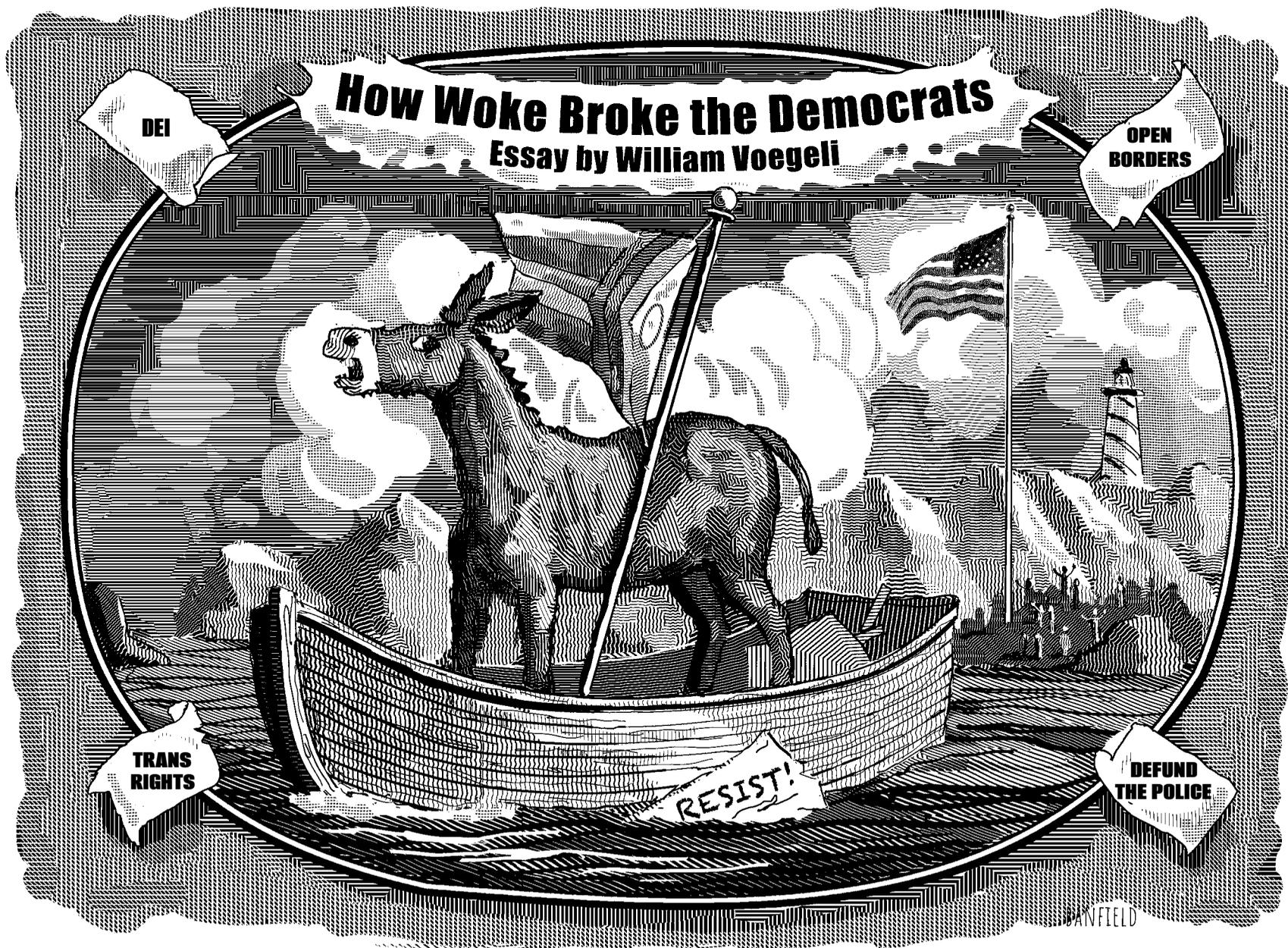


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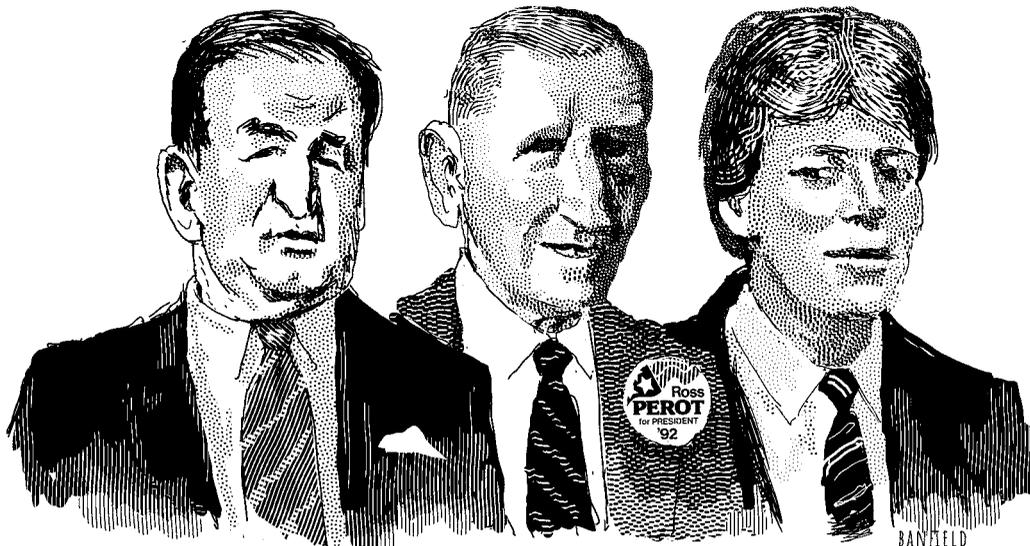


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Book Review by Andrew E. Busch

THE OUTSIDERS

When the Clock Broke: Con Men, Conspiracists, and How America Cracked Up in the Early 1990s, by John Ganz.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 432 pages, \$30 (cloth), \$20 (paper)



Pat Buchanan

Ross Perot

David Duke

WHEN THE CLOCK BROKE: CON MEN, *Conspiracists, and How America Cracked Up in the Early 1990s* takes a deep dive into the political and economic dysfunctions of a pivotal moment in recent American history. Though it focuses on a very narrow period, roughly corresponding with the one-term George H.W. Bush presidency (with occasional excursions into the more distant past), the book manages to cover a wide range of political, social, cultural, and economic tendencies, from David Duke's brief political success and the Los Angeles riots to economic competition with Japan, Bill Clinton's "Sister Souljah moment," and the standoff between white separatists and federal agents at Ruby Ridge.

A freelance journalist who writes the Substack newsletter *Unpopular Front*, John Ganz begins with the proposition that during this period—the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and the (in his view, superficial) economic boom of the Reagan years—a variety of factions “hoped to recast American democracy around the ‘negative solidarity’ of knowing who[m] you hated or wanted to destroy: this system would be based on domination and exclusion, a restricted sense of community that jealously guarded its boundaries and policed its members, and the direction of a charismatic leader who would use his power to punish and persecute for the sake of restoring lost national greatness.” In case anyone

misses the point, the book hurtles toward its end with a barely-concealed allusion to Donald Trump as one of the “phony populist gun-fighters” disdained by the paleoconservative-populist commentator Samuel T. Francis, one of Ganz’s main subjects of interest. The final paragraph relates the story of a 1992 limousine ride from New York City to Atlantic City Trump took with his architect Philip Johnson, during which Johnson reportedly told the future president that he would make a “good mafioso.” To which Trump replied, “The best.”

The book’s title is drawn from a speech libertarian economist Murray Rothbard gave in January 1992 at the John Randolph Club in which he embraced Patrick J. Buchanan’s presidential candidacy, exulted in America having not only turned back but broken the clock of the Soviet Union, and declared,

[W]e shall break the clock of social democracy. We shall break the clock of the Great Society. We shall break the clock of the welfare state. We shall break the clock of the New Deal.

The rise of Rush Limbaugh and talk radio, the culture of the LAPD under Chief Daryl Gates, tangled webs of extremists including the Aryan Nation, Christian Identity, and Ruby Ridge’s Randy Weaver, and the deeply troubled condition of New York City—all form additional interconnected points of interest.

THE BACKDROP TO IT ALL IS A NATION unmoored. Although Ganz allows that social liberalism contributed to feelings of dislocation, he clearly sees the locus of responsibility falling on the “neoliberalism” of the 1980s. In his telling, a new structure of “unchained” markets was imposed on society, destroying whole industries and laying waste to comfortable relationships of mutual economic security. The country was falling apart, the old political arrangements were defunct, and malign forces stepped into the vacuum.

Whatever the flaws of this narrative, there are several reasons to take *When the Clock Broke* seriously. For starters, Ganz has indeed pinpointed a critical moment in contemporary American political history. In a few short years, the United States went from being locked in global struggle with the Soviet Union to standing astride a unipolar world; moderate New Democrats went from being on the outside of their party to controlling the presidency; Republicans went from winning five of six presidential races to losing more often than they won; and the famous three-legged stool of the old conservative movement began to splinter. A couple of years after this period Congress went from an inveterate Democratic bastion to being highly competitive in nearly every election.

More subtle but no less important changes were also afoot. In the absence of constant vigilance against foreign threats, the salience



of character in the presidency diminished, a change that Bill Clinton took advantage of immediately. The end of the Cold War also altered politico-economic forces, helping turn the nation's largest state into a Democratic stronghold as conservative aerospace workers lost their jobs and moved elsewhere. *When the Clock Broke* provides a window into figures and events that helped define that crucial moment. Readers might be surprised with the number of times a theme of our own day was already raging—or at least simmering. And whatever one thinks of Trump, Ganz is not wrong that the protean outlines of “Trumpism” came into view in the early 1990s.

THE DECLINE OF MANUFACTURING AND accompanying fear of an Asian economic conquest was a topic of intense discussion in 1992. The Asian threat emanated from Japan. Democratic presidential candidate Paul Tsongas told audiences, “The Cold War is over, and Japan won.” Today, Japan has been supplanted by China, posing not only an economic but a military danger. Economic fears, then as now, put fresh wind into the sails of an old argument over whether American industries should be protected from foreign competition or perhaps even given a leg up with subsidies and other forms of industrial policy.

Cold War exhaustion, compounded by a certain amount of disillusion in the aftermath of the Gulf war, led in another, though complementary, direction: a more general turn by some against American engagement with the world. Immigration became more of a concern after Ronald Reagan's 1986 amnesty legalized and locked into place many heretofore illegal immigrants (the amnesty was supposed to be accompanied by more stringent border security, but nothing much resulted from that promise). U.S. aid to foreign countries also came under greater suspicion (though it had rarely been popular).

Other harbingers of our contemporary politics began to emerge in the early '90s. For example, Ganz notes the rise of the grassroots “techies” (or “computer freaks”), who in 1992 were all-in for Perot at the same time that early Silicon Valley oligarchs were swinging toward Clinton and the Democrats. The internet was just starting to register with the public. The fragmentation of the media, and the revival of the 19th-century partisan press that came with it, was further foreshadowed in the rise of talk radio. Another element of that picture, untouched by Ganz, was the concurrent rise of 24-hour cable news. Although CNN had been in existence for a decade, it did not really come of age until Bernard Shaw ducked under the

table in his Baghdad hotel room to report live the opening shots of the Gulf war. Fox News and MSNBC would launch a few years later, in 1996.

THE FIGURES ON WHOM GANZ FOCUSES were precursors of Donald Trump in varying ways. The terms connecting them were “populism” and “nationalism,” not always well defined but always suggesting what might be called “outsiderism.” In the English tradition, the figures representing these strands saw themselves as the “country” party, in opposition to the “court” party (or, as Trump would later call it, the “swamp”).

Ganz begins his story with David Duke, the Klansman and American Nazi Party figure who traded his white robe for a dress suit and ran in quick succession for state representative, U.S. senator, governor of Louisiana, and ultimately the Republican nomination for president. He narrowly won the first, lost the middle two, and in 1992 received a grand total of 2% of the accumulated Republican presidential primary vote (though he did break 10% in a handful of Southern states). National Republicans repudiated him, which helped him gain credibility as an outsider. Ganz notes that Duke possessed the “strange power to make voters alter their opinions to fit him”; a Republican-convened focus group despised a hypothetical candidate possessing Duke's traits, but made excuses for him when told the imaginary politician was David Duke. As a result, state Republicans feared Duke's voters and largely held their fire.

Though he caused the Republican National Committee heartburn, Duke himself burned out within a few years. To Ganz, Duke “found purchase as the acceptable public face of unacceptable private hatreds and paranoid, but he was always too ‘soft-core’ for the radical vanguard of his own movement even as he was too tainted with the reek of the racist netherworld to fully cross over into the mainstream.” In short order, two more substantial outsiders arose in his wake: Pat Buchanan and H. Ross Perot.

Buchanan, a political commentator who got his start as a speechwriter for President Nixon and served as White House communications director during Reagan's second term, was, in the parlance of the time, a paleoconservative. He attacked George Bush for his deviations from Reaganism—the big tax increase in 1990, funding for obscene art through the National Endowment for the Arts—but underlying it all was devotion to an older conservatism: protectionist, isolationist, even nativist.

Ganz reminds us that Buchanan's presidential campaign committee was called the

America First Committee, a bridge between Trump's America First and the first America First, the isolationist committee led by Charles Lindbergh and Robert E. Wood that was dedicated through December 6, 1941 to “keeping America out of war”—i.e., lobbying Congress to defeat the lend-lease aid that Great Britain needed to stave off defeat. (Whether Trump knows or cares about this history is hard to say.) At a campaign stop in New Hampshire, Buchanan complained about “Japan, China, Korea, and Germany—we've been supporting them for so long and they're putting nothing back.” Sounding like Trump a quarter-century later, Buchanan criticized “the failure of the national government of the United States to protect the borders of the United States from an illegal invasion that involves at least a million aliens a year. As a consequence of that, we have social problems and economic problems. And drug problems.” Buchanan's proposed solution? A border wall, built by the Army Corps of Engineers. He did not promise it would be beautiful, but he did expect that it would keep out 95% of the “illegal traffic.”

The recent chorus chastising Joe Biden for caring more about Ukraine's borders than America's even had an analogue. “As America's imperial troops guard frontiers all over the world,” Buchanan claimed, “our own frontiers are open, and the barbarian is inside the gates.” Though he posed a more substantial threat to Bush than Duke did, Buchanan, too, faded after giving the president a scare in the New Hampshire primary.

IT WAS TEXAS BILLIONAIRE ROSS PEROT who carried the mantle of the outsider into the 1992 general election. Perot was anti-NAFTA, anti-Gulf war, and, unlike Duke or Buchanan, lacked any experience in government (though he had a great deal of experience profiting from government contracts). He had honed his populism through his involvement in the MIA/POW movement that was convinced that hundreds or even thousands of living U.S. servicemen had been left behind in the jungles of Southeast Asia—and that the government had conspired to cover it up. In Ganz's estimation, “Perot positioned himself as a messianic figure in this nationalist cult of the undead.”

His campaign (or campaigns, since he dropped out in July before resuming his run in October) subsisted on large quantities of free media (especially cable television talk shows), rallies, and half-hour paid infomercials featuring Perot behind a desk discussing charts illustrating various economic problems. Ganz's assessment of Perot as a cult



leader is not far off. His voters, like Duke's, seemed transfixed by him and were unshakable even when confronted with his manifest flaws. One of his campaign organizers said that seeing Perot was "going to be like seeing the Virgin Mary or an apparition or something." Outside observers and even some Perot volunteers professed to find an authoritarian streak in him, made evident by his need for tight control, his tendency toward paranoia, and his penchant for spying on his own people. In some ways, Perot fit the picture of the classic demagogue: a man of wealth appealing to the grievances of the (self-identified) downtrodden, a politician adept at spinning homey aphorisms but without solid or detailed policy commitments ("We're not interested in detailed positions," he told an audience on the *Today* show). When it came to America's place in the world, Perot and Buchanan were two peas in a pod. "We are draining our treasury to defend the world," Perot complained. "The other countries who are rich, the other countries who have what used to be our money, are not bearing their fair share of the defense burden. We've got to change that." Perot ended up with nearly 20% of the vote, the best showing by an independent or third-party candidate since Theodore Roosevelt in 1912—and Roosevelt had already been president for nearly two full terms.

GANZ IDENTIFIES AN INTELLECTUAL shift taking place beneath the surface of the ongoing presidential campaigns. In his telling, a portion of what was known as "conservatism" broke off and reformed along different lines. Seeing the Reagan years as a missed opportunity, if not an outright failure, these conservatives were no longer content to conserve. What was required, in their view, was a counter-revolution of Middle American Radicals (or MARs). This counter-revolution would not be as committed to free-market economics as mainstream conservatism and would be more open to a "Caesarist" embrace of presidential power. Above all, it would be fiercely opposed to "globalism," by which the iconoclasts meant anything from free trade to collective security arrangements to the surrender of U.S. sovereignty to international organizations. Sam Francis, a contributor to paleocon *Chronicles* magazine, was a leader in this thought movement. Murray Rothbard, a radical libertarian driven out of mainstream conservatism, was another. Francis called for a "new nationalism" as a substitute for the old, decrepit conservatism, but expressed considerable pessimism about the future of the republican experiment in America. "We neither want a republic nor

could we keep one if we had one," Francis said. "We do not deserve to have one, and like the barbarians conquered and enslaved by the Greeks and Romans, we are suited only for servitude."

GANZ'S GLIMPSE INTO THE 1990S IS bracing. "So that's where that came from" is not an unnatural thought at numerous points in the narrative. Still, his book is not without serious shortcomings. One consists in what is not said. The book ends abruptly with the election of 1992 and its immediate aftermath, without any attempt to make a direct connection between that moment and ours. It is just assumed that everyone can draw a line between Duke, Buchanan, Perot, and Francis on the one hand and Trump on the other.

The problem is that the line is anything but straight. The outsiderism of the early '90s, in its broadest form, does look a lot like the outsiderism of today. Perot was the first significant presidential candidate since Wendell Willkie in 1940 to have no political experience at all. The next was Trump. Moreover, threads of nationalism, trade protectionism, neo-isolationism, and skepticism or hostility toward immigration hold the pieces of the package together.

The more one looks at the individual figures, however, the clearer it becomes that there is no straight line of development. David Duke is not Donald Trump, who deliberately appealed to and won a growing share of Asian, Hispanic, Jewish, and African-American voters. Buchanan is also not Trump, who eschewed a Buchanan-style crusade against homosexuality and has ratcheted down his party's pro-life commitments. One can hardly imagine Trump delivering Buchanan's 1992 national convention "culture war" speech. And though Perot created a mold for the perfect outsider, Trump does not fit it either. Perot was a Boy Scout, literally and figuratively, and was not only anti-free trade but also anti-deficit. Trump is anything but a Boy Scout and has thus far been steadfastly opposed to tackling the looming entitlement spending crisis. He may find Rothbard's nationalism congenial, but repeal the New Deal? Unlikely. And, although Trump mimics the language and arguments of the neo-isolationists, his first-term policies did not match the rhetoric and his second-term national security appointments appear to be a mix of neo-isolationists and more traditional Republican hawks. Thus, the outsiders of the early '90s did not provide a unified model that Trump followed. Rather, they showed the growing political viability of a general theme and offered various manifestations of it from which Trump could pick and

choose. Ganz leaves room for this ambiguity, allowing up front that the tendencies he describes were "inchoate" and that Trump later "crystallized" them, but the process by which they were crystallized and some elements jettisoned is entirely out of sight.

MORE GENERALLY, WHEN *THE CLOCK Broke* treats the early 1990s as if it were an unmitigated disaster that simply continued unabated until Trump was elected in 2016. To be sure, Ganz briefly acknowledges that those years were sandwiched between two periods of ("at least superficial") prosperity and optimism. But in the bulk of the book Ganz acts as if the rest of the '90s never happened. And from the beginning, one would also never know that the '80s had any redeeming qualities.

Ganz traffics wholesale in the hoariest liberal caricatures of the Reagan years, with its "glitzy veneer of great wealth," "the reorganization of the economy for short-term gain and sharp upward redistribution," and the reorientation of American life toward "selfish, individual pursuits of material goods." For good measure, the Southern Strategy is dredged up to implicate Reagan in racism (despite the fact that the 1980 Reagan campaign had essentially conceded the Deep South to Jimmy Carter until late polling showed it was winnable), Reagan is declared responsible for "intensification of the Cold War" (as if the invasion of Afghanistan and unprovoked mass deployment of SS-20s in Europe never happened), and his tax cuts and military spending are given sole blame for the deficit (even though real federal revenue went up for most of the 1980s and domestic spending grew more than defense in dollar terms). One is hard-pressed in Ganz's account to understand how Reagan won 49 states in 1984 and George H.W. Bush became the only sitting vice president since Martin Van Buren to win election to the presidency in 1988. A few clues: 1980 was the worst year for real family income since World War II, after which inflation was defeated, nearly 20 million jobs were created, and the indexing provisions of the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 took millions of middle-class families off the losing bracket creep treadmill they had been on for a decade and a half.

In retrospect, the recession of the early 1990s was relatively short and mild. It undoubtedly seemed more distressing at the time because the nation had not suffered a recession for eight years. In the previous eight years (from 1974 to 1982) there had been three recessions. Starting in 1991, there was a new recovery that lasted even longer. Running again in 1996, Perot won only half the

percentage he had four years earlier; in 2000, Buchanan headed Perot's Reform Party and won 0.4% of the national vote. A fuller rendering of these realities would have made for a more interesting, less formulaic book, albeit a more difficult one to write. What Ganz's book needs even more is a complementary volume picking up the story after 1992. We can see certain parallels from there to here, but how *exactly* did we get from there to here?

Undoubtedly, the Iraq war and the Great Recession were major factors in the rebirth of outsiderism. Conversely, perhaps 9/11 temporarily weakened the populist/isolationist impulse. The excesses and heedlessness of the establishment, however, both Republican and Democrat, fueled the fire, as succeeding presidents of both parties plunged ahead with substantially unrestrained immigration, unsuccessful ventures in nation-building abroad, and additional trade deals. They also continued to turn a blind eye to Europe's taking advantage of the U.S. security umbrella on the cheap. On all these fronts, warning signs flashed in the early 1990s but were largely ignored.

TRUMP IS THE CLEAR, THOUGH USUALLY unspoken, target of Ganz, who forthrightly declares that "the politics of national despair" described in his book "have now taken hold of the Republican Party," which is "dominated by figures and ideas that once would have been considered fringe." He feels compelled to acknowledge, however, that there were other forms of fringe thinking in the early '90s beyond the ones that contributed directly to Trumpism. Briefly at the beginning, and then in a chapter toward the end, *When the Clock Broke* puts what was referred to as "political correctness" (and today, "wokeness") under the microscope. Figures such as Sister Souljah, Leonard Jeffries, and Derrick Bell were then at the cutting edge of "multiculturalism" or "Critical Race Theory." They, too, contributed to the fraying of society in that era and beyond. From his perch on the CUNY faculty, Jeffries (the uncle of today's House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries) posited his theory that whites were inferior "ice people." In the wake of the L.A. riots, rapper Sister Souljah asked, "[I]f black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?" But it was Harvard Law School's Bell who arguably cast the longest shadow, as Critical Race Theory, with its crypto-Marxist division of society into white oppressors and black victims, has gradually crept into schoolhouses and board rooms across America.

If Trump is one political colossus of contemporary America, the other colossus, the

yin to Trump's yang, is not so much the Democratic Party but the complex of race-obsessed and often hateful forces that burst into violence in the summer of 2020 and seek to control and shape American life still, polarizing all they touch. If Ganz's goal was to trace the development of Trumpism back to the 1990s, his treatment of this phenomenon was unnecessary. If his goal was to trace current American division, discord, and dysfunction back to the 1990s, his treatment is insufficient.

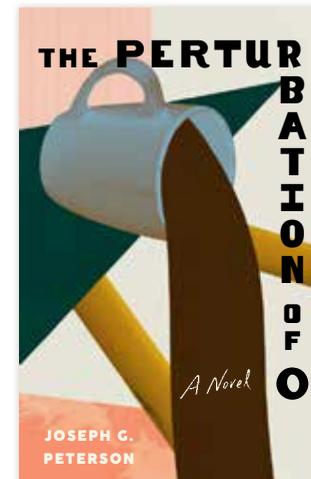
IN ADDITION TO GIVING SOME TENDENCIES too little weight, Ganz also repeatedly raises an interesting point but forces it to carry too much weight. Samuel Francis is a compelling example of a thinker who abandoned mainstream conservatism to espouse Middle American Radicalism, but how important was he? Did Murray Rothbard move away from the fringes of intellectual life when he found his new home among the tribe of the nationalists? How much do Randy Weaver and the other characters involved in Ruby Ridge have to do with any of this? There have always been extremists, and their stories have often not ended well. Was John Gotti really a hero to most New Yorkers? Did most conservatives, or even most nationalists, agree with Rothbard that *The Godfather* portrayed a right-wing utopia, as Ganz suggests? It seems unlikely. Amid Ganz's wheat there is a good deal of chaff.

Driving Ganz's analysis is a particular way of thinking, captured neatly in his list of the "good guys" of the early '90s: Jesse Jackson, Bernie Sanders, Tom Harkin, Jerry Brown, Harris Wofford. His partisan leanings lead him to make observations that he is unable or unwilling to process fully. Clearly, he fears demagoguery and authoritarianism—at least from the right—but he simply equates democracy with egalitarianism, never pairing it with constitutionalism, rights, or the consent of the governed. Yet, it is precisely democracy untethered to constitutionalism or fundamental rights that is most vulnerable to demagoguery and authoritarianism. Once that door is opened, any unscrupulous actor can walk through. Ganz quotes Huey P. Long as claiming, "There is perfect democracy [in Louisiana], and when you have perfect democracy it is pretty hard to tell it from a dictatorship." Long might well have read Aristotle. But, sincere or not, Long was nothing if not a voice for egalitarianism—the veritable Bernie Sanders of the 1930s.

Andrew E. Busch is associate director and professor at the Institute of American Civics in the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

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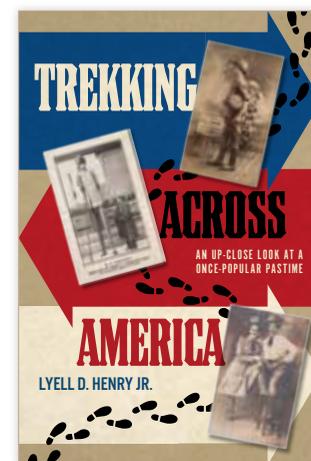
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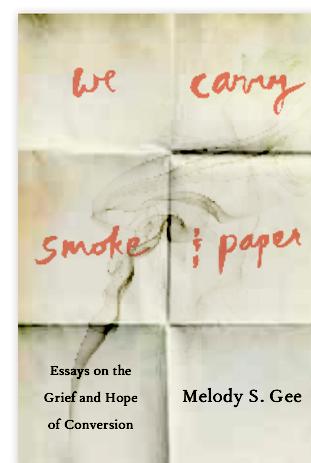
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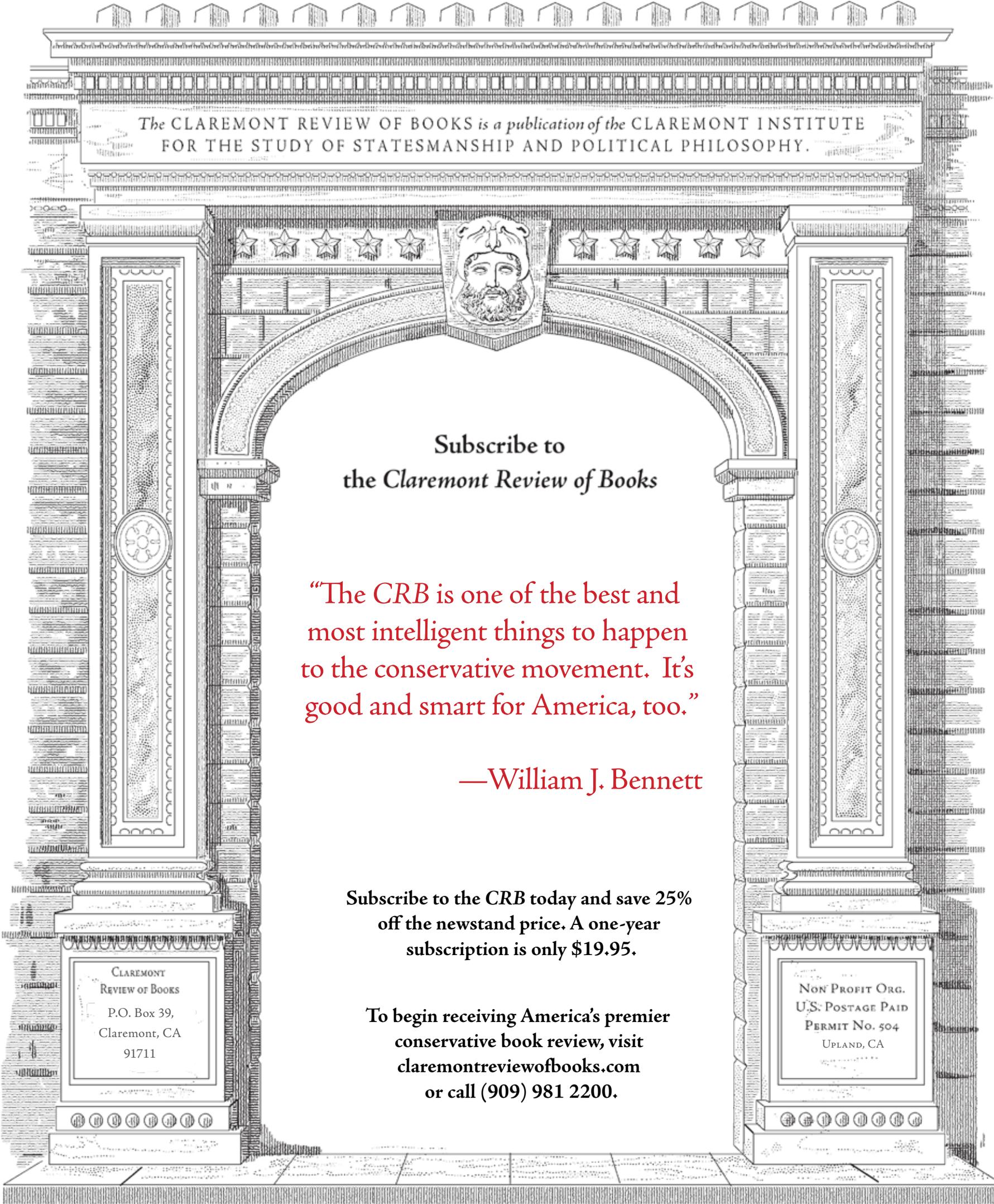


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