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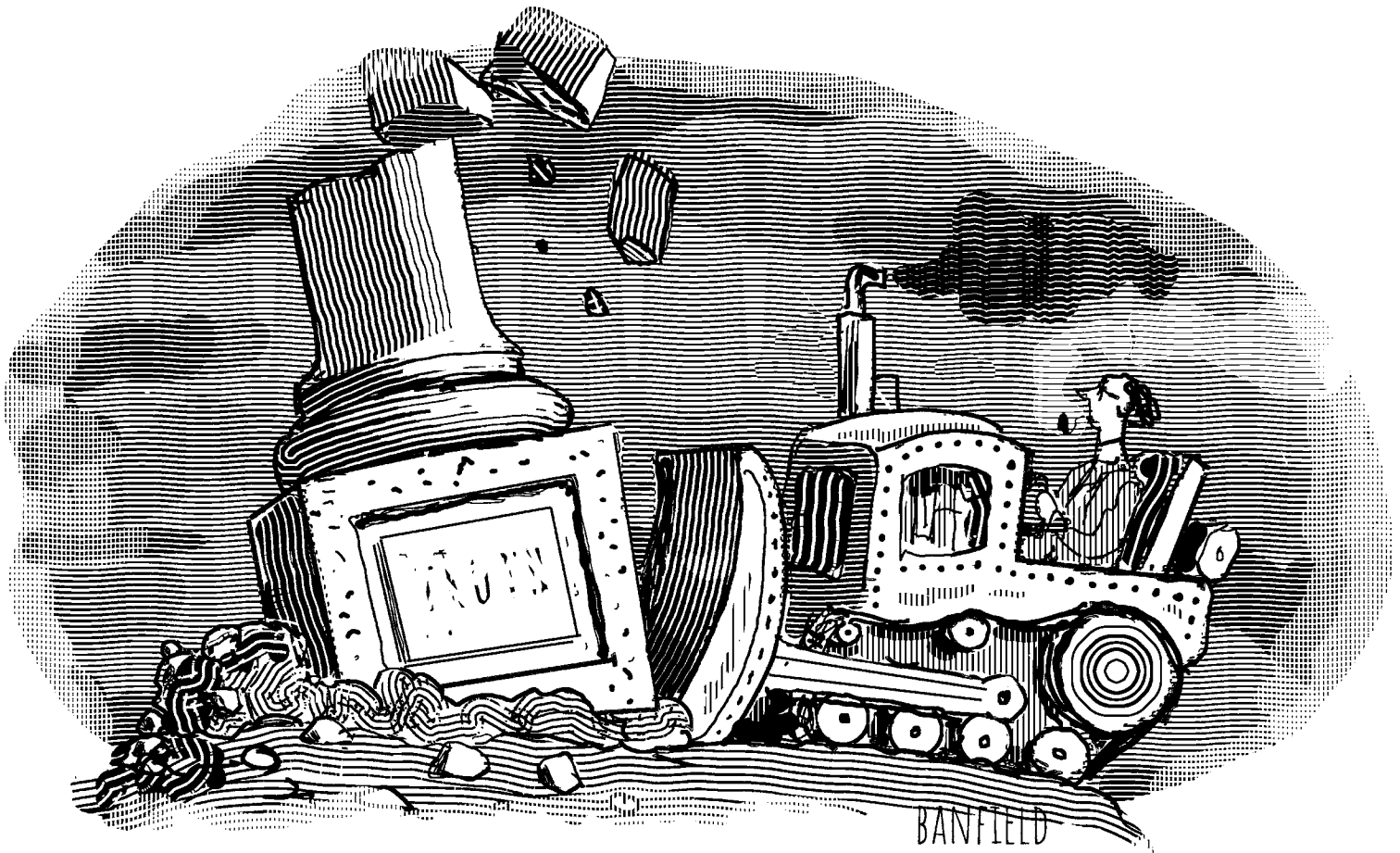

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Book Review by Yuval Levin

Fox and Friend

Friends Until the End: Edmund Burke and Charles Fox in the Age of Revolution, by James Grant.
W.W. Norton & Company, 496 pages, $45

"Coalition Dance," engraving by James Gilray, portraying (from left to right) Lord North, Charles Fox, and Edmund Burke (dressed as a Jesuit), 1785.

The english-speaking world of the late 18th century was a political biographer's dream. Great Britain and its American colonies overflowed with fascinating characters—impossibly learned and articulate figures with big personalities, strong opinions, bold ambitions, and a flair for the dramatic. The political arena in which they operated was the scene of a seemingly endless torrent of revolutionary upheaval. The challenge for a chronicler confronting this embarrassment of riches has less to do with assembling enough material to frame a narrative than with judiciously selecting the right material to make for a coherent story.

James Grant has risen to this challenge before, and his secret for doing so is an amateur's eye for the telling detail. Grant is an economic journalist by profession, the man behind *Grant's Interest Rate Observer*, a biweekly journal that has built up a cult following over more than four decades. His prior books have mostly focused on the markets, but he has also written several superb biographies, including *John Adams: Party of One*, published in 2005. That book's chief virtue was expressed in its subtitle: with a keen sense of the dynamics of faction and party, Grant examined how Adams related to both allies and adversaries.

His latest book, *Friends Until the End: Edmund Burke and Charles Fox in the Age of Revolution*, brings this eye for coalition and cooperation to Georgian Britain. And Grant has chosen ideal subjects for that purpose. Burke and Fox famously shared a decades-long friendship and political alliance that made very little sense on the surface. In temperament, ambition, and personality, they could hardly have been less alike, and their political endeavors were often rooted in quite different principles. But their many years of cooperation were not an accident, and their dramatic break over the French Revolution was not either. Their story charts the transformation of English politics from a struggle pitting the party of the crown against the party of Parliament into a debate between two factions of Whigs about the nature of political change in an increasingly liberal society.

Grant provides a gripping portrait of each man, and of the social and political scene in which he played a prominent part. The book is easily accessible to a lay reader yet steeped in the scholarly literature on late 18th-century Britain, including recent advances in understanding Burke in particular.

Grant takes Burke's Christianity seriously and rightly dismisses the strain of Burke scholarship that seeks to treat him as a historicist or a relativist. He also grasps the deep

and basic humanity that linked Burke's and Fox's political endeavors. Albeit for different reasons, each understood himself as a champion of the powerless. And seeing that can help to clarify the roots of an otherwise baffling alliance.

At the outset of the book, Grant neatly describes why that partnership seems at first so peculiar:

> It wasn't a shared social position that brought the two together. Burke (1729-97) was the son of an Irish lawyer, Fox (1749–1806) the cosseted heir of a rich English political family. Nor did their friendship spring from a shared piety or an ambition for the approval of King George III or his friends. Fox, who seemed to have had not one religious bone, married late and then to a courtesan; the doctors who performed his autopsy especially marked the damage to his overtaxed liver. Burke, a professed Christian who held that the established English church was the bedrock of civil society, was a homebody and monogamist.

For all their differences, though, each was a spectacular parliamentary orator, and Grant revels in their talents. He repeatedly contrasts Fox's gorgeous compact eloquence with Burke's ornate, seemingly bottomless treasury of classical allusions and literary metaphors, offering the reader ample opportunity to enjoy both.

He also shows persuasively that two politicians of such divergent dispositions could act in concert for so long above all because the great issues of the day involved the world beyond the British Isles, and in a way that called upon the humane instincts that marked both Burke's and Fox's political visions. The book is organized around the three great scenes of crisis that especially drew their attention—America, India, and France.

In the debate over the American war, Burke and Fox were united in criticism of the government for its mistreatment of the colonists, but some of their durable differences were already apparent. Burke endorsed the Americans' core complaints and grievances, but he tended to downplay the radicalism of their cause and insisted until well into the war that a complete break might be avoidable. Fox showed no such caution. He was known to walk around London in the Continental Army's colors, buff and blue, as if asking for a fight in which he could take George Washington's side.

The two men were most intensely unified in criticizing Britain's policy in India. They jointly launched the impeachment of colonial administrator Warren Hastings over his alleged abuses in the service of the East India Company. And they always focused on the tribulations of the Indian people themselves. In that cause, there was no risk of total revolution to temper Burke's enthusiasm. It was humanitarianism without unmoored, illiberal radicalism, and so there was little to separate Burke's and Fox's passions. The two were similarly aligned in opposition to slavery, for the same reasons.

Yet the opposite was true when the French Revolution dawned. In that case, sheer radicalism quickly came to the fore, while the underlying cause's humanity was badly undermined by its champions' violent extremism. Burke saw the danger almost immediately and offered prescient warnings about where the Revolution would descend years before the Terror emerged in Paris. Enthralled by the revolutionaries' early idealism, Fox forgave them countless sins on its account.

This disagreement brought an end to their political cooperation, and even to their friendship. This falling out was largely at Burke's insistence, because he understood that the dispute was not just a function of different judgments of events in France but involved a fundamental difference destined to become a key dividing line in English politics.

As he declared his opposition to Fox's views in a parliamentary debate on France in 1791, Burke told the House, "[I]t may be indiscreet in me at my time of life to provoke enemies, and give occasion to friends to desert me." Fox is recorded in the parliamentary journal as responding, in a hushed tone, "There is no loss of friends." But Burke insisted, "Yes, there is a loss of friends; I know the price of my conduct. I have done my duty at the expense of my friend. Our friendship is at an end."

This is, at least in one sense, the "end" to which Grant's subtitle refers. Burke and Fox were not friends to the end of their lives. In fact, as Grant beautifully recounts, when Fox heard that Burke was near death in 1797 and suggested they meet one last time, Burke refused—asking his wife to write to Fox that their principled differences remained, and it would do no good to pretend they were a minor personal grievance to be overcome.

This recognition on Burke's part highlights why a joint biography of Fox and Burke could offer profound insight into the time in which they lived. But it also suggests the limits of Grant's approach. The book never quite connects the dots between the nature of Burke and Fox's friendship and the character of the transformation of English politics in which they played such important parts. Brilliantly illuminating as Grant's book is, it leaves the reader largely in the dark about the deepest roots of the differences separating its two subjects.

Indeed, the book's chief strength is also, in a way, its primary weakness. Grant's command of finance makes him exceptionally perceptive of the economic dimensions of the story he tells. This book may be the best guide yet produced to the relation between money and politics in late 18th-century Britain, and offers among the clearest and most accessible explanations of the nature of the East India Company and the bizarre challenges it posed to Britain's government during the reign of George III. Grant is also acutely aware of the importance of the personal financial challenges that confronted the great statesmen of the age, as the long transition from an aristocratic to a more democratic politics left many members of Parliament (still unpaid then) bearing economic burdens intended for an immensely wealthy landed gentry that no longer quite existed.

Grant tells this story by frequently delving into minute financial details. At least a third of the book is taken up with elaborate explanations of pension arrangements, the terms of loans and gambling debts, the rules of 18th-century corporate governance, and both private and public balance sheets. These fascinating, helpful details illuminate the story, and they make a natural complement to Grant's generous attention to the grand personalities, humorous foibles, and captivating eccentricities of Burke, Fox, and their circle of friends. Grant is a superb storyteller and gives his reader a well-rounded appreciation of how his subjects lived.

But the personal and the financial are emphasized at the expense of political ideas. Grant has chosen two biographical subjects whose importance cannot be fully understood without careful attention to the substance of their arguments, and the principles that brought them together and then broke them apart.

This is especially true of Burke. Grant notes early on that Burke's value to the Whig aristocrats who elevated him from middling origins to a prominent position in English politics was his capacity for articulating political principles. He was, Grant writes, "just the one to enunciate the political creed" of the Rockingham Whigs, who otherwise "were little given to abstract political thinking." But

Grant does not detail the creed Burke offered them. And this relative marginalization of political philosophy leads him to ignore two particularly important facets of the story.

The first is Burke's distinctive approach to the nature of political friendship, and its relation to partisanship. This was a subject of great interest to Burke from his earliest days in Parliament. Burke was perhaps the foremost theorist of party in 18th-century English politics. A party, he argued, "is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed." Such work requires trust, mutual commitment, and a kind of political friendship—which, as with most of his ideas, Burke understood in broadly Aristotelian terms. Exploring Burke's notions of party, and their connection to this approach to friendship, would have added great depth to Grant's exploration of Burke's and Fox's relationship, and could have made its end a little more intelligible.

His discussion of their friendship's conclusion would also have benefited from the other set of concepts that Grant might have profitably explored: the substantive foundations of the internal Whig dispute about the French Revolution, the roots of which are evident in Burke's and Fox's thinking throughout their long careers.

In the book's final chapter, offering an overview of Burke's disagreement with the radical Whig Richard Price, Grant writes that

> the nature of man divided Burke and Price most fundamentally. Believing that he was perfectible, Price was anxious to get on with the work of deposing kings, breaking chalices, and reforming parliaments. Burke, proceeding from the contrary assumption, defended the institutions, habits, customs, and prejudices that saved us sinners from ourselves.

This is indeed the deepest difference that divided the two emerging camps of Whigs in the age of revolution. And these two camps became the two great parties of English politics in the course of subsequent decades. Not only Richard Price but also Fox and his circle advanced a conception of the human person that pointed toward a politics of liberation, while Burke and his faction advanced a view of man that inclined toward a politics of conservation.

It was possible for partisans of these two camps to cooperate for much of the late 18th century because they were both, if in rather different ways, liberals. But as the differences between their forms of liberalism grew clearer and more significant, their cooperation began to turn to opposition. Burke, as usual, saw this before most people did.

But James Grant's book makes no claim to be a work of political philosophy. And it illuminates a great deal that prior scholars of Burke and Fox have at least underemphasized. Both in concept and in execution, *Friends Until the End* is a great achievement. It is a gripping and accessible read. And it makes an enormous contribution to our understanding of two statesmen who deserve our attention, and of a time and place that teemed with greatness.

Yuval Levin is the director of Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, where he also holds the Beth and Ravenel Curry Chair in Public Policy. He is the founder and editor of National Affairs*, a senior editor of* The New Atlantis*, and a contributing editor of* National Review*.*

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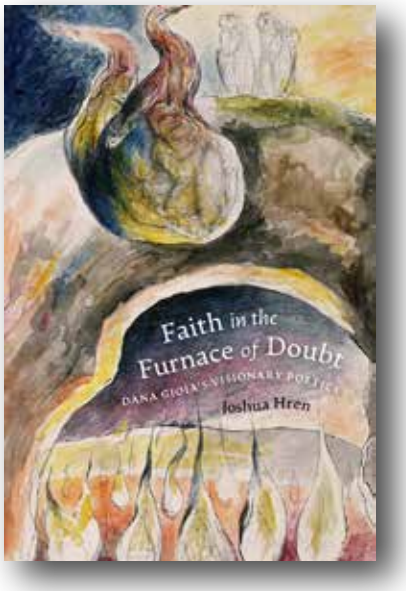

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