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Book Review by Michael Anton

TUNE IN, DROP OUT, START UP

How to Rule the World: An Education in Power at Stanford University, by Theo Baker.
Penguin Press, 336 pages, \$32



BECAUSE I'M GOING TO BE QUITE CRITICAL of Theo Baker's *How to Rule the World*, it feels only right to start with three pieces of sincere praise: the book held my attention all the way to the end, I learned things from it, and I read it twice. These are not reactions I expect most new books to generate, let alone one written by someone not yet of legal drinking age. Hence on this basis alone, I would have to concede that *Rule* (borrowing Baker's shorthand for a "secret" Stanford class, about which more below) is a real achievement.

The book is a college memoir of sorts, in the tradition of Ross Douthat's *Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class* (2005). Baker is adamant that, unlike Natalie Krinsky's *Chloe Does Yale* (2005) or even F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920), "this is no roman à clef"; he insists that everything he reports happened as written. Still, though the genre may be familiar, *Rule* is unusual in that it covers only one academic year, the author's freshman sojourn at Stanford University. That particular year—2022-23—was eventful, for Baker and Stanford alike. To cut to the chase, as a student journalist for the *Stanford Daily*, Baker man-

aged to bring down the president of arguably the world's most prestigious, influential, and richest university (even if the defenestrated ex-boss remains a tenured professor in the Biology Department). Baker is quick to acknowledge that he didn't pull this off all by himself, but if *Rule* is to be believed—and I have no reason to suspect otherwise—the announcement of Marc Tessier-Lavigne's resignation on July 19, 2023 wouldn't have happened without him.

HOW TO RULE THE WORLD IS REALLY two books: a journalistic procedural à la *All the President's Men*, and Baker's account of "the Stanford inside Stanford," his—to my ear, rather memorable—phrase for the secretive network of clubs and classes that separate "ordinary" Stanford students (if any can be called such) from the "10xers," "builders," and "high-agency" *Übermenschen* who constitute no more than ten, perhaps not even five, percent of the student body. The procedural gobbles up more and more pages as *Rule* progresses, but the inner Stanford is the more interesting topic. Baker has done a real service in shining a light into corners rarely, if ever, illuminated for outsiders.

The connection between the book's two themes is not merely that both defined Baker's freshman year, but what the "MTL" resignation over falsifying research data says about Stanford and elite academia more broadly. In both his investigation of the former president and his experience of the secret Stanford, Baker finds corner-cutting, conflicts of interest, ethical lapses, mendacity (up to and including outright lying), stonewalling, log-rolling, cover-ups, and much dismal else: all is not well in the ivory tower. *Rule* does not, to say the least, whitewash Stanford. Baker is forthright about the university's many recent failures: famous ones such as Theranos and FTX that resulted in jail time, but also lesser-known malfeasance such as a professor's \$29 million payout to settle a fraud claim, a former dean's affair with an undergraduate (though Baker omits that both were female and the dean was married to a man), and Stanford's steadfast refusal ever to acknowledge anything. "Stanford is supposed to look perfect," Baker intones.

I found *How to Rule the World* by chance. I spent most of fall 2024 in Berkeley researching my own (prospective) book on the modern university (among other things) and began

the actual writing of it earlier this year. One morning wasting time on clickbait (procrastination being the bane of all writers), I happened across a review of Baker's book. Now, had it been about any other school, I wouldn't have bought it; I've read enough college books at this point to grok the essential points. But if you're going to write about Cal (as alumni and sports fans call the University of California, Berkeley), you need to understand Stanford, its bitter cross-Bay rival, so I coughed up. I'm glad I did. *Rule* is helpful for understanding not only Stanford but our world more broadly, including the incubators that produce our elites.

THIS WILL PERHAPS NOT BE EVERYONE else's first impression. To write a memoir at such a young age can be considered an act of hubris. To write—and, worse, to succeed in publishing—anything at all can similarly arouse profound envy. More than 50 years ago, Tom Wolfe observed that:

In 1955, in *The Exurbanites*, the late A.C. Spectorsky depicted the well-paid Madison Avenue advertising genius as being a man who wouldn't read a novel without checking out the dust-jacket blurb and the picture of the author on the back...and if that ego-flushed little bastard with the unbuttoned shirt and the wind rushing through his locks was younger than he was, he couldn't bear to open the goddamn book.

It's easy to imagine similar reactions to Theo Baker's smug half-smile on *Rule*'s dustjacket.

When we add to this Baker's pedigree, well.... Though he doesn't mention it, Baker apparently attended one of those D.C. private schools that cost more than most colleges and to which Democratic presidents send their children (that is, before going off to Andover, which Baker names explicitly). His parents are both high-powered Washington reporters, one for *The New York Times*, the other for *The New Yorker*—that is to say, the twin peaks of the profession. (I suppose writerly convention requires me to mention that I know them both slightly, professionally only, in the way that if you work in press relations for the United States government, you will meet a lot of reporters.) Baker at one point credits his parents with "breaking the Monica Lewinsky story," which was news to me. Unlike Baker, who was born seven years after, I lived through the whole thing and vividly recall it being "broken" by Matt Drudge, who got it from Lucianne Goldberg, who had been working on a potential book

with Lewinsky's then-confidant Linda Tripp. *Newsweek*'s Michael Isikoff would have been the first mainstream reporter to break the story, but after his editors spiked it one too many times, Drudge splashed the thing on his eponymous website literally the next morning.

ANYWAY, WHATEVER THE MERITS OF that claim, it does give you some idea of Baker's milieu. An only child, he grew up mixing drinks for his parents' high-powered parties, getting to know D.C.'s high-powered denizens on a first-name basis. Baker goes out of his way to paint himself as a nerd who was once (literally) stuffed in a locker. Okay...but most nerds aren't also tending bar for the power elite in their own living room on Saturday nights.

The amount of name-dropping in *Rule* is thus not inconsiderable. The seven dust-jacket blurbs on the back represent a sampling of the 2026 illuminati; one doubts they would have gone to the trouble for just anyone's kid, however talented. One of those blurbs is from big-time Hollywood producer Amy Pascal (who is also thanked in the acknowledgments); did she once turn up in the Bakers' living room? Whatever the case, the instant I saw that, I thought: so this is going to be a movie.

Speaking of those acknowledgments, while they're not quite as humble-braggingly cringe as the all-time world champion on this score, Sheryl Sandberg's execrable *Lean In* (2013), they still prompted this reviewer to wonder why some of those bold-faced names, much less his parents themselves, whom Baker no doubt had review his manuscript as a favor (he would have been a fool not to, and he's definitely no fool), didn't advise the kid to tone it down for his own benefit. Baker's Nuke LaLoosh could have benefited from a Crash Davis teaching him all the right clichés to mouth. (I also would have advised him to skip the sex scenes and cut down on the swearing.)

Knowing some folks in both Big Tech and Big Media, I did a little informal canvassing to gauge reactions to *Rule*. Techworld was divided: first between people who have read or at least heard of it and those who have not (about 50-50 in my sample), and then between those angry at Baker for (in their view) trashing their beloved industry versus those who think he has identified some real problems.

Reporters (again, just my personal sample) were united: Baker is a "nepo baby" (a phrase I heard more than once) who hasn't paid his dues in the drudgy, aphid-infested vineyards of lower-tier journalism, yet nonetheless has

already scored a memoir published by a big Manhattan commercial house, a *New York Times* op-ed, an *Atlantic* feature, plus glowing reviews everywhere else, all at an age when most of the complainers hadn't yet gotten their first byline.

THE TRUTH SEEMS TO ME SOMEWHERE in the middle. Baker definitely has advantages—or, as we say today, he's "privileged"—and he used them to the hilt. Not every Stanford undergraduate was mentored by the founder of *Politico* or can call up Phil Taubman and Felicity Barringer—*New York Times* stalwarts now back home in Palo Alto—for some quick advice or a soul-searching ride around town.

Then again, Baker sort of *did* start out on one of journalism's lower rungs, didn't he? His *Daily* may reside at mighty STANFORD, but it's still an undergraduate-run college paper—well-funded but understaffed, the work unpaid, and, as Baker points out, close to irrelevant when he started there in fall 2022. It publishes in print only once a week (the *Daily Californian* across the Bay is on a similar schedule) and traffic to the rest of its web content was then a dribble. Kids today don't read news.

Besides, it's not clear what a person in Baker's position is supposed to do. Take a vow of silence in repentance for his privilege? Even if one were to espouse such an extreme view, one must realize that it's never going to happen. How one *uses* one's privilege is what matters, something the aristocrats of old knew in their bones. I might mention in this context that at one point Baker, referring to his high school girlfriend, lets slip that "I'd secured her a slot" in Stanford's famous undergraduate-run hackathon. Not *she* earned a slot but *he* secured her one. Doing favors for friends is all well and good, but when one is writing a book lamenting privilege run amok, one might want to be a bit more introspective about one's own role in perpetuating it.

At any rate, Baker is not simply a nepo baby. To repeat, he *did*, after all, take down a Stanford president—and from his not so lofty perch at a once-a-week student newspaper that still calls itself a "daily." It is perhaps more accurate to say that without his pedigree, without all that privilege, without all that mentoring, without that Rolodex, he couldn't have done it. Fair enough. But it *was* still he who did it. As with most phenomena, the resignation of Marc Tessier-Lavigne had many causes, but Theo Baker was the efficient cause.

Well, mostly. Another criticism of Baker and his book is that everything he report-

ed about Tessier-Lavigne's scientific and academic malfeasance had been discovered by others long before. Which is true, but not the *whole* truth. Yes, the core of what Baker thrust into public view had already been identified—but only by scientific “fact checkers” writing in online obscurity, heeded only by readers as technically adept as the checkers. It's also true that Baker could never (absent earning a Ph.D. in microbiology or some such down the road) have discovered what they discovered. But it's just as true that his reporting uncovered a lot more not then known, including human and process details that only reporting, as opposed to scrutinizing images in peer-reviewed science journals, could uncover. It's also notable that while Baker has many envious critics, the scientists and science-adjacent researchers who first figured out that Marc Tessier-Lavigne's research was fatally flawed are not among them. They all admire what Baker did and many helped him do it.

But as much as I consider myself a scourge of the sanctimonious and destructive modern university, and a Cal guy to boot, who therefore relishes a certain *schadenfreude* in watching *any* elite higher-ed Solon—but especially a *Stanford* president—go down, this part of the book is, as I said, much less interesting than Baker's account of “the Stanford inside Stanford,” which is *How to Rule the World's* real enduring strength.

ONE OF *RULE'S* THEMES IS THE lengths to which people go to create ever finer gradations of “elite.” The first is simply among schools themselves. On paper, Cal and Stanford are great rivals, going back nearly a century and a half. This is still true in certain sports, particularly football; one Stanford student told me ruefully that “Big Game week is the only time of year when Stanford really feels like a *college*.” It is perhaps still true in the competition between certain academic departments, though Berkeley's historic formal dominance in this arena is long gone, at least according to those news magazine rankings that everyone claims to disdain but secretly pores over.

It is definitely *not* true in endowment, funding, employer interest, starting salaries, parental pride, and applicant anxiety: in all these and more, Stanford long ago pulled decisively away. “The Farm” (Stanford's nickname for itself since Leland Stanford donated his horse farm for the campus) was always more “elite” in being private and therefore more expensive (the University of California was absurdly cheap within living memory; tuition and fees for my freshman semester in fall 1987 totaled

\$746). And there has always been a certain snobbery/resentment to the rivalry, each of which naturally flows in only one direction, exemplified by the Stanford section's taunting chant—“We-got-in! We-got-in!”—at the 1986 Big Game, which woeful underdog 1-9 Cal miraculously managed to win. It's possible that a non-athlete every now and then is admitted to both and chooses Berkeley, but interviewing dozens of NARPs (Non-Athlete Regular People) from each school, I posed that question to each and didn't learn of a single instance. Allan Bloom, who spent a year teaching at Yale, spoke of the “little Harvard worm” that eats away at the soul of every Yale student and professor. The Stanford worm is a lot bigger and a lot hungrier. As for what Stanford thinks of Cal, to the extent that it thinks about us at all, sometime in the last century Stanford ceased to consider Berkeley a rival and today acknowledges only Harvard as a peer—on which it looks down from a slight elevation.

Still and all, until the 1970s Stanford still had the reputation as a country club school for lazy rich kids, sort of a Northern

Dropping out has become more prestigious than graduating.

California USC, if slightly more intellectual. Tech changed all that, but more slowly than one might think. Baker quotes Sam Altman (there's another one of those bold-faced names to whom the precocious freshman miraculously has direct access) saying that Baker's secret Stanford “didn't exist at all” when Altman dropped out in 2005.

INDEED, THE PENULTIMATE SIGN OF SUCCESS in the “Stanford inside Stanford” is to drop out (the ultimate, of course, is to found a “unicorn,” defined as a company valued at \$1 billion or more). Dropping out has become more prestigious than graduating. Baker cites, for example, the famous Thiel Fellowships (established by double Stanford graduate—B.A. '89, J.D. '92—Peter Thiel), which give kids \$250,000 to drop out, not just from Stanford but from any college, as having an acceptance rate of less than 0.1%. Stanford's current acceptance rate, by contrast, is a relatively stratospheric 3.6%.

Just mentioning the latter is yet another humble-brag, but one which points to an uncomfortable query that Baker entirely avoids. People I trust who are (far) closer to this issue

than I am or ever will be tell me that it is today all but impossible for a white male to be admitted to any top school if he is not a star athlete who fills some team's specific need at that precise moment, a legacy (and even this advantage is declining), or the child of someone who cuts a (very) large check. The numbers Scott Johnston gives in his novel *The Sandersons Fail Manhattan* (reviewed by Heather Mac Donald in the Fall 2025–Winter 2026 CRB) are \$5 million for a mere second look and \$20 million for a real shot—provided your kid already has an at least plausible application. I'm pretty sure Baker's parents don't have that kind of money, even as I'm confident that Baker's application was sterling. But as he himself admits, so is everyone else's. Getting in for those who are not members of favored demographic categories is therefore basically a lottery. Which Baker won. Was that random? It's not implausible to suspect it wasn't; which is to say, Stanford admissions knew who his parents are and took that into consideration.

Baker reports several interviews with former Stanford president John Hennessy (the kid sure can open doors!), the man who, more than any other, took Stanford in a less intellectual, more business-y direction. Like every good privileged white liberal, Hennessy is terribly, terribly conflicted about all this. Not that he would change a thing, mind you. But he recognizes the inherent difficulty of the problem—liberalism and exclusivity do not, to say the least, go together like peas and carrots—however the only solution he can think of is...well, he can't think of any, so his voice trails off as he stares pensively into space, even as Stanford's endowment swells ever upward and its admissions rate ticks ever down.

IN ANY CASE, DROPPING OUT ONLY WORKS out—materially and socially—if you manage to become Sam Altman, which few do. Baker interviews, more than once each, not just Hennessy but two other Stanford presidents, all of whom lament drop-out culture. They point out that most of Stanford's greatest successes—David Packard, Bill Hewlett, Peter Thiel, David Sacks, Jerry Yang, Reid Hoffman, Kevin Systrom, Evan Spiegel, to name a few—did not drop out. Google's Sergey Brin and Larry Page dropped out of a Ph.D. program, but only after earning their B.A.s elsewhere and with enough credits to leave Stanford with M.A.s. Many other famous Silicon Valley founders (Reed Hastings, Jensen Huang, Vinod Khosla) also received M.A.s from Stanford after having secured their B.A.s elsewhere.

Richard Saller, the interim president who succeeded Tessier-Lavigne, is a former historian and humanities dean; his opposition to drop-out mania is likely genuine. But Hennessy helped create (if perhaps inadvertently) drop-out culture. And current president (and former business school dean) Jonathan Levin, at least in Baker's reporting, has done little to change it. They might be right that more great founders are baccalaureates than drop-outs, that most companies will not become unicorns—will in fact outright fail; Baker reports that only 0.5% of Valley startups become unicorns—and that on a utilitarian level one's career will be more secure with a degree. But that is hardly a ringing endorsement of the value of learning for its own sake. To students, the alternative logic seems as syllogistic as a line of code: if founding companies is the highest good, and founding is a game for the young, and the mentoring and money are available now (more on this below), then what fool would finish? But if dropping out is more prestigious than graduating—which today it absolutely is—what does that say about the value of a Stanford degree, much less of a Stanford "education"? The university's leaders appear painfully aware of this dilemma even as they have no idea what to do about it.

Thiel's rationale for his fellowships is that, as college gets progressively sillier, despite—or because—elite schools are becoming ever more selective, sticking it out makes less and less sense. This reasoning is far from unsound but does raise the question: why limit the \$250K to college students? Instead of paying kids to drop out, why not reach back a little earlier and just pay them to do stuff?

And therein hangs the tale.

THE REAL PURPOSE OF STANFORD, AND certainly the sole purpose of its admissions office—one may say its most powerful and important component—is to select the elect, to provide, as it were, a talent pool in which Thiel (and others) can fish.

But that 3.6% admissions rate is not selective enough, not in an era—as Baker reminds us—in which every elite university receives an ocean of nearly identical, near-perfect applications. Thus a way must be found to select within the elect. And that is the purpose of "the Stanford inside Stanford."

In one sense, there is nothing new in this. The Ivies long ago invented ways to differentiate their already upper-crust students: Harvard's final clubs, Yale's secret societies, Princeton's eating clubs, plus a network of fraternities open only to a portion of the student body, and themselves exquisitely differentiated, with Delta Kappa Epsilon traditionally

considered (in the Northeast at least) the top of the heap.

Stanford never had anything like Harvard's Porcellian or Yale's Skull and Bones. It still has fraternities, barely, but the university has long waged a successful war to limit their activities, influence, and number—especially the "housed" ones with a physical location on campus, which are almost all gone and remain only under severe restrictions (which Baker's first piece for the *Stanford Daily* reported on extensively).

That hardly matters, however, because the real purpose of "the Stanford inside Stanford" is not to get drunk or swallow goldfish (though lots of booze is consumed) but to identify and fund prospective "builders" and "founders."

AS BAKER SHOWS, THIS ALL STARTS absurdly quickly. "You have to break in fast," a Stanford senior who went to Baker's high school tells him; "They want to find people as early as possible." Basically, by the end of your first quarter, you'll know if you've been "plucked," that is, identified by one of the many "hangers-on"—in another of Baker's memorable turns of phrase, "blood-thirsty adults who are always on campus, always looking for teenagers they can exploit"—and placed on the radar of the venture capital (VC) elite. If you haven't, you probably won't even know that this secret Stanford exists. As for getting tapped later, that's theoretically not impossible, but upperclassmen can forget it; some VC firms "explicitly ask only for freshmen and sophomores."

Once you're in, life becomes a whirl of meetings, coffees, dinners, parties, and "retreats," many (most?) with the same 50 or so venture capitalists, seemingly always including at least one billionaire, present on every occasion. "Someone could live here for a year without a meal plan, just eating off free VC dinners," Baker quotes another friend as telling him.

If you're wondering how realistic it is for even the most talented talent spotter to identify the next Peter Thiel at 17, you're not alone. Yet the people behind "the Stanford inside Stanford" are not dumb. They must, one assumes, realize the inherent limitations and uncertainties of their quest. So why do they participate, not to mention underwrite it?

The answer seems to be a form of gambling. *Someone* is going to found the next unicorn, and given the economics and ecosystem of the tech world, that someone is all but certain to come from Stanford: "Stanford students are much better than anywhere else," one venture capitalist tells Baker. More specifically, he (or she) is likely to emerge from "the Stan-

ford inside Stanford," which prides itself on separating the wheat from the chaff, and then cultivating and watering the wheat. Identifying that wheat, Stanford insiders confidently tell themselves, is not so difficult. Correctly predicting which stems will end up towering over all the others is a bit harder. So they make their best guesses and spread their chips around the table. You never know what might happen—except that you can't win if you're not in the game.

THE GOAL IS TO GET LUCKY (THOUGH no techie will ever admit that his success owes anything to chance) by backing the next unicorn founder before the impossibly advanced age of 20—because if you don't, that rival investor over there will, and then the kid won't need you anymore, so those shares of "friends-and-family"-priced pre-IPO stock will go to someone else. In one of *How to Rule the World's* most absurd revelations, Baker reports that many VCs fork over pallets of cash to freshmen and sophomores *before* they've even founded a company, however nebulous, tenuous, or just plain harebrained their fever dream may sound (or be). This is known as "pre-idea funding." As Baker puts it, "Who needs an idea to start a company these days? That's so passé! All you need is [sic] smart people and cash." "Pre-idea funding's" equally absurd twin is "pre revenue": nothing is coming in, but the promise of a huge payout later is worth more than an actual, but modest, profit now. I don't know about you, but to me this sounds like yet another obvious and stupid elite-driven bubble. I've never felt more relieved to be long in old-economy index funds.

Absolutely no strings are attached to all that cash. Baker joins a campus club that spends prodigiously, wonders how that is possible, and is told by one of its leaders that the club has a "black hole budget." The kids think nothing of dropping \$1,000 at a nearby steakhouse on the club's credit card (undergraduate clubs have credit cards?). Student embezzling is rampant—or was, until the inventive Stanford kids solved for that. "It's easier now that our financial officer is in-house," the same club leader explains on the deck of an "exorbitantly expensive" 150-foot yacht cruising San Francisco Bay. "Now we can be more unethical, it's nice."

And that's just the money forked over for networking and blowing off steam. Even more is showered on "companies" that never get off the ground. One thing that stands out in Baker's text is that although household-name Stanford successes—Hewlett-Packard, Google, PayPal, NVIDIA, YouTube, Insta-

gram, etc.—come up a lot, not one recent triumph that emerged from “the Stanford inside Stanford” is ever named. Are there any? The kids are always starting companies but none of their firms seems to go anywhere. Baker describes several failures, and not a few frauds, but not one success.

DISAPPOINTINGLY, HE MOSTLY DOESN’T give us the caption at the end of the movie to tell us the protagonists’ fates. For example, what happened to “Janet,” who got caught up in the whirl, dropped out, was feted like the second coming of Cisco Systems co-founder Sandy Lerner, founded a company whose function Baker doesn’t mention, but whose tech “could do none of it”? The last we hear of her, she’s dissing her *untermenschlich* family, with whom she can no longer talk about “her achievements.” But what achievements? Janet is no doubt smart and talented, and will almost certainly make something of herself. But did she have to blow through millions and have her ego inflated like a parade float, and then burst, just to find out she’s not a “high-agency builder”? Wouldn’t she have been better off *not* dropping out?

What Baker describes is worse than a bubble; it’s a waste. Massive amounts of money, man-hours, and brainpower are being shoveled into a furnace. One is reminded of Raymond Chandler’s stinging put-down of chess: “as elaborate a waste of human intelligence as you could find outside an advertising agency.” The opportunity cost alone must be in the trillions.

The “investors” all say their goal is to effect positive change—or, in the Valley’s hoariest cliché, to “make the world a better place”—but it is hard not to conclude that the real motivator is greed. These are uniformly people who already have a billion or two (or ten) stashed away and really don’t need any more money. One might reply that there’s nothing wrong with making (more) money, especially if one does something truly good for humanity or society in the process. But this justification is hard to apply to the rituals Baker describes, since so much money is being shoveled at people who *still haven’t come up with any idea at all*. So how can investors’ motive be anything other than more money?

The closest thing I found to this ecosystem at Cal is its legendary “consulting clubs,” which have now spread to other campuses across the country but appear to have emerged first and remain strongest in Berkeley. In brief, these are student-run associations with similarly absurd acceptance rates—the most competitive are below 2%—that get sponsored by some of the Bay Area’s most lucrative businesses to do projects (analyses, prospectuses,

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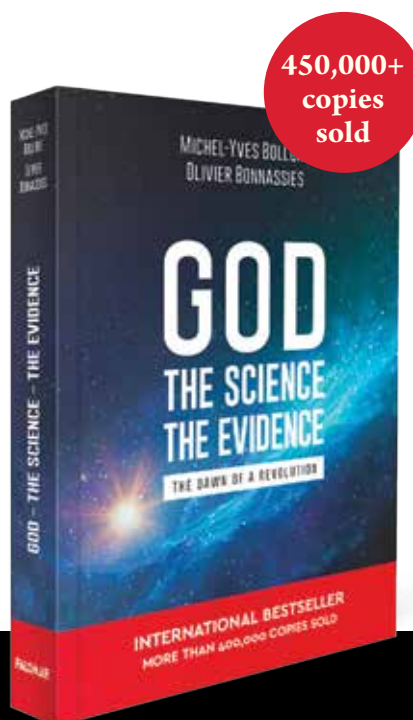
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reports, slide decks, and so on) for which the students are handsomely paid, and similarly feted at dinners and parties in The City. Budgets are also generous enough to finance yacht parties, “retreats” in Napa, junkets to New York, even boondoggles to Europe. It’s not clear whether the paying firms actually *use* the students’ work product; some kids told me they do, some took for granted that they don’t. This confused me until I read *Rule*, which does not mention the Berkeley clubs at all, which in any case are at best junior varsity compared to what Baker describes at Stanford. He nonetheless indirectly clarified for me those clubs’ real purpose: talent spotting, separating the wheat from the chaff as early as possible, only in this case more for finance than tech.

In sum, “the Stanford inside Stanford” amounts to a network of what Tom Wolfe famously called “masters of the universe,” but much richer, some of them quite old, swarming like suppliants around a few dozen, or at most a couple hundred, teenagers: throwing money at them, throwing parties for them, begging to become their sponsors, mentors, and investors.

If all that sounds kind of creepy, well... Baker never reports anything untoward actually happening to any of the girls (or boys) he knows, though he does acknowledge that in some cases, allegations were made. The closest he comes to addressing Silicon Valley’s truly gross side is mentioning that he was once invited to one of its now-notorious “sex parties” (he is quick to note that he declined), which I first learned about from *Vanity Fair* in January 2018, the height of the #MeToo era, but haven’t heard much about since. I guess Big Tech is just too important to embarrass over a few harmless orgies? Or something.

But whether sexual predation is taking place or not, Baker is right to warn that adults—and not just any adults, but this country’s richest and most powerful nominal grown-ups—chasing college freshmen like sailors on shore leave panting before a company of nurses is at best unseemly and at worst bad for these kids’ healthy development.

THE STYMYING OF WHICH IS STANFORD’S biggest failure. Nearly all elite college students are ambitious and want to make money. The point of college is not supposed to be to take that orange ember and stoke it white, but to cool it a bit, to show it alternatives. Stanford now quite explicitly does the opposite.

Baker shows a glimmer of the old way. He enrolled, by choice, in Structured Liberal Education, what’s left of the Stanford Great

Books program that Jesse Jackson nuked from orbit in 1987. Baker reports having studied, or at least read, or at least been assigned, four authors: Plato, Dante, Machiavelli, and Cervantes—as it happens, all writers I know well and who have enriched my life immensely (though not in the way the typical Stanford undergrad dreams of being enriched). The books don’t seem to have made much of an impression on Baker, however. In one sense, this is understandable, given his frenetic first year chock full of reporting, difficult computer science assignments, helping organize Stanford’s famous “TreeHacks” coding festival, endless parties on yachts and at Big Tech mega mansions, and much else. That can really gobble up a lot of time!

BUT FORGIVE THE OLD FUDDY-DUDDY college professor for asking: what is college really supposed to be *for*? Fun should be part of it, sure, and Baker first made his name reporting on the Stanford administration’s so-called “War on Fun,” i.e., its relentless Nurse Ratched-like regulations and restrictions on any social gathering whatsoever. He is at his funniest describing the Stanford brass reluctantly allowing an old Stanford tradition, Full Moon on the Quad, to resume after Covid and other crackdowns, but in a manner so pinched and bureaucratized as to make it a pathetic and boring waste of time.

Besides, as Baker learned the hard way, fun can get out of hand. At one point, he dabbled with OxyContin, miscalculated, and had to self-administer Narcan to prevent dying of an overdose. You read that right: the Stanford freshman scion of *The New Yorker Times* had to take Narcan to avoid *dying* from an opioid overdose at age 18. I learned to my surprise two-and-a-half years ago that this problem is not confined to decaying Red America when a perky sister at Cal’s most prestigious sorority recounted for me the “safety briefing” that precedes every frat party. When she mentioned “Narcan,” I had to interrupt and ask: what’s that? Finding out may have been the most dismaying thing I’ve heard in the last five years. *This* is now part of the college experience? I’m glad Baker told the story; the more kids can be scared off this menace, the better.

Anyway, the fuddy-duddy might continue: despite Stanford’s War on Fun, and even factoring out the overdose, perhaps Baker and his colleagues had a little *too much* fun. I’m sure in the process he created many wonderful memories for himself that he will cherish for a lifetime. But he might have done more for his soul had he seriously contemplated what Plato, Dante, Machiavelli,

and Cervantes were trying to tell him—and he might later cherish the fruits of that contemplation even more than memories of the yacht parties.

NOW, AS A TEACHER OF THE GREAT Books, of course I *would* say that. I am also the first to admit that those books are not for everyone. But it’s worth asking: Should elite schools be entirely free of them or treat them as afterthoughts? Should elite students be able to graduate with little to no exposure to truly great arguments? Stanford will always be elite because it is rich and because it is the gateway into, and the right hand of, the world’s richest industry. It will always be smart because it has the pick of the (on paper) best and brightest from all over the world. But does it really *impart* anything anymore? About coding, sure—or rather, for someone who doesn’t know anything about coding, I assume so. But about philosophy, the humanities, the soul?

Not that I mean to single out Stanford on this score, on which nearly all universities share the same more-or-less dismal record. I do, however, question whether those who do not know—who have not been taught—anything about the fundamental alternatives between reason and revelation, poetry and philosophy, ancients versus moderns, contemplation versus politics, war and peace, crime and punishment, sense and sensibility, and so much else, really count as “elite.”

Plus, it’s far from clear that Stanford is all that rigorous even in its supposed STEM strongholds. Every resentful Cal kid has known about Stanford’s notorious grade inflation since at least the 1970s, not to mention its formally eliminating the grade F and allowing students to drop a class up to 24 hours before the final. It’s apparently gotten much worse. Baker reports simply *not turning in* his final assignment for Computer Science 107, one of Stanford’s (supposedly) hardest “weeder” courses—that is to say, a class designed to force kids out of a given major if they can’t hack it. He still got a B-minus, “the lowest grade I’d ever received,” and presumably the lowest Stanford now bestows. Theo, if you ever want to experience a *real* weeder course, cross the Dumbarton Bridge, head up the Nimitz, get off at University Avenue, and take your chances in Chem 1, CS 61, or the granddaddy of ’em all Physics 7. To say that you’ll be grateful for—*relieved* to see—a B-minus understates the case considerably. These classes are designed not merely to weed you out of a prospective major, but out of college altogether. Baker also reports rampant cheating at Stanford (though none committed by himself), says that everyone knows about

it, and that no one ever pays a price for it—an ethos that naturally carries over into other endeavors, including business.

HOW TO RULE THE WORLD'S TITLE is, as noted, taken from the name of perhaps the most secretive secret within "the Stanford inside Stanford," a not-for-credit "course" "taught" by a shadowy Valley denizen whom Baker calls "Justin." (Baker says in his prologue that he changed many names, but any knowing reader will notice that he didn't change *all* of them, and a quick look at the *Stanford Daily's* website reveals that Justin's name was *not* changed.) In Baker's telling, Justin, then all of about 24, promises that he can teach people to achieve, well, anything. Baker quotes Justin as boasting:

There are a number of simple but non-obvious frameworks that govern how the world works. By learning them, a huge amount of latent talent and potential in the most promising people can be unlocked.

Hence Justin admits to Baker that, of the total time he spends prepping and teaching his course, 90 hours are devoted to selection; substance must make do with eight.

As to that substance, Baker interviews six students who took the class and concludes that its core messages are the highly original "the ends justify the means" and "get away with what you can, because everyone else is trying to do the same." One is reminded (at least I was) of Robert Greene's airport pop-philosophy book *The 48 Laws of Power* (1998), which sold millions of copies to (I would say) gullible businessmen looking for quick fixes. Greene wants to be Machiavelli but simplifies where Machiavelli elucidates and codifies where Machiavelli knows fixed rules are useless. One may say that Greene is to Machiavelli what Norman Vincent Peale is to Aristotle, or as Justin is to Xenophon—for if one really wants to rule the world, far better to study the *Cyropaedia* than to take Justin's course.

In truth, there are no "simple but non-obvious frameworks that govern how the world works." There are simple *concepts* that are hard to implement, just as there are complex ones even harder to implement. Everything true about politics, obvious and obscure alike, has already been thought of, hashed out, pros and cons weighed, inherent contradictions investigated, and written down. Stanford would serve its students, and the world, better if it made a sincere attempt to teach those insights and alternatives.

But the Farm has abandoned all pretense. Baker shows in no uncertain terms that Stanford is today more business than school. It openly advertises itself as the place to come to get rich, not to ask—much less seek answers to—the age-old question "How should I live?" Stanford does, however, proffer an answer; it's just that its answer is banal and depressing: serially found companies, on the thinnest of ideas or on no idea; chase the unicorn; become a billionaire (or, if you fail, a loser; but hey, at least you can say you went to Stanford!). Tell yourself all the while that you are "making the world a better place." Pat yourself on the back for your "inclusivity" in the world's most exclusive university, surrounded by the world's most exclusive zip codes, amidst the world's most exclusive industry. Stanford has always been kind of annoyingly hoity-toity (here a little of that old Berkeley *ressentiment* oozes out), but only recently did it become insufferable.

YOU MAY BE THINKING—THE THOUGHT occurred to me, too!—that this is a silly way to select our rulers. "Stanford students are much better than anywhere

Stanford is today more business than school.

else," recall. Wasn't it bad enough when our overlords all came from only three or four schools? Does it now have to be *one*? And not even the whole of that one, but a tiny secret inner core of it?

But do not lose heart, dear reader. What that VC actually meant was that Stanford students are much better than any others *at making her money*. They may be our elites, but they are not our rulers. In the final analysis, as improbable as it might seem, the joke is actually on Stanford (and all the rest).

Take Justin. In no respect does he "rule the world" nor have any prospect of doing so. This is certainly true in the prosaic sense. He's founded, or been involved in the founding of, a few companies, none of them unicorns, nor even provably successful. The ones that have been reported aren't even in the classic Stanford tech wheelhouse but involve such old economy stalwarts as insurance and aeronautics. So where does the money, not to mention the hubris, come from? Perhaps from "pre-idea funding" and "pre revenue"?

Okay, you might retort, but Baker shows Justin to be something of a crank. Even so, the punchline remains the same no matter whom one highlights: *no one* at Stanford rules.

Not its president (whoever that may be in a given moment), not its superstar faculty, not its board, nor its donors, certainly not its students, not even the "hangers-on." The same is true of Silicon Valley as a whole.

ACTUALLY, THE JOKE IS REALLY ON *ALL* of us: *no one anywhere* rules the world. We—all of us—are ruled by a set of ideas, a doctrine. We didn't create the doctrine. Even mighty Stanford didn't create the doctrine. No one can say precisely where it came from. My educated guess is that it emerged miasmically from late modern philosophy. So in that sense, a handful of writer-thinkers created it.

Except they didn't, not really, because their works are not the doctrine and they didn't write their books to create a doctrine, at least not the one we ended up with. Others took what they wrote, hammered it together, added some pet concerns, and hardened all that into dogma, without trying or even realizing what they were doing—and certainly without the guidance of a ruling mind trying to be consistent or accomplish anything specific. Indeed, the joke is doubly on mighty Stanford, because poor benighted Berkeley and its profs, protesters, polymaths, poets, preachers, prophets, and proles have influenced the doctrine more than Stanford ever has and likely ever will.

If all this sounds confusing, that's because nothing like it has ever happened in recorded history. The most basic question political science is supposed to be able to answer is: who rules? I have two graduate degrees in the field, and when I look today around America, and the Western world more broadly...*I can't tell*. It's not any president or prime minister. It's certainly not "the people," who explicitly and repeatedly vote against certain policies only to have those imposed on them anyway. It's not the bureaucrats, who enforce policy (doctrine), but who in every other respect are only following orders—from whom?

The more conspiratorially minded we become, the more we tend to want to answer: the oligarchs. But consider: at the height of George Floyd insanity in 2020, as I watched leader after leader of the world's richest companies bend the knee, figuratively or literally, I asked someone from the heart of the tech world why this was happening. Why would billionaires whose very fortunes rest on hyper-competence and seeing around corners and through stupid fads—why were these people genuflecting to something so obviously overwrought and ridiculous? "They're all terrified of their millennial workforce," he replied. Why not just fire the trouble-making

20-somethings? “Because the billionaires know they’ll be canceled if they do, and face a full-on revolt in the process.”

IN OTHER WORDS, THESE NOMINAL BIG Tech overlords are all afraid of the doctrine. It is the doctrine that motivates the 20-somethings, and everyone else, to punish violations of itself, and thus which has the power to punish even the nominal rulers, i.e., which wields true power. It turns out that tech overlords are no less slaves to the doctrine than the rest of us; they’re just richer and more prestigious. Like administrative state apparatchiks, to the extent that they rule, they merely execute on behalf of the doctrine.

On *How to Rule the World*’s fourth page, one of Silicon Valley’s most prominent figures inadvertently admits as much:

We rule the world...we write the rules that go into the machines that execute everything that happens on this planet nowadays. No law can be enacted without software. No law can be enforced without software. No government can act without software. We rule the world.

This is like a general claiming he rules because he tells the army what to do—after having been told by his king what to do. Techies may today write the “rules” in the sense of writing the code, but they don’t formulate the ideas that the rules embody.

Much later, Baker quotes an even more hubristic techie-god as asserting, “True agency is being able to bend the universe to your will.” Sorry, no, not even Caesar-with-the-soul-of-Socrates could do that. A bunch of founder-coders—even very, very rich ones—certainly can’t.

Hence all the jockeying and elbowing that Baker records and mocks is not for power, but merely for status and money. These are age-old wants of the human soul but lesser things than true power, much less true wisdom. What makes the Vanity Fair of Stanford all the more comic is that the contestants don’t realize the limited scope of the game they’re playing. Neither, I would venture to say, does Baker: he really seems to think the prize is world domination and that the Farm is the contest’s highest

arena. I don’t blame a kid Baker’s age for not yet getting it. It took me decades to figure it out and I’m pretty sure I still haven’t fully.

BAKER ULTIMATELY WAS NOT ADMITTED to Justin’s “course.” He had other entry points into the Stanford-inside-Stanford and could have—probably would have—become a made man, but walked away. At the time, he was too consumed by the Tessier-Lavigne story—which he could have dropped at any moment to grab the gold ring dangling right in front of him, but didn’t. Even after he felled the tallest tree on the Farm, not just any but the *same two VC firms that backed MTL’s subsequent startup* with a billion dollars reached out and offered Baker money to start his own company. He politely declined. How many kids—hell, how many *adults*—do you know who would have done the same?

Baker begins *How to Rule the World* saying he arrived on campus vowing never to become a journalist. Near the end, having succumbed to the seemingly inevitable, he voices the typical journalist’s lament that he’s been accused of Communism by the Right and fascism by the Left, so he must be on the right track. As someone to Baker’s right, let me say that I found surprising and refreshing just how unideological his book mostly turned out to be. Yes, at a few points, flashes of unthinking leftism burst through on topics as predictable as “disinformation,” Trump, George Floyd, Covid, “baseless conspiracy theories” about the 2020 election, “the January 6 insurrection,” the “Great Replacement...racist conspiracy theory,” and the like. Theo Baker is not one to go against the doctrine.

But even that is a bit ungenerous. Although the attacks of October 7, 2023 happened too late to be included in Baker’s account of his freshman year, he published a thoughtful piece in *The Atlantic* on how that day and its aftermath tore Stanford apart and inaugurated a reign of unreason. (The same can be said of many colleges, above all Columbia.) Baker refrains from taking sides, but simply by accurately reporting what happened on campus, he enables the astute reader to apportion blame fairly, against the grain of the doctrine. That takes courage, not to mention a certain independence of mind.

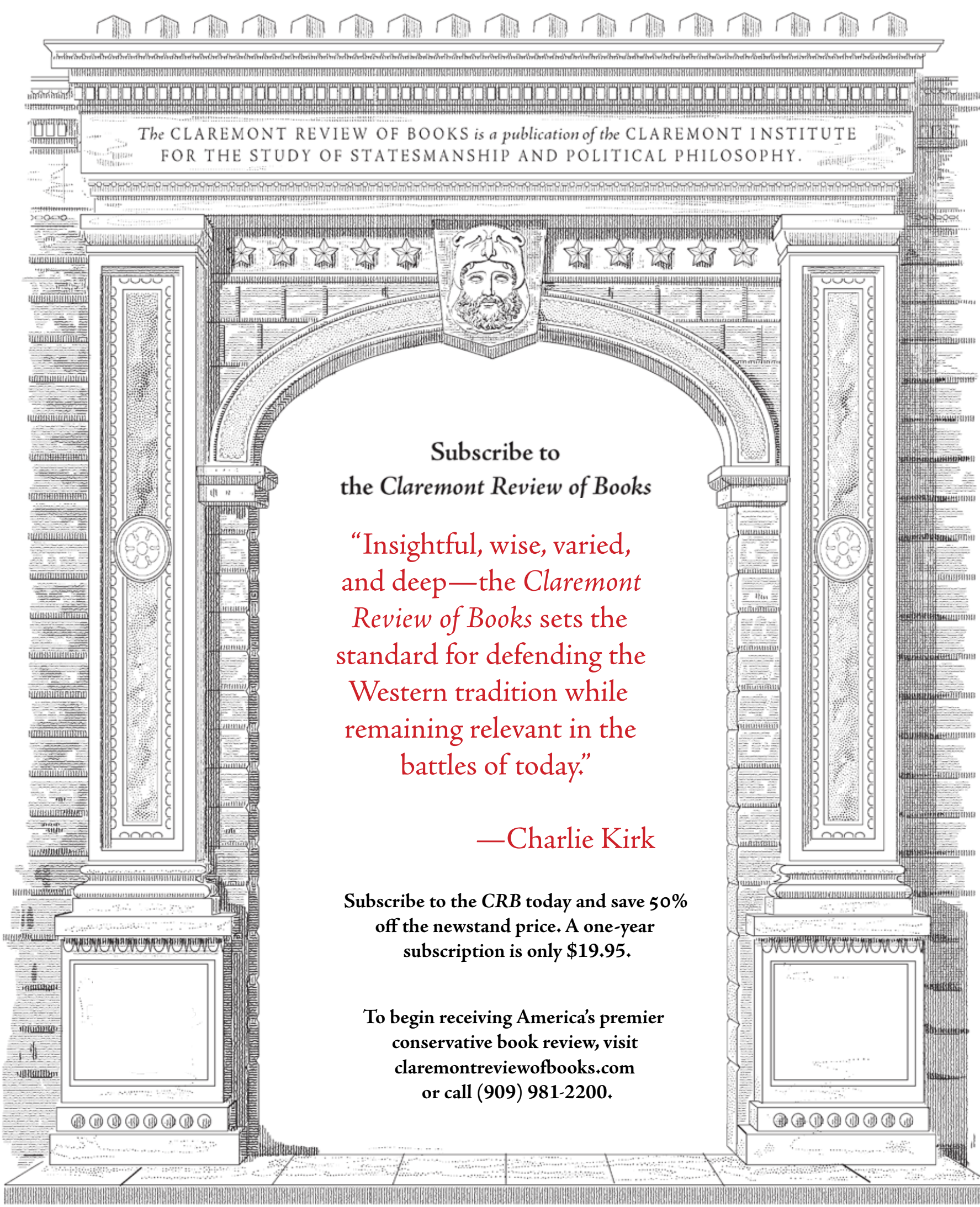
SO, HERE IS MY SUGGESTION FOR HOW Baker might profitably—for all of us—utilize his privilege, and his talent. If, as *Rule* implies, Baker has abandoned his tech-founder aspirations in favor of journalism, then perhaps he might combine the two interests. He correctly describes Silicon Valley’s press corps as “outgunned and underdeveloped.” So stay and help remedy that. Baker has already shown that he’s a once-in-a-generation star reporter, and that he understands the Valley better than most. He has a proven ability to get people to talk to him, always the hardest task in journalism, and he’s not shy about asking. Blow Kara Swisher and the rest of the Valley’s faux-journalist/de facto P.R. agents out of the water. That is, if he has the heart for it; she’s one of those bold-faced names thanked in his acknowledgments. To follow his vocation where it leads, he will have to piss off not just her but a great many more.

Another complaint I heard from reporters is that “you can’t cover someone you hate,” i.e., Baker is too scornful of the tech bros to be fair. That’s not the impression *How to Rule the World* left on me. I did detect, at times, a certain disdain, but on most pages I laughed along with Baker’s bemused astonishment at the absurdity of the scene. I don’t think Baker hates techies—not even Justin. I think he sees through them better than (most of) the rest of us *without* hating them, which in my view makes him unusually well qualified to cover them.

As if all this weren’t enough, Theo Baker managed to do what I hitherto would have insisted is impossible: he made Stanford interesting.

At the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Michael Isikoff was overheard to lament, “Rightwing praise, I do not need.” I assume Theo Baker is sagacious enough to realize the same applies to him, which is why I have packed so much unfair criticism into this review. I hope he appreciates the gesture.

Michael Anton is the Jack Roth Senior Fellow in American Politics at the Claremont Institute and the former director of policy planning at the Department of State in the second Trump Administration.



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