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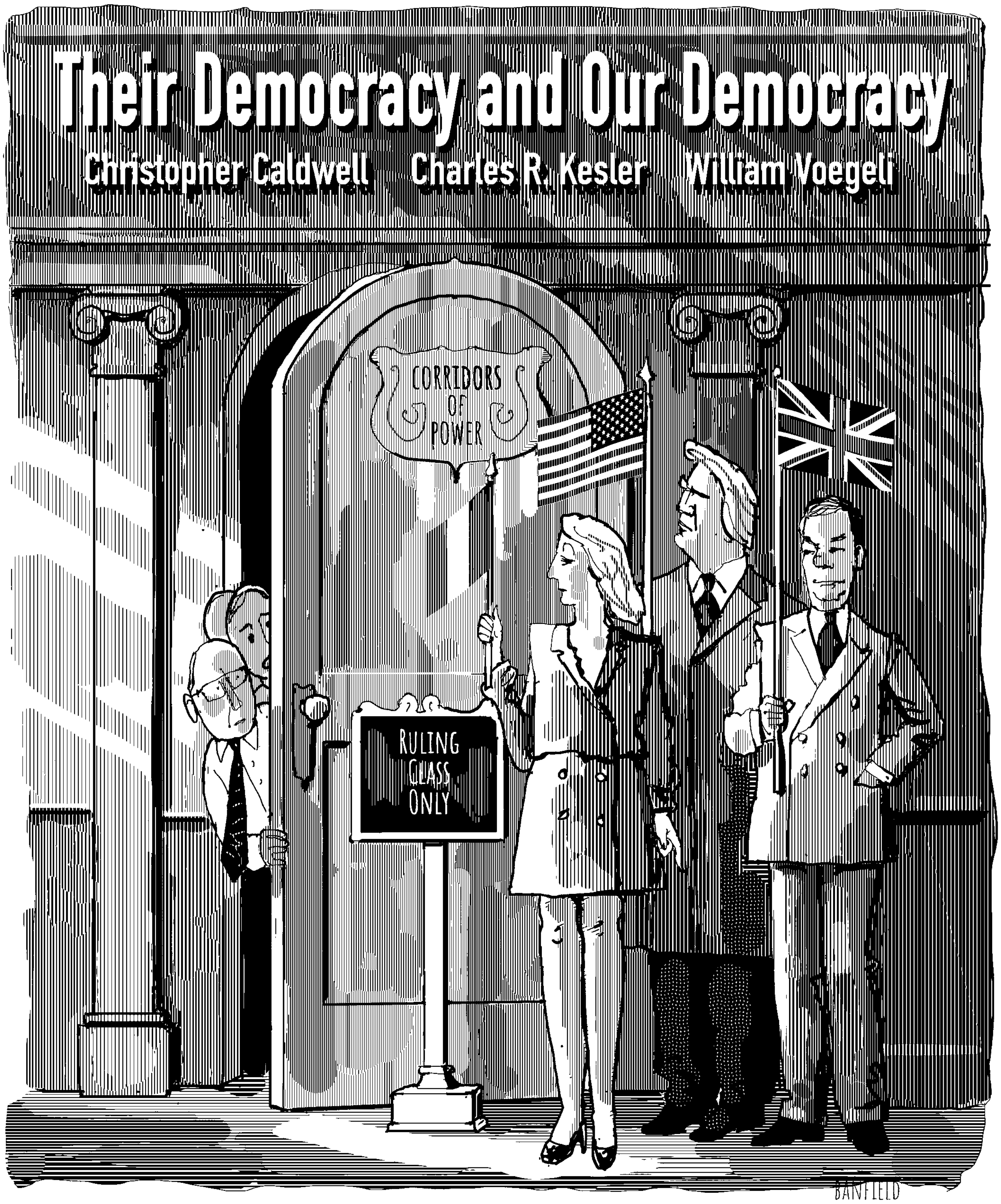
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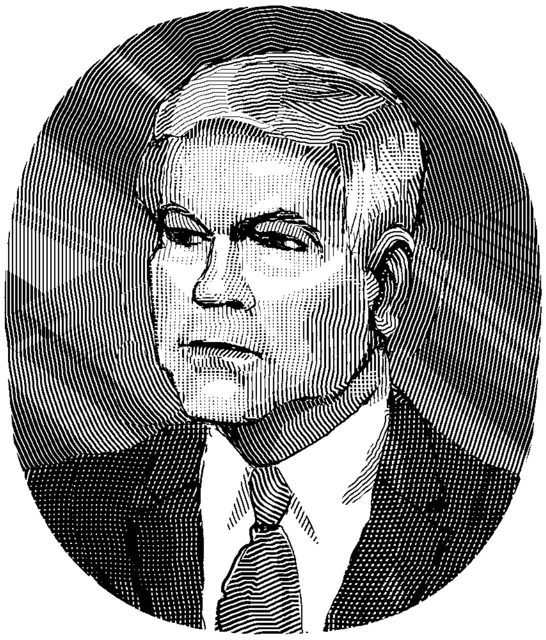
Book Review by Jean M. Yarbrough

AMONG FRIENDS

Leisure with Dignity: Essays in Celebration of Charles R. Kesler, edited by Michael Anton and Glenn Ellmers.
Encounter Books, 256 pages, $32.99



CHARLES KESLER

The editors of *Leisure with Dignity*, celebrating their teacher Charles Kesler, open with a brief archeology of the Claremont Graduate University (CGU) and of the Claremont Institute. Founded in 1925, CGU came into its own in the late 1960s with the arrival of Leo Strauss, who, together with his students Harry V. Jaffa, Martin Diamond, and Harry Neumann, brought forth the brilliant first generation of "Claremonsters." This brief Golden Age, which produced such luminaries as Tom West, as well as the late Michael Uhlmann and Angelo Codevilla, came to an end when Strauss left Claremont for St. John's College in 1969 and Jaffa and Diamond acrimoniously fell out. In due course, the graduate school entered its Silver Age, which saw the founding of the Claremont Institute in 1979 by Larry Arnn, my old graduate school pal Ken Masugi, the late Peter Schramm and Tom Silver, and other Jaffa students, primarily to "preach and perpetuate the Old Man's teaching." The Institute would later become the center of "West Coast Straussianism," to distinguish it from the more politically aloof "East Coast" variety. Jaffa continued to preside energetically over this rollicking group of Claremonsters for the next decade, when he was forced to retire from the university—though it was not much of a retirement; he merely moved his office over to the Claremont Institute and carried on as before. But it was clear that Claremont needed new blood, and with the appointment of Charles Kesler to the graduate school's and Claremont McKenna College's political science department in 1983, the Bronze Age was born.

Before getting to the essays in this *Festschrift*, drawn mostly from Kesler's doctoral students in the 1990s, a word of clarification: the Bronze Age that editors Michael Anton and Glenn Ellmers attribute to Kesler has nothing to do with the alt-right ravings of the Romanian-born Bronze Age Pervert (BAP) whose book Anton reviewed in these pages ("Are the Kids Al(t)right?," Summer 2019). Kesler, a West Virginia native, who was both an undergraduate and graduate student at Harvard, writing his doctoral dissertation on Cicero under Harvey Mansfield, brought a new sensibility to Claremont. Although a strong admirer of Jaffa (only a year out of college Kesler had praised him in the pages of William F. Buckley's *National Review*), the young assistant professor had no wish to imitate Jaffa's combative style. As Anton and Ellmers observe in their introduction, Kesler was remarkably reticent about his own philosophical views. The farthest he went was to sport a t-shirt emblazoned with the Latin phrase (found in Cicero) "*cum dignitate otium*." For those of us who first came to know Charles in his dapper middle age, the idea of him in a t-shirt (swilling beer, no less) is sure to raise an eyebrow, but the editors have put that phrase to good use as the title (loosely translated) of this engaging tribute.

The essays themselves, ranging on subjects from Plato's *Laws* to the administrative state, give ample testimony to the range of both Kesler's and his students' scholarly interests, as well as their relevance to contemporary politics. Bradley C.S. Watson's discussion of the classical view of penal justice contrasted with modern and liberal views of punishment provides a useful introduction to some of the more philosophical questions swirling around the very public criminal trials in the upcoming presidential election. What, Watson asks, is the connection between punishment and justice, why do some individuals act unjustly, do they do so voluntarily, and what should be the aim of penal justice: deterrence, rehabilitation, or—heaven forfend—revenge? Starting with Plato's *Laws*, Watson explores the tension between penal laws and justice. Although justice is *the* political virtue, there is nothing noble about the necessity of

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punishing wrongdoers. Perhaps this is why Aristotle (in contrast to the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*) devotes so little attention to this necessary aspect of justice in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. But why do men act unjustly in the first place? In Watson's reading, the principal motives are too much spiritedness, along with an outsized desire for pleasure. Still, he adds, we are never simply driven by our passions; at some level, we must choose to commit unjust acts. What then of ignorance: is it voluntary or involuntary? If voluntary, why punish animals and even inanimate objects that do us harm? (This, incidentally, was the question Ken Masugi raised in the seminar we both took on the *Laws* as graduate students at the New School for Social Research.) The ancient answer is that rehabilitation and deterrence, however necessary, are not the only aims of penal justice; there is also the very human desire for revenge—precisely what Donald Trump's opponents warn will dominate his presidency if he is elected later this year. Watson closes out his discussion of the ancients with a timely reminder from Thucydides that the regime's legitimacy is very much bound up with a willingness, however lacking in nobility, to punish injustice.

Unlike Plato and Aristotle, modern views of punishment tend to emphasize rehabilitation and deterrence while rejecting or seriously downplaying retribution and revenge. Watson pays special attention to the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for whom the root cause of crime is society, not the individual, who can never really be blamed for acting as he does. Does this sound familiar? There is much more in this fine essay that sheds light on our current approaches to penal justice.

In his essay on *King Lear*, Glenn Ellmers makes use of Plato's *Laws* in a different way, focusing on the educational function of "preludes" to the laws in Books IV and V. He proposes that we see the end of *Lear* as pointing to a new beginning, in which the idea of justice, absent in the king himself, can once again ennoble the English-speaking, and perhaps even the whole, world.

Two other essays focus on the classical virtue of prudence. Timothy Caspar explores the question of why Cicero, that intrepid defender of Roman virtue, nevertheless supported the First Triumvirate undermining the Republic. As Cicero explained in a famous letter to a friend in 54 B.C., statesmen may have a constant goal, *cum dignitate otium* (here translated as "peace with honor"), but the means by which they apply this principle will vary with the times. In the real world, statesmen must choose the lesser of two evils, while hewing to the higher dictates of natural law. Matthew Spalding in his essay then carries the classical virtue of prudence into the modern world, showing how it was attacked, on the one hand, by Niccolò Machiavelli for being too high-minded and by Immanuel Kant, on the other, for not being high-minded enough. It was between this Scylla and Charybdis that the American Founders, led by George Washington, had to navigate. Murray Bessette complicates the picture by exploring Machiavelli's discussion in the *Discourses on Livy* of how difficult it is for a good man to do evil when it is necessary and then make way for the return of the good once the evil has been extinguished. Even then, he argues, all regimes go through cycles and ultimately perish.

Given Charles Kesler's research and teaching interests, it is not surprising that nearly half of the essays focus on America, and especially the founding. In the first sentence of his essay, Michael Anton alerts the reader that his contribution will be no hagiography: "Stanley Rosen once wrote that Leo Strauss 'used to endorse Nietzsche's remark that the student's duty to his teacher is to kill him.'" Well, not literally, but Anton, focusing exclusively on *The Federalist* (and using the bestselling edition put together by Kesler himself), challenges his teacher's argument that the "[f]ounders relied just as much on ancient [practical] wisdom as on modern theory." Despite numerous references to ancient Greek and Roman political practice, nearly all of *The Federalist*'s examples are negative. Publius dismisses the Greek polities as "wretched nurseries of unceasing discord." The Roman Republic, while escaping this fate, fell victim to her incessant military expansion. Thus Anton is more open to the view that the American republic rests on fundamentally modern principles. But not entirely. He notes *The Federalist*'s movement from the lower concern with safety to the higher focus on happiness, the common good, an appeal to better motives, and even moral virtues. But if Kesler is right that *The Federalist* is not thoroughly modern—and Anton thinks he is—the student cannot help but ask, "How did things come to this?" Kesler's argument that *The Federalist*'s political science was undone by the "alien import of Progressivism [that] corrupted and supplanted the founding" is surely part of the answer. But Anton leaves the reader with a broader, more unsettling question: was there something about modernity itself that made even the wisdom of the founders susceptible to some of its more destabilizing elements?

One answer to Anton's probing question, offered by Patrick Deneen and other Catholic integralists, is a resounding *yes*, there is something wrong with liberalism itself. Vincent Phillip Muñoz, Kesler's student and Deneen's colleague at Notre Dame, isn't buying it. He rejects the argument that liberalism as originally conceived is a project of human emancipation and a celebration of individual autonomy, arguing instead that the founders' liberalism champions an ordered liberty, not wholesale license. Properly understood, it is compatible with communal responsibility, grounded on the laws of nature and nature's God.

Steven Hayward offers a different answer to Anton's question, focusing partly on the significance of evolutionary biology. Ironically, he shows how homegrown *conservatives* such as William Graham Sumner did much of the spadework to prepare the field for Progressivism. Although the influence of Social Darwinism has been both wildly exaggerated and wrongly linked to the founders' liberalism, it popularized certain more basic ideas, such as that nature is changeable, that nature should be conquered for the benefit of mankind, and that nature provides no standard for political life—all of which made the preservation of the natural rights republic after Darwin much more difficult.

By contrast, Anthony Peacock entertains none of these doubts about what went wrong. Although he agrees with Anton that the authors of *The Federalist* were partly inspired by the ancients, he locates their influence in Publius' concern for the honor of the American republic, especially in foreign affairs. Peacock is especially keen to show that republicanism can be reconciled with empire, albeit a new kind of empire that promotes commercial daring, maintained by a powerful military that made America the number one power in the world. His essay captures the ebullient mood of conservatives at the height of the Reagan era, but one wonders what he would say about "America's national-security state" (his unfortunate phrase) in 2024.

Finally, Ronald J. Pestritto closes out the collection with a rousing tribute that charts Kesler's seminal role in exposing the faulty historical analysis of progressivism that dominated much of the 20th century and which viewed progressivism as merely a continuation of liberalism, a pragmatic response to social and economic problems unforeseen by the founders. Through a careful analysis of Woodrow Wilson's writings, first sketched in the 1980s, Kesler showed otherwise. But it was not until Barack Obama publicly declared that he sought the fundamental transformation of America that Kesler's warnings about progressivism struck home. In later essays and then in his books *I Am the Change: Barack Obama and the Crisis of Liberalism* (2012) and *Crisis of the Two Constitutions* (2021) Kesler sketched out the three waves—constitutional, economic, and cultural—through which progressivism in the 20th century had passed.

Nor was he content merely to call out the Left; he also lobbed a few criticisms at his allies on the right. To those East Coast Straussians who found little to admire in the "low but solid" American experiment, Kesler warned against utopian longings for the classical world, while at the same time pointing out that the republic the founders created was devoted to liberty but not libertarianism.

Still, as longtime editor of the *Claremont Review of Books*, he has generally remained above the fray, welcoming a wide variety of opinions in its pages and providing a home for *cum dignitate otium*. *Leisure with Dignity* is a volume to be not only celebrated but seriously discussed.

Jean M. Yarbrough is professor of government and Gary M. Pendy, Sr. Professor of Social Sciences at Bowdoin College.

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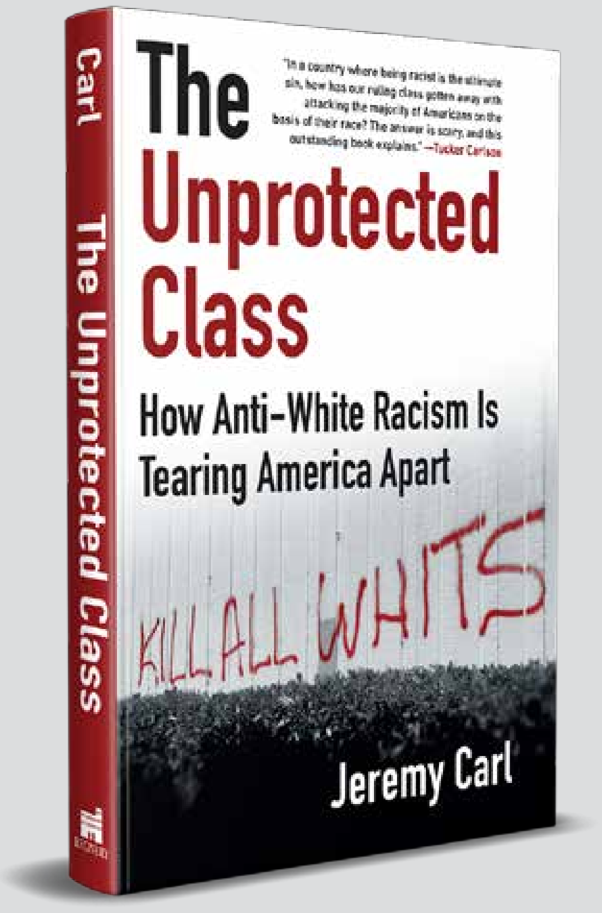
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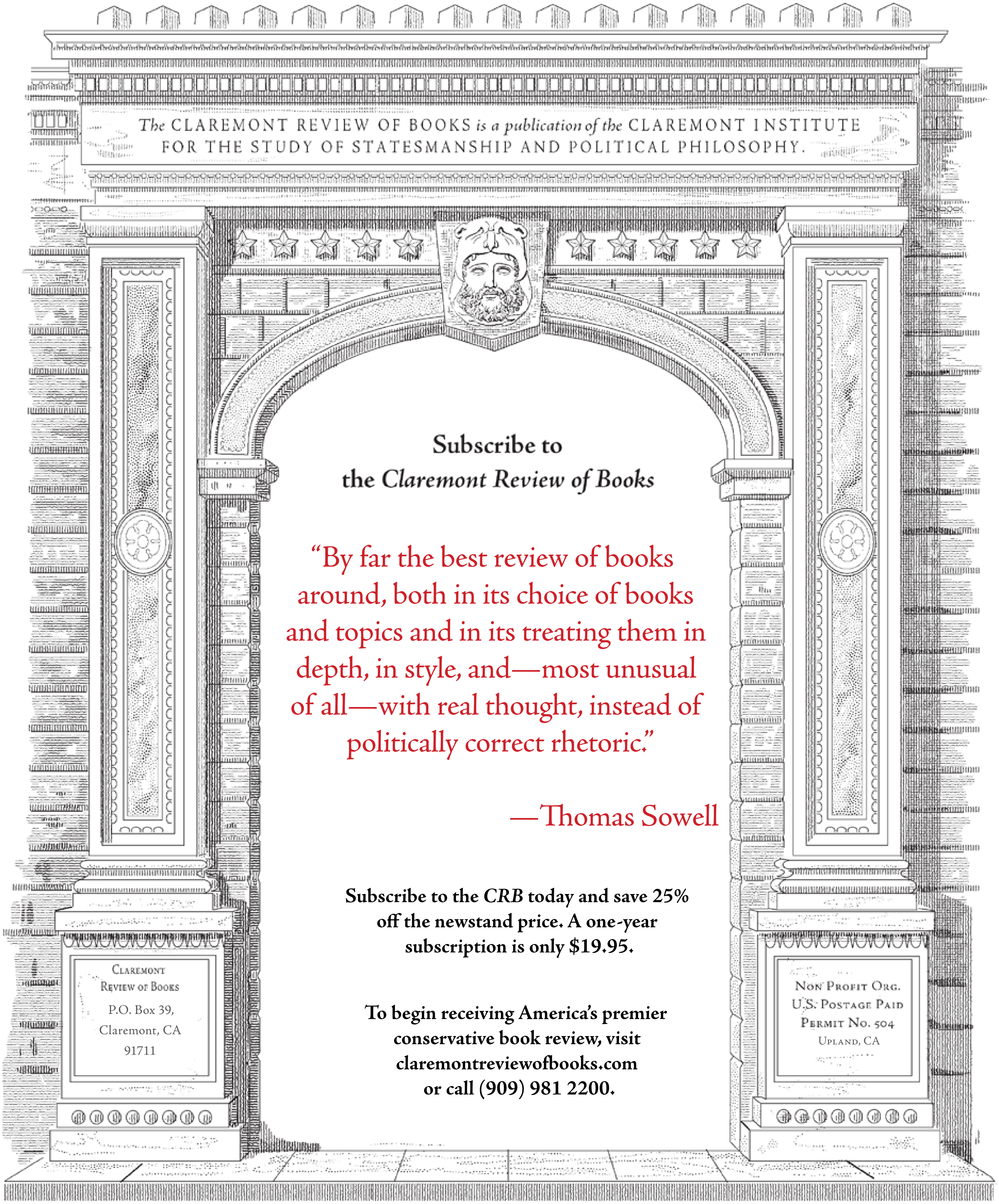

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