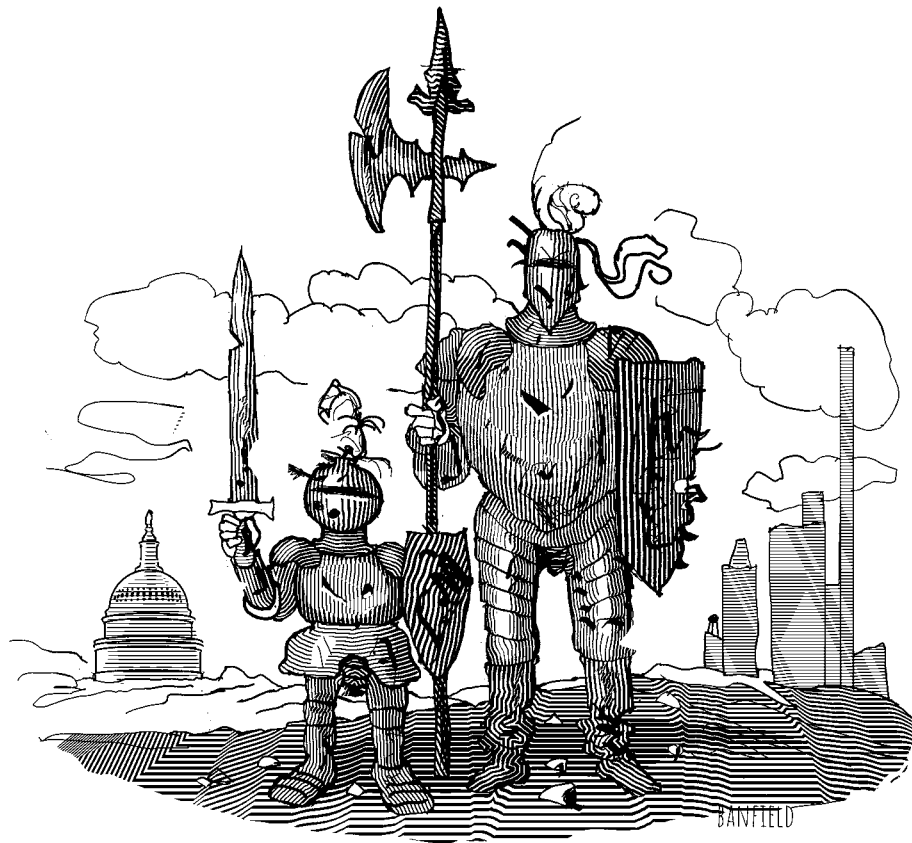
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Book Review by Conrad Black

IMPENETRABLE SANCTIMONY

Collision of Power: Trump, Bezos, and the Washington Post, by Martin Baron.
Flatiron Books, 560 pages, \$34.99 (cloth), \$21.99 (paper)

The Times: How the Newspaper of Record Survived Scandal, Scorn, and the Transformation of Journalism,
by Adam Nagourney. Crown Publishing, 592 pages, \$35



IN THEIR HEYDAY, THE MOST FAMOUS newspapers in the United States and Great Britain were subjects of intense public curiosity. Histories of their management and biographies of their rather flamboyant owners could turn a tidy profit. It is moderately encouraging that this genre of books, which scrutinizes the comings and goings of senior editorial officials at major newspapers, is coming back in fashion. It suggests some renewed interest in the beleaguered newspaper industry. But I have my doubts that *Collision of Power: Trump, Bezos, and the Washington Post* or *The Times: How the Newspaper of Record Survived Scandal, Scorn, and the Transformation of Journalism* will meet with the same enthusiastic reception as their predecessors. These two volumes are of uneven quality.

Martin Baron's *Collision of Power* is, I'm afraid, not a very good book. Both its text and its photographs confer upon the author an importance it is not clear he attained. Baron,

who edited *The Washington Post* from 2012 to 2021, revives once again the fragile legend of the *Post* as a courageous, vigilant guardian of constitutional democracy. In doing so, he clearly hopes to justify his paper's rabid hostility toward Donald Trump, as if that shameful exercise in naked partisanship was just one more brave act of defiance in the paper's storied history of defending American laws and norms.

THE UNDERLYING BASIS OF THE *POST*'S impenetrable sanctimony is the gigantic and largely fraudulent mythology of Watergate. Baron cannot resist the temptation to slather himself in the borrowed glory of that myth, though it has nothing to do with the current Jeff Bezos era. I knew the most famous publisher of the *Post*, Katharine Graham, for many years. She was most helpful to me when I became a significant newspaper publisher myself. We went to dinner in each

other's homes; she was a gracious, intelligent, and altogether impressive person. I also knew managing (and later executive) editor Ben Bradlee, though not as well—he was certainly a skillful and colorful newspaperman. And I came to know President Nixon through Graham and Bradlee.

Once, at a dinner, I congratulated Graham on putting Nixon on the cover of *Newsweek* and publishing a flattering account of an address he delivered to the American Newspaper Publishers' Association. Graham remarked on what a brilliant address he had given. When an appropriate moment presented itself, I suggested that a reevaluation of the former president was called for and that no one would better or more convincingly lead it than *The Washington Post*. I pointed out that there was in fact still no evidence that Richard Nixon himself had committed any crimes in the Watergate affair or its sequels—though some of his entourage had, and he had un-



doubtedly misled the public occasionally on the subject. I further took it upon myself to suggest that Nixon's one full term as president stood, next to Abraham Lincoln's and to the first and third terms of Franklin D. Roosevelt, among the most successful in American history. He withdrew from Vietnam while keeping intact a non-Communist government in Saigon; normalized relations with the People's Republic of China; triangulated the Great Power relationship; negotiated and signed the greatest arms control agreement in the history of the world with the USSR (while simultaneously restoring American nuclear superiority); ended segregation without singling out the Southern states for disparagement; abolished conscription; reduced the crime rate; founded the Environmental Protection Agency; and put an end at last to the riots, mass demonstrations, assassinations, and skyjackings that were constant when he was elected in 1968. Given all these facts, I suggested, he had been unfairly treated by the country, and some recognition of that should be shown while he was still alive to appreciate it (Nixon was then 73).

Graham responded that what had happened was a personal as well as a national tragedy, one that Nixon could easily have avoided. She agreed that the foibles of his own character made him particularly vulnerable, but felt it was not up to *The Washington Post* to redress. I replied that as they had seen fit to run a complementary cover story on him in *Newsweek*, there was an opportunity to present, in her own famous expression, "the rough first draft of history." The *Post* could simply alert the American public to the fact that Richard Nixon was not a horned sociopath with cloven feet, but in fact one of the nation's most accomplished presidents. At this point she effectively handed the conversational torch to Bradlee, who engaged in a lot of amusing pseudo-psychological nonsense about the journalistic duty of pursuing the facts, letting the chips fall where they may, and so forth. His competence as an editor has never been at issue, but he did not possess the maturity of personality or the integrity to exercise such a powerful role. A few months later he was gambling about again in the Iran-Contra saga, a prefabricated scandal of no practical significance that harried President Reagan during his second term. Bradlee led the *Post* gleefully into this melee, but there was very little in it. The Reagans were friendly with Graham personally, Reagan was a very popular president near the end of his term, and his former national security adviser, Admiral John Poindexter, took the blame for the fiasco. Bradlee volunteered to me one rather liquefied evening in

London that he was disappointed not to have been able "to do it again."

THERE IS NO LIMIT TO THE TORRENT of adulation that Martin Baron pours onto Ben Bradlee and the two reporters who broke the Watergate story, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Woodward became addicted to unearthing, or at least magnifying, some new scandal to afflict each succeeding regime. When Iran-Contra came along, he was mortified at the possibility of not being a lead reporter on another monumental convulsion. So in his 1987 book, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981–1987*, he confected the hokey fiction that he had disguised himself as a hospital orderly and snuck into the hospital room of former CIA director William Casey—who was heavily guarded and unconscious at the time, as official records confirmed—to extract from him a confession of felonious duplicity.

During the Trump era, reporters have indulged unrelentingly in exaggeration, omission, and pure spite against the man they want desperately to cast as the arch-villain in their own self-aggrandizing morality play.

This is the senior member of the mendacious duo that converted a full generation of the democratic world's journalists into a demented battalion of self-nominated investigative conspiracists. Even now, more than 50 years after the forced entry at the Watergate complex, these two still infest our television screens, strutting and preening themselves as soldiers of truth and slayers of monsters. Bernstein's chief post-Watergate distinction is having fumbled his way out of marriage with romcom doyenne Nora Ephron through various infidelities. He and Woodward have even been silent partners in the dodgy antique book and manuscript business of the not entirely reputable Glenn Horowitz.

Baron, having drunk the bathwater of the *Washington Post* legend to the lees, attempts in his book to pretend that his clumsy and relentless sandbag job on Donald Trump was in keeping with a long tradition of heroic resistance to tyranny. He imagines throughout

that there is an intense rivalry between the *Post* and *The New York Times*. There is not: New York is a much bigger market, and the *Times* has a much longer and more illustrious history. *The Washington Post* has no national stature at all except what it has temporarily acquired from the evanescent legend of the Watergate era. During the Trump era, however, reporters at the *Post* have indulged unrelentingly in exaggeration, omission, and pure spite against the man they want desperately to cast as the arch-villain in their own self-aggrandizing morality play. Baron not only fails to amend this dishonesty but indulges shamelessly in it himself.

Nowhere in the 500 pages of this book is it acknowledged that Robert Mueller's special counsel investigation was directed specifically to seek out evidence of collusion between the Russian government and Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, and that it found none. Such Russian interference as there was in that election, though unacceptable, was too trivial to have any possible impact on the results. Baron disparages some of Trump's stylistic infelicities and takes reasonable issue with a number of his more insouciant utterances. But he never so much as acknowledges the similarly egregious immoderation of Trump's adversaries. Presumably former CIA director John Brennan was a picture of statesmanlike composure when he accused Trump of committing "treason," as was former National Intelligence director James Clapper when he repeatedly alleged that Trump was an outright intelligence asset of the Kremlin. If Baron wanted to be taken seriously as a fair observer, he would at least have mentioned some of the more egregious and malicious smears of Trump published almost daily in the *Post* itself. These include the author's own statement that he thought Trump would try to overthrow constitutional government rather than surrender the presidency.

AS A MATTER OF COURSE, BARON repeatedly calls Trump "racist" (which he isn't—I've known him for 25 years). The Steele Dossier, a pastiche of lies and slanders, is validated in this book by the endorsement of the incandescently Trump-hating, since-fired CNN commentator Don Lemon. There is no mention that the dossier was commissioned and paid for by the Hillary Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee. On the night that fact came to light, a glabrous, potato-faced spokesman for *The Washington Post* described it on Fox News as "a talking point." There is also not a word about the FBI and CIA directors who co-operated to insert the Steele dossier, which they knew to be false, into the public record under the guise



of authentic professional intelligence work requiring no further corroboration. Baron does not mention that these intelligence stooges lied under oath to Congress, or that they used false affidavits to support repeated illegal wiretapping of the Trump campaign and transition committees, or that Clinton destroyed 33,000 emails, thousands of them sent illegally, under subpoena. There is no account of FBI director James Comey answering some variation of “I do not recall” 245 times under oath to questions about events that occurred in the previous two years. Hunter Biden’s misadventures with his laptop and his involvement in the Bidens’ intercontinental influence-peddling operation are not mentioned either.

A full enumeration of this book’s shortcomings would be longer than the book itself. I don’t doubt that the author was at some point a competent journalist and editor, but he is not a particularly good writer. He makes no attempt to be fair or impartial—which is a shame since, for all the excessive puffery about its recent history, *The Washington Post* deserves a more reliable and elegant account than this.

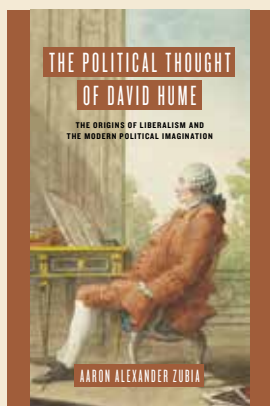
THE TIMES, BY ADAM NAGOURNEY, IS much more rigorous and focused. Here, too, I have had the privilege of knowing many of the personalities described, including

publisher Arthur “Punch” Sulzberger; his son and successor Arthur Jr., nicknamed “Pinch”; foreign correspondent Cyrus L. Sulzberger; editor Abe Rosenthal (and, as accurately described in the book, his tediously pretentious second wife); and journalists John Oakes; Seymour Topping; Johnny Apple; Tom Friedman; and John Vinocur. I have also had extensive business dealings with the *Times* and read many thousands of copies over more than 60 years. Punch Sulzberger was an astute, exquisitely polite, and unpretentious publisher. He was also a patriot who proudly wore his U.S. Marine Corps combat veteran’s tie clip every day. Abe Rosenthal was an awkward man, better at recognizing good journalism than producing it himself, like a good baseball manager who had been an indifferent player. But he rendered great service to the *Times* and was brutally sacked by the younger Sulzberger.

Nagourney, who covers politics for the *Times*, tells a more meticulous and detailed story about the fluctuating relationships on the masthead than any but the most avid devotee of journalistic table talk would wish to read. After a few chapters, we don’t care what the weather was like on the day the two candidates for a high editorial position had a booze-drenched supper at a restaurant near Times Square. One can become fatigued with

the floor-by-floor descriptions of where in the *Times* building these seminal encounters, hirings, firings, explosions of temper, or effusions of sentiment occurred. But for those committed to following the ups and downs of these personalities, it isn’t especially burdensome to do so—though, having employed thousands of journalists myself, I’ve never found them exceptionally interesting. Their main conversational asset is the number of unusual and newsworthy people and events they can describe, as well as to some extent the vagaries of their own personalities.

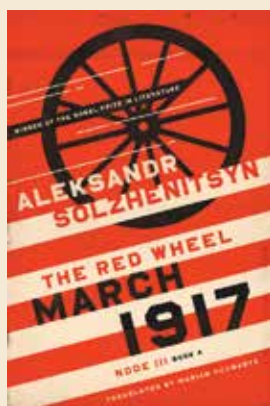
Neither of these books seriously addresses the matter of the typical journalist’s personality profile, as distinct from that of other occupations. Most of the individuals described would qualify as relatively well educated. But it is in my experience an unusual journalist who truly loves to chronicle the activities and utterances of other people, without yielding to the temptation to build up, tear down, or otherwise sway public judgment. Nagourney and Baron, experienced as they are, could give valuable insights into a resentment I have noticed lingering in the hearts and minds of most journalists—sometimes almost imperceptibly, sometimes obviously. It seems that many are psychologically tempted to manage the frustrations that inhere in the role of the chroni-



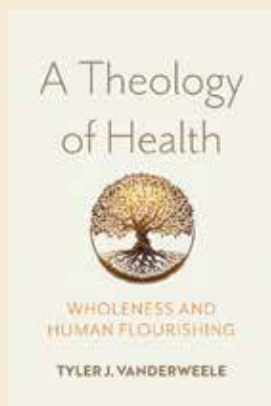
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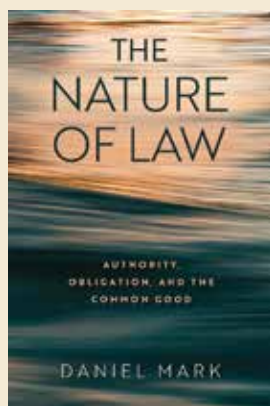
“This book was a joy to read.”
—BRYAN PILKINGTON



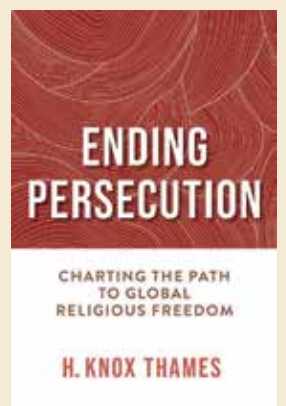
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—CARSON HOLLOWAY



“The author’s wealth of experience illuminates every page.”
—MARY ANN GLENDON

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cler by applying their own biases to what they are describing. In my days as a newspaper owner from 1971 to 2004, our company always went to extremes to enforce a distinction between reporting and comment. Only a few other companies did so, and neither *The New York Times* nor *The Washington Post*, whatever their other merits, was one of them.

IT WOULD ALSO HAVE BEEN WELCOME IF these two authors had devoted a little attention to the business side of the newspapers, especially as they purport to describe the papers' surviving into the internet age through recourse to digital subscriptions. The last Graham publisher of the *Post*, Kay's granddaughter Katharine Weymouth, described this strategy as a matter of "prayer" rather than execution. Her successors allegedly mastered it, but that does not explain last year's \$77 million loss, which Bezos has declared to be unacceptable. Ululations of joy about the *Post*'s resurrection may be premature. Nagourney gives plenty of attention to digital subscriptions and other responses to the internet, but almost ignores the commercial drama that the *Times* also endured during the editorial upheavals described. It is mentioned that the company dangerously overpaid for *The Boston Globe*, and also that it mistakenly invested an inexcusable \$2.7 billion in buying and canceling its own stock just before the price declined by over 90%. But there is no reference to the fact that part of the reason for the cancelation was that the *Times* partially paid for the *Globe* with its own stock, and had guaranteed the price of that stock going forward. The *Times*'s managers were hooked on their own lure, and the paper almost perished as a result. Nagourney should also have noted not only that the old *Times* building was hastily sold for much less than it was worth, but

that the cost overruns in the new building are nothing less than a scandal. The Mexican telecommunications multimillionaire Carlos Slim is mentioned as the holder of \$250 million in *New York Times* debt yielding 14%, but not as the prospective vulture that he was. He very nearly seized control of the *Times* for nothing, apart from his initial loan at an exorbitant interest rate. Arthur G. Sulzberger must carry the can for most of these disasters, but he is nowhere tagged for any of them.

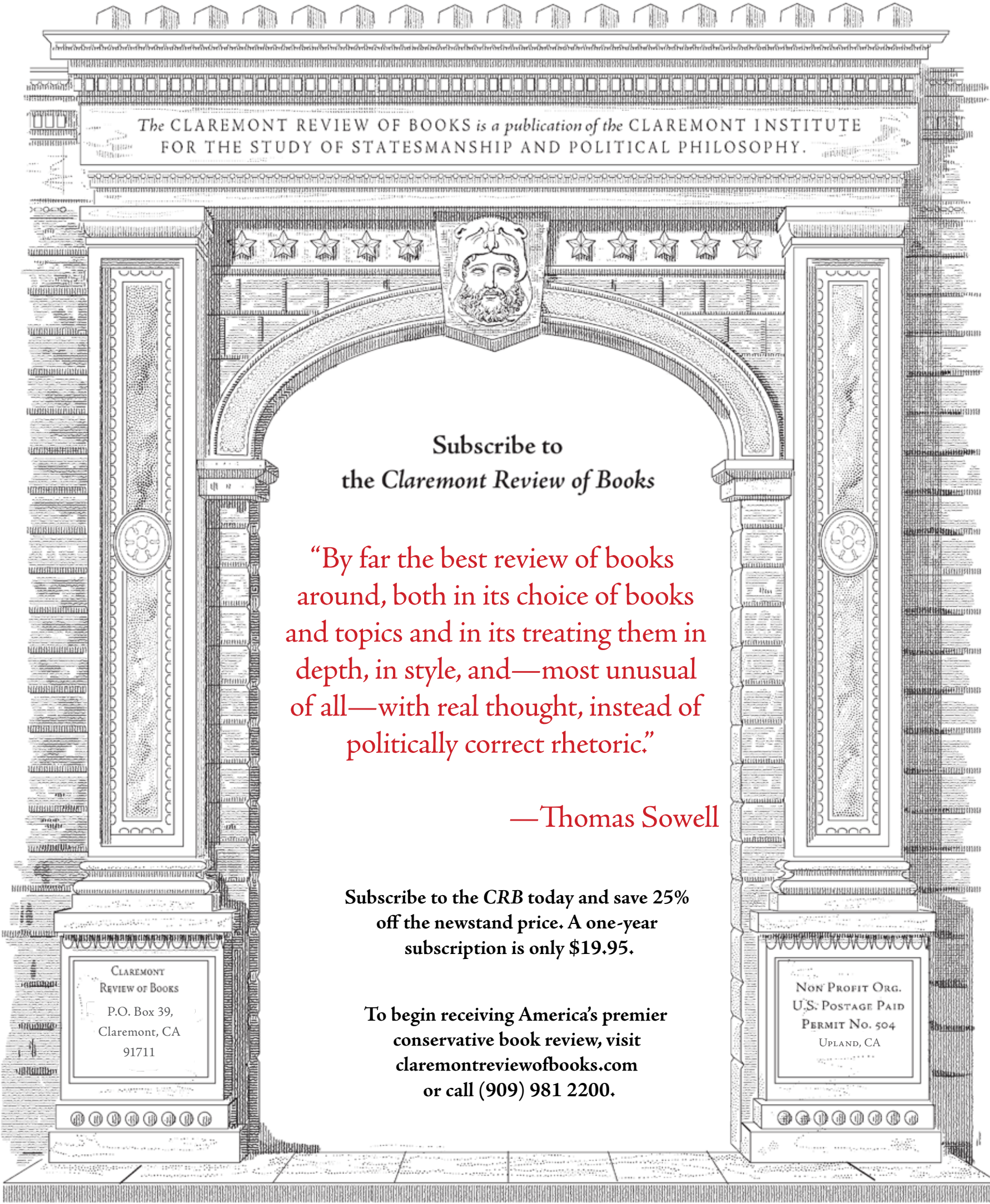
While the *Times* fought the depredations incurred by newer media, it came within a whisker of insolvency. Both the Grahams and the Sulzbergers controlled these properties with a relatively small percentage of the outstanding equity, to which was attached a controlling vote. The precariousness of this position was demonstrated when the Grahams sold the *Post* to Jeff Bezos for a fraction of what it had been worth five years before, but they did not endure the Sulzbergers' hair-raising experience of seeing their great asset almost lose all of its value. At the same time, *Newsweek* magazine cratered as its last Graham-era editor, Jon Meacham, sped it on its way down with the most implausible editorial strategy in magazine history: produce a magazine of commentary only. Apart from George Will, the contributors were a distinctly uninspiring bunch. Meacham has gone on to become a hired historian and speechwriter, without much greater success.

THE COMPARATIVE POINT THAT ARISES from reading these two books is that the Sulzbergers were more determined and tenacious newspaper owners than the Grahams. The Sulzbergers' patriarch, Adolph S. Ochs, was a publisher from Tennessee who bought the *Times* in 1896 and successfully competed in New York in the most crowded

daily newspaper market in history. He went head-to-head with Edwin L. Godkin (the *Post*), Whitelaw Reid (the *Tribune*), Charles A. Dana (the *Sun*), James Gordon Bennett, Jr. (the *Herald*), Joseph Pulitzer (the *World*), and William Randolph Hearst (the *Journal*). All but the Pulitzers and Hearsts are gone from newspapers now, and they are not in New York. Ochs's great-great-grandson is still the publisher of the *Times*. The Grahams came with Kay Graham's father, Albert Meyer, in 1933 and left with her granddaughter in 2013. Despite their horrifying commercial blunders, the Sulzbergers are still there.

What has really destroyed their legacy, more seriously than any economic or technological development, is the papers' total abdication of any pretense to journalistic objectivity. I suspect that one of the reasons only about 15% of Americans trust the media is that approximately half of Americans admire Donald Trump, and almost all the national political media leap at every opportunity to express their disparagement of him. Even those who despise the media will admit that a free press is essential to a democracy. This level of mistrust, regrettably not undeserved, really is a grave danger. A society will cease to defend what it does not respect or value. The unanimous, know-nothing assault on Donald Trump has sabotaged the credibility of the media and made it contemptible. It would have been a very good thing if either of these authors had tackled that subject as they celebrated the recovery of the famous newspapers that are the subjects of their books.

Conrad Black is a former newspaper publisher and the author of several books, including, most recently, The Political and Strategic History of the World, Vol I: From Antiquity to the Caesars, 14 A.D. (New English Review Press).



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