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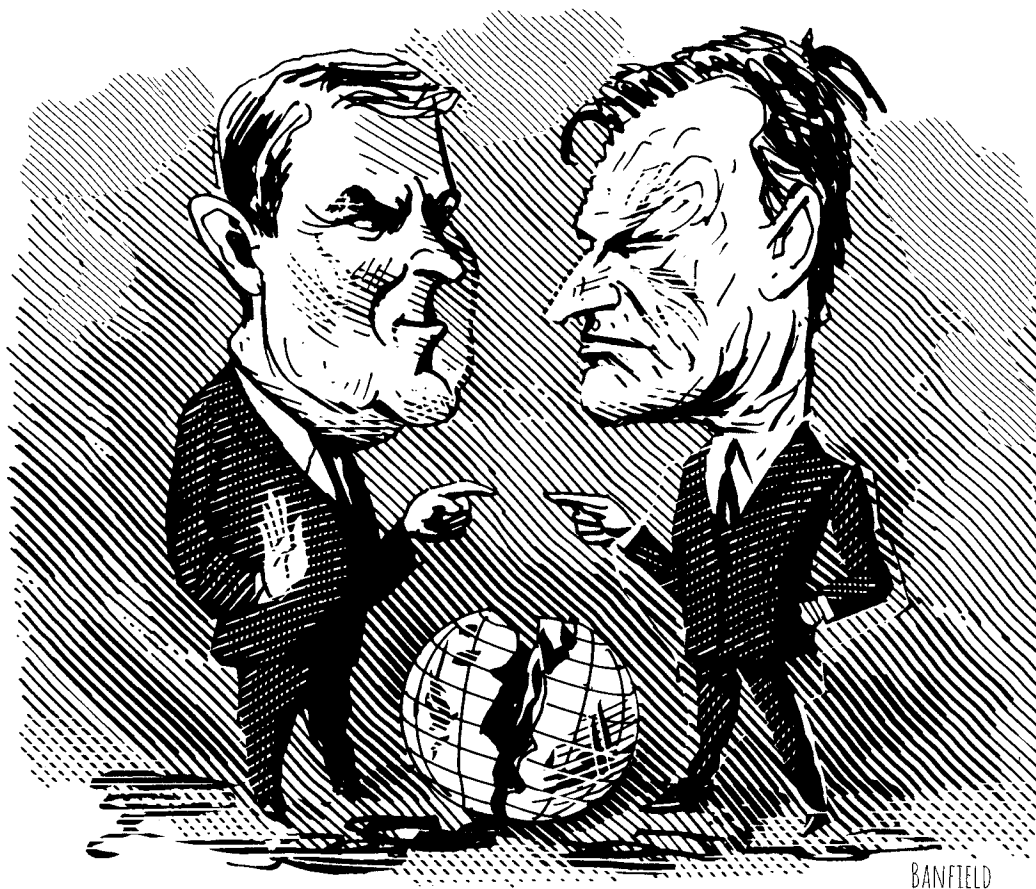


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Book Review by Jakub J. Grygiel

COLD WARRIOR IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Zbig: The Life of Zbigniew Brzezinski, America's Great Power Prophet, by Edward Luce.
Avid Reader Press, 560 pages, \$35



Cyrus Vance and Zbigniew Brzezinski
Drawing from *The New York Times Book Review*, 1984

BOOK REVIEWS, WROTE ZBIGNIEW Brzezinski in a 1960 letter to Abraham Brumberg, editor of the journal *Problems of Communism*, are “debilitating intellectually, demoralizing personally, and destructive collegiately.” Most often they degenerate into personal hostility instead of spurring intellectual debates, he thought, and thus it was better not to write them. Before serving for four years as national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, Brzezinski never shied away from expressing strong opinions, some correct and some not, and his distaste for book reviews may fall into the latter category.

Brzezinski was part of an administration that has gone down in history as a disaster both in its domestic and foreign policy. And yet he has already been the subject of two biographies, the first published a year after his death in 2017, *Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist*, by French policy analyst

Justin Vaïsse, and the second now, *Zbig: The Life of Zbigniew Brzezinski, America's Great Power Prophet*, by an Englishman, *Financial Times* journalist Edward Luce. Both books are readable first takes on a forceful intellectual shaping U.S. foreign policy in the second half of the 20th century. Luce's book, in particular, is full of personal details, relying perhaps too heavily on Brzezinski's diaries and interviews with his family but describing well the energetic strategist who relished intellectual sparks even if they caused personal animosity.

ONE MUST WONDER, THOUGH: IS IT purely by chance that Brzezinski's life has not so far interested an American biographer? Born in Warsaw in 1928 but educated in Canada when his Polish diplomat father was assigned to Montreal, Brzezinski arrived in the U.S. at age 22. He got his Ph.D. at Harvard and then taught there, followed

by Columbia. He quickly became a key participant in the intellectual and policy debates of the Cold War. Together with his Harvard mentor, Carl Friedrich, he wrote *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956), one of the most cited texts on the concept of totalitarianism, the lethal 20th-century concoction of ideology, technology, and control over mass media and the economy. Like Henry Kissinger (born in Germany), Brzezinski had a mindset that was thoroughly European, shaped by the historical experiences of the World War II generation. He accepted the continuity of history, the enduring nature of conflict, and the immense fragility of any political creation, including the American republic. Beyond these shared traits, there is no singular school of European-born policymakers, and the differences among these individuals were deep and intellectual clashes recurrent. For example, Brzezinski was more optimistic about the U.S. than Kissinger, strongly op-



that one could understand political developments through abstract theories perfected in seminar rooms. Hence, he traveled frequently and widely in Europe, gradually expanding his geographic reach elsewhere, especially in Asia. He focused on Russia as the central strategic problem facing the U.S., with China as a potential partner against Moscow's global aspirations. Latin America and Africa were for the most part irrelevant to him.

Above all, he was impatient with those who thought there was an alternative to a force-backed dialogue with the Soviets, and then, after the 1991 collapse of the USSR, with the Russians. While heading Carter's National Security Council, he openly disdained German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, a socialist who favored commercial relations with the USSR, including investing in a Siberian pipeline, in the expectation that Western money would soften Soviet attitudes. Brzezinski correctly thought that this was a massive mistake, based on the delusion that commercial interactions could convert enemies into friends, a mistake that Germany in the last two decades has repeated with Russia by pushing for energy dependence on Moscow through the development of two Baltic sea pipelines.

THE INTENSITY OF BRZEZINSKI'S INTEREST in how to defeat the Soviets makes him a somewhat odd fit for the modern Democratic Party, and Luce argues that Brzezinski's Democratic leanings were "partly an accident of sponsors." He served briefly in Lyndon Johnson's State Department and then developed a relationship with Carter early on, in part because he saw a potential presidential candidate he could influence. But his foreign policy views were not always in line with the party. An unfailing hawk on the Soviet Union, he opposed the arms control promoters who thought missile and warhead reductions would mitigate the conflict. He also opposed the "do-gooders" who often drafted the Democratic National Committee's foreign policy platform, and was loudly booed at the 1980 DNC convention. But he was not a Republican either, opposing what he thought to be Ronald Reagan's overly harsh stance toward Moscow (and declining Reagan's offer to have him stay on as national security advisor) and, later, criticizing the Middle East wars of George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. In the process, he went from being a pariah in the DNC at the end of the Carter Administration to returning as a darling of the hard Left under the second President Bush, and continued to support Democratic candidates.

He was mistaken on a few things. He consistently bought the view that a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would have a wider stabilizing effect in the region, as if the Arab countries genuinely cared about the Palestinians. He supported ceding the Panama Canal to Panama as a gesture of goodwill that would have improved America's position in Latin America and the "global South." And the debacle in Iran—from the overthrow of the shah in 1979 to the 444-day-long hostage crisis involving U.S. embassy employees in Tehran and the failed rescue mission that cost the lives of eight U.S. soldiers—was at least partly his responsibility, even if he would have preferred a much firmer stance against the Islamic regime. Luce's book is too sympathetic to Democratic politics to assess Brzezinski's policy mistakes. For the author, as for his subject, Carter was a moral figure who "kept the peace" (in Mondale's words), not a president who oversaw a moment of deep national malaise.

WHAT'S MORE, THERE'S AN UNDERLYING thread throughout the book suggesting that Kissinger was Brzezinski's great competitor. The relationship between the two was undoubtedly long, from their early days on the Harvard faculty

to their last years in Washington, D.C., and had its ups and downs. Brzezinski famously criticized Kissinger for favoring the "personal over the political, the covert over the conceptual and the acrobatic over the architectural." But too much is made of the rivalry with Kissinger (not to mention that Luce confuses Kissinger's 1957 book *A World Restored*, written as his doctoral dissertation, with his undergraduate thesis, the much more ambitiously titled "The Meaning of History"). Brzezinski himself did not seem to be obsessed with the German-born strategist and watched with some disappointment as Kissinger raked in money by selling access to his rolodex.

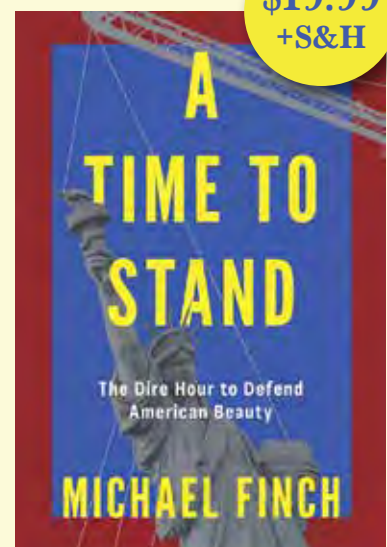
Luce ends his book with Brzezinski's death. Contrary to Catholic tradition (Brzezinski had been educated in Jesuit institutions and, according to Luce, espoused a "church-going agnosticism"), the family cremated his body and spread the ashes in a forest. Despite his prolific output, Zbig had left no instructions on the matter—a reminder that even a cogent thinker can dangerously overlook essential details.

Jakub J. Grygiel is a professor in the Department of Politics at The Catholic University of America.

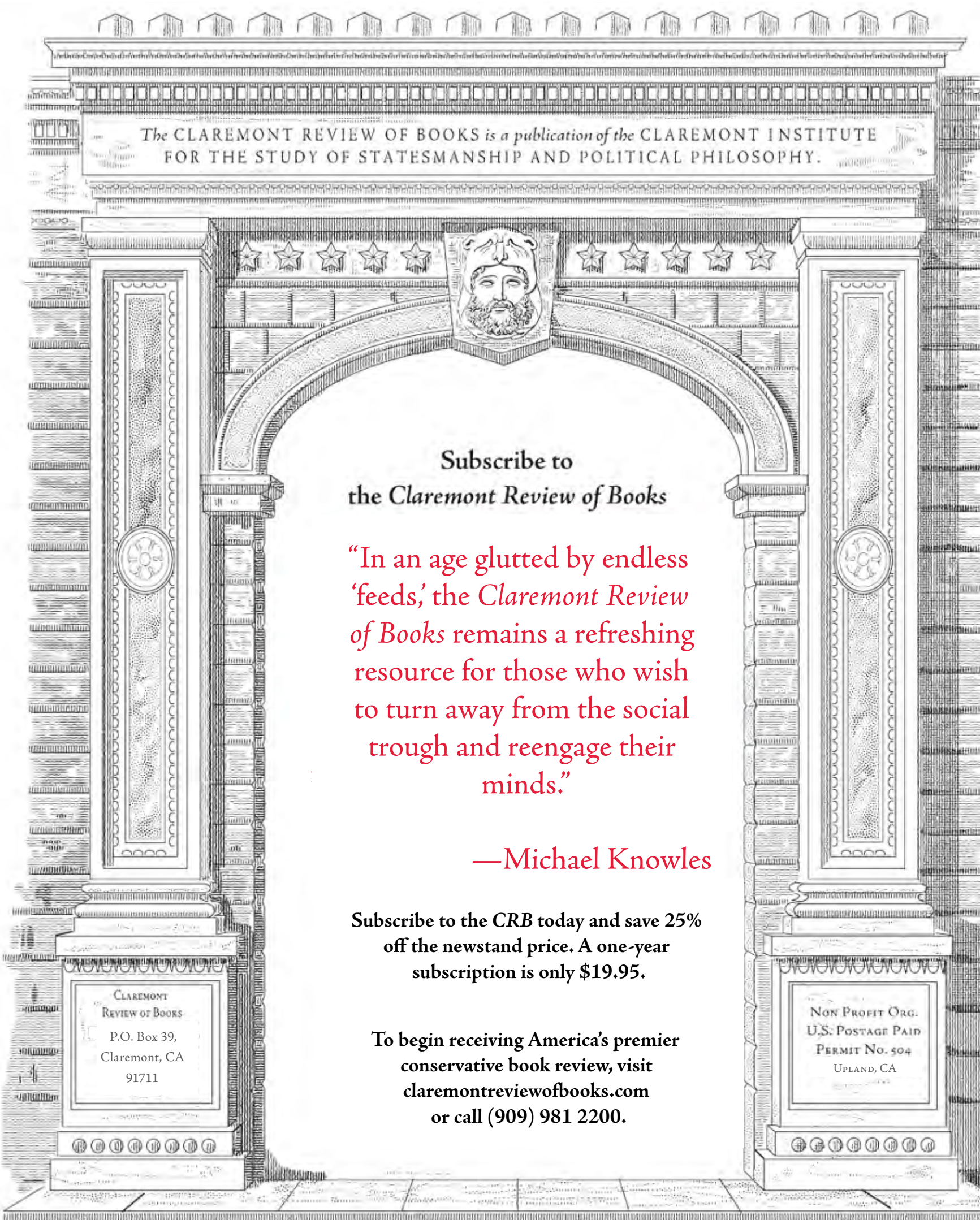
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