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The Ruling Class at Stanford by Michael Anton

Ilya
Shapiro:
*Justice
Scalia*

Christopher
Caldwell:
*Charles
de Gaulle*

William
Voegeli:
*Obama's
Legacy*

Glenn
Ellmers:
*Is Trump
the Greatest?*

Christopher
Flannery:
*Boss
Lincoln*

Martha
Bayles:
*Christopher Nolan's
Odyssey*

Lane
Scott:
*Yellowstone and
Lonesome Dove*

Spencer A.
Klavan:
*Translation
Wars*

Dorothea
Israel Wolfson:
*Tom Sawyer
at 150*

Leonard
Sax:
*Selling
Girls*

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

APPALACHIAN MEMORIES

by Charles R. Kesler

WHEN DOLLY PARTON DIED LAST MONTH, AGED 80, IT SEEMED as though the whole country paused to wipe a tear from its eyes. She was instantly recognizable, a celebrity whom almost everyone, across the generations, knew—perhaps one of the last artists who will enjoy such a broad following in our increasingly subdivided society. And she was beloved. “There has never been anyone like her, and never will,” posted President Trump, who ordered flags flown at half staff in her honor. “I don’t do politics,” Dolly said emphatically, and often. She declined a Presidential Medal of Freedom not only from Trump (twice) but also from Joe Biden.

Nonetheless, politicians liked to claim her as an acolyte. For example, Senator Bernie Sanders lauded her support for “LGBTQ+ rights, health care, and disaster relief.” Hillary Clinton echoed that praise. Well, it is true Dolly had many gay fans, gave millions of dollars to the cause of health care, and was so moved by the 2016 wildfires that raged through Tennessee that she created a special-purpose philanthropy to assist in the reconstruction. She named the charity “The My People Fund,” which somehow I don’t think would have been Sanders’s or Hillary Clinton’s name for it. “The Deplorables’ Fund,” maybe? Besides giving a million dollars to Vanderbilt University Medical Center in 2020 to help fight Covid, Dolly did something few donors could have imagined: she wrote a song, “When Life is Good Again,” to give people hope in those dreary, death-filled days of maximum Covid.

We’ve been brought to our knees...
There are no guarantees
But you know life goes on
This too shall pass away...
We’ll make it through this long, dark night
Darkness fades when faced with light
And everything’s gonna be all right
When life is good again.

As a singer, Dolly’s voice was utterly distinctive, a fluttery soprano capable of a mellifluous warmer register, too, the latter on display in her early, and enduring, gems, “Jolene” and “Coat of Many Colors”. But her songwriting ability was truly amazing. She wrote quickly, beautifully, and with an easy fecundity of themes. People in the music business credit her with writing more than 3,000 songs, selling more than 100 million albums, and achieving 25 No. 1 hits. And that’s not counting TV specials, series, and hit movies like *9 to 5* and *Steel Magnolias* (nor flops like *Rhinestone*). A more inclusive count would approach 5,000 songs, according to Dolly herself. Which is thousands more than Willie Nelson. Nashville and the wider music industry grieved her loss deeply. “The world feels a lot less sparkly all of a sudden,” said singer Kacey Musgraves. Beyoncé called Parton “the north star.... I am grateful for your art, your heart, your generosity, your humor, your entrepreneurship.”

Dolly was a strong woman and a self-confident artist. She was willing to try almost any kind of music or acting, but insisted on

judging the results by her own high standards. You may thus hear Dolly sing disco and dance-club music (e.g., “More Where That Came From,” “Potential New Boyfriend,” “Sweet, Summer Lovin’,” “Baby, I’m Burnin’”), and she was long rumored to be devoting a whole album to such painful material. Perhaps it suffices to say that the perfectionist decided against it.

With rock and roll, however, she had a natural affinity. Initially embarrassed to be elected to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame because she’d never recorded a rock album, she turned down the invitation until she had removed the stumbling block. She assembled an album of duets, singing rock classics with rock legends, called (what else?) *Rockstar*. Her 49th studio album and the last she produced in her lifetime, it is flabbergastingly good. Try her versions of “Stairway to Heaven” and “Let It Be,” for the latter of which she coaxed Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr to reunite, accompanied by her and by Mick Fleetwood and Peter Frampton. In many cases, Dolly’s version is better than the original.

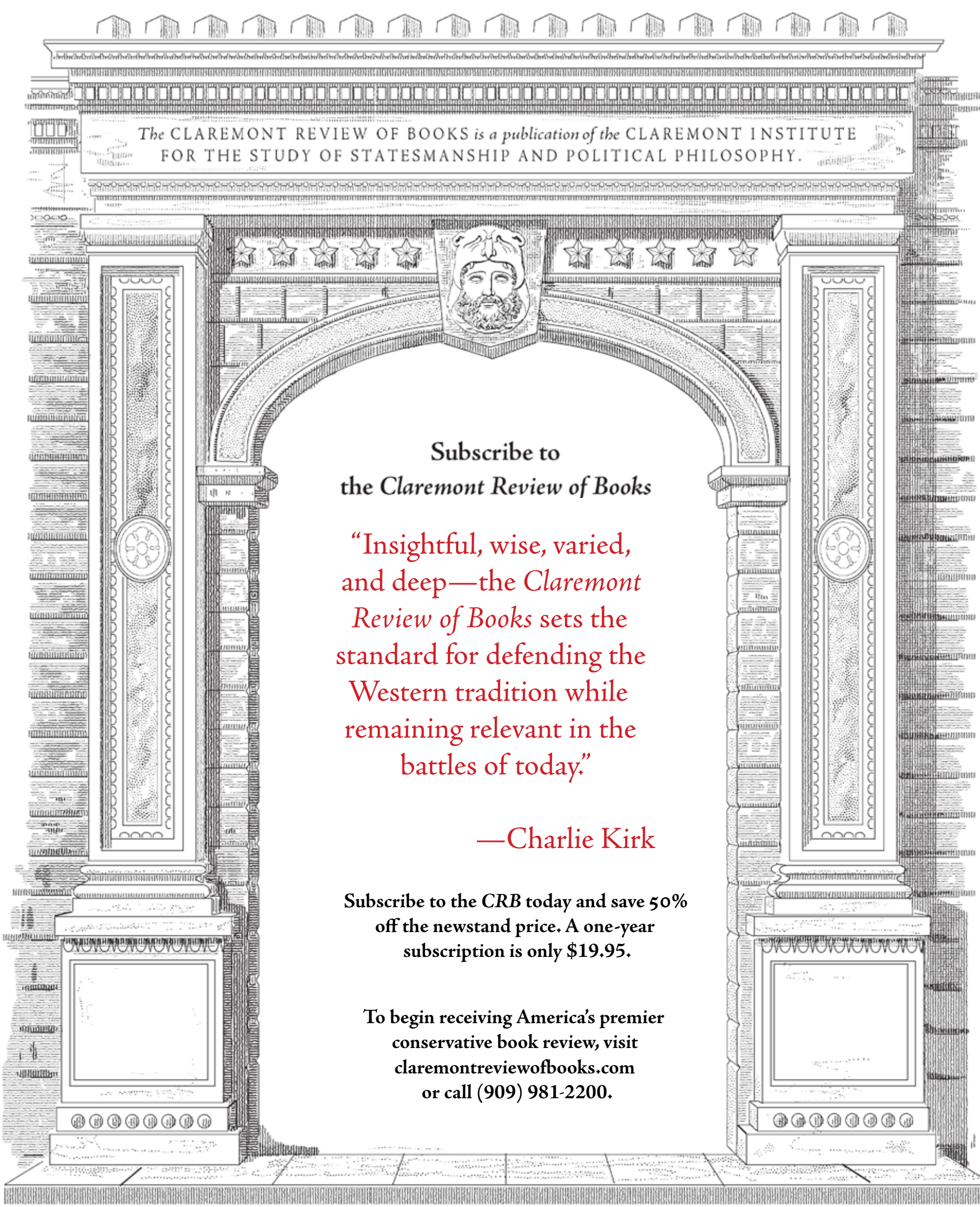
OF COURSE, HER GREAT CALLING WAS COUNTRY MUSIC AND bluegrass. Her shtick was all in the service, or mainly in the service, of that calling. She put it this way in her wonderful confessional, “Backwoods Barbie”:

I’m just a backwoods Barbie,
too much makeup, too much hair...
Don’t let these false eyelashes lead you to believe
that I’m as shallow as I look ‘cause I run true and deep...
I’m just a backwoods Barbie in a push-up bra and heels
I might look artificial, but where it counts I’m real.

This country girl traces her roots and her purpose to “my people,” with whom she grew up, desperately poor, in Tennessee. Her father never learned to read or write, which fact galvanized her in 1995 to found her Imagination Library, which delivers a book per month to kids five and younger throughout the English-speaking world. With her parents and eleven siblings she lived in a one-room cabin, before they upgraded to a two-room cabin on a nearby creek. Meditating on those times, Dolly concluded,

No amount of money could buy from me
The memories that I have of then
No amount of money could pay me
To go back and live through it again
In the good old days when times were bad.

Yet she always regarded this Appalachian squalor as more of a blessing than a curse. Her family kept “leaning on sweet Jesus / I know he’ll love and guide and lead us,” as Dolly expressed it in a sweet song, which ends by affirming “Appalachian memories keep me strong.”



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